

## SIDDHARTHA FESTIVAL, 11<sup>TH</sup> – 13<sup>TH</sup> NOVEMBER, 2016

### Talk by Professor Mahesh Deokar on Bodhgaya

*Namo tassa bhagavato arahato samma sambuddhassa*

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I pay my homage to Lord Buddha, the dhamma and the sangha of his followers. I specially pay my homage to this very place, Bodh Gaya and of course, the holy Bodhi tree under which we have gathered for this wonderful Siddhartha Festival. On the onset, let me also pay my homage and my sincere gratitude to Khyentse Rinpoche for giving me the opportunity to come here, and to spend some time among all of you.

In fact, after listening to Rinpoche yesterday and some of the wonderful teachers – Venerable Kabir and **Venerable Dhammadipa**, I really feel very humble and I don't really know what to say amongst this gathering of scholars, practitioners and all leading figures in the dhamma.

However, I have been given this task; the task to say something about Bodh Gaya. I consider this, as Rinpoche says, to be my turn to do something – to cleanse my own mind, as Shantideva has said in his *Bodhicaryavatara*. It is not for exhibiting skills or scholarly knowledge which one has, but just basically to do some *samskaras*, the cultivation of one's mind, I take this opportunity to think aloud in front of you, as to how this particular place inspired the Buddha – so that we as practitioners may be similarly inspired.

We are all here as fellow travelers in this journey towards liberation. At different stages, but we have now gathered at this particular place where Prince Siddhartha became the Buddha, **the enlightened one**. If we just see a few episodes in Lord Buddha's life which were connected to this place, we can almost see his replica – it is a replica of his entire struggle, his entire life. It also gives us scenes which explain his journey after enlightenment, till he achieved *parinirvana*, in Kushinagar, a place which is not really very far from here.

Prince Siddhartha left his five companions who were helping him in his practice and decided to go his own way. He searched for somewhere suitable for further practice and came to this beautiful place – described in scriptures as full of nature, peace, solitude – and this is where he decided to do his first practice.

This very first episode tells us something special. It underlines the need for us to get seclusion. One cannot achieve these things in a group – he has to seclude himself in order to

achieve something special, something **higher**. **This is the first lesson in one's spiritual quest**, which is underlined by this very episode: Where he left the company of his five very ardent, zealous companions who became his first disciples, the *Panchavargiyas*, as they were known, and decided to go alone in a quest for enlightenment.

So the first lesson to be learnt is the importance of seclusion, the importance of solitude in **one's quest for enlightenment**. **When Prince Siddhartha reached this place, it is told to us that** he underwent lots of hardship. He tried all different ways, and finally, just before sitting for that last night of the full-moon day of Vaishakha he decided to stop the practices which were: The practices of self-mortification, the practices of hard penances and hard austerities. He decided to accept the middle path, decided to accept the food. This is where we have the episode of Sujata, the young daughter of a Senani – an army chief who was staying in the area, and she came in order to fulfill her vow.

So she came to Prince Siddhartha sitting under a Banyan tree and asked her maid to prepare this excellent rice gruel and to offer it to the prince in a golden bowl. Once she did this offering, it is told by the scriptures that Sujata let her maid free – she gave her freedom from slavery. I feel that this is also one episode related to this place.

This offering which Sujata made was not only considered an important offering in the life of Prince Siddhartha. Yes, it gave him strength to pursue his final quest, his liberation but it also liberated Sujata from her mindset of holding someone as a slave. It liberated her maid from slavery, and it also liberated Sujata as the master from this mentality. A very liberating thought, a liberating point in the journey of Buddhism as a whole.

Dhamma is a power which liberates not only those practicing it, but also liberates those who come in contact with such a person. So I think this is one lesson, it was an advice given by the **Buddha to all his disciples throughout**. **This is also something we see in the life of Buddha's** great disciples like Anathapindika and others – who, once coming in contact with the Buddha, decided to liberate their servants from the bondages of slavery.

After receiving food from Sujata, Prince Siddhartha decided – on the night of the full moon day of Vaisakh – (of course, the later Pali works talk about the importance of this very point – describing it as the navel of the universe, the center, the epicenter of knowledge, of enlightenment) – this is the place which Siddhartha Gautama chose. The tradition later glorifies this place. It says that all the Buddhas of the past and the future attained enlightenment and will attain enlightenment under this place, under this very tree. So this is the spot of enlightenment for all the Buddhas, they say.

We just have to take it in more general terms. It is hinting at something very special. Before going to that, let us go back and recall what happened after Siddhartha Gautama received the alms and made a vow on the bank of the river Niranjara. He set his bowl in the current of the river, and made a vow – If today, this bowl flows upstream, my wish will be fulfilled. They say that the bowl that was thrown in the water really surged upstream and then sank down. This was a hint that on this night, Siddhartha would fulfil his dream of becoming enlightened, of becoming the Buddha.

Again, this is a very symbolic and representative episode which marks the journey of Siddhartha, the journey of Buddhism as a whole; that is, against the stream. It is called the *Pathisothagami magga*, or the path that goes against the stream. This entire practice, this entire path that one has chosen to undertake is going against the stream, not allowing you to flow with the stream – to make a special effort. To walk your way against the common understandings, the common beliefs and as I say, go against established norms of truth, against conventional knowledge, understanding and to go for something really different. By choosing this very path of going against the stream, Siddhartha sat under the tree with a firm commitment to attain liberation, to attain enlightenment.

I said that this place is said to be the navel, the epicenter of knowledge and I'll come back to that later. It is said that the Buddha made the commitment not to leave his seat till he attained liberation. **You must've seen this very famous image where the Buddha is shown to touch the ground.** It is well known as the *Bhumisparsha mudra*, a posture which depicts this. There is this very dramatic, figurative fight with the Mara which is depicted in most of the literary works in Pali and Sanskrit. This has also been well depicted in art forms, in paintings, in sculptures. The fight with Mara, the fight with evil tendencies in one's mind. In this very battle, the Buddha touched the ground and said, **"I make this earth my witness, witness to my vow, which I made many, many eons ago to complete this dream of achieving enlightenment for the liberation of all sentient beings."**

We are here in this very land, we are sitting on this very ground which the Buddha touched many, many years ago. While walking on this very space, walking on this very ground – let us touch this land with our hands, with our fingers and most importantly, with our minds. We make this firm commitment to complete our journey on the path and not to leave it incomplete. This is a moment which one must make use of, to firmly sow the seed, to lay the foundation of the whole journey toward liberation which the Buddha has made.

He is in a way inviting us all who have gathered here to make the same resolution which would give us that strength – which gave him that strength to stand up against all odds, all those threats that Mara was creating.

To overcome all those temptations which he was throwing at Siddhartha, we need that firm resolve, we need that commitment to walk on the path. This is the place, this is the land which gives us that strength. So let us touch the ground and make that resolve to complete our journey, come what may.

It is said that at the dawn, when Bodhisattva finally became enlightened, he realized this very subtle and profound dhamma for which he strived for eons – right from the point where he made his first resolve as Sumedha, in front of the Buddha Dipamkara, This was where he got this prophecy, the word from the past Buddha that this person, Sumedha would become the future Buddha. So the seed which he has sown has now come to his fruition. That seed now germinated into this tree, the tree of wisdom, the tree of Bodhi which made him the Buddha.

Even after getting enlightenment, he wanted to cross the ocean of samsara and he wanted to help others cross the same ocean. In Pali, it is said as follows: *tinno tareyam, mutto macheyam* – which means, after having crossed the ocean of samsara, I'll help others to cross

it over. Being free myself, I will help others gain freedom. This is the first step toward becoming the *samyak sambuddha*.

After becoming enlightened the next journey was to become a teacher, and to spread the message. In the *Vinayaka* texts of the Pali scriptures, we have a wonderful account of a few weeks which the enlightened Buddha spent in this very place. *Vinaya* talks about 4 weeks. Later on in the tradition, the account is extended to 7 weeks before he finally left for Sarnath, where the Buddha gave his first sermon. The sermon which turned the wheel of dharma, which set this whole caravan going.

Before that, the 7 weeks which he spent here in this very place, in the vicinity of this Bodhi Tree are very important.

Whenever I read this portion in the scriptures, I realize that this is a representation of the entire journey of the Buddha, and Buddhism. In the Theravada tradition which considers *sutta, vinaya and abhidhamma*, the teachings of the Vinaya talk about the first three weeks as the time which the Buddha spent in absorbing and revisiting that enlightenment experience which he had during that Vaisakh full-moon night.

It is said that the first week after enlightenment, he continued sitting under the same Bodhi tree, absorbing this experience, this knowledge which he had. Enlightenment, Bodhi, must have been such an overwhelming experience which you cannot simply absorb, or feel in that one flash. So he spent that whole week in *Vimutti Sukha*, the happiness, the joy of complete freedom, complete liberation.

We have to remember that the Buddha, when he achieved enlightenment, was sitting under this Bodhi tree facing the east. After the first week, he decided to walk north-east (As some traditional Buddhist accounts tell us), where he then watched the Bodhi tree under which he gained enlightenment, with eyes steadfast. Without blinking his eyes even once, he sat there, watching. This is called the week of *animesapallanka* – *animesa*: not blinking, looking steadfast.

I think this is very symbolic. This is something like experiencing or revisiting what he had experienced a week ago from a distance, from a neutral standpoint. This is where he started contemplating on various aspects of dhamma. After sitting for a week, he prepared a walking track – what is well known as a *chankramanapatha* in the tradition – in between this spot where he had the animesapallanka and the Bodhi tree.

It is said that the deities decorated this walking path with jewels. Therefore, this path is called *ratanachankama*. He walked up and down for a week, contemplating, reflecting on the dhamma and all its subtle aspects and points. He tried getting a grasp of it in such a way that he could share it with others. After completing that *chankrama* for a week, Buddha is said to have gone to the Northern direction, where there **was this place called 'jewel house'** – *ratnagriha* in Pali – where he sat and contemplated on *Abhidharma*.

This is the Theravada tradition which declares the Abhidharma to be the *Buddhavachana*, the words of the Buddha. It is said that this was the spot where he contemplated on the Abhidharma and he laid everything down in terms of aphorisms, in terms of *matrikas*.

Thus, after spending time with his own experience of liberation and with the subtleties of dhamma – the first encounter they say, which the Buddha had with a human being - that came when he was into the fifth week after enlightenment.

When the Buddha went to the East of the Bodhi tree – there was this Banyan tree called *Ajapala Nigrodha*. A tree where shepherds used to protect and tie their goats and sheep at, a tree for the ‘*ajapalas*’, cowherds. He went there, spending a week and he met a Brahmin who was described as ‘*huhunka Brahmana*’. ‘*Huhunka*’ is a word which actually describes the nature of this Brahmin. A Brahmin who always says, ‘*hun, hun*’ – this is a mark of his arrogance. Arrogantly, he asked the Buddha a question.

The Buddha, with his enthusiasm of sharing the dhamma with others – with all sentient beings as he had promised many eons ago – give these teachings. As the Pali texts record, there are these three verses – called the spontaneous verses, famously known as ‘*udanas*’. An ‘*udana*’ is a spontaneous utterance. These 3 verses which he uttered, as his first utterance after enlightenment according to the vinayaka tradition – which he uttered to a human being, to an audience outside.

Before that, according to the *suta* tradition he uttered a stanza where he described his own experience of liberation – his quest for liberation. Here, the Buddha said that he was, as a Bodhisattva running from life to life in search of a person building houses which symbolize *sansaric* bondages – and finally he saw Mara, who was the house builder. Then, he dismantled the entire structure, the house, and the tangles of craving and finally became liberated.

“*Aneka-jati samsaram*  
*sandhavissam anibbisam,*  
*Gahakarakam gavesanto*  
*dukkha-jati-punappunam.*  
*Gahakaraka! Dithosi,*  
*puna geham na kahasi.*  
*Sabba te phasuka bhagga,*  
*gahakutam visankhitam.”*

They say these are the two stanzas which he uttered after enlightenment, but those were to himself, revisiting his journey.

But the first three stanzas are addressed to a disciple – or someone he considered a first prospective disciple, this *huhunka* Brahmana talking about the subtle dharma, talking about this very law of dependent origination.

When he addressed three stanzas, it seems that the Brahmin did not understand anything and rather, asked him a question regarding the qualities which makes one a true Brahmin. Buddha answered him, underlining the importance of a moral life and mindful living as

important qualities of a Brahmin. In a way, we see that his first attempt to give the dhamma failed as the Brahmin walked away without realizing the dhamma.

Then we get the second episode. The next week which was the sixth week he spent under this very famous *Muchalinda* tree – as the commentary tells us, it was positioned south-east of the Bodhi tree. Buddha sat in meditation here for a week and there was an untimely storm. The snake, *Muchalinda* – named so because he was living close to this tree – came out and surrounded the Buddha with his coils, held his hood as a protection over his head and protected him for an entire week of heavy storm, and rain. After the storm was over, *Muchalinda* unfolded all his coils and took human form, standing in front of the Buddha, requesting him to give him that Dhamma, to teach him.

The Buddha then started with his second address, this time not to a human being, but to a *naga* and gave him the teaching on contentment, highlighting the quality of contentment – *santosha, santushti*.

Although Buddha gave this teaching to a *naga*, who was very satisfied with it – **still, it wasn't** this teaching that opened the eyes of someone to the truth of the dhamma. Something which will make a person see nirvana, see ultimate reality. It was still something related to morality, the moral life.

After this week under the Muchalinda tree – for the seventh week, Buddha walked to the south of the Bodhi tree in the direction of another tree called the *Rajayatana* tree. This is the tree where the Buddha sat in meditation for a week, and this was where (after he completed his 7 days of meditation) he encountered two people from the merchant class: Tapassu and Ballika, who have travelled from *Utkaladesha*. **Some people call it 'Suvarnabhoomi' or the golden land.** These two merchants, guided by their own tree-deity, approached the Buddha, offered him some food and became the first lay disciples of the Buddha.

**It is said that the Buddha gave them the dhamma, gave them the teaching. It isn't mentioned** as to which teaching it was, and what exactly he told them. Again, they were two lay *upaasikas*, belonging to the merchant class. So it must have been the dhamma focusing mainly on the *dhana*, the *shila* – the first steps to practicing the dhamma.

This is where he had this emotion – commonly termed a moment of frustration – a moment of anxiety, where even the Buddha thought, Is it really worth sharing this dhamma to these common people, the masses who are grappling, groping in the darkness of delusion, the darkness of ignorance, the darkness of craving. This is what dominates their life, and this dhamma is very subtle, very profound. It is difficult to see for the common man, whose eyes are full of the dust of ignorance. Is it really worth sharing this dhamma, is it really worth taking this effort?

**I'm sure that all** great teachers must have these thoughts. Is it worth spending so much effort and time to share this dhamma to those who have their own ideas, who have their own views, who are entangled in their own likes, dislikes?

The Buddha, throughout all these eons, fulfilled all the paramis by making great efforts which we heard about yesterday. The entire journey he undertook for this very moment of

becoming enlightened and sharing this knowledge with all the sentient beings, helping them come out of their ignorance. After 7 weeks, he had this moment where he was shaky in his mind – thinking as to whether he should teach, or not teach.

Then comes this very famous episode where they say the Brahma (Sahampati) came down when in Brahmaloak he realized this wavering thought in the mind of the Buddha, a decision **not to teach anymore. He thought, ‘If I teach, it will end up in exertion, and weariness and it will have no results.’**

The Brahma Sahampati came down, paid his reverence and reminded him of his promise, **which he’d made eons ago. He requested him to share his knowledge, to give his teachings to all sentient beings, asked him to use his omniscience to survey the world. He said, “As in a pond of lotuses where some lotuses have their buds already out of the water, ready to bloom with just one sun ray while other buds approach the surface, and yet others are submerged deep inside. The same way, there are beings who have little dust in their eyes, and just need one stroke of that magnificent light, the light of dhamma to bloom, to blossom, to become enlightened.**

Sahampati gave him this consolation and this confidence – **it’s a very beautiful sentence in Pali, a very beautiful line which all of us as practitioners and as messengers of dhamma should always remember.**

He told Buddha, he asked him, **“Get up, oh hero and wander as the leader of a caravan. Give this dhamma to all. Don’t be afraid, there will be people who will know, who will understand.” He said, “*aiyya taro bhavisiyanti*”** – there will be people who will understand. This is something very special. All of us who are working in the field of dhamma get this feeling of anxiety, sometime or the other – is it really worth preaching, or spreading the dhamma?

This other line always gives me this motivation **when I’m at work.** In the academic field, fighting with the administration and so on – that keep on doing your efforts, there will be someone who will understand. So keep on sowing these seeds. There will be a moment where someone will take the spark and light the lamp of knowledge.

This consolation and confidence which the Sahampati gave – *aiyya taro bhavisiyanti* – I think **it’s a very important thing to remember for all of us.**

Another thing. This Brahma Sahampati, is again a symbol – a symbolic representation of the *Brahma Viharas* – of sublime qualities. Maitri (Quality of Friendship), karuna (Quality of compassion), mudita (Quality of altruistic joy) and upeksha (the quality of equanimity). It again underlines that only wisdom is not enough to spread the dhamma, it is still lame.

If dhamma is to really walk, and if this wheel of dhamma is to get its momentum, it needs the backing of maitri and karuna. It is this karuna and maitri which Brahma Sahampati in a way invoked, or reminded the Buddha to invoke it in his heart, to be the teacher for the masses, to be the samyak sambuddha. Unless one has this, one cannot become the samyak sambuddha. One cannot really undertake this path of spreading the dhamma, of helping people come out of their bondages. Brahma Sahampati also represents the importance of these two qualities, along with pragya (wisdom).

So this is the point where Buddha's wisdom, obtained under this very Bodhi tree, under this very spot got accompaniment of karuna and maitri. This is also the point where he got the new way of teaching and spreading the dhamma. This is where the Buddha decided to teach. A great decision he made under this very tree, and I think this is more important than the moment of enlightenment which he got here, on the night of the Vaisakh full moon for us as disciples and followers of the Buddha. If he would not have decided to teach the dhamma, at this point, we all would've been lost. So I think for us, this is the greatest moment, even greater than the moment of enlightenment as followers of Buddhism.

Now for this very moment, the Buddha decided to set out on a journey, a journey in search of those who could take this dhamma. This is the point where he remembered his first two teachers, Alara Kalama and Uddaka Ramaputta, who taught meditation to him in his early days, when he was a Bodhisattva. After discovering that they're no more, he remembered the five companions of his who had been helping him when he was on his path. He decided that these are the ones to whom I should give the dhamma to first. One point was, he thought that they were the ones best suited to understanding the dhamma, because they were already of the path of the dhamma, practicing people.

The second thing, which is also important, is the sense of gratitude which is exhibited in the entire career of the Buddha. He decided to give whatever he'd achieved back to those teachers, those colleagues who'd helped him in his quest. This gives us another important quality to develop amongst ourselves – this sense of gratitude to all those who are helping us in our quest toward enlightenment.

As Rinpoche always says, or as the Mahayana teachings also tell us – Anyone who is helping you and even the ones who are creating obstacles for you – all these beings are your helpers. They are helping you in one way or another in your quest to achieve nirvana.

This deep sense of gratitude is reflected in the journey of the Buddha even after enlightenment. The 45 years that he spent journeying, travelling from this very place to Kapilavastu in the north and up to Ujjain in the south – this journey was a result of that sense of gratitude he had, to give everything back to society, back to all those beings who were, in some way or another, participants in his journey of enlightenment.

This is where, when he started on his journey – he met this *ajivaka* called *Upaka* – a person belonging to the *ajivaka* sect, he met the Buddha on his way to Varanasi and he asked him about his status as a spiritual practitioner, his teacher and the teaching of his teacher.

Buddha said that he is the Buddha. He said that he has no teacher, has become free from worldly entanglements and can teach the dhamma. Upaka, ignorant as he was, just looked at him, nodded and walked away, ignoring the dhamma which the Buddha was ready to give him, to offer him. He walked away.

The Buddha then continued his journey to Sarnath, to Varanasi (Isipatana) where he gave his first sermon, and where he actually set the wheel of dharma rolling. These episodes which took place here, where we have encounters of the Buddha with this Brahmin, and Upaka Ajivaka – are examples of his encounters with different traditions; one belonging to the

brahmanic tradition and the other belonging to the *shramanik* tradition, and both of them ignoring the dhamma.

Then comes the naga, represents the naga world, the animals, and the tapassubalika represents the merchant class. You see that in the entire career of the Buddha, these are the four communities with whom he was engaging and was trying to teach the dhamma to.

The entire episode which we had in this very place is a representative of the struggle, the journey of Buddhism that is continuing to this very date.

This story tells us a lot. It symbolizes many things, many qualities which a practitioner of the Buddha dhamma needs to imbibe in him, to carry forward and spread the tradition.

With these very words, I appeal – to myself, and to all of you – that you touch this ground and make this firm resolve to continue this journey towards enlightenment. I thank Rinpoche for giving me this opportunity to talk to you, and you for listening so patiently.

Thank you, and I will stop here.