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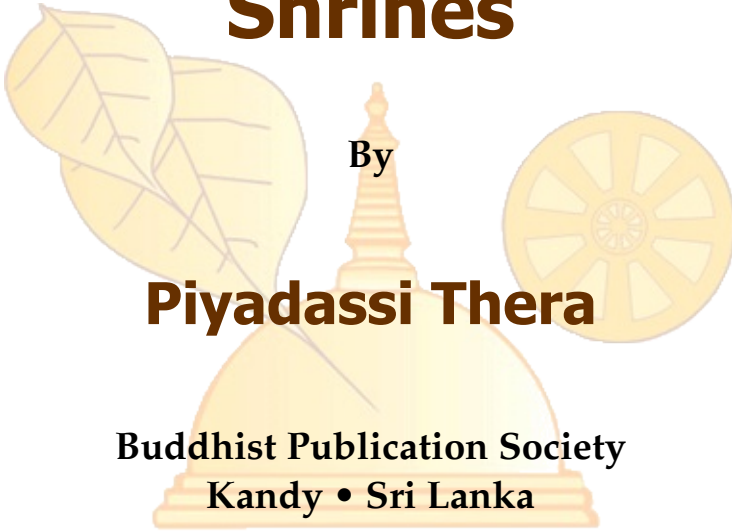
The Four Sacred Shrines

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The Four Sacred Shrines



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The Four Sacred Shrines

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While staying in the Sal Grove at Kusināra, a few hours before he attained parinibbāna the Supreme Buddha, at the ripe age of eighty, addressing the Venerable Ānanda, his most dutiful and beloved attendant, said: “There are four places, Ānanda, which the devotee should visit with feelings of inspiration (*saṃvega*): the place at which he can say ‘Here the Tathāgata was born,’ ‘Here the Tathāgata attained Supreme and Perfect Enlightenment,’ ‘Here the Tathāgata set in motion the incomparable Wheel of the Dhamma,’ ‘Here the Tathāgata finally attained Parinibbāna, the Deathless’. And there will come, Ānanda, to these places, pious Brethren and Sisters of the Holy Order, and devout men and women.”

It is significant and interesting to note that the being bent on Enlightenment or Buddhahood was born under trees in a park, practised self-mortification in quest of Enlightenment in the open under trees. He attained Buddhahood under a tree, delivered his first sermon to the five ascetics under trees in the Deer Park, and finally passed away to the Deathless under

the twin sala trees in an open park.

I — Lumbinī

Lumbinī, or Rummindēi, the local name by which it is now known, is the birth place of Prince Siddhattha Gotama. [1] It is one hundred miles north of Benares and within full sight of the snow-crowned Himalayas. Siddhattha Gotama, the Buddha, the Enlightened One, is the founder of the 'religion' called Buddhism. His father, Suddhodana Gotama, the Kshatriya (warrior clan) king, was ruling at Kapilavatthu over the land of the Sakyans on the Nepal frontier. Mahāmāyā, a princess of the Koliyas, was his queen.

On the full moon of May (Vesākha) Queen Mahāmāyā was travelling in state from Kapilavatthu to Devadaha, her parental home, according to the custom of the times, to give birth to her child. But that was not to be; for halfway between the two cities in the beautiful Lumbinī Grove, under the shade of a flowering Sal tree, she brought forth a son.

The discovery and identification of the Lumbinī park in 1896 C.E. is attributed to that renowned

archaeologist, General Alexander Cunningham, owing to whose indefatigable effort and perseverance many a hidden Buddhist holy spot, and the sacred body relics of the two chief disciples Venerable Sāriputta and Venerable Mahā Moggallāna, were brought to light.

At Lumbinī what attracts the attention of the pilgrim or the tourist most is the mighty Asoka stone pillar erected some 2210 years ago. History records that Emperor Asoka, after he became a Buddhist, gave up *Dig-Vijaya* (conquest of the world) and established *Dharma-vijaya* (conquest by righteousness) and state pilgrimages. The course of the state pilgrimages, which Asoka instituted in place of royal hunting parties, and the holy places of Buddhism which he visited, were marked by memorials in the form of imperial standards (*dhvaja-stambhas*), splendidly wrought in stone and inscribed with Asoka's edicts or inscriptions recording the Emperor's visit. Many of these still exist in a more or less perfect condition. [2]

Asoka went in procession to Lumbinī with the Venerable Upagupta, his teacher and adviser. The latter pointed out the birthplace of Prince Siddhatta Gotama, saying, "Here, Great King, the Venerable One was born." Asoka then paid homage to the holy spot and ordered a column of stone to be erected there to mark this first station of his pilgrimage. This pillar, "as crisp as the day when it was cut", had been struck by

lightning, when Hiuen Tsiang, the Chinese pilgrim saw it towards the middle of the seventh century CE. The inscription engraved on the pillar in five lines consisting of 93 Asokan characters reads:

- (1) *Devāna piyena Piyadasina lājina vīsati-vasābhisitena,*
- (2) *atana āgācha mahīyita hida Budhe jāte Sakyamunī ti,*
- (3) *silā vīgadabhī chā kālāpita silāthabhe chā usapāpīte,*
- (4) *hida Bhagavaṃ jāte ti Lummini-game yubalike kate,*
- (5) *atha-bhāgiye cha.*

The king Devānampiya-Piyadassi, when he was twenty-years-anointed, did (this place) the honours of coming (here) in person. Due to the fact the Buddha, the Sākya saint, was born here, he caused a stone surrounding and screening wall to be made [3] and a stone pillar to be set up. Also, he made the village of Lumbinī free of rent and entitled to the king's eight share of the grain." [4]

II — Buddhagayā

Buddhagayā, or Bodh-Gayā as the Indians call it, is the most sacred place to the Buddhists the world over. For it was here that the Master at the age of thirty-five attained Supreme Enlightenment (*anuttaram sam mā sambodhiṃ*). It is recorded in the Buddhist texts that the Prince Gotama, at the age of twenty-nine, renounced wife and child, his father and a crown that held the promises of power and glory, and in the garb of an ascetic retreated into the solitude of the forest in quest of the eternal verities of life. Accompanied by five other ascetics he practised severe asceticism on the bank of the Nerañjarā at Uruvelā near Gaya. Strenuously and zealously struggling for six long years, he came to death's very door. But self-mortification could not lead him to the desired goal. Abandoning asceticism and extreme fasting, he partook of food. His five companions, disappointed, forsook him. Then, un-aided by any teacher, save fixed determination, unflinching energy, and complete faith in his own purity and power, and accompanied by none, the Bodhisatta resolved to make his final quest in complete solitude. Cross-legged he sat under the Bodhi tree at Uruvelā—"a pleasant spot, soothing to the senses and stimulating to the mind"- making the

final effort with the inflexible resolution: “Though only my skin, sinews and bones remain, and my blood and flesh dry up and wither away, yet never from this seat will I stir, until I have attained full enlightenment *Sammā-Sam-Bodhi*.” So indefatigable in effort, so unflagging in his devotion was he, and so resolute to realise the Truth.

On a full moon day of May exactly 2551 years ago as the sun rose in a glowing Eastern sky, and the Vesākha (Vesak) full moon set slowly in the West, Bodhisatta Gotama solved the riddle of becoming, unravelled the mystery of being by comprehending in all its fullness, the Four Noble Truths,—the Eternal Verities: *Sorrow, the Cause of Sorrow, the Cessation of Sorrow, and the path leading to the Cessation of Sorrow*. Because of its sacred associations Gayā came to be known as *Buddha Gayā*, and the tree under which he sat and meditated as the Bodhi Tree, ‘The Tree of Wisdom.’

Thus did he become one whose *saṃsāra*, continued existence, had finally ended. He thought thus: ‘My mind is free from the corruption of the craving for repeated existence. Birth is destroyed, the noble life has been perfected, done all that there was to be done, for me there is no more rebirth. Knowledge and vision arose in me. Unshakable is my deliverance, this is my last birth.’ [5]

It was here under the Bodhi Tree that the Enlightened One reflected on the *paṭicca samuppāda* (dependent origination); the central conception of his Teaching, in direct and reverse order thus: “When this exists, this is; with the arising of this cause, this effect arises; when this cause does not exist, this effect is not; with the cessation of this cause, this effect ceases.”

The present Bodhi tree is one of the successors of the original Bodhi Tree. It is well-known that Saṅghamittā, the daughter of Emperor Asoka, brought with her the south branch of the original tree and planted it at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. It still flourishes and is the oldest known tree in the world.

According to the records of the Chinese pilgrims Fa-Hien and Hiuen Tsiang, Emperor Asoka was in the habit of visiting the Mahā Bodhi often. The story of the Bodhi Tree and Asoka’s visit are represented on the sculpture of Sāñchī. It is said that Asoka erected a shrine on the spot where the Master attained Enlightenment and enclosed the Bodhi Tree with a magnificent stone railing. However, no remains of Asoka’s shrine have survived. “The existing temple of Bodh-Gayā can hardly be dated earlier than the first century before Christ, but there is good reason to believe that it reproduces the design of the original temple which Asoka built on the same site.” [6]

There is a cultural link between Buddha-Gayā and Sri Lanka, for during the time of Samudragupta in India, Meghavaṇṇa, the reigning king of Sri Lanka, sent an embassy with costly present to Samudragupta which led to the founding of a monastery at Buddha-Gayā for the residence of the monks from Sri Lanka, at the request of Meghavaṇṇa. Hiuen Tsiang writes vividly about this monastery which he visited towards the middle of the 7th century CE

“This was the first Sinhala Saṅghārāma erected in Northern India but certainly not the first monastic foundation of Sri Lanka in India, for we learn from the Nāgarjunakonda inscription of Virapurisadatta that a spacious monastery called Sinhala-Vihara was built on the bank of the river Krsan in South India at least a century earlier. The foundation of the Mahābodhi Saṅghārāma still exists just outside the northern entrance of the Bodhgayā temple, defying the ravages wrought by time and in spite of the neglect of centuries.” [7]

III — Isipatana

Next we come to Isipatana, modern Sārnāth where the

Master set in motion the Wheel of the Dhamma (*Dhammacakkappavattana*).

Barely two months had passed since his enlightenment when the Buddha left Gayā for far away Benares, walking a distance of not less than a hundred and fifty miles, to make known the Truth to those five ascetics, His erstwhile companions, still steeped in the unmeaning rigours of extreme asceticism.

Travelling in stages, the Blessed One reached the deer sanctuary at Isipatana and met the five ascetics, and said: “The *Tathāgata* (an epithet of the Buddha, one of the meanings of which is ‘One attained to Truth’), monks, is an Arahāt, an Accomplished One, a Supremely Enlightened One is he (*Sammā-sambuddha*). Give ear, monks, the Deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you. I shall teach you the doctrine. Following my teaching you will know and realise for yourselves, even in this life time, that supreme goal of purity for the sake of which clansmen retire from ‘home to follow the homeless life.’”

Thereupon the five ascetics said: “Friend Gotama, even with the stern austerities, penances and self-torture you practised, you failed to attain the superhuman vision and insight. Now that you are living a life of luxury, self-indulgence and have given

up the struggle, how could you have reached superhuman vision and insight?"

Then replied the Blessed One: "The Tathāgata has not ceased from effort and reverted to a life of luxury and abundance. The Tathāgata is a supremely Enlightened One. Give ear, monks, the Deathless has been attained. I shall instruct you. I shall teach you the Dhamma". A second time the monks said the same thing to the Buddha who gave the same answer a second time. A third time did they repeat the same question. Then the Master asked, "Monks, did you ever hear me speak in this-wise before? 'Nay, indeed, Lord.' was their answer. Overcome and convinced by His utterance the monks indicated their readiness to listen to him".

Now, on a full moon day of July (Āsālhā), at eventide, in the shady Deer Park at Isipatana in Benares, addressing the five ascetics the Buddha said,

"There are two extremes, monks, which ought not to be cultivated by the recluse. What two? Gross sensuality which is low, worldly and conducive to harm; and self-mortification which is painful, low and conducive to harm. The Middle Path, monks, discovered by the Tathāgata, avoids these extremes and gives vision, gives knowledge and leads to peace, to

insight, to enlightenment and Nibbāna.

“What, monks, is that Middle Path? It is this Noble Eightfold Path itself, namely:

Right Understanding,
Right Thoughts,
Right Speech,
Right Action,
Right Livelihood,
Right Effort,
Right Mindfulness, and
Right Concentration.”

Then the Blessed One explained to them the Four Noble Truths: The Noble Truth of Dukkha (Suffering), the Noble Truth of the Cause of Dukkha, the Noble Truth of the Cessation of Dukkha, and the Noble Truth of the Path leading to the Cessation of Dukkha. [8]

Sārnāth which is situated five miles to the north of Varanasi marks the birth place of the Dhamma, the Teaching of the Buddha, and the Sangha, those Taught by the Buddha. For it was here that the Enlightened One proclaimed the Dhamma for the first time, and sent forth His first sixty disciples with the words:

“Released am I, O bhikkhus, from ties both human and divine. You also are delivered from

fetters human and divine. Wander for the welfare and happiness of many, out of compassion for the world, for the gain, for the welfare and happiness of gods and men. Proclaim the Dhamma, excellent in the beginning, excellent in the middle and excellent in the end, in the spirit and in the letter. Proclaim you the life of consummate purity. I shall go to Uruvelā, to Senānigama, to teach the Dhamma. [9]

Thus did the Supreme Buddha commence his *dhammadūta* work, his ministry, which lasted to the end of his life.

Asoka the Great came on pilgrimage to this holy spot and caused a series of monuments and a pillar with the lion capital to be erected. The lion capital which is given the pride of place in the excellent Museum at Sārnāth is today the official crest of free India. The pillar with the Asokan inscription reads "... the Sangha cannot be torn asunder by anyone whatsoever. Whoever, monk or nun, breaks up the Sangha must be made to wear white garments and to take up abode in a place other than a monastery."

Shri Nehru writes in his *Discovery of India* (p.44), "At Sārnāth I would almost see the Buddha preaching his first sermon, and some of his recorded words would

come like a distant echo to me through two thousand five hundred years. Asoka's pillars of stone with their inscriptions would speak to me in their magnificent language and tell me of a man who, though not an emperor, was greater than any king or emperor."

About Asoka's pillars, H. G. Rawlinsone writes in *India* (p.84): "These pillars are burnished till the surface is almost like glass, and their high polish so deceived later travellers that they thought they were made of metal. They were surmounted with a bell-capital, an abacus and a symbolic figure, usually a lion. The most striking of these capitals is the one found at Sārnāth, with its four magnificent lions upholding a *dharma-cakra* or "Wheel of the Law," which was set in motion at this spot. The abacus is decorated with realistic figures." John Marshall speaks with profound admiration of "the masterful strength of the crowning lions, with their swelling veins and tense muscular development," and goes so far as to declare that both bell and capital are "masterpieces in point of both style and technique—the finest carvings, indeed, that India has yet produced, and unsurpassed by anything of the kind in the ancient world."

IV — Kusinārā

From Sārnāth we come to Kusinārā or Kusināra as it is now called: It is in the Uttar Pradesh about 120 miles north-east of Varanasi. This being the scene of Buddha Gotama's Mahā-Parinibbāna, devout Buddhists all over the world visit this holy spot with feelings of inspiration. The Blessed One had now reached the ripe age of eighty. His two chief disciples, Sāriputta and Mahā Moggallāna, had passed away three months earlier. Pajāpatī Gotamī, the foster-mother of the Master and head of the Order of Nuns, Yasodharā and Rāhula were also no more.

The Buddha was now at Vesāli, and the rainy season having come, he went together with a great company of monks to Beluva to spend there the period of the rains. There a severe sickness fell upon him, causing him much pain and agony, but being mindful and self-possessed, bore it patiently. He was on the verge of death; but he felt he should not pass away without taking leave of the Sangha, the Order. So with a great effort of will he suppressed that illness, and kept his hold on life. His sickness gradually abated and when quite recovered he journeyed from Beluva to the Mahāvana. Worn out with sickness, with feeble limbs, the Buddha now journeyed on with much difficulty followed by the Venerable Ānanda and a great company of monks. Even in this last, long, wearisome journey of his, the Master never failed in

his attention to others.

The Blessed One now reached the Sāla Grove of the Mallas at Kusināra—the journey's end. Knowing that here would be his last resting place, he told the Venerable Ānanda, "I am weary, Ānanda, and would lie down. Spread over for me the couch with its head to the north between the twin Sāla trees." He then laid himself on his right side, composed and mindful, with one leg resting on the other. Speaking now to the monks the Buddha instructed them on many an important point which are recorded in the Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta or the discourse on the passing away of the Buddha, the longest discourse of the Buddhist canon. All the events that occurred during the closing years of his life also are recorded in this discourse. It is indeed a discourse that not only the devout Buddhist, but the students of Buddhism too, should read, for it is replete with important sayings and the instructive utterances of the Master.

The Buddha made his final exhortation to those who wished to follow his Teaching now and in the future in these memorable words:

Vayadhammā saṅkhārā. Appamādena sampādettha,

"Transient are all compounded things. With heedfulness work out your deliverance."

With these last words the master passed away. He attained *parinibbāna* that is free from any substratum of further becoming.

At Kusināra the main objects of interest are the Matha Kunwarka Kot, the shrine with the recumbent image of the Master, the Mahāparinibbāna Stupa immediately behind the image house, and the Aṅgāra Cetiya about six furlongs from the stupa, built at the spot where the remains of the Tathāgata were cremated; the Cetiya, of course, is in ruin and the restoration work has already commenced. When A. C. Carlyle discovered the image in 1833, it was in fragments, but he ably restored it. This colossal reclining image of the Tathāgata, 20 feet in length, lying on his right side with the head towards north, evokes nothing but *saṃvega*,—a noble inspiration and feelings of reverence in the pious pilgrim, and hardly any visitor leaves this shrine without being moved by the glance of the Buddha.

An inscription carved on the stone couch on which the image is placed, in characters of the 5th century CE, reveals the name of the donor and sculptor:

“Deyadharmoyaṃ mahā-vihārasvāmino haribālasya pratimāceyaṃ ghatitā dine ... māthurena.”

“This is the religious gift of Haribāla Svāmi of the Mahā Vihāra. This image is made by

Dina of Mathura.” [10]

The Mahāparinibbāna Stupa indicates the spot where the All Compassionate Master breathed his last and attained Mahāparinibbāna. The identity of the place with the site of Parinibbāna was settled beyond doubt by the discovery of inscriptions referring to the Parinibbāna Caitya.

History tells us that Asoka, having paid homage to this holy spot, caused a stupa to be built, but this has not been brought to light. “The Parinirvāna Caitya, to which the inscriptions refer, dates from the Gupta period and it is not impossible that the Asoka stupa lies buried underneath the later construction.”

Notes

1. In Sanskrit: *Siddhārtha*, the Bodhisatta's personal name, and Gotama, his family name. [\[Back\]](#)
2. *The History of Aryan Rule in India*, E. B. Havell, p. 96. [\[Back\]](#)
3. Or "he caused a stone and brick wall to be made" as Fleet suggested later in JRAS, July, 1903, p. 832. [\[Back\]](#)
4. The Rummindei inscription and the conversion of Asoka to Buddhism, by F.J. Fleet, JRAS, April, 1908. [\[Back\]](#)
5. MN 25. [\[Back\]](#)
6. *Aryan Rule in India*, E. B. Havell, p. 112. [\[Back\]](#)
7. *Ceylon Lectures*, B. M, Barua, p. 18. [\[Back\]](#)
8. S V 420 Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta. [\[Back\]](#)
9. Vinaya Mahāvagga, Khandaka, [\[Back\]](#)
10. *Buddhist Shrines in India*, D. Vahsingha, p. 41. [\[Back\]](#)

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