

4. *Kusinara, Place of the Buddha's Passing Away*

a) *How to reach there*

Kusinara or Kushinagar is in the village of **Kasia** in the Deoria district of Uttar Pradesh. The nearest town is **Gorakhpur**, 55 km away. By road, Kushinagar is 130 km south of **Lumbini**, 250 km east of **Sravasti** and 250 km north of **Patna**. All distances are approximate. There are now two good hotels for pilgrims to stay in at Kushinagar.

b) *Religious Significance* ^{1, 2, 3}

Three months before he reached the age of **eighty**, the Buddha renounced his will to live at the **Capala Shrine** in **Vesali**. Travelling in stages via **Pava** where he ate his **last meal**, offered by the smith **Cunda**, he reached the final resting-place at the **Sala** grove of the **Mallas** by the bank of the **Hirannavati** river in **Kushinagar**. There, on the full-moon day of **Wesak** in **543 BC**, the Buddha passed into *Mahaparinibbana*, the passing away into *Nibbana* wherein the elements of clinging do not arise (i.e. no more rebirth). His last convert was the wandering ascetic **Subhadda** and his last words to the *bhikkhus* were:

“Handa ‘dani bhikkhave amantayami vo: Vaya-dhamma sankhara. Appamadena sampadetha.”

(**Translation:** “Indeed, *bhikkhus*, I declare this to you: It is the nature of all conditioned things to perish. Accomplish all your duties with mindfulness.”)

The Buddha was lying on his right side between two **Sala trees** with his head to the north when he breathed his last. After his *Mahaparinibbana*, his body was taken into the town by the northern gate and out through the eastern gate to the shrine of the Mallas called the **Makutabandhana**. They were unable to light the funeral pyre until Ven. **Maha Kassapa** came and paid his respects. After the cremation, the **relics** were divided into **eight** equal portions by the brahmin **Dona**, who distributed them to **eight clans**, namely:

- King **Ajatasattu** of Magadha,
- the **Licchavis** of Vesali,
- the **Sakyans** of Kapilavatthu,
- the **Bulians** of Allakappa,
- the **Koliyans** of Ramagama,
- the brahman of **Vethadipa**,
- the **Mallas** of Pava, and
- the **Mallas** of Kushinagar.

Dona himself kept the **urn** used for dividing the relics. When the **Moriyas** of Pippalavana arrived, it was too late as all the relics had been distributed, so they took from there the **ashes**. Returning home, these men raised *stupas* to honour them. So it came about that there were eight *stupas* for the relics, a ninth for the **urn**, and a tenth for the **ashes**.

c) *Historical Background* **6, 9, 20**

In those days, Kushinagar was described by Ven. Ananda as “*this little mud-walled town, this back-woods town, this branch township*”. After the *Mahaparinibbana* of the Buddha, it became an important religious centre as Buddhism spread in India. As one of the four

pilgrimage places mentioned by the Buddha, it attracted devout Buddhists from all over India and abroad. **King Asoka** visited Kushinagar in 249 BC and raised several *stupas* and pillars at the site. But by the time **Hsüan Tsang** visited Kushinagar in 637 AD, the place was in ruins and its towns and villages waste and desolate with few inhabitants. He saw the *Sala* trees under which the Buddha passed into *Mahaparinibbana*, the *vihara* containing the **Reclining Buddha** image and beside it the 61 m tall *stupa* built by Asoka-rajā, in a ruinous state with a **stone pillar** in front. Further to the north, after crossing the Hirannavati river was a *stupa* marking the **cremation site**. Yet Kushinagar continued to be a living shrine until the 12th century AD, but after the Muslim conquest of India it became deserted and eventually fell into ruins and was forgotten.

In 1861-62, **Cunningham** visited the ruins of **Kasia** and identified the place as the site of the Buddha's *Mahaparinibbana*. In 1876, his assistant **Carlleyle** carried out extensive excavations, which completely exposed the **Main stupa** and discovered right at its front the famous **Reclining Buddha** image buried among the ruins of an oblong shrine. More excavations continued until 1912 and yielded datable finds which showed the continuous occupation of Kushinagar up to the 12th century AD.

In recent times, the **first Buddhist** to occupy Kushinagar was the **Venerable Mahavira**, an Indian national who was ordained as a monk in Sri Lanka, in 1890. He was responsible for restoring Kushinagar back to its rightful place as a sacred shrine. Ven. Mahavira repaired the main temple and built a *vihara* and *Dhamma* hall in 1902-03. After him came the **Venerable Chandramani** from **Akyab** township in Arakan, Myanmar, who was ordained as a monk in Chittagong in 1903. He continued the good work of his predecessor by gaining possession of the *Mahaparinibbana* Temple,

establishing educational institutions for the local people and reviving the tradition of *Buddha Jayanti*, which was celebrated for the first time in Kushinagar in 1924. Ven. Chandramani passed away in 1972 and was succeeded by his disciple, Ven. Gyaneshwar, a Myanmar monk who continues the noble task of taking care of the holy site.

d) *Objects of Interest* 9, 20

(i) Mahaparinibbana Temple

The present Temple was built by the Indian Government in 1956 as part of the Commemoration of the 2500th year of *Mahaparinibbana* or 2500 BE (Buddhist Era). The old temple restored by Carlleyle was too small to accommodate the increasing number of pilgrims visiting it. Inside this temple, one can see the famous **Reclining Buddha** image lying on its **right side** with the head to the **north**.

The statue is 6.1 m long and rests on a 7.3 m long stone couch. On the front side of the couch are three sculptures, believed to represent Ven. **Ananda** near the feet, Ven. **Subhadda** at the middle and Ven. **Dabba Malla** at the other corner. At the centre is an inscription of the 5th century AD, which states the statue was “*a gift of the monk Haribala to the Mahavihara*” and that “*it was fashioned by Dinna*”. This 1,500-year old Reclining Buddha image was executed out of one block of red sandstone brought in from **Mathura** during the **Gupta** period. It was **Carlleyle** who discovered it in 1876 in a dilapidated condition and successfully pieced together the fragments found scattered about. This statue bears the 32 marks of the Great Man (*Mahapurisa*) and can evoke different feelings in one’s mind, depending on where one stands to look at it.

- In **front** of the face, one can discern a **smiling mood** in the face.
- Near the **middle** part of the body, one can discern a mood of **suffering**.
- At the **feet**, one can discern the **calm** and **serenity** in the face.

(ii) Mahaparinibbana or Nirvana Stupa

This *stupa* beside the *Mahaparinibbana* Temple is a restoration of the **Main *stupa*** exposed during excavations by Carlleyle in 1876. When examined to a depth of 4.3 m, it revealed a copper plate and other objects from the Gupta period. The inscription on the plate in Sanskrit mentioned that the objects were deposited in the **Nirvana *stupa*** by the monk **Haribala**. Hsüan Tsang, who came in 637 AD, mentioned that the Nirvana *stupa* was built by Asoka. He also saw in front of it a stone pillar to record the *Nirvana of Tathagata* but it bore no date. The Nirvana *stupa* is believed to be erected originally by the Mallas to enshrine the Buddha's relics and subsequently enlarged by **King Asoka** and later during the **Gupta period**. It is likely that the Nirvana *stupa* was built on the site where the Buddha passed into *Mahaparinibbana* for devotees to worship long before Buddha images came into existence, although another theory puts the Buddha's *Mahaparinibbana* at the site of the Reclining Buddha. The *Mahaparinibbana stupa* was renovated in 1927 with donations of a Myanmar, **U Po Kyo**, and is 23 m tall.

(iii) Matha Kuwara Shrine

After eating the last meal offered by the **smith Cunda**, the Buddha became sick. According to the commentary, although the distance from Pava to Kushinagar was 3 *gavutas* or about 10 km, it took great effort and the Buddha had to **stop at 25 places** to rest. Thus comes sickness to a man, crushing all his health. As he wanted to

point out this fact, the Buddha spoke these words which aroused **religious urgency** (*samvega*): “*I am wearied and would rest awhile.*” At the last place of rest, 400 metres before reaching the *Upavanatta Sala* grove, the Buddha had to ask Ven. Ananda **three times** before the latter would go to the nearby stream to fetch him some water to drink. The reason why Ven. Ananda did not go at first was because many carts had crossed the stream, making the water muddy and dirty. After the third request, Ven. Ananda went to the stream and found that its water had turned clear and potable.

This place is called **Matha Kuwara** and a shrine has been erected and installed with a colossal **Buddha** image in earth-touching-posture (*bhumi-phassa-mudra*). The 3.05 m tall statue is carved out of one block of blue stone and is about 1,000 years old. The name ‘Matha Kuwara’ literally means ‘forehead prostration’, which is what devotees do when they visit this shrine. The present temple was built in 1927 out of donations of two Myanmar devotees, **U Po Kyo** and **U Po Hlaing**. It is located 0.4 km south-west of the *Mahaparinibbana* Temple.

(iv) **Cremation Stupa or Makutabandhana Cetiya**

After paying homage to the body of the Buddha for six days, the Mallas carried it to the **Makuta-bandhana**, the traditional place for crowning their chieftains, where they cremated it. The cremation ceremony is described in Part VI of the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, which also describes the partitioning of the Buddha’s relics by the brahmin Dona. The **Cremation stupa** was raised by the **Mallas** some time after the Buddha’s cremation and repaired in the 3rd century BC by Asoka and again in the 5th century AD during King Kumaragupta’s reign. When Cunningham visited the site in 1861-62, it was just a big mound. The hidden *stupa* was

subsequently exposed to reveal a circular drum 34 m in diameter resting on a 47 m diameter platform. During excavations, a large number of **clay seals** inscribed with Buddhist verses were discovered which confirmed that it was the **cremation site**. It is about **1.6 km east** of the Matha Kuwara Shrine along the main road. In recent times, the area around the Cremation *stupa* has been planted with grass and is well maintained for the benefit of pilgrims.

(v) **Buddhist Monasteries in Kushinagar**

In recent times there have been some developments in Kushinagar with the construction of several monasteries and other modern facilities for pilgrims. While in Kushinagar, pilgrims should visit the *viharas*, namely: Chinese Monastery, Japan-Sri Lanka Buddhist Temple, Myanmar *Vihara* and Tibetan Monastery, to pay their respects and seek assistance from the monks there to learn more about the holy site.