

# Journey to Bodhgaya: Garden of the Enlightenment

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## Introduction

At an audience with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, Middlebury College, VT, members of Milarepa Buddhist Meditation Center were invited to discuss proposed designs for the natural environment, and for buildings and gardens on 270 acres of meadows and woodlands overlooking the Connecticut River Valley in Barnet, Vermont.

As project designer, I spoke about the environmental setting, *feng-shui* and earth energies to place the project on the land; about historical precedents from India, China, Tibet and Japan for designing a Buddhist meditation centre here today in the west; about symbolic references to bridge philosophy and design; about expressions of Buddhist practice used in architecture and landscape.

Nearing the end of my carefully prepared presentation, His Holiness succinctly asked: "*Tell me, what is the basis for this design?*" Regardless of my seemingly extensive research, my response was shallow; he kindly accepted my sophomoric answer.

Following the audience, my dissatisfied response didn't go away. For years afterwards, I offered insufficient hindsight answers. If were to continue designing spiritual centres and gardens for meditation and healing, I needed firm physical, mental and spiritual foundation. Having neither, I set off to find such basis. But where?

While classical texts on garden-making suggest studying works of accomplished garden masters, I was particularly drawn to those also distinguished as spiritual teachers. Zen teacher Muso Soseki, designer of Kyoto's Saiho-ji Gardens said:

*There are people for whom landscape sustains their search for truth -- truly noble. These people will see the great earth -- mountains, rivers, trees and stones in their changing appearances following the four seasons -- a means to search for truth in making a garden.*

I began to see that His Holiness' question profoundly linked spiritual inquiry with the practice of designing gardens, making design of landscape integral to a spiritual path. As a Buddhist, this would lead me to spiritual texts such as *Uttaratantra Sutra*, *Prajna-paramita Sutra* and *Vimalakirti Sutra*, connecting qualities of a Buddha and Bodhisattva with landscape.

In Buddhist discourse, landscape is as much part of the Buddha and Bodhisattva as their own skin and bones; their own purified five aggregates (form – feeling – perception – compositional factors – consciousness). The beauty of their artistry is the expression of Buddha-nature, enlightenment itself – seed of every sentient being. Not only would their gardens be a source of inspiration, their teachings could reveal profound spiritual paths showing how they learned to do what they did. Going as deeply to the source of these designs would teach me ways to express landscape as spiritual practice, *the truth of design*.

In this light, scriptural texts about Buddha Shakyamuni's enlightenment over 2500 years ago in Bodhgaya, the garden of enlightenment, would suggest Bodhgaya as a fundamental expression of the Buddhist sacred landscape, providing precedence and inspiration. The allegory of Bodhgaya reveals the important relationships among: 1) qualities of landscape unsuitable for practice of a spiritual path; 2) qualities of landscape suitable for practices of a spiritual path, thus providing inspiration and precedence; 3) qualities of a spiritual teacher to design a place for practice of a spiritual path.

### **Qualities of landscape unsuitable for practice of a spiritual path**

Deciding that six years of austere, uncompromised living was not a reasonable approach to enlightenment, Siddhartha Gautama accepted others' care, regained his health, and set out for the crest of Pragbodhi Mountain. Although stating his intention to attain enlightenment there, Pragbodhi actually served as refutation of landscape unsuitable for practice of a spiritual path.

Desolate and barren of vegetation, rocks thrust vertically into the air listing precipitously, unstable stones and boulders heaving down the mountainside, Pragbodhi Mountain lay like a huge serpent across the landscape, shoulders and back arching into the sky, tail partially encircling the river valley below, the cave in its belly facing the setting sun, its head bowed southwest towards Bodhgaya. To 5<sup>th</sup> century Chinese pilgrim Fa-hien, Pragbodhi exhibited inauspicious characteristics enumerated in practices of *feng-shui*, already codified in writing for 700 years.

Pragbodhi Mountain could *not* be the place to attain enlightenment. So Siddhartha left the cave, descended the mountain and walked along the Nairanjana River towards the grove of trees of Bodhgaya and the Diamond Throne.

### **Qualities of landscape suitable for practices of a spiritual path**

The *First Avalokita Sutra* in the *Mahavastu* says:

*From the moment that bodhisattvas become completely endowed with steadfast activities of body, speech and mind, they go to that spot of earth where they sit to overcome all hindrances – That spot of earth (the Diamond Throne) has sixteen characteristics.*

Lifetimes before, Siddhartha came across this landscape and was struck by its beauty and peaceful setting. He took pleasure in Nairanjana River's pure waters, flowing gently between grassy banks. With glimpses into neighboring hamlets, sited neither too far nor too near the river, he was delighted by the seclusion and remote distance of the verdant woods from turmoil. Seeing all this, his mind became exceedingly calm -- certainly a place to attain enlightenment. It was as Siddhartha had thought in a previous life:

*This is the place where all the Buddhas overcome all obstacles to complete enlightenment – and beyond this none can pass.*

### **Qualities of a spiritual teacher to design a place for practice of a spiritual path.**

According to Mahayana Buddhist traditions, Buddha Shakyamuni actually attained enlightenment an incomprehensible time before his rebirth as Prince Siddhartha Gautama. Consequently, all the Buddha's physical, verbal and mental activities were deliberately intentional, expressions of complete awareness and knowledge. Nothing done nor any place gone was accidental, circumstantial or coincidence. His appearance as prince, ascetic and enlightened Buddha was

essentially a *performance* to show the process, difficulties and lessons individuals learn on the enlightenment path.

Consequently, the grassy woodland on the banks of the Nairanjana River was not merely inconsequential background for the enlightenment. Nor were scriptural portraits of the landscape embellishment or mere academic triviality to the subtle event. The Buddha purposefully sited and designed this garden landscape, inseparable and integral to his presentation of the discourse on the path to enlightenment, with qualities in which to most effectively present these teachings. Because of that, the garden of the enlightenment provides clues to the artistic expressions produced by the fully awakened mind.

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