Nepalese Repoussé/Bhutanese Paro Tsechu Festival Thangka/Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites
Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus
A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism, Part IV

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All five of the previously discussed events in the life of Śākyamuni Buddha have fallen into an obvious chronological order.* However, the next two, the ‘Gift of the Monkey’, which took place at Vaiśali, and the ‘Taming of Nālāgiri’, which took place at Rājagha, can only be placed chronologically in a general way as occurring during the Buddha’s ministry.

Indeed, although in modern literature these two are conventionally discussed after the correlated events of the ‘Illusion of the Twins’ and the ‘Illusion of the Gods’ Descent’, there is no certainty as to when the ‘Gift’ or the ‘Taming’ occurred between the post-enlightenment phase and the period immediately prior to the death of the Buddha (the Parinirvāṇa).

Vaiśali

[After observing an elephant attend the Buddha by bringing water and fruits, a monkey said to himself:] ‘I’ll do something too.’ One day as he was running about, he happened to see some stick-honey free from flies. He broke the stick off, took the honey-comb, stick and all, broke off a plantain-leaf, placed the honey on the leaf, and offered it to the Teacher. The Teacher took it. The monkey watched to see whether or not he would eat it. He observed that the Teacher, after taking the honey, sat down without eating. ‘What can be the matter?’ thought he. He took hold of the stick by the tip, turned it over, carefully examining it as he did so, whereupon he discovered some insect’s eggs. Having removed these gently, he again gave the honey to the Teacher.

The Teacher ate it.

The monkey was so delighted [because the Buddha had accepted his offering] that he leaped from one branch to another and danced about in great glee. But the branches he grasped and the branches he stepped on broke off. Down he fell on the stump of a tree and was impaled. So he died. And solely because of his faith in the Teacher he was reborn in the World of the Thirty-three (Trāyastrimśa) in a golden mansion thirty leagues in measure, with a retinue of a thousand celestial nymphs [apsarās].

(Burlingame, *Buddhist Legends* [Dhammapada Āṭṭhakaṭṭhā], Part 1, p. 180.)

With the exception of Hanuman in the Rāmāyana narrative, monkeys in Indian literature are generally mischievous, naughty creatures that are surely condemned to a still lower life in their next incarnations. Yet in this and several other versions of the story, the monkey derives the immediate benefit of rebirth in the Trāyastrimśa because of his gift to the Buddha. The ‘benefits of faith’ type of story is very commonplace in Buddhist literature. In the Pāli canon, there are two works, the Vimānavatthu (*The Stories of the Mansions* [that one will be reborn to in paradise because of one’s good actions]) and the Petavatthu (*The Stories of the Hungry Ghosts* [who have been reborn in a lower birth as a result of bad actions]), that set out in detail the benefits of being generous to the Buddhist community and to the Buddha in particular.

The narrative of the monkey’s gift is not closely tied to Vaiśali in surviving literature. However, the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (in India 629-45) relates that the place of the offering was marked by a stūpa just to the south of the so-called Monkey Tank at Vaiśali. While a large depression at Vaiśali is believed to be the Monkey Tank, no remains of the stūpa commemorating the Gift of the Monkey

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*Part I (Orientation, November 1985, pp. 46-61) discusses Asoka’s archetypal pilgrimage, Lumbini and Kapilavastu, and Bodhgaya and its environs; Part II (February 1986, pp. 28-43), the Śrīpatana Mrgadāva (Vārānasī and Sarnāth); and Part III (March 1986, pp. 32-46), Śrīvastī and the Jetavana Monastery, and Sākāya. Part V will include a discussion of the Buddha’s death at Kuśinagara, the division of the relics and the eight mahāstūpas, Asoka’s division of the relics, and notes on recent archaeological discoveries concerning the location of Kapilavastu, and the inscription of the Piprahwa Reliquary.*
(Fig. 1) Gift of the Monkey
Śāñci, Stūpa I, north torana, west pillar, east face, c. BC 25-25 AD

(Fig. 2) Worship at the Vaiśali mahāstūpa
Śāñci, Stūpa I, north torana, west pillar, east face, c. BC 25-25 AD

(Fig. 3) Worship at the Ambāpalivana pīṭha
Śāñci, Stūpa I, north torana, west pillar, east face, c. BC 25-25 AD
have been found at this time.

Although little known in literature, the Gift of the Monkey, or at least the pitha where the event took place, is well represented in art and examples survive from as early as the Sāñci torana (c. BC 25-25 AD; Fig. 1). In the Sāñci example, which may be a re-enactment of the event at the site before a group of pilgrims, a monkey is shown before the pitha where the Buddha would have been seated offering a bowl; behind him another monkey (or perhaps the same monkey in a repeated action) makes a gesture of offering with his right hand. Devotees kneel in front of the pitha while other pilgrims circumambulate and bring offerings. The subject does not appear among the sculptural remains at the earlier sites of Bhārhat and Bodhgaya. However, it cannot be concluded that the Gift of the Monkey narrative and pitha did not exist at the time those monuments were created, since more than half of each of those railings is missing and there is no means to reconstruct the lacking scenes.

The Sāñci scene is especially interesting for it is placed vertically, on the eastern face of the west pillar of the north torana, between two other depictions of events that also took place at
Vaiśali. The upper scene shows worship at a stūpa (Fig. 2) while the lower scene depicts worship at a pīthā under a mango tree (Fig. 3). Since Vaiśali was famous for the Ambapālivana, a mango grove where Śākyamuni frequently taught, the pīthā of the Gift of the Monkey and one of the eight mahāstūpas, one of the original eight stūpas to contain the portion of the relics of Śākyamuni given to the Licchavis (the rulers of Vaiśali), the whole face of the pillar would seem to be a depiction of the Vaiśali pīthas (see note in Part V). As no other site has the same combination of pīthas, the logical solution, offered here for the first time, is that the pillar represents the Vaiśali pīthas (see also the following section on Rājagṛha).

Later representations of the ‘Gift’ differ from the textual description of the event, for the monkey is usually shown offering the honey in a bowl, not a leaf, and dying by diving head-first into a well, as seen in a late fifth-century representation from Sārnāth (Fig. 4). Here, the monkey offers the bowl of honey to the Buddha at the left of the scene, while to the right he is seen falling, or as popularly interpreted, committing suicide, by diving down a well. At the top right is the monkey-turned-deva rising towards the Trāyastrīṃśa heaven. The relatively poor condition makes the scene somewhat difficult to read but the outline of the monkey offering the bowl may be seen quite well on the left, while the legs and tail sticking up out of the well would almost seem to support the knees of the deva flying off to Trāyastrīṃśa at the right. Interestingly, a much later scene, dated to the fourth year of Govindapāla (1165), painted in a manuscript of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra (Fig. 5) seems to combine elements from the two previous compositions. At the far right, a representation of the monkey makes a rather wild gesture of devotion like that of the secondary representation of the monkey in the Śāñci relief. Next, the monkey offers the bowl to the Buddha and then is seen, legs only, going down the well. The scene is finished by the presence of the newly elevated deva floating off to the
Trāyastriṁśa at the top right. It would seem that the feature of the well became part of the story by no later than the fifth century and continued to the end of Buddhist practice in India. Regardless of the changes in composition and details of the story, the scene always represents the potential of all beings to attain higher gatīs (levels of rebirth) by faith and offerings to the community of monks. Having made his sincere offering and having had it accepted by the Buddha, the monkey was assured of higher rebirth.

Vaiśāli was a famous city in Sākyamuni’s time and, together with Rājagṛha and Śrāvasti, is considered to be one of the locations in which Sākyamuni offered many important teachings. Although many more teachings are recorded as having been offered at Śrāvasti and at Rājagṛha than at Vaiśāli, the fact that the Vimalakīrtinirdesā-sūtra was taught at Vaiśāli makes it one of the most important loci of Mahāyāna Buddhism from the East Asian viewpoint. The stūpa commemorating the place of the teaching of this sūtra as reported by Xuanzang is no longer known (he indicated that it was five or six li [one or two kilometres] to the northeast of the city).

Also reported by Xuanzang, the column and stūpa attributed to Asoka still exist in remarkably good condition. Although much reduced in apparent height by the build-up of alluvial mud from nearly annual flooding of the area, the column (Fig. 6) is one of but two Mauryan pillars that are still standing with their capitals intact. The lion (Fig. 7) is very similar in style to the lions at Sārnāth (see Part II).

The greatest archaeological desideratum at Vaiśāli is the location of the monastery known as Ambapālīvāna. Unfortunately, Faxian’s and Xuanzang’s reports are completely contradictory regarding where the famous grove of the courtesan Ambapālī (also Āmrapālī and Āmrapālikā) was. In both the Mahāvagga (VI:29-30) and the Mahāparinibbāna-sutta (Sacred Books of the East, XI, pp. 30-34), it is related how the courtesan Ambapālī went out with her chariots to greet the Buddha, who was on his way to Vaiśāli, and she invited him and his community of monks to her guests at a meal the following day. Indeed, she had bested the young nobles of Vaiśāli by inviting and receiving acceptance from the Buddha before they could do so. After she had received the Buddha and his followers and had a discourse with the Buddha about the Dharma, she offered him her park of mango trees to use as a retreat. Her gift was accepted and the park became the primary retreat for Buddhists in early Vaiśāli. The location and full archaeological investigation of this important site should offer much further data about the time of the Buddha and his immediate successors.

Recently excavated at Vaiśāli, one of the four known mahaśūpas is now little but a protected mound of low walls and foundations (Fig. 8). The Licchavis received a portion of the relics after the cremation of Sakya muni and raised a very small mound of clay over it. This was later enlarged by Asoka and then again during the Kuśāna period. Relative to the Asokan pillar, its location exactly corresponds to the description given by Xuanzang. (For the mahaśūpas, see the Distribution of
the Relics’ section, Part V).

Vaiśali is a site that is being actively investigated at this time. Upon arriving there, the visitor is encouraged to go directly to the Archaeological Survey of India’s site museum both to see the excavated materials and to learn of any new work that may have been done in the recent past. Access to Vaiśali is now very easy since the ‘Seven Mile Bridge’ has been built over the Ganges River from Patna north. The bridge is the gateway to all travel in northern Bihar and Vaiśali is now an easy day’s excursion from Patna, where accommodation is convenient.

Rājagṛha

[After a series of attempts on Sākyamuni’s life, his cousin Devadatta still plots to murder him.] Now at that time there was a fierce elephant in Rājagṛha, [Pāli for Rājagṛha] a man-slayer, called Nālāgiri. [Devadatta plots with the mahouts to have the elephant released in the Buddha’s path along the carriage-road.]

Then the Lord, having dressed for the morning, taking his bowl and robe, entered Rājagṛha for alms food together with several monks.

Then the Lord went along that carriage-road. Then those mahouts saw the Lord coming along that carriage-road; seeing him, having let loose the elephant Nālāgiri, they brought him down to that carriage-road. The elephant Nālāgiri saw the Lord coming from afar; seeing him, having lifted up his trunk, he rushed toward the Lord, his ears and tail erect. Those monks saw the elephant Nālāgiri coming in the distance; seeing him they spoke thus to the Lord:

‘Lord, this elephant Nālāgiri, coming along this carriage-road, is a fierce man-slayer; Lord, let us turn back...’

‘Wait monks, do not be afraid; this is impossible, monks, it cannot come to pass that anyone should deprive a Truth-finder of life by aggression; monks, Truth-finders attain nibbāna [nirvāna] not because of an attack...

Thus the Lord suffused the elephant Nālāgiri with loving-kindness of mind. Then the elephant Nālāgiri...put down his trunk, approached the Lord...[and] stood in front of the Lord. Then the Lord, stroking the elephant Nālāgiri’s forehead with his right hand...

[Thus was Nālāgiri tamed.]

(Cullavagga, VII, 3.9-12, I.B. Horner trans.)

The seemingly simple story of the Buddha Sākyamuni subduing an elephant let loose in his path can actually be read at several levels. First, it shows the power of the Buddha to overcome evil and his ability to set the intermediaries of evil-doers on the right path. (The elephant is permanently tamed by his encounter with the Buddha.) It may also be seen as another episode in the ongoing effort of the jealous and inherently evil Devadatta (literally, ‘Dummy of the Gods’) to do harm to Sākyamuni. Throughout early Buddhist literature, Devadatta is portrayed as a cousin of Sākyamuni and a competitor for the establishment of a religious community. Devadatta makes several attempts on Sākyamuni’s life, so that this event could be interpreted as proof of the inability of evil forces to harm the Buddha. Yet another more profound interpretation is contained in the narrative itself — the success of overcoming the wild self-nature that prevents one from attaining buddhahood. As Sākyamuni places his hand on the forehead of the elephant, he recites these verses:

‘Do not elephant, strike the elephant (among men), for painful elephant, is the striking of the elephant (among men). For there is no good bourn [birth], elephant, for a slayer of the elephant (among men) when he is hence beyond [has died].

Be not proud, be not wanton, for the wanton reach not a good bourn [birth]; Only that should you do by which you will reach a good bourn [birth].’

(loc. cit.)

By calling Sākyamuni an elephant, the poem directly equates the two and by doing so informs us that it is the raging beast (the wild elephant) within us that must be quelled. This metaphor is well known throughout Asian Buddhism, although in China and Japan the beast is the water buffallo, and in Tibet it is either the elephant or the monkey that represents the untrained mind of the practitioner.

Representations of the ‘Taming’ scene are not found in the earliest Buddhist carvings at Bodhagāra, Bhārhat or Śāriṇī, yet the scene is known in early sculpture in a fully developed form in a relief (Fig. 9) from second-century Amaravati in the Kṛṣṇa River region. This visually dynamic scene illustrates the elephant twice, first using his trunk to swing some unfortunate person by one leg and the second time kneeling before the Buddha. In the cityscape, other figures flee or grab each other in terror while onlookers observe the scene from balconies and windows. The full and richly detailed narrative style of the Amaravati idiom conforms in detail to the full narrative in the Cullavagga, which describes the buildings and onlookers in some detail.

A later representation of the scene (Fig. 10) occurs in the same fifth-century Sānkhāra stūpa discussed above in relation to the ‘Gift of the Monkey’. This scene shows an altogether different composition but one which remains essentially stable for the next six or seven centuries (see Figs. 11 and 12). On the left, we see the kneeling elephant, in the centre, the Buddha with his right arm outstretched and, to the right, a figure of a monkey (usually said to be Ānanda, who figures prominently in the narrative) carrying a mendicant’s staff with a sistrum at the top (Sanskrit khakkara). The stūpa above the elephant may indicate that there was a stūpa somewhere in old Rājagṛha that commemorated the location of the event. Unfortunately, although there are traces of many stūpas in the area, we are unable to determine which one it might be. It is also possible that the stūpa symbolizes the Dharma by which Sākyamuni subdued the elephant.

A rare single image of the taming of the Nālāgiri (Fig. 11) from ancient Uddāṇāpura (modern Bihār Sharif in Bihar state), along with a surviving companion piece, was probably part of a set of the eight life scenes set into the sides of a stūpa. Moreover, the image is dated by inscription in the second or third year of Śīkapāla, which places it very close to the middle of the ninth century. In the sculpture, the Buddha stands in a torana-like trefoil arch while a tiny, almost puppy-like elephant
kneels in obeisance before him. A monk with a khakkara stands to the viewer's right, and a donor (no doubt the donor Cūda mentioned in the inscriptions) kneels just below the elephant in perpetual devotion to the Buddha. Examined closely, it will be seen that there are five lions emerging from the outstretched hand of the Buddha projecting towards the submissive elephant. These lions undoubtedly represent the Buddhist Dharma with which the Buddha tamed both the real and metaphoric Nālāgiri. (It should be noted that in the ninth to the twelfth century, the norm is five lions but one lion and no lions are also known.)

An extremely revealing painted representation in the 1165 manuscript of the Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā-sūtra (Fig. 12) cited above shows another puppy-like elephant but one that is portrayed in a kind of empirical 'multiple exposure'. He is shown both with his trunk raised as if in striking position and in the kneeling position simultaneously. The scene is set in a landscape, indicated by a palm tree with a bird in it, and the Buddha is accompanied by two monks.

Although early images of the Taming of Nālāgiri are lacking at Bodhgaya, Bahrut and Sāncī, there is a pillar face illustrating three of the other major pithas of Rājagrha on the north torana at Sāncī comparable to the Vaiśāli cluster of scenes. The west face of the eastern pillar of the north torana (the face opposite the Vaiśāli set), has at the top worshippers in front of a cave set in a rocky landscape (Fig. 13). Below that is a king setting out in a chariot to see the Buddha (Fig. 14), and below that is a pitha in a bamboo grove (Fig. 15). Read from top to bottom, the reliefs show the Grdhraukāṭa ('Vulture Peak') caves, a re-enactment of the visit of King Bimbisāra to the Buddha and the pitha at the Karāṇḍa Venuvana ('Bamboo Grove of Baskets'), all at Rājagrha. Thus, entering the gateway from the north, one passes between the pithas of Vaiśāli and Rājagrha. In an aside, it must be noted that the other toranas of Sāncī should probably be re-evaluated iconographically to determine if the pattern of showing the two pilgrimage sites is repeated. If so, then a major revision of the iconography of the toranas is in order.

As at Vaiśāli and the Jetavana at Śrāvasti, Sākyamuni Buddha spent many seasons at the Magadhan city of Rājagrha. For this writer, it is Rājagrha and specifically the Grdhraukāṭa much more than any of the other holy sites of Buddhism that epitomize the presence of the Buddha. The Grdhraukāṭa (Fig. 16) is the most important of the several teaching pithas at Rājagrha, and is a small spur on the southern slope of Chathā Hill, the most northeasterly of a ring of five hills around the ancient city. It is apparently so named because of an outcrop of rock that resembles the
open beak of a vulture (Fig. 17). However, Faxian tells another version of the naming of the peak:

...Thirty paces to the north-west there is another [cave], where Ananda was sitting in meditation, when the deva Mara Piṣūna [the Mara of lust] having assumed the form of a large vulture, took his place in front of the cavern, and frightened the disciple. Then Buddha, by his mysterious, supernatural power, made a cleft in the rock, introduced his hand, and stroked Ananda’s shoulder, so that his fear immediately passed away. The footprints of the bird and the cleft for (Buddha’s) hand are still there, and hence comes the name of ‘The Hill of the Vulture Cavern’. (James Legge, trans., *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms…*, p. 83)

There is a cleft in the rocks from the top of the peak down to what is generally believed to be the cave in which Ananda stayed. However, there are ancient stairs, now mostly lost, in the cleft and it is hard to determine the age of the stairs or the relationship of the cleft to any place that Sākyamuni might have sat because the top of the peak is completely covered with later (mostly Gupta period, 320-500) construction.

(Fig. 11) Taming of Nālāgiri, Uddānapura (Bihār Sharif), Bihar state, mid 9th century, Indian Museum, Calcutta

(Fig. 12) Taming of Nālāgiri, from an Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prājñāpāramitā-sūtra manuscript, dated 1165, Bharat Kāll Bhavan, Vārānasi
(Fig. 13) Worship at the Grdhrrakūṭa pīṭha
Sāñci, Stūpa I, north torana, east pillar, west face, c. BC 25-25 AD

(Fig. 14) Re-enactment of King Bimbisāra
setting out to visit the Buddha
Sāñci, Stūpa I, north torana, east pillar, west face, c. BC 25-25 AD

(Fig. 15) Worship at Veṇuvana
Sāñci, Stūpa I, north torana, east pillar, west face, c. BC 25-25 AD
Whatever the case of the naming of the peak, Sākyamuni and his disciples dwelled in natural caves near the summit of the peak (Fig. 18) and it is there that many teachings are believed to have been promulgated. In both Western and East Asian scholarship, the Grdhṛakūṭa is most often cited as the place of the preaching of the Mahāyāna sūtras, in spite of the fact that many important Theravāda tradition sūtras were taught there as well (e.g., the story of Vassakāra in the Anguttara-nikāya) and that many Mahāyāna tradition sūtras were taught at other locations. This modern ‘generic’ attribution of Mahāyāna Buddhist teachings to Grdhṛakūṭa is probably because the Lotus Sūtra (Saddharmapundarīka-sūtra) was taught there. In contrast to this view, which may be traced from Xuanzang’s time since he mentions this sūtra, Faxian notes the emotion he felt when he visited the site of the teaching of Sūraṅgana-Samādhi-sūtra:

In the New City Fā-hien [Faxian] bought incense (sticks), flowers, oil and lamps, and hired two bhikshus, long resident (at the place), to carry them (to the peak). When he himself got to it, he made his offerings with the flowers and incense, and lighted the lamps when darkness began to come on. He felt melancholy, but restrained his tears and said, ‘Here Buddha delivered the Sūraṅgana (Sūtra). I, Fā-hien, was born when I could not meet with Buddha; and now I only see the footprints which he has left, and the place where he lived, and nothing more.’ With this, in front of the rock cavern, he chanted the Sūraṅgana Sūtra, remained there over the night, and then returned towards the New City. (ibid., pp. 83-8)

The point remains that the sūtras mentioned by each of the two Chinese pilgrims are both advanced Mahāyāna texts, apparently accounting to some extent for the only partially correct modern view of the site as the seat of Mahāyāna teachings. Xuanzang mentions that the Buddha taught the ‘excellent law in its developed form’ (i.e. Mahāyāna) here, but Beal, reflecting the general cynicism of his time
regarding the earliness of the Mahāyāna Vaipulya class of sūtras notes, 'It is barely possible that the Buddha did in his later years declare a developed (mystical) form of his doctrine, and perhaps this mountain was the scene of his teaching; but the greater portion of the sūtras claiming the authority of his utterance here are fabulous' (Buddhist Records of the Western World, vol. 2, 1906, p. 153). There is a recent trend among some modern scholars, this author included, who see convincing evidence that many 'core' Mahāyāna ideals did indeed have an early origin and that they developed in a parallel manner to the Theravāda tradition. Mahāyāna Buddhism too closely resembles pre-Sākyamuni Upaniṣadic thinking and methodologies and emerges into the light of epigraphic and literary history too fully developed in the first century BC to have been an invention of the late second or first century BC. The chronological sequence and time of development problems are even worse regarding the late first- or early second-century AD 'emergence' of Mahāyāna as a few scholars have suggested. Accordingly, both the modern scholar and the modern practitioner may have more 'faith' in the preaching of, at least, the 'core' of Mahāyāna ideals by Sākyamuni. It is becoming apparent that the attribution of 'lateness' to Mahāyāna texts resulted from the phenomenon encountered in the very early Mahāyāna tradition of regarding one's own teacher as a buddha. This would have allowed the continual 'expansion' of the Mahāyāna literature during the tenure of each generation of teachers and would have given rise to various 'schools' of Mahāyāna texts. Essentially, all teachings, whether those of Sākyamuni or of subsequent teachers, were to be seen as the actual teachings of a buddha. This would have naturally led to confusion over distinctions as to sources and the sequence of exegetical statements integrated into the body of a text.
One approaches the Grdhra-kūṭa from the southwest of the hill along a pathway known as Bimbisāra's road (Fig. 19). Although the surface of the road is largely a modern restoration for the convenience of pilgrims to the site, its foundations are legitimate early stone work and the road would appear to date from the time of Sākyamuni Buddha. If that is the case, the road at Rājagrha/Grdhra-kūṭa is the one surviving archaeological remain in India that probably relates directly to Sākyamuni's ministry. It is best described by Xuanzang:

Bimbisāra-rāja, for the purpose of hearing the law, raised a number of men to accompany him from the foot of the mountain to its summit. They levelled the valleys and spanned the precipices, and with the stones made a staircase about ten paces wide and 5 or 6 li long. In the middle of the road there are two stūpas, one called 'Dismounting from the chariot,' because the King, when he got there, went forward on foot. The other is called 'Sending back the
crowd' because the king, separating the common folk, would not allow them to proceed with him. (Beal, op. cit., p. 153)

The long walk up the hill must be taken slowly especially if the day is hot (one should be sure to carry water). There is a tempting chairlift up to Chaithā Hill for those who might wish to take it, but it does not go to the Grdharkūṭa directly (there is still a long walk from Chaithā Hill to Grdharkūṭa and the lift is often shut down for repairs anyway). However, the history of the place comes far more alive by walking the ancient road and through the trails of the hills than by riding the chairlift to the modern temple and stūpa overlooking Grdharkūṭa from Chaithā Hill.

As one passes the 'Dismounting the Chariot' stūpa and turns off to the right fork in the trail to the Grdharkūṭa spur, there is a real sense of timelessness and anticipation of things past. The road is the one used in the time of the Buddha, the rocks were there when he lived, and even the direct descendants of the fauna from his time dart about on the hill. For much of the way, there is nothing to break the feeling that one could be approaching the potentially still active residing place of Sākyamuni Buddha. Even as one approaches the summit, passes the caves known as the 'Two Houses' and circles to the right around the peak itself, passing yet another cave where it is possible the Buddha himself sat in meditation (Fig. 20), there is no break in the mood of travelling in the past.

Only the garish pink stair railing installed by the Archaeological Survey of India (seen in part in Fig. 17) shatters the mood as one makes the final ascent to the platform at the top of Grdharkūṭa. There, at the summit, are two small temple basements of Gupta period bricks—remnants of history’s tribute to the great teacher who once sat there. At the westernmost of these, the visitor may offer his flower garlands at the tiny brick altar, just as Xuanzang once did before a life-size image of the preaching Buddha, and partake of his own meditations (Fig. 21).

Descending from the Grdharkūṭa, and returning to the fork in the trail, one should visit the modern Japanese stūpas on Chaithā Hill. (While walking the visitor must be cautious not to be touted by a less-than-energetic guide into taking a ‘short cut’ to the new stūpa, thus omitting the Grdharkūṭa which, after all, is the most important location in the area.) The stūpa is maintained by a group of Japanese Buddhists who subsidize monks and nuns to live there and to make daily offerings at the site of the teachings. The chants and drums of the monks and nuns may often be heard. In one way, it is appropriate that it is the followers from a nation that constitutes one of the traditional ‘furthest reaches’ of the Buddha’s Dharma who return to the centre, symbolically encompassing all Buddhist lands in between in their offering. Designed along traditional lines, indeed copying freely from Stūpa I at Śâri, the brilliant white marble anda (dome) of the stūpa demonstrates, in a general way, how many of the great stūpas of the past looked (Fig. 22). Yet when one approaches the stūpa to circumambulate it, the classical Japanese style captured in the modern images is self evident (Fig. 23). Here, on a now desolate peak in central Bihar overlooking the traditional location of the promulgation of many major sūtras is a profound and very moving expression of the continuation of the faith.

Descending to the floor of the valley and following a reputable guide or using the Archaeological Survey of India’s guidebook, Rājgrī, one may find the way to the Jivakāmravana, the monastery given by King Bimbisāra to the Buddha, to a series of low foundations of the old city amid which may be found the pit known as Bimbisāra’s Jail where the king was imprisoned by his usurper son, Ajāṭhasatru. Outside the north side entrance to the valley is the ‘New City’ of Rājagṛha built by Ajāṭhasatru. There one may find the hot springs in which Ānanda bathed, and, immediately adjacent to them, the Venuvana or Bamboo Grove where many sūtras were expounded by the Buddha.

Despite bad beginnings and having been a supporter of the Buddha’s cousin Devadatta, Ajāṭhasatru was converted by the Buddha and, in the later life of Sākyamuni, one of his staunchest supporters. After the Buddha’s death at Kuśinagara, the Magadhans under Ajāṭhasatru received a portion of the Buddha’s relics and built a stūpa to the immediate west of the ‘new’ city. Although it is now in ruins (Fig. 24) and seems never to have had early stone railings like those at Bhārhat and Śâri, it is one of the presumably accurately identified Eight Great Stūpas (Aṣṭamaṁśāstūpa) of the Buddha.

Until very recently, the Rājgrī (ancient Rājagṛha) area has welcomed only the most intrepid. However, with the advent of a modern hotel in the immediate area, there is not only easy access but considerable comfort as well. The Rājgrī area (and adjacent Bodhgaya) are among the most important and holiest sites of Buddhism and no one visiting Bihar should omit them.

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