

Mahabodhi Temple

The Mahabodhi Temple is an ancient but much rebuilt and restored, Buddhist temple in Bodh Gaya. According to Buddhist tradition, the temple is located where Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment. It is also a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Origins of the Mahabodhi Temple.

According to the traditional accounts of the history of the Buddha, it is said that when he was a young prince, he saw the suffering of the world and wanted to end it. To this end, he reached the banks of the Phalgu River, near the city of Gaya, India. Upon arrival, he sat in meditation under a peepul tree which later became known as the Bodhi tree.

As per Buddhist scriptures, after three days and three nights he attained enlightenment and the answers that he had sought. Thus it was upon this location, the Mahabodhi Temple was built by Emperor Ashoka in around 260 BC.

Construction of the Mahabodhi Temple

In approximately 250 BCE, about 200 years after the Buddha attained enlightenment, Emperor Ashoka, who had recently converted to Buddhism, visited Bodh Gaya in order to establish a monastery. These structures no longer exist today.

Additional structures were brought in by the Sungas. In particular, columns with pot-shaped bases were found around the Diamond throne. These columns are thought to date to the 1st century BCE, towards the end of the Sungas. These columns, which were found through archaeological research at the Buddha's Walk in the Mahabodhi Temple, quite precisely match the columns described on the reliefs found on the gateway pillars.

Decline and Restoration of the Mahabodhi Temple

Buddhism declined when the dynasties patronizing it declined, following the Hunnic invasions and the early Arab Islamic invasions such as that of Muhammad bin Qasim. A strong revival occurred under the Pala Empire in the northeast of the subcontinent (where the temple is situated). Mahayana Buddhism flourished under the Palas between the 8th and the 12th century. However, after the defeat of the Palas by the Hindu Sena dynasty, Buddhism's position again began to erode and became nearly extinct in India.

In the 13th century, Burmese Buddhists built a temple with the same name and modelled on the original Mahabodhi Temple.

During the 11th century and the 19th century, Burmese rulers undertook the restoration of the temple complex and surrounding wall. In the 1880s, the then-British colonial government of India began to restore Mahabodhi Temple under the direction of Sir Alexander Cunningham and Joseph David Beglar. In 1885, Sir Edwin Arnold visited the site and under guidance from Ven. Weligama Sri Sumangala published several articles drawing the attention of the Buddhists to the deplorable conditions of Buddhagaya.

Current Status of the Mahabodhi Temple

The responsibility of protection, management and monitoring of the temple was assumed by the Bihar state government upon the Independence of India. In accordance with the Bodh Gaya Temple Act, 1949 the state government shares such responsibilities with the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee. As per the act, The Committee, which serves for a three-year term, must consist of four Buddhist and four Hindu representatives, including the head of Sankaracharya Math monastery as an ex-officio Hindu member.

A 2013 Amendment to the Bodhgaya Temple Management Act allows the Gaya District Magistrate to be the Chairman of the Committee, even if he is not Hindu. The Advisory Board consists of the governor of Bihar and twenty to twenty-five other members, half of them from foreign Buddhist countries.

In June 2002, the Mahabodhi Temple became a United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) World Heritage Site. All finds of religious artefacts in the area are legally protected under the Treasure Trove Act of 1878.

In 2013, the upper portion of the temple was covered with 289 kg of gold. The gold was a gift from the King of Thailand and devotees from Thailand and installed with the approval of the Archaeological Survey of India.