

## The Final Leg

February 2nd.

10 am

We stayed at a friend's house in Delhi last night. I didn't arrange to meet other friends or do any teaching engagements in Delhi, because when making plans a few months earlier I wasn't sure what state I'd be in, and didn't want to make commitments I might not be able to keep. Or overextend myself before having to do an intensive meditation retreat. My friend has a large, quiet home with guest rooms. We all had a good rest. As Delhi is colder than Mumbai, it was good to spend one evening indoors in the cooler environment, giving a little bit of adjustment time for our bodies, before sitting outside in the cool mornings in days to come. Mumbai had been pleasantly warm.

Leading the pilgrimage was a commitment I'd made, contributing to the chanting recording project was another commitment, and the remaining commitment is the intensive meditation retreat. Today is officially the end of the one week interlude between the pilgrimage and the retreat. It was indeed very enjoyable to meet different types of Indian people and to experience the local cultures more, outside of the Buddhist holy sites circuit. Like appreciating a jewel more fully by looking at different facets and in different light. There is more of a feeling of respect for India and for Indians, which is what I had intended. Having got more of a sense for the well disciplined, well educated and deeply family minded people that middle-class Indians are.

In travelling to different regions of India, you also develop more of a sense for the sheer scale of the place, both in size and numbers. A colossal 1.4 billion people live in the subcontinent of India. And it is still growing around three quarters of a percentage point per year. There has been a kind of a recognition that the countries where I have lived my life predominantly are such sweet 'little' countries. Both of their populations combined add up to just one fourteenth of India's population. But I have no complaints. Sweet little countries are good too.

I did a little bit of yoga this morning and did a bit of an assessment of the state of my body, pre meditation marathon. Oh dear. There is lots of tightness and stiffness and a few extra kilograms have accumulated quickly around the middle part as well. Sitting on the bus, then sitting in meditation, and the extra cups of sweet tea and coffee in the afternoons and evenings due to cold weather, as well as the oil in the curry and on the pan fried paratha bread has all taken its toll. I will have to start being more strict and disciplined with my intermittent fasting regime as well as with yoga and stretching, in order to support the body with all of the extra sitting, which will start this evening!

Having done a lot of walking these past few days was actually very good for the body. And weight-wise, things would have been worse without it. I've had a break from all the supplements this past week as well. But as Bodhgaya is still foggy and cold in the mornings, it's time to start re-supplementing.

4 pm

On an aeroplane once again. This is the sixth of seven flights in this itinerary. It feels like we're heading for the home stretch, the final sprint, everything has gone to plan and gone well. The flight was delayed one and a half hours due to heavy fog in Delhi earlier in the morning. There is a kind of a coming home feeling as we head towards Gaya. I am hoping that I will be able to settle in a little at Mumtaz Guesthouse, then go and pay respects to the Bodhi Tree and meditate for 2 hours. And I am also secretly hoping that it won't very crowded.

10pm

Picking up our bags and getting through the airport was easy and fast, compared to coming in on an international flight. Gautam and Ardil were waiting outside as we walked through the exit, it felt good to see them. Mae Chee Ying had arrived safely and was at the guesthouse when we arrived. Tahn Joel and I headed off to the Mahabodhi Temple soon after putting our bags down. It was wonderful to see that there was literally no queue at the entrance.

JC, my Malaysian student, was sitting in my favourite spot when we got to the Bodhi Tree , but my second favourite spot was free right beside him. Tahn Joel started to set up my seat. JC, seeing that we'd arrived, moved back one row. He need not have, I'd have been quite happy sitting next to him. JC had separated from the bigger group after Varanasi, and had come to do a personal retreat in Bodhgaya. I am proud of him for making time for his practice in this way.

Sitting once again under the shade of the Bodhi Tree, just metres from the seat of Enlightenment, I just felt grateful. I was glad to be there... glad to have learned who and what The Buddha was... glad to be following in his footsteps, cultivating the Noble Path. Glad to be having an opportunity for my own practice now, after a busy period.

(4007 + 2 - 4009)

## **Blessed**

February 3rd

12pm

The other day after meditating at the Kanheri Caves, Shivani had said that the cool gentle breeze that flowed through the caves and under the rocky overhangs seemed to have a lovely and special quality to it. She felt almost as though it was whispering to her. I asked her, 'what is it saying?' She replied, 'you are so blessed!' And she exclaimed, 'it's true! I am so very blessed!' This morning, when Mae Chee Ying and Gautam came to my room at 6:30 am, just after I'd made myself a fresh coffee, and they offered an orange, a banana, and two home cooked cookies made by a villager back at Anandagiri, and a sliver of brownie cooked by a student in Bangkok, I felt the same way. I feel so blessed!

Last night during my two hour sit, I had wriggled and changed my posture three times! I could only manage thirty minutes without wriggling. Pathetic! You see! All this sleeping on

soft beds and with fluffy pillows makes the mind more dull and weak and the body gets attached to comfort. It's alright to do for a little while when leading others on pilgrimage, but not for too long. Now I have to reclaim the lost territory. This morning I sat for 45 minutes, then 55, another 55, had a quick toilet break and sat another 55. I am aiming to get back to one hour, and one hour and fifteen minute chunks of time between posture adjustments. I'll get there soon. The mind has a better chance of settling more deeply when the body can be still for longer periods of time.

My Thai bhikkhu companion, Ajahn Joy, who I often meet under the Bodhi Tree in February year after year is here once again. He sits by my side and literally never moves. 3,4,5 hours... he just sits perfectly still. He is very modest and unassuming, and very few people would notice him as he has a very slight frame and sits slightly slumped over, with a shawl draped over his head. But I notice, and I reckon that this monk has some pretty good meditation. And I'm very glad to have his companionship sitting right by my side.

Coming into the Mahabodhi Temple this morning there was hardly any one in line, and the people in front of us were a group of quiet and politely behaved Thais. Tahn Joel and I both noticed that both last night and this morning stood out in stark contrast in their peace and quiet, compared to when we were with our larger group. Each group has some interesting 'group kamma', it seems. The most recent pilgrimage group were extremely diligent and very harmonious, but they definitely had some kamma with crowds and noise. With our combined meditation monk's kamma, things are much more quiet and spacious, at least so far.

JC will be leaving tomorrow. This morning he offered me a lovely garland made entirely of rose blossoms under the Bodhi Tree, thanking me for being one of his teachers. During my break I went and offered it inside the vihara housed within the Chedi. The attendant monk kindly placed it on the lap of the Phra Buddha Metta statue. There was a nice Tibetan language puja and mantra recitation going on in the background, the sky was clear, the air was fresh, the groups visiting the Bodhi Tree were small and well behaved. I've died and gone to Bodhi Tree Heaven!

### **Re-envisioning Impressiveness... Sensible and Sustainable Striving.**

As a consequence of being a monk who prefers sitting meditation to walking meditation. And who enjoys longer sessions, because of the deeper samadhi that can arise. My body has developed some tell tale signs. Over a period of two decades of these habits, my calf muscles and achilles tendons have steadily become tighter. My legs feel a little stiff and walking hurts for a couple of minutes after sitting. Because of this, doing a proper session of yoga and stretching in the morning has become necessary, as has taking time for a half an hour of walking between the afternoon and evening sessions, while doing these marathons. These developments, as well as the fact that I find writing a journal to be a helpful support to the meditation retreat process, has meant that doing a full ten hours of sitting meditation in one day is not really possible anymore. It seems that 8.5 has become a number that is sustainable.

One level this is a little frustrating. Because it really is wonderful to rush off to the Bodhi Tree first thing in the morning and to be one of the first sitting under the tree. But I've been rethinking the matter with regards to impressive practice. The person I need to impress is my

own better self, my better self who has wisdom and common sense is saying that impressive practice has to include being considerate and sensible and mindful of the bigger picture. Because I do need to be able to walk after the meditation session! And if I write my journal until midnight, getting up at 4:30 means there has not been enough sleep or rest. The meditation suffers when there is too much genuine tiredness. So we now have a new working paradigm. I sleep at midnight. I get up at 5:30 am. I do a half an hour of yoga and have a light breakfast, then head off to the Bodhi Tree at 7:00 am. I sit for three and a half hours before breaking for lunch. I then return to the Bodhi Tree at 2:00pm, and do another 5 hours of sitting and a half hour of walking before leaving at 8:30 pm.

That's what I did today, and it seemed to work. The morning session was tough, with regards to the amount of pain... and so was the sitting later in the evening. The body is still getting used to the more intensive mode. But the early afternoon practice was really wonderful. With mindfulness, collectedness and wisdom coming together, working together, inclining the mind to experience a vast sense of emptiness. There was a stable and steady awareness which experienced a quality of emptiness, that was also pervaded by spiritual rapture and bliss. It lasted for about an hour. No thoughts... no pain... no liking or not liking. Just peace. This is the benefit of the more intensive practice. The tough periods are even tougher, but when the practice comes together, the concentration and insight is better.

Fortunately for me, Tahn Sampanno is a morning person. So he has been going first thing, and setting up my meditation kit and sitting on it from 5:30-7:30am. He literally warms my spot up for me. I then bring him his light breakfast. And he does some walking afterwards. Once again, after lunch, Tahn Sampanno goes in and sets things up at 1 pm, and I come and relieve him of his post at 2:30 pm. The best sitting spots are highly sought after, so Tahn Sampanno arriving early in the morning and early after lunch is crucial. This strategy is a way to ensure that both Tahn Sampanno and I get a good opportunity to sit in the most conducive places. We don't make the bad kamma of leaving mats taking up the space without a devout meditator sitting on them either. Win win.

(9 + 8.5 - 17.5)