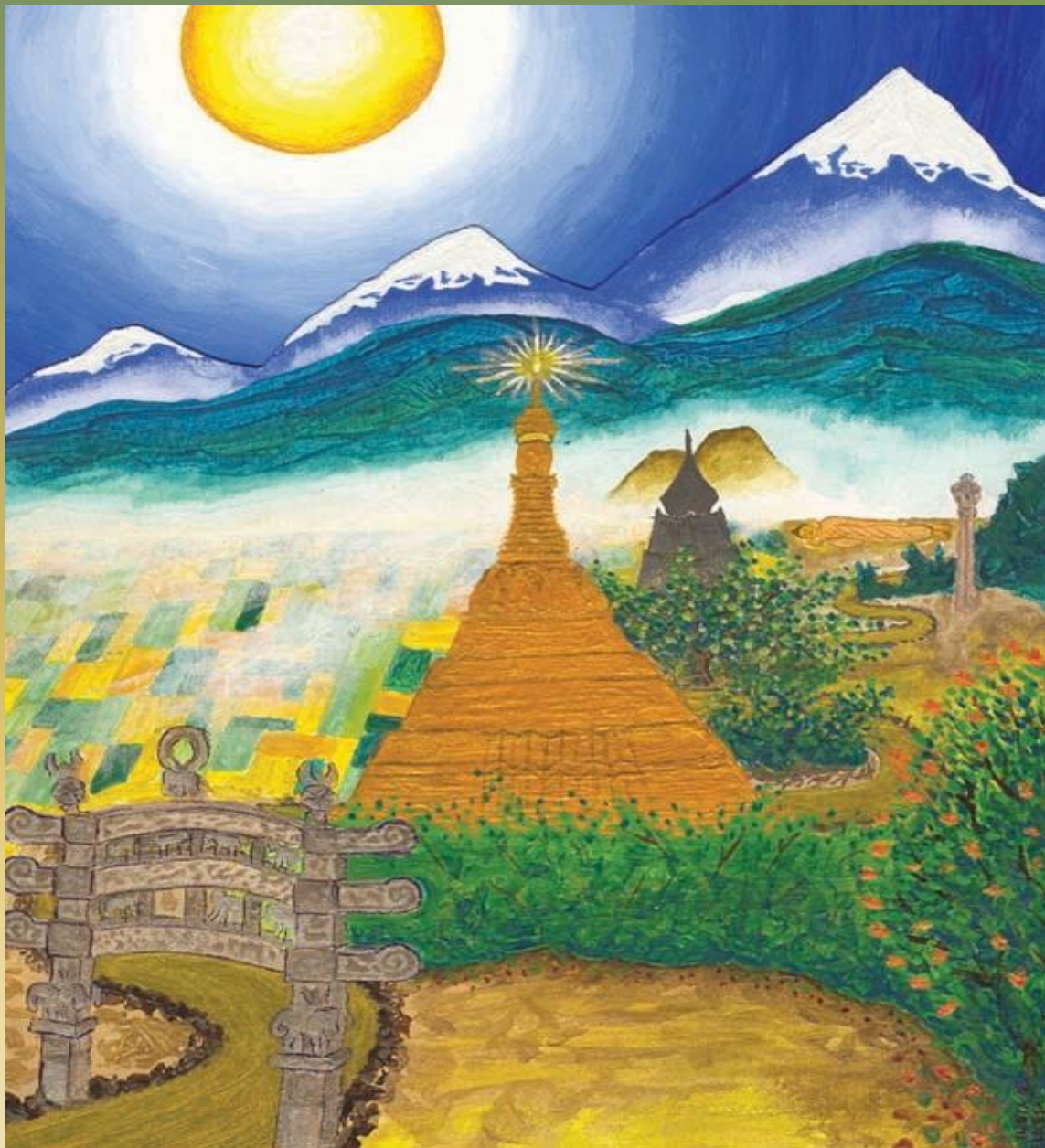


Along the Path

*The Meditator's Companion to
Pilgrimage in the Buddha's India and Nepal*



Kory Goldberg & Michelle Décary

2nd Edition

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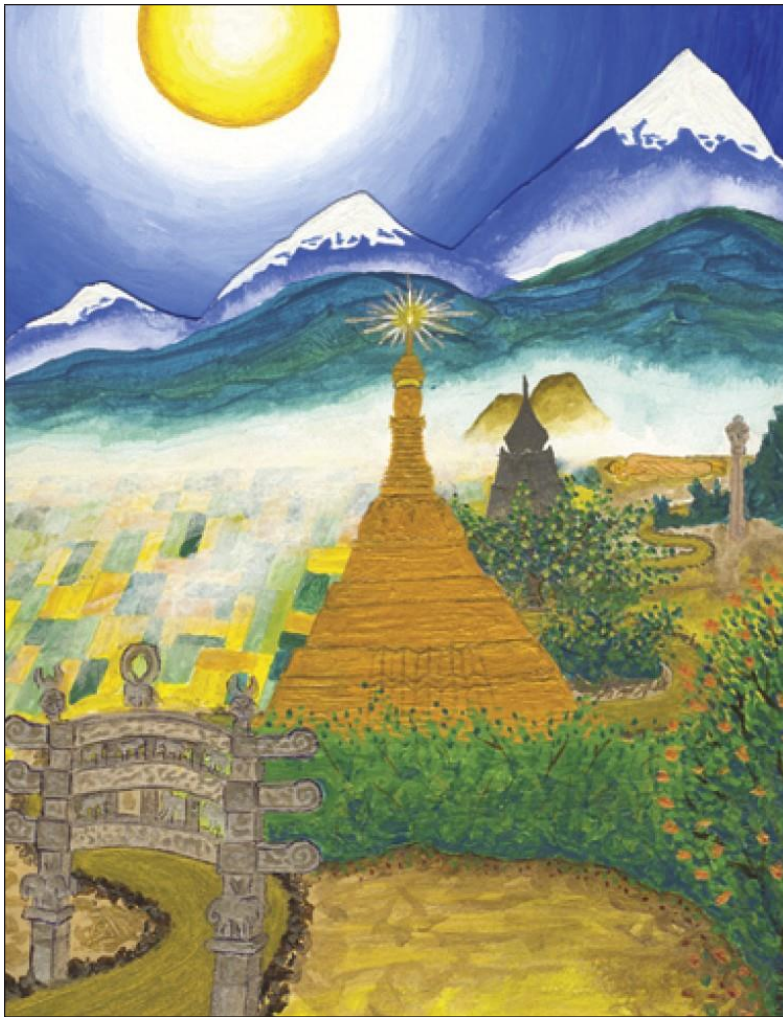
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Not all who wander are lost.

– J.R.R. Tolkien



*Wherever you travel in this world, Above, across, or
below;*

Carefully examine at all times

The arising and passing of all compounded things.

– Gotama the Buddha

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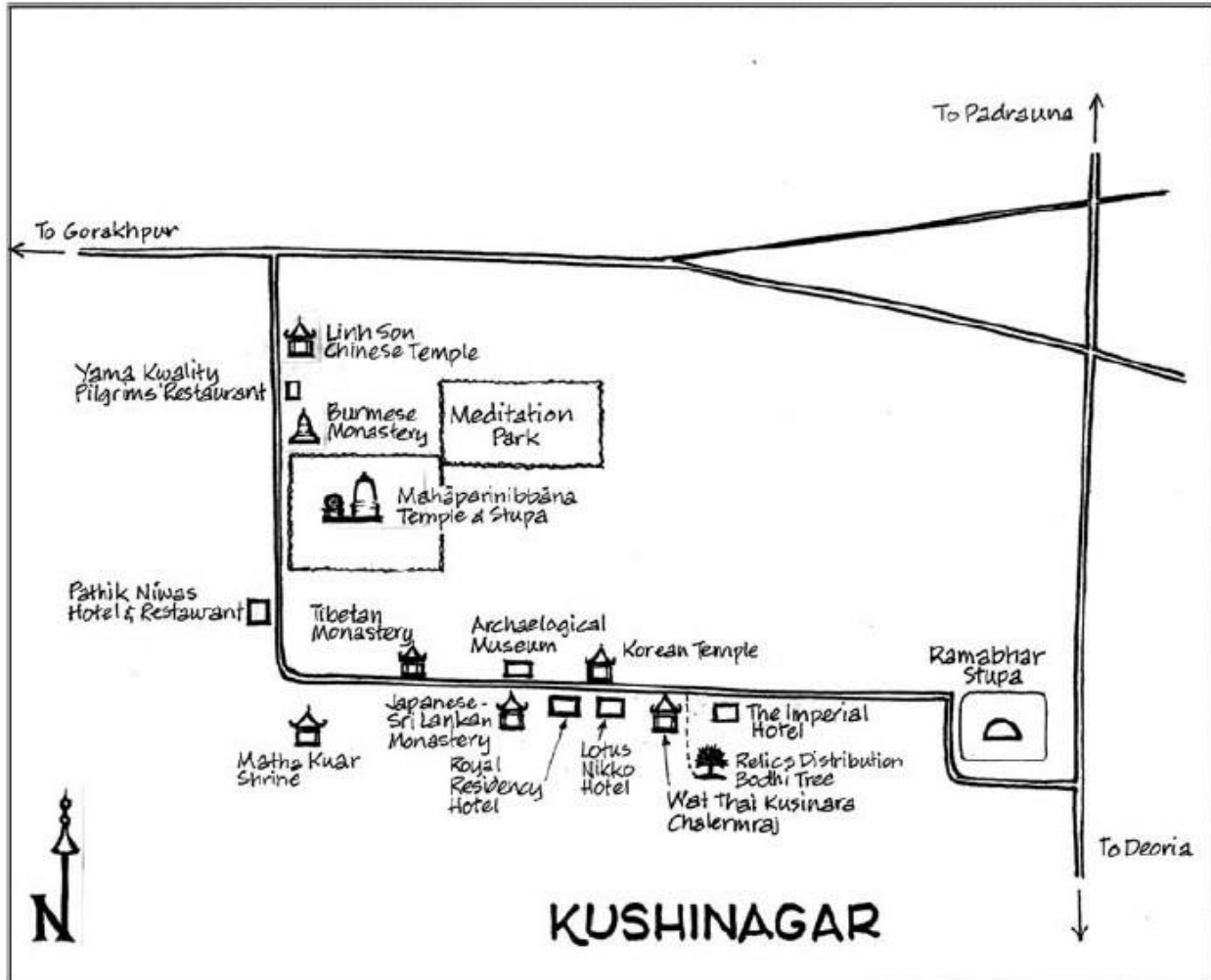
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A Selective Extract

Kushinagar (Kusinārā)



The Buddha's Last Days

After spending his last rainy season in Vesālī, the Buddha announced his imminent passing, and set off for Kusinārā with Ānanda. They stopped in the towns and villages of Bhaṇḍagāma, Hatthigāma, Ambagāma, Jambugāma, and Bhoganagara. In each of these places, the Buddha gave the same comprehensive instructions to the congregated meditators explaining the necessity of deeply understanding morality, concentration and wisdom.

This is sīla, this is samādhi, this is paññā. Samādhi imbued with sīla brings great benefits. Paññā imbued with samādhi brings great benefits. The mind imbued with paññā becomes totally free from the defilements of sense pleasures, becoming, false views, and ignorance.

Thirty kilometres before reaching Kusinārā, the Buddha and Ānanda rested in a small town called Pāvā, where they stayed in a luscious mango grove owned by Cunda the Silversmith, a lay disciple. Cunda was a great admirer of the Buddha and offered him a local delicacy prepared from a mushroom called “Tender Pig” (sūkara maddava). Shortly after the meal, the Buddha fell violently ill with dysentery, but bore the pains with perfect awareness and equanimity. The next day, having purged the illness, the Buddha felt fit enough to continue the journey.

After walking several kilometres under the scorching sun, the Buddha began feeling terribly weak and thirsty, and took refuge under the shade of a tree. “Ānanda, please fetch me some water,” the Buddha asked, pointing to a nearby stream.

“But Lord, a caravan of 500 carts just passed through here. The water is thick and cloudy,” Ānanda protested, not wanting the Buddha to drink such dirty water. “We are almost at the Kakutthā River whose water is clean. It’s better to wait for some time than risk drinking dirty water.”

“Please Ānanda, do not argue with me. I need water now,” the Buddha insisted.

Ānanda relented and took the Buddha’s bowl to the stream. As he approached the water, he was astonished to find it clear and unsullied. Ānanda was amazed that he had been the Buddha’s attendant for 25 years, and still sometimes failed to recognize the magnitude of his master’s powers.

Continuing on their journey, the Buddha and Ānanda met a Malla merchant named Pukkusa. The Buddha spoke to him about the Dhamma, and Pukkusa was filled with happiness. Feeling so grateful for receiving a personal teaching, Pukkusa offered

the Buddha a set of robes woven from golden thread. When the Buddha put on the lustrous cloth, Pukkusa and Ānanda were taken aback by how the Buddha's old and tired body glowed with a brilliant radiance, making the robe itself appear dull in comparison.

Before reaching Kusinārā, they came to the Kakutthā River, where the Buddha took his last bath and drink of water. After meditating by the riverbank, the Buddha told Ānanda,

Ānanda, the meal we ate at Cunda's was the Tathāgata's last meal. People may accuse Cunda of poisoning the Tathāgata, so make sure to console him, letting him know that the meal was greatly treasured. Rather than feeling depressed, Cunda should feel glad to have had the opportunity to offer him this auspicious last meal. Explain to him that there are two kinds of alms food whose fruits are far greater than any others. Which two? One is the alms food eaten just before attaining Supreme Enlightenment; the other is the alms food eaten before passing into parinibbāna. The fruits of both these meals are conducive to long life, beauty, happiness, fame, wealth, and heavenly rebirth.

After resting for a short while, the Buddha crossed the Hiraññavati River and went to the Malla's sālā grove. The Buddha was fatigued, and Ānanda prepared a place for him to meditate in the resting lion's pose between two great sālā trees. The trees, delighted to have the Buddha meditate beneath them, burst into untimely bloom and the flower blossoms gently fell on the Buddha's body. Heavenly mandārava flowers and sandalwood powder then fell from the sky, to the tune of divine music that drifted through the air.

"Ānanda, do you see all these wonderful offerings of veneration?" the Buddha asked his attendant. "None of these compare to living a life of Dhamma—the highest offering a being can make."

“Lord, meditators used to visit the Tathāgata to pay their respects. Now with the Tathāgata’s passing, meditators will no longer have a chance to do this,” Ānanda said.

“Ānanda, there are four places the sight of which will arouse inspiration in meditators. Which four? Where the Tathāgata was born, where the Tathāgata realized nibbāna, where the Tathāgata set in motion the Wheel of Dhamma, and where the Tathāgata passed into parinibbāna. Any meditator with a devoted heart who dies while on pilgrimage to these places will be reborn in a celestial realm.”

Ānanda could not take his eyes off the Buddha’s poor physical condition, and he regretted that in spite of all his years of close contact with the Buddha, he had still not reached the stage of total liberation, but merely of a sotāpanna. Overcome with emotion, Ānanda ran off to a nearby hut and wept in sorrow and shame. Hearing this, the Buddha sympathetically called him over:

“Enough Ānanda, do not weep. Have I not already told you that all things pleasant are impermanent and subject to separation? So how could it be, Ānanda, that whatever is born, become, and compounded is not subject to decay? How should they not pass away? Ānanda, for a long time you have attended the Tathāgata with bodily, verbal, and mental acts of loving kindness. You have done so gladly, sincerely and without reserve. You have acquired much merit, Ānanda. Keep on striving and you will soon be free from the taints.”

The Buddha then turned to a group of nearby bhikkhus and praised Ānanda for his wisdom and popularity, pointing out that people were always glad to see him and listen to him when he spoke. These are all positive qualities to be emulated.

Ānanda was still not ready to accept the Buddha’s looming demise. Hoping to convince the Buddha to live a little bit longer, Ānanda said, “Please, Lord, it is not fit for you to pass away in this miserable and insignificant town. We should go to a city like Sāvattthī or Rājagaha where there are many devoted followers who would make you a grand ceremony.”

The Buddha refused Ānanda's request, explaining that in a past life he was a Wheel-Turning Monarch by the name of Mahāsudassana. At that time, this small town was not insignificant, but a prosperous royal capital named Kusāvātī. If it was fit for the king to die in this place back then, the Buddha asserted, it was certainly fit for him to die here now.

Knowing that he would not live much longer, the Buddha asked Ānanda to send word to the Mallas of his forthcoming death. When the Malla people heard the news they rushed to the sālā grove and waited in a long queue to pay their last respects to the Buddha.

A wandering ascetic named Subhadda also heard the news that the Buddha was about to die. He hurried over to the grove hoping that the Buddha would be able to dispel a doubt of his that he'd been carrying for a long time. Seeing the long line of people, Subhadda went over to Ānanda, "Friend," he pleaded, "please allow me to ask the Buddha a question." Not wanting the Buddha to be bothered by philosophical debates in his last moments of life, Ānanda refused the ascetic's request, saying, "Please, Sir, the Buddha is exhausted. He should not be disturbed."

The Buddha overheard their conversation and told Ānanda to permit Subhadda to come forth with his question. He knew that this old man was ripe for awakening and that he too did not have much time left. Subhadda asked the Buddha about other teachers and whether or not they had direct knowledge of ultimate reality. "Forget about them, Subhadda! Concentrate on yourself. Practise the Noble Eightfold Path and you will realize the Truth!"



Hearing these words of encouragement and feeling the Buddha's immense compassion, Subhadda asked for immediate ordination. The Buddha consented and Subhadda became the last person to ordain during the Buddha's presence. Subhadda thanked the Buddha profusely and went off to meditate under a nearby tree. Within a few minutes he became an arahant and had the honour of being the last person to attain fruition during the Buddha's life.

As his end drew near, the Buddha gave his final directions to the assembled bhikkhus,

"Bhikkhus, do not think, 'the Teacher's instruction has come to an end. Now we have no Teacher!' You should always continue practising the Dhamma. The Dhamma will be your guide when the Tathāgata is gone."

After a few moments of silence, the Buddha looked around at the assembly and then uttered his last words,

Now, meditators, this I declare to you: decay is inherent in all compounded things. Strive with diligence! (Vaya dhammā saṅkhārā, appamādena sampādettha!)

The Buddha then closed his eyes and instantly entered the first jhāna. He ascended to the eighth jhāna and then slowly descended to the fourth, and from there guided

his consciousness to final nibbāna. A loud thunder struck and a great earthquake shook and the mighty deva king Sakka intoned:

*All compounded things are impermanent (Aniccā vata saṅkhārā),
Their nature is to arise and pass away (uppādavaya-dhammino).
When they arise and are eradicated (Uppajjitvā-nirujjhanti),
Their cessation brings happiness (tesaṃ vūpasamo sukho).*

Many monks and householders were overcome with grief, and threw up their arms and flung themselves to the ground, crying out, “So soon the Blessed One has passed away! So soon the eye has vanished from the world. Who can we seek refuge in now!” While these people wailed and trounced about, others who were fully aware of anicca, solemnly remained silent.

Bhikkhu Anuruddha, the Buddha’s cousin, gently reproached the weeping meditators, “Friends, enough lamenting! Has the Lord not already told you that all things that are pleasant are impermanent and subject to separation? So? Why this pitiful display? Whatever is born; dies. Whatever arises; passes away. Whatever is compounded; dissolves. Please regain your composure!”

The *bhikkhus* followed their elder’s council and spent the rest of the night around the Buddha’s body contemplating the nature of impermanence and listening to Anuruddha and Ānanda recount inspiring episodes from the Buddha’s life. Dignity was restored.

The next day, the Malla princes took care of the Buddha’s body as if it were the ‘king of kings’. They bathed the corpse in the Hiraññavati River, wrapped it in five hundred layers of expensive cloth, and then placed it on the funeral pyre of scented woods. For seven days, people paid homage to the body, offering flowers, incense, music and dance. The Mallas then paraded the body through town and brought it to the Makuṭa Baṇḍhana, their main shrine. When they tried to ignite the pyre, however, it would not catch fire. Legend tells that a host of devas had delayed the cremation until Mahākassapa arrived and paid his last respects.

At that time, Mahākassapa and a retinue of 500 *bhikkhus* were somewhere between Pāvā and Kusinārā. They came across an Ājīvika ascetic who had been in Kusinārā when the Buddha had passed on. When the ascetic told them the news, the ignorant *bhikkhus* began lamenting while the awakened ones remained in solemn silence. An old and ignorant monk named Subhadda (not to be confused with the 120-year-old ascetic) exclaimed, “Enough, friends, do not be sad, do not lament. We are better off without him. We have been frustrated by his saying: ‘This is allowed; this is not allowed.’ But now, we shall do as we like and we shall not do as we do not like.”

This set Mahākassapa thinking. He gave the *bhikkhus* an inspiring Dhamma talk on impermanence and encouraged them to go to Kusinārā before the body was cremated. When the group reached the site and circumambulated the Buddha’s corpse three times, the pyre spontaneously burst into flames. Everyone fell to their knees, joined their palms, and bowed their heads as the body burned.

When the fire died out, it was evident that the skin, flesh, sinews and oil of the joints did not produce any cinder or ash; only the bones remained. The Malla princes gathered the bones in a golden urn, and worshipped them with dances, songs, flowers and incense.

Shortly after, representatives from other states came along, including King Ajātasattu of Maghada, the Licchavīs of Vesālī, the Sakyans of Kapilavatthu, the Balian of Allakappaka, the Koliyans of Rāmāgāma, the Brahmins of Vetha and the Mallas of Pāvā. They all wanted a share of the relics for their kingdoms. The Kusinārā Mallas refused to give the bones up, arguing that since the Buddha had died in their precinct the relics belonged to them.

On the brink of a violent confrontation, the wise brahmin Doṇa came to the rescue with a suggestion, “Sirs, please listen to my proposal. Tolerance is the Buddha’s teaching. It would be wrong for us to clash over a share of the Exalted One’s bones.

Let us all unite in harmony and in agreement to make up eight parts. Let monuments be set up far and wide so that all may see and develop devotion.”

Coming to their senses, they agreed to divide the relics into eight equal shares, and let Doṇa keep the urn. Shortly after the relics were distributed, the Moryans of Pippalivana arrived, also wanting a share. But since the relics had already been divided, Doṇa gave them the wood ashes from the pyre. Each of the ten groups went to their respective states and erected stūpas enshrining the relics.

Site-Sitting

In the middle of the 5th century CE, a devout Buddhist named Haribala came to Kusinārā and found it totally in ruins. Wanting to revive the glory that the town deserved, Haribala enlarged the original stūpa (erected first by the Malla princes and then later renovated by King Asoka) and also built the famous monolithic sandstone reclining Buddha statue that can be seen today. However, the sacred ground was deserted again after the 12th century Islamic crusades, and left to the whim of the forces of nature.

In the mid-19th century, the British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham and his assistant Archibald Carlleyle rediscovered the lost site. Then in the early 1900s, the Burmese monk Bhante Chandramani fell in love with the holy town and made it his life mission to ensure that it did not fall in to ruin again.

When the Buddha finally passed away, it was not just the end of one life. Millions of lives, countless lives, had come to an end. And it was such a good end, after he had helped so many. At that moment there was very strong Dhamma dhātu, Nibbāna dhātu, and the effects have remained for centuries. – S.N. Goenka

Bhikkhu Chandramani built a small temple (today’s Burmese Temple) near the stūpa, which began to attract a steady stream of pilgrims to Kushinagar. Since the early days of Chandramani’s renovation efforts, a small town has evolved around the stūpa and a cultural and religious renewal has occurred. This is evident in the

growing number of temples and monasteries that make up much of the small town, as well as the new hotels and other amenities catering to pilgrims and tourists alike. Like Sārnāth, Kushinagar is slowly being revived, and is certainly worth a few days' visit.

Meditating in this place where the Buddha breathed his last (after countless aeons of practice!), it's easy to remember the Buddha's 45 years of selfless service to humanity. Whether meditating in the temple next to the beautifully draped statue, or outside by one of the stūpas, the Buddha's profound final words—*vaya dhamma saṅkhārā, appamādena sampādetha*—continue to waft through the air, reminding us to let go of our attachments and put an end to our deep-seated misery.

Nirvana Temple (Mahāparinibbāna Temple)

In 1956, the Mahāparinibbāna Temple was rebuilt to celebrate the 2500-year anniversary of the Buddhasāsana. The temple houses a magnificent 1500-year-old statue of the Buddha resting in the lion's pose. The statue's base has three small figures representing the people's attitudes at the time of the Buddha's death. The first is of a lamenting Malla woman, the second of an awakened bhikkhu meditating on *anicca*, and the third of an unenlightened bhikkhu with his head resting in his hands, obviously sulking with grief.

The neat temple grounds feature manicured lawns, flower gardens and large trees (including a few *sālā* just in front of the temple), and is a little oasis in the midst of a noisy Indian town. Chattering flocks of parakeets, flitting about from tree to tree, contribute to the peacefulness and beauty of the park. There is no entrance fee to this living temple and its operating hours are from 6:00am to 6:00pm.

Nirvāna Stūpa (Mahāparinibbāna Stūpa)

Directly behind the temple is a towering stūpa that was built over the spot where the Buddha, under the twin *sālā* trees, left the world of mind and matter. When Cunningham and Carlleyle opened the many-layered stūpa in 1876, they found terracotta Buddha figures, an inscription of the Nidana Sutta on a copper plate, and

pieces of charcoal from the funeral pyre. Meditating near this great, yet simple stūpa helps connect us to the all-embracing nature of the Dhamma.

A little ways from the Mahāparinibbāna Stūpa is a demolished stūpa that local monks say is the spot where the arahant Anuruddha passed away. Anuruddha was the Buddha's cousin, famous for mastering the practices of divine eye and for reminding the lamenting bhikkhus to contemplate anicca over the Buddha's corpse.

Matha-Kuar Shrine

South of the main temple at the crossroad towards the Cremation Stūpa is a shrine that was built in 1927 by Burmese pilgrims. The shrine houses a 10th century golden Buddha statue from Gayā. Local monks claim that this shrine marks the spot where the old King Mahāsudassana (the Buddha in a former life, see above), with his faculties purified and complexion bright, renounced all of his worldly possessions on his deathbed. His wife tried to please him by reminding him of all his treasures, but he retorted that he found them unpleasing, undelightful and unattractive.

All things that are pleasing and attractive are liable to change and disappear. To die filled with longing for these things is painful and blameworthy. Desire for these treasures must be abandoned.

With that said, the king passed away from this world and was reborn in the Brahma realm.

Ramabhar Stūpa (Makuṭa Baṇḍhana Stūpa)

This magnificent 15 m high brick stūpa, located in a peaceful and well-maintained park, marks the spot where the Malla princes cremated the Buddha. The trees here provide a nice shaded area for meditation on hot days. Locals call it Ramabhar Stūpa because it is near Ramabhar Pond, about 2 km from the Mahāparinibbāna Temple and Stūpa.

Relics Distribution Bodhi Tree

This huge bodhi tree is said to mark the spot of the Malla's royal council hall, where Doṇa prevented a conflict amongst the eight tribes by proposing to evenly distributing the Buddha's relics.

To get to the tree, turn right on to the narrow dirt footpath immediately after the lovely Thai temple. Follow the path for about 200 metres; on your left, you'll see the massive tree presiding over the paddy fields.

Archaeological Museum

Housing local antiquities, this tiny government Buddha Museum is open Tuesdays to Saturdays from 10:30 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. The museum is located opposite the Japan-Sri Lanka Buddhist Centre, and will hopefully have more to offer in the future.

Wat Thai Kusinārā Chalermraj

This magnificent monastic complex has a shrine containing a relic of the Buddha and has several meditation huts in a bamboo forest for anyone interested in self-retreats. The monastery also runs a clinic that offers free treatments for children and the elderly and charges Rs 5 for adults. Volunteer doctors are welcome in exchange for room and board.

Excursions

Pawanagar/Fazilnagar (Pāvā)

Beyond this small town (30 km from Kushinagar) is a grassy mound covering a stūpa supposed to mark the spot where the Buddha took his last meal at Cunda the Silversmith's house. Other than the small Jain Dharamsala 1 km from the stūpa, there's no obvious accommodation in this town, so you may want to consider making the journey as a day trip from Kushinagar. There are no direct buses either, so it's best to rent a taxi or jeep if you don't have a private vehicle.

Don

The brahmin Doṇa built a stūpa over the vessel in which the Buddha's ashes had been collected and from which he had divided them to the disputing clans (see above). Doṇa's stūpa today is a large grassy mound with a Hindu temple on it just outside the village of Don. Nearby is a graceful 9th century Tara statue, which is worshipped by locals as a Hindu goddess.

Don village is off the road that goes between Patna and Kushinagar, and can only be reached by private vehicle. From Patna, go through Siwan and Chhapra. From Kusinara, take the road via Gopalganj.

Arogya Mandir Nature Cure Hospital

Arogya Mandir Nature Cure Hospital is one of the few tranquil and clean areas around noisy Gorakhpur. Arogya Mandir can be a good place to stop and re-energize for a few days, especially if you have fallen ill during your pilgrimage. The four-acre property located about 5 km from the railway station was founded by the late Vipassana teacher, health and spiritual writer, and Gandhian freedom fighter, Dr. Vithaldas Modi. Arogya Mandir offers a wide range of therapies such as fasting, enemas, oil massage, steam baths, mud-pack therapy, yoga, brisk walks and badminton.