

Exploring Peacebuilding in the Birthplace of the Buddha



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Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha in southern Nepal, lies 25 kilometers from the Indian border on a flat plain that houses some of the poorest people in the world. Few of them are Buddhist, but many of them exist in conditions that seem not far removed from the era when the Buddha walked these lands. Most are Hindu or Muslim agricultural workers, tending their water buffalo and paddy fields, carrying straw on their heads and heavier loads in their oxcarts, sending their children to simple primary schools before they become part of the labor force.

In the year 249 BCE, almost 400 years after the birth of the Buddha, Indian Emperor Ashoka erected an inscribed pillar to commemorate the site of the Buddha's birth. Over the subsequent centuries, the region was forsaken, rediscovered, abandoned again, and finally explored and excavated in the late 19th century. Over the past 30 years, a community of monasteries has been built on land acquired by the Nepali government for donation to Buddhist organizations. In 1997, UNESCO recognized Lumbini as a World Heritage Site, thus increasing the likelihood of long-term protection.

Between the Maya Devi Temple at one end marking the birthplace, and the Shanti Stupa (Peace Pagoda) at the opposite end symbolizing world peace, lie the artfully designed structures of the Asian Buddhist community. With their delicate spires and fanciful roof lines, the temples and monasteries stand in stark contrast to the woeful huts of the local people who construct and service the religious institutions. There may be a certain level of monastic competition or national pride, as new structures rise higher and grander than those built previously, so that now the monasteries tower over the trees that served as the original height markers for building limits.

Almost all the Asian Buddhist countries have constructed monasteries and sent monks and nuns to teach and to host pilgrims. The Shanti Stupa monk, Venerable Sato, walks through the villages daily while beating his prayer drum, thus acquiring from the local children the moniker "Tam Tam Baba," or drum-beating monk. Venerable Vivekananda directs Panditarama, a Burmese meditation retreat center based on the teachings of Venerable U Pandita and popular with westerners and Israelis. Venerable Dr. Lam, who first came to an undeveloped Lumbini from his native Vietnam 40 years ago, exhorts everyone in this mix to honor the significance of Lumbini and live in harmony. This, it seems, is easier said than done.



There is conflict in the birth-land of the Buddha, between members of the monastic community, the local population, and the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT) tasked by the government with developing

the site. Dreams and desires pull the community in opposing directions. Infrastructure development happens at a snail's pace, due not only to differences, but also to Nepal's just-ended civil war and to the rhythm of construction carried out almost exclusively by pre-industrial hand labor. The LDT master plan, which was developed in 1978, is rapidly becoming outdated and is not necessarily consonant with what the monastics envision or the local population needs. To address these issues and to spur progress on developing Lumbini, Venerable Vivekananda invited Karuna Center for Peacebuilding to facilitate conflict resolution workshops that would hopefully move the process forward.

Thus, in December 2007 and November 2008, after completing other Karuna Center programs in Kathmandu, I journeyed to Lumbini intending to be of service to all the players and concerns surrounding the development of this pilgrimage site. To help with the facilitation, I invited Sonam Choepel and Karma Lekshe, the directors of a Tibetan NGO located in Dharamsala, to join me in Lumbini. We have been mentoring their NGO, Tibetan Centre for Conflict Resolution, for several years, and I felt that engaging with the Lumbini stakeholders would be another useful learning opportunity for them. Their working knowledge of Hindi, the common language on the Nepal/Indian border, also enhanced our work.

In 2007 we met in the still-unfinished Korean monastery, where a significant number of stakeholder groups addressed the conflicts together for the first time. In the room were rickshaw drivers, curio sellers, international monks and nuns, LDT staff, hotel owners, social workers, police, local educators, and others who have a vested interest in the region. We drew a wheel, a dharma chakra of interdependent stakeholders to illustrate the depth of mutuality and connection among members of the larger Lumbini community. We surfaced competing needs, fears, and visions, searching for agreement and common



ground. We spoke of sharing power and creating win-win solutions that would be of overall benefit and would improve life in Lumbini. We explored the application of metta (lovingkindness) and karuna (compassion) to conflict resolution, practiced right speech and skillful listening, and engaged in problem solving dialogues. Rickshaw drivers and roadside vendors saw that they could communicate their needs to international monks and Nepalese government representatives, and feel acknowledged and respected. The

three-day experience generated much enthusiasm, commitments to work together, plans for radio and print responses to the seminar, and a sense of empathy, affinity, and kindness with others that transcended status and role differences.

In 2008 our group was much enlarged, meeting in the more spacious and amenable Gautami Nepali Nuns Center. Here we explored perceptions about the pace and direction of development, identified connectors and dividers between groups and visions, and

created a common platform for peace in Lumbini based on the principles of compassion, generosity, meeting human needs, and the art of compromise. The group engaged in productive structured dialogue and collaborative problem solving, and surfaced critical issues such as the master plan, industrial encroachment, waste management, infrastructure, and stakeholder relationships. Over the days, we worked to build trusting relationships and widen the sense of inclusion among participants so varied in position and power. Symbolic of issues of inclusion, a Muslim educator remarked with deep passion that this was the first time in 30 years that anyone had asked his opinion about development and relationships in Lumbini. Spurred on by the general goodwill and spirit of metta, the participants formed the “Committee for the Preservation of Lumbini.” Almost the entire group signed up and agreed to monthly meetings. The first meeting took place just days after my departure, with promising results.



The committee selected officers and coordinators, agreed to meet monthly on the full moon day, expanded its base, and arranged to invite representatives from Kathmandu embassies who have a direct stake in Lumbini. Most importantly, they addressed several initiatives requested at our workshop particularly focused on education for the local population. Community members feel that Lumbini residents ought to receive direct benefit from the wisdom of the Buddhist tradition for the betterment of their own lives and their communities. Many work at the monasteries but have no understanding of Buddhism or the importance of their village to the Buddhist world. In a full and gracious response to this, Venerable Sagar Dhamma, an especially articulate Nepalese monk who ordained in Sri Lanka, will teach dharma to the local high school students and give dharma talks on local FM radio stations. Venerable Sato, the Tam Tam Baba from Japan, will send one student at a time to the Gandhi Ashram in India, who will then return and teach in the villages. Moti Lal Yadav, a Nepali, will establish a primary school in an underserved village. Venerable Bhadda Madika, a Burmese nun, will conduct World Heritage awareness programs. These are inspiring responses, bound to have positive and mutually reinforcing effects on all the stakeholders, rightly demonstrating their interconnections and interdependence.



Another area of grievance and concern for all is waste management and to address this the committee is establishing a radio program, educating the local school children, and beginning a weekly clean up campaign. This visible demonstration of cooperation resulting from the workshop will lift spirits considerably, as trash and lack of beautification is a widespread concern among all stakeholders. Others on the committee agreed to coordinate with UNESCO, and the president of the Rickshaw Pullers Association, Nagendra Giri, will work to smooth and regulate the interface between locals who offer services and spiritual pilgrims from abroad. Bicycle rickshaws serve as the taxi cabs of Lumbini, plying the monastic zone as

well as the surrounding roadways. All of this is very heartening, and while enthusiasm will naturally slack over time, a new impetus is in place to better share and showcase the teachings of the Buddha with both local residents and international visitors, for the enrichment of all.

Following this three-day seminar, I led a separate one-day workshop for the 30 staff members of the Lumbini Development Trust, who have their own set of conflicts in their mandated role to preserve, protect, and promote Lumbini. In this seminar we focused on the causes and conditions of conflict, on right speech and compassionate interactions, and on skills of conflict resolution. Members spoke honestly about the challenges of working in an organization that is politicized and divided, and we did our best to surface grievances and find mechanisms to reduce tension and improve group relations. This body has a great impact on the outcome of development in Lumbini, so their skills and happiness will reflect on the overall outcome.

As I returned home, I found myself reflecting on the question: “To whom does Lumbini belong?” Conflicts arise from differing understandings of this fundamental question by local residents, the worldwide Buddhist Sangha, and the Nepalese government, all stakeholders in Lumbini’s future. How much will Lumbini continue to be a reflection of the chaotic realities of contemporary Nepal/India, no matter how strictly the international community tries to uphold order, beauty, cleanliness, and current international standards for tourist sites? How much should it change to satisfy modern tastes and sensibilities? On the other hand, why should it stay disordered and unkempt? How can it serve the culture of Nepalese teenagers who come for school trips and picnics, looking for snacks and souvenirs, and simultaneously attract spiritual pilgrims who seek silence, inspiration, and sanctuary? Who decides? Does anyone get pushed out? How does harmony reign in this Buddhist world heritage site?

The multi-stakeholder group is on its way to resolving these issues, currently under the patient leadership of Venerable Vivekananda and the Committee for Preservation. Venerable Vivekananda deserves special mention as the visionary for these efforts to create a forum for multi-stakeholder dialogue and conflict resolution. There is now widespread agreement that Lumbini should be clean, green, and beautiful. Everyone wants spiritual education for the local adults and children to be offered by the monasteries. All ask for honesty and transparency in stakeholder relations, especially with the government, which in the end controls the finances. Everyone agrees that Lumbini should be preserved and protected as a holy site for all time, one where we can be reminded that the Buddha took birth in Lumbini, walked the earth for 80 years, and taught the world through his own experience that the end of suffering is possible and attainable. It is my hope that the Committee for the Preservation of Lumbini will accomplish its work well and continually, so that its inevitable conflicts are resolved with compassion and kindness, and the site becomes a beacon and inspiration to local and international visitors alike, for the benefit of all beings.

