

Dear Mr. Phan Wannamethee, President of the World Fellowship of Buddhists,

Bodhgaya in Bihar, India, where Lord Buddha sat under the bodhi tree and realized enlightenment, is the one and only sacred place for Buddhists throughout the world. Emperor Ashok built vajrasana as its memorial, and several Dynasties in their respect arranged the cathedral of Mahabodhi Temple. In the 7th century, Xuanzang worshiped the temple which is in about the same height as the present. In countries where Buddhism was inherited, nearby people went to pilgrimage to Bodhgaya remembering Lord Buddha, and distant people remembered and imagined his achievements. Since the enlightenment, Bodhgaya was the center of the world Buddhists for 1700 years.

In the beginning of the 13th century, however, the Islamic army invaded, destroyed Buddhist temples across India and killed many monks and nuns. Buddhism then was destroyed, and the cultural properties of the temple were buried and hidden in the earth. Finally in India where Buddhists are gone, the existence of the temple became forgotten.

In 1880, Alexander Cunningham, the founder of the Archaeological Survey of India, identified the location of the temple and implemented a large-scale excavation so the temple appeared beyond 600 years.

The Buddhists of the different countries visited Bodhgaya, vowed to vajrasana and worshiped the temple again. However, Bodhgaya came to be owned by Mahant, the Hindu brahman zamindar, and Hindu pujas were held in the temple's precincts. The statues of Buddha were taken away and stupas and small temples which the dynasties donated were about to be destroyed.

In 1891, Anagarika Dharmapala, who was a lay Buddhist and worried about the situation of the devastated Bodhgaya, established the Mahabodhi Society and commenced the protest movement for return of Mahabodhi Temple to Buddhists. Buddhists in then Japan established "Indo Busseki Kofuku-kai" (the Society for the Recovery of Buddhist Ruins in India) to cooperate with the movement, and Buddhists in different countries took various actions.

Following the independence of India in 1947, the Indian Government showed a policy to make Bodhgaya an international center of Buddhism, established Bodhgaya Temple Act in 1949 and launched the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee therefore the management right of the temple was handed over from Mahant to the committee. Under this law, however, it is decided and admitted that a total of nine people, four members of Hindus including Mahant, four Buddhist Indian nationals, and Chairman (Hindu) who is Director of Gaya district of the State of Bihar constitute this Hindu-dominated Management Committee. This fact, thus, still has been the main cause of various unreasonable irrationalities for Buddhists, and the problem continues to the present age.

On 14th October 1956, Maha Bodhisattva Dr. Babasahib Ambedkar, who drafted the Republic Constitution in India, took off from the yoke of the caste discrimination that persisted deeply in India, together with the population of 600,000 people of the suppressed class at Nagpur in Central Province and converted to Buddhism. Then Indian Buddhism raised the burning flame of its reconstruction and began to walk the way of the practice of dharma to realize liberty, equality and fraternity. I myself was born in Japan, but on the way of this road that Lord Buddha preached I met a crowd of Indian Buddhists who were poor but started to walk forward so I decided to walk with them. I have eaten the same things as they have, living in the same place, performing conversion ordinances and Buddhist ceremonies, organizing those Buddhists and doing various social movements. Then, with the cooperation of many people, I acquired Indian nationality and became Indian. As more than 60 years have passed since Dr.

Ambedkar's conversion, now Indian Buddhists are increasing their numbers greatly.

In this way, the Indian Buddhist people got concerned about the circumstances under which Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, the fundamental sacred place of their own faith, is under the superior control of the other religion. Then in 1992, they started a protest movement calling for return to the Buddhists of the temple to the Government of India, Bihar State Government, and the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee. We have used various peaceful means and developed various movements. We acted like a demonstration march towards the capital Delhi and Bodhgaya, implemented the campaign such as fasting and sit-in, submitting a petition to the President of Indian Government and Chief Minister of Bihar, sent a letter to the UN Secretary General. I visited the headquarters of UNESCO in Paris and the office of UN High Commissioner for Human Rights in Geneva and raised international interest in this issue. Our movement over 25 years greatly contributes to the improvement of the situation in Bodhgaya. However, the fundamental problem around the management right of the temple is still in the state of applying the Bodhgaya Temple Act of 1949 therefore our wish has not yet been fulfilled.

In 2012, I filed a case in the Supreme Court of India seeking the abolition of the Act and the enactment of a new law. The trial had been suspended for a long time, but full-scale deliberation began in July this year, and finally, the Supreme Court's decision is about to come.

This campaign is also a human rights movement for Indian Buddhists who figured out Dr. Ambedkar as their leader to establish their own existence. Moreover, Buddhists around the world hope for an early settlement of the contradiction of the central sacred place. Even in Japan, various people have been involved since the time Anagarika Dharmapala played an important role, and we have received support and cooperation from many people such as Joint Council for Rinzai and Obaku Zen and Okayama-ken "Dōwa Mondai ni torikumu Shūkyō Kyōdan Rentai Kaigi" (Religious Sects' Solidarity Conference to Address the Dowa Problem in Okayama Prefecture) for our movement. We are hoping that the management rights of Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya will be fully returned to Buddhists. Its return will make a big contribution to the future of Buddhism where Buddhists around the world will regain their central sacred place, gather together mainly in Bodhgaya and recommend peace and symbiosis for humanity. We will appreciate it if you would recognize this problem accurately, and we also would like you to support and cooperate with concern.

Please, everyone, stand up as Buddhists of the world with Indian Buddhists who have the same teachings of Lord Buddha as the light of dharma.

1. Please propose to the Indian Government, the Bihar State Government, the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee the returning of the management rights of Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya to Buddhists. Please discuss this issue with sects and organizations to which you belong, and appeal to the Indian authorities to carry out the return by their peaceful decision.
2. A long-term trial at the Supreme Court requires a great deal of expenses. Please aid the trial fee.

Sincerely yours,

13 Nov, 2018

President of All India Executive Committee for Release of Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya  
Arya Nagarjuna Shurei Sasai