

Strategies for Experiencing Spiritual Stratospheres

(I am actually writing about the day spent yesterday at Ajanta Caves from level three, back in Cave#12 at Ellora in the afternoon on day 13, January 22. Yesterday was a very long day and there was no time for journaling. Most of the group has gone to look at the Jain caves, the last four caves at the Ellora complex, Caves #31-34. They will meet me back here at 4 pm for meditation and puja. I was a little unwell yesterday and it was a very big day out, as it were. We woke up at 4 am and got back to the Hotel at 9 pm. After a good rest last night I am about 90% recovered now. There is no need to worry my dear readers)

Ajanta

Day 12, January 21

The wake up call went off at 4am, I ignored it. Tahn Anand knocked on my door at 4:30 am, and I let him in and then climbed back into bed moaning. 'You should wake up, it is nearly time to go' he said. 'I said 5 am, but 5 am was always really 5:30 am!' I said in response. Knowing that my group are a little slow first thing in the mornings. He made me a cup of coffee, then venerables Joel, Sampanno and Panyasiri arrived in my room, looking a little miffed at my still crumpled in bed state. I looked at their obnoxiously awake faces, they were all bright eyed and bushy tailed, the picture of health. I was outnumbered! Three healthy morning people against one grumpy evening guy with a cold. I sipped my coffee miserably, and started to rally to the occasion. My cold symptoms had not abated and I had a headache as well as a congested nose and hoarse throat.

Heading to my large medicine kit I started administering to myself, girdling my loins for the day. Two Ibuprofen for the headache, then I squirted nasal cleansing saline solution up my nostrils and sniffed hard a few times, headed off to the bathroom to blow my nose properly. Mae Chee Ying had also arranged and acquired some steroid nose squirting stuff that instantly opens up sinuses, another liberal squirt up the nasal passage. Then I took a broad spectrum symptom reducing pill. Quite the breakfast. Tahn Joel also gave me some phlegm reducing stuff to squirt down the back of my throat as well. Normally I would have just slept this kind of thing off, but there was a big day ahead and I needed to be functional and appear somewhat normal for the sake of the group.

I climbed back under the duvet and waited for the various concoctions to take effect. The monks were quite sweet, hanging out together until luang Por Achalo got it together. At 5:20 am, putting on a brave face and cheerful demeanour we headed to the bus. 'Good morning everyone', I said, 'Good morning Ajahn', the bus full of people replied. I took the microphone. 'You guys look about 40% awake!' I cajolled them, secretly sympathetic. It is a two hour drive to Ajanta from here. I explained, let's all nap for the first hour, then Mr Umesh can explain some things about Ajanta to us. Anti-inflamed, nasal-salinated, analgesicated and caffeinated, I was doing okay. Oxymetazone Hydrochloride is my new found friend! The extra nap time also helped.

On my last visit to this area a little over a year ago we noticed that there was a new hotel not far from the entrance to Ajanta Caves. We had tried out their restaurant and it had been fine. Mentioning this to Khun Lek, we decided to have the meal here, as it opened earlier

than the government run restaurant inside at the site of the caves. We could have our meal here at 8 am, and be at the caves when they opened at 9 am. Khun Lek had gone to the Ajanta Green Hotel hours before the group would arrive, to make sure that the food was coming along as required, as well as to supplement the Indian menu with some southeast asian style dishes. We had our meal, everyone was pleased, and then we headed onto the caves and indeed we were the first big group on the scene.

On the bus I had announced the morning's strategy to the team. We would pop into Cave#1 first, paying our due respects to the Buddha image and admiring the famous world heritage wall paintings, still visible over a thousand years later. Then we would head all the way to Cave#26 at the very end of the horseshoe crescent shaped line of caves. In theory, as most groups pop into many different caves as they meander along, by heading to the last one first we would have a good chunk of quiet time to ourselves. The last cave is also, in my opinion, the nicest one.

Coming into the Ajanta complex there was that, by now familiar joyful, coming home feeling. The weather was pleasantly cool, the sky was blue and the bougainvillea were in full bloom here and there in fabulous fuschia shades. It was the first time here for each of the other 6 monks and I thoroughly enjoyed seeing the wonderment, awe and joy on their faces, as they took in the extraordinary scale and human feat that is The Ajanta Caves. Knowing full well that Cave#26 would blow their minds even further.

I had said to the group to come at their own pace, as there are a lot of steps to navigate. We would be sitting first, then after about an hour we would do our puja. The monks were way up front and were the first to arrive. The monks find it easier to maintain a focus and to quickly change gears and move onto the next thing. It is the result of our training. Alms round time is alms round time... meal time is meal time... sweeping time is sweeping time... chanting time is chanting time. We are used to dropping things and going where we need to be. The laypeople tend to get very absorbed in the meals and in conversations and have some significant inertia dragging themselves away. By arranging things this way, telling people to get there at their own pace, the monks get to meditate more and the lay people don't feel too harassed. The smart one's are paying attention and are not too far behind the monks.

There is a Chedi inside the cave with a row of posts around it, creating a kind of cosy and intimate inner circle around the ornate chedi. We sat facing the Chedi from behind. Leaving the space in front of the Chedi for the laypeople.

Cave#26 was the last of the caves constructed here, during the 6th century, and over the period of 1000 or so years of developing the cave monastery the skills with regards to design, layout, proportions of the images and detailed finishing had obviously developed greatly. It is a work of art in its entirety. From the base of the pillars to the vaulted ceiling. Rather than painted murals, Cave#26 has deep relief carvings of scenes from the Buddha's life. A large panel depicting the Mahaparinibbana is particularly impressive, stretching along the left hand side wall for many metres. There is a sense of both grandness and of deep loving devotion in every detail. The central Buddha seated on a Dhamma Teaching throne contained within the Chedi faces devotees as they enter the caves. When looked at from the entrance the curves of the arched vaulted ceiling suggest a halo of pure radiance emanating

from the Buddha and the Chedi. The Buddha's hands in a teaching gesture are welcoming. 'Come'.. he seems to say... 'let me explain the source of sublime transcendent joy, so that you may Realise and experience it too.'

We sat for around an hour then began our puja. I couldn't even see the lay people from where I was seated, but trusted they would join in on cue, and they did, very enthusiastically. Chanting the refuge chant together in an Indian melody was really wonderful.

Buddham... Saranam... Gachaaamiiii...
Dhammam... Saranam... Gachaaamiiii...
Sangham... Saranam... Gachaaamiiii...

We chanted our praises to the Three Jewels, the fulfilling the Ten Parami chant as well as the Karaniyametta Sutta. Then I asked Shivani, my Indian student and friend to recite her version of the Karaniyametta Sutta. Shivani is a classically trained singer. Her precise Pali pronunciation combined with precise note shifts and cascading runs were truly magical. It sounded 'just right' in that sacred space and I imagined hundreds of Indian devas rejoicing above her head and throwing celestial jasmine blossoms down upon her. Shivani is a little shy and needs some encouraging support, and when shy her voice can be a little soft. But in embraced within the resonant chamber of the stone cave every word was clear and full. I could feel the joy of my fellow pilgrims as well. I think that on the level of mind everyone was an Indian deva while listening to Shivani.

After this we backtracked to Cave#10, one of the earliest Theravada tradition caves which also contains a Chedi but which is much more simple in style. After a meditation session we chanted the Dhammacakkapavattana Sutta, and the Refuge chant. This group are all good chanters. The sense of communion and harmony was awesome once again as we recited the first ever sutta within one of the oldest caves. We were rewarded by another chant from Shivani, her recitation of the Mangala Sutta.

After this most of the group went with Mr Umesh to learn about the world renowned paintings and murals. We agreed to meet up together upstairs on a quieter level of Cave#6. I was feeling a little under the weather, so after a toilet break I meditated upstairs in Cave #14 for a couple of hours. I felt that the group were happy wandering around discovering and learning about the place, I could leave them in the capable hands of our Thai and Indian guides as well as the other monks. A couple of the monks stayed and meditated with me. The illness was mild inasmuch as, so long as I sat quietly, looking inwardly, I felt fine. I just needed to spit out some phlegm every ten minutes or so. (I was grateful for the extra absorbent tissues I'd brought from Anandagiri.) This was the first time that I was going to be able to sit meditation for five hours in various caves in one day at Ajanta.

Finishing our day by meditating and chanting together one more time was perfect. It had been a great day of practice in a very grand place. The monks all appreciated a refreshing mango juice mixed with soda water drink at the restaurant on the way out, (as well as the clean toilets), The traffic was heavier heading back, so it was a bumpy three hour drive.

I announced to the group that tomorrow was officially an allowable sleep in day. The first one in 13 or more days for much of the group. We would be returning to Ellora Caves, departing the Hotel at a comfortable 10am.

Ellora part two

Day 13, January 22

Once again we had our meal on the lawns of the Kailash Hotel in front of the Ellora Caves complex. After the meal most of the group went with Mr Umesh to explore the Jain caves. The stone sculpture art is stunning in those caves. I was joined by Tahn Joel and Tahn Pannysiri for meditation on level three in Cave #12.

Today was a National Holiday all across India, as it was the official inauguration of a famous and important temple associated with Lord Rama in Ayodhya. This temple and site has been the centre of some significant controversy for quite some time. The Hindus of Hindustan (which is how they lovingly refer to India,) consider this town to be the historical abode of Lord Rama, when he had incarnated as an avatar of the deity Lord Vishnu way back in ancient history. But in the 1500's a mughal king had a mosque built on the site. Something which Hindu Nationalists deeply resented. In 1992 an angry mob finally destroyed the mosque, and this had provoked riots in many parts of India, with Hindus fighting muslims and vice versa. Long story short... the conundrum of what to do with the land went to the Supreme Court of India, and after much deliberation they decided in 2019 that a Hindu temple could be built on the land, and that the government of Uttar Pradesh, had to give a 5 acre piece of land to the moslem community where they could build and replace their mosque.

Mr Umesh explained that to many Hindus, the rebuilding and inauguration of the Ayodhya Ram Temple today, symbolises the return of Rama to his rightful abode, something which the Hindu community feels worthy of great celebration. This national holiday and atmosphere of celebration seemed to affect the visitors at Ellora today. Let's just say that they were vociferously celebratory. Even more so than usual. I enjoyed my 2 and half hours of sitting and 1 and half hours of journaling nonetheless. With earplugs pushed in tight and hat pulled over eyes, sitting in the farthest corner on level three of Cave #12, not too many people came too close.

At one point during my hours of afternoon meditation I had what I considered to be an ironic and humorous thought. 'It will be nice to leave the cave monastery and go back to the middle of the city where things are quieter!' I was grateful that it was just a one hour drive back to the sensory deprivation container of the hotel room.

A strange thing occurred in my meditation at around 4 pm. Energetically, I could feel that the group had come together to sit behind me in the large space. But when I turned around, absolutely no one was there! It was a very surreal sensation. At 4:15, I asked Tahn Joel to go and try to find the group... had there been a misunderstanding? It turned out that they had all been sitting together on level two just below! They made their way up one by one, we sat together for a little while and then had a lovely puja together.

Everyone was sitting quite spread out on level three. When we started to chant, the chanting filled the entire space rather magnificently. A curious thing occurred, after having been sitting in there meditating for hours, I literally could not bring to mind the Thai style intonation of the Praises to the Buddha chant in Pali. It came out of my throat in a particular Indian style that I have frequently heard while sitting under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya. I decided to chant it slowly in that style, 9 times. By about the third time round the entire group had learned how to chant along to the new style, and it sounded so wonderful! Somehow this loud, faith infused chant filling this ancient space made it feel sacred and alive once again. Our group of Malaysians, Thai's, Singaporeans, Australians, Americans, Canadians, two Indians and one Serbian were all chanting like Indian monks and nuns, and we turned Ellora into a monastery once again!

I think that the Buddhist devas were pleased and that the Blessings from the Buddha statue expanded in radiance during the puja. After the puja the superintendent opened up the inner sanctum of the big Buddha statue which is flanked by the eight Bodhisattvas. Everyone could go inside and bow at his feet one by one, then circumambulate. I had made a special sandalwood and saffron fragrance blend to offer on this occasion. I sprayed it liberally within the inner sanctum. It was a very good way to end a day that may otherwise have seemed spiritually challenging, at least for circumspect and quiet meditating Buddhists.

Tomorrow we have another full day back at Ajanta. I am hoping that as it is an ordinary weekday, that the crowds will be smaller and quieter. We'll see.