

Aurangabad Caves - beautiful and intimate

January 24

Last day of this Pilgrimage

It had been the suggestion of the good Mr Umesh, that rather than tire ourselves out on the last day with the one hour drive to Ellora Caves and back, that we could visit the much closer Aurangabad Caves, which were much quieter as well. Closer by and quieter sounded really good. I actually had a vague memory of visiting these caves from nineteen years earlier, on my first visit to these parts with a supporter from the USA and my younger brother. My memory is usually pretty good, especially the visual part, but I had a serious head cold at the time, so with a head full of mucus and on symptom suppressants medicine that made me drowsy, the experience at the time itself was vague, thus the memory was too.

I am very glad that we came here, because they are much more beautiful than I had recognized. Especially Cave #7. I do remember chanting a puja to a large image of Avalokiteshvara carved into a wall in front of a Buddha shrine, way back then, but had not recognized then how beautiful it was. The pathways and staircases and gardens had all been upgraded in a very lovely and thoughtful way, very harmonious with the natural environment.

Cave #7 at Aurangabad is unique in that it contains a small vihara with a circumambulation route around it. In front of the vihara are large images of Padmapani (a form of Avalokiteshvara) and Vajrapani, on either side of the entranceway. There is also a kind of a landing on a slightly lower level in front of these images and the Buddha vihara. The quality of the stone sculpture, particularly of the Bodhisattva images is still very fine, and the space in front was just big enough for the group, giving a cosy, warm and intimate feeling. We were held in the embrace of the Buddha, the Bodhisattvas, and the seven flesh and blood Sangha members present on the day.

I gave a talk first, reviewing what we'd been doing together, and highlighting what I felt should be the aspired for 'take-aways' from the pilgrimage experience and process. And how to recollect the separate sites and occasions of the pilgrimage frequently once having returned home, in order to keep uplifting the mind from the merit that had been produced. One of the ways that the merits of a pilgrimage are experienced is that one feels happy and glad at heart when recollecting it later. We did one last puja and meditation together, before an intimate asking of forgiveness ceremony.

The feeling in this cave was gentle, sweet and tender. This may have had something to do with the large and fine Bodhisattva images, which are revered and taken care of, as well as the mood of our group on this day, as we came together with mutual appreciation for our final group practice session together. The absence of crowds with erratic or chaotic energies was no doubt also another factor to the loveliness of the atmosphere here. The site is also surrounded by a lovely and quiet natural environment and expansive views, where the air flows nicely. It would have been a nice place to spend a lifetime practising I imagine.

Energetically things had been getting a bit frayed at the edges, as people's minds had begun to flow towards going home. But this site and occasion on our last morning together were really suitable for remembering and recapping what we'd all been doing and for appreciating, and closing it properly.

The Day After the Pilgrimage

January 25

Fern Residency Hotel, Aurangabad

10:30 am

In conclusion, firstly, let me say this. I am extremely pleased with the level of harmony and cooperation among the pilgrimage group who joined this particular spiritual expedition. It is quite amazing really, when you think about it, that among the 79 participants, when including all itineraries, there was not a single 'difficult' person to have to try to humour, settle down or contain. No divisive characters, and no one was triggered, acting out by being overly fearful or controlling, nor demanding lots of attention. If there were one or two, it would be kind of normal. But everyone treated the monks, khun Lek and her staff as well as the Indian guides and hotel staff graciously. Given that there were many people that I did not know very well before the trip, and given that such an excursion is disorientating and exhausting on one or other level for everybody, this is a really wonderful accomplishment for the entire group. Congratulations pilgrimage class of 2024!

As importantly, I also have a clear sense that people really 'got it'. That is to say, why we were doing the things we were doing, and going the places that we were going to etc. And perhaps most importantly, I feel that they truly benefited from the experiences. I received a very nice thank you card with handwritten messages of appreciation from most of the participants. Several people even said the pilgrimage was the best experience in their life thus far, and that it will be something that they remember until they die. So that is very gratifying.

One example is given below...

'Dear Ajahn, thank you for bringing such a large group of pilgrims with you to the Holy Sites as well as Ajanta and Ellora caves. And for thoughtfully arranging the schedule to avoid the crowds and take care of our health, and for leading us in practice and chanting sessions. I personally experienced moments of deep faith, rapture, and peak meditation moments. These moments will etch deeply in my consciousness, and help to ride through the ups and downs of my practice in the future. Thank you for the opportunity, the supportive conditions, the teachings, compassion, inspiration and compassion. With gratitude and loving-respects.'

As someone who tries to be a teacher to some people sometimes, it is always nice when a person you have encouraged experiences some benefit. This is one way that we repay our gratitude towards our own teachers, and the way that the Buddha's teachings continue to be a living tradition that is a light in this world.

Even so, for myself, today is a day for breathing out. There are no bumpy drives, no big groups to lead, but rather a few hours for laying on my back on the soft bed in the hotel room, that really is deliciously quiet today. A little bit of cocooning, of feeling the extent of the fatigue, and allowing the heart-mind to put the pilgrimage down. There is a particular kind of background psychological stress associated with leading a group of diverse peoples in strange lands through potentially dangerous situations. Of constantly having one's sensing antenna feeling out the situation. Wondering if everyone is okay? Or if they are not... how bad is it? Of trying to keep them spiritually focused... of having enough pressure directed skillfully to encourage them to practise more than usual, and learn more than usual. Yet ensuring that there is also some time for rest, recuperation and reflection. To support health and proper learning from the immersion into the journey and process. It is an intense experience, that you don't quite feel until it's over. Like... wow!... that was intense! And now the mission is accomplished... and my dear pilgrims have all gone home! I cannot say that I miss them right now in this exhausted moment. But I can say that I am genuinely proud of the pilgrims and also very happy for them. Pleased with the role I could play in encouraging them. And I would be happy to practise among each of them in the future as well. So it is a contented type of exhaustion that I am feeling.

Several people asked about future India Holy Sites pilgrimages. I said that I do have a loose plan to go to the remaining main Buddhist Holy sites in around two years time. To Savathi, where the Jetavana monastery was and where the Buddha spent eighteen rainy season retreats, then to Kusinara, the site of the Mahaparinibbana, then to Lumbini, the birthplace. After this, driving on to Pokhara, spending a couple of days and nights by a Himalayan lake, then onto Kathmandu for a few days, visiting ancient stupas and temples there. Many people said they would be interested to join. Some asked, why two years? Why not next year? I said that once every two years is fine... give me some time to recover!

Khun Lek said she would be willing to be our travel agent once again as well. I asked her just yesterday morning, if this was the most difficult trip she'd ever coordinated? and she gave an interesting answer. She said that it was certainly the most complicated. (because of the different options offered, and with people returning to several different countries, and because of the airlines cancelling and rescheduling their flights at short notice mid trip for those joining the latter portion.) But even though it was the most complicated, it was by no means the most difficult. Because all of the pilgrims, she said, were polite, kind and cooperative. Due to this, all of the challenges that arose could be surmounted. Given this the seeds are at least there for another pilgrimage.

But of course life is very uncertain, we do not know whether we will have the resources, vitality and freedoms that we have enjoyed this time around in two more years time. Yet it is a good sign that both teacher, students and support team are willing to continue the journey together.

Well done to all involved!

And now we have the most important part of the Holy Sacred Pilgrimage to continue with. Our committed and consistent daily practice. Because every 10,000 mile journey is

completed by taking one step after another, without stopping or going backwards. I wish you great strength, faith, resolve, determination, and every blessing for the journey!

After a few days visiting with friends in Mumbai, myself and two of the monks, Tahn Joel and Tahn Sampanno will have a private meditation retreat in Bodhgaya during the month of February.

With loving-kindness

Ajahn Achalo