

# Spiritual Dimensions of Buddhist Pilgrimage and Their Role<sup>\*</sup> in Cultivating a Mindfulness Culture: A Case Study

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## Abstract

In Pāli Literature from the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta, we come across abundant information on how Cārikā turned into DhammaCārikā, where emphasis on Pilgrimage developed on a larger scale from Kings, Emperors, Noblemen, laity, bhikkhus, and bhikkhunī who travelled to witness the footprints where the Buddha once walked and preached Dhamma to a larger gathering in his lifetime. This research presents case studies of prominent pilgrims who have revived the culture of Buddhist pilgrimage through mindful walking with awareness and developed a mindfulness culture, which has been ignored from a larger perspective, where no study has been conducted in such a manner. This study aims to show how important pilgrimage is for developing a mindfulness culture. Therefore, from this research, the untouched aspects of their ancient and modern pilgrim journeys will be connected through spiritual dimensions, and the role they played in cultivating a mindfulness culture will be examined through their primary resources from literature, epigraphical inscriptions, travelogues, archaeological reports, and revival work in developing these historical pilgrimage sites.

**Keywords:** Culture, Mindfulness, Pilgrimage, Spiritual

## Introduction

Before he attained Parinibbana, the Buddha told his attendant monk, Venerable Ananda. “There are four places which should be (visited and) seen by a person of

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devotion.” He then named his birthplace Lumbinī, the place where he attained enlightenment, Bodhgaya, the place where he first taught the way to enlightenment, Sārnāth, and the place where he attained parinibbana, Kuśinagara. Because of this injunction, faithful Buddhists from all over the world travel to India and Nepal to pay their respects to the Buddha at these spots, which he stated “would cause awareness and apprehension of the nature of impermanence.”

Walking towards the Buddhist pilgrimage is not as easy as we see in other views. When going forth, we need to prepare in mind the importance of why we are going on a pilgrimage, what benefits it has in life, and where it leads. While on pilgrimage, we get closer to Buddha and feel the vibrant positive energy that can still be felt for more than 2600 years, and it still develops the essential quality of human beings. Each element is fulfilled step-by-step through DhammaCārikā, which really boosts human mankind, as the Buddha said. The spiritual dimensions that are taken here are Saddha, Dana, Sila, Khanti, Metta, and Meditation.

### Buddha's View on Mindfulness through Doctrine

“Adinnapubbaka, do not worry about your son’s whereabouts. He has a fortunate kamma and was reborn in the Tāvātimsa heaven.” One of the bhikkhus was surprised by the Buddha’s comment and inquired, “Lord, how could a person be reborn in a celestial world simply by mentally professing devotion to the Buddha, without having given charity or observing the precepts?” The Buddha replied in verse as follows:

All phenomena of existence have the mind as their precursor, Mind as their supreme leader, and mind as their creator. When one speaks or behaves with a pure mind, happiness follows like a shadow. Adinnapubbaka and Maṭṭhakundalī, who overheard the conversation from the Tāvātimsa Heaven, became sotāpannas. Thereafter, Adinnapubbaka donated most of his wealth to the Sangha and used his spare time for meditation and community service. (Dh,2; DhA,1:2)

As a practice of mindfulness, pilgrimage provides a context for examining negative mental states to transcend notions of identity and difference. Taking refuge in the Triple Jewels provides a symbolically mediated experiential context for observing one’s awareness of perceptions. For some informants who adopted a meditative perspective,

being vulnerable and exposed to a wide spectrum of humanity became an opportunity to practice mindfulness. Furthermore, by calmly observing our reactions to unpleasant experiences, pilgrimages provide a space for eroding these conditioned responses. In this regard, mental hardships can be an asset along the pilgrimage path in bringing personal and collective suffering to the surface and fostering trust in one's own awareness.

While 800 mediators were sitting on a 10-day course on the train from Mumbai to the Middle Land, Vipassana Teacher Goenka said: This pilgrimage should not be taken as a blind rite or ritual- not by the present generation and not by future generations. There is no blind belief involved. It is a positive and wholesome meditation while we are moving, visiting all the important places of the Enlightened One. Seeing where he was born, where he became Enlightened, and where, throughout his life, he continued to guide people in Dhamma, we shall take advantage of the wonderful vibrations of this land, the wonderful land of India, the country of origin of the pure Dhamma. May we all work seriously!

Further, we look into the case study of a prominent pilgrim due to whom Buddhist Pilgrimage has transformed immensely, and they have indeed contributed to the Spiritual Development of Pilgrimage and Revival of Pilgrimage through the aspects of Cultivating Mindfulness Culture.

## **Spiritual Development of Emperor Asoka through his Pilgrimage Inscriptions**

**Delhi Topra Pillar Edict NO II** Translation line no 3 states Compassion, Charity, Truth, Purity, Insight, and also in many ways I have given (to)

**Inscription** states: dayaa, daanam, saccam, soceyyam, cakhudaanam api me bahuvidha dinna.

**Delhi Topra Pillar Edict No VII** Translation line no 18 says Dhamma should be followed according to instructions given in Dhamma (verses). These are religious charities. They should be followed, such as compassion, charity, truth, purity, humility, and piety, and should be increased in the world. Thus, Piyadassi, the beloved of God, says: I have cherished (acquired) some good qualities, and I am placing them before the people so that they will be followed. This will grow and (in the future) will continue to grow.

Inscription “Dhammapadanutthaya dhammam patipajjitabbo / esa hi dhammapadanam dhammaya patipatto ca, ime daya, danam, saccam, soceyyam, maddavam sadhuta iha loke vaddhissanti.”

**Delhi Topra Pillar Edict No VII** Translation line no 20 says, Here one may, in a smaller way, follow Dhamma discipline, but meditation is the best. I have done it by following the Dhamma discipline. These and those living beings should not be killed; I have made many such rules. In this world of men, meditation increases the growth of dhamma.

Here, Emperor Asoka refers to the spiritual development of Saddha – purity; Dana- charity, piety; Sila- truth; Khanti- gentleness, humility; Metta- compassion; Bhavana (Dhyana)- meditation, and insight. He adhered to the principles that Buddha preached related to Saddha, Dana, Sila, Khanti, Metta, and Bhavana (Dhyana). He went on an enormous and spiritual journey for more than 256 days to complete his pilgrimage, along with constructing pillars, inscribing edicts, digging water wells, planting trees, and building dwelling places for pilgrims.

The contribution of Emperor Asoka is enormous in different fields of his reign, but in the context of Pilgrimage through his inscriptions, if he had not constructed pillars, the evidence would have been lost over time. Here, only the pillar and minor edicts are taken as a source for the pilgrimage journey, marking it as a landmark in the present’s condition, because this can be seen from far and is visible in all directions on the trade or pilgrimage route connecting to major cities. Not only is a pillar important, but with an inscription written on it, it proves the archaeological evidence of the Buddhist period along with the Pali language, Brahmi script, history, and architecture of that period. These pillars helped later Chinese travellers, such as Fa Hein and Xuanzang, to make their journey easy with the help of the location of the Pillars and Edicts. Later in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, archaeologists such as Alexander Cunningham traced the lost Indian Emperor and his connection with Buddhism.

The observation of Emperor Asoka as a Pilgrim through his Spiritual Dimensions, as per the teachings of Buddha, is well explained here through the inscriptions of King Asoka to support the spiritual factors that are essential for Buddhist pilgrimage or DhammaCārikā. Needs to be highlighted that Saddha, Dana, Sila, Khanti, Metta, and

Bhavana (Dhyana) are the core foundations that laypeople benefit from over time. They are the Pāramitā or Perfections and a stepping stone to increase meritorious deeds through pilgrimage. Emperor Asoka, being on pilgrimage as stated through his minor rock edicts, took into consideration the Aharura edicts that he spent 200 plus nights and acquired merits while on pilgrimage. These spiritual factors support the spiritual development theory, which was the core thought process of Buddha, emphasizing pilgrimage through the Mahāparinibbāna Sutta. As many authors have not given any credit as to why pilgrimage needs to be done, but hereafter, taking into consideration Emperor Asoka's pilgrimage correlates to the above theory. King Asoka refers to himself as almost been a follower of the Buddha for the past two and a half years and states that he has been serving the Sangha religiously for the past year. This states that he is well-versed in the teachings of the Buddha, taught or preached by his teacher or master, and has personally been on pilgrimage with Buddhist monks and his family and subordinates from his kingdom. Thus, he understands the importance, or rather the role, of the DhammaCārikā in cultivating a mindfulness culture, which has been really beneficial in his life and transformed him into a Dhamma Asoka.

### **Spiritual Development of Venerable Xuanzang through his Pilgrimage Writings**

Venerable Xuanzang's writings are a masterpiece and detailed recordings of ancient Buddhist India, which no one can deny in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. His writing has enlightened the true ancient Buddhist India, along with Buddhist pilgrimage. His spiritual development can be understood through his diaries. The factors determining spiritual development, such as Saddha, Dana, Sila, Khanti, Metta, and Bhavana (Dhyana), can be traced accordingly through his writings.

His Saddha towards the land of Buddha can be found through his determination to visit the historic religious place until the last breath of his life, which was completed when he arrived at the place of enlightenment, Bodhgaya. He survived without food or water for quite some time in a drastic climate, overcoming scorching heat, sandy land, and severe cold. His determination cannot be expressed in words; we are at a loss for words. His inner stamina only comes alive through Saddha in Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

Being a monk on DhammaCārikā, he wholeheartedly followed the Sila, neither hurting any humans nor any living beings, adhered to the precepts, and spoke the truth wherever he travelled. He mentions each bit of the proceedings occurring at each place, which shows the truthfulness of his writings. Neither getting distracted by each of them, such as luxurious life, fame, or greed overcoming them, while walking on the path that leads towards liberation. Dana can be noticed through his zeal when he was ready to give up his life for a good cause, when he was captured at Bengal by the local inhabitants, seeing that Venerable Xuanzang had a fortune to please the god. He donated the offerings that he had brought from China and given away at holy Buddhist places. Lighting of lamps and incense, cleansing of the holy Buddhist statue itself is Caga or Dana, more towards ShramaDana, writing every Sutta which he translated from Sanskrit to his classical Chinese language, it is a huge Dana for the entire Buddhist world, which safeguarded the true heritage of ancient Buddhist pilgrimage. Khanti can be seen how patience he had been patient on the entire journey for more than 19 years. He used to patiently listen when he wanted to debate or attend any ceremony, and patiently learned from his masters at Nalanda University and from his fellow Buddhist monks. He had his own space of time travelling on foot over long distances; if he came across any caravans, he opted to travel with them. Through his Khanti, he completed an exceptional journey with many ups and downs. His enormous Khanti can be figured out from his writings, seeing the different conditions in which the pilgrims used to visit these Buddhist sites. Meditating in the land of Buddha closely resembles Bhavana or (Dhyana) towards the triple gems, meditating under the huge holy Bodhi tree, meditating at Birth birthplace of Siddhartha in Nepal, all can be traced out from his writings. He practiced meditation and learned scriptures from his teachers at Nalanda University. Metta towards all living beings is a milestone. A pilgrim completely devoted to Buddhist principles and their core teachings, which can show the true path towards liberation, is well explained through his enormous pilgrimage journey, which enhances the cultivation of a mindfulness culture.

### **Spiritual Development of Alexander Cunningham through his Reports on Pilgrimage**

Alexander Cunningham, a renowned person from British India, worked diligently with his passion to learn this wonderful structural Buddhist art and architecture. When he came across a diary of Xuanzang providing every minute detail of how Buddha spent his life at Majjhima Desa. He read the English Diary, which was translated from Chinese to French and then to English. He walked step by step as mentioned by Xuanzang, a Chinese Buddhist pilgrim in his diary, which helped him unearth the hidden heritage of Buddhist India and showcase to the entire world the historical importance of Buddha, which had vanished from mainstream learning. His reports of each site, which had been excavated, were like a guidebook for today's generations of academics and archaeologists to know what the sites looked like in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. His spiritual development can be traced through his reports, and the factors determining spiritual development are Saddha, Dana, Sila, Khanti, Metta, and Bhavana (Dhyana). Here, we do not need to mention the religious Saddha at the initial stage, but his faith was more towards the excavations to explore these ancient geographical sites in ancient India, where Buddhism once spread across the Asian continent. He was eager to know how the Buddha preached at each place and how it was connected with society. His Khanti can be understood through his zeal for learning, reading the diary day by day, making notes, and later walking on each step and starting to excavate and explore the ancient sites. Every time he was unsuccessful, he did not lose his patience and gradually unearthed many sites connected to Buddha. His Dana for the society is through developing the Archaeological Survey of India and bringing these sites under the jurisdiction of the Government of India so that they can be protected and preserved for future generations. The historical identity of Buddhist sites that had vanished from mainstream India was brought to light by such a great archaeologist as him. His Sila truthfulness can be learnt from his reports, where he marked each site length by length and breadth by breadth, keeping up-to-date details of whatever he had come across during the excavation, and what condition it had been found in was mentioned in his reports. He tried to conserve and preserve the sites and provided more details when he surveyed more of northern and central India. His books have left many records and reports that showcase the truthfulness that still stands as a testimony for more historians and archaeologists to learn from. His Bhavana, or (Dhyana) It can be traced back to when

he planted the Bodhi Tree saplings at Bodhgaya, where the original tree was devastated by a storm. Relics and artifacts found during excavation were kept in higher esteem. His spirituality towards the historicity of Buddha reveals Bhavana. He knew that Buddha artifacts would literally develop loving kindness among all people in society when they themselves see such beautiful sites, which were from the golden era of Buddhist India. This shows his Metta towards everyone and, through his zealous efforts, the cultivation of a mindfulness culture.

### **Spiritual Development of Anagarika Dharmapala seen through his establishment of the Mahabodhi Society, Revival of Pilgrimage**

He was a well-known personality in the revival of Pilgrimage in 18<sup>th</sup>-century India and the founder of the Mahabodhi Society, who played a major role in the free movement of the Mahabodhi Vihara from the clutches of Brahmins who were holding administrative positions and conducting Brahmanical activities on the Vihara premises, and similarly, at Sarnath. He was the first global Buddhist missionary. He experienced that the Mahabodhi Vihara was controlled by the Brahmin priest and that Buddhists were barred from worship. Both these places were in good condition; rather, all the Buddhist sites were occupied by Brahmins for their own purpose, or other sites were still not excavated. Both Buddhist historical sites are now on the UNESCO list, with Bodhgaya already having received accreditation and Sarnath in the pipeline.

His contribution has shed light on ancient Buddhist India, along with the Buddhist pilgrimage; his spiritual development can be understood through his work, educating people about the condition of Buddhist places in India. Mahabodhi Society centers were set up across many Indian cities, which increased Buddhist learning among Indians. The factors determining spiritual development are Saddha, Dana, Sila, Khanti, Metta, and Bhavana (Dhyana) can be traced accordingly through his writings and speeches.

Anagarika Dharmapala had a deep Saddha towards the teachings of Buddha, which can be noticed when he represented at the World Parliament of Religions in Chicago and explained how the teachings can be looked upon on the development of society and how the Buddha Dhamma is universally accepted. Saddha can also be looked upon when they started the foundation of the Mahabodhi Society in Kolkata, a platform to



monitor major Buddhist sites in India. Due to the efforts of Anagarika Dharmapala, the site of the Buddha's Parinibbana at Kushinagar has once again become a major attraction for all Asian Buddhists, which was lost for a quiet period. Developing Mahabodhi centers, especially at Bodhgaya and Sarnath, along with schools and vihara, is an enormous Dana to the Buddhist World. Sila can be seen through his body language, practising the eight precepts and living a life as an Anagarika, a homeless one, and dedicating his entire time towards the development of Buddhist vihara and preserving the culture. Khanti can be figured when Anagarika Dharmapala was asked not to worship at Bodhgaya; he was stopped from paying homage towards the Buddha statue, and compelled to light incense or lamps in the premises was completely barred. He maintained his patience and derived energy from the gathering movement for agitation to obtain complete rights and ownership of the Mahabodhi Vihara under the Buddhist nation. His Metta while being on Pilgrimage at Major Buddhist places, expressing virtue and brotherhood among people to propagate the core teachings of the Buddha. Emphasising Metta more by Anagarika Dharmapala because he knew Metta works as a bridge among all citizens of every country, and this will help more Asians and Europeans to visit the Buddhist sites in India, where Dhamma was spread by Buddha, who was compassionate to all beings. Bhavana (Dhyana), who mediated at all major Buddhist sites, also planned to develop meditation centers in the Mahabodhi Institute. He knew the importance of meditation (Dhyana) and Buddha relics, along with his chief disciples' relics, which are kept in the safe custody of the Mahabodhi management and are open to the public on specific, sacred days. The fourfold Sangha meditates near the relics and also at the Bodhi tree, which is planted on the Mahabodhi Society premises. The Mahabodhi Institution educates pilgrims about the importance of Buddhist sites and how they should be protected, and also looks after the cleanliness and hygiene of these locations. Dana, coming from pilgrims at this institution, is used for the development of these sites by planting trees, constructing dwelling places near the sites for pilgrims for accommodation. All of this started under the hardships foreseen by Anagarika Dharmapala to safeguard DhammaCārikā's future. These qualities enable him to cultivate a mindfulness culture through his hardships.

## Conclusion

As the world's fourth largest religion with more than 350 million followers, Buddhism's foundational creeds are non-violence (*ahimsa*) and the development of loving kindness (*maïtri*), altruistic compassion (*karuna*), and wisdom (*prajna*). These basic tenets of Buddhism were taught by its founder, Shakyamuni Buddha, who was an ordinary mortal, born as a prince in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE in India, who attained enlightenment (*bodhi*) through rigorous meditation and self-transformation. Hence, pilgrimage to the sacred places associated with the historical Buddha Shakyamuni has become one of the most visible and enduring expressions of religious practice throughout the Buddhist world.

As a practice of mindfulness, pilgrimage provides a context for examining negative mental states to transcend notions of identity and difference. Taking refuge in the Triple Jewels provides a symbolically mediated experiential context for observing one's awareness of perceptions. From the above case studies, which adopted a meditative perspective, being vulnerable and exposed to a wide spectrum of humanity became an opportunity to practice mindfulness. Furthermore, by calmly observing our reactions to unpleasant experiences, pilgrimage provides a space for eroding these conditioned responses. In this regard, mental hardships can be an asset along the pilgrimage path in bringing personal and collective suffering to the surface and fostering trust in one's own awareness. Therefore, if we all diligently adhere to and follow the spiritual dimensions of pilgrimage, it will certainly help cultivate a mindfulness culture in our lives, develop society on a larger scale, and closely connect with the Buddha pada.

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