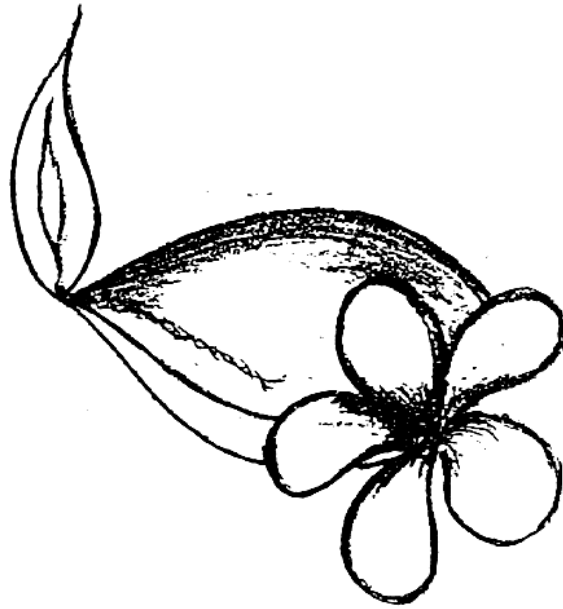


IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA



RADHIKA ABEYSEKERA

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

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Cover: Just as this small lamp helps to dispel the darkness, may this book dispel the darkness of ignorance from our minds.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

This book is printed by Mrs. Swarna Amaratunga, in memory of her beloved son, the late Dr. Chanaka Sanath Amaratunga. By the merit of this gift of Truth may he attain Nibbana!

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA



“...There are four places the sight of which will arouse strong emotion in those with faith. Which four places? Here the Tathagata was born (this is the first). Here the Tathagata attained enlightenment (this is the second). Here the Tathagata set in motion the wheel of the Dhamma (this is the third). Here the Tathagata attained final nibbāna without remainder (this is the fourth). The monk, the nun, the layman or laywoman who has faith should visit these places. And they who die with a believing heart in the course of their pilgrimage will be reborn on the dissolution of their body at death in a heavenly state.”

*Gotama Buddha
Maha Parinibbāna Sutta*

FOREWORD

As mentioned in this work of Mrs. Radhika Abeysekera, the Lord Buddha emphasized the importance of visiting the “four memorable places of the Buddha” so as to contemplate and understand the nature of impermanence that He taught. As a result, it is the custom of capable Buddhists to go on a pilgrimage to India (Jambudipa) at least once in their lifetime.

The Lord Buddha emphasized the importance of the pilgrimage so as to develop the nature of people’s minds. It is the custom in Sri Lanka, even today, not to perform evil deeds, speak ill, or think evil thoughts while on a pilgrimage. Pilgrims are very careful so as to be respectful of their particular religious teachings and to be constantly mindful. They also go on a pilgrimage to practise religious customs and duties. This is one way for Buddhists to acquire merit. On such a pilgrimage they can acquire the merit of generosity (dana), morality (sila), and the development of wisdom (bavana). There are many opportunities to acquire merit on such a pilgrimage.

Even before the time of the Lord Buddha, the tradition of pilgrimages existed amongst the Brahmins. They used to visit the “tirthas” or fords of the river. The holy banks of the rivers such as the Jamuna (Yamuna) were known as “punya tirthas”. They believed that by bathing on the banks of the sacred river Ganges they could purify their souls by washing away their sins. They also believed that after death they would be born in heaven, as their sins or demeritorious actions had been washed away.

The oldest historical record of a pilgrimage is in Chinese literature, in a document that was found in the royal archives of China. It documents a missionary pilgrimage of some Buddhist monks to America. The other is the famous work by Huiyen Tsiang. This document is a well-known record of many sacred Buddhist places in the East. Fa Huiyen’s valuable records also chronicle the historical data of ancient times.

The tradition of pilgrimages is also well known among Westerners. British literature inherited a very well-known collection of stories known as *Canterbury Tales* by Chaucer, which were stories related by pilgrims while on pilgrimage to Canterbury.

Muslims too have a custom of going on pilgrimage to Mecca, which is perhaps the most famous pilgrimage site in the world. The Prophet Mohammed also had requested that they go on pilgrimage as a religious duty.

When the Buddha asked His disciples to go on pilgrimage, His intention was entirely non-egotistical. His intention was to help people to train and control their minds from defilements. He did so out of compassion for living beings. He understood that it was easier for people to be more mindful on such journeys.

Mrs. Abeysekera has shown the results of her pilgrimage in both a spiritual and practical manner. If we can always have good thoughts, we will be able to gain good results. In a pilgrimage everyone has to try to generate good thoughts so that it will be helpful in this life as well as in future lives.

Mrs. Abeysekera has written this particular book to introduce the value of pilgrimages and to encourage such journeys by Buddhists. When I started to read this text I was reminded of a book I had read many years ago called *Where the Buddha Trod* written by Major R. Raven-Hart. Her previous books, *The Life of the Buddha* and *Questions and Answers in Buddhism – Volume I*, are very popular among youngsters as she is always open to discuss their questions in a way that they can understand. I hope that she will continue to write more and more books on the Dhamma for our younger generation. Her Dhamma dāna service towards the Buddhists in Winnipeg and the other parts of the world is very highly appreciated. The future generations will thank her for her noble dedication. Dr. Sarath Abeysekera, her Dhamma students, and good friends also deserve to share the thankfulness of the reader as they contributed their full support towards this valuable work.

May all the world be with the knowledge of the Dhamma so as to bring the message of peace of the Lord Buddha. May all beings be well and happy!

Ven. Kurunegoda Piyatissa (Maha Thera)
New York Buddhist Vihara
New York.

October 18, 1996

PREFACE

This book takes the reader “In the Footsteps of the Buddha”, from Lumbini where the Buddha was born, through Kapilavasthu, Bodh Gayā, Isipatana, and Sāvasthi to Kusināra where He passed away. A map of India, Nepal and Sri Lanka has been included so that the pilgrim can follow the path we took. For me, it was a privilege to visit these sacred Buddhist places. As a Buddhist I was moved to tears and touched by the magnificence of His presence at the sacred sites. And yet, just over one hundred years ago we did not have the opportunity to visit these beautiful holy sites.

It was Sir Edwin Arnold, the internationally famous author of *The Light of Asia* who made a representation to the Government of India about the disreputable condition of the ancient Bodh- Gayā temple site. In 1885 he addressed a letter to the Government and in it he stated: “It is certainly painful to one who realizes the immense significance of this spot (Bodh Gayā) in the history of Asia and of humanity, to wander round the precincts of the holy tree and to see scores and hundreds of broken sculptures lying in the jungle or on brick heaps scattered; some delicately carved with incidents of the Buddha legend, some bearing clear precious inscriptions in early or later characters...”

It was Anagārika Dharmapāla, a lifelong friend of Sir Edwin Arnold, and a Buddhist legend, who brought the cause to fruition. Despite many obstacles and an arrogant British Administration, the undaunted Anagārika Dharmapāla rescued and restored the sacred Buddhist places of heritage to their rightful custodians: the followers of the Buddha’s teachings.

In January 1891, Anagārika Dharmapāla visited Bodh Gayā, and seeing the deserted condition of the holy temple, vowed before the Bodhi tree that he would surrender his life to rescue the holy place from neglect. In May of 1891, he formed the Maha Bodhi society and worked tirelessly as an ambassador to restore the sacred sites, travelling all over the world to London, New York, Japan, Thailand, China, Burma and Ceylon (Sri Lanka) to champion his cause.

Thus, it is only fitting that this book should honour Sir Edwin Arnold and Anagārika Dharmapāla. This I have done by incorporating quotations from the writings of Sir Edwin Arnold and Anagārika Dharmapāla. If not for their determination and tireless efforts, we would not have the good fortune to have these sacred, holy sites to visit.

When we first planned this pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist places in India, we faced many hurdles. As I wanted to recreate the significant events of the Buddha’s life, we had planned our visit to India in summer. Temperatures soared over 100° F, and regularly scheduled pilgrimages to the sacred places were not available. Every agency we contacted tried to dissuade us from going, especially as we were taking our two young children with us. The heat, I was told, was unbearable even for an adult bred and brought up in the tropics, and worse for two young children brought up in the temperate climes of Canada. The roads, they told me, were terrible, with pot-holes and thick layers of dust that swirled around suffocating you wherever you went. The food and water, they told me, was just not what you are accustomed to. Chances are

your children will be sick. A better time would be in autumn after the monsoon rains, when it is cooler. The children, they said, should not be taken at all.

However, with the encouragement of my husband and the support of my family, we overcame all of these obstacles. A private pilgrimage was arranged just for us: my husband, our two children, my mother, and myself. A guide was found to accompany us throughout the journey. A box full of non-perishables was packed to ensure that the children would have food if they had difficulties adjusting to the change of diet. A medicine box that contained every conceivable type of medicine including syringes, needles, and antibiotics was included in our luggage! And even though everything that we were told was true, we had a very successful and enjoyable trip. We did face some hardship. However, there was nothing that caused us undue concern. The monsoon rains were delayed, making it unbearably hot. But a gentle shower preceded us so that in every instance the temperature dropped just for the duration of our visit. Our children coped well and had a very valuable and meaningful experience that they will relive for many years to come through the pictures and videos we made. We accomplished everything and more than we had ever hoped for, due to the kindness of the people and the helpfulness of the resident monks. We all remained healthy throughout the entire trip, so our journey unfolded as planned. I am a strong believer that anything is possible for the determined. Our faith and devotion, I knew, would carry us through.

This book is written to encourage and help pilgrims to enjoy better the sacred Buddhist places of worship. Having read the book you will be able to look for the sights and places I have described and will have a better understanding of what to see. You will also not be afraid to take young children (ours were 8 and 5 years old) on this sacred pilgrimage. With careful planning and preparation it can be a valuable learning experience with lasting memories for children. It should be noted, however, that only the major places in the Buddha's life are addressed in this book. One should also visit Nalanda, Vesali, Rajagaha, Gijjhakuta, etc., and the temples of the different countries, to complete the pilgrimage. The unique design and architectural styles of each country add an aura that pilgrims will find fascinating.

This book is also written for those of you who may not have the good fortune to visit these places. I have tried to recreate not just what I saw, but also what I felt. Documented descriptions of the sacred places by the seventh century Chinese pilgrim, Huiyen Tsiang, were included to add depth of vision. To feel the experience of the journey, the reader must have some quiet time set aside just for this purpose. Then read the book, and let your mind relax so that you can join me and follow "In the Footsteps of the Buddha".

Many people helped to make this book a reality. First, there was my family in Sri Lanka, who helped to organise the pilgrimage, and provided encouragement and support so that we could journey to India in summer. Then there were the resident monks at the sacred temples, Venerable Welvitiye Medhananda, Venerable Kuburupitiye Chandaratana, Venerable Saddhaloka, Venerable Piyaratana, Venerable Sudharma, Venerable Somaratana, Venerable Vimalananda, Venerable Samitha and Venerable Vimalasara, who spent many hours explaining the sights and the history, so that I would have the background necessary to write the book. And, as in the past, there was the encouragement of the Venerable Kurunegoda Piyatissa (Maha Thera) of the New York Buddhist Vihara, who wrote the foreword and checked the material for accuracy. The contribution of each and every one of you is gratefully appreciated.

I would also like to make special mention of my friend, Adrienne Bouchard Langlois, for her invaluable contribution to this book. I had all but given up the writing of this book for the last one and a half years due to the demands and pressures of juggling a new job with those of raising a young family. It was her quiet encouragement and belief in me that inspired me to take a few days leave and work many late nights to complete the book. When she offered to undertake the final editing of this book I was immensely touched. In the past, my husband and I had edited my books. Not being literary minded, it had been a tedious task of many readings that still resulted in errors that we had overlooked. I knew that the offer she made would enrich the book. I also knew that it would take up a great deal of her time. How could I express in words my gratitude for her contribution? As a Roman Catholic, my books were Adrienne's first introduction to Buddhism. With care and thoughtfulness she ensured that the meaning I was trying to convey was enriched by her editing.

It was also her inspiration that led to the use of technology to reproduce the beautiful pictures that are included in this book. We had taken many photographs but some of them did not reproduce well. Finally, we decided to use the best possible pictures available and scan them electronically into the document to produce clear pictures. I pored over many pictures to find the ones that best conveyed my feelings. Classical paintings from temples were used to create a visual image of the beautiful pictures that passed through my mind during the pilgrimage. The exquisite beauty of Lumbini, the tenderness of the Great Renunciation, and the grace and compassion of the Enlightened Buddha could not have been conveyed with words alone. My deepest gratitude to the inspired artists who helped to convey my thoughts in pictures and to my friend, Adrienne, for her thoughtfulness, caring, and commitment to this sacred book.

Finally, I want to thank my husband, Sarath, for his assistance with the first editing of this book and for his encouragement and support throughout the pilgrimage. It was no easy task for my husband to operate a heavy camcorder and two cameras so that I would have the pictures and the talks given by the monks, to assist me in writing and illustrating this book. His continued support towards my commitment to the teachings of the Buddha is greatly appreciated. And, my fondest appreciation to our children, who graciously gave up the use of our computer at request, and for the quiet games they played at my side so as provide me with the time I needed to write this book.

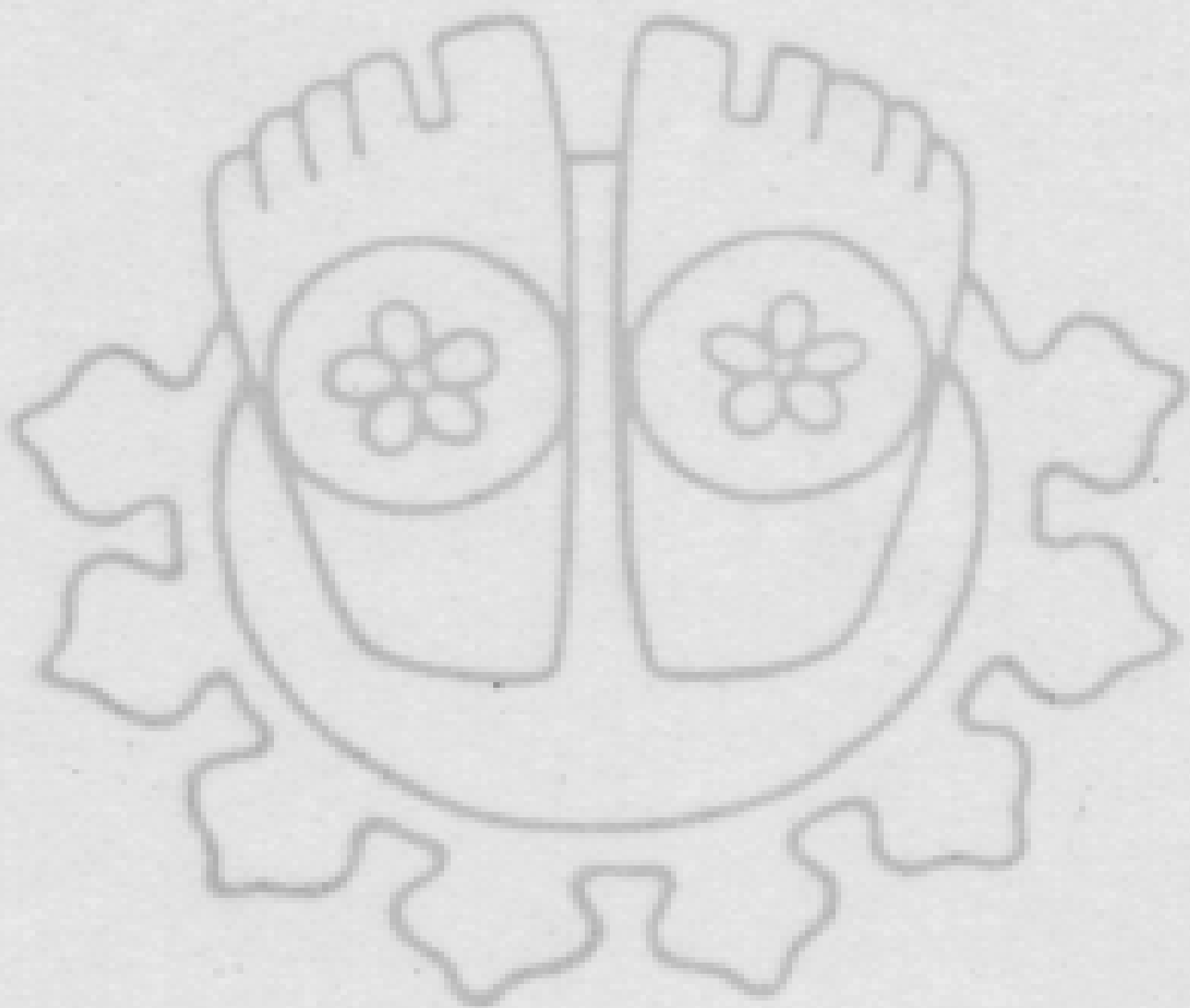
May you all partake in the merit of this gift of Truth.

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August 23, 1996

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

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LUMBINI PLEASURE GARDEN – 623 B.C.

Queen Māya looked at King Suddhodana, her almond-shaped eyes bright with love and devotion. A gentle smile played on her lips. It was time to leave, for the birth of their child. The King looked down at his beautiful Queen with love and pride, and let her go. She waved farewell and left Kapilavatthu to visit her mother in Devadaha.

The procession moved slowly along the dusty road. The sun beat down and the morning mist faded away. Queen Māya glanced out of her palanquin drapes and bade her attendants to stop.

Before her lies a wondrous park of lakes and ponds, with flowers and swans. The air is fragrant with the perfume of myriad blooms. A gentle breeze blows across the water, rippling its blue surface. The lotus blooms bow their heads in homage. Enchanted by the beauty of the Lumbini Pleasure Garden, the Queen steps down and walks slowly toward a sala tree resplendent in a gown of fragrant blooms. She grips the sala bough that yields down to her, forming a bower of fragrance and beauty, and the Prince is born. Sakka, the King of the Heavens, descends to Earth to receive the baby. A dazzling light illuminates the pleasure gardens and the ten thousand world systems tremble.



Sakka, the King of the Heavens, descends to Earth to receive the baby

(Picture courtesy of Budu Maga)

Taking seven steps on lotus blooms, with a lion roar the Prince announces His birth.

***“I am the chief in the world
There is no equal to me
I am supreme
This is my last birth
No rebirth for me.”***

The Queen looks down at her beautiful child. So small, and yet so perfect, with the noble marks. With tender care she holds Him close and takes Him back to Kapilavatthu. They name the baby Siddhārtha, which means “wish fulfilled”.



With tender care she holds Him close and takes Him back to Kapilavatthu

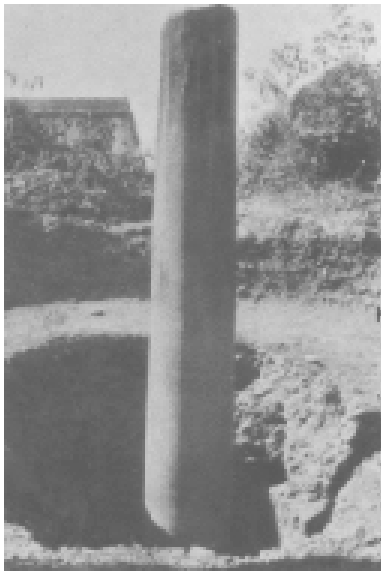
(Picture courtesy of Budu Maga)

LUMBINI PLEASURE GARDEN – 1992 A.D.

The rising sun dispels the mist. The eastern sky is a haze of colour, now blue, now pink, now a swirl of lilac. The majestic Himalayas tower into the pastel sky. I gaze in wonder at Lumbini.

It is the summer of 1992. We walk toward the Asokan pillar that marks the site where Prince Siddhārtha was born. I was expecting a beautiful park that would outshine the splendour of Butchart Gardens in Victoria, Canada, The Kew Gardens in London, England, and The Royal Botanical Gardens in Sri Lanka. After all, this is the birthplace of the greatest human being ever born. It is a national treasure and Nepal should be honoured to be the custodian of such a place. In reality, however, despite the efforts of the Lumbini Trust, the place is run-down, the most neglected of all the places of worship we visited. Gazing at the hidden beauty of Lumbini, I hope fervently that on my next visit, Nepal will have restored this sacred place to a vision of beauty.

I gazed at the Asokan pillar. The inscription on the pillar reads that twenty years after the coronation, Beloved of the Gods, King Piyadassi (Asoka) paid homage in person to the spot where the Buddha was born. It reads that he erected a pillar and a stone wall around the place, and exempted the village of Lumbini from paying taxes except for 1/8 share of the produce. Venerable Upagupta, Asoka's teacher and adviser, is said to have accompanied him on this procession. The top portion of the Asokan pillar has broken away. A crack down its shaft is said to have been caused by lightning.



The Asokan pillar before and after renovation
(Picture courtesy of Lumbini Trust)

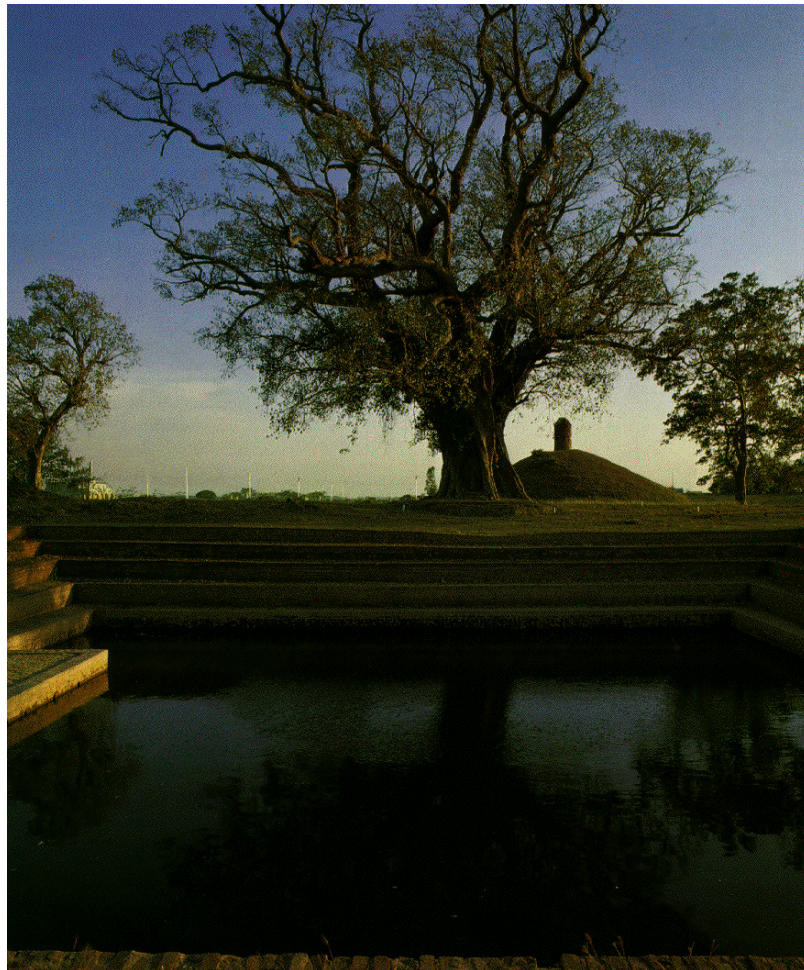
According to the writings of the Chinese monk Hiuien Tsiang, who visited Lumbini in the seventh century, this area was full of Buddhist monuments and a flourishing Buddhist site. All that remains now is the flat-roofed Māya Devi Temple, which seems to be of relatively modern construction. Inside is a worn out, life-size sculpture of Queen Māya and the baby Prince at birth. Queen Māya is holding a branch of the sala tree. The God Sakka, the King of the Heavens, receives the baby. The sculpture seems to be from the Gupta period. Beside the sculpture is an exquisite modern copy of the ancient sculpture. Outside the temple one can see the finely carved bricks of the original temple over which the new temple has been built.



Sakka, King of the Heavens, receives the baby – Māya Devi Temple
(Picture courtesy of Lumbini Trust)

Subsequent to our visit in autumn of 1995, archaeologists excavated 15 rooms in Lumbini beneath this temple. An international team of scientists found relics of the Lord Buddha five metres under the Māya Devi Temple. The announcement of the find was delayed for nine months until expert consultations with eminent archeologists were completed. A triangular case made of bricks and a large stone are said to mark the exact birthplace of Prince Siddhārtha.

A little to the south of the temple is the small lake where it is said that Queen Māya bathed after giving birth. At the time of Hiuien Tsiang, the water was clear and bright as a mirror. At present, it is a small pond with greenish water, as the monsoon rains are late. Beside the pond are ruins of ancient temples. It seems as if much work is still needed in Lumbini and that great archaeological artifacts are still left to be unearthed in this sacred location.



The pond where Queen Māya bathed
(Picture courtesy of Lumbini Trust)

We gathered around the Asokan pillar and lit our oil lamps and incense. We paid homage to the Buddha and recited the three refuges and precepts after the Nepalese monk of Sākyan descent. He was residing at the modern temple built by the Nepal Teravada Buddhist Community. Then we sat down to sing a devotional song depicting the birth of the Buddha. As the sweet voices of the children rose in the still air I felt the beauty of ancient Lumbini.

The fragrance of the sala and lotus flowers wafted through the air. Queen Māya's richly ornamented palanquin lay on the side. Her attendants, dressed gaily in robes of soft silk, walked hither and thither. Queen Māya, graceful and serene, her face filled with love and anticipation, walked slowly toward the sala tree.

*“Queen Māya stood at noon, her days fulfilled,
Under a Palsa in the Palace-grounds
A stately trunk, straight as a temple shaft,
With crown of glossy leaves and fragrant blooms;
And, knowing the time come – for all things knew –
The conscious tree bent down its bough to make
A bower about Queen Māya's Majesty,
And earth put forth a thousand sudden flowers
To spread a couch, while ready for the bath,
The rock hard by gave a limpid stream
Of crystal flow. So brought she forth her child
Painless – He having on His perfect form
The marks, thirty and two, of blessed birth.”*

Sir Edwin Arnold
The Light Of Asia

KAPILAVATTHU – 594 B.C.

Centuries before the time of the Buddha, there lived a king named Okkāka who had five sons and six daughters. After his wife passed away he married another. Before long he had another son. The king was happy and offered a boon to his new wife. She then asked the king to make her new-born son the next king. King Okkāka explained to her that this would not be possible because he had five older sons, but the queen was adamant and said, “A king does not go back on his word. You promised me a wish, now you must give me my wish.” The king then called his sons and explained what had happened. They decided to leave and form a new kingdom. The six sisters, when they heard that their brothers were leaving, wanted to go with them. And so the five princes and six princesses left with servants and wealth to form another city.

At the foothills of the Himalayan mountains they came upon a hermit by the name of Kapila. Kapila informed them that this would be a suitable place for them to found their new city. And so the princes and princesses settled down and built a city which they named Kapilavatthu.

After some time, King Okkāka sent his ministers to inquire into the welfare of his sons. On hearing that they had made a home near the foot of the Himalayas, beside a lotus pond near a grove of saka (type of teak) trees, the happy king said, “They are strong as sakkas, these princes, they are real Sākyans.” This, according to the Buddhist text, is how the Sākyan clan originated. King Suddhodana was a direct descendent of this Sākyan clan.

Prince Siddhārtha grew up in Kapilavatthu amidst every luxury. He was well versed in the arts and sciences and an excellent student and sportsman. He was also gentle and considerate and was loved by all. At sixteen, he married the beautiful Princess Yasodharā, and lived a life of pleasure in three palaces that were built for Him for the three seasons. It was after the young Prince saw the four signs – a sick man in great pain, a very feeble old man, a dead man amidst his weeping relatives, and a calm and serene recluse who had given up all worldly pleasures – that He began to ponder on the many unhappy occasions of life. It was on the day that His son was born that the Prince made the Great Renunciation.

The full moon hangs low in the blue-black sky. Gazing at His son, the Prince is torn between His desire to see His son’s face and His noble aspiration to help mankind. He knows that any movement would wake His beloved wife. Then His renunciation would be even more difficult. Turning slowly, He walks toward Channa, his charioteer.

“My mind is now athirst and longing for the draught of the fountain of sweet dew. Saddle then my horse and quickly bring it here. I wish to reach the deathless city;

My heart is fixed beyond all change, resolved I am and bound by sacred oath: the gates which were before fast barred and locked, now

stand free and open! These evidences of something supernatural point to a climax of my life;

Now I desire to fight against and overcome the opposing force of men who associate in search of pleasure, the men who engage in the search after wealth, the crowds who follow and flatter such persons...

But now I wish to go abroad to give deliverance from pain; now then for your own sake it is, and for the sake of all your kind; that you should exert your strength without lagging or weariness;

Oh Channa! Take this gem and going back to where my father is, take the jewel and lay it reverently before him, to signify my heart's relation to him... and say that I, to escape from birth, age, and death have entered on the wild (forest) of painful discipline: not that I may get heavenly birth, much less because I have no tenderness of heart, or that I cherish any cause of bitterness, but only that I may escape this weight of sorrow (for mankind).”

Asvoghosha Budhisattva
Life of the Buddha



Gazing at His son, the Prince is torn between His desire to see His son's face and His noble aspiration to save mankind (Picture courtesy of Budu Maga)

KAPILAVATTHU – 1992 A.D.

I arrived in Kapilavatthu with mixed emotions. This was the place where Prince Siddhārtha had grown up. A place filled with happy memories of an idyllic childhood and a happy married life. It was here that the Prince made the greatest sacrifice: leaving His parents, His beloved wife, and His newborn son, for it was here that He made the Great Renunciation. It was in Kapilavatthu that He gave up His kingdom and family for the benefit and welfare of mankind. This was the place where the Buddha later performed the twin miracle to show the proud Sākyans that He had attained His goal of enlightenment. And it was in Kapilavatthu that His son, the young Prince Rāhula, seeking his inheritance, received from the Buddha the greatest treasure of all, the gift of the Dhamma.

However, Kapilavatthu was also the place where the Sākyans had been destroyed. Memories of the blood shed during the destruction of the Sākyans mingled with sweet memories of His childhood, making Kapilavatthu a city of strong emotions. For it was here that Mahānāma, a Sākyan nobleman, tricked King Pasenadi Kosala, a neighbouring king. King Kosala had requested a Sākyan noble lady in marriage. The proud Sākyans, unwilling to give a noble Sākyan lady in marriage to King Pasenadi Kosala, gave Vāsabhakhattiyā, the daughter of Mahānāma and a slave girl. It was Vāsabhakhattiyā's son, the strong and forceful Prince Vidūdaba, who vowed to destroy the Sākyans when he later found out about the trickery. On hearing that the chair he had sat on had been washed with milk to remove the traces of his non-Sākyan blood, he vowed to wash his hands in the blood of the Sākyans as they had washed the chair he had sat on. Kapilavatthu was destroyed by Prince Vidūdaba during the time of the Buddha and many Sākyans were killed. The remaining few fled to form a new city.

Though most of the sites associated with the life of the Buddha had been discovered by the end of the nineteenth century, Kapilavatthu remained a mystery. It was thought that the town described by Fa Hien and Huiyen Tsiang in the seventh century was the second city built by the Sākyans who fled. It was in 1973 that an artifact with the word “Kapilavastu” (Sanskrit for Kapilavatthu) was unearthed, leaving no doubt as to the childhood home of Prince Siddhārtha. The remains of Kapilavatthu are in two locations: Piprahwa and Ganwaria. Ganwaria is the actual childhood home of the Buddha. Piprahwa was the religious centre. The Sākyans had built a stupa in Piprahwa to encase the relics of the Buddha. It is said that the distance between the two sites is because the stupa may have been built in one of the parks donated to the Buddha and His retinue, like the Nigrodhārāma, which was known to be some distance away from the city centre.

The Sākyan Stupa was first built in the fifth century B.C. and enlarged on two later dates. The first stupa was made from baked bricks and consisted of a simple dome surrounded by a brick path five metres wide. Two soapstone caskets were unearthed from the stupa and the charred remains of human bones were found in the caskets. The date, location and contents make it almost certain that these are some of the relics of the Gotama Buddha.

The second stupa built after the levelling of the first stupa was 19 metres in diameter. This is where the casket that had the inscription “Kapilavastu” was found. The third stupa, with a diameter of 23 metres, had a square base with 23.5 metre sides. It is this third stupa that we saw in Kapilavastu. A little to the east of the stupa are the ruins of a monastery.

Sweat trickles down my face as I lean against the gnarled old trunk of a barren tree. Its branches spread out, bare of leaves, giving no shade. I shut my eyes and the silence is shattered by the blast of a trumpet and the sound of galloping hooves. Gaily dressed peasants gather to witness the show of strength and valour of Prince Siddhārtha. He has to win the hand of the beautiful Princess Yasodharā. He has to prove to her father that He is worthy of her love.

Yasodharā looks on, her pale face framed by cascades of raven hair. She shades her eyes from the blazing sun and watches, breathless. The Prince excels in event after event. She smiles and claps her hands in approval.

A cool breeze fans my cheek as the full moon slowly crosses the evening sky. The city is bathed in silver, a hush descends as the Prince visits the bedchamber of His beloved wife. His newborn son suckles at his mother’s breast. Her hand shields him protectively, obstructing the Prince’s view. The Prince is torn between His desire to see His son and His noble aspiration to help mankind through His quest for Truth. Slowly, He turns and leaves. He flies across the city on His magnificent white horse, Kanthaka.

I walk toward the ruins in sadness. Had not the Buddha denounced the degrading caste system? Why, oh why, had the proud Sākyaans not heeded His teachings? The clash of swords, the screams of the wounded, the sickly smell of blood as the vengeance of Vidūdaba is unleashed. Turning my back, I walk away slowly, then faster and faster from the needless bloodshed.



Ruins at Kapilavastu (Picture courtesy of Road to the Buddha)

URUVELĀ – BODH GAYĀ – 588 B.C.

The Ascetic Gotama (Bodhisatta) had studied under the teachers Ālāra Kālāma and Uddakarāma Putta. He had mastered the realm of nothingness and the realm of non-perception, two very high stages of concentration, but yet He had not found the cause for sorrow, the way to defeat death. Leaving the great teachers, the Bodhisatta walked to Uruvelā to the rough terrain of the Prāgbhodhi mountain. He was joined by His five friends – Kondañña, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahānāma and Assaji. In a cave on Mount Prāgbhodhi (Prior to Enlightenment), the Bodhisatta set out to practise self-mortification in hope of self-purification.

The Bodhisatta decided to regulate His breathing. He started by practising the non-breathing ecstasy. He controlled His breathing so that there would be no exhalation from His mouth or nostrils. The air then issued from His ears, making a loud noise as is heard when a blacksmith uses the bellows. He then went on to the non-breathing exercise where He checked his ears, mouth, and nostrils. The trapped air beat against His skull with great violence, causing intense pain. It was as if a strong man were to drill His skull. Over and over again, He tried to check His breathing until the pain in His head and stomach were such that it was as if a butcher were trying to pierce His stomach with a sharp knife. The pain was as if He were being burned in a glowing charcoal pit. Even through such intense pain, His energy and determination were not diminished and His mind remained clear. Realizing that He would not reach His goal, He gave up the self-mortification of non-breathing.

He tried for purification by abstinence from food. Slowly, He reduced His intake of food until He was only eating one mustard seed a day. His once golden skin was shrivelled, withered, and blue-black. The fat and muscles melted until His body was reduced to a heap of bones held together by His wrinkled skin. And yet He did not find what He sought. The Devas thought that He had passed away, so weak was He in body. An erroneous message was sent to King Suddhodana that his son had died.

The Bodhisatta realized that He would not reach his goal by self-mortification. He began to eat again. His five friends left Him, thinking Gotama had given up His quest for the Truth. The Bodhisatta Gotama walked down the mountain and reached the banks of the river Neranjarā. He started to meditate under the Ajapāla Nigrodha tree.

It was here that the Bodhisatta had His last meal before enlightenment. A noble lady named Sujātā had prayed for a son. When her prayers were answered, she prepared a dish of milk rice from the richest of milk and came to keep the vow she had made to the Deva (Divine being) she believed lived in this tree. Seeing the Ascetic Gotama, so beautiful, so serene and calm, she thought, “Surely the Deva himself has come to accept my offering.” Offering the milk rice to the Bodhisatta, she proclaimed, “May your wishes be fulfilled just as mine have been.”



Sujātā offers milk rice to the Bodhisatta
(Picture courtesy of Budu Maga)

The blue-green waters of the Neranjarā River cascaded over the white sandstone. The rippling water was soothing, playing a musical song of its own. The sounds of nature were everywhere: the soft hum of the bees, the song of the birds. The wind blew a gentle spray of water that cooled the air. Taking His bowl, the Bodhisatta tested the power of His mind. Dropping His bowl into the swirling waters, He thought, “If I attain the supreme knowledge of enlightenment today, may this bowl float upstream.” The bowl floated upstream. Encouraged, the Bodhisatta crossed the river and walked to the shade of a beautiful Peepal (Religiose Ficas) tree. The thirty-nine year old tree had spread wide. Its thick trunk was strong and sturdy. Its tender leaves glistened like gold in the evening sun.

The Bodhisatta was pleased. Here was a beautiful stretch of ground, a lovely woodland grove, a clear flowing river with a village nearby for support. He thought, “Indeed, this is a good place for a young man set on seeking the Truth. Indeed, this is a good place for striving.”

Spreading some dried grass on the silver sand under the shade-giving tree, the Bodhisatta sat down, determined that He would reach enlightenment. He remembered that He had reached the first stage of jhāna many years ago as a child under the rose apple tree at the ploughing festival by meditating on His breathing. Slowly, He began to discipline His mind through the breathing meditation (Ānāpāna sati meditation). In stages, He attained the Supreme Knowledge known as enlightenment, by realizing the Four Noble Truths.



The Bodhisatta Gotama attains enlightenment
(Picture courtesy of Buddhist Cultural Center)

Uruvelā had been so-named because of its silver-white sand. The name, however, was soon changed. The significance of the Buddha's enlightenment was such that before long it was renamed. In 260 B.C. King Asoka referred to Uruvelā as Sambodhi. In later times it was known as Mahābodhi and Vajirāsana (diamond throne). The name Bodh Gayā (Buddha Gayā) seems to have been used in the thirteenth century.

URUVELĀ – BODH GAYĀ – 1992 A.D.

It was summer of the year 1992, and very hot. The climb to the Prāgbodhi mountain where the Buddha practised self-mortification was not possible, as we were travelling with our young children. But gazing at it from the Neranjarā riverbank, I imagined the hardship the Lord had faced in His quest for perfection. The mountain was stark, harsh with wild vegetation. Its craggy, rocky sides tore into the deep blue sky. A dark brooding mountain with sharp angles and crevices. The merciless sun bore down upon it, scorching the vegetation. Great thorn bushes devoid of leaves personified the hard and difficult times during the struggle for perfection through self-mortification.

We were informed that half-way up the mountain, at the base of a steep cliff, nestles a small Tibetan temple. Above the temple lies the cave in which the Bodhisatta had taken shelter. The Prāgbodhi (Prior to Enlightenment) mountain is now called Dongeswa and is one of the peaks of a mountain range. The view from the top of the mountain is said to be spectacular, with an aerial view of the landscape of Bodh Gayā and the Neranjarā River.

We rested under the Ajapāla Nigrodha (Banyan) tree where the Bodhisatta had His last meal. A gaudy statue of Sujātā, the Bodhisatta, and a cow was housed in a small alcove. The custodian of the premises had a donation box and a guest book. I was disappointed. Why had they used such garish colours? Sujātā was so beautiful, so refined. And the Bodhisatta, so God-like and perfect. How could they have lost the devotion, the fervour, the richness of Sujātā's gift? The sculptures did not seem to express such a wondrous event. Then I reflected beyond the present symbol.

*“...So, thinking him divine, Sujātā drew
Tremblingly nigh, and kissed the earth and said,
With sweet face bent, “Would that the Holy One
Inhabiting this grove, Giver of Good,
Merciful unto me His handmaiden,
Vouchsafing now His presence, might accept
These our poor gifts of snowy curds, fresh made,
With milk as white as new-carved ivory!”*

*Therewith into the golden bowl she poured
The curds and milk, and on the hands of the Buddh
Dropped attar from a crystal flask – distilled
Out of the heart of roses: and He ate...”*

Sir Edwin Arnold
The Light of Asia

So He had His last meal before enlightenment. In a golden bowl, milk rice made of the thickest, richest, cow's milk.

We walked toward the banks of the Neranjarā (Neranjaṅ) River, where the Bodhisatta had placed the bowl and tested the power of His mind. The noon-day sun bore down on us out of a cloudless blue sky. The monsoons were late. The river was dry. Miles of soft silky sand lay ahead of us. Miles of burning hot sand that blazed through our shoes. The scorching sun had turned the sandy riverbed into an inferno. We walked across the burning riverbed in temperatures over 100° F. For the first time our young daughter had to be carried. The hot sand had burned through her shoes, scorching her tender feet. And yet we know that the river had been lush and cool with fast flowing water. The Neranjarā derives its name from the words nelam (pleasant) or nila (blue). Its waters had been described as pure, blue and cool, and this description still holds true after the rains. What had caused the change – the destruction of trees and the clearing of land for cultivation, or a change in the weather pattern? We did not know, but two thousand five hundred and eighty-six years ago, during the same season, this had been a cascading river of cool beauty.

It was evening when we arrived at the main gate (east gate) of the Mahā Bodhi Temple. The setting sun had painted the sky in shades of red, pink, and orange. Against this backdrop could be seen the spires and turrets of the temple. The beautifully carved gateway is said to date back to the eighth century A.D. At the base of the gateway are two kneeling figures. Walking down the steps, we stood before one of the most beautiful temples in the world.

In the seventh century, Huiien Tsiang describes the temple thus: “To the east of the Bodhi Tree is a temple about 167 or 170 feet high. Its lower foundation wall is twenty or more paces wide in front. The building is of blue brick covered with plaster. All the niches in the different stories hold golden figures. The four sides of the building are covered with wonderful ornamental work; in one place, figures of stringed pearls, in another, figures of heavenly beings. The whole is surrounded by a gilded copper “Āmalaka” fruit. The eastern face adjoins a storied pavilion, the projecting eaves of which rise, one over the other, to the height of three distinct chambers; its projecting eaves, its pillars, beams, doors, and windows are decorated with gold and silver ornamental work, with pearls and gems set in to fill interstices. Its sombre chambers and mysterious halls have doors in each of the three stories. To the right and left of the outside gate are niche-like chambers; in the left is a figure of Avalokitesvara, and in the right a figure of Maitreya. They are made of white silver and about 10 feet high.”

The temple I saw was not the same as the one seen by Huiien Tsieng. It had been destroyed and rebuilt many times over. Various pilgrims have described the Mahā Bodhi Temple and it is apparent that all of these have been destroyed over time, sometimes by neglect, and sometimes due to destruction by non-Buddhists.

In 1877 Mindom Min, the last King of Burma, sent yet another mission to Bodh Gayā to repair the Mahā Bodhi temple and build a monastery to provide accommodation for pilgrims. However, despite his devotion and good intentions, it is said that the original character of the temple was not preserved.

When Anagārika Dharmapāla visited Bodh Gayā in 1891, this is what he saw and said:

“...Glorious moonlight last night, it being a full moon day, and the scene was something magnificent. The imposing structure of the Mahā Bodhi Temple standing in bold relief in the heavens...”

“...When I beheld the Bo-tree, an off-shoot of the original tree under which the Buddha sat, I had the same winged peace of soul as the humblest of pilgrims. Reverently, I visited the brick temple built in the form of a pyramid, and examined the carvings on the ancient stone railing. But I was filled with dismay at the neglect and desecration about me. The mahant, the head of the Hindu fakir establishment, had disfigured the beautiful images...”

“...The imperishable association of the place influenced me so much that a strange impelling force came over me and made me stay there and do all that was in my power for the restoration of the place to its legitimate custodians, the members of the Sangha...”

Anagārika Dharmapāla
Return to Righteousness

Due to the tireless efforts of Anagārika Dharmapāla, the British and the Indians had finally recognized the enormous historical and architectural significance of the temple. The repair of the temple and the clean-up of the sacred precincts were undertaken by J.D. Beglar in close consultation with Alexander Cunningham. Sadly, some of the choice Buddha statues, stupas and other antiques were shipped to the British Museum. Beglar used a miniature model of the temple that he found among the rubble to recreate the Mahā Bodhi temple. While the temple did not reflect the architectural wonder of the seventh century, he restored its majesty. He created a celebration in brick and stone to honour the Buddha’s enlightenment, a majestic temple Buddhists could visit to honour the momentous event. A temple with a presence, for the moment we walked in we felt the magnificence of the enlightenment.

The Mahā Bodhi Temple consists of a rectangular base with four small inward-sloping spires on each corner of the roof and a large spire at the centre. The central spire is 52 metres high and crowned with an Āmalaka. Each of the spires is intricately carved with rows and rows of niches. The four small spires on each corner are miniature replicas of the main central spire.

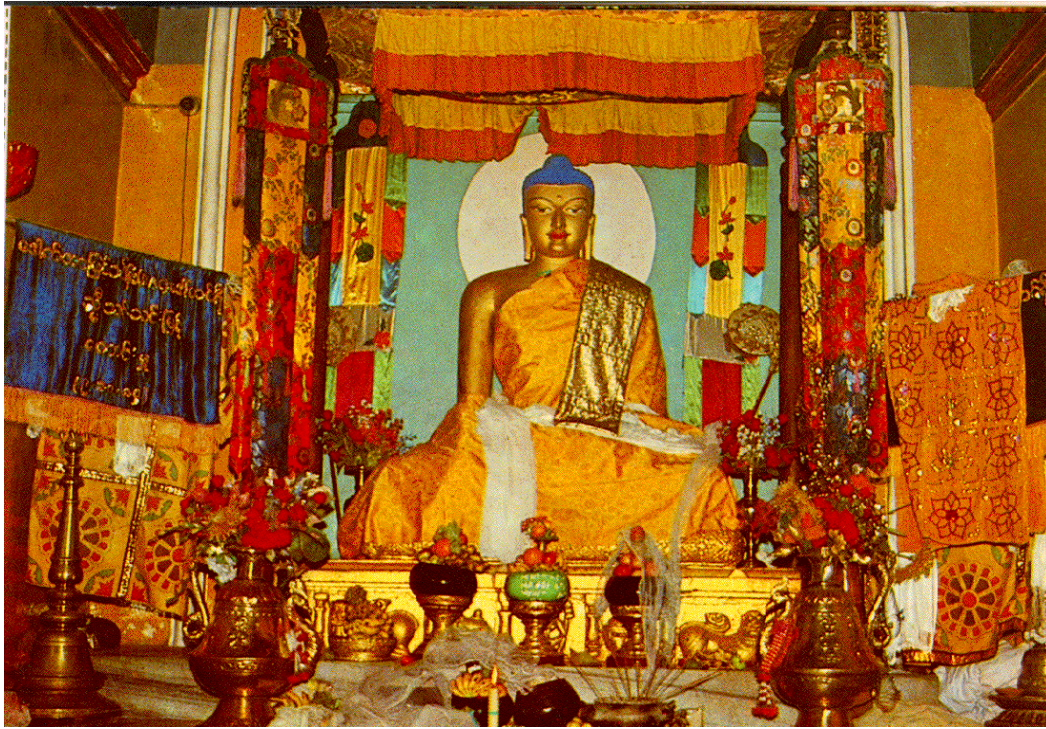
The temple is made of brick so well constructed that almost no cement is required. The two niches that held the statues of Avalokitesvara and Maitreya at the time of Huien Tsiang now hold statues of the Buddha. To the side of the Buddha statue on the left stand statues of the Bodhisattas Padmapāni and Avalokitesvara. The Buddha statue on the right is very beautiful,

and represents the transition from the Gupta to the Pala style; it dates from the seventh century A.D. Both Buddhas stand on lotus blooms with swirling waves that symbolize samsara.



The Mahā Bodhi Temple at Bodh Gayā (Buddha Gayā)
(Picture courtesy of Road to the Buddha)

The outer chamber has a granite floor and table on which pilgrims had strewn fragrant flowers and lit candles. The inner chamber contains the main shrine. The tenth century serene Buddha statue, which is two metres high, is said to stand on the very place where the Buddha attained enlightenment. A highly polished sandstone slab behind the statue is thought to be the original vajirāsana from the temple built by King Asoka. The golden statue is in the Earth-touching posture. The Buddha sits upon a cushion and radiates compassion and serenity. The inspired artist has captured the Buddha's compassion and tender grace. Below lies the earth goddess surrounded by two elephants and two lions.



The Buddha in the Earth-touching posture - Mahā Bodhi Temple

An interesting story is told about this Buddha statue. Around 600 A.D. King Sasanka, who was persecuting Buddhists and destroying Buddhist structures, cut down the Bodhi Tree and wished to destroy the Buddha statue and replace it with one of Mahesvara. However, on seeing the Buddha statue radiating compassion and serenity, he lacked the courage to do it himself. Instead, he called one of his officers and commanded him to perform the destruction. The officer was distraught. He thought, "If I destroy this Buddha image I will reap the misfortune of this act for eons to come. If I disobey the king, my family and I will be tortured." Then, going to a Buddhist friend, he explained his dilemma. His friend placed an oil lamp in front of the Buddha statue so that it would not be in darkness and sealed it behind a wall. He then drew a picture of Mahesvara on the face of the wall. When the work was completed the officer reported to the

king that the task was done. The king was seized with terror, his body broke out in big sores and his flesh rotted away. A few days later he died. The officer then tore down the wall and found to his surprise that the little oil lamp was still burning brightly even though several days had passed.

Taking the oil lamps and perfumed incense we had brought, we lit them. The glow of the lamps reflected off the golden face. Was He looking down at me or was He looking down at our children? We each felt the warmth of the compassionate Buddha and His eyes upon us. Many monks were deep in concentration as they meditated. The remaining monks started to chant in soft voices. The blessings of the Buddha and His Dhamma were all around us as His teachings unfolded with the words of the monks.

It was late, the sun had set and dusk surrounded us as we walked around the shrine to the Bodhi Tree. A silver moon shone between the leaves of the Bodhi Tree, bathing the tree in its silver light. The leaves glistened. It must have been on just such a night that the Buddha had sat under the great Bodhi Tree in deep concentration.

The moon dips behind a cloud to resurface in its full glory. Its silver light falls upon the compassionate face with the half-closed eyes, the raven hair drawn back from His broad forehead. The golden robe is dull in comparison to the glow that emanates from His face and body. The red lips slightly parted as He concentrates on His breathing. The serene but determined mind. What is He feeling? All alone in this great jungle devoid of any sound. For six years the Noble One has struggled, struggled to realize the Truth.

The silence is palpable. His mind so clear, like a polished mirror. And then the realization. The realization of the Truth. The tremor that passes over the serene face as He sees His previous births. First one, then two, then five, and ten, and fifty. He gazes in wonder as world cycles unfold before His eyes. How infinite was this samsara? Was there no beginning of time? A shadow crosses His face as He views the effects of kamma. The noble and the evil-doers each reaping the effects of their actions. How painful and unsatisfactory was this life? Even the noble, born into happy planes of life, suffered, for all component things were impermanent and subject to change. A gentle smile crosses His face. The Buddha realizes the Four Noble Truths, the path to deliverance. For some time He rejoices in His new-found happiness. Then His eyelids flutter open, His lips part as He joyously announces to the world:

***“Thro’ many a birth in existence wandered I.
Seeking but not finding, the builder of this house.
Sorrowful is repeated birth.
O house builder thou art seen. Thou shall build no house again.
All thy rafters are broken. Thy ridge pole is shattered.
Mind attains the unconditioned.
Achieved is the end of craving.”***

A brilliant radiance illuminates the world and the ten thousand world systems tremble.

It is dawn, the sun slowly rises and dispels the blue-grey mist. There is so much to see in Bodh Gayā that we come back to visit the Mahā Bodhi Temple. This time we come in procession, for we carry in a bowl the milk rice that is to be offered to the Buddha. The staff at the Mahā Bodhi pilgrims' rest house have prepared the milk rice with love and devotion just as Sujātā had done two thousand five hundred and eighty years ago. We take turns carrying the silver tray and walk the hundred or so yards, so that each of us can share the fervour and devotion that Sujātā had felt. The Mahā Bodhi temple by dawn is as beautiful as it was by dusk. Slowly, we walk down the steps, each lost in our own thoughts. I offer the milk rice to the Buddha. The golden statue fades away and I see the compassionate face of the Buddha, the gentle eyes, the serene smile, as He accepts my humble offering. I bow low and touch His feet.

*“Compassionate! Who with unceasing zeal
Beheld rise and fall of myriad earths
And in the rounds of birth gave all that men
Hold dear, for Truth to find and for our weal
That Truth beyond compare, of pain and cause
Its ceasing, and the way.
To thee who showed the active life and calm
That lies between the rungs of Eight-fold path
Which leads to bliss that cooleth passion's thirst,
To thee, sole teacher of the Truth, I bow
My lowly head and with a humble heart
To thee I bring an offering of my joy.
All wise, who spurned the hope of instant bliss
When first thou met prostrate thy forerunner
That we may taste the nectar of thy words
To hearten us who tread the wheel of life
Which first began we know not where or how.
To thee, sweet lord, I my humble brow bend
In lowly worship thrice, and at thy feet!
In faith and trust seek I refuge.”*

C.A. Hewavitharane
(Brother of Anagārika Dharmapāla)
At Thy Feet

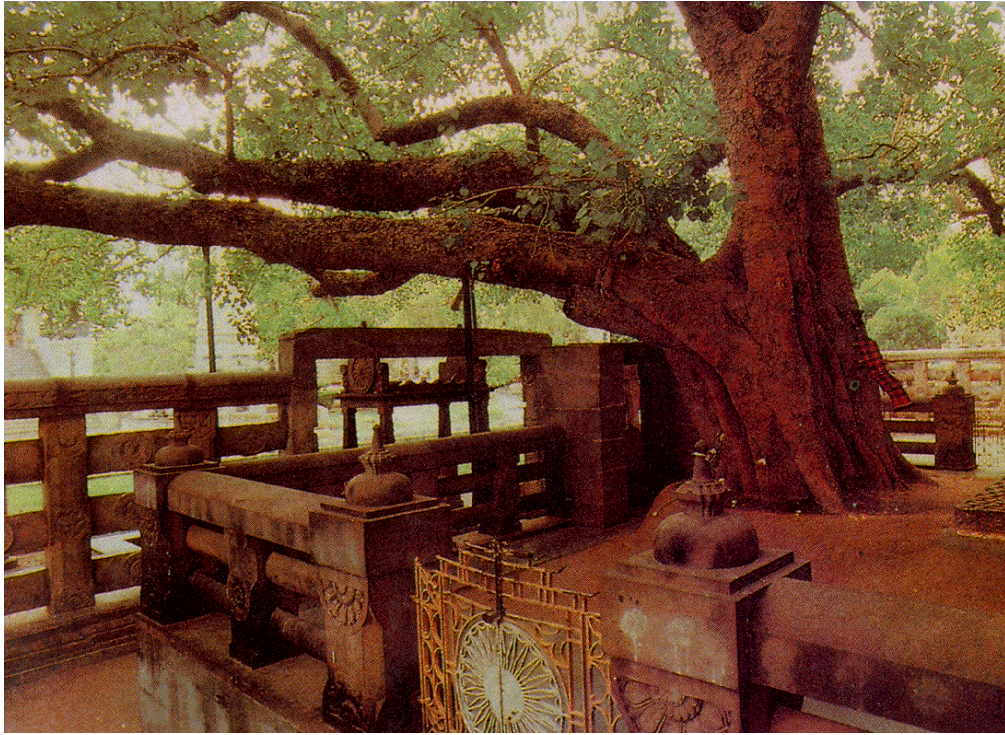
We then walk around the premises looking at the different historic sights that surround the Mahā Bodhi Temple. To the left of the main gateway is the Buddhapādha Temple. A small temple with delicately carved pillars houses a large round stone carved with footprints of the type used in early centuries as a symbol of the Buddha. According to the inscription on the side, the stone was carved in 1308 A.D.

We see the railing that surrounds the Mahā Bodhi Temple. Parts of the original stone railing built in about 100 B.C. still remain. In about the sixth century A.D. the old railing was dismantled, new stones were added and a larger area was enclosed. The older railing was made of smooth brown sandstone, while the newer railing is made of grey granite. Today, only seven of the railing pillars remain. Two of them have intricate carvings, one of a man controlling an elephant and the other representing a temple. Some of the other pillars can be seen at the Archaeological Museum. Outside the railing are hundreds of stupas. Some are beautifully carved and said to be from the Pāla period. Directly south of the Mahā Bodhi Temple is the foundation of one of the biggest stupas on the premises, said to have been built by King Asoka.

We walk in a clockwise direction starting at the Asokan pillar which is south of the Mahā Bodhi Temple. The pillar was found in Gol Patthar in Gayā and moved to its present location in 1956. There is no doubt that it is part of the original pillar erected by King Asoka in Bodh Gayā. According to documentation found on a plaque, the original pillar with an elephant capital was located just outside the temple railing to the right of the east gateway.

Further south is a tank which was dry when we visited, as the monsoons were late. We were told that this tank is covered with lotus blooms during the rainy season and that their fragrance perfumes the air surrounding the sacred temple. A recent statue of the Buddha sheltered by Mucalinda in the middle of the tank, as well as a sign, are misleading. The site where the Buddha spent the sixth week after enlightenment wrapped in the coils of the king snake Mucalinda is in fact about a kilometre south, in a place called Muchalin.

Continuing in a clockwise direction we walk north behind the Mahā Bodhi Temple and see the Bodhi Tree by daylight. The original Bodhi Tree from which a branch was taken to Sri Lanka was destroyed in 1874. A new tree has blossomed in its place. This is the tree that we saw – a beautiful tree with outspread branches and blue-green leaves that danced in the soft breeze. The outer vajirāsana (diamond throne where the Buddha sat), which is made of polished sandstone, is delicately carved. Believed to have been built by King Asoka, the vajirāsana is decked with flowers strewn by pilgrims. The Bodhi Tree is fragrant with the garlands of white jasmin flowers that deck its boughs. Flags flap gaily as a cool breeze blows through the Bodhi leaves. The leaves glisten in the sunlight and dance gracefully. I empty the fragrant sandalwood powder into the pot of water we have brought and lovingly bathe the tree, the roots, the boughs. Drops of water glisten in the sunlight as the children splash the fragrant water. As we light our oil lamps I observe a monk deep in meditation. I am reminded of the words of the Buddha when He hailed the efforts of a monk who chose to honour the Teacher by diligent meditation in the hope of attaining deliverance prior to the Pari Nirbbāna of the Buddha. The Buddha, pleased with his conduct said, “Excellent, excellent! He who loves me should act as this monk. He honours me best who practises my teaching best.” Sitting down under the great Bodhi Tree, which is a distant descendent of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment, we meditate.



The Bodhi Tree at Bodh Gayā
(Picture courtesy of The Mahā Bodhi Centenary Volume)

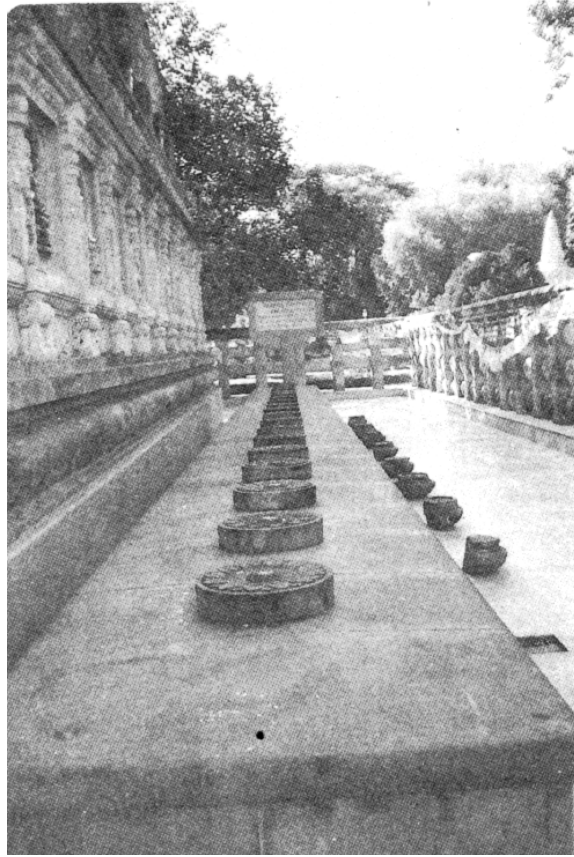
The Bodhi Pallanka is one of the four unchanging places (avijahitathanani)¹, unchanging because all Buddhas of the past attained enlightenment at this site, as will all Buddhas of the future. I think of the Sages of the past and the Sages to come. The names of the next ten Buddhas come to my mind: Metteyya, Rāma, Pasenadhi Kosala, Bhibhu, Digasoni, Samkacca, Subha, Todeyya, Nālāgiri and Pālaleyya. The era of the Buddha Metteyya is in this same world cycle (Maha Badra Kappa). The era of the next Buddha, Rāma, is 100,000 world cycles away. I aspire fervently that I may have the good fortune to be a disciple of the Buddha Metteyya. The writing of this book, the teaching of the Dhamma, may it all lead to a greater purpose, a fulfilment of a greater aspiration. May I attain enlightenment under the sage Metteyya, and may I then have the opportunity to teach the sweet nectar of the Dhamma to hundreds of thousands of people. Just as I now have the opportunity to teach the fragrance of the Dhamma to a handful of people, then may I have the opportunity to teach the Dhamma to an armful of people. And, upon hearing the sweet nectar of the Dhamma, may they attain the supreme bliss of Nibbana!

¹1. The other three unchanging sites are Isipatana, where the Buddha expounded the first discourse, The gate of Sankassa, where the Buddha first touched the Earth on His return from Tāvātimsa Heaven, and the site of the gandhakuti in Jetavana.



The outer vajirāsana and back wall of the Mahā Bodhi Temple

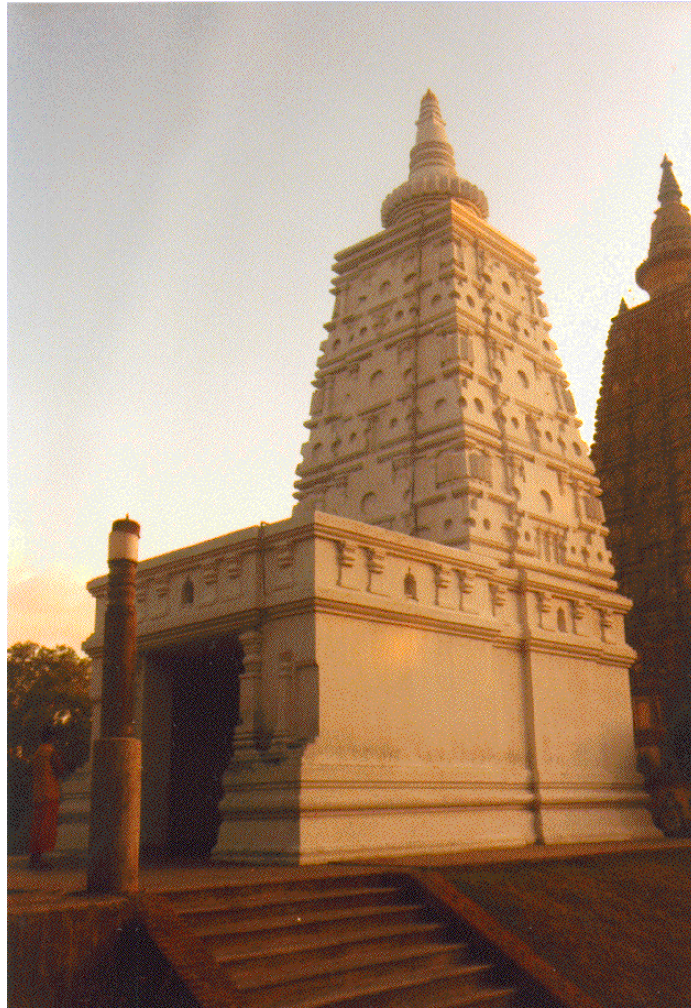
Walking around the Bodhi Tree we sight the Ratanacankama Chaitya, the Jewel Promenade Shrine. This structure marks the place where the Buddha spent His third week after enlightenment. The Buddha had created a golden promenade and meditated while walking, to convince the Devas who were in doubt as to His having attained enlightenment. These remains, along with the vajirāsana, and parts of the railing around the Mahā Bodhi temple, are remnants of the earliest temple at Bodh Gayā. The original building consisted of eleven pillars that were delicately carved. Today we see the base of one row of pillars. The row of lotus blooms is said to represent the miraculous lotus blooms that burst through the ground to receive the sacred feet of the Buddha as He walked in meditation.



The row of lotus blooms that burst through the ground
to receive the sacred feet of the Buddha
(Picture courtesy of The Mahā Bodhi Centenary Volume)

In the north-west corner of the garden is the Ratanaghara Chaitya, the Jewel House Shrine where the Buddha spent the fourth week after enlightenment reflecting upon the Abhidhamma. The original stone door frame with exquisite carvings is still intact. At this time His body was so pure that an aura of colours emanated from His Person. Gazing at the shrine, it was easy to visualize the jewelled chamber and the serene Buddha surrounded by the dazzling aura. In fact, the mid-morning sun was so strong by this time that it reflected off the walls and dazzled us just as the beautiful aura around the Buddha may have dazzled the Devas who were in attendance.

Walking back toward the main entrance we viewed the Animisa Chaitya, Unblinking Shrine, where the Buddha spent the second week after enlightenment showing gratitude to the Bodhi Tree that provided shade and shelter to Him during enlightenment. The temple, which has a single spire, is similar to the Mahā Bodhi Temple. There seems to be some controversy as to this location, as it does not correspond with the writings of Huiyen Tsiang. However, the presence of the Buddha and His first teaching by example – gratitude to those who have helped – makes this a very moving experience.



Animisa Chaitya at Bodh Gayā

From the steps of the main gate I gaze down at the Mahā Bodhi Temple and its precincts. The hundreds of stupas, the marble floor that surrounds the main temple, the Bodhi Tree in the background, fade away. I focus my mind momentarily on the devotees from all over the world. The Burmese, Cambodians, Chinese, Indians, Japanese, Nepalese, Tibetans, Thais, Vietnamese, Sri Lankans and those from the Western countries all unite with compassion and devotion to honour the Buddha and the momentous event of the enlightenment. The force of the compassion and loving kindness they radiate is palpable – an invisible force of warmth and love that encompasses all living beings. Then, I let my mind wander back to the time of the Buddha. The majestic Bodhi Tree would then have been the centerpiece. The beautiful white sand beneath its outspread branches turns to gold in the morning sun. The surrounding trees bow in homage to the Great Tree of Knowledge. In the distance lie the rippling waters of the Neranjarā River. Peace and quiet reign over the sanctuary. The Buddha stands motionless, unblinking, venerating the Bodhi Tree.

ISIPATANA – MIGADĀYA – 588 B.C.

After the invitation of Brahma Sahampati, the compassionate Gotama Buddha decided to teach His newfound knowledge to the world. Seeing that His two former teachers, Alāra Kalāma and Uddaka Rāmaputta, had passed away, He decided to teach His five friends who were residing in the deer park (Migadāya) at Isipatana. He left Uruvelā and walked toward Migadāya at Isipatana, near Benares (Vārānasi).

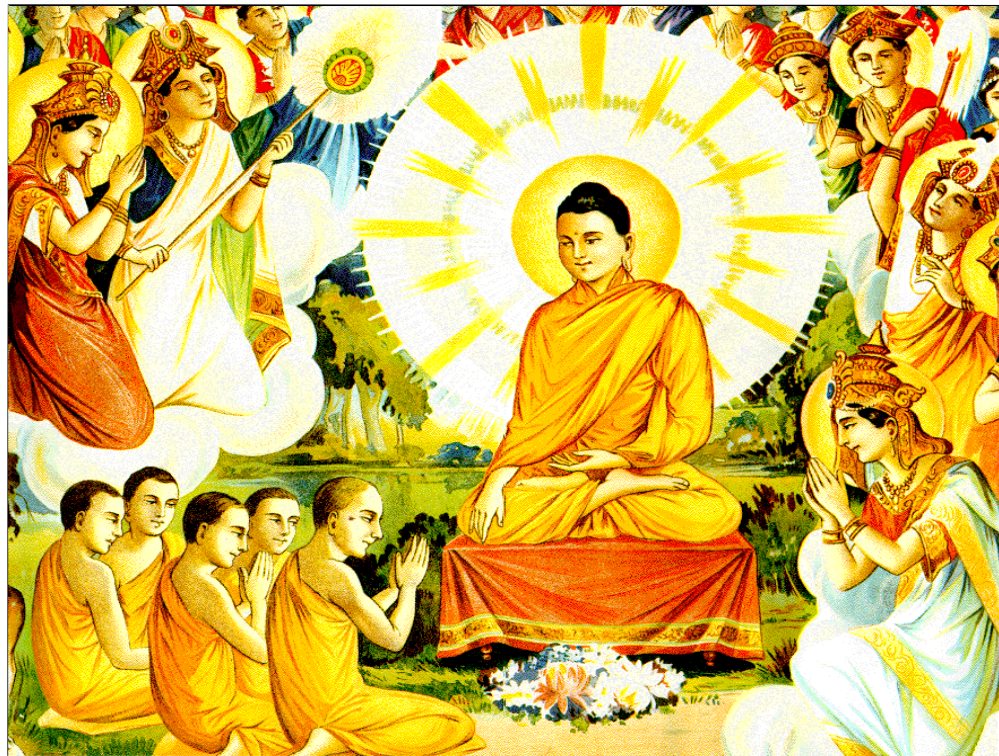
Isipatana, too, is one of the four unchanging places (avijahitathānāni). Unchanging because all Buddhas give their first discourse in this same sacred place. It is the custom of all Buddhas to go through the air to Isipatana to preach their first discourse. Isipatana is so-called because Sages on their way through the air alight here, or start from here, on their aerial flights (Isayo ettha nipatanticati – Isipatanam). The Gotama Buddha, however, walked the eighteen leagues to Isipatana as He knew that by so doing He would meet Upaka, to whom He could be of service. On the way He had to cross the river Ganges. Not having money, the Buddha used aerial flight to cross the river. On hearing of this event, King Bimbisāra exempted all ascetics from the toll payable to cross the river.

It was hot and the air was heavy with the oncoming monsoon rains. After about a week the Buddha arrived in Isipatana. The five ascetics – Kondaṇṇa, Bhaddiya, Vappa, Mahānāma and Assaji – saw Him coming in the distance. They decided that they would not acknowledge His presence, as He had given up the practice of self-mortification. But they could not ignore the radiance of His appearance. Walking up to Him, they took His bowl and provided Him with water to wash His feet and arranged a place for Him to sit. The Buddha addressed the five friends and informed them that He had found the Truth, the way to enlightenment. At first the five ascetics would not believe that He had attained enlightenment, as He had given up the practise of self-mortification. But the Buddha admonished them, saying: “Have I ever before claimed that I had attained enlightenment or spoken in this way?” When for the third time the Buddha proclaimed that He had found the way to defeat death, they accepted His words and sat down quietly to listen to Him.

It was the full moon day in the month of July (Āsālha) in the year 588 B.C. A gentle rain had cooled the air. A soft breeze rustled among the trees. The golden moon cast its soft light and illuminated the Migadāya. The Deer Park at Isipatana was quiet in anticipation. The Gotama Buddha addressed the five ascetics and preached His first sermon, known as the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta. Dhamma means wisdom or knowledge, and Cakka means establishment. As such, Dhammacakka- pavattana Sutta means the Establishment of Wisdom. Dhamma may also be interpreted as Truth, and Cakka as wheel. As such, Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta is also interpreted as the Establishment of the Wheel of Truth.

The Dhammachakkapavattana Sutta was addressed by the Buddha to the five ascetics. However, there were many earth-bound Devas, who, on hearing it, proclaimed: “This excellent Dhammachakka, which could not be expounded by any ascetic, priest, Deva, māra, or Brahma in this world, has been expounded by the Exalted One at the Deer Park in Isipatana.” Hearing this, the Devas of the six happy planes of life and the Brahmas of the thirteen Brahma worlds also raised the same cry.

The ten thousand world systems trembled. A radiant light surpassing the radiance of the Devas illuminated the world.



The Buddha expounds the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta to the five monks
(Picture courtesy of Budu Maga)

In this most important discourse, the Buddha expounded the middle path. He told the five ascetics to avoid the two extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. The former retards one's spiritual progress, the latter weakens one's intellect. The Buddha said: “There are two extremes that should be avoided by a recluse. Constant attachment to sensual pleasure by a recluse is base, vulgar, worldly, ignoble, and profitless. Constant addiction to self-mortification by a recluse is painful, ignoble, and profitless.”

Following the middle path that the Buddha realized on His own results in spiritual insight and intellectual wisdom so that one can see things as they really are. It leads to the attainment of the four stages of sainthood, to the understanding of the Four Noble Truths, and finally to the ultimate goal of Nibbana. The Buddha then went on to explain this middle path known as the Noble Eightfold Path. The Noble Eightfold Path is comprised of the following:

Right Understanding

Right Thoughts

Right Speech

Right Action

Right Livelihood

Right Effort

Right Mindfulness

Right Concentration

At the end of the discourse, Kondaṇṇa attained the first stage of sainthood known as Sotāpanna. He understood through realization that whatever is subject to origination is subject to cessation.

ISIPATANA – MIGADAYA – 1992 A.D.

It is the month of July in the year 1992, two thousand five hundred and eighty years after the Exalted One preached the Dhammachakka for the benefit of men, women, and Gods.

We drove to Sāranāth, the modern name given to Isipatana, from Vārānasi (Benares). The name Sāranāth was derived from the name Sārangānātha (protector of deer). In a previous birth our Bodhisatta, who was then named Sārangānātha, sacrificed His life to save that of a doe and her unborn fawn in this city.

It was very hot and dusty. The monsoons were late. The noonday sun bore down on us relentlessly. We arrived at the spot where the five ascetics first saw the Buddha. A huge dome-shaped mountain of bricks with an octagonal tower called the Chaukhandi marks this spot. Excavations indicate that the original temple was built on three terraces, each one smaller than the one below it. The octagonal tower was built in 1588 to commemorate the visit by the Mogul Emperor Humayan. The mountain of bricks now overrun by weeds and grass is all that is left of this ornate temple, which is said to have been adorned with precious stones and intricate carvings.

To escape the heat, we decided to visit the museum in Sāranath. Many Buddhist artifacts have been placed in the museum. The most interesting are the capital of the Asokan pillar, a beautiful statue of Prince Sidhārta, a huge rock umbrella, and the famous Sāranath Buddha.

The capital of the Asokan tower measures 2.31 metres and consists of a flower-like fringe, a drum and the lion crown. Four intricately carved animals – a bull, a horse, a lion and an elephant – form the drum. Between the animals is the Dhammacakka (Wheel of Dhamma), which represents the Buddha's first sermon. Above the drum of animals stand four roaring lions, back to back with their paws on the Dhammacakka, representing the Buddha's proclamation of the Dhamma (sinhanada) in the four directions of the Earth. Excavations indicate that a cakka was placed on the top of the pillar, but this has since been destroyed. India has adopted the Asokan lion capital as its national emblem.



Asokan Capital

The statue of the Prince, dating from the Kusāna period, gives a realistic representation of the garments worn at that time. Between the Prince's feet is a lion, and beside His left leg are some fruits and flowers. The beautifully carved rock umbrella that is 3 metres in diameter is said to have given shelter to the statue of Prince Sidhārta. The umbrella is adorned with several concentric rings that have lotus flowers and animal carvings. The outside rim has small hooks which may have been used to suspend garlands.

The statue of the Teaching Buddha is said to have been excavated near the Dharmarajika stupa in 1904. This outstanding image radiates the Buddha's resolve and strength, combined with complete equanimity, compassion and tender grace. The inspired artist has caught the moment when the Great Teacher, who had achieved enlightenment after six years of strenuous exertion, felt overwhelmed with compassion for suffering humanity and set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma by expounding the Four Noble Truths. This momentous event is immortalized by representing the Buddha seated gracefully, delivering the first sermon to the five disciples. The turning of the Wheel of Dhamma is indicated by the hands which are in the gesture of turning the Dhamma wheel. The Dhamma wheel, surrounded by two deer and five monks, is on a pedestal. The image of a woman and child on the side may represent the donor of the sculpture.



Sāranath Buddha at Isipatana

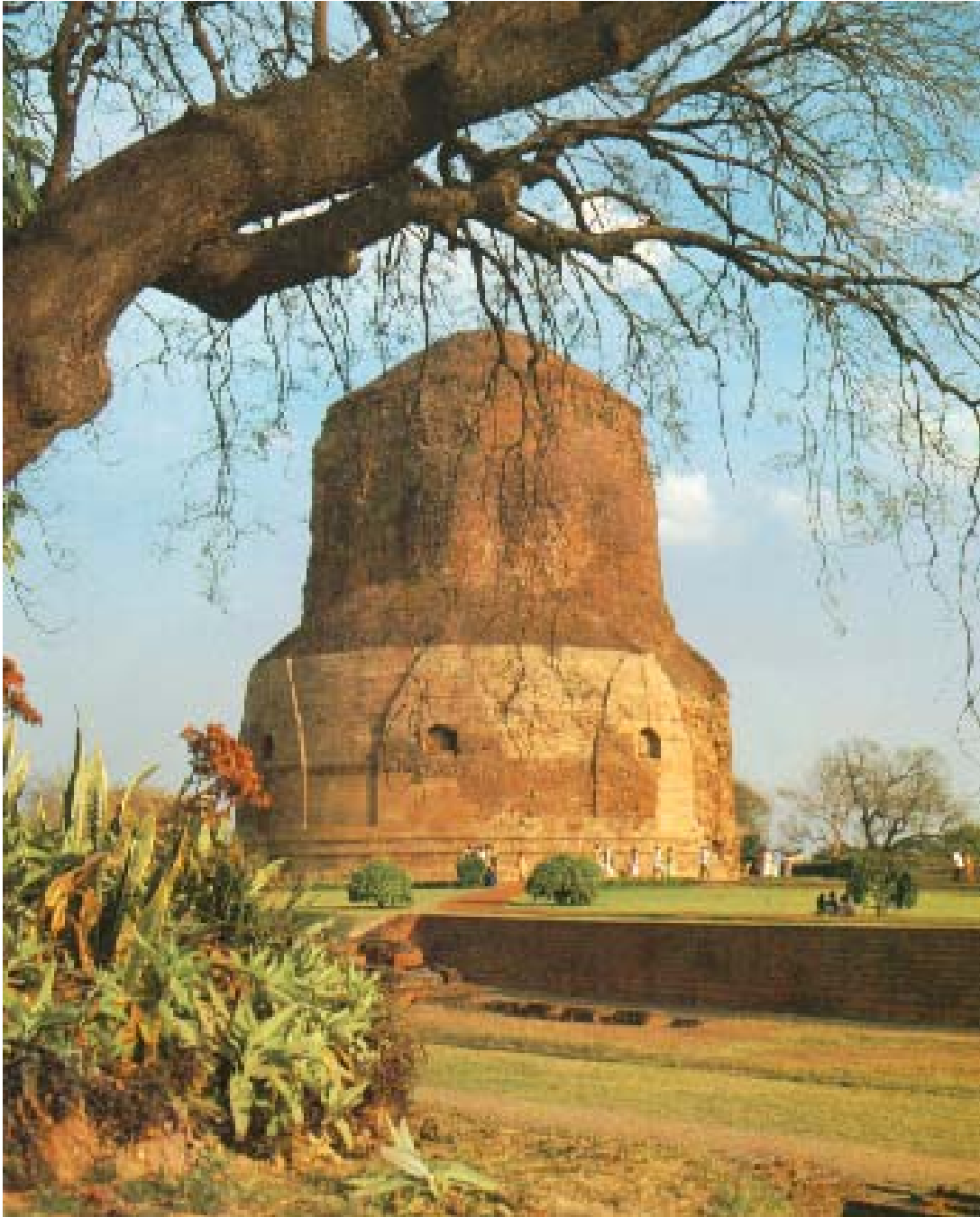
We walk to the site where the Buddha gave His first discourse. It is now a little cooler, as the sun is lower in the sky. Remains of the ruins of the buildings that were built by King Asoka to commemorate this sacred spot come to our view. The base of the Asokan pillar, the original said to have been over 12 metres high, bears the following inscription: "...the Sangha cannot be split. Whoever, whether monk or nun, splits the Sangha, must be made to wear white clothes and live somewhere other than in the monastery. This order should be made known in the community of monks and nuns. Beloved-of-the-Gods speaks thus...". Similar inscriptions have been found in Asokan pillars in Sānchi and Allahabad.

The archaeological remains of the temples and monasteries that housed the Buddha and the monks come into view. The Mūlagandhakuti, built on the remains of the original Fragrant Hut that the Buddha lived in, is to the east of the Asokan pillar. The shrine in its present form was built in the Gupta period. Excavations indicate that over the centuries it evolved into a huge structure. The Chinese monk Huien Tsiang describes it thus: "...in the enclosure is a temple about 200 feet high, the roof is a golden covered figure of a mango. The foundation and stairs are of stone. The towers and niches are of brick. In each niche is a golden figure of the Buddha. In the middle of the temple is a life-size figure of the Buddha made of copper. He is represented as turning the wheel of Dhamma...".

The Buddha spent the first rainy season at Mūlagandhakuti, in Sāranath. It was here that the Blessed One ordained Yasa and his fifty-four friends. On hearing the Dhamma, they attained enlightenment. The Buddha then addressed His sixty disciples (Yasa, his friends, and the five monks) and bade them teach the Dhamma so that others too could benefit from the nectar of Truth. "Go forth," said the Buddha, "and make sure that no two persons take the same path."

South of the Mūlagandhakuti is the Dharmarājika Stupa. It is believed that this marks the exact spot where the Buddha gave His first discourse, the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta. The original stupa is said to have been over 30 metres high. Unfortunately, only the foundation of this beautiful temple remains. The remains of many other shrines, temples and monasteries surround this area.

Walking east we come to the huge brick Stupa known as the Dhamek Stupa (Dhammika Stupa). It is believed that this marks the spot where the Buddha gave His second discourse, the Anattalakkhana Sutta. It was after hearing this discourse that the five monks attained arahantship. This stupa is about 28 metres in diameter and 33 metres in height. The lower part of the stupa is made of stone, while the upper part is made of brick. The original outer stones on the west side are missing. Around the stupa are eight projecting faces with a tapering point, each with a niche which must have held a statue of the Buddha. Around the middle of the stupa is an intricately carved stonework of lotus flowers with curving stems and geometric designs. The archeologist Cunningham spent three years (from 1834 to 1836) to excavate this stupa and the area directly below it, in the hope of unearthing the Buddha's relics. This Stupa, which was built in the Mauryan period, is in very good repair as it was renovated during the Gupta period.



Dhamek (Dharmika) Stupa at Isipatana

(Picture courtesy of Road to the Buddha)

We walk slowly, admiring the beauty and serenity of the place. The Deer Park has receded. And yet, the presence of the Buddha and the five ascetics is felt as we make our way toward a huge Bodhi Tree. A beautiful statue of the Lord Buddha preaching His first discourse to the five ascetics is built under the Bodhi Tree. This Bodhi Tree was grown from a seed of the Bodhi

Tree in Anurādhapura, Sri Lanka, and brought to Sāranath by the Anagārika Dharmapāla. As such, the tree is a descendent of the tree under which The Gotama Buddha attained enlightenment. By the material used in the sculptures it is clear that these statues are of newer construction. The wind is now stronger and we have difficulty lighting the clay oil lamps that we have brought. We sit quietly under the tree and pay homage to the Exalted One. I look at the statues and my heart is filled with wonder and gratitude that I too could, even for a small moment of time, be a part of this wondrous occasion.

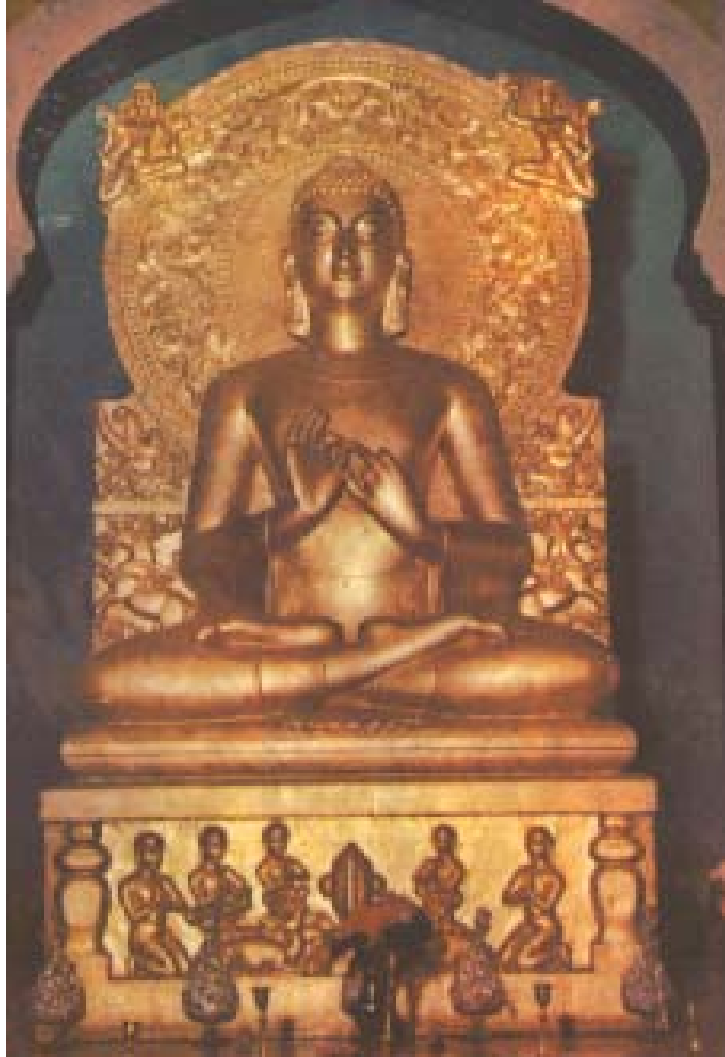
The deep resonating sound of a bell draws us toward the Mūlagandhakuti Vihara, which was built by Anagarika Dharmapāla in 1931. It is seven o'clock in the evening. The monks at the vihara are ready to chant the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta.



(New) Mūlagandhakuti Vihara at Isipatana
(Picture courtesy of The Maha Bodhi Centenary Volume)

The distinct architecture of this beautiful vihara displays the Gupta influence. In fact, it is similar to the vihara at Bodh Gayā. The portico and beautiful doors were a gift from Sri Lanka. A life-size gilded statue of the Lord Buddha with His hands in the “Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma position” catches your eye. The statue, which is similar to the one at the museum, radiates compassion and grace. We walk around the vihara, admiring the beautiful paintings of scenes from the life of the Buddha. The Japanese artists, Mr. Koestsu Nosu and his assistant, Mr. Kawai, brought many of the murals to life with their deftness with the brush. The murals have a distinctly Indian accent. The Japanese artists spent over three years to perfect the murals. They

look alive and vibrant. The scene depicting the Great Renunciation moves one to tears while the frescoes of Prince Siddhārtha at the ploughing festival is sweet, charming, and heartwarming to any mother. The shrine contains relics of the Buddha that were found in Taxila and Nagarjunakonda, which were presented to the Maha Bhodi Society by the Viceroy of India, Lord Irwin. Behind the temple lies the Deer Park.



The Lord Buddha in the Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma position
(New) Mūlagandhakuti Vihara

The sun has set but it is still quite warm at the vihara. A fan cools the air, causing a distinct hum. The Buddhist monks are ready to start the prayers. The devoted pilgrims sit quietly, their hands together, saluting the Great Teacher. Those present pay homage to the Buddha by

repeating the three refuges and the five precepts. The monks start to chant the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta.

I close my eyes and let the words wrap around me, forming a soft, warm haze. I let my mind travel back two thousand five hundred and eighty years, to the day when the Lord Buddha gave this same discourse. The gentle breeze that cools my cheek is no longer the droning fan but the wind rustling through the trees. I hear the gentle whisper of the leaves as they sway with the wind. The light that is cast upon us is now the soft glow of the July full moon. The sweet soft voice of the Buddha ripples through the air. I listen carefully, enjoying the sweetness of the soft words. The raised faces of the five monks are full of wonder. Enraptured, they gaze at the Blessed One.

The soft voice slowly fades away. The monks have concluded the chanting of the Dhammacakka- pavattana Sutta. The gentle rustling of the leaves is replaced by the droning fan. The soft glow of the full moon is once again replaced by the lights of the Mūlagandhakuti Vihara.

SĀVATTHI – 568 B.C.

Sāvatti, the capital of Kosala kingdom, was so-named because everything was available there (sabbam atthi). It was a vibrant, beautiful city with a lush, beautiful park owned by Prince Jeta. The Buddha started to spend the rainy season in Sāvatti twenty years after His enlightenment in His fifty-sixth year. He spent twenty-five rainy seasons in Sāvatti.

Sudatta, a wealthy merchant, (better known as Anāthapindika because of his generosity to the destitute), was visiting his brother-in-law in Sāvatti when he noted that a celebration was being organized. When he inquired whom they were honouring, he was informed that the Buddha was visiting Sāvatti and that the celebrations were in His honour. Upon hearing the name Buddha, Anāthapindika became transformed with fervour and vowed to see the Blessed One. Early next morning he saw the Buddha. On hearing that the Buddha was seeking a suitable place for His retinue and Himself to spend the rainy season, Anāthapindika looked for a suitable park to make available to the Buddha.

The park he chose was the lush garden of Prince Jeta. The Prince, however, was not selling his beautiful garden. When the persistent Anāthapindika would not relent from his request to buy the park, the exasperated Jeta said, “Cover the entire garden with 100,000 gold coins.” This was an unreasonably high price even for a park as beautiful as his. To his surprise, Anāthapindika accepted and soon carts arrived bearing thousands and thousands of gold coins that he strew all over the garden. His curiosity now aroused, Jeta asked Anāthapindika the reason for which he needed the park. On hearing that it was for the Buddha and His retinue he relented and handed over the park to Anāthapindika. The Vinaya pitaka describes the quarters Anāthapindika built as a vast complex with monasteries, attendance halls, meditation cells, bathrooms, lotus ponds and walkways – a beautiful complex that would be worthy of the Buddha. In honour of the two men responsible for the compound, it was named Jetavana Anāthapindikarāma (Jeta’s grove and Anāthapindika’s monastery). Later, to the East of Jetavana, the Pubbārāma was built in Sāvatti for the Buddha by Visākhā. Anāthapindika and Visākhā were the Buddha’s chief lay benefactors. The Buddha spent sixteen years of the rainy season in Jetavana and nine years of the rainy season in the Pubbārāma.

Sāvatti became a very important place as many of the Buddha’s discourses were delivered here. Also, because of the amount of time the Buddha spent here, many significant incidents that are of great interest to Buddhists occurred in Sāvatti.

The many-storeyed Ghandakuti where the Buddha resided was said to be exquisitely beautiful. The term Ghandakuti (fragrant abode) had been used because of the fragrant smell of the incense, perfumed flowers and garlands that the people offered to the Buddha. The Buddha’s daily routine was to sleep and eat in the Ghandakuti, to leave early in the morning to teach the Dhamma and help those in need, and to walk up and down in front of the Ghandakuti in meditation in the late evenings.

Angulimala – It was on just such a day that the Buddha, who was surveying the world with His

compassionate eye, saw the murderer Angulimāla chasing after his mother to obtain her finger to complete his necklace of fingers. The jungle thundered as Angulimāla crashed through the undergrowth with his sword upheld. His hair was matted, his body covered in blood, and the necklace of fingers swayed as he cut his way through the thick bushes. The stench of death was all around him. But it had not always been so. Ahimsaka, who was later named Angulimāla, had been a model student. Not only was he kind and compassionate, but he was also well versed in his studies. Jealous students, seeing his progress, decided to destroy him. They influenced the teacher with false accusations and stories. The teacher, who now thought that Ahimsaka would take his place, decided on a plan to eliminate him. He ordered Ahimsaka to provide him with (a necklace of) one thousand human fingers. This, he said, would be Ahimsaka's gift to him for his services as a teacher. In those days it was customary for a student to give a gift to his teacher on the completion of his education. This was a sacred, honoured tradition. Ahimsaka could not refuse. The ever-obedient Ahimsaka took to the jungles and became a dreaded murderer. Each time he killed a person he cut his thumb and threaded it on a necklace which he wore around his neck. His name was changed to Angulimāla, "necklace of fingers".

Angulimāla now had 999 fingers. Just one more to complete the gift to his teacher. Maddened by the death and carnage that were by nature foreign to him, Angulimāla ran after his final victim. His final victim, who happened to be his mother. It was at this point that he saw in the distance the radiant figure of the Buddha. Swerving, he ran after the Buddha. "Why kill my mother?" thought Angulimāla, "I will get this ascetic instead." However, try as he might, he could not out-run the Buddha. Tired and discouraged, he shouted, "Stop, stop ascetic!" The Buddha replied, "I have stopped. It is you who should stop." Perplexed, Angulimāla stopped and questioned the Buddha. The Buddha then explained that He had stopped all evil and that Angulimāla too should do the same. After listening to the Dhamma of the compassionate Buddha, Angulimāla threw down his sword and asked to be ordained as a disciple. He then followed the teachings, meditated, and reached the supreme bliss of enlightenment.



Angulimāla throws down his sword and asks to be ordained as a disciple

Angulimāla changed from a fearsome murderer into a compassionate and caring monk. One day, when he was walking in search of his noon-day meal, he saw a distressed woman in labour. She was in great pain and unable to deliver her baby. Filled with compassion, Angulimāla went to the Buddha and asked for help. The Buddha then dispensed the Angulimāla Sutta, which is still used by Buddhist families to help mothers in labour. Angulimāla went back and recited the Angulimāla Sutta and the distressed mother gave birth with ease.

The Suttas – Unlike in most other religions, the Buddha did not encourage His followers to pray to the Devas (Gods or other divine beings) when they were in distress or troubled. The Buddha said that those who were righteous and followed the precepts would be protected and blessed by the Devas without having to resort to prayers. The Buddha used the power of Truth. He placed Truth in highest regard and often used the power of Truth to obtain blessings. The teachings of the Buddha are known as the Dhamma. Dhamma translated to English, means Truth. The Angulimāla Sutta states that since he (Angulimāla) became an Arahant, neither by action, nor speech, nor thought, has he knowingly hurt a living being. It then goes on to say, “By the power of this Truth, may you be blessed with a safe and comfortable delivery.”

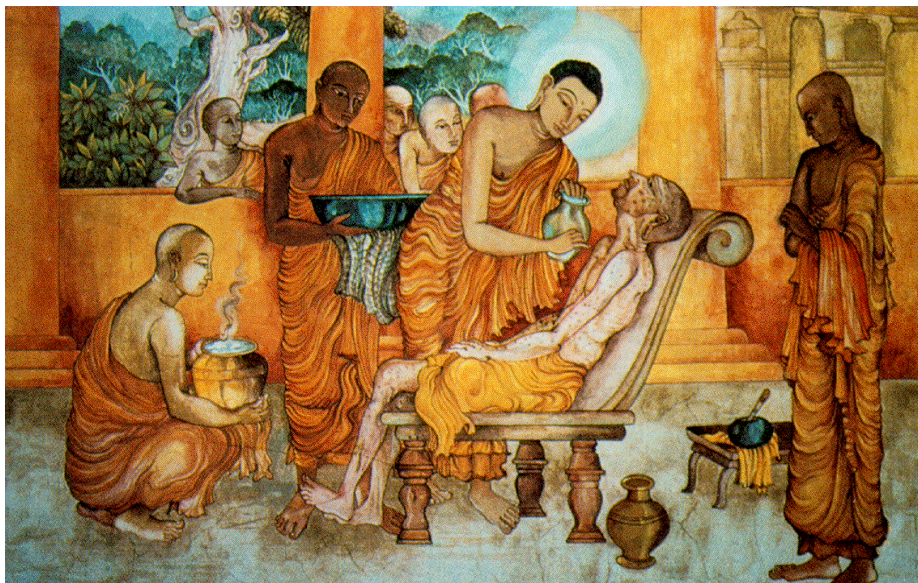
The Suttas (Discourses) that the Buddha dispensed are often used for blessings. The Mangala Sutta was dispensed by the Buddha in Sāvatti. A certain Deva, His radiance illuminating the entire Jetavana, saluted and addressed the Buddha, saying, “Many Devas and men yearning after good have pondered on actions that would result in the highest blessing. Pray tell us these highest blessings.” The Buddha then dispensed the Mangala Sutta. This and other suttas the Buddha dispensed such as the Ratana Sutta and the Karaniya Metta Sutta are recited by Buddhists to evoke blessings by the power of Truth. All such Suttas are ended by saying “By the power of this Truth may you be well and happy” or “By the Truth of these words may all your suffering, fears, diseases, etc., be cured.”

The Ānanda Bodhi Tree – Many persons came to Jetavana to pay homage to the Buddha and to learn His teachings. Sometimes when they came, the Buddha was away helping a person in distress. As many had travelled long distances to see Him and were disappointed, Ven. Ānanda asked the Buddha what could be done to help these disappointed devotees. The Buddha then asked Ven. Ānanda to bring a sapling from the Bodhi Tree in Bodh Gayā and plant it in Jetavana. He then said: “In my absence, let them pay homage to the great Bodhi Tree that gave me protection during enlightenment. Let the Bodhi Tree be a symbol of my presence. Those who honour the Bodhi Tree would in essence be honouring and paying homage to me.” The Bodhi Tree in Jetavana was known as the Ānanda Bodhi Tree. Ever since that time, Buddhists all over the world have venerated the Bodhi Tree as they would the Buddha with scented water, flowers and incense. Many uninformed persons have misconstrued this symbolic action by saying that Buddhists worship trees. The Buddha statue, the Bodhi Tree, the relics of the Buddha are but symbols of the Buddha that mortals use to focus the mind on the compassionate and serene qualities of the Buddha. The veneration of the Buddha provides the tranquillity and peace of mind that many people cannot readily acquire to meditate, study, and listen to His

teachings.

Kisā Gothami – It was also in Jetavana that the Buddha consoled the distraught Kisā Gothami when she lost her only child. Grief-stricken, Kisā Gothami was running around with the body of her child and asking for help to bring him back to life. She went to the Buddha, hoping that He would be able to help her. The Buddha asked her to bring a mustard seed from a house where there had been no deaths. In a city where extended families lived together under the same roof, Kisā Gothami could not find a single house where a death had not occurred. The Buddha then gently explained to her that death comes to all. Understanding that death comes to all, and the impermanence of life and all component things, Kisā Gothami finally disposed of the body of the child she had been carrying. Comforted by the teachings of the Buddha, she was later ordained as a nun and attained enlightenment.

Pūtīgatta Tissa – The monk Tissa, later known as Pūtīgatta Tissa, (Tissa with the putrid body), also felt the compassion and kindness of the Buddha at Jetavana. Tissa was very sick, in great pain, and all alone. His body was covered with infected boils that gave out a putrid smell. His fellow monks had deserted him as they were put off by his appearance and smell. Seeing the sad condition of the monk, the Buddha, with great compassion, gently washed Tissa’s body with warm water and dressed him in clean robes. He then taught Tissa the Dhamma. The monk Tissa attained Arahantship and passed away shortly thereafter. The Buddha then admonished the monks for having neglected Tissa who was in pain and in need, and advised them to show compassion and kindness to the sick by saying, “He who tends the sick tends Me.”



The Buddha ministers with compassion to Tissa’s needs
(Picture courtesy of Middle Land Middle Way)

Devadatta – The Buddha’s cousin, Devadatta, had always been jealous of the Buddha. Now old and ill, Devadatta realized that his end was near. He was weary and tired. He also felt

remorse for all the evil deeds that he had done to the Buddha. He thought back to when it had all started. As a young prince, Siddhārtha had always been everyone's favourite. He was so good, so kind and considerate. To make matters worse, He excelled in every skill and sport. Devadatta looked on, his heart filled with envy and hatred. Why was it that everyone obeyed and listened to Siddhārtha? Why was He always singled out as the best? Could they not see how great he, Devadatta, was? His mean spirit could not understand that it was his own arrogance, cruel nature, and lack of consideration that turned people away from him.

When Siddhārtha became the Buddha, Devadatta watched as Sākya princes and princesses embraced His Doctrine. He, too, decided to give up his life as a prince and follow the Buddha's teaching. For a brief period his jealousy and envy were buried as he explored the new teachings with interest. Before long, his keen mind developed by meditation, he reached the first stage of Jhana. But it was a temporary reprieve. His old anger and envy poured back into his dark heart. Gripped with hatred and jealousy upon seeing the popularity and veneration the Buddha received, he began to form a plot. Seeking the help of King Ajātasattu, a cruel and greedy king, he planned the murder of the Buddha. The first time his plan was foiled. The large rock he rolled down the mountain at Gijjhakūta bounced off another rock. A sliver detached and struck the sacred foot of the Buddha. The wound was deep and painful but not fatal. Devadatta plotted again. Feeding alcohol to the enraged king elephant Nālāgiri, he let it loose on the path toward the Buddha. But the Buddha with His grace calmed the enraged elephant. Unable to bear his defeat, Devadatta sought to cause disharmony among the monks. He started a following of his own.

Now close to death, he repented and regretted his actions. He reflected on the impermanence of life and his oncoming death. A pang of fear gripped his heart. Why had he not heeded the teachings when he had the opportunity? How had he veered so far from the Truth? Stumbling to his feet, he walked toward Jetavana to beg forgiveness of the Buddha for the grave wrongs he had committed. But it was not to be. Red-hot flames engulfed his mind and body. Gasping for breath, he died in torment before he reached the Buddha.

Visākhā – Visākhā was renowned for her beauty and for her generosity to the Buddha and His retinue. Being fond of beautiful clothes and ornaments Visākhā indulged herself, always dressing her best in exquisite garments. One day Visākhā accidentally left her priceless jewelled headdress at the Jetavana. Feeling that an item left in the monastery should not be taken back, she offered it to the Buddha. On being told that priceless treasures were of no value to His retinue of monks, Visākhā offered the jewelled headdress for sale with the idea of building monasteries and providing the requisites with the money generated. Unable to find a buyer who could afford the exquisite jewelled headdress, she bought it herself and used the money to build the Pubbārāma to support the Buddha and His retinue.

The Buddha was residing at the Pubbārāma when a disturbance attracted His attention. He saw a dishevelled Visākhā in wet clothes running toward Him in tears. Visākhā was bathing in the river when the news of her grandchild's death reached her. Unable to control her grief, Visākhā ran to the Buddha for solace and comfort. The Buddha questioned her as to the cause of her

grief and was told that it was because her beloved grandchild had died. Visākhā went on to explain how much happiness he had brought her. The Buddha then asked her if she would be happy if she had thousands of grandchildren. Visākhā confirmed that she would indeed be very happy as her grandchildren brought her untold happiness. The Buddha then explained to her about the impermanence of life. “Death,” he said, “comes to all living beings. Think then how unhappy you will be, for you will have so many more grandchildren, all of whom will die one day. Surely then you will be coming like this to me for comfort many, many more times.” Visākhā reflected on the Buddha’s words and realized that the stronger her attachment, the greater would be her grief at separation. Understanding through realization that all component things are impermanent, she composed herself and left the Buddha. Visākhā was able to understand this because she had reached the first stage of sainthood, Sotāpanna, at a young age after listening to the Buddha’s teaching.

A Young Man’s Question – It was also in Sāvatti that the Buddha helped a youth to understand the reason for the varied levels of spiritual development of the devotees who visited His Dhamma halls daily. Every evening a young man visited the Buddha and listened to His Dhamma, but never put His teachings into practise. After a few years the young man approached the Buddha and said, “Sir, I have a question that has raised some doubts in my mind.” The Buddha replied, “There should be no doubts regarding the Dhamma. What is your question?”

The young man then said that he had been coming to listen to the Buddha, to His Dhamma hall, for many years. He had observed that some of the devotees, monks, and nuns were obviously liberated. Some others had experienced some change in their lives for they were better than they had been before; and yet there were some others, like himself, who had not changed for the better. He went on to explain that people came to the Buddha because He was fully enlightened, compassionate, and powerful. He then asked, “Why do you not use your power to liberate them all?”

The Buddha then asked the young man which city he was from. The youth replied that he was originally from Rājagaha, but that he had been living in Sāvatti for many years. The Buddha then questioned him if he still had ties in Rājagaha. The young man said that he did. He said that he had many relatives there, that he still conducted business in Rājagaha, and that he visited the city often. The Buddha then questioned if he was familiar with the road between Sāvatti and Rājagaha. The youth replied that he knew it so well that he could walk the distance blindfolded. The Buddha then asked if others asked him for directions when they had to visit Rājagaha and if he helped them when they did. The youth replied that many people had questioned him on the directions and that, having nothing to hide, he had given detailed directions to Rājagaha. “These people,” said the Buddha, “to whom you give detailed instruction, do they all reach Rājagaha?” The man replied that not all of them reached Rājagaha, and that it was only those who traversed the entire path who reached Rājagaha.

The Buddha then gently explained to the youth that there were many who came to Him to learn the path to Nibbāna because He had realized the Truth and found the path to liberation. “And

because I have nothing to hide, I explain the path to them in detail. They listen to me carefully, but many do not walk the path to liberation. At most, with love and compassion, I can show you the path to liberation. I cannot carry anyone on my shoulders. Nobody can. Each step you take brings you closer to your destination. But you have to make the effort. You have to take the steps. He who has taken a hundred steps is a hundred steps closer to the goal. He who has taken all the steps has reached the final goal. The compassionate Buddhas show you the path. You have to exert yourself and walk the path.”

*With this beautiful explanation, the Buddha illustrates a fundamental concept of Buddhism. The Buddha was not a saviour. There is no saviour in the Buddha’s teaching. No God, Deva, or Brahma can liberate a person. The Supreme Buddhas are compassionate teachers who have, over countless years, perfected themselves and realized the Truth in order to teach the path to men and Gods. **You are your own saviour.***

The Buddha was of service to countless persons, and many significant incidents occurred in Sāvatti during His twenty-five years of residence at Jetavana and Pubbārāma. Santati, Patāchārā, Mattakundali, Chakkhupāla, Subha, and Uppalavanna are a few of the others who benefitted from the Buddha’s grace, compassion and teachings during His stay in Sāvatti.

SĀVATTHI – 1992 A.D.

When I first set foot in the Jetavana I was overwhelmed by the knowledge that this very soil I was now treading was also made sacred by the footsteps of the Buddha. Having spent 25 rainy seasons in Sāvatti, there was no doubt in my mind that the Buddha would have walked every inch of the park. How awe-inspiring it was to think that I would have the good fortune to tread even on the same soil that He had trod two thousand five hundred and sixty years ago.

We started by visiting the Nava Jetavana Vihara, just across from the main entrance of Jetavana. Exquisite paintings of the main events that occurred in Sāvatti, together with the important events of the Buddha's life, make this a unique temple. The paintings are very realistic and vibrant, transporting you back to the times when these events took place. The thirty-one life-size paintings include events such as the Buddha's first discourse in Isipatana and the Buddha's parinibbāna at Kusinārā, as well as events that happened in Savatti, such as the purchase of Jetavana, the planting of the Ānanda Bhodi, the blind monk Chakkhupala who unknowingly walked on insects while performing the walking meditation, Mattakundali, the son of a wealthy but miserly father, the death of Devadatta on his way to meet the Buddha to beg for forgiveness, Angulimala, Patāchārā, the nun Uppalavanna who was raped by a former admirer, and the grief-stricken Kisagothami with her dead child.

Walking through the main gate, we saw to the left of us the remains of a small temple, with a main shrine and two smaller shrines on either side. It is said that the main shrine contained a statue of the Lord Buddha, while the smaller shrines contained statues of Maitreya and Avalokitesvara.

Further along are the remains of a monastery with a courtyard and an octagonal well. The eight sides of the well may have represented the Noble Eightfold Path. This monastery is said to have been first built in the sixth century and rebuilt again on the same plan in about the twelfth century.

We walked a short distance north of the monastery and saw a cluster of eight brick stupas said to house the relics of important monks who lived in Jetavana. One stupa, dating from the fifth century, bore the name of Buddhadeva.

It was very hot and humid. When a cool breeze fanned our cheeks, we turned the corner to see the lush green foliage of the Ānanda Bodhi. The beautiful tree with its branches outspread looked as if it was radiating compassion and loving kindness to all quarters of the world. The original tree planted by the Ven. Ānanda is said to have died. It has been replaced by another sapling of the Bodhi Tree in Budh Gaya. The wind rustled through the leaves in song. As we sat beneath the tree and lit our oil lamps and incense I thought of all the pilgrims who had come before me, the devotees of the Buddha who had walked many miles to honour Him only to find that He was not present. Gazing at the beautiful tree I felt the presence of the Buddha. Was He with us or was it just my vivid imagination? A vision of the serene Buddha with His gentle

smile passed before my eyes. Yes, just

as it was two thousand five hundred and sixty years ago, the Buddha was not in attendance for us to pay homage. But He was present just as He had been for all the other devotees who visited Jetavana. And He would be there for all the pilgrims of the future as long as we lived His Dhamma. I saw the tired faces of the many devotees etched with disappointment at not seeing the Buddha. And then felt the calm solace that replaced the disappointment as they gently paid homage to the beautiful tree.



Ānanda Bodhi

We continued north toward the ruins of the Kosambakuti. When Huien Tsiang visited Jetavana the Kosambakuti was still intact and housed a beautiful carved statue of the Buddha in pink sandstone. The statue, which was unearthed by Cunningham, lies in the museum in Calcutta. The foundations of this brick structure are all that are left.

The multi-storeyed Ghandakuti, the most beautiful and decorative building where the Buddha resided, was made of sandalwood and is said to have burnt down when a mouse upturned an oil lamp left in the premises. The ruins which we saw date back to the Gupta period and consist of a rectangular terrace with stairs. The 2 metre thick walls ensured warmth during the cold season and a cooler interior in summer. The original Ghandakuti is said to have had a bathroom, a small bedchamber, and a jewelled staircase on which the Buddha stood to address His monks.

The Sumangalavilasini states that people had gathered around the Ghandakuti to mourn the Parinibbāna of the Buddha. Ven. Ānanda, on returning to Jetavana from Kusinārā, consoled the people with a discourse on impermanence. He then opened the doors, dusted the Buddha's chair, swept away the faded garlands and flowers, and arranged the Buddha's bed and chair in the same manner as he was accustomed to do each day when the Buddha was in residence.



Ghandakuti at Sāvattī

Even though the ruins in no way resembled the original building, the Ghandakuti left a lasting memory, for this too was one of the unchanging sites. Countless Buddhas had made this site their home during the rainy season. I felt the presence of the Sages of the past – a strange compelling force. I saw the Buddha standing on the jewelled staircase so all could see and hear Him, His sweet and gentle voice reaching down to the monks and devotees, each one feeling that it was to him and only to him that the Buddha spoke. I saw the Buddha devoting Himself to the welfare of mankind, sleeping only one or two hours a day; the Buddha rising early and looking at the world with compassion to seek out those He could help; the Buddha leaving to attend an invitation to partake in the noonday meal; the Buddha patiently teaching the assembled devotees; the Buddha gently bathing the infected wounds of Putigatta Tissa; the Buddha consoling the grieving. As the waves of pictures flashed before my eyes I was moved to tears. Was there any other person so compassionate, so great? Was there any other person who had devoted forty-five years of His life to the welfare of living beings with just one or two hours of rest a day? Was there any other person who had perfected Himself with determination and fortitude over a period of three hundred thousand world cycles intermittent with twenty immeasurable periods, so that

He could achieve enlightenment and become a Buddha to help mankind? I was reminded of the words of the Bodhisatta Gotama (then known as Sumedha) at the time of the Dipankara Buddha, just before He received the definite prophecy. He said:

*“Today if such were my desire,
I my corruptions might consume.
But why thus in an unknown guise
Should I the Doctrine fruit secure?”*

*Omniscience first will I achieve.
And be a **Buddha** in the world.
Why should I a valorous man,
The ocean seek to cross alone?
Omniscience first will I achieve,
And men and Gods convey across.”*

Knowing that there were many pitfalls between this time and the time when He would reach Supreme Buddha-hood, knowing that in samsara He may through His action be born in one of the unhappy worlds, knowing that He had the capability to reach enlightenment, the Bodhisatta Sumedha gave it up for us. He gave it up for the good of men and Gods. How fortunate I was to be able to visit the place where such a being had lived.

Walking down the path we came to a large monastery and a pond of green water. We were told that the pond was possibly close to the place Devadatta had reached before he died. Many other ruins were shown to us, one of which was said to have been the mansion of Anāthapindika. Large underground rooms could have been the rooms that housed his golden treasures. They could also have been meditation rooms for monks, and the compound a large monastery. The site where Angulimala helped the distressed mother was also identified, though there was no archeological proof to point out the exact location.

KUSINĀRĀ – SĀLA GARDEN OF MALLAS – 543 B.C.

Three months had passed since the Exalted One had informed Ānanda that He would be entering Pari Nirvana (passing away). Leaving Vesali, the Buddha walked slowly toward Kusinārā.

The Gotama Buddha was weary and in great pain. Reaching Pava, the Buddha had His last meal, a dish known as Sukramaddava, prepared with great devotion by Cunda. As requested, Cunda served the Buddha and buried the rest of the food. The pains in the Buddha's stomach were very strong. Calmly, He bore the pain and informed Ānanda that the merit earned by Cunda, who served Him His last meal, and by Sujātā, who served Him the meal before enlightenment, were the same. Thus the compassionate Buddha forestalled any remorse on the part of Cunda, as He knew that He would be passing away shortly after His meal.

He was thirsty. The Buddha requested a drink of water from Ānanda. Venerable Ānanda took his bowl and walked to a nearby stream. The water in the pond was muddy. Five hundred carts and oxen had just crossed it, churning up the mud. Venerable Ānanda returned without the water and told the Buddha that he was unable to provide Him with clean drinking water. For the second time the Buddha requested that Ānanda bring Him water, as His thirst was unbearable. Ānanda again walked to the stream and found that the water was still muddy and unclean. He came back without the water. Through parched lips the Buddha requested water for the third time, telling Ānanda to somehow find Him some water, as His thirst was unendurable. Ānanda walked to the stream and found the water clear and blue. Taking the Buddha's bowl, he filled it with drinking water and gave it to the Buddha to drink.

The Buddha was in great pain. With compassion He showed Ānanda the blood that He was passing and told him that He was like every other living being, subject to illness, pain and decay. The only difference between Him and others was that He had reached perfection in mind and realized the Truth. It was His mind that was enlightened.

Very slowly the Buddha walked toward the Sāla grove of the Mallas. It is said that the Buddha was so weak that He had to stop many times to rest. On the way a man by the name of Pukkusa heard His Dhamma and presented Him with two golden robes. As directed by the Buddha, he robed the Buddha with one and the Venerable Ānanda with the other. When the Buddha was robed, the Venerable Ānanda was surprised to find that the skin of the Holy One was exceedingly bright, so that the golden robe seemed dull in comparison. The Buddha informed Ānanda that the Tathagata's skin becomes clear and exceedingly bright on two occasions: the night He attains Buddhahood and the night He passes away. He then announced that at the third watch of the night He would pass away at the Sāla grove of the Mallas.

The Buddha reached the Twin Sāla trees and asked Ānanda to prepare a couch for Him with His head facing north. Seeing the sāla trees in full bloom even though it was out of season, the Buddha said: "It is not thus that the Tathāgatha is respected, venerated, honoured and revered. Whatever Bhikku or Bhikkuni, Upāsaka or Upāsika lives in accordance with the teachings,

conducts himself dutifully and acts righteously, it is he who respects venerates, honours and reveres the Thathāgata with the highest homage.”

At that moment Upavāna, a former attendant of the Buddha, was standing in front of the Buddha, fanning Him. The Buddha asked him to stand aside, as the Devas had assembled in large numbers to see the Tathāgata and were displeased that he was standing in Their way. The Buddha then spoke of four places made sacred by His association, which faithful followers should visit.

1. **Lumbini** – *The birthplace of the Buddha.*
2. **Buddha Gaya** – *Where He attained enlightenment.*
3. **Isipatana** – *Where He established the incomparable Wheel of Truth (Dhammacakka).*
4. **Kusinārā** – *Where the Buddha attained Parinibbāna.*

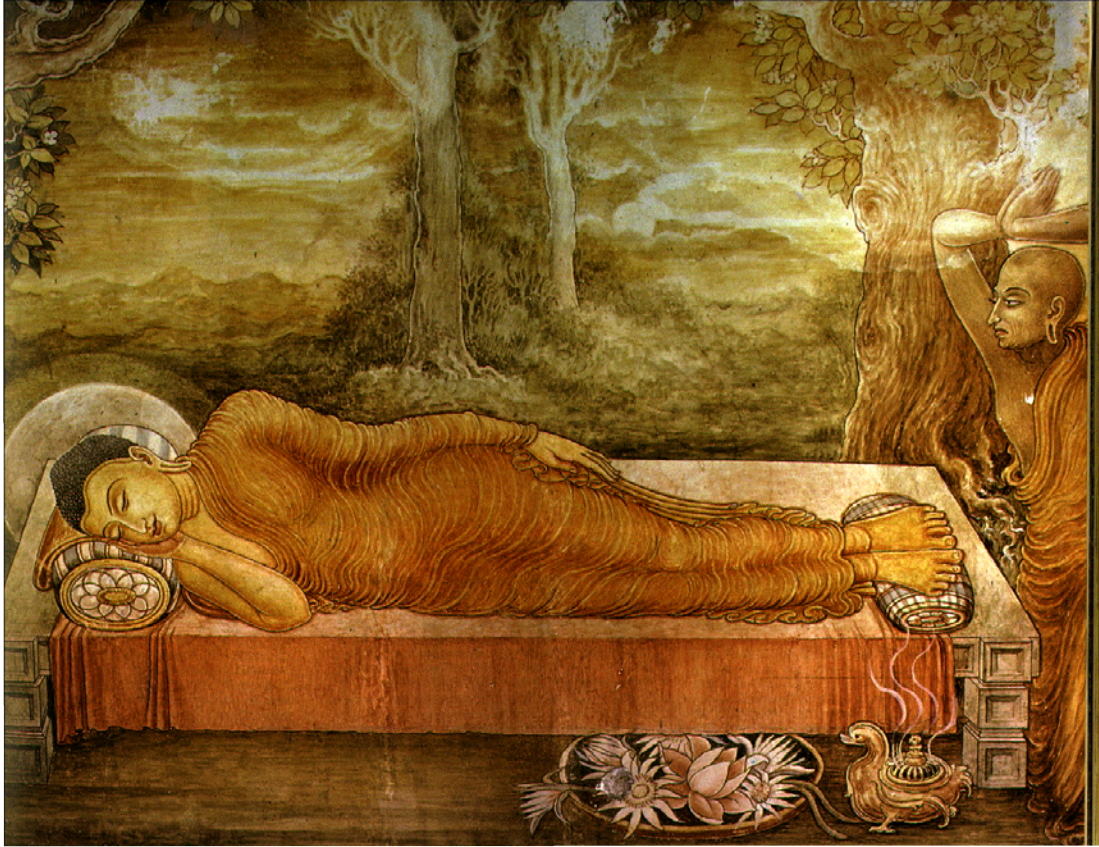
“And they,” added the Buddha, “who shall die with a believing heart in the course of their pilgrimage, will be reborn on the dissolution of their body after death in a heavenly state.”

At this time Subhadda, a wandering ascetic, came to Him to clear up a doubt. Happy with the Buddha's teaching he took refuge in the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha, and requested permission to be a monk. He was the last disciple ordained personally by the Buddha.

The Buddha then addressed His monks and asked them to question Him on any doubts they may have had. Hearing none, the Buddha addressed His disciples and said: “Subject to change are all component things. Strive on with diligence.” These were His last words. It was the full moon day in the month of May in the year 543 B.C. In the third watch of the night the Blessed One passed away.

For six days the grieving Mallas paid homage to the remains of the Holy One with garlands, perfume and music. On the seventh day, the day of the cremation, Kusinārā was knee-deep with flowers as Devas from the Heavens and Mallas from Earth paid homage to the body of the Blessed One. They carried the body to the Makuta Bandhana shrine.

On the instructions of Venerable Ānanda the last rites were performed. A sandalwood pyre was made to cremate the remains of the Blessed One. However, it was found that the sandalwood pyre would not catch fire. The Arahant Anuruddha who was in attendance informed those gathered that the Arahant Mahā Kassapa and a retinue of five hundred monks were on their way to pay homage to the remains of the Buddha. The Arahant Maha Kassapa had aspired to pay homage to the Buddha prior to His cremation. “The pyre,” he said, “would burn when they reached Kusinārā.” When they arrived the sandalwood pyre shifted to expose the sacred foot of the Buddha. The Arahant Kassapa and his retinue of five hundred monks touched His sacred foot and paid homage to Him. The sandalwood pyre then took flame and a blaze of fire ascended toward the heavens. A gentle shower of sandalwood and flowers rained over Him. The sky darkened and gloom prevailed. The “Light of the World” was no more.



In the third watch of the night the Blessed One passed away.

(Picture courtesy of Budu Maga)

The news of the Buddha's Parinirvāna spread far and wide and soon a number of kings were demanding a portion of the relics. There arose a dispute as to how His remains should be divided. With the help of Brāhmana Dona the dispute was settled amicably, and it was decided that the relics would be divided equally into eight portions and be shared among eight kingdoms as follows:

Ajāsattu, King of Magadha
Lichchavis of VaiSāla (Vesāli)
Sakyas of Kapilavastu
Koliyas of Rāmagāma
Kshastriyas of Bulikā
Brahaman of Vethadipaka
Mallas of Pāvā
Mallas of Kusinārā

KUSINĀRĀ – SĀLA GARDEN OF THE MALLAS – 1992 A.D.

It was midafternoon when we drove into the sleepy little town of Kushinagar. It was summer in the year 1992, two thousand five hundred and thirty-five years after the Parinibbāna of the Blessed One. We walked to Pāvā where the Buddha had His last meal. A very old gilded statue of the Lord Buddha seated in the lotus position was housed in a very old building. It was dark and gloomy. Iron bars blocked our view and entrance to the building. We had to be satisfied with a glimpse of the Buddha through the iron bars. Pressing my face close to the bars, I viewed the Buddha. After the bright sunshine it was difficult for my eyes to adjust to the gloom of the interior. After awhile I saw Him. Gilded in gold. The serene smile that hid the excruciating pain. The beautiful calm face radiating peace and compassion. The half-closed eyes drew me nearer.

We went to the stream where Ānanda had filled the Buddha's bowl with drinking water. It was now a dried-up pond, the sides of which were caked with mud, not much bigger than the big pot-holes we drove through on the way down. Some muddy water remained in the pond but most of it had dried up as the relentless sun beat down on it mercilessly. Gone were the shade-giving trees that had cooled the air. The huge, gnarled trees under which the Buddha had periodically rested were long gone. Most of the area was bare with a scattering of trees.

We drove to the Sāla garden of the Mallas. How had the Buddha walked so far? It must have been about six miles from Pava where He had His last meal to the Sāla garden at Kusinārā. What determination He must have had to control the pain and discomfort!

When Huien Tsiang visited Kusinārā many of the monasteries and temples had been destroyed, leaving behind only ruins. Amidst this rubble he had seen a beautiful reclining Buddha in front of a large stupa and a huge pillar. Since that time Kusinārā had undergone further decline. As late as 1854 there was no indication as to the whereabouts of Kusinārā, the final resting place of the Buddha. Cunningham visited the site of Kusia after hearing about the possibility that it could be Kusinārā. In 1876, Cunningham's assistant, Carlleyle, did excavation work near Kusia and discovered the large reclining Buddha. However, it was only in 1904, when a seal and a copper plate describing the Mahāparinirvāna Vihāra and the Parinirvāna Chaitya were unearthed, that archeologists proved conclusively that Kusia was indeed Kusinārā, the final resting place of the Buddha.

The sun was lower in the sky when we looked at the two new sāla trees that had been planted to commemorate the passing of the Blessed One. They were grown in front of the original Sāla trees under which the Buddha had rested. A big building known as the Nirvana temple, built by the Indian Government in 1956, housed a 6.1 meter-long golden statue of the reclining Buddha said to be on the exact spot where the Buddha had passed away. Excavations showed that the original temple consisted of an oblong hall and antechamber with its entrance facing west. The large number of curved bricks found among the debris indicated that the original temple also had a barrel-shaped, vaulted ceiling similar to that of the modern temple. The temple was surrounded by many brick remains of monasteries. They had been unearthed by the famous

archaeologists, Cunningham and Carlleyle, in 1876. The remains of eight little stupas that King Asoka had built to depict the division of the relics were behind the temple. We walked into the Nirvana temple.



Nirvana Temple at Kusinārā

The beautiful majestic statue of the reclining Buddha is an architectural gem. The original statue built in the fifth century had sunk. Carlleyle had carefully unearthed it and restored it to its former glory.

This is an extraordinary sculpture. It is made of a single slab of red sandstone overlaid with gold. The Buddha rests on His right side with His head facing north. The right hand is placed under His head with the left hand gently resting on His thigh. The architect has very cleverly portrayed the last moments of the Buddha. The Divine Face is alive, having different expressions depending on the angle of viewing. When you stand directly across from the Buddha's face, His face looks calm, serene and contemplative. When you walk to the middle of the statue you can see and feel the excruciating pain the Buddha must have felt during His last moments. The gentle face with the serene smile is etched with the pain He is experiencing. When you walk down to the sacred feet and looked up at the face, the face bears a gentle smile. Gone is the pain and suffering. The smiling Buddha had achieved His goal. He had conquered death and sorrow. The Buddha again seems tranquil and at peace. A lotus cushion supports His sacred feet. The marking of the chakra on the sacred sole of His foot is faded but still clear. At the base of the statue facing west are three small figurines which are somewhat disfigured. A distraught woman with streaming hair is said to depict the grieving Mallas. A monk in meditation, his back to the viewers, depicts the Arahants who accepted His passing away with calm. A monk overcome with grief, resting his head on his right hand, could be Venerable Ānanda or any of the other grieving monks. A partly damaged inscription at the centre reads: "This image is the meritorious gift of Haribala, a monk from the Great Monastery, and was fashioned by Din...".



↑ The calm and serene Buddha

↓ The Buddha in excruciating pain



The Parinibbāna Buddha - Nirvāna Temple

With the other devotees we began to light the little oil lamps and candles we had brought. My heart was heavy and my eyes ached with unshed tears. With great determination I recited the three refuges and the five precepts. The Buddhist monks started to chant Pirith, the teachings of the Buddha. Their soft gentle voices comforted me.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning tore across the sky illuminating the Nirvāna Temple. Instantaneously the power failed, plunging us into darkness. A roll of thunder rumbled across the air and the heavens tore open. The torrential rains matched the tears that were now streaming down my face. It was as if the very heavens were crying with me. I sensed the presence of the weeping Malla kings and the Buddha's devoted attendant, Ānanda, who had served Him until the end. The heavy fragrance was intoxicating. Was it the incense we had lit or all the sandalwood and perfumed flowers that the Malla kings had strewn? The soft voices of the monks continued their chantings, comforting the grieving devotees.

It was next morning when we came back to the Nirvana temple that I saw the Buddha in His full glory by daylight. Taking the orange robe we had brought, I gently draped it over the reclining Buddha. And as before the golden face of the Buddha outshone the orange of the robe. With great sadness we walked to the place of cremation.

A great mound of bricks marked the site where the Buddha was cremated. The original stupa is said to have been about 34 metres in diameter and set on a round base 47 metres in diameter. Loose bricks lay scattered here and there. Bending down, I gathered a small piece of broken brick and sand. Maybe this bit of sand would have a speck of ashes from the funeral pyre of the Lord Buddha. Maybe not. I know in my heart that the Buddha was with me throughout the

entire pilgrimage. Or maybe it was that I had been with Him. Being touched by His presence and teachings, He would be with me, always.

I was reminded of the Buddha's words when He addressed the grieving Ānanda. The Buddha said: "Ānanda, you may think the Teacher's instruction has ceased, now we have no Teacher! But it should not be seen like this. Let the Dhamma and the discipline that I have taught and explained to you be your Teacher after my passing."

The experience of the Buddha's presence is better described by Pingiya, who had the good fortune to meet with the Buddha. After travelling a very long distance he had finally got to see and hear the Buddha. When he returned from his trip he praised the Buddha to his teacher. His teacher then asked him how he could stay away from such a teacher as the Buddha. This was Pingiya's reply

*"I cannot stay away, Brahmin, even for a moment
From Gotama of great wisdom,
From Gotama of great understanding.*

*From He who taught me the Dhamma
Which is immediately apparent, timeless.
For the destruction of craving,
And the likes of which does not exist anywhere.*

*Being heedful both day and night, Brahmin,
I see him with mind as if by eye,
And thus I do not stay away from him.*

*My faith, joy, mind and mindfulness
Never leave the good Gotama's teaching.
Wherever He of great wisdom goes,
There do I bow down.*

*I am now old and my strength is gone,
And thus my body does not go anywhere,
But constantly I go on a journey in my mind
And thus Brahmin, I am in His presence (Always)."*

The Supreme Buddha Gotama is no more. But as long as His teachings, the Dhamma, remain with us, as long as we lead our lives according to his Dhamma, The Buddha will be with us, always.

***I go to the Buddha as my refuge
I go to the Dhamma as my refuge
I go to the Sangha as my refuge***

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