

Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus

A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism, Part I

John C. Huntington

There are four places, Ānanda, which the believing man should visit with feelings of reverence and awe. Which are the four? The place at which...the Tathāgata was born..., the place at which...the Tathāgata attained enlightenment..., the place at which...the Tathāgata set up the Āryan kingdom..., and the place at which...the Tathāgata passed away.

(*Mahāparinibbāna-sutta*, V. 16-22)

With these words in what is widely believed to be one of the earliest and least tampered-with *sūtras*, the Buddha Śākyamuni established the rite of pilgrimage among the faithful. The place at which the Tathāgata (Śākyamuni himself) was born (c. 563 BC) is Lumbinī, in the lowland Terai of modern Nepal. The place where the Tathāgata attained enlightenment is Bodhgayā in the heartland of ancient Magadha, now southern Gangetic Bihar. The 'setting up of the Āryan kingdom', also known as 'the preaching of the First Sermon', took place at the Mṛgadāva ('Deer Park') just north of Varanasi (Benares) and the Great Passing away (c. 483 BC) took place on a journey at the relatively remote village of Kuśinagara in the extreme eastern end of Uttar Pradesh in modern India (see map, Fig. 1).

Within a very short period of time (by no later than c. 250 BC, but perhaps much before that), four other places had become important sites of pilgrimage as well: Śrāvastī, the place of the 'Great Miracle'; Sāṅkāśya, where the Buddha Śākyamuni descended from Trāyastriṃśa heaven after preaching to his deceased mother; Vaiśālī, the place of the monkey's gift; and Rājagṛha,

where the wild elephant Nālāgiri was subdued. In time, there were many other pilgrimage sites. Virtually every Buddhist region either has locations where Śākyamuni is believed to have visited during his lifetime or surrogate 'life' sites, a visit to which serves as a substitute for visiting the actual site. For example, there are Mahābodhi temples emulating the temple marking the spot where the Buddha attained enlightenment in Beijing in China (see P. Swart's and B. Till's article in *Orientalism*, February 1985, pp. 28-39), Pagan in Burma, Patan in Nepal and Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka. Although the history of the early development of the eight major sites is lost in the oral traditions of the early lay Buddhists, by no later than the fourth century, the tradition of the Eight Great Miracles and the sites associated with them had become a reality of north Indian Buddhist practice.

To this day, pilgrims from all over the Buddhist world visit these shrines in northern India and in the Nepal Terai. Some of the sites are easily accessible and visitors can enjoy all the comforts of modern travel in India. Other sites are best left to the more intrepid traveller and are to be reached

only after long and difficult drives or railway journeys, approached only by poor roads and having only modest, or even no, accommodations. However, to visit any of them is to literally walk in the footsteps of Śākyamuni Buddha. Even for the non-Buddhist, the visit provides a sense of the continuity of history, the timelessness of the Buddhist teachings and an awe-inspiring impression of the reverence people of the past have felt for the great teacher.

To understand the phenomenon of pilgrimage in the Indic context, it is necessary to briefly examine the dual concepts of '*pīṭha*', or '*tīrtha*', and '*darsana*' relative to Indian religions. In the religious context, a *pīṭha* (literally 'seat [of *kuśa* grass belonging to a deity or holy man]') or a *tīrtha* (literally a 'ford at a stream') is the 'sacred site'. Such a place is recognized by some event having taken place there, either through the actions of the deity or by one of the great teachers or sages such as Śākyamuni Buddha. In Buddhism there are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of such sacred sites. Every place associated with the life of the Buddha, many locations of a vision by a teacher or holy man, every location of an attri-



bution of a miracle and even places of attainment by a saint are marked for posterity. These locations become the 'seats', *pīṭha* [of the teacher who will aid one's own progress in the path of advancement], or 'fords', *tīrtha* [to cross to the transcendent states of Buddhist eschatology], at which one may become inspired to make similar attainment oneself, or, at the very least, be reminded of the possibility of making the difficult attainments demanded by the Buddhist soteriological methodologies.

The second concept, *darśana*, literally means 'seeing' or 'viewing' but also carries a more profound concept of essentially identifying with the events that one 'sees'. The idea is much more than just witnessing or observing an important event in the sense that one who experiences *darśana* of an event becomes part of it and the merit or other benefits that might be gained by the principal participants are also gained to a lesser degree by the observer. In other words, when a great Buddhist teacher gives an initiation, he gains merit (*puṇya*) for benefitting others. At

the same time, the initiate gains merit for making commitments to Buddhism; those who participate in the ceremony gain merit for helping others make the commitments; those who attend the ceremony gain merit; and even those who simply pass by in a casual manner gain merit. In Buddhism, even beings in the most unfortunate of births can accrue merit by simply being present and observing events surrounding the teaching of the Dharma (Buddhist 'doctrine' as 'universal truth').

This concept of accruing merit is the underlying motivation behind the pilgrimages. While it is true that an individual might undertake a pilgrimage to gain some sought-after benefit (generally for other members of his family but occasionally for himself and usually related to health or prosperity), the act of making the pilgrimage itself does not generate the benefit but it is the merit attained that allows the believer to then dedicate that merit to some desired objective. The ultimate desired benefit is, of course, to positively affect one's own rebirth into

higher realms. It is believed that there are numerous Buddhist paradises and twenty-eight higher realms of Brahmanical cosmology available to those beings who have accrued enough merit. Among the Buddhist realms (*Buddhakṣetra*), Tuṣita, presided over by the Bodhisattva Maitreya, and Sukhāvatī, presided over by the Buddha Amitābha/Amitāyus, are the most important; cults promising to lead the faithful to these two paradises have flourished in the Buddhist world since the pre-Christian era. Among the cosmological paradises are those of Trāyastriṃśa (the heaven of the thirty-three Vedic gods), presided over by Indra (Śakra of the Buddhist texts); and the Brahmāloka, presided over by the Hindu god Brahmā. In the Pāli canon, for example, there is a clear division as to who will attain the different paradises; the Brahmāloka is where the most accomplished monks will go and is suggestive of higher spiritual attainment, while Trāyastriṃśa is the heaven to which the most successful lay followers (mostly defined in the texts

according to how munificent their gifts to the Buddhist community were) will go. Thus, a pilgrimage to the holy places is a kind of long-range planning for the future. Ultimately, however, it is the goal of the Buddhist to become either an *arhat* (in Pāli, *arahant*, in the Theravāda tradition) or a bodhisattva (in the Mahāyāna traditions), the latter ultimately becoming a Buddha. Such attainment is facilitated by rebirth either in the higher ranks of the human realm or in the paradises.

In the mundane sense, the eight great pilgrimage sites are where the major events of the life of Śākyamuni Buddha occurred. However, in the supramundane sense, the life events are part of a 'magic show' or, literally, 'conjurer's illusions' (*prātihārya*) aimed at displaying the nature of Buddhahood. Indeed, the Sanskrit name for the eight great events of the life of Śākyamuni Buddha is *Aṣṭasamahāprātihārya*, the 'Eight Great Conjurer's Illusions'. The implications are that the life essence which was to become Śākyamuni Buddha had other options, but chose the life that he lived as a conscious act of didactic demonstration. As a manifestation (*nirmāṇakāya*) of

the universal nature of Buddhahood (*dharmakāya*), it was more a matter of exercising his skilful means (*upaya*) in the instruction of 'trainable men' that caused the 'magic show' to take the form that it did. In other words, for the time and the place (in that particular *Buddhakṣetra*), the show was perfect in its ability to communicate Buddhist soteriological ideals to the populace. In another time and another place (some other *Buddhakṣetra*), the 'show' could be very different yet there would still be the eight great events in the life of the Buddha, whatever his name might be.

To visit the scenes of the eight great events is to experience in a direct way the life of the Buddha as both a demonstration of his perfection and the perfection of all Buddhas. We see and feel the locations of the conjurer's illusion teaching us the same message of Buddhist soteriological methodology that was displayed to his contemporaries. Through this experience, we are taught the fundamentals of the universality of the Buddhist experience and the specifics of the display that took form as Gotama Siddhārtha, the Buddha Śākyamuni.

provides the kind of validation of authenticity which determines the acceptance of a majority of the sites.

Later pilgrims, especially the Chinese and Tibetan monk-pilgrims, have left invaluable records of their visits to the holy sites of northern India. Among the first to identify most of the archaeological sites in the modern sense was General Alexander Cunningham who, working in the last decades of the nineteenth century, followed the writings of the pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang who toured the Buddhist world of South Asia in 399 to 414 and 629 to 645, respectively. Although many scholars criticize the two Chinese pilgrims for their inaccuracies, the truth is, given the circumstances of their travel and the intervals between the actual trip and the time of writing down their accounts, their narratives are amazingly accurate, on the whole 70 to 80 per cent correct, even to many minor details. Thus, while it is necessary to use caution when deriving information from the pilgrims' accounts, allowing independent corroboration (for example, finding an Aśokan pillar at a site verifying the identification as Cunningham did on a number of occasions, or an exact arrangement of monuments as occurred at Jetavana), the accounts have proven invaluable in determining the history of the Buddhist sites of northern India.

Because of their importance, two sites, Bodhgayā and Kuśinagara, have never become strictly archaeological. Throughout history and despite the brutal Muslim conquests of northern India with their wholesale destruction of religious sites, they have remained actively in worship since the time of the Buddha. Another, the Deer Park at Sārnāth was never 'lost', in the sense that its location was uncertain, but it fell into complete disuse during the Muslim period of Indian history.

Aśoka's effort to commemorate the sites of Buddhism were successful beyond any conceivably expected reality. Indeed, because of his surviving stone pillars at many locations, archaeologists argue about the location of an event within limits measured in metres rather than kilometres. Only the location of the Buddha's home city of Kapilavastu (not strictly one of the eight sites but one always associated

The Archetypal Pilgrimage of Aśoka Maurya and the Identity of the Sites

The king then fell at the feet of the elder Upagupta and said: 'Elder, I want to honour the places where the Blessed One lived, and mark them with signs as a favour to posterity.'

'Excellent great king,' Upagupta replied, 'your intention is magnificent. I will show you the sites this very day.'

(J.S. Strong, *The Legend of King Asoka*, 1983, p. 244)

During the progress of an imperial pilgrimage (or pilgrimages, the historical data are in disagreement on this point), Aśoka Maurya (r. c. 270-c. 220 BC), the first great unifier of all the northern Indic realms, established *stūpas* and marked the sites with pillars commemorating his visit. Having lived so short a time after the period of Śākyamuni Buddha, it is generally accepted that Aśoka's determinations of the sites (or, presumably, actually those of his spiritual advisor, said in the *Aśokāvadāna* to be Upagupta, a Dharma master from Mathurā) were

correct. Although not all the sites are extensively excavated, there is enough archaeological evidence at each of them to confirm early, at least Maurya (c. 321-185 BC) or pre-Maurya period, activity at each. In some cases, the pillar or shaft of the Aśokan pillar with its inscription still survives; in other cases, only the ornamental capitals survive. Elsewhere, at Bodhgayā for example, an ongoing tradition, obviously from the time of Śākyamuni himself, connects the site with the great Teacher. Whatever the case, it is the discovery of Aśokan monuments that

with Lumbinī) has been subject to debate. However, in recent years, archaeological discoveries of Gupta period (320-500) plaques commemorating the *stūpas* of Śākyamuni Buddha's parents, King Śuddhodana and Queen Māyādevī, have been discovered at the so-called 'Nepali contender's' site at Tiluarakot (also called Tilurakot) in the Nepalese Terai, verifying at least an early tradition of the identification of the site as Kapilavastu. The 'Indian contender' for recognition as Kapilavastu, Piprahwa (also Piprawa), is one of the few sites with contemporaneous burial of relics of Śākyamuni Buddha in inscribed caskets and may have been one of the as-yet archaeologically unidentified city-states to which relics from the cremation of the deceased Śākyamuni Buddha were taken (to be discussed in part III).

(Fig. 2) Image of Māyādevī giving birth to Gotama Siddhārtha under the *aśoka* tree c. 5th-6th century (?)
Temple of the Birth, Lumbinī, Nepal

(Fig. 3) Image of Māyādevī giving birth to Gotama Siddhārtha under the *aśoka* tree 20th century
Temple of the Birth, Lumbinī, Nepal

(Fig. 4) Image of infant Gotama Siddhārtha declaring his world domination and preparing to receive his natal bath.
Modern East Asian (Japanese?)
Temple of the Birth, Lumbinī, Nepal

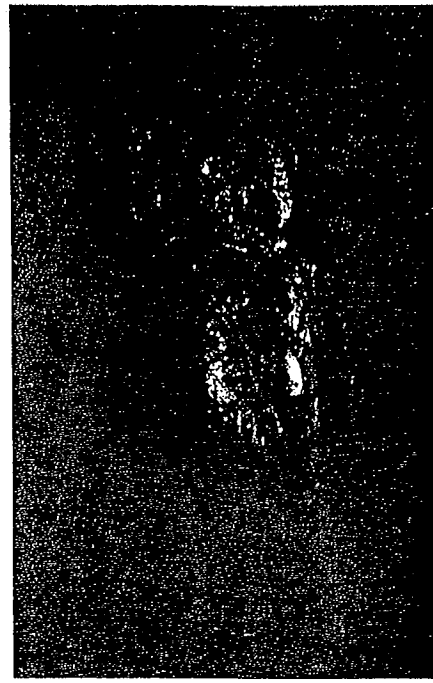
Lumbinī and Kapilavastu

Speaking to the King Aśoka, the tree-spirit (*yakṣī*) who had observed the birth of the Buddha states:

'Throughout Indra's three-fold world,
there shone a supernatural light,
dazzling like gold and delighting the eye.
The earth and its mountains,
ringed by the ocean,
shook like a ship being tossed at sea.'
(J.S. Strong, p. 246)

The Bodhisattva, reigning as regent of the Tuṣita paradise, realized that the time had come for this final birth in the world of men. He made the appropriate determinations of family (the Śākya family), country (Kapilavastu), time (that it would be appropriately receptive to a Buddha), race (the Ikṣvāku race) and of mother (Māyādevī, wife of Śuddhodana, *rāja*, or king, of the Śākyas). Māyādevī had dreamt of a white elephant entering her womb. The dream interpreters had told her and her husband that a prince who would either become a universal monarch (*cakravartin*) or an Enlightened being (Buddha) would be born to them. As her time came, Māyādevī retired to the royal gardens at Lumbinī and bathed in a great tank. Holding a branch of an *aśoka* tree, she gave birth through her right side to the

Bodhisattva (Figs 2 and 3). Received by the god Indra (Śakra or Śataketu of the texts), the infant, born fully conscious and with full faculties, stepped to the ground and took seven steps in each of the four directions, proclaiming to the east, 'I shall reach the highest Nirvana;' to the south, 'I shall be the first of all beings;' to the west, 'This will be my last birth;' and to the north, 'I shall cross the ocean of existence.' (There are several versions of these statements.) Immediately, two streams of water, one warm and one cool, poured forth from the heavens, produced by the *nāgas* (snake beings, specifically cobras, demi-gods of the underworld and guardians of the treasure of knowledge) to provide the infant's natal bath (Fig. 4). Depending on the various descriptions, the events were attended by multitudes of spiritual



beings, the gods, Indra and Brahmā, yakṣas, gandharvas, kimnaras, bodhisattvas and many others.

Approached today by modern road from the Nepalese-Indian border at Saunali and part of the Nepalese government's Lumbinī development plan headed by Loka Darshan Bajracharya, modern Lumbinī (also known as Rummindei and Rumin-dei in the literature) is a grassy parklike setting where only a modest amount of excavation has been undertaken (Fig. 5). The site consists of only a ruined *stūpa* which, according to the *Aśokāvadana*, was presumably constructed by Aśoka, a tank (Fig. 6) and a modern temple (Fig. 7)—built on the remains of much earlier structures. A fragment of the lower shaft of an Aśokan pillar, originally to have been surmounted by a capital with a horse sculpture of which fragments recently have been found, carries a definitive identification:

King Priyadasi, beloved of the gods, having been anointed 20 years, came himself and worshipped saying, 'Here Buddha Śākyamuni was born,' and he caused to be made a stone [capital] representing a horse, and he caused this stone pillar to be erected. Because here the worshipful one was born, the village of Lumbini has been made free of taxes and a recipient of wealth. (A. Führer, 'Buddha Sakyamuni's Birth-Place', ASINI, vol. VI, 1897, p. 33)

The *stūpa* mound was believed by Cunningham to commemorate the place where Indra received the child, while the temple commemorates the actual birth site. Other large *stūpas* at the site and the tank where Māyādevī bathed just prior to or, by some accounts, just after the Birth, are the monuments that one visits. Archaeological work in progress demonstrates extensive activity in historical periods at the site, mostly by workmen of the Indian Kuṣāṇa (1st-3rd centuries AD) and Gupta periods, but later material also indicates the presence of Nepali artisans during the eighth through tenth centuries.

Most important by far is, of course, the Temple of the Birth. Built on the foundations of past temples, the earlier basements have yet to be excavated. (The finding of Maurya period bricks would be very interesting as the lowest layer.) The present temple, however, is a recent construction. Immediately

to the west of it is the Aśokan pillar bearing the foregoing inscription while to the east of the plinth and at the entrance of the temple proper is a gigantic pipal tree (*Ficus religiosa*, in Sanskrit *pīpal* or *āśvattha*), the *bodhi*- or enlightenment-tree of Śākyamuni Buddha. Conventionally, the small interior cell of the temple is entered from a door on the south; however, access is also from the 'main' door to the temple on the east (presumably for those practitioners whose rituals demand it). Once inside the simple chamber, one finds a stark simplicity compared to many Buddhist temples. On the west wall are three small niches, the central one containing a badly eroded and broken image of Māyādevī giving birth (Fig. 2). To the left is a modern image of the same subject (Fig. 3) and to the right, a modern gilt figure of the baby Siddhārtha, one hand raised demonstrating the proclamations of the seven steps and standing still in order to receive the bath which will be offered him by the *nāgas* (Fig. 4). During the full moon of Vaiśākha (about May), devotees come to the shrine and offer a bath to the image as a demonstration of their commitment to the Buddha and in order to directly partake in the joy of the Birth themselves.

By visiting these ancient shrines and the modern Theravāda temple just to the east of the site (the latter an interesting mixture of Buddhist iconographic traditions), the pilgrim has begun to trace the *tīrtha* of the great journey of realization. The journey traversed by Śākyamuni Buddha and his immediate predecessors is a demonstration that epitomizes the Buddhist promise of the attainment of altruistic compassion and wisdom that leads to one's own salvation.

City of his father, the *rāja* of the Śākyas, the palace and the environs of Kapilavastu provided the environment for the nurturing of the young Buddha-to-be. The image of the Yakṣa Śākyavardana bowed before him when he was presented at the Śākya family temple. The sage (*ṛṣi*) Asita foretold his future as either a *cakravartin* or a Buddha. His mother died shortly after his Birth and the young Bodhisattva was raised there by his maternal aunt

Mahāprajāpatī Gotamī. There were many events of his childhood and early youth, such as the tossing of the dead elephant, the archery contest, his marriage to Yaśodhara (by some accounts, also to [Gōpā] about four or five years after Yaśodharā and a few years later, either seven days before or on the eve of his departure, to Mṛgadajā). Not far from Kapilavastu was the village of the ploughing festival where the Bodhisattva first meditated. Because there had been a prediction that the Bodhisattva would leave home by the age of twenty-nine to become an ascetic, the king had guarded the gates to the city, but from these very gates the young prince went forth on four outings on which he encountered the Four Visions: an old man, a sick man, a dead man and a monk (*bhikṣu*), literally beggar or mendicant). Late one evening, he felt disgust with the women of his entourage upon envisioning them in dishevelled states while sleeping:

The Bodhisattva looked at the entire gathering of women...some had torn clothing and dishevelled hair; their ornaments and diadems lay on the floor. He saw some had ugly shoulders and long arms dangling; some had ugly or discoloured faces or flawed bodies...He saw women snoring, laughing, mumbling, coughing and gritting their teeth...Struck by the sheer ugliness of the women thus transformed...the Bodhisattva indeed had the impression of a cemetery. (*The Voice of the Buddha [Lalitavistara]*, Dharma Press, 1983, pp. 310-11)

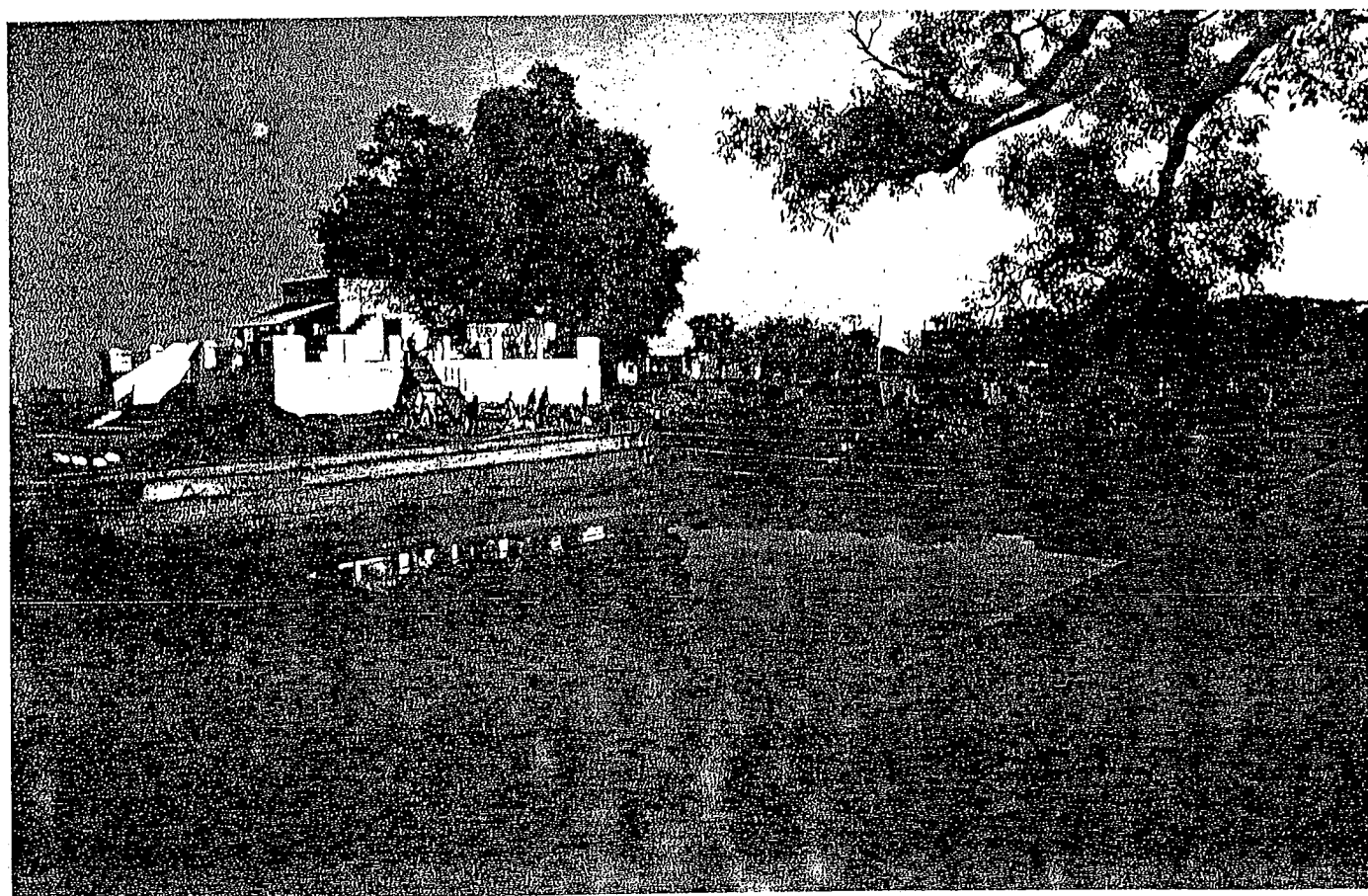
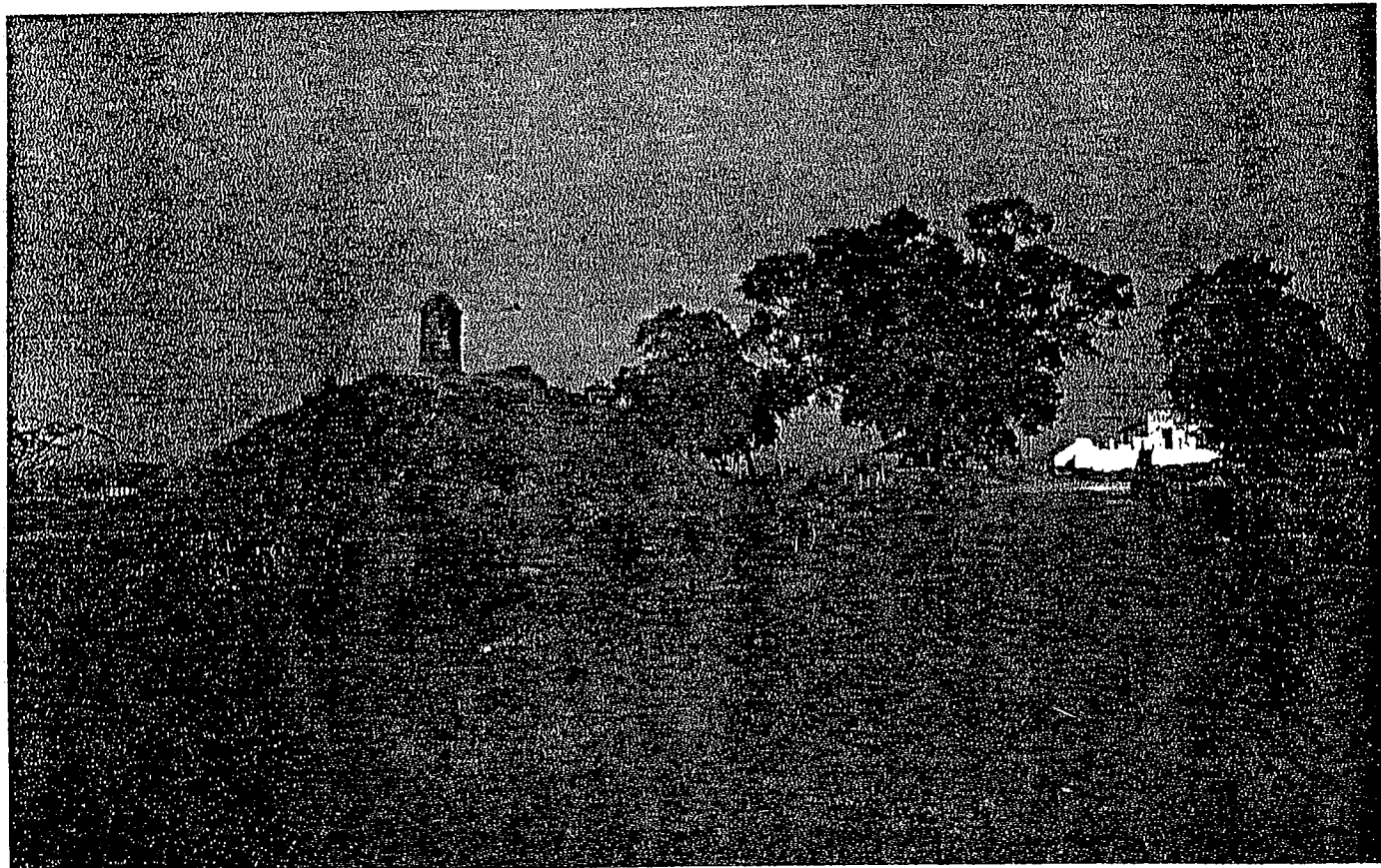
He then summoned his groom and his horse and departed the castle to take up the life of a wandering mendicant.

Writing in the fifth century, the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Faxian tells us of Kapilavastu:

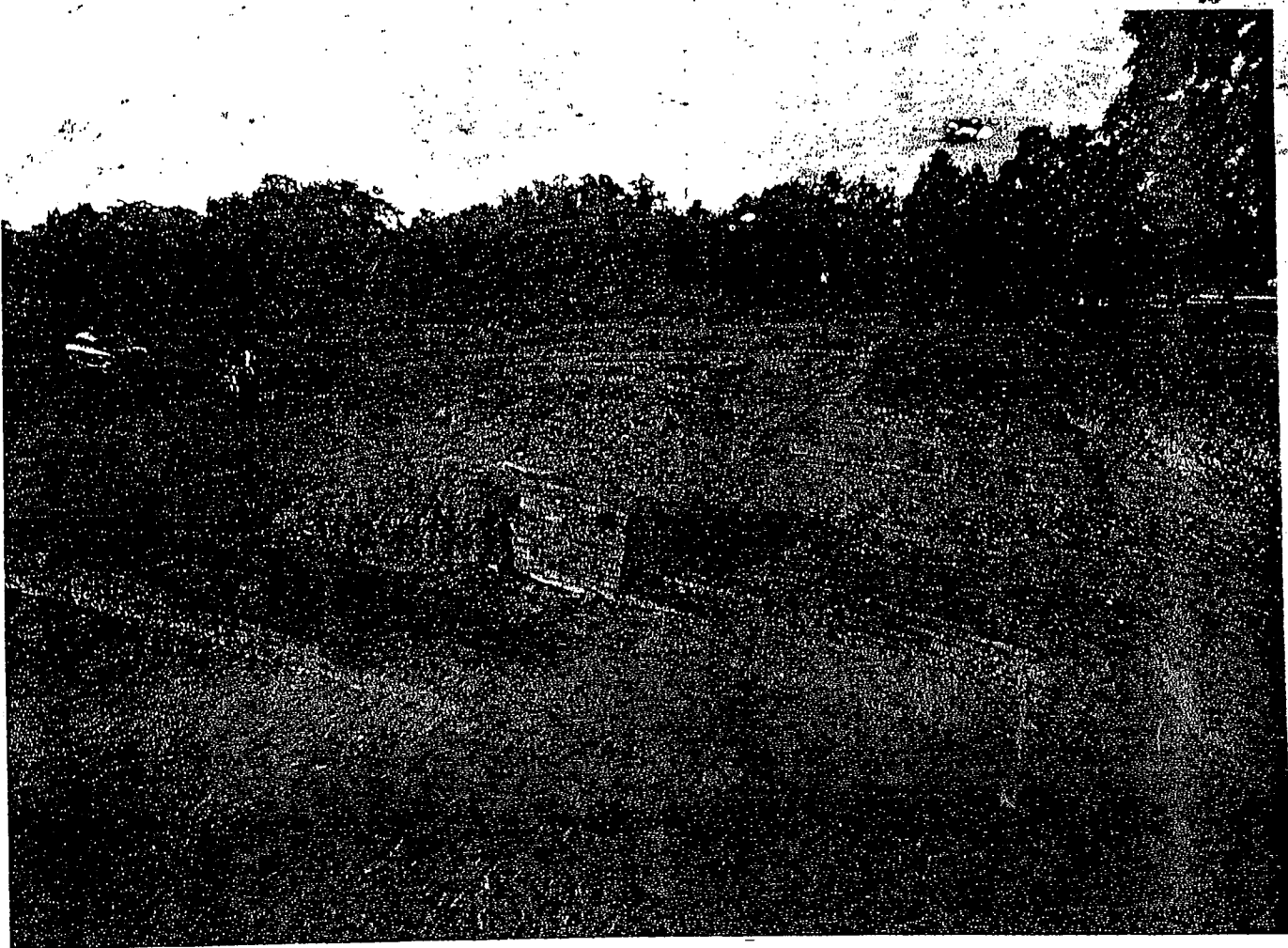
Less than a yojana [a day's journey] to the east from this [Lumbinī] brought them to the city of Kapilavastu; but in it there was neither king nor people. All was mound

(Fig. 5, opposite top) Overview of *stūpa* and Temple of the Birth from the south Lumbinī, Nepal

(Fig. 6, opposite bottom) Tank in which Māyādevī took her bath and Temple of the Birth from the south Lumbinī, Nepal







(Fig. 7, opposite top) *Stūpas* of Śuddhodana and Māyādevī
Kapilavastu, Nepal

(Fig. 8, opposite bottom) 'Palace area'
Kapilavastu, Nepal

(Fig. 9) Eastern gateway to the city walls (gate of the Great Departure)
Kapilavastu, Nepal

and desolation. Of inhabitants there were only some monks and a score or two of families of the common people.

No such monument as an Aśokan inscription marks Kapilavastu, which is immediately adjacent to modern Tiluarakot, and which only recently has been identified. Strictly speaking, it is not one of the eight great sites of Buddhism. Yet modern visitors to Lumbinī usually go to Kapilavastu on the same trip into Nepal because of the proximity of the two sites. As immigration regulations permit foreigners to

cross the border only at Saunali, one goes to Lumbinī first and then follows the new highway in progress to Kapilavastu. (On the day of this author's trip to Kapilavastu in December 1984, the highway was indeed still very much 'in progress' and, on several occasions, impromptu fordings, detours and repairs to the road surface had to be made to facilitate progress along it. Once at the Kapilavastu site, however, staff from the Royal Nepalese Department of Archaeology showed the greatest courtesy and were immensely helpful in making sure that the most important features of the site were visited.) Two *stūpa* bases (Fig. 7), both much damaged by flooding of the Bāngangā River (also known as the Bhāgirathi), are on the west side of the ruins of the site. These two *stūpas* have been identified by recent finds of Gupta period seals as the *stūpas* of Śuddhodana and Māyādevī, the parents of the Buddha. While these seals do not constitute conclusive proof of the iden-

tification of the early site, they provide identification of what was, in effect, the *de facto* site for several centuries, presumably most of the pre-Christian era and early Christian era periods.

What remains of the palace area (Fig. 8) is the brick foundations of the relatively modest structures in the centre of a walled enclosure. While the bricks are of the Kuṣāṇa period, they rest on Maurya period remains, which in turn (presumably) rest on pre-Maurya (Śākya) remains. If this is the case, the structure is small by standards for even modest Asian palaces but in keeping with the remains of structures at Rājāgrha (to be discussed in part III) of approximately the same period. Ultimately, it is the eastern gate of the walled area (Fig. 9), the gate of the Great Departure (Mahābhiniṣkramaṇa), that is the most important spot of the site. It is through this portal that the Bodhisattva, with his groom Chandaka and mounted on the horse Kaṇṭhaka, departed the material world of sense-

desire. As one looks at this gate, one has to envision what this action must have meant for the young prince who had never known anything but the luxury of the palace, and whose infant son was yet to be born, and whose profound family ties to his father and aunt could only have beckoned him back.

Bodhgayā and its Environs

O Hero, having gently overcome by your love
the forces of the crafty demon
here on the best of seats you will today
obtain incomparable Enlightenment.

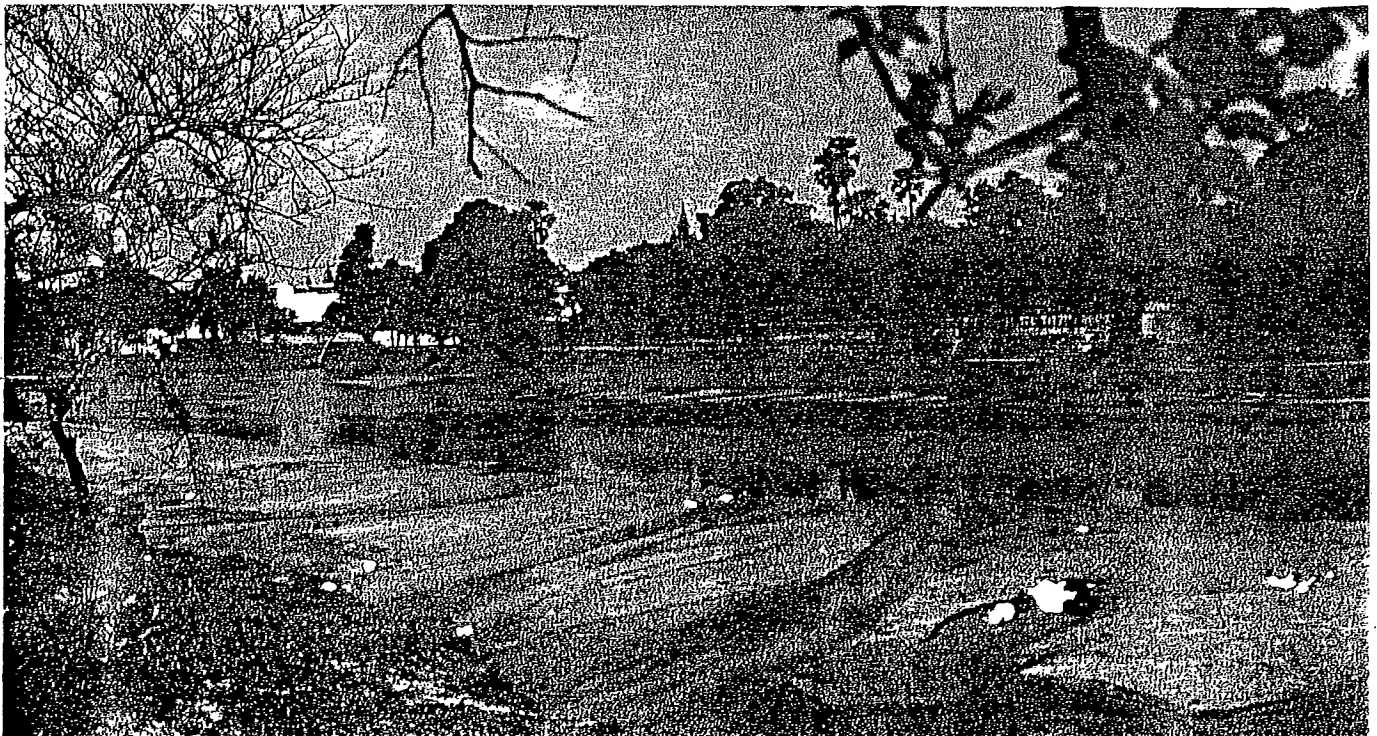
(*The Voice of the Buddha*, p.510)

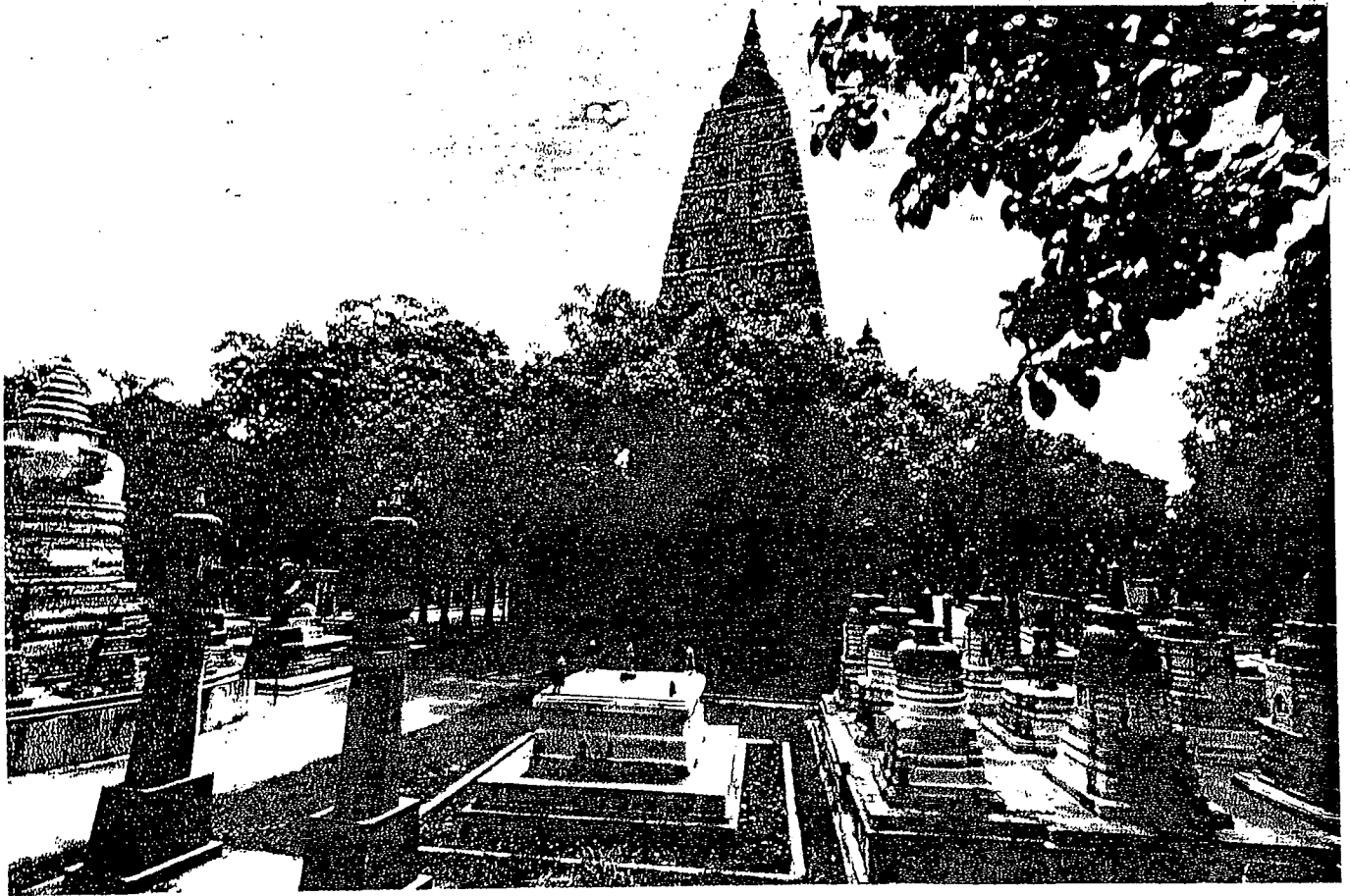
Cutting his long hair and discarding his princely jewellery and array, the Bodhisattva changed clothes with a wood-cutter and began his life as a mendicant. Studying with various teachers (the lists of names vary) and joining with five other ascetics (again, the names vary), the Bodhisattva studied the methods of release from the 'unsatisfactoriness' (*dukkha*) of mundane life

(Fig. 10) Tree shrine at 'Sujāta's Place'
Bodhgayā, Bihar state, India



(Fig. 11) Nairāñjanā (modern Phalgu) River at
a ford directly in line between 'Sujāta's Place'
and Mahābodhi Temple
Bodhgayā, Bihar state, India





(*samsara*). Wandering among the hills and streams of lower Gangetic Bihar (ancient Magadha) and practising asceticism to the point of starvation, the Bodhisattva realized that neither extreme pleasure nor extreme privation would lead to release. Taking food and rest, he began to restore himself, but his five companion ascetics, imagining him to lack perseverance, left him in disgust and headed to the Deer Park (Mṛgadāva) near Varanasi. The Bodhisattva, coming down from the mountains, passed through a village (Fig. 10) where Sujātā (or, alternatively, two sisters, Nandā and Nandābalā) offered him a thick milk soup (by some accounts his first meal). Taking the bowl to the banks of the Nairāñjanā (modern Phalgu) River, he bathed and changed his rags for the clean white shroud of a dead man. After eating the meal, he crossed the Nairāñjanā (Fig. 11) amid wondrous signs of the approaching event. Svastika (in some accounts Kihli), a grass merchant, greeted him and gave him a bundle of *kuśa* grass on which to make his seat. Coming to the *aśvattha* tree, he made his seat.

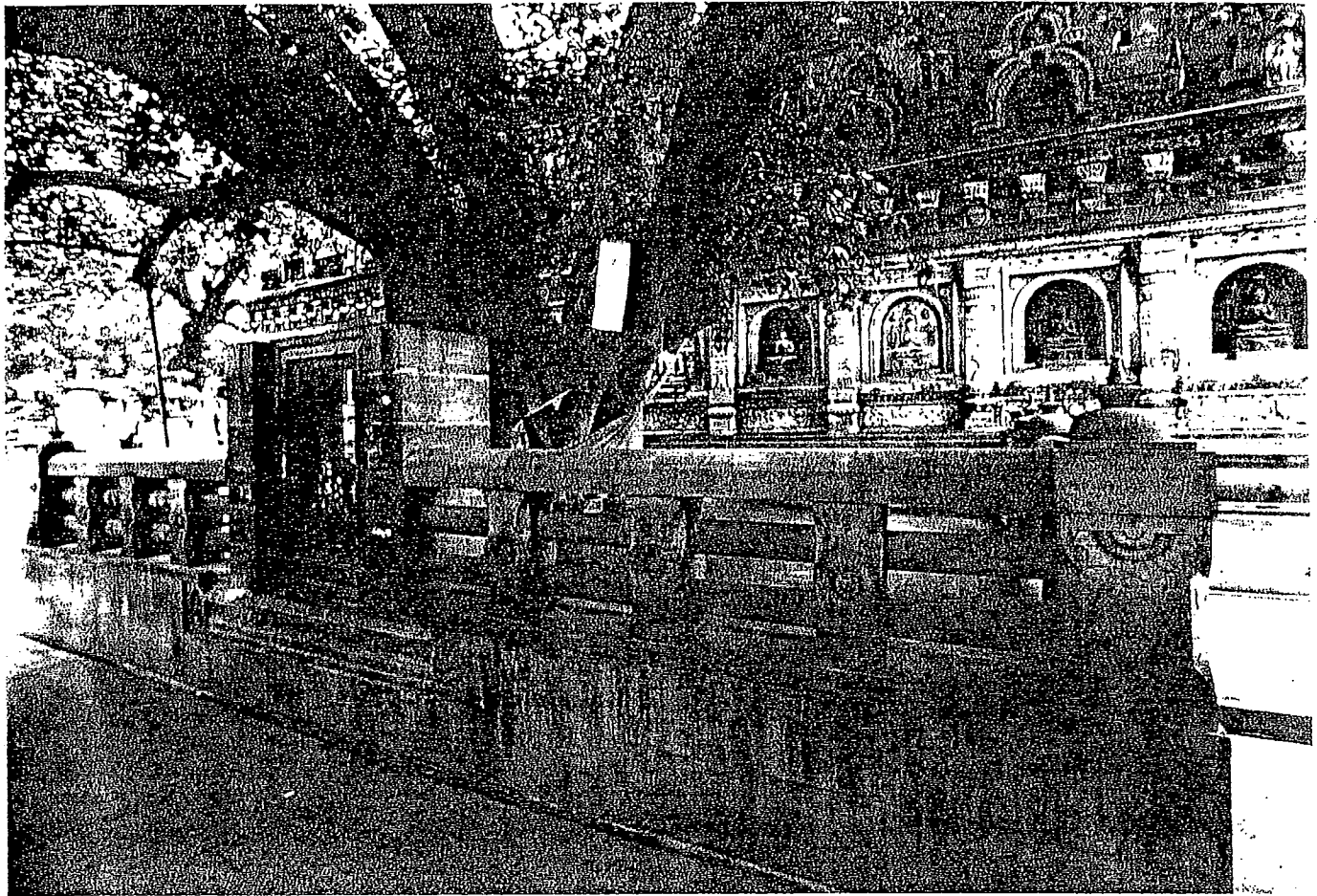
Māra, 'Death' (the personification of the pains and horrors of the endless cycle of rebirth through which every being shall pass until the end of the cosmos itself), confronted the Buddha-to-be with every conceivable temptation, threat and challenge, but for each, the Bodhisattva remained unmoved by emotion or attachment. Māra then confronted the Bodhisattva with his own daughters, 'Desire', 'Pleasure' and 'Delight' (various other names also exist), sensuous beauties who tempted the Bodhisattva with their wiles, but to no avail. Before his gaze, they turned into nothing but dishevelled old hags.

At that point, Māra challenged the Buddha-to-be's right to enlightenment. In silent response, the Bodhisattva moved his right hand to his right knee and let his fingers slide over it to touch the ground. Immediately, directly in front of the throne of *kuśa* grass, Bhūmidevī, the goddess of the earth, emerged to bear witness to the Bodhisattva's multitude of past lives of accumulated achievement. The victory over Māra (*Māravijaya*) was complete

(Fig. 12) Mahābodhi (*aśvattha*) tree shrine from the west (It is either under this tree or its immediate predecessor that the Buddha Śākyamuni became enlightened.)
Bodhi Gaya, Bihar state, India

and his host of demon-armies fled in terror. Freed of all hindrances to enlightenment, the Bodhisattva realized within himself the Twelve-fold Chain of Causation that leads to birth and death, the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path to Salvation.

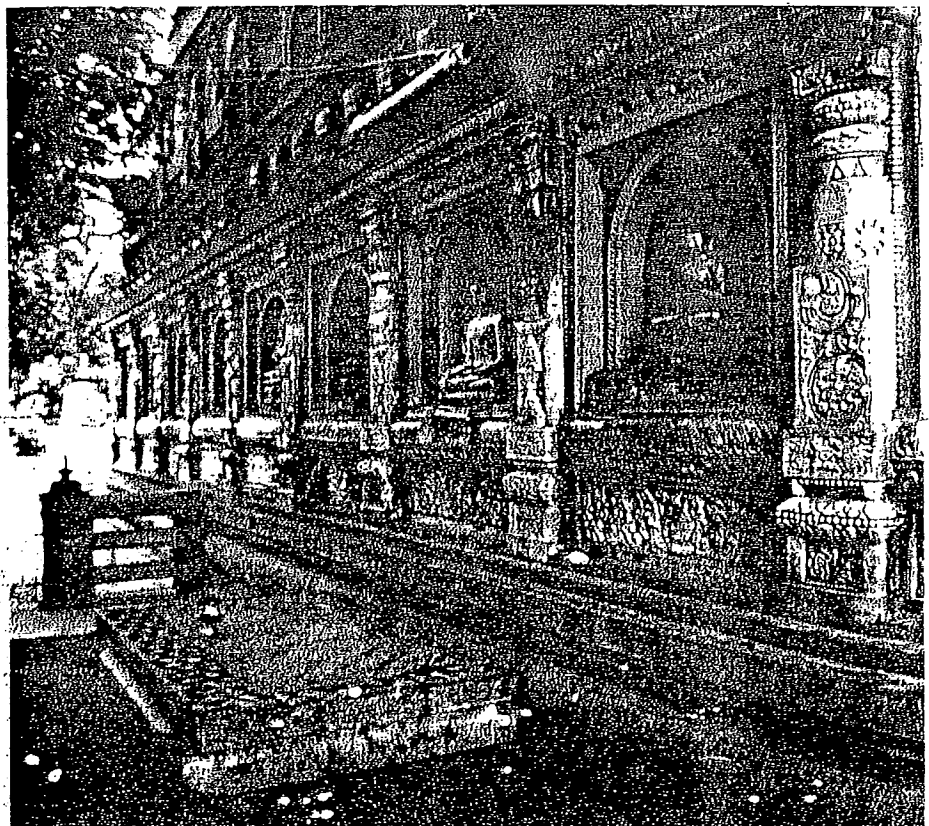
Following his victory, the then 'Buddha' ('Enlightened One') remained in ecstasy under the *aśvattha* tree (by dint of his achievement under it, his *bodhi*-tree — other Buddhas have different species of trees as their *bodhi*-trees) for seven days engaging in a detailed examination of his newly-won Enlightenment. According to the 'northern' tradition, he then meditated for seven days under the *aśvattha* tree, and for an undetermined period of time with the Nāga Mucilinda, and for another seven days in the Bodhimanda (Bodhi Gaya area in general) studying the Twelve

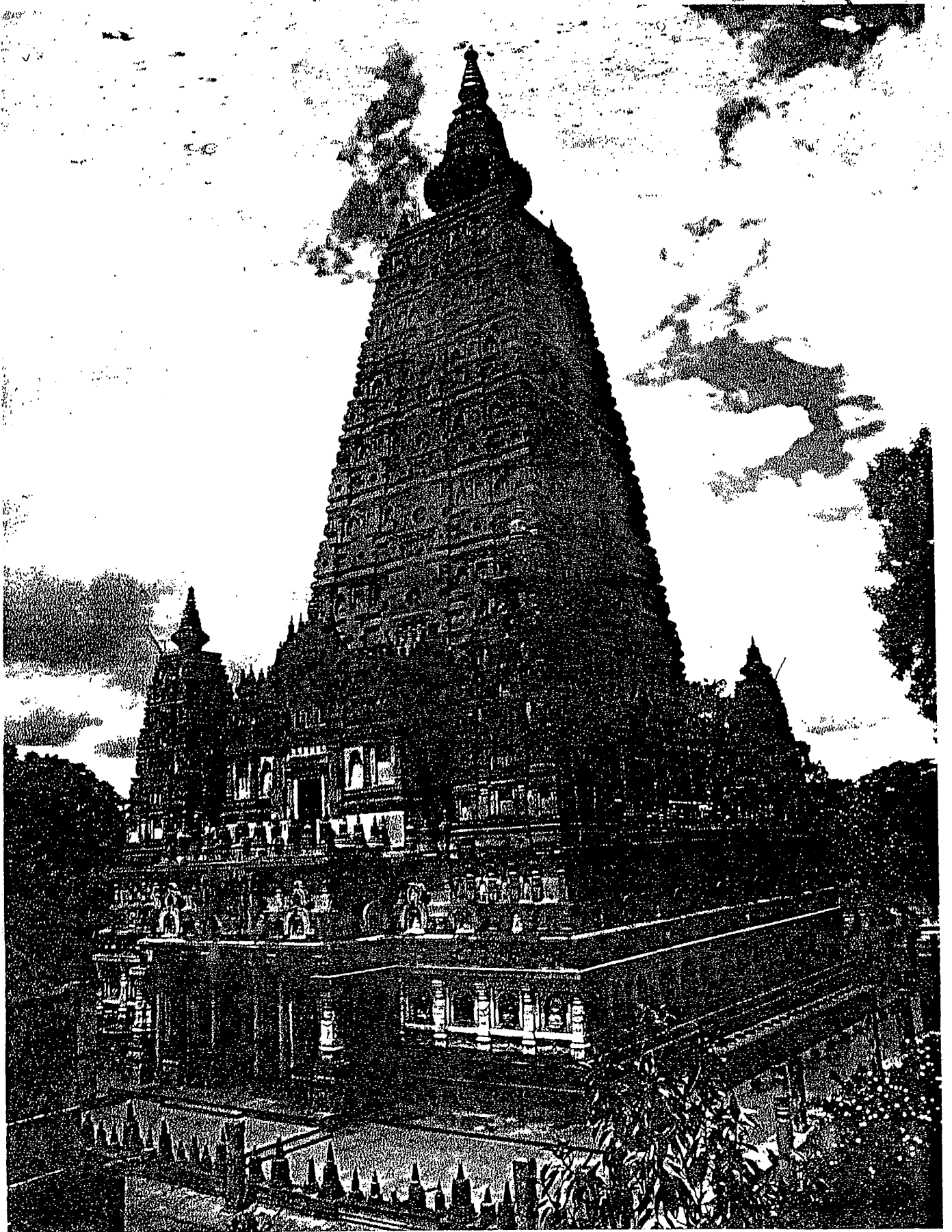


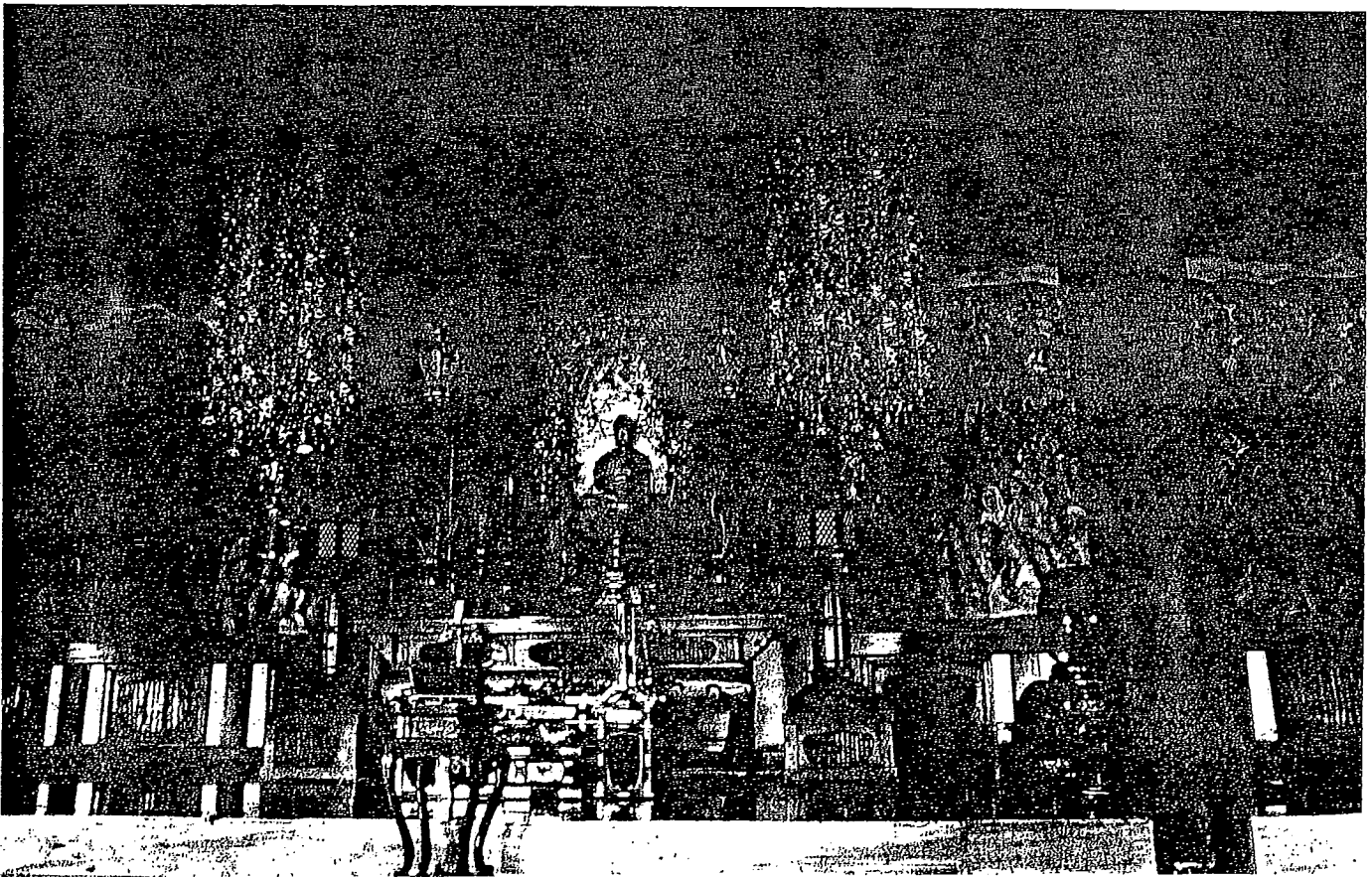
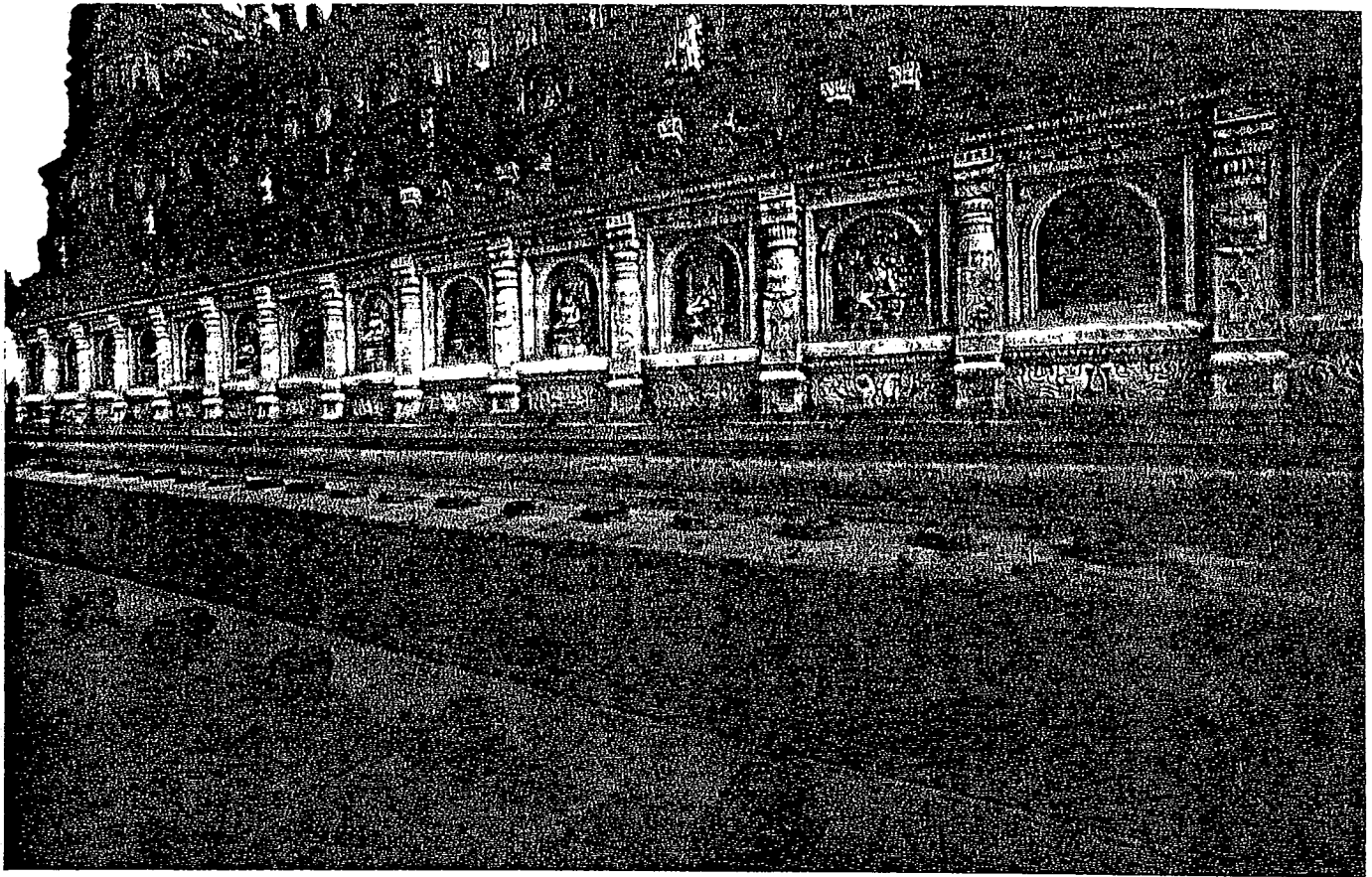
(Fig. 13, *left*) Mahābodhi tree shrine from the southwest showing the devotional area Bodhgayā, Bihar state, India

(Fig. 14, *right*) Aśokan platform immediately to the west of the Mahābodhi tree Bodhgayā, Bihar state, India

(Fig. 15, *opposite*) Mahābodhi Temple from the northeast Bodhgayā, Bihar state, India







Nidāna (Twelve-fold Chain of Causation), from whence he went to Vārāṇasī's Mṛgadāva to preach. According to the 'southern' tradition, the Buddha (1) stayed under the *aśvattha* tree for seven days, (2) stood looking at the tree for seven days, (3) walked near the tree but under a *patra* (*Borassus flabellifera*; a type of palmyra palm) tree for seven days, (4) sat in a place where the gods (*devas*) paid obeisance to him for seven days, (5) meditated with the Nāga Mucilinda for seven days, (6) sat under the *nyagrodha* (banyan) tree for seven days, and (7) meditated for seven days in the place where Brahmā requested him to teach. The Theravāda list of post-Enlightenment sites is (1) the *aśvattha* tree where the Buddha meditated for the first seven days, (2) the Animisalocana Stūpa where, out of gratitude, the Buddha stood gazing at his *bodhi*-tree for the second seven days, (3) the promenade (*caṅkramaṇa*) where the Buddha walked up and down for the third seven days, (4) the Ratnaghara where the gods paid devotions to him for the fourth seven days, (5) the meditation under the Rājāyatana tree for the fifth seven days, (6) the meditation under the Ajapālā Nigrodha tree for the sixth seven days, and (7) the meditation with the Nāga Mucilinda for the seventh seven days. Whatever the case of the post-Enlightenment meditations, the new Buddha, at the request of the god Brahmā who invoked the Buddha's compassion for beings less fortunate than himself and convinced him that there were beings ready and capable of receiving his teachings, left for Vārāṇasī and the Mṛgadāva to begin his ministry.

The Mahābodhi site at Bodhgayā is far more than just the *pīṭha* of the Buddhist religion. Above all other sites, it epitomizes the soteriological promise of Buddhism. Throughout its history, the Mahābodhi has been the focus of Buddhist pilgrimage and, even in past times, visitors from all over the Asian world have visited the site.

Most important is the shrine of the tree itself (Figs 12 and 13). Said in the Sri Lankan chronicles to have been destroyed in Aśoka's time by a wife jealous of the amount of time Aśoka spent on Buddhism, the same chronicles

(Fig. 16, below) Main image in Mahābodhi Temple, photographed in 1969 Bodhgaya, Bihar state, India

(Fig. 17, opposite top) View of north side of Mahābodhi Temple, showing platform and vases marking the place where the Buddha walked Bodhgaya, Bihar state, India

(Fig. 18, opposite bottom) Interior of Nihon no Dera (Japanese Temple) Bodhgaya, Bihar state, India

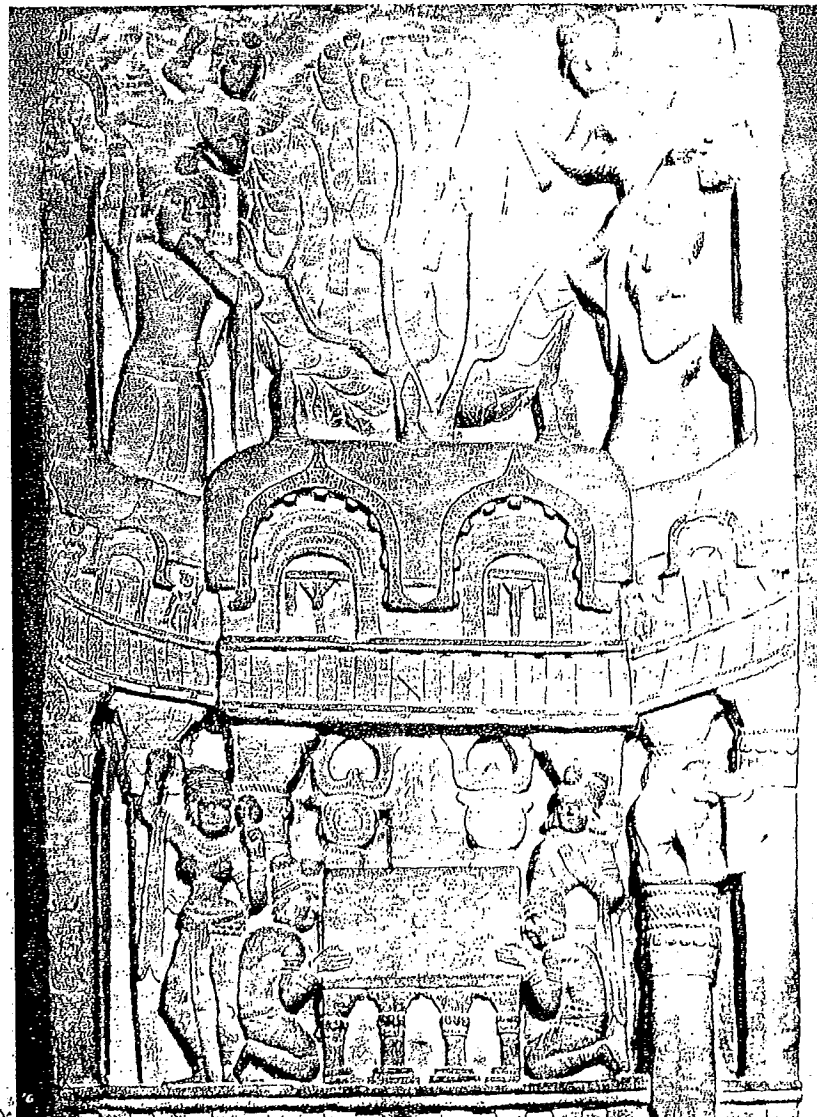
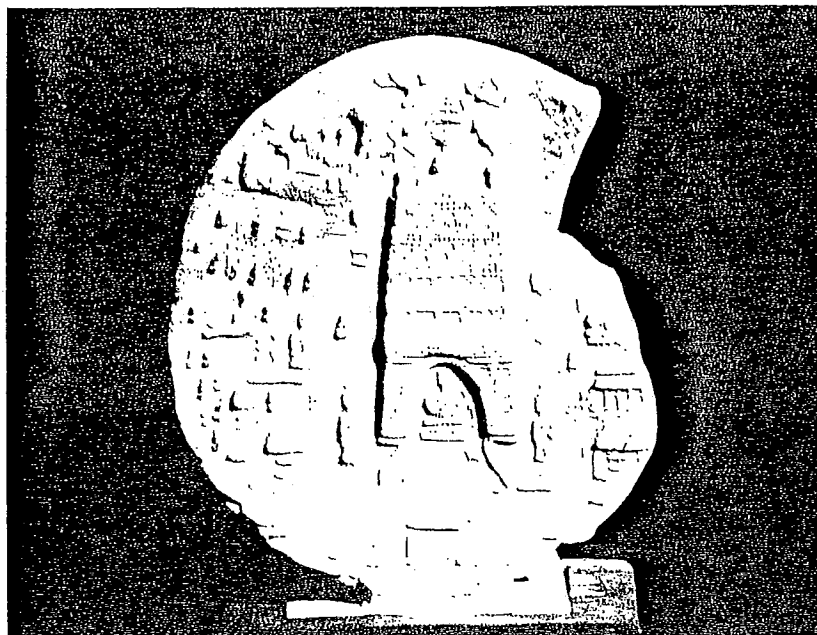


(Fig. 19) Terracotta plaque believed to depict Mahābodhi Temple as it existed 2nd-4th century AD c. 4th century, found at Patna city Patna Museum, Bihar state, India

(Fig. 20) Section of railing pillar (*vedikā*) from Bharut *stūpa* showing inscribed relief of Mahābodhi Temple as it is believed to have appeared just prior to the construction of the Bharut *stūpa* (c. 100-80 BC) Indian Museum, Calcutta, India

would have the present tree to be a cutting (or seedling) of the Śrī Mahābodhi tree at Anuradhapura in Sri Lanka, itself a cutting of the original tree. Other texts, the *Aśokāvadāna* for example, tell of the attack on the tree but also of its restoration through the loving care of Aśoka. (Speaking as an amateur botanist who has raised *asvattha* trees, this author has serious doubts about the ease with which the original tree is said to have been killed. Even a severely damaged tree can regenerate from scions with amazing rapidity. I am therefore inclined to believe the 'restored tree' version of the story.) Whatever the case, the present tree is of great age and size and is the spiritual focus of the Buddhist world. Immediately to the east of the tree (between it and the temple) is an Aśokan period platform (Fig. 14), assumed to have been placed there by Aśoka as part of his commemoration of the site. Although often held to be a surrogate for the *vajrāsana* (adamantine throne) of the Enlightenment, its original Aśokan period intention was not as a throne at all but as a platform (*āyaka*) in front of the tree on which offerings were made to the tree itself.

The Mahābodhi temple (Fig. 15), in spite of its large size and architectural importance, is secondary to the tree. If one keeps the whole concept of the site in mind, it must be realized that the temple is subordinate to the tree and is, in effect, 'under' the tree on the east side. In fact, in the strictest sense, the figure of the Buddha inside the temple is conceived of as seated under the tree and the temple simply houses him. Positioned at the moment of touching the earth (*bhūmisparśa-mudrā*), the main figure in the temple (Fig.



crucial moment of summoning the goddess of the earth Bhūmidevi to witness his right to enlightenment. It is this moment, the moment of gaining the right to enlightenment and not the actual Enlightenment, that is the validation of the soteriological methodology taught by the Buddhists. To enter the temple and to pay one's obeisance to the Buddha within is to participate in the very moment of Enlightenment.

The present temple is largely a nineteenth-century British Archaeological Survey of India reconstruction based on what is generally believed to be an approximately fifth-century structure. Prior to that, there seems to have been a pyramidal structure perhaps built in about the second century (Kuşāṇa period). Knowledge of it comes only from a small, *circa* fourth-century terracotta plaque (Fig. 19) found at modern Patna. It is significant that this version does not have the upper terrace with the small temples in the four corners. These small temples, although not used as such today, probably reflected certain esoteric traditions in Buddhism that were emerging more and more into less esoteric contexts by the late fourth and early fifth century. The pyramidal temple probably replaced an open pavilion that had been constructed around the tree and the Aśokan platform. Representations of this early temple are found at Sāñcī, on the *toranas* of Stūpa I (to be discussed in Part III), dating from around 25 BC, and on a relief carving from the *stūpa* railing at Bhārhut (Fig. 20), from the early Śuṅga period (c. 185-c. 73 BC). Clearly identified by an inscription on the roof of the temple in the Bhārhut relief, the Mahābodhi temple was, in Śuṅga times, an open structure, undoubtedly of wood, enclosing the tree and platform. In the foreground of the relief is a pillar with an elephant capital, identical in type to those of Aśoka and probably indicating his commemorative pillar which still survives (without the capital) at the site. Although we can never be sure of what may have existed in ephemeral materials, it would appear from early reliefs both at Bhārhut and on a Śuṅga period railing at Bodhgayā itself that the original form of the shrine was simply a platform under a tree. This is not surprising

since there is evidence that shrines of this type have had a five thousand-year history in the Indic sphere, ranging from the Harappā civilization (c. 2000-1750 BC) to modern times where such shrines may be seen in virtually every village and town in India.

Five places of the the seven weeks of meditation are marked in the Bodhgayā area, with the *āsvattha bodhi*-tree being the most prominent. The Animiśalocana Stūpa, where the Buddha stood gazing out of gratitude at his *bodhi*-tree for the second seven days, is a small temple on a mound (perhaps a *stūpa* mound) to the northeast of the main temple. The promenade where the Buddha walked up and down for the third seven days is clearly marked on the north side of the temple by a series of lotus pedestals (Fig. 17) commemorating those that are said to have sprung forth from the ground at every step of the Buddha. The Ratnaghara (Ratnagha, 'gem-chamber', or Ratnagiri, 'gem-hill') where the gods paid devotions to him for the fourth seven days is marked by a platform to the north of the walk. Both the place of the meditation under the Rājāyatana tree and the place of the meditation under the Ajapālā Nigrodha tree are unidentified. Finally, the meditation with the Nāga Mucilinda for the seventh seven days is located some distance from the site but is commemorated by a modern sculpture in the Buddhakuṇḍa, a tank to the south of the temple.

In addition to the ancient sites surrounding the Mahābodhi temple, there are at Bodhgayā a number of recently constructed temples and temples under construction. Burmese, Japanese (Fig. 18), Sri Lankans, Thais, Tibetans and other contemporary Buddhist groups have all constructed either temples or temples and guest houses so that their countrymen will have familiar devotional space during their visit to the very heart of the Buddhist world.

Like all religious shrines throughout the world, at certain seasons Bodhgayā is a sea of activity. However, regardless of the many diversions, the beggars, the street vendors and the very eager guides, once one enters the compound of the temple itself, there is a tranquility

and earnestness that transcends all distractions. At the shrine of the tree on the west side of the temple, one stands within a few feet of the actual site of the Enlightenment, the gateway to a bright new promise for the future of all beings. After visiting the tree shrine, one enters the temple and there before one, represented in one of the most magnificent of all Pāla period sculptures, is the image of Śākyamuni at the moment of his attainment. In a very real way, the visitor shares in the triumph and carries away some of the essence of the attainment.

Perhaps the old Tibetan woman this author saw during a 1969 visit to Bodhgayā, who was starting her second million full body prostrations in front of the shrine, best characterizes the importance of the shrine — to her and to all Buddhists everywhere, Bodhgayā is the *vajrāsana*, the indestructible seat that has become the sacred point from which all else in the Buddhist faith emanates. Above all else it is worthy of the reverence and offerings (*pūja*), from the faithful. It is a Buddhist axiom that each person should practise according to his own ability, and it is here at Bodhgayā that practice, from the most profound discourses on the Dharma to the simplest acts of faith, is most appropriate. Even for the non-Buddhist, to go there is to gain a real sense of the history, the present vitality and the future of Buddhism.

The exhibition 'Flowering of the Lotus: Buddhist Art of India; Photographs by John C. Huntington' will be shown at the University of Chicago (30 September - 28 October); University of Wisconsin (31 October - 3 November); First Street Forum Gallery, St. Louis, Missouri (late February and early March 1986, this showing being sponsored by the Asian Art Society of Washington University); and The Ohio State University (31 March - 2 May 1986). For further information about the exhibition or scheduling a showing, please contact John C. Huntington, Department of the History of Art, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio 43210, U.S.A.

John C. Huntington is Professor in the Department of History of Art at the Ohio State University.

Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus

A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism, Part II

John C. Huntington

The Rṣipatana Mṛgadāva ('Deer Park') Near Vārāṇasī

After Gotama Siddhārtha had attained his enlightenment and
Buddhahood he thought to himself:

'This is what I have won through many efforts —
Enough! Why should I make it known?
This *Dharma* will not be understood
by persons consumed with lust and hate.
Heading against the stream, [the *Dharma*] is
deep, subtle, delicate and difficult to see.
It will be unrecognized by those slaves of passion
who are cloaked in the mire of ignorance.'

(*Majjhima-nikāya* I.168, trans. Horner)

With these thoughts (recorded in a form of poetry known as *gāthā*) Śākyamuni determined that mankind was not worthy to share in his new insights. Knowing what was in Gotama Buddha's mind, Brahmā Sahampati, lord of the Brahmāloka (essentially the priest-deity of the early Upaniṣadic Āryans) appeared before him and pointed out to him that there were indeed 'trainable men' with little accumulation of 'dust' (defilement) and that if they did not hear the *Dharma*, they would wither and decay from the state of attainment that they had achieved. However, if they heard the *Dharma* preached, they would mature towards their own enlightenment. Thus, at the coaching of the embodiment of human compassion, Śākyamuni resolved to spread his teachings so that others who were able could benefit from his experience.

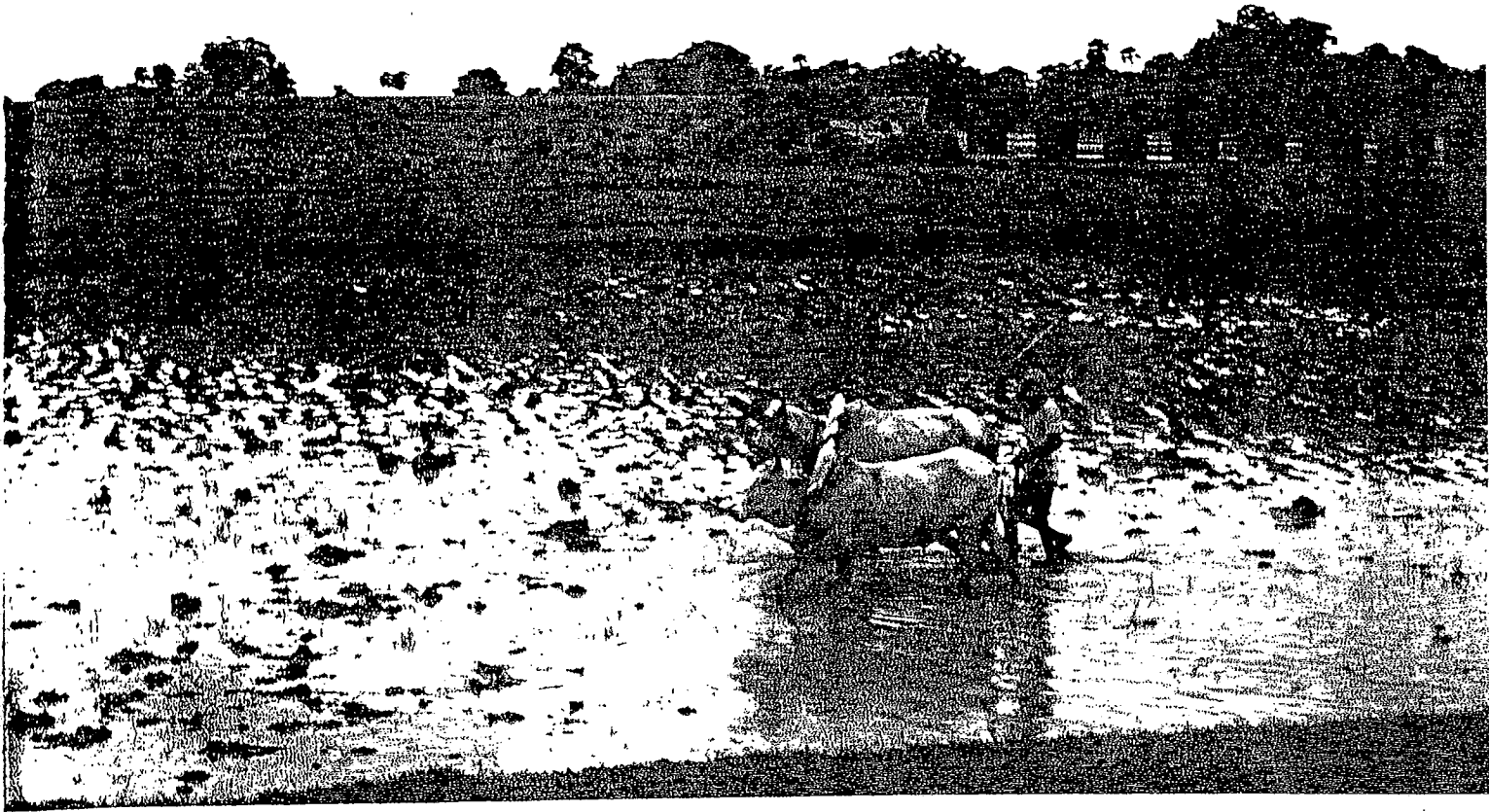
Having made the decision to teach his *Dharma* to 'trainable men', Śākyamuni Buddha determined to teach the five ascetics with whom he had practised austerities during the six years of wandering in the forests. Accordingly, he made his way north along the Nairāñjanā River to the

Vārāṇasī, where he went to a forested area known as the Rṣipatana Mṛgadāva.

One can follow the old route north along the west bank of the Nairāñjanā River where, with the exceptions of some power lines and the ubiquitous trucks of the Indian highways, some sights must closely resemble those that greeted Śākyamuni on his first post-Enlightenment trip (Fig. 1). The countryside exhibits lush growth during the rainy season and usually abundant grain production. The cultivation methods have changed little over the centuries and although there is a modern railway bridge and elevated right-of-way in the background of this photograph, such a ploughman, very possibly this individual's own ancestors, would have been among the views that greeted the newly enlightened Buddha on his journey north to the Rṣipatana Mṛgadāva.

Conventionally, according to the *Mahāvastu*, the name Rṣipatana (literally 'fallen sage' or 'fallen wiseman') refers to the place where the bodies of the five hundred Pratyeka Buddhas (literally 'Buddha for one's self', a lesser type of Buddha who does not teach but keeps his attainment to

nirvāṇa. The name Mṛgadāva has its origin in that the king of Vārāṇasī had designated the place as a sanctuary to herds of *mṛga* (essentially 'game creatures'); in effect, it had become one of the first 'game preserves'. However, there is more to the names than a simple recalling of events. It requires an aside into the language of Sanskrit Buddhist names to understand the beauty and communicative elegance of what is being said with this name about the attainment of enlightenment and the 'First Sermon'. At Bodhgayā, the Buddha Śākyamuni had just overcome the Buddhist personification of evil, Māra, whose name means 'Death' and is derived from the the Sanskrit root *mṛ*, essentially 'to die'. *Mṛg* is a verb implying to hunt or pursue and *mṛga* means 'deer' only in a general sense. Technically, *mṛga* refers to any small game animal that might live in a forest, especially antelope and deer, notably those creatures that are pursued or chased — by running they hope to avoid death and thereby they are 'those afraid to die', which is what *mṛga* literally means. 'Deer' simply became a convenient English equivalent for the term



(Fig. 1) View of farm land along the banks of the Nairañjanā River Bihar State

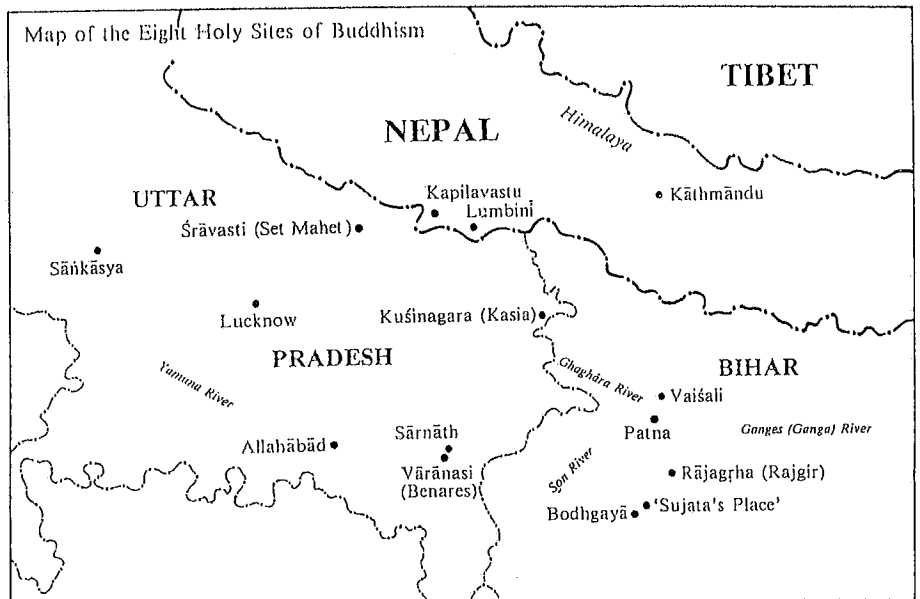
interpretation of it during the Tang dynasty (618-907). Therefore, Śākya-muni conquers Death through his insights and travels to the park of those 'who are afraid to die' to teach them how to overcome death! Double entendre such as this is a deliberate process in the Sanskrit language known as *śleṣa* and Buddhist Sanskrit literature abounds with it. It adds overtones of meaning to statements that then reinforce the major themes of a passage. It must be noted that there is a debate as to when this technique came into Buddhist literature. For many, the 'original' language of Buddhism does not appear to have been Sanskrit but is either Pāli or Māgadhi. However, even in Pāli the name 'Deer Park' is 'Isipatana Migadāya' (exhibiting nothing but simple phonetic changes from a presumed Sanskrit original) and the allusions of the text seem to be earlier than the second century BC when there was a period of translation of the early Buddhist texts into the central Indian literary Sanskrit in Mathurā

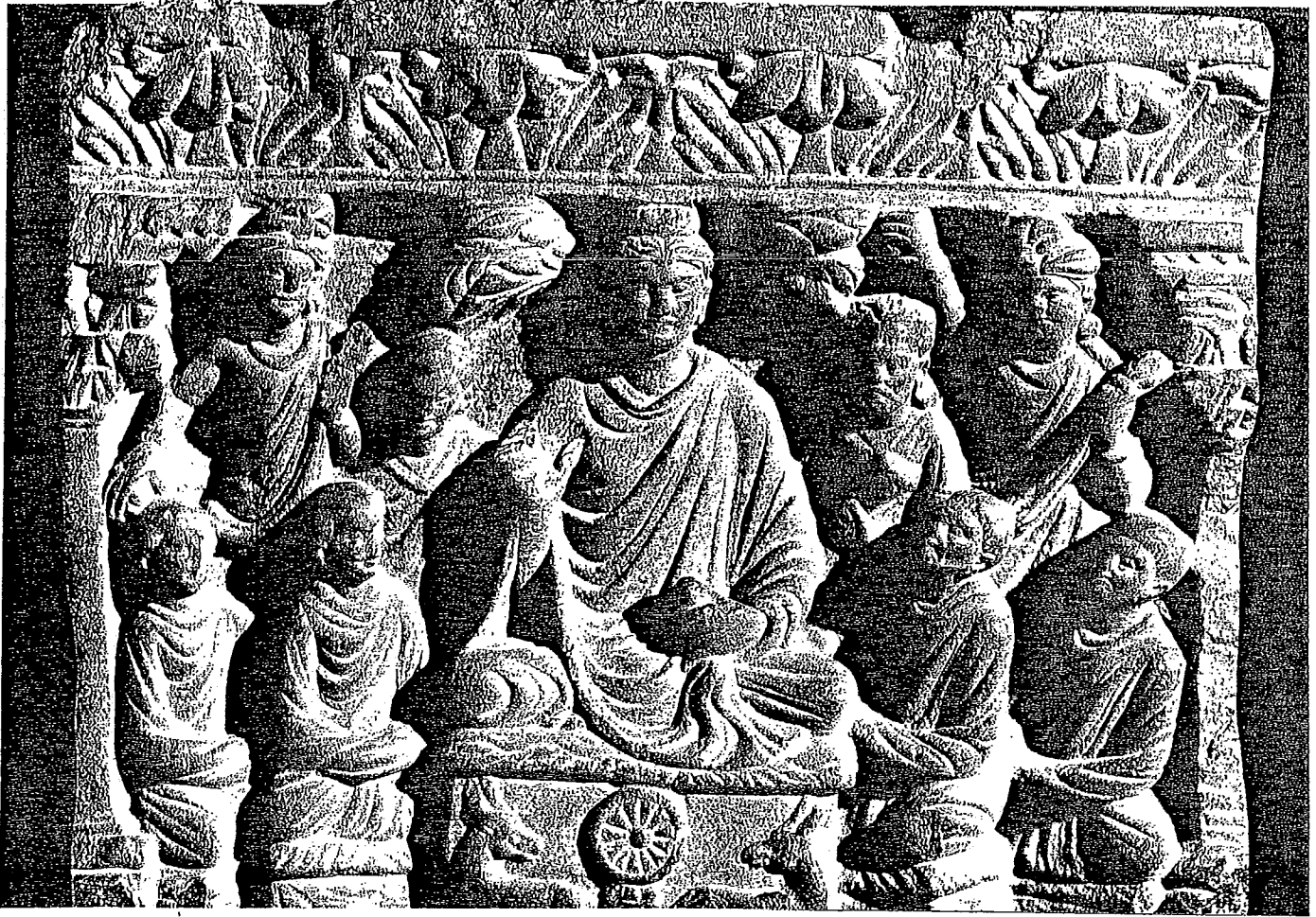
and associated centres. Thus, the symbolism of the Rṣis and Mṛga extends to the earliest layers of Buddhist literature.

As Śākyamuni approached his former companions at the Mṛgadāva, they spoke among themselves and said: Your reverences, this recluse Gotama is coming, he lives in abundance, he is wavering in his striving, he has reverted to a

life of abundance. He should neither be greeted, nor stood up for, nor should his bowl and robe be received; all the same a seat may be put out, he can sit down if he wants to. (*Majjhima-nikāya* 1.171, trans. Horner)

But his appearance, bearing and personal radiance (*prabhā*) were such that the ascetics rose to greet him with all respect and formality. They received him as one who has self-attained the state of a 'further-man', the goal to





(Fig. 2) Śākyamuni delivering the First Sermon while displaying the *abhaya-mudrā*
From Gandhāra (Peshawar Valley, Pakistan),
c. 3rd century AD
Patna Museum

which they aspired, who by virtue of his attainment was worthy of being their teacher. Early accounts of the 'First Sermon' differ in both their content and as to the number of ascetics taught. For example, in the *Ariyapariyesana-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* (I.172), wherein Śākyamuni is describing his meeting of the ascetics and the First Sermon to a group of monks, Śākyamuni says that he taught two monks while the other three walked for almsfood (went begging); he then taught three monks while the other two walked for almsfood. However, the version of the First Sermon found in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* of the *Anguttara-nikāya* (and all of its similar versions, as in the *Lalitavistara*) in which the Buddha

has become the commonplace one in Buddhist culture and art.

After addressing the monks about the benefit of following neither the path of extreme asceticism nor extreme luxury but to follow the Middle Way where the needs of life are met without excess, Śākyamuni continues his discourse to them:

O' monks having abandoned the two extremes, the Tathāgata will teach the *Dharma* by means of the path of the Middle Way [the Eightfold Path]: 1. right views, 2. right intentions, 3. right speech, 4. right action, 5. right livelihood, 6. right effort, 7. right mindfulness, 8. right meditative concentration.

O' monks, here are the Four Āryan Truths [Four Noble Truths] and what are they? They are 1. suffering (*duḥkha*, literally, 'unsatisfactoriness'), 2. the source of suffering, 3. the destruction of suffering, and 4. the way that leads to the destruction of suffering.

What is meant by suffering? Birth, old age, sickness, death, separation from the object desired, and joining with what one does not desire are suffering...

The source of suffering is desire.

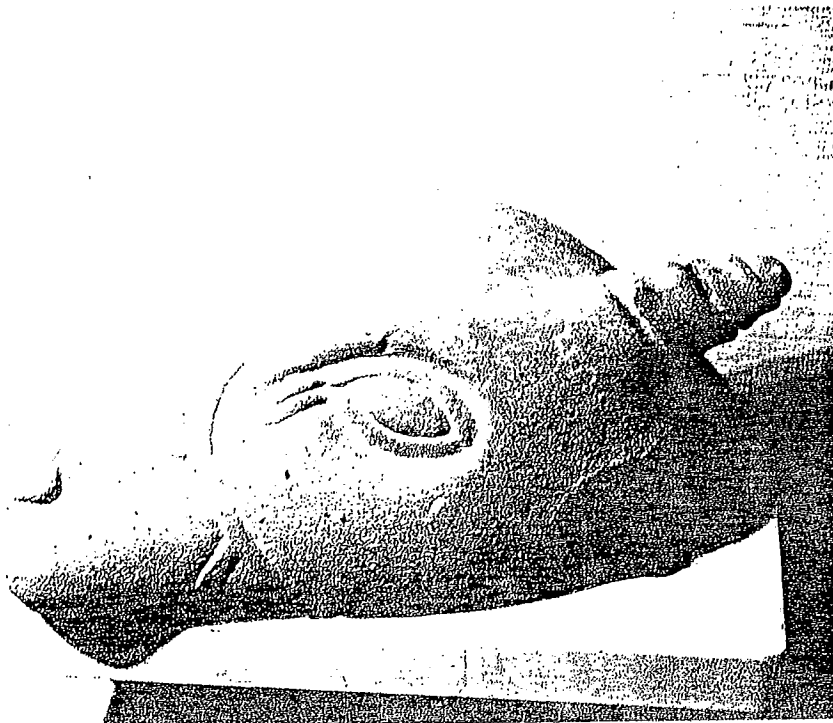
What is meant by the destruction of suffering? The destruction of suffering is freedom from all desires...

What is meant by the way that leads to the destruction of suffering? It is the Eightfold Path [of the Middle Way]. (Summary, based on several texts and translations)

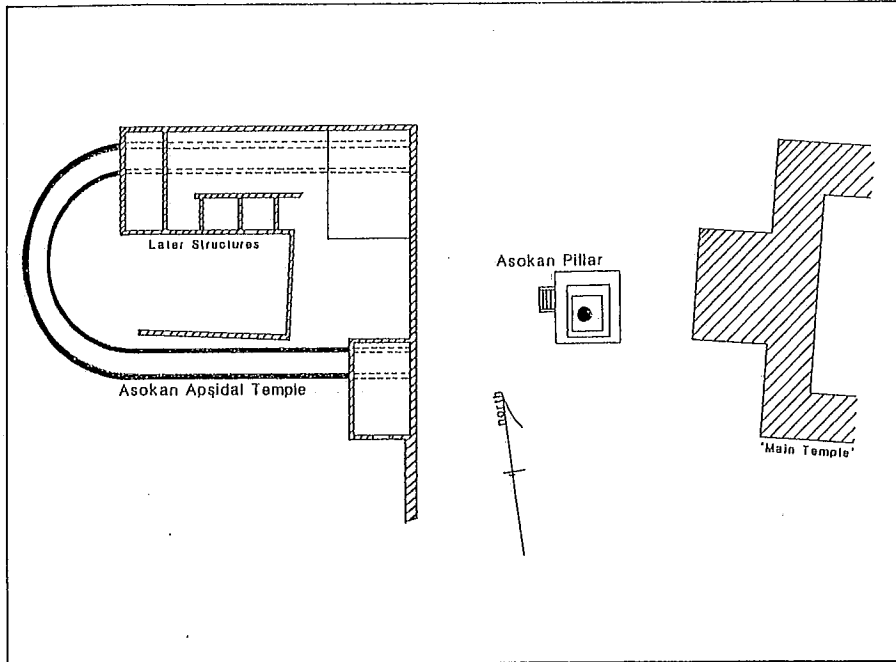
The teaching is generally said to have taken place in the second watch of the night (midnight to 4 a.m.) and to have been accompanied by many miraculous signs and the visitation of Indra and Brahmā, the four great heavenly kings (Caturmahārāja or the Lokapāla of the Devaloka) and many other beings of the spiritual worlds. In Buddhism this is the 'setting in motion of the Wheel of the Law' (*dharma-cakrapravartana*), invoking ancient Vedic symbolisms (*Atharvaveda*, 10th Kanda) of the wheel as a year symbol constituting the order of the year cycle and thereby the order of the progression of existence. With this sermon, Gotama Buddha established what is known as the Āryan kingdom the



(Fig. 3) Śākyamuni delivering the First Sermon while displaying the 'Gandhāran version' of the *dharmacakra-mudrā*
From Gandhāra (Peshawar Valley, Pakistan),
c. 3rd century AD
Lahore Museum



(Fig. 4) Antelope (*mṛga*) head from the
Mauryan apsidal temple at Sārnāth
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum

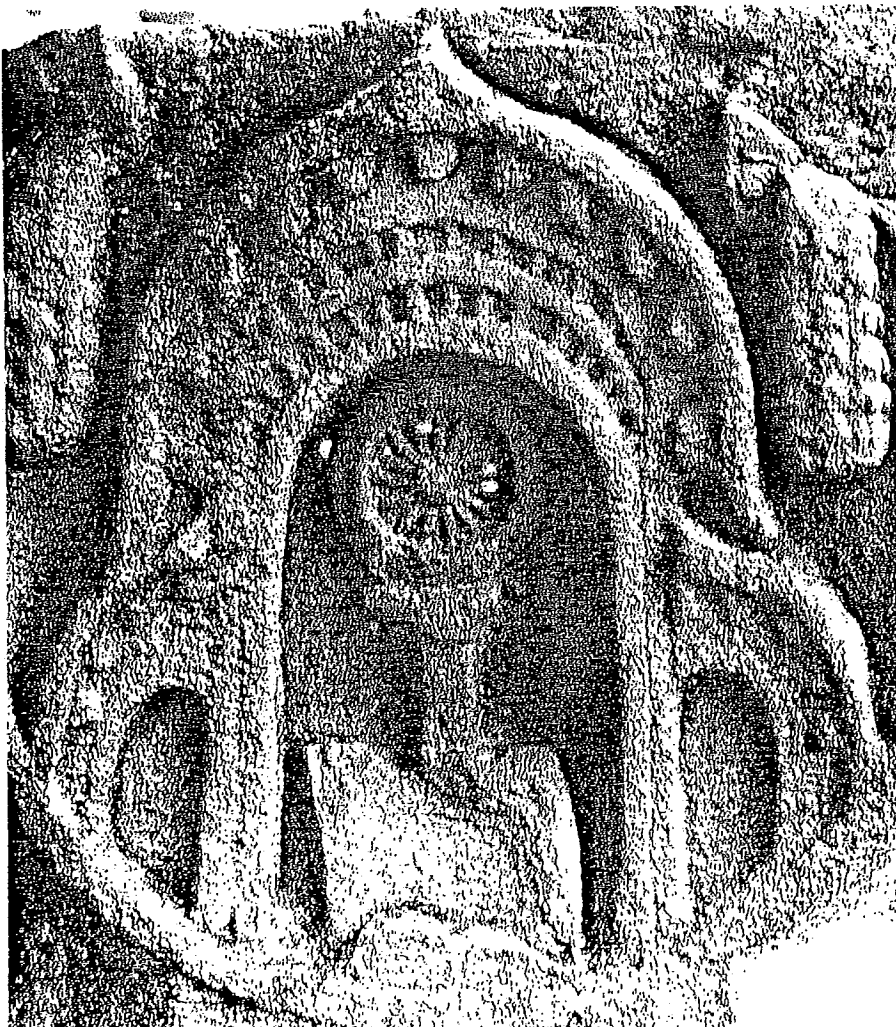


(Fig. 5) Sketch plan of the Mauryan apsidal temple at Sarnath

(Fig. 6, bottom) Relief depicting the temple of the First Sermon (*Saddharmacakra-gandhakuṭi*?) on a railing pillar from Bodhgayā c. 120-100 BC Bodhgayā Museum

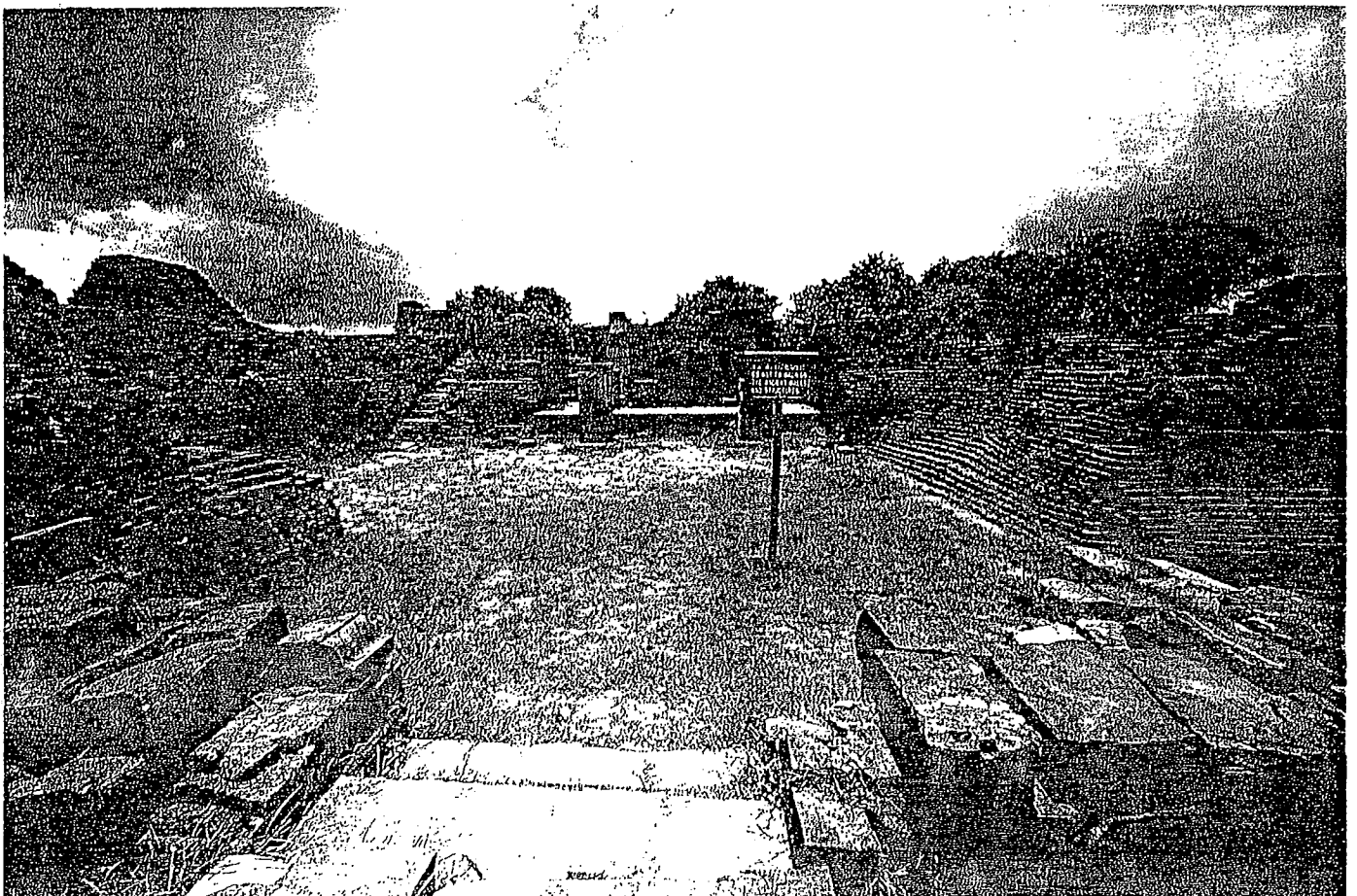
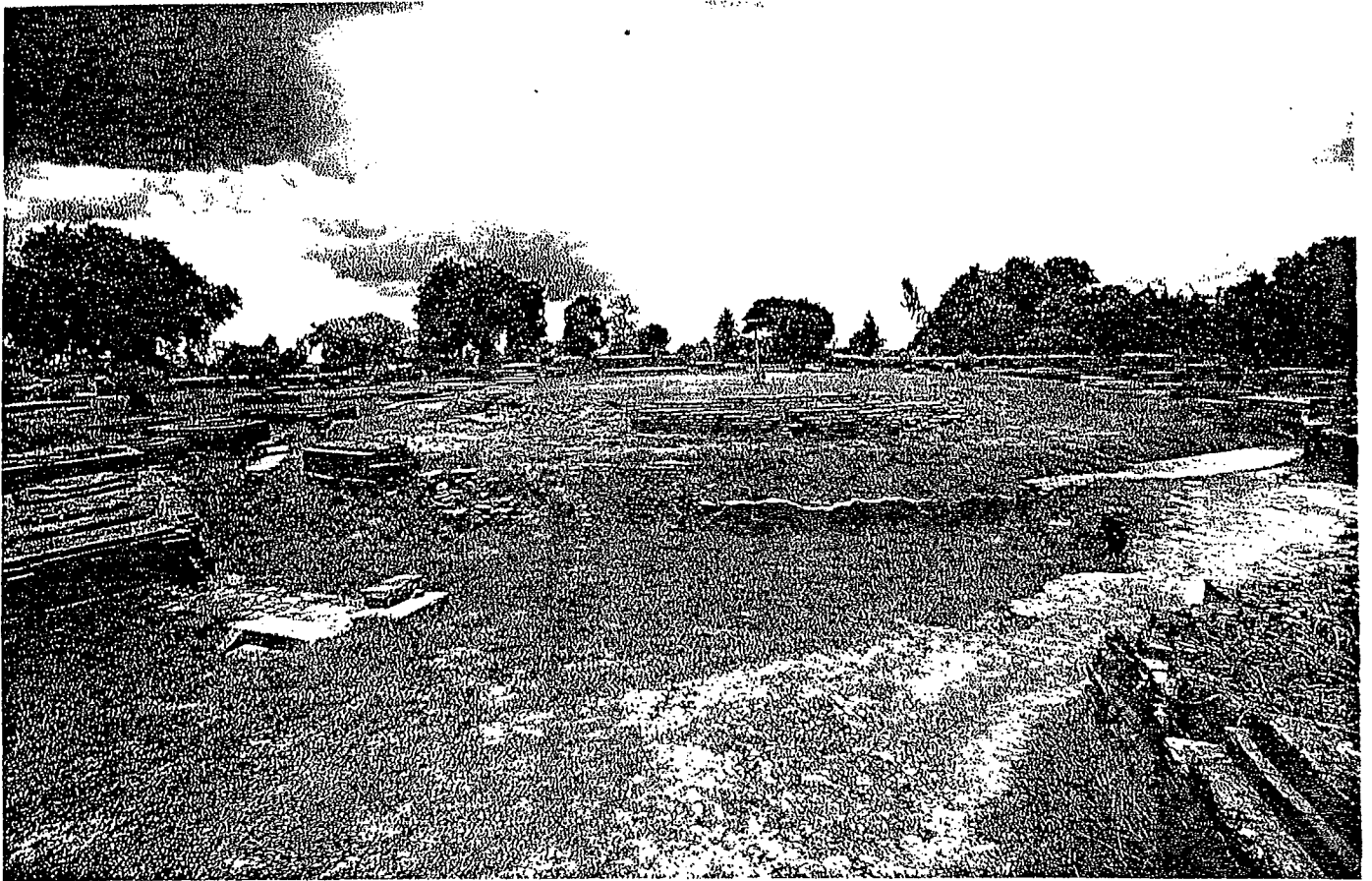
(Fig. 7, opposite top) Dharmarājikā Stūpa at Sarnath Pre-Mauryan (c. 350-300 BC)? to Gupta period (320-500 AD)

(Fig. 8, opposite bottom) 'Main Shrine' at Sarnath Śuṅga(?) (c. 185-c. 73 BC) to Gupta (320-500 AD) period (remains presently visible date from the Gupta period)



beings follow, at their own pace, the path to enlightenment.

Apparently since the time of the Buddha's First Sermon, the Rṣipatana Mṛgadāva and its immediate surroundings have been the focus of pilgrimage and considerable veneration. In the strictest sense of the word, it is *the* Buddhist *pīṭha* (for explanation of this term see Part I of this article, November 1985, pp. 46-61), for it is where the master sat and delivered his instructions to his disciples — where he began the process of sharing his insights with those receptive beings who had seen the goal but who had not themselves found the way. Sculptural representations of the preaching Buddha, signified by his *abhaya-mudrā* in early works and the *dharmacakra-mudrā* in later images, abound in sculpture of the Indic world (Figs 2 and 3). These appear to be surrogates for the *pīṭha* at Sarnath, the modern name of the site where the Rṣipatana Mṛgadāva is located. No later than Aśokan times (c. 270-220 BC), the Rṣipatana Mṛgadāva site had great importance equal to or even surpassing that of Bodhgayā. Possibly in part because of its proximity to one of the great ancient cities and religious centres of India, Vārāṇasī, it retained that importance until Muslim



Sārnāth is presently a large archaeological park just north of the city of Vārāṇasī, and is, without doubt, one of the most rewarding of all Buddhist sites in India to visit. Not only is the site of easy access, but Sārnāth is considered by many to be the home of the beautiful fifth-century Gupta school of sculpture and the site museum is filled with works of surpassing quality and elegance.

Originally known as the Śrī-Saddharmacakra Jinavihāra (The Victor's [Buddha's] Monastery of the Revered Wheel of the Good Law), or more simply the Dharmacakra Jinavihāra, the site has never really lost its context in the Buddhist world. During the Islamic period, the monastery fell into complete disuse and its buildings and ruins became merely an abundant source of bricks for roads, bridges, and other building projects. For example, in 1794, Bābu Jagat Singh, the Diwān of Rāja Chet Singh of Vārāṇasī, virtually 'mined' the Dharmarājikā Stūpa to exhaustion to build a bazaar, still known as Jagatgañj. However, even during these trying times, occasional Sri Lankan and Burmese monks found their way to the site.

There is considerable disagreement regarding the precise spot where the First Sermon took place at Sārnāth. Current opinions range from the Caukhaṇḍī Stūpa, an unexcavated site just west of the museum, the Dhamekh Stūpa at the eastern side of the site, the Dharmarājikā Stūpa and the place of the Aśokan pillar. While this author has no intention of subjecting the reader to the kind of scholarly debate necessary to 'disprove' previous suggestions and to 'prove' that which follows, it does seem that one place has been completely overlooked as a possibility, in spite of very early supporting evidence for the identification. This is the Mauryan period (c. 321-185 BC) apsidal temple just to the west of the Aśokan pillar. Site plans (Fig. 5) show a large apsidal temple with its open end to the east on axis with and facing the Mauryan pillar as if the pillar had been set up in front of the entrance to the temple. Ravaged by fire, the hall appears to have been wilfully destroyed. However, among the fragmentary remains in the hall were sections of a wheel similar to the one surmounting the four lions of the



figures, animals, including an antelope (*mrga*) head (Fig. 4) and fragments of railings, all in the characteristically polished Chunār sandstone of the Mauryan period. Given the presence of the wheel, the antelope, and the many other auspicious symbols found in the hall, it may be suggested that the Mauryan architects believed that they were building a hall to commemorate the First Sermon. Interestingly enough, at Bodhgayā there is a relief on a railing made during the Śuṅga period (c. 185-c. 73 BC) that depicts what must

(Fig. 9) Relief depicting the temple of the First Sermon
From Bhārhut, c. 100-80 BC
India Museum, Calcutta

Dharmacakra because of its shape and the presence of the enshrined wheel (Fig. 6). Given what we know of early Indian architecture, it seems almost obvious that this is a representation of the apsidal temple at Sārnāth. The hall depicted in the relief terminates in an apse or in a circular cell of a type

examples. The type of hall is so extensively used to house *caityas* (objects of worship or shrines, mostly miniature *stūpas*) that it is best known in English language literature as a 'caitya hall' although that is not its true name. Regrettably, the foundations of the Mauryan apsidal hall at Sārnāth have been reburied to protect them and while little remains at the site except grassy ruins, the chance survival of a modest relief at Bodhgayā provides us with a glimpse of what may be the early hall of the First Sermon.

The actual date of the origin of the Dharmarājikā Stūpa (Fig. 7) is uncertain; the central portion of the mound has been completely removed by Jagat Singh's 'brick miners', leaving no traces of any early foundations. It is probably not one of the original eight Mahāstūpas that housed the Buddha's relics after their original division into eight portions. Yet, its origin is generally believed by its modern excavators to pre-date Aśoka (the large size of Aśoka's addition to the Dharmarājikā *stūpa*, which measures 1.2 metres in diameter, suggests that it originally encased a smaller *stūpa*) and therefore it also must predate the Aśokan division of the relics. So far as is known, it falls into a unique category of *stūpa* monument — a *stūpa* which is not one of the original eight or nine but one which pre-dates the Aśokan division. That it had major relics, however, is illustrated by the fact that a cylindrical marble relic casket (now lost) and a sandstone relic chest (in the Indian Museum) of very early types were found in the interior. More study is needed on these early monuments to determine their implications for the history of Buddhism. Successive rebuildings include the Aśokan one, another of the Kuṣāṇa period (1st-3rd century AD) and one of the Gupta period (320-500), along with several minor later additions ranging up to the tenth century. It has been argued that the Dharmarājikā Stūpa marks the site of the First Sermon. If this were so, it would be out of keeping with the other three of the four great sites of Buddhism, Lumbinī, Mahābodhī at Bodhgayā and Kuśinagara. At each of the other three, a temple was raised to mark the location of a major event; each has *stūpas* nearby but never as the focal point of the event. It would seem that the Dharmarājikā Stūpa is thus an

important early *stūpa*, located near the temple of the First Sermon and presumably containing relics of Gotama Buddha but not marking the spot of the First Sermon.

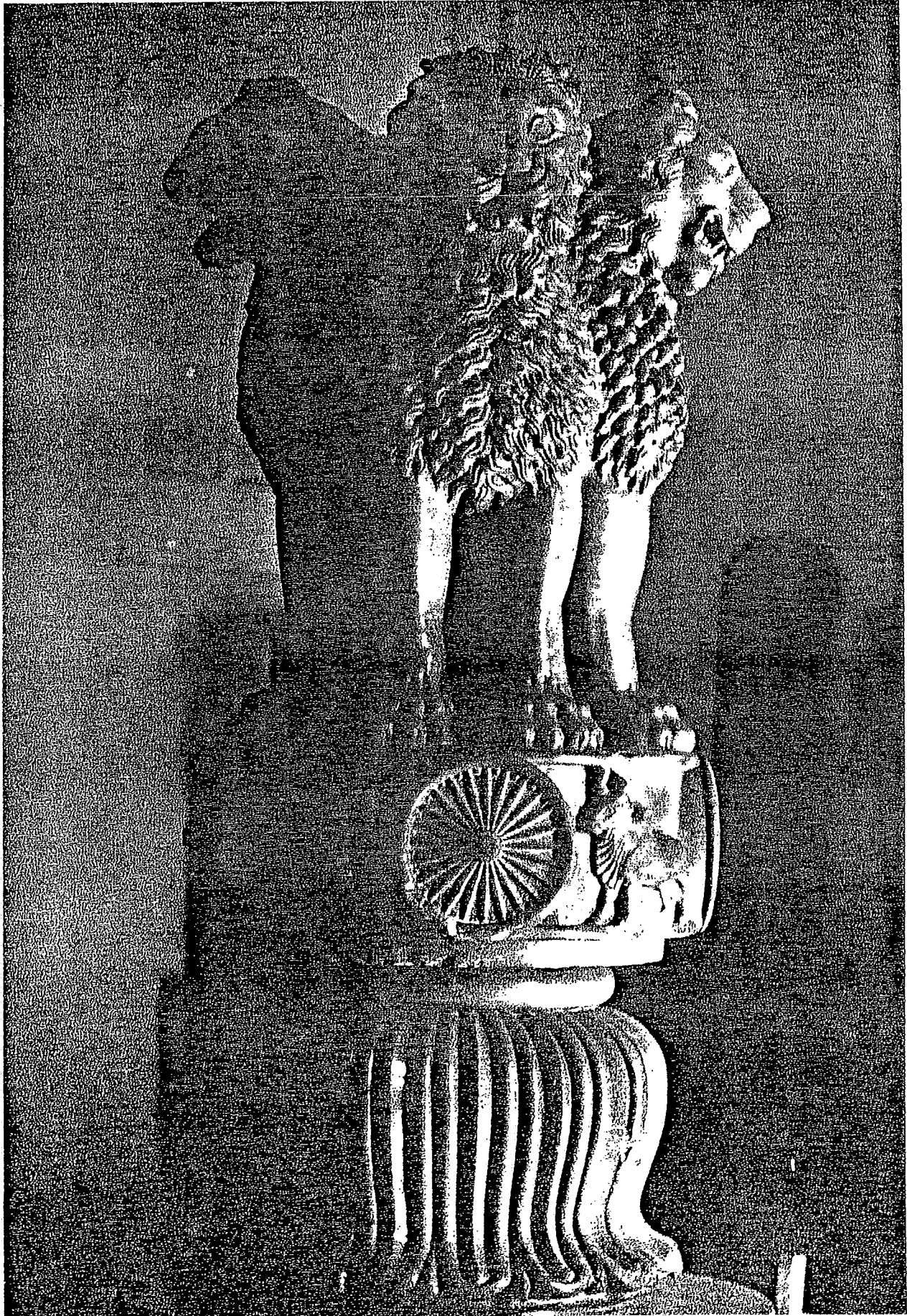
The structure now known as the 'Main Shrine' at Sārnāth (Fig. 8) dates as presently seen from around the fifth century. It is probably built on the site of a Śuṅga period temple that we know of only from reliefs from Bhārhut and Sāñcī (Fig. 9). Because of the massive walls of the present temple, it is reasonable to assume that it was the pyramidal temple that Xuanzang described as 'about two hundred feet high and surmounted by a Golden *āmra* fruit'. The name of this structure has also come down to us and it was known as the *Mūlagandhakuṭī*, literally 'Original Hall of Fragrance'. As has been noted by several others, the very fact that it is called the 'original' means that it probably was not, but was a substitute for, the original Hall of Fragrance.

Although only briefly noted in the *Aśokāvadāna* as a place where the Mauryan emperor visited during his tour of the Buddhist holy sites, Sārnāth has more Mauryan period material than any other single site in India. The Aśokan column just to the west of the Main Temple originally bore the famous capital (Fig. 11) that adorns the flag and coinage of modern India and which now rests in the central hall of the Sārnāth site museum. The column (Fig. 10), badly fractured most likely by lightning, remains *in situ*. It bears no identifying inscription (because of the fame of the site, it may be presumed that none was necessary) and only carries an admonition to the community that the *saṅgha* (monkhood) cannot be divided by anyone. This assertion addresses the schismatic pressures that Buddhism was undergoing during the Mauryan period and was probably added to the pillar sometime after it had been set up, but still during the Maurya period. Considering that it had to have fallen from a height of about fifteen metres, the capital (Fig. 11) has survived remarkably intact. Its four adorsed lions, drum animals (Fig. 12) and lotus capital are preserved with only minor nicks and bruises. Indeed, the only portion that was lost was the *dharmacakra* which the lions once supported

(Fig. 13). That this was the premier pillar in the Buddhist world is demonstrated by the fact that there are several full-scale copies of it, one from the Aśokan period at Sāñcī and others at Kārī and Kānheri (Cave 3) in Western India. There is also a first century AD relief on the *torāṇa* of Sāñcī Stūpa III (Fig. 14) showing devotees circumambulating the Aśokan column. Thus, by no later than the first century AD, Aśoka's monument to Buddhism had become worthy of veneration in its own right.

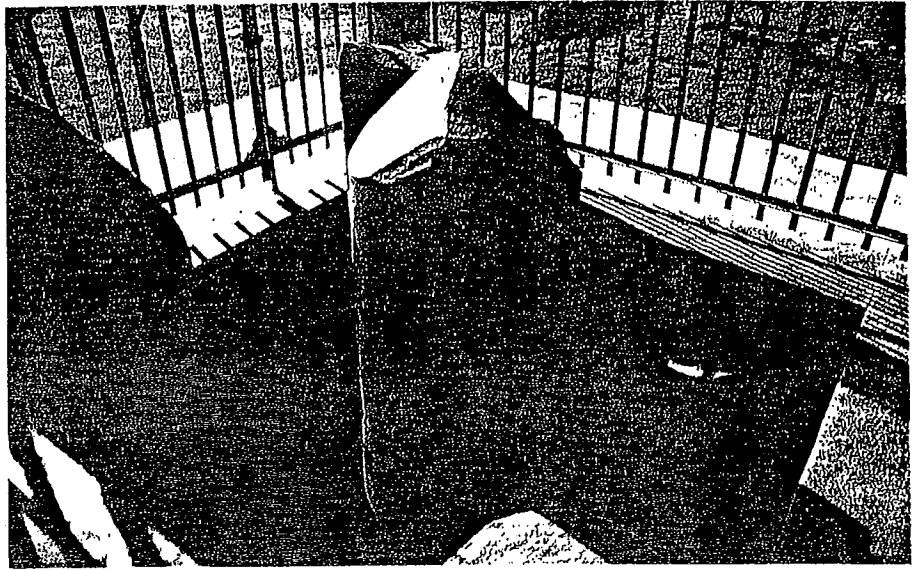
Fragments of several carved stone human heads of the Maurya period (Figs 15, 16 and 17) came to light in the excavation of the apsidal hall that this author has identified as the probable site of the Mauryan hall of the First Sermon. The exact locations where they were found are apparently unrecorded or at least unpublished; in any case, they would be of little significance since the site was so disturbed that no location can be certain to have a particular relevance. Because of the sculptures' importance to the history of Indian art, however, no one should visit the site without being aware of them. The bearded head in Figure 15 might be that of one of the ascetics who intently listened to the Buddha's teaching of the *Dharma* at Sārnāth. Two other less complete heads in the storeroom at Sārnāth also seem to be representations of ascetics and one must assume that there would have been others at the site.

Another group of fragments includes two heads, one of which is crowned (Fig. 16), the other wreathed (Fig. 17). These heads are remarkable in many ways. Their headdresses are unlike the princely turbans usually associated with the pre-Christian era 'Indian' style of royal figures as seen at Mathurā, Bhārhut, Sāñcī and in early Swāt (Pakistan). The merlon portion of the crown on the head with the wreath and merlon crown itself relate directly to Achaemenid royal portraits and the convention for it may have come to India with the presumed migration of craftsmen after the fall of Persepolis to Alexander the Great in 330 BC. Yet the wreath convention, although possibly Near Eastern or even Hellenic in origin, is, by the Mauryan period, totally integrated into Indian symbolism with examples of the type being found in several schools of

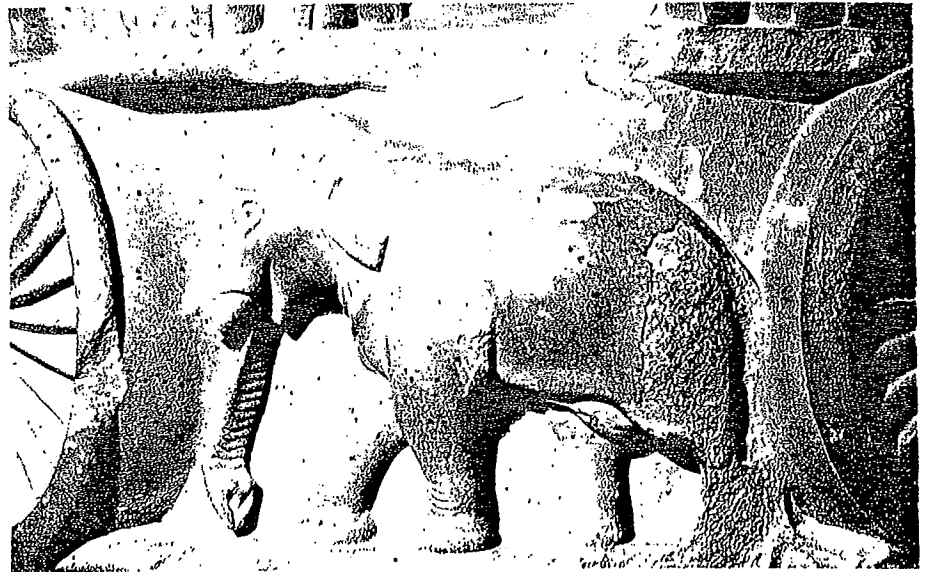


(Fig. 11, *opposite*) Capital of the Aśokan column at Sārnāth
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum

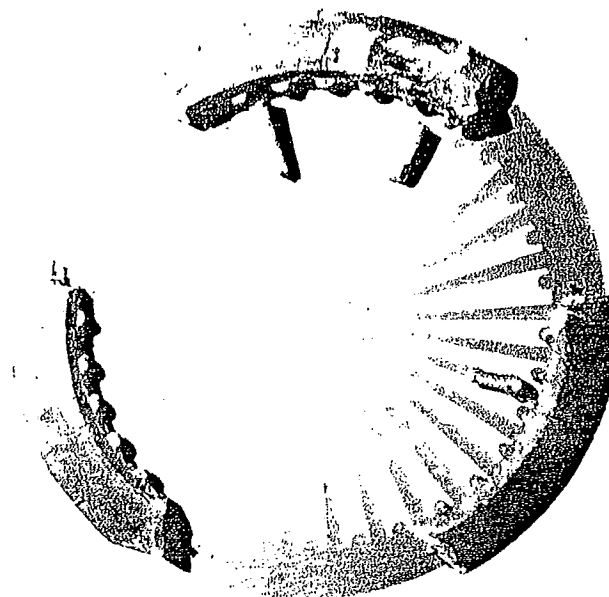
(Fig. 10) Fragments of the Aśokan column under a protective shed at Sārnāth
c. 250 BC

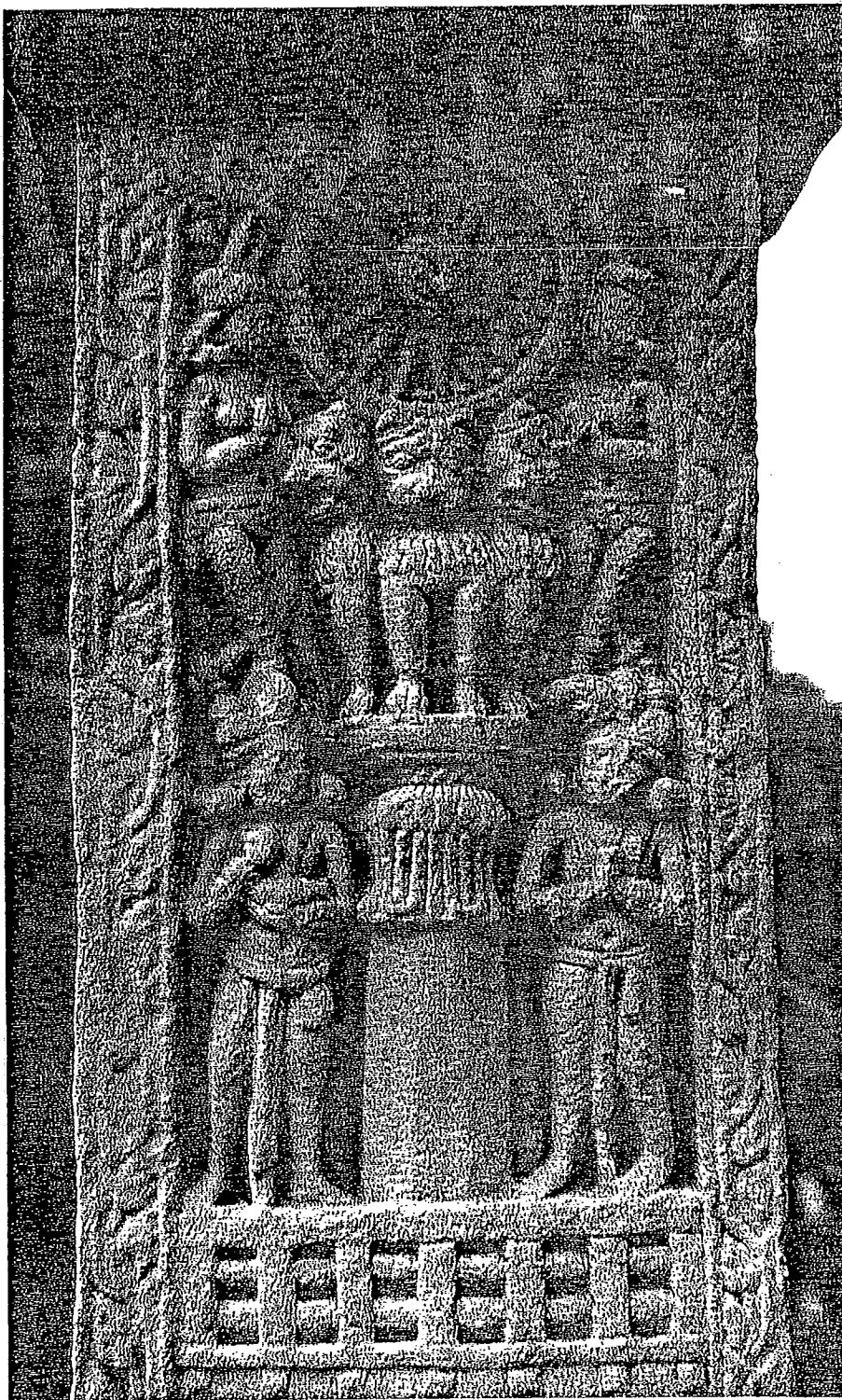


(Fig. 12) Drum figure of an elephant on the Aśokan capital at Sārnāth
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum



(Fig. 13) Fragments of the *dharmacakra* from atop the capital of the Aśokan column at Sārnāth
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum





(Fig. 14) Relief depicting devotees circumambulating the Aśokan column on the *torana* of Stūpa III at Sāñcī
Early 1st century AD

sculpture. The second head, wearing only a wreath, is remarkable indeed. The convention of the wreath is found very widely in Gandhāran sculpture

associated with both Buddha and bodhisattva figures as a symbol of their religious attainment. Since royal portraits in India bear little relationship to these images, and since only the known early images of bodhisattvas closely compare, it must be suggested that these two heads may be from Mauryan bodhisattva images. Moreover, even very early representations of

(Fig. 2) depict both the ascetics whom Śākyamuni conventionally first taught as well as groups of bodhisattvas. It is possible that the archetype for the Gandhāran convention was a scene at the Mauryan temple of the 'First Sermon'. If this proves to be correct, the whole notion of the rise of the bodhisattva cult and bodhisattva imagery is set back in time almost two hundred years!

The modern sculpture storeroom at Sārnāth contains numerous other fragments of Mauryan sculpture from the apsidal temple location, but to this author's knowledge there has been no attempt to assemble the miscellaneous body parts and fragments even to see what might have been there. Whether the bodies of any of the figures and possibly other figures may be reconstructed or not or whether whole figures were removed at some early date to make a land fill for a bridge or road is unknown. Whatever the answer is, it will alter the present view of Mauryan period art and Buddhist history.

Discovered between the 'Main Shrine' (Mūlagandhakuṭī) and the Dharmarājikā Stūpa of Aśoka was a colossal image of a Buddha standing under a huge umbrella-supported pillar (Figs 18 and 19). The inscription says it was dedicated by the monk (*bhikṣu*) Bala in the year 3 of the reign of the Kuṣāṇa emperor Kanīška (c. 123 AD) at the place where the Lord [Buddha] walked. Although called a 'bodhisattva' (literally 'enlightenment-being') in its inscription, the sculpture is clearly a representation of a Buddha and is an example of the Mathurā school of sculpture. Mathurā, which is some considerable distance away from Sārnāth, had become one of the great centres of Buddhism in the last two centuries of the pre-Christian era and by the time this image was created, it was capital of all of Kuṣāṇa India. The distinctive mottled sandstone of the image, from known quarries not far from Fatehpur Sikri, demonstrates that not only the idea of the image came from the Mathurā region, but the very stone out of which it is carved did as well. Given the fact that there are no other stone images of the Buddha in local Sārnāth stone from this period, it is probable that a 'dominant' stone



(Fig. 15) Head of a bearded ascetic
From the Mauryan apsidal temple at Sārnāth,
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum



(Fig. 16, *top right*) Fragment of a
(bodhisattva?) head with a merlon crown
From the Mauryan apsidal temple at Sārnāth,
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum



(Fig. 17) Fragment of a (bodhisattva?) head
with a wreath
From the Mauryan apsidal temple at Sārnāth,
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum



(Fig. 18) 'Bodhisattva' [Buddha] in front of a pillar that originally supported the umbrella (*chattra*) canopy of Figure 19
From just outside the Mūlagandhakuṭī ('Main Temple') at Sārnāth, dedicated by the *bhikṣu* Bala in the year 3 of the Kaniṣka era (c. 123 AD)
Sārnāth Museum

Mathurā. There were demonstrably different image traditions, sometimes in other types of stones, at Bodhgayā, Kauśāmbī, even at Mathurā, and especially in Gandhāra. Some of these traditions have surviving examples, but the great lithic images of the period (in Central India) were those of the 'Bala' type, for several examples have been

As any visitor to the site will soon learn, Sārnāth was one of the great art centres of the Gupta period. Although many of the sculptures have been removed to the Indian Museum in Calcutta and others are on display in other museums in India and elsewhere, the collection at the site is still overwhelming. For many who visit the site, the Buddha displaying the *dharma-cakrapravartana-mudrā* (Figs 20, 21 and 22) from the third quarter of the fifth century epitomizes the Gupta school. It was found in the excavation campaign of 1904 to 1905 just to the south of the Dharmarājikā Stūpa, but its original context is unknown (it might have been placed at one of the cardinal points of the Dharmarājikā

graceful beauty and unqualified elegance of the figure of the Buddha along with the rich ornamental detailing in the halo is simply not found combined in such a manner in other schools of Indian art. Even the Ajaṇṭā caves, with their lavish ornamentation, seem crude and provincial when compared to this sculptural idiom. Indeed, the quietude and beatific appearance of the face (Fig. 21) has led a number of authors to indulge in speculations on the ontology of Buddhism and the image has been cited in arguments about the 'deification' of Śākyamuni. Unfortunately for that theory, there has never been a 'deification' of Śākyamuni, or any other Buddha for that matter; a Buddha, by definition, is a teacher. He is one who has attained 'transcendent' insight into soteriological, ontological and eschatological matters, but the manner in which he achieved his insight and his teaching of the way (soteriological methodology) is an attainment ultimately open to all beings and not a matter of divinity.

Beneath the platform or throne (properly *pīṭha*) on which the Buddha sits is depicted a group of figures flanking the two sides of a *dharma-cakra* (seen head-on from the rim) and two reclining antelope. To the viewer's left of the *dharma-cakra* are two shaven-headed males, a female and a dwarf or possibly a child, while to the right are three shaven-headed males. The five males are the five ascetics who were selected by the Buddha to hear the First Sermon whereas the female and the dwarf/child are probably donor figures present as patrons of the image.

While the presence of the five ascetics makes it certain that the 'First Sermon' is being depicted, the Buddha's particular *mudrā*, the *dharma-cakrapravartana-mudrā* (Fig. 22), suggests that there is more to this teaching gesture than is obvious from the sculpture. In the language of symbols, it is a universal gesture to indicate the number 'one' with the forefinger. However, this image points to the circle formed by the thumb and forefinger of the right hand with the middle finger of the left hand, not the forefinger. There are various accounts of the order of teachings, most of them having to do with the preaching of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* (better known by its



Kegon-kyō, names). It is usually explained that Śākyamuni taught the *Avataṃsaka* in the second week after his enlightenment but that no one could understand its deep and complex meaning. It was only then that he decided that he must teach 'the beginning' of the process and thus, went to the Mṛgadāva to teach to his former companions. In the '*Avataṃsaka* view' then, the teaching at the Mṛgadāva is not the 'First Sermon' but the 'Second Sermon'. Here, in a single image of Śākyamuni pointing with his middle finger to the wheel formed by the thumb and forefinger of his right

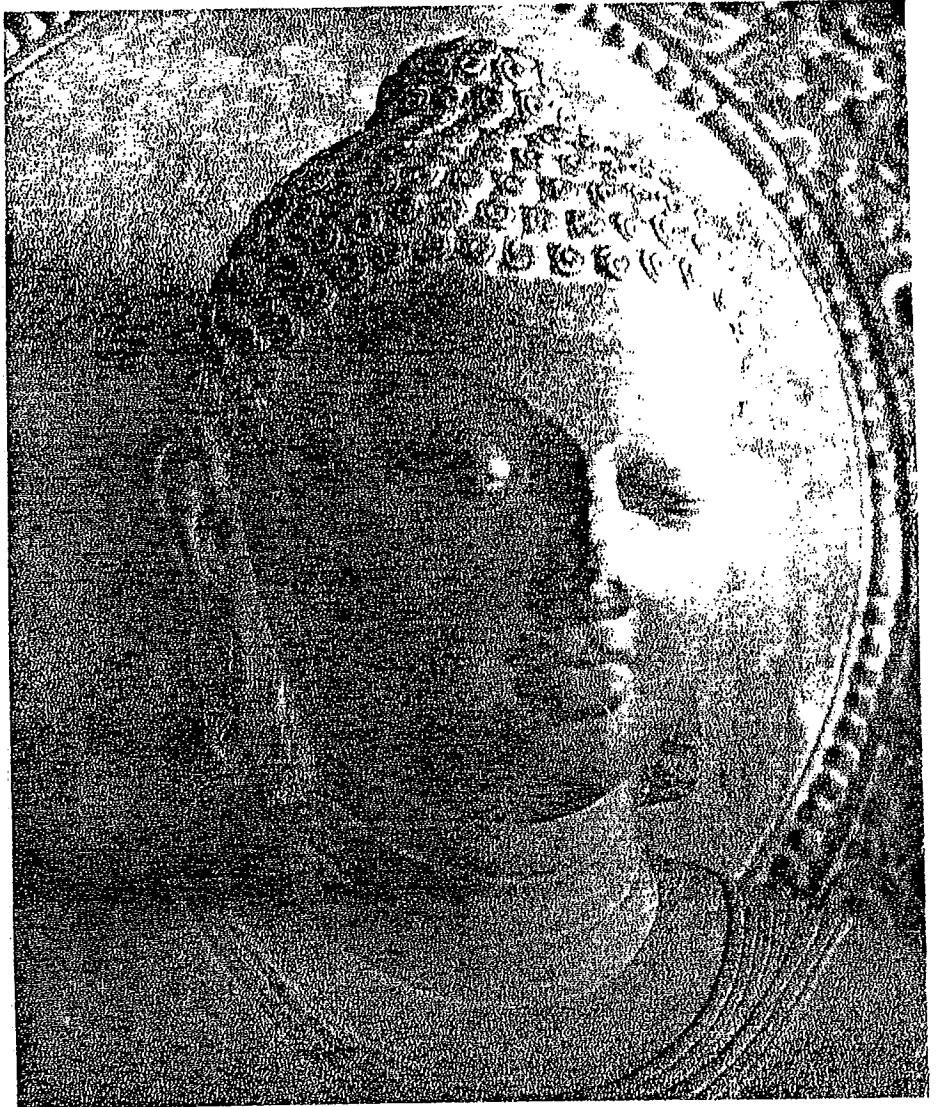
hand, we have evidence of the teaching of the *Avataṃsaka-sūtra* in India.

Modern Sārnāth is a busy place, filled with pilgrims, visitors, archaeology buffs and, because of its small zoo and playground, people simply on holiday at a beautiful park. It is surrounded by a number of Buddhist institutions and to visit all of them would take several days; yet the effort is worthwhile, for nowhere in India except Bodhgayā is Buddhism more alive and vibrant than at Sārnāth, the ancient monastery of the founding of the Āryan kingdom of *Dharma* by the turning of the Wheel of the Law.

(Fig. 19) Umbrella (*chattrā*) canopy that originally shaded the 'Bodhisattva' image of Figure 18
From Sārnāth, c. 123 AD
Sārnāth Museum

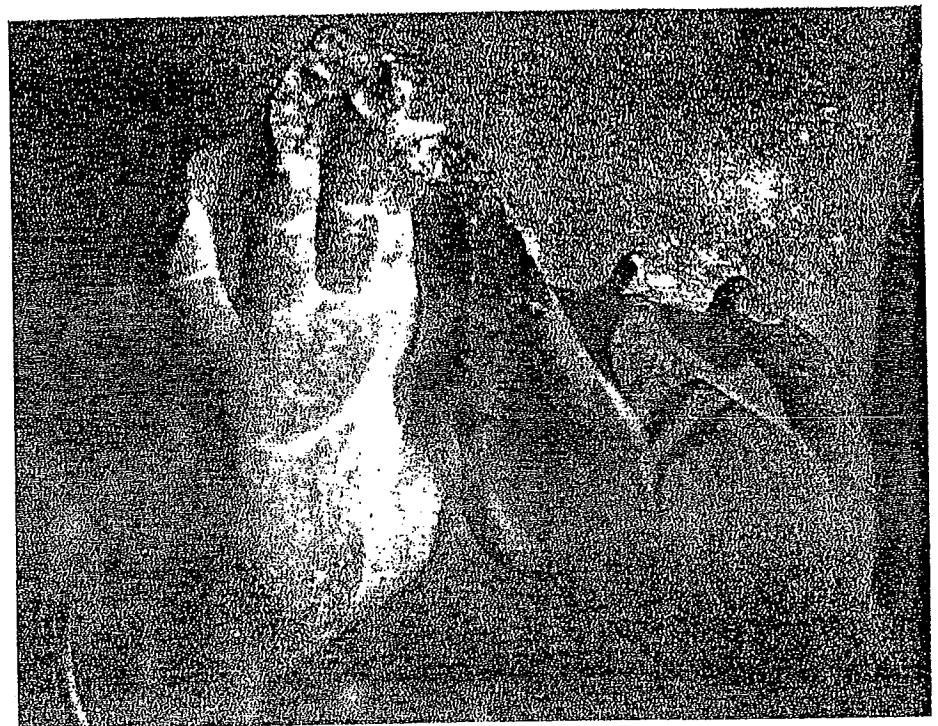


(Fig. 20, *opposite*) Śākyamuni delivering the 'First [Second] Sermon' while displaying the *dharmacakrapravartana-mudrā* from Sārnāth, 1st half 5th century Sārnāth Museum



(Fig. 21, *top*) Detail of Figure 20

(Fig. 22, *bottom*) Detail of Figure 20 illustrating the *dharmacakrapravartana-mudrā* of Śākyamuni



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