

Emptiness, Richness, Toughness, Dampness and Sweetness

February 13, day 11

12:00 am.

Some morons think that letting off fireworks at midnight is a good idea just because someone got married. This of course sets the dogs off into their terrified and torturous cacophony. Honestly, the inconsideration and stupidity still stuns me at times. Apparently there is a complete ban on alcohol sales in Bihar, but somebody definitely slipped something that destroys brain cells into the bowl of fruit punch. And now I must remind myself... you are a guest here Ajahn... behave. You came here to cultivate virtue and patience, not to become irritated and find faults. Saaadhuuu!!! But I digress, despite the evening's auditory obnoxiousness, we did have quite a lovely day.

We awoke this morning to the sound of rain. The local weather app has been quite accurate, so we checked the prediction. A dry spell from 8-9:00 am, followed by two hours of showers. Well... not much point going to the Temple really. I suggested we have a quiet morning, rest between breakfast and lunch, and aim to be at the Bodhi Tree from the afternoon and evening after lunch.

Today was the day that we'd accepted an invitation to have the meal with the Myanmar and Tripura nuns community. Adil, one of Mumtaz's sons and co-manager of the guesthouse, offered to drive us all in his SUV. We headed off at 11 am. Sayalay Yasanandi is originally from Yangon, Myanmar, she has been a Samaneri for 24 years. At one point she started listening to Luang Por Anan's online teachings, and has since attended retreats that Tahn Ajahn has taught at his monastery, Wat Marp Jan. Tahn Ajahn frequently asks me to contribute a talk during these retreats, which is how she came to know me. Sayalay now considers Luang Por Anan as her main teacher, which is something significant that we share in common.

Sayalay, (sister) had offered a meal at her centre here in Bodhgaya about a year ago, when I was here finishing off the 4000 hours vow. I had a head cold at the time and had been feeling a little overwhelmed by the crowds in town for HH Dalai Lama's teaching. So although I accepted the invitation and tried my best to be smiling and friendly, I was there in body, but not completely present in mind. Today, as we'd been forced indoors by the elements and had had a little rest, there was much more bandwidth, so I asked many more questions about her community.

At some point Sayalay had either visited or been invited to the Mahabodhi Society in Bangalore. Once there, a monk called Bhante Ananda invited her to India's northeastern region, Arunachal Pradesh and Tripura, to encourage the local ethnic Buddhists. This region is close to Myanmar and many of the people there are Theravada Buddhist. Here she discovered that many sincere young women wished to receive training as nuns, and in partnership with the Indian Mahabodhi Society, she began training novice nuns. Her sister, Sayalay Dhammavicaya, joined her about 8 years ago. They have ten nuns that they are now training together.

They live in what is basically a rented guesthouse on the outskirts of Bodhgaya, until they can get the correct paperwork and status to buy a property, establish a charitable trust, and build a nunnery. I will encourage some of my own supporters to help them once it is possible to receive contributions from other countries. The five storey place where they currently live is quite nice. I asked and learned about their daily routine.

They have a morning chanting and meditation session. Then they have a light breakfast and walk the half hour walk to the Mahabodhi temple, where they do more chanting and sitting, then they walk back, do some study, and have lunch. There is a rota where some of the nuns take turns preparing the day's meal. These nuns are very sweet and sincere, and their teacher is tough and determined, which are necessary qualities for her to be doing what she is doing.

After a rest they have either a communal study or meditation session. Then once again they walk to the temple for some evening practice. It is an impressive and sincere schedule that they maintain, and the nuns are well behaved and radiant.

We were genuinely happy to accept the invitation and to encourage them. Today was the Indian samaneri's preceptors birthday, and so they had dedicated the merits of the meal offering towards Bhante Kassapa's long life. They invited us back one more time before we leave Bodhgaya. Bhante Kassapa is a senior Ladakhi Indian monk, and he has been instrumental in regenerating a better quality of Theravadan Buddhist monastic sangha within India. Developing monasteries and centres in Ladakh, Bangalore, and most recently in Bodhgaya. (And other places.) He is in Bangalore at present, but once he returns we will likely be sharing a meal with him as well. I met him at Ajahn Anan's monastery when he and some of his monks were also attending one of Ajahn Anan's retreats.

After the meal it was still drizzling, what to do? As we had the Mumtaz & Sons mobile and the affable company of Adil as a knowledgeable local driver, I suggested that we visit some of the international temples today. Namely my favourites, the Japanese and Bhutanese.

The first place we stopped off at was the 80 feet tall sandstone Buddha constructed in the Japanese style and consecrated in 1989. Both Tahn Joel and Tahn Sampanno were impressed with the scale and serenity of the image. I also love sandstone Buddhas. Visiting the Japanese temple just a block's walk away, was both peaceful and poignant, inasmuch as there was not a single Japanese person, neither in residence taking care of the temple or visiting it. It was a little bit eerie, as though an essential component of the scene had been somehow deleted. A couple of decades ago there were a lot of Japanese pilgrims on the Buddhist trail, and now spotting them is like spotting a rare migratory bird. I assume that the younger people are less interested in religion and also have less disposable income? The older demographic are probably still interested, but may probably also have less cash. Like in many places, inflation has increased faster than incomes for decades, and so whereas people may still have a reasonable quality of life, there is less leftover for things like overseas trips than before.

The temple was beautifully simple, but with just the two bored Indian caretakers hopeful for tips and no Japanese there at all, there was definitely a surreal quality to it. We had a peaceful meditation in the hall, and could sense that it had been a sincere place of practice before, as a certain air of peace still pervaded the shrine and hall. Mindfulness of the rise

and fall of Empire was a central part of my theme of contemplation. As was appreciating the Japanese aesthetics. I love the way that they combine the cool of greys with the splash of warmer colours in the wooden panels, doors, and paintings on the ceilings. We were grateful to have a quiet and dry place to meditate in any event.

The Bhutanese temple, just a couple of hundred metres down the road from the Japanese one, is much more vibrant, and actually has a resident community of monastics. The aesthetic is very celestial and stunning. There are freshly gold-leafed statues with beautifully painted faces, and murals of Bodhisattvas in pure abodes on the walls, and intricate mandalas on the ceiling. This temple was part of the inspiration for my dana hall design back at Anandagiri. Although as part of the Thai Forest Tradition I could only replicate a small portion of the colour palette. I made a fusion of the Bhutanese three-tiered roof design, with the Nepalese Newari style terracotta and gold aesthetic tones. But here, in little Bhutan, we all appreciated the liberal splashings of sky blue, coral, lapis, jade, amber and gold.

The rain had stopped by the time we'd finished appreciating the Bhutanese temple, and so Adil, whose car has a special pass because he is a bonafide resident of Bodhgaya proper, dropped us right at the entrance of the Mahabodhi temple. I enjoyed sitting, breathing in the recently washed air and listening to the Bhutanese puja under the tree. There was some loud thunder though, and after exactly one and a half hours of sitting the sky burst and showered us with big drops of rain. We packed up quickly and headed to the meditation park, where there is a covered pavilion containing a very large bell, and enough space for about 6 people to sit. My new friend and fan it seems, Samanera Saddhasila, a sweet-faced and always smiling Ladakhi novice, helped pack, carry and relocate my gear. He has been paying his respects every single day. Today he had three of his novice friends from Arunachal Pradesh at his side. All four of them looked like they'd just literally descended from Tushita heaven, so clear complexioned, bright eyed and smiling were they. Tahn Joel also commented upon the palpable radiance that each of them possessed.

1 am and it is still raining outside. I said to my venerable brothers that if it's raining tomorrow morning we may visit the French Oven coffee shop after breakfast, and another of the international temples. Tahn Sampanno suggested the Korean one. Coffee, Cake and Korea... why not?

(89.75 + 2.25 - 92)

Family Reunions

February 14, day 12

It drizzled lightly in the morning and then it rained heavily at 9 am. Tahn Sampanno braved the temple in the early morning, which was truly noble and determined, but as I'm trying to preserve my health for the long haul I didn't want to risk catching a chill. We did all have our coffee and cake at 9:30 am, and kind Adil agreed to drive us to the new Korean temple and be our guide once again.

The Shrine hall was really beautiful. And unlike the Japanese temple, this one had resident monastics and a school and looked new and felt lively. We sat for a while, did some chanting

and took some photos, as it was very photogenic! Tahn Sampanno who had practised in the Korean tradition for many years recited the heart sutra in the hall three times. Adil then dropped the monks and Gautam off at the Tibetan monastery where Venerable Tokme was offering lunch today.

Once again it was really lovely to just be with Tokme, and with Pema, perched in her bed and being encouraging from her comfy corner. This time with Gautam there to translate we had a better chat. I would ask questions to Tokme, which Gautam repeated in Hindi to Pema, who translated to Tibetan for Tokme, and then it would come back to me in reverse. But with patience and determination we learned some things.

Tokme had escaped from Tibet when he was 38. I had met him 17 years ago here in Bodhgaya when I was 34, not long after he had fled. Now he lives in a small retreat hut in the hills outside of Dharamsala. He was able to go forth as a bhikkhu with the Dalai Lama as his preceptor. These days, because of mobile phones he is able to keep in touch with his brothers and sisters back in Tibet, which must mean a lot to him. His parents have passed away already. One thing that amazed me, was that he had crossed the border into Tibet secretly some years back, in order to do his pilgrimage to Mt Kailash, a very taxing and demanding pilgrimage, and then he escaped back to India once again! I really admired his courageous and determined pilgrimage spirit.

Tokme served veggie momos, dhal, rice, veggie curry, apple pie and salted tea. We chanted a blessing and took some photographs. Tokme has a toothache, so we arranged that Gautam is going to help him get to the dentist and Mae Chee Ying will help liaise in covering the costs. Pema on the other hand lost track of the time, saying that she forgets everything when she's here, but now there's no bus from Bodhgaya to Kathmandu. Once again Gautam will help her to get to Patna where she can catch a bus. Despite the different nationalities and languages, it was a very warm, intimate, family gathering type of occasion.

We went into the old shrine room at Namgyal monastery, and it felt very powerfully sacred. Dassan had mentioned the other day that it's the oldest temple in Bodhgaya, dating back since before India gained independence. The smell of decades of Tibetan incense residue was wonderfully transporting, and the vibrations of tens of thousands of pujas seemed to have permeated everything. I wanted to meditate there but it was cordoned off from the public.

It was still overcast in the afternoon, but we just had to try anyway. We managed to sit for 45 minutes from 2:30-3:15 pm, before getting rained on once again! We quickly moved to the bell pavilion in the meditation park and sat for 45 minutes there as well, after which the rain did clear up. So... back to the Bodhi Tree, where we sat for three more hours. There were many small Thai groups today, and many other small groups as well. I noticed pujas that were done by seven different nationalities. Thai, Sri Lankan, Cambodian, Burmese, Korean, Tibetan, and English. The meditation was pleasant.

Sitting under the big bell in the meditation park was kind of cool. It is about two metres tall and one and a half metres wide, and probably weighs about three tonne. When I say sitting under it, I mean literally. This bell has the heart sutra on it, sacred sanskrit syllables, and vajras as well. Bells have a special meaning in Vajrayana Buddhism. They represent the

special bliss that is experienced through the realisation of emptiness. I couldn't help but think that if the bell fell on me and I died, that it would probably be an auspicious death. But the bell didn't fall on me... so I'll do my best to continue with an auspicious life for now.

(92 + 4.5 - 96.5)