

From the Deer Park to the Cave Monastery.

(Varanasi - Hyderabad - Aurangabad)

Day 10 12:45pm

The lay pilgrims had a longish brunch in the salubrious setting of the Varanasi Hotel, where everyone was able to mingle a little and those who were departing could say their thank yous and goodbyes. In a busy and bustling city such as Varanasi this protected space was useful for people to be able to discuss and process their experiences. The atmosphere was one of gratitude and joy. After the monks finished our meal a trail of sweet people came over to our table one after the other, offering some parting gifts and kind words, a hand written card, a few even with tears in their eyes. When Buddhist practitioners practise Dhamma sincerely, and experience the peace and greater understanding that this brings, gratitude naturally overflows. I am quite comfortable around such tears, as I shed them frequently myself.

They were making comments with regards to how they felt their faith had deepened and become more powerful. How they were clearer and more determined in their aspiration. And how the suttas were more interesting and had more meaning to them since they had visited some of the places where they had been given. Basically, the pilgrimage had been successful in invigorating and deepening the practice of the participants. They could feel a deeper commitment and connection to the practice.

Faith in the Buddha, in the practice, in the value of pilgrimage as a practice, and some faith and respect for a teacher are all very helpful. The participants could have focused upon the challenges and hardships of our time together, and this would have made them miserable. But they focused upon their meditation practice, upon listening to the teachings, and upon expressing their faith and making their sincere aspirations. Because of this they became joyful and had a truly beneficial time.

So today 19 characters from our pilgrimage will exit stage right, tonight, 3 new characters will enter left stage, (khun Jintana, khun Joob from Bangkok and Shivani from Mumbai) And the following day another 16 pilgrims will meet us for lunch in front of Ellora caves, where we will have our full team for these final few days. Not as smooth a transition as we'd hoped, with the kerfuffle of flight changes, but the show goes on. I am quite sure that the new members of the group will be just as lovely as those departing. Although I predict that they will be chattier. We are losing the Singaporean majority. The Malaysians will now take first place, the Thai's second, and the Singaporeans will fall to third in numbers.

I wasn't sure how adding a second bus of pilgrims would work when liaising with khun Lek for this trip. And we took a bit of a gamble and decided to trust in people's good intentions. I learned that if the second bus is filled with mostly Singaporeans, it will work just fine! They are an orderly and well disciplined people.

I am writing on the plane now as we prepare to depart. Our flight to Aurangabad is via Hyderabad, a place that I've never been to before. The check-in took quite a while, the flight was delayed and there was a last minute gate change, but all things considered, it went

pretty smoothly. The security checks were very thorough and hi-tech. Our tickets were scanned at the entrance of the airport before we even entered the building, and the names were cross checked with the information in their system. Then a photograph was taken. Later, when checking through the baggage scanning the photograph was verified.

The first time that I landed in Varanasi was 21 years ago, and you used to have to walk across the tarmac from the plane into a dingy little brick terminal with just a couple of immigration clerks processing the occasional flight. Now Varanasi has a shining, air conditioned international terminal with many flights per day. There are exclusive shops as well as pleasant sitar themed muzac piped over an audio system in the background. The rate of both economic and infrastructure development here in Varanasi has been astonishing. Even the traffic flowed well along the highway from the hotel to the airport. Not a holy cow in sight. Although apparently they still wander around beneath the raised highway... I was actually happy to hear this. Varanasi would just not be Varanasi without cows!

To me it seems pretty clear that India will be rising and will become a formidable world power within just a decade or two. Many developed nations now have shrinking populations, including China, whereas India still has a growing population and a relatively young demographic. There is the degeneration of the nuclear family and falling away from organised religion in much of the developed world too. And a subsequent sense of the dissolution of civil society. But family and religion still appear to be central in Indian life. Who knows what will happen in the world, I could be wrong, but this is Ajahn Achalo's 40,000 feet view looking down from above the cumulus clouds in Indian skies at the beginning of the year 2024.

Your children, if you have them should learn Hindi, not Mandarin. They'd better learn Bollywood dancing rather than piano. And we'd all better get used to the Indian ways of queuing up and grabbing for luggage without any sense of personal space. Because the Indians are going to take over! You had better not lose your spot in the line, or an Indian will surely take your seat, no two butts about it! With an assured wobbling head I am telling this to you now sir and madam! My father's father, his father before him, and seven generations before that besides are all saying like this. Hindustan will be the centre of the universe! I believe that Buddhism will also become a significant force for good within Indian society. Mark my words sir and madam, Buddhism has a seat at the table here - there will be many a Bhante and Ayya among the Babas, Amas and Mullahs. PM Modi-ji is having a huge Chedi built in Delhi to house the Buddha relics currently enshrined in the National Museum of Delhi. It is a sign... a portentous omen... it is written... it is destiny. Buddhism is there. (Buddhism is here) Jaiya Ho! May it be so. Stop being silly bhante. Time for a few thousand mantras and an hour of breath meditation on Indigo flight number 6E626, in seat number 1F.

Just a few more thoughts before I turn to my mantras... these days when you land in Thailand, the advertisements that greet you as you leave customs are of young men wearing and advertising make up. With their pink lip gloss and eyelined eyes you can't quite tell if they are men or women, which is probably kind of the point. They are celebrating softness and prettiness. Much like K-Pop boy bands do. Along the highways into the city there are also huge billboards with smooth faced white skinned doctors advertising their cosmetic

surgery services. Prettiness is what is prized. Evidently it is big business too. But there are definitely less families and less babies.

Travelling around India these past few days it seems that the popular culture and advertising appeal revolves largely around very masculine looking men. Be-bearded brutes, with manicured moustaches and bulging biceps are everywhere. They are presented as strong, capable and heroic. Famous movie stars are advertising metal pipes and concrete, holding big bars in their manly hands. The difference is quite stark. The women on the other hand are very shapely and dressed in feminine looking saris and shining silks, bedecked in very glamorous looking jewellery. If not all glammed up, they appear alongside their children, looking motherly.

I am not making any judgments about any of the above observations, simply sharing some of what I have observed. Wear as much makeup as you want, or make your muscles as big as you like. Yet these observations do give the sense that India knows what it is and that it is becoming stronger. Empires in decline do get fascinated with frivolity and decadence. The foundations of a secure and sane society still appear strongly to be in place here. Obviously every place has its shadow side and there is always room for improvement.

3:30 pm Hyderabad.

Back in another airport sitting at another gate. Hyderabad has a beautiful new airport. The bathrooms were as good as in any five star hotel that I have seen, and the staff were professional and friendly. Everything is well signed and transferring to our gate was easy. Although my microphone and batteries invariably cause a small fuss.

Sorry to grumble but the air quality in northern India at this time of year is quite simply just awful. The weather app says the Air Quality Index rating in Varanasi and Sarnath is 460. It is similar in Bodhgaya. The app warns - "Dangerous for all types, exposure even for a few minutes can lead to serious health problems.' During the final sitting in the Deer Park yesterday I coughed quite a lot. There is no infection perse, but my body produces a lot of mucus to try and protect the lungs from all of the dangerous pollutants, mostly microscopic dust particles suspended in the foggy haze. This always happens around the one week point in my previous experiences if ever I come in December or January. It is a good time to be flying south to warmer, drier and cleaner air. Just sitting in the cleaner and drier air of the plane and the airport for a couple of hours my body feels less oppressed, breathing is lighter and easier and I can tangibly feel an increase in vitality. Helping everyone to get the important merit was good, but it was definitely time to get out of Dodge. My sympathy for the people of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh is genuine. I expect London, Paris and New York were just as bad back in the day as well though.

9:00 pm.

The flight on the smaller propellor plane was a little bumpy, but we made it all in one piece. Unfortunately one person's suitcase did not arrive but hopefully the airline will sort it out by tomorrow.

As neither the Buddha nor the great disciples appear to have visited this part of India, this portion of the pilgrimage will be more about celebrating the fact that hundreds of generations of Buddhist practitioners have maintained and handed down the religion with its wisdom, teachings and practices. And have expressed such beautiful faith and devotion in the process. Apparently Ellora, where we will be visiting tomorrow, had monastics in residence for around 700 years. Ajanta, where we will visit the day after tomorrow, had monastics in residence for over 1000 years! There definitely would have been great Arahants, Bodhisattva practitioners, and scholarly minded teachers with great wisdom. We just don't know their names. Even so, we can go and pay our respects, offer our practice and soak up some of the blessings of thousands of years of practice dedicated to realising ultimate truth.