

Present Day - Places

Contributed by Dr U Than Sein
 Friday, 02 November 2007
 Last Updated Wednesday, 02 January 2008

Present Day - structures and places The Mahabodhi Mahavihara (Mahabodhi Temple)

A magnificent 54 meters high, the Mahabodhi temple, built with sandstone, is located at the place of the original Bodhi tree, where the Gotama Buddha sat for the enlightenment and spent first week of deep meditation, after enlightenment. Original temple was supposed to have been built by the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka (270-232 BCE). King Ashoka frequently visited the Bodhi tree and inspired by the sermon given to him by his spiritual teacher Upagupta (Mogalliputta Tissa), who said:

"Here at the seat of enlightenment, the greatest of the sage dispersed, and quickly repelled the forces of Mara, and here that peerless individual attained everlasting, exalted, Supreme enlightenment." (Ashokavandana) King Ashoka built the first temple (chaitya) in the 3rd century BCE. Subsequent Kings and pilgrims to Bodh Gaya had built the temple and nearby structures. When the Chinese monk Fa Hien visited Bodh Gaya at the beginning of the fourth century CE, he did not mention seeing any temple. It was not known who exactly built the present day Mahabodhi Temple, but probably built by Pala Kings around sixth century. When another Chinese monk Hiuen Tsiang visited the place in the seventh century CE, he had described the Mahabodhi Temple, substantially the same as it is today. Successive pilgrims from neighbouring countries, such as Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Nepal and China, made donations, constructed monuments and stupas, and renovated various structures in and around the temple. Between 10th and 18th centuries, a series of Myanmar kings sent emissaries to Bodh Gaya, made donations, built monuments and stupas, and also carried out repairs of the Temple. Similarly, pilgrims from Sri Lanka, Nepal, Vietnam, China and other parts of India did the same. King Mindon of Myanmar, who had organized the Fifth Sangha Congregation, sent a mission in 1877 to Bodh Gaya to review and make repairs of the Mahabodhi Temple and also to build a monastery for accommodating Myanmar pilgrims. The monastery (Mahabodhi Rest house) still exists today near the Mahant's palace, and the two stone inscriptions describing the donations of King Mindon are also visible alongside the Myanmar temple fully occupied by Mahant's people. King Mindon also built Kuthodaw Pagoda and surrounding stupas, as part of the traditional foundations of the new royal city, Mandalay, Myanmar, which also included a pitakat taik or library for religious scriptures, and also commemorating the organization of the Fifth Buddhist Synod in 1871. The Pagoda and its surrounding stupas formed the world's largest book of Buddhism, consisting of 729 large marble tablets with the Tipitaka Pali canon of Theravada Buddhism inscribed on them and gilded in gold. One more was added to record how it all came about, making it 730 stone inscriptions in total.

Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) of Sri Lanka visited Bodh Gaya in 1891 and stayed at this Myanmar Mahabodhi Resthouse for more than 2 decades to initiate an historic Buddhist movement to gain back the management of the Maha Bodhi Temple into the hands of Buddhists. Anagarika Dharmapala established the Maha Bodhi Society, which flourished since then for disseminating Buddhism around India, Asia and the world. Throughout the last 30 years of his life, Anagarika Dharmapala ceaselessly strived to get back the tasks of restoring the rights of Buddhists to worship there and control the management of the Maha Bodhi Temple. Kings of Buddhist countries, eminent scholars and intellectuals from India and around the world began to speak out in support of the issue. It was only in 1949, the Bodh Gaya temple Act (Bihar Act XVII 1949, amended February 1955) was passed making provision for the setting up of a committee of four Hindus and four Buddhists to manage the affairs of the temple. On 23rd May, 1953, the temple was finally handed over to the Government, through Dr S Radhakrishnan, the then Vice president of India.

The Mahabodhi Buddha Image As soon as someone enters the Mahabodhi Temple one would see at the end of the main chamber, a Buddha statue, looking at and smiling at you. This statue was initially found at the Mahant's compound and British archeologist General Cunningham in late 1880s moved it to the present location inside the Temple. The Buddha image is about six-feet high and gold-gulited with the right hand touching the ground, and the left hand resting on his lap. This gesture, bhumiphassa mudra (earth-touching gesture), signifies Gotama Buddha's enlightenment. The Buddha image and its surroundings make a definite appeal that whoever seeing it felt the urge to bow.

In the middle of the Temple chamber, there is a remnant of Shiva linga that was installed around 9th century but taken

away at the request of Anagarika Dharmapala and Myanmar pilgrims in the 19th century. At the upper level of the main chamber of Mahabodhi Temple, there is another image of standing Buddha crowned and jeweled, supposed to be built around Pala period. Smaller statues of Buddha, two standing and two sitting, could also be seen on either side of the standing Buddha.

Bodhi Tree and other sacred places Around the Mahabodhi temple, the seven sacred places where Gotama Buddha spent a week each for meditating after enlightenment can be found.