

# *3000 hours* - MEDITATING AT THE SEAT OF ENLIGHTENMENT

(Intensive Meditation Retreats in Bodhgaya – Journal Entries)

## **Foreword**

Anandagiri Forest Monastery, Petchabun Province, Thailand – 7/4/2018

Dear reader, as you will discover in the following pages, I have spent many periods doing intensive meditation retreats in Bodhgaya, the site of Lord Buddha's Enlightenment in India. During the most recent of these, as well as meditating around ten hours per day for a month and a half, I also started writing a semi-autobiographical journal. These are what comprise this book. By semi-autobiographical I mean that what I wrote was partly about my own spiritual practice, meditation commitments, and personal process. It was also partly about the others I was sharing the experience with, and then also partly about Bodhgaya itself, an intensely fascinating place.

This might sound like a strange thing to say, but in a way with this book, I am sharing several of my greatest loves, my love of meditation and the spiritual life, my love and gratitude for The Buddha and his transformative Teachings, and my love for the physical place of Lord Buddha's Enlightenment. Bodhgaya is a Holy Site sacred to Buddhists from all around the world, situated in Bihar state, Northeast India. It is rich with symbolic, historical, and spiritual meaning. It is also rich in spiritual energy, something of great interest to sincere meditators, because energy is something which can be absorbed, refined, and then utilized in the process of mental cultivation. Perhaps especially for those with a daily meditation discipline and who possess deep faith.

So why go to Bodhgaya in the first place? Why meditate there you might ask. In Bodhgaya, where the 'Vajra Asana' or Diamond Throne Seat of Enlightenment is situated, it seems that when the Bodhisattva finally realized the ultimate goal of Liberation from all suffering, after many thousands of aeons of arduous striving. Some of the purity, unshakeable peace and unceasing bliss that his mind experienced as 'The Buddha,' also infused the very earth element in this place.

I recognize on one level that this may sound preposterous, that something of 'mind' could stick to something of 'earth' for thousands of years. Considering for a moment that the Buddha's mind was no ordinary mind, having been developed to the farthest extent that is possible, then completely purified of all negative qualities as well. We can be open to the possibility that ordinary standards and assumptions are no longer an accurate gauge. After having had thousands of occasions to check this perception for myself, I can truthfully and sincerely testify that this does indeed seem to be the case. Herein lies the reason for my deep appreciation of this most Holy of Holy Sites, and perhaps it is one reason why Lord Buddha encouraged all of his followers to make a pilgrimage here if they are able.

So how does this physical place infused with the purified minds of several Buddhas, for three previous Buddhas were also Enlightened here we are told, effect the faithful devotees? Most pilgrims feel great joy and gratitude as soon as they arrive here, and can feel a powerful energy radiating from The Vajra Asana and Bodhi Tree even before meditating. Once meditating other interesting effects can often be observed. People with very busy minds sometimes find that their thoughts simply settle down much more quickly. Loud noise is not as disturbing as it would normally be, and it seems easier to be detached from, or at peace with the physical pain that can arise while sitting in meditation. These effects are not guaranteed and do not always occur, but certainly occur frequently in the minds of many meditators. This helps practitioners to experience their minds with less pain and hindrances, and greater levels of tranquility, rapture and peace, which is naturally very encouraging.

Countless groups of pilgrims visit from many different countries. They are clean, well fed, and radiant with deep faith for the most part, and wealthy enough to travel. Yet at the same time this sacred site is also situated in what is currently one of the poorest regions in the world. That being so, the dichotomy of stark contrasts that one witnesses here is often truly stunning. Great joy and faith consistently manifests right alongside total despair. Abundance and well-being walks side by side with abject poverty. The traditional bright white clothes of the lay devotees literally brush up against the unwashed thread-bare, dirt-colored rags of the beggars. Because of this, Bodhgaya is a place that can be bizarre, bittersweet, brutal and beautiful all at the same time.

For the practicing Buddhists who cherish truthfulness and virtue, if they spend more than a day or two here, they must learn how to engage with people who lie, and steal, and cheat. For that is how they earn their living. There are honest people too, who shine like diamonds in a pile of dung for their rarity. (No introduction to Bodhgaya could go without mentioning excrement – although it is much better now than it was several years ago!) There are many honest people away from the tourist sites I am told. It is common for pilgrims to feel extremely elated one moment, and then thoroughly disturbed in the next. It is a great place for developing wisdom if you are not averse to a robust creative challenge, but certainly not for the faint hearted. Modern day Bodhgaya is a place easily worthy of a book in and of itself.

Even so, the writing of this book literally took me totally by surprise, because normally, simply maintaining the required degree of focus for the meditation retreat daily schedule is already very tiring. To try and write a book at the same time would really seem quite impractical. One of the effects of a lot of meditation however, can be the arising of inspiration, extra mental clarity and energy, so on one level perhaps it is not so strange. Clearly the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment is a high energy place as well. What was a little strange though, was the way the thoughts, feelings and ideas flowed so easily, given that I had been diligently pacifying thoughts for most of the day. I was certainly not sitting around thinking about writing a book!

Back at the monastery now, having just recently opened up this document on my laptop to do some editing, I can see that it is already 75 pages long! So indeed, a short book is what these journal entries did seem to become. I also made notes and suggestions throughout the text

while writing in India, as promptings for making interesting or relevant additions in the future. So by the time you read this, no doubt things will have expanded further.

Looking back, it was around mid-day on day 11 of the 45 day retreat, when I found that I simply felt like writing. So I picked up my mini-tablet, pressed the 'notes' app icon, and started eagerly tapping away. Whole paragraphs seemed to flow out already fully formed one after another, so that after just one and a half hours, there was already 4 pages of text! It continued to surprise me that on many subsequent evenings, there were more and more words queued up and ready to fly. Personally, I had never experienced this sense of 'flow' to such a pronounced degree before. By curious synchronicity it would seem, a period of frequent late night wedding parties, notoriously loud in India, where sleep was simply not possible until midnight, made extra time available for this project by default.

Also a little curious is the fact that most of what I wrote was written in the lying down posture! (After meditating upright for ten hours the body was desirous of rest.) Previously I had no idea that I could tap away at a touch pad with such dexterity. Nor that I could be so diligent while lying down! I'm actually a little surprised that I did not give myself a repetitive strain injury! Although I did get some cramps and locked joints a few times! Interestingly though, the alert yet relaxed posture seemed to lend itself nicely to the intimate tone of sharing that appears in the text like telling stories and confiding to a very close and trusted friend. So on this most recent and final in a series of intensive meditation retreats, it turned out that by day and early evening I was an upright, diligently meditating yogi, striving to realize profound emptiness, and by night I was a horizontal yet prolific writer, with a mind completely full of words! What can I say? Life is strange and people are strange. That's simply the way things are.

In hindsight, I think that because this meditation retreat was the final one in a long series that stretched a time span of more than a decade, there was a natural sense of reviewing going on. These retreats are very intensive, and I had done them at least ten times, so there was a lot to review. I was processing what it was really all about, and considering how to integrate my understanding into my normal life back home.

Recognizing the universality of 'spiritual striving,' at some point I clearly decided to share these thoughts with others. Perhaps this is simply the kamma or character tendency of someone who makes efforts to teach people? This was completely spontaneous though. In a way I am thinking out loud all of the things that I have learned and am still applying myself. When I read through some of the entries, I can observe a directness and immediacy in these words which is quite compelling at times. One of the advantages of doing something unplanned and 'off the cuff' as it were, is that it can capture something a little magical, that could probably not be achieved in a slower, more drawn out process. Because of this I have aimed to keep the journal entries as they were originally composed, with as little editing as possible. Occasionally when a concept or comment would seem to benefit from further explanation, I may insert an additional paragraph. Where I have added something significant later, this will be clearly stated.

I realized that I would most likely not be coming back to Bodhgaya in order to do such a long retreat again. My life as an abbot and teacher has gotten busier, and my body is getting older. On a personal level, perhaps I was also wanting something to be able to refer back to when recollecting the experiences in future as these retreats in India have been a large and important part of my monk's life. For not only have I sat meditation *under the Bodhi tree* for 3000 hours, I calculated that I have walked down the ancient stone stairs into the temple compound approximately 1500 times, and then naturally walked back up them as many times as well. Always with a sense of awe... and of coming home. Another way to consider it is that if all of these periods of practice in Bodhgaya were put together, they would actually span a period of an entire year and a half. Bodhgaya has literally been one of the places I've lived this lifetime.

At a certain point while composing the words, I recognized that the semi *diary*, semi *travel journal*, and semi *tale of epic saga* form that the writing was taking, might indeed prove to be a very interesting teaching modality. There was the sense of a Noble Mission, and those who had undertaken it. There was the surreally strange, yet fascinating place and there was a rich cast of major and minor characters, which prove the old adage that sometimes fact is stranger than fiction!

So the Journal entries took the format of a kind of sharing with close friends, who in this case would be fellow Buddhist meditators. In fact, I did originally send out each journal entry upon its completion to an email group list of close students and friends, as something of an update as we went along. The last two chapters were written on the 5 hour flight back to Thailand, and in the few days we spent in a quasi-bardo state in Bangkok recuperating. I knew that I had to capture the thoughts and feelings before they dissipated, because there is no way you can capture the energy and feeling of Bodhgaya in hindsight from the serenity of a Forest Monastery! Especially when thoroughly exhausted. No doubt other duties would be pressing once I got home as well.

Several of my students asked me to compile these journal entries and present them as a book, as they had found them educational, inspiring and touching. They felt that others may feel similarly. And so here it is! May some of these words prove to be interesting and encouraging to you, wherever it is that you find yourself now. May you succeed in all of your spiritual endeavors, attaining both your short and long-term goals.

With Loving-Kindness,

Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu



## **Chapter One - Sitting at the Seat of Enlightenment (18/2/2018)**

Day 11 out of 45... *(100 hours of 400 / 2700 hours of 3000)*

1 pm...

In a few hours I will complete the first 100 hours of formal sitting meditation of an intensive meditation retreat, where I am aiming to complete 400 hours of meditation in 45 days - under the large sacred Bodhi Tree at the site of Lord Buddha's Enlightenment, Bodhgaya, Bihar, India. It is a curious place to be doing a meditation retreat given that it is so crowded and noisy... and yet, here we are (again). I am fortunate to have Ajahn Nyaniko and Mae Chee Aimy as my companions throughout, as well as a few close students and friends, who are spending periods practicing along with us here as their schedules permit. Several more monks will also join us in a couple of weeks. Being the 11th full day since our arrival, despite very cold mornings, stiff competition for sitting spaces, a day and a half 'knocked out' by food poisoning, as well as two drizzling rainy days, I am basically still on target to meet my

goal. This could change however, as there are always interesting challenges here.

Although I have kept track of the number of hours I've sat in meditation here in Bodhgaya over the years, I've actually lost track of how many times I have been here! Some stays have been short ones, as part of a longer pilgrimage covering many ancient Buddhist sites. Other occasions were shorter periods tacked on either before, or after leading, or attending a pilgrimage. But most of the stays have been specific retreats of around five to seven weeks. This particular meditation retreat is the final in a series that I have had to complete in order to fulfill a personal meditation goal. That is, to sit 3000 hours of formal meditation within the vicinity of the Bodhi Tree and Mahabodhi Temple, as an offering to the Three Jewels (Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha), and as an offering to the Buddha's of the past, present and future.

Someone like me doesn't just decide to sit 3000 hours under the Bodhi Tree in India. It sounds way too ambitious and bold. The hardships, both imagined and real seem way too daunting. Such a fantastic goal crept up on me somehow, when I realized in a haphazard kind of way, that I might just be able to accomplish it. It actually took many years of trying sincerely, and slowly stretching my ability, to develop the capacity to sit for ten hours per day with consistency. It was only possible because my love and gratitude for the Buddha and his teachings is even greater than my significant capacity to complain. Sitting for around 4-5 hours per day, with other activities in between (alms round, walking meditation, study, chanting etc.) is the basis of my monk's life in Thailand, but doubling this and doing it for more than a month without a break is a different league of practice.

As the years have rolled on, the trips have blended into one another in memory and have become timeless somehow. I reckon this is approximately the 15th visit however, and I have calculated that if you joined all of my retreats and pilgrimages together, after this current one is completed, I will have spent a year and a half living and meditating in Bodhgaya alone. (And another 6 months or so in other Buddhist sites of India.)

I am now aged 45, having been a Buddhist monk for 22 years and having lived mostly in Thailand. Looking back, even I am actually quite surprised by just how much time I've been able to spend living and practicing here - in this most Holy site for Buddhists. Around 15 years ago, this special place captivated my heart and mind in several compelling ways. I realized quickly that it was a very potent place to practice, and subsequently rose to the occasion to do so as often as I could. It is a very intense place, which inspires an intensity of practice in me like no other place can. As my various practices have deepened here through repeated visits and thorough immersion many close students and friends have also taken opportunities to practice and learn. They have supported my physical needs, and I have supported them by determined example. We have been growing like saplings under the big tree.

Bodhgaya is both a wonderful and terrible place, Inspiring, and unnerving, Sacred and sad. On the way to and from the Temple, as one walks past crumpled old beggar ladies and kids crippled from polio, looking down you see rags, dirt and misery, looking up you see a pure gold plated multi-tiered spire reflecting brilliantly in the sun. Skinny, dull eyed, hungry

looking children sell garlands of flowers intoxicatingly rich and exuberant in colour. It is a place of shocking contrast and extremes.

It was however 'intense' from the very beginning, according to the legend. Where even after Lord Buddha had secured complete Unassailable Enlightenment, Mara, the King of Delusion, rallied his forces with never before seen might, to both object to, and to try and obstruct the spreading of such a profound accomplishment. The weapons turned to flowers it is said, as they entered the space immediately surrounding the Lord, so powerful was the purity and compassion.

Some people think that this is the stuff of legend and mythology, an artful metaphor, but I do not. Mara the sentient being it is understood, is based in a higher heaven realm. His armies of asuras and yakhas and various others are living in upper, lower and parallel realms. They all share 'wrong views' and harmful intentions. So although their weapons cannot be seen by the ordinary human eye. Lord Buddha, thoroughly endowed with a purified divine eye could see them, and once Enlightened, he was completely aloof and removed from harm's way. So the weapons were real, conventionally speaking, thrown by the dark power of greed, hatred and delusion residing in these beings minds. The flowers were real too, and they manifestly symbolized a fundamentally important fact, that true goodness triumphs over evil, and that the power of light transforms and eradicates darkness. The Buddha proved this in his own mind first, then it was reflected outwardly after the fact.

This evil-minded Mara being living in a high heaven realm is both a compelling and perplexing concept. It challenges people's perceptions of heaven and hell in a good way I believe, and points directly at why we need to aim for something better and more dependable. The Buddhist cosmology and Buddhist Teachings are genuinely sophisticated, and they offer some rhyme and reason in response to the great diversity and complexity that can be observed everywhere in the world.

So how does Mara get to live in heaven you might ask? God doesn't decide these things you see, kamma does. Clearly this being made enormous merits in the past. Having a vast and powerful mind himself, he has also evidently trained in the path of mental cultivation for quite some time.

Then, with truly epic samsaric 'terribleness' he made a drastic choice. At some point in his path of cultivation, being very interested in 'power,' he became fascinated with dark power. The power of Greed, Hatred and Delusion, and because of his vast merit, he was given the job of CEO. The Chief Executive Officer of Kilesa Incorporated – The Ministry of Defilements. So in a way, just like Darth Vader of Star Wars – *he went over to the dark side.*

Samsara is the true game of snakes and ladders. There are booby traps everywhere! You can be progressing very well for a time, then get swallowed by a deceptive serpent. There are suttas which state that it is not at all uncommon for celestial beings to be reborn in hell once their merits are exhausted, and then heavy old kammās ripen. From the hells to the heavens, there is not one inch of the conditioned universe which is truly safe. It is, as Lord Buddha states, the realm of death. We gotta get out of this place! Realizing the 'Deathless' is the escape hatch. This is what the Buddhas and Arahants have accomplished.

I have come to see Mara as one of my teachers. WHAT!?! I hear you scream, wait, let me finish. The Buddha, teacher of teachers, teaches me what to do. Mara on the other hand, teaches me what not to do. But he must be respected, because hating him brings him ever closer. The only way to defeat Mara is through cultivating and maintaining mindfulness and wisdom. Recognizing wholesome and unwholesome, skillful and unskillful, and choosing only the better of the two, to the best of our ability. Then slowly his influence and our vulnerability will wane.

So Bodhgaya is the place of Enlightenment, and the place of Mara's armies. Ground Zero, the physical epicenter of the battle that Lord Buddha won. Now it is up to us to follow in his steps. Mara can also be kamma, and our attachment to the destructive emotions of greed, hatred as well as our propensity to becoming deluded - the three root kilesa. For students of life, there is a lot to be learned here. Having developed a committed long-term relationship with Bodhgaya, I've learned to love it mostly. And now I must rush back to the Bodhi Tree... there is meditation which must be done!

*Continued at 10pm, after completing the first 100 hours... A very noisy wedding party next door has inspired me commit to continue writing in this journal.*

My relationship with Bodhgaya, even since first hearing about it, was always enigmatic. I was fascinated and magnetically drawn. What actually makes a site Holy I wondered? How might one experience this? Would meditation be different in such a place? I was very eager to know. The visits have grown longer and more frequent over the years, as I've learned how to practice here, and witnessed the benefits of doing so. I've also led groups on Pilgrimage to many of the Holy Sites, feeling that I ought to play a role enabling others to benefit as I have.

Drawing towards the end of this long-term practice goal that I have been diligently working on for a decade, I am giving some thought to this process I've been involved in, and the things which precipitated it, and sharing some of my thoughts. How did a guy from Australia wind up as a Buddhist monk in Thailand? And forge such a strong and loving bond with the Holy sites of Bodhgaya in northern India?

### **Suggestions of spiritual inclinations from deep in the past...**

Often as a child I had a curious feeling, and the associated sense of disorientation, that somehow I was born in the wrong place. I had nothing to compare life in Australia to however, so who could know where the right place might have been? I still remember clearly however that the times where I felt the happiest, were the times when I felt truly alone. Not lonely or abandoned, but safe, yet truly alone. Such as when I had run way ahead on a long bushwalk in the rainforest with my family, and got 20 minutes to myself on a quiet forest path surrounded only by the magical canopy of trees. Or while sunbathing quietly on the beach after swimming and playing with my brothers for hours. When no one was talking... when there was happy exhaustion... the feelings of sun and breeze on the skin, the sound of waves breaking... a sense of vast space... and not having to be anyone. These are my happiest

memories.

Perhaps it was around the age of 15, after reading the novel 'A passage to India' for English class, or after seeing the movie 'Ghandi,' that the idea of 'India' began to develop a magnetic pull in my heart and mind. Or maybe it was after Mrs. Morissova, the human resources teacher at high school, had told our Social Studies class fascinating stories about her back packing trip to India, that the urge to travel East began to grow.

I also remember that around the time I first began to meditate sincerely, not long after graduating from high school at the age of 17, I had picked up a Ravi Shankar record with four 'ragas' on it from a second hand record shop in Brisbane. I would play it quite loud when my twin brother was out and no one else was at home. The sitar and tabla ragas stirred very strange emotions that I still cannot quite describe. Listening to the strange and exotic music I became psychically unmoored feeling at once lost, yet almost touching, almost finding, a shaft of light, a glimpse of hope, an inkling of a way forward. As tears rolled down the cheeks of my moved yet bemused young face, I couldn't have explained why. The music seemed to bring me into my heart where I could feel the confusion and pain, but also suggested beauty and hope in some sacred and ancient other-worldly place. But how on earth to get there?

I entered Buddhist study and practice this lifetime by simply diving in at the deep end. Without having read a single word of the Buddha's teachings, I signed up for an intensive 10 day retreat that had been recommended by a friend. It was on day 8 of a 10 day Vipassana retreat when I was 20 years old, that a profoundly reorienting experience finally occurred, helping me to make more sense of my experience of life.

Sitting for 11 hours per day on the floor, I'd never experienced so much physical pain! Being forced to truly be with my mind without distraction, I'd never experienced so much emotional pain either! But with the teacher, SN Goenka-ji's constant prompting to 'Staaaart agaaain' in the practice of reestablishing mindfulness, mid-afternoon on day 8, all of the pain in my body seemed to disappear, and my heart and mind felt full, cool and content. I recognized deeply something fundamentally important and profound. 'This is what I've been searching for!' The Path that I could wholeheartedly give myself to was going to be a spiritual one. It was a relief to discover that there was something worth pursuing that might lead to some contentment, in this baffling experience of life.

Being much happier in my monk's life in Thailand just three years later, immersed in a Buddhist culture and learning to chant in the ancient Indian language of Pali as well as to speak in Thai, I still had a very strong sense that I must one day go to India. Mother India was like a siren calling in the distance; somehow she had gotten thoroughly under my skin, most probably in lives previous to this one, and now with the Theravada texts as a reference, the four main Buddhist Holy sites would be the obvious place to start.

I remember suggesting to Ajahn Jayasaro, the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat in my early years as a monk, after he had told some of his own wonderful India stories, that he should arrange a Pilgrimage and take some of the monks along. It would be so good for our faith and for bringing the ancient tradition more to life. When he did accept an invitation to lead a

pilgrimage the following year, unfortunately I was not one of the five monks which he invited to come along! When I complained to Tan Ajahn regarding this seemingly unjust scenario, he responded... 'I have no doubt you'll be invited by laypeople in the future yourself.' He was right.

## **Chapter Two - The Longest Journey Begins With The First Step.**

Day 12

*(The chapter below was written in part on Day 12, but then was completed on day 22 when I had a 'rostered half day off.' This chapter gives some history as to how I came to practice in India.)*

In our tradition, after training as a monk for a five year period, one is allowed to go wandering by oneself, or with a friend or two, in search of good practice situations. It was during one such seven week period of walking on 'tudong' alone, after completing my initial training, that I learned some useful things in relation to my own character, and some of the latent wholesome inclinations within. This was heartening, because young monks tend to struggle with containing negative qualities to the degree necessary, to be able to live within the extremely exacting monastic code (rules of conduct). Perhaps containing the less noble tendencies is precisely what allows the good to blossom. Lord Buddha describes mental training as like refining gold. The impurities must be removed, what remains is very fine.

Once I'd hit the road as it were, and could experiment a little, feeling my own edges under the wide open sky. I noticed some interesting new impulses and inspirations. Curiously, rather than go searching for quiet forests or meditation masters, which is the norm (by this time I'd already had some wonderful experiences of both) I found myself wanting to walk to, then pay respects and meditate at, the site of ancient Chedis purported to contain Buddha relics. Where this impulse came from I don't know, but since I hadn't heard of anyone else in my community doing this in Thailand, I now believe that it was an old Pilgrimage habit established in past lives.

Walking from Wat Pah Nanachat (The International Forest Monastery) in Ubon province, to 'Phra Taht Phanom' Chedi, in Nakhon Phanom province, is more than a 200 kilometer journey, and it took me about two weeks. The Chedi is very sacred to the people of Northeastern Thailand, and is believed to contain a bonafide relic that arose from Lord Buddha's cremated bones. I made a vow not accept any lifts along the way, which meant walking 15-20 kilometers per day. It was interesting walking much of the day, stopping to rest or meditate under trees occasionally, then taking turns spending the night in forests, open fields, orchards, or the occasional monastery. Life slows down a lot, and becomes very simple. One subsists on food offered on alms alone. There was always enough food offered when walking in northeast Thailand. Recent examples of well practiced monks and their well behaved communities have inspired the people with great faith.

Curiously, after all of that walking, I actually only chanted and meditated at the Chedi for a couple of hours on the evening that I arrived there, but I did observe something very unusual. For although there were a lot of people milling around making quite a bit of noise, and although I was tired from walking 20 kilometers and carrying my gear, my mind did experience some very pleasant rapture while chanting, then became deeply peaceful in meditation. This was very interesting. I would have spent several days were there a suitable place to stay nearby, but the Chedi is in a busy 'study' monastery in the middle of the large town. Having gotten used to the quiet of Forest Monasteries I found this too challenging, so I hit the road again the very next day.

From Phra Taht Phanom, I then walked to Wat Pah Suthawat, an old monastery in Sakhon Nakhon province, which contained artifacts and relics of Luang Por Mun. This took only a few days. Luang Por Mun was the most respected forest monk of the last century. The Teacher of our teacher's teacher - like a Venerable Great Grandfather as it were. A lineage Guru, he was a very strict and austere monk with exceptional meditation abilities and the highest spiritual attainments. I wanted to walk all the way on foot and bow my head before his relics, as an offering of respect, and as an acknowledgement of the hardships he endured in order to realize the highest Dhamma. So that is how this wandering Forest monk somewhat haphazardly became a Pilgrim to ancient Holy Sites, initially in Thailand.

Originally I had hoped to walk all the way to Chiang Mai, but in acknowledging Luang Por Mun's austere hardships, I met with some of my own! Feeling weak after having had diarrhea twice in just three weeks (one of the added bonuses for westerners living in Asia) I reconsidered my plan. Having also grown a little weary of walking alongside busy roads in full sun with no tree cover, I decided to head for the train lines, which would pass through several National Parks. I would try to take a bus to Uttaradit, and then continue along the train tracks northwards to Chiang Mai. This would shorten the journey by several hundred kilometers and also assure a more spacious and quiet route. This seemed like a good plan B. Curiously, just moments after formulating this new plan, a good hearted and open minded Iraqi lay man, who lived over the road from the Wat invited me for tea, then offered a ticket to wherever I needed to go. It seemed that Luang Por Mun's merit was taking care of me.

Walking along the train tracks I had many days of relative quiet and constant, almost monotonous 'sameness' within which to observe my mind. The actual walking is harder because of all of the uneven rocks, but the serenity of the scenery compensates. The track or path alongside it stretches on and on and on. This gave a lovely sense of predictability and safety... for you could see where you were going. Houses were set way back from the tracks and trains were infrequent. You can hear them coming a long way in advance because the tracks start to make a subtle ringing noise, so there were no sudden surprises.

I noticed that if I recited the mantra 'Bud-Dho' in conjunction with the footsteps. 'Bud' with the right and 'Dho' with the left, and considered the qualities of the Buddha's Enlightened mind, that my mind did not actually become very peaceful, despite the hours of effort. This was disappointing, as working with this 'Bud-Dho' mantra and method had been very effective for many masters in our tradition, but somehow it felt a bit dry for me. Then I

decided to experiment with a variation on the theme.

The Holy Site which was to be my final destination, 20 or so kilometers north of Chiang Mai, after paying respects at a couple more ancient Chedis, was called 'Phra Buddha Baht Si Loi.' This translates roughly as 'The Four Buddhas Footprints.' This is a monastery that has a large boulder which is reputed to contain imprints, or large 'footprints' of four Teaching Buddhas. Shakyamuni Buddha, or Gotama Buddha, whose teachings we all study and practice, but also of the three previous Buddhas of this aeon who arose before.

This aeon is considered a fortunate one, inasmuch as there will arise five Teaching Buddhas in total. Apparently there are many aeons where no Buddhas arise in the human world at all. Four have come, and Maitreya will be the next and final one of this aeon. So walking along the train tracks I decided to experiment with reciting the names of the five Buddhas. " Namō Kakkhusandho Buddhō... Namō Konagammano Buddhō... Namō Kassapo Buddhō... Namō Gotamo Buddhō... Namō Maitteyo Buddhō... "

Most interestingly, when I thought of the 'conventional beings' who had arisen in their final births as Buddhas, after incredibly long periods of building virtue and merit, my mind felt rapturously happy with gratitude, love and respect. I envisioned the seemingly endless train tracks before me as being like the millions of lives the Buddhas traveled in order to be able to teach us all. I felt awe and deep gratitude. The mind became very happy, content and peaceful. After some time of reflecting in these ways, it would then be content to abide with the more simple 'Bud-Dho.'

It seemed that I needed to acknowledge the beautiful 'conventional being' who realized 'non-being' (not-self) first, before refining the contemplation to consider the non-personal transcendent qualities of Wisdom, Purity and Compassion, that radiated from their liberated minds. I was slowly learning that I was a 'devotional type' of spiritual practitioner, the Sanskrit word for this is bhakti, and that for me, opening the heart with loving appreciation was a very effective doorway for then abiding in a more simple, deep, and content quality of peace. Perhaps this deep 'love' for Buddhas and their qualities, was part of what made my mind receptive to some quality of 'Blessing' at places where Buddha relics were enshrined. Perhaps it was what made it possible for the mind to feel deep peace and contentment, despite crowds and noise. It was all very interesting phenomenon to begin to observe.

There are not many examples of senior western Theravadan monks who could have shown or taught me this. Some things we have to work out on our own, but as I have now spent much more time in Thailand and speak the Thai language better, I have realized that this character type and approach is common to many Thais as well. One can hear and feel the loving devotion in the tone of their chanting at large gatherings. It is deeply beautiful and moving. This seems to be similar for many Southeast Asians and South Asians as well. The shared character traits are probably the reason I settled in Asia rather than return to Australia as I had originally thought I might. Resonance.

So I carried on with my walk along the tracks, experimenting with the new more devotional technique. I also had a copy of Bhikkhu Nyanamolis 'Life of the Buddha' which I read from

repeatedly along the way. Once reaching the city of Lamphun, I made a detour to an ancient monastery with another revered ancient Chedi, 'Phrataht Haripunchai.' And curiously, once again I had the same experience. While meditating near the Chedi, my mind became rapturous, content and more deeply collected than normal. Once again, the monastery was not where I wanted to stay for very long, so I headed off again after just one night.

Reaching the northern city of Chiang Mai, unfortunately I had developed a chest infection, the nights in late December are quite cool, and there had been heavy mists. Fortunately one laywoman supporter had a quiet house on the outskirts of the city, and the upper floor was vacant. I rested there, recovering for a few days. When Dr Patriya came to visit she asked many questions about what I was doing and why. She was a bit baffled as to why monks would go wandering around, exposing themselves to threats and hardships when we had good, quiet and safe monasteries to live in.

I did my best to explain that this has always been a part of our lifestyle since the time of the Buddha, to seek more solitude for the sake of learning about the mind, developing more of an inner refuge, facing and overcoming fear etc. When I also described the more devotional aspects of what I'd been doing, of demonstrating gratitude by willingly undertaking difficulties, and of going to ancient sites with Buddha relics, it reminded Patriya of something important.

The Buddha himself had recommended that after he was no longer in the world, all Buddhists should undertake a Pilgrimage to the four main Holy Sites in India. She also aspired to do this one day. At that time Patriya was working at a university in Washington State USA, and had a young son in school. She wasn't sure when it might happen.

I walked to one final Chedi on a mountain behind Chiangmai. Starting very early in the morning, I arrived around 7:00 am. The much revered Doi Suthep Chedi was fairly quiet in the early morning, but crowds soon gathered after 8:00. Even so, once again, I'd had a lovely long meditation next to the much revered, ancient gold-plated Chedi. After another rest day, I would head off to the final site of what had become my first Pilgrimage.

It took a few days wandering in the more hilly northern Thai landscape before coming to the site of the Four Buddha's Footprints. Even though I am quite the 'faith-type' in character, even I was a bit confused by this phenomenon, you see, the Footprints are huge! The four footprints, one within another, were going down quite deep into a large boulder. There are other sites in Thailand and also in Sri Lanka which have such imprints, usually a single one purported to have been made by our most recent Buddha. Several very respected Thai Arahants in recent history however, had confirmed with their special abilities that the imprints were indeed made by the previous four Buddhas, and that the site was undeniably sacred. I've since come to understand that the Buddhas made these imprints with their mighty psychic powers, not their physical bodies, perhaps as a way of determining where their order would flourish long into the future.

When I bowed my head at this strange yet fabulous artifact, I surprised myself with a dedication that I spontaneously made. Evidently Dr Patriya had reminded me of a deep held wish that I had as well. "Due to the merits accumulated through having walked 700

kilometers... and having paid respects at ancient Chedis containing Buddha relics... as well as to the relics of the great arahant and meditation master Luang Por Mun... and now to these Four Most Hallowed footprints... May I be invited to attend a Pilgrimage to the Four Holy Sites of India and Nepal, and have the opportunity to practice meditation and humbly bow my head there too!"

After having made my aspirational dedication at The Four Buddha's Footprints in the Mae Dtaeng area of Chiang Mai province, I made my way back to Patriya's mother's house, which was situated on the outskirts of the city of Chiang Mai. This time I finally accepted a lift just moments after leaving the monastery, and was there within one single hour! It seemed so strange! I stayed and rested there for a couple of nights, on the top floor of the quiet house. Then one morning Dr Patriya visited once again and announced a curious thing.

"For many years I've wanted to go on the traditional Buddhist pilgrimage to India. Seeing you wandering on tudong and meditating at Holy Sites has reminded me that this is something I really wish to do. I need to make this happen. I've decided that I will sincerely try to arrange such a tour, sooner rather than later, and I would like to invite you to join." No one will be surprised to hear that I Happily accepted! I thought quietly to myself... goodness that was fast!

It took about 9 months before everything was in place. Patriya had to find enough participants to make the trip viable, we needed at least 15. She had asked me to try and find some fellow pilgrims as well. I invited two other lay friends, a couple from North America who were living and working in Thailand at that time. Dr Ronna Kabatznick was teaching English at a university in Northern Thailand and her husband, Professor Peter Dale Scott was with her, working on writing a book. I also invited a fellow monk friend as well, Tan Anando. (Now Ajahn Anando)

So as it happened, we did an 8 day whirlwind pilgrimage in India, with another 5 days in Nepal. Although we spent most of our time on long bus rides, with not much time at the actual sites, to this day I am very grateful to professor Patriya, and to Dr Ronna, and Dr Peter, for introducing me to the practice of pilgrimage in India, and enabling that very first trip. Ronna and Peter also helped out significantly with the costs. In a way, we all introduced each other to this strange yet wonderful place...Mother India... Mother of all Mothers! I have many funny, surreal and bittersweet memories from that first trip. A westerner's first impressions of India, especially the poorest regions, tend to leave deep impressions. I'd love to relay some stories here, but to do so would be a diversion from the themes I'm trying to focus upon, so perhaps another time.

### **First meditation at the Mahabodhi Temple/Chedi and sacred Bodhi Tree**

From the very first time I had the chance to meditate here at Bodhgaya this life, I was deeply moved. Even approaching the Mahabodhi temple from 500 yards away, I remember that I felt very much in awe. But I'm getting ahead of myself... we had to get there first.

In those days there was not yet an airport in Gaya, so we had to land in Calcutta, and then catch a train to Gaya. The Calcutta train station was mind boggling. I had never seen such a vast and dense sea of brown-colored humanity. You literally had to find the right current, and then be pushed along to the correct platform. Who knew where the wrong current might take you! Despite the incredible human density, old lady beggars who came only to the height of my chest pulled on my robes, while children beggars tapped on my lower legs. The look in their eyes was hard and desperate, all I could offer was a kind smile, which seemed completely useless at the time. Just when I was feeling totally dejected on the platform, a sweet young Indian couple held their baby in my face and asked for a baby blessing. The first one for me this lifetime! So that cheered me up for a moment. I had some special Holy Water in my shoulder bag and so sprinkled some on his forehead, at which point he burst into tears and screamed!

Checking into the Hotel at 3am, it was actually quite emotionally painful for me to have to go to my room for a few hours, rather than rush off to the site! There had been people asleep all over the train platform when we arrived. Several had looked up at us and unabashedly stared and stared and stared. Terribly thin, with dull and hard yet haunted eyes, lying on the cold hard floor without a mattress. Their images haunted me then as I lay on the fresh linens of the hotel bed and tried to sleep. For stepping on the platform of Gaya airport was the first time that I truly recognized that despite the fact that I was a renunciant, I was wealthy, (with freedom and support) gratuitously healthy, and absurdly clean.

We made our way into the compound which contained the Temple, Mahabodhi Chedi, Sacred Bodhi Tree and Vajra Asana after a hearty breakfast. We were on a very tightly scheduled tour however, and after what seemed like a short chanting and meditation session the group was already leaving for lunch, after which they would then set off to see other significant local sights. I wished to be nowhere else however, but under the sacred ancient tree, which is situated on the western side behind the large Chedi. I literally couldn't drag myself away, and needed more time to both experience and process what it was that I was experiencing. So I asked if I could skip lunch, and just stay on in the Temple compound.

I was relieved when the guide and Dr Patriya said yes. I remember sitting... and sitting... and sitting, and although I had to wriggle around quite a bit to manage the pain, I'd never felt so happy to keep trying. It was as though you could smell Enlightenment here... taste it... hear it... feel it... it was sooo close! Closing one's eyes to meditate and trying to realize nibbana, the mind did become quite serene. I didn't become Enlightened though!

Dr Ronna joined me back under The Bodhi Tree, after visiting the site where Sujata had offered milk rice to the Bodhisattva, on the day before the very night that he became Enlightened. As a psychologist who treats people with eating disorders, the nourishing meal that played a role enabling Liberation held special import to her. Walking back to the Hotel at dusk, with tenacious beggar kids tagging along all the way, there was a sense of having touched something magical, wonderful, profound... yet not quite having realized it. (A recurring theme!) Even coming close 'intuitively,' to some vibration or impression of liberation, was truly valuable and affirming. It seemed to illustrate a tremendous richness of potential, both in the place, and in my mind. I was deeply moved and enchanted by the site of

the Buddha's Enlightenment. I became both hopeful and determined that I would return, though I had no idea how. India was as scary as it was enchanting, and tickets and support were not yet easy to come by for a fairly junior, young monk.

As it happened my return was very swift indeed, as the kind laypeople in the pilgrimage group took up a collection to help us return to Varanasi from Kathmandu, where our group tour was ending. We would spend one week in Sarnath, the site of the first Liberating Teaching, and then spend one more month in Bodhgaya, before returning to Thailand. How wonderful! I decided to make a formal meditation practice goal of 108 hours, the same number as there are beads on a Buddhist rosary. This would inspire some diligence and determination in my practice, and serve as an expression of faith and gratitude to both Lord Buddha, and our generous supporters.

Unfortunately when we came back, Bihar was experiencing the coldest winter in 100 years. On top of this, Holiness the Dalai Lama was giving a Kalachakra initiation, which had attracted around 10,000 more pilgrims! And so the small pilgrimage town that we had visited had now transformed into something resembling a circus, a showground, and an enormous Buddhist multicultural event. Sadly the cold weather, the crowds, the filth, the constant loud noise as well as a serious illness, made Enlightenment appear quite far away indeed! Enlightenment it also seemed was not what I could hear, or smell!

Although I had sincerely hoped and intended to sit 108 hours of meditation, and had genuinely tried, at the end of the month, and after a week in bed with a truly terrible flu, my tally was a meagre 64. When I told my friend Tan Anando of my hoped for goal compared to the actual tally, he responded in the unsympathetic way the Brits can have at times, saying, "You didn't even come close!" We were good friends to one another while sick though, reading stories, passing tissues, and playing 'I spy with my little eye!' We only had one argument in the entire 7 weeks, which we forgave each other for promptly. Despite the challenges of the second visit, I was still enchanted, and not deterred as I had glimpsed and experienced a very special potential, which I wanted to explore more deeply.

The idea of setting goals and offering practice here had already been consummated. It was a theme I would return to repeatedly. The desire to sit for longer periods that arises in the mind quite naturally under The Bodhi Tree was also something that I would determinedly tap into again, and again. Along a similar vein, this concept of specifically generating, and then dedicating merit, in the very same manner that I had done as a young monk, which seemed to precipitate being invited to India in the first place, was something that I would do a lot of in Bodhgaya.

Meditation, Lord Buddha explains, produces a great deal of good kamma. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama once said that merits produced in Bodhgaya, are 7 times more potent than those produced elsewhere, because of the special qualities of this place. The Vajra Asana, or Seat of Enlightenment, is the place where Buddhas in this universe must become Enlightened.

So the three before our Buddha, and the one yet to come, are all predestined to be Enlightened in this very place. Crazy as it seems at times!

Deliberately engaging in very good kamma producing activities, and then dedicating this merit in support of particular goals, was a practice that I was to develop a lot in Bodhgaya over the years. (And have been doing even during this period where I am currently writing.) Namely, setting goals to do many hours of formal meditation per day for periods of many weeks. Over the years I have dedicated merits specifically to support the development of a new monastery... the spreading of teachings... to bolster the challenged health of my dearest teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Anan... and as a support to my father through a debilitating illness, and while he passed from this life. Every single day I have also dedicated merits to the cause of peace in this world, and sincerely wished well-being for All. Although true peace for all still seems a long way off, I do believe that things would degenerate further were it not for the prayers of sincere spiritual practitioners from all traditions currently in this world.

When you meditate for ten hours per day for 6-7 weeks, there is time for many lovely prayers, dedications, and the refinement of aspirations. Although it is difficult, I am also very aware that it is a privilege, and a luxury to have the time and opportunity for such a focus. May all beings kammically connected benefit from my current and past practices of generosity, virtue, and mental cultivation, and may they all have such excellent opportunities!

May we All be Well, Happy, Safe, Free from Suffering, and Progress Swiftly along the Path to Unshakeable Peace!

### **Chapter Three – Pleasant Sounds, Unpleasant Sounds... and the Silent Mind.**

Day 13 of 45 (*119.5 hours out of 400 / 2719.5 out of 3000*)

9:30 pm...

There are certain periods where the Brahmin priests in India say that marriage ceremonies will be most auspicious. Evidently this period is one such time, as there is another VERY loud wedding next door, inspiring more late night journal musings. It is the same recurring theme of extreme contrasts one witnesses constantly here in The Place of Enlightenment. Thousands of sincere Buddhists have come from all around the world seeking peace, meditation and contemplation, and opportunities to create meritorious kamma. Meanwhile, Maras's army has arranged yet another Wedding From Hell!

When the music stops at midnight, or sometimes 1 a.m., the 'noise' will not yet be over, for the dogs have evidently felt left out! Once they can finally be heard they will all howl in unison for a half an hour or so. They sound so wretchedly malcontent! Then there will be two hours of relative quiet before the more holy sounding temple bells ring out at 4am. The Muslim call to prayer will come at 5:00. Mindfulness, patient endurance, forgiveness and earplugs are all necessary equipment here. The earplugs lower the volume by around 30%. The wedding music is so loud though, that even this will not allow for sleep.

At the Mahabodhi Temple the same dynamic plays itself out in the form of pujas, and in ones

reactions to them. Heaven and Hell, arising and ceasing, pleasant and unpleasant, coming and going. When you grasp you suffer. When you abide with that which knows sense contact 'as it is,' and is mindfully aware of the characteristics of arising and ceasing, everything is fine. Not making a 'self' out of pleasant and unpleasant, liking and not liking.

There is an auspicious chant in the Theravada tradition called The Quails Protection. For the last two mornings at the Mahabodhi Temple there has been a large and loudly amplified Vietnamese puja, replete with cymbals and drums. I tried to restrain myself from giving it a name, but as it stretched on for hours I have to confess that I failed. I coined it 'The Screaming Cat from Hell Protection'... "Through the Power of this Auspiciousness - may all Beings be free from suffering!"

I do apologize - it is very bad kamma to articulate such sarcasm I know! Some Vietnamese pujas are truly lovely as well. I know one Vietnamese bhikkhu who chants the Diamond Sutra every day, accompanied by his little wooden gong. His gentle chanting, and the accompanying soft little pok, pok, pok, pok, pok are a delight to listen to for hours, but this current puja is 'challenging' I'm afraid. With the more 'operatic' style, the chanter needs to be pitch perfect to pull it off. When the leader is flat and sharp, and all over the place, and loudly amplified as well, he's making bad kamma too!

As soon as the Vietnamese puja was over however, one could hear the more somber rumblings of the Bhutanese Lamas chanting in the distance. A small group of around 50 are doing their New Year's World Peace recitations. We sit directly under the Bodhi Tree, yet facing the wall of the Chedi. When the lamas come and circumambulate the Chedi ten times around mid-morning, as a part of their formal puja, they recite the Amitayus Long Life Mantra quickly the entire time. When they do this there is a very palpable sense of magic and uplift in the air. It takes them about a half an hour to complete their circumambulations, and it's a real joy to be embraced by the sense of blessings as they file around and around gracefully yet determined behind us. The syllables of sacred mantras rumble and tumble quickly out of their mouths in unison, "bhara, bhara, dhara, dhara, om, om, ah, ah, hum, hum, bhrum, bhrum" etc. It is wonderfully transportive. Ajahn Nyaniko told me that it always makes him feel that everything will be alright and in fact that things are going to get "better, better, better, better, better, better!" (It works best when said very quickly! ;))

Introducing Ajahn Nyaniko a little more personally now, here is an excerpt from a group email that he recently sent supporters and friends. It describes some of our shared challenges, practice, and friendship.

### **Shut up and meditate!**

“While sitting under the bodhi tree, one is in close proximity to the energies of other people - some quite pleasant, and some less so. We can tap into the lovely energy of the Drukpa Kagyu monks, and the now-7-year-old reincarnated Stakna Rinpoche doing a long puja nearby, which can be helpful for an uplifted meditation experience. Or a group might be circumambulating the MahaBodhi Stupa, and quietly chanting mantras, which adds to a sense

of serenity. Then a group sits down right behind us, and the group leader starts chanting into a loudspeaker, which is turned up so loud that you can't even tell what is happening. Their group isn't so big - no need for a loudspeaker, it's hurting my ears, etc. So irritation can arise with this kind of impingement. The Tibetan puja was so peaceful and enjoyable, and now... this.

In order to deal with our resulting low-level trauma, Ajahn Achalo and I will, from time-to-time, stop meditating and talk over our experiences. We stop our timers during these moments and help each other process the situation. This time of processing may include having a chat about how we "shouldn't be irritated by this group turning their speaker up so loud, but I am. I should reflect that they are actually making good kamma for helping me to build parami." Or we might talk about meditation, or when times get really tough, our exchange might include rubbing some lavender, or rose essential oil on the heart chakra area, to ease the pain. If we stop meditating for too long, we won't meet our daily quota of 10 hours. So at a certain point Ajahn Achalo will turn to me and say "tell me to shut up and meditate." Then I inevitably respond with, "Shut up and meditate, Ajahn!" He says "Okay, Thank you." And thus we pull our hats down over our eyes, and get on with our cultivation of equanimity and the foundations of mindfulness."

It is true that I have a selection of essential oils stashed in an inside pocket in my monk's man-bag! (called a yam in Thai) When it's really bad, having your own portable aromatherapy spa treatment really can help! Lavender and Rose seem to relax and calm the heart, and re-establish a sense of well-being. Applying sandalwood oil on the back of the neck and on our wooden prayer beads helps for psychic protection.

Having spent literally thousands of hours meditating at the Mahabodhi Temple I've also heard thousands of pujas. I can recognize which country and tradition at considerable distance with ease. It would be best not to have preferences, but we are only human after all. The Sri Lankan Pali and Sinhala language pujas are my personal favorite, followed by the Tibetan, then Chinese, and then the Thai. The pujas recited by hundreds of faithful devotees literally swim with the energy of faith and love, and centuries of tradition and respect. When the pujas are led well and the pilgrims are sincere, waves of good energy ebb and flow over the minds of all the meditators nearby. I dislike the sound of the Cambodian, Burmese, and Vietnamese pujas equally however! But have trained myself to appreciate the faith and love. Mudita (appreciative joy) Brahma Vihara is what makes it possible to survive Bodhgaya with ones sanity still intact, and restrains one from harming others as well!

There is also a motley looking crew of Indian men in robes who may or may not actually be monks. They do a long puja every morning and evening, and face their amplifier unfailingly in our direction. Unfortunately, a tone of meanness and greed somehow comes through despite their strenuous efforts to be harmonious and melodic. The alms bowl for monetary donations is placed directly in front of the speaker. Curiously, very few people oblige. I could be wrong in my assessment of course, but I've had hundreds of opportunities to check that inner sense. One tries to restrain judgment, and not to fully believe ones perceptions. They are probably doing their best with the opportunities that life has given them. There are well

trained Indian bhikkhus as well of course.

There is one Indian Bhikkhu who frequently chants the solo of 'Inviting the Devas to listen to Dhamma,' during the morning and evening puja that is piped over the Temple speakers each day. It is so pitch perfect, delicately nuanced, and beautiful, that I literally stop breathing when I hear it, the mind and body being content to subsist on just this divine sound. I'm a good chanter, but this venerable puts me totally to shame. He must have had a classical training since childhood before he became a bhikkhu, so flawless and refined is his craft.

The most beautiful sound however is the silent mind, a mind with mindfulness and equanimity firmly established. When the mind stays with the breath consistently for a time, and mindfulness and concentration become more constant and firm, a lovely sense of firm aloofness can arise. Where all sounds that arise and cease can be known as 'just that much.' From a still and quiet awareness that looks on as if from afar, even though it is right there in the same space.

We all try to establish this balanced serenity before the Indian puja each morning and afternoon! Sometimes succeeding, and sometimes not. It is wonderfully educational though, to observe the way that the very same noise which was annoying in the morning, can sometimes not affect the mind at all in the afternoon of the same day if one simply stays very quiet, inward, and still. Once we have witnessed many times that it is possible not to react, we have to take responsibility for the fact that our reacting is the real problem. This is suitably humbling, and humility is one of the Highest Blessings in life, as the Buddha taught in the Mangala Sutta.

Even if we are having an inner reaction there is still some goodness that can be cultivated. As Lord Buddha taught in the Ovada Patimokka. 'Patient endurance is the supreme incinerator of defilement.' When the mind is peaceful, one abides in peace, and when one must endure... one endures. Investigating the sense base contact very closely, and trying to restrain liking and disliking can help one to 'let go' quite effectively at times. Sometimes I can, and sometimes I can't, but the fact that one can at times is an important lesson about the nature of awareness. Awareness is not the thing that is reacting, but awareness can and often is affected by liking and not liking, in gross and subtle ways.

Ajahn Chah once explained in a talk that in his own experience of his earlier practice knowing what one needs to let go of, and yet not quite being able to do so, is around 50% of the practice. This is very important to understand, because it is this very act of mindfully 'knowing' what needs to be let go of, and holding this in awareness patiently, intending to let go as soon as one can, that conditions being able to 'let go' more in the future. If we give up too quickly, we will not be laying the conditions for the deeper peace that will come in due course. There is a reason that meditation practice is called practice!

Equanimity is an incredibly valuable quality to both cultivate and possess. Having opportunities presented again and again for an extended period of time while sitting in a formal meditation context, is a great opportunity for practice. Equanimity is a quality that must be hard won through great effort, and there really seems no way around this. Once you

have some facility however, it can be applied in many other areas. It is wonderful and instructive to observe how something that caused suffering the day before can be a total non-issue today. We train ourselves not to react, or at least not to grasp the reaction, knowing that it will change.

For myself, I have found that it is more possible to find a pronounced sense of that 'spacious awareness where nothing sticks,' here in Bodhgaya, than it is anywhere else. The fact that several Buddhas liberated their minds from ALL suffering in this very place, seems to have fused the very air with liberating potential. Many of my students have commented that they have less thinking, and are less reactive to pain while meditating under the Bodhi Tree as well. I've seen many people try intensive meditation here, and get completely agitated, and quickly run away though too! So perhaps having strong faith, some patience, and quite a lot of meditation experience are also important factors.

I should acknowledge that there is also a 'mystical' side to practice here in Bodhgaya. To fail to mention this would seem dishonest somehow. Meditation monks are naturally going to have some interest in such things. Monks have to be very careful both with how they relate to 'psychic' phenomena, and how they talk about these. Obviously though, in the course of sitting meditation for thousands of hours in a very spiritually potent place, there are going to be periods or moments of heightened sensitivity and awareness.

Some people are more prone to experiencing interesting visual phenomenon than others. I am probably one of those. Interpretation, miss-interpretation, or identification with such phenomenon can be dangerous. Nonetheless, some of these experiences can be very inspiring, and broaden one's perspective of life and the universe. Having a Teacher who is more experienced and adept, as I do, is also important and helpful for keeping things in a sensible perspective.

So much of what we experience in life feels limited and frustrating. Working with the same thought patterns, reactions, cravings etc, year after year, decade after decade. Often times our minds seem boring mundane and tedious. So to experience new vistas, or to glimpse something luminous, beautiful, and radiant at times or in moments, can supply some much needed inspiration and give cause for optimism. I wish I could tell you some of my experiences here, but unless you become a monk or a nun, at this stage I cannot.

Our monastic rules of discipline are so strict in this area that I have to labor the point a little more. With regards all of the statements I have made above... I am not making any claims to have stabilized meditative absorptions, mastery of psychic powers, or to have a purified divine eye. I feel it important to acknowledge however that I do experience periods of deep peace, moments of heightened sensitivity, and also experience beautiful and/or *interesting* visual phenomena with my eyes closed in meditation at times. Developing the mind's potential is a process, and naturally there will be suggestions in the course of practice of greater things to come as with the process of learning how to 'let go' as mentioned above. Some experience of these things in the course of practice is what will help lay the causes for mastery of such things in the future.

There are however many stories of incidents that occurred that were seen with ordinary eyes, which certainly seem to allude to the presence of benevolent beings in parallel realms that are aware of us humans here. Some *very interesting* photographs have surfaced as well! I will try to tell some of these 'interesting' stories a little later on, and include an interesting picture or two.



*These may be beings in a parallel realm joining in the chanting.*

## **Chapter Four – Our Usual Days**

Day 17 (157/ 400 – 2757/3000)

10 pm...

Once again we've a late night wedding party, and I'm returning to this rapidly expanding journal.

### **Our usual days during this retreat ...**

Ajahn Nyaniko and I complement each other quite well as mutual support on these marathon retreats. I am more of a night person, whereas he is definitely a morning person. I can be a little slow getting where I'm going, but once there I am a stayer. Ajahn Nyaniko has said that he would not be sitting for as long without my support and example. So he helps me get there, and I help him to stay there, and together we manage '10 hours per day' most days.

Sitting 10 hours of meditation for one day is not actually so difficult. Doing it for 10 days, then another 10, then another 10, and yet another back to back - is something quite difficult

indeed. It requires determination, stamina, patience, surrender, and a deep commitment to putting forth energy even when exhausted. At some point illness will be a part of the equation as well, and we practice with, and through this too.

I decided to work up to, and then maintain doing ten hours of formal meditation per day here, because it felt like the kind of effort that is genuinely hard to maintain - yet doable if sincere. It requires the maintenance of focus, yet it is still possible to stay fairly healthy. Also, there is not much else to do in Bodhgaya, other than to go shopping! So it keeps us engaged skillfully and wholesomely, with no cause for future regrets.

So what does one actually do while meditating for ten hours you might ask? Mostly I am practicing breath meditation, which Lord Buddha described as the 'crown jewel' in the crown of all meditations. I have found however, that I need to practice *metta* - Loving-Kindness meditation for about a third of the time, to keep the mind happy and content, while working with so much impingement. There is a lot of noise.

When the mind becomes very peaceful with the breath, I simply enjoy the peace. At times one can be aware of an extraordinary amount of noise and activity, yet be completely unaffected - aware, yet detached, and serene. Also, when the metta practice really takes off, one can get quite expansive with it making many beautiful wishes for many others beings. Family, friends, teachers, all humans, all devas, all beings in the universe, all beings in all universes! Metta practice produces great merits that will be a support in the future as well, recollecting this can give energy to keep meditating.

When the mind isn't so peaceful, or when there's a lot of pain in the body, I try to investigate and sharpen the mindfulness. There is a lot to work that can be done over a ten hour period, and it is a great creative challenge! When there isn't stable concentration, a different kind of peacefulness can be achieved by learning to detach from feelings/thoughts/sense impingement. One can shift from a state of irritation, and the sense of feeling oppressed - to coolness, detachment, and the experience of emptiness (of self) when the mindful investigation is sustained with integrity. The peace that comes from 'letting go' of liking and not liking can be very resilient once established in the mind. It requires mindfulness, wisdom, and some stability of mind to be brought to work together. When we know how to practice there is always the potential for peace.

Typically I start my day at 4:15 with a morning coffee, Ajahn Nyaniko, having been up for some time already, is kind enough to make it for me. He walks cheerfully into my room with pleasant greetings while I moan from my bed! Having gone to sleep at some time between 11pm-12am on most nights, 4:15 does seem too early! After coffee, some chit chat, and attending to bathroom matters, we are out the door by 4:50am. Both of us cheerful by this stage.

One morning Ajahn Nyaniko came in singing a Madonna song from at least 25 years ago! Besides the fact that we're not supposed to sing (occasionally in private is tolerated) I couldn't believe that he was so cheerful! Unfortunately, he got some of the words wrong so within a minute or two I had remembered the exact words, and then sung them back to him. We

complimented each other. Me – "It's amazing that you can be so cheerful first thing in the morning!" Ajahn Nyaniko... "And it's amazing that you can remember the exact words of a song you haven't heard for 25 years first thing in the morning too!" My students who must be able to hear some of this silly banter somehow manage to hang onto their faith. In my experience though, one does need to balance intensive practice with a certain amount of light-heartedness. If we sung all day we would lose our support very quickly. Especially if we sung Madonna! Madonna would not normally be our first choice either... let's put it down to stress. 😊 I forgave him, and I know you'll forgive me.

It is wonderful to witness many other people from many different countries walking hurriedly to the Temple an hour or so before dawn as well. Invariably they are radiant with joy radiating from their faces. The local hawkers are out in force as well, looking less joyful and at ease. For whereas the pilgrims clearly have enough resources, both to be here and to get by, for the locals, making a living can be tough. Although we walk right by each day, they still try to push their wares relentlessly. "Lotus flowers... garlands... money change... butter lamps... tea for poor man?"

There are three flower selling boys for whom I have come to feel some genuine affection and respect for over the years Roshan, Rahul, and Sunny. These boys work from very early in the morning, and then go to school as well. When we are not with a lay friend, which is most of the time at this hour, they usually give us a small 10 rupee plate of marigolds as a gift. We will be sure to give them a proper big order or monetary gift before leaving this time. It is important to relate to at least some of the locals with kindness and care, as it makes the dreariness and desperation all around seem easier to be with. We wish them good luck; good day, and sometimes I ruffle their hair.

Mae Chee Aimy, a Malaysian 8 precept nun who has lived with me at Anandagiri for some years leaves even earlier than us, and as one of the very first to enter the temple grounds after the gates open, she reserves our favorite places for us by putting down a little mat. Mae Chee is sitting by 5:05, and we are there by 5:10. Teamwork!

We usually sit from 5:10 until 7:30, and then break for a light breakfast and a cup of chai tea, under a nearby tree within the Mahabodhi Temple compound. It is wonderful to soak up the atmosphere of all the other pujas and Tibetans doing their full length bowing at this time. Getting out of one's own head and rejoicing in the goodness of so many others is helpful. After a quick toilet break, we then sit from around 8:15 until 11:00. So basically we get 5 hours of meditation done before lunch.

Lunch is pre-ordered by our lay-stewards, and is on the table as we arrive at a nearby restaurant by 11:15. In Thailand we eat alms that we receive on traditional almsround from our alms bowl. But here we are a little more flexible. I am somewhat prone to intestinal issues if the food is not well cooked or clean. So eating almsround for me in Bihar would probably end in certain death. (I'm nor joking!) There are scores of restaurants in Bodhgaya, catering to pilgrim's needs, and there are usually other monks and nuns in the restaurants when we arrive as well. We usually eat either Tibetan or Indian food from restaurants that I trust. My experiment with eating half cooked pizza from 'Be Happy' restaurant had me

hanging over the toilet bowl throwing up repeatedly just a few days ago, so we are back at our most trusted establishments once again.

Veg momos (dumplings) with cheese and steamed spinach with cheese is my usual meal at 'Om Tibet' restaurant. Vegetable curry and 'palak paneer' (spinach and cheese curry) with three chapatis is my usual order at 'Om International Restaurant.' The Tibetan food is too bland, and the Indian too greasy and spicy, so we alternate! Food is food and in any case we're grateful.

After lunch we have a little rest from 1-2pm, and are back sitting under the Tree by 3:00. Having a coffee and toilet break around 6pm we then sit again from 6:30-8:30pm. This is basically our normal day. Day, after day, after day! Consistency and repetition gives rise to energy and momentum, making the mind ripe for growth and insight.

If any shopping occurs - Indian or Tibetan incense, prayer flags, small Buddha statues or prayer beads for friends etc. It will usually happen around 9pm, on a meandering walk back to the pilgrim's guesthouse. It's a good time to go shopping because we're all too tired to get very interested! One of our students or stewards will chaperone the monks and pay for any small items with funds that were sent along by students and friends. Many of our supporters do appreciate a hand-picked souvenir from the Holy Site.

On the way back there are other kids we've come to know, Binky and Bharty, two little girls from the nearby shanty town. They ask for biscuits or juice almost every day. "Bis-Ket... Bis-Ket naah." Although it seems a bit strange, I usually ask them to sing-a-song first, because then it feels like more of a truly human exchange. Actually 'seeing' them and 'hearing' them before just throwing things at them. They can now say Please, Thank you and Goodnight. I even taught Binky a line from one of my favorite songs as a young adult, when I was broke and wondering what to do with life. "I've got loooooove in my pocket.... but I've got no mooooooneeyyy." She sings it very well, and then we always laugh afterwards! This is the full extent of my inappropriate behavior with the locals however.

There is another lad who I kind of adopted 7 years ago. I was very affected by the poverty, and hardship that I witnessed on my first trip to India 16 years ago. So much so that I felt significantly depressed for a month after my return to Thailand. Yet on subsequent trips I noticed how easy it was to become indifferent. We simply get used to things. So getting fed up with my own indifference, 7 years ago I made a decision that I would respond with true kindness somehow. Although it would just be a drop in the ocean, I decided that I should try and help at least one poor Bihari family in all of this coming and going from Bodhgaya.

Arun changed his name to Gautama for good luck. Now Gotam to his friends. My students and I have helped him and his family in various ways over the years. He was such an angry and confused little boy at age 11, but clearly trying to understand life and to be good. He caught my attention because of his truthfulness, and actually reminded me of myself as a teenager. With an alcoholic father and no money at home for food, he left his village home to work at the age of 7. When I think of what a true 'human' he has become now at 18, due to the kindness that was shown to him, I could literally weep. His smile is open and has true

depth now, whereas he never really smiled before. He has the joy of gratitude and knows that there are good people in the world. He knows what's right and wrong, and how to be sober, responsible, and kind. I'm so proud of him, but that is a longer story for a later chapter!

We have our own floor, the fourth floor in a five storey building. We each have our own room with its own little bathroom. We get a significantly discounted rate as we stay for more than a month. The owners are actually Muslim, very clean, honorable, and gentle people. Many students pool contributions together to support the monks and mae chee. A little bit of 'private space' is necessary when spending most of the day in public and outdoors. We could stay in one of the monasteries, but it would be appropriate to attend the chanting and help with chores, and then our intensive meditation focus would no longer be possible. So we establish a temporary monastery on level four of Mumtaz Guesthouse.

## **Chapter Five – Day of Miracles!**

Day 19 of 45 – *(177/400 -2777/3000)*

Namo Shivaya, Akkbah Allaha, Hare Krishna, Hare Rama! Miracles do happen! Nearly three weeks in Bodhgaya in February and still no sinus, throat or chest infection! This must be a new world record! Homage to echinacea, vitamin C, olive leaf extract, zeolites, tumeric capsules, and spirulina. And thank-you to my kind students with a vested interest in keeping me alive for offering all of this kit. About a third of my luggage weight when I come on these retreats is supplements and immune system boosters!

Even so, last time around, approximately three months ago, the supplements were not enough. Adequate rest is also important. After not sleeping well for five nights in a row due to the festivities associated with the Diwali/Lakshmi festival (loud music and fireworks!) a throat infection became a chest infection which became mild pneumonia. I then coughed up so hard and so much getting all of that mucus out, that I gave myself a hernia! As I've said, practice here can be tough. It has been two months exactly now since the hernia surgery, and things seem to be holding together quite well - thank goodness!

Another miracle that seems to have occurred is that a real looking Indian monk had a heated exchange with the perhaps not so real looking ones the other day, and today they had no amplifier! Thank heavens for small mercies. They actually sounded ok as just a part of the din of all the other pujas combined. Namu Buddhaya!

Speaking of miracles, Ajahn Visalo, my Indonesian bhikkhu friend has joined Ajahn Nyaniko and myself, after finishing a small pilgrimage with a group from Wat Pah Nanachat led by Ajahn Sukhito. He is another with some India Kamma and deep kammic imprints for sure, having lived here as a swami in a Hindu tradition as a very young man. He has an interesting story. The first time he came to Bodhgaya as a swami he made a request of the Buddha. 'Yogi Gautama, I am having difficulty truly understanding spiritual practice and which direction to take in life. Please help give me guidance.' Not long after he found a book of teachings by Venerable Ajahn Chah, the northeastern Thai Forest Meditation Tradition master! The

teachings made good sense, and he soon found his way to Wat Pah Nanachat, The International Forest Monastery where I also trained. Now he has been a Buddhist monk for ten years. He is a good monk, and a good friend.

Because he will only be here for about a month, feeling that he is starting a bit late and has a limited opportunity, Ajahn Visalo is being especially determined, sitting for 12 hours today for the second day running! I once sat 11 hours for ten days straight here on one of my past retreats, and I have also sat for 12 hours on a couple of occasions. It's very difficult! Getting older now, I find ten per day more sustainable. Ajahn Visalo has decided that he will try to sit 12 hours of meditation for 10 days straight! Forest monks sometimes enjoy some good hearted competition. Not that this is Ajahn Visalo's intention, but having very determined friends is actually good for general morale. We also understand that to bring about truly extraordinary results, we have to sow some extraordinary causes. Offering of practice here at the place of Enlightenment is believed to produce even greater and more potent merits than practicing anywhere else – this is a good motivating factor.

This evening a very 'interesting' thing occurred right at closing time. We were all sitting side by side facing the Chedi, after each completing our final hour of meditation according to our determination, and just as the guards began to blow their whistles to announce that it was time to pack up and get out, a lovely strong breeze suddenly blew. You may not yet realize the happy consequences of such an event. Bodhi leaves began to fall all around like a rain of pure gold! Bodhi leaves from the Bodhi Tree are dearly prized by pilgrims, many of whom are here for just a day or two. After this shower of leaves came a lovely light shower of rain. Everyone got some leaves, and everyone got blessed by what seemed like a sprinkling of Holy Water.

Was it the devas of the Bodhi Tree rejoicing in the efforts of the Forest Monks? Or were they offering their mudita to the many different groups who had just finished their offering of chanting? It's difficult to say for sure. We were grateful that the refreshing rain came right at closing time though, and that it only lasted a few minutes.

