

Places of Pilgrimage

Q: What are the main sites of Buddhist pilgrimage and why do Buddhists visit these places?

Just before the Buddha died, he told his followers to remember him by going on a pilgrimage to four holy places. These are the sites of his birth, his enlightenment, his first teaching and his death. At all these sites, temples and shrines containing relics of the Buddha have been built. By visiting these places, Buddhists can reflect on the events of the Buddha's life and may feel a stronger connection to him.

However, there is no obligation for Buddhists to go on pilgrimage, and many Buddhists never visit pilgrimage sites.

Lumbini

The Buddha's birthplace, Lumbini, is in the foothills of the Himalayas in Nepal. Emperor Ashoka visited Lumbini in the third century BCE. He ordered for the



site to be marked with a stone pillar on which was carved, 'Here the Buddha was born'. Lumbini was deserted for a long time, but in 1896 a German explorer rediscovered Ashoka's pillar. Since then, the area has remained a place of interest for archaeologists, who try to learn more about the history of Buddhism by studying the remains of building and other ancient objects. **In recent years, both Theravada and Tibetan monasteries have been established in Lumbini.**

“ Millions of people get immense inspiration. Buddha's spirit always there. But real Buddha's holy places is in one's self. That's important. So real Buddha's sacred place must build within our heart. ”

- The Dalai Lama

Bodh Gaya

The most importance place in the world for Buddhists **is Bodh Gaya, where the Buddha achieved enlightenment.** Every year, hundreds of thousands of people visit from all over the world. **The main attraction is the Mahabodhi Temple, which is believed to have been built by Emperor Ashoka. At**



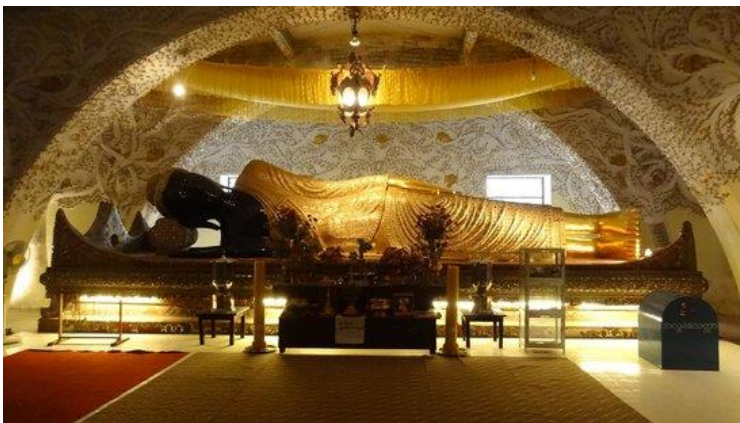
the back of the temple, there is a Bodhi tree. According to legend, the tree is a descendent of the Bodhi tree under which the Buddha found enlightenment. It can be crowded near the tree, but pilgrims often meditate around it, believing that this will help them in their own search for enlightenment. There is also a statue in Bodh Gaya called the Great Buddha. It is 25 metres high and was completed in 1989 after seven years of building by over 12,000 bricklayers.



Sarnath

On the site of the deer park at Sarnath where the Buddha gave his first sermon stands the Dhamekh Stupa. Pilgrims walk around the Dhamekh Stupa three times, one for each of the Three Jewels. The circle also symbolises the cycle of Samsara. Sarnath was a vibrant Buddhist area until it was destroyed in the 12th Century CE by Muslim conquerors. The area was rediscovered in 1937 and is now a thriving Buddhist community again, with many monasteries that pilgrims visit.

Kusinara



At the site of the Buddha's parinirvana is the Mahaparinirvana Temple and Stupa, which are said to be built on the exact spot that the Buddha died. The ruins of several monasteries can also be found in this area. Buddhist pilgrims also visit the nearby Ramabhar Stupa, where the Buddha was cremated.

Other Sites of Pilgrimage

The four sites specifically mentioned by the Buddha are usually considered to be the most important, but there are several other sites of Buddhist pilgrimage across Asia. **Many people believe that these sites contain relics of the Buddha, including his hair and teeth. These objects price to Buddhists that the Buddha really existed and they are a way of connecting with his life and teachings.** At some sites there are also ancient monasteries.

Quizzical Questions

1. How should Buddha's followers remember him?
2. What is there no obligation for Buddhists to do?
3. Why is Lumbini a place of pilgrimage?
4. Why is Bodh Gaya a place of pilgrimage?
5. What is the legend about the Bodhi tree at Bodh Gaya?
6. Why is Sarnath a place of pilgrimage?
7. At Sarnath, why do pilgrims walk around the Dhamekh Stupa three times? What does this symbolise?
8. Why is Kusinara a place of pilgrimage?
9. Where was the Buddha cremated?
10. Why are objects such as the Buddha's hair or teeth important in Buddhism?

Key Words

- **Pilgrimage**
A journey to a place of religious or spiritual importance
- **Lumbini**
Where the Buddha was born
- **Bodh Gaya**
Where the Buddha reached enlightenment
- **Sarnath**
Where the Buddha taught his first sermon
- **Kusinara**
Where the Buddha died

Tasks

- a) Look at our key words box. Create a sentence or paragraph that includes these words. It must make sense!
- b) Create a 'Travel Guide' to explain pilgrimage in Buddhism. Include key words and facts from the information.
- c) Read the quote from the Dalai Lama. Why do you think it is **not** a duty to go on a pilgrimage if you are a Buddhist?

Think

Is it symbolism or respect, or both, that keeps pilgrims visiting holy sites such as the Bodhi Tree at Bodhi Gaya?

