



A N I N S I D E R ' S G U I D E F R O M

WHERE IDEAS BEGIN

*An Insider's Guide to Eastern India — the birthplace
of Buddhism, and the source of one of humanity's
most enduring conversations*

Architecture of Belief Series

F A R H O R I Z O N S

Archaeological & Cultural Trips



We live in a strange moment. Information has never been more abundant, and yet meaning has never felt harder to find. Facts are contested. History is rewritten. The loudest voice often wins.

The travelers who come to Far Horizons are the ones who push back against that. Not because they have all the answers, but because they understand that the questions themselves have a history — and that history is worth standing in front of.

Eastern India is where some of the most important questions in human civilization first took shape. Not as philosophy confined to a text — but as a movement. A counterculture. An argument that began under a specific tree, in a specific moment, and eventually changed how a quarter of the world thinks about the nature of suffering, the structure of society, and the possibility of meaning that comes from within.

Eastern India is the original text.

Most travelers drawn to Buddhism encounter it downstream: in the temples of Kyoto, the monasteries of Ladakh, the retreats of Southeast Asia. Those places are extraordinary — but they are translations. This guide is for the traveler who wants to go to the source: to understand not just what Buddhism became, but why it was necessary, what it was responding to, and why the conversation it started is still the one worth having.





01

BODH GAYA

The tree, the moment, the place

There is a tree in the Indian state of Bihar. It stands in a walled enclosure beside the Mahabodhi Temple — a slender-trunked fig with roots that go deeper than the visible ground. Pilgrims circumambulate it at dawn. Monks meditate beneath it. The air around it carries a quality of sustained attention, as if the place has been listened to for so long it has learned to hold the listening.

It was here — under a tree descended from this one — that Siddhartha Gautama sat down in the 6th century BCE and refused to get up until he understood the nature of suffering. Told simply, it sounds like the beginning of a religion. What it actually was, in its historical moment, was the beginning of an argument: about power, about who had the right to interpret the sacred, about whether meaning was inherited from caste and priests or arrived at through your own inquiry. The Mahabodhi Temple that stands there today is a UNESCO World Heritage Site — a 55-meter spire rising from the Bihar plains — but the architecture is not the point. The point is that you are standing where the argument began.

By the time you reach the tree, you will know what you are looking at.



You arrive at Bodhi Gaya not as a tourist completing a checklist, but as someone who has spent days in conversation with Dr. Malcolm David Eckel — a scholar of Buddhist studies and a Great Courses lecturer with a worldwide following.



02

INDIA'S ORIGINAL COUNTERCULTURE

What made Buddhism necessary

To understand why Buddhism emerged when and where it did, you have to understand what it was pushing against. In the 6th century BCE, the dominant framework in northeastern India was Brahmanism — organized around the authority of the Vedas and the priest caste who interpreted them. Access to the sacred was controlled. Your place in the cosmic order was determined at birth, enforced by ritual, and not subject to individual inquiry.

Buddhism said: no. Not quietly. The movement that gave rise to it — the Shramana movement, “the strivers” — was one of the most radical intellectual upheavals in ancient history. It rejected the authority of the Vedas and the caste system as a measure of spiritual worth, and held that the path to liberation was open to anyone willing to do the work. This happened at a particular moment for a reason: rapid urbanization, powerful new kingdoms, expanding trade, and a merchant class that sat outside the traditional hierarchy — what historians call the “second urbanization” of South Asia. Jainism emerged from the same moment and region. Eastern India was not a quiet backwater. It was the intellectual center of a civilization in transformation.

You can read about a revolution. Or you can stand where it started.



The Silk Road was not only a trade route — it was an information highway. Buddhism traveled it as a living conversation, changing every place it landed, and being changed. That is what makes the source so important.



03

NALANDA UNIVERSITY

The mind that carried it forward

Imagine a university that, at its height, housed ten thousand students and two thousand teachers — where scholars traveled from China, Korea, Japan, Tibet, Mongolia, Persia, and Turkey to study, not because it was the only option, but because it was the best. Imagine a library so vast that when it burned, it reportedly took months for the fire to go out. Now imagine that almost no one outside classical studies knows it existed.

Founded in the 5th century CE in what is now Bihar, Nalanda was one of the first residential universities in the world and arguably the greatest center of Buddhist learning ever established. It was not withdrawal from the world — it was where the world's most serious thinkers came to argue: about logic and metaphysics, medicine and astronomy, the nature of consciousness and the structure of reality. The curriculum included Buddhist philosophy alongside grammar, logic, medicine, mathematics, and the Hindu traditions Buddhism had emerged in dialogue with. In 1193 CE, the commander Bakhtiyar Khilji burned it to the ground; surviving scholars fled, some to Tibet, where the Nalanda tradition survived in a different form.

The library burned. The conversation continued.



The ruins of Nalanda are a UNESCO World Heritage Site — excavated brick structures covering some 14 hectares, a fraction of the original complex. To walk them is to walk through the evidence that ideas are not easily destroyed.

04

THE SCULPTED CAVES

Where the argument went underground

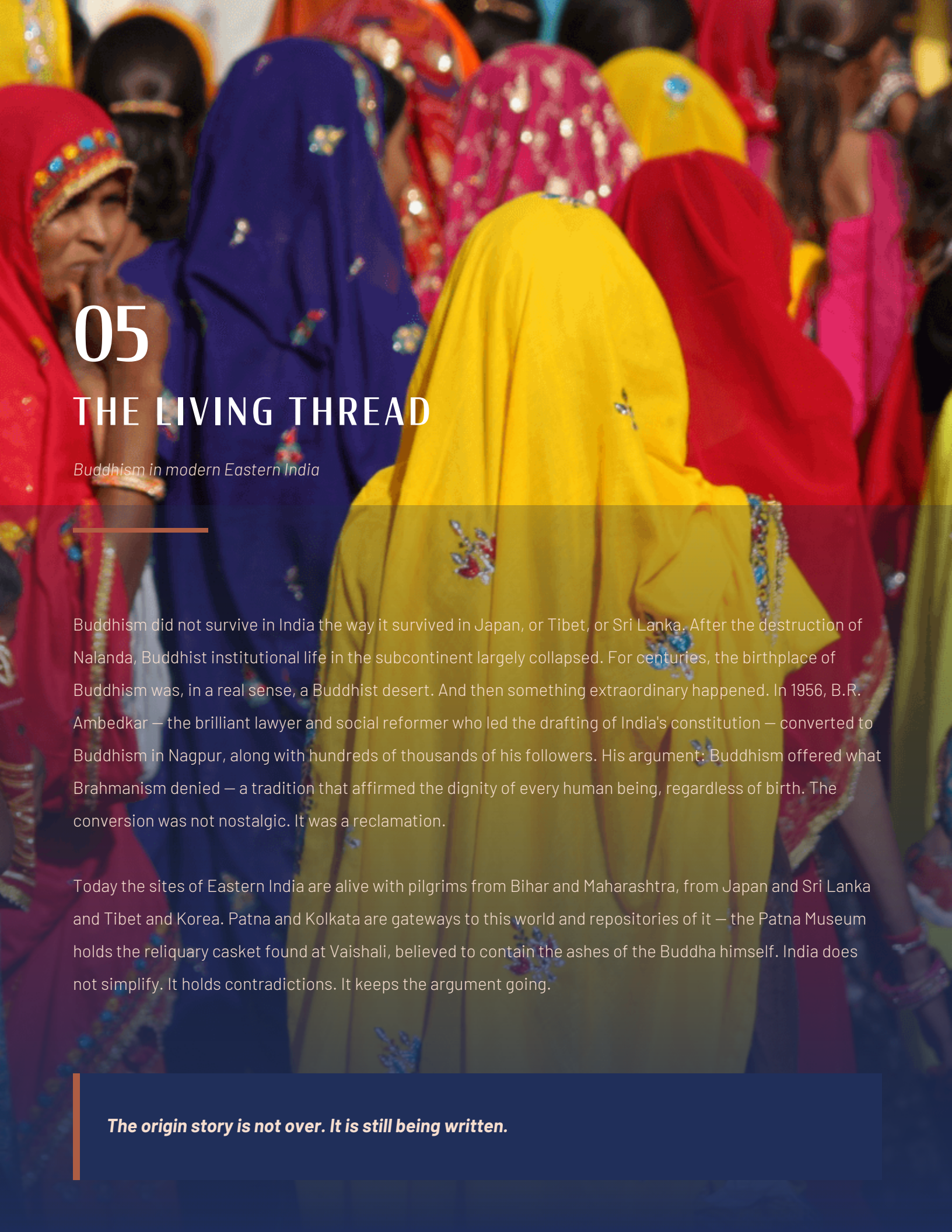
Long before the great temples were built — long before Buddhism had the political patronage that would fund its most spectacular monuments — practitioners carved their worship directly into rock. The cave temples and monasteries of Eastern India are among the oldest surviving evidence of Buddhist practice: spaces cut from living stone, often in remote hillsides, where monks lived and meditated and, over centuries, covered the walls with imagery — Buddhas in every posture, bodhisattvas of extraordinary stillness, and the Jataka tales rendered with a psychological complexity that would feel at home in a modern novel.

These are not tourist attractions dressed up as archaeological sites. They are primary documents. On this itinerary, that story is written twice. Rajgir's Son Bhandar Caves are the first chapter — two modest rock-cut chambers from the Mauryan era. The real revelation comes at the trip's close, in Odisha: Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri, the monastic cluster archaeologists call the “Diamond Triangle.” When the Archaeological Survey of India excavated Ratnagiri (1958–61), its leader — Debala Mitra, the first woman to head the ASI — uncovered a carved gateway she called “the loveliest entrance to a structural monastery in the whole of India.” The complex flourished for roughly 800 years before it was lost so completely that even the name of what you're standing in front of is still being argued over.

What they built in stone is still here. What they believed is still in conversation.



To stand inside these spaces is to understand something no book can fully convey: that the people who built this tradition were human beings, working with their hands, in the dark, on something they believed mattered enough to last.



05

THE LIVING THREAD

Buddhism in modern Eastern India

Buddhism did not survive in India the way it survived in Japan, or Tibet, or Sri Lanka. After the destruction of Nalanda, Buddhist institutional life in the subcontinent largely collapsed. For centuries, the birthplace of Buddhism was, in a real sense, a Buddhist desert. And then something extraordinary happened. In 1956, B.R. Ambedkar — the brilliant lawyer and social reformer who led the drafting of India's constitution — converted to Buddhism in Nagpur, along with hundreds of thousands of his followers. His argument: Buddhism offered what Brahmanism denied — a tradition that affirmed the dignity of every human being, regardless of birth. The conversion was not nostalgic. It was a reclamation.

Today the sites of Eastern India are alive with pilgrims from Bihar and Maharashtra, from Japan and Sri Lanka and Tibet and Korea. Patna and Kolkata are gateways to this world and repositories of it — the Patna Museum holds the reliquary casket found at Vaishali, believed to contain the ashes of the Buddha himself. India does not simplify. It holds contradictions. It keeps the argument going.

The origin story is not over. It is still being written.

A photograph of Dr. Malcolm David Eckel, an older man with glasses, wearing a dark jacket and carrying a backpack. He is standing on a wooden railing on a mountain path, holding a walking stick and a cap. In the background, there are traditional Chinese-style buildings with yellow roofs nestled against a steep, rocky cliffside. The scene is misty and atmospheric.

06

THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES

Your scholar: Dr. Malcolm David Eckel

Dr. Malcolm David Eckel is Professor Emeritus of Religion at Boston University, where he taught Buddhist studies for decades. He is the author of several books on Buddhist philosophy and one of the scholars featured in The Great Courses, where his lectures have introduced hundreds of thousands of listeners to the intellectual depth of this tradition.

What makes his presence irreplaceable is not just his credentials — it's his way of seeing. He understands Buddhism not as a relic to be preserved but as a living philosophical tradition with profound implications for how we understand consciousness, ethics, and meaning. Traveling with him is not a lecture series attached to a tour. It is a sustained, two-week conversation about some of the most important questions human beings have ever asked. His scholarship is rigorous. His company is remarkable.

EASTERN INDIA — JANUARY 19, 2027

This expedition visits Bodh Gaya, Nalanda, Rajgir, Patna, and Kolkata, then closes in Odisha — the Buddhist Triangle of Lalitgiri, Ratnagiri, and Udayagiri, the Konârak Sun Temple, and the Jagannath Temple at Puri — the full arc of Eastern India's Buddhist heritage, from the moment of origin to its contemporary life.

January in Eastern India is the ideal time to travel — cool, clear, and timed to the cultural rhythms of the region. To travel this route with a scholar who has spent his life understanding this tradition is to participate in a conversation that is still unresolved — still alive, still contested, still capable of surprising you.



Far Horizons expedition: Eastern India, departing January 19, 2027, led by Dr. Malcolm David Eckel, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Boston University. Space is limited — Final payment is due four months before departure. To hold a place, contact Far Horizons before end of September 2026.

ARCHITECTURE OF BELIEF

This is part of a series.

Eastern India is where an idea began. What happened to it next is the more interesting question, and it is the one the rest of these journeys follow.

Ideas do not stay where they are born. They travel — along trade routes, over mountain passes, into courts and monasteries and marketplaces that reshape them on arrival. Each of these expeditions picks up that movement somewhere along its length.

ALREADY ACTIVE

North India — October 2026

Japan — November 2026

Sri Lanka — January 2–16, 2027

Eastern India — departs January 19, 2027

Central Asia & the Silk Road — spring 2027

Himalayan Kingdoms: Ladakh & Bhutan — October 1–18, 2027

Gujarat & Rajasthan — November 2–18, 2027

DEPARTING JANUARY 2027

*Sri Lanka, January 2–16, and Eastern India, departing January 19. The oldest surviving form of the tradition, and the ground it came from ...
three days apart.*

To learn more or begin a conversation about booking, contact Far Horizons — space on the January 2027 expedition is limited.



The traveler who stands under the Bodhi tree, who walks the ruins of Nalanda, who sits in the silence of caves cut two thousand years ago – that traveler will leave with a question. Not one we can predict. But it will come.

You may come to Eastern India curious about Buddhism. You may come as someone who has practiced for years, or someone who has never thought about it at all but cannot resist the pull of origin stories. It doesn't matter which. What matters is that you come willing to be surprised.

**That is how intellectual travel works.
It doesn't close loops. It opens them.**

The trip ends. The question doesn't.

THE EXPEDITION

Eastern India — departs January 19, 2027

Led by Dr. Malcolm David Eckel, Professor Emeritus of Religion, Boston University

Bodh Gaya · Nalanda · Rajgir · Patna · Kolkata · the Odisha Diamond Triangle · Konârak · Puri

Space is limited. Final payment is due four months before departure. To hold a place, contact Far Horizons well before the end of September 2026.

THE ARCHITECTURE OF BELIEF

North India · Japan — autumn 2026

Sri Lanka · Eastern India — January 2027

Himalayan Kingdoms — October 2027

Gujarat & Rajasthan — November 2027

Central Asia & the Silk Road — dates TBA

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