Meeting the Buddha: On Pilgrimage in Buddhist India

Molly Emma Aitken
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Molly Emma Aitken : Meeting the Buddha: On Pilgrimage in Buddhist India before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Meeting the Buddha: On Pilgrimage in Buddhist India:

5 of 8 people found the following review helpful. CompilationBy A CustomerThought this might be something new so I ordered the book. Turns out though to just be a compilation of stories and essays by other authors about their experiences at Buddhist sites in India. Having been to "Buddhist India" myself I was able to compare my actual experiences with those presented in the book.I can't say there's much useful information here. Just the musings, often misguided, of British dignitaries, Indian Princes and other non-pilgrims, about their trips to Bodh Gaya and similar places. Outsiders looking in and faithfully reporting their misunderstandings of what they saw. Many of these diary-style stories date back to earlier centuries and contain largely yawn-inducing hyperbole. No self-respecting Buddhist would put forth such drivel. And many of the contemporary writings I've read elsewhere (Matthiessen, Hahn, Dalai Lama).The excerpted writings of Thich Naht Hanh presented in "Meeting the Buddha" are wonderful but you're better off buying "Old Path White Clouds" to get the full version."Meeting the Buddha" will be of more interest to a historical researcher or academic Buddhist than to an actual spiritual "pilgrim." If the author had written her own account of modern-day travels in India I might've been more impressed.4 of 4 people found the following review helpful. A great introduction to the main Buddhist sitesBy A CustomerThis books paints a moving picture of the main Buddhist holy sites in India through the accounts of many centuries of pilgrims and travellers down to the present time. For anyone interested in learning more details of the history and background of these and other Buddhist holy sites, I'd also recommend "Holy Places of the Buddha," by Dharma Publishing (also available from .com). Both of these books are wonderful guides to the Buddhist holy places, and complement each other very nicely.6 of 6 people found the following review helpful. A lively account of the Buddhist holy placesBy A CustomerI really love this book. Having been to Bodh Gaya and Sarnath myself, I find that these accounts by generations of pilgrims really bring the images and feelings back to me. And the descriptions of the other places (Lumbini, Kapilavastu, Rajagriha, Shravasti, Sankasya, Vaisali and Kushinagara) are so vivid and alive that I now almost feel like I've been to all of them too. I'm sure that anyone with an interest in Buddhism, India, pilgrimage or travel will appreciate this book.

From E.M. Forster to Peter Matthiessen to Allen Ginsberg, many of the world's most acclaimed writers have traveled to the holy lands of India seeking spiritual enlightenment. Their lyrical and highly personal recollections are compiled here for the first time in one volume, taking readers on a colorful journey to each of the eight Buddhist pilgrimage sites of India.

From Library JournalAitken has edited a marvelous work on pilgrimage to the seven most important places in India for Buddhists, including the place where the Buddha was born, where he attained enlightenment, and the site of his first teaching. Though there have been other recent Buddhist pilgrimage books (Holy Places of the Buddha, LJ 6/1/94), what makes this one special are the accounts from sacred Buddhist texts and writings of Buddhist pilgrims throughout the ages describing the site, indicating its importance for the Buddha, and each pilgrim's description of his/her thoughts and feelings when at the site. Selections include writings by John Blofeld, Sandy Boucher, Allen Ginsburg, and Gary Snyder. The contrast between the flowery, idealized presentation of the sites in some Buddhist sacred texts and the accounts of the difficulties of traveling in India in modern times is especially interesting. Andrew Schelling's introductory essay captures the romance and hardship of pilgrimage as religious journey. The work includes notes about the contributors and a very useful list of sources from which the selections have been taken. Highly recommended for religion collections.?David Bourquin, California State Univ., San BernardinoCopyright 1995 Reed Business Information, Inc.From BooklistThe earliest Buddhists were wanderers or "spiritual goers-forth," as Andrew Schelling writes in his engaging introduction to this unique collection of Buddhist pilgrimage literature. India is inlaid with holy places, from mountains, caves, and rivers to gardens, temples, and monasteries, and has long been a mecca for spiritual seekers of many persuasions. Buddhists and kindred spirits attracted to Buddhist teachings and practice find that traveling, especially walking, is a form of knowing, so journeying to such sacred sites as Lumbini, Buddha's birthplace; Bodh Gaya, where he attained enlightenment; Sarnath, where he first taught; and Sravasti and Sankasya, places of miracles and the commitment to spreading the dharma, are invaluable steps along the path to wisdom. Vivid and revelatory writings of pilgrims both historic and modern are gathered together in this handsomely designed and quite engrossing volume. This blend of the past with the present, the outer with the inner, reflects Buddhism's vitality. Modern writers include the Dalai Lama, Walter del Mare, Allen Ginsberg, Peter Matthiessen, Gary Snyder, Anne Waldman, and Kate Wheeler. Donna SeamanExcerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.A Japanese pilgrim wearing a robe stamped with the symbols of Buddhist shrines he has visited.Introductionby Andrew SchellingThe householders life, says old Buddhas document The Digha Nikaya, is full of dust and hindrance. And immediately you feel it, right in your shoes. From the start, Buddhism showed a sharp impatience for stay-at-home habits. It has spread out from India, traveled to China and Japan, Southeast Asia, Europe and America, and in twenty-five hundred years hasnt shaken that fine old skepticism.The impulse to ramble is as old as humankind. We have ample testimony of a close ancestral connection to migratory animals, and it appears that the earliest calendars were incised animal bone, small enough to slip in a pocket as the human clan arranged its year by traveling to seasonal food sources. Archaeologists are uncovering routes of migration our human forebears followed, keeping herds of reindeer and

antelope, bison and sheep in sight. For most human beings, for tens of thousands of years, home was quite literally on the hoof. The hunter, the nomad, the rambler, and finally the pilgrim. Perhaps it is no more than the swift human intellect and our proud, strong legs following a primordial hunger to see whats around the bend, over the next hill, or just upriver.Every child grows up in a landscape both seen and imagined. Parents, relatives, and friends bring home tales of marvelous places. The elderly revisit their childhood landscapes by turning them into further stories. These brilliant outward-looking eyes never quite catch up with that shimmering ability to see things and locations within. Poems, journals, hagiographies, the diaries of merchants and seekers, accounts of sailors and soldiers traditions of storytelling never disappear. How many records do the libraries hold now of visits to India a continent known in its own treasury of tale and legend as Jambudvipa, the Rose-Apple Island?Tale and legend? Stations of pilgrimage, like stories, get more, not less rich as the generations roll past. The earliest human art cliff walls pecked with meaningful designs or pictographs caves delicately and inspirationally peopled with ocher and manganese animal forms were not undertaken at places of permanent residence. They were at locales to which people journeyed, passing by on migratory circuits, or at a later date making special efforts to visit: they were ceremonial centers, shrines, locations of brave human deeds and brilliant supernatural occurrences. Peerless art and innovative architecture arise to commemorate the old stories, and in their wake spring up field tents, or little guest lodges, to make the sites hospitable for visitors. Everyone hungers to visit and revisit the locales associated with legend. To some, this life of rambling and migration takes such hold of the imagination that it comes to seem the one life worth leading if only for some brief period. If only once in a lifetime.The early Buddhists were an order of wandering alms-seekers. A ragtag bunch, they could be found at crossroads and river fords, along highways, camping in city parks, or sheltering in forest groves. India would scarcely offer such a range of destinations for the Buddhist pilgrim had Shakyamuni Buddha settled into a secluded ashram like a Brahman priest, or lived out his days as a philosopher king in his fathers palace. The model he took for himself and his followers that of philosophical rambler, beggar of food, tatter-robed paraclete, inveterate pilgrim was an old one. Others before him had gone to the forests and highways for centuries, tired of rigid social forms and a predictable religion of the kitchen and bedroom. Indias great casteless community of the homeless was already ancient in Buddhas day.The pilgrim, the wanderer, the forest dweller, figures so familiar to the old epics, to poetry and legend, that the arts of India seem charged with them. The Buddhas resolve as a young man to leave his fathers palace, what the annals call his Great Going-Forth, came after seeing the Four Signs. On successive days he encountered an old man, a sick man, a corpse and, lastly, a wandering mendicant on perpetual pilgrimage to the source of life. You meet similar mendicants on every pilgrimage route in India today, at all the temples and riverbanks. You see them on trains, in taxis and rickshaws, traveling by private cars. But mostly they have gone and continue to go forth by foot.How can we separate the notion of pilgrimage from the primal instinct to set out on a walk, shake off the householders dust, and simply see something new? Our bones ache with it. The word pilgrim along with its Latin original, peregrine, simply means a person who wanders across the land. The old Sanskrit words from India spring from the same irresistible source. A yatrika is a rambler, a thirthayatrika a wanderer who frequents crossroads and riverbanks. You may think the world of nation states, superhighways, and rigidly drawn borders no longer accommodates such folk, but in India they ramble as they have for millennia a tradition that traces itself back to a prehistoric pan-Asiatic shamanism.It was near Taxila in 323 B.C., after fording the Indus River, that Alexander the Greats army encountered a community of spiritual goers-forth. The fierce, ragged, skull-carrying mendicants they met were not Buddhists but sadhus on pilgrimage into the Himalayan foothills holy to Siva. But before the Greek soldiers were done with India they would bring back accounts of a Buddhist civilization that took for its principal emblem the shramana or homeless wanderer, who owned only a patchwork robe, begging bowl, and razor to tonsure the head. The Greeks coined their own term, gymnosophist naked philosopher to describe these figures. And ever since, homeless men and women of religion, perpetual pilgrims, have exerted the strongest fascination over foreign travelers to India probably because nowhere else has such a community so durably established itself. Buddhism picked the archaic tradition up from epic and wisdom book, and placed the wanderer at the core of its discipline.Even the initial settling in of the bhikkhu and bhikkhuni (ordained monk and nun), which occurred during Buddhas lifetime, did not spell an end to the wandering life. It arose as a provisional response to cycles of weather. July and August are Indias monsoon season. Every year torrential rains pour from the sky, rivers overflow, and water makes the roads nearly impassable. Sakyamuni Buddha counseled his students to sit out the periodic downfalls as specified rain retreats. Certain of these shelters developed over time into permanent centers. Some received donations of land and used financial gifts to raise walls and spires, meditation halls, stupas, and libraries. With the blossoming of Buddhist civilization, the vast viharas of north India came into existence centers of meditation, art, learning, philosophical debate, and trade. The one at Nalanda, founded in present-day Bihar state in the fourth century C.E., accommodated up to ten thousand resident yogins, scholars, and artists at a time. Yet for all the massive walls, the kitchens and libraries, the halls of worship, no concept of staying put ever fully caught on. Etymologically, the word vihara means a place to wander about. To consider these way stations colleges or monasteries misses something crucial. Youll see, if you visit the expansive courtyards and long, covered arcades of Nalanda, that its residents thought the best seeking and most subtly colored thinking was still to be done on foot.What is this thinking done on foot? Ask any pilgrim, youll get the same answer: You only find out by going. It is an attitude

toward life, not a catechism had from some book. Old Buddha ancestor of North America Henry David Thoreau gets as close as Ive seen. In his essay Walking he tracks the word saunter to Old French Sainte Terre holy land. A saunterer is a holy-lander, a walker to sacred places and storied locations. We should, he admonishes, go forth on the shortest walk, perchance, in the spirit of undying adventure, never to return prepared to send back our embalmed hearts only as relics to our desolate kingdoms. Its here he gives a taste of that adventurous urge that forms the pilgrims resolve. If you are ready to leave father and mother, brother and sister, and wife and child and friends, and never see them again, if you have paid your debts, and made your will, and settled all your affairs, and are a free man, then you are ready for a walk.Only the walker who sets out toward ultimate things is a pilgrim. In this lies the terrible difference between tourist and pilgrim. The tourist travels just as far, sometimes with great zeal and courage, gathering up acquisitions (a string of adventures, a wondrous tale or two) and returns the same person as the one who departed. There is something inexpressibly sad in the clutter of belongings the tourist unpacks back at home.The pilgrim is different. The pilgrim resolves that the one who returns will not be the same person as the one who set out. Pilgrimage is a passage for the reckless and subtle. The pilgrim and the metaphor comes to us from distant times must be prepared to shed the husk of personality or even the body like a worn out coat. A Buddhist dictum has it that the Way exists but not the traveler on it. And when you peruse the journals, books, and poems left behind by travelers of the Buddhist world to India, China, Japan, or Tibet you find a strange thing. For the pilgrim the road is home; reaching your destination seems nearly inconsequential.No pilgrim to Buddhist India has left more compelling an account than seventh-century Chinese monk Hiuen Tsiang. Id call him the patron saint of the pilgrim. His own record of the twenty-year journey describes in vivid terms the elemental recklessness you need if you would become a pilgrim, you must be as much rogue as saint, as much buccaneer as contemplative. Simply to get out of Tang Dynasty China, Hiuen Tsiang had to break an imperial decree, bribe a series of border guards, and slip off toward barbarian lands in disguise. And that was the easy part. From there his way was beset by bandits, fierce desert storms, unscalable mountains, savage beasts. Fearsome supernatural creatures would lurk at every turn of the road, but over the border he goes like a convict over the wall, and never looks back. Wu Cheng-Ens delightful book Monkey provides Hiuen Tsiang with a rascally, trickster monkey alter ego and guardian, giving the tale a fabulous coloring: pilgrim and irrepressibly mischievous monkey, bound to each other as they pursue a supernatural journey into old India. Everyone heading off to the Buddhist sites of India should read it. For on that vast subcontinent, your own mind, so similar to the silly, aggressive rhesus monkeys you meet on the road, will be your greatest nemesis. That same mind is also your only protector.What I mean is that excessive piety does not prove particularly useful to the Buddhist practitioner. What an impediment it is to the pilgrim! If your temperament impels you toward the sites of the Buddhist world, especially those spread across the Gangetic Plain, youre going to need to be loose, spontaneous, charitable, open-eyed, humorous, and unsentimental as you encounter Indias endless string of beggars, cripples, lepers, dirty children, imploring mothers, avaricious merchants. You need generosity but not lavishness, determination but not rigidity. You need a dry wit, even a trace of irreverence. It helps the inner organs, assists the appetite, and certainly makes more tolerable Bodh Gayas scorching winds or those aggressive flies in the teashops of Lucknow.Chuckling demons are likely to strew your path with impediments. If you take the pilgrims route to India, you must be prepared for nearly anything for misguided companions, bad food, crowded trains, for pickpockets, unreliable buses, filthy toilets. And most of all, for that companions monkey: your own peevish egoism.Going to India in 1992, my third trip, I expected to visit the Buddhist sites of the north. Some Id not seen in twenty years, some not at all. Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Nalanda, Lumbini... I intended to bow my head at each. But in Calcutta my companion and I found our plane tickets no good the airlines on strike. No one had warned us. Refugees from religious riots that were flaring in Bombay and Lucknow choked all the trains. Even a taxi could not get over the bridges that might lead us west. We raged and worried, we raced about town. But through some baffling string of events we landed on a train winding south, and in a few days found ourselves outside Bhubaneswar, from which Buddhism had been brutally driven twelve hundred years earlier. On a massive rock overlooking the field where Buddhist king Asoka had vanquished the Kalinga empire, we found his first edicts carved in the archaic script: One must feed and give shelter to wanderers.Here, within this body, is the Ganges and Jumna... here are Prayaga and Banares here the sun and moon. Here are the sacred places, here the pithas and upa-pithas. I have not seen a place of pilgrimage and an abode of bliss like my own body.So sang Saraha, eighth-century arrow-smith and tantric adept from Orissa. His words add an unexpected twist to the pilgrims journey, but he is not alone in his sentiments. Renowned contemplatives, fearsome yogis, and reckless poets have always interpreted pilgrimage in similar ways. Theyve mocked it as futile, belittled it, reviled it for ignorance. Sixteenth-century bhakti poet Mirabai, her tongue full of barbs for mechanically heedless modes of worship, declared Banares and Ganges are found at a holy mans feet! And in Japan, Dogen Zenji told his students, No need to wander the dusty countries. A long-standing tradition in India discounts pilgrimage as one of the easy practices, contrasted to the notably tough disciplines of yoga, meditation, renunciation, and celibacy. And Saraha and others of his temperament insist that Buddha himself is hidden in the practitioners body. What use all this traveling, to pray at a monument built over a litter of bones?Yet, having pushed our way through the rigors and austerities, the tough inward labors, the meditations and koans and visualizations, all those dharma combats and the countless Vajrayana prostrations, some of us still burn with a profound hunger we know

we can only satisfy by actually journeying to the legendary sites. Mirabai, it turns out, was an avid pilgrim; Saraha wandered so much no one knows quite where he practiced; and Dogen spent twenty years marking the dusty countries with his foot soles before exhorting his students to stay home. These adepts and poets, do not forget, are using a wry topsy-turvy language meant to get under your skin. Upside-down language its called in some sects of tantra. Gary Snyder has pointed out how in the literature of Zen blame is often praise in disguise. In tantra, interdiction regularly serves as the secret goad. Upside-down speech, twisted utterance, hidden teachings.As so, alert to the ironies, the Buddhist practitioner heads for north India.Buddhism flowered in India for fifteen hundred years. It grew from a small band of wandering mendicants into a vast civilization. Princes and kings, merchants and philosophers, poets and courtesans, bandits and streetsweepers all contributed voices and acts to a continent that was already thick with old stories. Architects and sculptors and painters played their roles. The splendid Mahayana sutras of India conjure Buddha worlds numerous as the grains of sand on the Ganges, and today with a map you can visit thousands of unexcavated ruins. Renowned Buddhist sutras like the Vimalakirti or Lankavatara open with a survey of those in attendance: bhikkhus and bhikkhunis by the thousands, bodhisattvas by the tens of thousands, the nearly numberless gods and goddesses known to Hinduism; and devas, nagas, yaksas, gandharvas, asuras, garudas, kinnaras, and mahoragas supernatural beings of every conceivable sort. Animals and ghosts appear, warlords and lepers all are in some sense interchangeable. Thus Ambapali, former courtesan of Vaisali and disciple of the excellent Buddha, fashioned a song:Once I had the body of a queenNow its lowly, decrepit, an old houseplaster falling offSad but truePartly its this perception of splendor and squalor rubbing against each other that draws you to India: sites where Buddha turned the wheel of dharma such as Vulture Peak, Magadha, Anathapindikas garden, or Sravasti, other sites, intimately associated with Buddhas life Lumbini, his birthplace, Bodh Gaya, where he heroically attained enlightenment, Sarnath, where he first taught, and Kusinagara, where he entered the great nirvana. But if you go with open eyes, there is more charnel grounds, orphanages, sumptuous palaces, nuclear power plants, devastating slum sectors, holy rivers. How could you pass up an opportunity to visit the Ajanta caves, with their murals that make you weep at past splendor? The pillar-edicts set up by King Asoka? And what of those splendid temples down south?Yet a thousand years ago the Buddhist civilization that created so much grandeur disappeared. When Hiuen Tsiang visited Bodh Gaya to pay homage to the legendary Bodhi tree under which Buddha had attained enlightenment, a statue of Avalokiteshvara stood alongside it. The pilgrim recounts an old prophecy, that the earth will swallow this statue completely when Buddhism vanishes from India. And with a sharp unsentimental eye Hiuen Tsiang notes that the statue has already sunk in the dirt to its breast, and he gravely observes that in India Buddhism cant last longer than another 150 or 200 years.He wasnt far off. Except for Magadha and distant Kashmir, between the eighth and ninth centuries Buddhism was driven from India. Twelve hundred years of Moslem then British rule have given it little room to return. The orange robe of the Buddhist pilgrim really only reappeared in our own lifetime. So of that extensive, now legendary civilization, what remains in India on the eve of the twenty-first century? Shattered buildings and sculptures by the thousands, a few careful archaeological renovations, dozens of underfunded regional museums, and a million Buddhist refugees from Tibet. Yet, the sites remain tender and animated. The stories associated with Buddha have lost none of their vibrancy. You have to believe that the lokapalas tutelary deities that guard the local sites have kept to their job.Above all, there is India herself a teeming Buddha world. It draws pilgrims like no other nation. At the Buddhist mountain of Udhayagiri, sitting inside a hermit cave hewn from one massive boulder into the shape of a tigers head (you go in through the jaws), I wrote in a 1993 journal:I sat here oncea hundred yearsand all the women I ever knewwere like a vaporEven if you cant get out of Calcutta or Bombay, even if the Buddhist sites prove beyond reach, you can sit in a doorway or hermit cave, or wander on Nimtalla Ghat while corpses turn to ash and vapor over slow stacks of firewood. You can ponder terrible environmental destruction, or the collapse of great empires. Everything, everyone youve ever known, may seem a vapor. During Shakyamuni Buddhas lifetime, his disciple the poet Mahakala composed this terrible song:This lady who cremates the deadblack as a crow she takes an old corpse and breaks off a thighbone,takes an old corpse and breaks off a forearm,cracks an old skull and sets it outlike a bowl of milkfor me to look at.Witless brain dont you get it ?whatever you do justends up here.Get finished with karma, finished with rebirth no more bones of mineon the slag heap.Its the same meditation, twenty-five hundred years from Mahakala to Allen Ginsbergs A body burning in the first ash pit. To sit in a charnel ground and brood on impermanence the Way exists but not the traveler on it. To feel the skull under your face. To envision yourself the Old One, the Sick One, the Corpse. To take to the road, spurred by a Buddhas insight. To visit places others have wandered before you, they also spurred on by old stories. Maybe none of this so accommodated into lifes daily round as in India these many thousand years.And so, in your hand a book: the accounts of what a few travelers found there.Lumbini: The tank of Queen MajaLUMBINI AND KAPILAVASTUWhere the Buddha Was Born and RaisedA noble person is hard to find;one is not born everywhere.Wherever such a wise one is born,that family attains felicity.What not even a mother, a father, or any other relative will do, a rightly directed mind does do, even better. The Dhammapada, 5th-1st c. B.C.E., translated from the Pali by Thomas ClearyThe land where Siddhartha the Buddha was born and raised is a place of dreams. Before giving birth to Siddhartha, Queen Maya, it is said, dreamt of a large white elephant entering her body. She related her dream to a pandit, who interpreted its significance before the court at Kapilavastu. The

elephant, the pandit explained, was her son Siddhartha, the future Buddha, and the elephants entrance into her, her sons conception.The legends describe the Lumbini and Kapilavastu of Siddharthas youth as beautiful places verdant and prosperous. But the legends tell us, in Siddharthas eyes, their beauty and luxuries were as evanescent as dreams. Indeed, while Lumbini has faded into an unspectacular flatness, the site of Kapilavastu, razed at the end of the Buddhas lifetime, has altogether disappeared. Today the regions past beauty lives on only in Buddhist stories, and in the imaginings of inspired pilgrims.At Lumbini and Kapilavastu, no one has succumbed to dreams of the past more than the areas scholars and archaeologists. In 1897, the British government hired Anton Fhrer to find the ancient town of Kapilavastu, which had been lost for centuries. Fhrer went to the Nepalese Terai, where the town was believed to exist and, within a short time, began to send reports to his superiors of fantastic successes in the field; he was digging up Buddhist stupas, inscriptions, and relics. His reports were precise. His careful measurements and minute descriptions left no doubt that he had found the real Kapilavastu. Excited, Fhrers supervisor paid him an unexpected visit. To his shock, the archaeological site bore no resemblance to Fhrers reports. Maddened by his search for fame and facts, Fhrer had invented nine-tenths of his concrete historical evidence. What he did not invent he had destroyed in a futile search for relics.In 1976, the site was discovered again, this time in Piprahwa, a town in Indias Uttar Pradesh. Evidence at Piprahwa was more convincing. Archaeologists had found monasteries, seals labeled Kapilavastu, and a stupa thought to contain a portion of the Buddhas relics. Unfortunately, the evidence at Piprahwa was not conclusive and debates about Kapilavastus real location continue.Lumbini undergoes new development even as Kapilavastu waits to be fixed on the map. Lumbinis planners intend to adorn the area with monasteries, a moat, and a nature sanctuary on the one hand, shops, banks, hotels, and a golf course, on the other. Dreams of the past mingle with dreams of the future as the areas planners attempt to evoke Lumbinis ancient glory, while creating a new center of international Buddhist activity.Queen Maya was on her way to her parents home when she stopped to give birth in the Lumbini Grove. Her baby son, it is said, bore the thirty-six distinguishing marks of a future Buddha, including webbed fingers toes and a circle of hair between his brows. Shortly after her babys birth, Mayas husband, the king of Kapilavastu, invited seers to foretell the prince Siddharthas future. Recognizing the thirty-six marks, the seer predicted that the baby would become either a universal monarch or a great religious leader.As the future Buddha or Bodhisattva grew older, his father watched anxiously for signs of spirituality in his son. Hoping to keep the boy at his side, he arranged his sons marriage, built pleasure palaces for Siddhartha, and surrounded him with seductive courtesans. His wife, Yasodhara, bore the Bodhisattva a son named Rahula, further tying the young man to home. Fearing the sequestered prince would remain too naive to fulfill his destiny, the gods placed first an old man, second a sick man, third a dead man, and finally an ascetic on the road outside the city, where they would catch the Bodhisattvas eye on his pleasure rides into the countryside. Disturbed by these sights, Siddhartha resolved to leave the city and look for a solution to the sorrow of impermanence (dukka). Despite his fathers best efforts, he turned away from home and family and, exiting Kapilavastus East Gate, entered upon the life of a wandering ascetic.I. LUMBINIPeter Matthiessen, 1978 C.E.I sit on the top level of the wall, my feet on the step on which the loads are set and my back against a tree. In dry sunshine and the limpid breeze down from the mountains, two black cows are threshing rice, flanks gleaming in the light of afternoon. First the paddy is drained and the rice sickled, then the yoked animals, tied by a long line to a stake in the middle of the rice, are driven round and round in a slowly decreasing circle while children fling the stalks beneath their hooves. Then the stalks are tossed into the air, and the grains beneath swept into baskets to be taken home and winnowed. The fire-coloured dragonflies in the early autumn air, the bent backs in bright reds and yellows, the gleam on the black cattle and wheat stubble, the fresh green of the paddies and the sparkling river over everything lies an immortal light, like transparent silver.In the clean air and absence of all sound, of even the simplest machinery for the track is often tortuous and steep, and fords too many streams, to permit bicycles in the warmth and harmony and seeming plenty, come whispers of a paradisal age. Apparently the grove of sal trees called Lumbini, only thirty miles south of this same tree, in fertile lands north of the Rapti River, has changed little since the sixth century B.C., when Siddhartha Gautama was born there to a rich clan of the Sakya tribe in a kingdom of elephants and tigers. Gautama forsook a life of ease to become a holy mendicant, or wanderer a common practice in northern India even today. Later he was known as Sakyamuni (Sage of the Sakya), and afterward, the Buddha the Awakened One. Fig trees and the smoke of peasant fires, the greensward and gaunt cattle, white egrets and jungle crows are still seen on the Ganges Plain where Sakyamuni passed his life, from Lumbini south and east to Varanasi (an ancient city even when Gautama came there) and Rajgir and Gaya. Tradition says that he traveled as far north as Kathmandu (even then a prosperous city of the Newars) and preached on the hill of Swayambhunath, among the monkey and the pines.Lumbini: Prayer flags under the Bodhi TreeQueen Maya Gives Birth in the Lumbini GroveFrom Asvagosha, The Buddha-Karita, first century C.E.Verily the life of women is always darkness, yet when it encountered [Mahamaya], it shone brilliantly; thus the night does not retain its gloom, when it meets with the radiant crescent of the moon.This people, being hard to be roused to wonder in their souls, cannot be influenced by me if I come to them beyond their senses, so saying Duty abandoned her own subtile nature and made her form visible.Then falling from the host of beings in the Tushita heaven, and illumining the three worlds, the most excellent of Bodhisattvas [the future Buddha] suddenly entered at a thought into her womb, like the Naga King entering the cave of

Nanda.Assuming the form of a huge elephant white like Himalaya, armed with six tusks, with his face perfumed with flowing ichor, he entered the womb of the queen of King Suddhodana, to destroy the evils of the world....Maya... holding him in her womb, like a line of clouds holding a lightning-flash, relieved the people around her from the sufferings of poverty by raining showers of gifts.Then one day by the kings permission the queen, having a great longing in her mind, went with the inmates of the gynaeceum into the garden of Lumbini.As the queen supported herself by a bough which hung laden with a weight of flowers, the Bodhisattva suddenly came forth, cleaving open her womb.At that time the constellation Pushya was auspicious, and from the side of the queen, who was purified by her vow, her son was born for the welfare of the world, without pain and without illness.Like the sun bursting from a cloud in the morning, so he too, when he was born from his mothers womb, made the world bright like gold, bursting forth with his rays which dispelled the darkness.As was Aurvas birth from the thigh, and Prithus from the hand, and Mandhatris, who was like Indra himself, from the forehead, and Kakshivats from the upper end of the arm, thus too was his birth [miraculous]....Unflurried, with the lotus-sign in high relief, far-striding, set down with a stamp, seven such firm footsteps did he then take, he who was like the constellation of the seven rishis.I am born for supreme knowledge, for the welfare of the world, thus this is my last birth, thus did he of lion gait, gazing at the four quarters, utter a voice full of auspicious meaning....When he was born, the earth, though fastened down by [Himalaya] the monarch of mountains, shook like a ship tossed by the wind; and from a cloudless sky there fell a shower full of lotuses and water-lilies, and perfumed with sandalwood.On the Road to LumbiniMajor Rowland Raven-Hart, 1956 C.E.It was a hot and dusty journey; but I was very fortunate in my travelling-companions. There was a local lawyer, and a doctor (I think the Railway Doctor), and the Sub-Divisional Officer, travelling second-class with us for the sake of company. They were all very interested in my plans.... [T]he doctor offered to borrow an elephant for me, but added (advice which I had already received from other sources) that I should do better to relinquish the romance and take a pony: unless you are a good sailor. When you watch an elephant walking, it looks so smoo-ooth, like floating on soap. But when you are up on it, all the legs are walking as if they hated each other, and you may think there are sixteen legs.The countryside was disappointingly flat. I had hoped to get into hillocks at least, heralding the Hills, and to see these in the distance; but the Indian plains continue well into Nepal before the foothills rise suddenly from them; and clouds curtain the snows except in the mornings or rarer evenings. Sugar was the main dull crop of those dull plains, but relieved by patches of forest and by fine groves at the stations: mango, rose-apple, mahua, neem chiefly....Except for the Himalayas to the north it was not a picturesque route. Except for them; but, oh Lord! the glory of those pearl-polished eternal snows, rising to twenty-six thousand feet behind their wine-purple foothills a mere twenty-five miles away, and backed by a shrill blue sky which seemed nearer than the peaks. We had them for a few morning hours only, after the sun had licked up their level garlands of mist: then billows of white cloud swamped them. One must live in flatlands for years, as I had done, to realise at the sight of the Hills how one has missed them; and to add to my joy in them was the thought that here, at least, was a sight that the Buddha must also have loved as a boy.Perhaps, too, something of the keen crystal of those peaks has entered into Buddhism: as the endless, implacable desert into Islam, or the labyrinthine magnificence of the forests into Hinduism....We had many rivers to cross. I kept no log, but would estimate that there were four big ones, although the last of them, the nearest to Lumbini, was almost dry; and another four smaller streams; and a dozen or more of irrigation-watercourses, often only a couple of yards across but surprisingly deep I crossed most of them on pony-back, and often had to hoist my long legs up onto his neck to keep my sandals dry. One or two had remnants of bridges, over which I teetered in trepidation: the guide would not trust his pony to them but forded the channels....The ferry, at the one river that was too deep to ford, was a proud and ancient craft, some twenty-five feet long, poled to and fro, with a raised decking at the stern. Most of the planks of this decking were loose, and some were missing: after distributing the baggage so as to block the larger holes, the pony was persuaded aboard, to my surprise and somewhat to the alarm of two country-women who crossed with us....This ferry was at a village. Our course lay, in fact, from village to village, the cool-shady mango-grove of the next-to-come always visible as we left each. It is traditional for the Indian village to have a grove, though in the days of the Buddha they were more probably of sal up here, clumps deliberately left when clearing the virgin forest. Such a grove was (and is) also traditionally the meeting place... where the Buddha so often preached to villagers.We made a couple of short halts in those mango-groves.... They give a solid shade, but the leathery, dead-green leaves are crowded at the ends of the branches, so that one looks up into bare boughs of an interwoven complexity like the ribs of a futuristic umbrella, as hypnotic as a Cretan labyrinth-ornament. Often, when my eyes had been enmeshed there, a slant of sunlight below was the Lords yellow robe, as he passed through the shade on the way to his daily Alms-round for his one daily meal.Apart from the mango-groves, there was no temptation to linger in the villages. Nepalese villages are rarely attractive. The standard eligible residence is a windowless, smoke-filled hovel, the once-whitewashed mud walls ornamented with cow-dung cakes, drying there for use as fuel, further impoverishing the land. Pumpkin vines did their best here to cover walls and roofs, their yellow flares welcome patches of brightness. There was of course no sanitation, and the neighbourhood of watercourses and ponds stank to Beelzebub, who provided the serried cohorts of flies that they demanded....John Blofeld, 1956 C.E.At the time of my visit to Lumbini, the road had not quite been completed, so I decided to make the journey from the rail-head on horseback, starting at dawn. I set off on a thin, hired

nag along a sandy track which led me through the rice-fields and across several streams where the villagers were performing the ablutions with which each Hindu day begins. They were standing up to their waists in water, laving themselves from brass pots, Indias inevitable lotas [water pots]. The mens bodies, burnt copper by the sun, glistened as the water slid over them; the women were fully dressed as if they had been standing on dry land. If the ford lay far from a village, instead of bathers there would be brightly plumaged birds pausing in their morning drink to stare superciliously at the clumsy human intruder on a strange, four-legged beast and the tattered figure (my guide) who slouched beside. Presently the green vegetation grew sparser; I could almost see the implacable advance of the yellow sand which, by a process of erosion, is rapidly turning this part of hungry India into a desert. By now the sun stood high in a brazen sky and the temperature had almost reached its peak for that day I learnt later that it had been 116 degrees in the shade. A burning wind sprayed me with coarse particles of sand, clogging eyes and nostrils and rasping my throat. I had never in my life experienced such cruel discomfort, but I knew the worse would follow, for the blisteringly hot ride back to the rail-head would have to be accomplished that afternoon. Foolishly I had brought no hat and was wearing a short-sleeved bush-shirt, so that my lower arms were in danger of having all the skin burned off their upper surface.Barbara Crosette, 1994 C.E.On an initial visit to the archaeological center, I went by taxi (arranged with advance notice by the hotel). Next day, I switched to a bicycle, and that made all the difference. Pedaling along still-earthen roads that traverse the site on its north-south axis lanes more jarring to cars than bikes makes it possible to listen to those zephyr breezes and see small pictures of life that would otherwise be missed: a village boy fishing with a bamboo pole in water that will soon be channeled into the park, a woman and her little son eating lunch in the shade of Buddhas trees. The people who live around Lumbini are mostly Hindus and Moslems, said Nirmala Nanda Bhikku, the abbot and only resident monk at the Theravada temple. Theres not a Buddhist in sight, he reassured me. The Bhikku allows families from the neighborhood to harvest and sell the mangoes from more than a hundred trees in his monastic grove; it brings them a welcome added income.In the Lumbini GroveFrom the Introduction to the Jataka, 5th1st c. B.C.E.[T]here was a pleasure-grove of sal-trees, called Lumbini Grove. And at this particular time this grove was one mass of flowers from the ground to the topmost branches, while amongst the branches and flowers hummed swarms of bees of the five different colors, and flocks of various kinds of birds flew about warbling sweetly. Throughout the whole of Lumbini Grove the scene resembled the Cittalaka Grove in Indras paradise, or the magnificently decorated banqueting pavilion of some potent king.Hiuen Tsiang, mid-seventh century C.E.To the northeast of the arrow well about 80 or 90 li, we come to the Lumbini... garden. Here is the bathing tank of the Sakyas, the water of which is bright and clear as a mirror, and the surface covered with a mixture of flowers.To the north of this 24 or 25 paces there is an Asoka-flower tree, which is now decayed; this is the place where Bodhisattva was born on the eighth day of the second half of the month called Vaisakha, which corresponds with us to the eighth day of the third month....East from this is a stupa built by Asoka-raja, on the spot where the two dragons bathed the body of the prince. When Bodhisattva was born, he walked without assistance in the direction of the four quarters, seven paces in each direction, and said, I am the only lord in heaven and earth; from this time forth my births are finished. Where his feet had trod there sprang up great lotus flowers. Moreover, two dragons sprang forth, and, fixed in the air, poured down the one a cold and the other a warm water stream from his mouth, to wash the prince.To the east of this stupa are two fountains of pure water, by the side of which have been built two stupas. This is the place where two dragons appeared from the earth. When Bodhisattva was born, the attendants and household relations hastened in every direction to find water for the use of the child. At this time two springs gurgled forth from the earth just before the queen, the one cold, the other warm, using which they bathed him.Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita (D. P. E. Lingwood), 1949 C.E.During the couple of days that we spent at Lumbini our feelings were divided between joy at being at the very spot where the future Buddha had first seen the light of day, and a sense of regret, even outrage, at the desolate and neglected appearance of the sacred place. It was as though the tide of Buddhist revival, which flowed strongly at Sarnath, and none too feebly at Kusinara, had as yet hardly touched Lumbini. The only modern building to be seen was the Rest House erected by the Government of Nepal for the benefit of pilgrims, where we installed ourselves soon after our arrival, and where the caretakers provided us with a meal. Those other than pilgrims found it convenient to use the Rest House, however. Either because there was no other accommodation, or because in the land of autocracy even the lowest representative of authority was accustomed to behave in a high-handed manner, touring government officials regularly treated it as a sort of caravanserai. On the evening of our arrival a police inspector turned up with twenty of his men and soon the peace and silence of the place were lost in uproar. Next day it was even worse. While their master was busy squeezing money from the local landlords, who from time to time arrived on elephants, bearing with them the customary gifts, some of the inspectors men slaughtered a goat in the compound and without removing its hair, hide or anything else cooked it whole over an open fire. Though Munindra, Arun Chandra and Thaung Aung were by no means vegetarians, on seeing this gruesome sight all five members of our little party felt like making a strong protest. But on reflection we decided not to do so. The police inspector had been drinking since early morning, and to judge from the way in which he was behaving with the landlords he was not the sort of person who would be amenable to reason. All the same, we could not help thinking how sad it was that the First Precept, the precept of abstaining from injury to any living being, should be so flagrantly violated in the very birthplace of the Buddha.V. S.

Naravane, 1965 C.E.[T]hroughout our journey to Lumbini we pass through a backward, undeveloped area. As we drive from Gorakhpur to the border town of Nautanwa, and then again as we cover the ten miles from Nautanwa to Lumbini on elephant-back, we find that neither nature nor human ingenuity has anything exceptional to offer us. And yet, in spite of the uninteresting landscape, the drabness all around, and the utter absence of any architectural remains, we cannot help being stirred to our depths at the very sight of Asokas pillar. A saffron-robed bhikku stands serenely in a corner with a dreamy, far-away look in his eyes. There is no bustle, no persuasion, no supplication. Beggars do not remind us of the rewards awaiting the charitable in heaven; priests do not solicit our co-operation in the task of saving our own souls; double-locked doors do not hide the deity. All we have here is the pillar of Asoka, two tiny mounds of earth to mark the excavation of some relics, and a small temple with an image of Queen Maya delivering Siddhartha. The legends we have heard or read do the rest, and we are satisfied.John Blofeld, 1956 C.E.After tethering my horse and resting awhile, I went in search of the stump of a stone commemoration pillar erected there almost two thousand three hundred years ago by the Emperor Ashoka who, having conquered all India by fire and sword, lived to become a devoted peaceful servant of the Compassionate One and the leading Buddhist missionary of all time. The remaining stump was too meagre to be at all impressive except on account of its history. Yet, mindful that I was on pilgrimage, I seated myself nearby, composed my mind reverently and entered upon a discursive meditation, trying to evoke the scene of the sacred birth which had taken place on or very near the spot indicated by the base of the Ashokan pillar. Presently, I entered upon a vivid daydream.Before me stood a deliciously cool and shady forest of sal trees all laden with scarlet flowers and surrounded by mile upon mile of fertile fields. In the distance, a glittering cavalcade was approaching. Messengers rode before, proclaiming that Her Majesty Queen Mayadevi was returning to her fathers house, there to await the birth of her royal child, whom the astrologers had foretold might one day rule the earth. The cavalcade drew near. I saw warriors in snow-white dhoti, [cloth worn around the waist] behelmeted and mailed in chain of silver; courtiers in coloured silks with graceful curved swords supported by golden chains worn across their naked breasts; women unveiled in the ancient style, but with the outlines of their figures modestly concealed beneath fold upon fold of their gold-bordered saris. Chariots followed, drawn by white oxen with gilded horns, and at last a palanquin carried upon the shoulders of three score bearers, its heavy silken canopy hiding the lovely Queen who sat within. Presently a tiny hand emerged and gestured lightly to a courtier riding a white and strawberry horse close to the palanquins left. A word of command was barked down the line and the procession halted. Women hastened forward from their places behind the royal palanquin, their saris aflutter; and from within stepped down a lady, her outer garment a simple sari of silver-edged white silk gauze; her lovely docile face full with the fullness of approaching motherhood; her eyes alight with pleasure as she gazed at the scarlet clusters upon the sal trees. Smiling to her ladies, she walked slowly towards the welcoming shade of the forest, moving cautiously lest she stumble and hurt her precious burden. Beneath the finest tree of all, which flaunted its scarlet beauty as though contemptuous of mere human adornment, she stopped and raised her hand, supporting the weight of her body upon a heavily laden branch. That which was about to befall no man dare even try to imagine. I knew that her child would be born even as she stood upright leaning upon that lovingly offered branch. Hurriedly I turned away my head or, rather, I opened my eyes to the hot glare.Gone were forest, smiling fields, thrice-blessed Queen and cavalcade. There was nothing in sight but the burning ugliness of the present. Yet I felt beautifully refreshed. I was smiling and inclined to sing. What I had seen had been neither dream nor vision. I had merely shut my eyes and deliberately induced a picture of the events which have made Lumbini a place ever to be remembered. But either the magic of the place itself as the repository of sublime thoughts proceeding from the hearts of generation upon generation of pilgrims, or else the state of mind which the mere thought of being in Lumbini induced, had clad my imagining in such rich colours that I felt like a man awakened from a delicious dream a dream so real that even the lotus-shaped henna stain upon Queen Mayadevis palm remained imprinted on my memory. Though the journey back to the rail-head proved as physically painful as I had feared, there was such a sense of gladness in my heart that bodily fatigue had no power to distress me. I knew that my journey to that grim-looking place had not been in vain, for neither poppy nor mandagora could have induced such vivid and lovely thoughts in any other setting than sacred Lumbini.Lumbinis MonumentsIn 1896, the German archaeologist Anton Fhrer found a broken Asokan pillar and identified the site where it lay as the Lumbini Grove. Sixty-two years later, in 1958, King Mahendra of Nepal donated money for the sites rehabilitation. Around this time, the United Nations was funding excavations in the area as well. Established in 1970, the Lumbini Development Committee sketched out extensive plans for the Groves further development. Though work is ongoing at the site, progress, under the committees aegis, is slow.TILLAR NADI THE RIVER OF OILKnown as the river of oil, the Tillar Nadi, where Queen Maya bathed after giving birth to the future Buddha, lies to the southeast of the Asokan pillar.From Tibetan Works in the Bkah-Hgyur and Bstan-Hgyur, 8th14th c. C.E.In accordance with what happens at the birth of every Buddha, there fell on his head a stream of cold water and one of warm, which washed him, and at the spot where he had been born there appeared a spring in which his mother bathed.Hiuen Tsiang, mid-seventh century C.E.[There] is a little river which flows to the southeast. The people of the place call it the river of oil. This is the stream which the Devas caused to appear as a pure and glistening pool for the queen, when she had brought forth her child, to wash and purify herself in. Now it is changed and become a river, the stream of which is still

unctuous.THE ASOKAN PILLARKing of the Mauryan Empire, Asoka ruled over most of what is now present-day India. In the early years of his reign, Asoka waged war against the Kalingas of Orissa. Though victorious, he was repulsed by the wars brutality and decided to embrace nonviolence and the Buddhist dharma. He proclaimed his change of heart to the public in a number of stone inscriptions engraved on cliff faces and pillars throughout his empire. Asokan pillars erected at or en route to several Buddhist pilgrimage sites fed legends, like the Asokavadana, which portrayed the king as an ideal Buddhist ruler and pilgrim. An inscription appears at the base of the Asokan pillar in Lumbini recording Asokas pilgrimage to the Grove.From the Asokavadana, second century C.E.Upagupta took [Asoka] to the Lumbini Wood, and stretching out his right hand he said: In this place, great king, the Blessed One was born.And he added:This is the first of the caityasof the Buddha whose eye is supreme.Here, as soon as he was born,the Sage took seven steps on the earth,looked down at the four directions,and spoke these words:This is my last birthIll not dwell in a womb again.Asoka threw himself at Upaguptas feet, and getting up, he said, weeping and making an anjali:They are fortunate and of great meritthose who witnessedthe birth of the Sageand heard his delightful voice.Now for the sake of further increasing the kings faith, the elder asked Asoka whether he would like to see the deitywho witnessed in this wood the birthof the most eloquent Sage,saw him take the seven steps,and heard the words he spoke.Asoka replied that he would. Upagupta, therefore, stretched out his right hand toward the tree whose branch Queen Mahamaya had grasped while giving birth, and declared:Let the divine maiden who resides in this asoka treeand who witnessed the birth of the Buddhamake herself manifest in her own bodyso that King Asokas faith will grow greater still.And immediately, the tree spirit appeared before Upagupta in her own form, and said, making an anjali:Elder, what is your command?The elder said to Asoka: Great king, here is the goddess who saw the Buddha at the time of his birth.Asoka said to her, making an anjali:The Asokan Pillar at LumbiniYou witnessed his birth and sawhis body adorned with the marks!You gazed upon his large lotus-like eyes!You heard in this woodthe first delightful wordsof the leader of mankind!The tree spirit replied:I did indeed witness the birth of the best of men,the Teacher who dazzled like gold.I saw him take the seven steps,and also heard his words.Tell me, goddess, said Asoka, what was it like the magnificent moment of the Blessed Ones birth?I cannot possibly fully describe it in words, answered the deity, but, in brief, listen:Throughout Indras three-fold world,there shone a supernatural light,dazzling like gold and delighting the eye.The earth and its mountains, ringed by the ocean,shook like a ship being tossed at sea.Hearing this, Asoka made an offering of one hundred thousand pieces of gold to the birthplace of the Buddha [and] built a caitya there.King Asoka, the Rummindei Pillar Edict, an inscription in Brahmi found at the base of the Asokan pillar in Lumbini, 274232 B.C.E.Twenty years after his coronation, King Priyadarsi [Asoka], Beloved of the Gods, visited this place in person and worshiped here because the Buddha, the Sage of the Sakyas, was born here.He ordered a stone wall to be constructed around the place and erected this stone pillar to commemorate his visit.He declared the village of Lumbini (now Rummindei) free of taxes and required to pay only one-eighth of its produce (about half the usual amount) as land revenue.Hiuen Tsiang, mid-seventh century C.E.In Hiuen Tsiangs day, the Asokan pillar had already fallen in two. During his visit, Tsiang saw... a great stone pillar, on the top of which is the figure of a horse, which was built by Asoka-raja. Afterwards, by the contrivance of a wicked dragon, it was broken off in the middle and fell to the ground.Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita (D. P. E. Lingwood), 1949 C.E.[T]he Asokan Pillar nearby... stood beneath the open sky behind a low railing. On its highly polished surface the ancient Brahmi letters were cut deep and clear, and we could still spell out the announcement Here the Blessed One was born. For some reason or other, I felt even more deeply moved here than I had done at either Sarnath or Kusinara. The truncated stone shaft stood so calmly and so simply beneath the cloudless blue sky; it seemed so unpretentious, and yet to mean so much. Lingering behind when Buddharakshita and the others had moved on in the direction of the mounds, I gathered some small white flowers and with a full heart scattered them over the railing at the foot of the column. As I did so I heard Buddharakshitas voice. What are you messing about with those flowers for? he shouted roughly. Come on, we cant wait for you all day!THE TEMPLE OF QUEEN MAYAQueen Mayas temple is said to rest on the foundations of an Asokan monument and the temples relief sculpture to have been commissioned by the Mall kings of the Naga Dynasty, rulers of southern Nepal between the eleventh and fifteenth centuries.Maha Sthavira Sangharakshita (D. P. E. Lingwood), 1949 C.E.Apart from the two mounds, which rose like two volcanic islands out of a perfect sea of loose bricks, and seemed to have once formed the lower half of twin stupas, the only ancient building of which any trace remained above ground was the Rumindei Temple. This was so small as to be a chapel rather than a temple, and in an extremely dilapidated, not to say ruinous, condition. On our first visit to the place, soon after our arrival, we found the door locked, and it was not until the evening of our second day at Lumbini that it was opened by the old Hindu woman who kept the key and was responsible, so it seemed, for the rudimentary worship that kept alive the religious traditions of the place. The interior of the temple was disappointing. The only object of interest was a stone slab so well worn, and so thickly smeared with vermilion, that the figure of Mahamaya holding onto the branch of a sal tree as she stood giving birth to the future Teacher of Gods and Men was barely discernible. On our questioning the old woman it soon became clear that she had not even heard of the Buddha or of Buddhism and that she was under the impression that the temple was dedicated to a Hindu goddess.S. R. Wijayatilake, 1963 C.E.Adjacent to the Asokan pillar is the Maya Devi temple. It is obviously a recent structure, crude and incongruous. However, this temple contains a significant piece of

sculpture depicting the birth of the little Siddhartha. Queen Maya Devi is shown holding the branch of a sal tree and the baby prince emerging from a side. Unfortunately, misguided devotees have daubed the place with oil and paint....