

Kolkata - trees on walls and fat happy dogs.

Bodhgaya, March 2, day 29

Our second day in Kolkata was quite lovely. We were met at the museum by an old student and friend of mine, Sandeep, along with his lovely Assamese fiancé Ankurima. It was nice to revisit the sculptures in the museum. Repetition makes one feel more familiar. I was able to take some close up pictures of some of my favourites. This time we also admired the Bengali style miniature paintings on the upper floor. Always nice to get a face full of green and blue multi-armed gods and goddesses when in the city of goddess Kali. And we appreciated some ceramics and fine arts, especially one particularly cool carving of Indra, riding nonchalantly and sideways on a celestial elephant's back.

In the afternoon, Sandeep suggested that we visit the Ramakrishna temple which is set in a nice garden setting along the Hooghly river bank. Driving in the heavy traffic across the Howrah bridge was no doubt a quintessentially Kolkata experience, as so many locals do it each day. It is a very old bridge made with 26,500 tonnes of riveted steel! We meditated quietly in the beautiful sandstone mandir. Many locals were sitting in quiet reverence there as well. Then we sat on the grass for a while outside, enjoying the cool late afternoon light. There were many Indians and read this attentively, they were all gracious, gentle and beautifully behaved. The gardens and flower beds are also immaculately kept.

Sandeep is originally from Aurangabad, went to university in Delhi and Mumbai, but moved to Kolkata when his fiancé got a government job here. I know him from some teaching occasions in Delhi, and he had joined me for a practice period in Bodhgaya five years ago as well. I asked him what he appreciated about Kolkata. He noted that the local people are very devout in their pujas to the goddess Durga, and that they were very kind and generous towards the street dogs and cats. After he mentioned this, I noticed it too. There were many fat dogs sleeping comfortably and fearlessly in many places. I found the people of Kolkata to be quick to smile, very friendly and gracious.

One very interesting thing that I've noticed in Kolkata, is that there are trees on and growing up the walls of old buildings! In Asia it is not uncommon for various types of ficus trees to sprout in drain pipes or to grow from cracks here and there. The seeds are very small and pass through the intestines of birds unharmed. The saplings are usually pulled out before they get too big. But here in Kolkata, many such saplings have been left alone to get their roots down well into the ground, sometimes from on top of four or five storey buildings, literally from the rooftops. Once they've gotten a root down, the trunks have then become quite thick! So that there are literally large tree trunks clinging to brick walls, many of them! Sometimes there are several on the one building! It's quite enchanting actually. And I've never seen this anywhere else. When I asked Sandeep about it, he felt that this was a reflection of the people of Kolkata's reverence and respect for nature. When I did a little bit of research, it seems to be the case that the Banyan tree is also considered to be quite sacred by many. The trees that I saw on the buildings were mostly Banyan and there were also a few Bodhi Trees as well.

It was good to do more walking these past two days after so much sitting this past month. Even so, the walking combined with squatting up and down hundreds of times while

admiring and taking photos of stone sculptures had made my legs and feet quite sore by the end of the day. Sandeep kindly massaged Luang Por Achalo's calves and feet back in the Hotel room in the evening.

Although a little dark, the rooms in the Lalit Great Eastern are extremely quiet, especially considering that it is situated in a busy part of the old city. Lek, our travel agent, had suggested it to us for its proximity to the museum. Apparently it is one of the oldest hotels in Asia. But it did have a big renovation recently. Rudyard Kipling stayed here one, as did Queen Elizabeth II. All sorts of nasty imperialist colonialist types did I guess, and no doubt lots of nice people too. These days the clientele seems to be mostly wealthy Indian people, the men are all dressed in trousers and button up shirts. Tahn Joel and I were the only white people we saw, and we were the one's wearing an ancient indian style of robe! The big samsaric recycling machine is not without a sense of irony. My how things change. The guy at the door of the Hotel and the head chef had nice twirled up Punjabi stuyle moustaches at least. The chef had also studied cooking in Thailand, we learned.

Completing the Current Vow

1:00 pm Bodhgaya

Everything went smoothly this morning. Brunch, transfer, check in, flight. We did have to walk over half a kilometre from the Gaya airport exit to the road entrance gate, because Modi, the Prime Minister was either coming or going to an election rally talk somewhere in Bihar, and they weren't allowing cars into the carpark. Thank goodness for suitcases with wheels! Once we got past the gates, and the many soldiers at the gates, our intrepid friends Ardil and Gautam were there to greet us, complaining about politicians just like everyone does everywhere around the world it seems.

9:30 pm.

200 hours completed!

The afternoon sitting was very pleasant. The second hour was especially light and full of ease. I sat for 3 hours, went to the bathroom, and then sat the final 2 hours. It did rain yet again after a while, but this time only lightly. So most people just sat through it, and then things dried up nicely afterwards. It felt lovely to be back. And just like that, 200 more hours have been sat!

On such occasions, when a significant vow has been completed, it is an especially potent time for making dedications. I made the wish that our world and human society will remain a place where organic human beings may continue to be able to practise Dana, Sila and Bhavana, for the sake of Realising Nibbana. What does Ajahn mean by organic human beings?...

Seeing the mass roll out of biometric face recognition technology and bar code scanning machines at the bigger Indian airports was a stark reminder of the strange point we seem to be at in history. With all of the developments around Artificial Intelligence, robotics, augmented digital reality, cloning, synthetic programmable biology, and the push to have

people connected to the internet constantly in the future, with either masks strapped to their faces or implants in their brains, it is evident that we are approaching a much stranger and weirder world than the one that many of us grew up in. Many people seem to be more in relationship with technology and the internet than they are with each other. It might sound like a strange thing to say I suppose, but if you are paying attention, we actually can't take it for granted that we will continue to have the kind of sovereignty over our bodies and minds that we have had up until now. When so many hundreds of billions of dollars are being invested into making our way of living and functioning very very different, you can be sure that the world is changing a lot, in ways that we haven't quite recognized. The pace of this change will likely accelerate quite soon.

Personally, the more I hear about augmented reality, digital and crypto currencies, autonomous AI driven drones, and being part of the 'internet of things' etc, among other hi tech developments. The more I like to make the place where I live look old and traditional. With an emphasis upon stone, bricks, wood and trees, lots of them! With electrical lines buried out of sight and underground, and with 80 million year old fossilised tree resin beads running through my fingers... sacred mantras being recited in my mind. I am not a big fan of the brave new world we seem to be being dragged into.

I made it clear in my prayers that if there comes a point where I am no longer able to be in control of my own thoughts. Or if the ability to live a truly virtuous life is compromised. Then it is fine with me to get a corporate recall and be called back to the main headquarters. (Meaning - to die and be reborn in a more conducive environment.) Wherever sincere Buddhist cultivators are practising Buddhadhamma for the sake of liberation, may I only find myself in their company. If I am able to do this in Thailand for a bit longer, that's okay too. But if I should suddenly find myself in Tushita heaven in the presence of Maitreya Bodhisattva, that would be cool as well. I'd rather my Citta join 'Celestial-Lotus-Link', than my brain be fused to neuralink, conjoined to starlink. Elon won't miss me.

More in accordance with tradition as we've known it, I also dedicated whatever merits that have accrued during the pilgrimage and retreat period to my parents and teachers, the devas of the Bodhi Tree and Mahabodhi Temple, all those who supported me to be here and to have these wonderful opportunities... as well as with all beings with whom I share a kammic connection. May we only ever think of benefitting one another, and may we all continue to grow in the wonderful p, sacred Buddha- Dhamma together!

Tomorrow I plan to do a few more hours for good measure, and on the following morning we will offer many flowers, fragrances and ask forgiveness and take our leave properly.

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