

# Manufacturing Lumbini: The United Nations, Development, and Buddhism in the Twentieth Century

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**Abstract:** This article draws attention to the United Nations' sustained development interventions at the Buddha's birthplace of Lumbini, in the rural Terai region of Nepal. Following a self-described "pilgrimage" to Lumbini in April 1967, former United Nations secretary-general U Thant championed a call to restore the site to its rightful glory as a global pilgrimage destination and center of "world peace." Despite fifty years of formal sponsorship by the United Nations, Lumbini's development remains incomplete. This article has three main arguments. First, the UN's sustained investment in Lumbini marks an unprecedented convergence between the international peacekeeping organization and expressions of religious piety and devotion. For many Buddhists, Lumbini is regarded as an auspicious place on par with Jerusalem or Mecca. Decades long interventions at Lumbini challenge normative assumptions concerning the UN's secular authority. Second, through these sustained investments the UN became the preeminent patron of Lumbini, conferring to the international organization the power to mobilize Buddhist ethical principles in its peacekeeping agendas during the Cold War. Development interventions at Lumbini lead to the appropriation of a pacified and politically benign Buddhist ethic premised solely on the Buddha's teachings of compassion (*karuṇā*), good-will (*metta*), and nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*). These ethical maxims were harmonized with the UN Charter and redirected to justify the organization's sustained investment in Nepal. Third, UN sponsorship of Lumbini brought together disparate political entities and religious organizations in service of common goal. Despite garnering a diverse coalition of investors, frictions amongst these stakeholders beleaguered the development proceedings throughout the latter half of the twentieth century. Despite these tensions, UN intervention has left an indelible mark on the accessibility of the site and its global prestige as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, Development, United Nations, World Peace, Nepal

While visiting the Buddha's birthplace of Lumbini in Nepal's rural Terai region during the summer of 2019, I made a point to locate a statue of former secretary-general of the United Nations U Thant that was installed at the site only a few weeks earlier. As I walked rather aimlessly through the south gates of the park, a local rickshaw driver offered his services. Naively assuming that U Thant's monumental role in the development of Lumbini was public knowledge, I took the opportunity to inquire about the statue's location. After circling most of the park unable to locate the memorial, I decided to consult the staff at the Lumbini Hotel Kasai who had co-sponsored the statue's construction with the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT). Thankfully the manager of the property, Rajesh, kindly informed the rickshaw driver of its location. Before departing Rajesh and I took a photo together, as I was apparently the first visitor to inquire about the newly installed memorial. As the rickshaw pulled up and jolted to a halt in the dusty vacant lot adjacent to the Lumbini University campus, I noticed a walkway leading to a clay brick podium, upon which was a nondescript bronzed bust of the former secretary-general (see Fig. 1). On a placard below the inscription reads (in English): "U Thant declared that his visit to Lumbini in April 1967 was one of the most important days of his life, and he put into motion United Nations initiatives for the development of Lumbini. This statue commemorates his outstanding support to

develop Lumbini as a pilgrimage and tourist center.”



Fig. 1: Bust of U Thant installed at Lumbini, Nepal in 2019. Photograph by author.

In this article I explore how Buddhism came to operate alongside the United Nations’ development interventions in Nepal as a culturally salient mediator of peace amidst the Cold War.<sup>1</sup> I argue that these development initiatives have framed all subsequent engagements with Lumbini for the Nepalese state and its minority Buddhist populations, as well as foreign Buddhist organizations invested in practices of ritual pilgrimage. Why did the Buddha’s birthplace become a centrally visible topic of discussion within the UN and its development subsidiaries? Why did the reigning Hindu monarchy incorporate Lumbini into its national development agendas? How has the discourse and practice of development appropriated Buddhist ethical maxims and to what ends? In traditional Buddhist configurations of polity, the secular authority – the king – is tasked with ensuring the survival and spread of the Buddha’s dispensation (*śāsana*) through its support of the monastic community (*saṃgha*).<sup>2</sup> In its sponsorship of Lumbini, the United Nations, in effect, took up the mantle of previous investors in the religious efficacy of the Buddha’s birthplace. This patronage inspired Buddhist organizations to repatriate the site and drew Nepal’s government, then a Hindu

1. This article represents part of a broader project on the modern formation of Lumbini and its significance as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Early versions of this article were presented to the Space, Place, and Religion group at the American Academy of Religion general conference in San Diego in 2019, and at the Religion and International Development group at the American Academy of Religion general conference in Denver in 2022. This article benefited from comments and edits by Juliane Schober, Anne Feldhaus, Christoph Emmrich, Sophia Arjana, and Eric Breault, as well as important insights from conversations with Brooke Schedneck, John Holt, William Hedberg, and Mu Lung Hsu.

2. I use Sanskrit for Buddhist terminology throughout this article.

monarchy, into the fold as custodian of the site's material heritage. In framing Lumbini's development and revitalization as a peacebuilding initiative the UN and its development agencies have contributed to the popularization of Buddhism as a fundamentally nonviolent, peaceful, and ultimately, politically benign religious tradition. Over the course of the UN's formal development interventions, this universalized representation of the Buddha's birthplace has been embraced by local Buddhist organizations in Nepal, their global compatriots, and the Nepalese state: each mobilizing the site for their own agendas. The UN's appropriation of Buddhist ethical commitments, through its protracted investment in Lumbini, deserves a degree of scrutiny. This intervention is not innocuous, as all stakeholders in the "Lumbini Project" have struggled to formulate, and actualize, a shared vision for the site. As the UN mobilized Lumbini as part of its peacebuilding agendas to meet the fraught geo-political tensions of the Cold War, other groups sought to capitalize on the site's global prestige. Borrowing the authoritative rhetoric of the UN, global Buddhist organizations, like the World Fellowship of Buddhists, articulated Buddhism's main tenets through the idioms of world peace and brotherhood.

This article challenges fundamental assumptions about the UN's secularity and the efficacy of its development interventions. Although the UN's investment in Lumbini has not resulted in the utopian destination envisaged by former secretary-general U Thant, the prolonged development process has certainly made the site more accessible and has expanded Nepal's global visibility. I show that, in the case of Lumbini, religious piety germinated unprecedented large-scale socio-economic and infrastructural development interventions. Lumbini's manufacture cannot be reduced simply to its economic benefits, even when these remain overriding concerns for state and international parties. My reflection on the UN's involvement in the ongoing manufacture of the Buddha's birthplace speaks to the complex and overlapping agendas of the international agency and its interactions with national governments and religious organizations.

### Lumbini Before the United Nations

The sites associated with the life of the historical Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama, occupy a prominent position in Buddhist cosmology, indexing soteriologically significant moments on the path toward enlightenment (*nirvāna*). On his deathbed, the Buddha instructed his disciple Ananda to undertake pilgrimage to the locations of his birth (Lumbini), of his awakening (Bodhgaya), of his first teaching (Sarnath), and of his final passing away (Kushinagar).<sup>3</sup> In the Buddhist biographical genre these places operate as way markers on the Buddha's progress toward enlightenment in his final incarnation as Siddhartha. They are considered auspicious by Buddhist practitioners as they endeavor for liberation from cyclical rebirth in the world of suffering (*saṃsāra*). Pilgrimage to these four potent places is extremely meritorious and, historically, has been the exclusive purview of virtuoso monks and righteous kings in their patronage of the Buddha's dispensation (*śāsana*). Only in the last hundred and fifty years have lay Buddhists begun to travel to the biographical sites with any regularity. The biographical sites, located in the north Indian states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh and in Nepal's bordering Terai region, are significantly isolated from most of the world's Buddhist populations. While historical evidence of pilgrimage to Lumbini is sparse, the proliferation of the biography of the Buddha in the expanse of Buddhism's diaspora beyond the Gangetic Plain attests to the pervasiveness of imagination about the founder's historical homeland in

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3. The Buddha's command to undertake pilgrimage is chronicled in the *Mahāparinibbāna Suttanta* of the Pali Dīghanikāya (c. fourth century BCE). See *Last Days of the Buddha: The Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, trans. Sister Vajira and Francis Story (Kandy, SRL: Buddhist Publication Society, 1998), part 5, lines 16–22.

Ancient India.<sup>4</sup> Despite long periods of disuse or even disregard, the biographical sites have often reemerged in particular cultural and historical contexts to legitimate political rule, propagate internal reform movements, and assert monastic lineal superiority.

Under British colonialism the sites of the Buddha's biography were identified and excavated in service of the curatorial state as hypostatized objects of history.<sup>5</sup> Although Nepal was never formally colonized, the force of this technocratic enterprise spilled into the rural Terai region along India's northern border. In 1896 German Indologist and archeologist Anton Alois Führer, with the aid of Nepalese General Khadga Shamsheer Rana, located the ruins of the Maya Devi Temple and unearthed a portion of an Ashokan pillar (dating to the third century BCE) identifying the presumed birthplace of the Buddha in the southern foothills of what is now Nepal.<sup>6</sup> The discovery and subsequent excavation of the pillar and its adjacent temple was the result of nearly a century of orientalist concerns with locating the authentic origins of Buddhism and localizing its founder in time and space.<sup>7</sup> In their rediscovery, the biographical sites also became accessible once again in practices of ritual pilgrimage by Buddhist communities from across Asia.<sup>8</sup>

Regarded as auspicious and symbolic locations of Buddhist history and practice, Lumbini and the other biographical sites were incorporated into revival and reform movements factoring prominently in the articulation of Buddhism as a global religion on par with Christianity. Campaigns to repatriate the biographical sites by Buddhist modernist organizations were instrumental in the "representation of Buddhism as a 'world religion' fully the equal of Christianity in antiquity, geographical expanse, membership, and philosophical profundity, with its founder, sacred scriptures, and fixed body of doctrines."<sup>9</sup> The Abrahamic traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam each had a "sacred center" orienting religious devotion and piety, and Buddhist reformers – most notably Maha Bodhi Society founder Anagarika Dharmapala – frequently referenced the need to repatriate the Buddhist "Holyland."<sup>10</sup> The legacies of these early discourses of Buddhist revival and ecumenicism framed the rhetoric deployed by the United Nations in its development interventions at Lumbini in the late-1960s, as it sought to vocalize Buddhist commitments to compassion (*karuṇā*), good-will (*metta*), and nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) in a global register.

Despite efforts by the Maha Bodhi Society to articulate a shared heritage at the biographical sites in the early decades of the twentieth century, Lumbini remained significantly isolated due to its location in

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4. For a detailed discussion of the Buddhist biographical genre, see Juliane Schober, ed., *Sacred Biography in the Buddhist Traditions of South and South East Asia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1997).

5. See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (New York: Verso, 2006), and Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

6. See G. Bühler, "The Discovery of Buddha's Birthplace," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* (1897): 429–433, and Anton Führer, *Monograph on the Buddha Sakyamuni's Birth-Place in the Nepalese Tarai* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1897).

7. See Philip Almond, *The British Discovery of Buddhism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988) and Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the "Mystic East"* (London: Routledge, 1999).

8. For a discussion of the Buddhist imagination and India, see Toni Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2008) and Richard Jaffe, *Seeking Śākyamuni* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2019).

9. Donald Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1998), 185.

10. I use the term "sacred center" to emphasize the Christian influence on the formation of world religions such as Buddhism, and to signal the pervasiveness of this ideology in the rhetoric of Maha Bodhi Society founder Anagarika Dharmapala. See Anagarika Dharmapala, *Return to Righteousness: A Collection of Speeches, Essays and Letters of the Anagarika Dharmapala*, ed. Ananda Guruge (Colombo: Department of Government Printing, 1965).

Nepal's remote Terai under the autocratic governance of the Hindu orthodox Rana regime (1846–1951).<sup>11</sup> Under Rana rule, Buddhism was largely stripped of its public expression and minority Buddhist communities were confronted with discrimination and significant political and economic pressure to conform to a national caste hierarchy driven by a “policy of vigorous Hinduisation.”<sup>12</sup> Throughout the 1930s and 1940s members of Nepal's minority Newar indigenous Buddhist community joined the globalizing efforts of the Maha Bodhi Society and were ordained in the traditional Theravāda lineages of Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Burma). These Nepali converts to Theravāda sought to revive Buddhism in Nepal and promulgate social reforms including the dissolution of caste hierarchies, the rejection of prescribed Hindu life-cycle rituals, and the ordination of women.<sup>13</sup> Such efforts were rebuffed repeatedly by the Rana elite, with many of the Theravāda converts expelled from Nepal for missionizing on the streets of Kathmandu. Taking up residence in Kalimpong, India these exiled Nepalis established the Dharmodaya Sabha (DS) as Nepal's first modernist Buddhist organization. The DS grew to prominence as the principal Buddhist organization in Nepal under the patronage of King Tribhuvan following the revolution of 1951.<sup>14</sup> Tribhuvan and his successor Crown Prince Mahendra publicly supported the DS's efforts, granting the organization custodianship of Lumbini and sponsoring initiatives to hold the fourth World Fellowship of Buddhists Conference in Kathmandu in 1956 commemorating the 2500th anniversary of the Buddha's passing away. This event was a landmark moment in the construction of Nepal's Buddhist heritage as, for the first time in modern history, the eyes of the world's Buddhist population centered on Kathmandu. Enthused by their new-found place in the global pan-Buddhist movement and rejuvenated support from the Nepalese monarchy, the Dharmodaya Sabha was convinced that a new day of democracy and religious freedom had emerged in Nepal. As Kuladharna Ratna proclaimed:

Though Buddhism received a little setback for some time, with the dawn of independence in India and of democracy in Nepal, Buddhism is flourishing again not only in these countries but in other distant corners of the globe also. Truly, Buddhism is now experiencing a glorious renaissance as a democratic religion transcending the materialistic ideologies of this age.<sup>15</sup>

In the decade following the 1956 Conference little investment was made in the development and conservation of Lumbini despite the ratification of the Ancient Monument Preservation Act, which granted the first protections to the site in over a half-century since its rediscovery. Development initiatives at Lumbini fell under the purview of the newly formed Lumbini Dharmodaya Committee which consisted of the two adjoining district magistrates, one local non-official representative, and three nominees of the Dharmodaya Sabha – the most influential member being the venerable Bhikkhu Aniruddha Mahathera, who resided at Lumbini for forty-six years.<sup>16</sup> The Buddha's birthplace was under their joint care until the formation of the Lumbini Development Trust in 1985.<sup>17</sup> The Dharmodaya Sabha's official custodianship of the Buddha's birthplace set the stage for UN interventions in the following decades.

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11. For a discussion of the Rana Dynasty in Nepal see Richard Burghart, *The Conditions of Listening: Essays on Religion, History and Politics in South Asia* (London: Oxford University Press, 1996).

12. Ramesh Chandra Tewari, “Socio-Cultural Aspects of Theravāda Buddhism in Nepal,” *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 6, no. 2 (1983): 72.

13. Sarah LeVine and David Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005), 25.

14. Ria Kloppenborg, “Theravada Buddhism in Nepal,” *Kailash* 5, no. 1 (1977): 308.

15. Kuladharna Ratna, *Buddhism and Nepal* (Kathmandu: Dharmodaya Sabha, 1956), 19–20.

16. Ratna, *Buddhism and Nepal*, 17.

17. See HMG/Nepal, *The Lumbini Development Trust Act*, 1985.

### U Thant & United Nations Interventions at Lumbini

On April 14th, 1967, former United Nations secretary-general U Thant made a self-described “pilgrimage” to Lumbini. An avowed Buddhist from Burma (Myanmar), U Thant was the first non-European secretary-general to be elected to the United Nations since its formation in 1945. U Thant’s stopover in Nepal was part of a broader diplomatic mission in South Asia that included longer visits in Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and India. The secretary-general’s enthusiasm for Lumbini is evident in a brief entry recorded by an accompanying staffer: “At 8:15 a.m., he flew to Lumbini by special helicopter to visit the birth-place of Lord Buddha. Describing his impression, he said that it was one of his life’s ambitions to pay respects to this sacred spot and he felt gratification that his wish had been fulfilled.”<sup>18</sup> Heralded as a momentous day for Nepalese foreign relations, U Thant’s visit was one of hope and “mutual interest between Nepal and the UN” regarding “universal peace.”<sup>19</sup> From the early stages of UN intervention in Nepal, Lumbini was instrumental in discussions of development, peace, and prosperity. U Thant’s aspirations for developing Lumbini are evident in personal communications with Bhikkhu Aniruddha, whom he had met during his visit. Aniruddha, a Nepali convert to Theravāda Buddhism, received higher ordination as a monk (*bhikkhu*) in U Thant’s homeland of Myanmar. As abbot of the Dharmodaya Sabha monastery (*vihāra*) at Lumbini, Aniruddha was one of the most influential Buddhist stakeholders in the UN-sponsored development interventions. The two maintained a multi-year (1967–1971) correspondence characterizing a unique conjuncture between a local Buddhist community and the international peacekeeping agency.

The secretary-general’s delight in visiting the Buddha’s birthplace sparked a multi-year passion project that dominated the remaining years of his service at the United Nations. Lumbini and the figure of the Buddha became, in a matter of a few days, a powerful talking point for U Thant as he advocated for peace. U Thant’s public address titled “Roads to Peace” at Manhattan College on April 26th, 1967, encapsulates the formidable experience of visiting Lumbini, just a few days prior:

I have just returned from a visit to some Asian countries. For me it became almost a religious pilgrimage. As you may know, my personal religion is Buddhism. On this visit, I had the opportunity to visit the Temple of the Tooth in Ceylon, the Stupas of Sanchi in India and the birthplace of the Enlightened One himself at Lumbini in Nepal. The Lord Buddha was, as you know, the apostle of the doctrine of non-violence, the conscious avoidance of injury or pain to any living creature. And in my mind, I recalled, not only the teachings of the great and compassionate Buddha, but also the practice of his precepts by the Emperor Asoka, who became so horrified after waging one war that he relinquished all fighting thereafter and built up a great empire based only on love.<sup>20</sup>

In the decade under U Thant’s leadership (1961–1971) the United Nations was belabored by Cold War geopolitics – largely the product of the fractured political, economic, and social realities of newly independent nation states in Asia and Africa. It is in this historical context that Lumbini emerged as a development project under the United Nations and its subsidiaries the Department of Technical Cooperation for Development (DTCO), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). As inaugural members of the Non-

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18. United Nations, “Visit in Nepal,” Press Release SG/T/152 (April 14, 1967). UN Archives, S-0886-005-04-00001.

19. “To the Secretary General,” *The Rising Nepal*, April 13, 1967. UN Archives, S-0200-0005-01.

20. United Nations, “Text of Address by secretary-General at Manhattan College on ‘Roads to Peace,’” Press Release SG/SM/696 (April 26, 1967). UN Archives, S-0886-0005-05-00001.

Aligned Movement (NAM), Nepal and Burma were positioned within a bloc of developing Asian nations who opposed alignment with either the Soviet Union or the United States. U Thant's campaign to revitalize the Buddha's birthplace as a center for world peace rallied morale and financial support within this bloc of emerging nations. His position at the head of the international peacekeeping organization afforded a unique opportunity to advocate for the development of the Lumbini as a pan-Asian concern within the growing electorate. However, if his utopian aspirations were to be actualized, Lumbini would require a sizeable makeover from its current state as an unfinished archeological excavation with a singular pilgrim's rest house operated by Nepal's Dharmodaya Sabha.

### Peace Through Blueprint Development

Development was among the UN's three founding pillars alongside maintaining peace and security following WWII.<sup>21</sup> Early UN development initiatives were premised on two concerns: 1) the deconstruction of the colonial and imperialist economic order through the promotion of "free trade and fair dealing," which could only be achieved through "assistance to reduce poverty and increase productive capacity," and 2) anxieties about recently de-colonized "Third World" countries in Asia and Africa "drifting toward communism."<sup>22</sup> The UN's development agencies underscored a commitment to human flourishing through a reconfiguration and reallocation of material and financial resources in the global south, implemented through a series of technocratic interventions including surveying, planning, and design.<sup>23</sup> Under the aegis of the DTCD and the UNDP, development initiatives were operationalized through various forms of "technical assistance" interventions. These forms of foreign aid prioritized economic growth and stability as the focal elements of modernization. They espoused technological expertise and planning as means for coordinating and implementing broad economic and social changes, which by the mid-1950s were widely recognized as "two sides of the same developmental coin."<sup>24</sup> The application of prevailing social scientific paradigms concerning race, ethnicity, and culture formed the backbone of this new attention to reconfiguring the material realities of the "un/underdeveloped" global south.<sup>25</sup> Margaret Mead's *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change*, commissioned by UNESCO in 1953, provides insight into the development paradigm operative with the UN at the time:

It has become increasingly clear that the wide gap between wealth and relative welfare, ascribed to economic development in a few countries, and grinding poverty in most of the others, constitutes a basic source of economic and social instability in the world and is, in fact, a *threat to peace*. It has been recognized that accelerating the economic development in less advanced areas is imperative from the standpoint of all countries alike and that increase in productivity in the under-developed areas is a prerequisite to raising the living standards of their peoples.<sup>26</sup>

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21. John Trent and Laura Schnurr, *A United Nations Renaissance: What the UN is, and What it Could Be* (Opladen, Germany: Verlag Barbara Budrich), 71.

22. Trent and Schnurr, *A United Nations Renaissance*, 72.

23. Trent and Schnurr, *A United Nations Renaissance*, 74.

24. David Ekbladh, *The Great American Mission: Modernization and the Construction of an American World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015), 31.

25. For examples of prominent social scientific contributions to shaping the UN's development paradigm, see Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Race and History* (Paris: UNESCO, 1952), and Margaret Mead, *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change* (Paris: UNESCO, 1953).

26. Mead, *Cultural Patterns and Technical Change*, 22. My emphasis.

Lumbini represented a particularly malleable site in the UN's global development initiatives as it was strategically positioned between the rising superpowers of India and China. Grafted into the ideological frameworks of the non-aligned movement and the UN's mandates of development and peacekeeping outlined in its 1945 Charter, Lumbini became a decades-long aid initiative to Nepal. Delegated to specialized agencies, such as the UNDP and the DTCD, technical assistance initiatives were extensively planned; relying on a range of infrastructural, cultural, and socio-economic surveys to compile a comprehensive perspective on the impacts of any foreign intervention. At least three such surveys were conducted at Lumbini under U Thant's tenure between 1967 and 1971. Each successively built upon the observations of previous experts until an adequate assessment had been made. These surveys provided the raw data from which a master plan for development could be designed and successfully implemented. Focused on reconfiguring Lumbini to meet the needs of the modernizing global populace, the UN exploratory surveys outline the geopolitical, economic, and social benefits of development. The UN's technical interventions also signal a moment in which religion became incorporated into the international agency's paradigm of peace through development. Through U Thant's interventions, the symbolic capital of the Buddha and his biography were mobilized to justify broad infrastructural, economic, and social transformation in an impoverished developing nation. While these technical assistance interventions were well intentioned, they rarely resulted in sustained development.

The first of the UN's technical assistance surveys was commissioned in late 1967 with the task of assisting the "Government [of Nepal] in assessing the possibilities and drawing up a plan for the development of Lumbini as a religious and general tourist centre *equipped to receive pilgrims, tourists and other visitors*," advising specifically on "the infrastructure requirements (transportation, facilities, water, energy and appropriate and adequate accommodations for *each type of visitor*" (my emphasis).<sup>27</sup> While the Kobe team largely accepted the historical and cultural importance of the Buddha's birthplace, their preliminary recommendations suggested that Lumbini should be developed within a much broader plan for tourism in Nepal, as a secondary tourist destination to the much more economically viable capital city of Kathmandu and its surrounding areas. The commission also cautioned, "in a country at this stage of development, pure or mainly religious investments cannot be justified from an economic point of view," and that "domestic tourism does not generate such an increase in the national income as to make it worthwhile to encourage travel from the rest of the country to Lumbini."<sup>28</sup> These assessments demonstrate a real concern with Lumbini's viability as an international tourist destination, more than the center for world peace U Thant envisaged. Many of these anxieties continue to plague the ongoing development interventions at the site today. Despite over five decades of investment in making the Buddha's birthplace accessible, the Gautam Buddha International Airport that services Lumbini today was only officially inaugurated in 2022. Prior to its completion foreign visitors to the site arrived via congested Indian border crossings or via domestic flights from Kathmandu.

Despite voicing legitimate concerns, the Kobe report began to formalize a discourse concerning the Buddha's birthplace, designated the "Lumbini Project" within UN circles. It produced a reference point from which various positions, vis-à-vis development, could be asserted and it provided a preliminary plan for undertaking financial and technocratic interventions in Nepal's rural Terai region. By December 1968 "certain short-term projects" were initiated by the UN in agreement with the Nepalese government. These projects included improvements to the road between Lumbini and Bhairawa airfield, preparatory work on

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27. Susumu Kobe, "Report of the United Nations Mission for the Development of Lumbini, December 18, 1967–January 9, 1968," Internal Report (1968), 2. UN Archives, SS-0200-0005-03.

28. Kobe, "Report of the United Nations Mission for the Development of Lumbini," 26.

drilling of a well and arrangements between the “Government of Nepal and the Japanese Overseas Technical Co-operation Agency for assistance in providing a diesel-electric power station.”<sup>29</sup> In addition to these five preliminary initiatives larger development proceedings were being formulated within various UN agencies. In a letter to Aniruddha dated June 10th, 1969, the secretary-general reassured the monk that the situation was being discussed between the Nepalese government and the UNDP, “so as to ensure steady economic and social progress for the people of the area.”<sup>30</sup> Nepal’s Terai region is comprised predominantly of individuals identifying as Hindu or Muslim, with a very small ethnic minority identifying as Buddhist.<sup>31</sup> Although early UN reports advocated for incorporating local communities into the development plans, over one thousand local inhabitants were eventually displaced by the Nepalese monarchy in its implementation of the UN Master Plan adopted in 1978.<sup>32</sup> U Thant’s vision for Lumbini was utopian, aimed at combating global geo-political tensions, but UN intervention through technical development initiatives did little to change the socio-economic condition of Terai residents; in some cases contributing to their suffering.

F. E. Okada’s report compiled in January 1969 was the second technical assistance intervention aimed at assessing the viability of Lumbini’s development under the guidance of the UNDP. Okada’s report outlined the political, economic, and religious advantages of developing Lumbini:

The significance of Lumbini Garden as the birth site of Gautam Buddha is not merely related to religion but assumes political and economic significance in Nepal’s present and future relationships with, in particular, Asia and, more particularly, with South-East Asia and Japan.<sup>33</sup>

He also asserted that Nepal’s development of Lumbini would be a rallying cry for the Buddhist nations of the world, stating, “the emotional debt that Buddhists will feel toward Nepal, if Lumbini Garden is developed, is not to be minimized; the religious favour of Buddhists should not be underestimated.”<sup>34</sup> While Okada recognized the enormous possibility of creating a pan-Buddhist destination in Nepal, he was also skeptical of the Nepalese monarchy’s commitment to seeing the project through, writing in May 1970, “my impression is that there is an unenthusiastic attitude on the part of the Government of Nepal towards the Lumbini Project.”<sup>35</sup> In Okada’s report the potential of Lumbini’s development to serve as a unifying force for the world’s Buddhist populations echoes the aspirations of the secretary-general. This is not entirely surprising as Okada’s primary interlocutors during his visit to Nepal were members of the Dharmodaya Sabha, particularly Bhikkhu Aniruddha.

A third survey on the viability of developing Lumbini, which was now formally known as the “Lumbini Project” within UN circles, was conducted by F. R. Allchin, lecturer in India Studies at Cambridge University and consultant to the UNDP, and K. Matsushita, an architect and planner with the

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29. U Thant, “Letter to Bhikkhu Aniruddha dated June 10, 1969.” UN Archives, S-0200-0005-01.

30. U Thant, “Letter to Bhikkhu Aniruddha,” 2.

31. See D. K. Upahadhyay, “Local Participation in the Development of Lumbini.” Background Paper no. 9 for the Lumbini Development Review Mission, presented to UNDP October 1999.

32. For a detailed discussion of the displacement of local residents at Lumbini, see Kate Molesworth and Ulrike Müller-Böker, “The Local Impact of Under-Realisation of the Lumbini Master Plan: A Field Report,” *Contributions to Nepalese Studies* 32, no. 2 (July 2005): 183–211.

33. F. E. Okada, “Observations on the Lumbini Project,” UNDP Internal Report (January 13, 1969), 1. UN Archives, S-0132-0003-17.

34. Okada, “Observations on the Lumbini Project,” 1.

35. United Nations, “Memorandum: The Lumbini Project,” Internal Report (May 22, 1970), 1. UN Archives, S-0200-0005-01.

Japanese firm Tange and URTEC.<sup>36</sup> The central aim of Allchin and Matsushita's survey was to "assemble data to be utilized in connection with the perspective appeal of the secretary-general to interest governments, especially Buddhist countries, for coordinated assistance for the development of Lumbini."<sup>37</sup> The Allchin and Matsushita report included an initial design using the technique of "zoning" which was envisaged to meet the needs of Lumbini's diverse visitors and local residents. The development plan outlines three primary zones consisting of the "Sacred Garden," the "Monastic Enclave," and the "Pilgrim Village," each with their own designated purposes. The Sacred Garden would house the archeological ruins and preserve them for posterity. The Pilgrim Village would "provide accommodation for both pilgrims and tourists on the one hand and local service population on the other," and the Monastic Enclave included allocated space for "a group of shrines, monasteries, and places of worship to be constructed by individual states and institutions."<sup>38</sup> It was even suggested that the construction of these modern spaces "might assume a diversity of styles in keeping with the free development and diversity of Buddhist sects."<sup>39</sup> For Lumbini to truly emerge as a desirable destination on the international stage it would have to be transformed: developed, modernized, and made accessible through new technologies.

U Thant's vision for the Buddha's birthplace recruited and empowered a wide array of stakeholders invested in seeing Lumbini developed as a pilgrimage and tourist destination. In May of 1970, members of thirteen nations (Afghanistan, Burma, Cambodia, Ceylon, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, Singapore, and Thailand) convened to form a specialized working group within the UN electorate focused on Lumbini's development. This group made up the International Committee for the Development of Lumbini (ICDL), which operated until 2005. Successive campaigns to solicit funds from foreign governments and independent Buddhist organizations were undertaken in the early stages of the ICDL's development proposals. However, these early fundraising initiatives were generally ineffective, and reports suggest that the ICDL quickly concentrated efforts on Japan, Thailand, and the United States only. Additionally, it was apparent that not all the Buddhist nations petitioned to support the project were on-board with the touristic development of the site, nor were they convinced of the Nepalese government's ability to coordinate fundraising and implement the large-scale transformation. This conditional moral support for the project is evident in communications with the Sri Lankan delegation. In a letter directed to the secretariat in 1971 H.S. Amerasinghe, Permanent Representative of Ceylon, states:

I have been requested by my Prime Minister to state that while we consider any appropriate means of preserving Lumbini as a site sacred to Buddhists to be deserving of universal support, we feel that it would detract from the religious significance and merit of such a project if it were to serve a secular purpose such as tourism.<sup>40</sup>

These comments suggest that some governments were initially hesitant to financially support the Lumbini project if its result would amount to a "secular" space. Here the development proposals, already gaining steam within the United Nations, were set in conflict with the spiritual character of Lumbini. These early remarks signal the ongoing frictions between Lumbini's preservation, development, and use as a joint

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36. F. R. Allchin and K. Matsushita Allchin, "Report for the Lumbini Development Project," Internal Report (December 1969), 1. UN Archives, S-0200-0005-03.

37. Allchin and Matsushita, "Report for the Lumbini Development Project," 2.

38. United Nations, *Lumbini: The Birthplace of the Buddha* (New York: United Nations, 1970), 14. UN Archives, S-0200-0005-01.

39. United Nations, *Lumbini: The Birthplace of the Buddha* (1970), 14.

40. United Nations, "Letter from H.S. Amerasinghe dated June 23, 1971." UN Archives, S-0200-0005-04.

tourist and pilgrimage destination. While the UN's development proposals for Lumbini sought to universalize the Buddha's teachings of compassion, peace, and nonviolence under U Thant's leadership, the religious value of the site to Buddhists was largely glossed over. Buddhism, despite its apparent harmony with the principles of the UN Charter, is not simply a humanistic and rational philosophy. Rather, the Buddha's teachings inform various acts of piety and devotion, including in this case pilgrimage to the biographical sites.

The three viability surveys jointly commissioned by the UN secretariat, the UNDP, and the DTCD provided the ICDL with technical data that could be used in implementing a blueprint for sustained investment in the infrastructural and social development of Lumbini and its surrounding area. These surveys present a clear picture of a fundamental tension between the needs of various types of visitors to Lumbini. In these technocratic interventions local residents, foreign tourists, and Buddhist pilgrims were identified as having separate motivations for encountering the Terai site. Each would have to be accounted for in a singular design under the utopian umbrella of fostering peace. With this data in hand ICDL commissioned famed Japanese architect Kenzo Tange to design the formal development plan for the Buddha's birthplace. Kenzo Tange's Master Plan for the Development of Lumbini (KTMP) was adopted by the ICDL in 1978 with an expected completion date of 1985 (see Fig. 2). To date the KTMP remains incomplete, much to the angst of domestic and foreign Buddhist communities. The KTMP incorporated many of the design elements included in the Allchin and Matsushita report, retaining the tripartite zoning of the site connected by a central walkway. Tange understood his design to fit with the ideology of peace envisaged by U Thant, noting in the final design: "The Lumbini area should be a place where many people from the world visit and stay together to think about and learn the spiritual inheritance originated in Buddha's teachings and seek the way to make use of it for the peace of the world and human life in future society."<sup>41</sup> The UN's development interventions did not lead to the immediate transformation that U Thant had envisioned, rather the project of manufacturing Lumbini into a global destination has been a protracted process that remains incomplete today.

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41. Kenzo Tange and URTEC, *Final Outline Design for Lumbini, July 1972* (Tokyo: Kenzo Tange and URTEC, 1972), 3. UN Archives, S-0200-0005-03.



Fig. 2. Lumbini Master Plan footprint, Lumbini, Nepal, June 2019. Photograph by author.

### Lumbini and the Buddha in Service of World Peace

In his forward to *Lumbini: The Birthplace of Buddha* (1970), U Thant, referencing the Buddha's doctrine of compassion for humanity, wrote that "at no time in history has the message of the Buddha been more relevant than it is today."<sup>42</sup> Envisaged as a center for promoting peace, inter-religious dialogue, and global connectivity, Lumbini came to operate as a recurrent talking point amidst the tumultuous Cold War. As development initiatives plodded along behind the scenes, the Buddhist biographical genre came to operate as a powerful rhetorical device within the United Nations. Taking up the mantle of U Thant's diplomacy, UN leaders have repeatedly heralded the Buddha as an "apostle of peace," advocating for compassion and nonviolence in moments of geopolitical contestation. Since the inauguration of the KTMP in 1978, Lumbini has hosted secretary-generals Kurt Waldheim (1981), Javier Pèrez de Cuèllar (1989), and Ban Ki-Moon (2008), each of whom has expressed a continued desire to see the Buddha's teachings inspire and promote world peace. Successive iterations of the ICDL's *Lumbini: The Birthplace of Buddha* were published by the UN in its fundraising and awareness campaigns throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Following U Thant's example, it became customary for the reigning secretary-general to contribute the opening remarks.

Former secretary-general Kurt Waldheim, following U Thant, signaled the religious and spiritual significance of Lumbini by noting that, "despite its isolation and comparative inaccessibility, thousands of pilgrims visit this holy place every year out of reverence to the Buddha," and that the UN is dedicated to supporting the Government of Nepal in developing Lumbini "into an appropriate centre with adequate

42. United Nations, *Lumbini: The Birthplace of the Buddha* (1970), 1.

facilities for pilgrims and tourists.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, former secretary-general Javier Pèrez de Cuèllar calls Lumbini more than just a pilgrimage site or tourist destination:

World-wide attention is focused on Lumbini not only because pilgrims and tourists come from all over the world, but because for all mankind Lumbini has a special meaning as a place of meditation and spiritual renewal, a centre of cultural exchange and a symbol of peace.<sup>44</sup>

For the United Nations, efforts to develop Lumbini were deeply symbolic. As principal patron of the Lumbini Project, throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, UN leaders consistently championed the figure of the Buddha as a “humanitarian” and “apostle of peace and brotherhood among men.”<sup>45</sup> This rhetoric advanced United Nations peacekeeping initiatives amidst the protracted threat of geopolitical conflict spanning the Cold War era:

Buddha’s message of compassion and devotion to the service of humanity is more relevant today than at any other time in history. Peace, understanding and a vision that transcends purely national boundaries are imperatives of our insecure, nuclear age.<sup>46</sup>

On the occasion of the first meeting of the ICDL at Lumbini in 1984, former secretary-general Pèrez de Cuèllar explicitly linked the master development plan to the organization’s foundational moral imperatives adopted in its Charter:

The United Nations, as you know, has long been associated with the plans to create a centre of pilgrimage and cultural exchange to reflect Lumbini’s special meaning for the international community as a symbol of peace and understanding. We look forward to the early completion of the Master development plan when Lumbini will stand as a symbol of those principles which also find expression in the Charter of this Organization.<sup>47</sup>

The equation of Buddhism with the foundational principles of peace and global connectivity in the UN Charter reflects an impulse to read the entirety of Buddhism through a lens of pacifism, liberal politics, and radical selflessness. Lumbini’s development in accordance with KTMP remained a talking point after the Cold War as well. Several secretary-generals have heralded the development initiatives as a triumph in the pursuit of world peace and global connectivity. On the occasion of the World Buddhist Summit held at Lumbini in 1998, former secretary-general Kofi Annan expressed: “As the most sacred place of pilgrimage for the world’s Buddhists, Lumbini provides yet another illustration of the inter-connectedness of all people, across borders and across time.”<sup>48</sup> A decade later, former secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon conveyed similar sentiments during his 2008 visit to Lumbini:

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43. United Nations, *Lumbini: The Birthplace of Buddha* (New York: United Nations, 1979), 1. UN Archives, S-0904-0087-02.

44. United Nations, *Lumbini: The Birthplace of Buddha* (New York: United Nations, 1983), 1. UN Archives, S-1024-0130-24.

45. Javier Pèrez de Cuèllar, “Message from the Secretary-general” (Nov. 19, 1986). UN Archives, S-1024-0109-18.

46. United Nations, *Lumbini: The Birthplace of Buddha* (1983), 1.

47. Javier Pèrez de Cuèllar, “Message from the Secretary-general” (March 4, 1984). UN Archives, S-1024-0117-14.

48. United Nations, “Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s message to the World Buddhist Summit,” Press Release SG/SM/6812 (1998). UN Archives, S-1096-0322-04-00010.

I am awestruck by the beauty and profound significance of this site, the birthplace of the Lord Buddha. Being here, I am reminded of his amazing life journey from sheltered prince to founder of one of the world's great religions. I sincerely hope that we can learn from his lessons, from his teachings and his philosophy to bring peace, stability, harmony, reconciliation, and friendship among people of different beliefs, different religions, and cultures. This is exactly what human beings should promote and pursue for a better world, a more peaceful, more prosperous world.<sup>49</sup>

Efforts to mobilize the teachings of Buddhism as a tool in service of the UN's peacekeeping agenda, although well intentioned, do not accurately reflect the lived realities of Buddhist encounters with modernity in the twentieth century. Despite the global recognition of Buddhist figures who have championed calls for peace, such as the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the late Thich Nhat Hanh, Buddhist populations are far from immune to violence or political turmoil. Citing protracted nationalistic conflicts in Sri Lanka and Myanmar, David McMahan signals that "while modern forms of Buddhism have often advocated for peace and justice, they have also on occasion been co-opted by political forces with quite different agendas."<sup>50</sup> We ought to remain cautious, then, of the ways in which development interventions at Lumbini have been co-opted in overdetermining the content and character of Buddhism as a passive and fundamentally nonviolent religion. It is important to keep in mind that Buddhist doctrines of compassion (*karuṇā*) and nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) are idealized moral imperatives that are not always actualized in practice. Many nations with majority Buddhist populations have endured sustained periods of communal, ethnic, and religious violence.<sup>51</sup> Building up Lumbini as a utopian destination for world peace has not only advanced the UN's ideological commitments to peace through development, but it has also engendered frictions between the stakeholders invested in constructing a global destination in Nepal's rural Terai.

### Frictions at the Buddha's Birthplace

As the Lumbini Project moved through the stages of gestation, from utopian imagination to concrete construction, it collected investors from foreign and domestic governmental agencies as well as local, regional, and global Buddhist organizations. Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century Lumbini was drawn into multiple development agendas with differing priorities: for the UN Lumbini was a symbol of the agency's ideological commitments to peace, for many Buddhists the site was a vestige of cultural heritage and a potent repository of the Buddha's presence, and for the Nepalese monarchy Lumbini's development was the impetus for economic growth and geopolitical posturing. These divergent commitments and priorities produced certain frictions that have contributed to the incomplete nature of the site today. As Anna Tsing notes, friction "makes global connection powerful and effective" and it also, without even trying, "gets in the way of the smooth operation of global power."<sup>52</sup> This is a productive lens for looking at how global Buddhist organizations, national governments, and the UN worked at varying speeds to implement the KTMP in service of their own ideological commitments. What is striking about Lumbini compared to the other Buddhist biographical sites in India is that early investment by the United

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49. "UN Support for Development of Lumbini Encouraging: Prince Gyanendra," *The Rising Nepal*, March 8, 1989.

50. David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 42.

51. For a more nuanced discussion of Buddhist violence in Sri Lanka and Myanmar (Burma) see Juliane Schober, "Buddhism, Violence, and the State in Burma (Myanmar) and Sri Lanka," in *Religion and Conflict in South and Southeast Asia*, ed. Linell Cady and Sheldon Simon (London and New York: Routledge, 2007), 51–69.

52. Anna Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 6.

Nations constrained the possibilities for how the site could be developed. Each of these stakeholders in Lumbini indexed their investment to the KTMP, which sought to harmonize development, preservation, and use through the modern design technique of zoning.

As the ICDL worked to raise funds for the completion of the KTMP, the Nepalese monarchy gradually reappropriated custodianship of the site as a national heritage monument. Lumbini's care, once invested to Dharmodaya Sabha by King Tribhuvan, shifted back to the direct control of HMG/Nepal. Successfully executing the KTMP would renovate the Buddha's birthplace into an economic generator in the region, elevating Nepal's GDP and providing a pretext for social transformation in impoverished regions of the country, bringing them more closely in line with the central authority in Kathmandu. Concurrent with the ICDL's commissioning of the KTMP, the Nepalese monarchy moved to include Lumbini in its national development initiatives targeting the central Gandaki Region. As one UN "Aide Memoire" signals:

The Government of Nepal has given high priority in the development of this site because of the location of Lumbini which lies along the North-South axis of the Gandaki region. Thus the development of Lumbini will be of great help in the development of this region. The long-term objectives of the project are to promote regional development in Nepal for economic and social benefits of the people who are now residing in the Gandaki zone.<sup>53</sup>

Due to the "great disparity in resources and income" in the Gandaki/Lumbini regions, the Nepalese government sought assistance in "reducing the social and economic imbalance throughout the country through regional development and to make the regions more economically and socially complementary to each other."<sup>54</sup> In advancing these agendas, HMG/Nepal consigned Lumbini's significance to its potential value to the economic growth of the nation. The Hindu monarchy, generally apathetic to the religious value of Lumbini for its minority Buddhist constituents, sought to capitalize on increased foreign aid in its national infrastructural development plans. Unlike King Tribhuvan's patronage of the Dharmodaya Sabha decades earlier, the newly formed Lumbini Development Committee (LDC) was not invested in the continuation of Lumbini's spiritual potency as an autonomous Buddhist space, but rather with the preservation of the site's historical heritages and its potential for increasing tourist revenues. Members of the Dharmodaya Sabha were included on this early iteration of the government's development committee, but their role was largely ceremonial.

In this reconfigured heritage network, Nepali Buddhist monks such as Aniruddha Mahathera were supplanted with governmental representatives and diplomats as the principal ambassadors for the joint Lumbini Project between the United Nations and HMG/Nepal. In 1985 the LDC was restructured, and the Lumbini Development Trust (LDT) was enacted, tasked with the successful implementation of the KTMP. The LDT has operated as the executing agency for the Nepalese government for nearly forty years, retaining principal custodianship today. The LDT's custodianship of Lumbini is a contentious topic domestically. As Kate Molesworth and Ulrike Müller-Böker signal, "local people have very little faith in the LDT's capability to manage the development of Lumbini as it is perceived to be both disorganized and corrupt."<sup>55</sup>

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53. United Nations, "Lumbini Development Project Aide Memoire," Internal Report (March 28, 1973), 4. UN Archives, S-0132-0021-04.

54. UNDP, "Gandaki/Lumbini Regional Planning Project Phase I," 1.

55. Molesworth and Muller-Boker, "The Local Impact of Under-Realisation of the Lumbini Master Plan," 195.

These sentiments are evident in national level criticisms of the LDT, and the Nepalese Government as a whole, for their inability to complete the KTMP.<sup>56</sup>

By the mid-1980s it was becoming increasingly apparent that, despite sizable pledges from Thailand, Japan, Sri Lanka, and the U.S. the funds necessary to complete the KTMP were not materializing as expected. In 1984, attempts to secure 2 million USD in assistance from the Japanese Government were met with reluctance. An internal UN report states: “a major factor in the consideration of Japanese contribution was to assure Japanese donors that foreign funds would be properly accounted for and the Nepalese Administrative structure would be placed on sound footing.”<sup>57</sup> This anxiety about proper use of foreign funds has plagued the Lumbini project since its inception. While the United Nations was a prestigious patron in Lumbini’s development, the management of financial contributions and the on-the-ground implementation of the KTMP were left to at the discretion of HMG/Nepal and its national committee, which did not inspire a great deal of confidence domestically or abroad. In a 1986 account of his audience with HMG/Nepal, the ICDL’s chief fundraising coordinator R.K. Basu laments that the Nepalese monarchy had not acted on his efforts to promote cooperation with the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand.<sup>58</sup> These remarks signal the ongoing struggle to gain satisfactory investment from the HMG/Nepal. In another “Note for the File,” Basu reports that, despite the formation of the LDT in 1985, “to date no action had been taken to coordinate fundraising efforts with the ICDL working group” comprised of representatives from Bangladesh, India, Singapore, and Sri Lanka.<sup>59</sup>

Concomitant with efforts to secure capital investment from foreign governments, the ICDL petitioned global Buddhist organizations to raise awareness and fundraise within their memberships. Between 1972 and the early 2000s, the World Fellowship of Buddhists emerged as formidable armature in the development apparatus focused on the Buddha’s birthplace. The World Fellowship of Buddhists was formed in Colombo, Sri Lanka in 1950 by representatives from twenty-seven countries.<sup>60</sup> Although the organization includes membership from most Buddhist traditions, with 130 regional centers in over thirty countries, Theravāda Buddhists have played a central role in its formation and continuation into the present.<sup>61</sup> The organization holds as its core commitments the advancement of the teachings of the Buddha; the promotion of unity, solidarity, and brotherhood amongst Buddhists; and the organization of social, cultural, and other humanitarian services, including working to ensure peace and amongst people and happiness for all beings.<sup>62</sup> The central aims of the WFB became aligned with United Nations in its far-reaching initiatives to secure the protection of Buddhist antiquities, monuments, and temple spaces for posterity. Since 1972 Lumbini has been a consistent theme reprised in WFB regional and general conferences. However, the tensions that plagued the successful implementation of the KTMP in geopolitical arenas became equally apparent in the Buddhist organization’s efforts to raise funds and ensure their proper use in Nepal. For a decade and a half the WFB publicly supported the development initiatives championed

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56. See Sangeeta Lama, “Digging up Lumbini,” *Himal Southasian*, June 1, 1998, <https://www.himalmag.com/digging-up-lumbini/>.

57. UNDP, “Project Revision: Assistance to the Lumbini Development Committee,” Internal Report (1984). UN Archives, S-0143-0003-02.

58. R. K. Basu, “Note for the File,” Internal Report (April 4, 1986). UN Archives, S-0143-0003-22.

59. R. K. Basu, “Note for the File,” Internal Report (May 21, 1986). UN Archives, S-0143-0003-22.

60. Robert E. Buswell and Donald Lopez Jr., eds., “World Fellowship of Buddhists,” in *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2014), 998.

61. Buswell and Lopez, “World Fellowship of Buddhists,” 998.

62. World Fellowship of Buddhists, “The Constitution of World Fellowship of Buddhists,” rev. ed. (Bangkok: The World Fellowship of Buddhists, 1966), 2.

by the Nepalese government until the relationship between the WFB and the LDT began to sour following the organization's fifteenth General Conference held in Kathmandu in 1986. Initially, the WFB operated as a conduit linking the joint United Nations-HMG/Nepal sponsored Lumbini Project to a network of Buddhist communities ready to raise funds for the revitalization of the Buddha's birthplace as a global pilgrimage destination. During U Thant's tenure several staffers in the UN secretariat convened with the executives of the WFB at its Bangkok headquarters to raise awareness about the impending Lumbini Project. Calls to continue partnership with the United Nations and its development initiatives at Lumbini were echoed in the formal resolutions at its biennial general conferences between 1972 and 1986.

At the eleventh General Conference held in Bangkok, Thailand in 1976, the WFB passed a resolution "Declaring Nepal a Peace Zone," as "the birthland of Lord Buddha."<sup>63</sup> This declaration came in conjunction with a second formal resolution reiterating the Dharmodaya Sabha's request for WFB support in the Lumbini's development. The petition requests cooperation with Nepal's LDC so that "Lumbini might be developed into foremost international centre of Buddhist pilgrimage."<sup>64</sup> Again, at the twelfth General Conference in 1978, the WFB called for the "restoration" of Lumbini in one of its four declarations. During the proceedings of the conference, held in Tokyo, the WFB passed Resolution 201/9/GC12 declaring 1979 the "Lumbini Year" advocating the organization's commitment to "cooperate with and provide the Lumbini Development project with funds, publicity and other means."<sup>65</sup> The Resolution states:

Whereas the UN has been planning to restore the pristine glory of LUMBINI, the sacred Birth-Place of Lord Sakya Muni Buddha, as part of its efforts to maintain world peace and world brotherhood; We hereby resolve to declare the year 1979 as the Lumbini Year, and that all Buddhists in all countries should observe it with solemnity, respect and dignity, and that we plan and implement various programmes and functions, including the publication of books and periodicals, the organization of seminars and conferences, the promotion of pilgrimages to Lumbini, and to cooperate with and provide for the Lumbini Development Project, now in operation, with funds, publicity and cooperation.<sup>66</sup>

This formal resolution was reiterated in successive years as the WFB sought to bring attention to the UN Lumbini Project and raise funds for the completion of the KTMP. A resolution passed at the fourteenth General Conference of the WFB in 1984 enhanced previous support noting "the need to preserve [Lumbini] for now and for posterity, a historic place of the utmost importance to all Buddhists and to others interested in Buddhism's peaceful way of life."<sup>67</sup> Another resolution titled, "The Lumbini Project," recognized, and thanked, the Nepal monarchy's vested interest in Lumbini's development, but also signaled anxieties about the proper execution of the project; petitioning the UN secretary-general to request a new oversight board executed through the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific (ESCAP) in Bangkok. The request notes that a new "International Advisory Committee" would "assist the Project Management in policy, implementation and resource mobilization functions" and should ideally consist of

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63. "11th General Conference: Resolutions," The World Fellowship of Buddhists, accessed May 13, 2022, <http://wfbhq.org/general-conference-detail.php?id=015000017>.

64. World Fellowship of Buddhists, "11th General Conference: Resolutions."

65. "12th General Conference: Record of Proceedings," The World Fellowship of Buddhists, accessed May 13, 2022, <http://wfbhq.org/general-conference-detail.php?id=015000012>.

66. "12th General Conference: Resolutions," The World Fellowship of Buddhists, accessed May 13, 2022, <http://wfbhq.org/general-conference-detail.php?id=015000012>.

67. "14th General Conference: Resolutions," The World Fellowship of Buddhists, accessed May 13, 2022, <http://wfbhq.org/general-conference-detail.php?id=015000014>.

“members who are experts and who are deeply interested in this project to be selected on the basis of equitable geographical distribution, bearing in mind that the great majority of Buddhists reside in the ESCAP region.”<sup>68</sup> This attempt to assert a degree of oversight in the UN sponsored Lumbini Project signals growing anxieties amongst various Buddhist communities about the proper implementation of the KTMP.

At the fifteenth General Conference of the WFB held in Kathmandu in 1986, the WFB asserted that the organization was committed to “interreact with the Lumbini Trust to expedite the development of Lumbini as a permanent symbol of World Peace and as a foremost spiritual centre for World Buddhism.”<sup>69</sup> The WFB resolved to formulate an executive committee within its membership “with the principal purpose of mobilizing financial and material resources” in support of the Lumbini Project designated as the “WFB’s Global Resource Committee for Buddha’s Birthplace (WFB-GRCBB).”<sup>70</sup> The new committee was envisioned to be an internal body aimed at facilitating the flow of donations from Buddhist communities to the newly formed Lumbini Development Trust (LDT), toward the successful execution of the KTMP. Resolution 235/1/GC15 tasked the WFB-GRCBB with “closely interacting with the Lumbini Development Trust in fund-raising and other activities.”<sup>71</sup> Consultations between the WFB Global Resource Committee and the LDT continued for several years “without the achievement of a joint machinery for actual consultation of projects in the Monastic Zone and the Sacred Garden.”<sup>72</sup>

As a result of these failed efforts to effectively collaborate with the LDT, the WFB eventually resolved to take a “larger perspective” of development. In the 1990s, support for Lumbini was articulated as only one part of ongoing efforts to advocate for the preservation of the circuit of four Buddhist heritage properties corresponding to the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, first teaching, and death. Here it is evident that Lumbini’s development remained a priority, however, there is a decidedly different tone as to how WFB investment should be handled as anxieties about “appropriate” development became more apparent. These numerous resolutions represent three decades of ecumenical support from the WFB. While this support may not have materialized as intended, it is nevertheless important to recognize the contributions of the global Buddhist community to the modern manufacture of the Buddha’s birthplace. The under-realization of the KTMP today is the result of multiple moments of disconnect and friction between various stakeholders at all levels of investment throughout the twentieth century. As the Nepal monarchy gradually reappropriated custodianship of the Buddha’s birthplace from the Dharmodaya Sabha, concrete connection to the site and oversight of development was removed from the hands of Buddhist organizations. Powerless to enact substantial change at the site as an ecumenical body, the WFB directed its efforts toward encouraging the construction of individual temples and monasteries in the Monastic Zone. At present 29 of the 42 plots of land granted to foreign Buddhist communities within the Monastic Zone have been developed.

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68. World Fellowship of Buddhists, “14th General Conference: Resolutions.”

69. “15th General Conference: Declaration” The World Fellowship of Buddhists, accessed May 13, 2022, <http://wfbhq.org/general-conference-detail.php?id=015000015>.

70. “15th General Conference: Resolutions,” The World Fellowship of Buddhists, accessed May 13, 2022, <http://wfbhq.org/general-conference-detail.php?id=015000015>.

71. World Fellowship of Buddhists, “15th General Conference: Resolutions.”

72. “15th General Conference: Record of Proceedings,” The World Fellowship of Buddhists, accessed May 13, 2022, <http://wfbhq.org/general-conference-detail.php?id=015000015>.

## Conclusion

Lumbini's development throughout the twentieth century marks a unique conjuncture between religious interests and the UN's aspirations for world peace. As I have shown, development interventions at Lumbini, initiated by former secretary-general U Thant, contributed to the appropriation of a pacified and politically benign Buddhist ethic within the UN. This innocuous Buddhism, premised on nonviolence, peace, and compassion, was harmonized with the UN Charter and subsequently redeployed in service of the agency's peacebuilding agendas amidst the Cold War. Through the discourse of development Lumbini became a globally significant destination for fostering utopian aspirations for peace. These initiatives stand in tension with the material realities of the Lumbini Project, which remain beleaguered by frictions amongst its diverse constellation of stakeholders that includes domestic and global Buddhist organizations as well as governmental and extra-governmental agencies. While they have often been touted as motivation for UN intervention, the socio-economic conditions of the local community and concern for the daily practices of piety by Buddhist residents and pilgrims have often been glossed over in favor of fostering economic growth. The UN and the Nepalese state's management of the KTMP have contributed to this disparity. What I have attempted to demonstrate is that UN intervention both expanded the prestige of Lumbini to a global scale and subsequently created the implicit parameters by which the site could be encountered and valued. While the UN is often viewed as a secular entity, the Lumbini Project demonstrates a curious case in which religious piety was operationalized as the impetus for large scale development intervention that spanned over three decades.

Through the design element of zoning the KTMP has effectively consigned Buddhist investment to the Monastic Zone while the Nepalese government and other foreign investors have been responsible for securing funds for the surrounding public spaces. This manufactured division of secular and religious investment continues to feed anxieties about the failings of the development plan to foster sustained ecumenical engagement and nurture global connectivity and peace.<sup>73</sup> The UN's interventions at Lumbini demonstrate that global development projects are, as Anna Tsing notes, animated by creative frictions enacted in the "sticky materiality of practical encounters."<sup>74</sup> Despite significant tensions between its international patrons and its domestic custodians, Lumbini retains a prominent position in discourses of tourism and regional geopolitics. Inscribed on UNESCO's World Heritage Site list in 1997, Lumbini has gained even more prestige as an international destination within the UN's network of heritage sites.<sup>75</sup> At Lumbini, discourses of Buddhist ecumenicism, geopolitical cooperation and peace, as well as social welfare and economic prosperity have been interwoven, indexed to a singular development plan commissioned by the United Nations. Despite the incomplete nature of the KTMP today, various stakeholders throughout the twentieth century were drawn to the symbolic capital of the site as an opportunity to enact social, political, and religious change. These investments elevated the Buddha's teachings of compassion (*karuṇā*) and nonviolence (*ahiṃsā*) to a new global stage and continued to play a sizeable role in the negotiation

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73. See Justin McDaniel, *Architects of Buddhist Leisure: Socially Disengaged Buddhism in Asia's Museums, Monuments, and Amusement Parks* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 36.

74. Tsing, *Friction*, 1.

75. Michael Di Giovine has termed the integrated network of unrelated heritage sites under UNESCO a global "heritage-scape," see Michael Di Giovine, *The Heritage-scape: UNESCO, World Heritage, and Tourism* (Plymouth, UK: Lexington Books, 2009).

of Nepalese national identity throughout the nation's protracted democratization between 1990 and 2015.<sup>76</sup> More recently, Lumbini has emerged within geopolitical discourses as India and China vie for “soft power” in the Himalayan region.<sup>77</sup> Although the legacies of twentieth century frictions remain apparent in contemporary encounters with the site, it is equally apparent that Lumbini has never been more accessible than it is today, in large part thanks to the UN's interventions.

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76. For a detailed discussion of how the symbolic capital of the Buddha's birthplace was incorporated into national identity in Nepal, see Dannah Dennis, “Mediating Claims to Buddha's Birthplace and Nepali National Identity,” in *Media as Politics in South Asia*, ed. S. Udupa and S. McDowell (London: Routledge, 2017): 176–189.

77. See Jason Overdorf, “Nepal's Prachanda Inks Lumbini Deal with Chinese NGO: Report,” *GlobalPost*, November 8, 2012. <https://theworld.org/stories/2012-11-08/nepals-prachanda-inks-lumbini-deal-chinese-ngo-report>.

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