



BODHGAYA - MELTING POT OF ALL BUDDHIST TRADITIONS

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Abstract

Bodhgaya, the sacred site where Prince Siddhartha attained enlightenment and became the Buddha, is a profound spiritual hub that unites diverse Buddhist traditions from around the world. As the birthplace of Buddhism, it holds immense significance for followers of Theravāda, Mahāyāna, and Vajrayāna traditions, making it a unique melting pot of Buddhist cultures and practices. Various monasteries, meditation centres, and institutions established by different Buddhist communities further enrich Bodhgaya's religious landscape. Annual teachings, festivals, and meditation retreats provide opportunities for interfaith dialogue, cultural exchange, and spiritual growth. This global Buddhist presence fosters unity, encouraging a shared understanding of the Buddha's teachings while respecting diverse interpretations. As a centre of pilgrimage and practice, Bodhgaya continues to play a vital role in sustaining and spreading Buddhist heritage worldwide.

Keywords: Bodhgaya, Buddhism, Mahabodhi Temple, Buddhist pilgrimage, Theravāda, Mahāyāna, Vajrayāna, Buddhist monasteries, spiritual hub, enlightenment, cultural exchange.

Introduction

Bodhgaya, a small town located in the Indian state of Bihar, is a melting pot of Buddhism and a significant pilgrimage site for Buddhists worldwide. It is the place where Prince Siddhartha Gautama attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree¹ over 2,500 years ago. Since then, Bodhgaya has been a center of Buddhist learning and practice centers attracting monks, nuns, and laypeople from different Buddhist traditions. The town is home to several Buddhist temples, monasteries, and institutions, each representing a unique Buddhist tradition.

¹ Vipassana Research Institute, 1985

The Mahabodhi Cetiya, a UNESCO World Heritage Site², is the most famous and sacred spot in Bodhgaya. It is an architectural masterpiece that dates back to the 6th century AD to the Gupta period, the original temple was believed to be built by King Asoka in the 3rd century BC. The Bodhi Tree is just behind the Mahabodhi Cetiya. There is also the Vajrasana under the Bodhi tree, it is believed to be the exact spot where the Buddha attained enlightenment. The Cetiya is surrounded by several shrines, stupas, and various trees, creating a serene and spiritual meditative atmosphere. Programs and chanting take place around the year in the vicinity of the temple where monks and nuns of all traditions come together radiating the vibration of Universal love for the benefit of all sentient beings.

Theravada Monasterie

As the growing number of Buddhist pilgrims who come to visit the Mahabodhi Temple and meditate in the sacred place of Bodhgaya increased, the necessity to accommodate them became a necessity. Hence various monasteries from different countries started building their monasteries.

Royal Thai Temple

The Thai Temple, also known as Wat Thai Bodhgaya, is a beautiful Buddhist temple built in 1957 with the support of the Thai government and the royal family³. It is designed in the traditional Thai style, with a colorful and intricate roof, ornate carvings, and beautiful murals depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha. The temple is surrounded by lush gardens and a peaceful atmosphere, making it an ideal place for meditation and contemplation. It is an important center for Thai Buddhism in India and serves as a cultural and spiritual hub for the Thai pilgrims in the region. It offers a range of activities and services, including meditation classes, Dhamma talks, and cultural events. The temple also has a guesthouse and a restaurant, which serve authentic Thai cuisine and provide a taste of Thai culture and hospitality.

The Myanmar Vihara

This beautiful Buddhist temple located at the bank of Niranjara river Bodhgaya was built in 1936⁴. India. It was one of the earliest temples built to help Buddhist monks and pilgrims comfortably stay. Today, The Myanmar vihara is an important center that serves as a cultural and spiritual hub not only for the Myanmar Buddhist community but also for other Buddhist practitioners from all over the world.

² listed on the Unesco Heritage on 2002

³ <https://tripxl.com/blog/thai-monastery-bodhgaya/>

⁴ David geary, pg 64.

The Mahabodhi Society of India in Bodhgaya is an organization initially dedicated to the maintenance and preservation of the Mahabodhi Mahavihara. The society was founded in 1891 by the Sri Lankan Buddhist leader Anagarika Dharmapala, who was inspired by a vision to have the right to worship the most holy Buddhagaya Cetiya ⁵at Bodhgaya. And also to restore the other holy sites related to the Buddha.

Today, the society also promotes Buddhist education, meditation, cultural exchanges, and conferences. The society also runs several social and community development programs including healthcare, education, and environmental conservation initiatives. These programs aim to improve the quality of life for local communities and promote sustainable development in the region. The Mahabodhi Society of Sri Lanka also has organizations in Sarnath, Sarvasti, Veshali, and even in Lumbini, in Nepal for the promotion, protection, and preservation of Buddhism, and its work has had a significant impact on the revival of Buddhism in India and beyond.

Mahayana and Vajrayana Monasteries

The Japanese Temple, also known as Nipponji, is a beautiful wooden temple that represents the Shingon tradition of Japanese Buddhism. The experience is enabled through esoteric practices involving meditation, visualization, chanting, and ritual. The temple features a stunning garden with a pond, a bell tower, and a statue of the Buddha. It is a peaceful and contemplative space that offers a unique perspective on Japanese Buddhist culture.

The 80-foot Buddha statue built in 1989⁶ is like a trademark of Bodhgaya after the Mahabodhi Cetiya was a gift from the people of Japan to the people of India. Daijokyo Buddhist Society spent seven years on the construction of the Great Buddha Statue. Today this special statue is visited by thousands everyday from all over India and the world.

The Vietnamese temple in Bodh Gaya, which is just some 3 km away from the main Mahabodhi temple is a beautiful and serene temple with a huge number of trees. It is a perfect place for serene meditation. It also provides safety accommodation for the visiting pilgrims to Bodhgaya.

The Tibetan Monastery, also known as the Namgyal Monastery, is a significant institution in Bodhgaya. It is the personal monastery of the HH Dalai Lama. It has been working for young Tibetan monks in the hope of ensuring the survival of the unique Tibetan Traditional

⁵ <https://mbsiindia.org/> accessed on 10 march, 2025

⁶ <http://www.great-buddha-statue.com/> accessed on 14th March, 2025

Buddhist studies and practices. The monastery features a large prayer hall, a library, and a museum, and it offers classes and workshops on Buddhist philosophy, meditation, and culture.

The Bhutanese Temple, also known as the Kyichu Lhakhang, is a beautiful Buddhist temple located in Bodhgaya, India. The Bhutan Temple was built in 1966 with the support of the Bhutanese Government and the Bhutanese community in India. Bhutanese Buddhist traditions are diverse and rich, with a wide range of practices and ceremonies that are celebrated throughout the year. The monastery also provides free medical arrangements for the Bhutanese pilgrims visiting Bodhgaya for Kora and chanting. There are also mask dances which are organized in the new Bhutanese temple in Bodhgaya.

Tipitaka Chanting by Theravadian and Monlam by Vajrayana Tradition

The Tipitaka Chanting program is a unique and special event that takes place in Bodhgaya every year. It is an international gathering of Theravada Buddhist monks and nuns from all over the world, who come together to chant the Tipitaka, the Buddhist scripture, over a period of 12 days which usually starts in December. It is being organized by the International Tipitaka Council. And this year was the 19th celebration. It is dedicated to bringing Buddhadharma back to India.⁷

The program is a powerful and moving experience. The program is open to the public, and visitors are welcome to attend, participate, and listen to the chanting. There is also a Dhamma talk every evening, a discourse given by various renowned masters from different Theravada Traditions. It is a unique and special program bringing together devotees from various countries.

Monlam

The Monlam means “wish path”⁸ The Buddhist path of helping others through kind prayers is a significant event in the Tibetan Buddhist calendar. It is a week-long chanting that takes place in Bodhgaya annually from December to February, depending on the Tibetan lunar calendar by their different traditions. The festival attracts thousands of Tibetan Buddhists along with other followers of Tibetan Buddhism from around the world who gather to pray for world peace and the well-being of all sentient beings. The festival includes various religious activities, such as teachings, chanting, debating, and offering prayers. Monks and nuns from different Tibetan Buddhist traditions, including the Gelug, Sakya, Kagyu, and Nyingma Schools, participate in the event. They wear their traditional robes and perform rituals and ceremonies according to their respective traditions. One of the highlights of the festival is the Great Prayer Ceremony,

⁷ <https://tipitakachantingcouncil.org/>

⁸ <https://monlam.org/>

which takes place on the final day of the festival. During the ceremony, monks and nuns chant the Mangala Sutta, a discourse attributed to the Buddha that contains verses of blessings and auspiciousness.

The chanting creates a powerful and uplifting atmosphere that is said to bring peace and happiness to all who hear it. Another significant aspect of the festival is the offering of butter lamps. Thousands of butter lamps are lit and arranged in intricate patterns, creating a beautiful and mesmerizing display. The butter lamps represent the light of wisdom and compassion, and their glow is said to dispel ignorance and suffering. The Tibetan Monlam at Bodhgaya is not only a religious event but also a cultural celebration. Visitors can enjoy traditional Tibetan music, dance, and food, and browse stalls selling Tibetan handicrafts, thangkas, and other souvenirs. The Tibetan Monlam at Bodhgaya is a unique and inspiring event that offers a glimpse into the rich culture and spiritual traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.

Conclusion

Bodhgaya is a unique example of both unity and diversity in the Buddhist world. It is like a melting pot where different practices and schools of thought can coexist peacefully. The holy place where Gautama Buddha gained enlightenment has become a yearly pilgrimage spot where Buddhists from all over the world come to honor the figure. The study of Bodhgaya's historical, cultural, and spiritual importance has shown how it crosses religious lines and brings Buddhists from all over the world together in their dedication. Bodhgaya is where the Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana schools meet. It is a great example of how Buddhist ideas and practices are linked. At this holy place, different rituals, teachings, and architectural styles live together. This shows that Buddhism is open to everyone and that its core principles are international. Bodhgaya shows how Buddhism has lasted for a long time and how it can bring people from different religions together in their search for enlightenment.

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