

Introduction

A PILGRIMAGE IS UNLIKE any other form of travel, and certainly any other activity from our daily life. If we recognize this from the start and appreciate our journey as a way not only to trace the Buddha's life, but also to appreciate how beings have benefitted from his activities, then a pilgrimage becomes so joyous. The Buddha uncovered the causes of suffering, revealed our innate mental clarity, and taught us how to gather the positive causes that lead to permanent happiness. These truths are universal. Of course, it is not easy to dispel the delusions that cause suffering; we have been habituated in them for a long time. So long, in fact, that we have come to believe our delusions are real. So we repeat the same mistakes over and over, and suffering never comes to an end. Everyone in the world strives for happiness their whole life, but in the end, no one is entirely free of suffering. The Buddha's wisdom pinpointed the root cause of our delusion for us and showed how lost we are in the jungle of confusion. The possibility of enlightenment gives us great hope and joy that suffering can actually end.

Pilgrims don't travel as tourists do, taking pictures and sightseeing, just looking a place over and quickly leaving for the next one. At each place we can reflect on the Buddha's

wisdom and take the opportunity to appreciate how precious his teachings are now and have been for centuries. Through the ages, people from all over the world have sacrificed their time and resources to visit these holy places to honor the Buddha and his followers, and to receive blessings. Just as in ancient times, today people stay for days to study the precious Dharma. Afterward, they take the Buddha's message of wisdom, compassion, and purification back to their own countries. In this way, the Dharma has benefitted countless sentient beings all over the world since the Buddha transmitted it 2,600 years ago. How amazing!

Outwardly, these sites became holy because the Buddha blessed them by performing his enlightened activities there. Honoring these places today supports our efforts to build inner courage, wisdom, and compassion; to purify all our shortcomings; and to create peace and harmony within. When we become holy through the practice of the Buddha's instructions, then the places we go will be made holy. Think of Milarepa: even though he committed such harmful acts in his youth, now, every place he went during his lifetime is full of blessings because he became enlightened. This thought can encourage us to study and practice tirelessly.

The most important practices that the Buddha taught are love, compassion, bodhichitta, and causality. The Dharma is not just an academic philosophy, but is a practical method that dispels the confusion and mental afflictions that directly cause all the suffering in the world. When you encounter conflicts and obstacles, step back and reflect on these practices instead of indulging in the conflict. This will help to reduce pride and ego, and increase your understanding of others, allowing you to walk in others' shoes. Then through this wisdom and the

method of compassion, a real sense of serenity is possible. We can't leave the teachings on the table and expect peace and happiness to come without effort. The Buddha gave complete instructions. Recalling interdependence, our part is to take responsibility for our study and practice.

All Buddhists are not buddhas; we are not all enlightened, so there is always a possibility we may make mistakes and face limitations. But as we progress in these practices, we will become happier and more peaceful. Then we will have the inner resources to help others. Bodhichitta is the consummate path and method to train our mind. Once our mind becomes a friend, we, too, become holy.

Interdependent arising is a fundamental doctrine held by all Buddhist traditions. It explains that no phenomena, including ourselves, exist inherently or as independent entities; everything arises in dependence on various causes and conditions. Our planet and all its inhabitants function within that framework. This is not just Buddhist philosophy; this is how all phenomena function, universally. We just need incisive awareness, a clear mind, to capture the reality nature of all phenomena. We cannot presume we know how reality works or guess at it. We have to measure our actions very carefully and create the right causes for what we desire.

After practicing relative bodhichitta, we practice ultimate bodhichitta or mahamudra. When the Buddha became enlightened, he declared, "I have found an unafflicted nectar that is deeply profound, total peace, free from fabrication, luminous, and unconditioned." This describes the nature of mind; every individual has it equally. The Buddha completely eliminated all delusion and directly realized absolute wisdom. That is the holiest among the holy.

Even though we have the potential to realize the nature of mind, it is like gold hidden in ore, or butter yet to be churned from milk. With great compassion, the Buddha showed the method to reveal our true nature, the universal way every being is constituted. We all want to be free from suffering and always desire peace and happiness, but we remain ignorant of how to accomplish this. Everyone, even small ants, keeps busy looking for a better place, a place with less suffering. We dedicate our entire lives to this endeavor, but the day never comes when we can say, “Now my mission is accomplished.” We are always dissatisfied; we never have enough. Even if someone made a billion dollars, they would still be hungry for more. The Buddha discovered total satisfaction, the ultimate achievement, and left instructions on how we, too, can achieve the same. We already have this great path; we don’t have to research anything, just follow it. That’s why I called this book *Sacred Places, Sacred Teachings: Following the Footsteps of the Buddha*.