

Last full day in Bodhgaya

9:30 am

It is the beginning of March and there is rain this morning yet again. I am relieved that I completed my goal yesterday already. This much rain is definitely unusual. In previous years we were literally moisturising our faces and the insides of our nostrils due to very dry air at this time. And hundreds of Bodhi leaves would be falling at the temple with every little gust of wind. This time around the Bodhi Tree is still very green and very well hydrated, which is nice. I've only managed to collect 15 leaves. I can be content with this.

I may have mentioned something about packing before. Eughh! A lot of things have accumulated over the past seven week period. Just looking at it I feel grumpy! My lovely students gave me many nice things and other faithful pilgrims have frequently offered a little something here and there at the Bodhi Tree on many days. It all adds up. Today we have our second invitation meal with the Burmese and Indian nuns and this fact is turning out to be really timely and helpful actually. Phase one of the packing process has been to focus upon regifting! It is not simply a matter of getting rid of stuff we don't want. A lot of the things I will be donating are of very good quality and will be very useful to a community who lives here. Honouring the intentions of the donors to support Sangha members feels good, as does making a nice big pile of gifts to share. The emphasis upon generosity is helping me through the initial stage of the daunting packing process.

For all of Sayalay Yasanandi, the senior nun's inspiring qualities, she has a similar weakness to me. She can't stand bland food and is attached to the chilli sauces of Southeast Asia. I can eat fried rice and veg momos day after day, so long as there is a tasty dipping sauce to dip them in. So another component of today's offering to the nun's community are a few bottles and jars of very yummy chilli sauces from Thailand. Mae Chee Ying has been in charge of the chilli sauce dispensation, and will be dispensing the remainder to the novice nuns today. I predict that the nuns will be well pleased with the sauces and pastes.

Tamim and Adil, the Mumtaz guesthouse co-managers, are kindly allowing us to store a few things here until our next visit. This is also very helpful. So the second phase of packing, (that I'm taking a break from now while writing this... yes... procrastinating :), is sorting out the medicinal requisites. Mae Chee Ying helped me to prepare many things in order to be able to take care of the monks and the pilgrimage group. Happily we have used very little of our supplies. I am regathering, sorting and repacking all the stuff that each monk had helped to carry, and will be leaving a suitcase with all of these illness treatments and symptom relieving medicines behind. This will also save money and effort for the next trip, life permitting.

With five bags of gifts for the nuns placed outside my room and one suitcase of medicines packed and put aside, It'll be much easier to deal with the remaining things that I want to take back to Thailand this evening. I will do this after a few more hours of meditation under the Bodhi Tree. One can only take so much clutter at a time!

3:30 pm

The nuns made and offered a very lovely meal. We exchanged gifts. As Sayalay Yasanandi is a teacher herself, and as she also sees Tahn Ajahn Anan as her main teacher now, I am never quite sure what to share or say in terms of giving encouragement. So I told them a few fun 'off the record' stories about encounters with ghosts, and also about some of the more 'interesting' meditation experiences, as a way of encouraging them all, and illustrating that practice gets more interesting when we do a lot more of it. It was fun to watch the young nuns' eyes widen and to see them all leaning in to hear the details. They're really scared of ghosts! They appeared to enjoy the visit. Sometimes people don't need another teacher, but everyone enjoys a fun uncle with interesting stories.

Sayalay has had to have bars put on all of their windows because their place has been broken into by young teenage boys repeatedly, and many things have been stolen. The metal rods from the building site for an extension were also recently stolen. It is hard to be angry at people motivated by genuine poverty and hardship and in many cases without skillful parenting, but such experiences do lead to a certain feeling of broken heartedness. Sayalay actually already had a nunnery to take over back in Myanmar, but has committed her heart to helping reestablish a nun's community in India, although at times, understandably, she wonders if she made the right choice and wants to run away.

I have to admit that personally I couldn't do it. If I need bars on my windows to live somewhere and if I can't trust my neighbours, I just simply couldn't live in such a place. I don't even lock the door of my kuti back at Anandagiri. My limit for staying in Bodhgaya is 6 weeks.

We talked about how to become more tough, without becoming mean. And how to practise metta and forgiveness, while also maintaining strong, sensible boundaries, when living in a dangerous place. It is definitely advanced practice, building a community, training nuns and practising in Bodhgaya. Supervising the building of many structures will not be an easy task either. Sayalay Yasanandi has many admirable qualities. I do believe that she will get her charitable trust certification and be able to build her nunnery. And then I think Bodhgaya will feel more like a true home, both to herself and her following. We certainly add our prayers and merit dedications for their success.

After the meal, as it was still drizzling, we did some last minute souvenir shopping. Tahn Joel picked up a nice statue for himself and one for a close monk friend. I got some Indian topaz beads to make wrist malas for the villagers back home. I'm heading off to the Bodhi Tree in a half hour for one final three hour meditation session. I won't be adding this to my formal tally, I just want to be sure that if I've accidentally overestimated, this gesture will even things out.

10:00 pm

At the beginning of the sitting session at 5:00pm, I dedicated merits to the devas of the Bodhi Tree and to the nagas in the vicinity of Bodhgaya, and then I made a simple request. I said, 'friends, I would like to sit for three hours now, please hold back the rain so that I can'. I cannot tell you for sure whether they heard the request, or whether they had any influence on the situation or not. But I can tell you that once I offered a rose garland to the Bodhi Tree and Vajra Asana, after meditating for exactly three hours, heavy rain started to fall! Fortunately I had an umbrella, and dear Gautam was there to help pack things up quickly.

Today, each member of our small group has separately thanked me for including them on the pilgrimage and during this retreat period. They said that they've felt more inspired, and have benefited more than they thought they would have. I thanked them too, for having been harmonious, diligent and considerate. It is very helpful having diligent and thoughtful companions. And it is wonderful to be able to share this mode and style of practice with a few friends.

During the past four weeks, Tahn Joel did around 140 hours of sitting around 40 hours of digital editing. Mae Chee Ying did around 120 hours of sitting and 50 hours of walking meditation. Tahn Sampanno also did around 160 hours of formal meditation practices. After having scaled back my efforts a little compared to previous intense retreats here, at 200 hours of formal practice, I still managed to do more than my Kalyanamittas. I am not boasting, I'm just relaying the facts. This is to be expected, because I've trained here for many years and have learned how to practise with the pain in the body and the impingement of the crowded open air situation. It does take repetition and familiarisation and repeated visits, then the capacity and stamina increases. The Ajahn should actually do more, that's why we would call him Ajahn. Even so, I am very pleased with everyone's efforts and I sincerely rejoice. I am fortunate to have such spiritual friends.

Taking leave of the Bodhi Mandala

Bodhgaya, March 4, 2024

6 am

Had a chat with my friends Tahir and his father Mumtaz in the bead shop last night. Mumtaz at 68, walks to and from the mosque to pray five times per day. At 750 metres per walk it adds up to seven and a half kilometers of walks per day. He will stay at the mosque during Ramadan. I Couldn't bring myself to pack after a nice meditation and pleasant evening. So I went to bed at 11 pm, hoping I'd wake up fresh and with a clear functioning brain. In general I'm more of a night person though, so that was taking a bit of a risk. Success! Woke up at 5 am fresh and alert, and packed for an hour.

Okay, now you're the one at the front of the class asking the teacher, 'but why does a renunciant monk have so much stuff that it takes so many hours to pack?' Good question, smarty pants. I might ask you a question in return. 'Have you ever been on a 7 week trip away from home where you'd be meeting with cold, hot and rainy weather? Or where you had to be a teacher with teaching aids, as well as a nurse with medicines ready to go when either you or your friends were unwell? And where you'd also be doing your own one month long meditation retreat after leading a pilgrimage?' The medicines and immune supporting supplements alone fill one medium sized suitcase. Then there's the meditation mat, meditation cushion, shawls etc. We do our own own robes and undershirts as well, so there is the detergent, clothes lines etc. On top of this, there are the gifts which accumulate along the way. (I have about 15 different brands of incense that I have been packing!) And then there are the gifts to take back to the devout villagers at home. It is not so simple being a monk, teacher, tour leader, abbot and meditation marathon runner! I try to pull it off with

some panache though. My suitcases are all colour coordinated, and with group check in, we usually avoid any excess baggage weight fees.

The good news is.... Drum roll.... Listen to this! Seven weeks into this adventure, and there was/is (*for the first time*) no serious illness! Yes, there were some sore throats and a feeling of being on the edge of illness several times. But it never fully took hold. Not having to deal with a throat, chest or sinus infection, or food poisoning, has been such a support to fulfilling all of the goals of this trip. I am confident that the supplements are a big factor, as was allowing for a little more rest than on previous trips. Other good news is that being able to leave a suitcase at Mumtaz is a different kind of tremendous support. That's about 20 kilograms of stuff we don't need to take back to Thailand, and 20 kilograms that we don't need bring back to India next time as well. Saaadhuuuu!!! But making note about what is left behind and looking at the expiration dates on the meds etc all takes time. It's okay, we have time.

9 am

We took our leave of the Phra Buddha Metta statue inside the vihara contained within the Chedi. We also offered three beautiful rose garlands and expressed gratitude for the opportunity, asked forgiveness for any wrongdoing by body, speech or mind. And we also requested Blessings to be able to return and practice similarly in the future, if possible. Then we did the same thing at the Bodhi Tree. It was very crowded, especially with Thai's and Vietnamese this morning, but it felt good to be taking leave properly.

After this we lit some incense and stood about 30 metres in front of the Mahabodhi Chedi, and asked for both permission and support from the devas and protectors of the Mahabodhi Temple Mandala, with regards to the large Buddha Metta statue project being built in Ubon Rachathani province in northeast Thailand. This was suggested to us by Luang Por Anan. The land is being bulldozed today! Work on the foundation has begun.

Tahn Joel and Tahn Sampanno wanted to have one last meditation session under the Bodhi Tree. I chose to do circumbulations, while reciting the names of the five Buddhas of this aeon. I did three inner, and then three outer circumambulations and then came back to the guesthouse with Gautam.

Cirrus Stratus Clouds over the Bay of Bengal

2:30

The cirrus-stratus clouds over the Bay of Bengal are Beautiful. The sky is blue above, the clouds are wispy, white and fluffy below. It is a lovely balancing perception to the hot, cramped and harrassed feelings experienced at check in, immigration and baggage screening. Domestic flights are smooth to and from Bodhgaya but international one's are a special experience. Listening to the Thai monks complaining about it was entertaining. I didn't have to complain about it myself since I already felt great empathy all around.

There are some benefits to standing a long time in line however. I did meet one lovely 81 year old monk in the queue in front of me who had been a monk for 61 years. He had

wanted to come to Bodhgaya ever since he first ordained and had studied the stories related to the life of Lord Buddha's life. This had been his first visit to India. He said that he had felt tremendous rapture at the Mahabodhi chedi and Bodhi Tree. He had also visited Veluvana, the first monastery and walked up to the site of the Buddha's kuti on Vultures Peak, and back down again, unassisted. I was impressed, and very happy for him. The monk behind me on the other hand, had been told that he had two months to live after being diagnosed with lymphatic cancer. That was nine years ago though. After his diagnosis, he had ordained and has come to Bodhgaya once a year since becoming a monk. He believes in merit and that merit can prolong his life. I believe him! He looked radiant and healthy.

4:00 pm

There are mists over the mountains of Myanmar. Suvarnabhumi, the golden land lay before us.

Hygiene (White Magnolia)

11:00 pm

I did my favourite cleansing ritual tonight. Bathing my body under the warm shower spigot, while washing my robes, under shirt and monks shoulder bag etc. The brand of detergent was 'Hygeine', and although it's not actually antiseptic, just reading those words feels good, (and naturally it smells good too.) It feels good to wash the dust of Bodhgaya off of the body and to rinse the grime of striving out of the cloth.

We all marvelled at how quiet and gracious everyone inside the airport was, how efficient and friendly the staff were. How the passengers left space between themselves and the baggage belt, and moved forward to collect a suitcase only once they'd seen it. We walked through customs with our trolleys completely unharassed, and then enjoyed smooth and silent roads to our lodgings for the night... But it is very interesting isn't it? That everyone wants to go back to Bodhgaya.

This period of sharing journals is also coming to a close. Enough of this 11 pm eloquence, these midnight musings. This vain verbaciousness. An Australian is not supposed to have so much vocabulary anyway, it's audacious. (Personally I blame Thomas Hardy, and my mother for giving me his books.)

The pilgrimage and retreat period were a success, and now they have passed. The challenge of integrating greater faith and effort into daily life continues. I hope that something that I've shared of the journey, our practice and process has been interesting, useful or encouraging for you. Wishing you every support, success and inspiration along your own journey towards deeper peace and well-being.

With metta

Ajahn Achalo

