

**In Buddhist India:**  
A White Plum Pilgrimage to Northern India and Nepal  
with Shantum Seth

by Tony Soho Doubleday

Part 1

"Buddha was born in Kapilavastu;  
Enlightened at Magadha;  
Taught at Varanasi;  
Entered Nirvana at Kusinagara."

These four lines from the White Plum Oryoki (meal-time) ceremony describe the milestone places and events that made up the life of Siddharta Gautama, the Buddha Shakyamuni, who lived in northern India during the years 566 - 486 BCE.

Kapilavastu, Magadha, Varanasi and Kusinagara are real locations, traceable in the archaeological record. They are the main destinations of any pilgrimage to the land of the Buddha, and today we know where almost all of them are. But, this was not always the case. The history we may take for granted was actually discovered relatively recently, in circumstances that might come as something of a surprise. So, before describing the White Plum Pilgrimage to Northern India and Nepal in January 2006, I want first to explain how it comes to be possible to go on a pilgrimage in the Buddha's footsteps at all.

Strange as it may seem, the Buddha was unmentioned and almost entirely forgotten in his homeland until the mid nineteenth century, by which time amateur British archaeologists and Sanskritists had begun painstakingly to piece together the evidence for India's earliest history, none of which had been documented critically, chronologically or coherently before. Until modern times India's cultural memory was confined to its highly selective, Hindu-centric and mythic canon. By the end of the Mughal invasions in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism had been persecuted out of existence as a distinct religious tradition in India, and the great monasteries, which had been witnessed from the fifth to seventh centuries by Chinese pilgrims, such as Fa Hien and Hsuan Tsang, had been reduced to smouldering ruins. Over the subsequent centuries Buddhism disappeared from Indian history, its cultural relics lost in the jungle, and its origins remembered only abroad, in the lands where its missions survived.

Even today, with the exception of a small minority (of whom more later), most Indians do not especially revere their country's Buddhist past. In the course of our pilgrimage across the Ganges plain circumstances revealed time and again how little connection the modern Indian feels with Buddhism. It was ironic to notice that Buddhism is not really even all that esteemed as a sect of Hinduism. To most Indians the Buddha was a minor avatar of Vishnu, who came to appease the heretics. His teachings are seen as the concern of Tibetan refugees. Otherwise, Buddhism seems in the main to be valued as a

useful means to make money from tourists.

The reinstatement of the Buddha's place in Indian history is down to Europeans, and the British in particular. In his excellent and highly readable book entitled, *The Buddha and the Sahibs*<sup>1</sup>, Charles Allen relates the thoroughly gripping tale of rediscovery, exploration and excavation of the archaeological record of Indian Buddhism. He explains how free spirits like Sir William Jones, Colonel Colin Mackenzie, Dr Francis Buchanan, Brian Houghton Hodgson, Sir John Marshall and above all, perhaps, James Princep and General Sir Alexander Cunningham, became caught up in a passionate desire to solve the mystery of the "Boudh" and the puzzling ruins that filled India's wildernesses. Their time in India drove some of these men to early graves, and it is poignant to reflect that these detectives of early Indian culture, whose work turns out to be so crucial to the arrival of the Dharma in the West, now languish in relative obscurity themselves, destined perhaps to be forgotten in our post colonial embarrassment about the equivocal record of British India.

Reading Allen's book, as I prepared to visit the sacred places associated with my own Buddhist practice, I realised what a debt of gratitude I owed to James Princep and rest. I recommended the book to my fellow pilgrims, our guide, Shantum Seth, referred to it on several occasions and I noticed at least one copy doing the rounds on the coach, as we made a number of long, slow journeys on the busy and dusty roads of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and Nepal.

Allen explains that it was thanks to the tireless enthusiasm of Princep, for example, that, in 1823, a hitherto undecipherable script, known as *Brahmi*, was finally decoded. The script had been found carved into numerous mysterious, finely polished sandstone columns lying broken and up-ended in the jungle, or hewn as edicts into rock faces throughout northern and central India. No one knew what any of it meant until Princep deciphered the script and lifted the veil to reveal the forgotten existence of a once powerful empire, ruled by Devanam Piyasa Ashokasa Raja, or Ashoka, who converted to Buddhism in the eighth year of his reign and made a pilgrimage to the places of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, teaching and death. At some of these places Ashoka erected stone memorial pillars in honour of the Tathagata. All across his empire he built stupas and inscribed edicts to guide the populace in the practice of Dharma. When translated, the Brahmi script identified many of the key sites associated with the Buddha's life and was the first conclusive evidence that the Buddha had lived and died on the Ganges plain about 230 years previously. Hitherto, the British "orientalists" had seriously puzzled whether Buddhism was Egyptian in origin!

Equally importantly the deciphering of the Brahmi script, coupled with new translations of the *Mahavamsa* in Ceylon, confirmed that Ashoka was the grandson of Chandragupta Maurya (r.316-292 BCE), who was already known to history by his Greek name, Sandrokottos, as the founder of the Mauryan dynasty and an ally of Alexander the Great during his campaign in India, in

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<sup>1</sup> Published in the USA as *The Search for the Buddha*

the year 323 BCE. Chandragupta was also the ruler in whose court the Greek ambassador and writer, Megasthenes, served as representative of the Macedonian General, Seleucus Nikator, in 303 BCE.

Further discoveries revealed that Ashoka was aware of the Hellenistic rulers Ptolemy II of Egypt (r.285-247BCE), Magus of Cyrene (300-258 BCE) and Alexander of Epirus (r. 272-258 BCE).

So, by deciphering the Ashokan edicts Prinsep anchored the vagaries of India's classical past in the known historical facts of Alexander's campaign and its Hellenistic aftermath. It emerged that Ashoka ruled 267- 231BCE, and that he made his pilgrimage in the year 249 BCE.

After that, it was possible to plot ancient Indian history and the life of the Buddha with considerable certainty, and as the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, armed with the, by then, comprehensible and equally important records of the great Chinese Buddhist pilgrims to India during the era 399-689 CE, Cunningham and other archaeologists gradually began to find and excavate the forgotten and jungle infested sites of early Buddhist India. Gradually myths and fables began to line up with archaeology. Lumbini, Rajgir, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Sravasti, Vaishali and Kusinagara were found and their significance understood.

Not everything was settled though. In his *Records of the Western Regions During The Great Tang Dynasty*, Hsuan Tsang gave ambiguous directions to Kapilavastu, and Ashoka did not leave any clues either. So that, even today, there remain two possible locations for its whereabouts: one in Uttar Pradesh and the other in Nepal. Nepal insists that its Kapilavastu is authentic; India is characteristically indifferent.

For the modern pilgrim, there can be no doubt that without the essential evidence left by Ashoka, the detailed travel chronicles of Hsuan Tsang, Fa Hien etc. and the tireless work of Prinsep, Cunningham and others, the journey we can now make would not have been possible.

Moreover, in the *Gem in the Lotus: the seeding of Indian civilisation*, the historian, Abraham Eraly says, "Buddhism in early Mauryan times was a minor sect". So it may not be an overstatement to say that, if Ashoka had not converted to Buddhism, granted it royal patronage and begun to send missionaries abroad, the teaching of the Buddha might not have become a world religion, and could have died out entirely by the second century BCE. If this is right then our debt to Ashoka is great indeed.

For me, as a foreigner in India (and British at that), knowing all this before I set out on pilgrimage, provided an additional and very important layer of meaning to the places I saw. A writer like Charles Allen makes it possible to appreciate the historic importance of ancient remains not only for what they can tell us about our past in themselves, but also for *why* it is that we can know what they tell us about our past. In doing so he builds a bridge, which gives character, humanity and value to the information we possess.

Seeing an ancient site with an understanding of how it was rediscovered and its meaning for modern history makes it all the more intelligible; and, if I can be forgiven a bit of poetic fancy, I think that looking back on the pilgrimage from that perspective has brought me closer to being able to say, with Wordsworth, that *"These beauteous forms, through a long absence, have not been to me as is a landscape to a blind man's eye: but oft, in lonely rooms, and 'mid the din of towns and cities, I have owed to them .... [a] blessed mood, in which the burden of the mystery..... the heavy and the weary weight of all this unintelligible world, is lightened."*

I know it might be argued that, to an open heart, any place will communicate itself, regardless whether one knows its past. Nonetheless, it seems to me that, to pursue the example of Wordsworth and his romantic enthusiasm for the Wye Valley and Tintern Abbey, the monastic ruins of England are all the more emblematic of what is changed and forever lost when one has an understanding of the Middle Ages, the Reformation and the Tudor history that made them what they are today. And so, I think, it is with the remains of Buddhist India, which to the uninitiated (and no matter what the state of their understanding of Buddhist practice) might otherwise appear no more than dispersed piles of carefully preserved rubble, albeit sometimes located in the immaculately manicured gardens of the Archaeological Survey of India.

Therefore, I would urge anyone thinking of making a pilgrimage to Buddhist India at least to read Allen's book beforehand. Not only is it a fascinating story in its own right; it opens new dimensions on the places to be seen; it does something timely to redeem the British colonial past; and it brings Ashoka and the Chinese pilgrims of the early middle ages into the dazzling foreground of the mind, where they belong.

## Part 2

*"There are these four places, Ananda, which the believing man should visit with feelings of reverence and awe. Which are the four?"*

*The place, Ananda, at which the believing man can say, "Here the Tatagatha was born";*

*The place, Ananda, at which the believing man can say, "Here the Tatagatha attained the supreme and perfect insight";*

*The place, Ananda, at which the believing man can say, "Here was the kingdom of righteousness set on foot by the Tatagatha";*

*The place, Ananda, at which the believing man can say, "Here the Tatagatha passed finally away to that utter passing away which leaves nothing whatever to remain behind."*

### *Mahaparanirvana Sutra*

Until January 2006 I had not been to India. I cannot now remember when or why I first decided that I wanted to go. It was probably a combination of looking at pictures of my grandfather in the army in India in the 1920s as child, a romantic reading Hesse's *Journey to the East* in my late teens and, eventually, deciding I was a Buddhist. Whatever the case, it was a long time ago. Part of the reason I had not gone was that I decided, also years ago, that if I was to make a journey to *Buddhist* India, I would want to go with a Sangha, and ideally one made up of people who shared my practice. I did not see any point in going merely as a tourist.

So, when Bob Bowles told me about this particular pilgrimage with Dharma friends from ZCLA, it struck me that there might never be a better opportunity, and I am really grateful to him for persuading me that, seen in this light, the cost was an irrelevance! In the end the three of us from the White Plum Sangha in the UK, Bob, Claire Greaves and I, joined up with a monk from Japan, a Swiss citizen, two Germans and other members of the mainly Californian Sanghas of Egyoku Roshi and Daniel (Nagy) Buckley Sensei.

We exchanged emails with our fellow pilgrims before we left, and most of the group said they too had wanted to go to India for many years, and that they hoped that it might be a life changing experience. Reading peoples' post pilgrimage correspondence, it would be fair to say that this is indeed what it was.

The original idea for a White Plum pilgrimage was conceived by Egyoki Roshi, and all the pre-booking and administrative arrangements were very ably sorted out by Dokai Dickinson of ZCLA. However the journey through India herself was managed and led with the care and patience of a genuine bodhisattva by Shantum Seth, who has been guiding pilgrims around Buddhist India for the last 18 years. He knows each site, each hotel and the

surrounding area intimately, and long experience has taught him the best order in which to make the tour. He knows the local people too, and can cut through "red-tape" and introduce his pilgrims to areas and experts not normally readily available.

It would be hard to sing Shantum's praises too highly. He seems to think of everything. He welcomed us all into his home, where we were introduced to his family and fed a delicious meal. He is charming, witty, knowing and self-effacing. He is also that rare thing in India: a profoundly clear-sighted Buddhist teacher. He practices in the Vietnamese Zen tradition, in the lineage of the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, and his background is one of political activism in the Gandhian mould.

Shantum remains strongly committed to social action and the promotion of Gandhi's social and economic ideals through his charity, *The Ahimsa Trust*. Our first day in Delhi was spent visiting Gandhi's house, which is a museum and shrine to his legacy. A monument stands at the place in his garden where he was assassinated, and stone footprints mark the path of his last short and fateful walk. It was with an obvious and deeply felt reverence that Shantum led us to and bowed before the monument; and we could not help but be stopped in our own tracks by the sight of those frail looking footprints, which traced out Gandhi's last steps into eternity.

Gandhi's rooms are largely as he left them (in all their austere simplicity). His spinning wheel is still there, and the message of *swadeshi* (reliance on local skills and crafts), which we took from his home, was in many ways emblematic of the journey upon which we were about to embark and the people whom we would meet. For it was to be as much a pilgrimage of social exploration into Bihar (the poorest state of India) and Uttar Pradesh (its most populous state), as it was to be a voyage into the Buddhist past. From both of these perspectives it was to be a journey of personal challenge and self-discovery for each of us. As if to underscore this, Shantum gave each of us a scarf of *khadi* (homespun Indian cotton) to wear on the pilgrimage.

In the course of our journey we were to be plunged into one breathtaking sight or experience after another, not all of which were pleasant; and in one case - that of a bronchial infection that passed around our group - so downright uncomfortable that two members of our party were forced to give up the journey at the half way stage. Although the mosquitoes were mercifully sleepy in January and the weather pleasantly Mediterranean, several members of the group brought home souvenirs in the shape of ticks and other parasites!

Shantum makes no secret of his view that India herself is a great teacher. It offers no quarter. From the moment one walks out of the airport the noise, colour, hassle and traffic crowd in. On our first day, as we sat in the back seat of a taxi that was going nowhere in a traffic queue, Claire and I were confronted by a young girl of not more than five years, peering in at us through the car window. She pleaded for chocolate, which we did not have, and it was heart wrenching to smile kindly at her, but offer nothing, and be quite

incapable of escape.

We all found the seemingly universal poverty of Bihar very hard to accept in the first few days. We saw mile upon mile of people subsisting (just) and appearing to do so with a cheerfulness and dignity that was incomprehensible. I was acutely aware that we were witnessing life on the edge. These people survived, so I thought, as long as they were healthy. What, I wondered became of those who fell ill? To my relief, there was a partial answer in Rajgir, where we visited a free hospital run by Jains, and saw the selfless generosity of the nuns and doctors who work there voluntarily. It is essentially an eye hospital, cataracts being a particularly prevalent degenerative disorder in that part of India, however it also tackled polio. People travel great distances on foot for free and almost immediate operations or to be fitted with prosthetics.

During the first week we were also really troubled by the numberless beggars we encountered. There were leprosy and polio victims with withered limbs and deformed backs, and young children and the elderly with babes in arm, all feigning hunger and calling out "Sahib" or "Baba" and rattling empty tins as we passed by. We walked their gauntlets up to the Vulture Peak (Griddhakuta) in old Rajgir, the capital of the ancient kingdom Bimbisara of Magadha (543-491BCE), and down from the Ascetic's Cave in the Dungsiri Mountains, where Prince Siddharta practised self-mortification for six years before renouncing it, but they are ubiquitous wherever foreigners regularly go in India.

Shantum's advice was firm: we should give nothing, but watch our feelings and walk on. This was a tough practice, made only marginally easier by the sheer number of people to whom we would have had to give, and the fact that until quite late in the first week, many of us had only very large denomination currency, and therefore nothing we could sensibly give anyway.

Towards the end of the journey our attitudes to the beggars began to acculturalise. For one thing it was clear that we acted as a magnet for them. Not only were they not troubling their fellow Indians, but they seemed to materialize before us as if out of nowhere. We gradually realised that, until we turned up, these people were busy with other things, which our arrival prompted them to abandon in favour of the seemingly more lucrative occupation of begging from us. Then there was the obvious fact that those engaged in begging were clearly the members of extended families who could not carry out high value work: the young, the elderly and infirm. When we were absent the function of last two categories was to provide a crèche for the first. None of these people appeared to be starving, and it was not as if any of them were about collapse for want of a few rupees to buy rice. They looked to be cared for and a part of a local community. Begging appeared merely to be one of their ways of making a contribution to the economy.

Another arresting point, that became strikingly obvious to us as we travelled around, was that people did not tend to beg in areas that were not normally frequently by tourists. In other words, people were begging from us because travellers like us, who had passed that way before, had given them money! An

occasion that seemed to prove this was when we went to the site of a stupa that marks the place where the Buddha took his last meal. It is in the middle of a Muslim town that is away from any beaten tourist track. The local people were enormously curious about us. We had huge fun with the children taking their photographs on digital cameras and showing them their pictures, and we chatted with the women about possession by spirits and a local Sufi saint - but not one begged from us.

Shantum wanted us to learn for ourselves and was not prescriptive about our behaviour. Nevertheless, he made plain his view that we should not encourage the habit of begging, and still less be the agents of its introduction into places it had not yet reached.

If direct begging was difficult for us to ignore, so too were the less direct methods adopted by the would-be guides and helpers we met along our way. I was unprepared in advance for the bands of young men seeking to "befriend" us. Because of them, I found myself running for the cover of the hotel more than once in Bodh Gaya. I formed the distinct impression that, to these lads, we were merely walking ATMs, whose function was to shell-out unlimited quantities of rupees if only they could work out the right combination of buttons to press. The more sophisticated among them even wheedled for dollars and sterling, turning up their noses at rupees! The "right buttons" seemed to be linked to well-rehearsed stories about being a "poor student" and needing money to buy expensive dictionaries and text-books. Their methods had clearly worked many times before; and I admit to being taken in more than once, parting with, by Indian standards, quite sizeable sums of money out of what, I now fear, was a misplaced desire to help. All I think I really did was encourage them to try the same trick with the next hapless visitor to Bodh Gaya! It was only after yet another rendition of a suspiciously similar tale, coupled with the ungracious acceptance of 300 rupees to share between two boys (it was never "enough!"), that I began to realise what a game this really was. Even after I had learned my lesson, and started saying "No" more forcefully, I couldn't help giving in to the sweetly charming tenacity of my young "friends", and the injured dignity with which they took my brush-off. It was all quite faultlessly rehearsed.

The street traders were also quite a challenge. They appeared to regard all Western, Korean and Japanese comers as undifferentiating consumers, who would buy anything if only one pestered long enough. They may have been right; but we could, and for example on the Bimbisara Road down from the Vulture Peak, did, walk for hundreds of yards with the same trader trying to sell us postcards we'd seen numerous times elsewhere, and really didn't want at any price. If it had crossed his mind for a moment that we really didn't want to buy, or that we were ignoring him, we would never have known it. The fact that the traders were so polite didn't help much either. It wore us into feeling sorry for them, and wishing that we really *did* want to buy their merchandise in order to help them out! Towards the end of the trip Claire was confronted with a really amusing example of this predicament. She had begun talking with a charming trader who wanted to sell her a Buddha image. They had a very enjoyable conversation about all sorts of things, but she really did not want to



buy the image. In desperation the man turned to Shantum's ever smiling, helpful and cricket-loving assistant, Jagdish Chomula, and pleaded for his help to make the sale, because, he said, he really liked Claire and wanted her to have the Buddha! It was so hard to walk away in these situations.

In the areas frequented by tourists such interactions became very predictable and often hilariously funny. I watched in delight as one of the Americans, Ed, engaged in a tremendous banter with one trader in Rajgir who was changing his prices from one day to the next. Ed gave as good as he got, and even walked away from the encounter with a complimentary rosary (*mala*)! However, some of us had to learn some hard lessons before it all became funny. At first, I thought that if I bought something - anything - from one street hawker the rest might leave me alone. What an error that was! Having bought one cotton blanket, at what I feared was an inflated price, they were all over me to buy loads more – and all at a special price, of course! Then, I began to worry that I had no idea of the value of anything. I felt very uneasy because prices were unfixed, and it was impossible for me to know what anything was genuinely worth. There came a cathartic moment when it dawned on me that prices are never fixed, anywhere, and I have never had any idea what anything is truly worth. Simply because I didn't barter on the High Street in England it did not follow that I was paying a fair price there either! After that, money seemed to me to be like energy, and all that really mattered was whether the trader and I both walked away from a transaction feeling that we had made a good deal. It no longer mattered what anyone else had paid by comparison. This was quite liberating for me. Bob, who had been to India previously, and seen it all before, looked on with a wry smile as I agonised over all this.

In the end I decided that the only key to a hassle-free walk through a popular tourist haunt, such as Bodh Gaya or the chair-lift area around Rajgir, was speed, purpose and avoiding eye contact (for which sunglasses were a boon!). However this was a strategy I adopted rather reluctantly, because it meant missing out on all opportunities for interaction, a proportion of which would be, I felt sure, well motivated and enriching.

Away from the more overtly tourist areas, though, there were a great many people with whom, thanks largely to Shantum, it was possible to have – and we did have - enriching encounters. I have mentioned the children who loved to be photographed and the nuns and doctors in the Jain hospital. There were also volunteer teachers; the charming and erudite archaeologist, Basanta Bidari, at Lumbini; the consummate salesman and proprietor of a Metha's silk-weavers' workshop in Varanasi; friendly villagers (including one headman who let 30 of us have *chai* on his roof!); a lovely, toothless, old hotel gardener who sang and clapped for us as we planted saal and ashoka trees in Kushinagar; father and son Jwala and Saket Prasad, two excellent traditional musicians; and, of course, other pilgrims.

We gazed on, in admiration, as a Japanese Nicherin layman gently led his two young sons through a service in honour of the Lotus Sutra on the Vulture Peak at sunset - in the very spot in which Buddha is supposed to have taught

it. I had a brief but quite unforgettable encounter with an old Tibetan monk at the Bodhi Tree, who shook my hand and put his forehead to mine. It was an impromptu and delightful moment in which two Buddhists, from very different backgrounds and practices, with no language in common, came heart to heart in a place of deep and united significance.

We also encountered some of the few citizens of India who do count themselves Buddhists. These are ex-untouchables who, inspired by the example of Dr Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar (1892-1956), converted to Buddhism as a means of escape from the caste system, which Ambedkar felt to be an intrinsic part of Hinduism, whatever Gandhi argued to the contrary. The predominantly economic, social and political motivations behind the original mass conversions instigated by Ambedkar in 1956, coupled with the coincidence of his own death shortly afterwards, left the new Indian Buddhists leaderless and without any clear sense of the religion they had joined. Over the years that situation has slowly improved and a number of the new Buddhists have become monks and set up *viharas*. Nevertheless, life remains hard for them, they lack good teachers and, in many respects their social and economic circumstances are unchanged. Shantum has adopted the cause of a number of them, and it was a pleasure for us that one monk, in particular, happily joined in with our group as we sat in the Jetavana grove, near Sravasti. The re-emergence of Buddhism in India is a matter dear to Shantum's heart, and we talked at some length about the ways in which we as European and North American Buddhists might help.

I should also say that, for all the poverty we saw, particularly in Bihar, people struck us overwhelmingly as extremely intelligent and brilliant entrepreneurs, able to make a living out of almost anything. If materially, very many people are unimaginably poor by our standards, their community lives are rich. It is hard to imagine that isolation and loneliness are especially common occurrences in Indian village life. The people are also noticeably concerned with personal and domestic cleanliness. Yet, this interest does not extend beyond their immediate living areas. Outside the home they seem to have no conception of litter. Everywhere along the roads there are rubbish heaps, with, nine times out of ten, someone to be seen picking over them. This is a society in which refuse is either recycled or left to rot. Now that plastic and non-biodegradable rubbish is becoming more prevalent, India is likely to face significant environmental problems if it does not change its cultural attitude to litter.

At several points in the journey we were quite fearful for India's future. Not only is this a sub-continent where religious and political tensions are seldom far from the surface (there were bombings in Delhi before we went and Varanasi after we returned; and the Nepalese Maoist guerrillas ended a ceasefire while we were there), but its economic and environmental sustainability is precariously balanced. The mass of the population survives by farming or by recycling, repairing and selling locally made goods and services. Seeing this, it is easy to understand why Shantum is so wedded to Gandhi's belief in self reliance based on local crafts and skills. If and when it happens that the rural areas are flooded with cheap, throw-away, mass

produced goods from China then, quite apart from the environmental impact, we worried that the fragile local economy might easily collapse and that millions of landless people could be left without any hope of self-reliance. As I write this article I notice, in *The Independent Magazine* (11 March 2006), an article by Daniela Bezzi and Peter Popham, on the human cost and damage done to traditional community life in Jharkhand, east of Bihar, by India's drive to industrialise. It points out that the Indian IT industry employs only about one million people out of a population of more than a billion, and that the overwhelming majority of the people derive no benefit from India's economic growth.

Nevertheless, and in spite of the pressures upon it, the rural landscape remains stunningly beautiful. Even though people and noise dominate more or less everywhere, and there is little left of the jungle that would have covered much of the Ganges plain until modern times, there are still kingfishers with iridescent plumage in the trees, sarus cranes standing an enormous 1.65m tall, vultures, kites, monkeys, elephants, jackals and water buffalos. In many places, we could imagine the clock turned back two thousand years! We saw houses of wattle and daub with reed roofs and dung pats plastered to every available wall to dry out for fuel; and we saw field layouts, hamlets, craft industries, oxen harnessed to carts and ploughs and methods of husbandry that were as old as the land herself.

The tigers and wild elephants that roamed the forests for centuries may have disappeared but our visit to the Dungasiri Mountains reminded us that there are still other dangers in Bihar. On the roof of a school we visited there we noticed an armed guard. This was bandit country, and as if to underline the risk still further we saw a memorial to Sul Sunbong, a Korean Engineer who was shot by bandits on 10 January 2002 whilst working as a volunteer at the school.

One of the most memorable things we did was to walk from the Dungasiri Mountains in Prince Siddharta's footsteps through a timeless rural landscape, remote from the beaten track, to the bank of the river Nairanjana, where Sujata gave him a rice gruel meal before he journeyed on to Bodh Gaya and Enlightenment. Along the way the noise of traffic and radios disappeared, peace settled upon us and the natural beauty of India glowed in the afternoon sunlight.

Bodh Gaya and all the Buddhist sites are profoundly inspiring places to visit. To be able to sit in zazen in these places, to light incense, to make bows and to chant sutras as a Sangha felt to me the perfect response. I am left with so many vivid memories: chanting the Heart Sutra on the Vulture Peak as the sun set behind the hazy, forested hills of Rajgir; the stillness of zazen at dawn beneath the Bodhi Tree, notwithstanding the hubbub all around us (the Karmapa was there with a multitude of monks and a really good public address system!); the misty morning solemnity of Kushinagar and the stupa at the Buddha's cremation site; the fervent devotion of an old Tibetan woman chanting "*Om, Muni Muni, Mahamuni, Shakyamuni Svaha!*" in the Ascetic's Cave; the numinous sound of whispering leaves in the trees of the Lumbini

garden (one of the other few places we escaped the noise of traffic horns); and the crows, the monkeys and a stray dog at Sravasti (which despite the fact that its muzzle was swollen and infected, it was mange-ridden and patently very unwell, managed to trot around with a wagging tail, happy as you please!)

In each of these places Shantum told stories of the Buddha's life in a way that was human and moving, and in each we felt a distinct sense of connection with our Buddhist heritage. If we felt joyous and triumphant beneath the canopy of the Bodhi Tree, in Kushingar the mood was sublimely serious, as if even now Shakyamuni was laying down the responsibility for the Dharma, and passing it onto us. It cannot have simply been the fog that affected us here. At the end of the trip we all shared appreciatory verses, and two summed up Kushinagar very well:

*A Dharma descendent returns  
And mother India embraces him.  
In Kushinagar the Lord enquires of  
the pilgrim:  
Have you used your Dharma  
inheritance well?*

*At the end, not much  
To be said about dying:  
All fades. Practice well.*

*Ed Emyo Swyatek*

*John Heart Mirror Trotter*

Sarnath, the Jetavana and the Venuvana grove, all places where the Buddha taught, felt tranquil and reflective. They are gardens, in the National Trust style, with well-conserved remains, fine trees, shrubs and grassed areas. We passed quiet, reflective hours in these places, exploring the ruins, holding service, admiring Ashokan pillars and, in the case of Sarnath, visiting the museum where we were able to see the wonderful lion capital from the top of the Ashokan pillar, which is today the symbol of the Indian state. There was also a stunning 5<sup>th</sup> century sandstone image of the Buddha turning the wheel of the Dharma (*Dharmachakrapravartana-mudra*). This carving is really quite exquisite. But for the ornately decorated surrounding halo, bordered by *apsaras* (celestial nymphs), it is carved in almost full relief, and the down lighting of the museum creates a subtle shadow, which highlights its elegant features and radiates the yellow warmth of the sandstone. No photograph does it justice.

I want to make special mention of Nalanda and Sravasti. Like Sarnath and the Jetavana, Nalanda is now owned by the Archaeological Survey of India and surrounded by well-tended gardens in the British style. It is a place that Buddha was accustomed to pass through on his way between Rajgir and Pataliputra, and a lay devotee named Pavarika donated a mango grove there to the Sangha. Nalanda is however of very great importance to the history of the Dharma in India for another reason. It was there, between the 5<sup>th</sup> and about the 12<sup>th</sup> centuries that the various schools of the Mahayana emerged and flourished. I think it has to be doubted whether Nagajuna ever lived there. In his time (2<sup>nd</sup> century) there is no evidence for its existence. However, it is

surely the place where his Madhyamika school matured after Ayradeva (4<sup>th</sup> century). It is also the place where Asanga and Vasubandhu (5<sup>th</sup> century) developed the Yogacara system, where the Vajrayana began and to which Hsuan Tsang and other Chinese pilgrims came to study the sutras before taking them home to China. No one knows who wrote the great Mahayana sutras, nor where or exactly when, but it is certain that they were originally studied and expounded at Nalanda. So I was particularly keen to see this place; and I was not disappointed. Only an eighth of the site has been excavated, but it is nevertheless enormous. Even as ruins the surviving monastery walls and Shariputra's stupa are truly massive! It was humbling to consider the 10000 monks and 1500 teachers that had once lived there. We were to get some sense of how such a multitude might have appeared from the throngs of Tibetans we encountered in Bodh Gaya. Wandering from hall to hall, we were able to sense our close continuity with these countless forgotten Indian practitioners of the Way and with the great foreign pilgrims of the first millennia who had gone before us. In my mind's eye it was still possible to see how impressive it would have looked in its heyday, which the Chinese pilgrim Hwui Li has described for us:

*"All the outside courts, in which are the priests' chambers, are of four stages. The stages have dragons projections and coloured caves, the pearl red pillars, carved and ornamented, the richly adorned balustrades, and the roofs covered with tiles that reflect the light in a thousand shades, these things add to the beauty of the scene.... The whole establishment is surrounded by a brick wall, which encloses the entire convent from without. One gate opens into the great college, from which are separated eight other halls standing in the middle (of the sangharama). The richly adorned towers, and the fairy-like turrets, like the pointed hilltops, are congregated together. The observatories seem to be lost in the vapours (of the morning) and the upper rooms tower above the clouds. From the windows one may see how the winds and the clouds (produce new forms), and above the soaring caves the conjunctions of the sun and moon may be observed."*

Sravasti is the site of a once powerful city, the capital of the kingdom of Kosala, which was ruled by King Prasenajit, who together with Bimbisara of Magadha was the principal royal patron of the Buddha and the early Sangha. Just as at the site of Bimbisara's capital in Rajgir, almost nothing remains of ancient Sravasti today. The site, known locally as Mahet, is overgrown with jungle scrub, and has never been excavated. It is marked out only by the line of the earthworks, which once surrounded the old city, and by the remains of two large stupas in the centre. One, known as Pakki Kuti, is reputed to be the stupa of Angulimala, a famous brigand who terrorized Kosala until the Buddha converted him. The other, Kachchi Kuti, is thought to mark the remains of a wealthy merchant and Buddhist layman, named Sudatta, who donated the nearby Jetavana grove to the Sangha. It was strange to sit atop these stupas as the sun went down, herons flew overhead, ox carts passed and children played about us, wondering at all that had been and now lay buried there. Egyoku Roshi summed it up well in her appreciatory verse at the end of the pilgrimage, inspired in part by the inevitable trader, who kept holding out his wares saying, "Only see!":

*"Only see scrub-covered Sravasti.  
Only see layer upon layer of human life.  
Someday, someone will live on the ruins of my house  
And know nothing of me. Only see!"*

Another really important moment for Claire and me occurred at 11.00 pm one night while we were staying in Varanasi. At Shantum's suggestion, and with Jagdish's generous help, we two went out to the bank of the Ganges to watch the funeral pyres burn for an hour or so. Apart from the distant sounds of the railway and the neon lights flickering on the Ganges, there was once again that sense of timelessness about the scene. As smoke rose and melted above a full moon, we watched a dog sniffing around, a corpse soaking in the Ganges and another two burning on pyres. We heard the crackle of the fires as those who tended them laughed and conversed as if they were cooking food. In that place, death did not seem morbid, nor something to be hidden away. It was simply a fact of life, about which there could be little sentimentality or artifice. The task of cremating a parent was an ordinary and natural one, expected of every oldest son. No doubt grieving does go on somewhere else, but there was a healthy and earthy realism to the spectacle we witnessed, which looked far easier to come to terms with than the sanitized death rituals we have in our own culture.

People often say that India is a spiritual country. If I found it so, it was not in quite the way I might have expected. It certainly is not the case that everyone in India meditates. Nor are people any less preoccupied with making a living than we are. In many ways they are far more preoccupied with money, and for obvious reasons. If people are "spiritual" in India, I would not have said they were consciously so. I saw no obvious distinction between behaviour in the market places and behaviour in the Hindu holy sites we saw, and I would be surprised if Indians expected there to be any. Even if one allows that the distinction between the sacred and the profane is a western preoccupation, and therefore that to the Hindu everything is sacred, I would not conclude that India is therefore intrinsically more spiritual than England. If everything is sacred then it is also all profane. It is simply a matter of the perspective of the observer, and therefore what appears spiritual in India can just as easily appear spiritual in England.

There is however, in India, an easy acceptance of things that would drive most Westerners to distraction, and this, I think, is part of the so-called spirituality of the place. Things happen slowly, in good time, by roundabout routes and sometimes only when oiled by bribes. Everything requires time and patience, and perhaps knowing that, people do not hurry. They have time to stop and watch; and there is no embarrassment in their curiosity. No one seems to lose his temper either (in public anyway). Appreciating all this, there was no point in our having any expectations about, say, the duration of a journey from one place to the next, because nothing along the route was predictable apart from delay. So, on the whole we stopped worrying, and simply allowed things to happen as they might. Of course, this was easy for us, because Shantum bore the entire responsibility for the organisation of the

pilgrimage. Nevertheless, as a consequence of letting things take their course, amazing new sights and experiences rewarded us at every turn of a corner; and because life is so public in India, and so different from life in the West, there was no shortage of things to marvel at.

I wonder too whether the essence of what I learned most deeply in India, and a significant part of what it offers, is not the result of the in-door: out-door contrast that exists between our societies. Does the fact that Indians live outside so much, whereas we live the greater part of our lives indoors, infect the way they and we are, and so make India appear to us more spiritual? In other words, I am asking to what extent does the physical act of shutting ourselves in-doors in northern Europe and America encourage us to "stay in-doors" psychologically as well?

I am left with the possibility that the sense of separation and isolation inherent in the physical environment we inhabit actually encourages us to think, to make distinctions between self and others, to internalise our feelings and to pursue inner dialogues far more seriously than we would if we lived more sociably.

As a consequence, perhaps, we complicate, restrict and overburden our inner lives in ways that would never occur to us in a more public, undifferentiated society such as the mass of India enjoys. I don't know. All I can say is that the more I saw of India, of its teeming population, the constant noise and public life, the more my own inner dialogue died down, and the less my usual small-minded self-interest preoccupied me. My life seemed to become more and more a part of, and undifferentiated from, all the life that was going on around me.

I wouldn't have expected that before I left. If anything, noisy and crowded places have more usually repelled me, and I have retreated from them into myself. So, it was wonderful to find an inner clarity on this trip that I have only otherwise come close to on *sesshin*, or in remote wilderness places. It's trite, of course, that no matter where you go you always take yourself with you, but I can honestly say that wasn't how this particular trip felt. Somewhere along the road I got out of the way.

Thus, there were circumstances in which we practised *zazen*, which I would previously have thought quite pointless and verging on the hellish, but in which we sat as calmly and immovably as I can ever recall sitting in a Sangha. On one particularly memorable, noisy morning in Bodh Gaya we sat in the semi open-air meditation hall of our hostel with the distant drone of Tibetan horns competing with voices in the street, car horns and radio music, when Ekyoku Roshi stood up and said:

*"A Golden Buddha,  
A beggar at the gate,  
Voices in the street -  
All breathes in all; all breathes out all.  
All are Shakyamuni's voice and figure.*

*Who is this all that is not separate from all?  
All is breathing in all; all is breathing out all."*

And that is how it was.

Our common journey, shared experiences and White Plum background made connecting with one another and practicing together very easy. However, if the group had been thrown together at random, I would have said that these were great people to travel with anyway. It was good to spend time with Claire and Bob outside *sesshin*, and a lot of fun to watch the Americans struggle to comprehend Jagdish's patient explanation of the rules of cricket, listen to Nagy's gentle mockery of his country's government (I don't think the present US administration benefited by many votes from this crew), tour the temples of Bodh Gaya with Bunryu and Ed, listen to Ed fooling around with the children and the traders (the economy will have nose-dived after he left), celebrate Bunryu's and Sandy's birthdays, talk with the ZCLA old hands about their memories of Maezumi Roshi and suddenly, just as the coach was about to leave, to spot Yvonne way away across the paddies sneaking just that little bit closer to a grazing sarus crane.

We spent quite long periods of time on the coach (which averaged 25kmh over journeys of 300 km!), sometimes feeling quite ill, but never once did I hear anyone complain or notice anyone tire of another's company. We took a lot of care to look after each other's interests and well-being. When two people dropped out in tears of disappointment the group was enormously supportive. Apart from scheduling in zazen and services at places along the pilgrimage, those who wanted to met together each evening to share experiences from the day. We met once in full council, and we introduced and respected a system of labels, which were worn by anyone who wanted to be silent for any period of time, and we shared appreciatory verses at the end of pilgrimage. On the last full day together three members of our group, John, Cassie and Claire, received the five mindfulness trainings from Shantum in a simple ceremony under a pipal tree in the Jetavana. I hope that I haven't seen the last of my fellow pilgrims.

The return home has been interesting too in its own way. I don't really think that the rats race any faster here than they do India. Perhaps they smile less and lose their tempers more easily. They do stay in-doors more and they certainly drive a lot faster. On the other hand, they use their horns less, and generally try to leave one another space. People did seem to have more time in India. No one stops and simply looks here. But London nevertheless feels very quiet and empty by comparison with Delhi! It even feels peaceful!

I asked myself whether I have been changed by this pilgrimage, and before attempting an answer decided to wait a month, to let the euphoria wear off. As Wordsworth has it, I feel I did see many "beauteous forms", which have left behind a "blessed mood"; and even if, as my photographs confirm, many of the traces of Indian Buddhism do comprise broken pillars, crumbling *stupas* and ruined *viharas*, they are nevertheless heavily redolent of the Buddha, his first followers and the successive generations of teachers, monks and



pilgrims, with whom I would think any sensitive and genuinely interested modern visitor may share a deep sense of spiritual continuity. I also remain disconcerted by the condition of Buddhism among the Indians, particularly the ex-untouchables, and I wonder what can be done about it. Apart from that, I would say that I have returned feeling far more certain of, and grateful for, the value of my own life. A pilgrimage to Buddhist India is good for the soul (if Buddhists have such things). I heartily recommend it.