



The Lost Caves of the
Pacceka Buddhas

S. Dhammika

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The Lost Caves of the Pacceka Buddhas



We usually associate the Himalayas with Hindu saints, not with Buddhist monks. But in the Jataka we are often told that the Bodhisattva became a swami or a rishi and went to live in the Himalayas. Unfortunately, now, many centuries later, it is impossible to identify any of the caves, forests or other landmarks where the Bodhisattva made his abode. In fact, it is difficult to identify any of the locations mentioned in the Jatakas. There is however, two exception to this – the Nandamula Cave and the Nanda Pabbata.

The Jataka make it clear that the Nandamula Cave was the special abode of pacceka-Buddhas. Perhaps they favoured this Himalayan location because it offered complete seclusion and because of its beautiful natural surroundings. In the Paniya Jataka (No. 459) a character asks what a pacceka -Buddha is like and the answer given is: “Their hair is two finger-breaths long, their robes are yellow and they abide in the Nandamula Cave.” In the Darimukha Jataka (No. 378) a pacceka-Buddha is described as “rising into the air like a golden goose, and treading on the clouds made his way to the Nandamula Cave.” Other Jataka stories describe pacceka-Buddhas flying from or to the cave from Benares. But exactly where might this sacred and celebrated cave be?

During a recent visit through the Himalayas it was exactly this question that I set out to answer. Fortunately, we have at least some idea of its general location. The Nandamula Cave was said to be somewhere on Nanda Pabbata, now named Nandadevi, which at 7,434 m (24,390 ft.) is India's second highest mountain. This spectacular peak is located



The trail to Nandadevi

in Uttarakhand near where the borders of India, Nepal and Tibet meet. I and my Sinhalese friend Viraj took a bus from Neonatal to Almira and from there to the ancient temple town of Baleshwar where we spent the night. In the morning we tried to find a reasonably clean eatery in the bazar for breakfast and eventually had to settle for one which was just less dirty than the others. As we sat eating, the proprietor recognizing me as a Buddhist monk and thinking me to be a Sri Lankan, approached us and addressed me in fluent Sinhala.



Approaching Matoli

We were astonished! To encounter a Sinhala-speaker in a remote Himalayan village is unusual by any standards. As it happened, the proprietor had recently retired from the Indian Army and during IPKF mission in Sri Lanka in 1987 he had been in the Intelligence Corps and had learned Sinhala. We were lucky to have met him; he provided us with much useful information about how to get to Nandadevi and what we might expect on the way. After we paid the bill he handed us a hamper of food for our onward journey and refused to take any payment for it. After Bageshwar the road became higher, steeper and narrower, and the countryside more beautiful. On every horizon there were soaring peaks.

Finally, we arrived in the small town of Munsariya beyond which there is only tracks.

The next day we bought provisions and with packs on our backs and staffs in our hands set off on the long trek to Matoli, the last village before Nandadevi. It was a long, arduous, mainly upwards -sloping march. Other than a few shepherds the only person we met during the next several days was a Korean mountain climber. We slept in shepherds' huts, in village's homes and once under a rock ledge. In places the track it literally hacked out of the side of the mountain. In other places rough steps continue up for great heights. Every night I dreamed of the sacred cave. Would we be able to find it? And if we did what would it be like? Would there be any evidence of the saints who lived there in the distant past?

Eventually we arrived at the small village of Matoli. This place once thrived on the traders who travelled between Tibet and India, exchanging salt and wool for grain and tea. But after the Chinese invasion of Tibet in 1950 the communists sealed the border, all trade stopped, and now Matoli is half deserted. While spending a few days resting we asked around to see if anyone knew of a cave somewhere near the foot of Nandadevi, whose glistening snow peak can be clearly seen from the village. No one knew of any. When we were well rested we set off again, down the narrow valley that leads from Martoli to the foot of Nandadevi. The scenery was spectacular, the air bracing and we were full of expectation. That night we made camp under a rock ledge and the early the next

morning as we were having breakfast a Hindu swami walked into our camp.

We invited him to have a hot cup of tea and found that he spoke quite good English. When we asked him if he knew of any caves he pointed to the side of the mountain above us. After bidding him goodbye we set off up the slope. There was no track and the going was rough. The higher we got the thinner the air became and the more difficult it was to breathe. After an hour's climb we reached to the snow and could see the mouth of the cave a little beyond. Neither I nor my companion had boots suitable for walking in snow but fortunately it was not deep and there was little of it. Finally, exhausted but thrilled and expectant, we reached the cave. Its mouth was large but on entering we found the inside was larger still, a veritable cathedral of rock big enough to accommodate perhaps hundreds of people. It was also icy cold but surprisingly dry.



The swami who pointed us to the cave

Using a torch, we looked around trying to find evidence of habitation but without success. I examined the walls of the cave to see if there were any inscriptions but again found none. We spent several hours meditating, just sitting quietly listening to its silence, feeling its presence, and gazing out at the incredible view from the mouth of the cave. Whether the cave we found is the Nandamula Guha mentioned in the Jataka I cannot say. But perhaps it doesn't matter. Trying to find it was a wonderful adventure and of course, it is not going to places that leads us to spiritual heights but purifying our heart.