

India 2024

Every 10,000 mile journey begins with the first suitcase

(Anandagiri, Jan 6, 2024)

This morning's meal was accompanied by a palm full of vitamins and supplements. Vitamin C, vitamin D, a probiotic, zinc and echinacea. And now I've just returned to my kuti after an extensive visit to the monastery storeroom, with two full shopping bags in hand. Face tissues, toilet tissue, pocket tissue, antiseptic wet wipe tissues were the major spoils of the excursion. This many vitamins and so many tissues in such a variety of shapes and styles can only possibly mean one thing. Ajahn Achalo is preparing to return to India!

I tend to be a last minute packer, with the exception of longer trips to India. Previous experiences of dribbly nose, dribbly throat, and dribbly bottom, inspire one to consider anti-chafing measures well in advance. Thailand makes great tissues! So soft and sweet smelling. Technically I have not exactly begun to pack, yet I have been putting things in little piles here and there and have made a detailed packing check-list. (Extra pair of shoes in case your main pair gets stolen, for example.) Tomorrow will be the official packing day. My beloved Thailand, my beloved Thailand, I haven't even left and yet I can already feel it. I will miss you! But of course I love India very much in an entirely different way. I know that I'm going to miss my cat too. Not sure if this is sweet or sad? Kaew Mani, my blue-eyed little princess, I will miss you yelling at me in the morning, demanding that I feed you! Such feelings will all arise and cease only to be replaced by others.

There is a seven week trip planned, and it is curious to observe the somewhat bipolar responses I am having whenever I think about it. Ripples of excitement and enthusiastic joy, followed by waves of anticipatory weariness and preemptive fatigue. It is always a very rich experience.

On December 30th, 2022, exactly one year and one week ago, I completed a 4000 hours vow of sitting meditation under the sacred Bodhi Tree. For the first time ever I was mindful and determined not to sit a single extra minute under that tree! For I wanted to feel the joy of having accomplished that much, without the burden of feeling there was anything more that must be done. There was a sneaking suspicion even then that a subsequent vow would likely one day ensue. But it was going to be just fine to give it some time. Let the bulb of bold determination rest under the surface in the cool dark for a season. Meditation at Anandagiri Forest Monastery would suffice. It is a very nice place to meditate in any event.

So what have I been up to since then? We didn't have any significant building projects in 2023, and being more settled and less busy in the monastery, I was able to explore some fun new disciplines. Taking up a sincere hobby of watercolour painting was one. Seeing the benefit of being consistent with discipline, and understanding how vows can help one to put in more effort than might otherwise be the case, I made a completely different type of vow. To paint 100 paintings of lotuses within one year. I was also determined that I would teach myself, learning by trial and error. At first I could barely fit one flower on the page, and the very first lotus looked much more like an Iris than it did a lotus, truth be told. But I did keep going, and over the months, slowly but surely things progressed nicely. There started to be a

foreground and a background, buds, seed pods and leaves, and a clearer sense of which direction the light was coming from in each of the pictures. I also trained myself to be consistently aware of each in and out breath whilst painting, using the new painting practice as a way to train in maintaining mindfulness throughout different postures and activities. It was a nice new development in my daily routine and a welcome change of modalities. I could see that a certain quality of joy and peace started to permeate the pictures as they blossomed on the paper as well.

Online teaching was another discipline that I have continued with. Leading guided meditations and doing question and answer sessions once a fortnight to a group of interviewees students. These sessions are then shared on YouTube as a resource to practitioners around the world.

Back in April, when Ajahn Sunando, my second monk at Anandagiri visited a highly respected meditation practitioner, Luang Por Rueshi Khet Kaew, and this meditation hermit sent a very specific message via Ajahn Sunando back for me, the rumblings of a subsequent vow began. Luang Por Rueshi said that I should indeed make an additional vow and continue to the 5000 hour point. One hour for each year of Gautama Buddha's teaching dispensation. I guess this is when spring sunshine started to trickle down and cause the rumblings for a future vow's sprouting.

But if I were to commit to another 1000 hours of formal sitting meditation under the Bodhi Tree in Bodhgaya, how should I approach it this time? It must have been about ten years ago that I started doing intensive meditation marathons in earnest in Bodhgaya. And 41 years of age is quite a bit different to 51. There are some stiff and achy muscle issues now that were less of an issue then. Some additional kilogram issues as well. Sitting for longer sessions is still fine, it's just walking afterwards that is harder! But I have come up with a paradigm that may suffice. I will aim to do 200 hours of meditation within one month, and hope to do this five times in the coming years, samsara permitting. That means about 8 hours per day, with a couple of days spare in case of illness or rain. Such an approach would open up time to do a proper session of yoga each morning, before resuming the pretzel position for much of the remainder of the day. And one month of 8 hours per day seems much less daunting than several previous marathons of 6 or 7 weeks of ten hours per day.

Of course with the world being the way that it is, one can never assume that such plans would go completely without a hitch. This time around, when I make my vow there will be some fine print in the contract. Untimely death would naturally absolve the commitment. As would any upheaval in the global order that makes international travel much more difficult. If at some point it becomes clear that any remaining hours cannot be accomplished in Bodhgaya. I will be able to fulfill the commitment at another, or at several other Holy Sites within Thailand.

In setting the intention to go to Bodhgaya at least five more times though, there are other considerations. Conscience is a fascinating thing, the way it impinges uncomfortably, like a stone in your sandals, inspiring nuanced adjustments in intentions and actions. For myself it feels like a matter related to morality, that if you are going to take a lot of any given thing, you should make efforts to ensure that others also have opportunities or access to that said given thing. This isn't necessarily something that one has to do, but rather, something that is

good and feels like the right thing to do. Subsequently I decided to lead one more pilgrimage to some of the Holy Sites of India. I would set aside a period of time for supporting and encouraging others in learning how to contemplate and practise at the Holy Sites, and then reward myself afterwards with a private retreat. And that's how the initial idea for a one month retreat became plans encompassing seven weeks. There will be a two week pilgrimage, a few days of rest, then the one month for meditation.

On previous pilgrimages I have usually opened the opportunity up to those who have done in person retreats with me predominantly. This time I made a specific choice to make it more inclusive. Opening up the opportunity to people who had attended just a talk or two, and to those who have only attended online sessions as well. We were hoping to have a group of around 40. At first it seemed as though it might be quite a small group, with just a few people committing, but then close to the cut-off deadline many people stated their eagerness to join all at once. Under such circumstances, how do you choose who can come and who cannot? Once it became clear that we would be needing more than one bus, it would be prove to be more economical for everyone if we continued to accept a few more.

There are some potential risks in accepting people into a group who you have never actually met. But it is an interesting experiment in big-heartedness and trust. For now, I am going to trust that our combined merits and blessings combined with good intentions will be bringing together a group of lovely people capable of being flexible, diligent and harmonious. Strategic Optimism.

Altogether I have led three pilgrimages to the four main Holy Sites in India, and have joined in on two other full pilgrimages. Having observed that I always caught a chest infection by the halfway point on each of these pilgrimages, after the fifth full Buddhist circuit pilgrimage, I decided that in the future I would experiment with visiting two of the main sites, then an interesting secondary site in a less dirty, crowded and foggy place. Figuring that it would likely be less exhausting doing it this way. So this time we will be going to Bodhgaya and Rajgir in Bihar, then Varanasi and Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh. After which we will fly to Aurangabad in the more developed state of Maharashtra, in the Southwest of India. From Aurangabad we will visit the sites of the ancient cave monastery complexes of Ajanta and Ellora. Some of the pilgrims will be joining for just the first portion, some will meet up with the group for the second portion, but most are joining the whole program. The group is comprised of mostly Singaporean and Malaysians, (about two thirds). And the rest are from many different places. The US, Australia, Dubai, Turkey and Canada to name a few.

Two of the other monks currently resident at Anandagiri, Tahn Panyasiri, (Australian) and Tahn Sampanno, (American) will be heading down to Bangkok with myself in two days. To visit with some students and friends, to pay respects at the temple of the Emerald Buddha, and to do some final preparations. Tahn Anand, a local Thai monk from a nearby hermitage will join us in Bangkok, and another two monks Ajahn Joel, (Australian) and Tahn Danny, (Malaysian) from Ajahn Anan's monastery will be meeting us at the airport on the 11th of January. If six monks seems like a lot, there will be around 55 pilgrims joining, khun Lek, our dynamic Thai tour guide and three of her staff will be coming along as well. We will then be met by two Indian guides and Gautam my godson upon our arrival in Gaya. A group of 68 people altogether. Two big busloads full! Now if that is not a serious gesture of sharing an opportunity with others, then I do not know what is. Please wish us all the best of luck! Much

peace, serendipity and insight! Both to those jointing the pilgrimage, and anyone else who may read this at some time.