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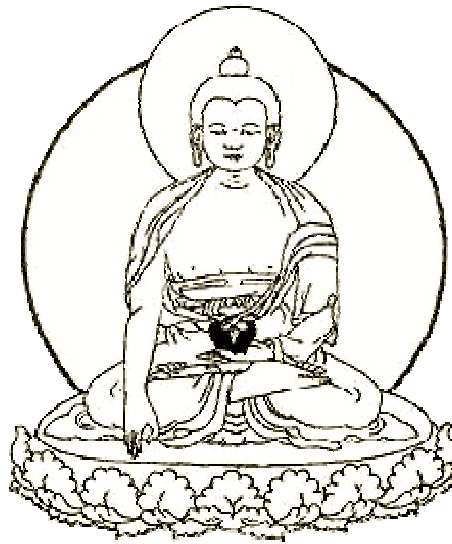
Everlasting Rain of Nectar, by Geshe Jampa Gyatso

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The Eight Places of Buddhist Pilgrimage

by Jeremy Russell

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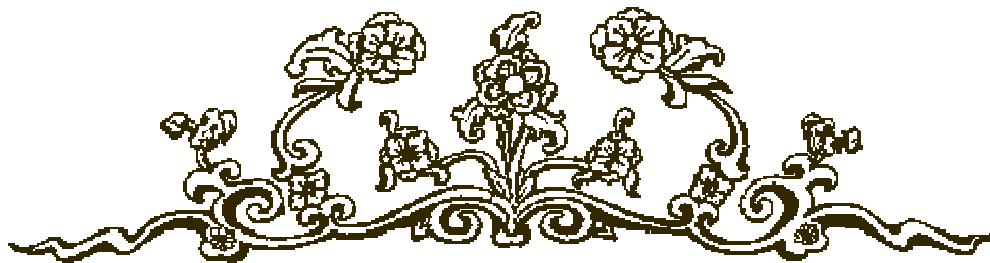
Lord Buddha said:

Monks, after my passing away, if all the sons and daughters of good family and the faithful, so long as they live, go to the four holy places, they should go and remember: here at Lumbini the enlightened one was born; here at Bodhgaya he attained enlightenment; here at Sarnath he turned twelve wheels of Dharma; and here at Kushinagar he entered parinirvana.

Monks, after my passing away there will be activities such as circumambulation of these places and prostration to them.

Thus it should be told, for they who have faith in my deeds and awareness of their own will travel to higher states.

After my passing away, the new monks who come and ask of the doctrine should be told of these four places and advised that a pilgrimage to them will help purify their previously accumulated negative karmas, even the five heinous actions.



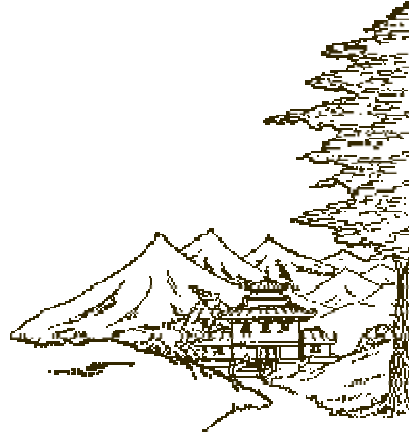
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Introduction

Across the world and throughout the ages, religious people have made pilgrimages. The Buddha himself exhorted his followers to visit what are now known as the four great places of pilgrimage: Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar. Many great teachers of the buddhist tradition maintained the practice of pilgrimage and paying respect to the holy sites. Nagarjuna, father of the mahayana, restored the temple in Bodhgaya and protected the bodhi tree, while the great Indian master Atisha, later on as important as Nagarjuna to the Tibetan tradition, also often visited Bodhgaya and indeed attained many realizations there.



Of the many places in northern India associated with the Buddha, eight in particular have become special objects of pilgrimage: the four great places above, and four others, namely, Rajgir, Shravasti, Sankashya and Nalanda, each of which is regarded as having been blessed by the Buddha. After the Buddha's passing away and the cremation of his body, the relics were divided into eight portions and various beings erected a great stupa over each. So arose the tradition of eight places of pilgrimage.

The actions of the Buddha in each of these places, recalling which is an important aspect of making pilgrimage, are described within the canons of the scriptures of the various traditions of his teaching, such as the sections on Vinaya, and also in various compendia describing his life. The sites themselves have now been identified once more with the aid of records left by three pilgrims of the past. The great Emperor Ashoka, although initially opposed to Buddhism, later became a zealous follower who in the second decade of his reign made a great pilgrimage to numerous buddhist shrines. As well as other buildings, he left inscribed pillars at each site to indicate the significance of each place. Many remains of these ancient structures survive even today.

In the early fifth century AD, the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien walked from China to India in search of buddhist books on discipline, the Vinaya. He was followed two centuries later by Hsuan Chwang. Records of the travels of both, which contain detailed accounts of the holy places they visited, have survived in Chinese. Translated into English in the last century, they are now available in most western languages.

The practice of Buddhism flourished long in India, perhaps reaching a zenith in the seventh century AD, at which time the Buddha's teaching began to be firmly established in Tibet. After this it began to decline because of the invading muslim armies, and by the twelfth century the practice of the Dharma had become sparse in its homeland. Thus, the history of the eight places of pilgrimage from the thirteenth to the mid-nineteenth centuries is obscure and they were mostly forgotten. However, it is remarkable that they all remained virtually

undisturbed by the conflicts and developments of society during that period. Subject only to the decay of time they remained dormant, waiting for rediscovery.

From the middle of the last century, the Archeological Survey of India, under the auspices of the British Government, and one Englishman in particular—General Sir Alexander Cunningham—unearthed and identified many sites, including the eight places of pilgrimage. Since that time, owing to a renewed Indian interest in Buddhism and the devotion and hardship of many individuals, the pilgrimage sites have been revived. Now, two and a half millennia after the Buddha, there are once more active buddhist establishments and practitioners of the Dharma from many lands resident in all but one of the eight places.

The following account is intended less to present a purely historical record of the places of pilgrimage than to offer some information and perhaps inspiration to other pilgrims, with the wish that this revival may increase.

Lumbini

"... here at Lumbini the enlightened one was born ..."

"After taking seven steps,
he speaks with a voice like Brahma's:
'The destroyer of old age and death
has come forth, the Greatest of Physicians.'
Looking fearlessly in all directions,
he pronounces these words rich in meaning:
'I am the first,
the best of all beings,
this is my last birth.'"

Voice of the Buddha

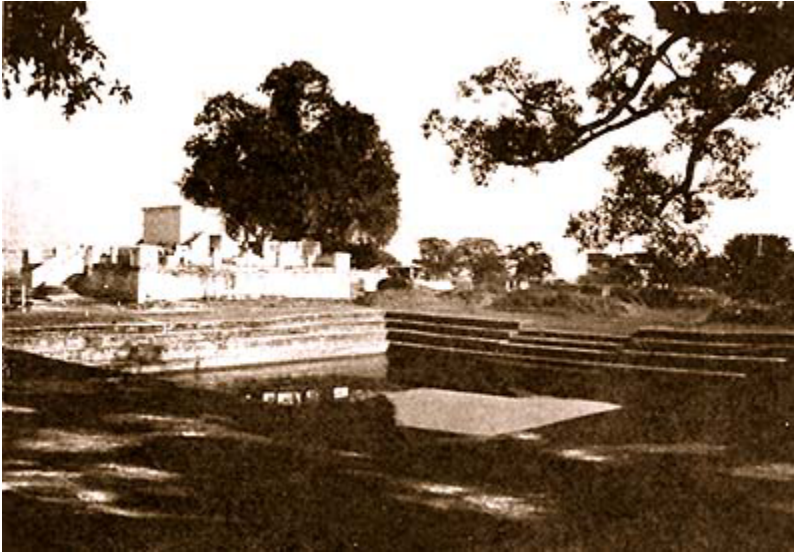
Lumbini was the birthplace of the Buddha and is now located near the Nepal-India border north of Gorakpur.

Immediately before his birth, the bodhisattva was lord of Tushita deva realm. There he had resolved to be reborn for the last time and show the attainment of enlightenment to the world. He had made the five investigations and determined that this southern continent, where men lived for one hundred years, was the most suitable place and, as the royal caste was then most respected and the lineages of King Siddhodana and his Queen Mayadevi were pure, he would be born as their son, a prince of the Shakya dynasty. Placing his crown upon the head of his successor Maitreya, the bodhisattva descended from Tushita to the world of man.



During the night of his conception, Queen Mayadevi, who is to be the mother of all the thousand buddhas of this aeon, dreamt of a great white elephant entering her womb. The earth trembled six times. It is said that in the manner of all bodhisattvas in their final birth, he remained sitting cross-legged for the whole time within the womb. Furthermore, all buddhas are born in a forest grove while their mother remains standing.

At the appointed time Queen Mayadevi was visiting the Lumbini Garden some ten miles from the Shakya city of Kapilavastu. Emerging from a bath with her face to the east, she leant her right arm on a sala tree. The bodhisattva was then born from her right side and immediately took seven steps—from which lotus flowers sprang up—in each of the four directions. To each direction he proclaimed as with a lion's roar: "I am the first, the best of all beings, this is my last birth." He looked down to predict the defeat of Mara and the benefiting of beings in the lower realms through the power of his teachings. He then looked up to indicate that all the world would come to respect and appreciate his deeds.



The gods Brahma and Indra then received him and together with the four guardian protectors bathed him. At the same time two nagas, Nanda and Upananda, caused water to cascade over him. Later a well was found to have formed there, from which even in Fa Hien's time monks continued to draw water to drink. The young prince was next wrapped in fine muslin and carried with great rejoicing to the king's palace in Kapilavastu.

Many auspicious signs accompanied the bodhisattva's birth. Also, many beings who would play major parts in his life are said to have been born on the same day: Yasodhara, his future wife; Chandaka, the groom who would later help him leave the palace; Kanthaka, the horse that would bear him; the future kings Bimbisara of Magadha and Prasenajit of Koshala; and his protector Vajrapani. The bodhi tree is also said to have sprouted on the day of Buddha's birth.

When Ashoka visited Lumbini two centuries later, his advisor, the sage Upagata, perceived by clairvoyance and described all these events, pointing out their sites to the emperor. Ashoka made many offerings, built an elaborate stupa and erected a pillar surmounted by a horse capital. When Hsuan Chwang saw it, the pillar had already been destroyed by lightning. Nevertheless, when discovered at the end of the last century the inscription which remained on the present ruin was sufficiently legible to clearly identify the site as Lumbini.

The prince, now named Siddhartha, spent his first twenty-nine years in Kapilavastu. There he performed three more of the twelve principal deeds of a buddha. Surpassing all the Shakya youths and even his teachers in all fields of learning, skill and sport, he showed that he had already mastered all the worldly arts.

One day while still a child he was left unattended beneath a tree as his father performed the ceremonial first ploughing of the season. He sat and engaged in his first meditation, attaining such a degree of absorption that five sages flying overhead were halted in mid-flight by the power of it.

Later he was married to Yasodhara and experienced a life of pleasure in the palace amongst the women of the court. Yet despite King Suddhodana's efforts to protect him from unpleasant sights, one day when riding in his chariot through Kapilavastu he happened to see a man feeble with age, another struck down with sickness, and a corpse. He immediately realised the suffering nature of men's lives. Then he saw a monk of holy countenance, and recognized his path and vocation.

It is said that a buddha renounces the world only after seeing these four signs and when a son has been born to him. Accordingly, seven days before Siddhartha would have been crowned as his father's heir, a son, Rahula, was born to Yasodhara. Without further delay Siddhartha told his father of his resolve to leave the transient luxury of worldly life and live as a renunciate in order to discover the causes of true happiness and the end of misery.

Suddhodana was reluctant to let him go. Therefore, riding the horse Kanthaka and accompanied by the groom Chandaka, Prince Siddhartha left Kapilavastu with the aid of the gods. Some distance away he performed the great renunciation, cutting off his hair and donning the robes of an ascetic. He sent Chandaka back to the palace with his jewels and horse, and entered into the homeless life.

Some years later, after attaining enlightenment, Buddha returned briefly to Kapilavastu at his father's invitation. The Buddha and his followers were welcomed and treated well by the king and the people, who listened to his teachings. Five hundred Shakya youths became monks at this time, including Rahula, the Buddha's own son, Nanda, his half brother, and Upali, the barber, who was to later become one of the Buddha's most important disciples.

The splendour of Kapilavastu did not last for long, for the city and many of the Shakya clan were destroyed by the rival king Vaidraka even within the Buddha's lifetime. When the Chinese pilgrims visited the area they found nothing but ruin and desolation and merely a handful of people and monks dwelling there. Yet all the sites of the events mentioned in the early scriptures were pointed out to them, and several of these were still marked by stupas. After this, the area was lost in jungle and earlier in this century, was still only accessible by elephant.





Now only Lumbini, the birthplace itself, has been identified with certainty. Kapilavastu has been but tentatively located. At present these sites are still being explored and some ruins have been unearthed. The remains of Ashoka's pillar can be seen, as well as a shrine of indeterminate age dedicated to Queen Mayadevi. A Nepalese buddhist temple was built in 1956 and a Tibetan monastery of the sakya order was completed in 1975, which, as well as possessing a beautiful and elaborate shrine, is well illustrated within by traditional murals. Here many young monks are studying and practising the Buddha's teachings, thereby both aiding the revival of Lumbini as a place of buddhist practice and preserving the great traditions lost in Tibet.

The Nepalese temple, which is cared for by a monk of the theravada tradition, also has rest houses within its grounds, provided by buddhists from Japan and the former U.N. General Secretary U Thant. In cooperation with the Nepalese Government, UNESCO is also helping to improve and develop this first of the eight pilgrimage places.

Bodhgaya

"... here at Bodhgaya he attained enlightenment ..."

"Here on this seat my body may shrivel up,
my skin, my bones, my flesh may dissolve,
but my body will not move from this very seat
until I have attained Enlightenment,
so difficult to attain in the course of many *kalpas*."

Voice of the Buddha

The bodhisattva, having renounced the luxurious life of Prince Siddhartha, now as Gautama the ascetic, walked in a south-easterly direction from Kapilavastu and came to Vaishali. Here he listened briefly to the teaching of Arada Kalapa, an aberrant samkhya, but left dissatisfied. Crossing the river Ganges he once again entered the kingdom of Magadha and came to Rajgir, the capital, where he listened to the yogic teachings of Rudraka. Again dissatisfied, he left followed by the five ascetics. Together with them he came to the village of Uravilva on the banks of the Nairanjana river, which is close to the place now known as Bodhgaya. Here they engaged in long, austere practices. For the first two years Gautama ate but one grain of rice a day, and for the next four years he ate nothing at all. He remained sitting in continual meditation despite the almost complete degeneration of his body.

Six years after his initial renunciation he realized that extreme mortification does not yield liberation. He arose and broke the austerities. The five ascetics were disgusted and departed to Benares.

As his former garments had perished, he took a yellow shroud from the corpse of a servant girl awaiting cremation nearby. To help him wash it, the god Indra struck the ground and produced a pond. A local brahmin's daughter, Sujata, approached and offered him a golden bowl filled with rice prepared in the essence of the milk of one thousand cows. Renewed in body and mind, his complexion brilliant as the lustre of burnished gold, the bodhisattva bathed and then walked to a nearby cave to continue his meditation. However, the earth shook and the voices of previous buddhas resounded in the air, telling him that this was not the place of his enlightenment and advising him to proceed to the nearby bodhi tree. The sites of all these events were seen by the Chinese pilgrims in the fifth and seventh centuries, and they record that stupas had been constructed at each. None of these exist today.

As he walked to the tree the graincutter Svastika gave him a bundle of kusha grass. A flock of birds flew around the bodhisattva three times. When he entered the area about the tree, the earth shook. He made himself a seat from the kusha grass on the eastern side of the tree and after seven



circumambulations sat down facing the east. He made the great resolve not to rise again until enlightenment had been attained, even if his skin, bones and flesh should crumble away. Sending forth a beam of light from the hair-treasure between his eye-brows, he invoked Mara, who came to challenge him. Mara dispatched first his horrible armies and next his enticing daughters, but the bodhisattva remained unmoved and defeated him, calling upon the earth and her goddess as his witness. He continued in profound meditation through the three watches of the night and finally realized supreme enlightenment at dawn. The air filled with flowers and light, and the earth trembled seven times.

For seven days the Buddha continued to meditate beneath the tree without stirring from his seat and for six weeks more remained in the vicinity. During the second week he walked up



and down, lotus flowers springing from his footsteps, and pondered whether or not to teach. This was later represented by the chankramanar jewel walk, a low platform adorned with eighteen lotuses, which now runs close and parallel to the north side of the Mahabodhi Temple. For another week he sat gratefully contemplating the bodhi tree; this spot was later marked by the animeshalochana stupa, now situated to the north of the chankramanar. Brahma and Indra offered a hall made of the seven precious substances, in which the Buddha sat for a week radiating lights of five colours from his body to illuminate the bodhi tree. Hsuan Chwang describes this site as being west of the tree and remarks that in time the precious substances had changed to stone. However, ratnaghara is now identified by some as a roofless shrine again north of chankramanar.

During a week of unusually inclement weather, the naga king Muchalinda wrapped his body seven times about the meditating Buddha, protecting him from the rain, wind and insects. Hsuan Chwang saw a small temple next to the tank, thought to be this naga's abode. He described it as being somewhat southeast of the bodhi tree and it is now identified with the dry pond in Mucherim village near Bodhgaya.

While the Buddha sat meditating beneath the ajapala nigrodha tree, Brahma came and requested him to teach the Dharma. Hsuan Chwang saw this tree with a small temple and stupa beside it at the southeast corner of the bodhi tree enclosure. It is thought that the site is now within the Mahanta's graveyard near the present eastern gate.

Buddha spent the last of the seven weeks seated beneath the tarayana tree. Hsuan Chwang placed this some distance south and east of the bodhi tree enclosure, near the places where the bodhisattva earlier had bathed and eaten Sujata's offering. All were marked by stupas. Here two passing merchants, Trapusha and Bhallika, offered the Buddha the first food since his enlightenment. Seeing that he needed a vessel to receive it, the four guardians of the directions each offered precious bowls, but he would only accept one of stone from each. He pressed the four bowls together to form one, which survived, and when Fa Hien saw it in Peshawar four rims could be seen in the one.

After thus spending forty-nine days meditating close to the seat of enlightenment, the Buddha left Bodhgaya on foot to meet the five ascetics at Benares in order to turn the first wheel of Dharma. This accomplished, he returned briefly to Uruvela and introduced the three brothers—Uruvela, Gaya and Nadi Kasyapa—to his teachings. They developed faith in the Buddha and, together with a thousand of their followers, became monks and accompanied Shakyamuni to Rajgir.

Thus far we have described Bodhgaya only in connection with Shakyamuni Buddha, but that connection is in no way exclusive. In the same manner as Shakyamuni, all the buddhas who show enlightenment to this world eat a meal of milk rice, sit upon a carpet of grass at Vajrasana, engage in meditation, defeat Mara and his forces and attain supreme enlightenment beneath the bodhi tree (although the species of tree differs with each buddha).



The present bodhi tree is a descendant of the original, for the tree has been destroyed deliberately on at least three occasions. King Ashoka, initially hostile to Buddhism, ordered it to be cut down and burned on the spot, but when the tree sprang up anew from the flames his attitude was transformed. In deep regret for his destruction, Ashoka lavished so much personal care and attention on the new tree that his queen became jealous and secretly had it destroyed once more. Again Ashoka revived it and built a protective enclosing wall, as had previously been done by King Prasenajit of Koshala within the Buddha's lifetime. Later, Nagarjuna is said to have built an enclosure to protect the tree from damage by elephants and, when in time this became less effective, placed a statue of Mahakala upon each pillar.

Records of the third destruction of the tree are given by Hsuan Chwang, who reports seeing remains of these walls, and states that in the sixth century a saivite king of Bengal by the name of Shasanka destroyed the tree. However, even though he dug deep into its roots, he was unable to unearth it completely. It was afterwards revived by Purvavarma of Magadha, who poured the milk of one thousand cows upon it, causing it to sprout again and grow ten feet in a single night.

In addition to human destruction, the tree has perhaps perished naturally several times, yet the pipal is renowned for growing wherever its seeds fall and the direct lineage has continued. General Cunningham offers an example. After showing severe decay for more than a decade, the remains of the old tree fell over during a storm one night in 1876. Young sprouts were already growing within the old tree (which grew into the one we see today).

The origins of the Mahabodhi Temple, which adorns the site today, are shrouded in obscurity. Various traditions hold that Ashoka erected a diamond throne shrine, which seems to have been a canopy supported by four pillars over a stone representation of Vajrasana. When General Cunningham was restoring the floor of the present temple he found traces that he took to be the remains of the shrine. It is his opinion that the temple may have been built between the fifth and seventh centuries, but this would seem to be based on Hsuan Chwang's detailed description of it, while Fa Hien mentions it not at all. Others propose that because of its resemblance to similar structures in Ghandhara, Nalanda and so forth, as well as other archaeological evidence, its founding could have been as early as the second century AD—Nagarjuna is reputed to have built the original stupa upon the roof, which is more consistent with the latter theory. However, from Hsuan Chwang we can be certain that the temple existed before the seventh century.



Accounts of the builder are no longer clear. Some legends attest that he was a brahmin acting on the advice of Shiva. The statue in the main shrine of the temple, famous for its likeness to Shakyamuni, is said to have been the work of Maitreya in the appearance of a brahmin artisan.

Monastic tradition seems to have been strong in Bodhgaya. Fa Hien mentions three monasteries and Hsuan Chwang describes particularly the magnificent Mahabodhi Sangharama, founded early in the fourth century by a king of Ceylon. Both pilgrims make special remark of the strict observance of the Vinaya by the monks residing there. Some accounts tell that the great master Atisha, who later emphasised pure practice of the Vinaya, received ordination in Bodhgaya.

As elsewhere, neglect and desolation followed the muslim invasion of northern India. However, extensive repairs and restoration of the temple and environs in the fourteenth century by the Burmese and their further attempts in the early nineteenth century are recorded. In the late sixteenth century a wandering sanyasi settled in Bodhgaya and founded the establishment which is now the math of the Mahanta. When in 1891 Anagarika Dharmapala, inspired by appeals in the press by Sir Edwin Arnold, began the Mahabodhi Society and sought to restore the site as a buddhist shrine, he was obstructed by bureaucracy. The British Government of India decided that the temple and its surroundings were the property of the saivite Mahanta, who only then began to take an interest in it. Nearly sixty years of judicial wrangling followed until the Mahabodhi Temple was legally recognized as belonging to buddhists.

Since the inception of the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee and the beginning of its active administration in 1953, vast improvements have been made to both the temple and its grounds. Existing structures have been repaired and new stupas are being erected. With the reintroduction of gilded images in the niches of the Mahabodhi Temple, it begins to regain some of the splendour described by Hsuan Chwang.

The establishment, in the surrounding district, of beautiful temples and monasteries by the people of Tibet, Japan, China, Thailand, Burma and others has brought back to Bodhgaya the varied traditions of buddhist practice that have evolved in those lands. By contrast, the headless, mutilated statues in the local museum present a disturbing reminder of past destruction.

Pilgrims abound in Bodhgaya and in recent years thousands have had the fortune to listen to the Dharma there. Many buddhist masters are again travelling to Bodhgaya to turn the wheel of Dharma. For example, the Kalachakra empowerment given by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1974 was attended by over 100,000 devotees. The Tibetan monastery now offers a two-month meditation course annually for the international buddhist community, and meditation courses and teachings are given occasionally in the Burmese, Thai, Japanese and other temples.



Sarnath

"... here at Sarnath he turned twelve wheels of Dharma ..."

"Keep in mind this most beautiful wood,
named by the great rishi,
where ninety-one thousand *kotis* of Buddhas
formerly turned the Wheel.
This place is matchless, perfectly calm,
contemplating, always frequented by deer.
In this most beautiful of parks,
whose name was given by the rishi,
I will turn the holy Wheel."

Voice of the Buddha

All the 1,000 buddhas of this aeon, after demonstrating the attainment of enlightenment at Vajrasana, proceed to Sarnath to give the first turning of the wheel of Dharma. In like manner, Shakyamuni walked from Bodhgaya to Sarnath in order to meet the five ascetics who had left him earlier. Coming to the Ganges, he crossed it in one step, where King Ashoka later made Pataliputra his capital city. He entered Benares early one morning, made his alms round, bathed, ate his meal and, leaving by the east gate of the city, walked northwards to Rishipatana Mrigadava, the rishi's Deer Park.

There are many legends about the origin of this name. Fa Hien says that the rishi was a pratyeka buddha who had dwelt there but, on hearing that the son of King Suddhodana was about to become a supreme buddha, entered nirvana. Others mention 500 pratyeka buddhas and Hsuan Chwang mentions a stupa marking the site of their nirvana.

The name Deer Park derives from an occasion in one of Shakyamuni's former lives as a bodhisattva, when he was leading a herd of deer. After much indiscriminate plundering of the herd by a local king, an agreement was made with him that one of their number would be offered only when necessary. The turn came of a doe, who was shortly to give birth and wished to delay until then. The bodhisattva offered himself in her stead, which so impressed the king that he not only resolved to refrain from killing deer in future but gave the park to them as their own.



At this place the five ascetics had resumed their austere practices. When they saw the Buddha approaching, thinking him still to be the Gautama who had forsaken their path, they decided not to welcome him. Yet, as he neared they found themselves involuntarily rising and paying respect. Proclaiming that he was the Buddha, Shakyamuni assured them that the goal had been attained. Hsuan Chwang saw a large, dome-shaped stupa on this spot, where a large mound,

probably its remains, surmounted by a muslim monument now, stands a short distance south of the park.

During the first watch of the night the Buddha was silent, during the second he made a little conversation and at the third began the teaching. At the spot where all the buddhas first turn the wheel, 1,000 thrones appeared. Shakyamuni circumambulated those of the three previous buddhas and sat upon the fourth. Light radiated from his body, illuminating the 3,000 worlds, and the earth trembled. Brahma offered him a 1,000-spoked golden wheel, and Indra and other gods also made offerings, all imploring the Buddha to teach.

Thus, inviting the gods and all who wished to hear, and saying that he spoke not for the purpose of debate but in order to help living beings gain control of their minds, Shakyamuni began the first turning of the wheel of Dharma. He taught the middle way, that avoids the extremes of pleasure and austerity, the four noble truths, and the eightfold path. Kaundmya was the first of the five ascetics to understand and realize the teaching; Ashvajit was the last. All eventually became arhants.

The teachings included in the collection known as the first turning of the wheel, which began here, extended over a period of seven years. Other teachings, such as those on the Vinaya and on the practice of close placement of mindfulness, were given elsewhere, but the wheel was turned twelve times at Sarnath.

From the time of the Buddha, monastic tradition flourished for over 1,500 years on the site of the Deer Park. Amongst the many ruins, archaeologists have found traces dating from as early as the third century B.C., and the existing inscription of Ashoka's pillar, dating from that time, implies that a monastery was already established during Ashoka's reign. Fa

Hien speaks of two monasteries with monks in residence, while two centuries later Hsuan Chwang describes a mahavihara encompassing eight divisions. This contained a great temple with ornate balconies, over one hundred niches containing gilt images in its walls, and a statue of the Buddha in the teaching posture.

The last monastery constructed before the muslim invasion, the Dharmachakra-jina vihara, was the largest of all. It was built by Kumaradevi, queen of King Govindachandra, who ruled in Benares from 1114-1154. Here a surviving fragment of stone inscription records that in 1058 a monk presented a gift copy of the *Prajnaparamita Sutra* to the monastery: evidence of mahayana activity at that time. The discovery in the area of ancient statues of



Heruka and Arya Tara shows that vajrayana was also practised there.

Formerly, two great stupas adorned the site. Only the Dhamekha remains, assigned by its inscription to the sixth century. The Dharmarajika stupa built by Ashoka, some say upon the very place of the teaching, was pulled down in the eighteenth century by Jagat Singh, who consigned the casket of relics contained within it to the Ganges river. Hsuan Chwang describes that Ashoka's pillar, which stood in front of the stupa, was so highly polished that it constantly reflected the stupa's statue of the Buddha.

Benares, which was the second city to reappear following the last destruction of the world, was also a site of the previous buddha's manifestations. Kashyapa, the third buddha of this aeon, built a monastery near Deer Park, where he ordained the brahmin boy, Jotipala, an earlier incarnation of Shakyamuni. Hsuan Chwang records stupas and an artificial platform at the places where several previous buddhas had walked and sat in meditation.

Deer Park was also the location of Shakyamuni's deeds as a bodhisattva in former lives. Hsuan Chwang mentions a number of stupas commemorating these near the monastery: one where the bodhisattva offered himself as the deer; another where, as a six-tusked elephant, he offered his tusks to a deceitful hunter; and a third where the bodhisattva had been a bird, with Maudgalyayana and Sariputra as a monkey and an elephant.

Another stupa commemorated the occasion when Indra manifested as a hungry old man and asked a fox, an ape and a hare (the Buddha in a former life) for food. The fox brought fish, the ape brought fruit, but the bodhisattva hare, having nothing else to offer, threw himself on a fire and offered his roasted body. Indra was so moved by this act that he took the hare and placed him in the moon. Many people in central Asia still refer to the moon as the hare sign, or worship the hare in the moon.



Today the actual site of the Buddha's teaching at Sarnath and the several ruins in the area have been enclosed in a pleasant park. Nearby, a well-planned museum houses a number of unearthed statues, many barely damaged, as well as several other findings from the site. The museum's entrance is dominated by the famous lion capital from Ashoka's pillar, which—an indication of the Indian Government's renewed interest in Buddhism—has been adopted as the national emblem. The wheel design on its base has become the central figure of India's flag.

Adjacent to the park is the Mahabodhi Society's Mulaghandaluti Temple, an imposing building containing certain relics of the Buddha. Close by is the Society's sangharama and a library possessing a rare collection of buddhist literature. Also in the vicinity are Burmese, Chinese and Tibetan temples, as well as a Tibetan monastery and the Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, where two hundred young monks practise and study the many aspects of the Buddha's teaching, aspiring to qualify for the degree of acharya. There is also a Tibetan printing press, The Pleasure of Elegant Sayings, which over the last decade has published more than thirty Tibetan texts of buddhist treatises, otherwise hard to find. Thus the wheel of Dharma that Shakyamuni first turned at Sarnath continues to revolve.

Rajgir

Where the Buddha converted Sariputra and Maudgalyayana

"King Ajatasatru possessed a very ferocious elephant. Devadatta, hearing that the Buddha was coming to Rajgir, arranged to have the elephant escape. As the Buddha came toward the city, Devadatta went to the palace terrace to see the Buddha killed, but when the elephant came rushing at the Buddha, the Enlightened One tamed the elephant with a few words, and the ferocious beast knelt at his feet."

Mulasarvastivadin Vinaya

When Gautama the ascetic first visited Rajgir on his way to Bodhgaya he was met by King Bimbisara. The king was so impressed by the bodhisattva that he tried every means to persuade him to stay. Failing in this, he received a promise that Gautama would return to Rajgir after his enlightenment. Accordingly, after teaching in Sarnath, the Buddha travelled to Rajgir, the royal capital of Magadha, followed by over a thousand monks of the new order.



King Bimbisara welcomed them all and offered the Veluvana Bamboo Grove. This was to be the first property of the Order and one of the Buddha's favourite residences. The site was ideal for a monastic order, being not too near the city, calm by day and night, free from biting insects and having mild air and tanks of cool water. Thus it was suited to the practice of meditation, and here Shakyamuni passed the first rainy season retreat following his enlightenment. He was to return to this

place for several rainy season retreats later in his life. When Hsuan Chwang visited Rajgir he saw a monastery and the Kalanda tank, where Shakyamuni bathed and which still exists. Close to this stood an Ashoka Stupa and a pillar surmounted by an elephant. Not far away King Ajatasatru had built two stupas, one over the portion of the Buddha's relics that he had received, the other over half of Ananda's body. Later Ashoka unearthed the first of these to obtain relics for his 84,000 stupas.

Perhaps the most important event of the Buddha's first visit to Rajgir was the conversion of Sariputra and Maudgalyayana. The story of their conversion is as follows. Ashvajit, last of the five ascetics to be converted by Buddha, was making his alms round one morning and happened to meet Sariputra. Sariputra was greatly impressed by the monk's noble and

subdued demeanor, and asked him what teachings he followed. Sariputra immediately attained arhantship, and when he repeated what he had heard to his friend Maudgalyayana, he also instantly achieved the same. Later, stupas were erected at the places associated with these events. The two left their teacher Sanjaya and came with 500 of their former followers to meet the Buddha. Buddha welcomed both as his chief disciples, Sariputra having the greater intelligence, Maudgalyayana wielding the greatest miraculous powers. Both were born near Rajgir and later, retiring to their respective villages, entered nirvana before the Buddha did.

During his stay in Rajgir, Shakyamuni received two significant invitations: one from his father King Suddhodana, the other from a wealthy merchant who wanted him to spend the next rainy season in Shravasti. Accepting both, the Buddha returned briefly to Kapilavastu and sent Sariputra to Shravasti to prepare for his visit there.



Shakyamuni later visited Rajgir on a number of occasions. On several of these, attempts were made on his life. Once a lay follower of the nirgrantha jains concealed a fire-pit in front of his house and invited the Buddha to a meal of poisoned food. However, the pit changed into a lotus pond with a flower bridge and the Buddha proved that one freed of all inner poisons could not be harmed by external means. At another time he predicted the birth of a son to the wife of a jain, who in defiance killed her. But as her body was being burnt, the child came forth from amidst the flames. Stupas marking these places were later seen by the Chinese pilgrims.

King Ajatasatru, who had usurped his father Bimbisara's throne and allowed him to die in prison, came under the evil influence of Shakyamuni's jealous cousin Devadatta, who had tried to force the Buddha to permit him to lead the Order. Failing to achieve this, Devadatta invited the young king to harm the Buddha. Professional assassins were hired for this purpose, yet in the end they fell at the Buddha's feet in devotion. The king then let loose a maddened elephant from his palace, but the animal, affected by the Buddha's presence, fell

on its knees out of homage to him. It is also in Rajgir that a young boy later to be reborn as the great king Ashoka came to him and offered him a handful of sand, wishing it were gold.

Yet the most important of all associations of the Buddha with Rajgir is that with Vulture's Peak, a small mountain just outside the city. Here, sixteen years after his enlightenment, he set forth the second turning of the wheel of Dharma to an assembly of 5,000 monks, nuns and laity, as well as innumerable bodhisattvas. This collection of teachings, which extended over twelve years, includes the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* and the *Surangama Samadhi Sutra*, as well as many *Prajnaparamita Sutras*, which, as the Buddha himself told Ananda, contain the very essence of all his teachings.

Mahakashyapa recorded these latter teachings and Shakyamuni placed them in the custody of the nagas until such time as men were ready to receive them. The Buddha's respect for Mahakashyapa was such that when they first met, the two exchanged cloaks. The great disciple now resides within the Gurupada Mountain near Bodhgaya. Here he awaits Maitreya, upon whom he will place the cloak of Shakyamuni.



When the Chinese pilgrims visited Vulture's Peak they found the summit green and bare. Fa Hien mentions a cave and Hsuan Chwang a hall slightly below it, where the Buddha is said to have sat and preached. Here also he once reached through the mountain with his hand to calm Ananda, whose meditation was being disturbed by Mara in the form of a vulture. Before the cave were the walking and sitting places of the previous buddhas, and a stupa where the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra* was taught.

King Bimbisara built a causeway leading up to the hill. At the foot of the hill was Amaravana, the mango grove offered to the Buddha by the physician Jivaka. The remains of what was once a monastery may still be seen here. According to Hsuan Chwang, at one time on Vulture's Peak there was a monastery occupied by many meditators and several arhants.

The final journey of Buddha's life, which ended with the mahaparinirvana at Kushinagar began at Rajgir. Shortly after this, the First Council—an assembly of 500 monks presided over by Mahakashyapa—met under the patronage of Ajatasatru in the Shrataparna Cave, a short distance southwest of Veluvana Bamboo Park, and compiled the Buddha's teachings into a collection known as the *Sthaviranikaya*. A stupa once marked the spot where, with great exertion, Ananda achieved arhantship on the night before the council in order that he might attend.

Ashoka later erected a stupa in honour of this First Council at the place a distance west of Shrataparna Cave where at the same time the mahasanghikas, regarded by some as proto-mahayanists, compiled their canon. According to Nagarjuna, an assembly of bodhisattvas also met on Vimalasvabhava Mountain, located to the south of Rajgir, and compiled the

mahayana scriptures. Nagarjuna states that Samantabhadra presided over this meeting, while Vajrapani recited the Sutras, Maitreya the Vinaya and Manjushri the Abhidharma.

The sites of many of these events may still be found in and around Rajgir, which is also a flourishing pilgrimage centre of hindus and jains. A Burmese temple offers resting facilities for pilgrims and there is a new Japanese temple near the remains of Ajatasatru's stupas. Vulture's Peak retains a quiet peace, but just as Pa Hien warned of lions and tigers at certain places of pilgrimage during his lifetime, here present pilgrims should beware of bandits.

The Ratna Girl Hill above the Vulture's Peak is now crowned by the beautiful Vishwa-Shanti Stupa, built recently by Japanese buddhists. On four sides golden statues of the Buddha depict his four great actions: birth, enlightenment, teaching and passing away. In a nearby temple, Japanese monks continue their strident practice of resounding sutra and drum.

Lastly, one may remember that the Buddha sent the sixteen arhants to various parts of the world to safeguard his doctrine, and one of them, Kshudrapanthaka came to and still resides on Vulture's Peak.



Shravasti

Where the Buddha performed Great Miracles

"When the time came for the contest, the Buddha cast a mango seed on the ground; instantly the seed took root, and a great mango tree arose to shade the hall. After defeating the six philosophers and converting them to his teaching, the Enlightened One performed the Great Miracle of the Pairs.

"Standing in the air at the height of a palm tree, flames engulfed the lower part of his body, and five hundred jets of water streamed from the upper part. Then flames leapt from the upper part of his body, and five hundreds jets of water streamed from the lower part. Then by his magic power, the Blessed one transformed himself into a bull with a quivering hump. Appearing in the east, the bull vanished and reappeared in the west. Vanishing in the west, it reappeared in the north. Vanishing in the north, it reappeared in the south. ... Several thousand *kotis* of beings, seeing this great miracle, became glad, joyful, and pleased."

Mahavastu

Another of the four places common to the buddhas of this world is Shravasti, the site regarded as their chief residence and the place where the holders of erroneous doctrines are publicly defeated. Indeed, Shakyamuni spent twenty-five rainy seasons there and also performed many great miracles.

When the Buddha accepted in Rajgir the merchant Anathapindika's invitation to spend the second rainy season at Shravasti, it was on the condition that proper facilities for all his monks would be available. Anathapindika and Sariputra examined the area and found only the park of Prince Jeta to be suitable for such a large assembly of monks. However, the prince was unwilling to part with it for less than the number of gold coins that would cover the area. Undismayed, the merchant proceeded to cover all the ground with gold coins. When but a small portion remained uncovered, the prince asked him to desist and announced that he himself would build a vihara on the spot, some say using the gold he had received for the purpose. The merchant also built a vihara, as did King Prasenajit later. These were the principal buildings used by the Buddha on his first visit to



Shravasti. The park with its buildings became known as Jetavana Grove.

Hsuan Chwang states that during its most magnificent period, Jetavana had temples, meditation halls, monks' chambers, bathing places, a hospital, pleasantly shaded tanks and a well-stocked library with reading rooms. It was altogether an ideal place for practising the Buddha's teachings, many of which were first given here.

One of the first statues of Shakyamuni originated at Jetavana. Ordered by King Prasenajit, it was made of hardwood. King Prasenajit placed it at his seat in the vihara. Fa Hien tells that when Shakyamuni next visited Jetavana, the statue came out to meet him. He told it to return to its place, saying that it would serve as a model for others after his passing away. The Jetavana vihara which housed this image was once an elaborate seven-storied building. It eventually burned down but the image survived and a two-storied structure was built in its place. At the time of Hsuan Chwang the statue was kept in a brick shrine.



Ananda once asked Buddha to allow a tree to be planted at Jetavana because when the Buddha was not present at Jetavana his followers had nowhere to place their offerings of flowers and so forth. Maudgalyayana brought a seed of the bodhi tree and when the tree grew the Buddha is said to have blessed it by spending one night meditating under it. This is now known as the Ananda bodhi tree.

The Chinese pilgrims mention a number of stupas in the park commemorating various events. One marked the occasion when the Buddha found a sick monk unattended and languishing in his own filth. Shakyamuni bathed and nursed the monk himself and exhorted the other monks to care for each other similarly in the future. Another stupa marked the spot where some non-buddhists, wanting to defame the Buddha, murdered a woman and left her body behind the monastery. Others marked the places where

Shakyamuni walked and sat.

When Ashoka visited Jetavana he erected a great pillar on either side of the eastern gate, the left surmounted by a wheel and the right by an ox. Near the monastery and beside the well used by the Buddha, he built a stupa enshrining a relic. It is taught that this was one of the mahavihara's most flourishing periods, after which it was somewhat neglected. However, archaeological evidence has shown a revival during the Kushan period of the first century and much reconstruction. Later, during the Gupta period, even when brahmanism was once again ascendent, Jetavana received new support. Many of the present ruins show the styles and ornaments of the Guptas.

Fa Hien found decay evident but was welcomed by resident monks, who were astonished to see a brother from the land of Han. Two centuries later Hsuan Chwang found the place deserted, but soon after his visit another revival occurred, as evidenced by the traces and

images from the eighth and ninth centuries that remain. As in other places, the monastic tradition persisted here well into the twelfth century, when the muslim invasions became overpowering. Records show that Vidhyadhara, a minister to King Madanapala of Kanouj, built a vihara in 1119. An inscribed copper plate dated at 1130 found amongst the ruins states that the former king's son Govindacauda made a gift of six villages to Buddhabhattoraka and the monks of Jetavana.

The Jetavana Grove was a short distance south of the prosperous city of Shravasti, the capital of Koshala, which stood on the banks of the Achiravati River. Here Prasenajit had his palace, and close to it built a monastery. Nearby was the vihara of Mahaprajapati, who was Shakyamuni's stepmother and the first woman admitted to the Order. A short distance away is a large, ruined stupa marking the place where Angulimala the murderer attained arhantship and where his body was later cremated. Outside the city was a forest where once lived a community of 500 blind men, all of whom regained their sight when the Buddha came and preached to them.

A part from these associations, Shravasti is best remembered as the place where Shakyamuni defeated the holders of other doctrines. Some accounts say this was accomplished by debate, others by miracles; perhaps there were both. The leaders of India's six main philosophical schools had challenged the Buddha to a contest of miraculous powers many times as he wandered through the surrounding kingdoms. Finally, in his fifty-seventh year he accepted at Shravasti. King Prasenajit built a hall especially for the event; in it seven thrones were erected. On the first day of spring, the six other teachers took their seats and Shakyamuni came to him, flying through the air. He sent forth fire and water from his body and the hall was destroyed, then reformed as a transparent palace. Planting his tooth-pick in



the ground, he caused a great tree to spring up, fragrant and fully laden with flowers and ripe fruit. He multiplied his body infinitely, filling all space with buddhas expounding the Dharma. These and many other miracles he performed and in eight days utterly defeated his opponents, whose followers adopted the buddhist doctrines. For a further seven days he continued to show miracles and give teachings to the great

assembly. Both Chinese pilgrims describe a tall temple containing a statue of Buddha, which stood outside Jetavana Grove in commemoration of these events. Nearby is the place where Devadatta, failing in his attempt to scratch the Buddha with poisoned nails, finally went down to hell.

Further south were various places associated with King Vaidraba, successor to Prasenajit, who destroyed Kapilavastu and killed many of the Shakyas within the Buddha's lifetime.

The ruins of Shravasti were rediscovered in 1863 by General Cunningham near the village of Sahet Market. The city ruins lie virtually untouched and are still enclosed by ramparts. The remains of the monasteries and stupas of Jetavana have been well excavated and the many images and other findings are contained in the Lucknow Museum. A new park has been created around these ruins with flowers and trees shading the lawns. In this case restoration has regained some of the qualities that made the place attractive of old; peace and tranquility pervade it. Three new buddhist temples have been built alongside the park, one of which was founded by two Burmese ladies and another by a Ceylonese monk. Both offer accommodation to pilgrims. A fine Tibetan stupa has recently been completed in the courtyard of this latter building.

The third temple has a sad story. It was built many years ago through the efforts of a solitary Chinese monk, who, unfortunately, died before its completion. Now the Chinese temple and a seven-storied pagoda with a number of out-buildings are empty and locked, pending a legal decision of possession and responsibility. Apart from the intrinsic value of these constructions, it would be a fitting tribute to Fa Hien and Hsuan Chwang if they were to be restored and opened.

Sankashya

Where the Blessed One descended from Tushita Heaven

"Four places are always determined in advance:
where the Buddhas shall attain Buddhahood;
where they shall begin to preach;
where they shall expound the law and refute heretics;
and where they shall descend from the Tushita Heaven after
having preached to their mothers.
Other places are chosen according to circumstances."

Fa Hien

The most westward and perhaps most obscure of the eight places of pilgrimage is Sankashya, whose name may derive from a stupa built there by Kashyapa Buddha's father and dedicated to his son. This is the last of the four places common to the buddhas of this world.

Some say that during his forty-first year Shakyamuni went up from Shravasti to the Tushita Heaven and passed the rainy season retreat teaching Abhidharma to his mother, Queen Mayadevi, who had died seven days after Buddha's birth and been reborn as a male god in Tushita. The same happens to the mothers of all the buddhas, and they too later go to teach them, afterwards descending to Sankashya.

Seven days before his descent the Buddha set aside his invisibility. Anuruddha perceived him by his divine sight and urged Maudgalyayana to go and greet him. The great disciple did so, telling the Buddha that the Order longed to see him. This was the time Prasenajit's statue was made. Shakyamuni replied that in seven days he would return to the world. A great assembly of the kings and people of the eight kingdoms gathered. As the Buddha descended, a flight of gold stairs appeared, down which he came. He was accompanied on the right by Brahma, who, holding a white chowny, descended on a crystal staircase, while to the left Indra came down a flight of silver stairs, holding a jewelled umbrella. A great host of gods followed.

The Buddha bathed immediately after his descent, and later a bathing house and stupa were built to mark the site. Stupas were also raised at the spot where he cut his hair and nails, and where he entered samadhi. The Chinese pilgrims describe further stupas and a chankramana where Shakyamuni and the previous buddhas had walked and sat in meditation.

The three flights of stairs disappeared into the ground, but for seven steps of each, which remained above. When Ashoka came here later he had men dig into the earth around the protrusions in order to discover their depth. Although they reached the level of water, they could not find the stairs' end. With increased faith, Ashoka then built a temple over them with a standing image of the Buddha above the middle flight. Behind this temple he erected a great pillar surmounted by an elephant capital. Because the tail and trunk had been destroyed, both Chinese pilgrims mistook this for a lion.



Hsuan Chwang tells that the original stairs had existed until a few centuries before his visit, when they disappeared. Various kings built replicas of ornamented brick and stone, with a temple containing images of Shakyamuni, Brahma and Indra above them. These were within the walls of a monastery, which he describes as excellently ornamented and having many fine images. He further says that some hundreds of monks dwelt there and that the community had lay followers. Two centuries earlier Fa Hien found roughly 1,000 monks and nuns living here pursuing their studies, some hinayana and some mahayana. Both pilgrims tell stories of a white-eared dragon who lived close to the monastery, caring for it and the surrounding area. Fa Hien especially remarks on the abundant produce of the land and the prosperity and happiness of the people.

Little seems to be known about Sankashya after the Chinese accounts. In 1862 General Cunningham identified the spot as being located outside an obscure village west of Farruhabad, above Kanpur, on the Ganges. Not much of the ancient glory of the place remains today. Within a deserted, fenced area stands a large mound topped by the crumbling ruins of a Hindu shrine, in which the former image has been replaced by a small representation of the Buddha. The elephant capital of Ashoka's pillar has been remounted on a ten-foot high pillar beneath a stone canopy. Another small shrine nearby contains a statue of Buddha. The surrounding grounds appear as if they might contain the ruined foundations of former buildings, but if any excavation has ever been done it is buried once more. This is the only one of the eight places of pilgrimage where today there is no temple, monastery or even a solitary monk. Perhaps the wildness of the area is the cause. With or without a dragon's aid, it may be hoped that this will change.

Nalanda

Site of the great Monastic University

"What do you think, householder? Is this town of Nalanda successful and prosperous, is it populous and crowded with people?"

"Yes, venerable sir, it is."

Upali Sutra

Although Nalanda is one of the places distinguished as having been blessed by the presence of the Buddha, it later became particularly renowned as the site of the great monastic university of the same name, which was to become the crown jewel of the development of Buddhism in India. The name may derive from one of Shakyamuni's former births, when he was a king whose capital was here. Nalanda was one of his epithets meaning "insatiable in giving."

Shakyamuni stayed here on a number of occasions, for a mango grove had been offered to him by 500 merchants. Hsuan Chwang mentions a number of temples and stupas marking places where Buddha had taught. On one visit he preached to men and gods for three months, and a stupa containing his hair and nail clippings of that period was erected. A remarkable tree that had been miraculously produced from a discarded tooth stick of the Buddha stood in this area. Next to a water tank, a stupa marked the place where a non-buddhist, holding a bird in his hand, had challenged the Buddha to divine whether it was alive or dead. The Buddha declined to answer him. Another stupa commemorated the occasion that a foreign monk had prostrated himself before the Buddha, praying for a rebirth as a universal monarch. Shakyamuni sadly told his followers that this monk possessed such vast merit that he might have become a buddha, but because of this action he would be reborn as a universal monarch as many times as there were atoms of earth beneath his prostrate body.



The sitting place of Shakyamuni and the buddhas who had come before him was marked by a stupa, as was the spot nearby where Bimbisara first came to greet the Buddha. In two neighbouring villages, Ashoka built temples and stupas where Sariputra and Maudgalyayana were born and also entered parinirvana.

During his stay at Nalanda, Hsuan Chwang saw a number of temples in and around the monastery. Some contained images of the Buddha, others of Avalokiteshvara and also Arya

Tara, whom he describes as having been a popular object of devotion at that time. He also mentions the great temple erected by King Baladitya, which was similar to but slightly larger than the Mahabodhi Temple. The ruins of this are now prominent on the site.

Modern historians have tentatively dated the founding of a monastery at Nalanda as being in the fifth century. However, this may not be accurate. For example, the standard biographies of the teacher Nagarjuna, believed by most historians to have been born around 150 AD, are quite specific about his having received ordination at Nalanda monastery when he was seven years old. Further, his teacher Rahulabhadra is said to have lived there for some time before that. We may infer, then, that there were a monastery or monasteries at Nalanda long before the foundation of the later Great Mahavihara.

It is recorded that Kumaragupta the First, an early Gupta monarch who reigned between 415 and 456 AD, built a monastery. In the century following this his various successors each built a further monastery. Between the years 530 and 535 a king of central India, perhaps Yashodharman, added another, and by building an encircling wall around them all created a mahavihara.

At the time Hsuan Chwang stayed at Nalanda and studied with the abbot Shilabhadra, it was already a flourishing centre of learning. In many ways it seems to have been like a modern university. There was a rigorous oral entry examination conducted by erudite gatekeepers, and many students were turned away. To study or to have studied at Nalanda was a matter of great prestige. However, no degree was granted nor was a specific period of study required.



The monks' time, measured by a water clock, was divided between study and religious rites and practice. There were schools of study in which students received explanations by discourse, and there were also schools of debate, where the mediocre were often humbled, and the conspicuously talented distinguished. Accordingly, the elected abbot was generally the most learned man of the time.

The libraries were vast and widely renowned, although there is a legend of a malicious fire in which many of the texts were destroyed and irrevocably lost. The fire is said to have eventually been put out by a flood of water that poured from the texts on highest yoga tantra, kept in the topmost story.

During the Gupta age the practice and study of the mahayana, especially the madhyamaka, flourished. However, from 750 AD, in the Pala age, there was an increase in the study and propagation of the tantric teachings. This is evidenced by the famous pandit Abhayakaragupta, a renowned tantric practitioner who was simultaneously abbot of the Mahabodhi, Nalanda and Vikramashila monasteries. Also Naropa, later so important to the tantric lineages of the Tibetan traditions, was abbot of Nalanda in the years 1049- 57.

Much of the tradition of Nalanda had been carried into Tibet by the time of the muslim invasions of the twelfth century. While the monasteries of Odantapuri and Vikramashila were then destroyed, the buildings at Nalanda do not seem to have suffered extensive damage at that time, although most of the monks fled before the desecrating armies. In 1235 the Tibetan pilgrim Chag Lotsawa found a ninety-year- old teacher, Rahula Shribhadra, with a class of seventy students. Rahula Shribhadra managed to survive through the support of a local brahmin and did not leave until he had completed educating his last Tibetan student.

Nalanda was perhaps most important for its mahayana activities. Under the guidance of Nagarjuna, formulator of the middle way, it eclipsed even the monastery at Bodhgaya. Aryadeva, Nagarjuna's principal disciple, held his famous debate with Maitrichita at Nalanda. Two further disciples of Nagarjuna to attain great fame in India were Chandrakirti and Shantideva, both students of Nalanda.

Arya Asanga, father of the lineage of extensive teachings and formulator of the mind-only school, also spent twelve years at Nalanda. His brother Vasubandhu, introduced to the mahayana by Asanga, became abbot after Asanga retired and taught to thousands. The great mahayana logician Dignaga, author of the *Pramanasamuccaya*, was another abbot at Nalanda. His excellent successor Dharmakirti, who defeated the renowned hindu scholar Shankaracharya in debate, also received his training at Nalanda. Also of this lineage, Kamalashila wrote most of his works at Nalanda. He and Shantiraksita, another renowned scholar of Nalanda, were among the very first teachers to carry the Dharma to Tibet.



A pilgrim to Nalanda today finds vast and well-excavated ruins, many of which are more substantial than the mere foundations remaining in other places. It is easier here to imagine the former glory of the monasteries and temples described by Hsuan Chwang. An adjacent museum houses many buddhist and hindu images from different ages, as well as other findings from the site. Nearby is the Nalanda Institute of Pali Studies, where a number of ordained and lay students have re-established a tradition of buddhist knowledge. While the range of study at this Institute is broader than its name might imply, it would be most appropriate if in the future the present holders of the direct traditions of Nalanda were able to reintroduce them there.

Kushinagar

"... and here at Kushinagar he entered parinirvana."

"How transient are all component things!
Growth is their nature and decay:
They are produced, they are dissolved again:
And this is best,—when they have sunk to rest."

Mahaparinirvana Sutra

Last of the places of pilgrimage is Kushinagar, where Shakyamuni entered mahaparinirvana. This was the furthest he had reached on his final journey, which retraced much of the road he had walked when many years before he had left Kapilavastu.

When he reached his eighty-first year, Buddha gave his last major teaching—the subject was the thirty-seven wings of enlightenment—and left Vulture's Peak with Ananda to journey north. After sleeping at Nalanda he crossed the Ganges for the last time at the place where Patna now stands and came to the village of Beluva. Here the Buddha was taken ill, but he suppressed the sickness and continued to Vaisali. This was a city where Shakyamuni had often stayed in the beautiful parks that had been offered to him. It was also the principal location of the third turning of the wheel of Dharma.

While staying at Vaisali, Buddha thrice mentioned to Ananda a buddha's ability to remain alive until the end of the aeon. Failing to understand the significance of this Ananda said nothing and went to meditate nearby. Shakyamuni then rejected prolonging his own life-span. When Ananda learned of this later he implored the Buddha to live longer but he was refused, for his request had come too late.

Coming to Pava, the blacksmith's son Kunda offered him a meal which included meat. It is said that all the buddhas of this world eat a meal containing meat on the eve of their passing away. Buddha accepted, but directed that no one else should partake of the food. Later it was learned that the meat was bad. He told Ananda that the merit created by offering an enlightened one his last meal is equal to that of offering food to him just prior to his enlightenment.

Between Pava and Kushinagar the Buddha rested near a village through which a caravan had just passed. The owner of the caravan, a Malla nobleman, came and talked to the Buddha. Deeply moved by Shakyamuni's teachings, he offered the Buddha two pieces of shining gold cloth. However, their lustre was completely outshone by Shakyamuni's



radiance. It is said that a buddha's complexion becomes prodigiously brilliant on both the eve of his enlightenment and the eve of his decease.

The next day, when they arrived at the banks of the Hiranyavati river south of Kushinagar, the Buddha suggested that they should go to the caravan leader's sala grove. There, between two pairs of unusually tall trees, Shakyamuni lay down on his right side in the lion posture with his head to the north. Ananda asked if Rajgir or Shravasti, both great cities, would perhaps be more fitting places for his passing. The Buddha replied that in an earlier life as a bodhisattva king this had been Kushavati his capital, and at that time there had been no fairer nor more glorious city.

The noblemen of Kushinagar, informed of the Buddha's impending death, came to pay him respect. Among them was Subhadra, an 120-year-old brahmin who was much respected, but whom Ananda had turned away from the monkhood three times. However, the Buddha called the brahmin to his side, answered his questions concerning the six erroneous doctrines, and revealed to him the truth of the buddhist teaching. Subhadra asked to join the Sangha and was thus the last monk to be ordained by Shakyamuni. Subhadra then sat nearby in meditation, swiftly attained arhantship and entered parinirvana shortly before Shakyamuni.

As the third watch of the night approached, the Buddha asked his disciples thrice if there were any remaining perplexities concerning the doctrine or the discipline. Receiving silence, he gave them the famous exhortation: "Impermanence is inherent in all things. Work out your own salvation with diligence." Then, passing through the meditative absorptions, Shakyamuni Buddha entered mahaparinirvana. The earth shook, stars shot from the heavens, the sky in the ten directions burst forth in flames and the air was filled with celestial music. The master's body was washed and robed once more, then wrapped in a thousand shrouds and placed in a casket of precious substances.



For seven days, offerings were made by gods and men, after which, amidst flowers and incense, the casket was carried to the place of cremation in great procession. Some legends say that the Mallas offered their cremation hall for the purpose. A pyre of sweetly scented wood and fragrant oils had been built but, as had been foretold, it would not burn until Mahakashyapa arrived. When the great disciple eventually arrived, made prostrations and paid his respects, the pyre burst into flames spontaneously.

After the cremation had been completed the ashes were examined for relics. Only a skull bone, teeth and the inner and outer shrouds remained. The Mallas of Kushinagar first thought themselves most fortunate to have received all the relics of the Buddha's body. However, representatives of the other eight countries that constituted ancient India also came forth to claim them. To avert a conflict, the brahmin Drona suggested an equal,

eightfold division of the relics between them. Some accounts state that in fact Shakyamuni's remains were first divided into three portions—one each for the gods, nagas and men—and that the portion given to humans was then subdivided into eight. The eight peoples each took their share to their own countries and the eight great stupas were built over them. In time these relics were again subdivided after Ashoka had decided to build 84,000 stupas. Today they are contained in various stupas scattered across Asia.

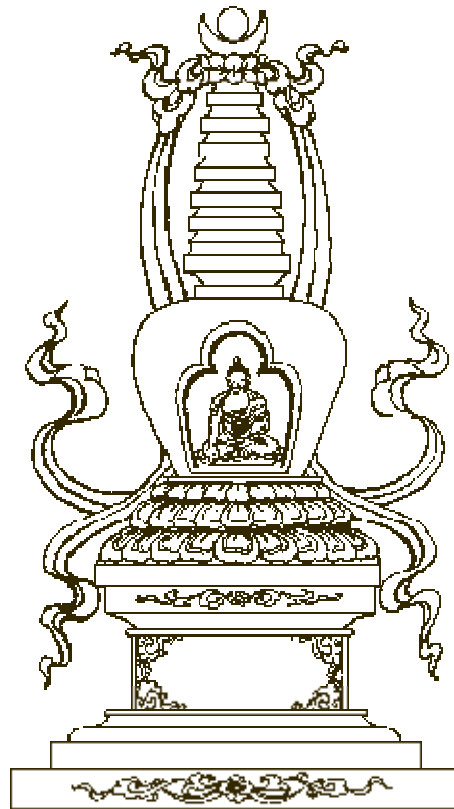
In later times Fa Hien found monasteries at Kushinagar, but when Hsuan Chwang came, the site was almost deserted. Hsuan Chwang did see an Ashoka stupa marking Kunda's house, the site of Buddha's last meal. Commemorating the mahaparinirvana was a large brick temple containing a recumbent statue of Buddha. Beside this was a partly ruined Ashoka stupa and a pillar with an inscription describing the event. Two more stupas commemorated former lives of the Buddha at the place. Both Chinese pilgrims mention a stupa where Shakyamuni's protector Vajrapani threw down his sceptre in dismay after Buddha's death, and some distance away a stupa at the place of cremation and another built by Ashoka where the relics were divided.



Kushinagar was rediscovered and identified before the end of the last century. Excavations have revealed that a monastic tradition flourished here for a long time. The remains of ten different monasteries dating from the fourth to the eleventh centuries have been found. Most of these ruins are now enclosed in a park, in the midst of which stands a modern shrine housing a large recumbent figure of the Buddha. This statue was originally made in Mathura and installed at Kushinagar by the monk Haribhadra during the reign of King Kumaragupta (415-56 CE), the alleged founder of Nalanda Monastery. When discovered late in the last century the statue was broken but it has now been restored. Behind this shrine is a large stupa dating from the Gupta age. This was restored early in this century by the Burmese. Not far away a small temple built on the Buddha's last resting place in front of the sala grove has also been restored. Some distance east a large stupa, now called Ramabhar, remains at the place of the cremation.

On one side of the park a former Chinese temple has been reopened as an international meditation centre. Next to it stands a large Burmese temple. On the south side of the park is a small Tibetan monastery with stupas in the Tibetan style beside it. Thus also at Kushinagar one can see dharmic activities alive even today.

Conclusion



A buddha appears but rarely in this world and after his passing away leaves behind three kinds of relics: the remains of his body, the utensils he used, such as his alms bowl, and the edifices and places commemorating events in his life. Of the relics of Shakyamuni, the remains of his body, although widely distributed across Asia, are becoming increasingly inaccessible owing to political circumstances. As for the second type of relic, although the various objects used by the Buddha were preserved for long and were seen by both Fa Hien and Hsuan Chwang, many have since disappeared. Thus the fact that the eight places of pilgrimage and the four great places in particular can still be visited with moderate ease assumes a special importance.

In this account we have described some of the events of the Buddha's life associated with these places. We have also mentioned some of the subsequent developments—the building of stupas, temples and monasteries, and the flourishing practice of the Dharma amongst the resident monks up to the twelfth century. In doing so an attempt has been made to draw attention to the religious significance rather than the mere historical interest of these places.

Now that in recent years new temples and monasteries have been built and there is at least one monk residing in seven of the eight places, it can be said that the practice of the Dharma has been re-established there. The work of the late Prime Minister Nehru in encouraging and assisting this movement should not be overlooked. Nor should the activities of the buddhist orders from the many contributing countries be underestimated. Had these orders not maintained pure lineages over the seven centuries since Buddhism left India, there would be nothing to bring back to these sacred places. Thus the renewal of these sites may be regarded as an indication of the strength and purity of the Order today.

After much discussion of the places themselves, it may be appropriate to say a little about the practice and efficacy of pilgrimage. The Buddha advised those of his followers who could make pilgrimage to holy places to do so with mindfulness of the actions of the enlightened ones associated with them. He further advised them to engage in religious practices in the places of pilgrimage. Buddha himself had shown such respect. For example, at Vajrasana and Sarnath he circumambulated before sitting where previous buddhas had sat.

There are many such practices particularly relevant to the pilgrimage places. In the Tibetan tradition, for example, as well as making circumambulation, prostrations and offerings of flowers, incense and light, a pilgrim is encouraged to offer the "seven branch prayer" and the "mandala of the purified universe," and to recite the mantra of Shakyamuni Buddha and numerous sutras. At Vulture's Peak in particular, where the *Perfection of Wisdom Sutras*, the epitome of the Buddha's doctrine, were expounded, the *Heart Sutra* is often recited. His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama has also compiled an anthology of buddhist meditational prayers to be read in all places or times associated with Buddha Shakyamuni. Entitled *The Sublime Path of the Victorious Ones*, this is available in English translation (Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Dharamsala, H.P., India).

The merit acquired through these practices of circumambulation and so forth is greatly increased in the places of pilgrimage through what is referred to as "the power of the object." Illustrating this is the story of the monk who prostrated himself to the Buddha at Nalanda, wishing for birth as a universal monarch. Fulfillment of his prayer was assured because of the power of the object to whom he had made prostration. In a similar but contrary manner, Devadatta and others fell directly to hell because of the power of the object whom they knowingly attempted to harm.

However, in this context it is important to have a proper motivation and to be mindful of both one's actions and the object. His Holiness the Dalai Lama recently admonished pilgrims to Bodhgaya, saying that although circumambulation of the Mahabodhi Temple at Vajrasana could be immensely beneficial, to do it without respect or while continuing to chatter to one's friends and so forth would be as valuable as circumambulating Gaya Railway Station.

The Buddha many times referred to the value of pilgrimage. To give a quotation found in a commentary to the *Vinaya Sutra* by the First Dalai Lama (1392-1474), which is known in Tibetan as *Lung-Treng-Tik*:

Bhikshus, after my passing away, if all the sons and daughters of good family and the faithful, so long as they live, go to the four holy places, they should go and remember: here at Lumbini the enlightened one was born; here at Bodhgaya he attained enlightenment; here at Sarnath he turned twelve wheels of Dharma; and here at Kushinagar he entered parinirvana.

Bhikshus, after my passing away there will be activities such as circumambulation of these places and prostration to them.

Thus it should be told, for they who have faith in my deeds and awareness of their own will travel to higher states.

After my passing away, the new bhikshus who come and ask of the doctrine should be told of these four places and advised that a pilgrimage to them will help purify their previously accumulated negative karmas, even the five heinous actions.

With grateful thanks to Geshe Ngawang Dhargyey for his advice, and to the many by whose efforts the eight places of pilgrimage have been restored. May this brief account, despite any mistakes it might contain, contribute to their flourishing further.



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