

3. *Sarnath, Place of the Buddha's First Sermon*

a) *How to reach there*

Sarnath is located in the state of Uttar Pradesh, 30 km from the city of Varanasi (Benares). From Bodhgaya, the distance is 250 km. All distances are approximate.

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

After spending seven weeks at the seven places in Bodhgaya following his Enlightenment, the Buddha decided to teach the *Dhamma* he had realized to the Five Ascetics, namely: **Kondanna**, **Vappa**, **Bhaddiya**, **Mahanama** and **Assaji**, who had served him for six years, but left after he abandoned the path of self-mortification. He arrived at **Deer Park** or **Isipatana** in modern day Sarnath on the full-moon day of *Asalha*, exactly two months after *Wesak*. When they saw the Buddha coming in the distance they decided not to welcome him, but as soon as the Buddha approached they found themselves unable to keep their pact and began to serve him. The Buddha was able to convince them of his Attainment. That very night, the Buddha delivered the historic **First Sermon**, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* or Discourse on Turning the Wheel of *Dhamma*, which led to Kondanna attaining the **first stage of sainthood** at the end of the discourse. The remaining four ascetics attained the first stage of sainthood successively over the next four days. Later, the Buddha preached to them the *Anattalakkhana Sutta* or Discourse on the Characteristics of Non-Self, hearing which they attained *Arahantship* or **final sainthood**.

In Sarnath too, the Buddha converted the rich man **Yasa** and his **54 friends**, who also became *Arahants*. Later, the Buddha despatched them in various directions to propagate the *Dhamma*, with each to go a separate way. Thus Sarnath became famous as the place of the **First Sermon**, as well as the **founding of the Sangha** (Monkhood).

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

King Asoka visited Sarnath in 249 BC and erected several monuments to mark his pilgrimage, notably; the *Dhamek stupa*, *Dharmarajika stupa* and the **Asokan** pillar surmounted by the famous **Lion Capital**, which is now the crest of India. During the reign of King Kaniska (78 AD), Sarnath was a centre of religious activity and the famous colossal *Bodhisatta* image with a large parasol, was installed by the *bhikkhu* **Bala of Mathura**. During the Gupta period (4th-6th century AD), the *Dhamek Stupa* was encased with carved stones, the **Mulagandhakuti** main shrine was enlarged and the famous **Preaching Buddha** image, a gift of King Kumaragupta, was added.

In 520 AD, Sarnath had its share of destruction during the invasion of the Huns under the barbarian Mihirakula. But after the Huns were defeated, Sarnath again flourished under the Buddhist king, **Harsa Vardharna** (606-647 AD) and continued to be a living shrine under the **Pala kings** (8th-12th century AD). The last known patron of Sarnath was **Queen Kumaradevi**, the pious Buddhist wife of King Govindachandra of Benares (1114-1154 AD). She built a large monastery at Sarnath named **Dhammacakka Jina Vihara**, the ruins of which were exposed during excavations in the early 20th century. Things took a turn for the worse when Muslim hordes overran India and started their trail of destruction. After

the **diaspora** of the *Sangha* in India, Sarnath became deserted and was forgotten for about 600 years.

In 1794, Sarnath came to the notice of the world under **tragic circumstances**. Jagat Singh, a minister in Benares, dismantled the famous Dharmarajika *stupa* as a convenient way of collecting bricks and stones for building a housing colony. When the *stupa* was pulled down, workmen found at a depth of 8.3 m, a stone box containing a green marble casket. Inside it were **human relics**, presumably those of the **Buddha**, since they were enshrined there by King Asoka. Following Hindu custom, Jagat Singh consigned them into the Ganges River, where they were **lost forever**.

This act of **vandalism** would have gone unnoticed but for a report about the discovery by **Jonathan Duncan**, Commissioner of Benares, which appeared in the 'Asiatic Researches.' Soon public attention was attracted to the ruins of Sarnath and in 1815, **Col. C. Mackenzie** began explorations and discovered some sculptures, which are now kept at the **Calcutta Museum**. In 1835-36, Cunningham carried out excavations and recovered over forty sculptures and carved stones. Another tragedy struck when they were carted away in his absence together with sixty cartloads of stones from the shrines as construction material for two bridges and some buildings in Benares. Further excavations were continued on and off from 1851 to 1922, which exposed the **Dhamek stupa**, the **Dharmarajika stupa**, **Mulagandhakuti** shrine, **Asokan pillar** and the ruins of several monasteries. The first four monuments are considered more **sacred** because of their association with the Buddha. The fifth sacred spot is probably the sunken shrine of **Pancayatana**, which is believed by some monk teachers to be the site where the Buddha preached the First Sermon.

d) *Objects of Interest* ^{6, 9}

(i) Chaukhandi

This is the first monument to be seen as one enters Sarnath. This mass of brickwork with an octagonal tower on top is what remains of an ancient *stupa*. The tower was constructed to commemorate the visit of Hamuyan, father of Akbar Khan to Sarnath in 1588 AD. This site is believed to be the place where the Buddha stopped to let the Five Ascetics see him and welcome him as he entered the Deer Park.

(ii) Deer Park or Isipatana

A kilometre north is the famous **Migadaya** or Deer Park, also called **Isipatana** or Seer's Landing. Within its serene grounds are found all the sacred ancient monuments, namely:

(iii) Dhamek Stupa

This imposing *stupa* is cylindrical in shape, 28.5 m in basal diameter and 43.6 m tall. During the Gupta period, the lower portion was encased in stone, having beautiful carvings all round. The design consists of a broad band of *Swastikas* worked into different geometrical patterns, with a chiselled lotus wreath running above and below the *Swastikas*. While boring a shaft in the centre of the *stupa* in search of relics, Cunningham found remains of an earlier *stupa* of Mauryan bricks. It was probably the *stupa* raised by Asoka when he visited Sarnath. No bodily relics were found inside this *stupa*, but a slab with Buddha's creed, '*ye dhamma hetuppabhava, etc.*' in the characters of the 6th and 7th century was discovered. This appears to suggest its close association with the Buddha's *dhamma*. According to an inscription of the Pala king Mahipala I (1026 AD), its original name was **Dhammacakka stupa**. The Archeological

Survey of India used this finding to support its claim that this spot marks the **site of the First Sermon**. However, it is not possible to confirm this claim as two other places, namely: **Dhammarajika stupa** and the Gupta shrine of **Pancayatana**, are also believed by Burmese monks to be the site of the First Sermon. For the pilgrim, the best thing to do is to treat the whole area as the place of the First Sermon and to be **mindful** at all the holy shrines.

(iv) Dharmarajika Stupa

The ruins of the **Dharmarajika stupa** are a short distance north of the **Dhamek stupa**, and consists of a circular base of what remained after the wanton act of destruction by Jagat Singh. The original *stupa* built by King Asoka was **13.4 m** in diameter but was enlarged twice during the Gupta period so that the base we see today is larger. The **Dhammarajika stupa**, as its name indicates, was believed to be built by Asoka to enshrine the bodily relics of the Buddha at the time of his **re-distributing the relics** from the seven original *stupas* and enshrining them in a number of other *stupas* at different places. However, some Burmese monks are of the opinion that the **Dhammarajika stupa** marks the site of the First Sermon.

(v) Mulagandhakuti (Main Shrine)

North of the *Dhammarajika stupa* are the ruins of the Main Shrine, site of the **Mulagandhakuti** or **First Perfumed Chamber** where the Buddha spent the first rains-retreat. According to the **Dhammapada Commentary**, it was donated by the rich man **Nandiya** and as soon as the Buddha accepted the gift, a **celestial mansion** arose in Tavatimsa Heaven awaiting its owner, Nandiya. The main shrine was a square building, **18.3 m** on each side, with the entrance facing east. The area between the ruins of the Main

Shrine and the Dharmarajika *stupa* is believed to be the site of the *Cankama*, the promenade where the Buddha did his **walking meditation**. This belief is supported by the discovery of the famous colossal *Bodhisatta* image installed at this site by *Bhikkhu* Bala of Mathura.

(vi) Asokan Pillar

A short distance to the west of Mulagandhakuti, under a flat roof and enclosed by railings, stands the 2 m high base of the **Asokan pillar**. The original pillar was 15 m high and surmounted by the famous **Lion Capital** which can be seen in **Sarnath Museum**. This pillar is believed to mark the site where the Buddha assembled the *Sangha* comprising sixty *Arahants* and exhorted them to go in different directions to spread the Teaching. On the pillar is an inscription, which says: “*Let no one cause a division in the Sangha.*” During Asoka’s time, *bhikkhus* from many sects lived in Sarnath and it is believed that he issued this *Sanghabhedaka* (Cause a Schism in the Order) **Edict** to promote harmony among the various Buddhist sects.

(vii) Sunken Shrine of Pancayatana

To the east of the Dharmarajika *stupa*, is a sunken shrine under a concrete platform. It is made of terra cotta bricks and modelled to resemble one of the four square temples of the Gupta period, called “*pancayatana*”. The site of this sunken shrine of Pancayatana is believed by some monk teachers to be the place where the Buddha preached the **First Sermon** to the five ascetics. Being not as well known as the four main monuments of Sarnath, it has fewer visitors. As a result, it is a **quieter** and more conducive place for **meditation**.

(viii) Mulagandhakuti Vihara

About 500 m east of the Dhamek *stupa* stands the **Mulagandhakuti Vihara**, built by the Maha Bodhi Society of India in 1931 under the untiring efforts of **Anagarika Dharmapala**, whose mission was to make all the sacred Buddhist places in India come under the care of the *Sangha*. On the day of opening, the **sacred relics** of the Buddha unearthed in Taxila in 1913-14, were presented by the Director General of Archeology, representing the Government, to the Maha Bodhi Society. These Buddha relics were enshrined under the **Preaching Buddha** image and are taken out every year during *Kathina* for worship. The beautiful **Ajanta style frescoes** on both walls of the *vihara* were painted by a famous Japanese artist, **Kosetsu Nosu**. He took three years, from 1932-35, to complete the murals. A short distance outside the *vihara* is a newly constructed shrine with life-size images, depicting the Buddha's First Sermon to the Five Ascetics. At present, the abbot of Mulagandhakuti *Vihara* is Ven. Dr. **Dodangoda Rewata Thera**, Deputy General Secretary of the Maha Bodhi Society of India and author of the book, "The Lotus Path", describing the Eight Great Places of Pilgrimage.

(ix) Sarnath Archeological Museum (Closed on Fridays)

The museum houses **antiquities** recovered from the ruins at Deer Park during excavations from 1905 onwards. Inside the museum, numerous sculptures of the Buddha and *Bodhisatta*, mostly of the **Gupta** period (4th-5th century AD) are displayed. The four most important sculptures on display are described as follows:

- *Lion Capital*

On entering the main hall, one sees the most magnificent sculpture of **Mauryan** art – the **Lion Capital**, which once crowned the Asokan Pillar at Deer Park. This polished sandstone sculpture

is 2.3 m tall and consists of **four lions** sitting back to back on a **circular abacus** about 0.3 m high. The abacus has **four running animals**, each separated by a *Dhammacakka* wheel on its side, namely: **Bull** representing the Buddha's birth sign; **Elephant** representing his conception as Maya Devi dreamt that an elephant entered her womb; **Horse** representing the *Bodhisatta's* renunciation as he left home on his horse Kanthaka; **Lion** representing his First Sermon. The **four lions** that surmount the Capital represent the **roar of the Buddha** in the four directions. The Lion Capital is the **crest** of India and the *Dhammacakka* Wheel is the emblem of its national flag.

- *Colossal Bodhisatta Image*

This colossal standing image is of **red sandstone** donated by the *bhikkhu* Bala in 81 AD during the reign of King Kaniska and represents the best tradition of Mathuran art. Behind the statue is a stone shaft, which once supported a beautifully **carved umbrella**. The stone umbrella can also be seen in the main hall.

- *Buddha's Life Panels*

There is a sculptured panel showing the **four principal** events, namely: Birth, Enlightenment, First Sermon and *Mahaparinibbana* of the Lord Buddha. Another panel illustrates the **eight events** in the life of the Buddha, namely, the four principal events and the four **miracles** – the great miracle at **Sravasti**, the descent from Heaven at **Sankasya**, the taming of the drunken elephant Nalagiri at **Rajagaha** and the offering of honey to the Buddha by the monkeys at **Vesali**.

- *Preaching Buddha Image*

The seated Buddha image in *Dhammacakka mudra* or Preaching posture is one of the most beautiful creations of Gupta art. This famous sculpture was a gift of King Kumaragupta who ruled from 414-455 AD. The halo around the head is carved with floral designs and has two celestial figures on both upper corners. Inset at the bottom are seven figures, representing the Five Ascetics plus the Queen and her son in kneeling position, paying homage to the *Dhammacakka* wheel. A picture of this sculpture can be seen on the cover of Ven. K. Sri Dhammananda's book, "The *Dhammapada*".

(x) Mahabodhi Society

The credit for restoring Sarnath into a living shrine goes to Anagarika Dharmapala, founder of the Maha Bodhi Society of India. He established the Mahabodhi Society in Sarnath, which is located on the left of the Mulagandhakuti Vihara, which it oversees, in addition to the Mahabodhi schools, college, library and training school for monks and nuns. Lately the Society has constructed a hospital to cater for the poor patients around Sarnath.

(xi) Temples and Monasteries in Sarnath

There are several modern temples and monasteries for the pilgrim to visit in Sarnath, namely: the Burmese *vihara*, Chinese temple, Japanese temple, Korean temple, Thai temple and three Tibetan monasteries. The Burmese monastery is called the Dhammacakka Vihara and was established by Ven. Chandramani of Kushinagar. The present abbot is Ven. U Wannadhaza, a Burmese Sayadaw, who has been in Sarnath for many years. Lately, the *vihara* has added a new wing to accommodate pilgrims visiting Sarnath.