

Unbearably Beautiful

Day 14, Jan 23

Ajanta Day Two

The longing for the sanctity of the quiet hotel room in moments yesterday afternoon was futile, because the fireworks were exploding until midnight in all directions anyway, especially in the city! The Indian people really know how to party, you've got to give them credit for that. It was an ordinary weekday today however, and the day immediately after the national holiday where hundreds of millions of people celebrated the return of Rama to Ayodhya. So I was hopeful that the revellers would either still be sleeping in or going back to work.

The drive from Aurangabad to Ajanta was definitely faster and smoother. Lek suggested that we pop into the Ajanta Green Hotel along the way for a coffee or a chai, as there was time, I agreed. The chai was certainly nice, but when the proprietors graciously put on some Thai music quite loud, things kind of degenerated. Everyone talked louder and became engrossed in their conversations, getting the pilgrims on the bus swiftly at departure time was challenging. Even so, we made it to the place where the shuttle buses depart by 8:45 am.

Mr Umesh had told me that the first bus would be at 8:45. Some bus drivers arrived and one had started revving his engine, but no bus manifested at the pick up point. 9:00 o'clock came and the buses were still not forthcoming. I had really hoped to get to cave #26 as early as possible, in order to have a proper sitting before chanting and breaking for the meal. Why can't the driver be more solicitous?! We've come from other countries... got up at 4:30 am... driven for two hours... been waiting for twenty minutes, why are they being so recalcitrant?!

Part of me laughed at the absurdity of getting upset because I wanted to rush somewhere else in order to be peaceful. But another part was deeply committed. An extra twenty minutes of sitting at Cave #26 would mean the difference between becoming deeply peaceful or not. At 9:05 the bus arrived. I decided to go ahead as swiftly as I could. The group had been here before now and knew the way. They could dawdle if they wanted, but I would get my extra 20 minutes in any case.

Walking along the ridge of the cliff face in front of the caves in the fresh morning air, under the blue sky with the sound of birdsong all around was invigorating. I wished a good morning to the various security guards in front of each cave. By the time I had set up my sitting mat behind the Chedi, bowed and crossed my legs it was 9:45 am. According to the plan that I'd hashed out with khun Lek, we would have to leave the cave at 11:00 am to get back to the restaurant in time for the meal. That meant a half and hour sit and a half hour puja only, after all, of this effort to be here first... so frustrating!

I realised then that if khun Lek could have one of her helpers deliver a simple meal into the cave complex for the 7 monks by 11:30, I could make it a one hour sit and half hour puja, as the lay people were not bound so tightly by the mid day cut off for their meal. The

wonderfully flexible and dynamic Khun Lek readily agreed. And so we sat for an entire hour in the cool cave in delicious silence. There really were very few tourists so early on this day.

Shivani Gupta Agarwal from Mumbai, a student of mine, had joined our pilgrimage in Aurangabad. She is a classical Indian singer who recites Pali suttas beautifully. At the one hour point Ingot up, wandered quietly over to where she was sitting and asked her to chant three chants solo. The Nibbana Sutta, Mangala Sutta, and Bojhanga Paritta. I rushed back to my cushion, sat in full lotus position and readied myself for this delight. Shivani's voice seemed to be made for that cave and for that moment. From the very first note I was struck with a kind of rapture difficult to describe. Her voice was as clean and clear as a diamond and reverberated inside the stone cavern, multiplying her magic. I was so happy... so touched... so completely content to be right where I was at that moment that it was a little overwhelming. The stunning cave, the stunning voice, the exquisite words, describing the pristine unsurpassed liberated state that the Buddha had realised. The perfect notes and perfect words rebounding off of scores of perfectly sculpted ancient stone Buddhas. Tears simply streamed down my cheeks for the entire ten minutes that Shivani chanted. And I was not the only one. How was I going to lead the next chants with a nose and throat full of mucus? Fortunately I only needed to manage the first few words and everyone would chime in.

The quality of rapture that I experienced on this occasion was extremely strong. If I did not apply the samadhi that I have cultivated for decades to contain the emotions, I would have been a heaving sobbing mess, lying in a wet puddle in the middle of the cold stone floor. But it was not sadness that I was experiencing. It was intense spiritual delight that probably cannot be understood to those who have not yet personally experienced it. An ecstatic state of spiritual rapture. Fortunately there was still mindfulness and I did manage to get the introduction line for the preliminary homage out of my throat, and everyone joined in offering homage to The Buddha right on cue, and once again I found this to be unbearably beautiful. More tears... more mucus... more palpitating chest bones. Oh dear. After we had chanted the Preliminary Homage, Refuge Chant, Praises to the Three Jewels, Karaniyametta Sutta, and the Ten Perfections chant as a group. I asked khun Earn Kalyanakorn, one of our Thai pilgrims, to chant a famous Thai folk song in praise of the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. Khun Earn is also a professional singer with a beautiful voice. She gave a wonderful rendition and I was a complete mess once again. Thank goodness there was a stone Chedi right in front of me, blocking me from the view of my students! A pile of super absorbent but very damp facial tissues was growing very large in front of me! The Thai words that she was singing have such a beautiful meaning and are very touching.

After Earn finished the song we dedicated merits and paid respects together. I've never wept for 45 minutes straight like this my entire life! My face must have been totally flushed and my eyes very swollen. The monks had to then dash off if we were to eat on this day. We found a perfect large space carved out from the cliff space which was set back quite a bit from the main path and Lek and her helpers swiftly manifested a perfect meal for the occasion. When I explained my experience to the other monks, Tahn Sampanno said that he'd experienced the exact same thing. This made me feel less awkward about it.

I have a bit of a theory as to why the rapture was so strong on this particular occasion. You can believe me or not. Devas have a more subtle type of body than humans, and

subsequently experience more subtle and profound rapture. This is the result of all of the skilfulness and merits that they have cultivated. I think that many of the local devas attended our puja, and had experienced great rapture and joy and mudita. As the very ether that surrounded all of us was full of blissfully rapturous sentient beings, those of us with more sensitive minds were resonating both with our own joy, and that of the devas, which was why it was so intense and overwhelming. I did a little survey afterwards and it seemed that around 20% of our group had experienced the same thing. So it wasn't just me being histrionic or neurotic. (... at least not on this occasion :) But if you wanted to accuse me of being a religious fanatic, on this occasion you might be right. It had been a wonderful morning, religiously fantastic. And all of the frustration about the dawdling dilly dallying coffee sipping pilgrims and tardy half arsed bus driver was entirely forgiven.

We would be meeting Mr Umesh at 1:30 pm at Cave #1 for a detailed tour of the famous cave paintings in caves #1 and #2. This opened up another wonderful hour for the monks to go back and sit in Cave #26. During this hour I was able to recombobulate and regain my usual composure, before facing my students once after their lunch.

Hearing Mr Umesh describe the special qualities of the paintings was really precious. As an ex university professor he really knew his subject material. As a serious amateur painter myself now, I had a deeper appreciation for what Umesh was describing. And great sympathy for the subject matter as well. Great Bodhisattvas, inspiring stories of renunciation, Enlightened Buddhas. But the details of daily life in ancient India depicted in the 1500 year old paintings was also very precise, prolific and intriguing. The degree to which the master painters had been so precise and true to life was mind blowing and commands great respect. Keep in mind that this was no framed picture hanging on a wall. We are talking about all four walls from floor to ceiling, and the ceiling as well! The hairstyles, the garments, the floral motifs and mystical creatures dancing in and around the flowers... it was an entire fabulous ecosystem. I have a new found and deep respect for the skill and integrity of the painters of ancient India.

On my first two visits here I had been too fascinated with the stunning stone sculpture work as well as the sheer scale of the engineering feat of creating an entire and vast monastic complex out of a cliff face, to care much about some old fragments of pigment on the walls and ceilings. But I am very glad to have maintained attention long enough to develop an appropriate level of due appreciation. Chye Aik, one of my Malaysian students helped me to acquire a wonderful book with close up high definition pictures containing many details of the paintings and even more detailed descriptions. I am sure that I will appreciate learning even more about them once back at Anandagiri. And I am confident that this study will be edifying to my own attempts at the art form.

There were some challenges in the caves with paintings on this occasion however. Large crowds of locals who talk very loudly, as well as troupes of school children who screech and yell even more loudly, created a cacophony of noise reverberating within the stone caverns, and within my ear canals to a point that was becoming quite unbearable. Combined with the fact that there was a strong chemical preservative smell filling the entire space (and my nostrils), and a decided lack of oxygen in the poorly ventilated cave. So that when Mr Umesh described and pointed out not only a 3D effect, but an 8D effect, wherein the eyeballs of Bodhisattvas on walls, and cows emanating from lotus mandalas in the ceiling could be seen

to be staring at one from wherever you stood in the cave, it suddenly all began to feel like bad acid trip! As a monk accustomed to living on a quiet mountain top, surrounded by trees and open sky, I needed to retreat. I made it through one hour and fifteen minutes of the tour. The rest of my learning would have to come from the quiet and odourless book experienced within the serenity of my minks kuti. Right then I needed to find a hole to crawl into.

One of the monks meditation cells on level two of Cave #6 worked very well in this respect. My attendant who was carrying my meditated mat and zafu did not notice my discrete escape from the group however, and so I had to sit on the bate stone floor. But I actually really appreciated this. I needed the grounding effect of hard stone beneath my bottom and under my ankles. With stone above, below, around and everywhere, I sat for an hour before the group arrived for our predetermined 4 pm meeting time. Once again we chanted and sat together and dedicated merits. It had been an extraordinarily rich and wonderful day!

Soon I would be leaving Ajanta once again. I am so glad to have visited on four separate occasions, and to have taken several full days interspersed with long meditation sessions, to properly take in the Ajanta Cave monasteries. And very glad to have been involved in offering beautiful chanting sessions in several of the Chedi meditation viharas as well. I have still probably only just scratched the surface of what Ajanta was and is. But my group has been much more respectful and attentive than most of the tour groups that whizz through the ancient site in just a couple of hours.

I have wondered why I have returned here again and again, and why I find it so moving. My conclusion, after much deep reflection on the matter, (and consultation with some of my gifted teachers), is that I have lived here for several lives before. As an artist, and a bhikkhu... and probably as a bhikkhu who was also an artist. I do not feel that I have any unfinished business here at Ajanta anymore. But rather, that I just needed to visit this place that had meant a great deal to me in the past. (I feel similarly about the site if Nalanda Monastic University, which I have also visited around ten times now.) When I think of Ajanta, I simply feel tremendous gratitude. That it had been a place to practise the wonderful Buddhadhamma, and to create potent auspicious merits.

I can see the way that the merits of past lives manifested powerfully in my life this lifetime. When workmates started encouraging me to do ten day vipassana meditation retreats from the age of eighteen, despite the fact that I had never read a Buddhist book. When strong intuitive impulses drew me to Thailand at the age of twenty one, despite the fact that I had never travelled to Asia before. When I went forth as a bhikkhu under a preceptor renowned for his unshakable equanimity and immaculate purity at the age of twenty three, in the lineage of the renowned Arahants Luang Por Mun and Luang Por Chah. Despite the confusion, challenges and ordinary mundane craziness experienced by many young adults, clearly potent forces of goodness were propelling this being a noble direction from behind. I am grateful to the opportunities and merits from the past, just as I am grateful to those of the present. And it has been wonderful to share this pilgrimage of faith, gratitude and respect with two bus loads full of fellow travellers on the Path.

Despite my feelings of fullness, contentment and ease, leaving the site of the Caves is never easy. The only way out is through a winding alley walled in very tightly by stores on either side, with scores of aggressive storemen hell bent on getting you to buy something...

anything! I didn't want to get stuck in this pit of misery as I have before, not after such a lovely day. So I asked Victor, a young and fit looking Chinese Malaysian to help get me through this alligator alley unscathed. I imagined him as the kick ass Kung Fu hero Jackie Chan, and me as the prisoner being rescued. We made a pact, no matter what came at us we would, just keep stomping forwards undeterred. He was in front and I hung onto the strap of his shoulder bag firmly from behind. They came for us like sharks as we moved forwards. 'My shop!... please look!... remember me!?... special price!... one minute only!... have a drink!... old friend!... old friend!... remember me!?... aiyaaah!!! How could I possibly forget!?' I literally recited the syllables 'Bud-Dho' out loud until I made it to the relative safety of the bus. Old Friend - BUD-DHO... Special Price - BUD-DHO... One Minute - BUD-DHO... Sprite, Fanta - BUD-DHO. Sitting on the bus I drew the curtain tightly shut... a clear message that I wasn't interested, and still they banged on the glass window with their stone merchandise! Now I do have compassion, I recognize that they would not behave like this if they were not desperate. But on this occasion it was my students that would have to deal with this Maharashtra-Mode-Of-Retail. I have enough malas, statues, Ajanta books and fridge magnets for a lifetime, thank you very much.

Today was the last full day of the pilgrimage. It was a three hour drive back to the Hotel. I collapsed into bed happily at 10pm. Tomorrow we would visit a smaller, quieter, nearby cave monastery, just a leisurely 15 minute drive from the Hotel. For one last puja and meditation.