

A Reminder Written Especially for Pilgrims

This October, I plan to travel on pilgrimage to the Noble Land of India together with my Dharma friends from the West. In conjunction with this, we also plan to receive an audience with His Holiness Tenzin Gyatso, the great guide of world peace. First, for my Dharma friends and students, I will briefly explain, through five sections, the reasons for going on pilgrimage, its benefits, and related matters.

1. The Meaning of the Tibetan Expression “Gné Kor”

First, I will explain the meanings of the two Tibetan words *gné* and *kor*.

Gné, or “sacred place,” refers to an exceptional land or location where, many kalpas and many years ago, buddhas, bodhisattvas, siddhas, and precious lamas engaged in spiritual practice and cultivation.

Kor, literally “circling” or “circumambulation,” means personally traveling to such a precious sacred place and, while there, engaging in practice and spiritual cultivation, making prostrations and offerings, circumambulating, and performing other practices through which merit is accumulated and obscurations are purified.

The sacred places to which we will now travel are the four universally renowned great sacred places:

- Bodh Gaya, the place where the Blessed Buddha attained buddhahood;
- Varanasi, the place where he turned the Wheel of Dharma of the Four Noble Truths;
- Lumbini, the place where he was born;
- Kushinagar, the place where he passed into parinirvāṇa.

I expect that more extensive explanations will be given when we arrive at the sacred places themselves.

2. Motivation

From the perspective of the Buddhist teachings, whatever virtues of body, speech, and mind we may perform, our motivation at the beginning is of primary importance. According to whether the causal motivation is good or bad, the virtues performed through body and speech will produce results corresponding to it.

Before going on pilgrimage, we should understand that this journey is not like an ordinary sightseeing trip or vacation. We should learn about the histories of the sacred places and understand the benefits of pilgrimage. Then, with faith and devotion, we should think:

“Through this excellent opportunity, I have now been able to go on pilgrimage. I am extremely fortunate.”

With joy in our hearts, we should also think:

“This pilgrimage is not merely for my own happiness and enjoyment. It is for all sentient beings to possess happiness and to be free from suffering.”

If the pilgrimage is embraced by such a good intention or correct motivation, the actual pilgrimage itself becomes genuine virtue embraced by the Mahāyāna. Therefore, by all means, we should find a way to sustain a good motivation.

3. How We Should Undertake the Pilgrimage

Having embraced the pilgrimage with the good and altruistic motivation explained above, when we begin the actual pilgrimage, we should prepare thoroughly and make sure that none of the necessary provisions are missing.

Although the place to which we are traveling is India, the “Noble Land”, its environment, food, climate, and other conditions are entirely different from those of the United States. Everyone should understand this and exercise care in all matters concerning food and conduct.

In particular, do not forget to bring the medications you ordinarily take and any other necessary personal items. You should make special preparations for these things.

When we begin the actual pilgrimage, we should not conduct ourselves as though we were ordinary tourists. Instead, while remaining at a sacred place, we should recollect its history. We should remember whichever buddhas, bodhisattvas, siddhas, lamas, or other beings originally blessed that place, recite praises to them, and engage as much as possible in meditation, spiritual practice, and cultivation.

While traveling, we should follow the directions of the guides and travel together with the group. We should not remain behind alone, separate from the group and go elsewhere, or travel ahead by ourselves. At all times, we should travel and remain together with the group.

4. The Benefits of Pilgrimage

It is said that, for someone who ordinarily practices the Dharma, practicing for one day at an exceptionally sacred place is more beneficial than practicing for an entire year at home.

In general, it is said that there are two possibilities:

A sacred place blesses the person, and a person blesses the sacred place.

The places we are discussing here are exceptionally sacred places that certainly bless the person. Therefore, as explained above, we should remain there peacefully and without haste, applying ourselves to recitation, meditation, spiritual practice, and cultivation.

There are many accounts of certain fortunate individuals whose minds underwent extraordinary transformations while they were at sacred places and whose qualities of the grounds and paths then increased rapidly. It does not appear necessary to relate all of those accounts here today.

5. Concluding Advice

On this occasion, we have the opportunity to travel together on pilgrimage to India as lama and students, Dharma friends, and male and female companions whose view and conduct are in harmony.

In conjunction with this, something that gives us even greater reason to rejoice is the opportunity to receive an audience with His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, the supreme head of the Victorious One's teachings upon the earth, the guide of world peace, and our protector and refuge.

Considering His Holiness's advanced age and the critical juncture of the times, this audience has come at precisely the right time. An audience with the lama and an excellent pilgrimage such as this may occur only once in a lifetime. Therefore, without allowing this time and opportunity to be lost, everyone should participate together.

During the journey, the hotels, food, fellow travelers, climate, and other conditions may sometimes not accord with the habits and preferences through which we have become somewhat spoiled by living according to our own wishes. When this happens, there is no other method than to practice patience.

In general, judging from the climate, the preparations made by the travel guides, the destinations, and the other circumstances of the present journey, I have great hope that it will go very well.

One reason for this is that my elder Dharma brother, Lama Kozen, together with his students, will participate as leaders and guides of our pilgrimage. This gives me great peace of mind. He not only has experience undertaking pilgrimages together with his students, but is also knowledgeable about and familiar with both Western and Eastern religions and cultures.

On this pilgrimage, students from Dharma communities of both the Great Mahayana Vehicle of Buddhism and the Secret Mantra Vajrayana Vehicle will travel together. This is like the Tibetan proverb:

“The tiger and the lion travel side by side, shoulder to shoulder.”

This is extremely fortunate.

Taking this opportunity, I would like to say to my dearly beloved elder Dharma brother, Lama Kozen, for joining us on this pilgrimage, I offer you, from the center of my heart, my immeasurable gratitude and thanks.

There is also something that all those going on pilgrimage should keep firmly in mind.

We are ordinarily accustomed to traveling in advanced Western countries, considering which country is most pleasant, which hotel is most luxurious, which food is most delicious and nutritious, and which climate is best and most tolerable. This pilgrimage will be somewhat different.

Therefore, whatever hardships or fatigue may arise, we should wear the armor of courage and resolve, thinking, “For these nineteen days, I will certainly endure these difficulties for the sake of the pilgrimage.”

Everyone should prepare accordingly. As the saying goes:

“Prepare for the worst and hope for the best.”

Finally, I pray that this pilgrimage of ours may be free from all obstacles and hindrances and may be auspicious and excellent.

Written by Khenpo Karten as necessary guidance for the pilgrims.

Sarva Maṅgalam.

May all be auspicious.

Tashi Delek!