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## Journey to Buddhism's Four Most Sacred Sites with the New Book *Buddhism and Pilgrimage*

Interview with Paolo Coluzzi by Alison Spiegel

**P**aolo Coluzzi, author of the recently released *Buddhism and Pilgrimage: A Journey to the Four Sites*, has been interested in Buddhism since he was 17 years old. Growing up in Italy, he became unsatisfied with aspects of Catholicism at an early age and was immediately drawn to Buddhism after discovering a book by Christmas Humphreys, the founder of the London Buddhist Society, in the library of his secondary school. From there, he read as much as he could on the subject, took up meditation, and explored other traditions, including Hinduism. But it wasn't until he moved to Brunei to teach and started backpacking around Asia that he reached a deeper level of connection with Buddhism. "Everything changed," Coluzzi recalled of this time in his life, "because for the first time I could really touch Buddhism."

Now a professor at the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur, Coluzzi recently transformed a manuscript from his travels into the latest installment of Mud Pie Book's "Buddhism and" series. *Buddhism and Pilgrimage*, which came out at the beginning of September, focuses on the four sacred sites in Buddhism: Lumbini, where the Buddha was born; Bodhgaya, where the Buddha attained enlightenment; Sarnath, where the Buddha began to teach; and Kushinagar, where the Buddha died. Each chapter begins with an introduction, putting the pilgrimage site in context with a story about the Buddha, and then leads into a journal entry from the author's travels to the site. *Tricycle* caught up with Coluzzi to learn more about the writer behind the diary entries and how practitioners can make the most of a time when pilgrimage remains challenging for most.

**Why is pilgrimage important to Buddhists and why did you want to write about it?** It's not an obligation. You can be a very good Buddhist without ever traveling to India. But I think in general pilgrimage has been such an important part of the spiritual path because the effort to get there gives you a kind of strength. For me, it gave me so much energy when I was in Bodh Gaya, for example. The meditations I had there were so amazing and so deep. Even now when I feel a little bit down for some reason, one of the ways I cheer myself up is thinking about my travels, especially to India. If you manage to take it easy and just enjoy what you're experiencing, be open to everything, and not try to be too much in control, it's an amazing way of traveling.



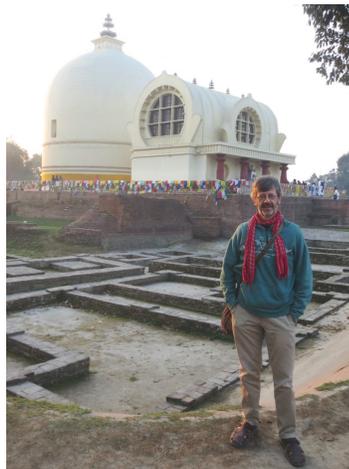
The Bodhi tree in Bodhi Gaya

**Do you have a regular meditation practice?** I do Transcendental Meditation because I see it as a practical thing that gives me energy and it's only 20 minutes. But I also do Buddhist meditation when I can take more time. I've done all-day retreats. I love both. I remember a few years ago I had a chance to talk to [meditation teacher] [Ajahn Brahm](#) and I asked him about Transcendental Meditation and said, "I practice it every day. Is that OK?" He said, "That's fine, if that works for you." Then he stopped and looked at me and said, "However, learn Buddhist meditation as well. Then you have two different tools instead of one."

**Travel remains difficult for most of the world due to the pandemic. What do you suggest to people whose ability to embark on a pilgrimage is limited these days?** What I'm trying to do is make the most of it, to take advantage of it, and to use it as an excuse to think about things a little bit differently. Of course I miss traveling a lot but at the same time, I had time for this book and for reading. I walk more around where I live. There is a good side to this as well.

And you can read my book! Or anything about Buddhists sites in India and Asia. And start planning. Everything is impermanent right?

**Do you think you'll stay in Asia or return home to Italy or somewhere else one day?** I wouldn't mind finding somewhere else in Asia or if I had the chance to go to Europe either and try to do something for Buddhism. There are a thousand different spiritual paths and that's fine, but I would be happy if people knew a little bit more about Buddhism



because I think it can give so much to society and to the world. It has to me. I think if everybody followed even the very basic five Theravada precepts, I think we would live in a different world. The very fact that Buddhism tells you that you should not base your happiness on your material things, on possessing or attachment, if that was put into practice in some way, it would change society.



*To learn more about Buddhism and pilgrimage, read about why Buddhists go on pilgrimage, the four sacred sites of Buddhism, the climate threat to Buddhism's holy sites, and an interview with Stephen Batchelor on his book, Confession of a Buddhist Atheist, which is all about pilgrimage.*

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