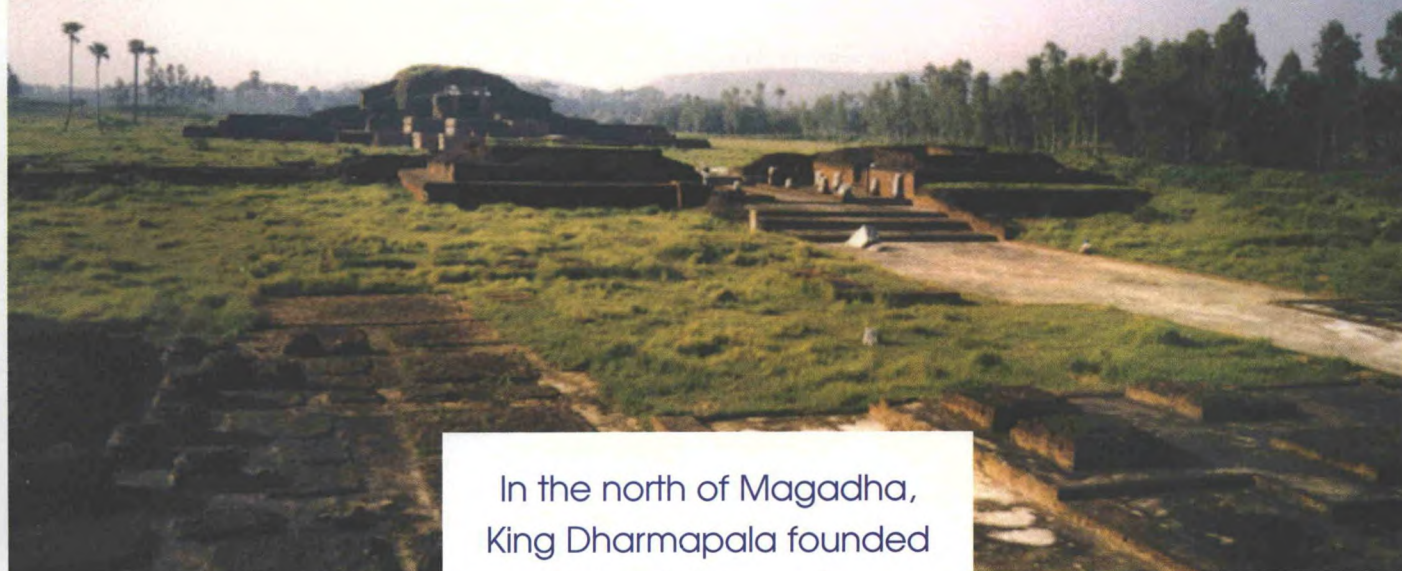


# Vikramashila

ancient seat of tantric Buddhism



In the north of Magadha,  
King Dharmapala founded  
a splendid monastery,  
Vikramashila, which  
became the seat of  
learning for Tantrayana.  
Ven. Shrivasti Dhammika  
tells of its history, its  
rediscovery, and his own  
modern-day odyssey.

General view of Vikramashila

From the eighth or ninth centuries onwards, a new type of Buddhism began to develop, later known as Tantrayana. In the beginning this new interpretation of Buddha's teaching met with disapproval amongst the more traditional monks and nuns so King Dharmapala (775–812) founded Vikramashila especially for the study of Tantrayana.

One Tibetan source describes the monastery. "Shri Vikramashila was built on the bank of the Ganges in the north of Magadha, on top of a hill. At its center was a temple, which housed a life-size copy of the Mahabodhi image. Around this were 53 small temples for the study of the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* and another 54 ordinary ones, all surrounded by a wall. Thus the number of temples was 108. He [Dharmapala] also provided requisites for 108 pandits."

From other sources we also know that there was a huge courtyard big enough to hold 8,000 monks, that at the entrance to the main temple were two statues, one of Nagarjuna and another of Atisha, and that the monastery's perimeter wall had six gates. At the main entrance there was a *dharmasala* to accommodate those who arrived after the gates had been locked at night.

What the monastic universities at Valabhi and Bodhgaya were to Theravada Buddhism and Nalanda was to Mahayana, Vikramashila was to Tantrayana. Some of the monasteries' 'gate-keeper scholars' were amongst the greatest names of this twilight period of Indian Buddhism. They included Shantipa, Jetari, Ratnavajra, Jñanashrimitra and the great Naropa (1016–1100). Vikramashila's first abbot,

Buddhajñanapada, was the author of some fourteen works and was described as "a great pandit learned in many fields of knowledge."

The monastery's greatest son, however, was the Bengali monk Atisha (982–1054). Apart from being a brilliant scholar and prolific writer, he also developed a new curriculum for the university, built more rooms for its monks and invited some of the best pandits of the time to come and teach there. The colophons on several of Atisha's works state that he wrote them "while residing at Shri Vikramashila Mahavihara."

At its height, between the seventh and ninth centuries, Vikramashila attracted numerous teachers and students – it is said that during the time of King Ramapala there were 160 teachers and 1,000 students. Students flocked to the university from all over north India as well as Kashmir, Java, Nepal and



Tibet. But by the eleventh century the golden age was over. When Tsultrim Gyalwa came to India to invite Atisha to Tibet there were only 53 monks at Odantapuri and 300 at Vikramashila.

Vikramashila's connection with Tibet is well known, its connection with Sri Lanka less so. However, tantra flourished in Sri Lanka for about 300 years and teachers from Vikramashila were sometimes invited to the island. The *Caturastisiddhapravritti* says that Shantipa, one of the legendary 84 Mahasiddhas and a teacher at Vikramashila, visited Sri Lanka at the invitation of its king and stayed for three years. Nor was the movement one-way. Lankajayabhadra, famous for his expositions of the *Guhyasamaja Tantra*, was one of the great Sri Lankan tantric scholars who taught at the monastery.

Some tantric practitioners had a reputation for unconventional behavior but such things were not tolerated at Vikramashila. It is recorded that a monk named Maitrigupta was expelled for bringing wine into the monastery. As was the custom, he was ejected over the wall rather than being allowed to leave through the main gate!

At the beginning of the thirteenth century Vikramashila met the same fate as all Buddhist centers in India. One Tibetan source says that the monk Prajñarakshita prayed to a tantric deity and the Muslim soldiers who were about to attack Vikramashila were scattered by a great rainstorm. The reality was rather different. As the invading armies pushed further east, the king hastily fortified several of the larger monasteries including Vikramashila and stationed soldiers in them. But it did no good. In about 1206 Vikramashila was sacked, its inmates were killed or driven away, and its foundation stone was tossed into the Ganges. The university's last abbot, Shakyashribhadra, left about a year before this and spent the rest of his life in Tibet and Kashmir where he died in 1255.

## rediscovery

Towards the end of the nineteenth century European and Indian scholars began speculating where Vikramashila might be. Silao, just south of Nalanda, Sultanganj near Bhagalpur, and Hisla, south of Patna, were all mentioned as possibilities. In 1901 Nundlal Dey suggested that it might be at Patharaghat where there were several huge mounds and fragments of Buddhist statuary near a hill overlooking the Ganges. One ancient Tibetan source says that the monastery was situated "where the holy river flows northward," and indeed the Ganges does turn north at Patharaghat. Although Dey's suggestion is now widely accepted as correct, excavations at Patharaghat in the early '70s failed to find a single inscription or seals actually mentioning the name Vikramashila.

Today Patharaghat is one of the most interesting Buddhist

sites in north India and yet at the same time one of the least known and least visited. At first it seems to be somewhat out of the ancient heartland of Buddhism, but in actual fact this is not so. Nearby is Champaganagar, the Campa of old, visited by the Buddha and the scene of several of his discourses. Abhayadatta, who wrote the biographies of the 84 Mahasiddhas, was a native of Campa and so were several of his subjects.

To the west is Munger, a town that is believed to derive its name from Maudgalyāyana, one of the Buddha's two chief disciples. In the seventh century the famous Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang spent a year in this town studying with Tathagatagupta and Kshantisimha. At Sultanganj there are the ruins of another huge Buddhist monastery. A magnificent bronze Buddha statue recovered from these ruins is now one of the great treasures of the Birmingham Museum.

The fact that a few local village temples have ancient Buddhist statues in them now serving as Hindu gods also attests to the fact that Buddhism once flourished in this region. But that was long ago. Today, Bhagalpur District where Patharaghat is situated is perhaps one of the most poverty stricken and lawless areas in India.

## the journey

Getting to Vikramashila promised to be a long and grueling trip, but we decided to go nonetheless. We hired a four-wheel-drive in Bodhgaya and set off before the sun came up. After hours bumping over dusty pot-holed roads we got to the Ganges and began to follow it towards the east. We arrived in Bhagalpur around sunset, booked into the town's only hotel, a truly seedy and rundown establishment, and fell into bed exhausted after the long drive. The next morning when I went into the bathroom to wash, I found that a rat had eaten half my soap.

Leaving Bhagalpur early we arrived at Patharaghat in about two hours. Patharaghat itself is a hill with its rocky north side washed by the Ganges and its top offering a commanding view over the river. The first thing we noticed were a series of caverns dug out of the side of a rocky, water-filled depression. Local lore says that these mysterious caverns are the result of mining in ancient times, but their real origin and purpose are unknown. At the foot of the nearby banyan tree is a beautiful statue of Tara, some votive stupas, and other pieces of sculpture. The Tara is now worshipped by locals as a Hindu goddess.

A little further along on the side of the hill is the Bothesvaranath Temple. Just inside the main gate is a collection of ancient statues of the Buddha, Tara, Avalokiteshvara, and other bodhisattvas. The first shrine has another statue of Tara at its entrance. Right next to this is a cave with two chambers cut out of the side of the hill, and outside the temple's back gate is a similar one.



About 100 yards beyond the temple is yet another cave, large, finely cut and with a paneled ceiling. Another Hindu temple is situated right beside the water and all the rocks nearby have ancient carvings on them.

Patharaghat is a very picturesque place and the many caves and Buddhist statues in the area suggest that it used to be a popular meditation retreat with monks and siddhas from Vikramashila. I once read an old text mentioning that Naropa



*One of the caves at Patharaghat*

used to stay in a cave near Vikramashila and it made me wonder if one of the caves we had seen might have been sanctified by his presence. Hsuan Tsang came to Patharaghat and wrote of it; "By cutting the rock, houses have been made; by leading the streams through each there is a continuous stream of water. There are wonderful trees and flowering woods; the large rocks and dangerous precipices are the resort of men of wisdom and virtue. Those who go there to see the place are reluctant to return." Nor has the place lost its appeal. We noticed that wandering swamis and sadhus congregate here from all over Bihar.

After seeing everything we took the road about three kilometers southeast to the ruins now identified as Vikramashila. A broad processional path leads up to the monastery's main entrance. The remains of the huge stone pillars that once supported the roof of the gatehouse can be seen on the left and right. One of these pillars is nearly four-foot square. Passing through the gate we entered a vast quadrangle surrounded by monks' cells. The thickness of the walls suggest that there may have been two or even three tiers of these cells. According to the archaeological report up to six inches of ash were discovered in some of these cells, proof of the monastery's fiery end.

In the middle of the quadrangle is the immense main temple, built on a cross plan, rising in three terraces and with shrines on each of the four sides. Circumambulating the temple

we noticed numerous terracotta figures decorating the sides of the terraces, but most were badly weatherworn. When Dey came here he found Buddhist sculptures scattered all over the place. In the home of an Englishman living nearby he saw "...some votive stupas, a big statue of Avalokiteshvara, a large seated figure of Buddha...and some broken statues. These statues were exquisitely sculptured." He was also told that some years before his visit another Englishman digging in the ruins had found "a beautiful lotus made of silver, containing eight petals, which could be opened and closed by means of a spring."

I didn't see a single piece of sculpture so I asked the watcher who was hovering around hoping to get some baksheesh, "Are there any statues?" "Yes," he said, "In the museum." "Museum!" I exclaimed with excitement, "You mean there's a museum here?" He nodded his head and we followed him through a grove of mango trees to a rundown building, its rusty iron door firmly fastened with a huge padlock. My face fell. I already knew the answer to my question but I asked him anyway. "Do you have the key?" "Oh no," he said cheerfully, "That's kept in Patna." I gave him his baksheesh, and we walked back to examine the other ruins scattered around the main complex, most of them still unexcavated.

The archaeological report on Vikramashila makes it clear that the ruins are very large, but even this did not prepare me for the sheer massiveness of the main temple and its cloisters. In its heyday it must have been the most magnificent Buddhist monastery in all India. In one ancient account of Vikramashila, it says that as a delegation from Tibet approached the great monastery, they were "greatly thrilled to have the first distant glimpse of its golden spire shining in the sun." The golden spire is long gone, but anyone interested in the roots of tantric Buddhism will still find Vikramashila a fascinating place to visit.

To go there first you have to get to Bhagalpur. You can either take a train from Patna or, as we did, hire a vehicle in Bodhgaya and go via Nawada, Jarnui, Tarapur and Sultanganj. From Bhagalpur it is another 58 kilometers over very poor roads. Make sure you go via Patharaghat as the direct road is impassable even for four-wheel-drives. If you are coming from either Patna or Bodhgaya expect the whole trip to take at least two days because of the condition of the roads and the many unexpected delays that always seem to happen in India. ☸

Ven. Shrivasti Dhammika is a Buddhist monk from Australia with a special interest in sacred places in India. Amongst his publications are *Middle Land, Middle Way – A Pilgrim's Guide to the Buddha's India* distributed by Wisdom Books ([www.wisdombooks.org](http://www.wisdombooks.org)) and *Navel of the Earth – The History and Significance of Bodh Gaya*.

