

Navigated Nerves

Bangkok, January 11, 5:00am.

The fact that I sorted through my monk's shoulder bag and removed 4 unnecessary items at 4:30am in the morning means that I am nervous. But the fact that I am awake early and paying such detailed attention to my luggage at this point in time means that I am 'on task' and paying attention. There is none of the foggy brained foot dragging of the previous big pack back at Anandagiri. Just like a good athlete or performer will have nerves before a big event, so will the leader of a large pilgrimage group to India. My carry-on bag has now been rearranged to have all of the things that I will need at the Mahabodhi Temple this evening, should travel go without a hitch.

Opal. A dear long term student offered me a 5ml bottle of Damascus Rose essential oil yesterday, which I added to that which I already had, topping up a 20ml bottle. I dabbed the last little drop on my chest in the heart chakra area as a bonus little aromatherapy treatment. It is both curious and wonderful to observe the way that offering fine fragrances at Holy Sites seems to ensure having more fragrances to offer at Holy Sites. Apparently it takes 10,000 little roses to get just 5ml of this pure essential oil. I will mix it in with lavender, rose geranium and water to make my signature blend once we get to India. I've 40,000 blossoms worth ready to go!

My toiletry liquids are already in ziplock bags. I have bathed, khun Chin, my senior monastery committee member is on his way to drive us to the airport.

On the plane 12:45 pm

We arrived on time and met most of the pilgrim group in the VIP room that we had reserved. Everyone was wearing their white upper body wear and white or dark lower gear, and were smiling. Khun Lek was giving out ticket print outs and transmitting various details. We had plenty of time so I just let everyone schmooze among themselves for 15 minutes or so before picking up the mic. I was just getting first impressions, remembering faces, feeling things out. It felt good. Looks like a lovely group.

People came and paid respects one by one quite organically, they handed me their required 'in case of death' letters, and I gave them their chanting books and blessed amulets. I made a couple of announcements and requests, basically, expect immigration in India to be slow and rude and don't take it personally. I also explained that they may observe a different manifestation of Ajahn Achalo in India. With a big group in crowded situations at times we can't afford to dilly dally, daydream or get distracted. We need to function and move as a group. So I asked their forgiveness in advance if I have to say either 'shut up!' or 'hurry up!' and raise my voice at times. I am still the kind-hearted Ajahn, but practicing the kindness of making sure we get where we need to go and do what we need to do. This is not my favourite part of being a leader. In Thailand and other places where I sometimes teach one can usually say things gently and most people are sensitive, self-aware and receptive. But people sometimes do get understandably disoriented in the pilgrimage sites, especially first timers. And a gentle slap on the cheek (metaphorically speaking) is sometimes necessary.

We moved through check in smoothly, then headed off for our last meal in Thailand for a while. Going through immigration went quite smoothly, and there was time for a coffee on the way to the gate. The word for a monks attendant in Thai is 'upatak'. We had JC and Shin Xiang as our attendants, and these guys are 'supertaks'. I mentioned to the other monks that as I am used to being either right on time or just a little bit late, and that having an entire 40 minutes spare before boarding actually made me feel nervous! But everything went fine.

Khun

Lek has even managed to have her Indian tour company partners collect the luggage at the baggage claim and take it to the Hotel. This will save quite a bit of time. I just hope everyone's bag arrives. Each bag had a tag attached with a number on it, so in theory it should be possible to account for all of them.

As we are flying with Thai, the monks were invited to board first. Khun Lek arranged the front row with the extra leg room. (I told you she is a star!) Once again I was able to look at each of the pilgrims as they boarded the plane after us and filed by one by one, making the effort to smile at them reassuringly. They all looked so sweet and well behaved, it did not require much effort to smile. It is easy to rejoice in their good intentions, faith and merits.

Remembering their faces is a good start, remembering all of their names will be trickier! I know about half so far. But at least they know that I see them and that I am keeping an eye out.

The Boeing 737's have been in the news again recently, (not in a good way), and so I was secretly relieved to see that our plane on this occasion was an Airbus A320. I managed to have a 15 minute power nap on the runway while the pilot waited for clearance. At 1:15pm, we have just flown over the shores of Myanmar and are currently over the Bay of Bengal.

8:30 pm, in the Hotel

We were fortunate in that it was just our plane on the tarmac when we landed in Gaya. It took just an hour and a quarter to get through immigration and clear all of the luggage. We were all sitting on the bus and headed towards Bodhgaya after within an hour and a half of arriving. Apparently His Holiness the Dalai Lama is in town, and due to this there are more stringent security measures. The bus had to park some distance away. It was definitely a good idea to skip checking in at the hotel and to aim directly for the Bodhi Tree. But after the half hour walk and half hour clearing security, we would still have three hours in which to practice.

It is also the period of time where the Nyingma sect are having their prayer festival, which is the largest of the Tibetan prayer festivals. Their prayers for the day had just finished and literally a couple of thousand monks were in the process of leaving the Mahabodhi as we were trying to enter. Finding a suitable place to sit with a group as large as ours was a bit of a challenge, but eventually a great space opened up on the western side directly under the branches of the Bodhi Tree. Apparently there is a new policy where amplifiers are no longer allowed into the temple. This posed another challenge. We chanted with natural voice and volume as best we could, then settled into a long sit. There was no guided meditation or succinct teaching this evening as without an amplifier it just wasn't possible. I had to trust that the pilgrims would be okay with just sitting. I certainly did enjoy the lovely long sit though myself. We sat from 5-7pm. And I sat the first two hours of my next round of 1000! (...4002)

After the regular chanting piped over the Mahabodhi Temple speakers from 6-7pm I suggested that we do three circumambulations of the innermost circumambulation route. It was still kind of busy, but it was doable. The flowers and other prayer festival decorations were magical and the lighting was lovely. After the circumambulations I noticed that the temperature had dropped considerably. Although only 7:30 in India, it was 9pm in Thailand and 10pm in Malaysia and Singapore. I could see that some of the pilgrims were tired and that many were shivering, so I decided that we had best dedicate merits and take our leave. A fifteen minute puja, a two hour sit, and three circumambulations reciting praises to the Three Jewels was a great beginning to our offering of practice here.

Seeing just how crowded the temple is, Khun Lek and I decided to tweak tomorrow's schedule. When the really big festivals are going on here, the quietest time is around lunch. So tomorrow morning we will go to meditate at the place where Lady Sujata offered the sweet milk rice to the Bodhisattva. Going early we will likely avoid the tour groups that usually come a bit later. Then we'll have an early lunch and go straight back to The Mahabodhi. We will spend 4-5 hours in one long session, rather than breaking it into two. With the help of our Indian guides we will try to get permission to bring the amplifier in, and perhaps it might be possible to give a teaching during the quiet mid day period.