

Family, Friends and Devas

January 28

Today we had a meal dana at Shivani's home. I met two of her neighbours who are dear friends. Varsha was a Jain practitioner, the other, Jyoti, was her meditation friend. Many other people came as well. Let me try to remember them, I definitely cannot remember all of their names, but their relationship to Shivani I can recall. Ayay, her husband, then her mother, mother's sister, brother, brother's wife, brother's six year old daughter. Kaamod, her music producer friend, the music producer friend's wife, and his four year old son. A vocalist friend, Aarti. Then there was the maid, the convalescent mother in law as well as her carer. All in one apartment! Which was fortunately quite spacious.

Shivani's mother was over the moon to be able to serve the monks with her own hand. She had been lethargic and with little appetite since a thyroid tumour had been removed, but today she had a lot of energy and a good appetite. There were many Dhamma questions after the meal. Everyone was respectful and sincerely interested. Altogether we were there in Shivani's living room for around five hours. We chanted a long blessing and then I did some chanting for the mother in law.

Apparently the extended family comes together like this at least twice per month, which, to the three monks who are all originally from Western countries, seems impressive. A couple of these people had children who were educated overseas and who then found work abroad as well, apparently the kids do not visit very often. I asked one lady how she felt about that. She said, 'I gave her wings, so how can I give her a cage? Since I gave her her wings, I must also give her the sky.' She visits her daughter in America every few years herself, as the daughter does not come home.

After the meal we went to some nearby Hindu temples to continue our cultural studies. There was one very famous and very popular Saraswati (goddess of music, poetry and knowledge) and Laxmi (goddess of prosperity) Temple. The queue to enter was about 500 metres long, with perhaps 2000-3000 people waiting in line to pay their respects. The temple attendants kindly escorted the foreign holy men in robes to the front of the queue, nobody seemed to mind. Many people raised their hands in respectful gestures. I offered a white lotus to Saraswati, and a pink lotus to Laxmi, and my virtue to Durga, (the fierce goddess, of whom I'm a bit scared.)

The Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is my Refuge, and Nibbana is my goal. But appreciating the accumulated virtue of well disposed deities is a type of mudita practice, recollecting their existence is a samatha practice called 'devanussati', which is recommended by the Buddha of gladdening the mind. So we all felt fine about making some small offerings and observing the rich cultural scene. One kind temple priest allowed us to sit under a fan behind a statue to Hanuman, the monkey headed god. I did feel some sweet energy of metta blessings within the temple surroundings. So did Tahn Joel and Tahn Sampanno. After this we went to a nearby Shiva Temple. This temple had some areas designated for sitting meditation not far from the main shrine. The sandstone posts and walls were all beautifully hand carved and seemed very old. We all enjoyed the atmosphere of devotion and had an half hour meditation session. After this big day out we had a nice quiet evening at the Hotel.

Encourage and be Encouraged

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Shivani is a recording artist, who now has her own small recording studio in southern Mumbai. And I actually played something of a role in this development. During the covid lockdown period, when I was doing regular livestreams for my students. Seeing that we all needed some uplifting during those challenging times, knowing about her talent, I occasionally asked Shivani to chant a sutta for us. Not long after, an Indian-Canadian lady asked if she could sponsor Shivani to record a few tracks. I encouraged Shivani to do so. But recording studios were expensive to hire. After producing several lovely works her husband became supportive of her hobby turned professional endeavour. Ajay had an office in an old building not far from their home that he was no longer using, and he agreed to have it converted to a fully soundproofed recording studio. Shivani generously allows some of her close friends to use the facility free of charge as well. Kamod is a very skilled traditional vocalist, and also a talented arranger, mixer and producer. Shivani and Kamod invited me to record a chanting track at the facility.

After yesterday's big day we had a quiet morning at the hotel, then Tahn Sampanno, Shivani and I walked up to the studio at around 3:00pm. Kaamod's student/assistant, Shivahari, another young and talented singer also came to offer his assistance. He would be our sound engineer. As someone who has done a lot of ordinary, simple chanting for decades, it was actually very interesting to receive specific advice about how to change the texture and tone of the voice, and learn different ways to project it, in order to get different effects. Kamod made me work quite hard to do three versions of just one chant. He was very exacting, in a good and professional way, getting me to separate syllables and words, to stay on beat, to enunciate clearly, with even emphasis on each word, except when a particular special emphasis was intended.

It took three hours to record the vocals of just one simple chant! But I did enjoy learning new things from genuine professionals. To be able to do so is an honour. And it was quite nice to be sitting in the position of a humble student once again. Kaamod and Shivahari were both patient and encouraging, and I was earnest, sincere and hard working. Given the language barrier and my lack of professional training in this area, we did quite well. Kamod and Shivani both felt that the quality of faith, purity, feeling and devotion in the voice was as important as the technical side. This was encouraging. It was a very interesting glimpse into the lives of professional recording artists. Mind you, they would probably get the desired for results much faster than I did.

Kamod said that he was going to make four tracks. One with just the one track of my voice and a simple ambient soundscape. A simple, peaceful, meditative track. Another with a vocal harmony effect by layering the different versions of my own chanting. This would be more joyful and devotional. Another with a chanting response to my chanting by a chorus composed of Shivani, Kamod and Shivahari. And a fourth with some traditional Indian style ad-lib runs in the background as an authentic ambient effect. That would be Kamod's vocal contribution. Eventually these tracks will be made available for free distribution and will be

able to be used in different ways. The meditative style track can be helpful for relaxing after work and when preparing to meditate. The other styles can be used in media whenever an ambient backing track might be suitable. It was a wholesome way to meet one another, spend time together, and share freely of our talents in a generous and open exchange. Today's track was the Three Refuges. Tomorrow I will do a second track, the preliminary homage and praises to the Buddha.

Some people feel that the traditional Theravada monks should not involve themselves at all with this kind of activity. I believe that I have a good sense of a middle way with it. So long as I am not learning and playing instruments or writing musical scores myself, and just contributing a vocal of chanting, then leaving the musical part to others, I think it is okay to do these projects from time to time. As a kind of a compassionate outreach activity..

I once had a kind of a premonition or intuition many years ago, that recordings of my chanting might one day help to lead some people to find a sense of refuge and spiritual discipline that they may not otherwise find. With this in mind I have co-produced a few chants with different people over the years. And now I have actually met a good number of people who became my students after listening to a chanting track on the free meditation app 'Insight Timer.' They listened to a chant first, then tried a guided meditation, then listened to teachings on Refuge and Ethics. Then, after listening more and more, and meditating more and more, they became sincere and committed, disciplined Buddhist practitioners. Several of these people just joined the recent pilgrimage to the Holy Sites in fact.

One track in particular has around one million plays, and there are tens of thousands of appreciative comments. From helping people's kids fall asleep peacefully, to starting the day off joyfully, or finding a centre, a moment of peace during a difficult period. I am glad to have contributed some joy, hope and encouragement in moments to many people, to various degrees and in various ways, during these challenging and fraught times in our world.

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Today Shivani and her husband invited us to the Hare Krishna temple for our meal. The temple was beautiful and immaculately clean, and we got to observe the last part of one of their pujas. Visiting the Hare Krishna centre in Brisbane, Australia, back when I was fifteen years old was the very beginning of my spiritual searching this lifetime. The vegetarian meal was light, clean and tasty. We visited their store and Shivani offered some incense and masala chai spice to add to tea. Interestingly, one of the main ingredients of the hand rolled sandalwood agarbatti incense is cow dung! The Hare Krishna see cows as being Holy and so have integrated this by product in this way. I am curious to see whether this affects the fragrance in any noticeable way.

We had another evening at the recording studio. It is fascinating the way the world of busy southern Mumbai simply disappears once you are inside the sound proofed and modern studio. Kaamod was very particular about the Pali pronunciation. The length or shortness of the vowels, the softness or crispness of the consonants, the clear spacing between. After chanting in the Thai style for nearly thirty years it was challenging. The Thai language has a completely different alphabet and is a tonal language, so inevitably the Pali in Thai comes

out in its own particular way. But there was no arguing with the Indians about the correct way to enunciate one of their ancient languages. We had to record the track phrase by phrase and once again it took three hours. I think that the results will be quite nice though, capturing a very authentic feel.

Kaamod commented that he felt I listened and took instructions well. He said I was a good example of the way one should learn. But as I've said before. We should be confident about what we do know and humble about what we don't. And if we have the opportunity to learn from professionals, then this is an honour and an opportunity. Tahn Sampanno and I really enjoyed meeting and working with cultivated, intelligent and diligent Indian men with a good work ethic. I knew they were out there somewhere! Meeting Mr Umesh, our guide in Aurangabad had been good in a similar way. These guys are all quite firm in their ethical precepts as well, which is a factor in why it is pleasant to spend time together and learn from one another.

Tahn Sampanno, who used to be in the Korean Buddhist tradition for many years before he joined our tradition, also recorded a track. The Heart Sutra in Korean, which is a chant that he knows by heart. Since the Indian producer was not familiar with the language he did not keep stopping him and make him do it again and again! So Sampanno's recording session was over in just a half an hour. I am interested to see the difference in the musical accompaniment that they select for the Chinese based language as opposed to the ancient Indian one.

Tomorrow is our last full day in Mumbai. We will be visiting Shivani's mother, and then we will visit the site of another ancient cave monastery complex on the northern side of the city.