



JOURNEY

THROUGH

BUDDHIST

India

In the Footsteps of the Buddha

We landed in New Delhi late at night. The sky was filled with a tangerine glow from the city lights below. Having traveled through four airports and many time zones with little sleep, I couldn't believe we had finally arrived in India. My husband, Larry ('79), and I had looked forward to the trip for months, and soon we would join our group and travel in the footsteps of the Buddha.

LEFT: People moved through the crowded and noisy streets as the scent of cooking spices wafted through the air.

by **Victoria Witherow ('88 and MPC '95)**



ABOVE: A welcome stop amidst a day-long bus ride on the road to Bodhi Gaya

New Delhi was amazing: a feast for the senses—the streets filled with people in cars, trucks, and auto-rickshaws, on bicycles and on foot. Dogs, cows, monkeys, and a groom riding an elephant made their way down busy city streets and sidewalks. Vibrant colors were at home with the dust. Aromas were familiar and new. Just as captivating was Old Delhi, different yet the same. Its streets were narrow and crowded. Men navigated their ware-laden wooden carts between buses, bicycles, and pedestrians. Dogs ran about. People gathered—talking, eating, and shopping. Vehicle horns honked almost symphoniously as acts of courtesy and warning.

After two days in Delhi, adjusting to air travel and exploring the city we met our fellow pilgrims—Buddhists and non-Buddhists, we looked forward to the journey, organized and led by Shantum Seth, a Buddhist practitioner and ordained teacher in the Zen tradition of Thich Nhat Hanh. Joining us as co-leaders were noted Buddhists and authors, Stephen and Martine Batchelor.

After a brief meeting at the hotel, we were off and “rolling on dharma wheels” as Shantum would say. The journey was an exercise in mindfulness, and we didn’t stop for 16 days. Bus ride, plane flight, bus ride, walking, bus ride—on and on—until we flew back to Delhi at journey’s end. Along the way, we visited towns and sites important to the time of the Buddha: Rajgir; Nalanda; Bodhi Gaya (where Siddhartha Gautama sat beneath the Bodhi Tree and became enlightened); Sarnath (where the Buddha

gave his first significant sermons); Kushinagar (where the Buddha died); Lumbini, Nepal (where Siddhartha Gautama was born); Kapilavastu; and Sravasti. Bodhi Gaya is one of the more popular destinations for Buddhist pilgrims. The streets outside the Mahabodhi Temple are crowded with people, many of them Tibetans selling their crafts. In the evening, the grounds of the temple sparkle with hundreds of tiny lights, like winter holiday time in the U.S., and chanting is heard over loudspeakers. Masses of people quickly circumambulate the temple via upper and lower walkways. The famous Bodhi Tree grows next to the temple, and beneath it is a shrine commemorating the place of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Offerings are made there: brilliant-colored and metallic-sparkled fabrics are hung on the fence around the shrine, and flowers are placed at the foot. The offerings are periodically removed, only to accumulate again. We were fortunate to visit the temple during the day and night, spending one morning meditating under the Bodhi Tree. Amidst the buzz of people swiftly moving past, we were able to achieve calm. As we explored the grounds, visual feasts were around each corner...pilgrims prostrating, monks praying, puppies playing—and many shoes. Shoes were allowed neither in the temple (where the large gold Buddha statue resides) nor outside the temple where pilgrims congregate at ground level.

Although our journey provided many opportunities for mindfulness, our visit to Kushinagar offered an unexpected chance, as we briefly enjoyed the company of a new friend. After visiting the statue of the reclining Buddha at the Mahaparinirvana temple, we gathered on the lawn outside to hear Shantum



tell stories about the Buddha's life. Soon a small, black-faced monkey made its way to Shantum and sat next to him, like it had something important to share. A few quiet chuckles escaped from our crowd, and minutes later our friend moved along.

In addition to our travels in the footsteps of the Buddha, our journey to India included visits to Varanasi, a city important to Hindu pilgrims, and to Agra, home of the famous Taj Mahal. In Varanasi, we rose early one morning and traveled to the banks of the Ganges for a sunrise boat ride. It was cold, dark, and quiet. The un-motorized boat moved slowly and we could hear the water sloshing against its sides as we glided along, experiencing the architecture from our river view. We could see other boats taking the same journey as ours. In the short distance between land and us, we watched people on the bank making their way to bathe in the river and saw the fires burning at the cremation ghats.

One night in Varanasi, a handful of our group chose to visit the cremation ghats close up. We took a boat to the nearby bank, stepped off onto the stairs, and walked single file through the narrow and crowded paths to a roof above the fire pits where we watched workers weigh firewood. We knew when a body was coming for cremation as yelling and chanting preceded its arrival. The dead were covered with muslin-looking cloth, some also adorned with metallic gold fabric and flowers. The night was black and the fires burned hot. Instead of sadness, the air buzzed with a feeling of reverence and transformation. We walked close to the pits on our exit to the boat, close enough to smell the smoke and see the ash, and left feeling a deep sense of peace.

Upon our return to New Delhi, we left much of our group behind. Fellow pilgrims were beginning their travels home. A few stayed on to visit the Taj Mahal. We awakened early to catch the train and arrived in Agra without delay. After breakfast and stops at Fatehpur Sikri and the Agra Fort (two remarkable creations), we approached the entry gate at the Taj Mahal. After passing through rather tight security (many items, such as flashlights, were not allowed), we made our way to the majestic Taj, proceeding through a large archway and walking next to a long, still pool of water, able to see the Taj's reflection in the clearness. Shoes were not allowed inside, so we left them with a gentleman at the foot of the stairs before making our ascent to the room of the tombs. Exquisite was the craftsmanship on the exterior: marble carved into flowers and semiprecious stones laid into marble in the shapes of flowers and vines. The interior, where the tombs of Mumtaz Mahal and Emperor Shah Jahan are located, was dim and crowded, but just as fine. Guards encouraged people to move around the tombs quickly. Yet even in the crowded dimness, the craftsmanship and the space

were moving. If you had a flashlight, you could shine it on the inlaid flowers and see the luminescent beauty. We gathered in early evening on the lawn inside the grounds for our last group meditation before journeying home. We left the Taj at dusk, basking in the blue-gray glow of the evening sky and made our way to the train station.

Our brief journey through India and Nepal was life changing, each moment a mindful adventure. It was not always easy. What meaningful journey is? A cold virus spread through our group, and all but one person caught it before the trip ended. Strepisils (cough drops) and hot ginger tea became regular requests. Some travel days on the bus were very long, and sometimes the rides were bumpy. The journey was, however, delicious, mind expanding, and life altering. Children ran to the roadside smiling and waving as we passed by. Smoke from cooking fires tickled our noses as we rolled through the countryside in early evening. The water in our hotels was hot and refreshingly perfect for a bath or shower, bottled drinking water was plentiful, and the food was healthy and scrumptious (and somewhat addicting...breakfasts at home might never be the same). We made new friends, explored Indian countryside on foot, and breathed in the beauty of another land.

Victoria Witherow

Victoria Witherow, consultant project manager and medical writer, lives in Salt Lake City, Utah, with her husband Larry. Passionate travelers, they were inspired to visit India after attending a mindfulness meditation retreat where Shantum Seth shared historical knowledge and captivating tales of traveling in the footsteps of the Buddha. They journeyed to India for the adventure, education, meditation, and, albeit brief but thrilling, cultural immersion.

IF YOU ARE INTERESTED IN MORE INFORMATION ABOUT TRAVELING IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA, PLEASE VISIT WWW.BUDDHAPATH.COM OR EMAIL INFO@BUDDHAPATH.COM.



RIGHT: Monks at the Mahabodhi Temple following along in their books and chanting.