

Seven Sacred Places

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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.

(1) Maha Bodhi Tree: Behind the Mahabodhi Temple, there is a Bodhi tree planted since early 19th century. Several Bodhi trees might have been replanted using the saplings from earlier Bodhi tree. During Mauryan Emperor King Ashoka's period, his daughter, Sanghamitta, took a branch from the Bodhi tree from Bodh Gaya to Sri Lanka, and planted in a place near the city of Anuradhapura. That Bodhi tree still grows at the same place, and is the oldest continually documented tree in the world. The existing Mahabodhi Tree in Bodh Gaya is believed to be grown from the sapling brought from the original Bodhi tree from Sri Lanka. There is a platform built in between the Maha Bodhi Tree and the Temple. It is a large rectangular red-sand stone slab, thought to be put at the exact place where Gotama Buddha sat for deep meditation and attained the enlightenment. This platform is called 'vajirasila' (the rock of diamond) or 'vijirasana' (the diamond seat) and some Buddhists believe that an enormous diamond lay buried beneath the earth fuelling the site's spiritual power.

(2) Animisa-lokana (Animisa Cetiya): About 50 meters at the north-east side of the Maha Bodhi Temple in a small hill, and to the right of the main entrance to the main Temple, there is a small stupa type temple with a Buddha image. This small temple is known as "Animisa Ceti" (Unblinking Shrine), to mark the place where Gotama Buddha spent the second week after enlightenment, remained standing and gazing uninterruptedly to the Bodhi tree.

(3) Cankamana (Ratanacankama Cetiya): At the side of the Maha Bodhi Temple, if one turns around, there is a spot where Gotama Buddha spent third week in meditation, walking back and forth, from the Bodhi tree to unblinking spot. Presently a raised structure with symbols of lotus flowers, known as Jewel promenade Shrine (Ratanacankama Cetiya) showed where the Buddha's feet rested and lotus flowers sprang up. Pilgrims will notice that the Mahabodhi temple is surrounded by the stone railings, dated back to 100 BCE, erected by pilgrims to the temple. (4) Ratanaghara Cetiya: At the north-west of the Bodhi tree, there is a small shrine (Ratanaghara Cetiya or the Jewel House Shrine) with small images of Buddha of recent era. It is a place where Gotama Buddha sat for deeper meditation during the fourth week after enlightenment, and the blue, yellow, red, white and orange rays emanated from his body. These colors are used in the present day Buddhist flag.

(5) Ajapala Nigrodha: When entering the main gate and descending the stairs towards Maha Bodhi Temple, there is a stone pillar marking Ajapala-Banyan tree, where Gotama Buddha spent his fifth week of meditation after enlightenment. It is also here where Lord Buddha made a response to a question raised by a Brahman that good kamma (action) but not birth made a Brahman. Near the pillar, there is a brass bell donated in early 19th century by the pilgrims from Myanmar. There is a beautifully curved gateway, probably built around the eighth century and at its base on each side, there exists two kneeling figures of ladies/deities, supposed to be left by the Myanmar Missions around mid-1800s.

(6) Mucalinda Lake: Just beyond the south-east corner of the Maha Bodhi Temple is a 6m high section of a huge stone pillar, moved to its present place in 1956, and believed to be originally erected by King Ashoka to mark Bodh Gaya with an elephant statue on the top of the pillar which stood outside the temple railing to the right of its east gateway. Walking through the pavilion built just south of the present day pillar, there is a large pond, called Mucalinda, supposed to be a lake where Lord Buddha spent his sixth week of meditation after enlightenment. It is a place where the king of the serpent (Naga) rose up from the water to protect Gotama Buddha from a severe storm created by Mara (the god of chaos) who wanted to disturb the Buddha's meditation. Right in the middle of the pond, there is a Buddha image (of Myanmar style) covered by the serpent king, which was donated by Myanmar pilgrims in early 1990s.

(7) Rajayatana: Just a few meters on the south side of the Mahabodhi Temple, a small forest tree which is another type of Banyan tree (called Linlun in Myanmar), replanted by the Myanmar Mission, marks a place at which Gotama Buddha

spent the last seventh week after enlightenment. It is here where Gotama Buddha preached to the passersby, including two merchants, Tapussa (Tapassu) and Ballika (Bliallika) of Ukkala (Utkala) (believed to be modern day Yangon of Myanmar). Gotama Buddha gave them eight strands of hairs and sermons with two gems "Buddham saranam gacchami and Dhammam saranam gacchami". These eight strands of hairs are believed to be placed as relics inside the Shwedagon Pagoda at Yangon, along with the relics of other Buddhas.

Archaeological Museum Going further south of the Mahabodhi temple, an archaeological museum of Bodh Gaya has fine collection of stone and metal images from the 1st to 12th centuries. Most of the images belong to the Pala-sena period of 8th-12th centuries. The most important exhibit is the stone railing of the Maha Bodhi Temple, with carvings illustrating the famous Buddhist shrines, the Bodhi tree, the Dharma (Dhamma) wheel, various events in the life of the Buddha, and some auspicious symbols. The museum opens everyday from 10:00 am to 5:00 pm, except Fridays. Temples around Bodh Gaya Several Buddhist countries have built temples at Bodh Gaya. The oldest temple was built by King Mindon of Myanmar in 1877, followed by the second oldest - Mahabodhi Buddhist Society Rest House built in 1901. It forms part of the Mahant's palace buildings. At the end of vegetable garden, there are two small Myanmar-styled pavilions, housing the inscriptions of Myanmar mission sent by King Mindon in 1877. The inscriptions written in both Devanagari and Myanmar languages, and carved on smooth white marble slabs, can be read even today. They described the history and purpose of the donations by King Mindon. In the court yard of the Mahant's palace, a few large Buddha statues can be found, and some are partially destroyed. A few of them are dated back to fifth centuries. Present-day Myanmar Buddhist Vihara built and renovated since early 19th century is situated on the old road to Gaya, a few kilometers north of the Mahabodhi Temple, and just beyond the Mahant's palace, near the Gaya police station. A series of new buildings have been added in the Myanmar Vihara, including a newly built two-storeyed consecrated Seema (sanctum-sanctorum) where the monks (sanghas) can be ordained as per Theravada tradition.

Similarly, there are temples, near and around the Mahabodhi Temple, built by Thai (with typical Thai pagoda style Temple), Sri Lanka (Maha Bodhi Society building and stupa), Chinese, Tibetans, Bhutanese, Japanese, etc.

The Niranjara River flows near Bodh Gaya towards Gaya, and there is a bridge now built in late-1990s crossing it near the Myanmar Buddhist Vihara. The end of this bridge is used as a local bus stand. After crossing the bridge, one can reach to a local village where a Gupta-period cedi has been built, which is believed to be the site of Sujāta's house, according to the excavations made in the 1970s. The finding indicated that the building was built during the late Gupta period, and had been repaired several times. One inscription showed that it was Sujāta's abode built by King Devapala. Archaeological excavations are still carrying on at the same place, and the structure looks like the ruins of an ancient stupa (ceti or chaitya). Others believed that it is the place of the Ajapala tree where Gotama Buddha spent his fifth week of meditation after the enlightenment. At this Niranjara River, Gotama Buddha, after having taken the rice and milk offered by Sujāta, made a solemn declaration that if he was to become Buddha and join those of the previous Buddhas, the begging bowl should float upstream. He, then, put the bowl in the river, which actually floated upstream confirming Gotama's wishes. About ten kilometer north-east of Bodh Gaya and six kilometer east of Gaya on the way to Rajgiri, a small road lead to a village from where pilgrims can climb up to a middle of a small hill, called the Pragbodhi or Dukkara-cariya (Dungeshvari) (practicing strenuous and austere meditation). There is a cave where Gotama Buddha spent as an ascetic for six-long years, after the renunciation of all worldly pleasures. After a short half-way climb from the base, pilgrims would find a small Tibetan temple and a cave believed to be where Gotama Buddha sat and meditated. The image inside the cave showed the familiar Buddha image of Dungeshvari, showing an emaciated, skeletal figure of meditating Buddha. If one climbs to the top of the hill, there are ruins of foundations showing the existence of a large monastic complex and several stupas. On the new road from Bodh Gaya to Gaya, pilgrims may find the Gaya International Airport and the Magadh University that becomes an international centre for Buddhist study. Many Myanmar monks are studying there for attaining undergraduate, graduate and postgraduate degrees in Buddhist study.

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{Text prepared by Than Sein, Buddhist devotee, New Delhi, 26 October 2007} Further readings:

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