

Day 5

Rajgir Hotel 8:00pm

Well... that was a big day! Where to start? First thing I will say is that I am so thrilled to still feel healthy! This is usually the point where some illness curse begins to 'boil and bubble... toil and trouble.' Adding more achiness, tenderness and fatigue to that which is already occurring due to the travel and dust. A couple of people in the group have begun to feel a bit feverish and are resting early this evening. One additional thing that I've added to my 'pilgrimage illness prevention regime' is to clean out my sinuses with a saline spray, and then squirt an iodine solution up there afterwards, as well as squirt the iodine for throats solution down the back of my throat as well. I do this after returning from our various outings. The theory is that it will stop viruses and bacteria that have been inhaled before they become systemic in the body. I don't know if this is what is helping, or if it's the extra zinc and vitamin D I'm taking this time around as well. Whatever it is, hopefully it lasts.

Venerable Sampanno is giving some sutta readings to the group as I type, giving me a little break and freeing up some time for me to write my journal. It is good for the pilgrims to meet the other monks and benefit from their learning. And good for the monks to get more practice at teaching. I have been alternating between bus number 1 and 2 the past few days. Venerable Panyasiri encouraged the folks on bus number 2 today. These two monks are familiar with many suttas and can share relevant examples and stories from the Pali suttas pertaining to our location and the events that occurred around here.

It was another 5/6/7 program this morning. Our program today being a day for exploring Rajgir. It was quite chilly, so we thought it best to move around a bit before returning to the Bamboo Grove for a nice long sit. Our first stop was to a site where one can observe some ancient ox cart tracks that have been worn down deep into stone, proof that there has been a lot of traffic in these parts since mediaeval times. Next, we visited the place which contains the site of a Chedi that King Ajathasathu had had built to house the relics of the Buddha. Interesting fellow this Ajathasathu. He had been swayed by the Buddha's evil cousin Devadatta, to jail and starve his own father to death, in order to take over the Kingdom. Once he did that, he also invaded and took control of the Kingdom where the Buddha had been born, despite the Buddha's repeated requests that he not do that.

Eventually the fog of evil covetousness dissipated from his mind enough for him to realise that he had been very foolish indeed, and he finally developed a deep loving respect for The Lord Buddha. When he had passed into Mahaparinibbana and had been cremated, the Buddha's relics were divided into eight portions, for eight kingdoms. King Ajathasathu is said to have carried the Buddha relics on his own head and walked all the way back from Kusinara to Rajagaha on foot. Here he had a stupa made to contain the relics.

The life of the Buddha and the characters that we meet by studying it are so very instructive about both the nature of samsara and the nature of our minds.

From these events we can glean that even though King Bimbisara was extremely generous towards the Buddha and the Sangha, and had even attained to the first stage of Enlightenment, he was still subject to the workings of kamma. Similarly, despite the

Buddha's extraordinary abilities, he couldn't defend the Kingdom where he was raised from an invading army. As to the truly wise and peaceful example of perfection that the Buddha personifies, he was very tolerant and forgiving of this person's wretched acts. Considering King Ajathasathu, he is also an interesting example that no one is permanently and inherently evil. Very bad people can become quite good people within just one lifetime. It will be awhile before he gets out of hell, but after that, who knows what good he may eventually bring about?

There are no more relics housed in the remains of the Chedi that we visited today because later, after another power crazy monarch had conquered most of Northern India. He also came to his senses and became a benevolent ruler as opposed to a psychotic despot. King Asoka had the relics removed from the eight great stupas, and had small amounts of relics enshrined in a great number of stupas all over India, so that Buddhists everywhere would be able to venerate the relics of the Buddha.

After doing a little chanting at the chedi site we returned to the Bamboo Grove. I marvelled once again at how it truly is becoming a lovely grove! We sat for two hours in silence together. A group of Thai monks came and chanted the Ovada Patimokkha chant while we were sitting, which was a very nice ambient backdrop to the meditation. After the sitting there was a little bit of time to wander around the grove leisurely. I took the opportunity to seek out exotic bamboo species and take some photographs for future reference, to use as a reference in my water painting hobby.

A curious thing happened while I was having my leisurely stroll. There I was simply trying to find the Himalayan Blue Bamboo, the Borneo Black Bamboo, the yellow with green stripes bamboo, as well as the curious bulging bulbous type, and take a few snapshots. And pilgrims kept coming up alongside and discreetly asking the most profound meditation and Dhamma questions! 'Oh look! Black bamboo!'... 'Ajahn what is the difference between sankhara-upekkha and jhana samadhi?'... 'Oh there it is! Himalayan Blue bamboo!'... 'Ajahn, how common is it for lay people to really be stream-enterers this lifetime?'

It caught me a little by surprise, but it's a good sign and it's actually not so surprising. I have been getting them to sit for longer sessions as well as reading things with regards to purifying and liberating the mind. Our pilgrimage is kind of like a moving retreat with a Life of The Buddha theme. So it's only natural for sincere students and practitioners to have questions. They are probably too shy to ask in front of the group and find it easier to approach when I am away from the big group and relaxed. I have decided to schedule in a long session tomorrow night specifically for meditation questions.

After lunch we visited a famous hot springs bathing spot, which is mentioned in the suttas from over 2500 years ago. Apparently today was an especially auspicious day for bathing, so the place was packed with scantily clad Indians, dripping with water, all looking clean and very cheerful about being so. The number of men dunking themselves into one particular pool was mind boggling to me, and you couldn't have paid me any amount to jump into that secondhand murky coloured water with hundreds of strangers! But even so, I genuinely enjoyed the joy of the locals, whose immune and nervous systems could obviously take it.

After our cultural studies it was back to Buddhist pilgrimage. We headed to Vultures Peak. Some very keen mala sellers recognized me from the year before and the year before that, and enthusiastically helped to push me up the mountain! This bothered me a bit last time, but I just surrendered to it this time. There are two small cave/rocky overhangs associated with Mahamoggallan and Sariputta. Our group was too large to all fit everyone into the first cave, but we managed to split the group roughly into two and had a lovely half an hour sit in the caves. After this we had a more cosy/squeezy puja altogether at the second cave. This cave is believed to be the place where Sariputta attained complete deliverance of mind while fanning the Buddha while he was giving a teaching to a wandering ascetic.

The chanting together was lovely, with very good energy, and the cave lent itself very well acoustically. After the chanting we headed up to the Buddha's kuti on Vultures Peak to offer flowers, fragrance and to sit for an hour. It was quite a complex scene up there... difficult to describe. First, it was really cold and windy. It was also having a constant stream of multi ethnic pilgrims, each doing their own puja in their particular style, despite the space being quite limited. One Vietnamese monk in particular stood out among this occasions chanters. He yelled his puja very loud and very fast behind us, with a unique and particular tone of what appeared to my ear consciousness to be anger, for the entire hour! At the same time a very gentle, sweet and warm voiced Thai Bhikkhu led his melodic puja directly in front of us. Meanwhile prayer flags flapped, fluttered and snapped in the strong breeze all around. I asked the group later, and most people had still managed to have some joyful and peaceful moments despite the eccentric and blustery franticness. The pilgrims also understand quite well now, why we will be heading up the mountain at 5:45 am tomorrow. For even though it will be bitterly cold. We will most likely be able to avoid mala sellers and yelling chanters at least for an hour or so, as well as possibly witness a beautiful sunrise. Fingers crossed our merits will kick in again and smooth the way for a serene experience.

I have some sympathy in moments for power crazy Kings. If I was one of the Kings of Thailand in the past, I would have invaded both Cambodia and Vietnam and forced them to chant more beautifully. I'm sure there have been more stupid reasons for wars before. Fortunately I am not a king, and I have earplugs and patient endurance.