



Lumbini- Saravasti 1.3.2007

The next morning, after breakfast we took rickshaws to the birthplace of the Buddha. It was a cool and windy day.

Lumbini, as the cradle of Buddhism, has a vast range of Temples from every tradition and country on what could be described as a peace campus, surrounding the official birth place.

The Mayadevi (Queen Mayadevi, the Buddha's mother) Temple is a modern red painted structure built to mark the first footprint of the Buddha as he took seven steps as soon as he was born. We had space to chant the Iti pi so three times while circumambulating the stone. There was another of Ashoka's pillars outside and as we approached a black bird called above us and Luang Por waved at it in a very sweet way.

Again we chanted and placed a silver cloth around the fence of the pillar and other pilgrims came and chanted with us helping to place the cloth there. I liked this feeling of unity.

Finally we sat under a Bodhi tree for our practice and the wind, rain, heat and smoke from a fire mingled with our chants. This felt for me like the mountain practice and later two Bodhi leaves fell on to me so I picked them up and put them into my chanting book at the end of the practice.

We then walked to a Thai temple to enjoy their facilities and then a short drive to the Temple of Bhutan. Such

intricate architecture, colour, paintings and statuary, distinctly different from both Thai and Indian structures. We followed Luang Por up the steps to the temple and 'quite by chance' just as he sat down the amazing sound that is Bhutanese chanting, trumpets and percussion started up.

We were instructed to do a five minute practice and I found the sound really helpful in keeping away chatter and developing concentration. I later spun the prayer wheel with Bridget and reflected on the range of temples and planned hotels that are part of the Lumbini development plan: I hope it will all contribute to bringing peace to the world.

Travelling back across the border we had to wait for some time and many of us bought light cotton bed covers that brought and continue to bring great comfort now that I am home; breathing in its smell from time to time evokes vivid pictures and wonderful feelings. Bridget and I bought the same colour and when she came to stay recently we put mine on her bed. Another Sangha moment.

The long journey to Saravasti ended in a Heritage hotel that was once a residence of the Maharaja of Balrampur (a title that no longer officially exists in India). I loved the faded grandeur and the hotel manager seemed a gentle and erudite man.

The food was served in the main dining room and as we were the only ones there, I enjoyed the feeling of us talking as a group, in a congenial way.



Saravasti (Balrampur) – Jetvanaram- Lucknow 2.3.2007

7.00 The morning sun brought the surprise of a formal and well tended garden. After breakfast we visited the palace behind the hotel where the once-upon-a-time Maharani offered us tea and biscuits but not an audience! Packed up and on the bus for the trip to Jetvanaram (the Jetta grove). Luang Por and Luang Aa had shaved their heads as it was full moon day. The Buddha spent 17 of 25 rains retreats at the Jetta Grove and it is the place where much of the Dhamma arose. There had been many houses and wells were still in evidence. We chanted and practised on the floor of the house of the Buddha, the floor he had walked on, which was now covered in roses and marigolds.



This was a place of deep contemplation and the chanting processions of Sri Lankans' with white embroidered parasols only added to the atmosphere of joyful reverence. Surrounding a Bodhi tree we touched it in silence and poured water on the bark. We visited another disciple's house and practiced and poured water on the remains of the walls. The feeling of 'so many blessings' was ever present.

After this we visited a huge Thai Temple complex filled with hundreds of pilgrims and monks. An enormous gold Buddha could be seen from a long way off. There were stacks of Buddha rupas (500) for assembled monks to take back to their ministries around India. It felt as if this place was single-handedly wanting to bring back Buddhism to India with an almost evangelical zeal. Already many Dalits (aka Harijahns, or untouchables) have become Buddhists because of the despicable discrimination they face still in India but I suppose I feel that this path is something to be attracted to rather than providing an escape route.

They had good food and lunch was a pleasant experience. The term 'out of focus' Buddhists came up and I pondered on this for a while. I found a cool and quiet place to practice and finished just as it was time to get back on the bus. Several of us reflected on the number of temples in the area and genuinely wondered how local people might feel about such opulence set against such poverty.

We went back to the heritage hotel and then prepared for the six hour journey to Lucknow. I acknowledged my embryonic sadness at imminently leaving everyone.

At Lucknow we stopped for dinner at a Holiday Inn and then navigated the most unbelievable traffic to the station where we said goodbye to the Ajan from Varanasi and our lovely driver and assistant to get on the sleeper train to Agra.

