

Reflections



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Three disciplines for progress
on the Buddhist path are
study, reflection and meditation.

The Pilgrimage's Itinerary

by Chris Higgins

Introduction

In one of his last utterances before his Mahaparinirvana, the Buddha said to Ananda, his favorite attendant:

There are these four places, Ananda, which the believing man should visit with feeling of reverence and awe.

Which are the four?

“The place, Ananda, at which the believing man can say, Here the Tathagata was born--Lumbini

The place, Ananda, at which the believing man can say, Here the Tathagata attained to the supreme and perfect insight—Bodhgaya

The place, Ananda, at which the believing man can say, Here was the kingdom of righteousness set on foot by the Tathagata--Sarnath

The place, Ananda, at which the believing man can say, Here the Tathagata passed finally away in that utter passing away which leaves nothing whatever to remain behind”--Kushinagar

The four places mentioned by Gautama Buddha: Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath and Kushinagar, constitute the Dharma Yatra. (Source—www.IncredibleIndia.org)

Our March 2010 pilgrimage In the Footsteps of the Buddha, conducted by Drikung Kagyu monks, Lama Gursam and Lama Jamdor included all four of these sites!!

Before the Trip

Lama Gursam first visited the Buddhist Sangha of Bucks County in 2008, where he gave dharma talks and conducted a retreat. *A brief biography of Lama Gursam*. He returned to the BSBC in June 2009. In addition to providing Dharma talks, Lama and his wife, Amber, provided information about the 2010 pilgrimage, “In the Footsteps of the Buddha”. Long-time members of BSBC, Jim Hild, Dan Lee, Edna Telep and Chris Higgins (hereinafter the BSBC4) expressed interest and eventually determined to attend the pilgrimage. The BSBC4 met a number of times before trip departure to plan the trip, determined which items could be packed by 1 and shared with the group, and discuss the trip. Spirits ran high as the travelers shared food, plans and anxieties while preparing!

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Editor's Comments:

The four of us - Edna, Jim, Chris and I - went on a pilgrimage to sacred Buddhist sights in India and Nepal. This issue is dedicated to sharing our experiences. The trip was lead by Lama Gursam and his wife Amber. Lama Jamdor also accompanied us. Not all the pictures and other things we would like to share can be contained in this Spring issue of REFLECTIONS. This actually only covers about half of the pilgrimage. Additional information and pictures will appear in the Summer issue in July. Enjoy! And give us your feed back. – Dan –

Sights and Sounds of India: The View from the Bus

by Edna Telep

I should have been prepared. The itinerary clearly stated that we'd be moving from one city to another, usually by coach and occasionally by train. However, I preferred to dwell on the places we'd be seeing rather than the means of getting to them. Hence, the frequent and seemingly interminably long bus rides, crowded railway stations and trains, and the often pre-dawn and post-dusk hours we spent getting to our destinations came as an unpleasant surprise to me.



Nevertheless, in retrospect, I have come to see my hours spent being transported from one important Buddhist site to another as a plus rather than a minus. They provided many indelible impressions, at very close range, of everyday life in this vast,

February 28, 2010

The BSBC4 (Chris, Jim, Edna and Dan) caught the 3:31pm NJ Transit train at the Hamilton Station to the Newark Airport, allowing plenty of time for the 8:45pm non-stop Continental Airlines flight to Delhi.

Jim Hild had volunteered to meet and greet other pilgrimage travelers and give each a name button, so that we quickly became acquainted with our pilgrimage group which then totaled 15, departing from Newark on the same flight. Most were members of local Sanghas and had come to know Lama Gursam through his US travels and dharma talks.

March 1–Day 1 of the pilgrimage–Delhi

Delhi time is 9 ½ hours later than Eastern Day Light Savings (who knew about the half hour?), so after a 14 hour night flight from a US time perspective, we arrived in Delhi at 11 at night! The group collected luggage and met Lama Gursam, Lama Jamdor and Amber, just as promised at the “Flavors Café” to the left of the one and only exit from the main gate after baggage claim in Delhi International terminal. We also met Summer, who was arriving from California, so we were then 16 pilgrims and 3 guides.

We exchanged a small amount of currency in the airport at an exchange rate of 40 rupees per dollar.



A modern looking tour bus (without a bathroom) transported us for the hour trip to our hotel in Old Delhi. In India traffic drives on the left, a holdover from British colonialism. The amount of activity at that time of night was surprising, with folks walking in the streets, strange looking yellow and green vehicles that reminded the author of golf carts (later found out to be taxis!) and a variety of other vehicles.

March 2–Day 2 – Old Delhi and a bus ride to Dehradun

We arrived in Old Delhi at about 2am, walking with our overnight bags through grey, winding, dusty alleys to the Tibetan refugee area where we divided into 2 groups—some went to the White House Hotel and some to the Sakya House. BSBC4 were on the third floor of the Sakya House. Our (Edna & Chris) double room had a padlock on the door and the plastic key

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crowded, and distinctly non-western country. Living conditions, transportation, commerce, industry, and recreation were all clearly visible through the windows of our tour bus as we drove through cities, towns and rural areas following the path of the Buddha.



By western standards, most Indians do not live well. Most of the homes we saw, outside of the larger cities, were makeshift in appearance. They seemed to serve as both commercial structures and domiciles, with the business on the ground floor, facing and open to the road, and the dwelling either upstairs or in the rear.

India's population is huge, and there seemed to be throngs of people everywhere. In the areas through which we traveled, the north and northeast, much of everyday life appeared to be lived out in the open. Someone getting a haircut or having a midday meal were things we often observed from the bus. It was not unusual to see open air 'luncheonettes', with two or three large, deep pots on burners out in front of a building, where laborers could pick up

holder when inserted in the holder inside the room turned on the electricity (something we didn't know to do at first). The room was modest, but comfortable and we slept well, until our 7 am wake-up call.



Some of the group had a short walk with Amber before breakfast to explore the Tibetan temple, where mostly older people were circumambulating the temple and turning the prayer wheels which surrounded it.

The whole group met for a buffet breakfast at the Sakya House: porridge, omelet, spinach, coffee/tea for 130 rupee. This was our first taste of Tibetan tea, a spice tea made with milk and butter and Tibetan bread, a bit like a large but denser English muffin.

A porter took our luggage via a tricycle rickshaw to the bus and we prepared for an all day bus ride. There was so much to see: we passed the Delhi Red Fort and Ghandi's cremation site and museum, gardens. We saw many water buffaloes, cows, goats, cars and trucks. It was strange to see women in colorful saris on the back of motorcycles. Traffic was thick, roads were poor and the horn was used liberally by all to communicate. After seeing the challenges, we understood why our bus always had both a bus driver and a separate navigator, who helped watch out for obstacles.



Along the way, we stopped at Cheetel Grand for lunch—a roadside eating place with beautiful gardens (which was unusual, as most of the area along the road we traveled was either fields or modest houses or shops along barren dirt lined streets) and birds in display cages. Most of us had mango lassi and a vegetable thali (platter) and were grateful for the respite from the bus.

7pm—We arrived at the Peace Stupa in Dehradun and were advised to secure our belongings, as the monkeys had been known to make off with loose items. As it turned out, although we heard and saw monkeys, most

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a meal and then eat it while sitting on a nearby rock or fence. Not many of the amenities we westerners are accustomed to exist there.

Particularly in the rural areas, people seemed very poor. Most were very thin, and it was not unusual to see people with obvious disabilities or physical abnormalities.



Clothing was barely adequate and rarely good quality. Western haute couture is unknown in India. Most buildings seemed to be in need of repair and were often scaffolded, using bamboo poles, or braced with timbers. There was a general feeling of disrepair about most of the villages we passed through. Animals wandered, untethered and untended through residential and commercial areas. I don't recall seeing any healthy looking animals; both cows and dogs were mangy and scrawny. Yet, despite the poverty and absence of material comforts, people did not seem unhappy or

were content to stay on their side of a very tall fence which cordoned off the trees. The paths around the magnificent Stupa were lined with spiritual sculptures and writings and worshipers walked around the stupa well into the night. Dinner in a vegetarian restaurant on the grounds of the stupa was ala cart with many ordering a tasty Tibetan vegetable soup. The air in Dehradun, in the foothills of the Himalayas, was crisp and clean.

The 4th person from Boston caught up to us here; her plane had been delayed in the US. Now we were 16 pilgrims, 2 monks and 1 spouse.

March 3–Day 3–Dehradun, the Drikung Kagyu seat in exile.

7am dharma talk and meditation in the Stupa with Lama Gursam--Developing a Good Heart.

8am Breakfast ala cart.

9am departure to visit three of the four institutions that comprise the Drikung Kagyu Institute: Jangchubling Monastery, Samtenling Nunnery, and Songtsen Library. (We did not visit the Kagyu College.)

Next we visited the Samtenling Nunnery and meditated in their temple.

Drikung Kagyu Samtenling Nunnery was founded by His Holiness Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang Rinpoche in 1992. The nunnery is a branch of Drikung Kagyu Institute and it functions as a educational center as well as a center to preserve and promote the traditional Drikung Kagyu nunnery system.

Samtenling Nunnery is located in the northern Part of Dehra Dun, close to Jangchubling Monastery, Songtsen Library, and Kagyu College.

Our last stop was a tour of the Songtsen Library.



Songtsen Library functions as a non-political institution. Besides its aim to collect and preserve books on Tibetan and Himalayan Studies, it is also engaged in research and publication on various subjects related to Tibet and the Himalayas. The institution is named after the 33rd Tibetan King, Songtsen Gampo (617-650). The building's architecture is inspired by Yumbu Lhakar (yum bu lha mkhar), Tibet's oldest known building, popularly known as Tibet's first castle, predating the era of Songsten Gampo.

Songtsen Library has received official recognition as a Research Resource Center for Tibetan and Himalayan Studies by Hemwati Nandan Bahugana

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depressed. Children played, people smiled, and a sense of industry was evident in many places.

In fact, India appears to be in the midst of an economic revival. Construction can be seen everywhere. On the outskirts of Delhi, a huge superhighway project with elevated roadways is underway. Even in the more rural areas there is evidence of building activity. New homes and businesses are rising, and some existing ones are being renovated or repaired. Bricks are commonly used for building, and tall kilns dot the landscape every few miles, along with piles of new bricks and dirt. We were told that much of the new construction has been financed by Tata, India's largest automotive manufacturer, while the Indian government itself has done very little to develop or improve infrastructure. We met a rug dealer on one of our train rides who told us that although his own business in the United States, where he sells his carpets, has fallen off sharply, India's economy is booming.



Gharwal University in Srinagar, Uttarakhand.

The Library is located on a beautiful and tranquil piece of land. The stillness of the place is very conducive to study, and there is excellent modern accommodation for students, visiting scholars, researchers, and guests.



In October 1985, His Holiness Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang, the supreme head of the Drikung Kagyu Order of Tibetan Buddhism, founded the non-profit organization Drikung Kagyu Institute (DKI) in Dehra Dun, India.

The Kagyu (bka' brgyud) lineage is sometimes referred to as the "lineage of oral-instructions". The "Ka" (bka') of Kagyu refers to the authoritative instructions, precepts or words (Skt. vacana) of the Buddha while "gyu" (brgyud) is the uninterrupted lineage of masters and students. The founder of the Kagyu lineage was the Mahasiddha Tilopa (988-1069), who lived in Northern India. He is considered to have received a direct transmission from the primordial Buddha Vajradhara. In this context the Kagyu lineage has originated from the very essence of reality itself and thus transcends all space and time. Viewed from another level of understanding he also had human teachers, from whom he received four special transmissions, The Four Oral Instructions (bka' babs bzhi) for which he became the lineage holder. Some etymologies of the name "Kagyu" consider it as a abbreviation of Lineage of Four Oral Instructions (bka' babs bzhi brgyud pa). When Tilopa's transmission is linked directly to Vajradhara, it is called the "direct transmission" but when it is traced to his human teachers, it is referred to as the "indirect transmission." (Source—www.drikung-kagyu.org)

We returned to the Stupa for a 3pm buffet lunch.

Some of us did a walking tour with Lama Jamdor, including the home and crypt of a founding Rinpoche and the Standing Buddha.

5 to 7pm meditation and Lama Gursam dharma talk –The 37 Practices of Bodhisattva.

March 4–Day 4 –Leaving Dehradun, returning to Delhi train station

Wake up call for 3am bus departure from Dehradun. Some of us were unwell with intestinal symptoms and were concerned about the upcoming long bus ride, but were reassured that roadside stopping would be possible.

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Aside from the Buddhist shrines we visited, perhaps my most vivid impressions of India were furnished by the roadways themselves. I was very surprised to find most rural roads being shared by an incongruous variety of vehicles.



It was not unusual to see trucks (many), buses (often with as many people sitting on the roof as inside the cabin), taxis (open-aired and closed, and filled to bursting), private cars (relatively few), mopeds and/or motorcycles (often carrying three people), bicycles (again with more than one rider and sundry goods on board; once, in Lumbini, I saw a man carrying two young goats wrapped in cloth slings, one on either side of the center bar of his bike), and cows sharing a road. In addition, all of these vehicles seemed to be self-regulating; it was rare to see a traffic light or a stop sign. Yet I saw only one accident during the two weeks we were there, and that was in Delhi, at night. We did see several disabled trucks,

Men went in one direction; women in the other. By now we had developed a full understanding of the need to always carry a personal supply of toilet paper and hand sanitizer!

We stopped at the Cheetal Grand again for breakfast and arrived at the Delhi train station with time to spare for our 2:30 pm 13 hour trip to Gorakhpur. A warm take-out dinner was purchased for the train trip, as we were cautioned against eating train food.

It was hot in the train station, which was a chaos of travelers with traditional and untraditional baggage, beggars, porters and vendors. Dan had his back pack ably repaired by a 1 armed young man; Jim was surrounded by teenage young men with questionable motives, but the police intervened, and Chris battled intestinal symptoms.

The group had tickets in 3rd class accommodations. (Class 1 through 3 are air conditioned; 4 through 6 are not). Class 3 compartments are set up with 6 berths perpendicular to the walls on one side of an aisle. 2 more berths are across the aisle, but parallel to the walls. Sheets and blankets were provided and many of us shared compartments with local travelers, who had reserved the most desirable bottom berths.

March 5 – Day 5 – Train arrives in Gorakhpur, bus ride to Lumbini, Nepal, the Birthplace of the Buddha



Arrived in Gorakhpur early at about 4am and trekked through the crowded train station, up and down 2 staircases, lots of mosquitoes, met our official tour guide, Tenzin, and boarded a somewhat smaller bus headed for Lumbini. Our roadside pit stop this morning was more private, as we scrambled behind a brick wall.

Before the Nepal border, Tenzin collected our passports and \$25 US from each of us for the Nepalese visa and 50 rupees for a 'bribe'. While our documents were being examined, we walked across the boarder and some had breakfast in a local eatery, but others were more cautious and opted to wait and had only bottled juice or water. Border negotiations took about 1.5 hours and resulted in the need for an additional payment of \$10 US per person.

Arrived at the Monastery hotel at about 10am. Rooms are pleasant, hot shower wonderful, lovely grounds and temple. After a tasty buffet lunch (400 Nepalese rupees), we left at 3pm for the birth site ruins.

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however, with their cargo spilled out on the road. Above the back bumper of all trucks are written the instructions, "Blow Horn" and "Use Dipper at Night"; this is how Indian drivers signal to one another that they wish to pass. One result of this practice is very noisy roadways.



The 'dipper' refers to flashing one's bright lights to signal the same desire at night. While the views out the bus window could sometimes seem grim, they were relieved by the fresh produce carts we often saw lined up along the roadsides in towns and villages. Perhaps it was market day, or maybe they were always there. In any case, there would be several carts in a row facing out toward the road, filled with brightly colored fruits and vegetables arranged in pyramid formation.



We walked about ½ mile from the entrance to the site, passing sign posts for temples and monasteries representing many nationalities, as well as vendor stalls. The birth site ruins are surrounded by trees, strung with prayer flags and sheltering groups in prayer. The site is contained in a stone building with a rectangular wooden scaffold walk leading to the birth site. After viewing the site, we sat along the perimeter with Lama Gursam, chanting most of the prayers in the Bodhisattva Foundation Prayer Book we used for the first time here and throughout the remainder of our trip.

6pm Calm Abiding Meditation dharma talk in Monastery Temple. Emerged to find a dramatic night sky with Orion prominent.

The hotel had a small lobby room with a television and as we passed, we



saw several young (under 10 years old) monks watching the animal channel on TV. The following morning I met Helen, a young woman from the UK, who had been watching TV with the youngsters. As a volunteer, she was teaching the 'baby' monks English. She also explained to me that Nepal time is 15 minutes later than Indian time, perhaps as a show of Nepal's separation from India.

In Lumbini, we were joined by 3 Tibetan women, all of whom live in the US. Tenzin's wife, who lives in Oregon also accompanied us, so now we were 25--20 pilgrims, 2 monks, 1 guide and 2 spouses.

Lumbini grove, the sacred site of Lord Buddha's birth is today a small village in Nepal, 27 kms from Sonauli on the Indo-Nepal border.

Queen Mahamaya's dream. On the full moon night of Vaisakha (April-May), Mahamaya, the chief queen of king Suddhodana of Kapilavastu, had a beautiful dream. In the dream she saw a six-tusked elephant enter her side as she lay sleeping. The king summoned sixty four Brahman astrologers to interpret the dream. They concurred that the queen would give birth to a son who would acquire world renown.

Queen Mahamaya bore the child for ten months and one day expressed a desire to go to her maternal home. The royal entourage camped in the beautiful Lumbini grove, the royal park near Kapilavastu. When the Queen reached out for a branch of a Sal tree the child miraculously came out of her right side.

The heavens filled with light and the devas (Gods), showered flowers on the young Prince Siddhartha who descended from his mother's womb on a lotus pedestal. The prince took seven strides in all the four directions and announced that this would be his last birth. Queen Mahamaya departed to the heavenly abode soon after giving birth.

These 'open-air' markets were similar to the farmers' carts we see on country roads here during the summer. Supermarkets don't appear to have made their way to rural India yet.

In some ways, the lives of rural Indians are typical of those of people in many other countries; people farm and children play games. The difference however, is in the manner in which these things are done. Instead of mechanized farm equipment, all the work of tending the fields seemed to be done by hand. Often we would see small groups



of 3 or 4 people, mostly women, working out in the sun-drenched fields, picking or cutting down some crop. Children, on the other hand, took every opportunity to play cricket. It seemed that whenever a flat, vacant, and bare piece of ground was available, it was quickly adopted by the local children for this game. Sometimes their bats looked store bought, but more often they appeared to be improvised from whatever could be found.

Asita's Prophecy

An old sage, Asita, prophesied that the prince would become a world renouncer if he ever experienced suffering. To ward off this possibility, King Suddhodana ensconced the prince in the royal luxuries of his palace at Kapilavastu, but to no avail. Destiny took its course and Prince Siddhartha renounced his royal heritage and set off on the course to find a solution to end human misery.



The Mayadevi Temple

The Mayadevi temple and the tank nearby are part of the sacred complex. There are two beautiful panels in the temple, the older one in stone and the other in marble. Both panels show Mayadevi holding the Sal tree and the young prince emerging out of her right side. Just outside the temple is a tank whose water glistens in the faint sun, the gentle breeze creating endless ripples. Here Queen Mahamaya had her bath before the delivery and it was also here that prince Siddhartha had his first purificatory bath.

The sacred site of the Buddha's birth is at the southern end of Lumbini grove. Excavations have revealed a series of rooms and a stone slab, which is now believed to mark the exact location at which the Buddha was born.

The Rummendei Pillar

Three hundred years after the Mahaparinirvana, Emperor Ashoka visited Lumbini and erected a pillar there. This pillar, though broken, still remains at the site. It is known as the Rummendei pillar after the earlier name of the place (modern name Rupandhei) in Nepal.

The Chinese traveler, Fa Hien, in the 5th century AD and other travelers and pilgrims were aghast to see that jungles had swallowed the entire place, and nothing existed of the scenic pleasure garden. Excavations beginning in the 19th century have once again drawn attention to this holy place. (Source—www.IncredibleIndia.org)

March 6 – Day 6 – Lumbini and bus ride to Kushinagar

Edna and Chris woke at 3 am, as one mosquito dive bombed our heads. In the night we had turned off the overhead fan. Lesson: the fan acts as a centrifuge to force insects to the perimeter of the room and away from its occupants.

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I am so grateful to have had the opportunity to travel to India. The trip strengthened my faith in Buddhist doctrine through not only the concrete observation of holy sites, but even more so through experiencing the kindness and consideration of Lama Gursam, Lama Jamdor, Amber and Tenzin, who led us. In addition, it opened my eyes and broadened my understanding of a culture quite different from my own and has inspired me to seek out more foreign travel to Asia in the future.



5:30 am wake up call for 6 am outing to the birthplace meditation. Prayed and meditated with Lama Gursam, inside the building across from the birth site. Many other pilgrims were visiting and worshipping—about half of the worshipers were monks, but also there were also many lay people.

After breakfast, another trip to the birthplace site, and lunch, we boarded the bus at about 1:45pm. The border crossing into India at Belahiya was much quicker than into Nepal and we continued toward Gorakhpur (again).

Signs of poverty abounded along the road: dusty poorly paved streets, small shacks, trash, emaciated animals, dung patties drying on walls, and variously shaped dung storage huts, We also saw tiny pastel colored pyramids, that looked like a child's doll house; these were cremation cemeteries.

Arrived at Pathik Niwas, a state run hotel (probably the least favorite place we stayed) at 7:15pm, after a tiring 5 hour bus ride.

March 7–Day 7–Kushinagar and bus trip to Varanasi

5:30 am wake up call in anticipation of our 6:15am pilgrimage to the site of the Buddha's death. We walked over at dawn and arranged a bower of candles on the landing outside the temple building. Then we went into the building as a group and were awed by the 6 meter long reclining Buddha, which took up most of the inside of the building, leaving only enough perimeter for a single ring of sitters and an aisle for walking. When it was our turn, we unfurled a golden cloth and draped it over the Buddha statue amid chanting. Other groups on pilgrimage made similar offerings and the experience was profoundly spiritual. Individuals were rubbing gold foil onto the exposed face and feet of the statue. As a result, pilgrims who touched the statue came away with gold dust, for example on their foreheads.

After breakfast at the hotel, we boarded the bus at 10am heading to Varanasi.

Stopped along the way at a Buddhist cremation stupa (group photo). In a small village along the way, we encountered a stoppage due to a fire. Young people roadside were very interested in us, waving and taking photos with their cell phones!

Kushinagar is the place that the Buddha chose for his Mahaparinirvana, or final exit from this earth. Kushinagar or Kushinara as it was then known was



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the capital of the Malla republic, one of the republican states of northern India during the 6th and 5th centuries BC. Kushinagar is identified with the modern village of Kasia, 51 kms from Gorakhpur city, in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

During his lifetime the Master traversed the dusty plains of the Ganga valley, subsisting on whatever he collected as alms, and pausing to rest only during the rainy season. In 543 BC on the full moon night of Magh (January - February), the Master lectured to the Sangha at the village, Beluva, near Vaishali, on the impermanence of all living things, and said that his own life on earth was soon to end.

His last meal. From Vaishali the Lord went to Pava, where a humble metalsmith, Chunda, invited the Sangha for a meal. Having tasted the food, the Master immediately realized that there was something wrong with it and asked Chunda to bury the rest so that others would not be harmed by it. Chunda was overcome with grief and guilt when he realized that his offering was the cause of the Master's fatal illness. But the Buddha consoled him saying that one who donates the Buddha's last meal acquires great merit.

The Buddha desired to leave his corporeal body at the Sal grove on the banks of the Hiranyavati River in Kushinagar. The Master asked the Sangha, whether anyone had any queries. Sakyamuni then uttered the last words, "Now, bhikshus, I declare to you: all conditioned things are of a nature to decay - strive on untiringly."

On a bed, which Ananda had prepared under two Sal (shorea robusta) trees, the Lord entered the sphere of No Nothingness then the sphere of Infinite Consciousness, then the sphere of Neither Perception, nor Non-Perception.

Paying Homage. King and commoner, villager and townsman from far and near flocked to pay obeisance to the earthly remains of the Lord for the next six days. On the seventh day the Lord's person was bedecked with garlands and taken in a procession to the accompaniment of music. The revered bhikshu, Mahakashyapa lit the funeral pyre at Mukutabandha Vihara (Rambhar Stupa) in Kushinagar. Today not much remains of this stupa except a large brick mound rising to a height of almost 15 metres set within a well-kept park.





Thereafter there ensued a war among eight great powers of north India for the possession of the holy relics. Finally the sacred relics were divided and encased in eight stupas in different parts of the country.

The Mahaparinirvana temple In 7th century AD, the Chinese traveler Hiuen Tsang lamented on the desolation of this sacred site. However he mentions the Mahaparinirvana Stupa. Thereafter Kushinagar sank into near oblivion, almost forgotten by the world until early this century.

The Mahaparinirvana temple enshrines a 6 meter long statue of the Buddha in the Parinirvana posture. Carved from black stone, the statue now looks metallic gold because of the application of gold leaves by pilgrims. (Source—www. IncredibleIndia.org)

A little Q and A about the Pilgrimage

by **Jim Hild** and **Dan Lee**

Would you share a funny incident that happened to you during your trip?



Jim: There were many funny incidents during our pilgrimage. One story is my experience of sending postcards back to family and friends. I asked Lama Jamdor to help with this. So while we were in Varanasi, he and I went to the post office. We went to the window and asked for stamps. We put the stamps on the cards. I said “Thanks” and was about to drop them in the mail slot when Lama Jamdor said, “Not so Fast. We need to have the stamps canceled”. He went on to explain that if I had dropped the cards in the slot the clerk would strip off the stamps and resell them, discarding the cards. Canceled stamps can’t be resold. He said to me that people here are very religious and many are Buddhist but they don’t practice what they learn. Later on our trip Lama Jamdor mentioned he was coming to the U.S.A. later this year. I said I would take him to our post office and help him send back post cards to his fellow monks. He laughed.

Dan: Jim’s right, funny things happened all along the way. And it was good that they did. The traveling was pretty grueling, the schedule exhausting and we needed a sense of humor. I found the bathroom accommodations good for a laugh throughout the entire trip. Such as, the night of Montezuma’s revenge on the train that rocked and reeled with only an Indian style toilet minus the plumbing (you could see the railroad tracks zipping by) in a room that had not been cleaned in quite an age. Or the bus stopping for rest room breaks - which meant pulling over to the side of the road – men to the front of the bus and ladies to the back.

The Stupa at the Bohdi tree where Buddha reached enlightenment was decorated with many bas relief sculptures of the Buddha. People would decorate them by placing garlands of marigolds around the Buddha. We had finished meditating and Lama Gursam was a few minutes into his teaching, when I looked up to see a chipmunk (or the Indian equivalent of one) sitting on top of Buddha’s head munching on a marigold. From where I was sitting it looked all the world like Buddha was wearing a Davy Crockett hat. One of the women in our group whipped out her camera. Between trying not to



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laugh and hearing Davy Crockett King of the Wild Frontier rolling through my brain, I have no idea what Lama taught on that morning.

What was the most profound spiritual moment / holy sight of your trip?

Jim: I had several moments of profound spiritual experience . The one that I most hold dear is taking refuge under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhi-Gaya. Lama Gursam performed the ceremony. It was late morning and after we walked around the temple, we found a spot and sat in meditation for awhile. Lama Gursam then started the ceremony and the feeling of taking refuge at this spot was overwhelming.

Dan: Each site was meaningful in its own way - some more than others. In Bodhigaya the lamas performed a food offering ceremony at the end of which the food (packaged goods) was distributed among those who attended. We were to eat what we wanted and give away the rest to the monks, beggars etc. that were all around. As I was giving food to those who were begging, one of the sweet members of our group came up to me and simply said “Don’t forget to save some of the food for yourself otherwise giving is just martyrdom”. Something in that instance clicked and the life long sense of guilt and uneasiness with having things while others are destitute was resolved. Of course Buddhism teaches to be grateful for having while giving to others. Jesus in response to accepting a lavish expensive gift, said, “The poor you have with you always.” The Torah taught Jews to tithe and leave the corners of the fields for the poor to glean as they enjoyed the rest for themselves. All the wisdom traditions teach the same simple truth this fellow pilgrim reminded me of. I have known it intellectually for decades. But in that moment, It all came together. We give; we care – each of us we are able and willing while we remember to be grateful for what we have. Kicking a 60 year habit of guilt was no small spiritual moment! But–Bam!, it was a spiritual “Ah-Ha” I will never forget. I could have saved a lot of money in therapy over the years had I gotten the insight years ago! I could share other equally profound moments that made this trip a treasure – perhaps later I will.



What was traveling by train and bus like - how did that impact or color your experience?

Dan: There were long , sometimes tedious, hours of travel. The bus was pretty comfortable though the ride was quite bumpy the farther back in the bus you sat. The trains were a real trial! We traveled the trains overnight and sleep happened by accident (at least for me). We were stacked three high in narrow hard bunks. Oh and as westerns we were advised not to eat the food on the trains. Lama Jamdor said he does not even eat train food. But the train built a hearty bond between us as we traveled together. The bus gave a window into India and its rural people. Without the bus rides I would never have identified five styles of cow dung paddies made by locals to use as fuel. (Local women by the way - in two weeks never saw a man take up the chore of “poop for fires”. Now becoming a cow (or water buffalo) dung design expert is worth hours of being jostled on a bus. Seriously the bus travel added greatly to the trip. The sights of unimaginable poverty and the glimpses into local life and struggles (and joys) greatly enriched the trip. There were





many spiritual lessons right outside our window.

Jim: In order to get to all the holy sites, I estimated that we traveled over 3000 kilometers. This meant we spent a lot of time on the bus or train. While this gave us a chance to see the country side , I estimate we spent about 76 hours in transit. The buses did not have bathrooms, so we either stopped at a gas station or along he road. Having toilet paper and hand sanitizer was critical. If we could have flown several legs of the trip we could have spent more time at he holy sites . However we still had a very enjoyable time and it gave us time to get to know each other. I will say though, our two, night train experiences were challenging - not conducive to sleeping and there were many unpaid travelers in out bunks - mice, bed bugs , cock-roaches and flies.

What is one thing that you took with you that you would take again and why?

Jim: From a practical point, I would say my nausea pills. But probably it would be my camera. I did take a lot of pictures (about 800) but when I returned home. I wished I had taken more pictures - especially more movie pictures. There was so much I remember but do not have a picture of it.

Dan: I have to agree with Jim that a camera is essential and with it a small journal - not for doing traditional journaling , there is no time for that. But to jot down a zillion notes, phrases and brief thoughts through out the day. There is so much to take in and absorb. Notes help with retention and help remember which picture was taken were and of what. The temples can tend to blend together after awhile without notes to go back to. Oh, I know you asked me to name just one thing but I am naming just one thing at a time—my sleep sack and Deet spray would accompany me on any return trip as well.



What was the most exciting thing you brought back with you?

Dan: I am not sure what you are looking for with this question. The total experience was beyond any expectations I had. I do not know how to put it into words. The profound impact of the trip - how do you describe it? The most exciting thing I brought back with me was the feeling of awe and gratitude that I was privileged to bring back so many things - spiritually and mundane - that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

Jim: There were many things I brought back with me. If we are talking about non-material things then I would say it was my experience of being where the Buddha was, seeing what he probably saw, walking where he walked , meditating where he mediated. This was a very spiritual experience. Materially, then I would say a leaf from the Bodhi tree (papal tree) where he became enlightened.

What would you advise someone thinking of taking this pilgrimage, to keep in mind?

Jim: Although I have traveled several times to Asia and countries similar to India, I would say to keep in mind the differences in culture and way of doing things. The part of India we were in was mostly agricultural and very





poor. The extent and number of people living in some of the most basic living conditions made the very poor parts of the United States seem middle class by comparison. I have been to Southeast Asia during the Viet Nam conflict and to Japan and South Korea, which was devastated during the Second World War. Viet Nam has recovered and has increased its standard of living. In Japan and South Korea both countries have made significant improvements to their respective economies and the standard of living is similar to that of the USA now. India is still, from the part of the country I was in, pretty much the same as it was during the Buddha's time, except there are now cars and motor cycles along side ox-driven carts competing for the roads.

The second thing would be the climate is hot and dry in March and I needed to wear a face mask to keep the dust and pollutants out of my lungs.. Some people on the pilgrimage were more affected than I was but it still made you cough.

Dan: Jim has brought up two very important points. I was amazed at the need for a face mask. And the poverty is staggering to behold. Decades ago I did some church work on the Navajo reservation in Arizona where they live in mud hogans and in the poorest sections of Appalachia. Those people are rolling in luxury by comparison. I thought I was prepared for beggars and vendors. But I found the poverty to be beyond imagination and all pervasive. You see it from the bus window. You are surrounded by sellers (there are no jobs. How else do they survive?), beggars, and visibly hungry children. After our boat ride down the Ganges we walked back to the taxis through a sea of beggars and sellers. It was there that I encountered lepers for the first time. I cannot describe how it tore at my heart seeing them stretch out their half remaining hand while pleading for food. One cannot get away from the begging and pleading to buy trinkets. It can be physically as well as mentally wearing. But I would not trade that experience for anything. I wish everyone in the West could experience it. It produces a deep inner well of compassion and of gratitude. The memory of a adolescent girl who eyed my bag of food with starving eyes as I waited for our train will never leave me. I had determined to give it to her when the train pulled in. To do so ahead of time would have meant being accosted by many needy souls. As the train came to a halt, I turned and started to hand it to her. But before I could offer it to her she leaped at it, ripping it from my hands, grasping and pawing at it like a starved animal as she ran off into the crowd. We drove by small cities made of scrap plastic and sticks -- the home of hundreds. Lama Jamdor told me during the monsoon season many die just because the exposure to the elements is too much for those who are too poor.



Quickly moving on, be prepared for the filth and lack of sanitation - not where you stay and certainly not in the monasteries which are impeccable - but through out all India and Nepal.

Another word of advice would be to go with your heart and mind like a sponge - an indiscriminate sponge absorbing everything that comes your way



How did you feel when you got back home about being home ?

Dan: I wanted to go back in India on the next plane. I was tired but that was short lived. Fortunately we arrived back on a Monday and I had the rest of the week off from work to reflect, journal and absorb the most fantastic journey I have ever been on. I still think about meditating Bodhi-Gaya and want



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to be back there to meditate again. I am confident I will some day.

Jim: When we returned home we were all tired. It had been a 15 hour flight leaving Delhi evening around 11:00 PM. We got back in the States around 4:30 AM and it took us about 2 ½ hours to get back to Yardley, where we all went our separate ways home to sleep for the better part of that day. It was good to be home, and it was good to be in my own bed. I had an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for the life style I have here but with some many great memories and experiences – it will last a life time. In some ways I feel that India was most likely a part of my life many life times ago

What was it like to meditate at such spiritually significant locations?

Jim: Meditating at the holy sites was very special. I could not but feel a great connection to where I was and why I was there. I don't know how exactly to describe it but the connection was sometimes overwhelming.

Dan: My experience varied from site to site. Certainly there was a sense of amazement and reverence at each site. But, for me each held its own energy. Some like the Bodhi tree where Buddha reached enlightenment was extremely tranquil and calm despite thousands of people around. The places of Buddha's death and cremation were very moving. But at each site I felt united with history – more than that united with this ancient spiritual path.

There was something else. At the sites there were hundreds or thousands of pilgrimages from all over the world. You were in the great flow of people. Here in good old Yardley Pa. one can feel like the smallest of minorities – part of a handful of Buddhist and meditators. There - to use a biblical phrase – one felt “encompassed around about by a great cloud of witnesses” of those who have found insight and spiritual awareness in the Three Jewels. One sensed being part of a host of seekers stretching back and forward into time as far as time will go – and stretching around the world at present. Quite a hefty vibrant community to be apart of.

Would you do it again and if so would you do anything differently?

Dan: Yes, I would do it again in a heart beat! I want to do it again and again. Differently! If possible I would spend more days at the monasteries where I could engage in more meditation, and contemplation. I would perhaps not visit all the sites but return to those that held the most meaning for me. This would definitely mean as many days as possible in Bodhi Gaya. And I would try to avoid that last grueling 17 hour overnight train ride from Gaya to Delhi replacing it with an hour air flight.

Jim: I don't think so. However, knowing what I know now, it would be easier to transition into the culture and surroundings. People are people and while customs, food and surroundings are different from what I am use to here in the States; I felt that I transitioned quickly into where we were.

Dan: Oh forgive me for being over chatty, but I would love to go back and spend 4 - 8 weeks in study. I also hope to go back some day and include time in Dharmasala.



What was the thing that surprised you the most?

Jim: I guess that what I had expected to see and what I found was a little bit of a surprise. I have been to many parts of Asia and I thought that India would not be too much different from that part of the world and from the movies and pictures I have seen before I arrived. My image was more of a progressive society. What I found was a very poor and low standard of living. Basic needs in many cases were not being met. This was a country of great contrast - poor areas along side some very beautiful and very spiritual surroundings. Most of the towns did not have anything like a supermarket or department stores. Everything was a small family owned enterprise – “grass roots” sort of enterprises – everything from recycling water buffalo dung into fuel, to clothes, cookware and fruit and food stands.

On a practical matter, there were very few sanitary facilities available to us or for that matter anyone living in this part of India. People would relieve themselves anywhere and everywhere. This took a little time to get use to. When I got back home, and accidentally tuned into an NPR program on the sanitary situation in India, the reporter said that the people of India have more cell phones per capita than toilets and that if the country could provide more sanitary facilities to its population as it did cell phones, it would help significantly curb the spread of diseases

Dan: To all that Jim said, “AMEN” spelled out in huge neon letters. It was a country and a journey of constant surprise. Perhaps the biggest surprise to me was how much I loved it and could not get enough of it.



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