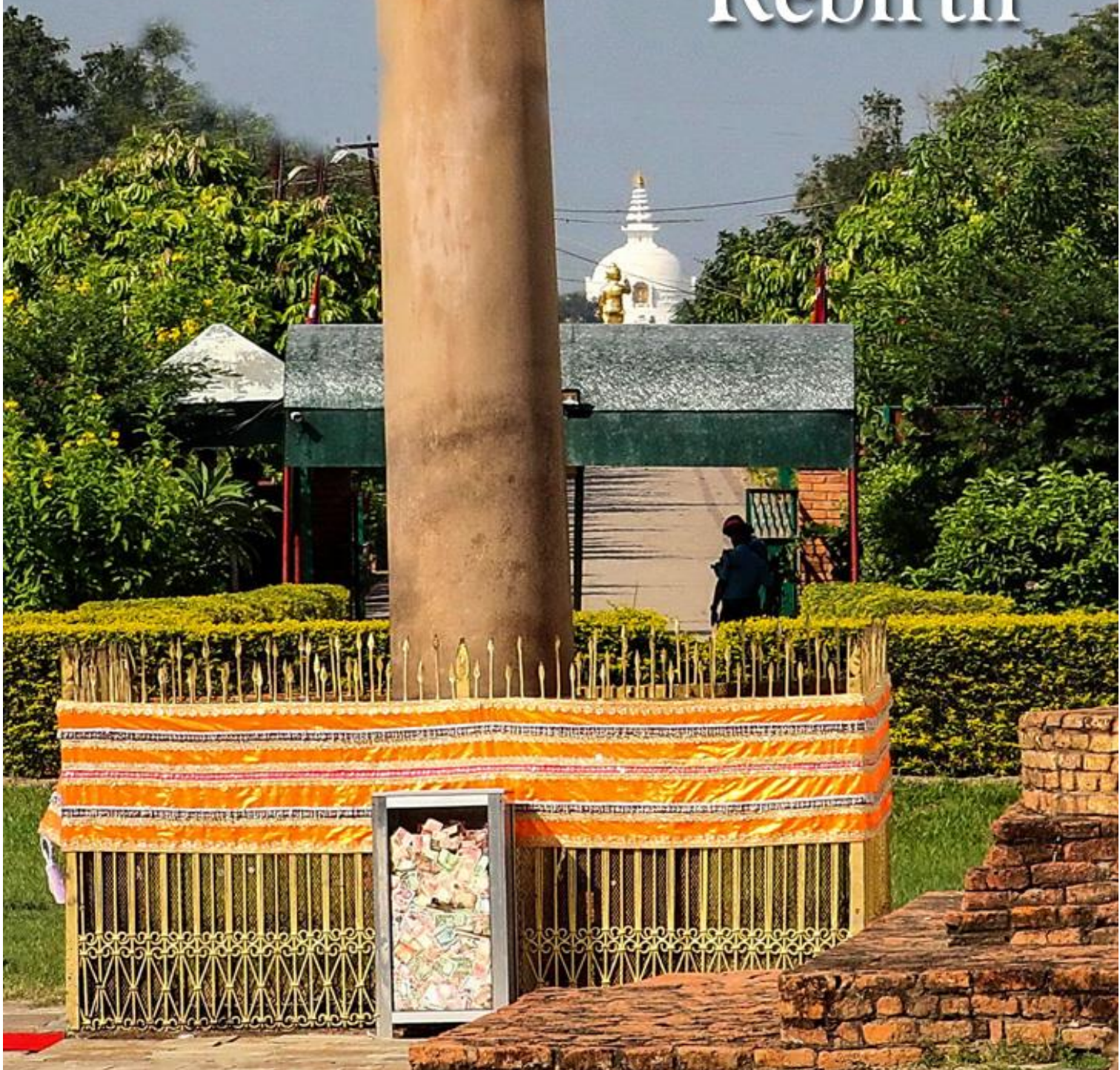


# Lumbini: Birth & Rebirth



## Lumbini – Birth and Rebirth



As is well-known, Lumbini is the first of the four major holy places of Buddhism, it being where the person who was to become the Buddha was born. Almost every account of the Buddha's life, traditional or contemporary, recounts the incidents that supposedly occurred at his conception and birth: his mother dreaming of a white elephant before or as she conceived; giving birth to him while grasping the branch of a tree; and he emerging from her right side. Some later accounts even add that Mahamaya was a virgin when she gave birth. None of these stories are mentioned in the Tipitaka.

The only discourse in the Tipitaka dealing with Gotama's birth is the *Acchariyabbhuta Sutta* which relates several wondrous events that supposedly occurred before, during, and immediately after the event. However, not all the details it mentions should be dismissed as fantastic exaggerations; some may have been based on fact, while others may have had a didactic purpose. For example, the discourse claims that Mahamaya gave birth while standing which is by no means improbable. Little is known of ancient Indian birthing practices, but it is possible that women commonly delivered in either a

sitting, lateral or upright position. Interestingly, Britain's Royal College of Midwives recommends upright birthing and says that it is quite safe if the midwife and other attendants are properly trained and prepared for it.

The discourse also says that a brilliant light appeared when the



Ancient sculpture of the Buddha's birth,  
6th century CE

Gotama was born - not a star indicating a particular location as with the Christian nativity story - but one which allowed beings to think differently about each other. The sutta says:

“When the Buddha came forth from his mother’s womb, a great immeasurable light more radiant even than the light of the gods shone forth into the world... And even in the dark, gloomy spaces between the worlds where the light of our moon and sun, powerful and majestic though they are, cannot reach, even there did that light shine. And the beings that are reborn in that darkness became aware of each other because of that light and thought, ‘Indeed there are other beings here’.”

It would seem that this story was not meant to suggest that an actual light appeared when Gotama was born. Rather, it is a literary device, an allegory, a way of saying that the advent of the Buddha would enable beings to become aware of each other, thus making empathy and understanding between them more likely.

Almost the only thing that can be said with certainty about the Buddha’s birth is that it took place in Lumbini, a location between the Buddha’s hometown and the main Koliyan town – i.e. Kapilavatthu and Devadaha. The birth is always depicted as happening in the open, with Mahamaya standing and grasping the branch of a tree, and although tradition says Lumbini was a garden, the Tipitaka says it was a village (gama) and King Asoka’s Lumbini inscription calls it a village also. So it is much more likely that Mahamaya gave birth in one of the village houses or at least under some type of shelter.

The Buddha asked his disciples to try visit the places where the four pivotal events in his life occurred, one of these being Lumbini, and pilgrims may well have started going there perhaps even while the Buddha was still alive. The first person we know of to have made a pilgrimage to Lumbini was King Asoka who went there in 249 BCE, marking the place and commemorated his visit with a beautifully crafted stone pillar. After this there is no records of Lumbini until the Chinese pilgrim Faxian went there at the beginning of the 4th century CE. About two centuries later another Chinese pilgrim, Xuanzang, visited, but neither he or Faxian gave much information about it other than to mention a few landmarks and to say that it was a rather forlorn place. The last pilgrim known to have visited Lumbini until the end of

the 19th century was the monarch of a small kingdom in western Nepal who managed to get there in the first decade of the 14th century. He inscribed his name, Ripamalla, and the famous mantra Om Mani Padme Hum in the top of Asoka's pillar. Even at this time Lumbini had probably long been abandoned but after this king's visit, it was engulfed by the jungle, known only to local people, even its Buddhist heritage forgotten.

As for Buddhists, they never forgot Lumbini but none of them seem to have made an effort to find it so they could go on pilgrimage there. In the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries several Burmese kings sent missions to make offerings at or to repair the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya but there is no record of them inquiring about the location of Lumbini or even being curious about it.

Strangely enough, it was the British who first made an effort to rediscover Lumbini. As knowledge of Buddhism in the west grew throughout the 19th century, scholars became interested in locating the places mentioned in the religions sacred scriptures. The most intrepid of these was Alexander Cunningham, an Indian army engineer with something of a passion for the ancient topography of Buddhism. He studied Faxian's and Xuanzang's travelogues and used the directions and distances from one place to another which they gave, to locate some of these places. And he had considerable success, eventually identifying or verifying the identities of Kosambi, Savatthi, Isipatana, Vesali, Sankassa, Kusinara, various locations around Rajagaha and others. The scriptures mentioned that Kapilavatthu and Lumbini were near each other, a detail confirmed by both Chinese pilgrims, so Cunningham knew that if he found one he would find the other. But despite his efforts the location of both eluded him.

As other British Indians took up the challenge of finding Lumbini, what had been a scholarly endeavor soon developed into a race in which reputations and honor were at stake. Eventually, some of the more perceptive men involved in this race thought the two places might lie somewhere across the British Indian border in Nepal, in what was known as the tarai. This sparsely populated and thickly forested strip of land ran along the India-Nepal border and was dangerously malarial and deliberately left so by the Nepal's government as a barrier to deter unwanted foreigners entering the kingdom. Nonetheless, a few British

officers – Vincent Smith, Laurence Waddell, and a German employed by the British Indian government named Alois Fuhrer, had managed to get permission to explore parts of the tarai.

Interestingly, on several occasions before all this, the British went remarkably close to locating Lumbini without knowing it. In 1816 their surveyors had demarcated the India-Nepal border in such a way that Lumbini ended up being in Nepal, a mere 7 km north of Indian territory. As a result, today one often hears the ridiculous claim that “the Buddha was Nepalese.” If the surveyors had explored the jungle a bit more they might have stumbled on King Asoka’s great pillar and perhaps drawn the border slightly to its north, and Lumbini would have been in India. About 60 years later they missed another chance. In 1880, Laurence Waddell, a doctor and passionate amateur antiquarian with a particular interest in locating the Buddha’s birthplace, had been posted to a district abutting the Nepalese border and some locals had informed him that there was a stone pillar in the jungle just over the border in Nepal. Intrigued, Waddell instructed one of his Indian workers to go there and make a copy of any inscription that might be on the pillar, which was done. However, the worker made a copy of a King Ripamalla’s short graffiti near the top of the pillar – Asoka’s now famous inscription being obscured by centuries of rubbish at the time. When Waddell read the graffiti, which was of little interest, he gave the pillar no further thought, and thus missed having the honor of discovering Lumbini. In the end, this honor went to a Nepalese rather than a Briton.



Khadga Shumsher Rana

A Nepalese nobleman named Khadga Shumsher (1861-1921) happened to be the governor of the province which included Lumbini at this time and he came to know about British interest in finding the Buddha birthplace. When he heard about the pillar, on the 1st of December 1895 he went to see it, dug away some of the earth around its base and revealed Asoka’s inscription. To cut a long and rather complicated story short, Shumsher made a copy of the inscription, sent it to Vincent Smith who had it translated, and Asoka’s words “for here the Lord was born” (hida

Bhagavam jate ti) finally confirmed the location of Lumbini.

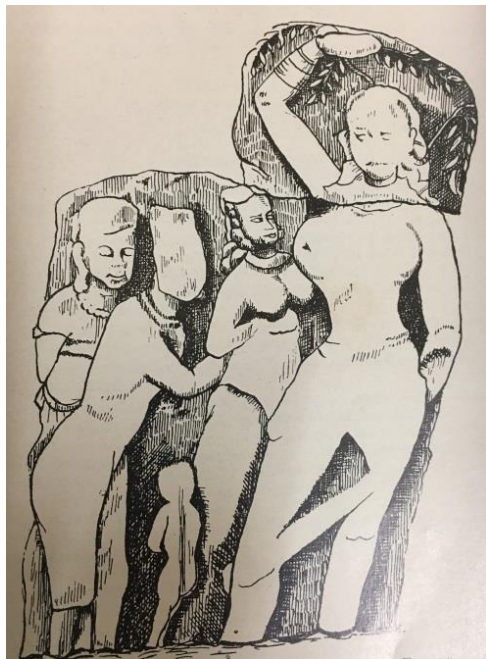
Newspapers in India, Germany, Britain and even Russia all reported the news. Over the next 18 months at the request of the British Indian government, the Nepalese gave permission for scholars to visit Lumbini, including some of the big names in Indian and Buddhist studies,



Lumbini shortly after its discovery, with Asoka's pillar

Prof. Rhys David, Vincent Smith, Laurence Waddell, and William Hoey.

Right next to Asoka's pillar was a small temple to a goddess called Rupam Devi by the locals, the interior of which some of these visitors tried to examine, but not being Hindus the presiding swami would not



The sculpture from inside the temple showing the broken head discovered by Mukherji

let them enter. However, during Hoey's visit he managed to slip into the temple unnoticed and found that the image inside was actually an ancient, much worn and damaged, image of the Buddha's birth, although with Mahamaya's head broken off. Realizing the importance of Lumbini's identification, in 1899 the British managed to get permission from the Nepalese government to allow an archaeologist to come to Lumbini to do some excavations. Thinking that a Hindu would be more acceptable to the Nepalese

they chose P. C. Mukherji although he was granted only two months in which to do his explorations. Of many important discoveries Mukherji made was the missing part of the nativity image in the temple.

One would have hoped that the discovery of Lumbini would allow pilgrims to once again visit there in keeping with the Buddha's instructions that it would enhance the faith of those who did. But it was not to be. Nepal's oppressive and reactionary Rana government was determined to prevent any outside influence into the kingdom, fearing,

probably correctly, that it would endanger their grip on power. Thus for the next 50 years it was almost impossible to visit Lumbini despite it being a day's walk from the Indian border. A trickle of Burmese, Sri Lankan and Indian Buddhists managed to make the pilgrimage because the border guards would mistake them for Nepalese. A few Europeans managed to do it also. For example, in 1933 the German Indologist Ernst Wald Schmidt joined a small group of locals and accompanied them all the way to what he called "the Bethlehem of Buddhism." But as soon as he arrived the guards noticed him and demanded he leave, although they did allow him to have a look around before accompanying him back to the border.

In 1951 Nepal's Rana regime was finally overthrown, the king, who had been confined to his palace for decades was freed, and the first attempt to establish a modern democracy in the country was made. In 1955 Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru wrote to King Mahendra of Nepal informing him that the following year would mark the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's birth which was expected to be celebrated around the world and suggested that Nepal develop Lumbini for the numerous pilgrims who were expected to visit the Buddhist holy places.

The king took up the suggestion and with a development plan conveniently provided by the Indians, a reasonably good road was constructed from Lumbini to Nautanwa (which was to become the main India-Nepal border crossing for Lumbini), a tourist bungalow, post office and a small Theravadin vihara were built and a tube well was dug, all paid for by the king himself – 100,000 rupees all told. Further, he had a forest of sal trees planted, a modest garden laid out and banned animal sacrificed being made in the temple, something he could do being, many Nepalese believed, an incarnation of Vishnu. On the big day of the 1956 Buddha Jayanti the king actually visited Lumbini and announced that from that day onwards that Vesak would be a public holiday.

It should also be noted that beginning in the 1930s but especially after 1951, the Newari Buddhists of Kathmandu, many of who had converted from Mahayana to Theravada, did much to help develop Lumbini: leading pilgrim parties; looking after pilgrims who came; petitioning the governments concerning problems at Lumbini; etc. Chief among being Ven. Dhammaloka and Ven. Aniruddha, an alumni

of Sri Lanka's Vidyalankara Pirivana.

When, in 1967, the deeply religious Buddhist Secretary-General of the United Nations, U Thant, visited Nepal he flew from Kathmandu to Lumbini and after his visit commented: "This is the most important day of my life" as tears welled up into his eyes. On his return to Kathmandu, he met King Mahendra and discussed with him the possibility of further enhancing



King Mahendra and U Thant discussing the development of Lumbini



Kenzo Tange and companions on their way to inspect Lumbini

Lumbini's sanctity. Back in New York he set up a UN committee to turn the nativity site into an international center for peace, got UNESCO involved who in turn hired the famous Japanese architect Kenzo Tange to draw up a master plan. Tange visited Lumbini and spent some time studying Buddhism and

its history (he was not at all religious), and in 1978 his firm submitted its design. The project to preserve Lumbini

and landscape the sacred garden and surrounding park was supposed to be finished by 1985, but bureaucratic dawdling and corruption in Nepal slowed progress and in 2005 Tange died without ever seeing the completion of his master plan.

Despite these and other setbacks, Tange's plan was largely finished by the early 1990s and with most Buddhists countries and several bigger Buddhist organizations and sects building temples there, and many thousands of pilgrims visiting every year, Lumbini has been reborn.



The new Sri Lankan temple and pilgrims' rest at Lumbini