

Intermission Mumbai

25 January

At the encouragement and invitation of my Indian student from Mumbai, Shivani, I decided to spend approximately one week in Mumbai, in between the Holy places pilgrimage and the Bodhgaya intensive meditation retreat. Taking a time for breathing out, shifting modes before another intense undertaking. It is also a time for seeing a little more of India, and meeting people who are not those in or directly around the Buddhist sites. Something that I feel I should do a little more of after so many visits to India. I am joined by venerables Joel and Sampanno.

Leaving Aurangabad, I noticed a kind of a psychic heaviness on the plane which was interesting. It was a similar sized plane and similar duration flight as say Bangkok to Phitsanulokh, or Bangkok to Ubon Rachathani in Thailand. But it felt very different. Working folks returning to the megalopolis I guess, where lives are probably quite stressful. The city of Mumbai is believed to have a population of close to 22 million, which was the population of the nation of Australia in 2010!

After arriving in Mumbai airport, picking up our suitcases, coming out into the terminal, I did not know how we would find Shivani? The security is really strict in Indian airports, no one who is not flying is allowed inside. We walked toward the nearest exit and sure enough there she was, in a pink floral embroidered salwaar kameez suit waving her right hand in large semi circles, while her left hand held a bouquet of bright orange flowers. I could see her smile from 15 metres away! Now here was a Mumbaiin that did not have a heavy energy. We came out of the doors and Shivani offered the flowers, tears streaming down her face, lowered to her knees and bowed three times right there on the ground. I guess some people might find that strange, but I do the same thing whenever I meet my teacher at an airport too. Both respect and humility are beautiful qualities. 'I can't believe you've really come, I'm sooo happy, I'm overwhelmed, I'm sorry!' She said. 'No need to be sorry', I said. 'We're very glad to be here'.

We headed off to find the Uber driver who she had travelled with. As we travelled from the airport to the Hotel on Marine Drive, Shivani gave us something of an oral history of the past 30 years of Mumbai's development, some of which I vaguely remember. The sense we got is that Mumbai has grown and changed very fast and continues to, and that infrastructure development programs are not very efficient and are affected by the agendas of greedy politicians, so are not necessarily aimed at what is needed most. Even so, millions of people keep migrating here, despite the slapdash, higgledy piggledy breakneck paced development. Jaguar, Rolls Royce, Louis Vuitton, Herrmes, and Starbucks were all available for anyone with the bucks.

The Hotel that we had chosen as our temporary monastery was not one of the fancier plate glass monstrosities that have been soaring skyward for the past decade or so. But rather a slightly run down but lovingly staffed five storey hotel that was built in 1943, in a style with some Art Deco touches. The Sea Green Hotel faces directly onto Marine Drive, so there is a wonderful view of the Arabian Sea from the balcony. It was a lovely surprise to find that all of

the caretaking staff were Ambedkar Buddhists. They were literally over the moon to discover that they would be having Buddhist monks as their guests for a few days. We have a suite room where there is one bathroom, one bedroom, and a sitting room with two sofa beds and a small table with chairs. Once we had settled in, it felt a bit like a university students share house kind of a set up. Without the sex, drugs and rock and roll, and a few more decades under our belts. Most importantly, it felt cosy and clean and we felt welcomed, safe and taken care of.

Shivani, khun Lek and myself chose this place through discussions together for a few compelling reasons. It is a five minute walk from Shivani and her husband's apartment. It is also within walking distance of some famous Art galleries, the Mumbai Museum, and the Heritage buildings walking streets. It had bigger rooms but was half the price of the newer places. It is also surrounded by cleaner air due to the sea breezes, and there are plenty of decent restaurants and coffee shops nearby on the days when it is more convenient for our host to offer a meal at a quiet restaurant, rather than cook herself. The Queen's Necklace Suite on level 4 at Sea Green Hotel South on Marine Drive in Mumbai has my wholehearted recommendation. So long as you don't mind some traffic noise. Earplugs are my constant companion in India anyway. The moon and sunsets over the Arabian Sea are very picturesque.

A five minute walk in Mumbai

26 January

I slept so deeply last night, when I woke up at around 2 am for a few minutes, I literally had no idea where I was. It took some time to remember... India... post pilgrimage... Art Deco Hotel... Mumbai... Ahh!

Shivani arrived at 7 am, and invited us for a Southern Indian style breakfast at one of her favourite local restaurants, called 'Status.' It was just a five minute walk away, she said. We wandered leisurely, enjoying the cool, fresh, but not cold air. I noticed that the trees seemed similar to those in Bangkok, except that there were many more Banyan Trees. When we got to the restaurant, it's 'status' was closed. Opening at 9:30. Shivani was embarrassed, the monks didn't mind at all. We were enjoying the quiet streets. Shivani explained that as it was Indian Republic day, a National public holiday, all of the offices were closed. The streets were atypically quiet. A perfect morning for wandering around. Shivani remembered a fabulous coffee shop instead, literally on the way back to the Hotel. 'Tokai Blue', it was called. Tokai is apparently the word for peacock in one of the native languages. The coffee and cake was good!

The plan for the day was to see the museum. Shivani felt it wouldn't be too crowded. There was also a kind of cultural pride festival going on where street stalls with art and installations and live performances would be happening. After the museum there was another restaurant she had in mind.

The Status had been a five minute walk away, and apparently so was the museum. We stepped out the door again and headed towards the museum. After just a few minutes we

started to walk past some rather grand and fabulous looking brick and stone buildings from the colonial era. There were also really tall and mature trees along the footpaths. Crowds had begun to arrive in this more central area, and getting to the gate of the museum probably took us ten minutes. Unfortunately, as it was a public holiday, the museum was closed. Once again the good Shivani was sorry and once again the monks didn't mind. The charming architecture and smiling festive mood of the locals was quite pleasant to observe.

She suggested that we walk slowly towards the Royal China restaurant, about a five to ten minute walk. There really were many stalls with artworks along Mahatma Ghandi Drive, as a part of the 'Khalla-Ghoda' festival. I really enjoyed admiring them. There were Celestial Cows walking through heavenly lotus fields in uber vibrant colours. Elephant headed gods looking cartoon like... minimalist... abstract... and/or genuinely god-like. There were sweet Shivas, fierce Shivas, loving Krishnas, Ramas and Sitas. And a whole wall of Sadhus faces, each with a unique gaze and complexion. There were also impromptu nationalistic songs from Indian movies being sung on street corners. And these guys could really sing! All this with beautifully grand and pompous Victorian era buildings as the backdrop. It was so surreal it is difficult to describe. But as mindful observers we enjoyed it well enough. Three caucasian monks in orange robes seemed to blend in just fine.

Every now and then some sweet young man would come and touch one of my feet and say, 'vandaami bhante' (I offer my respects venerable sir) He would be one of the local Buddhists. The more curious hindus and muslims occasionally enquired, 'ekh photo'... or 'ehk selfie'? And took a photo with us. But there were lots of smiles all around.

About fifteen minutes into our proposed ten minute walk, Shivani suggested that we pop into a modern retail store called FabIndia, as she was sure that I'd appreciate their traditionally inspired merchandise. And sure enough I stumbled across a set of really awesome candle holders, which reminded me that one of the candle holders on the main shrine back at Anandagiri had recently cracked and broken. The candle holders had wooden stands, a beaten copper wax drip catching ring all around, and light amber coloured hand poured glass cylinders with little air bubbles inside them. I can be a bit of an aesthetic fascist when it comes to the ambiance of the sacred spaces at Anandagiri, but these were literally perfect. Hand made, traditional looking, and complimentary to the terra-cotta brickwork all around.

After this Shivani showed us the Flora Fountain, a Venetian looking World Heritage listed carved marble fountain that really is very beautiful. It was about a five minute walk from FabIndia to the fountain. So far we had had four five minute walks that had taken ten to fifteen minutes each, and my feet had started to hurt a little bit. And so I asked Shivani how much further the restaurant was. She replied, 'about five minutes away'. And sure enough it took about 15 minutes. Partly because of crowds, partly to look at the local wonders, and partly because Shivani's five minutes is ten minutes to everyone else. We passed the incredible Victorian era train station, which used to be called Victoria Station, but got its name changed to 'Chatrapati Shivaji Terminus', at some point. And eventually, around fifteen minutes later we came to the Royal China Restaurant.

The meal and conversation was lovely, and we probably should have returned to the Hotel at this point. But there was a cottage industry handicrafts emporium not so far away that I was interested to see. Shivani arranged an Uber. It took quite some time for him to get to us

through the traffic. Now that it was afternoon there was a different kind of crowd coming out for the festivities. There were many large groups of youngish men, say in groups of 30-40, that were wandering around with orange flags and orange head scarfs yelling out slogans. Tahn Sampanno observed that it had a bit of a Trump rally vibe to it, except the skin was brown, the hats were orange, and love of Shiva was somehow in the slogan.

The uber driver eventually arrived and took us to a dress shop with a similar name to the government run cooperative that I had read about. The dress shop owner then directed us to a handicrafts shop not far away, also with a similar name. We went there, and although they had amazing stuff, it was all very high end to the point that we felt a bit out of place. It turns out that the government run cooperative had closed down during covid lockdowns. Shivani located another large Indian handicrafts shop with a broader range (... *about a five minute walk away.*) We went there and it was really great. The sweet family that ran the store were happy to show us all of their products and answer all of our questions. Which Buddha statues were bronze work from the south, which were brass from the North, which were sandalwood, which were cheaper woods. Which religious paintings were from Bihar, Odissa, or Rajasthan etc. I really do enjoy learning about traditional religious themed handicrafts, and feel great joy in seeing when they are still being lovingly made in the traditional way. We didn't particularly need anything, but just wanted to see what is being produced in India, to admire the craft and talented artisans. Shivani offered each of the monks a selection of hand rolled agarbatti incense sticks, which smelt divine.

The walk back to the Hotel would take fifteen minutes, Shivani said. Why not? I thought. (Everything hurt already anyway.) It was a day for doing the Heritage Walks and learning about this part of old Mumbai. We walked past the High Courts, a Library with reading room, a University, and a cricket field with about ten games being played simultaneously! Shivani had an app which told her how many steps she'd taken that day. It was 19,000! I don't know where she gets her boundless energy from!? We had a great day out, saw many wonderful sites and learned many things. We also made a firm resolution that tomorrow, we would go only to the museum and nowhere else. We were going to need some recovery time.