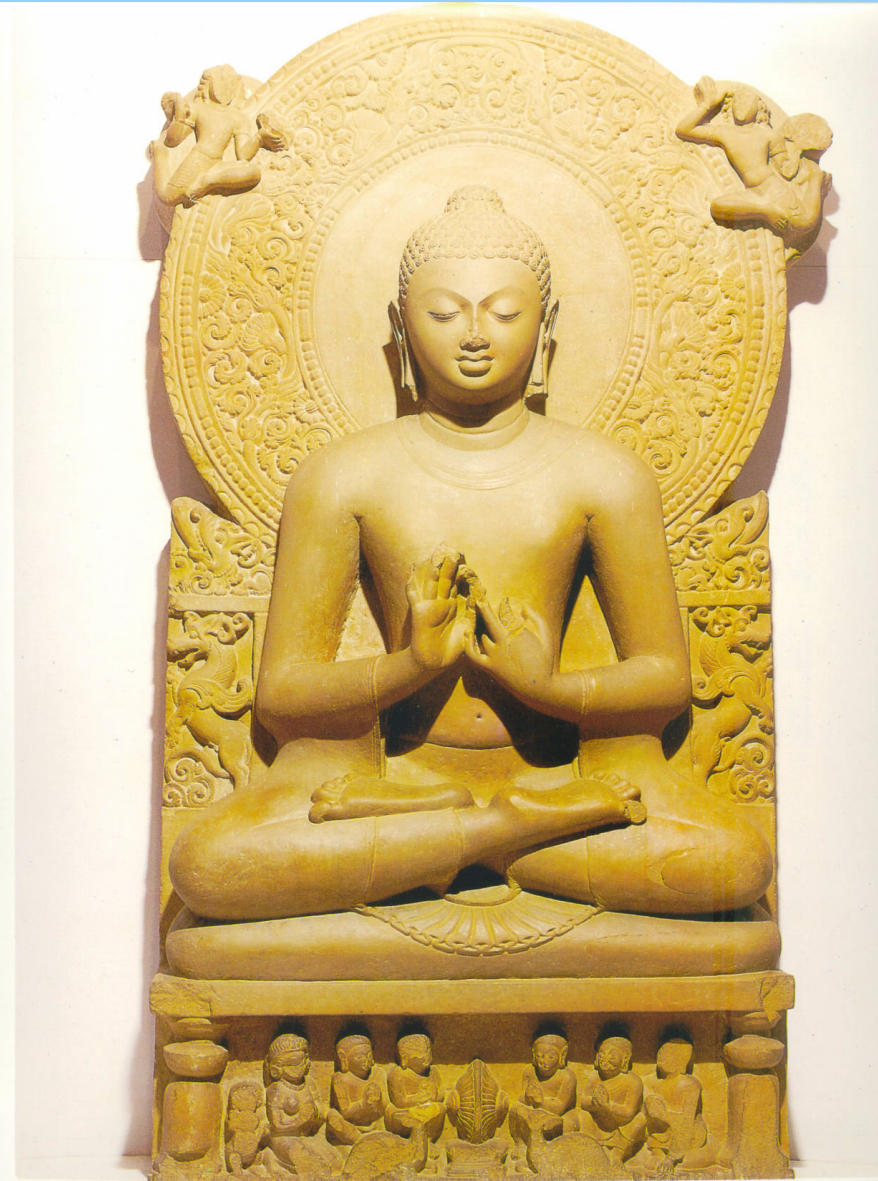


# The Parami Tour 2007

## Following in the Footsteps of the Buddha



The Journal of Zarine Katrak

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## Returning to India Gaya 24.2.2007

I felt suddenly assailed by emotions that were difficult to name as we flew over Bihar. I had not been back to India for twenty seven years under the guise of not wanting to make the trip without my brother Navroze who had died just months before we had planned to come here together in 1988. I had thought that I would never come back. I had been afraid that the paralysis and fostering of indifference to the contradictions of extreme material poverty and opulent wealth was undesirable to experience again.

Circling Gaya, seeing the two vast dried river beds, the fields - some green and cultivated some brown and excavated (and later understanding that this was for brick making) I had an overwhelming sense of coming home to a land that is perhaps embedded within me and leads to 'the wisdom of no escape'.

I wanted to kiss the ground and later found out that dear Ken had subtly done this and was willing to share the gesture with me. Our bus was waiting, air-conditioned, and we met the Venerable Ajan from Varanasi who would accompany us on our pilgrimage. Luang Por said 'welcome home' to me as I got on to the bus which I could barely acknowledge and at the same time I wondered how he had connected with my feelings.

We made the short journey to Bodhgaya through the most extreme everyday/normal poverty I have ever seen; punctuated particularly by plastic litter, dwellings made of found materials, with brick and government buildings marginally better in their state of decay. The persistence of hawkers, children asking for money looked, at first glance like a society in spiralling decline. How could I accept this without the guilt of privilege? But if I was going to make this journey I would have to find a way of letting go of fear.

The Sujata Hotel was a haven, facing one of the Thai Temples in the town. The juxtaposition of these clean and in the case of the Thai Temple richly decorated buildings and well kept compound was starkly poignant and was the first registration point on my continuum of contradiction. How can all this be squared?

After lunch we went to Sujata's 'House' - a mound with a Bodhi tree - she gave the Buddha his first nourishment after enlightenment, milk rice, before he walked to the river whose flow would help him decide to share his learning.

We walked to the tree accompanied by so many children asking for our names and/or money. They seemed so used to doing this that persistence grew in the face of wavering neutrality. Jaisingh and Santos intervened but the young people were at liberty to laugh, joke, play music in this public place.

We sat and were blessed by the venerable Ajans and we proceeded to chant and practice amid the every increasing backdrop of sound. This was accompanied by workmen bringing up baskets of stone on their heads and dumping them on Sujata's 'plateau'. As I practised it was difficult not to notice the hostility with which they seemed to empty their baskets closer and closer to the venerables. I first became frightened for Luang Por and then for myself but as we continued the noises lessened and the anger seemed to dissipate and the fact that we were no longer in a Buddhist country seemed very clear and acceptable.

The idea, that whatever happened was meant to happen, began to assert itself.







We went down to the river (bed) and 'quite by chance' we arrived before three coach loads of Thai pilgrims. We sat under the tree and received blessings from the venerable Ajans, chanted and practiced under the second Bodhi tree with the instruction from Luang Por of keeping Nekkhamma and giving Metta, these two ingredients formed part of the antidote to fear and a basis for both belonging and making a constructive contribution on this trip.

I loved chanting here; again there were many children vying for attention but because something started shifting in my heart, the rays of joy began to creep into my perception.

On then to the Mahabodhi Temple; and such a lot of people from many Buddhist traditions, kind of like Babel and not like it at the same time. We visited the gold Metta Buddha rupa and made offerings of flowers. '

Quite by chance' we found a spot beside a Tibetan group and amid chants from every corner of the Buddhist world we chanted and practised under the Bodhi tree of enlightenment (considered to be the sixth tree related to the original)

I picked up three Bodhi leaves and gave one to Ken. We wore our white sashes and I thought of all the Thai people who wished us well, the Devas, all who are dear to me and the Greenstreete group.

We walked three times around the main temple and chanted carrying a gold cloth that Luang Por had brought then pinned it to a wall with so many other offerings.

Everyone was finding big things happening to them that seemed to defy explana-

tion but were wordlessly visible. Mine was the revelation emanating from Bante about Dana and giving Metta not money to all the persistent people wanting things from strangers; also the fact that I was really on this trip and about facing the fear of all these years of not coming 'home'.

I reflected on the idea that in losing the Dhamma, grasping and unhappiness can become paramount and that giving Metta and using my materially privileged life in a way that is more awake and focused on Buddhist activity and to do it now. Luang Por is an inspiration as well as a visionary..and all these thoughts brought me happiness and a renewed sense of purpose.

Next stop the new Thai monastery under construction. Here we met the Abbot a playfully spirited man who talked about listening, seeing and talking skilfully, about happiness being a table full of food so why would you not eat? Because if you just look at it but do not eat from it you will always be hungry.

He spoke of loving this place even though he had had lots of difficulties with well rights but was happily sharing them with the local Hindu community. The peaceful, simple yet beautifully designed compound, temple, Kutis with places for over 100 pilgrims could well fuel the hostility from the local community who have so little and treat their external environment as a low priority.

We went back to the hotel and had dinner. I went to bed though the others had an hour with Luang Por, chanting practising and discussing the day. Sorry I missed it but for me it was 'enough'





**Bodh Gaya –Rajgir – Nalanda –  
Bodhgaya  
25.2.2007**

**Morning call at 5.00** to get ready to go to the mountains; we left at 7.00 and because of a bus crash somewhere on our route we had to go an alternative way which was very potholed and bumpy. But we saw a range of villages, brick kilns, wells, skinny and fuller figured cattle, cereal stacks, dung stacks that were very beautiful with great attention to detail, children and adults talking and doing everyday tasks. It was compelling watching India go by and catching glimpses of life in many forms.

Mr Don and Samang had generously brought lots of Thai snacks, and my favourite sweet tamarind, which gave unexpected comfort on our many long journeys.

We got to Rajgir, stopping first at the 2500 year old tracks where 500 bullock carts a day carried provisions up the mountain to the University City of Nalanda. Stopped for lunch at a pre arranged hotel and met the same monks we had seen on the flight from Thailand and their coach party (turned out to be a frequent occurrence).

Then on to the baths where there was once just a stream where the Buddha bathed. It was hard to imagine peace and contemplation as it was so hectic - full of Hindu families laughing, playing and washing like Sunday at a Lido. We then crossed the road to the Squirrel Park where the Buddha presided over 1000 monks (without a microphone). We chanted and did a practice thinking about Kanthi. I noticed that I was enjoying practising anywhere and anytime. A flower seller gave the venerable Ajans an offering to place on the shrine.

On we drove to Nalanda University. This was a most amazing place for me. Built and re-built over 16 centuries and destroyed by the Muslim invaders of Northern India in the 12<sup>th</sup> century ACE. Many of the monks were killed during this time. Luang Por got us together in what would have been a monk's cell and we did a forgiveness practice. I felt many powerful monks join us in this space. At the end he, followed by Les, crawled into a dark space beside the cell much to the surprise and concern of our guide who failed to dissuade them.

On next to Vulture's peak a place where the Buddha and his close disciples spend long periods of time practising in the caves and on top of the mountain. We walked to the top in the wake of Luang Por at an effortless 'blink-and-you-miss-him' pace.

Again 'quite by chance' a space on the top of the mountain became free for us to receive blessings, chant and practice. People came and went as we sat and the Devas of earth, wind and rain visited us and added to our blessings. My practice felt both rooted and exhilarating.

As the rain gained strength we went to practise in the cave of Sariputta. Luang Por said that the rain would stop at the end of our practice and we emerged to a beautiful sunset for our walk down the mountain. We stopped and facing the descending sun, he chanted, it seemed for our group, the people asking for alms and anyone touched by the fading rays.

The day had been full and returning to the hotel, after several hours on our second home, was a welcome retreat. I decided to go to bed without any dinner, 'tired but happy'.

