

## **Along the hazy road headed for the city of light**

It is actually day 7 as I write, it is 9:00am, we are in the bus on the highway between Bodhgaya and Varanasi. We have just finished our morning chanting and have recited the Dhammacakka sutta as well. With a long Q and A session and Dhamma discussion last night there was no time for journaling. But we have our longest bus ride today, so I will take the opportunity now. Fortunately for me I do not get carsick when reading or writing in moving vehicles.

As it is day seven I am very pleased as I notice a distinct lack of sneezing, sniffles and coughing on the bus. Allowing for mid-day rests in warm and clean rooms after exposure to damp and cold air in the mornings has been a good strategy. As was encouraging everyone to be diligent with their supplements. Moving from place to place at a sensible pace is also helpful. In every other pilgrimage to India that I have joined about one third of the group would be unwell by this stage.

Last night, when we had returned from Rajgir to Bodhgaya for one more night, there was a part of me that wished to go straight to the Bodhi Tree and sit for three hours, to finish the first 10 hours... one percent of this next thousand! But I restrained myself, I have had many such opportunities before and will likely continue to have the opportunity again quite soon. I decided to rest a little in my room, in order to have some good energy to answer any practice related questions of the pilgrims later in the evening. It is a time for leading, supporting and encouraging others. Most of the pilgrims did go to the Bodhi Tree for a few more hours, their fourth and final session for this particular pilgrimage. It is good for them to go and experience the place in smaller groups to express their faith and do some practice in whatever manner they choose to. Deepening the connection and feelings of affinity at the Seat of Enlightenment in this universe.

But what did we get up to earlier in the day?

**Day 6** (January 16)

### **Misty Emptiness**

Because we had been to Vultures Peak the previous day, day five, and because I knew that it was going to be very cold, I did make this second, early morning practice session up on the mountain an optional one. All but three pilgrims roused the good energy to join though, which was inspiring. (The other three were resting, heading off the beginning of colds, preventing them from becoming more serious, they had my blessing to do so.)

We left the Hotel at 5:45 am and were at the base of Vultures Peak within just ten minutes. The guard below allowed us to begin climbing the mountain at 6:00am. It was somewhere between eight and ten degrees, and all of the monks had good enthusiastic energy. We climbed swiftly in the cold, warming ourselves up, getting to the peak within just a half an hour. We set up our sitting places within the very site demarcated as having been where the Buddha's kuti was. I bowed deeply, imagining Lord Buddha still here sitting with us. The other pilgrims, also enthusiastic, soon followed, trickling in steadily at their own pace and setting up their meditation places behind the monks. At this 6:30 am time slot, as had been

hoped, we had the place to ourselves. The cows were huddled against one another for warmth out of the wind down below and even the monkeys were still sleeping.

We sat for around 45 minutes, then we did a special long special puja. Those with faith in the mahayana believe that Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, at the request of Lord Buddha, recited the Prajnaparamita Sutra, (perfection of wisdom), for Sariputta, who loved to listen to various expressions of wisdom teachings, right here on Vultures Peak mountain. As a group we recited the Mandarin version three times, then Tahn Sampanno, who had been a monk in the Korean tradition previously for nine years, recited the Korean version three times (by memory). Then Ezra, one of the younger Singaporean pilgrims did a rendition of the original Sanskrit three times as well.

It was very lovely both reciting and listening to these various melodic expositions pertaining to the subject of Sunyata - Emptiness. The ultimate nature of conditioned reality, which when seen as such is liberating for the mind. Seeing that we still had the hilltop to ourselves after the various Heart Sutra renditions, we chanted the Anattalakhana sutta as well. The sutta on the subject of Not-Self that had been taught to the five original bhikkhus in the Deer Park in Sarnath. Emptiness of Self.

After this long puja I noticed that there was a small Korean group waiting to the side very quietly and respectfully, and so we had a quick group photo, then made the space available for them. The senior monk looked very venerable and full of metta. We had the spot to ourselves for a full two hours, so we had been very fortunate. There was time to offer some candles, flowers, incense and fragrances around the periphery of the Buddha's kuti site as well. While the Koreans did a lovely puja themselves.

Sometimes you can see a lovely sunrise from Vultures Peak, but the mist was very heavy on this day. The foggy atmosphere was beautiful in a different way however, infusing everything with a quality of soft ethereal white light. The serenity of this misty morning practice session was chalk and cheese compared to the cacophony of the day before, with several characters evidently from the crazy wisdom school well represented. But the Pali puja that we did together in the Sariputta cave, the very place where he was Enlightened, had been a special highlight of yesterday. As was the half hour meditation in Mahamoggallana cave. In my experience making a couple of trips to each place is valuable in this way, as each occasion will open up a different blessing for the group. On the way down the mountain we passed many groups that were eagerly making their way up the hill. Thai's, Tibetans, Sikhimise. Everyone appeared to be cheerful.

The drive back to Bodhgaya was pleasantly smooth and uneventful, we were back at our Hotel by 2pm. The question and answer session later in the evening was well attended and the questions seeking ways and methods for deepening practice, and pertaining to integrating more practice into lay life post pilgrimage, were good and sincere questions. I have been 99% impressed with this group, (I won't mention the unimpressive 1%, as 99% is already clearly an A ) And I have felt proud of our department as a group overall, of both the monks and laypeople whenever we have moved to and from and within the Holy Sites together. I can't take full responsibility for having trained them all, as most of then pilgrims in this group attend the teachings of many well practised monks that pass through various centres near to where they live, and do in-person as well as online retreats with several

senior monks as well. But I can claim to have played a role in teaching and training them. So I do feel deservedly a little bit of wholesome pride.

### **Day 7 continued** (January 17)

Now on the bus at 11:30am.

The stop at the roadside Thai temple at the halfway point between Gaya and Varanasi was appreciated by all. For our four Thai pilgrims and three Thai tour guides it was like popping into Thailand for an hour for a clean toilet break and a bowl of familiar tasting noodle soup. The Malaysians and Singaporeans were very happy slurping along as well. It does feel much colder today, even though it is the middle of the day the fog has not lifted and it has trapped the cold within. So the hot spicy noodles were definitely a good call. Our group made a generous offering to the temple inspired by the opportunity of sowing causes to continue to meet with clean toilets and hot noodles in cold weather.

We did a second chanting puja on the bus before resting a little.

1pm

We just had a toilet break at a big gas station. We shared a special fragrance puja in the bus afterwards, to help people to fully recover their composure. I sprayed everyone on the top of their heads with an agarwood, saffron and rose essential oils holy water blend. Tahn Anand had made this very nice mix. At 3:30pm we arrived at our Hotel and had a quick toilet break before getting back on the bus. Then we headed to the Holy River Ganges.

### **Death and Devotion... Impermanence and Aspiration.**

Taking the pilgrims to see the burning ghats at Varanasi has always been an important part of each pilgrimage to India that I have led. It is a rare opportunity to witness such a primal, archetypal scene. Where the bodies of around 200 recently deceased Indians are burned on average, out in the open, on the river bank, each day. There is also a puja offered by Brahmin priests each evening not far from the burning ghats. In the past we've watched the 'aarti' puja first, then visited the charnal ground afterwards. But this time, because of the cold, Lek and I opted for the death and impermanence contemplation first, followed by the cultural studies activity.

There isn't really a good way to explain or to prepare people for the experience, other than to encourage them to be truly mindful, 'present', to be respectful, and to be open to observing, studying and learning from 'truth'. The burning ghats did not disappoint. There were many bodies already on funeral pyres as we arrived, and several being bathed in river Ganges water in preparation for being burned next. Our boats moored nearby and as we walked up the stone steps and came closer, smoke and ash and heat blew all around us in blustery gusts and even into our faces. It is very confronting, because some of that ash comes directly from bodies that are returning to the elements. The smell of flesh being consumed in flames is also a part of the olfactory experience.

We walked among the funeral pyres to observe the flaming embers that have been burning continuously for 4000 years. Each funeral pyre is lit from this sacred flame kept under a

small temple to Lord Shiva. With such a large group this time around we did not stay too long, but long enough to observe the scene and to be informed by it. The thing that I take away from the experience is the recognition that whether rich, middle class or poor, once the body dies, we all end up on the ground being burned (or buried) side by side. The recognition that there is nothing at all in this material world that can be taken along after death is very poignant. And this recognition causes one to reflect on what it might be that can be taken to the next life. The sum of our good and bad deeds, the qualities of heart that we have cultivated, our deepest and sincerest longings and aspirations.

Going to the ghats around sunset but before it gets very dark is less intense, and subsequently probably better for first time pilgrims. I enjoy it when it's intense of course, and I have even been at midnight on one of my previous visits here. But the point is to help fellow practitioners to develop insight and spiritual urgency, not to freak them out or overwhelm them. After observing thenscen for a while we regathered a little distance away to the side of the ghats, and chanted the metta sutta together. I dedicated merits to any beings that I may have a kammic connection to, and spread loving-kindness to the grieving relatives of the recently deceased, and any wandering or lost spirits who may be feeling confused or tormented

Watching the Brahmin priests offering lights, sonorous devotional chanting and incense to the Goddess of the Ganges and to Lord Shiva from the boat after visiting the ghats up close up was a nice balancing activity. There was a sense of hope, beauty and grace, and an intimation of something better than this fraught mortal world that we must navigate. As Buddhists, we do not pray to deities for our salvation. But the reminder that the practice of Buddhaddhamma leads to heaven and beyond was uplifting, and a nice note to end the evening on. We did some more chanting on the bus to cleanse our minds of any negativity and to help pacify any anxiety or shock. Checking in with the pilgrims they all seemed like they had coped with the experience very well.

Tomorrow we have a big day at the site of the ancient Deer Park.