

ภาควิชาการ/ภาษาอังกฤษ

# Our Pilgrimage to the Holy Buddhist Sites in India

## A Contemplative Report

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It was very fortunate for me to join the curriculum enhancement project entitled “An in-depth study of Buddhism in India”<sup>1</sup> organized for the post-graduate students of MCU Khonkaen Campus studying the course Selected Buddhist Work. The two main objectives of the project were:

- i) to enhance students’ knowledge of the Pali Canon with reference to the socio-cultural and historical contexts and
- ii) to provide an opportunity to the students through an organized tour to the Buddhist holy sites in India to experience first-hand and conceptualize the diverse situational contexts in which the monastic disciplinary codes (vinaya) originated and the significance of different locations in which the Buddha’s numerous discourses were delivered.

Quite unlike other pilgrimage groups, our group was rather unique in the assimilation of the two aspects of academic pursuit and spiritual quest into one coherent whole. At the academic level, the aim was to develop a clear understanding and appreciation of the Pali Canon, and at the spiritual level, the focus was laid upon gearing up and furthering the Canon-based knowledge to a higher state of ethico-spiritual and reflective understanding. In this regard, our group was very fortunate to have the venerable Daosayam Vachirapanyo, a long-term expert in the

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\* I am grateful to my family for relieving me from household duties for more than a week’s time and supporting me to join this spiritual journey. If any merit has been accumulated, may my husband and our two children, Fronk and Frank share the benison and prosper in the dhamma path forever.

<sup>1</sup> The project was co-ordinated by the Most Venerable Dr Daosayam Vachirapanyo, lecturer in the department of Buddhism and deputy-director of Sangha College, MCU Khonkaen Campus.

field of history of Buddhism in India who has until now penned more than ten books related to Buddhism, as our tour and spiritual guide. Well-known both in India and Thailand for his expertise in guiding pilgrims to the various Buddhist holy sites of India, he has left an indelible spiritual mark and a lasting impact on all members of the group that comprised of 33 monk-graduates and 10 lay devotees, including myself. Besides having the opportunity to listen to his very detailed lectures on Buddhism, different aspects of Vinaya and Suttanta Pitaka, the origin and development of different suttas, the significance of the Jataka Tales, meanings of different chantings, etc, we had a thoroughly interactive session with all the 33 monk-graduates who participated in the project. During the entire trip, each of the monk-graduates was assigned to make a summary presentation on a selected volume from the corpus of the Vinaya and the Suttanta Pitaka and each presentation was followed by a very intellectually stimulating question-and-answer session.

Apart from this academically-oriented atmosphere, the entire trip was enlivened by the quest for spirituality in terms of paying homage to the Buddha and merit-making at many different temples. Our group of ten lay devotees led by Dussadee Ruammek was overwhelmingly supportive and engaged in a series of merit-making rounds by offering yellow robes, cash donations and lot of other things at eight different Thai temples.

Our itinerary covered all the historically and archaeologically significant Buddhist sites in northern India. Each of the four most holy sites – Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagar – are unique not only for four great events associated to the life of Buddha i.e. birth, enlightenment, deliverance of the First Sermon and his passing away or Mahaparinibbana, the archaeological remains at other equally important Buddhist sites including Varanasi, Sravasti, Kapilavastu, Pawanagar (present-day Fazilnagar), Kesaria, Vesali, Nalanda, Rajgir and many other locations are a reminder of the historicity of the fact of attainment of the highest spiritual advancement by the noble founder, Gotama Buddha and many of his devoted disciples.

Personally, this journey to India was a real homecoming for me not only in terms of knowing and feeling my own roots and my interdependence and affiliation to all Buddhists, especially Thai monks and lay devotees, but it also helped bridge the historical gap of more than 2500 years and made me stand vis-à-vis with the bygone days, actually centuries, of India's great heritage and rich socio-cultural, historical and spiritual past. The most emotional moment for me was at Lumbini, where while paying my respects to the Buddha's mother, Maha Maya, I also had the chance to pay my respect and express my gratitude while acknowledging my indebtedness to my own mother and motherhood in every woman, whether married or unmarried. This was done not with any intention of valorizing "motherhood", but simply as an act of expressing my sincere feelings of love and gratitude to womanhood in general. Equally emotional were the moments spent in the vicinity of the Buddha's cremation stupa at Kushinagar, where having heard the detailed description of the Buddha's funeral from venerable Daosayam Vachirapanyo, I realized in great depths the truth embedded in the Buddha's eternal message – "sabbe dhamma anatta."

While the contemplative mood at both Lumbini and Kushinagar stretched between the two polarities of birth and death, what awaited us at other sites was the transcendental feeling of inspirational joy and reverential awe for the Buddha and his entire teachings. Some of these extremely interesting sites were – the Deer Park at Sarnath where the Buddha delivered the First Sermon that comprised of the Four Noble Truths, the Kesaria stupa, where the Buddha delivered the Kalama Sutta, the sutta which had earlier changed my whole perspective on life, the Cunda stupa that marked the place where Cunda, the blacksmith, offered the last meal to the Buddha, after partaking of which the Buddha fell violently ill and almost bled to death instantly. Unable to choke back my tears while paying homage to the Buddha at this spot, deep in my heart what touched me most was the fact that the Buddha had no complaint about the meal that eventually brought an end to his life, but instead expressed his gratitude and words of praise to Cunda for his wholesome intention and meritorious act of offering the last meal. Behind Buddha's words of praise was his

deep concern for Cunda's well-being and his intention to protect Cunda from social blame and criticism. The stupa erected by emperor Asoka and perhaps reconstructed during the time of many other subsequent rulers (the ruins of which still remain) to mark the event of the last meal-offering bear testimony to the fact of Buddha's loving-kindness and equanimity towards his lay devotee irrespective of the fatal effect the food had on his own body. Here as our group stood in meditative silence for a few precious moments, I asked myself, "Can I ever perfect the four sublime states of mind in this life by following the example of the Buddha, my supreme teacher?"

The magnificent and grandiose ruins at the Jetavana Vihara in Sravasti where the Buddha spent 25 retreats out of total 45 retreats in his life-time, reminded us the role of exemplary lay devotees like Anathapindika (the incomparable alms giver) and Visakha whose dedicated support to the Sangha at its nascent stage was crucial in paving the path for harmonious co-existence, mutual support and inter-dependence between the monastic Order and the lay community. Another very important site was at Vesali, the place where the Bhikkhuni Sangha came into origin for the first time. While paying my homage in front of the Kutagarshala Vihara and the Ashoka Pillar and recalling that momentous time when Maha Prajapati, Buddha's step-mother and the first bhikkhuni in the history of Buddhism, took the vow along with five hundred laywomen to accept and endure all hardships in life in order to become ordained renunciants, I realized the invincibility and profundity of the human spirit when guided by the inner urge to conquer itself along the path of renunciation and spiritual chastity.

Amidst the ruins of the Nalanda University was yet another emotionally charged situation when we sat down in front of the Sariputta Stupa to pay our homage and sincere gratitude to Venerable Sariputta, one of Buddha's foremost disciples and all other arahats and devoted monastic disciples down the ages, including the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang, all of whom contributed in their own unique ways to keep the Buddhist tradition alive up until the present day.

Our last destination was Bodhgaya, where since time immemorial any passer-by must have had experienced life in its entirety – the serenity, stillness and sublimity embedded in the spiritual quest and the cacophonous humdrum of daily living when life is just beset only with the quest for survival at the mundane level. At this holiest place where Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree, the realization dawned on me that renunciation and worldly life are two sides of the same coin, what matters most is the inner urge to decide which path to follow distinctly or just strike a balance between the two by treading the Middle Path. The interior space and the immediate exterior surrounding of the Mahabodhi temple is forever engulfed by this dual nature of human life and predicament – inside, the environment is infused by the sublimity of devotionism with monastics and lay devotees deeply engaged in chanting, praying, worshipping, reciting suttas and practicing mindfulness and different forms of meditation, whereas, immediately outside the precinct of the temple stand in stark contrast the harshness of the struggle for minting and saving an extra coin for mere survival with sellers and buyers of innumerable exotic and votive merchandise endlessly engaged in the act of bargaining and trading.

Just as one realizes while walking along the ghats of Varanasi (especially, the Manikarnika ghat, where the fire and flame of the pyre has never ever been doused) that life and death are nothing but two sides of the same organic phenomenon that we call human existence, at Bodhgaya one sees and experiences the two phases of human endeavor – the urge for renunciation and the desire to remain rooted in worldly life. Thanks to the Buddha for demonstrating so elegantly the depth of the former, which gave his spiritual search a universal garb challenging people from diverse socio-cultural background across the globe to experience and delve into the renunciant path for the attainment of the highest spiritual benefit for oneself and others.

Throughout our journey we observed that diverse chanting from many different groups of monastics and lay devotees could be perpetually heard at all the important Buddhist sites in India. As we walked alongside the colorful and white-clad groups of pilgrims from many different countries like Vietnam, China, Tibet, Korea, Japan, Mongolia, Thailand, Laos, Myanmar, Cambodia, and Sri Lanka who came in throngs to pay homage to the Buddha, we realized the solidarity of Buddhist fraternity and sorority and the message of universalism underlying the Buddhist weltanschauung or comprehensive world-view that has played a vital role in unifying people from such diverse socio-cultural backgrounds.

One may wonder – how and why is this harmonious experience possible? Why don't the different forms of chanting rise up in a cacophonous crescendo severing the much hard-to-achieve meditative state of mindfulness but rather merge rows of assembled devotees with the sublime stillness of the spiritual quest? Why has time and again every historically holy Buddhist site embraced people from diverse socio-cultural backgrounds and nationalities into the eternal fold of a serene quietude? The answer to these questions can be found nowhere else but the timeless teachings of the Buddha that lay great emphasis on the reflective understanding of the Four Noble Truths and the cultivation of the four sublime states of mind (brahma vihāra) – loving-kindness (mettā), compassion (karuṇā), sympathetic joy (muditā) and equanimity (upekkhā) – alongside the realization through the practice of insight meditation (vipassanā) that all conditioned things and states in this universe, including our lives and egos, lie within the parameters of the three characteristics of existence (tilakkhana), i.e. impermanence (aniccā), suffering (dukkha) and non-selfness/non-substantiality (anattā). The Buddha's teachings on equanimity, non-substantiality, and cultivation of right mindfulness are unique in the history of religions and have helped Buddhism spread to different parts of the world without ever having had to waste a single drop of human blood.