

Carrot (cake) and Stick

February 5, Bodhgaya, 3rd full day.

Rain early in the morning challenged the aspired for morning meditation goal. Waiting for things to dry out a little we arrived later than usual. And then it rained again just two and a half hours into the sittings. But truth be told, it was a bit of a relief to have a valid excuse to bail. The mind had a lot of resistance to sitting, still with pain in the shoulders and some lingering mild trauma from the day before's efforts. The first sit I managed just 20 minutes before I needed to wriggle, next I managed 35. Then 30/30/30. The mind was flying from pain, flying from its meditation objects, and indulging in fantasies about running away. 'There is that museum that I haven't seen in Kolkata yet... I want to see the ancient Buddhas... we could go for just a couple of days... and then there's that government shop with the real sandalwood oil'. But this is all familiar territory, day three is hard. I did not fall into the snare. We will be staying put for now.

Coming back towards the guest house in the drizzle, Mae Chee was looking leftwards, over in the direction of The French Oven coffee shop and she said, 'today we have time for coffee and cake before the meal, if you'd like Tahn Ajahn.' The Buddha had an evil cousin. Does that mean that Mara has a nice niece? I was sold. 'It can't all be stick', I said to Tahn Joel, 'got to have some carrot too... carrot cake!' He agreed. But in the end Mae Chee and I settled for a cinnamon roll and a cappuccino. Tahn Joel had the carrot cake. It really was the perfect thing, all things considered.

Of course I am not actually saying that Mae Chee Ying is Mara's nice niece, I just liked the alliteration. Clearly in being so kind and helpful she is one of the Buddha's daughters. But it is nice to invert the stories sometimes and consider things from different angles. We often hear that the Buddha had an evil cousin. But do we consider that someone appearing temporarily evil has a Buddha for a cousin? Practice in India forces my mind into these magnanimous contortions. One has to become very forgiving and accommodating in order to avoid misery and contentiousness.

I was thinking earlier about the annoying fake monks that take other people's flower offerings and hand them out to unsuspecting Indian tourists, getting them to repeat the refuges in Pali after them, then asking them for a donation. On one level they are complete scoundrels. But what if in the big scheme of things they are actually helping people? Hundreds of people are saying. 'I go for Refuge to the Buddha... Dhamma... Sangha', right there under the Bodhi Tree, who otherwise would not be saying such a thing. Who knows where this may lead them in the future, when they have merits enough to meet more scrupulous monks.

As I approached the afternoon session after this morning's floundering attempts, I never would have imagined that a pair of socks could be so encouraging. But they were! As I pulled on a new pair of socks that had been offered by one of the pilgrims, Tracie, from Texas. I noticed that there was one word knitted into the weave which appeared over the toe area. It spelled 'LEGEND'. Yep... my socks were looking up at me and telling me in no uncertain terms that I was a LEGEND! I found this so helpful at the time. That being so, we headed back to the Bodhi Tree, I was feeling courageous in my nice new clean socks.

The afternoon was better. I did two 55 minute sits, then went for a walk with Tahn Sampanno to find the perfect incense diffuser for him, something he'd mentioned he would appreciate. Once again I was grateful for the distraction. Moving the arms when walking is like a gentle massage behind the shoulder blades. Nandini and Siddhartha, a brother and sister at the shop, were very sweet and helped us to find the perfect thing. A copper Tibetan styled one with auspicious symbols along the front and back. They insisted that Tahn Sampanno take the incense burner and trusted that one of our helpers would come and pay for it later. Once back in the Temple I did two one hour and five minute sits. I am older and it is taking a bit longer to come together, but we're getting there. Normally it should be less painful by tomorrow. The tender muscles become kind of numb. There will be no more late morning coffee and cake, or mid afternoon retail therapy tomorrow!

The Long Paw of Ageing

'Om Tibet', our favourite restaurant for a clean and simple meal when on retreat in Bodhgaya, was suddenly demolished recently. The old building it was housed in is being replaced by a new dwelling for His Holiness the Dalai Lama, for whenever he is in town. It is in a very central location. Currently it is a four metre deep hole in the ground. It is quite the reflection upon emptiness impermanence. The end of an era for the perfectly situated half way between the temple and guesthouse meal stop. Seventeen years of lunchtime history is gone without a trace.

We know the family who ran the restaurant quite well. Dassan, his mother and sister have reopened their restaurant in a different location, which is not on our walk home to the guesthouse. We decided that ordering the meal beforehand, and having Gautam pick it up on his motorbike and bring it to the guesthouse was a good way to keep supporting this sweet Tibetan family, as well ensuring that we continue to have clean and healthy food. But Dassan decided to pop into the guesthouse and pay his respects today anyway, which was very sweet of him. He came with a large bunch of flowers and a warm apple pie cooked by his sister, fresh out of the oven. He informed me that he will be closing the restaurant on February 10th for Tibetan New Year, but he has invited us to be his family's guests of honour on that day. How could we say no?

People may wonder how it feels when someone offers flowers, a pie, bows, and makes a special invitation. Does it feel awkward? Does it go to your head? When I see someone doing this in front of me, usually I am just very touched by the beautiful qualities that I am witnessing. Loving respect, gratitude and humility are such beautiful qualities. I resonate with the goodness and feel empathetic joy, without making a big sense of self out of it. The heart becomes very sensitive from a lot of meditation and I could easily weep many times per day while in Bodhgaya. But I keep mindfulness in the heart as well, and can restrain the tears. But I am deeply touched nonetheless.

Another thing that has been happening these past few days is that very sweet people from Ladakh have been coming and paying respects to me as I've been returning to sit on my meditation mat under the Bodhi Tree. After leading some monks from India at a session of chanting at the Emerald Buddha a couple of years ago, and having accepted an invitation to

have the meal at Bhante Kassapa's monastery in Bodhgaya last year, I have met a few monks and laypeople from Ladakh. They have not forgotten me. When they bow, they do it with such deep respect, warmth and humility, it is really very touching. Once again, I just feel so touched and so happy for these people, that they can experience such beautiful qualities. When someone is very humble before me, I also find it humbling. I pay respects to my closest teachers with deep gratitude and respect as well.

But there is something going on here... the way that more people are paying respects with a deeper sense of reverence. Just as I find my muscles stiffer and body heavier, feeling older. From the outside this body looks older as well. As a Theravada monk, this has implications. Ageing only goes in one direction, slowly but surely, Ajahn Achalo is becoming a Luang Por. (Venerable Father)

In my life I try to be somewhat peripheral. I like to be close enough to know what's going on, and to be able to contribute something to the scene. While still having lots of time for my own practice, and protecting the practice opportunity of the other monks and nuns at my monastery. It is a bit of a tightrope to walk. One doesn't want to become completely marginal, or be sucked into the whirling centre. But wherever you are in the picture there are worldly winds to navigate. With several of our elder teachers being around the age of 90, you don't have to be Einstein to figure out that within ten years the scene is going to significantly change. I pray sincerely that our teachers live as long as possible, in good health. And continue to put sincere efforts into my own practice while I still can.

On one level, when thinking about Dassan from Om Tibet, and his family, you could say that we are simply paying customers, with our lay students paying for our meal most of the time whenever we've eaten at the restaurant. But on another level, having a clean and safe place to eat, and being served by friendly and trustworthy people, really is something we have come to value. Especially after seventeen years! I've never gotten food poisoning after eating at Om Tibet, and that really has been a tremendous support to our practice here. And clearly the family sees us as more than just customers as well. There is the exchange of goods and services, but there is also enduring friendship. Dassan is 29 years old now, but I have known him since he was twelve. He has even visited Anandagiri a few years ago on his trip to Thailand. It will be good to take the time to visit their new premises, to receive the meal and to chant a blessing. And I have been thinking of bringing a nice New Year's gift as well. I will talk with Mae Chee, who is acting as our steward with regards to our options.

(26 + 6.5 - 32.5)

Sangha Harmony

February 6, 4th full day.

12:00 pm

I had a bit of a creepy experience with a ghost at the guesthouse at exactly 12:00 am last night. I will not go into too much detail because some other people staying here will read this. Suffice to say it went away after some chanting. Chanting is good!

This morning's sitting was definitely easier. An interesting thing happened in my second sit, while sitting, at 45 minutes, sitting through to the full hour was looking like it would be easily doable, as the mind was aware of pain yet settling within. But then there was a gentle tap on the leg... I ignored it. Two minutes later... another tap. Another two minutes later and I hear Gautam's voice. 'Achaan', I reluctantly opened my eyes. 'Today you have flower offering, now it's 9 o'clock.' Oh yes... some of my overseas students had asked Gautam to arrange two big baskets full of jasmine blossoms and two big baskets full of rose petals to sprinkle around the base of the Bodhi Tree. I asked Tahn Joel if he wanted to join? He heard but he wasn't listening. I could tell that he was peaceful and not interested in going anywhere or doing anything. It's nice that both of our meditations were becoming peaceful at the same time.

Getting to the front of the throng of people under the Bodhi Tree took some manoeuvring. But as I got closer I heard... 'Ajahn Achalo!... Tahn Chao Khun!... nimon!... (*we invite you*) The sea of white clad people parted and I suddenly found myself standing between the most senior Thai monk in India to my right, (PhraT hamm Bodhiwong) and the most senior monk from Khaokho, (Ajahn Parami) where I live in Thailand to my left. I made respectful gestures and they both literally gave me bear hugs! Evidently there is harmony in the Sangha. :) We offered basket after basket of flower petals together under the Bodhi Tree. I went back and sat for 55 minutes twice, back to back.

I don't want to tempt fate, but I'm feeling very healthy, after nearly a month in India, and it is sooo nice! The cleaner air and that extra little bit of sleep at night makes such a big difference.

But Why?...

11:30 pm

It is interesting to me that I managed 5 sitting meditation sessions of 45 minutes today, and 5 sessions of 55 minutes. It is day 4 you see, and the capacity within the sitting is slowly but steadily increasing. Tomorrow I think I will simply aim for ten sessions of 50 minutes. There's a nice simplicity to that. Many people will be wondering, what is the point of all this forcing, numbering and counting? There are good reasons for it, so let me explain it to you.

Sitting with more pain, if you are actually working with it, sharpens mindfulness. Sharp mindfulness then sees the quality and characteristics of mental phenomena more clearly.

A consistent, repetitive timetable creates the conditions for more consistent periods of collectedness. Consistent and regular periods of collectedness, deepen over a period of days and weeks. Samadhi gets deeper and better.

More mindfulness... more Samadhi... more Patience and Determination, is the foundation for genuinely profound insight experiences, and potentially for liberating experiences. This is why people sign up for meditation retreats where there is a set structure to surrender to. I'm

just structuring my own here in Bodhgaya. Working out what the body and mind can take at this point in time, and I think we're almost there.

Why 50 minutes per session? I tend to have some hindrances for the first ten minutes or so of each sitting. Then, often, the mind will find some peace for around 30 minutes. Coming out of the peacefulness, pain in the body presents itself. I practise being patient with the pain for a few minutes. If I then adjust the posture slightly. For example, place the left leg on the right, instead of the right on the left. I can then repeat the process, and sit for another 50 minutes without standing up. After three sessions, I need to do some walking for about 15 minutes. Then I can continue sitting.

There have been two Thai laywomen here practising with us these last few days. Khun Anne and Khun Lilly. They will be returning to Thailand soon. Earlier in the day I agreed to help Anne choose a thangka (Tibetan style painting) of the Buddha, and to help Lilly choose a wrist mala. After the final session at 8:30 pm, we all went to look at some stalls at the side of the road. Anne found something suitable, and I also chose a nice Thangka as a gift for the Tibetan family who have invited us for the meal on Tibetan New Year in a few days. I have been told that there is a lot of empty wall space in the new premises, so a hand painted picture of the Buddha will be uplifting for the family and their customers. As Lilly wanted real turquoise, I recommended Mumtaz store, as most of what is available is fake, or other stones dyed.

(32.5 + 8.25 - 40.75)