

Walking With the Buddha

A photo essay

by

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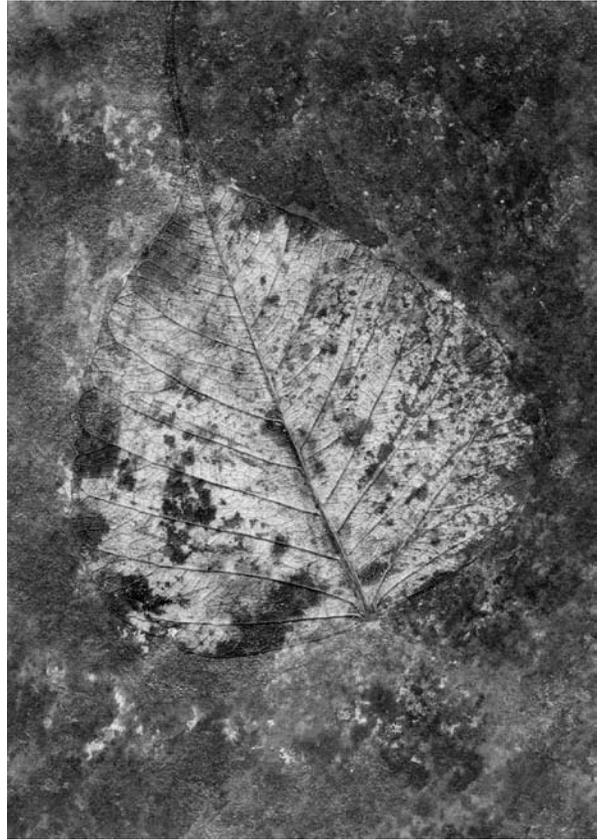
A pilgrimage is a journey made to sacred places as an act of devotion. In January 2007, I had an opportunity to travel in the company of Shantum Seth, an experienced guide, who has led pilgrimages since 1988, and a Dharma teacher ordained by the Vietnamese Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh. Twenty pilgrims and I visited sacred Buddhist places in India and Nepal. I had never traveled with a group before and was not sure what to expect, so before I left I emailed Shifu to ask him how one prepares for a pilgrimage. He wrote, "Just keep your heart open." I needn't have worried, because once I got there I realized that Shifu's teachings over the years had been so clear and thorough, I was already prepared.



Siddhartha Shakyamuni abandoned palace life in search of a way to alleviate human suffering. Through the practice of meditation he achieved supreme prajna, or wisdom, and became an enlightened being, or Buddha. For the rest of his life Shakyamuni taught others how to reach this goal. Before he died, the Buddha suggested that it would be of great benefit to those interested in his teachings to make a pilgrimage to the places associated with his life.

In LUMBINI, just outside of Kapilavastu, Queen Maya gave birth to Siddhartha Gautama by holding onto a tree. When he was born, Asita, a respected sage, was invited to do a reading of the baby. He said that he would be either a great warrior, or if he witnessed suffering, would become a universal teacher. This photo shows the place where Queen Maya bathed the baby Buddha.

RAJGIR -During the lifetime of the Buddha, the hills and caves surrounding Rajgir were home to spiritual teachers. It was at Rajgir that Siddhartha came to seek the path of liberation. It was also here, after 6 years of ascetic life, that the Buddha decided to leave ascetic life. His five friends, who were on the same spiritual path, abandoned him since they felt spiritual salvation was not possible through any other means.



BODH GAYA - Here the Tathagata attained enlightenment. Tathagatha means; One who has thus come, thus gone. The story goes that he spread kusha grass beneath the tree – vowed not to get up until he attained supreme knowledge. For 49 days Mara assaulted him in vain. On the full moon in April-May he attained Samma Sambodhi – the Enlightenment that he was looking for. Here he became the Buddha or the Awakened one.

The SACRED BODHI TREE at the Mahabodhi Temple. The tree is a UNESCO World Heritage Site – The original tree was destroyed and replanted at least 5 times. The present tree grew from a sapling brought from the tree in Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. It is believed to be a sixth generation descendent of the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment 2,500 years ago. Shantum led a mindfulness exercise with a group of us sitting under the tree. Tears fell from my eyes that had nothing to do with “I, me, mine.”



VULTURE PEAK (Griddhakuta Hill) – In cut caves the Buddha spent many rainy seasons meditating and teaching. It was here that he delivered the Lotus Sutra and the Prajnaparamita of Perfect Wisdom Sutra. At the heart of the Lotus Sutra are three major concepts: 1) That everyone can attain Enlightenment; 2) that the Buddha is eternal, having existed from the infinite past and appearing in many forms throughout the ages to guide and teach the Law, and; 3) the noblest path is that of the Bodhisattva, one who de-

votes himself to attaining enlightenment not only for himself but for all sentient beings.

Devadatta was one of Shakyamuni's cousins, but he became his rival and enemy. It was here that the Buddha was first brought when he was wounded by a rock thrown by Devadatta. By the time the rock came close enough, only a shard touched the Buddha's foot. In the Lotus Sutra, the Buddha predicts that Devadatta will become a Buddha, which indicates that all beings, no matter how evil, can become Buddhas.





VARANASI - is located on the West bank of the Ganga River and flows through the north Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Buddha traveled 200 kms from Bodh Gaya to the ghats of Varanasi or Kashi (City of Light) looking for the five Hindu saddhu ascetics, old friends of his on the path.

Varanasi, Benares, or Kashi, is a place of spiritual pilgrimage. Hindus believe that bathing in the Ganga washes away sins. Nearby there is also Avimukta, the city that is never forsaken by Lord Shiva, and the Mahashamshana, the great cremation ground.

SARNATH DEER PARK – DHAMEKH STUPA – Here the Buddha found his five friends, at Rishipatta, the Deer Park near Kashi, and gave the first teaching. The turning of the Dharma Wheel. Possibly built 500 AD. A 33-meter high solid cylindrical tower. Borders have geometrical and floral patterns and figures of humans and birds. Base is stone; upper areas are brick.



NALANDA, in Bihar, has the ruins of one of the world's oldest monastic universities, founded in the 5th century AD. In the 7th century Hiuen Tsang spent 12 years there as a student and teacher. Once had 3,000 students from Java, Sumatra, Korea, Japan and China. The Buddha came here often. Sariputra came from the area and attained Nirvana here. The arts of debate and public speaking, math and medicine were taught here. Nagarjuna and Padmasambavha went to Tibet from Nalanda to spread the teachings of Shakyamuni. A fire and schisms between Buddhist sects and the resurgence of devotional Hinduism almost destroyed Nalanda. Now a World Heritage Site, it is open to the public.



SRAVASTI was the town where the Buddha held retreats for 25 years during the rainy season when the Sangha stayed in one place. This place is called Jeta Grove or Jetavana Vihara.



JETA GROVE – A wealthy merchant, Sudatta, invited the Buddha to Sravasti and looked for a suitable place to build a retreat center. There was a beautiful park in the south edge of Sravasti that belonged to Jeta, son of the King of Sravasti. Jeta demanded that Sudatta cover the entire park with gold coins. Sudatta painstakingly paved every inch of the land with gold. Then Jeta said that since the trees were left uncovered they belonged to him. Finally he changed his mind and donated valuable wood to build the center. The park became known as the Jetavana Vihara after Prince Jeta's donation to the Sangha.

KUSHINAGAR is the place the Buddha chose for his Mahaparinirvana, or final exit from earth. In 543 BC on the full moon night, the Buddha lectured to the Sangha on the impermanence of all living things, and said that his own life would end soon. In this town, a metalsmith, Chunda, invited the Sangha for a meal. When he tasted the food, the Buddha immediately realized there was something wrong with it and asked Chunda to bury the rest so the others would not be harmed by it.

Chunda was overwhelmed with grief and guilt knowing that his meal was the cause of a fatal illness for the Buddha. The Buddha consoled him saying that the one who donates the Buddha's last meal acquires great merit.

The **MAHAPARINIRVANA TEMPLE** enshrines a six-meter long statue of the Buddha in the Paranirvana posture. Carved from black stone, the statue now looks metallic gold because of the application of gold leaf by pilgrims.

