

Lumbini

Contributed by Dr U Than Sein
 Wednesday, 02 January 2008
 Last Updated Monday, 28 March 2011

Lumbini: the Birth Place of Gotama Buddha

A unique being, an extraordinary man arises in this world for the benefit of the many, for the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the good, benefit and happiness of the gods and mankind. Who is this unique being? It is the Tathagata, the Exalted, and Fully Enlightened One. Anguttara Nikaya, 1,1,13, p22

Lumbini

Lumbini, the birth place of Gotama Buddha is situated in Nepal, across the Indian border town of Sonauli which is about 130 km from Gorakhpur, UP, and continue for another 13 km by road from Siddhartha Nagar (Bhairawha) of Nepal, which has a small airport with daily direct flight from Kathmandu.

Historical facts

Immediately before birth, the Bodhisattva was the Lord of the Tushita (Tusita) divine realm. There, he had resolved to be born for the last time and to have the attainment of enlightenment. During the night of his conception, Queen Maha Maya Devi, the wife of King Suddhodana of Kapilavattu (Kapilavastu), dreamt of a great white elephant entering her womb. On the full moon day of Kason (May or Vesakha) in the year 563 BCE, a noble prince, the Bodhisattva, was born in the Lumbini Park (Garden), 16 km from the Sakya city of Kapilavattu. Emerging from the bath in a pond, with her face looking to the east, she leant her right arm on the Shala (In-ginn) tree and gave birth to the future Buddha. The prince was born to from her right side and immediately took seven steps, in each of the four directions, east, south, west and north. In each direction, the newly born Prince Siddhartha proclaimed as, with a lion's roar, by holding his right hand with pointing index finger upwards: "I am the first, the best of all beings, and this is my last birth and hereafter I will not be born again." The heavens filled with lights and the devas (gods) showered flowers on the young Prince who descended from his mother's womb on the lotus pedestals. After having joyous birth to Siddhartha, Queen Maya Devi died on seventh day after birth and the kingdom mourned her. King Suddhodana summoned her sister Mahapajapati Gotami to look after the Prince. Many auspicious signs accompanied the birth of Siddhartha, and many beings who would later play a major role in the life of Gotama Buddha are said to have born on the same day: Yashodara, future wife of Siddhartha; Chandaka, the groom who would help him leave the palace, Kanthaka, the horse that would bear him out; the future Bimbisara of Magadha and Prasenajit of Kosala and his protector, Vajrapani. The Bodhi tree is also said to have sprouted on the same day of Buddha's birth.

After two centuries later (249 BCE), Mauryan Emperor King Ashoka visited this birth place of Lord Buddha, and made many offerings, built a stupa and erected a pillar surmounted by a horse capital. Despite the importance of the place in the Buddhist history, there were a few references to this place for many centuries thereafter, compared to other sacred sites of the Buddha. In the fifth century CE, the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien visited Lumbini and described in his account to the sacred lake in which Maha Maya Devi took a bath before she delivered the noble soul. Another Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-Tsiang (603-664 CE) who came to Lumbini gave a much detailed account of the birth place of Gotama Buddha. In addition to the lake, he described about the Ashoka pillar, which was partially destroyed by lightning.

For almost a thousand year, the birth place in Lumbini with its buildings was lost in the jungle, until it was rediscovered again in 1890s by Archaeologists – Khadga Samsher and Dr Anten Furer. When Archaeologist Walddell featured the article "Where is the Birthplace of the Buddha?" in Calcutta Englishman, and later reproduced by all the other English-language Newspapers in India, a great deal of public interest aroused. Before Walddell was able to make necessary arrangements, Government of India had given permission for Dr Anten Fuhrer, a German Archaeologist to carry out the exploration. In the last week of November 1896, three parties advanced on the border area, one from the Nepal side and two from India. Dr Fuhrer was met by a squad of Nepali sappers, who had been sent to assist him by the local regional governor, General Khadga Samsher Rana. However, unknown to him, General Khadga had also decided to investigate a second pillar; the standing column spotted by Duncan Ricketts in 1885, the rubbing for which Vincent Smith had examined. It was just over ten miles south-east of Nigliva, near a village called Rumidei. At Rumidei, General Khadga Rana was joined by Mr Ricketts and Dr Fuhrer. According to Dr Fuhrer's report – "On digging away the accumulated debris, it proved to be an Ashoka monolith, 24 ft. 4 in. high, standing upon a masonry platform, and to bear about 9 ft 8 in from its base a well preserved inscription of the Mauryan period. The inscription fixes with absolute certainty of the garden of Lumbini, where according to the Buddhist belief Prince Siddhartha was born." The inscription of Asoka on the pillar was found some three feet below. Mr Ricketts had the good fortune to be present while the inscription was being unearthed. Dr Fuhrer arrived later. The pillar, which is of polished sandstone, is split vertically down the middle, probably by lightning, and the top is broken off. The inscription is in four and half lines of beautifully incised and well-preserved characters, averaging about over an inch in height. The main purport of the record is that King Piyadasi, beloved of the Devas, who was anointed twenty years ago, came to this spot, and worshipped, saying: 'Here was Buddha Sakyamuni born', and caused a stone pillar to be erected. Thus, history has been set at rest all doubts as to the exact site of the traditional birth-place of Gotama Buddha in the Lumbini garden.

U Thant, a devout Buddhist and Secretary General of the United Nation, visited Lumbini in 1967 and recommended the Nepalese Government to develop Lumbini by establishment of a "Lumbini Development Trust". The Trust was established in 1970 with support from more than 13 Buddhist nations. However, till some years after its formal establishment, not much works were carried out except a few restoration of Maya Devi Temple and the Lumbini Garden. In 1997, the Archaeological Department of Nepalese Government demolished the Maya Devi Temple by shifting its main content to a near-by temporary House and the excavations were made on the same site. After a few months, beneath the ruins of old monastic structures dated back to King Ashoka's time, the exact place of the Birth of Prince Siddhartha marked with a stone was discovered.

The Government has rebuilt the Maya Devi Temple on the same place, kept it as a historical park and maintained as a world heritage under the guidance of UNESCO. The Lumbini Development Trust, with the help of UNESCO, has created the Lumbini Park, consisting of the Maya Devi Temple, the Lumbini Garden and related Monastic complexes, where nearly a hundred monasteries are built from various nations and religious organizations. Being a cultural heritage, visitors have to pay entry fees to the Maya Devi Temple and Lumbini Park.

Queen Maya Devi's Temple

New Maya Devi Temple (served as museum) has been rebuilt in 1998 surrounding the old monastic ruins and a stone-slab, marking the birth place of Lord Buddha, located deep in the sanctum sanctorum. Around the stone-slab, old monastic structure revealed many rooms. A damaged and much worn sand-stone sculpture showing the birth of Prince Siddhartha from Queen Maya Devi dating from the 5th century BCE. The damaged sculpture depicted Maha Maya Devi standing and supporting herself by holding a branch of the shala tree, with a new born infant Buddha standing upright on a lotus pedestal with an oval halo, and a few people standing and helping the mother. The same style of sculpture of the birth of Buddha can be found in many other places, even at the Ananda Temple of Pagan, Myanmar built in 10th century CE.

Ashoka Pillar

The most important monument on the west side of Maya Devi Temple in Lumbini is the stone pillar erected by King Ashoka in 250 BCE, in the 20th year of the Emperor's reign. The inscription on the pillar describes: "King Piyadashi, beloved of the gods, 20th years after his consecration, came himself and worshipped saying 'Here Buddha Sakyamuni was born', and he caused to make a stone capital representing a horse; and he caused stone pillar to be erected. Because here the Supreme One was born, the village Lumbini was made religious centre and also liable to pay only one-tenth share (of produce)." Chinese pilgrim Hsuan-Tsiang noticed a horse at the top of the pillar, and it may have been damaged in late 7th century. The shaft is 2.21 metre with a height of 4.11 metre, with around 3 metre underground.

Pushkarini (Pond)

A little to the south of the Temple is a small water pond, supposed to be a sacred pool where Mayadevi took a bath before delivery. Water in the pond may have been replenished, but not so clear due to algae grown in the pond.

Buildings in the Lumbini Park

Myanmar Government with additional private contributions built a complex of monastic structures at the Myanmar Buddhist Temple in Lumbini in the year 2000. The complex consisted of two stupas – replicas of Shwedagon and Ananda, a two-storied monastery for visiting monks, a big ordination hall, and a four-storied guest house. All are built with Myanmar style-architecture.

There are many Monasteries built by other Buddhist countries in the Lumbini Park. A few largest monastic buildings are from Myanmar, Thailand, China, Korea and Japan.

Visit around Lumbini – Kapilavattu in Nepal

Kudan and Taulihawa area, about 27 km west of Lumbini, accessible by motorable road nowadays, are believed to be linked with sacred site of Kapilavattu (Kapilavastu), the capital of Sakya, where Gotama Buddha spent his early 12 years, and visited several times again after the enlightenment. There are many ruins and mounds of stupas and monasteries and broken pieces of King Ashoka's Pillar in a rectangular fortified area, surrounded by a moat and walls, which is about 10 km north-west of Taulihawa, called as Tilaurakot and being identified as Kapilavattu. Prince Siddhartha, one day when riding in his chariot through the city of Kapilavattu, happened to see a man feeble with age, another person struck down with sickness, and a corpse, and tried to understand the sense of ageing, sorrow and pain, disease and death. He immediately realized the suffering nature of human's live. Then, he suddenly saw a radiant happy holy man who had

conquered all such sufferings. He decided to renounce all worldly riches and pleasures to seek truth and embark on the path of Nibbana. Gotama Buddha, before the fourth rain retreat after his enlightenment, visited Kapilavattu, at the request of his father King Suddhodana.

During this visit, the Buddha admitted his cousin Nanda and his own son, Rahula, into the order. About 3 km south of Kudan and nearby the village of Gotihawa, there is a huge stupa consisting of successive rings of wedge-shaped Mauryan bricks excavated by the Nepalese Archaeological Department, and identified it as an old monastery, supposed to be the site of Nigodharon Temple where Gotama Buddha spent 15th rain retreat, and visited several times.

Kapilavastu (Piprahwa) in India

While the earlier scholars like Ryles Davids and PC Mukherji identified Tilaurakot of Nepal as the site of Kapilavastu (Kapilavattu), Indian archaeologist KM Srivastava and others identified Piprahwa, a nearby place inside India, as the site of main city of Kapilavattu. Piprahwa is a village lying on the road linking from Sravasti to Sonauli, about 20 km from Naugarh Railway Station. Kapilavattu city was destroyed by the rival kings even within the Buddha's lifetime. When the Chinese pilgrim Fa-hsien visited this place, he found a stupa and a pillar constructed by King Ashoka. The fellow Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsiang (around mid-600 CE) described the same picture. The ruins are spread over a large area and the Ashoka Pillar mentioned by the Chinese pilgrims was not traceable. A large stupa at this ancient site is said to have housed the bone relics of Gotama Buddha which were preserved by the rulers, Sakya. Three groups of seals are found among the ruins, which are dated back to Kusana period of 1st century. Letters on the seals indicated the place as Kapilavattu.

Stone caskets containing the relics believed to be that of the Buddha's were found at this site in 1898, by Mr WC Peppe, who did extensive excavations on many stupas around. Among the five caskets found, a smaller one contained an inscription, which provided a clue to the identification of Kapilavattu. The inscription, as translated by Rhys Davids, was read thus: "This shrine for relics of the Buddha, the August One, is that of the Sakyas, the brethren of the distinguished One, in association with their sisters, and with their children and their wives." There also found two stone caskets carrying the relics of Buddha, which are now housed at the National Museum at New Delhi.

Myanmar Buddhist Viharas in Naugarh and Varanasi

Venerable U Nandarwuntha, also known as Saywinkaba or Naugarh Sayadaw, had built a Myanmar Buddhist Vihara at Varanasi in early 1950s. Sayadaw in 1960s moved to Naugarh, near the Indian side of Kapilavattu (Piprahwa), and established another Monastery (Temple-residence). After Naugarh Sayadaw passed away in 1990, successive Myanmar monks could not stay and maintain it. The monastery now belongs to Sayadaw's adopted son's wife and it is no longer a temple but a private house. The Myanmar Buddhist Vihara (usually known as Saywinkaba Temple or U Nandarwuntha's Vihara) in Varanasi is still maintained by successive Myanmar monks (including the late U Yewada of London), and being used as a pilgrimage guest house till date.

{Text and Photos by U Than Sein, 1 December 2007}