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On Pilgrimage

Susan Elbaum Jootla



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by

Susan Elbaum Jootla

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On Pilgrimage



Let me take you on a Buddhist pilgrimage. Let us visit the main places where Gotama Buddha lived and taught the Dhamma. Let us see what they look like now, recall what happened there in the days of the Buddha, and practise his Dhamma at these sites.

Before he attained Parinibbāna, the Buddha told his attendant monk, the Venerable Ananda, “There are four places which should be (visited and) seen by a person of devotion.” He then named his birthplace, the place where he attained Enlightenment, the place where he first taught the way to Enlightenment, and the place where he attained Parinibbāna.

Because of this injunction, faithful Buddhists from all over the world travel to India and Nepal to pay their respects to the Buddha at these spots which he stated “would cause awareness and apprehension of the nature of impermanence” (*Ten Suttas from the Digha Nikaya*, p. 272). Let us use the mindful approach implicit in this statement for our present purely imaginary pilgrimage. Perhaps this literary tour will one day arouse in us an urge to make such a pilgrimage a reality. For now it may provide us with a

way to delve deeper into the process of mental purification taught by the Buddha to end all suffering. So, keeping in mind the transient, unsatisfactory and essenceless nature of all phenomena, let us now travel to the Indian subcontinent on a voyage of both past and present.

Lumbini

The first place the Buddha urged his followers to visit was Lumbini, where he was born, the son of King Suddhodana of the Sakyan clan. At present Lumbini is in southern Nepal, less than half an hour's drive from the Indian border. Very little remains here today to remind us of the Buddha. But Emperor Ashoka, who ruled much of India several centuries later, marked a hillock with a pillar proclaiming that he had come here on a pilgrimage because of the place's importance as the location of Gotama's birth. There is a Japanese plan to build an elaborate garden complex in the vicinity to commemorate the great event.

His mother, Queen Maya, had left her husband's home in Kapilavatthu to travel to her parents' residence when she knew her child was soon to be born. But on the way, quite unexpectedly, she gave birth while standing in a forest of sal trees, near Lumbini village. Soon after the baby was born, he

stood on the ground, took seven steps to the north, looked around and said: "I am the foremost in the world; this is the last birth; now there is no more renewal of being in future lives" (Majjhima Nikaya 123; in *Middle Length Sayings*, 3:166-67).

At this time, several awe-inspiring phenomena took place in the world of nature as well, as they do whenever any Bodhisatta takes his final birth. A vast brilliant light appeared and it was visible on all the levels of existence of this world system, from the darkest hells up through the celestial planes. The entire area extending to 10,000 other world systems surrounding our own all trembled and shook.

We find the story of the Bodhisatta's natural conception, the condition of Queen Maya while she was pregnant with the great being, and the events surrounding his birth, retold by the Venerable Ananda as part of the discourse quoted above. The Buddha had asked Ananda to recount all of this to a group of monks gathered at Anathapiṇḍika's park in Savatthi. After Ananda mentioned all these amazing events, the Buddha added that there was yet another wonderful quality of his which the monks should remember:

A Perfect One's feelings of pleasure, pain or neutral are known to him as they arise ... as they are present ... as they subside. His perceptions and thoughts are also

known to him as they arise, remain and subside.

While we are in Lumbini, let us reflect on the clarity of the Perfect One's understanding of mental processes. When we meditate here at the Buddha's birth place, we would be doing proper homage to him if we too strive to know with accurate mindfulness the rising and vanishing of feelings, perceptions and thoughts. Only Buddhas and Arahats can have perfect awareness of every mental activity, but any student of Buddhism should begin to train to see the fickle, transient, changing nature of mind and body. Slowly, if this is practised with a concentrated mind and from a sound moral base, it will develop into full insight into impermanence.

Bodh Gaya

Now let us go to Bodh Gaya in the modern Indian state of Bihar. Here Gotama became a Buddha by attaining, without the guidance of a teacher, the thorough intuitive understanding of everything in the universe.

The small town of Bodh Gaya is probably the most often visited of the four pilgrimage sites. It has become something of an international centre as many people come here to see where the Bodhisatta became a Buddha.

In ancient times this area was called Uruvela. It was here that Gotama sat under the Bodhi Tree beside the bank of the Nerañjara River. The broad, shallow river no longer flows close to the Bodhi Tree; its course now runs perhaps half a kilometre away. The wide-branching pipal tree we see today in Bodh Gaya is, as it were, the grandchild of the original tree under which the Bodhisatta prepared, from a pile of grass, his seat of Enlightenment.

Right beside the tree stands the Maha Bodhi Temple, a great monument to the greatest of achievements. But we actually approach them both by going barefoot down a long stone-flight of steps. We proceed facing the Temple's square tower which is encircled with rows and rows of small niches. Some of the alcoves contain Buddha statues, damaged, restored, or covered in gold leaf. Let us walk around the Temple on paving stones smoothed by millions of footsteps over hundreds of years. Let us sit at the base of the Bodhi Tree inside its stone-railing enclosure.

We can now, with grateful minds, pay our respects to the Buddha, whose enormous efforts over countless aeons culminated here. Let us bow to the One who in this very place agreed to share with other beings the ancient path he had discovered, the way leading to the utter cessation of suffering. Let us bow again to his Teachings, the Truth, the Dhamma. And let us bow

still again to those who maintain and practise the pure Dhamma, the Sangha.

While we are at this most important place for Buddhists to visit, let us cultivate wisdom along with this faith. Starting from the confidence that the Buddha did find the Truth and that it is still being correctly taught, let us try to work our way to our own insight into the Dhamma.

Here in Bodh Gaya the Bodhisatta Gotama discerned, among other things: the impersonal nature of all “beings” and “things;” how they are all unsatisfactory because they are caused and conditioned by other factors; and how by eliminating the causes, the resultant suffering can be uprooted once and forever. So let us now meditate on the law of dependent origination, the chain of causes and effects through which all the suffering of existence comes about.

At the time of his Enlightenment, the Bodhisatta was searching for the escape from the suffering (*dukkha*) of the world, so his analysis of dependent origination on this occasion begins at old age and death, the most apparent kinds of suffering. From there he works his way back to the causes behind each step. He finds that birth is the condition for ageing and dying, that becoming is the condition for birth, and

that mind's clinging lies behind becoming. He finds that clinging arises when there is craving. Craving develops out of feelings, which arise because of the contact of the six sense organs with their objects. Because of mind and body there are the sense organs. And consciousness continually brings the whole complex of mind and body into being, a role most evident in the rebirth process.

The Buddha then shows how consciousness and mind-body mutually condition each other so that if either ceases, the other must also end. Next he analyses the chain of causation in terms of the cessation of its factors. This ultimately shows how all the suffering that follows any birth can be brought to an end by breaking this cycle of dependent origination.

When the Buddha states his own profound discovery of this ancient law, he does not mention where or how the chain is to be broken. But in many other suttas he advises us not to allow craving to arise in response to pleasant and unpleasant feelings. Our meditation here near the Bodhi Tree will begin to cut this link between feeling and craving if we can equanimously and closely observe the feelings, both mental and physical, as they arise and vanish. This means training the mind to know all the feelings as they come and go without getting caught up in

wanting the pleasant ones to last or wishing the unpleasant ones to cease, and without ignoring the neutral feelings.

Sarnath

When the Buddha had spent seven weeks in seven spots near the Bodhi Tree in what has ever since been called Bodhi Gaya, he decided to acquiesce to the entreaties of the deity Brahma and teach the Dhamma to other beings. He decided to go to Isipatana where he realised he would find competent disciples. Although the Buddha met a few individuals along the way who recognised from his demeanour that he was a special person, none of them was curious enough to ask him to show them the way to liberation.

At Isipatana, now Sarnath, in a deer park near Varanasi, he came to the five ascetics who had associated with him during his period of arduous asceticism before his Enlightenment. Here, to this small group, the Buddha gave his first discourse.

Modern Sarnath is almost a suburb of Varanasi, the holy city for India's millions of Hindus. It is a tiny village whose reason for existence is its association with the teaching of the Buddha. Amidst a large park there is a great brick stupa built by Emperor Ashoka and inscribed with the Buddha's first discourse. It has

recently been renovated on its ancient foundations. Some say the monument marks the site of the Buddha's first sermon, others the site of the second sermon. The nearby ruins of the Dhamma-seat marking the spot where the other sutta was given are well excavated and slightly below the present ground level.

The Buddha's first discourse is called the Dhammacakka-ppavattana Sutta, the Discourse Setting in Motion the Wheel of the Dhamma. It was delivered on the evening of the full moon of July, just before the monsoon rains began. This discourse teaches the Four Noble Truths, the basis of all his other instructions. The second sutta, the Anattalakkhana Sutta, the Discourse on the Characteristic of Not-self, was given a few days later to the same five disciples. Once the five former ascetics had heard both these talks, they all became fully liberated Arahats.

Having seen Sarnath's ancient sites, let us also visit the modern temple near the stupa. It houses murals of the Buddha's life, and more important for us, some splinters of bone encased in glass in a vault beneath its shrine. These are said to be relics of the Buddha. Let us pay our respects to them, realising what proof this is of impermanence. Even the greatest of beings has left almost nothing behind after his demise.

Now let us choose a shady spot somewhere in the neat park grounds around the stupa, and sit and consider what great events took place here more than 2500 years ago. The lawns about us are scattered with numerous foundations of ancient monasteries which were used by many generations of Buddhist monks, bhikkhus. Each bhikkhu strove hard to purify his mind of all defilements to attain Arahathship. Once he had succeeded, the Arahath lived perfectly at peace, creating no new kamma, without the slightest trace of desire, egoism or ignorance remaining in his mind.

Here the Buddha began a long career in guiding other beings in the direction of liberation. But just one talk was not enough for the five ascetics to attain full enlightenment. In fact, at its conclusion, only one of them reached the first stage of enlightenment, stream-entry (*sotapatti*). This is because Buddhas do not enlighten others by means of magic powers. Each individual has to do his own work. Buddhas and teachers who convey the pure Dhamma can give invaluable guidance by pointing out the way, by encouragement and instruction. But it remains the task for each one of us to actually cleanse our mind of its defiling tendencies.

The First Sermon

Let us meditate on what the Buddha taught at Isipatana. His first sermon enunciated the Four Noble Truths. In explaining the first noble truth, the truth of *dukkha* or suffering, he points out the obvious suffering in repeated birth, decay, illness, death, sorrow, grief and despair. He likewise states that we are very often unhappy because we do not get what we want, or because we find ourselves in situations we do not like. But in addition to these forms of suffering, the Buddha declares that our entire being, the mind-body which we mistakenly take as “I,” is *dukkha* because it is inherently unsatisfactory due to the fact that it is constantly changing and decaying.

In the second noble truth, on the arising of suffering, the Buddha states that it is craving, *tañha*, that leads again to rebirth, along the chain of dependent origination. What forms does craving take and where should we look for it? Craving longs for pleasurable sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tangibles and ideas. There is also a very basic desire for life itself, and in some people, a wish for annihilation of the “self.” So craving can be caught, observed and let go at any of the sense doors, whenever it arises.

The third noble truth is the ceasing of suffering. Suffering is brought to an end by giving up craving. With the elimination of all traces of desire, there is the utter passionless cessation of *dukkha*, Nibbāna.

The fourth noble truth is the way to uproot the causes of suffering, the Noble Eightfold Path. Walking on the path means eradicating the cause of craving, which lies in ignorance about these very Four Noble Truths. In this first discourse which we are now considering, the Buddha stresses that his is a moderate way of going between the extremes of sensual indulgence and asceticism, which he knew that his audience had been dedicated to for a long time.

The eight steps of the path are divided into three groups: the wisdom group of (1) Right View and (2) Right Thought; the morality group of (3) Right Speech, (4) Right Action and (5) Right Livelihood; and the concentration group of (6) Right Effort, (7) Right Mindfulness and (8) Right Concentration.

Let us work to develop this path now at Sarnath. We have to strive, initially in a theoretical way and later on through direct insight, for (1) Right View and for (2) Right Thought, the wisdom sections. The Buddha specifies in many discourses that right thoughts are those connected with the renunciation of sense pleasures and thoughts free of ill will and cruelty.

The Buddha explained over the years many aspects of Right View, or understanding, as he taught the Dhamma to different individuals. Here are four of the

most central which we can consider as we sit here in the gardens of Sarnath.

a) All of our actions of body, speech and mind are either good or bad depending on the quality of the volition behind them. Sooner or later in the rounds of rebirth good actions bring pleasant results while evil ones bring unpleasant results. This is the law of kamma.

b) What I consider “myself” is nothing more than mind and body. Mind, the Buddha discovered, is a combination of the four aggregates: consciousness, feeling, perception, and other mental formations, the most central of which is volition.

c) All of these physical and mental aspects of “myself” are extremely short-lived, transient (*anicca*); they cannot give any lasting satisfaction (*dukkha*), and cannot correctly be taken as any kind of controlling or durable “being” or “self” (*anatta*).

d) All the things and beings of the world are conditioned by and dependent on many other factors, as shown in the law of dependent origination.

The second section of the Noble Eightfold Path is morality, *sila*. We need to keep our morality perfect at all times, not just when we are on a pilgrimage or attending a meditation course. This means adhering to: (3) Right Speech (not lying), (4) Right Action (not

killing, stealing or indulging in sexual misconduct) and (5) Right Livelihood (one which does not harm others). These moral steps of the path concern the active side of our lives when we interact with other people. We have to be careful of our verbal and physical actions and of our means of livelihood not only to keep from hurting others, but also to develop the concentration and wisdom required for liberation.

With a strong base of *sila*, let us make use of this chance at Sarnath to put forth (6) Right Effort to cultivate (7) Right Mindfulness and (8) Right Concentration. Without the support of these three steps of the concentration section of the path, its wisdom phase will remain only intellectual and will not gain the impact of full liberating insight. Right Effort is steadfast exertion to develop the good and to avoid evil in order to concentrate the mind. Right Mindfulness is clear and systematic awareness of the five aggregates as they actually are, free of illusions. That is, seeing how body, consciousness, feelings, perceptions and mental formations are all impermanent, unsatisfactory and without any lasting essence or self. Right Concentration is the steady one-pointedness of a mind temporarily free from the hindrances of restlessness, doubt, sensual desire, ill will and sloth. The Buddha taught *anapana*, mindfulness of breathing, as well as many other

techniques for focusing one's attention. A concentrated mind is our main tool for developing *pañña*, the wisdom that liberates the mind from the causes of suffering.

We have just reviewed the Four Noble Truths and analysed briefly the Noble Eightfold Path, here at the very place where the Buddha first transmitted his discoveries of the ultimate truth to others. Next we have to train our minds to really understand these truths within ourselves. Perhaps we find that taking this pilgrimage is increasing our dedication to the long task of cultivating the mundane Noble Eightfold Path, summarised in the preceding paragraphs, until its factors grow into the supramundane path at the moment of stream-entry.

The Second Sermon

By the time the Buddha taught his second sermon, the Anattalakkhana Sutta, all the five disciples had attained the first stage of enlightenment. They were now ready to let go of the remaining mental defilements upon hearing this discourse pointing out to them the selfless nature of mind and body.

As we have already seen, the Buddha terms the body one aggregate and divides mind into four aggregates-feeling, perception, mental activities and

consciousness. "I" am the combination of these five aggregates, nothing more. We all have the deluded but deep-seated idea that some aspect of this body or mind is somehow "me." Central to this notion of "I" is the concept of control, and it is the inaccuracy of this idea that the Buddha shows clearly in the Anattalakkhana Sutta. He says, if "I" cannot make "my" mind or body remain as I would like them to, it does not make any sense to consider them "my own" property. The body will get sick whether or not "I" like it or want it to. Mere wishing cannot change this fact. Nor do "I" have perfect control over the workings of mind by a simple act of will.

The next section of this sutta is a dialogue with the monks. The Buddha encourages the bhikkhus to see that all the aggregates are impermanent, unstable by nature, hence incapable of giving lasting satisfaction. They agree that ultimately it is not logical or plausible to think that the aggregates are "I" or "mine."

The Buddha wants his disciples to let go of interest in every kind of future existence. So the sutta proceeds in very strong terms. The Buddha states that noble ones become freed only when they are fully disgusted with and repelled by every kind of body, feeling, perception, mental activity and consciousness-be it past, present or future, be it internal or external, be it gross or subtle. At the conclusion of this discourse the

five monks attained Arahatsip. This talk was sufficient for them to eliminate completely the illusion “I am” at every level of their minds. We should not expect to complete the task this rapidly, however, as letting go of attachment to ourselves is a complex, difficult and long term task. But let us make good use of our time at Sarnath where the Buddha first proclaimed and rationally explained the teaching of non-self. Let us meditate on the aggregates, remind ourselves of the depth of our delusion and conceit that “I exist” and “I can do things,” and begin to analyse mind and body to see the invalidity of such conceptions in the light of their utterly transient nature.

Savatthi and Rajgir

For the next forty-five years the Buddha ceaselessly taught others how to put an end to their misery, how to escape from the round of birth and death. An order of monks and an order of nuns developed, guided by the rules he instituted as and when a need for each of them arose. He also had many lay disciples, men and women working in the cities and villages of the Ganges valley.

Our pilgrimage could also include stops at places like Savatthi and Rajgir which are frequently

mentioned in the suttas. Savatthi was the home of both the Buddha's chief lay disciples: the male follower Anathapiṇḍika and the female follower Mother Visakha. It was also the capital of King Pasenadi's Kosala state and many discourses on how lay people can practise the Dhamma were given to the king here. The Buddha spent twenty-five rainy season retreats in Savatthi, mostly at the monastery Anathapiṇḍika built for him and the Order of monks at Jetavana Grove, and a few at Mother Visakha's vihara. Today the ruins at Savatthi are quite extensive. The remains of the monastic buildings are in a lovely garden of large sal trees. Here is the site of the Perfumed Chamber, the Buddha's personal residence for so many monsoons. The remains of the city itself are a few kilometres away and we can still see its gate at which the Buddha performed his unique Twin Miracle.

At and around the town of Rajgir occurred all the incidents in the Buddha's life connected with King Bimbisara, the king's son and successor, Ajatasattu, and the evil Devadatta. We can still visit the Vulture's Peak where Devadatta tried to murder the Buddha by hurling a huge boulder down on him. We can visit the mango grove of the physician Jivaka, where many discourses were given. King Bimbisara's bamboo grove, amidst which he had a vast monastery built for

the Buddha and his monks, has been rediscovered by archaeologists. A park has been built around the remains of the ancient structures there.

These are two interesting side trips, but let us return to the itinerary which was determined by the Buddha's own injunction to his faithful followers-to visit the four spots most essential in his career.

Kusinara

The final place which the Buddha recommended that his followers see on pilgrimage is Kusinara, where he attained Mahaparinibbāna. This is now a small town in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Here we can walk among the remains, mostly foundations of ancient monastic buildings. Let us pay respects at the golden coloured Buddha statue in the Nirvana Temple. The figure of the Blessed One is lying on his right side in the Parinibbāna posture, and it nearly fills the modern temple. Just behind the temple we see an ages-old stupa which was renovated by some Burmese Buddhists in the 1920's. These two structures are probably located on the actual site where the Buddha passed away, utterly relinquishing all kinds of suffering forever. There is another worn down old stupa about one or two kilometres away which probably marks the place of his cremation.

Until the Buddha's great demise, Kusinara was an unimportant village. The Venerable Ananda had urged the Blessed One to leave this "insignificant, barren" place and to pass away in a great city full of devoted followers. But the Buddha described how long before, this very town had been the prosperous capital of the vast empire of the Universal Monarch Maha Sudassana.

The Buddha then had Ananda invite the local Malla princes to come and pay final homage to the Blessed One. They did this bringing their families and retinues. One wandering ascetic named Subhadda questioned the Buddha and took ordination as his last bhikkhu disciple.

Next the Buddha gave his final instructions to the monks, saying that the Dhamma and the Discipline he had taught them all these years would suffice as their teacher once he was gone. He made sure that none of the monks had any doubts or uncertainty about the Buddha, Dhamma or Sangha. His very last words are an exhortation to them-and to us also-to work at purifying the mind by means of insight into the ultimate truth of existence until not the slightest attachment to "me" and "mine" remains.

Let us choose a quiet spot here to meditate, perhaps inside the Nirvana Temple or beside the Cremation

Stupa. Calming our minds, let us strive to comprehend deeply his final teaching: “All conditioned and compounded things have the nature of decay and disintegration. With mindfulness endeavour diligently to complete the task.”

We need to experience for ourselves the utter instability and unreliability of everything in this world. Let us train ourselves to do this so thoroughly that we give up our attachment to ourselves, that we relinquish all interest in the pleasures of the senses, that we let go of our desire for continued existence in any form. If we work mindfully to know mind and body as they are, we will be putting into practise the way to the cessation of suffering taught by the Buddha.

Following his last words, the Buddha entered all the four jhānas and the immaterial absorptions and then attained the cessation of all mental activity. Then he came down all the jhānas in reverse order to the first jhāna; from the first he again rose up to the fourth jhāna. And “immediately after rising from the fourth jhāna the Bhagava passed away, realising *parinibbāna*,” dying never to be reborn (Dīgha Nikāya, p. 290). The Venerable Anuruddha, who was beside him at this time, explained to the monks the Buddha’s progress through these stages.

The Malla princes were informed and they made special arrangements for the Buddha's cremation, honouring his body for six days. They wrapped the body in many layers of finest cloth and placed it on a large funeral pyre of perfumed woods. When they thought everything was ready, they tried to light the fire, but it would not light. Some time later the Venerable Maha Kassapa arrived with a large group of bhikkhus. As soon as they had paid their last homage to the Buddha's body, the funeral pyre spontaneously burst into flames and everything except a few pieces of bone and some teeth was quickly burnt up.

Followers of the Buddha arrived from many parts of the Indian subcontinent, and all wanted a share of the relics to revere. Accordingly, the remains were divided into eight parts. Later in different regions stupas were built to enshrine them. One was at Kusinara itself, but none of the archaeological sites we see here can definitely be identified as that stupa.

May all who have participated in this mental pilgrimage be inspired to actually visit the places where the Buddha was born, attained Enlightenment, first taught the Dhamma, and passed into Parinibbāna. May all beings come to understand the Four Noble Truths and so eradicate suffering.

Note on sources: Quotations from the Dīgha Nikāya come from the Burma Piṭaka Association's English translation of *Ten Suttas from Digha Nikaya, Long Discourses of the Buddha*, (Rangoon, 1984). All other references are to the English translations published by the Pali Text Society, London.

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