

Taking leave of the Kingdom

Bangkok, January 10th

It was good to meet with and encourage khun Jintana and her staff for a few hours last night. In an economic environment that appears to be shrinking, trying to meet goals for growth of a business and having deadlines in the timeframe for doing so definitely causes some stress. Jintana and some of her staff made some very generous offerings to support the costs of the 6 monks travelling to India. In stressful times, continuing to be generous when it is still possible adds some joy to life. Supporting others to have retreat-like situations will definitely help to manifest similar opportunities for oneself in the future as well.

Many people came to join the meal offering this morning. Lovely, sweet, smiling kind people with faith and good wishes for the monks leading a pilgrimage. Many of the people who came had actually been on pilgrimage to India, or have joined myself and others in Bodhgaya, for practice periods in the past. A good number of them also appeared to be finalising plans for meeting up in Bodhgaya once again in February as well. There was a lovely sense of camaraderie and of shared faith. I forced myself to give a Dhamma talk in Thai, (still don't feel so confident in doing so), on the subject of consciously producing very specific types of potent spiritual merit, then, once inspired and focused, making resolutions to increase both the amount of practice we do, as well as well committing to being more determined with the commitment to consistency.

Tahn Anan, Tahn Joel and Tahn Danny arrived after the meal and we headed to Wat Phra Kaew (the Emerald Buddha temple) for some chanting and meditation. This monastery is actually part of the Thai royal family palace complex, which has been generously opened up to welcome both those with faith as well as curious tourists. About 18,000 people are passing through on average each day at present. Having received an honorary title from His Majesty the King, I am no longer allowed to just pop in using the normal protocol for coming and going. I have to inform some of the staff there. They then allow the cars in our group to drive directly into the complex and personally escort us into the temple. The monks were allowed in via the back door and meditation mats had been set up for us to the side of the hallowed shrine, in a quieter little zone, away from the thronging crowds. It is an honour for which we were grateful. We offered our specially procured jasmine blossom garlands, chanted for twenty minutes and then sat for an hour and a half. It was 37 degrees Celsius outside, probably about 34 inside, but we had fans blowing in our direction. Winter came and went very quickly in Bangkok this year! As usual, it felt good to pay respects and to request blessings for safe passage and return for all participants on the pilgrimage.

Two laywomen who are joining the pilgrimage, one from Serbia and one from Singapore, managed to join the group of Thai's who came along for the afternoon. After the meditation we decided to stretch our legs and visit another sacred ancient monastery. It was good to walk a little and to catch the ferry over the Chao Phraya river to Wat Rakhang. The atmosphere on the lively river is always lovely in the late afternoon light. I had thought we would be able to meditate quietly in the uposatha Hall there, but as it happens the resident monks came to do their fortnightly recitation of the rules of discipline just as we arrived, so I asked if we could join them and they graciously consented to allow our group to join the ceremony. The chanter had a good chanting voice. The recitation took around an hour. It

seemed auspicious that we had arrived just in time to join the ceremony, and had attended it within the precincts of the beautiful and ambient old monastery, with lovely wall murals of celestial beings stretching to the high ceilings, and a large freshly gold-leafed Buddha smiling down upon us.

Driving back in the van with the other five monks after meditating together was good for pre-pilgrimage bonding. We marvelled at the politeness and order of a Bangkok style traffic jam. It had taken 45 minutes to get from Ekamai to Thonburi on the way, but an hour and a half on the way back. Observing the tens of thousands of vehicles moving slowly along the arteries of highways and tollways in Bangkok, we did not hear the single honking of a solitary car horn.

Once back at the 7th floor where we stay in Ekamai there was some last minute luggage rearranging and load sharing. Tahn Sampanno has the skin issues and acute wounds package in his suitcase, and Tahn Anan has one of the digestive tract issues medicine packs. Venerable Panyasiri and Venerable Sampanno got the speaker transmission. They will be helping to keep them charged up and bring them along to each site. I have the microphones and the batteries. Everyone has antiseptic wipes, mosquito repellent and ear plugs. A went to bed a little earlier than usual, tomorrow will be a big day. We are meeting the pilgrims at the airport at 7:30 am.