

Determined Meditators and Deranged Merit Makers

Bodhgaya, February 25th, day 23

Although it was very grey outside in the early morning, we set out as usual with determination and hope. Even so, it drizzled lightly for the full first hour meditating under the Bodhi Tree, and did not look like it would let up, so we moved to the covered bell pavilion in the nearby meditation park for the remaining two hours of the morning session. Although the rain did stop after another half an hour, it was good to dry out slowly under cover, rather than get wetter. Big drops fall from the Bodhi Tree for quite some time even after the rain stops. We'd had enough Holy water blessings from those drops earlier already. The view of the Chedi from the bell pavilion is lovely, and it is nice to get a more spacious visual from time to time. Tahir mentioned later that having this much intermittent rain in February is very unusual. I remember it getting drier and drier during this period on previous visits.

Simran, Gautam's wife and his two year old daughter, Amishya, visited us after lunch. As Anraj, his son has settled in with Simran's aunt and is a two hour drive away we didn't get to see him. They both looked well. At Gautam and Simran's request, I actually chose Amishya's name for her. It means beautiful, truthful, and free of deceit. Although Amishya has seen me on video calls and in photos, and I had met her in person last year, as soon as she saw my big white body and face she burst into tears and sobbed very loudly! After five minutes she could come a little closer, so long as she was clasping onto her mother desperately. (I remember crying one time as a little boy myself when I met an uncle with very hairy arms and a beard!) I must look ginormous to a two year old! She did wave goodbye and blew us a kiss as she left, so there was some progress there. Simran is a very simple, gentle and gracious lady, Gautam is fortunate. By simple I mean beautiful but not demanding or vain. They are a nice looking couple.

There was an easy joy in today's meditation, but it was less subtly peaceful than yesterday's. A Thai layman had invited us to come and offer a set of robes to the Phra Buddha Metta statue before leaving the temple last night. But as it was magha puja day, it was very crowded and pushy inside the vihara. Spending twenty minutes amid the aggressive throng of determined merit makers did dissipate some of the built up good energy for sure. I regretted accepting his invitation afterwards, but once Tahn Joel and I were deep inside the vihara we were committed. The offering of meditation practice is the highest practice, and we'd just done that for most of the day. I sometimes say yes to things I might normally refuse if asked immediately after a pleasant meditation. To be fair, the man who had asked us to join him in the offering had helped my pilgrimage group make a similar offering a month ago, and everyone had really appreciated the opportunity at that time. It was busy then too, but crazy busy last night.

I had a very nice chat with a monk brother earlier in the day, he was sitting meditation next to me. Actually I had met him around 8 years earlier at my monastery, when he had popped in and had asked to rest for a few hours, and invited me to join him at a teaching invitation in a nearby city later in the evening. There was a big building project at Anandagiri at the time and I felt over-extended and exhausted already, so I let him stay and rest, but did not join him on his invitation. He probably thought I was a bit mean or stingy at that time, but we do need to know our limits and to recognize when it is best to stay home.

Anyway, it turns out that Ajahn Saengtham has been coming to Bodhgaya for many years as well, sitting for most of the day also. But as a monk who has spent a lot of time meditating in forests and cemeteries, he has preferred to meditate further away from the Chedi. He explained that he is just now only able to meditate right next to the Chedi, in the midst of the noisy crowd. We discussed the various skillful means we use to keep our minds centred and bright. He is four years older than I and has been a monk 6 years longer. These days he oversees three monasteries, with 40 monks in residence. He had come with 15 monks in total, but 6 had just returned. He is sitting ten hours per day during this period and is staying in Bodhgaya for two months.

As I am often the more senior in my groups and putting in more effort in practice than most of the people around me, it was really nice to meet an elder brother who had more monasteries, more monks and was meditating more and for longer! Geng maahk! (Thai for really skilled or talented.) He is calm and friendly as well. It is good to have sincere contemporaries, Kalyanamitta. I did not feel the slightest bit competitive or threatened by him. I actually feel relieved to have met another monk so similar, who is still putting forth a very good effort as he gets older. It is inspiring and encouraging. It's always nice to make a new friend. He lives just one province away back in Thailand, so we will probably visit one another at some point in the future. The fact that he'd visited Anandagiri so many years ago, when basically no one really knew about it, seems to suggest a significant kammic connection.

(173 + 8 - 181)

**There are monks, and there are monks...
And then there are monks that just aren't monks!**

Bodhgaya February 26th, Day 24

'Day 24', is written above, 189 hours is written in the tally below. Looking at the date above as well, I am realising that within a week, should all go smoothly, I'll already be back in Bangkok. The land of polite people and quiet traffic jams. The day after tomorrow, we'll be off on our Kolkata excursion. The Bodhgaya marathon is drawing to a close... the finish line can already be seen. (And in just a few more days I'll be grumbling about packing again.) I have scheduled one last full day of practice here on the 3rd, to tick off any extra outstanding hours, if there are any, and to put in a few extra just in case.

Sadly, the Bhutanese puja has finished. There was some Vietnamese wailing, I mean chanting, which was a bit worrying. But the one day long 'Maha Sangha Dana' soon made way for a fairly pleasant Pali sutta recitation by the Laotian community. The Vietnamese community arranged a 'Maha Sangha Dana' after Magha puja, which always starts with auspicious chanting from several lineages, and ends with one nun in particular yelling through the microphone. 'Sit down! Sit down! Wait a minute! Wait a minute! Make a line! Make a line!'

I guess it seems like such a nice idea, making offerings to all of the monks and nuns from every tradition under the sacred Bodhi Tree. But handing out wads of cash here, besides it

being against our rules, is just not a good idea. The front of the line is always very decorous and gracious, but the back of the line is always totally feral. It is these kinds of activities that actually inspires local uneducated men to shave their heads and find an orange robe to wrap around their dishevelled forms and to present themselves as monks. I genuinely appreciate the generous heartedness and faith of the organisers, but at the same time, they really need to think through the logistics and implications more.

Most monks and nuns in this day and age do accept and carry funds. In the Ajahn Chah lineage, we must have a steward who carries the funds of the laypeople, and the steward purchases the things that are needed with the funds of the lay supporters. This way of doing things has more checks and balances, which is better. But having said that, I do personally know many good monks and nuns who do carry funds, but who are frugal and modest in how they use money and who keep very simple standards. In general though, I think it is very important to know the monastics that you are donating to. To show some discretion and good judgement.

Pema left yesterday, she had found a monk companion to travel with to Patna and then into Kathmandu, I was relieved. Tokme also left today, he came and offered me a flower garland and some fruit under the Bodhi Tree before leaving. Our extended family reunion is slowly disbanding, adding to that sense of an approaching closure.

Although this is retreat day number 24, there were 21 or so days before this retreat period, so indeed, many weeks have already passed. The way we experience our time here is so interesting. After the first few days, it feels like a week already. After a week, it feels like you've been here a month. But then after about a month, perceptions kind of normalise. And after 6 weeks, coming into the seventh, it suddenly seems like it all went so fast. We all have a similar experience, with regards how we've perceived our time in India.

The 8 hours per day paradigm for formal sitting has been a good one. (It is closer to 8 and a half, plus half an hour of walking.) It is not still not easy, which is kind of the point, but given that I led a pilgrimage before the retreat and have to go back to being an abbot afterwards, it is very good to not feel completely exhausted at this stage. My health and energy levels are definitely better. And I notice that my clothes are washed and that my toenails have been clipped.

I had some lovely meditation in the afternoon and evening where I experienced what I sometimes refer to as 'teflon mind', where although it's very noisy all around, nothing seems to be jarring or to stick in consciousness. Spacious awareness with noise arising and ceasing in space, with no one listening, liking or disliking. It was like that for an hour or so on two occasions. This also suggests that the 8 hours per day is enough to support some good mindfulness. The fact that many of the Thai and Sri Lankan pujas were lovely today was no doubt also a factor in why the meditation could deepen in such a way.

I am grateful to Tahn Sampanno and Tahn Joel and Mae Chee Ying in different ways. To Tahn Sampanno for being steady and uncomplaining in his practice, as well as for helping to reserve my preferred sitting space. Tahn Joel has been very disciplined as well, doing 2 x 3 hour sits most days, plus a 2 hour digital editing session in his room in between. The Phra Buddha Metta file is coming along very beautifully. The plodding patience and warrior-like

determination that he brings to this is admirable, and will help the final product enormously. Tahn Joel is also a no dramas kind of guy, and we both appreciate Buddhist art similarly. Mae Chee Ying offers us our simple breakfast each morning and manages the budget and the payments. In recognition of her important supporting role I had liaised with close supporters to cover much of her own costs while she is practising here. She is also consistent and sincere. The monks have been undemanding with regards to our meals, so we've tried to make it as easy for her as possible, and the good Gautam is as much a helper to Mae Chee as he is an attendant to me. He picks up the food from the Tibetan restaurant in his motorbike, and washes the dishes afterwards. So Mae Chee Ying gets a lot of time at the Bodhi Tree as well. We've functioned well as a team.

Tomorrow is Tahn Joel's birthday. He is similar to me his relationship to time and dates. He thought he was turning 40 on the 28th. His parents reminded him in a recent phone call that he's actually turning 39 on the 27th. I often don't know what month it is. (I only write these journals when on pilgrimage or intensive retreat in India.) As he is appreciating the retreat opportunity and practicing well, he is staying on in Bodhgaya while we go to Kolkatta. The folks at Om Tibet restaurant will feed him while we're gone.

Mumtaz's sons offered the meal once again today. This time Shalal also came, and explained some of his cooking secrets. The veggie curry paste had been soaked in lemon juice and ginger for some hours before being cooked. This brings out the flavours of the spices as well as adding a nice refreshing zing. Similarly with his mutton curry, he said the spices are simmered in the oil for hours before being added to the stew. And this time he had added curd to his Palak Paneer (a spinach and cottage cheese dish), once again giving a surprising zing. The mother of the sons made her signature creamy rice dish. As usual, everything was delicious. Even so, we all made a concerted effort to not overeat, because to do so makes the afternoon practice much harder.

When the family goes to this much trouble, I kind of feel that I should get something from Tahir's shop, which is in the ground floor of the guesthouse. So after the evening practice at the Bodhi Tree, I decided upon a lotus seed mala (they soak them in resin to make them smooth, durable and hard), with amber spacers and a rosewood guru bead. It is lightweight and a lovely brown colour. I also got some amber essential oil to rub on my amber mala. (He always makes sure he stocks up before I come!) The lotus seed mala is one of the less expensive options compared to many of his other fabulous options.

I am always mindful as the time of departure comes closer, that despite whatever outstanding vow I may have, there are no guarantees that I will be able to return to Bodhgaya. There have always been scary headlines in the news for as long as I can remember. But the headlines in my newsfeed just now, is something I have never witnessed before with such consistency and intensity. So many news sites and reporters are speaking of an escalation of war, as well as predicting big economic challenges. Large scale cyber attacks are another thing that seems to be frequently in the news. We all hope for the best, and add our merit dedications and prayers. At the same time, we are mindful that these last days really could be our last in Bodhgaya, should travel become more difficult, or indeed if we ourselves suddenly have to leave this life.

To end this entry on an auspicious note. There is one Tibetan yogi who I have known for around 15 years. Lhakpa Dorjee, is a practitioner of Chö. If ever there has been some funds available in the past when meeting him in Bodhgaya, we have shared a contribution with him. To help him attend teachings with his Nyingma gurus, or to practice in sacred charnal grounds in India and Nepal. I wanted the others to meet him, so I invited him over to my room at 9:30 pm to do a puja. With his dreadlocks hanging, drumuru snake skin drum banging, thigh bone trumpet hooting, vajra and bell ringing, and lots of strange syllables ensuing very loudly, it is definitely a glimpse into an ancient and different world! He assured us that he had expelled all obstructive influences and that many beings had benefited.

May all beings be well!