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# 3000 HOURS OF MEDITATION

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at the sacred Mahabodhi Tree in Bodhgaya, India  
and a Traditional Four Holy Sites Pilgrimage

Personal Journal entries shared with Dhamma friends,  
with a closing chapter offering practical advice on  
how to make one's life a Sacred Pilgrimage.

**By Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu**



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with a closing chapter offering practical advice on  
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**By Ajahn Achalo**





This Collection of teachings by Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu has been sponsored for free distribution by a group of dedicated Thai, Malaysian and Singaporean lay students, in honour of several significant occasions occurring in the year 2020.

This year Ajahn Achalo enters his 24<sup>th</sup> year as a bhikkhu, which is exactly half of his life thus far. It is also the tenth year since Anandagiri Forest Monastery was established.

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## FOREWORD

*by Phra Rachabodhivitate*

Some students of Ajahn Achalo have made a request for a compilation of his teachings in order to create a book or two in honour of several things that are occurring in the year 2020 - one is his upcoming 48th birthday, another is 24 years in the robes and the last is to mark the 10th year anniversary of Anandagiri. In Asia, time is often marked in 12 year cycles so Ajahn Achalo will be completing his 4th cycle in the world and his second cycle in the robes. Half his life as a bhikkhu!...and ten years of all the hard work that it takes to establish a monastery. That is all worthy of celebrating.

The compilation of teachings will cover a range of topics and themes that should prove useful for those new to Buddhism, as well as those who are experienced in this practice. There are some special contributions on the theme of faith, or confidence, in Buddhism - its benefits and how to nurture it. The collection of teachings given here are well grounded in the traditional discourses of the Buddha, along with practical explanations and illustrations from personal experience. There is also a wealth of guidance from Ajahn Achalo's experiences on pilgrimage, but the themes explored are also useful for daily life practice in the "ordinary world".

All in all, I am pleased to see this collection of teachings come into being and I extend my blessings to all who helped to make it happen. Anumodana!

*Phra Rachabodhivitate*  
(Ajahn Pasanno - Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery)



## INTRODUCTION

*by Ajahn Achalo*

**G**reetings from Anandagiri Forest Monastery, Petchabun Province in Northern Thailand. I am writing this in my monk's cabin in the middle of our rainy season retreat. This is the ninth consecutive year I have spent the three-month retreat period here and it is the quietest time of year by far. The five bhikkhus and one mae chee (eight precept nun) are living harmoniously and there are no building projects to impinge upon our time. The mist and the clouds and the sound of the insects on our remote and quiet mountaintop leaves me feeling a long way away from noisy and dusty Bihar, northern India, just now!

By way of introduction to this collection, firstly I should mention that this book has come about due to the request of several close students and fellow pilgrims. While I wrote the journals herein mostly for my own enjoyment, I also shared them with a group of laypeople and monks who had joined me either on pilgrimage or for periods of practice in India. The intimate and candid tone of the writing reflects the fact that these people and I know each other quite well. I'm also a very open kind of a person, not so fond of secrets. Several of these people felt the content would be encouraging, and possibly even educational to a broader audience, and subsequently offered to co-sponsor the production of a book.

Many people are interested in formal Buddhist teachings, which are usually non-personal and are more about a process than an individual's story. But another type of person, perhaps more curious in nature, also wants to know about the conventional person who is giving the teaching. And about a teacher's personal process along the path of mental cultivation. Autobiographies of famous monks and nuns are very popular in Asia. Some people have a big appetite for intimacy, and like to learn by hearing about how a person practises with the actual struggles, rather

than simply hearing about the results and insights from their sincere practice. We all learn in different ways.

So what is this book about? There is writing from four different occasions or sources presented within this book. Section One contains journal entries from a time when I was striving to fulfil the last portion of a vow to meditate three thousand hours at the site of the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya. Section Two contains journal entries and commentary from a recent three-week-long pilgrimage, during which I led a group to the four main holy sites—the place of the Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and final Nibbana—as well as other significant sites in northern India and Nepal. Third, there are reflections from other monastics and pilgrims who have joined me on these occasions. The final section contains recommendations for bringing more devotion, commitment, and effort into our everyday lives.

These writings have been bundled together here because of the similarity of the under-riding themes. Briefly put, they involve the intensive engagement in Buddhist practice, in places historically associated with the Lord Buddha, with a focus upon demonstrating, deepening, and drawing upon the faith faculty. The fact that most of this writing was composed on-location in India is another cohesive element.

### **Some Context**

Theravada Forest Monks normally live in monasteries that are situated within secluded areas of forest. These days they are usually quite structurally solid, well established facilities. But this was not always the case. Our tradition is also one where wandering has played a central role. From the time of the Buddha himself, monks and nuns would practise in various places at different times. Rather than being sedentary and cloistered, we have lived very close to nature. Often, monastics have been willing to leave their monasteries—even living in caves, under rock-hangings, or in large fields under a tree in the dry season— if doing so supports spiritual growth. Such wandering can support the practice of renunciation and non-attachment.

In the recent past, places like Thailand and Burma were still eighty percent covered in jungle, and it was quite easy to find quiet and secluded places set in lush forests not far from the edges of towns.

But in today's Southeast Asia, the human population has increased and the forest cover has lessened to such a degree that forest monks must surround themselves with a buffer of forest simply to keep the outside world at bay. In many cases in Thailand, including at Anandagiri, the monastery which I founded and where I usually live, we've even had to plant the forest ourselves! Change is inevitable of course and all of this is okay—as long as we still have some quiet places to practise in, which we do. In fact, it has been a great joy, here, to watch a new forest begin to become established.

However, there are still occasions where moving around is useful. Going on pilgrimage and practising in holy sites are such examples. Not necessarily because these places are quiet, but rather that they can bring the Buddha's life to life in a tangible way. This is different from regular modes of study and meditation. Furthermore, the inspiration of the momentous things that occurred in these places nourishes faith very deeply.

I have lived most of my twenty-four years as a monk in traditional forest monasteries. As a rule, they are clean and orderly and have a regular, set routine. We bhikkhus must adhere to many monastic rules; additionally, each monastery has its own standards and ways of doing things. Frequent meditation, the shared daily routine, and training with mindfulness throughout all activities often gives the monks and nuns a lovely sense of composure and radiance. People usually feel inspired when they witness the monastics in these serene, simple, and traditional contexts.

As well as living in several of these wonderful monasteries over the years, I have also had many opportunities to practise whilst on pilgrimage in India and Nepal. This is partly due to the close proximity of these places to Thailand, as well as to my tendency to enjoy actively expressing my faith. It is also in no small part due to the fact that several of my closest, long-term students have happily supported these periods, often joining in as well. I am blessed to have such kind and generous support. After several pilgrimages, as I learned the ropes of how exactly to practise in these sometimes chaotic places, I began to spend increasingly longer periods practising at the holy sites, especially Bodhgaya, the site of Lord Buddha's enlightenment.

### **Practising in India...**

Sharing these journal entries is one way that I am endeavouring to repay the kindness of others. It is a rare glimpse into the nitty gritty of the post-modern pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites, something to which many Buddhists aspire but which most are unable to fulfill. I hope by sharing the journey that you, the reader, may feel included and experience the pilgrimage to some degree yourself.

However, I do need to offer a few clarifying words about practising in these places. Even for faithful Thai Buddhists who respect the practice of pilgrimage, it can seem a bit odd to see a group of monks sitting at tables having a sumptuous meal in a four star hotel, chatting away merrily and eating on ordinary plates with knives and forks. They would previously have only seen us sitting on the floor eating circumspectly and silently from our monks' bowl. On the other hand, some readers will know very little or perhaps nothing at all about Theravada monastics and monasteries. For these, it is important to understand that living in hotels and guesthouses and eating at restaurants is not the norm. It is an exception, but one made with good reason.

Both the pilgrimages and intensive practice periods I have been a part of have been occasions of very sincere focus and effort, in many respects more rigorous than life back in the strict monastery. (This is not the case for every pilgrimage tour, but it is definitely the case for mine.) In general, I have placed even more emphasis on study and formal meditation practice than normal while at the holy sites. For the sake of practicality, I have at times been less concerned with maintaining the appearance of the traditional form than with fulfilling my practice vows. We monks do keep our serious training rules throughout, but most on-lookers will not know the difference between the actual rules and the cultural forms. For example, if one has been chanting, meditating and teaching at one holy site since the early hours of the morning and will be doing similarly at a different site in the afternoon, it is simply easier and more practical to have a meal prepared by the hotel together with our lay students. While the Buddha encouraged the monks to go on alms round, he also made the provision for accepting an invitation to a meal offering. In this context, our students have invited us and are offering the meal.

With regards to staying in better quality hotels, in Bihar and Uttar

Pradesh in northern India, the difference in standards between a two-star and a four-star is truly vast! There are serious health and safety issues that need to be considered when selecting accommodation, especially when the group is comprised largely of middle-aged to elderly women. I have tended to encourage my students to save up a little longer so that we can all stay in nicer places as a support to good health and well-being throughout what is often a grueling journey. Despite taking this extra care, usually one third to a half of the group gets either dysentery or a sinus, bronchial, or chest infection. It simply goes with the territory!

When staying longer in India with a smaller group, we all tend to be more frugal. In Bodhgaya, I have usually stayed at a 2-star guesthouse operated by some Moslem friends and have taken my meals at a quaint restaurant operated by a sweet Tibetan family. My students have offered and then prepaid for these supports for the duration of our stay. Some people have wondered why I don't stay in local Buddhist monasteries and go on alms round for my meals. The reasons are as follows. The entire point of going to practise intensively in Bodhgaya, for myself at least, has been to meditate as much as possible at the actual holy site. Staying in one of the monasteries would usually require joining the resident community in their daily routine and activities. Not to do so would appear ungrateful and rude. Then there are the many lovely folks who would try to chat with you, which can also be a distraction. But when staying in a place that has been paid for by kind sponsors, one has the autonomy to set one's own routine. We literally leave the guesthouse at 4:45 a.m. and return at 9 p.m., spending most of the day at the Bodhi Tree.

Similarly, having a healthy, clean, and modest meal ready on the table at 11:30 a.m. is the simplest and fastest way to nourish our bodies, and the risk of food poisoning is much less at a trusted restaurant as well. Having barely survived food poisoning in India three times already, I assure you that the experience inspires one to take good care! Lying on the ceramic tile floor of the bathroom close to the repository of the next expulsion all night long is an experience that you never quite forget. And when it is coming from both ends at the same time it is not a pretty sight at all! My constitution is not strong in this area and I doubt that I would survive on the local alms food for very long. So steamed veggie momos it is (and believe me it gets very boring after a month)! You do however get used to the smell of antiseptic gel on your hands, for it is the fragrance

of safety to a justifiably paranoid mind! And compared to some of the other smells that one meets with, it can seem quite comforting indeed. You must be wary of the garnish, however, even on a fresh hot meal. Don't say I didn't warn you!

I have usually been accompanied by several other bhikkhus and some close lay students during these intensive practice times. In a way, we have established our own little monastery on two floors of Mumtaz Guesthouse. It has proven to be clean and safe and has the wonderful benefit of being only a ten-minute walk to the Mahabodhi Temple. And the Om Tibet restaurant is exactly half way between the temple and our guesthouse. I have walked that stretch so many times I could do it with my eyes closed, but no doubt an auto rickshaw would drive straight into me if I tried! The fact that I still have all four of my limbs is, I believe, proof that benevolent unseen beings protect pilgrims at the holy sites!

As for the occasion when, after a twelve-hour bumpy drive from Kushinagar to Lumbini, and after waiting on the bus at the border between India and Nepal for more than an hour, I actually sang a song to my beleaguered and wilting students, then encouraged a few of them to sing a song as well...what can I say? Yes, I broke my rules and they broke theirs too! (Most were on the eight precepts, which forbids entertainment.) Some things we will have to put in the category of 'extenuating circumstances' or perhaps even temporary insanity. Mother India has a way of pushing people over the edge! I could have edited this occasion out of the journals, but it is more honest and interesting to leave it where it is. There is also the time when coming back from the temple after completing my ten-hour meditation quota, I encouraged a beggar girl to sing one of my favourite songs in exchange for a carton of her favourite mango juice drink. Seeing her as we did each day, standing barefoot in the dust and skinny as a rake, it just helped the situation if everyone could smile. It also allowed her to feel that she had something to share as well. Many monks would never do anything like this...but I have sometimes done this. I probably have more metta than equanimity at this stage.

So as a word of final warning, if you are looking for an impeccable and inspiring story of a consistently super-strict bhikkhu who is throwing off defilements left, right, and centre, and rapidly becoming the purest shade of pure, then this is not the book for you. If on the other hand you

can resonate with the sincere efforts of a good monk with some weaknesses, trying so hard that he almost becomes impressive, then the contents of the following pages may be right up your alley. For those more interested in what I teach on formal teaching occasions, there is another book being published this year. It is a compilation of talks given in several different contexts over a period of many years, entitled *The Process of Realisation*.

When it comes to being a good monk, I personally believe that the occasional exception proves the rule. And when it comes to making heroic efforts, a sense of humour can be a wonderful support along the way. I am aware that I am taking some risk in sharing so much, so intimately with you all and I hope that you will accommodate a little eccentricity and human frailty. Even monks have personalities and the kammic momentum of their habits. As all of us who are sincere, practising Buddhists know, the path of purification does have the occasional pothole! We must all do our best to keep picking ourselves up, carrying on, and doing better.

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I offer the words in the following pages as an encouragement. Please take what is useful and leave aside what is not. Having now qualified the context a little, I hope you enjoy the journey too!

With Loving-Kindness,  
Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu

*August 2019*





## SECTION ONE

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*3000 hours – Meditating at the Sacred Bodhi Tree  
Personal Journal entries shared with Dhamma friends*

## BODHGAYA – OPENING WORDS

As you will discover, I have spent many periods of intensive meditation retreat in Bodhgaya, the site of Lord Buddha's enlightenment in India. During the most recent of these, I started writing a detailed journal. This was in addition to my ten-hour daily sitting meditation schedule. I wrote partly about my spiritual practice, meditation commitments, and personal process, partly about the others I was sharing the experience with, and partly about Bodhgaya itself, for it's an intensely fascinating place. Somehow, writing about what I was doing helped me to keep recollecting why I was there and helped me to keep my focus. After meditating all day, there was often a lot of mental energy and clarity late at night, but no friend to talk over the day's experiences with, as everyone else was asleep. So I started writing journal entries and shared them via email with a few friends. Several of my students subsequently asked me to compile these journal entries and present them as a book, as they found them informative, inspiring, and touching.

This might sound like a strange thing to say, but through 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, a holy site sacred to Buddhists from all around the world, is situated in Bihar state, northeast India. It is rich with symbolic, historical, and spiritual meaning. It is also rich in spiritual energy, which is of great interest to sincere meditators, because energy can be absorbed, refined, and then utilised in the process of mental cultivation—perhaps especially so by those with a daily

meditation discipline and who possess deep faith.

This energy is part of my reason for spending so many hours meditating in Bodhgaya. It's where the Vajra Asana, or Diamond Throne Seat of Enlightenment, is situated, where the Bodhisattva finally realised the ultimate goal of liberation from all suffering after many aeons of arduous striving. I wholeheartedly believe that some of the purity, unshakeable peace, and unceasing bliss that his mind experienced also infused the very earth element in this place. To some, it may sound preposterous that something of 'mind' could stick to something of 'earth' for thousands of years. But if we consider for a moment that the Buddha's mind was no ordinary mind, having been developed to the furthest extent possible and completely purified of all negative qualities as well, perhaps we can be open to the possibility that ordinary standards and assumptions are no longer an accurate gauge. After thousands of occasions to check this perception for myself, I can sincerely testify that it does seem to be the case. Herein lies the reason for my deep appreciation of this most holy of holy sites. Perhaps it is one reason why Lord Buddha encouraged all of his followers to make a pilgrimage there if they are able.

So how does this physical place infused with the blessings from the purified minds of several Buddhas (for we are told that three previous Buddhas were also enlightened here) affect faithful devotees? Most pilgrims feel great joy and gratitude as soon as they arrive, 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 busy minds sometimes find that their thoughts settle down much more quickly. Loud noise is not as disturbing as it would normally be, and it seems easier to be at peace with the physical discomfort that can arise while sitting in meditation. These effects are not guaranteed and do not always occur, but certainly occur frequently for many meditators. This helps practitioners to experience their minds with less pain and hindrances, and greater levels of tranquillity, rapture, and peace, which is naturally very encouraging.

As beautiful as Bodhgaya can be, it can also be bizarre, bittersweet, and brutal all at the same time. Countless groups of pilgrims visit from many different countries. They are clean, well fed, radiant with deep faith, and wealthy enough to travel. Yet at the same time, this sacred

site is situated in what is currently one of the poorest regions in the world. So great joy and faith manifests right alongside total despair. Abundance and well-being walks side by side with abject poverty. The traditional bright white clothes of lay devotees literally brush up against the unwashed, threadbare, dirt-coloured rags of beggars.

Practising Buddhists who cherish truthfulness and virtue must learn how to engage with people who lie, steal, and cheat (for that is how some earn their living). Of course, there are very honest people too and several are good friends of mine. Because of these contrasts, it is common for pilgrims to feel elated one moment and disturbed the next. It makes it a great place for developing wisdom, if you are not averse to a robust creative challenge. But it's certainly not for the delicate or faint-hearted.

Bodhgaya is a place worth writing about. Even so, the writing of this book took me by surprise, because simply maintaining the required degree of focus for a meditation retreat schedule is already very tiring. However, with a lot of meditation comes inspiration, extra mental clarity, and energy. The site of the Buddha's enlightenment is a high-energy place as well, which also helped things along no doubt. What surprised me was how easily thoughts, feelings, and ideas flowed, given that I had been diligently pacifying thoughts for most of the day. I was certainly not sitting around thinking about writing a book! I had never experienced this sense of 'flow' to such a pronounced degree before. By curious synchronicity, as I began writing, my Indian neighbours started partying; a series of late-night wedding parties ensued, which made sleep simply impossible until after midnight. So by default, I had extra time available for the actualisation of this project.

Another curiosity is the fact that I mostly wrote while lying down. (After meditating upright for ten hours, wouldn't you?) I'd had no idea that I could tap away at a touch pad with such dexterity, nor that I could be so diligent while in the lying down posture! It turned out that by day and early evening I was an upright, diligently meditating monk, striving to realise profound emptiness, and by night I was a horizontal, 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.

It's unlikely that I'll return to Bodhgaya for such a long period of retreat again. My life as an abbot and teacher has gotten busier, and my

body is getting older. Not only have I now sat in meditation under the Bodhi Tree for three thousand hours, I have walked down the ancient stone stairs into the temple compound approximately 1,500 times, and then naturally walked back up them as many times as well. Each time, I've experienced a sense of awe and of coming home. If you put together all of my trips to Bodhgaya, they would span a period of one-and-a-half years. Bodhgaya has literally been one of the places I've lived during this lifetime. So on a personal level, these journal entries allow me to reflect on an important part of my monk's life. As previously mentioned, I also shared these journals with a small group students and close friends with similar loves, and so they were also intended from the outset as an encouragement to some of my fellow Buddhists.

May some of these words interest and encourage you, too, wherever it is that you find yourself now. May you succeed in all of your spiritual endeavours, attaining both your short and long-term goals!

## CHAPTER ONE

### *The Seat of Enlightenment*

Bodhgaya, Bihar, Northern India - 18 February 2018  
*Day 11 of 45 (110 hours of 400 / 2,710 hours of 3,000)*

I am about to complete the first hundred hours of sitting meditation of this intensive retreat. I am aiming to complete four hundred hours overall in forty-five days, all under the large sacred Bodhi Tree at the site of Lord Buddha's enlightenment. My larger goal is to sit three thousand hours of formal meditation within the vicinity of the Bodhi Tree and Mahabodhi Temple, as an offering to the Three Jewels (the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha), and as an offering to the Buddhas of past, present, and future. This is not my first retreat here and I'm on the home stretch now, as it were, with a mere (huh!) three hundred hours to go.

Someone like me doesn't just decide to sit three thousand hours under the Bodhi Tree in India. It sounds way too ambitious and bold. It actually took many years of sincerely striving, 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 are even greater than my capacity to complain. Sitting for four or five hours per day with other activities in between (alms round, walking meditation, study, and chanting) is typical of my monk's life in Thailand, but doubling down on my efforts and doing it for more than a month without a break is a different league of practice.

I am now forty-five years old. I've been a Buddhist monk for twenty-two years and have lived for most of that time in Thailand. Looking back, I am actually quite surprised by just how much time I've been able to spend living and practising here at this most holy site for Buddhists.

Around fifteen years ago, this special place captivated my heart and mind in several ways. I realised quickly that it was a very potent place to deepen meditation, and subsequently committed to coming and doing so as often as I could. Many close students and friends have also taken opportunities to practise and learn here. They have supported my physical needs and I have supported them by my determined example. Together, we have been growing like saplings under the big tree.

The Bodhi Tree itself is formidable. It's about twenty metres high and an astonishing forty metres wide. It is of the *ficus* soft wood family and a relative of the Banyan tree. All trees of this genus are now referred to as Bodhi trees, but this one is often referred to as the Maha (Great) Bodhi Tree. It has large heart-shaped leaves that rustle pleasantly in the breeze. It is situated on the western side of the square-based chedi and is fenced off both by a five-by-five metre brass fence and an outer sandstone fence. King Ashoka had a piece of sandstone carved into a symbolic Vajra Asana, or Diamond Throne, around 2,300 years ago, and this sits nestled neatly between the Tree and the chedi.

You used to be able to go and sit meditation right up against the tree trunk and also to touch the stone plinth and place flowers upon it. People used to press their heads against it, probably making such wishes as 'May wisdom penetrate this thick skull and lead me to enlightenment!' But when the Tree showed significant signs of poor health, it was found that the soil around the roots was too compacted. The Tree literally needed some breathing space, which it has now been given, courtesy of the fencing. Tall metal posts have also been installed here and there to support its unusually long branches. It is perhaps the only Bodhi tree in the world that is twice as wide as it is high. It is also quite lopsided, as the eastern side has no space to grow because of the tall chedi structure, whereas the western side is sprawling and majestic.

Around a hundred people can sit under the Tree in the innermost area. Large pujas are also held under the Tree, just outside a sandstone wall that separates the inner area from a middle ring zone on the grand western side. On this side, beyond the inner zone, three to four hundred people can also sit or chant 'under the Bodhi Tree'. There are frequent mass ordinations of temporary novice monks here, as Thai men love going forth at this sacred site. Even though most of these men will only be monks for ten to fourteen days, they believe that going forth in this

place will help bring about auspicious opportunities in future lives.

In this larger, 'middle ring zone', many smaller pujas take place and hundreds of Tibetans do full-length prostrations as well. That is, they bow from a fully upright to a fully horizontal position on stationary bowing boards. This is done in fast repetition with the aid of slippery hand pads. These practitioners develop very strong upper arms and abdomen muscles! All this occurs constantly from 5 a.m. to 8:45 p.m. The more determined will attempt 100,000 full-length prostrations in three months, before returning to the mountainous regions where they live. Doing 100,000 prostrations is considered to be a good preparatory practice before moving onto deeper contemplations. It is also believed to reduce one's bad kamma and lessen obstructions.

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

This is a curious place for a meditation retreat, given that it is so crowded and noisy. Yet here I am again. I am fortunate to have Ajahn Nyaniko and Mae Chee Aimy as my companions throughout, along with a few close students and friends who are spending periods practising with us as their schedules permit. Several more monks will also join us in a couple of weeks. Despite cold mornings (two of them drizzly, rainy days), stiff competition for sitting spaces, and spending a day and a half knocked out by food poisoning, I am still on target to meet my goal. This could change, however, as this is a place of interesting challenges.

Bodhgaya is at once wonderful and terrible, inspiring and unnerving, sacred and sad. On the way to and from the temple, we walk past crumpled old beggar ladies and kids crippled by polio. Looking down, we see nothing but rags, dirt, and misery; while looking up, we behold the temple's multi-tiered, gold-plated spire shining brilliantly in the sun. And all around, skinny, dull-eyed, children sell garlands of flowers that are intoxicatingly rich and exuberant in colour. It is a place of contrast and extremes.

According to legend, it was intense from the beginning. Even after Lord Buddha had secured complete unassailable enlightenment, Mara,

the King of Delusion, rallied his forces with might never seen before. He wanted to obstruct the spreading of such a profound accomplishment. However, the Lord Buddha's purity and compassion were so powerful that Mara's weapons turned to flowers as they entered the space surrounding him.

Some consider this mythology, an artful metaphor at best, but I do not. Mara, a sentient being like us, is understood to inhabit a higher heaven realm. His armies of asuras and yakkhas and various others are living in upper, lower, and parallel realms. They all share wrong views and harmful intentions. Although their weapons cannot be seen by the ordinary human eye, Lord Buddha could see them with his purified divine eye. Those weapons were launched by the dark powers of greed, hatred, and delusion that existed in the minds of Mara and his army. I believe the flowers were real too. They represent a fundamentally important fact: true goodness triumphs over evil, and the power of light transforms and eradicates darkness. The Buddha proved this in his own mind first, by liberating himself from the causes of suffering, and then it was reflected outwardly in his encounter with Mara.

It is a perplexing concept that an evil-minded being such as Mara can live in a high heaven realm. I believe it challenges people's perceptions of heaven and hell in a good way, and points directly at why we need to aim for something better and more dependable than a high rebirth. How does Mara get to live in a heaven? God doesn't decide these things - kamma does. Mara would have had to make enormous merits in the past. The fact that he has a vast and powerful mind (albeit a misguided one) suggests that he had also trained in the path of mental cultivation for quite some time.

At some point, he must have made a drastic and terrible choice—he became fascinated with dark powers. That is, the powers of greed, hatred and delusion. Because of his vast merit, he was given the job of CEO—the Chief Executive Officer of Kilesa Incorporated, in the Ministry of Defilements. Samsara is a 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. In some suttas, it states that it is not uncommon for celestial beings to be reborn in hell—once their merits are exhausted, then heavy old kammās can ripen. From the hells to the heavens, there is not one inch of the conditioned universe that is truly

safe. It is, as Lord Buddha stated, the realm of death. We've gotta get out of this place! The only escape hatch is the Deathless. This is what the Buddhas and arahants have realised.

I have come to see Mara as one of my teachers. Before you put the book down and walk away, hear me out. The Buddha teaches me what to do. Mara, on the other hand, teaches me what not to do. He must be respected in a way, because hating him would only bring him closer. The way to defeat Mara is through cultivating and maintaining mindfulness and wisdom. We need to recognise what is wholesome and unwholesome, skilful and unskilful, and make the best choices to the best of our ability. Then, slowly, his influence will wane.

So Bodhgaya is the place of enlightenment and the place of Mara's armies. It is ground zero, the physical epicentre of the battle that Lord Buddha won. And now, it is up to us to follow in his steps. 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. Ever since I first heard about it, I was fascinated and felt magnetically drawn to it.

As a child, I had a curious feeling that somehow I was born in the wrong place. I had nothing to compare life in Australia to, however, so I didn't have an inkling of where the right place might have been. Perhaps it was around the age of fifteen, after reading the novel *A Passage to India* for English class, or after seeing the movie *Gandhi*, that the idea of India began to develop a magnetic pull in my heart and mind.

Not long after graduating from high school, I picked up a Ravi Shankar record from a secondhand record shop in Brisbane. I would play it quite loudly when my twin brother was out and no one else was at home. The sitar and tabla ragas stirred very strange emotions in me that I still cannot quite describe. Listening to the strange and exotic music, I became psychically unmoored. I felt lost, yet as though I could almost touch a shaft of light, a glimmer of hope, an inkling of a way forward. Inexplicable tears rolled down my cheeks. The music seemed to bring me into my heart where I could feel the confusion and pain, but it also hinted at beauty and hope in some sacred and ancient place. But where was that place and how would I get there?

I entered Buddhist study and practice in this lifetime by diving in at the deep end. I was twenty years old and hadn't read a word of the Buddha's teachings, but I signed up for an intensive ten-day Vipassana retreat that

had been recommended by a friend. I sat for eleven hours on the floor each day. I'd never experienced so much physical pain! Being with my mind without distraction, I'd never experienced so much emotional pain either! But the teacher SN Goenka-ji constantly prompted us to 'Staaaart agaaain' in the practice of re-establishing mindfulness. By mid-afternoon on the eighth day, all of the pain in my body seemed to disappear and my heart and mind felt full, cool, and content. I thought, 'This is what I've been searching for!' The path that I could wholeheartedly give myself to was a spiritual one. It was a relief to discover something that might lead to contentment within this baffling experience of life.

Just three years later, I was ensconced in a monk's life in Thailand. I'd immersed myself in a Buddhist culture and was learning to chant in the ancient Indian language of Pali as well as to speak in Thai. Yet, I still had a 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 past lives. Now, with the Theravada texts as a reference, the four main Buddhist holy sites would be the obvious place to start.

In my early years as a monk, I heard Ajahn Jayasaro tell some wonderful stories about India. I suggested that he should arrange a pilgrimage and take some of the monks along. It would be good for our faith and would bring our ancient tradition to life. As it happened, the following year, he did accept an invitation to lead a pilgrimage. Unfortunately, though, I was not one of the five monks he invited to come along! When I complained about 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

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### *The Longest Journey Begins With the First Step*

*Day 12 of 45 (+10 hours – 2,710)*

**M**onastic training is rigorous. Restraining our less noble tendencies is precisely what allows the good in us to blossom. Lord Buddha describes mental training to be like refining gold. The impurities must be removed and what remains is very fine. In our tradition, we are required to stay put in the monasteries for our first five years of training as a monk. After this, a degree of personal freedom is afforded us and we are allowed to go wandering alone or with a friend or two in search of good practice situations. In Thai, it's called tudong. When I was a young monk wandering on a seven-week solo tudong, I learned some useful things about my own character and saw some of my latent wholesome inclinations. To a young monk like me, this was heartening.

Rather than search for quiet forests or meditation masters, which is the norm (and by this time I'd already had some wonderful experiences of both), I found myself with the urge to pay respect and meditate at ancient chedis purported to contain Buddha relics. So I set off on my first pilgrimage. Where this impulse came from I don't know. I hadn't heard of anyone else in my community in Thailand doing this. It could very well be an old pilgrimage habit established in past lives.

I walked from Wat Pah Nanachat (the International Forest Monastery) in Ubon province, to Phra Taht Phanom Chedi in Nakhon Phanom. It's more than two hundred kilometres and took me about two weeks. I made a vow not to accept any lifts along the way, which meant legging it fifteen to twenty kilometres per day. The chedi is sacred to the people of northeastern Thailand, and is believed to contain a genuine relic of Lord Buddha's cremated bones.

Life slows down and simplifies when you're making such a journey. I would walk much of the day, occasionally stopping to rest or meditate under a tree. I spent my nights in forests, open fields, orchards, or the occasional monastery. I subsisted on alms alone. There was always enough food offered when walking in northeast Thailand, as well-practised monks and their communities have inspired the people there with great faith.

On the evening I arrived at the chedi, I only chanted and meditated for a couple of hours, but it was long enough to observe something unusual. Although there were a lot of people milling around making quite a bit of noise and I was tired from walking and carrying my gear, my mind experienced a very pleasant rapture while chanting, and then settled deeply in a peaceful meditation. I found this curious indeed.

I would have spent several days there, but the chedi is in a busy study monastery in the middle of a large town. Being 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. It contained artifacts and relics of Ajahn Mun, the most respected Thai forest monk of the last century. He was a strict and austere monk with exceptional meditation abilities and the highest spiritual attainments. I walked all the way on foot and bowed my head before his relics as an offering of respect and an acknowledgement of the hardships he endured to realise the highest Dhamma. That is how I first became a pilgrim to holy sites, starting in my adopted home, Thailand.

My original plan was to walk all the way to Chiang Mai, but while acknowledging Ajahn Mun's austere hardships, I met with some of my own—two bouts of diarrhoea 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. I could try to take a bus to Uttaradit, and then continue along the train tracks northwards to Chiang Mai. The route would pass through a few national parks and would shorten the journey by several hundred kilometres. I was also assured a more spacious and quiet route. Curiously, just moments after formulating this new plan, a goodhearted and open minded Iraqi layman 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 Ajahn Mun's merit was taking care of me.

Walking along the train tracks, I experienced many days of quiet constancy within which to observe my mind. The actual walking was harder because of all of the uneven rocks, but was compensated for by the peaceful scenery. Through it all, the path stretched on and on. Houses were set a way back from the tracks and trains were infrequent. You could hear them coming when the tracks started to make a subtle ringing noise, so there were no sudden surprises.

I spent hours reciting the mantra 'bud-dho' in conjunction with my footsteps—'bud' with the right and 'dho' with the left. I considered the qualities of the Buddha's enlightened mind, yet my mind did not become peaceful. Working with the buddho mantra had been very effective for many masters in our tradition, but somehow it felt a bit dry for me. I decided to experiment with a variation on the theme.

The holy site that was to be my final destination was called Phra Buddha Baht Si Loi. This translates roughly as 'The Four Buddhas' Footprints'. The monastery there has a large boulder which is reputed to contain imprints, or large 'footprints' of four teaching Buddhas: Shakyamuni or Gotama Buddha, whose teachings we all study and practice, and also the three previous Buddhas of this aeon. It is said that in this aeon there will arise five teaching Buddhas - four have come so far, and Maitreya will be the next and final one. Apparently, there are many aeons where no Buddhas arise in the human world at all, so we are considered particularly fortunate. While walking along the train tracks, I decided to experiment with paying homage to each of the five Buddhas separately. I recited, *'Namo Kakkhusandho Buddhho. Namo Konagammano Buddhho. Namo Kassapo Buddhho. Namo Gotamo Buddhho. Namo Maitteyo Buddhho'*.

I thought of these great beings. After incredibly long periods of building virtue and merit, they had arisen in their final births as Buddhas. With this recollection, my mind felt rapturously happy with gratitude, love, and respect. I envisioned the seemingly endless train tracks before me as the millions of lives the Buddhas endured in order to be able teach us all, and I felt awe and deep gratitude. I became happy and peaceful. After reflecting like this, I would then be content to abide with the simpler mantra, 'bud-dho'.

I was starting to learn that I was a ‘devotional type’ of spiritual practitioner. The Sanskrit word for this is ‘bhakti’. I found that opening the heart with loving appreciation was an effective doorway to a simple, deep peace. Perhaps this love for Buddhas and their qualities also made my mind receptive to blessings at places where Buddha relics were enshrined. Perhaps that was what made it possible for me to experience deep peace and contentment despite the crowds and noise.

There are few senior Western Theravada monks who could have shown or taught me this. Having now spent more time in Thailand, I have realised that many Thais share this character type as well. You can hear and feel the loving devotion in the tone of their chanting at large gatherings. This resonance is probably the reason I settled in Asia rather than returning to Australia.

I carried on walking, experimenting with my new devotional technique. I also had a copy of Bhikkhu Nyanamoli’s *The Life of the Buddha* that I read along the way. Upon reaching the city of Lamphun, I made a detour to Phrataht Haripunchai, an ancient monastery with another revered ancient chedi. 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, however, the monastery was not where I wanted to stay for very long, so I headed off after just one night.

By the time I reached the northern city of Chiang Mai, I had developed a chest infection. The nights in late December are quite cool and there had been heavy mists. Fortunately, I knew a laywoman supporter who had a quiet house on the outskirts of the city. It had a vacant upper floor where I could rest and recover for a few days. The supporter’s daughter was a woman by the name of Dr Patriya, who asked many questions about what I was doing and why. She was baffled as to why monks would go wandering around exposing themselves to threats and hardships, when all the while we had good, quiet, safe monasteries we could live in.

I explained that we go on tudong to seek more solitude for the sake of learning about the mind, developing more of an inner refuge, and facing and overcoming fear. It has been a part of the monks’ lifestyle since the time of the Buddha. When I also described the more devotional aspects of what I’d been doing, 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 aspired to do this one day. However, since she was working at a university in Washington State, USA, and had a young son in school, she wasn't sure when it might happen.

After regaining my strength, I walked to one final chedi on a mountain behind Chiangmai. I started out early in the morning and arrived around 7 a.m. The revered Doi Suthep Chedi was fairly quiet at such an early hour, but before long, crowds began to gather. Even so, I enjoyed a lovely long meditation.

I gave myself one more rest day and then headed off to the final sacred site of what had become my first pilgrimage. It took a few days wandering the hilly northern Thai landscape before coming to the site of the Four Buddhas' Footprints. Even though I am quite the faith-type in character, I was a bit confused. The footprints were huge! They sat one within another, deeply imprinted into a large boulder. I'd heard however that several very respected Thai arahants had confirmed with their psychic abilities that the imprints were indeed made by the previous four Buddhas, and that the site was undeniably sacred. I've since come to believe 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 and wondrous artifact, I spontaneously wished, 'Due to the merits accumulated through having walked seven hundred kilometres and having paid respect at ancient chedis containing Buddha relics as well as the relics of the great arahant and meditation master Ajahn Mun, and now having paid respect 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 practise meditation and humbly bow my head there too'.

After my aspirational dedication I made my way back to Patriya's mother's house. This time, I accepted a lift moments after leaving the monastery and was there within a single hour. It seemed so strange after my weeks of dedicated walking. I stayed and rested there for a couple of nights, and then one morning, Dr Patriya visited and announced, 'For many years I've wanted to go on a traditional Buddhist pilgrimage to India. Seeing you wandering on tudong and meditating at holy sites

has reminded me that I need to make it happen. So I've decided that I will sincerely try to arrange a tour, sooner rather than later, and I would like to invite you to join'. I thought, 'Goodness, that was fast!' It was only days since I'd made my wish. It should come as no surprise that I happily accepted the offer.

It took nine months to get everything in place. Patriya had to find at least fifteen participants to make the trip viable and had asked me to find some fellow pilgrims too. 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 writing a book. I also invited a fellow monk friend, Tan Anando (now Ajahn Anando).

We did an eight-day whirlwind of a pilgrimage through India, with another five days in Nepal. Although we spent most of our time on long bus rides and not at the actual sites, I am very grateful to Dr Patriya, Dr Ronna, and Dr Peter for enabling that first trip and introducing me to the practice of pilgrimage in India. I'd finally made it to this strange and wonderful place—Mother India, mother of all mothers! I have many funny, surreal, and bittersweet memories from that first trip. A Westerner's first glimpses of India, especially of the poorest regions, tend to leave deep impressions.

### **First Meditation at the Mahabodhi Temple and Sacred Bodhi Tree**

In those days there was not yet an airport in Gaya, so we had to land in Calcutta and then catch a train. The Calcutta train station was mind-boggling. I had never seen such a vast and dense sea of brown-coloured bodies. In fact I'd never seen such density of humanity in any shade or in any place! To make our way to the platform, we had to find the right current and allow ourselves to be pushed along. Who knew where the wrong current might take us! Old ladies who reached only to my chest height tugged on my robes, while child beggars tapped on my lower legs. The look in their eyes was hard and desperate. All I could offer was a kind smile, which didn't feel like much. Just as I was feeling totally dejected and useless, a sweet young Indian couple held their baby in my face and asked for a blessing. It was the first baby blessing I'd ever been asked to give, so that cheered me up. I had some special holy water

in my shoulder bag and sprinkled some on the baby's forehead, after which he promptly burst into tears and screamed!

We checked into our hotel at 3 a.m., to my emotional distress. Earlier, I'd seen people sleeping all over the train platform. Several had looked up at me and unabashedly stared. They were terribly thin with dull and haunted eyes, and they lay on the cold, hard floor without the luxury of a mattress. Their images haunted me as I lay on the hotel bed with its fresh linen and tried to sleep. On the train platform, I'd recognised for the first time that despite being a renunciant, I was wealthy (with freedom and support), gratuitously healthy, and absurdly clean.

In the morning, we enjoyed a hearty breakfast and then made our way into the compound that contained the temple, Mahabodhi Chedi, Sacred Bodhi Tree, and Vajra Asana. I was deeply moved and enchanted by the site of the Buddha's enlightenment from the outset. We were on a very tight schedule however and after what seemed like a short chanting and meditation session, the group was already getting ready to leave for lunch, after which we would be whisked around some other significant local sights. But I wished to be nowhere else. I couldn't drag myself away from the sacred, ancient tree. So I asked if I could skip lunch and stay on in the temple compound.

I was relieved when our guide and Dr Patriya said yes. I continued my sitting and although I had to wriggle around a bit to manage the pain, I'd never felt so happy to keep trying. Enlightenment felt so close it was almost tangible. I could just about see, hear, taste, and touch it. I closed my eyes and tried to realise Nibbana. My mind did become quite serene, although I didn't become enlightened.

Before long, Dr Ronna joined me back under the Bodhi Tree. She'd visited the site where Lady Sujata had offered milk rice to the Bodhisattva just hours before he became enlightened. She was a psychologist who treated people with eating disorders, so the nourishing meal that enabled the Buddha's liberation held a special meaning for her. As we walked back to the hotel at dusk—tenacious beggar kids tagging along all the way—I had the sense I'd touched something magical, wonderful, and profound...yet had fallen short of fully realising it. Realisation or not, coming close to a vibration or impression of liberation was truly valuable. I became hopeful and determined to return, though I had

no idea how. India was as scary as it was enchanting, and tickets and support were not easy to come by for a fairly junior monk.

As it happened, my return was swift. The kind laypeople in the pilgrimage group took up a collection to help us return to Varanasi from Kathmandu at the end of the tour. 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. It was then that I decided to make a formal meditation practice goal of 108 hours at the Bodhi Tree, 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 my generous supporters.

Unfortunately when we came back, Bihar was experiencing the coldest winter in a hundred years. On top of this, His Holiness the Dalai Lama was giving a Kalachakra initiation that had attracted around ten thousand more pilgrims! The small pilgrimage town that we'd visited had now transformed into something resembling a circus, or at least an enormous Buddhist multicultural event. The cold weather, the crowds, the filth, the constant loud noise, and a bout of serious illness made enlightenment feel very far away indeed. This time round, enlightenment was not exactly what I could hear or smell!

Although I had sincerely hoped (and tried!) to sit 108 hours of meditation, at the end of the month (and after a week in bed with a terrible flu), my tally was a meagre sixty-four. When I told Tan Anando, he responded in the unsympathetic way Brits can have at times. He said, 'You didn't even come close!' That's not to say he was an unsupportive friend. We had buoyed each other while sick, reading stories, passing tissues, and playing 'I spy with my little eye'. And we only had one argument in the entire seven weeks, for which we promptly forgave each other. But I had to admit he was right, I hadn't even come close to reaching my goal.

Despite the challenges I'd faced, I was still enchanted by the site of Lord Buddha's enlightenment, and I'd established a goal and a mode of offering practice there. It was a theme I would return to repeatedly. I would also continue to generate and dedicate merit in Bodhgaya, in the same manner that I'd done at the Four Buddhas' Footprints in Thailand.

Meditation, Lord Buddha explained, produces a great deal of

good kamma. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama once said that merits produced in Bodhgaya are seven times more potent than those produced elsewhere, because of its special qualities. The Vajra Asana is the place where all Buddhas in this universe must become enlightened. The three previous Buddhas were also predestined to be enlightened at the very same place, as is the Buddha yet to come. It is most auspicious indeed.

When you meditate for ten hours per day for six to seven weeks at a stretch, there is time to make many prayers and dedications, and to refine your aspirations. Over the years, I have dedicated merits specifically to support the development of a new monastery, to support 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 his passing from this life. Every single day I have also dedicated merits to the cause of peace in the world, and sincerely wished wellbeing for all. Although true peace for all still seems a long way off, I do believe that the prayers of sincere spiritual practitioners from all traditions prevent things from degenerating further.

May all beings kammically connected to me 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 of 400 / 2,719.5 hours of 3,000)*

There are certain periods in which the Brahmin priests in India deem marriage ceremonies to be most auspicious. Evidently this is one such period, as there is another loud wedding next door. When the music stops at midnight or 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 howl in unison for a half an hour or so. Then there will be two precious hours of relative quiet before the holy sound of temple bells begin ringing out at four. The Muslim call to prayer follows at five. Mindfulness, patient endurance, forgiveness, and earplugs are all necessary equipment here. The earplugs lower the volume by around thirty percent. The wedding music is so loud though that even this will not allow for sleep.

At the Mahabodhi Temple, the same dynamic plays out in the form of pujas and one's reactions to them. States of heaven and hell arise and cease; the pleasant and unpleasant keep 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. The key is not to make a 'self' out of pleasant or unpleasant, liking or not liking.

There is an auspicious chant in the Theravada tradition called the 'Quail's 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'. I must apologise—it is very bad kamma to articulate such sarcasm, I know! Some Vietnamese

pujas are truly lovely. I know one Vietnamese bhikkhu who chants the *Diamond Sutra* every day, accompanied by a small wooden gong. His gentle chanting and the soft *pok, pok, pok* are a delight to listen to for hours. But this puja challenged me.

As soon as the Vietnamese puja finished this morning, the more sombre rumblings of Bhutanese lamas chanting could be heard in the distance. A small group of around fifty are doing their New Year's World Peace recitations. We sit directly under the Bodhi Tree, facing the wall of the chedi. When the lamas come and circumambulate the chedi ten times 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 palpable sense of magic and uplift in the air. It takes them about half an hour to complete their circumambulations, and it's a real joy to be embraced by the energy of their graceful, determined practice. The syllables of sacred mantras tumble quickly out of their mouths in unison, 'bhara, bhara, dhara, dhara, om, om, ah, ah, hum, hum, bhrum, bhrum' and so on. It is transportive. Ajahn Nyaniko told me that it always makes him feel that things are going to get 'better, better, better, better, better' which he intones like a personal mantra. So that you may get to know Ajahn Nyaniko a little more personally, here is an excerpt from a group email he recently sent supporters and friends:

*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-seven-year-old reincarnated Stakna Rinpoche doing a long puja nearby. 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. 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—there's no need for a loudspeaker and it hurts my ears. 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 may include having a chat about how we shouldn't be irritated by this group turning their speaker up so loud, but we are; or that we should reflect that they are actually making good kamma for helping us 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 ten hours. So at a certain point Ajahn Achalo will turn to me and say, 'Tell me to shut up and meditate'.*

*I inevitably respond with, 'Shut up and meditate, Ajahn!' He says 'Okay, thank you'. And with that, 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 things are really bad, having your own portable aromatherapy spa treatment can help! Lavender and rose relax and calm the heart and re-establish a sense of wellbeing. Applying sandalwood oil on the back of the neck and on our wooden prayer beads helps for psychic protection. I studied aromatherapy and therapeutic massage for a little while as a young man back in Australia, when considering possible careers, and so learned a few useful things. I never imagined giving treatments to myself by rubbing it completely undiluted on my chest under the Bodhi Tree in India though! It really does help however.

Having now spent thousands of hours meditating at the Mahabodhi Temple, I've also heard thousands of pujas. It would be best not to have preferences, but I am only human after all. The Sri Lankan Pali and Sinhala pujas are my personal favourite, followed by the Tibetan, then Chinese, and then the Thai. The pujas recited by hundreds of faithful devotees emanate the energy of faith and love. There is one Indian bhikkhu who frequently chants the '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. My mind and body seem content to subsist on this divine sound alone. Mudita (appreciative joy) brahmavihara is what makes it possible to survive Bodhgaya with one's sanity still intact.

The most beautiful sound however is a silent mind—a mind firmly established with mindfulness and equanimity. When the mind stays with the breath consistently for a time, and mindfulness and concentration become more constant and firm, a lovely sense of aloofness can arise. All sounds that arise and cease can be known as 'just that much' by

a still and quiet awareness that looks on as if from afar. We all try to establish this balanced serenity before the cacophony of pujas each morning and afternoon. Sometimes we succeed, sometimes we don't. It is wonderfully educational, though, to observe the way that a noise which was annoying in the morning can sometimes not affect the mind at all in the afternoon if one simply stays very quiet, inwardly focused, and still. Having witnessed many times that it really is perfectly possible not to react with aversion, 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 find ourselves having an aversive reaction, there is still some goodness that can be cultivated. As Lord Buddha taught in the *Ovada Patimokkha*, 'Patient endurance is the supreme incinerator of defilement'. When the mind is peaceful, one abides in peace; when one must endure, then one endures. Investigating the sense base of contact very closely and trying to restrain liking and disliking can help us to 'let go' quite effectively at times. Sometimes I can and sometimes I can't achieve this, but the fact that it's possible at times is an important lesson about the nature of awareness. Awareness itself doesn't react, but liking and not liking often affect awareness in gross and subtle ways.

Ajahn Chah once explained that knowing what one needs to let go of, yet not quite being able to do so is around fifty percent of the practice. This is important to understand, because the very act of mindfully knowing what needs to be let go of, and patiently holding this in awareness, conditions our ability to let go more in future. If we give up too quickly, we will not be laying the conditions for the deeper peace that will come in due course. With practice we develop equanimity, an incredibly valuable quality. It must be hard won through great effort, and there seems no way around this. There is a reason that meditation practice is called 'practice'!

I should acknowledge that there is also a mystical side to practice here in Bodhgaya. To fail to mention this would seem dishonest. Meditation monks are naturally going to have some interest in such things. But monks have to be very careful both with how they relate to psychic phenomena and how they talk about them. Obviously, though, in the course of sitting meditation for thousands of hours in a

spiritually potent place, one is likely to experience periods or moments of heightened sensitivity and awareness.

I am not making any claims to have stabilised meditative absorptions, to have mastery of psychic powers, or to have a purified divine eye. I feel it is important to acknowledge however that I do at times experience periods of deep peace, moments of heightened sensitivity, and perceive beautiful and interesting visual phenomena with my eyes closed in meditation. Developing the mind's potential is a process—for now, I'll leave it at that.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Our Usual Days*

*Day 17 (157 hours of 400 / 2,757 hours of 3,000)*

Sitting ten hours of meditation for one day is not so difficult. Doing it for ten days, then another ten, and yet another ten back-to-back is more of a challenge. It requires determination, stamina, patience, surrender, and a deep commitment to put forth energy even when you're exhausted. At some point illness will be a part of the equation, too, and we must practice with and through it. What does one actually do while meditating for ten hours, you might ask? I mostly practise breath meditation, which Lord Buddha described as the 'crown jewel' of all meditations. I have found however that I also need to practise metta, loving-kindness meditation, for about a third of the time to keep my mind happy and content.

When my mind becomes peaceful with the awareness of the breath, I simply enjoy the peace. At times I can be aware of the extraordinary amount of noise and activity around me, yet be completely unaffected. I'm aware yet detached and serene. And when the metta practice really takes off, the heart can feel very expansive and I make many beautiful wishes for 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 generate energy to keep meditating.

When my mind isn't so peaceful or when there's a lot of pain in the body, I try to investigate and sharpen the mindfulness. When there is no stable concentration, I can sometimes achieve a different kind of peacefulness by learning to detach from feelings, thoughts, and sensory impingements. When mindful investigation is sustained with integrity,

for hours at a time, it is possible to shift from a state of irritation and a sense of feeling oppressed to coolness, detachment, and then to experience a quality of emptiness (of self). In giving interest to and placing the attention on awareness, or ‘that which knows’, consistently, the awareness itself becomes more pronounced. One can rest with this awareness more and more until it becomes the actual object of meditation. Layers of habitual identification fall away from the mind. Once established, the peace that comes from letting go of liking and not liking can be very resilient. When we know how to practise, there is always the potential for peace. Sometimes with the emphasis upon mindfulness, sometimes with the emphasis upon wisdom, and sometimes due to a quality of collectedness. But regardless of the approach, the resulting peace is quite similar.

In order to be able to sit for ten hours a day, day after day, you have to make a set routine. We stay at the Mumtaz Guesthouse where we have our own floor. It’s the fourth floor in a five-storey building. The owners are Muslim and they’re clean, honourable, and gentle people. We have our own rooms, each with a small, private bathroom. Our rate is significantly discounted as we stay for more than a month. Many students pool contributions together to support the monks and mae chee. This little bit of private space is necessary when spending most of the day outdoors in public. We could stay in a local monastery, but then it would be appropriate to attend their chanting and help with chores, and our intensive meditation focus would no longer be possible. So we establish a temporary monastery on level four of the Mumtaz Guesthouse.

I typically start my day with a coffee at 4:15 a.m. 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 usually gone to sleep close to midnight, 4:15 a.m. does seem early! Ajahn Nyaniko sensibly goes to bed earlier. After coffee, some chit-chat, and attending to bathroom matters, by 4:45 we are out the door (both of us cheerful by this stage).

One morning, Ajahn Nyaniko came in singing a Madonna song from at least twenty-five years ago. Besides the fact that we monks are not supposed to sing, I couldn’t believe that he was so cheerful! Unfortunately he got some of the words wrong, but within a minute or

two, I had remembered the correct words and sung them back to him. In my experience, one does need to balance intensive practice with a certain amount of light-heartedness.

I said, 'It's amazing that you can be so cheerful first thing in the morning!' Ajahn Nyaniko replied, 'And it's amazing that you can remember the exact words of a song you haven't heard for twenty-five years first thing, and in the morning too!' We are good friends and complement each other from time to time to buoy the spirits. I must confess that we have also on occasion sung the musical theme from the Rocky movies while rushing down the flights of stairs at 4:45 am. And at other times we have pretended to be Navy Seals with an important mission to perform. I'm sure all of this seems quite silly, especially from fully grown men from a strict monastic tradition. But a little bit of fun and good humour is a great way to start the day before an early morning two and a quarter hour meditation session on an empty stomach.

Walking to the temple an hour or so before dawn, we are among many other people from various countries. They are noticeably radiant with joy. The local hawkers are out in force as well, looking less joyful and at ease. Whereas the pilgrims clearly have enough resources to get by, making a living can be tough for the locals. They try to push their wares relentlessly. Lotus flowers. Garlands. Money change. Butter lamps. 'Tea for poor man?'

There are three young flower-sellers for whom I have come to feel genuine affection and respect: Roshan, Rahul, and Sunny. These boys work from very early in the morning and then go to school as well. Often they give us a small ten-rupee plate of marigolds as a gift. We will be sure to place a big order or give them a monetary gift before leaving this time. It is important to relate to at least some of the locals with kindness and care. We wish them good luck and good day and sometimes I ruffle their hair.

Mae Chee Aimy, a Malaysian eight-precept nun who has lived with me at Anandagiri for some years, leaves even earlier than us. She's one of the very first to enter the temple grounds after the gates open and reserves our favourite places for us by putting down a little mat. Mae Chee is sitting by 5:10 a.m. and we are there by 5:15 a.m. That's what I call teamwork!

We usually sit until 7:30 a.m. and then break for a light breakfast

and a cup of chai tea under a nearby tree within the Mahabodhi Temple compound. It's a wonderful time to soak up the atmosphere of the other pujas and the Tibetans doing their full-length bowing. Getting out of our own heads and rejoicing in the goodness of so many others is helpful. After a quick toilet break, we then sit again until eleven. This schedule allows us to get five hours of meditation in before lunch.

Lunch is pre-ordered by our lay-stewards, and is on the table as we arrive at a nearby restaurant. In Thailand we eat what we receive on traditional almsround, and from our monks' bowl. Here we are more flexible. I am somewhat prone to intestinal issues if the food is not well cooked and clean, so eating almsfood in Bihar would probably end in certain death. (I'm not joking!) There are scores of restaurants in Bodhgaya catering to pilgrims' needs, and there are typically 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 had me hanging over the toilet bowl throwing up repeatedly just a few days ago, so we are back at our most trusted establishments. Vegetarian momos (dumplings) and steamed spinach with cheese is my usual meal at Om Tibet. Vegetable curry and palak paneer (spinach and cheese curry) with three chapatis is my usual order at Om International. We find the Tibetan food somewhat bland and the Indian quite greasy and spicy, so we alternate. Food is food and in any case we're grateful.

After lunch we have a little rest and are back sitting under the Tree by three. We have a coffee and toilet break around six and then we sit again until 8:30 p.m. This is 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.

On the way back, we see other kids we've come to know. Binky and Bharty are two little girls from the nearby shantytown. They ask for biscuits or juice every day. 'Bis-ket...bis-ket naah'. I usually ask them to sing a song first, because then it feels like more of a truly human exchange. They can now say 'Please', 'Thank you', and 'Goodnight'. I even taught Binky a line from one of my favourite songs as a young adult, back when I was broke and wondering what to do with my life. She sings it very well and then we always laugh afterwards. This is the full extent of my inappropriate behaviour with the locals however!

There is another lad who I've sort of adopted. I was deeply affected by the poverty and hardship that I witnessed on my first trip to India sixteen years ago. 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. Getting fed up with my own indifference, seven years ago I made a decision to try and help at least one poor Bihari family.

Arun changed his name to Gautama for good luck. He's now Gautam 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 eleven, but was clearly trying to understand life and trying to be good. He caught my attention because of his truthfulness, and reminded me of myself as a teenager. Gautam had an alcoholic father and no money at home for food, so he left his village to work at the age of seven. When I think of the man he has now become at eighteen, I could literally weep with joy. His smile is now open and has true depth. He has the joy of gratitude and knows 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 story for a later chapter!

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *Day of Miracles!*

*Day 19 of 45 (177 hours of 400 / 2,777 hours of 3,000)*

**N**amo Shivaya, Akkbah Allaha, Hare Krishna, Hare Rama! Miracles do happen! It's been 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, turmeric capsules, and spirulina. And thank you to my kind students with a vested interest in keeping me alive with all these offerings. About a third of my luggage weight on these six week retreats is made up of supplements and immune system boosters.

Even so, supplements are not always enough. Adequate rest is also important. Last time I was here, approximately three months ago, I didn't sleep well for five consecutive nights due to the festivities associated with the Diwali/Lakshmi festival (read: loud music *and* fireworks). A throat infection ensued, which became a chest infection, which became mild pneumonia. I then coughed so hard and so much that I gave myself a hernia! As I've said, practice here can be tough. It has been two months exactly since the hernia surgery and things seem to be holding together quite well. Thank goodness!

Speaking of miracles, my Indonesian bhikkhu friend Ajahn Visalo has joined Ajahn Nyaniko and me after finishing a small pilgrimage with a group from Wat Pah Nanachat led by Ajahn Sukhito. He is another monk with some India kamma and deep kammic imprints for sure. Ajahn Visalo actually lived here as a swami in a Hindu tradition as a young man. The first time he came to Bodhgaya as a swami, he made a request of the Buddha. He said, 'Yogi Gautama, I am having difficulty truly understanding spiritual practice and which direction to take in

the holy life. Please help give me guidance'. The tradition which he had joined placed a great deal of emphasis upon guru devotion, stating that one's progress depended largely upon the blessings of the guru. And yet, the lineage guru had already passed away. Not long after his request in Bodhgaya, 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 in Thailand. 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, Ajahn Visalo is being especially determined, sitting for twelve hours today for the second day running. On one of my past retreats, I once sat eleven hours for ten days straight, and I have also sat for twelve hours on a couple of occasions. It's very difficult! Getting older now, I find ten hours per day more sustainable. Ajahn Visalo has decided that he will try to sit twelve hours of meditation for ten days straight! Having very determined friends is good for general morale. We also understand that to bring about truly extraordinary results, we have to sow some extraordinary causes.

This evening, a very interesting thing occurred right at closing time. We were all sitting side-by-side facing the chedi, each completing our final hour of meditation according to our determination. As the guards began to blow their whistles to announce that it was time to pack up, a strong breeze blew through the compound. You may not yet realise the happy consequences of such an event. Bodhi leaves began to fall all around like rain! Pilgrims dearly prize leaves from the Bodhi Tree. After this shower of leaves came a lovely light shower of rain. Everyone got some leaves and we were all 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? I cannot say for sure. We were grateful that the refreshing rain came right at closing time, though, and that it only lasted a few minutes. We were grateful for our little handfuls of Bodhi leaves as well.

## CHAPTER SIX

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### *Joy, Wonder, and Renunciant Thunder*

*Day 22 of 45 - half way! (200.75 hours of 400 / 2,800.75 of 3000)*

I originally wrote this chapter two days ago. When I read back over it, though, I realised I couldn't send it out to my beloved students and friends. It was far too intense. Although the sense of effort, conviction, and determination was palpable and would perhaps be inspiring to some, overall it felt too heavy. My intensity is not so surprising. I'm more than three weeks into this unrelenting meditation effort. I may also 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!

These retreats require a dogged shoulder-to-the-grindstone effort, which can only be sustained by deep and genuine resolve. This wilful resolve was evident in my words, and I will explore more of this later. But for now, I have done a little bit of a re-write with some of the lightness that comes from having finally gotten past the half way mark. And, in fact, I have had a rostered half-day off in the meantime. Let's face it - drinking lemon, lime, and bitters only works because of the sugar. Too much bitters without sugar is unpalatable. Too much sweetness is terrible too! The Middle Way is the way.

I saw Binky and Bharty again today. 'Ajahn, Appy nah', they implored. Appy is their preferred brand of apple juice. Evidently they like biscuits when it's cold and juice when things are warming up. Today they had bright pink and purple faces. Happily, it's not because they were beaten (oh, the things I've seen...) but because it is Holi, Hindu New Year. People smear bright colours all over each other's faces for three days to celebrate the occasion. Levitas is one of Mother India's

two favourite sons. The other is Gravitas. (Their friends know them as Levi and Ravi.) They are distant relatives of Bathos and Pathos. There'll be more from these two later, but for now, a touch of joy and wonder....

The other day I arrived at the temple around 2:30 p.m. and was getting ready to settle into the long afternoon and evening session, but my preferred seat was not available. I had to sit further down along the chedi wall, two and a half metres away from 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 challenges. Very large groups of Sri Lankans like to form a circle around the adjacent Ratana Jongrom Chedi. It's a one-metre high, approximately nineteen-metre long sandstone tribute to the place where Lord Buddha did walking meditation for one of the seven weeks immediately after his enlightenment. When they gather there, us silently meditating monks seated between the jongrom path and chedi are somewhat in their way.

One-on-one the Sri Lankans are lovely, but in large groups 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! What to do? Mindfully note it and practise forgiveness, I suppose. Accept the curious workings of kamma. Their chanting is at least very nice. (Apologies to my dear and well behaved Sri Lankan lady friends!)

Anyway, there I was, at least two metres from the Tree. There was absolutely no wind, but the moment I placed my meditation mat down, a bodhi leaf landed directly upon it! This kind of thing adds an element of magic to balance the challenges of this place. When I told Ajahn Nyaniko he said, 'That reminds me of what happened to me earlier. When I was thinking an unskilful thought, a bodhi leaf slapped against my face and then blew away, as if to admonish me for not being mindful'. Naturally, he'd received big, beautiful leaves on more wholesome occasions though. Perhaps they're gifts from the devas who abide in the Bodhi Tree? I do believe they're there. They know when to rejoice and they have a sense of humour as well. Once when I led my first group of around thirty 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, five leaves fell directly

onto or just next to me. Many people noticed and commented, as there were no leaves falling anywhere else at that time. Now moving onto some more serious business....

Having now made it through ninety-three percent of the entire goal of three thousand hours, it does feel like I'm entering the final stretch. Two more Ajahns have recently joined us and another two 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. He has been an excellent companion here previously, but has been holding the fort at Anandagiri this time. When I started these marathon sessions around eight years ago, I never imagined that one day I'd be joined by six monks, one nun, and ten laypeople, all striving diligently with their practice under the Bodhi Tree. Soon, the little free time that I have will no doubt be given over to friendly chats with the group, which is to be expected. We still have three more weeks of ten hours per day to follow through with though, so I need strength, health, luck, and whatever else might help!

The first time I tried to do two hundred hours of meditation here in twenty-five days (which was eight years ago now), I remember wanting to give up at the 136-hour point. I felt I could be content with a B-grade for the endeavour! 'Why do I need to be impressive anyway? It's too hard!' I thought. The shoulder pain, the knee pain, and practising with all the noise and the symptoms of flu felt too much. At that time a layman named Adrian, who happens to be a teacher, was acting as my steward. He frankly told me that at sixty-eight percent, my total efforts would only be marked as a C-! Obviously that wouldn't do.

I did eventually finish the two hundred hours. Going beyond what I thought I was capable of was a good training and the attitude served me well when I eventually took up my duties as abbot of Anandagiri. Since then, I've stretched my meditation marathons to three hundred hours in thirty-three days, and then have worked up to four hundred hours in forty-five days. It's much more difficult than fulfilling the goal of two hundred hours, because the days get harder as you go along. When I didn't give up and kept on going, slowly increasing my efforts and abilities, I could eventually do double what seemed an impossible task just a few short years before. I've learned a lot about the nature of doubt, the true strength of the human mind when we persevere, and about how

to stretch my limits slowly but surely. Unrelenting effort grinds laziness down. Unshakeable faith and sheer determination exhaust doubt. And enduring with the feeling of wanting to give up without actually doing so becomes an inner resilience, a toughness that can be truly surprising.

As impressive as all of that may sound, I am not actually trying to be impressive—not to myself or anyone else. Rather, I am trying to demonstrate irrefutably a very important fact: I can do more than I think I can. If we truly wish to cross from samsara into Nibbana, as I do, then consistently doing more than we think we can must become our new way of life.

Unfortunately our habits are very deep. They will drag us backwards 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. (But not fight with other people.) We fight our internal spiritual war with virtue, patient endurance, loving-kindness, mindfulness, wisdom, and unflinching determination. It is the only way. If there were another way, Lord Buddha and the arahants would have told us.

This may come off sounding rather extreme and inflexible. But when talking about 'practice', I am talking about laying the causes for completely purifying and transforming the mind and leaving all of the suffering of the world behind. I am not talking about doing a bit of practice because it feels nice. Rather than trying to make samsara more comfortable, which is futile and will always end in pain, true practitioners are aiming at destroying samsara within – that is, our own deluded attachment to the unsatisfactory conditions of the world. It is possible to approach Buddhist practice in different ways, of course. It can be treated as a supplement or a kind of spiritual 'add on' to an otherwise worldly life. Or as a Band-Aid, a method to ease the pain without really digging in to remove the deeper causes. Or as 'damage control', which is simply being generous and ethical enough to try and avoid the worst pitfalls of samsara. But there is also the approach that aims at a complete outer and inner revolution—the path of the spiritual warrior—and it requires giving it our all. We can continue to play enchanting music on the decks of the sinking Titanic and smile at life's approaching disasters. Or we can jump on a raft and start paddling like hell to the other shore. You should know from my tone which school of practice I belong to.

I am not judging anybody or dismissing people's efforts. Life is difficult and challenging for all of us. I know that there are hundreds of thousands of people, possibly millions, who know how to practise and who wish to undertake it very sincerely, yet their kammic life situation does not yet allow a complete commitment. There are single parents, people with big families, people with jobs and kids and ageing parents. Then there are people living under authoritarian regimes or those working several jobs just to pay the bills. These are not people I would admonish. We should 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!

On the other hand, there are those who are lazy, distracted, half-hearted or wishy-washy, who have good opportunities but are heedless. They know they should focus, but they don't. You guys need a kick in the pants! People like this know what they need to do and have the opportunity, but just can't find the resolve to do it yet. If this is you, what should you do about it? I recommend doing a little more, then a little more, then on and on without 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. As Ajahn Maha Boowa liked to say, 'The kilesas are walking all over your heart'. It's time to start kicking them out.

Teachers I trust have told me that the wonderful results they've gained from practice have come from extraordinary and unrelenting efforts maintained over many years. I'm not sharing that to dishearten or intimidate anyone. Rather, I think we need to recognise the truth of the type of effort that is required to work towards our goal, and take a determined and optimistic long-term view. We can all make these kinds of efforts if we increase our capacity steadily over time.

As I said, those of us who truly aspire to be enlightened and liberated 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. Deep samadhi is the basis for truly powerful insight, and only arises from 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!

Many people overestimate the level of their concentration when life is not too challenging. But when life gets tough, their 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. Shortly after becoming an abbot, I asked my main teacher Ajahn Anan, ‘Now that I am an abbot and teacher and am busy with building the monastery, how many hours of meditation should I aim to do each day?’

He asked, ‘So before you were an abbot you were doing about five, right?’

‘Yes’, I said.

‘Okay’, he replied, ‘now that your life is more complicated, you should aim to do six!’ I love my Ajahn for his tough love. I haven’t been able to follow this advice. I’m still only averaging around five hours a day—but I do think he’s right! Without his honesty, I might have been heedless and let things slip back too far.

We can lose heart when we try hard for a period of time and don’t seem to get anywhere. We are actually getting somewhere, but the journey may be longer than we think. Ajahn Anan says that even if you don’t attain jhana, samadhi, or the first stage of enlightenment in this life, the more you can practise the sooner the enlightenment experience will come—your number of future lives is certainly decreasing. This long-term, optimistic view can be 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 practise in 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 Thirty-Seven Wings to Awakening. This is a list of Dhammas to be cultivated for those aspiring for liberation. There’s no way around it.

It is of course normal to feel like giving up at some point along the way. People often ask me, ‘Ajahn, I’ve been meditating for ten (or fifteen or twenty) 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?’ I invariably ask how long they sit for each day and the answer is usually

thirty to forty minutes or sometimes an hour. On such occasions it is not easy to say what I feel I have to say, but a sincere question deserves a sincere answer. I tell these people that they're aware of the illness and the symptoms and that they have found the correct medicine. The problem is that they are not yet taking enough. I recommend adding an additional session, so that they meditate every morning and evening. Then I encourage them to cut back on entertainment, news, social media, and other distractions, and eventually aim to add an afternoon meditation session as well.

If people meditate forty-five minutes to an hour three times per day, they will experience a big difference. Half an hour once per day will not get you very far. It is a good start and does make merit and lay a foundation, but the benefits are limited. Mindfulness needs to be generated and sharpened frequently 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 sense of coolness, spaciousness, and wakefulness in the mind, along with less reactivity and a greater capacity to reflect wisely.

On this path of great effort, our parami must become more powerful than our greed, hatred, and delusion. Faith must become more powerful than doubt. A capacity to 'stay with' and be patient must grow stronger than our habitual restlessness and sensual cravings. The capacity to relinquish must be even more powerful than our desire to acquire. Attaining enlightenment is a process of letting go of all that obstructs our potential purity of mind, rather than attaining something external to us. In order to let go, we need to assiduously cultivate spiritual qualities.

I have experienced many hours of peace and ease while sitting under the Bodhi Tree here in Bodhgaya. This is true 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 liberation'—when the mind is content, cool, and at ease, and where no palpable suffering can be discerned. If you can experience this 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 realised, then it stands to reason that it can, in time, be fully realised.

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. 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.

I wish you success in being more committed in your own way, doing a little more study, contemplation, and meditation, and doing it day after day. I hope you refuse to ever give up. Then 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!

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### *The Smell of Real Monks*

*Day 24 (220 hours of 400 / 2,820 hours of 3,000)*

Yesterday, March 1, was Magha Puja, one of the three most holy days of the Buddhist calendar. It commemorates an occasion when Lord Buddha laid down the central principles of restraint that support the realisation of Nibbana. Here in Bodhgaya, many people make an effort to honour this special day, and have often travelled great distances to do so. You might wonder how it felt to be at one of the most holy places on this holy day, surrounded by inspired devotees. It was nothing if not overwhelming.

There were so many groups of pilgrims, all jostling for space to do their special pujas. Every group, it seemed, required its own loud speaker. The bigger groups who had reserved spaces within the compound also had very large amplifiers. The result was total auditory mayhem. When the Bhutanese lamas were banging their cymbals and blowing their long horns, 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. At the same time the chanting of Cambodian, Burmese, Thai, and Sri Lankan groups was blaring over speakerphones. It continued like this all day.

Normally it's easy enough to practise with sound. You find ways to be patient, observe the flux and change, and rest in precious hushed moments in between. But Magha Puja at the Mahabodhi Temple was akin to a storm that raged all day, the sound waves crashing and crashing against our ears and sensitive minds without reprieve. Our group found it a long and exhausting day. However, we did manage to keep our practice vows!

Ajahn Nyaniko and I found ourselves turning to emergency aromatherapy treatments several times. After three or four generous dabs of lavender and rose though I began to feel a bit worried. Forest monks should maintain a certain air of toughness and austerity in our carriage and demeanour. We're supposed to be like Green Berets, dug down in the trenches killing the kilesas left, right, and centre. But we had begun to smell like a florist or as Mae Chee Aimey commented, like babies' talcum powder! This would just not do.

We rummaged through our emergency supplies to look for an alternative. Curiously enough, Ajahn Nyaniko had picked up some myrrh at the farmers' market in Hawaii where his parents live. And I'd been offered some frankincense. If the three wise men thought these medicinal unguents were a suitable offering for the baby Jesus, they'd certainly be good enough for us. So we blended the two and came up with a new aromatherapy treatment with its own catchy slogan. 'Mankinsence—Man Up!' That seemed more in order. Unfortunately when we rubbed it on our chests it didn't smell very nice.

Looking desperately through my supplies I found some essential oil of sweet basil, an herb that is sacred to Hindus and which is frequently offered to Lord Krishna. That seemed promising. I mixed in a little more coconut oil as a base and then a few drops of sweet basil, and hey presto! It was much more fragrant. Now we have a new name and slogan: 'Mankinsence-asil—the Smell of Real Monks'.

Please forgive my self-satirising. When practice is a tough slog you've got to find ways to laugh. Obviously we don't have these essential oils to perfume our bodies. My primary use for them is to make fragrant offerings at the chedi and Bodhi Tree. It's effectively incense without the chemicals and smoke. On occasions like this, we use some of the oils therapeutically too. Rose and lavender work well for calming and softening. Frankincense and myrrh are more grounding. Sandalwood is traditionally used for psychic protection. However, the fragrance of virtue, Lord Buddha assures us, is the finest and is not blown away by the wind.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

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### *95% of the Big Goal is Completed!*

*Day 29 of 45 (252.5 hours of 400 = 67% / 2,852.5 hours of 3,000 = 95%)*

It is the twenty-ninth full day since arriving. According to my tally, I've lost a day and a half to food poisoning, another half-day to yesterday's throbbing sore throat, and a couple of hours due to the Prime Minister of Vietnam's State visit earlier in the week, when we were locked outside for a while. With 147.5 hours to go and seventeen full days in which to accomplish it, it's looking pretty good for a successful completion of four hundred hours. Nothing can be taken as a given, of course. Nonetheless, it feels good to be on target. Even if I were to suddenly die (as we Buddhists like to consider) and could not complete my vow, I've already made it to the 95% point of three thousand hours meditating at the Bodhi Tree. My teacher friend Adrian assures me this is an A. So anything from here on is an A+!

I have started to become a bit obsessed by the numbers. Although it is all about the process and not simply reaching a target, the tally keeps me on track to follow through with strong effort and determination. Goals and intentions need to be clear and firmly established in order to succeed. So while to some it might seem like a neurosis, it is actually more of a skilful means. The Tibetans here try to do 100,000 full-length prostrations in three months and some count their mantras by the millions. My group of forest monk friends and our students are counting our hours of sitting meditation. It's not a bad thing at all.

When I'm tired the numbers loom large in my mind. On the most difficult days, I recall that one day is just one third of a percent of the 3,000-hour goal. Three difficult days only add up to one percent! This line of thinking is unskilful as it can be disheartening and sap my energy.

When you shrink things down to smaller goals like 'just ten hours for today' and keep on going, eventually the end draws near. On the other hand, nothing is really coming to completion. My commitment to daily practice will go on after this retreat ends. It's the ultimate goal, the overcoming of all suffering that I must keep in mind. After all of my efforts this result must surely have come closer. I believe this with deep faith. So I will keep sowing the causes and allow the eventual results to come in their own time.

On the subject of numbers, I have done some reviewing and rough calculations. If I can keep up an average of five hours of meditation per day back in my usual monk life, then after just three more years I will have completed approximately 30,000 hours in total. (This lifetime.) Ten percent of this would have been accomplished at the Bodhi Tree. I see my efforts as an offering of practice. These periods of longer sitting are also an investment in maintaining a good standard of practice back at the monastery, where more duties, complications, and opportunities for distraction await. Thousands of times I have set my intention to be a truly good and sincere meditation monk and I continue to do so daily.

Some people may well wonder, what do you do for ten hours each day? When I'm sitting in meditation here, I'm not just sitting. I am sharpening and clarifying the quality of mindfulness, mostly using breath meditation. I deliberately pacify hindrances or unwholesome mind states, repeatedly bringing my mind to a sense of balance—'keeping the mind in the middle', as Ajahn Chah advised. Sometimes I spend time in wise reflection, sometimes I cultivate loving-kindness, and at other times I investigate the sense bases and the body, trying to see them clearly as 'not-self'. If the mind inclines to peacefulness I simply let it rest, in order to have energy and clarity to bring to daily tasks and to have good energy for further contemplations.

In my personal experience, five hours of daily sitting practice helps me to maintain and apply a good quality of mindfulness to my investigation and wise reflection throughout the day. It also firmly establishes goodwill. I normally complete two hours in the morning (one before and one after the alms round), an hour in the afternoon, and then another two in the evening (one at the evening puja and one before sleep). At busier times, I may reduce the sessions to forty-five minutes or so, but I keep up the regularity as best as I can. Coming from a large community I know many

monks who do less, but a few who do much more. I also try to do an hour of walking meditation in the afternoons. It supports clear mindfulness and investigation as well as bolstering physical health. I have to admit I often fail to manage the walking if I have office work to get done or building projects to supervise.

Although on most days here in Bodhgaya I am sitting for ten hours per day, I'm only counting nine and a half officially. That's to account for time chatting a little here and there to other members of our group. I don't mind though because the sincerity of my friends' practice brings much joy. It is also good to share the practice opportunities that I've been given. I haven't yet given you a proper update about some of the other members of the current team. Here goes....

Ajahn Nyaniko has been averaging ten hours per day, and the newly arrived Ajahn Visalo managed to sit twelve hours per day for ten days in a row! They're both still in excellent health. Canadian-born Ajahn Pavaro, my 'second monk' at Anadagiri, has now arrived for these final three weeks. This is his third intensive retreat in Bodhgaya. We share an affinity 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 bookish than I, polite and always on time, a good brother and friend, and overall a decent and well-liked monk. In contrast I am 'faithy', emotional, creative, and usually a little late. I'm 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 have accumulated somewhere between seven to eight hundred hours of practice here in Bodhgaya.

Mae Chee Aimy is a quiet achiever. She averages around seven hours per day and has been here for four of these longer retreats. She also spent one rainy season retreat in Bodhgaya many years ago. We calculated that she must have already accumulated around 1,500 hours of formal practice here. I feel as though I won the lottery to have this particular Malaysian-born Mae Chee as our resident nun at Anadagiri. She's hard working, consistent in her practice, and happy to help when it's needed. 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 I also include her in many excursions.

Mae Chee Aimy is a helpful steward. She holds the funds that were

offered to support our retreat, orders and pays for the meals, and helps me with the accounting. Looking at the funds that were offered for various needs, we recently discovered we had a significant surplus. 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 travelling. So when he reached 120 hours in ten days we did a little chanting and offered him a five-inch, hand-carved, smiling Buddha in meditation mudra as a gift.

Another two Thai Ajahns have joined us now as well, Ajahn Ghit and Ajahn Anand. Both spend time with me regularly at Anandagiri. Ajahn Ghit has a very caring nature and he volunteered to clean the abbot's kuti regularly back at the monastery. They are sitting meditation a lot as well, although are less intense than Nyaniko, Visalo, and me. Closer to our departure date if everyone has been very diligent, Mae Chee will help each of the monks select a few souvenirs to take back for family and close supporters. Until then, no shopping!

We have a few lay-supporters and friends with us too. They are practising well and are highly inspired. In about a week, we will also be joined by around fourteen of our Thai students and supporters who wish to be here for the final push.

Ajahn Nyaniko and I have added some chanting to our daily routine at the chedi. We have both learned the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, the Buddha's First Teaching, by heart and it seemed an appropriate recollection. Chanting about the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path in the very place where Lord Buddha fully realised these liberating truths feels wonderful. To be able to do it by heart is a joy. It takes us around fifteen minutes. We then chant the factors of dependent co-arising, another way that the Lord Buddha's profound insights are described, which takes another five minutes. Some of the regulars here have seen us sitting like lumps of wood for more than three weeks. Naturally, they were shocked by our sudden transformation into professional Pali chanters! Jaws dropped and people started bowing towards us from several directions. Now, a few people wait with their chanting books in hand and join in once we pipe up. This has been a good addition to the schedule.

I also had a lovely meditation experience two days ago. The days immediately after Magha Puja were tough. I felt kind of heavy and

clogged up after sitting in the psychic soup of big noisy crowds all day. By patiently enduring and persisting, things shifted significantly. My mind felt so light, serene, and energised that I stayed up much too late two nights in a row. So it's been up and down, but I'm now ninety-five percent of the way to the big goal. I am sharing the merits of my practice with all those kammically connected.

**CHAPTER NINE***Mumtaz Gems & Sons*

**G**uesthouse Tahir has a high-end ‘original kwalkity’ Buddhist mala (prayer beads) shop on the lower floor, and Ardil helps with a bit of this and that. Meanwhile, Shalal sources and distributes malas to and from many places—lapis lazuli from Afghanistan, turquoise from Pakistan, rainbow moonstone from here in Bihar, and some Russians who are repeat guests at the guesthouse bring amber from Kaliningrad. The semi-precious gemstone beads are now mostly processed in Chinese factories. They are perfectly round, have wide, well-centred holes, and are immaculately polished. The sandalwood and rosewood beads however are still handmade in India.

The sign on the shopfront reads Mumtaz Gems & Sons and they have hundreds of thousands of malas in stock. Competition is steep—there are hundreds of stalls on the street, mostly run by Tibetans who come down for the pilgrimage season. I’m quite certain that no other place in the world has as many Buddhist malas for sale as Bodhgaya in peak tourist season. In order to be a cut above the rest, Mumtaz Gems & Sons go for better quality, a good reputation and offer free re-stringing.

Tahir is charming and persuasive. He will invite you for tea and a chat as you walk by. ‘No pressure, just come and talk. Such an honour to have you as our guest!’ he’ll say. After a few sips of tea he will wave his trinkets, gypsy-like, before your eyes. He’ll share his secrets and his knowledge, show you family heirlooms, tell you charming tales, and you’ll soon feel that he is a true friend. ‘Here, smell this—real sandalwood oil... real amber oil...best and rare agarwood mala’. The smells wafting through his store are divine. With sandalwood, the pitch goes, ‘This one real, this

one more real', meaning one has been boiled to extract the oil while the other has not. The price difference is staggering.

Outside, the streets of Bodhgaya are crowded with beggars dressed in dirty rags. Dust and noise abound and unholy odours assault you from every direction. Whether walking or riding in an auto rickshaw to and from the temple, the smell of filth and excrement is unavoidable. Coming into a clean, bright, and fragrant space is very enticing, especially when the owner is well mannered and gracious. Once sweet chai has been poured, most people are more than happy to lose themselves in the pleasant sensory phenomena—and lose some of their money in the process as well! After all, retail therapy is relaxing after a hard day of striving.

I've inevitably become interested in a few of his items in the decade that I've known this man, as have most of my friends. I do have several mantra practices in addition to my breath and walking meditation, so a few special strands of mala beads have found their way into my life. Over the years, I've also re-offered malas from Tahir's shop to senior monks including His Holiness the Dalai Lama and His Holiness the Karmapa. I've learned how to string malas and tie the special slipknots and have taught many of my monk friends these skills as well.

One night, I was having a cup of tea with Tahir in the shop when Mumtaz came home from his devout praying at the mosque. Mumtaz is the grey-bearded, slightly stern-looking patriarch of the family. Perhaps recognising a fellow religious man, he shared a few thoughts with me. 'You know Ajahn', he said, 'these Buddhists are coming, especially from China, they are looking for special mala. Coral, amber, turquoise, they are paying so 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 it is lucky for me, nah, Ajahn? I can take care of my family. Have house, have car, is okay...no?'

I replied, 'Yes, it's good Mumtaz, good for you and your family', and then took my leave for the night. As I walked upstairs to my room on level four, I couldn't help feeling a little defensive. After all, I'd been meditating at the Bodhi Tree all day. In the bag slung over my shoulder were two malas purchased on previous trips, one turquoise and one amber. 'No', I

thought, '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 artefacts if you do millions of mantras like I do!' But I do have to admit the malas can be expensive. The Muslim brothers and their like must be laughing at us all the way to the bank! Never mind. If Buddhist practitioners do their mantras and the Mumtaz family gets by just fine there is no harm and no problem. 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!

Take my advice and skip the Bodhi seed malas though. You see, there is actually no such thing, and yet they are for sale (and quite expensively at that) all over Bodhgaya. I've spent enough hours under the Bodhi tree to know very well what its fruit looks, smells, and feels like. The Bodhi Tree comes from the fig family. *Ficus religiosa* is its botanical name. The fruits are soft and contain hundreds of tiny 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 growing that were sprouted from the fruit of the sacred Tree here. Incidentally, we also recently enshrined thirty-three Bodhi Tree fruits, and three hundred Bodhi Tree leaves (from the Tree here in Bodhgaya) in the foundation of a chedi we are building. I believe they contain a special blessing energy. And we will enshrine a further seven hundred more leaves in higher levels later this year.

Suffice to say: I know Bodhi tree seeds, and they are not suitable for making malas with. Even when the fruits are mature and dry, the seeds are not hard. If you rub them between your fingers they will crumble. The seeds on Bodhi seed malas however are very hard and much larger. They're obviously from a completely different species of tree. Evidently, large numbers of locals have been colluding for a long time to sell 'Bodhi seed malas' to pilgrims, knowing that no such thing exists. They're not going to fool this bhikkhu though. I'm sticking with overpriced turquoise and amber—real wallah!

But rest assured that my students and friends do not spend all of their money at Mumtaz Gems & Sons. For the past few years, we've been putting aside some funds for a local charity, the Root Institute. When there are surplus funds from what has been offered to us, we monks join in donating too. The Root Institute have a free school, a women's clinic, an animal shelter, and an orphanage for kids who have HIV. They also

have outreach health services with a team that travels out to the poorer villages. We have given at least USD\$1,500 each year over the last four years. In this way, not all of people's spare cash goes to expensive malas!

I do consider Tahir a friend though. He really does want to give us Buddhists the perfect mala and feels content when he manages to do so. His love of his dear Allah is very deep and he frequently expresses regret that he is so absorbed in business matters. Every now and then, he tries to engage me in a religious discussion and tries 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, as was Jesus; but that the last 'Big Teacher' was Mohammed. Even so, they respect teachers.

I usually remain fairly quiet during these religious chats, emphasising that generosity, virtue, and metta will lead to rebirth in heaven. I feel this is common ground. I refrain from sharing the idea that no God is ultimately greater than any other being in terms of our shared potential. According to the Buddhist view, we all have an equally special potential for enlightenment — Devas, or 'Gods', included. This might cause offense, as would the idea that there is something higher than life in the highest heaven realm, so on these points I stay silent.

God is highest for Hindus and Muslims in India. Any other notion is sacrilege. They believe that one must pray for forgiveness, for salvation, and for blessings, and praise the qualities of Gods in order to experience good fortune on earth. They believe that they may then be reborn in their divine company in the afterlife. In our faith, Nibbana is the highest and it is to be realised by each person individually. No prayers to gods alone can accomplish this. We all have the extraordinary potential of a god-like nature—to fill the universe with radiance—and then the potential to transcend even that. No conditioned phenomenon, not even boundless radiance from immense samadhi or oceans of merit, can compete with the bliss of having 'let everything go'. Or so say those who have realised liberation from suffering. The purified mind with no remainder of clinging experiences the highest bliss.

The number of people in the world who resonate with this concept is limited. Most people can't even imagine how extraordinary their minds already are, or how much more they might become in the future. We should feel immense gratitude to the Buddha for teaching us about our ultimate potential and for explaining the path to realise it. I most certainly do!

## CHAPTER TEN

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### *Bodhgaya in the Age of Kali*

*Day 30 of 45 (270 hours of 400 / 2,870 hours of 3,000)*

I returned an hour earlier this evening as I'm now dealing with a mild upper respiratory tract infection. Breath meditation is extra challenging with a completely stuffed up nose. Unfortunately tonight there's another very loud wedding party next door. People have been asking whether I'm staying next to a wedding reception hall, but I'm not. However, there are five guesthouses within twenty metres of ours, including one directly adjoining our building. At five storeys high with some thirty to forty rooms, each can suddenly become a wedding reception hall without prior notice. First, a bus arrives with the guests, and a DJ boom box is hot on their heels.

The DJ set-up is a sight to behold. Imagine a two by two metre platform on wheels, with large speakers facing four directions. Strobe lights are rigged on top and a skinny Indian teenager inside operates a CD player blasting an odd blend of bargain bin techno Bollywood grunge. This whole contraption is tugged along by an agricultural tractor. Spotlights illuminate the bride and groom who walk ever so proudly in front of the tractor, while at the rear you'll invariably find around twenty barefoot slum kids grinding and gyrating, enjoying their own private rave in the dust stirred up by the vehicle! I'm not sure why, but seeing pre-teen kids doing pelvic thrusts rhythmically into the air is deeply unsettling somehow. So many things just don't seem quite right with this scene, it disturbs me more than it should. I tell myself not to judge. This ruckus happens just down the road from our beloved United Nations World Heritage premiere pilgrimage site. This is Bodhgaya in the Age of Kali. At least the slum kids are having a good night out!

Around seven years ago, loud noise would make its way to the entrance of the Mahabodhi Temple compound, especially on Friday and Saturday nights. Many small shops were set up right outside the wall, just two hundred metres from the Tree, and boys would be playing CDs to sell to tourists on small stereos. According to Mumtaz's son, Tahir, the United Nations World Heritage group had proposed a two-kilometre quiet zone around the site. It would require relocating local businesses and houses, which is easier said than done. Then curiously, a few years ago, some small bombs were placed inside the temple compound, including under the Bodhi Tree. Several of them exploded, injuring two monks. Islamic terrorists were blamed. Once it was a matter of national security, military bulldozers with orders from Delhi came and demolished all of those little shops within days. None were compensated for their loss of business and income.

Local Muslims insist that it was not the work of terrorists, because their community benefits directly from the Buddhist pilgrims. They point the finger at the Mahabodhi Temple Management Committee itself. They say that the bombs were small, not intended to do any real damage, and were detonated in the off-season with just enough time to bulldoze and redesign the entrance area before the next pilgrimage season commenced.

I doubt we'll ever know for sure who was behind it, but 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 told that only cars with special registration stickers will be allowed in the inner zone around the temple. And soldiers at two checkpoints now pat us pilgrims down as we enter. They are very friendly soldiers though and the pat down is quite perfunctory at times. Even so, seeing many army personnel in military fatigues has affected the ambience of the holy place.

I hope not to be sitting beside the next bomb that goes off in Bodhgaya. May there be no more bombs! I always make a point of paying respects at the Temple of the Emerald Buddha, Bangkok's most sacred shrine, before travelling to India. I ask for protection from the Thai devas, for safe travels to and from the holy site, and promise to share merits with them too. I really believe that these gestures are helpful. Lord Buddha clearly states in a sutta that one of the ten

benefits of cultivating loving-kindness is that devas (angels or celestial beings) protect you. Furthermore, one of the benefits of recollecting the goodness of celestial beings is that you also become dear to them. Many modern people doubt these things, but I'd rather have the love and protection of the devas than the superficial 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!

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### *Hitting the Bump*

*Day 30 of 45 (270 hours of 400 / 2,870 hours of 3,000)*

When doing intensive retreats, the part between the halfway and three quarters point is often quite tough. You've gotten over the initial spurt of enthusiasm and reaped the benefits of good health you brought from 'normal life'. Those are the things that carry you through the first quarter, although you have the added task of adjusting to the pain. Then there's an extra push of determination to get to halfway. You think once you are halfway you'll feel accomplished and enthused, but I've normally found myself lamenting, 'Oh dear, only halfway...now I have to do that all over again!' This is where the moment-by-moment practice truly becomes the path and our refuge. Thinking of how much further there is to go is just too painful.

In Northern India, by this stage you will usually have had some health challenges too. That's more or less where I'm at now. A mild cold lingers and I'm on symptom-suppressing meds to dry up the mucus, but now have a completely blocked nose. Ho hum. Thank goodness the weather is still pleasant and the pujas have been at a reasonable volume lately, otherwise it would be even more of a drag.

Ajahn Nyaniko and I both hit an energetic wall yesterday. It's curious the way we synchronise at times. The feeling is that there is just not enough energy to go on. We have both been through this before previously though. So are we going home? No! We got up at 4:15 a.m. again and sat five hours before lunch today just like every other day. This is where having made a determination or vow is important, because otherwise the compulsion to move onto the next thing or to take a break will drag you away. Laziness is a kilesa, and sloth and torpor is one of

the hindrances to concentration. If practitioners can overcome it, their mind will be bright, energised and beautiful. So we push on. But to be fair, we're probably not working with laziness here at this stage. After a month, we are likely in need of a rest. Although genuinely fatigued, continuing on at this point is still valuable for different reasons. Keeping on going when you feel that you cannot is precisely the point; it's when you really begin to cultivate a different level of spiritual virtue.

We've been chanting the first sermon at the Bodhi Tree by memory in the afternoons. It's an act of devotion and gratitude, and also a contemplation to remind us of the central teachings and 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. That's the Second Noble Truth. We crave for sense pleasures, we crave to be or to become some things, and we crave to not become others. Cessation of suffering, the Third Noble Truth, comes from relinquishing these various craving tendencies, not from being pushed around by them. The ability to relinquish craving comes from a habit of ethical behaviour, strong mindfulness, concentration, wisdom, and lots of practice. It is a training. So we cultivate this path towards the cessation of suffering—the last of Lord Buddha's Four Noble Truths.

Patient endurance is the supreme incinerator of defilements. So it says in the *Ovada Patimokkha*, a central teaching pertaining to restraint. There's no way around it, sometimes we just have to toughen things out, even though it feels like the defilements are incinerating us instead! Ajahn Chah said that the secret to growth in practice is not so difficult to understand—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 most people's preferences and habits. These 'Middle Way' standards bring extra energy and clarity to the mind.

When you really haven't had enough rest, it's still useful to practise, even though it does lean to the side of austerity. At these times, we can develop patience and determination, and find creative ways to generate energy where there doesn't seem to be any. Getting through such occasions, we become less frightened of fatigue—we see that it can be endured and does pass. Ajahn Pasanno, who was the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat in Thailand when I went forth as a novice monk, used to say,

‘Sometimes we feel that there isn’t the energy to practise, but in my own experience it is by putting forth an effort to practise that energy arises in the mind. Effort generates energy’. It’s a teaching I apply quite often. Ajahn Pasanno did not just teach Dhamma, he also led by example. He was at the morning meetings, afternoon sits, and evening meetings everyday.

When I’m feeling exhausted and experiencing resistance, I recall the Buddha and the great masters like Ajahn Mun and Ajahn Chah. The Buddha practised extreme austerity for six years before his insight into the Middle Way. The Dalai Lama once said that the image of the Bodhisattva practising austerities is his favourite, because it reminds him that the Buddha’s insights were hard-won and that he shouldn’t take the Dhamma for granted. Thinking of Lord Buddha’s incredible striving puts our difficulties into perspective and we can feel inspired and grateful. However, we shouldn’t reject our good efforts if we compare them to truly great practitioners. This is unskilful 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 recognised and countered with metta.

Being willing to be a bit austere for a limited period helps us to appreciate the great efforts of elders from our lineage. It can be like an offering of repentance for the times when our practice leaned too far to the side of laziness or sensuality. This isn’t punishing ourselves because we feel guilty, rather, we are making a noble effort when the time is right. It brings dignity.

Whenever we have great goals, we have to find ways to keep working towards them, even when the going is rough. Master Hwa, a meditation master from the Chinese Chan tradition, famously said, ‘Bitter practice, sweet mind’. You could say our practice is a little bitter right now, and we are dragging our feet a little too. But drag our feet we do, all the way to the foot of the Bodhi Tree!

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### *My Favourite Sri Lankan Aunty*

One time here in Bodhgaya, an elderly Sri Lankan lady by the name of Sumedhi\* approached me as I was folding up my sitting mat. She said, 'Bhante, I have noticed you sitting for long periods every day. I am also sitting, just behind you. My mind is very peaceful and I love meditating here at the Bodhi Tree, but I need a teacher. I think that you may be able to help me. Can I ask you a question?' She seemed sincere, so I obliged. 'Yes, I'll try to help if I can', I replied. She said, 'Well, you see, I am trying to practise breath meditation, but very soon after I close my eyes and start to meditate I see a small, very bright light in front of me. It's gold in colour and all around it is bright whitish or yellowish light. I cannot feel my body or my breath at all, and I can stay like that for many hours'. I was very happy for her! But she looked concerned and asked, 'What should I do, Bhante?'

I explained that it sounded like her mind was absorbing into a wholesome, deeply concentrated state. One of the main reasons people cultivate breath meditation is it eventually leads to this kind of bright and peaceful abiding. But Sumedhi wished to be able to cultivate insight as well as peace. She said, 'I want to be at least a stream enterer this lifetime. I wish to realise Nibbana'. A stream enterer has attained the first level of realisation. After attaining this, one's eventual complete liberation is assured.

I recommended that rather than observing flux and change of the breath, instead to use her concentration to investigate the elemental nature of her body, particularly the bones. My own teacher in Thailand, Ajahn Anan, had gotten very good results from this type of practice.

*\*I've changed her name to protect her identity*

Not long afterwards, Sumedhi reported to me that she could hold the perception of her teeth ‘one-pointedly’ in her meditation. She said that it was a cool and peaceful experience. I then recommended that she try to visualise her entire skeleton. Once she could do this, she should then visualise it crumbling to small pieces and eventually to dust, then finally see it blowing away in the wind with only empty space remaining. When I returned to Thailand, I sent her a CD with some guided body contemplation meditations.

During this trip our paths have crossed once again. I asked her about her body contemplation practice, and she explained that even while talking to me, she could see her skeleton clearly in her mind’s eye if she choose. She had also done the disintegration contemplation many times. I wanted to dig a little further, so I asked about possible insight experiences. ‘Sumedhi’, I said, ‘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? One that comes with a sense of a knowing awareness that knows a profound pervasive quality of emptiness?’

Pointing to her heart, she said, ‘Oh, yes. Sometimes I can go in 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. So as a way of checking whether Sumedhi’s experience was a kind of deep sleep (called *bhavanga*) or the fruit of correct practice and investigation, I asked how she felt afterwards. She reported feeling blissful for two or three days afterwards. That actually sounded very promising indeed! But I’m still not absolutely sure whether she is experiencing profound concentration or very deep insight.

There is also a peaceful state known as ‘neighbourhood concentration’ (*upacara samadhi*), where the mind is touching upon *jhana* (deep, one-pointed absorption). If a person has faith, a lot of merit, and strong virtue, they can experience this state for many hours at a time—sometimes even for days, weeks, or months! It can be very peaceful as well, with only a few very wholesome thoughts arising. This is where a practitioner needs a highly developed teacher to help them see exactly what they

are experiencing. Unfortunately, I cannot 'embrace consciousness with consciousness' and see precisely the level of her concentration and insight, although Sumedhi had hoped that I could.

When I asked her about her metta cultivation, she smiled sweetly and said, 'Oh I can't actually be angry at anybody'. I also found this very promising because deep insight does weaken the kilesa of aversion. I'm not quite sure what to say here, except that it seems Sumedhi's practice is going very well! To look at, she just looks like anyone's sweet old granny. But there she is, sitting ten hours per day with her radiant mind-states, her metta and her insights, aiming for Nibbana!

The reason I'm sharing the details of these conversations is that it certainly appears that this woman'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 Sumedhi do exist. One of the qualities of someone who is truly established in liberation, though, is that they have no doubt about how to practise. Sumedhi does seem to have some doubts, so this is a little confusing. But I think I know what might be going on. For it really does seem that Sumedhi knows the correct way to practise in order to experience deep peace and a sense of letting go of self. What she has doubts about it seems is how to label and describe these things, as well as how much further she needs to go in order to have finished the letting-go process, to be entirely liberated. From listening to her describe her practice and experiences, it's as though she has climbed a ladder and is now well established on a higher level. She can't see the ladder anymore, so she is confused about how many rungs or steps she took or how many more there are left. But it doesn't matter! I'm very happy for her and glad to know her.

Talking with Sumedhi is uplifting and cool. She is modest and humble, and has a distinct lack of hubris. It's also noteworthy that she has kept the eight precepts very strictly for twenty-five years. It would not surprise me if she were already established in a stage of liberation. How wonderful if that is the case! She asked to come and stay at Anandagiri for a few months and I said she'd be very welcome. I would like to introduce her to my teacher, who can gauge these things with far more accuracy than me. I'd be very interested to hear what Tan Ajahn has to say. For now, I'm happy to have met my favourite Sri Lankan Aunty at the Bodhi Tree.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### *Advanced Zazen Practice*

*Day 32 of 45 (282 hours of 400 / 2,882 hours of 3,000)*

Yesterday was difficult. I was dealing with a persistent cough, so my mind would not settle into any real peace. Yet I had made my commitment to clock up the hours. So I sat, but it was all rather gruelling. Today the cough is much better and my morning sessions were quite pleasant. I have a glimmer of hope that soon my normal energy and focus will return—just in time for the final push towards the finish line.

When the mind does not settle inwards comfortably, one tends to notice more things which ‘just don’t seem quite right’ in the area under and around the Bodhi Tree. It is a truly fascinating and dynamic place where so much is going on at once, much of it wholesome and some of it quite awful. Now that I’m closely approaching three thousand hours, even I can’t believe that we actually managed to meditate there! If it were not for the Buddha’s blessings, it would surely not be possible.

#### **Advanced Zazen**

Our usual approach is to sit right up to the chedi wall on the northern side, still in very close proximity to the Bodhi Tree. In fact, one branch wraps around and perfectly covers our corner of choice. Then it’s possible to practise a bit like zazen in the Zen tradition, where if you open your eyes all you see is the wall. There are just a few choice spaces that afford this extra opportunity for restraining the senses. Meditation monks cherish these prized spots and vie for them, which is why we must arrive early each day.

Normally, with *zazen*, as with most retreat situations, a quiet place is a support for seeing the movement of the mind more clearly. Here in Bodhgaya, however, your mind may be noisy but your surroundings are often noisier! Normally, retreat situations run on a predictable schedule, which creates a sense of security that can help the mind to settle. In Bodhgaya though, you literally never know what is about to come around the corner.

To establish some sense of seclusion, we sometimes pull our hats down just over our eyes. It looks really silly, but as well as giving us sun protection, it screens out the visual awareness of large numbers of people who are constantly filing around the chedi. They shuffle past just three metres behind my back, usually clockwise but not always. Thousands of people pass by on any given day during peak season. These days the most sacred Buddhist site is full of hustle and bustle.

It's possible to come at a quieter time. I believe it is nice and quiet in May, although you have to contend with an average temperature of forty-five degrees Celsius. Sometimes it gets up to forty-nine! At night, it cools down to a marginally more bearable thirty-eight. I'm told that if you lie on concrete or ceramic tiles with a wet blanket over you and the fan on then it's not as bad. I haven't tried it personally. In the monsoon it is just thirty-eight degrees with ninety percent humidity. Sounds great if you like watching mould grow on the walls, your clothes, and probably your body too. I think I'll stick to the busy cold season from mid-October to mid-March.

### **'Signlessness': Silent Awareness Amid an Ocean of Noise**

There are signs in English placed near the Tree and on prominent posts holding up its branches. SILENCE, they say. Loudspeakers are to be kept at a low volume in the inner area so as not to disturb meditators, by order of the Secretary MBTMC. The signs are universally ignored by people whose mother tongue is Vietnamese, Khmer, Burmese, Sinhala, Thai, Tibetan, Chinese, or Hindi. However, I have yet to witness a loud or inconsiderate English-speaking group! (Though I suspect it was English-speakers who complained so often that the signs were erected.)

A place where signs are completely ignored might as well be signless. That is also what we are aiming for: signlessness. Clear, empty

awareness that is not attending to sounds, not commenting, not liking or disliking. Simple awareness. Even for Olympic-grade meditators it's a creative challenge here. But it is possible, at least at times.

There is no shortage of sound to practise with. It starts before dawn. When the gates open at five, the chant 'Buddham Saranam Gachami, Dhammam Saranam Gachami, Sangham Saranam Gachaaaaami', is played over the audio system in a continuous loop for fifteen minutes. At 5:30 a.m., a group of Indian monks officially associated with the Mahabodhi Temple chant their morning puja and some parittas for about half an hour. This too is piped over the loudspeakers at full volume. Then at six, without skipping a beat, a group of Indian monks not formally associated with the temple will start their puja nearby. Their amplifier invariably faces our direction. They drone on for forty-five minutes or so. Simultaneously, several smaller groups will be doing pujas in the inner area, each with their own amplifier. It's not uncommon to hear Thai, Korean, and Chinese pujas going on all at once. This is just what happens in the early hours—after breakfast things really warm up!

So it continues throughout the day. Large groups of Tibetan monks create a blanket of background noise with frequent explosions of trumpets, cymbals, drums, and bells. Sri Lankans often come in groups of one hundred to two hundred, circumambulating before doing smaller pujas at several sites within the compound. The Burmese and Cambodians usually only number twenty to thirty people, but their amplifiers are designed for a few hundred!

All of these sounds can be quite beautiful in their own way, but together creates a cacophony that easily impinges on the concentration of an ardent meditator. I try to see the sound as waves—when it crashes loudly, you know that it will soon recede. This helps to stay equanimous and patient, keeping the mind in the middle. If you allow the mind to like one sound, then it will automatically dislike another less pleasant one when it impinges. To avoid losing equilibrium, one has to try and be mindful of all of these sounds without falling into liking and disliking. So we train to rest in an awareness that notices change and cessation. This helps us not to grasp or become irritated.

I've come to accept that Mara has some kind of right to impinge here. Or perhaps it is the kamma of those practising: 'Kamma Mara', as it were. No doubt we've distracted others in the past. Or perhaps

the noise is here to inspire and impel us to work really hard. Over a period of ten hours each day, it is fascinating to observe the way that the noise can feel like knives, daggers, and spears to an uncollected and irritable mind. Mara's army seems to be winning at times. However, due to strong mindfulness combined with concentration and wisdom, there arises the silent mind. Then the sounds can be seen as 'only sounds' and cannot shake us. They arise, stay, then fall like harmless flowers when they touch the peaceful mind.

When the mind becomes peaceful amid the richness of ambient noise, the peace can actually be very spacious and resilient. However, it's only a matter of time until another group comes around with their cheap amplifiers turned up to full volume with echo and reverb effects turned on as well. This can move the mind from peace. At least that's what happens to this bhikkhu's mind fairly often, after which I have to patiently start again. But there are also some occasions when even very obnoxious noise does not move the mind. Which is very interesting to experience and observe. It's as though the noise can clearly be heard, but no one is listening. There is only a steady and pronounced spacious awareness. And a deep coolness. These occasions give me both confidence and hope that one day, as a result of all of this practise, such steadiness of mind will be the ordinary experience and struggling will be the exception. We must lay down the causes.

### **Right Recollection, Wrong Forgetfulness**

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

Though I've observed it hundreds of times under the Bodhi Tree, I am unfailingly astonished by the way many groups behave once they have finished their formal puja. When people first arrive, they tend to have a sense of respect, reverence, and even awe at being at the sacred site. They take great care in making their offerings and doing their chanting or listening to a Dhamma reflection from their leader. But

very often, as soon as the puja is over, they start carrying on as if they're at a market. With blatant disregard for the meditators sitting right near their feet, they start speaking loudly, laughing, bumping into meditators, and posing for photos and selfies. Within the very rasami (radiance) of the Bodhi Tree, they behave as if it is not there at all. They've come all this way to make merit, yet as soon as the merits accrue they start piling demerit on top!

It's no wonder Lord Buddha observed most beings transmigrating up and down along the bank of birth and death, from the heavens to the hells. Very few make it to the other shore, to the Deathless. Humans don't seem to be able to maintain focus and restraint for very long, even when they have faith! The unskilful karmas they make may manifest endless obstacles on their spiritual path and bind them to the samsāric wheel.

I'm quite pleased to have maintained a true respect and reverence for this holy place, even after all these years. Setting a goal of many hours of formal meditation forces you to stay focused, and is one of the reasons I've been committed to this mode of practice here. I will not allow myself to fall into a long conversation under the Bodhi Tree and will only talk in hushed tones. I do not allow myself to become 'kingly' and receive guests, offerings, or hold court under or near the Tree, as many other monks do. The Buddha is the only big Ajahn here for me.

Unfortunately, the Thais who are repeat visitors or who stay for longer periods are among the worst for mindless chattering. They set up their mats under the Tree as if to chant and meditate, but once they get talking, their only concerns are the price of plane tickets and accommodation, the state of the toilets, where to buy cosmetics, shawls, beads, and statues...and they go on and on! They're just like the parrots that land on the branches of the Tree and start screeching and squawking. I once helped my gardener from the monastery come to Bodhgaya for three weeks. He agreed that Thai laywomen were the worst for mindless chatter, but they do love the Bodhi Tree. He commented that they might be reborn as local parrots, chatting away and shitting, oblivious to the sanctity of their surroundings. It's certainly possible!

Anyway, enough about the noise. You get the picture. Sometimes one has to be willing to sit for a very long time to find the silent mind. Some days it's about patiently enduring, or when it's really bad

then impatiently enduring! Nevertheless, every time I approach the Bodhi Tree to pay respects, I can feel a magical sense of presence and a palpable quality of silence that somehow permeates this crowded and noisy space. Many other people notice this too. Learning to attenuate the mind to this otherworldly or transcendent silence can make practice here very rewarding.

### **Unwitting Fields of Merit**

So that was the section on noise. What about tactile sensations? First, let me set the context with a little explanation about our monks' rules. The Theravada tradition tends towards strict adherence to the monastic rules laid down by the Buddha, although there are always exceptions. In recent history, forest monks have been the strictest. When Ajahn Mun regenerated the forest meditation tradition in Thailand during the last century, his incredibly stringent standards set the tone. Ajahn Chah, who considered Ajahn Mun as one of his primary teachers, was immaculately scrupulous as well. So being part of this lineage, we have an incredibly strict standard of celibacy. The most stringent in the world, I expect. Lord Buddha did not give any wriggle room here! Because of this, monks tend to avoid all physical contact with women. It's not out of aversion or condescension as some people presume, but rather maintains our uncompromising and impeccable standards of celibacy. Sexual abuse cases are virtually nonexistent in our order, so obviously this extra caution is very effective in protecting women and children as well.

Our rules around handling and owning money are similarly strict. If we touch it, even without intention, it is a minor offence. If we accept it, it is a more serious offence. If we then go and buy something, an even more serious offence has occurred. For this reason, we must travel with a steward. This person may carry funds that supporters have donated for the monk's needs. The money is still the property of the original donor, however it can be used to purchase 'allowables'—things that the monks can use like food, tickets, and accommodation. Mae Chee Aimy is currently acting as our steward.

It soon becomes evident in Bodhgaya that not all monks and nuns are strict when it comes to refraining from accepting and using money, or from physical contact. In fact most are not. It is understandable then that many laypeople are unaware of the monastic rules.

This leads to some challenges for those of us who sincerely try to keep them.

One challenge we face is dealing with people who want to make offerings. Although we are sitting facing the wall and our body language clearly states that we are meditating and aiming for quiet and seclusion, many people wish to ‘make merit’ by offering us money. They come by, bend in very close to our faces, and drop the money in our hands, or even on our lap! Sometimes they slap it on our thighs so that we know: ‘Money!’ They then also often say ‘*Amitofo*\*’ in our ears. If this happens just as the mind is becoming peaceful, it can be quite traumatic.

For monks sitting quietly, bent upon meditation and determined to keep our rules, all this can seem incredibly intrusive and inappropriate. We don’t want the money, we don’t want the close contact, and we don’t want to be disturbed! So what to do? We simply sit very still without moving or flinching, knowing we are not intending physical contact and not accepting the funds in our minds. Once the person has wandered off out of sight, we flick the money off our robe or hand. Usually one of our students or Mae Chee will then pick the funds up towards the end of the session and use them for food or donations. We remind ourselves that the person means well and is acting in good faith. It is just more ‘seeing, feeling, hearing’ to be mindful of.

### **Thieves in the Temple**

Another advantage to facing the wall is that you can spare yourself the experience of witnessing some disturbing things. Unfortunately, there is a phenomenon of ‘fake monks’ in Bodhgaya. They are not the old guys chanting for donations, but young men literally hustling for donations right under the Bodhi Tree. I wouldn’t be surprised if they change back into jeans when they go home.

These guys with black eyes and black auras circle the compound like sharks hunting for prey. When first-time visitors come around the Bodhi Tree, they are often deeply affected and moved. Observing their soft openness, these fake monks move in closer and offer them a Bodhi Leaf. (Not necessarily one from the Great Tree, though they imply it is the case.) Then they plead, ‘Would you mind giving me a donation? I need money for books and tuition fees. I am studying, but I am poor’.

*\*The Chinese name of Amitabha Buddha*

They probably get a donation half the time. This scenario is disturbing. I shudder to think of the bad kamma that these fellows must make by taking hold of vulnerable, radiant minds and pulling them into their greed with a trick.

Reflecting upon kamma, one must try to develop compassion. The hustling, fake monk probably comes from a very difficult home situation. My adopted Dhamma son Gautam left home because his dad was an alcoholic and there was no money for food. His dad used to beat his mother too. But Gautam had a good mum who told him, 'It's okay to go to bed without food in your stomach sometimes, but don't go to bed as a liar or a cheat!' Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu! I know another boy called Vikram whose mother scolds him if he comes home empty-handed. He's expected to get money by hook or by crook. Although he is charming, he is not radiant and endearing like my Gautam! Through their behaviour, the hustling monks are looking at dark futures. The Buddha called those who steal from the laity by being monks only in form as 'the worst type of thief'. Life here may be tough, but if only they could see how much worse things could get, they would find another way to get by. I have no doubt that the preta (hungry ghost) and hell realms exist, and no doubt that's where these guys are headed.

### **Where to Place Our Attention**

Practising in Bodhgaya is a great workout for monks who usually live in protected environments. We have to utilise all of our skills and cultivate them even further. If we focus on the cheats and the low standards of many people here, it is easy to become negative and cynical. But if we focus upon what Lord Buddha accomplished here and try to practise as he instructed, our practice will surely deepen.

In terms of speech, I make it a practice not to find fault, criticise, admonish, or draw final conclusions while here. One can't help but notice things that aren't right, but we can choose whether or not we make kamma with our speech. Committing to saying something makes things more fixed and solid. I've never admonished a fake monk or told another monk to teach less and meditate more while under the Bodhi Tree. I've never scolded them for going shopping by themselves in the market. I remind myself constantly that I've come to cultivate the Four Foundations of Mindfulness and The Four Brahmaviharas. I focus on

seeing things as sights, sounds, and feelings, and seeing thoughts as just thoughts, not making a big self in my mind, and this makes it possible to be here contentedly. What other people do is their business. Sometimes it's good business and sometimes it's bad. That's the way it is. When I go back to Anandagiri, I will have to be more responsible and engaging. But here, I am only responsible for my behaviour and the quality of my mind. The rest of crazy samsara can continue to be crazy, as it so often is! Samsara within is what we can actually liberate ourselves from.

A meditator can focus upon the positives here. There are hundreds of lovely beings to rejoice with each day, if we so choose. All around are radiant faces of the faithful from so many different places, their arms full of flowers, their bodies lowered to the ground in beautiful bows expressing gratitude to our Teacher. One can rejoice with the good and be equanimous with the not-so-good. It's a wonderful strategy for maintaining wellbeing. I have also found that finding ways to be generous and supporting worthwhile causes here helps me to be aware of the basic goodness all around. Goodness is never too far away in the human realm, but sometimes we have to look for it.

**CHAPTER FOURTEEN***The Rise of Gautam*

On my first visit to India, I was very saddened and disturbed by the state of the homeless and the beggars. After repeated visits to Bodhgaya however, I noticed a growing indifference to the plight of the many poor people here. The poorest folks are dirty and rude, and they have hard-looking eyes. It is easy to start seeing them as not quite human, but their pain and difficulties are certainly very real. My indifferent attitude concerned me, so I decided to find a way to engage with the community directly. Even while working on qualities like patient endurance and determination, we have to ensure that our kindness and compassion do not degenerate. That is why, seven years ago I decided to help one poor kid in Bihar. Gautam was the lucky recipient of my compassionate resolve. His real name was Arun, which means sunrise, but he changed it to the Buddha's original name for good luck.

At age eleven, Gautam was angry and abrupt, but he looked in your eyes when he spoke and he was truthful to a fault. He had neatly combed and oiled hair in something like an Elvis-style quaff (which I admit I also found kind of cool). More importantly, I recognised that he had some dignity and a sense of style and pride, despite his tattered flip-flops and filthy unwashed feet. I was looking for someone who was good at heart yet also strong, someone who would fight for himself and his future. I was looking for a diamond and didn't mind if at first it was a bit rough.

When Gautam first approached us, we were walking along the road and he asked my student François and I if we wanted to buy some CDs. Noticing his young age, I asked him, 'Why aren't you in school?' He answered in broken but understandable English. 'My dad is drink alcohol.

He no working and my home have no money for food. I am selling CD so have money for food. And also take money home for my mother and brother, younger one, sometimes, if I have'. This totally melted my heart. I was not expecting such a brutally honest and disarming answer. And so I told my steward to buy all of his current stock and to pay him double what he was asking. He had seven CDs. François was far from convinced and reluctantly handed over the cash, his eyebrows raised in my direction.

The next day I invited Gautam to join us for lunch and fed him many a greasy curry. His table manners were atrocious! He ate with his hands and scattered rice grains all over the table! I didn't see him again until the following year, but he had made an impression, and evidently so had I. He later told me that when he went home that night, the whole family had a big feast and sung songs of praise in thanks and gratitude to their Hindu gods.

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

Gautam reminded me of my own younger self, as he is a naturally sensitive and self-aware young man. I could see that the anger he felt was because he knew right from wrong, and he saw so much that was wrong. I once asked him what his biggest dream was and he answered, 'What dream? I have no dream. Just want to leave this place'. I nearly burst into tears, not only because Bodhgaya is so dear to me, but also because I totally understood his feelings!

Later Gautam told me that when he first met me, he had a strong

feeling that I would help him. He was right. We sent him to school for a time, but without a lot of one-on-one attention he did not progress much. He called me from India one day and said that he did not want money transferred anymore because he was ashamed that he was not doing well and frightened that I would be disappointed when I checked his progress. His parents told him not to call me and tell me this, but he followed his own sense of integrity. My students and I appreciated his truthfulness and sense of conscience. In any case, I feel that he benefitted from the discipline of going to school each day, being surrounded by well-behaved kids, and from knowing that people wished for him to succeed.

After a few years one of my students, Peter from Melbourne, offered him a motorcycle so that he could run a taxi service for tourists travelling alone. I was worried that he would crash into something and die, but he didn't. He gets by just fine, and has now learned how to hire cars and be a guide to further away places such as Rajgir and Varanasi. I have coached him in cleanliness, politeness, truthfulness, generosity, and kindness, and told him to trust in good kamma. Interestingly, he gets much more income from the gifts of appreciative people than he gets from his fees. People respond to his helpful and trustworthy nature with considerable generosity.

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

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

Meeting Gautam's mother Deva Muni for the first time a few years ago was quite funny. I told Gautam repeatedly that I was busy with my schedule and didn't have time to get distracted, but he really insisted, so

finally I acquiesced. I had thought that perhaps she just wanted to thank me for helping her son. Instead she told me, ‘Since you are his big brother now, that makes you my son. My home is crumbling and the roof is caving in. It leaks in the monsoon. You should help me rebuild my house!’ I was quite surprised and Gautam was deeply embarrassed, but I guess she felt she’d take her chances. I told her that we’d help Gautam and eventually he would help with the costs of home repairs. In the meantime, she would need to wait a little longer.

Gautam has proved that he can take care of his motorbike, as he has it serviced every couple of months. And his dad has shown that he will cook and sell samosas daily. He also has a fifteen year old younger brother who wants to work and doesn’t like school. After discussing it with the other monks, we have decided to allocate some of the funds that were made available to help the family to lease a proper shop out in the village. Khun Jintana, a Thai lay student and supporter, is matching our offering one to one. Sometimes it’s this initial helping hand that can make all the difference.

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

These days it is somewhat inevitable that when celibate monks mentor young men some people will suspect sexual abuse. Because there has been so much scandal, particularly in Catholic institutions. So I’d prefer to simply put all my cards on the table and address the subject directly. My motivation in helping Gautam was and is sincerely humanitarian and altruistic. I wanted to see if one of these poor kids could turn out alright if shown some kindness and direction. I also wanted to prove to myself that humans are the same all over. If I’d chosen a young girl this would have aroused even more suspicion, so I chose a young boy. Or perhaps he chose me?

Back in the village close to Anandagiri, there are several more teenage kids whom my students and I are helping out. One boy’s mother fled to

escape debt collectors, so we are helping to put Nick through mechanics' tech school. The father of two teenage girls died in his sleep one night. He probably had lung disease, and then spraying too much pesticide in his fields pushed him over the edge. So we are helping both Kim and Mai with a monthly stipend to make sure they graduate from high school. Most recently, two more teenage boys Boss and Maek lost a father to alcohol-induced liver failure, so we are helping them in the same way. My long-term gardener has proved loyal, responsible, and trustworthy, but he could not afford to put his daughter through university. So once again, two of my students are helping her with a significant monthly stipend. It is important to help those less fortunate. It is the right thing to do.

So I would like to assure you that my celibacy vow is still pure and intact, as it has been for twenty-two years. It is good for people to know that there are still some benevolent monks in the world who know how to mentor young men and women skilfully. My entire community is impeccable in this area and I am proud of my association with them. Gautam loves me like a father, brother, and teacher all in one, and trusts me with his life. He is in good hands. The only scandal here is that both my students and I have been wonderfully kind and generous towards him for seven years, and intend to continue to be kind long into the future as well.

Gautam has helped me too. He helped me to keep my heart open towards the poorer people of Bihar. He became a living and breathing example of the fact that people will often behave like true human beings if they are given opportunities and have a role model. And he helped me to feel a little contentment about the fact that at least my friends and I were able to help out one Bihari family. Which is much better than feeling a hard quality of indifference, or defeated and forlorn dejection. Thank you shining Arun, lucky Gautam, for being a spot of brightness that shines out of the darkness.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### *You Won't Need to Dodge Bullets*

Good Vinaya-keeping monks don't get to watch many movies. Exceptions might be when on long-haul flights on planes or during family visits. One movie I did watch while staying with my parents was *The Matrix*, which was released in 1999. One of my favourite pieces of dialogue is when Morpheus tries to explain to Neo that he is 'the One' who will one day be able to conquer or transcend the oppressive gate-keeping agents. Neo asked Morpheus, 'What are you trying to say, that I can dodge bullets?' Morpheus responded, 'What I'm saying is that when you're ready you won't have to'.

This is an interesting way to relate to any 'bullets' that are fired our way. Meditating under the Bodhi Tree, the kinds of bullets I experience are loud noises and painful feelings. At times they literally feel like an assault. But I can see that when I have a good quality of mindfulness and wisdom present, these bullets do not affect my heart very much. It's as though they fly right through a spacious mind, a mind that doesn't grasp with liking or not liking. When I can sustain this balanced composure by keeping the mind very still, then a more pronounced sense of stability is established. When that happens it's as though the bullets do not even enter my field of awareness. The mind has collectedness as its object. Because I am not yet truly adept at samadhi or liberated from conditions, the mind eventually always returns to a more normal state where these things can be irritating again. But it is great to experience some equanimity and to glimpse our transcendent potential.

In Buddhism, we understand that we do not have to kill or remove the things that throw (metaphorical) weapons at us. Rather, we learn

how to make ourselves invulnerable to them. However, there is also a sutta where Lord Buddha states that if there is a thorny bush along our path that can be avoided then we should walk around it. Ours is not a path of unnecessary self-torment.

After the Buddha was fully enlightened, Mara the Evil One would still come around and try to trick or distract him. The Buddha's response was always the same. He would say, 'I know you Mara' and that was it. There was no need to kill him. Mara would leave, dejected and defeated with drooping shoulders. The Buddha knew all things that impinge upon consciousness with his fully established mindfulness and wisdom. He had realised a deeper truth beyond grasping at the body and mind as being a 'self'. He knew that all things were constantly in flux and that there was no solidity to be found. This being so, none of Mara's 'worldly dhamma' tricks could work.

Another type of 'bullet' I have had to contend with is hurtful words. Even good monks who put effort into doing noble things get criticised quite a bit. More on that later. It seems to be the deal in samsara. But if meditation practitioners have truly well established mindfulness and wisdom, we can be equanimous with regards to much more than loud noise and physical pain. We can become equanimous to all of the eight worldly dhammas, which are sometimes called the eight worldly concerns. These are four pairs of opposites: gain and loss, fame and ill repute, praise and blame, and happiness and misery (sometimes listed as pleasure and pain). Most worldly beings constantly chase after the positive side of these four pairs while trying to avoid the negatives. But inevitably, we must all meet with both sides. As practitioners, we must understand that they are pairs; where you have one you have the other.

With mindfulness and wisdom, we become aware of the nature of conditioned phenomena. We also become more familiar with a quality of awareness that knows these things as they truly are. This awareness, when cultivated and purified, is sometimes referred to as the unconditioned. In order to realise it, we need to purify our deluded grasping mind by maintaining mindfulness and wisdom. The unconditioned mind is also called 'the Deathless'. When Lord Buddha taught the Four Foundations of Mindfulness, he stated that mindfulness, when cultivated and made much of, leads to the Deathless and merges in the Deathless. Those whose minds have merged with the Deathless no longer have to dodge

bullets. 'I see you Mara', is all they need to say.

Being in Bodhgaya, I often think of the events leading up to the Buddha's enlightenment and those that occurred shortly afterwards. On the eve of his enlightenment a Brahmin man offered the Bodhisattva eight bunches of kusa grass. He accepted these and used them as a cushion under the Bodhi Tree. According to legend, the eight bunches of kusa grass symbolised the fact that the Bodhisattva was going to transcend the eight worldly dhammas. He would rise above them—a truly rare occurrence in the world—and then teach others how to do so as well. This did not mean that the worldly dhammas no longer existed, but that the mind of the Buddha was above their reach.

In the process of developing the path factors such as mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, sometimes we will be wise and equanimous with regards to the worldly dhammas, and at other times we won't. There is a traditional list of three different classes of beings that I quite like: worldly beings, lovely beings, and truly noble beings. It is tempting to judge ourselves against a very high standard (perhaps that of noble beings) and feel like we are failing. But perhaps we are lovely beings, and what makes us lovely is that while we do make mistakes and have unskilful reactions, we are nevertheless trying to train ourselves and purify our minds!

I'm not yet a fully enlightened or liberated being, so I am still affected by these worldly dhammas, but much less so than I was twenty years ago. Thank goodness! I'm not out of the matrix yet, but I am working on it diligently. Regarding these periods of intensive practice in Bodhgaya, when it comes to the worldly dhammas of praise and blame, I've had my fair share of both. I'm going to share a few comments from both sides of the spectrum to give you a glimpse at some of what I've been practising with. On the praise side, people have said 'Ajahn Achalo is so deeply committed to his practice. Only Ajahn Achalo can sit for so long for so many days. (This is not true!) Ajahn's practice is very inspiring. Ajahn has such good kamma to be able to go to India so often—he must have made a lot of good kamma there in the past. Ajahn Achalo is so kind to his students, leading them in developing their practice alongside him as well' and so forth. Then there's the blame: 'Ajahn Achalo travels too much. Ajahn is too attached to one posture. Ajahn takes too much from laypeople. He is too attached to peacefulness, which is not correct

practice. He is practising for psychic powers, which is a lesser motivation. He should practise in all four postures wherever he is. There's no need to go to India so often! And so on.

Of course we must all necessarily practise with some praise and blame in our lives. I've noticed however that some of the criticisms felt hurtful to me while others gave rise to irritation. For a long-term mindfulness practitioner this is actually very interesting. Hmm, I asked myself, what's going on here? Obviously there were things that needed investigating in my own mind—such as why these 'blame bullets' were sometimes penetrating and sticking.

On the most basic level, when you are trying to do something genuinely difficult which requires great sincerity, and when you are doing this with the utmost of wholesome intentions—completely exhausting yourself in the process—it simply hurts when someone projects a negative motivation onto you. You don't do these things in order to be praised, but at the same time you are not expecting to be criticised. After some consideration, I noticed the particular criticisms that grated the most were those which simply didn't make sense. I had to acknowledge that I was also attached to the idea that people should be reasonable and make sense! In a world where all not-yet-enlightened beings are deeply affected by ignorance and delusion, I considered that I might be expecting too much.

I was reminded of a conversation I had with Ajahn Sumedho over twenty-two years ago. He is the most senior Western disciple in the lineage of Ajahn Chah. I am fortunate that he was one of my first teachers, for he has great wisdom and also a great sense of humour. At that time I was a samanera, or novice monk, living at Amaravati monastery in Hertfordshire, England. Ajahn Sumedho was the abbot back then. I had been lamenting about some hurt feelings and seeking his advice about how to practise with them. He said, 'Samanera Achalo, you are a very sensitive and reflective person. You seem to take it for granted that other people have these same qualities, and you suffer, thinking they are being wilfully insensitive or hurtful. But I have to tell you something. Being reflective is already a sign of significant development. Most people are not reflective, they simply cannot see themselves or the way they affect others'. He continued, 'I try to encourage people to meditate, develop mindfulness, and cultivate loving-kindness so that they become more

sensitive, considerate, and wise. But it can take people quite a long time!

It was great advice to keep in mind, as was something else he once said over one of the breakfast meetings. He said, 'This is the twentieth century. Every moron is entitled to his opinion!' Now we're in the twenty-first century it seems more relevant than ever. What I think he was saying is that we live within a culture of articulating criticism before really thinking things through. This seems to be even more so since social media and instant messaging became so widely used and qualities such as graciousness and patience have taken a serious nose-dive.

Reflecting on this, it is quite likely that this few people who were critical of me were probably not seeing the picture clearly. They may have made comments prematurely. People are also often unaware of what might be stimulating critical thoughts; for example, they might be feeling envious or threatened. I needed to accept that this is quite normal, and that there is nothing I could do about it. Each of us must take responsibility for our speech and actions, but we cannot control others. Nevertheless, I would like to address a few of the comments directed at me.

It's been said by some that I travel too much and take too much from the laity. If one were to take simplicity and renunciation as the highest guiding principle in the monk's holy life, then frequent travel to foreign countries does seem immodest. I can see this. However, undertaking intensive practice opportunities with wholehearted sincerity is not unskilful. These opportunities have been gladly and freely offered by people wanting to support one of their teachers and accumulate merit by doing so. Furthermore, I haven't simply been travelling; I've been practising intensely and opening up such opportunities for others to share. It's both a way of teaching and leading the practice. Those who have supported our meditation retreats, many of whom have come and practised alongside us, are genuinely grateful.

Even in the Buddha's time very good monks could have different qualities. For example, take Venerable Mahakassapa, foremost in strict austerity practices, and Venerable Ananda, the extremely solicitous and universally loved attendant of the Buddha: they were wonderful in quite different ways, and their qualities complemented one another. We need variety in the types of characters that teachers have, to teach people with differing inclinations. In general, it is good to be careful when criticising virtuous monks and nuns. Even if you don't like their style, they are

worthy of respect. If they are not virtuous then it's a different matter. If we criticise respectable members of the sangha too harshly or unfairly, we may be separated from the care of wise and virtuous teachers in the future. Kammic obstructions are real. Personally I do try to be very careful in my own public comments about other monks and nuns. I try to focus on the good wherever it is present.

As for my being 'too attached to the sitting posture' it is good to bear in mind that the Bodhisattva made a solemn vow, right under the sacred Bodhi Tree, that he would not move from the sitting posture until his liberation was secure. This really says a lot about the fact that great insight often occurs while sitting in meditation and while practising with great determination. After the Bodhisattva became the enlightened Buddha (in the sitting posture), he then sat without moving for another entire week, delighting in the bliss of liberation. Sitting a lot does not mean that one is not mindful when in other postures. It usually just means that a practitioner is having a closer look at things with a quiet, more circumspect mind.

On a personal note, I can say that my sitting meditation practice had sometimes degenerated. Coming for intensive retreat was a way to re-establish and reaffirm my commitment to the practice. Becoming deeply involved in building a monastery from the ground up, there has necessarily been a lot of work to supervise and a lot of people to liaise with. It can be good to take periods of time to sit for longer in order to reinvigorate my practice. Leaving the place where you've become too busy can actually be very helpful. In any case, criticising meditation monks for meditating a lot seems a strange thing to do.

I have been accused of being attached to samadhi and developing psychic powers. But how would anyone know what I'm doing in my meditation by observing me from the outside? When it comes to samadhi, the Bodhisattva had mastered all eight jhanas, yet realised that these alone would not liberate him. However, his Middle Way insight and approach utilised the power that came from the first four jhanas and combined it with wise reflection and focused investigation. He did not stop practising jhana. Samadhi gives a foundation for deep penetrating insight. I have never claimed to have mastered the jhanas, but I certainly do aspire to! People who have true mastery of consecutive levels of deeply concentrated states are actually quite rare these days. If someone

had such skills and wished to practise them deeply it would be extremely wholesome, but it is unlikely that they would do so in such a noisy and busy place.

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

The reason I am mentioning these things is because being critical of people practising for samadhi is actually quite serious and inappropriate for Buddhists. In one sutta the Lord Buddha explains that his teachings will not disappear quickly from the world. Rather, they will be changed slowly over time, while still being cited as his teachings. He explains further in this sutta that one way to know his teachings are being degenerated and beginning to disappear from the world will be when people criticise the cultivation and practice of samadhi.

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

The few individuals who have been vocal about these points have something very interesting in common, none are serious meditators. They do not meditate daily even for half an hour. It is understandable that people sometimes have negative reactions, but it is quite a shame in this situation. Criticising other practitioners does lead to kammic results. When they do come to apply themselves sincerely to meditation

practice in the future, they may encounter some challenges. I wish them every success in meeting those challenges with conviction and inner strength. And I hope they'll be able to meet with good teachers who can encourage them appropriately.

Ajahn Chah once said, 'Suddhi Asuddhi Pacattam'. It means that our purity is something we know for ourselves. We know our purity of virtue, intention, understanding, and effort. If our understanding changes during the course of our practice, we make the necessary adjustments. Until then, we practise as sincerely as we can.

In this way, to transcend the worldly dhammas means to find peace beyond blame, but also beyond praise. To conclude, I will share some excerpts of appreciative emails that were sent to me recently:

From Liv in Melbourne:

*Dear Ajahn Achalo,*

*Sadhu Sadhu Sadhu for the 3,000 hours and your perseverance—being a role model and inspiration for the rest of us.*

*Anumodana for everything you offered me. The support, the talks, the mala and most of all for helping me rekindle the JOY in the Dhamma. It's like being reborn again.*

*With metta – Liv*

From Lisa, a British laywoman who spent ten days with us:

*It's been so wonderful to feel welcome in such a select and wonderful group, doing such a special pilgrimage. It really is incredibly touching to have been a part of it and I shall never forget it!*

*May you all have wonderful insights under the tree and wherever you are in the future! I hope to see you all soon.*

*With metta, Lisa*

From Ajahn Nyaniko:

*I will be forever grateful to Ajahn Achalo for providing me the impetus to do this kind of practice. His stalwart friendship and kindness has been invaluable not only to me, but to all of us practising here with him.*

From Ajahn Anand, who is now practising at a retreat centre in Myanmar:

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

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

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

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

*Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu.*

It's clear to me that meditating intensely and sitting a lot at this holy site really does empower people's practice and faith. I am also honoured to have so many lovely friends and to know people who are deeply committed to practice. A few critical comments amongst a great deal of joy, pure good efforts, wholesome love and appreciation can certainly be practised with. And I will continue to use such comments as an opportunity to investigate my attachments to the worldly dhammas. It is just one more experience to be mindful of and to develop equanimity towards.

Now back to the retreat—we are almost at the three-quarters point!

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### *Bodhgaya in the Age of Kali (Part II)*

*Day 33 of 45 (292.5 hours of 400 / 2,892 hours of 3,000)*

A change is as good as a holiday, or so they say. Tonight there is a political rally in the Kalachakra Grounds about two hundred metres from our guesthouse. I believe it is a rally for the very popular Hindu Nationalist Party. It's very well organised, has guest swamis, musicians, and bhajan singers, and quite a budget, given the amount of colourful lighting that has been strung up everywhere. The rally goes even later than the local weddings. Amazing! Attracting a middle and upper middle class crowd, it is an interesting scene, a glimpse of modern India.

The large open field used for the rally is also where His Holiness the Dalai Lama teaches when he is in Bodhgaya. He teaches upwards of ten thousand monks and nuns, along with tens of thousands of laypeople. I attended once when His Holiness was here and swore never to again! Although I love, respect, and miss him dearly (it has now been two years since I attended any of his teachings), I couldn't take being pushed and shoved and jostled so much. And don't get me started on the smell of excrement in the air. Us big, tall Aussies are delicate creatures compared to the tough Tibetans in exile. They have my deepest sympathy and utmost respect. If you have to be tough to survive, you will be.

Tonight is of a different flavour—in between the agitated speeches, the yelling, and cheering, I notice that the music at long last is actually very nice! Real tabla, harmonium, thumb cymbals, and well-trained voices singing bhajans with genuine love and devotion. During the musical and chanting interludes, you can feel waves of love radiating out in all directions. Perhaps the gods have come too. But then soon enough there's more yelling. It is very surreal, especially at 1 a.m., which

is how late it went last night. At least I got to experience tasteful Indian music though, after complaining so vehemently about the boom-box techno trash they play at the weddings.

So once again here we have it—Bodhgaya at its best, delirious, and calamitous. Yelling and screaming one second, surreal divinity the next. India's tourist authority slogan is 'Incredible India'. And it really is incredible...as in not quite credible? Certainly it is incomprehensible. It's a bit like falling in love with the wrong type of person despite your better sense. But once in love, what can you do? (Become a monk... quickly!) The tourist authority's slogan for the state of Bihar, strangely enough, is 'Blissful Bihar'. Well, it certainly is blissful in moments. Of course baffling, brutal, barbaric, and bizarre would just as easily work. But then don't forget beautiful, because that is here too.

It seems the dramatic sense of extremes (and perhaps a lack of sleep) have got me waxing lyrical again. I'm remembering some interesting things I've seen and heard in Bodhgaya, and thought I'd share a few stories. I'm a bit reluctant though, because I don't want to discourage anyone from coming here. In fact, I wholeheartedly encourage you to come. Visiting Bodhgaya and the other Buddhist holy sites with a heart of faith generates enormous amounts of merits. The merits are beneficial for lifetimes, or so the Lord Buddha stated.

In any case, if you were to come for a short visit and stay in a hotel, guesthouse, or monastery, travelling only along the pilgrimage route, you would have a wonderful time. You would most probably be very safe. You would see poverty, illness, and despair, but it would not likely affect you personally. Your mind would quite possibly become very peaceful at times because of the powerful blessings in these places. Your appreciation for Lord Buddha and his Sangha would deepen, and your efforts at practice would probably increase on your return home. This is the normal experience. Giving to charities, clinics, and schools makes the experience more rewarding as well. There are many good people doing noble things here, and contributing feels really good. But Bihar is the poorest and roughest region of India. There's simply no way around this. So if you stay longer than the usual seven to twelve days or dare to step out of the pilgrim's zone, then disturbing details of a harsher reality may begin to filter through to you.

I'm not going to tell you in great detail about the riot I saw, caused

when a hotel manager strangled a lower caste boy to death for not cleaning the dishes properly. Text messages flew out in all directions and hundreds of angry young men gathered here within an hour. They burned tyres and screamed blue murder. Thick, black smoke filled the air. Auras and eyes were strangely black and red too. Soldiers quickly moved in to quieten the scene. Bemused pilgrims walked by warily and were basically left unscathed. It felt very dangerous though, like another small spark could cause a much bigger explosion. We walked by, had our lunch and a rest, and by the afternoon everything was as before.

I also won't spend too much time talking about the teenage boy who was found chopped in half in the Mahayana Hotel water tank after a foreigner had decided to sponsor his education. Apparently another boy was so jealous that he took his spiteful revenge. What do you even use to cut someone completely in half? It's nasty business. Not surprisingly my own Dhamma son Gautam is still quite frightened whenever my students help him. He insists we keep things discreet and not advertise our kindness.

Then there was the day soldiers came in big trucks and started demolishing the illegal fifth stories of hotels and guesthouses with mallets—while they were still full of guests! Bribes were quickly paid and the demolition was delayed for a few months. It went ahead after the pilgrimage season was over. We were staying on the fifth floor of an adjacent guesthouse, watching pilgrims quickly gather their belongings, when it all began. The ten-year-old son of the owner told us our fifth floor would be next, so we quickly relocated. But the soldiers left as quickly as they came. The next day the guesthouse owner's son had a black eye, probably from his father who was irritated at losing his guests.

I can think of three more horrible stories right off the top of my head without even really trying. Should I tell you? Perhaps not. When you stay for longer or come more often, these are the kinds of things you see and hear. So how about the wonderful, or the simultaneously disturbing and wonderful? Bodhgaya has everything!

There is a small cemetery that lies behind some souvenir shops between the Mahabodhi Temple and the town of Bodhgaya. About ten years ago an elderly Tibetan nun walked into the cemetery, sat in meditation posture, and began to spontaneously combust! She obviously knew that it was her time to die, and so 'entered the fire element' in the

properly designated place. It took a couple of days for the flames, which were radiating outwards from her heart, to fully consume the body. I've read about this in the suttas. This is the way Maha-moggallana disposed of his body at his final passing as well. If one's fire element meditation is very powerful, it could probably occur much faster. Tahir the mala shop owner showed me some pictures he'd taken of it. He saw it with his own eyes, yet was sceptical. He said, 'I don't believe possible. I think putting some kind of chemical'. But sincere students of Buddhist practise understand that cremating your own body while sitting in meditation posture at the close of life is a sign of a truly gifted and accomplished yogi or yogini.

Other wonderful things happened here too. Sweet and encouraging things. Eleven years ago I was experimenting with different practices and I made a vow to do seven thousand Tibetan-style bows on a bowing board in the compound. It was very difficult for a new initiate into the practice, and made sitting meditation painful afterwards as well! I remember the moment I'd finally finished my seven thousandth full-length bows. A high level reincarnated lama walked right in front of my board. He was Ling Rinpoche, the reincarnated tutor of the Dalai Lama. I had met him before, at Patna airport on my very first visit five years earlier, when both our planes were cancelled due to heavy fog. I went to pay respects and he gave me a Bodhi Leaf. The greatest arahant teachers and bodhisattvas still pass through this place if their health allows. If you sit under the Tree long enough, you can observe a galaxy of bright Buddhist stars passing by.

It's now 1 a.m. The music has stopped, so it's time for bed. I have morning meditation at the Tree at 5:10 a.m. That's just four hours away! Finally I will make three hundred hours, the three quarter point of this retreat.

To leave things on an uplifting note, I'll finish with a contribution by Ajahn Nyaniko who is sitting the final thousand hours with me.

*We are not always born as humans. In fact, according to the Buddha's teachings, the human rebirth is one of the most uncommon, and yet the most fortunate rebirth for gaining the opportunity to practise Dhamma. Since beginningless time we have been born as hell beings, animals, ghosts, humans, and long-lived gods of various ascending levels up to the*

*highest immaterial Brahma realms. The Buddha himself had been born in all of these levels of existence, even after making the determination to practise as a bodhisattva so many aeons ago. So it stands to reason that there are animals, gods etc. even now who are possibly Buddhas-to-be.*

*There was something I witnessed last November during the previous four hundred hour meditation vigil at the Bodhi Tree along with Ajahn Achalo. This thing I am about to write about happened to Ajahn Achalo for real, and had I not been sitting there witnessing it myself I may not have believed it. One day about halfway through our time in Bodhgaya, bodhi leaves started dropping one after another onto Ajahn Achalo's lap. And they weren't just dried-up old bodhi leaves, but bright green, fresh ones. Looking up, we noticed a pigeon pulling leaves off the branches of the Bodhi Tree, and dropping them. The bird was apparently picking the leaves and offering them. We watched in amazement as the leaves continued to fall. Ten, twenty, and more leaves—about one per minute, or at least one every few minutes. It was causing a bit of a stir around us, but we kept up a semblance of meditation, discreetly tucking away the leaves as they fell.*

*Eventually Ajahn Achalo had to get up and use the restroom. I continued sitting. The moment Ajahn Achalo got up, the bird stopped picking leaves and just sat still on the edge of the Mahabodhi stupa. The moment Ajahn Achalo returned and sat on his meditation mat, the bird once again jumped back into action and picked more bodhi leaves, dropping them one-by-one on Ajahn Achalo's lap.*

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

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### *Past the Three Quarters Point!*

*Day 36 of 45 (311 hours of 400 / 2,911 hours of 3,000)*

Ajahn Nyaniko and I made it through a tough few days. Now that we are finally past the three quarters point and can clearly see the end of our marathon, there is a much longed for burst of...what? I couldn't call it inspiration—we're too fatigued for that—but perhaps a willingness to keep going. Quiet determination. Or quiet confidence? No, that sounds too energetic. Quiet plodding-ness, more like it. That is much better than the alternative: being quietly forlorn! In any case, we need a little wind in the sails of our efforts.

We've had another team line-up change occur now, with dear Joyce and Wendy already back in Malaysia. Now Jintana and Victor have returned and are joined by their companions Elle, Victor's partner, and Getmala, Jintana's good friend and massage therapist whom she offered the ticket to in gratitude for many years of squeezing the stress out of her body. They are all stalwart supporters and practitioners. It is interesting to observe their fresh enthusiasm and joy. I feel well dug into the trenches by now. I am not depressed or cynical at all, but tired to the bone.

The Thai monks have settled into the rhythm of things nicely, sitting around seven hours daily with a little walking meditation too. They are less driven than their 'farang' (Westerner) brothers, but sincere and gentle. Ajahn Visalo, our Indonesian-born bhikkhu brother, is rising to the occasion like a mountain climber! After having sat twelve hours per day for ten days and then coming down to eleven hours for a day or two, he decided he'd try and sit for thirteen hours per day for the next ten days. This is definitely the meditation Olympics now! Ajahn

Visalo's light frame and past yoga practice put him in good stead for the challenge. Because he now has a bigger breakfast but then skips lunch, I've shared some great espresso coffee and Hawaiian spirulina as a support.

It's quite beautiful to see Ajahn Visalo rise to this challenge. There's no competitiveness or aggression, just the sincerest wish to practise as hard as possible as an act of gratitude and respect to the Buddha. He feels that he started later with these sessions so has to make up for lost time. He is also sharing a portion of the merits with me for encouraging him to join. I am impressed with his efforts and also pleased to have played an enabling and supportive role, as are those who have supported me in helping him. Through all of our skilful efforts, may we all realise our hearts' deepest desire for peace.

We have seen several sets of students and friends come and go during these weeks. Most can only manage to stay between ten and fourteen days, but Ajahn Nyaniko, Mae Chee and I have stayed on throughout. Our efforts here have been like a meditator's marathon—very difficult, requiring stamina, endurance, and the use of all of one's skills. Yet it's entirely doable.

These periods in Bodhgaya were extremely helpful while I was learning how to be an abbot and building the monastery. Despite being physically and emotionally exhausting, they've always given me a burst of fresh inspiration and spiritual energy and potent merit to continue with the next phase of work. After I'd been an abbot for three years, my teacher Ajahn Anan commented, 'Achal, you're much tougher now than a few years ago. I can tell'.

I grumbled back (with only a little resentment), 'Yes, well, I had no choice but to get tougher, did I?'

Ajahn laughed and said, 'Yes, that's how and when people get tougher, when they don't have a choice!' He was pleased by my development.

Ajahn Nyaniko will be taking on more of a leadership role at Abhayagiri monastery in California when he returns. He has my utmost respect (and deepest sympathy) for rising to the occasion. The praise and blame phenomenon will be a real workout for him and will require consistent sharpening of the wisdom sword. These three periods of

retreat that we've shared will have helped him to find greater inner resources, to learn more about stamina, and to understand more deeply that there is a refuge inside when everything else hurts. By now you might be questioning whether being an abbot or co-abbot is really so hard. The answer is YES! People can be very critical of and ungrateful towards those who take on the burden of leadership. It's also a huge sacrifice to make for those who like spending time alone and having a simple, spacious life with plenty of time for meditation. Few monks have all of the qualities required to teach, administrate, and lead meditation practice as well.

Ajahn Nyaniko has said several times during our sessions together here that no one has ever made him practise so hard in the entire sixteen years he's been a monk. I remind him that I invited him here but didn't force him into anything. He has never said that he regretted accepting the invitation to join me for the final thousand hours of my three thousand though. On the contrary, he wishes to give his formal practice the importance, time, and attention it needs in order to blossom. Meditation monks need to support one another to not let our formal practice slip. Ajahn Nyaniko also said on a difficult day recently, 'This place would break any man'. I responded, 'Yeah, I know what you mean, but you know what? It's actually put me back together several times as well'.

There's something about intensive practice that allows old wounds in the heart/mind to resurface and be seen more clearly in a truly wise context. This allows the wounds to heal more fully. The mind can fall apart at times, but within the sacred container of our regular daily routine and discipline it can come together again stronger and more whole. Consistent practice creates a 'container' with adequate time and space to allow the really big stuff to be worked through. Sometimes it simply flows through. This process can be very painful, but in a healing way. Intensive meditation for more than a month in a place like Bodhgaya is akin to an initiation by fire though, and not for the fickle or faint hearted, nor for those with a loose grip on sanity!

It is also good to do these intensive practices with trusted friends who are just as deeply committed. Ajahn Pavaro, my second in charge at Anandagiri for the last six years, has been a good brother and compatriot on several of these intensives, just as most recently Ajahn Nyaniko has

been. Ajahn Chah once said, 'No one really understands the suffering of a monk, except another monk'. This is true! We support each other with our intimate understanding of the bhikkhu's form in a way someone outside the 'container' of this form cannot.

I've put myself through this intensive process at least ten times now. When I hit a wall a few days ago, I told a traumatised part of my heart that I won't be doing this again in this lifetime. Ten intensive Bodhgaya retreats, each lasting more than a month, are enough. That bruised and stretched part of my heart was relieved! But the benefits I've reaped from doing this have been considerable. What an incredible opportunity to have had in the middle of my life! (That's assuming I live a bit longer. If I die soon I can say 'What a great opportunity to have had towards the end of my life', instead!)

Sadly for serious meditators, things have gotten steadily busier in Bodhgaya over these past ten years. It looks like using this place for intensive retreats will become more challenging, possibly too challenging for many. The number and size of the groups and the waves of noise that come with them are on the increase. However, the number of people gaining important merits through paying respects here is increasing too, which might be seen as a positive. There is a saying in Thai: 'When you gain one thing, you lose another'.

The personal challenge for me now is to make the monastery that I have been building into a type of sacred holy site that inspires diligent, quiet practice. There is an eighteen-metre-tall chedi already half complete. It contains many inspiring sacred images and has been blessed by several of Thailand's great masters, so this will help in creating an uplifting aesthetic. But now I have to keep things at a 'middle way' level of development. So long as I keep the monastery small enough that my administrative burden does not become too great (and keep things strict enough to scare away the tourists) things should go okay.

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

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

### *The Advanced Quicksand Phase*

*Day 38 of 45 (335 hours of 400 / 2,935 hours of 3,000)*

I'm definitely in the 'advanced quicksand phase' now. How do I know? It's when I trip over my own feet on the way up a flight of stairs, and then actually fall over because I lack the swiftness to right myself quickly enough. That's the degree of fatigue I'm experiencing, and that's what just happened. Don't worry, there's no serious damage, but probably a very large bruise!

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

Around 4 p.m. I said to Ajahn Nyaniko, 'I can't take this anymore. I'm going to the bathroom and then for a walk'. What I didn't tell him was that the shops and old local friends beckoned. I was going window shopping for gifts. Ajahn Nyaniko was due to complete one thousand hours of meditation the following day. Although his goal is 1,080, this seemed a very significant milestone and worthy of acknowledgement. Also, Khun Jintana, who is here now and helped a lot with our accommodation costs, has a new home in Bangkok. I thought she'd appreciate a new Buddha statue.

I left the temple on a mission. Having visited Bodhgaya fifteen times over the past sixteen years, I've learned which shop owners offer a good range of souvenirs but will also tell you a reasonable price the first time, with no tricking, arguing, or cheating. Such shopkeepers are rare here, but they do exist. Dodging auto-rickshaws and what seemed like thousands of pilgrims, I checked a few of the street stalls that lined the roads, breathing in clouds of dust all the while, but soon headed for Nasim's shop. Nasim is another kind Muslim brother. Many monk friends and students have found 'the perfect thing' in his shop over the years. Sure enough, inside I discovered a statue that seemed very suitable for Jintana. On a street stall further down the road I found a lovely faux-antique image of Maitreya that I thought Ajahn Nyaniko would like. The detail was surprisingly intricate and the patina deep and captivating. I'd have to consult with Mae Chee Aimy to see what the budget allowed, but I presumed we were in good shape.

My little bout of retail therapy was effective on several fronts. It felt good to shift my focus to gratitude and appreciation of others. Also, the chaos outside was much crazier than inside the temple! Coming back and seeing the monks and our group of lay friends all sitting so restrained and determinedly, I actually felt a wholesome sense of pride and was happy to settle back down. I could also feel the serenity emanating from the Tree once again. It was in stark contrast to everywhere else I'd just been. I only did eight-and-a-half hours of meditation on this day though! I can't do that every day or I won't complete my vow.

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

Now back to the advanced quicksand. I'm coming up to the six-week point, which I've often felt is my outer limit for these retreats. But being somewhat of a religious fanatic, I usually make myself stay a bit longer. Ajahn Sumedho sometimes talks about his days as a young monk when he would train himself to be more patient. He would

think, 'I can't stand this for one more second!' But instead of giving up he would wait an extra second and then say to himself, 'One'. Then he'd count his breaths, 'Two...three...four...five. Ha! You see! You can stand it for longer!' We have to do this to stretch our capacity and stop believing in our imagined limitations. It's not easy though. Sage-like patience is generally not won on the sofa.

When I attended the Dalai Lama's teachings in northern California around twenty years ago, there was a point when His Holiness suddenly stopped commenting on the text he was teaching, looked out into the predominantly middle class audience and said, 'It is simply not possible to grow spiritually without difficulty and hardship'. He must have picked up a vibe in the room to stop and address the audience's propensity for laziness, impatience, and attachment to comfort. I remember it clearly to this day, and it makes me feel better about the uninspiring dullness and exhaustion I'm feeling, as well as my bruised hip from tripping up the steps. 'We have difficulty and hardship, Your Holiness!' I offer it on the shrine of aspiration for spiritual growth.

This morning I snuck away an hour early and I'm skipping lunch. I'm going to squeeze in a siesta nap and some elusive quiet time alone. The advanced quicksand phase has snuck up on me differently this time. There is no physical quicksand, but you feel as though there is. The fatigue saps your energy levels here. It usually rises to the ankles for a while after a week or so, and you first notice less bounce in your step. Then up it goes to the knees, then the waist. It hovers there for a while. Everything is harder and takes more energy. If you stay for more than a month, it rises to the chest and everything seems *really* hard. After five weeks it's up to your chin. That's its usual course, but this time it went from my knees and suddenly straight up to my neck! (It didn't help that I stayed up too late talking with students two nights in a row.) But we're in the final week now, so slow and dogged trudging should be ok.

The last time I was here was the worst. A mild throat infection later became pneumonia, and was followed by an eye infection. After only resting a day-and-a-half in bed throughout these illnesses (and coughing up very large amounts of mucus into a thick towel at my sitting place under the Tree), I finally reached the 'under quicksand with a lead weight on my head' phase. You could also call it the

‘walking dead phase’. I still finished those four hundred hours though. Thank goodness I had the medicines I needed.

Dealing with less sleep and the constant need to put forth a lot of energy into establishing mindfulness within noise and crowds is hard enough. Added to this is the challenge (a particularly formidable challenge for forest monks) of lacking physical seclusion or space. We’re accustomed to having time alone on mountains and in forests, at least for periods in the day. Yet here we are meditating in public in a crowded place, day after day without reprieve. There is also the walk to and from the temple where aggressive hawkers and beggars jostle for your attention. It’s intense, and very different from life in an established forest monastery. It’s like being used to walking through an English garden, but now trekking through the Amazon. It’s wild out there!

I have come to believe, from repeated observation, that in the course of practising here our auras slowly pick up ‘other peoples’ stuff’ while meditating under the Bodhi Tree. Psychic pollution is real. More and more of it gets lodged in our somewhat porous minds. We also pick up blessings—they’re definitely in the air here too—but you pick up the nastier stuff as well. There are reasons that Lord Buddha recommended meditating in solitude. But he also recommended practising at the Four Buddhist Holy Sites, and so we deal with it. When we return to our quieter habitats, within a week or so this extra ‘stuff’ will fall away by itself. Doing some extra chanting and walking meditation and simply walking around in nature is all that is usually needed. I guess I’m feeling homesick! Anyway, just a few days to go now....

A nice thing happened yesterday. The pigeon that had been helping with bodhi leaves flew in for a little visit. We hadn’t seen him for about a week. He sat on the ledge just above my head and looked down into my eyes for quite a long while as if to ask, ‘So, did you get enough leaves for your chedi quota?’ I answered, ‘I think there are enough, thank you very much’. After lunch I put all the leaves into a big bucket to soak. Late at night all the monks and laypeople helped wipe the rehydrated leaves with tissue paper. I then carefully placed each one between the pages of some notebooks so they will dry flat. I counted approximately five hundred leaves! We will get them laminated once they are dry. Gautam knows just the place.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

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### *Finding Energy When There Isn't Any*

*Day 41 of 45 (360.5 hours of 400 / 2,960.5 hours of 3,000)*

My mind feels bright, light, happy, and mostly contented now, rather than completely fed up. I got over that bump and am facing a different problem. Now I have no will to meditate. Meanwhile, we still have five more full days and just over thirty-nine hours of practice to go. Perception is a very interesting thing. In the first week, thirty-nine hours seemed like a 100-metre sprint. At the end of the sixth week, it seems like the final few days of climbing Mount Everest after discovering your oxygen tank has just run out.

Right now I wish to simply sit or lie down or chat, but not to be mindful of breathing, or mindful of noises, or to sit up very straight. Give me a sofa! A beanbag! A hammock! Anything but the meditation cushion! When I say I have no will to meditate, I mean it. I am experiencing a lot of resistance when I approach the long meditation sessions, yet contentment arises at the thought of just chilling out. I'm quite happy to be in Bodhgaya, I just don't want to meditate! So in a way the big bump is behind me—I'm past being completely fed up with the whole scene—but there are still large bumps in the mind to overcome. It's the holiday mentality that we have after working very hard and experiencing some success. It must be time for a reward, a vacation, or a heavenly rebirth. But that is not the path for going beyond death; vacations and heavenly rebirths come to an end when their supports degenerate. Besides, my goal is not yet accomplished. It is not yet time to chill out. So meditate I must. A solemn vow to Lord Buddha in the place of enlightenment is binding.

For the first twenty-five minutes at the Mahabodhi Chedi this morning, my legs were crossed but I was slumped over with the top of my head pressed hard up against the sacred chedi. A pathetic sight, really! I was meditating on the feeling of really not wanting to meditate anymore. (I did restrain myself from groaning though.) It was a bit embarrassing after looking somewhat impressive for more than a month, but it is what it is.

Out of sheer necessity I tried out various skilful means. For a while I internally recited the mantra of Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom. When nothing changed, I switched to the mantra of a more fierce form of Manjusri. If peace would not arise thinking of the Buddha, perhaps fierce wisdom could help. It didn't seem to help very much, but it was at least good to be exploring options and making creative efforts. I then also tried recollecting and calling upon various merits I've produced from skilful actions. Bringing these to mind can manifest fresh energy. I thought of the merit of encouraging some students to help Tahn Ajahn Anan with the cost of building his chedi, and also with some of his health needs. I recollected helping village kids with scholarships to be able to finish high school or technical college, and sponsoring one's university education. This line of reflection was working a little so I continued with it. I thought of the many people I may have helped to progress in understanding Dhamma through sharing teachings and guided meditations on my website and on meditation apps. I made a determination, 'May the power of the good kamma from this help me now to move forward too!'

It was quite hard work to produce a healing balm from within and then massage it into the hardened knots of a strained mind. I felt more willing to meditate afterwards though, but I was still significantly slumped over. Finally I visualised myself inside the chedi. I saw the chedi as golden light, with its structure holding me up. My knees and bottom were inside the base and its spire rested upon my head. The walls held up my spine, not allowing my body to slump too far. I resolved, 'May I be firm, unwavering, and inspired by the blessings of the Chedi of Mahabodhi!' After half an hour or so of these mental gymnastics, I could actually sit upright and felt able to meditate for the remainder of the early morning session. Then after breakfast everything was fine again. Big bumps can be shifted if we're determined and creative.

Ajahn Pasanno, one of my first monastic teachers, used to say to the new monks he was training at Wat Pah Nanachat, 'Sometimes we don't feel that there's energy for the practice. But putting forth effort is what produces energy, so we just do it. Oftentimes the energy then comes'. It's a teaching I have strived to remember. If we surrender to the feeling that we don't have the energy or will to practise, we will not get far. Ajahn Chah is famous for saying, 'When we want to practise, we practise. When we don't want to practise, we practise. When it's peaceful, we practise. When it's not peaceful, we practise. When we're diligent, we practise. And when we're lazy, we practise!' Similarly, Ajahn Chah also once said, 'If you are still practising according to your preferences, then you have not really begun to practise'. These are teachings I have deep faith in. If we keep on practising no matter our mood or energy level, we will develop insight into the nature of moods and mind states. Our quality of mindfulness will be emboldened by patient endurance, and with the wisdom that knows the impermanence of moods. We will find out for ourselves that energy can be generated.

### **Kilesa Mara**

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

For ten years now, making the effort to sit meditation a lot under the Bodhi Tree has been central to my monk's life. I sometimes think that I may have an unhealthy co-dependent relationship with dear old Mother India. These times at the holy site are bittersweet: extremely difficult and extremely rewarding at the same time. The lows are very low and the highs exhilaratingly high. India is both wonderful and awful, and because of this it has an incredibly beguiling charm. One can get attached to the intensity of both the love and the hate, a bit

like being stuck in a bad relationship with a beautiful, passionate person who just can't get their life together, I suspect! I am joking of course. I actually don't think there is anything unwholesome in my relationship with Bodhgaya. I simply have to acknowledge that I've done my time here now, and there are other aspects of my life that need my full attention...but I will miss Bodhgaya! There is a part of me that is attached to this mad, passionate, ongoing affair. The beauty, the intensity, the struggle! So I seriously had the thought, 'Stop at 2,970 hours, the ninety-nine percent point. You know you want to come back anyway, and this way you'll have to!' Fortunately I saw through it with some wisdom. I said to myself, 'Finish it, Ajahn. Then come back anyway if you really want to!'

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

I responded, 'I know you Mara! Knowing that every moment is arising and ceasing I will complete the vow anyway, without attaching to it as a rite or ritual. Truthfulness and determination are virtues—paramis—that need perfecting. Having made the vow, I will finish it!' The hours themselves are not what will liberate me, but the mindfulness generated in intensive retreats will support the wisdom that knows arising and ceasing ever more clearly in the future. These lines of thought were fed by sheer exhaustion, but one has to expect some inner and outer obstacles when practising very hard.

So this was a long day, but I got through it. Ajahn Nyaniko also feels that he's running without any gas now. It is good to have his company and empathy. He mirrors back to me that it's not laziness but exhaustion affecting our minds now. We both hit the 'I'm fed up' wall at the same time around ten days ago. And now we've hit the 'there's no energy left' wall at the same time. Neither of us will give in. Moving through walls is what we came here to do.

Ajahn Visalo, who remains as fresh as a daisy, is still sitting thirteen hours per day! I predict that he will manage it for ten days in a row. He is great company in a different way, proving that the

impossible is actually possible. Ajahn Pavaro, who has some arthritis in his lower back, also sits for many hours each day. He is willing to work with the pain. The Thai Ajahns are quietly and joyfully determined. Our lay supporters and students are also making sincere efforts. Sometimes I feel embarrassed by my lack of enthusiasm at this point, but everyone is supportive and no one is judging.

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

## CHAPTER TWENTY

### *The Final 1%*

*Day 42 of 45 (370.5 hours of 400 / 2,970.5 hours of 3,000)*

I walked out from the Temple at 8:45 p.m. tonight, past Sashi Singh who is in charge of the door at the VIP reception hall and Sonil Mehta who cleans the toilets in there. ‘Namaste Guruji, good evening’, they said. I made my way around the side where I have squirreled away my sandals safely for the past forty-three days, and...no shoes! Bodhgaya in 2018 is what it is. It was a good thing that the emotional tone of my practice had taken a more joyful and tranquil turn. It made it easier for me to deal with the fact that my shoes had been stolen!

Sashi Singh has a subtle way of letting you know that your right to use the VIP toilets is not a given. I only use them to save time because they are closer. After I greeted him today he said, ‘You give me balm!’ He meant one of the menthol balms I bring from Thailand, which are highly sought after here. The coolness is refreshing in the relentless heat. I replied, ‘I came many weeks ago and gave you three times! There’s none left. How am I supposed to get more?’ He said, ‘Just joking’, which was a lie. Mae Chee Aimy gives him ‘money for tea’, which secures her right to use these closer toilets too. The tradition of ‘backsheesh’, the giving of little gifts, is what gets things done in this country. It seems offensive at first, but when you understand that wages are very low, the exchange seems fair enough. In any case, I’m nearing the end point of this retreat now and my gifts have run out.

Today was the day I allowed myself to feel confident that I’m going to make it to three thousand hours. I haven’t ever allowed myself to feel this since I completed the first thousand and made a vow to sit two thousand more. I knew finishing could not be taken for granted. There was a lot of hard work to be done and infinite potential for obstructions. For instance,

the bomb scare the month before we arrived could have led to greater restrictions and made sitting all day an impossibility. Or a bomb could have actually exploded. The sharp pain I felt in my left knee on the first day could have gotten worse. The food poisoning and chest infection might have been followed by a more serious illness. The fatigue and exhaustion could have been more intense (especially if more weddings kept me from sleep!) I may have lacked the physical and mental energy to carry me through. Tripping up the staircase might have been truly debilitating, rather than just leaving an apple-sized bruise in shades of purple, red, and blue. Yet here I am, and day forty-two has come and gone!

Reaching the ninety-nine percent point of my goal was a watershed moment. An enormous pressure fell away from my heart and I shed quiet tears of joy and relief. By mid-afternoon, the end of this meditation marathon felt close. This has been the day I actually felt the true accomplishment of this task, and felt relieved of the enormous burden too. Those bittersweet yet delicious tears on the cushion this afternoon were hard won!

This meditation vow has never actually been about reaching a certain number. I have been clear about this from the beginning. Setting this goal was about forcing myself to commit even more deeply to a transformative process. It was about stretching my spiritual capacities and abilities and increasing the chances of experiencing true insight and deep peace. It was about taking several steps further along on a journey towards final liberation, and doing so in the very place where the Buddhas in this universe reached their final goal.

I have been deliberately working at the limit of my ability, stretching, and stretching it further. It is possible to do more here if you have great faith and recollect the example and efforts of the Buddha. In meditation retreats, the five spiritual powers of faith, energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom are developed a great deal. Lord Buddha explained these are qualities that lead to enlightenment. Perhaps it's especially so in this place where there is much faith and spiritual energy. You couldn't meditate in Bodhgaya with all of its noisy, chaotic, crazy charm without great faith. This faith deepens further still through the practice.

My experience here has not only been one of struggle. I have known wonderful moments of deep peace and seen the mind temporarily let go of all things that cause suffering. I have experienced extremely deep faith

and gratitude towards the Buddha and this path. Sometimes my loving-kindness meditation became so vast that I could not have imagined it possible to feel such love. I have also been able to experience profound equanimity towards the most extraordinary impingements, to a degree I would never have considered possible a few years ago. There were many other interesting and uplifting experiences I observed in meditation too. Suffice to say my practice at the Mahabodhi Temple has been quite difficult at times but also deeply encouraging and rewarding.

I have been incredibly well supported through these many retreats. There have been literally thousands of opportunities to make prayers, dedications, and aspirations, and thousands of hours to develop insight and experience deeper peace. I feel enormously grateful for these opportunities. However, I am still not profoundly spiritually enlightened. People might wonder why not after so much practice! It is important to understand that complete, unshakable spiritual liberation is the most difficult thing for sentient beings to achieve. It is a process that takes lifetimes. I feel honoured to know of this path, to be walking this path, and to be making some progress along it. We have insights in the course of practice, which deepen over time. In glimpsing and experiencing the mind's true potential with the clarity that comes from intensive meditation, you develop great confidence in ultimate truth, in your ultimate nature, and the path that leads to the complete realisation of this. However much practice we can do, we are coming closer to this culmination.

This evening however, I feel a different quality of inspiration, and it relates to everyone else I know travelling along this path. I am somewhere along my process and I recognise that this is similarly the case for all the other kind people who support me and aspire for liberation. So tonight I felt a strong urge to reach out to close friends and students and invite them to join me in spirit, by making a commitment to sitting the final hour or hours with us, from wherever in the world they are. When I mentioned this to Ajahn Nyaniko and Ajahn Pavarro they both thought it was a good idea too. So we have each sent out emails to let friends know that between 7:30 p.m. and 8:30 p.m. India time on March 23rd (2018) we'll be fulfilling our meditation goals under the Bodhi Tree.

I have offered these hours of meditation in gratitude to Lord Buddha, the truth of the way of practice he realised, and the noble disciples who practised and realised the same liberation. In doing so, I've also reconfirmed

my dedication to the meditative and contemplative path. May all those who have supported us receive a large portion of the merits accrued!

### **Day 43 of 45—Love Flows Back**

I checked my email quickly this morning and was surprised by the number of people who responded with joy, inspiration, and enthusiasm, making their commitments to joining us in spirit during our final hours. Although I hadn't planned or strategised it this way, the positive response was nourishing for my meditation. I felt ease, serenity, good will, and loving appreciation. What a contrast compared to the state I was in just two days ago. I checked my emails again after lunch and we had considerably more than fifty people now—from as far afield as Malaysia, Thailand, Mexico, USA, Canada, Australia, England, and France!

By late evening I had heard that many of the villagers near my monastery would also come and sit at the meditation hall in Anandagiri during our final hour. And a group of Malaysians were coming to chant and sit together at Joyce's house as well. We should have at least a hundred friends sitting along with us in many parts of the world. I made the decision that this final hour will be one where I spread loving-kindness to all of these other spiritual aspirants. May they be supported on their path to complete liberation as well! And may the blessings of Bodhgaya, the seat of enlightenment in this universe, flow powerfully into their minds!

## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

### *Forgiveness Supports the Process*

*Day 44 of 45 (390.5 hours of 400 / 2,990.5 hours of 3,000)*

Continuing on the theme of including others, I should provide an update on who has joined us here in India. Besides Phongphan, Aye, Victor, and Elle, for the last few days Khun Jintana and several of her relatives, friends, and staff have also joined us. With six monks as well, it's a big team of around twenty now! Anandagiri Sangha and associates are taking up quite a few spaces under the Bodhi Tree.

Liv from Melbourne left our group a few days ago. She stayed nearly forty days in all. She's over seventy years old and we were all inspired by her courage, commitment, and determination. Liv was deeply affected by a recent relationship breakup, but found her time in Bodhgaya healing and useful for regaining a broader perspective. I was moved to see her wiping away tears repeatedly, but nonetheless continuing with her meditation. She told me that the earlier tears were inspired by grief, but the ones that came later were inspired by joy, healing, and letting go. It seems the relationship breakup was partly due to her deepening commitment to practice, so in a way the separation has forced her further along the process of deepening the refuge within. I reckon that bloke made a mistake, but what would a monk know about such things?

We have a large contingent of Thais now. Thai people generally tend to be scared about the discomfort experienced in India. But Khun Jintana, a successful and persuasive consultant from Bangkok, told her friends that as this was the final intensive retreat, they'd better take the opportunity now while they could do it with a trusted Ajahn. They have deep faith and a religious devotion to creating merit, so were easily persuaded. Although very busy with her company, Jintana has sincere faith and genuine spiritual

aspirations, so this is the fifth time she has joined us here. She's increased her hours of meditation with each trip. Phongphan and Aye from Phitsanulok have joined us for the fourth time and have increased their hours as well. We are proud of our faithful and diligent following. They have become an extended family of aunts and uncles to my Dhamma son Gautam as well, who runs errands for them tirelessly.

Jintana's three nieces, all in their early twenties and all quite nice looking, have been a new phenomenon for poor eighteen-year-old Gautam to try and relate to. After hours outdoors, even in hot, sticky countries, Thai women often manage to look like they've just stepped out. They are so clean, neat, and tidy, and often sweetly scented. Poor Gautam is surrounded by Tavatimsa angels and is clearly confused and besotted! 'Which one is single?' he asked, and then later added, 'Has she asked about me? Why doesn't she like me?'

I answered, 'Gautam, they came here to meditate! Even if she liked you I wouldn't let her be your girlfriend!' He quietened down after this, but did manage to add them all as contacts on his phone! (Somehow we've successfully ushered our Indian son into the twenty-first century. He is a neurotic teenager just like any other, with his phone full of pictures of himself. I am so glad I'm not eighteen—and that I'm celibate!)

Thais are lovers of food, so our little breakfast scene has grown. When Mae Chee Aimy originally asked me what she could do to support me during this time, my two main requests were to keep the breakfast scene small and simple, and to make sure there was a lot of water and steamed veggies at lunch. (When you sit most of the day, regular bowel movements are important!) But poor Mae Chee Aimy is far outnumbered now.

At 7:30 a.m. each morning we take our breakfast in a far corner of the compound. Hungry dogs circle like vultures at the smell of so much food, and the occasional fight breaks out among them. The humble Tibetan monks sneak peeks in amazement from the safety of their bowing boards. 'Who are these great lamas being offered such a feast?' they must be wondering. I keep my gaze down, somewhat embarrassed, and try to be quick about it all. The Thai monks seem just fine about taking a bit longer!

So what is for breakfast? With all of the laypeople carrying a little something each and Gautam picking up some local fare, it is quite a spread. Our *nouveau cuisine* is cosmopolitan fusion, or perhaps a confusion, and a little bizarre in the current context. We have salmon

and mayonnaise on chapati, potato curry on chapati, or shredded pork and chilli paste on chapati; or there might be yoghurt with muesli and extra fruit and nuts in a stainless steel bowl; or chocolate chip muffins and brownies; or bananas and oranges and pomegranate. On some mornings there have even been slices of tiramisu, banoffee pie, and cheesecake from the local upscale Be Happy Café. Fresh espresso bags, plastic cups, and thermos flasks with hot water are all ready to go too, as well as flasks containing chai tea. You can choose one item or snack on a little from each. Like I said, I try to keep it simple and flee the scene quickly! Ajahn Nyaniko and I have to finish five hours of meditation before eleven, so there is no time to dilly-dally.

Adding to the bizarreness of the breakfast scene today was a resident Indian sadhu who was indignant about not being invited to join in. He screamed at us until he was offered some chai tea. Thais abhor public displays of anger, so they tried to ignore him at first. He only responded by yelling louder and angrier. All eyes were then on Gautam, as if to say, 'Deal with him—you're Indian!' So Gautam yelled back, 'You're not invited, go away! We'll give you something when we're done!' At this point the angry sadhu yelled even louder with big bulging red eyes and spit flying out of his mouth! Mae Chee Aimy bravely gave him some tea in a paper cup. Upon receiving it he instantly wagged his head and smiled, sat quietly to the side and enjoyed his tea. He didn't even ask for a muffin or sandwich. I would have yelled for the brownies. (Not really!)

Thais know how to make a win-win out of giving offerings to monks. Once we get up and go back to our practice, our students divvy up all of the leftovers and take another half an hour enjoying a fabulous picnic brunch. The chanting, the bowing Tibetans, the early morning sun, and the smell of burning incense all add to the ambience.

My meditation continues to flow more easily now, with the end clearly in sight. I am still fatigued, but with much less inner resistance. Serene and spacious periods have returned. Since Khun Jintana's staff and relatives had to return to Bangkok on the afternoon flight today, they took the opportunity to ask for forgiveness and formally take their leave. It's not as though anyone has done anything obviously wrong, but it is a beautiful and useful practice that supports mental cultivation in several important ways. Negative qualities do frequently arise in the minds of unenlightened beings. We're still affected by ignorance,

delusion, and confusion. Because of this, we will at times act unskillfully with our speech and actions, both intentionally and unintentionally. Asking forgiveness is a way to train in becoming more mindful of these things. It also weakens pride and stubbornness, heavy qualities that weigh our hearts down. For people who want to experience deep peace beyond the grasping of ego, we are willing to practise relinquishing these negative qualities.

The traditional ceremony goes both ways: the teacher also asks for forgiveness for any unskillful actions. I ask forgiveness of my own teachers and other respected elders frequently, and all of us monks and nuns ask forgiveness of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha every day as part of our evening chanting.

Today I was also offered a beautiful Buddha statue. Khun Jintana and several of my Malaysian students (who could not be present) wanted to offer a meaningful gift at the completion of my vow. This was their way of showing respect and appreciation. With the end so clearly in sight and some people needing to fly out, we decided to have the offering today.

Khun Jintana said the following, and then her staff repeated some parts after her lead. The exchange was gracious and beautiful. ‘Dear Phra Ajahn, we would like to sincerely thank you for this opportunity to practise along with you and the other monks here in Bodhgaya. I feel that I have grown in my practice and understanding, and I am quite sure that this would not have been the case without your encouragement and example. I am truly very grateful. If we have done anything wrong or hurtful by body, speech, or mind, intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or unknowingly, during this time or at any time in this life or previous lives, we humbly ask for your forgiveness’.

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

Traditionally, this is an opportunity to rejoice and encourage. It’s an opportunity to offer a type of blessing. So I responded, ‘I would like to take the opportunity to tell you all that I am very pleased and impressed with everyone’s efforts and behaviour, and also with the faith and courage that

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

I then asked how many people had felt some experience of deep peacefulness. Interestingly, everyone had. Some of these people were quite new to the practice and were dealing with heat and mosquitoes, large crowds and unceasing noise, and sitting for hours and hours, yet they all felt some deep peace! This is testimony to the special blessings still present in Bodhgaya today.

I continued with a few more words of encouragement. Some of what I said was inspired by the talks Ajahn Jayasaro gave when I was a junior monk at Wat Pah Nanachat. 'We are all affected by ignorance, so greed, hatred, and delusion will inevitably arise at times. This is why our practice is called training. We have to develop more awareness as we go along. Acknowledging faults and asking for forgiveness is good, because it helps us to develop more awareness and take more responsibility. You also have to forgive yourself for making mistakes, because it's inevitable at this stage. So please don't think that I am holding onto grudges or judging you harshly. We understand that it is a process. What I would ask of you however is that you be truthful and sincere, and that you keep on trying to learn from mistakes and to do better. We have to practise at our level of ability, which is different for everyone. I don't mind if you crawl, walk slowly, or run, so long as you are developing your practice sincerely. But now that you do know of this training, please don't go backwards. Make an effort with your virtue and meditation. I am confident that the merit your practice has generated here is significant. You have a certain amount of good energy available to you now. I encourage you to try and invest this energy into a sincere daily practice from today onwards. Otherwise the energy dissipates and you will have simply taken one step forward and one step back. So please keep practising and only go forwards'.

Lastly I added, 'The other monks and I are also still in training. So we may have slipped up in moments too. Please forgive us if we appear to have done anything unsuitable or unbecoming for monks'. After this, beautiful flower garlands were offered.

Next it was time to offer the Buddha statue. I had selected a

twenty-centimetre-tall carving. It was made of lapis lazuli, a rich, blue coloured stone with naturally occurring gold flecks. Naturally it was from Mumtaz's shop. Before the offering I gave a little background. 'Khun Jintana and several of my Malaysian students who could not be here just now wanted to offer a gift in acknowledgement of my having fulfilled this long-term practice vow. They asked me to choose a suitable gift. I chose a stone Buddha made from lapis lazuli. Did you ever notice the colour of the Buddha Metta's hair in the main vihara inside this chedi, and the colouring around the painted eyes? The traditional paint used for decorating these parts of Buddha statues is actually made from ground up lapis stone mixed with mineral oil. So as far as elements go, lapis is associated with the highest of the high. As such, it is a very suitable material for a Buddha statue. You could say that it is a kind of sacred material, having been respected in Buddhist art for millennia. But why offer a beautiful gift at all? I think that it is appropriate to offer gifts to spiritual teachers in acknowledgement of important occasions. From my side, I have to consider what would really make this image sacred, otherwise accepting this statue is simply collecting a beautiful thing. Buddha images can only really be sacred if we relate to them skilfully and respectfully, otherwise they're just earth element. So in accepting this gift, I will make a commitment to relate to it in a skilful and useful way. Since it was offered here under the Bodhi Tree, close to the completion of my vow, when I look at it and pay respects in the future it will remind me of these periods of diligent practice. I will remember that while here, even when I was tired I meditated. With sore muscles, I meditated. While still a little unwell, I meditated. And I will try to remember not to be lazy and to continue to be diligent at all times'. With that, Khun Jintana offered the statue. I put it on a small ledge on the chedi behind me and the monks chanted a blessing.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

### *Day 45—The Last Full Day*

*Day 45 of 45 (400 hours of 400 / 3,000 hours of 3,000)*

Walking back to the temple after our midday rest, I noticed that Bodhgaya was hotter and dustier now. Most of the stalls along the side of the road were gone. While things were becoming more bleak and harsh with the change of seasons, inwardly I was feeling such ease and a complete lack of tension. I simply coasted along. If I were expecting some kind of grand fireworks and explosions, it could have been a big letdown. But I was expecting nothing of the sort. There have been many wonderful high points along this journey, but I could not have anticipated any of them.

Back at the Tree this afternoon, a kind of a small miracle occurred. The pujas were mysteriously quiet. In the distance, a pleasant sounding Vietnamese puja went on for hours, but their amplifier was on low. Meanwhile two fairly large Sri Lankan pujas happened under our side of the Bodhi Tree with no amplification at all! Unheard of! Both Ajahn Pavaro and Nyaniko noticed and commented as well. Many large yellow Bodhi leaves also fell around us like a rain of gold. This was a nice touch too.

After years of counting down the numbers, I approached my final one-and-a-half hour session with the thought, 'Only one half of one tenth of a percent to go! A twentieth of a percent! My goodness that is really close'. We set up a special shrine for the final puja and sitting. We put a large brass Buddha statue on a higher ledge of the chedi above us (the statue that is destined for Jintana's new Bangkok home) and draped him in long celebratory garlands of orange marigolds. We spread a large hand-woven Kashmir 'silk on cotton' rug to sit on. Then

finally we sprayed copious amounts of my favourite special blend of rose, rose geranium, and lavender essential oils to set the scene. I didn't mind being a little flamboyant for this once in a lifetime occasion.

Our puja was not interrupted or overwhelmed by anyone else's puja—not even the one that is always piped over the loudspeakers. That was more than a little miraculous. During the final sit, I was energetic and determined that this sit was actually for everyone else. I brought to mind the hundred or more people I knew were sitting in tandem with us all around the world. I visualised their smiling faces. I spread loving-kindness and shared merits. I also made repeated requests from the sacred holy site itself for support for their growth in the practice. 'May the boundless radiance and blessings of the Vajra Asana bless all of these peoples' practices. May they grow steadily in Dhamma and realise great peace! May the merit and power of the enlightenment of Kakusandha Buddha, Konagammana Buddha, Kassapa Buddha, and Gotama Buddha in this most sacred place shine into the minds of all of these people and guide and protect them always! May the retinue of devas, the tens of thousands of them who also visit this place, increase the power and efficacy of these dedications and blessings, and deliver them directly into these peoples' hearts and minds!' I also made dedications for all beings kammically connected to me, whether they were meditating then or not.

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

At the end of the hour, I dedicated the merit of this to all beings. As I lifted my hat off, Ajahns Pavaro, Nyaniko, and Visalo all placed bright orange garlands over my head! When I swivelled around, the laypeople also had garlands ready to adorn me. They placed them in my lap. I looked like some Big Baba Swamiji Guru! It was a little embarrassing, but it would be okay for this one occasion, so I let myself revel in the glory for a few moments. Passersby were very interested in the scene, especially the stricter monks who know that bhikkhus shouldn't do such things! Yet I wanted to share the joy, as all of the other monks had

been so diligent too. So I took garlands off my shoulders and lap, and draped them over the other monks' heads as well. Now we were a group of Swamiji bhikkhus! We shook hands congratulating each other and then inevitably it was photo time. I hope those photos don't get shared around too much, as one needs to understand the context.

And so that was the three thousandth hour. I had the thought, 'That was a very difficult thing to do! And now it is done. When I think of it at the time of death, I will be very pleased to have done this!' Wishing you all well!

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

### *Taking Leave of the Bodhi Mandala*

*Day 46, March 18, 2018 (3,000 hours practice puja  
at the Bodhi Tree completed!)*

I am writing this on the plane. It's a five-hour flight to Bangkok via Varanasi, Lord Shiva's city of eternal light. Having been there several times, I must say it's a good thing that cows are considered holy—otherwise all of the cow poo might lead to cognitive dissonance! But I digress...I want to capture my thoughts, feelings, and impressions about these last days in Bodhgaya while they're still fresh.

#### **The last day**

I woke up at 4:30 a.m. choking. I seriously couldn't breathe. I made my way to the bathroom where I started coughing up thick, sticky mucus, all the while wheezing for breath between coughs and spitting out phlegm. This lasted about five minutes before my breathing was normal again. The curious thing is that I do not have a cold. What a way to wake up! It's as though my body had gotten through something difficult and can now start functioning in a different mode. So the clean up and recovery begins. I think that the body produces more mucus while in this very dusty environment too, in order to wrap up some of the particulate matter hovering in the air. Aside from dust, incense smoke, smoke from wood fires and cooking with cow dung, I prefer not to think too much about what some of those other particulates might be. The body knows it's not good though!

Looking at my clock, I realised I could actually go back to sleep! It's been nearly seven weeks now with only one sleep in, and even then I was not luxuriating in a relaxed state but sick with food poisoning. Today there was an extra hour and a half before I needed to start packing, and breakfast

was to be offered by Gautam in my room at seven. So I quickly fell back asleep. Wonderful!

At breakfast time, the ever-diligent Ajahn Visalo was already at the temple, but the three other monks and I ate together. It was incredible to sit on a soft mattress, enjoy a quiet, clean environment, and take our time. It's the simple pleasures. Gautam looked a little sad, however. For the past seven weeks, he has had a role and a community, and has contributed to something noble. But in a few hours we would all be getting on a plane and leaving him behind once again. Living in Bihar in the hot season when very few tourists come through is tough. It's a bitter time. The heat is unrelenting and the competition between hawkers and guides is fierce. They begin to snarl at each other in a manner similar to the dogs in the temple and fistfights occasionally break out.

Last year Gautam refused to go to the airport because he didn't want us to see him cry. This time he was confident he could hold his tears until we were gone. We softened the blow of our departure by showering him with gifts. Our lay supporter Aye gave him an electric kettle and a large thermos. I gave him a blanket, some soap, and several small bottles of sweet basil oil for his mother to offer as a puja to her Hindu gods. We also coordinated a fund to help his youngest brother Anand go to a private school. The standards there are not great, but it's a step up from the local government school. Soon there will be a new general store enterprise that he'll have to help manage, at least for a few months, so at least there are new developments on the horizon.

The mood was light for us monks today. Having finally completed our marathon, there was no requirement to meditate. We were exhausted, but feeling relief and happiness. We went to the temple and Bodhi Tree to offer flowers and ask forgiveness, and also to reaffirm some future goals and vows in front of the resident ancient Buddha statue, Phra Buddha Metta.

At 8:45 a.m. we were met eagerly by Roshan, one of my favourite flower sellers, two hundred metres from the entrance to the temple. Six years ago I placed an order of fifty garlands with Roshan. He was just six years old. Every morning after that, when I stepped out of the Mahayana Hotel at five, Roshan was there. 'Hello sir, flowers order...garlands, you order'? He'd greet me. No matter how many times I told him our flower budget was spent, he still came by every morning. Nowadays I keep his enthusiasm at arm's length by promising to place an order on our last day. So there he was,

now twelve years old and all smiles, bearing bulging rice sacks packed with fifty freshly strung garlands. They were a cheerful combination of daisies, marigolds, and roses. He and Gautam carried them to the temple for us.

Today was unlike all others as we were 'leaving the mandala', as it were, rather than entering it to practise meditation and develop our minds. We needed to ask forgiveness sincerely and then request the blessings of the mandala to accompany us in the future, wherever we are. When practising in holy sites auspicious and gracious beginnings and endings are considered important. We four monks each placed garlands at the base of an Ashokan pillar at the bottom of the entrance stairway. King Ashoka had these pillars erected 2,300 years ago. This was an offering to the outer ring of the mandala and the first of many places we made devotional offerings this morning. It was lovely to take the time to do this properly, now that we were relieved of our formal practice regimen.

Next we offered garlands to the two ancient standing Buddha images that flank the entrance to the vihara. With this, we made an offering to the intermediate ring of the mandala. Carved in the Palla era more than 1000 years ago, the images have received the offerings of the faithful for more than a millennium. They stand with a sense of serenity and aloofness, yet also kindness, power, and grace. Climbing up on a little ledge in the wall, held firmly in place by the other monks, Gautam then passed me some garlands to drape over the elegantly extended stone hands. The contrast of the colourful flowers against black ancient stone was stunning.

After this we entered the vihara to make some offerings to the central image, Phra Buddha Metta. This statue, along with the Bodhi Tree, Vajra Asana, and chedi spire, is considered to be the very centre of the mandala. There is a hook sticking out on two pillars either side of the statue. We placed a garland on each and several in front, and then bowed onto the thick flagstone floor. We took this image to be a physical representation of Shakyamuni Buddha. Since our practice was also an offering to him, at this point we informed the Buddha that we successfully completed our vows and would be leaving. We returned to this inner shrine room again before our final departure from the compound, to pay respects one last time and make some special pledges. But first we asked for forgiveness.

After exiting the vihara, we moved in a clockwise direction around the chedi, heading to the site of the Bodhi Tree and the Seat of Enlightenment. The Buddha Metta image faces east, greeting pilgrims as they descend the

stairs and walk towards the chedi. The Bodhi Tree and Vajra Asana are on the western side of the chedi. We kept the chedi on our right hand side until we came to the Bodhi Tree. Then we each placed several garlands on the carved sandstone fence immediately around the sacred Tree—one for the Seat of Enlightenment, one for the Bodhi Tree, and one for the Mahabodhi Chedi itself. After this, we bowed deeply onto the marble floor facing east, directly under the Tree. The Vajra Asana was just a few metres before us, between the Tree and the chedi, so we were actually bowing to all of the sacred objects.

It is difficult to describe how moved, joyful, and grateful we felt with our heads pressed against the cool marble floor. On one level, these most sacred objects are awesome and intimidating, but on another level it was such an honour to place our heads there. Considering what occurred here and the gifts it has brought to our lives, it is difficult to hold back tears of gratitude.

Next we asked for forgiveness. Although we tried to be very respectful to this sacred place, over the course of our time there we inevitably must have thought and said some unskilful things. The Dalai Lama has said that merits made there are seven times more potent than elsewhere. Unfortunately, bad kamma is seven times more harmful as well. Acknowledging faults truthfully and humbly can reduce the bad kamma. I led a small ceremony and the other monks repeated the words after me. With hands respectfully placed together and heads bowed low, we said, 'We offer our sincere and deep respects to the Vajra Asana, to the Bodhi Tree, to the Mahabodhi Chedi and the sacred relics it contains, as well as to the very liberation and enlightenment of Kakusandha Buddha, Konagammana Buddha, Kassapa Buddha, and Gotama Buddha and to the future enlightenment of Maitreya Buddha which will occur here as well, at this most holy and sacred place in this universe'.

Although the Buddhas are liberated and enlightened, not present in a gross form for us to see, on this occasion we addressed them as though they were still there. We asked forgiveness not so much in order to be forgiven by the Buddhas, but rather to acknowledge our faults truthfully in a manner that reduces any kammic obstruction we may have incurred. The blessings of the Buddhas are still very much present at the holy site, which is why Lord Buddha said it is very beneficial to pay respects here.

We continued, 'We also humbly ask for forgiveness for any unwhole-

some or inappropriate act of body, speech, or mind that has occurred in this holy place. Please understand that as we are still in training, our minds still affected by greed, hatred, and delusion, some mistakes are inevitable. Please kindly accept our sincere offering of formal meditation practice. May the power of the merits produced completely override any negative actions. May the powers of the Buddhas bless and protect us wherever we are. May we never be separated from the teachings of Buddhas, and may we grow steadily on this path, never slipping backwards!

Finally we dedicated merits, quietly and individually. I said, 'I dedicate the merits of my practice here to my mother, father, and teachers, to all who have supported me in my bhikkhu life, to all who have supported or are supporting my monastery, and to all who consider me as one of their teachers. May we all continue to grow in Dhamma together. Furthermore, I dedicate merits to all beings kammically connected to me through either wholesome or unwholesome deeds. May they receive these merits and rejoice. Lastly I dedicate merits to all beings everywhere. May they all grow in the Buddha-Dhamma and realise complete freedom from suffering and unshakeable peace! May the Buddha sasana in this world endure for a long, long time to come!'

Once we had completed our ceremony, we rose from our knees and continued walking in a clockwise direction. Here we met our lay students and friends. They were waiting to ask forgiveness of us in the place where we'd been sitting in the past days. They offered especially fragrant garlands for this special occasion. Each was strung with around 180 wild roses. The exchange was similar to the ceremony we recently held with Khun Jintana's relatives and staff. Our lay followers had all behaved impeccably, taken excellent care of their teachers, and practised very hard. So this ceremony was full of mutual respect and appreciation, and once again tears were hard to hold back. I am so proud of them! After the ceremony, I encouraged them to ask forgiveness of all of the sacred objects as well.

Our regular flower seller Surendra had sent along an extra rose garland as his special gift to me, so now I had an especially lovely flower offering to re-gift to the Phra Buddha Metta statue when we took our final leave. Once again we continued in a clockwise direction until we had come full circle. We entered the vihara to take leave of Lord Buddha one last time. We unhooked our previously offered garlands and replaced them with the finer and more fragrant roses. After offering the rose garlands we bowed

our heads on the floor. It was wet (it had recently been mopped) which made it uncomfortable, but at least the smell was nice. We each made some promises and articulated our personal aspirations, then asked for the blessings and protection of the Buddha to be with us in this life and all lives until enlightenment. Our hearts felt torn as we left the vihara. It is hard to say how it is possible, but many people feel the presence of the Buddha in there. His power, purity, wisdom, and compassion are palpable.

When leaving the site of the Mahabodhi Chedi, we decided to chant some short suttas under an entrance archway around twenty metres in front. Once again, we were offering respects at an intermediate ring while exiting the mandala. Looking at the fifty-four metre gold-spined chedi built in honour of the Buddha and chanting words that he spoke while teaching over 2,500 years ago was a poignant moment. After our final puja, we walked slowly around the outer circumambulation ring, which is around five hundred metres long. Then after exiting the outer gate, we bowed on the ground facing the chedi one last time. I gazed at the chedi intently, determined to recollect it in my mind in the future. Sometimes when I need to be strong, I actually visualise myself as the chedi.

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

Lunch was offered by three of Mumtaz's sons and two of his nephews on the fifth floor of the guesthouse. It was a veritable feast and had clearly been cooked with much love and respect. The good womenfolk at home had definitely been involved, although we did not meet them. Shahlal had cooked one curry and one dessert himself though. Mumtaz had given specific and detailed instructions regarding the menu. We enjoyed vegetable and paneer curry, mushroom masala curry, spinach and paneer curry, chapati, fried rice with saffron and peas, fried fish, chicken curry, and finally creamy, sweet milk rice and pomegranate, papaya, and mandarins for dessert. All five monks, Mae Chee Aimey, and our four remaining students agreed that it was the best meal of the entire stay. It was wonderful to see these Muslim brothers outside of their merchant roles. They enjoyed the opportunity to show their care and appreciation and the overall mood was warm and loving.

As I write, we are over the Bay of Bengal, halfway through our flight home. India is receding quickly and Thailand looms large. Recollecting

leaving the Bodhi Tree and Mahabodhi Temple, I am feeling a rich and complex emotional state. Monks shouldn't really talk in sexual terms, but this ongoing relationship with intensive practice in Bodhgaya has been like a passionate affair. It just so happens that I am passionate about spiritual practice! The payoffs, there, when meditation goes well are truly wonderful, and yet it can be stormy when things aren't going so well. So it has been a stormy and passionate affair! I can't give Bodhgaya a gender, but I can say that I have loved and hated it equally at times. Overall though, my love for that place and what it represents within the ocean of samsara is much more than words can describe.

I suspect that the causes for this intense love may lay even deeper than this one lifetime. Once when I was visiting a gifted and elderly monk in the Chiang Rai province in northern Thailand, I asked him why I felt so happy and comfortable in Bodhgaya. I had a sense of warm familiarity. He answered that I had come through the area while travelling overland to India in a past life, moving through the Mekhong river basin. When I later asked Ajahn Anan if I had walked to India from Thailand, he answered matter of factly, 'No, you rode an elephant'. The question remains: why would one travel overland all the way from Thailand to India? Well if you felt great gratitude to the Buddha, you might wish to go to Bodhgaya.

I have always found leaving Bodhgaya difficult and bittersweet. I'm often exhausted and fed up, yet feeling content through having practised very hard. A large part of me definitely wants to go home, yet another part is torn. When meditation is good there, it feels like a different kind of home. You can touch your true home there—the internal space where all suffering, frustration, and sense of limitation is transcended for a time. The gratitude and love one feels towards the Buddhas afterwards are also beyond the normal scope of human emotion. Many people shed happy tears there, sitting for entire meditation sessions with tears rolling down their cheeks and dripping onto their clothes.

This peace we can experience in moments through meditation, or through insight experiences in the beginning and middle stages of our practice, gives us a glimpse of deeper truth, deeper reality, our true potential, and indeed the actual nature of the mind. As our practice progresses, these experiences occur for longer durations. This will at first

weaken and then finally begin to uproot the negative qualities of ignorance and delusion from the mind. As practice deepens further over several lifetimes, the power of insight will completely eradicate ignorance and delusion. A purified and liberated mind is what remains, experiencing unshakable peace and unceasing bliss. I personally know several practitioners, all of them great monks, who have accomplished this.

When we have an experience of deep peace and glimpse a spacious, unconfused, deeper reality, we can imagine what it must be like to be a fully enlightened Buddha or totally liberated arahant—where unshakable peace is our constant reality and our purity is untouched by greed or hatred. While experiencing this to some degree is incredibly important for our understanding, commitment, faith, and confidence in the path of practice, it can also be quite painful to return to a more normal mind that is not yet purified. But this is a process of familiarisation. There are necessarily many ups and downs. The return of some suffering impels us to practise harder in order to go completely beyond it. We must aim for an upward trajectory over a long period of time, feeling confident and taking heart that these small insights have laid the powerful causes for future, deeper ones.

In my experience, the quality of peace I've touched in meditation in Bodhgaya has been deeper than elsewhere. It's as though the merit of the Buddhas and the resonance of liberation lend a helping hand to the practice there. When you experience this, you feel such love and gratitude to the Buddha and to this special place. That's what makes it painful to leave.

That place is deep under my skin and emblazoned indelibly in my mind. In leaving, I tell myself it is also just another step along a path. It is an encouragement and source of merit along the way. The true journey is in one's heart and mind. If I keep practising sincerely, I will eventually experience deeper peace and ease than I have felt even here. Wherever I am when the path factors truly come together in the mind will be the place where enlightenment occurs. Lord Buddha stated that those who see the Dhamma see the Buddha; so we see the Buddha wherever we practise correctly.

When people occasionally asked Ajahn Chah whether he had been to holy sites in India (he hadn't) he would answer, 'You think the Buddha can't be born in Thailand, huh? You think the Buddha

can't realise the Dhamma in Thailand'? As someone who had realised Dhamma fully in his mind while living in Thailand, it was a pertinent question. So although I have completed a difficult yet rewarding period of practice in the place where all the Buddhas in our world become enlightened, now comes the even more difficult task of practising more each day, wherever I may find myself. May the thousands of prayers that I have made about doing so be effective! And may I share the benefits of my practice with as many beings as possible.

I wish you success on your own journey as well. May you never lose sight of your deeper nature and ultimate potential. If you fall down, may you quickly rise again. If you make mistakes, may you remedy these with skilful actions. May you always be inspired and determined to take the next step—leading eventually to heaven and beyond.



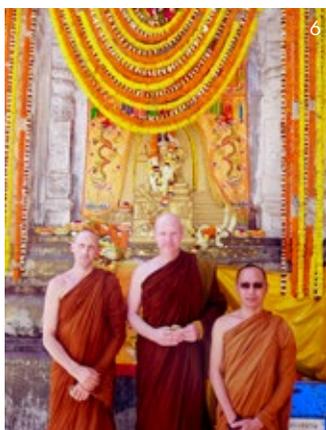
1. *Favorite spot*
2. *Approaching 3000 hours with friends*
3. *Ajahn Achalo  
& Ajahn Nyaniko*



4



5



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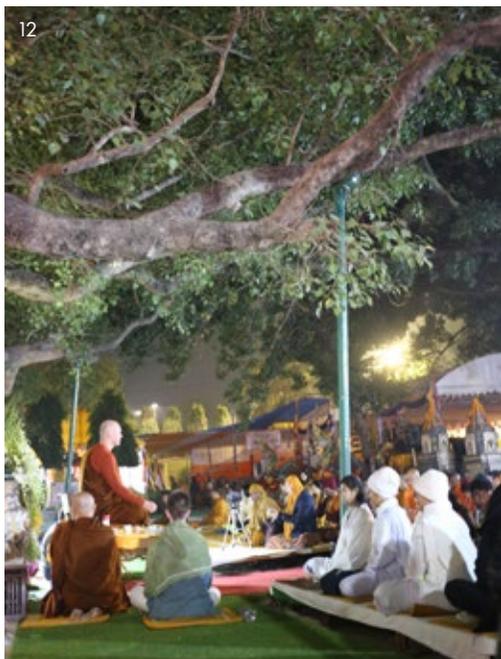
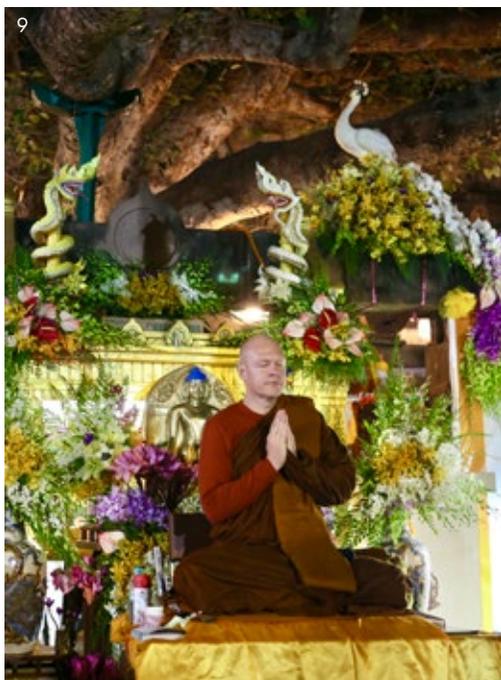


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8

- 4. *Grand flower offering*
- 5. *Chanting before 300th hour (Did Nagas join?)*
- 6. *Some of our flowers*
- 7. *Friends congratulate with garlands*
- 8. *Cheering squad*



9. Teaching under Bodhi Tree  
 10 & 11. On top of the Mahabodhi Chedi  
 12. Teaching under Bodhi Tree



- 13 *Meditating inside the Chedi*
- 14 *Painting gold leaf on the Buddha Metta statue*
- 15. *Gotam and his wife*
- 16. *Gotama's baby*
- 17. *At Gotam's village*





## SECTION TWO

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*Traditional Four Holy Sites Pilgrimage  
Fulfilling Outstanding Vows*

**TRADITIONAL FOUR HOLY SITES PILGRIMAGE**  
.....*Fulfilling Outstanding Vows*

This section contains journal entries from the perspective of leading a traditional Four Holy Sites Pilgrimage, as well as excerpts from the experiences of the participants. The journals describe the various sites that were visited, some of the significant events that occurred there during the life of the Buddha, and the relevance of these to Buddhist practitioners. The commentary gives some ideas for how to prepare properly for, and how to understand, pilgrimage as a spiritual practice. For those who may not be able to join in this traditional practice, these writings give the opportunity to share in the experience of those who did.

The twenty day pilgrimage occurred during the months of February and March of 2019. The journal entries, commentary, and excerpts were pieced together by myself in Bodhgaya over a twenty day period immediately after the pilgrimage. During this period I combined 5-6 hours per day of meditation at the Bodhi Tree with 4-5 hours of writing alone in my room. The writing was an enjoyable way to revisit the multi-faceted journey, and to process the experience of that intense period, both for myself and the thirty-five others who had joined in the spiritual expedition.

## CHAPTER ONE

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### *Fulfilling Outstanding Vows*

#### **India 2019: Unfinished Business** **Saturday March 9**

I am back in Room 302, Mumtaz Guesthouse, Bodhgaya, a ten minute walk from the sacred Bodhi Tree. Around this time last year, I was approaching the completion of my three thousand hours sitting meditation vow. I recall the sense of joy tinged with sadness as I ascended to the summit of my goal. Ajahn Nyaniko and Mae Chee Aimey had been my stalwart companions, and many others joined us for periods during our six-week stay. I was preparing to live the remainder of my life with less of a physical relationship with India and Bodhgaya, yet with a deeper commitment to doing more practice wherever I would find myself, presumably at Anandagiri Forest Monastery.

Despite feeling somewhat torn, I was confident and optimistic that the merit and blessings produced would support me in finding a calm centre, an eye in the storm, and my own private seat for enlightenment (or at least a modicum of mindfulness and wisdom) wherever I was, provided I was heedful and diligent. Yet here I am in 'Incredible India' and specifically now in Bodhgaya for a period of several weeks once again...and so soon! This certainly smells like kamma (among various other things).

Vows made here are potent and I had two I'd not yet completed. The first was to lead a third pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites. I'd previously led two and participated in two more. The second was to do a traditional Chinese Mahayana devotional practice known as 'three steps,

one bow' all the way up Vulture's Peak in Rajgir, a two-hours drive from Bodhgaya. My vow was to do this three times and I had completed it twice already. I am happy to report that both outstanding vows have now been fulfilled. I have led three full Buddhist-circuit pilgrimages and got my middle-aged body up that holy mountain for the third time, pressing my forehead to the sandstone steps more than three hundred times, or every third step, while ascending to Vulture's Peak.

So I was here in Bodhgaya twenty or so days ago with a group of thirty-five, leading a full pilgrimage of the four Buddhist holy sites (the place of Buddha's birth, enlightenment, first teaching, and final Nibbana), as well as some other sites that were significant in the life of the Buddha. I have now returned with a few friends who joined me on the pilgrimage for a three-week period of practice at the Bodhi Tree. Ajahn Ghit, Ajahn Visalo, Mae Chee Aimy, and Liv from Australia were all here last year as well. And this time we are also joined by another Thai Bhikkhu by the name of Ajahn Max, and a Malaysian laywoman by the name of Soo Ping. Considering that since they were in India already carrying out our pilgrimage, they might as well dive in deep with me one more time to immerse ourselves in intensive practice here. It's also a good excuse to avoid the sound of grinding granite bricks twenty metres from my monk's cabin back in Thailand at Anandagiri, as the chedi we are building slowly approaches completion.

There are several purposes for my writing these journals. One is to help myself digest and process having led a three-week pilgrimage. In addition, I'd like to relay my current experience, including doing more intensive meditation practice in Bodhgaya. And I also wish to share with a larger group of people some thoughts and impressions about the purpose, experience, and benefits of a traditional, sacred pilgrimage. In order to do so I will make use of my pilgrimage journal and include excerpts written by many of the pilgrims. Through it all I will have to ask you, dear reader, to please bear with me as I oscillate between the past and present, as well as between my experience and the experience of others!

### **Monday March 11**

Walking towards the Mahabodhi Temple at 7:30 a.m. yesterday after a little recuperative sleep in, I experienced a lightness so pronounced I felt like I might float! Was it the result of an amazing meditation or a sorely

needed and long overdue session of yoga? No. It was the absence of the thirty dear pilgrims I'd been sharing every aspect of life with over the preceding twenty days. Leading a full pilgrimage in northern India is intense and taxing. There are very real risks and concerns. Having offered all of my skills and given my energies to the group, I am thoroughly fatigued, yet happy to have fulfilled another important vow and to have facilitated a genuine spiritual journey on the Buddhist practice path.

By now you will have noticed that I am prone to making vows when inspired. Then I must doggedly follow through after the fact, inspired or not! Around fifteen years ago I attended my first pilgrimage to the holy sites. It was twelve days long and included travelling overland from Lumbini to Kathmandu—a long, windy drive. A few years later I embarked on another pilgrimage, this time for only eight days. Both experiences seemed too hurried and left little time for practice. It was quite frustrating to have to leave so quickly after an arduous bus ride, only to hop on the bus once again. I had intuited a presence of blessings at these ancient places and wished to dive in deeply, settle the mind, and absorb those blessings to the fullest extent possible, so when I led my first group we went for sixteen days. I found the longer pilgrimage very valuable and similarly appreciated by all who attended. That's when I made the vow, 'I will lead two more full pilgrimages this lifetime, bringing my total number of pilgrimages to five, in honour of the five teaching Buddhas of this auspicious aeon'.

But sixteen days still seemed a little too short to me. The roads are not very good, so even though the distances between various holy sites are not so great, a lot of time is spent being jolted around on a honking, swerving bus. So I set my fourth pilgrimage at nineteen days, which opened up a lot more time and opportunity for spiritual practice at the actual sites, and allowed time to recover in between the somewhat gruelling bus rides. For this fifth pilgrimage I added yet another day. But before writing more about this most recent pilgrimage, I'd like to mention something I observed this morning at the Bodhi Tree while it is still fresh in my mind. (I warned you that I would most likely do this!)

Back here in Bodhgaya I am observing the way deeply established habits have the power to keep bringing us back to the same places to do similar things again and again. I am always struck when I return here and notice that despite the many thousands of pilgrims passing through,

those who stay on to practise more intensively are often the very same people I met last year, a few years ago, and sometimes many years before that! Between yesterday afternoon and this morning I have already met five other Thai Ajahns and one Thai bhikkhuni who are familiar from my previous trips. That's not to mention the Vietnamese monk who always seems to be here as well. We're all sitting under the same side of the Bodhi Tree in the same area we've sat before! This principle of familiarity would hold true for acting out bad habits in disturbing places too, which is scary!

My sense is that we've probably practised in a similar manner in this very place in previous lives as well, perhaps as monks and nuns when this site was a large monastery. Which it must have been for hundreds of years. Or perhaps we were pilgrims from far away lands who stayed for a long period after an arduous journey. (One dear teacher did tell me that I've previously made this journey from Thailand by elephant.) Now in this life, the weight of both the habit and the potent supportive merit keep drawing us back here. How fortunate we are among human beings. I hope we all get liberated one of these lives though!

Although I plan to sit quite a lot in the coming days, as per my previous habit, I am not going to make a formal pledge. The pilgrimage was taxing and my body and mind need some rebound space. One can't and shouldn't have one's foot on the pedal full throttle all of the time. As Ajahn Anan sometimes says, 'Even the most talented warrior cannot fight day after day without sleeping. Too many nights without sleep and he will surely be overcome by the enemy'. There is a time and place for well-earned rest. Even so, I did do eight hours of meditation both yesterday and today at the Bodhi Tree. It felt good to be there and to be physically still. It also felt really good to sleep an extra hour in the morning, do a session of yoga, and have a quiet light breakfast in my room. Most civilised!

### **March 12, 10 p.m.**

The VIP Guesthouse has a lot to answer for. Unfortunately it seems to be the premiere spot for wedding attendees to get properly drunk to obnoxiously loud, poor quality music. This Very Intrusive Premises occupied by groups of Very Inconsiderate People is pumping out noise yet again tonight. However, Ajahn Anan says that falling into dejection and

irritation is actually bad kamma, so we must learn to focus on something good even while facing challenges. I've heard His Holiness the Dalai Lama say repeatedly as well that we must practise 'taking obstacles as the path' and do so with an attitude of joyful effort. So I guess it's, 'thank you, VIP Guesthouse, for reminding me of these Very Important Principles'. Soon I will write about two recent happy occasions here in Bodhgaya to buoy the mind while I wait out the revellers. But first, I'm going to share a few words about pilgrimage. And share some of the perspectives of the pilgrims who joined in this most recent one as well.

### What Is a Pilgrimage and Why Join One?

*If you were to ask me "Why did I decide to go on Pilgrimage?" I would answer that the decision was prompted by the thirst to know, first hand, how the master of the teachings, the Lord Buddha, actually lived. What were the difficulties and challenges he experienced as he strove and became awakened and subsequently taught those teachings to countless fortunate beings 2,600 years ago? It was awe inspiring to be able to visit and experience the four main holy sites as well as several important secondary holy sites. Feeling the atmosphere and energy of the sites, it felt to me as if the Lord Buddha was actually still present. — Michelle*

Pilgrimage is a chance to take time away from ordinary life where we tend to be immersed in mundane duties and distractions, and devote a period of time to religious or spiritual activities such as chanting, meditating, and listening to Dhamma discourses. We travel great distances to holy sites where spiritually significant things have occurred, and consider them deeply. The spiritual pilgrim takes time for reflection and contemplation. Undertaking a greater level of austerity as well as participating in some meaningful ceremonial activities is also usually a part of the traditional pilgrimage experience.

Lord Buddha praised the practice of pilgrimage in the suttas. In the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, Lord Buddha responded to his trusted attendant Venerable Ananda, who asked how his followers should honour him after he passed into final Nibbana. Lord Buddha explained that people should visit and pay their respects at four places: Lumbini, the site of his birth, Bodhgaya, the site of his enlightenment, the Deer Park at Sarnath, the

site of the first formal teaching, and Kusinara, his place of final Nibbana. He said that to do so would be for their benefit for a long time to come.

Ajahn Anan, a close disciple of Ajahn Chah, who is also renowned for his special abilities later explained to me that Lord Buddha was able to utilise his remarkable powers and impart a large portion of the merit he had accumulated as a Bodhisattva into these physical locations. So that those who pay respects with a heart of faith would gain merits similar to paying respects to the Lord Buddha himself. Although merit is difficult to see with the ordinary naked eye, it is actually a quantifiable ‘thing’. The merit of devas, for example, can apparently be observed by gauging the radiance and distance of their auras. Similarly, for those with the ability to see, the incomparable merit of the Buddha infuses the Buddhist holy sites and radiates outwards from them. This is so to such an extent that even devas from other universes sometimes come to pay obeisance. Thus I have heard.

One of the ways that this merit can be experienced is when people chant in these places and feel deep gratitude, love, and rapture while doing so. While meditating at the holy sites, their minds can become more peaceful more quickly despite the busyness and noise. Many people say that they’re able to meditate with less pain or that the pain simply bothers them less. A deep, cooling joy can also fill the heart while practising at the holy places. Not all pilgrims experience these things, but a great many do, which is no doubt a reason why many return time and time again. For those who spend more time taking selfies and pictures of the physical buildings and going shopping for souvenirs than they do considering the significant things which occurred at the holy sites (which is unfortunately often the case in this day and age), obviously the merits will be much less and the benefits dissipated.

### **Why Lead a Pilgrimage?**

Leading a pilgrimage is an opportunity to give something of significant spiritual import back to fellow practitioners and to some of the close students who support me to live a spiritual life. It’s a way to help them learn more about the Buddha’s life and teachings and the skilful means and methods that he imparted, to assist us all in reducing the suffering in our lives and eventually progress to a state entirely beyond suffering. Leading a pilgrimage is a practical and effective way to help a group

of good-hearted people to produce significant spiritual merit or potent, positive kamma. This is a powerful evolution-inspiring force, and supports a deepening of true insight and peace. For my part, I learn about the Buddha's life and teaching more deeply as well. I am also a firm believer that when we help others grow, we will be helped in our own process in the future too. But enough about my musings about pilgrimage for now. How did the other pilgrims experience it? I'd like to give some examples both from a beginner and a repeat pilgrim.

Ven. Chikwang Sunim, a senior Australian nun ordained in the Korean tradition, is an experienced meditator and returned for a second pilgrimage. She wrote of her experience.

*In particular, it was at the ruins of the Kuti (Buddha's residence) or meditation sites where the Buddha had meditated and taught, that seemed the most powerful places to me. It was on top of Vultures Peak, in the Deer Park and in Jetavana, where I experienced the depth of the Buddha's life so profoundly in meditation and contemplation. For 1,200 years, Buddhism was alive in India, then completely lost for more than a thousand, and now once again we can step in the Buddha's footsteps. Thirty years ago, on my last visit, most of these sites were in a state of ruin. And now to see them so developed and full of devoted Buddhists from all around the world, was so inspiring. Such reflections grew throughout the journey, leading at times to a deep sense of connectedness and peace in meditation.*

*Through the generosity of our group as well as our personal offerings of practice in each sacred site, my heartfelt vows grew. In some places like Bodhgaya, it was easy to meditate on the vastness and magnificence of Deva and heavenly realms. This offered more depth of meaning to Mahayana texts and the teachings that I was familiar with. I always believed the Buddha offered teachings that would suit the minds and capacities of all beings in all realms. Still, it was the foundational teachings shared by Ajahn Achalo on this trip that grounded me in the Shakyamuni Buddha's Dhamma, revealed to us by Ananda, 'in place and time, at that time, the lord Buddha said...'. Then through the rituals and offerings we all engaged in, it allowed those rarefied, pure states of mind, to be more present, accepting and open in the chaos, the filth and seeming poverty that we found ourselves in at times, in a more non-judgemental, caring, and giving way.*

## **I Don't Actually Like Leading Pilgrimages!**

Pilgrimage has been a large part of my monk's life and I feel passionate about its value as a practice. That doesn't mean I like every aspect of it though. Many people are surprised when I confide in them that I don't actually like leading pilgrimages. A sincere pilgrimage requires focus, discipline, and determination. There are also risks and threats to the safety and health of the participants. Now you must understand that to get a group of thirty or more people to be focused and disciplined while practising with some significant hardships means at times pushing, nagging, and admonishing. You also have to maintain a cool indifference towards the lamentations of the softer group members, as the pilgrimage chafes against comfort and preferences. Generally speaking, I would much rather be relaxed and sweet, able to chill out with my lay friends rather than having to push and scold them at times. Yet to help them receive the genuine benefit of the journey, pushing, scolding, and affected indifference are a necessity. Then there is the worry! Someone always gets injured and several always get sick. Occasionally someone gets separated from the group and has ensuing anxiety, fear, and resentment to process. When you lead a group of people that you care for into a dangerous place it is quite stressful!

Although in general I don't enjoy the experience of leading pilgrimages in northern India, I am very happy to do so. It's a complex emotional experience: being happy to do something that you don't really like! But it is a creative challenge that I know will genuinely benefit my students. Witnessing and hearing of this benefit is touching and rewarding. Besides the stress and worry, naturally there are also many wonderful and magical moments we share along the journey. I will describe the pilgrimage that we shared in detail following our day-by-day itinerary, but first let me get to those two recent happy experiences...

## **Teaching on the Dhamma Seat Under the Sacred Tree**

I haven't mentioned yet that I was actually in Bodhgaya briefly back in early December last year as well. On that occasion, I was invited to give a teaching as a guest speaker during the annual Tipitaka recitation ceremony. Initially, I felt a lot of resistance to the idea, having assiduously protected my anonymity around these parts and avoided all formal invitations as much as possible. I'd preferred to keep to myself and focus on fulfilling

my vow. But having fulfilled the vow, it did seem worth considering. Perhaps it was time to share some thoughts on Dhamma. I consulted Ajahn Amaro, a senior monk in our lineage who had been a guest speaker the previous year. I emailed to ask if he felt that the occasion was worth supporting and would be beneficial. He answered that not only did he think it was worth supporting, but it was he who had recommended me to Mdm Wangmo Dixey, the main event coordinator! So that reply got me thinking that I was probably supposed to rise to this particular occasion. What's more, the talk was going to be translated into Hindi by Anagarika Arpan, an Indian born eight-preceptor in training at Wat Pah Nanachat. The idea of giving something back to India and her people seemed appropriate after benefiting from practising here so often.

I tend to get a little nervous before doing something new in a public setting. When I first approached Wangmo to check in regard to timing, a leaf from the Bodhi Tree fell directly between us. She picked it up and offered it to me. It was a welcoming and auspicious sign that settled my nerves to some degree.

The talk was on quite a cool December evening, with what seemed to me a rather small audience. I must admit to feeling quite relieved! Bowing in front of the Bodhi Tree, Vajra Asana, and Dhamma Teaching Seat, I felt both humbled and honoured. I had pleaded with as many Thai students as I could to attend and sit in the front row as my cheer squad, so there were around fifteen kind and familiar faces smiling broadly at me and radiating loving-kindness. Bless them! After a couple of slightly clunky minutes, I settled fairly easily into the talk.

The subject matter was as profound and awesome as could be. I had been asked to comment upon the sutta which describes the occasion where the Bodhisattva received his prophecy and prediction of future Buddhahood. This happened under the previous Buddha Dipankara four incalculable periods plus 100,000 aeons ago. It was a profound honour to read from this text and comment on it under the branches of the sacred Bodhi Tree, the very place where the Bodhisattva fulfilled his special destiny. The Buddhavamsa or 'Buddha Chronicles' also lists many details of the twenty-two Buddhas who arose in the world between the time that Sumedha received his prediction and actually became Shakyamuni Buddha.

I was glad that I only discovered later that more than nine hundred people had watched the talk on livestream and another three hundred or so on Facebook live. Knowing this at the time would have made me more tense. I guess it's a special type of person who doesn't feel nervous knowing that more than a thousand people are looking at them and listening to every word! Anagarika Arpan did a great job of translating, and another Indian laywoman also translated some of the question and answer session into Bengali for the monks and lay people from East Bengal and Bangladesh. It was a strange yet surreally beautiful occasion.

### **Sitting Inside the Centre of the Mahabodhi Chedi**

Another rare opportunity was offered to me just days after having given the talk. It was the opportunity to sit meditation in a special inner chamber contained within the chedi itself, in a room one level above the vihara that houses the revered Buddha Metta statue. A recent Sri Lankan acquaintance who has close connections with the temple management mentioned that he'd like to arrange this for me. I had not made any particular effort to receive either of these special opportunities. They manifested out of the blue. Evidently having made the effort to meditate diligently while facing the wall of the chedi for many years had made a deep kammic connection to the holy site. These honours were no doubt the results of diligently laying causes and have nothing to do with a personality or 'self'.

Sitting alone within the core of the fifty-four-metre tall chedi for two entire hours was wonderful. I can't describe what it meant to me or what it felt like. Suffice to say I was deeply humbled and I made my mind as still and quiet as I could out of respect. To sense thick walls all around and a towering weight (and enshrined relics) above, while knowing that the Buddha Metta statue and the Vajra Asana were below, inspired a very careful and silent awe. It was also amazing to be in Bodhgaya and to be sitting in a genuinely quiet and protected space! Towards the end of the time I made aspirational prayers and dedications and asked forgiveness for any misdeeds I'd committed knowingly or unknowingly towards the Buddhas of past, present, and future, and to the holy site in general, in this and previous lives. Dedicating merits from within felt super charged as well. I will treasure the memory as long as breath lasts.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Pilgrimage Preparation*

To help modern people understand the practice of pilgrimage you can't really skip over the preliminaries. For such a journey would not be a true success without proper preparation. So allow me to give you some background. You may be surprised by how much care goes into preparing for a spiritual pilgrimage in northern India. We were going with the express purpose of increasing our efforts at laying the causes which lead to heaven and beyond (Nibbana) and hoping to survive the journey as well! Considerable care was needed to maintain our focus with integrity as well as to stay safe.

So what are the dangers? The roads are significantly less safe than at home and there are more contagious illness around. Simple things like steps and staircases are less even and regular, so people who are accustomed to the consistency of developed world standards can wind up crumpled on the floor with one misjudged step. Even something as simple as giving to beggars in the wrong place can result in the hapless donor being mobbed by a desperate throng of people. A panic attack or mild trauma can ensue. To make the experience even more traumatic, tour guides and police often scold the well-wisher by saying, 'I told you already, don't give to the beggars here!' Then there is the problem of contracting secondary infections if someone catches a simple flu. Due to the exposure to germs and the lack of adequate time to rest, people can wind up with several bugs and many unpleasant symptoms all at once.

There is also the curious phenomenon of ghosts in the hotels! India is such an ancient land with millennia of overlapping civilisations and intermittent wars. Ghosts are definitely around. Most of my students

on pilgrimage were South East Asians, who are notoriously petrified of them. No one has ever been harmed by one, although it does add an element of stress.

You may be wondering whether anything like this happened to our group. Yes—all of it in fact! Before relaying the litany of dramas and mishaps, I would like to stress that the group dealt with all of these situations beautifully. And everyone enjoyed and benefitted greatly from the pilgrimage, even with the occasional challenge.

So what were the ‘interesting or challenging phenomena’ that we had to work and practise with? On the first day, Maheshie, a Sri Lankan Australian, had a fainting spell during the Dhamma talk at the Deer Park. She’s a diabetic and was dealing with a combination of fatigue and the stress of her roommate cancelling the day before travelling. She bounced back within an hour, though, and joined us for the Brahman Aarti ceremony on the Ganges River and our night-time visit to the burning ghats. Several people commented that my face looked paler than hers when I realised one of my pilgrims was lying down on the grass in our midst being fanned! We all spread loving-kindness to her in the meditation session after the talk.

On the third day, Elaine, a Chinese Malaysian lady, was so weak from diarrhoea that she couldn’t physically get out of bed. We had the necessary medicine and an acupuncturist at hand, as well as two Indian tour guides, so she followed onto Bodhgaya from Varanasi in a separate car and luckily was well enough to rejoin the group activities the next day.

On the journey from Varanasi to Bodhgaya, just a couple of hundred metres ahead of our bus, an elderly woman was run over by a truck while crossing the highway. The villagers then expressed their dissatisfaction and grief by placing garbage on the highway and setting it alight. A long line of traffic on one of the nation’s busiest roads came to a complete standstill and we all had to wait over an hour for the police to come and settle the matter. (The lady deserved this much deference and acknowledgement at the very least. We offered our sincere condolences, prayers, and best wishes for a fortunate rebirth.)

After several days of chanting and meditation at the Bodhi Tree, Chooiwan, a Malaysian Australian, tripped down one of the steep stone staircases. Deepening pain and great difficulty walking meant a visit to Gaya hospital the next day where an X-ray revealed a broken bone. A

cast was put on, crutches purchased, and Chooiwan soldiered on with good cheer and determination. The presence of my adopted Indian son Gautam proved helpful as he was a loyal wheel chair pusher!

On our last evening in Bodhgaya, Chikwang Sunim Bhikkhuni, an Australian-born nun ordained in the Korean Mahayana order, decided to give some money to children and beggars in front of the Mahabodhi Temple. She was swamped and engulfed by a five people deep wave of hungry humanity snatching, yelling and screaming. Being well practised, she took it in her stride without seeming too affected at all. Looking on horrified, I felt slightly traumatised though!

After this interesting beginning, things settled down quite nicely. Once we were two weeks into our journey, though, about a third of the group had contracted either a sinus or bronchial infection. Four of these people also seemed to have flu-like symptoms. I had designed the itinerary with this possibility in mind, however, so that for the last two stops we spent three nights in each place. The sick pilgrims, myself included by that time, could skip an entire day or two and still visit the holy site at least once. One afternoon of rest and coughing up sticky slime sufficed for me.

As for ghosts, I met some in Varanasi on the second night there. Khun Jintana from Bangkok heard repeated knocking on her door in the wee hours of the morning in Rajgir. Dinethi, a Sri-Lankan Australian from Geelong, met one in Lumbini as well. None of these subtle-bodied beings were malicious though, so a combination of chanting, spreading metta and leaving the lights on overnight seemed to work well enough.

One final drama ensued when Joyce from Malaysia, sitting quietly in meditation at Jetavana in Savathi, was bitten on her upper arm by a crazed monkey! I'm not sure why he singled her out. Other than an impressive bruise and a slightly shaken heart, Joyce was fine. Fortunately her jacket prevented her skin from breaking, so no tetanus or rabies injections were needed. Decorating the site of the Lord Buddha's kuti in the afternoon with a hundred kilograms of roses and fifty of marigolds buoyed the moods of Joyce and the rest of the group, and once again we took the event in our stride.

I hope I haven't scared you off doing a pilgrimage in India! Throughout these times, people were having very peaceful meditations and learning more deeply about Buddha-Dhamma with every passing

day. With the increasing efforts and focus, many experienced their most peaceful meditations ever, and several mentioned that the trip had completely changed their outlook on life. Most expressed sincere gratitude and a determinedly deepened commitment to Buddhist practice once they returned home. When Khun Lek, our Thai tour leader, asked everyone on the bus on the last day whether they hoped to return to India, all eagerly said that they did. This speaks louder than my words. Importantly, none of the dramas were debilitating and we all fared okay.

An excerpt from Chooiwan's sharing (the pilgrim who broke her foot!) illustrates well the fact that people benefit greatly from the practice of pilgrimage despite the inherent risks. Her writing also captures the way that a well-prepared group of practitioners will be able to take various challenges in their stride and function well as a team.

*When we returned to the Mahabodhi Temple in the afternoon, the brightly coloured flowers which we offered in the morning bedecked every corner of the temple. Seeing this brought such spontaneous happiness. While waiting to enter the inner depths of the Mahabodhi Chedi for our private meditation session upstairs, Ajahn told me to engrave this vision deep in my heart in order to recall at the moment of passing on. Entering the depths of the Chedi, the mind felt embraced within this sacred space. When Ajahn led us in making aspirations, for the very first time, my aspiration became quite clear. Prior to that, it was always fairly vague and wishy-washy. I have such immense gratitude towards Ajahn for leading me clearly along this path.*

*Breaking a foot in India is certainly an experience. However, what really struck me in my heart is the beautiful metta that cocooned me, making the remaining 50+ hours of bus rides over bumpy roads endurable and more than worthwhile. My dear roomie Susan cared for me like a child through the rest of the trip. And dear Khun Lek, our tour guide, who when asked if I can continue the trip, said... 'CAN!... Why not?.. I have a plan B and plan C!' She was always 3 steps ahead to care for me in more ways than I can count.*

Now that you are more aware of some of the risks and of some of the things that pilgrims may have to practise with, I'll go through a few instructions and suggestions on preparation.

### **Preparing Properly: A Suitable Group**

Travel in northern India is dangerous compared with more developed parts of the world. And doing something that produces potent good kamma and powerful spiritual merit can attract painful kammic ripenings; unfortunately it seems to be the case that negative kammās often ripen when we're about to do something powerfully skilful. For these reasons, I would never open up the pilgrimage to just anyone who wished to join. That may sound elitist or arrogant but it is really just common sense and care. Once on the road in the middle of nowhere we must work like a family, trusting and depending upon one another. If anything goes seriously wrong with one pilgrim it can affect the entire group. So no one practising any form of wrong livelihood or with obvious serious character flaws would be welcome on the pilgrimage. (More ordinary character flaws are fine—we're all works in progress!)

This being the case, the opportunity was offered to good-hearted people quite well known to me, people who had done retreats with me, as well as a few who were recommended by people whom I also know well. Two thirds of the group were 'old students' who had done nine-day retreats with me before, which was an incredible support. They knew and trusted me, were familiar with my teaching style, and had already proven themselves to be capable of focus and discipline. These folks set the tone with their familiar warmth, friendship, and trust. I invited several sincere and well-practised monks and one senior nun to join as well. A significant Sangha presence is an important component. We pool our merits, which creates a powerful protection. A kind of synergy can occur where providence and grace manifest...and I believe that at times it certainly did.

### **A Good Tour Company**

You need to work with professionals. Thailand has many experienced tour operators who have led hundreds of pilgrimages. These people can utilise their connections and experience when problems arise. I insist upon having two Thai guides and two Indian guides travelling with us. This way it is possible to delegate when challenges arise, such as when Elaine needed to travel in a separate car and Chooiwan needed to go to hospital. The whole group felt safe and taken care of and the guides were supported and not overstretched. It costs more but you get a lot of value for what you pay.

We also stay in a better class of hotel, not out of a preference for luxury, but so that people could eat clean, hot food and get quiet rest. The difference between three and four stars in India is a great chasm! Our nineteen-day trip cost around USD\$3,500 (115,000 Thai baht). About half the group were middle class professionals who could easily afford this, while the other half had to save for a couple of years. Sometimes partners, friends, and family chipped in to help. I believe it is a good investment in one's spiritual practice and future happiness. People waste money in all sorts of silly ways, so it is wise to spend it on creating good kamma and developing wisdom if you can, accumulating the 'noble inner wealth' as it were. This type of wealth can actually be taken to the next life.

The monastery did not profit from the tour. This was my offering to my students who support me. My tour costs were shared equally by all of the pilgrims. The other three monks and nun had separate sponsors. Khun Lek and her company Flyright Tours are impeccable. Lek is a tough, smart woman with a good sense of humour—just what is needed in India. She puts the locals in their place when they overstep boundaries or neglect duties in a manner I simply could not! We spent hours over several phone calls finalising the itinerary, as a meditation-based tour is quite unusual. I was determined to keep this the focus through a practical itinerary. The entire group loved Khun Lek and felt they'd made a good friend. She also took great photos and shared these with everyone so that the pilgrims could focus upon practice and study rather than get distracted by taking photos.

### **Preparation**

From six months before the proposed travel dates, I started to send out pilgrimage preparation letters via an email list. These suggested more meditation, more exercise, and healthier eating to get the body ready. It helps to be more in shape and better primed for sessions of chanting, sitting, and listening to Dhamma talks while sitting on the hard ground or floor. People were encouraged to experiment and get their meditation kit together: a mat, a pillow, a bench, or a combination that worked. I also sent a basic recommended reading list to help familiarise people with our subject matter. *The Life of the Buddha* by Nyanamoli Thera and *The Great Disciples of the Buddha* are rich in fun, epic stories and great teachings.

I also recommended that people consciously do good deeds for the purpose of making good kamma, and dedicate this merit to all participants of the proposed pilgrimage. Generating good will and good energy towards one another long before departure is skilful. I further suggested that people invite any guardian angels or ancestors in parallel realms who are interested to come along too. I also encouraged people to ask forgiveness of any beings we may have harmed, intentionally or unintentionally, knowingly or unknowingly, who are still holding onto grudges—particularly those in India! Asking forgiveness and dedicating merits can lower the intensity of negative kammic ripenings.

Taking three weeks out of modern life is evidently not easy. The number of people who had expressed a seventy to ninety percent commitment and who dropped out in the last six months was quite high. This added an element of stress to the organisers and I had to keep finding suitable replacements. Admittedly, this is one of the parts I did not enjoy. On one level it was quite fascinating, yet also bittersweet to see the way that some very sincere folks had to reluctantly pull out due to various pressing reasons, while others seemed to glide in quite easily close to the time of departure. No doubt there had to be a very specific type of merit to assure participation. It would be fascinating to have the ability to see the past life connection of those who did join!

## **Chanting**

In my experience, chanting harmoniously and with good energy is an important component of the pilgrimage practice. As well as helping us consider the teachings and significant individuals and events during the life of the Buddha, chanting in time and in harmony adds to the feeling of being on a spiritual journey together. It is a powerful harmonising influence. Chanting can also be a grounding and rapturous experience if people are well practised, which inclines and primes the mind for more peaceful meditation. The monks knew most of the chanting by heart.

I also believe that good chanting attracts the support of Buddhist devas and draws powerful energetic blessings. It would make sense that a good number of devas around the Buddhist circuit will have chanted these same chants in past lives. Some may have even heard them taught by Lord Buddha himself! Many of the chants that we would recite were suttas taught by the Buddha in the language that he

spoke, and on a number of occasions we would be chanting them in the very places they were originally taught. Since more than half of the group were Chinese Malaysians with faith in Kwan Yin Bodhisattva, and since we were visiting Vulture's Peak where it is believed that Kwan Yin (Avalokiteshvara) spoke the Heart Sutra, the group also practised this chant in Mandarin. We actually did the chant nine times up on Vulture's Peak.

### **Devas**

The word 'devata' means 'radiant one' in Pali and it refers to beings in heavenly worlds. It often gets shortened to deva in modern lazy English. I believe it was most likely the case that some of the local devata joined in with our chanting, as well as some devas from Thailand and Malaysia who came along for the pilgrimage. It is even possible that more devas joined the pilgrimage than humans! This increases the chances of safety and serendipity in mysterious ways, because devas often have great merits. So when we had strangely quiet periods for meditation in places that are usually busy, which we did on many occasions, I would suggest that devas may have been involved. I can't prove it of course, perhaps such things are a matter of intuition and faith. It is not necessary to believe in these things to benefit from chanting, meditating and studying on a pilgrimage.

To help people prepare, I sent audio files and PDF files of the chants in the precise way that we would chant them. I am averse to out of tune, or low energy chanting, so preparing people was a gift to myself too! People in various locations such as Melbourne, the Kuala Lumpur area, and in Bangkok began chanting practice sessions together. Phil from Kent in the UK also diligently practised by himself for many months beforehand. This definitely paid off once we were on the road. It was inspiring to hear people from different countries and ethnic backgrounds chanting harmoniously with a shared appreciation and faith. It's a testament to the potential of humans to cooperate in beautiful, subtle, and sophisticated ways.

Three months before departure, it was time to start training for the 'three steps, one bow' practice up Vulture's Peak. I sent a video of myself demonstrating the method and was pleased by how many of the group intended to join in. The monks practised back at Anandagiri up

a much smaller hill. On the big day, around half the group actually did the practice all the way up the mountain. I was so relieved that no one had a stroke or a heart attack. Phew!

Six weeks before leaving, it was time to consider immune assisting supplements. I recommend taking vitamin C, echinacea, and olive leaf extract for up to a month before travelling—a half dose for the first two weeks, then the full dose for the next fortnight. In my experience, the people who take these are less likely to get seriously sick. If they do get sick, their energy is still buoyant enough to continue participating in the full schedule. If people catch the flu, there's not much that can be done other than allowing for rest. There are a lot of bugs in the air in northern India! Having antioxidants built up in the bloodstream ready to get to work is helpful.

### **In the Event of Death**

I also requested the pilgrims write an 'In the Event of Death' letter, to be handed to me at the airport on the day of our departure. In exchange for the letter, I would hand each of them a blessed Buddha amulet, a blessed wrist mala (prayer beads), and two chanting books. The letters were to help the group process such an event should it actually occur, and also for the sake of practicality. It would be my preference to cremate any dead bodies in India, rather than try to arrange for a bloating and smelly corpse to be shipped back home. Sorry to be blunt, but you do need to be practical in such situations. Of course we'd do lovely chanting along with cremation! Fortunately nobody actually died on the trip. I requested that the letter be something I could share with the departed's family or significant others, and which might be read at a memorial gathering. Pilgrims were to list the names and numbers of those to be contacted at the top of the letter, then clearly state their cremation preferences (for example, where to return or sprinkle the ashes). For myself, I announced that my body could be burned anywhere and the ashes left right where they were. I would not be intending to hang around!

To develop wisdom, contemplating the possibility of death is helpful. A large factor in attaining an auspicious rebirth is recognising that one's body is dying, and being ready and willing to let go of this life swiftly. Too much grief, worry, and attachment can result in lower realms or ghost births.

### **Blessed Objects**

The Buddha explained that developing jhanas can lead to having special abilities beyond ordinary conceptual understanding. He also stated that metta jhana is extremely protective. Some gifted meditation masters with powerful metta jhana are able to infuse objects with concentrated metta. This can have a protective influence when virtuous people with faith wear them. I insisted that everyone in the group wear both a blessed Buddha amulet and wrist mala, not only for their confidence and wellbeing, but to lessen the likelihood of serious mishaps. The mala could also be used on the long bus rides for mental recitation of mantras such as Bud-dho or Buddham Saranam Gacchami. But enough details about pilgrimage preparation for now. Back to Bodhgaya right now...

### **Post-Pilgrimage in Bodhgaya (March 15)**

We monks like a schedule. It's what we've gotten used to. So here in post-pilgrimage Bodhgaya, I've worked out a nice rhythm. I do a session of yoga in the morning and have a quiet, light breakfast in my room. Then I do two three-hour sitting meditation sessions at the Bodhi Tree, one from 8-11 a.m., and one from 5-8 p.m. I've also added two two-hour writing sessions for this journal. A little quiet time away from the madding crowd is very nice indeed!

The other five monks and Mae Chee are all being very diligent. They leave the guesthouse at 4:45 a.m. and are sitting under the Bodhi Tree by 5:15 a.m. I personally liaised and found sponsorship to support the monks to have the pilgrimage opportunity as well as this intensive retreat. One benefit of being an abbot and teaching retreats for a period of years is that you meet many good and kind people who wish to support other practitioners and accumulate good kamma. It can be enjoyable and rewarding to connect the dots, and to enable others to accumulate auspicious merits and have wonderful opportunities for practice.

On pilgrimage the monks all helped out with teaching when asked, and were equally helpful by just sitting alongside when it was time to meditate. The laypeople found it a great support to have a row of Sangha members sitting like Buddha statues in front of them when increasing their own efforts. Now they basically have no duties, other than to sit

meditation as long as they wish. It is lovely to witness them taking the opportunity and using it to the fullest with no external pressure to do so. Like me, they are inspired by the Buddha and the love of Dhamma practice. No senior monk ever supported me to this degree to have these pilgrimage and practice opportunities. Obviously I've been supported to live in good practice monasteries, though, and am truly grateful. Supporting others to have similar opportunities is a beautiful way to express this gratitude.

It is a lovely change to be able to walk leisurely to and from the temple, enjoying some walking meditation, and not have to fulfil a '10 hours sitting per day' vow. The good thing about having practised so hard previously is that now six hours sitting and one hour walking plus four hours of writing per day seems easy and pleasant!

Anagarika Arpan joined us here and kindly offered me my breakfast the first few days. Now that Mae Chee Aimy has some Thai friends and students helping to offer breakfast to the five other monks at the Mahabodhi temple, my adopted son Gautam (now twenty years old!) is offering breakfast to me in my room. This morning was his first go. I heard his footsteps outside my door around seven, then a curious crashing sound, followed by the distinct noise of many small objects rolling along the marble floor. After a few minutes I got up to look, and saw dear Gautam picking pistachios up off the floor and putting them back in a bowl! Smiling, he said, 'I think changing better, no eat this one. I'm come back one minute'. He soon returned with a fabulously strong cup of masala tea. Gautam makes good tea and is very happy to have his dear Ajahn to himself for this period of time each day. Believe me, there have been big things to talk about!

### **The Prince Becomes a Lion**

Today after lunch at the Om Tibet Cafe, I met Gautam's wife and his forty-five-day-old son Angraj for the first time. It's quite a story. Poor Gautam, poor Gautam's wife...poor everyone! In his caste they give their sons the surname Kumar (little prince) before marriage. It became Singh, his actual family name, after marriage. Singh means lion.

Back in March last year, I had a strong feeling about my adopted son's likely sexual blossoming—so much so that I tried to explain what

condoms were and forced him to watch a YouTube demonstration video with Hindi explanations. (On a model, not on a real man's privates.) I had to do my fatherly duty, after all, which proved to be utterly useless anyway!

Gautam had been determined to stay single and seriously considered becoming a monk. He had hoped to avoid the poverty trap that early marriage and the birth of children can be. He had shown remarkable restraint, refraining even from having girlfriends, despite the fact that several tourists/pilgrims had demonstrated a lively interest. He couldn't stand the idea that they might have another boyfriend somewhere else, which I explained was very likely the case. Just for the record, I ask many questions and he tells me everything. Those are our rules. Then I give fatherly advice. The very reason I trusted Gautam as the one Bihari I was determined to help was because of his truthfulness.

In recent years some students of mine had sponsored a little samosa (curry puff) stall for Kailash, Gautam's father, on the condition that he gave up drinking. For the most part he did. Kailash would wake up early to make his curry pastries then push his portable stall into the market area of town. The dignity of work kept him from the booze. Unfortunately however, despite his promise to me, he occasionally still drinks.

One night Kailash met up with an old friend and they both got completely sloshed. In their drunken revelry they decided that their son and daughter should get married. Gautam was nineteen and his friend's daughter Samran was seventeen and still in her final year of high school. The bride's dowry was set at 30,000 rupees (\$400) and the money soon handed over. A few months later, Gautam was informed that he would be getting married. The date was set and the arrangements already made. Gautam called the bride's mother and told her that he did not wish to marry. They were also quite a poor family and evidently the bride's mother liked what she had heard about this young man. So she replied, 'Your parents agreed and the dowry has already been paid. Marry her you must.' It was later discovered that the daughter had also hoped to avoid an early marriage.

In Bihari village culture, arranged marriage is still the norm and the parents are the biggest deciding factor. Once money has been exchanged it is considered a binding contract. Failure to follow through can have serious repercussions, if not legally then through village justice. Gautam

felt that if he did not go through with the wedding, then either he or his father would be in serious danger. So he married young Samran. I've seen the wedding photos and I do believe him when he says that he married against his will. Both bride and groom look utterly miserable! Gautam actually looks very angry. The marriage ceremony was the first time they'd met.

According to custom the new bride spends a few days in her husband's home. And that's all it took! Gautam told me it was Samran who crawled over to his side of the bed late at night and pulled him close to her. The rest was simple biology. Samran returned home and returned to school soon afterwards. Four months later, Gautam was informed that his wife was pregnant. His first and only sexual experience resulted in a child! (I tease him for having been so effective, after which he blushes and looks like he doesn't know whether to laugh or cry!)

Samran gave birth a month and a half ago and then went back to school for her final exams. The news of his fatherhood did not make Gautam happy. He is struggling with resentment towards his father and sadly towards his wife, who he has until recently, largely ignored. He hasn't even talked to his father since the wedding.

Recently Gautam told me, 'I am not your student. I am your disciple. I don't remember you in my head, I remember you in my heart. I would die for you.' He said this in a serious tone with no one else watching to impress. He said further, 'Everything my father did not do for me, you have done for me. I will not forget anything.' It is true that I went out of my way to help this kid, while some of my closest students objected. It was a matter of principle for me. Coming and going to the place of the compassionate Buddha's enlightenment in comfort, health, and ease, and ignoring the terrible poverty all around seemed somehow immoral. I simply had to help at least one individual and through him one family in the Buddha's land. Actually I had hoped that Gautam and his father would get along and respect one another later in life. I was not trying to take Kailash's place, which is why we found him a respectable livelihood.

Gautam was invited to join our pilgrimage as a way to broaden his knowledge for leading tourists on the Buddhist circuit, something he's been developing as a part time job. All of my long-term students know about my Bihari son, so he was scolded, encouraged, chastised,

and instructed, 'Well you are a husband now. You did produce a child so you must be a good and loving husband! You have to be a good father! Don't blame your father. What's done is done, it's your kamma and now you must be responsible!' He heard this for more than two weeks from many Malaysian and Australian aunties, from Peter the Australian who completely changed his life by offering him a motorcycle five years ago, and from me as well. I even made him call Samran and tell her that he loved and missed her while I was listening. He wasn't expecting that! Our support for the marriage has helped him to see that it can be a noble undertaking. Many people gave him gifts for his son and wife as well. My students are a sweet bunch!

Gautam had been petrified that I would be angry about the marriage. He thought I expected him to become a monk. Back in December I asked Gautam if he had a girlfriend. He said no. But I had a feeling! Of course he was completely ignoring his pregnant wife at the time. I could feel something in the air between us. That was the one time that he has lied to me. Since then, he discussed the matter with Mae Chee Aimy, with Dassan our favourite waiter at Om Tibet Cafe, as well as another senior Western monk whom he'd helped to take care of when he was passing through. He was terrified that I would get angry and disown him. They all said the same thing, 'Ajahn is kind and understanding. Telling the truth is always best. He won't be angry. But if he finds out from someone else instead, he will be very disappointed.' So Gautam called me in Thailand and said, 'Ajahn I don't want to tell you something, but I have to tell you. I am marry and now I am have boy'. Then he explained how it had occurred.

Actually, I have always known that he becoming a monk was unlikely, as long as he could not read. In some respects, having to settle down with a nice local girl may be for the best. He's loyal in nature, and marriage will keep him from the pain and confusion of casual relationships with people who may have turned out to be insensitive, fickle, dishonest, or cruel.

I met Samran earlier today and was pleased that she appears to be a lovely young lady. There is no sign of hardness or meanness in her face. She has studied hard and writes English, Hindi, and Sanskrit quite well. I am optimistic that she may be able to teach Gautam to read and write while he teaches her to speak English. Together they can help each other to be more effective in life.

I was able to nurse the baby on my lap. He is so incredibly small and fragile! The monks chanted him a blessing and then I told Samran, 'I've told Gautam to be a good husband and father. You let me know if he does anything wrong!' Now Gautam has been on a plane with us (he was absolutely terrified) when we returned from Lucknow to Delhi and then from Delhi to Gaya. He hopes to one day come to Thailand. He is keen to try and take temporary ordination as a monk in the future. It was a dream that he would like to at least partially fulfil. Gautam recently told one student, 'When I first meet Ajahn, Anandagiri is nothing, just starting. Now it is big, many buildings, and I am big also. I want to see because we growing together at same time'.

It is great to see that Gautam is basically okay. His desperation, fear, and anger are mostly gone. He knows how to get by and has a certain amount of dignity and self-confidence. By now he also knows many good people. Since a group of students helped him to open a proper little grocery shop in the village last year, now run by his younger brother, Chandan, the family is paying the bills. He recently told me, 'Actually I think she is a nice girl, Ajahn. Simple but also smart. Not angry one. Nice looking also.' So I am optimistic.

## CHAPTER THREE

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### *Our Pilgrimage Begins Where the Teaching Began*

I have complete confidence that there are energetic blessings at the holy sites. Simply by being there with a heart of faith and a desire to grow, sacred blessings work their way into people's lives and minds, especially if their minds become more soft and receptive through the act of meditation. For precisely this reason, during our trip I aimed for us to have repeated long periods of chanting and meditation at every single holy site. Most of the Dhamma reflections and explanations of the historical significance of various sites were given back at the hotels in the evenings. In the quieter places, though, we would have some Dhamma talks and readings at the actual sites as well, especially if an important sutta was taught at that site. To share the experience with those of you who are interested, I'll go through a day-by-day account of how our pilgrimage progressed.

#### **Departure**

I am now the leader of an expedition  
 To dusty and dangerous places  
 The burden of worry worn willingly like a yoke  
 In gratitude to steps I've been able to take.

When lifestyles are far from true meaning and goals  
 The mundane and comfortable becomes like a jail.  
 Lost and distracted within ordinary lives  
 The Pilgrimage practice will bring you back to life.

*Ajahn Achalo*

### Leaving Your Home

Passion towards friends churns like water,  
 hatred towards enemies burns like fire.  
 Through the darkness of ignorance one forgets  
 what to adopt and what to reject.  
 To abandon one's homeland,  
 is the practice of a Bodhisattva.

*Gyalsey Thokmey Sangpo, 14th century Tibetan monk  
 from Thirty-Seven Practices of a Bodhisattva*

### Arrival

Mother India has royally slapped your face  
 She did it because of your stubborn ways.  
 Don't ignore me child! Heed what I say!  
 Your life is blessed, yet it is slipping away.

Mindful of your steps in this strange new place.  
 Looking back on your life as though far away,  
 From the dream that it was you now awoken.  
 And recognise that you were sleeping.

*Ajahn Achalo*

### Pilgrimage Day 1: Bangkok, Varanasi, Sarnath (February 17)

Group check-ins at big airports are a flurry of activity. The sense of thousands of people coming and going is not very helpful for centring or focus. For this reason, Khun Jintana kindly sponsored the hiring of a VIP room at the airport so that our group could have our first 'checking in' session with each other after checking in the bags. Five people's flight transfers were too tight to attend that first meeting, but the chance for most to exchange their 'in the event of death' letter for the blessed objects and chanting books in the quiet containment of the VIP room was a very good way to start our journey together. We also had our first chanting session—an auspicious beginning! We met up with the other five pilgrims at the boarding gate and had time for

greetings and exchanges of their letters for blessings before we set off.

We landed in Gaya airport after three-and-a-half hours, but did not actually get off the plane, which seemed a bit strange. You simply want to go and pay respects at the Bodhi Tree! But in order to keep the long bus rides to a minimum it made more sense to start in Sarnath and travel by road back up to Bodhgaya. So we sat on the plane until it departed again for Varanasi, the big city next to Sarnath.

Clearing immigration and customs in Indian airports always seems to take longer and appear more complicated than anywhere else, no matter how new and modern the airport appears. So we hung around inside Varanasi airport for quite a while until Khun Lek gave us the sign that we could move on from what had begun to seem like a bardo (a state in limbo between births).

Because of wedding parties, the local hotels were heavily booked so our group was split and stayed in two separate hotels for the first three evenings. I wanted to start off with some suitable practice, but there was no conference room for a Dhamma talk available at either location. If we rushed to the Deer Park we would arrive with only fifteen minutes before closing time, so that wouldn't do. Luckily Khun Lek came up with the suggestion to use the Wat Thai (Thai monastery) Uposatha Hall for our first meeting. As the crow flies, the hall is less than five hundred metres from the site of the first sermon, and it is a large, peaceful space. So off we went, ready to get our pilgrimage underway!

We chanted the *Dhammacakka Sutta* (the first sermon on the turning of the Wheel of Dhamma) in the hall. It was something of a dress rehearsal for the following day, when we would have the chance to chant it at the actual site where it was first taught. The half-hour chant and sitting practice were a modest beginning, but most people felt a pronounced quality of peace, even after a day of travel. We had definitely arrived in India and begun our pilgrimage; the screeching parrots in the trees outside and the loud, erratically melodic honking of bus and trucks in the distance confirmed it.

During this first sitting session I had something of an epiphany—I thought of a way to help the group focus and bring an appropriate quality of effort and determination to our journey. I was fairly confident that if we were sincere, we should be able to complete 108 hours (the number of beads on a Buddhist mala or rosary) of formal spiritual

practices during our eighteen-and-a-half days together. I asked the group how they felt about this and they were happy to commit. So we made a pledge in front of the large sandstone Buddha statue in the hall. Later I worked out some achievable proportioning: twenty hours of chanting, twenty hours of Dhamma discourse, and sixty-eight hours of sitting and walking meditation would be our goal.

That evening the laypeople enjoyed a fabulous Indian meal. Those who wished to keep eight precepts (and thus would not be taking evening meals) would begin on the next day. It was thereafter announced that the following day would be a 'five, six, seven' day. That meant a wake up call at 5 a.m., breakfast at 6 a.m., and being ready to leave and on the bus at 7 a.m. It would then be a short half-hour bus ride to the Deer Park. We had now entered the mandala of sacred pilgrimage and had serious spiritual work to do!

### **Pilgrimage Day 2: Sarnath – Aarti on the Ganges, Shiva Burning Ghats (February 18)**

*With each meditation throughout the journey, I felt mindfulness strengthen. Sitting with Ajahn and the other monks was inspiring and I recognised and felt humbled by the great past merits which must have supported this opportunity. I also recognised that being able to meet great teachers and great kalyanamittas (spiritual friends), and having a purely inclined mind and healthy body in order to practise Dhamma is very rare. Not everybody can meet with these unless they have past good kamma.— Dinethi*

We arrived at the gates to the Deer Park shortly after dawn, each with two marigold garlands in hand. To our disappointment, the superintendent insisted that flowers were no longer allowed in the Archaeological Survey of India premises. However, we'd gotten our hopes up to offer flowers! Seeing that the early morning mist and chill were still in the air, I thought of the Sri Lankan Mahabodhi Vihara a ten-minute walk away. We could offer the flowers there and also sit quietly with some protection from the elements, then come back to the Deer Park later.

The building, made entirely of large, red sandstone bricks with a replica of the Mahabodhi Chedi ascending from its roof, turned out to be a lovely place to sit. This Vihara is just 150 metres or so from the site

where the first sermon was taught, so we felt that we were 'at the holy site'. Many people said that it was a surprisingly peaceful meditation. After offering our flowers, we were also given the opportunity to have Buddha relics contained within a reliquary placed upon our heads. The resident Sri Lankan monk kindly bestowed this honour. After this pleasant beginning, we walked back into the Deer Park and found a place to sit not far from the Dharmekha Stupa.

Chanting the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* in the place where it was taught was deeply moving. Sitting meditation for another full hour afterwards while hearing other groups chant the sutta with slightly different accents was beautiful too. The air resounded with words affirming the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path, the first true disciple Kondanya being established in liberation, and the devas of every realm rejoicing!

After lunch at the hotel we returned to the Deer Park, chanted the first and second sutta on site, and then studied the text of the first teaching line by line. Dinethi, a Sri Lankan Australian who had missed her original flight from Australia, was able to join us in time for the teaching. After giving the reading and commentary, I was surprised to see that Dinethi's friend, Maheshie was lying down in the middle of our group being fanned by those around her. I learned later that as a diabetic she sometimes has dizzy spells. Apparently my face became paler than hers! We settled into sitting practice while Maheshie relaxed and regained equilibrium. Everyone spread loving-kindness to her. We were able to have a lovely long sit before leaving at dusk. I allowed for some group photographs in the golden afternoon light with the ruins of the ancient Chedi behind. In general, I set a no-pictures policy until after chanting, listening to teachings, and meditation has occurred. Our group was unusual in this regard, but it did support more of a sense of focus and composure.

From the Deer Park we headed for the holy Ganges River. We would be going to Lord Shiva's 'burning ghat', the riverbank site where around two hundred corpses are burned each day. But before this we had a leisurely journey down the river to the site where Brahman priests perform their puja, called the 'aarti', to the Goddess of the Ganges River. It was beautiful to witness an ancient ritual that has been occurring in the same place for thousands of years, and to do so alongside thousands

of Indians who believe it brings blessings into one's life. The atmosphere was simultaneously joyful and reverential, and watching it all happen from the seats of boats on the river was a unique experience.

The Ganges is an interesting place. Not only is the river said to be the home of a powerful goddess, it is believed by Hindus to flow directly from Lord Shiva's hair. Lord Shiva's earthly home is Mount Kailash. Thousands of people bathe in the river each morning. Doing so is believed to wash away one's sins. (If only it was so easy...according to Buddhism the law of kamma is real and no one can take our kamma away from us.) People even drink the Ganges water, which always makes me cringe, especially since Tahn Ajahn Anan has said that it is literally swarming with ghosts! More on that later.

### **Initiation by Fire: Shiva Burning Ghats**

After an hour-and-a-half or so of cultural studies, our two boats headed towards the burning ghat cremation site. It is an amazing sight as you approach from the river, especially at night. Soot-blackened sandstone temples line the riverbank, enormous stacks of wood are piled high, and plumes of smoke billow upwards from the many bodies burning simultaneously along the 200-metre stretch. It is believed that at this sacred charnel ground, death and destruction are met directly with blessings descending from high heaven. After the challenges of mortal life, the departed devotee is embraced by the Lord of Heaven himself and welcomed into everlasting bliss.

Believing firmly in kamma as I do, I do not accept that the minds of all who are burned here ascend directly to heaven. Nor do I believe that any deity has absolute power. I do however firmly believe that powerful and benevolent deities do exist, and that naturally they would radiate loving-kindness to their followers. Those with both strong faith and powerful merits may be receptive to certain types of energetic blessings, especially after a lifetime of prayer and contemplation associated with a particular deity. Such faithful devotees could certainly ascend to a heaven realm and enjoy a long life there. But all lives in conditioned realms arise and cease, even the lives of the great devas.

Having stood on this site surrounded by burning corpses and grieving relatives on many occasions now, I can attest to the fact that

there is definitely something special about this place. I have never felt scared or depressed while standing upon ground that is literally dusted with the ashes of yesterday's burnt bodies. There is a magical quality in the air, which may well be the metta blessings of Lord Shiva.

Some in our group were quite scared to visit this place, partly because of the filth, but mostly because of fear of death and ghosts. Chinese people in particular have a lot of superstition and fear around cemeteries and funerals. I had been clear with everyone that this was a non-negotiable part of the program, just as death is a non-negotiable consequence of birth. This is when having a teacher and a group of spiritual friends can be helpful. People can find a new courage to confront the frightening aspects of life.

As I mentioned earlier, there are some aspects of leading a group in India that I do not enjoy. I find the burning ghats the most worrying place. With the uneven stone steps, the crowds, and groups of grieving relatives carrying the deceased on their shoulders, it's a seething and swarming place with complex energies and emotions all around. Varanasi is a place with a lot of drug use too. It's most known for ganja, but recent decades have seen an increase in amphetamines and heroin as well. Drug crazed people could be a threat here. That's not to mention the wandering holy cows with big horns, some of which are huge! Then there are the pariah dogs and excrement-smearred steps to watch out for. With smoke blowing in people's eyes as well, the risk of a fall here is quite high, as is the risk of someone freaking out. The reason I insist that we should go, however, is that it's such a rare opportunity for contemplating impermanence and death. It's like nowhere else on earth for its sheer openness and scale. At least two hundred bodies are cremated here daily. The fact that the locals tolerate tourists at this place during what must be a sensitive time is quite remarkable. It is a real honour to be allowed to visit.

Despite the risks, I have considerable faith that when spiritual pilgrims come here with the correct attitude, one of respect and sincerity, the purity of this attitude and perhaps Lord Shiva's blessings as well will probably keep us safe. At least they have on my seven visits so far. Our group was also dedicating merits to any departed relatives or friends who may have been hanging around for a long time waiting to move on. These merits could be the cause for a better rebirth. Such

compassionate intention is powerfully protective as well.

Despite the stress and worry, the rewarding part is seeing people grow past their fears and beyond their self-imposed limitations. Joyce's husband Clifford had told her that he would simply not come to the ghat and that she needed to clear this with me. Joyce however maintained noble silence! When the boat landed on the banks nearby, Clifford marched forward along with everyone else. Joyce was so proud of him. Their shared deepening practice has become a new gift to their relationship.

Jintana, a Thai woman who had been here with the previous pilgrimage group, had said to me before departure, 'I don't need to go again as I've done it before'. I asked her what she disliked, and she replied, 'The filth, the smoke, the smells, walking upon the ashes of recently burned bodies, and ghosts!' I responded, 'The fact that you have this aversion and fear simply proves that you still have more work to do, so you definitely need to come. No exceptions!' We stayed for a half hour, which feels like a long time in such a place. After fifteen minutes Khun Lek asked, 'Can we go now? The smoke is hurting people's eyes.' I said, 'No, it has to be a half hour. This is one of our meditation sessions too'.

Soon after, Jintana approached me and said, 'I don't feel anything! No fear or aversion. I just feel normal. It seems normal!' Sadhu, Jintana! I was so pleased for her. This is where repetition is important. We have to keep exposing ourselves to wise perceptions until fear and delusion fall away. Death and filth are normal in the world. The body is made of elements that must be returned. They're only borrowed. Seeing this clearly, the heart becomes sober and unconfused.

We had done some chanting before going up onto the ghats. I'd also given instructions to keep mentally reciting either the Praises to the Buddha verse in Pali (Itipi So) or the simple mental recitation 'bud-dho, bud-dho' while fingering the prayer beads I'd given them. The feeling in the bus afterwards was a bit heavy, but we dedicated merits and chanted the Ratana and Metta Suttas, as well as some other mantras, and then everyone felt okay.

Before descending from the bus I announced to any ghosts, 'Okay you guys, we've spread loving-kindness and dedicated merits to the best of our abilities. If you cannot receive these merits yet, please rejoice in our good and kind intentions. Now go back to where you came from

and don't follow us. We'll come back and visit and try to help more next time.' I'm not sure if any ghosts were following us, but no one called me in my room in the middle of the night. We all slept well.

Several people told me that they realised they must focus more on spiritual practices and deepening their inner refuge once they returned home. This is precisely what I was hoping to inspire, and is the great potential of the ancient sacred charnal ground of Benares, or Varanasi as it is now known. Below is a selection of the different kinds of ways people experienced and responded to the time at the burning ghats.

*The Burning Ghats - When it comes to attending wakes and funerals, I have always considered this as taboo. Such perceptions are probably due to the many superstitions and restrictions instilled into me during my upbringing. So when we were in the bus and on the way to the Ghats I had mixed feelings and was actually contemplating whether I should go or not. If given a choice, I would much prefer to sit in the bus and wait for everyone. However, surprisingly, when the bus stopped, I just got off the bus and like everyone else I got into the waiting boat. Before I knew it, we were on the way towards the cremation site of the Ghats. Upon arrival, I just followed everyone and walked, step after step towards the cremation site to witness the cremation of dead bodies. (All the while I kept asking for forgiveness over and over again - of any beings I may have harmed previously.) Surprisingly, there were absolutely no disturbing thoughts nor fear and I felt quite calm. All the superstitions that I brought along with me seemed to have just faded away. What an experience! It was surprising for me to see the locals witnessing such ceremonies just like a normal everyday event. Then, while considering, I realized that after all death is just part of the process of life. Furthermore, it's really unimaginable to me that the fire (Shiva's flame) at the sacred cremation site of the Ghats has been burning for at least 4,000 years! — Clifford.*

*The sacred energy and blessings from meditating at the holy sites gave me an increase in spiritual strength that I wasn't clearly aware of until the day that Ajahn Achalo took us to the burning ghats on the banks of the Ganges river. We were not just going to be sitting on the boat and looking from there. Ajahn led us to have a closer look, by walking right by the*

burning corpses, one after another, so it seemed never ending. When one was finished being consumed by the fire, another one was waiting to be burned. I learned to be frightened of death and ghosts when I was young like most Chinese or Thai families. During the previous pilgrimage, I was very frightened of this place. Every step I walked at the burning ghats, I remember very well that I followed close behind Ajahn Punnyo, a senior monk from England. With my own belief that monks can help to chase away ghosts!

After learning from Ajahn Achalo that ghosts actually like to ask for merits from monks, then this time I didn't follow any monks! I walked past corpse after corpse with the sacred spiritual strength I had received and generated. Looking into the fires, and stepping on earth covered with the ashes of burned bodies, I couldn't believe that my fear was actually gone! I am not aware when exactly the fear left my mind, at what precise moment. The only thing I know is that I followed the instructions of my teacher as he advised. To simply observe... to be mindful of the nature of birth ending with death... and to have loving-kindness and compassion towards ghosts, rather than fear and aversion. By applying this diligently, acceptance occurred and fear disappeared. At first I did not understand why we needed to have a close-up look on the last trip. But now after my second visit to the funeral pyres, I can see very clearly.

Ajahn explained that Lord Buddha recommended to monks that they live in charnel grounds from time to time. The Forest monks in Thailand also do this. Now I see why. The result of these contemplations and practices was that not only did I overcome my fear, but I have also been contemplating death in everyday life. I feel that I am very fortunate to have had such a rare opportunity to experience this other type of Holy place, with respected Ajahns and dear dhamma friends. I no longer have a fear of ghosts or death after this pilgrimage, but more acceptance and contemplation of death as part of my normal routine in life. — Jintana

I was not terribly keen on the idea of visiting a funeral ghat, especially on the last day of Chinese New Year. However, I decided to put superstition aside and trust my Three Refuges. So, donning the wrist mala and my amulets, I made up my mind that I WILL NOT see anything supernatural nor see any dead bodies and that I WILL be fully protected. Then I made sure I hung around as close to a monk as I possibly could to be even more

*sure (refuge in the Sangha). Then using the chant that I always fall back to for protection, I had the Buddhānussati on a replay loop in my mind for almost the entire time on that ghat. I slept soundly that night but recalled, the next morning, the swirling, rushing, confused energy that I felt on the ghats that previous night and was most relieved that we weren't visiting the Ganges again that morning! – Lean*

*When we went to the burning ghats one evening, I was struck by how much of a calming and sobering effect that this place had on me. As is often the case, the actual event or reality of the situation is not as one might think or imagine it will be. For me there was no sense of horror, gore or the macabre. I had been concerned that I might feel that I would be an intrusion to the local community and families who were laying their dead to rest, however, people did not seem to mind our presence some even seemed to be quite welcoming. Following Ajahn Achalo and Ajahn Visalo and some other pilgrims as they walked among the cremation fires, we stopped near one of the fires where a clearly visible head and body could be seen being burned with very little wood. The Indian man tending this fire was keen to explain what was happening and said that this particular person's family did not have much money for wood to burn, which was why the body was more visible than is usual. This man had a number of interesting insights to share, the one that has stuck in my memory is that "burning is learning", I had to agree, there was lots of learning that evening about life, death and impermanence. – Phil*

The main insight I've developed personally from visiting this magical and haunting site is a sense of the complete pointlessness of vanity and pride based upon a human birth. The reflection stays with me long after each visit. You see many different dead bodies arriving here—male and female, young and old, rich and poor—all of them winding up on the same muddy bank. They are all consumed by fire, surrounded by dogs and cows, and any remaining bone fragments are tossed into the river. It is humbling. Other countries may sanitise the procedure more and hide it from view, but in the end our bodies all share a similar fate.

**Burning Ghats**

To the burning ghats you go

To walk on the ash-gray dust of death  
On your forehead nervous beads of sweat  
The mind is dizzy, it wants to black out  
Shiva the Destroyer revealing his clout.

Fresh piles of wood with bodies in them  
Some half burned and several smoldering  
The men-folk are solemnly grieving  
The oldest sons' heads are shaven.

You want to flee from this ghastly place  
The blood drains slowly from your ashen face  
But you came here to look death in the face  
So you steel yourself and meditate.

Four thousand years of hallowed fame  
The amber embers of Shiva's flame  
Rich or poor, foolish or wise  
Millions of bodies, all consumed by the fires.  
Yet even with saffron, sandalwood and unguents  
The stench of a bloated corpse is pungent  
On the same muddy bank they were all laid down  
Pariah dogs and sacred cows all around.

You do not flee, for there is no where to go  
You came here because you wanted to know  
In the temple above, a swami's chanting  
Down by the river bank, a ritual bathing.

Looking inwards, making the mind still  
Surely this has nothing to do with God's will?  
Smoke in your eyes, fear in your heart  
And then you suddenly wake with a start.

Death is the consequence of birth  
 Yet not the opposite of life  
 The final moment of this form and name  
 Is not a permanent state of decay.

This is nature, this is the norm  
 For all of the world's compounded forms  
 For what arises must surely cease  
 Since time immemorial it has been like this.

The Ganges Goddess's whisper is kind,  
 'Death could crush you with the flash of an eye  
 Yet Yamaraja has given a chance  
 Increase your merits, don't get lost in the dance.'

The cause of death is birth  
 The cause of birth is craving  
 All forms are flying into death by fire  
 Work steadily untying the knots that bind  
 Transcend and fly in Nibbana's eye.

*Ajahn Achalo*

### **The Holy River is Haunted**

Several great Thai meditation masters have said that the Ganges River is one of the most haunted places on earth. They are talking from direct perception, seeing with the purified divine eye, which is a result of very deep samadhi. For myself, I also noticed a different feeling on the boat in front of the pyres compared to being up on the bank. It felt sad and heavy down there. According to folk belief, if your ashes or a portion of your remaining bones are tossed into the river after cremation, your soul will be received by Lord Shiva and elevated instantly to a lofty heaven. A scoop full of Ganges River water is also poured upon the remains as added insurance.

For people with great merit, this might actually be the case. These would be generous and virtuous beings who had trained their minds to be angel- or deva-like through chanting, meditation, and consistently

recollecting their beloved god. The lightness of their consciousness and their depth of faith may open them to the uplifting blessings of the deity who resides in a heaven realm. But for those with heavy kamma and dark, untrained minds full of grasping and attachment, when their ashes or bone strike the river their consciousness simply gets stuck there. They were attached to the idea of getting to the river, believing it would absolve their sins. But the law of kamma and the weight of attachment are more powerful than the hopes and beliefs of worldly beings. Ajahn Anan once had a student who took some water from the river and placed it upon her shrine back in Thailand. She dreamed of lines of Indian ghosts for a week—they missed their Ganges home!

### **Pilgrimage Day 3: Sarnath, Sutta study, Museum visit (February 19)**

We arrived at the Deer Park shortly after sunrise and enjoyed a lovely one-hour sit close to the Dharmekha Stupa, then chanted both the Dhammacakka and Anattalakhana Suttas. The weather warmed up, so we moved to under the shade of a tree and people were given the choice to either sit or walk in meditation or circumambulate the ancient chedi.

We'd studied the sutta the day before and would study it again that afternoon in the very place it was taught. Along with the chanting and quiet sitting, it was a really wonderful way to make the mind receptive to the teaching and develop a sense of connection and appreciation. I am sure that many people came to understand the content more deeply. The Buddha's first teaching, 'The Turning of the Wheel of Dhamma', was powerful in many regards. It was the first formal sutta, which became a part of the Dhamma as an object of refuge in the world. Then when the Buddha's disciple, Anya Kondanya, was partially liberated through contemplating the teaching, he became the first member of the Enlightened Sangha, another refuge. So the Deer Park is the place where the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha became fully manifest in our world. It's where the first five disciples, and later many more, proved that the Buddha's wise instructions do indeed lead to liberation. As it says in the sutta itself, 'The incomparable Wheel of Dhamma has been set in motion by the Blessed One in the deer sanctuary at Isipatana, near Benares, and no seeker, brahmin, celestial being, demon, god, or any other being in the world can stop it!' Millions have been liberated

since, and more still are progressing and being liberated today. We were in a special place indeed.

After lunch we returned to the Deer Park to study the second sutta, the teaching on not-self that Lord Buddha taught to the five ascetics. During this teaching, all five became arahants and experienced the same quality of liberation as Lord Buddha. After these profound considerations, we had another lovely sit, again with the sound of other groups chanting the liberating suttas in the distance.

After our third sit of the day, we headed off to the adjacent museum, which houses many stunning works of art from the Gupta Dynasty period. The sandstone-carved Gupta images from around 1,500 years ago are now my personal favourites. Earlier images from the Gandhara period in what is now Pakistan and Afghanistan seem too Greek and god-like for my taste. The Gupta era images look truly serene. Deep peace, purity, and otherworldly aloofness are apparent in the simple lines of the faces and robes. Their beautiful ornate halos, on the other hand, suggest the dynamic power and versatility of the Buddha, ‘trainer of those capable of being trained, teacher of gods and humans’.

There is one famous statue of the Buddha in this museum that many people believe to be the most beautiful in the world. We paid our respects to it and did some brief chanting despite the large Sunday afternoon crowds of Indian tourists. It was nice of the security staff to allow it. After this there was time for some shopping for people who wanted a small sandstone Buddha souvenir. The stalls along the roadside are quite reasonably priced. Now let’s revert back to my time here in Bodhgaya for a moment...

*During the pilgrimage, on the first few days of the trip my mind was not peaceful. I was still worried about work and problems. After a few days though, my mind started getting used to the new habit of waking up early, chanting, meditating, listening to Dhamma talks or reflections for at least 4-5 hours per day in each holy site. Practising at real sacred sites gave rise to a different level of energy in me. It took a much shorter time to have a focused and peaceful mind there. When my mind experienced deeper and longer periods of peace, it gave the mind the power and stability to observe the pain and to be able to detach from it, and let go of reacting to it, much more easily than when sitting at home. — Jintana*

### **Post-Pilgrimage Bodhgaya (March 18)**

One of the things I've tried to teach Gautam is the importance of being truthful and keeping one's commitments. He has seen many examples of what he called 'cheats' in Bodhgaya and he does not want to be like them. I explained that keeping the five precepts was the way out of never ending difficulty. One time that demonstrated his sincerity was when, after receiving money from Thailand each month to support his schooling, he called me and said, 'Ajaaahn...school is not working. I am go to school everyday but still no read, no write, not get better. I am scare you come and check later, you angry me. My mother say just go. You take money and you go. But I don't want because no working. Maybe my brain some problem, Ajahn. I am sorry'. It seemed that his teacher was not giving Gautam individual mentoring to help him with the basics, even though he had started in the lower class. But I really appreciated his honesty and the fact that he had tried.

So we tried to find ways to help Gautam and his family earn a living. That's when a Sri Lankan Australian man named Amalka and a few of his friends chipped in to help Gautam's father purchase his samosa stall, and Peter from Melbourne offered him a motorcycle so that he could be a taxi service for tourists travelling alone. This was the beginning of his part time local tour guide vocation. Mostly he sells pictures of the Buddha, little Buddha statues, and prayer beads, but when he meets tourists he mentions that he has a bike if they need a lift somewhere. Gautam makes more money from the tips of grateful people he couriers around than from selling merchandise, but the selling is the way he meets new clients.

Gautam enjoyed reminding me yesterday that I still had one outstanding commitment not yet fulfilled. For years he has been asking me to visit his family home and village and allow his mother to cook me a meal. And for years I had been saying 'next year, next year'. I was always on a tight meditation schedule and didn't have time for day trips. But yesterday my Dhamma son had a point. His Ajahn, 'mister vows and commitment', had an outstanding obligation. So I said okay!

Several of the Thai monks and Mae Chee were also interested in coming along. So Gautam raced home to buy groceries and help his mother prepare. We headed off at 9:15 a.m. and after quite a bumpy ride were there in less than an hour. Muni Devi offered us a lovely meal of

puri, dhal, fried spinach, fried potato, halva, and chai tea. She had been preparing the meal since five in the morning!

The village kids are adorable. They're a little shy at first, but once they trust you they are so smiling and sweet. The way they multiplied at the door was fascinating. At first there were five, then ten, and suddenly twenty, all staring and staring like they do. I kept thinking of their intelligence, charm, and potential. They live in such basic surroundings with so few opportunities that my heart aches with sadness and frustration for them. Each of them is a potential Gautam. Meanwhile, it was quite remarkable to see Gautam in his village, so confident, strong, and with the beginning of a paunch from eating so well! He has a motorbike, speaks English, and has just been on an aeroplane—a far cry from when I met him, on his old bicycle with breaking flip flops!

I gave Gautam's parents a small gift, some tiger balm in a little glass jar. I encouraged Gautam to talk to his father as well, as it's been ten months now. I told him that if he wants good parents next lifetime, he must be kind to the ones he has this lifetime. Even if they have flaws.

Mae Chee helped purchase 1,500 rupees worth of cookies for all the kids. The cookie distribution caused a bit of a scene. It was obvious that getting a whole packet of cookies was a rare opportunity indeed. Suddenly there were fifty kids and adults at the door! Considering this scene later, I felt waves of gratitude for my dear old mother, Angela. She would make us a sandwich with either an apple or orange in a lunchbox each day for school. In this lunchbox there were always two cookies. After school each day we had a glass of juice and were allowed another two cookies. My siblings and I had everything we needed, but our parents did not give us money. We had to get part time jobs at fifteen in order to go to movies and buy CDs. My parents taught us the value of money. Due to this, all six of Mel and Angela's kids grew up to be hard working and responsible without taking things for granted. Of course we complained about what we thought was stinginess at the time, but now I can see their wisdom and am deeply grateful. I love you Mum! Bless you, Dad, wherever you are now!

## CHAPTER FOUR

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### *Sacred Occasions in Holy Bodhgaya*

#### **Post-Pilgrimage Bodhgaya, 12:30 a.m. (March 21)**

There's no point trying to sleep tonight. This time it's not a wedding, it's the beginning of Indian New Year, which will grind along for at least three days. I'm not sure if the dogs are expressing irritation or enthusiasm, but scores of them are howling along to the terrible techno music. Like the Thais during their Songkran festival, the Indians stretch out their party and make it last for multiple days. But whereas the Thais get drunk and throw water on each other, Indians get drunk and smear each other with fantastically bright coloured powder. It's not uncommon to see them with multicoloured green, purple, pink, and blue faces. They actually look quite scary once drunk, with reddened eyes and iridescent faces, a bit like creatures that have escaped from the demon realms below! It's just a few days, however, then things will settle down in this pilgrimage town.

Today was a curious kind of day. Around ten this morning a pleasant breeze blew through the temple compound and those of us sitting under the Tree were showered with bodhi leaves. I picked up twenty or so without getting up from my spot. The joy and excitement this elicits is always contagious. Around forty-five minutes later, something quite bizarre happened. A large swarm of big, black bees descended onto the compound. For reasons I can't understand, they swarmed all over certain individuals only. The more they were shooed away, the more aggressive was their swarming. One poor old Tibetan nun was screaming in the distance. It did seem that people who stayed very still were bothered much less. One person was completely swarmed not far from us, so I

approached her to suggest just staying still for a couple of minutes. Then around ten bees landed on me as well and one stung me in my left ear. Fortunately I'm not allergic and it didn't hurt very much. We decided to break a little earlier for lunch today.

Yesterday a large Hanuman Langur was traipsing through the temple complex. It was a curious black-faced monkey with a tail longer than its body. It jumped elegantly along the top of the sandstone walls and stole a flower garland that I'd given to a Mae Chee. It then climbed up a tree and starting eating the marigolds. Perhaps someone threw something at the mischievous monkey today and hit a bee's nest by accident. It's certainly possible.

### **Merit Creates Golden Opportunities**

Some of Tahn Ajahn Dtun's monk disciples are in Bodhgaya at the moment. Ajahn Dtun is another senior disciple of Ajahn Chah who is very respected for his practice. Several of his students are good monks who I've practised side by side under the Tree with for many years. As today was our fortnightly monastic rules recitation day, we decided to have our ceremony together in the compound. Fifteen bhikkhus coming together formally in this way was uplifting. Then after the ceremony was complete, Ajahn Tongwan invited me to join in a special offering. His group of lay followers had arranged to have the main Buddha statue within the chedi repainted with a layer of paint containing real 24-karat gold, and there was an opportunity to co-sponsor the offering.

Usually I am not so into gold. The kind of greed that money and gold can inspire seems repulsive to me, so I tend to prefer a mountain of flowers to a mountain of gold. However, it seemed a good opportunity to join in this merit-making occasion just this once. It was quite an expensive affair (two-and-a-half times the price of offering 5,000 marigold garlands)! But Mae Chee Aimy, who has been being a great steward and accountant, had just done her bookkeeping and updated me on the state of our funds. Seeing that we were still quite well supported, I consulted with the five other monks and we decided to join in one quarter of the cost. Several of them were more enthusiastic than I, which sealed the deal. I'm not sure if it's because they want to be born more handsome next life,

which is what Thais believe is the result of offering gold leaf! It's probably more likely they felt offering one of the finest and purest elements to the most revered and sacred Buddha images seemed a noble way to use the funds. We duly dedicated merits to the donors as well of course.

At seven that evening we got up from our places under the Tree, headed into the vihara, and waited for the evening puja to finish. We offered a set of three robes (lower, upper, and outer) to the statue and chanted the traditional praises to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha as they were draped over its body. When the ritual master arrived, many sets of robes were peeled off the statue to reveal his stately form. I was in the front row, approximately a metre from the statue, which is protected within a glass enclosure. As someone who studies and appreciates Buddhist art, it was lovely to be so close to this ancient statue affectionately known as 'Phra Buddha Metta'.

We chanted nine rounds of the Praises to the Buddha while Buddha Metta was being painted. The experienced monk was skilled and careful, delicately brushing a thin layer of gold over the form in long, elegant strokes from the neck slowly down the chest and body, then the left and right arms, and lastly the legs. The volume and energy of the faithful chanting inside the vihara was formidable. Forget the idea of us fifteen monks leading the chanting, we had to go at the pace of the much louder middle-aged ladies towards the back! It seemed a bit slow to me, but curiously took exactly the right amount of time.

At the very end, several monks were allowed up onto the shrine to put on the last few brush strokes of gold. Ajahn Visalo and I joined Ajahn Tongwan up there and had the honour of painting some gold over the Buddha's heart area and the 'touching the Earth' hand. I am 191 centimetres tall and my head came precisely to the chest, so he's larger than he appears! I was able to touch my head to the hand that symbolises Lord Buddha overcoming all Maras and make aspirational prayers. I still can't quite believe I was allowed up so close to this most revered statue and actually touched it! What an honour indeed.

I was sure to share merits with all who have supported me to be here on this and previous occasions. May we all have wonderful

opportunities to practise and generate powerful auspicious kamma that will support growth along the path of development towards liberation!

Ok, back to our pilgrimage. Where were we up to? Oh yes, Day 4...

#### **Pilgrimage Day 4: Varanasi to Bodhgaya (February 20)**

Because the road and a bridge are undergoing repair, we hoped to head off early this morning to avoid traffic congestion. So we were up at 4 a.m. and planned to leave at 5 a.m. However, one of our pilgrims, Elaine, was so weak with diarrhoea that she could not get out of bed! We gave her antibiotics and oral rehydration salts and considered what to do. We didn't want to leave her in that state, so we hung around for an hour. Once she started to feel better, Khun Lek and I decided that she should travel in a separate car and meet us in Bodhgaya. That way she could stop whenever she felt she needed. So we hired a car and Elaine travelled with Shailesh, one of our friendly Indian guides. Happily, dear Elaine quickly bounced back to robust health.

Although leaving an hour later than planned, we still managed to avoid traffic and actually made it to our lunch destination early. There is a new and welcome phenomenon along the pilgrimage route—Thai monasteries with rows of spotlessly clean toilets have been built at the halfway points along several long stretches. We certainly made the most of them. There we enjoyed hot noodle soup that was a hit with the Thais and Malaysians. The monks and Aussies on the other hand really appreciated their fresh espresso. Donations were made to the monasteries and the ladies picked up some shawls and scarves from the gift shop. Within an hour or so we were back on the road and three hours later we were in Bodhgaya.

On the bus we passed the time skilfully with a long session of chanting, which helped build up our hours to meet our practice goal. The auspicious chanting has other more important functions as well. The roads here are genuinely dangerous. Trucks and buses frequently drive into lanes of oncoming traffic. Basically the biggest, fastest moving vehicle gets right of way. The lane markings seem to be only provisional suggestions. Our bus would frequently swerve without warning and miss large oncoming vehicles by mere inches.

So the chanting was an extra protection. And if we did crash and die, knowing that we'd already done our chanting we should be able to move confidently onto the next birth—hopefully with the assistance and guidance of some friendly Buddhist devas!

This sounds dramatic, but I am not exaggerating. If anyone but an experienced Indian driver was to navigate these highways, we'd all be dead within an hour! These drivers, however, have learned the secret rules and practised the appropriate responses since they were young. They know how to navigate their way through pure chaos. At the end of the trip, our driver was guaranteed a generous tip. In the meantime, anxious foreign passengers must learn to relax and trust.

Since we made it in such good time, we were able to check into our hotel and have a shower before heading off to the site of Lord Buddha's enlightenment. Our game plan was to establish a base camp, do a group puja and have a one-hour sit together. Then people could go off and pay respects closer to the Tree and seat of enlightenment as they wished. We were in the Mahabodhi grounds by 5 p.m., which was perfect.

We got a great spot on a raised section to the side with a full view of the chedi. After thirty minutes of chanting I sat the entire two-and-a-half hours right there in formal meditation. It was so lovely to be back, to be still, and to soak up the blessings and devotional atmosphere. Others went off to bow and circumambulate the chedi, to offer garlands of marigolds, or do walking meditation. It was a great way for them to demonstrate respect and express gratitude. We all came together again at 8:20 p.m. to dedicate merits and to pay respects together.

Back on the bus, when I asked how many people had felt deeply joyful in moments, everyone raised a hand. When I asked how many had some deeply peaceful moments in meditation, once again everyone raised a hand. Sadhu, sadhu, sadhuu! Indeed this is a special place.

*Going to India for pilgrimage was a dream that I had for a long time. It was such a wonderful experience, and in my life that was the happiest time I have had. I decided to go on pilgrimage in order to deepen my meditation, and to see where the Lord Buddha's birth and enlightenment places were for myself. My most inspiring and peaceful moment was at Bodhgaya under the Bodhi tree. — Maheshie*

**Bodhi Tree**

For those who have an inkling  
 Life is more than we can see  
 The Bodhi Tree calls faintly  
 Like incense on the breeze.

For those who doubt rightly  
 The wisdom of the day  
 The Bodhi Tree whispers softly  
 Come quietly... this noble way.

Not everyone will hear the call  
 For it is subtle and for the wise  
 The Buddhas lead by example  
 For those with little dust in their eyes

Although passions promise pleasure  
 They leave one feeling burned  
 Yet restraint and relinquishment  
 Lead to a calm for which is yearned

Heart shaped leaves rustle softly  
 Who could have known of such peace?  
 One has to travel inwards  
 To sit in the shade of the Bodhi Tree.

*Ajahn Achalo*

**Pilgrimage Day 5: Bodhgaya - Sujata's Village (February 21)**

Today we were up at 4 a.m. and on the bus by 4:45 a.m. We breakfasted after several hours of practice.

Our group is made up mostly of middle-aged women. Trying to lead them can be a bit like herding cats at times! Seeing how slow they can be, I realised I had to step up my stern tone to keep everyone focused. Monks are well trained at moving from the relaxed state of meditation swiftly onto the next scheduled item. We are also trained at waking up quickly and getting moving, because if you miss the early

morning chanting at training monasteries, you forego the meal on that day! Clearly laypeople have not had the benefit of this training.

Bathroom breaks are perplexingly long affairs. Interestingly, when we've had to go to the toilet by the side of the road, the process seems to go much faster. Khun Lek moves a tent with a cut out floor to a fresh patch after each customer has finished his or her business. These are the best smelling toilets in India!

The reason we needed to be so early today was to get a spot directly in front of the Vajra Asana and right below the Bodhi Tree. We were indeed among the first in queue and managed to secure a coveted place under the Tree. It was wonderful to sit quietly for the first hour, do our chanting, and then have another hour-and-a-half of sitting. People could walk around or go to the bathroom as needed, but many of them sat the entire three-hour session right there along with the monks. Several had their longest meditation session ever, and surprised themselves by seeing that sitting for more than an hour is perfectly possible. In fact peacefulness can deepen further if one does.

Admittedly the meal scene was a bit weird on these few days in Bodhgaya. We would have a late breakfast at nine, then lunch at half past eleven. I told people to keep breakfast light and have a proper midday meal. We were eating to support spiritual practice, not squeezing in practice between sumptuous meals, as so many other groups do.

We had our Dhamma talk in the hotel's conference room at 1 p.m. We explored the factors that influenced the warrior-like Bodhisattva whose compassion had no limits. We considered his momentous task of building the merits and the qualities that enabled him to 'lead a multitude over to the other shore' after his enlightenment. It is good to consider these matters deeply, so that the heart is truly appreciative whenever we bow at the Bodhi Tree.

After the talk and discussion, we went to the site where Sujata offered sweet milk rice on the day before the eve of Lord Buddha's enlightenment. To me this represents the fact that heroic spiritual striving is only possible because it is supported by tender kindness and nourishing gestures. It was great to be able to visit one of the places we'd been reading about, and it made it all the more real. Once there, it is easy to imagine the Bodhisattva coming down from the mountain, taking a bath in the nearby Neranjara river, heading over to sit under a Banyan Tree, taking his meal, and then

moving on to the ficus tree which later became the Bodhi Tree. To this day there is still a banyan tree at Sujata's place.

The site of the milk rice offering can occasionally be peaceful, but is usually quite chaotic. We were very fortunate as we were able to have a long sit, before doing a lovely puja. We also offered two hundred pink lotuses to the statue of the Bodhisattva flanked by lady Sujata. We managed all of this before a large group of Sri Lankans descended upon the place. When groups of one to two hundred arrive at the small space, with booming loudspeakers no less, it can feel overwhelming. I stressed the importance of rejoicing in others' faith and being willing to have some peaceful sits and some not so peaceful ones. The benefit of usually returning to significant places more than once is that at least some of the sessions will likely be peaceful and inspiring. Then the really challenging occasions can be forgiven and forgotten!

Afterwards we returned to the Bodhi Tree. Having already completed two chanting pujas that day, we spent our time just sitting. The Dhamma talk at the hotel in the evening was on the subject of Buddha's enlightenment. After coming out of deep jhana samadhi states, the Bodhisattva was able to recollect hundreds of past lives. He tried to find the cause of birth and something superior that was not subject to death. Through sustained contemplation, he saw the causal links between attachment and craving, based upon ignorance, which leads to birth after birth. Knowing and seeing these things clearly, ignorance was uprooted and delusion fell away from the Buddha's mind. He said later, 'With the thought, "This is the Noble Truth of the cessation of dukkha, and this cessation of dukkha has been realised", there arose in me vision, knowledge, insight, wisdom, light, concerning things unknown before'. It's incredible to think that Lord Buddha realised liberation right here!

### **Pilgrimage Day 6: Bodhgaya - Flower Power (February 22)**

We arranged for a grand flower offering at 9 a.m. today. If you know the process and have the connections, it is possible to sponsor the decoration of the entire Mahabodhi Temple complex with thousands of multi-coloured marigold garlands. In fact it requires 5,000 garlands, which is approximately 200,000 individual flowers. The cost is 80,000 rupees (USD \$1,100). A team of expert flower arrangers spends many hours draping the garlands in beautiful contrasting patterns over

entranceways, walls, and railings. There are usually strings of yellow, then of orange, then of alternating white and red marigolds, all with a lovely fresh smell. Once completed it is beautiful and uplifting to see.

After our morning chanting and meditation, we walked over to a large open area and sat between huge long rows of garlands that had been piled high. 5000 garlands! It was quite a site to behold! We formally dedicated these flowers to the five Buddhas of this fortunate aeon. There were three before Gotama Buddha (Kakhusandha, Konagamana, and Kassapa Buddhas) and Maitreya Buddha will come next. All of the Buddhas in this universe must be enlightened here. We also asked forgiveness of the three jewels and all sacred objects, then determined (requested) that these merits be a powerful source of energy, inspiring ever-increasing growth in the path of virtue, concentration, and wisdom. We then dedicated merits to teachers, parents, family, friends, beings who feel ill-will toward us, and finally to all beings everywhere. This was a consciousness-expanding and heart-opening experience for everyone. Great joy arose from the honour and privilege of this momentous merit-creating opportunity.

After lunch and a rest we returned to the Mahabodhi Chedi and Bodhi Tree. Seeing the bright and beautiful, elegantly draped flowers all around was uplifting for all. The expert team were still spreading rose petals and jasmine blossoms in beautiful patterns on the raised 'Buddha's walking meditation path'. It smelled divine!

### **Meditation Within the Chedi**

There is a vihara (small chapel) within the tall, elongated body of the chedi structure that most pilgrims don't know about. It's about ten metres directly above the vihara that houses the main Buddha statue, 'Phra Buddha Metta'. To enter this upper and inner vihara, you must take a sharp left when entering on the lower floor, then walk up an extremely steep stone staircase. The wooden shutter doors that block access to the staircase are, as far as I've seen, always locked. (Although I was granted permission to meditate there for two hours back in December.)

This upper-inner sanctum is a little unusual as it does not contain an image of Shakyamuni or Gotama Buddha, but instead a stone carving of the future Buddha Maitreya that is over a thousand years

old. So the ground floor vihara is devoted to the Buddha of our current age, while this upper shrine room is devoted to the future Buddha. This is symbolically and cosmologically interesting, because according to the suttas the Bodhisattva spends the life preceding his final human birth in the Tushita heaven realm 'above'.

Maitreya (Sanskrit) or Mettaya (Pali) will be a Buddha of extremely vast merits, having taken four times as long to build his paramis (perfected virtues) using the 'effort approach', than Gotama Buddha took with his 'wisdom approach'. His foremost quality will be metta, or loving-kindness, and he will arise near 'the peak of the aeon', a time when humans will have great virtue and merits. It is said that he will live for 80,000 years. The average lifespan during that golden age.

On this day we were granted special access to this special place for an hour. Because the crowds are great and there are security risks (undetected bombs have been found within the compound before), management doesn't usually allow access to this space. However, I have a new friend (who wishes to remain anonymous) who has a close working relationship with the management. He is in the position to ask for an occasional favour and volunteered to ask on our behalf. This suggests an auspicious kammic connection and some powerful merits within our group as well.

Coming into this sacred space felt like being given an opportunity to receive energetic blessings from the four Buddhas of this aeon as well as having a private audience with the future Buddha, and to ask for his blessings too. The four Buddhas were all enlightened on this very spot, so some special energetic blessing associated with them is definitely still here. Maitreya is destined to be enlightened here as well, so his own illustrious destiny is powerfully and inextricably linked to this site too.

It may seem vain or greedy to be asking for the blessings of so many Buddhas, yet if by some kammic good fortune one finds oneself sitting directly above 'the seat of enlightenment', then it simply seems the right thing to do! The truth is that all unenlightened beings are vain. We need the blessings and metta of teachers to help us overcome this vanity, and also overcome the power of greed, hatred, and delusion in all of their manifestations in our minds. Pretending to be humble and then not being bold enough to actually ask for help is another type of conceit and a missed opportunity.

The members of my group were not grappling with any concerns about appearing vain however. Most of us are 'faith types' and we just felt really lucky! No need to think too much! As we queued directly in front of the chedi, each with a colourful plate of flowers in hand, the atmosphere was of joy, anticipation, and excitement. An Indian monk with a special key arrived and we all filed swiftly through the entrance and up the steep stone stairs. Heads were counted by a guard and only the agreed upon number of pilgrims, guests, and guides were allowed through. The vihara is not very large, so our group of forty-three filled the room snugly.

We offered our flowers, settled on the floor, paid respects, and then chanted praises to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. We recited the chant celebrating the fact that the Buddha fulfilled the cultivation of the paramis and became the enlightened Bhagawan (Itipi So Bhagava). I encouraged everyone to make their minds as quiet and still as possible. After twenty-five minutes of delicious silence, I led a simple visualisation where we imagined Kakhusandha, Konagamana, Kassapa, and Gotama Buddhas above us in the form of golden light. We asked for their forgiveness and blessings, then visualised golden light coming from them through the crowns of our heads and radiating outwards through every pore. This was a skilful means to help make the mind receptive to the blessings I really believe are there, even though the Buddhas are now fully established in liberation.

Next we imagined the ancient gold-leafed image of Maitreya in front of us was the actual Bodhisattva himself. I encouraged people to be clear about their aspiration and to ask for Maitreya's blessings to fulfil this. Some people aspired for liberation as soon as possible. Others aspired to be liberated during the time of Maitreya under his guidance, while a couple of the pilgrims had a bodhisattva vow themselves and requested his support to grow on that long and difficult noble path. We each had our own personal way of aspiring to be the best we can be through developing goodness and uprooting ignorance. It was an incredible honour to be there and share this time of sincere aspiration. My eyes have welled with tears of joy remembering it just now.

We also shared merits with our teachers and made dedications and prayers that our parents, family members, friends, co-workers, enemies, and all beings may be supported and incline towards growing in the path

of generosity, ethics, and mental cultivation, through to final liberation.

We enjoyed a spacious, long period for practice in the afternoon and early evening, feeling buoyant and inspired from the day's auspicious activities. Such opportunities do not arise without conditions. I am confident that all who were able to join in the grand flower offering and special meditation within the Chedi had powerful supportive merits from the past. Now we have built upon these further. May the auspicious and wholesome aspirations of all the pilgrims, both Sangha and laity, be fully realised with every support! Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu! Below are some of the sharings from several pilgrims regarding this first week or so of our pilgrimage.

*Certainly, for me this was a truly memorable pilgrimage, something that I will remember for a long, long, time. I can still remember the calmness and peaceful feelings that I felt when we were chanting under a tree on our first day at The Deer Park (Sarnath). I had several great sittings in there and this may possibly be attributed to the strong energy within the park. Somehow, I felt really good the whole time whenever we were inside the site of the First Sermon.*

*The events in the Mahabodhi Temple were the most unforgettable. Firstly, there was so much joy to see the whole temple being decorated with various colored flowers that we had offered. The whole temple was practically 'lit up' and transformed into a sea of vibrant colours. What a beautiful sight! Then, the opportunity to be granted access into the sacred upper level of the Mahabodhi Chedi to offer flowers, chant and make our aspirations. The energy and feeling was so immense and overwhelming. I also remember that when I was seated on the platform and was meditating with the group, one bodhi leaf fell onto my head, a few minutes later another one fell on my left side, and then another one on my right. For a moment it felt as if I was being blessed. – Clifford*

*Our chanting inside the Mahabodhi Chedi was electrifying! The enormous reverberation and vibration was unforgettable. I was so moved I could feel and hear my heart beat echoing through my head and entire body – especially when my head was pressed against the altar table! The meditation was very peaceful, the place is so completely infused with goodness. It was an unusual meditation inasmuch as I kept my eyes open and gazed at the 1000 year old gold-leafed stone statue of Lord Maitreya the whole time.*

*Trying to imbed his image deep into my memory so that I don't forget him! I aspired to be reborn in the Tushita Heaven Realm as a Deva as soon as possible, and to have just that one long life time in heaven before coming back in the era of Lord Maitreya. It's a long way off – millions of years from now! But it's a good plan! Will have to continue to practise a lot and make lots of merits in this life in the meantime! I am sure this beautiful experience will stay with all of us for a long time. – Joyce*

*One of the things that I noticed on the trip was how 'easy' it was to meditate for longer periods of time. At home I usually sit for 45 minutes to an hour and beyond this it often starts to be a bit of a struggle. However on the pilgrimage I was regularly sitting for two hours sometimes two-and-a-half hours in one go and although this required intention and effort it didn't seem to be the struggle that seem to occur when at home in passing the hour mark. What was even more remarkable was that these extended periods of practice occurred in very busy and incredibly noisy places and yet I experienced good periods of peacefulness and a lot of joy. – Phil*

*My happiest experience was this: I was so glad that on the morning of the second day in Bodhgaya, I was able to sit my longest sitting meditation session ever – one hour! From 5:30 to 6:30 a.m. Followed by walking meditation from 6:30–7:15 a.m. and finishing with another sitting meditation from 7:15–8:00 a.m. I am still surprised to this day that it was even possible for me! The most inspiring aspect of the trip for me however, was actually the virtue, manners, kindness and gracious behavior of all four of the monks. This gave rise to great inspiration in me. This, combined with the friendship, sincerity and metta from all of the other pilgrims built up a lot of good energy and willingness in me. – Taew*

### **Pilgrimage Day 7: Austerity Cave, Bodhgaya (February 23)**

The cave where the Bodhisattva is believed to have practised extreme austerities for six years is about a forty-five minute drive from Bodhgaya. Once you arrive, there is a steep twenty-five minute walk up to the cave. As the cave is small and the space in front of it is a little cramped, I was once again determined that we get there first in order to actually meditate. We walked up just after dawn and were indeed the first to arrive. Everyone

was able to offer a candle in the cave, and then we had a quiet one-hour sit right in front of it. Once several other groups approached, we offered the sound of our chanting for twenty minutes.

I encouraged people to make some Middle Way determinations here, concerning areas where we need to increase our efforts to reduce the unwholesome and increase the wholesome. It was a chance to set sincere yet achievable goals inspired by the Bodhisattva's incredible example, particularly as this was his place of determination too. It is also the place where he had his insight into the correct approach of the Middle Way. To combine deep concentration with sustained contemplation and investigation is the way to uproot ignorance and destroy delusion.

The Buddha later said of this period of striving, 'It is possible that another being suffered as much in their spiritual striving, but it is impossible that any being ever suffered more'. I felt waves of awe and deep gratitude. His penance was actually for us, as the Bodhisattva was ripe for liberation under Dipankara Buddha millions of lives before.

There always seems to be some impingement to work with at these pilgrimage sites. Today it was smoke from the burning cow dung that was being used to boil chai tea nearby. It blew in our direction for the entire hour- and-a-half. If the breeze had blown the other way, we would have smelled the fragrance of the vanilla, jasmine, and rose candles we'd brought all this way from several different countries. Alas, that was not to be. Perhaps the devas who support and rejoice in austerity at this place thought we should practise a little austerity as well. We did so uncomplainingly.

*Meditation in front of the cave was interesting. Rather than dropping into what I considered my 'tree stump samadhi' mode, I turned my mind towards reflection and a little insight occurred as to what I needed to learn as my lesson during this particular retreat. I was being taught patience: patience with my ageing body, with its aches and pains; patience with my own perceived lack of progress; patience with having to be with people 24/7 even though I have always needed a few hours of quiet time alone each day; patience with the dust, noise, and road conditions. – Lean'*

### A Drop in the Ocean

After lunch we visited the Root Institute to make a donation. The Root Institute is a part of the FPMT group of monasteries/centres in the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. There are several nuns living in residence and they have a retreat centre. They also run several noble and worthy charitable outreach projects.

One sees a lot of poverty and hardship when travelling in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. I believe it is appropriate to make significant helpful gestures towards alleviating this difficulty while considering Lord Buddha's example. It also feels good to actually do something, rather than simply feel depressed.

I've been encouraging my groups of students to pool together donations for the Root Institute for many years now. I've also frequently sent any remaining funds made available for my use to this Institute before returning to Thailand. They have a free Buddhist School for boys and girls, a free women's clinic, as well as an outreach program to teach villagers about hygiene. They also have an orphanage for abandoned children with HIV and an abused animal shelter. As well as rejoicing in all of the good things that the good people from Root do, I am also genuinely grateful to know of a trustworthy place where we can contribute. Sadly there are a lot of scams around as well.

Walking into the Root Institute after being in northern India for a week already, we could feel an energetic shift. I am familiar with this feeling from my monastery back in Thailand. A cool, quiet, safe feeling in the air announces, 'This is a place where people keep moral precepts and are ethical, a place where people cultivate patience, honesty, and kindness'. It was palpable, and everyone in the group noticed it. Good energy from meditation retreats also builds up in places, and good-hearted devas have probably moved into the trees as well (the class of earthbound devas who live in trees are called rukkha-devas).

Our combined donation was 170,000 rupees. (US \$2,500) Which is not a huge amount but not a small amount either. The staff were very touched and made us cups of hot lemon, ginger, and honey water. We enjoyed hanging out and soaking up the benevolent vibes. Although there are many blessings to be absorbed around the Bodhi Tree, there are less-supportive energies to be navigated as well. It was restorative to be in this sanctuary before returning to the Bodhi Mandala. I also sensed that

appreciative devas associated with their centre rejoiced in our offering and spread loving-kindness to us. This was helpful—thank you, devas!

After our visit at Root we went on to some of the international monasteries around Bodhgaya, to rejoice in the expressions of faith by the Buddhists of the world. The eighty-foot tall sandstone Buddha at the Japanese Temple, and the Bhutanese Temple with its incredibly beautiful wall paintings were favourites. Phil from the UK told me he had an upset tummy after we visited the big sandstone Buddha. Lek, our trusty guide had the medicine on the bus! And so he was treated immediately. Our outing was followed by another evening of meditation, devotion, and contemplation at the Mahabodhi Temple and sacred Bodhi Tree.

### **Mangala Sutta excerpt**

To be respectful, humble, contented, grateful  
And to listen to the Dhamma on due occasions.  
This is the Greatest Blessing.

*The Buddha*  
(*Narada Thera, trans.*)

### **The Humble Pilgrim**

The humble pilgrim is willing.

To receive the hard and menacing stares,  
In order to glimpse something truly rare.  
To traipse down slippery and uneven stairs.  
If in doing so, one finds a deeper footing there.

A pilgrim on the Path of Self Awareness,  
Self-discovery... and ultimately Self-lessness.  
Learns to surrender willfulness,  
And offers a humble willingness.

*Ajahn Achalo*

**Pilgrimage Day 8: Bodhgaya, Rajgir, Veluvana (February 24)**

We were keen to once again secure our favourite spot under the Bodhi Tree, so were up and ready early. We did our morning puja, then asked forgiveness of the Buddhas and all of the sacred objects in the vicinity of the Bodhi Mandala: the Vajra Asana or seat of enlightenment, the Bodhi Tree, the Mahabodhi Chedi and the temple/vihara contained within, the Buddha Metta statue and any relics contained within the chedi, and lastly the devas of the Bodhi Tree. We also restated our particular aspirations for enlightenment. It's a powerful thing to do here. Lastly we dedicated merits to our teachers, parents, family members, friends, co-workers, and even beings we've harmed knowingly or unknowingly who wish us ill. We said, 'We have been operating under the influence of greed, hatred, and delusion because of ignorance of the truth. Please forgive us, as we didn't know any better. We are trying sincerely now, so please rejoice and do not obstruct us. May all beings kammically connected through good or harmful deeds partake in these merits, and may we all progress steadily on the path of deliverance to unshakable peace'.

After a light breakfast back at the hotel, there was time for packing and bathing. After lunch we hit the road again. I didn't tell the group that we'd experienced the best of the food and hotels for a while. They'd discover this soon enough for themselves! Having gotten into the groove of bumpy rides, sitting on hard surfaces, and practising with the extremes of chilly mornings and hot afternoons, we were all in good stead for coping with a little less comfort. Fatigue is also conducive to a good night's sleep regardless of the digs.

Dear Chooiwan had broken her foot at the Mahabodhi Temple the previous night, and we awaited her return from hospital. When she came back, she had to move her way up the stairs and along the aisle on her bottom, pulling herself along with her arms. We all cheered her creativity and determination. This was our first big challenge as a group, and we were determined to embrace it with loving-kindness.

This is quite an interesting occurrence for the leader of the group as well as for the injured pilgrim. When you think about it...isn't it amazing that this could actually occur on the very day that we made a big donation to a woman's health clinic, and the day after offering

5000 garlands to the Mahabodhi Temple! Sometimes making a lot of good kammas very quickly can stir up some bad kamma from the past. With a blessed amulet, a blessed wrist mala, in a blessed place, and after producing vast merits and duly dedicating them to all classes of beings, it is still possible for someone to break a bone! I forgot to mention that we had just done some auspicious chanting and I had also cautioned everybody to be extra mindful while walking down the poorly lit staircase! Sometimes it seems that if it is going to happen then it is going to happen. Many Asians would optimistically think, 'Imagine what might have happened if she hadn't made all of that merit!' And there is some validity to this consideration, because tripping down stairs can result in worse injuries than a broken bone in a foot. Fortunately the service at the hospital turned out to be fairly quick and adequate. Perhaps that is one way that the merit manifested.

Originally we were scheduled to go to Nalanda from Bodhgaya, but I didn't want to rush this so we decided to go straight to the Veluvana, the site of the Bamboo Grove monastery, which was closer. The Veluvana was the first monastery gifted to the Buddha and his order. It is also the place where Lord Buddha met Sariputta and Maha-Moggallana for the first time. And it was the site where 1,250 arahants spontaneously gathered to hear Lord Buddha preach the *Ovada Patimokkha*, the laying of the foundation of the Buddhist monastic discipline.

The drive to Rajgir took around four hours. Many groups were present at the site of the Bamboo Grove, chanting in what seemed like competition with one another. Once we started to meditate, however, there was a curious synchronicity where several of the groups hushed at precisely the same time. So we had an unlikely, very peaceful sitting. I was grateful for this minor miracle! Ajahn Visalo gave the Dhamma talk to the English speakers that evening, while Ajahn Ghit gave a talk in Thai. These were appreciated by all, and after more than a week into our pilgrimage I appreciated the break.

## CHAPTER FIVE

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### *Bowing Towards Heaven and Beyond*

#### **Post-Pilgrimage Bodhgaya (March 22)**

It's the third evening of the Holi celebration and everything is eerily quiet, even the dogs. Last night walking back to the guesthouse, Mae Chee Aimey said to me, 'Ajahn there's some strange intense energy...can you feel it? What is it?' There was indeed a dizzying, wild energy in the air. Minds do become sensitised from meditation and we could all feel it. I replied, 'Mae Chee, ninety percent of the locals are very drunk at the same time and have been for two days now. Because alcohol is illegal in Bihar they're drinking home made whiskey, which is even stronger. I suggest getting back to our rooms and locking the doors!' Tonight, thankfully, it seems to have petered out. Perhaps after two nights of partying everyone was ready for a good night's sleep. Wonderful. Sweet dreams!

Tahn Stuart, one of Ajahn Anan's Western monks, is currently unwell with vomiting and diarrhoea. After many questions we are assuming that it's more likely a virus than food poisoning or bacteria. Hopefully he'll feel better in the morning. Two days ago, three of our group had stomach cramps and bloating too. And Soo Ping, who has stayed on after the pilgrimage group and who has been very diligent, practising ten to eleven hours of meditation per day, is in bed with the flu now as well. Forging on through illness is simply a part of intensive practice here. Being strategically optimistic, we hold this as a kind of purification. The peace and joy, deepening faith and insight that we all also experience here, make a few days of painful symptoms worth it. I've been significantly sick in India more times than I can

count on my fingers and toes, but I've had hundreds of lovely peaceful meditations as well. The bliss of liberation surrounded by Mara's armies—it's an ongoing theme!

Back to the pilgrimage...

### **Pilgrimage Day 9: Vulture's Peak, Nalanda (February 25)**

Vulture's Peak is a mountaintop in Rajgir, where Lord Buddha used to take time for secluded retreat. In Lord Buddha's time, Rajgir was the capital city of the Kingdom of Magadha, where King Bimbisara reigned. In those days it was pronounced Raja-gaha, meaning the seat of the king. King Bimbisara had a close relationship with the Buddha and actually offered the very first monastery to the order, which was the Bamboo Grove Monastery we visited yesterday afternoon. No doubt as his order grew quickly, Lord Buddha appreciated taking a period away from time to time. By then there were many capable arahants down below.

Vulture's Peak feels close to the heavens. The wide, open views in all directions give rise to a sense of vast empty space. It is a peaceful place to meditate if you can get some quiet time without a noisy crowd. It is wonderful to contemplate either the space element or the ultimate, empty nature of phenomena here. Likewise, it's possible to expand one's normal sense of limitation by radiating goodwill, filling all of space. In terms of mental cultivation, grand and vast things seem possible in this place. Meditators' minds tend to incline in these directions here whether they intend it or not.

With true determination to get some quiet time on Vulture's Peak, I mentioned to Khun Lek the day before that I'd like to leave the hotel at 5 a.m. She told me the guides were worried about the likelihood of snakes and robbers in the pre-dawn hours. I said I'd tell people to use a flashlight to avoid snakes, and that robbers would be unlikely to take on our large group. In the samsaric game of snakes and ladders, or in this case snakes and robbers, we must make powerful merits that will help thrust us in the direction of true safety. Sometimes we must take some risks, because rebirth under a strong influence of ignorance and attachment is even scarier than death! The deeply peaceful and inspiring moments and meditations that one can have in holy places produce powerful merits, so I insisted. By 5:20 we were all at the base of the

hill. Fast climbers can make it up in a half hour, slower folks in forty-five minutes. After twenty minutes a beautiful dawn light radiated throughout the sky. By the time we reached the top, the red sun was already rising.

We sat in meditation on top of the peak for an hour. I ensured that a passageway was left so that other early pilgrims could come and pay respects at the site of Lord Buddha's kuti. After forty-five minutes, a small Sri Lankan group had ascended the mountain. They came into the site of the kuti and did their puja with voices rich in faith. Dinethi told me later that the monk leading the chanting was famous in Sri Lanka for his beautiful chanting. Such was our good fortune on that day. After the Sri Lankans left, we did our own puja. We recited a few Pali chants as well as nine rounds of the Heart Sutra in Mandarin, which held special meaning for many of the Chinese Malaysians in our group who have deep faith in Kwan Yin Bodhisattva. As we wandered down the mountain, we met hundreds of pilgrims on their way up. The early start was indeed a good idea. The following day we would be doing the three steps, one bow practice up the hundreds of broad sandstone steps, but I felt it was important to have this quiet sit on this first day to establish a sense of connection and familiarity with the site.

On our way down the mountain we passed dirty beggars crumpled along the side of the stairway. They banged metal containers on the stones, coughing, spluttering, and spitting all the while. 'Maharaja. Maharani. I am blind man, I am poor man. Please. Please...' they implored. I noticed green mucus dribbling from the noses of the beggars' children. The reason I noticed this in particular was because the very next day I would be placing my forehead on the same steps where the mucus was being dribbled. I was so sure I'd pick up some kind of infection that I determined to start taking respiratory tract infection antibiotics that very day.

## **Nalanda**

In the afternoon we travelled to Nalanda. It's where the Buddha's chief disciple Sariputta was born and passed away, and later became the site of the renowned Nalanda Monastic University, which accommodated around 15,000 monks in its heyday. Seventeen revered masters that formed the foundation of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition composed some

extraordinary wisdom teachings at Nalanda. Shantideva and Nagarjuna are perhaps the most well known. The Chinese Pilgrim Hsuan Tsang also took texts back from this place to China to supplement Chinese Mahayana Buddhism.

The roads here are better, so it only took us half an hour from Rajgir. Rather than go straight into the archaeological site and look at rows of ancient bricks, we went to a small museum over the road, which houses original artefacts discovered at the site. Although the museum is small, it is full of incredible masterpieces. There are big Buddha carvings of Bihar black stone (basalt), which are around 1,200 years old. There are also several carvings of revered bodhisattvas in the Mahayana tradition, such as Samantabhadra, Manjushree, and Padmapani. And there are bronze, stucco, and stone miniatures of many Buddhas and bodhisattvas. The fact that artisans from that era could carve such intricately detailed pieces without the help of diamond tipped drill bits is astonishing to me. The collection speaks to a cultural sophistication of the society and monastic community in that era.

My personal favourite image of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is housed here. When I first saw it twelve years ago, I literally stopped breathing and fell to my knees. Not out of shock and horror, but rather out of being stunned and humbled by the poignant beauty. My response may not have been to the beauty alone. I have a feeling that I may have performed devotions before this very image in a past life and the deep appreciation flowed up in my mind stream once again. It is a multi-armed male image with some androgynous attributes. It's at once dynamic, engaging, and yet still. You can see perfectly centred equipoise, purity, and aloofness, yet also kindness, and it seems to be reaching out with power, capability, and care. I know I'm going on a bit about a statue...but we monks spend a lot of time contemplating, cultivating, and generating spiritual qualities, so when you see so many of these virtues carved impeccably in sandstone, it is breathtaking!

When I mentioned to everyone that this was my favourite bodhisattva image, Venerable Chikwang Sunim, an Australian born senior Mahayana nun in the Korean tradition, confided that she had to agree. We asked permission to do a little chanting right there in the museum and the guards kindly consented. They also allowed us to take pictures afterwards, which they had not allowed before. I'm not

sure if Khun Lek asked Mahatma Gandhi to speak on our behalf, but I have my suspicions! (Indian currency bank notes all have a picture of Gandhiji on them.)

It was good to visit the museum and consider what Nalanda had been and the role it had played in preserving and spreading Buddhism around the world. It gave rise to feelings of deep gratitude for the hundred or so generations since the Buddha's time who have passed down the teachings and practices we utilise today. But for us Theravadans it is as the place of Sariputta's birth and Parinibbana that Nalanda has deep significance as a pilgrimage site. After serving Lord Buddha impeccably as his chief disciple, he established many thousands of beings in stages of liberation due to his having equal wisdom to Lord Buddha himself. It took him 'two incalculable periods plus 100,000 aeons' to develop this wisdom faculty. The fact that we still have some fully enlightened masters with us today is in no short measure due to this lineage of great and wise monks who were liberated themselves and knew how to teach correctly.

Next we went for a long walk in the ancient archaeological site and found a large old tree to sit under. After meditating for forty-five minutes, I shared some readings of Sariputta and Moggallana's close friendship. They spoke of Sariputta's attainment of stream entry after hearing just one line spoken by Venerable Asaji; of how Moggallana received the same result when Sariputta repeated the pithy line to him; how Sariputta first met the Lord in the Bamboo Grove, his service to the order; and finally his remarkable passing in the same room where he was born, with heavenly deities visiting to pay respects. The appearance of the deities led to his stubborn mother being finally receptive to her son's guidance. A staunch Brahman, she was the last person Venerable Sariputta established in stream entry before passing into final Nibbana. After the reading we paid respects at the place where he passed away and where his relics may still be enshrined to this day.

### **Pilgrimage Day 10: Rajgir, Vaisali (February 26)**

*My main aspiration for this pilgrimage was to ask for forgiveness and to dedicate merits accordingly. I believe that I have successfully fulfilled this aspiration in every holy site that we visited and during every important occasion that we participated in. I am glad that I made this decision, as*

*everything turned out unexpectedly beautifully. It was just wonderful to travel with the group. You could actually feel the connection, the understanding, care and concern among everyone. Exactly like one BIG Dhamma family. For me, it has been an inspirational pilgrimage and I sincerely rejoice. I am happy to have consciously taken another step along the Dhamma path. – Clifford*

This morning I was wearing my robe in a rather unusual way, gathered and draped over one shoulder then tied and secured firmly around my chest. I was ready for Olympic-level bowing! The quiet before dawn at Vulture's Peak mountain is surreal. A couple of hours later, the stall keepers and beggars will have come to work and hundreds of pilgrims will be climbing their way to the summit, but at 5:30 a.m. it was pitch black and we were alone. Even the insects and birds were still asleep.

I started bowing at the very first step. Those first hundred or so metres were quite difficult because of the smell. Clearly some of the stallholders and beggars had relieved their bowels either side of the path. When you do this bowing practice, taking three steps and then lowering yourself to a bowed posture along the ground, then standing up again, it is necessary to breathe deeply! I have a sensitive nose and an attachment to pleasant smells, so this was a great practice for me. Just pushing through and refraining from throwing up was the theme of the first ten minutes. Then after thirty or so bows, the sky turned a beautiful shade of gold and a sense of boundless space and a fresh breeze liberated me from the lower realms. We were bowing towards heaven now!

Some of the younger and fitter members of our group passed me early on. I wanted to take it fairly slowly, to say appropriate mantras with each bow, ask forgiveness for wrongdoings, request blessings and inspiration for ongoing projects, deepen my aspirations, recollect that Lord Buddha had frequently come by this way, and say, 'Thank you, Lord Buddha. Thank you!' Bowing practice slows you down and opens up the possibility for all of these contemplations, dedications, and considerations. I also wanted to keep some of the older and less fit members within earshot. Every third bow or so, I dedicated merits to all in the group who were bowing, 'May everyone be healthy, supported and strong, successful in their offering of bowing'. (Read: may no one faint, have a heart attack, or a stroke!)

Twice I stopped and sat down by the side of the path for five or ten minutes. This allowed Joyce and Jintana to catch up a little and for me to say a few encouraging words. And to be entirely honest, after forty-five minutes of bowing up a steepening incline, I also needed a little rest. The other monks and I had trained at Anandagiri, but our hill there is quite small. This was the real deal. It definitely seemed harder than seven years ago. My heart was pounding in my chest, my body completely covered in sweat. That's ageing!

I later discovered that Jintana did some skilful reflection around this time which inspired a fresh burst of energy. I'll share what she wrote about this occasion now.

*Another deeply touching experience happened at Vulture's Peak mountain. One early morning, Ajahn Achalo led us in paying highest respects to the Buddha by offering '3 steps one bow' all the way up the mountain, this is a Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist practice. This was not forced upon us, but rather recommended as a way to express or show faith and gratitude for those fit enough to try. So I decided to offer this out of deep respects. About half of the group joined in. I felt that it was possible with my level of strength and health at present. When I decided to do it I truly believed that it would be doable and that it would not be too hard, because I exercise regularly as a part of my lifestyle. It should be possible to complete the vow all the way to the top of the hill. But I realized after 45 minutes of continuous bowing, when I reached half way, that I felt very exhausted!.. Sitting on the edge of the path, covered in sweat and with my heart pounding away in my chest... and there was still another half of the mountain to go! And from what I could see it was getting steeper! I started to wonder if I would actually be able to complete the task all the way to the top?*

*Then I stood still and closed my eyes, stopping the wondering and doubting, taking a deep breath I focused upon the Buddha only. I imagined that lord Buddha was waiting for me smiling with metta at the top. Then I continued on with bowing, feeling my head, elbows, hands and knees touching the stone path and steps with sharp mindfulness. Tears of rapture came to my eyes and a joyful strength came back as in the beginning, because I felt like I was truly touching Lord Buddha's foot prints with my bowed head. I was deeply touched and this became deeply imprinted in my mind until now and forever.*

*Even while writing, I still feel touched and my eyes fill with tears of rapture again. I've learned that UNSHAKABLE FAITH in the Triple Gems can inspire me to have determination to accomplish things I never realized that I could do before. – Jintana*

Bowing past a cave where Moggallana had spent a rainy season retreat and seeing that some of the pilgrims had offered candles, I rejoiced at heart. A few minutes later I was bowing past the very cave where Sariputta achieved full enlightenment, while fanning the Buddha who was giving a teaching. I rejoiced in Sariputta's enormous wisdom and kindness, our recent reflections of him still fresh in my mind. Thank you, dear Sariputta!

After Sariputta's cave, the stairs wind up and around quite steeply. After getting to the top of this knoll you then have to bow down some stairs, proceed a distance on flat ground, then bow up the final steep steps. Joyce was just behind me and suddenly I heard her burst into a very loud mantra recitation. It was the long mantra of Avalokiteshvara. I thought she was expressing her great faith, however she later told me that she didn't have any energy left to finish, though she really wanted to. Her chant was a combination of a plea for help and a prayer for support. It was effective and she kept on determinedly bowing.

She wrote about this later...

*The most challenging part of the entire trip for me was doing the 3 steps 1 bow practice up Vulture's Peak. As I started the long climb, reciting the mantras of Bud-dho, Namō Kwan Shr Yin Pusa and Om Mani Padme Hung etc., helped me to stay focused and garner enough strength and endurance to be able to 'be with' the discomforts and pain in my back. At one point towards the Peak though, just past the second cave where Venerable Sariputta attained Arāhantship, I felt that I just couldn't do it anymore! After one hour of constant climbing and bowing on an empty stomach, I was mentally and physically completely drained! Here the steps go downwards for a stretch, then there is a flat section, and then there are the final few steps up to the actual Peak.*

*I stopped momentarily, looked at the slope going down, and felt like I was going to fall right over if I dare move! I looked up at the top of Vulture's Peak, calmed myself down, took a few deep breaths and then asked for*

*some divine intervention. Then one chant was in my heart and became the only thought. It was the Maha Karuna chant. (Long mantra of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva.) Kneeling down, I gathered all my strength and started chanting with all the might, volume and faith that I have! I felt emotionally charged as I chanted, and when I started to move again, I was in tears as I did my three steps, one bow down the stairs sideways. (When doing three steps, one bow down steps one has to do the actual bow sideways on the third step.)*

*My heart was filled with joy, faith and energy as I bowed along the short flat stretch and approached the final steps. Now in the golden light of dawn, under many thousands of brightly colored Tibetan prayer flags which had been strung between the trees, blowing silently in the soft cool breeze. Mindfully stepping, counting and bowing, once finally on the Peak I could see the site of the Buddha's kuti in front. With such joy I did the bows and mantras, doing three deep bows within the kuti with the beautiful expansive sky above and all around. I was so energized by now that I actually continued with the bowing around the outside edge of the kuti before going to sit at my favorite meditation place. I was very grateful that dear Maheshie was by my side all the way until I made it to the very top! Thank you Maheshie and Phra Ajahn for your quiet encouragements while you bowed as well, as we climbed up Vulture's Peak. Thank you very much! – Joyce*

As Joyce mentioned above, bowing down the stairs is also required in this practice, you have to turn sideways and some of the steps are quite narrow. You can feel exhausted, shaky on your feet, and light headed, so it's a little scary! As it happens the steps get steeper and narrower the higher you go, so one faces the most challenging part once already tired. In the flat section between the two knolls, there is an incredibly bright and positive energy. Thousands of Tibetan prayer flags have been strung up and it is a magical sight in the golden early morning light.

I was so happy as I made those last few bows up the steepest, narrowest steps. I was going to fulfil my vow! I was also very pleased to see about half the group already silently sitting in meditation. It was still and lovely up there and once again we had it to ourselves. Even the monkeys who had gathered there were behaving well. I made my way reverently toward the site of the Buddha's kuti. To my reckoning it

had taken exactly 330 bows. Then I bowed three more times, visualising the Buddha. After this I spent what seemed like a long time with my head on the flagstones confirming aspirations, repenting mistakes, and dedicating merits to all who have and are supporting me, to all beings, then lastly to the aunties who were still bowing. Be strong! Be healthy! Be successful!

Once I sat down to meditate, Joyce made it to the kuti. After bowing inside, she then proceeded to bow around the perimeter of the kuti. She was literally bowing circles around us. Soon after, Khun Jintana arrived and then Aunty Monica. I was so proud of them too. Keep in mind that Jintana is over 50, Joyce is over 60, and Monica is close to 70! We had all done this practice together on Putuoshan Island in China a couple of years ago as well. (I admit to be a slightly unusual Theravada monk.)

Sitting quietly in the warm morning sun on Vulture's Peak was wonderful. There was no formal chanting or reflection on this day. It was left to each person to make it special in their own way. As we were leaving, I noticed that Chooiwan had been carried up the mountain on a dolly by two strong Indian men. I asked a couple of her friends to join her chanting the Heart Sutra to commemorate her successful ascent to the summit. I would have liked to join them too but the bowing and worrying had left me feeling a little pooped.

We decided to be adventurous with our breakfast this morning. I knew from previous visits that the samosa (curried vegetable pastries) at one restaurant at the base of the mountain were really good. It took some convincing to get Khun Lek to agree. In my experience, as long as the food is fresh and really hot, it's usually safe to eat. After a few hours of bowing and meditating on an empty stomach, we all thoroughly enjoyed the samosa and chai tea. It was also good to experience eating alongside locals at an Indian restaurant. Lek arranged extra sandwiches, oranges, and bananas too.

After breakfast we headed back for a shower and to pack, for after lunch we would be back on the bus. There was a shop in our hotel with real sandalwood oil, so some last minute shopping ensued.

Leaving Rajgir, we stopped to take a look at the site where the evil prince Ajatasattu had had his father, King Bimbisara, imprisoned, then tortured and finally starved to death. It is such a samsaric tale. The generous and devoted King Bimbisara had actually

attained stream entry, the first level of enlightenment, before his imprisonment. He had experienced much joy watching the Buddhist order flourish in his kingdom, where most people became Buddhist and apparently seventy-five percent of them attained stream entry by the time Lord Buddha entered final Nibbana. Remembering that 1,250 arahants had gathered there spontaneously for Magha Puja, it is not so surprising. The merits of people born so close to so many liberated beings must have been significant indeed.

King Bimbisara's son had fallen under the sway of the Buddha's evil cousin Devadatta, who encouraged him to seize the reign from his father. Devadatta was also contentiously vying for leadership of the monastic order. This samsaric cycle of kamma and rebirth is full of joy and sorrow, loyalty and betrayal. Even the Buddha had enemies, amazing as that seems. Jealousy is a frightening and blinding thing if not kept in check. Apparently the King had been warned by seers of his son's impending betrayal, so heavy was the kamma that was about to ripen. But he had said that once the prince wanted the kingdom he would simply give it to him. Alas it was not so simple.

Many Kings throughout history have invaded neighbouring kingdoms to secure their power, but this creates such heavy kammās for them. It is not uncommon for great kings to be assassinated by their own children or heads of military, or for a crown prince to be poisoned so that the son of a minor wife may take the throne. May I never be born into royalty!

King Ajatasattu eventually developed deep remorse for his terrible actions as well as great faith in the Buddha. Apparently he too would have attained the first level of enlightenment, had he not caused his father's premature demise. Once the Buddha's remains were cremated, it is said that King Ajatasattu walked all the way from Kusinara back to Rajagaha with the relics of the Buddha held upon his head. He later had a grand stupa made. I find this story a beautiful contemplation of both impermanence and the ultimately good nature of conscious beings.

### 3 Steps 1 Bow Up Vulture's Peak

The burnt orange sunrise strikes the wet of my back  
As I bow my forehead on the steep sandstone track  
Drops of sweat offered to the dust  
So grateful to be walking away from lust.

Thousands of steps stretching to the sky  
Mindful footsteps right, left, right  
Forehead placed on sacred dirt  
Where once Lord Buddha walked upon this earth.

Were it not for the Buddha,  
These feet would drag me down  
Were it not for the Dhamma  
We would not be rising now.

Palms joined together, thumbs touching head  
Pressed to throat, pressed to chest  
Head bowed in supplication for the profundity of teaching  
In penance too for any mindless breaching.

Though the going is hard it feels good and right  
3 steps 1 bow at dawn - the day replaces night  
Above the mud the lotus does rise  
The darkness of ignorance mindfulness outshines.

Bowing with a heart's most noble aspirations  
There is also time for focused dedications  
And prayers for every being for which you care  
... as well as those in all directions everywhere.

Past the cave where Moggallana once stayed  
Candles flicker and pilgrims quietly pray  
Past the cave where Sariputta attained  
Tears of grateful joy suppress the muscle pain.

On wobbly legs the summit you have reached  
Prayer flags flutter up on Vulture's Peak  
The light of early morning is a special shade of gold  
It was harder this time, you are getting old!

The morning dew lifts from ancient boulders  
You wrap your robe around your shoulders  
Monkeys gather also on the craggy knolls  
And black birds are hungry, are they ravens or crows?

The empty skies feel close to heaven  
In meditation upon the mountain  
Here the devas gathered to hear the Lord teach  
Listen closely, can you hear them in the breeze?

Emptiness of sky  
Emptiness of self  
Full of mindful knowing  
Void of suffering.

Behind Vulture's Peak mountain  
A blood-red sunset falls  
Like the life giving blood of the masters  
Who came this way before.

*Ajahn Achalo*

## CHAPTER SIX

### *Peace at the Site of the Cessation of all Suffering*

#### **Pilgrimage Day 10: continued, Patna, Vaisali (February 26)**

The stretch of road from Rajgir to Patna is some of the worst on the trip. This is due in part to traffic congestion and partly because of road repairs causing detours. We passed our time on the bumpy roads by chanting, albeit with involuntary vibrato, ‘*Na...ab...mo...oh...oh...tas...sss...ab*’. I’d thought we might try and see the museum in Patna, the ancient capital city of Pataliputra in the era of King Ashoka, and the current capital city of Bihar. But first we had to make it across the second longest bridge in India, Mahatma Gandhi Setu or Gandhi’s Bridge. At 5.7 kilometres in length it straddles the Ganges river basin at one of its broadest points. Once we were across and I gazed into the traffic at the crossroads, I let go of that idea quite easily.

The Ganges River here separates the states of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. We had officially escaped notorious Bihar—India’s wild, wild West—with just one broken bone among us! We passed kilometres of banana plantations along the riverbank, which no doubt help to feed the two states’ 300 million inhabitants. We arrived at our hotel in Vaisali, the previous capital city of the Licchavis in Lord Buddha’s time, and retired to our rooms for a well-earned rest. It had only been a six-hour drive but felt much longer. We didn’t need to be up until five the next morning, which was a refreshing break from the previous three 4 a.m. rises.

#### **Pilgrimage Day 11: Vaisali, Kesiriya, Kusinara (February 27)**

After a leisurely wake up and breakfast we visited the Ananda Stupa.

This ancient site contains an original Ashokan pillar that still has the iconic Lion Capitol in place on top after 2,200 years! It's quite humbling to consider all that has come and gone in that time. We squeezed in a chanting session and meditation, but soon saw storm clouds brewing and noticed the wind was picking up, so we headed back to the hotel for the formal teachings. At least we were able to chant the *Ratana Sutta* on site there, as it had been taught by Lord Buddha in Vaisali.

Once again I got slightly irritated with how long it takes a group of thirty-five people to get from one point to another. I'm attached to ensuring that the teachings are taught, the chanting is chanted, and the meditations occur. That's a large part of my role as the leader of a practice-based pilgrimage. Some of the group, however, are enjoying the sites with a dreamy appreciation at a leisurely pace. Others are having deep reflections, epiphanies, and heart opening experiences as we go deeper. There's a lot going on internally for people as they meander towards the bus, with many fascinating sights vying for their attention on the way.

Don't get me wrong, my irritation is only momentary and I let go of it very quickly. It is an unavoidable part of trying to lead any group at all. After being an abbot for eight years I understand this very well! In general I'd say I am ninety-five percent content with the group's behaviour and level of sincerity—we have an 'A Team' here. They're just a little dithery and dreamy at times. In my ordinary daily life I'm a bit like that too. Just ask Joyce how long it can take me to choose an incense bowl or a candleholder! At least the pilgrims are appreciative and interested; they're not at all a negative bunch. I am very pleased with the level of friendliness and harmony among the group and the commitment to practice in general. I am quite patient with them overall and they have tolerated my furrowed brow and stern tone in moments as well. Like any loving family, we children of the Buddha are getting along just fine.

Of course I'm not going to tell you the precise occasions where I felt irritated. I don't have an axe to grind, nor do I want anyone to feel bad. I'm simply being transparent about the challenges I was working with as well. We learn from practising with irritation. Ajahn Chah instructed, 'Practice making big suffering into little suffering and little

suffering into no suffering'. It is a process of doing one's duty and training in letting go.

Back at the hotel we talked about the occasion when the Buddha pacified disease and an influx of hostile spirits in the city of Vaisali, then taught the *Ratana Sutta* as a protection. The beautiful verses extol the superior virtues of the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, the pure concentration that arises on a foundation of generosity and ethics, Nibbana, the path to realisation, and those who have realised it. It inspires great inner confidence. The Buddha also made holy water through the chanting of such auspicious verses and had Venerable Ananda sprinkle it in the households of Vaisali from the Buddha's own alms bowl. This was the beginning of a tradition that continues to this day. The beginning of the Bhikkhuni order also occurred in Vaisali, and the Buddha announced his intention to leave behind his final life here as well. That meant to experience Nibbana without the results of past clinging—and no more painful body.

Stopping at Kesiriya, the site of a very large, ancient chedi, pleasantly broke up our six-hour drive to Kusinara. The chedi, which is still being excavated by archaeologists, is believed to contain Lord Buddha's alms bowl, which he had personally offered to the laypeople here. Walking around the remains of the chedi takes around ten minutes. We did this three times, keeping the chedi on our right side in the traditional manner of circumambulation. This made for an invigorating session of walking meditation. Contemplating the faith and generosity of previous Buddhist generations is always uplifting. Then we did a short puja before getting back on the bus.

We arrived in Kusinara around 6:30 p.m. and took the opportunity to rest in our rooms after a long day on the road.

### **Post-Pilgrimage Bodhgaya, 11:30 p.m. (March 23)**

I'm happy to report that both Tahn Stuart and Sister Soo Ping are back on their feet and feeling much better. You can't keep good meditators down!

This Sunday afternoon there were large numbers of noisy Indian tourists at the Bodhi Tree. I do wish that the big sign that reads 'SILENCE' was written in a language other than English. And that one

of the security staff would occasionally tell people to be a bit more quiet. I have never seen a noisy group of Europeans or North Americans here ever. Nevertheless, despite the crowds and the noise, for three-and-a-half hours straight I felt a relaxed sense of balance—open and spacious relaxation and ease. Meditation was quite easy and pleasant despite the conditions. There was even an instance where a teenage boy came right up behind me and loudly said the Hindi equivalent of ‘BOO’! His mouth was about two inches from the back of my head. I guess he wanted to see if he could frighten me, but I didn’t flinch. I managed to be aware of sounds with nothing sticking.

Even after more than 3,000 hours of practice here (3,100 as of yesterday!) this is an unusual experience. Normally I might have a couple of half-hour or forty-five minute periods of such serenity during a three-hour session. The rest of the time I would be actively working to re-establish peace, using loving-kindness practice to pacify reactivity and gladden the mind, or investigating sense-base contact to sharpen mindfulness and increase equanimity. But today the entire period was serene! I suspect that I received some help. This was probably not just my usual level of parami working alone.

Sometimes very gifted masters can encourage other practitioners by radiating some of their samadhi, metta, or equanimity into the less-developed meditator’s mind stream for a period of time. It gives you a chance to experience where practice will go in the future if you are persistent and consistent. I’m not sure who did that for me today, but I have an inkling. A couple of days ago I was able to bow at the feet of a ninety-four-year-old monk from Thailand who was here in Bodhgaya for the first time. I offered him some flowers and joined his chanting. Tahn Ajahn Tong, a senior disciple of Tahn Ajahn Anan, was attending to him and kindly invited me to join.

According to Ajahn Tong (who is also a gifted meditator) this monk has the reputation of being the most gifted at blessing sacred objects of all the monks in Thailand today. So of course, me being me, I was sure to get two Buddha statues and two sets of prayer beads blessed by this most Venerable Luang Por Hoch. He was only here for three nights. I believe he returned to Thailand yesterday. If it was you who encouraged me, Luang Por Hoch, thank you. Please feel free to do that as often as you like!

Tahn Ajahn Dtun, a well respected contemporary of Tahn Ajahn Anan, also passed through last week. Reverential salutations were made and flowers offered to him too. As Lord Buddha states in the *Mangala Sutta*, ‘Offerings of respect made to worthy ones bring the highest blessings’. Lucky me to have such opportunities! Bodhgaya is a magnet for some of the greatest monks and nuns on the planet. All wish to show respects at this most sacred site.

As if to make up for some of the poorly behaved locals at the temple earlier today, our small group has now been joined by four long-time Indian Dhamma students from Delhi. Sandeep, Mettre, Monica, and Maheema are all sincere practitioners with impeccable manners. I met them while teaching at a centre in Delhi last December. They have come to join us in meditation and for some lively Dhamma discussions. These Indian students of Lord Buddha seem to know precisely what their doubts are and are keen to overcome them. Their active investigation into Dhamma is engaging and refreshing.

This group associated with the centre Delhi Dhammarama are hoping to establish a forest monastery in our lineage in due course. Many senior teachers from our tradition have already visited, so the signs seem promising. At my suggestion, today they visited the place where Lady Sujata offered milk rice and also the Austerity Cave. They then joined us at the Bodhi Tree for a few hours of evening meditation. After visiting the country of these people’s birth for so many years, it feels good to meet and include some Indians in our previously insular practice circles.

Now back to the pilgrimage, to the site of Buddha’s final Nibbana....

### **Pilgrimage Day 12: Kusinara (February 28)**

*Then came the day that I felt lucky enough to be able to spend my twenty-first birthday at Vaishali, visiting the still fully intact Ashokan pillar at the ancient monastery site. Kusinara was great too. The serenity I felt at the spot was just amazing. When we came in, some people did cry. I think I only got a bit teary that time... with gratitude for Him. But when I sat to meditate, the understanding came where I knew that Lord Buddha’s body was gone. He was gone,*

*but his teachings were here, still here with us. And his legacy is what should remain and be carried on through practice. — Angie*

We were at the gates to the site of the Mahāparinibbana just after sunrise. There was already a large group of Thais there before us, led by a famous senior monk from Ayutthaya province. His group were well-behaved and all wearing white just like our group. As this senior monk was getting older, he'd decided to spend one week in one holy site, and visit a different site each year. Clearly he wanted his following to meditate and practise more deeply. I respect this monk's kindness towards his students very much.

Space inside the Mahāparinibbana Vihara is limited. With this senior monk's group of one hundred and our group of thirty-five, and needing to leave space for people to circumambulate the statue of the reclining Buddha, it was a bit of a squeeze. With this other senior bhikkhu leading his group's chanting, I allowed our group to simply rejoice and soak up the faith and harmony by sitting quietly wherever they'd fit.

After the Venerable Luang Por's group left the vihara to go and meditate outside, our meditation was extremely peaceful. A whole hour went by quickly with the most wonderful sense of bright, pure, empty bliss. I looked at Ajahn Max who was sitting right next to me and he looked as blissed out as I felt. I enquired, 'Was your sitting peaceful?' A long pause ensued before he answered, 'Sungop mahk', *very peaceful*.

Back on the bus, I asked the pilgrims how many of them had a very peaceful sit. Thirty out of thirty-five raised their hands. Then I asked how many had just had their most peaceful sitting ever. About five people raised their hands. It was certainly one of my most peaceful as well. It's challenging to try and describe, but I believe that sometimes at these holy places some of the Buddha's blessings flow forth. I don't know how, and it's never guaranteed, for you never know when it might occur. Certainly the sincerity of the pilgrims and their level of merit must be a factor.

After such an uplifting morning we were keen to get back to the site of the Mahāparinibbana. For our second visit we sat outside under a tree. It was lovely to have the time to be physically still and just to sit. Many in the group have settled into sitting for longer sessions now,

finding that if they stick with it long enough the mind can become gladdened and bright. Our sit was not as peaceful as in the early morning, but lovely nonetheless. Hearing the chanting of various Thai, Sri Lankan, Burmese, and Vietnamese groups in the distance was an opportunity to rejoice in others' beautiful expressions of faith and love.

As we were only in Kusinara for one full day, I wanted to practice a lot. After lunch and a short rest, we travelled to the nearby site of another ancient chedi, the place where Lord Buddha's body was cremated. This place is both a little sad and also quite joyful. It was where the sacred Buddha relics were formed. It seems that a certain amount of the merits of the Buddha were able to fuse to these relics, so that when people pay respects and meditate nearby they often feel an uplifting sense of peace.

Just before he passed into 'Nibbana without remainder' Lord Buddha told Ananda, who was grieving, that the suttas and training rules would be his legacy. Lord Buddha had been prolific in teaching 84,000 Dhamma verses over forty-five years. He said they should be seen as representing the Buddha, and that his disciples should not feel that their teacher was gone. Even so, apparently everyone with faith who was less than an anagami shed tears at the Buddha's passing. It's evidently very difficult not to get attached to such profound goodness and boundless, all pervasive, selfless love. The anagamis and arahants experiencing the two uppermost levels of liberation understood the impermanent nature of phenomena with purified equanimity, and did not grieve in the same way.

Lord Buddha also clearly stated that his teaching is not nihilistic, and that he had attained to something 'Deathless'. I encouraged my students to consider this deeply. The Buddha's body died, but his purified and liberated mind continued to experience unshakable peace in some profoundly subtle and indescribable way. The Buddha also said that those who see Dhamma see the Buddha. So we need not lament, we need to practise!

It was great to sit for two hours and then do our evening chanting at this powerful ancient site with its gentle dome of earthen bricks. Since this was the place of relics, I also requested some relics and promised to take care of them by enshrining them in the Bodhgaya-Ananda-Cetiya later in the year—if the Buddhas and devas felt it's appropriate.

Later in the evening I read from the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*, which details many of the wondrous and interesting events leading up to and surrounding the Buddha's final Nibbāna. There was much to consider so we only got halfway through. The rest we left for Lumbini in the following days.

### **Between Twin Sala Trees**

On the folded robes of monks,  
Golden ochre piled quite high.  
The Teacher of gods and humans,  
Lay on his right side.

Monks sat silently in the quiet grove.  
Having entered nibbāna one and all.  
Except for the Arahants and Anagāmi,  
From many an eye tears did fall.

The sky was filled with devas,  
For twenty leagues around.  
To witness the momentous occasion,  
A Tathagatha laying the khandas down.

They wished to pay respects,  
With warm loving regards.  
But sad they were as well...  
Separation from the loved.

For forty five years the Sage had wandered,  
Having taught all with ears to hear.  
A happy sight for those with faith,  
A refuge to draw near.

Between twin sala trees,  
With blossoms raining down.  
First the Buddha entered the jhanas,  
Then Nibbāna - without remainder.

Although his body took one last breath,  
 We must ask ourselves, what died?  
 Mahaparinibbana...  
 What remained is purified mind.

Neither eternalism or nihilism,  
 No self to destroy or subsist.  
 Formations pacified, the other shore,  
 Unconditioned bliss.

*Ajahn Achalo*

### **Pilgrimage Day 13: Kusinara to Lumbini (March 1)**

*As a result of the broken foot and the lack of ramps, I was walking on my knees all the way into the Mahaparinibbana Temple and also up into the Buddha's kuti in Savathi. I had a sense that I needed to do this, to crawl in on my knees, to seek forgiveness of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha and to develop humility and reverence. Rather than feel embarrassed, I found these contemplations to be nourishing. Humility is beautiful, reverence is suitable. The injury slowed me down and bought an even deeper attitude of contemplation and of looking inwards.—Chooiwan*

We were hoping for another shower of blessings this morning and followed the same schedule, meeting the Thai Ajahn and his followers at the gate. Things progressed somewhat similarly with lovely chanting, but the arrival of a large group of Vietnamese merit makers changed the vibe considerably. Ajahn Max and I were sitting against the wall at the feet of the reclining Buddha, where people make offerings. We were brushed up against constantly and nearly stood on several times before I noticed an adjacent quiet corner and judiciously bailed out. I could see the agitated scene would be going on for quite some time. Having pulled their hats down over their eyes as we often do, Ajahn Ghit, Ajahn Max, and Ajahn Visalo didn't notice that their commander had retreated, so they stuck it out until it was time to go. I had a nice sit in my corner, but did have to spend some time letting go of thoughts, feelings, and reactions to that particular Vietnamese group and their methods of showing respect.

After an hour or so, our group placed a sparkly golden robe on the hallowed stone statue. We circumambulated around the statue (and other groups) with the robe three times, which proved quite the challenge. Some members of my group hadn't gotten the concept that if they stopped then the whole group must also stop. On several occasions I had to pull the robe quite vigorously to get the team moving again. It was not so much herding cats as dragging them along! Placing the robe over the statue was another logistical challenge, as a group of friendly Thais eagerly joined in—so eagerly in fact that I had to ask one man, 'Do you mind if I can have one corner of the robe that I am actually offering?' Most people enjoyed this devotional offering, but I was glad when it was over. Then I rejoiced in the pilgrims' happiness.

After breakfast we had another peaceful time under a tree in the well-tended grounds. It was a privilege to have been able to practise for long sessions here on four occasions, plus the one at the cremation site. There was time to consider the incredible outcome of the Buddha's extraordinary efforts and offerings. I felt immensely grateful to Shakyamuni Buddha, and also happy for him that after fulfilling his special destiny he was able to truly rest in the Deathless, in unshakable peace. His legacy has endured a long time and to this day benefits hundreds of millions of people.

After lunch we were on the bus again and headed for the border of India and Nepal. We passed abundant fields of wheat and mustard greens, and school children who eagerly smiled and waved at us as we drove by. A few kilometres from the border, we stopped at a Thai monastery called Wat 960. Wat means 'monastery' in Thai, and the 960 is for the year it was established, which happened to be the year the late Thai King Rama the 9th celebrated his 60th year as Thailand's constitutional monarch. The bathrooms there are dazzlingly clean and fresh smelling, which is somewhat of an anomaly in rural India. There is also a lovely gift shop and free fried roti with sweetened condensed milk on offer, made by cheerful Thai aunty types. That was a big hit for the five-preceptors, while the eight-preceptors went shawl and scarf shopping instead. I was hoping to get an orange T-shirt with a smiling Ganesh to secretly use as pyjamas, but alas the gods did not support this, as they had sold out!

Khun Lek offers the monks here freshly ground espresso powder whenever she passes through, and the monks in my group were generously

treated to double shots. The resulting cheerfulness proved helpful for the upcoming long wait at the border, which we reached within the hour.

For some reason that only Indian and Nepali border officials can fathom, crossing the border takes a long time. The two checkpoints at Sonauli are only a hundred metres apart, but we were stuck between them for at least an hour, and this was after a nine-hour journey. Since we'd already done a lot of chanting and were now feeling fatigued, I decided to relax the vibe by encouraging a few of the pilgrims to come to the front of the bus and sing us all a song. The microphone and speakers were already in place, as was a captive audience. I admit that we broke our precepts here, but it was after a long drive and a very strong cup of coffee...sometimes these things occur under extenuating circumstances. (I won't do it again, I promise!) Limping but cheerful, Chooiwan sung Lara's Theme, Lean Lim sung Sound of Silence, Jintana gave us a few lines of Streisand, and Venerable Chikwang Sunim even sung us a song in Korean. And because I felt like I was drowning in fatigue and claustrophobia there at the border I sung the chorus of John Legend's 'All of Me' as a positive affirmation: 'My head's under water but I'm breathing fine...you're crazy and I'm out of my mind'. Yup! Don't ask me how I even know the words, and don't ever give me a double shot of strong roast espresso!

Once we were released from the between-borders bardo state, we regained our normal composure. The road to the hotel was being redone, so the rest of the ride was extremely bumpy. The hotel, however, is probably the nicest of the trip and we would happily be staying three nights. The following morning after a light breakfast we would walk three kilometres to Lumbini Grove, the site where the Bodhisattva was born.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

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### *Where the Last Birth Illuminated the World*

#### **Post-Pilgrimage Bodhgaya, 1 p.m. (March 26)**

This morning was unseasonably stormy, which has cooled things down nicely and settled the dust as well. Yesterday afternoon I was sitting in the shadow of the chedi, and though there was a gentle breeze, my forearms left sweat marks on the robe covering my thighs and droplets of sweat coalesced on my brow. It must have been around thirty-eight degrees Celsius. The Bodhi Tree has now shed around ninety-nine percent of its foliage, so while sitting under the shade of the Bodhi Tree is still a powerful metaphor, it is a sweaty practice indeed! It will get steadily warmer from here—by the beginning of May temperatures can reach forty-eight degrees. I honestly think I would die if I stayed! Most of the commercial airlines fly here until the end of March, with a break until the October 1. The hot season is too hot and the wet season is too wet for tourists.

The Bodhi Tree looks kind of sad now, bald and twiggy as it is. Someone said it had an austere kind of beauty, but I couldn't quite convince myself. In a few days, after this heavy rain, it will sprout tens of thousands of new baby leaves that are reddish pink in hue. I doubt we will witness this, although as soon as you close your eyes to meditate it doesn't really matter.

In three days we will be leaving Bodhgaya once again. As opposed to last year, I am not feeling grief or separation anxiety. I just feel incredibly grateful to have completed the 3,000 hours vow and three full pilgrimages as well; to have been supported to be here on so many occasions and

in turn to have supported many others in coming to practise here too; grateful for the Buddha, the Chedi, the Tree, the Buddha Metta statue, the entire Bodhi Mandala, and for devotional practice and the practice of pilgrimage itself. And I'm grateful for the peace, wisdom, and wellbeing that Buddhist practice brings. Even though there is still a way to go, having come even a little way out of suffering is such a privilege and a relief.

On a more mundane level, my journal writing may slow down now. I don't have writer's block so much as writer's cramp! Tapping away on this tablet four hours per day has begun to wear on the ligaments in my hand. I'll do my best to soldier on, enduring with the tendon pain. There are just a few days left now between fulfilled vows and the abbot's duties awaiting me back home.

### **Pilgrimage Day 14: Lumbini Grove, Nepal (March 2)**

*If anyone of us were not well, we would offer each other medicines and ask whether any help was needed. We would watch out for each other as one big happy family. This sort of warmth and tender concern from all of us towards each other demonstrated how we all tried our best to understand the teachings of the Buddha and put them into practice, even though it was over more than two thousand years ago that he taught. — Soo Ping*

The much-needed rest awaiting us in the quiet, clean, and spacious Japanese-run Kasai Hotel was wonderful. I could feel an infection growing in my upper chest, and several of the other pilgrims had caught bugs by this stage. I'd designed the itinerary with this in mind, knowing from experience that by now everyone would be starting to feel tired. That's why I'd scheduled three nights at two of the most quiet of the sacred sites, Lumbini in Nepal, and then Savathi back over the border in Uttar Pradesh. There was less travelling and less to see and do now, but lots of time to meditate for those who were still well and time to rest for those who weren't.

We started with a '5-6-7' morning, waking up at 5 a.m., breakfasting at 6, and walking into the Grove at 7. The hotel was situated right at the periphery of Lumbini Grove, a large protected and reforested area

that is reserved for monasteries from many different traditions. These form a peaceful buffer surrounding the hallowed site of the Bodhisattva's birth. Our location meant we could turn the long walk into the site into a walking meditation practice. Khun Lek asked me three times, 'Are you sure you want everyone to walk, Ajahn?' She'd never known another pilgrimage group to do this. Thais' abhor exercise!

We set out from the hotel in the misty morning air wearing hats, shawls, and scarves. Lumbini is closer to the Himalayas and at a higher elevation so the mornings are cool. We began the three-kilometre walk, monks and nun at the front of the line. Some people practised mindfulness of their footsteps, while others recited mantras quietly on their prayer beads. Our guides and Chooiwan went ahead in electric auto rickshaws to set up a nice place close to the birth site.

The site of the Buddha's birth is contained within a building approximately twenty-by-twenty metres wide. It is possible to circumambulate the periphery on a wooden boardwalk before paying respects at the very special place in the centre. Remains of an old stone carving depicting the birth scene (possibly from King Asoka's time) are enshrined directly above the actual birthplace.

A group of around a hundred Nepali high school students were queued up ahead of us to pay respects within the building. At first I was quite touched, as one does not often see reverential groups of teenagers. But as I approached, a different sense impression took prominence in my mind. Foot odour! It was the distinct smell of feet that had been trapped in unwashed socks and cheap vinyl shoes, multiplied by a hundred...and in a confined space no less. I had committed myself to circumambulating three times, so I did so out of gratitude to Lord Buddha. Then I made a little aspirational prayer: 'May whatever acts of non-virtue I've committed in the past be purified by this act of penance! May the sweet smelling fragrance of virtue be fully purified!' It was a relief to leave the building and head towards our sitting place. I would attempt to pay respects here again in a more composed manner later.

We had half-an-hour for chanting and an hour-and-a-half for sitting practice, though we were challenged by tourists and pilgrims taking photographs and selfies all around us. Many were taking photos of us as well, as organised groups led by monks seem to be less common here. After leading the chanting I pulled my knitted hat down over my

eyes, pushed my earplugs in deeply and tried to make the most of it, thinking of the incredible significance of the Bodhisattva's birth. The following day we would choose a space further away. In any event it was an honour to be there.

Afterwards, I peeped into the birth site on a hunch, thinking the queues to pay respects may have been smaller. No one was in there. I was able to do three full-length prostrations on the boardwalk, my head hovering less than a metre from the very place the Bodhisattva entered this world in his last birth. I felt such gratitude, love, and awe. How do you describe such appreciation? It is better just to bow as deeply as one can. It was here that the Bodhisattva took seven steps in the northern direction and with one hand pointed up said, 'I am foremost in the world'. With the other hand pointed down he said, 'This is my last birth'. At this very spot the explosion of light that filled the universe occurred—the light of millions of lives worth of accumulated merit, and of his unstoppable mission that would successfully liberate millions of beings! It even lit up the hells for a few moments, or so we are told. The Mahā-Bodhisattva's merits had the power to illuminate everything. It is only the darkness of ignorance and kamma that obscures this light from beings' minds.

### **Worlds Within Worlds**

Several of the international monasteries and temples within the Lumbini Grove are really very beautiful. In the afternoon we headed off in the bus and were able to park directly in front of the large Chinese monastery. Khun Lek chatted with the abbot, who granted us permission to sit in meditation within the grand hall. I found the meditation session there to be still and peaceful, even though we were about a kilometre away from the site of the birth. If you are able to find a quiet place to sit, away from the armies of compulsive and mindless photo-taking tourists, the Buddha's blessings shine forth powerfully. We did twenty minutes of chanting and once again many of the Chinese Malaysians enjoyed reciting the *Heart Sutra* in Mandarin, this time with great acoustics.

I had to work diligently to help the group tick off their formal practice requirements in order to fulfil our vow. I planned to get everyone to practise a lot in the afternoon, breaking the sessions up by strolling mindfully along to the next fabulous temple. Alas no one else

seemed quite as determined to fulfil the vow! Keeping them moving swiftly and restraining them from taking photos until after our practice took a special focus on my part. After we were done they could be appreciative and dreamy-eyed, looking at all the beautiful architecture and Buddhist art, which I also love.

Next we visited the Korean meditation hall, hoping to chant in there as well. I would have asked Venerable Chikwang Sunim to chant for us in Korean if we had been given the chance, but unfortunately the hall was being renovated and access was not allowed. So we wandered a little further and found a Tibetan monastery from the Karmapa's Karma-Kagyu lineage. When we entered the hall no monks were in sight, but they could be heard in the distance doing their evening puja.

There was no one to ask permission to sit, so we bowed and sat anyway, asking permission of the Buddha statue instead. The deep guttural chanting of the monks and the timeless sacred noises of the drums, horns, and cymbals made for a wonderful backdrop and a pleasant surprise. Many pilgrims said they felt completely transported to a mountaintop in Tibet. After our meditation we did a few more chants and then I allowed time for photos.

### **Pilgrimage Day 15: Lumbini Grove (March 3)**

Although I'd hoped to find a quieter, warmer place to sit within the Grove this morning, when we woke up it was raining. Therefore I swapped the morning and afternoon schedules so that we'd be under cover in the international monasteries in the morning, then hopefully outside in the Grove with fine weather in the afternoon.

After breakfast I noticed some people's faces seemed forlorn at the soggy weather, so I picked up the microphone on the bus and said truthfully, 'My dear students, if I trusted that you would meditate in your rooms I would gladly give permission for you to do so. But since I have absolutely no confidence that you would do so, and every confidence that you would all go back to sleep, we will be meditating in the international monasteries!' They all laughed, recognising the truth of my words, and then seemed more willing to rise to the occasion.

Once again we enjoyed a peaceful meditation and chanting session in the Chinese monastery. The rain kept the tourists away, so we were

uninterrupted. Next we found our way to an extremely beautiful Tibetan-inspired centre with a meditation hall contained within a chedi. The floor was pristine white marble and the tall, dome-shaped ceiling was painted with Buddhas and bodhisattvas in the most serene and tranquil shades. Perhaps, I thought, Tushita heaven looks like this. Loud chanting with tacky music was being played over the audio system, which I found a little disappointing, but I could see that the Malaysians were very joyful. We sat for an hour-and-a-half in there as well, me with earplugs pushed in deep, the others doing appreciative listening meditation. As we headed back to the hotel the weather appeared to be clearing up and the pilgrims were looking cheerful and inspired.

After lunch we reassembled for our afternoon session of walking meditation into the sacred Grove. The weather in these parts is strange. In the sun it feels too hot, then in the shade it suddenly feels too damp and cold. Where is that elusive Middle Way? Back at the hotel perhaps? No! That may be 'the Upper Middle Way' and will not lead to insight or liberation. We must practise patient endurance with feelings and be mindful of impermanence and change.

Within the Grove we found a nicer space this time, away from the hustle and bustle. As we'd already done our chanting in the morning, we had a one-hour group sit, after which I allowed time for walking or circumambulating. On our way out we were able to circumambulate the birth site once more. This time there was no overpowering foot odour, so I sprayed my signature 'Holy Site Fragrance Offering Blend' while I walked. (There was no point the other day!) The divine scents of Damascus rose, lavender from Provence, and rose geranium from Australia lingered deliciously in the holy air.

The evening's Dhamma discussion and reading was quite moving for me. We'd talked of the Bodhisattva's birth the night before, and now we considered the final passing into Mahāparinibbana. It encapsulated what an extraordinary eighty years the Buddha's life was. He was able to put down all burdens, having fulfilled his mission and duty to the utmost. He left behind a well-trained and noble Sangha and an exhaustive body of teachings that would endure, encourage, and inspire for millennia. We were impressed, we were grateful, and we aspired to follow the Lord Buddha's instruction and example.

### Siddhattha Gotama

Consummate preparedness,  
 Inevitable and unstoppable.  
 Arriving in this world,  
 With a blast of blinding light.  
 Not legend, nor myth, nor hyperbole,  
 But hard won spiritual might.

So delicate, so vulnerable,  
 So powerful, so wonderful.  
 One finger to the sky,  
 Another to the ground.  
 'I am foremost in the world,  
 And this is the last round'!

Foremost in the world,  
 This little baby boy.  
 Such power, such beauty,  
 Such grace...and so bright.  
 Will burst through the door...  
 To the Deathless.  
 Which no Mara, Deity, or Brahmin can deny.

Not avatar, or divine seed,  
 Nor emanation of God.  
 But rather a human being,  
 Who had worked extremely hard.  
 Asita the hallowed seer wept,  
 With both joy and sorrow.  
 For he would not see the blossoming  
 Of our Teacher and spiritual hero.

Siddhattha Gotama, Son of the Sakyans,  
 Was born in Lumbini Grove.  
 Yet students of Truth do wonder  
 When was this immanence...  
 His Eminence, the Bodhisatta...  
 Truly born?

When did Bodhicitta,  
Begin to illuminate this form?  
How many millions of lives,  
Have passed by since and before?

When did the safety of the multitude,  
Become more important than yours?  
And suffering beyond compare,  
Become simply par for the course?  
Imponderable, unfathomable,  
indomitable, undoubtable.  
How long did it take sir?...  
Incalculable times four!

The cause of birth was known  
And could have been undone.  
Yet he chose to be born  
Again and again and again.  
Wandering on...  
In every conditioned realm.  
In every possible samsaric state.  
More lives than there are grains of sand,  
On the mighty Ganges banks.

A million times a million lives,  
Slowly perfecting virtues.  
Conversant with transcendence.  
Knowing selflessness,  
Yet choosing to be selfless.  
Building qualities...merits...a following,  
However long it should take.  
Determined to lead them to safety,  
He did it for our sake.

Born human, but not of this world.  
Thus come...and thus gone.  
Quivering with compassion,  
Uncompromisingly kind.

There are simply no words,  
No analogies or metaphors.  
To adequately honour this phenomenon,  
And what it meant for us all.

But please don't be intimidated,  
Or silenced into awe,  
Impressive as he was,  
That's not what he did this for!  
The Bodhisattas efforts,  
Were neither for reverence...  
Or salutation.  
Tirelessly he worked for you and I.  
He did it for salvation.

'Open are...  
The doors to The Deathless.  
To those with ears.  
Let them show their faith'.

*Ajahn Achalo*

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### *Fragrant Offerings in Jeta's Grove*

#### **Post-Pilgrimage Bodhgaya, 1 p.m. (March 27)**

The dear Mumtaz Guesthouse Moslem brothers offered us their customary banquet today. It was going to be on our last day, but alas there is a wedding scheduled. So two days before our departure is just fine. Tahir the bead shop manager, his younger brother Ardil, his wife's brother Tamim who is the Guesthouse manager, and Tamim's big brother (whose name I wish I could remember) were all our waiters. The Moslem sisterhood (Tahir's mother and wife) helped a lot behind the scenes as well. There were a couple of cousins and an eight-year-old nephew in attendance too. Although it takes a while to get used to eating with these various long-shirted, bearded men popping up by your side constantly, spooning more curry or chapatis onto your plate, the love and care with which they do so is touching. This is the fifth time that they have done this for me and my following, and the family-like feeling of love and care is palpable.

They served up a feast of palak paneer (spinach and cheese curry), mushroom masala curry, paneer masala curry (a spicy cheese curry), vegetarian masala curry, fried vegetables, paratha bread, rice, fried lentil dhal, fried fish, tandoori chicken, sweet creamy rice, and a platter of fruit! I'm getting wise to these guys now so I said I was full halfway through the meal! The monks and laypeople said it was our best meal so far. Nothing compares to home cooking made with love and respect.

I will miss my dear Muslim brothers! I've spent more time with these lads than with my own brothers over the past five years. The shared

kamma between us may be quite deep. The third floor of this guesthouse is not just a place I've stayed; it has been one of the places I've lived in this lifetime.

After this journaling I'll be heading back to the Bodhi Tree. I wasn't going to set a formal goal but I couldn't help myself! After twelve more hours of meditation (which I hope to accomplish in the next thirty-six hours) I will have done a hundred hours of formal sitting practice under The Tree in the nineteen days since the pilgrimage. It's hardly impressive, but I will also have done a hundred hours of writing, and I can happily live with these efforts.

Tomorrow we will make another grand flower offering of five thousand garlands at the Mahabodhi Chedi as it is our last full day here. There were some remaining funds and the monks all felt that our supporters would approve of a big offering and subsequent dedication of merits to them. We have three Malaysian, two Thai, and four Indian laypeople, and among the monks one Aussie, one New Zealander, one Indonesian, and three Thais. We may not all be Indian, but we're all still here in India and quite the mix! Like it said on the bag of chips someone offered me yesterday, 'India's Masala Mix'. (And they were indeed very tasty.)

Okay, onwards with the pilgrimage recollections we must go!

### **Pilgrimage Day 16: Lumbini to Savathi (March 4)**

*The thing that impressed us most of all was seeing that we were actually able to practise in every place and situation in the footsteps of Lord Buddha. We have now truly learned that we can practise if there are loud noises, or if there is a strong and cold wind, or harsh sunlight and heat. Admittedly for the first few days we felt some confusion and did not understand why we were doing some of the things we were doing, and aversion did arise. But by continuing to try to practise with strong resolution, we saw that no matter what arises or comes, will pass, if we are able to 'let go' of liking and not liking, no matter where we are, no matter what noises arise, we can experience a peaceful mind.— Jiap and Phong*

We walked into the Grove again this morning. The pilgrims have grown more focused and circumspect as they learn how to approach this walk as a practice. Walking in for a third time gave rise to a sense of having truly visited and showed our respects here. Because so many in the group were unwell with colds, we sat in a sunny spot a little off to the side. We sat together for an hour, had optional walking for forty-five minutes, then came together for a final chant. My voice was a little challenged now, as I needed to stop and expel viscous mucus from my throat from time to time.

Afterwards we had time to pack our things, have lunch together, and we were off again. Leaving the lovely hotel was slightly painful. We were in for a long ride! It was a bumpy ride to the border, because the road was being remade and had not yet been sealed.

At the border at Sonauli we had another long wait in the bus, but this time with entertainment performed outside! It was Shiva-Aarti day, an important day for Hindus, and sure enough along came a float on the back of a truck with a dancing Shiva and Parvati! Another float behind had a depressed and tired looking Hanuman, but Shiva and Parvati were seriously partying! My group enjoyed the spectacle while we waited. As we pulled away and crossed the border, I looked back and waved at Shiva. He blew me a kiss and then waved goodbye. I actually blushed and I just don't know what else to say. Perhaps I've said enough. Let's take it as some kind of blessing and as a warm welcome back to India!

### **Transparency is Best**

Once again we stopped at Wat 960 a little way over the border, to stretch our legs, use the bathroom, and enjoy this mini-Thailand. Coming out of the Wat we bumped into a familiar group of Malaysians who were heading towards Nepal. I think about ten people from this group had either done previous pilgrimages with me or attended my retreats or Anandagiri kathinas. We were happy to see each other. Three members of this group had initially requested to join our pilgrimage and expressed a seventy-five percent level of commitment. They later decided to invite a different monk to lead a slightly shorter and less expensive trip than mine, pulling out of my group 'for personal reasons'. They never told me their reasons, but copied my itinerary almost exactly, though they

left a few days later than our group, hoping not to bump into me!

A fan belt had just broken in the engine of their bus and they had to wait three hours for a replacement or repair. This was the cause of our unintended meeting at the entrance to the Wat Thai. Personally I think these folks should have told me their reasons for pulling out and asked for my blessings, which I would have gladly given. In my opinion, when relating with senior teachers who try to support you in realising deeper and even ultimate truth, one should not make the slightest kamma with deception. Imagine hoping not to bump into one of your Buddhist teachers while on a pilgrimage! It's silly. I personally make aspirations to meet my teachers as often as I can. Sometimes Asians have funny ideas about saving face. Truthfulness is always best, however, at least with spiritual mentors.

One upshot of this meeting was that the lovely Thai bhikkhu who was leading their group had recently been given some relics from an old chedi in Jetavana, where we were now heading. He came onto our bus before we pulled out and formally offered them to me. I was touched and grateful. It was only recently at the cremation site in Kusinara that I'd made aspirational prayers for relics for the Anandagiri Chedi. How auspicious!

It took an hour to get to the border, an hour to cross the border, and then around six hours to get to Savathi. The narrow road meant slowing for traffic frequently. The rural scenery was lovely though. We had a couple of chanting sessions, an ambient outdoors toilet break, and stopped off at yet another Thai monastery along the way. There was noodle soup waiting for the five-preceptors and hot clear soup for the eight-preceptors. The monks were served espresso yet again, which we later regretted as it kept us awake very late! The senior monk there gleefully told me he had met the abbot of Anandagiri monastery just two weeks ago, which is kind of funny since that should be me. Actually Ajahn Sunando, the 'number three monk' at Anandagiri had recently passed through with another group. There was no point correcting the monk and I was happy for his happiness.

We pulled into the hotel around 9 p.m. and called it a night. It would be a six, seven, eight day tomorrow, so we had an extra hour's rest.

## FRAGRANT OFFERINGS: SAVATHI

### **Pilgrimage Day 17: Savathi (March 5)**

The Jetavana in Savathi, now called Saraswati, was the site of a very important monastery in the Buddha's day. The extremely generous and devout Anathapindika, foremost layman patron to the order, offered it and Lord Buddha spent eighteen rainy season retreats there. It was also the site where thousands of wisdom teachings were given and many thousands of beings experienced penetrative insights and were subsequently liberated. In some ways this place was like the Buddha's headquarters, situated in the large Kingdom of Kosala, under the rule of King Pasenadi, another great patron to the order.

Coming into the historical park, we approached the place archaeologists believe to be the site of the Buddha's kuti. The foundational structure has been rebuilt to commemorate the site. The 'gandha kuti' or 'fragrant kuti' is the focus of intense devotion, and several groups were already chanting when we arrived. We set up along one side on a raised area, sat for an hour soaking up the blessings, and then did our chanting. The sun had gotten stronger, so we soon relocated to a shady spot under a nearby tree, where people could either sit or walk in meditation, as they preferred.

I had a nice second sit, however with closed eyes and earplugs inserted I missed what happened next. An agitated monkey approached Joyce, hoping to grab her bag to see if there were any snacks inside. Joyce looked the monkey straight in the eyes, at which point it leapt at her! She turned to the side and the monkey bit her hard on her upper left arm. People then shoed it away. Throughout this, Joyce remained quiet and composed, and I only found out after we'd finished the meditation and formally paid respects. Fortunately Joyce's jacket had not torn and the monkey's teeth did not break her skin. He did leave an impressive purplish red monkey-mouth-shaped bruise though! Joyce was understandably a little shaken.

### **Curling up in a Ball, Receiving Fragrant Waves of Joy**

By now I had fulfilled most of my duties, having led chanting and meditation at the four main holy sites and many other sites as well.

This was our last significant stop on the pilgrimage trail and I felt both relief and a deep fatigue. My body and mind were telling me to take a break, which in all honesty I'd probably needed for several days, so I decided that I would hole up in my room for the afternoon. The hotel had upgraded me to a suite, which was very nice of them, except that it was strangely lacking windows. There was an air conditioner though. What at first had seemed strange turned out to be a true gift and exactly what I needed—a big, air conditioned cupboard to crawl into, close the door, and forget that I was in India being a teacher. There was just me, the fluffy bed covers, tissues for coughing mucus into, and lovely cool, anonymous darkness! I could drop everything until the morning. How wonderful.

I had to do this discreetly, otherwise fielding the tender enquiries and concerns from all of the aunties, listening to their recommendations, and accepting offerings of medicine would most certainly have pushed me over the edge! So I pulled Ajahn Visalo aside and asked him to take over for a half day. I told him not to mention this to anyone until they were all already sitting on the bus.

We had arranged for one hundred kilograms of roses and fifty of marigolds to decorate the Buddha's gandha kuti the next day, but there'd been a little mix up and the flowers arrived early. Khun Lek informed me of this after lunch and asked me what to do. The offering would have to happen without me. I would offer my appreciation from afar. I was a little disappointed not to be able to join in, though I had specifically requested this offering myself, so in a way that was my contribution.

Ajahn Visalo led a meditation and chanting, and then the hour-and-a-half of mindful and devotional flower offerings also counted as a formal practice. People told me later that it really did require special focus and stamina, as there were a lot of flowers to lay out. It may seem like a strange thing to say, but I could feel waves of joyful elation even from within my dark cupboard. I made a special rose-heavy fragrance blend within my dark hole as well and had a little celebratory spray.

### **Pilgrimage Day 18: Savathi (March 6)**

I felt rested in the morning and even had enough energy to cope with everyone's concerns at breakfast. We returned to the park and I was so

pleased to see that the warden had kept the beautifully arranged flowers on the kuti site. I was able to appreciate the result of our group's labour of love, which included an orange marigold effigy of the Buddha in his kuti with a yellow marigold halo constructed by Ajahn Max. We set ourselves up near the kuti again, the fragrance of rose petals and morning dew suffusing the air around us. Everyone was delighted and I felt embraced and included too.

Now that the group were quite good at chanting (I had whipped them thoroughly into shape), we had a long session of sutta chanting alongside the Buddha's kuti. We chanted all of the first three sermons, known as the cardinal suttas, as well as the *Metta Sutta*, *Mangala Sutta*, and *Ratana Sutta*, before dedicating merits. We then also made special aspirational prayers: 'Through the merits of chanting these suttas, the words of the Buddha in the language he spoke, in this sacred place where the Buddha gave so many teachings, may we always come into contact with the pure and true Buddhadhamma, fully penetrate the meaning of the teachings, and realise liberation!'

After the chanting and dedications, we once again moved under the tree, but this time Gautam was employed as our 'Monkey Protection Squad Commander'. Everyone had a peaceful meditation.

### **The Mother's Monastery**

There is a very interesting resident community immediately adjoining Savathi. The land was probably a part of the original Jeta's Grove Monastery 2,600 years ago. An eight-precept Thai Upasika by the name of Khun Mae Bongkot has been developing this site for several decades. We visited this beautiful place in the afternoon before returning to the archaeological site later.

Entering Khun Mae Bongkot's centre, one is immediately struck by how clean and orderly it is, not to mention huge! I was told there is currently a community of 150 eight-precept laypeople in residence. 'The Mother', as Khun Mae Bongkot is known, is an inspiring teacher to many, particularly Thai laywomen, although a few men stay there as well.

The site is immaculately clean with a beautiful gold-leafed Buddha statue and a gold-coloured chedi over a hundred metres tall towering in the distance. Amazingly, these buildings and the chedi were predominantly

constructed by the (mostly female) residents, led by Khun Mae herself. Considering the quality, scale, and elegance of these structures, it is quite an achievement. Clearly Khun Mae Bongkot has significant leadership abilities and a vast store of merits to have been able to accomplish this, particularly in rural India. Leading a large harmonious community is even more impressive than the buildings.

As impressive as this place was, after two hours I started to miss India and was keen to get back to the archaeological site. We also needed to have a Dhamma talk, meditate, and do some chanting to meet our goals. It took quite some time to regroup and get on the bus, but we managed to return to the Jetavana in time for a meditation and Dhamma talk in the lovely late afternoon light. I read and commented on the Anapanasati Sutta, the Buddha's instructions on breath meditation. Doing so very close to where it was originally taught and then giving some practical pointers about the practice as well was a lovely way to show respect for the Buddha and his teachings.

That evening I asked Ajahn Visalo to give the talk. Although he tried to wriggle out of it, the group appreciated his contributions. Ajahn Ghit and Ajahn Max met with the Thais once more as well. Their offerings of knowledge and encouragement were also greatly appreciated. Meanwhile I crawled back into my air-conditioned hole for another session of healing, happy sights, sounds, and experiences still fresh in my mind.

### **Pilgrimage Day 19: Savathi to Lucknow (March 17)**

*I was filled with joy in every Holy site, except the place of the final Mahaparinibbana, where it was a bit solemn. Walking this spiritual journey was a completely different type of experience, unlike any I've had before. It was a big leap for me, which furthered my faith and confidence in the Triple Gem refuge of Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. After returning home I started to experience the qualities of gratitude and contentment gradually arising with more consistency in my mind, and understand now that consistency in spiritual practice and cultivation is the key. — Michelle*

We returned after sunrise to the Jetavana archaeological site. It was really great to have been able to enter this special place five or six times.

We had one more chanting session, one more meditation, my final talk, and an overview of our pilgrimage. I had tallied up all of our practices and indeed, with one more talk in the bus to Lucknow, (which I would invite Chikwang Sunim Bhikkhuni to give) and two more chanting sessions on the six-hour drive, we were set to fulfil our 108 hours of formal practice. I encouraged people to rejoice, consider the potency of this special merit, and then dedicate it to growing in the practice and realising our sincere spiritual aspirations.

There was a shared feeling of deep joy and warmth, of having done something difficult yet worthwhile together and having done it well. I congratulated the other monks, bhikkhuni, the entire group, and myself! I thanked everyone for their positive attitude. We had a beautiful asking of forgiveness ceremony and gifts were exchanged. I was offered a very nice carving of two scenes—the birth of the Bodhisattva as well as the Mahāparinibbana, the Buddha's passing from the world. It seemed symbolic of the fact that we had now accomplished the pilgrimage from inception to completion.

I talked a little about the inevitability of people's feelings being hurt at times, on such journeys and in life in general. People do not always deal with us as sensitively as we'd like. Sometimes when thinking of a group it is impossible to care perfectly for every individual. I encouraged genuine forgiveness and developing the capacity to focus upon positive experiences and feel gratitude. We were indeed all very fortunate. As we had a little extra time, I read some excerpts from a Wheel Publication book called *The Coming Buddha Maitreya*, to help those among us who aspired to meet him in the future. It was a good occasion to sow seeds. After this there were inevitably happy photos, and we would soon be homeward bound.

## CHAPTER NINE

### *Humbly Taking Leave*

#### **Pilgrimage Day 19-20: Savathi, Lucknow, Bangkok (March 7-8)**

*This pilgrimage trip has changed a lot in my life. I chant and sit meditation every night since coming back from India. I never did this before and never thought that I could do it. I've stopped watching television dramas and I no longer post junk messages on social media. I study more Dhamma and chat more with Dhamma friends, sharing Dhamma-related information. I understand myself and other people better and I also feel more independent. I am very glad that I went and I am very grateful. — Taew*

The lay people requested the five precepts within the Jetavana, an important commitment in this inspiring place, then after a photo session we headed back for lunch. I'd travelled from Savathi to Lucknow eight years ago and remember it as being particularly bad (we had to stop twice to have a flat tyre changed). This time round I was surprised to find a significantly smoother, elevated highway.

We chanted together (much easier along a smooth road), after which Venerable Chikwang Sunim Bhikkhuni shared a lovely reflection about the pilgrimage. I appreciated hearing the Venerable's experience in various holy sites. I may not enjoy leading pilgrimages very much, but I really love hearing about the benefits of the practice and of the ways in which people's hearts expanded or their insights grew. Next we had a little rest, and then there was time for a final chanting session. We had accomplished our practice goal and I could finally stop pushing everyone. What a relief!

Khun Lek mentioned that there was time for shopping before the pilgrims' late dinner and late night transfer for their 1 a.m. flight. (This was the one unfortunate part of the itinerary—returning directly from Lucknow saved us a very long drive, but did mean an overnight flight.) I was actually quite interested to tag along and experience urban middle class India, which I've seen little of.

Khun Lek and Veejay took us to a big shopping centre complex around the corner from the quaintly named Piccadilly Hotel. Khun Jintana kindly offered us coffee in the coffee shop there, but then suddenly disappeared. So keen was she to look at the Indian dresses and fabrics that she dashed off before the coffee she'd ordered for herself arrived at the table! I should have sensed that something was up when both Joyce and Jintana had perfectly applied lipstick on their mouths before we'd even stepped off the bus! They'd become 'red-lipped tigers', as the forest monks in Thailand refer to them. The eight precepts had been relinquished and it was going to be dinner and designer dresses.

There was a supermarket and department store within the shopping complex called Big Bazaar. Liv was interested in a couple of long cotton shirts, so Ajahn Ghit, Gautam, and I tagged along as well. I enjoyed seeing the vibrant and dynamic fashion. No one does colour the way they do on the Indian subcontinent. Seeing locals who were relaxed and out shopping was a nice change from the desperation we'd seen so much of along the Buddhist circuit. There was no cheating, no bargaining, and no yelling. Instead we saw polite queuing and easy smiles. It was like being on a completely different planet! I felt very happy for these locals with their lighter kamma and more merit, compared to those oppressed by abject poverty we'd seen so much of recently. I even helped Gautam choose a new outfit for his wife. (That was a first for me and for him!)

By 9 p.m. we were back at the Piccadilly Hotel and waving goodbye to the pilgrims departing on the bus. They all waved back so joyfully and enthusiastically after such a rich shared experience. Khun Jiap, one of the Thai pilgrims who came along with her husband Phong, had thanked me sincerely. She said, 'Thank you for turning my husband into a new person!' He now shared her faith in Buddhist practice and deep appreciation of the Buddha, and was now genuinely supportive of her practice. As we said goodbye I felt relief and satisfaction. Everyone was okay and they had a good time. Phew! The pilgrims were now returning to four different

countries, all more or less in one piece. One was limping and several had mucus dribbling from their noses, but otherwise all was well.

Now there were just the four monks, Liv from Australia, Soo Ping from Malaysia, Shailesh, and Gautam. I went back to the room and crashed, relieved when the loud wedding music from the wedding at our hotel actually stopped at 10 p.m. on the dot. I almost didn't believe it! Thank Shiva, Rama, Krishna, Durga, Ganesha, and the whole colourful gang. Hallelujah! The next day our much smaller group would be flying to Delhi, then taking a connecting flight to Gaya, or so we hoped.

I feel glad at heart to have led another successful pilgrimage, tiring as it was. I believe it has been spiritually significant for all involved. The merits and kammic connections that have been deepened between this group of Buddhist practitioners and the fully enlightened teaching Buddha and his liberating Dhamma will, I believe, incline the minds of the pilgrims towards practising more and ultimately support their liberation from samsara. This potent merit, combined with the merit of past and future practice, will be working its evolution-inclining influence for lifetimes, until the goal is reached. As Lord Buddha said in the *Mahaparinibbana Sutta*, if people visit the four holy sites with a mind of faith, it will benefit them for a long, long time to come. The challenging part now, for all of the pilgrims as well as myself, will be integrating our deepened faith, confidence, and understanding into daily life. We must move beyond inertia and continue inching steadily forward.

### **The Likely Future of My Pilgrimage Practice**

I feel that around three weeks is the right duration for a practice-focused Buddhist pilgrimage in northern India for several reasons. It allows time for meditation practice and study to truly deepen. Many of the participants noticed that their meditation deepened after the first few days, once they'd gotten used to sitting longer. Reflecting on the life of the Buddha with a lot of time for meditation in between supports the consideration and appreciation of the detail more deeply, and with greater interest and enthusiasm. We had a 4:1 ratio of formal practices to teaching, so we did four times as much meditation and chanting as listening to Dhamma. But the twenty hours of Dhamma discourse were rich and focused. A three-week period also gives laypeople enough time away from their ordinary lives to be able to look back on them with more

clarity, as well as time to make resolutions for appropriate adjustments upon returning.

I'm sorry to say that I won't be leading any more three-week pilgrimages as far as I can see. It requires much more energy to lead one than it does to follow one. There is the inevitable illness that occurs when spending extended time in these parts as well as the strain of worrying about people. In part, I wear myself out because I'm so uncompromising about aiming to have the most spiritually powerful pilgrimage possible. I am the one who insists that we all go to the burning ghats, but then I worry about someone tripping over! I encourage the pre-dawn morning ascent up Vulture's Peak in Rajgir, then worry about bandits or thugs. I highly recommend the three steps, one bow practice up the mountain, and then worry that the older pilgrims may have heart attacks! I care too much not to worry, which is detrimental to my own energies. Of course I've been very happy to do this each time, but it would not be sustainable to continue every couple of years as this body ages. I also must return to a monastery where there is a significant workload to pick up and not much help with administration. Senior monks have duties and responsibilities just like laypeople do.

I fear that my deep love of pilgrimage will not die easily though. In the future I think it is likely that I will lead half pilgrimages, samsara and life permitting. These pilgrimages could be just two weeks long, and I may add another site that is easier to be at, while we adjust to the harsher reality of South Asia. Perhaps we could start at Kathmandu with its colourful chedis, beautiful crafts, and gentle people, followed by Lumbini, Kusinara, and Savathi. Then the next time we could take in the Ajanta and Ellora caves in the less crowded and more prosperous southern India, followed by Sarnath, Bodhgaya, and Rajgir. Unfortunately these itineraries would be less spiritually potent as the full, immersive experience, but they would still be of some benefit. It will depend upon the level of interest of my students as well.

I do hope however that some of my younger brothers, up and coming teachers themselves, will lead new groups on complete holy site pilgrimages in the future. I am happy to share my experience and recommendations with them. Hopefully conditions in the world continue to support this kind of travel too. We can't take anything for granted.

**Post-Pilgrimage Bodhgaya, 11.30 p.m. (March 28)**

I had to forego my early morning writing session today. In order to fulfil my 100-hour meditation goal, I needed to meditate for nine hours (plus I'll have to do one final hour tomorrow morning). I left Mumtaz Guesthouse at 5:30 a.m. and walked to the temple. I was able to sit for three hours in my favourite spot before our scheduled grand flower offering.

There was a loud group of Thai monks right next to where we'd planned to make our dedication. Well, to be fair, it was just one talkative monk with a very loud speaker. Unfortunately I understood his uninspiring banter. He was outlining a strategy to get the cheapest price when bargaining with Indians at the market! Then he was having a cash stipend handed out to the monks. Accepting money as a personal fund, accepting it into your hand, and bargaining are all against our training rules! What to do? Only about five percent of Thai monks keep the rules very strictly these days, so one sees and hears all manner of things. It has been nearly 2,600 years since Lord Buddha passed and degeneration occurs. According to our rules, funds are to be given to a steward. They are still considered the property of the donor, but the steward can purchase something on behalf of the monk if it is within the spirit of what the donor intended. Funds can be exchanged for useful and allowable things and then given to a monk or nun. Liv and Soo Ping were our kind stewards in Delhi, and Mae Chee Aimy has been in Bodhgaya. These checks and balances designed by Lord Buddha are extremely sensible and helpful.

Thankfully, after fifteen minutes the Thai monk hushed and we were able to focus on the wonderful occasion at hand. One must expect a little obstruction before making a lot of merit. Patient endurance is often needed. There were two rows of marigolds on arm-length strings. The rows were about eight metres long and stacked around eighty centimetres high. Five thousand garlands is a lot of flowers! Some were bright yellow, some orange, and others alternated yellow and orange. The six monks, one mae chee, three Indian, two Malaysian, and two Thai laypeople sat between the veritable mountains of garlands. Then I led the dedication.

We visualised the four Buddhas thus come as well as Maitreya Buddha in the sky above the Chedi. We then visualised the Chedi

already fully adorned with garlands. We offered these to the Buddhas past, present, and future. We asked forgiveness and then dedicated the merits to our own spiritual growth and progress: 'Due to this and all past merits, may I develop samma-samadhi, from momentary onto the neighbourhood and full absorption levels. May I experience vipassana insights. May I realise the paths and fruit of the levels of enlightenment. May I be liberated from all suffering!' We then dedicated the merit of our wholesome aspirations to all of the kind people who had contributed to helping us to be there, as well as to our teachers, relatives, and friends.

After the formal dedication we did some more meditation before breaking for lunch. The expert team of flower arrangers would work for the next five hours to decorate the compound. They've got the process worked out very well by now and the results are always stunning. When we returned to meditate more in the afternoon, Monika and Surabhi were weeping with joy at the beauty of the flowers.

I'd observed these big decoration days before and always assumed the cost must be phenomenal. But when many people join in it's really quite reasonable. It costs 85,000 rupees, which is around USD\$1,200 or 40,000 Thai Baht. This buys 5,000 garlands and an entire team of flower arrangers, and the result is world class. One of the nicest aspects of this flower offering to the Buddhas is that it is uplifting to the crowds of pilgrims entering the compound as well. I saw many other people admiring the flowers and smiling with joy and appreciation as well.

## **Packing**

On this last evening in Bodhgaya I've been packing my bag and sorting out what to take back and what to give away or leave behind. After six weeks and as the senior monk it really builds up. How did I wind up with so many statues! At least they're wooden and are fairly light. Mae Chee Anita from the Royal Wat Thai will visit tomorrow morning with a big bag to collect left over goods from the six monks and Mae Chee Aimy. Mae Chee Anita enjoys seeing to it that they are given to people who can use them. This way the original donors receive their intended merits as well. Seeing all of the antibiotics that I'm about to donate to a local clinic, I'm feeling grateful that my health has been quite good this time around. People have given me four shawls over the course of six weeks

and then there is the one that I came with as well. The four new ones will be passed on and re-gifted. I really don't enjoy packing, but combining it with being generous does make it more fun.

While sorting through all of these things, I discovered a large pile of letters in the outer pocket of my suitcase. The death letters! My first thought is a grateful recognition that no one actually died. What a relief! And then I was actually quite tempted to open them up and read them. How interesting they might be! But no, I said they'd be confidential and so they will. I wrapped them carefully in several paper fibre bags and placed them in the dustbin. Go on and keep living skilful lives, dear students, so that when you do die it will be with a heart at ease.

### **Repentance and Redemption**

Although practising in sacred spiritual places can inspire effort and diligence, it is also inevitable that some of our thoughts, speech, and actions will have been inappropriate and created negative kamma. Especially if staying a long time or with a group of people. Similarly, after becoming inspired we can make sincere and confident vows for practice back in our normal lives, but fail to keep them perfectly. Life is constantly throwing up challenges that can throw us off kilter or grind down our energy and inspiration. So while we might practise more and aspire to do better, we can then falter and take a few steps back. How do we reconcile this?

I do think it's important to aspire to do better, to sincerely make vows and then to try to keep them. How would we otherwise go beyond our current limitations? At the same time it's important to allow for some human fallibility. This is where acknowledging fault, asking forgiveness, and reaffirming the same vow can be helpful. This helps to put the bad feeling behind us and is good for our self-respect and dignity. Taking on a strict practice for a period of time as a gesture of penance can also be helpful. We don't do this to punish ourselves, but rather to redeem ourselves. We can make a gesture of compensation to our own spiritual life.

To be honest, this is one factor that inspired my original 1,000-hour meditation vow here in Bodhgaya to become a 3,000-hour one and a reason that I made a vow to lead a third pilgrimage. It was at least in part to make up for my imperfect practice and keeping of vows. We have to

keep on trying and keep on going until we get it right.

With some of these things in mind I always make a sincere effort to take leave of what I call the Bodhi mandala with great care. The Bodhi mandala comprises everything in the Mahabodhi Chedi compound. The seat of enlightenment, the Bodhi Tree, the Chedi, the Buddha Metta statue, relics within the Chedi, highly virtuous protector devas, and the devas of the Bodhi Tree. Although I can't see it myself, I am confident that the entire Bodhgaya area is filled with the radiance and light of the merit and blessings of the Buddhas. It's why practice here can be more spiritually effective, and also why bad kamma generated here could prove to be very obstructive as well.

When we acknowledge fault and ask forgiveness in a gracious and humble way, paying our respects with deep gratitude and reverence, I believe that our obstructive kamma will be lessened and blessings secured and perhaps even multiplied. We cannot avoid making mistakes just yet, but we can be gracious and humble towards objects worthy of reverence. And if we want to be supported and protected by devas, we have to learn to behave more like them.

Yesterday we offered the 5,000 garlands as a group and then asked forgiveness as a part of that ceremony. It was the beginning of our leaving the Bodhi mandala beautifully. Coming into the Mahabodhi Temple in the afternoon and seeing the flowers cascading over gates and entranceways and draped elegantly over the walls was very uplifting. In the afternoon I took more time to visualise offering these flowers repeatedly, acknowledging fault for particular mistakes, saying sorry and asking for forgiveness more specifically.

Later in the afternoon I circumambulated the middle ring zone of the compound three times, going in a clockwise direction, keeping the Chedi and Tree to my right. I quietly recited the hundred-syllable Vajrasattva Mantra 108 times while doing so. (It's a mantra which Tibetan Buddhist practitioners believe helps to lessen or purify negative kamma.) Admittedly this is a slightly strange practice for a Theravada forest monk, but if you spend months on end in this place year after year surrounded by practitioners from every lineage, your practice is bound to become a little eclectic! For me it was a skilful way to remain mindful of the fact that I was acknowledging faults and being contrite. It felt good to begin the process of leaving the

mandala before the actual departure the next day, taking care and expressing love with every footstep on the hot sandstone tiles. Taking in the sight of the gorgeous flowers from every angle was another motivation for walking around and around. I hope to recollect the image of these offerings when this body is dying at the end of this life. I made this aspiration repeatedly.

### **A Mostly Sweet, Slightly Bitter Goodbye**

While sitting in meditation late in the afternoon, several monks, my dear brothers, came and gave me special gifts. Tokme, a Tibetan monk who I've known for twelve years, and who my students and I have tried to help a little each year, gave me a rosewood mala. Ajahn Joy, a Thai monk, gave me a very large, gold-leafed and laminated Bodhi leaf. He said it was the largest he'd collected and he wished to give it to me, which was a touching gesture. Then a Thai lady who I bump into here every year came with her four-year-old granddaughter. She sent her granddaughter to offer me a can of cold soda and told her to pay respects. She did so with such grace and it was so cute. It was all getting a bit ridiculously beautiful and I was about to cry. That's when I got up to do the circumambulation I mentioned.

In the last sitting of last night some strong waves of sadness rippled through my mind. Sometimes it's as though these energies come with a sender's address. This one came from Gautam. I could feel his sadness. He's been with my group for six weeks receiving a lot of warmth, and within a day we'll be leaving him. He later told me that he'd go home to his parents once we left, so as not to see Bodhgaya with all of us gone. I think it was good for him to experience the fact that I didn't reject him for his change in life circumstance. I believe steady support from a benevolent older man will help him continue to heal and grow responsible and strong.

Recently Gautam experienced what you might call a 'teachable moment'. Soo Ping, a Chinese-Malaysian student of mine, had decided to stay on the extra three weeks with the monks. She is sincere and particularly determined and diligent in her practice, but she can also be forthright at times. One day Gautam brought his wife and son to meet the group and me, but forgot to mention this to Soo Ping, who was very busy practising around eleven hours per day. Soo Ping admonished

him by saying, 'How come you told everyone else except me? That's not right and not fair'. She said it repeatedly, despite the fact that I told her it was unintentional and that he was very busy. Soo Ping had really wanted to see the baby so she continued to wave her finger and raise her disapproving voice. At this point, the now twenty-year-old Gautam promptly burst into tears! Later I told him, 'You know, Gautam, one day I think you may well bow at your father's feet and kiss them with gratitude for arranging your marriage to a nice, gentle, humble Bihari girl!' He is appreciating his wife more now and calling her every day. He also visited her and the baby during Holi a few days ago as well.

In the last meditation yesterday evening, however, I couldn't push the sadness completely from my mind. That is the kamma of love. I decided ten years ago that I was going to love one seemingly god-damned and dirt poor Bihari. Gautam was the one. I try to have loving-kindness towards all Biharis, all Indians, and everyone really. But when you make a loving commitment you make an attachment as well. And when someone you really care for is sad, you feel the sadness as if it's your own. When some Thai monks started chanting the *Dhammacakka Sutta* nearby, I decided to join in too, as I know the words by heart as well as the Thai intonation. It was uplifting to do so and lifted my mind above the sorrow.

### **Auspicious Departure**

After spending an hour in my room packing, Gautam brought me breakfast and his freshly brewed masala chai tea. Then we walked to the temple together, where we were joined by Ajahn Ghit and Ajahn Max. The other three monks had left for the Bodhi Tree hours earlier. We picked up twenty garlands in front of the temple from Rojan and Sunny, my two favourite flower sellers. Then we picked up twelve very special garlands made entirely of wild rose. There were two for each of the five monks (Tahn Stuart had already left to catch an earlier flight) and two for Mae Chee Aimy. These were from Mr Surendra, who has been my main flower wallah for twelve years now. He had been passing me a bag of six marigold garlands everyday so far, which were to be paid for today. The marigold garlands were fifty rupees each and the special rose garlands were five hundred rupees each. They had been offered by Khun Phongphan and Khun Aye, our Thai friends who had left yesterday. Daily

flower offerings to the Bodhi Tree and Vajra Asana are an important component of daily practice here.

I offered my fragrant rose garlands to the Buddha Metta statue. There are hooks high on posts on either side of the image. Fortunately my long arm can reach that high! I then bowed my first bow of the day on the stone flagstones in front of Buddha Metta inside the vihara. Surendra had kindly offered a bag of loose roses as well, which I then offered to the Bodhi Tree. When I came to the Tree, the Nepali born lama who is the only person allowed inside within the gilded railings asked me to wait a few moments while he swept up yesterday's flowers. He'd then spread mine at the base of the Tree. I wondered what karma he had made to have this special honour. I think he may actually be from the Shakyan family, a direct heir of the Buddha's family or clan bloodline, some of who fled to the Kathmandu valley when their Kingdom was invaded around 2,600 years ago. I don't think the lama knew that it was my last day, but he handed me a large piece of bark that had fallen off the Tree, a much sought after relic in these parts to be sure! I pressed it to the crown of my head reverently.

After this I meditated in my favourite place for an hour, fulfilling this year's modest vow. I've done one hundred hours of meditation in nineteen days. This makes a grand total of 3,129, also counting twelve back in December, and seventeen when the group passed through five weeks ago. I didn't make another formal vow or determination, but I would like to return and do 204 more hours in the future, bringing the total to 3,333! I'm obsessed, I know. Please forgive me.

Next I started my circumambulations, slowly paying my respects and informing the mandala of my taking leave. I did three circumambulations first along the 500-metre long outermost ring, and completed another 108 Vajrasattva mantras. Then I did nine circumambulations of the innermost ring, and recited another 108 Vajrasattva mantras. The practice was very pleasant, my feet touching smooth white marble with each step. I bowed to the Bodhi Tree, to the Vajra Asana, to the Mahabodhi Chedi, and then walked around to bow one last time to Buddha Metta. There I met an old friend, a Tibetan monk I've known for some years by the name of Lama Gelek. He'd just returned from pilgrimage at the Ajanta and Ellora caves in the south. He insisted that I allow him to chant for me inside the vihara. He said that he prayed for my long life, health,

and fame, chanting for some time in Tibetan, which was very sweet of him. The vihara was also pleasantly quiet at that time. Then I took my final bow from Buddha Metta. I said, 'Please forgive any wrong actions and please inspire me through the power of all merit accumulated to continue to purify my virtue, concentration, and wisdom, the path to enlightenment and liberation'.

After this I did one circumambulation around the intermediate ring, and finally one last outer ring circumambulation, stopping to pay respects at the northern, eastern, southern, and western directions. I prayed, 'Although I am leaving this physical place today, may my mind always be held within the Bodhi mandala, and may the blessings of this mandala shine through me into the world. May I serve and benefit the Buddha sasana, the Buddha's dispensation'. By now it was hot and I was tired from the walking, but I was happy to have taken leave properly and respectfully, leaving a sweet fragrance behind.

### **Final Personal Reflections: March 30, Bangkok, 4 a.m.**

It's been wonderful to relate to the Bodhi mandala in a different manner than in previous visits over recent years. In the past I've practised to increase effort, determination, and patience, areas where I can be a little weak at times. This was very important and I am ever grateful for those precious opportunities.

Deepening my connection to formal practices that lead to liberation and enlightenment, in this place that symbolises the very possibility, was indeed useful and perhaps even necessary given my faithy/devotional type of character. We all need to be more of a spiritual warrior at times. Having made this auspicious connection here, now receiving very special opportunities was also truly gratifying and encouraging.

As a bhikkhu, my entire life is supported by the gifts of kind and generous lay Buddhists. To share my experience of how to practise at the sacred sites with a group of fellow monks and sincere lay people was both an honour and an appropriate gesture of reciprocity. We should give back to those who enable us to the extent that we can. In my experience, giving something beautiful back always makes me feel better about my life. Watching people grow and learn, experience deep peace, and develop more confidence regarding their extraordinary

potential is additional gratification.

During this recent period of three weeks since the pilgrimage ended, I have had a more relaxed and spacious relationship to the Bodhi mandala. I was able to enter and leave the sacred site graciously yet with more flexibility. Sometimes I secured a prized seat, at other times I didn't. At times I picked up fallen Bodhi leaves, but on many other occasions I allowed others eager for blessings to pick them up instead. On some days I've done many hours of meditation, and on other days I've spent half my time in my room, writing this journal. It has been a useful time for renegotiating my relationship with this holy place. My love and respect is the same, but my manner of grasping and holding is necessarily different now. I've done the 3,000 hours, I've collected 1,000 leaves, and I've led three groups of pilgrims. Blessings have been secured, prayers and determinations made. Now I must make space for others to do the same, and continue learning how to make every place a sacred place of practice. I must now continue to strive in perfecting the most difficult expression of energy and devotion. That is, to practise a sincere expression of a Middle Way approach consistently—not too lazy, not too wilful or tense—in daily life, wherever I am in the world.



*May the blessings of the Bodhi Tree continually inspire me to keep my mind cool and balanced, and may these blessings flow through me as well, to encourage many others in our shared task of doing good, avoiding harm, and purifying our minds.*

*May the blessings of the Seat of Enlightenment constantly inspire me to keep sitting, and bring mindfulness into every posture and activity, until I realize enlightenment!*

*May the sacred relics of Buddhas, containing an energetic vibration of liberation, draw my mind like a magnet to that very same realization.*

*May my recollection of the all-knowing yet loving gaze and smile of the Buddha Metta statue inspire me to practise joyful effort in the face of outer and inner obstructions with an attitude of unshakeable optimism, knowing the deeper, purer nature of minds.*

*May all beings be well, be happy, and be free from suffering! May they share a portion of whatever merits have been accrued through devotional practice and pilgrimage in the holy sites in India, and may this be a cause for their liberation!*

*Sadhu! Sadhuu! Sadhuuu!*

I will leave you now with just a few more of the lasting impressions that some of my students shared after the pilgrimage, as well as their enduring aspirations. May these serve as a source of some encouragement in your own journey, both in life and in Dhamma practice.

As these were written immediately after the pilgrimage when many participants were still feeling very inspired and grateful to one of their teachers there are some words of praise and gratitude. I feel slightly uncomfortable including this here, but to edit it out would not be honest. So I have left them as they were written. Please understand that I feel very grateful towards the Buddha and to my own teachers as well. Recognising when something has been given and feeling gratitude is an important spiritual quality praised by the Buddha. Several of the pilgrims chose not to share words about their experience so perhaps there were some people who did not feel very grateful as well. This is normal with any group of people. Where there is praise there is also blame. I tried my best.

*With much appreciation and gratitude for Tan Ajahn's relentless effort in teaching us the Dhamma as well as pushing us to practise diligently, I have been following your advice by doing a 15 minutes chanting puja every day. Somehow chanting the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta seems to be not as lengthy and difficult to chant anymore. In fact I find myself enjoying it and feel a sense of accomplishment after doing this*

*chant. After puja (with some calmness) I usually sit and meditate between 30 - 45 mins and this has become my daily task when I am home. When travelling I try my best to put in as much effort as possible as less practice will result in an apparent stirring up of more defilements and weakening in my mindfulness. So this 20 days pilgrimage was a very worthwhile effort for me! — Elaine*

*I know for a fact that it is not easy to lead successful pilgrimages of nineteen days with an average of thirty people, from several different countries with different cultures and traditions, and having to coordinate the detailed program to suit the daily situations as conditions change. It's a tough job which Ajahn Achalo does with 'tough love' for his students! Pushing us because he knows we can do more if we sincerely try. I am deeply grateful to him for making special arrangements for all of us to have wonderful opportunities to make extra merits! Now we are back in our mundane lives, with home and family duties to attend to, and we're not getting any younger! It is obvious more effort has to be put forth in order to continue to stay deeply connected to the Buddha-Dhamma. I have to work out a more disciplined schedule to practise more. As hard as it is... try we must. NO! Ajahn would say. Don't try, just commit and just do it la! Consistency! — Joyce*

*I had mentioned to Ajahn Achalo that one of the reasons for my going on pilgrimage was to dedicate merits to my parents who had both passed on. I did so at each site, and also learnt from Ajahn how to dedicate merits both more broadly and/or specifically, as well as seek forgiveness. I was always quite lax in this area previously, and being able to do it sincerely and repeatedly from the heart was something I needed to practise. It felt good to do this for my dear parents. I had heard so much about Indian Holy Site Pilgrimage from friends before, but the experience is much more nuanced and rich when one is actually there. Conditions allowing, I would like to go to the places that I could not get to on two feet this time, especially Vulture's Peak. I am so happy that Ajahn will continue to lead 'Half-Pilgrimages', and I hope and intend to join. — Chooiwan*

*During the pilgrimage many of my fellow pilgrims became my 'Kalyamitta' - true spiritual friends. Once they found out I would stay on to join Ajahn Achalo's small group for further practice at Bodhgaya,*

*they rejoiced for me and gave me many encouragements. They even gave me medicines and many other useful things such as mosquito nettings so that I would be better equipped in my further journey of practice. Even during the three weeks of additional meditation practice, on and off, some of them would text me and ask how my practice was getting along, or would just say hi. Their continued encouragements and good wishes really went deep and warmed my heart and I felt as if I was not forgotten, even though they had all gone back to the worldly world, getting on with their family and working lives. This is my first pilgrimage to India and it will always be ingrained deep in my heart and never be forgotten. I had found a great teacher in Ajahn Achalo and new found kalyamitta friends. My faith has deepened after this pilgrimage and I will continue on in my practice. —Soo Ping*

*Before going on the actual pilgrimage, I had thought that as this was the last full pilgrimage that Ajahn Achalo would lead, it was a rare opportunity to be able to join again. So it mattered the most to go. But after completing the 20 days and the 108 hours of practising meditation, chanting and studying many suttas, listening to Dhamma talks at the holy sites, on the bus, in the hotels etc., I realized that it had a positive impact to my thoughts toward my life and a positive effect on my habits in general as well. So it wasn't just a good opportunity during the period of pilgrimage that would bring more benefits in future lives. There were very real and tangible benefits immediately after the trip as well.*

*I've noticed that I can let go of problems and emotional reactions from life's situations easier than before. I continue to meditate and chant one hour every morning and have now also added chanting the Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta on the weekly lunar observance day, in order to recollect the wholesome practices during the pilgrimage, and to help keep my mind in deeper peace. DEEP PEACE leads to DEEP THOUGHT and deep thought leads to WISE DECISION making, on many important matters, such as exiting my business so as to have more time to practise in a few years. (I can see the little light at the end of the tunnel) Life has become less complicated, simpler, and it is easier to be happy. —Jintana*



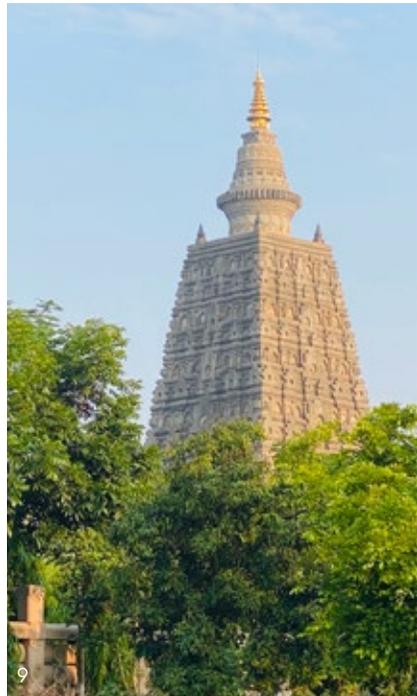
1-3. *Sarnath*  
4-6. *Varanasi*



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8



9

7,8& 9. Bodhgaya

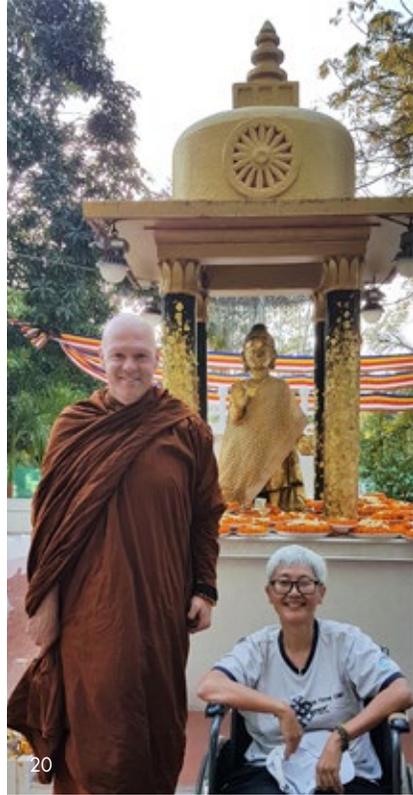


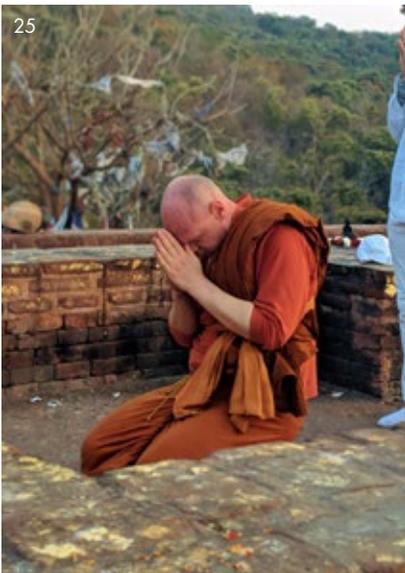
10-14. Bodhgaya



15. *Sujata's Village*  
16, 17, 18. *Austerity Cave*

19. *Famous teaching Buddha - Sarnath*  
20,21. *Veluvana*





22-26. Vulture's Peak

27



28



29



27. Big sandstone Buddha image. Bodhgaya  
28. King Asoka Lion Capitol - Sarnath museum  
29. Sri Lankan Mahabodhi Temple Sarnath

30,31. *Nalanda*

32. *Thai sandstone hall Sarnath*





33. *Nalanda*  
34,35. *Vaisali*  
36. *Kesiriya*



37-40. Kusinara  
41. Cremation Site





42-44. *Lumbini*  
45,46. *Jetavana*



47-51. *Jetavana*



## **SECTION THREE**

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*Life as a Sacred Pilgrimage*

## AFTERWORD

### *Life as a Sacred Pilgrimage*

Dear Reader,

I must confess a small feeling of dilemma. I am aware that many of you will have never been on a traditional pilgrimage and may not ever have the opportunity to do so. What's more, my devotional style may seem quaint and perhaps very alien to you. While I live in a forest monastery in rural Thailand, where Bodhgaya is just a three-and-a-half hour flight away from Bangkok, Thailand and India seem far removed from places like North America, Europe, and Australia. Also, a traditional pilgrimage may seem the farthest thing away from the daily grind of many people's everyday lives. So are all of my musings irrelevant? Have they been pointless escapism or mere spiritual entertainment? Have I been wasting your time and mine? I truly hope not.

I hope to have given you a sense of how wonderful pilgrimage and intensive meditation at ancient holy sites can be. My intention was not to share just another story, but to stimulate faith. That's why I have shared the journey with love, gratitude, and respect to the truly inspiring Lord Buddha and his exemplary, impeccable life. And that's why I've been referring to the empowering teachings and practices of the Dhamma that we all share. I have also been trying to help people understand what we all actually do on these trips that we refer to as 'pilgrimage', hopefully inspiring a few to one day undertake a pilgrimage of their own, if conditions allow. But perhaps most importantly, I have shared my own experience and process during periods when I have put forth a lot of effort and energy into meditation practice. I'm hoping you'll see it might be possible for you to put more effort into your spiritual life as well. I know that you will derive immense benefit from doing so. I would love for you to come closer to your ultimate spiritual goal of realising complete freedom from every type of suffering—just as Lord Buddha did.

I find myself wanting to shout from the rooftops, or from this mountaintop monastery anyway, that we can transform our daily life into something deeply meaningful and sacred. One of the greatest benefits of going on a traditional physical pilgrimage is that it inspires people to do exactly this. When we take time out from the habits of normal life and remember our true refuge—the Buddha and the precious practice of Dhamma—it leads to a refuge within. Turning to our inner refuge, we become more determined and inspired to integrate the Dhamma into our lives.

I would like to make a few suggestions and encourage you to try to accomplish something similar, whether or not you have been on a traditional pilgrimage or done any intensive practice. I am also going to try to explain why cultivating a devotional quality of faith is beneficial, and that everyone can do this if they sincerely try. I am mindful however that this may seem a little strange. I have been on more physical pilgrimages in exotic locations than most of the monks that I know, and I'm surrounded by blessed sacred objects and stunning Buddha images here at Anandagiri. My entire life is immersed in traditional Buddhism. You, however, may feel you live a mundane life in an apartment, in the suburbs, or tucked away in a rural area out back of beyond. Who am I to tell you it can be made sacred? You may work in an office where the spiritual seems completely abstract. What gives me the confidence to say that you can find a way to make all of your daily activities part of your journey towards spiritual illumination and liberation? I've pondered these matters at length and believe I do have some useful suggestions. Although my journals may seem exotic, the practices and themes are in fact central to the life of any sincere spiritual practitioner. After all, the spiritual path is the journey, wherever you are. Our study and practice determine whether our life is a spiritual one—not the location.

I've contributed to some free meditation apps that are available worldwide, and I am privy to the comments that users make on them. Some people have said that they've developed deeper understanding and greater peace after listening to my talks and following along with the guided meditations. They've said it helped them to change their lives. This is the power of the teachings. People have written these comments from such unlikely places as Iran, Afghanistan, and Russia! This has really brought home to me the fact that human beings can learn a lot in the privacy of their bedrooms, so long as they have the

information and make a sincere effort.

This is why I have personally shared a lot of talks and meditations on my website, on the apps, and on YouTube as well. Currently around 1,500 people per day are studying and practising from the material I have shared at '[www.peacebeyondsuffering.org](http://www.peacebeyondsuffering.org)' and on the 'Insight Timer' meditation app. A great many more people use the resources available at '[www.forestsangha.org](http://www.forestsangha.org)', the portal for our global community. I've shared the talks from one of the pilgrimages that I led in India too, so that people can study the life, teachings, and practices of the Buddha wherever they are. Yours might be a 'virtual pilgrimage'. There are also chanting audio files and downloadable chanting books available. Those with faith can chant along with the audio if they need the moral support.

I believe the most important thing in our so-called ordinary life is to find ways to make it sacred. It's imperative for those of us who aspire to realise our greatest spiritual potential. We do this by bringing our spiritual practice fully into our lives, to the extent that we can. Our goal is to progress as much as possible within this lifetime, wherever we find ourselves. Then our entire life becomes a sacred pilgrimage. How noble! How wonderful!

In some respects, monastics in the 'living practice tradition' are grade A-level spiritual practitioners. Given this, there are suggestions we monastics can make based on our experience and insights. If you decide to follow my suggestions, our lives will not be very different at all. We may be wearing different coloured clothes, but our study and practice and subsequent insights may be similar indeed. As Ajahn Chah said in some of his talks, we must ordain our hearts and we must ordain our sense bases with our commitment to being mindful. A hallmark of Ajahn Chah's legacy was that he taught the laity that came to his monastery just as much as he did the monks and nuns. They were practising together.

Luang Por Piak, a renowned and gifted meditation master who was a close disciple of Ajahn Chah, visited Wat Pah Nanachat, the International Forest Monastery in Ubon Rachathani province a few years ago. (Incidentally, it's where I went forth as a monk.) One of the junior monks asked him about the refined samadhi absorptions. He answered by saying that the monk was not yet at a level where those instructions would be relevant. He recommended that he plug away at the basics for some time first. However, he ended by saying, 'If you really want to know

about the samadhi absorptions, you can ask some of the old ladies who come and sit all night once a week on the lunar observance days, and who have been doing so for decades. Some of them may know’!

After living for twenty-four years in my community I know a great number of monks. Some of them are enlightened, some of them are practising well...and some are very sloppy indeed! The same goes for the laypeople I know. There are sincere and disciplined ones (who sometimes make me feel ashamed if I’m going through a lazy patch!) But then there are the stubborn ones who nod their heads yes, yes, yes, when they come to listen to Dhamma talks, yet never seem to do what is being suggested to change their habits and lives. Observing this, I know that the good monks and nuns and the well-practised laypeople are in fact very similar—as are the lazy and unfocused monks and the stubborn and distracted laypeople. It’s time to choose which team you are going to be on!

If you are sincerely interested in making your life into a sacred pilgrimage, then please consider my words. I’m someone who cares for your growth and development and who is trying to help, even though we are not entirely in the same situation. If my suggestions make sense, then try to integrate them where you can.

## **HOW TO MAKE AN ORDINARY LIFE INTO A SACRED LIFE**

### **Recognising Your Potential**

First and foremost we need to acknowledge our spiritual potential on a very deep level, until we really ‘get it’. Many Buddhists take the Three Refuges in an overly external way. We need to understand that the Buddha demonstrated our shared potential for liberation. The Dhamma teachings are the directions or the map showing us the way to actualise this for ourselves. We must follow the instructions. When we do, the Dhamma or path factors such as right mindfulness and right concentration will function in our hearts. The Dhamma wheel that the Buddha sent forth into the world is supposed to be rolling in your heart. That is when you actually become a member of the Sangha—those who practise correctly. It’s not a matter of simply reciting the words every now and then and bowing to things outside of us. There are practices that we need to do in order to keep that wheel rolling.

## **Recognising Your Good Fortune**

The next thing is to recognise the opportunity we have. Life as a human being is full of challenges; having a distracted mind with fluctuating moods is taxing and wearying. Even so, anybody who is reading these words and understands the content conceptually is an incredibly fortunate being. Feeling sorry for ourselves in times of challenge is understandable, but it is such a pity and a waste of time and energy to do so! We have the potential, resources, and opportunities right in front of us and within us to transform our human life into something extremely valuable.

We must acknowledge and keep remembering that of all the beings in samsara, very few of us meet with Lord Buddha's teachings and practices. Of those who do, only some will have the requisite mental acuity to understand them, along with the political freedom, opportunity, and physical health to put them into practice. We must also remember that enormous periods of time go by in cyclic existence where no Buddhas arise and their teachings don't exist in the world. So we are already truly fortunate. It is best to take heed and utilise our opportunity while we still can. Many people all around the world wish to win the lottery. Very few of us recognise that we already have!

## **Setting Noble Intentions**

Next we must set a strong intention and resolve. Strong and clear intentions become thoughts, speech, and actions. Reflect upon the drawbacks of not focusing skilfully and upon the inevitability of death. The day we must leave this lifetime is constantly drawing nearer. If you hope to realise Nibbana and put an end to every type of suffering, you must set this as a very strong intention. And if you hope to meet people who can encourage you in your practice and to have opportunities to practise in future lives, you must actually do the practice! Being generous will help you to be born in an abundant situation. Being virtuous will help you to be born among ethical people. But if you want to be born close to wise people and those who are practising well, you also have to practise. There's no way around it.

## **Embodying Reverence**

Making the tone of our lives sacred requires generating and then

demonstrating a genuine quality of deep reverence. Deeply established reverence is beautiful, gracious, radiant, and energising. But it has to come sincerely from the heart. This requires elements of faith, love, and devotion to be well established and fully blossoming. When developed rightly they are bright, joyous qualities. Yet intelligent people can feel quite wary of expressing loving devotion. Perhaps they don't want to appear naïve, gullible, or stupid. Perhaps devotion seems antiquated or parochial. I am the first to acknowledge that when people feel passionate devotion towards things that aren't truly worthy, like pop stars, professional sports people, or celebrities, it can appear kind of pathetic. (At least it does to me!) Even so, it is important to observe that the human heart and mind tends to actively look for people to admire, love, and trust. We need heroes and heroines; it seems fundamental to the human psyche. Given this, it is best to actively train ourselves to focus this faculty upon objects which are most worthy. In other words, the Buddha and the well-practised Sangha members we trust the most. If after reading this you find that there are celebrities who you love more than the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, you might want to consider this deeply and try to bring things more into balance.

For traditional Asian Buddhists, many absorb the qualities of faith and love from their parents and grandparents quite organically. Their elders take them to the temple or monastery, teach them to offer alms food, and praise and admire them when they do so. For people with a modern education who have not yet met many good monks or nuns, opening the heart fully to a spiritual object will likely be a gradual process. Engendering genuine heart-based faith will be an easy step for a few, but most will be careful before taking such a leap. It is of course wise to take care before giving one's love wholeheartedly to any object. We've all had broken hearts. And yet some people may still be wondering: why would I even want to? Faith and devotion towards the Buddha can be a tremendous source of joy, energy, and inner confidence. You will come to have a refuge that you truly trust, experienced as confidence and well-being in your own heart—and that refuge leads you somewhere that you really want to go. That's why!

It might be good to take a moment to think of the ways that qualities like suspicion, doubt, cynicism, and anxiety about the future negatively affect our minds. These mind states can be like a cancer that destroys happiness. On the other hand, a deep faith in Lord Buddha and

confidence in his teaching and training point to your own inner goodness and potential. It will lead onwards towards auspicious conditions in future births, and then eventually to the liberation of Nibbana. It is something you can truly love and trust. Then the entire way that we perceive the world and our ultimate goal within it completely changes. We have a refuge, a direction, hope, and ultimately a cause for optimism. Even the negativity we can witness in ourselves and others comes to be seen in a different light—as something that is not permanent or inherent and which can definitely be overcome. Faith in the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha and confidence in your potential is the opposite of cynicism and pessimism. These negative qualities can and should be replaced with the optimism and altruism that come with taking refuge. Wouldn't this be better?

I shouldn't just preach, I should lead by example, so I'll share a little story with you now. When I was nineteen years old, my elder sister told me I was the most irreverent person she knew. Given that she was a television journalist at the time, that was saying quite a lot! I did not respect the government, the police, the military, or politicians, nor had I ever met a teacher I felt was teaching me something truly useful. I rarely heeded the advice of our parents either. Obviously I was a very critical and super idealistic person. What she didn't realise was that the reason I was so disappointed in what I saw all around me was because I was genuinely looking for something of real value that I could put my trust in.

After I did my first ten-day Vipassana retreat at the age of twenty-one, my character began to transform. What the Buddhist teacher explained about the Four Noble Truths and the importance of generating mindfulness actually made sense! So I took his advice to meditate every day and have done so ever since. Within a year-and-a-half I had a Buddha statue on a little altar, which I bowed to happily. I was meditating every day, had completely given up alcohol and even stopped watching television! I was making an effort to keep the five ethical precepts. Once I found something worthy of reverence, I revered it wholeheartedly! Within another year I was living in meditation centres in Thailand and was well on the path to becoming a monk. The funny thing is that my sister and I were quite close when I was irreverent, but once I became a practising Buddhist she didn't really like me anymore. She once called me a 'pompous pontificator'! Win some lose some I guess?

Recently a retired combat soldier from a European country came to

visit me at Anandagiri. He had fought in places like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Somalia. This guy was Tough with a capital T. He'd found my website and had begun a daily meditation practice. He wished to thank me personally and wanted to pay his respects. When I gave him a small, blessed Buddha amulet he fell to his knees right there on the path and bowed three times in the dust! I would never have encouraged or instructed such a person to perform that kind of gesture. But when he did this I was touched and very happy for him. I understand that it wasn't really about me. Sure, I was the monk who had shared teachings and methods in a way he'd understood. But most importantly, he had found something he could trust and respect: the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha, of which I am just one small tiny part. Discovering a teacher and the teachings had led to him having more clarity and peace, which also meant less confusion and worry. True and deep gratitude and respect was his natural response.

People sometimes worry that teachers might become proud when people bow to them a lot. They don't realise that we are bowing a lot too. Personally I bow at several of my teachers' feet when arriving or departing from a meeting with them. I literally press my forehead on their feet. That's how much I love and respect them. What's more, I believe that for some of these Venerables it is their last life, so I am not going to miss my chance! It might appear strange (at least it probably does in an airport) but it fills me with joy and gratitude. The number of Thais who would do this is less and less these days, their faith having been damaged by one too many scandals. But I don't even mind if some onlookers feel unsettled by the spectacle. I hope that it causes them to question why this middle-aged, six-foot-four white guy would bow at an Asian monk's feet. The answer, my friends, is because there is something imminently respectable there!

I've done the Three Steps One Bow practice all the way up Vulture's Peak in Rajgir three times. People spit on the ground in that part of the world so I have always got a chest infection as my reward, but I have done it anyway. I've done full-length Tibetan style prostrations all around the Mahabodhi Temple compound many times, laying this body on that sacred earth with deep gratitude, for I know that without Lord Buddha's example and teaching I may be well on my way to the lower realms. I say this with truthful humility. Suffice to say that when Ajahn Achalo says it is good to bow, he knows what it's like to bow!

Of course I am not suggesting that everyone should become as 'faithy' and devotional as me in the way they express respect and gratitude. Some people simply have a more shy and modest disposition. I am suggesting however that we should at least all feel and experience such things. It doesn't matter if you only bow secretly in the privacy of your bedroom when no one else is looking!

### **Respect, Gratitude, and Love Become Faith and Loving Devotion**

Depending upon their character traits, some people will feel more natural respect for the Buddha based on appreciation of his teachings. Others will simply feel more love. Hopefully we all feel gratitude. Ideally though we would love, respect, and feel grateful to the Buddha in equal measure. Why? Because together these qualities elevate our faith from a spiritual faculty into a spiritual power. Faith is the first of the five spiritual powers that Lord Buddha explained 'lead to the Deathless and merge in the Deathless'. The others are energy, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom, and they support one another.

To cross over to 'the other shore' of Nibbana, we need to be able to let go of all of our attachments. In order to achieve this, our five spiritual powers need to be strong. The spiritual power of faith is not the same as an intellectual appreciation of the three jewels. Of course, it is important to take stock of why we have faith, but once we are confident about what we have faith in and why, we need to make this faith powerful.

In our sacred life, we exhibit reverence towards that which deserves it. This makes our minds softer and more receptive to the teachings, and ripe for insight as well. This develops the spiritual power of wisdom. Pride, arrogance, and stubbornness are obstructions. Irreverence and cynicism also harden the mind. Humility, gratitude, and reverence however are noble qualities, so long as that which we revere is good. Among the good, Lord Buddha is supreme.

We have to start where we are. I'm going to go in the order in which I think most modern people need to progress. So let's start with respect. Consider how hard the Bodhisattva strived to cultivate noble qualities and accumulate merits in order to become the Buddha. Naturally we feel respect for such honourable and strenuous efforts. When we then consider how intellectually sound his teachings and advice are on so many subjects,

we will surely respect his extraordinary intelligence and wisdom. So once we recognise the respectable nature of the Buddha's efforts and qualities, let us respect him wholeheartedly.

Next comes gratitude. The Bodhisattva delayed his own liberation as an arahant under Dipankara Buddha thousands of aeons ago in order to teach and benefit many millions of other beings as well. It's something that we can and should feel deeply grateful for. He made that effort and sacrifice for us. We can also consider the ways that his teachings and methods have affected our lives positively. Let me ask you a few questions to get started. Have the teachings helped you understand the samsaric predicament with more clarity and perspective? Was this a relief? Have the Buddha's wise recommendations helped you to live a more skilful life? Have your actions become more beneficial and less harmful to yourself and others? Has the Sangha, the legacy of the Buddha's incredible work in establishing an order, benefitted you? Have you acknowledged those who preserved and handed down the teachings for 2,600 years? When we feel grateful to our teachers we must acknowledge the teacher of our teachers. Have the meditation methods that the Buddha practised and taught given you more peace and clarity in your heart? I'm quite sure that your answer to all of these questions would be a resounding yes! As we can see, there is a lot to be grateful for. Let us feel that gratitude deeply.

Next comes love. This one can be a bit tricky for intellectual people. 'The Buddha taught non-attachment and the Buddha has gone to Nibbana', I hear you mumbling. 'So why should I love him and how can I love him if he's gone?' Actually the Buddha said on many occasions that he had 'attained to the Deathless'. Yet stubborn people with little imagination still figure him dead! He also said that his teaching was not nihilistic. Similarly he also said many times, 'He who sees the Dhamma sees the Buddha'. All of this means that something remained after his Mahaparinibbana.

What remains is very subtle—the purified and liberated mind. But to think that the Buddha is dead and gone is wrong. How could he be a dependable refuge object if he were simply dead? You might wonder whether we can actually love the purified and liberated mind. Of course we can! Why not? The word 'Buddha' means enlightened and liberated. So when you love Buddha, you are loving enlightenment and liberation. Surely this is much better than loving chocolate or

Elvis! Enlightenment and liberation is what we all aspire to in our heart of hearts, so of course we ought to cherish it. But it takes some sophisticated contemplation and inner work. I believe you are smart enough to be able to succeed here though. Let us also remember that Lord Buddha said the mind becomes like that which it considers. So contemplate the fact of Nibbana. The enlightened state is referred to as ‘upamanussati’, which is translated as ‘the highest recollection’. It is a practice recommended by the Buddha.

Perhaps learning to love the Buddha is as simple as dropping your doubts and giving yourself permission. Many modern people, in their determination to be scientific and ‘not be superstitious’, actually hang onto their doubts in a dogged and religious kind of a way. Many of them have a superstitious belief in their doubts! And they think people like me with well-reasoned faith are strange. When something is truly worthy of our respect, gratitude, and love, it is okay to generate these qualities fully and let them shine forth—grandly or modestly in their outer expression, as you prefer. But fully manifest faith as a spiritual power in your heart, in order for it to help propel your mind to the other shore of Nibbana, the Deathless.

The second of the five spiritual powers is energy. A deep quality of faith is extremely effective in generating wholesome energy. This energy can then be focused into cultivating the other three powers: mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. But faith and energy come first and I believe Lord Buddha listed them in this order for good reason.

Many years ago, Ajahn Sumedho told me that the happiest people he ever saw were the Tibetans who were doing the Three Steps One Bow practice all the way around Mount Kailash. They would lie down on the ground bowing after every three steps, and they did so for fifty-two kilometres at an altitude of five thousand metres, where the air is thin. Simply to trek around is hard enough! This example demonstrates how joyful the quality of faith can be and just how much energy it can produce. So if you’ve ever wondered why you don’t have more energy and enthusiasm for practice, you might wish to consider the aforementioned points and see if more energy can be aroused.

Our capacity to love is perhaps our true gift as human beings. It separates us from many other species that often love their young

only until they have grown. Love is attachment for sure. But since we have mountains of attachment, we need to start placing it somewhere that will actually give us good results. How many times did you fall in love only to wind up with a broken heart? Loving the Buddha won't break your heart. It will help you to remember what is skilful, noble, and wise. We all hope to meet with the Buddha's teachings in future lives and to continue our practice until we reach the final goal. Loving the Buddha deeply is the kind of attachment that will help your consciousness gain rebirth in a place where there is a Buddha and/or his teachings. If you don't deeply love the Buddha, you will likely be reborn in a place surrounded by the sorts of things that you deludedly love...and this could be dangerous!

We must train ourselves to place our love on truly worthy objects. Love your favourite teachings. Love your teachers (with an equal measure of respect—don't fall in love with them!) And love the practice of Dhamma. Love is an extremely powerful force and it plays a role in your spiritual life. People who know what and how to love are happier and more radiant. We can purify our capacity to love and the quality of that love over time. It is a training and a process. Love doesn't have to be the deluded and clinging type. But we need to learn how to love properly. By practising metta, or loving-kindness, we can train ourselves to have unconditional and impartial love for all beings everywhere filling space. We should similarly love the Buddha and his teachings. We must also cherish our life and the spiritual opportunities it has presented us.

The Buddha taught that equanimity is the closest quality to the experience of Nibbana. It is also the most subtle and difficult to perfect of the four brahmaviharas. It is the result of wisdom and imperturbability and comes from a great deal of practice, restraint, and patient endurance, along with the collectedness and steadiness of samadhi or concentration. It is also developed through understanding and respecting the workings of kamma. We may not have great equanimity yet, but in the meantime we can place our attachments on the most worthy objects and commit to purifying them from there. The way to make any quality strong is through volitional repetition of thoughts and actions. There is good reason for all of our bowing and chanting!

## Make a Physical Space

Now we need to think about practical things that will be helpful in our mission. Some of you may already be doing many of the things I suggest below. If so, *saaadhuuu!*

First of all I think it is very important and helpful to designate a part of your living space for the Buddha. This is symbolic. You are now literally making space in your life for something important. It sends a strong statement to yourself and will be a constant reminder in your home. The space we live in affects our minds. The Chinese understanding of feng shui (wind and water) and the Indian version vastu have recognised this since ancient times. A separate shrine room where you chant and meditate would be great, but if this is not possible yet, then a corner or nook. If that is not possible, consider installing or designating a high shelf. After we have chosen our specially designated space, it is time to set up an altar. Depending on your available space, this could be set up on a table (a small one if need be) or your special shelf.

To set up a proper altar you must find either a statue or a picture of the Buddha that communicates some admirable quality you love or respect. Make it a decent size so that you can see it when you're moving about your home as a constant reminder that the Buddha and his teaching are central in your life. If it's an image you really like that would be great. Be willing to spend some money on this if you have the resources. If your budget is tight then do the best you can.

You can place other things on your altar as well: a vase or two for offering some flowers; an incense bowl; candle holders and candles; your favourite Dhamma book or collection of suttas; or a nicely framed picture of one of your beloved teachers. Make your shrine look well loved and keep it clean. Some people prefer Zen-like simplicity and serenity that's suggestive of peace. Others prefer a little richness—perhaps some silk brocade or beautiful prayer beads to show that they are offering the very best. Whatever seems appropriate and that you feel happy to have right there in your living space is fine. Make space for Buddha and his liberating example. If you work at home or have your own business it might be possible to have another reminder in the space where you work. An example would be a picture on the wall of a beautiful chedi or of one of the holy sites.

In my monk's cabin I simply use some bookshelves. This is an efficient use of space. I have three tiers of shelves and a little table underneath. I place Buddha images on the top shelf. Pictures of my teachers and other inspiring images sit on the middle shelves. Incense, candles, vases, prayer beads, and chanting books go on the table below. I keep a Kashmiri carpet and a zafu (meditation cushion) in front. Naturally, few people will have as much religious regalia as I. (My students have been generous with gifts to their Ajahn.) In fact I also have a little traveling shrine kit as well. Whenever I have to stay outside of a monastery, the first thing I do when I enter the room where I will be staying is set up my small shrine and bow. It changes the feeling of the space and I instantly feel more at home.

Try to make the place where you meditate a place that you would really want to be. Have a carpet or a mat and a zafu or bench nicely set up and ready to go if possible. Make the lighting pleasant. If space is tight make sure your meditation gear is close by and easy to set up. Think of all the things you spend money on—phones, tablets, computers, cars, stereos, entertainment, food, clothes...—now try to invest some resources in your meditation space as well.

### **Pay Respects: Bow**

Once you have your shrine or altar it is now time to bow. If you're serious about transforming your life into one which is deeply spiritual, it would be great if you could commit to paying respects through bowing when you wake up and get out of bed. First thing in the morning, remember the Buddha. (It's great to then meditate as well.) This is what monks and nuns do. If this seems too much, then try to commit to bowing before going to work or leaving the house to run errands. We don't just bow perfunctorily though. Take a few moments to think of what it is you feel towards the Buddha that makes you happy to offer respects. If it is respect, recollect why you respect him, then bow with deep respect. If it is gratitude, remember what you are grateful for and bow with gratitude. If it is love, remember why you love the Buddha and bow lovingly. If it's all of these, then bow with love, respect, and gratitude. It is such a simple thing and takes hardly any time at all, but it creates a powerful imprint in your mind, especially if done every day. It reminds you that you have taken refuge and that you have this precious refuge in

your heart and in your life. Traditionally one bows three times—for the Buddha, the Dhamma, and the Sangha.

Your dedicated space and practice of bowing can be a valuable resource. For example, suppose you are having a conflict with somebody and you are tempted to become argumentative or contentious. The better part of you knows that it doesn't help, but you're worried that you might not be able to stop yourself. You can bow to Buddha and make aspirations with your head lowered before him. 'Lord Buddha, may I be patient, wise, and compassionate like you!' Sometimes we can even make a little promise before we leave home, by bowing to the Buddha and promising not to argue, or to forgive, or to keep a precept strictly for example. There are many skilful ways to relate to this sacred space that will help deepen your practice in daily life.

The Buddha did not allow images of himself to be made when he was alive. But around three centuries after he entered Mahaparinibbana they began to appear in what is now Afghanistan and northern India. We are no longer in the time of the historical Buddha and we need as much help as we can get to maintain our skilful focus. However, it is important to understand that we do not bow to a statue alone. We use the image as a reminder, a representation. In our hearts we bow to the actual Buddha and his teachings, and to his realisation—which is also our deepest nature and potential. The arahants I know personally, and their arahant teachers before them as well, have all been happy to bow to Buddha images. If it's okay for them then I think it is okay for us as well.

Ajahn Chah taught the monks who studied with him to bow a lot. They bowed when waking up or going to sleep, when leaving from and returning to their dwellings, when entering or leaving a Dhamma hall, when arriving at or leaving the teacher's residence, during formal chanting sessions, and towards monks who are more senior. In the Theravada monastic tradition bowing is simply something we do. It can feel a little strange at first, but as this practice deepens we do feel deeply grateful and are happy to do it. Sometimes we might have to bow to a senior monk we may not particularly like. On such occasions we bow out of respect for the Buddha's training rules as well as to practise humility. It is we ourselves who benefit most from being humble and easy to train. Pride is painful, humility graceful.

## Daily Meditation

Any genuine spiritual life is a life with spiritual disciplines. We must commit to a daily meditation practice. Practise in front of your shrine if it is suitable, otherwise in a quiet place somewhere else. If you're insanely busy, then you should still commit to at least fifteen minutes per day. Everybody can make the time for a fifteen-minute practice! Sometimes people don't want to bother with just fifteen minutes and promise themselves to do it in the future when they have more time. But what if that time doesn't open up? Even a short daily practice is better than none. A daily discipline is something that can be expanded upon later; not having a daily practice won't get you anywhere! Making time for daily practice also demonstrates our commitment and respect. Over time, once we see the benefits of meditation—increased clarity and peace, and less reactivity—it becomes something we sincerely cherish and would never miss.

Many regular meditators express feeling 'something is missing' on days they don't meditate. The practice is a pillar that supports clarity and we notice when the pillar is not there. The mind gets darker and feels dirtier the longer we neglect to meditate. Conversely, the more we meditate the brighter we feel. Even if you have many thoughts, establishing a little detachment from your thinking is way better than being completely lost in it. Daily meditation practice will produce periods of peacefulness if done consistently and correctly. Millions of people in the world today experience this and hundreds of millions have in the past. However, commitment and consistency are fundamental if we hope to get such results.

To truly make our life a sacred pilgrimage, it would be best if we meditate more than once per day. If your schedule allows it then every morning and evening would be great. If you're retired or you have a lot of spare time, try to work up to three times per day. Meditating every morning, afternoon, and evening is the hallmark of a genuine spiritual life. If it's not possible just yet, it might be something that you can work towards. There might be one or two days a week where you add an additional session. If you think that meditating a lot will get boring and tedious, then you still have much to explore. There are many subjects to meditate on. One can alternate loving-kindness sessions, contemplating impermanence, recollecting the qualities of the Buddha, Dhamma, and

Sangha, or contemplate the body as elements. There are lots of skilful ways to engage the mind in meditation.

As an abbot and teacher I frequently meet long-term meditators who complain that their practice isn't really getting anywhere. While they experience some peace and clarity, there is no breakthrough to speak of. When I ask them how much they meditate they usually answer around thirty to forty-five minutes per day. I invariably recommend increasing to two and then three sessions when they can. For people who aspire to meet future Buddhas or to be members of the ordained sangha in future lives, this is the kind of effort and commitment that would normally be required.

If you are one of the rare individuals who loves meditation and who also has spare time and is capable of applying discipline, you can increase the duration of the three sessions steadily. You can also alternate them with walking meditation. I have two very committed elderly students in a nearby city, a retired couple who meditate for four hours per day. They do three hours of sitting and one hour of walking meditation. They also chant every morning and evening. That's about five hours of formal practice every day. Both of them sincerely aspire to attain the first level of enlightenment (stream entry) this lifetime and so they are putting in the work. Unusually for Asians, they've asked their adult kids to move out and to let them have this quiet time while their physical health still allows. If conditions change in the future then one of the children can move back home to help. They are truly lovely and inspiring people and I am very happy to know them. I share this example simply to illustrate that practising diligently is indeed possible and there are some who actually do it.

Of course some people will be thinking, 'But practice is about being mindful in all postures, not just forcing ourselves to sit'. Or, 'Taking on a practice like this and doing it like a ritual in the belief that it will get me enlightened is attachment to rights and rituals...the real practice is to be mindful in all postures and to reflect wisely all throughout the day!' Congratulations for having a very fine partial understanding my dear Dhamma friends! Let me restate now what should be quite obvious but which some people like to be in denial about. When we sit in meditation we are aiming at refining and enhancing mindfulness. The clarity that is developed is what we must then determinedly bring into all aspects of life.

Most people find that the more they sit meditation mindfully, the more mindfulness they can then bring into their daily life. The extra clarity supports wise investigation and sharpens powers of observation. We don't do it as a ritual, we do it to support the generation of the wholesome qualities which will lead to liberation.

Some of you might be thinking, 'Oh my goodness! I can't even manage once a day consistently and Ajahn is suggesting three times and then increasing the length of the sits from there!' This is not a guilt trip, my friends, and I don't wish for anyone to feel poorly about their efforts. I'm not judging, just giving you the information. If you wish to succeed in the highest sense of the word then eventually your practice might have to look something like this. So do what you can. Encourage yourself. Increase your efforts slowly and consistently if necessary. Some people have to do more acts of generosity and service for a period before the inspiration for sitting arises and deepens. For others, long chanting sessions are more rewarding and easier to commit to. Walking meditation works better for some. Do what you can where you can. When I was a junior monk at the International Forest Monastery, Ajahn Jayasaro used to say, 'I don't expect all of my students to be going at a running pace. But I do expect them to be going forwards. If you can't run, then walk. If you can't walk, then crawl. If you are making some progress, then as one of your teachers I am content'. I always remember this particular encouragement fondly.

When it comes to big breakthroughs, or when we feel that things have truly progressed, unfortunately there is no guarantee—not even when our effort is heroic. It really does depend upon how strong our spiritual powers have become over a period of lifetimes. But one thing that Tahn Ajahn Anan says repeatedly that I have found to be helpful is, 'One should practise with the intention of realising Nibbana. But don't get disheartened if that does not happen in this lifetime. You can feel confident that the more you practise, the closer that experience and occasion is coming. The merits that practice produces are definitely helping bring this to fruition. You can also be sure that your number of future lives—the cycle of birth, ageing and death—is definitely being reduced. There will be much less suffering in the future'. Although results of practice can seem difficult to quantify in the present, those with access to the bigger picture attest that this is the case. And that is a really great result!

## Chanting

Chanting can seem strange for non-traditional Buddhists, but it has wonderful benefits. Many traditional Asian Buddhists find committing to chanting easier than committing to meditation, but for Westerners or ‘Westernised Asians’ it can seem strange. It only seems strange because we haven’t done it much before. But if we decide that we are going to do something and we do it every day, after a while it isn’t strange at all. It simply becomes something that we do every day! Once again you can work up to it if you wish. For complete beginners I suggest to do it once a week at first. You can do the chanting in English if you prefer. (Chanting books in English and Pali and chanting audio files can be downloaded for free from ‘[www.forestsangha.org](http://www.forestsangha.org)’.) Chanting along to an audio file can help it seem less strange. It can also help us feel connected to a community and an ancient tradition.

Many people complain that when they come to meditate they have a lot of thoughts, or conversely they feel sleepy and dull. Chanting for twenty minutes can help collect the mind a little, peeling it off of the day’s preoccupations, and at the same time energise and wake the mind up. When you become familiar with the words and their meaning, you can contemplate and reflect on the Dhamma while you are chanting. Chanting practice then becomes a complement to and an extension of your meditation practice.

## Offering Flowers, Light, and Fragrances

Traditionally, Buddhists all around the world have offered flowers, light, and fragrance to the Buddha as an act of respect and devotion. Some people naturally think metaphorically and symbolically, but for other people this is harder. Basically you can experiment with making various offerings and if it works for you then I recommend that you embrace it as a practice. Mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom are seen as ‘light’ qualities that overcome the darkness of ignorance and delusion. So when we offer light on an altar or shrine it’s like an affirmation of our potential. The Lord Buddha also explained that among fragrances, the fragrance of virtue is supreme. The Buddha was the most purified in virtue, so when we offer flowers to the Buddha we are acknowledging this. Once again it’s a positive affirmation of what we respect and aspire to.

These days, people are more concerned about carcinogenic substances and try to avoid smoke and chemicals where possible. You can get 'low smoke' incense that should be fine in a large open space. The Japanese type is quite good. It's high on natural fragrance and low on smoke. Similarly, you might not opt for big candles that are chemically fragranced, but small tea lights are probably okay. I certainly use them. But if you don't want to take any risks you can try rubbing some pure essential oils on an object in front of a Buddha image and let them evaporate naturally. Lavender is great. Sandalwood is my personal favourite and there are sustainable plantations in Australia. Or you could make offerings of fragrant flowers instead. In Thailand and Sri Lanka they offer garlands made of jasmine blossoms that literally smell divine. It might be nice to take on a practice of offering fresh flowers at your shrine at least once per week as a reminder of what you care for most. After a period of years these little gestures gain a powerful momentum.

I have a few lay friends who have battery operated 'candles' with flashing LED lights in the place of flames. You can probably get these in home wares stores all around the world now. Apparently they look just like candle flames, or so they excitedly tell me. I'm too much of a traditionalist to get into fake flames, but if this creates an uplifting ambience and has no ill health effects, then go for it! If you offer fragrance, flowers, and light to the Buddha you can then also make some aspirations. One example is as follows: "Through the power of these offerings of light and sweet fragrance made to all Buddhas and their meritorious deeds, may I grow in virtue, mindfulness, concentration, and wisdom. May I completely overcome ignorance and delusion and realise Nibbana, unshakeable peace". Feel free to change the words so that it represents your deepest aspirations.

Buddhists believe that all of these little deeds generate merit, and at the end of a lifetime the merit accrued is significant. Offering light and fragrance is a daily part of my own practice. I even have my own incense blend! (I know you're not surprised!) I have blended various ingredients that have been offered to me by students and friends. I use sandalwood powder, ground up Bhutanese Himalayan Herb incense, and ground up frankincense and myrrh. I then sprinkle a tiny bit of this blend that I have called 'the Silk Road blend' on top of a Japanese incense stick lying horizontally. It smells lovely! I find it does help to create a sacred atmosphere.

### **Listen to Dhamma Talks or Read Dhamma Books**

Try to make a time in the week where you either listen to a Dhamma talk from one of your favourite teachers or read some suitable Dhamma from a book. Lord Buddha explains that the mind becomes like what we give our attention to. If we are lost in obscure YouTube viewing, watching TV, Facebook cyber stalking, or constantly answering social media messages, our mind has very little chance of becoming reverent, radiant, mindful, and wise—and our life has little chance of becoming a truly spiritual one. (Unless all of your surfing and viewing relates to spiritual matters, which is highly unlikely!)

Give some attention to the things that are most important. The Buddha's teachings will not be in the world forever and they are difficult to come by, so we must give them attention now while we can. Regular Dhamma input gives us reflective tools and creates wise frames of reference in our life. If you listen to Dhamma or read Dhamma material often, you will likely find yourself reflecting upon what you recently read or heard throughout your week. It can be tremendously helpful for maintaining a balanced mind that is not too lost in worry and reactivity. Good Dhamma input is food for the heart. Eat wisely!

### **Avoid Harmful Input**

A spiritual life is one that cultivates the wholesome while avoiding the unwholesome. 'Do good, avoid harm, and purify the mind. This is the teaching of all Buddhas'. On this note I feel I should add that viewing pornography or playing very violent computer games will be destructive to your spiritual practice and spiritual goals. I could have put this in the next section regarding training with the ethical precepts, but it doesn't fit neatly into the category of just one of the precepts and it is so harmful and prevalent now, so I feel we'd better dive in right here first. The same device that you may be using to listen to a Dhamma talk or a chanting file can in the next second be used in these other unskillful ways. The analogy of having an angel on one shoulder and a devil on the other has perhaps never been so literal when it comes to what can be done with a portable device and a data package these days.

We already have the big challenge of working with the lust and anger that are the result of past imprints on the mind. Adding more and more of

these imprints will surely be a disaster. Unfortunately these activities are highly addictive and stimulate the release of large amounts of dopamine in the brain. Research has shown that with frequent long-term use these activities rewire the neural patterns in the brain to such an extent that the feeling of needing to engage in them can become overwhelming and compulsive. In fact it's not dissimilar to heroin addiction.

If you have become seriously addicted and need help it is okay to admit this. You might need specialised therapy or to join a relevant support group. Taking responsibility is better than being in denial. It is also the compassionate thing to do for yourself in the long run, even if it causes you some embarrassment in the short term. Don't be fooled into believing that these things are not harmful because society sees them as normal. They are. Some of the cleverest people on the planet have been paid enormous sums of money to create the devices that we use as well as the material available on them. They know the addictive potential, so the blame does not fall entirely upon the user. But the user is the one who has to take responsibility and overcome the problem. The content providers and creators will have their own kammic consequences to deal with later.

I'm putting these quite firm and serious comments in here right after the meditation and chanting recommendations for a poignant reason. If you were to spend one hour per day chanting, meditating, and listening to a Dhamma talk but then spent two hours with these kinds of unskilful distractions, your spiritual practice would not develop. It's as though you are pouring fertiliser on a delicate plant in the morning and putting it in the soft light of the semi-shade. Then you're taking the delicate plant and putting it in the full sun in the afternoon and pouring poison on it at night. It's a case of one step forward and two steps back. Despite your good efforts at cultivating bright qualities like mindfulness, the unskilful engagement will feed the darkness of the kilesas even more. If we hope to develop our meditation we must practise restraint of our senses and circumspection with what we mentally consume. The 'Middle Way' principle is one of not allowing the mind to ever become too hot with obsessions or violent passions. You can have sexual relations with your partner and watch the occasional movie. But hardcore sex and violence is out of bounds for the sincere spiritual practitioner.

All unenlightened beings have lust and craving. This is normal. But to become obsessed with sex is to resonate with the lower realms, particularly

the animal realm. Being intoxicated with gore and violence on the other hand is to resonate with demonic realms. If we combine sex with violence we are getting into very dangerous territory indeed. Samsara is endless and there are myriad possible destinations within the conditioned realms. The human birth is rare however and it is a potential launching pad to heaven and beyond. It can also be a diving board to animal, ghost, demon, and hell worlds. The potential for a mind's evolution is boundless; likewise the potential for a being's misery is bottomless! So will this life's freedoms and opportunities be a launching pad or a diving board? The choice is yours.

Some people may have doubts about the existence of these upper, lower, and parallel realms. I've completed three thousand hours of meditation in Bodhgaya, which constitutes perhaps ten percent of all the meditation I've done in this lifetime so far (yes, that's 30,000 hours). Suffice to say that occasionally one sees things in meditation. While I do not yet have mastery over psychic powers I have absolutely no doubt about the existence of beings in these other worlds.

We've been talking about living a noble life, about fully embracing the opportunity presented to us and making our entire life into a sacred journey. In order to do this we must make good choices. We must embrace the good and profound and shun the unskilful and profane. Our noble journey will likely be one that takes several more lives, so in this kammic game of snakes and ladders we want to meet with lots of ladders in the future—and to be able to avoid the gaping jaws and fangs of the snakes!

Lord Buddha explained that attaining an auspicious rebirth is not a sure thing, even for people with large amounts of good kamma. He explained that in those moments between births it is like throwing a stick up in the sky. One end is our wholesome kamma and the other end is the unwholesome. There is no knowing which end of the stick will hit the ground, or which resultant kamma will ripen at that precise moment. Obviously doing skilful practices consistently and generating mindfulness throughout the day will prove to be a tremendous support when this time comes. You will have been resonating predominantly with the human and heavenly realms. But the more one has engaged the mind with lust and aversion, the greater the chances are of falling to a dark place. Please take care.

## **Training With Ethical Precepts**

When someone wished to become a follower of Lord Buddha in his day, first he would be told about the benefits of being generous and of maintaining the five ethical precepts. Then he would hear about the benefits of mental cultivation. The five precepts allow a human being to be truly human. They create a safe container for our passions. Within this they cannot flow out in a way that would make very bad kamma and cause serious harm. Lord Buddha also explained that when we maintain ethical standards we are free of remorse, which creates the necessary foundation for the mind to settle into the collected stillness of concentration.

I'd like to add that this training in ethical precepts is in fact a training. Nobody begins with perfect virtue. If our usual habits are off the mark, then we should try to break the precepts less often and work at purifying our conduct over time. It's a good idea to consider the benefits of keeping the precepts and the drawbacks of breaking them until you truly recognise their incredible value. Keep in mind that the Buddha is not a judgemental or condescending figure. He does not damn beings to hell. He did however understand the law of kamma. He saw the conditions necessary for beings to progress within samsara and eventually transcend it. He was motivated by boundless, impartial compassion and immaculate, unobscured wisdom. He said his teaching and training leads to heaven and beyond. The beyond is Nibbana. We can trust that the Buddha's advice was coming from a very good, kind, and wise space! With that in mind, here are the precepts in brief:

### **1. I undertake the precept to refrain from killing any living being**

This one's simple enough. All beings cherish life and are frightened of death. We are also living within the matrix of kamma. The result of killing beings, according to the Buddha, is that one's own lifespan is likely to be reduced by some means or another. Our actions will influence future lives as well as this one.

### **2. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking that which is not given**

Don't steal or cheat. Doing so makes you feel anxious about being caught, and in the future you will also be cheated. It's not worth it.

We should try not to think in terms of short-term gains, but rather of powerful causes for future security.

### **3. I undertake the precept to refrain from sexual misconduct**

Personally I prefer to translate this as 'I commit to being sexually responsible'. It seems to me this precept is not about moralising about the nitty gritty of what you can or can't do. It's about not harming yourself or others. In general it is understood as having one committed sexual partner. Ideally there should be some sense of caring for the people who you have sexual relations with, not just using others for sexual pleasure.

On the most basic level, sexual relations between two consenting adults who are not in a relationship with one another are considered okay. But on a more refined level it's not really about having as much sex as you can without technically breaking the rules. It's about practising moderation and not giving into any form of serious sensual addiction. People then sometimes wonder what they should do if they become bored with their partner after some time. Should they get a second, third, or fourth divorce? To be honest here, I actually think that this might be an intended 'part of the program'. You'll get more sleep and you can then get up early and meditate!

Let me just say this. Before I was a monk, I wasn't a monk! If I can practise the kind of restraint required by our bhikkhu training rules (trust me, Lord Buddha doesn't give us an inch!) then you can manage having just one partner and going without sex at times.

### **4. I undertake the precept to refrain from harsh and unskillful speech and from telling untruths**

This one is perhaps the hardest precept to purify and also maybe the most important. (Although clearly they are all important.) Basically you shouldn't lie or deceive. This gets tricky in the area of 'white lies' and not wanting to hurt people's feelings. One way of considering this precept is that another word for Dhamma, the teachings of the Buddha, is TRUTH. The Buddha realised the ultimate truth and was thus liberated. On the other hand, another way of understanding ignorance and delusion, the qualities that bind us to the wheel of

cyclic existence, is misapprehension or seeing things falsely. It is through seeing the truth clearly that we will be liberated. By staying deluded and deceived we will remain in a state of suffering and dissatisfaction. So clearly we want to make as much auspicious kamma with truthfulness as we possibly can—and to make as little kamma with deception as we can.

Our commitment to this precept will also have a bearing on the quality of teacher and teachings we will meet in future. There are good and bad teachers and true and false Dhammas. If you want to meet the true teachings and bona fide, qualified, experienced teachers who can lead the way, then be truthful!

### **5. I undertake the precept to refrain from taking intoxicating drink and drugs which lead to carelessness**

Regarding issues of substance abuse, I think this precept is fairly clear. But we humans are experts at making excuses and justifications. Many people feel that half a glass of wine or one bottle of beer isn't really an issue, as long as you don't get intoxicated. Defining intoxication gets tricky though. Where is the line exactly? It's a fine line for sure! Many people will admit that half a glass or one bottle usually becomes a full glass and another bottle. Be honest! There is also the matter of the legalised use of marijuana and in some places psychedelic mushrooms. It's not simply a case of whether these things help you to feel relaxed or peaceful. We are talking about the serious and difficult process of purifying the mind of all delusion. While very powerful, clear mindfulness is actually a subtle and delicate quality, it needs specific supports to fully blossom. Taking intoxicating substances damages and dulls it, which is a terrible shame because we must depend upon it a great deal.

What it really comes down to is deciding how sincerely you wish to walk this path and how quickly you wish to progress along it. We are already intoxicated by our greed, hatred, and delusion. We are so often caught in painful reactions of liking and not liking. Do you really want to add any more confusion or inebriation to the volatile cocktail that is your mind state? Of course it's a personal choice. The precept seems pretty clear to me though.

People who keep this precept strictly have reported to me that it supports greater feelings of dignity and confidence. Their dedication to being a good Buddhist practitioner also feels more solid and tangible. They don't have to contend with painful doubts or habits of defensiveness. The rewards of keeping this precept strictly do seem greater than the benefits of being non-committal or only half committed.

It is also good to take a look at other activities in modern life that could be considered intoxicating. We've already covered computer games and porn. From time to time after your meditation, ask yourself non-judgementally whether some areas in your life are currently imbalanced. Make sure to ask yourself in a loving and caring way. You could note a problem binging on Netflix or YouTube, spending endless hours on Facebook, or making nasty comments on Twitter. Think about abandoning or limiting activities that distract or cloud the mind, and embracing those that are conducive to establishing or enhancing clarity.

### **Maintaining Autonomy From Your Portable Devices**

Please consider how often you look at your portable devices. If we hope to have a clear presence of mind established in the body and in the present moment, sending the mind out elsewhere very often will not be helpful. I suggest putting the phone on silent for periods throughout the day and having times when it is not on you. For instance, you could leave it in a different room when you meditate. Don't have smart devices physically on your person either (Apple watches for example). We have to learn how to use devices and not be used by them.

We hear suggestions these days that humanity would do better if we merged with artificial intelligence and had microprocessors implanted directly into our brains. If you hope to be truly human and to have mindfulness or truth-discerning awareness then I absolutely would not recommend it! Ajahn Siripannyo, a good friend of mine, once asked Luang Por Liam what he felt was the greatest threat to the Buddha-sasana (the Buddha's Dhamma-Vinaya or teaching and training dispensation). His answer was a little surprising at the time: 'Technology'. Now that a few years have passed I can clearly see the prescience of Luang Por's observation. Please try to maintain your autonomy and set sensible

boundaries with technology. Trust me, you do not want to be just another cog in the mechanics of the world, because you are not just another thing. You are a conscious being with enlightenment potential. Try to live 'off grid' to some extent, and meditate while you still can. You have been warned!

### **Enjoy the Blossoming of Virtue**

My main teacher in Thailand, Tahn Ajahn Anan, has a lovely way of talking about the quality of virtue. Keeping the precepts is not just a matter of not being able to do fun stuff. People who keep the ethical precepts strictly for a period of years will come to notice what a stabilising effect it has on their well-being. Tahn Ajahn explains that refraining from unskilful thoughts, speech, and actions actually enables the quality of virtue to blossom fully in your heart. Virtue is a quantifiable quality residing in your heart and mind. It is cool, protective, and uplifting. Ajahn Anan refers to this as 'the noble wealth', a type of wealth far superior to material things. He also explains that this is the only type of wealth that we can take with us into the next life.

Ajahn Chah also once explained that when people are virtuous for a long time and also meditate a lot, they can come to experience a happiness akin to a heaven realm right here in the human world. Although they have a human body, the mind has become like that of an angel or heavenly being. They feel great faith, freedom from remorse, contentment, and confidence. He then urged meditators not to get stuck in such a state, but to strive further for a safer and superior quality of bliss and contentment—that which comes from liberating insight. At this stage don't be too concerned about getting attached to an angel-like quality of joy and contentment—most people still spend quite a bit of time in animal and ghost realms because of their untrained minds. It's better to allow this heaven-like contentment to become fully manifest and stable, and then use this as your foundation for liberating insight.

### **Be Generous**

Generosity plays an important role in making your life a sacred journey that is a source of blessings to yourself and others. Generosity supports the subtle 'letting go' that occurs in skilful meditation. In order to develop

samadhi we have to learn how to not 'pick up' the five hindrances. If they've already been picked up, we at least have to learn to put them down. We must also learn how to let go of unwholesome cravings—cravings to have some things and cravings not to have other things. We have to let go of our liking and not liking. And eventually we have to let go of our delusion and ignorance. These things have to be relinquished. Through training in giving away a portion of our resources, wealth, and/or time, we flex this 'letting go' muscle of the heart and ripen this capacity of mind. So it's not just about 'being a nice Buddhist'. It's much more profound than that. (Although being a nice Buddhist is great too!) One of the most important aspects of our practice is this letting go. As Ajahn Chah consistently said in many of his talks, 'If you let go a little, you'll have a little peace. If you let go a lot, you'll have a lot of peace. If you let go completely, you'll have complete peace'.

If you have resources to share, integrating generosity more fully into your life shouldn't be too difficult. Support a charity or a few charities that you trust. Be kind to a few friends and family members. Support a monastery or some monastics if you feel grateful or inspired. Co-sponsor a meditation retreat to help keep the costs down for others. Or you could offer to help at a food bank or a soup kitchen, or volunteer at a community centre, old folks home, hospital, hospice, or animal shelter. Taking a few hours out of your week and offering them in service to others is a support to spiritual practice. It helps us to become less self-absorbed and to put aside our personal preferences for periods of time.

Personally I've been involved in reforestation projects, scholarship programs for underprivileged kids, the building of a monastery, teaching retreats, leading pilgrimages, and sharing Dhamma resources with many people around the world through various forums. All of these extra activities come with issues, I assure you! Nevertheless, you have to roll with the punches while trying to do the right thing. So even we meditation monks find many ways to serve. It is imperative to practise what you preach. But I don't do this to impress or appease anyone. I do it because it is a duty to help when and where we can and also because it ultimately serves my own benefit as well.

Being generous will also help us to be less anxious at the time of death. We have to leave everything behind anyway. The merits of having been generous will help keep the mind bright at this important

juncture. However, many people these days have trouble making ends meet, sometimes working two jobs just to pay the bills. Some people are studying and working. Others are injured or long-term unemployed. So what can you do if you are busy and broke? Sometimes we have to be creative. You can do extra meditation and chanting and dedicate the merit to some people in need. You can do an extra session of loving-kindness meditation dedicated to a friend who is suffering. You can listen to someone who needs friendship and moral support. You could practise being extra patient with someone who is irritating. There are millions of ways to practise being generous at heart. When we really embrace this attitude, it plays a huge role in making our mode of living in the world both noble and inspiring.

### **Bring Your Mental Cultivation Practices into Daily Life**

I strongly recommend beginning each day with a session of chanting and meditation. It sets the tone for the rest of the day. It establishes a quality of clarity and presence of mind, creating a little bit of space between us and our various thoughts and moods. This is enormously helpful in becoming less reactive and keeping the mind balanced. Once our practice is established, it is helpful to then strongly set the intention or determination to bring our practice into the various activities of daily life.

Our habits have gained a lot of power over a long period of time. If we don't set a clear intention to bring more mindfulness to our habits of thought, speech, and action, we risk falling into autopilot. Our formal meditation practice can still be compartmentalised to a large degree, but on completion of a session we make the following determination: 'I intend to be mindful throughout the day and continue training my mind'.

Intention is a very powerful thing. Once you've clearly set your intention, you may be surprised how many more insights you begin to have—insights about your own behaviours and some of the energies behind these. You may find yourself gaining insights into the behaviour of others as well. I have to give you a word of warning here though. Don't be surprised if some of the people around you don't like you becoming more mindful. People will be able to sense that something's changed. Some appreciative and sensitive people may start saying things such as 'You seem more peaceful and I feel more calm when I'm around you, or 'I have this feeling that I can trust you'. Others however may feel defensive,

perhaps because they sense that they cannot control you, after all, powerful people who have strong integrity are not as easily manipulated as others. Perhaps it's also because they don't want to be called out on some of their intentions or unskilful habits. You might then experience a shift in your friendship circle. Some relationships may fall away while others come closer. All of this is okay. Shift happens.

Life is increasingly interesting and fun when we are less reactive, have a sense of space and separation from our thoughts and feelings, and begin to train our minds. When we are less reactive we have the option to respond to the situation at hand. You can get quite creative here. We begin to have options—whether to say something or not, when to say it and how. You could say something in one way on one day, then try it from another angle another day. Or you could simply assert your right to remain silent and offer a smile.

Adding some sessions of walking meditation to our week is tremendously supportive to this process. Over time we are able to integrate a sense of truly 'being in the body' throughout our day. You can practise by walking in a hallway, on a verandah, or in a living room. We usually practise for thirty to forty-five minutes or so, and maintain awareness of the feelings on the bottom of the feet each time we lift, move, and place them. Through this training we come to know feelings as simply feelings while we are in a more engaged situation. During the day, when you have to walk from A to B you can immediately go to the feelings at the base of your feet instead of being lost in thought or distracted by the various things you see.

Wrist malas or prayer beads can be helpful as well. If you have to be in a long meeting or on busy public transport, being with the breath can seem too subtle or impractical. Run these little beads through your fingers and bring awareness to the feelings at your fingertips while reciting the syllables 'Bud-dho'. This practice can help you maintain a sense of presence of mind. You can also repeat phrases such as 'May I be well, may I be happy. May all beings be well, may all beings be happy', while you work the beads. You might have to practise a little equanimity if some people around you make critical comments. You can just tell them that it helps you to be mindful and pay attention. These days, more people have some understanding of the value of mindfulness, even in the corporate world.

If you are consistent with your daily practice, clear with your wholesome intentions, appreciate your life, and respect your potential as well as this path of practice, your life really will become a sacred spiritual journey. What a wonderful discovery to have made!

### **All the Best for Your Spiritual Life and Sacred Journey**

We have covered many subjects in this book, especially where making efforts with this path of generosity, virtue, and mental cultivation is concerned. And we've looked at how to embody your spiritual practice fully, applying it to every aspect of your life. I hope that you will rise to the occasion and bless your own life by taking on some or even all of my suggestions, if you haven't yet done so.

Doing our daily practices and skilful ceremonies with regularity is a large factor in what makes the tone of our life spiritual. And feeling a deep appreciation and love for the Buddha, his teaching and training, as well as for those who are practising well, is a tremendous nourishment and support in life. I wholeheartedly encourage you to appreciate the three refuge objects, your special ability as a conscious human being, and the wonderful opportunities that this presents. A life of appreciation is a gracious and graceful one. It really does seem to me that a life of reverence and grace is the best vessel for growth and the development of mindfulness, wisdom, peace, insight, contentment, and serenity.

I sincerely hope that some of what I've shared in these pages has been helpful. May your own spiritual journey bring you peace and solace, joy and tranquillity, understanding and a quiet inner confidence—and eventually complete liberation from every type of suffering. My wish for you is the experience of unceasing unshakeable peace.

*With loving-kindness,  
Ajahn Achalo Bhikkhu*





**GLOSSARY**



**Ajahn** (*Thai*) – respectful term meaning teacher; a common term of address for monks who have passed ten rains retreats

**anagami** – a ‘non-returner’; the third of four stages of enlightenment; a person who has overcome the first five fetters: self-view, clinging to rites and rituals, skeptical doubt, craving and anger

**arahant** – one who has attained enlightenment and gone beyond suffering

**asura** – a demigod characterised by wrath, pride and envy, one of the forms one can take in rebirth according to Buddhist cosmology

**bhajan** – Indian devotional song

**Bhante** – a respectful term of address for Buddhist monks in the Theravada tradition

**bhikkhu** – an ordained male monastic; a monk

**Bodhisattva** – a person who is on the path towards buddhahood; the Buddha before he attained enlightenment

**brahmaviharas** – also known as the Four Immeasurables or the Divine Abodes: loving-kindness, compassion, empathic or appreciative joy, and equanimity

**chedi** – a stupa; a mound-like structure usually containing relics that is a place of devotional practice and meditation

**Deathless, the** – see also Nibbana

**deva** – a being who has taken birth in a heaven realm

**Dhamma** (*Sanskrit: Dharma*) – the Buddha’s teachings

**Four Noble Truths** – the first teaching given by the Buddha. The truths of suffering, the cause of suffering, that suffering can be overcome, and the path to end suffering

**jhana** – one-pointed absorption in meditation

**jongrom** – walking meditation, usually taking the form of mindfully back and forth along a prescribed path

**kamma** (*Sanskrit: karma*) – the principle of cause and effect; wholesome actions diminish suffering and lead to future positive experiences, whereas unwholesome actions lead to negative experiences

**kilesas** – defilements; unwholesome states that cloud the mind; the three unwholesome roots of greed, hatred, and delusion

**Mae Chee** (*Thai*) – an eight-precept nun

**Mahaparinibbana** – the great parinibbana of the Buddha; although Buddha attained enlightenment during his lifetime, upon death and the dissolution of the body he was released from the cycle of samsara and all rebirth—he attained parinibbana. See also Nibbana

**mandala** – a circular figure symbolically representing the universe

**Mara** – a demonic celestial being who challenged the Buddha before his enlightenment

**metta** – loving-kindness; unconditional friendliness

**Middle Way** – the Buddha’s path of moderation between the extremes of sensual indulgence and self-mortification

**Nibbana** (*Sanskrit: Nirvana*) – the goal of the Buddhist path; liberation from suffering and otherwise endless rounds of rebirth

**Noble Eightfold Path** – the path to liberation taught by the Buddha: right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration

**Pali** – a literary language of classical India in which the Buddha's teachings were first recorded

**parami** (*Sanskrit: paramita*) – perfection. The ten perfections in Theravada Buddhism are: generosity, morality, renunciation, wisdom, energy, patient endurance, truthfulness, determination, loving-kindness, and equanimity

**precepts** – training rules governing ethical conduct. The five precepts commonly observed by lay-Buddhists are refraining from killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lying, and taking intoxicants. The eight precepts further include refraining from taking meals after midday, abstaining from dancing, music and other entertainments as well as wearing makeup, jewellery or other adornments, and refraining from taking a high or luxurious sleeping place.

**puja** – a religious ceremony which may include chanting, offerings, and reflection

**sadhu** – an ascetic, sage, or holy man; an expression meaning good, excellent, or auspicious

**samsara** – the repetitive cycle of birth and death; one who is liberated from samsara has attained Nibbana

**Sangha** – community of those who follow the Buddhist path; often more specifically those who are undergoing monastic training

**sasana** – teaching, practice, or doctrine; the Buddha sasana is the teaching of the Buddha

**stream enterer** – one who has attained the first of the four stages of enlightenment and has cut through the three fetters of self-view, clinging to rites and rituals, and skeptical doubt

**sutta** (*Sanskrit: sutra*) – discourses of the Buddha; Buddhist scripture

**vihara** – Buddhist temple, monastery, or central hall

**Vinaya** – the rules and procedures that govern the Buddhist monastic community

**wat** (*Thai*) – temple

**yakkha** (*Sanskrit: yaksha*) – a class of nature spirits. In Thailand, sculptures of yakkhas resemble ogres and commonly guard the gates of Buddhist temples





This book contains a selection of journal entries by Ajahn Achalo written from February and March, 2018, as he completed the final hours of his vow to meditate for 3000 hours at the site of Lord Buddha's Enlightenment in Bodhgaya, India. It also includes reflections composed while leading a pilgrimage to the Four Holy Sites the next year. The collection is at once an informal Buddhist teaching, a travelogue, and candid diary. Sometimes humorous, sometimes sad, but always brutally honest. It offers a rare glimpse into the heart and mind of a meditation monk

Ajahn Achalo was born in Australia in 1972 and went forth as a bhikkhu at Wat Nong Pah Pong in Ubon Rachathani province, Northeast Thailand in July 1997. His teachers include Ajahn Sumedho, Ajahn Pasanno, Ajahn Anan and Ajahn Jayasaro. He currently lives at Anandagiri Forest Monastery in Petchabun province in Northern Thailand.