

## **A day of practice in the Deer Park**

Sarnath, January 18, day 8

In the Hotel restaurant at breakfast time I notice that the entire restaurant is filled with our pilgrims. They seem quite jolly and chatty. There is a great selection of nutritious food. Everyone seems to have rested well and our collective health remains robust. There does not appear to be any post funeral pyre trauma manifesting itself, either physical or psychological. Other than people diving gleefully into some moderate sensuality, relishing the lashings of yummy food. No one appears to have gotten disoriented or overwhelmed and slipped on a cow excrement smeared sandstone step. No one has come up to me and screamed, 'how could you have done that to me?!' As last night's itinerary activities probably had the highest risk for both mental freak outs and/or physical accidents, as the leader of the group I am relieved that all appear unscathed.

I didn't receive a wakeup call today, and neither did the other monks, but secretly I am grateful for the extra hour of sleep that I stole. The lighting in the restaurant is soft and elegant, the food is fabulous, the staff are polite and elegantly dressed, but there is a strange, shrill, high pitched screeching noise in the background that impinges on consciousness gratingly. Like a sadistic teacher punishing his naughty pupils, dragging their fingernails down the blackboard... or worse... a horde of hungry ghosts have forced open a portal into the human realm and are calling out for help from the abyss! I asked the monks to help me locate the source of the tormented shrieking, and apparently it was a rotary griller/toaster in desperate need of oiling. Samsara... there's always a proverbial fly in the soup somewhere.

We left the hotel at 7:30am and headed towards the site of Isipatana, the ancient Deer Park, where the first two Teachings were given to a group of five ascetics. Those who had been companions to the Buddha when he was striving in his ascetic phase. Lord Buddha explained his insight into the Four Noble Truths here in this place. That Unsatisfactoriness is to be 'known'... and that he knows it fully. That it's cause, the various manifestations of craving are to be 'abandoned'... and that he has indeed abandoned it. That the complete cessation of suffering is to be 'realised'... and that he has indeed Realised it, and is subsequently liberated from the conditioned world, abiding with a mind released into the unconditioned - Nibbana. And lastly, that the Eightfold Path leading to the abandonment of the cause of suffering must be fully developed, and that he had developed it fully.

We are told that at first the five ascetics were reluctant to believe the Buddha and give ear to his counsel. But when he asked them... 'hey! Have I ever spoken like this before? Have I ever made such a claim? They concluded that he had not... then he implored them to listen. Finally his old companions acquiesced. As the Buddha described his insights, his discovery and subsequent liberation, Kondañña, one of the five ascetics experienced 'the deathless', glimpsed nibbana, and entered the stream of Liberation.

This was both a wondrous and extremely momentous occasion. For it signified that the Dhamma as taught by The Buddha could be penetrated by other beings whose spiritual faculties were developed enough to comprehend the Truth. When Kondañña did comprehend, the first formal teaching was delivered into the world and the first member of

the Arya Sangha became manifest. The Three Jewels of Refuge, Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha were now in the conditioned world, pointing towards the unconditioned. The Dhamma Wheel had been set in motion and nothing could stop it.

Entering into The Deer Park, for me there is always a sense of inner joy, of ineffable but definitely palpable vibrant purity pulsating from outside, and of quiet inward awe as well. That this is the place where the consequences of the Buddha's accomplishment really started to shake things up. When the Buddha taught the discourse on 'Not-Self', not long after setting 'The Wheel of Dhamma in Motion', all five of the ascetics' minds were fully liberated, and there were five more Arahants in the world.

We made our way to the ancient remains of the Dharmeka Stupa. First we circumambulated three times, while chanting the praises of the Three Jewels. Then I did one extra round and offered some special fragrances, (agarwood and jasmine) After our circumambulations we set up our places for chanting and sitting. We chanted the Dhammacakka Sutta together, then I sat for two hours, giving the option to the group to do walking or more circumambulations after sitting together for the first hour. It was wonderful to chant the sutta together in the place where it was taught. And the chanting was quite tight, as everyone had been practising at home for months, preparing diligently for this occasion.

As we sat, four or five groups of Thai's filed in one after another and did their pujas, similar to ours. It was lovely to have the central themes repeated and the Pali words of the sutta resounding in the ether, as well as the Thai translation. Each of the groups arrived... stayed for some time... and moved on during our two hour sit. Most groups can manage about an hour to an hour and a half here, but we would spend two and a half hours in the morning, and another two and a half in the afternoon.

Khun Lek had found a suitable restaurant in a Hotel nearby for lunch. After lunch we visited the small but fabulous museum which contains many masterpieces from the Gupta period of Buddhist patronage. I love the Gupta images for their subtlety and serenity of form. The combination of masterful sculpting accomplished in the modest medium of common sandstone gives a sense of both grandness and humility. The matte skin-like tones of the stone are also very warm and relatable somehow. One image of the Buddha giving the first sermon in particular is considered by many to be the most beautiful Buddha statue in the world. The members of our group were suitably touched. But there are also beautiful Avalokiteshvaras, Taras and Maitreyas, as well as the famous Ashokan Pillar Lion Capitol, all housed in this museum. And a very large and fierce Lord Shiva, stabbing a demon with his trident! The Hindu wing of the museum has a very different feeling to the Buddhist one. But the sculpture is stunning nonetheless. Walking around inside was a wonderful way to digest our meal and uplift our minds suitably before our second session in the Deer Park.

Entering the Deer Park again we walked around inside a little and then found a suitable place to sit meditation once again. This time a little further away from the the big stupa where the focus of most of the visitors devotion is directed. We sat for an hour, then I gave a short talk, and then we chanted the sutta on 'Not-Self' together. We sat once again after this, dedicated merits, then asked forgiveness of the Holy Sites, of one another, and chanted a blessing. Despite the misty cold outdoors, it was very good to have spent much of the day here.

Tomorrow about half of the group will be leaving, 29 pilgrims out of 59. As this was the amount of time that their work schedules allowed for. Those of us remaining will be travelling onto Aurangabad, in the Southwest of India, to visit and practice at the Ajanta and Ellora cave monastery complex archaeological sites for a few days. About twenty new members of this pilgrimage will be meeting us there, as I made this shorter tail end option available to old students. Not many groups make it to these far flung sites, and so a good number of stalwart pilgrims were keen to make the special trip.

The low cost airline companies of India have been giving poor khun Lek the run around, with cancelled and rescheduled flights affecting some of those leaving and most of those arriving. Some non-refundable connecting flights have to be abandoned as well. It is frustrating for khun Lek and for the pilgrims to have to pay more for schedules that are actually much less convenient, but it is part and parcel of a modern way pilgrimage to India, and always one of the possible contingencies. I've been affected by this phenomenon several times in the past myself. Once because a flight was cancelled due to heavy fog, and once because a flight was cancelled by the Airline. We have to roll with the punches on such occasions. Making mountains of merit will always attract some challenges. Fortunately Lek is good humoured, capable, and as generous as she can be in minimising additional costs to her customers p. We are fortunate to have her experience on these occasions. I asked her the other day just how many trips she has led to India? On average 4 per year for 25 years, minus three years due to covid. At least 80 times! You would either develop a lot of connections and creative abilities as well as a hearty sense of humour, or go mad. Fortunately she went with the former.