

BUDDHA GAYA THE PLACE WHERE BUDDHA ATTAINED ENLIGHTENMENT

The next great landmark in the history of Buddhism is the site where the prince of the Sakya clan attained Supreme Wisdom (Bodhi or sambodhi). The memorable event happened at Uruvela, near Gaya, where he sat in meditation under a pipal tree. Because of its sacred associations the place came to be known as Buddha Gaya and the tree as the Bodhi tree. In ancient days the place was known as Sambodhi, as stated in an inscription of Asoka who visited this sacred site. To the Buddhists the place was also known as Mahabodhi.

On account of its connection with this signal event Buddha Gaya may be said to be the cradle of Buddhism and to the devout Buddhist there is no place of greater interest or sanctity. The holy spot of Enlightenment attracted pious pilgrims from far and near and the sacred tree and the Vajrasana, the diamond seat on which Gautama reached his final victory over worldly desires and realised the bliss of Supreme Knowledge, were maintained with great devotion and care. Holy shrines and stately monuments were raised all round. And the account of the Chinese pilgrim, Hiuen Tsang, gives us a glimpse of the past splendour of the place. The sacred tree has passed through many vicissitudes and the present tree is one of the many successors of the original Bodhi Tree.

The monuments that were raised in course of centuries were brought to light by Sir Alexander Cunningham and a number of other scholars. The present shrine, the stately Mahabodhi temple, was also renovated at a great expense. Asoka is said to have erected a shrine on the holy spot of Enlightenment and it is perhaps this shrine which is frequently represented in early Buddhist art. No remains of Asoka's shrine have survived. But the stately structure we see now is a later erection. This temple has a balustrade gallery, surrounding the sacred Bodhi tree, which was perhaps made of wood at one time and later translated into stone. The temple has been restored and renovated so many times that it is difficult to determine its original architectural form. From the description of Hiuen Tsang it appears however, that the temple largely in its present shape and appearance existed already in the seventh century A.D. This grand temple supplies the prototype of the Mahabodhi temple to Burma.

As it now stands the Mahabodhi temple at Buddha Gaya is approximately 160 feet high and consists of a straight edged pyramidal tower surmounted by a stupa, complete with the harmika, with a fluted amalawa-like lower member

and with angle-amalakas at the corners demarcating the different stages in the ascent of the tower.

The entrance porch, evidently later than the original temple, is on the east. Each of the four sides of the tower presents several tiers and niches, while the front face has a tall lancet opening for the admission of light into the sanctum. At the base of the tower rises a turret at the four corners of which, there is a replica in miniature of the main spire. Towering against the sky, this lofty and massive pile dominates the entire landscape all around and draws visitors and pilgrims from all parts of the globe.

The temple enshrines the great gilded figure of the Blessed One in the earth-touching attitude which symbolized the supreme event of Enlightenment. The devotion of the votaries has endowed the Master with a robe of state and over his head is a sumptuous umbrella signifying the suzerainty of the Religion of the Master. Along the northern side of the temple there is a narrow masonry platform raised about four feet above the ground. This is known as the "jewel shrine of the walk" or the Buddha's Promenade (chankama) where, after the attainment of Enlightenment, the Great Teacher is said to have spent a week in walking to and fro in deep meditation. At the points where he set his feet there are sculptured ornaments representing the miraculous blossoms which are said to have sprung up under his footsteps. Passing along this promenade and to the west of the temple stands the Bodhi tree and the holy spot of Enlightenment, now marked by a red sandstone slab, representing the Vajrasana on which the Master is said to have reached Perfect Wisdom. The original Mahabodhi shrine, as sketched in the early reliefs, is represented as enclosing this holy spot including the Bodhi Tree. The idea of erecting a temple with a lofty conical tower necessitated its situation being a little to the east of this holy spot so that they are now placed at the back of the temple.

Around the temple lie innumerable remains, of which the most important are the portions of the stone railing, which probably surrounds the original shrine. These stone railings represent two different periods of construction, the earlier going back to about the 2nd century B.C. and the later to the early Gupta period. Interesting carvings still adorn these rail posts, and of these the figures of Indra as Shanti and that of the Sun god Surya drawn by a four-horsed chariot are noteworthy. Beautiful sculptures and richly decorated votive stupas, scattered all around, still continue to attract the admiring gaze of the pilgrims and visitors who flock to this Venerable Shrine. The Mohanta's shed nearby are storehouses of fine sculptures and other relics which once adorned this holy spot. In the immediate vicinity are situated seven sacred sites, still remembered by tradition as being identical and those where the Lord is said to have passed seven tranquil weeks in the enjoyment of his Buddhahood. A visit to these places will well

repay the devotion of pious pilgrims as well as the curiosity of inquisitive visitors.

(Buddhist Shrines in India)



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