

Spiritual Journey to India

by Rev. T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki

This winter, from January 21 to February 14, I traveled alone to India for a pilgrimage to the Buddha's sacred sites. These include such sites as his birthplace, the place of his enlightenment, the place where he passed away etc. This was my first trip to India. I had wanted to follow the Buddha's footsteps with my own feet for a long time, but had not had a chance to do so. All of a sudden, right after Thanksgiving, I decided that I should go now, while I still have energy and am young enough to walk to the various sites. I started to plan my trip. All I wanted to do was simply to pay respect to the Buddha by walking to his sites on my own feet. I did not want to go with a tour group; I wanted to have a flexible schedule based on my needs. For some places, I would take more time, for other places, less. In a sense, this was my personal retreat.

I carried one medium-sized bag with minimal belongings such as tooth brush and paste, towels, clothes for two or three days, battery-run shaver, soap, wet-tissue, toilet paper, some medicines, flash light, camera, etc. as well as my Buddhist robe. I also carried a small bag and some US dollars. The only reservation I had was a round trip ticket between New York and New Delhi, but I had two recommendation letters, from a Sri Lankan monk and a Tibetan monk. I assumed that I would find temples at the sacred sites of the Buddha that I planned to visit. I knew that there were Sri Lankan temples near Buddha's sacred sites, and since many Tibetan people settled in India after the time of His Holiness, I assumed there must be Tibetan temples as well. I expected that the two letters would give me a good chance of obtaining lodging at the temple at each location, and they worked. Except for the first day, when I was on a train, and the last, when I took a room in a hotel in New Delhi, I stayed at various temples. Buddhist monks in all the temples that I stayed at were very kind and showed me around, explaining all about the area. If they were not available, they provided other monks or lay people who were knowledgeable about the sites. Thus my trip was very educational as well as spiritual.

My trip began at New Delhi on January 22. I went first to Mathura, famous for the style of its Buddha statues, and Agra where I got on the express train to Vanarasi. I spent four nights at the Maha Bodhi Society of India, a Sri Lankan temple in Sarnath, where the Buddha gave the first sermon to five monks and Buddhism began. Then I moved to Buddha Gaya where Siddhartha became enlightened under the Bodhi Tree. After three nights at Maha Bodhi Society of India in Buddha Gaya, I went to Nalanda /Rarjgir, where the Larger Sukhavativyuha Sutra and the Meditation Sutra on the Pure Land were taught. After staying at the Chinese Temple in Nalanda for three nights, I stopped by the Patna Museum and went on to Vaishali (Vimalakirti's home town), where I stayed at the Sri Lankan temple for three nights. From there I went to Kushinagar, where the Buddha entered Pari-nirvana (passed away) while lying ~~down~~ between the Sala Trees, surrounded by his disciples, at the age of 80 years. In Kushinagar I stayed at the Japanese-Sri Lankan temple. Next I went to Lumbini in Nepal, where the Buddha was born, staying at the Korean temple for two nights. My last stopping place was Sravasti, India, where the Smaller Sukhavativyuha Sutra (Amida-kyo) was taught in the garden of Jatavana Vihara.

Here I stayed for two nights at the Korean temple. Then I went back to New Delhi for one night and left for the United States on February 14.

My trip was full of new and wonderful experiences – too many to share in a limited space. Instead of trying to describe each detail, I would like to share some of my general impressions.

There is nothing like being there physically. “One actual glance is equal to a hundred times hearing!” When I was at the sites, I naturally thought of how the Buddha thought, spoke and practiced at that time, and how the other disciples saw him. Sometimes I even felt as though I were participating in the Buddha’s assembly in the present, surrounded by all the other disciples. In the Buddha Gaya, I thought of the Buddha sitting under the Bodhi Tree right in front of me. In Jetavana Vihara, I visualized the Buddha talking to Shariputra with 1250 people present, including me. In old Rajgir town I imagined how the Buddha’s disciples came to see King Bimbisara when he was imprisoned in the jail. From the jail you can see Vulture Peak, where the Buddha gave various teachings. I found that even now, 2500 years after he lived, we can hear the Dharma and meet the Buddha when we visit his sacred sites.

When I was in Sarnath, I was asked about the difference between New York and India. The first thing that came to my mind was that India is a place for all while New York is a place for humans only. In India, cows, goats, pigs walk freely here and there, dogs sleep on the ground, and chickens run across unpaved streets. It is not pretty, as there are all kind of droppings on the ground. As a side note, it is amazing to see, in some towns, how animals, people, bikes, cars, horse-carts, ox-carts, cycle-rickshaws, auto-rickshaws, buses and trucks run back and forth all at the same time without accident. It was a stampede! Although the people around the Buddha’s sacred sites in India are poor and uneducated, they have great rich smiles which made me forget that they live poor and difficult lives. Their strength may come from their being close to nature, like trees settled firmly in the ground. New York life is human-centered, and separated from nature. I believe that closeness to nature may nurture Indian people’s mindful hearts and make them richer than we are in some ways.

“No worry! No hurry! Eat curry!” is the way to live in India,” a taxi driver told me when I was in Mathura. This is a very cute expression and it was useful for me. When I felt in a hurry, I told myself, “No worry, no hurry, eat curry!” I really needed to change the rhythm of my daily pattern during my stay in India. Many of the Buddha’s sacred sites are located in the country side. The electricity is often out, and some towns do not have electricity at all. The temples I stayed at in Vaishali, Kushinagar, and Sravasti had their own electric generators, but they were supposed be shut down after 9 PM because of the loud noise they make. Many places do not have hot showers. High technology, such as computers and the internet, has nothing to with the people who live in the Indian countryside. During my visit to the sites, I did not have much information about what had been happening in the world – no TV, no radio, and only once in a while a chance to read some newspapers. I had a hard time remembering what day it was. It was great that I did not have to worry about appointments, telephones, e-mail, etc. Many times, after 9

PM, there was little I could do with no light so I went to bed early. Since it was up to me to decide how to spend my time on this trip, I didn't have to rush too much. When I found a nice spot, I stayed there for hours – sometimes, I meditated, sometimes I drew pictures, other times, I wrote poems. If I felt a little tired, I took a nap. Whenever hot water was available, I washed my clothes by hand (or foot) – there was no washing machine or dryer. Since I stayed at temples, I attended the morning and evening Puja, Meditation and Chanting. Therefore, my everyday living in India was very meditative and relaxing. By the way, “eat curry” every day became a little problematic after two weeks - though I like curry, it was too much! Luckily, I did not have any problems with my stomach.

To see several pictures that I took in India, please visit the New York Buddhist Church web site, www.newyorkbuddhistchurch.org.

In closing, I would like to thank the Rev. Kono Scholarship Fund of Midwest Temple, which supported my trip financially. Thanks also to all my friends who gave me advice and support, and to all the new friends that I met in India, who helped me a great deal. I have to tell you this: my trip was a trip to meet the kindness, compassion and love both of the Buddha and of the people of India.