

Pilgrimage in Early Buddhism: Layman and Monk, and the Hindu Origin

by Hōyu Ishida

INTRODUCTION

The name of Buddhism is given by Westerners to the vast synthesis of teachings attributed to Gautama (Pāli, Gotama), the Buddha, the Sage of the Śākya Clan, and to much that later grew out of them as they spread from India to other lands. The closest Sanskrit term for Buddhism is *Buddha-śāsana*, which means "the teachings of the Buddha." The goal of Buddhism is to become a *buddha*, an "enlightened one," by the Buddha's teachings. There are many teachings or ways to attain enlightenment. The Buddha, out of his compassion and in accord with the need and ability of his followers, offered various kinds of teachings. They were suitable to each case so as to lead people to the final goal of enlightenment. This method of extending different teachings to different followers according to their needs is called *upāya-kauśalya* ("skill in means"). Thus, "Buddha is compared to a skilled physician who adjusts his remedies conforming to the nature and intensity of the disease of the patients."¹

The purpose of this essay is to discuss one of the means or ways to reach the goal of a certain Buddhist path. I would like to take up here the subject of "pilgrimage" used as a method of attaining that goal and examine the meaning of Buddhist pilgrimage. I would like, however, to limit my discussion to the lay devotees of early Buddhism who were inspired to visit the four sacred places associated with the Buddha's life, and the *stūpa* where the Buddha's ashes and relics were entombed. In the first half of this essay, the four sacred places, *stūpa*-worship and the purpose of pilgrimage are discussed.

In the second half, I propose to show why the pilgrimage to those places by lay devotees was essentially important by analyzing their role in relation to that of monks or nuns who together composed the unconventional Buddhist community called the sangha. The sangha (the extraordinary norm) and the lay-oriented sangha (the ordinary norm),² both fulfilled their roles by helping each other. I will analyze the relationship between these two norms and the two Hindu norms,³ since Buddhism arose out of Hindu, or Vedic, tradition. I will examine the role which pilgrimage played by observing the transition of the sangha after the death of Śākyamuni Buddha.

(I)

In the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra* (Pāli, *Mahāparinibbāna-suttanta*), four Buddhist sacred places associated with the Buddha's life are mentioned. The sūtra says that: "There are these four places, Ānanda, which the believing man should visit with feelings of reverence and awe."⁴ The first is a grove of sāla trees called Lumbinī, near the capital of Śākya, Kapilavastu, where "the Tathāgata was born." The second is the bank of the river Nairāṇjanā at Buddhagayā where "the Tathāgata attained to the supreme and perfect insight." The third is the Deer Park at Ṛṣipatana near Vārāṇasī, which is "the kingdom of righteousness set on foot by the Tathāgata." The fourth is Kuśinagara, where "the Tathāgata passed finally away in that utter passing away which leaves nothing whatsoever to remain behind!"⁵ These four spots are associated with the four main events of the Buddha's life and are to be journeyed to by his followers "with feelings of reverence and

awe." In this sūtra, the purpose of pilgrimage is thus stated:

And they, Ānanda, who shall die while they, with believing heart, are journeying on such pilgrimage, shall be reborn after death, when the body shall dissolve, in the happy realms of heaven.⁶

It's clear that the goal of one's pilgrimage to such places is to attain the realm of heaven (Sanskrit, *svarga*; Pāli, *sagga*), but not the realm of nirvāṇa (Pāli, *nibbāna*). We must note that the realm of heaven is not the final goal of Buddhism. Rather, it's a place where, after being reborn there, one will then be able to attain future final enlightenment. Hence, the sūtra is suggesting that the pilgrimage, especially for the sake of lay devotees, is to attain the realm of heaven since they did not renounce the world as the monks or nuns had done. (This issue will be made clear later.)

I will now turn to other important places associated with the Buddha where lay people visited primarily in order to gain merit to be reborn at least in the realm of heaven. They are the various *stūpa* where the Buddha's relics or ashes are entombed.

After the death of the Buddha, his remains were treated like those of a King of Kings. The Mallas of Kuśinagara performed the cremation ceremony as taught. They first paid "honor, reverence, respect, and homage to the remains of the Blessed One with dancing, and music, and with garlands and perfumes," made "canopies of their garments," and prepared "decoration wreaths to hang thereon."⁷ Then, for seven days, they paid homage to the bones of the Buddha in their council hall with dancing, and they erected a solid mound or tumulus in which to place his bones and ashes at the four crossroads of the city. It was at this point that the king of Magadha, Ajātaśatru, the son of the queen of the Vaidehī clan, first heard the news of the Buddha's death at Kuśinagara. He then sent a messenger to the Mallas of Kuśinagara, saying:

The Blessed One belonged to the soldier caste, and I too am of the soldier caste. I am worthy to receive a portion of the relics of the Blessed One. Over the remains of the Blessed One will I put up a sacred cairn, and in their honor will I celebrate a feast!"⁸

As other kings and Brahmins heard the news of the Buddhas's death and wished to bring his remains home with them, the relics were distributed to eight kingdoms. Mounds were then made over the Buddha's remains in the kingdoms, and feasts were held. The Mauryas of Pippalivana, however, came to Kuśinagara too late, so they could only bring back the Buddha's relics, but still they made a mound and held a feast as well. Thus, *stūpa*-worship began and the Buddha's followers made pilgrimages to these *stūpa* with reverence and devotion in order to receive merit from the Enlightened One.⁹

(II)

With these events in the background, I will discuss the basic relational scheme between monks and laymen in Buddhism. Further, I will interpret the meaning of pilgrimages by lay-devotees to places associated with the myth and events of the life of the Buddha in connection with a comparison of the two norms in the Hindu tradition.

In both the Hindu and Buddhist traditions, the ordinary religious norm is based upon the notion of world-affirmation, while the extra-ordinary norm is based upon that of world-negation. In the ordinary norm, the aim of a religious person is to achieve his or her mundane goal, remaining in this world and participating in its activities. In the extra-ordinary norm, however, the aim is to attain release from the cycle of birth and death, called *saṃsāra*, by renouncing the world.

The Hindu notion of religious life is limited to only the three upper *varṇa*, or social classes, *brāhmaṇa*, *kṣatriya*, or *vaiśya*, and excludes *śūdra*. For these so-called "twice-born" Hindus, there are four aims of life: *dharma* or duty, *artha*

or wealth, *kāma* or desire, and *mokṣa* or liberation.¹⁰ *Dharma*, *artha* and *kāma* are the three main aims of the ordinary norm; and *mokṣa* is the goal of the extra-ordinary norm. Hindus pursue those aims throughout the four life stages called *āśrama*, by which their life is arranged within the social system based on *varṇa* (or caste system). Their primal importance is to fulfill their *dharma* in accordance with their *varṇa* and *āśrama*.

The first *āśrama* of Hindu religious life is *brahma-cārin*, the period of being a student of the Veda. At the start of Hindu religious life, one spends his youth before marriage in becoming a student of the Veda, under the spiritual guidance of a priest. During this period, one is initiated into traditional duties and patterns of behavior. One also learns chastity, obedience and other disciplines. According to *The Laws of Manu*, a *brāhmaṇa* should perform his initiation in the eighth year after conception, a *kṣatriya* in his eleventh year, and a *vaiśya* in his twelfth year.¹¹

After finishing this *āśrama-gr̥hastha*, the period of being a householder, he gets married and performs the ordinary activities of life. His *dharma* at this stage is to beget children, to exercise his inherited profession, to fulfill sacramental duties to the gods and ancestors in submission to the spiritual authority of the priests, and to support those holy men by gifts, and so forth. Thus, in this last *dharma*, there is an interdependence between householder and priest; that is, between the ordinary and extra-ordinary norms. Hence, during these two *āśrama*, religious Hindus focus their life on attaining *varṇāśrama-dharma*.

After fulfilling the aims of the ordinary norms, with the coming of age of his sons, he adopts the extra-ordinary norms and enters the third *āśrama* of *vānaprastha* as a transitional period. He renounces worldly passions and family life, retires into the forest, introverts into hermit existence, purifies his soul from secular tendencies through ascetic practices, centers his mind on devotional exercises, practices yoga, and realizes the unity

of the eternal in the individual and the universe.

He then, finally, puts himself into the last *āśrama*, that of *saṃnyāsīn*. He becomes a homeless mendicant and an ascetic saint, walking along the road apparently aimlessly, yet actually on the path of liberation from the worldly bondage of rebirth. Thus, in the Hindu religious tradition, both ordinary and extra-ordinary norms are stages in the progress of one's life, which is arranged basically by *āśrama* and, strictly, within *varṇa*.

The Buddhist tradition, however, is different, although it developed from the basis of the Hindu tradition. After the attainment of his enlightenment, the Buddha established the unconventional community called the sangha. He moved to reject the traditional *varṇa* system by which many people were oppressed. Therefore, he did not employ *āśrama* in the sangha but allowed a person of any race, sex, age or caste, including *śūdra*, to join the sangha. The new member lost his former *varṇa* by taking refuge in the Three Treasures: the *Buddha*, the *Dharma* and the *Sangha*. This revolutionary "casteless" system was the basis of the sangha (especially the monastic sangha that will be discussed later in comparison with the lay sangha) and it distinctly differed from the orthodox Hindu tradition. As the *Aṅguttara-Nikāya* reads:

The four great rivers, Gaṅgā, Yamunā, Aciravatī, and Mahī, upon reaching the great ocean, lose their former names to be called great ocean. Just so, O Pāhārādha, the four *varṇa*, *Kṣatriya*, *Brāhmaṇa*, *Vaiśya*, and *Śūdra*, upon retiring from household life to the homeless one under the Truth (*Dharma*) and Discipline (*Vinaya*) announced by the Buddha, lose their former names (*varṇa*) to be called the world renouncers, the children of the Śākya.¹²

In order to propagate his teachings effectively, the Buddha, in accord with the need and convenience of his followers, then established two groups together known as the sangha: the monastic and lay communities. The former consisted

only of *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī*, monks and nuns (I will hereafter use the word *bhikṣu* to signify both *bhikṣu* and *bhikṣuṇī*), who cut off entirely their social positions and worldly desires. This is the extra-ordinary norm of the Buddhist tradition. The latter consisted of lay people called *upāsaka* or *upāsikā*, "laymen" or "laywomen" (I will hereafter use the word *upāsaka* to signify both *upāsaka* and *upāsikā*), who remained in their respective classes or states, which is the ordinary norm of the Buddhist tradition.

The ideal of the *bhikṣu* was to transcend karma by thoroughly detaching oneself from the secular world in order to attain *nirvāṇa*, the extra-ordinary goal. On the other hand, the Buddha, realizing that his teaching was too profound to be realized by *upāsaka*, who were motivated by worldly desires, applied the method of *upāya* ("skill in means"). He taught them the realm of heaven as a temporary goal to be attained by accumulating good karma or practicing the five precepts.¹³ In both norms, however, the Buddha meant to lead *bhikṣu* and *upāsaka* to the final goal of *nirvāṇa*.

In this relationship between *bhikṣu* and *upāsaka* again we are able to see the harmonious coexistence of the ordinary and extra-ordinary norms. Both transferred merits to each other. *Bhikṣu*, since they had renounced the world, depended on *upāsaka* for food. But by their joyously and meritoriously accepting (*puṇyānumodana*) the alms given by *upāsaka*, the act or spirit of meritorious gift-giving (*puṇyakarma*) by *upāsaka* was rewarded. Thus, by the *bhikṣu*'s pure and meritorious acceptance, *upāsaka* were also able to demonstrate and accumulate good karma, which was the essential and important ethic to Buddhist lay devotees, and the Buddha was the most central figure of this relationship, as the prototype, who is unsurpassed in transferring his merit to the others.¹⁴

After the Buddha's death, however, his followers began to have different interpretations of his teachings, especially regarding *vinaya*, or "discipline." The Buddha is said to have told Ānanda that, if the sangha wished, it might revoke

the minor rules.¹⁵ However, Ānanda forgot to ask which rules were minor.¹⁶ Therefore, the First Council¹⁷ decided to retain everything in the *vinaya*¹⁸ since they were afraid that the sangha (especially the monastic sangha) would be corrupted if they began to revoke rules and regulations at their convenience.

As a result, they agreed to reinforce and increase the rules of *vinaya*, and the monastic sangha began to be split into two groups that differed on points relating to discipline and the separation of monastic and lay matters.¹⁹ Hence, the sangha, which emphasized *vinaya*, was becoming strongly monastic through the influence of the conservative group of monks called *Sthāvarā*, and *upāsaka* were left out of the sangha. In fact, the Buddhist Councils were held only by *bhikṣu* who composed the three branches of the Buddhist scripture called the *Tripiṭaka*: the *sūtra*, *vinaya* and *adhidharma*. Thus, the sangha became identical only with the *bhikṣu* who were isolated from *upāsaka*, and the gap between *bhikṣu* and *upāsaka* in general grew; however, another group of monks were closely associated with *upāsaka* and even developed *stūpa*-worship.²⁰

In observing the basic interdependent relationship between *bhikṣu* and *upāsaka* of the Buddha's sangha, we have seen the *upāsaka*'s main role, which was the ethical act of making good merit, such as meritorious offering (*puṇyakarma*) to those who renounced the world. By the *bhikṣu*'s pure, joyous, and meritorious acceptance (*puṇyānumodana*), the merit was then transferred to the *upāsaka*.

After the death of the Buddha, however, as this basic scheme of the sangha became shaky because of the split described above, the *upāsaka* lost their role in the sangha. They did, however, have the five precepts which limited the extent to which they could exercise their role. Yet they continued their devotion to the Buddha, in worshipping the sacred places associated with him and his relics (for the Buddha was visibly gone).

Pilgrimages to those spots became important

especially for the *upāsaka*, while the *bhikṣu* were continuing to develop their doctrines based on *vinaya*. Just as the *upāsaka* were told to receive merit from the *bhikṣu* through giving alms to the Buddha's sangha (we can see this scheme still in the Theravādin countries), they believed that by receiving merit through the pilgrimage to those places with a believing heart, reverence and awe, as we have seen in the *Mahāparinirvāṇa-sūtra*, they could attain their general temporary goal, the realm of heaven, even while they participated in social and secular activities. Hence, the pilgrimage to the sacred places became a major method for most lay devotees to attain the final enlightenment which would come after the attainment of the realm of heaven.

FOOTNOTES:

1. T.R.V. Murti, *The Central Philosophy of Buddhism* (London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1974), p. 247.
2. I apply the method of the ordinary and extra-ordinary norms, in the second half of my paper, advocated by Franklin Edderton in *Dominant Ideas in the Formation of Indian Culture*. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 62 II 3 (September, 1942).
3. In this article, Franklin Edderton discusses only the Hindu tradition, but I use this method for the Buddhist tradition as well.
4. *The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, in *Buddhist Suttas*, T.W. Rhys-Davids, trans., *The Sacred Books of the East*, p. 90.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 90.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 91.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
9. This reminds me of a journey by Friar Felix Fabri and his pilgrim companions to Jerusalem in his *The Book of the Wonderings of Friar Felix Fabri* (the Library of the Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society). Whenever they visited the holy places of Jerusalem, associated with the myth of Jesus, they expressed their reverence and devotion to Jesus and obtained "plenary indulgences." Although there are many basic differences in purpose, etc. between the two pilgrimages, the pattern of making pilgrimage to the sacred place to experience the myth and receive merit by expressing their reverence and devotion is very similar.
10. The three upper classes were Aryans and were classified as *dvija*, "twice-born," from their initiation ("birth") into the study of the *Veda*. *Śūdra* were excluded from the Vedic study and from the use of Vedic *mantras*. See *The Hindu Religious Tradition* by Thomas J. Hopkins (Encino: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1971), p. 75.
11. See "The Laws of Manu" in *A Source Book in Indian Philosophy* by Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan and Charles A. Moore, ed. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), p. 177.
12. *Anguttara-Nikāya*, vol. IV, p. 202.
13. The five precepts (*pañca-śīlāni*) are not to take life, not to take what is not given to one, not to commit adultery, not to tell lies and not to drink intoxicants.
14. The idea of transference of merit later becomes essentially important in the *Mahāyāna* tradition as a symbol of compassion.
15. See *The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, p. 112. "When I am gone, Ānanda, let the order, if it should so wish, abolish all the lesser and minor precepts."
16. Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion*, 2nd ed. (Encino: Dickenson Publishing Company, Inc., 1977), p. 65.

17. The First Council took place with a great gathering of monks at the Magadhan capital of Rājagṛha soon after the Buddha's death.

18. Robinson, p. 65.

19. *Ibid.*, p. 66.

20. These *bhikṣu* who were closely associated with the *upāsaka* later came to be central figures for the rise of the *Mahāyāna* Buddhism.