

Chapter 5

"Today we are going to learn about the Buddha and the religion of Buddhism that was founded after his life on earth was completed," announced our guide Ravi when he picked us up in the morning for the trip to Sarnath, about 10 km from Varanasi.

I had been anticipating this part of the pilgrimage from the outset when I first laid eyes on a Bharatonline web page. The internet offered many tours and pilgrimages to India's holy places, but none was as professionally created as Bharatonline. Bharat was the ancient name for India, a name derived from the epic Mahabharata, which included the greatest scripture of soul-consciousness – Bhagavad-Gita. Bharatonline offered a Cultural Trail tour for only \$1,000 US dollars. The second part of that tour was a Buddhist pilgrimage to the major places that were associated with the birth, life, and death of Siddhartha Gautama, the prince who gave up the prospects of an earthly throne to become the Buddha, the Enlightened One.

When I told Ben about the Cultural Trail tour, he liked the price, but he didn't like the Buddhist pilgrimage aspect of the tour.

"What are you trying to do?" he asked. "Are you trying to make a Buddhist out of me?"

"No, Ben," I replied. "I thought that for the price of only one thousand dollars, you and I would see some great places in India. We'll see the Golden Triangle of Delhi-Jaipur-Agra, the holiest city of India – Varanasi, and we'll travel through several places that Buddhist pilgrims visit. Along the way we'll ride through a lot of India's countryside, villages, towns, and cities. And, of course, you'll get to see your son, Jason, for a week."

I didn't want to scare off my Christian friend, nor did I want to say much about my interest in Buddha's teachings. So I painted a picture of a cultural tour, not a Buddhist pilgrimage, out of respect for Ben's strong Christian beliefs. Several times I thought Ben would cancel the trip or try to find another less religious tour. I kept steering him in the direction of the tour that my heart and soul yearned for. I had been exposed to Buddhism during my tour of duty in Vietnam during the early 70's, and I had visited Thailand and Taiwan. Now I had the chance of a lifetime to visit the birthplace – the heart – of Buddhism. I didn't want to pass up such an opportunity.

"Paul, I don't think I can afford to take the trip to India," said Ben about four weeks before our departure date, which was already set for the third week in February. The news was devastating to me, and I thought I would never see the land of my spiritual past in this lifetime.

"Why not?" I asked.

"I just came back from the mission that I told you about, and I'm short of cash," he answered. "I spent more money than I anticipated, and I can't afford it at the time."

“I thought your organization, Aid For All Nations, was taking care of your expenses,” I said.

“I thought so, too,” he answered, “but it turned out that I had to pay for my own expenses.”

“Ben, I already booked the tour for both of us,” I told him.

“I’m sorry, Paul,” he said. “I’ll cover the cancellation charge.”

I saw a long causal chain of events starting to come apart. The plans, the trip to the visa office in San Francisco, the visit with his son to discuss the anticipated trip, the research on the internet, the India travel guide book – all for naught. Something inside of me said that a new chain of events would have to be forged through sheer determination and concentration.

“Ben,” I said, “what if I pay for your plane ticket and the Cultural Trail tour, and you pay me back within an agreed period of time. Would that work for you?”

“I hate to borrow that much money,” said Ben.

“Don’t worry, Ben,” I responded. “Now that I’m collecting my monthly Social Security check, I can afford to lend you a couple of thousand dollars.”

“Are you sure you don’t mind?” asked Ben. He was still trying not to commit himself to an unaffordable trip.

“No, I don’t mind,” I replied. “I trust you. I know you’ll pay me back.” I was determined to go to India, no matter the cost.

“Great,” said Ben excitedly. “So I’ll get to see where my son lives and works half of the year, after all. And I promise to pay you back when I can.”

‘And I’ll get to make my pilgrimage to India’s holy sites, including the places where Buddha walked,’ I thought to myself.

At Sarnath, we first visited the archaeological museum, which had artifacts from the 6th century B.C. – the era of the Buddha. Chief amongst the preserved artifacts was the Lion Capital – the national emblem of India. Also known as “Shakyasimha Buddha,” the Lion Capital was established by the Mauryan Emperor Ashoka to commemorate the life of Buddha and his teachings. Four symbolic representations stood atop the pillar: the elephant represented the dream of Gautama’s mother of how his birth would happen; the bull represented the sign of Taurus, the time of his birth, enlightenment, and death; the horse represented the renunciation of the Buddha from the world of royalty and his asceticism; and the lion represented the confidence of the Buddha in the four noble truths that he taught. The twenty-four spokes on the Wheel of Dharma represented the wheel of the law of change with the principles of cause and effect.

My attention was drawn to three major statues of the Buddha. The first statue showed the Buddha seated in the lotus position with his palm turned outwards near his chest. This was the oft-repeated pose of the Abhaya Mudra, which stated, “Fear not, be not afraid.” The second statue showed the Buddha seated in his teaching

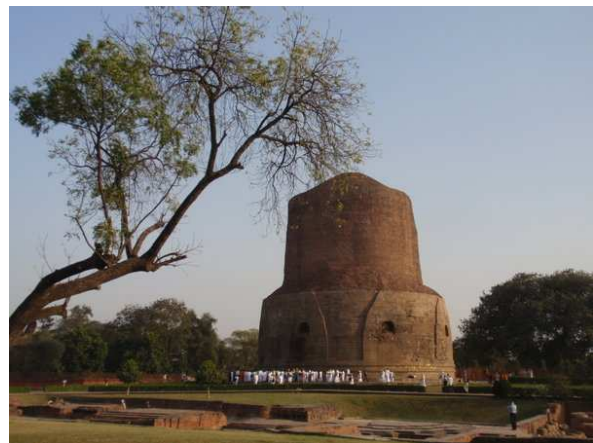
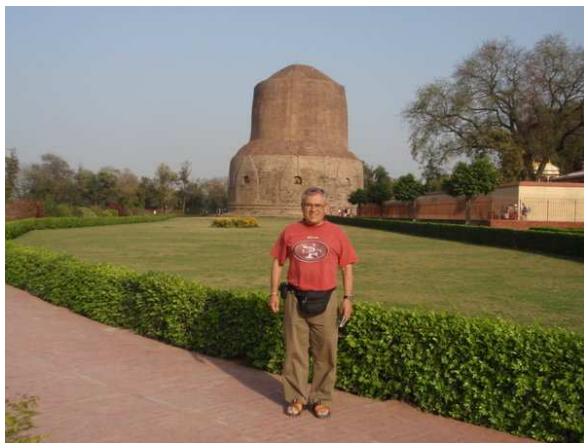
pose with the thumbs and index fingers of both hands forming two circles and touching each other, making a figure eight – the sign of infinity.

“This is the Dharmachakra Pravartan Mudra,” explained Ravi. “It represents the duality of ignorance and knowledge. The Buddha taught that the root cause of all suffering in this world was ignorance. In order to be free from suffering, a person needed to open or untie the knots of suffering through knowledge.”

Ravi’s explanation was a little different than the version I had learned, which stated that the root cause was desire. In order to stop suffering, a person needed to eliminate desire.

The statue of the Bodhisattva Maitreya reminded me of the various religious teachings of the arrival of a once and coming savior: the second coming of Jesus in the Christian religion, the arrival of the Mahdi in the religion of Islam, the return of Quetzalcoatl in the Mayan cosmology, the coming of a Jewish Messiah known as Mashiach (anointed king), and many others.

Our arrival at the actual archaeological area of the ruins of the old city and monastery brought a sense of wonderment and *déjà vu* to my inner awareness. This was the place where the Buddha preached his first sermon to his first five disciples after achieving enlightenment under the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. The remains of an Ashokan pillar marked the location where the first Buddhist monastery was set up by the Buddha for sixty male converts. I watched the flow of pilgrims from Vietnam, Thailand, China, and Sri Lanka walk respectfully through the entire site known as Deer Park in Buddha’s time.



I entered the flow of pilgrims and circumambulated around the tall cylindrical tower-shaped stupa built by Emperor Ashoka on top of the Buddha’s relics. This was the emperor’s way of paying penance for his numerous bloody campaigns of conquest. This was also the process whereby the superior Buddhist teachings of non-violence conquered the hearts and minds of the inhabitants of India in the 3rd century BC.

“Om Mani Padme Hum,” I chanted along with other pilgrims as we circumambulated the Dhamekha Stupa, where the turning of the wheel of Dharma

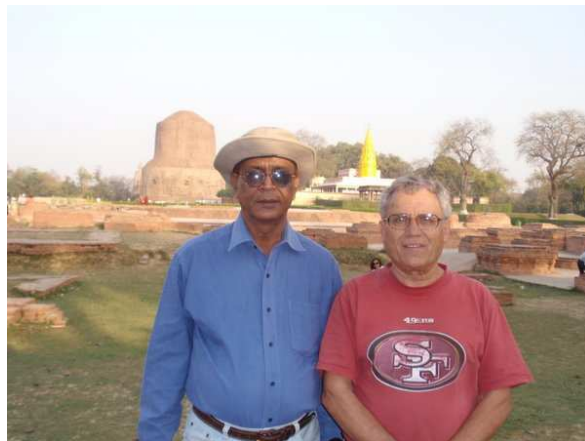
(law) began when the Buddha proclaimed the middle path for attaining Nirvana (the inner kingdom of heaven). I placed a small square of gold leaf on the stupa in imitation of the other Buddhists. The mantra, "Om Mani Padme Hum," was meant to signify the jewel in the lotus, the great middle way of achieving the Buddha nature – the ideal or highest spiritual potential that exists within all human beings. It reminded me of the Christ-mind of Christianity, the Nous of the Greek philosophers, and the Gnosis of the Gnostics.

When I finished circumambulating and chanting, I found Ben preaching to our guide Ravi amongst the ruins near the stupa.

"Jesus said I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life," preached Ben. "No man can come to the Father God except through Jesus. Buddha cannot save man. Only Jesus can. Buddha died, but Jesus rose from the dead. You must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and he will forgive your sins. Then you will be assured of going to heaven instead of to hell."

Ben stopped preaching when he saw me coming within earshot.

"Are you a Christian like your friend here?" asked Ravi when I approached him and Ben.



"I'm a Yogi," I answered. "I believe that all paths lead to God. No one has a monopoly on the One God who lives, moves, and breathes in us all." I knew that answer wouldn't please Ben, but I did not want to be hypocritical. "I am a Christian, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a follower of the teachings of Krishna, and I bow in respect to the saints and sages of all religions."

"Do you think a person can believe in all religions?" asked Ben, turning to Ravi. He needed confirmation for his antagonistic stance towards me.

"No, I don't think so," replied Ravi.

"It is possible," I said, defending my position. "To the Sufi, the Mystic, and the Yogi, the divine presence lives in everything and in everybody. And all religions essentially teach that God is omnipresent and omniscient. Therefore, those who know God and are aware of his divine presence in everything, they say that God is everything."

Such an inclusive view of all religions was hard for Ben to comprehend. He had been raised believing that only Christianity had the exclusive right to grant salvation to mankind. To him all other religions were wrong and false. There was a wide gulf in our theologies and points of view.

Within the area known in ancient times as Isipatana (present Sarnath) stood a sapling of the Bodhi tree, the tree of enlightenment. It was actually a sapling taken from a sapling of the original Bodhi tree under which the Buddha was enlightened. Presently, its limbs were supported by many sturdy buttresses.



I sat under the emblematic tree and meditated on the one source of all life and on the Buddha nature within all sentient beings. The ground of our being was consciousness, and we were the offshoots of that great tree of life.

Next to the tree was a lovely little enclosure with life-sized statues of the Buddha and the group of five disciples, who were listening to the Buddha's first sermon – the Chakka Pavattana Sutta (the Wheel of Law).



I stood at the blue-colored plaque in front of the enclosure – facing the red-robed Buddha – and read the English translation of the words of wisdom from the Buddha that reverberated throughout the centuries to all the seekers of the ultimate reality:

“Bhikkus (monks), these two extremes should not be followed by one who has gone out from home to homeless life.

“The giving up to the pleasures of sense, which is low, vulgar, worldly, unworthy and harmful; and the giving up to self mortification, which is painful, unworthy and harmful. O bhikkus, by avoiding these two extremes the Tathagata (enlightened being) has found out that middle path which giveth vision, which giveth knowledge, which tends to peace, higher wisdom, enlightenment and Nibbana (Nirvana).

“And what, o bhikkus, is that middle path which is found out by the Tathagata, which giveth vision, which giveth knowledge, which tends to peace, higher wisdom, enlightenment and Nibbana? It is this very Noble Eightfold Path, namely: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration. This, o bhikkhus, is that middle path, which is found out by the Tathagata, which giveth vision, which giveth knowledge, which tends to peace, higher wisdom, enlightenment and Nibbana.

“Now this, o bhikkus, is the Ariya (noble) truth of suffering: birth is suffering; decay is suffering; disease is suffering; death is suffering; to be conjoined with things which we dislike is suffering; to be separated from things which we like is suffering; not to get what one wants, that also is suffering. In short, these five aggregates which are the objects of grasping are suffering.

“Now this, o bhikkus, is the Ariya truth of the origin of suffering: It is this craving that leads back to birth, along with the lure and the lust that finds pleasure now here, now there, namely, the craving for sensual pleasure, the craving to be born again, the craving for annihilation.

“Now this, o bhikkus, is the Ariya truth of the Cessation of Suffering: Verily it is the utter passionless cessation of, the giving up, the forsaking. The release from, the detachment from, this craving.

“Now this, o bhikkus, is the Ariya truth of the path leading to the Cessation of Suffering: Verily it is this Ariya Eightfold Path, namely: right view, right aspiration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration.

“This is the Ariya truth of suffering. Thus, o bhikkus, concerning things unheard before, there arose in me vision, knowledge, understanding; there arose in me wisdom, there arose in me light.”

The teachings of the Buddha swirled in my mind as I stood and read the entire sutra from beginning to end. It was as if I was hearing the actual words of the Buddha for the first time, as if I was actually sitting at the feet of the great teacher with his disciples. The fleeting vision was firmly implanted in my mind, giving rise to the knowledge that I understood what the middle path to Nirvana was all about. A bright light arose in my inner awareness, allowing me to see the wisdom of the Noble Eightfold Path. This was the path I wanted to follow for the rest of my life on earth.



