

## **PART II**

### **The Four Places of Pilgrimage**

#### **Contents**

1. Lumbini, Birthplace of the Buddha
2. Bodhgaya, Place of Supreme Enlightenment
3. Sarnath, Place of the First Sermon
4. Kushinagar, Place of the Mahaparinibbana

# 1. Lumbini, Birthplace of the Buddha

Lumbini is located in Nepal, 20 km from the border town of Bhairawa, across the Indian border crossing at Sonauli.

## 1.1 Religious Significance

The Buddha was born on the full-moon day of Wesak, 623 BC (This dating is based on the Theravada tradition. Scholars' dating is 563 BC, 60 years later). His father was **Suddhodana**, chieftain of the Sakyas of Kapilavastu (Pali: Kapilavatthu). His mother was **Maya Devi**, daughter of Suppabuddha, a chieftain of the Koliyas of Devadaha

On that auspicious day, Maya Devi was traveling to her parents' home in Devadaha to deliver her first child following her Koliya family custom. Along the way, the entourage passed Lumbini Garden, a grove of Sala trees, where she decided to stop to bathe in the Sakyan pond and rest. Thereafter she began to experience the signs of labor. Summoning her maids to cordon off the area with curtains, she held on to the branch of a Sala tree with her right hand and gave birth to the Bodhisatta (Future Buddha) in a standing position.

According to Majjhima Nikaya Sutta No. 123, as soon as the Bodhisatta was born, he took seven steps to the North and declared his position in the world with these words:

<i>Aggo' ham asmi lokassa --</i>	I am the chief in the world.
<i>Jetto' ham asmi lokassa --</i>	I am the highest in the world.
<i>Setto' ham asmi lokassa --</i>	I am the noblest in the world.
<i>Ayam antima jati --</i>	This is my last birth.
<i>Natthi dani punabbhavo --</i>	There is no more becoming for me.

## 1.2 Historical Background

In 249 BC King Asoka visited Lumbini as part of his pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist places and worshipped at the sacred spot where the Buddha was born. To commemorate his visit, he built an Asokan Pillar with a horse capital and an edict written in Brahmi. Today only 6.7 meters of the pillar still stand but without the horse capital.

According to ancient tradition, when Asoka visited Lumbini, he constructed a brick shrine and placed a “Marker Stone” on top, to worship the exact site of the Buddha’s birthplace. In 1992, archaeologists started excavations at the old Maya Devi temple and discovered the said marker stone pinpointing the exact spot where the Buddha was born.

The Chinese pilgrim Faxian (5<sup>th</sup> century AD) visited Kapilavastu but found it impossible to go to Lumbini as it was engulfed by jungle and the road was dangerous. Another famous Chinese traveler Xuanzang (7<sup>th</sup> century AD) visited Kapilavastu and managed to travel to Lumbini, where he recorded the presence of the Sakyan pond, Sala tree, several stupas and a stone pillar with a horse capital built by King Asoka, which later broke off in the middle and fell to the ground.

After the Muslim conquest of Northern India in 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, Buddhist monks were persecuted and temples pillaged. Lumbini became deserted and fell into ruins. However, there were still isolated cases of pilgrims visiting the holy place. On the upper portion of the Asokan Pillar is an inscription from the early 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. It records a local devotee who visited Lumbini before it was lost in the jungles for the next 500 years. Ripu Malla, a Prince of the Nagaraja dynasty of western Nepal, had his name and a verse inscribed on the Asoka pillar to record his visit to Lumbini.

In 1896 Gen. Khadga Shamsher Rana, Governor of West Nepal, while clearing the jungle in Lumbini, discovered the broken Lumbini Pillar. Seeing an inscription near the base, he knew that it was important. To have it deciphered, he invited German archaeologist Dr Anton Führer, working nearby in India, to come and see it. Führer later claimed that he himself had discovered the pillar ignoring Khadga's role. Although some people have attributed the rediscovery of Lumbini to Führer, the site and the pillar were already known, as Khadga Shamsher had sent rubbings of the inscription to Vincent Smith some years earlier but the latter failed to decipher the writing. (Ref: The Buddha and Dr Führer: An Archaeological Scandal by Charles Allen)

## 1.3 Objects of Interest

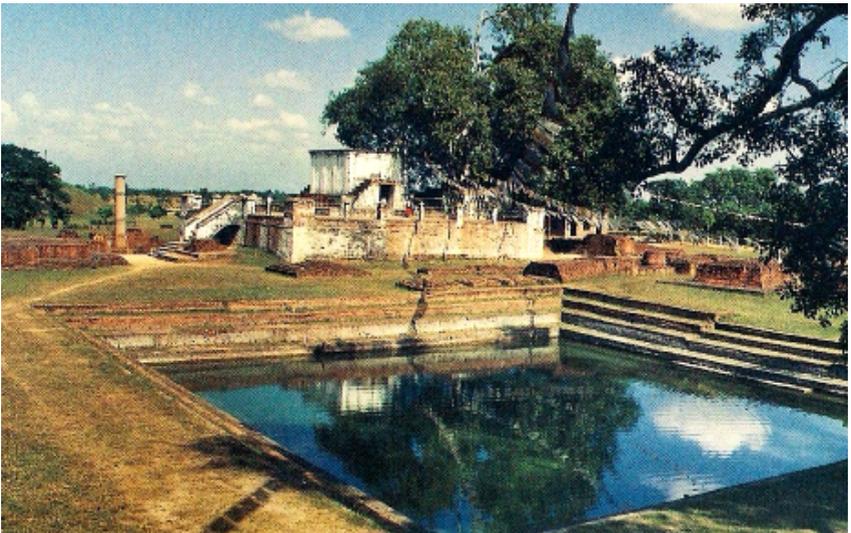
### (i) Asokan Pillar

Upon entering Lumbini Garden, the most visible landmark is a tall stone pillar surrounded by an iron fence. This is the famous Lumbini Pillar erected by King Asoka in 249 BC. Originally it had a horse capital on top but later it was struck by lightning and broken in the middle leaving 6.7 m standing without the capital. It is this pillar with its inscription that confirmed this site as the Buddha's birthplace. At the base is an inscription in ancient Magadhi Prakrit script translated as follows: *“King Piyadasi, Beloved of the Gods, in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of his reign visited this place and worshipped because here Buddha Sakyamuni, was born. He had both a **stone railing (silavigadabhica)** and a pillar set up. Because the Lord was born here, the village of Lumbini was exempted from tax and pay only one eighth share (of produce).”*

**Note:** Earlier '*silavigadabhica*' was translated as '**stone capital**', the horse capital of the Pillar. It was changed to '**stone railing**' after the Marker Stone was discovered because a railing was more appropriate to protect the shrine marking the Buddha's birthplace.



**Plate 1.** The Asokan Pillar at the back of the Maya Devi Temple.



**Plate 2:** Postcard photo of the old Maya Devi Temple built in 1939, which was demolished in 1991 for archaeological excavations to be carried out to locate the exact place where the Buddha was born.

## (ii) ‘Sanctum-Sanctorum’: Exact Spot of the Buddha’s Birthplace

The area just in front of the Asokan column was formerly the site of the old Maya Devi temple, a white box-shaped structure built in 1939 by the local administrator Keshar Shumser. It was dismantled in 1992 for archeological excavations to be carried out underneath the shrine room. On 4 February 1996, a team of UN-sponsored archeologists announced the discovery of the Buddha’s birthplace beneath the temple’s foundation. The archeologists excavated 15 chambers to a depth of about 5 m, and found a commemorative stone slab shaped like a womb atop a platform of seven layers of bricks dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, pinpointing the exact spot of the Buddha’s birthplace, the ‘Sanctum-Sanctorum’. According to ancient Buddhist literature, when King Asoka visited Lumbini in 249 BC, he placed a **“marker stone”** on top of a pile of bricks as a commemorative monument, for himself and posterity to worship.

Since the excavation was completed in 1996, the site has remained closed to the public, and the excavations covered by a corrugated iron roof and tarpaulin until 2001. Today a new temple has been built to house the ancient Nativity Sculpture, which was consecrated on Wesak Day in 26 May 2003. Inside pilgrims can circumambulate the excavated ruins of the temple complex and the Asokan shrine put up in the 3rd century BC. The historical “marker stone” said to pinpoint the spot where Mayadevi gave birth to Prince Siddhattha, is covered with bulletproof glass to make sure that it is well protected.

## (iii) Puskarni – the sacred pond

South of the Asokan pillar is the famous sacred pond **Puskarni**, believed to be the pond where Maya Devi washed herself before giving birth to the Bodhisatta. It has been enlarged several times.



**Plate 3:** Lumbini Garden in 2001 showing the famous Asokan Pillar. The area under the corrugated iron roof was the site where the old Maya Devi temple once stood before it was demolished for archaeological excavations in 1992. In the foreground is the Puskarni or sacred pond where Maya Devi had a bath before giving birth to Prince Siddhattha.



**Plate 4:** Photo of the new temple in Lumbini built over the remains of the old Maya Devi temple. In the foreground is the Puskarni or sacred pond, where Maya Devi washed herself before giving birth.



**Plate 5:** The new temple has a wooden platform for circumambulating the ancient Asokan shrine shown covered by a glass-topped box. This site is believed to be the exact spot in Lumbini where the Buddha was born.



**Plate 6:** The "Marker Stone" supposedly put by King Asoka to worship the exact spot where the Buddha was born.

#### (iv) Ancient Nativity Sculpture

In May 2003, the ancient stone sculpture depicting the **Nativity of the Buddha** was placed in the new temple complex built over the exact spot of the Buddha's birthplace. The sculpture dates back to 4<sup>th</sup> century AD and contains a bas-relief image of Maya Devi, mother of the Lord, holding a branch of the Sala tree with her right hand, her left hand resting on her hips. On her right side supporting her is a woman, presumably her sister Maha Pajapati. Beyond the latter is the slightly bent figure of Sakka Devaraja, who is in the attitude of receiving the newborn child. Below is a small figure of Prince Siddhattha with a halo around his head, standing on a lotus pedestal. (see photo below)



## 2. Bodhgaya, Place of Supreme Enlightenment

Bodhgaya (Pali: Buddhagaya) is located in Bihar state, 105 km by road south of the state capital Patna.

### 2.1 Religious Significance

After the Great Renunciation, the Bodhisatta approached two ascetics named **Alara Kalama** and **Udakkā Ramaputta**, who taught him to attain the Formless Jhanas. Although they were the highest attainments at that time, still he was dissatisfied because they did not lead to Nibbana. Leaving them, he arrived at an isolated cave on a hill known as Dugeswari, where he underwent six years of painful and profitless practices until his body became skeleton-like and he nearly died. Realizing the futility of self-mortification, he adopted the Middle Path and started eating again to regain his strength. His five companions, thinking that he had given up the struggle and reverted to luxury, left him. The Bodhisatta was now alone in his struggle for Enlightenment.

One day on the eve of Wesak, while waiting to go on alms-round under a Banyan tree, the Bodhisatta was offered milk rice in a golden dish by the **Lady Sujata**, daughter of the chieftain of the nearby village of **Senanigama**. After the meal, the Bodhisatta took the dish and went to the **Neranjara** river and saying: “*If I am to succeed in becoming a Buddha to-day, let this dish go upstream; but if not, let it go downstream*”, he threw it into the water. There it floated to the middle of the river and raced upstream for eighty cubits (37 m) before it sank in a whirlpool.

In the evening, on the way to the Bodhi tree, the Bodhisatta was offered 8 handfuls of grass by the grass-cutter **Sotthiya**, which he placed on his seat under the Bodhi tree. Sitting cross-legged, facing the east, the Bodhisatta made a resolution, saying:

*“Let my skin, sinews and bones become dry. Let my flesh and blood dry up. Never from this seat will I stir until I have attained Buddhahood.”* (Ref: Buddhism in Translations by Henry Clarke Warren pp 71-83)

This was the culmination of his Perfections developed over countless eons that no being, not even Mara and his dreaded army, could unseat the Bodhisatta from the Aparajita or Unconquered throne. When challenged by Mara, the Bodhisatta called upon the earth to bear witness to his Thirty Perfections, by touching the ground with his right hand. Instantly, the earth responded with a great quake that shook and scattered Mara and his forces until they fled in defeat. Before the sun had set, the Bodhisatta had vanquished Mara and his forces. Then with mind tranquilized and purified, in the first watch of night, he developed the Knowledge of Past Lives; in the middle watch, the Divine Eye; and in the last watch, he developed the Knowledge of Destruction of Taints and attained Supreme Enlightenment. A **Supreme Buddha** (Samma-sambuddho) had arisen in the world on the full moon day of **Wesak** in 588 BC.

## 2.2 Historical Background

Bodhgaya (Pali name: Buddhagaya), scene of the Buddha’s Supreme Enlightenment, is the most hallowed place on earth to Buddhists. During the Buddha’s time, this place by the banks of the River Neranjara was known as Uruvela. King Asoka was the first to build a temple at this sacred spot. Beginning with Asoka’s first visit in 259 BC, countless pilgrims have gravitated to this cradle of Buddhism without intermission for more than 1500 years. The devastation of Buddhist viharas and shrines by Muslim hordes in the 13<sup>th</sup> century abruptly halted the flow of pilgrims to Bodhgaya. **Dharmasvamin**, a Tibetan pilgrim, visited Bodhgaya in 1234 AD. He found the place deserted and wrote:

*“Only four monks were found staying (in the vihara). One said, ‘It is not good. All have fled in fear of the Turushka soldiery.’ They blocked up the door in front of the Mahabodhi image with bricks and plastered it. Near it they placed another image as a substitute.”*

When Buddhism declined in India, the Burmese came to the rescue of the decaying Mahabodhi Temple by undertaking repairs during the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century AD. Thereafter, Bodhgaya was forgotten by the Buddhists and the Great Temple fell into ruins. A wandering Hindu ascetic, Mahant Gosain Giri, taking advantage of the situation, established his Math (temple) at Bodhgaya and took control of the Mahabodhi and its environment in 1590 AD. Thereafter, the holy Buddhist shrine passed into the hands of successive Mahants (abbot) who used the place for sacrilegious practices. In 1861, **Cunningham** found the Mahant and his followers indulging in all sorts of non-Buddhist ceremonies at the main shrine.

**Sir Edwin Arnold**, author of the “Light of Asia” visited the Mahabodhi Temple in 1885 and reported this observation in the Daily Telegraph in London: *“The Buddhist world had, indeed, well-nigh forgotten this hallowed and most interesting centre of their faith – the Mecca, the Jerusalem, of million Oriental congregations when I sojourned in Buddhagaya a few years ago. I was so grieved to see Maharatta peasants performing ‘Shraddh’ (Hindu funereal offering ceremony) in such a place, and thousands of precious ancient relics of carved stone inscribed with Sanskrit lying in piles around.”*

The battle to regain control of Mahabodhi Temple by Buddhists began in January 22, 1891 when **Anagarika Dharmapala** visited Bodhgaya. Visibly moved by the neglect and sacrilege of this most sacred shrine, he took the vow, *“I will work on to make this sacred spot to be cared for by our own Bhikkhus.”*

As a first step, he founded the **Maha Bodhi Society** of Buddhagaya in May 31, 1891 to garner support for this noble objective. Next, he invited four Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka to come and stay at Bodhgaya, namely: Ven. **Chandajoti**, Ven. **Sumangala**, Ven. **Pemmananda** and Ven. **Sudassana**. They arrived at Bodhgaya in July 1891 and took up residence in the Burmese Rest House. As the Mahant had property rights to the land in Bodhgaya, he objected to their presence and in February 1893, two of the monks were severely beaten up by his men.

Two years later in 1895, when Anagarika Dharmapala attempted to install a Buddha image presented to him by the people of Japan on the upper floor of the Temple, he was assaulted and prevented to do so by the Mahant's men. So the image was kept in the Burmese Rest House. Still the Mahant and some Hindu organizations were not satisfied and tried to get the image removed from the Rest House but the Government did not yield.

In 1906, the Mahant filed a suit seeking to eject the Buddhist monks from the Rest House. Thereafter a long legal battle ensued between the Mahant and the Buddhists, which continued till 1949, when the State of Bihar enacted the Buddha Gaya Temple Management Act, which effectively transferred control of the Temple land and other property to a Management Committee.

Two things of the Bill were objectionable; one that the nine-man Management Committee of the Temple would have a Hindu majority, and the other that Buddhist members should be of Indian nationality. In spite of protests by the Maha Bodhi Society, the Bill was passed with an amendment for provision of an Advisory Board in which the majority should be Buddhists and not necessarily all of Indian nationality. This means that Buddhists can only advise on the management of the Mahabodhi Temple but the control and final say belongs to the Hindus!

### 3. Objects of Interest

#### (i) Mahabodhi Temple

The Mahabodhi Temple has a long history. Excavations by Cunningham in 1872 suggested three periods in its construction. The first phase of construction by **King Asoka** during the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC was the Bodhi Shrine under the Bodhi Tree. The second phase of construction during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, involved renovation of the original Bodhi Shrine by two pious ladies, **Surangi** and **Nagadevi**, wives of **Sunga** kings. **Huviska**, the Kushan king of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD undertook the third phase of construction. The images of the Buddha originated during this period. Therefore shrines were erected for their installation.

Cunningham suggested that the entire Mahabodhi Temple, as seen today, was mainly the structure of the Huviska period (111-138 AD). As it was built over the remains of Asoka's shrine, the **Vajrasana** (Diamond) Throne retains its original position of the Seat of Enlightenment (**Bodhimana**). In the 7<sup>th</sup> century AD, renovations were carried out which included placing a new basalt slab over the older plaster throne at the Vajrasana. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, massive renovations were carried out under the able supervision of Cunningham, Beglar and R. L. Mitra to restore the Maha Bodhi Temple, which had fallen into ruins after centuries of vandalism and neglect by its squatter-occupants, the successor Mahants of Gosain Giri. The magnificent building we see today is the result of the rare devotion and dedication of **Cunningham**, **Beglar** and **Mitra**.

The Mahabodhi Temple is undoubtedly the most exquisite-looking building in Buddhagaya. Standing 52 meters high with a base of 15.2 meter square, it consists of a straight pyramidal tower surmounted by a stupa. At the corners of the base, there arise four smaller towers – miniature replicas of the main spire. The main

door faces east. In front of it is an imposing ancient gateway decorated with carvings. The niches on the walls of both sides of the Temple contain images of the Buddha. The main shrine hall or Sanctum on the ground floor is reached after passing through a vaulted passage, on both sides of which are stone staircases leading up to a smaller shrine hall on the first floor.

On entering the Sanctum, one comes face-to-face with the great gilded image of the Buddha seated in the earth-touching posture (*bhumi-phassa-mudra*). Just gazing at this magnificent image of our Lord will certainly evoke feelings of joy and reverence in the heart of the pilgrim! This is the result of the faith and devotion in heeding the Buddha's exhortation to "*visit the holy places and look upon them with feelings of reverence*".

The colossal gilded image is from the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD. Here the Buddha is depicted as sitting on a patterned cushion instead of a lotus. It is supported by a pedestal, decorated with figures of lions alternating with elephants. The patterned cushion is a common feature found in other Buddha images from Eastern India, which was probably copied from this image. Most people are not aware of the fact that this image was not in the temple when archeological explorations were going on in and around Buddhagaya by the then British government. According to an article on "Buddhagaya Sculptures" in the Sambodhi 1993, R. L. Mitra noted that it was in the Mahant's compound. Later on, at the request of **Cunningham** and **Beglar**, it was moved to its present location at the main shrine. If not for the timely intervention of these two gentlemen, this inspiring image would still be wasting in the Mahant's compound instead of its present rightful place for pilgrims to worship!



**Plate 7:** Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya is the most hallowed place on earth to Buddhists, who come from all over the world to pay homage to the Buddha.



**Plate 8:** The 10th century colossal Buddha image inside Mahabodhi Temple.

## (ii) The Bodhi Tree (Bodhidruma)

The Bodhi tree under which the Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment is situated behind the Temple. It is a Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), also known in Pali as ‘*assattha*’. It is said to have sprung up at the same time when the Buddha was born, i.e., his co-natal (*sahajata*). According to the Commentaries, different Buddhas attained Enlightenment seated under different trees and each of them became the ‘**Bodhi tree**’ of that particular Buddha during his time. In the present dispensation, only the Bodhi tree of Gotama Buddha is revered. The site of the Bodhi tree is the same for all Buddhas. It is believed that no place on earth can support the weight of the Buddha’s Enlightenment. The ground is so firm that it remained unmoved, even as a violent earthquake shook the world and scattered Mara and his army who had come to challenge the Bodhisatta for the Seat of Enlightenment.

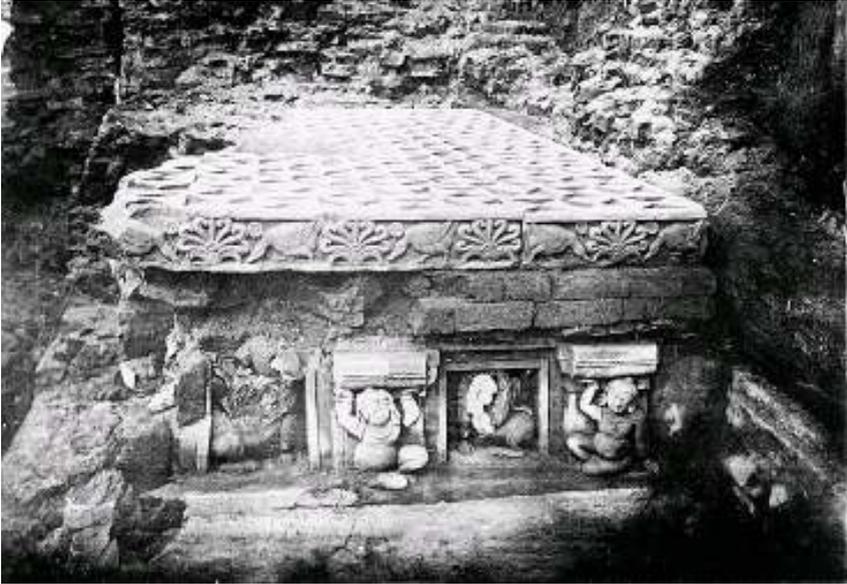
From earliest times, kings and commoners have come here to honor it. Being the object of veneration of Buddhists, it became the target of destruction by the enemies of Buddhism. According to Xuanzang, the Bodhi tree was first cut down by **Asoka** before his conversion but later out of remorse, he revived the tree by bathing the roots with scented water and milk. He paid homage to the tree so earnestly that his queen, Tissarakkha, filled with jealousy had it destroyed secretly. Again Asoka had it revived. Thereafter, he built a wall 3 m high to surround it for protection. After the fall of the Mauryan Empire, Sunga king **Pusyamitra**, a persecutor of Buddhism, also destroyed the Bodhi tree but a sapling of the tree from Sri Lanka was brought back and replanted in the same spot. During 6<sup>th</sup> century AD, **Sasanka**, a Hindu king cut down the Bodhi tree but sometime later it was replanted with a sapling of the Bodhi tree of Sri Lanka by King **Purvavarma** of Magadha, who then built a wall 7.3 m high to surround it. Its remains were 6.1 m high when Xuanzang visited it in 7<sup>th</sup> century AD. In 1876, the old decaying Bodhi tree fell down during a storm. **Cunningham** replanted a sapling from it on the same spot.



**Plate 9:** The present Bodhi Tree behind the temple was replanted in 1876. It is surrounded by a 6-metre high sandstone balustrade to protect it from vandals.



**Plate 10:** The Seat of Enlightenment is under the canopy on the left. The Buddha sat under facing the east with his back towards the Bodhi Tree.



**Plate 11:** The Diamond Throne when it was discovered and the photo taken in 1892 by Cunningham during excavations at the Mahabodhi Temple.



**Plate12:** The Diamond Throne as seen today after repairs.

### (iii) The Vajrasana or Diamond Throne

The Vajrasana is located between the Bodhi tree and the back of the Temple. It marks the actual spot where the Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment. It is said that the Buddha sat facing east with his back to the trunk of the Bodhi tree. According to legend, when the Bodhisatta tried sitting on the other three sides of the tree, the ground on which he sat sank down. Only the eastern side held firm, capable of supporting his enlightenment. A more practical reason why the Buddha chose the eastern side was to avoid the afternoon sun from the west, which is quite strong during the month of May. A red sandstone slab measuring 2.3 meters long by 1.3m wide by 0.9m high now marks the site Enlightenment or **Bodhimana**. Pilgrims who visit this spot should spend some time in this conducive place to reflect on the virtues of the Buddha, to attain fullness of faith and calm, followed by mindfulness meditation to develop spiritual insight.

### (iv) The Buddha's Stay at 7 Places after Enlightenment

After attaining Buddhahood on the full-moon night of *Wesak*, as dawn broke, the Buddha uttered a paean of joy (*udana*). While sitting on the *Vajrasana*, he decided to continue sitting on the undefeated throne on which he overcame Mara and fulfilled all his wishes, including the one to become a Buddha.

- **First Week on the Throne (*Pallanka Sattaha*)**

The Buddha sat on the Diamond Throne for seven days in meditation absorbed in the bliss of emancipation (*Arahantship* Fruition). At the end of seven days, he emerged from the absorption and contemplated on the Doctrine of Dependent Origination (*Paticca Samuppada*) the whole night.

- **Second Week of the Unblinking Gaze (*Animisa Sattaha*)**

Throughout the second week, as a mark of gratitude to the Bodhi Tree for providing him shelter, the Buddha stood gazing at it without closing his eyes. On the spot where the Buddha stood a shrine was erected by King Asoka. Called the **Animisilocana Cetiya** or ‘Unblenching Gaze’ shrine, it is located on elevated ground within the courtyard in front of the Temple.

- **Third Week on the Walk (*Cankama Sattaha*)**

The third week was spent on walking meditation along a ‘jewelled promenade or **Cankama**’ running from east to west between the Diamond throne and the Animisilocana Cetiya.

- **Fourth Week in the Jewelled House (*Ratanaghara Sattaha*)**

The Buddha spent the fourth week in the ‘Jewelled House’, reflecting on the **Abhidhamma**, which deals with absolute truths concerning mental and material processes. As he contemplated on the deep and profound doctrine of the **Patthana** or **Conditional Relations**, there arose great rapture in the Omniscient mind, which activated material processes in the body to emit rays of six colours – blue, gold, white, red, pink and a massive brightness of all these assorted colours. This spot is now marked by a small shrine within the compound to the north of the Cankama.

- **Fifth Week at Ajapala Nigrodha Tree (*Ajapala Sattaha*)**

During the fifth week, the Buddha sat at the root of the Ajapala Banyan tree reflecting on the Dhamma and absorbed in the bliss Fruition of Arahantship. This Banyan tree was called Ajapala because goatherds came for shelter under its shade. Here the Buddha declared the qualities of a true Brahman in reply to a question by a conceited brahmin. This site is indicated by a signboard within the courtyard, directly in front of the Temple.

- **Sixth Week at Mucalinda (*Mucalinda Sattaha*)**

After seven days at the Ajapala Banyan tree, the Buddha moved to the Mucalinda (*Barringtonia acutangula*) tree, a short distance south of the Temple. There he sat for seven days at the root of the Mucalinda tree, absorbed in the bliss of Arahantship. At that time, there arose an untimely rainstorm and gloom for seven days. Mucalinda, serpent king of the lake, came out and used its coils to encircle the Buddha's body and its hood to cover the Buddha's head thereby protecting the Lord. The site of this episode is at the Mucalinda pond, a short distance south of the Temple.

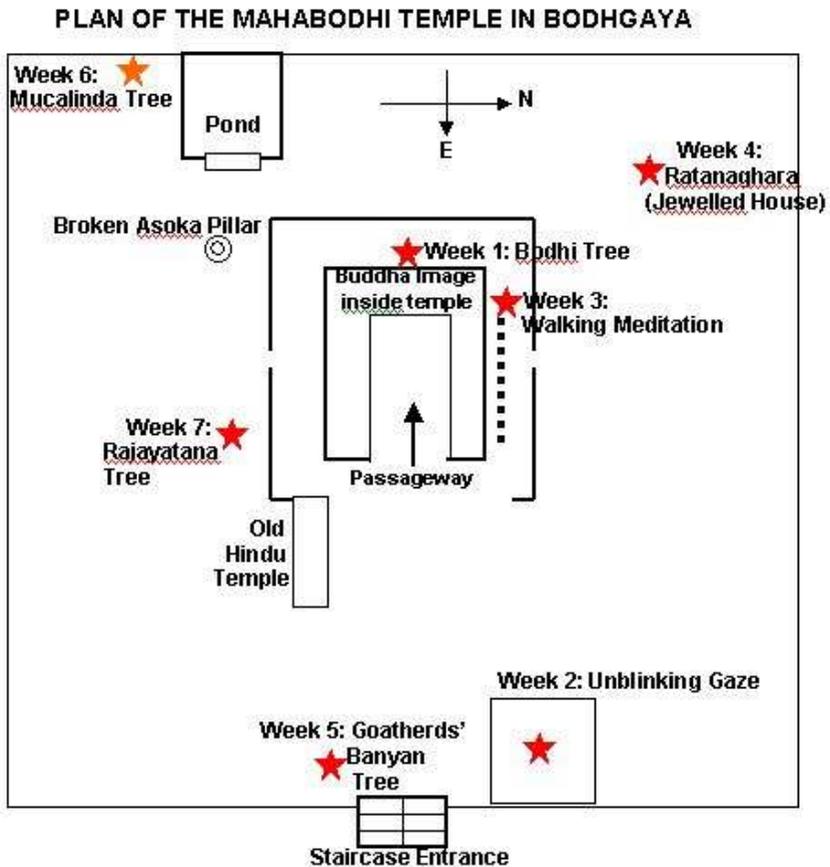
- **Seventh Week at Rajayatana Tree (*Rajayatana Sattaha*)**

After seven days at the Mucalinda tree, the Buddha moved to the Rajayatana tree (*Buchanania latifolia*) near the Temple. Here he sat at the foot of the tree absorbed in the bliss of *Arahantship* for seven days. At that time, two merchant brothers, **Tapussa** and **Bhallika**, from **Ukkala** met the Buddha and offered him rice cakes and honey. They became the first lay disciples and took the Twofold Refuge, reciting: "*Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami.*" Before taking leave, they asked the Buddha for an object of worship. Thereupon the Buddha rubbed his head and presented them with eight hairs.

The site of this episode is marked by a signboard just south of the Temple.

**Note:** Myanmar claims that Ukkala was located in Myanmar and when the two brothers returned to their native village, the precious hair relics were eventually enshrined at the **Shwedagon Pagoda** in Yangon.

Below is the plan of the Mahabodhi Temple complex showing the location of the seven places where the Buddha spent seven days at each place.





**Plate 13:** First Week on the Throne (Pallanka Sattaha)



**Plate 14:** Second Week of Unblinking Gaze (Animisalocana Sattaha)



**Plate 15:** The Buddha spent the third week in walking meditation on the Cankama or cloister running east to west near the Bodhi Tree as shown.



**Plate 16:** The Buddha spent the fourth week in the “Jewelled House” reflecting on the Abhidhamma. As he contemplated on the deep and profound doctrines, there arose great rapture in his mind, causing light of various colors to emit from his body. These colors are represented in the Buddhist flag.



**Plate 17:** The Buddha spent the fifth week at the Aja Pala Nigrodha tree for 7 days in meditation. Here he declared the qualities of a true Brahman in reply to a haughty brahmin who asked what are the things that make a Brahman.



**Plate 18:** The Buddha spent the sixth week at the root of the Mucalinda tree when there arose an untimely rainstorm for 7 days. Mucalinda, serpent king of the lake came out to protect the Lord from the rain and cold.



**Plate 19:** Seventh week at the Rajayatana Tree shown on the right surrounded by a sandstone balustrade.

### **(v) Sujata Kuti, Site of Lady Sujata's Milk Rice Offering**

Just across the bridge over the river Neranjara is the village of **Bakraur**. Formerly the object of interest at this place was a grassy mound that was fenced up. The site was popularly known as **Sujata Kuti or Sujatagarh** while the village was known as **Senanigama** during the Buddha's time.

In 1973-74, the Archeological Society of India (ASI) undertook excavations of the mound to reveal the remains of an extensive brick stupa 65.5m in diameter and 11m high, indicating the religious importance of the place. The ASI has put a signboard to indicate that the stupa marks the site of Lady Sujata's house (Sujatagarh).

However it is more likely that this large stupa was erected by King Asoka to mark the place where the **Lady Sujata offered milk rice** to the Bodhisatta prior to his Enlightenment since the selection of sites for stupas were not arbitrary. King Asoka erected such memorials only at places that were traditionally connected with important events in the Buddha's life.



**Plate 20:** Based on the name “Sujatagarh”, which means Sujata's Place, this stupa probably marks the site where the Lady Sujata offered milk rice to the Bodhisatta on the eve of his Enlightenment. This is because such memorial stupas were usually erected to commemorate important events in the Buddha's life.

### 3. Sarnath, Place of the First Sermon

Sarnath is located in the state of Uttar Pradesh, 30 km from the city of Varanasi (Benares) and 250 km east of Bodhgaya

#### 3.1 Religious Significance

After spending seven weeks in Bodhgaya following his Enlightenment, the Buddha was undecided about teaching the Dhamma to others as he realized that it was profound and hard to discover, and others would not understand him. The deity Brahma Sahampati who became aware of the Buddha's thoughts, pleaded with him to teach the Dhamma otherwise the world would be lost. The Buddha considered the plea and out of compassion decided to go to Benares to preach to the Five Ascetics, namely: **Kondanna, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahanama** and **Assaji**, who had served him for six long years, but left after he abandoned the path of self-mortification.

Traveling on foot, he arrived at **Deer Park** or **Isipatana** in modern day Sarnath on the full-moon day of *Asalha*, exactly two months after Wesak. When they saw the Buddha coming in the distance, they decided not to welcome him, but as soon as the Buddha approached, they found themselves unable to keep their pact and began to serve him. Eventually the Buddha was able to convince them of his attainment. That very night, he delivered the historic First Sermon, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* or the Discourse on Turning the Wheel of *Dhamma*, which led to **Kondanna** attaining the first stage of sainthood called *sotapanna* (stream-winner) at the end of the discourse. The remaining four ascetics attained *sotapanna* status, successively over the next four days. On the fifth day, the Buddha preached to them the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* or Discourse on the Characteristics of Non-Self, hearing which they attained arahantship or final sainthood.

In Sarnath too, the Buddha converted the rich man **Yasa** and his fifty-four friends, who also became arahants. After the rainy season, the Buddha dispatched them in various directions to propagate the Dhamma, with each to go a separate way. Thus Sarnath became famous as the place of the First Sermon, as well as the founding of the Community of Monks (Bhikkhu Sangha).

### 3.2 Historical Background

**King Asoka** visited Sarnath in 249 BC and erected several monuments to mark his pilgrimage, notably; the Dhammarajika stupa, Dhamekh stupa and the Asokan pillar surmounted by the famous Lion Capital, which is now the crest of India. During the reign of Kushan king **Kaniska** (78 AD), Sarnath was a centre of religious activity and the famous colossal Bodhisatta image with a large parasol was installed by the bhikkhu **Bala** of Mathura. During the Gupta period (4<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century AD), the Dhamekh Stupa was encased with carved stones, the Mulagandhakuti main shrine was enlarged and the famous Preaching Buddha image, a gift of **King Kumaragupta**, was added.

In 520 AD, Sarnath had its share of destruction during the invasion of the Huns under the barbarian **Mihirakula**. But after the Huns were defeated, Sarnath again flourished under the Buddhist king, **Harsa Vardharna** (606-647 AD) and continued to be a living shrine under the Pala kings (8<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> century AD). The last known patron of Sarnath was **Queen Kumaradevi**, the pious Buddhist wife of **King Govindachandra** of Benares (1114-1154 AD). She built a large monastery at Sarnath named Dhammacakka Jina Vihara, the ruins of which were exposed during excavations in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Things took a turn for the worst when Muslim hordes overran India at the close of the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD and started their trail of destruction and massacre of the Buddhist monks.

After the Diaspora of the Sangha in India, Sarnath became deserted and was forgotten for about 600 years. Archeological excavations at the site in the 1800's by **Major Kittoe** revealed evidence of a tragic period of massive and sudden destruction by fire. The discoveries of remains of ready-made wheaten cakes and wheat and other grain in some of the cells suggest that the conflagration had been so sudden and rapid, as to force the monks to abandon their very food. In short, the evidence would indicate that the destruction was caused by fire applied by the hands of an adversary bent on extermination rather than by any ordinary fire! According to **Cunningham**, so vividly was the impression of a great final catastrophe by fire fixed in Major Kittoe's mind that he summed his conclusion as follows: "*All have been sacked and burnt, priests, temples, idols, all together. In some places, bones, iron, timber, idols, etc., are all fused into huge heaps; and this has happened more than once.*"

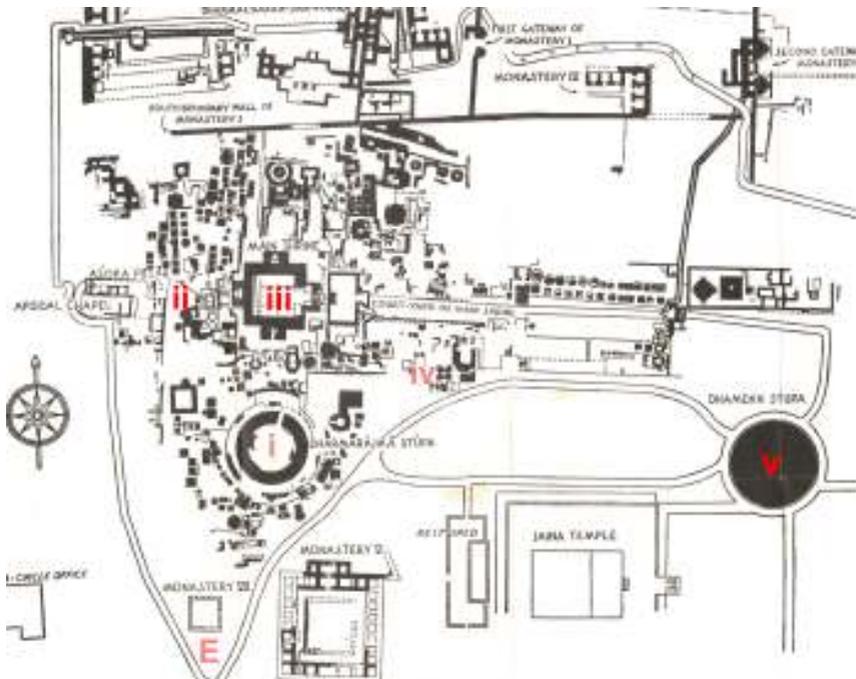
In 1794, Sarnath came to the notice of the world under tragic circumstances. **Jagat Singh**, a minister in Benares, dismantled the famous Dhammarajika *stupa* as a convenient way of collecting bricks and stones for building a housing colony, which he named Jagatjanj, after himself. When the stupa was pulled down, workmen found at a depth of 8.3 m from the top, a stone box containing a green marble casket. Inside it were human relics, presumably those of the Buddha enshrined there by King Asoka. Following Hindu rites, Jagat Singh consigned them into the Ganges River, where they were lost forever.

This act of vandalism would have gone unnoticed but for a report about the said discovery by **Jonathan Duncan**, Commissioner of Benares, which appeared in the 'Asiatic Researches'. Soon public attention was attracted to the ruins of Sarnath and in 1815 **Col. C. Mackenzie** began explorations and discovered some sculptures, which are now kept at the Calcutta Museum. In 1835-36, Cunningham carried out excavations and recovered over forty

sculptures and carved stones. Another tragedy struck when they were carted away in his absence together with sixty cartloads of stones from the shrines as construction material for two bridges and some buildings in Benares.

Further excavations were undertaken on and off from 1851 to 1922, and exposed the Dhamekh stupa, the Dhammarajika stupa, Mulagandhakuti shrine, Asokan pillar and the ruins of several monasteries. The first four monuments are considered sacred because of their association with the Buddha. The fifth sacred spot is probably the sunken shrine of Pancayatana, which is believed by some monk teachers to be the site where the Buddha preached to the rich man Yasa.

Below is the ground plan of Deer Park, Sarnath extracted from the publication “Sarnath” by the Archaeological Survey of India.



### 3.3 Objects of Interest

#### Important Monuments in Deer Park

While in Sarnath, pilgrims should visit 5 important monuments related to the Buddha's ministry in Deer Park, Sarnath. Their locations are shown in the ground plan of Deer Park identified by the numbers below.

- (i) Dhammarajika Stupa
- (ii) Asokan Pillar
- (iii) Ruins of Main Shrine
- (iv) Sunken Shrine of Pancayatana
- (v) Dhamekh Stupa
- (E) Entrance

#### (i) The Dhammarajika Stupa

The ruins of the Dhammarajika stupa is a short distance north of the main entrance. It consists of a circular base of what remained after the wanton act of destruction by Jagat Singh. The original stupa built by King Asoka was 13.5 meters in diameter but it had been enlarged many times so that the base we see today is much larger. The Dhammarajika Stupa is believed to be built by King Asoka at the time of his re-distributing the relics from the original stupas and enshrining them in other stupas at different places throughout his empire. The sanctity of this stupa is amply borne out by six enlargements, which it successively underwent, the last being in 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. It is the only relic stupa in Deer Park, the Dhamekh Stupa being only a memorial stupa. These facts support the view that the site must have been the venue of a very important event, such as the preaching of the First Sermon. In fact, the large number of votive stupas surrounding the Dhammarajika Stupa lends further support to this view.

## (ii) The Asokan Pillar

Just a short distance north of the Dhammarajika Stupa is a concrete path that leads to a small pavilion with an iron railing. Inside one can see several pieces of the broken Asokan Pillar of Sarnath. The original pillar was 15 meters high and surmounted by the famous Lion Capital, which consists of four lions standing back to back and can be seen in Sarnath Museum today. This unique sculpture is made of polished sandstone and stands at 2.15 metres. It is more elaborate than all the other capitals of the Asokan pillars bearing the Edicts of Asoka. A graphic representation of it was adopted as the National Emblem of India in 1950 and appears in Indian currency notes.

This Asokan pillar is believed to mark the site where the Buddha assembled the first sixty arahants and exhorted them to go in different directions to spread the Teaching. On the pillar is an inscription, which says: “*Let no one cause a division in the Sangha.*” During Asoka’s time, bhikkhus from many sects lived in Sarnath and it is believed that he issued this **Sanghabhedaka** (Causing a Schism in the Order) in order to promote harmony among the various Buddhist sects living in Sarnath at that time.

## (iii) The Ruins of Main Shrine (Mulagandhakuti)

From the pavilion of the Asokan Pillar, one can see the rear section of the ruins of a large ancient building. This used to be the Main Shrine of Sarnath. It is believed to be built on the site of the Mulagandhakuti or First Perfumed Chamber, where the Buddha spent the first rainy season in Sarnath. According to the Dhammapada Commentary, the rich man **Nandiya** was the donor and as soon as the Buddha accepted the gift, a celestial mansion arose in Tavatimsa Heaven awaiting its owner, Nandiya.

The main shrine was a square building, 18.3 m on each side, with the entrance facing east. The area between the ruins of the Main Shrine and the Dharmarajika Stupa is believed to be the site of the **Cankama**, the promenade where the Buddha did his walking meditation. This belief is supported by the discovery of the famous colossal Bodhisatta image installed at this site by **Bhikkhu Bala** of Mathura in AD 81 during the reign of the Kushan king Kanishka.

#### (iv) The Sunken Shrine of Pancayatana

Just a short distance east of the Main Shrine, is a sunken shrine under a concrete platform. It is made of terra cotta bricks and modeled to resemble one of the four-squares temples of the Gupta period, called ‘pancayatana’ or ‘five bases’. The site of the sunken shrine of Pancayatana is believed by Burmese Sayadaws to be the place where the Buddha converted Yasa, the son of a millionaire of Benares

Yasa was raised in a life of luxury and lived surrounded by female musicians who used to entertain him with song and dance. One night he fell asleep during the show and they too went to sleep in the hall. When Yasa awoke in the middle of the night, he felt so disgusted at seeing his female dancers and musicians asleep in such repulsive postures that he ran away from his house towards Deer Park. The Buddha had risen before dawn and was doing walking meditation in the Cankama beside his residence. When the Buddha saw Yasa coming, he left the walk and went to meet Yasa to teach him the Dhamma. Yasa became a sotapanna after listening to the Buddha’s preaching at the Deer Park. As the Pancayatana Shrine is a short distance in front of the Cankama, it is very likely to be the place where the Buddha converted Yasa.

### (v) The Dhamekh Stupa

Dhamekh Stupa, the most imposing structure in Sarnath, is cylindrical in shape, 28.3 m in basal diameter and 43.6 m tall. It is a solid structure with a drum of stonework and the upper part of brickwork. The drum has eight arched projections, each with a niche for an image. Below them are beautifully carved geometric and floral patterns with human figures and birds, of the Gupta period. It is situated 150 meters east of the Dhammarajika Stupa. Cunningham who explored Sarnath in 1835-36 also carried out excavations in the Dhamekh Stupa. While boring a shaft in the centre of the stupa in search of relics, Cunningham found remains of the original stupa in mud and bricks. It was probably the stupa raised by Asoka when he visited Sarnath. No bodily relics were found inside this stupa, but a slab with Buddha's creed '*ye dhamma hetuppabhava, etc.*' in the characters of the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> century was discovered. This appears to suggest that it is a memorial stupa.

An inscription of the Pala king Mahipala I (1026 AD), states that two brothers Sthirapala and Vasantapala constructed a new stone shrine Gandhakuti and restored the **Dhammarajika Stupa** and the **Dharmacakra**. Based on this inscription, the Archeological Survey of India had suggested that the **Dharmacakra** refers to the Dhamekh Stupa and it marks the site of the First Sermon.

However, the name mentioned in the inscription is 'Dharmacakra' **not** 'Dharmacakra Stupa'. It could be the name of a monastery (Dharmacakra Jina Vihara) or some other structure (such as the Dharmacakra wheel on the Sarnath Lion Capital).

It is unlikely to be a stupa as there has been no record of a stupa of that name in Sarnath before.



**Plate 21:** Circular base of the Dhammarajika Stupa after it was pulled down by Jagat Singh in 1794. Note the numerous votive stupas surrounding it.



**Plate 22:** Photo shows the pavilion at the back of the Main Shrine in Deer Park. Inside one can see several pieces of the broken Asokan Pillar of Sarnath.



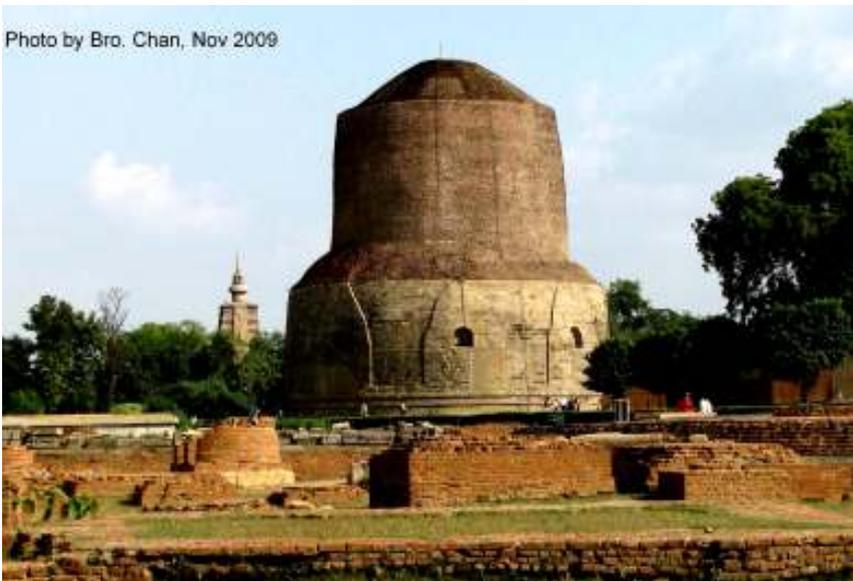
**Plate 23:** Photo showing the broken pieces of the Asokan Pillar of Sarnath.



**Plate 24:** Photo showing the ruins of the Main Shrine in Deer Park



**Plate 25:** The sunken shrine of Pancayatana is believed to be the place where the Buddha converted Yasa, son of the rich man of Sarnath.



**Plate 26:** Although Dhamekh Stupa is the most imposing structure in Sarnath, it is a memorial stupa of lesser significance compared with the other shrines.

## (vi) Sarnath Archeological Museum

The museum houses antiquities recovered from the ruins at Deer Park during excavations from 1905 onwards. Inside the museum, numerous sculptures of the Buddha and Bodhisatta are displayed. The four most important sculptures are described below.

### • Lion Capital of Sarnath

On entering the exhibition hall, one sees the most magnificent sculpture of **Mauryan art** – the Lion Capital, which once crowned the Asokan Pillar at Deer Park. This polished sandstone sculpture is 2.3 m tall and consists of four lions sitting back to back on a circular abacus about 0.3 m high supported by a Persepolitan Bell. The abacus has four running animals, each separated by a Dhammacakka wheel on its side. **Alfredoucher** (1865-1952), a French Indologist and specialist in Buddhist archaeology, has suggested this symbolism: **Elephant** represents Buddha's conception as Mayadevi dreamt that an elephant entered



her womb; **Horse** represents the Bodhisatta's Great Renunciation as he left home on his horse Kanthaka; **Lion** represents the Buddha as lion of the Sakyas; **Bull** represents the endurance of the Dhamma (Teaching). The four lions that surmount the **Sarnath Capital** symbolize the Lion's roar of the Buddha in the four directions. This Lion Capital is the **crest of India** and the Dhammacakka Wheel is the emblem of its **national flag**. It has 24 spokes to represent the 12 links of the Law of Dependent Origination in forward order and the 12 links in reverse order.

- **Colossal Bodhisatta Image**

This colossal standing image is of red sandstone donated by the bhikkhu Bala in AD 81 during the reign of King Kaniska and represents the best tradition of Mathuran art. Behind the statue is a stone shaft, which once supported a beautifully carved umbrella. The stone umbrella can also be seen in the main hall.

- **Buddha's Life Panels**

There is a sculptured panel showing the four principal events, namely: Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon and Mahaparinibbana of the Lord Buddha (Left panel). Another panel illustrates the eight events in the life of the Buddha, namely, the four principal events and the four miracles - the great miracle at Sravasti, the descent from Heaven at Sankasia, the taming of the drunken elephant Nalagiri at Rajgir and the offering of honey to the Buddha by a monkey at Vaishali. (Right panel)



- **Preaching Buddha Image**



The seated Buddha image in Dhammacakka mudra or Preaching posture is one of the most beautiful creations of Gupta art. This famous sculpture was a gift of **King Kumaragupta** who ruled from AD 414-455. The halo around the head is carved with floral designs and has two celestial figures on both upper corners. Inset at the bottom are seven figures, representing the Five Ascetics plus the Queen and her son in kneeling position, paying homage to the Dhammacakka wheel.

### (vii) The Mahabodhi Society of India, Sarnath

The credit for restoring Sarnath into a living shrine goes to **Anagarika Dharmapala**, founder of the Maha Bodhi Society of India. He established the Mahabodhi Society in Sarnath located on the left of the **Mulagandhakuti Vihara**, which it oversees, in addition to the Mahabodhi schools, college, library and training school for monks and nuns. Inside the Society building is a museum displaying photos and various paraphernalia belonging to the late Anagarika Dharmapala. Lately the Society has constructed a hospital to cater for the poor patients in Sarnath.

### **(viii) Mulagandhakuti Vihara**

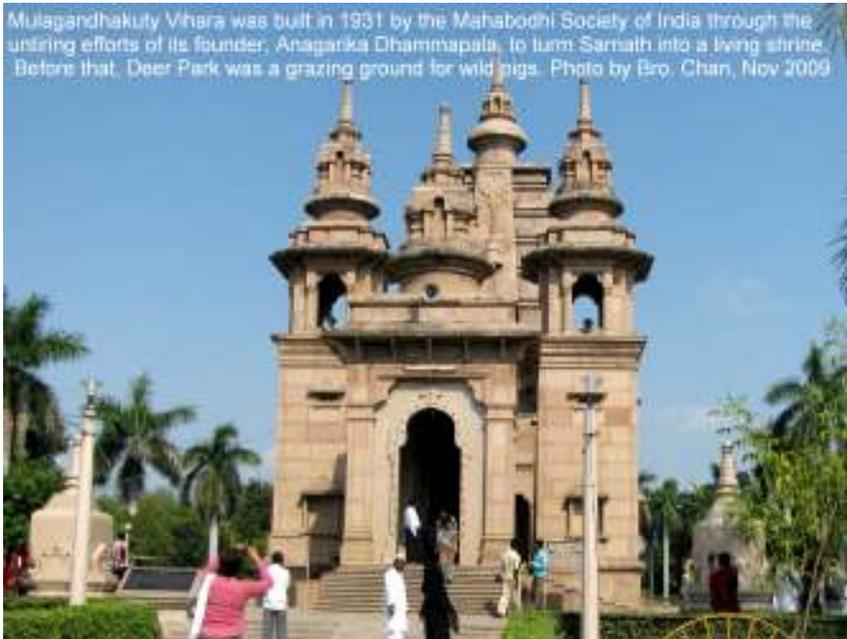
The Mulagandhakuti Vihara was built by Maha Bodhi Society of India in 1931 under the efforts of **Anagarika Dharmapala** with the financial assistance of **Mrs. Mary Elizabeth Foster** of Hawaii. On the day of opening, the sacred relics of the Buddha unearthed in Taxila in 1913-14, were presented by the Director General of Archeology representing the Government to the Maha Bodhi Society. In 1913, British archaeologist **Sir John Marshall** (1876-1958) made a significant discovery in the ancient city of **Taxila**. While excavating the ruins near the **Dhammarajika Stupa** in **Chir Tope** mound at Taxila, 40km from Islamabad in Pakistan, he found the bone relics of the Buddha that had been enshrined during the Kushan period in 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD. Sixteen years later, **A. H. Longhurst** discovered another set of bone relics in **Nagarjunakonda**, South India.

These two sets of relics are presently enshrined in an underground chamber under the Preaching Buddha image and are taken out every year during Kathina for worship. Japanese artist, **Kosetsu Nosu** spent 3 years from 1932-35 painting the beautiful Ajanta style frescoes on both walls of the vihara. A British Buddhist, **B L Broughton** donated for this splendid work.

### **(ix) Chaukhandi Stupa**

This is the first monument to be seen as one enters Sarnath. This mass of brickwork with an octagonal tower on top is what remains of an ancient stupa. The tower was constructed to commemorate the visit of Hamuyan, father of Akbar Khan to Sarnath in 1588 AD.

This site is believed to be the place where the Buddha stopped to allow the Five Ascetics see him and welcome him as he entered the Deer Park. This stupa was probably erected to commemorate that event.



**Plate 27:** Front view of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara showing its unique design



**Plate 28:** Chaukhandi Stupa is the first monument one sees on entering Sarnath

## 4. Kushinagar, Place of the Mahaparinibbana

Kushinagar (Pali: Kusinara) is situated in the village of Kasia in Kushinagar District (formerly part of Deoria District) of Uttar Pradesh. The nearest town is Gorakhpur, 55 km away. By road, Kushinagar is 130 km south of Lumbini, 250 km east of Sravasti and 250 km north of Patna.

### 4.1 Religious Significance

Three months before the age of eighty, the Buddha renounced his will to live at the Capala Shrine in Vaishali. Traveling in stages via Pava where he ate his last meal offered by the smith **Cunda**, he reached the final resting place at the Sala grove of the Mallas by the bank of the Hirannavati River in Kushinagar. There on the full-moon day of Wesak in 543 BC, the Buddha passed into Mahaparinibbana, the passing away into Nibbana wherein the elements of clinging do not arise (i.e. no more rebirth). His last convert was the wandering ascetic Subhadda and his last words to the bhikkhus were: “*Handa ‘dani bhikkhave amantayami vo: Vaya-dhamma sankhara. Appamadena sampadetha.*” (Translation: “Indeed, *bhikkhus*, I declare this to you: It is the nature of all conditioned things to perish. Accomplish all your duties with mindfulness.”)

The Buddha was lying on his right side between two Sala trees with his head to the north when he breathed his last. After his Mahaparinibbana, his body was taken into the town by the northern gate and out through the eastern gate to the consecration ground of the Mallas called Makutabandhana. They were unable to light the funeral pyre until Ven. Maha Kassapa came and paid his respects.

After the cremation, the Buddha's ashes were divided into eight equal portions by the brahmin Dona, who distributed them to the eight clans, who came to claim their share of the relics, namely:

- King Ajatasattu of Magadha,
- the Licchavis of Vesali,
- the Sakyans of Kapilavastu,
- the Bulians of Allakappa,
- the Koliyans of Ramagama,
- the Brahman of Vethadipa,
- the Mallas of Pava and
- the Mallas of Kushinagar.

Dona himself kept the jug (*tumbha*) used for dividing the relics. When the Moriyas of Pippalavana arrived, it was too late as all the relics had been distributed, so they took from there the ashes of the cremation pyre. Returning home, these men raised stupas to honour them. So it came about that there were eight stupas for the relics, a ninth for the jug, and a tenth for the ashes.

## 4.2 Historical Background

During the Buddha's time, Kushinagar was described by Venerable Ananda as "*this little mud-walled town, this backwoods town, this branch township*". After the Mahaparinibbana of the Buddha, it became an important religious centre as Buddhism spread in India. As one of the four pilgrimage places mentioned by the Buddha, it attracted devout Buddhists from all over India and abroad. King Asoka visited Kushinagar in 249 BC and raised several stupas and pillars at the site. But by the time Xuanzang visited Kushinagar in 637 AD, the place was in ruins and its towns and villages waste and desolate with few inhabitants. He saw the Sala trees under which the Buddha passed into Mahaparinibbana, the vihara containing the Reclining Buddha image and beside it the 61 m tall stupa built by Asoka-rajā, in a

ruinous state with a stone pillar in front. Further to the north, after crossing the Hirannavati river was a stupa marking the cremation site. Yet Kushinagar continued to be a living shrine until the 12<sup>th</sup> century AD but after the Muslim conquest of India, it became deserted and eventually fell into ruins and was forgotten.

After a silence of more than 500 years, **Alexander Cunningham**, the Archaeological Surveyor who had the deep insight into Buddhist geography visited Kasia and identified the ruins at Kushinagar in the course of his visit in 1861-62. The local names of the ruins and mounds engaged his attention. The main site was called **Matha-kuar-ka-kot** or fort of Matha-kuar, who according to local belief was represented in the large stone image of a seated Buddha image lying unsheltered on a low mound near by. A kilometre and a half to the east stood the large hillock of brick ruins locally known by the name of **Ramabhar Tila** (or mound).

It was difficult for Cunningham to read the correct historical significance behind these names, but he correctly interpreted the name Mathakuar as '**Mathakumar**' to mean the '**dead prince**', thus referring by implication to Buddha who belonged to the princely family of Sakyas of Kapilavastu and died at the place. Fifteen years later Cunningham's assistant **Carlleyle** carried out extensive digging at the site and completely exposed the great central stupa and, most important of all, discovered, right at its front, the famous reclining statue of Buddha, the Nirvana statue buried in the debris of the ruins of an oblong shrine.

Though the location of ancient Kushinagar thus appeared to be quite certain, doubts were still raised about its accuracy. Better excavations were therefore, undertaken by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1904-07 under **J. P. R. Vogel** and others. These excavations yielded irrefutable proofs of the identity of Kushinagar and of the monuments in numerous inscriptions in the form of seals and a copper plate, the former referring to the

Mahaparinibbana Vihara and latter to the Mahaparinibbana Stupa itself. Although none of these records makes any direct mention of the name of Kushinagar, Brahmi writings on the copper plate stated that: “The Lord Buddha passed away here on this site” confirming it as the place of the Buddha’s Mahaparinibbana.

In recent times, the first Buddhist to occupy Kushinagar was **Ven. Mahavira**, an Indian national who was ordained as a monk in Sri Lanka in 1890. He was responsible for restoring Kushinagar back to its rightful place as a sacred shrine. Ven. Mahavira repaired the main temple and built a vihara in 1902-03. After him came **Ven. U Chandramani** from Sittwe in Rakkhine State, Myanmar. He met Ven. Mahavira in 1895 while studying in Calcutta. Impressed by the keenness of the young monk, Ven. Mahavira made arrangements to sponsor his studies in India and Burma. Upon completion he returned to Kushinagar to assist Ven. Mahavira.

After the demise of his predecessor, Ven. U Chandramani continued the noble work. Although he failed to secure the management of the Mahaparinibbana Temple, the Indian Government granted him permission to look after the articles that were donated in the name of Lord Buddha, such as the Mahaparinibbana Buddha image, and he could manage them as necessary. Later he started educational institutions for the local people and reviving the tradition of Buddha Jayanti, which was celebrated for the first time in Kushinagar in 1924.

Ven. U Chandramani passed away in 1972 and was succeeded by his capable disciple, **Ven. U Gyaneshwar (U Nyanissara)**, a Myanmar monk who continues the noble task of taking care of the holy site. In 2002, the Myanmar Government awarded Bhaddanta Gyaneshwar the title ‘Aggamahapandita’ in recognition of his distinguished services and in November 2005, he was conferred the title ‘Aggamaha Sadhamma Jotikadhaja’ on the occasion of his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday anniversary.

## 4.3 Objects of Interest

### (i) The Mahaparinibbana Temple and the Reclining Buddha Image

The present Temple was built by the Indian Government in 1956 on the 2500<sup>th</sup> year of the Mahaparinibbana or 2500 BE (Buddhist Era). The old temple restored by **Carlleyle** was too small to accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims visiting it.

Inside this temple, one can see the famous Reclining Buddha image lying on its right side with the head to the north. The statue is 6.1 m long and rests on a 7.3 m long stone plinth or couch. On the front side of the couch are three sculptures. The figure near the feet is believed to represent Ven. Ananda weeping with grief on hearing that the Blessed One was about to pass away. The figure in the middle is believed to represent Ven. Subhadda, the last disciple of the Buddha. The figure with long hair near the face of the Buddha is believed to represent a Malla chief paying homage at the feet of the Blessed One.

At the centre is an inscription of the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, which states the statue was, “*a gift of the monk Haribala to the Mahavihara and that it was fashioned by Dinna*”. This 1500-year old Reclining Buddha image was executed out of one block of red sandstone brought in from Mathura during the Gupta period. It was Carlleyle who discovered it in 1876 in a dilapidated condition and successfully pieced together the fragments found scattered about. This statue bears the 32 marks of the Great Man (*Mahapurisa*) and can evoke different feelings in one’s mind, depending on where one stands to look at it.

- When viewed at an angle above the head, one can discern a serene mood in the face as shown in the photo below
- When view from the lower part of the statue, one can discern a mood of suffering in the facial features.



**Plate 29:** From view of the Mahaparinibbana Temple in Kushinagar



**Plate 30:** The Mahaparinibbana Stupa is the huge bell-shaped dome shown here behind the Temple. It was renovated by Sayadaw U Chandramani in 1927.



**Plate 31:** Reclining Buddha image inside the Mahaparinibban Temple. When viewed from the lower part of the statue, one can discern a mood of suffering in the facial features.



**Plate 32:** When image is viewed at the head, one can discern a serene mood in the face, evoking the Bliss of Peace (santisukha) of the final liberation as the Buddha passes into Mahaparinibbana, the complete cessation of all suffering!

## (ii) Mahaparinibbana Stupa

This stupa beside the Mahaparinibbana Temple is a restoration of the Main stupa exposed during excavations by Carlleyle in 1876. When examined to a depth of 4.3 m, it revealed a copper plate and other objects from the Gupta period. The inscription on the plate in Sanskrit mentioned that the monk Haribala deposited these objects in the Nirvana stupa. Xuanzang, who visited Kusinara in 637 AD, mentioned that the Nirvana stupa was built by King Asoka. He also saw in front of it, a stone pillar to record the Nirvana of the Tathagata but it bore no date. The Nirvana stupa, is believed to be have been erected originally by the Mallas, to enshrine the Buddha's relics, and subsequently enlarged by King Asoka and later during the Gupta period. The Mahaparinibbana stupa was renovated in 1927 with donations of a Myanmar devotee, U Po Kyo, and is 23 m tall.

## (iii) Cremation Stupa or Makuta-bandhana Cetiya

After paying homage to the body of the Buddha for six days, the Mallas carried it to the **Makuta-bandhana**, the traditional place for consecrating their chieftains, where they cremated it. The cremation ceremony is described in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, which also describes the partitioning of the Buddha's relics by the brahmin Dona. The Cremation stupa was raised by the Mallas some time after the Buddha's cremation and repaired in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC by Asoka and again in the 5<sup>th</sup> century AD during the reign of Gupta King Kumaragupta.

When Cunningham visited the site in 1861-62, it was just a big mound called **Ramabhar Tila** built of large bricks and stood about 15m above the fields. (Note: When Cunningham discovered the place, the Hindus had erected a temple dedicated to the Hindu

deity **Ramabhar Bhavani** at the site. Although the temple was removed later, the stupa is still known as '**Ramabhar**' to the locals).

This huge brick stupa consists of a circular drum 34m in diameter resting on a 47m-diameter platform. During excavations in 1910 and later in 1956, a large number of clay seals inscribed with Buddhist verses were discovered which confirmed that it was the cremation site. It is located about 1.6 km east of the Mahaparinibbana Temple along the main road.



**Plate 33:** After the Buddha had passed away, his body was cremated at the Makuta-bandhana Cetiya, the traditional consecration ground of the Malla chiefs. A stupa was raised by Mallas over the cremation site, which was later enlarged by various kings over the centuries to its present size shown above.

### (iii) **Matha Kuar (Mathakumar) Shrine**

Regarding the name **Mathakuar**, Cunningham was correct when he interpreted it as **Mathakumar** to mean ‘**dead prince**’, thus referring by implication to the Buddha who was a prince and died at the place. According to Ven. Pimbure Samitha Thero of the Japan-Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple in Kushinagar, Lord Buddha took a brief rest at the site of the Matha Kuar shrine before proceeding to the Upavattana Sala Grove where he entered Mahaparinibbana. Here he preached the Dhamma to his disciples and said that he too was a human being subject to old age and various kinds of diseases in this world, in order to arouse urgency in them. But he reminded that he had gained supreme knowledge and wisdom surpassing any other being in this world. This place is now called **Matha Kuar** and a shrine has been erected and installed with a 3.05-m tall statue Buddha carved out of one block of blue stone from the Gaya region. It is about 1,000 years old. In 1927 Ven. U Chandramani built the present temple out of the donations of two Myanmar devotees, U Po Kyo and U Po Hlaing.

**H. B. W. Garrick**, an assistant of Cunningham, who visited the place in 1880-81 reported as follows: “This statue is set up lately by the local authorities at a distance of about 400 yards from the Main Temple and is called by the villagers ‘Matha Kuar’. It is now very devoutly worshipped by many sects of Hindus, who bring offerings of ghee and betel with which they besmear the face and sprinkle the figure; there is also to be seen, occasionally, a profuse supply of flower garlands about it. The Nirvana figure is also an object of worship, but there are iron gates to the chamber where it is enshrined, which can only be opened to worshippers on the payment of a fee; and that being an expensive luxury, it is indulged in by few amongst the wealthier classes, and the ascetic Buddha's popularity is chiefly owing to its being situated in the open air, unguarded by priests and accessible without payment.”



**Plate 34:** Mathakumar Shrine or Shrine of the Dead Prince in Kushinagar.



**Plate 35:** Inside the shrine is a 3m tall Buddha image in earth-touching posture

**(v) The Conversion of Dr. Ambedkar into Buddhism by Venerable Sayadaw U Chandramani on 14 Oct 1956**

The most memorable event in the Buddhist world in modern times was the conversion of 380,000 Dalits (Untouchables) into Buddhism under the leadership of **Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar**. This historic event took place on 14 October 1956 at a 14-acre vacant plot of land now known as '**Diksha Bhumi**' in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The person chosen by Dr. Ambedkar to be his Dhamma Guru and administer the Three Refuges and Five Precepts was none other than **Sayadaw U Chandramani** of Kushinagar, whom Dr. Ambedkar regarded as his true mentor.

The Nagpur conversion was the greatest peaceful conversion in mankind because never in the history of any religion in the world has so many people at one time and at the instance of one man, voluntarily changed their religion. To commemorate this historic event, a shrine was built at the Kushinagar Burmese Temple where Sayadaw U Chandramani was Abbot. Inside the shrine, one sees a statue of Dr. Ambedkar kneeling in front of a statue of Sayadaw U Chandramani, depicting his initiation as a lay disciple. Two months later, Dr. Ambedkar passed away in New Delhi.

As shown in the accompanying photos, the shrine is always locked to prevent vandalism. According to the current Abbot Sayadaw Bhaddanta Nyanissara, the local Hindus felt insulted to see the statue of Dr. Ambedkar, the first Law Minister of India, kneeling in supplication to a Buddhist monk and they would enter the shrine and cause damage to the statues. So all the doors and windows have iron bars to prevent vandals from throwing stones at the statues to cause damage.



**Plate 36:** Statue of Sayadaw U Chandramani inside the shrine at the Burmese Temple commemorating the mass conversion of Dalits in Nagpur, Maharashtra



**Plate 37:** Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar kneeling to his spiritual mentor, Sayadaw U Chandramani who administered the Taking of Refuge and the Five Precepts.