

PILGRIMAGE IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA



PILGRIMAGE IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

Introduction	3
1. Lumbini	8
2. Bodhgaya	11
3. Sarnath	16
4. Kushinagar	18
5. Rajgir	20
6. Sravasti	24
7. Vaishali	27
8. Sankasya	29
9. Nalanda	31
10.Kapilavastu	37
Bibliography	40

Compiled by par Eric Dezert (K.Shenpen), on the occasion of the pilgrimage organized in 2016 for Kagyu Samye Dzung Bruxelles, on the basis of informations collected from the books mentioned in the bibliography.

INTRODUCTION

The Buddha himself advised future generations of his disciples to go on pilgrimage to the places where he had lived and taught, especially Lumbini where he was born, Bodhgaya where he attained perfect Enlightenment, Sarnath where he set the wheel of the Dharma in motion, and Kushinagar where he left this world. For centuries the practice of pilgrimages attracted thousands of travellers seeking inspiration to those places, as well as the many other sites of importance in the history of Buddhism in India and many other Asian countries.

There are four places, Ananda, which a pious person should visit and regard with feelings of reverence.



What are those four?

Here the Tathagata was born! This, Ananda, is a place which a pious person should visit and regard with feelings of reverence.

"Here the Tathagata fully awakened into supreme and unsurpassable Enlightenment! This, Ananda, is a place which a pious person should visit and regard with feelings of reverence.

Here the Tathagata set in motion the peerless Wheel of the Dhamma! This, Ananda, is a place which a pious person should visit and regard with feelings of reverence.

Here the Tathagata passed into the state of Nibbana, where no trace of attachment remains! This, Ananda, is a place which a pious person should visit and regard with feelings of reverence.

Those, Ananda, are the four places which a pious person should visit and regard with feelings of reverence. And indeed, Ananda, pious monks and nuns, laymen and laywomen will come to those places, saying: 'Here the Tathagata was born. Here the Tathagata fully awakened into supreme and unsurpassable Enlightenment! Here the Tathagata set in motion the peerless Wheel of the Dhamma! Here the

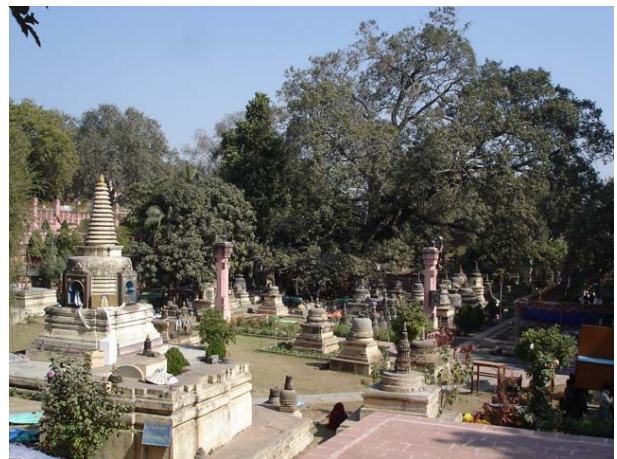
Tathagata passed into the state of Nibbana where no trace of attachment remains!

And anyone, Ananda, who dies while making such a pilgrimage with his heart established in the faith will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness when his body dissolves after death.

From the Mahaparinibbana Sutta, Digha Nikaya 16.

After the Buddha's cremation his relics were divided into eight parts, which were given to the rulers of the eight countries where he had been most influential when he was alive. Eight stupas were built to house the relics, at respectively :

- Rajgir, one of the main cities of the kingdom of Magadha, by King Ajatashatru.
- Vaisali, capital of the Licchavis and the kingdom of the Vajjis.
- Kapilavastu, the city of the Shakyas.
- Allakappa of the Bulis (location not known at present).
- Ramagrama, one of the main cities of the kingdom of the Koliyas (situated not far from Lumbini).
- Vethadipa, a Brahmin locality (location uncertain, perhaps at Bettiah in Bihar).
- Pava, one of the Mallas' main cities (situated near Kushinagar in Uttar Pradesh).
- Kusinagar, the Mallas' capital.



Two additional stupas were also built, one on the site of the funeral pyre and the other to house the urn which had contained the Master's ashes. For centuries many pilgrims visited these sites, but most of them are no longer considered today as sites of major importance. At Pava and Ramagrama the ruins of stupas have been brought to light relatively recently, but the sites of Allakappa and Vethadipa have not yet been identified.

As well as the four main sites, several other sites also associated with Buddha Shakyamuni today constitute major destinations for Buddhist pilgrims: Kapilavastu, Rajgir, Vaishali, Shravasti, Sankisa and Nalanda. Thus the original places of pilgrimage differ in part from those visited most frequently during earlier centuries.



An additional relic of the Buddha also exists, a tooth said to have been found by the nun Khema (a wife of King Bimbisara of Magadha) in the ashes of the funeral pyre. She presented it to King Brahmadata, and it subsequently passed into the hands of several rulers, until Guhasiva, King of Kalinga, for fear of losing it, had it taken to Sri Lanka by his daughter. A huge temple was built around the tooth in 371, and it has been exhibited every year since in a grand procession in the city of Kandy.

The biographical writings on the Buddhas in the Buddhist canon explain that stupas existed long before the coming of Shakyamuni. The relics of the previous Buddha, Kasyapa, had already been placed in a similar funerary monument. Its site was the first place Siddhartha visited after leaving his father's palace. There he abandoned all his ties to this world and made the vow to attain liberation.

Years later Shakyamuni showed his disciples the shape a stupa should have by placing on the ground his robe folded in a square to represent its base, his bowl turned upside down to represent the heart and his parasol to represent the pinnacle. Stupas are receptacles for the relics of great masters and supports for the offerings of practitioners who follow the Buddha's teachings. They symbolise the awakening of *bodhicitta*, the potential for realisation. It is said that the power of *bodhicitta* is awakened in those who honour their presence.



All Buddhist traditions teach that the Buddha was only one example of a multitude of awakened beings who have manifested across the incalculable number of universes which have listed throughout beginningless time. The cosmic period (*kalpa*) in which we are living now is known by the name of Bhadrakalpa (fortunate era), during which a thousand buddhas will appear, Shakyamuni being the fourth of the series. His birth and obtaining of Enlightenment were the fruit of an incalculable number of lives dedicated to truth and virtue. By developing the six Paramitas (generosity, ethics, patience, perseverance, concentration and perfect knowledge), he dedicated all his existences to the welfare of others, following the example of the buddhas who had preceded him.

Among the six sorts of destinies in which the beings of Samsara evolve, being born in an almost endless cycle of rebirths in various forms, only existence as a human being offers the favourable conditions which are necessary for obtaining Enlightenment. The Buddha taught that the chances of obtaining such a vehicle are as rare as those which a blind turtle would have of putting its head into the opening of a yoke floating on the ocean. Someone who has the good fortune to be reborn at a time when the teaching of a buddha is available and still authentically practised benefits from an even more exceptional opportunity, called "the unique conjunction".

Developing the Mind of Enlightenment, *bodhicitta*, when one already possesses those special conditions is a rare and very valuable accomplishment. Taking it to completion is an act requiring almost superhuman determination and courage.

What the Buddha achieved by destroying the chains of ignorance and the mind poisons, and by transmitting that enlightened knowledge to the world, is an incomparable accomplishment. His ability to share his knowledge with others by setting in motion the Wheel of the Dharma is an exceptional historic event which has enabled a multitude of disciples during the last twenty-five centuries to free themselves from the sufferings of existence by following his example.



As he entered into Parinirvana, Buddha Shakyamuni gave his last teaching on the truth of impermanence and demonstrated the beauty of a life devoted to developing full awareness of the nature of beings and the world around them.

The pilgrim's travels, inspired by admiration and devotion, bring him into contact with the body, speech and mind of the Buddha, and make him take part inwardly in the events which marked the Buddha's life on earth: his birth, his Enlightenment, his teachings and his departure beyond suffering, always in utter perfection.

For those who see in the person of Shakyamuni a being whose actions show the example to follow in order to attain Enlightenment and plenitude, a pilgrimage is a physical and symbolical return to the source, a journey in quest of realisation of the deepest meaning of the Buddha's life and teachings. By undertaking that journey in body and mind, the pilgrim transforms his perceptions through profound meditation on his view, commitment and determination, qualities which open wide the way to Enlightenment.



A pilgrimage undertaken with devotion turns the mind away from doubt and fear, and opens it up to the dimension of knowledge. Our admiration for those who by their example have shown the way to Enlightenment extends our vision, and makes us feel love for all beings and the desire to contribute to their happiness. A pilgrimage is an inner communion with the Buddha's mind and teaching, and an external act of devotion, celebration and homage to the potential of all beings to attain the ultimate perfection of Buddhahood.



As he travels, the pilgrim experiences the Buddha's qualities and transforms his ordinary view of daily life into a pure perspective. He no longer sees the world as an abyss leading us to more and more suffering, but as a springboard for obtaining supreme Enlightenment.

In the course of history three people have played an important part in the preservation and development of the main centres of activity, which had already been created in the time of Buddha Shakyamuni.

- The Emperor Ashoka, who after conquering and unifying India by sowing destruction, converted to Buddhism and became an exceptionally zealous practitioner. He made a pilgrimage throughout the country, and had pillars built on which were carved edicts describing what had taken place at each important site. He also had many monasteries built, and supported the Sangha throughout his reign, which is considered as one of the most important in the history of India.
- In the fifth century the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hien travelled to India to obtain instructions on the *Vinaya* (the code of monastic discipline), and visited the great pilgrimage sites.
- In the seventh century another Chinese pilgrim, Hsüan-tsang, followed in his footsteps.

Both Chinese pilgrims provided invaluable historical information on the state of Buddhism and the great monastic institutions of their time. Their accounts have been translated into English.

The peak of Buddhist tradition seems to be around the seventh century, after which a slow decline began, ending with the massive destruction of monasteries inflicted during the invasions from Persia and Central Asia around the twelfth century.

Between the thirteenth and nineteenth centuries the Buddhist pilgrimage sites were little by little forgotten and abandoned. They were apparently not deliberately destroyed, but awaited their rediscovery towards the middle of the nineteenth century, notably thanks to the researches of the Archeological Survey of India and General Alexander Cunningham, who identified and brought to light many Buddhist sites, including the eight main pilgrimage destinations.

Since then, thanks to the efforts of many individuals devoted to the Dharma, India's renewed interest in its Buddhist past, the arrival of many Tibetans from the 1960's onwards and modern means of communication and travel, a flood of pilgrims which increases a little more every year once again travels to the places where the Buddha and his disciples lived 2500 years ago.



LUMBINI



Just before he was born in this world the Bodhisattva was the ruler of Tushita, the purest of the divine realms. Thus he held the highest position that a being could attain in the six worlds of Samsara, with no equals. Knowing that his next birth would be the last in the interminable cycle of life and death, he inspected the universe to see where would be the most appropriate place for him to appear in the world. As a result of his investigations he decided that the most propitious place would be the southern continent of Jambudvīpa, where human beings lived for an average of a hundred years.

Observing the purity of King Suddhodana and his wife Queen Mahāmāyā, and seeing that the royal caste was highly respected in the region, he decided to be born in the Sakya royal family.

After placing his crown on the head of the Bodhisattva Maitreya, who took his place as ruler of Tushita, the Bodhisattva was reborn as a human being. On a night of full moon in the month of Vaisakha (April/May), Queen Mahāmāyā had a wonderful dream; she saw a white elephant with six tusks pierce her right side, while she experienced unutterable bliss. The next day the King summoned sixty-four Brahmin wise men and astrologers to interpret the Queen's dream. They predicted that she would give birth to a child who would become universally famous.

Having carried the child for ten months, and sensing that his birth was imminent, Mahāmāyā asked to be taken to her parents to give birth, according to the tradition. On the way the Queen asked for a pause so she could rest. After quenching her thirst in a small pool in the flower gardens of Lumbini, she grasped a branch hanging towards her for a moment, and in an instant the Bodhisattva emerged miraculously from her womb. The gods who were present at the event took the child and laid him carefully on the ground. The child took seven paces towards each of the four points of the compass - flowers burst forth wherever he placed his feet - and he uttered his lion's roar four times, exclaiming:

« I am the first, the greatest among beings, this is my last birth ! »

He looked downwards to show that he would overcome Mara and relieve the sufferings of beings in the lower worlds thanks to his teachings. Then he looked upwards to show that the whole world would respect him and appreciate his actions. When Brahma and Indra had bathed him, assisted by the nagas Nanda and Upananda, the child was wrapped in fine cloth and taken to his father's palace at Kapilavastu.



Many auspicious omens appeared when the Bodhisattva was born. The earth shook, all beings were freed for a moment from the grip of their negative emotions, and divine music was heard throughout the kingdom, as described in the Lalitavistara Sutra. Many of those who in the future would play important parts in his life were born at the same time on the same day: Yasodhara who

became his wife, his faithful servant Chandaka, the steed Kanthaka who enabled him to leave the palace, and Kings Bimbisara and Prasenajit, who ruled the kingdoms of Magadha and Koshala and were the Sangha's greatest benefactors.



Suddhodana summoned the sage Asita to predict the child's future. When he saw the child, Asita began to weep. Alarmed, the King feared a bad omen, but the old man reassured him, explaining that he was sad because he was very old and would not see the King's son become adult.

The child would be an exceptional being such as is rarely seen in the world, and if one day he encountered suffering, he would abandon the worldly life and achieve the highest spiritual realisation.

Soon after Siddhartha's birth Mahamaya died, and from then on it was her sister Mahapajapati who took care of the child. The King shut his son up in sumptuous palaces where he lived throughout his childhood and adolescence, cut off from all contact with the outside world so that he was never confronted with suffering. The prince excelled all the other

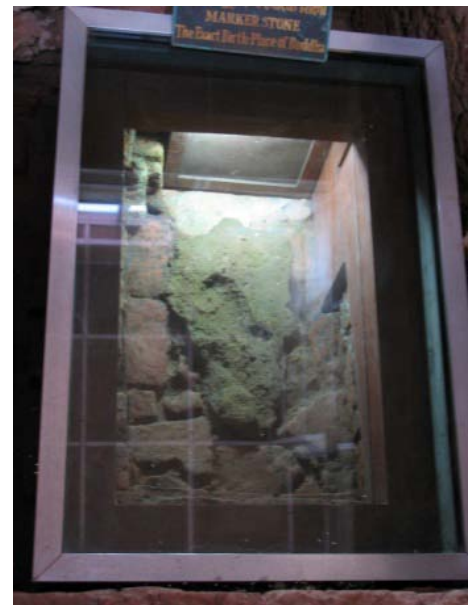
young noblemen of the court in every way, through his intellectual gifts in his studies, his artistic talents, his ability with his hands and his strength in sporting competitions. Everyone admired him and he completely mastered all worldly activities.

One day, while his father was engaged in performing a ceremony to inaugurate the crop-sowing season, the prince, who was only a few years old, sat down at the foot of a tree to relax and keep cool, and he entered into a state of deep concentration. He was only found a few hours later, still plunged in his meditation.

When he grew up, he married a woman who had many fine qualities, Yasodhara, who gave him a son, Rahula. Many years later, they both joined the Buddha's Sangha.

Despite all the prince's gifts and his father's efforts to keep him in the palace, what had to happen happened, and one day he was confronted with suffering in the form of an old man, a sick person and a corpse being carried to the cremation ground. These experiences moved him deeply, and when a little while later he met an ascetic meditating under a tree, filled with peace and serenity, he decided without hesitation that this was the path he too should follow.

One night he left the palace in secret with his horse and his servant. They rode until daybreak and then stopped. The prince cut off his long hair and exchanged his precious garments for a renunciant's robes. He sent Chandaka and Kanthaka back to the palace. His quest for Enlightenment had begun.





When he had attained Enlightenment, the Buddha returned once to Kapilavastu with his Sangha, at his father's invitation. His reunion with his family was a time of great happiness for all concerned. He taught them the Dharma, and five hundred young Sakyans, including his son Rahula, were ordained and joined the Sangha.

The Buddha also stopped one day at Lumbini on the way to Devadaha, and there uttered the Devadaha Sutra, refuting the views of the Niganthas, the disciples of Mahavira, the founder of Jainism.

BODHGAYA



Bodhgaya is in the province of Bihar, not far from Patna (the ancient Pataliputra), in rich and fertile territory irrigated by the waters of the river Phalgu, formerly the Nairanjana. Near Bodhgaya, which was then called Uruvela, are some low, steep hills with caves in which the future Buddha and his ascetic companions lived for six years, practising the most extreme austerities, eating only a few grains of rice a day.

At the end of the six years, thanks to those austerities and the merits he had accumulated, Siddhartha knew that if he died of starvation owing to his fasting he would take rebirth in the highest spheres of the divine worlds. But at that crucial moment his former vow to obtain Enlightenment for the welfare of all beings caused him to be flooded with compassion, and he decided to abandon the ascetic path.

He dressed in a shroud he had found in a nearby cemetery and went to the riverbank, where he fainted because his body was so weak due to lack of food. A young woman, Sujata, found him and gave him the milk she was carrying to offer the forest divinities. Revived, Siddhartha set out for the Diamond Throne, the place where the previous Buddhas, Krakuccanda, Kanakamuni et Kasyapa, had also attained perfect Enlightenment.

Having received from a young boy, Svastika, the gift of a bundle of kusha grass, Siddhartha made himself a seat, sat down under a pippala (*ficus religiosa*) tree and entered a state of deep contemplation. His body produced a halo of light which spread in the ten directions, attracting even the attention of the heavenly beings. Mara, the Master of Illusion, frightened by the prospect of losing his hold on the world and on beings, hastened rapidly to the spot to try to distract the young sage. The Bodhisattva touched the ground, calling on the earth goddess to witness the incalculable number of existences in the course of which he had devoted



himself body and soul to the practice of virtue, virtue which had led him to that place to manifest the supreme achievement of Buddhahood. The earth showed its recognition of his achievement by trembling.



Mara then unleashed himself on Siddhartha to stabilise him, sometimes by launching his terrifying hordes of demons to attack him and seek to terrify him, sometimes by sending his daughters in the form of divinely beautiful goddesses to try to seduce him. But the purity of the bodhisattva intention prevailed. By the power of his compassion, the

arrows of Mara's warriors were changed into a rain of flower petals, and his army was defeated.

During the first part of the night, the first watch, he penetrated the four dhyana (absorptions) :

- In the first, characterised by the cessation of negative desires and states of mind, arose well-being resulting from perfect detachment.
- In the second, marked by the cessation of discursive thought, arose powerful inner calm.
- In the third, detaching himself from the feelings of well-being inherent in the deep concentration in which he was plunged, he obtained a happiness bringing perfect equanimity and vigilance.
- In the fourth, characterised by the cessation of any sensation of well-being or suffering, arose perfectly pure attention, free from any notion of pleasure or pain.

During the second watch Siddhartha developed the penetrating vision of his past lives. He clearly knew each of the states of existence through which he had passed to reach that day, every one, without exception and in the smallest detail. As he contemplated all the difficulties he had endured during that long journey, great compassion for the beings still entangled in Samsara welled up inside him.

During the third watch he saw how ignorance and the causal link it generates - karma - drives beings into an endless cycle of births and deaths, during which they experience the effects of their past actions and create the causes of their future experiences. As he contemplated the cycle of existence, his compassion grew still more.



During the fourth and last watch, just before dawn, the Buddha entered into vajra samadhi, the final stage of the path, during which the last veils covering his mind were definitively eliminated. He had found the answer to the problem of universal suffering and clearly saw the means to achieve it



"When I knew and saw thus, my mind was liberated from the taint of sensual desire, from the taint of being, and from the taint of ignorance. When it was liberated, there came the knowledge: "It is liberated". I directly knew: "Birth is destroyed, the holy life has been lived, what had to be done has been done. There is no more coming to any state of being"

The earth shook. He had become the Buddha, from whom the Dharma would soon flow spontaneously for the welfare of beings, lighting up the world thanks to the perfect, unlimited knowledge of reality in all its forms which he had now acquired. The spot was baptised Bhodimanda, the Seat of Enlightenment, which later became Bodhgaya.

The Buddha spent the next seven weeks there.

During the first week he remained seated under the Bodhi tree, meditating and experiencing the joy of liberation:

"I have found a truth which is profound, calm and luminous, beyond concepts and utterly free."

The second week he rose from his kusha grass cushion and moved away from the Bodhi tree to sit on a hillock a little way off, from which he observed the place of Enlightenment without closing his eyes for seven days.



During the third week the Buddha walked up and down to the north of the Bodhi tree. Flowers appeared miraculously where his feet touched the ground. Centuries later an arcade, Ratnacankamana, was built there.



During the fourth week the Buddha contemplated karmic causality and clarified the links between the causes and circumstances which perpetuate the cycle of existences. He saw that twelve inter-dependent factors fashion Samsara, and ensure its survival as long as nothing comes to interrupt their mechanical sequence. He also saw that it was possible to reverse the course of things and become completely free from the fetters of causality by eliminating ignorance. Ratnaghara, a sanctuary made of precious substances offered by Brahma and Indra, was built at the place where the Buddha unravelled the tangle of inter-dependent production.

Some texts say that during the fifth week Brahma took the form of a Brahmin sage, and came to the Buddha while he was meditating under an ajapala nigrodha tree, to ask him to teach the Dharma. The Buddha told him:

"The true Brahmin is he who has overcome the demon (ego) inside him, he who is free from pride, moderate and virtuous. He alone deserves the name of Brahmin."

During the sixth week a violent storm broke out and torrents of water beat down on the forest. A gigantic serpent, a Naga, appeared, wound himself round the Buddha and spread his wide hood over him, thus protecting him from the storm.





During the seventh week the Buddha was meditating at the foot of a rajayatana tree when two merchants, Tapussa and Bhallika, came to offer him rice and honey. Both took refuge, thus becoming the first Buddhist lay disciples. The Buddha foretold that they too would one day attain Enlightenment. (Great merit is earned by offering a Buddha his first and last meal). He gave them some nail-parings and a tuft of his hair, which they took home and had enshrined in a stupa.

A little while later Brahma and Indra, the two greatest lords of the god worlds, came to the Buddha and asked him to teach. They repeated their request three times, but the Buddha seemed unable to make up his mind to grant it, expressing his doubt as to whether beings would be able to follow so long and difficult a path and realise such a deep truth, but at last he agreed.

He first thought of going to find the teachers who had guided him a few years earlier, but through his clairvoyance he saw they had left this world. He therefore decided to set off to find his former ascetic companions, and met with them at Sarnath. After the rainy season the Buddha passed through Uruvela on the way to Rajgir. Sixty people in the village took the lay practice precepts. He also met Kasyapa, a famous Hindu master who practised a fire cult and lived there, surrounded by a thousand disciples. Very soon Kasyapa and all his pupils took refuge, as did his two brothers who headed the community with him.



The present Bodhi tree is a descendant of the tree under which the Buddha realised Enlightenment, which was destroyed at least three times. The first attempt to destroy it was made by Ashoka, who was originally hostile to Buddhism. But when he saw that the tree was continuing to grow in the midst of the flames, his attitude changed and thereafter he had boundless devotion to that sacred tree, to such an extent that

his wife had it destroyed for a second time out of jealousy. Having brought it back to life again, Ashoka had a protecting enclosure built to avoid any future destruction. The tree was nevertheless destroyed a third time by a Shivaite king of Bengal, who tried to dig up all its roots but without success, and a while later another king, Purvavarma of Magadha, revived it by pouring the milk of a thousand cows on the ground. A branch taken to Sri Lanka produced a tree as imposing as the original, and it was shoots from that tree which were later brought back to Bodhgaya and planted there.



Nagarjuna is credited with having rebuilt the protecting enclosure surrounding the tree, to protect it from elephants. He also had the Buddha's relics enshrined in the stupa at the top of the Mahabodhi temple.

L'arbre de la Bodhi actuel est un descendant de celui sous lequel le Bouddha réalisa l'Eveil, ce dernier ayant été détruit à au moins trois reprises. Il fut détruit une première fois par Ashoka, qui était à l'origine hostile au Bouddhisme, mais lorsqu'il vit l'arbre continuer à pousser au milieu des flammes, son attitudes changea et il eut dès lors une dévotion sans bornes pour cet arbre sacré, au point que sa femme le fit détruire une seconde fois par jalousie. L'ayant ravivé à nouveau, Ashoka fit construire une enceinte protectrice pour éviter toute nouvelle destruction. L'arbre fut néanmoins détruit une troisième fois, par un roi Shivaïte du Bengal, qui essaya d'en extirper toutes les racines mais sans y parvenir, et quelques temps plus tard, un autre roi - Purvavarma de Magadha - le ramena à la vie en versant sur la terre le lait de mille vaches. Une branche emportée au Sri Lanka, donna naissance à un arbre aussi imposant que l'original et ce sont des pousses de cet arbre qui furent plus tard rapportée et replantées à Bodh Gaya.



Nagarjuna est aussi crédité pour avoir fait reconstruire l'enceinte protectrice qui entourait l'arbre, pour le protéger des éléphants. Il fit également enchâsser des reliques du Bouddha dans le stupa qui se trouve au sommet de temple de Mahabodhi.

SARNATH



Close to Varanasi (Benares), Hinduism's most sacred city, Sarnath is the place where the Buddha again met with his first five ascetic companions, and where he set in motion the Wheel of the Dharma (*Dharmachakrapravartana*).

The name 'Sarnath' derives from 'Saranganatha', which means 'Lord of the Deer'. In a previous life the Buddha, who was then a stag and the leader of a flock of deer, offered the king his own life in exchange for that of the doe about to give birth whom the king had captured. The king was impressed by the stag's altruism, and felt so guilty that he decided to create a sanctuary, the Deer Park (Mrigadaya) where animals could live in peace and security.

Subsequently the Deer Park became known to the wise as a peaceful place, propitious for meditation, and many Rishi frequented it. A little while before Prince Siddhartha entered

this world, the gods came down to earth to announce his coming to the five hundred wise men practising in the Deer Park. When they heard this news the five hundred sages entered nirvana, leaving behind only some relics with which the ground was consecrated. This is why the Deer Park is also called Rishipatana.

It was in the Deer Park that the Buddha gave his first teaching to his five companions, Kaundiya, Vaspa, Bhadraka, Mahanaman and Asvajit. He explained the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path and the Twelve Links of Inter-Dependent Origination. First Kaundiya, then his four other friends, at once obtained Enlightenment and realised the ultimate meaning of the teaching at the very moment when they received it. Thus the Supreme Community (the Arya Sangha) was established, so that the Three Jewels were present to guide future generations. Even today, a monastic community is still considered to exist when five fully ordained monks are present in the same place.



From then on Sarnath became a sacred place for all Buddhists, the symbol of the transmission of the Dharma and the foundation of the Sangha. Not long after the first teaching, about fifty young noblemen from Varanasi became members of the burgeoning community and swiftly attained Arhatship, bringing the number of disciples to sixty. The Buddha encouraged them to travel across the country and share their experience with the people they met.

The Buddha returned to Sarnath several times and gave other teachings there, such as the *Buddhapitaka-duhshilanigraha-sutra* on the moral conduct (or rules of morality) to be observed by monks and nuns. Several other sutras were also transmitted in the region of Varanasi not far from Sarnath, such as the *Adhyasayasamodana-sutra* on karma, which was pronounced for the benefit of a group of bodhisattvas whose minds had become distracted by worldly pleasures.



KUSHINAGAR



When he had reached the age of eighty-one, the Buddha gave his last major transmission, a teaching on the thirty-seven factors of Enlightenment, and then left Vulture Peak at Rajgir with Ananda and set off northwards. He stopped at Nalanda, and then crossed the Ganges at the place where Patna is situated today and came to the village of Beluva. There, on the full-moon day of the month of Magh (January-February), the Buddha fell ill, and after giving the Sangha a teaching on impermanence, announced that he would soon leave this world. Taking no notice of his pain, he continued on his way to Vaishali, where he had often stayed in the past in the superb parks which had been

offered to receive the community. Vaishali is also the place where the Wheel of the Dharma was turned for the fourth time, and where the Second Council of the Sangha was held.

During this brief stay at Vaishali, the Master mentioned three times to Ananda that a Buddha could live on until the end of the kalpa, but Ananda did not understand the hint and think it useful to ask him to do so. So Shakyamuni gave up the idea of prolonging his life, and when Ananda later begged him to do so, he replied that he had missed the opportunity to make the request, and now it was too late.

After a while the Buddha reached Pava and was invited to take a meal by Kunda, a blacksmith's son. Kunda offered spoiled meat, which the Buddha ate, but which he forbade the monks accompanying him to consume. When Kunda lamented that he had offered the Master a poisoned gift and was being reproached by the other monks, the Buddha explained that great merit was earned by serving an enlightened being his last meal, and also for the last meal offered just before he reached enlightenment.

Between Pava and Kushinagar the Buddha met a Malla nobleman accompanying a caravan of merchants. The man spoke with him and then, as a sign of gratitude and respect, offered him two long pieces of cloth of gold. But the Buddha was so radiant that the cloth seemed dull in comparison with his radiance. It is said that the body of a Buddha manifests such outer signs just before he reaches Enlightenment and at the moment of Parinirvana.



The next day he and his monks arrived on the banks of the river Hiranyavati to the south of Kushinagar, and settled in a sala woodgrove. Kushinagar was the capital of Malla, one of the northern Indian republics at that time. The Buddha lay down on his right side in the lion's posture, his head facing north. Ananda asked if it would not be more suitable to leave the world in a place such as Rajgir or Shravasti, the most famous cities at that time. The Master refused, explaining that in a previous life he had reigned over the city of Kushinagar, which was then called Kushavati and surpassed all the places he had known in this life.

The nobles of Kushinagar heard that Shakyamuni was preparing to leave this world and came to pay



him a final homage. Among them was a highly respected old Brahmin called Subhadra, who had three times been refused entry to the Sangha. The Buddha asked him to approach, answered his questions on the six erroneous philosophical doctrines, taught him the Dharma and gave him ordination. Subhadra was the last monk to be ordained by the Master in person. He sat down not far away to meditate and attained the state of arhat before the Buddha entered Parinirvana.

Out of respect, Sariputra and Maudgalyayana too entered into bliss before the Buddha, in their villages near Nalanda where they had been born.

As the third watch of the night drew near, the Buddha asked the disciples around him three times if they still had questions or doubts concerning the Dharma. No one replied, so he gave them a final admonition:

*"Impermanence is inherent in all phenomena.
Strive with diligence to obtain Enlightenment!"*

Then he passed through the different stages of meditative absorption and entered Mahaparinirvana. The earth shook and shooting stars lit up the skies; the air was filled with delicious perfumes and heavenly music was heard. The Master's body was washed, dressed in new robes and placed in a receptacle made of precious substances. For four days gods and men came to present their offerings at the Master's feet, and then he was carried to the place where he was to be cremated. The Mallas offered their own funeral pyre for the Buddha. A bonfire of rare scented woods was prepared, but no one was able to set it alight. It had been predicted that only Mahakasyapa could light the pyre. When he arrived and prostrated before the relics, the pyre caught fire on its own.

After the cremation, the ashes were examined to find relics. Only the skull, teeth and some pieces of the cloth shroud remained. As the Buddha had chosen to leave this world in their territory, the Mallas considered that they had the right to the relics, but the representatives of the seven other countries of India at that time also asked to receive some of them. Thanks to the skilful intervention of the Brahmin Drona, it was decided that the relics would be divided into eight parts, so that a stupa to contain them could be built in each country. Some centuries later Ashoka took out the relics, and divided them to be placed in eighty-four thousand stupas throughout the country. Nowadays they are preserved in many countries of Asia and beyond.



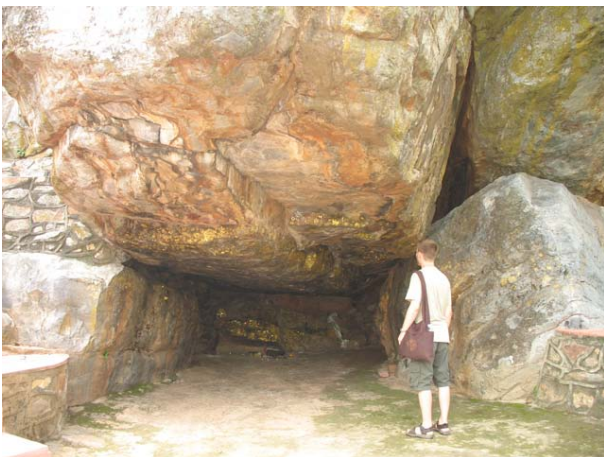
RAJGIR



master there.

King Bimbisara saw the young prince passing by, dressed in his newly acquired mendicant's robe, and was impressed by the grace and serenity of his attitude. The King had him followed by a servant, and the next day went to find him at the place where he had spent the night. He was so impressed by Siddhartha that he offered him half of his kingdom if he would agree to stay at Rajagriha. But the young prince, whose mind was totally focused on the one and only goal which he sought, obtaining Enlightenment and the extinction of suffering, politely refused the invitation, but promised to return when he had achieved his goal.

A year after he had attained Enlightenment and set in motion the wheel of the Dharma, the Buddha set out for Rajagriha to keep his promise to the King. On the way he stopped for a while at Uruvela, where Kashyapa, his two brothers and their thousand disciples joined the Sangha. When this imposing group appeared at the gates of the city, the King came in person to receive them, and as a sign of welcome installed them in his favourite park, which he gave to the Buddha for the monastic community. Venuvana, the Bamboo Grove, became the first Buddhist monastery. It also had a reservoir of water, Karanda, in which the Buddha liked to cool himself. Later there were as many as eighteen monasteries in the city. The Buddha spent many rainy seasons at Rajagriha and gave many teachings there.



Bimbisara's son Ajatashatru had two stupas built not far from the park, in which were enshrined the relics of the Buddha which he had received after the cremation, and some of the relics of Ananda. Later Ashoka had the Buddha's relics taken out of the



stupa and divided up to be placed in 84,000 stupas throughout his empire.

As well as the Buddhist community, Rajagriha also housed Jain and Hindu temples. Mahavira, the Jain founder, spent many rainy seasons in the city. Some of his disciples, jealous of King Bimbisara's interest in the Buddha, tried to kill him, but their attempts failed. Strangely, although the Buddha and Mahavira lived and taught at the same time in the same places, they never met.

The most important event of the Buddha's first visit to Rajagriha was his meeting with his two leading disciples, Shariputra and Maudgalyayana. Ashvajit, one of Siddhartha's former ascetic companions, was in the city collecting alms when Shariputra saw him passing by. Impressed by the serenity of his attitude, he approached him to ask who his master was and what he taught. A simple explanation was sufficient for Shariputra to attain instantly the state of *arhat*. He went to find Maudgalyayana and repeat what he had just heard, and Maudgalyayana too at once attained the state of *arhat*. The two friends left their master Sanjaya and went to join the Sangha with his five hundred disciples. The Buddha received them as his two leading spiritual sons, Shariputra being the wisest and Maudgalyayana possessing the greatest powers. Both were born in the region of Rajagriha and died in their native villages shortly before the Buddha himself left this world. Stupas were built on the sites of their cremations.



During his stay at Rajagriha Shakyamuni received two important invitations, the first from his father King Suddhodana, and the second from the rich merchant Anathapindika, asking him to come and stay in his city of Shravasti during the next rainy season.

King Ajatashatru, who had usurped his father's throne and left him to die in prison, came under the influence of Devadatta, the Buddha's jealous cousin who had tried a little while previously to force Shakyamuni to let him take charge of the Sangha. Devadatta created a schism in the Sangha and managed to convince Ajatashatru to try to kill the Buddha. Assassins were hired to kill him, but they all failed and came to prostrate themselves at his feet, begging for pardon. The King then released a raging elephant in the streets of the city. The elephant charged furiously towards the Buddha, who calmed him with a simple gesture and a few words, and the animal went to lie down beside him.

Jivaka, the court physician, a brilliant and generous man, had given his mango grove to the community.





He took care of the Buddha's health, and the Buddha was fond of the doctor and his mango grove. Jivaka introduced Amrapali, an enchantingly beautiful courtesan, to the Buddha; she became a nun and one of the leading figures in the women's Sangha. An important sutra, the *Sammanaphalasutra*, explaining the fruits of the holy life, was taught in the mango grove for Ajatashatru, who had repented and wished to obtain forgiveness. As for Devadatta, little by little his followers deserted him and at length he was left alone and died in great sufferings.

It was at Rajagriha too that a young boy who was later reborn as the great Emperor Ashoka offered the Buddha a handful of sand, saying that he wished it were gold.

It was also near Rajagriha, on the road from Nalanda, that Shakyamuni met Pippali, son of the richest Brahmin of the city. Although he had longed from his earliest youth for the religious life, Pippali was obliged to marry Bhadda Kapilani, a very beautiful woman who also longed for the holy life. After twelve years of chaste life together, following an event during which Bhadda Kapilani nearly died, they agreed they had no more time to lose and set out to follow their respective spiritual paths. The Buddha went to meet Pippali, and at their meeting at once accepted him as one of his disciples. From that day on he was known by the name of Kashyapa. On his way back Kashyapa offered his robe in precious material for the Tathagata to sit on. In exchange the Buddha offered him his own robe, which he wore for the rest of his life. The Buddha treated Kashyapa with great respect, saying that in many ways he was his equal. Eight days after their meeting he rose before a great assembly of monks, holding a flower in his hand, and remained without moving for some time. Only Kashyapa understood this symbolic teaching, and from then on he was called Mahakashyapa.



During all the time he spent with the Buddha, Mahakashyapa occupied an important position in the Sangha. When the Buddha's corpse was cremated no one could set the pyre alight until he had arrived, and it was he who took back to Rajagriha the portion of the ashes intended for King Ajatashatru. On the way he met a monk who told him that now the monks would finally be free to do as they pleased. On his return he summoned the community's leading disciples, and it was decided to hold a council to gather and memorise the Buddha's teachings for future generations.



Five hundred *arhats* were to take part in the council. The five hundredth and one of the most important, was his cousin Ananda (the name means 'bliss' or 'happiness'), who had spent most of his life as the Buddha's personal attendant. Ananda had not yet become an *arhat*, so he spent the night before the Council trying with all his might to realise the essential meaning of the teachings which he had not yet understood; and at dawn he achieved liberation. Later a stupa was built on the spot where he had meditated that night. The Council was held under the patronage of King Ajatashatru, who had repented before the Buddha's Parinirvana and devoted himself to the cause of the Dharma in the Saptaparni cave.



Of all the teachings given at Rajagriha, the most important are those which were transmitted by Shakyamuni on Vultures' Peak sixteen years after he had attained Enlightenment. Before an assembly of five thousand monks, nuns and laymen and women, he set the Wheel of the Dharma in motion for the second time. This collection of teachings, which extended over a period of twelve years, includes

the *Saddharmapundarika-sutra* (the *Lotus Sutra*), the *Surangama-samadhi-sutra* and the many *Prajnaparamita* sutras which represent the essence of all the other teachings. Mahakashyapa collected these teachings and entrusted them to the Nagas, for they were intended to be revealed only later, when the circumstances favouring their dissemination were present.



After Ajatashatru's death his son moved the capital of Magadha to Pataliputra. A stupa was built near the Venuvana to contain Ajatashatru's ashes.

SHRAVASTI



In the Buddha's time Shravasti, capital of the kingdom of Kosala, was the greatest city of the Ganges plain. The city had already existed long before the birth of Siddhartha and was connected with the city of Ayodhya, Rama's legendary birthplace. At the crossroads of three great trading routes, Shravasti was a very advanced and prosperous city, where fifty-seven thousand families lived. Its great walls were pierced by immense gates through which great processions with imposing chariots and elephants loaded with palanquins could pass.

The Buddha spent twenty-five rainy season retreats at Shravasti, and performed several miracles there during a debate with opponents from other philosophical traditions. The place is considered as one of his main residences. He gave a large number of teachings there, and laid down the rules for the Sangha community's life.

Having spent the first rainy season after his Enlightenment at Rajgir, the Buddha met the merchant Anathapindika (his Sanskrit name means "incomparable alms-giver"), who wished to become one of his disciples. As he had a family and professional responsibilities, Anathapindika asked the Buddha if he could practise the Dharma without being ordained and abandoning his present way of life. The Master replied that he could continue to follow his calling, while respecting the spirit of the teachings and acting rightly. Anathapindika then invited the Buddha to visit Shravasti. The Buddha accepted, on condition that facilities which could lodge the entire Sangha were arranged. While Shakyamuni went to Kapilavastu at his father's invitation, Shariputra went to Shravasti with Anathapindika to prepare for his arrival. A park near the city which belonged to Prince Jeta was the ideal site to build a monastery, but the Prince was very attached to it, and only agreed to part with it on condition that its entire surface was covered with gold pieces. Anathapindika did this, using his entire personal fortune to purchase the park. Impressed, Prince Jeta stopped him before he had finished and used the gold he had received to pay for erecting buildings to lodge the Sangha. Later his father Prasenajit, the powerful King of Kosala, and Anathapindika had other monasteries built. Their main buildings were up to seven storeys high. Subsequently a stupa was built in memory of Anathapindika.



At its height the Jetavana contained many temples, halls where the monks gathered to meditate and listen to the Master's teachings (Gandhakuti, the Hall of Perfumes, being the most important), lodgings which could receive up to five hundred Sangha members, baths, a hospital, pools shaded by great trees and an imposing library with reading rooms. It was an idyllic spot for studying and practising the Dharma.

One of the monasteries, Purvarama, was built by Vishaka, the daughter of a rich banker and one of the Sangha's most generous benefactors. She sold a necklace of precious stones and several other possessions to be able to build the monastery. She brought her father-in-law to the Dharma, and he too became an active benefactor of the Sangha.



Shravasti also became the main place of residence of Mahapajapati, Siddhartha's foster-mother, the founder and matriarch of the women's Sangha. A great monastery was built there to house the Sangha of nuns.

It was at Shravasti that the first statue of the Buddha was carved, in sandalwood, at the request of King Prasenajit, who wanted a reminder of the Buddha's presence even when he was absent. When the Buddha arrived for the first time in the temple built specially to house the statue, it began to stand up in order to come and meet him.

Shakyamuni ordered it to remain seated, and declared that in future it should serve as the model for other images. The statue survived a fire which ravaged the monastery, and still existed when the Chinese pilgrims came to India many centuries later.

One day while he was travelling through the Jalini forest near Shravasti, the Buddha met Angulimala (the Sanskrit means "finger-necklace"), a killer who had already murdered nine hundred and ninety-nine people and was on the point of completing his vow to kill a thousand. The Buddha appeared to him in the guise of his mother, but Angulimala was so obsessed with his sinister plan that he tried to kill him anyway, in vain because his blows could not reach the Buddha. Finally, when he was exhausted, the Buddha showed himself as he really was and taught him the Dharma, explaining the results of karma. Angulimala realised his errors, asked to join the Sangha and completely abandoned violence. Although he still had to suffer enormously owing to his past deeds, he no longer committed the slightest fault and rapidly achieved the state of *arhat*. A stupa was built in his memory.

Near the city lived five hundred men who had been blinded on the King's orders to punish them for the crimes they had committed. When they heard the Buddha's teachings they recovered their sight and prostrated themselves at his feet. Their canes remained on the spot, planted in the ground, and became trees in whose shade members of the Sangha often went to meditate.

Ananda asked the Buddha's permission to plant a shoot from the Bodhi tree at Shravasti, to serve as an altar before which the disciples could place offerings when the Master was not residing in the monastery. Maudgalyayana brought a seed of the Bodhgaya tree, which was planted and produced a tree. The Buddha meditated for an entire day under its leaves to consecrate it. Several centuries later, when the original tree had disappeared, a shoot from the Bodhi tree in Sri Lanka was replanted in place of the Anandabhodi tree.



One day the Buddha found an old monk alone in his cell, ill and lying in his excrements. He washed him himself, fed him and took care of him until he was better. After this event he urged the members of the Sangha to pay greater attention to one another and take care of their brethren when they needed it.



Relics of the Buddha were given to the kingdom of Kosala after his cremation. They were enshrined in a stupa built for that purpose near the Jetavana. There were also three other stupas at Shravasti, housing the relics of the previous Buddhas, Krakucchanda, Kanakamuni and Kashyapa.

The most important event in the Buddha's life concerning Shravasti is his performance of miracles and defeat of his opponents. The most distinguished masters of the six leading schools of philosophy in India at the time came regularly to provoke the Buddha into accepting a public

debate. Finally he agreed and asked that the contest should take place at Shravasti, where King Prasenajit had a large hall built especially for the event. King Bimbisara asked the Buddha what he would do if his opponents performed miracles, since a rule of the Sangha forbade that type of practice. The Buddha replied that he had created this rule for the Sangha, but not for himself. So at the age of 57 he went to Shravasti and took his place facing his critics on one of the seven seats prepared for the occasion.

During the eight days of the debate Shakyamuni performed a great number of miracles. He rose into the air, and his body emitted flames and water which destroyed the hall where the audience had gathered, and then made it reappear in the form of a magnificent palace of crystal. He planted a toothpick in the ground and made it instantly produce a huge tree filled with deliciously perfumed flowers and all sorts of fruits. His body multiplied endlessly, giving the impression that all of space was filled with Buddhas of all sizes teaching the Dharma. His opponents were totally overcome and subjugated, and all their disciples left them to join the Sangha. A temple was built on the spot to commemorate this event.

While the Buddha was still alive, King Prasenajit's son Virudhaka took power, launched a conflict with the Shakyan kingdom and massacred all its inhabitants. It is said that Virudhaka, Devadatta who had tried personally to kill the Buddha at Shravasti, and Chinchimana, a nun who untruthfully accused the Master of having behaved improperly with her, were all three born in the hell realms due to the serious nature of their negative acts.



VAISHALI



Five years after attaining Enlightenment the Buddha went to Vaishali, the capital of the Lichchavis and the most important city of the Vrijian confederation, the most ancient republic known to history. Even before Siddhartha's birth the Lichchavi, Malla and Videha clans had formed a confederation to protect themselves from their powerful neighbours, the kingdoms of Kosala to the west, ruled by King Prasenajit, and Magadha to the south, ruled by King Bimbisara and subsequently his son Ajatashatru. The city of Vaishali was very beautiful, and its inhabitants were famous and respected throughout India for

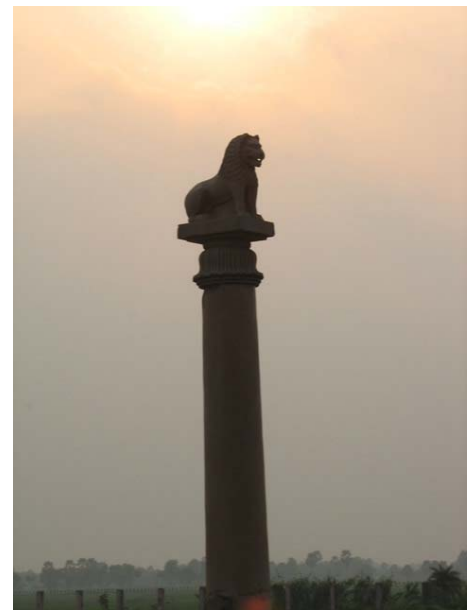
their love of freedom, their calm and their prosperity.

The Lichchavis' chiefs welcomed the Buddha with a grand procession of elephants. When he set foot on the ground, thunder rolled and a shower of rain put an end to an epidemic of plague which had ravaged the country after a drought lasting several months. The Buddha won great respect among the people. He taught the *Ratna-sutra* and eighty-four thousand people took refuge in the Three Jewels.

The Buddha returned many times to Vaishali. In the *Bodhisattvacarya-nirdesha-sutra* the city is described as a wonderful place whose beauty made one think of an earthly paradise. Its inhabitants were cultivated and prosperous. The Buddha observed that there was not a similar city anywhere, not even in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three Gods (of Hinduism).

During one of his visits a young monkey grabbed his alms bowl and climbed up a tree to collect honey from a hive and offer it to the Buddha. Thrilled to have been able to make this offering, the monkey jumped from branch to branch until he slipped, fell and was killed. He was immediately reborn in a divine realm.

Many teachings were given at Vaishali, including the *Bhadrakalpika-sutra* (the Fortunate Aeon Sutra), a text which sustains the efforts of all those who seek enlightened knowledge, and presents the thousand Buddhas who will appear during the present kalpa, thus inspiring confidence in the natural continuity of the Dharma. The text emphasises the perfections, culminating with the presentation of *Prajnaparamita*. To hear and recite the *Bhadrakalpika-sutra* is to invoke the spiritual influence of all the Buddhas whose coming it announces. It is the first sutra presented in the Tibetan Buddhist canon, preceding the *Lalitavistara-sutra*, the Mahayana version of the Buddha's life.



Vimalakirti, a layman whose understanding of the Dharma astonished even Mahakashyapa and who is said to have given teachings to the bodhisattva Manjushri, also lived at Vaishali. One day the famous courtesan Amrapali, whose beauty had no rivals, invited the Buddha to come to her home with the Sangha for a meal. He accepted joyfully. On the way back she met the Lichchavi

chiefs, who offered to exchange the honour the Buddha was to pay her for a hundred thousand gold pieces. She refused and a little later welcomed the Buddha to her home. Amrapali soon joined the Sangha, and realising the transitory nature of phenomena, especially beauty, swiftly purified her mind and became one of the Master's best disciples.

The Buddha gave his last teaching in Amrapali's mango grove, as told in the *Mahaparinirvana-sutra*, and announced to his disciples that he would soon leave this world, before setting out for Kushinagar. During a conversation he told Ananda that he could prolong his life (implying that he should be asked to do so), but Ananda did not understand the allusion and did not make the

request. After the Parinirvana and the cremation the Lichchavis obtained some of the Master's relics, which they enshrined in a stupa. When Ananda too entered into Parinirvana, the Lichchavis also obtained half of his ashes.



The first ordination of a nun took place at Vaishali. Mahapajapati, the Buddha's foster-mother, had often begged him to accept women in the Sangha, but he refused, saying that the society of that time was not ready to accept such a thing. One day Mahapajapati and five hundred other women, including Siddhartha's former wife Yasodhara, put on monastic robes and went on foot from

Kapilavastu to Vaishali, to show they were able to do exactly as monks did. Shakyamuni agreed to ordain them, and Mahapajapati became the head of the new Sangha.

The Second Buddhist Council was held at Vaishali about a hundred and ten years after the Buddha's Parinirvana. Seven hundred *arhats* coming from Magadha and Mathura met to examine some practices by the monks of Vaishali about which many Sangha members had complained, considering that they no longer corresponded to the original tradition. It was decided by general agreement to abolish some practices but there was disagreement over others, and this later led to a separation between two ways of thought, that of the Sthaviras who adhered to a more orthodox doctrine, and that of the Mahasamghikas who favoured a more progressive approach.

Many stupas were built in the region of Vaishali to commemorate the important events which had taken place there.

SANKASYA



Sankasya is the farthest west of the major Buddhist pilgrimage sites. It is nevertheless one of the four 'unchanging' sites, the others being Bodhgaya, where all Buddhas attain unsurpassable Enlightenment, Sarnath, where they set the Wheel of the Dharma in motion, and Shravasti, from where their teachings are disseminated and where they subjugate their opponents. Sankasya is the place where all Buddhas return to earth after spending the rainy season retreat in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three to transmit their teachings to their mothers, who have been reborn there.

Queen Mahamaya, the Buddha's mother, died seven days after giving birth to him and was reborn in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. As she had not had the opportunity to hear the Dharma during her time on earth, the Buddha appeared to her there to transmit his teachings to her and ensure that she was established on the path to Enlightenment.

It is said that the Buddha ceased to be invisible seven days before his return from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. Thanks to his 'divine eye' Anuruddha saw that he was preparing to return, and urged Maudgalyayana to go and meet him. The great disciple did so, and told the Buddha that the members of the Sangha urgently desired to see him return to them. The Buddha replied that he would return to earth in seven days. A great assembly covering thirty leagues of ground and consisting of the kings and populations of the eight great nations gathered to meet him. On the twenty-second day of the ninth month of the lunar calendar, three staircases appeared, descending from Mount Meru; the central one was made of jewels, the one on the right of gold and the one on the left of silver. The Buddha walked down the central staircase, accompanied at his right and left respectively by Brahma and Indra, both surrounded by a multitude of other celestial beings. Shariputra was the first to welcome the Buddha, who gave a teaching on the occasion of his return.

Three flights of stairs are said to have vanished into the ground, while seven others remained visible. When Emperor Ashoka visited the site two centuries later, he had excavations carried out around the still visible part of the staircase to see how far it went down. He reached ground-water level but could not find the base of the structure. This greatly inspired his faith, and he had a temple built to protect the part of the construction which still existed, and a statue of the standing Buddha erected at the top of the central flight of stairs. Behind the temple he installed a great pillar, its capital adorned with an elephant, which can still be seen today.



As it was associated with the miracles performed by the Buddha and considered to be a direct link with the celestial realms, Sankasya became an important and very popular place of pilgrimage. The Chinese pilgrim Fa-hien who stayed there in the fifth century described several temples and stupas, representing in particular the miraculous events which had taken place at Shravasti. A thousand monks of the Hinayana and Mahayana traditions lived there in a monastery called the



Dragon Vihara, whose name probably refers to the Naga Kharewar (a water spirit) said to live in the pool near the staircase. The Naga was considered as a protector of the region, and the rains and abundant harvests which ensured the community's prosperity were attributed to him. The country was rich and it was pleasant to live there; its inhabitants were particularly hospitable.

When the pilgrim Hsüan-tsang visited Sankasya two centuries later the community was still flourishing, and several thousand monks were still practising there. A magnificent temple covered what remained of the three flights of stairs; Hsüan-tsang recounts that with time the original staircase had sunk into the ground, and the local authorities had had a new structure ten metres high built above it, decorated and adorned with many precious stones. He saw Ashoka's pillar with its capital, and also a stupa

marking the spot where the Buddha had bathed on his return from the Heaven of the Thirty-Three. Other stupas commemorated the visits to the site of previous Buddhas, and there was a monastery at the precise point where the Buddha had entered into *samadhi* to travel to the celestial realms. The foundations of a wall of some sixty metres were still visible, testifying to the place where the Buddha had walked.

Hsüan-tsang also tells the story of the nun Utpalavarna, of whom it was said that she was changed into a universal monarch so that she could be the first to look on the Buddha when he reappeared on earth.

There are no more recent accounts of the site than those dating from the seventh century. The site of Sankasya was only rediscovered in 1862 by a British army engineer and archaeologist, Alexander Cunningham. The pool still existed and the villagers still made offerings to the Naga Kharewar on the days commemorating important events in the Buddhist calendar, or when the rains were late. Sloping ground indicated the places where stupas and monuments had formerly stood, but all the bricks of the structures had disappeared.



At present there is not much to see at Sankasya, as the buried remains of the structures of the past have still to be brought to light. Only Ashoka's pillar and the ruins of the staircase temple remain. But despite its outlying situation Sankasya remains an important reminder to Buddhist monastics and laypeople of the Buddha's deeds, in particular his return to this world after fulfilling his duty to his mother.

NALANDA



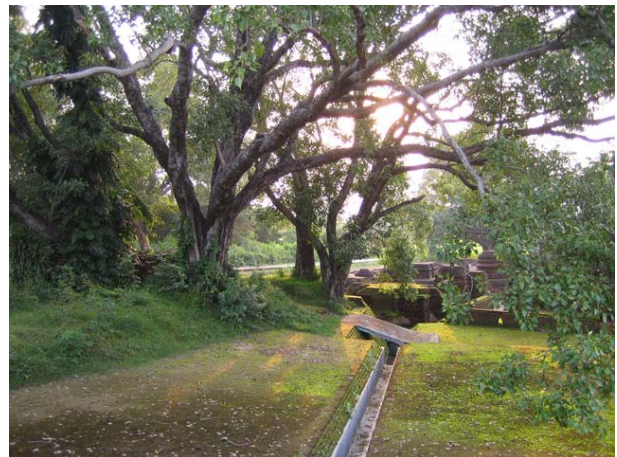
In the Buddha's time Nalanda was a little Brahmin village a dozen kilometres north of Rajgir, on the route leading to the great cities on the banks of the Ganges and its tributaries, Vaishali, Shravasti, etc. The place was consecrated several times by the Buddha's presence, but became famous above all in succeeding centuries as the largest and most famous Buddhist university which has ever existed. It played a central role in the development and maintenance of the Buddhist tradition in India.

Nalanda's name is interpreted in various ways. It means 'inexhaustible gift' and could be an epithet of the Buddha. The name could also refer to the generosity of the inhabitants. It is perhaps linked to a previous life of the Buddha, when he ruled in that area with the name of King Nalanda. Finally, it possibly derives from the name of a variety of lotus which covered nearby ponds.

The *Mahaparinirvana-sutra* refers to the many times that the Buddha visited Nalanda during his travels, stopping often in the Pavarika mango grove to give teachings. During one of those visits he met Mahakasyapa, who at once recognised him as the master he had been seeking.

The *Brahmajala-sutra* describes how the Buddha's teachings flowed naturally from the situations he met while he was travelling with the Sangha. One day, as a group of monks were walking from Rajgir to Nalanda with the Buddha, a lively discussion began between the Brahmin Suppiya and his pupil Brahmadata, who was walking just behind him. In the evening the group met in the mango grove, and the discussion between the two disciples continued until late in the night. Next day the Buddha explained to all his disciples the dangers which result from falling into the extremes of nihilism and eternalism. Anyone who falls into those extremes becomes like Suppiya and his disciple, unable to find any possible common ground and no longer knowing any peace, with the struggle continuing uninterruptedly to the point of exhaustion.

The mango grove had been offered to the Sangha by a group of five hundred merchants. The Buddha settled there and taught the Dharma for three months, after which a great stupa was built to enshrine his nail parings and some locks of his hair. He subsequently returned there often during his travels, and several stupas were built to commemorate the various teachings he gave there. It is said that a great tree grew on the spot where the Buddha had planted a toothpick in the ground.



One day a foreign monk came to prostrate himself before the Buddha, praying to be reborn as a universal monarch. Saddened, Shakyamuni told his disciples that the monk possessed such merits that he could have attained Enlightenment in a very short time if that had been his wish, but because of the wish he had uttered he would now have to be reborn as a universal monarch as many times as there were atoms on the surface of the ground covered by his prostrated body.

Stupas were built at the places where the Buddha was in the habit of sitting to teach, and the spot where he had met King Bimbisara for the first time.

Ajatashatru, the son and successor of Bimbisara, transferred the capital of Magadha from Rajgir to Pataliputra and the Brahmins of Nalanda followed him, so that the community found itself without means and little by little its activity died out. Ashoka was the first to re-establish the place



by having a temple built there which later became Shariputra's Great Stupa. He also built monuments at Kalapinaka and Killika, the villages where Shariputra and Maudgalyayana were born and had entered Nirvana.

Four hundred years after the Buddha's Parinirvana, when five hundred Mahayana masters decided to build a centre for the study and propagation of the Mahayana, they agreed on the choice of Nalanda as the most appropriate place. New temples were built for the five hundred Mahayana masters around the one built

by Ashoka. The famous historian Taranatha mentions Avitarka as one of Nalanda's first masters, and Rahulabhadra, also known by the name of Siddha Saraha, as having studied with him.

The five hundred masters who founded Nalanda brought with them the Mahayana sutras, which had been revealed not long before. Later other sutras appeared to enlarge the body of teachings studied and practised in that place, which rapidly became the principal storehouse of Mahayana texts. Nalanda was the source of a very advanced tradition of studies, practice and learning. From its foundation the monastery produced a lineage of exceptional masters, who established there a tradition whose standards of excellence have never been equalled.

The most famous master of Nalanda is Nagarjuna, who was a disciple of Saraha. Astrologers had predicted to Nagarjuna's parents that he would live no more than seven years. Unable to bear the idea of seeing their child die, his parents sent him far away from the family home, under the guardianship of a servant. One day Nagarjuna went to the door of the monastery and met Saraha there. Following his instructions to the letter, Nagarjuna succeeded in overcoming the obstacles to living longer than the fatal age of seven. He became a monk at Nalanda.



Several centuries before kings became the patrons of the monastery, Nagarjuna worked unceasingly to establish the educational standards which would apply to future generations of teachers and students. After mastering Saraha's teachings he thoroughly penetrated the meaning of the Mahayana sutras, and developed a skilful dialectic for transmitting the profound view of *Madhyamika*, the Middle Way which avoids the extremes of nihilism and eternalism. Going against all the false doctrines on the nature of reality which circulated in his time, he pushed intellectual reasoning to the limits beyond which the immediate experience of ultimate reality, beyond concepts, is to be found.

When Aryadeva arrived at Nalanda he was already a scholar of high calibre, and he became Nagarjuna's main disciple. He is famous for having overcome in debate the formidable *tirthika*

Durdhasakala, also called Ashvagoshā, whose poems after his conversion to Buddhism are famous for their depth and beauty.

Asanga, another important master, famous for having received the texts known by the name of the Five Treasures from the bodhisattva Maitreya, spent the last twelve years of his life at Nalanda. After his death his half-brother Vasubandhu, author of the *Abhidharmakośha* and its commentaries on the most subtle of the Abhidharma works, became abbot of the monastery. Vasubandhu was



one of the most remarkable teachers in the history of Nalanda. His main disciples were the great logician Dignaga, the philosopher Shtiramati, the *Vinaya* master Gunabhadra, and Vimuktasena, an exceptional commentator on the *Prajnaparamita*.

At the beginning of the fifth century Nalanda had become a centre for the study and practice of the transmission lineages of Nagarjuna (*Madhyamika*) and Asanga (*Cittamatra*). Two masters in Nagarjuna's lineage, Buddhapalita and Bhavaviveka, then formed two currents of thought deriving from Nagarjuna's tradition, the

Svatantrikas and the Prasangikas. For their part, Asanga's successors Vasubandhu and Shtiramati integrated the philosophical views of the Abhidharma teachings with the meditation practices of another school, the Yogachara.

After spending years at Nalanda, all these great masters returned to their homelands and travelled across the country to teach the Dharma. Nagarjuna and Aryadeva were living examples of the Mahayana masters' ideal of compassion. They went wherever they were invited and shared their knowledge with all those they met. Asanga and Vasubandhu, originally from Gandhara in north-west India, travelled and taught throughout the country. Buddhapalita and Bhavaviveka, who came from the south, gave their talents and knowledge to disciples in the south of the peninsula. Through their accomplishments and activities, these exceptional beings established the Mahayana tradition and won respect for it from one end of the country to the other.

Nalanda's fame attracted scholars, Buddhists and non-Buddhists, from all parts of the country. Debates over ideas took place frequently, and many great pandits trained at Nalanda became famous by winning battles of oratory thanks to their intellectual keenness and the subtlety of their arguments. These epistemological and dialectical debates on sometimes very difficult points of doctrine gave birth to a discipline of logic and reasoning which Dignaga, a great logician, codified in a text called the *Pramanasamuccaya*. During a debate Dignaga three times challenged the arguments of his *tirthika* opponents, most of whom subsequently decided to follow the Buddhist path.



Tales of the remarkable performances of these masters gradually began to awaken the curiosity of the nobility, who started to take an interest in them. Finally it was the kings of the Gupta dynasty, the first of whom was Kumaragupta in the fifth century, who became the main patrons of the monastery and enlarged it, with each generation constructing additional buildings to house more and more monks.

A propitious site was chosen for building the first great monastery, but it is said that during the excavations the workers injured a Naga who lived there. A famous wise man from the region foretold that the monastery would know times of glory and be a model for the transmission of the Dharma during the next thousand years. But because the Naga had been injured, the place would finally fall prey to fire and persecutions and much blood would flow. This came to pass during the invasions in the twelfth century.



The accounts of the Chinese pilgrims who stayed and studied there show that in many ways Nalanda resembled a modern university. A very strict entry examination controlled by the "Gatekeepers" restricted access to the colleges, and many candidates were not admitted. Studying or having studied at Nalanda conferred great prestige. However, no degrees were awarded at the end of studies, and the study cycles did not last for fixed periods.

The monks' days were divided into periods of studies, rituals and practices. Time was measured by a water clock. There were schools where students were taught by a master, and others where they learned through debates. Less able students had to bow humbly, while those with evident talents were honoured. Hence the abbots of Nalanda were generally the most learned people of their time.

In about the seventh century at Nalanda, Chandrakirti and Kamalabudhi, who held the lineage of Buddhapalita, developed to perfection the skilful dialectical tool of the "necessary consequence" which no affirmation concerning the reality of a phenomenon can resist. They established the *Madhyamika-Prasangika* tradition, while the holders of the lineage of Bhavaviveka developed the *Madhyamika Svatantrika* approach.

At the beginning of the seventh century, in the most memorable debate in the history of Nalanda, Chandrakirti, who was then abbot of the monastery, confronted the learned layman Chandragomin. Chandrakirti defended the *Madhyamika* point of view of Nagarjuna and Buddhapalita, and Chandragomin defended Asanga's view. The debate went on for seven years and attracted a large audience from all parts. The two masters and their points of view were so perfect that neither could succeed in refuting his opponent's arguments. This debate is a classic in the annals of the history of Buddhism.



Dharmapala, formerly head of the monastery of Bodhgaya, became abbot of Nalanda after Chandrakirti. He increased the monastery's reputation still further by refuting the views of two schools, the *Samkhya* and the *Vaishesika*. He ordained Dharmakirti, a famous logician in the lineage of Dignaga. Jayadeva succeeded Dharmapala soon afterwards. He was the master of the Mahasiddha Virupa and of Shantideva, author of the famous *Bodhicharyavatara* (*The Path to Enlightenment*).

By that time Nalanda had become a centre of studies not only for Indian monks, but for students coming from faraway countries: Kashmir, central Asia, China, Korea, Java, Sumatra and Burma.

Most of the surviving accounts on Nalanda derive from the writings of these pilgrims from distant countries, which were preserved in their country after Buddhism had disappeared from its birthplace.



In the seventh century some fifty Chinese students were living at Nalanda. The six colleges counted between three and five thousand students, divided between eight large multi-storey monasteries. Nalanda's libraries were very famous. Unfortunately a fire destroyed many texts, which were definitively lost.

The Palas ruled Bihar and Bengal from the eighth to the tenth century, and a more limited region in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. The Pala kings were Buddhists and supported the Sangha by building monasteries, employing craftsmen to

beautify them and supplying the monks' needs in food and study materials. Nalanda attained the peak of its splendour in the eighth and ninth centuries.

In the eighth century Shantarakshita was abbot of the monastery. He was invited by King Trisong Detsen to go to Tibet and establish the Dharma there. Of his two main disciples, Haribhadra continued his lineage in India, and Kamalashila followed him to Tibet, where he subsequently succeeded him and continued his work.

During the Pala dynasty the Vajrayana teachings became pre-eminent and were practised widely. In particular, Naropa and Abhayakaragupta, two highly respected tantric masters, became abbots of the monasteries of Nalanda, Mahabodhi and Vikramashila in the eleventh century. The reputations of these great monasteries and that of Odantapuri, another famous monastery in the region, were known throughout Asia, and emissaries loaded with offerings came from distant countries to pay homage to the monks who lived in them.

In the twelfth century the decline of Buddhism in India began. It was completed when the Turkish armies of Bhakhtyar Khalji, coming from central Asia, looted and destroyed all the great monasteries.

The Two Supreme

Two Indian masters and scholars of pre-eminent importance:

- **Asanga**, founder of the Yogachara school.
- **Nagarjuna**, founder of the Madhyamika school.

The Six Jewels of Learning

These masters are slightly less important because they are not always recognised in the same way by the different schools, which is why the list is sometimes slightly different too.

- **Aryadeva**, Nagarjuna's main disciple, ensured the maintenance of the ideas of the Madhyamika school.
- **Dharmakirti**, author of Seven Treatises, a famous logician and disciple of Ishvarasena, who was himself Dignaga's disciple, renowned for having overcome the famous Hindu master Shankara in a debate.

- **Dignaga**, a famous logician.
- **Vasubandhu**, author of the Abhidharmakosha.
- **Gunaprabha**, Vasubandhu's main disciple, famous for his work The Vinayasutra.
- **Shakyaprabha**, an important commentator on the Vinaya.

The Seventeen Great Pandits

There are sometimes references to the Seventeen Great Pandits, a grouping consisting of the Two Supreme, the Six Jewels of Learning and the nine following masters listed below.

- **Atisha**, holder of the teachings on training the mind (lojong).
- **Bhavaviveka** was among the first to expound the view of the Svatantrika Madhyamika school.
- **Buddhapalita** was among the first to expound the view of the Prasangika Madhyamika school.
- **Chandrakirti**, considered as the greatest defender of the Prasangika Madhyamika view.
- **Haribhadra** wrote a commentary on Asanga's Ornament of Clear Realisation.
- **Kamalashila**, an author who lived in the eighth century and wrote important texts on meditation.
- **Shantarakshita**, abbot of Nalanda, founder of the Yogachara-Madhyamika school, who also helped Padmasambhava to establish Buddhism in Tibet.
- **Shantideva**, eighth century Indian author who wrote the Bodhicaryavatara.
- **Vimuktisena** wrote a commentary on Asanga's Ornament of Clear Realisation.

KAPILAVASTU



After his birth in the family of King Suddhodana and Queen Mahamaya, Siddhartha grew up in the palace, surrounded by all the pleasures and enjoying all the privileges available to his rank. But Siddhartha, whose name means "he who accomplishes his intentions", finally decided to leave his native land and set off in search of the teachings which would enable him to put an end to the sufferings of existence. Having achieved his goal at the foot of the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya and gathered around him the beginnings of a community, he returned to his birthplace,

accompanied by his disciples.

When the Buddha drew near to the ramparts of the city of Kapilavastu, his father and his fellow citizens came to meet him. A description of this meeting is preserved in a sutra entitled "The reunion of father and son", which explains in great detail the consequences of past actions. The Buddha stayed for a while with his disciples in the Nigrodha Park outside the city and taught the Dharma there to the Shakyas. Five hundred members of his clan became his disciples and joined the Sangha, including his cousin Ananda and his son Rahula, while his father and all his subjects became lay disciples.



When his father's life was drawing to a close, the Buddha returned to Kapilavastu at his request and gave him a teaching on what happens after death. After his father's death the Buddha's aunt Prajapati and his former wife Yasodhara became the first nuns, accompanied by a group of five hundred other women. The Shakyas followed the Buddha's precepts on non-violence with such diligence that on the day when Virudhaka, the vengeful King of Kosala, attacked Kapilavastu, they offered no resistance, and as a result the city was completely destroyed and almost all its inhabitants exterminated.

Although Kapilavastu occupies an important place in the accounts of the Buddha's life, the city never seems to have been a major pilgrimage site. Nevertheless, in the third century before our era, Ashoka included it in his own pilgrimage, and had many monuments built in the region to mark the places where important events had taken place.



According to the accounts written by the Chinese pilgrims Fa-hien in the fifth century and Hsüan-tsang in the seventh century, it seems that these places of pilgrimage were frequented more by foreign visitors than by Indian monks. They both describe deserted sites, their surroundings occupied only by some lay families and with wild elephants and lions living there. However, the ruins of the palace of King Suddhodana were still visible. Fa-hien even describes paintings

representing the Buddha which decorated the ruined walls. He also saw the Nigrodha tree at whose foot Prajapati had offered the Buddha a robe, the field where the Bodhisattva had watched farmers at work and the place where Virudhaka had the Shakyas' children massacred.

Fa-hien describes a virtual city consisting of stupas, each commemorating an event related to the Buddha's life: the spot where the wise Asita stood when he observed the extraordinary marks on the prince's body, the places where Siddhartha was confronted with sickness, old age and death, and the site of the eastern gate of the city through which Siddhartha left the palace. A stupa marked the spot where an arrow shot by Siddhartha in a sporting competition in which he had shown his superiority over all the other competitors had landed. A jet of water had then appeared where the arrow had fallen, and the water was famous for its healing properties. Ashoka had had a great stupa built at the place where King Suddhodana had come to meet the Buddha when he returned to the city.



In the seventh century Hsüan-tsang found a dozen cities in ruins near Kapilavastu, all of which had visibly been long abandoned. He could not estimate the precise extent of the city, only a few of whose surrounding ramparts remained. Only the remains of the palace were still clearly visible. He found many ruined monasteries in the region, with just one still active and occupied by some thirty monks.

Hsüan-tsang describes the same stupas as Fa-hien, and also several monasteries, some of which still contained representations of Siddhartha, his wife

and his son Rahula. He also mentions an area north of the town where he saw hundreds of small stupas commemorating the extermination of the Shakyas by Virudhaka. Several sites nearby marked the birthplaces of past Buddhas, notably Krakucchanda and Kanakamuni, which could be identified through the presence of pillars built by Ashoka.

The site of Kapilavastu is of crucial importance, because its situation would make it possible to determine where the major events concerning the birth and youth of the Buddha took place. However, as the sites had been abandoned since the seventh century, no tangible trace of the presence of monuments remained at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the search to rediscover the ancient Buddhist sites began.

In 1896 the discovery of an Ashoka pillar made it possible to identify Lumbini. But there are so many ruins in the region surrounding it that it is difficult to identify them with certainty, and this includes Kapilavastu. There are several theories





today concerning its possible site, in a region extending on both sides of the Indian-Nepali border. Since 1901 it has been presumed that the ruins of fortifications found near the village of Tilaurakot in Nepal formed part of it. Excavations have brought to light ancient temples and several stupas, two of which were dedicated to King Suddhodana and Queen Mahamaya. However, more thorough research is still needed to establish that Tilaurakot is indeed the site of ancient Kapilavastu.

Ten kilometres from Lumbini and some twenty kilometres from Tilaurakot, in Uttar Pradesh in India, is another site, Piprahwa, discovered in 1898. There too the ruins of monasteries and many stupas have been found, and one stupa in particular is considered to have served to contain a portion of the Buddha's ashes received by the Shakyas after his cremation. A coffer containing very ancient objects and inscriptions was found in the foundations of that stupa; they seem to indicate that the site was in fact Kapilavastu.

Thus there is still some doubt today as to the exact localisation of Kapilavastu, but perhaps future researches will resolve it.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

In English

Walking with the Buddha (Buddhist pilgrimages in India)
Eicher Guide 1999 (New Delhi) - ISBN 81-900601-6-3

Holy Places of the Buddha (Crystal Mirror Series N° 9)
Dharma Publishing 1994 - ISBN 0-89800-244-3

Asvaghosha's Buddhacarita or Acts of the Buddha
A translation by E.H. Johnston
Motilal Banarsidass (New Delhi) last print 1998 - ISBN 81-208-1029-5 (4)

Old Path White Clouds by Thich Nhat Hanh
Parallax Press 1991 - ISBN 0-938077-40-6

The Long Discourses of the Buddha
A translation of the Digha Nikaya by Maurice Walshe
Wisdom Publications 1995 - ISBN 0-86171-103-3

The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha
A translation of the Majjhima Nikaya by Bhikkhu Nanamili & Bhikkhu Bodhi Wisdom
Publications 1995 - ISBN 0-86171-072-X

The Connected Discourses of the Buddha
A translation of the Samyutta Nikaya by Bhikkhu Bodhi - Wisdom Publications 2000
ISBN 0-86171-331-1

Buddha and the Sahibs : The Men Who Discovered India's Lost Religion
Charles ALLEN - Published by WISDOM BOOKS in 2003
ISBN 13 : 9780719554285

On Internet

The Eight Places of Buddhist Pilgrimage by *Jeremy Russell*
<http://www.lamayeshe.com/otherteachers/more/pilgrimage/index.shtml>

In French

Sur les traces de Siddharta de Thich Nhat Hanh
Pocket 1991 - ISBN 2-266-07539-X

Voyage dans l'Inde du Bouddha (Bodhgay, Rajgir) de Gérard et Carisse Busquet
Claire Lumière 2001 - ISBN 2-905998-58-X

Le Lalitavistara - L'histoire traditionnelle de la vie du Bouddha Cakyamuni
Traduit du sanscrit par P.E. Foucaux
Les Deux Océans 1988 - ISBN ?

Le Soleil de la Confiance (la vie du Bouddha) de Taranatha
Padmakara 2003 - ISBN 2-906949-28-0