

PILGRIMAGE IN THE HOLYLAND OF INDIA

by
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Epigraph:

“The waters of Mother Ganga, holy river of the Hindus, have their origin in an icy cave of the Himalayas amidst the eternal snows and silences. Down the centuries thousands of saints have delighted in remaining near the Ganges; they have left along its banks an aura of blessing.

An extraordinary, perhaps unique, feature of the Ganges River is its unpollutability. No bacteria live in its changeless sterility. Millions of Hindus, without harm, use its waters for bathing and drinking.

Dr. John H. Northrop said: ‘Perhaps bacteriophage (the virus that destroys bacteria) renders the river sterile.’”

Autobiography of a Yogi, Paramahansa Yogananda,
p. 343-344n.

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Chapter 1

For the life of me, I don't know what possessed me to take off my shirt and pants and step out of the boat in my swimming trunks to take the plunge into the Ganges River. The boatman steadied the bow of the boat alongside the bottom step of the famous ghat where Brahma had sacrificed ten mythic horses to establish the sacred spot on the river that flowed from the head of Shiva.

"Be careful," cautioned Ravi the guide. "The steps are slippery."

Ravi stood on the bow and watched the foreigner descend into the sacred Ganga. This was the first time in his twenty-seven years as a tourist guide that he was witnessing one of his clients attempt the liberating bath in what most non-Hindus considered to be the filthiest river in the world. Ravi's light blue pants and sky-blue shirt matched the colors of the natural surroundings of water and heaven, which were witnesses of the performance and participants in its eventual outcome.

PICTURE

With my left hand I held the secured front of the boat and placed both of my feet firmly on the first dry stone step above the water line. As I looked intently past the ripples on the surface of the water into its contents, my mind raced back to the day when I decided to travel with my musician friend Ben to India. It was during the season of Advent. Ben told me that he wanted to visit his son, who worked in a tech company designing clothes; half of the time he worked in the United States, and the other half in India. The company had its feet planted on both continents, in both worlds.

I told Ben that I would first consult with my wife, and then ask my Hindu friends when would be a good time to travel. My wife gave me her blessing to travel abroad; this would give her more free time to be with her sisters. She was now at the stage in her retired life where the company of her six sisters was more cherished than the daily routine with her husband.

My Hindu friend Girjesh told me that February or March would be a good time to travel. The weather would be warm and pleasant. And if I was there in the middle of March, I would be able to witness and participate in the colorful spring festival of Holi. That sounded like fun to me, especially when I looked it up on the internet. However, he warned me that I should bring old clothes to wear on festival day, clothes I could throw away because the colored powder would not wash away.

Ben was happy to hear I would be traveling with him. He did not want to travel to a foreign country like India alone, and he had been looking for a traveling companion for many years. And now he would not only be able to see where his son worked, but he also would see and experience another country. We both shared something in common – we loved to travel to other countries.

Something in the water caught my eye. Was I seeing things clearly, or was it just my imagination? When I at first told my wife of my desire to bathe in the sacred Ganges like all the Hindus did, she remarked, “Why would you want to go into a polluted river where they throw dead corpses in?” Her friend had visited India twenty years before, and she had seen a corpse floating in the river. My wife made me go to the doctor and get a hepatitis A vaccine; otherwise she didn’t want me coming back into contact with her. I would become an “untouchable” in her eyes.

Now, as I peered with focused eyes – and with the mind of concentration – into the contents of the river, I did not see any particles of polluted matter, nor did I see any ashes of dead bodies. I saw pure water. There is nothing to fear, I thought to myself.

I glanced at Ben, who snapped a picture of me with my Olympus digital camera. He was wondering if I was actually going to undergo what he considered to be a heathen ritual. Only baptism in the Jordan River or in a Christian setting was considered sacred to him, not this false belief in coming to the Ganges River to wash one’s sins away. My mind was set. Not even the scowl on Ben’s face could keep me from going with the flow of inspired action that was moving my consciousness in the direction of the Ganga.

The crystal-clear water reflected my surroundings, just like the mirror of my mind reflected the events that transpired during the past two weeks. A tapestry of wondrous sights unfolded before me: There was the first day in New Delhi, when Ben’s son Jason took us to the most popular tourist attractions. A small Jain shrine, devoted to the master of non-violence Bhagwan Manavir, stood on a hill overlooking the outskirts of the city. The 13.6 foot-high pink-toned granite statue of Manavir sitting in the lotus position looked out over a peaceful garden.

PICTURE

I remembered having to take off my shoes, and even removing my leather belt, before entering the “Ahinsa Sthal” (place of peace). I even washed my hands at the marble sink and rang the bell which hung over a marble relief of a lion and cow drinking the water of life from the same lotus-shaped bowl.

PICTURE

The view from the hill allowed me to catch a glimpse of the distant 12th century Qutab Minar, the world heritage site of the first of Delhi’s seven cities.

PICTURE

Next the driver Umesh, who worked with Jason, drove us to the modern marvel of architectural engineering – the Lotus Temple. Even from the entrance, which was a couple hundred meters from the Bahai house of worship, the twenty-seven white marble petals looked spectacular as its lotus shape unfurled before the eye of the beholder. I remembered the awe I felt as I walked barefoot past the turquoise pool of water surrounding the temple and entered the simple circular sanctuary devoted to the grand idea of the oneness of humanity, religion, and God.

PICTURE

My eyes automatically were drawn to the high dome ceiling in the central portion of the inner lotus. A small inscription within a nine-pointed star caught my attention: three horizontal lines connected by a single vertical line, with the top and bottom lines having a circle at each end; two five-pointed stars stood to the left and right of the inscription. My curiosity got the best of me, and I had to keep asking until I found out what the symbolic inscription meant. A lady at the book counter in the gift shop told me it was a symbol of the “Greatest Name” – the three horizontal lines represented the three worlds: the world of God, the world of manifestations, and the world of man, which were all connected by the vertical line symbolizing all the manifestations of God. And the two stars represented Baha’u’llah and Bab (“the Gate”), the manifestations of God for the age we were in.

After a break for lunch at an Indian restaurant, where we sampled the best of southern and northern dishes, we continued on our sight-seeing tour of Delhi. A large sign with the letters ISKCON was placed high on one of the three ochre and maroon shikharas (spires) that came into view at our next stop. The letters looked familiar. Something struck a chord in my heart as I bought two marigold garlands at the entrance, placing one of them around my neck and giving the other three-colored garland for Ben to put around his neck.

PICTURE

The sound of a conch shell inside the temple at the top of a flight of steps – and a familiar chant – beckoned us to enter. Now I knew where I was. The words of the chant “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama” brought back memories of a bygone era. Images of the flower children and the hippie culture of San Francisco came up to the surface of my consciousness like bubbles floating up to the surface of the water. The rhythmic chant suddenly came flowing out of the depths of my heart and out through my mouth. “Hare Krishna, Hare Rama,” I sang as the devotion in my heart prompted me to join the group of worshippers at the central altar-shrine of Krishna. Ben was surprised to see me respond with such religious fervor; he stayed at the back of the small seat-less circular temple and watched. I placed my garland of pale yellow, orange, and red marigolds on the altar to be blessed by the priest.

It’s funny, and amazing, how the present flows out of the past, and sometimes it’s even more astounding how the past flows out of the present. That’s how I felt when I confronted the murti (“living divine likeness”) of Swami Prabhupada in one area of the Krishna temple. A darshan (holy sighting) of the swami in his present image as a deity (or idol, as some would say), sitting life-like in a lotus position on a throne, brought a past experience in a flash of lightning to the forefront of my mind.

“Oh, my God! What a trip! This is incredible!” I exclaimed. Jason was standing next to me. “I saw him in the flesh forty years ago at Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. I can see it all like it was only yesterday. He was riding in a tall wooden juggernaut (chariot) with huge wheels, just like the kind they use sometimes during special festivals in India. There were hundreds of Krishna devotees in the procession, wearing their saffron-colored robes, dancing and chanting, ‘Hare

Krishna, Hare Rama.’ Then they set up a place for him on a slope so he could expound on the sacred scriptures, the Bhagavad Gita, to the people sitting on the green grass below. And there I was, on the main drive through the park, standing and listening to him quote the Gita in Sanskrit, and then recite a commentary on it in English.”

“What’s happening?” asked Ben as he approached us to see what we were looking at.

“Paul says he saw this swami in Golden Gate Park forty years ago,” answered Jason.

Ben did not show any enthusiasm at the announcement of such news. It’s almost as if he wanted to blurt out, ‘So what,’ but he kept the negative sentiment to himself. He was beginning to form a new opinion of his singing partner, and it wasn’t a favorable one. The interest that I displayed in what were to him heathen idols simply shocked him. A real Christian is repulsed by idol-worshipping. He was starting to wonder what kind of Christian I was.

As we concluded our tour of the Krishna temple and after I had paid homage to a shrine of the heroes of the epic Ramayana – Lord Rama, his wife Sita, his brother Laksman, and his faithful servant Hanuman – we walked down the same flight of stairs that we had walked up. I looked back at the same letters ISKCON, and now I knew what they meant: International Society of Krishna Consciousness.

PICTURE

It did not get any better for Ben at the last tourist attraction we visited that day. It seemed like all of India was at the newest attraction that had just opened up in 2005. Long lines formed at the high security entrance. Cameras and electronic devices were strictly prohibited. Everyone was frisked twice to make sure no prohibited items were brought into the vast 100-acre complex of Indian culture. For propriety’s sake, there were separate lines for men and women. We were told that there was a giant IMAX theater and a spectacular boat ride. It felt as if we had entered an Indian version of Disney World. It so happened that we had just missed the last show of the day of the Mystic India film in the theater. Ben was disappointed. That was the one thing that really had him excited about coming to the place. His son reassured him that he’d get a driver to bring us the next day to see the shows in the three exhibition halls. And what a show it was! The eleven-year-old yogi’s epic journey through India was a sight to behold, a true fulfillment of Krishna’s advice to his disciple Arjuna: “Be a yogi!”

Ben reluctantly took off his shoes – the fourth time in one day – before entering the focal point of the entire complex: the grand Akshardham Monument, built of pink stone and white marble. I took off my sandals and walked barefoot up the stairs with my hands folded in front of me in the pranam pose. I felt as if I was entering the holy of holies of Indian temples. My heart, mind, and soul were totally enraptured as I beheld the central deity whose spirit permeated every facet of the brilliant site and whose light of God-realization shone throughout, like the sun of a solar system.

Slowly I walked up to the seated-in-the-lotus position 11 foot-high, gold-plated murti of Bhagwan Swaminarayan and bowed. “Namaste,” I softly breathed as I pranamed with my folded hands raised to my forehead and paid homage to the divine soul of Swaminarayan that inhabited the eternal abode (Akshardham) within the monument.

PICTURE

The highlight of the evening was the musical fountain and light show at the Yagnapurush Kund (place of sacrificial fire). Overlooking the stadium-sized square and the central eight-petaled lotus-shaped fountain was a 27 foot-high metallic murti of Neelkanth Varni, the child-yogi form of Swaminarayan. The synchronized display of colors, water fountains shooting heavenward, and the music dazzled the senses. The narration of the story of creation (Brahma), preservation (Vishnu), and dissolution (Shiva) of the five elements of fire, air, water, earth, and ether vibrated through the loud speakers. I looked over at Ben and softly intoned the melody of the theme song of our ensemble:

“You are the song and the music,
You are the song that I sing,
You are the melody,
You are the harmony,
Praises you make my heart sing.”

Ben looked back at me with a smile that turned into a frown when he realized that I was combining our sacred theme song with the profane spectacle that he was witnessing.

In my eyes, the musical fountain was mesmerizing, and the display of colors suddenly matched the splendid fiery colors of the sun’s morning rays reflecting in the waters of the Ganges River. I was seeing both scenes at-one-moment. My whole being cried out within me: I want to be immersed in India – in her history, culture, tradition, religion, language, and spiritual life.

I was ready to take the next step into the sacred river at the most holy city in India – Benares. Little did I know what this next step entailed.

Chapter 2

The second step down into the river almost sent me sprawling against the hard stone ghat. A woman in a saree to my right slipped on the moss-covered step and landed with her ribs hitting the stairway and her legs awkwardly slipping into the water while her hands were clutching the higher dry step for dear life. I felt my left foot slide a little on the slippery moss, but my right foot was still firmly planted on the dry step. Thus I avoided the plight of the woman in the saree, who was picking herself up and sitting on the dry portion of the ghat, her feet dangling in the water.

Carefully, and slowly, I gripped the mossy surface with my toes and brought my right foot down onto the soft green mat, in the meantime balancing my body by gripping the dry step with my finger tips. One more step and I would be on the firm footing of the riverbed. I had to keep my mind focused on the task at hand.

Ravi the guide watched as I slowly descended into the waters of the sacred Ganga, who for the Hindus was a mother, a goddess, an emanation from the lotus feet of Vishnu, and a purifying stream from the matted hair of Shiva. An hour earlier, Ravi had guided us into the boat in the early morning darkness. He told the boatman to row downstream to the sacrificial fire, the last rites given by the fire of cremation to the dead body as it is liberated from this world and the soul is offered to the heavens. The red dawn sun rose and hovered over the haze of the eastern horizon as we glided southwards in the boat to the blazing fire at the cremation ghat, Harishchandra.

PICTURE

Dozens of men stood to both sides of the funeral pyre and watched the neatly-stacked wooden logs burn the shroud-wrapped corpse into ashes. Ravi told us that after about two to three hours, when the fire had died down, a handful of the ashes of the deceased would be sprinkled on the flowing water to be carried in the arms of mother Ganga to the sea.

Ben gritted his teeth as he watched my slow descent into the river. It was a total surprise for him to see his friend going through a transformation right before his eyes. Ben's past perception of me as a Christian singing and playing the synthesizer with the ensemble in the church was now at odds with the present perception of me as a person partaking in the Hindu ritualistic bathing in the unclean river. His mind could not accept my behavior. One incident especially bothered him. He could not understand why I would want to have a Hindu priest put a tika (red spot) on my forehead at a Hanuman shrine in Gurgaon, where his son worked.

PICTURES

"That's a mark that represents the third eye, or the spiritual eye, to me," I tried to explain. "There's a verse in the Bible that says if your eye is single, your whole body is full of light. That to me signifies the opening of the spiritual eye, in the middle of the forehead, to the divine light within our being."

Ben had never heard such a strange explanation of that scripture before. Actually, he did not want to hear anything I had to say about spiritual or religious matters. It sounded too heretical for him. He didn't want to see any more temples, either. So we ended up going to Purana Qila, the "old fort" and ancient site of the sixth city of Delhi, where a mosque of red and white marble and slate was the most preserved structure. I found out that Purana Qila was inhabited as early as 1,000 B.C. and was believed to be the site of Indraprastha, the capital of the Pandavas in the Mahabharata epic.

PICTURES

We spent a day at the National Museum, where I stopped to look at the statues of Vishnu, Buddha, Ganga and Yamuna, Kaliya-Krishna, and other religious artifacts, while Ben raced past them to the maritime section, the Mughal coins, and the musical instruments on display.

PICTURES

We seemed to hit a neutral place when we visited the Mughal Gardens, although by then an illness was tormenting him and his feet were too tired to walk, so he sat down to rest. I walked briskly by myself through the musical garden with the water fountain, the herb garden with ayurvedic uses, the rose garden and the beautiful circular garden, and finally the intriguing spiritual garden with plants and trees mentioned in religious texts. Some of the names were familiar to me, like grape, hibiscus, date palm, mango, pomegranate, jasmine, olive, fig, lotus, and mustard tree; others were unfamiliar, like euphorbia, henna, bael, amla, neem, kalpvriksh, reetha, cork tree, udumber, silk cotton tree, arjun, bodh tree, shami, ber, and kaner. I finished my visit to the Mughal Gardens by writing down the words from the Song of Mughal Garden:

"Dear friends,
Delighted you visited us, Mughal Garden today.
We trees lovely, salute you for you gave us happiness;
We flowers, beauty and fragrance experienced bliss;
Thank you.
When you go home, remember us.
Plant a sapling or tree or flower.
God bless you."

I have to admit that I have a propensity for spiritual and religious things. Ben keyed in on that characteristic of mine when he blurted out one evening: "I didn't know you were so spiritual." He said that in a critical tone, almost sarcastic, as if he had discovered a flaw that irritated him.

"Ben, I try to appreciate every aspect of a culture, including the spiritual," I said, defending my position.

"But why do you have to go inside every temple?" he asked. "It looks like you love their idols more than you love Jesus."

“Ben, you go to a temple to worship God, don’t you?”

“I go to a church.”

“It’s called the Russian Gospel Temple. It’s a temple.”

“It’s a Christian church.”

“Every person going inside a temple is seeking a personal relationship with God,” I continued to reason with Ben. “Some visualize that relationship through the image of Krishna, some through Buddha, and some through Jesus. Each religion has their teacher or savior who teaches and shows the devotee or worshipper the way to God.”

“You cannot serve two masters,” said Ben, quoting part of a verse to justify his condemnation of my acceptance of other masters or religious teachers.

“That verse has to do with spiritual riches of the soul in contrast to material riches of the world,” I countered.

“You cannot worship both Jesus and those idols in the temples that you go inside,” reaffirmed Ben sternly. “If you worship those idols, you’re not a Christian.”

“I can learn from each one of those teachers who points the way to God,” I explained.

“Only Jesus is the Son of God, and the rest of those you call teachers are false gods,” stated Ben in a judgmental manner.

“You’re being very self-righteous, Ben,” I cautioned him. I walked away. I thought the wisest course of action was to avoid religious arguments. How could I teach him to appreciate the wisdom of the Bhagavad-Gita and the knowledge of the soul that Krishna imparts? He looked only at his Bible as the exclusive guide.

It was then that I realized I was on slippery ground with Ben. I considered myself broad-minded and tolerant of other religious beliefs; Ben, on the other hand, was narrow-minded and did not accept any other religion besides the Christian one. I categorized myself as a student of comparative religions and tried to see each religion as a path to God; Ben was convinced there was only one path to God – his.

I now knew what I needed to do as I stood looking at the river and contemplated the grandeur of the next step that I would take. I would be the example to Ben and to others. I would be the way shower. Some day, when Ben looked back at his pilgrimage with me to India, hopefully he would see my actions as righteous and exemplary. And perhaps he might even come to know what I already knew as I stepped from the slippery moss-covered step onto the secure riverbed: I was following in the footsteps of the great masters who had come to bathe in the pure and liberating waters, whose divine grace flowed from the heavens to the earth in the form of Mother Ganga. I was following in the footsteps of Jesus, who had come to India and to Benares, which was at that time named Kashi, the city of Light.

PICTURE

Chapter 3

I was now standing on solid ground. I cupped my hands and drew out a handful of river water to investigate with my eyes. I used to do that when I was backpacking in the wilderness and wanted to check if there were any unfavorable particles in the water I was about to drink from a flowing stream. This time, though, I only wanted to see what the water from the river looked like up close. It was pure, as if all unpropitious particles had been filtered out. I repeated the scientific experiment, and the results were the same. The water looked pure. An axiom flowed through my mind: “To the pure, all things are pure.” In short, to the pure-minded, everything is part of God.

PICTURE

I took another two steps forward into the depths of the warm water, wading up to my waist. I stopped to contemplate the heart-warming sensation I was experiencing; a current of energy was flowing through my spine. I felt as if I was being connected to a higher mind, a vast consciousness that encompassed the entire universe. And the center of that universal consciousness was right where I was standing in the Ganges River – within the heart of India – at its most holy city of Benares.

I took the holy water from the Ganges into my cupped hands and poured it on the crown of my head. I closed my eyes and felt the water streaming down my head and face. As I entered a meditative state of mind, I visualized a gateway to a divine realm, a heaven on earth. It was a tirtha (ford), a crossing from the physical world to the world of the spirit that was perceived by the eye of the soul. In this world India became a land where the gods descended to earth as avatars and men ascended to the heavens as gods.

A book of memories opened up in my mind’s eye, and I saw myself on the field of Kurukshetra in the epic battle of the Mahabharata. It was a story that came to life when I encountered the birthplace of Krishna – the divine hero of the epic – in Mathura. On top of the gateway to the sacred Krishna Janmasthan Complex (where I visited the Garbha Griha – the sanctum sanctorum, resembling the cranial chamber – the place where the avatar of Vishnu was born), I saw the chariot that was the focal point of the epic battle. Within the chariot sat the personality of Arjuna and the personification of the divine soul, Krishna. The soul (charioteer) was instructing the personality (ego) about the battle of life, how to conquer and be the master by means of the divine Self. Those teachings on the immortality of the soul (divine Self) were embodied in the sacred scripture – the Bhagavad Gita.

PICTURES

I took some more of the refreshing water into my cupped hands and poured it a second time on my crown chakra. Another book of memories opened up and I saw the mahatma (great soul) overcome the great British Empire on the road to independence by the powerful force of non-violence. This chapter of India

culminated at the Gandhi Smriti in the hallowed Birla House, where the national memorial to the life of Mahatma Gandhi honored the virtues of truth, non-violence, unity and equality that his epic journey displayed. Here was a martyr who was remembered for leading India's march to freedom (from Kranti to Gandhi) in its pursuit of independence (from Raj to Swaraj) from 1857 to 1947.

PICTURES

I recalled watching the movie Gandhi and reflecting on the opening scene – which depicted the assassination of the heroic leader on January 30, 1948 – as I walked beside the footprints that led from the house where he spent his last days to the martyr's column.

PICTURES

Another movie came to mind, Lagaan, which I had seen at Jason's apartment; it portrayed the story of a battle between the villagers who fought against the unjust land tax imposed on them by their British rulers. That battle with the British Empire in 1893 was also waged in a non-violent manner – this time in the form of a cricket match.

PICTURE

Gandhi's battle was immortalized at the Rajghat, where a black granite platform marked the spot of his cremation near the west bank of the Yamuna River, which flowed further downstream into the Ganges River. By now I had learned enough Hindi to be able to read the words "He Ram" (O, God) inscribed on the front side of the platform. On the eastern end of the square-shaped platform was a glass-enclosed eternal flame that burned perpetually in honor of the great soul who defied the injustice of the empire and brought India to Swaraj (self-rule). When the world bowed in homage as Gandhi's body was laid on a sandalwood pyre, they (and I) bowed to the message that came from the pyre:

"Lead me from the unreal to the Real
From darkness to Light
From death to Immortality."

PICTURES

I took the liberating water from the Ganges a third time into my cupped hands and poured it on the top of my head. This time tears of joy mingled with the river water that flowed down my face. I was overwhelmed by the intuitive wisdom that led me to this place and possessed me to re-enact an age-old ritual of salvific benefit. I was on the threshold of Moksha – the goal of the tirtha yatra (journey to the sacred center).

This time a book of remembrances opened up to my inner vision, and I saw that I had lived in India many times before. My soul took flight to the not-so-distant time of the Mughal Empire. Shiv Narayan, Jason's driver, took us this time to Jami Masjid, India's largest mosque. On the car's visor was a saying of Sai Baba of

Shirdi: “If you look to me, I look to you.” Ben and I walked up the magnificent flight of sandstone steps to the huge square courtyard, built by the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan in 1656 on a natural mound. We took off our shoes and sandals before setting foot onto the holy ground. Ben had no idea he was going to another holy site until he had to bend down and take off his shoes; this time the holy site wasn’t called a temple, but a mosque. The three black and white domes drew our attention as we approached the central dukka (water tank) that was set up for ritual ablutions. We entered through the central arch to see groups of Muslims seated on the ground, discussing the virtues of submission to the will of Allah and reciting suras (chapters) from their holy book, the Quran (Koran). Along the outer wall of the courtyard surrounding the mosque was a tower. I found out that I could go to the top by paying a guide 100 rupees. Ben’s injured right knee didn’t allow him to climb, so I climbed the 130 steps by myself.

PICTURES

A guide led the way through the dark narrow passageway of the spiral staircase by lighting up the steps with his flashlight. The view at the top of the tower was amazing – a 360 degree view of the world of Delhi, as far as the eye could see through the hazy atmosphere. To the east was the nearby Red Fort, an imperial citadel built by Shah Jahan in 1639; it was the seat of the Mughal Empire, whose 330-year rule in India ended in 1857.

PICTURES

For the next three days I would see remnants of the Mughal rule throughout the golden triangle of Delhi-Jaipur-Agra. It was a journey into a world of the royal path – a caparisoned elephant ride up the cobbled narrow pathway through Surya Pol (Sun Gate) to the royal city on a hill, Amber Fort, in Rajasthan (abode of the rajas, kings).

PICTURES

And down below – the colorful pink city (terracotta) Jaipur, with its relics of the golden past (City Palace), was a feast to the eyes; its observatory (Jantar Mantar) a feast for the mind; and its Chohki Dahni (“a fine hamlet” of Rajasthani culture) a feast for the stomach – Ram Ram Sa!

PICTURES

The blending of Hindu and Muslim (Mughal) architecture and life throughout the region demonstrated that the diverse cultures could co-exist. The religion of the One God (Allah) and the religion of the many gods (multiform manifestations of the One Reality) both flourished on Mughal territory. The 13th century Temple Shri Rama Hari Har at Fort Jaigarh pre-dated the Mughal reign and was preserved in recognition of the Hindu deities Vishnu-Shiva and Vishnu’s reincarnation as Lord Rama. The façade of the three-storied Jama Masjid (congregational mosque) at the Johari Bazaar section of the main road through Jaipur blended in with the hub of activity.

PICTURES

The Shila Devi Temple at Amber Fort, dedicated to the awe-inspiring goddess Kali, was where I received another vermilion mark on my forehead. The Lakshmi Narayan Temple in Jaipur reminded me of the similarly-named temple in Delhi, which I had visited to see the paintings and quotes from the Indian epic Mahabharata: “He who desires to cross the painful ocean of worldly life, which is full of the crocodiles of lust, anger, greed and infatuation, should catch hold of the Bhagavad Gita which has the disciplines of action, devotion and wisdom as its oars. It will easily take him to the land of liberation (Nirvana).”

PICTURES

The Jaipur temple, dedicated to Vishnu (Narayan) and his consort (Lakshmi), was an equally impressive creation of the Birla family, for the white marble temple had carvings of great masters throughout history: Socrates, Zarathustra, Confucius, Buddha, Jesus Christ, and others.

PICTURES

I stood in the river, covering my tearful face with my hands. My humbled spirit was ready for the next step – immersion. I took three deep breaths, inhaling the warm current of etheric energy slowly up my spine and exhaling the cool current of etheric energy down my spine. As I took my last breath, inhaling it deeply into my lungs and etheric body, I submerged myself into the dark depths of the Ganges River.

PICTURE

I recalled awakening several mornings ago at the Dera Rawatsar (Heritage Guest House) and hearing the Muslim call to prayer: “Allahu Akbar” (God is great). That was the morning I sat up and meditated in my bed as I listened to the enchanting call in the distance. My mind submitted to the flow of images coming from the Muslim (and Mughal) world: I walked again through Fatehpur Sikri (City of Victory), an ancient capital built near a lake by Emperor Akbar (“the Great”) in the last quarter of the sixteenth century.

PICTURE

The spiritual center around which the city was built was the camp (cavern) of the Sufi mystic, Sheikh Salim Chisti. The purity-loving saint had blessed Akbar with the auspicious prediction of an heir to the throne. Now pilgrims, and supplicant childless women, came to the square white marble mausoleum within the grand open mosque in search of a miracle and to honor the Muslim mystic who inspired Akbar to build a grand capital city of red sandstone to preserve the memory of Salim Chisti, who embraced the wisdom of the inner divine presence.

PICTURE

I took off my sandals and walked up the five steps in my bare feet past the thin pillars with serpentine struts that curved upwards to the roof. Inside the sacred shrine was the cenotaph of the Sufi saint, covered with orange, red, green, purple, and other colored cloth laid on top of the tomb. On the walls were floral designs with inlaid stones of many colors. One of the designs caught my eye. It was the tree of

life, a universal symbol of the human cerebrospinal system and the kundalini energy that flowed through the spine to bring knowledge and wisdom. The Sufi saint was a practitioner of that wisdom. The Sufi teacher says, "The roads to God are many; and you can approach the top of the mountain from the river, highway, village, or sea, but the top of the mountain is One."

PICTURE

In the dark waters I also saw the cruelty of the conqueror as he expanded the Mughal Empire throughout India. And yet, there was something noble about him as he tried to establish an empire on the principle of peaceful co-existence with the non-Muslim subjects. It was said that amongst his many wives, he deliberately chose three main wives (a Hindu, a Muslim, and a Christian) to be his paragons of the equality of religions. They were allowed to worship and practice their religion freely. Thus, Akbar established his empire on the foundation of respect and tolerance of every religion. That was my goal, also.

My last memory of Akbar was his tomb in Sikandara that we visited on our way to Agra. This was a memorial planned by the great emperor himself, a tomb in the center of a vast garden enclosed by high walls on all sides. We approached the well-preserved site from the south side. The ornate gateway led to the dignified square tomb structure, which was finished by Jahangir, the son of Akbar, several years after his father's death in 1605. The entire site at one time was named Bihishtabad (The Heavenly Abode).

PICTURE

I leaped out of the water as my lungs called out for air. My hands were raised over my head as I seemed to be taking flight in the momentary weightlessness. In the twinkling of an eye, I felt as if I was transformed into pure consciousness – a bubble on the ocean of eternity. An image of the newly-established seventh wonder of the world formed in my mind's eye in that pure moment. I was on the seventh floor of a revolving restaurant. In the distance was the Taj Mahal. Then instantaneously my guide Raju led me through the Gate Way decorated with red lotus flowers – a Hindu motif representing Brahma the Creator – and eleven white marble cupolas on top. And then behold – the sublime garden-tomb opened up like a vision of Paradise.

PICTURE

The walk through the garden along the water channel and a row of cypress trees seemed to be a slow-motion stroll in an enchanted wonderland, and the eyes never once left the vision of the dream-like white marble abode of the mortal remains of the beloved wife Mumtaz Mahal and her husband, Emperor Shah Jahan. I looked at the reflected image of the Taj in the Lotus Pool, and I noticed the four symmetrical minarets positioned at the four corners of the platform. The guide Raju remarked that the four towers were built at a ninety-three degree tilt, so that in case of an earthquake they would fall away from the marble structure. Ben was not there to see the vision of beauty that I beheld. He said he did not want to pay the 750 rupees

(\$15 US) for the entrance fee. I could not understand how he would give up the opportunity to see the grandest man-made wonder of the Mughal period for a measly few dollars.

When I finally arrived at the steps that led to the actual mausoleum, I put on the covering that was provided for my sandals and I ascended the stairway. My soul seemed to ascend up through the majestic octagon-shaped building straight to the central dome, which appeared to represent the throne of God. I was enraptured by the story of love (kama) that was immortalized inside the tomb chamber as I looked at the cenotaphs erected in honor of the inseparable lovers.

Before I turned to leave the vision of paradise on earth, I visited the adjacent mosque and took a look at the Yamuna River that flowed below the west bank on which the Taj Mahal stood. It was the same Yamuna River that flowed past the Akshardham in New Delhi, past the birthplace of Krishna in Mathura, and past the seventh wonder of the world, the Taj Mahal. It was the same river – the largest tributary of the sacred Ganga – that flowed into the Ganges River at Allahabad, about 80 miles above Varanasi.

PICTURE

I contemplated all that as I soared with hands raised in flight above the waters of the Ganges River, which contained the sacred water from the Yamuna River. The pale yellow waters of the Ganges blended with the emerald waters of the Yamuna, and the confluence of those waters was conjoined by the invisible (and mythical) Saraswati River. It was in the pure, creative, and nourishing Saraswati – the consort of Brahma – that my spirit soared.

Chapter 4

I was now one with the river. I had entered the stream, immersed myself in it, and swam several strokes away from the shore. I felt a new-found freedom, as if the burdens of life had been lifted. I floated on my back awhile, savoring the buoyancy and the lightness of spirit. It was as if I had been released from the physical body and was floating on air.

PICTURE

As I returned to the west bank of the river, I heard a man -- who had previously been chanting and praying -- suddenly erupt into laughter. The “Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha” of the Hatha Yoga he was practicing was infectious, and I started laughing with him, “Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha.” All the tension was being released from the body, clearing the lungs of inner congestion. All inner impurities were being expelled.

When I finally returned to the side of the boat, I asked for a match to light the candle that was part of the diya (light and flower offering) that I had bought as a ritual gift for Ma Ganga. I held the leaf bowl in my hand as the candle was lit, then I gently placed the diya with marigold flowers and candlelight on the surface of the water. I pushed the leaf bowl away from the shore, trying to make it enter the downstream current of the river. The flowing movement of the river embraced the offering of devotion and carried it slowly on the long journey to the sea.

PICTURE

I returned to the ghat, stepped on the stone stairway, and got into the boat.

“I feel like a new man, now!” I exclaimed as I put my dry shirt back on.

I was exhilarated from the experience. My mind entered a joyous silence. The boatman rowed the boat in the other direction, going upstream to the other cremation spot, the Manikarnika Ghat. Another boat of tourists was heading in the same direction. The people in that boat were astonished to see that I had bathed in the Ganges. “It felt good,” I told them with a smile as we passed their boat. I was consciously aware of the implication behind the ritual bath – Hindu scriptures advised adherents of the faith to prepare the soul for its final journey to liberation (Moksha) by bathing in the sacred river.

Ahead was the cremation area where funeral pyres burned the dead bodies day and night. There was a body inside the burning stacked pile of wooden logs, and another body wrapped in shrouds on a bier awaited its turn to be consumed by the fire and returned to the elements of the earth, from which it was created. ‘Dust to dust, ashes to ashes’ – but the spirit soared into the heavens on the wings of everlasting life.

PICTURE

The boatman turned around and rowed past the Mir Ghat, the Tripura Bhairavi Ghat, and the Man Mandir Ghat. We were back at the place where we began our journey on the Ganges – Dashashwamedh Ghat. We stepped out of the boat and walked up the ghat (stairway). I looked closely at the painting of Shiva on a blue-

colored pillar. I had seen it from a distance when we were out on the river, but now I was able to see the meditative blue-skinned Shiva sitting in the lotus position on a tiger skin with his right palm lifted in the mudra of blessing and his trident standing upright at his right shoulder. The Ganges River flowed from the top of his head.

PICTURES

Our guide Ravi led us past the platform where priests and sadhus mingled with devotees of the river. One sadhu looked directly at me as I passed by. I stopped to look at him and saw that his forehead had the markings of a Shiva follower, and his orange robe and long beard were signs that he had been immersed in the wisdom of Shiva for many years. I raised my camera to take a picture of him. I had captured a moment in time of India's sacred heritage. And the bare-footed sadhu with a long club in his left hand had captured my attention with a holy darshan (spiritual sighting). I smiled at him and moved my mouth in recognition of his divine nature by softly voicing, "Namaste."

I caught up with Ravi and Ben, who had walked on ahead without noticing that I had stopped to have a moment-in-time communion of souls meeting at a sacred site. Ravi was telling Ben about the next holy place.

"We're going to see the Vishwaneth Temple," said Ravi, who was striding slowly towards a small, narrow alley. "There's no cameras allowed near the temple, so we'll leave your cameras at my friend's Masala tea shop."

We walked through a tight security place. The golden top of the temple dedicated to Shiva glistened in the light of the morning sun.

"The Hindu people who bathe in the Ganges come here for their blessing from Shiva," said Ravi as he stood in a doorway about 50 meters across from the Vishwanath Temple. He pointed at the visible crown of the temple. "There's about 750 kilograms (or 1,654 pounds) of gold plating on the temple spire."

"Can I go inside the temple since I bathed in the Ganges River?" I asked, wanting to be included in the number of the privileged few.

"You have to be a Hindu to go inside," Ravi said.

"What about my past life as a Hindu, does that count?" I asked in a serious tone.

Ravi looked at me and seemed to want to say, 'Are you kidding?' But instead he simply responded, "No."

Ravi reassured me that I'd get to see a Vishwaneth Temple. "There's a replica of the same temple at the Banares Hindu University," he said. "The temple was planned by the nationalist Madan Malaviya and financed by the wealthy industrialists, the Birlas."

PICTURE

I had heard the name of Birla several times now. The Birla House was where Gandhi was immortalized. And the Laxmi Narayan Temple was built by the Birla family. Their contributions to Hindu culture and religion were widespread throughout the country.

When we walked past the Sharpal (guardians) of the temple – and past the sacred bull Nandi, which faced the temple and symbolized the yearning of the human soul for oneness with Paramatma (the Supreme Soul) – we took off our shoes and entered the abode of Shiva, the Lord of the universe. Inside the sanctum sanctorum was the Shiva lingam – the supreme symbol of Shiva as the deity who brought about the dissolution of the old in order to bring into manifestation the new. The Shiva lingam was a round pillar-shaped black stone resting in the center of a circular-shaped plate with an extension for the water to flow out. The pillar and the circle represented the combined energies of the masculine and feminine principles of the universe. Creation was an act that required the male and the female. I looked up and saw a rope hanging from the ceiling and water was flowing along the rope and dripping on the flower-covered rounded head of the pillar. The water represented the divine waters of the heaven-borne Ganges fecundating the male-female Shiva lingam and bringing new life to the fields, the creatures of earth, and to all of existence.

PICTURE

“And that concludes our tour for today,” said Ravi as we left the temple dedicated to Shiva. “Tomorrow we’ll go to Sarnath, and I’ll tell you all about the Buddha and his teachings.”

The driver dropped us off at the Meraden Grand Hotel. The rest of the day was ours to do with as we pleased. I had noticed a Christian church near our hotel, and I suggested to Ben that we should take a look at it. So we walked down the street to the church, which happened to be a Catholic Marian church named St. Mary’s Cathedral. The large wooden doors at the church entrance depicted the twelve apostles with their distinct symbols (i.e. Peter with the Keys to the Kingdom, Paul with the Book of Life and the Sword of Wisdom, etc.). Inside the church, above the entrance, was a fascinating painting of a bearded and long-haired Jesus sitting in the lotus position on a green surface. The orange robe signified he was a sadhu (holy man), and the solar halo against a blue background signified his divine nature. His right hand was raised to his chest in the Abhaya mudra, saying in hand language, “Be not afraid.” This was Jesus the Yogi, who had traveled to India during the missing years of the biblical account. My encounter with the iconic representation of Jesus in that cathedral was similar to the darshan (encounter of a spiritual nature with divine personages) that I had experienced with the murtis (holy idols) in Hindu temples.

PICTURE

I don’t know if Ben noticed the pictorial depiction of Jesus as a Yogi. After I took the picture with my digital camera, I turned around and saw him heading for the altar, where a statue of the La Pietà – Mother Mary holding her crucified son Jesus in her arms – was enshrined. My intuition told me that it would not be wise to tell him the story of Jesus in India. It would make our fragile relationship deteriorate even further. I didn’t want that to happen.

When we came out of the cathedral, a young rickshaw driver, who had followed us from the hotel, accosted us and offered to take us anywhere we desired. I wanted to go to the Ganges River again, to reflect on the morning boat ride and the immersion in the mystical waters. Ben agreed to go for a ride since there was nothing else for us to do in the evening. And according to the rickshaw driver, it was too far to walk – six kilometers!

Along the way we encountered a world teeming with humanity – and cows. The traffic was dense, and the air was suffocating. It was a totally different experience than the morning ride in an air-conditioned vehicle. Ben and I both felt the need to cover our noses with our handkerchiefs. We were not used to such a vast variety of smells – cow dung, human urine, car fumes, food cooking, cremation smoke from the river, incense offered to the gods – it was a real smorgasbord of olfactory sensations. Certain roads were closed off to traffic, so Salam Udin, a Muslim, pedaled his bicycle-rickshaw through narrow side alleys and byways to get us as close to the river as he could. Eventually, he parked his rickshaw in a parking lot about 200 meters from the river. Salam's friend at the parking lot said he'd take us to the river. It turned out that Salam's friend wanted to make some money out of us by showing us his family's textile shop afterwards.

PICTURE

Nevertheless, we were taken to the river. We sat down and rested near the pillar of Shiva, the same place we had entered the river for the boat ride in the morning. We watched boys playing cricket, monkeys climbing the walls, and a few boats on the river. It was not as exciting as in the morning.

I reflected on what had transpired in my life after I entered the stream of the sacred waters: a total identification with India's history and tradition, and an immersion in its most sacred ritual of bathing in the legendary Ganga. I had come to the City of Light – Kashi – also known as Benares, and presently called Varanasi. The transformation of my consciousness was complete – I had arrived at the center!

The American writer Mark Twain, during his trip to India in 1896, wrote in his travelogue: "Benares is older than history, older than tradition, older even than legend, and looks twice as old as all of them put together." [Following the Equator, A Journey Around the World, Chapter 50]

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 Dharmchakra 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.

PICTURES

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.

PICTURE

“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.

PICTURES

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).

PICTURE

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.

Chapter 5

The trip from Varanasi to Bodh Gaya was about 250 kilometers (135 miles), and it took our driver Raju five-and-a-half hours to get us there. That same distance took the Buddha forty-nine days to complete by foot. That was when he had journeyed from Bodh Gaya, the place of the Bodhi tree of enlightenment, to Sarnath near Varanasi to preach his first sermon on the Middle Way and the Noble Eightfold Path.

We checked in at Hotel Sujata, which was named after the maiden (from the nearby Sujata village) who had offered milk rice to the famished ascetic Gautama Siddhartha. The lobby of the hotel had a small shrine near the entrance. The shrine featured a stone relief of the Buddha in the teaching pose, displaying the Dharma-chakra Pravartana Mudra, which signified the turning (or setting into motion) of the wheel of the Dharma (law). Around the shrine were offerings of flowers, fruit, candles, and small Buddha figures. Three Buddhist flags hung behind and to the sides of the shrine. The colors of blue, yellow, red, white, and orange signified the manifold aura of the Buddha. I automatically pranamed with hands joined (palms together) to the sacred shrine set aside for devotees in the hotel.

PICTURE

Before going up to the room, I stopped at the gift shop on the ground floor. A large wood relief carving of the events in the life of the Buddha was displayed on a wall to the left of the gift shop. I approached the framed wood relief carving and saw that it had twenty-eight sections of detailed work, with four columns arranged in seven rows. From the top, and left to right, the story of the Buddha unfolded: (1) Dream of Maya Dev, the Buddha's mother; (2) Birth of Buddha; (3) childhood play of Buddha; (4) Compassion on goose; (5) Wedding with Yashodhara, his wife; (6) Meeting a sick old man; (7) Looking at dead body; (8) Quitting the palace; (9) Crossing the river; (10) Plucking out the hair; (11) Experience of Dharma; (12) Meditation; (13) Learning from singing women; (14) Receiving kheer from Sujata; (15) Overcoming the temptations of Mara; (16) Attainment of Buddhahood; (17) Sermon to five Brahmins; (18) Pacifying the snake; (19) Beginning alms in the city of father; (20) Beginning alms from wife Yashodhara; (21) Initiation to his son Pahal; (22) Elephant and monkey serve the Buddha; (23) Buddha blessing Yaksha; (24) Lifting the kid of sheep; (25) Pacifying Nilgiri elephant; (26) Ananda bringing water to Buddha; (27) Parinirvana; (28) Stupas over mortal remains of Buddha.

PICTURE

An hour later our tour guide, Brajesh Kumar, arrived to show us the sights of one of the four most sacred pilgrimage places for Buddhist pilgrims – Bodh Gaya, also known as Buddha Gaya.

“I am a Buddhist,” said Brajesh as he introduced himself to us. He wore a green shirt and black pants. “I will take you to the places where Buddha walked and show you the places important to Buddhism. I will even demonstrate later on the

method of meditation, which is central to understanding how Buddha achieved enlightenment.”

I was curious to see our guide demonstrate the Buddhist method of meditation. I personally had studied and practiced only the Yoga method of meditation. I glanced at Ben and noticed that he was completely uninterested in the subject of meditation. That was the last thing on his mind.

In the meantime, we got into the car and our driver Raju drove a short distance to the Tibetan monastery-temple, where the dazzling and colorful world of Tibetan Buddhism was exhibited through the awe-inspiring Thangka paintings hanging as banners along both sides of the central aisle. At the focal point at the end of the aisle sat a towering golden Buddha with eyes wide open. At the feet of the earth-touching pose of the Buddha was a picture of the present Dalai Lama, the messenger of peace and the gospel of compassion to the world.

PICTURES

The Thai monastery-temple was closed. We were told that tourists couldn't enter the grounds beyond the locked gate because of the swarm of bees inside the temple. I was disappointed. I really wanted to relive and revive the memories of my R & R trip to Thailand during my tour of duty as a medical corpsman in the Vietnam campaign. My fondest memory of that trip back in 1970 was the sight of the emerald Buddha in Bangkok. I was amazed at the craftsmanship that it took to carve a Buddha from a single block of jade. I was even more amazed at the Buddha's teachings of compassion and non-violence, which corresponded to my views as a conscientious-objector. I was brought up by my Christian father and mother to believe that killing was wrong, even in war. Those thoughts came to mind as I looked at the monastery-temple (wat) that looked similar to the Temple of the Emerald Buddha and wondered what was inside. Probably just another Buddha statue.

PICTURE

We visited one Buddhist monastery-temple after another. It seemed as if every Buddhist country around the world had their own temple in Bodh Gaya. The Japanese had established a Daijokyo Buddhist temple with an outdoor Great Buddha statue made of sandstone. It rose eighty feet into the heavens, perhaps designed to match the eighty years that the Buddha lived during his final lifetime on earth. The large sandstone hands of the Buddha lay in his lap with palms upward, the right hand on top of the left. This mudra – gesture performed by the hand(s) – was the characteristic meditation pose, the Dhyana Mudra.

PICTURES

Standing to the left and right as sentinels and messengers of his noble teachings were the Buddha's ten great disciples: Ananda, Sariputra, Punna, Mahakaccana, Rahula, Subhuti, Upali, Mahakassapa, Mahamoggallana, and Anuruddha. My favorite was Ananda, whose name meant “bliss.” The name was used as a suffix for

names (and personages), such as Yogananda (“bliss of Yoga”) and Kriyananda (“bliss of Kriya”).

Something extraordinary was starting to transpire in my consciousness as I stood at the base of the lotus pedestal and contemplated the greatness of the Buddha. It was as if in the depths of the Buddha’s meditations, I was a person that he was envisaging. In the great scheme of the universe, I was a thought in the cosmic mind of the Awakened One. I was part of one vast stream of consciousness that flowed into infinity. When I had entered the stream of the Ganges, I had felt my spirit unite with the flow of an invisible current of life. Now as I entered the stream of the awakened Buddha-nature, I no longer felt a separate self or personality. The stream (of the self) had become one with the cosmic ocean.

At one of the temples there was a slogan posted on a wooden sign: “Brothers and sisters of the world! Let us tread the path of righteousness shown by Lord Buddha, the all Compassionate One, to attain universal peace and happiness.” The call was loud and clear to my awakened mind.

At another temple there was a sign that proclaimed the essence of the three jewels (or treasures) of the Buddhist faith:

Buddham saranam gacchami = I go to the Buddha as my refuge.

Dhammam saranam gacchami = I go to the Dhamma as my refuge.

Sangham saranam gacchami = I go to the Sangha as my refuge.

The monastic-temple dedicated to the sacred great Bodhi tree – Jaya Sri Maha Bodhi Vihara – was the place where Brajesh explained the meaning of the three jewels:

“We as Buddhists take refuge and find guidance in the Buddha, who not only was a historical figure for us, but also the highest nature that exists potentially in all human beings. And we also take refuge in the Dharma (Dhamma), which is the law or teachings that Buddha gave to the world. Finally, we gather together in a Sangha or community to help each other on the path to enlightenment.”

When we entered the temple, the first thing I noticed was the murals of the life of the Buddha on the walls.

“These paintings represent the life of the prince Siddhartha on the path of renunciation from worldly thoughts and desires,” said Brajesh as he led us from the picture of the emaciated sannyasi to the progression of murals showing the prince becoming a Buddha. “He practiced austerities, like fasting and meditating, for six long years in his quest to understand the wheel of existence and ultimate reality. He discovered that his asceticism was an extreme form of bodily discipline that did not produce the desired result of knowledge, wisdom, and insight into the cause of suffering and the meaning of existence. He had left the royal palace and his life as a prince in order to find answers to his questions, and all he found was that his body became very weak from all the fasting. The second painting shows the village girl Sujata bringing him a bowl of rice pudding (kheer) to restore his body to health. The

third picture shows his battle with the temptations of life, personified by the sensuous pleasures of Mara and the angry creatures of fear and death. The Buddha sat calmly under the Bodhi tree and defeated the tormenting illusions of the mind one by one. With his right hand he touched the earth, calling on the earth to witness his victory over the illusory world of Mara.”

PICTURES

I turned around to tell Ben that the temptations of Buddha sounded similar to the temptations of Jesus in the wilderness. He was not behind me. I spotted him heading out the front door. He must have heard enough and didn't want to hear any more about the life of Buddha.

Brajesh continued telling me about the rest of the paintings on the walls. He was glad that at least I was still interested in hearing the rest of the story, how the enlightened Buddha went to Sarnath to deliver his first sermon on the Middle Way and the Noble Eightfold Path to his first five disciples, and how the Sangha or community of Buddhist followers was formed to spread the teachings of the Buddha to the rest of the world.

It was starting to get dark, and Raju suggested we go to the Sujata village before it got too dark to see. He drove us across the dry river Niranjana, which would fill up with water when the monsoon rains arrived, and we stepped out of the car to look at the large eleven-meter-high brick stupa (Sujatagarh). This was where the daughter of the chief of the village was commemorated for her act of kindness in offering milk to the Buddha. She had inadvertently brought a dish of Madhupayasa (rice cooked with pure cow's milk) as an offering of thanksgiving for prayers answered to the tree-spirit of the Bodhi tree, and instead she gave the dish of milk rice to a starving man who looked like the deity of the tree in person. Later, when she learned that the man was the Buddha who had gained enlightenment at the Bodhi tree, she was overjoyed to know that she had performed a noble deed of great merit.

PICTURE

It was dark now.

“Perfect time to take you to the Mahabodhi Temple,” said Brajesh with his characteristic smile that brightened his face and glistened in his eyes. He didn't say any more. He didn't want to spoil the surprise.

We took off our shoes and sandals at the shoe stand and gave them to the attendant. We were about to enter the holiest site in the world of Buddhism, the place where it all began.

“Welcome to the Land of Enlightenment,” said the orange sign with dark blue letters. “Mahabodhi Mahavihara, a World Heritage site.” The Great Bodhi Tree and the Great Temple-Monastery. This was the center of the Buddhist universe, the nave of the world wheel, the mid-point of the cosmos where the great awakening takes place.

As I stepped through the main gate, I felt a tingling sensation running up and down my spine, electrifying every nerve cell in my body. A procession of lights was being performed by white-robed pilgrims from Sri Lanka.

PICTURES

We walked along the upper path way that encircled the main temple, whose central pyramidal tower rose like a spiral 177 feet into the heavens. The marble path felt cool to my bare feet. The entire path was lit up with thousands of bright orange-red lights. This was a brilliant display of enlightenment in the midst of darkness. What a nice surprise to welcome the pilgrim in search of light from above!

PICTURE

As I walked to the western portion of the temple grounds, I kept my eyes focused on the Bodhi tree, which I could see dimly in the semi-darkness next to the western wall of the main temple. I would have to come back in the morning at daybreak to get a better view of the sacred tree (*ficus religiosa*) that connected heaven and earth. After making a clockwise circumambulation on the upper path, I was ready to descend to the main sanctum to meet the Buddha.

The sound of Buddhist prayers, chanted in waves of sonorous tones, beckoned the pilgrim and devotee to come inside and join the chorus of voices that filled the chamber. The deep voices of the monks droned in my ears as I stood at the entrance and pruned to the sacred presence at the heart of the sacred shrine. The bright golden glow from the gilded murti (sacred idol) of the Buddha drew me to its light like a moth to the flame. I walked down the middle of the seated-on-the-floor monks and devotees and found a space in the front row. I crossed my legs and sat down on the ground, firmly pressing the bone at the end of the spinal cord and stirring the kundalini at the base of my Muladhara chakra. I closed my eyes in meditation and saw an afterglow of the Buddha's image in my mind's eye. I started humming the chant of the Buddhist monks, which sounded like a continuous OM of the cosmic vibration. I was finally here – at the very spot where the Buddha achieved enlightenment. An aura of serenity and peace flowed through my entire being. It was the Buddha-nature ascending in my inner tree of life.

PICTURES

This euphoric feeling of being with the Buddha continued with me the rest of the evening and throughout the night. I couldn't wait until daybreak to return to the sacred place of enlightenment (Bodhimanda) and see everything again in the light of day.

Early the following morning I arose at five o'clock and tiptoed out of the hotel room. I did not want to wake up Ben, who was fast asleep. I had a rendezvous with destiny at the Mahabodhi Temple. I was anxious to walk once again on the ground where the Buddha walked.

Daybreak allowed me to see the signs and the sights more clearly at the temple complex. The sight of the four-sided eight-tiered pyramidal spire, with the crown of a bell-like stupa on top, was brightened up with the dawn light. I walked

down the eastern steps of the complex, past the gateway (torana), and headed straight for the western section where the Bodhi tree stood.

The sight of the Bodhi tree with its fluttering heart-shaped leaves and elongated branches brought an overwhelming sense of historicity to my perceiving mind – this tree was a descendent of the original tree where the Buddha sat for forty-nine days prior to the great moment of his enlightenment. This was the tree that represented the ascension of consciousness from the roots of the earth (Muladhara, or root, chakra) to the branches in the sky (Sahasrara, or crown, chakra) – the outer tree corresponded to the inner tree (within man). The turning wheels of energy in my spine (and etheric body) connected to the roots, trunk, and branches of the Bodhi tree on the physical (and metaphysical) levels. I was like the blind man who had received his sight and suddenly saw men “as trees.” The Bodhi tree lived in me, and I lived in the Bodhi tree. I stood in front of the tree of life and paid homage to it.

PICTURES

Behind the tree – within an enclosure – was the diamond throne (vajrasana), built by Emperor Asoka to commemorate the place under the tree where the Buddha sat and contemplated the realization of the goal of Nirvana. Having reached the supreme enlightenment, the arahant (worthy one) sat on the diamond throne for seven days, absorbed in the rapturous bliss of having reached the mountain top of attainment. The red sandstone seat of enlightenment was covered with a golden blanket. This was the solid rock foundation upon which the world of the Buddhas (past, present, and future) was built. This transcendental place of permanence and indestructibility was the Holy Mount that was at the same time the center of the world and the central point of every place in the universe. In my mind’s eye, it was the eye of wisdom that revealed the ultimate reality to the individual mind. This station of the first week after enlightenment became known as Pallanka (diamond throne) Sattaha. It culminated with the Buddha arriving at the complete comprehension (backwards and forwards) of the universal law of cause and effect. The Dharma (teaching) of Dependent Origination (i.e. all phenomena are based on causes and conditions) was established in his consciousness.

PICTURES

I walked next to the place (station) where the Buddha spent his second week after enlightenment. A shrine was erected by Emperor Asoka, and it was located on the northeast of the main temple. From here the Buddha stood gazing at the Bodhi tree without closing his eyes for a whole week. I looked inside the doorway into the shrine interior and saw a small statue of a Buddha standing with his right hand showing the blessing gesture and his left hand summoning heaven to witness his enlightenment. I tried to stand at the elevated ground within the courtyard in front of the temple and look with fixed gaze in the direction of the Bodhi tree for as long as I could. I began to see that there might be another meaning to the fixed gaze. There was a state of consciousness that I knew about called Samadhi, a non-dualistic awareness of “I am that.” The beholder and the object

being viewed become one. It was the realization that there is no separation between subject and object. When the mind is mindful and still, a one-pointed concentration sets in and the space between the viewer and the object viewed is obliterated, and “you are there.” This conscious awareness of oneness was what the Buddha contemplated as he stood looking at the Bodhi tree, the place of his enlightenment. This second week became known as the Animisa (gaze) Sattaha.

PICTURES

It was at the moment when I was totally focused on the Bodhi tree that I noticed a procession of white-robed pilgrims coming down the cloister walk along the northern side of the temple. Their circumambulation around the temple in clockwise manner was slow and meditative. The white robes of the male and female Buddhist devotees reminded me of the Essenes from the time of Christ who also wore white robes to signify the pure path of righteousness that they were following. I wondered if there was a connection between the Buddhists and the Essenes.

PICTURES

I joined the procession of white-robed pilgrims in the meditative walk along the same path that the Buddha walked during his third week after enlightenment. A raised platform with lotus flowers was erected to memorialize the steps of the Buddha and the lotus flowers that sprang up as he walked in meditation. The final decision that he made during that historic walk was that it would benefit all of humanity if he proclaimed the four noble truths and the eightfold path that he had realized in meditation. He would do it out of the compassion of his heart and to alleviate the suffering in the world.

As I walked with the pilgrims – step by step – I realized that the teachings of the Buddha had a powerful effect on me. I always had a strong desire to make the world a better place and to help suffering humanity. That was the Buddha-nature in me. To give a helping hand when needed, to do good to others, to be kind to all sentient beings – those qualities were what made me a better person, and they brought happiness to the giver and the receiver. I contemplated these things as I walked.

And then I saw something that touched my heart deeply and affected me immensely. A devout woman in front of me was bowing, falling to her knees, and prostrating herself on the ground with each step that she took. I slowed down and watched her perform what I thought to be a form of penance, for she seemed to be repeating a chant in an agonizing tone at every repetition of the bowing, kneeling, and prostrating. I could feel the pain and suffering she was going through. I felt as if the suffering was a self-imposed form of asceticism or a form of purification rite. I had seen pilgrims visiting the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City walk on their knees the last hundred yards of the way. I realized the devotees of all religions perform acts of reverence and humiliation in many ways to prepare themselves for their meeting with the divine. I watched as the woman made her final prostration at the

temple entrance, and then she entered walking prayerfully with a contrite heart to meet the Buddha in the inner sanctum.

I left the Cankama (walking meditation) Sattaha area with a profound shift in consciousness. I walked back to the Bodhi tree. I started walking up the western stairs to the middle path (below the upper path). There was an entire section of a raised platform overlooking the Bodhi tree where young Buddhist monks were performing a long sequence of repetitive prostrations on their soft mats. I watched them for a while, and then I went to look for the station where the Buddha spent the fourth week after his enlightenment. I located it in the northwest area of the complex.

PICTURE

The Ratanaghara (the place of basic contemplation) was where Lord Buddha reflected on the Patthana or the Causal Law. A roofless shrine called the Jewel House marked the spot. The small shrine had gold leaf offerings placed on the sides of a padlocked door with a wheel design. The jeweled chamber, according to legendary accounts, was where the deities created a crystal palace for the Buddha to meditate in. As I stood at the site, I remembered what our guide told us about the Buddha's three bodies; he said that blue, yellow, red, white, and orange rays emanated from his eternal Dharma-kaya (embodiment of truth) after his enlightenment. I understood that to mean the aura of his etheric body. To understand our eternal Dharma-kaya (or truth-body), and to know that the aura of our etheric body emanates from that essence or truth, is to understand the higher teachings of the Abhidharma (or Patthana). I had seen the multi-hued colors of my aura or etheric body in my meditations, and I understood the jewel-like colors to be reflections of feelings and thoughts in my body and mind. There was a causal interdependent relationship between everything that originated within the three bodies of man (i.e. physical, mental, etheric).

PICTURES

I remembered seeing the signboard next to a pillar marking the spot where a banyan tree once stood. I had seen the sign and the pillar at the bottom of the eastern steps when I had hurriedly made my way to the Bodhi tree. The sign at the fifth station said it was the Ajapala Nigrodha tree (banyan tree):

“Lord Buddha spent the fifth week under this tree in meditation after enlightenment. Here he replied to a Brahmana that only by ones deeds one becomes a Brahmana, not by birth.”

The pillar beside the sign was covered with gold leaf offerings from devotees, and it had a silver band near the top. My mind immediately thought of the shivalingam that connected the heavens and earth, the pillar of fire that was the vertical axis of the visible and invisible worlds. The Buddha had climbed the spinal pillar and retrieved the wisdom of the higher mind, bringing it back down to earth for the benefit of mankind. Now he was teaching the whole of humanity that the caste system of India, where the Buddha lived, was not based on truth (Dharma), but on selfish

motives. Henceforth, he taught the equality of humans and their advancement based on deeds, not by an arbitrary designation at birth. This was also what Mahatma Gandhi taught when he tried to do away with the caste system, which was still alive and functioning two thousand years after Buddha.

PICTURES

And yet my mind posed a question for consideration: Wasn't the concept of karma based on one's deeds determining a future life? Didn't the Buddha call upon the earth to bear witness to his past lives as proof that he deserved to be a Buddha? From one perspective, the Buddha was right in saying that one's deeds determined a true Brahman, whose actions corresponded to his high calling. "By their fruits (deeds) you shall know them," were the words of another master – Jesus.

Here I was, thinking for myself, just like the Buddha taught. Ignorance had to be overcome by knowledge and wisdom. It would take a lot of thinking about causes and conditions. I had to develop mindful meditation about all the thoughts that surfaced in my conscious mind. The mind of the Buddha had to become my mind, just like previously I had worked at making the Christ-mind the center of my consciousness.

I proceed to the sixth station, where the Buddha spent the sixth week in meditation. A sign saying Mucalinda Lake (the Abode of Snake King) marked the site. The actual lake (pond) was a short distance south of the temple. I didn't go there. I didn't have to. I understood where the abode of the snake king was. The seven-headed Mucalinda snake, which arrived during the storm to protect the Buddha, was the divine kundalini that was at the same time the inner tree of life (Bodhi tree). As a Yogi, I had learned that the energy within the spine (kundalini) can be used for procreation or for spiritual illumination. During spiritual awakening, or uncoiling the sleeping snake (kundalini), the column of fire (energy) rises in the spine and ascends to the crystal lake of the skull (ventricular system), where all seven chakra energies combine to raise the crown (seven-headed snake) over the head of the enlightened one.

PICTURES

I had one last station to visit before I would end my visit to the premises of the Mahabodhi Mahavihara. That name "Vihara" made me think of the northern state of Bihar, which derived its name from the word "Vihara" (monastery, dwelling, refuge). This was the state and place in space and time that had become the dwelling and the refuge (Bihar/Vihara) of the great teacher, the Buddha. And pilgrims from all around the world came to this state and place to witness the birthplace of Buddhism and experience the life and teachings of the Buddha. Also, the sacred Ganges flowed through the middle of the state, just like the river of life in the spine flowed through the middle of the human body.

The Rajayatana tree was where the Buddha spent the seventh week in meditation. It was located in the area south of the temple. It is said that two merchants met the Buddha here and offered him rice cakes and honey. They

listened to the Buddha and took refuge in his teachings, and so they became the first lay disciples.

PICTURES

After forty-nine days, the Buddha had overcome all the temptations and cravings of worldly pleasure that the deceiver Mara had confronted him with; he had penetrated through every cause and condition of existence; he had freed himself from the self (the “I” or ego) that went through the continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth; he had recollected all of his previous existences and eliminated the root cause of karma, which was a personal self; and he had freed himself from the wheel of existence. He had become the fully awakened one, the enlightened one, the Tathagata (the teacher of Truth).

I now knew what I needed to do if I was to follow in the footsteps of the Buddha. The seven stations of spiritual and mental development were symbolically established at the Mahabodhi Mahavihara. This was where the Buddha, through his exemplary life, showed what needed to be done – step by step. Every great teacher taught by example: the life of Christ was a lesson in love for God, self, and one’s fellow-man (i.e. “a new commandment I give to you, that you love one another”); the life of Krishna was a lesson in the yoga of the indestructible and imperishable universal Self that resides as the divine self in all beings; the life of Buddha was a lesson in compassion for all sentient beings to the extent of showing the path to enlightenment and escape from the wheel of existence.

I went back inside the temple for one last darshan of the Buddha, one last exchange of the holy sight (i.e. “I behold the same divine in you that is in me”). I sat with the Buddhist monks again and chanted, “Om Mani Padme Hum.” I meditated with mindfulness and absorbed concentration on the causes and conditions of my existence. I saw myself awakening from ignorance and self-identity. I perceived the Buddha-mind expanding my mind to behold millions of lifetimes on the wheel of existence. I delved into the Buddha-nature that was at the center of my being. I knew with a lightning flash of illumination that the Buddha of Infinite Light and Boundless Life was in me.

As I walked out of the Mahabodhi Temple, it dawned on me that this holy ground, this place of enlightenment, was the place where Vishnu’s incarnation as the world teacher (avatar), the Buddha, produced its supreme moment of enlightenment. I looked back at the temple as I reached the top of the eastern steps and saw the sunrise illuminating the temple and a ray of light penetrating inside.

Chapter 7

My pilgrimage in the holyland of India was coming to its final days. I had entered the cleansing stream of the sacred river. I had entered the flow of the sap in the holy tree of life. Now I had one more stream to enter: the ever-changing stream of impermanence.

Our journey to Rajgir (“House of the King”) went through a large white gateway whose pillars stood on each side of the road, and the sculptured top spanned the road like a bridge. The gateway reminded me of the torana that I passed through on my way to the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya. In the distance I could see a peak with a white stupa on top. We were on our way to Gridhrakuta, also known as Vulture’s Peak. This was the place where the Buddha spent the last eight years of his life (up to three weeks before his passing at the age of 80) revealing his pinnacle teachings, which later became known as the Threefold Lotus Sutra.

PICTURE

When we came to the end of the road, there was still almost half a mile left to the top. We walked from the parking lot, which was crowded with buses and Buddhist pilgrims, to the staging area. The usual fanfare of a holy site – with hawkers peddling their wares or selling relics as souvenirs, and beggars asking for money – confronted us. I saw an orange-robed Sadhu whose appearance intrigued me. He had the three white horizontal markings on his forehead that indicated he was a devotee of Shiva. Our eyes met. An intuitive thought told me that this was me in a previous existence. The strange encounter – like in a mirror – was uncanny. I had a picture of us taken together, standing side by side.

PICTURE

At the crowded assembly area, we had the option of either walking up the pilgrim’s path or taking a one-seat chair-lift to the top. Ben’s injured knee made it easy for him to decide what to do. The brace on his knee made it difficult for him to walk long distances. I decided to stay with my traveling companion the last mile of the way. We stayed in line with our guide Brajesh and our driver Raju and waited for our turn to take the painted chair-lift ride to the top of Mount Vulture Peak.

PICTURE

At the end of the chair-lift ride, we walked a short distance to the white marble Vishwa Shanti Stupa (Peace Pagoda), which I had seen from the gateway. There were steps leading past the stone lion-shaped guardian Fu-dogs (symbolic of the “Lion of Buddha” as the protector of the Dharma). At each of the four cardinal points of the commemorative circular edifice was a niche on the wall. Inside each niche was a gilded statue of a contemplative Buddha. The four Buddha statues immortalized the four major events in his life: the birth in Lumbini, the enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, the first sermon (turning the wheel of Dharma) at Sarnath, and the Parinirvana (final release from the wheel of existence) at Kusinagara. The entire span of the Buddha’s life – from the rising in the east to the setting in the west – was

symbolized by the stupa, whose body was the body of the Buddha, the perfected man. The indwelling presence of the Buddha, seen through the images, revealed a timeless drama enacted to give insight into the nature of reality through the highest teachings of the Dharma. The white stupa – with the four-square, altar-like harmika (or structural summit on the dome) – ascended to a higher level of a supernal realm. And the finial (at the apex) – with the five circular rings representing the five basic elements of earth, water, air, fire, and ether (space or akasha) – sent the eye of the beholder heavenward to the apex of the cosmic mountain.

PICTURES

Next door to the white stupa was a small Japanese temple where two big drums thundered out what sounded like the deep-sounding rhythms of the heart of the universe. A chant of “Namu myoho renge kyo” (devotion to the teachings of Buddha and the universal law of cause and effect) rolled through the air, inviting the curious pilgrim to step inside.

Our guide showed us the lower hilltop, the actual Gridhrakuta (also known as Eagle’s Peak or Mount of the Numinous Eagle), where we would have to descend several hundred meters in order to see the platform where the Buddha preached the Lotus Sutra.

“The Lotus Sutra was the sermon that revealed the ultimate teachings of the Buddha,” said our guide Brajesh. “I’ll tell you more about the Lotus Sutra when we get to the site.”

PICTURES

Ben’s mind was set on taking the easier route down from the hilltop (Ratnagiri). He would take the chair-lift and wait for us down below. I didn’t want to miss out on the spiritually elevated place where the ultimate vision of the Buddha was revealed. I walked down the pilgrim’s path with Brajesh and Raju.

Along the way there was a cave where Buddhist monks and devotees meditated and chanted. Outside the cave there was a sign stating that this was the “Stone House on Gridhrakuta”:

“Gridhrakuta Hill was the favorite resort of Lord Buddha and the scene of his important sermons. The whole area is studded with Buddhist monuments. The cave in all probability represents the stone house as mentioned by the Chinese Pilgrim Hiuen Tsang during the 7th century A.D. A large number of terracotta plaques, depicting the figures of Buddha and Maitreya in two rows with Buddhist creed in minute characters below each image, were found from one of these caves. Most of the antiquities have been preserved in the archaeological museum at Nalanda.”

PICTURES

There was another cave where I was able to sit in solitude and meditate on the awe-inspiring thought that the Buddha meditated in these same caves. There was the sense of a supernatural presence in the cave where dozens of candles had been burned and hundreds of gold-leaf offerings had been placed on the stone walls.

PICTURE

When we arrived at the ruins atop Gridhrakuta Hill, I noticed an interesting sign near the platform. It said: “These ruins probably represent the Buddhist monastery on the Gridhrakuta Hill noticed by the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang in the 7th century A.D.” I recalled the years I had taught ancient civilizations to the sixth-graders in my school. Hiuen Tsang (also called Xuanzang) was my favorite historical figure that was part of the unit on Ancient China that I taught. I was able to combine the epic Journey to the West as part of the multidisciplinary curriculum. The epic was a fictionalized account of Xuanzang’s pilgrimage to India during the Tang dynasty in order to obtain Buddhist scriptures to bring back to China along the Silk Road. The pilgrim is called Tripitaka (“Three Baskets,” i.e. of scriptures) in the story, and the main character turns out to be Monkey King (an adaptation of India’s epic hero Hanuman). The heroics of Monkey King (also called Sun Wukong, or “awakened to emptiness”) were related on many levels: an adventure story, a study of Chinese culture and history, and an allegory of a pilgrim’s progress toward enlightenment (or awakening). I loved reading the story with my students. And here I was, standing at the same place where the Chinese scholar-monk had stood and marveled at the teachings of the Buddha.

PICTURES

“I was going to tell you about the Lotus Sutra,” said Brajesh as we stood on the sublime site – overlooking the hills and valley – where the essence of Buddha’s teachings was proclaimed. “Here, for many years, the Buddha taught concepts that were meant to help his disciples discover the Truth (or Dharma) and Ultimate Reality of all existence. First of all, he taught that everything in the universe is impermanent, that every beginning has an end, and every birth has a death. His four noble truths showed everybody that desire causes suffering, and he showed how to end that suffering by following the noble path to enlightenment. His devoted disciples had worked out their karma and were ready to learn the highest teachings, which would liberate them from the wheel of existence. The highest teaching was that the disciples were all Bodhisattvas (awakened beings), whose function was to spread the compassion of the Buddha to all living creatures. That was the Buddha Way. And here, on this sacred site, the Buddha gave the disciples the vision of the Buddha Land (the Kingdom of Heaven), the inner Buddha-nature that needed to be uncovered through practice and skillful means. The ceremony in the air at the end of the Lotus Sutra reveals the eternal Buddha who serves through all his devoted disciples to bring compassion and enlightenment throughout all ages to all living beings. Thus the Buddha never dies, for the Buddha is the Dharma and the Truth, which lives as the inner Buddha-nature that unfolds eventually in every living being.”

The words of a true Buddhist devotee resounded in my mind as we walked down the pilgrim’s path, back to the parking lot. Brajesh had taken me to the transcendent mountain of Buddha-hood, where the mind of wisdom revealed the ever-existent inner Buddha-nature that worked for the salvation (liberation from the wheel of existence) of all of us. It was the divine awareness and awakening to a

realm of transcendent peace. It was entering the stream of impermanence (of the outer world, the wheel of samsara) in order to flow into the ocean of the One Reality. It was the arrival at the immortal center, where all paths and streams converged.

Coming down from the blissful heights of the mountain-top is never easy. The euphoria of being at a place that transcended space and time slowly dissipated as we reached the parking lot, where Ben patiently waited for our arrival. I relished the tranquility of the moment. I sat silently in the car, savoring the awareness of the emptiness and impermanence of existence and realizing that there was nothing to be said, nothing to be desired. There was a stillness in the soul. There was no vision, no sign from above, just a mindful consciousness that I was part of an infinite reality that expanded in all directions, through all spheres of existence, through all space and time.

The rest of the day was spent at the monastery-university of Nalanda, a renowned center of learning founded in the 5th century AD on a hallowed site where the Buddha often stayed at a mango grove. He held philosophical discussions here. It was the place of the birth and nirvana (passing away) of Sariputra, one of the chief disciples of Buddha. It was here that Sariputra affirmed his faith in the teachings of the Buddha. And it was here that a grand stupa and temple (known as Temple 3) was erected over the existing shrine of Sariputra's relics by the Emperor Ashoka. Later, Nalanda ("the giver of knowledge") became a Buddhist university to promote the teachings of Buddha. Various subjects like theology, grammar, logic, astronomy, metaphysics, medicine and philosophy were taught here.

PICTURES

As I walked along with the local guide Anil Kumar, I thought of my life as a perennial student for nine years of my life. I often felt that I had lived like a monk during my college years. There was also a soul intuition that made me think that I was a monk many times in my past lives. The guide showed us the monasteries where the monks lived, and I thought of the dormitories where I had lived and studied. My final thought as I left the ancient halls of learning was that I could have been at Nalanda. Perhaps it was at the same time when the Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang studied here and listened to the exposition of the "Treatise on the Stages of Yoga Practice."

There were a few more places to visit before we reached our final destination at Kusinagar. On Monday morning we checked out of the Sujata Hotel and headed north through Patna – across the eight kilometer long bridge over the Ganges River and its wetlands – up to Vaishali. Vaishali was the place where Buddha supposedly preached his last sermon. What was impressive about the place for me was the Buddha's relic stupa that I saw. The sign said:

PICTURES

"This is one amongst the eight original relic stupas built over the corporeal remains of Buddha. According to Buddhist traditions, after attaining Mahaparinirvana his body

was cremated by the Mallas of Kushinagar with a royal ceremony befitting a universal king and the mortal remains were distributed among eight claimants including the Lichhavis of Vaishali. Seven others were Ajatshatru the King of Magadha, Sakyas of Kapilavastu, Bulis of Alakappa, Koliyas of Ramagram, a Brahmin of Vethowep and Mallas of Pava and Kushinagara.”

I listened to the monk explain the significance of the Buddha’s relics in his limited English. The actual site was not much to look at.

PICTURES

However, the idea of the relics brought to mind a day in my life a couple of years back when I had gone to see the Maitreya Buddha relics tour near my house in the East Bay in California. It was an overwhelming experience, seeing all those relics from the Buddha, his disciples, and other Buddhist masters. The energy I felt from the relics was, simply stated, "enlightening." You've got to experience it for yourself. I've seen relics in Russia and Ukraine at sacred sites, and the energy felt there was miniscule compared to the "brilliant" (I feel compelled to say cosmic) light emanating from the relics of the Buddhas. It's a great way to connect with the Buddha-nature within each one of us!

PICTURES

<http://www.maitreyaproject.org/en/relic/index.html>

A flyer that was passed out at the tour, titled "Blessings of the Buddhas," gave a good explanation about the relics: "When we think of relics we tend to think of something dead, inanimate and maybe not very appealing, such as clothing, bones or tooth fragments. That is not what these relics are. When a spiritual master is cremated, beautiful, pearl-like crystals are found among their ashes. Tibetans call these Ringsel. These Ringsel are special because they hold the essence of the qualities of the spiritual master. His inner purity appears in the form of relics. True spiritual teachers do not generally discuss their own attainments. The relics are physical evidence that the teacher attained qualities of compassion and wisdom before death."

Our next stop was at the nearby archaeological site, the excavated remains of Kolhua – Ancient Vaishali (6th century BC). We saw a well-preserved Mauryan stone pillar, dating from the 3rd century BC with a life-size lion sitting atop it. Legend says that some monkeys offered the hungry Buddha a bowl of honey here. Thus, it was declared a sacred site. The ruins of a 5th century BC brick stupa is believed to have been built by Lichhavi rulers soon after Buddha’s death to enshrine his ashes. I saw Buddhist pilgrims placing gold-leaf offerings on the pillar and on the stupa. There were workers, men and women, doing continuous excavation work at the site. There was also a sign to read:

“Kolhua, a part and parcel of ancient city of Vaishali marks the spot where a local chief of monkeys had offered a bowl of honey to Lord Buddha. The event is regarded as one of the eight most significant events of his life according to the

Buddhist literature. This was the place where Buddha spent many a rainy seasons, allowed nuns to the Sangha for the first time, announced his approaching Nirvana and converted Amrapali from a proud court dancer to a nun."

PICTURES

I had read that the last days of the Buddha were recorded in the Mahaparinibbana Sutra, so I looked for the sutra. There was something inside me that wanted to learn more and more about the life of this extraordinary person who had walked in these parts of India and had risen to the highest attainable level for a human being – he had become a Buddha. I found the sutra, and I also found the wisdom of all that the Buddha did and said during his last days on earth:

And also at Vaishali, in Amrapali's (mango) grove, the Blessed One often gave counsel to the bhikkhus (monks) thus: "Such and such is virtue; such and such is concentration; and such and such is wisdom. Great becomes the fruit, great is the gain of concentration when it is fully developed by virtuous conduct; great becomes the fruit, great is the gain of wisdom when it is fully developed by concentration; utterly freed from the taints of lust, becoming, and ignorance is the mind that is fully developed in wisdom."

Thereupon the Blessed One entered the hall of audience, and taking the seat prepared for him, he exhorted the bhikkhus, saying: "Now, O bhikkhus, I say to you that these teachings of which I have direct knowledge and which I have made known to you — these you should thoroughly learn, cultivate, develop, and frequently practice, that the life of purity may be established and may long endure, for the welfare and happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, well being, and happiness of gods and men."

"And what, bhikkhus, are these teachings? They are the four foundations of mindfulness, the four right efforts, the four constituents of psychic power, the five faculties, the five powers, the seven factors of enlightenment, and the Noble Eightfold Path. These, bhikkhus, are the teachings of which I have direct knowledge, which I have made known to you, and which you should thoroughly learn, cultivate, develop, and frequently practice, that the life of purity may be established and may long endure, for the welfare and happiness of the multitude, out of compassion for the world, for the benefit, well being, and happiness of gods and men."

Then the Blessed One said to the bhikkhus: "So, bhikkhus, I exhort you: All compounded things are subject to vanish. Strive with earnestness. The time of the Tathagata's Parinibbana is near. Three months hence the Tathagata will utterly pass away."

That night we slept in the Lotus Nikko Hotel in Kushinagar. I woke up twice in

the night, at two and at five. Each time, I awoke from intriguing dreams. I sat in meditation during those times, meditating on the Buddha-nature.

Ben must have seen me meditating when he woke up before dawn to go to the bathroom. Previously, I had tried to be discreet about meditating in the middle of the night without being seen. I knew Ben would have questions about that kind of behavior. Sure enough, when I started getting ready for breakfast, Ben came at me with full force:

“What were you doing there sitting like a Buddha?” asked Ben. He had seen enough Buddha statues to know what the meditation position looked like. “Are you trying to become a Buddha?”

“That’s my way of communicating with the divine,” I answered. “I follow what the Bible says: Be still and know that I am God.”

“So now you’re trying to say you’re God,” said Ben, his voice displaying disapproval.

“I’m saying that I unite with the divine nature, the image of God, which exists in all living creatures,” I replied, trying to explain my understanding of the relationship between the human and the divine.

“All have sinned and come short of the glory of God,” quoted Ben from the Bible. “Our nature is sinful, and we need to confess our sins and let Jesus come into our hearts to make us clean.”

“I don’t see it that way, Ben,” I said. “I see our soul as the image of God, and it is divine and strives to know the nature of its divinity. It’s the illusion of the world and its temptations, desires, and ignorance that keep us from seeing that divine nature. Ignorance is the blindness of our physical eyes that keeps us from seeing with the divine eye of our soul.”

“So now you’re calling me ignorant?” steamed Ben, his face turning red with anger. His ego definitely was becoming defensive, and I braced myself for the self-righteous indignation that I had seen him display before. “Don’t you try to fool me with your fake Christianity. Don’t even try to say that you’re a Christian. I don’t know what you are, but I do know that what you believe is not what a Christian believes.”

“Ben, I’ve tried to tell you before that you shouldn’t judge a person according to their religious belief,” I remarked. “You should evaluate a person by their deeds. By their fruits you shall know them, said Jesus.”

“Our deeds are like filthy rags in the sight of God,” preached Ben. “You must accept the living Jesus into your heart, not some dead Buddha that you pray to.”

“Ben, I’ve told you before that I follow the teachings of love that Jesus taught,” I replied. “And I follow the teachings of compassion that Buddha taught.”

“And I’ve told you before that you can’t have two masters,” admonished Ben sternly.

“The Christ-mind and the Buddha-nature are one and the same to me,” I answered.

“No, it can’t be,” said Ben. “Christ lives in the heart, not in the mind.”

“The heart is only an instrument for pumping blood, not for thinking,” I replied. “When the Bible says to love the Lord thy God with all your heart, mind, and soul, it means with your feelings, thinking, and intuition. But it’s always the mind that does the thinking and realizing of a soul’s union with the divine.”

“If you continue on your present path, you will be condemned to hell and damnation,” yelled Ben, pointing his finger judgmentally at me. His face was contorted with anger. An image of Buddha’s battle with Mara flashed in my mind.

“Ben, I know in my mind and soul who and what I am, and I’ve told you before that I’m a Christian, a Buddhist, a believer in Krishna-consciousness – all of those things,” I said, trying to keep my cool.

“You are not a Christian!” Ben exclaimed, taking a step in my direction. “And don’t go trying to tell people that you are.”

I was completely taken aback by Ben’s self-righteous behavior. I tried to reason with him, and I realized that wasn’t working. I knew I had to break the chain of events that was escalating from an argument into a fight.

“Get thee behind me, Satan!” I affirmed as I turned to leave. I walked out the door. Ben was too shocked by my statement to make any further remarks. I knew he would take the biblical verse as an affront.

When Ben tried to sit at the same table where I was sitting, I asked him to sit somewhere else. I did not want to deal with him for the meantime. I needed to think of my next course of action. I also wanted to refocus my mind on the purpose of my pilgrimage. I had picked up a pamphlet about Kusinagara, written by the Archaeological Survey of India. It had a word of advice from the Buddha before he left his mortal body:

“There are four places a believing man should visit with feelings of reverence and awe:

(1) The place at which can be said, here the Tathagata (“knower of truth”) was born. [Lumbini]

(2) Here the Tathagata attained to the supreme and perfect insight. [Bodh Gaya]

(3) Here was the kingdom of righteousness set on foot by the Tathagata. [Sarnath]

(4) Here the Tathagata (“revealer of truth”) passed finally away in that utter passing away which leaves nothing whatever to remain behind. [Kushinagar]”

The last place was where I was at – Kushinagar. It began to dawn on me that it was also a state of mind, where everything passes away and there was nothing left behind. It was the state of impermanence. I was suddenly faced with the impermanence of friendship. That too was temporal and subject to change.

When we both returned to our room after breakfast to prepare for our tour of Kushinagar, I knew what I had to say and do.

“Ben, we need to talk about our situation,” I said calmly, sitting down in a chair.

Ben looked at me with a sense of hurt and concern.

“OK,” he said, sitting down on the bed.

“First of all, I did not want to be as harsh as I was, and the statement I said to you was meant to say that what you had said to me was a lie and an illusion. That is what Satan, the father of all lies, is to me. I couldn’t have you denounce me as a non-Christian, because that is not true.”

Ben didn’t say anything. He looked at me and just listened.

“Furthermore, you know that I have befriended you and tried to help you with the musical ensemble that you formed,” I continued. “You even told me that you thought I was a God-sent. And I was happy to help you. But what you did and said today has killed the spirit in me to help you any further. I believe it’s best that we go our separate ways.”

I paused to see if there was any reaction from Ben. He did not say anything. I took that silence to mean that he also thought it best that I leave the ensemble. After all, if he thought I wasn’t a Christian, how could he approve of me singing in a Christian group?

“And I really feel that it would be wise for both of us to refrain from discussing religion or theology any more,” I proceeded, bringing the one-sided talk to a conclusion. “It’s obvious that our views are diametrically opposed to each other, and we will only aggravate each other by discussing religion. Does that sound OK with you?”

“If that’s what you want,” said Ben. He had accepted the inevitable. He must have seen it coming. It was as if he too realized the nature of impermanence in our friendship.

Impermanence. Finality. Nothing lasts forever. This too shall pass.

These concepts bombarded my mind when we toured the Mahaparinirvana Temple and the adjacent Nirvana Stupa, the place where the Buddha chose to free himself from the wheel of existence (i.e. the cycles of birth, death, and rebirth). When I walked up the steps to the barrel-vaulted temple and entered through the western door, I was awe-struck by the 20-foot-long reclining Buddha facing me. The 1500-year-old gilded image, carved from one block of red sandstone, was reclining on its right side, with the head pointed to the north and the face looking in the direction of the setting sun. That was the final position of the Buddha as his mortal body lay dying between two sal trees.

PICTURES

“If you stand at the feet of the reclining Buddha,” said the local guide Misra, guiding me to the soles of the feet, which showed imprints of the wheel of Dharma, “you will see a dying face. If you stand here at the mid-section, you will see a thinking face. And if you come here and look directly into the Buddha’s face, you will see a smiling face.”

PICTURES

I followed the guide to the three views of the reclining Buddha. Ben stayed outside the temple. When he saw the image of the dead Buddha through the entrance door, he decided to roam around the monastery ruins instead. I, on the other hand, wanted to be in the presence of the thinking Buddha, who had taught his disciples to think for themselves.

When I stepped outside the temple, the guide led me to the stupa, where he told me the story of the Buddha's last words as we performed the clockwise circumambulation around the stupa:

"It was a full moon night when the Buddha passed away. His disciple Ananda was at his side and he listened as his master spoke of his final moment. 'My moment has arrived, and I will leave this mortal body,' said the Buddha. 'Who will guide us now?' asked Ananda. 'Be a lamp unto yourself,' said the Buddha. 'Consult the Dharma, the principles of righteous living. Listen to your own inner voice. Remember that all conditioned things are impermanent, and they pass away. Work out your own salvation with diligence.' Those were the Buddha's final words."

I reflected on the words, "Work out your own salvation with diligence." I had read similar words in the Bible: "Work out your own salvation with fear (awe) and trembling (diligence)." How similar the statements. How much in practical wisdom the advice of two great sages.

The guide also showed us the sal tree standing near the temple, and I read an interesting fact about the temple on the nearby sign: "The present form of the temple has been given in 1956 A.D. on the occasion of Buddha's 2500th Jayanti celebrations." The temple was built to commemorate the year 2500 BE (Buddhist Era) since Buddha's Mahaparinirvana (the great completion of nirvana). Buddha Jayanti (also known as Buddha Purnima) is celebrated in remembrance of three important events in Buddha's life: (1) His birth in 623 BC. (2) His enlightenment in 588 BC. (3) His attainment of Nirvana at the age of 80. All three events occurred on the full moon of the fourth lunar month, Vaisakh, i.e. April or May.

PICTURES

On our way out of the sacred site, we stopped at a large Dharma bell donated by the Tibetans to ring out the three-fold blessings of the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha. The keepers of the bell allowed me to ring the bell, which to me was the sound of the universal sound OM reverberating the vibrations of Truth (Tathagata) throughout the cosmos. The sign explained the significance of the bell:

"OM SWA-STAM

Blessings of the Precious Triraina ("three jewels"). May this Dharma Bell foster the restoration of the holy places of Aryadesha (India) blessed by the Buddha. May the Sangha offer service wherever the Dharma has been manifested. May we remember the Mahamuni (The Great Sage), following the Three

Trainings so that the Buddhadharma continues to flourish until Maitreya turns the Dharmacakra.”

There was a shrine that was part of a large monastic complex across the street from the Mahaparinirvana Temple. The shrine was called the Matha-Kuar (“forehead prostration,” a form of devotion performed by devout Buddhists). The watchman of the shrine opened up the locked gate so I could go inside and pay homage to the 1000-year-old gilded statue that was carved out of blue stone. It represented Buddha under the Bodhi tree in the Bhumisparsha Mudra (earth-touching pose).

PICTURES

There was one more site to visit in Kushinagar: Ramabhar Stupa, the site where the mortal body of Gautama Siddhartha was cremated. Buddhist traditions refer to the stupa as Makutabandhana Chaitya (“banding the crown” stupa). The Ramabhar (“place of Rama”) stupa was near the Hiranyavati River. Our guide told us the story of how the mortal body of the body could not be cremated for six days because the Buddha had promised his disciples he would wait for their arrival. As soon as they arrived, two legs came out of the coffin and the body went through the process of self-immolation. I was impressed with the synchronicity of an event that occurred during our visit to the cremation site; we saw a cremation taking place near the river, probably at the same place where the Buddha was cremated.

PICTURES

[Note: I was told that the grounds across the river were the future site of the Maitreya Project, where 48 Buddhist countries are to contribute for the ground-breaking ceremony in 2010.]

Preview Maitreya Project: <http://www.maitreyaproject.org/>
<http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=389451>

After our tour of Kushinagar, we were supposed to get ready to travel to Lumbini, the birthplace of Gautama Siddhartha. However, our driver Raju heard disturbing news of civil unrest at the border of Nepal. A large tour group at our hotel also had heard news of a strike and violent demonstrations against the government in Nepal. Raju didn’t want to risk his life since he was a family man, and he didn’t want to risk our lives. We were told we could ride up to the border and find out if we would be turned back, like other groups. After conferring with our travel agency, we decided it would be best for all of us to skip our trip to Lumbini, Nepal.

I felt sort of disappointed that I wouldn’t make it to the fourth major pilgrimage site that was on the pilgrim’s list of sacred places to visit. We were supposed to be staying at Hotel Nirvana, and that was symbolically significant for me. The first thought that occurred to me was: “Well, I guess I don’t get to go to Nirvana this time around.” I soon recovered from that silly thought, and I realized that I had already seen the birth of the inner Buddha as the awakening of my own inner Spirit in my

consciousness. I didn't need to travel to a physical place to see where the physical Buddha was born.

Also, I had already performed the ritual of bathing the "Baby Buddha" at the Maitreya Buddha Relics Tour. The pouring of water on "Baby Buddha" was an act of cleansing the self of negative karma with purificatory water. I remembered reciting the purification prayer as I poured the holy water on the image and symbolically on the crown chakra of my inner Buddha:

"Although the Buddha's holy body has no faults,
In order to purify the body, speech, and mind obstacles of all
sentient beings,
I offer this bath of the Buddha's holy body.
May the body, speech, and mind obstacles of all sentient
beings be purified."

PICTURES

Since our afternoon and evening time was now our own, to do with as we pleased, I decided to walk around the sacred sites again. Ben decided to take a long afternoon nap. I walked back to a theme park of the four holy places that was in the vicinity of the Chinese-Vietnamese Linh Son Buddhist Temple of Kushinagar. Replicas of the major Buddhist sites adorned the complex.

PICTURE

I was especially impressed by the statue of Mahamaya, the mother of Gautama Siddhartha, with the baby Buddha. It was rare to see a statue of the mother who immaculately conceived – just like the Virgin Mary – a holy child. Later, I was to learn that the divine feminine (or goddess) of our pure consciousness (or divine mother kundalini) is also capable of giving birth to the inner "Son" or inner "Buddha." That "immaculate conception" within the inner spirit was a story that was told allegorically in many religious scriptures. It was a story of the union of the sun (masculine) and the moon (feminine) forces within the human being to produce a "Christed-One" or an "awakened Buddha." The story of the Mahamaya ("great goddess") is the dream of the mother (of life) being impregnated by the spirit (symbolized by a white elephant). Her walk in the garden and grabbing hold of a tree (the spinal tree of life) and then giving birth to a baby Buddha through her right side (etheric body) is the process whereby the creative energy in the spine ascends to the mental body of the initiate. When the baby Buddha steps out of the womb (birth into spiritual body), he takes seven steps (seven centers or chakras of the spine) and becomes the master.

PICTURE

In the evening, I went once again to the Mahaparinirvana Temple. I wanted to meditate with the monks and chant with the pilgrims. I watched a Sri Lanka Buddhist ceremonial covering of the Buddha's body with orange, brown, and saffron colored cloth. I listened to a Korean Buddhist group chant, and I wept inside as one woman was overcome with uncontrollable sobs and tears as she dissolved into her inner

Buddha nature. I meditated beside the smiling face of the Buddha, and I meditated at the feet of the Buddha.

PICTURES

When the temple doors closed at six in the evening, I walked around the complex and waited for the full moon to rise. The full moon reminded me of the Wesak festival, when the Buddha made his annual appearance during the Buddha Purnima (day of birth, enlightenment, and nirvana) to devotees who traveled (in body and in spirit) to the mystical Mount Kailash.

PICTURE

The full moon also reminded me of the beginning of the Hindu Holi festival. Raju told us that the full moon signaled the beginning of the colorful holiday that heralded the beginning of the blossoming of the multi-hued flowers of spring. That's why people threw colored powders and colored water at each other. Raju wanted to drive out of Kushinagar by four in the morning in order to avoid having his car smeared with colors that might not wash off easily. He even prepared for that eventuality by putting diesel oil on his car, which would make it easier to wash the colors off.

So we woke up early and left at four. We drove through Gorakhpur, Paramahansa Yogananda's birthplace, on our way towards Shravasti, the place where Buddha spent 25 monsoon seasons. Along the way we saw boys shooting spray guns with colored water at each other and at passers-by. We saw people smeared with purple, orange, yellow, red, blue, and golden colors on their face, hair, and clothes. Several people, especially boys, had their faces covered with golden or silver colors. My favorite sighting was a cow that had been colored with purple polka dots – a real "Holi Cow."

PICTURE

We arrived at the Mahamaya Hotel, a former palace of the local maharaja, in Balrampur just as the Holi festivities went into full swing.

"This is the first time I have not been hit by the colors," said Raju as he drove his car through the gated grounds of seven acres of sprawling green landscape. He had driven his car as fast as he could to get to our destination.

We were given the royal treatment at the former palace. I was impressed by the size of the rooms and the large dining area, which had royal lion and mandala tapestries hanging on the wall. The entrance to the hotel lobby featured a beautiful shrine with a painting of the Mahamaya, the great mother (of the Buddha).

PICTURES

After breakfast and Masala tea, I walked with Ben around the green grounds. We walked in the direction of the gate, where I heard the sounds of Holi celebrations. I saw a group of revelers and musicians coming down the road. A man was beating a drum in rhythm to the chanting of "Happy Holi." I came up to the chained entrance gate to take a picture of the exuberant merrymaking. The youthful group noticed me and came towards the gate. Raju had warned me to stay inside the compound

because of the possibility of mischief and pranks by frolicking groups. Ben wisely retreated back to the security of the hotel room.

However, I got caught up in the spirit of the joyous occasion and extended my hand to the extended hands of the multi-colored faces at the gate. Each one of them wanted to shake my hand and put some colors on my clothes and head. “Happy Holi,” I shouted in glee as I shook each one of their hands. We danced to the sound of the music, and we laughed heartily as we said “Happy Holi” to each other. The affectionate panorama of color and happiness made me feel like I was one of the people of India. I was no longer a separate entity, a tourist, or even a pilgrim. I was a joyous note in the melodic, festive symphony of Spring. I was at-one with Mother Nature’s cosmic dance.

PICTURES

Some of the hotel workers noticed me interacting with the local street group, and they brought some yellow and red Holi powder to put on my forehead, hair, and face. They wanted to celebrate with me. They had never seen a foreigner (i.e. white man) get so enthusiastic about the festival of colors. About seven of the workers at the hotel came out to do the ceremonial Holi embrace and placing of colors on each other. The brotherly embrace bonded all of us into one brotherhood. The right hug, left hug, right hug, left hug, right hug, left hug seemed to follow some rhythm of friendship that I repeated with each of my fellow-men (as I now regarded my Hindu acquaintances). I felt a strong bond of fellowship and friendship with them as I laughed and said “Happy Holi” to them and placed red and yellow powder on their forehead. My clothes were completely covered in colors, and I felt as if all the colors of my aura were shining brilliantly in the bright light of day.

I was glad my Hindu friend Girjesh had advised me to bring some old clothes that I wouldn’t mind getting completely covered with colors. It was such a joyous occasion that I was thrilled beyond all belief.

The event was commemorated with a group picture. I still remember Uday Singh the guard, Uday Bhan the cook, Rajendra, Ram Sewak, Sunil, Vimal and Kallu. Their faces are etched in my memory as the one and only Holi festival that I have ever experienced. I still can see myself raising my hands in praise to the colorful Holi spectacle. It was a day to remember – Wednesday, the eleventh of March, 2009.

PICTURES

The following day was the last day of the pilgrimage. We were headed for the ancient city of Shravasti, about 17 kilometers from the Mahamaya Hotel in Balrampur. Shravasti (or Sravasti) was known during Buddha’s time as Savatthi. The earliest references to Savatthi were in my two favorite epics of India – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata – where it is mentioned as a prosperous city in the Kingdom of Kosala.

The Jetavana monastery at Shravasti was considered to be one of the eight holy places for a Buddhist pilgrimage. The Buddha spent twenty-four rainy seasons

at the monastery that was built for him by one of his disciples, Anathapindika. The main attraction for me was the ancient Bodhi tree that was supported by steel trusses. This was a sapling of the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya, and it was planted as a sacred symbol of the Mahamuni (“great sage”). The tree took the place of the Teacher during his absence. It was a reminder to look within one’s own nature (the esoteric tree of life in the spine) to find the Buddha.

According to Buddhist tradition, it was planted at the direction of Ananda, Buddha’s disciple. Thus, it became known as the Ananda (“bliss”) Bodhi tree.

PICTURES

Our guide, Anant Ram Rana, showed us the ruins of the various temples and stupas surrounding the Jetavana monastery. The Chinese pilgrim Hiuen Tsang had found the brick structures of the temples in utter ruins. Presently, they revealed just enough to attract the modern-day pilgrim in search of Buddhist shrines and sacred sites.

“Temple 2 and Temple 3 were hallowed by the personal use of the Buddha,” said Anant Ram Rana. “It was at one of these temples that the Buddha delivered the Maha-Mangala Sutra, the great discourse on supreme blessings. It is considered by Buddhists and Hindus alike as a supreme guide for life’s journey.”

PICTURES

There were other archaeological sites that we stopped at, such as the ancient city of Orazar, the stupa remains at Pakki Kuti, and another mound of ruins called Kachchi Kuti. However, to me they were just remains from the past that were reminders that everything in life is impermanent. It was a reminder of the words of the Buddha: “All things which exist in time must perish. Because, then, death pervades all time, get rid of death, and time will disappear.” To me the Buddha had passed in a boat of wisdom from this mortal world – across the sea of birth and death – to the other shore of the immortal world (Nirvana).

At the end of a journey, or a pilgrimage, there is a sense of completion and fulfillment. I felt a sense of realization and awakening to a world of wisdom, the wisdom of the Bodhi tree, the Dharma, and the Buddha. I reflected on the discourse that the Buddha delivered at the Jetavana Monastery in Shravasti. The teachings of the Buddha (Tathagata, the teacher of truth) were the supreme blessings that accompanied the path of the wise man.

In conclusion, my wish for myself and for the rest of humanity is that the stream of supreme blessings would accompany us on our ever upward path to enlightenment and Buddhahood.

MAHAMANGALA SUTTA

(DISCOURSE OF THE SUPREME BLESSINGS)

I have heard that at one time the Blessed One was staying in Savatthi at Jeta's Grove, Anathapindika's park. Then a certain deva, in the far extreme of the night, her extreme radiance lighting up the entirety of Jeta's Grove, approached the Blessed One. On approaching, having bowed down to the Blessed One, she stood to one side. As she stood to one side, she addressed him with a verse.

*Many deities and humans, yearning after good,
have reflected on Blessings.*

Pray, tell me the Supreme Blessings.

*Not to follow or associate with the foolish,
to associate with the wise,
and honour those who are worthy of honour.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*To reside in a civilized place,
to have done meritorious actions in the past,
and to have set oneself on the right course.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*A good education, accomplished in many skills,
well disciplined
and pleasant speech.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*The support of mother and father,
the cherishing of spouse and children
and peaceful occupations.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*Liberality, righteous conduct,
the helping of relatives
and blameless action.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*To cease and abstain from evil,
to avoid intoxicants
and steadfastness in virtue.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*Patience, humility,
contentment and gratitude,
hearing the Dhamma at the right time.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*Self-control, the holy life,
perception of the Noble Truths
and the realization of Nibbana.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*A mind that, when touched
by the ways of the world,
remains steady, unstained, sorrowless, and at peace.
This is the Supreme Blessing.*

*Everywhere undefeated
when acting in this way,
people go in well-being.
These are the Supreme Blessings.*

<http://www.buddhacommunity.org/mahamangala.htm>

PICTURES

