

Paying Homage to Lokapita: My Pilgrimage to Swayambhunath, Kathmandu, Nepal

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Lokapita Swayambhu is what the Mahayana Saddharma Pundarika Sutra - the Lotus Sutra in English - calls Lord Buddha. Lokapita - father of the people - is a term tinged with emotion. In what sense is Lord Buddha like a father? Because He is the First Refuge, He gives shelter and one of the attributes of a father is to give shelter to his children. The Saddharma Pundarika Sutra emphatically asserts the eternal aspect of Lord Buddha. In a very different sense, Lord Buddha is eternally present. The Sangha founded by Him is still very vibrant. The Second Refuge, Dharma, signifies the Buddhist teachings and is typically found in books.

Mahayana arose from the Lokottaravadi Mahasanghikas and was accompanied by the apotheosis of Lord Buddha. Although the Saddharma Pundarika Sutra is by no means the earliest Mahayana text - we find that Buddha Amitabha is already present in the Buddhakshetra Sukhavati in the west and Buddha Akshobhya is already present in the Buddhakshetra Abhirati in the east, and so the Sukhavati-vyuha Sutra and the Akshobhya-vyuha Sutra and many more Mahayana Sutras must have been written before the Saddharma Pundarika Sutra - it is one of the most important of all Mahayana Sutras. It is fully extant in the Sanskrit original and has been published as such by the Mithila Institute, Darbhanga, Bihar, India. The Chinese translation by Kumarajiva is noteworthy. Modern translations into English etc. are also readily available.

It is perhaps based on the description of Lord Buddha as Lokapita Swayambhu in the Saddharma Pundarika Sutra that the Buddhist pilgrimage site of Swambhunath in Kathmandu, Nepal, got its name. There is an interesting legend connected to this pilgrimage site. The legend says that the Kathmandu valley was initially full of water and Bodhisattva Manjushri saw Lord Buddha at Swambhunath surrounded by water. Bodhisattva Manjushri then took out his sword and cut a gap in the Himalayas and the water drained out and the Kathmandu valley was formed.

Bodhisattva Manjushri is, of course, a mythological figure and does not even have a historical prototype. His origin is unknown and his origins have been speculated to be as far apart as Andhra Pradesh, India, and Xinjiang, China. Exactly like other Mahayana Bodhisattvas, for example, Avalokiteshwara, Theravada - Sthaviravada in Sanskrit - does not recognise Bodhisattva Manjushri.

I made a pilgrimage to Swambhunath some years ago. Statues of Lord Buddha are everywhere. From the base of the hill to the hilltop where there is both a Stupa and a temple,

Lord Buddha is everywhere - and not just in a worshipping context. This probably needs a little explanation.

In very ancient times, Lord Buddha was not represented in statues. He was later represented symbolically. Much later, His statues came into existence. He was, and still is, represented in statues and paintings in both a narrative context and a worshipping context. His depiction in a narrative context is simply a depiction of events in His life.

The view of Kathmandu and the Himalayas from the top of Swambhunath is breathtaking. There was earlier only a steep staircase to the top of the hill. Now, a more easily climbable staircase has been constructed although the old staircase is still there. Cars and buses have to be left much lower down the hill as one starts to climb up the stairs. On my way down from the top of the hill, at the bottom of the stairs, I bought a statue of Lord Buddha and a Nepalese Khukri, dagger, in a scabbard - the latter as a souvenir of my second visit to Nepal, the first having taken place way back in 1981.

I saw Homa, burnt offering, being performed in open air on the hilltop. Homa, common in Hinduism, was taken into Vajrayana Buddhism from Hinduism and the set of twelve Homas mentioned in the Mahayana Mahavairochana Sutra is important in the Shingon School of Mahayana Buddhism in Japan. The Shingon School of Mahayana Buddhism was founded by the Japanese saint Kukai.

Various nationalities melt into one in paying homage to Lord Buddha at Swayambhunath. Nepalese, Indians, Chinese and many other nationalities can be found at Swayambhunath paying homage to Lord Buddha.

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