

# Travelogue: The Buddha Path & the Gandhi Legacy in Contemporary India

BY JERLINA LOVE

In December 2006, I took the opportunity of a lifetime to travel with my friend Kelsey to India, the birthplace of Buddhism and Gandhian nonviolence. These are the two strongest philosophical forces in my life, and I was tremendously excited to see, feel, hear, taste and touch the physical and cultural contexts from which these philosophies and practices had emerged. Kelsey and I traveled across the north of India for two weeks studying Buddhism in Sarnath, Bodh Gaya and Kushinagara. The following two weeks, I joined Global Exchange's "Gandhi Legacy Tour." This tour was led by Arun Gandhi, who is both the founder of the M.K. Gandhi Institute for Nonviolence and the Mahatma's grandson. Traveling to India woke me up to a rich land, history and people, who have contributed immensely to the world and our conceptualization of peace and non-violence. I can't wait to go back!

## SARNATH

After Siddhartha Gautama (the Buddha) defeated his *mara* (internal demons) and attained enlightenment, he was faced with a new challenge: would he continue to sit or would he teach others to free themselves from suffering? He wisely chose to set out and teach others, and the small town of Sarnath was where he delivered his first lecture to his first five disciples. It was also in Sarnath where I shook hands with the Dalai Lama! His Holiness currently lives in Dharamsala, India, which has become an international hub of Buddhist peace activity.

Seated in lotus position, Gautama attained enlightenment underneath the bodhi tree, which is located in what is now the town of Bodh Gaya. Today, Buddhists from across the globe pilgrimage to sit, meditate, chant and pray beneath its branches. I sat for hours and chanted the Nichiren Buddhist mantra *nam myoho renge kyo* (meaning, the teaching of the lotus flower of the wonderful law) as I contemplated the message of the Buddha: to achieve enlightenment one must battle and win against the *mara* that haunts one's consciousness. Gandhi's bril-

liance was to use this method of "fighting" to successfully liberate India from the British in 1947.

## MUMBAI

I took a two-day train ride from Northern India to Mumbai where the Gandhi Legacy Tour commenced. The first day of our tour, we visited the Women's India Trust. This organization is a co-operative that provides women with empowering work opportunities, such as making linens, paper products, handicrafts, and jams. The second day of our trip, the group visited Mani Bhavan, where Gandhi resided from 1917 to 1934. His bedroom is still preserved, and it was there that Martin Luther King Jr. spent the night in 1959 and deepened in his commitment to nonviolence and the civil rights movement in the U.S.

## SANGLI

Every day, our group visited co-operatives and schools where Indian men and women, inspired by Gandhian ideals of self-improvement, empowerment and village uplift, work to transform their lives and society. My group was composed of activists involved in similar activities



A visit to Sarnath, where the author met His Holiness the Dalai Lama.



across the U.S., Mexico, Nicaragua, Palestine and Switzerland. Sami Awad, the founder of Holy Land Trust, a Palestinian nonprofit that educates and trains people in non-violence, was one of the many illustrious members of my group. Awad had come to India to deepen his own understanding of Gandhi's teachings, and share his findings with other Palestinians struggling against Israeli oppression.



The famous Bodhi Tree, where the Buddha attained enlightenment.

#### AHMEDABAD

I had been most excited about visiting the Satyagraha Ashram, the legendary birthplace of Gandhi's *Salt Satyagraha*, in 1930. This stop in the Legacy Tour was also the most enlightening for me, as it gave me much insight into Gandhi's daily life. The Mahatma worked very hard, starting his days at 4 a.m. He dedicated his time to cleaning, cooking, studying, meditating, writing for *Indian Opinion* and *Harijan*, meeting with liberation leaders from across the globe and taking care of his own physical health. Not only did Gandhi work steadfastly, but he also led a simple material life. Such a peaceful, frugal lifestyle was a true feat, especially considering that the Satyagraha Ashram is on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, a bustling city.

#### DELHI

Raj Ghat, the site of Gandhi's cremation in Delhi, has become a pilgrimage site for Gandhi students from all over the world. Although Gandhi was the "Guru" of the movement, it took the actions of ordinary people across India for the liberation movement to succeed.

At the entrance of the site, a plaque commemorates Gandhi's ideals:

*I would like to see India free and strong so that she may offer herself as a willing and pure sacrifice for the betterment of the world. The individual, being pure, sacrifices himself for the family, the latter for the village, the village for the district, the district for the province, the province for the nation, the nation for all. — M.K. Gandhi*

#### GORGAON

The final few days of my tour, I stayed with Preeti, Maneesh, Yashua and Namya at their home in Gurgaon, a suburb of Delhi. I met this family in California where they had come to live for a year and practiced Buddhism with my family. They moved back to India a few months before my trip and invited me to stay with them. This exchange was a beautiful manifestation of grassroots "globalization from below." First, they served as citizen ambassadors from India; then we met again during my tenure as a citizen ambassador for the U.S. What a powerful experience!

#### Resources:

Global Exchange: <<http://www.globalexchange.org>>  
 The Gandhi Institute: <<http://gandhiinstitute.org>>  
 Navdanya: <<http://www.navdanya.org>>  
 Holy Land Trust: <<http://www.holylandtrust.org>>  
 The Buddha Path: <<http://www.buddhapath.org>>  
 His Holiness the Dalai Lama: <<http://www.dalailama.com>>  
 Women's India Trust: <<http://wit.org.in>>