

A PILGRIMAGE IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

by JOAN HAMZE

For many years I had considered going on a Pilgrimage in the Footsteps of the Buddha, but the timing had never been right. When I heard of this one being organised by Shantum Seth of New Delhi, it was convenient for me and it seemed to be most well organised. This appealed to me as I am now old and felt I might have left it rather late for such a venture.

Two other people - Stephen Penn and Mike Regan - were also planning to come from Coventry, England, and Shantum most thoughtfully suggested that they communicate with me. From the moment we all met at Heathrow the whole journey took on a feeling of adventure, particularly because of the trouble that was being reported about India at that time.

As soon as I met Shantum in New Delhi I felt sure I had not made a mistake in coming on this particular Pilgrimage. Before leaving Delhi he invited us all to his home to meet his family, who proved to be most kind and charming people. While we were in his home, he set us up with what proved to be essential items for the journey.

There were eight of us in the party besides Shantum. We all agreed this was really an ideal number. Besides the three of us from England, there was Jerry and Mark Braza, a father and son from Salt Lake City. Doris Field, a grandmother from Houston, Texas. Jacalyn Bennett and Andrew Hier from Massachusetts. From the beginning we seemed to instinctively become friendly with each other and were a truly united party, inspite of our differences of background.

Just before we arrived in India an internal air strike had started, but fortunately Shantum had been able to book us all on the night train to Patna so the Pilgrimage was not disrupted. At the end of the train journey a bus was waiting for us and from then until the end of the Pilgrimage all our travelling took place in this bus, which was driven by a highly skilled driver Mr. V.P. Singh and his kindly and helpful assistant Mr. Ayub Kahn.

Our first stop was at RAJGIR where we were taken to the best accommodation in town, which was truly appreciated. A feature of the journey throughout was that wherever we stopped we stayed in the best place available. On this Pilgrimage there was so much to see that one needed to have ones mundane comforts considered in order to be refreshed to take full advantage of all the wonderful experiences that were on offer.

As we started to travel in the footsteps of the Buddha, a deep feeling of peace came upon one which seemed to grow in power as the journey progressed. At the first stop the highlight of the visit was the VULTURES PEAK where we went at sunset, which was the Buddha's favourite time for being in this place. Getting to the top involved a steep climb but some member of the party was always at hand to help me up the steepest paths. Getting to the top proved to be a spell binding experience. Shantum invariably mentioned some relevant detail that gave one a vivid impression of how it must have been at the time of the Buddha.

Next morning we visited the BAMBOO GROVE that King Bimbisaro presented to the Buddha, this too was a beautiful and peaceful place.

We then moved on and stayed for three nights just outside BUDDHA GAYA. While there we visited URUVELA village where the young SUJATA gave Siddhartha the milk rice to end his period of austerities. We also visited the DUNGASIRI CAVE where as a Bodhisatta the Buddha spent six years practising various austerities. Because this was to be a particularly strenuous climb, Shantum engaged two strong sixteen year old lads to help me. The cave is now being looked after by some Tibetan Lamas. This was another place where there was a great feeling of peace. Although the cave is small we were all able to get into it together and meditate for a while.

Throughout the Pilgrimage we had a Group Meditation in at least one place every day.

Buddha Gaya is considered to be the holiest of all Buddhist places as it was here that Prince Siddhartha attained Enlightenment. While at Buddha Gaya, each morning we were able to meditate close by the Bodhi tree and Mahabodhi Temple which mark the spot. This is a place where all visitors find it most helpful to meditate. We were particularly fortunate in having a group of Tibetan Lamas also visiting the site and we found their devotion most inspiring. On the second day we saw the little boy who had recently been found in KATMANDUE who was considered to be a reincarnated Lama who had been a great teacher.

Apparently there are always many people in Buddha Gaya, so here particularly we were most grateful to Shantum for seeing that no mundane problems occurred to mar our experiences.

After leaving Buddha Gaya, we proceeded to VARANASI where the Buddha preached his first sermon in the DEER PARK. The Deer Park was the hunting preserve of the King of Varanasi and is situated six miles to the north of the town where the present site of SARNATH is situated. Here at the Deer Park, facing the spot where the Buddha preached his first Discourse, we meditated for a while and a beautiful translation of that Discourse was read. Following that we had a most interesting Dhamma discussion. Everyone in the group sharing freely the ups and downs they were experiencing in their Dhamma practice. We stayed the whole day in this area. Mike and I spent quite a while meditating in the Sri Lanka Temple, which is truly beautiful, and where the peace that pervades the whole of the Deer Park area was also very strong.

Shantum told us that in this area the Buddha must have walked along the shores of the RIVER GANGES. So at 6.00am the next day we all proceeded to a place where we could hire a large rowing boat to row us along the river so that we could see the route the Buddha must have taken. It was indeed an amazing sight where all of life and death seemed to be depicted so serenely. After the river trip we went to Benares which was nearby, where a friend of Shantum's gave us breakfast.

The journey from VARANASI to KUSHINAGAR is a long one, there was dense fog all the way. This apparently is a frequent occurrence on this route, but it meant that we did not reach our destination until well after midnight. We were all full of gratitude and admiration for Mr Singh's skillful driving. Even though it was so late, we were given a delicious meal soon after our arrival. Next morning naturally we got up rather later than usual.

It was here in KUSHINAGAR, in a forest of Sal trees that the Buddha died and attained Mahaparanivanna. A large stone figure of the reclining Buddha has been carved and a Stupa has been built to house some of the relics of the Buddha after his cremation. We met each day by the reclining Buddha statue for meditation and a relevant reading from the scriptures. After wandering

round the ruins for a while we sat down and Shantum told us the story of the events that took place here. While he was talking a large monkey came along and sat perched on a wall perfectly still all the time he was talking.

The fog was still quite dense. In the late afternoon we all walked the two kilometres to the Stupa commemorating the Buddha's cremation. It was dusk by the time we arrived, but light enough for us to circumambulate the Stupa three times. This for me was the highlight of the Pilgrimage, I would almost say it was a magical experience. It was obvious that here particularly all members of the group were deeply moved, as they were at the other places I found so uplifting. In his usual thoughtful way, Shantum had provided a rickshaw in which I was driven back to the hotel. Before leaving this sacred place we circumambulated round the reclining Buddha statue and it seemed that we all left in a particularly peaceful state. A packed lunch was provided for us by the Hotel and we were then heading for LUMBINI.

It was dark when we arrived at the border where our passports had to be checked. For a party of nine this took quite a while, but Shantum's experience and efficiency enabled this to take place with the least disturbance for us. On arriving at LUMBINI we booked in at a most comfortable Japanese-run hotel where we were able to refresh ourselves completely. It was here that I was most aware of the strong feeling of friendliness that had grown up between the members of our group. There was a Shrine Room in one part of the hotel grounds and so each day we had our early morning meditation and Sutta reading in this peaceful room.

LUMBINI, which is across the border into the Himalayan Kingdom of Nepal, was the birthplace of Prince Siddhartha Gautama, who was later to become the Buddha. Queen Mayadevi of the Sakya clan was on her way to her parental home for the birth, as was the custom in those days, when under a sita Ashok tree she gave birth to the Prince.

We went by bus to the Lumbini Gardens. When we came to the place where Emperor Ashoka had erected a Pillar to commemorate the birth of the Buddha, we sat down and Shantum told us all the stories about the birth, and also about the Lumbini Development Project that is being sponsored by the United Nations.

We saw the Temple of Mahadiva and a tank in which it is said that the young Prince was bathed shortly after his birth. Shantum knew the Archaeologist who had been working there for many years, and he had most interesting things to tell us, including the fact that a few weeks ago he had discovered a carving depicting the birth of the Buddha that was older than the Ashoka Pillar that made it look as if the actual birth of the Prince might have taken place a short distance away from the Ashoka Pillar. He was so knowledgeable about the site and he made everything sound so interesting that it was hard to drag ourselves away. When we eventually did we walked back to the hotel which was very pleasant.

That evening we had a Communal Japanese Bath which was most relaxing. It lasted several hours. During that time most people shared some aspect of their life with the group and also mentioned what it was that had made them join the Pilgrimage.

Next morning Jacalyn was ill and she and Andrew decided to abandon the trip. Our sadness that this should have happened, once again showed what a close knit group we had become.

We then returned to India, and once again Shantum took over the long and tedious side of having our passports checked. When this was over we had

another picnic lunch, this time on our way to BALRAMPUR which is near to KAPILAVASTU and SRAVASTI.

We arrived after dark at Travotel Maya in Balrampur, where we were made most welcome. In the morning we went to KAPILAVASTU itself, where once stood the Palace of Siddhartha's father King Suddhodhana. Here we had our meditation and Sutta reading and later saw the ruins of the Palace and Granary.

In the afternoon we went to SRAVASTI which is the ancient capital of the KOSHALA Kingdom, where the Buddha spent twenty four Rainy seasons, and where He taught awareness of breathing. It is also where He converted the notorious murderer ANGULIMALA. The road down which it all took place can still be seen and a STUPA has been erected to mark the spot. We also saw the JETAVANA PARK which was presented to the Buddha by the banker ANATHAPINDIKA, who purchased it from Prince Jeta by covering its ground with gold coins. This was another place where a feeling of peacefulness was felt in all parts of the Park.

Next morning we visited the Sri Lanka Temple in which there are thirty beautiful paintings depicting the life of the Buddha.

After that we went again to the Jetavana Park for our last meditation and Sutta reading together. This we had on a section of the ruins which faces the Bodhi tree which Ananda planted, so that when the Buddha was no longer there people would have something to remember him by. It was a fitting site to finish our Pilgrimage, with our hearts filled with peace. For me it was indeed the end of a true Pilgrimage - a perfect Pilgrimage.

The Buddha Himself said that it would be meritorious for His followers to visit various places that had been important in His life and Teaching. For anyone wanting to take this Pilgrimage, one could not find a better guide than Shantum Seth. His ancestors have lived in the UTTAR PRADESH and BIHAR area of India for innumerable generations. He was brought up in India and speaks the languages of the areas to be visited, and he has done much research into all aspects of the life of the Buddha, besides being a wonderful story teller so that he can make even the most well known stories take on a new freshness. He is a devout lay Buddhist and a student of the Vietnamese Zen Master THICH NHAT HANH. He has organised many similar Pilgrimages to the one I have just described, including the visit of the Venerable Thich Nhat Hanh, who travelled with forty students from ten countries.

Shantum lived in England and the USA for twelve years, which makes him well able to explain the underlying structures and subtleties of Indian life to those unfamiliar with the country and society. He is at present working in India as a consultant for the United Nations Development Programme.

Shantum Seth's address is:-

