

Ellora Caves

Day 11, 20 January

After breakfast we headed from Aurangabad to Ellora Caves at 7:30am. It is about a 45 minute drive. Part of me had wanted to go a bit sooner, always keen to have more quiet time before the bigger crowds arrive, but another part had the sense that after a full day of travel yesterday, we shouldn't push it too much. Several people have begun to show mild flu-like symptoms. Nothing too serious, but it was good for everyone to have a proper night's rest and an easier start. The fact that we'd made it to day 10 before illness presented itself is really good actually, and that which is manifesting seems quite mild. (Later in the day I had some cold/flu symptoms as well, and was glad of this decision.)

We have a new Indian tour guide now, Mr Umesh. (OM - the sacred syllable - Isha - God) Umesh is an elegant, eloquent and learned man. Originally from Aurangabad, he told us some interesting information about the state of Maharashtra and the history of the cave monastery complexes while we were on the bus. For myself, I don't really need to know many details. It is obvious that both Ajahnta and Ellora were special places of Buddhist practice and that there was a lot of love and devotion expressed their for many centuries. When I visit, I simply like to resonate with the faith of scores of generations of Buddhists and have mudita for the truly lovely Buddhist art. But even so, knowing a little bit is not a bad thing. Particularly as this is my fourth visit, if I don't know anything at all it will start to look embarrassing!

According to history, the Ajanta Cave complex came first. The 3rd century BC was when the first caves began construction. At that time one of the Kings of the Satavahana dynasty invited some of the mostly wandering monks to settle in the area, he wanted to open up opportunities for staying on for longer periods. As well as having designated spaces for teaching the laity and for the carrying out of auspicious ceremonies. The King helped sponsor the construction of the caves, as did merchants along the trading routes which passed by. Apparently the King was a Hindu, but he believed in supporting sammanas, spiritual seekers. As a percentage of the citizens in the Kingdom had become Buddhists, he was happy to help develop some facilities. As did his descendants and those of several dynasties that came later, spanning over 1000 years. Which is truly extraordinary when you think about it.

The rocky mountains in this area are made of Basalt, and are the result of volcanic activity. Essentially lava that has flowed up from under the earth's crust. The stone is neither very hard nor very soft, so it can be carved and excavated, without crumbling. As this region of India is drier and hotter, there were obvious benefits to being able to retreat into a deep stone cave during the mid day hours.

The Ellora Cave complex came after Ajanta, and they are interesting inasmuch as they have three religions represented. Hindu, Buddhist and Jain. The Kings of this region supported all three of these religions. Which is apparently something King Ashoka had done as well. The Buddhist caves at Ellora were constructed during the 7-9th century. That makes them between 1100-1300 years old.

Mr Umesh and I came up with a game plan, I would lead some chanting and sitting in the morning, up until lunch time. And after lunch he could show people around and explain a few things about the caves, particularly the Hindu one's, of which I knew nothing. Then we would meet again at Cave 11 at 4pm to sit meditation together for one more hour.

The group of pilgrims joining us from Malaysia and Singapore, feeling enthusiastic and determined, (even though they'd been up since 2am), decided to come straight from the Aurangabad airport and meet the rest of the group in front of Ellora Caves. They would forgo checking into the Hotel so that they wouldn't miss any of the group program or activities. I appreciated this demonstration of commitment, enthusiasm and harmony. It was great to start this next leg of practising in ancient pilgrimage sites together. One upshot to the unforeseen flight rescheduling for this group was that they had been able to visit the National Museum in Delhi yesterday, and pay respects to the Buddha relics and ancient statues housed within. Very auspicious!

Waiting for 60 people to all use the few toilets available at the Kailash Hotel took quite a bit of time, but we were all inside and bowing together in Cave number#10 by 9 am. Cave#10 is the one which appears to have been used for chanting and other ceremonies. It contains a Chedi, and a beautiful and very tall arched ceiling. Within the Chedi, as an interesting embellishment, there is the large image of the Buddha flanked by two celestial Bodhisattvas, probably Padmapani and Vajrapani, who were prominent figures in ancient Indian Mahayana Buddhism.

We did a number of chants together, and as on previous occasions the acoustic resonance was wonderful. It is difficult to describe what it feels like to be kneeling on a stone floor worn smooth by millions of the bare feet of the faithful, surrounded by stone walls, and with a stone ceiling above and stone Buddha statue and Chedi directly before one. With just soft natural light coming from the entrance and no microphones or speakers. There is a groundedness, a sense of security and coolness, of connecting with a timeless, non-personal, ancient living tradition, and yet the way that the stone reflects everyone's voice equally, there is also a wonderful sense of communion in the shared act of expressing our faith and gratitude. Everyone's voice counts and yet is also a part of the harmonious whole. The chanting leader simply has to project the first word and everyone else is immediately by one's side. An objective onlooker would have difficulty ascertaining who, if anyone was actually leading. And this is my favorite manner of leading in fact. Just tapping the tuning fork gently, and everyone following in perfect harmonious resonance of their own volition. We added our own clear and strong voices of faith, one more puja in a long line of tens of thousands done before and many thousands to come afterwards.

After the puja in Cave#10, we moved to Cave number 12, where there is a large and less visited hall up on the third level. The wide staircases, palatial verandahs and huge columns connecting the stone floor with stone ceiling... floor above floor, is very grand and awesome. It would have taken generations to excavate this cave monastery, and for people with a modern sense for instant or fast gratification, it is amazing to consider one generation constructing a facility for the next generation, not ever seeing it completed within their own lifetime.

As the Ellora cave monastery was built during the late Buddhist era of Indian Buddhism, there are a lot of Mahayana and Vajrayana elements here. The large Shakyamuni Buddha contained within his own shrine room at the back of the hall on level three is flanked by the 'Eight Great Bodhisattvas', four on the wall to his left, four in the wall to his right. There is also a row of large Taras along the back wall before one enters the shrine room.

I have meditated in cave#12 a few times now, and my sense, for what it's worth, is that the big Buddha within this shrine room on level three is the most spiritually charged spot within the Buddhist caves at Ellora. We sat together here for about an hour. The noise of the local people out on a day trip on the lower floors is quite raucous. Nothing reflects sound quite so well as a large expanse of smooth stone in all four directions. The kids seem to feel that it is a safe space to vent any pent up frustrations from home, literally screaming at the top of their lungs and enjoying hearing their primal scream yelled back at them from all around. Earplugs help a little. I am somewhat used to the phenomenon and managed to experience some peace anyway. Visualising a sea of sentient beings screaming helplessly in cyclic existence helped me to respond with compassion. But truth be told, they were probably having a lot of fun.

Most Indian tourists probably see Lord Buddha as not a particularly important deity in their pantheon. (A minor avatar of Vishnu is apparently how he is seen.) There does not seem to be any particular reverence expressed towards the Buddha images by most tourists. But for those local Indians who are actually Buddhist (about 15% of the population of Maharashtra) when they see bhikkhus, they are very respectful. Literally falling to the ground and bowing, touching the feet of the monks with reverence. It is very sincere and moving. Especially when an entire family does it. They also frequently ask for a photograph and are very touched when the monks grant permission. The smiling faced simple request 'ehk foto?', is rarely ever just one photo though. As other people all around literally queue up to be next. I can handle three or four photos, but more than that and I have to run away. Pleasing some and disappointing others, what to do? Can't please everyone.

The lunch was served in the garden behind Kailash Hotel and it was a very pleasant spot with a view of the cliff face that contains the caves. It is ten degrees warmer and 40% less humid than Sarnath, where we were just yesterday, and the air quality is much better. It felt good to be drying out a bit, as it were, and getting some good sunlight.

After lunch I joined Mr Umesh for part of his explanation about the Kailash temple excavation at Ellora. It is the world's largest monolithic structure. (Made from one piece of stone) and it is an extraordinary feat in terms of stone excavation and carving. About a half an hour into the experience of climbing steep steps in strong sunlight, surrounded by tourists, I started to feel short of breath and dizzy. It looked like that is what I was going to be able to manage today. I left the group and descended the hill (that we'd ascended to get a birds eye view.) I did make a customary visit the inside of the Shiva shrine, where I sprinkled a few drops of very pure and precious Mysore sandalwood essential oil on the Shiva lingam inside. Lord Buddha is my refuge, but it is okay to be respectful of powerful deities, when in Rome, as it were. A little side image of Lord Ganesha contained within a stone post also got some sandalwood rubbed on his cute belly as well.

I made my way to cave#11, which Mr Umesh had suggested would be quieter than cave#12. During the three hour sit I had to work with some dullness and also some fever-like symptoms. Having the three hour chunk of time to work with was great however. It is during these longer sits that I am able to regain and recharge the energy necessary to lead a large group on pilgrimage. Then pilgrims trickled in at their own pace and we shared the final hour of sitting together and shared merits.

Back at the Hotel, Tahn Danny gave my legs a massage and Tahn Anand helped to wash my robes. I did have a mild fever and was achy all over, but took some meds and slept early. We had a big day planned for Ajanta caves tomorrow. Common sense was saying that I should delegate to Ajahn Sunando, my second monk at Anandagiri, who had joined us today. But he had not been there before and it wouldn't really work. I had a clear plan about how to structure the day, and where to do our pujas and practice. So I decided to get as much rest as possible, and then use some of the medicines which Mae Chee Ying had ensured that I had to lower the symptoms and increase functionality tomorrow. I can have a rest after this if needed, once people are somewhat familiar with the Ajanta caves. With meditation time scheduled in the days program I think it will be fine.