



Here & Now

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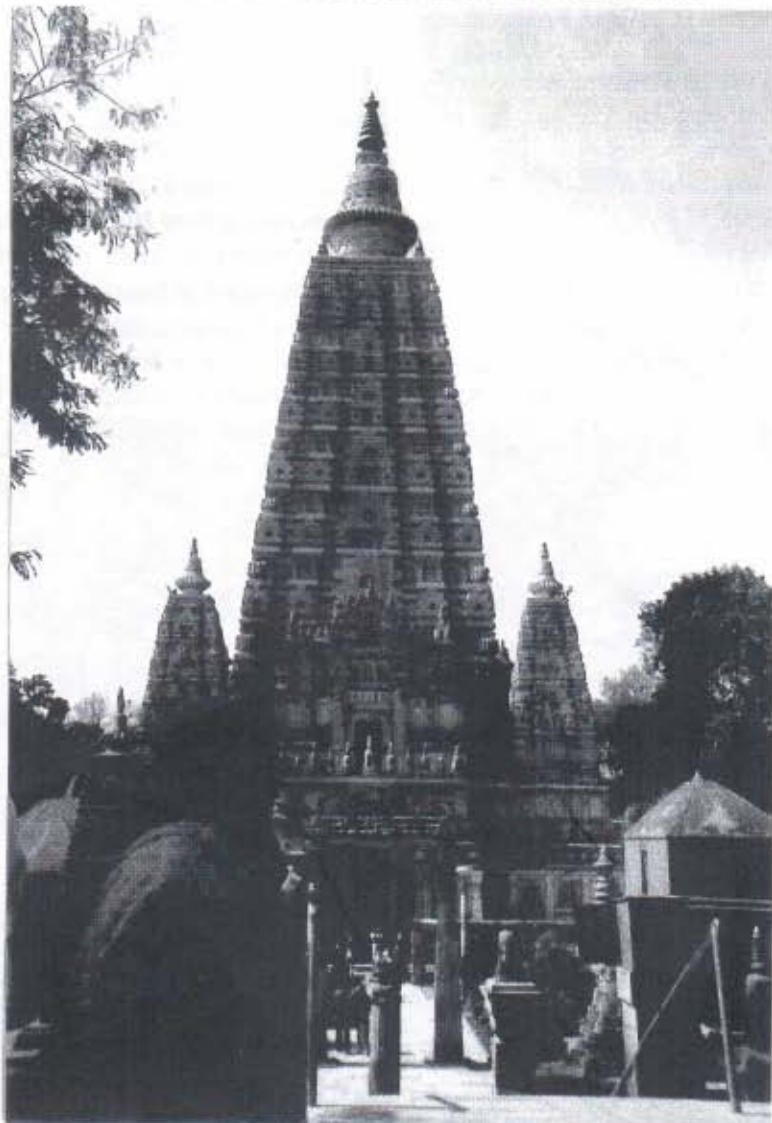
Pilgrims in the Land of Shakyamuni Buddha

Meg Stacey with Jennifer Lorch

In February 2000 seventeen pilgrims gathered in Delhi; two were our organisers and guides, Shantum Seth and Gitanjali Varma. We were the only two from the UK, although one of the ten Americans had lived in Shetland for 20 years — another was living in Japan. Of the others, one each came from Canada, Germany and Chile. We were mostly middle aged or over. At 77 I was the eldest, followed by two of the men. I had wondered whether I was too old for such a trip, but had been encouraged by an article in *The Mindfulness Bell* written by an octogenarian. I need not have had any fears. I was well looked after throughout, helped in and out of the coach and up and across difficult places. Jennifer and I were one of three couples travelling together; there were also two pairs of friends. Eleven of us were practising Buddhists of one kind or another, one a Soto Zen monk. The others included a Gnostic Christian and a woman Episcopalian priest. The Chilean and I appreciated that Shantum and Gitanjali were also followers of Thây's teachings; they (Shantum and Gitanjali) were glad to have fellow practitioners among the pilgrims.

No matter where we came from and what, if any, was our practice, we travelled as a sangha, looking after each other and sitting together each morning (unless we had an early travel start). Sometimes the group sat in one of the sacred sites; in two of the Japanese hotels we used their beautiful meditation spaces, protected but open to the sky, air and birds. At lunch we shared life stories, in the evening we shared "strucks" (i.e. what had struck us during the day).

What can one say about the trip of a lifetime to a most amazing country? There is so much: the sights, sounds and smells — at once delights for and assaults on body and mind; cows, monkeys, chipmunks/squirrels, buffaloes, bamboo and mango groves, lentils and sugar canes; the transformations we experienced (or didn't) when faced with immense and visible differences of wealth and poverty the beggars and peddlers who assailed us, especially outside the sacred sites. Beggars grossly deformed by crippling disease, probably mostly polio, but remarkably agile with a stick or on all fours; others old and blind; some suckling babies. The feeling of impotence could be overwhelming.



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Mahabodhi Temple Bodhi Gaya

Time and time again we came back with amazement and awe to the realisation that we were walking in the steps of the historical Buddha, that many of these problems were present in his day, albeit in different form. The contrast between the court where he had been brought up and what he saw outside was part of the young Gautama's impetus to search for enlightenment. The rapid, often painful, economic and political struggles, happening around us in modern India, mirrored the profound changes of the Buddha's day. Yet the buffalo, along with the buffalo boys, remains crucial to the rural economy.

We visited Uruvela village whose children the Buddha had taught — and whose modern children Thây had also taught in 1988. Rajesh, who at the age of 12 had gathered those children together for Thây, showed us around. The following day we waded through the Nairanjana river, now quite a distance from the Bodhi Tree — its course having changed over time — walked on across the fields and climbed to the Dungasiri mountains to the caves where Gautama the ascetic had meditated. One cave, shared with a Hindu deity, contains a striking image of the emaciated Gautama.

We rested and meditated there and walked back across the fields, picnicking on the way under a tree we shared with a Hindu village shrine, and watching rural life as we passed through villages — invited in one to join the revelries for Saraswati, the goddess of learning — and again wading the river. How had the emaciated Gautama walked that distance when so near death, he was rescued from by Sujata, the Uruvela village maiden?

Yes, the Buddha really was a man; one now understood this in a new way. Whatever else we learned/experienced this was a dominant realization, one that other pilgrims have also commented on. Serendipitously we were able to hear a dharma talk Christopher Titmuss gave at Sarnath, which reinforced this understanding and also illuminated our growing appreciation of the way the Buddha's teaching emerged from his royal experiences and his Hindu upbringing.

Many sites no longer echo the life of the Buddha's day in the way those villages, fields and paths still do. Bodhgaya, for example, was amazing. The Bodhi Tree, a descendant of the tree Gautama sat under until he reached enlightenment, once on the edge of the forest not far from the river, is now behind the great Mahabodhi Temple in grounds studded with stupas and at night candle—lit up by the faithful. Worshippers of all traditions from all over the world throng the site, circumambulate the temple, prostrate in front of the diamond throne. A microcosm of the Buddhist world was there: so many languages — from Pali and Sanskrit to those of the modern world; so many different coloured robes, garbs, chants, offerings, practice techniques. Some of our pilgrims found it too disturbing to sit through meditation there, but while Jennifer and others went to investigate the joyous noise made by the Bhutanese monks, some of us sat on. I retain a strong sense of what that meditation was about — out of a wonderful kaleidoscope of sound.

This place and many of the other major sites impressed us with the strength of the dharma that the



Bodhi Tree,
Bodhgaya

Buddha taught, its unity and variety. Many are the temples of the different nationalities — Japanese, Thai and Burmese being prominent — each proclaiming their faith and practice. We “temple hopped” down the main streets of Bodhgaya and also in Lumbini where the Buddha was born. The site — with its wonderful sculpture of the Buddha’s birth — is currently being re—organised and further temples erected.

In Nalanda came my first impression of the historic durability of the Dharma and the vicissitudes through which it has passed. Here are the well—excavated ruins of three successive monastic universities built one on top of the other in the fifth to the twelfth centuries A.D. Although legend has it that the invading Muslims drove Buddhism from India, we learned that — while they may have been the last straw — by then the University (for so long foremost in the world) was seriously weakened by internal and external difficulties.

Shantum, whose grass circle talks at every site were excellent, had reminded us at the outset that India is now a secular state, but it remains a spiritual country. Most of the areas we went through were predominantly Hindu — we visited some Hindu shrines where we were blessed. The so—ancient Hindu beliefs and practices deepened my understanding of the way Shakyamuni Buddha developed his teachings.

We saw the sun rise over the Ganges at Varanasi (Benares), the most sacred Hindu city, as we were rowed past the ghats where the dohis beat the dirt out of the washing, where the devout bathe at dawn in the holy water of Mother Ganga, and where the dead are cremated before their ashes are committed to her. We sat and watched the sunset in places where the Buddha had also watched it, notably Vulture Peak.

A morning meditation in the Temple at Kushinagar beside the great statue of the reclining Buddha was a profound experience indeed. Sarnath, the deer park where the Buddha set the Wheel of the Dharma turning, with its statue of the teaching Buddha, the great stupa and the trees and greenswards, was impressive. For me, however, if I had to choose one place only that I could return to it might well be Sravasti, our last stop. Jeta Grove, Anathapindika’s gift to the Buddha, remains beautiful and peaceful, resonant still of all those rains retreats the Buddha spent there. On the final morning after meditation Shantum invited me to read the fourteen mindfulness trainings — such a privilege. Many of the pilgrims had not heard them before and were delighted with what they heard. One can think of no better conclusion to a magnificent and enlightening trip where we walked not only in the footsteps of the Buddha but also of Thich Nhat Hanh.

For information about future pilgrimages consult the Seth’s web page: <[www:buddhath.com](http://www.buddhath.com)>
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