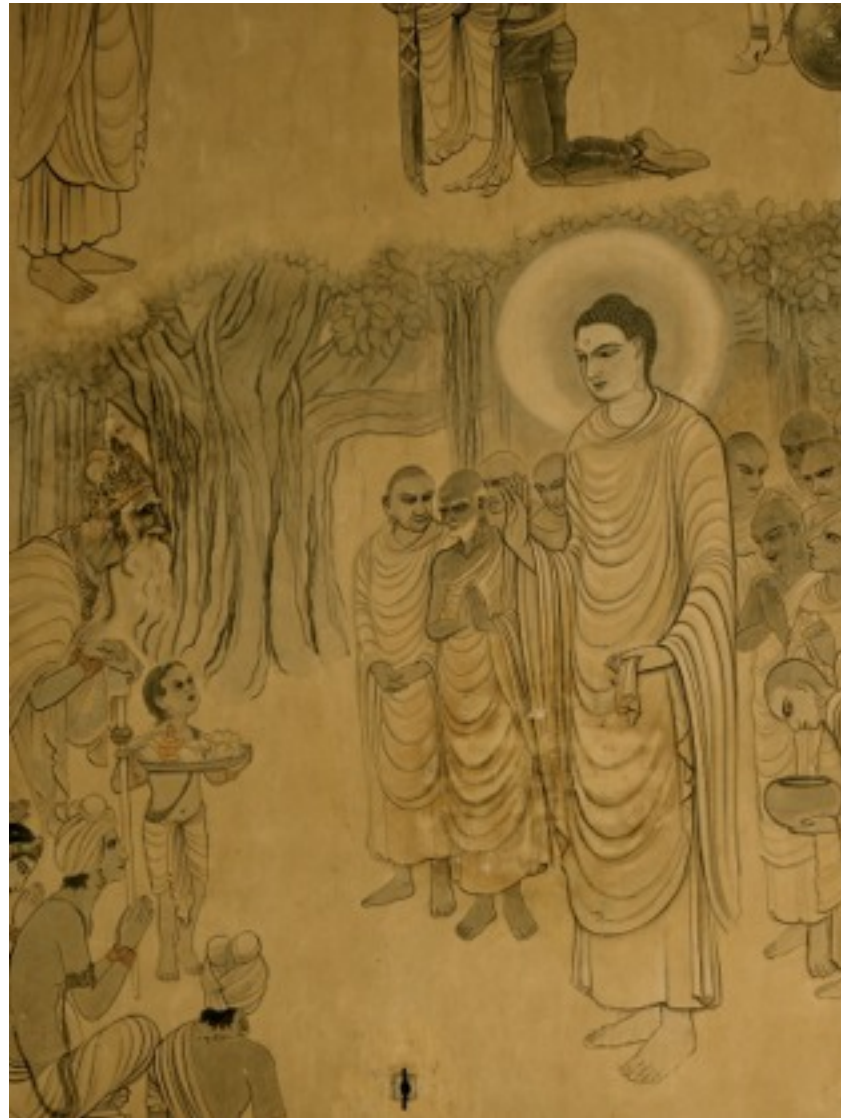


This is where the Buddha walked.
A Pilgrimage to the middle land.





This is a photographic story of an awe inspiring pilgrimage I was fortunate enough to be part of this past winter of 2013. Pariyatti hosted the pilgrimage as an experiment – I was helping as a server on the trip along with Brihas Sarathy and Kory Goldberg. Kory was our main guide. We followed along with Kory Goldberg and Michelle Décary's book, [Along the Path](#), which is a beautiful book to read and reflect on – even if you aren't on pilgrimage. Who knows, it just may inspire you to go!





अकेले चले
WALK ALONE

“There are four places which should be (visited and) seen by a person of devotion,”
the Buddha said to his attendant monk, the Venerable Ānanda.

He then named his birthplace, the place where he attained Enlightenment, the place where he first taught the way to Enlightenment, and the place where he attained *parinibbāna*.

Due to ease of travel, we did not travel in the order of the above named sites to visit, we actually started our trip in Sārnāth, where the Buddha gave his first discourse to the five ascetics. Here is a photo of the *stūpa* in Sārnāth which marks the spot of the Buddha's first discourse.



During our pilgrimage we were fortunate to attend several Saṅgha danas. A Saṅgha Dana is a rare opportunity to serve monks their morning or mid day meal. In Sārnāth - both male and female pilgrims were allowed to serve the monks, which we found was not always standard. Indeed it was a great privilege and we left full of sublime joy. Here is a picture of Patrick Given-Wilson and Ginnie Macleod serving the monks.



Here is a young monk putting gold leaf on the ruins of Sārnāth, which of course is not allowed by the Archeological Society of India!



The next day, a trip was planned to visit the ghats along the Ganges River in Vārānasī. What a contrast! Many of us found it extremely inspiring however, after all India is India – and it wouldn't be as striking without the spiritual diversity and extreme devotion of ash covered ascetics huddled together along the ghats in their tents, along with 1,000's of devotees bathing in the sacred Ganges River, and bright eyed tourists donning orange tunics and dreadlocks – all wandering around the ghats at 6 in the morning. 100's more floated by the scene in boats... with wide open eyes – the pink morning light falling on their beaming faces. We saw a rotting cow floating about 15 feet away from young devotees vigorously bathing in the holy water of Mother Ganga (the Ganges River).





Not by water is one made pure,
Though many people may bathe here.
But one in whom there is Truth,
He is pure, he is a brahmin.

-Buddha

Here is a shot of the burning ghats, where devout Hindus burn the bodies of their loved ones. Here you can see piles of wood waiting on the boats just off the shore:









“Hello boat?” the boat wallas coo as you walk the ghats along the Ganges – which in India is actually called “Mother Ganga”. Kory had arranged for a sunrise boat ride on day 2 of our yatra.



In Vārānasī, we also stopped by the Burmese Vihara where early courses were held in the 70's. It was so lovely to hear stories from John Luxford, Bob Jeffs and Jenny Jeffs about some of their most memorable and sometimes hilarious experiences there. Some of these stories were recorded on video.







Minutes before our bus was to roll out of Sārnāth, something really special happened. Kory came on the loudspeaker in the bus and informed the pilgrims that we had been invited for a relics viewing. After Kory and some of the Teachers had privately requested it, our group was invited by the three senior monks of the Mahābodhi Society for a viewing of the Buddha Relics at the Mūlagandhakuṭi Vihāra.

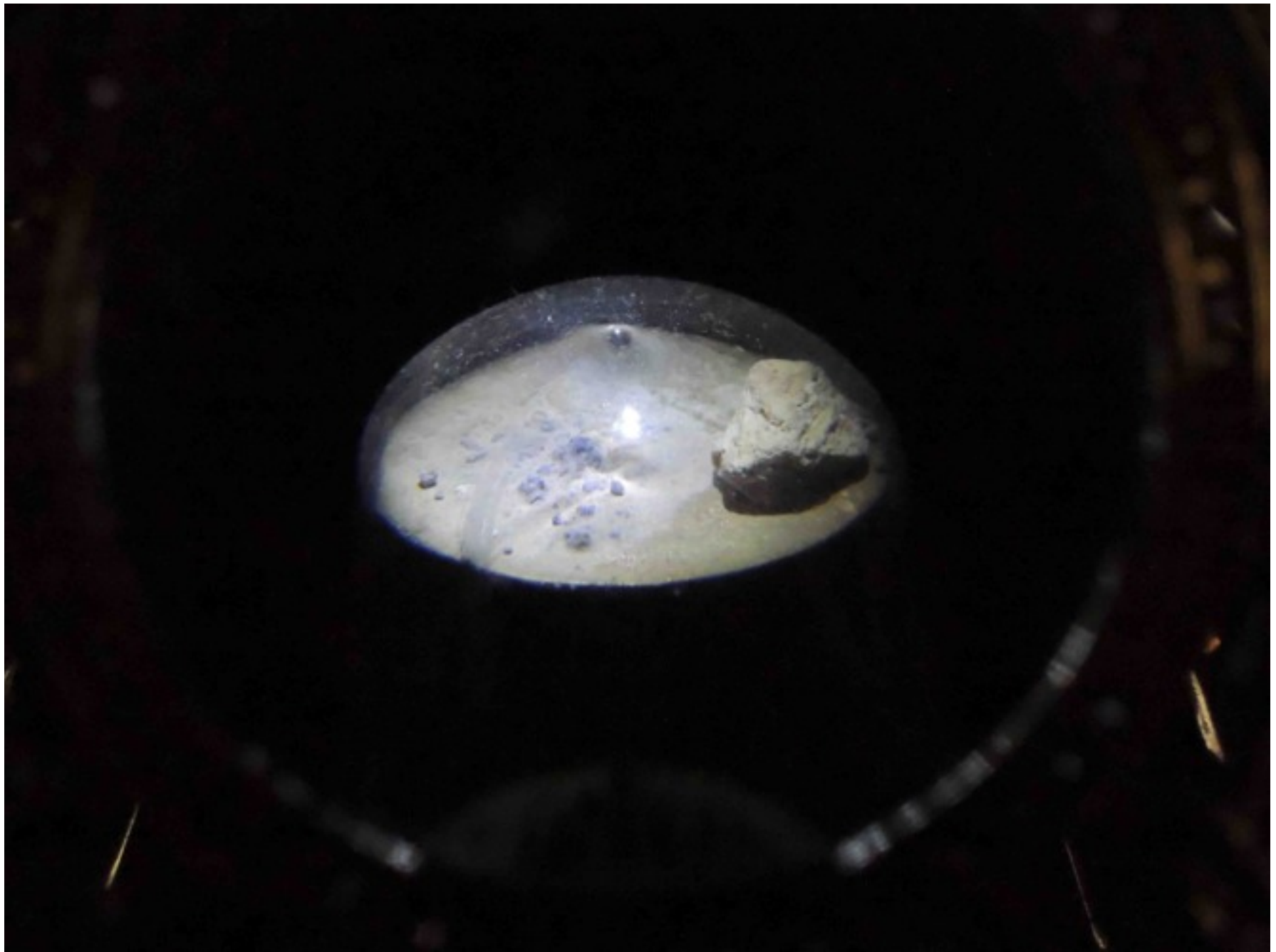
Each pilgrim was allowed the opportunity to pay their respects to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Saṅgha with awareness of *anicca*. It was a sublime and thrilling experience for all. Here is the vessel that contains the Buddha Relics:





22.02.2013 14:24

Here is a close up the Buddha Relics:



We visited the Mūlagandhakuṭi Vihāra in Sārnāth where we were allowed to chant the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* along with several head monks and about 200 Sri Lankan lay devotees. It was a stunning experience – full of *anicca* awareness. A thought kept flowing through my mind as we were chanting: “We are sitting in the exact location where the Buddha gave his very first discourse to the five ascetics.” I turned my camera on, pressed record and sat down to meditate and take part in the chanting; as we finished the chanting, I had the feeling I was connected to all meditators all over the world who cherish what the Buddha taught – a way to come out of deep suffering.

“Oh! The sweetness of Dhamma! Oh! The freedom waiting for anyone who makes sustained and patient right effort!” The thought soaked through my entire mind and body.

Here is a shot of the Mūlagandhakuṭi Vihāra in Sarnath that houses the Buddha Relics and where local Bhikkhus chant the *Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta* every evening at 6:00 o'clock:





Directly after the viewing, paying our respects and meditating with the relics, all the pilgrims' faces seemed to glow with deep reverence and gratitude. Here is a sweet photo of John Luxford, Nirmala Ganla and one of the center managers at Dhamma Cakka where we were fortunate enough to stay and meditate.



In Sārnāth we also visited a school called “Alice Project Universal Education School” where they teach aspects of the Buddha's teaching and practice some form of Ānāpāna. They have over 700 students in attendance there – all happy and thrilled to share some of their classroom lessons.



Here is the group just before leaving Dhamma Cakka Vipassana Center in Sārṇāth:



DHAMMA CHAKKA
धम्म चक्क



In this afterglow, we moved on to Bodhgayā. We began with a meditation under the Bodhi Tree. We were surrounded by many others chanting, meditating and practicing various other devotional practices. Even with such diversity of practices, the atmosphere was suffused in peace and subtlety and all the pilgrims came out softly smiling in the early morning light.





24.02.2013 09:59

We headed for the charming meditator run “Be Happy Cafe” which we visited many times during our 5 day stay in Bodhgayā.

I remembered the owner from Dhamma Kunja, so I went up to her and said, “Hi Krista, do you remember me?”





And she said, “Of course I remember you; you gave me orange juice on day 7 of my first course, how could I forget you?” I stared back at her piercing blue green eyes in awe. We chatted for a while and enjoyed catching up and talking about her life in Bodhgayā. Then I watched her as she skillfully moved about her familiar domain – running her darling cafe with its incredibly yummy food, along with her Indian husband. Krista and her husband helped with many aspects of our Bodhgayā logistics.

On the full moon night of Feb. 25, we packed up our mosquito nets, our shawls, and our meditation cushions and set out to meditate all night at the MahāBodhi Temple. It happened to be my birthday starting at midnight as well. Instead of singing “Happy Birthday” (which Kory and Brihas were threatening...!) To everyone's relief I'm sure, I requested to take the precepts and chant the Buddha Vandana all together that night. So at midnight, under the graceful and sheltering branches of the ancient Bodhi Tree, Dr. Ganla led us in taking the precepts and in paying Homage to the Buddha, Dhamma and Saṅgha in Pāli. It was very beautiful. Meditating all night at the Bodhi Tree was a poignant way to spend contemplating one more year in this vehicle of birth, decay and death that I am so attached to.



That night Brihas and Kory couldn't resist and got me a surprise birthday cake from Be Happy Cafe. Imagine, a delicious carrot cake with cream cheese frosting in Bodhgayā, India! In the end, I did get a “happy birthday serenade” in 15 different languages... which to my initial embarrassment, was incredibly dear and touching, and allowed everyone to truly grasp just how many countries we actually came from. I think my favorite might have been the funny Australian accented one by Patrick Given-Wilson! It was hilarious. Here is a nice photo of Patrick:



Many people said they didn't feel much drowsiness during the all night sitting. I felt pretty awake though not very concentrated at times; overall, it was easier than I thought it would be. As the hours slipped by, we could occasionally contemplate how hard the Buddha worked for all of us - that full moon night so long ago...



With hundreds of other pilgrims camped out for the night, we were certainly not alone. The rule of no loudspeakers or loud chanting helped to create a meditative environment, and I felt a lovely sense of camaraderie with all the other pilgrims there that night.





The “next day” or rather, after a few hours of resting in a horizontal position with awareness of sensation and *anicca*, and some kind of sweet Bodhgayā sleep, we biked to the cave where the Bodhisatta is thought to have practiced *dukkhacariya* ascetic practices (or self mortification practices) – Dugeswari Mountain - and that is when I started to get sick – rather fittingly. As we rode our rented Indian bicycles (some came with brakes, some without) to the mountain range (you can see them in the distance in the photo below), the hot sun beat down on us.

At some point, I started to feel woozy and sluggish. After a while, I began chanting the Buddha Vandana under my breath just to inspire myself and began to think of the ride as a practice in strong determination. Thoughts of the Buddha eating only one grain of rice in a day or standing with one arm raised for days together came wafting into my mind in a swirl of nausea and gratitude.



I may have been experiencing heat exhaustion – or *sāṅkhāras* (formative reactions, the part of the mind that reacts and creates suffering) manifesting on the body as they do – or both – whatever it was – I couldn't help but feel relief to finally reach the mountain where there was a stall selling water in clear plastic bottles. The water was almost hot from sitting outside under the sun – but I glugged it down, and walked on. We trudged up the mountain to the cave where the Buddha may have practiced some of the ascetic practices, which he eventually realized were futile.



Inside the cave was sweltering, yet devout Burmese pilgrims sat inside meditating and paying their respects to the gaunt Bodhisatta image. I could only manage a couple of minutes inside the cave before I had to come back outside to collapse into a sitting position on the rock outside. Everything became quiet and still – what is this body after all – but a vehicle to explore the entire field of *dukkha* (suffering) in order to eventually transcend it. What is a pilgrimage after all – but an awakening reminder of what it took for the Buddha to give us this precious gift – a way out.



While we were in Bodhgayā, we visited the Burmese Vihāra where more early courses were held in the 70's. Bob and John and Jenny told more great stories. It turns out, the same Indian Aunty who used to cook for those early courses happened to still be there – running some aspect of the Vihāra still. They were thrilled to all see each other again after so much time, and reminisce about early “Goenka courses”. It was a touching reunion for all.



While in Bodhgayā, we traveled to Gayāsīsa Hill. The bus ride alone was a mind bending lesson in Indian traffic jams. There was a four way stop – with traffic in every direction as far as the eye could see – it took us 40 minutes just to edge up to the intersection. Mixed into it all, there were cows and vegetable carts and choking exhaust fumes, kitchen fire smoke, dust, yelling drivers and fist wielding assistant drivers running around outside banging on the sides of buses. Our driver and assistant remained remarkably calm, and when they somehow managed to pull our bus gingerly around the corner of a vegetable cart – that wouldn't budge – and past a long line of opposing traffic, the entire busload of pilgrims broke out into applause. Oranges were passed around and the bus began slowly lurching forward again. Onwards.

Our driver's assistant:



Our driver:



We reached Brahmajoni Hill (Gayasisa). This is where the Buddha gave his third teaching or what is known as the “Fire Sermon”:

“Bhikkhus, all things are on fire. What is on fire? The six sense organs – eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind – are all on fire. The six sense objects-sights, sounds, smells, tastes, sensations, and mental objects-are all on fire. The six consciousnesses-sight, hearing, smell, taste, feeling and thought – are all on fire. The six contacts between the sense organs and the sense objects are all on fire. All these sensual experiences are on fire, whether pleasant, unpleasant or neutral. They are burning from the flames of craving, aversion, and ignorance. They are burning from the flames of birth, old age, sickness, and death, and from the flames of sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief and despair.

Bhikkhus, when noble followers understand the truth, they grow disenchanted with the six sense organs, six sense objects, six consciousnesses, six contacts and six sensual experiences.

When they grow disenchanted, craving fades away. With the fading of craving, they are liberated. When liberated, there is knowledge that they are liberated. They understand: “Birth is exhausted, the holy life has been lived, what was to be done is done, there is no more of this to come.”

By the end of the sermon, the hearts of the one-thousand ascetics were gladdened and they all achieved arahantship: total liberation from clinging to the taints of existence.
(pp. 132-33 Along the Path)



24.02.2013 15:14



24.02.2013 15:24

The next stop was the Sujātā stūpa. Wandering through dirt paths along mustard fields, cabbage farms, and palm trees makes a particularly memorable pilgrim site. Although the site may not mark the exact location where the young girl is said to have offered sweet rice milk to the Bodhisatta just before the night of his enlightenment, what's important is that we remember her generous spirit.





SUJATA TEMPLE

This is The ancient place, Where Sujata of Village Senani (BAKROUR) had offered milk-rice to Siddhartha here Under Banyan tree.

24.02.2013 17:21

From there we moved on to Nālandā – where we met the glorious and radiant Dr. Panth who talked to us about the revival of pilgrimage in India and the importance of pilgrimage in general. He seemed to ooze Dhamma nectar and all the pilgrims were thrilled to listen to him speak.



From our base at Wat Thai Nālandā, a Thai monastery in Nālandā, we visited the ancient ruins of the Nālandā University to meditate and contemplate the magnificent hub of learning that drew scholars from India and beyond.

“This great university of international acclaim was famous for its religious, philosophical, linguistic, social and scientific fields of study. When the famous Chinese pilgrim Xuan Zang arrived in 635 CE to study and teach there for five years, the university was already thriving. In his vivid and detailed accounts, Xuan Zang relates that more than 8,000 students from all over Asia attended the university, and that the teachers numbered over 1,000. Despite these numbers, admission was not easy: most applicants were rejected by the gatekeeper, who would pitch a series of difficult questions that required quick and accurate answers.” Along the Path: (p. 192)

Kory and Brihas challenge each other within the gates of the ancient university:





28.02.2013 09:28

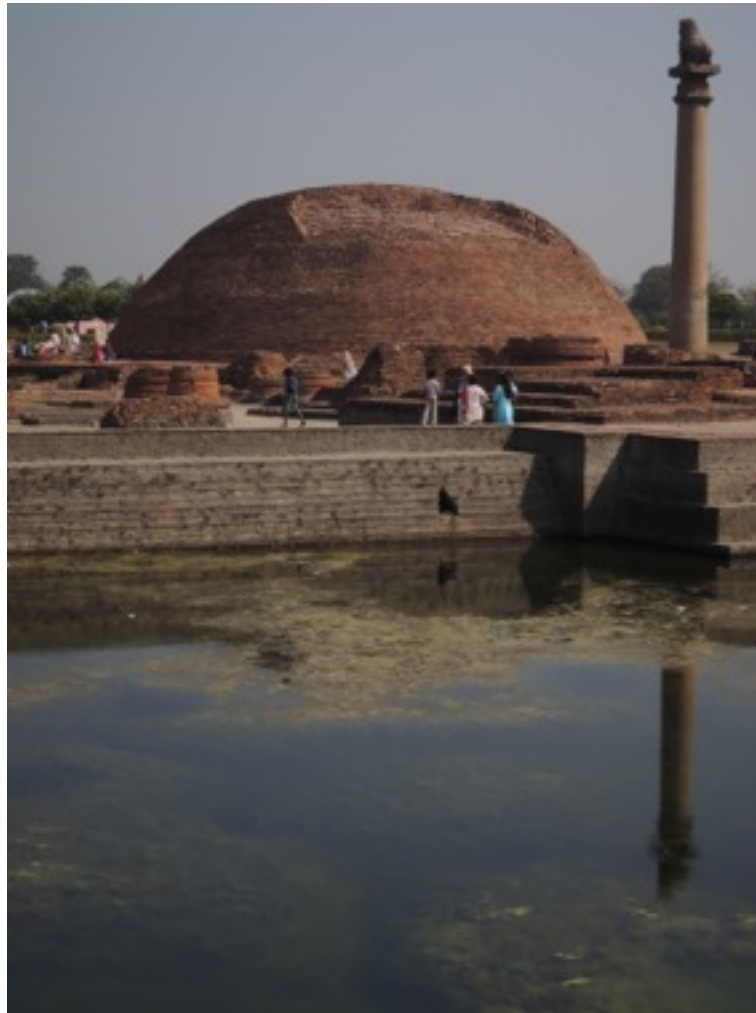
The next day I finally had to stay in bed to rest. It's funny, as the only other time I came on pilgrimage I got sick in this same area. The other pilgrims moved on to explore places of significance in Rajgir, like Vulture's Peak (Gijjhakūṭa). “When not staying with the Saṅgha at Bamboo Grove, the Buddha retreated to this crag, whose natural silences made it an ideal place for serious meditation. Many of the Buddha's students, including Sāriputta and Ānanda, became *arahants* in one of the caves on this rocky hill.” (p. 175, *Along the Path*)





As the bus rolled into Vaishali, a few pilgrims quietly chanted the Ratana sutta, the location the inspiring sutta was chanted by Ānanda during a famine in the great city. Once in Vaishali, we were fortunate to visit the place where women were first admitted into the Buddha's order: Mahāvana Kutagarasala Vihāra. As we entered the area of ruins and sat down to meditate I felt immense gratitude well up and warm tears rolling down my cheeks – Anicca!

This is the *stūpa* where the remains of Ānanda were found during the 1970's. It is said about Ānanda that, “People are delighted when they see him, they are pleased when he speaks about the Dhamma, and they are disappointed when he is silent.” (p. 211 Along the Path)



In Vaishali, we experienced an extremely peaceful meditation at the Shanti Stūpa. We were intending to sit elsewhere, but when 100's of other pilgrims showed up at the initial site, we decided to walk to this stūpa, and a soft peace fell over us like a protective cover.



In Kushinigar we had a Saṅgha *dāna* and meditated near the *mahāparinibbāna* location. At the Mahāparinibbāna Stūpa, the whole atmosphere felt charged with Dhamma *dhātu*, and the beautiful temple with it's 1,600 year old reclining Buddha image is breathtakingly beautiful. Just sitting inside or outside the *stūpa* to meditate is a wonderful way to pay homage to the Buddha's teaching.





03.03.2013 10:15





03.03.2013 10:33



03.03.2013 10:02

In Lumbini – we met an inspiring young nun who practices in our tradition – and a few of us interviewed her on camera.



In the sacred garden, we meditated near chanting Thai monks, and were able to get very close to the marker stone which is said to mark the exact location the young Siddhattha was born. The vibration near the stone felt very strong and we meditated near the beautiful Mahāmāyā Temple and Asokan pillar, soaking up the inspiring stories that we read aloud together from Along the Path.











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今此
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而今
...

日達





राजेंद्र रेडिमेंट
कार्मेटिक्स सेंटर

STO.150







In Nepalese Kapilavasthu - we got to meditate at the place where Siddhattha may have walked out of the palace gates and into his great renunciation - it was sublimely delicate and peaceful there and many a pilgrim reported not wanting to move.





05.03.2013 09:00



05.03.2013 08:54



RAPTI ZONE

GULMI

ARGHAKHANCHI

PALPA

KAPILAVASTU

RUPANDEHI

NAWA

LUMBINI

INDIA







On our way to Shravasti, where we concluded our Yatra, a few pilgrims quietly chanted the Mangala Sutta on the bus. We read story after story aloud in the only place the Buddha spent 24 rainy seasons – the magical Jetavana.





Nearby, we visited Mother Visākha's monastery, where we met a monk who is a practitioner in our tradition. He had started a small monastery – and alone lives there, but he beamed at us full of inspiration and enthusiastic plans. He told us the awe inspiring story of Mother Visākha with such deep admiration and faith in his voice, it brought tears to many eyes.





The wise, absorbed in meditation
Take delight in the inner calm of renunciation.
The mindful and awake:
All beings hold dear.

-The Buddha