

Sacred Sarnath Relics of Lord Buddha

The Sacred Relics of Tathāgata Buddha are enshrined at Mūlagandhakuti Vihāra at Holy Ishipatana Migadaya, Sarnath, Kashi (Varanasi), India. Isipatana Migadāya, Sarnath is eternally sacred to the Buddhists, where Gautama Buddha preached the first sermon (discourse) to the Five Disciples known as Dhammacakkapavattana – Turning the wheel of Dhamma. It was the beginning of the glorious journey of Dhamma from the sacred spot where the Dhamek Stupa at holy Sarnath is now located.

The Sacred Relics at Sarnath enshrine Corporal Relics (Shariradhātu) of the Mahakārunika Buddha. It is believed that Gautama Buddha sanctioned his mortal remains to be enshrined in stupas (votive monuments). After the Mahāparinibbana of the Great Master under the twin Sāla tree in the Sāla grove of the Mallas at Kushinārā (Kushinagar), his sacred body was cremated at Mukutabandhana Caitya (presently Ramāvar Stupa) in a befitting ceremony suitable to the Exalted One.

According to the Mahāparinibbana Sutta, the sacred body of Sakya Muni Buddha got burnt without emission of smoke leaving behind the bones as Relics. Further as per the Sutta, during cremation seven parts of his body, usnis (bone of forehead), four teeth (molar) and two ribs were not reduced to ashes (not broken). The other body parts were reduced into Relics of various sizes. The body parts of Gautama Buddha as Relics became supreme object of veneration since then.

Distribution of Relics:

It is believed that the Relics were divided into eight equal parts and distributed among the following eight claimants:

1. Mallas of Kusinagar, 2. Sakyas of Kapilavastu, 3. Koliyas of Ramagama, 4. Licchavis of Vesali, 5. Bulis of Allakappa, 6. Mallas of Pava, 7. Brahmin of Vethadipa and 8. Magadha king Ajatasattu.

They carried the most precious object to their respective kingdoms and built stupas (Sarirastupa) there. According to the Buddhist chronicle, seven stupas with Buddha's Shariradhatu are venerated by the kings of Jambudipa (India). The eighth one, at Ramagāma, is venerated by the Naga kings.

Later on, Venerable Mahākāshyapa for security and safety collected Relics from seven stupas leaving aside the Relics of the Ramagāma stupa. The

Relics thus collected were securely placed in a stupa in Rajagaha – the Capital City of Magadha during the reign of Ajatasattu.

After 218 years of Mahāparinibbana (Great Passing away) of Gautama Buddha as predicted by Venerable Mahākāshyapa, Emperor Asoka (273 B.C. – 232 B.C.) arrived at the scene. He collected Relics from the seven stupas and built 84,000 stupas enshrining them, distributing the pieces of Relics in his vast empire. Many of these stupas and viharas were later brought out in the travelogues of the foreign travellers (5th – 7th Century A.D.).

Some of these stupas were later on identified by British officers and archaeologists. Many of these stupas, on excavation, yielded bones of Gautama Buddha. Some of these Relics were later on donated by the British Government to Buddhist countries and to Buddhist organizations of repute. The tooth Relic venerated by the king of Kalinga was later taken to Sri Lanka and is being venerated there in Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Tooth Relics) of Kandy.

The Maha Bodhi Society of India, the pioneer Buddhist organization, established in 1891 was offered Buddha Relics and is now the proud possessor of three such Relics. The Relics found at Bhattiprolu, Guntur District, Andhra Pradesh has been enshrined at Sri Dharmarajika Chetiya Vihara, Calcutta and another found at Nagarjunakonda (another sacred Buddhist site in Andhra Pradesh), has been enshrined at Mūlagandhakuti Vihāra at Ishipatana, Migadaya, present day Sarnath, near Varanasi in Uttar Pradesh, India.

Brief History of Mūlagandhakuti Vihāra:

In 1916, the Government of Bengal by letter No. 1022 of 31st July 1916 (Gen. Dept. Misc. Branch) informed the Maha Bodhi Society that the Government of India was prepared to present Relics of the Buddha provided the Society is ready for enshrining and safeguarding them in suitable manner at Calcutta, Sarnath and Taxila. The Society accepted the offer. On 3rd November 1922, the foundation stone of the Vihāra was laid by H.E. Sir Harcourt Butler and construction of the Vihāra was completed in 1931.

On 11th of November 1931, the Director General of Archaeological Survey of India, Rai Bahadur Dayaram Sahni, as representative of H. E. Lord Willingdon, presented the bone Relics of Buddha to the Maha Bodhi Society. The ceremony took place at the Sarnath Museum. The Relics were brought

to the Mūlagandhakuti Vihāra in a long procession, placing the casket containing the Relics on the back of an elephant sent on the occasion by H.E. the Maharaja of Benares.

On the occasion of the first anniversary of the opening of the Mūlagandhakuti Vihāra at Sarnath, Varanasi, a Relic of Buddha, discovered at Nagarjunikonda, Andhra Pradesh, was presented (December 27, 1932) to the Maha Bodhi Society by Rai Bahadur Dayaram Sahni, Director-General of Archaeological Survey of India, on behalf of H. E. the Viceroy, before a distinguished gathering of Buddhists, some of whom had come from Japan, Tibet, Ceylon and Burma.

The ceremony was performed according to Buddhist custom. A procession accompanied the Relic to the Vihāra, where it was placed in the great temple, after which the ceremonial ringing of a large bell (weighing about 350 Kgs) presented by the United Buddhist Society of Japan took place.

History of Relics found at Nagarjunakonda:

The Relic enclosed within the silver casket enshrined in the Mūlagandhakuti Vihāra at Sarnath (ancient Isipathana) was found by Mr. A. H. Longhurst, late Superintendent, Archaeological Survey of Southern Circle, in 1929 in a large Stupa at Nagarjunakonda in the Palnad Taluk of the Guntur District of the Madras Presidency. The silver casket is a modern replica of the original casket, which was found in a broken condition.

The Stupa in which the Relic was found is described in the inscriptions found on the site as the Mahāchetiya or the 'Great Stupa' of the Blessed One, i.e. Gautama Buddha, and is, therefore, is a personal relic of the Great Teacher himself. These Relics were presented by H. E. the Earl of Willingdon, Viceroy and Governor General of India, to the Maha Bodhi Society of India to be enshrined by them in the aforesaid Vihara in 1932 C.E.

Every year, the foundation day of Mūlagandhakuti Vihāra is celebrated in the month of November. During the festivity special exposition of Relics is held for public viewing, when thousands of people from various countries come to Sarnath. The Vihāra for the attraction of Relics of Sakya Muni Buddha becomes congregation of all peace-loving people of the world.