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Buddhist Pilgrimage and the Ritual Ecology of Sacred Sites in the Indo-Gangetic Region

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Abstract: In contemporary India and Nepal, Buddhist pilgrimage spaces constitute a ritual ecology. Not only is pilgrimage a form of ritual practice that is central to placemaking and the construction of a Buddhist sacred geography, but the actions of religious adherents at sacred centers also involve a rich and diverse set of ritual observances and performances. Drawing on ethnographic research, this paper examines how the material and corporeal aspects of Buddhist ritual contribute to the distinctive religious sense of place that reinforce the memory of the Buddha's life and the historical ties to the Indian subcontinent. It is found that at most Buddhist sites, pilgrim groups mostly travel with their own monks, nuns, and guides from their respective countries who facilitate devotion and reside in the monasteries and guest houses affiliated with their national community. Despite the differences across national, cultural-linguistic, and sectarian lines, the ritual practices associated with pilgrimage speak to certain patterns of religious motivation and behavior that contribute to a sense of shared identity that plays an important role in how Buddhists imagine themselves as part of a translocal religion in a globalizing age.



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1. Introduction

According to early Buddhist texts such as the Pali Canon, the birthplace of Buddhism is associated with the geographic region known as *Majjhimadesha* ("middle country"). Sometime between the sixth and fourth centuries BCE, it is believed that the Buddha lived and taught in the foothills of Himalayas in the low plain lands of the Terai and Indo-Gangetic region that extends east to what is now the Indian states of Bihar and West Bengal. Although the transregional histories and ties to the Buddha-dharma in the Indian subcontinent spans over numerous centuries, the modern rebirth and renewal of this ancient pilgrimage geography is a relatively recent phenomenon spanning the late nineteenth and twentieth century (Geary and Mukherjee 2017; Ray 2014; Sharma 2018; Singh 2010). Today, a journey through Buddha's homeland is a dream for many Buddhist followers and for those who seek the path of Awakening (*bodhi*) as exemplified by the Buddha's life. In this journey, four places have been elevated as part of a sacred geography due their association with important biographical events in the life of the religious founder. These places are: Lumbinī, (birthplace of Buddha, Nepal); Bodhgaya (the place of Buddha's enlightenment), Sarnath (where Buddha delivered his first sermon), and Kuśinagarī (where Buddha took nirvana). Although not limited to these sights, these places have become sacred foci for the convergence of multiple expressions of Buddhist devotion that cut across national, cultural-linguistic, and sectarian lines. Collectively and individually, these sacred sites are visited by hundreds of thousands of devotees and nondevotees that are drawn to the "spiritual magnetism" (Preston 1992) of place but also the melding of Buddhist teachings, culture, and heritage values as popular religious and tourist spaces.

Many recent studies have deliberated about the meaning of such pilgrimage for those who visit these iconic Buddhist sites (Bruntz and Schedneck 2020; Geary 2014; Hall 2006; Huber 2008). A few scholars have positioned the importance of social engagement wedded to soteriological aspirations as one of the highest forms of meaning that life-long followers seek in their dwelling in Buddhist places (Goldberg 2013; Kitiarsa 2010). Others have discussed forms of contestation that is generated by those interested in touristic aspects that can be seen as contradicting the peace and serenity that is sought after among some Buddhists and spiritual tourists themselves (Geary 2008; Hung 2015; Hung et al. 2017; Philp and Mercer 1999). Such seeming contradictions are played out in the same spatial environment, not to mention the diverse national and sectarian expressions of Buddhism, including its own local adaptations among new Buddhist converts and communities. However, only a handful of studies offer some insights on the specific religious performances, rituals, and “material affordances” (Gibson 1977) in Buddhist pilgrimage sites and how these religious activities both inscribe and produce certain meanings (Seelananda 2010; Wong et al. 2013).

This paper aims to describe the ritual ecology related to the main Buddhist pilgrimage sites in North India and Nepal, showing how the material and corporeal aspects of Buddhist religious experience contribute to the distinctive religious sense of places, as well as some of the unique pressures on the built environment as spaces of religious heritage. Our use of the term ritual ecology builds on the definition of a religious setting provided by Kerestetzi (2018, para 2) as “a coherent space in which objects, bodies, actions, and ideas form a system—or even an ecosystem” that enables us to dispense with some of the dualistic approaches such as faith/matter and sacred/profane. Although much of our descriptions of ritual phenomena can be generalized across several main Buddhist pilgrimage sites, our analysis is greatly informed by sustained fieldwork at a few prominent sites, especially Bodhgaya—the seat of enlightenment located in south Bihar. Thus, a study of ritual ecosystems at Buddhist sites, such as Bodhgaya, has the potential to provide important insights into how the vitality and vibrancy of a site for Buddhist practitioners and visitors can be more effectively managed by state governments, archaeological and heritage agencies, and religious authorities. A focus on rituals as a mode of analysis also helps to make sense of the corporeal and cosmic synthesis of Buddhist world-making and the relationship between spatiality and materiality that is so important to the emplacement of a sacred geography (Shinde 2020).

It is important to keep in mind that this paper is a preliminary effort to contextualize the predominant forms of religious practice and how that gives rise to certain patterns of sacralization rather than an exhaustive all-encompassing picture of the various rituals and performances undertaken by the different international and local Buddhist groups. Due to the absence of normalized ritual protocols and diverse histories and lineages, there is considerable variability and innovation across the Buddhist spectrum. The remainder of the paper is divided into the following sections: In the next section, we provide an overview of Buddhist pilgrimage drawing on recent scholarship and translations. Following this, we provide a more comprehensive taxonomy of prominent Buddhist rituals and performances in sacred sites with a specific reference to Buddhist sites in North India and Nepal. In the final section, we highlight some main themes deriving from the research and discuss how the influence of rituals and forms of spatial management impact the religious environment, the pilgrimage-tourism economy, and heritage values that contribute to the sociocultural fabric of Buddhist sites.

2. Buddhist Pilgrimage and Paths of Convergence

Although distinctive forms of Buddhist pilgrimage and religious travel are common in various parts of Asia, such as Thailand, China, Taiwan, Japan, and so forth, (Bruntz and Schedneck 2020; Choe and O'Regan 2015; Mason and Chung 2018; Wong et al. 2016), our emphasis here is on the paths of convergence associated with the biography of the founder and how this core Indic geography absorbs and attracts pilgrims from multiple

Buddhist traditions (as well as non-Buddhists). What is the religious and historical basis for Buddhist pilgrimage in the Indian subcontinent? What are the main motivations and goals for undertaking Buddhist pilgrimage, and how is that expressed through religious journeys and the ritual ecology of sacred sites in India and Nepal?

What is usually taken as the “locus classicus” (Huber 2008) of Buddhist pilgrimage are the four main sites—Lumbinī, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Kuśinagarī—recommended by the Buddha to visit after his death in the famous Mahāparinirvāṇa sūtra (MPNS). These four sites mark his birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and *parinirvāṇa* respectively. Counter to the usual reification of the four-site model of Buddhist pilgrimage, in a recent chapter, Strong (2014) scrutinizes some of the different translations of the famous discourse in Pali, Sanskrit, and Chinese, noting some noteworthy differences among them. Of particular importance is a preceding paragraph that is common in Chinese translations which he refers to as “Ananda’s lament”. In this passage, “Ananda expresses to the Buddha his sorrow that, in times past, after they had spent the rains-retreat in various places, mind-cultivating (*mano-bhāvanīya*) monks used to come for the sake of seeing (*dassanāya*) the Buddha (i.e., of having *darśan* with him), but that now, after the Blessed One’s demise, they will no longer be able to do so. And this grieves him” (Strong 2014, p. 51). Furthermore, Ananda specifies that “the monks used to journey not only in order to see the Buddha, but to worship him and make offerings, to ask questions and to receive instruction on the Dharma. Once the Blessed One enters *parinirvāṇa*, there will no longer be any point in their coming” (Strong 2014, p. 51). This leads Ananda to pose the obvious question about the preservation of the Dharma and how the monks should respond to his pending absence. In response to Ananda’s query, the Buddha appears to recommend the importance of undertaking pilgrimage to the four sites as a way to earn rebirth in heaven but also as a solution to his absence whereby followers may “continue to ‘see’ and venerate him after his passing” (Strong 2014, p. 51).

On the basis of his reading of Ananda’s lament, Strong makes a number of observations that speak to the importance of pilgrimage and ritual in the Buddhist tradition. Firstly, the passage cited above hints at what may have been an earlier pattern of pilgrimage that existed during the lifetime of the Buddha and suggests the importance of several places located on the margins of urban centers that correspond with the Buddha’s rain retreats, such as Vaiśālī, Rājagṛha, Śrāvastī, and Saṃkāśya. Although these four locations are frequently described as “secondary sites” that evolved out of the primary “locus classicus” prescribed by the Buddha to Ananda, as Strong suggests, the reverse may actually be the case when referring to the origins of pilgrimage. This tradition is also corroborated by several passages in the Pali Vinaya as well as Buddhaghosa who describes the importance of monks and nuns, especially those who “cultivate the mind” (*mano-bhāvanīya*) undertaking pilgrimage to visit the Buddha at the end of the rains retreat as a form of veneration and a means of receiving instruction. Another important distinction here is how the Buddha’s recommendation of the four sites that follows Ananda’s lament is no longer directed toward “meditating monks and nuns” but rather encompasses all Buddhists who wish to journey and see the Buddha, including laymen and laywomen (Strong 2014, p. 52). In other words, as Strong writes, “If pilgrimage originally started as a strictly monastic tradition for meditating monks during the lifetime of the Buddha, it would seem that, with the Buddha’s passing, it became more generally a devotional tradition for all Buddhists” (Strong 2014, p. 52). Although more speculative, another reason for the displacement of the earlier four sites associated with the rain retreats may have been the desire to build a distinct biographical tradition that would not only be open to wider Buddhist publics but could be distinguished from other popular and competing religious movements at the time, such as Jain centers of pilgrimage that were also present in places such as Rājagṛha, Śrāvastī, and Vaiśālī (Strong 2014).

When we turn to the goal of undertaking pilgrimage to the four sites as expressed by the Buddha to his companion Ananda, according to Strong, two key Indic concepts need to be highlighted. Firstly, by foregrounding the Buddha-*carita* or Buddha-biographical

tradition, which focuses on the activities (*carita*) performed by Sakyamuni Buddha, and the places associated with these acts, this provides an opportunity for Buddhist devotees to undertake a form of “*darśan* by proxy”—even after his death and *parinirvāṇa*. Another way of viewing *darśan* by proxy, “is to see it as *darśan* (direct seeing) on its way to being *anusmṛti* (vivid imaginative or meditative recall). This is important because, in the non-Pali versions of the MPNS, the language of ‘seeing’ disappears, and is replaced by the language of ‘recall’” (Strong 2014, p. 56). Given the emphasis on imaginative and meditative recall, according to André Bareau, this could imply that instead of undertaking pilgrimage to the physical sites “meditating on moments of the Buddha’s life for the purpose of recalling him (*buddha-anusmṛti*)” and his different aspects of Buddhahood might be sufficient as alternative to seeing (*darśan*) and also indicate that this could “be done anywhere at any time” (cited in Strong 2014, p. 57). It is also worth noting that the emphasis on *anusmṛti* would have also likely been more integral to the aspirations of monks and nuns rather than laypeople.

The second key Indic concept that needs to be highlighted with reference to pilgrimage practices is the importance of sacred places as conduits for arousing *saṃvega*. In his translation of the concept, Strong writes “*Samvega* is a complex notion, but it is generally thought to be a religious emotion in the face of the sight of the truth of impermanence or any other feature of *saṃsāra* that gives rise to a desire to adopt the religious life” (Strong 2014, p. 54). Although the Buddha does not explicitly address why these four pilgrimage sites result in *saṃvega*, it would imply, according to Strong that

pilgrimage to (and so darśan at) these sites entails a dual and contradictory emotion of remembering the presence of the Buddha at a particular time and place of his life by ‘seeing’ him, and of being moved by a realization of his present absence there. In this sense, pilgrimage sites would be akin to relics which, I have argued elsewhere, are essentially reminders of a biographical process that affirms both the presence and the absence of the departed one. (p. 54)

Although it is tempting to suggest that there would have been some clear benefits to visiting the four sites in a biochronological order and to retracing his life journey, there does not appear to be any evidence of this from pilgrim records (Strong 2014). The only literary instance of this, as Strong points out, is the famous Aśokāvadāna legend where he undertakes pilgrimage and marks the sites with *caityas*.¹

What is evident in these translations of the MPNS are the ways in which Buddhist pilgrimage can be defined as the “ritual re-enactment of religious narratives” (Castelli 2003 cited in Deeg 2014, p. 9) that has empowered a sacred landscape and is representative of a “concentrated evocation of the Tathagata’s [Buddha’s] life” (Coleman and Elsner 1995, p. 195). An important feature of Buddhist pilgrimage is an emphasis on rebirth. The Pali version of the Buddha’s discourse mentions that those followers who die during their pilgrimage to the four sites,² or after having made it, “will by virtue of their merit be reborn in heaven (or in the favourable human state)” (Strong 2014, p. 59). This sentiment continues today, especially among lay Buddhists, and that is its close association with accruing merit on the journey, or on the journey, in this life and for those to come. Thus, pilgrimage in the Buddhist tradition has taken on an important soteriological dimension as an external metaphor of an internal journey toward spiritual awakening (Coleman and Elsner 1995).

However, it is also important to clarify that pilgrimage is not only a process of embodied recollection that allows one to internalize the teaching of the dhamma but also involves contact with sacred traces and various material objects, such as relics, that play an important role in sanctifying space and representing the physical aspects of the narrative.³ As vital entities of the Buddha’s present absence, the veneration of relics through the treatment of his corporeal remains and the subsequent construction of Buddhist *stūpas* or *caityas* may well be some of the oldest forms of Buddhist pilgrimage (Deeg 2014). Through their division and multiplication, relics have also played an important role in the geographic and ever-expanding repertoire of stories associated with the Buddha’s life through the layering of various hagiographical legends and events. Although Buddhist relics take

on a particular significance in the Buddhist homeland given their association with the Buddha's biography and/or other enlightened persons, as Maud (2017, p. 422) writes, "the geography of relics is not static but continually evolving, and the movement, exchange, and relocation of relics index the transformations of Buddhism's presence in the world, its geographical extension, and the fluctuating fortunes of its adherents".

While much has been written on the spread of bodhi tree offshoots (Maitland 2018; Nugteren 1995; Ober 2019), the replication and reproduction of Mahabodhi temples (Asher 2012; Guy 1991), and the afterlives of relics (Mukherjee 2018; Sharf 1999; Trainor 1997) that all contribute to a "shifting terrain of the Buddha" (Huber 2008), there is no denying that these material objects and their circulations have become important foci of ritual veneration (and various sociopolitical power struggles) that mediate the Buddha's presence and are central to accruing merit. Due to their heightened status in relation to a sacred place, they have also been instrumental in the material prosperity of certain localities, including the development of monasteries around sacred sites by attracting donations and gifts from various lay pilgrims and patrons. As Schopen (2004, p. 100) writes, "relics gave rise to festivals; festivals gave rise to trade; trade gave rise to gifts and donations" (cited in Maud 2017, p. 424). Donation inscriptions as well as contemporary ritual practices at various sacred sites point to a long history of gifts and offerings to the local *saṅgha* or the *stūpa* itself (Deeg 2014, p. 10). Through the actions of various pious rulers as well, at least since the time of Asoka, we also see how patronage translates into material transformations such as various infrastructural improvements, the building of rest houses, and improved connectivity (Geary 2017).

Thus, by undertaking pilgrimage for the devout, not only does this entail a journey to see the Buddha and arouse certain religious emotions associated with his worldly activity and subsequent material traces, but it is capable of inspiring one along the path of Buddhadharma by embodying the sacred paradigm of the religion's founder. Together, relics and places of pilgrimage serve as mnemonic devices and spaces of memorialization that both embed and diffuse the spiritual biography of the Buddha, as well as many of his faithful disciples. In the next section, we provide a survey of some of the dominant ritual forms that are visible at Buddhist pilgrimage sites in North India and Nepal today.

3. Sacralizing Space through Ritual Performance

Although Buddhist pilgrimage is a diverse phenomenon that cross-cuts many different rituals and motivations, based on the analysis above, especially the recent translations by John Strong, a few key patterns can be discerned from both historical and contemporary practices. It could be argued that the primary motivation to undertake pilgrimage is: *a journey to see and/or recall the Buddha and be moved by a realization of his present absence*. In Buddhism, unlike in other religions, such as Islam, it is not necessary or obligatory to undertake pilgrimage or perform certain rites of passage that are related to the fundamental religious tenets. Group composition, length of the pilgrimage journey, and the means of transportation also vary significantly across Buddhist cultural groups. For example, among some Buddhist communities, such as Tibetans, undertaking the pilgrimage journey—*gnas skor ba* (Trans. "going around a [sacred] place")—by foot and sometimes over several years and months is seen to be more meritorious than expediated modes of modern transportation such as airlines and buses. Despite these variations in length and mode of travel, pilgrimage, one could argue, is universally seen as an auspicious opportunity to venerate the sacred traces and through various ritual practices accrue religious merit (*punya*) that hopefully provides certain soteriological advances such as a favorable rebirth and ultimately liberation. However, as we illustrate below, undertaking pilgrimage and accumulating good karma may also be directed toward more mundane this-worldly aspirations and rewards that have an important social and economic role in society.

Once at a Buddhist sacred site, what activities do pilgrims undertake to fulfil the goals and aspirations of the journey? From this wider normative definition of Buddhist pilgrimage, we can now turn to some of the prevalent ritual forms and expressions that

take place at sacred sites in India and Nepal. In creating this ritual taxonomy, it is important to keep in mind that these categories are not mutually exclusive, and there is considerable overlap between the different practices in term of their desired goals and intention. For example, it could be argued that merit-making is infused within each of the ritual categories below. We also do not focus on more esoteric forms of ritual engagement such as secret initiations that may take place between a discipline and guru at a sacred site. Rather, our focus is on public displays of ritual that mediate Buddhist pilgrimage and the sacred built environment.

3.1. Calendrical Rites and Memorial Ceremonies

These are rituals that occur at regular intervals throughout the Gregorian and lunisolar calendar that mark a date or event of symbolic significance for the Buddhist community. Below are some of the more prominent ritual events.

Vesak. (S. Vaiśākha; P. Vesākha; T. Sa ga zla ba): Based on the ceremonial cycle of Buddhist holidays, especially following the Theravada and Tibetan tradition, the foremost calendrical ritual is that of Vesak (also referred to in vernacular terms as Buddha Purnima or Sawa Dawa in Tibetan). This full-moon day falls on the fourth lunar month of the traditional Indian calendar (usually corresponding in April–May) and commemorates three important events in the life of the Buddha: his birth, awakening, and *parinirvāṇa*. Although widely celebrated in many parts of Asia, especially in South East Asia, it takes on particular significance in the holy land and is frequently combined with other meritorious actions (see below). On this occasion, numerous functions and rituals are arranged to honor the memory of the Buddha, such as elaborate processions through the surrounding town toward the main temple or stupa (Figure 1). This event is usually organized and planned by local monastic councils and temple committees. Although the date of Vesak has become standardized in contemporary India and in many ways has become a symbol of unification for the different monastic groups and lineages in Buddhist sacred places, it is important to keep in mind that the actual date and symbolic importance of Vesak varies considerably amongst Buddhist communities.⁴



Figure 1. Procession and re-enactment of events in the Buddha’s life by school children during Vesak in Bodhgaya. (Photo from the author).

Kathina Dana: This refers to the “great robe offering” ceremony in the Theravada tradition that marks the end of the *vassa* (“rains”) retreats and is celebrated with many *sanghadana*’s held between different local monasteries and temples, especially from South and South East Asia (Figure 2). On these occasions, lay pilgrims visit members of the sangha and offer cotton cloth for the purpose of making new robes, gifts, feasts, and donations to the temple to support the monks and nuns in their pursuit.



Figure 2. Offerings by lay pilgrims during the Kathina Dana at a nearby temple in Bodhgaya. (Photo from the author).

Other collective gatherings: It is common for Buddhist communities to organize ritual gatherings at sacred sites to celebrate lunisolar events throughout the year. Losar (T. lo-gsar), the Tibetan New Year, is usually celebrated around February (according to the Tibetan Calendar) and lasts 3–15 days. In July, Theravada and Tibetan Buddhists in Sarnath celebrate *Asalha* “Dharma Day” or *Chökor Düchen* (T. chos ‘khor chen), which honors the day the Buddha first taught the four noble truths and turned the wheel of dharma on the full-moon night of the month of Asalha. Magha Puja—a time when 1250 Buddhists came together to pay their respect to the Buddha—has now become a festive occasion among Buddhists from South East Asia to honor the Sangha and provides opportunities for lay and monastic people to reaffirm their commitment to the Buddha-dhamma. Many Burmese groups celebrate the *Abhidhamma* day to mark the day the Buddha went to the Tushita heaven to teach his mother. On the full-moon day in March, Buddhists from the Mahayana traditions of Tibet and East Asia celebrate Avalokitesvara’s birthday—one of the eight great Bodhisattvas. Rituals and forms of worship on this day involve the recitation of the mantra ‘om mani padme hum’ and the active practice of compassion (*karuna*) that exemplifies the Bodhisattva ideal to save and protect beings. In the spirit of the Bodhisattva ideal, among Chinese Buddhists, the Water Land Dharma Function is also prominent in some sacred sites and is presided over by high-ranking monks who invite beings of higher realms to ease the suffering of those below. Throughout each month there are also important observances such as *uposadha* (P. uposatha; T. gso sbyong) that follow the new and full moon. On these occasions, ordained members of the sangha assemble together and intensify their practice of the Buddha’s teachings by making a conscious effort to renew

their commitments to moral conduct through their recitation of the *bhikkhu-pratimoksa* from the *Vinaya Pitaka* (monastic rules) as well as undertake various forms of self-cultivation and mental purification such as meditation. Among laypeople, it is important to maintain the Eight Precepts (*astahga-sila*).

In addition to these popular Buddhist ritual events that correlate with the lunisolar calendar, there are increasingly a number of memorial events that recognize important historical figures, teachers, and Rinpoches. Some of the more prominent events that we have witnessed include the birthday celebrations of the Dalai Lama on 6 July, the birth of the Thai King on 28 July, and the birth and passing of Anagarika Dharmapala (17 September and 29 April). Among new Indian Buddhists, the birth of Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar on 14 April, his conversation on 14 October, and his passing on 8 December are particularly auspicious and may also correlate with conversion ceremonies (see below).

3.2. Sacred Movement, Meditation, and Veneration of Objects

These embodied rituals reflect both individual and collective forms of aspiration and spiritual cultivation that are directed toward both soteriological and mundane goals. This category of rituals is perhaps the most dominant and expressive modality that can be observed at Buddhist pilgrimage sites. As Wallace writes “all formal practices of focused concentration, mindfulness, prayer, chanting, and other ritual activities are performed as a means of cultivating one’s heart and mind or expressing one’s faith” (Wallace 2002, p. 36). Similarly, Huber (2008, p. 310) shows in his study of Tibetan pilgrimage, the ritual work “performed by the pilgrim’s body is understood as ‘cleansing’ or removing certain types of embodied moral and cognitive defilements that hinder progress toward salvation”. Although there is a wide spectrum of veneration rituals and practices involving sacred movement that overlaps with the next section, we have chosen to highlight four here:

Pradaksina (P. *padakkhina*; T. *skor ba*) is the common practice of showing reverence by circumambulating a holy object, person, or place. Among Tibetans, this is referred to as *kora*, *kor* meaning circle in Tibetan. In English, making *kora* is the same as undertaking circumambulation, from the Latin *circum* (around) and *ambulare* (to walk), and in many ways, it represents a microcosm for the pilgrimage journey itself. To circumambulate as a form of religious veneration involves making a clear and conscious connection with something that is regarded as special and holds sacred power (Figure 3). As Keown writes “Locating the encircled object at the centre symbolizes its centrality in the lives of those who walk around it. The activity also represents integrity and cosmic harmony in mirroring natural phenomena such as the clockwise course the sun was believed to follow over the surface of the earth” (2004, p. 218). At Buddhist pilgrimage sites, the most common objects of devotion are stupas or temples but might also include relics, bodhi trees, pillars, images, monasteries, shrines, and other natural features of a sacred landscape such as mountains and hilltops. Circling a stupa or sacred object three times can also be interpreted as a way of showing respect for the Triple Gem. In places such as Bodhgaya, it is not uncommon to see a steady stream of Himalayan Buddhists moving clockwise in large numbers around the upper and lower circumambulation path swirling their prayer wheels, muttering guru-mantra recitations, and counting their mala prayer-beads on their fingertips throughout the day. For many of these Tibetan Buddhists, it is believed that performing *kora* while counting prayers or mantra and/or spinning a prayer wheel with a strong motivation helps to multiply the merit.⁵



Figure 3. Tibetan nun with prayer wheel outside Mahabodhi Temple. (Photo from the author).

Prostration: (P. *panipāta*, S. *namas-kara*) This is a common gesture of deep respect used among Buddhists to show reverence to the Triple Gem (three times) and a common practice of veneration at sacred sites that helps to accumulate merit. Although the type of prostration and accompanying prayers vary across Buddhist traditions (such as half and full length with emphasis on different verses), it is quite common in pilgrimage sites to see Buddhists prostrating along a circumambulation path or before a particular image, teacher, or stupa (Figure 4). In the Pali Canon, there are several *suttas* that mention laypersons prostrating before the living Buddha (Mills 1982). The action, when it involves dropping the entire body forward and stretching it full length on the ground, also requires considerable physical and mental effort. For these reasons, prostrations, like forms of meditation (see below), can be interpreted as a means of purifying one's body, speech, and mind of karmic defilements to further progress along the path to enlightenment.⁶ For example, in the northwest corner of the Mahabodhi temple complex, during the winter season, it is common to see hundreds of maroon-clad monks performing full-length prostrations on long wooden boards in sets of a hundred thousand over several weeks and months in an effort to complete their preliminary practices.



Figure 4. Full-length prostration before the Mahabodhi temple, Bodhgaya. (Photo from the author).

Meditation: We use the English term meditation to refer to a range of more specific techniques and practices that express forms of restricted bodily movement that bring about physiological changes and encourage an altered state of consciousness which is amenable to spiritual development. The two most prominent forms of Buddhist mental cultivation that are used for concentration purposes and to focus the mind are calming meditation (*samatha*) and insight meditation (*vipasyana*). Although the various forms of meditation are not directly associated with pilgrimage rituals, they are increasingly prevalent at sacred sites and are suggested to play an important role, especially among Mahayana Buddhists, as means of enacting one's Buddha-nature that can also be interpreted as a form of veneration toward Shakyamuni and the Dharma. This is especially the case in Bodhgaya where pilgrims can be found throughout the Mahabodhi temple complex in quietude and stillness. Although it has been emphasized that these meditation techniques were rarely practiced by laity in the past, today, they figure prominently in the ritual ecology of sacred sites among individuals and groups as a means of removing mental impurities and cultivating techniques that speak to Buddhist aspirations of achieving Nirvana across a wide spectrum of practitioners.

Dance: although not nearly as common as the embodied rituals highlighted above, forms of religious dance, especially among Tibetan Buddhists, often take place at sacred sites and are often part of larger religious gatherings and festivals. Lama dancing (T. 'chams), in particular, are performed by masked dancers accompanied by ritual music and involve the enacting of various religious dramas that depict important Tibetan mythological themes such as the subjugation of demons.

3.3. Chanting, Recitation, and Prayer Festivals

Despite the popular association of Buddhism (and the Buddha) with forms of quietude and stillness, Buddhist pilgrimage sites are densely layered sonic environments. As part of the “ritual re-enactment of religious narratives” (Deeg 2014, p. 9), the individual and collective recitation of certain Buddhist teachings, discourses, and prayers play an important role in elevating the sanctity of the place while paying homage to the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. As part of this “grammar of sanctification” (Eck 2012), certain pilgrimage places have become important locales for particular Buddhist discourses and stories associated with the Buddha’s life (lives) along with his disciples. One example is the Lotus and Heart Sutra in Vulture Peak, Rajgirha. Given the importance of the Lotus Sutra in Rajgir-Nalanda for Mahayana Buddhists, especially the Nichiren school of Buddhism, it is common to see gatherings of Japanese Buddhists practicing the *daimoku*, chanting the title of the sutra in the form of “*namo myoho renge hyo*” (Jap.) a phrase meaning “Hail to the Scripture of the Lotus of the Wonderful Dharma”, which is itself an expression of devotion to the Lotus Sutra’s truth and power. Among Tibetan Buddhists, in most pilgrimage places, one hears the words “*om mani padme hum*”. Although the exact translation of this verse has a complex grammatical structure and is not easily amendable to a definitive translation, it does gesture toward the meaning: “homage [or Praise] to the Jewel-Lotus One”. This popular mantra is widely associated with the venerated Bodhisattva of compassion Avalokitesvara and is frequently placed in prayer wheels. Other common prayers include the refuge prayer (Kyabdro in Tibetan), which is the act of taking refuge in the Three Jewels. In the ancient Pali language, the chant goes,

Buddham saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Buddha”.

Dhammam saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Dharma”.

Sangham saranam gacchami. “I take refuge in the Sangha”.

Accompanying these prayers and mantras is the use of a *mala* (skt)—a form of rosary—held in the right hand and fingered by pilgrims to keep count of the number of recitations made during their worship. Although the string of beads on a mala can vary in number and length, the most common number is 108.⁷ In terms of the type of bead, increasingly they are made from sandalwood or seeds of the Bodhi Tree under which the Buddha gained enlightenment, although rosaries can also be made from a range of other materials such as wood, hard-nut kernels, crystal, and bone (Keown 2004, p. 171).

Given the importance of Bodhgaya in terms of multiplying aspirations, Buddhist sacred sites, such as the Mahabodhi temple, have become important staging grounds for several *monlams* (or prayer festivals) that involve prayers, mantras, and long liturgies guided by high-ranking lamas and Rinpoches from the different Tibetan schools (Figure 5). Although many of the original *monlam* prayer festivals in Tibet commemorated the Buddha’s defeat of the heretical teachers at Sravasti, at several Buddhist sites in India and Nepal, they are now conflated with a broader set of global discourse such as “world peace” (see Huber 2008). Over a period of ten days (sometimes more), the festival includes prayers performed three times each day at the sacred site and may be accompanied by tantric practices of visualization, rituals for expiation of misdeeds committed during the previous year, and a rededication to the principles of Buddhism for the coming year (Buswell and Lopez 2013, p. 831). As part of the materiality of devotion that accompanies these large ritual gatherings, elaborate altars are constructed on the side of the temple or beneath the Bodhi tree, arranged with silver water bowls, receptacles filled with rice, and elaborate multicolored *tormas* made of colored barley flour and butter that are used as an offering or propitiation to various spiritual beings (Figure 6).



Figure 5. Monlam event under the boughs of the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya. (Photo from the author).



Figure 6. *Tormas* during the Monlam chanting in Bodhgaya. (Photo from the author).

In recent years, the Light of Buddhadharma Foundation (LBDFI) founded by Wangmo and Richard Dixey (the former is the daughter of Tarthang Tulku) have taken a leading role in organizing the annual International Tipitaka chanting ceremony. The chanting ceremony brings together upwards of 3500 Theravada monks, nuns, and lay followers from ten South East and South Asia countries to chant the teachings of the Buddha, as recorded in the Pali Canon. Each country is represented by separate national stalls and simultaneously chants over one another during the scheduled event (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Thai participants in the International Tipitika Chanting ceremony in Bodhgaya. (Photo from the author).

3.4. Spiritual Teachings, Initiation, Counsel, and Retreat

Many Buddhists undertake pilgrimage to gain access to high-ranking monks or nuns and their teachings at a sacred site. Contact with a guru or members of the sangha may translate into forms of private counsel, spiritual initiation, and blessings. Because the vast majority of pilgrim groups reside in monasteries located at each of the main pilgrimage sites, senior monks and nuns also play an important role as ritual mediators and guides for merit-making activities, providing dhamma talks that recount stories of the Buddha's life and leading groups in chanting and meditation.

Given the importance of spiritual counsel, several Buddhist sites have evolved into important centers of study (of Buddhist philosophy and practice) and retreat (meditation) that draw both secular and religious participants. For example, there are several Goenka-inspired Vipassana Centres on the outskirts of various Buddhist pilgrimage sites attracting various participants throughout the year. There is a six month spiritual program offered by Root Institute for Cultural Wisdom in Bodhgaya. Through the peak months of December and January, many of the pilgrims from the Himalayan regions migrate to Bodhgaya, escaping the cooler climates by following respected lamas or Rinpoches from the various Tibetan schools and lineages (Geary 2014). This affords unique opportunities to attend various teachings, such as Ayang Rinpoche's annual phowa (T. 'pho ba) course held in Bodhgaya each year. There are also increasingly growing numbers of educational groups and pilgrimage tours such as the American-based Carleton (formerly Antioch) Buddhist Studies Program that involves both contemplative and educational university accredited courses that take place in residence at the Burmese *vihara*.

3.5. Dana and Making Merit: Donations, Offerings, and Service

Dana (Skt.; Pali) is loosely translated in English as “generosity” and is a key Buddhist virtue and source of great merit (*punya*) that is believed to be multiplied at a sacred site. As the first of ten perfections in the Pali tradition, among Theravada Buddhists, *dana* is seen as altruistic behavior that is instrumental in overcoming selfishness and attachment. In the Mahayana tradition, it usually refers to the Perfection of Generosity (Keown 2004, p. 69). Among all Buddhists, practicing different forms of generosity and making offerings provides certain soteriological advantages such as achieving a better rebirth. Offerings at a sacred site may also be directed toward more mundane material benefits such as the fulfillment of a special vow and/or to honor a deity in return for financial prosperity and good health. However, what defines a worthy recipient of a gift, also known as a ‘field of merit’ (*punya-ksetra*) is not always clear and may vary considerably across Buddhist cultural groups and among lay and monastic members. First and foremost, at a pilgrimage place, a valued field of merit is likely to include the giving of alms to members of the ordained sangha, making offerings toward a buddha image or shrine, the refurbishment, or embellishing of a temple or stupa, and the financial support of religious infrastructure and construction works such as a *dharamshala* (pilgrim-lodge) for pilgrims. As several scholars have shown in recent studies, increasingly, sacred sites have become launching pads for spectacular “materializations of merit” (Askew 2007; McDaniel 2016) that may also be used to compete for pilgrim and tourist patronage. In contrast to these spectacular displays, what is more common among lay pilgrims are ephemeral ritual offerings that are tied to the efficacy of karma and are part of the everyday materiality of devotion such as sweet perfumes, flowers, attaching prayer flags, providing bowls of fruit and foodstuff, water, oil lamps, candles, and incense. Applying gold leaf on sacred objects and images such as stone footprints (to the chagrin of conservation authorities) is also a popular practice among some South East Asian Buddhist groups. In a recent chapter by anthropologist Cook (2018), she accompanied a group of 120 Buddhist pilgrims from Chiang Mai, northern Thailand, to Nepal and India to make the journey around the four sites. In one instance, Cook describes the ways in which Thai lay pilgrims internalize and actualize the truths of suffering and impermanence in Kuśinagarī by symbolically cremating the names of deceased family members on small slips of paper, which allow them to create a tangible connection between the death of the Buddha and their own personal experiences of loss. These actions are not only morally transformative to the participant, but they also infuse and enhance the sacred power associated with the Buddhist sites because “the more people share in a meritorious act, the more merit is created” (Cook 2018, p. 45).

Another meritorious activity that is of great importance in Bodhgaya, especially to Theravada Buddhists, is the dressing of the gold-gilded central image of Buddha Shakyamuni with robes. During particularly auspicious days on the lunar calendar, the Buddha image is repeatedly dressed throughout the day by the temple management staff at the request of the devotee. The sanctification of robes by the Buddha is not only a great source of merit but also provides an important source of revenue for the temple management committee who later return the robes to the entrusted devotee, usually in exchange for a financial donation to the temple (Figure 8).

In several Buddhist sites in India and Nepal, making *Dana* may also translate into various forms of relief work and charitable projects that may fall under the umbrella term “socially engaged Buddhism” (Queen 2012), which involves applying Buddhist solutions to reduce various forms of suffering. The engaged Buddhist movement cuts across the lay–monastic divide and includes Buddhists from traditional Buddhist countries as well as more recent Western converts. Due to the poverty surrounding many Buddhist pilgrimage sites in the Indo-Gangetic region, this has given rise to a number of charitable initiatives that include supporting or sponsoring children at schools and/or orphanages, establishing an NGO, giving to beggars, and/or volunteer service to the community and environment with various initiatives ranging from health clinics to the building of public toilets. For some, this form of “engaged Buddhism” is an expression of the highest form of seeking (Goldberg 2013).



Figure 8. Offering robes to the main Buddha image in the Mahabodhi temple. (Photo from the author).

As we see in this section, providing Dana and accruing merit can be expressed in a range of ritual forms, from the recitation of certain verses, offerings to the sangha, donations, and social work, to name a few. Although there are multiple modalities for the transference of merit, one could argue that undertaking pilgrimage itself represents one of the highest forms of merit-making in the Buddhist world given the ways in which other ritual practices are enfolded within the journey. For these reasons, pilgrimage places are very auspicious locales for undertaking virtuous deeds which are akin to a merit multiplier effect.

3.6. Temporary Ordinations and “Conversion” Ceremonies

Although not nearly as common as some of the ritual behavior described above, pilgrimage places are also valued spaces for deepening ones commitment to the Triple Gems through forms of temporary ordination (*P. pabbajja*—“to go forth”) as well as conversion. In terms of temporary ordination, this is especially the case for many Theravada Buddhists, especially from Thailand, where temporary ordinations are like a rite of passage for young men in Thai Buddhist society who are expected to spend some time in a *vihara*. Although it was not practiced during the Buddha’s time and it is not clear when this practice was introduced (Keown 2004, p. 297), it is valued as a way of affirming ones commitment to the Buddha’s teachings and acquiring and transmitting merit by temporarily living in accordance with the dhamma. The stay might range from one day to several weeks, during which they have their heads shaved, wear monastic robes, reside in a nearby temple, and devote themselves to religious practices, including meditation and chanting. In recent years, there have been several cases of high-profile pilgrimage missions involving government employees from Thailand, including police and judges who resided at the Royal Wat Thai in Bodhgaya during the course of their ordination period.

Although the term “conversion” is somewhat problematic in the Indic context with respect to more fluid forms of South Asian religiosity and expression, it has become more prevalent in the modern era among people belonging to scheduled castes and scheduled tribes following the example of Bhim Rao Ambedkar. Much has been written about the highly accomplished low-caste leader Dr. Ambedkar (1891–1956) and his program of social reform that culminated in the highly symbolic conversion to Buddhism on 14 October 1956 in Nagpur, Maharashtra (Fitzgerald 1997; Jondhale and Beltz 2004; Zelliott 2008). Following in footsteps of Ambedkar, the majority of New Buddhists consider *diskha bhoomi* in Nagpur as a pilgrimage place and take initiations there. However, there are several instances of “conversion” ceremonies (or rather, *dhamma parivartan*) that have taken place under the boughs of the Bodhi tree or in other pilgrimage locales and sometimes coordinated through the Triratna Buddhist community (formerly TBMSG/FWBO) that organize these initiations among the Dalit community.

3.7. Consumption and Shopping

It is well known that pilgrimage and commerce are closely intertwined throughout the world. The record of Buddhist pilgrimage to India speaks to the importance of collecting sacred objects, “souvenirs”, and mass reproductions that are believed to capture the spirit of a place, serve as a mnemonic device for storytelling, and imbue the pilgrim with the power of the original place visited. This is certainly the case for the reproduction of Mahabodhi temple miniatures (as well as large-scale reproductions) that commemorate the Buddha’s enlightenment and have been found in several collections around the world (Asher 2012; Guy 1991). In more recent times, we have seen a growing market for various technologies of encapsulating the essence or authenticity of the pilgrimage journey that can be brought back to one’s home and circulated among friends and relatives as gifts. Although postcards and prints have lost some of their appeal in recent years because of digital cameras, they continue to play an important role in documenting forms of devotion that help to capture a “sense of place” and as a way of memorializing the journey. Moving beyond the flatness of texts and pictures, a number of sacred souvenirs bring a different sense of materiality and are popular purchases in these sacred locales. Those in wide circulation include bodhi leaves, sandalwood perfume, wooden and stone buddha statues and images, *mala*-beads, Buddha lockets, meditation bags, incense sticks, singing bowls, bracelets, and thangka paintings (Figure 9).



Figure 9. Sacred souvenirs on display in the bazaar, Bodhgaya. (Photo from the author).

Some destinations have also gained certain notoriety for specific purchases that speak to the historical and mythological context for their sacredness such as in Rajgir/Nalanda—black Buddha image; Vaishali—wooden Ashoka pillar with the Lion on top; Sarnath—the iconic Buddha image housed in Sarnath Museum; Kuśinagarī—reclining Buddha image; and Lumbini—the baby standing Buddha image. In addition to these “sacred souvenirs”, there is also a growing market among some pilgrim groups for certain Indian products such as silk scarfs and shawls, medicinal items, and Himalayan products, such as tea, herbal medicines, and popular Indian cosmetic brands, such as skin and face creams.⁸

4. Discussion: Embodying the Buddha-Dharma

Although we often interpret and imagine Buddhism as a religion of transcendence, in this concluding section, we draw insights from actor-network theory and material religion that takes seriously the close ontological ties between ritual practice and religious objects in mediating the human–divine dyad and destabilizing certain dichotomies such as the sacred/profane and spirit/matter. A question that often arises in the context of Buddhist pilgrimage, why is there a persistence of place in a religion that emphasizes *annica* or impermanence as part of the ethical foundations of Buddhist life and practice?

If *annica* is one of the three marks of existence in Buddhism—the others being *dukkha* (unsatisfactoriness) and *anatta* (non-selfhood)—the term expresses the notion that all conditioned existence, without exception, is in a constant state of flux—a complete absence of permanence and continuity. This is exemplified in human life itself with the aging process and the subsequent cycle of birth and death (*samsara*). Thus, underlying the doctrine of *annica* are certain ontological assumptions regarding the timeless and limitless truth about reality and the physical embodiment of that truth through individual Buddhas and their material or corporeal remains.

As a means of addressing the continued presence and agency of the Buddha following his passing, we have shown how pilgrimage and the rituals embodied at sacred places play an integral role in the memory work that help to reinforce the patterns of religious life. On one level, sacred places and their material affordances provide important physical links to religious narratives that act as mnemonic devices for recalling sacred events in the biographic life of the founder while providing a paradigmatic model of aspiration for those who have made progress along the path to nirvana. These aspirations continue to play a formative role in linking the human world with transcendent realms as the moral axis points for the religious community. Thus, as places of memory, the Buddhist pilgrimage sites provide a ritual environment that helps to reinforce and internalize the truths of the dhamma because they help bring to life the stories of the Buddha in the holy land in ways that are morally transformative. As Cook (2018, p. 51) writes, “These practices are intended to effect changes within themselves, resulting in the actualization of moral good in accordance with Buddhist cosmology”.

On another level, sacred sites are also invested with the presence of the Buddha by virtue of various techniques of ritualized consecration and worship involving sacred objects. The most widespread ritual technique for defining sacred place is relic enshrinement. For Buddhist adherents, it is believed that relics contain the energy of the Buddha and contact or proximity to these sacred objects yields strong soteriological benefits as sources of great merit (Huber 2008; Trainor 2007, p. 637). Through the symbolic construction of stupas and reliquary shrines, these material embodiments also suffuse and permeate the surrounding environment with the sacred and moral qualities of enlightened beings (Huber 2008, p. 61). Furthermore, as Huber points out with reference to Tibetan pilgrims, the superior quality of a holy place and its affective residue can also “be harvested and carried away, such as is commonly seen in the collection of water, earth and stones, or talismans from holy places by pilgrims” (2008, p. 61).

Thus, at a phenomenological level, the various ritual practices such as prostrations, chanting, and circumambulations not only provide a “focusing lens” (Smith 1980) that helps to evoke various affective responses and emotions such as *samvega*, but they also

help to purify those within it. According to Anne Klein (Lama Rigzin Drolma), this is the “operative premise” of Buddhist ritual praxis. Not only do formal ritual elements and their repetition provide a great source of support along the path, but they also play an integral role in dissolving certain negative impediments toward the sublime goal of enlightenment. As Klein (2016) explains in the context of Tibetan ritual practice, this quality of “dissolving and evolving” is a vital key to the embodied experience of ritual that corresponds with the basic meaning of enlightenment: “the first is *byang*, meaning to cleanse, eliminate, remove; hence, dissolve. The second is *chub*, meaning to grow, blossom, further, develop; hence, evolve”.

In the context of postcolonial modernity, Buddhist sacred space brings to the foreground a complex set of relationships and influences that converge around the notion of heritage and monumentality. There has been considerable scholarship in recent years around the ways in which heritage regimes (Geismar 2015) operate through an objectified historicist lens in ways that refashion relations among people giving rise to a sense of “disenchantment” and “social abstraction” that masks the exploitative and capital-intensive projects launched by various state governments and interest groups (del Marmol et al. 2013). As Michael Herzfeld describes, “Monumentality implies permanence, eternity, the disappearance of temporality except in some mythological sense. Monuments have a metonymic relationship to the entities (such as nation-states) that they serve, and their ponderous ontology discourages thoughts of their potential impermanence . . . ” (Herzfeld 2006, p. 129). These projects and prescriptions of monumentality are often ushered through by state authorities and international experts in the name of conservation, protection, and tourism development that may run in opposition to the religious sensibilities and ritual praxis of sacred space by devotees according to their own traditions of worship. Many Buddhist sites are situated in archaeological landscapes and because of the fragile nature of these landscapes, the governing authorities may prohibit or curtail the performance of certain rituals. Due to these restrictions and limited opportunities to perform certain rituals, the arena of performance often shifts to nearby monasteries and their temples. For instance, in Sarnath, pilgrims want to touch the Dhamek stupa but cannot do so because of fear of excessive wear and tear. In other words, the restrictions on certain ritual performances can create a spatial disconnect with access to certain relics and sacred objects, which is an essential part of pilgrimage (Shinde 2020).

At the same time, these forms of ritual practice also have the potential to subvert the strategies of place-making by heritage regimes and provide glimpses of alternatives to reigning territorial notions of property and enclosure (Collins 2011, p. 129) through their ongoing dialogues with devotion. As Collins writes, “There is little doubt that a naive empiricism focused on a material culture conceived of as a collection of objects fails to recognize the diversity of ways that people employ objects in social action (2011, pp. 127–28)”. It is for these reasons, in this paper, we have focused on the phenomenological ritual relationship with sacred space—the sensory, performative, storied, and embodied dimensions of place. Directly associated with the ritual praxis is the Buddhist belief that pilgrimage places have transformative power and that sacred power is contingent on the ongoing ritual reconsecration and renovation of the built environment.

Although efforts are being made to control the ritual activity through various heritage and conservation management instruments, we argue that this ritual relationship should be paramount in decision making because these embodied practices of remembrance and veneration underpin the religious values and meanings associated with these places. This emphasis on ritual behavior and the role of “practice” among Buddhist pilgrims also helps draw attention to the ways in which meaning and action interact in affectively charged ways to inculcate and reinforce cultural knowledge and religious-cosmological structures. As Bourdieu has shown, practice activates meaning, in that “space can have no meaning apart from practice” (Bourdieu 1977, p. 214). This presents unique management challenges for religious site managers and caretakers as they negotiate and meditate the fault lines of the physical and intangible qualities of sacred space and how certain objects, bodies,

actions, and ideas constitute a ritual ecosystem. Despite the technocratic nomenclature around “consuming” places of heritage and worship, Buddhist adherents do not undertake pilgrimage to “consume” the built environment but are active participants in the restitution and reinvention of a living sacred site that has implications for management, including new global conservation mandates around UNESCO.⁹

Due to the sheer number of pilgrims from abroad, it is difficult to generalize the significance of the pilgrimage journey, given the different backgrounds, motivations, and experiences. Although this paper provides a broad descriptive overview of the ritual ecology of sacred sites along the pilgrims path in North India and Nepal, more case studies are needed among different national groups and lineages to shed light on how Buddhist themselves imagine Buddhism on a translocal and transhistorical scale and the ongoing significance that rituals have for the importance of pilgrimage in the Indo-Gangetic region.

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Notes

- ¹ It has been argued elsewhere that the story of Aśokāvadāna and his redistribution of relics into 84,000 parts became a kind of ideal model for pilgrimage that entailed a process of mythologizing the pilgrim—and the ‘pilgrim builder extraordinaire’ (Coleman and Elsner 1995, p. 174).
- ² As Strong (2014, p. 55) illustrates, given the different position and meanings associated with each of the four sites, MPNS reminds us that not all places of pilgrimage would have had the same affective quality and emotional charge, and therefore, it is not particularly clear from the Buddha’s discourse “what aspects of the Buddha were thought to move pilgrims at different sites”. For example, were sites such as Bodhgaya valued more given its association with the Buddha’s awakening in comparison to a place such as Lumbini, which would have been associated more with the merits stemming from the Buddha’s previous lives?
- ³ An important distinction that is often made when referring to Buddhist relics is ‘primary relics’ or ‘corporeal relics’ associated with enlightened persons and secondary relics or ‘relics of contact’ that were previously in the possession of sacred persons or were used and touched by them (see Deeg 2014, p. 13).
- ⁴ Among some Buddhist communities, such as the Tibetan-Himalayan groups, Vesak is referred to as Sawa Dawa, and it is believed that the merit associated with one’s wholesome actions and deeds are particularly auspicious and increases 100,000 times. In the East Asian calendar Shakyamuni’s enlightenment and passage into *parinirvāṇa* occur in the twelfth and eleventh lunar months. For example, among the Japanese, this includes *nehan-e* (*parinirvāṇa* day) on 15 February, *hanamatsuri* on 8 April (Buddha’s birthday), and 8 December as *shaka-Jodo-e* (Bodhi day or date of Enlightenment).
- ⁵ For more on Tibetan practices of circumambulation, including Bon practitioners who circumambulate counterclockwise, see <https://www.lamayeshe.com/article/kyabje-zopa-rinpoches-advice-circumambulation> (accessed on 13 February 2021) and <https://www.yowangdu.com/tibetan-buddhism/circumambulation.html> (accessed on 13 February 2021).
- ⁶ Among some Tibetan-Himalayan Buddhists, prostrations are also frequently used in tandem with forms of visualization to a tantric deity. These prostrations may include the visualization of a particular “refuge tree” of which Guru Rinpoche (a common epithet of Padmasambhava) may be the centerpiece among the Nyingma sect, while reciting a prayer of taking refuge or the seven-line supplication to Guru Rinpoche. We would like to acknowledge Arthur McKeown for helping to clarify this.
- ⁷ Although the explanations for this exact number vary widely, some scholars attribute the number to a list of 108 afflictions, while others associate it with Buddhist cosmological renderings of all phenomenal existences (Buswell and Lopez 2013, p. 380).
- ⁸ Thank you to Manish Kumar for his insights on this section related to these items of purchases.
- ⁹ One expression of this is the Kyiv Statement on the protection of religious properties within the framework of the World Heritage Convention that emerged in 2010 following an international seminar on the role of religious communities in the management of World Heritage properties, involving active participation by religious authorities.

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