

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA

A Service by Fritz Hudson

Presented January 29, 2006

Chalice Lighting

The Buddha sends forth a single ray

And I with all the assembly see that these domains are extremely wonderful.

Rare are the divine powers and wisdom of the buddhas;

Sending forth a single pure ray, they illumine innumerable domains.

We beholding this attain that which has never been before.

Lotus Sutra

Opening Song: #193 "Our Faith Is but a Single Gem"

Introduction: "Pathway Pictures" (words & pictures)

From many lips in every age, the truth eternal is proclaimed

by Western saint and Eastern sage, and all the good, however named. ("Our Faith – " verse 3)

Every year, at this time, we look again to the opposite side of our globe, to the eastern hemisphere and eastern sages for our teachings. Last year, you granted me the opportunity to travel that half-way around our world, to walk in the footsteps of two of those sages, one ancient, one modern. The modern path, Mahatma Gandhi's, I'll show you next week. Today I want to show you what I found on the path trod almost 2,500 years ago by Siddhartha Gautama, the one who became, the awakened one, the Buddha. (* = picture projected)

* This map of the northern Indian subcontinent shows the major sites of the Buddha's life. His birthplace, Lumbini, is here at the foot of the Himalaya mountains, in present day Nepal. The site of his enlightenment, Bodh Gaya is here, in India, south of the Ganges River. The site of his first sermon is Sarnath, just outside the ancient city of Varanasi, on the Ganges, here. The site of many of his most remembered teachings is the city of Rajgir here to the east. And the site of his death, the tiny village of Kushinigar, is on the way back north, here.

* We were five on this pilgrimage: two of us Unitarians, four of us Buddhists. (That's Unitarian math, you understand.) We started out by plane. We soon switched to train, and then to jeep, and often bicycle rickshaw. But much of our trip was made as the Buddha himself traveled, on foot.

Lumbini, where Siddhartha was born, was simply a rest stop on the road between his father's and his mother's homes, it is said.

* Today a Temple covers the site.

* And within that temple, the archeologist Basanta Bidari here describes the excavation which has peeled away the layers of what centuries of pilgrims have added to that simple beginning.

* Once they discovered the first stone laid to mark the spot of his birth, they placed this case over it.

* Behind the temple, for many years, a constructed pool has replicated the pond where Maha Deva, Siddhartha's mother, is said to have washed after she had given birth. We read the Buddha's words by its side.

* Later though, a few hundred yards to the east, I found this stream running through the woods – perhaps an even more likely recollection of the first world to which the Buddha awakened.

I hope some of you recall the story Kim told on this Sunday two years ago of Siddhartha's princely childhood in his father's house, and his decision at the age of 30 to leave that comfort to find an answer to the suffering of others' old age, disease and death. Indian and Nepalese archaeologists quarrel now over who might have found the ruins of that ancient city. No one has found it for certain. Of course there no way to trace Siddhartha's path for the six years he sought wisdom in remote forests and caves. * The last of those caves, however, is believed to be in the bluffs overlooking a river-bed about 250 miles to the south of Lumbini.

It shows as a white spot on the hillside here

* We climbed that hillside to what is now a shrine.

* And inside we found a gold statue of Siddhartha, ribs showing the effect of trying to understand the cure to life's suffering by denying himself its pleasures.

The legend is that Siddhartha finally left this cave to seek the river bank at the base of the hillside.

* At this time of year, the water lies just below its sandy bottom, like parts of our own Platte River.

At the river side, a young woman, Sujata, met Siddhartha and offered him some rice milk. And Siddhartha, impressed by her compassion, decided he might change his way of seeking the answer to life's suffering.

* A shrine to Sujata now marks this spot.

* And inside, a statue depicts her kindness to the starving Siddhartha.

Filled with Sujata's rice-milk and kindness,

* Siddhartha then crossed the river, the Nerañjara, and sought a tree to sit beneath and meditate.

* The site of his sitting, which led to his enlightenment, is now marked by a large temple, the Mahabodhi temple.

* And we were there at the time of a large annual prayer gathering on its grounds.

* At the center of the temple is a large gold statue of the Buddha.

* But the center of the pilgrim's attention is the large Bo, or popil tree, growing right alongside the temple's foundations.

Early in the morning, at dawn when we went, we could meditate right at the Bo tree's roots. The hard marble floor made a prayer cushion, our zafu, necessary. It was cold, but this wool hat I purchased kept me quite warm.

* By 8:00am, however, other pilgrims began filling the concourse

* And spilling over onto the grounds.

- At 8:30am, a grand procession brought three Tibetan rinpoches to set on thrones set just to west of the tree, to lead what by then were several thousands of monks in prayer.

* Not far from this temple, but outside the city, I found this other popil tree which might better recall what drew Siddhartha there.

Siddhartha, now the enlightened Buddha, left his popil tree determined to teach what he'd learned – his four noble truths and his eight-fold path to enlightenment. He traveled to the northwest, about 150 miles, to what is now the oldest continuously inhabited city in the world.

* Varanasi, or Benares is on the Ganges River.

There the Buddha found people gathered in a park, called Deer Park, outside the city, near a place now called Sarnath, and he told them of his discoveries.

* The park is now the ruin of an ancient Buddhist university. We sat amidst its fallen walls and read his first sermon.

* There are many temples nearby.

* There is also a deer preserve, to remind of us of what the Buddha found there.

From the deer park, the Buddha set out for nearly 40 years of traveling and teaching throughout northern India. One of his most frequent stopping places was the ancient city of Rajgir, about 200 miles to the west of Sarnath.

* Now as you enter, you can see the ancient city walls.

* And you can see the ruins of ancient monasteries established to study his teachings.

* The site of one of his most well-known sermons, the heart sutra, is said to be a promontory known as Vulture's peak, to which we found our way.

* There we stood beneath the Buddha's pulpit.

* And we meditated on the overlook.

From time to time during his life, Siddhartha's travels took him back to his family home in the north. Nearing 80 years old, he resolved to make that trip again. On the way, he stopped about half way between Rajgir and his family home, in the village of Kushinigar.

* It's still a small village.

* There he took a meal. (produce market stall)

And in that meal was some spoiled pork. He became so ill that, in the weakness of his age, he died.

* The site of his death is now temple, with a large park around it.

* And inside that temple is a statue of Buddha, reclining and covered in silk.

* We meditated by his head in the morning.

* Then in the afternoon, we trekked out to the large ceremonial mound, or *stupa*, where his body was burned to ash.

* And we performed *cara*, or ritual walking, around the stupa, around and around.

These are the shoes I wore on this path, bought brand new just before I left. Each time I wear them now, I am reminded of the ground which broke them in, and the man whose steps on that same ground brought lessons and examples still worthy of our following.

* (Buddha statue)

Sermon: "In the Footsteps of the Buddha"

January 29, a year ago, was a Saturday. I was in Kathmandu, Nepal, my journal reminds me. And I then, like you today, was a member of a religious congregation. Early that morning our pilgrim group traveled by taxi cab from our Hotel Varga on the west side across the city to the famous Bodi stupa on the east side. After we had performed *cara* (circumambulation) around the stupa, we headed up a narrow street behind the shrine and entered the confines of the Ka-Nying Shedrup Ling Buddhist Monastery. We made our way upstairs in the main building to the chambers of Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche, abbot of the monastery. He was receiving visitors, conducting a kind of serial pastoral counseling, or a sharing of (and responding to) joys and sorrows. We were a joy, the return of old friends. Robert and Diannah, our group leaders, had been married by the Rinpoche many years ago. Their leadership of this pilgrimage brought them back to his chambers every year. The Rinpoche spoke with each of us, asking after the spiritual quality of our pilgrimage, and blessing for each of us a prayer shawl as a memento of our meeting. This is mine. And then, at 10:45am, which would have been 10:45pm I think here, we descended the stairs to join the congregation - about this size, on prayer mats in the monastery's main auditorium - for the Rinpoche's weekly teaching discourse. It lasted until 1:15pm - two and a half hours. I won't ask for your attention nearly that long - I hope. Actually, you've already given my pictures the most important attention I'll ask for today. My words now will be but introduction to conversations I hope those pictures have already stimulated and which I hope we'll deepen in days yet ahead - teasers you might even say.

When I was still in Kushinigar, the Buddha's death site, three days before, I awoke into pitch blackness at 4:30am one morning. I'd had a disturbing dream. In that dream I was struggling to prepare for this morning, I guess, struggling to prepare my words to communicate my experience in the Buddha's footsteps to you from this pulpit. It all had to be translated from Tibetan, I realized, and that was slow and arduous work. (I can't speak, or read, a word of Tibetan.) It was already Sunday morning, and I hadn't gotten it down yet. But I couldn't even get to the pulpit, this pulpit, because I had to perform a marital recommitment ceremony in my office before our service began. I awoke in a sweat. And I wrote in my journal: "Integrating my India experience with my Lincoln life has already begun." One year later it's still hard work and I still do not feel prepared, fully.

I've spoken with you of my intellectual and experiential encounters with the Buddha in our country before. *Waking the Buddha*, my words on this Sunday two years ago, are in our sermon rack out in Fireplace Room. They still apply. I won't repeat them, today. Beyond those words, if you want to recall my impressions when I first returned from my sabbatical time last June, my sermon *The Boon* is still out there as well. Today I want to take my next steps on this pathway by sharing with you two things. First, I'll let you in on a stream of thought that grew in my experience while on the path in north India a year ago. Second, then, I will share with you an experience more recent, here in Lincoln, which was shaped, profoundly and quite unexpectedly, by my experience back then and there.

"The pilgrim feels a – call, and is changed by the journey," Philip Cousineau writes in *The Art of Pilgrimage*. And "the deepest of these changes is the need to share the gold, the wisdom, the boon of the journey." To introduce *Waking the Buddha*, my sermon two years ago, Kim told the story of Siddhartha's childhood in, and departure from, his father's castle near Lumbini, in the city of Kapilivasthu. That telling came from this book: *From Long Ago and Many Lands: Stories for Children Told Anew*. It was published by Beacon Press in 1948, the year before my birth. It was written by Sophia Lyons Fahs, Director of the then American Unitarian Association's Department of Education, and initiator still of our current approach to guiding our children's spiritual growth and learning. For 57 years that story has been our invitation to join the Buddha's path. Sophia called it "Gautama Finds Out for Himself." It is probably what started me down my path to India as a young minister. When I left you for India, last December - the realization of a trip more than 10 years in the planning – my deepest longing was undoubtedly to see some remnant of Kapilivasthu's city gate, the symbol of the Buddha's decision to quit the comfortable and serve the afflicted.

I knew, when I left, that it wasn't on the pilgrimage's itinerary. Still I had read a book that had described the city's site in Northern India. And with our group being so small, just five, I had hoped that I could convince Robert, our leader, to reschedule our time to take us there, or that I could leave the group at Lumbini for a day, and find my own way there. Only once I got to talk with Robert face-to-face and to experience the challenge of simple survival, let alone travel, in India - only slowly over many days - did I realize how far beyond me this possibility actually lay.

The book I'd read, it turned out, made just the Indian case for their discovery of Kapilivasthu. To get to that site from Lumbini, though only 20 miles as the crow flies, would take recrossing the border with Nepal (which took 3 hours by itself) and then traveling 100 miles by jeep road (at 15 miles an hour) to reach. Dr. Bidari, the Nepalese excavator of Lumbini, I learned, had just published his own book making an extensive case for an alternate site for Kapilivasthu, in Nepal. The site too was just 20 miles from Lumbini, but it was behind the lines of the Maoist rebel forces that now control much of the Nepali countryside. Dr. Bidari couldn't bring guests there now, and he only went himself when he could get firm assurances from the Maoists for his safety.

As it turned out January 25 was the day before I would have to decide whether (as I surely would have in my Peace Corps days) I would defy all prudence and strike out for one Kapilivasthu or the other. On that day, instead, I wrote in my journal these words: "Letting go of seeing Kapilivasthu may be just part of letting go of the UU frame for seeing the Buddha." What I'd begun to sense by then was that passing through that city's gate to begin his spiritual quest was probably not what Siddhartha saw as his most important life decision, no matter what we teach here. Rather Siddhartha's most important decision, he might well have thought, was accepting Sujata's rice-milk, her compassion. In that decision he turned to following what he called "the middle path" to meaning. I began to ask myself: How might that light shine on the words we've sung for so many years, as the Buddha's parting blessing to his followers – song #184: "Be ye lamps unto yourselves. Be your own confidence; hold to the truth within yourselves as to the only lamp." Bhikku Nanamoli's *Life of the Buddha*, I learned, translates the Buddha's final words to his followers this way: "It is the nature of all things to dissolve. Attain perfection through diligence." I asked myself, "Hadn't the Buddha given up the path of truth seeking even before he undertook asceticism. Was perhaps the path of diligent practice in the midst of impermanence more truly his way?"

When I look carefully at my copy of *From Long Ago and Many Lands*, an original printing, I see its own life path. Its title page has an embossed stamp that reads "Universalist Sunday School Library, Abington, Massachusetts." That, however, is crossed over with a black X. On the opposite page is inscribed, in a careful, straight hand, "Unitarian Universalist Church, Rochester Minnesota." But then, back on the title page, is an ink stamp impression which reads "Unitarian Universalist Society of Iowa City." (Ah, that's where I stole it!) And I, in my travels, have carried it yet beyond there, to Phoenix Arizona, and now here. Yet scrawled above all these places is penciled "2nd Grade. Please Return." I intend to, to every Unitarian second grade I can touch, but my learnings in the Buddha's footprints will now forever change my interpretation of this story's value.

In *The Art of Pilgrimage*, Philip Cousineau also writes "The pilgrim feels a – call, and is changed by the journey. -- The ancient wisdom teachers taught that the ultimate answer – is the boon of increased self-knowledge," (p.216)

Varanasi, that oldest of cities, has a particular place in the heart of all India. It is the place that Indians most want to die. The picture I showed you, taken from our boat on the Ganges, showed the high-rise apartments in which people come to stay when they feel their life ebbing. In the foreground, on the river bank, you might remember seeing the smoke rising from the cremation pyres on the ghats (or piers). They're lit every morning to consume the bodies laid upon them. Within an hour after I took that picture, we were standing on that bank, perhaps 20 feet from a pyre, watching the flames make their miraculous conversion. It takes hours. Jesus, one of my fellow pilgrims, went back later that day to watch two more cremations, all the way to their conclusion - to watch the smoldering ashes finally being pushed down the bank to sink beneath the river's wash. While we stood there, we learned of each family member's role in the ritual, and of the odd honor paid to the wealthy *dalit*, or untouchable, caste families who managed the transformation, from flesh and wood to ash.

The next day, after our visit to the Deer Park at Sarnath, I fell ill at dinner, the victim we surmised of spoiled chicken at our lunch-time stop. I had to lie on my side on the marble floor, until I'd purged myself of all that disagreed with me so violently. I then spent most of that night and the next day none too far from my room and toilet, though mostly out on the rooftop patio overlooking the Ganges ghats. The day after that I felt quite fine as we set out for our trek to Kapilivasthu. But when we entered the temple there, and saw the Buddha statue, reclining at his death, my fellow pilgrims said "He looks just like Fritz did, back on the dining room floor." Had I been 35 years older, the Buddha's 80, rather than

my own 55, I might have known his experience even more closely. As it was my experience was plenty close enough to leave an impression. I was struck to learn then that Canda, the wretched dalit who unsuspectingly gave Siddhartha his last meal (the poisonous pork) is venerated in Buddhist hagiography as highly as is Sujata, who gave him his first meal just before his enlightenment. Each of them, it is said, brought him a challenge he had to surmount to follow his path.

Not until three weeks ago, however, did I begin to understand how deeply this experience had worked within me. As you know, that was when my father lay dying on his bed at the Ambassador Care Center. To me, over those three days, he took on the aspect of Siddhartha - his cover a white cotton sheet, not yellow silk, his body at a quarter turn, not fully on his side. On the third day I sat with him there with my hand on his, when only breath was what we shared of life, I decided I could take one final gift, of a sorts, from him - one I think he would have freely given. I took some pictures. I've only been able to glance at them so far, in transferring them to my computer. But there they are now stored, to be seen when I need to prepare myself, or my children for my own death. And, when my father died, only hours later, I found my next steps guided by what I learned of the eldest son's role at an Indian death by the Ganges

- to arrange for and accompany the body's passage to the Aspen Mortuary

- to accompany it again to the crematorium,

- to help push it, in its cardboard box, into the furnace, and wait while the gauge on the furnace controls showed me that it had reached the temperature of complete combustion, 1000 degrees.

Finally then, two days later, I picked up the ashes and sealed them, using my father's screwdriver, into the wooden urn my mother and I picked out at the mortuary. We'd picked it mostly because my father was an outdoor woodsman and wood craftsman. But I learned after we'd chosen it that its wood, called "seneesh," came from India, and that the urn had been crafted there.

On that Tuesday, January 25 last year, the day before my dream about integrating my experience of that place into this in my hotel room in Kushinigar, I wrote in my journal "It's hard to believe I'm really here. Am I really here? Is enough of me exposed to actually be affected? or am I just passing through in a protected bubble?"

I think it is only now that I can answer that question. I was there, and, more importantly, "there" is now here, within me. Four days after I made that journal entry, on my prayer mat in the monastery auditorium - my knees crying out for escape, as perhaps your bottoms are now - I was still able to write down one thing Chokyi Nyima Rinpoche said. He said it first in Tibetan, which was translated by his assistant Thomas. But then in his own playful if fractured English, he repeated it, for emphasis. He said:

"The core of the Buddha's teaching is two-fold.

First, understanding or wisdom.

Second, loving kindness or compassion."

I wrote this question to myself then: "Do we, does Unitarian Universalism, teach compassion as natural to human beings, as he does. Or do we teach only that wisdom comes to us naturally?" More pointedly, now, I would ask: Do we yet understand, as the Rinpoche did, that wisdom without compassion is pointless and without value? Compassion, the other necessary core of religious teaching, is the treasure I found under my feet in the footsteps of the Buddha. Even in my first day there, in Bodh Gaya, site of Siddhartha's enlightenment, a dharma talk I heard at the Wat, or Thai temple, taught the same lesson, in more memorable words:

"Wisdom tells me that I am nothing;

Love tells me that I am everything.

Between these two flows my life."

Closing Song: #295 "Sing Out Praises for the Journey"

Chalice Extinguishing

*The moral life of a (person) may be likened to traveling to a distant place:
(taught Tsesze of China, in his "Golden Mean")
One must start from the nearest stage.*

*It may also be likened (he said) to ascending a great height:
One must begin from the lowest step.*