

Seeking the Buddha's Footprints

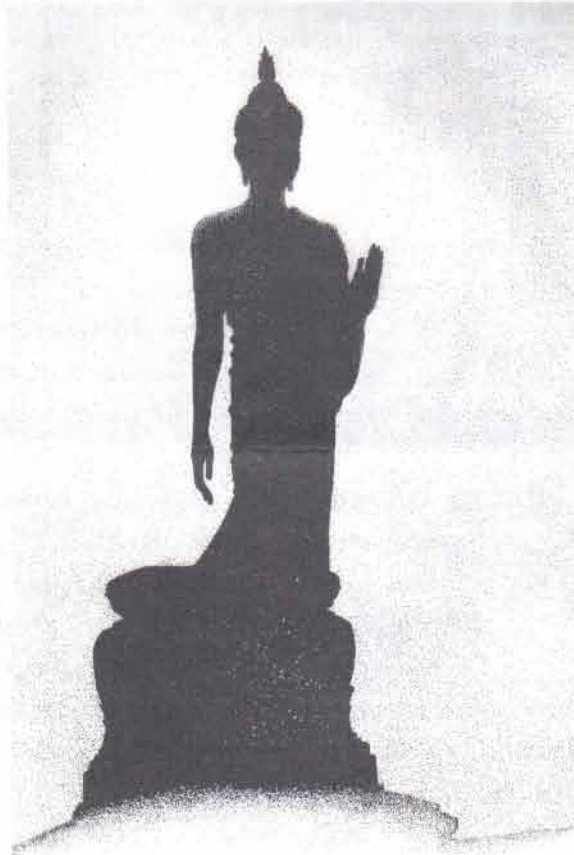
'Ananda, there are four places for faithful disciples to see, which may be their inspiration: here a Perfect One was born...discovered the full supreme Enlightenment...set rolling the matchless wheel of the Law...here a Perfect One finally attained Nibbana.'

Returning to the source of the Buddha's life and teaching through the ancient practice of pilgrimage, Angela Coton explains how she was able to deepen her faith in the simplicity of her own practice back home in England:-

The opportunity to join a pilgrimage, 'In the Footsteps of the Buddha', through India and Nepal came just when I was beginning to involve my heart more in my practice and to develop a sense of gratitude to the person who gave us the Dhamma. It was a three week journey, combining meditation, sightseeing and talks about the Buddha's life, led by Shantum Seth, a disciple of the Vietnamese Zen Master, Thich Nhat Hanh.

I had expected a powerful emotional experience, something dramatic and overpowering – as if merely to sit beneath the Bodhi tree would shatter all my greed, hatred and delusion and propel me to Nibbana in a blaze of flashing lights! But of course, as I found out, the Buddha's footprints are harder to follow.

At dusk on the second day of the pilgrimage we walked up Vultures Peak, a hill near Rajgir where the Buddha often sat to watch the sunset. The view of the surrounding wooded hills must be similar to that of two and a half thousand years ago, and the steps are the same ones that were laid for the Buddha by the local king, Bimbisara. I took off my shoes as I climbed, in an attempt to bring myself closer to the earth, to the Buddha who had walked there. At the top, where a shrine had been built for pilgrims to offer incense, we sat in meditation facing the glorious red sunset. I reminded myself that the Buddha sat here: but felt remote from the experience, as if the pious monuments built by his followers actually separated me from the Buddha himself.



Just south of the modern city is the attractive Bamboo Grove – still containing bamboos – where the Buddha's first monastery was built. This park, peaceful amid India's customary noise and bustle, seemed much more as it would have been in the Buddha's day although the monks and monasteries were missing. We sat quietly to hear Shantum tell the story of the Buddha and King Bimbisara who had donated the grove.

Our visit to Bodhi Gaya, next on our itinerary, happened to coincide with a Nyingmapa Tibetan festival which had drawn thousands of mainly Bhutanese monks. With every inch of ground around the main temple occupied by prostrating pilgrims and chanting monks, we were unable to reach the base of the Bodhi tree. However, Shantum obtained permission for us to take the stairs to the temple's roof, where we meditated under the upper branches of the tree. The Tibetan chanting – a rhythmic, powerful sound – drowned all internal distractions. I began to realise the futility of expecting Buddhist shrines in modern

India to be anything like the places that the Buddha knew. What the places offered was the experience of Buddhism as a living, dynamic faith.

The Bhutanese pilgrims swirled like a river around the temple, circumambulating step by step or in full-length prostrations. They chanted quietly to themselves and turned their prayer wheels: each was totally absorbed in his or her devotions. It was impossible not to be awed by the intense concentration, not to be overwhelmed by the massed monks and nuns in their red and yellow robes.

The local people are Hindu and Muslim, but every Buddhist nation has at least one temple in Bodhi Gaya.

We spent an afternoon at the Root Institute, a Tibetan Buddhist organisation which tries to serve the material as well as the spiritual needs of the local people. We visited Tibetan, Japanese, Thai and Bhutanese temples, and also the Vietnamese temple (closed) and the Burmese temple (run-down and used as a dormitory); we wondered whether, as the Dhamma spread, there might one day be an 'English Temple'. I felt the power of the Buddha's teaching, whose many different traditions, sundered by time and geography, could still meet peacefully. Our own group of three Britons, five Americans and our Indian guide represented at least four traditions. Two of us, Carol Williams and I, practise in the Theravadin Forest Tradition.

Before leaving Bodh Gaya we visited the hills nearby, where the Buddha-to-be practised austerities. The cave he was said to have used had been visited by other pilgrims before us; their votive candles made it unbearably hot and smoky. Without the temple and shrine, and the long line of sometimes aggressive beggars, it would have been a lonely, barren place.

At Sarnath, where the Buddha expounded the teaching to the five ascetics, we sat by the ruined wall of a monastery and listened to the story of the first sermon. In the evening, the resident Sri Lankan monks held their puja and I managed to find space inside their crowded temple to listen. The unfamiliar style of Pali chanting — the monks' voices amplified by loud speakers, those of the lay people in the background — washed through the building like waves beating upon a shore. Although very different from the Tibetan chanting, it was equally moving.

Kushinagar, the site of the Buddha's death, is a quiet town without the beggars and street merchants we had met elsewhere. The stupa, built on the site of the Buddha's cremation, is a venerable brick ruin completely covered with grass, shrubs and even tiny Bo tree saplings, which have to be constantly removed lest they tear it apart. At this peaceful stupa, it no longer mattered that I could not feel the living presence of the Buddha: Kushinagar was, after all, the place where he died. It was a site that spoke strongly of the transcendence and uncertainty of life.

The diversity of Buddhist traditions was very obvious here. We stayed in the Chinese temple, which is run by a delightful Vietnamese nun. Fellow guests included a

Tibetan Rinpoche and a Japanese monk. In the town we met a Sri Lankan monk, a Thai monk and a 'phony monk', who wore robes in order to attract rupees. The Rinpoche told us that one benefit of pilgrimage is that at the holy sites it is easier to meditate deeply; one brings the Buddha alive by being mindful — and I saw that I would not find the Buddha by trying to recreate his historical setting. His humanity, although it reminds us that as human beings we too can follow him, seemed to be less important than his teaching; the facts of suffering and our human reactions to it, our craving and confusion, are the same to day as they were two and a half millennia ago, as is the Path to their cessation.

The full moon occurred while we were in Kushinagar. That day, Carol and I visited the Thai monk at his small outdoor shrine, and requested the Three Refuges and the Five Precepts. He spoke no English, we spoke no Thai: the Pali was sufficient. I felt it significant to reaffirm my practice in this way, in this place. Then, at the Chinese temple, we offered the evening chanting from Chithurst in Pali and English; adding our own language to the others in which the Buddha is honoured at these holy places.

At Lumbini, across the border in Nepal, we meditated each morning beneath the large statue of the newborn Buddha in the prayer court of our Japanese hotel. At the site of the Buddha's birth, which is being 'developed' and currently resembles a building site, Taiwanese pilgrims chanted at the Mayadevi temple which honours the Buddha's mother. In the Nepalese temple, we were told by a lone Theravadin monk that the Nepalese are 'hubble-

bubble Buddhists, all mixed up with Hinduism'.

In the Tibetan temple a man chanted, accompanying himself on a cymbal. Attracted by the singing, I wandered in, camera at the ready. I looked up to see the Buddha image, gazing serenely down on me and, with a jolt, remembered that Lumbini is not just a collection of dead monuments for tourists, but a place for pilgrims following a profound and enduring teaching.

The pilgrimage concluded at Sravasti, where the Jeta Grove, which was given to the Sangha by the wealthy merchant, Anathapindaka, is still beautiful today with its trees, flowers and silent brick ruins. Shantum told us how Anathapindaka had purchased the grove by covering the ground with gold coins; and about the conversion of the murderer, Angulimala, nearby. In the



Shantum Seth

stillness we meditated, sitting and walking. We chanted in several languages. We shared the poems that we had been asked to write about our experience of the pilgrimage. I tried to convey the sense I had gained of India's deeply religious heritage, and the glory of the Buddha's living religion where all traditions can enrich each other.

The journey itself showed us more than the ancient holy sites, left in ruins for centuries after the decay of Buddhism, and now restored and surrounded by modern temples. Throughout, we had been introduced to the hospitable Indian people — many living in the same way as their ancestors had done in the Buddha's time. We saw the poverty many live in, and Shantum pointed out that similar scenes must have confronted the Buddha. This, more than the monuments, brought him alive.

I returned home to everyday life, without the flashing lights of 'entertainment', without a 'peak experience': but with something more significant and enduring, which I am only now beginning to find words for. Travelling as a small 'sangha' with other lay Buddhists, and sharing our experiences, had opened me more to what the Buddha really saw — beyond the wealth and poverty, beggars and street merchants, shrines and sacred places.

After the colourful varieties of Buddhism I had encountered on this journey, basic Theravada practice seemed mundane and unexciting. But I realised that although it is important to have stood where the Buddha stood and to have seen the sights and people he saw, truly walking in the Buddha's footsteps means being present with the ordinariness of everyday life, practising his teaching at every moment, in all places. ❖

(Carol Williams used this opportunity to prepare herself for her own death which took place some six months later.)

For details of future pilgrimages organised in this way, contact: Vivien Bell (01730 812362).

Upasika News

In March, after the annual Sangha gathering at Amaravati, there was an Upasika weekend at which members of the monastic community were invited to participate in a series of discussions on the theme of Sangha. About 100 people attended. Some participants offer reflections on their experience of the weekend.

'...How good it is to be in contact with companions on the path. The experience of common aspiration and values, and difficulties is all too rare a treat for some of us....

'...The heart is full of gratitude to the monastic sangha for existing. But it is easy to overlook what lay supporters can offer each other, and to think that the monastery is the only place where we can draw inspiration and insight, where we can be 'spiritual'. Yet, as was pointed out in our small group meeting, the practice in the monastery simply involves things like relating to that to which one is averse, examining it in the light of the Four Noble Truths — and this practice is available to us outside the monastery too! Admittedly it might be easier in the monastery where there is commitment to practice, but of course leadership in the monastery is important and neither that nor the commitment is a 'given'. Nevertheless the general atmosphere of peaceful and wholesome aspiration is undoubtedly beneficial to those who visit. But it can be fragile, for example when senior monks disrobe. Where else might we find support ?...

'...The importance of local groups was emphasised again and again as we attempt to practise in a culture that is not Buddhist. And even contact with Amaravati can be daunting at first...

Would developing a lay *vinaya* help ?...In considering this, some voiced concern, since there are a variety of social milieus in which lay supporters operate — could there be a lay *vinaya* that could possibly cater for all ? We have to be part of other lay communities: the work-place and family being the most obvious. However the point was made that our *vinaya* could essentially be simply a reflection on how the Five Precepts might be extended.

LAY RESIDENTIAL OPPORTUNITIES AT AMARAVATI

Maintenance Team Member:

We are looking for someone with building skills such as carpentry or plumbing who can make a significant contribution to our maintenance team. In addition to your practical skills, the ability to lead less experienced helpers and/or organise jobs for outside contractors would be a definite advantage.

Kitchen Manager

There is an opening for a person with good interpersonal skills and the equanimity to ensure the smooth running of the Amaravati kitchen. This is a great opportunity for seeing to the nutritional needs of the community in a sometimes hectic but spiritually enriching environment. Previous community experience preferred.