

Section Four – Chapters 18-22

Chapter Eighteen - Past the Three Quarters Point!

Day 36 – (311/400 – 2,911/3,000)

Mid-day...

So, we did get through a few tough days, patiently enduring, Ajahn Nyaniko and I, and now that we are finally past the three quarters point and can clearly see the end of our marathon, there is that much longed for burst of... What? Couldn't call it inspiration, we're too fatigued for that, but a willingness to keep going. Quiet determination? Quiet confidence? No that sounds too energetic. Quiet plodding-ness. That is much better than quiet forlorn-ness! Putting a little much needed wind in the sails of our efforts as it were.

We've also had another team 'line-up change' occur now, with dear Joyce and Wendy already returned to Malaysia, having been successful in their own determinations. Now Jintana and Victor have returned once more, increasing their efforts, joined by their companions Elle, Victor's partner and Getmala, Jintana's good friend, (a massage therapist who Jintana offered the ticket to, in acknowledgment of years of kindly squeezing stress out of her body.) Elle and Getmala are both here for the first time. Phongphan and Aye are here for their second 'round' during this trip after having committed to starting and then ending the intensive retreat period in Bodhgaya, along with the sangha. Stalwart supporters and practitioners!

It is interesting to observe their fresh enthusiasm and joy from our dug into the trenches stance. We are not depressed or cynical at all, but tired... to the bone tired. We feel joy at the goodness and kindness we see and feel all around us, supporting us, and we smile quietly. Everyone else is chatty. It's like that. The Thai monks have settled into the rhythm nicely, sitting perhaps around 7 hours, with a little walking. They are less driven than their farang (westerners) brothers, but sincere and gentle. Ajahn Visalo, our Indonesian born bhikkhu brother on the other hand, is rising to the occasion like a mountain climber! After having sat 12 hours per day for ten days, after coming down to 11 hours for a day or two, he then decided he'd try and sit for 13 hours per day for ten days! This is definitely the Olympics now! He has sat for 3 days already so far.

Ajahn Visalo's light frame and yoga practice past have put him in good stead for the challenge. Because he now has a bigger breakfast but then skips lunch, I've shared some really good espresso coffee and Hawaiian spirulina as a support. Superior nourishment and great stimulants! It's quite beautiful to see the way the Ajahn has risen to this challenge on his own. There's no competitiveness or aggression just the sincerest wish to practice the hardest possible as an act of gratitude and respect to the Buddha. He is also sharing a portion of the merits to me for encouraging him to join. He feels that he started later with these sessions, so has to make up for lost time. So whereas Ajahn Nyaniko and I are steadily cruising in the final legs of long marathons, the Thai bhikkhus are cruising on shorter marathons, and Ajahn Visalo is doing the Triathlon! He is giving it his all, modestly, quietly, yet heroically. I am both impressed and also pleased, to have played an enabling and supportive role, as are those who've supported me in helping him. Due to these and all of our skillful efforts, may we all realize our hearts deepest desire for peace!

So newly arrived people coming with high levels of enthusiasm, determination, and inspiration is a source of fresh energy. They are kind to us in our fatigue. The Malaysian flavor and tone is replaced by a Thai one now, but they are equally lovely. (The Thais bought a lot of fabulous supplementary foods as well of course so quite literally different flavours.) We are nourished by our beautiful, sincere and kind supporters, who feel equally supported in their practice by their determinedly meditating teachers as well.

We have seen several sets of people, students and friends, come and go during these weeks. Most modern people can only manage 10-14 days, but Ajahn Nyaniko, Mae Chee, and I have stayed, and stayed, and stayed. What we have been doing here really is like a meditator's marathon. Something very difficult, that requires stamina, endurance, and the use of all of one's skills. Yet, it is entirely doable. Drawing on all of your skills for an extended period of time, you build upon them, and learn to develop new skills as well. I remember that after having been an abbot for three years that my dear Teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Anan said to me one day... "Achaloo... you're much tougher now than a few years ago... I can tell."... To which I grumbled with only a little bit of resentment. "Yes, well... I had no choice but to get tougher didn't I?"... Tan Ajahn laughed. "Yes, that's how and when people get tougher, when they don't have a choice!" He was pleased by the development.

With a six and a half week period, there is enough time to review the way life was going before the intensive retreat, and consider what is coming up in the period ahead as well. Then to make firm resolutions about adjustments that need to be made. Setting resolutions repeatedly, gives us the conviction to carry through when we return especially when the resolutions are made in a spiritual 'power place.' These periods in Bodhgaya have been extremely helpful in my process of learning how to be an abbot while building the monastery. They are a break of sorts, at least from those roles. But despite being physically and emotionally exhausted upon returning, there was always a much needed burst of fresh inspiration and spiritual energy/merit to continue with the next phase.

Ajahn Nyaniko will be taking on more of a leadership role at Abhayagiri monastery in California when he returns. He has my utmost respect and deepest sympathy for rising to the occasion. The praise and blame phenomenon will be a real workout for him, and that wisdom sword will be getting consistently sharpened. These three periods of retreat that we've shared will have helped him to find greater inner resources and to learn more about stamina. To have understood more deeply that there is a Refuge inside when everything else hurts. By now you might be asking... "Is being and abbot or co-abbot really so hard?" And the simple answer is YES! People can be very critical of, and ungrateful towards the people who take on the burden of leadership.

For people who also like spending time alone and having a simple, spacious life with lots of time to meditate, embracing administration, and taking on 'having to be responsible' is a huge sacrifice to make. Very few monks have all of the qualities required to teach, administrate, and lead the meditation practice as well. Often times abbots don't really choose this role, but rather they accept it after realizing that either no one else will do it, or the community feels that they are the best choice. Since no first time abbot has all of these skills they then have to learn on their feet and be criticized when they fall short of everyone's expectations. There is the joy of knowing that one's life contributes to the growth and well-being of many others, and then there is the other stuff. Monasteries also exist within samsara and have the nature of unsatisfactoriness; they do however offer quite good conditions for working towards an escape.

Ajahn Nyaniko has said several times during our three sessions together here, that no one has ever made him practice so hard before in his entire 16 year monk's life! I remind him that I invited him, but didn't force him. He has never said that he regretted accepting the invitation to join me for the final 1,000 hours of my 3,000 though. On the contrary, being a person with a helpful, generous disposition, he feels he may have worked on projects a little too much in the past, and needed to find a way to imprint new conviction and commitment to the formal practice in his life. He wishes to give formal practice the importance, time, and attention it needs in order to blossom. These intensive retreat sessions have been great for this. Meditation monks need to support one another in not letting our formal practice slip off the page. Sometimes leaving the monastery for a while is a good thing.

Ajahn Nyaniko also said once on a difficult day, about ten days ago... "This place would break any man." To which I responded... "Yeah, I know what you mean, but you know what? It's actually put me back together several times as well." There's something about really intensive practice that allows old wounds in the heart/mind, which we've given some good attention, to resurface, and to be seen even more clearly in a truly wise context. This allows things to heal even more fully. The mind can kind of fall apart at times, but within the sacred container of the regular daily routine and disciplines it can come together again stronger and more whole. There is the time, space, and well established 'container' with all of the consistent practice, to allow the really big stuff to be worked through, or to simply flow through. It can be very painful, but in a healing way. Intensive meditation for more than a month in a place like Bodhgaya is like Initiation by Fire though, and not for the fickle or faint hearted, or those with a loose grip on sanity!

It is also good to do these kinds of things with trusted friends who are just as deeply committed. Ajahn Pavaro, my second monk at Anandagiri for the last 6 years, was a good brother and compatriot previously on several of these intensives, and most recently Ajahn Nyaniko has been. Ajahn Pavaro kindly helped mind Anandagiri in my place for these last couple of retreats, but has joined for the last few weeks of this final one. Ajahn Chah once said... "No one really understands the suffering of a monk - except another monk." This is very true! We can support each other with our intimate understanding of 'the form' like someone outside of this same 'container' cannot.

I've put myself through this at least ten times now! So I recently told a traumatized part of my heart, during the 'having hit the bump' phase a few days ago, that I won't be doing this again to this 'body/mind' this lifetime. Ten 'longer than 1 month' intensive retreats here in Bodhgaya are finally enough. That bruised and stretched part of my mind was very relieved I assure you! But the benefits I can see for my practice, and the process of this lifetime, have been considerable. I have committed to leading a three week pilgrimage to the Holy sites in India next year, which entails different challenges, but nowhere near the intensity of these retreats. What an incredible opportunity to have had in the middle of one's life though! Assuming I live a bit longer, but if I die soon we can say, what a great opportunity to have had towards the end of one's life instead!

To be able to come to Bodhgaya roughly ten times in around ten years and immerse oneself in these intensive retreats has been kind of like sticking the sword of mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom into flaming coals until it is truly heated and flaming red hot. Then beating, and beating, and beating the edge to get it as sharp as possible! I've observed that my sense of humor, sense of irony, the sense of bathos that balances the already acute

sense for pathos, have all developed considerably. Then, there is the sense of perspective that frequently living for periods in one of the poorest regions of the world inevitably affords. It gives one a sense of gratitude and contentment. The capacity to both endure and to 'let go,' has also been deeply developed 'on the sitting cushion' here in Bodhgaya. I could say similar things about having been an abbot, teacher, and building a monastery - which has occurred in parallel with these ten or so retreats.

Sadly, for serious meditators anyway, things have gotten busier and busier in Bodhgaya over these past ten years. It looks like using this place in the way that I've been able to, will become more challenging, and possibly too challenging for many. In general, meditation practitioners do need some periods of 'hush' between intense waves of noise, for the mind to settle and go inward, supporting some kind of a process. The number of groups, the size of the groups, and the number of waves of noise that come with them seems to be constantly increasing. The number of people gaining important merits through paying respects here is increasing too however, so for all of those people the recent changes in comfort and ease of travel might be seen as a positive. There is a saying in the Thai language that translates as... "When you gain one thing, you lose another." This is so often true.

The big personal challenge for me now is to make the monastery that I have been building into a type of Sacred Holy Site, which inspires diligent, quiet practice. With a container of standards, or way of doing things that supports intensive meditation practice as well as a growth in insight. I am highly motivated to do this, and have some good ideas so there is considerable likelihood that I will succeed. There is an 18 metre tall Chedi already half complete, containing many inspiring, sacred images, which has been blessed by several of Thailand's great masters, so this will help in creating the uplifting aesthetic. But now I have to keep things at a 'middle way' level of development. So long as I keep the monastery small enough that my administrative burden does not become too great, and strict enough to scare away the tourists! Things should go okay.

So here in Bodhgaya we are hoping to carry on slowly but steadily now, and hang on to our sanity too. It's only 9 more full days. If there are no unforeseen dramas or challenges we are on track to finish our meditation goals. Hopefully there'll be no unseasonal rain, visits from dignitaries or debilitating illness. After our chanting session each afternoon, we ask for Blessing, support, and protection to finish with ease.

Retail Therapy as a skillful Aikido move!

Day 38 – (335/400 – 2,935/3,000)

Late pm...

Two days ago Mara successfully moved me from my post. Having endured through an especially long, aggressive, and loud Khmer puja in the morning I just couldn't take the very loud, long, and out of tune Vietnamese one in the afternoon. Mara attacking through the ear sense base! So when there was neither the bulletproof-ness that comes from some samadhi inner stability, where the noise just doesn't seem to enter deeply, nor the bullet-aloofness that comes from excellent mindfulness, where one is very aware, but nothing sticks. What could I do? Revert to an older strategy... stop being a meditation warrior for a period and just be a nice guy.

So at around 4:00pm, I said to Ajahn Nyaniko, "I can't take this anymore... I'm going to the bathroom, and for a walk." Shaved eyebrows were raised and eyes widened. He'd agreed to be a friend to Ajahn Visalo in sitting and so was committed to staying very, very still. But the bathroom stop was just the first stop, because I was really going window shopping! I didn't tell him that though because I suspected he'd like to come too. What was I window shopping for? Gifts for others! Visiting here 15 times over 16 years I have come to know lots of people, and lots places. When it comes to choosing souvenirs or gifts there are a couple of places with not only a nice selection, but the shop owner also tells you a reasonable price first time, with no tricking, arguing, or cheating. Such shopkeepers are rare – but they do exist! We simply haven't had the time, or energy to have a look yet with our rigorous schedule, but on this day the shops and old local friends beckoned.

The following day Ajahn Nyaniko would complete his 1,000 hours, and although his goal is 1,080, this seems a significant milestone and worthy of acknowledgement. Also, khun Jintana who is here now and who helped a lot with our accommodation costs has a new home in Bangkok. I think she'd appreciate a nice new Buddha statue. So I left the Temple with a mission. Dodging auto-rickshaws, and what seemed like thousands of pilgrims, I checked a few of the street stalls that line the roads, breathing in clouds of dust all the while, but sure enough I discovered a statue that seemed very suitable at Nasim's shop. Nasim is another kind Muslim brother and many monk friends and students have found 'the perfect thing' in his shop over the years. On a street stall considerably further down the road I found a lovely faux-antique image of Maitreya that I think Ajahn Nyaniko will like. The detail was surprisingly intricate, and the patina very deep and captivating. I'd have to consult with Mae Chee Aimy to see what the budget allows – but I think we're in good shape.

The retail therapy was effective on several fronts. It felt good shifting the focus to demonstrating gratitude and appreciation to others. Also, the chaotic vying outside was much crazier than inside the temple! Coming back and seeing the monks and our group of lay friends all sitting so restrained and determinedly I actually felt very wholesomely proud, and was very happy to settle back down. I could also feel the serenity which emanates from the Tree once again, in stark contrast to everywhere else. I only did 8.5 hours of meditation on this day though! I can't do that every day, or I will not complete my vow.

As it turned out Yom Jintana loved the Buddha I had scoped out, and appreciated the quite reasonable 'real price' without the usual hassles when we popped into the shop at the end of the day's striving last night. Ajahn Nyaniko was also very moved to be presented with the Maitreya Statue as a surprise yesterday afternoon, the day he finally made 1,000 hours! Back at the guesthouse, Tahir had some very small jewel sized semi-precious stones in his store specifically for ornamenting statues. We are looking forward to adding a few turquoise and lapis jewels into Maitreya's crown.

Advanced Quicksand Phase

Day 39 (*will be 345 of 400 hours by day's end - Samsara permitting*)

Late morning...

I'm definitely in the advanced 'quicksand phase' now. How does one tell? It's when you trip over your own feet on the way up the flight of stairs, and then actually fall over because you

don't have the swiftness to right yourself quick enough. That's the degree of the fatigue, and that's what just happened. Don't worry, no serious damage, but probably a very large bruise! Just a flesh wound as we say. Yep, coming up to the six week point, a point I've often felt was my outer limit for these retreats, but being a religious fanatic I usually make myself stay a bit longer than this.

Ajahn Sumedho talks about his days of training himself to be more patient as a young monk. When the thought would arise, "I can't stand this for one more second!" He would wait that extra second, and then say to himself, "One." Then counting the breaths, "2,... 3,... 4,... 5,... - Ha! You see! You can stand it for longer!" We actually have to do this to stretch our capacity and learn to disbelieve our imagined limitations. It's not easy though. Sage-like patience is generally not won on the sofa.

Once when attending the Dalai Lama's teachings in Northern California around 20 years ago, all of a sudden His Holiness stopped commenting on the text he was teaching, abruptly looked out into the predominantly middle class audience and said, "It is simply not possible to grow spiritually without difficulty and hardship!" He had obviously picked up on some laziness, impatience, and 'attachment to comfort' impressions in the air given his response. I remember it clearly to this day, and it makes me feel better now about the uninspiring dullness and exhaustion I'm feeling, as well as the bruised hip from tripping up the steps moments ago. "We have difficulty and hardship Your Holiness" I offer it on the shrine of aspired for spiritual growth.

Snuck away from the morning session one hour early, and I'm skipping lunch. This way you get a proper siesta nap and some extremely elusive 'quiet time alone.' The advanced quicksand phase snuck up on me differently this time. There is no physical quicksand; it's just that you feel as though there is. The fatigue saps your energy levels here. It usually rises to the ankles for a while after a week or so, when you first notice less bounce in your step. Then up to the knees, then the waist. You hover there for a while. Everything is harder, takes more energy, and there's less and less energy available. If you stay for more than a month, it rises to the chest, or rather one sinks into it down to one's chest, and everything seems *really* hard. After five weeks it's up to your chin. This time it went from the knees straight up to the neck all of a sudden! (Stayed up too late talking with students two nights in a row.) But we're in the final week now... so slow and dogged trudging should be ok.

The most recent Intensive retreat here, the one just before this one, was the worst. A mild throat infection later became pneumonia, and was followed by an eye infection. After only resting a day and a half in bed throughout these illnesses (coughing up very large amounts of thankfully clear mucus into a thick towel at my sitting place under the Tree) I finally reached the 'Under the quicksand with a lead weight on my head' phase. You could also call it 'The walking dead phase!' But finish those 400 hours I did! I still remember that just when the mucus from the chest was easing up, much to my horror; it seemed that it started seeping out of my red and puffy left eye! Fortunately I had antibiotics both for the chest and eye and could self-medicate and carry on.

It's not just less sleep and the constant need to put forth a lot of energy while working with 'establishing mindfulness with noise and crowds' so as not to fall into irritation. The other really tough thing, for anyone probably, but perhaps especially for Forest Monks, is the lack of physical seclusion or space. We're accustomed to having time alone, on mountains and in forests, at least for periods in the day. And yet here we are meditating in public in a crowded

place, day after day after day, with no days off. There is also the walk to and from the temple where the often aggressive hawkers and beggars send their minds out at yours constantly. It's intense, and very different from interacting with other monks and devout laypeople while living in an established Forest Monastery. A difference probably somewhat similar to walking in an English garden, as opposed to trekking through the Amazon! It's wild out there man!

I have come to believe, from repeated observation, that in the course of practicing here, our auras slowly 'pick up' some of the significant amounts of 'other people's stuff' hovering in the air while meditating under the Bodhi Tree. Psychic Pollution is real. More and more 'stuff' getting lodged in our somewhat porous minds, having been made porous through decades of deliberate sensitizing and softening. One can and certainly does pick up Blessings here, as these are also definitely in the air to, but you pick up other stuff as well. There are reasons that Lord Buddha recommended meditating in solitude, but he also recommended practicing in the Four Buddhist Holy Sites - and so here we are. When we return to our quiet, more normal habitats after a week or so, this extra 'stuff' will fall away all by itself. Doing some extra chanting and walking meditation and simply walking around in nature is all that is usually needed. I guess I'm feeling homesick!

Anyways - Just a few days to go now.

A nice thing happened yesterday though. The pigeon that had been helping with Bodhi leaves, but which suddenly disappeared around a week ago, flew in for a little visit. Sitting on the ledge just above my head, and centred right above my head, he looked down and into my eyes inquiringly for quite a long while as if to ask, "So, did you get enough leaves for your Chedi quota?" I answered, "I think there are enough, thank you very much." Having collected 400 two visits ago, and 300 on the last visit we only needed 300 to make the 1,000. After lunch I put all the leaves to soak into a big bucket. Late at night all the monks and laypeople helped to wipe the now rehydrated leaves with tissue paper, and I then carefully placed each one between the pages of some notebooks. (This way they will dry flat) I counted approximately 500 leaves! We will get them laminated once they are dry. Gautam know just the place.

Chapter Nineteen - Finding Energy when there isn't any.

Days 41 - 43

Day 41 - $(360.5/400 - 2,960.5/3,000)$

Early am. My mind feels bright, light, happy, and mostly contented now, rather than completely fed up. I got over that bump, and yet somewhat problematically now, there is simply no will to meditate. Meanwhile, we still have five more full days of practice to go! There is the wish to simply sit, or simply lie down, or simply chat, but not to be mindful of breathing, or mindful of noises, or to sit up very straight. Give me a sofa! A beanbag! A hammock! Anything but the meditation cushion!

The practice of 'simply' sitting' is perfectly possible in quiet places, or places with nice views. One can actually take 'relaxed broad awareness' as a meditation object while sitting, and this can be very serene, especially in quiet, open places. But in crowded noisy places, one generally has to make a concerted effort in order to maintain some equipoise and composure.

Otherwise serious aversion will usually arise, unless of course one has uprooted all aversion.

Now when I say no will to meditate, I mean it, a lot of resistance is present when I approach the long meditation sessions, and yet a lot of contentment arises at the thought of just chilling out. Quite happy to be in Bodhgaya, just don't want to meditate! So in a way the big bump is behind me, of being completely fed up with the whole scene and enterprise, but there are still large bumps in the mind to be overcome. It's the holiday mentality that we have after working very hard and experiencing some success. It's time for a reward, a vacation, or a heavenly rebirth. But this is not the Path for going beyond death, the vacations and heavenly rebirths come to end when their supports degenerate. Regarding this retreat, it is not yet time to chill out, and meditate we must, a solemn vow to Lord Buddha in the Place of Enlightenment is binding.

So for the first 25 minutes at the Mahabodhi Chedi this morning, while my legs were crossed, I was slumped fully over and literally leaning with the top my head pressed hard up against the actual Sacred Chedi. A pathetic sight really! Feeling what it's like to 'really not want to meditate anymore' was necessarily the meditation. I did restrain myself from groaning though. It was a bit embarrassing after looking somewhat impressive for more than a month, but what to do? It is what it is.

Out of sheer necessity I was trying out various skillful means, internally I was reciting Manjusri Bodhisattvas mantra, then after a while, when nothing changed, the mantra of a more fierce form of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. If peace would not arise thinking of the Buddha, perhaps fierce wisdom could help? Didn't seem to help very much though, but it was at least good to be exploring options and making creative efforts.

Following another creative impulse, I then also tried 'aditahning merit,' recollecting and then calling upon various merits produced from skillful actions to manifest as good, fresh energy now. The merit of encouraging some students to help Tahn Ajahn Anan with the costs of building his chedi, and also with some health needs. I recollected helping village kids with scholarships to be able to finish high school, or technical college, and even one in university. This line of reflection was actually working a little so I continued with it. Thinking of the many people I may have helped to progress in understanding Dhamma, and learning to be more peaceful, through sharing teachings and guided meditations on my website and on meditation apps. 'May the power of the good kamma from this help me to move forward now to!'

It was hard work, having to produce a healing balm from within, and then massage this newly generated energy into the hardened knots of an over strained mind. Feeling more willing to meditate afterwards though, but still significantly slumped over, finally I visualized myself inside the Chedi. With the Chedi visualized as golden light, yet solid, I visualized myself held up by the Chedi of golden light. My knees and bottom were inside the base, and the chedi spire rested upon my head. The walls held up my spine, not allowing the body to slump too far. 'May I be firm, resolute, unwavering, and inspired by Blessings of the Chedi of Maha Bodhi!'

After half an hour or so of these mental gymnastics, I could actually sit upright, and felt able to meditate for the remainder of the 2 hour 15 minutes early morning session. After breakfast everything was fine. Big bumps can be shifted if we're determined and creative. The early mornings are hardest for me.

Ajahn Pasanno, one of my first monastic teachers, used to say to the new monks he was training at Wat Pah Nanachat when I was training there in my first year as a monk. 'Sometimes we don't feel that there's energy for the practice. But putting forth effort is what produces energy, so we just do it, and often times the energy then comes.' It is a teaching I have strived to remember. If we surrender to the feeling that we don't have the energy or will to practice we will not get far.

Ajahn Chah is also famous for the wonderful quote. 'When we want to practice we practice, when we don't want to practice we practice, when it's peaceful we practice, when it's not peaceful we practice, when we're diligent we practice, and when we're lazy we practice!' This is a teaching I have deep faith in. If we just keep on practicing no matter our mood or energy level, we will develop a lot of insight into the nature of moods and mind states. Our quality of mindfulness will be emboldened by patient endurance, and the wisdom that knows that moods change. Energy can be generated. Practicing like this when it's tough, at least there is mindfulness and effort being maintained so that when things come together again they will come together even better.

By the end of the day the total was 361 hours, only 39 to go! Perception is a very interesting thing to notice. In the first week 39 hours seems like a 100 metre sprint. At the end of the sixth week 39 hours seems like the final few days of climbing Mt Everest after discovering that your oxygen tank has just run out.

Day 41 continued... Kilesa Mara, Vipassanu Kilesa Mara

It is interesting to observe the way that potential obstructions can manifest both outwardly and inwardly to deter one from fulfilling a spiritual goal. With the 'hitting the bump' days, it was simply aversion painted with a broad brush. Earlier in the morning today it was more subtle sensuality that longed for the ease of peaceful relaxation, with aversion only towards the focused task of meditation. Later today, Mara's armies regrouped with more sophistication. As I approached the 99% point of fulfilling my goal, some curious thoughts and ideas arose.

For ten years now, making the effort to sit meditation a lot under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya has been something central and important in my monk's life. When I first made it to an accumulation of 1,000 hours six years ago I felt such joy and contentment, and a wholesome sense of happiness for having completed something very worthwhile. That in an inspired gush of enthusiasm, I actually determined to sit a further 2,000 hours here this lifetime! After slogging away at it for a few more years, when I made it to 2,000 hours early last year there was a very different feeling. One more like, 'Ahh... hmmm... well, you know what? 2,000 might have been just about right!'

Originally I had thought I'd spread this determination out over a few more years, but seeing the way Bodhgaya was changing quickly, I realized I had better get on with it sooner rather than later. So I've actually done three of these intensives in just the past eighteen months. That means the intense relationship I have with this place has become even more so in recent years. I sometimes think that I may have an unhealthy co-dependent relationship with my dear old Mother India. You see every time I come here I get beaten up, but I still keep coming back!

These times in the Holy site are bittersweet, extremely difficult, and extremely rewarding at the same time. The lows are very low, and the highs very high. India is both wonderful and awful, and because of this it has an incredibly beguiling charm. One can get attached to the intensity of both the love and the hate. A bit like being stuck in a bad relationship with a beautiful and passionate person who just can't get their life together I suspect! Fighting, and then making up. Getting beaten up, but convincing yourself it'll never happen again. I am joking of course. I actually don't think there is anything unwholesome in my relationship with Bodhgaya. I am simply having to acknowledge that I've done this a lot now, and that there are other aspects of my life that need my full attention, but I will miss Bodhgaya!

Although these frequent visits over the past decade have been wholesome and helpful on one level I know that to keep doing these retreats long-term would not be the best thing in the broader picture of my life now. I know that what I really need to do is a bit more practice every day in my normal life, understanding that this will make a very big difference over the period of the coming years. I need to spend more time practicing in the monastery that I have founded. But there is a part of me that is attached to this mad, passionate ongoing affair! The beauty... the intensity... the struggle! So I actually seriously had the thought, "Stop at 2,970 hours, the 99% point! You know you want to come back anyway, and this way you'll have to!" Fortunately, I saw through it with some wisdom. "Finish it Ajahn, and then come back anyway if you really want to!"

Then Mara tried from another angle, which contained real wisdom, but also a trick. This is what he said, "There is no actual ending. 3,000 hours means nothing. There has only been arising and ceasing all along. Every moment has had its ending. So to show you're not attached to this rite and ritual you are performing, you should stop before completing it."

My considered response, "I know you Mara! Knowing that every moment is arising and ceasing, I will complete the vow anyway, without attaching to it as a rite or ritual. Truthfulness and Determination are Virtues which need perfecting (paramis) - having made the vow, I will finish it!" The hours are not what will liberate me, but the mindfulness generated in intensive retreats will support the wisdom that knows arising and ceasing ever more clearly in the future. These lines of thought were probably also fed by sheer exhaustion, and looking for any reason to take a break, but one has to expect some inner and outer obstacles when practicing very hard.

This was a long day, but I got through it. Ajahn Nyaniko also feels that he's running without any gas now. Just sitting upright, but completely exhausted. It is good to have his company, and empathy to mirror back that it's not laziness, but exhaustion affecting our minds now. We both hit the 'I'm fed up and that's enough' wall at the same time around ten days ago. And now we've hit the 'There's just no energy left' wall at the same time. And yet neither of us will give in. Moving through walls is what we came here to do. Ajahn Visalo, who remains as fresh as a daisy is still managing to sit 13 hours per day! I predict that he will manage to sit 13 hours ten days in a row. He's like, "What wall?" He is great company in a different way proving that the impossible is actually possible. Ajahn Pavaro who has some arthritis in his lower back also sits for many hours each day, being willing to work with the pain. The Thai Ajahns are quietly, and joyfully determined. Our lay supporters and students are also making very sincere efforts. Sometimes I feel embarrassed by the lack of enthusiasm I feel at this point, but everyone is supportive and no one is judging.

I remind myself consistently that there is a valid and deep reason to keep going. It's not just about fulfilling the vow. It's also to create new spiritual muscles and resources developing the ability to draw on something even deeper when inspiration is not there. When you feel that you cannot go on any further, but you refuse to give in, and go on anyway, that's when you know that you're stretching your ability and building a greater capacity. Whoever you become in the future will be grateful that you did. When you finally come to fully realize that you're not anybody at all you'll feel even more grateful to the conventional beings of the past that made the realization possible!

Chapter Twenty - Quiet Tears of Relief and Joy - Entering the Final 1%

Day 42 - (370.5 / 2,970.5)

Written late p.m.

This was the day when I really allowed myself to feel truly confident that I was actually going to make it to the total of 3,000 hours. I have never allowed myself to feel this since making the vow after completing 1,000 hours, that I would complete 2,000 more here. I was committed and determined, but not complacent, because I knew it could simply not be taken for granted. There was a lot of hard work before me, and infinite potential for obstructions.

The bomb scare the month before we arrived could have led to greater restrictions, where sitting all day may not have been possible. Or a bomb could have actually exploded! The sharp knee pain on the first day, in my left knee, that I'd never had before, could have gotten worse. The food poisoning, the chest infection, might have been minor illnesses compared to a more serious one that followed. Then there is the slow build up of fatigue and exhaustion. There could have been more, and more weddings keeping us from sleep! The physical and mental energy just might not be there to carry me through. Tripping up the staircase might have been truly debilitating, rather than just leaving an apple sized bruise in beautiful shades of purple, red, and blue. And yet, and yet, day 42 of 45 has come and gone!

For me, having gotten to the 99% point of my goal today, and then anticipating commencing the first of the final three days tomorrow, that will comprise the last 1%, was a true watershed moment. An enormous pressure fell away from my heart, and there were quiet tears of joy and relief. By mid-afternoon, I could feel that the end of the meditation marathon was truly very close. In a way I think that today has been the day where I actually felt the true accomplishment of this task, and felt relieved of the enormous burden too. My goodness those bittersweet, yet delicious tears of joy and relief on the cushion this afternoon were hard won!

Sheer exhaustion as the weeks progress shrinks your world a great deal, and you just have to try and get through the day, one day at a time. Sometimes it feels like you won't make it till the end of the day, and so you simply don't have the energy to think of the future at all. So much so, that I had not anticipated this wonderful moment. It really caught me quite by surprise. It is astonishing to think that just yesterday, I had felt such tremendous resistance in the morning meditation, now, just 30 or so hours later it all seems so close! The days have gone by one after another, and finally, it's truly within reach!

Of course this meditation vow has never actually really been about reaching a certain

number. I have been clear about this from the beginning. Setting this goal was actually about forcing myself to commit even more deeply to a transformative process, one that I am already deeply committed to anyway. It was about stretching spiritual capacities and abilities, and increasing the chances of experiencing true insight and deep peace. It's about taking several steps further along on a journey towards final liberation, and doing this in the very place where the Buddhas in this universe reached their final goal, after thousands of eons of cultivation.

In working up my abilities to sit longer here over a period of years, and then stretching the time periods out for longer, and in not allowing for days off, except for illness during these retreats I have been deliberately working right at the very limit of my ability. Stretching and stretching it further, because it is possible to do more here, if you have great faith, when recollecting the example and efforts of the Buddha.

The five spiritual powers of Faith, Energy, Mindfulness, Concentration, and Wisdom that Lord Buddha explained as being qualities which lead to Enlightenment, get developed a great deal in meditation retreats. Perhaps especially in this place where there is so much faith and spiritual energy. Meditating in Bodhgaya, with all of its noisy, chaotic, crazy charm requires the development of mindfulness and skillful means as well as wisdom. And you couldn't or wouldn't do it without great faith. This faith is then deepened further in the process.

But it has not just been struggle. The commitment, consistency, effort, and struggle create a container which is very rich in spiritual potential. Although I have not yet attained to a higher stage of enlightenment there has been development. There have been many wonderful moments of deep peace, of seeing the mind 'let go' of things which cause suffering temporarily, and then experiencing the mind at peace through having let go.

There have been experiences of extremely deep faith and gratitude towards the Buddhas and this Path. There have been periods where the loving-kindness meditation became so vast that I could not have imagined it possible to feel such love. Similarly, I have been able to experience profound equanimity towards the most extraordinary impingement, that I would never have considered possible a few years ago. There were other interesting and uplifting experiences observed in meditation too, but our monastic rules forbid me from describing them further here. Suffice to say though, that these times of practice at the Mahabodhi Temple, as well as being quite difficult have also been deeply encouraging and rewarding.

Please join us, Pilgrims One and All.

Although there is still exhaustion, there is also a quiet confidence and determination to just keep coasting along steadily now, and all will be fine. I was never sure how these last few days would feel, or how I would approach them, but late this evening I had an uplifting inspiration.

I have been incredibly well supported in having my personal spiritual process through these many retreats. There have been literally thousands of opportunities to make prayers, dedications, aspirations, and thousands of hours to develop insight and experience some deeper peace. I feel enormously grateful for so many wonderful opportunities. I am still not profoundly spiritually Enlightened however. People might very well wonder... why not after so much practice!?

It is very important to understand that complete, unshakable spiritual liberation is the most difficult of all things for sentient beings to achieve. It is necessarily a process that takes lifetimes. I don't acknowledge this with a terrible sense of disappointment or frustration, because I feel honored to know of the Path, to be walking the Path, and to be making some progress along it. Good things take time. We have insights in the course of practice, and they deepen over time. In glimpsing the mind's true potential in moments, or for periods with the clarity that comes from intensive meditation, you develop great confidence in ultimate truth, in your ultimate nature, and the path that leads to complete realization of this. However much practice we can do, we are coming closer to this culmination. But the different quality of inspiration I suddenly feel this evening is actually with regards to everyone else that I know who is also traveling along this Path. In acknowledging that I, as a conventional being, am somewhere along in a process, or journey I recognize that this is the case for all of the other kind people who support me and the other Buddhist practitioners that I know who aspire for liberation.

So tonight I felt a strong urge to reach out to close friends and students and invite them to join me in spirit, by making a commitment to sitting the final hour or hours with us in two days time, wherever they are. When I mentioned this to Ajahn Nyaniko and Ajahn Pavaro, they both thought it a good idea to. So we have each sent out emails to let friends know that between 7:30 and 8:30pm 23rd March, East India time, we'll be fulfilling our meditation goals under the Bodhi Tree. The email I wrote is below...

"Dear Dhamma friends,

Hope you are all very well,

As you are all aware, I have been plodding away at fulfilling a personal meditation 'aditahn' (vow) here in Bodhgaya for over ten years. Finally, with just 30 hours, (1% of the 3000) to go, I am feeling more confident that it is likely that I will finally fulfill this vow.

Several people had mentioned that they would be practicing more during this period also. I thought some of you may wish to know exactly when the final hour is happening, to join in wherever you are, should you feel moved to do so.

So between 7:30 and 8:30pm on the 23rd of March Bodhgaya time is when I expect to sit the final hour.

Ajahn Nyaniko will also be completing his 1,080th hour (108 x 10) at the same time.

*That is 9-10pm Thai time / 10-11pm Malaysian time / 11-12pm Perth time / 12pm-1am Sydney /East coast Australia time.
Around 2-3pm London time / 7-8am San Francisco time.*

Why sit all these hours here?

I have offered these hours of meditation in gratitude to Lord Buddha, the Truth of the Way of practice he realized, and the Noble Disciples who practiced and realized the same Liberation, and also to re-confirm my dedication to the meditative / contemplative Path.

Feel free to join us in spirit if you feel you'd like to.

In kindness,

Ajahn Achalo

Thanks to all who have supported us in these retreats! May you receive a large portion of the merits accrued!"



Participants in a previous full Pilgrimage in 2016

Day 43 - Love flows back

Checking email quickly in the early morning today, I was very surprised by how many people had responded with joy, inspiration, and enthusiasm, and had made a commitment to joining us in spirit during our final hours. After checking with the other Ajahns, we had 35 who had committed to join in during the five hours we'd been asleep!

Although I hadn't planned it this way, or worked it out as a strategy, this positive response was very nourishing for my meditation. I felt a lot of ease, serenity, good will, and loving appreciation even in the very early morning. Again it was an amazing contrast compared to just two days ago. Checking emails again after lunch, we had considerably more than 50 people now. From Malaysia, Thailand, Mexico, USA, Canada, Australia, England, and France!

Although the hot season is definitely making itself felt, with a lot more sweating under the Bodhi Tree now, once again the afternoon sit was buoyed by a sense of tranquil uplift and joy. There are many more Bodhi leaves falling now too, which is a cause for frequent outbursts of laughter and excited cries.

I walked out from the Temple at 8:45, past Sashi Singh, the one in charge of the door at the VIP Reception Hall, and Sonil Mehta the one who cleans the toilets therein. "Nammaste Guruji, Good Evening." I made my way around the side, where I have squirreled away my sandals safely for the past 43 days. And lo and behold! No shoes! Bodhgaya in 2018 is what it is. It was a good thing that the emotional tone of my practice had taken a more joyful and tranquil turn. It made it easier for me to deal with the fact that my shoes had been stolen!

Sashi Singh has a subtle way of letting you know that your right to use the VIP toilet is not actually a given. I only use them because they are closer, and so doing so saves time. Coming out this morning, after I greeted him he said, "You give me balm!" The menthol balms from Thailand are highly sought after hereabouts. The coolness is refreshing in the relentless heat. After which I said, "I came many weeks ago, and gave you three times! There's none left. How am I supposed to get more?" After which he said, "Just joking!" Which was a lie. Mae Chee Aimy gives him 'money for tea,' which secures her right to use these closer toilets to. The tradition of 'backsheesh' *giving of little gifts* is what actually gets things done in this country. It seems offensive at first, but when you understand that wages are very low, then the giving of gifts actually seems fair enough.

By late evening I had heard that many of the villagers near my monastery would also come and sit at the meditation hall in Anandagiri during our final hour. And a group of Malaysians were coming to chant and sit together at Joyce's house as well. The numbers weren't certain, but it was clear we would have at least 100 friends sitting along with us in many parts of the world. I began making a list of all of those that I knew of, and made the decision that this final hour would be one where I spread loving-kindness to all of these other spiritual aspirants. May they all be supported on their path to complete Liberation as well! And may the Blessings of Bodhgaya, the Seat of Enlightenment in this universe, flow powerfully into their minds!

Just two more full days to go...

Chapter Twenty One - Beautiful Endings - Forgiveness Supports the Process

Days 44 - 45

Day 44 (390.5/400 – 2,990/3,000)

Continuing on the theme of including others more deliberately now, I should give a little update about who has joined us here in India. As well as the two couples Phongphan and Aye, Victor and Elle, for the last few days we have also been joined by khun Jintana, and several of her relatives, friends, and staff. With 6 monks in total as well, it's a big team of around 20 just now! Anandagiri sangha and those associated take up quite a few spaces and are well represented under the Bodhi Tree of late.

Liv Conquest from Melbourne left our group a few days ago. She stayed nearly 40 days. For someone over 70, we were all inspired by her courage, commitment, and determination. She was naturally very deeply affected by a recent relationship breakup, but found her time in Bodhgaya healing and useful for regaining a sense of broader perspective. Seeing her wiping away tears repeatedly, but continuing with her meditation was moving. Tears are inevitable, and meditation is a very good response. She told me that the tears earlier were inspired by grief, but that the ones that came later were inspired by joy, healing, and 'letting go.' It seems the relationship breakup was partly due to her deepening commitment to practice. So in a way, the separation has forced her further along in the process of deepening the Refuge within. For my part I reckon that bloke made a mistake, but what would I know about such things?

So we've a large contingent of Thais now. Thai people in general tend to be quite scared about the discomfort experienced in India. Khun Jintana, a successful and persuasive consultant in Bangkok, told her friends however that as this was the final intensive retreat, they'd better take the opportunity to do it now, along with a trusted Ajahn. They do have very deep faith, and a religious devotion to creating 'merit,' so they could be easily persuaded. Although very busy with her company, Jintana has sincere faith and genuine spiritual aspirations, so she has joined us here for the fifth time now, increasing the hours of meditation with each consecutive trip. Phongphan and Aye from Phitsanulokh have joined us for a fourth time, and have increased their hours consecutively as well. We are proud of our faithful and diligent following. They have become an extended family of aunts and uncles to my Dhamma son Gautam as well, who runs errands for them tirelessly.

Jintana's three nieces, all in their early twenties have been a different phenomenon for poor 18 year old Gautam to try and relate to. After hours outdoors, even in hot, sticky countries, Thai women often manage to look like they've just stepped out of their houses after showering. So clean, neat, and tidy, and often sweetly scented. Poor Gautam is surrounded by Davatimsa angels, and is clearly confused and besotted! "Which one is single?" He asked me! And then later, "Has she asked about me? Why doesn't she like me?" To which I answered, "Gautam, they came here to meditate! Even if she liked you I wouldn't let her be your girlfriend!" He quieted down after this, but did manage to add them all as friends on his phones whatsapp! Somehow we've successfully ushered our Indian son into the 21st century. He is a neurotic teenager just like any other, with his phone full of pictures of himself! I am so glad I'm not 18! And I am so glad that I'm celibate! (That might come as a surprise to some but it's true.)

Thais are lovers of food, so our little breakfast scene has become quite a big breakfast scene! For the record before I go on, when Mae Chee Aimy asked me earlier what she could do to be a true support during this time my two main requests were to keep the breakfast scene small and simple, and to make sure there was a lot of water and steamed veggies at lunch. (When you sit most of the day, regular bowel movement is important!) But poor Mae Chee Aimy is far outnumbered just now!

At 7:30am each morning, we are taking our breakfast in a far corner of the compound, surrounded by a few diligently bowing monks. The humble Tibetan monks sneak peeks in amazement from the safety of their bowing boards. "Who are these great Lamas being offered such a feast?" They are wondering. I keep my gaze down, somewhat embarrassed, and try to be quick. The Thai monks seem just fine about taking a bit longer! The hungry dogs circle

like sharks at the smell of so much food, and occasionally fight bitterly. One has to admire the Thai people's ability to add sensuality and celebration to the austerity of spiritual striving. They really love their Ajahn's too, and if the early morning has been tough, this care and appreciation can be even more nourishing than the food.

So what is for breakfast? With all of the laypeople carrying a little something each, and Gautam picking up some local fare, it is quite a spread. Our nouveau cuisine - cosmopolitan fusion, is perhaps a 'confusion', and a little bizarre in the current context. But breakfast seems to be thoroughly enjoyed nonetheless. So what's on the menu? Salmon and mayonnaise on chapati, or potato curry on chapati, or shredded pork and chili paste on chapati, or yoghurt with muesli and extra fruit and nuts in a stainless steel bowl, or chocolate chip muffins and brownies, or bananas and oranges and pomegranate, and some mornings there have even been slices of tiramisu, banoffi, and cheesecake from the local upscale 'Be Happy Cafe.' Fresh Espresso bags, plastic cups, and thermos flasks with hot water are all ready to go to as well as flasks containing Chai tea. You can choose one item, or snack on a little from each! Like I said, I try to keep it simple and flee the scene quickly! Ajahn Nyaniko and I have to finish 5 hours of meditation before 11am, so there is no time to dilly dally.

Adding to the 'bizarreness' of the breakfast scene today was a resident Indian 'sadhu' who was indignant about not being invited to join. He literally screamed at us with rage until he was offered some chai tea. Thai's abhor public displays of anger, so they tried to ignore him at first. To which he responded by yelling louder and angrier! All eyes were then on Gautam, as if to say, "Deal with him quickly, somehow, you're Indian!" So Gautam yelled back. "You're not invited, go away! We'll give you something when we're done!" At which point the angry sadhu amazingly yelled even louder with big bulging red eyes and spit flying out of his mouth! Mae Chee Aimy then bravely gave him some tea in a paper cup, at which, upon receiving, he instantly wobbled his head and smiled. The wind and thunder was instantly blown out of the storm. He sat quietly to the side and enjoyed his tea. Didn't even ask for a muffin or sandwich? Incredible India! I would have yelled for the brownies. (No I wouldn't have!)

Thais understand very well how to make a win-win celebration out of giving offerings to monks. You see, once we get up after 15 minutes, our students get to divvy up all of the leftovers, and take another half an hour or so enjoying a fabulous picnic brunch! The chanting all around, the bowing Tibetans, the early morning sun, the cooler morning weather, and the smell of burning incense all add to the ambience. The food, followed by a long toilet break, is a particularly enticing way to procrastinate before their next meditation!

My meditation continues to flow more easily now, with the end clearly in sight. Energy is still quite low because of fatigue, but with much less inner resistance, serene and spacious periods have returned. I had to break a little more quickly before lunch however, as most of khun Jintana's staff and relatives have to return to Bangkok on the afternoon flight. They asked for the opportunity to ask forgiveness, and formally take their leave. This might seem like a strange thing to do, since no one has actually done anything obviously wrong, but it is a beautiful and useful practice which supports mental cultivation in several important ways.

Being still affected by ignorance, delusion, and confusion, negative qualities do frequently arise in the mind of unenlightened beings. Because of this we will at times most certainly act unskillfully with our speech and actions, both intentionally and unintentionally, knowingly and unknowingly. Asking forgiveness is a way to train ourselves to become more mindful of

these things. It is also a way to weaken pride and stubbornness heavy qualities that weigh our own hearts down. For people who want to experience deep peace beyond the grasping of ego, we are willing to practice relinquishing these negative qualities.

The traditional ceremony goes both ways as well, with the teacher also asking for forgiveness if something unskillful occurred from their side. I think it is also important to recognize that even as someone who is a teacher to others, I to ask forgiveness of my own teachers and other respected elders frequently. And actually all of the monks and nuns ask forgiveness of Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha every day, as part of the evening chanting. So this is a useful and beautiful practice that we are all engaging in and cultivating.

Part of the ceremony today would also be the offering of a beautiful Buddha image. Khun Jintana and several of my Malaysian students who could not be present, had wanted to offer a beautiful and meaningful gift at the completion of the vow. Again, this is simply another way of showing respect and appreciation. With the end so clearly in sight, we decided to have the offering today, so that more people could be included.

The dialogue below may seem a bit over the top to some. In an age where people value egalitarianism and equal rights above all else, but for people who wish sincerely to be trained to abandon the qualities of greed, hatred, and pride etc. these respectful exchanges do hold a beautiful place in the full spectrum of human relations. Respect for teachers, parents, and elders is culturally deeper in Asia, many Asians are very comfortable with this though the younger generations perhaps less so.

If memory serves correctly the following is what khun Jintana said, and then her staff repeated some parts after her lead. I include it here because I think the exchange is both gracious and beautiful.

"Dear Phra Ajahn, we would like to sincerely thank you for this opportunity to practice along with you and the other monks here in Bodhgaya." Then Jintana said personally, "I feel that I have grown in my practice and understanding, and I am quite sure that this would not have been the case without your encouragement and example, and I am truly very grateful." Continuing the ceremony, "If any of us have done anything wrong or hurtful, by body, speech, or mind, intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or unknowingly, during this time, or at any time in this life or previous lives we humbly ask for your forgiveness."

I love the way the ceremony jumps from this short practice period to this lifetime to all previous lives in one sentence! Might as well wipe the slate completely clean! It is actually possible that people hold deep grudges from past hurts and pains, so it is skillful to set the intention to let all of these old grudges completely go. Now that we know they are not useful.

Jintana also added the offering of 'pavarana' - giving her teacher permission to make requests for his needs. "If there is anything you need to support your own practice or health, please ask me and I will be happy to try and support. Please also inform me of any future opportunities to practice with yourself and the other monks, and I will sincerely try to attend."

Traditionally teachers would not be haughty, punitive, or scolding under such wholesome circumstances. It is usually an opportunity to rejoice, mirror, and encourage. It's an opportunity to offer a type of blessing. And so I responded, "I would like to take the opportunity to tell you all that I am actually very pleased and impressed with everyone's

efforts and behavior, and also with the faith and courage that you demonstrated in coming to this place, many of you for the first time. I know that you've had to be patient with many unpleasant things. I am however quite sure that you've all seen in moments at least, the benefits of patiently enduring and keeping up an effort in the meditation practice."

I then asked how many people had felt some experience of deep peacefulness, despite the crowds and noise. Most interestingly everyone had! Consider this for a moment. The fact that people quite new to the practice are sitting with heat and mosquitoes, large crowds and unceasing noise, and sitting for hours and hours, many for the first time, and yet they all felt some deep peace! This is testimony to the special blessings still present in Bodhgaya today.

I continued with a few more words of encouragement. Some of what I said was inspired by the talks Ajahn Jayasaro gave when I was a junior monk at Wat Pah Nanachat.

"Because we are all affected by ignorance, then greed, hatred, and delusion will inevitably arise at times. This is why our practice is called training. We have to develop more awareness as we go along. Acknowledging faults and asking for forgiveness is good, because it helps us to develop more awareness and take more responsibility. You also have to forgive yourself for making mistakes, because it's still inevitable at this stage. So please don't think that I am holding onto grudges or judging you harshly. We understand that it is a process. What I would ask of you however, is that you be truthful and sincere, and that you keep on trying to learn from mistakes and to do better.

We have to practice at our level of ability, which is different for everyone. So I don't mind if you crawl, walk slowly, or run, so long as you are developing your practice sincerely. But now that you do know of this training, please don't go backwards. Make an effort with your virtue and meditation. I am confident that the merit your practice has generated here is significant. You have a certain amount of good energy available to you now. I encourage you to try and invest this energy into a sincere daily practice from today onwards. Otherwise the energy dissipates and you've simply taken one step forward, then one step back. So please keep practicing and only go forwards."

Lastly I said, "Both the other monks and I are also still in training. So we may have slipped up in moments too. Please forgive us if we appear to have done anything unsuitable, or unbecoming for monks."

After this beautiful flower garlands were offered.

Then it was time to offer the Buddha statue. I had selected a stone image, approximately 20 centimeters tall, carved from Lapis Lazuli, a richly blue coloured stone with naturally occurring gold flecks. It was from Mumtaz shop naturally. Before the offering I gave a little background.

"Khun Jintana and several of my Malaysian students who could not be here just now, had wanted to offer a gift in acknowledgement of my having fulfilled this long-term practice vow. They asked me to choose a suitable gift. I chose a stone Buddha made from Lapis Lazuli. Why? Did you ever notice the color of the Buddha Metta's hair in the main Vihara inside this Chedi, and the colouring around the painted eyes? Well the traditional paint used for decorating these parts of Buddha statues is actually made from ground up Lapis stone mixed with mineral oil. So as far as elements go, Lapis is associated with the highest of the highest,

as such it is a very suitable material for a statue. You could say that it is a kind of sacred material, having been respected in Buddhist art for a millennia.

But why offer a beautiful gift at all? I think that it is appropriate to offer gifts to spiritual teachers in acknowledgement of important occasions. From my side, I have to consider what would really make this image sacred? Otherwise accepting this statue is simply collecting beautiful things. Buddha images can only really be sacred if we relate to them very skillfully and respectfully. Otherwise it's just earth element really. So for myself, in accepting this gift, I will make a commitment to relating to it in a skillful and useful way. Since it was offered here under the Bodhi Tree, close to the completion of my vow, when I look at it and pay respects in the future, it will remind me of these periods of diligent practice. I will remember that while here, even when tired I meditated, with sore muscles I meditated, while still a little unwell, I meditated. And I will try to remember not to be lazy, and try to continue to be diligent at all times."

Khun Jintana offered the statue, I put it on a little ledge on the Chedi behind me, and then the monks chanted a blessing.



Phra Buddha Metta from inside the Maha Bodhi Temple Vihara - and my new Lapis Buddha image

Day 45 - The Last full day.

Late pm...

Today's meditation was perhaps the most surreal of any day of practice here. For a sense of perspective, that's about a year's worth of days. I experienced an easy calm with a complete lack of tension. Going through the motions and simply coasting along. In a way, if I was

expecting some kind of grand fireworks and explosions, it could be seen as a big letdown. But I wasn't expecting this. There have been many wonderful high points along the entire journey, but none of them could have been anticipated in terms of which precise hour they would occur.

Walking back to the Temple and Tree after our midday rest, I noticed that Bodhgaya was hotter and dustier now. Most of the stalls along the side of the road are gone. It was strange that outwardly things were becoming more bleak and harsh, while inwardly I was feeling such ease. On this afternoon a kind of a small little miracle did actually occur though.

After working so hard at separating mindfulness of sounds from the sounds themselves for a month and half now, with so many consistently very loud pujas being chanted all around, today's pujas were mysteriously, almost ethereally quiet. A pleasant sounding Vietnamese puja in the distance with the volume on the amplifier very low went on modestly for hours. And most strikingly, two fairly large simultaneous Sri Lankan pujas under our side of the Bodhi Tree were both recited with no amplification at all! That was the first time I'd seen such a thing. It was so nice... just like the good old days! It did seem that something external was controlling the volume more sensibly today. Both Ajahn Pavaro and Nyaniko noticed and commented as well. With the extra heat, many large yellow Bodhi leaves also fell around us, like a rain of gold. This was certainly nice too.

After years of counting down the numbers in a strange reverse tally, I would count down how many hours were left, and work out what this meant in terms of percentage. 1,500 = Half way already! 50% to go. 2,000 = Two thirds! 33% to go etc. Going to the bathroom before the final one and a half hour session, coming out of the bathroom I had the strangest thought, "Only one half of one tenth of a percent to go! (1 twentieth of a percent.) It sure felt good to have this bizarre thought though. My goodness that is really close!

We set up a special shrine for the occasion of the final puja and sitting. We put a large brass Buddha statue on a higher ledge of the Chedi above us, (destined for Jintana's new Bangkok home) and draped him in long celebratory orange marigold garlands. We also spread a large hand-woven Kashmir 'silk on cotton' carpet to sit on. Then finally we sprayed copious amounts of my favorite special blend of Rose, Rose Geranium, and Lavender essential oil fragrance, to set the scene. I didn't mind being a little flamboyant for this once in a lifetime occasion.

Once again during our puja we were not interrupted, or overwhelmed by anyone else's puja. Not even the one that is always piped over the loudspeakers. That was actually a little miraculous. During the final sit I was energetic and determined that this sit was actually for everyone else. Bringing to mind all of the people who I knew were sitting at that very same time, at least 100, visualizing their faces, seeing them smiling, spreading loving-kindness, and sharing merits. I also made repeated requests from the Sacred Holy Site itself for supporting their growth in the practice.

"May the Boundless radiance and Blessings of the Vajra Asana... bless all of these people's practice. May they grow steadily in Dhamma - Realizing Great Peace!"

May the Merit and Power of the very Enlightenment of Kakusandha Buddha, Konagammana Buddha, Kassapa Buddha, and Gotama Buddha in this most Sacred Place - shine into the minds of all of these people! And guide and protect them always!"

"May the retinue of Devas, tens of thousands of them, who also visit this place, Increase the power and efficacy of these Dedications and Blessings, and deliver them directly into these people's hearts and minds!"

I also made these dedications for all beings kammically connected to me, whether they were meditating then or not.

This was a good way to end as it's not just about me. It's about all of us realizing not-self, and experiencing enduring and unshakable peace as a consequence. May we all be supported in doing so! For the final five minutes I then made a few promises and commitments to the Buddhas and the Holy Site regarding my own practice. Knowing this was a very potent time to do so.

At the end of the hour, as I dedicated the merit of this to all beings, and lifted the hat off my head, a very strange thing occurred. Ajahns Pavaro, Nyaniko, and Visalo all placed bright orange garlands over my head! When I swiveled around, the laypeople also had garlands ready to adorn. They placed them in my lap. I looked like some Big Baba Swamiji Guru!

It was a little embarrassing, but it was ok just for this one occasion, to revel in the glory for a while. Passersby were very interested in the scene! Especially the stricter monks who know that bhikkhus shouldn't do this! But I wanted to share the joy, as all of the other monks had been so diligent too. So taking garlands off my shoulders and lap I draped them over the other monk's heads as well. And now we were a quorum of Swamiji bhikkhus! We shook hands congratulating each other, and then inevitably it was photo time. I hope those photos don't get out and about too much, as one needs to understand the context!

And so that was the 3,000th hour. Wishing you all well!

From my side I did also have the thought...

'That was a very difficult thing to do! And now it is done. When I think of this at the time of death, I will be very pleased to have done this!'





After our final chanting session and having completed our vows

Chapter Twenty Two - Taking Leave of the Bodhi Mandala

Day 46 – (3,000 hours Practice Puja completed!)

I am writing this on the plane, as we've a five hour flight to Bangkok via Varanasi, Lord Shiva's city of eternal light, so it is said. Having been there several times, I must say that it's a good thing that cows are also considered Holy as well, otherwise all of the cow poo might lead to cognitive dissonance! But I digress... I want to capture my thoughts, feelings and impressions about these last days in Bodhgaya while they're still fresh. Understanding that my 'other life' will absorb attention in different ways very soon too, I'd better commit pen to paper now, tapping away on a tablet as it were.

I never imagined that I could learn how to use a touch pad on a mini tablet so adeptly, and the possibilities this would open up. Writing in the late evening, early mornings, and before and after midday naps for a month, these recollections can now actually fill a book! And now here we are 9,000 metres in the air, somewhere above Bihar state, northern India, and I'm writing the closing chapter! But enough of these wistful musings today was quite a day, offering the usual richness of experience and feeling, so there is a lot to share.

Waking up at 4:30am choking! I couldn't breathe, seriously! I made my way to the bathroom and started coughing up thick, sticky mucus, all the while wheezing for breath in-between coughs, and spitting out phlegm. It was strange, sticky mucus that required serious hacking to expel, breathing had been transformed into rather desperate wheezy inhalations through extraordinarily viscous slime. I did this for about five minutes before breathing was normal

again, and then took some cough mixture. The curious thing is that I do not have a cold! What a way to wake up! My tongue was dry and cracked no doubt from breathing through my mouth while asleep. So that's how the day began.

It's as though the body knows that it has gotten through something difficult, and can now start functioning in a different mode. The clean up and recovery begins! I think that the body produces more mucus while in this very dusty environment, in order to wrap up some of that 'particulate matter' hovering in the air constantly. Aside from dust, incense smoke, smoke from wood fires and cooking with cow dung, I prefer not to think too much about what some of those other particulates might be! The Body knows it's not good though! With mild lactose intolerance, the ghee in the curries was no doubt another factor as well.

Looking again at my clock, I realized I could actually go back to sleep! Ahhhhh. Nearly 7 weeks now with only 1 sleep in, and not luxuriating in a relaxed state, but because of food poisoning! Today there is an hour and a half before I need to start packing, then breakfast is being offered by Gautam at 7:00am in my room. I quickly fell back to sleep. So nice!

We ate breakfast together, three of the other four monks, and I (Ajahn Visalo, diligent to the last minute is already at the Temple.) It was incredible to sit on a fairly soft mattress and enjoy a quiet, clean environment, and to be able to take our time. Simple pleasures. Gautam's face looks a little sad however, as soon our entire group will be leaving. He has had a role, a community, has contributed to something noble and received a lot of warmth, love, and gifts from many in the process, for nearly 7 weeks now. But in just a few hours today, we will all get on a plane and leave him behind once again. Living in Bihar in the hot season, with very few tourists is tough. It's a bitter time. With unrelenting, baking heat, and more competition among the other hawkers and guides, they can begin to snarl at each other in a manner similar to the dogs in the Temple. First fights do actually also break out at times.

We try to soften the blow of our departure by showering him with gifts, both for himself, and his family, sorting out things that we don't need to take back. Our lay supporter, Aye, gave an electric kettle, and a large thermos. I gave a blanket, some soap, and several small bottles of sweet basil oil for his mother to offer as a puja to her Hindu gods. We also coordinated a fund to help his youngest brother Anand, to go to a local private school, whose standards are not great, but which are better than the local government school. And soon there will be 'the new general store' enterprise that he'll have to help manage, at least for a few months. So at least there are new developments that are promising. Last year Gautam refused to go to the airport because he did not want us to see him cry. Now he is confident that he can hold his tears until we're gone.

Some of my old and over-protective students had admonished me initially, for being warm with him, and allowing my students to be generous, but we all see good results now. It is better to love and lose than not to love at all. He has learned to be more loving towards his own family, which was so shattered when he was younger. Now, he helps hold it together and it is a warmer, more functional, more hopeful family at long last. It is better to be attached to goodness and grieve when separated, than to become mean and numb, and simply survive. Tears of separation can be the very moisture that stop a field from becoming completely parched and barren. Knowing that people 'out there' somewhere, love you, is better than knowing no love. At least that's my opinion.



Gautam's younger brother Anand

But for the monk's today the mood is light, having finally completed our marathon, there is no requirement to meditate. Although exhausted, our mood is one of relief, and there is also a little bit of happiness. We will go to the Temple and Bodhi Tree to offer flowers and ask forgiveness, and also reaffirm some future goals and vows in front of the resident ancient Buddha statue, Phra Buddha Metta.

So at 8:45am we were met eagerly by Roshan, one of my favorite flower sellers, 200 metres from the entrance to the Temple. I once made an order of 50 garlands with Roshan six years ago when he was just six years old. Then every single morning after that, when I stepped out of the Mahayana Hotel at 5:00am, where we were staying that time, Roshan was there, greeting us eagerly and determinedly "Hello sir, flowers... order... garlands... you order?" No matter how many times I told him our flower budget was spent, he still came by every morning! Now I keep his enthusiasm at arm's length by promising... "Okay, last day... order, 20 garlands." And so there he is, 12 years old now, and today he is all smiles. We ordered 20 from Sunny, and 10 from Rahula as well, but they had to go somewhere, possibly to school. So Roshan has 50 freshly strung garlands in bulging rice sacks! They are a combination of daisies, marigolds, and roses, colorful and cheerful. Roshan and Gautam carry them to the Temple for us.

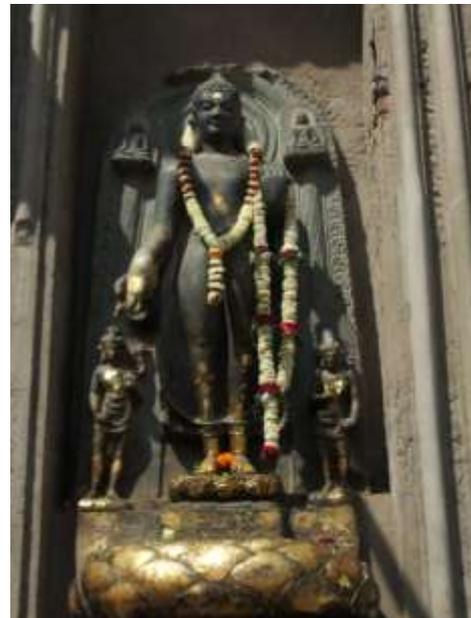
Entering the Bodhi mandala in order to take leave...

This day is unlike all of the others, as we are 'leaving the mandala' as it were, rather than entering it to practice meditation and develop our minds. We must ask forgiveness sincerely, and then request the Blessings of the mandala to go with us in the future, wherever we are. With the practice of pilgrimage, or when practicing in Holy Sites, auspicious and gracious beginnings and endings are considered to be very important.

So we, the four monks, each placed garlands at the base of an Ashokan pillar at the very bottom of the entrance stairs. (King Ashoka had these erected 2,300 years ago) But this is just the first of many places we will make our devotional offerings this morning. As we enter, then leave the 'Bodhi Mandala' in more of a ceremonial and devotional manner. It is lovely to take the time to do this properly, being now relieved of our formal practice regimen. Offering

the garlands at the pillar is making an offering at the 'outer ring' of the mandala as it were. Having two 'temple attendants' in the form of Gautam and Roshan is very helpful, as they already have the garlands lined up in a row along their right forearms, the sack of extra garlands is held in their left hands.

After the Asokan pillar, we offer garlands to two very beautiful ancient standing Buddha images that flank the entrance to the Vihara contained inside the actual Chedi. The entrance to the Vihara being on the Eastern side. Here we are offering to the intermediate ring of the mandala and these standing Buddha images receive our supplication. Carved in the 'mauryan' era more than 1,500 years ago, the images have received the offerings of the faithful for more than a millennia. They are very graceful and beautiful images, capturing serenity, aloofness, yet also kindness, power, and grace. Climbing up on a little ledge in the wall, and held firmly in place by the other monks, Gautam then passes me some garlands to drape over the elegantly extended stone hands. The contrast of soft colorful flowers against black ancient stone is stunning.



Ancient images which flank the entrance to the main shrine room of the Maha Bodhi Temple

Entering the innermost zone of the Bodhi mandala and paying respects...

After this we enter the vihara to make some initial offerings to the resident central image. "Phra Buddha Metta." This image, as well as the Bodhi Tree, Vajra Asana, and Chedi Spire are considered to be the very centre of the mandala. There is a little hook sticking out on two pillars either side of the image. We place a garland on each, and several in front, then bow on the thick flagstone floor. We understand this image to be a physical representation of Shakyamuni Buddha. Since our practice was also an offering to him, at this point we inform the Buddha that we did successfully complete our vows, and that today we will be leaving. We will return to this inner shrine room again before our final departure from the compound, to pay respects one last time, and make some special pledges, but first we will ask forgiveness.

After exiting the Vihara we move in a clockwise direction around the Chedi, heading to the site of the Bodhi Tree and the Seat of Enlightenment. The Buddha Metta image faces east,

and greets pilgrims as they descend the stairs and walk towards the Chedi. The Bodhi Tree and Vajra Asana are on the western side of the Chedi. We walk keeping the Chedi on our right hand side until we come to the Bodhi Tree. We each then place several garlands on the carved sandstone fence immediately around the sacred Tree, one for the Seat of Enlightenment, one for the Bodhi Tree, and one for the Mahabodhi Chedi/Temple itself. After this we bow deeply on the marble floor facing east, directly under the Tree. The Vajra Asana is just a few meters behind, between the Tree and the Chedi, so while bowing in this way, we are actually bowing to all of the sacred objects.

It is difficult to describe how moved, joyful, and grateful we feel with our heads bowed and pressed against the cool marble floor. On one level, these 'most sacred' objects in the universe are actually awesome and intimidating when just meters from one's head, but on another level we feel it such an honour to place our heads there. That gratitude and a sense of having great good fortune is also present in the mind. When we consider what occurred here, and the gifts it has brought to our lives, it is difficult to hold back the tears of gratitude.

Asking for Forgiveness...

We must ask for forgiveness now, because although we have tried to be very respectful to this sacred place, in spending so many days, inevitably we have thought and said some unskillful things. The Dalai Lama has said that merits made here are 7 times more potent than elsewhere. Unfortunately bad kamma is 7 times more harmful as well! Acknowledging faults truthfully and humbly can reduce the bad kamma.

I led a small ceremony and the other monks repeated the words after me. With hands in respectful gestures and heads bowed low, "We offer our sincere and deep respects... to the Vajra Asana... to the Bodhi Tree... to the Mahabodhi Chedi... and the Sacred Relics it contains. As well as to the very Liberation and Enlightenment of Kakusandha Buddha, Konagammana Buddha, Kassapa Buddha, Gotama Buddha... that occurred in this place. And to the future Enlightenment of Mettaya Buddha which will occur here as well, at this the Most Holy and Sacred place in this Universe."

Although the Buddhas are Liberated and Enlightened, and not present in a gross form for us to see on this occasion we address them as though they are still here. We understand that the Blessings of the Buddhas are still very much present in this certified Holy Site which is precisely why Lord Buddha said it is very beneficial to pay respects here. We ask forgiveness not so much in order to be forgiven by the Buddhas, but rather to acknowledge our faults truthfully, in a manner that reduces any kammic obstruction which we may have incurred.

"We also humbly ask for forgiveness. For any act of body, speech, or mind that has occurred in this Holy place, which was unwholesome or inappropriate. Please understand that as we are still in training, having minds still affected by greed, hatred, and delusion, some mistakes are inevitable. Please kindly accept our sincere offering of formal meditation practice, and may the power of the merits produced, completely override any negative actions."

Request for Blessings...

"May the powers of the Buddhas bless and protect us wherever we are. May we never be separated from the Teachings of Buddhas, and may we grow steadily on this Path, never slipping backwards!"

Finally we dedicated merits. We did this quietly and individually. But I said something like this, "I dedicate the merits of my practice here to my mother, father, and teachers... all who have supported me in my Bhikkhu life, and who have supported or are supporting my monastery, and to all who consider me as one of their teachers. May we all continue to grow in Dhamma together! Furthermore, I dedicate merits to all beings kammically connected through either wholesome, or unwholesome deeds. May they receive these merits and rejoice! Lastly I dedicate merits to All Beings Everywhere may they all grow in the Buddha-Dhamma and realize complete freedom from suffering and unshakeable peace! May the Buddha-sassana in this world, in this age, endure for a long, long time to come!"

Once we had done our ceremony, we rose from our knees and continued walking in a clockwise direction. Here we met our lay students and friends. They were waiting to ask forgiveness of us in the place where we'd been sitting all of these past days. They offered very beautiful, and especially fragrant flower garlands comprised solely of wild roses, for this the special occasion of the last day. (Around 180 roses per garland) The exchange was similar to the ceremony we held with khun Jintana's relatives and staff the other day. Our lay followers had all behaved impeccably, taken excellent care of their teachers, as well as practiced very hard. So this ceremony was full of mutual respect and appreciation, and once again tears were hard to hold back. I feel so proud of them! And happy for them too! After the ceremony, I encouraged them to ask forgiveness of all of the sacred objects as well.

Surendra, our regular flower seller had actually sent along an extra rose garland as his special gift to me. And so now I had some especially lovely flower offerings to re-gift to Phra Buddha Metta when we took our final leave.

Taking leave of the Buddha...

Once again we continued in a clockwise direction until we had come full circle, and reentered the vihara to take leave of Lord Buddha one last time. We unhooked our previously offered garlands and replaced them with the finer and more fragrant roses. After offering the Rose garlands we bowed our heads on the now wet, recently mopped floor. The wetness was uncomfortable, but at least the smell was nice. We each then made some promises and articulated our personal aspirations, then asked for the Blessings and Protection of the Buddha to be with us in this and all lives - until enlightenment. Our hearts felt torn as we left the vihara walking backwards. It is hard to say how it is possible, but many people feel the presence of the Buddha in this vihara, Power, Purity, Wisdom, and Compassion. Emptiness that can speak.

When leaving the site of the Maha Bodhi Chedi, we decided to chant some short suttas under an entrance archway around 20 meters in front. Fortunately the crowds were small today, as pilgrims had to walk between us on their way in and out of the temple. Once again, we were offering respects at an intermediate ring while exiting the mandala. Looking at the 54 meter tall gold spired Chedi built in honor of the Buddha, and chanting words that he spoke while teaching over 2,500 years ago was very poignant. After our final puja, we walked slowly around the outer circumambulation ring, which is around 500 metres long. Then after exiting the outer gate, we bowed on the ground facing the Chedi one last time. I gazed at the image of the Chedi intently, being determined to recollect it in my mind in the future. Sometimes when I need to be strong, I actually visualize myself as the Chedi!

Being a last minute packer, I had to get back to the guesthouse quickly. Our lay students and Mae Chee were already packed however, so stayed for one final meditation.



Served a feast by the Muslim brotherhood.

Lunch was offered by three of Mumtaz' sons, and two of his nephews on the fifth floor of Mumtaz' Guesthouse. It was a veritable feast, and had clearly been cooked with much love and respect. This is where the good womenfolk at home had also definitely been involved, although we did not meet them. Shahlal had cooked one curry, and one desert himself though. They served us, every separate dish, with their own hands. Vegetable and Paneer curry, mushroom masala curry, spinach and paneer curry, chapati, fried rice with saffron and peas, fried fish, chicken curry, and finally creamy sweet-milk rice, pomegranate, papaya, and mandarin oranges for dessert. All five monks, mae chee Aimy, and our four remaining students agreed that it was the best meal of the entire stay. Mumtaz, the patriarch of the family, had also given specific and detailed instructions regarding the menu.

It was interesting, wonderful in fact, to see these Muslim brothers outside of their merchant roles. Clearly they really enjoyed the opportunity to show their care and appreciation, and the mood was genuinely warm and loving. The harshness of the weather in Bodhgaya is a big challenge for the locals, because basically they only have 6 months to make a living from the religious pilgrims. Very few people come in the hot or wet season. So the aggressiveness behind some of the hard selling, and the apparent over-pricing, is actually a matter of life and death for some.

Saying Goodbye

We are over the Bay of Bengal now, halfway through our flight home. India is receding

quickly and Thailand looms large ahead. Recollecting leaving the Bodhi Tree and Mahabodhi Temple earlier today, I am feeling a by now familiar rich and complex emotional state. Exhausted yet inspired, fed up, yet still in love, a different kind of a fabulous concoction in a way that perhaps only the kitchen of Bodhgaya could produce, for all the variety of nuance in flavor and feeling.

Monks shouldn't really talk in sexual terms, but in terms of trying to describe what this ongoing relationship with intensive practice in Bodhgaya has been like it has definitely been an ongoing and truly passionate affair. It just so happens that I am passionate about spiritual practice! The payoffs when meditation goes well here are truly wonderful, and yet it can be and often is stormy when things aren't going so well. So, it has been a stormy and passionate affair! I can't give Bodhgaya a gender, but I can say that I have loved and hated it equally at times. Overall though, my love for this place and what it represents within the ocean of samsara, is much more than the simple words 'whole-hearted' can describe.

I suspect that the causes for this intense love may lay even deeper than just this one life as well. Once when I was visiting a gifted and elderly monk in Chiang Rai province in Northern Thailand, I asked him why I felt so happy and comfortable in that area. There was a lovely sense of warm familiarity. Luang Por Jhe answered that I had come through the area while traveling overland to India in a past life, moving through the Mekhong river basin. Later, when I asked Ajahn Anan if I had walked to India from Thailand, he answered matter of factly, "No, you rode an elephant!" Why would one travel overland all the way from Thailand to India? If you felt great gratitude to the Buddha, you might well wish to go to Bodhgaya.

Standing on the top of the steps that descend down into the Mahabodhi Chedi compound and looking back upon it today, having finally completed 3,000 hours of meditation, (and many hundreds of hours of chanting and bowing, offering of flowers etc.) And then realizing that leaving this time would be different from the other times somehow, it is hard to describe how I felt, and still feel.

I have always found leaving this place difficult, and bittersweet. Often exhausted and fed up on one level, yet feeling content through having practiced very hard. A large part of oneself definitely wants to go home, yet another part is torn. The peace one can feel when meditation is good here, is experienced as being like a different kind of home. You can touch your True Home here where all suffering, frustration, and sense of limitation is suspended or transcended for a time. The gratitude and love one feels towards the Buddhas afterwards is also of a quality that is beyond the normal scope of human emotion. Many people shed happy tears here, sitting for entire meditation sessions with tears rolling down their cheeks and dripping onto their clothes. True peace is indescribably beautiful, and true gratitude is deeply moving beyond words.

The peace we can experience in moments through meditation, or through Insight experiences in the beginning and middle stages of our practice gives us a glimpse of deeper truth, deeper reality, our true potential, and indeed the actual nature of the mind. As our practice progresses these experiences will occur for longer durations. This will weaken at first, and then finally begin to uproot the negative qualities of ignorance and delusion from the mind. As practice deepens further over several lifetimes, the power of Insight will completely eradicate ignorance and delusion. A purified and liberated mind is what remains, experiencing

unshakable peace, and unceasing bliss. I personally know several practitioners, great monks, who have accomplished this.

When we have some experience of deep peace, or of letting go of suffering, and glimpse a spacious, unconfused, un-contracted, deeper reality we can imagine what it must be like to be a fully Enlightened Buddha, or totally liberated Arahant. Where unshakable peace is the constant reality, and where greed and hatred cannot even touch such purity.

While experiencing these things to some degree is incredibly important for our understanding, commitment, faith, and confidence in the Path of practice it can at the same time be quite painful to witness a more normal mind, not yet purified, return after experiencing such peace. But this is a process of familiarization. There are necessarily many ups and downs. The return of some suffering impels us to practice harder, in order to go completely beyond it. We must aim for an upward trajectory over a long period of time, feeling confident, and taking heart that these small insights have laid the powerful causes for future deeper ones.

In my experience, the quality of peace I can touch in meditation in Bodhgaya has been deeper than elsewhere. It's as though the merit of the Buddhas and the vibration or resonance of Liberation gives one a helping hand in the practice here. Lifting things higher or thrusting down deeper than might normally be within reach. When you experience this, you feel such love and gratitude to the Buddha, and to this special place. This makes it painful to leave.

Having spent around one year in Bodhgaya in total now, on an average day I have descended these ancient stone steps, worn smooth by the bare feet of faithful pilgrims, around 4 times per day. That means I have felt those steps under my feet, then looked up to see the Mahabodhi Chedi rise towards the sky, and raised my hands in anjali around 1,500 times! Similarly with the Buddha Metta statue, except that I have raised my hands in respectful salutation every time I came into, or have left the innermost zone of the Temple. Nearly 3,000 times! You may think me mad when I tell you this, but this statue spoke to me at least 10 times. Let's just say that's how it seemed.

They were always pertinent and useful words in any case. Suffice to say, this place is deep under my skin, and emblazoned indelibly in my mind.

In leaving I tell myself, this place is also just another step along a path. It is an encouragement and source of merit along the way. The true journey is in one's heart and mind. If I keep practicing sincerely, I will eventually experience deeper peace and ease than I have felt even here. Wherever I am when the Path Factors truly come together in the mind, will be the place where enlightenment occurs. Lord Buddha states, those who see the Dhamma see the Buddha, and we see the Buddha wherever it is that we are practicing correctly.

When people occasionally asked Luang Por Chah whether he had been to Holy Sites in India (he hadn't) he would answer, "You think the Buddha can't be born in Thailand huh? You think the Buddha can't realize the Dhamma in Thailand huh?" As someone who had realized Dhamma fully in his mind, while living in Thailand, it is a pertinent question.

So I have just completed a difficult yet rewarding period of practice in the place where all the Buddhas in our world become Enlightened. As difficult as it was before, now comes the even more difficult task of practicing more each day, wherever it is that I find myself. May the

thousands of prayers that I made in order to be able to do so be 100% effective! And may I share the benefits of my practice with as many beings as possible.

Wishing you success on your own journey as well. May you never lose sight of your deeper nature and ultimate potential. If you fall down, may you quickly rise again. If you make mistakes, may you remedy these with skillful actions. May you always be inspired, and determined to simply take the next step – leading eventually to Heaven and Beyond.

With Loving-Kindness

Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu