

The Path of Pilgrimage and the Gradual Unfolding of Buddha Nature

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Abstract

The Birthplace of the Buddha, the place of his enlightenment, his first preaching of the Dhamma, and his Mahāparinibbāna are historical places that mark the life of the Buddha. Buddhist and spiritual aspirants who aspire to walk in his footsteps should embark on a pilgrimage to the Eight Great Places of Buddhist Heritage. It is a way to connect with the Buddha and his teachings, make the mind flourish, and come closer to the true self, our Buddha Nature that abides in wisdom and compassion. A pilgrimage can give us the fruits of uplifting faith, devotion, and knowledge, connecting us with places and portals that inspire our spiritual development. Before the Buddha reached Mahāparinibbāna, he advised his students to visit four specific sites associated with him, to reflect on the particular event of the Buddha's life connected with each place, and to continue to practice as earnestly as if he were still living among them. This paper will take a journey into the purpose, spiritual practice, and hardship of pilgrimage to understand our Buddha Nature.

Keywords: Buddhist pilgrimage, Buddha Nature, hardship of pilgrimage, Buddhist heritage.

Questioning and seeking meaning and purpose for existence is our human tendency. We thirst for the way that leads to spiritual wisdom, true happiness, and liberation. For those who follow the Buddhist spiritual path, the one who provides guidance and answers to questions concerning the meaning of life is the Lord Buddha. Gotama Buddha has been a symbol of world peace, loving-kindness, and freedom from suffering for millennia. The Buddha's gentle teachings have the power to touch the hearts of all, transmitting the blessings of perfect enlightenment, deep healing, and the transformation of the human condition.

Before Buddha became awakened, he was known as Prince Siddhartha Gotama. Prince Siddhartha Gotama lived a life of utmost luxury, with the highest standards of worldly comforts a man can have. However, he bravely abandoned this highly luxurious life of security and attachments to begin a spiritual journey to find a way to freedom from the sufferings of men. Due to his extraordinary courage, he found the way to attain enlightenment. After achieving his enlightenment, the Buddha worked extensively until his last human breath to pass on the message of peace and love and the path to awakening for the benefit of humanity and all living beings.

After the Buddha's *Mahāparinibbāna*, from generation to generation, the Saṅgha received, upheld, and transmitted the light of his teachings, the Dhamma, starting with the direct disciples of the Buddha. For over three hundred years, the precious teachings were secured by oral transmission, by reciting and recalling every word spoken by the Tathāgatha. During this era, emperor Asoka ruled an empire that spanned nearly all the Indian subcontinent. King Asoka fostered the spread of Dhamma far and wide across

his empire and encouraged missionary activity to lands as far away as the ancient Greek kingdoms of the Mediterranean. Eventually, the Dhamma was found in lands far west and east of India, profoundly influencing cultures like China, Korea, Japan, Vietnam, and the Snowlands of the Himalayas. Practitioners of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and the Vajrayāna were found everywhere, from the mountains to the oceans of Asia, from the humblest villages to the palaces of ruling kingdoms who were great patrons of Dhamma (Bhikkhu Sujato, 2022, p. ii). Even as it spread throughout Asia, the Dhamma flourished in India's sacred land. However, some seven hundred years ago, the Dhamma virtually disappeared from the land of its birth. Only in the 19th century did these holy places begin to come to light again. Today, thanks to the hard work of local governments, archeologists, historians, scientists, protectors of religion, and the devotion of faithful persons, the Buddhist holy places are renewed, maintained, and protected carefully and safely (Bhikkhuni Goi Huong, 2022, p. 7). The revival of Buddhism in India and the restoration of Buddhist shrines inspire appreciation for the efforts of the great men who have dedicated their lives to restoring the holy shrines to their past glory (Chan, 2001). We are very fortunate to have this chance to return to the sacred land of Buddhist origin and walk in the footsteps of the Buddha.

Going on a pilgrimage, one can see the significant historical landmarks of Buddha's sacred life directly from his birth to his enlightenment and his *Mahāparinibbāna* (Thich Nhat Tu, 2008, p. XIV). With reverence and feelings of gratitude, we can see with our own eyes the sacred places in which Lord Buddha worked tirelessly to benefit many living beings. A pilgrimage is, therefore, an enrichment of one's experience of Buddhist spirituality and a journey toward self-discovery.

1. The Eight Great Places of Buddhist Heritage

India and Nepal have four most historical and holiest places in Lord Buddha's life (Thich Nhat Tu, 2008), they are:

1. Lumbini (Nepal), the Buddha's birthplace.
2. Bodhgaya in the current Mahā Bodhi Temple, where Buddha attained enlightenment,
3. Deer Park in Sarnath, the place where Lord Buddha gave his first teaching and thereby set the wheel of Dhamma in motion.
4. Kushinagar, where Lord Buddha passed away and entered Nibbāna.

By the time of King Asoka, four more places associated with significant events of the Buddha's life became pilgrimage sites. These four more sites are considered to be places where Buddha performed principal miracles, namely (Chan, 2001, p.17):

5. Sravasti: Here, the Buddha performed the Twin Miracle to silence the heretics and ascended to Tāvatiṃsa Heaven to preach to His mother.
6. Sankasya: Where the Buddha descended from Tavatimsa Heaven, accompanied by Sakka and Brahmā, after preaching to Devas and his mother for three months.
7. Rajgir: Here, the Buddha tamed Nāḷāgiri, the drunken elephant.
8. Vaishali: On this site, a band of monkeys, out of reverence, dug a pond for the Buddha to use and offered him a bowl of honey.

Together, these eight places connected with important events in the life of the Buddha became known as *Aṭṭhamahāṭhānāni*—also called the Eight Great Places of Buddhist Heritage (Deshpande, 2013).

The Eight Great Places of Buddhist Heritage to visit during pilgrimage are:



Note. From the website of Cetiycarika [Photographs], retrieved July 18, 2025 (<http://cetiycarika.org/>)

I.A Lumbini – The Birthplace of the Buddha

We turn to Lumbini, the site where the supreme life of the historical Buddha all started (*The Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā*, 1990). According to history, in the final stage of pregnancy, carrying the Bodhisattva already for ten months, Queen Mahāmāyā traveled to her parents' home in Devadaha to deliver her first child, following the tradition of her Koliyan clan. On the way, the entourage passed the garden of Lumbini, a pleasure grove of Sala trees, which were in full bloom. She decided to stop there to rest and admire the flowering trees and plants. Soon, she began to experience signs of forthcoming birth. Quickly, she summoned her female servants to close off the area with curtains. Then, with her right hand holding on to a branch of a Sala tree for support, she gave birth to the Bodhisattva in a standing position: *Here, in the garden of Lumbini, under the Sala tree, the great sage was born without causing any harm to his mother. After birth, he looked in all four directions and, in each direction, he walked seven steps; blooming lotuses sprang up with every step he took.*

I.A.1 The Symbolic Meaning of the First Seven Steps

The seven steps taken by Prince Siddhartha after his birth hold deep symbolic meaning in the Buddhist tradition. Each step represents an essential aspect of the Buddha's profound journey and the principles he would later teach (*The Nidāna-kathā of the Jātakaṭṭhakathā*, 1990):

1st principle–Purity: Represents the Buddha's pure and uncontaminated nature, untainted by ignorance and the defilements of the world. It suggests that the Buddha's birth was not an ordinary one but one that came from a higher realm of existence.

2nd principle–Morality: Signifies the Buddha's commitment to living a righteous life of virtuous conduct, free from harmful actions and full of compassion for all beings.

3rd principle–Renunciation: Indicates the Buddha's eventual renunciation of his luxurious royal life and the impermanence and unsatisfactory nature of worldly pleasures. He renounced seeking spiritual truth and the path to liberation.

4th principle–Wisdom: Foreshadows the Buddha's achievement of profound insights and perfect wisdom into the nature of existence, the Four Noble Truths of suffering, and the way to overcome it. This step suggests that the Buddha would become the supreme *Knower of Truth*, and he would lead others as well toward genuine understanding.

5th principle–Enlightenment: Predicts that the Buddha would attain perfect enlightenment and realize the universal truth about the nature of reality and the nature of the self.

6th principle–Compassion: Signifies the Buddha's boundless compassion and love for all sentient beings. He would dedicate his life wholeheartedly to teaching and guiding others to liberation, like himself.

7th principle–Transcendence: Indicates that the Buddha would transcend the cycle of samsara's birth and death and attain complete liberation: *Nibbāna*.

These seven symbolic steps taken by Prince Siddhattha at birth predict his extraordinary destiny as the Buddha—the *Awakened One*, who would lead countless beings to the path of wisdom, compassion, and ultimate liberation from suffering. In this great event on the full-moon day of Vesākha, Lumbini became the birthplace of the Sākya prince Siddhattha, son of Queen Mahāmāyā Devī and King Suddhodana of the Sākya. Prince Siddhattha would later become—*The Buddha* and *World Spiritual Teacher*.

I.A.2 King Asoka

Returning to the history of Lumbini, among the earliest visitors who underwent pilgrimage to the birthplace of the Buddha, the most important one was King Asoka (Bidari, 2007, pp. i-ii). Visiting the site where the Buddha was born, he was deeply touched by the great significance of the Buddha's compassionate teachings and the importance of this site. Therefore, in the third century BC, he placed a pillar marking the Buddha's birthplace bearing an inscription that the Buddha had been born there¹. Due to the Asokan Pillar, the location of Lumbini was never disputed during the early years. The pillar inscription offers proof beyond all doubt: it stands as testimony to Lumbini's place in the historical birthplace and beginning of the life of the Buddha.

I.B Buddha's Advice on Pilgrimage

The advice of a pilgrimage came from the Buddha himself in his last discourse before passing away and was preserved in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. His chief attendant, Venerable Ānanda, expressed concern that the community would struggle to maintain their faith without the Buddha's presence. Thus, the Buddha advised his disciples to visit four specific places associated with him, reflect on the particular event of the Buddha's life connected with each site, and continue to practice as earnestly as if he were still living among them. Before Buddha passed into *Mahāparinibbāna*, he said (*Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*: DN 16, ii 72):

These Ānanda are the four places that a faithful person should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence. And truly there will come to these places, Ānanda, pious bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, laymen and laywomen, reflecting: 'Here the Tathagata was born! Here, the Tathagata became fully enlightened in unsurpassed, supreme enlightenment! Here, the Tathagata set rolling the unexcelled Wheel of the Dhamma! Here, Tathagata passed away into the state of Nibbana, in which no element of clinging remains!

And whoever, Ānanda, should die on such a pilgrimage with his heart established in the faith, at the breaking up of the body, after death, will be reborn in a realm of heavenly happiness.

2. Purpose and Practice of Pilgrimage

When one undertakes a spiritual journey to the holy Buddhist sites, then the Buddha can be found, not in the physical remaining's on the sites like the ruins of a monastery or the impressive architecture of ancient temples, but in the way one understands the deep meaning of the Buddha's teachings and the effort one

¹ UNESCO World Heritage Centre. *Lumbini - the Birthplace of the Lord Buddha*. Retrieved July 18, 2025, from <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/666>

takes to follow his footsteps by the way one practices Lord Buddha's profound teachings (Thich Nhat Tu, 2008). In Buddhism, understanding plays a crucial role in one's spiritual progress. So, for the pilgrim, it is to understand that a pilgrimage is a spiritual journey in veneration of the Lord Buddha. This act of reverence purifies one's thoughts, speech, and actions; through it, many noble qualities can be developed (Chan, 2001, p.1).

So, what is the purpose of pilgrimage? Certainly, there are many more purposes, but at least four psychological fruits can result from the practice of pilgrimage (Dr. Miles Neale, n.d):

1. Connecting with the legacy and inspiration of the Buddha and the possibility of one's own awakening
2. Purifying karmic imprints
3. Cultivating merit or virtues
4. Establishing living networks with other pilgrims.

From these four benefits of pilgrimage, let us look more closely at the benefits of the first fruit: *connecting with the Buddha and the possibility of one's own awakening*. Dr. Miles Neale (n.d.), a Buddhist psychotherapist, explains: 'We can say that one purpose for pilgrimage in the Buddhist context is to directly connect with the living legacy of the Buddha to deepen one's insight into the nature of reality.' Enlightened beings have made this connection with their activities in these environments; they are always connected to these sacred places (Khentrul Rinpoche, n.d.). When we go to these places, we commemorate them, and we can cultivate the same spiritual motivation; we can have the inspiration to walk in their footsteps to change ourselves towards a state of peace and happiness.

A pilgrimage is furthermore a way to connect with our *Buddha Nature*: this nature is the pure, true, and luminous state of our consciousness that is free from any duality or impurities (*The Tathāgatagarbhasūtra*, as cited in Zimmerman, 2002). Lord Buddha said that all beings possess the seed of Buddha Nature. It is a seed within all humans that gives rise to the potential to grow; it is the fundamental nature of all beings. Part of this fundamental nature is the tenet that all beings may realize enlightenment, just like the Buddha himself. Buddha nature is a source of hope, inspiration, and empowerment for spiritual practitioners. It implies that no matter how obscured by defilements one's mind may be, the potential for enlightenment remains, and liberation from suffering is possible for all beings.

During Buddhist pilgrimage, sacred sites are understood as spiritually charged locations that facilitate profound inner transformation. Such places function as symbolic gateways through which practitioners may access deeper levels of awareness, activate latent spiritual potentials, and cultivate altered states of consciousness that support existential insight. When we sit near the Diamond Throne (*Vajrasana*) under the Bodhi Tree, where Prince Gotama attained enlightenment, we can connect to our Buddha Nature and the possibility that all of us can achieve complete awakening, just like Lord Buddha. Additionally, according to tradition, not only did Gotama Buddha attain enlightenment under or near the Bodhi tree, but also past Buddhas and numerous Arahants are believed to have realized awakening in this sacred area. Because of this long continuity of realization, such pilgrimage sites are regarded as fields of accumulated merit and spiritual power (*puññakkhetta*), where the presence of past practice and realization influences the mind of the practitioner in powerful ways. The energy radiating from these places is enormous, affecting our minds and inner transformation beyond our limited human sensory awareness.

3. Inspirational Hardship of Historical Pilgrimages

For over 2000 years, pilgrims have volunteered to endure a great deal of hardship to reach the holy sites of the Buddha. The time, energy, cost, and resources required to make such a journey have always been

enormous. Written accounts of Chinese pilgrims, such as Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang, from as early as the fourth century CE of their travels to Bodhgaya reveal that it took several years to get to India on foot (Chan Khoon San, 2001, pp. 17-18). Years in which they encountered illnesses, bandits, and near starvation, and witnessed many others die along the way. They report that this immense struggle was endured with great devotion because they saw pilgrimage as a part of their spiritual practice of cultivating their minds and not just a means of travel to a destination point.

Venerable Chan Khoon San (2001), in his book *Buddhist Pilgrimage*, describes the faith, devotion, and hardship of famous pilgrims of ancient times. Reading these stories inspires admiration and gratitude for these brave heroes of the past who amazingly dedicated their lives for the benefit of Dhamma:

Emperor Asoka made a visit to these eight shrines, a *dhammayatra* (dhamma expedition) or a pilgrimage of piety. On his twentieth regnal year in 249 BC, he followed the advice of the Buddha and embarked on a holy pilgrimage visiting all these places. His pilgrimage was a 'landmark' journey because he built stupas and raised pillars with inscriptions to commemorate his visit to these holy places wherever he went. These towering monolithic pillars made of polished sandstone and topped with animal capitals have helped to identify the exact locations of the Buddhist world's most sacred places, even after they fell into ruins following the downfall of Buddhism in India. Many of these Asokan pillars still stand today, proclaiming his faith and devotion. (p. 17)

Venerable Chan Khoon San continues:

From China came devout and earnest Buddhist monks like Fa Hsien, Hsüan Tsang, and many others, who traveled great distances, braving immense hardships, perils, and even death to fulfill their desire to visit the holy places. In the *Kao-seng-chuan* (Chinese Monks in India, by I-Ching), another pilgrim, I-Ching, described how he had to pass many days without food, even without a drop of water, and wondered how the other travelers, under such difficult conditions, could keep up their morale and spirit. On the long trek, many died from physical exhaustion or sickness; some had to leave their bones in desert sands or elsewhere in India. Yet, despite these difficulties, they never faltered nor wavered. Such was their indomitable spirit and desire to gaze on the sacred vestige of their religion. Never did men endure greater suffering by desert, mountain, and sea and exhibit such courage, religious devotion, and powers of endurance! (pp. 17-18)

These brave stories of heroic, devotional Buddhists from ancient times are precious and inspirational; their great mind and faith, their energetic bravery, and the unselfish life these heroes lived are inspirational sources for our own lives to dedicate our time and spirit in keeping our focus on our spiritual development and to awaken to our Buddha Natura.

In our modern times, we have commercial airlines, travel agents, and advanced technology to ease the journey, but still, undergoing a pilgrimage requires an investment of material and mental resources and forces the pilgrim to confront all their self-imposed limitations, attachment to comforts, unrealistic expectations, and naive fantasies about a spiritual journey. 'Pilgrimage as practice can help us to reframe the hardship we may encounter, to help us transform our activities into meaningful gestures of devotion, contemplation and transformation' (Dr. Miles Neale, n.d.).

Conclusion

The legendary life of the Buddha tells us that when the Bodhisattva was born in Lumbini, he looked in all four directions, and in each direction, he took seven steps. The seven steps symbolize seven noble traits; they predicted the foundation he would embody and promote throughout his life and teachings. Lord Buddha's commitment to these seven principles inspires his followers to cultivate virtue and compassion-

ate behavior. The *Suttanipata*, a Buddhist text, states (as cited in Bidari, 2007, p. 69),

‘The wisdom child, that jewel so precious, that which cannot be matched, has been born at Lumbini in the Sākya land for weal and joy in the world of men.’

Many Buddhist and spiritual seekers from the ancient past until our modern times aspire to attain these supreme noble traits, just like the Buddha. His beautiful teachings, therefore, inspire spiritual seekers to go on a Buddhist Pilgrimage to Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Kushinagar, and other essential sites, to walk in the Buddha's footsteps and connect with his life, principles, and qualities. Due to this connection, aspirators can be touched and moved, seeing more clearly the possibility of awakening their own Buddha nature.

World Heritage

Engaging in such a spiritual pilgrimage, let us not forget that these sacred places are not places from legend; they are genuine, living treasures from the lifetime of the Buddha. UNESCO, The World Heritage Convention, states that²:

Since the discovery of the Asoka pillar in 1896, the authenticity of the archaeological remains in Lumbini has been confirmed The remains of viharas, stupas, and numerous layers of brick structures from the 3rd century BC to the present century at the site of the Maya Devi Temple are proof of Lumbini having been a center of pilgrimage from early times The delicate balance must be maintained between conserving the archaeological vestiges of the property while providing for the pilgrims.

UNESCO furthermore states:

‘As the birthplace of the Lord Buddha, testified by the inscription on the Asoka pillar, the sacred area in Lumbini is one of the most holy and significant places for one of the world's great religions.’

Based on these official statements of the World Heritage Convention, the Asokan Pillars are doubtless proof to testify to the value and authenticity of the holy Buddhist sites and their connection with the life of the Buddha.

Therefore, through virtuous intention and dedicated pilgrimage, may those who seek connection with Lord Buddha and his healing Dhamma, providing wisdom, develop spirituality in the footsteps of Lord Buddha, and flourish their happiness for the benefit of many. May the sacred places be supported and protected and open for many years to come, for the healing sound of the Dhamma to reverberate throughout the holy land of India and beyond.

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