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### **Cover Page Footnote**

I am grateful for the support provided by Ven. Shi Chi Yu from Kuching Ci Zhao Buddhist Association, our local Malaysian tour manager, Mr. Ong Onn Lai from the Holistic Path Holidays Sdn Bhd, and the other thirty-five pilgrims during the preparation of this paper.

# A Case Study of Pilgrimage as Experiential Learning: Reflections of a Buddhist Pilgrim

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This paper narrates my learnings as a pilgrim in India and Nepal based on an analysis of my response to different experiences and observations throughout the journey. The significant impacts of this experience on life were reflected using Kolb's cycle of experiential learning. The learning process is described based on the four processes of the model: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. It is believed that pilgrims are motivated to satisfy their needs as indicated in Maslow's hierarchy of needs. This article also acknowledges some established key ideas from other pilgrimage scholars. However, this paper presents only the ideas and early findings of the impacts of this pilgrimage experience on life. The long-term effects of pilgrimage are yet to be explored in future studies.

**Key Words:** Buddhist, pilgrim, Kolb's cycle of experiential learning, Maslow's hierarchy of needs, pilgrimage

## Introduction

Pilgrimage is defined as a sacred learning journey attended by groups of people intentionally for non-material purposes (Coleman & Elsner, 1995; Davis, 2007). Pilgrimage is seen as holistic, enriching, participative, heuristic, and transformative and a thought-provoking topic for studying the nature of experiential learning (Greenia, 2018). Kreiner (2018) viewed a pilgrim as generally different from a tourist, as pilgrims travel for spiritual reasons, not for pleasure and curiosity. He also reported that there remains a lack of holistic conceptualisation of literature on pilgrimage. There is also a lack of strict boundaries on the definition and concept of pilgrimage (Nickerson *et al.*, 2018).

Without a common definition, people tend to view pilgrimage differently, resulting in a strong emotional attachment to specific meanings. It can be particularly difficult for a Buddhist to come to understand the meaning the term pilgrimage, particularly, since the terminology of pilgrimage is not familiar among the majority of Asian Buddhists. In addition, it is challenging to demonstrate the reasons why pilgrimage is critical and thus overcome resistance to it. People tend to link the term to Christian and Muslim pilgrimage journeys. Notwithstanding difficulties regarding terminology, many Buddhists believe that they should go on pilgrimage - for example to Thailand, Sri Lanka, Tibet or even China as well as Mount Putuo, Mount Wutai, Mount Jiuhua and

Mount Emei - the four sacred mountains for Mahayana Buddhism (Birnbau, 2003). Mahayana is a major Buddhism movement originating from northern India that emphasises compassion for all sentient beings. Many Buddhists believe that the true Buddhist pilgrimage places are located in India and Nepal, which are connected to the life of Gautama Buddha.

This paper aims to strengthen the community's understanding of and knowledge about Buddhist pilgrimage and to build confidence about the existence of sacred Buddhist places through the reflections of a Buddhist pilgrim in India and Nepal. The personal pilgrimage learning experiences were assessed using Kolb's learning cycle, focusing on the pilgrim's internal journey as a transformative spiritual experience. This paper presents results of a qualitative study to explore the application of journal writing as a reflective tool to help Buddhist pilgrims to integrate their holistic learning experiences and problems encountered during a pilgrimage with their personal future growth and development process through an interpretive case study.

In generally, most literature focuses on sacred places rather than emphasising pilgrims' learning experiences (de Silva 2016). There is limited research into motivations for pilgrimage because many pilgrims have been unable to express their intentions and motives (Mustonen, 2005). According to Maslow's theory on the hierarchy of needs, pilgrims are motivated to enhance their esteem and status

amongst the Buddhist community by participating in pilgrimage activities that are expected to satisfy their self-actualisation needs (Blackwell, 2010).

## Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is a whole-person action learning through direct experience, to acquire tacit knowledge and skills by recognising mistakes as part of learning. The main aspects of experiential learning include insight, spirituality, and transformation (Davis, 2007). A reflective learning journal is a commonly used tool for cognitive experiential learning to create written records about critical incidents to gain insights into the learning processes. However, Lew and Schmidt (2011) reported that reflective journals focus on learning strategies and processes rather than the learning products, which include knowledge acquired. I used Kolb's cycle of experiential learning to reflect on my learning process in this pilgrimage journey and its significant impacts on my life.

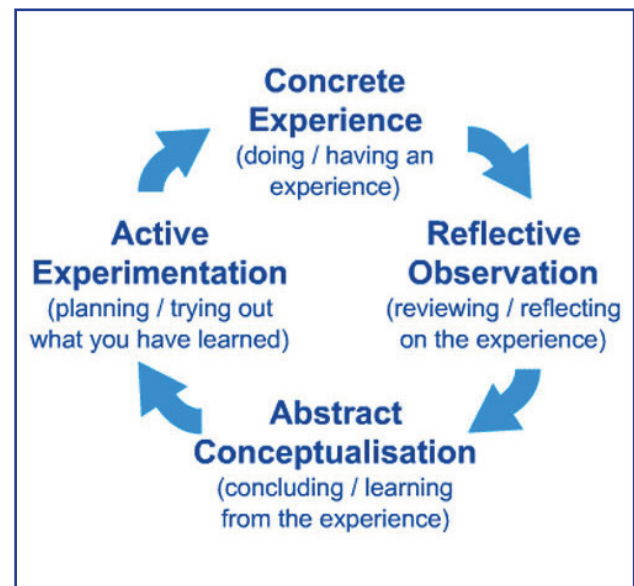
There is a vast literature on learning, with most of it examining the process of learning and why and how people learn. However, very few of these studies focus on the outcomes or outputs of the learning process.

## Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning

Kolb introduced the idea that the learning process occurs in a cycle (McLeod, 2010). This is the basis of reflective practices - the assumption that we learn from our experiences. The reflections that are undertaken contribute to our professional knowledge.

Kolb's theory of experiential learning provides a helpful framework for understanding how reflection helps us make sense of our experiences. The learning cycle begins with a **concrete experience**. As a Buddhist pilgrim in India and Nepal, I was engaged in practical activities with those in the pilgrimage tour. This is called concrete experience, an intuitive preference for learning through direct experience by emphasising interpersonal relations and feelings as opposed to thinking. During or after the concrete experience, we often reflect on what we did, what went well and what did not go so well. This is referred to as **reflective observation** and highlights the importance of reflecting on actions to learn from experiences. This involves learning through exposure to and the examination of different points of view to achieve an understanding.

Figure 1: Kolb's Cycle of Experiential Learning Model



(McLeod, 2010)

These reflections on experiences often result in new ideas or conceptualisations that shape our learning about practice through **abstract conceptualisation** by thinking about an issue in theoretical terms. By doing this we generate new understanding about ourselves and our practices that inform how we work. We then experiment by trying out these new ideas or conceptualisations as parts of the learning process through **active experimentation**. We test out the implications and validity of our new understanding in the real world and integrate new approaches to our practices by doing it and judging their practical value. This cyclical process of experiential learning is repeated to see what happens as a result of our adaptations. A process such as this can help a Buddhism practitioner think about new experience, reflect, draw new conclusions and decide to adapt to new practices (Vince, 1998; Kolb & Kolb, 2011). This experiential learning model is illustrated in Figure 1.

## Methodology

This case study captured the experience of an ecumenical and culturally diverse group of 39 persons consisting of 35 pilgrims, an Indian tour guide, a local Malaysian tour guide, a Malaysian tour manager and a nun. Case Study research a method and empirical inquiry used extensively in the social sciences to investigate a complex contemporary phenomenon in its real-life context (Davis, 2007). Case study research is crucial to strengthen the knowledge gained from previous research. However, it

focuses on individual reflection that could lead to biases. Therefore, it is difficult (and perhaps incorrect) to arrive at a generalisation from a case study (Ekanayake, 2015). Thus, this paper is presented in a reflective journal form. This is a tool that is used for self-reflection and to learn from experiences that would improve one's understanding of the thinking and learning processes. A reflective journal, according to Black, Sileo and Prater (2000) is a personal document or autobiography used to self-reflect on good and bad events, ideas and themes occurring in our life, to help us learn from our experiences. Reflective journals enable learners to re-frame their past, present and future beliefs and understanding continuously. Lew and Schmidt (2011) report that a reflection journal could help improve self-reflection and learning among learners. To add a deeper layer to the reflection, the researcher also participated in the pilgrimage as a pilgrim. However, a research limitation of this type of work is that one's experiential nature (in this case of a pilgrimage) is immensely subjective (Davis, 2007).

Data for this study were drawn from the pilgrim's written reflective journal completed before, during and after the pilgrimage journey. This was moderated via extensive observations of other pilgrims, and checked throughout the journey by interviewing other participants in the experience.

### Validity and Reliability

Validity is defined as whether this study could measure what it intended to measure (Creswell, 2014). The reflection journal was reviewed by two other pilgrims who are experts in the area of religious tourism and pilgrimage to ensure content validity. They are both Buddhism practitioners who have been learning Buddhism practices for more than 10 years.

After validation, the narrative journals were analysed using the thematic content analysis method. The major themes and transcript documents were scrutinised by the two reviewers twice – on the sixth month and one year after the pilgrimage journey – to ensure information accuracy and consistency over time. Meanwhile, reliability is identified as the consistency of findings and interpretation when repeating or comparing assessments within a study (Stone, 2011). To ensure reliability, this study was participatory, in that other pilgrims helped gather and interpret information.

### Concrete Experience

The 11-day meeting with Buddha commenced on 25 November 2019 and ended on 6 December 2019. The journey involved a culturally diverse group of 39 persons, including 35 pilgrims, an Indian tour guide, a local tour guide, a tour manager, and a bhikkhuni, who in Buddhism practice is a fully ordained female monastic or a nun. This was my first experience of participating in the pilgrimage. 'I am a pilgrim, not a tourist', I told myself internally. In these 11 days, we went to the nine most essential sacred places in the history of Buddhism: Lumbini, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, Vaishali, Sravasti, Rajgir, Kushinagar, Nalanda University, and the Ganges River.

Lumbini, Nepal, is believed to be the birthplace of Prince Siddhartha Gautama, the original name of Buddha before he achieved enlightenment. He was born in Lumbini Park about 2,500 years ago. Bodhgaya is the holy site where Buddha achieved enlightenment, which was listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Site in 2002. Prince Gautama is believed to have been enlightened under a Bodhi tree - the tree of awakening - in Bodhgaya on a full-moon night. This is when he became the Buddha. Enlightenment is a state of peacefulness and serenity gained by being deeply absorbed in meditation. Sarnath Deer Park is believed to be the place where the Buddha first turned the dharma wheel and where the Sangha was established. Sangha is a Sanskrit word used in Buddhism that refers to the monastic community of monks and nuns. Vaishali is an important place in Buddhism because it is believed to be where Buddha gave his last lecture before entering nirvana and announced his decision to accept females into the Sangha and delivered the *Medicine Buddha Sutra*. The Buddha is believed to have spent 25 years of his dharma propagation period in Sravasti. Dharma refers to the Buddhist doctrine that is commonly regarded as the teachings of the Buddha. The *Diamond Sutra* and the *Amitabha Sutra*, the two most significant oral teachings of Gautama Buddha in the history of Buddhism, were delivered at Jeta-Vana Vihara, the centre of Sravasti. According to the commentary, Buddha spent 24 rain retreats at this place. Rajgir literally means 'king's residence'. After Buddha entered nirvana, the first three large gatherings of Sangha members to compile Sutras were believed to have been all held at the Saptarni cave near Rajgir. Kushinagar was the site where Buddha entered nirvana. Nirvana is the ultimate goal of a Buddhist, which means to achieve a state that releases oneself from suffering, desire and the cycle of birth. The Reclining Buddha statue is located



inside Mahaparinibbana Temple. Nalanda Temple was a Buddhist higher institution in ancient India. Ven. Master Fa Xian and Ven. Master Xuan Zang, the most admirable Chinese Buddhist monks, scholars, travellers, and translators, are believed to have studied here. In 2014, the new Nalanda University officially came into existence after more than 800 years. The Ganges River is revered as the mother of India. According to Buddhism's history, Buddha travelled across the Ganges during his 45 years of dharma propagation.

### Reflective Observation

The 11-day pilgrimage journey was indeed a critical moment for us because of the challenges and constraints we faced. The challenges started on the first day of the trip. I can imagine now how the venerable Buddhism masters migrated from place to place, from India to China and Southeast Asia, which is certainly full of obstacles. We are lucky to travel via airplane, yet we still grumble about rushing for a flight. They, on the other hand, had to walk or used only horses to travel. They were lonely and nobody accompanied them. We are so fortunate now with our friends travelling together with us. Even though the noise of the crowds might be ear-splitting, I appreciate them. We should be grateful for whatever we have. One of the pilgrims commented,

*Thinking about my life, my family and my previous experience, this journey reminds me of how lucky we are.*

We appreciated everything we had even though some of us could not adapt to fully vegan food, the drinks, the weather, and the accommodation. A participant shared,

*This is a pivotal journey for many of us, even if it is not always as what we expected ... but worth it.*

The friendly Indian tourist guide shared with us that some guides struggle with being in the job, even though they are officially recognised as cultural ambassadors by their government. Sometimes, they must compromise with bargained prices and salaries. I heard one of the participants on hearing this, tell her friend:

*This journey teaches me to be more compassionate and emphatic'.*

I was so excited and felt blissful that I was at Bodhgaya, the holy place. It is believed that the Bodhisattva (Buddha-to-be) practiced resultless austerity there for a long period before discovering the Middle Path. It was so

amazing that I was at the Mahabodhi Temple, the Great Awakening Temple, a Buddhist temple in Bodhgaya, marking the location where the Buddha was said to have attained enlightenment. A participant stated

*even though I am not yet a Buddhist ... I practice meditation. Meditation makes me feel calmness and peace.*

I observed people from all around the world and from different denominations of Buddhism. They prayed devoutly in their own way. I wondered what their prayers were. I observed the different natures and intentions of fellow pilgrims and travellers. Most of them felt that this journey expressed their feelings of devotion to the Buddha. One of my fellow travellers had a feeling that

*this pilgrimage strengthens my knowledge towards these historical pilgrimage sites.*

Some of my group took pictures wherever we went even though we were prohibited from taking photographs at certain sacred sites.

I recalled my challenges in life. Most of the time, I have no idea how to overcome them. The only thing I could do in future is to observe and think twice before any actions. Do not worry about others; just be yourself! We climbed mountains early in the morning of the third and fourth days. We walked according to our ability and with a sincere heart, without any feelings of hatred or ambition. I could feel my heart was soft enough to perform all these. I think that was why I did not feel any pain in my legs. An 80-year-old participant shared with her little voice:

*I have to do it now. If not now, when?*

I believe we all have our own karma (cause and effect). We cannot force this and ask everyone to be the same as us. The bamboo garden was a comfortable place for Buddha to give lectures, and it is believed that the Buddha loved this place very much; that is what I know about this place. Surprisingly, Nalanda is an archaeology university in which the most important sites were being destroyed. Buddhism has waned in India now; less than 1% of its people are Buddhists. We wondered why Buddhism is widely practiced by people worldwide but not in India. We wondered about what was going wrong. Our hearts broke when we saw the destroyed Ashoka pillar at Mahabodhi temple.

Lumbini was another personal highlight. A few other pilgrims and I had the same feeling that Nepalis were much

more friendly even though they were so much poorer. Lumbini is an amazing place in which I felt delighted from the bottom of my heart because it is believed that Prince Siddhartha was born there. We went to the place where three gems gathered – Buddha, Dharma and Sangha. I deeply appreciated it. Eventually, we arrived at the Ganges River, the holy river of this pilgrimage land. The feeling was not very strong, as this is not really one of the holy places in the history of Buddhism. I just took it as a cultural visit and part of an adventurous journey like one would have on a cruise trip. The only feeling was that Buddha was spreading and delivering dharma along the Ganges River. That is the history of the river. We saw that dead bodies were cremated and placed in the river. I heard one of our group comment:

*We will also become like this one day.*

I began to realise the impermanence of life.

We performed refuge at Bodhgaya. This was my second time going for refuge, which meant being reborn after this trip. Buddhism refuge is a formal ceremony to express our allegiance to the three gems – Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. With this act, we became official Buddhists. We confessed ourselves in front of the Mahabodhi Stupa. This was a rebirth after all. I secretly discovered some people who could not help but cry. I loved this place. I could feel that I would come back here someday with my loved ones. I will not forget the feeling of meditating and reciting at the Mahabodhi Temple. I appreciated the volunteers who willingly stay at Bodhgaya to contribute to the community and the public particularly in the aspects of education and medicine. This was something that I could not do for now.

This was also the first time I travelled with a venerable bhikkhuni, and this made me feel in awe. Ven. Shi Chi Yu is an ordained Buddhist nun with over 30 years of experience in Mahayana Buddhism practice. She has been leading pilgrimages throughout India and Nepal since 2017. The lecture she gave on the last day of the journey was as follows:

*Dear disciples, Amitabha. We finally make it in these 12 days of pilgrimage in the holy lands, of India and Nepal. Some of you have officially become a Buddhist disciple, how rare, how incredible! Recalling, in these 10 days, we did morning and evening classes together in the holy land, recited the sutra, recited the Buddha, released life, prayed, made all kinds*

*of offerings, repented of sin karma, with joy all kinds of good deeds, infinite respect, piety, vigorously rotate the Dharma wheel, may the Buddha's Dhamma live in the world for a long time. In these 12 days of spiritual pilgrimage, Bodhi seeds have been deeply planted in each of us, from now on, may we together forever break all evil and improve all good practice. Do not forget to always return these merits and good deeds to all sentient beings, may all sentient beings be free from sufferings.*

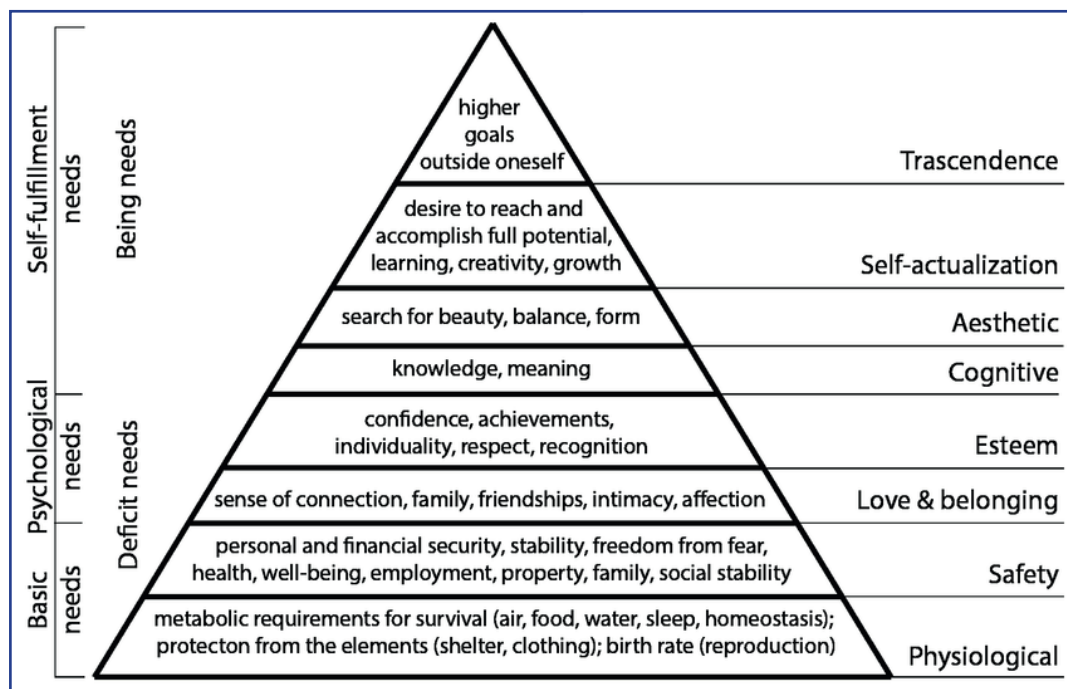
### Abstract Conceptualisation

India is the home of Buddha. Although it has experienced the vicissitudes of dynasties and of time, it still has a great foundation to spread and educate later generations. In the time after the pilgrimage, I finally understood a lot of things and truths. Challenges were overcome. The pilgrimage journey was challenging. Yet, I was motivated to complete all the tasks given because I saw the relevance of the journey to my life. Adult learners are goal-oriented, practical and want to see the relevance of learning (Lieb 1991). I felt a sense of personal achievement, responsibility, and personal growth in completing this journey. Maslow's needs hierarchy theory proposes that individuals are motivated to satisfy five basic types of needs: physiological, safety, social, esteem and self-actualisation. According to Maslow, these needs are arranged in a hierarchy of importance, with lower-order needs requiring adequate satisfaction before the next need begins to motivate behaviour (Mathes & Edwards, 1978; Stone, 2014).

Religion goes beyond self-actualisation to transcendence needs. Religion helps people to achieve self-actualisation, to search for fulfilment and realise their potentials (McLeod, 2010). Transcendence needs are the expansion of our consciousness beyond ourselves through our faith and recognition of spirituality. Sutra recitation and meditation enhanced my mindfulness to develop and build my inner strength and bring my distracted and restless mind to the present moment. It released me from feelings of fear, anxiety and stress that affect my performance and mental focus, especially in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Maslow's hierarchy of needs can be used to measure motivation for religious behaviour, attitudes, practices, and beliefs (Brown & Cullen, 2006). Jørgensen *et al.* (2020) reported that pilgrims search for meaning

Figure 2: Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs



(Balint &amp; Pangaro, 2017)

and fulfilment in life. Blackwell (2010) suggested that a pilgrim will voluntarily participate in pilgrimage activities to leverage their self-actualisation, esteem, and status amongst the (Buddhist) community once their basic and psychological needs have been fulfilled. Maslow's hierarchy of needs is shown in Figure 2.

### Active Experimentation

The learning experience was a good starting point to improve future life goals. My most powerful feeling was that I wished to contribute to society and community in the future to help the needy. I made my wish at Bodhgaya. It was a blessing for all of us to confess our sins in such a unique and special way. We listened to our peers and companions throughout the 11-day journey. I learnt that we must open our hearts and expose ourselves to the public and the community. Do not be too withdrawn; you are not as important as you think you are. I promised to do recitation at least once a day and discipline myself by doing more meditation and undertaking meaningful deeds. Meditating under the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya was peaceful. I promised to get rid of greed, anger, and foolishness from now on. I wished to contribute to Buddhism and serve the neediest and all people willingly without any bias. I also hoped to be given the opportunity to serve others full-heartedly, just like the offerings and

monasteries made by King Ashoka and King Bimbisara of Rajagaha. I believe that faith is more important than life. Before attending the pilgrimage, I thought of liberation as only a possibility; after the trip, I am sure that liberation is a reality! I told myself that I must try my best to apply Buddhist practices to modern life appropriately and to keep Buddhism in sync with modern science, democracy, humanity, environmental protection, and social justice.

### Conclusions

This paper combines a reflection on my participation in an 11-day Buddhist pilgrimage in India and Nepal and how this experiential learning affects my beliefs and life philosophy. The idea of a Buddhism pilgrimage is still considered vague. In this paper, I have applied Kolb's cycle of experiential learning, one of the most established models of management education, to illustrate my learning experience in the pilgrimage trip. My engagement in practical activities during those 11 days in the nine most significant sacred places in Buddhism history enabled me to reflect on these activities, particularly what went well and what did not. I felt ashamed that I always grumbled about work, life, and the future. My learning was shaped and conceptualised through Maslow's hierarchy of needs theory. I am motivated to become a better me, to meet my transcendence needs via my faith and recognition



of spirituality. The next chapter of my life will focus on promoting the welfare of others, particularly in the aspects of education, Buddhist literature, and health. I could not speak for others, but in my case, my commitment to myself is to help more people when I can.

*Immerse yourself and love with your heart!*

Kolb's learning model creates an ongoing learning cycle that enables a pilgrim to progress repeatedly to reach transcendence. This paper presents only the idea and early findings of the impacts of this pilgrimage experience on life. One of the limitations of the case study is that it lacks scientific rigour and a basis for generalising the findings to the population. The long-term impacts of undertaking pilgrimage as self-therapy via the practices of mindfulness to become a steady rock in a stormy ocean are still highly unexplored (McIntosh, Schlee & Munro, 2020) and will be examined further in my next academic paper.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the support provided by Ven. Shi Chi Yu from Kuching Ci Zhao Buddhist Association, our local Malaysian tour manager, Mr. Ong Onn Lai from the Holistic Path Holidays Sdn Bhd, and the thirty-five other pilgrims I met during the preparation of this paper.

**Figure 3: Kushinagar, India, November 30, 2019**



(Author's photograph)

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