



PILGRIMAGE SITES AND FESTIVALS RELATED TO BUDDHA'S RELICS

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Abstract

The Buddha's pilgrimage sites have been growing for millennia and continue to change in the current era. Buddhists visit these locations, revered as holy spaces, to pay respects, reaffirm their beliefs, and seek enlightenment. According to Buddhism, the pilgrimage sites in India and Nepal include Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and Lumbini. Regional cultures, resources, and historical events have influenced the evolution of these places. The process has frequently involved building temples, monasteries, and other buildings and producing Buddhist-related cultural and artistic works. India and Nepal are corporate organizations that have invested heavily in promotion. Festivals related to Buddha's relics are as follows: 1. Buddha Tooth Relic Festival (Sri Lanka), 2. Shwedagon Pagoda Festival (Myanmar), 3. Maha Stupa Festival (India), 4. Parinirvana Day (Various Countries), 5. Relic Processions in Thailand. These festivals are celebrated around the world.

Key Words - Holy places, Enlightenment, Bodhi Gaya, Sarnath, Lumbini, Buddha's Relics

Introduction

Siddhartha Gautama, also known as the Buddha, was an ancient Indian philosopher and the founder of Buddhism. He lived in the 5th century BCE, and his teachings profoundly impacted the world. Siddhartha was born into a wealthy family in Lumbini, now modern-day Nepal. According to legend, his birth was accompanied by encouraging signs, including a lotus flower blooming beneath his feet and a shower of fragrant flowers falling from the sky. As a young man, Siddhartha was sheltered from the world's suffering by his father, who wanted him to become a great king. However, at twenty-nine, Siddhartha left his palace and set out into the world, seeking enlightenment. For six years, Siddhartha studied with various teachers and practiced asceticism, but he found no lasting solution to the problem of suffering. Finally, he

sat under a Bodhi tree and vowed not to rise until he had attained enlightenment. After a long period of meditation, Siddhartha experienced a profound realization and became the Buddha, or the "Enlightened One." He spent the rest of his life teaching the Dhamma, which offered a path to liberation from suffering. He did missionary work for forty-five years and finally attained Maha Parinibbana at Kushinaga. In the Maha Parinibbana Sutta, the final days of the Buddha are described. After his Maha Parinibbana, his body was cremated, and his remains were distributed among his followers. According to the Mahā Parinibbana Sutta, after his Parinibbana in Kushinagar, the remains of the Buddha were cremated at that location. Initially, his ashes were sent only to the Sakya clan, where the Buddha was gone.

However, six clans and a king demanded the ashes of the Buddha. A Brahmin named Dona divided the Buddha's relics into eight portions to resolve this dispute. These eight portions were delivered as follows: to Ajatasatthu, king of Magadha; to the Licchavis of Visali; to the Sakyas of Kapilavatthu, to the Bulis of Allakappa, to the Koliyas of Ramagama, to the Brahmin of Vethadīpa, to the Mallas of Pava, and to the Mallas of Kushinaga. In addition to these eight portions, two other essential relics were contributed by Dona (the Brahmin who contributed the relics of Buddha) and received the body of Buddha. The Moriyas of Pipphalivana received the residual ashes of the funeral pyre.

Pilgrimage Sites and Festivals

There are many important pilgrimage sites for Buddhists, as it is the birthplace of Buddha. Here are some of the most important Buddhist pilgrimage sites they are:

Bodh Gaya: Bodh Gayā is a religious site and place of pilgrimage associated with the Mahabodhi Temple complex, situated in the Gaya district in the Indian state of Bihar. It is famous for being the place where Gautama Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment (Pali: *bodhi*) under what became known as the Bodhi Tree. Since antiquity, Bodh Gayā has remained the object of pilgrimage and veneration for Buddhists. In particular, archaeological finds, including sculptures, show that the site was in use by Buddhists since the Mauryan period. Bodh Gayā is considered the holiest site in Buddhism. Known as Uruvela in the Buddha's time, it is by the bank of the Niranjana River. The first temple at the site was built by the Maurya Emperor Ashoka. Bodh Gayā's history is documented by many inscriptions and pilgrimage accounts. Foremost among these are the accounts of the Chinese pilgrims Faxian in the 5th century and Xuanzang in the 7th century. The area was at the heart of a Buddhist civilization for centuries, until it was conquered by Turkic armies in the 13th century.

Sarnath: (also known as Deer Park, Isipatana Deer Park, Rishi Pattana, Migadaya, or Mrigadava) is a town northeast of Varanasi, in Uttar Pradesh, India. The Buddha chose "Deer Park by the Hill of the Fallen Sages, outside of Varanasi" for his first teaching after he attained enlightenment in Bodh Gaya. The teaching is entitled *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*. Sarnath is one of the eight most important pilgrimage sites for Buddhists, and has been nominated to become a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Sarnath is where Gautama Buddha's sangha first convened, when he gave the first teaching to his original five disciples, Kodinnya, Vappa, Bhaddiya, Mahanama, and Assaji, known as The First Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma. This teaching occurred around 528 BCE when the Buddha was approximately 35 years of age. The Buddha before Gautama Buddha is Kassapa Buddha, who was born in Sarnath, where he returned and joined his sangha of men and women in order to give his first teaching.

Kushinagar: (Pali: *Kusinārā*) is a town in the Kushinagar district in Uttar Pradesh, India, 53 kilometres (33 miles) east of Gorakhpur on National Highway 27. Kushinagar is a Buddhist pilgrimage site, where Buddhists believe the Buddha's Mahaparinibbana. According to Alexander Cunningham, Kushinagar was named for the abundance of the kusha grass found in this region. According to the *Mahāparinibbāṇa Sutta*, the Buddha attained parinirvana shortly after he arrived in Kushinagar. Seven days after his parinirvana, the remains of the Buddha were cremated at that location. Originally, his ashes were to go only to the Sakya clan, to which the Buddha belonged. Six other clans and a king demanded the ashes of the Buddha. To resolve the dispute, a Brahmin named Drona divided the ashes into eight portions, distributed as follows: to Ajātasattu, king of Magadha; to the Licchavis of Vesali; to the Sakyas of Kapilavatthu; to the Bulis of Allakappa; to the Koliyas of Ramagama; to the Brahmin of Vethadipa; to the Mallas of Pava; and to the Malls of Kushinagar. In addition to these eight portions, two other relics were distributed at that time: Drona (the brahmin who distributed the relics) received the vessel in which the body had been cremated, and the Moriyas of Pipphalivana received the remaining ashes of the funeral pyre.

Lumbini: Lumbini is a Buddhist pilgrimage site in the Rupandehi District of Lumbini Province in Nepal. According to the sacred texts of the Buddhist Commentaries, Maya Devi gave birth to Siddhartha Gotama in Lumbini around 624 BCE. Siddhartha Gotama achieved Enlightenment and became Shakyamuni Buddha, who founded Buddhism. He later passed into *Mahaparinibbana* at the age of eighty, in 544 BCE. Lumbini is one of the four most

sacred pilgrimage sites pivotal in the life of the Buddha. Lumbini has several old temples, including the Mayadevi Temple, and several new temples, funded by Buddhist organizations from various countries. Most of the temples have already been completed, and some are still under construction.

Many monuments, monasteries, stupas, a museum, and the Lumbini International Research Institute are also near the holy site. In the time of the Buddha, Lumbini was situated east of Kapilavastu and south-west of Devadaha of Shakya, an oligarchic republic. Lumbini complex is divided into three areas: the Sacred Garden, the Monastic Zone, the Cultural Center, and New Lumbini Village. The Sacred Garden remains the epicenter of the Lumbini area and consists of the birthplace of Buddha and other monuments of archaeological and spiritual importance, such as the Mayadevi Temple, the Ashoka Pillar, the Marker Stone, the Nativity Sculpture, Puskarini Sacred Pond, and other structural ruins of Buddhist stupas and viharas. The Monastic Zone, spanning an area of one square mile, is divided into two zones: the East Monastic Zone, which represents the Theravada school of Buddhism, and the West Monastic Zone, which represents the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools of Buddhism, with their respective monasteries on either side of a long pedestrian walkway and canal.

Rajgiri: (name Rajgir, literally meaning "royal mountain", comes from the historic Rājagriha (Pali: *Rajagaha*), meaning "house of the king" or "royal house") is an ancient city and university town in the Nalanda district of Bihar, India. Also, the cultural capital of Magadha. It was the capital of the Haryanka dynasty, the Pradyota dynasty, the Brihadratha dynasty, the Mauryan Empire, and it was the retreat center for the Buddha and his sangha. Other historical figures such as Mahavira and King Bimbisara lived there, and due to its religious significance, the city holds a place of prominence in Buddhist, Jain, and Hindu scriptures.

Rajgir was the first capital of the ancient kingdom of Magadha, a state that would eventually evolve into the Mauryan Empire. The ancient Nalanda University was located in the vicinity of Rajgir, and the contemporary Nalanda University, named after it, was founded in 2010 nearby. The town is also famed for its natural springs and towering hills that dominate the landscape. Rajagiri was an important city during the time of the Buddha and is home to several important Buddhist sites, including the Vulture's Peak, where the Buddha gave several important sermons, and the Gijjakutta mountain, where the Buddha spent much time in meditation.

Savatthi: Savatthi is a town in the Shravasti district in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. It was the capital of the ancient Indian kingdom of Kosala, where the Buddha lived most after his enlightenment. It is near the Rapti River in the northeastern part of Uttar Pradesh, India, close to the Nepalese border. Savatthi is one of the most revered sites of Buddhism. It is believed to be where the Buddha taught many of his *Suttas* (sermons), converted many of his famous disciples, and performed his "great miracle" and "twin miracle," a subject of numerous historic reliefs, statues, and literature in Buddhism. Savatthi, as a capital, was at the junction of three major trading routes in ancient India, connecting it to the different regions of the Indian subcontinent. Inscribed slabs and statues found at and near Savatthi suggest it was an active Buddhist site and prosperous area from the time of the Buddha, around the 5th century BCE, through at least the 12th century CE. Savatthi is the location where the Buddha gave most of his Dhamma talks, later remembered by His followers and centuries later written down as *Suttas*. Savatthi was an essential Buddhist city during the time of the Buddha and is home to several important sites, including the Jetavana monastery, where the Buddha spent several rainy seasons, and the Ananda Bodhi tree, where the Buddha meditated.

Vesali: It was an ancient city and today an archaeological site located north of Patna in present-day Bihar, India. It is also a Buddhist pilgrimage site. The Buddha preached his last sermon before his Maha Parinirvana around 544 BCE, and Vaishali is also home to two important stupas directly related to the Buddha, the Relic Stupa of Vaishali, which is said to contain the ashes of the Buddha. The last Tirthankara of Jainism, Mahavira, was born in *Kundagrama*, which has been identified as a suburb of the city of Vaishali, and he was therefore referred to as Vesali. The city finds mention in the travel accounts of Chinese explorers, Faxian around (4th century CE) and Xuanzang (7th century CE), which were later used in 1861 by British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham to first identify Vesali with the present village of Basarh in the Vaishali District of Bihar. Vesali is well known for its close association with the Buddha. After leaving Kapilavatthu for renunciation, Prince Siddhartha came to Vaishali first and undertook his initial spiritual training from Uddaka Rāmaputta and Ālāra Kālāma. After the Enlightenment, the Buddha frequently visited Vaishali. He organized the Sangha on the pattern of Vesalian democracy. It was here that he first allowed females to join the sangha, initiating his maternal aunt Mahapajapati Gotami into the order. Vesali was an important city during the time of the Buddha, and Vesali is home to several important Buddhist sites, including

the Kutagarasala Vihara, where the Buddha stayed, and the Ananda Stupa, which is said to contain the ashes of Ananda, the Buddha's disciple.

There are many crucial Buddhist pilgrimage sites. When pilgrims visit these sites, they can realize the teachings of the Buddha, which can be a transformative experience for many pilgrims. When the Chinese pilgrims Faxian (337 - 422 CE) and Xuanzang (602 - 664 CE) visited India centuries later, they reported that most ancient sites were ruined. These Asoka edicts, which were written in Prakrit and Brahmi script, are considered some of the earliest written documents in India and provide essential insights into the history and culture of the Mauryan Empire. Asoka is said to have personally visited many of these stupas and donated to support the spread of Buddhism.

Moreover, the Maha Parinibbana Sutta says that of the Buddha's four eye teeth, one tooth was worshipped by Indra's celestial, the second in the city of Gandhara, the third in Kalinga, and the fourth in Rāmagāma by the king of the Nagas. Annually, tooth relics are paraded through the streets of Sri Lanka and China. In India, the "Great Stupa" at Sanchi is the oldest structure and was initially commissioned by the emperor Asoka the Great of the Maurya Empire in the third century BCE. Its nucleus was built over the sacred relics of the Buddha. According to Myanmar tradition, some legends state that the Shwedagon Pagoda in Myanmar houses eight strands of Buddha's hair relics, which were given to the first two disciples of Buddha (Taputta and Bhallika). Buddha's hair relics were enshrined at Sule and Botataung Pagodas in Yangon (Myanmar). There were three bone fragments of the Buddha in the Kanishka casket, which arrived in Myanmar by the British following the excavation, where they remain in U Khandi's monastery in Mandalay.

Conclusion

Among these numerous festivals, in Sri Lanka, the New Harvest Festival in January (Duruthu), the New Year Festival in April (Bak), the Esala Perahera Festival in July or August (Esala or Nikini), and the Karthika Festival in November are considered the four main traditional festivals of the Temple of Sacred Tooth Relic. The Festival of the Sacred Tooth Relic is one of the oldest and most significant Buddhist festivals, involving dancers, jugglers, musicians, fire eaters, and lavishly ornamented elephants. The lunar calendar determines the ten-day festivity date, usually in July or August. In China and other Mahayana countries, they also celebrated the Buddha's relic stupa festivals according to their traditions and rituals.

Generally, Buddhist festivals are celebrated to commemorate important events in the Buddha's life, honor Buddhist teachings and principles, and bring together the Buddhist community in spiritual practice since the lifetime of the Buddha. Making offerings is mainly a way of expressing gratitude and respect for the Buddha. We can make offerings of food, flowers, candles, and incense and engage in virtuous activities such as meditation, chanting, and studying the dharma. These activities help to cultivate inner peace, merits, respect, purification of the mind, and wisdom. Offering Buddha's relics is essential in many branches of Buddhism. It is considered a way of deepening one's spiritual connection to the Buddha and other enlightened masters. By offering relics, one can accumulate positive karma, develop spiritual qualities, and progress towards enlightenment.

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