Sowing the Seeds of the Lotus
A Journey to the Great Pilgrimage Sites of Buddhism, Part II

John C. Huntington

The Rṣipatana Mrgadāva (‘Deer Park’) Near Vārānasi

After Gotama Siddhartha had attained his enlightenment and
Buddhahood he thought to himself:

‘This is what I have won through many efforts—
Enough! Why should I make it known?
This Dharma will not be understood
by persons consumed with lust and hate.
Heading against the stream, [the Dharma] is
deep, subtle, delicate and difficult to see.
It will be unrecognized by those slaves of passion
who are cloaked in the mire of ignorance.’

(Majjhima-nikāya 1.168, trans. Horner)

With these thoughts (recorded in a form of poetry known as gāthā) Sākyamuni determined that mankind was not worthy to share in his new insights. Knowing what was in Gotama Buddha’s mind, Brahmā Sahampati, lord of the Brahmāloka (essentially the priest-deity of the early Upaniṣadic Āryans) appeared before him and pointed out to him that there were indeed ‘trainable men’ with little accumulation of ‘dust’ (defilement) and that if they did not hear the Dharma, they would wither and decay from the state of attainment that they had achieved. However, if they heard the Dharma preached, they would mature towards their own enlightenment. Thus, at the coaching of the embodiment of human compassion, Sākyamuni resolved to spread his teachings so that others who were able could benefit from his experience.

Having made the decision to teach his Dharma to ‘trainable men’, Sākyamuni Buddha determined to teach the five ascetics with whom he had practised austerities during the six years of wandering in the forests. Accordingly, he made his way north along the Nairāñjana River to the Ganges, across the Ganges and west to Vārānasi, where he went to a forested area known as the Rṣipatana Mrgadāva.

One can follow the old route north along the west bank of the Nairāñjana River where, with the exceptions of some power lines and the ubiquitous trucks of the Indian highways, some sights must closely resemble those that greeted Sākyamuni on his first post-Enlightenment trip (Fig. 1). The countryside exhibits lush growth during the rainy season and usually abundant grain production. The cultivation methods have changed little over the centuries and although there is a modern railway bridge and elevated right-of-way in the background of this photograph, such a ploughman, very possibly this individual’s own ancestors, would have been among the views that greeted the newly enlightened Buddha on his journey north to the Rṣipatana Mrgadāva.

Conventionally, according to the Mahāvastu, the name Rṣipatana (literally ‘fallen sage’ or ‘fallen wise man’) refers to the place where the bodies of the five hundred Pratyeka Buddhas (literally ‘Buddha for one’s self’, a lesser type of Buddha who does not teach but keeps his attainment to himself) fell after their attainment of nirvāṇa. The name Mrgadāva has its origin in that the king of Vārānasi had designated the place as a sanctuary to herds of mṛga (essentially ‘game creatures’); in effect, it had become one of the first ‘game preserves’. However, there is more to the names than a simple recalling of events. It requires an aside into the language of Sanskrit Buddhist names to understand the beauty and communicative elegance of what is being said with this name about the attainment of enlightenment and the ‘First Sermon’. At Bodhgaya, the Buddha Sākyamuni had just overcome the Buddhist personification of evil, Māra, whose name means ‘Death’ and is derived from the the Sanskrit root mṛ, essentially ‘to die’. Mṛga is a verb implying to hunt or pursue and mṛga means ‘deer’ only in a general sense. Technically, mṛga refers to any small game animal that might live in a forest, especially antelope and deer, notably those creatures that are pursued or chased — by running they hope to avoid death and thereby they are ‘those afraid to die’, which is what mṛga literally means. ‘Deer’ simply became a convenient English equivalent for the term based, in part, on the Sino-Japanese
As Śākyamuni approached his former companions at the Mrgadāva, they spoke among themselves and said: Your reverences, this recluse Gotama is coming, he lives in abundance, he is waver ing in his striving, he has reverted to a life of abundance. He should neither be greeted, nor stood up for, nor should his bowl and robe be received; all the same a seat may be put out, he can sit down if he wants to. (Majjhima-nikāya 1.171, trans. Horner)

But his appearance, bearing and personal radiance (prabhā) were such that the ascetics rose to greet him with all respect and formality. They received him as one who has self-attained the state of a ‘further-man’, the goal to
which they aspired, who by virtue of his attainment was worthy of being their teacher. Early accounts of the 'First Sermon' differ in both their content and as to the number of ascetics taught. For example, in the *Ariyapariyesana-sutta* of the *Majjhima-nikāya* (1.172), wherein Sākyamuni is describing his meeting of the ascetics and the First Sermon to a group of monks, Sākyamuni says that he taught two monks while the other three walked for almsfood (went begging); he then taught three monks while the other two walked for almsfood. However, the version of the First Sermon found in the *Dhammacakkappavattana-sutta* of the *Anguttara-nikāya* (and all of its similar versions, as in the *Lalitavistara*) in which the Buddha addresses the five monks as a group has become the commonplace one in Buddhist culture and art.

After addressing the monks about the benefit of following neither the path of extreme asceticism nor extreme luxury but to follow the Middle Way where the needs of life are met without excess, Sākyamuni continues his discourse to them:

O monks having abandoned the two extremes, the Tathāgata will teach the *Dharma* by means of the path of the Middle Way (the Eightfold Path): 1. right views, 2. right intentions, 3. right speech, 4. right action, 5. right livelihood, 6. right effort, 7. right mindfulness, 8. right meditative concentration.

O monks, here are the Four Aryan Truths (Four Noble Truths) and what are they? They are 1. suffering (*duḥkha*, literally, 'unsatisfactoriness'), 2. the source of suffering, 3. the destruction of suffering, and 4. the way that leads to the destruction of suffering.

What is meant by suffering? Birth, old age, sickness, death, separation from the object desired, and joining with what one does not desire are suffering...

What is meant by the source of suffering? The source of suffering is desire.

What is meant by the destruction of suffering? The destruction of suffering is freedom from all desires...

What is meant by the way that leads to the destruction of suffering? It is the Eightfold Path (of the Middle Way). (Summary, based on several texts and translations)

The teaching is generally said to have taken place in the second watch of the night (midnight to 4 a.m.) and to have been accompanied by many miraculous signs and the visitation of Indra and Brahmā, the four great heavenly kings (Caturmahārāja or the Lokapāla of the Devaloka) and many other beings of the spiritual worlds. In Buddhism this is the 'setting in motion of the Wheel of the Law' (*dharma-cakra-pravartana*), invoking ancient Vedic symbolisms (*Atharvaveda*, 10th Kanda) of the wheel as a year symbol constituting the order of the year cycle and thereby the order of the progression of existence. With this sermon, Gotama Buddha established what is known as the Aryan kingdom, the perfect realm of *Dharma* wherein all...
(Fig. 3) Śākyamuni delivering the First Sermon while displaying the ‘Gandhāran version’ of the dharmacakrā-mudrā.
From Gandhāra (Peshawar Valley, Pakistan), c. 3rd century AD
Lahore Museum

(Fig. 4) Antelope (ṛgga) head from the Mauryan apsidal temple at Sārnāth
C. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum
beings follow, at their own pace, the path to enlightenment.

Apparently since the time of the Buddha’s First Sermon, the Śrīpatana Mrgadāva and its immediate surroundings have been the focus of pilgrimage and considerable veneration. In the strictest sense of the word, it is the Buddhist pīṭha (for explanation of this term see Part I of this article, November 1985, pp. 46-61), for it is where the master sat and delivered his instructions to his disciples — where he began the process of sharing his insights with those receptive beings who had seen the goal but who had not themselves found the way. Sculptural representations of the preaching Buddha, signified by his abhaya-mudrā in early works and the dharma-akra-mudrā in later images, abound in sculpture of the Indic world (Figs 2 and 3). These appear to be surrogates for the pīṭha at Śrīmāth, the modern name of the site where the Śrīpatana Mrgadāva is located. No later than Asokan times (c. 270-220 BC), the Śrīpatana Mrgadāva site had great importance equal to or even surpassing that of Bodhgaya. Possibly in part because of its proximity to one of the great ancient cities and religious centres of India, Vārānasi, it retained that importance until Muslim times.
Sārnāth is presently a large archaeological park just north of the city of Vārānasi, and is, without doubt, one of the most rewarding of all Buddhist sites in India to visit. Not only is the site of easy access, but Sārnāth is considered by many to be the home of the beautiful fifth-century Gupta school of sculpture and the site museum is filled with works of surpassing quality and elegance.

Originally known as the Śrī-Saddharmacakra Jinavihāra (The Victor's [Buddha's] Monastery of the Revered Wheel of the Good Law), or more simply the Dharmacakra Jinavihāra, the site has never really lost its context in the Buddhist world. During the Islamic period, the monastery fell into complete disuse and its buildings and ruins became merely an abundant source of bricks for roads, bridges, and other building projects. For example, in 1794, Bābu Jagat Singh, the Diwān of Rāja Chet Singh of Vārānasi, virtually 'mined' the Dharmarājikā Stūpa to exhaustion to build a bazaar, still known as Jagatānālī. However, even during these trying times, occasional Śrī Lankan and Burmese monks found their way to the site.

There is considerable disagreement regarding the precise spot where the First Sermon took place at Sārnāth. Current opinions range from the Caukhāndī Stūpa, an unexcavated site just west of the museum, the Dhamekh Stūpa at the eastern side of the site, the Dharmarājikā Stūpa and the place of the Aśokan pillar. While this author has no intention of subjecting the reader to the kind of scholarly debate necessary to 'disprove' previous suggestions and to 'prove' that which follows, it does seem that one place has been completely overlooked as a possibility, in spite of very early supporting evidence for the identification. This is the Mauryan period (c. 321-185 BC) apsidal temple just to the west of the Aśokan pillar. Site plans (Fig. 5) show a large apsidal temple with its open end to the east on axis with and facing the Mauryan pillar as if the pillar had been set up in front of the entrance to the temple. Ravaged by fire, the hall appears to have been willfully destroyed. However, among the fragmentary remains in the hall were sections of a wheel similar to the one surmounting the four lions of the Aśokan capital, fragmentary human figures, animals, including an antelope (mṛga) head (Fig. 4) and fragments of railings, all in the characteristically polished Chunār sandstone of the Mauryan period. Given the presence of the wheel, the antelope, and the many other auspicious symbols found in the hall, it may be suggested that the Mauryan architects believed that they were building a hall to commemorate the First Sermon. Interestingly enough, at Bodhgaya there is a relief on a railing made during the Suiṅga period (c. 185-c. 73 BC) that depicts what must be considered to be the Temple of the Dharmacakra because of its shape and the presence of the enshrined wheel (Fig. 6). Given what we know of early Indian architecture, it seems almost obvious that this is a representation of the apsidal temple at Sārnāth. The hall depicted in the relief terminates in an apse or in a circular cell of a type characteristic of all presently known

(Fig. 9) Relief depicting the temple of the First Sermon
From Bāhrīnā, c. 100-80 BC
India Museum, Calcutta
examples. The type of hall is so extensively used to house caityas (objects of worship or shrines, mostly miniature stūpas) that it is best known in English language literature as a ‘caitya hall’ although that is not its true name. Regrettably, the foundations of the Mauryan apsidal hall at Sārnāth have been reburied to protect them and while little remains at the site except grassy ruins, the chance survival of a modest relief at Bodhgaya provides us with a glimpse of what may be the early hall of the First Sermon.

The actual date of the origin of the Dharmarājīka Stūpa (Fig. 7) is uncertain; the central portion of the mound has been completely removed by Jagat Singh’s ‘brick miners’, leaving no traces of any early foundations. It is probably not one of the original eight Mahāstūpas that housed the Buddha’s relics after their original division into eight portions. Yet, its origin is generally believed by its modern excavators to pre-date Aśoka (the large size of Aśoka’s addition to the Dharmarājīka stūpa, which measures 1.2 metres in diameter, suggests that it originally encased a smaller stūpa) and therefore it also must predate the Aśokan division of the relics. So far as is known, it falls into a unique category of stūpa monument—a stūpa which is not one of the original eight or nine but one which pre-dates the Aśokan division. That it had major relics, however, is illustrated by the fact that a cylindrical marble relic casket (now lost) and a sandstone relic chest (in the Indian Museum) of very early types were found in the interior. More study is needed on these early monuments to determine their implications for the history of Buddhism. Successive rebuilding include the Aśokan one, another of the Kuśāna period (1st-3rd century AD) and one of the Gupta period (320-500), along with several minor later additions ranging up to the tenth century. It has been argued that the Dharmarājīka Stūpa marks the site of the First Sermon. If this were so, it would be out of keeping with the other three of the four great sites of Buddhism, Lumbini, Mahābodhi at Bodhgaya and Kuśinagara. At each of the other three, a temple was raised to mark the location of a major event; each has stūpas nearby but never as the focal point of the event. It would seem that the Dharmarājīka Stūpa is thus an important early stūpa, located near the temple of the First Sermon and presumably containing relics of Gotama Buddha but not marking the spot of the First Sermon.

The structure now known as the ‘Main Shrine’ at Sārnāth (Fig. 8) dates as presently seen from around the fifth century. It is probably built on the site of a Śūla period temple that we know of only from relics from Bhārhat and Sāñcī (Fig. 9). Because of the massive walls of the present temple, it is reasonable to assume that it was the pyramidal temple that Xuanzang described as ‘about two hundred feet high and surmounted by a Golden anra fruit’. The name of this structure has also come down to us and it was known as the Māulgandhakūs, literally ‘Original Hall of Fragrance’. As it has been noted by several others, the very fact that it is called the ‘original’ means that it probably was not, but was a substitute for, the original Hall of Fragrance.

Although only briefly noted in the Aśokavadana as a place where the Mauryan emperor visited during his tour of the Buddhist holy sites, Sārnāth has more Mauryan period material than any other single site in India. The Aśokan column just to the west of the Main Temple originally bore the famous capital (Fig. 11) that adorns the flag and coinage of modern India and which now rests in the central hall of the Sārnāth site museum. The column (Fig. 10), badly fractured most likely by lightning, remains in situ. It bears no identifying inscription (because of the fame of the site, it may be presumed that none was necessary) and only carries an admonition to the community that the saṅgha (monkhood) cannot be divided by anyone. This assertion addresses the schismatic pressures that Buddhism was undergoing during the Mauryan period and was probably added to the pillar sometime after it had been set up, but still during the Mauryan period. Considering that it had to have fallen from a height of about fifteen metres, the capital (Fig. 11) has survived remarkably intact. Its four addorsed lions, drum animals (Fig. 12) and lotus capital are preserved with only minor nicks and bruises. Indeed, the only portion that was lost was the dharmacakra which the lions once supported (Fig. 13). That this was the premier pillar in the Buddhist world is demonstrated by the fact that there are several full-scale copies of it, one from the Aśokan period at Sāñcī and others at Kārlī and Kāñheri (Cave 3) in Western India. There is also a first century AD relief on the torana of Aśokan Stūpa III (Fig. 14) showing devotees circumambulating the Aśokan column. Thus, by no later than the first century AD, Aśoka’s monument to Buddhism had become worthy of veneration in its own right.

Fragments of several carved stone human heads of the Mauryan period (Figs 15, 16 and 17) came to light in the excavation of the apsidal hall that this author has identified as the probable site of the Mauryan hall of the First Sermon. The exact locations where they were found are apparently unrecorded or at least unpublished; in any case, they would be of little significance since the site was so disturbed that no location can be certain to have a particular relevance. Because of the sculptures’ importance to the history of Indian art, however, no one should visit the site without being aware of them. The bearded head in Figure 15 might be that of one of the ascetics who intently listened to the Buddha’s teaching of the Dharma at Sārnāth. Two other less complete heads in the storeroom at Sārnāth also seem to be representations of ascetics and one must assume that there would have been others at the site.

Another group of fragments includes two heads, one of which is crowned (Fig. 16), the other wreathed (Fig. 17). These heads are remarkable in many ways. Their headresses are unlike the princely turbans usually associated with the pre-Christian era ‘Indian’ style of royal figures as seen at Mathurā, Bhārhat, Sāñcī and in early Swāt (Pakistan). The merlon portion of the crown on the head with the wreath and merlon crown itself relate directly to Achaemenid royal portraits and the convention for it may have come to India with the presumed migration of craftsmen after the fall of Persepolis to Alexander the Great in 330 BC. Yet the wreath convention, although possibly Near Eastern or even Hellenic in origin, is, by the Mauryan period, totally integrated into Indian symbolism with examples of the type being found in several schools of
(Fig. 11, opposite) Capital of the Aśokan column at Śārṇāth
c. 250 BC
Śārṇāth Museum

(Fig. 10) Fragments of the Aśokan column under a protective shed at Śārṇāth
c. 250 BC

(Fig. 12) Drum figure of an elephant on the Aśokan capital at Śārṇāth
c. 250 BC
Śārṇāth Museum

(Fig. 13) Fragments of the dharmakāra from atop the capital of the Aśokan column at Śārṇāth
c. 250 BC
Śārṇāth Museum
sculpture. The second head, wearing only a wreath, is remarkable indeed. The convention of the wreath is found very widely in Gandhāran sculpture from the first century BC and is associated with both Buddha and bodhisattva figures as a symbol of their religious attainment. Since royal portraits in India bear little relationship to these images, and since only the known early images of bodhisattvas closely compare, it must be suggested that these two heads may be from Mauryan bodhisattva images. Moreover, even very early representations of the ‘First Sermon’ in Gandhāran art (Fig. 2) depict both the ascetics whom Śākyamuni conventionally first taught as well as groups of bodhisattvas. It is possible that the archetype for the Gandhāran convention was a scene at the Mauryan temple of the ‘First Sermon’. If this proves to be correct, the whole notion of the rise of the bodhisattva cult and bodhisattva imagery is set back in time almost two hundred years!

The modern sculpture storeroom at Sārnāth contains numerous other fragments of Mauryan sculpture from the apsidal temple location, but to this author’s knowledge there has been no attempt to assemble the miscellaneous body parts and fragments even to see what might have been there. Whether the bodies of any of the figures and possibly other figures may be reconstructed or not or whether whole figures were removed at some early date to make a land fill for a bridge or road is unknown. Whatever the answer is, it will alter the present view of Mauryan period art and Buddhist history.

Discovered between the ‘Main Shrine’ (Mūlagandhakuti) and the Dharmarājikā Stūpa of Aśoka was a colossal image of a Buddha standing under a huge umbrella-supported pillar (Figs 18 and 19). The inscription says it was dedicated by the monk (bhikṣu) Bāla in the year 3 of the reign of the Kuśāna emperor Kaniska (c.123 AD) at the place where the Lord [Buddha] walked. Although called a ‘bodhisattva’ (literally ‘enlightenment-being’) in its inscription, the sculpture is clearly a representation of a Buddha and is an example of the Mathurā school of sculpture. Mathurā, which is some considerable distance away from Sārnāth, had become one of the great centres of Buddhism in the last two centuries of the pre-Christian era and by the time this image was created, it was capital of all of Kuśāna India. The distinctive mottled sandstone of the image, from known quarries not far from Fatehpur Sikri, demonstrates that not only the idea of the image came from the Mathurā region, but the very stone out of which it is carved did as well. Given the fact that there are no other stone images of the Buddha in local Sārnāth stone from this period, it is probable that a ‘dominant’ stone image tradition had developed in
(Fig. 15) Head of a bearded ascetic
From the Mauryan apsidal temple at Sārnāth,
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum

(Fig. 16, top right) Fragment of a
(bodhisattva?) head with a merlon crown
From the Mauryan apsidal temple at Sārnāth,
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum

(Fig. 17) Fragment of a (bodhisattva?) head
with a wreath
From the Mauryan apsidal temple at Sārnāth,
c. 250 BC
Sārnāth Museum
Mathurā. There were demonstrably different image traditions, sometimes in other types of stones, at Bodhgaya, Kauśāmbī, even at Mathurā, and especially in Gandhāra. Some of these traditions have surviving examples, but the great lithic images of the period (in Central India) were those of the ‘Bala’ type, for several examples have been found at other locations.

As any visitor to the site will soon learn, Sārnāth was one of the great art centres of the Gupta period. Although many of the sculptures have been removed to the Indian Museum in Calcutta and others are on display in other museums in India and elsewhere, the collection at the site is still overwhelming. For many who visit the site, the Buddha displaying the dharmacakrapravartana-mudrā (Figs 20, 21 and 22) from the third quarter of the fifth century epitomizes the Gupta school. It was found in the excavation campaign of 1904 to 1905 just to the south of the Dharmarājikā Stūpa, but its original context is unknown (it might have been placed at one of the cardinal points of the Dharmarājikā Stūpa). The highly idealized realism, graceful beauty and unqualified elegance of the figure of the Buddha, along with the rich ornamental detailing in the halo is simply not found combined in such a manner in other schools of Indian art. Even the Ajanta caves, with their lavish ornamentation, seem crude and provincial when compared to this sculptural idiom. Indeed the quietude and beatific appearance of the face (Fig. 21) has led a number of authors to indulge in speculations on the ontology of Buddhism and the image has been cited in arguments about the ‘deification’ of Śākyamuni. Unfortunately for that theory, there has never been a ‘deification’ of Śākyamuni, or any other Buddha for that matter; a Buddha, by definition, is a teacher. He is one who has attained ‘transcendent’ insight into soteriological, ontological and eschatological matters, but the manner in which he achieved his insight and his teaching of the way (soteriological methodology is an attainment ultimately open to all beings and not a matter of divinity).

Beneath the platform or throne (properly pīṭha) on which the Buddha sits is depicted a group of figures flanking the two sides of a dharmacakra (seen head-on from the rim) and two reclining antelope. To the viewer’s left of the dharmacakra are two shaven-headed males, a female and a dwarf or possibly a child, while to the right are three shaven-headed males. The five males are the five ascetics who were selected by the Buddha to hear the First Sermon whereas the female, and the dwarf/child are probably donor figures present as patrons of the image.

While the presence of the five ascetics makes it certain that the ‘First Sermon’ is being depicted, the Buddha’s particular mudrā, the dharmacakrapravartana-mudrā (Fig. 22), suggests that there is more to this teaching gesture than is obvious from the sculpture. In the language of symbols, it is a universal gesture to indicate the number ‘one’ with the forefinger. However, this image points to the circle formed by the thumb and forefinger of the right hand with the middle finger of the left hand, not the forefinger. There are various accounts of the order of teachings, most of them having to do with the preaching of the Avalokitaśaka-sūtra (better known by its Chinese, Huayan Jing, or Japanese,
It is usually explained that Śākyamuni taught the *Avatamsaka* in the second week after his enlightenment but that no one could understand its deep and complex meaning. It was only then that he decided that he must teach 'the beginning' of the process and thus, went to the Mrjadāva to teach to his former companions. In the 'Avatamsaka view' then, the teaching at the Mrjadāva is not the 'First Sermon' but the 'Second Sermon'. Here, in a single image of Śākyamuni pointing with his middle finger to the wheel formed by the thumb and forefinger of his right hand, we have evidence of the teaching of the *Avatamsaka-sūtra* in India.

Modern Sārnāth is a busy place, filled with pilgrims, visitors, archaeology buffs and, because of its small zoo and playground, people simply on holiday at a beautiful park. It is surrounded by a number of Buddhist institutions and to visit all of them would take several days; yet the effort is worthwhile, for nowhere in India except Bodhgaya is Buddhism more alive and vibrant than at Sārnāth, the ancient monastery of the founding of the Aryan kingdom of *Dharma* by the turning of the Wheel of the Law.
(Fig. 20, opposite) Sākyamuni delivering the ‘First [Second] Sermon’ while displaying the dharmacakrapravartana-mudrā from Sārnāth, 1st half 5th century
Sārnāth Museum

(Fig. 21, top) Detail of Figure 20

(Fig. 22, bottom) Detail of Figure 20 illustrating the dharmacakrapravartana-mudrā of Sākyamuni

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