

IN THE FOOTSTEP

A contemporary company of pilgrims journeys through the ruins and temples of India and finds the teachings of the Buddha still very much alive. By Anne Cushman

In the hot, dusty countryside on the outskirts of Bodh Gaya, India, not much has changed since a wandering ascetic named Siddhartha Gautama first passed through 2,500 years ago. Men in white dhotis still guide plows drawn by water buffalo through a patchwork of brown and green fields. Golden haystacks shaped like stupas shimmer next to acres of mustard and lentils. Women in saris carry baskets of grain on their heads down crooked dirt alleys roamed by chickens, pigs, and hump-backed Brahman bulls.

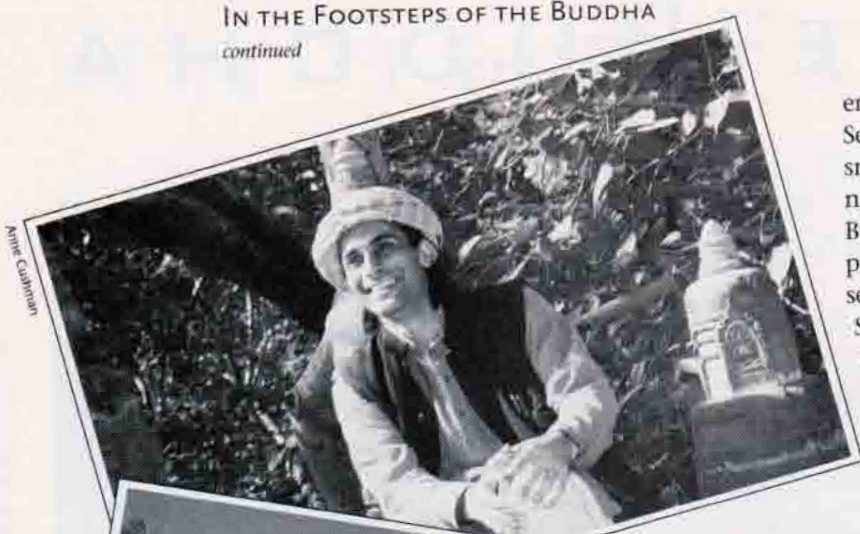
In fact, on this bright December afternoon, the only anachronistic note is my troupe of nine Western pilgrims. Laden with cameras, Buddhist guidebooks, and meditation cushions, we tramp across the dry bed of the Niranjana River, and through the tiny mud hut villages scattered along its banks. Finally we straggle, disheveled and thirsty, up the rocky, crumbling slopes of the Dungasiri mountains, toward the cave where Siddhartha—en route to becoming the world-renowned teacher known as the Buddha, or Awakened One—spent six years attempting, without success, to bully his mind and body into submission.

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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

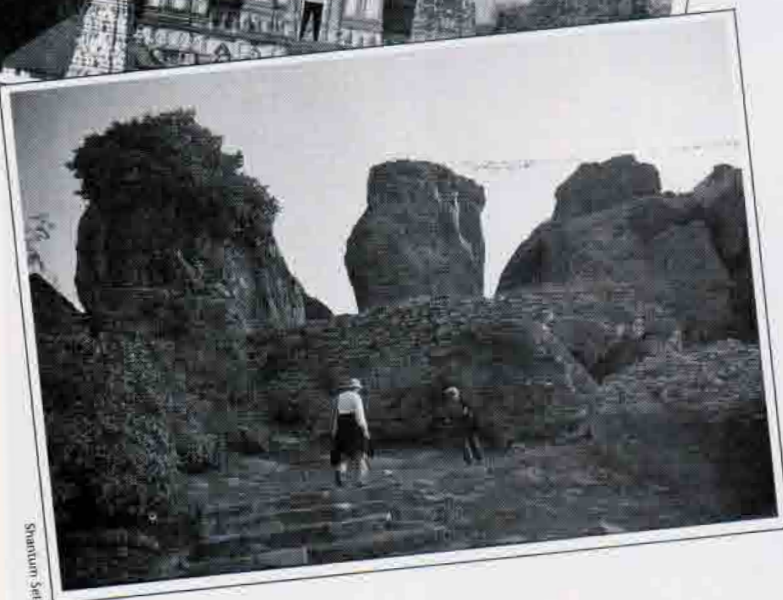
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Annie Cashman



Shantum Seth



Shantum Seth

From top to bottom: pilgrimage guide Shantum Seth; the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhi Gaya, which marks the site of the Buddha's enlightenment; pilgrims climbing to Vulture Peak, where the Buddha loved to sit and watch the sun set.

er things," wryly comments our guide, Shantum Seth, as we pause to rest in the courtyard of the small, whitewashed temple that perches on the cliffs near the entrance to the cave. "So in the sutras, the Buddha goes into a great deal of detail about the practices he did here." As an elderly Tibetan monk serves us sugar cookies and strong, sweet *chai* (tea), Shantum recounts how Siddhartha starved himself until his spine poked through the skin of his belly and his buttocks looked like a buffalo's hooves; how he held his breath until his head felt like it was being split open with a sword; how he ate cow dung and his own excrement.

"There was a strong belief in those days that the body was an obstacle to enlightenment," Shantum explains. A solitary monk's chanting drones from the cave behind him, blending with the amorous cooing of the wood doves in the hills. "But ultimately, Siddhartha found that asceticism didn't bring him freedom; so he left his cave to look for a better way."

When the story is finished, we creep through the narrow, waist-high entrance into the cave, a smoke-blackened dome about 12 feet in diameter. Butter-lamps glow on two small altars. We squeeze our meditation cushions into a circle. Shantum gently rings a bowl-shaped brass bell he holds in the palm of his hand. Closing my eyes, I confront my own mind—whose unruly nature, like the surrounding landscape, has changed little since the time of the Buddha.

This visit to the Mahakala cave is just one stop on Shantum Seth's "pilgrimage in the footsteps of the Buddha," a trip he's been leading annually since 1988, when he organized a tour for his teacher, Vietnamese Zen master Thich Nhat Hanh. For Seth, the two-week pilgrimage is not a business venture but a spiritual practice, an opportunity to recharge his commitment to Buddhism and forge a "traveling sangha," or community of practitioners. For the handful who journey with him—the group is limited to 20 in size—it's a rare opportunity to trek through an India that few tourists visit, led by a guide whose knowledge of his country—both ancient and modern—is coupled with a keen understanding of the needs of Western guests.

The 36-year-old son of a distinguished Indian family—his father is a prominent businessman and his mother was the first female judge on India's high court—Seth spent over a decade studying, working, and traveling in the West. While earning degrees in technology and development studies at British universities, he became a fervent political activist, spearheading peace rallies, antinuclear protests, and environmental cam-

paigns. As his interests broadened to include spiritual practice, he traveled to the United States to explore meditation, Native American ritual, and the California human potential movement.

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His quest eventually brought him to the Ojai Foundation in southern California, where he became a student of visiting teacher Thich Nhat Hanh, whose "socially engaged Buddhism" offered an appealing combination of contemplation and activism. Instructed by Nhat Hanh to "help bring Buddhism back to India," Seth returned to Delhi, where he now coordinates a United Nations program to assist village artisans throughout South Asia.

Pilgrimage to the sites associated with the Buddha's life is a time-honored tradition, recommended by the Buddha himself. Over the years, a complex mythology has grown up around the benefits of visiting these Buddhist meccas. Many practitioners believe that such pilgrimages help stockpile merit that can be cashed in in future rebirths (the more suffering endured en route, the more merit accrues). Others say that anyone who dies while on such a voyage will be reborn in the Pure Land. According to one Tibetan teacher, a site like the bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya—under whose sheltering branches the Buddha attained enlightenment—has been transmuted into "a place of diamond, a vajra place." "If you meditate there, recite prayers, and study, the place has a special power for the mind to come to realization," he insists.

Seth's explanation for the significance of the pilgrimage he leads is more down-to-earth. His aim, he says, is "to demystify Buddhism—to bring the Buddha alive, as a human being, into people's lives and practice." "Many of us are brought up thinking of religion in a theistic form, especially in Western Judeo-Christian culture," he points out. "But one thing the Buddha said very clearly is that he is a human being. We are all human beings, and we all have the potential of becoming a Buddha."

The nine potential Buddhas who have come on this year's pilgrimage are all here for different reasons. Nancy is a photographer on the verge of her 70th birthday; she's here to "celebrate a rite of passage" and take a few

good pictures. Larry is a vipassana meditation teacher who wants to visit the birthplace of his tradition. Jan, a visual artist, is here to "come to terms with her own mortality" after a brush with melanoma. Shantum's brother Vikram, our token cynic, has come to escape the storm of publicity generated by the recent publication of his epic novel, *A Suitable Boy*.

I'm here as a spiritual adventure-seeker. As a practitioner of Buddhism and yoga for over a decade, I'm eager to tour the country where both those practices originated. However, I've come with some uncertainty about the spiritual objective of my mission. Buddha-nature is everywhere, I've been told again and again; the present moment is sacred, no matter where I am. So how will it benefit my practice, I wonder, to trek around the world to sit at the sites of someone else's enlightenment?

Pilgrims on the Road

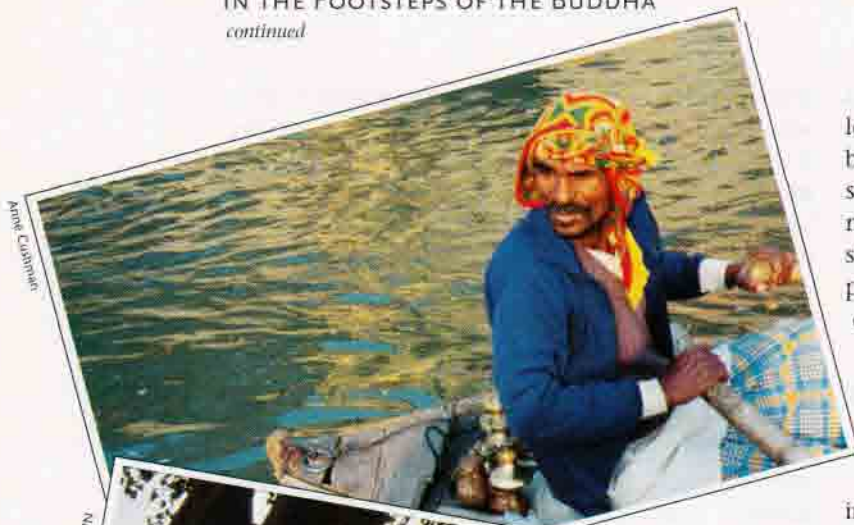
Traditionally, spiritual pilgrimages are undertaken on foot; some practitioners make a full prostration at every step for the final mile to each site. However, our group has opted for more efficient means of locomotion. The northeastern region traversed by the Buddha—a 600-square-mile swath of Ganges River basin—is the least developed part of the country; public transportation consists of an unreliable, uncoordinated network of local trains and buses. So Shantum has hired a driver and a comfortable minibus to ferry us from one sacred site to the next.

To my American eyes, accustomed to space-age superhighways cruised by bored commuters at 65 miles per hour, the scenes that unreel outside the bus window are almost unbearably exotic, an onslaught of imagery unencumbered by plot, like an avant-garde film. We share the narrow, bumpy roads with bullock-carts (piled improbably high with bamboo, sugar cane, or dried cow dung), freight trucks (which seem to spend most of their time overturned by the side of the road), bicycle-rickshaws (generally transporting seven or eight people and a couple of small farm animals), and an occasional camel or elephant; it can easily take us six hours to travel a hundred miles.

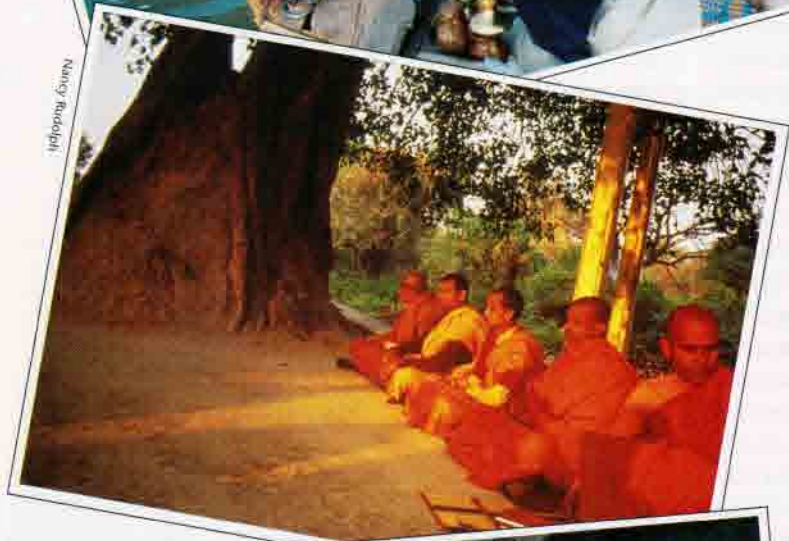
Roadside cooks concoct unrecognizable, fly-studded delicacies over wood-fired clay ovens; scrawny ponies toss their tinsel-tasseled manes like debutantes as they draw their painted tongas through city streets. A little girl balancing a crate of chickens on her head prods a water buffalo across the highway with a crooked stick. By the side of a silvery river, smoke rises from a blackened corpse on a funeral pyre.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

continued



Anne Cushman



Nancy Rudolph



Anne Cushman

From top to bottom: a vendor peddling his wares in a canoe on the Ganges River; Sri Lankan monks under a pipal tree in the Jeta Grove at Sravasti, where the Buddha spent 24 rainy seasons; a roadside cook preparing chal.

Drunk on the sights, I start to malfunction. I begin losing small items (pens, notebook, flashlight, water bottle) and small social skills (making casual conversation, exchanging money for goods and services, remembering my roommate's name, keeping my shoelaces tied). I've been assigned the apparently simple duty of counting our suitcases before they are piled on top of our bus and after they are taken down, to ensure that nothing disappears en route. But on the rare occasions I actually remember to do so, I find that invariably more bags come down from the roof than I thought were put up there in the first place. "Are all 16 bags loaded?" Shantum asks me one morning as I stare drowsily out the bus window, trying to remember the Hindi for "hot water." "Yes, of course," I say with a guilty start. "Anne," he points out patiently, "We only have 11 bags."

Nalanda and Vulture Peak

Of course, we're far from the first pilgrims to have traveled this colorful and bewildering route. On the first day of our journey, as we lurch along the road from Patna to Rajgir, Shantum gives us a brief history of some who have come before us.

The first pilgrim whose expeditions were recorded was the emperor Ashoka, ruler of India in the third century B.C. After Ashoka converted to Buddhism—in a spasm of remorse after his troops had slaughtered 100,000 people in an expansionist war—he reformed his government according to Buddhist principles of nonviolence and replaced military forays with what he called "dharma tours." Those pilgrimage sites he deemed most significant he marked with enormous, inscribed stone pillars, some over 50 feet tall.

In the fourth century A.D., the Chinese pilgrim Fa Hien walked all the way from China to India, along a dangerous trail whose only road signs were the bleached bones of earlier travelers. Two hundred years later, Fa Hien's memoirs inspired yet another Chinese monk, Huiien Tsiang, whose longing to visit the Bodhi tree was undeterred by minor obstacles such as pirate attacks and an imperial edict forbidding him to leave China.

In the 13th century, India's flourishing network of temples and monasteries was wiped out by invading armies, overgrown by forests, buried in humus, and forgotten. When 19th-century British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham made it his mission to locate and dig them up again, in many cases all he had to go on were the accounts written by Fa Hien and Huiien Tsiang and the occasional tip of an Ashokan pillar protruding from the earth.

Compared to these earlier travelers, our voyage is well-mapped and luxurious. On the first night of our

journey, we stay at the Centaur Hokke Hotel in Rajgir, an opulent Japanese-run resort established to cater to Buddhists on pilgrimage. (The Japanese have recently invested more than 250 million rupees—close to \$9 million—in this region, which they see as a potential tourist gold mine.) We don cotton kimonos and head to a steaming bathhouse, then feast on vegetable tempura and miso soup served by Indian waiters with impeccable Japanese manners. Shantum suggests that we eat our dinner in silence, as a form of meditation. (“Good God, why?” asks Vikram cheerfully.)

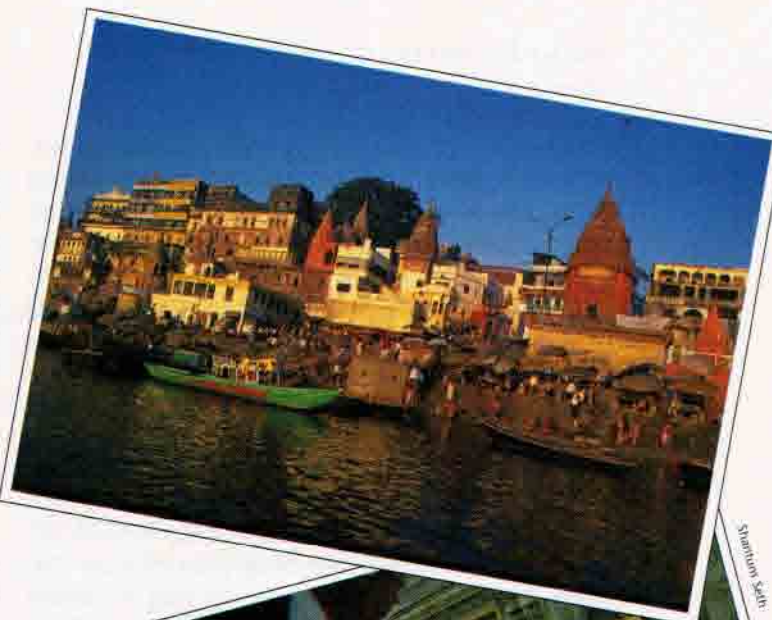
The next morning, we visit the ruins of the monastic university of Nalanda, which flourished from the second to the 12th centuries A.D. as the greatest educational institution in all of Asia, and whose students included such luminaries as the philosopher Nagarjuna and the Tibetan patriarch Padmasambhava. Today, Nalanda is a vast, grassy field of crumbling brick walls and stupas adorned with stuccos of serene, graceful bodhisattvas.

An armed guard initially shoos us away from the courtyard containing the most beautiful sculptures, but he relents after a brief, murmured interchange with Shantum. (“What did you say to him?” I ask. “I told him we were professors of art from Harvard University,” Shantum answers with a grin.) From the top of the disintegrating Shariputra temple, we can see for miles across checkered, ox-plowed fields. Stuck in crevices between the bricks are smoldering sticks of incense and withered chains of marigolds.

Archaeologists have excavated only a fraction of the university, which at its peak housed over 10,000 of Asia’s finest students, admitted only after a rigorous oral S.A.T. administered by the gatekeeper. In a few places, the earth has been carved away like the cross-section of a cadaver to reveal layer upon layer of unexplored buildings beneath the surface: nine levels of construction altogether, explains the local guide who shows us around. “Buddhists don’t like to destroy things,” he says in Hindi as Shantum translates. “So when they wanted new buildings, they just sealed over the old ones and built on top of them.”

I sit down on a sun-warmed heap of ancient bricks and picture my mind as a ruined temple, most of it underground. Where, I wonder, are the Ashokan pillars that will show me where to dig?

Late that afternoon, we walk slowly up the old stone road that winds to the top of Vulture Peak, where the Buddha used to love to sit and watch the sun set. We’re trailed, at a discreet distance, by a bored-looking guard with a gun slung over his shoulder, enlisted by Shantum as insurance against the bandits that reputedly roam the Rajgir hills.



Shantum Seth

Shantum Seth



Aime Culhane

From top to bottom: bathing ghats on the Ganges River at Varanasi; the festooned trunk of the Bodhi tree, whose ancestor’s branches sheltered the Buddha on the night he attained enlightenment; young Tibetan monks playing marbles in the courtyard of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhi Gaya.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

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When Siddhartha was still a wandering mendicant, he so impressed the king of this region that the monarch begged him to return and start a monastery after he attained enlightenment. Siddhartha assented; and in fact, Vulture Peak became one of his favorite places to teach. "The Buddha must have walked up and down this road a thousand times," says Shantum as we climb. In the Buddha's day, he tells us, the now-overgrown valley was dotted with the bamboo huts of hundreds of monks (more substantial structures were frowned on as encouraging material attachments). Nowadays, from the bottom of the road, a squeaky chairlift departs for a Japanese temple on a nearby hilltop; vendors hawk cigarettes, chocolate bars, and cheap plastic lockets displaying Buddha icons. But the rocky crag of Vulture Peak itself is deserted except for one man wrapped in a shawl and *lungi*, selling incense and wreaths of marigolds. A few of us buy incense, bow, and place it on the brick foundations of a ruined temple marking the site of the Buddha's meditation hut.

As we look out over the valley, I recall that it was on Vulture Peak that the Buddha is said to have delivered the Heart Sutra. Its cryptic words run through my mind: "Form is emptiness, emptiness is form . . ." Nothing exists independently, the Heart Sutra tells us; everything is empty of a separate self, inextricably entwined with all things.

It was on Vulture Peak, too, that the Buddha gave his enigmatic "flower sermon": Gazing out over a crowd of monks eagerly awaiting his teachings, he wordlessly held up a single blossom. Most of the audience was bewildered; but one monk, Mahakasyapa, looked at the flower and smiled in perfect understanding.

The air is humming with crickets and the calls of unfamiliar birds; we can hear the distant clatter of the chair lift and the faint, tinny whine of recorded chanting from the Japanese temple. We sit in silence, watching the sun sink in tendrils of magenta clouds.

Under the Bodhi Tree

From Rajgir we drive southwest to Bodh Gaya, checking in after dark at the austere, dormitory-like guest house of the Dai Jo Kyo Temple. We wake up at dawn to the sound of chanting: *Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhasa*. . . Downstairs in the lobby, the hotel staff are starting their day with an offering of incense. After the chanting comes the steady whisk of a straw broom on a sidewalk. I draw back my curtains to see the head and shoulders of a giant Buddha statue looming over the nearby rooftops.

Known in the Buddha's day as Uruvela, the little town of Bodh Gaya is now world-renowned as the place of his enlightenment. After six years of practicing austerities in the Mahakala cave, the story goes, Siddhartha Gautama finally recognized that asceticism was not the path to freedom. Staggering down from the mountains to the Niranjana River, he accepted a bowl of rice and milk from a village girl named Sujata and sat down under a tree on a mound of fresh-cut kusha grass, vowing not to get up until he had found liberation.

Marking the spot of the Buddha's breakthrough is the Mahabodhi temple, an imposing multispired pyra-

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mid whose construction was begun in the second century A.D. on the site of an earlier structure built by the emperor Ashoka. As we walk to the temple at sunrise through already bustling streets, we dodge hordes of vendors selling postcards, statues, packets of dried bodhi leaves, malas made of pipal wood. Children with friendly, calculating eyes greet us like long-lost relatives and hand us their addresses scrawled on scraps of paper.

Like most Buddhist sites in India, the Mahabodhi temple was abandoned for centuries; when excavation was begun in the late 19th century, it was half-buried in silt, and its precincts were in use as a grazing ground for pigs. It has now been completely restored, however, and we wander around the grounds, admiring the profusion of elaborately carved shrines and stupas. Along the north side of the temple, a marble walkway and a row of carved stone lotuses mark the Bejewelled Walk, where in the days following his enlightenment the Buddha paced up and down absorbed in ecstatic contemplation.

What most touches me, though, is not the statuary, but the practitioners. Since the Mahabodhi temple's rediscovery, Buddhists from all over the world have founded branch temples in Bodh Gaya, and the Mahabodhi grounds are aswirl with the maroon robes of Tibetans, the black of Japanese, the saffron of Sri

Lankans, the amber of Burmese. In shaded alcoves, monks doing prostrations repeatedly hurl themselves face down onto polished boards, their hands and elbows protected by pads against the force of their devotion. A Korean woman in a plain grey pantsuit circumambulates the temple with the slow, almost imperceptible steps of walking meditation. Bright-eyed young Tibetan monks—judging from their faces, they can't be more than 10 or eleven years old—cluster under a feathery neem tree, laughing and playing with marbles and toy cars. One of them takes off his sandals and runs and slides, runs and slides, down the Jewelled Walk, his robes flapping around him.

We hold our morning meditation under the bodhi tree, on the exact spot where the Buddha attained enlightenment. The tree itself—a *figus religiosa*, commonly known as a pipal tree—is encircled by a million-dollar gold-plated railing, donated three years ago by the president of Sri Lanka to protect this most sacred site in all of Buddhism; that, in turn, is encircled by a stone fence with a locked iron gate, to protect the premier's investment. But the janitor has a key, and Shantum has endeared himself to the janitor; so while devotees from around the world chant, prostrate, circumambulate, and click their cameras outside the locked gates, we set down our zafus in the inner sanctum.

Here, under the light of the full moon, the Buddha awakened into full realization over the course of a nine-hour sitting. In deep meditation, the Buddhist sutras say, he recalled his hundreds of thousands of previous births and deaths; and he saw how all living beings—and entire universes—arise and pass away like the waves of the ocean. Perceiving how ignorance of their impermanent and interconnected nature binds all people in an endless loop of craving and misery, he cast off the chains of that ignorance forever. "Oh jailer, I see you now," he proclaimed as the morning light dawned. "How many lifetimes have you confined me in the prisons of birth and death? But now I see your face clearly, and from now on you can build no more prisons around me."

The massive pipal that spreads its delicate, heart-shaped leaves over our heads is not, of course, the exact same tree that sheltered the Buddha through his full-moon vigil. That original tree, legend has it, was killed by Ashoka's queen, who, jealous of the attention her husband was lavishing upon it, inserted a poisoned thorn in its trunk. However, incorrigible as the Dharma itself, a new tree sprang up from the dead one's roots. Over the centuries, at least two successive trees were destroyed—one by a hostile king, one by a winter storm—and replaced by saplings grown from their carefully hoarded seeds.

As I settle myself on my meditation cushion, I peek surreptitiously at my surroundings. The tree trunk is swathed in yards of bright orange chiffon and dotted with flakes of gold leaf; its branches are strung with a canopy of white plastic flowers. An enormous altar is covered with offerings: bright plastic wands, shiny tinsel trees, streamers and paper flowers. I close my eyes and try to imagine the spot as it was when the Buddha sat here—no canopy, no golden railing, just a gentle breeze blowing through a cathedral of leaves.

Suddenly I am startled from my reverie by a tidal wave of sound: the sonorous, guttural chanting of several hundred Tibetan monks who have assembled in the courtyard outside our little compound. The chanting throbs into my stomach, vibrates the core of my spine; it's like the sound of a mountain range singing, or a black hole praying before it swallows a galaxy. Giddy, unreasonable happiness surges through me. For a few evanescent moments, my thoughts are blown away, and I feel a bodhi tree unfurling its tightly folded leaves in my heart.

The Deer Park at Sarnath

Two days later, we leave Bodh Gaya well before dawn, to avoid a statewide political protest that threatens to close down all the roads. We're heading for the Deer Park at Sarnath—just outside the 5,000-year-old city of Varanasi—where the Buddha gave his first teachings. But a few hours from Bodh Gaya, we find ourselves snarled in a spectacular traffic jam. Rumor has it that the backup started the night before when a coal truck overturned and spilled its cargo across the highway; now traffic is at a standstill for close to 100 kilometers.

Most of the vehicles are huge rust-colored trucks (there's only one truck manufacturer in India), their prows gaily decorated with the icons of various gods and goddesses—Durga, Shiva, Kali, Krishna—and wreathed with tinsel, streamers, and strings of withered vegetables. The drivers honk their horns convivially, lie down for naps under their vehicles, cook meals over roadside fires. Vendors appear, selling peanuts and bananas. One man passes with a frying pan and a basket of eggs on his head; for 15 rupees, he says, he'll make us breakfast. Sometime midmorning, someone in our group remembers it is the day before Christmas.

"The more suffering you go through on a pilgrimage, the more merit you get," Larry reminds us. But actually, the group remains quite blithe. In the late afternoon, we disembark from our foundered vehicle and walk into the nearby village, where we check into a

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grimy truckstop motel that, as my roommate remarks, is "quite lovely, really, if you don't look at the mattresses too closely." We eat curried potatoes and cauliflower, chapati, rice, and dal in a railway restaurant; then rattle back to the motel in bicycle rickshaws, through a smoky, crowded marketplace lit by wood fires and oil lamps. Jan says, "This is the first Christmas I've ever had that really felt like Christmas."

That night I dream that the Buddha is coming to give a Dharma talk in the street outside our motel. I lean out the window and crane my neck to see him; but all I can glimpse is the back of his shaven head as he disappears into the crowd.

The next morning the traffic jam has melted away—for once, impermanence is on our side—and we drive unimpeded to the luxurious Hotel Varanasi Ashoka. The marble lobby is presided over by a stunned-looking Santa Claus enshrined in silver and magenta tinsel like a Hindu deity. After blissfully hot showers, we head to the ruins of the Deer Park at Sarnath, where the brick foundations of long-abandoned temples mark the spot where the Buddha first proclaimed the Four Noble Truths: the existence of suffering; its origin; the possibility of ending it; and the way to do so.

The merchants who swarm in the Deer Park parking lot are forbidden to enter the temple grounds, but one young man trails me in anyway, surreptitiously flashing a Buddha concealed in the palm of his hand and muttering in my ear like a street drug dealer: “Madame? Buddha. 50 rupees.” The sun is setting as we walk around the ruins, stopping to examine the broken fragment of an Ashokan pillar, a handful of deer grazing in a fenced pen, the remnants of a shrine commemorating the hut where the Buddha slept.

As a three-quarters moon rises, we practice walking meditation around a massive bell-shaped stupa, looming close to 150 feet tall. Votive candles cast dancing shadows across the sidewalk. On my right walks a Tibetan monk chanting mantras. On my left hobbles a one-legged man on crutches, murmuring, “Help me, madame, I am very poor.”

Where the Buddha Died

The next day—after a sunrise boat ride on the Ganges near Varanasi—we travel to the little town of Kushinagar, where the Buddha died at the age of 80 in the shade of two sal trees. We arrive late at night; but although it’s almost midnight by the time we finish our dinner, my roommate and I head out for a moonlight stroll through the temple park across the street from our government lodgings.

The park entrance is barred with a locked iron gate; but as seems to be standard procedure in India, an informal, unbarricaded path leads in to the left of the official entry. The night watchman is asleep on the steps of the squat modern temple marking the Buddha’s place of death. The light of the almost-full moon

pours down over teak and ashoka trees and the by-now-familiar jumble of ruined brick walls. For a few moments, I mistake the distant grumble of a truck engine for the sound of chanting.

What ubiquitous human impulse insists that we throw up these structures of stone and brick? It's as if we desperately want to reassure ourselves that the Buddha's life really took place. But what moves me most is not the disintegrating remnants of ancient houses of worship—the discarded skins of Buddhism—but the almost unspeakable beauty of the land itself: the silver light on the sal leaves, the owl drifting under the full moon.

The next morning, Kushinagar is revealed as a sleepy little town, too far off the beaten track to attract any but the most dedicated of pilgrims. (In fact, the Buddha's disciples berated him for choosing to die in such an insignificant "mud-and-daub" village.) Even the inevitable children soliciting money seem less professional than their counterparts in Bodhi Gaya or Sarnath. We walk to the ruins and meditate inside the temple next to an enormous fifth-century reclining Buddha, draped in a gold blanket emblazoned with the slogan "Thailand 1993."

After a period of silent sitting, Shantum guides us through the Buddha's meditation on death: "The practitioner compares his own body with a corpse that he imagines he sees thrown onto a charnel ground and lying there for one, two, or three days—bloated, blue in color, and festering—and he observes, 'This body of mine is of the same nature. It will end up in the same way. There is no way it can avoid that state.'" As we finish, we hear chanting beginning outside: a middle-aged Korean man in casual slacks is circling the temple, praying to Amitabha Buddha.

"I came here partly to deal with my own death—but I feel much more alive than I ever have," says Jan that evening, as we sit in a circle on the floor of a tiny Chinese temple in downtown Kushinagar. The temple is run by a nun who befriended Shantum on a previous visit;

we've gathered there to sip chai, nibble on the nun's homemade candied ginger, and check in about how our pilgrimage is unfolding.

"Being at the place the Buddha died—and realizing that for all his accomplishments, he had to die too—somehow makes me feel more at ease with my own mortality," adds Larry. "And it somehow helps me see the possibility of dying peacefully, without attachment, as I'm fairly sure the Buddha did."

What's hitting home for all of us, we discover as we talk, is the essential humanity of the Buddha. We've seen the places he walked, sat, struggled, triumphed, and taught, and now we sit in the place where his body returned to the earth. Somehow, this realization makes the task of achieving the liberation he spoke of seem more accessible to all of us.

The Jeta Grove

After a trip across the Nepali border to visit the Buddha's birthplace, we return to India for the last stop on our pilgrimage: the Jeta Grove at Sravasti, where the Buddha established a monastery and spent 24 rainy seasons teaching. Our hotel is a cavernous, once-elegant structure that used to be the guest house of a local maharaja; its battered facade is overgrown with a crimson waterfall of bougainvillea. The Jeta Grove itself is an exquisite, wooded park that feels dreamily serene despite the incessant commentary of the hoopoes and parakeets and the quarreling of the giant langur monkeys who romp through the bel trees. Tradition holds that this piece of land was bought for the Buddha by the wealthy merchant Anathapindika from a prince, who demanded that Anathapindika cover the entire grove with pieces of gold as a purchase price; as we stroll slowly down the path used by the Buddha for walking meditation, I imagine the grass around us buried in sparkling coins.

As we walk, Nancy tells us that back in New York City, a monk at a Sri Lankan temple gave her a package to deliver to one of his teachers, whom he assured her she'd find meditating under a pipal tree at the Jeta Grove. To our amazement, she actually does find the

monk she is looking for; and after she presents him with her gift, he invites us all to return for an unspecified ceremony late that afternoon.

So at four o'clock on the last day of our pilgrimage, we find ourselves assembling under the giant pipal known as the Anathapindika tree. According to legend, Anathapindika once asked the Buddha to whom the faithful should make their offerings when he was not present in the Jeta Grove. The Buddha responded that if they presented their gifts to a pipal tree, it was exactly the same as offering them to the Buddha himself. So Anathapindika planted a pipal on this spot to serve as a surrogate Buddha.

As we take our seats in a semicircle under the branches, eight Sri Lankan monks in brilliant saffron robes file in and sit opposite us. The head monk, an elderly man with the ageless, compassionate face of a Buddha statue, unreels a white silk cord, which is passed from monk to monk, then from pilgrim to pilgrim, until all of us are linked. We raise our hands into prayer position as the monks begin to chant in the lilting, melodic Sri Lankan style: *Buddham saranam gacchami, Dhammam saranam gacchami* . . . It's the oldest Buddhist chant of all: "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the dharma, I take refuge in the sangha."

This, I think, is where the Buddha can be found: not in the ruins of ancient stupas, but in the lives of the people all around the world who practice the teachings they were built to commemorate. The buildings are far less durable than the insights; the temples disintegrate with time, but the realizations are born again and again with each generation of practitioners.

When the chanting is finished, Larry asks the head monk the question that I started the trip with: "What is the spiritual value of pilgrimage?"

"When you come to places where the Buddha lived, you become happier. You increase the well-being within you," he answers in Hindi as Shantum translates. "In America, it might be more difficult to remember the Buddha with every step you take."

He pauses, then smiles at us, and concludes, "Besides, there is a special kind of

sukha, or joy, that comes from sharing the dharma with friends." ♦

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