

# 1. *Lumbini, Birthplace of the Buddha*

## a) *How to reach there*

Lumbini is located in Nepal, near the Indian border town of **Sonauli**. Nowadays one can apply for a Nepalese visa in Kuala Lumpur in order to enter the country. From the border, a good road leads to Lumbini, about 20km away. All distances are approximate.

## b) *Religious Significance* <sup>1, 2, 4</sup>

After fulfilling the practice of the Ten Perfections (*Paramis*) for four incalculables (*asankheyya*) and a hundred thousand world cycles (*kappa*), the *Bodhisatta* or Future Gotama Buddha took conception in the womb of **Maya Devi**, the queen of **Suddhodana**, chief of a small **Sakyan** republic, just across the present Indo-Nepalese border. On the full-moon day of May in **623 BC**, **Maya Devi** was travelling in state from the Sakyan capital of **Kapilavatthu**, to **Devadaha**, her parents' home, to deliver her first child in keeping with the ancient tradition of her people. Along the way she passed through **Lumbini Garden**, a pleasure grove of Sala trees which were then in full bloom. Stopping to admire the flowering trees and plants, she began to feel the pangs of childbirth. Quickly she summoned her female attendants to put up a curtain around her. Holding the branch of a **Sala tree** to support herself, she gave birth to the *Bodhisatta* while standing up. According to *Majjhima Sutta No. 123*, as soon as the *Bodhisatta* was born, he took seven steps to the North and declared his position in the world with these words:

- Aggo'ham asmi lokassa* – I am the chief in the world.  
*Jetto'ham asmi lokassa* – I am the highest in the world.  
*Setto'ham asmi lokassa* – I am the noblest in the world.  
*Ayam antima jati* – This is my last birth.  
*Natthi dani punabbhavo* – There is no more becoming for me.

As soon as the *Bodhisatta* was born, a **great immeasurable light** surpassing the radiance of the gods appeared, penetrating even those abysmal world inter-spaces of darkness where the sun and moon cannot make their light prevail. The ten thousand-fold world system shook, quaked and trembled and there too a great immeasurable light appeared to **herald the birth** of the *Bodhisatta*.

### c) *Historical Background* <sup>6,9</sup>

In 249 BC, the great Mauryan emperor **Asoka**, who ruled nearly the whole of India from 273 to 236 BC, visited Lumbini as part of his pilgrimage to the sacred Buddhist places and worshipped in person the sacred spot where the Buddha was born. To **commemorate** his visit, he built a **stone pillar**, which bears an inscription in Brahmi script to record the event for posterity. The inscription engraved on the pillar in five lines reads (translation):

*“Twenty years after his coronation, King Piyadassi, Beloved of the Gods, visited this spot in person and worshipped at this place because here Buddha Sakyamuni was born. He caused to make a stone (capital) representing a horse and he caused this stone pillar to be erected. Because the Buddha was born here, he made the village of Lumbini free from taxes and subject to pay only one-eighth of the produce as land revenue instead of the usual rate.”*

(**Note:** The coronation of Asoka took place in **269 BC**, four years after his reign.)

After the devastation of Buddhist shrines in India by the Muslims in the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD, Lumbini was deserted and eventually engulfed by the tarsi forests. In 1896, the German archeologist **Dr. Alois A. Fuhrer**, while wandering in the Nepalese tarai in search of the legendary site, came across a stone pillar and ascertained beyond doubt it was indeed the birthplace of the Lord Buddha. The **Lumbini pillar** (also known as the Rummindei pillar) stands today majestically proclaiming that here the **Buddha was born**.

#### d) *Objects of interest* [9](#), [14](#), [15](#)

##### (i) **Asokan Pillar**

Upon entering Lumbini Garden, the most visible landmark is a tall pillar surrounded by an iron fence. This is the famous Lumbini Pillar erected by King Asoka in 249 BC. Originally it had a horse capital on top but afterwards it was struck by lightning and broken in the middle leaving 6.7 m standing without the horse capital. It is this pillar with its inscription that confirmed this site as the Buddha's birthplace.

##### (ii) **Sanctum Sanctorum: Holiest of the Holy Spots**

The area just in front of the Asokan column was formerly the site of the old Maya Devi shrine, which was dismantled around 1995 for archeological excavations. On 4<sup>th</sup> February 1996, a team of UN-sponsored archeologists announced the discovery of the Buddha's birthplace beneath the temple's foundation. The archeologists excavated 15 chambers to a depth of about 5 m, and found a commemorative stone slab **shaped like a womb** atop a platform of

seven layers of bricks dating back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, pinpointing the **exact spot** of the **Buddha's birthplace**, the *sanctum sanctorum*. According to ancient Buddhist literature, when King Asoka visited Lumbini in 249 BC, he placed a stone on top of a pile of bricks as a commemorative monument, for himself and posterity **to worship**.

### (iii) New Maya Devi Shrine

Nearby is the new Maya Devi shrine, a small pagoda-like structure, which holds a stone sculpture depicting the **Nativity of the Buddha**. The sculpture contains a bas-relief image of Maya Devi, mother of the Lord, holding a branch of the Sala tree with the newborn infant standing on a lotus pedestal. It was previously installed in the old Maya Devi temple.

### (iv) Puskarni – the sacred pond

South of the Asokan pillar is the famous sacred pond – **Puskarni**, believed to be the same pond in which **Maya Devi washed** herself before giving birth to the *Bodhisatta*.

### (v) Myanmar, Nepalese, Tibetan Viharas & Meditation Centre

The **Nepalese Vihara** is built inside Lumbini Garden. It is a Theravada monastery run by an old Nepalese *bhikkhu*. The **Tibetan** and **Myanmar viharas** and the **Panditarama** Meditation Centre are farther away, outside the garden complex. Pilgrims are advised to visit these places to pay their respects to the *Sangha*, whose presence has sanctified the environment of Lumbini.

### (vi) Kapilavatthu, the Sakyan Capital

Located some 27 km west of Lumbini, lie the ruins of the ancient Sakyan city of **Kapilavatthu**. The site has been identified with the archeological mound at **Tilaura Kot** (kotmound, fortified area). Excavations of these ruins by the Nepalese Archeology Department have exposed mounds of old *stupas* and monasteries, made of kiln-burnt bricks and clay-mortar. The remains are surrounded by a moat and the walls of the city are made of bricks. The fortified area of the site is 518 m running north-south and 396 m from east to west, roughly 20.5 hectares. On the basis of the archeological findings, the outer city of common citizens is very extensive and fits the reported size of Kapilavatthu as narrated by Hsüan Tsang in the Si-yü-ki.

Pilgrims visiting Lumbini should spend an extra day to visit Tilaura Kot where they can still see the site of the **Eastern Gate**, called the *Mahabhinnikkhamanam Dvara* (Great Renunciation Gate). It was from here that the *Bodhisatta* set out on his quest for Enlightenment on the night of the full-moon of *Asalha* (July) in 594 BC when he was twenty-nine years old. In the vicinity of Tilaurakot, there are several Buddhist sites of significance, notably:

### (vii) Niglihawa, Birthplace of Kanakamuni Buddha

Niglihawa, 3 km north-east of Tilaura Kot, is believed to be the ancient town of **Sobhavati**, birthplace of **Kanakamuni Buddha**. At the time of his birth, a heavy shower of gold fell over the whole of Jambudipa. Taking this “coming down of gold” as an omen, he was named **Kanakagamana** (*kanaka* = gold, *agamana* = coming). Over time, the original name Kanakagamana has taken the corrupt form of **Konagamana**. Emperor Asoka visited this place in 249 BC during his pilgrimage and erected a pillar to commemorate

the event. Today, the **Asokan pillar** can still be seen but it is broken into **two pieces**. The upper portion is 4.6 m long while nearly 1.5 m of the lower portion stands above ground slightly tilted. The inscription in Brahmi script on the pillar reads:

*“King Piyadassi, Beloved of Gods, having been crowned king fourteen years, increased the stupa of Buddha Kanakamuni to double its original size. Twenty years after his coronation, he came himself and worshipped it.”* (translation)

### **(viii) Gotihawa, Birthplace of Kakusandha Buddha**

Gotihawa, 7 km south-west of Tilaura Kot, is believed to be the ancient city of Khemavati, the birthplace of **Kakusandha Buddha**. Emperor Asoka visited it too at the same time and erected a **pillar** to record his visit. The pillar is broken and only the lower portion of about 3 m still stands in situ, but below ground level. Both the Asokan pillars described here were mentioned by **Hsüan Tsang** in the *Si-yü-ki* when he visited Kapilavatthu in 637 AD. At that time, each had a lion-head capital at the top.

### **(ix) Kudan, Site of Nigrodharama (Banyan Grove)**

At Kudan is a site, which scholars believe to be the *Nigrodharama* or Banyan Grove, which King Suddhodana offered to the Buddha when he visited Kapilavastu. It was here that Ven. Rahula was ordained when he came to ask for his inheritance from the Buddha. The remains of a brick foundation wall of an ancient monastery, believed to be built during Buddha's time, is still standing at the site.