

## **Dancing Bones, Silk Scarves and Dim Sum**

Bodhgaya, February 20, Day 18

Last night there was no wedding music at all, tonight there is some, but it's very quiet as it's a long distance away. Heaven! The meditation today was light and bright and easy throughout the entire day, and even the shoulder pain has all but abated. There was some challenging phenomenon in the afternoon, but there's always something.

Yesterday in the afternoon I saw my Tibetan lady friend, Pema, circumambulating the Chedi. I asked her how many circumambulations she does each day. She does four of the outermost route, six of the intermediate, and fifteen of the innermost one. I worked this out to be about five kilometres of circumambulations. This is a lot for a 78 year old. And then there are her 138 full length prostrations each morning, and the walks to and from the monastery where she stays on top of that. But she confided in me that she is not as joyful this year as in previous years, so I asked her why? She explained that she's having difficulty sleeping at night, only getting two hours sleep on average. Because of this, she feels blurry and absent minded during the day. I told her to wait while I went and got my little bottle of pure lavender essential oil. Then I explained that she should put four drops on her fingers, rub it on her chest, put another drop on her finger, rub it in her temples, and then inhale the fragrance from her fingertips while falling asleep. Today I saw her in the morning and she smiled joyfully. She slept for four hours last night, felt more rested and was very grateful. Lavender always helps me to fall asleep if ever I've got a bit over stimulated. I gave her that bottle to use, as one of my students on the pilgrimage had offered another one recently.

So my challenge in the afternoon is that a group of Vietnamese have settled around the area where we like to sit quietly. A couple of them are impeccably well behaved, but there are two nuns who are very challenging. One in particular brings a big thermos flask of tea and a bag full of snacks, and she is literally chatting and having a picnic about half the time. She was sitting directly to the right hand side of me the entire afternoon. Her friend sits to the right hand side of her. Although my mind was fairly peaceful, there were moments when I was really shocked by the coarseness of this nuns' behaviour. I mean, we're talking mixing instant coffee, peeling and munching on bananas, eating peanut brittle, making a little pile of rubbish in front of herself, chatting loudly with her friend and laughing out loud quite frequently. I just wanted to ask her, why bother sitting under the Bodhi Tree amongst the meditators? Why not just enjoy the atmosphere from one of the raised platforms outside of the inner area? But I didn't want to make the kamma of admonishing anyone and just decided to be as patient as I could.

At one point though, I couldn't take it anymore, and so I let myself have a few quiet little mean thoughts about them, by way of a secret admonishment. So I gave them nicknames. When considering the ringleaders behaviour, the ratio of merit to demerit just doesn't add up. I think she's making more bad kamma than good kamma. So her nickname is Dum Sum. As for her cohort, it's not very bright to follow the lead of such a chatty snacker in the most sacred place in the universe. So her nickname is Dim Sim. Yep, Dim Sim and Dum Sum, are the picnicking Vietnamese nuns. They left at about 5 pm and Tahn Joel and Mae Chee Ying took their places. Much better!

There has been an interesting group doing an interesting puja on a raised platform about 15 metres behind where we sit in the evenings. A group of about 12 foreigners appear to be following a Tibetan Rinpoche in what I think is the Chö practice. They each have their drum, bell and human thigh bone trumpet. I am only vaguely familiar with the chants and practice because of some chants with music that were made by Ani Choying Drolma, a Nepalese nun from Boudha, and her musician friend, Steve Tibbetts some years ago. I've been hearing some familiar chants and it piqued my interest. So tonight, when they started once again at 7:30 pm, I actually went and sat meditation directly behind them, doing some listening meditation with my eyes closed. At one point something quite interesting occurred. With my eyes closed, I saw two laughing and dancing skeletons made of light dancing above their heads! They seemed joyful, and not scary at all. After that, I went back and sat facing the Chedi.

As we were leaving the temple, I noticed that the Rinpoche and his group were still there, and so I decided to ask the Rinpoche about the practice and the chants, and to mention my experience. Chödpa lama Rinpoche lives in France, is from the Karma Kagyu tradition and is a practitioner of Chö. He explained that towards the end of the practice, they visualize these beings and ask them to deliver merits to any ghosts or other beings who may need it. The skeletons come from their minds to perform this task and then return to their minds afterwards. Rinpoche seemed pleased about my experience, saying that it meant his students' practice was having some effectiveness. He told his following in French, and they seemed pleased too. Like I said... an interesting group doing an interesting puja! I am not claiming to have psychic powers by mentioning this experience. But I am claiming that the power of these people's sincere visualisation in the spiritual amplifier of Bodhgaya made an impression in my mind. (Please don't try the Chö practice at home without the guidance of an experienced teacher.)

After the evening's practice was over, I invited Victor, his mother, Elle and their three daughters to visit the nearby shop of two of my friends, to look at some silk scarves to consider getting as souvenirs to remember their visit to India by.

Dinesh and Rakesh are two Brahmins from Varanasi who have a small shop here. I have known them both for 17 years now, but hadn't actually seen them for four years, so it was a good opportunity to pop in on them and let the kids have some fun with bright coloured scarves too. They agreed it was a good idea and we all headed off to their store.

It was really lovely to see the two brothers after all this time! Things had been really tough during the covid period, but happily, they are bouncing back now. The kids asked me to help choose the colours of their scarves, which was quite fun. Michelle got a lovely turquoise, Thera got a lovely cross between champagne and coral, and Minerva got a baby blue with hand embroidered edging. Dinesh and Rakesh offered me a piece of Tibetan style red silk and silver thread brocade in a lotus design. As the family is returning to Thailand tomorrow, Mae Chee Ying then offered to take them to a clothing store where the kids could get Indian styled pyjama suits. Everyone was happy and having lots of fun.

(136.5 + 8 - 144.5)

## **Observing Change**

Bodhgaya, February 21, Day 19

Some days here have a very clear and discernible theme. Today's theme was noticing change. There is virtually no more shoulder pain, after it having been a major theme for the last ten days. The cool weather is suddenly gone, and the afternoons are now hot. Victor and his family are gone. There were many Vietnamese around us once again, but they were all impeccably well behaved. And the Bhutanese puja, which has always been experienced by me as being truly lovely, was quite awful this morning. Impermanence.

I think it must have been some kind of invocation to a wrathful protector or something that the Bhutanese were doing this morning. Much faster than usual and with constant fast beating of cymbals and drums and frequent blowing of the long trumpet like horns. The speakers were also very loud. After trying to practise with it for over three hours, it really was too hard to be at peace with, and the results of my efforts was that I felt a little traumatised. The sensitivity of mind had increased, but not the collectedness, so everything just hurt. But in the afternoon things smoothed out, both inwardly and outwardly, and by the evening I had some of the most peaceful meditation so far on this trip. I would not have predicted this this morning. Impermanence again.

(144.5 + 8 - 152.5)

## **Enriched, Sustainable Striving**

When I first returned to Bodhgaya after the pilgrimage, I had toyed with the idea of trying to sit 250 hours of meditation during this retreat, setting a minimum goal of 200 hours, with the possibility of doing more. Now that I am already three quarters through the initial 200, I could certainly push to do the extra 50, particularly as there is already a good momentum now, and the body seems to have finally adjusted. But I have given the matter some thought. On this occasion I am going to commit to just the initial 200 hours. In the past, I have sat 300 hours in 30 days once, and then 400 hours within six weeks on another three occasions. I know what it is like to surrender fully to the meditation practice, leaving not much time or energy for anything else, and the kind of results that this can lead to. I know that I can certainly fulfil such vows if I set the resolve to.

This time around however, I have been experimenting with doing a lot of practice, yet leaving just a little bit more time for rest, being kinder to my ageing body. As well as allowing others into my world just a little more, even though I am practising intensively. I have committed to completing the 5000 hours, life permitting, but I have not put a time limit on it. In my experience, the trickiest part of this more intensive style of practice is learning how to integrate more meditation practice, and having a more sensitive mind with more clarity, into one's ordinary daily life afterwards. I am finding that this current mode of pushing hard, but not 'hardest', is an interesting and important area to explore. Practising alongside other Kalyanamitta is also enriching to one's life both during and after the intensive retreat. And feels like the right thing to do, as a mahathera. (Monk of over 20 years experience.) To be leading by example and having others practising alongside.

As Ajahn Nyaniko has expressed a sincere interest in completing another 1000 hours of meditation here, he was my stalwart companion through hours 2000-3000. And recently Tahn Joel has expressed a similar interest in returning and making a 1000 hours offering of practice. Tahn Sampanno has mentioned that he has found practising here very fruitful and inspiring as well, as has Mae Chee Ying, and I know of several other monks friends back in Thailand who hope to have an opportunity to do intensive practice in Bodhgaya as well, who have not had the opportunity as yet. So there is less of a sense of needing to hurry up to tick this vow off of my to do list. And more of a sense for taking things a little more slowly, and sharing the journey with some of my spiritual companions.

As such, for the remainder of my 5000 hours meditation in Bodhgaya practice vow, I am thinking of deliberately going a little more slowly. So as to learn more about integrating intensive practice into daily life. And how to include a few more people along for the journey. I am also intending to continue to lead pilgrimage groups to practise in Holy sites in India and Nepal, before doing these more private intensive retreat periods afterwards. Making sure that those who support me and my friends on retreat also have some opportunities for pilgrimage practice in India.

All of these ideas about pacing efforts and returning to India repeatedly with groups of students and friends, is of course contingent upon the world staying somewhat similar to how it is now. In terms of stability, freedom and prosperity. Which is not something we can take for granted. Mindful of this, right from the outset of increasing the vow from four to five thousand hours this time around, I qualified the commitment by saying that if conditions in the world change, I will fulfil the vow at a different holy site where there are Buddha relics. But we can hope for the best and have our plan A.

In deciding to be content with 200 hours of sitting meditation this time, suddenly means that we have a few spare days on our hands. Having generous supporters and a talented travel agent is a dangerous combination. What a fabulous sentence that is! Where is this going!? Don't worry, we're not going to Rio De Janeiro. But after 6 more days of 8 hours and 15 minutes per day of sitting, conditions permitting, Tahn Joel, Mae Chee Ying, Gautam, Ardil and myself will be going to Kolkata for a couple of days. Kolkata is just a short flight away from Gaya, and the ticket prices are quite affordable at this time. Mae Chee Ying, acting as our steward, has done the number crunching and our budget can accommodate this little side trip. Why go to Kolkata?

Kolkata actually has the Asia Pacific region's largest museum. Tahn Joel and I share a deep interest in Buddhist art, particularly sculpture, and the history of this art. As Kolkata is in the region where Buddhism and Buddhist art flourished for a milenia, we are sure that it will be a good museum to visit. I had actually tried to visit the museum on a previous trip nearly two years ago, but unfortunately the day we chose to pass through Kolkata was the day the museum was closed! Ever since then I've felt that something was missing in my life. Not really! But it will be good to visit India's largest museum. And good to build on our knowledge and understanding.

This excursion is also going to be something of a little birthday gift to myself. Because the 29th of February was the day that I went forth as a samanera 28 years ago. As it only comes

around once every four years, it is nice to acknowledge it somehow. We will return to Bodhgaya on the 2nd, in order to have a day and a half to properly say our thank yous and goodbyes. Returning to Thailand on the 4th. Life permitting.