2010

The Geography of Buddhist Pilgrimage in Asia

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Stoddard, Robert, "The Geography of Buddhist Pilgrimage in Asia" (2010). Geography Faculty Publications. 27.
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A pilgrimage is a journey to a sacred place motivated by religious devotion. Although the term may be applied to a meditative search for new spiritual experiences, prolonged wanderings, or travel to a place of nostalgic meaning for an individual, here the word refers to the physical journey to a distant site regarded as holy. As defined in this essay, pilgrimage excludes local and family places of worship; therefore the spatial component of distance is critical.

Throughout the world and in numerous faiths, pilgrimages differ from other forms of worship because of the emphasis on the unique roles of movement and place. Most other religious activities are located conveniently in the home and neighborhood, and thus are situated in close proximity to where people reside. This spatial proximity adheres to a common geographic principle: phenomena having interacting functions are located close together. In contrast, pilgrimages occur because worshippers feel obligated to travel to particular sites of sanctity, irrespective of their locations. In fact, within certain religious traditions, the act of visiting a nearby pilgrimage site is regarded as having less spiritual merit than that of undergoing the hardships of travel to a remote holy place.

The role of movement as a form of worship is demonstrated further by religious processions and circumambulations; consequently, the journey to a pilgrimage site may possess more significance than mundane travel to a distant destination.

Pilgrims want to be present at sacred places deemed to have extraordinary spiritual significance because those sites are uniquely different from the secular world. This dissimilarity may arise from a variety of religious perspectives. Some places are regarded as particularly auspicious because they are sites where communication with the divine is particularly accessible. Adherents of several religions believe that humans can experience direct interaction with the divine only at a few spots on the earth’s surface. Frequently these are located at distinctive topographic sites, such as mountaintops, hot springs, or natural caves.

Pilgrims may be attracted to other places that commemorate events of supreme spirituality, especially those sites where a religious leader was born, delivered spiritual guidance, or died. Pilgrimages may also occur at locations sanctified—according to the worldview of devotees—by miracles and similar divine phenomena. In some religions, the importance of particular places is enhanced by doctrines that obligate adherents to make pilgrimages to designated sites.

The sanctity of particular sites also may result from their geometric position within the cosmos. In several religions, a compelling attraction arises from the belief that there is an axis mundi (cosmic axis; center of the world), which forms the focus of a religious universe. Within the territory of many ancient civilizations, the precise geographic location of the “center of the universe” was regarded as a place of great spiritual benefits. Similarly, the concept of a cosmic mandala superimposed on the earth creates a place of sanctity at its central position.

The mandala, which is probably the quintessential union of the Buddhist religion with art, represents the universe through its geometric design, religious symbols, and use of color. Painted mandalas frequently are small because they are kept in homes and at local public altars. Within several religious traditions and on a different scale, the mandala is the inspiration for the architecture of temples and the arrangement of buildings around a sacred site in a town, thus creating a sacred geography. When the mandala is visualized as encompassing a region (or even the entire universe), the focal center marks an extraordinarily sacred place.

Still other pilgrimage sites evolve from continual growth in the number of worshippers. A place that once may have attracted only regional pilgrims sometimes increases in importance through the spreading of its reputation. This increased popularity, in turn, convinces other adherents of the sacredness of the place, a process that eventually creates a pilgrimage site of considerable importance.

A pilgrimage generally consists of four components: preparation for the sacred journey, the journey itself, adoration at the sanctified site, and return to the mundane setting. Each component may inspire tangible artistic expressions. In anticipating and preparing for the journey, pilgrims may ob-
tian embellished maps and manuscripts describing the route and brochures promoting the virtues of a specific pilgrimage. Often associated with the actual travel are amulets, special dress, and distinctive equipment (e.g., a portable altar, prayer wheel, or box of religious items). The sacred site itself may be adorned with awe-inspiring architecture, statuary, wood and stone carvings, paintings, prayer flags, textiles, gardens, precious objects of veneration, and various votive offerings. Items brought back home may include an assortment of reliquaries and mementos commemorating the sacred journey.

It is not surprising that objects with artistic merit are associated with pilgrimages. For many believers, the accomplishment of an extraordinary journey represents the zenith of their religious experiences and virtually compels a materialization of the feat. Thus, in all phases of pilgrimage, the incentive for commemorating this momentous event inspires art, ranging from mass-produced mementos to extraordinary works of fine art. Conversely, the desire to be in the presence of awe-inspiring religious art may provide motivation for worshippers to make a difficult journey.

Obviously the correlation between pilgrimages and artistic objects is not perfect: the finest art may not necessarily generate pilgrimages, and some major holy places may be void of numerous works of art. For example, in the case of Buddhism, several important pilgrimage places are not associated with outstanding architecture, sculptures, or paintings. Conversely, several places listed by UNESCO as World Heritage Sites possess fine art, which may entice tourists in general but not necessarily large numbers of religious pilgrims (as demonstrated by Borobudur in Indonesia and Ajanta in India).

A meaningful discussion about Buddhist pilgrimages (as with pilgrimages in other religions) depends partly on an identification of which places are most sacred, and which thus constitute major destinations. In addition to the inherent problem of measuring sanctity, complications arise from differences in historical periods, doctrinal variations, and changing cultural milieu.

The temporal factor is apparent in the changing significance of certain sites during the long history of Buddhism. Several places relating to the Buddha’s life attracted pilgrims in early days, especially during the rule of the Indian emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE), but were neglected later. Furthermore, the spatial distribution of pilgrimage sites during early periods reflects the spread of Buddhism over several centuries. From its original core in the northern portion of South Asia, Buddhism spread to China in about the third century, to Korea in the fourth, to Japan in the sixth, to Tibet in the seventh, and to Mongolia in the sixteenth. Meanwhile, Buddhism also expanded to Sri Lanka, Myanmar/Burma, Thailand, Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam.

The task of identifying major Buddhist pilgrimage sites is further complicated by variations in interpretation and development of the religion. Although all Buddhists regard Lumbini, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, and Kushinagara as the principal holy places (as discussed below), the secondary sites vary among the Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana schools of thought. The importance of various holy sites is related also to their cultural settings. Despite the belief in gaining great merit by undertaking a long journey to a sacred site, the somewhat contradictory geographic principle of proximity remains operative. The importance of nearness is demonstrated by the tendency of pilgrims to visit places within their own cultural regions more frequently than those elsewhere. This regional variation is due to an awareness of nearby locations, the socializing impact of family and friends, and the ease of accomplishing a less ambitious journey. For example, Mount Emei (in China), the Jokhang Temple (in Tibet), and the Temple of the Tooth (in Sri Lanka) enjoy greater visitation by pilgrims living within those cultural settings than by others from the worldwide Buddhist community.

As mentioned above, the four most holy places for Buddhists are in South Asia: Lumbini, where the Buddha was born; Bodh Gaya, where he gained enlightenment; Sarnath, where he pronounced his first teachings; and Kushinagara, where he died and attained final nirvana (see “Map of Asia: Selected Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites”). As a result, Buddhists from around the world journey—sometimes several times—to these four holy sites.

It is not known when the earliest pilgrimages to Lumbini occurred, but the rock pillar and several stupas (reliquary or commemorative mounds) erected by Ashoka in the third century BCE provide an indication of the site’s antiquity. Few pilgrims visited the site after the early period, but during the last half century, increased development has made Lumbini a place of international importance for Buddhist pilgrims.

As the site where the Buddha attained enlightenment, Bodh Gaya is a highly revered place attracting multitudes of pilgrims. The seminal event occurred in the shade of a pīdī tree (called the Bodhi Tree), a major destination for pilgrims. Commemorating this sacred place is the Mahabodi Temple, with its several statues. Those sculpted in local black stone by Gupta artists in the fourth through sixth centuries are significant, but a particularly famous statue of the Buddha dates from the Pala dynasty (8th–12th century). Also within this temple are many tsho-tsha, figurines or miniature stupas made from clay. Additional ornamentation is seen in the sandstone railings that line the circumambulation path, some of which date to the first century BCE.

Sarnath, the place where the Buddha first taught the path to enlightenment, is revered because the concept of the Three Jewels of Buddhism—the Buddha, the Dharma (the teachings and doctrines of the religion), and the Sangha (the community that practices the path to enlightenment)—was first promulgated there. The most famous artwork linked to this site is the “lion capital” (ca. 250 BCE), which depicts lions facing the four directions over a Dharma wheel (dhammachakra). In addition to ancient ruins, in the 1930s two new temples were constructed: the modern Mulagandhakuti Vihara, which contains decorative wall frescos painted by a Japanese artist; and a temple built by Chinese craftsmen that houses a marble image of the Buddha.

Kushinagara is where the Buddha died and entered final nirvana (parinirvana). After the thirteenth century Kushinag-
ara fell into obscurity until the British archaeologist Alexander Cunningham rediscovered it in 1861. The destination of contemporary pilgrimages is the Mahaparinirvana Stupa, along with the nearby fifteen-hundred-year-old Buddha image. This stupa is surrounded by ruins of ancient monasteries and similar archaeological structures.

Four additional sites traditionally related to the life of the Buddha—Rajagaha, Vaishali, Shravasti, and Sankasya—are places where he performed miracles. Generally these places are not known for unique artistic artifacts, except for the ubiquitous Buddhist monument: the stupa. Invariably a stupa exists at every Buddhist pilgrimage site, although their forms may vary depending on age, size, and cultural region (which may also dictate different names, such as dagoba and pagoda). Some of the more famous stupas in South Asia are at Sanchi (India), Kathmandu (Nepal), and Anuradhapura (Sri Lanka).

Outside the homeland of the Buddha in northern India are sites sacred to each of the main branches of Buddhism. Theravada Buddhism is represented by several pilgrimage places in Sri Lanka. In the vicinity of Anuradhapura are nearly half of the country’s sixteen Buddhist holy places (the solosthasthana), including Sri Maha Bodhiya, Ruwanwelisaya (commonly called Maha Stupa), and Abhayagiri Vihara (containing a gold-leaved Tripitaka, the canon of Theravada scriptures).

Two other very popular pilgrimage places in Sri Lanka are the aforementioned Temple of the Tooth in Kandy, and Kataragama. The interior of the Temple of the Tooth is richly carved and decorated with inlaid woods, ivory, and lacquer; the temple is surrounded by a delicately carved stone wall. Kataragama is noteworthy because, as with several other pilgrimage sites in Asia, it is sacred to more than one religion (in this case, Hinduism as well as Buddhism).

Premier pilgrimage places for Vajrayana Buddhism comprise three located in Tibet: the Jokhang Temple, the Potala Palace, and Mount Kailash. The Jokhang, which blends Indian, Nepalese, and Chinese architectural styles, houses several decorated shrines and a venerated statue of Shakyamuni, the historical Buddha; on the roof, statues of two golden deer flank a Dharma wheel. The gigantic, thirteen-story Potala contains over one thousand rooms, ten thousand shrines, and two hundred thousand statues. It is situated on top of one of the three hills—the Three Protectors of Tibet—that surround Lhasa. In the western part of the Tibetan cultural region, Mount Kailash, regarded as the axis mundi of the world, is holy to Buddhism, Hinduism, Jainism, and the early Bon religion. It represents the pilgrimage site par excellence, partly because its isolated location requires extraordinary effort to visit. Another noteworthy Vajrayana Buddhist pilgrimage place is the spectacularly situated Taktsang in Bhutan.

Mahayana Buddhism is the branch that spread to China in the first century (and thence to Japan and Korea). In China, numerous places attract pilgrims, but special attention is given to the Four Sacred Mountains of Buddhism: Mount Emei, Mount Wutai, Mount Putuo, and Mount Jiuhua. Mount Emei, the location of the first Buddhist temple in China, is the site of many monasteries built in an architectural style that emulates the landscape. Of special note at Mount Putuo are three major temples, which are most impressive and elaborate. The efficacy of this religious site is demonstrated by the fact that pilgrims spend several days walking and climbing the long path to reach it. Grand, centuries-old temples with exquisite architecture are found on other mountaintops as well.

Among the several circuits of holy sites in Japan, the pilgrimage to eighty-eight temples along the coast of Shikoku (the smallest of Japan’s four main islands) is regarded as most important. The religious motivation for pilgrims on this route is apparent, because these temples, built to serve the common person, lack some of the artistry of other, more elegant Japanese temples; furthermore, walking this circular pilgrimage usually takes between forty and fifty days.

This brief discussion omits numerous other holy sites (for example, a significant place of pilgrimage in Myanmar, the Shwedagon Pagoda); nevertheless, those included reveal several general characteristics of the pilgrimage phenomenon. Devotees are attracted to specific places having extraordinary spiritual power and are committed to visiting those sites despite the hardships associated with travel to distant places. Indeed, for some pilgrims, the geographic act of movement itself is inherently a form of worship and an inspiration for art. In turn, existing artistic objects at holy sites often serve as magnets that attract pilgrims.

Notes

4. Here the name “Tibet” refers to a cultural region, not necessarily to a political entity. Consequently, Bhutan belongs to the Tibetan region.
5. In general, Mahayana Buddhism is practiced in East Asia; Theravada, in Southeast Asia; and Vajrayana, in Central Asia. For a discussion of the main principles and differences between these schools of thought, see Roger W. Stump, *The Geography of Religion: Faith, Place, and Space*, Lanham, MD, 2008; pp. 133-51.
Map of Asia: 
Selected Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites

Afghanistan
1. Nagarshar

Bhutan
2. Taktsang

China
3. Mogao Caves
4. Mount Emei
5. Mount Jiuhua
6. Mount Lu
7. Mount Putuo
8. Mount Tai
9. Mount Wutai

India
10. Ajanta
11. Bharhat
12. Bodh Gaya
13. Kushinagara
14. Nalanda
15. Rajagha
16. Sanchi
17. Sankasya
18. Sarnath
19. Shravasti
20. Vaishali

Indonesia
21. Borobudur

Japan
22. Mount Fuji
23. Kansai region
24. Chionji
25. Kasuga Shrine
26. Mount Kinpu
27. Narita
28. Watanaya Prefecture
29. Mount Koya
30. Kumano Shrines
31. Shikoku
32. Mount Ishizuchi

Myanmar/Burma
33. Mount Geumgang
34. Sagaing Pagoda
35. Shwemogyi Pagoda

Nepal
36. Gosaikund
37. Kathmandu
38. The Great Stupa of Swayambhu
39. Lumbini

Nepal
34. Saraburi
35. Chiang Mai Province
36. Mount Chiang Dao
37. Mount Suthep
38. Wat Phra That Doi Suthep
39. Wat Phra That Doi Suthep

Tibet
37. Mount Kailash
38. Tongren County
39. Samye Monastery

* Designated as the Union of Myanmar since 1989
** Designated as Tibet Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China since 1965