

# LOOKING FOR THE RELICS OF BUDDHA

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**“In 1898 (B.E. 2441) an Englishman, William Peppe dug out the relics of Buddha from the old stupa in North India, near the border of Nepal. And I understand it was given to the Royal family of Thailand. Where is it now?**

I started to ask this question immediately after I came to this country two years ago. But the answers were always nearly the same; “I have never heard of it” or “I don’t know.”

*How I came to be interested in these relics has a fairly long and winding story.*

About 20 years ago, hypnosis caught my curiosity and I read several books on it. One of the books said the brain waves emit-

ted during the sitting of high priest of “Zen” *Buddhism* and those of the person under hypnosis have rather similar patterns. This is the beginning of my interest in “Zen”. Although I said “interest in Zen”, it does not mean I was keen: I simply read books on it from time to time for informations, and I sat at “Zen” temple only twice, trying to get a glimpse of it.

As you know, Japan is a country of *Mahayana Buddhism*, and it has so many sects, probably about 60 or more. In the meantime, I came to know there is *Theravada Buddhism* in South East Asia. Buddhism is so diversified now! 8 years ago, I started to wonder what it was originally like when Buddha was alive and looked for the books on original Buddhism. After finishing those books, I further wanted to read original scriptures.

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So I chose "Mahāparinibbāna Sutta", "Dhammapada", "Sutta-Nipāta", which Dr.H. Nakamura, greatest Japanese scholar on Indian Philosophy and Buddhism, translated from Pali original into Japanese, and read them all. I was much surprised. I expected to find very complicated and difficult teachings in them. On the contrary, what I found there was the path which we should follow as human beings, and it was in the simplest form and that in the plain language.

Especially, Gautama Buddha described in the "Mahāparinibbāna Sutta" was so human and impressive. It was an entirely new discovery to me. When young, I studied at a Christian University for a year, and was in New York for five years. During those periods, I often attended churches, not because I was a Christian, but as I thought it was a good way to know western people and western society. So, I think I have a fairly good knowledge about Christ and Christianity. But, ashamedly, I didn't know much about Gautama Buddha himself. I should say I practically knew nothing.

Gautama Buddha, after persistent preaching for 45 years, reached the age of 80. He must have now been very tired with his senile body. Probably he knew he was going to die shortly. One day he set for a last journey up northward. He may have intended to return to his native place, Kapilavatthu. This sutta, "Mahāparinibbāna" describes what happened from the beginning of this journey till his death and distribution of his relics into eight.

Gautama Buddha, very slowly went through villages and towns, preaching the "path of truth". It must have been as if he had been forcing himself to walk ahead by skipping his tired and weak body.

On the way he had an attack of diarrhoea after eating the meal offered by Chunda, son of a metal-worker. Bloody excrements did not stop. He, however, said "Let's go to Kusinara", enduring an acute pain, and tried to continue his journey. Soon, he found it difficult and said to Ananda, "Please fold the coat into four. I'm tired. I want to lie down" and said, "Bring me water. I'm thirsty. I want to drink" three times but it was refused each time and he was told to go to the other river as the water in the near-by river was muddy and unfit for drinking.

Just before his death, Buddha said to Ananda, "Chunda may blame himself or others may criticize him, since the food offered by him put Buddha to death. But Ananda, don't let them do that: it had a great merit, as the Buddha entered Nibbana by eating it." While being tortured by such an acute pain as putting one to death, Buddha was still concerned about Chunda. What a warm consideration! Here we can see his deep compassion and humanity.

Dr.Nakamura's annotations were various and voluminous. Half of the book was occupied by the annotations. When I read books I usually don't pay much attention to annotations or footnotes but Dr. Nakamura's were so interesting that I read them all, one by one. The last one ran like this:

*In 1898 (B.E. 2441) an Englishman, William Peppe, unearthed an urn from old stupa in his estate in Piprawa, 13 kilometres away from Kapilavatthu. On its surface, letters of several centuries B.C. (1/2 centuries B.E.) were incised and say, "This is the urn containing the relics of Buddha of Shakya clan, the world honoured-one. Reverently, we, his brothers, sisters, wife and son, place it here." So, we can conclude this is real relics of Buddha who actually lived in history. The relics were donated to the Royal family of Thailand and a portion of them were given to Buddhists in Japan. Now they are in Nittai-ji temple (meaning, Japanese-Thai temple) in Nagoya, and all sects of Buddhists are taking its care on rotation.*

It was in April 1982 (B.E. 2525) when I read this annotation. Although I am easy to forget things, the story about these relics remained at the corner of my mind somehow.

In May 1983 (B.E. 2526), I came to Thailand and I started to ask the question which I quoted earlier. But I nearly gave up, as no appropriate answer was obtainable. In the meantime, I luckily had a chance to visit Nagoya on business. It meant I could visit Nittai-ji temple.

In Nagoya, I asked several people where Nittai-ji temple was and what kind of temple it was. Answers were "I don't know" or, at best, "It is the temple where rich or famous people will have their funerals." I may have asked the question of wrong persons, because they were all businessmen and they are generally too busy to be keen on religion. At the hotel I stayed in, I was told almost any taxi driver in Nagoya should know its location.

Upon my arrival at the temple, I immediately proceeded to the main building. However, I found all the doors were closed fast, as it was already past lock-up time, and there was nobody around. I thought what a pity it was after coming all the way, and was hesitant to leave. While I kept standing there for some time, a man approached the main building. His clothes were so poor that he looked just like a vagabond. He started to knock at a door vehemently, which was several meters away from where I stood, and was yelling something in a loud voice. I thought, "Oh, there's a drunkard. What is he yelling at?", and got closer to him and listened. He was repeating "I have been worshipping here for over 15 years. What a treatment you give me for my arrival a little later than the closing-time!" Then, the door was opened from within. Looking at this, I felt how lucky I was and entered inside with him.

In the center of the main hall, there was a brilliantly shining gold-bronze Buddha image and a plank of, say, 3 metres by 0.5 metres, was hanging from the ceiling. On the plank you could read "พระพุทธรากษณ์" in Thai letters. The notice board said they were written by the present King Bhumipol. (The Buddha image was so gorgeous and impressive that, upon return to my hotel from the temple, I showed its picture to Mr. Pong Sarasin, with whom I accompanied to Nagoya for the same business. Being so well versed in antique arts and collector himself, Mr. Pong said to me, "The image belongs to early Chieng Saen, and although it may not be 1,000 years old as the temple's notice board claims, it is probably more than 700 years old. You cannot find such a fine one, even in Thailand any longer.")

The stupa which contains the relics was not at the main campus of the temple. You had to walk about 10 minutes. Upon arrival, I found nobody there. It was all quiet. It may have been a little to late, but I dropped in at the office anyhow and told the monk in charge that I had come from Thailand. He then kindly took me to the gate and opened the lock to let me proceed directly under the stupa. Realization that you are now standing just in front of the relics of the great person, who, as far as 2,500 years ago, preached "the path of truth" gave you the mixed feelings. I felt solemn. I felt something warm. And at the same time, I felt the satisfaction that I had done something which I had been longing for.

Later, I went back to the main office and got the pamphlet, entitled "History of Nittai-ji temple", It said,

- \* The urn itself, which William Peppe discovered, was given to the museum in Culcutta, India.
- \* The relics were presented by British government to King Chulalongkorn.
- \* Portions were given by the King to Ceylon and Burma, learning which, Japanese ambassador, Mr. Inagaki envied very much, and requested King Chulalongkorn for a portion, too. The King granted the request as "A present to Japanesees people from the King of Thailand."
- \* Upon hearing good news from the ambassador, Japanese Foreign Minister, Mr. Aoki requested the heads of the 56 Buddhist sects to prepare for receiving, and in 1901 (B.E. 2444) all 56 sects agreed to send to Bangkok a big mission, headed by the Pope Otani.

- \* At the Palace, King Chulalongkorn gave them the relics and a Buddha image to be placed at the temple which would be newly built for the relics.
- \* Three cities, Tokyo, Nagoya and Kyoto, all wanted to have the relics and competed with each other, but Nagoya won the battle by donating a piece of land of 20 rai.
- \* In 1903 (B.E. 2446) The present Nittai-ji temple was built., and so on.

However, the greatest fruit I found in this "Nittai-ji temple" was the following sentence.

"King Chulalongkorn dedicated the relics to Wat Sakhet."

When I read this, I cried in my mind "Hurrah, I found, them! I found them at last!"

Oh, Wat Saket! I've been there, already twice. But, I didn't know about this at all.

Two years before the discovery of these relics, namely in 1896 (B.E. 2439), an archeologist discovered "Lumbini", Buddha's birthplace, near Therai, Nepal. There was a pillar erected by King Asoka (250 B.C. or B.E. 293) and said "20 years after the accession to the throne, the King came here to make merit and lowered the tax for the villagers."

The name, Lumbini, often appeared in written documents of more than twenty centuries ago, but nobody knew where it actually was. Until about 85 years ago, some western scholars doubted even existence of Buddha, needless to say Lumbini. For instance, a French scholar insisted in his book "Legend about Buddha" that such a person never existed and all legends came from myths about the sun.

Of course, the existence was proved by these successive discoveries of Lumbini and the relics. In this sense, these were one of the greatest discoveries in Oriental History. Upon return from Nagoya, I met Ven. Pra Bhavana-Kosolthera, Deputy Abbot of Wat Paknam, Thonburi and talked about the relics and Wat Sakhet. He said "Yes, that is right" and gave me a small booklet, "History of Wat Srakesa".

It naturally referred to the discovery of the relics, and further, it said "when the relics were discovered, Marquis Curzon was the Viceroy of India and had been a good friend of His Majesty (King Chulalongkorn) while the former was in Bangkok. As such Curzon decided to present the relics to His Majesty in His Majesty's capacity as the Upholders of Buddhism in the Buddhist world then."

Now, I know !

Besides the main question where the relics now are, there always hang in my mind, the other question "Why Thailand was chosen as receiver of the relics out of many Buddhist countries." I found the answer to this question, too !

By chance, I talked this story to Dr. Kusalasaya to whom I had been introduced by Mr. Pong Sarasir. The doctor, although very pious Buddhist, did not know anything about it. So, we decided to go there together some day.

Actually, 10 days after that, we went there. But we first dropped in at the book-store of Wat Bavornvivet, because I wanted to buy some books suggested to read by Ven. Pra Bhavana-Kosolthera, such as "The Path of Purification" written by Budhaghosa, great Indian scholar on Buddhism in 9th century B.E. There, I also found many interesting books on Buddhism and ended up with pur-

chase of 10 books, including "Treasury of the Buddha's Words" (from Majjhima-Nikaya translated by Ven. Nyaamoli), "Origin of Buddha image" by Coomaraswamy, and so on. I think I can read them repeatedly till I die. Then, we dropped in at Wat Mahatat, too.

So, it was toward evening when we went up to worship the stupa which sparkled gold on top of the hill. The floor on which the stupa was also served to be an observatory as it can command a panoramic views. When we arrived there, we found several novice monks strolling, but soon, they disappeared.

There now remained only two of us, and an empty square space of 20 metres wide. The sensation that I was standing in front of the Buddha's relics, after which I spent fairly a long time, was that of excitement and joy. Emptiness of the place strangely prompted the feeling of happiness. I worshipped. I noticed my head bending lower and lower; it was as if it had been pulled down by some invisible power.

After sitting side by side on the skirt of the stupa for a while without speaking a word, we stood close by the concrete fence.

Looking down from there, vast spread of the towns of Bangkok struck your eyes. Looking up, you saw the grey clouds all over the sky. They hinted the beginning of the rainy season. You could also see the orange color of sunset through the rifts of the clouds. All those made quite a contrast, and their serene beauty crept into your mind gently. We leaned motionless against the fence and felt time flow slow and quiet. But, soon, we had to leave, as the guard told us that the gate would be closed.

It was May 4, 2528 and just one day and two years since I arrived in Thailand.