

Exposition of the Sacred Relics of Lord Buddha

The Holy Buddha Relics

c. 4th – 5th centuries BCE

Piprahwa (Ancient Kapilavastu)

District Siddharth Nagar, Uttar Pradesh

Acc. No. Sl. No. 115 & 116

National Museum, New Delhi



Buddha's Life: The birth of Sidhartha, who was born to king Suddhodhana, the ruler of Kapilavastu (identified with Piprahwa, Distt. Basti, Uttar Pradesh) and Mayadevi in about 563 BCE, was a significant event in the history of mankind. At the age of twenty-nine, he renounced the pleasures of this earthly life and set out in a tireless quest for salvation. Seated under a Pipal tree, with an intense desire, which he expressed in his own words. “...*I will not stir from this seat until I have attained supreme and absolute insight,*” he received enlightenment and was called Guatama (his Gotra) Buddha (the enlightened one) at the age of thirty –five years.. Thereafter, during forty-five years of his illustrious life he visited many places on foot teaching his doctrine (Saddharma), converting people and organizing them into a community (Sangha).

Distribution of the Sacred Relics: The Buddha passed away or achieved Mahaparinirvana at the age of eighty in the city of Kushinagar. When the Buddha, on his deathbed, was asked by Ananda who should guide him after Buddha was gone, Buddha replied it was to be his teachings, his dharma. *Milindapanaha* mentions, “One who sees the dharma sees the Buddha”.(*Mil.*, 71). *Mahavastu* declared that “when the relics are seen, the Buddha is seen.”(Mhv.133)

Though Buddha had attained nirvana, his precious body relics were to be revered as signifier of the Buddha Himself.

The Mallas of Kushinagara cremated his body with ceremonies befitting a Universal King (cakravartin). His holy relics, from the funeral pyre were collected and divided and given by Brahmin priest Dhona of Kushinagar to kings and priests. The eight shares were distributed among Ajatashatru of Magadha, the Licchavis of

Vaishali, the Sakyas of Kapilavastu, Mallas of Kushinagar, Bullies of Allakappa, the Mallas of Pava, the Koliyas of Ramagrama and a Brahmana of Vethadipa.

The sacred relics were commemorated into eight different stupas. Two more stupas came into existence, one over the urn in which the relics had been collected and the other over the embers. Thus, stupas erected over the bodily relics of Buddha (Saririka-stupas) are the earliest surviving Buddhist shrines. It is stated that Ashoka (circa 272–232 BCE) being an ardent follower of Buddhism, opened up seven of these eight stupas, and collected major portion of the relics for enshrinement within innumerable (84000 stupas) built by him in an effort to popularize Buddhism and spread dharma.

Kapilavastu Piprahwa: The relics under the care of the National Museum, New Delhi were excavated from Piprahwa in the Siddharthnagar District of Uttar Pradesh, an erstwhile part of the ancient city of Kapilavastu. The mound at Piprahwa reveals the secret in identifying it with the ancient Kapilavastu. Discovery of an inscribed casket by William Claxton Peppé (1852-1936 AD), a British colonial engineer and an estate manager in 1898 at this stupa site, was an epoch-making discovery. The inscription on the lid which refers to the relics of Buddha and his community, the Sakya, runs thus:

*‘Sukiti bhatinam sa-bhaginikanam sa-puta-dalanam iyam salila nidhare
Bhaddhasa bhagavate sakiyanam.’*

Sri Subhuthi Mahanayake Thero of Waskaduwa Temple, Sri Lanka who was helping the Archaeological team and Mr. Peppé translated the text which means “*this noble deed of depositing of Buddha’s relics were carried out by the brothers, the sisters and the children of Sakyas*”.

The discovery was followed by many explorations. A further excavation of the stupa, partly dug by Peppe by the Archaeological Survey of India (1971-77) apart from revealing three stages of the construction brought to light two more steatite relic caskets, one each from the northern and southern chambers containing a total of twenty-two sacred bone relics , twelve sacred relics from the bigger casket and ten sacred relics from the smaller casket. Twenty sacred bone fragments are kept in the national Museum, New Delhi while remaining two holy bone fragments are on display at the Indian Museum, Kolkata.

This was followed by the discovery of more than forty terracotta sealings from different levels and spots in the eastern monastery at Piprahwa with the legends,

‘Om Devaputra Vihare Kapilavastusa Bhikshu Sanghasa’, meaning ‘community of Buddhist monks of Kapilavastu living in Devaputra Vihara’ and ‘Maha Kapilavastu Bhikshu Sanghasa’ in Brahmi character of 1st and 2nd centuries CE which have provided adequate evidence to establish that Piprahwa was the ancient Kapilavastu.

Timeline since 1898

1898 : William Claxton Peppé, a British colonial engineer discovered the stone coffer, which consisted of the five vases containing offerings including beads, pearls, precious and semiprecious stones, bones and ash. Replicas of the offerings were kept by Peppé, while most of the offerings were handed over to the Indian Museum at Kolkata.

1899 : The bone relics present in the stone coffer was presented to King Rama V of Thailand. The relics was further divided into three shares and gifted to Thailand, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. In Thailand, the Holy relic has been enshrined in a chedi

on the top of Suwanbanphot, Bangkok. Every year, during the Loi Krathong Festival, there is be a seven-day and seven-night celebration, which has become a tradition to worship the Buddha's relics.

Mr W.C. Peppe handed another part of relics, as a token of gratitude, to the Most Venerable Sri Subhuthi Mahanayake Thero who was assisting excavation. This portion is kept at Waskaduwa Viharaya in Sri Lanka's Kalutara.

1951-52 : The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) takes ownership of Piprahwa after the abolition of Zamindari system in Uttar Pradesh and this enables further excavations at the site.

1971 –77: The Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) conducts excavations at Piprahwa between 1971-77, under the supervision of Shri. K. M. Srivastava, Director (Archaeology). The excavation team discovers two inscribed steatite stone caskets containing twelve sacred relics from the bigger casket and ten sacred relics from the smaller casket.

1997: The golden pavilion was presented as a gift to the museum by the Royal family of Thailand.

Current Status: Portions of this collection of sacred relics have been taken to Sri Lanka (1976,2012), Mongolia (1993,2022), Singapore (1994,2007), South Korea (1995) and Thailand(Dec 1995). The sacred relics (20 bone fragments) loaned by Archaeological Survey of India to National Museum, are now in the safe custody of National Museum, New Delhi and remaining two with the Indian Museum, Kolkata. Sacred Relics will be taken for exposition in Thailand on 22 February 2024. It will be only second exposition to Thailand.

VISIT Details

1. Holy Relics: Piparahwa Relic at National Museum. Out of 20 piece, 04 pieces to be carried.
2. The date of arrival of the Holy Relics in Thailand from India is 22nd Feb (Morning) , 2024.
3. The Holy Relics to be kept safely at the National Museum, Bangkok, for limited period of quarantine.
4. The following venues have been finalized as suitable in consultation with officials of the Royal Government of Thailand as also in consultation with officials of Indian embassy:
 - (i) Sanam Luang Pavillion, Bangkok: 22 Feb 2023 – 3rd March (11 Days)
 - (ii)Ho Kum Luang, Royal Rujapruek, Chiang Mai : 4th - 8th March 2024 (5 Days)
 - (iii) Wat Maha Wanaram, Ubon Ratchathani: 09th – 13th March 2024 (5 Days)
 - (iv) Wat Maha That, Ao luek, Krabi : 14th - 18 March 2024 (5 Days)-
 - (v)The Hoy Relics will be escorted back on 19th March (morning) from Thailand.