

Section Three – Chapters 14-17

Chapter Fourteen - Advanced Zazen Practice

Day 32 - Saturday March 10, 2018 (282/400 – 2882/3000)

Afternoon...

Yesterday was a very difficult day practice wise. I'm still in this having 'hit the bump' zone. With a persistent cough, the mind would not settle into any real peace, and yet I had made my commitment to be there, and to clocking up the hours. So sit and sit I did, but it was all rather grueling. It was no doubt good to get the phlegm out of the body in any event. Today, happily the cough is much less, and the morning sessions were really quite pleasant. There is a glimpse of hope that soon, normal energy and focus will return in time for the final push towards the finish line of our goals.

I've decided to have a half day off today for several reasons. I have sore back muscles from coughing, and a headache probably related to the illness. I am almost at the Three Quarters Point in my practice goal, and there is a fairly large group of students coming in just a few days. In taking off the afternoon, I get the evening time as well. It's a good opportunity to expand upon my journal to. For some people, creativity is a kind of therapeutic activity. It feels like this for me just now.

My students sometimes tease me that despite all of the supplements that I horde, and then religiously consume, at some point I still get sick. One shelf in my wardrobe at the Guesthouse is Supplements and Essential Oils! With many people coughing and sneezing all around you all day at some point in time your body, just another organic specimen dropped into the petri dish, is going to meet some bugs for which there is not yet immunity. I remember very well the first chest infections I caught in India and Nepal though, and remember being in bed with no energy for a week, then having a lingering cough for more than a month once back in Thailand.

Even with the help of immune boosting supplements, and free-radical negating antioxidants, one gets sick after being here for some weeks, but not in the very first week! You still have enough energy to practice while the body is fighting the bug. Recovery is faster, and it seems that a couple of half days off will suffice, rather than the full week in bed. So, I still swear by my supplements! Echinacea, Vitamin C, Tumeric capsules, Probiotics, Chlorella, and an herbal parasite preventing tincture, Cloves, Wormwood, and Walnut Husk all comprise my cornucopia of supplements. (I hate to think what is in the air parasite-wise, and what one might pick up while barefoot in the loo! Better to play it safe!) Bullet Proof! I have absolutely no faith in the flu vaccine, and haven't had any vaccinations for 11 years. Curiously I am still alive.

Back to my difficult day yesterday, one notices the things which 'just don't seem quite right' in the area under and around the Bodhi Tree more when the mind does not settle inwards comfortably. Usually I can manage a balance with enough circumspection and determination, but not when sick or exhausted. Unfortunately the mind can fall into irritation when that occurs. Witnessing these things more clearly yesterday, uncollected as I was, I realized that it

is in fact quite amazing how many 'phenomenon' fit into this category - of just not seeming quite right!

As noted before though, this is the place of Enlightenment, and the place where the forces of Mara expressed their absolute dismay and discontent about the fact of this Enlightenment, with a terrible might and force. To this day, true to form, while many people still experience bliss, joy, tranquility, insight, and a deepening of faith and understanding under the Bodhi Tree at the very same time, bizarre and seemingly inappropriate things are going on in that same sacred space.

It is a truly fascinating and dynamic place, where so much is going on at once much of it wholesome and some of it quite awful. Now, closely approaching 3000 hours, sometimes even I can't believe that we actually manage to meditate there! If it were not for the Buddhas Blessings it would surely not be possible. I've decided to write about it here on this my afternoon off from meditating, because I doubt I could recollect it and do it true justice were all of these 'phenomena' not still perfectly fresh in the recent memory of my mind.

To help in setting the scene, for those who've never been here, the Bodhi Tree is about 20 metres high, yet around 40 metres wide. It is of the 'ficus' soft wood family and as such is a relative of the Banyan Tree. All trees of this genus are now referred to as Bodhi Trees, but this one is referred to as the Maha (*Great*) Bodhi Tree. It has large heart-shaped leaves which rustle pleasantly together in the breeze. Being situated on the western side of the square based Chedi; the edge of the large trunk is just three metres from the centre point of this western side. There is a brass fence around the tree approximately 5 x 5 metres wide, and a sandstone fence outside of the brass one.



King Asoka had a piece of sandstone carved into a symbolic 'Vajra Asana' or Diamond Throne, around 2300 years ago, and this sits nestled neatly between the Tree and the Chedi. The precise place where the Enlightenment occurred is probably a few metres below, having had tree foliage falling upon it for several millennia. It may actually be situated under the

edge of the Chedi itself, since the size of the base of the Chedi was expanded around 140 years ago. You used to be able to go and sit meditation right up against the tree trunk and also touch the stone plinth, and place flowers upon it. People used to like to press their head against it, probably making such wishes as, "May wisdom penetrate this thick skull and lead me to Enlightenment!" But when the Bodhi Tree showed significant signs of poor health, it was deduced that the soil around the roots was too compacted and that the tree literally needed some breathing space, which it now has.



Posts have been installed here and there to support the unusually long branches. It is perhaps the only Bodhi Tree in the world which is twice as wide as it is high. It is also quite lopsided, as the eastern side has no space to grow because of the Chedi structure, whereas the western side is very sprawling majestic and grand, so these posts really do help. Around 100 people can sit under the Tree in the innermost area. Large pujas are also held under the Tree, just outside a sandstone wall that separates the innermost area from a middle ring zone on the grand western side. On this side, beyond the innermost zone, literally 3-400 people can also sit or chant 'under the Bodhi Tree' There are frequent 'mass ordinations' of temporary novice monks here, as Thai men love 'going forth' under the Bodhi Tree. Even though most of these men will only be monks for 10-14 days, they believe that going forth in this place will help bring about more conducive circumstances for longer and better opportunities in future lives. No doubt a small percentage, also stay on for years, or even until they pass from this life.

In this larger 'middle ring zone' area, there are many smaller pujas going on which people recite while facing the Chedi, and hundreds of Tibetans doing full length prostrations as well. That is, bowing from a fully upright to a fully horizontal position on stationary bowing boards. This is done in fast repetition with the aid of slippery hand pads. These bowers develop very strong upper arms and abdomen muscles! This is occurring constantly, from 5am to 8:45 pm., and observing their bowing with great faith, energy and perseverance can be very uplifting. Many Tibetan monks and nuns and some laypeople (from many countries) literally bow all day, taking just little breaks here and there. The more determined will try and do 100,000 full-length prostrations in three months, before returning from the plains back up

to the mountainous regions where they live, once things warm up. Doing 100,000 prostrations is considered to be a good preparatory practice before moving onto deeper contemplations. It is also believed to reduce one's bad karma and lessen obstructions.

I also once did 7,000 of these bows on an earlier visit, and 10,000 on a subsequent visit. It was wonderful to express gratitude and faith in such a significant and 'embodied' way. There is more pain in the shoulder muscles when you try and sit meditation though! So I finally settled on sitting for ten hours rather than working up to bowing 1,000 times per day. I would have a more handsome body shape if I had taken the bowing option, but that's not what it's about!

Advanced Zazen

Our usual approach is to sit right up against the Chedi wall on the northern side, yet still very close in proximity to The Tree. In fact one branch wraps around the corner of the western side, and perfectly covers our little preferred northern corner of choice. Then one can do a practice a bit like Zazen in the Zen tradition, where if you open your eyes, all you see is the wall. There are literally just a few choice spaces which afford this extra opportunity for restraining the senses, and the meditation monks cherish these prized spots and vie for them, which is why we must arrive very early each day.

Normally with Zazen, as with most retreat situations, a quiet place, even silence all around, is in place as a support to seeing the movement of the mind more clearly. Here in Bodhgaya, even if your mind is noisy, outside is often noisier! And normally in retreat situations, you have a lot of predictability in the schedule, so a sense of security can help the mind to settle. Here, you literally never know what is about to come around the corner!

To assist with establishing some sense of seclusion, as well as facing the wall, we sometimes also pull our hats down just over our eyes. This looks really silly, but it affords sun protection, and screens out the visual awareness of large numbers of people, filing constantly around the inner kora immediately around the Chedi. From my usual sitting spot, they are filing around just six metres away from my right shoulder, and three metres behind my back, usually clockwise, but not always. Thousands of people must pass by on any one day during peak season. If you put foam earplugs in your ears, you can screen out about 30% of the noise which is truly extraordinary at times! These days, the most sacred site of Buddhists, a place of meditation and contemplation, is a very noisy and busy place!

You could try to come at a quieter time. It is nice and quiet in May I am told when it is 45 degrees Celsius on average, sometimes 49! It goes down to an unbearable 38 at night. I am told that if you lie on concrete or ceramic tiles with a wet blanket over you and the fan on, then it doesn't seem so bad. So far I haven't tried. Only 38 degrees with 90% humidity in the monsoon if you like watching mould grow on your body as well as on your clothes and the walls. Now you know why everyone comes in the cold season, from mid October to mid March.



My favourite sitting spot - and the crowds filing by

'Signlessness' - Silent Awareness amid an Ocean of Noise

There are signs in English placed near the Tree, and on prominent posts holding up branches. SILENCE, say some. The others say 'loudspeakers are to be kept at a low volume in the inner area, so as not to disturb meditators, by order, the secretary MBTMC.' The signs are universally ignored by people who usually speak Vietnamese, Khmer, Burmese, Sinhala, Thai, Tibetan, Chinese, or Hindi as their mother tongue. I have yet to witness a loud or inconsiderate English speaking group! I suspect however that it was English speaking people who complained so often which caused such signs to be placed here.

So, in a place where signs are ignored it might as well be signless. And this is what we must aim for - Signlessness. Clear, empty awareness not attending to sounds, not commenting, liking or disliking, but simply aware of them even for Olympic grade meditators, it's a creative challenge. But it is possible, at least at times.

So what are some of the noises that meditators and visitors must practice Being Aware of at the Temple? It starts before dawn! When the gates open at 5am, a CD of the chant 'Buddham Saranam Gachaaaaami, Dhammam Saranam Gachaaaaami, Sangham, Saranam, Gachaaaaami,' is put on the audio system. This is played at high volume over loud speakers for around 15 minutes, and then there is around ten minutes of quiet. At 5:30, a group of Indian monks officially associated with the Mahabodhi Temple will chant their morning puja and some parittas for about half an hour. This is piped over the loudspeakers too, and is very loud. The unrelenting tone and pace can appear to sound a bit like chainsaws.

Then at 6:00am, without skipping a beat, 'the other group of Indian monks,' not formally associated with the Temple, my 'special teachers' will start their puja nearby, with their amplifier facing our direction. They will drone on for 45 minutes or so. Less like a chainsaw these guys, but more like drunken karaoke. (I'm sorry but it's true) Simultaneously, from around 6:00am, usually several and sometimes many smaller groups will be doing smaller pujas in the inner area, each with their own amplifier. You can easily have a Thai, Korean, and Chinese puja going on all at the same time. This is all in the early hours around dawn, but

after breakfast things really warm up!

For me and my friends, having a little break after meditating for two hours, (5:15 – 7:15am) - having been working with some tiredness and all of the chanting noise is quite helpful. Sometimes the mind is really peaceful, and sometimes it isn't, and one never really knows which way it will go.

After breakfast, say around 8am, is when the large groups from the Tibetan tradition will start their morning sessions. These are amplified quite loudly to, and there are frequent explosions of trumpet, cymbal, drum, and bell sounds interjected. I've actually come to really love the Tibetan pujas, partly because they are beautiful in their own way, but also because they make a blanket of background noise that screens out so much of the other noise. Once the mind has adjusted to holding this 'big noise' in awareness in a detached way, other noise isn't a problem. For the people who had hoped to do a quiet puja in their own language though, it is probably quite frustrating not to be able to hear themselves, or their leader.

Other larger sized groups that frequently come around after breakfast are the Sri Lankans, often in groups of 100-200. The Burmese, and the Cambodians usually have just 20-30 people, but amplifiers designed for 200! The Sri Lankans will circumambulate first, chanting all the while, and then they will do small pujas at several sites within the compound. Usually the leading monk recites first, Pali and Sinhala, and then everyone else repeats. If the monk has a good voice, which 90% of the time they do, these pujas are very beautiful sounding. The languages with Indian roots seem to really suit this place and are transporting and enigmatic. The deep faith in the voices is very touching too. One can imagine such pujas having been going on here for millennia.

The Burmese and Cambodians on the other hand chant Abhidhamma lists quickly and in strange sounding accents and intonations - at least to my Thai attenuated ears. They do this while continually circumambulating. One must try to see the sound as being like waves, when it impinges loudly, you know that soon it will recede; this helps to stay equanimous and patient, keeping the mind in the middle. You train to rest in an awareness that 'notices' when it changes and ceases. This helps in not grasping or being irritated by it.

Past years were quieter, and there were lovely periods of 'hush' where the rustling of leaves and the sound of birds was pleasantly audible in the background. These periods were helpful for deepening into peacefulness and preparing for the next wave of oncoming noise. But these days there are usually several pujas going on nearby, or passing by at the exact same time, literally all day. So if you allow the mind to like one, then it will automatically dislike another less pleasant one when it impinges. To avoid losing equilibrium, one has to try and be mindful of all of these 'sounds' without falling into liking and disliking.

It can take longer, but when the mind becomes peaceful amid such a 'rich with ambient noise' scene, the peace can be very spacious and resilient. Nothing sticks to the cool, spacious awareness that can seem quite vast at times. When the Burmese and Cambodian groups come around with their cheap amplifiers turned up on full volume, complete with echo and reverb effect turned on as well, this can move the mind from peace. At least this bhikkhu's mind forms its current level of ability, and then you simply have to patiently start again.

Right Recollection, Wrong Forgetfulness

In Thai, mindfulness is sometimes translated as 'right recollection,' and interestingly, ignorance is sometimes translated as 'forgetfulness.' When we are mindful, ignorance is being negated, and the mind is clear and bright. When we are not mindful, ignorance seeps back in and reclaims the mind, and it becomes dull and cloudy, or even dark. Then the kilesa, negative qualities which cloud the untrained mind, can become active leading to unskillful thoughts, speech, and behavior.

Something I have observed literally hundreds of times under the Bodhi Tree, which still astonishes me, is the way groups behave once they have finished their formal puja. When groups first arrive, they often have a sense of respect, awe, and reverence at being at the sacred site. They take great care in making their offerings, and doing their chanting, or listening to a Dhamma reflection from their leader, and perhaps doing a little meditation. But very often, as soon as the puja is over, they slip into auto-pilot mode and start carrying on as if in the market, or at home. Even with scores of people meditating metres from their feet. Speaking loudly, laughing, bumping into meditators, and posing for photos and selfies still metres from the Vajra Asana, and within the very Rasmi (radiance) of the Bodhi Tree, they behave as if it is not there at all! Coming all this way to make merit, as soon as the merits accrue, they start piling de-merit on top!

No wonder Lord Buddha observed that most beings are transmigrating up and down along the one bank of birth and death, from the heavens to the hells, while very few make it to the other shore - to the Deathless. Humans just don't seem to be able to maintain focus and restraint for very long, even when they have faith! The unskillful karmas they make manifesting endless obstacles before their spiritual path binding them to the wheel.

One can get irritated by the inconsideration and stupidity demonstrated by many. I am quite pleased that I have maintained a true respect and reverence for the Holy Place, even after all these years. I will not allow myself to fall into a long conversation while at the Bodhi Tree, and will only talk in hushed tones. In fact, setting a goal of many hours of formal meditation forces you to stay focused, it is one of the reasons I committed to this mode of practice here. I do not allow myself to become 'Kingly' and receive guests, offerings, or hold court under or near the Tree, as many other monks do. Though many would love it if I did, and it would be very lucrative. But the Buddha is the only Big Ajahn here for me.

Unfortunately the Thais who are repeat visitors, or who stay for longer periods are among the worst for chatting mindlessly. Setting up their mat and other supplies under the Tree as if to chant and meditate. But once they get chatting... the price of plane tickets... accommodation... the state of the toilets... where to buy cosmetics... shawls... beads... statues... which restaurants are the worst and the best... where they went recently... where they're going soon... who else they saw... when they're returning to Thailand. On, and on, and on! Occasionally one in our group tells them to be quiet, but as soon as one goes another comes, you can't win!

Sometimes noisy parrots come and land on the branches in the Bodhi Tree, screeching and squawking loudly, on, and on, and on. I once helped my gardener from the monastery to come to Bodhgaya for three weeks, and he agreed that the Thai laywomen were the worst for mindless chatter, but they love the Bodhi Tree! He commented that they will likely join the parrots in their rebirth chatting away and shitting, oblivious to the sanctity! It's certainly

possible! - Such a shame!

Indian tourists are noisy in a different way. With the whole subcontinent being scattered with Holy Sites associated with Gods in one way or another I think it's difficult for them to feel deep reverence for just one more holy place. They see Lord Buddha as just one more incarnation of Vishnu, not particularly important in the scheme of things. So they yell to one another to come along, or hurry up or just to let their friends know, "Hey, I'm over here!" The pujas seem to just be noise that they need to speak over in order to be heard. The number of Indian tourists increases year by year. Obviously a small percentage that are well studied are truly reverent and meditate sincerely, but they are far outnumbered by their agitated brothers and sisters.

Anyway, enough about the noise! You get the picture. One has to be willing to sit for a very long time to find the Silent Mind. Sometimes the mind finds centeredness and inner quiet quite quickly, at other times it takes longer. Some days it's just patiently enduring, or when it's really bad, impatiently enduring! These days, in general, great patience and determination is needed. But every time I approach the Bodhi Tree to pay respects, I can feel some magical sense of presence and a palpable quality of silence that somehow permeates this busy and noisy space. Many people notice this. Learning to attenuate the mind to this other-worldly or transcendent silence can make practice here very rewarding.

Maras Rites

As frequent and long-term guests, something that my friends and I have inevitably thought hundreds of times is this... It would be so easy to have one official Indian worker in this fairly small area that could walk around and ask chatty folks to be quiet or move along. They could ask for the volume of amplifiers to be turned down when they were clearly too loud. Who could shoo away fake 'hustling' monks who are harassing pilgrims for donations, and it would make such a big difference to the experience of so many people! And yet it simply never happens. I've come to accept that it seems to be the case that Mara has some kind of right to impinge here. Or perhaps it is the kamma of those practicing, 'kamma Mara,' as it were. No doubt we've distracted others in the past?

Or perhaps the noise and impingement is here to inspire and impel us to work really hard? To find that quiet, silent mind that arises from strong mindfulness combined with concentration and wisdom. The sounds can be seen as 'only sounds' that cannot shake, or even touch the still and quiet mind. They arise, stay, then fall like harmless flowers when they touch the peaceful mind. We can but try!

Over a period of ten hours each day, it is fascinating to observe the way that all of this noise can be like knives, daggers and spears to an uncollected and irritable mind. Mara's army seems to be winning at times. Or alternatively, completely harmless and of no consequence to a genuinely peaceful mind, that knows how to 'not disturb the noise.' Here, becoming enlightened to the not-self nature of sense contact, and separating 'that which knows' from the known is also perfectly possible. Lord Buddha proved it, as did several Buddhas before him, and one more to come in this aeon.

Unwitting Fields of Merit

So that was the section on 'noise.' What about tactile sensations?

First, let me relate a little about the monk's rules to set the context. The Theravada tradition tends to have stricter adherence to the monastic rules laid down by the Buddha, although there are always exceptions. The Forest Monks in recent history have been the strictest, although for periods in history that wasn't always the case. When the inspiring practice of Luang Por Mun regenerated the Forest Meditation Tradition in Thailand last century, his incredibly stringent standards set the tone. Luang Por Chah, who considered Luang Por Mun as one of his primary teachers, was immaculately scrupulous as well.

So being in this lineage we have an incredibly strict standard of celibacy. The most stringent in the world, I expect. Lord Buddha did not give any wiggle room here! Because of this, the monks tend to avoid all physical contact with women. Not because of aversion or condescension, as people often presume, but rather, in order to maintain our uncompromising and impeccable standards of celibacy. The amount of sexual abuse cases in our order/lineage to date is still virtually nonexistent. So obviously this extra caution is very effective in protecting women and children as well.

On top of this, the rules around the handling and owning of money are just as strict. The Buddha knew very well what troubles this stuff brings with it! If we touch it, even without intention, it is a minor offense. If we accept it, it is a more serious offense. If we then go and buy something, an even more serious offense is incurred. When we travel, we must have a steward. This person may carry funds given by supporters for the monk's needs. Monks who truly know and who sincerely keep the rules understand that the money is still the property of the original donor. However, it can be used to purchase allowable things that the monks can use, such as food, tickets, accommodation, etc. I would never come to India without a student or friend acting willingly as a steward, because keeping our rules strictly would not be possible. Mae Chee Aimee is currently fulfilling this function.

As soon becomes evident in Bodhgaya, not all monks and nuns are strict when it comes to accepting and using money, or refraining from physical contact. In fact most are not. So it is understandable that much of the laity is unaware of the actual monastic rules. This leads to some challenges for those who sincerely try to keep them.

So one extra challenge that we have is in relation to those who want to make offerings. For although we are sitting straight and composed and facing the wall, our body language saying clearly... "I am meditating and aiming for quiet and seclusion." There are many inspired people who wish to 'make merit' as it were. So people frequently come by, usually Asian women, they bend in real close, right by our faces, and drop money in our hands, or on our lap! Sometimes they slap it on your thigh so that you know 'money!' They then also often say, 'Amitofo' in your ear. If this happens just as the mind is becoming peaceful, it can be quite traumatic.

For monks sitting quietly, bent upon meditation and determined to keep our rules, this can seem incredibly intrusive and inappropriate! We don't want the money! We don't want the close contact, and we don't want to be disturbed! Sometimes you can feel like screaming. "What kind of merit is that? Disturbing my meditation and making me break my rules! Go Away!" But the problem is even if you said it once there will be another merry merit maker

coming round the corner blissfully unaware any moment, and more tomorrow, and the next day. So what to do?

We simply sit very still without moving or flinching, knowing we are not aiming at contact, and not accepting the funds in our minds. Once the person has meandered out of site, "Amitofo... Amitofo..." we flick the money off of our robe or hand. Then usually one of our students or Mae Chee will pick the funds up towards the end of the session, and use them for food or donations or something. We remind ourselves that the person means well, and is acting in good faith. It is just more 'seeing... feeling... hearing...' to be mindful of. But after training very strictly, to be very aloof from these things, it can take some practice and adjustment to find the required equanimity and maintain the goodwill, but it can be done. When meditating in public and in a diverse context these are the risks and the things we need to practice with.

Thieves in the Temple

Related to this theme of keeping the rules and good standards, another advantage to facing the wall is that you can spare yourself the experience of witnessing very disturbing things. What things? Unfortunately there is a sad phenomenon in Bodhgaya known as 'fake monks.' Not the old guys chanting for donations, but young men, literally hustling for donations right there under the Bodhi Tree. I wouldn't be surprised if they change back into jeans when they go home.

These guys with black eyes and black auras are like sharks wearing robes looking for prey. When first time visitors come around the Bodhi Tree, they are often deeply affected and moved. They are inspired, grateful, and in awe. Often very good hearted people anyway, their hearts are particularly open now. One of these guys, observing the soft receptive openness, rather than give them the opportunity to experience rapture, wonder, and joy, will move in close, and offer them a Bodhi Leaf. (Not necessarily from The Great Tree!) The pilgrim is excited, touched, how wonderful! He grabs her attention (they usually approach women), and after his gift is given he says, "Would you mind giving a donation? I need money for books and tuition fees, I am studying, but I am poor." Probably they get their donation half the time, but the 'not right-ness' of this scenario is deeply disturbing. The bad kamma that these guys make must be terrible, literally taking hold of these vulnerable radiant minds and pulling them into their greed with a trick.

One has to reflect upon kamma and try to develop compassion. It is the pilgrim's kamma to meet these 'monks' in these moments, and the hustling fake monk probably comes from a very difficult home situation. Gautam, my adopted Dhamma son, left home because his dad was alcoholic and there was no money for food. His dad used to beat his mother too. But Gautam had a good mum. She told him, "It is okay to go to bed without food in your stomach at times, but don't go to bed as a liar or a cheat!" Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu. I know another boy called Vikram whose mother scolds him if he comes home empty handed, he's expected to get money by hook or by crook. So although he is charming, he is not radiant and endearing like my son!

With such behavior, the futures of the hustling monks will only get worse and worse. The Buddha called those who steal from the laity by being monks in form only as 'the worst type of thief.' Life here is tough, but if only they could see how much worse it gets, they would

find another way. I have no doubt that the preta (hungry ghost) and hell realms exist, and no doubt that that's where these guys are headed.

Where to Place our Attention?

Practicing in Bodhgaya is a great 'workout' or 'workshop' - like experience for monks who usually live in very protected environments. We have to utilize all of our skills and cultivate them even further. If we focus upon the cheats and the low standards of many of the people here, it is easy to get negative, hard, defended, and cynical. But if you focus upon what Lord Buddha accomplished here, and try to practice as he instructed sincerely, your practice will surely deepen, because it is such a rich opportunity and situation!

In terms of speech, I make it a practice not to find fault, criticize, admonish, or draw final conclusions while here. One can't 'not notice' things that 'aren't right,' but we can choose whether or not we make kamma with our speech. Committing to saying something makes things more fixed and solid. As a senior monk who is an abbot and a teacher, coming from a good community, I could throw my weight around and intimidate people quite a bit. But if I started, where would I stop? And who wants to walk around being grumpy all day?

I've never admonished a fake monk, or told another monk to teach less and meditate more while under the Bodhi Tree. I've never scolded them for going shopping by themselves in the market. I remind myself constantly that I came to cultivate the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, and the Four Brahma Vihara. Focusing upon seeing things as sights, sounds, feelings... and seeing thoughts as just thoughts - not making a big self, or big 'others' in my mind, makes it possible to be here contentedly. What other people are doing is their business. Sometimes it's good business and sometimes it's bad business. It's the way it is. When I go back to Anandagiri I will have to be more responsible and engaging. But here, I am responsible for just my behavior and the quality of my mind. The rest of crazy Samsara can continue to be crazy as it so often is! Samsara within is what we can actually liberate ourselves from.

Of course if we focus upon the positive here, there are hundreds of lovely beings to rejoice with each day if we choose. We see the radiant faces of the faithful from so many different places, with arms full of flowers, or bowing beautifully with gratitude to our Teacher. One can rejoice with the good, and be equanimous with the not too good. It's a wonderful strategy for maintaining well-being! I have also found that finding ways to be generous and supporting things worth supporting here also helps one to be aware of the basic goodness that is always present and never too far away in the human realm, if we look for it.

Chapter Fifteen- The Rise of Gautama

Feeling uninspired by and also concerned by my own growing indifference to the plight of the many poor people around Bodhgaya after repeated visits, I decided to engage directly. The poorest folks are dirty, and rude, and have hard looking eyes (understandably). It is easy to start seeing them as not quite human, but their pain and difficulties are very real. Even while working on qualities like patient endurance and determination, we have to ensure that kindness and compassion do not degenerate. So I decided around 7 years ago to help one poor kid in Bihar. Gautam was the lucky recipient of my compassionate resolve. His real

name was Arun, which means sunrise, but he changed it to the Buddha's original name for good luck!

I feel that I made a good choice in selecting this child when he was eleven. Although he was angry, and abrupt, he looked in your eyes when he spoke, and he was truthful to a fault. He also had neatly combed and oiled hair in something like an Elvis style quaff – which was kind of cool! I recognized that he had some dignity and a sense of style and pride, despite his breaking flip flops which revealed filthy unwashed feet. I was looking for someone who was good-hearted yet also strong, someone who would fight for themselves and their future.

When he approached my student Francois and myself seven years ago and asked us to buy some CD's, I asked him forcefully, "Why aren't you in school?" He answered in broken but understandable English, "My dad is drink alcohol. He no working and my home have no money for food. I have to sell so have money for food - and also take money home for my mother and brother, younger one, sometimes... if I have" This broke and melted my heart. I told my steward to buy all of his current stock, and to pay him double with the funds he was given for my needs! Francois was far from convinced and reluctantly handed over the cash with eyebrows raised in my direction.

The next day I invited him to join us for lunch and fed him many a greasy curry. Gautam saw this big ol' softy a mile away! I didn't see him again or help out more until the following year, but he had made an impression, and evidently so had I. Gautam later told me that when he went home that time, the whole family had had a big feast and sung songs of praise in thanks and gratitude to their Hindu gods!

The following year I invited him to join my students and I for lunch more often, and let him sit right next to me, the big Ajahn. Because he had a father I did not tell him that I was adopting him as a son, but told him that I was going to be his big brother. He loved that! At first he made no respectful gestures, and could not yet think of ways to help us. Rather, he just wanted someone to listen while he complained about India and Indians! He also spoke with his mouth full! But he did listen to me and remembered every word. My students thought he was rude, mean, and selfish, but I knew he had a love of truth, and a bullshit detector as sharp as they come, a piece of equipment that I respect. His heart was like an infected boil that needed squeezing before treatment. He needed to complain and be heard. A few years later, when he could explain some of what he had been through in his short life, this need for 'releasing' was very understandable. The beautiful smile, kindness, and willingness to help that we see in Gautam now is testament to the resilience of human beings and the power of kindness to heal.

He reminded me of my own younger self, as he is a naturally sensitive and self-aware young man. I could see that the anger he felt was because he knew right from wrong, and saw so much that was wrong. I once asked him what his biggest dream was... and he answered... What dream? I have no dream... just want to leave this place." I nearly burst into tears, because Bodhgaya is so dear to me, and also because I totally understood his feelings! Later he told me that when he first met me he had a strong feeling that I would help him and his life, and he was right.

We sent him to school for a time, but somehow, without a lot of one on one attention he did not seem to progress. He called me from India one day, and said that he did not want money transferred anymore, because he was ashamed that he was not progressing, and frightened

that I would be disappointed when I checked his progress. His parents told him not to do this, but he followed his own sense of integrity. My students and I appreciated his truthfulness and sense of conscience. In any case I feel that he benefitted from the discipline of going to school each day, being surrounded by better behaved kids, and from knowing that people wished for him to succeed.

After a few years one student, Peter Vasallo from Melbourne offered him a motorcycle so that he could offer a taxi service for tourists traveling alone. For this poor kid with nothing, getting a motorbike really broadened his horizons, and gave him a sense that he could get ahead, life does have opportunities for advancement. I was worried that he would crash into something and die, but somehow he didn't. He worked this career move out by himself and so far it has worked. He gets by just fine, and has now learned how to hire cars and be a guide to further away places such as Rajgir and Varanasi. I have coached him in cleanliness, politeness, truthfulness, generosity, and kindness and told him to trust in good karma. Interestingly, he gets much more income from appreciative peoples gifts than he gets from his fees. People respond to his truthfulness and trustworthiness with considerable generosity. Clearly it is his good karma to have been born close to Bodhgaya where so many good people are coming and going.

These days, when I am here with other monks, Gautam helps carry our bags to and from the Temple and helps in arranging breakfast. He places my sitting mat and cushion for me and folds it up at the end of the day as well. He is a good attendant, and proud of his association. Each year his English gets better. Since Gautam started taking money back home to help with food and to educate his younger brothers, his example somehow shocked the father into some kind of decency. Now Gautam's dad has a small samosa shop, paid for by two of my students in Melbourne. Having to get up and make the samosas has kept him mostly sober and he no longer beats his wife. Just one person with strong virtue in a family can be like a blazing Sun for goodness to constellate around.

Some of my Thai students felt it was wrong to be so generous to this rude Bihari kid, but my Australian students were much more willing. We made the right choice. Helping Gautam has helped an entire poor family. He doesn't drink, or smoke, and meditates every day. Extra money goes to his mother and brothers. I'm proud of my Bihari son! I will be meeting the entire family in a few days to see how they're doing. They will visit me at the guesthouse.

Meeting Gautam's mother for the first time a few years ago was quite funny. I told Gautam repeatedly that I was busy with my schedule and didn't have time to get distracted, but he really insisted, so finally I acquiesced. Thinking that she just wanted to thank this kind hearted stranger who had decided to help her son I would give her the opportunity. So what did this tough lady from the Bihar village actually say? Gautam said, "This is my father Kailash Singh and my mother Deva Muni." I said, "Nice to meet you." Deva Muni said, "Since you are his big brother now, that makes you my son. My home is crumbling and the roof is caving in, it leaks in the monsoon. You should help me rebuild my house!" I was surprised and Gautam was embarrassed, but I guess she felt she'd take her chances. I told her that we'd help Gautam and eventually he would help with the costs of a new house, in the meantime she would need to wait a little longer.

Gautam has proved that he can take care of his motorbike, as he has it serviced every couple of months! And his dad has shown that he will cook and sell samosa daily. He has a younger brother who is 15 and who wants to work and doesn't like school. Having had a chat with the

other monks, we are allocating some of the funds that were made available to help the family to lease a proper shop house out in the village. A Thai lay student and supporter, Khun Jintana is matching our offering one to one. Sometimes it's just this initial helping hand that can make all the difference.

My Dhamma son says if he can help his family to stand on their own feet, he's interested to become a monk, but I see him looking at girls and I have my doubts! Currently he is still only 18. His caste marries young and he has already refused two offers of marriage! He knows that if he has kids too, that his headaches will never end. Just helping his brothers is already a big burden. It will be interesting to see how things unfold, but at the very least he has become a good and lovely human being and I am proud of him. I think I already said that!

I know that these days it is somewhat inevitable that when people hear of a monk's mentoring of young men, that some will suspect a sexual component. There has been so much scandal that has occurred, particularly in Catholic institutions I'd rather simply put all the cards on the table and address the subject directly. My motivation in helping Gautam was, and is sincerely humanitarian and altruistic. I wanted to see if one of these poor kids could turn out alright if shown some kindness and care. I wanted to prove it for myself too, that humans are the same all over. If I'd chosen a young girl this would arouse even more suspicion, so I chose a young boy, or maybe he chose me?

Back in the village close to Anandagiri there are several more teenage kids who my students and I are helping out. One boy's mother fled to escape the debt collectors, so we are helping to put Nick through mechanics tech school. The father of two teenage girls died in his sleep one night, just like that. He probably had lung disease and after spraying too much pesticide in his fields this pushed him over the edge. So we are helping both Kim and Mai with a monthly stipend to help get them graduated from High School at least. Most recently two more teenage boys, Boss and Maek lost a father to alcohol induced liver failure, so we are helping them in the same way. My long term gardener has proved very loyal, responsible, and trustworthy. He is one of the reasons that I can leave the monastery for long periods of time. He could not put his daughter through university, so once again two of my students are helping her with a significant monthly stipend. It is important to help those less fortunate. It is simply the right thing to do.

So I assure you that my celibacy vow is still pure and intact, and has been for 22 years. And Gautam, from what I can tell, shy and sensitive as he is, is still quite inexperienced in this area. It is good for people to know that there are still some good and benevolent monks in the world, who know how to mentor young men and women skillfully. My entire community is impeccable in this area and I am proud of my association. Gautam loves me like a father, brother, and teacher all in one, and trusts me with his life. He is in good hands. The only scandal here is that both my students and I have been wonderfully kind and generous towards him for a period of 7 years, and intend to continue to be kind long into the future.



Gautam younger, hungry and angrier (with a gift from a student) – Then older, healthier and happier

Chapter Sixteen - EQUANIMITY - You won't need to dodge bullets!

Those of you who are old like me (46) will probably remember certain scenes from the first Matrix movie, released in 1999. Many Buddhists appreciated this movie, because of certain parallels with Buddhist paradigms. One of my favourite pieces of dialogue, is when Morpheus is trying to explain to Neo, that '*He is the One*' that will one day be able to conquer or transcend the control of the oppressive gate-keeping agents. Neo asks Morpheus... "*What are you trying to say... that I can dodge bullets?*" Morpheus responds... "*What I'm saying is that when you're ready... you won't have to.*"

Neo then had to train in various ways to be able to understand the rules/laws that the agents worked by/within, being themselves a part of the matrix. So that he'd know their moves and ways so well, that they would be unable to destroy him. No one had ever survived an encounter with an agent before. Unfortunately once Neo could confront the agents, things got more and more violent, and any semblance of Buddhist parallels got quickly lost!

Good Vinaya (*monk's rules*) keeping monks don't get to watch many movies generally, only on long haul flights on planes, or while visiting family usually. I used to be on my dear old dad's case when I visited now and then, about watching war movies before going to bed each night. Worried about the imprints he was building up in his mind and the consequences for his rebirth. So there I was while visiting many years ago, watching The Matrix in his living room and he's like, "*Ajahn, why are you watching this? It's so VIOLENT!*" And I said, "*It's metaphorical dad... the agents aren't real, they're part of a simulated artificial intelligence reality.*" Not surprisingly, dad didn't buy it!

You see the way we understand things in Buddhism is that we do not have to kill or remove the things outside which throw weapons, rather, we learn how to make ourselves invulnerable

to these. At the same time there is a sutta where Lord Buddha states that if there is a thorny bush in the path that can be avoided; he advises that we walk around it! This is not a Path of unnecessary self-torment. Although the 'middle way' requires facing a certain amount of suffering in order to go beyond it; the suffering that leads to the end of suffering as it were. Let me tell you about it!

After the Buddha was fully Enlightened, Mara the evil One would still come around and try to trick or distract him. We have to understand that this is his function in the universe. The Buddha's response was always the same, he would say, "I know you Mara" and that was it. There was no need to kill him. Mara would have to leave sad and defeated with drooping shoulders. So what is this almighty and powerful "I know you" all about then?

The Buddha knew all things which impinged upon consciousness with mindfulness and wisdom fully established. Because of this he had realized a deeper truth above and beyond grasping at the body and mind as being a 'self.' He knew that all things were constantly in flux and that there was no solidity in anything. This being so, none of Mara's 'worldly dhamma' tricks could work. Because Lord Buddha was not motivated by desires for gain, fame, praise, or even happiness, knowing that such things are empty. He had realized something superior and enduring, and his only remaining motivation was the altruistic wish to help others to realize this same unshakeable peace.

Recently, back at Anandagiri before coming to India, I was uploading a file for my website and it was taking a long time. So I clicked another page to have a quick look at some news on YouTube. Mara likes to manifest through Google of course, so there was a sparkling object waiting to attract my attention. You see I used to study acting and singing when in Sydney as a young man, and because of this I am slightly vulnerable to having a quick peep to see who made it into the finals of those terrible Got Talent shows! This is when I discovered that there was an Australian artist called Sia, who had had a hit song called 'Titanium.' One of the finalists had done a cover of her song. Please rest assured that I do not allow myself to get very absorbed in such things. My meditation schedule combined with abbots duties would not allow for such a disaster in any case. But I did take a peep on that occasion and I did notice the words!

I'm bullet proof... fire away... fire away...

I'm bullet proof... ricochet... ricochet...

You shoot me down... but I won't fall... cause I'm *Tiiii-Taaa-Niiii-Aaahhh Aaah Aaaaahm!*

I'm as hard as bullet proof glass... *I'm Tiiii-Taaa-Niiii-Aaahhh Aaah Aaaaahm!*

This kind of sentiment isn't really about being bulletproof I would suggest. This is more like having become tough through surviving great difficulty, and then hardening the heart excessively. Surviving in life is not the same as growing with life. Qualities like indifference, cynicism, and numbness can make us less affected by the criticism and ill-will of others, but they are unpleasant qualities to have in the mind. In and of themselves they are also obstructions to truly wholesome qualities such as metta, compassion, and equanimity which are truly beautiful and pleasant mind states. But I've just been throwing in a bit of popular culture here to entertain you and then hold up the Buddha's superior example in contrast. I do like this idea of being bulletproof though. I like this idea very much. Back now to the real thing...

I can see when I am meditating under the Bodhi Tree that when there is a good quality of mindfulness and wisdom present that loud noises and painful feelings do not affect the heart very much. It's as though these 'bullets' can fly right through a spacious mind not grasping with liking or not liking. When I can sustain this good mindfulness and balanced composure for a certain amount of time by simply not moving from it keeping the mind very still then a more pronounced sense of stability can be established. At those times it's as though the bullets do not even enter. The mind is delighting in an inner quality of stability and coolness so that although the noise can be heard, no one is actually listening. The mind has 'collectedness' as its object. Because I am not yet truly adept or liberated, the mind always returns to a more normal state where these things can be irritating again. But it is great to experience some equanimity at these times, and experiencing to some degree the transcendent potential of our minds.

If meditation practitioners have truly well established mindfulness and wisdom we can actually be equanimous with regards to much more than loud noise and physical pain. We can become equanimous to all of the Eight Worldly Dhammas, sometimes called Eight Worldly Concerns. These are four pairs of opposites - Gain and Loss, Fame and Ill-repute, Praise and Blame, and Happiness and Misery (or pleasure and pain). Most worldly beings are chasing after the positive side of these four pairs constantly, while trying to avoid the negative side. But inevitably we must all meet with both sides. As practitioners we must understand that they are pairs, and where you have one, you have the other.

With mindfulness and wisdom functioning in our minds we become aware of the nature of conditioned phenomena. In becoming aware of the nature of conditions we are also becoming more familiar with a quality of awareness which 'knows these things as they truly are.' This Awareness, when cultivated and purified is sometimes referred to as the Unconditioned. So it is by becoming aware of the nature of conditioned phenomena, and sustaining our mindfulness of this constantly changing nature with great consistency and determination that we experience and then finally fully realize the Unconditioned. Basically we purify our mind of deluded grasping by maintaining mindfulness and wisdom. The unconditioned mind is also called the 'Deathless.' Conditioned phenomena arise and cease, that which can know these things however is a constant. When Lord Buddha taught the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, he stated that Mindfulness, when cultivated and made much of... Leads to the Deathless and merges in the Deathless. This is to be experienced within our own minds.

In the world of conditioned phenomena, where there is day, there is night. Where there is light there is dark. Where there is heaven there is hell. From the perspective of the Unconditioned, these things are all arising and ceasing and seen essentially as being the same, sharing the same characteristics - and not experienced by a solid unchanging 'self.' In the process of developing the path factors such as, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom sometimes we will be wise, mindful, and equanimous with regards the 'worldly winds,' and at other times we won't.

There is a short list that describes three different classes of beings that I quite like; Worldly Beings, Lovely Beings, and truly Noble Beings. Sometimes it can seem as though there is nothing in between. We judge ourselves against a very high standard and often feel like we are failing. So recognizing that the people who are trying to train themselves and purify their minds can be referred to as 'lovely beings' is encouraging. Lovely beings still make mistakes and have unskillful reactions, but we are lovely because we keep on trying!

Being in Bodhgaya now, I often think of the events leading up to the Enlightenment of the Buddha, and the things which occurred shortly afterwards in the very place where we are practicing. On the eve before his Enlightenment, after having had some food, and taken a bath, the Bodhisatta was walking towards the Tree which would later become known as 'The Bodhi Tree.' On his way he was offered eight bunches of Kusa grass by a Brahmin, so we are told. These he used as a cushion under the Tree. This was not a coincidence, according to the legend; this symbolized the fact that the Bodhisatta was going to transcend these 8 Worldly Dhammas. He would rise above them, a truly rare occurrence in the world, and then teach others how to do so as well. This did not mean that the worldly Dhammas no longer existed, but that the mind of the Buddha was above their reach.

Being not yet a Fully Enlightened or Liberated Being I am still affected by these 'worldly winds' as they are sometimes called, but much less so than twenty years ago thank goodness. I'm not out of the matrix yet. I am working on it diligently though.

Praise and Blame

So in taking the time lately to reflect upon what engaging in these intensive retreats has been all about I feel that it is worth mentioning that even good monks who make efforts at doing very noble things get criticized quite a bit too! This seems to be the deal in samsara. Naturally there has been considerable praise as well as blame. Because the Mahabodhi Temple is quite a public place, and because tall western monks stand out quite a bit, it wasn't really possible to do these retreats completely off the radar as it were. Also, our community is fairly tight knit, so people's movements are noticed and commented upon. This isn't necessarily a bad thing; we should keep an eye on each other, if we care, but obviously comments are not always motivated by care.

So on the Praise side people said things like this; "Ajahn Achalo is so deeply committed to his practice. Only Ajahn Achalo can sit for so long for so many days. (*Not true!*) Ajahn's practice is very inspiring. Ajahn has such good kamma to be able to go to India so often; he must have made a lot of good kamma there in the past. Ajahn Achalo is so kind to his students, leading them in developing their practice alongside him as well," etc. Then there was the Blame; "Ajahn Achalo travels too much. Ajahn is too attached to one posture. Ajahn takes too much from laypeople. He is too attached to peacefulness, this is not correct practice. He is practicing for psychic powers, which is a lesser motivation. He should practice in all four postures wherever he is. There's no need to go to India so often!" Blah, blah, blah.

So as well as a lot of appreciation and support, there were some fairly consistent critical comments too. It's not that every little critical comment can upset me of course. We know for ourselves the purity of our intentions and the sincerity of our efforts, and can feel dignity and wholesome pride about this. But because these things were said to close students repeatedly and persistently over a period of years, and then relayed to me repeatedly as well they did make an impression. The people making the critical comments were also actively trying to discourage some of my close students from supporting, studying, and practicing with me, which is also a fairly serious matter. They did not succeed though. Unfortunately, these very suspicious and critical people damaged the level of trust and friendship they had previously shared with some of my students.

Of course we must all necessarily practice with some praise and blame in our lives. I noticed however that some of the criticisms felt hurtful to me, while others gave rise to irritation,

which, for a long term mindfulness practitioner is actually very '*interesting*.' Hmmm, I asked myself, what's going on here? Obviously there were things which needed investigating in my own mind. Why are these 'blame bullets' penetrating and sticking I asked? Wishing to understand my own reaction, after considering the matter quite deeply, the particular criticisms which grated the most I noticed, were those which simply didn't seem to make any sense. Then I had to acknowledge that I was attached to the idea that people should be reasonable, and actually make sense! In a world where *all* not yet Enlightened beings are deeply affected by ignorance and delusion, I considered that I might be expecting too much.

Another factor where I was a bit 'stuck' is that the people criticizing me it seemed were the very type of person that should have known better. (In my opinion) By this I mean Buddhist practitioners themselves who have heard and studied many teachings. Why would Buddhists find fault with meditation monks for meditating a lot? It is a very good question. These considerations remind me now of a conversation I had with Luang Por Sumedho over 22 years ago, which seems relevant here. Luang Por is the most senior western disciple in the family/lineage of Ajahn Chah. I am fortunate in that he was one of my first teachers this lifetime. He has great wisdom and also a great sense of humour.

At that time I was a samanera, or novice monk, living for a period at Amaravati monastery in Hertfordshire in England, where Ajahn Sumedho was then the abbot. I had been lamenting about something or other. There must have been some hurt feelings about some interaction that I was relaying to Luang Por, and I was seeking his advice about how to practice with this. He had an interesting response which I remember to this day. He said the following.

"Samanera Achalo, you are a very sensitive and reflective person. You seem to take it for granted that other people have these same qualities, and suffer, thinking they are being willfully insensitive or hurtful. But I have to tell you something. Being reflective is already a sign of significant development. Most people are not reflective, they simply cannot see themselves or the way they affect others." He continued. "I try to encourage people to meditate, develop mindfulness, and cultivate loving-kindness so that they become more sensitive, considerate, and wise. But it can take people quite a long time!"

Another interesting and humorous thing that Luang Por Sumedho once said over one of the breakfast meetings around that time was this. Keep in mind that this was in the nineties. "*This is the twentieth century... every moron is entitled to his opinion!*" Sometimes we would spit out our tea laughing at the things he said over breakfast! What I think Luang Por was saying here though, is that the culture of articulating criticism, before really thinking things through properly, is quite prevalent nowadays. They seem quite a bit more so since social media and instant messaging became so widely used and qualities such as graciousness and patience took a serious hit in the morality of the modern world.

The reason I mention these things here is that it is quite likely that the people who were being critical were probably not seeing the picture clearly, and making comments prematurely, which is common. People make quick assumptions based upon what they see with their eyes externally, and articulate their reactions too quickly. They are also often times unaware of the energies in their own minds that might be stimulating critical thoughts such as feeling envious or threatened. I needed to accept the fact that this is quite normal, and that there was nothing I could do about it. Each person must take responsibility for their speech and actions, but we cannot control these in others.

Some people have suggested that I ignore the critical comments about my practice in Bodhgaya completely, and just let the practice speak for itself, to those who can appreciate it. This of course is very wise advice. There will always be some who criticize unfairly, but having given it some thought I have decided to address the criticisms briefly, because there are some important points to be made that might help people with certain misconceptions, or doubts.

Certainly we must all learn to take fair criticism squarely on the chin, and make appropriate adjustments to our behavior if warranted. With unfair criticism we must learn to practice equanimity. We simply can't expect all criticism to stop, as it won't, not even for the Buddha. From my side I have to keep practicing with the fact that *I don't like* unfair or misinformed criticism. I do still have an attachment to the idea that people should be good and kind, fair and reasonable. Clearly some of these *blame-bullets* can find a target in this tender heart while I still have this attachment. Equanimity does increase over time though, with familiarization, wise reflection, deep contemplation, and continuing serious practice, wisdom deepens.

Very obviously, there has been great appreciation and faith, and a lot of support for me to be able to come to India and Bodhgaya often over the past ten years. Many of my closest students have come to practice alongside myself and other monastic companions, seeing it as a good opportunity to offer service, and deepen their own practice. A number of these same people have come on the Pilgrimages that I lead as well. We are committed to supporting one another and to growing together. It has given me great joy to share wonderful opportunities, and to watch these sincere and lovely people grow. With all of this goodness and mutual benefit this is very obvious; the criticism can be seen as largely irrelevant.

So below are the critical comments that I heard repeatedly, and my response. I hope that this open sharing is useful for other people's perspective as well.

"Ajahn Achalo travels too much and takes too much from the laity"

It is of course entirely true that if one were to take simplicity and renunciation as the highest guiding principle in the monk's Holy Life then frequent travel to foreign countries does seem immodest. I can see this. I would suggest however, that undertaking intensive practice opportunities with wholehearted sincerity that were gladly *offered freely* by people who wanted to support one of their teachers and accumulate merit by doing so is not at all unskillful. Further to this, opening up such opportunities for others, and leading by example is no longer simply 'traveling.' It is both a way of teaching and leading the practice.

I think it is also useful to consider that in this world, and indeed in people's characters, there are different types of 'good.' My personal approach places more emphasis upon strong faith, metta, and generosity than on the strictest standards of simplicity and renunciation. Usually it is wisest to judge a tree by its fruit. The very people who have supported the other monks, nuns, and I, who've come to meditate for periods in India have frequently come and practiced alongside of us as well. They have benefitted deeply from their time. Many would not have been brave enough to come without their Ajahns, and would not have practiced as hard without our diligent example. Those who actually supported our meditation retreats are genuinely grateful. This fact speaks for itself.

Bringing to mind some very venerable monks from the Buddha's time Venerable Mahakassapa, foremost in strict austerity practices, and Venerable Ananda, the extremely solicitous and universally loved attendant of the Buddha for example, were wonderful in quite different ways. As archetypes their qualities complimented one another. We need variety in the types of characters that teachers have, to teach people with differing inclinations. In general, it is good to be very careful when criticizing virtuous monks and nuns, because even if you don't like their style they are people worthy of respect. If they are not virtuous then this is a different matter. If we criticize noble members of the Sangha too harshly or unfairly, we may be separated from the care of wise and virtuous teachers in the future. Kammic obstructions are real. Personally I do try to be very careful in my own public comments about other monks and nuns, and try to focus upon the good wherever it is present.

"Ajahn Achalo is too attached to the sitting posture"

Those who have said that Ajahn Achalo is *"too attached to the sitting posture, Lord Buddha taught to be mindful in all postures"* may have perhaps forgotten that the Bodhisattva made a solemn vow right here under the sacred Bodhi Tree, that he would not move from the sitting posture until his liberation was secure. This really says a lot about the fact that great insight often occurs while sitting in meditation *and* while practicing with great determination. After the Bodhisatta became the Enlightened Buddha, **in the sitting posture**, he then sat still without moving for another entire week - delighting in the bliss of liberation. Sitting a lot does not mean that one is not mindful when in other postures. It usually just means that a practitioner is having a closer look at things with a quieter, more circumspect mind.

But on a personal note, if anyone really wished to know what was actually going on for me when coming to India over this past period, my sitting meditation practice had actually recently degenerated. Coming for intensive retreat was a way of reestablishing and reaffirming my commitment to the practice. Becoming deeply involved in building a monastery from the ground up, there has necessarily been a lot of work to supervise, and a lot of people to liaise with. Sometimes it is good to take periods of time to sit for longer in order to reestablish, or reinvigorate the practice. Leaving the place where you've become too busy can actually be very helpful. This does not mean we practice sitting ten hours per day all the time. Even though I actually wish that I did!

"Ajahn Achalo uses earplugs, he has aversion to sounds, that's not the real practice."

The Buddha does say in various suttas that noisy places are not the most suitable for cultivating meditation, and recommends more quiet and secluded places. Bodhgaya is *sooo noisy* that even foam earplugs only help a little only softening the volume by around 30%. This can help in the process of finding 'the silent mind' of clear and peaceful awareness. Otherwise, loud, jarring noises can shock the mind before it becomes calm. In any event, you have to practice a lot of mindfulness of noise in Bodhgaya, with or without earplugs. Come and try it for yourself!

"Ajahn Achalo is attached to Samadhi..."

... Ajahn Achalo is attached to developing psychic powers"

I have a couple of questions for those that have assumed I am, or have been attaching to jhana samadhi, delighting in the peace that comes from deep concentration 'self indulgently' without investigating this type of attachment, or that I've been developing psychic powers,

and have become fascinated unskillfully. My first question to these people would be, "How do you actually know what I'm doing in my meditation simply by looking from outside?" The level of presumption is really quite stunning.

My second question to these people would be, "Who are you actually quoting? And where did you get this perspective from?" According to my studies in this area, after the Bodhisatta had mastered all 8 jhanas he realized that these alone would not liberate him. His Middle Way Insight and approach however utilized the power that came from the first four jhanas combined with wise reflection and focused investigation. He did not stop practicing jhana. Samadhi gives a foundation for deep penetrating Insight. I am not claiming and have never made any claims to having mastered the jhanas, but I certainly do aspire to! People who have true mastery of consecutive levels of deeply concentrated states are actually quite rare these days. If someone had such skill, and wished to practice these skills deeply it would actually be extremely wholesome, but it is unlikely that they would do so in such a noisy and busy place.

I have read many suttas where Lord Buddha extols the monks to meditate, but have never read one where he tells them not to attach to sitting meditation, or even to samadhi. Obviously consistent mindfulness and wise contemplation are important too. All of the Path factors have to work together in our practice, and then come together and harmonize in our minds. Formal sitting meditation typically supports this however.

Being critical of people practicing for samadhi is actually quite serious, and not appropriate for Buddhists. There is in fact one sutta, where Lord Buddha explains that his Teachings will not disappear quickly from the world. Rather, they would be changed slowly over time, yet still be cited as His Teachings. He explains further in this sutta, that when people criticize the cultivation and practice of samadhi, this will be one way that we will know his Teaching is being degenerated, and beginning to disappear from the world. So please don't criticize monks for trying sincerely to develop their sitting meditation! It's a large part of what we (and you) are supposed to be doing.

The truth regarding my practice in Bodhgaya, is that at my current level of development, I have to cultivate 'being mindful' of the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, in order to be able to simply stay sitting, rather than running away. There is a great deal of pleasant as well as very coarse sense contact that one has to work with, when essentially sitting meditation in public and outdoors at a busy pilgrimage site all day. The heat, the cold, the rain, the bugs, the fleas, the bird poo, the chanting, the mindless talking, the arguing, (a certain type of Indian tourist) the dog fighting, and the pain in the body and mind, there is so much to be mindful of! Sometimes the mind does become quite peaceful, and nothing seems to impinge, and when this happens it is very nice! If my detractors could truly see how much good old-fashioned patient endurance I have had to utilize in these noble endeavors, I believe that they would feel some appreciation.

What type of Buddhists criticizes monks who meditate a lot?

Regarding the handful of individuals who have been very vocal, and who actively discouraged those who I had encouraged to meditate from meditating. After making some enquiries, I did discover something very interesting. From the various things that I have heard about their lives and their practice they all had one thing in common. None of these people are actually serious meditators! They do not meditate daily even for half an hour, and I doubt

that they could sit still for one single hour even in a quiet place, without thinking a lot, or falling asleep, let alone in a noisy and busy place. Yet for some reason they have felt in a position to judge? I have also heard that some of the monks these people consider to be their teachers have actually criticized them for not meditating enough! Obviously one shouldn't take the opinions of such people to heart at all, and actually I do not. These words and opinions have not changed my commitment or mode of practice in the slightest.

These people do however all attend Dhamma talks, read Dhamma books, and listen to recordings of teachings, but do not make an effort to sit meditation quietly and regularly. This is like visiting doctors and collecting medicine for your illness, but refusing to take it. Yet in having collected so much medicine, these people evidently feel they're in a position to prescribe it. The truth is that they would not be able to tolerate the pain that arises in the body from sitting still for even one hour, as they do not yet have the mindfulness or the patience to do so. These are the Buddhists who are criticizing full time monks who meditate a lot. It is both presumptuous and absurd. I would not be giving advice to a professional in any field unless I was at least as familiar in that field as they were.

I recognize that I can get a bit triggered here, because when fellow Buddhists criticize monks for meditating, I do find it quite baffling and irritating. I'll be quiet about this subject soon I promise, but before I do I would like to make one or two more final observations before moving on for the sake of context and perspective, but please do feel free to skip to the next chapter now if my ranting is getting boring!

Another popular contemporary view these people all shared is the view that *'being mindful of one's mind-states all throughout the day is what real and correct practice is.'* For some strange reason they separate this practice from the practice of formal meditation. This consistency is certainly an important part of practice, but the fact is regular formal meditation is what actually makes it possible to be mindful throughout the day. Otherwise the mindfulness is simply too weak and fuzzy. One might be vaguely aware of the mind-states, but there's no power to 'let the mind-state go' if it is unwholesome. You can't separate formal meditation where one sharpens and clarifies mindfulness from maintaining mindfulness all throughout the day. I have lived with many meditation masters, and this is the teaching and understanding that of each of them has shared. Those great monks and nuns who became Enlightened while listening to one teaching in the time of the Buddha had developed their mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom in past lives. They were spiritually ripe and mature.

Many modern people make the assumption that sitting meditation a lot means that one is attaching to peace, instead of being mindful of mind-states. Once again I must ask. How can they know this? And why draw this conclusion if you don't know? The fact of the matter is that if a person is developing mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration together, as recommended by Lord Buddha, they can take a closer look at the mind while sitting. It is possible to be even more mindful of your mind-states while sitting meditation. Anyone with a sincere and regular sitting practice knows this. People who do not have a regular practice should not draw conclusions prematurely. But some do of course and some will in the future too.

I've had lots of opportunities to consider this small group of vocal people and consider their critical comments, having heard these relayed back to me many times over a period of years. What I now personally feel is going on, is that these individuals probably find those who meditate a lot quite confronting and threatening. And precisely because they do not yet have a

good quality of mindfulness, or 'truth discerning awareness,' they prefer to find fault with that which is threatening, rather than investigate their own laziness and attachment to comfort. They only became critical of the practice of their friends, and of the monk who encouraged them, once their friends increased their efforts in meditation.

It is understandable that people sometimes have defensive reactions, but it is quite a shame in this particular context. I am concerned about the kind of kamma that people who criticize sincere practitioners are making. When they do come to apply themselves sincerely at meditation practice in the future, they may meet with some challenges. I wish them every success in meeting that challenge with conviction and inner strength, and I hope that someone like me actually helps them to keep going, to be patient and diligent.

These critical comments did not discourage or dissuade me from fulfilling my formal meditation practice vow, because as Luang Por Chah once said in a talk about his practice while wandering on tudong... 'Suddhi Asuddhi Pacattam.' Our purity is something we know for ourselves; Purity of virtue, purity of intention, purity of understanding, purity of effort etc. If our understanding changes during the course of our practice we have to make adjustments. Until then, we practice as sincerely as we can according to our best understanding.

It is very important that we all train ourselves to see our opinions as our current roadmap or paradigm. We hold them with conviction if they are the result of sincere study and investigation. But we also hold them in a way that is flexible, in case our understanding changes or deepens later. When the mind is peaceful however, there are no opinions. We have to be mindful of views and opinions as well, and see them as Luang Por Chah advises us 'as not a sure thing' both our own opinions, and those of others. A lot of meditation and skillful contemplation is what gives people the clarity and ability to see opinions for what they are.

Editor's note... I thought this would be a nice place to insert a few appreciative comments that were actually said towards the end of, and after this period of practice, by some of the other participants. It gives a glimpse into the benefits they were receiving and their natural joy and appreciation because of this. Otherwise it's just Ajahn Achalo's perspective and word. The following are excerpts from emails that were sent to me.

Liv Conquest wrote upon her return to Australia...

Dear Ajahn Achalo

Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu for the 3000 hours and your perseverance - being a role model and inspiration for the rest of us. Anumodana for everything you offered me. The support, the talks, the mala and most of all for helping me rekindle the JOY in the Dhamma. It's like being reborn again.

With metta – Liv

Lisa Andranov, a British laywoman who spent around ten days with us wrote a lovely email after leaving our group around the mid-way point.

"Good afternoon everyone, I hope that you are all very well.

I just wanted to share the photo from yesterday so you all have it and to say a huge thank

you. It's been so wonderful to feel welcome in such a select and wonderful group, doing such a special pilgrimage. It really is incredibly touching to have been a part of it and I shall never forget it! May you all have wonderful insights under the tree and wherever you are in the future! I hope to see you all soon.

With metta, Lisa. "

Ajahn Nyaniko wrote the following as a part of his update towards the very end of our retreat. Day 42 of 45.

I will be forever grateful to Ajahn Achalo for providing me the impetus to do this kind of practice. His stalwart friendship and kindness has been invaluable not only to me, but to all of us practicing here with him. Not only has he been able to put up with my own idiosyncrasies, but he has presented me with lovely gifts along the way. One of the most noteworthy gifts was on the day when I reached 1000 hours. I had decided to join Ajahn Visalo for a 13 hour sit that day, thus just having breakfast and skipping the main meal. In the afternoon when Ajahn Achalo arrived for the 3-8pm sit, he dropped a weighty package in my lap, saying it was my reward for reaching 1000 hours. Indeed, the timing was uncanny, as I was just really running out of gas at this point. The gift was completely unexpected, and very moving, and inside was an awe-inspiring vintage Maitreya Bodhisattva image. Because Ajahn Achalo knows me well enough to have noticed my love of Maitreya Bodhisattva, he was able to touch my heart with a most meaningful gift. Ajahn Achalo has managed to impress me on several occasions over the years and this was one of them.

This morning Khun Pongpan, Ay, Jintana, Victor, and all the others made a grand flower offering at the Temple and dedicated the merit to Ajahn Achalo and the rest of us meditators trying to finish our determinations. This particular offering consisted of 5000 orange and yellow marigold garlands, totaling around 200,000 individual flowers! This is enough to cover the innermost Asokan wall completely surrounding Maha Bodhi Temple, and adorn the entrance to the Buddha Metta shrine with a lavish flower arrangement. Rejoicing in this offering caused a boost in my energy - a bit of something to get me through the next few days.

Ajahn Anand (not my teacher Ajahn Anan) wrote this from the retreat centre where he is now practicing in Myanmar after reading the final of my journal entries.

I feel deeply touched with tears welling up in my eyes.

I really miss the good old days when we were practicing together there. And every time now when I start a meditation session I have actually been visualizing myself sitting at the Mahabodhi Chedi and Maha Bodhi Tree, near the Vajara Asana of the Buddha. And imagine that you all 'Ajahns' were there sitting side by side, and this makes me smile, feel happy, and the meditation goes well. Also every morning and evening metta chanting session, I do radiate metta and compassion to you, every joining bhikkhu and all lay supporters there with thankful and gratitude mind. I also wish that Gautam is doing well. His welcome smile every time he came to see us was full of good will and eagerness to help us.

Earlier on at Maha Bodhi Chedi, I did tell you once that I felt I needed inspiration to persevere further and advance in practice. It is something like I know the way, know the map of how to go to the destination, but need fuel to speed up and maintain the vehicle on track.

Now I have to admit that you did help me to find this inspiration. No words can really describe but 'Thank You deeply from my heart'.

May we all be liberated from Samsara and Enlightened by the Dhamma soon!

*With loving-respect and gratitude,
Javanapanno Bhikkhu, Anand.*

Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu.

So clearly we can see that meditating intensely, and sitting a lot at this Holy Site really does empower people's practice and faith. I am also honored to have so many lovely friends and to know people who are deeply committed to practice as well. As Ajahn Nyaniko's message stated, my students actually offered 5000 garlands to show their gratitude and generate good energy to help push us over our finish lines. Isn't that stunning! It really did help too. A few mean-hearted comments amongst a mountain of joy, pure good efforts, wholesome love, and appreciation can certainly be tolerated.

Now – back to the 'almost three quarters point of the retreat!



Our large group towards the end - with the 5000 garland puja/offering!



Chapter Seventeen - Bodhgaya in The Age of Kali - (pt2)

Day 33 – (292.5/400 – 2892/3000)

11:30pm.

A change is as good as a holiday they say! Tonight there is a political rally in the Kalachakra Grounds. It is 200 metres from our Guesthouse. It is the currently very popular Hindu Nationalist Party rally I believe, although I couldn't say for sure. What I can say is that it's very well organized, has guest swamis, musicians, and bhajan singers, and quite a budget, given the sheer amount of colourful lighting that has been strung up everywhere. The rally goes even later than the weddings, amazing! It has attracted a middle and upper middle class crowd. It is an interesting scene, the kind of which I have never witnessed in Bodhgaya to date, but it is a glimpse of modern India.

When His Holiness the Dalai Lama is in Bodhgaya, this large open field is where he teaches upwards of 10,000 monks and nuns, along with tens of thousands of laypeople. I came once when His Holiness was here, and never again! Although I love, respect, and miss him dearly (It's now two years since I attended any of his Teachings, most recently in Australia) I just

couldn't take being pushed and shoved and jostled so much again, nor the smell of that much excrement in the air. Delicate creatures us big tall Aussies, compared to toughness of the Tibetans in exile. They have my deepest sympathy and utmost respect. If you have to be tough to survive you will be.

Tonight there is very different flavor! It is so interesting to see, that having practiced with very obnoxious noise late into the evenings frequently, has made everything seem so relative. In between the agitated speeches, the yelling and cheering, I notice that the music at long last is actually very nice! It is extremely loud, but not deafeningly so. Real tabla, harmonium, thumb cymbals, and actual well trained voices singing bhajans with genuine love and devotion. During the musical and chanting interludes you can literally feel waves of love radiating out in all directions. Perhaps the gods have come too? And then soon there's more yelling! It is very surreal, especially at 1:00am, which is when it went on until last night. But at least I got to experience tasteful Indian cultural music though, after complaining so vehemently about the boom box trash they play at the tacky weddings.

So once again here we have it! Yelling and screaming one second, and surreal divinity the next. Bodhgaya at its best, delirious and calamitous! India's tourist authority slogan for their country is 'Incredible India.' And it is! That word captures a lot - incredible, not quite credible? Certainly it is incomprehensible. But it is what it is, and it grows on you. Like fungus, or mould? No, it's like falling in love with the wrong type of person, despite your better sense. But once in love, what can you do? (Become a monk... quickly!)

The tourist authority's slogan for the state of Bihar, strangely enough, is 'Blissful Bihar.' Well, certainly in moments. Of course, baffling, brutal, barbaric, and bizarre would just as easily work. But then don't forget beautiful, because that is here too. So the strange dichotomy in the air, the dramatic sense of extremes living side by side, and perhaps a lack of sleep, have got me waxing lyrical again. I'm remembering other interesting things I've seen and heard in Bodhgaya, and thought I'd share a few stories.

As I tap away, there is also reluctance, because I don't want to discourage anyone from actually coming here! In fact, I wholeheartedly want to encourage you to come. Coming to Bodhgaya and the other Buddhist Holy Sites with a Heart of Faith, and paying respects at these Holy Sites, generates enormous amounts of spiritually beneficial merits. Beneficial for lifetimes the Lord Buddha states. So let me give a much needed and hopefully reassuring preface.

If you were to come for a short stay, and stay in a Hotel, Guesthouse, or Monastery, traveling only along the pilgrimage route, you would have a wonderful time, and most probably be very safe. You would see poverty, illness, and despair, but it would not likely affect you personally very much. Your mind would quite possibly become very peaceful at times, because of the powerful Blessings in these places. Your appreciation for Lord Buddha and his Sangha would deepen, and your efforts at practice would probably increase upon your return home. This is the normal experience. Giving to charities, clinics, and schools makes the experience more rewarding as well. There are many good people doing noble things here, and contributing feels really good.

But Bihar is the poorest and roughest region of India, there's simply no way around this. So if you stay longer than the usual 7-12 days, or dare to step out of the pilgrim's zone, disturbing details of a harsh reality for many will begin to filter through. So I must give a warning now.

The details below are potentially quite disturbing. Only sincere students of samsara should venture past this paragraph. Skip to the next chapter if you prefer. I've put a few happy tales towards the end to keep things balanced though, so read on if you dare... or if you care...

I'm not going to tell you in great detail about the riot I saw, caused when a Hotel manager strangled a lower caste boy to death for not cleaning the dishes properly. Text messages flew out in all directions, and hundreds of angry young men were here, burning tyres and screaming blue murder within an hour. Not so easy to sweep under the rug these days, with Airtel and Aircel towers all around, and with mobile packages cheap. Thick black smoke filled the air, and auras and eyes were strangely black and red too. The soldiers quieted the scene quickly. Bemused pilgrims walked by warily, but were basically left unscathed. It felt very dangerous though, like another little spark could have caused a much bigger explosion. We walked by, had our lunch and a rest, and by afternoon everything was as before.

Nor will I spend too much time talking about the teenage boy who was found chopped in half in the Mahayana Hotel fountain, after a foreigner had decided to sponsor his education. Apparently a jealous boy feeling left out had taken his spiteful revenge. Not surprisingly my own Dhamma son Gautam, is still quite frightened whenever my students help him, and insists we keep things very discreet, and not advertising our kindness. What do you use to cut someone completely in half !?! Nasty business.

Then there was the day that the soldiers came in big trucks and started demolishing the illegal fifth stories of hotels and guesthouses with mallets while they were still full of guests! Bribes were quickly paid, and the demolishing was delayed for a few months, but certainly did occur after the pilgrimage season was over. We were staying on the fifth floor of an adjacent guesthouse, watching pilgrims quickly gather their things and then the noisy smashing began. The 10 year old son of the owner told us our fifth floor would be next, and so we quickly relocated. But the soldiers left as quickly as they came. The next day the guesthouse owner's son had a black eye, probably from his father, irritated at losing his guests.

Then there was the snippet of a very disturbing conversation Ajahn Pavaro and I overheard in the 'Be Happy Cafe,' run by an American woman and her Nepali husband. "They don't just rob you these days; they kill you, and burn down your house! It's really not safe anymore!" ... Be Happy?

I can think of three more really horrible stories right off the top of my head without even really trying! Should I tell you? Perhaps not... When you stay for longer, or come more often these are the kind of things you see and hear, but enough of disturbing stories! What about the wonderful, or how about both disturbing and wonderful at the very same time? Bodhgaya has everything!

There is a very small cemetery between the Mahabodhi Temple and the town of Bodhgaya just behind some souvenir shops. One day, about ten years ago, an elderly Tibetan nun simply walked into the cemetery, sat in meditation posture, and began to spontaneously combust! She obviously knew that it was time to die, and so 'entered the fire element' in the properly designated place. It took a couple of days for the flames to fully consume the body, radiating outwards from the heart.

I've read about this in the suttas. This is the way Mahamoggallana disposed of his body at his final passing as well. If one's fire element meditation is very powerful, it could probably

occur much faster. Tahir, mala shop owner and Mr. Mumtaz' son, showed me some pictures he'd taken. He saw this with his own eyes! And yet incredulous he said to me. "I don't believe possible. I think putting some kind of chemical." But sincere students of the Buddha understand that cremating your own body, while sitting in meditation posture at the close of life, is a sign of a truly gifted and accomplished yogi. This also happened here!

Okay so enough of the intensity of Ravi... now shy Levi's turn...

Other wonderful things happen here to, sweet things, and encouraging things. 11 years ago I was experimenting with different practices, and I made a vow to do 7000 Tibetan style bows on a bowing board in the compound. It was very difficult for a new initiate into the practice, and made sitting meditation painful afterwards as well! I remember that the moment I'd finally finished my 7000th full length bow that a high level reincarnated lama walked right in front of my board. Ling Rinpoche, the reincarnated tutor of the Dalai Lama then went and sat under the Bodhi Tree. I had met him before at the Patna airport on my very first visit 5 years prior, when both our planes were cancelled due to heavy fog. I went to pay respects, and he gave me a Bodhi Leaf. Did he know about the vow? I don't know.

The greatest Arahant teachers and Bodhisattvas still pass through this place if their health allows. If you sit under the Tree long enough, you can observe a galaxy of bright Buddhist stars passing by. Perhaps even some of the birds in the Bodhi Tree are Bodhisattvas? A story for later.

1:00 a.m. The music has stopped, it's time for bed. Meditation at the Temple and Tree at 5:10, that's just four hours away! Finally I will make 300 hundred hours, the three quarter point of this session by the day after tomorrow... I mean by the end of today... I'm confused – okay in about 20 hours then!

And once again on an uplifting note, to add balance to the disturbing stories earlier, here is a contribution by Ajahn Nyaniko, who is sitting the final 1,000 hours in tandem of my final 1,000.

Bodhisatta Bird

We are not always born as humans. In fact, according to the Buddha's teachings, the human rebirth is one of the most uncommon rebirths, and yet the most fortunate rebirth for gaining the opportunity to practice Dhamma. Since beginningless time, we have been born as hell beings, animals, ghosts, humans, and long-lived gods of various ascending levels up to the highest immaterial brahma realms. The Buddha himself had been born in all of these levels of existence, even after making the determination to practice as a Bodhisatta so many aeons ago. It stands then to reason that there are animals, gods, etc. even now, who are possibly Buddhas-to-be.

There was something I witnessed last November, during the previous 400-hour-meditation vigil at the Bodhi Tree along with Ajahn Achalo. This thing I am about to write about happened to Ajahn Achalo for real, and had I not been sitting there witnessing it myself, I may not have believed it if he had simply told me.

Anyway, one day about halfway through our time in Bodhgaya, Bodhi leaves started dropping one after another on Ajahn Achalo's lap. And they weren't just dried-up old bodhi

leaves, but bright green fresh bodhi leaves. How could the fresh leaves be falling off the tree onto Ajahn Achalo? Looking up, we noticed that there was a pigeon that was pulling leaves off the branches of the bodhi tree, and just dropping them. A stream of leaves, one after another, fell on Ajahn Achalo's lap, as the bird was apparently picking the leaves and offering them. We watched in amazement as the leaves continued to fall. 10, 20, and more leaves, about 1 per minute, or at least 1 every few minutes. It was causing a bit of a stir around us, but we kept up a semblance of meditation, discreetly tucking away the leaves as they fell. Eventually, Ajahn Achalo had to get up and use the restroom. I continued sitting. The moment Ajahn Achalo got up; the bird stopped picking leaves, and just sat still on the edge of the Maha Bodhi stupa. The moment Ajahn Achalo returned, and sat on his meditation mat once again the bird jumped back into action and picked more Bodhi leaves, continuing to drop them one-by-one on Ajahn Achalo's lap.

We discussed possible reasons for this strange occurrence. During a previous India trip, Ajahn Achalo had made the following determination: "If the Buddhas and Bodhisattas deem it appropriate, may I collect 1,000 bodhi leaves for the new Anandagiri chedi by the time I have sat 3,000 hours here." Perhaps that pigeon was a Bodhisatta? Or perhaps some deva was putting pressure on its mind? We can only speculate, but it is uncanny that the same pigeon, or one that has very similar markings to the previous one, dropped yet more leaves on Ajahn Achalo, myself, and Ajahn Visalo this time around as well. Scores of them! We haven't counted the Bodhi leaves yet, but it looks like Ajahn Achalo's determined goal of collecting 1,000 leaves may have already been reached. With 700 collected from the previous two trips and just 300 needed from this one.