

## The Strangeness of the Passing of Time

Kolkata, 29 February, 2024

The conventional fact that I became a samenera, novice Buddhist monk in Ubon Rachathani province on the 29th of February, 28 years ago - (*7 sets of 4 years*), seems quite surreal to me now. It is something quite hard for me to believe, for several reasons. The first of course is the head scratching wondering, has that much time really gone by? Looking at recent photos... yes, evidently it has! The other thing that feeds a sense of disbelief, is when I remember what a struggle getting through each week was initially, and how long for example, the first three months rains retreat seemed at that time. (I literally didn't think I could make it through to the end) There is that little bit of amazement in acknowledging that, hey! I'm still here! In fact, I am now older, and more senior in my monastic age, than most of my earliest monastic teachers were when I met and studied under them, back in the day.

And yet, despite all of the doubts, chaffing and resistance of the earlier years, knowing who and how I was as a little boy, there is also, at the same time, a strange sense of inevitability about how this life has panned out thus far. For I was never going to be content working for a corporation or the government, and that this human life needed to be one that was both meaningful and of value to both myself and others was also never up for discussion. My mother told me that once I discovered Buddhism and became a monk, that she felt a tremendous sense of relief. For I was both incredibly idealistic as well as very irreverent towards things I couldn't respect as a teenager, that she had had no idea what career I could possibly be content with. I also had no clue at the time, which was very painful. And here we are. She also said that she always knew I'd find my niche. Mother's intuition.

Although I had hoped I would make it in the robes for a long time, I never took it for granted that I'd be able to. I just didn't think I had the requisite determination and patience. And it is no exaggeration to state that in the early years, I couldn't even imagine that I'd live to be fifty and still be a monk. That I am, is something I feel very glad and grateful for. So there is a lot of gratitude and thankfulness in my heart today. To my parents, all of my teachers, my preceptors, my bhikkhu companions, students, supporters and friends. And also gratitude towards inner qualities such as strong faith in the Buddhadhamma and stubborn tenacity.

I have learned that my personal style is one of having spurts of strong initial faith and courage, which causes me to commence or commit to something noble but difficult. But then to feel that it's all too hard not long afterwards, and complain and lament that I can't do it. And yet... I do not actually give up. Readers of my journal entries will be familiar with this theme!

As I am writing right now in a Hotel in Kolkata, that is a renovated and repurposed building originally built in 1840, does seem to corroborate the fact that generations do indeed arise, stay for some time, and pass away... one after another. When we went to the India Museum in Kolkata today, this theme of contemplation deepened quite profoundly.

The Buddhist stone sculpture gallery of the museum here is awesome! They have many fine masterpieces displayed in historical order from the Mauryan empire period, through the Gandhara, Gupta and onto the Palla period. Basically, from early Indian Buddhism to late

Indian Buddhism. About 1300 years worth of history, from the 3rd century BC until the 10th century of the common era.

As someone who has studied Buddhist art a little, by visiting world renowned museums whenever my life and travels have allowed it, it was a real treat to have this deeply immersive experience. And what a privilege to be able to admire the works of master artisans of so many ages, under one roof!

Originally Buddhist art didn't actually contain Buddhas. People worshipped images of Buddha's footprints or Dhamma Wheels, both representing the Path of practice. Or images of Bodhi Trees, representing 'Bodhi' - Enlightenment itself. We saw these depicted in the earlier sculptures today. Then came the serene and simple Buddhas of the Gupta, and ever more beautifully detailed images of late Indian Buddhism, with lotus thrones above lions, elephants or deer. Celestial Bodhisattvas flanking left and right, Bodhi trees shading and devata honouring from above.

The sense of eras, ages and empires arising and ceasing is profound and instructive. As is the sense of faith, love, devotion and gratitude that the artists and donors demonstrated in the creation of all of these works. The quality of purity, compassion and aloof equipoise in the Buddha's faces is moving in yet another way. There is so much rich contemplation that can be done in such a special place! The possibility that Tahn Joel, Mae Chee Ying or myself may have actually paid respects to some of these images when they were in their original home, during the time of those previous empires is another moving and humbling consideration.

The Kolkata museum, also known as The India Museum, is huge, and we only managed to view two galleries before feeling both completely content and completely exhausted! Having been sitting facing the Mahabodhi Chedi with eyes closed for many days for the past nearly four weeks was no doubt a factor in our lack of stamina for this more extroverted activity. But at the same time it was lovely to truly savour that which we had come to appreciate. We returned to the Hotel after just three and a half hours away, but we all commented upon how full the day had felt!

Tomorrow we will go back and see some of the other sections of the museum. No doubt dinosaur bones and mummies will be another facet in the ongoing contemplations! But I suspect that the paintings of deities may be more moving. Let's see. It's late, and even with the planned sleep in, this dinosaur has to go to bed.

With metta and all good wishes.