

## **Summer Storms and Secret Sleeps**

Bodhgaya, February 22nd, day 20, 3:00 pm.

Apparently it rained at 2 am last night. We didn't realize until we stepped outside and noticed how wet everything was. Sitting under the tree, I was really sleepy this morning. Which was strange as I'd slept well and just had a coffee. It could be an air pressure thing. Yesterday it was so dry and warm, today it's cool, damp and fresh. There was a loud Vietnamese puja of sorts way off in the distance, loud and fast. I decided to go and check it out to see if it might blow the clouds away from my brain. They were chanting very loud, and very fast. Usually I can make out some words, but this time I couldn't recognize a single syllable. Nevermind, I enjoyed their determined and focused energy of their mantra recitation. Going to sit again... still sleepy. Mae Chee Ying very kindly went and bought me another coffee and it helped. The next two hours were peaceful enough and the fresh air was pleasant.

At 2:30 pm there was a very light rain but a bright sky, 'let's go Gautam, I don't think it will really rain' I said, hopeful. Stepping out the door, taking a few steps, there was thunder, a few moments later, aiyah! Real rain... we turned back and headed inside. Can I tell you a secret? Since I'd been so sleepy in the morning, I was secretly happy to crawl back in bed and have a bonus nap with a proper excuse. We tried again at 3:30... still a light drizzle. At 4:15 it was possible to depart. Luxuriating lazily in bed for that little bit of extra time was so nice! I did lose a couple of hours off of today's tally due to the late afternoon start however.

In the evening there were many small groups from Thailand passing through. 'We are Siamese if you please... bing bing bong. We are Siamese if you don't please... bong bong bing.' (Sorry, unrelated and irrelevant reference to an old Disney cartoon) The chant that the Thais most commonly chant is the Dhammacakkapavattana sutta, which is something that I really appreciate. Otherwise you hardly hear it. Having these words resounding, pertaining to the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, and about the Lord Buddha's liberation through fully realising all of these things, there, under the Bodhi Tree, where he was liberated, is always very special. Kudos to my fellow Thai's for keeping the Dhamma Wheel rolling under the Bodhi Tree! The Burmese usually recite the Paticca Samupada, the 12 links of dependant co-arising in forward and reverse. Which is another way that the Enlightenment insights are described.

(152.5 + 6 - 158.5)

## **Inspiration and Sadness in Samsara**

Bodhgaya, February 23rd, day 21, 10:00 pm.

Although it rained again last night, things were pleasantly cool, clean and fresh at the Temple when we arrived. Someone or some group has sponsored one of the big flower puja offerings recently, so there are strings of bright marigolds draped over everything looking glorious and cheerful. Literally hundreds of thousands of yellow, orange, white and burgundy coloured blossoms are strewn everywhere. They look especially fresh in the golden early morning light. The morning practice was pleasant, I did two hours of sitting, then walked to

and from the bathroom past the ongoing energetic Vietnamese groups puja, appreciating their energy before doing another hour and a quarter of sitting.

Today we had accepted a meal invitation by Ajahn Kritisana, a Thai born abbot of a monastery here in Bodhgaya, called Wat Buddha Metta. Ajahn Kritisana is an interesting character. He personally oversaw the covering of the uppermost portion of the Mahabodhi Chedi spire with around 285 kilograms of gold! That's about 18.5 million US dollars worth in value at today's rate, placed in the middle of Bihar, which is India's poorest state. Whereas I genuinely appreciate the incredible feat it was for him to have been able to do this. Jumping through all of the bureaucratic hoops, raising the funds, working with Indian laws and Indian officials, coordinating with the artisans, and surviving the armed robbery of his monastery at one point. Personally I could never really get into the project.

Ajahn Kritisana had invited me many times to join his ceremonies, and I had always refused. I was committed to 3000 hours of meditation as an offering, and not interested in 300 kilograms of gold. Although I do appreciate that offering the finest and most precious material element at the most important shrine is valid. My middle-way response to the good Ajahn was to accept one meal invitation at his monastery on each visit, and to dedicate merits to the success of his project, which I duly did. (He did let me sit meditation on top of the Chedi one time before they removed the scaffolding, and allowed me to press my head against the golden spire while making my aspirations, both of which were pretty awesome experiences :) So we have an interesting friendship, where our focus and mode of practice is very different, but we can and do have mudita for each other's sincere efforts in different areas.

One of the risks of doing an intensive meditation retreat in a somewhat public place, and in accepting the occasional meal invitation outside of the cocoon of the guesthouse bedroom, is that it does leave the field quite open to a diverse potentiality of phenomenon which may impinge. There can be and sometimes are surprises. Today was such a day, where something Ajahn Kritisana told me caught me quite off guard.

We had a pleasant enough meal, and I enjoyed hearing of the next 1000 kilograms of gold project, where Ajahn Kritisana now hopes to gold plate the entire spire, not just the uppermost portion. One of the reasons that I am wary of these kinds of projects, is that in trying to liberate yourself from samsara, it is best not to make any potentially 'complicating' karmas. Because we have to deal with the consequences of the good and bad things that we do. What will the consequences of leading such a grand offering be? I don't want to be born as a deva with golden coloured skin for 500 lives, or a human with a golden complexion and stunning good looks for a thousand lives. The potential of becoming deluded by the myriad of unintended karmic consequences to me seems too high. But I do rejoice that Ajahn Kritisana has led tens of thousands of people in making auspicious merits.

Ajahn Kritisana also gave me a gift of 300 little Buddha amulets that have Bodhi Tree twigs, leaves, and seeds ground into powder and pressed into the plaster, along with some soil from Bodhgaya. The villagers back home will love those. And I promised him a selection of really good probiotics, as he has some stomach issues of late. But after our talk about projects, vows, goals and health challenges, he told me some information that I was not expecting. A mutual acquaintance of ours had passed away a while ago, which I had

assumed had been due to natural causes. But it turned out that it was more nefarious than that. (I have to be deliberately ambiguous here, showing due sensitivity by not mentioning a gender, occupation, nationality or name.) The worst part was hearing that the final hours of this person's life were very painful and traumatic. After our conversation I showed Tahn Joel and Tah Sampanno around his monastery, and we admired the Northern Thailand style with many very beautiful hand crafted elements.

After my mid day rest we went back to meditate as usual. After three and a quarter hours, at around 6:30pm, when I walked to the bathroom with Gautam as my companion, I noticed that my mind was very sensitive. The noises, smells, crowds, and overall sense of intensity was affecting me more than it normally does. When I went back to sit for the final hour and a half, I had this quite surreal experience where my physical body was very upright, but my energetic body was slumping. I could feel the gut punch that the news I'd heard at lunch had been to the system, and I realised that I needed to do some work processing the shock and sadness. I have plenty of experience of meditating after hearing sad stories, but not in the middle of the three ring circus that the Mahabodhi Temple can seem like on a Friday night. I needed some walls and a little more quiet to allow the sad feelings the space within which to arise and cease.

Telling people that I was feeling unwell would have affected their meditation, so would have packing up my things by myself. So I decided to just take my key and sandals and leave discreetly, leaving my mat and meditation pillow where they were. Gautam would pack it up at closing time and the first place they'd look for me would be in my room. It wasn't the best form, but it was the best I could do all things considered.

Leaving the Temple with a somewhat bruised and crumpled inner core, and without the usual centred and spacious mind set, was quite intense. The chanting seemed too loud, the crowds too unruly, the butterlamp sellers and rickshaw drivers too pushy. It's like this most days of course. But after two hours alone in my room I was feeling much better. When Tahn Joel and Gautam returned with my things I explained why I'd left in that way. They were quite understanding.

Sometimes if the shoulder pain is too much, you need to massage it a little. If a cough is too intense, it's better to stay indoors. And some mind states just need a little bit of quiet space to abide within before they fall away. Yesterday rain meant that I did not complete my meditation goal, and today it was emotional pain. As I said earlier, meditation retreats outdoors and in public can throw these kinds of curve balls. But I think I'll still manage to fulfil the vow, provided there's not too much more inclement weather or shocking information. Thank goodness there is no wedding next door this evening!

(158.5 + 6.5 - 165)

## **Magha Puja**

Bodhgaya, February 24th, day 22

I got back in the saddle quite well today, after having taken a little quiet time last night. The weather was good. There were many groups, many pujas, and lots of noise! But sitting close

to and facing the Chedi, I was able to stay mostly in the calm eye of the storm. I must admit that I wasn't sure if the pilgrims would ever be able to return to Bodhgaya in such force after the three years of covid restrictions, but it was as busy today as I've ever seen it. Magha Puja day is celebrated throughout the Buddhist world, and many people made the effort to come and celebrate it in Bodhgaya this year. There were lots of Thai's, Vietnamese, Sri Lankans, Burmese, Bhutanese, Tibetans and Indians. Even so, I was able to do my eight hours of sitting. Offering a puja of practice.

I've had a couple of lucid dream-like experiences in the past week that I thought I might mention. I am aware that in these journals I share a lot of the struggles, and even the sense of an evening out or plateauing of experience here, but it can be hard to share what the highlights are like. When I say that the meditation was bright, light and easy, for example. What does this mean to you, the reader? Who cannot gauge whether it is more peaceful than usual or not? It does get more peaceful than usual, which is no doubt a big part of why I keep coming back. Particularly in the 6th/7th/8th hours of practice. I am sure that people can appreciate that by meditating for around 9 hours per day, consistently, for more than three weeks, in a holy power centre like Bodhgaya, that this would likely make a person's mind brighter and more sensitive. Perhaps due to this, I do experience some interesting dreams at times.

Recently in a vision-like lucid dream, I saw the deity Krishna standing before me. He was very youthful, with skin the colour of the blue sky, he was wearing fresh garlands of beautiful flowers, and playing a flute. But I couldn't hear anything. There was a lot of radiance around his face. I asked him in the dream, 'do you have something to say to me?' In response to this, he pressed his flute against his lips, and then pressed the flute against my lips. It was not really a sexual, or even a sensual gesture, but rather it was very tender and intimate. Sharing something dear to him with me. Then he transformed into a baby-like form, and was cradled in my left arm. He was looking up at me with loving devotion, the way that a parent would look at a young child. I do not know the meaning of the dream, but it was a pleasant experience.

Hindus believe that the Buddha is an avatar of the god Vishnu. (Buddhists obviously do not) Krishna is also believed to be an avatar of Vishnu. So, given that Hindus have seen and continue to see Bodhgaya, as a holy site associated with Vishnu, and there are even priests present who do pujas to him here each day, it would not be unusual for some of the blessings of that deity to also be around. Given that I do spend hours each day spreading metta under the Bodhi Tree, it would not be so surprising if some devas noticed and appreciated this, particularly as they do have the Brahma Vihara quality of Mudita, or appreciative joy. Don't worry, I'm not going native and becoming Hindu. The Buddha is my Refuge and Nibbana, the Unconditioned is my goal. I'm just sharing the kind of numinous experiences that can occur when meditating a lot. Interpretation of dreams or visions is tricky, and it is probably best to just be mindful of them, and then simply put them down, not making too much out of such things. Visual phenomenon arising and ceasing... not I... not mine... not self.

(165 + 8 - 173)

