



## **The Mahabodhi Temple: Exploring the Sacred Energy Site of Buddhism**

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### ABSTRACT :

The life of the Gotama Buddha, the founder of Buddhism, has been preserved in many forms and sites for more than twenty-five centuries in India. One of the four Sacred Sites of Buddhism is the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, Gaya, Bihar, India. It was where the Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree after a long time (six years) for seeking the Truth and extremely practiced self-mortification around 623-544 centuries B.C.

From the Sacred Land of Buddhism, the Buddha began his journey to propagate the Dharma and establish the Sangha in Isipatana. Migadaya (Sarnath) founded Buddhism and accepted disciples and lay Buddhists. So, this place is the heart of Buddhism. It is where a great man who became the Buddha with immeasurable compassion and great wisdom saved countless people from suffering, led to a good moral life, and trained his disciples to become Arahants and future Buddhas. After the Buddha entered Nibbana in the 3rd century B.C., King Asoka built a small Temple to mark this important place and strictly protected the Holy site.

This site was the heart of Buddhist culture for centuries until Islam conquered it in the 13th century. Almost all the Buddhist Sites have been destroyed, including the Mahabodhi Temple. From that time on, Buddhism was considered forgotten, and the Holy sites of Buddhism were also forgotten. The Mahabodhi Temple gradually, over the years, was buried underground due to wind and rain. Until the 19th century, it was excavated and restored by British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham.

Now, it is restored into a majestic and imposing complex with a main Temple and many towers around it. On this campus, monks, nuns, lay Buddhists, and pilgrims or visitors can choose a place to chant, meditate, walk, or pay homage to the Buddha to receive the sacred energy any time the same time for a short time or a long time, depending on the opening and closing times.

In 2002, the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodh Gaya became a World Heritage Site. Mahabodhi Temple is a place where everyone wishes to go at least once to pay respects to the Buddha, worship the Bodhi Tree, and seven Holy places where Buddha meditated after enlightenment.

Keywords: Mahabodhi Temple, the Buddha, Enlightenment, Bodhi Tree, disciple (monk, nun), lay Buddhists, restore, Anagarika Dhammapala, sacred energy.

### Introduction :

The Mahabodhi Temple (literally: "Great Awakening Temple"), was a place where the Buddha attained enlightenment, and there could abide the sacred energy of the Enlightenment of the Awakened One. It was the heart of Buddhist culture for centuries until Islam conquered it in the 13th century and at present. This is the Holy Land that Buddhists in the world have always wished to visit once in their life. One of the energies of the Holy Land has been recorded in the famous sutta. For example, in The Last Days of The Buddha (Mahaparinibbāna), the Buddha said Anand, there are four Sacred Sites that the faithful should visit and look upon with feelings of reverence.

1. Lumbini, where the Buddha was born
2. Mahabodhi Temple, where the Buddha attained supreme enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree
3. Isipatana, Migadaya, Sarnath, where the Buddha set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma
4. Kusinara, where the Buddha entered the Nibbāna

The Buddha said to Ananda that the bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, laymen, and laywomen should visit these places and reflect on these four Holy sites. And anyone who dies while making the pilgrimage to these shrines with a devout heart will be reborn in heavenly happiness after death.<sup>1</sup>

These Four Holy Sites have been recognized as World Heritage sites by UNESCO with Mahabodhi Temple being the most important site because it is the origin of Buddhism. Therefore, many Buddhist temples are from other countries in Bodhgaya today. There are a lot of monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists of all sects who come for their religious ceremony, and boundless people in the world come here to visit, chant, or meditate. The history of the Mahabodhi Temple has been recorded in many documents. Among them, the most important are the documents of the Chinese monks Fa Hien and Xuanzang, who made pilgrimages to this holy place in the 4th and 7th centuries to ask for sutras.

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### History of the Buddha:

“The household life is full of troubles and defilements. It is not possible to lead a completely pure, holy life while living in a household.”<sup>2</sup> According to the history of Buddhism, when Queen *Mahāmāyā* was on the way from *Kapilavasthu* to *Devadaha*, following their customs, Prince *Siddhattha* was born at *Lumbinī* Grove, *Kapilavasthu* in 623 B.C (Nepal today). According to the *Mahā Buddhavaṃsa* (*The Great Chronicle of Buddhas*), the *Gotama Buddha* was a Brahman ascetic named *Sumedha* at Amaravati city. The *Dīpaṅkara* predicted Him to become a *Gotama Buddha* after four *Asāṅkheyya kappā*<sup>3</sup> and a hundred thousand eras from that day.<sup>4</sup> Until the time of *Kassapa Buddha*, *Bodhisattva* was last prophesied to become the *Buddha* even in this *Bhadda Kappa*.<sup>5</sup>

The Prince was beautiful and possessed the thirty-two marks and eighty signs of a great human. Whoever had those marks would become one of two abilities as a universe monarch or the Buddha. The saint, Asita, declared that the Prince would become the Buddha. After the naming ceremony, Queen *Māyā* passed away. *Mahāpajāpatī* has chosen to take care of Prince *Siddhattha*. When Prince *Siddhattha* was 29 years old, he left the palace and became ascetic after seeing the four events of the old man, the sick man, the dead man, and the dignified ascetic. He has not been enlightened through practicing with two teachers and himself in self-mortification. Finally, he discovered and followed the Middle Way and attained enlightenment under the Bodhi Tree. Then, the Buddha spent seven weeks at seven sites, namely: The week on the throne under the Bodhi Tree, of the Gaze, on the Walk, at the Golden House, at the *Ajapāla Banyan tree*, at the *Mucalinda Lake*, at the *Rājāyatana tree*.<sup>6</sup>

After seven weeks of meditation at seven places around the Bodhi Tree, the Buddha went to Sarnath to meet the five ascetics, who together practiced self-mortification and preached the first Dhammacakkappattana sutta. After listening to this Dhamma, they became the first five bhikkhus, the Sangha. Thus, Buddha found Buddhism at that time. Then, the Sangha developed rapidly. The Bhikkhuni Sangha also was established. Many mistakes occurred there, so the Buddha set out the rules and regulations (Vinaya) to maintain the Sangha. During 45 years, the Buddha brought a new vitality to Indian society, namely, the moral, equal, renunciation lifestyle, until he entered Nibbana at 80 years old in Kusinara. After the cremation of the Buddha's body, his relics were divided into eight parts, plus the pot contained the relics and the ashes to worship in ten of the stupas.

Around 316 years later, to respect the Buddha, King Asoka erected the monument to mark the birthplace, the Enlightenment (Diamond Throne in Bodhgaya, under the Bodhi Tree), set in the wheel Dhamma, and Nibbana of the Buddha. That birthplace<sup>7</sup> site was the Sacred Land of Buddhism engraved on the pillar: “*hida budhe jate sakyamuni. Here was born the Buddha, the sage of the Sākyans*”. This pillar is still seen now. The archaeologist General *Cunningham* explored this Holy Land in 1896.<sup>8</sup> As for Bodhgaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment, the King built a small temple, the Vajrasana (The Diamond Throne), and erected a pillar and a fence to protect this Holy place.

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### History of the Mahabodhi Temple:

The *Mahabodhi Temple* or Bodhgaya Temple is one of the four Holy sites of Buddhism at Bodhgaya, Gaya, Bihar, India. That is a place where the Buddha attained enlightenment. Bodhgaya is located 115 km south of the state capital of Bihar, Patna, and 16 km from Gaya, in eastern India. It has a total area of 4.8600ha. The Temple stands in the East of the *Mahabodhi Tree*. The architecture of the Temple is superb, and it was built entirely of bricks.

The present Mahabodhi Temple Complex at Bodh Gaya includes the 50 m high grand Temple, the Vajrasana, the sacred Bodhi Tree, and six other sacred sites of the Enlightenment of the Buddha, surrounded by numerous ancient Votive stupas, maintained and protected strictly by inner, middle and outer circular boundaries. It has the form of a cylindrical pyramid, and on top of the tower is the pointed peak of the pyramid, representing the great soaring wisdom of the Buddha.

In the 3rd century BC, King *Ashoka* built a temple of *Buddha* here. In the 7th century, the *Pala* kings in Bengal rebuilt on a larger scale. In the 12th century, the Temple was destroyed. By the 14th century, the kings of Myanmar (Burma) had restored the Temple when pulling missions here. After

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1. <sup>1</sup> Digha Nikāya, 16. MahapariNibbāna (The Last Days of the Buddha) sutta, 263-264.
  2. <sup>2</sup> M I,36. *Mahasaccaka* sutta. 335, Ed by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Buddhist Publication Society Kandy, Sri Lanka, Tr. by Bhikkhu Nanamoli & Bhikkhu Bodhi, 1995.
  3. <sup>3</sup> Four incalculable ago
  4. <sup>4</sup> Buddhavaṃsa IA, 15.
  5. <sup>5</sup> Buddhavaṃsa IB, 290
  6. <sup>6</sup> The Great, 239-266.
  7. <sup>7</sup> *2500 Years of Buddhism*, 2012, 18
  8. <sup>8</sup> Piyadassi, Thera, *The Buddha his life, teaching* pdf, 1995, 38.

many centuries, the *Mahabodhi Temple* suffered many great floods and was buried under mud. It was until the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century that *British* archaeologist *Alexander Cunningham* directed the excavation and restoration of the *Mahabodhi Temple* as it is today. This shows us that the sacred energy where the Buddha became a Buddha still exists, and its incarnation is the *Mahabodhi Temple*.

The Temple is built in the shape of a 9-storey vertical pyramid. The unique structure is the tower dome. On the main tower base, there are small towers at four corners. The images of *Buddha*, *Bodhisattvas*, and gods are carved into the wall niches according to the *Mahāyāna* tradition. Outside is a vast campus for monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists to come here to bow, meditate, chant, or walk around the campus to pay respect to the *Buddha* for many days and months, from early morning until late at night. When entering the Temple, monks, Buddhists, and tourists should visit a large round rock placed on the left side of the courtyard. There are two large footprints on the rock face - according to legend, the *Buddha*'s. Entering the Temple, everyone has to line up to worship in front of the gilded statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, which is placed in the main hall. The *Buddha* statue is 2m high, put on a 6m high stone pedestal, with a very serene *Buddha* face, with a finger pointing to the ground, the face of the statue facing the East.

Behind the *Mahabodhi Temple* is a sacred *Bodhi* tree next to it. Its branches are very green and surrounded by a low stone wall. Under the shade of the *Bodhi* tree is a red sandstone slab named *Vajrasana* - this is considered the diamond throne because this is where the Buddha once meditated and attained enlightenment. The original *Bodhi* tree that *Buddha* sat beside to become a Perfectly Enlightened One is still alive to the time of King *Asoka* and was protected by the King. Besides, the King replicated this precious tree by extracting its branches and sending them to other locations across the country. Because he was very devoted to the *Buddha*, King *Asoka* carefully cared for this *Bodhi* tree. The King visited the *Bodhi* tree daily as if the *Buddha* was still here. So, the King considered the *Bodhi* tree as a national treasure. Out of jealousy, the King's concubine, Mrs. *Tisarakkhā*, sent someone to cut down the *Bodhi* tree and burn it secretly. According to the prayers of King *Asoka*, this second *Bodhi* tree grows from the sprout at the stump of the cut tree.

However, the Second *Bodhi* Tree was destroyed in the 2nd century B.C. during the persecution of *Buddhism* by King *Pushyamitra Shunga*. Later, the *Bodhi* tree was replanted. But then this third *Bodhi* tree was destroyed again around the beginning of the 7th century, ordered by King *Sasanka* of *Ganda* (*Bengal*, reigned 590 - 625). Because this King was a pagan, he did not like *Buddhism*. In 620, King *Purnavarma* replanted the *Bodhi* tree. The King also built a wall over 7m high to protect the *Bodhi* tree. This *Bodhi* tree was described by *Xuanzang* in his diary when he visited here.

Around the 12th century, the fourth *Bodhi* tree was destroyed again because the Muslim army of *Muhammad Bakhtiyar Khalji* invaded India, destroying most of the Buddhist relics, including the *Mahabodhi Temple* and the *Bodhi* tree. Despite this, the *Bodhi* tree continued to revive. Right where the stump had been destroyed, a young shoot had sprouted and grew rapidly, luxuriant branches. This seems to confirm that the Truth will always exist. The modern *Bodhi* tree is extracted from the *Bodhi* tree in *Sri Lanka*. Which is a branch of the original tree brought to *Sri Lanka* in the 3rd century B.C. by King *Asoka*'s daughter, *Bhikkhuni Sanghamitta*, who went to *Sri Lanka* to establish a Buddhist nun, brought this branch of *Bodhi* from *Sri Lanka* to *Anuradhapura*. Although it is only a "descendant" of the first *Bodhi* tree, it has also become a great tree several hundred years old, and the stump is about three or four people hugging. Around the *Bodhi* tree, monks, Buddhists, and tourists sit with folded hands and solemnly pray. A breeze blew, a few *Bodhi* leaves fell, and many pilgrims respectfully picked it up, believing it was a blessing that the *Buddha* had bestowed.

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### **Anagarika and the Mahabodhi Temple :**

During the 16th century, a *Hindu* monastery was established near *Bodh Gaya*. From that time, the abbot of this monastery, or *Mahant*, became the primary landholder of the area and claimed ownership of the *Mahabodhi Temple* grounds.

In the 1880s, the British government of India restored the *Mahabodhi Temple* under the direction of Sir *Alexander Cunningham*. In 1885, after visiting the site, Sir *Edwin Arnold* published several articles to get the attention of the Buddhists about the deplorable conditions of the *Buddhagaya*. From these articles, *Anagarika Dhammapala* visited the *Mahabodhi Temple*. He decided to take control of the Temple for Buddhists. The campaign partially succeeded in 1949, establishing the *Budhgaya Temple Management Committee* (BTMC). The committee has nine members, including the chairman, who must be Hindu by law. The first head monk of the *Mahabodhi Temple* to the management committee was *Anagarika Munindra*, a *Bengali* who had been an active member of the *Maha Bodhi Society*.<sup>9</sup>

We have deep gratitude to Venerable *Anagarika Dhammapala*, who brought back the management of the *Mahabodhi Temple* to *Buddhism* and let everyone always see the monks there taking care of the *Buddha* statue in the *Buddha* Hall with faith and boundless joy.

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### **The energies of the Mahabodhi Temple :**

The most prominent activities in *Bodhgaya* in recent years are The International *Tipitaka* Chanting program, The International *Tipitaka* Chanting Ceremony for World Peace at *Bodhgaya* has been going in *Bodhgaya* since 2006, on the occasion of the 2550th *Buddha Jayanti*. This event is held every year to chant the Teachings of the *Buddha* under the *Bodhi* Tree of *Bodhgaya* for ten days from 2 Dec. to 13th. Buddhist monks, nuns, and lay followers in the world, especially in Buddhist countries, are participating in this important event, and hundreds and thousands of monks and lay followers are going there to attend this event.

*Wangmo Dixey*, the Executive Director of LBDFI, came to *Bodhgaya* to witness this event. LBDFI bears all expenses with support to the other ten countries. The Light of *Buddhadharma* Foundation International (LBDFI) is the main supporter of this ceremony. LBDFI, based in Berkeley (California), completes the whole work. Nyingma Institute Dharma College and Mangalam centers execute also support the same. The sole purpose is to rejuvenate the biblical sites of the *Pāli* Buddhist Canon by asking elder monks to visit India. It could be only possible through the right preaching to

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9. <sup>9</sup> Wikipedia, Maha Bodhi Society

Indian monks.



**Figure 1: The International Tipitaka Chanting under Bodhi Tree yearly**

In addition, the great events of *Tibetan Buddhism* have been organized under *the Bodhi Tree* and on the campus of the *Mahabodhi Temple* every year as The Teaching of His Holiness the 14<sup>th</sup> *Dalai Lama*, His Holiness the 17<sup>th</sup> *Karmapa*, and other schools of *Tibetan Buddhism*.

Many monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists came from many countries, from different schools such as *Theravada*, *Mahāyāna*, and *Vajrayana*, to the *Mahabodhi Temple* with their sincere minds and respectful bodies to the *Buddha* and the *Bodhi tree*. After that, they silently stand in a line going to the *Buddha Hall* to pay homage to the *Buddha*. Then, they choose a place for chanting, meditation, walking, or visiting the seven sites where the Awakened One spent his time after enlightenment. Just like that, one by one, group by group came and went. That is why the *Mahabodhi Temple* is always full of followers of *Buddhism*, *Hinduism*, and other schools. The most sacred thing is that the atmosphere here is very silent, pure, and dignified despite being crowded with people. At the same time, everyone practices the *Dhamma* differently and prays for world peace, for *Buddhism* to last forever, for them to be enlightened, for their lives to be safe and happy, etc. They will be so happy if a *Bodhi tree* leaf falls on them as if they get a blessing from the *Buddha*.

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## Conclusion:

This short article cannot fully convey all the sacred and noble things about the *Mahabodhi Temple*. It just tells some basic pieces of information to review this sacred place where the *Buddha* diligently practiced to attain the Three Insights (*Te- Vijjā*) and the Six Supernaturals (*Abhiññā*, Pa; *Abhijna*, Sa). And from here, He was called the *Buddha* with ten Noble features such as the *Blessed One*, the *Worthy One*, the *Perfectly and Completely Awakened One*, *He Who is Both Wise and Virtuous*, the *Bliss-Gone One*, the *Knower of the World*, the *Peerless Guide Who Tames Beings*, the *Teacher of Gods and Men*, and the *Blessed Buddha*.

The birth of *Buddhism* and the appearance of *Buddha* were considered the wonders of the world. *Buddhism* brought the compassion and wisdom of religion to all humans worldwide, spread the moral lifestyle everywhere, and contributed the foundation to world peace. The *Mahabodhi Temple* is likened to the embodiment of *Buddha*, with the top of the tower being the pointed peak of the pyramid, representing the great soaring wisdom of the *Buddha*. The *Bodhi Tree* is like a shade that radiates compassion and protects and guides sentient beings on the path to liberation. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

The monks, nuns, and lay Buddhists who return there are like returning to their homeland, like visiting their parents again. The satisfied, grateful, and respectful faces of the pilgrims coming and going made the place more dignified and full of energy.

We sincerely wish everyone will be visited there at least once in your life.



May you all be well and happy forever  
*Namo Tassa Bhagavato Aharato Sammāsbuddhaya.*

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