

Sakyamuni Buddha

By Reverend Kazunori Takahashi

Every year on April 8th, we observe Buddha's Birthday, *Hanamatsuri*. According to Buddhist tradition, Prince Siddhartha Gautama (who later became Sakyamuni Buddha), the son of King Suddohana and Queen Maya, was born at the Lumbini Garden in Nepal on April 8 of about 2,500 years ago.

Four years ago, I had a chance to visit the Lumbini Garden. From long before, I wanted to visit sacred places relating to Sakyamuni Buddha's life. Then at last, I could achieve my wish of traveling to Nepal and India by myself, using my two-week vacation. I visited Lumbini Garden, Buddha Gaya where Buddha attained supreme enlightenment, Sarnath where Sakyamuni Buddha delivered his first Dharma message, Kusinagar where he entered into Nirvana, and some other places where Sakyamuni Buddha stayed and gave guidance to his disciples.

My first destination was Kathmandu, Nepal. To reach there, I took four airplanes. I changed airplanes in Honolulu, Tokyo, Bangkok, then I finally arrived in Kathmandu, Nepal. It took about 18 hours to go to Nepal by the airplanes. I had various precious experiences through this travel, but space is limited to talk about everything, so I'd like to share one unforgettable incident.

When I visited different places relating to Sakyamuni Buddha's life, I met so many Buddhist people. They were from not only Nepal and India but also Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Cambodia, China, Korea, Indonesia, Japan, European countries, United States and so on. When they visited there, they did a service and paid homage to the altar.

When I heard what they chanted, I was surprised. Many of them chanted "Vandana Ti-sarana" that we always chant at Sunday services. They chanted "**Namo Tassa Bhagavato Arahato Sammasam Buddhassa,**" and "**Buddham Saranam Gacchami, Dhammam Saranam Gachami, Sangham Saranam Gacchami.**" The way of chanting is a little different depending on traditions, but the words are totally same.

The definition of Buddhist is "a person who relies on Buddha, Dharma and Sangha," so it is not strange that other Buddhists also chant Vandana-Tisarana. However, I heard that in Nepal and India, the birthplace of Buddhism. In addition, those countries are far from Hawaii. Therefore, I couldn't help but have a deep impression, because I could reconfirm that Buddha Dharma is shared with so many people and became a strength beyond space and time.

After this experience, I thought of the following Shinran Shonin's words: **How joyous I am, Gutoku Shinran, disciple of Sakyamuni! Rare is it to come upon the sacred scriptures from the westward land of India and the commentaries of the masters of China and Japan, but now I have been able to encounter them. Rare is it to hear them, but already I have been able to hear. Reverently entrusting myself to the teaching, practice and realization that are the true essence of the Pure Land way, I am especially aware of the profundity of the Tathagata's benevolence. Here I rejoice in what I have heard and extol what I have attained.**

(The True Teaching, Practice, and Realization of the Pure Land Way, Preface: *Collected Works of Shinran*, p. 4)

I tend to take for granted that I can listen to the teaching of Buddhism. However, through visiting the sacred places of Nepal and India, I was reminded that it's great for me to have chances to listen to the teaching of Buddhism here today.

Hanamatsuri is to celebrate the birthday of Sakyamuni Buddha. This celebration is a great opportunity for us to be reminded of how rare it is to listen to the Buddha Dharma today. It would also make us remember the importance of passing it on to the next generation. Namo Amida Butsu.