

**The Shrine of Steadfast Gaze.  
Where is it?**



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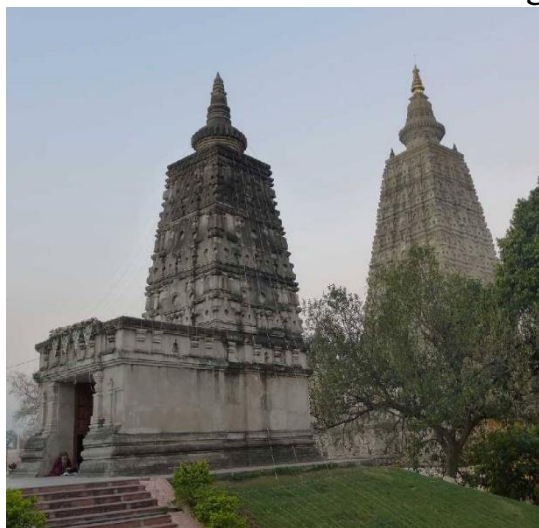
Essays on Buddhist History & Culture

## The Shrine of Steadfast Gaze. Where is it?



According to the introduction to the Jātaka, after the Buddha's awakening he spent seven weeks at Uruvelā, the modern Bodh Gaya, and during the second week he sat gazing at the Bodhi Tree without blinking.

In time, a shrine called the Animisa Cetiya, in English the Shrine of Steadfast Gaze or sometimes the Unblinking Shrine, came to be built on this site and became one of the seven sacred locations (*sattamahāthāna*) at Bodh Gaya. With the almost complete disappearance of Buddhism after the 13<sup>th</sup> century Bodh Gaya was abandoned, its temples and shrines fell into ruin and the very location of most of them was forgotten. In 1877 a



Temple A.



Temple A before its repair, circa 1910.

mission from the king of Burma came to restore the Mahābodhi Temple and in the process they destroyed many of the smaller shrines around it, often leaving no more than their foundations. After Joseph Beglar excavated the whole area in 1880, the only structures that were more than just foundations were the Mahābodhi Temple, the small temple that now shelters a footprints stone, what is now identified as the Ratnaghara Caitya, and a small single-spire temple now with a large sign next to it identifying it as the Animisa Cetiya. I will call this building Temple A. How did this temple get to be identified as the Animisa Cetiya?

Towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when pilgrims began returning to Bodh Gaya they wanted to see all the places where the Buddha had stayed during his seven weeks there. Being mostly simple folk with no

knowledge of history or archaeology, it is only natural that they would identify any existing structures with the ones they most wanted to see. Having worshipped the Bodhi Tree, their next concern was to see the place where the Buddha had sat for seven days gazing at it. Other than the Mahābodhi Temple itself, the most noticeable structure was Temple A and so it gradually came to be identified with the Animisa Cetiya.

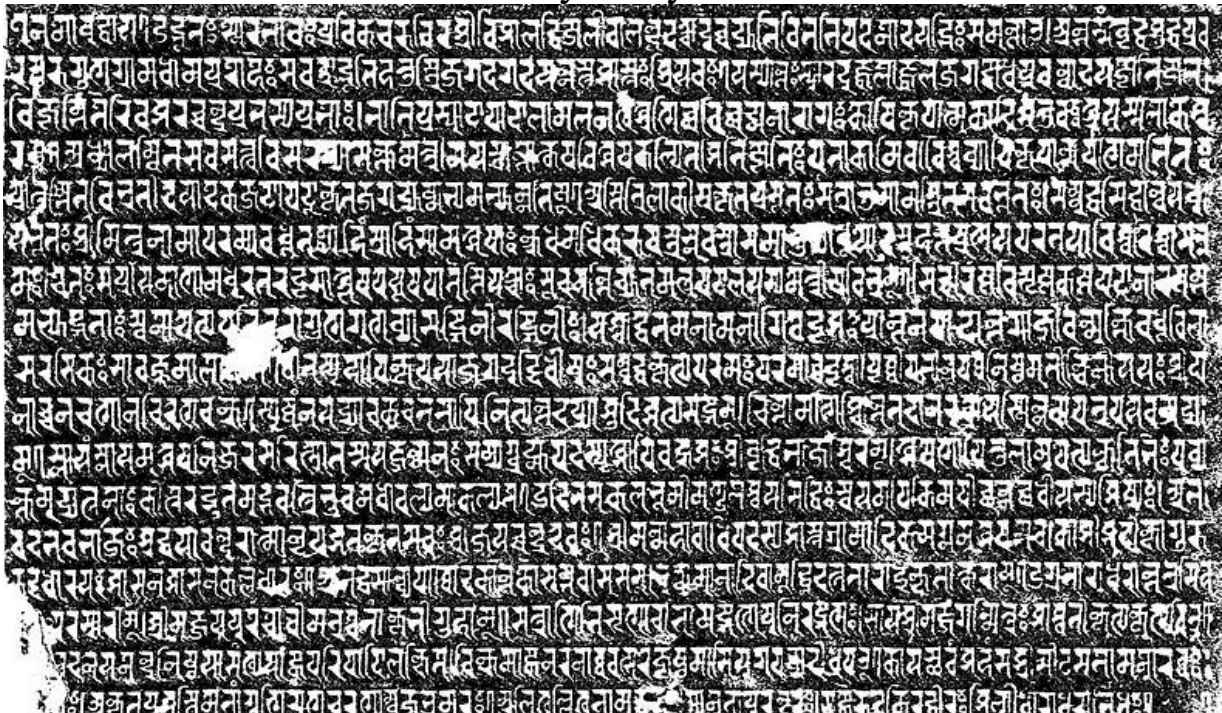
What had been just uninformed popular opinion gradually became accepted fact when in the 1980's the Temple Management Committee decided to put up signs identifying the various sacred sites around Bodh Gaya after consultation with the leading monks in the town. The abbot of the Burmese Vihara produced a book called the *Jinatthapakāsanī* written by Kyithe Laythat Sayadaw in 1920 which identified Temple A as the Animisa Caitya. In this book, the author says he had used the Tipitaka and the commentaries to try to locate all the seven sacred sites "to the best of my ability". While the Sayadaw no doubt had strong faith, this is not very helpful in settling questions pertaining to history or archaeology and at best his conclusions were uninformed guesses. Nevertheless, the Temple Management Committee accepted his conclusions and Temple A 'officially' became the Animisa Cetiya.

In this article I will contend that there are two reasons why Temple A cannot be the Animisa Cetiya. Firstly, it will be noticed that it sits on the top of a very high hillock, in fact, it is nearly the highest ground around Bodh Gaya. This is not a natural hill but a part of the large artificial mound built up by centuries of habitation, what in archaeology is called a tell. The fact that Temple A sits on the top of this mound proves that it was built at a very late date, in fact, it is probably the last large structure built at Bodh Gaya until the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Secondly, there is no record of what the ancient Animisa Cetiya looked like, but as it was built to mark the place where the Buddha sat for seven days gazing at the Bodhi Tree, we can safely conjecture that it would have had a Buddha statue in it positioned to face towards the Bodhi Tree. Temple A faces towards the river, not the Bodhi Tree. These facts are sufficient to prove that Temple A cannot be the Animisa Cetiya.

So if Temple A is not the Animisa Cetiya what is it? In the 19<sup>th</sup> century Alexander Cunningham discovered an inscription at Bodh Gaya which might throw some light on this temple's real identity. Unfortunately, he did not say exactly where he found this inscription but



it may well have been in Temple A. The inscription recorded the building of a shrine at Bodh Gayā by a monk named Śrīmitra



Śrīmitra's inscription

sometime between the years 1183 and 1192. It also mentions that a statue of Avalokiteśvara Siṃhanāda and three statues of Tārā were enshrined in this temple. When Rajendralal Mitra was at Bodh Gaya in 1877 he noticed that Temple A had a statue of Avalokiteśvara Siṃhanāda in it and also that local people worshipped it as a goddess they called Tārādevi and referred to this temple as Tārā Vihāra. The statue of Avalokiteśvara Siṃhanāda is still enshrined in Temple A and dates from either the 11<sup>th</sup> or 12<sup>th</sup> century.



Mitra's drawing of Avalokiteśvara Siṃhanāda statue in Temple A, 1878

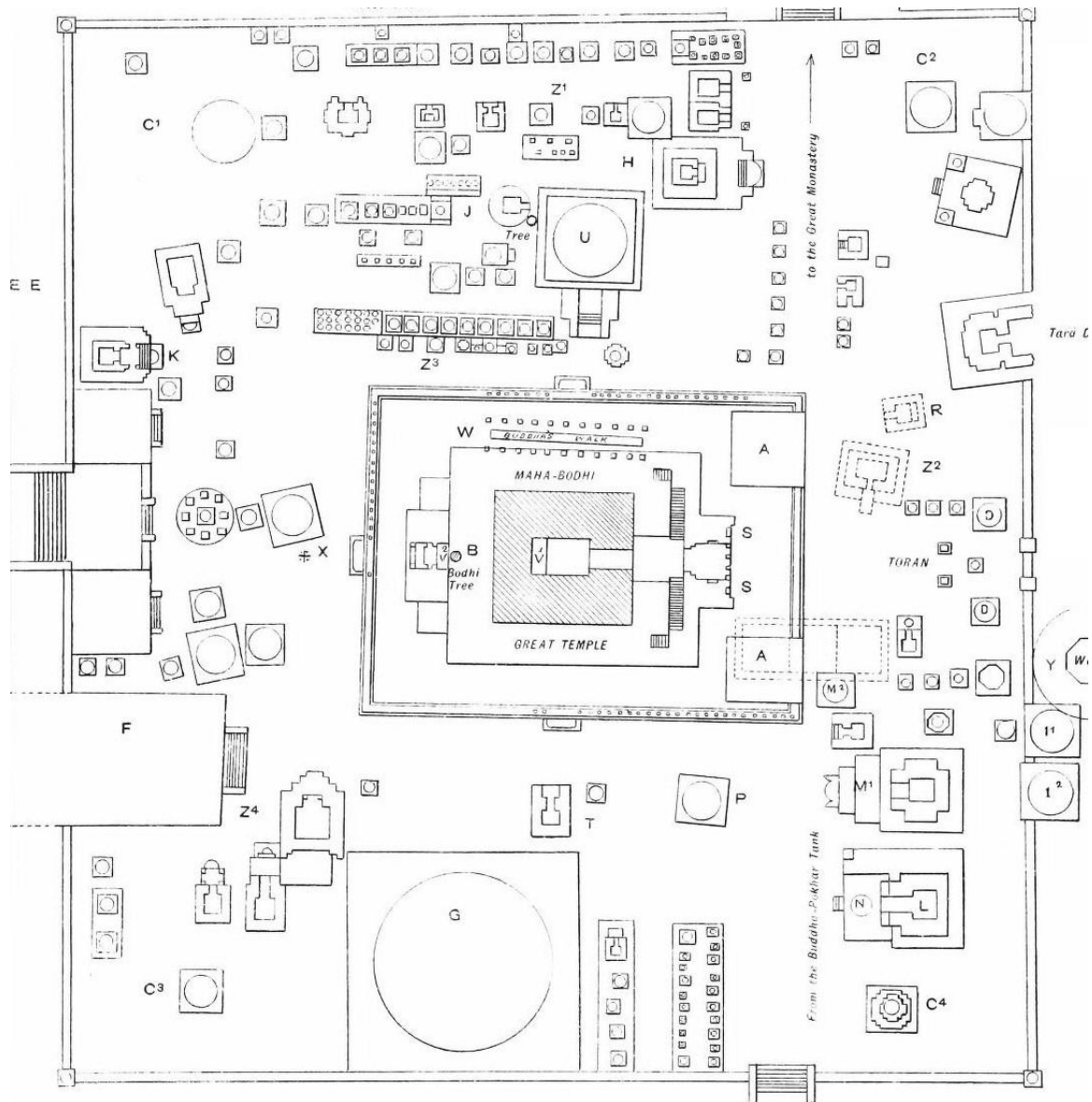
When the Tibetan pilgrim Chag lo tsa ba Chos rje fpal, aka Dharmasvāmin, visited Bodh Gaya in the 13<sup>th</sup> century he mentioned a Tārā Vihāra as one of the prominent sights at Bodh Gayā. He went on to say that one of the statues enshrined in this temple was called Tārā of the River and that it faced the river. These are good reason for thinking that Temple A is the one built by Śrīmitra.

In the second half of the 14<sup>th</sup> century another Tibetan, Bcom Idan rig ral gri, aka Bhagavan-khadga, made a pilgrimage to India and subsequently wrote a detailed account of Bodh Gaya called *The Elaborate Treatise of the Diamond Throne*. In it, he mentions that north-east of the east gate to the sacred compound around the Mahābodhi Temple, is a statue he called Tārā of the Water Hole (Chu khungSgrol ma) and tells a story about it basically the same as the one Chag lo tsa ba Chos rje fpal heard about a hundred years earlier. He does not mention this statue being in a temple, but its location, the stories about it and its name suggests that the two pilgrims were referring to the same statue and thus about Temple A.



Avalokiteśvara Simhanāda statue today.

So where is or was the real Animisa Cetiya? There are three facts that can help in answering this question. As it was built to mark the place where the Buddha sat gazing at the Bodhi Tree it must have been within view of the Tree and almost certainly facing it. It should be clearly understood that the Bodhi Tree does not grow now in its original place. It originally grew just behind the Vajirāsana, now marked by the altar inside the Mahābodhi Temple. The introduction to the Jātaka give us precise information about the location of the Animisa Cetiya, saying that it was directly north of the Bodhi Tree (Jātaka I,77). This is confirmed by Xuanzang who also says that it was north of Mahābodhi Temple. Interestingly but perhaps not surprisingly, Bcom Idan rig ral gri confirms this. He wrote: “During the entire fourth week he [the Buddha] gazed without blinking at the Bodhi tree and the corresponding monument is to the north [of the Mahābodhi Temple], a life-sized sacred image of the Buddha gazing at the Bodhi Tree, with a spire above it about twenty-five dom high.”



Cunningham's map showing Temple U directly north of the Mahābodhi Temple

If we look directly north of the Mahābodhi Temple we see the foundations of a large rectangular structure of what was no doubt once a large temple. It is much the same now as it was when it was excavated by Beglar in 1880. On Cunningham's map of the Mahabodhi Temple compound it is marked as U. It will be noticed that the entrance of this temple would have faced to where the Bodhi Tree originally grew, right behind to the altar now inside the Mahābodhi Temple, i.e., at the Vajirāsana, although tilted just slightly to the east. This is very strong evidence that the foundations of Temple U represent the remains of the original Animisa Cetiya.