



FOOTSTEPS OF THE BUDDHA TOUR 2019

Report on the tour by Karma Tensum

The Itinerary

The itinerary was quite similar to our tour last year. We shortened the tour by a couple of days and took Sravasti off because of the long bus ride to get to it. So we started the tour with the visit to Clement Town. Last year several members of the group found the long bus ride from N. Delhi to Clement Town difficult. This year we flew and that made the journey substantially easier.

One of the major aims of the Footsteps of the Buddha tours is to connect TCEF sponsors with their sponsored children and/or elders, and to share the Tibetan culture and hospitality with the hope that tour members may support our work. From that point of view, the visit to Clement Town is always an important part of the tour, an important part of the work that we do at TCEF.

As in the past, several members made emotional and heart touching connections with the sponsored children and elders. These are perhaps best conveyed in the few images shared here.



Karen Cooper and Alan Davis with Sanoav Wanamu

Photos curtesy Jeff VanTine



Jennifer Pryor & Bill Crenshaw with Tashi



Sue & Oscar Davis with Ngawang Oetso & Ankit

Photos curtesy Jeff VanTine



Wintersong Safronoff with Priyanka

The day the group arrived in Clement Town was also the full moon of the first Lunar month. Tibetans celebrate this day as **Choenga Choepa** - a day to celebrate the miracles the Buddha performed at Sravasti. There is a special ceremony centered on beautiful butter sculptor offerings. So the tour got off to a brilliant start when the group got to witness this special ceremony within the settings of the beautiful Tashi Kyil monastery here at Clement Town.

The following day, the group visited the Tibetan community at Clement Town - the wonderful Buddha statue at the Kargyu monastery, the Great Stupa at the Mindrol-ling Monastery which has now become a tourist destination for the Indian State of Uttarakhand within which Clement Town is situated. We circumambulated these sites, turned big and small prayer wheels, watched thousands of prayer flags and just soaked in the atmosphere of a special place.

On our final day we returned to the Tashi Kyil Monastery. They gave us special permission to sit in their prayer hall and the abbot gave a special talk. He introduced Tibetan or Buddhist meditation to the group and also delved into the basics of Buddhism, encouraged us to introspect and find those niggling things that are the sources of unhappiness in each of us and thought that meditation might enable us to discover those and more.



Group at Tashi Kyil Monastery, Clement

We had really good feedback about the day trip to Rishikesh. Some even suggested that we spend the final night of the Clement Town leg at Rishikesh to enjoy the evening Aarti and morning prayers of this temple town.

The heart of the tour started in Bihar - Sarnath, Varanasi and Bodh Gaya. All of these sites were special, had their own energies and group members were able to soak in the blessings and sacred atmospheres in these places. The composition of the group was more diverse than last year and not everyone was into quiet reflection at these sites. Still, the majority did that and others walked quietly around the sites, taking pictures, asking questions and just enjoying a totally different culture.

Following our flight from N. Delhi, we had no special event planned on our first night at Sarnath. But Katharine found out from the Lonely Planet guide that that evening there was a chanting session at the Sri Lankan monastery at Sarnath. So most of the group went there and enjoyed a wonderful evening filled with the echoes of Buddhist chants - I believe most of them were in Pali - the common language of the people during the time of the Buddha.

Early next morning we headed to the famous Dhamekh stupa - the site of the Buddha's first teaching. The morning freshness is a great time to visit these sites. There were relatively few



Group in front of the Dhamekh stupa, Sarnath

pilgrims that morning and we so enjoyed being in that sacred space. As always, we circumambulated the stupa, offered traditional Tibetan scarves or khatas, offered incenses and lit candles. People offered special prayers. Later we walked to a quiet spot and reflected on the four noble truths - the first teachings of the Buddha.



The museum at Sarnath houses some of the most important and impressive collection of Buddhist art - especially art from the Sarnath and Mathura schools of Buddhist art. Rangeet our guide for this sector did a great job of walking us through this impressive museum. Among the exhibit was the original Ashokan Lion capital that is now the emblem of India and therefore commonly printed on all Indian currencies.

India and VJ led the group for the Varanasi leg of the trip. Again, people came back really

excited about the trip, the boat ride, the realizing of small lamps or diyas as it is called in Hindi, the bustling Varanasi market and more. It seemed they packed in a lot for that single night!



The Burning Ghats at Varanasi

Bodh Gaya is always a very special pilgrimage spot for Buddhists. We had three nights here but the bus ride from Sarnath to Bodh Gaya took longer than expected. We reached Bodh Gaya rather late and so on our first night the group just checked into the Royal Residency and relaxed. Early next morning, we headed to the main Mahabodhi temple complex. Security continues to be tight here and no cell phones were allowed into the complex. This explains why we don't have a collection of images from this spot. We had arranged special flower offerings for every member of the group and so the first thing we did was to line up with the other pilgrims and offer these to the sacred Buddha image inside this temple.

At these sacred sites, we hoped to share special and inspirational thoughts - mostly from the teachings of HH The Dalai Lama, to use the special energies of these sites to add meaning - all with the ultimate hope of changing their lives for the better, even if it is only to a very small degree.

Rajgir and Nalanda were our next stops. The ruins at Nalanda University bear testimony to the truly outstanding Buddhist culture and knowledge that existed in India during the ancient times. In the context of Tibetan Buddhism, HH The Dalai Lama always underlines how much we owe to the scholars of Nalanda University. The Japanese Pagoda at Rajgir is stunning in its simplicity and beauty. It is dedicated to World Peace. The Buddha spent many summers in and

around Rajgir giving some of his most important teachings. One of his most important teachings - the heart sutra teachings were delivered at Vulture's Peak at Rajgir.

Kushinagar is where the Buddha passed away into parinirvana. Inside the Parinirvana stupa is the iconic reclining Buddha - a colossal reminder to every pilgrim of the impermanence of all



Draping a shawl over the reclining Buddha at Kushinagar

phenomena. We circumambulated this historical stupa with a huge traditional offering shawl and later draped this around the reclining Buddha as a mark of our gratitude of his illuminating teachings.

Thanks to our local tour operator and guides, the border crossing into Nepal and Lumbini went through smoothly. What was not quite so smooth were the roads in Nepal and so the last 26 kilometers to Lumbini was a bit of a struggle.

Lumbini - the birth place of the Buddha was our last pilgrimage spot. Thousands of prayer flags hang all around the campus of the Mayadevi temple. This temple dedicated to queen Mahamaya, the mother of the Buddha, is the central pilgrimage site here. In the front is a special variant of the sal tree - maybe a distant sapling of the historical tree under which the historical Buddha was born some 2500 years ago. The sprawling campus includes the shaft of an Ashokan pillar and several quiet spots for reflection.

Lumbini is now the home to temples from many Buddhist nations. We hired several tuk tuks to visit many of these temples - each of them giving us a peep into the architecture and culture of that particular country.

The Footsteps of the Buddha Tour ended here with Raj a memorable farewell dinner from Raj Madan and MultiVision Tours. The majority of the group journeyed on for a 5 day Nepal add on.

Special thanks to Raj Madaan and MultiVision Tours & Travels, New Delhi for making excellent arrangements throughout this journey

Photos curtesy Jeff VanTine

The Members

At our full strength we had 25 tour members - and all of them were wonderful. This was a much bigger and more diverse group than last year. We had a few younger members in their thirties but most of them were in their sixties and a few in their seventies. The best part was that everyone gelled together really well and so all our time together became that much more pleasant.



Group at Lumbini, Nepal

Memorable Moments

We had several memorable moments. It started early in the tour at the New Delhi railways station. We arrived late, around mid night and when everyone's luggage was on the platform it was a formidable collection of around 30 pieces of luggage. Raj, our tour operator began negotiating with a gang of porters and soon it became clear that there were some serious differences in what the porters wanted and how much Raj thought was fair. Their negotiations

Photos curtesy Jeff VanTine

were going nowhere and it seemed that we were being substantially over charged because of the circumstances. At this point, Winter intervened decisively and dramatically. She shouldered four luggages, coaxed all group members to just pick up their own and just started to walk. The porters quickly relented and we came out of that situation grateful for Winter's strengths!



Tseten Dorjee - Keeping the group in good humor

The long bus rides through the heart of Bihar gives tour members a close insight into rural India - houses, fields, people and livestock. But they can also be long and sometime tedious. We were about to start a really long stretch when Ranjeet, our tour guide for that sector, used the bus microphone to make sure everyone was back on the bus. He then related an incident when he was traveling with a European group and one member hopped right out of the bus rather unexpectedly. That person returned soon after with a sheepish grin said that he just had to catch that rabbit under the bush! Ranjeet then burst into a really happy and healthy laughter. That set the tone for more jokes. Soon we coaxed other tour members - Raj, Thinlay, Chris, Jigme etc to crack a joke, share a story or even sing. These magical moments melted the miles away.

We had just one night at Rajgir. Chief Minister Nitesh Kumar was in town and he was staying at the Government Circuit House quite close to our hotel. Traffic was restricted in that area and this in turn led to a really funny incident. There was a big yellow bus that was fumigating the streets in Rajgir that night. The group had already fled one round of fumigation into the safety of our own coach. Because of the traffic restriction, our coach could not take us back to the

hotel. So we had no option but to walk to our hotel and Ranjeet our guide thought it would be around 300 meters. So we got off our coach, still thinking and talking about avoiding the fumigation, when we noticed the yellow bus coming right after us, bellowing copious amounts of smoke! The group ran - ran to avoid the smoke but the bus was catching up fast. At one point, we just buried our heads in our jackets or whatever as it smoked right past us. I know some group members will remember this night for a long time!

Difficult Moments

On the fourth day in Nepal we decided to visit the hill station at Nagarkot. Our hope was to get a peep into the majestic Himalayan ranges and our local contacts told us that our best shot was at Nagarkot. So we rented this mini van and set off. We had already encountered some bad road conditions in Nepal but the winding roads up to Nagarkot were really bad-mostly because they were broken by the monsoons and then never fixed. At every turn we hoped that the worst stretch was behind us but it wasn't. Long bus rides are to be avoided in Nepal.

Concluding Thoughts

Overall, this was another amazing tour. One great reason to do this pilgrimage is because the Buddha himself encouraged it. Thank you Joan Bird, TCEF sponsor and 2018 tour member for sharing this quote from the Buddha:

"There are four places, the sight of which will arouse strong emotions in those with faith. Here the Tathagata was born... Here the Tathagata attained enlightenment... Here the Tathagata set in motion the Wheel of the Dharma... Here the Tathagata attained final Nirvana... And, the monk, the nun, the layman or laywoman who has faith should visit these places." – The Buddha

For TCEF, the following are some of the other blessings that accrued from the 2019 Tour:

- Raised awareness and shared the endangered Tibetan culture with a group of interested persons from the West.
- Raised awareness of the educational needs of Tibetan children in exile
- Connected TCEF sponsors with their sponsored children/elders
- Found several new sponsors - Karen Davidson, Colleen Drake and Mary Angela Collins have already confirmed new sponsorship of elders. Winter, Chris and Katharine have indicated they'll do new sponsorships. So we potentially have half a dozen new sponsorships from this tour.
- Raised \$10,000 for TCEF

Footsteps of the Buddha Tour 2020

Next year will be TCEF's 25th Anniversary. So we hope to do a great tour to celebrate it. Tentative dates are from February 26 to March 12 tour which will include exploring Sikkim with our really close Himalayan friends.