

From the Vajra Asana to the Rajas Gaha.

5,6,7

Wake up call at 5, breakfast at 6, departure at 7am, Khun Lek had announced last night. Tahn Anand and Tahn Sampanno arrived at my room at 5:30am to see if any help was needed. I invited them to join me in having a cup of coffee... chill chill. Then I invited them to start breakfast without me at 6am. I wanted to do the packing myself and sort through things slowly. Our lovely students had offered many things during the previous two days and it was going to take a little bit of time sorting out things to take to Rajgir and Varanasi, and things to leave in Bodhgaya. There was a happy, contented feeling while taking this time to pack. That the pilgrimage was going well... we'd had many lovely meditations in several special places already... the group was getting along well.. and everyone was still healthy. So far so good!

The drive to Rajgir went well too, the fog was very light and the road was in quite a good condition. We arrived at the site of the Bamboo Grove by 9:00am. This time I was a little surprised that we got the place to ourselves for the first hour, because 9 o'clock is not 7 o'clock after all. The only other group to arrive was being led by Tahn Ajahn Tong Daen, and they were impeccably well behaved and quiet. Luang Por Tong Daeng is a highly respected meditation monk from Northern Thailand. His group arrived while we were meditating. We sat for an hour and a quarter and I led short guided meditation recollecting several of the wonderful things that had occurred here. The fact that a great king, king Bimbisara had gifted his bamboo grove to Lord Buddha and his order. The very grove in which we were now sitting, and that it was the very first monastery ever established under Gautama Buddha. That the foremost disciples, Venerable Sariputta and Venerable Moggallana had come to pay respects to the Buddha for the first time right here in this place. That the establishment of the bhikkhus rules of discipline, 'the patimokkha', had been proclaimed here to a gathering of 1250 Arahants. Awesome even to imagine! And that apparently by the end of the Buddha's teaching career, as much as 75% of the laypeople in this kingdom had realised stream-entry, the first stage of enlightenment.

This fact is awe inspiring and incredibly impressive, but not actually that surprising when you consider that with the Buddha, his two chief disciples, and many other very talented and utterly pure monks would have been living in the vicinity. There must literally have been arahants in every suitable forest grove, cave and rocky over-hanging. So meeting practitioners capable of teaching would not have been difficult at all. Even for the those who didn't become enlightened, they would have been able to make enormous amounts of auspicious merits by offering alms to lines of serenely countenanced samannas each morning. At the end of each day, how lovely it must have been to fall asleep at night with tens of thousands of stream enterers, thousands of Arahants, and a Sammasambuddha spreading loving-kindness in all directions!

Things have changed quite a bit since those days no doubt. But to be fair, Rajgir has improved leaps and bounds in its general appearance and atmosphere compared to my first visit here 21 years ago. I remember one guide explaining around 15 years ago that there

was a project underway of planting many different types of bamboo in the bamboo grove, but in those days, the most prominent trees were some shabby rows of scrubby eucalyptus and it was a stretch of the imagination envisioning a beautiful bamboo grove. The eucalyptus are still there now, however they have huge trunks and look grand and venerable these days, and there are indeed many beautiful clusters of different types of bamboo in every direction all around! Medium green, dark green, blueish-gray-green stalks can be observed, even bright golden coloured bamboo stalks are here. There are small, medium and large trunks, small medium and large leaves, even very tiny twig-like species with very small leaves. It is a wonderful reflection about how grand things can become if seeds that are planted are consistently nourished for many years. Something that looked quite pathetic is now becoming genuinely grand. And even the obnoxious noise from the nearby town seems further away now, screened and muffled by the vegetation. Previous sits here had always been a kind of going through the motions gesture for me. But on this occasion the sitting was pleasant.

After our meditation and merit dedications, our group paid respects to Luang Por Tong Dang, then headed for the bus and back to the Hotel for lunch. On the way I noticed a university, a new zoo, a beautiful new fountain, and also that many of the local buildings were freshly painted. I am happy for the people of Rajgir that their economy appears to be growing and their quality of life is improving.

Nalanda - the birth place of Sariputta

At 1:45pm we headed off to Nalanda. We were there by 3pm. Many of the pilgrims are here for the first time and have nothing to compare our current experience to. But for myself, it is such a pleasant change when the roads are fairly smooth and traffic is flowing well. Previously, a day like today, traveling from Bodhgaya to Rajgir, then Rajgir to Nalanda was an exhausting, bumpy, swerving, and constantly honking experience. But we actually arrived at Nalanda in good shape after having had a little rest.

First we went to the tiny little museum, which looks truly deceptive from the outside, because it is filled with stunning treasures that were discovered during archaeological digs around Nalanda. That such beautiful craftsmanship was possible in stone and bronze since fifteen hundred years ago is amazing to me. For the tools that they had must have been quite primitive. Given this, it is a testament to the incredible talent of the master artisans of the day, that they had such precision and such strength in their hands. Observing the pilgrims, everyone appeared to have been transported to a heaven realm of contented appreciation for a period of time.

My personal favorite image of a multi-armed Avalokiteshvara carved in sandstone is housed in this museum. Whenever I see him, I feel a wave of strong emotion, I simply want to fall to my knees and bow and cry with loving appreciation. I do bow, and I do feel the appreciation, but I also have enough mindfulness to direct the heart away from the type of rapture that might manifest as streams of tears rolling down my cheeks. I don't think my students would understand or appreciate what that was all about. My intuitive sense is that I may well have done pujas and meditations in front of this statue before, and that the appreciation that I felt in that life was so deep and strong, that it can still trickle into consciousness in this life when the visual prompt is before me.

On this occasion the guard gave permission to take photographs and a short video of the features of the statue. I also asked if we could chant? He said no... so I begged, pleaded and bargained. The guard gave permission for one minute. So we chanted one round of the long mantra of the thousand-armed Avalokiteshvara. It was short but it was sweet, and the sound of deep faith and respect resounded in a hall at Nalanda once again.

After the visit to the museum we wandered at a relaxed pace towards the large Sariputta Stupa, chanted for 20 minutes, meditated for one hour, dedicated merits, then enjoyed exploring the remains of the monastic residences and halls in the pinkish light of dusk.

For the evening Dhamma discussion I read from the Great Disciples of the Buddha, the inspiring childhood, going forth, enlightenment, teaching career and final nibbana of Venerable Sariputta. Many of these things all occurred in the vicinity of Rajagaha. It was a very nice way to end a lovely day here. And tomorrow we will be able to pay respects and do some practice at the cave where Sariputta became Enlightened, as well as at the site of the Buddha's retreat kuti on Vultures Peak mountain.