

2. *Bodhgaya, Place of the Buddha's Enlightenment*

a) *How to reach there*

Bodhgaya is located in Bihar state, 105 km by road south of Patna or 230 km by road east of Varanasi. All distances are approximate.

b) *Religious Significance* ^{1, 2, 4}

After the Great Renunciation, the *Bodhisatta* approached two ascetics named **Alara Kalama** and **Udakka Ramaputta** who taught him to attain the Formless *Jhanas*. Although they were the highest attainments at that time, still he was dissatisfied because they did not lead to **Nibbana**. Leaving them, he arrived at an isolated cave on a hill now known as **Dhongra** hill, where he underwent painful and profitless practices for six years until his body became skeleton-like and he nearly died. Realizing the **futility of self-mortification**, he adopted the **Middle Path** and started eating again to regain his strength. His five companions, thinking that he had given up the struggle and reverted to luxury, left him. The *Bodhisatta* was now alone in his struggle. One day on the eve of *Wesak*, while waiting to go on alms-round under a Banyan tree, the *Bodhisatta* was offered milk rice in a **golden dish** by the **Lady Sujata**, daughter of the chieftain of the nearby village of **Senanigama**. After the meal, the *Bodhisatta* took the dish and went to the **Neranjara** river, and saying: “*If I am to succeed in becoming a Buddha today, let this dish go upstream; but if not, let it go downstream*”, he threw it into the water. There it floated to the middle of the river and raced upstream for eighty cubits (37 m) before it sank in a whirlpool.

In the evening, on the way to the *Bodhi* tree, the *Bodhisatta* was offered eight handfuls of grass by the grass-cutter **Sotthiya**, which he placed on his seat under the *Bodhi* tree. Sitting cross-legged facing the east, the *Bodhisatta* made a resolution, saying: “*Let my skin, sinews and bones become dry. Let my flesh and blood dry up. Never from this seat will I stir until I have attained Buddhahood.*”

This was the **culmination** of his Perfections developed over countless aeons, that no being, not even Mara and his dreaded army, could unseat the *Bodhisatta* from the *Aparajita* throne. When challenged by Mara, the *Bodhisatta* called upon the earth to bear witness to his **Thirty Perfections**, by touching the ground with his right hand. Instantly, the earth responded with a **great quake** that shook and scattered Mara and his forces until they fled in defeat. Before the sun had set, the *Bodhisatta* had vanquished Mara and his forces. Then with mind tranquilized and purified, in the first watch of night, he developed the **Knowledge of Past Lives**; in the middle watch, the **Divine Eye**; and in the last watch, he developed the **Knowledge of Destruction of Taints** and attained **Supreme Enlightenment**. A Supreme Buddha (*Samma-sambuddho*) had arisen in the world on the full moon day of *Wesak* in **588 BC**.

c) *Historical Background* ^{6,9}

Bodhgaya, the scene of the Buddha’s Supreme Enlightenment, is the **most hallowed** place on earth to Buddhists. During the Buddha’s time, this place by the banks of the river **Neranjara** was known as **Uruvela**. **King Asoka** was the first to build a temple at this sacred spot. A portrayal of the Asokan temple and other buildings at Bodhgaya has been found in a bas-relief on the **Bharhut Stupa** in Madhya Pradesh. Beginning with Asoka’s first visit in 259 BC, countless pilgrims have gravitated to this **cradle of**

Buddhism without intermission for more than 1,500 years. The devastation of Buddhist *viharas* and shrines by Muslim hordes in the 13th century abruptly halted the flow of pilgrims to Bodhgaya. **Dharmasvamin**, a Tibetan pilgrim, visited Bodhgaya in 1234 AD. He found the place deserted and wrote:

“Only four monks were found staying (in the vihara). One said, ‘It is not good. All have fled in fear of the Turushka soldiery.’ They blocked up the door in front of the Mahabodhi image with bricks and plastered it. Near it they placed another image as a substitute.”

When Buddhism declined in India, the **Burmese** came to the rescue of the decaying Mahabodhi Temple by undertaking repairs during the 14th and 15th centuries. Thereafter, Bodhgaya was forgotten by the Buddhists and the Great Temple fell into ruins. A wandering **Hindu ascetic**, Mahant Gosain Giri, taking advantage of the situation, established his Math at Bodhgaya and **took control** of the Temple and environments in **1590 AD**. Thereafter, the holy Buddhist shrine passed into the hands of successive Mahants who used the place for **sacrilegious practices**. In 1861, **Cunningham** found the Mahant and his followers indulging in all sorts of non-Buddhist ceremonies at the main shrine. **Sir Edwin Arnold**, author of the *Light of Asia* visited the Mahabodhi Temple in 1885 and reported this observation in the **Daily Telegraph** in London:

“The Buddhist world had, indeed, well-nigh forgotten this hallowed and most interesting centre of their faith – the Mecca, the Jerusalem, of a million Oriental congregations when I sojourned in Buddhagaya a few years ago. I was so grieved to see Maharatta peasants performing ‘Sharaddh (or Shrada)’

in such a place, and thousands of precious ancient relics of carved stone inscribed with Sanskrit lying in piles around.”

Note: *Shrada* is a Hindu last rite, in which mantras and verses are chanted on behalf of the dead, in the belief that this will free the soul from its earthly existence, and allow it to be reborn in heaven.

d) *Anagarika Dharmapala and the
Maha Bodhi Society* ^{6, 16}

The battle to **regain control** of the Mahabodhi Temple by Buddhists began in January 22, 1891 when **Anagarika Dharmapala** visited Bodhgaya. Visibly moved by the **neglect** and **sacrilege** of this most sacred shrine, he took the vow, “*I will work on to make this sacred spot to be cared for by our own Bhikkhus.*” As a first step, he founded the **Maha Bodhi Society** of Buddhagaya on May 31, 1891 to garner support for this noble objective. Next, he invited four Buddhist monks from Sri Lanka to come and stay at Bodhgaya, namely: Ven. **Chandajoti**, Ven. **Sumangala**, Ven. **Pemmananda** and Ven. **Sudassana**. They arrived at Bodhgaya in July 1891 and took up residence in the Burmese Rest House. As the Mahant had property rights to the land in Bodhgaya, he objected to their presence and in February 1893, two of the monks were severely beaten up by his men. Two years later in 1895, when Anagarika Dharmapala attempted to install a Buddha image presented to him by the people of Japan on the upper floor of the Temple, he was **assaulted** and **prevented** from doing so by the Mahant’s men. So the image was kept in the Burmese Rest House. Still the Mahant and some Hindu organizations were not satisfied and tried to get the image removed from the Rest House but the Government did not yield.

In 1906, the Mahant filed a suit seeking to **eject the Buddhist monks** from the Rest House. Thereafter a long legal battle ensued between the Mahant and the Buddhists which continued till 1949, when the State of Bihar enacted the Buddha Gaya Temple Management Act which effectively transferred control of the Temple land and other property to a **Management Committee**. Two things in the Bill were **objectionable**; one was that the nine-man Management Committee of the Temple would have a **Hindu majority**, and the other that Buddhist members should be of Indian nationality. In spite of protests by the Maha Bodhi Society, the Bill was passed with an amendment for provision of an **Advisory Board** in which the majority should be Buddhists and not necessarily all of Indian nationality. This means that Buddhists can only advise on the management of the Mahabodhi Temple but the **control and final say** belong to the **Hindus!**

To the Maha Bodhi Society, there is no justification for the Mahabodhi Temple to be **controlled by non-Buddhists** just as if a Muslim mosque, a Christian church, a Sikh gurdwara or a Hindu temple were to be controlled by persons of different faiths. In his article entitled *The Vow Still Remains* in Sambodhi, 1996, the **late Ven. Pannarama Mahathera**, Bhikkhu-in-charge of Buddhagaya Maha Bodhi Society, revealed the irony that even the **Advisory Board**, which was supposed to be controlled by Buddhists, has only **11 Buddhist** members but **14 non-Buddhist** members! It is time that these non-Buddhist members were **replaced** by representatives from **Buddhist organizations** which are really concerned about the development of **Bodhgaya**, the place of Buddha's Enlightenment. Thus, Dharmapala's vow is **not fulfilled** and it still remains.

e) *Objects of Interest* [4](#), [9](#), [17](#), [18](#), [19](#)

(i) Mahabodhi Temple

The Mahabodhi Temple has a long history. Excavations by Cunningham in 1872 suggested **three periods** in its construction. The first phase of construction by King Asoka during the 3rd century BC was the *Bodhi Shrine*, represented in the bas-relief on the 2nd century BC Bharhut *Stupa*. The second phase of construction during the 1st century AD involved renovation of the original *Bodhi Shrine* by two pious ladies, **Surangi** and **Nagadevi**, wives of **Sunga** kings. The third phase of construction was undertaken by **Huviska**, the **Kusana king** of the 2nd century AD. The images of the Buddha originated during this period. Therefore shrines were erected for their installation. Cunningham suggested that the entire Mahabodhi Temple, as seen today, was mainly the **structure of the Huviska period** (111-138 AD). As it was built over the remains of Asoka's shrine, the **Vajrasana Throne** retains its original position of the Seat of Enlightenment. In the 7th century AD, renovations were carried out which included placing a **new basalt slab** over the older plaster throne at the Vajrasana. In the late 19th century, massive renovations were carried out under the able supervision of **Cunningham**, **Beglar** and **R.L.Mitra** to restore the Maha Bodhi Temple, which had fallen into ruins after centuries of vandalism and neglect by its squatter-occupants, the Mahants. The magnificent building we see today is the result of their **rare devotion and dedication**.

The Mahabodhi Temple is undoubtedly the most exquisite-looking building in Bodhgaya. Standing 52 m high with a base of 15.2 sq. m, it consists of a straight **pyramidal tower** surmounted by a *stupa*. At the corners of the base, there arise **four smaller towers**

– miniature replicas of the main spire. The main door faces east and in front of it there is an imposing **ancient gateway** decorated with carvings. The niches on the walls of both sides of the Temple contain images of the Buddha. The main shrine hall or **Sanctum** on the ground floor is reached after passing through a **vaulted passage**, on both sides of which are **stone staircases** leading up to a smaller shrine hall on the first floor. On entering the Sanctum, one comes face to face with the great gilded image of the Buddha seated in the **earth-touching-posture** (*bhumi phassa-mudra*). Just gazing at this magnificent image of our Lord will certainly evoke **feelings of joy and reverence** in the heart of the pilgrim! This is the result of the **faith and devotion** in heeding the **Buddha's exhortation** to “*visit the holy places and look upon them with feelings of reverence*”.

The **colossal gilded image** is from the **10th century AD**. Here the Buddha is depicted as sitting on a **patterned cushion** instead of a lotus. It is supported by a pedestal decorated with figures of lions alternating with elephants. The patterned cushion is a common feature found in other Buddha images from Eastern India, which was probably copied from this image. Most people are not aware of the fact that this image was not in the temple when archeological explorations were going on in and around Buddhagaya by the then British government. According to an article on *Buddhagaya Sculptures* in the Sambodhi, 1993, R. L. Mitra noted that it was in the **Mahant's compound**. Later on, at the request of **Cunningham** and **Beglar**, it was moved to its present location at the main shrine. If not for the timely intervention of these two gentlemen, this inspiring image would still be wasting in the Mahant's compound instead of its present rightful place for pilgrims to worship!

(ii) Bodhi Tree (Bodhidruma)

The *Bodhi* tree under which the Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment is situated behind the Temple. It is a Pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*), also known in Pali as *assattha*. It is said to have sprung up at the same time when the Buddha was born, i.e., his **co-natal** (*sahajata*). According to the commentaries, different Buddhas attained Enlightenment seated under different trees of their choice and each of them became the '*Bodhi* tree' of the particular Buddha during his dispensation. In the present dispensation, only the *Bodhi* tree of Gotama Buddha is revered. The **site** of the *Bodhi* tree is the **same** for all Buddhas. It is believed that no place on earth can **support** the weight of the Buddha's Enlightenment. The ground is so **firm** that it remained **unmoved**, even as a violent **earthquake** shook the world and **scattered** Mara and his army, who had come to challenge the *Bodhisatta* for the **Seat** of Enlightenment. Even Sakka *Devaraja* is unable to travel in the air immediately above it. Such is the charismatic power of the place called "Navel of the Earth".

From earliest times, kings and commoners have come here to honor it. Being the **object of veneration** of Buddhists, it naturally became the **target of destruction** by the enemies of Buddhism. According to Hsüan Tsang, the *Bodhi* tree was first cut down by **Asoka** before his conversion, but later out of remorse, he revived the tree by bathing the roots with scented water and milk. Asoka paid homage to the tree so earnestly that his queen, **Tissarakkha**, was filled with jealousy and had it destroyed secretly. Again, it was revived by Asoka as before. Thereafter, he built a wall over 3 m high to surround it for protection.. After the fall of the Mauryan empire in the 2nd century BC, the Sunga king **Pusyamitra**, who was a persecutor of Buddhism, also destroyed the *Bodhi* tree but

a sapling of the tree from Sri Lanka was brought back and replanted in the same spot. During the 6th century AD **Sasanka**, a Hindu king, cut down the *Bodhi* tree, but sometime later it was replanted with a sapling from the *Bodhi* tree in Sri Lanka by King **Purvavarma** of Magadha, who then built a wall 7.3 m high to surround it. Its remains were 6.1 m high when Hsüan Tsang visited it. In 1876, the old decaying *Bodhi* tree fell down during a storm and a sapling from it was planted on the same spot by **Cunningham**. The present *Bodhi* tree is now 125 years old.

(iii) **Vajrasana or Diamond Throne**

The *Vajrasana* is located between the *Bodhi* tree and the Temple. It marks the actual spot where the Buddha attained Supreme Enlightenment. It is now marked by a red sandstone slab 2.3 m long by 1.3 m wide by 0.9 m high. Pilgrims who visit this spot should spend some time in this conducive environment to reflect on the virtues of the Buddha to attain fullness of **faith** and **calm** followed by **mindfulness** meditation to develop insight.

(iv) **The Buddha's Stay at Seven Places after Enlightenment**

After attaining Buddhahood on the full-moon night of *Wesak*, as dawn broke the Buddha uttered a paean of joy (*udana*). While sitting on the *Vajrasana* he decided to continue sitting on the undefeated throne, on which he overcame Mara and fulfilled all his wishes, including the one to become a Buddha.

• *First Week on the Throne (Pallanka Sattaha)*

The Buddha sat on the Diamond Throne for seven days in meditation absorbed in the bliss of emancipation (*Arahantship* Fruition). At the end of seven days, he emerged from the absorption and

contemplated on the Doctrine of **Dependent Origination** (*Paticca Samuppada*) the whole night.

- *Second Week of the Gaze (Animisa Sattaha)*

Throughout the second week, as a mark of **gratitude** to the *Bodhi* Tree for providing him shelter, the Buddha stood gazing at it **without closing his eyes**. On the spot where the Buddha stood, a shrine was erected by King Asoka. This shrine, named the **Animisilocana Cetiya**, is located on elevated ground within the courtyard in front of the Temple.

- *Third Week on the Walk (Cankama Sattaha)*

The third week was spent on **walking meditation** along a ‘jewelled promenade or *Cankama*’ running from east to west between the Diamond throne and the Animisilocana Cetiya.

- *Fourth Week in Jewelled House (Ratanaghara Sattaha)*

The Buddha spent the fourth week in the ‘Jewelled House’, reflecting on the *Abhidhamma*, which deals with absolute truths concerning mental and material processes. As he contemplated on the deep and profound doctrine of the *Patthana* or **Conditional Relations**, there arose **great rapture** in the Omniscient mind, which **activated** material processes in the body to **emit rays of six colours** – blue, gold, white, red, pink and a massive brightness of all these assorted colours. This spot is now marked by a small shrine within the compound to the north of the *Cankama*.

- *Fifth Week at Ajapala Nigrodha Tree (Ajapala Sattaha)*

During the fifth week, the Buddha sat at the root of the *Ajapala* Banyan tree reflecting on the *Dhamma* and absorbed in the bliss of *Phalasamapatti* (Fruition of *Arahantship*). This Banyan tree was

called *Ajapala* because goatherds came for shelter under its shade. Here the Buddha declared the qualities of a true Brahman in reply to a question by a conceited brahmin. This site is indicated by a **signboard** within the courtyard, directly in **front** of the Temple.

- *Sixth Week at Mucalinda (Mucalinda Sattaha)*

After seven days at the *Ajapala* Banyan tree, the Buddha moved to the Mucalinda (*Barringtonia acutangula*) tree, a short distance south of the Temple. There he sat for seven days at the root of the Mucalinda tree, absorbed in the bliss of *Arahantship*. At that time, there arose an **untimely rainstorm** and gloom for seven days. Mucalinda, serpent king of the lake, came out and used its coils to encircle the Buddha's body and its hood to cover the Buddha's head, thereby protecting the Lord. The site of this episode is at the Mucalinda pond, a short distance **south** of the Temple.

- *Seventh Week at Rajayatana Tree (Rajayatana Sattaha)*

After seven days at the Mucalinda tree, the Buddha moved to the Rajayatana tree (*Buchanania latifolia*) near the Temple. Here he sat at the foot of the tree absorbed in the bliss of *Arahantship* for seven days. At that time, two merchant brothers, **Tapussa** and **Bhallika**, from **Ukkala** in **Myanmar** met the Buddha and offered him rice cakes and honey. They became the **first lay disciples** and asked the Buddha for an object of worship. Thereupon the Buddha rubbed his head and presented them with **eight hairs**. The brothers returned to their native Myanmar with the precious hair relics, which were later enshrined by the king in **Shwedagon Pagoda** in Yangon. The site of this episode is marked by a signboard just **south** of the Temple.

(v) Sujata Kutu

Prior to enlightenment, the *Bodhisatta* was staying on the other side of the **Neranjara** river in a cave now known as **Dungeswari**. This cave is on a hill, now known as the Dhongra hill, about an hour's journey from Bodhgaya. After undergoing painful and profitless practices for six years, he decided to adopt the Middle Path and moved to the **Uruvela forest** near the village of **Senanigama**, where one can still see the site of **Lady Sujata's house**, which is now on a small mound. In that village too, one can visit a small shrine under a Banyan tree, with images portraying **Sujata's offering** of milk rice to the *Bodhisatta* on the eve of his Enlightenment

(vi) Uruvela Forest

The area, which was once a forest, is now a wooded area near the Sujata Shrine. Here one can find an old building with a dry well in the centre. This site is believed to be the **fire-chamber** of the **Kassapa brothers**, three matted hair *Jatilas*, who had a following of **one thousand disciples**. Here the Buddha tamed the serpent, which inhabited the fire chamber. The taming of the elder Kassapa brother **Uruvela** took a longer time. The Buddha had to employ his psychic powers to convert the misguided *Jatila*. After Uruvela Kassapa became the Buddha's disciple, his brothers, **Nadi** and **Gaya**, followed suit together with their followers. After hearing the **Fire Sermon** preached by the Buddha, the thousand newly ordained *bhikkhus* became *Arahants*.

(vii) Temples and Monasteries in Bodhgaya

Bodhgaya is the fountainhead of Buddhism. It occupies an area of only 15 sq. km, but within this small area are found over **thirty** monasteries and institutions representing every country in the world with a sizeable Buddhist community. A visit to some of

these temples can help one to understand how the religion is practised in different countries according to local culture that does not run counter to the Buddha *Dhamma*. There are also a few *Vipassana* meditation centres, such as the **Burmese Vihara** and the **International Meditation Centre**, to cater for yogis who wish to spend a **meditation retreat** at Bodhgaya. The names of Buddhist temples, monasteries and institutions listed in the Buddha Mahotsav 1999 Souvenir Programme are shown below, in alphabetical order:

All India Bhikkhu Sangha, Asian Buddhist Culture Centre, Bangladesh Temple, Buddhagaya Temple Management Committee, Burmese Vihar, Chinese Temple, Daijokyo Japanese Buddhist Temple, Dhamma Bodhi Meditation Centre, Drikyug Charitable Trust, Druk Nawag Thupten Choeling, Indosan Nipponjee Japanese Temple, International Meditation Centre, Jambunad Vihar, Karma Temple, Korea Temple, Maha Bodhi Society, Maitreya Project, Nav Bauddha Vihar, Panch Sheela Vihar, Root Institute for Wisdom Culture, Royal Bhutan Temple, Sakya Monastery, Sambodhi Welfare and Cultural Society, Shechen Monastery, Taiwan Temple, Tamang Nepal Temple, Thai Bharat Society, Thai Bodhi Kam, Tibetan Temple, Trailokya Centre, Vietnam Temple and Wat Thai Temple.