

Pilgrimage to the Buddha's Life Sites



Sakyamuni Buddha, Museum no. IM.121-1910

Pilgrimage formed an important part of Buddhist devotional practice from ancient times. The Rg Veda, a Brahmanical text composed in c. 1200 BC, refers to the spiritual benefits that could be acquired by undertaking a pilgrimage to holy sites.

In the Mahaparinibbana sutta, another early text, it is stated that the Buddha encouraged all devotees to make pilgrimages to four holy sites to ensure that they would be reborn in a heavenly world. It was at these four sites that the most significant events of the Buddha's life took place (birth, enlightenment, turning the wheel of the law and death).

- Lumbini - the Buddha's birthplace
- Bodhgaya - where the Buddha sat in deep meditation beneath a pipal (bodhi) tree until he achieved enlightenment
- Sarnath - a deer park where the Buddha gave his first sermon and set the wheel of law into motion
- Kusinagara - where the Buddha passed away (parinirvana)

Four other sites associated with special events and miracles soon also became a focus for pilgrimage:

- Sravasti - the place of the 'Great Miracle'
- Sankasya - where the Buddha descended from Trayastrimsa heaven after preaching to his deceased mother

- Vaisali - where he received the gift of honey from a monkey
- Rajgir - where the wild elephant, Nalagiri, was tamed

These eight sites are collectively known as the Astamahapratiharya.

Lumbini

Lumbini (25 km E of Kapilavastu, Nepal) is where Queen Maya gave birth to the Buddha. The emperor Ashoka is thought to have visited the site in 250 BC with his teacher, Upagupta. Whilst he was there, a pillar (known as the Rummendei Pillar) and a stone wall were built to commemorate his visit. An inscription on the pillar recorded Ashoka's visit and noted his ruling that since Lumbini was the birthplace of the Buddha, the village would be exempt from paying taxes and would only have to contribute one-eighth of its produce.

Surrounded by monasteries, the site now includes the pillar, a tank where the nagas (spirits of the waters) gave the Buddha his first purifying bath, the Mayadevi temple which stands on the precise birth place of the Buddha and a bodhi tree.



Panel showing the birth of the Buddha, 1st-2nd century, Museum no. IM.109-1927



Ashoka's pillar at Lumbini, 2006



Tank at Lumbini, 2006



Tibetan Temple (Tara Foundation), Lumbini, 2007

Bodhgaya



Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya (click image for larger version)

Here the Buddha finally gained enlightenment, sitting under a pipal tree, also known as the bodhi tree. As the most important Buddhist site, Bodhgaya has been a key pilgrimage destination for Buddhists throughout Asia. Even today it attracts thousands of visitors from all over the world.

The site has undergone many changes over the centuries. It was first marked by a tree-shrine (bodhighara) which was then enclosed by a two-storey wooden structure together with a stone throne. When Ashoka came to Bodhgaya in 259 BC, a commemorative temple was constructed. The Chinese pilgrim Faxian visited in approximately 400 AD and noted that the bodhi tree was still standing and that a tower shrine had been erected.

Extensively restored during the 19th century, the brick tower of the Mahabodhi temple dominates the site, standing immediately in front of a descendant of the original bodhi tree.



Buddha image, Mahabodhi temple, Bodhgaya



Model of the Mahabodhi Temple, Museum no. IS.50-1995



Model of the Mahabodhi Temple, Museum no. IS.21-1986



Votive seal, Museum no. IM.123-1999



Vajrasana, Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya © John Huntington



Pillar, Bodhgaya, Museum no. IS.1065-1883



Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya



Miniature stupas, Bodhgaya



Seated Buddha, Bodhgaya, Museum no. 617-1872



Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya



Mahabodhi Temple, Bodhgaya

Sarnath



Seated Buddha, Sarnath Museum. ©John Huntington

After his enlightenment, the Buddha gave his first teaching in a deer park at Sarnath. This is referred to as the first turning of the Wheel of the Law (Dharmachakra). It was here that the Buddha also established the order of monks (sangha).

Because of its great importance as a pilgrimage site, Sarnath has been continuously occupied from the 3rd century BC until the 12th century AD when Buddhism was on the wane in northern India.

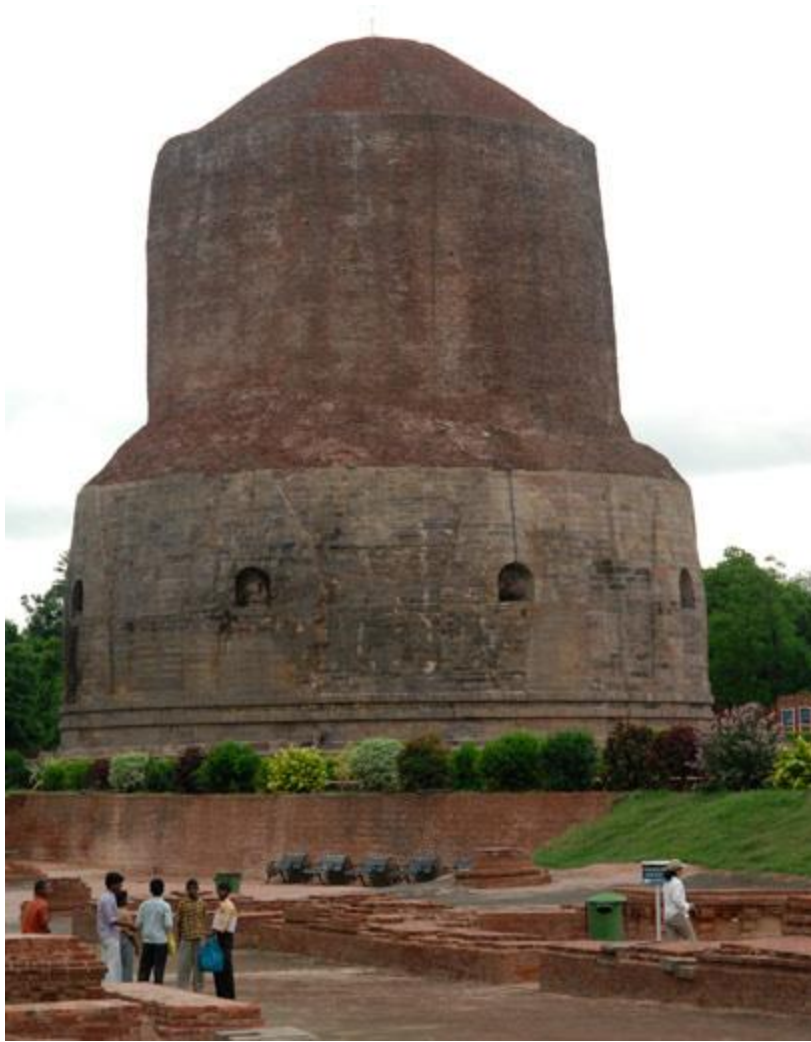
Ashoka visited the site and constructed two stupas (Dharmarajika and Dhamekh) and a commemorative pillar. By the 11th century these structures had fallen into disrepair, but excavations in the late 19th century uncovered the pillar together with a marble relic casket and an image of the Buddha delivering his first sermon. The Dhamekh stupa that exists today was built from brick during the 5th-6th centuries and stands on the site of earlier structures.



Site of Sarnath. ©John Huntington



Detail of relief carving, Dhamek stupa, Sarnath Photograph by John Clarke, 2009



Dhamek stupa, Sarnath. ©John Huntington



Detail of relief carving, Dhamek stupa, Sarnath Photograph by John Clarke, 2009



Dhamek stupa, Sarnath Photograph by John Clarke, 2009



Seated Buddha (Maitreya), Nepal, 10th-11th century. Museum no. IS.37-1988



Standing Buddha, Gupta period (late 5th century). British Museum, Asia 1880.15 Indian Museum collections



Relief panel, Swat Valley, 3rd century. Museum no. IM.297-1921

Kusinagara



Temple at Kusinagara. Photograph courtesy of Firefly Mission, 2007

The Buddha chose Kusinagara, capital of the Malla kingdom, for his final extinction (Mahaparinirvana). Records note that the Buddha had visited the city a number of times and many of the Mallas had become his followers.

After his death, the Buddha's body was cremated at the shrine of the Mallas. His remains were divided into eight parts which were subsequently placed under eight stupas in different parts of the country.

Ashoka made a significant contribution to construction at this site. The Mahaparinirvana stupa marks the spot where the Buddha passed away. The temple contains a 6 metre long statue of the Buddha in parinirvana posture (lying on one side).



Temple at Kusinagara



Image of Buddha in parinirvana posture, Kusinagara. Photograph B Pilgrim/Wikipedia, 2007



Panel showing the death of the Buddha, 100-200 AD, Museum no. IM.247-1927

Sravasti



Seated Buddha, Sravasti. Photograph by Gaurang Prajapati, 2008 (click image for larger version)

During the Buddha's lifetime, Sravasti, capital of the powerful Kosala kingdom, provided a retreat during the rainy season for large numbers of the monastic community (sangha).

The Buddha spent much of his monastic life in Sravasti giving discourses and engaging in debates. It was here that six non-believers challenged the Buddha to perform a miracle whereupon he levitated on a thousand-petalled lotus, caused fire to shoot from his shoulders and water to flow from his feet and then multiplied himself.

The monastery known as Jetavana Vihara was built by a rich and pious merchant who became a disciple of the Buddha. Close to the monastery is the Anandabodhi tree, grown from a cutting taken from the Bodhi tree in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka which itself grew from a cutting taken from the original Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya. The monastery is still an important pilgrimage destination.



Anathapindikastupa, Sravasti. Photograph courtesy of Firefly Mission, 2007



Anandabodhi tree, Jetavana Grove, Sravasti. Photograph by B Pilgrim, 2006



Anathapindikastupa, Sravasti. Photograph courtesy of Oriental Art



Jetavana Grove, Sravasti. Photograph courtesy of Firefly Mission, 2007



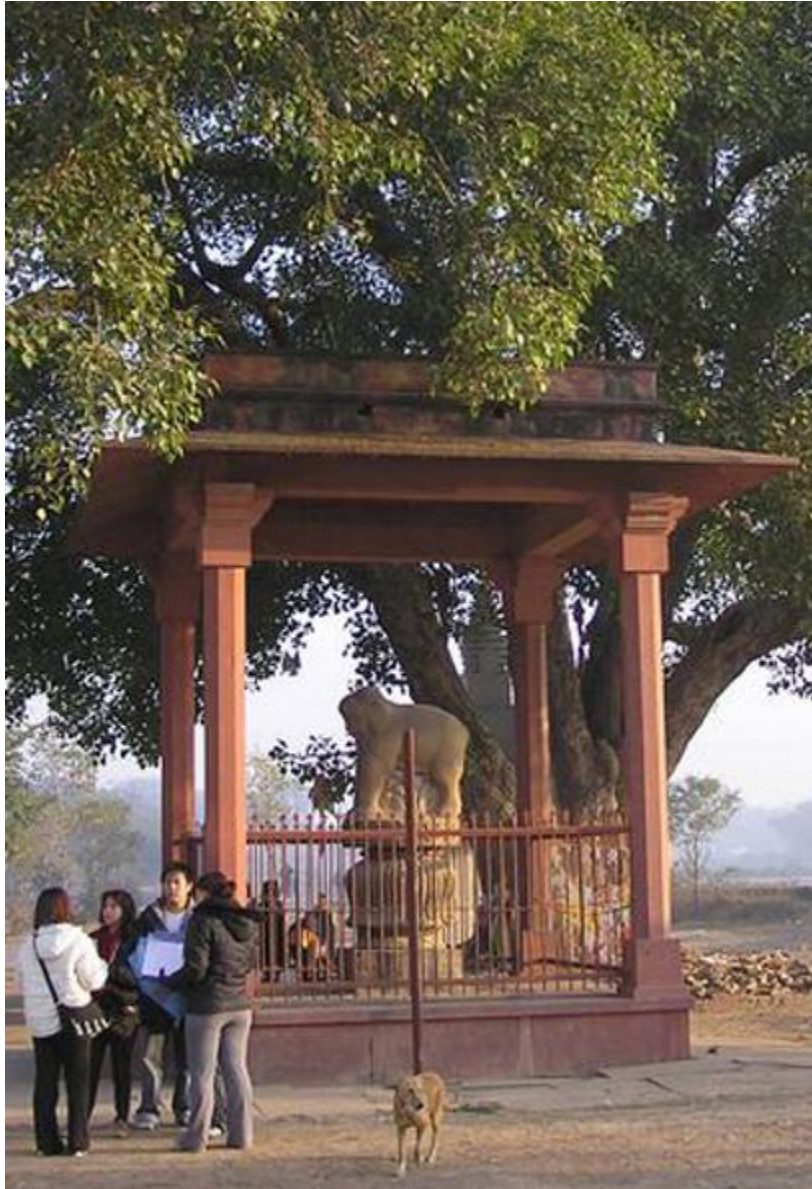
Relief panel showing the Great Miracle of Sravasti, Swat Valley, 3rd century. Museum no. Im.302-1921

Sankasya



Panel showing the descent of the Buddha from Trayastrimsa Heaven, Gandhara. Museum no. IS.11-1947

Sankasya (now identified with the village of Basantpur in Uttar Pradesh) is where the Buddha, together with Brahma and Indra, descended to earth from the Trayastrimsa heaven after preaching to his deceased mother, Mayadevi. Three ladders of silver, gold and jewels were provided for the gods and the event was witnessed by a vast crowd of people to whom the Buddha preached the Law. The Chinese pilgrims Faxien and Xuanzang noted that three ladders were to be seen there made from brick and stone. These may have been constructed by Ashoka to commemorate the Buddha's descent. A shrine marked the spot where the Buddha's foot first touched the ground and Ashoka also erected a pillar with an elephant capital to mark this holy place.



Pillar and capital erected by Ashoka, Sankasya. Photograph courtesy of Firefly Mission, 2007



Elephant capital from pillar erected by Ashoka, Sankasya © John Huntington



Descent of the Buddha from Trayastrimsa Heaven, Kashmir, 8th century. Museum no. IS.8-1978

Vaisali



Monkey offering the Buddha a gift of honey, Indian Museum, Kolkata © John Huntington

Five years after his enlightenment, the Buddha was invited to Vaisali by its ruler, a Licchavi (Nepalese) prince. The city was affected by drought and plague, but as soon as the Buddha arrived there was a thunderstorm with torrential rain which cleansed the city and its people. The Buddha stayed and preached for seven days, converting 84,000 people to Buddhism.

Records indicate that the Buddha made several visits to Vaisali for the purpose of preaching to the monastic community (sangha) and setting down many instructions and rules (suttas). The Licchavi rulers constructed monastic buildings (vihara) for the Buddha's use and it was here that a monkey took the Buddha's alms bowl, filled it with honey and then offered it to the Buddha.

It was at Vaisali that the Buddha delivered his final discourse.



Lion capital of pillar erected by Ashoka. Photograph © John Huntington



Relic stupa at Vaisali. Photograph courtesy of Firefly Mission, 2007



Monastery at Vaisali with pillar erected by Ashoka. Photograph by B Pilgrim, 2006



Remains of stupa at Vaisali © John Huntington

Rajgir

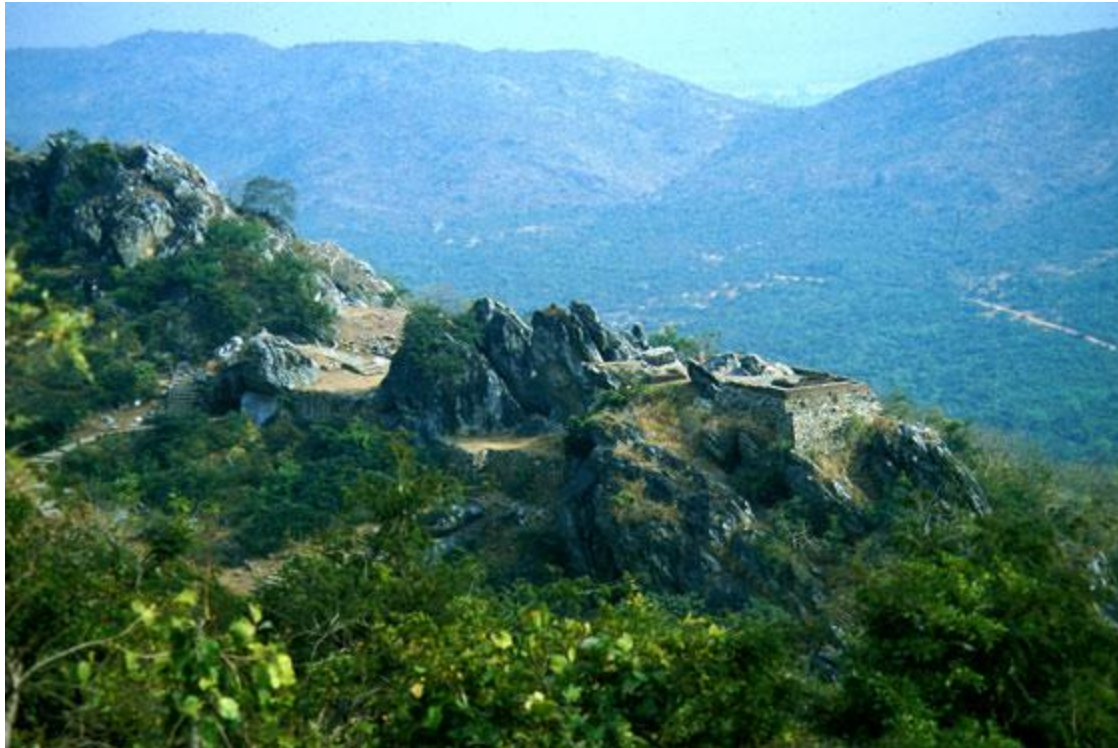


Relief panel showing the Buddha subduing the elephant Nalagiri, Takht-i-bahi. Museum no. IS.3302-18883

The Buddha spent several months meditating and preaching at Rajgir, converting the king of Magadha (present day Bihar) and many others to Buddhism including Jivaka (the king's physician), Sariputta and Mogallana who were to become important and influential disciples. Royal patronage allowed monastic buildings (vihara) to be constructed, providing a retreat for monks during the rainy season.

It was at Rajgir that Devadatta, one of the Buddha's disciples, attempted to kill the Buddha and seize leadership, by setting loose the wild elephant known as Nalagiri. Many texts relate the miraculous story of how the Buddha faced the charging elephant and subdued him.

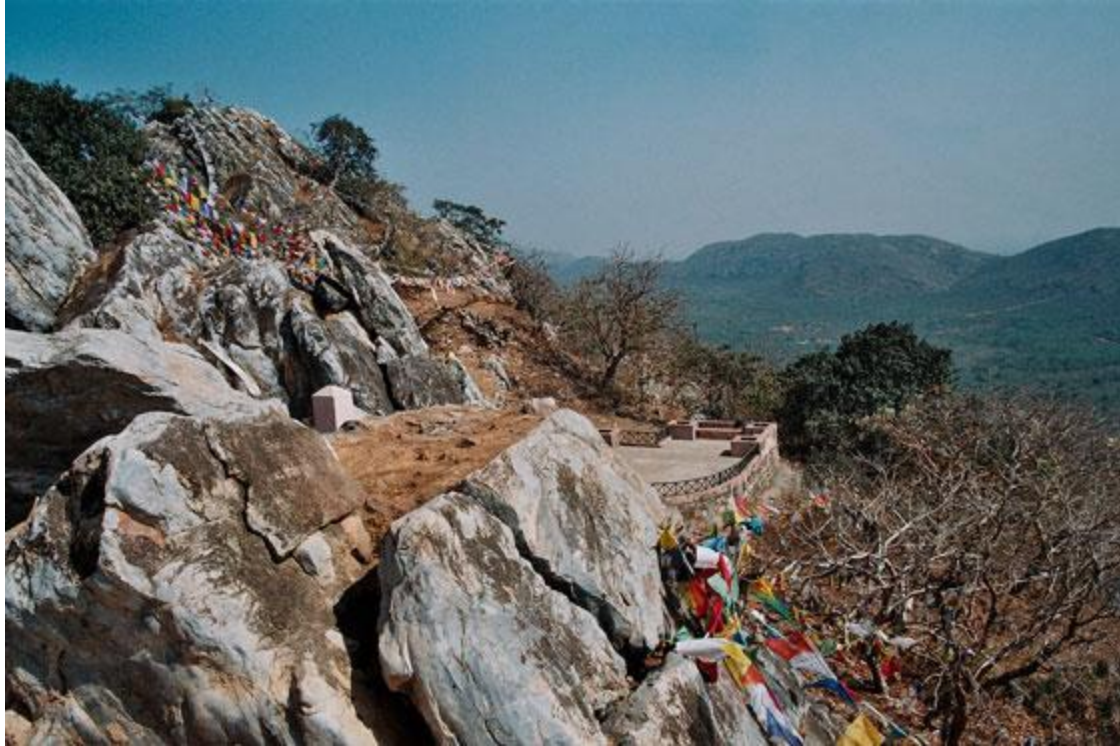
Ashoka erected a pillar to mark his visit to Rajgir and accounts of the city, monasteries and shrines appear in the journals of the Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang.



View of Vulture Peak, Rajgir © John Huntington



Shrine at Vulture Peak, Rajgir Photograph by John Clarke, 2009



Prayer flags, Vulture Peak, Rajgir Photograph by John Clarke, 2009



Monks worshipping at Vulture Peak, Rajgir. Photograph by B Pilgrim/Wikipedia, 2007



Shrine at Vulture Peak, Rajgir © John Huntington



Burmese Buddhist temple, Rajgir. Photograph courtesy of Firefly Mission, 2007



Worshippers at Vulture Peak, Rajgir Photograph by John Clarke, 2009



Buddha taming the elephant Nalagiri at Rajgir © John Huntington

The early development of Buddhist pilgrimage may be attributed not only to the monastic tradition of wandering from place to place, but also in the belief that certain sites were imbued with the Buddha's sacred presence by way of his relics or by the fact that he had visited those places. The cult of relics and the foundation of stupas therefore have a very close connection with the practice of pilgrimage.

Although Buddhism flourished in India until the early 13th century, the growth in popularity of Hinduism from around the 8th century resulted in Buddhist culture becoming concentrated in Bihar and Bengal, the traditional heartland of Buddhism. The important monasteries and temples in northern India continued to provide a focus for pilgrimage.

Travelling along the trade routes from India, monks converted merchants, traders and others and so effectively spread Buddhism through the Himalayas to Central, South-east and East Asia, reaching Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia, China, Korea and Japan. The temporary shelters set up as retreats for monks during the monsoon season eventually became permanent monasteries. The tradition of pilgrimage was established in these new areas and consequently pilgrims made their way back to the Buddhist homeland in India in order to visit sacred sites and to collect texts and relics. The accounts written by Chinese pilgrims not only describe the places visited, but also discuss the motivation for pilgrimage and acknowledge India as the place to which pilgrims must travel in order to experience the Buddha's living presence.

For devotees unable to visit India, local pilgrimage sites developed around objects and relics. Places that were associated with the Buddha's previous lives (or even those of previous Buddhas) became the focus for pilgrimage. For example, in the Theravada tradition it is believed that the Buddha made miraculous journeys to Sri Lanka, Burma and Thailand. Accordingly, sites that are understood to be imbued with the Buddha's presence have become part of regional pilgrimage networks.