

Blessed and Blasted in Bodhgaya

Hotel 5:00am, January 12

It is 8 degrees and 88% humidity outside. As such, it was the right choice not to be rushing off to the Bodhi Tree to sit meditation on the damp floor and in the fog. A hot brekky first will be best. The weather app says that it will be 12 degrees when we arrive at the spot where lady Sujata offered the milk rice to the maha-Bodhisattva, and 14 when we complete our one hour sit... which will be much more salubrious.

Apparently, after giving up the extremely austere practices and having a bath in the Neranjara river, the Buddha-to-be glowed gold. This is what inspired Lady Sujata's maids to run off and exclaim to the good lady that a real live devata (literally radiant being) had appeared under a tree and was positively glowing beautifully! All of those mountains of merits, millions of millennia of accumulating and developing wonderful qualities were banging at the door, about to burst through and shine forth. This was no ordinary garden variety tree deva! How awesome! And what good fortune lady Sujata had to be able to offer the meal to such a being just hours before he became the Tatagatha. The one 'Thus Come and Thus Gone' Come with all those merits, inspiring qualities and awe inspiring abilities... and gone were all of the attachments, craving and clinging. No more births among unsatisfactory conditions were possible.

There is another lovely consideration which I like to contemplate about this occasion. The fact that even the toughest, most heroic of beings must still depend upon the kind, loving and nourishing gestures of others. There is a lovely sense of Yin and Yang in this. Toughness, resolve and discipline being complimented by just the right amount of tenderness. This is clearly a part of the world of conditions that we have to recognize and be able to work with, The Bodhisattva, after cultivating awesome qualities and abilities for imponderable amounts of aeons, still needed a mother and a wet-nurse before becoming foremost in the world. Once he was the Buddha, he sought out his mother and taught her (he was a him by then), in order to repay the kindness.

Although currently the site where the milk rice was offered looks pretty ordinary, with the inevitable cows, dogs and children begging. According to Luang Por Piak, apparently it is also the site of the goatherd Banyan Tree, a spot where The Buddha spent one of the seven weeks after his Enlightenment experiencing the bliss of liberation and considering the Five Spiritual Powers, my personal favourite list of Dhammas. On a later occasion he also answered a Brahmins question there, about what makes a person truly a Brahmin, and his answer was truly revolutionary in its time. That it is a person's qualities (regardless of caste) that makes them a person of high birth.

Also, not very far away, is the site where Lord Buddha taught the Fire Sermon to a group of 1000 matted hair as ascetics, all of whom attained final liberation while considering the profound wisdom teaching. So suffice to say, it is a special place indeed. And I believe that when those with faith incline their minds properly and receptively, some sense for the blessings that occurred here can still be felt. If there are less crowds and noise it is easier though, which is why we are heading there straight after breakfast.

6:00pm

An interesting day. The morning's plan went perfectly, while the afternoon plan did not, but we made it work and it was good enough. We arrived at the place where Lady Sujata offered the milk rice just as the sun was rising up in the sky, causing the mist to rise. We got the place to ourselves and not even the beggars had arrived. We did our puja, I gave some short reflections about the wonderful things that had occurred in the area, and then we sat for an hour and a quarter. As it was still quite quiet after the sit, we also chanted the Fire Sermon together. After that, we offered lights and fragrances and took a few group photographs.

The working theory for the afternoon was that if we arrived at what was lunch time for the Tibetan monks, the temple would be quiet. We would do some chanting, sit together, then allow some time for freestyle practice. It was quietish... but every spot where a group of 60 or so people could gather was reserved for the Nyingma Monlam Chenmo gathering. So we resorted to plan B. Find any available place to sit under the Bodhi Tree, then meet up together at 4pm for the walk back to the bus.

I was able to sit in my favourite spot! But not without some 'interesting phenomenon' manifesting. An elderly nun of some sort, Russian or Slavic looking, as far as I could tell, seemed to feel strongly that this place was reserved for someone else, so she yelled at me!... and yelled at me... and yelled at me. I've got a pretty good sense for the etiquette for meditators under the Bodhi Tree. And when things are this busy, available spaces are fair game. I hadn't pushed aside anyone's things, I just parked myself in a tight but empty space. It was curious to observe that when you don't actually understand a single word, it affects the mind less than it might otherwise. I felt kind of sad for the old lady, yelling for a full five minutes at a meditation monk under the sacred Bodhi Tree like that. I put in my earplugs and pulled my hat over my eyes as I always do, and spread metta to her. I was able to sit for three hours, with her right by my side, and I dedicated merit to her several times.

I noticed some of my old meditation buddies from previous retreats there under the tree and felt great joy at seeing them. A familiar Vietnamese monk, Korean layman, Tibetan monk and Thai monk. After the meditation a large group of the pilgrims from our group approached and made many lovely offerings. Fragrances, a set of Three Robes, Tibetan incense, a cloth that had been offered to the Phra Buddha Metta statue etc. I gave a short blessing. 'Due to this merit may you always be imbued with the fragrance of virtue... and may this virtue be a cause for your Liberation!'

The dates of this group's time in Bodhgaya have synchronised perfectly with both the large Nyingma gathering, as well as HH Dalai Lama still being in residence. A double whammy! I suspect that it is probably the result of very specific merits and karmic affinities from their past lives. But such karmic affinities ripening in such a manner at this time have also brought very large crowds and have necessitated a long walk to and from the bus to the Mahabodhi Temple. They've definitely experienced the 'full immersion' Bodhgaya experience. I sincerely hope that the prayers invoking the blessings of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas being recited and amplified all around are penetrating deeply into their hearts and minds. There are many first time pilgrims in the group. Becoming familiarised with Bodhgaya, some may return on a later occasion during a quieter time.

On the way back to the bus I took the pilgrims into one of the cleaner, quieter gift shops with fixed prices in case they wanted incense, a new mala, a Buddha locket or a statue. Or some gifts for friends and family back home. Something to remember pilgrimage in India by. Two kind pilgrims offered Venerable Panyasiri and Venerable Sampanno a lovely little hand carved wooden travelling shrine Buddha image.

9:00pm

The Oaks Hotel where we are staying has a lovely rooftop lounge space where I was able to give a talk to the group in the evening. We explored the subjects and occasions previously mentioned. It was so nice to have a spacious and quiet place within which to contemplate the life of The Buddha and his liberating teachings. I added a few funny anecdotes to help people process the intensity of their first trip to Bihar, being able to laugh at the end of the day is good for managing stress. It is quite a culture shock for first-timers from Singapore, but everyone appears to be rising to the occasion and doing well. We have only been in India for 32 hours, but it already feels like a couple of days. I figure we've had about a weeks worth of sense impressions already, which is why it feels like longer.

Tomorrow we are heading to the site where the Bodhisattva practised the extreme of austerities, before having his insight into the Middle Way. Once again we will head off early in hopes of having some quiet time. I'm going to schedule in a mid-day nap tomorrow, and a visit to the Root Institute so that we can practise some generosity and kindness towards the locals.