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The Eight Great Places of Buddhist Pilgrimage

Chan Khoon San

Sabbadanam dhammadanam jinati.
The Gift of Dhamma excels all gifts.

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Cover Design

Cover shows a close-up photo of the famous Reclining Buddha image inside the Mahaparinibbana Temple in Kushinagar. Its unique facial expression evokes the Bliss of Peace (*santisukha*) as the Buddha enters Mahaparinibbana, the complete liberation from all suffering.

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About the Author

Bro. Chan Khoon San was born on 8 August 1941 in Penang. Prior to retirement, he worked as a Senior Research Chemist in a large plantation company. He is married with two daughters and three grandchildren.

After retiring from work in 1996, Bro. Chan went to Myanmar to pursue the intensive practice of Satipatthana Vipassana meditation under the guidance of the Most Venerable Chanmyay Sayadaw Ashin Janakabhivamsa at the Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Centre in Yangon. Until today, he still continues the intensive practice of Satipatthana Vipassana meditation at the Chanmyay Yeiktha Meditation Centre in Hmawbi every year during the cold season in January.

For the rest of the year, he conducts Sutta classes at various Buddhist societies in the Klang Valley. Since 1991, he has organized eighteen Buddhist pilgrimages to India.

Bro. Chan is the author of seven books on Buddhism, namely:

- (1) 'Buddhism Course',
- (2) 'Buddhist Pilgrimage',
- (3) 'No Hinayana in Buddhism',
- (4) 'The Lotus-like Lay Buddhist',
- (5) 'Shrines and Relics in Buddhism',
- (6) 'Pali Recitation Manual' and
- (7) 'The White Lotus Ascetic'.

The first three books have been translated into Vietnamese, the fourth book into Hindi and Myanmar, and the fifth book into Sinhalese and Bengali.

Preface

As more and more Buddhists begin to realize the importance of performing a pilgrimage following the Buddha's exhortation, the need for a simple guidebook becomes evident. This present book is a condensed version of my earlier book "Buddhist Pilgrimage New Edition 2009", from which I have extracted those articles describing the Eight Places of Pilgrimage only, and omitting all the other less important sites.

For years, pilgrims have been taught that Vaishali was the place where a monkey offered honey to the Buddha. When I checked the references, I discovered a lot of variation among the different Buddhist traditions concerning the actual locale of this event. The various places given include the Parileyyaka forest near Kosambi, Sravasti, Mathura and Vaishali. To avoid controversy, it is better not to include it in the present book. So I have replaced it with the Buddha's renunciation of the will to live on, which caused a mighty earthquake in Vaishali. This particular event appears in all the Buddhist traditions and there is no doubt about the locale.

I have retained the Introduction, which focuses on the mental aspects of a pilgrimage. The Buddha repeatedly emphasized that the pious disciple should visit the four pilgrimage places and "look upon them with feelings of reverence". Such an attitude distinguishes a true pilgrim from someone who visits the four places for sightseeing like a tourist! So the pilgrim must always keep this objective in mind, which is to show reverence through body, speech and mind when he/she enters the holy shrines. A brief description of famous pilgrims of the past, in particular the earnest monks from China is also retained. It is to remind the modern pilgrim what these brave men had to go through in order to fulfill their desire to visit these holy sites and look upon them with feelings of reverence. Their exemplary conduct and fortitude is a source of inspiration for present day pilgrims to emulate, in order to develop patience and endurance during the journey.

In AN 2.119, the Buddha taught that we should always remember with gratitude those people who have helped us. In line with his admonition, I have also included the sections on “The Decline and Downfall of Buddhism in India” and “The Revival of Buddhism in India” after six centuries of oblivion in its country of origin. The objective is to enable present day pilgrims realize that it was the untiring efforts of the Sangha, archaeologists, historians, scholars and lay devotees, who have contributed to the restoration of our great Buddhist heritage in India and the revival of the Buddha Sasana. The sacrifices and tribulations of the great men who made this possible must be recognized and appreciated. The Buddhist world owe them a debt of gratitude!

To make the descriptions of the various shrines and monuments easier to follow, I have added many photographs and maps to help the pilgrim identify and locate the various places of interest. These photos came from my personal collection, as well as from Dhamma friends who have traveled with me in the course of my eighteen pilgrimages beginning from 1991. To avoid confusion, their modern names are used for the Eight Places of Pilgrimage.

Special thanks to Sis Toh Gaik Hoon for reading the text and making many useful suggestions for improvement.

I am indebted to Bros. Cheng Chong Hua, Tony Quah Seng Hai, Ng Swee Kong, Teo Chiang Khai and Andy Lim Yen Suan for kind permission to use their photographs in this book.

Lastly, I wish all fellow pilgrims a safe, fulfilling and memorable journey.

May all beings be well, happy and peaceful!

With Metta,
Bro. Chan Khoon San
Klang, March 2018

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PART I: Introduction

1. Mental Aspects of a Pilgrimage

1.1 A Journey of Faith and Devotion

For the majority of Buddhists, going on a pilgrimage to the holy places mentioned by the Buddha, is a once-a-lifetime undertaking. With so much time, money and effort involved, it is imperative for the intending pilgrim to truly understand what a pilgrimage is all about, especially the mental aspect, since the physical part is normally taken care of by a travel company.

A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place as an act of faith and devotion. In the scriptures, faith or *saddha* is the professing of confidence in and the sense of assurance based on understanding that one places on the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. It is not the blind belief based on wrong view. As ignorance is the leader of immoral mental states, so *saddha* is the leader of moral mental states because its chief characteristic is the **purification of the mind.**

Thus the pilgrim is no ordinary tourist who travels for the pleasure of sightseeing and enjoyment. Unlike sensual delights, the sight of the holy shrines do not arouse craving but act as a condition for wholesome mental states to arise in the pilgrim's mind. The Buddha himself advised us to visit those places where he was born, where he attained Enlightenment, where he preached the First Sermon and where he passed into Mahaparinibbana, and look upon them with feelings of reverence.

By showing veneration or reverence at the holy shrines, one is able to purify one's thought, speech and action. In this way, the pilgrim is endowed with the morality of Right Thought, Right

Speech and Right Action. So we can see that visiting the places of pilgrimage with the correct mental attitude can help us in our practice of the Buddha's Teaching.

According to the great Pali commentator, **Ven. Buddhaghosa** the positive feeling resulting from seeing these sites is the religious excitement or the sense of urgency they produce. Another commentator, **Ven. Dhammapala**, explained that this sense of urgency means the mind possesses the knowledge that one should shrink from doing wrong, namely, the knowledge of morality.

1.2 Development of the Perfections (*Paramis*)

The second aspect of a pilgrimage is that it is also **an act of renunciation** whereby the pilgrim does not crave for luxury but is contented with simple accommodation, food and transport. This non-greed state of mind enables one to endure any discomfort without complaint but with patience and loving-kindness. In the course of visiting the sacred places, **one feels that one is in the Master's presence** and this fullness of faith conduces to joy and the observance of morality, the foundation of all merit. Many pilgrims take the opportunity to bring with them requisites to perform *dana* out of reverence and gratitude to the Sangha, who take care of the holy places. The holy shrines are also conducive places for pilgrims to reflect on the Buddha's virtues and practise mindfulness to develop wisdom. These are various practices by which one can show veneration at the holy shrines in addition to the normal acts of devotion like the offering of flowers, lights, incense, and worship (*puja*). In the course of the pilgrimage, one will be able to arouse many wholesome factors that cause one's volition to become superior and lead to the accumulation of superior wholesome kamma. Indeed, one can develop the Perfections (*paramis*) and earn much merit when going on a pilgrimage. But it should not end when one has returned home.

After the journey is over, one should always try to recollect the joyful moments spent at holy places to keep them vivid in one's memory. Such recollection is **productive of joy** and is a skilful means of re-enforcing one's good *kamma* already acquired. In times of sickness, fear and worry, or sorrow, one can easily dispel these negative mental states by rejoicing in one's wholesome actions during the pilgrimage.

1.3 Taking the Eight Precepts during Pilgrimage

Besides developing faith and performing charity, the pilgrimage is also a suitable time to practice the Buddha's Teaching by cultivating *sila* or morality. This is because morality is the foundation of all meritorious actions without which there can be no act of merit.

Thus many well-informed Buddhists undertake the **Eight Precepts** or *Uposatha Sila* to maintain purity of mind at the Four Places of Pilgrimage, namely: Lumbini, Buddhagaya, Sarnath and Kusinara. However among the less-informed Buddhists, some may prefer to eat vegetarian meals throughout the journey, thinking that it is a form of precept taught by the Buddha to keep oneself pure (as some members are taught to believe by certain proponents of vegetarianism).

As the **Buddha did not advocate vegetarianism** for the Sangha and the laity, it is proper to explain that **keeping Eight Precepts** is far more superior than keeping a vegetarian diet as far as morality (*sila*) is concerned. Of course, some Buddhists may prefer to eat vegetarian food for health or other personal reasons. This is acceptable provided that they understand that it cannot replace the Eight Precepts where a **greater degree of restraint of the senses must be exercised**.

1.4 Fellowship and Patience during the Pilgrimage

Fellowship means friendly association, especially with people who share one's interests. For Buddhists, fellowship is important in order to encourage and help one another in the practice of the Buddha's Teachings and to strengthen our faith in times of trial and tribulation. A pilgrimage in a group to the Four Holy Places is one of the best ways to cultivate Buddhist fellowship. Over the course of the journey, members of the group will have the opportunity to interact closely and get to know each other well under conditions where loving-kindness (*metta*), appreciative joy (*mudita*), generosity (*dana*) and faith (*saddha*) prevail.

It is easy to be cool and nice when conditions are favorable. What about times when things don't turn out to expectations, such as delays in flight schedule, breakdown of vehicle and arriving very late at the destination, malfunction of the air-conditioner in the bus causing rising temperatures or insufficient hotel rooms in spite of confirmed bookings? For ladies traveling in India, the biggest problem is the lack of public toilets. The bus driver will have to look for one in a petrol station and the ladies will have to form a long queue while the men do it behind the bushes. So the pilgrim must be mentally prepared to put up with all sorts of difficulties and inconveniences and this requires a lot of patience. Otherwise anger will arise and defile our minds even while we are performing a holy pilgrimage! In such trying times, we should remind each other of the Buddha's advice in Dhammapada Verse 184: **"The best moral practice is patience and forbearance."**

1.5 Arousing Religious Urgency during Pilgrimage

According to the Scriptures, the Four Holy Places of pilgrimage are called *Samvejaniya-thana*, or places that will **arouse awareness and apprehension** of the nature of impermanence, the first of the three characteristics of existence.

Thus skillful pilgrims take the opportunity of a pilgrimage to arouse religious urgency (*samvega*) by reflecting on the last words of the Buddha before he entered *Parinibbana*: “Indeed, *bhikkhus*, I declare this to you: It is the nature of all conditioned things to perish. **Accomplish all your duties with mindfulness.**”

The Four Holy Places were once great centres associated with the Buddha, Dhamma and famous arahant disciples of the Sangha. One reads in the Pali scriptures about the glory of Buddha’s Birth at Lumbini, his Enlightenment at Bodhgaya, the First Sermon at Deer Park, Sarnath and his Parinibbana at Kushinagar. Today the Buddha and the great arahants are no longer around, for even the Enlightened One and great arahants have to succumb to sickness, old age and death. Thus **the world of living beings** (*satta-loka*) does not remain constant but is subject to change according to the Law of Impermanence. One becomes truly apprehensive when one reflects on this, and it arouses the **religious urgency** (*samvega*) to practise the Noble Eightfold Path in order to realize Nibbana, the cessation of all suffering.

After Lord Buddha’s Parinibbana, his devotees all over India built stupas and viharas to commemorate important events of the Buddha at these places. Thus we read about the 84,000 stupas built by King Asoka to honour 84,000 Dhamma-khandas (Groups of Teachings) and monuments built by Buddhist kings of various dynasties to honour the Buddha. Today the pilgrim has to travel long distances over poor road conditions to remote areas in north India only to see the vestiges and ruins of these once glorious monuments, that have been damaged or destroyed over time.

One becomes aware that the **conditioned world** (*sankhara-loka*) and **natural world** (*okasa-loka*) do not remain constant but are subject to changes according to the Law of Impermanence. One becomes truly apprehensive when one reflects on this. It arouses the religious urgency (*samvega*) to practise the Noble Eightfold Path in order to realize Nibbana, the cessation of all suffering.

2. The Four Places of Pilgrimage

The idea of a pilgrimage came from the Buddha himself over 2500 years ago! In answer to his attendant, Venerable Ananda's concern that the *bhikkhus* (monks) would no longer be able to see the Blessed One to pay their respects and seek inspiration (to practice the Teachings) after his demise, the Buddha advised pious disciples to visit Four Places, the sight of which will inspire *saddha* (faith accompanied by mental purity) and *samvega* (religious urgency). This is because they arouse the awareness and apprehension of impermanence (*anicca*), the first of the three characteristics of existence. What are the Four Places?

(i) Place of Birth, **Lumbini** in Nepal: "This is a place that a pious disciple should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

(ii) Place of Enlightenment, **Bodhgaya** in Bihar, India: "This is a place that a pious disciple should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

(iii) Place of First Sermon, **Sarnath** in Uttar Pradesh, India: "This is a place that a pious disciple should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

(iv) Place of Decease (Mahaparinibbana), **Kushinagar** near Kasia in Uttar Pradesh, India: "This is a place that a pious disciple should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence."

"And whosoever, Ananda, should die on such a pilgrimage, with his heart established in faith, he at the breaking up of the body, after death, will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness."
(Digha Nikaya, Sutta 11, Mahaparinibbana Sutta)

2.1 The Four Places of Miracles, with Vaishali as the Place where Buddha Renounced the Will to Live on

Gradually the basic four pilgrimage places (Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar) were increased in terms of the great events of Buddha's life to eight by adding four more places traditionally considered to be places of four principal miracles he performed.

(i) **Sravasti** in Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha performed the Twin Miracle to silence the heretics, after which he ascended to Tavatimsa Heaven to preach to his mother.

(ii) **Sankasia** in Uttar Pradesh, where the Buddha descended from Heaven accompanied by Brahma and Sakka, after preaching to his mother for three months.

(iii) **Rajgir** in Bihar, where Buddha tamed the drunken elephant, Nalagiri.

(iv) **Vaishali** in Bihar: The miracle of the offering honey by a monkey to the Buddha is replaced by the Buddha's renunciation of the will to live on, which caused a mighty earthquake, a truly great event in the Buddha's life.

There are a lot of contradictory claims regarding the locale of the honey offering. According to Dhammapada Commentary Book 1:5b, the offering of honey to the Buddha by a monkey took place in the **Parileyakka forest** near Kosambi. Prior to that, the Buddha was residing in the Ghositarama, where a dispute arose among the monks that caused a lot of quarreling. Although the Buddha tried to unite them three times, the quarrelsome monks refused to listen to his admonitions. Finally the Buddha left Kosambi without informing anyone in the monastery and traveled alone until he arrived at the village of Parileyakka. There at the foot of a beautiful Sala tree in the forest, the Buddha spent the tenth rainy season attended to by the elephant Parileyakka.

Now a certain monkey saw the elephant up and about every day performing the minor duties like sweeping the Sala tree area, getting drinking water for the Buddha with a water-pot, etc. So he decided to do something too. One day he saw a honeycomb on a stick, free from flies. He broke off the stick, took the honeycomb and placed it on a banana leaf. Then he offered his gift to the Buddha. The Buddha took the honey, sat down but did not eat the honey. The monkey was watching and wondered why the Blessed One did not eat the honey. So he took the stick of honeycomb and as he was examining it carefully, saw that there were some insect's eggs. So he gently removed the eggs and again offered the honey to the Buddha. Then the Buddha ate the honey.

Filled with joy that the Buddha had eaten the honey, the monkey leapt from branch to branch dancing about gleefully. But a branch broke and he lost his grasp, falling on a tree stump and was impaled. So he died. But because of his faith and dana, he was reborn as a deva in Tavatimsa with a retinue of celestial nymphs.

The Dhammapada Commentary version of the monkey's offering of honey to the Buddha is slightly different from similar stories found in various **Chinese and Tibetan sources**. In the Tibetan version, which occurred in **Jetavana, Sravasti**, the monkey takes the Buddha's bowl and uses it to collect the honey from a tree. He dies not by falling from a tree and impaling himself on a tree stump but by falling into a pit. Rather than being reborn as a deva, he is reborn as a human being, who becomes a monk. A Sanskrit version of this story can be found in the *Sanghabhedavastu* of the Mulasarvastivada Vinaya (SbhV ii, 47-49). This monkey's gift of honey became one of the four great miracles of the Buddha's life. (Reference: Unfortunate Destiny: Animals in the Indian Buddhist Imagination by Reiko Ohnuma).

Xuanzang recorded two similar episodes about monkeys, which took place in two different locations. The first account is located in **Mathura** (Si-Yu-Ki, Part I, p.182). He says that there is a great

dry marsh, beside which is a stupa. Here a monkey offered a pot of honey to the Buddha, who ordered it to mix it with water and distribute it among the monks. After completing the act, the monkey filled with joy, fell into a deep hole and died.

In his second account located at the Kutagarasala in **Vaishali**, he says: “To the south of the stone pillar is a tank. This was dug by a band of monkeys (Markatahrada) for Buddha’s use. Not far to the south of this tank is a stupa; it is here that the monkeys, taking the alms-bowl of Tathagata, climbed a tree and gathered him some honey. Not far to the south is a stupa; this is the place where the monkeys offered honey to the Buddha. At the north-west of the lake there is still a figure of a monkey.” (Si-Yi-Ki, Part II, p.68)

The story of the monkey offering honey to the Buddha is well known among all the Buddhist traditions. It appears to have been derived from an earlier common source. However, there is so much difference with respect to the actual location, it is better to leave it out of this book in order to avoid controversy.

Among the events in the Buddha’s life when great earthquakes shook the earth, the first took place when the Bodhisatta descended from Tusita heaven and entered the mother’s womb. Three more followed, one each in Lumbini, Bodhgaya and Sarnath at his Birth, Enlightenment and Preaching of the First Sermon respectively. The fifth earthquake occurred at the Capala shrine in Vaishali after the Buddha renounced the will to live on, three months before Parinibbana. The sixth earthquake took place when the Buddha passed into Mahaparinibbana at Kushinagar.

The particular event at Vaishali is recorded in the canonical literature of all the Buddhist traditions. There is no question about the locale. Vaishali certainly deserves to be included among the Four Places of Miracles because of the Buddha’s renunciation of the will to live on, not because of the offering of honey by a monkey, whose locale is doubtful.

2.2 The Stupa as the Supreme Object of Worship

The word stupa (Pali: thupa), derived from the root ‘stup’ (‘to heap’) is a mound or tumulus. Originally they were graves containing the ashes and charred remains of the dead after cremation. For poor folk in ancient India, the corpses or remains of the pyre were left to rot or be eaten by animals in the charnel ground. However for rich or famous persons and spiritual leaders (non-Brahmanic), their ashes were buried under a stupa. Stupas were erected in cemeteries or on private ground; in cases of special honor, at a crossroads. (Buddhist India by Rhys Davids)

Before the Buddha passed away he gave instructions on how his body should be cremated, and a stupa raised at a crossroads to enshrine the ashes. *“And whoever lays wreaths or makes offerings, will reap the benefits and happiness for a long time.”*

The Buddha mentioned that there are four persons worthy of a stupa, viz: a Supremely Enlightened Buddha, a *Pacceka* Buddha, a Noble disciple and a Universal monarch.

“Why is the Buddha worthy of a stupa? Because at the thought: *“This is the stupa of the Bhagava, Arahant, Supremely Enlightened One!”* the hearts of many people will be calmed and made happy; so calmed and with their minds established in faith, they at the breaking up of the body will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness.” (Mahaparinibbana Sutta, V, 26-31)

Four Types of Stupas

Buddhist stupas may be categorized into four types, namely:

(a) Saririka or Relic Stupa

These stupas contain the **corporeal relics** of the Buddha, the Chief Disciples, Buddhist teachers and saints. Stupas containing

the relics of the Buddha, which are considered the **most sacred** objects of worship, are usually very large and grand, as they have been enlarged and renovated several times by successive Buddhist kings of India. According to legend, Emperor Asoka broke into seven of the original eight relic stupas (Ramagama stupa was left intact), took a major portion of the Buddha's relics and distributed them in 84,000 stupas all over his empire. As a result, one can still see many of these stupas in India, such as the Dhammarajika stupa in Sarnath, which once enshrined the Buddha's relics.

(b) Paribhogika Stupa

These stupas are built over **sacred objects used** by Buddha, e.g., his robe, water-pot, razor and needle-case.

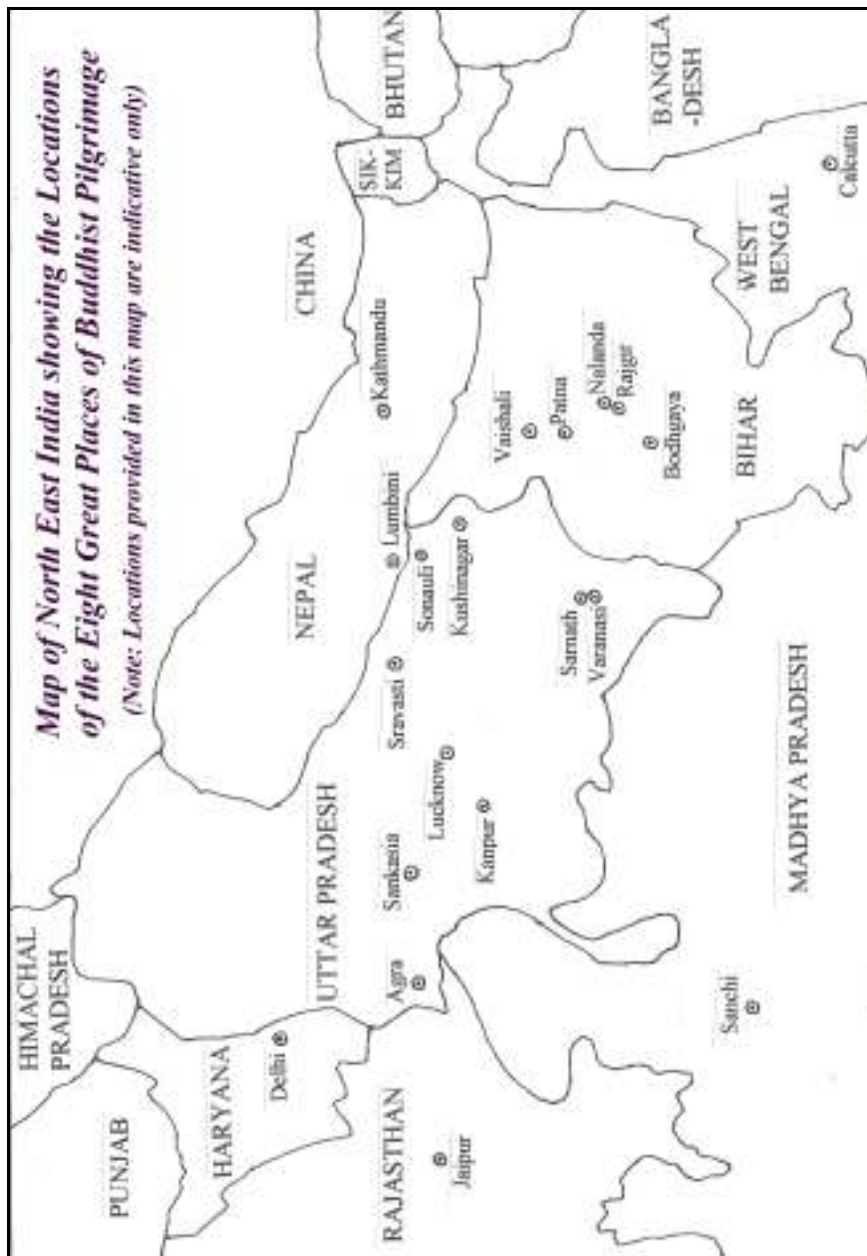
(c) Uddesika or Memorial Stupa

These stupas were built to commemorate important events in the Buddha's life, including those of his previous births or spots hallowed by his presence. A good example is the Asoka Stupa in the village of Bakraur commemorating the offering of milk rice by Lady Sujata to the Bodhisatta prior to his Enlightenment.

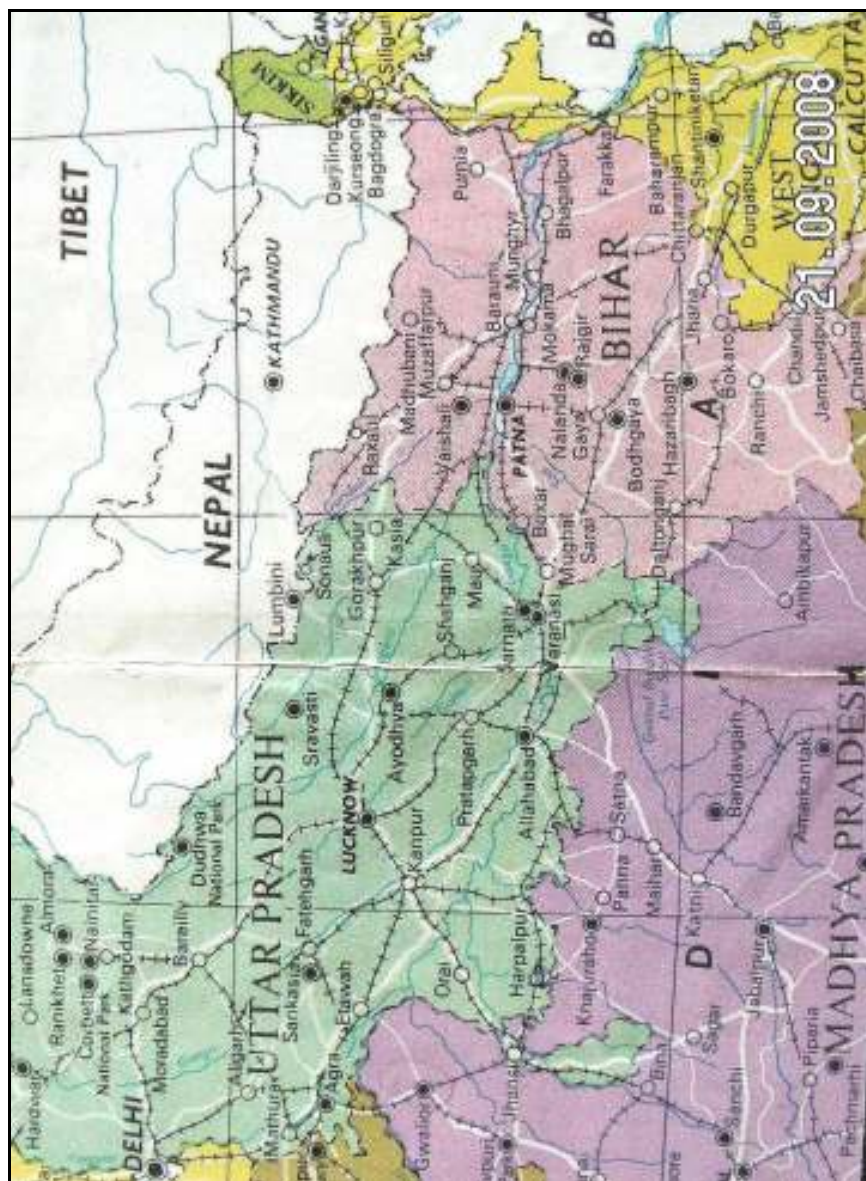
(d) Votive Stupas

These are usually small stupas erected at sacred sites by devotees mainly as an **offering** for attaining religious merit. The most number of votive stupas can be seen at the four places of pilgrimage, namely: (i) Lumbini, surrounding the site where the Buddha was born; (ii) Bodhgaya, surrounding the Bodhi tree where the Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment; (iii) Deer Park in Sarnath, where the Buddha preached the First Sermon; (iv) Kushinagar surrounding the Mahaparinibbana Temple where the Buddha passed into Mahaparinibbana. Besides these places, votive stupas are also erected around relic stupas, as the latter are considered supreme objects of worship.

2.3 Map of India showing the Eight Places of Pilgrimage



2.4 Tourist Map of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh showing the Principal Towns around the Eight Places of Pilgrimage



2.5 Mental Attitude When Visiting the Holy Shrines

It is imperative for the pilgrim to realize that the principal purpose of the pilgrimage is to honour the Buddha. Therefore when visiting the holy shrines, we should show proper respect. The Buddha is the King of Dhamma (*Dhammaraja*) and we should approach the shrine as we would approach the presence of a king. Hence we should not engage in taking photographs excitedly, or look here and there treating the visit like a sightseeing tour or engage in frivolous talk but remain calm and serene in sense faculties. We should walk mindfully, head down and with palms clasped together in reverence maintaining noble silence or mentally reciting the virtues of the Buddha. As we enter the shrine, we should focus our mind as if we are entering the court of the *Dhammaraja*. Finally we should pay homage (*pūja*) by taking refuge in the Triple Gem followed by Five or Eight Precepts and reciting the Virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. This is the proper way in which a pious disciple should visit the holy places and look upon them with feelings of reverence.

3. Famous Pilgrims of the Past

The four pilgrimage places and four places of miracles are known as *Atthamahathanani* or the **Eight Great Places**. Emperor Asoka called a visit to these eight shrines “*dhammayatra*” (dhamma expedition) or a pilgrimage of piety. On the twentieth year of his reign in 249 BC, he heeded the exhortation of the Buddha and embarked on a holy pilgrimage visiting all these eight places. His pilgrimage was literally a ‘landmark’ journey because wherever he went he built stupas and raised stone pillars with inscriptions to commemorate his visit to these holy places. These towering monolithic pillars made of polished sandstone and topped with animal capitals have helped to identify the exact locations of the Buddhist world’s most sacred places even after they fell into ruins following the downfall of Buddhism in India.

Today after over two millenia, many of these Asokan pillars still stand testifying to his faith and devotion. Modern day pilgrims can still see these pillars in Lumbini, Vaishali and Lauriya Nandangarh, the famous Lion Capital at Sarnath Museum and Elephant Capital at Sankasia. Thereafter, succeeding Buddhist kings, queens, nobles and rich people followed King Asoka's example. As a result, the landscape of northern India became studded with Buddhist monuments, shrines and temples. In fact, the state of Bihar derived its name from the word "vihar", which means "monastery" because the area was full of monasteries.

From China came the devout and earnest Buddhist monks, like Faxian, Xuanzang and many others, who traveled great distances braving immense hardships, perils, and even death to fulfill their desire to visit the holy places. In the Kao-seng-chuan (Chinese Monks in India by I-Ching), another pilgrim, I-Ching, described how he had to pass many days without food, even without a drop of water and wondered how the other travellers, under such difficult conditions, could keep up their morale and spirit. On the long, long trek, many died from sheer physical exhaustion or sickness and some had to leave their bones in desert-sands or somewhere out in India. Yet, in spite of these difficulties, they never faltered nor wavered, such was their indomitable spirit and desire to gaze on the sacred vestiges of their religion. Never did men endure greater suffering by desert, mountain and sea and exhibited such courage, religious devotion and power of endurance! (Note: Modern day pilgrims should try to emulate the exemplary conduct of these ancient pilgrims in order to develop **patience and endurance** during their journey to the holy places.)

The pioneer among them was **Faxian**. He took five years to walk from the Western border of China across the Taklamakan desert, one of the most hostile environments on this planet, and over the windswept passes of the Pamir and Hindu Kush mountain ranges to Northern India. After spending six years in India, he sailed to Sri Lanka, where he spent two more years. His homeward journey

by sea took another year in which he stopped for five months in Java. Faxian left an account of his journey of AD 399-414 in the Fo-kwo-ki (Record of the Buddhist Country).

One hundred years after Faxian, two monks, Sung Yun and Hui Sheng of Loyang, were sent by the Empress Dowager of the Northern Wei dynasty to obtain Buddhist books from India. They started out in AD 518 and after reaching as far as Peshawar and Nagarahara (Jalalabad), returned to China in AD 521. Sung Yun left a short narrative of his travels but Hui Sheng did not record any detail of the journey.

Undoubtedly the most renowned Chinese pilgrim was the great Tipitaka master, Xuanzang, who secretly set out on the long journey to the West in AD 629 at the age of twenty-seven. His travel in India was the most extensive, taking almost seventeen years (AD 629-645). When he returned to China, the T'ang Emperor T'ai Tsung bestowed upon him great ovation and public honour. Xuanzang's record of his travels, known as Ta-T'ang-Si-yü-ki (Record of the Western World), is a detailed and romantic account of the Buddhist shrines in India and other countries he passed through. His devotion, piety and love for learning became a source of inspiration to his contemporaries and later generation of pilgrims including **I-Ching** (Chinese: **Yijing**), who took the sea route to India and back. His travels covered the period AD 671-695 in which he spent ten years studying in Nalanda and another ten years in Sri-vijaya, Sumatra translating the scriptures. He wrote his account in the Nan-hai-ki-kuei-nai-fa-chuan (Record of the Inner Law sent home from the South Sea).

The records of these Chinese pilgrims are the only available writings describing the condition of Buddhism and the Buddhist sites, as they existed at that time. These records have proven to be invaluable in locating their ruins during excavations in the 19th century by Sir Alexander Cunningham and others.

4. The Decline and Downfall of Buddhism in India

Buddhism in India suffered two extensive devastations in its history. The first was by the Hephthalites or White Huns, who invaded India in 470-480 AD and conquered the border provinces of Gandhara and Kashmir. The Hun king, **Mihirakula** was a barbarian bent on destroying the Buddhist establishment. The conquest was accomplished with great ferocity and the Gupta regime was completely extinguished. It was not until around 530 AD that Mihirakula was defeated by Yasodharman of Mandasor. Xuanzang who passed through Gandhara and Kashmir 100 years later heard about the devastation and reported that in Gandhara alone, “*Mihirakula overthrew stupas and destroyed monasteries, altogether one thousand and six hundred foundations.*”

At that age, Buddhism had enough vitality to heal the wounds inflicted by the Huns for over a decade. Sangha life picked up again in new monasteries built over the ruins of the demolished ones. However, in the western part of India, namely: Gandhara, Kashmir and western Uttar Pradesh, Buddhism had lost much ground to Brahmanism of the Gupta age. In the eastern part, in Magadha (Bihar) and West Bengal, it began to revive again under the Buddhist king, **Harsa Vardhana** (7th century AD) and later on, under the patronage of the **Pala kings** (8th-12th century AD).

This was a period when the viharas underwent transformation from being monastic training centers to larger institutions or mahaviharas dedicated to learning and scholarship. Some of these mahaviharas such as **Nalanda** had as many as 10,000 students from every Buddhist country. Kings, nobles and wealthy people all contributed their share towards the maintenance of these famous universities. Their financial support made these Buddhist institutions famous and prosperous but they undermined the high ideals of renunciation and simple lifestyle upon which the Sangha was founded.

Although Buddhism was taught, mundane subjects including astronomy, medicine (*Ayurveda*), grammar, metaphysics, logic, philosophy of language, classical Hindu and non-Indian philosophy were all regularly studied. So the monks slowly became accustomed to an easy life devoted to academic pursuits and religious rituals and relaxed their moral code to accommodate worldly practices and beliefs. According to I-Ching who studied in Nalanada from 675-85 AD, “the venerable and learned priests of Nalanda monastery ride in sedan-chairs when they travel. The necessary baggage are carried by their attendants; such are the customs among the Bhikshus in India”. Such easy lifestyles & wealth contributed to the disintegration of the Order into diverse sects, to a weakening of morality and corresponding erosion of the laity’s faith in the Sangha.

The Mahayana doctrine had reached the stage where arahantship was openly condemned and Bodhisattaship held up as the goal towards which every good Buddhist should aim for. With the passage of time, more philosophical speculations in the Mahayana tradition emerged and led to the worship of various Mahayanist gods and “Bodhisattas” conceived to symbolize the philosophical speculations. As time went on, converts to Mahayana, who were well acquainted with the Hindu deities of the day, conveniently adopted many Hindu deities into the Buddhist pantheon. These Hindu deities were represented as “Bodhisattas” in order to reconcile the two faiths and to attract more devotees. To convince the naive devotees that it was indeed a Buddhist deity, each icon had a small Buddha image on its head.

Grand temples were built in honor of these new “Bodhisattas”. Elaborate ceremonies were performed attracting people from all walks of life and encouraged different superstitious beliefs and modes of worship. These practices formed the basis for the development of **Tantrayana** by Buddhists who adopted the methods of Hindu Tantrists by incorporating Vedic and Hindu beliefs into the religion.

During the later part of the Pala period (9th to 11th century AD), Buddhism became heavily adulterated by the Tantric cult, with its magic spells, yoga and practices that were completely alien to the earlier form of Buddhism. The religion was now reduced into an esoteric yogic system with emphasis in the efficacy of magic spells and mantras and practice of mudras (physical postures), mandalas (mystical diagrams), kriyas (rites), etc. Tantric mystics were accepted as great leaders who claimed to have discovered the shortest route to Deliverance. In some quarters, it was believed that the “grace of the teacher” was sufficient for the realization of the Sublime. The highly symbolic language of esoteric Tantric writers encouraged some of these gurus to ridicule the monastic code and even propagate mass indulgence in wine and women as a way to attain the highest knowledge.



Left: Avalokiteshvara Padmapani, 10th–11th century AD, Bengal Exhibited at Delhi Museum



Right: Tantric deity Marici found at Nalanda ruins. Dept. of Archaeology, India

The discovery in the ruins of Nalanda of several Tantric images, all of which belonged to the Pala period of its history, provides evidence of the development of Tantrayana at Nalanda University.

According to **Ven. Jagdish Kashyap**, the religion had become so polluted and weakened by these perverted forms of practice that its revival was practically impossible after the Mahayana/Tantra temples and monasteries were destroyed by the Muslim invaders.

Below: Photo of sculpture at Nalanda Museum entitled “TRAILOKYA VIJAYA” shows the lower portion of a vandalized sculpture of a Vajrayana Buddhist deity represented trampling the Hindu god Shiva and his consort Gauri to show the supremacy over Hindu pantheon.



4.1 The Fatal Blow

The Turuskas or Khaliji Turks from Afghanistan dealt the fatal blow to Buddhism in India at the close of the 12th century AD. They were fanatical Muslims, bent on conquest and destruction. By then, they had conquered the western part of Uttar Pradesh, where they had settled themselves with expansionist aims. Soon they began their invasion, spreading terror and panic through all the towns and countryside in their path, and their advance posed a tremendous threat to all monasteries and temples of northern India. The whole doomed area in the east, ancient Magadha (Bihar) and North Bengal, fell to the marauders. Especial ferocity was directed towards Buddhist institutions with huge Buddha and “Bodhisatta” images, which were systematically plundered, destroyed or vandalised. The shaven-headed monks wearing distinctive monastic robes were easily spotted and massacred wholesale as idolaters (most of them were **Tantric followers**). Such was the savagery of the Muslim invaders!

In 1684, after nearly five centuries of oppression, the Indians united under the **Maratha king Chhatrapati Shivaji** (Mumbai Airport is named after him) and were able to end Muslim rule in India. The decisive point for us is that Turkish power and Muslim rule had collapsed, the Marathas had re-established religious tolerance over most of India and the British continued this Maratha policy over a still wider area. It became possible for Buddhists not only to make pilgrimages to India but also to start restoring Bodhgaya, Sarnath and other holy shrines and once more to build temples for the monks to stay. In fact, the demise of Muslim rule and the arrival of the British Raj were the most significant events that paved the way for the revival of Buddhism in India.

5. The Revival of Buddhism in India

The disappearance of Buddhism in India lasted six centuries, from the 13th to 18th centuries AD. According to **Ven. Bhikkhu Jagdish Kashyap**, it was almost so complete that even in recent times, the local people of Patna, Rajgir and Mathura, once the strongholds of Buddhism, could not even recognize the Buddhist relics that were discovered there. While in many places, the Buddha statues that were not destroyed came to be worshipped as Hindu deities. Buddhist stupas that had been abandoned for centuries became so overgrown with wild vegetation and trees that they resembled hillocks!

After six centuries of darkness, light dawned on Buddhism with the coming of the **British Raj** in the 18th century, that attracted a crop of scholars and explorers. These newcomers from the West were filled with enthusiasm to discover what lay hidden in this ancient country. Asokan pillars towering in the open were the first monuments that came under their scrutiny. Their discoveries began in 1750 with the discovery of fragments of an Asokan inscription of the Delhi-Mirath Pillar, followed by inscriptions on the Delhi-Topra Pillar, the Allahabad-Kosambi Pillar and Lauriya Araraj and Lauriya Nandangarh Pillars, the last two in Bihar.

With the discovery of these ancient inscriptions, the next task was to find out what was written and who was the author. But there was no Indian scholar competent enough to decipher them. In 1837, **James Princep**, an official of the Indian Mint and Secretary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal succeeded after several years of painstaking study and hard work, in deciphering the inscriptions, which were written in **Brahmi**. He published his results containing English translations of the seven pillar Edicts, the opening words of which were: “*Thus spake the beloved of gods, King Piyadasi*”

Who this King Piyadasi was still remained a mystery. Luckily that year, **George Turnour**, historian and officer of the Ceylon Civil Service, published his English translation of **Mahavamsa**, a Pali chronicle of Ceylon. The occurrence of the word ‘Piyadasi’ in the Mahavamsa helped Prinsep in identifying King Piyadasi as the great Buddhist **Emperor Asoka**. The deciphering of the Asokan inscriptions and the identification of Asoka was an epoch-making event. It revealed that India during Asoka’s time was **Buddhist India!** Obviously the Brahmins who wrote India’s history had intentionally omitted that golden period. This discovery enriched the history of India and of Buddhism to such an extent that all previous books on Indian history had to be re-written!

6. The Pioneers of Buddhist Revival in India

The arrival of **Sir Alexander Cunningham** (1814 -1893) accelerated the discovery and restoration of the archaeological sites in India. He was the first Director General of Archaeology and undoubtedly the greatest explorer of Buddhist heritage in India. He came to India in 1833 and served in the army and other government departments in India and Burma as an engineer. He took up archaeology because he had an innate concern for ancient remains, and was deeply disturbed by the way the monuments were suffering from the ravages of nature and the plunder of man. His association with Buddhist monuments began when he undertook excavation of the Dhamek stupa in Sarnath around 1840 where he saw the irreparable damage of its beautiful facade due to the meanness **Jagat Singh**, minister of Benares. His achievements as an archaeologist during a span of 28 years led to his appointment as Surveyor of Indian Archaeology in 1861. That same year a French scholar, **M. Stanisla Julien**, had published a translation of the travel records of the famous Chinese pilgrim **Xuanzang** who was in India in 629-644 AD.

Following the descriptions of cities, places and land routes recorded by the Chinese pilgrims **Faxian** and **Xuanzang** in their travels, Cunningham initiated a systematic survey of the archaeological remains of northern India that resulted in the discovery of several ancient Buddhist sites such as **Kushinagar**, **Sankasia**, **Sravasti**, **Nalanda**, **Kosambi** and many others that had become obscured with time. In 1865, the department was abolished but revived in 1870, with **Cunningham as Director**, the post he held until he retired in 1885. During his retirement in London until his death in 28 November 1893, he wrote several books on Buddhism based on his findings. His contribution to the restoration of Buddhist Heritage in India is unrivalled. **Buddhists in particular owe him a special debt.**

While Cunningham dedicated himself to the restoration of Buddhist heritage sites, another person who dedicated his life to reclaiming them back to Buddhists was **Anagarika Dharmapala** (1865-1933), pioneer of the Buddhist revival-movement in India. Born in Sri Lanka by the name of **David Hewavitarana**, he later took the name of Anagarika Dharmapala, which means “Homeless Guardian of the Dhamma”. Dharmapala came to Bodhgaya in 1891 after reading several articles written by **Sir Edwin Arnold**, author of the “Light of Asia”, describing the deplorable condition of the Mahabodhi Temple, the most sacred place of worship of Buddhists. What he saw shocked and saddened him so deeply that he vowed to devote his life “*to make this sacred spot to be cared for by our own bhikkhus*”.

Realizing that it would not be an easy task to accomplish unless the message of the Buddha spread, he founded the **Maha Bodhi Society of India** to spearhead the movement. This started the process that generated considerable interest about the rich heritage of Buddhism, which had nearly become extinct in the country of its origin. Starting at Bodhgaya, where the battle to regain control of the **Mahabodhi Temple** began, the Maha Bodhi

Society expanded its activities to Sarnath, venue of the First Sermon.

When Anagarika Dharmapala came to India in 1891, Sarnath had been reduced to a tiny village surrounded by jungle, which was the grazing ground of wild pigs. Dharmapala decided to restore it into a living shrine, by building a new vihara beside the famous Deer Park. With the completion of the **Mulagandha Kuti Vihara** in 1931, and the subsequent establishment of the Maha Bodhi Society Library, Free Clinic, Schools and Teachers Training College, Pilgrims' Hostel and Sangharama, Sarnath is once again pulsating with life.

Another great personality who was a friend in need was the famous archeologist, **Sir John Marshall**, Director General of Archeological Survey of India 1902-1928, best known for his discovery of Indus Valley Civilization at Harappa and Mohenjodaro and his excavations of Taxila which lasted twenty years. In 1925, when the Indian Government decided to stop the construction of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara on the grounds that it was too near the Dhamekh Stupa, the Maha Bodhi Society appealed for his help. A meeting was held in Taxila (near Islamabad) between Sir John Marshall, **Devapriya Valisinha**, secretary of the Maha Bodhi Society and **Dr. C. A. Hewavitarne** younger brother of Anagarika, in which the Sarnath Vihara building in question was discussed. As a result of the intervention of Sir John Marshall, the dispute was amicably settled in 1926 with an offer of an alternative plot of land for the Vihara by the Indian Government, financial compensation of expenditure incurred on earlier foundation works and 20 acres of land to be developed into a park at their cost as an annexe to the Vihara.

With its headquarters in Calcutta, the Maha Bodhi Society has expanded its activities to many cities in India, as well as overseas in Japan, Korea, Hong Kong, Sri Lanka, England and USA. The impact of the expanding activities of the Maha Bodhi Society was

soon felt throughout India spurring millions of low caste Hindus to embrace Buddhism, following the example of their leader **Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar**, Champion of the Depressed Castes of India, who chose **Sayadaw U Chandramani** of Kusinara to be his mentor in a historic ceremony on 14 October 1956 in Nagpur, Maharashtra. The Nagpur event was the greatest religious conversion in the history of mankind. It opened the floodgates for the masses of low-caste Hindus to enter the fold of Buddhism and escape the scourge of the caste system, as each year more and more low-caste Hindus embrace Buddhism swelling the Buddhist population to about 50 million today according to estimates by Buddhist scholars.

Among the Sangha members, the most prominent was **Sayadaw U Chandramani** of Kusinara, mentor of the famous Dalit leader Dr. Ambedkar. He possessed all the necessary qualities, such as wisdom, patience, courage, stamina and untiring effort to rebuild the Buddha Sasana in India, and to develop it in Nepal, and to carry on teaching and practising both Vipassana and Loving Kindness meditation. In addition to his Dhammaduta activities, he took a keen interest in the education of the young people of Kushinagar because he knew that any change of mindset would have to come from the younger generation.

As Kushinagar is world famous as the final resting place of the Buddha, many pilgrims as well as tourists make it a point to visit the Burmese Temple to pay their respects to Sayadaw, who was always concerned about the welfare of the pilgrims. While doing all that, he passed away in the Kusinara Burmese Temple on 8 May 1972 at the age of 97, having lived nearly 80 years as a Bhikkhu in India serving the cause of the Sasana with great determination and patience, despite all the hardships he faced including a very poor diet, poor living conditions and a hostile environment. To all his devotees, especially in India and Nepal, they could never again find such a great missionary. **He was truly the Hero of the Sasana in India.**

Gradually, all the Pilgrimage sites were restored and developed as religious-cum-tourist resorts. Most of them have regained much of their lost glory and are pulsating with life, thanks to the concerted efforts of the Sangha, archeologists, historians, scholars and lay devotees in their restoration. In particular, the **Burmese and Sri Lankan Buddhists** have played a crucial role by building viharas to accommodate the Sangha so that the bhikkhus can act as custodians of the holy shrines and enhance the sanctity of the environment. Many of the shrines are located in rural areas that lack basic amenities, and the monks there play a useful role in promoting the education and welfare of the local population.

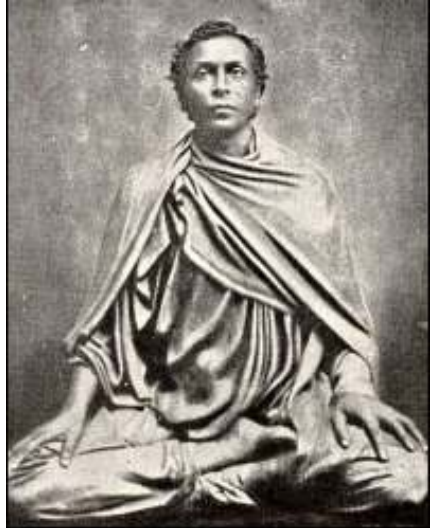
Once again, they are living shrines, worthy of worship and veneration to which thousands of devotees come every year from all over the world to pay homage to the Greatest Teacher the world has ever known, the Lord Buddha, and earn merit by this pilgrimage of piety and faith. A visit to these repositories of glorious Buddhist heritage will certainly uplift the mind and enable one to develop many noble qualities. The sight of fellow pilgrims, who come from far and wide, with the common aim of honoring the Blessed One, will surely arouse joy in one's heart.

For the disciple who has completed this journey of piety and faith, the **spiritual impact is unique and unforgettable**. In fact, the sights of these holy shrines impact so deeply in the mind that the pilgrim will always remember these revered images with joy long after the journey. All devout Buddhists should heed the Buddha's exhortation and go on a pilgrimage at least once in their lifetime to experience the benefits.

The Four Great Pioneers of Buddhist Revival in India



1. Sayadaw. U Chandramani
(1876-1972)



2. Anagarika Dhammapala
(1864-1933)



3. Babasaheb Dr. Ambedkar
(1891-1956)



4. Gen. Alexander Cunningham
(1814-1893)