

MUSEE ASIATICA

Biarritz

Press dossier of the exposition
«On the steps of Buddha »
Photographs by Xintian Zhu
From 7 September to 31 December 2010



Summary

- Biography of photographer
- Presentation of the exposition
- Extracts from exposition

Biography of Mme Xintian Zhu

Mme Xintian Zhu, conservator of Musée Asiatique, artist – painter and photographer, was born in 1951 in China. From 1970, she carried out her career of photography in a professional photographic laboratory for 12 years : from 1982 to 1986, as professor of theory and technical photography at the University of Hangzhou.

She has a doctorate in Art History and Archaeology of the Far East from the University of Paris 4 – Sorbonne. Since 1990, she is a researcher at the Indian Cultural Research Centre, and one of the founders of Musée Asiatique.

From 1997, with the objective of promoting cultural exchange between the east and west, she held many exhibitions on a global scale. From the time Musée Asiatique was established in March 1999, she has organised hundreds of exhibitions some of which are the following :

- March 1999, « The Historic Monuments of India and China »
- December 2001, « Afghanistan »
- July – December 2003, «Wonderful Tribal Art from Bastar »
- November 2003, «The Festival of Ganesa »
- July – November 2005, « Marriage in India »
- March-May 2008, « Angkor – Wonder of the World »
- June – September 2008, «Atru – New Angkor»
- May – December 2009, «The erotic sculptures on the temples of Khajuraho in India»
- July – August 2010, « Miracle of World Archaeology : Patan »



An army of gigantic demons leave quietly after threatening Buddha.

Presentation of the exhibition

After his Enlightenment under the bodhi tree (knowledge) more than 2500 years, Buddha Sakyamuni has opened a "path of deep knowledge of oneself" leading to the discovery of our true self.

To visit the place where Buddha lived, suffered, fought against demons, attained enlightenment, preached, then renounced his life, is a deep desire for the Buddhists and the people who wish to know Buddha, but few among them are able to undertake this long journey. Recently, at the beginning of this year 2010, it has been possible for the conservator of Musée ASIATICA, Madame Xintian Zhu.

Siddharta Gautama, Buddha Sakyamuni, contemporary of Socrates and Confucius, was a prince who renounced his throne in order to study the truth. Maya, the mother of Buddha, wife of king Suddhodhana from Kapilavastu, had a dream where her son would be born, in the form of a white elephant coming down from the sky, symbol of the beginning of a grand era.

The history of 80 years of Buddha on earth constitutes one of the most remarkable events in the history of humanity. His meaningful life is the path to follow for all those who wish to know oneself and to liberate themselves from suffering.

In this photographic exhibition, you will be able to see the dream of Maya (Bharhut) and the birth of Buddha (Gandharan art), the place where the Buddha had undertaken his asceticism, a cave lost in the mountain (at the side of Rajgir), maintained today by Tibetan monks. You too will be able to follow the path of the conservator of Musée Asiatique who has visited the splendid temple of Mahabodhi at Bodhgaya, where the Buddha had attained enlightenment, as well as Sarnath, where a stupa dating to two thousand years is brought up in the border of the park of gazelles where the Buddha had started his first teaching.

During her journey, Mme Zhu stopped at the site of the famous university of Nalanda where the learned scholars had taught since centuries, in ruins from the 12th century. It is remarkable to know that after more than two thousand years since the death of Buddha,



this place still remains alive, active and flourishing, a grace to the pilgrims.

The Buddha did not want his disciples to illustrate his image on the monuments. Thus, the first representations of Buddha are in the form of throne, stele, Bodhi tree, or impression of foot. One never finds the representation of Buddha in human form in most of the ancient Buddhist monuments, for example, on the stupas of Bharhut, Sanchi or Amaravati (between 1st century before J-C and 3rd century after J-C).

It is in Gandharan art that Buddha began to be represented in Greek style. Later the image of Buddha began to be diversified according to the aesthetics of different nations and believers.

In this exhibition, you will be able to admire the sculptures of different schools, which are preserved today in the museums of Patna, Nalanda, Sarnath etc.

A surprising exhibition in the hall of Musée ASIATICA from 7th September to 31 December 2010 !



Sanchi – Prayer flags from pilgrims

Extracts from the exhibition

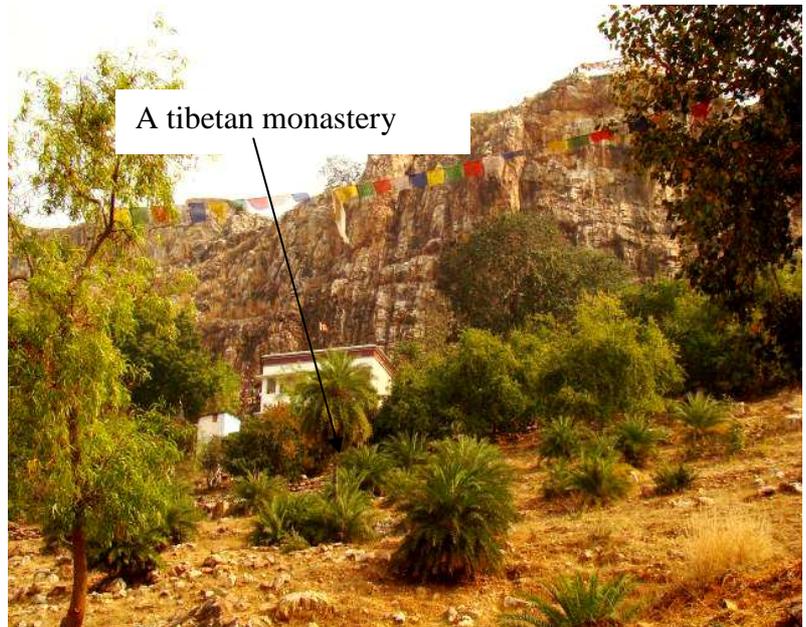


On this very ancient image on the top of the balustrade of Bharhut stupa dating from the 1st century before J-C., you can see a woman lying down on a bed at night, then you can see a candle stand lighted at her feet.

One can also observe on the edge of the bed two servants waving a hunter's mouche, and another, in *anjali mudra* (gesture of adoration) from the other side of the bed.

This is the queen MAYA, who saw in a dream, the arrival of a white celestial elephant that you see kneeling and whose paw supports on his arms. This is the announcement of the birth of Buddha. According to tradition, for the birth of the Buddha, the queen MAYA had to leave the palace of her husband, king Suddhodhana, who ruled the country Sakya, in the capital Kapilavastu, in order to return to the house of her parents to wait for Buddha's birth. On the way, she passed the Himalayan hills in the Terai region to the south of Nepal for resting in the coolness of the forest of Lumbini. There, seated under a branch of the Sala tree, she gave birth to prince Siddhartha.

It is in the cave of these rocky hills that Prince Siddhartha took shelter in order to meditate on the significance of life. He left his father's palace after having discovered the sufferings of life. This place is difficult to access : it is necessary to cross the river to about twenty kilometres to reach Bodhgaya, walk across the plain and then walk through a steep path. There – high, in this peaceful place, some tibetan monks have constructed a small monastery close to the cave over which the prayer flags are hung.



Very few pilgrims know this quiet place. Everyone, nearby, find a secret place of cremation where great monks wished to be buried, after having passed their last days close to this sacred place.

It becomes necessary to bend in order to enter in a narrow cave, a lonely cave at that time. At the place where Buddha was meditating for several years, his emaciated and gilded image is now represented. The place is silent, solemn and filled with spiritual power and faith gathered for centuries.

The incense burnt here day and night now graces the presence of the monks who come from Tibet in order to honor the memory of the Great Light. But the Buddha observed that asceticism was not the correct life. It weakened the body and mental faculties.

He thus resumed the path and met five monks who headed towards Benares.

With them he continued his search for the truth of life and to master perfection... He came to the conclusion that starvation from hunger does not help to realise the truth. He went and meditated under a Bodhi tree,...then he saw the light. Siddhartha became the enlightened Buddha.



Sarnath – The Stupa of Dhamtekk

Accompanied by five sages, Buddha reached Ganga and stopped at Dhamtekk close to Sarnath. It is there that he preached on a full moon the four Noble Truths and the Way of the Noble Path, in the famous garden of deers and doe. At this place also, a stupa had been erected in the third century of our era for commemorating this event. On the image above, five tibetan monks stop by and you can see that the stupa is in the process of being decorated with a long golden colour ribbon.



The Sarnath museum protects the sculptures which have been discovered at the end of excavations since the 19th century in the surroundings of this sacred place. In particular, one of the most moving sculptures of Buddha making the gesture of turning the wheel of the king. He is in the Gupta style of 4th /5th century, when Sarnath protected a community of thousands of monks.



On the wall of the Mahabodhi temple, numerous images of the Buddha, dating in general from 11th and 12th century.

The tall pyramid structure of the Mahabodhi temple (the temple of the Great Awakening) is known to all Buddhists. It is surrounded by a stupa at a height of 60 metres and at the corners it is surrounded by four smaller pyramids. This temple had been reconstructed several times, and lastly at the 11th century. It is still surrounded by a balustrade dating to the 2nd century. It is also surrounded with a large square courtyard which contains hundreds of stupas. Around all, a square enclosure allowing pilgrims to make their endless petitions. They are of all nationalities, but above all they acknowledge the tibetan pilgrims, those from Sri Lanka, China, Japan, Thaïland and India. Some walk removing their mala (rosary), others reciting mantras or some sutras, some others bowing down, finally many tibetans and some westerners lying down on their body in a meditative pose.

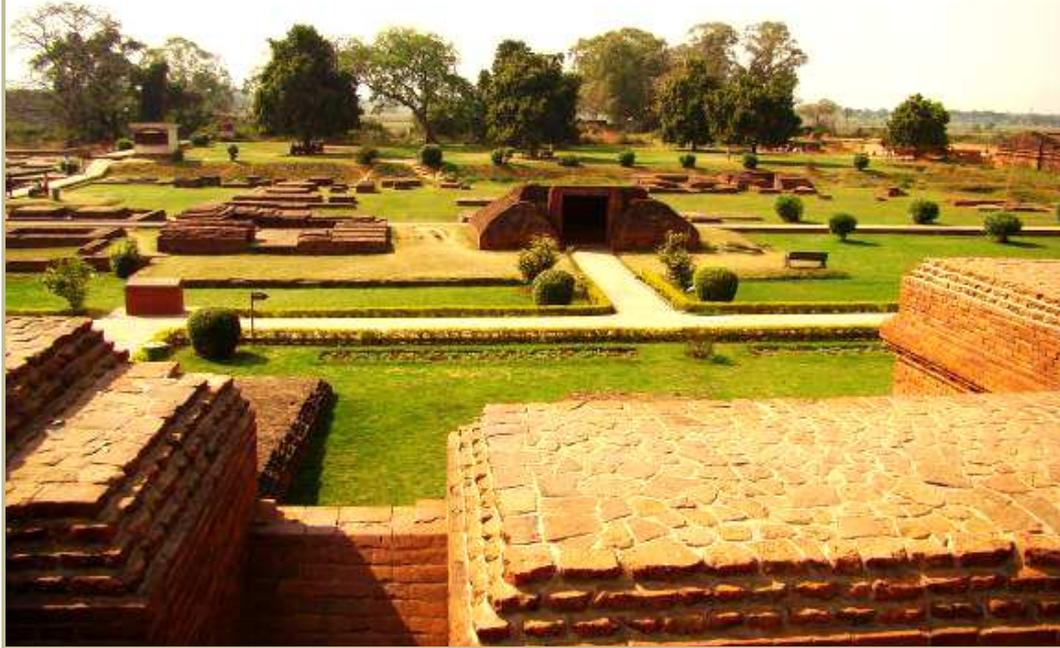


In the enclosure of the temple of Great Awakening (Mahabodhi), some scenes of dévotion.



In front the balustrade surrounding the tree of knowledge, or of « Great Awakening », numerous pilgrims come to meditate day and night.

The ruins of the Buddhist University of Nalanda



The Stupa of Sanchi : one of the most beautiful and ancient Buddhist monument.

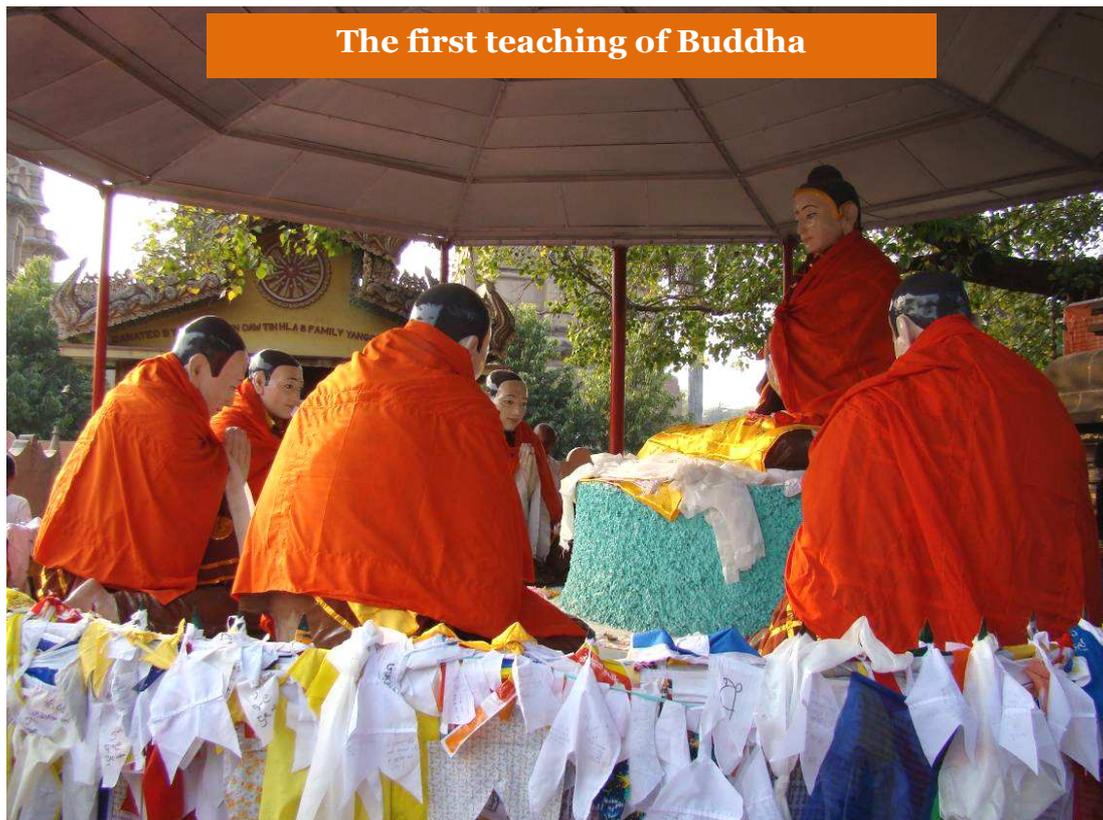


Accompanied by his young disciple Ananda, Buddha is lying down under a tree at Kusvinnagara terrace with a bout of fever. It is there that he attained Nirvana, the final aim of accumulation of his life, in 483 before J-C.

Scene of devotion in the enclosure of the Mahabodhi temple.



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