

Moderately Eccentric Bodhi Mandala

February 7

10:00 pm.

It was quite a nice day and there's not much to say really. Inwardly there was more patience and more mindfulness. Outwardly the temple had a lovely atmosphere for the most part. There is a Bhutanese puja happening behind where we sit, and one from the Buddhists of Darjeeling is happening to our right. Neither are too big or too loud and they were actually pleasantly complimentary. Several large Thai groups passed through and they were well behaved, their speakers soft. There was clean air and a gentle breeze. All in all it was a breezy and holy day under the Bodhi Tree.

I've even been able to do my two 15 minute sessions of walking meditation in between sittings, along the inside pathway between the shrine symbolising the Buddha's walking meditation path and the Mahabodhi Chedi. At busier times this has meditators squeezed in all along. It is wonderful to think of walking precisely where the Buddha walked.

A playful but slightly naughty puppy keeps wandering through under the Tree. He ate the sweet that someone had dropped as an offering on my monks' shoulder bag. A Thai monk hit him softly with a pillow at one point to shoo him away, and got scolded roundly by an elderly lady for doing so. 'Don't hit dog!... you hit dog... someone hit you... how can you do? DON'T HIT DOG!' I wasn't sure of her nationality. The Thai monks are not used to being scolded by women towering over them, waving a finger menacingly, but they chuckled about it softly once the aunty moved along. I'm not actually sure who made more bad kamma though.

The senior Cambodian monk who leads the Pali evening chanting inside the temple at 6:30 pm every few days is not our emotional favourite. His performance stood out as the days one dissonant dirge. I time my toilet break and chat with Gautam at that time just in case it's his turn. This activity is a useful distraction. I suppose it is a matter of taste.

A crazy man wandered around circumambulating later in the evening, I wasn't sure if he was scolding, complaining, prophesying or prognosticating. But he was definitely speaking loudly and gesticulating. Other than that he was harmless. The Indian monks from Maharashtra seemed to have had a bit of a skirmish at one point as well, about who was going to be in pole position to pounce on unsuspecting pilgrims. When the crowds are smaller and the speakers softer, the little conflicts around the Temple impinge on ear consciousness more. But when you open your eyes there are scores of people sitting quietly and who are impeccably well behaved, humbly doing their private practice and prayer.

The electric rickshaw drivers are much more aggressive now that there are less potential passengers. In trying to walk along the road they keep cutting in front and stopping still, you turn to dodge them and another one cuts you off. Sometimes you have to turn around and do a series of semi circles to get out of the maze of tuk tuks that manifest around you when leaving the central area. If you needed a rickshaw it would be helpful I suppose, but when you're just trying to walk home it's really not helpful!

There seems to be a new garbage disposal system in front of the Om International Hotel, which is about 50 metres down the road from Mumtaz. They used to have large metal bins, but now it gets emptied onto the ground right along the side of the road. The pigs and dogs get first digs, then the poorer humans scavenge for the recycling, and then the cows appear the morning after and add some faeces and urine to the scene. An excavator comes and picks up about 70% of the mess in the afternoon at some point. The remaining 30% mixes with the leftover rot of the previous. So there is some kind of a garbage disposal system it seems. But the overall impression is one of there being an open garbage tip just 50 metres away from our guesthouse. And directly over the road from several guesthouses and hotels. The stench when walking by, as we have to do four times per day is just awful.

Now of course this is a wonderful Dhamma teaching about the true nature of food, and the impermanent and unsatisfactory nature of conditions. And an argument could be made to say that it is a good thing to get a face full of such a 'teaching' regularly whilst on a meditation retreat. But how do you walk by such a phenomenon, without adding a pile of vomit onto the scene? One has to keep some nutriment inside one's body afterall. Naturally I came up with a strategy, like I always do, to try and mitigate the challenge.

A friend in Bangkok once gave me a cashmere neck scarf from the Czech Republic. I've been using it for fifteen years. It is a lovely boring beige colour, not too thick, not too thin, not too itchy, and it breathes as it were. And I discovered in the very cold weather that you can also breathe through it. So after I prepare my daily fragrance puja into a spray bottle, I test it liberally on the scarf. And then the nice smells seep in. So whereas the outside smells like the apocalypse, and inside my room smells like an apothecary, the cashmere neck scarf is the intermediary. The stench hits the outside of the scarf and is then magically transformed by the fabulously fragranced fibres, coming into the nostrils smelling like agarwood and lavender. And that's how I survive the dangerous in-between-worlds bardo state between Mumtaz Guesthouse and Om International Hotel.

Our two Thai friends headed home today, and Asoka from Singapore will depart tomorrow. Despite Bodhgaya's ever present intensity, the crowd and noise is less, it's a bit like breathing out and having some space between breaths. Things are settling and quieting. Even the wedding singing and fireworks happening about 500 metres away are at about a 2 out of 10 on the intensity scale.

(40.75 + 8.25 - 49)

Blue-Black

Feb 8

Sixth full day. Well Dhamma friends, it's not easy, this ten times 50 minutes formal sitting meditation business. At least not for me. But there were some bright and light periods today. I checked in with Venerable's Joel and Sampanno, as well as Mae Chee Ying, and everyone is experiencing quite a bit of tranquillity and rapture in their practice. (As well as the usual struggles.) Everyone can feel the special holiness of the site as well. All are establishing

their rhythms and deepening in the meditation. I was fifteen minutes short on one of the sessions because of a fun chat with Tah Joel about visions, aspirations, vows and character inclinations. The occasional dhamma chat is helpful though.

I chatted briefly with my long-time Thai bhikkhu companion this morning as well. Ajahn Satien from Udon Thani, in northeast Thailand. We've hardly ever talked, but we've sat next to each other for hundreds of hours over the years. He comes and sits from 5:30 to 10:30 am, and I've never seen him move! He is not sitting there drooling either. Must have good meditation. I love having his stalwart companionship by my side, and there is also just a little bit of envy. I wish I could do that! He's about 30 cm shorter, small framed, and probably about half of my body weight. He is two years senior to me in his monk years and 7 years older in age, which is inspiring to notice. What kind of merit do you have to make to be born light and slight? Economy must feel like Business Class to him! When he comes to Bodhgaya, he stays for three months at a time, and does the same thing every single day, so the consistent rhythm over a long time is another factor. He will be leaving for Thailand in 5 days. Small people wish they were bigger, big people wish they were smaller, life is so perplexing.

One of the ways we can incline our minds to peaceful and contented states is by recollecting the skillful things that we have done in the past. This is called Cagganusatti. I had not done it as yet with the following theme, but today, as a way to encourage my current efforts, I gave some focused thought to recollecting and considering the other wholesome activities that I've done whilst on retreat in Bodhgaya, during all of the past fifteen or so visits. I worked out that I've done approximately 300 hours of walking meditation, 150 hours of bowing, 50 hours of chanting, 30 hours of flower and fragrance offerings, and 20 hours of formal teaching. All within the precincts of the Mahabodhi Temple. That's around 550 hours of other spiritual activities, besides the sitting meditation. (With my propensity for calculating, I was bound to get around to doing this one day :)

It is interesting for me to notice that the ratio of formal sitting to other spiritual activities is about 8 to 1. It makes sense to me, because I use my time in Bodhgaya predominantly as a meditation retreat. But I do feel very glad to have done all of the other supportive activities as well. (And very glad to have been supported in doing them.) It is also interesting to notice that I've done 200 hours of practice, for every one hour that I've talked about the practice while here. This is pleasing to me. Practice monks should practise quite a lot, after all.

Tahn Joel and I were talking earlier about how to paint the face of our joint project, the soon to start blossoming, Phra Buddha Metta statue. We will have to consult with Luang Por Anan as well of course, but we both like the current version that can be seen within the Mahabodhi Chedi Vihara. It has a distinct Indo-Tibetan look and feel. The image is actually carved in Bihar blackstone. I'm not sure at what point someone decided to paint it with gold paint, nor at what point the facial features were also painted on, in the distinctive Tibetan style.

A few years ago the hair and eyebrows were jet black. But now the hair is the colour of lapis lazuli, and the black eyebrows have a flash of turquoise above them. The lips are coral coloured. It all sounds a bit strange, but somehow it works. You see these colours repeated everywhere in Northern Buddhism. Lapis, turquoise, coral... and yellow amber and jade. In

the suttas the Buddha's hair is described as being 'blue black', and his eyes are said to have been blue.

Which style do you prefer?

(49 + 8 - 57)