

Section Two - Chapters 6-13

Chapter Six - Joy, Wonder, and Renunciant Thunder

Day 22 of 45 - half way! - (200.75/400 – 2800.75/3000)

I had originally written this chapter 2 days ago, once at the halfway point of this marathon of meditation sessions. I had intended for that sharing to be the last, in order to focus upon the remaining half of this retreat in a very circumspect and inward way. Reading back over it in order to do a little proof reading though, I simply couldn't send it out to my beloved students and friends. Too intense! Although the sense of effort, conviction, and determination were very palpable and would perhaps be inspiring to some, over-all it just felt too heavy. Not so surprising, being more than three weeks into this unrelenting meditation marathon, and with three more weeks to go. Also, I may have overdosed on '*Beyond Tangy Tangerine 2:0*,' - in the effort to fight off a sore throat. It's probably best not to write very late at night when afflicted by ascorbic acid induced heartburn! The sore throat did go away though.

These retreats do require a dogged kind of shoulder to the grindstone willful effort, which can only be sustained by some deep and genuine resolve. The dogged, willful resolve was very evident in my words and we will explore more of this later because it is central. But for now, I am doing a little bit of a re-write, with some of the lightness that comes from having finally gotten past half way! And having had a rostered half day off in the meantime after the fact. Because let's face it, the drink 'Lemon, Lime and Bitters' only really works because of the sugar. Too much bitter without sugar just doesn't work. Too much sweet is terrible too!
Middle Way.

By zodiac this life my conventional 'self' is a Gemini with Gemini rising, which may be why there are so many words. And it seems there may be two aspects to my conventional character as well, represented by this sign of 'the twins.' There is the light, friendly, bubbly chatty side, and the utterly resolved, because utterly fed up, spiritual warrior side. I also have Moon in Aquarius, which is why Ajahn Munindo (*one of our abbots in England*) says, I'm 'weird.' When I asked him "*What do you mean by that?*" He replied, "*Come on, you're not exactly an ordinary Aussie bloke are you?*" And well, perhaps he has a point. This influence can make people idealistic, and somewhat prone to visions, thus have I heard.

Apparently having Mars and Venus in Cancer makes me a tender and caring, yet whiny and whiny kind of warrior. The emotive/empathic water element of Cancer helps balance all the air of Gemini and Aquarius though, so I have been told. It's probably for the best as a mercurial mind with a cold heart could be quite a scary thing. I suspect that the Moon in Cancer aspect is why I really hate packing, a large part of me just wants to stay at home and resents the sense of upheaval. That idealistic Gemini and Aquarius combo keeps dragging the whole team around though, here, there and everywhere. No wonder conventional reality has the nature of unsatisfactoriness. So many elements pulling this way and that! I only mention all of this to help you understand why it is that I can shift very quickly from the seemingly

frivolous to the terribly serious, sometimes mid-sentence! But enough about the conventional Achalo, now, let's step back into India. Watch your footsteps.

You met Binky and Bharty the other day, the two young shanty town girls of "*bisk-ke... bis-ke...*" fame. Today they have bright pink and deep purple faces, I'm not joking they really do. Happily, not because they were beaten (*Oh the things I've seen!*), but because it is Holi, Hindu New Year, where people smear bright colours all over each other's faces. They'll do this for three days, don't ask me why. You'll no doubt be interested to know that the girls have now graduated to greeting us with "*Ajaaaahn - Appy naaah.... Appy nah Ajaaaahn*" Appy being their preferred brand of apple juice. Evidently they like biscuits when it's cold and juice when things are warming up. Fair enough.



Binky looking Happy with a bottle of Appy

Now let me give you a cursory introduction to Mother India's two favorite sons. Levitas and Gravitas, known as Levi and Ravi to their friends, distant relatives of Bathos and Pathos. There'll be more from these two later, but for now, a touch of joy and wonder...

Joy and Wonder - Bodhi Leaves...

The other day, when I arrived at the Temple around 2:30pm, getting ready to settle into the long afternoon/evening session, my preferred seat was not available. So I had to sit further down along the Chedi Wall, two and half metres away from very edge of the sacred Bodhi Tree. Aside from feeling somewhat removed from the shade and blessings of the grand old tree, this spot has some added potentially challenging elements. Very large groups of Sri Lankans like to form a large circle entirely around the adjacent 'Rattana Jongrom Chedi.' A 1 metre high, approximately 19 meters long, sandstone tribute to the place where Lord Buddha did walking meditation, in one of the 7 weeks immediately after his Enlightenment. When

they do this, the still and silently meditating monks seated between the Jongrom Path and Chedi, are evidently somewhat in their way.

One-on-one the Sri Lankans are very lovely, but in a group they can be rather scary. Ajahn Nyaniko, Ajahn Visalo, and I have all been stepped on by middle-aged ladies, had their handbags hit various parts of our bodies, and their often large bottoms situated rather too close to our faces, sometimes for more than half an hour! What to do? Mindfully note it and practice forgiveness I suppose. The long chanting at least is very nice.

Anyway, despite being at least 2 metres from the Tree, and there being absolutely no wind, the moment I placed my meditation mat down in my less than favourite place, a Bodhi leaf landed directly upon it! As if to say, 'We're still aware of you and holding you in our embrace Ajahn!' This kind of thing happens with some frequency, and adds an element of magic to balance the challenges of this place. When I told the story to Ajahn Nyaniko he said, "That's very interesting, it reminds me of what happened to me earlier too. When I was thinking an unskillful thought, a Bodhi leaf slapped against my face... then blew away! As if to admonish me and say, "Be mindful, or no Bodhi Leaf for you!" Naturally he had received big, beautiful leaves on more wholesome occasions as well.

I have come to believe that there are Devas (angels/celestial beings) abiding in the Bodhi Tree. They appear to be good hearted, and wise. They know when to rejoice, and have a sense of humour as well. Evidently they are aware of our thoughts and moods. Once when I led my first Pilgrimage group of around 30 pilgrims, we were all lucky enough to be able to squeeze in under the Tree. While I was giving a short encouraging talk about becoming clearer in our aspirations for liberation, and then setting the aspiration firmly in this, '*The Liberation*' place, no less than five leaves literally fell directly onto, or just next to me. Many people noticed and commented, as the leaves were not falling anywhere else at that time. There are many other stories as well, some very dramatic, but perhaps that's enough for now.

Now moving onto some more serious stuff...

Renunciant Thunder...

(From 2 days ago)

Having passed the halfway point of this current intensive meditation retreat, I am taking a half day off now, to do some yoga, some washing, and to write a little more in this journal. Two more Ajahns have recently joined us, and two more are coming in a couple of days along with a larger group of laypeople. It will be good to see Ajahn Pavaro, my 'second monk' of six years, who has been an excellent companion here previously, but who has been 'holding the fort' at Anandagiri this time around until now. Soon, the little free time that I have will no doubt by necessity, be given over to friendly chats with my fellows and lay students/friends. A bigger group means '*more issues*' and more talk. This is normal. They're all lovely people though. We still have three more weeks of '*10 hours per day*' to follow through with. Please wish me strength, health, luck, and whatever else that might help! Having got 93% through the entire goal of 3000 hours now though, it does feel like I'm entering the final stretch.

I won't be keeping or sharing a journal during this final period, ticking off those last 200 or so hours. (*Editor's note – that's what I thought when I originally wrote this!*) The energy levels tend to flag a little after weeks of such efforts and with less sleep. I'll need to conserve energy simply to make it through 'till the end. Also, as this final stretch is a culmination of a long term practice goal, and an important part of the entire process. It will be an important time for inward reflection, and not yet the time for commenting. I may add something after, some postscript perhaps. I would like to get a few more thoughts written down here now though, while I currently have the chance.

It has been enjoyable taking this time for reviewing and reflecting, as I approach the finish line of what has seemed an enormous undertaking. Getting some perspective on what's been going on for the conventional 'me,' engaged in the process of '*letting go of self*,' within the context of these ongoing periods of intensive practice in India. When I started these marathon sessions around eight years ago, I never imagined that one day I'd be joined by 6 monks, 1 nun, and 10 laypeople all striving diligently with their practice under the Bodhi Tree!

Recollecting the first time that I tried to do 200 hours of meditation here at the Bodhi Tree in approximately 25 days (that was 8 years ago now) I remember very clearly how I wanted to give up at the 136 hour point, feeling that I could be content with a 'B-' grade in the entire endeavour! Why did I need to be impressive anyway? I asked myself. It's too hard! I thought. The shoulder pain, the knee pain, and practicing with all the noise as well as with the symptoms of flu, it all seemed a bit much. At that time a layman named Adrian, who is a teacher, was acting as my steward. Adrian is once again in Bodhgaya even as I write, since then we've kept in touch. He frankly told me that 68% was actually still just only a 'C-!' So obviously that wouldn't do.

This was just before moving to the property that later became Anandagiri Forest Monastery. The reason I had come to India to meditate so intently way back then, was that I wanted to deepen and also re-confirm my commitment to formal practice. And to consciously generate great merits... as well as request help from divine powers! (*The merit of the Buddha and the devas/celestial beings*) Before picking up all of the abstract additional duties of 'being an abbot' and 'building a monastery.' I was going to need all the help I could get!

I told myself when I wanted to give up that being an abbot would be harder, and I wouldn't be able to just run away. (*I'd made a 3 year minimum commitment!*) So I might as well get used to just keeping on going, even when I didn't want to. And so I did eventually finish the 200 hours. It was a good attitude to train more deeply in, because there were definitely times when I did want to give up the whole '*being an abbot and building a monastery*' thing. And going past the '*I just can't do this any longer!*' point, was something I needed to learn how to do with some regularity and dexterity.

Since then, there have been occasions when I have returned to Bodhgaya and stretched the meditation marathons to 300 hours in 33 days a couple of times. Then I finally worked up to 400 hours in 45 days, and have done this on several occasions. This is much more difficult than 200 hours, because the days get harder as you go along. But having done these intensive

meditation marathons now on many occasions, one might ask, why keep on doing it? Isn't once or twice enough? This is a great question. Is it enough?

It is interesting to notice, isn't it? When I didn't give up and kept on going, slowly increasing my efforts and abilities rather than decreasing, that eventually I could actually do *double* what seemed impossible just a few short years before. And I could do it with some regularity. One learns a lot about the nature of doubt, and the true strength of the human mind when we persevere, and also about how to stretch your limits slowly but surely. I needed to carry through, witness, and experience this many times in order to prove it to myself. Unrelenting effort I have discovered, grinds laziness down. Unshakable faith and sheer determination, exhausts doubt. And enduring with the feeling of wanting to give up, without actually doing so, becomes an inner resilience, and toughness that can be truly surprising.

But as impressive as all of that sounds, I am not actually trying to be impressive, either for myself, or anyone else. Rather, I am trying to demonstrate irrefutably, a very important fact - *that I can do more than I think I can*. The reason this needs to be demonstrated to oneself, is because if we truly wish to cross from Samsara into Nibbana, as I do, then consistently doing more than we think or feel that we can must actually become our new *Way of Life*.

Unfortunately our habits are very deep, and they will definitely drag us back if we don't put up an honest and unrelenting struggle. Working diligently to '*Cultivate the good... Avoid harm... and Purify the Mind*' is the real Holy War. We do actually have to be '*warriors at heart*.' (Not fight with other people) We fight this Spiritual War with Virtue, Patient Endurance, Loving-Kindness, Mindfulness, Wisdom, *and* Ruthless Unflinching Determination. It is the only way. If there was another way, Lord Buddha and the Arahants would have told us.

I do recognize that this all sounds rather extreme and inflexible. When talking about 'practice' here I am actually talking about laying the causes for completely purifying and transforming the mind, subsequently leaving all of the suffering of the world behind. I am not talking about doing a bit of practice because it seems 'nice' rather than trying to make Samsara more comfortable, which is futile, as it will always end in pain. True practitioners are aiming at destroying Samsara within, which is our own deluded attachments to the unsatisfactory conditions of the world.

It is possible to approach Buddhist practice in different ways of course. As a supplement or kind of spiritual 'add on' to an otherwise worldly life. Or as a band-aid, learning how to use the methods to ease the pain, but not really digging in to remove the deeper causes. Or as something like 'damage control,' being generous and ethical enough to try and avoid the worst pitfalls of samsara. Then there is the approach which aims at a complete *outer* and *inner* revolution, the path of the Spiritual Warrior, giving it our all.

We can continue to play some enchanting music on the decks of the sinking Titanic, and try to smile at the always approaching disasters, even as we gasp for air! Or we can jump on a raft or any floatable object at hand, and start paddling like hell to '*the other shore*.' You will know from my tone by now, which school of practice I belong to! This guy wasn't walking

around in the full sun with diarrhea 17 years ago, still trying to find ways to make this monks life work, because I needed a new positive affirmation. The tears streaming down the 18 year old face of a younger me were not lightly shed. They were heavy, and they were expressions of a great ache. My heart had been broken about a million times too many you see. So I was, and still am, seriously motivated to remove this heart from harm's way. That means taking a lot of responsibility, and establishing consistent mind and life changing disciplines.

But alas, everything one says needs qualifying! I am not judging anybody or dismissing people's efforts. Life is difficult and challenging for almost everybody. I also know that there are hundreds of thousands of people, possibly millions, who know how to practice and who wish to undertake it very sincerely. Yet their kammic life situation does not yet allow a complete commitment as yet. Single parents, people with big families, people with jobs, and kids and ageing parents etc. Then there are people living under authoritarian regimes, or those working several jobs just to pay the bills. These are not the people I am admonishing. We have compassion for and dedicate merits to such fine people, may their situations improve! May they have the opportunities and support that they aspire for!

There are those who are lazy, distracted, half-hearted or wishy-washy who have good opportunities, and yet are heedless. They know they should focus, but they don't. You guys need a kick in the pants! Some people know what they need to do, and have the opportunity, but just can't find the resolve to do it yet. So what to do in the meantime? I recommend doing a little more... then a little more... then on and on, without allowing any slipping back. If you need to crawl, or take baby steps then so be it. But take them! Reclaim territory from Greed, Hatred and Delusion one inch at a time if needed, but start reclaiming that territory, because as Ajahn Maha Boowa liked to say, "*the kilesa are walking all over your heart.*" It's time to start kicking them out.

Chapter Seven - Increasing Conviction, Energy and Resolve – in order to achieve our Ultimate Goal.

Editor's note... I can see in my re-reading of these journal entries after the practice period in India, that the tone of what I was firmly and truthfully telling myself are reflected in the words above and below. And so this theme of effort and determination is what I had decided to share with students and friends. The 'halfway point' is where I was at when writing. This meant – only half way!... don't give up!... keep going! In general I am not a teacher who scolds, or firmly admonishes very much. In fact I am probably a little too friendly and soft. So I was taking the time to let my students know what I really think we need to be doing, and felt emboldened to do so, because during this time I was being unrelentingly focused and determined myself. So please read these words with this understanding of the context.

It seems that many people these days kind of assume that if they sit once per day, read a Dhamma book, attend a Dhamma talk occasionally, or listen to a few talks off the web, that some kind of Enlightenment experience will arise at some point just as it did for Annya Kondannya when listening to the first Teaching. We forget that Kondannya was an extremely

diligent and strict ascetic before hearing the teaching. The spiritual powers do need to be developed and ripe in order for Profound Liberating insight to occur.

I know from many personal conversations with the Teachers who I trust the most, that the wonderful results they gained definitely came from extraordinary and unrelenting effort, maintained over a period of many years. I don't repeat this here in order to dishearten, discourage, or intimidate anyone. Rather, I think we need to recognize deeply, the truth of the type of effort that is required in order to motivate ourselves to start working towards our goal, with a realistic, determined and optimistic long-term view. We can all make these kinds of effort eventually, if we increase our capacity steadily over time.

Those of us who truly aspire to be Enlightened and Liberated, actually have to do more than we think we can do right now. That means sitting with restlessness, and doubt past the point where we'd like to give up. The Middle Way is a constant and consistent applying of pressure against the power of laziness and greed, hatred and delusion. Deep Samadhi is the basis for truly powerful Insight, and this only arises from a great and consistent effort. If people seem to develop stable concentration quickly in this lifetime, it is because the effort was already put forth in previous lives. So in this life we need to put forth effort! Lots of people over estimate the level of their concentration as well, when life is not too challenging. But when the shit hits the fan and life gets tough – the collectedness is suddenly not there. When the going is good we need to work hard in preparation. When the going is tough, we need to work even harder.

So where does Ajahn Achalo get this perspective from anyway you might ask? Shortly after becoming an abbot I asked my main teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Anan. "Now that I am busier as an abbot and teacher and busy with building the monastery, how many hours of meditation should I aim to do each day?" He replied... "So before you were an abbot you were doing about five right?"... Yes... "Okay, so now that your life is more complicated you should aim to do six!" I love my Ajahn for his Tough Love. The truth is gold to me. I haven't been able to follow his advice though, still only averaging around five... but I think he's right! Without his honesty I might have been heedless and let things slip back too far.

People can lose heart when they try hard for a period of time and then don't seem to get anywhere. We are actually getting somewhere, but the journey may be a little longer than you think. Stopping along the way, or going in reverse won't help! Keeping on steadily going forward, even if slowly is what actually works. One of the things my teacher Ajahn Anan says, which I think is very helpful is that even if you don't attain jhana, samadhi, or attain the first stage of Enlightenment in this life the more you can practice the sooner the Enlightenment experience is definitely coming, and the number of future lives is certainly decreasing. This long term confident and optimistic view can be very helpful for sustaining consistent effort.

For those who are on a longer more altruistic Path, who aspire to be truly great practitioners and teachers in the future before attaining final liberation the more you can practice this life the more skills you will develop, and the faster you will be able to help sentient beings in the future. All Buddhist Paths are Paths of effort. 'Right Effort' is a factor in the Noble Eightfold

Path. The Four Great Efforts are an integral part of the '37 Wings to Awakening.' These are a list of Dhammas to be cultivated for those aspiring for liberation. No way around it! It is of course normal to feel like giving up at some point along the way. We can feel that we've made enough of an effort that the results should come more quickly. Stopping or becoming rebellious or stubborn at such times simply doesn't work. I came up with a bit of a visual analogy for this while thinking about it earlier today. Suppose you are walking from Varanasi to Bodhgaya. You don't know how far you've come, but you're tired, and you think you should be there already. So you stop right there in the middle of the path and say... "Bodhgaya should be here already! I've walked long enough! I demand Bodhgaya! *that you* - come to me where I am right now!" Is this useful? Will Bodhgaya come any closer? So then Bodhgaya doesn't come and you get even more stubborn. "Okay fine!" you say in a huff. Then, rebelliously you start walking back the other way. Stupid! We can't relate to the spiritual path as 3 year olds like this. What we can do is mindfully take just one more step, no matter how tired or impatient we feel. When we do this, we will certainly get to Bodhgaya – the place of Enlightenment.

As someone who teaches with some frequency now and as an abbot who people visit and ask questions about practice of, there is a frequent question that I meet with. It goes like this... "Ajahn, I've been meditating for 10 (*or 15, or 20*) years now, but I don't feel that I'm really getting anywhere... am I doing something wrong? Do I need to change the method?" Then the Ajahn invariably asks. "How long do you sit for each day?" And the answer is usually "30-45 minutes" or occasionally it will be 1 hour. On such occasions it is not so easy to say what I feel I have to say, but a sincere question deserves a sincere answer. Tough Love.

Basically, I tell these people that they're aware of the illness and the symptoms, and have found the correct medicine. The problem is that they are not yet taking enough. I recommend adding an additional session, so that they then meditate every morning and evening. Then I encourage them further to cut back on entertainment, news, social media and other distractions, and eventually aim to add an afternoon session as well. If people meditate 45 minutes to an hour, three times per day, they will definitely experience a big difference. A half an hour once per day will not get you very far. It is of course a good start, and does make merit and lay a foundation so nothing is wasted, but the benefits are limited. Mindfulness needs to be generated, and sharpened frequently in order to gain true strength so that it can apprehend 'mental objects' quickly, and have the power to 'put them down' before they delude the mind.

With more regular and consistent practice, there will usually be a tangible growth in a sense of coolness, spaciousness, and wakefulness in the mind, less reactivity and a greater capacity to reflect wisely as well. What we get out of practice is usually commensurate to what we put in. Stopping and starting doesn't work. We lose ground... the ignorance seeps back in. One has to be consistent. There's no way around this.

In this Path of Great Effort the power of parami, or virtue, must necessarily become more powerful than that of greed, hatred and delusion, in order to overcome and uproot it. Faith must become more powerful than doubt. A capacity to just 'stay,' and be patient must become stronger than all of our habitual restlessness, and sensual craving. The capacity to relinquish

must be even more powerful than our desire to acquire. Attaining Enlightenment it would seem is more a process of letting go of all that obstructs our potential for purity of mind rather than actually attaining something outside. We need to assiduously cultivate spiritual qualities in order to be able to let go though.

Sitting meditation is a great way to see clearly what one needs to let go of. Sometimes we can, and sometimes we can't. It's a process. Holding the attachment in awareness, and becoming more mindful of the suffering it causes, conditions future letting go. Patiently abiding with a mind that is *almost peaceful*, or peaceful in moments, also further conditions longer periods of concentration to arise. Bodhgaya has been a wonderful place to both consider and practice all of these things.

I have experienced many hours of seemingly easy peace and ease while sitting under the Bodhi Tree here in Bodhgaya. To a degree and for durations of time that I would never have thought possible a decade ago. Although I am not yet a fully liberated 'noble one,' I have had experiences of what my teacher calls 'temporary liberations.' When the mind is content, cool and at ease, and where no palpable 'suffering' can be discerned. In experiencing this, one witnesses a potential. If you can experience it for even a short period of time, it serves to demonstrate that 'suffering' can definitely 'fall away' from the mind, and the mind can experience deep peace. If this potential can be partially realized, then it stands to reason that it can be fully realized. Once the necessary conditions are fully present.

This peace and detachment then gives rise to energy and stability for the important investigation of sense contact, and of the various feelings that arise when sense impingement occurs. Often times one is able to remain with some balance and equipoise, having had some experience of the mind which doesn't react. Other times one reacts, but perhaps less than before. Although it seems there is a long way to go before 'stabilization of samadhi' has been fully accomplished, and there is the capacity to enter absorptions at will, witnessing some growth and having some experience of deep peace has certainly been encouraging. I do feel that there has been some progress in developing more mindfulness and wisdom, and a reduction in ignorance and delusion, which means less suffering!

Anyways, that's probably enough from me for now...

So I've been trying to share with you as sincerely and openly as I can, my own level of commitment to this transformative Path of Insight. Writing at a time where I am doing intensive practice, will no doubt have captured a certain intensity in my words as well. I am trying to be a good example of someone practicing, and hope that my example and sharing have been educational and inspiring to some. Please forgive me if anything I've said has seemed harsh or offensive. If something I said was not useful, then please simply leave it with me. If something was useful, then you can bow at my lotus feet! *Joke!*

Wishing you success in being more committed in your own way, by doing a little more study, contemplation, and meditation wherever you are now, and doing it day after day - refusing to ever give up. In this manner, your spiritual powers will grow, and your negative habits will

fade. It is a tried and true approach that leads to the Deathless, and merges in the Deathless. The Buddha and the Arahants have proved it.

May you be Well, may you be Happy, may you be Free from every type of suffering, and attain Unshakeable Peace as swiftly as possible!

With Loving-Kindness

Chapter Eight - Holy Basil, Frankincense and Myrrh - The Smell of Real Monks

Day 24 (220/400 – 2820/3000).

Yesterday, March 1st, was Magga Puja. It is one of the three most Holy days of the Buddhist calendar commemorating the occasion where Lord Buddha laid down the central principles of restraint, which support the realization of ultimate truth - Nibbana. Here in Bodhgaya, many people make a special effort to celebrate, acknowledge, and honor this holy day at this most holy place often traveling great distances to do so. So how was it? You might ask. Spending one of the most holy days at this most holy place, with so many inspired devotees? Well, it was absolutely awful! Why?

There were so many groups competing to do their special pujas in quite a limited space, and every group had their own loud speaker. The larger groups who had reserved bigger spaces within the compound also had very large stationary amplifiers as well. The volumes all incrementally increasing to be heard over one another. The result was total auditory mayhem! One point in particular was especially raucous when the Bhutanese lamas were banging their cymbals and blowing their long horns, and the Japanese 'Namo Myo Ho Rengye Kyo' group decided to turn up their speakers, beat their drums louder, and yell their mantra to be heard above the din! It's especially baffling when one considers that Lord Buddha forbade the monks from playing, or even touching musical instruments - he could see this coming! Try to imagine that at the same time, there is also a Cambodian, Burmese, Thai, and Sri Lankan group doing simultaneous amplified chanting... and consider that it was like this *ALL* day.

Normally the pujas and sounds can be practiced with easily enough. Like waves that build, crash, and then rescind. The mind finds ways to be patient, observe the flux and change, and rest in the precious hushed moments in-between. But Magga Puja at the Mahabodhi Temple was a storm that just raged all day, and the churning waves just crashed, and crashed, and crashed on the shores of our ears! All in our group found it be a very long day, and we came back to the Guesthouse very tired. We kept our practice vows however!

On this day, Ajahn Nyaniko and I had to turn to emergency aromatherapy treatments several times, relaxing the tension around the trauma of the over stimulated, and subsequently

bruised heart/mind. After 4 or 5 generous dabs of lavender and Rose Otto throughout the day though, I began to feel a bit worried. You see Forest Monks need to maintain a certain toughness and austerity in our carriage and demeanor. It's archetypal, we're supposed to be like green berets, dug down in the trenches, and killing the kilesa left right and centre. But on this day we had begun to smell like a florist, or as Mae Chee Aimee commented... like babies talcum powder! This would just not do!

So Ajahn and I consulted our apothecary of emergency supplies to look for an alternative. Curiously enough, he had picked up some Myrrh at the farmers market in Hawaii, where his parents live. And I'd been offered some Frankincense. How Amazing! Well if the three wise men thought these medicinal unguents were the most suitable offering for Jesus, they'd certainly be good enough for us. So we blended the two and came up with a new aromatherapy fragrance/treatment, with its own catchy slogan. 'Mankinsence - Man Up!'

That seemed much more like what was in order. Unfortunately, when we rubbed it on our hearts, it just didn't smell very nice! Too astringent, too musty, too manky. Once again looking desperately at my supplies I found some essential oil of basil, an herb that is sacred to Hindus and is offered to Lord Krishna. That seemed promising! So I mixed in a little more coconut oil as a base and then a few drops of sweet basil and hey presto! It all smelt very nice. And now we have a new name. 'Mankinsence-asil – the Smell of Real Monks!'... Ummm, on second thoughts maybe not. Okay I got it! 'Mankinsence-asil - The Fragrance of Would Be Saints.'

Please forgive the self-satire. Sometimes, when it's really a tough slog, you've gotta find ways to laugh. Obviously we don't have these essential oils to perfume our bodies. Primarily I use them to make fragrant perfume offerings at the Chedi and Bodhi Tree. Incense without the chemicals and smoke! My favorite blends are Lavender, Rose, and Rose Geranium; Jasmine, Ylang-Ylang, and Grapefruit; and Sandalwood, Rosewood, and Amber. Many friends who wish to participate in our practice puja in India offer a little oil here and there, but we do use some of the oils therapeutically at times. Rose and lavender really works for calming and softening. Frankincense and Myrrh is more grounding. Sandalwood is traditionally used for psychic protection. The fragrance of virtue, Lord Buddha assures, is the finest, and is not blown away by the wind.

Chapter Nine - 95% of the big goal is accomplished!

Day 29 – $(252.5/400 = 67\% - 2852.5/3000 = 95\%)$

Mid-day...

It's mid-day on March 6, 2018. I'm at Mumtaz' Guesthouse just after our meal. Yesterday I had a half day off, due to having a mild throat infection, and after having been rained on a little I thought it best to play it safe (after catching pneumonia last time). After a rest and

some medicine things seem okay for now. In a little while we will return to The Bodhi Tree to continue our offering of practice.

Three more monks arrived to join us a few days ago. The Canadian born Ajahn Pavaro, and the two Thai monks Ajahn Kgit, and Ajahn Anun, all of whom have an association with Anandagiri monastery. All six monks, Mae Chee, and our current group of lay friends are practicing very sincerely and well. It is very pleasing to observe. Our corner of the Temple complex with everyone sitting straight and quietly, from opening time to closing time looks truly inspiring!

It is the 29th full day since arriving. By the end of the day, the total hours of meditation sat by me on this retreat so far will be 252.5 hours. With 147.5 hours to go, and with 17 full days remaining, it's looking pretty good for a successful completion of 400 hours. We are two thirds of the way through our time here, and I'm two thirds through this particular retreat's practice goal. Recognizing that nothing can be taken as a given of course, nonetheless, it feels good to be on target.

But even if I were to suddenly die (as we Buddhists like to consider), and could not complete this particular vow as of this very day, I've already made it to the 95% point, of my aspired for 3000 hours meditation at the Bodhi Tree/Vajra Asana, here in Bodhgaya. Which Adrian, my teacher friend assured me was an A. Anything from here on is an A+ he said! I remember how far away this seemed just 6 months ago, with 800 hours still to go back then. It really does feel good to have come this far and got this close to finishing this formal practice pledge.

By now I am starting to be a bit obsessed by the numbers. For although it is all about the process, having made a determination at this place, you have to follow through. When you're tired the numbers loom large in the mind. For some it might seem like a neurosis, but clearly it is a skillful means. The Tibetans come here and try to do 100,000 full length prostrations in three months, and they count their mantras by the 100's of thousands and sometimes by the millions. My group of Forest Monk friends and our students are counting our hours of sitting meditation.

On difficult days, you can think unskillfully that 1 day is just one third of a percent of the 3000 hour goal. Three difficult days are still just only 1%! And this line of thinking can be really disheartening, sapping the energy to carry on. A whole day of sincere effort seems like almost nothing! But when you shrink things down to smaller goals, 'just ten for today,' and keep on going, eventually the end draws near. In a way of course, nothing is coming to completion. My commitment to daily practice will go on. But the final cessation of all suffering must surely have come much closer. This at least is my sincere and deep faith. Sowing the causes, the results come in their own time.

I have recently done some reviewing and rough calculations. In the bigger picture of my

monk's life, if I can keep up an average of five hours of meditation per day, after just 3 more years, my offering of practice this lifetime will be approximately 30,000 hours thus far. (With ten percent accomplished at the Bodhi Tree.)

These periods of longer sitting are an investment in my maintaining a good standard of practice back at the monastery, where more duties, complications, and opportunities for distraction await. I have set my intention to be a truly good and sincere meditation monk while here in Bodhgaya, literally thousands of times, and continue to do so daily. Our goals and intentions need to be clear and firmly established in our minds in order to succeed.

So what are we actually doing when meditating anyway?

When sitting, one is not 'just sitting' of course. We take this meditation time to sharpen and clarify the mindfulness, mostly using breath meditation as our tool. One deliberately pacifies the hindrances or unwholesome mind states which are present, repeatedly bringing the mind to a sense of balance. 'Keeping the mind in the middle' As Luang Por Chah advised. Sometimes wise reflection is required, other times loving-kindness, and other times one investigates the sense bases and the body, trying to see them clearly as 'not-self.' At other times, if the mind inclines to peacefulness, we simply let it rest, in order to have energy and clarity to bring to daily tasks. Or in order to have good energy for further investigation once the mind moves from the peaceful state.

In my own personal experience, 5 hours per day (2 in the morning - one before, and then one after the alms round, 1 in the afternoon, and then two in the evening - one at the evening puja, and one after) helps me to maintain a very good quality mindfulness and wisdom where investigation and wise reflection is ongoing throughout the day, and where goodwill is firmly established. At busier times the sittings may come down to just 45 minutes or so, but I keep up the regularity as best as I can. I know many monks who do less, but a few who do much more. Walking meditation supports good clear mindfulness and investigation too as well as our physical health. I try to do an hour in the afternoons, but often fail here, if there is office work, or building projects to supervise.

Although I am sitting for ten hours per day here in Bodhgaya on most days I'm only counting nine and a half officially, because of some chatting to other members of our group, a little bit here and there. This was less of an issue in the past, because there were just a couple of others. Now, with more people, more issues, and more coming and going, there's inevitably more to liaise. I'm happy to facilitate though, because the sincerity of my friend's practice also brings much joy, and it is good and correct to help others to have similar opportunities to those that I've been given.

According to my tally, there's been a day and a half lost to food poisoning, another half day lost to yesterday's sore throat, and a couple of hours lost due to the Prime Minister of

Vietnam's state visit earlier in the week, where we were locked outside for a while. So after subtracting the 2 days, and a few hours I am averaging the intended 9 and a half hours. If I can keep this up for the remaining time all will be well! (With 2 empty days still allocated for unexpected or unforeseen 'stuff' – because there always is some!)

So let me now give you a proper update about some of the other members of the current team...

Ajahn Nyaniko has been averaging 10 hours per day, and the newly arrived Ajahn Visalo managed to sit 12 hours per day, ten days in a row! So inspired and determined he was. They're both still in excellent health. I have sat 12 hours on several occasions in the past as well, mostly when I had to make up for some hours that were lost due to rain, illness, or something like that. I also once sat 11 hours, ten days in a row, but never 12 hours for ten days! Actually he sat 11 hours one day, but 13 the next (wow!) which seemed 'same-same' to us. So Ajahn Visalo has impressed and inspired. With a lighter frame, and a yogi's past he has very flexible hips, and less weight to bear... wonderful assets to bring to such occasions!

Ajahn Pavaro, my second monk, has now arrived for these final three weeks. This is his third 'intensive' in Bodhgaya. He has also attended a full pilgrimage that I led, then led one of his own the following year. We share a love for the Holy sites of Mother India. Before he was a monk, Pavaro was a professor of comparative religion, with a deep love of and familiarity with the Pali suttas. He is more heady and booky than I, polite, and always on time. He is a good brother and friend, and a very decent and well liked monk and man. I am faithful, emotional, creative and usually a little late. Not quite sure how he puts up with me! But we both love the practice. He has not kept track of his hours as obsessively as I, but must be somewhere between 7-800 hours of practice here himself.

Mae Chee Aimy is a quiet achiever, plodding consistently as she does. She averages around 7 hours per day, and has been here for four of these longer retreats by now. She also spent one rainy season retreat in Bodhgaya many years ago, another person with a deep kammic affinity. We calculated that she must have already accumulated around 1500 hours of formal practice here! As an abbot, I feel I won the lottery to have this particular Malaysian born Mae Chee as our resident nun at Anandagiri. Hard working, and consistent in her practice, and happy to help when it's needed. No dramas she just gets on with it, and grows and matures all the while. She is fortunate to have me as her abbot as well, because I give her a great deal of free time for her formal practice, which can be rare, and include her in many excursions.

Having less training rules than the monks, yet being very familiar with our rules, Mae Chee Aimy is a very helpful steward. She holds the funds that were offered to support our retreat, orders, and then pays for the meals, and helps me with the accounting. Looking recently at the funds that were offered for various needs, we discovered we had a significant surplus. (Many Thais have made offerings since we arrived, so the original food fund is virtually untouched)



Joyful after a full day of striving

I asked Ajahn Visalo if he would like a statue, or something similar, as a reward for his special efforts. He was interested in a small, light Buddha statue to take along when traveling. So we were able to offer Ajahn Visalo a lovely 5 inch, good quality, hand carved wooden Buddha statue, as a reward and a token of appreciation. When he reached the '120 hours in ten days,' we did a little chant, and offered the smiling Buddha in meditation mudra as a gift.

There are another two Thai Ajahns who've joined now as well, Ajahn Git and Ajahn Anun. Both spend time with me regularly at Anandagiri. Ajahn Git has a very caring nature, and he volunteered to clean the abbots kuti regularly back at the monastery. They are sitting meditation a lot as well, although are less intense than Nyaniko, Visalo, and I. Closer to the time that we leave, if everyone has been very diligent (which I'm sure they will have been) Mae Chee will help each of the monks to select few souvenirs to take back for family and close supporters. Until then, no shopping!

Having recently reached the 'ten years as a monk' point, Ajahn Anun felt that he needed to reinvigorate his level of inspiration saying that he knows very well how to practice, but the motivation is flagging. He has found that sitting close to the Bodhi Tree and Vajra Asana has been very moving and inspiring, and is very grateful that I found the support to include him. He also shared with me recently that he feels very touched by both the quality of practice, and care towards the Sangha that my students are demonstrating, as do I.

Two brothers, Chye Aik and Chye Locke, our Malaysian layman students/friends, have now departed having practiced very well for around ten days. They have now been replaced by Joyce Lim, and Wendy Chew our Malaysian Laywomen students/friends. Liv Conquest from Melbourne has been with us the whole time. All are practicing well, and are highly inspired. In about a week, we will be joined by around fourteen of our Thai students and supporters who wish to be here for the final push.

As of three days ago, in seeing that reaching our goal seemed likely with less pressure to sit extra hours 'just in case' Ajahn Nyaniko and I have added some chanting to our daily routine at the Chedi. We have both learned the 'Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta,' the Buddha's First Teaching by heart, and so it seemed an appropriate recollection. Chanting 'The Teaching' that elucidates the Four Noble Truths and The Eightfold Path, in the very place where Lord Buddha fully penetrated these Liberating truths, feels wonderful. To be able to do it by heart is a joy. It takes us around 15 minutes. We then chant the factors of 'Dependent Co-Arising,' which is another way that the Lord Buddha's profound Insights are described, which takes another 5 minutes.

Some of the other people close by, regulars who seem to be here for longer periods as well, who've seen us sitting like lumps of wood for more than three weeks, were literally shocked by our suddenly transforming into professional Pali chanters! My goodness, they can actually do something! Jaws dropped, and people suddenly bowed toward us from several different directions. Now, a few people wait with their chanting books at hand in order to join in once we pipe up. This has been a good addition to the schedule.

I had a very lovely meditation experience two days ago. The days immediately after Magga Puja were tough, feeling kind of heavy and clogged up after sitting in the psychic soup of the big noisy crowds all day, with the mind not collecting. But patiently enduring and persisting, things shifted significantly. After this the mind felt so light, serene and energized that I stayed up way too late two nights in a row, which is a factor in why I got the sore throat I'm sure. The mind was not tired, but the body needs more than three and a half hours sleep! Especially when fighting off the bugs hovering in the air all around. Today's meditation continued pleasantly as well, the weather is cool and fresh after yesterday's light rain.

Sharing the merits of our practice with all those kammicly connected.

Chapter Ten - Mumtaz Gems & Sons

The Muslim brotherhood. Tamim runs the Guesthouse. Tahir has a high-end 'original quality' Buddhist mala (prayer beads) shop on the lower floor, and Ardil helps with a bit of this and a bit if that. Meanwhile, Shalal sources and distributes malas to and from many places. Lapis Lazuli from Afghanistan, Turquoise from Pakistan, Rainbow Moonstone comes from Bihar itself, and some Russians who are repeat guests at the guesthouse bring real Amber from Russia, sourced from Kaliningrad.

The semi-precious gemstone beads are now mostly processed in the factories of China. They are perfectly round, have wide well-centred holes, and are immaculately and highly polished. They are perfect for meditation beads. Rose quarts, amethyst, agate, crystal, jasper, onyx and garnet to name but a few. Sandalwood and rosewood however, are still handmade in India. Everything is available at a price from very cheap to very expensive! Tahir is charming and persuasive, and really wants his customers to love their malas. "As you wish sir, as you wish madam... if you like you then you take, better... If you can't pay now, you pay next year, no problem!" If you are not quite sure... "Okay you take and you try first... if you like then you buy... no like, no problem!" If you don't have the cash on you... "Yes we take credit card... 6% surcharge only."

Deliveries need to be sent frequently to Delhi and Dharamsala. The Buddhist Mala business is bigger than you might think! The sign on the shop reads 'Mumtaz Gems & Sons,' and they have hundreds of thousands of malas in stock. Most of it is kept at their large multi-floored home. Competition is steep from hundreds of stalls on the street, mostly run by Tibetans who come down from various places for the pilgrimage season. In fact, I'm quite certain that no other place in the world has as many Buddhist malas for sale, than Bodhgaya in peak tourist season! So Mumtaz and Sons go for better quality, and a good reputation. Repeat customers often return after many years. The re-stringing of malas is offered for free!

Tahir is very charming; he is the man in front. His English, although not perfect, is very quaint. Having known him for many years I can translate very well. For example, "Actually nah, actually this not coming," means, "This is very difficult to source, and is a truly rare item hardly ever in stock." Of course somehow Tahir manages to always have such things in stock!

He will invite you for tea and a chat as you walk by, no pressure, just come and talk. Such an honor to have you as our guest! But then, he will start showing you 'special things' while you chat, to see if something catches your eye. Like a gypsy he waves his trinkets before your fascinated eyes. He is sharing his secrets, his knowledge, showing you the family heirlooms, telling you charming tales, he has all the time in the world. You soon feel he is a true friend. "Here, smell this real sandalwood oil... real amber oil... smell this real, 'best quality' sandalwood mala... best and rare agarwood mala." The smells are divine! With sandalwood the pitch is particularly funny. "This one real... this one more real!" Means that one has been boiled to extract the oil, while the other has not, the price difference is staggering.

Keep in mind that outside on the streets of Bodhgaya, one sees many 'down and out' types dressed in dirty rags. There is also a lot of dust and noise, and unholy smells waft from every direction. Whether walking, or riding in an auto rickshaw to and from the Temple the smell of filth and excrement is an assault to the often 'sensitized by meditation' senses. Coming into a clean, bright coloured, fragrant space is very enticing, especially when the owner is well mannered, gracious, and clean. Once the sweet Chai has been ordered and offered most people are very happy to lose themselves in the pleasant sights, smells, sounds, and tastes. It is my belief that many people succumb to buying expensive items here that they would easily forego elsewhere, it is largely a matter of time, place, and context. Retail Therapy as it were, relaxing after a hard day of striving.

Over the years, inevitably I became interested in more than a few of his items as well, as have most of my friends, both monks and laypeople alike. We must necessarily walk past this shop everyday! Close students with gratitude and faith have on occasion been keen to make an offering to their Ajahn. I do have a several mantra practices as well as my breath and walking meditation practices, so a few special strands of mala beads for these special practices have found their way into my life. I also learned how to string malas, and tie the special slip knots, and have taught many of my monk friends as well. Making malas actually became one of my hobbies! Over the years malas from Tahir's shop have also been re-offered by myself and others to many other senior monks, including His Holiness the Dalai Lama, and His Holiness the Karmapa.

Mumtaz is the patriarch of the family. Gray-bearded and slightly stern looking he is often seen walking to and from the mosque. One night, I was having a cup of tea with Tahir in his mala shop when Mumtaz, who sometimes stays on level two, came home from his devout praying at the mosque. Tahir stepped out for a moment, and Mumtaz came in for a chat. Perhaps recognizing a fellow religious man with some accumulated wisdom from life, Mumtaz shared a few thoughts with me. Here are some of Mr. Mumtaz' Gems...

When I asked him how the family was, how is business? This was his reply...

"You know Achaan... these Buddhists are coming... especially from China... they are looking for special mala. Coral... Amber... Turquoise... and they are paying sooo much money!... I am making a lot of money!" Smiling, he continued. "It's crazy huh Ajahn? God is everywhere... God created Everything... so if you want to pray to God you can pray anywhere!... and you can use anything!... Any tree is okay, don't have to go to Bodhi Tree... any simple wood mala is also okay! No need to spend tens or hundreds of thousands of rupees on coral or amber!"... but then wistfully he considered... "But it is lucky for me nah Achaan... I can take care of my family... have big house... have car... is okay... noh?... Achaan... noh?"

My reply... "Yes it's good Mumtaz, good for you, and your family." Then after a few moments, "okay, I need to rest, goodnight."

Walking up the stairs to level four, after meditating at the Bodhi Tree all day, with one turquoise mala and one amber mala from previous years in my shoulder bag, I felt a little defensive!... "No! The Tree where Buddha was Enlightened is *not* like just any other tree!" And... "It's okay to have a few special malas to use as sacred implements, if you do tens, hundreds, even millions of mantras like I do!"... But yes, they can be expensive.

I tell you they are laughing at us my friends! And they are laughing all the way to the bank! But never-mind, if Buddhist practitioners do their mantras and the Mumtaz family gets by just fine, then there is no harm and no problem. Seems win-win to me! But perhaps don't believe them too quickly when they say... "Special price for you... another one... selling much more nah." Ask them for their best 'reasonably priced' items!

As of a few years ago though, I started encouraging my students and friends to put aside some funds for a donation to a local charity. If there is a surplus of funds that were given for the monks needs by the end of our stay, which there usually is, then we join in the offering as well. We have been giving to the Root Institute's Charities for years. They have a free school, a women's clinic, an animal shelter, and an orphanage for kids with HIV. They also have outreach health services with a team that travels out to the poorer villages. We have given at least US\$1,500 each year over the last four years. This way not all of people's spare cash went on expensive malas!

I do believe that Tahir is a good man and a friend. He really does want to give us Buddhists the perfect mala, and feels content when he manages to do so, (*the new owner being content with the product – but not always content with the price!*) it is point of merchants/ craftspeople's pride. On a higher level his love of his dear god Allah is very deep, and he frequently expresses regret that he is so absorbed in business matters. Muslim families in India have many children, so there are many mouths to feed. He respects the sincerity of my spiritual practice and that of my students and friends, and asks us to pray for him too.

Having respect for teachers and meditators and recognizing virtue in people, every now and then he tries to engage me in a religious discussion, clearly, trying to find common threads and mutual appreciation. The same is true of Tamim. They believe That Buddha was a Teacher with a close connection to God, same with Jesus, but then that the last 'Big Teacher' was Mohammed. Since Mohammad's time there are some teachers with some connection, but not the truest and deepest connection like their prophet.

I usually remain fairly quiet during these religious themed chats, emphasizing that generosity, virtue, and metta will lead to rebirth in heaven. This is a common thread. The idea that no 'God' is ultimately greater than any other being in our shared potential, and that we all have an equally special 'Buddha potential' would sound offensive I am sure. And that there is something higher than life in the highest heaven realm, living alongside the most powerful Brahma realm Deities, would also seem quite grating.

God is highest for Hindus and Muslims in India, any other notion is sacrilege. One must pray for forgiveness, pray for salvation, pray for Blessings, and praise the qualities of Gods in order to experience good fortune on earth, and then be reborn in their divine company in the afterlife. No doubt it is very perplexing for people who love their gods so dearly, yet still experience great difficulty and pain. Why does god not love me? Bless me? When I adore him /her so?

Nibbana is the Highest say the wise, and it is to be realized by each person for themselves. No prayers to gods alone can accomplish this. In terms of a god-like nature, we all have extraordinary potential to fill the universe with radiance, then transcend that for something much finer. No conditioned phenomenon, even boundless radiance from immense samadhi, and oceans of merit can compete with the bliss of having 'let everything go' say those who

have realized Nibbana. The purified mind with no remainder of clinging experiences the highest bliss!

The number of people who resonate with this concept in the world is limited. Most people can't even imagine how extraordinary their minds already are, or how much more so they might become in the future. Experiencing limitations and imagining greatness outside of themselves praying for something outside to fix the problem, but ultimately the problem is within, and so sadly it doesn't work. We should feel immense gratitude to the Buddha for teaching us about our ultimate potential, and for explaining the Path to realize this. I most certainly do!

The Buddha, Dhamma, Sangha are my Refuge!

Bodhi Seed Malas - a Higher Teaching on Emptiness

Bodhi seed malas are a fascinating phenomenon. You see, there is no such thing, and yet they are for sale, quite expensively all over Bodhgaya. So they do not really exist, and yet they appear! A bit like us! But what do you mean Ajahn, they do not exist?

Having sat as I have for so many hours, days and seasons under the 'Tree of Bodhi,' I know very well what a Bodhi Tree fruit looks, smells, and feels like. I also know what they look and smell like half digested, once excreted by parrots! The Bodhi Tree comes from the fig family; 'ficus religiosa' is another name for it. The fruits are very soft, and they contain hundreds of tiny little seeds within. It is possible to sprout many saplings from just one fruit. In fact Anandagiri Forest Monastery has more than ten Bodhi Trees currently steadily growing, that were sprouted from the fruit of this very tree.

We also recently enshrined 33 Bodhi Tree fruits, and 300 Bodhi Tree leaves (from The Tree in Bodhgaya) in the foundation of a Chedi we are building, because I believe they contain a special energy of Blessing. We will enshrine a further 300 seeds in a higher level a little later this year, and another 700 more leaves. (How we came to have so many leaves is an interesting story for later.)

Even when the fruits are mature and dry they are not hard, you rub them between your fingers and they crumble. The seeds on Bodhi Seed Malas however are very hard, and are clearly one single seed. Very obviously from a completely different species of tree! But even high Lamas in the Tibetan tradition have said repeatedly that reciting mantras on 'Bodhi Seed Malas' is more effective and auspicious than on other materials. So, evidently, large numbers of Indian born people have been colluding for a long time to sell 'Bodhi Seed Malas' to pilgrims! And even hoodwinked the Tibetan lamas, since who knows when! Knowing full well that no such thing exists! Why am I not surprised? What a lucrative scam! Not gonna fool this bhikkhu though! I'm sticking with overpriced turquoise and amber - real wallah!

Chapter Eleven – Bodhgaya in the Age of Kali

Day 30 – (270/400 - 2870/3000)

Deliberately coming back one hour earlier in the evening, realising that my body needed to rest a little more and expel some mucus from this mild upper respiratory tract infection I'm dealing with, in order to get strong again. (*Breath meditation is extra challenging with a completely stuffed up nose!*) But unfortunately, we've another very loud wedding party right next door. So there are more journals from the Ajahn after all! The three days of Holi were surprisingly non eventful however, so we mustn't grumble. Could be worse! As one of my French friends likes to say.

People have been asking, are you right next to a wedding reception hall? If so, why stay there? No, we are not next to an officially designated reception hall. However, there are 5 Guesthouses within just 20 metres of ours, including the one which directly adjoins Mumtaz' Guesthouse on one side. As the busiest part of pilgrimage season slows, the guesthouses are often vacant. At 5 storeys high, with approximately 30-40 rooms, they are perfect to hire for one wedding party of 70-100 guests. Any one of them suddenly becomes a wedding reception hall without any prior notice. The bus arrives with the guests, and the DJ's boom box is hot on their heels.

The hired DJ set up is so bizarre that in trying to explain it to you I risk losing credibility with my readers. But trust me, I am a bhikkhu who does not tell lies. Imagine a 2 x 2 metre platform on large wheels. Very large speakers facing 4 directions. Some strobe lights rigged on top facing various directions. A skinny Indian teenager inside with a CD player one supposes? Then imagine that this boom box on wheels is being tugged along by an agricultural tractor, *yes really!* Now imagine a strange blend of 'bargain-bin techno-Bollywood-grunge' being played soooo loud, that even if you screamed in the ear of the person next to you, they could not hear. (*Seriously*)

The DJ evidently has ADS (attention deficit syndrome), or perhaps self-induced brain damage, because he never lets a single song finish before he stops the track in mid-flight, then everything is quiet for a few seconds, and he loads the other song he suddenly feels like playing. Unfortunately this guy seems to be the only DJ with a portable boom box in Bodhgaya, because it's always the same bad music disjointedly played, and played way too loud!

The really bizarre bit is while the bride and groom are walking in front of the tractor, ever so proud of the obnoxious noise their nuptial agreement has co-sponsored the slum kids, about 20 of them, aged between 3-14, are having their own private 'rave' in the dust stirred up behind the boom box pulled by the tractor. Spot-Lighted made-up, Bride and Groom in satins and silk up front... filthy slum kids barefoot and often bare chested, grinding and gyrating

their pelvises, dancing, laughing, smiling, breathing in the dust behind. It is so surreal and mind boggling to witness this phenomenon, here at the 'United Nation - World Heritage - Premiere Pilgrimage Site,' that all you can do is shake your head and smile in disbelief. At least the slum kids are having a good night out!

In the past, around 7 years ago, loud noise used to come all the way to the entrance of the Mahabodhi Temple compound, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. There were many small shops right outside the wall, literally just 200 metres from The Tree. Boys selling CDs to tourists would be playing the CDs on their little stereos.

According to Tahir, Mumtaz' son, who used to have a little mala shop just 100 yards from the Temple entrance, The United Nations World Heritage people had proposed a 2 kilometre quiet zone around the site, suggesting that local businesses and houses be relocated. Easier to say than do. Many pilgrims are here for just one day, and what they buy depends largely upon what they walk past in their travels. No vendor was going to move outside into the 'officially designated retail zone' voluntarily.

Then curiously a few years ago, some small bombs were placed inside the Temple Compound, (yes truly!) under the Bodhi Tree, and in a few other places. Several did explode, injuring 2 monks! Then, very interestingly, now that it was a 'National Security Matter,' military bulldozers with orders from Delhi came and demolished all of those little shops within days. No one was compensated for their loss of business and income.

Some of the local Muslims insist that the bombs were not placed by Muslim terrorists, because the local Muslims benefit greatly from the Buddhist pilgrims. Why would they sabotage their own income and families comfort? They say that the Mahabodhi Temple Management Committee was involved. Yes! The local Muslims say that the committee bombed their own premises! The bombs were small they say, not intended to do any real damage, further, they were placed in the Temple in the off season, with just enough time to bulldoze and redesign the entrance area, before the next pilgrimage season commenced.

Just last month several more bombs were found in the compound, this time during the peak of the pilgrimage season. Fortunately this time they did not go off! Locals are now being told that only their cars with special registration stickers will be allowed in the inner zone around the Temple. All of the local businesses went on strike and closed for two days last month, as a protest. People feel that this is one more step in a big plan to move the local people completely outside of this inner zone eventually. Currently one needs to be patted down by soldiers at two checkpoints when entering the Temple. They are very friendly soldiers though and the pat down is quite perfunctory at times. Even so, seeing so many army personnel in military fatigues does have an effect on the ambience of the scene.

Hoping not to be sitting beside the next expeditious bomb in Bodhgaya. (*the end justifies the means*) May there be no more bombs! I always make the point to pay respects at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok's most sacred shrine, before traveling to India. And ask for protection from the Thai Devas, for safe travels to and from the Holy Site, promising to share merits with them too. I really do believe that these gestures are helpful.

An interesting thing happened after making one of these 'aditahns' a few years ago. We'd offered our jasmine garlands, and made our requests at the Emerald Buddha, and then made our way to another important ancient Wat, Wat Rakhang, to attend the evening chanting and to meditate. On the way out of the Hall, an elegant looking Thai lady stopped us and asked what we were doing. I told her we were going to India, and taking leave properly and asking for protection. She asked which flight we were on, and curiously as it happened, she was a stewardess for Thai Air, also traveling to India the next day, but going to Delhi.

That evening I went with a friend and picked up some special flowers from the flower market in Bangkok. Wow! What a place! Before long we had more than we could realistically take to India on the flight. Orchids, lilies, and especially fragrant magnolia flowers called 'champa' to offer at the Bodhi Tree. I did my best once back at my friend's home to cut the stems and compact our floral load as much as I could. We were flying in economy and already had a carry-on bag, but both I and Ajahn Pavaro would be carrying another big bag of flowers. They let us through check in and customs no problem, but once on the plane where would we put them? Then an interesting thing happened.

As we stepped aboard the plane, the bursar greeted us, took our flowers, put them in a cupboard, and then motioned for us to sit in the front row of business class! The stewardess who we'd met on the previous day had obviously been on the phone, seeing what she could do. She had no way to know about the flowers. She was just showing her respect, but how did she manifest on the step of that temple hall on that day at that particular time? My own sense is that the Devas of the Temple of the Emerald Buddha are very lovely!

Lord Buddha clearly states in a sutta that one of the ten benefits of cultivating Loving Kindness is that the Devas (*angels/celestial beings*) protect you. Further, one of the benefits of recollecting the goodness of celestial beings, is that you also become dear to them. Many modern people seem to have a '*superstitious belief in doubt*' regarding these things, but I'd rather have the love and protection of the devas than the cramped and dusty false confidence that comes from being able to say, "*I don't believe in anything I can't see with my own two eyes.*" We need to keep washing the dust out of our eyes. We will see many wonderful things!

But back to our efforts of doing an intensive meditation retreat in postmodern *Age of Kali* Bodhgaya...

Chapter Twelve - Hitting the Bump

Day 30 (270/400 – 2870/300)

Two Thirds to Three Quarters

I've noticed for myself, doing intensive retreats, that the part between the half way and three quarters point is often quite tough. There's the initial spurt of enthusiasm, as well as the good health that one brings from 'normal life.' That carries one for the first quarter, although adjusting to the pain is often hardest in the beginning. Then, there's the extra push of determination to get half way. You think once you are half way you'll feel like - wow! Half done already! But I've normally found that once half way, there's often a kind of 'Oh dear... only half way! Have to do that all over again!' lament. This is where the moment by moment practice truly becomes the Path, and our only Refuge, because there is simply no other choice. Thinking of how much further there is to go is just too painful.

In India, by this stage, one will usually have had some health challenges too. So you are working with less energy, and less sleep, and with more impingement than normal. And there's still quite a ways to go! Ho humm. So that's more or less where I'm at now. The mild cold lingers, and I'm on symptom suppressing meds to dry up the mucus, but now have a completely blocked nose. Thank goodness the weather is still pleasant, and the pujas have been at a reasonable volume lately, otherwise it would seem even more of a drag.

Curiously, both Ajahn Nyaniko and I hit a bit of an energetic wall on exactly the same day, yesterday. At precisely the one month point, (without a weekend!) I had several days after a very serene meditation experience, where the meditation was tranquil and easy, even at the beginning of my throat infection, but after a couple of days the mind returned to a more normal state, and the illness began to take its toll on the available energy. There's now just this strong and deep feeling/sense like, 'Okay, well, that's enough of this for now... time to go back home!' This is where having made a 'determination' or vow is important, because otherwise these deep compulsive, habitual 'enough,'... 'onto the next thing'... energies will drag you away.

We've been chanting the first sermon at the Bodhi Tree by memory in the afternoons as an act of devotion and gratitude, and also as a contemplation, to remind ourselves of the central teachings and to inspire correct practice. Suffering, or unsatisfactoriness, exists in the conditioned experience of life in the world. The real cause of suffering is the craving in our minds, so it says in the Second Noble Truth. Craving for... Craving to be or to become... and Craving not for. Cessation of suffering, the Third Noble Truth comes from 'relinquishing' these various craving tendencies, not from being pushed around by, or following them. Being able to relinquish craving comes from a habit of ethical behavior, strong mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, and lots of practice. It is a training. So we cultivate this Path - the Fourth of Lord Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

Patient Endurance, is the supreme incinerator of defilement, so it says in the Ovada Patimokkha, a central teaching pertaining to restraint. There's no way around it, sometimes we just have to tough it out even though it can feel like the defilements are incinerating us instead! But Ajahn Nyaniko and I have both seen, and been through this before. So are we going home? No! We got up at 4:15 again, and sat 5 hours before lunch once again today. It is harder though, so we only made it for four hours in the evening.

Venerable Ajahn Chah said that the secret to growth in practice is not so difficult to understand really. Simply - eat little, sleep little, and meditate a lot. By this I believe he means 'exactly the right amount' which is usually quite a bit less than people's preferences and habits. These 'middle way' standards bring extra energy and clarity to the mind.

But what about when there really hasn't been enough rest and when the body/mind is low in energy and tired? Practice at such times is still useful, even though it does lean to the side of excessive austerity. We can develop patience and determination at these times, and find creative ways to find or generate energy, where there simply doesn't seem to be any. Getting through such occasions a few times, we become less frightened of fatigue and exhaustion, understanding that it can be endured and does pass. We have greater resources than we realize. Often times, putting forth effort generates the energy that is needed.

Ajahn Pasanno, who was the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat in Thailand when I went forth as a novice monk, and one of my first Dhamma teachers, used to say the following quite often when training the monks. "Sometimes we feel that there isn't the energy to practice... but in my own experience it is by putting forth an effort to practice, that energy arises in the mind.... Effort generates energy." It is a teaching that I have remembered, and try to apply quite often. Ajahn Pasanno did not just 'teach Dhamma,' he also led by example. He was always at the morning meetings, the afternoon sits, and the evening meetings, everyday!

I find thinking of the example of the Buddha very useful when I'm feeling exhausted and experiencing resistance, and also of the great masters like Luang Por Mun and Luang Por Chah. The Buddha practiced the extreme of austerity for 6 years before having his insight into the Middle Way. The Dalai Lama, most famous for his radiance and metta, once said the image of the Bodhisattva practicing austerities is in fact his favorite image, because it reminds him that Buddha's Insights were hard won, and that he shouldn't take the Dhamma for granted. Thinking of Lord Buddhas incredible striving puts our difficulties into a different perspective, and we can feel both inspired and grateful.

Many people reject themselves and their own good efforts when they compare their efforts to the truly great practitioners. This is unskillful and unnecessary. We have to learn to be inspired by others as a way to nourish our efforts, not sabotage them. I can do this easily now, but it took some years of inner work. Guilt and self-denigration have to be recognized and countered with true metta.

Being willing to be a bit austere, or extreme for a limited period helps us to appreciate the

great efforts of our lineage elders. In a way, it can be like an offering of repentance for the times when our practice leaned too far on the side of laziness or sensuality. This isn't like punishing ourselves because we feel guilty, but rather making a noble effort when the time is right. This can bring dignity.

In any case, whenever we have great goals, we have to find ways to be willing to keep working towards them, even when the going is rough, understanding that things will change for the better and the goal is coming closer. Master Hwa the meditation master from the Chinese Chan tradition is also famous for having said... "Bitter Practice - Sweet Mind.."

Laziness is a kilesa, and sloth and torpor is one of the hindrances to concentration. If a practitioner can overcome these, their mind will be truly very bright and beautiful.

So our practice is a little bitter just now, and we are dragging our feet a little. But drag our feet we do! All the way to the root of the Bodhi Tree! The more recently arrived monks are still all bright eyed and bushy tailed however.

I will be interested to see if the energy and enthusiasm pick up once we get to the three quarters point in just a few more days. I suspect that it will. But it is also good to consider at such times, what might the results of unrelenting effort look like in the future? The chapter below is perhaps illustrative.

Chapter Thirteen - Upasika Sumetha - my favorite Sri Lankan Aunty

So when we met Mumtaz and his sons you might have noticed that there was no mention of his mother, sisters, wife, or daughters? Never mind. Let me introduce you now to a wonderful lady, my favorite Sri-Lankan Aunty, who I recently caught up with here in Bodhgaya. She is a very modest and un-assuming person so I have changed her name slightly to protect her identity.

One time here in Bodhgaya, a good many years ago, I can't remember exactly when, an elderly Sri Lankan lady by the name of Sunethra, approached me as I was folding up my sitting mat, and asked to have a few words. Since then, we've bumped into each other again here repeatedly, and I've come to know her quite a bit better. On that first meeting, I remember that she said...

"Bhante, I have noticed that you are sitting for long periods every day. I am also sitting, just behind you. My mind is very peaceful, and I really love meditating here at the Bodhi Tree, but I think I need a teacher. I think that you may be able to help me. Can I ask you a question Bhante?" she asked.

She looked like a very sincere, serene and sweet lady, and so I obliged. "Yes, I'll try to help if I can." So she continued...

"Well you see, I am trying to practice breath meditation... but very soon after I close my eyes and start to meditate... I see a small very bright light in front... gold colour... and all around like whitish/yellowish, bright light. And I can't even feel my body or my breath... and I can stay like that for many hours," she said. I was very happy for her! She looked worried and concerned, and so asked. "What should I do Bhante?"

I explained that it sounded to me that her mind was absorbing into a wholesome, deeply concentrated state, which is one of the main reasons people cultivate breath meditation, because eventually it leads to this kind of bright and peaceful abiding. But Sunethra wished to be able to cultivate Insight as well as rest in peace, because she said. "Bhante, I want to be a stream enterer at least this lifetime, I wish to realize nibbana" Stream enterer is the first level of realization after which complete liberation is assured.

After this I recommended that rather than try to observe flux and change with the breath, that she use her concentration to investigate the elemental nature of her body, particularly the bones. As my own main teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Anan, had gotten very good results from this type of practice.

In not very long, Upasika Sunethra reported to me that she could hold the perception of her teeth, very 'one-pointedly' in her meditation. She said that it was very cool and peaceful. I then recommended that she try to visualize her entire skeleton. Once she could do this... to then visualize it crumbling to small pieces... then eventually to dust... and finally blowing away in the wind. Reducing it to fine earth element, then seeing even this as disappearing, and only empty space remaining. When I returned to Thailand, I sent her a CD with some guided body contemplation meditations.

Another time, I came to Bodhgaya and we crossed paths again, for just one day, but didn't have much time to talk. On this trip, once again our paths have crossed, and this time we were able to have some longer discussions. When I asked her about her body contemplation practice, she explained that even while talking to me, she could see her skeleton clearly in her mind's eye if she chose... and even while walking here and there she could be aware of just her skeleton. She had also done the disintegration contemplation many times. Now I wanted to dig a little further, so I asked about possible past 'Insight' experiences.

"Sunethra, have you ever had an experience which is different to the radiance and brightness of concentration. An experience that is more like a 'letting go of the Four Elements' completely, with a sense of a 'Knowing Awareness' that knows 'Emptiness'?"

She answered... "Oh yes... sometimes I can go in (pointing to her heart) and there is just nothing. No world, no me... nothing at all!"

I wasn't sure if this was a real Insight experience however, because experiencing 'nothingness' as a dull sleepy state, is not the same as 'nothingness' as a profound concentrated state, which

is also not the same as knowing 'Voidness' the 'Ultimate Empty Nature of Everything' lucidly. So as a way of checking whether Sunethra's experience was a kind of deep sleep, (bhavanga) or a valid experience of the fruit of correct practice and investigation, I asked how she felt afterwards. She said...

"Oh I feel so blissful afterwards for two or three days!"

That seemed very promising! But I'm still not sure if this is the experience of profound concentration, or the experience of deep insight.

There is also a peaceful state known as 'neighbourhood concentration' (upacara Samadhi) where the mind is literally 'touching upon' jhana (truly deep - one-pointed absorption) If a person has strong faith, a lot of merit, and very good virtue, they can experience this state for many hours at a time also, and sometimes even for days, weeks and months! It can be very peaceful as well, with only a few very wholesome thoughts arising. This is where a practitioner needs a very developed teacher to help them see exactly what they are experiencing. Unfortunately I am not at a level where I can 'embrace consciousness with consciousness' and see precisely the level of her concentration and insight. Although Sumetha had hoped that I was.

I also asked her about her metta cultivation. She said...

"Oh I can't actually be angry at anybody."

Very promising yet again!

So I'm not quite sure what to say here myself, except that it seems to me that Upasika Sumetha's practice is going very well! I have been very happy to meet and get to know her. She appears to be experiencing very deep and wholesome meditation regularly,

The reason I share the details of these conversations here, is that it certainly appears that this lady's mental cultivation is quite advanced, and bearing great fruit. It is wonderful to know that such results are still occurring, and that people like Sumetha still exist. One of the qualities of someone who is truly established in liberation though, is that they have no doubt about how to practice. Sumetha seems to have doubts, so this is a little confusing.

But I think I know what might be going on...

Whereas it seems that Sumetha can experience the radiance of samadhi, easily and regularly, and can also experience an absence of a sense of self she has doubts about the 'level' of these experiences. This doesn't mean that she doesn't know how to practice to experience these things again and again. So it looks for all intents and purposes that she does know the correct way to practice, to experience deep peace, and a sense of 'letting go' of self.

So what I think is going on, is that this lady does have deep insight and concentration, and knows very well how to practice to experience these regularly. What she has doubts about, is how to label and describe these things, and in ascertaining how much further she needs to go in order to have finished 'letting go' and be entirely liberated. A visual image that comes to mind is like someone who has climbed a ladder, and is now established on a higher level. Sumetha can't see the ladder anymore, so she is confused about how many rungs or steps she took, or how many more to go. But it doesn't matter!

Talking with Sumetha, there is a complete lack of arrogance or hubris. One feels uplifted and cool afterwards. She is very modest and humble. Noteworthy, is that she has also kept the eight precepts very strictly for 25 years. All of these other factors lead me to feel that she may in fact already be established in a stage Liberation! How wonderful if that is the case! She asked to come and stay at Anandagiri for a few months; I said she'd be very welcome. I would like to introduce her to my teacher in Thailand who can gauge these things with far more accuracy than I. I'll be very interested to hear what Tan Ajahn has to say.



Figure 1 Sumetha from Sri Lanka and Liv Conquest from Melbourne