

Boring Day at the Office

Bodhgaya, February 11, Day 9,

11pm

As soon as I had settled into the meditation posture under the Bodhi Tree after bowing, a Bodhi leaf fell and landed directly on my head. It seemed an auspicious sign, but in hindsight it may have been a gesture of encouragement to help me get through what came next. For although I slept a sensible amount, ate moderately, did yoga, and made a good effort, the morning's practice was underwhelming. A dullness persisted that was neither heavy sleepiness nor clarity. The subtle fogginess simply did not move. It was the equivalent I suppose of a boring day at the office. Then we had a nice boring meal at the guesthouse, which I did actually enjoy.

In the afternoon the lack of energy continued. It was a little unusual, because the effort to be mindful of the meditation object was consistent and sincere, which would normally bring about some clear sense of presence, especially after hours. Or at least a few bright moments. What is interesting is that I noticed that Ajahn Joy, my Thai bhikkhu companion, was nodding quite noticeably off to my side as well. Tahn Sampanno went for a walk to visit the Thai Temple in the morning, and another walk outside to look at the Tibetan thangka paintings in the afternoon, so I'm assuming that the sitting wasn't so invigorating for him today either. Later, as we were leaving the temple compound, Tahn Joel commented that his day was kind of lacklustre. It wasn't until the last hour and a half, of over eight hours of practice, that my mind experienced some cool, spacious tranquillity. Comparing notes later, it had been exactly the same for Tahn Joel.

I have some suspicions. Just as bright and good hearted celestial beings can radiate good energy as a support to practitioners, I suspect that other unseen forces may sometimes be radiating unhelpful influences. Bodhgaya is the place of the Enlightenment of Buddhas, but it is also the place where the forces of Mara put up a strong fight. On days like today, low energy days, one gets to make effort and determination parami, and to cultivate patience, even if not experiencing samadhi. Tomorrow I will do some energising, and negative influence negating chanting if the dullness phenomenon continues.

There was an interesting puja held under the Bodhi Tree in the late evening. One of the western nuns from the Root Institute was reading a Mahayana Sutra, or extensive praise, in English, to a group of international students. One does not hear such treatises with so many superlative, wonderful adjectives about immaculate virtues, profound abilities, perfected minds, useful and melodious speech and impeccable behaviour very often. It was like the reward for a hard day's effort in the dust of the grindstone. The diamonds of the diamond vehicle were sparkling down from above, with vajra minds and vajra speech and vajra forms in a vajra sky. Shine Great Bodhisattvas! Blow away the dust of ignorance and delusion from the minds of sentient beings! Explode the darkness of the world away with explosions of accumulated goodness. Shower down a rain of blessings that floods the world with peace!

(73.25 + 8.25 - 81.5)

Expanding in Space

February 12th Day 10

12:30 pm

And just like that the Bhutan and Darjeeling pujas are over. Our Himalayan friends are heading back to the hills. The entire Mahabodhi Temple suddenly has a quieter and much more spacious atmosphere. After observing the breath within a noise saturated ether for the past 9 days, the relative absence of sounds is poignant. Instead of layers of multilingual pujas pressing in on consciousness from very close by, I noticed the sound of a hawk screeching way above the Chedi, about a hundred metres above, and a motorbike honking from 500 metres behind. And I could even hear my breath. On this quiet Monday, there were no tourists for the local monks to offer outreach to either, so even they were quiet. The meditation was also lighter, brighter, and more spacious than yesterday's as well. After a few hours one group of Tibetan monks came and did a puja under the Bodhi Tree. No horns, no bells, no drums, no speaker, no clouds of juniper incense smoke, just their rich, deep, resonant natural voices. It was truly lovely.

You get the sense that the pilgrimage season is slowing and ending quite quickly this year, with economic slowdowns in many places being a factor I presume. So far I haven't seen any large Chinese, Japanese or Korean groups. Which is different to previous years. There is a consistent trail of small and medium sized Thai, Myanmar, and Cambodian groups, and a good number of Vietnamese who seem to be here for longer periods. But you never quite know what is just about to come around the corner around here. So we'll have to play it by ear and work with it whatever it is. The temperature will start getting warmer now as well. It can be quite stunning how quickly the atmosphere changes here. One week the weather is cold and misty and Himalayan people are everywhere. Two weeks later it's hot and dry and Southeast Asians are dominating the scene.

9:30 pm

I laughed out loud to myself when I just re-read the above paragraph. The dear mountain people did not go home, evidently they just had a little power nap. A big Bhutanese Dukpa Kagyu lineage puja is being set up right in place of the Darjeeling one that just finished. Apparently it will go for twelve days. Indian tourists were back in force in the late pm, and the missionary monks were giving the Refugees zealously, whether people wanted them or not. And now we have a wedding in the guesthouse immediately to my right, as I write, and one three doors down to my left as well. The mobile techno boombox, a feature of Bodhgaya weddings, is pumping out it's usual trite, as it stirs up dust in front of the roadside garbage pit. And I wonder for the umpteenth time, why the boombox boy can't find any decent music in this subcontinent full of great singers, with scores of Bollywood hits annually? Tahn Joel thinks it's because people marry very young here, before they develop any taste in music. It looks like Bodhgaya just had an outbreath this morning then a quiet pause in between breaths. Now it's pumping again. (Not a reference to wedding night activities.)

The Bhutanese puja will probably be quite nice, as the past one's have been. And I'm actually quite glad that we'll be having it as an aural backdrop for the next twelve days. We have been in India for an entire month today!

(81.5 + 8.25 - 89.75)

#SaveGautam'sfamily

There is an ongoing challenge that my godson and his family face. With the pilgrimage season in Bodhgaya being seasonal, he struggles to make an income for literally half of every year. With a wife, two children and both parents depending upon him for support it is a serious conundrum. I asked him a year ago to really think about what options there might be for potentially earning a consistent income. He has come up with the idea of establishing a restaurant at a crossroads within his home village, where people from other villages also pass by. He feels that a place with samosa and chai for breakfast, rice, chapati, dahl and curry for lunch and dinner would be something that would work. He said that his village doesn't have a proper restaurant yet. He could run the place himself outside of the tourist season, and his younger brother could do it whenever he is away. The challenge that he has now is in finding the initial start up capital. He wants to sign a two year lease, pre-pay a year's rent, paint and fit out the premises with tables and chairs etc. hire a cook, then really have a proper go at it.

Some of my students previously helped Gautam's elder brother to open a small grocery store, which did work for a period of years. But during the covid lockdowns, like many such small enterprises, the shop went under. But at least some experience was gained in running a small shop successfully for a period of years. So I think that the restaurant could actually work, and I would like to support Gautam in this regard. The challenge that I have is that I cannot allocate funds that have been made available for the running of my monastery, or for the support of monks on pilgrimage and retreat, towards helping a young Indian man open a restaurant in a village in Bihar. I cannot make the negative kamma of misallocating funds, nor have Gautam make the complex kamma of receiving any misallocated funds.

So, I've come up with a simple strategy. Transparency. To simply inform my students and supporters of the possibility to help one Bihari family, and see if they choose to support this of their own good hearted free will. Because if 40-50 people each helped out \$100, Gautam would have his start up capital and could commence his two year trial. I have asked Joyce in Malaysia if she is willing to take up a collection and then transfer the funds to his wife's account, something she has done before, and the ever helpful Joyce is happy to assist. Joyce's email contact is joycelimdhamma@gmail.com, if anyone is interested to offer support. A gift to support this project would also be a gift to me, because I do worry about him, his parents, wife and kids in the slow season as well.

Thirteen years ago, I decided that I was going to help one Bihari kid, and I chose Gautam. With ripped jeans, grubby feet, a broken flip flop, and broken English, he approached a friend and I, and tried to sell us some CDs. I asked why he wasn't in school. He was 9 at the time. He explained as best he could that his father drank a lot and did not work, and that there was no money or food at home. So at 9, he was finding a way to feed himself and

share a little with his mother and brothers. My heart broke. Ask a stupid question. He had seven CDs. I asked my friend to please buy them all. I asked his name as well, Gautam he replied. Gautam said, 'you my friend, you buy all, I give discount,' I explained that we were happy to help him and his family and would pay the full price. Gautam looked confused, but accepted the money.

My friend took me for the meal, and after the meal I was surprised that Gautam was waiting outside the restaurant. He approached us and said, 'I just wanted to say something... thank you for helping my life.' He had been touched, and he was sincere. I assume that we were the first to buy his CDs without bargaining for a discount, and perhaps the first to inquire sincerely about his life. That was the moment that I decided that this was the kid that I was going to help. He had some manners and some gratitude, so perhaps he would be a worthy investment. There was something else that I liked about Gautam Kumar too. For despite the torn clothes and the broken shoe, his hair was coiffed in a perfect Elvis style quiff. Freshly oiled and combed, this little kid had style! It seemed to make a statement that although he didn't have much, he was going to make the best of what he had, and I liked that. Thirteen years later and I am still trying to help him, just like a real father and son!