

Symbols of the Enlightened Mind

VEN. SHRAVASTI
DHAMMIKA
goes to Bihar
in search of
stupas, the
primordial
sacred
structures
which can be
found in all
Buddhists
traditions.

During Buddhism's period of glory, the Indian state of Bihar was literally dotted with stupas. Some marked places where events in the Buddha's life had occurred; others, at important monasteries or population centers, enshrined relics of the Buddha or of famous saints. While a few are remarkably well preserved, most are little more than grassy mounds, many with Hindu temples on top. Traveling through Bihar I located the remains of at least forty stupas although there could easily be two or three times more than that. Here are the stories of five of the more interesting and accessible ones.

Lauriya Nandangar The small market town of Lauriya Nandangar in the far north of Bihar is situated on what was once the main pilgrims' road from Pataliputra (now Patna), the capital of King Ashoka's empire, to Lumbini, the birth place of the Buddha. Ashoka marked all the important stops on the way with large stone pillars – the one at Lauriya Nandangar is the only one that stands in its original position, still unbroken and crowned with its capital.

Behind the local sugar mill, one and a half kilometers from the pillar, lie the ruins of perhaps the biggest stupa ever built in India. Rising in a series of round, square and polygonal terraces, it is now only 24 meters high, but it has a circumference measuring nearly 457 meters. A small stupa was found deep inside, next to a page of Buddhist scripture dating from the fourth century C.E. Why was Lauriya Nandangar graced by both a pillar and such an enormous stupa? As with so many Buddhist sites, all records have been lost and we are left with a mystery.



Monks worshipping Dona's Stupa.
A fifth century sculpture from Gandhara

Don According to the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, as word spread that the Buddha had died, representatives from several kingdoms and clans began arriving in Kushinagar to claim the mortal remains. The Shakyas wanted some because, "The Tathagata was the greatest of our tribe." The envoy of King Ajatasattu said that his master was entitled to the relics as he and the Buddha were of the warrior caste. And the Mallas of Kushinagar said, "The Tathagata attained nirvana in the precincts of our town, and we will not give up his bones." In all, eight claimants were involved in this rather unseemly dispute. It was agreed that Dona, a respected Brahmin who had the trust of all concerned, should divide the relics, and as a reward he would be given the vessel that had contained the relics, which he announced he would enshrine in a stupa.

The division had been made to everybody's satisfaction when an envoy from the Moriyyas of Pipphalivana turned up demanding a portion. Although the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta* is not quite clear on this point, it seems that Dona came to the rescue once again, suggesting that the Moriyyas be



Photo Ven. S. Dhammika

The Stupa at Kesariya

given the ashes from the funeral pyre. This was done and thus the first ten Buddhist stupas came to be built. In this sutra Dona is portrayed as a skilled peacemaker. “The Buddha taught patience so it ill becomes us now to fight over the bones of that most exalted person,” he is quoted as saying. Some later literature however represents Dona as something of a trickster. According to the *Sumangalavilasani*, not content with receiving the measuring bowl, he stole some of the ashes as well!

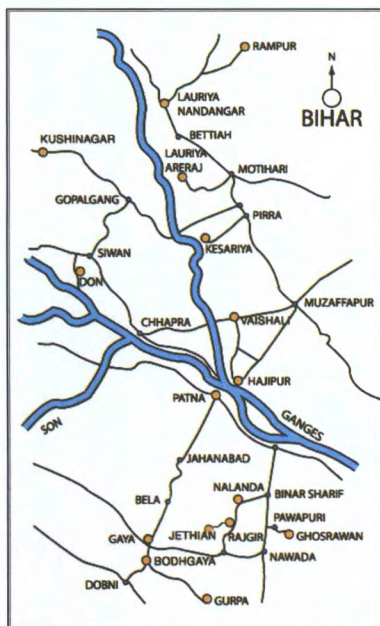
The stupa built by Dona was a popular destination for pilgrims in ancient times. It is mentioned in the *Divyavadana*, written about the second century C.E., and in several other works. The Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, who went there in the seventh century C.E., wrote that, although in ruins, the stupa still sometimes emitted a brilliant light. Its location has long ago been lost, but I recently did some research to see if it could be found again. I looked at the three references to Dona in the Pali *Tipitaka* for geographical information, then to Hsuan Tsang’s account of his visit to the stupa, and finally, I looked at my survey map of Bihar. I eventually spotted a small village in Siwan District named Don. Vaishali is about 40 miles away, quite close to Hsuan Tsang’s estimation. The village of Don seemed a good contender for the site of Dona’s stupa – but whether there were ruins in the village and, if so, whether they were Buddhist, I did not know.

At Don a high, round grassy mound with a small Hanuman temple on it appeared from behind the houses. Pieces of broken brick were strewn on the ground indicating that the mound was not made of earth. Amongst these I found small bits of shiny black pottery – a distinctive type called Northern Black Pol-

ished Ware, which was only made between the sixth and the second centuries B.C.E. Its presence proved that the site dated from around the Buddha’s time. I was told that, within living memory, the core of the stupa had been very high but that it had since collapsed and the bricks used to build the temple now on the top of the stupa. Behind the mound was a statue of Tara, delicately carved out of black stone, which I estimated must date from around the ninth century. Without proper archaeological examination it is impossible to say if the mound in Don is in fact Dona’s stupa, but I think the chances are very good – its location, name, the pre-Christian pottery, and the Buddhist statue all point to it.

Kesariya It was in Kessaputta (modern Kesariya), located near the main crossing point on the Gandak River, where the road from Pataliputra forked to Lumbini or Kushinagar, that the Buddha taught the *Kalama Sutta*, one of his most important discourses. According to later legend, when the Buddha left Vaishali on his last journey to Kushinagar, he was followed by crowds of Vajjians, whom he had asked several times to return home. At Kessaputta he urged them once more to let him continue his journey alone, and out of compassion and as compensation, he gave them his bowl. A stupa was later built at Kessaputta to commemorate this incident and to mark the place where the *Kalama Sutta* had been taught.

In 1988, a farmer told me of a large mound in Kesariya. On first seeing it, I wasn’t sure if it was a stupa – it was pointed rather than rounded, and covered with trees. In 2000 I visited Kesariya



again, and was surprised to find that the archaeological survey had been excavating it for two years. Although the excavation is only half finished, the layout of the great stupa is quite clear – it rises in five huge terraces, each a different shape, so that from above it looks like a giant mandala. Shrines containing life-size statues of the buddhas are located in the sides of the terraces. In the nineteenth century the archaeologist Alexander Cunningham measured the stupa and found it to

be 1,400 feet in circumference and 51 feet high. Even in its ruined state, the stupa is an extremely impressive sight.

Hajipur Ukkacela (modern Hajipur) was the first town in ancient times that pilgrims came to on the other side of the Ganges from Pataliputra. The Buddha stayed in or passed through Ukkacela on several occasions; during one such visit he taught the *Cula Gopalaka Sutta*. Tradition has it that Ananda, the Buddha’s most beloved disciple, died near Ukkacela. The Chinese pilgrims Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang saw a stupa in the town enshrining half of Ananda’s remains and another stupa on the opposite bank of the river enshrining the other half. They heard that when Ananda realized his life was drawing to a close he set off from Magadha heading north. King Ajatasattu, accompanied by a contingent of soldiers, went after him to plead that he stay in Magadha. As they approached, Ananda was already in a boat crossing the Ganges. Meanwhile, the people of Vijja flocked to the other bank of the river to welcome him. Ananda was now in the middle of the river with the assemblies on either bank imploring him to come to their side. So as not to disappoint either party and to avoid the possibility of conflict between them, he raised himself into the air and disappeared in a mass of flames. Half the ashes fell on one side of the river, half on the other, and that’s how the two stupas came to be built. Parts of the story may be legendary, but it probably embodies some historical facts as well – that Ananda died near the border of Magadha and Vijja and that there was some arrangement between the two countries to share his remains.

The stupa built on the south bank of the Ganges has long since disappeared but the other one has recently been identified on the edge of Hajipur – a large grassy mound rising from the surrounding market gardens. The K. P. Jayaswal Research Institute recently conducted excavations in the

area and found evidence of the site having been inhabited from 1000 B.C.E. onwards. When I first visited it I was deeply moved to think that the mortal remains of Ananda himself might be inside this pile of bricks. Because of the temple on the top however, it is highly unlikely that it will ever be excavated.

Jethian In the second year after his enlightenment, the Buddha returned to Bodhgaya where he taught and ordained the three Kassapa brothers and their one thousand followers. Accompanied by the newly ordained, the Buddha then headed for Rajagriha, the capital of Magadha. Some years before, when still a wandering ascetic, he had met King Bimbisara in Rajagriha and had told him that when he became enlightened he would come and meet him again. Now he was keeping his promise. As the large yellow-robed party moved towards the capital, word of their approach preceded them, and King Bimbisara and his retinue set out to meet them. The Buddha stopped at the village of Lativana some 14 miles from Rajagriha and camped at a shrine called the Supatittha Cetiya. It was here that the two great men, the Buddha, the supreme king of Dharma, and Bimbisara, the ideal secular monarch, met. According to legend it was King Ashoka who later built the stupa over the Supatittha Cetiya.

A low, grassy mound at Jethian is what remains of this stupa. Beside it is a large pond that was formed by digging earth to make bricks for the stupa. On the side of the stupa is a beautiful statue of the Buddha about five feet high, sitting with his hands in the dharmachakra mudra, and surrounded by smaller buddhas. If you climb to the top of one of the nearby crags, you will be rewarded by a fine view over a countryside that has probably changed very little since the Buddha’s time. The modern name Jethian is a Hindi contraction of the village’s original name, Lativana, which means the ‘Palm Grove.’ From the top of any hill you will see palm trees growing everywhere around Jethian – it makes you realize how timeless India really is. ☸



The Buddha statue at Jethian

Photo Ven. S. Dhammika

Ven. Shravasti Dhammika was born in Australia and has been a Buddhist monk for 26 years. He is the author of several books including *Middle Land Middle Way – A Pilgrim’s Guide to the Buddha’s India* and *Navel of the Earth – The History and Significance of Bodh Gaya*.