



Bodhgaya – Varanasi – Sarnath – Varanasi 26.2.2007

4.30 Morning call and breakfast blessing. I talked with Elizabeth and Bridget about 'Sangha moments'; the many times when we needed support out in the world and we were there for each other in unobtrusive but tangible ways.

Then back on the bus to cross from the state of Bihar into Uttar Pradesh along a two laned highway (that sometimes just stopped or had fallen in a land slip or just was not finished) headed for Varanasi (formerly Benares). It was a fascinating journey watching a different India from the day before go by, filled with lorries, truck stops and road side villages. The highway's surface changed to Tarmac on crossing the State line and the rest of the journey was punctuated by, oddly, a 'motorway service station' for our packed lunch with flushing facilities and an open air pee stop (ladies always had a wall to share a bonding communal wee behind – mercifully away from the men - in another more fundamental example of a 'Sangha moment').

Varanasi is a small city with a huge population; subsequent overcrowding and poverty seemed very apparent. Cows and bulls are free to roam in the city of Shiva. The sacred Ganges draws devout Hindus to bathe in the waters for purification, give offerings to the water and aspire to be cremated on the Funeral Ghats.

Amid all of this we checked into a luxury Hotel Ramada and I felt a little shocked by this concrete example of the two extremes of India. A quick bit of processing based on Luang Por's wise teachings told me that I could either further pollute the world with guilt or I could count this opportunity as a gift and blessing and send Metta and gratitude out into the world.

A quick check-in, and a short journey to Sarnath, the place of the first Sermon. We initially visited the Museum of Archaeology there to be guided around the treasures that were once housed at Sarnath. Particularly striking was the sculpture of the Padmasana Buddha preaching his first sermon at Sarnath along with other Buddha rupas and the original four headed lion capitol of Ashoka's pillar, an official symbol of India.



As a person of Indian origin, I loved seeing the Buddha depicted in the same way; I find this a rare and pleasurable sight. We learned more of the Muslim invasion, the destruction of the monasteries from the 11th century ACE and the migration of Buddhism from India.



At the Sarnath Monastery site of the Archaeological Survey of India, opposite the museum, I felt a great sense of peace among the remains of beautiful buildings and the huge Stupa preserved by a British Victorian named Cunningham.

We received blessings, chanted and practised in the well kept grounds (joined by a dog in repose) and then walked three times around the Stupa chanting, in the usual joyful disjunction with many Sri Lankan pilgrims.

On the bus Luang Por presented each of us with a small replica of the Padmasana Buddha and I was touched by this sweet gesture. Back at the hotel Jeremy went to see Luang Por to talk about his spending a few months there as an Anagarika in one of the mountain monasteries.

On his return to our room he said that Luang Por would give us a blessing for our relationship and practice. We had previously had a ceremony of commitment at Greenstreete but it felt appropriate to be given this on our pilgrimage together.

The venerables Ajans received us in their room and Luang Por asked me about my practice and I said that it was different in different places but I was learning to practice anywhere. I asked him about his vision for all of us on the trip, about bringing the Triple gem back with us more fully, should we do it both individually and collectively?

He felt it should be done individually and we discussed what the Triple gem actu-

ally means and how it must be consistent. I think he was talking about commitment to the path. He talked about the of the Iti pi so and suggested I focus on its meaning as well as the Parami. I felt he was encouraging me to practise more – or perhaps that is something I know for myself. Then we had a blessing with Les present (who had 'quite by chance' come into the room) and Luang Por said it was a blessing for practice.





Varanasi – Kushinagar 27.2.2007

4.15 Up and had to use the hair dryer to dry my clothes. It was hot enough during the day but pretty cool at night. A short drive and walk to the Ganges for a river boat trip at sunrise. The city was still bursting with people. Descending the Ghats (Quays) we got votive offerings of flowers and candle to float on the river. We chanted and Luang Por asked us to look at the watery rising sun and use it as a Nimita. We did a chant for the dead as we approached the Cremation Ghats that burn twenty four hours a day as it is so auspicious to be cremated here for a Hindu.

There were many boats and people but it was restful with our venerables. Jeremy and I continued our habit of supportive conversations and we were both doing well observing and acting on the experience of what at times is abject poverty without boundaries, with loving kindness.

Back on the bus, after breakfast in the hotel at about 7.00, and on the road to Kushinagar, the death and parinibbana place of the Buddha. Very verdant countryside and lots of sleepiness interspersed with food and snacks offered by Mr Don, Pascale and Bridget, wipes and tissues from Jaisingh and the very thoughtful behind-the-wall-ladies-loo-and-discussion group stops.

Arriving at the Thai Temple in Kushinagar was like stepping back to Thailand, the design, architecture, gardens, accommodation were planted on Indian soil.

Within the complex were housed Buddha relics. We were welcomed by a senior monk and were told of the clinic and school they provide for local people. The accommodation for pilgrims was simple and comfortable. Elizabeth, Pascale, Jane and I shared a five bedded room (with bathroom attached!) They provided the most exceptional ginger tea which I found soothing for the body.

In the evening after dinner our Parami group chanted and practised in the Buddha Relic Hall it was a very intimate and moving experience that I cannot put into words. We shared thoughts and feelings. I talked of fear and paralysis, not wanting to return to India but being here together I have learned that all I need is a peaceful mind and I gave thanks to all who support me, my Parami Sangha family, the venerable Ajans and the opportunity of this trip.

The group made beautiful observations, particularly Luang Aa who talked of seeing a man cleaning a gutter with his bare hands and at the same time looking happy and of the care and attention he had seen people pay to their animals. It was as if he was unmasking the acceptance and peacefulness that people may feel under the seeming chaos that is India. I was also struck by pt saying he had had a good cup of coffee because to notice happiness in the simple everyday is sometimes easy to overlook.

Kushinagar – Lumbini

28.2.2007

4.30 A good night's sleep and I went to practice in the Relic Hall with a feeling of being full. After breakfast we went to the Parinibbana, death place, of the Buddha. In what Jeremy calls the 'Igloo like structure' lay the beautiful statue of the Buddha. We had space to chant and the venerable Ajans did blessings and we brought to mind our parents and gratitude; and any loved ones who had died. We paid respects at the feet of the Buddha and all covered the statue with a gold cloth. We walked outside and chanted together again.



Moving to the huge cremation stupa of dark brick we did a practice then walked round chanting the Iti pi so. This was the place where the body of the Buddha failed to burn until Ananda arrived at which point it spontaneously combusted. Vancam, a lady originally from Laos, bought about ten children asking for money ice cream from a vendor outside the Stupa garden, which felt like a very skilful thing to do. They all seemed genuinely pleased with the gift

We returned to the Thai temple for an audience with the Abbot and made offerings along with a large Thai group. He gave us each small rupas made of the earth and Bodhi leaves from the four key places in Buddhism, a very special honour. Luang Por later said it was like having a certificate for doing the Paramis.

At 1.00 we set off on the seven hour journey to Lumbini, Nepal, the birth place of the Buddha. We travelled through familiar countryside and then a huge sprawling town – Gorakpur – which seem to take over an hour to traverse.

We crossed the border and the uniforms and faces of the people and villages changed in subtle ways. Nepal seems a little richer with more traditional thatched dwellings. Borders are subject to such change in 2500 years, I suppose, but how does it affect the people?

Reaching the hotel we checked-in and had dinner then met with the venerable Ajans for chanting and practice. Luang Por told us what the Abbot in Kushinagar had talked about; don't wait to chant and practice until your deathbed and have the monks do it for you. Do it now! He said he was surprised and pleased that Buddhism was developing in the west.

Luang Por also added that we had done the Parami chant well.

