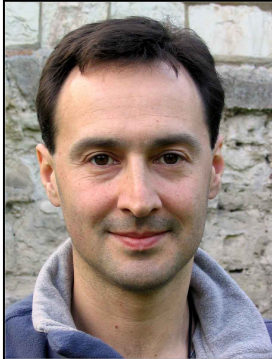


Back in March, FWBO News published some of the travel diaries of Rijumati, an Order Member currently engaged in an open-ended non-flying world trip. His story started with the moving words "As I got on the train from Cambridge it really felt like I was leaving - after 24 years of living there".

Six months later, he's in Bodh Gaya, and we're pleased to present this update...

A journey to Ajanta



I had arranged to visit the famous caves of Ajanta and Ellora with several friends from the Mahavihar community. Aurangabad, which was to be our base for the visits to the caves, is about 250km from Pune. With our Buddhist driver, Prashant, we were seven, magnificent or not still to be decided! Creeping through the Pune rush hour traffic, we slowly made our way east into the hot and dusty centre of Maharashtra. We had a long but straight forward journey, taking a few breaks and having a searing curry in a roadside restaurant.

I shared the room with Indecara, a Burmese monk friend, who had decided to come too. I put up my mosquito net, but realised that Indecara didn't have one. Fortunately there weren't many mosquitoes and I gave him some 'Odomos' repellent which he gratefully applied. The others headed off for the Aurangabad boys hostel where they were to stay.

Although it was 1am or so before we turned in, Indecara and I decided to get up at 6am to meditate together.

Indecara is a kind and gently spoken man with a deep reverence for the Buddha - by his own admission a faith type. He is very unassuming and happy to go along with most of the plans - though occasionally we both bemoaned the social conventions that impinged on our attempts to actually get to see the caves. Although he has been a monk for 23 years, he seemed very happy for me to lead the pujas and meditations for the group - he kept referring to me as the "senior monk"

The next morning, after meditation, we met our host again, Mr. S. He works very actively among the Dalit's promoting Dr. Ambedkar's message. In fact he seemed to have carved out a niche for himself, a self-professed "leader of 1000s." His publicity, published in Marathi and English, emphasizes the closing words of Dr. Ambedkar's conversion speech in which he says that any person has the right to convert another person to Buddhism. He has used this to great effect, setting up large meetings where he converts people to Buddhism which, he said almost gleefully, had brought him a certain notoriety with some of the monks who believed that conversion was purely their prerogative. I pointed out that really no one converts another, conversion is something one does for oneself by taking the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha as a refuge, all that another can do is to witness the step one has taken. He wholeheartedly agreed. Mr. S is a generous and likeable man, and I also sensed a political shrewdness and ambition in him.



Travelling north from Aurangabad one gradually enters the landscape of the ancient Seyardi hills. Deeply weathered, mainly comprised of volcanic rock such as basalt, they have been cut over the aeons by the fast moving monsoon rivers to create a landscape of gorges and plateaus. By midday the heat was intense, our little jeep becoming like an oven. All around the land was parched, yellow and dusty. It is hard to imagine that it could ever look green and luscious as it must do in the rains; really it seemed on the verge of turning into desert. Once long ago all of this would have been forest, but now it is just scrub, grassland, parched arable land and lonely stunted trees, like a great savannah. Dropping down from the high plateau to the Waghore river gorge - above which the Ajanta caves are situated - one has spectacular views of the plains and hills.

Ajanta is a prize jewel in the rich crown of India's glorious archaeological heritage - and the Indians know it! The hoard of touts and vendors there were some of the most persistent I'd yet met. I practised my usual attitude when beset of not even acknowledging the existence of the person trying to sell me yet another guide book or rock crystal. Having dodged the touts, and taken the Tourist bus up the gorge we got our first glimpse of the horseshoe bend in the Waghore gorge, high above which are the greatest Buddhist caves in the world. Here in 1819 an English hunter, John Smith, saw the arch of the largest cave (cave 10) whilst chasing a tiger and on investigating further rediscovered this lost treasure, comprising no less than 29 rock cut caves.

The caves were created in two phases roughly 700 years apart. The first caves were cut in the 2nd© BCE, through patronage of various kings and are in a Theravada style. They are simple, aesthetic and on a grand scale especially cave 10 with its large stupa. There is very little ornamentation and no figurative depiction of the Buddha. The later caves date from about 460 CE, under the patronage of king Harisena and are in Mahayana style. They are sumptuously ornamented with frescoes (or more accurately tempera paintings), beautiful Buddha statues and many scenes from the Jatakas and the Buddha's life. Broadly there are two types of caves the shrine halls which were used purely for worship and spiritual practice and the viharas which contain chapels as well as lodgings. With the sudden demise of Harisena in 477, and the strong resurgence of Hinduism thereafter it seems that the caves were abandoned by 480. Tragic as this is, it is certainly why the caves are so well preserved compared to those at Ellora which were never lost.



It was searingly hot as we climbed the steps up to the first cave. I had been concerned that visiting on a Sunday would mean there would be hordes of visitors, but it seems the March heat had put people off. What a cool relief to enter Cave 1. The simile of Enlightenment as a cool cave certainly has a powerful meaning in India during the hot season. As my eyes adjusted to the gloom, and my body to the drop in temperature, I became aware of a large hall, supported by rock columns, every inch of which was covered, or had once been, by frescoes. At the side were lodgings, and at the back a shrine room with a large seated Buddha flanked by Bodhisattva attendants. This was a Mahayana vihara adorned on a grand scale. In a far corner is the fresco of Padmapani, which is the most famous of all the images from Ajanta.

We took Patil as a guide, which I offered to pay for. He was a vigorous man of about 50, with a strong booming voice and compendious knowledge, which he obviously enjoyed sharing. It was well worth the money as he pointed out delicate details and gave us a potted history of Buddhism at Ajanta. We told him that we were Buddhists and he tailored his explanations, giving us greater detail where we already knew the stories. On the whole his explanations were faithful to the teachings of the Buddha, though less so when it came to death and reincarnation.

To understand the full history of the caves is a life's work and well documented through the efforts of many scholars. As I listened to our guide and gazed, somewhat rapt, at the zenith of Buddhist art in India I felt very moved. What would it have been like to live and worship here? The caves capture through art the arising of archetypal figures in Buddhism. From the earliest days one sees nothing but a stupa, a symbolic copy of the burial mound where the Buddha's remains, and those of his Enlightened disciples would have been kept. As the caves develop one sees more ornamentation and figures coming in, until eventually there are representations of the Buddha in many postures, flanked by archetypal figures such as Padmapani holding a lotus and Vajrapani holding a vajra-thunderbolt - symbolizing the compassion and wisdom aspects of Enlightenment.

Patil patiently guided us from cave to cave for about one and a half hours. Although he was speaking in as simple English as possible for the sake of my Marathi speaking friends, nonetheless some of them found it a strain to take in so much information. I however was captivated by the story and eager to hear all he had to say. When he eventually left us to our own devices, we only had an hour before closing and we had another task to perform. Leaving the great caves we went in search of a quieter place where we could do some worship. Cave 23 vihara is only partially complete and at the end a Buddha sits in the chapel flanked by two figures still emerging from the rock. Here, with the blessing of the attendant we chanted Pali puja, the same words that would have been used by the monks 2200 years ago when the first caves were cut. Perhaps it was the first time this chapel had heard the echo of "namo tassa bhagavato arahato" for over 1500 years. Absorbed in the timeless act of worship a stillness settled upon our little band of seven pilgrims, and the heart was refreshed and joyful.

As we left Ajanta caves, taking the low path along the dried up river bed I made a wish to return one day during the rains and see the caves in their luscious and verdant aspect, surrounded by abundant life and waterfalls. We were all uplifted and enriched by the visit, and though 3 hours is barely a beginning in terms of getting to know the caves, they had nevertheless worked their magic upon us - which is the point of pilgrimage.

Once again our plans took an unexpected turn (for me at least). We were now heading for Jalna, 90km (i.e. 2.5 hours drive) to the east of Aurangabad, and not at all a convenient starting point for the next day's visit to Ellora

caves which are 30km to the north west of Aurangabad. Here we were to stay with Milind's family and meet his father who is a member of our Order called Arunabodhi. We arrived around 10pm and were greeted with great warmth by Arunabodhi and family including Milind's baby daughter - the darling of the house. At this point the women of the house started to prepare a meal for us. We were invited to do a short puja in front of their shrine as all of us crammed into the main room of the house - which comprised of one general room, a small bedroom, a kitchen, washroom and toilet all attached off a central open courtyard. Here live the family of 6 or 7. By the time the puja and the meal were finished it was well past 11pm. Once again Indecara and I were given pride of place, taking over the small bedroom, whilst everyone else slept together in the main room. The room was oppressively hot and airless, but nonetheless I slept soundly.

We had agreed to a collective meditation at 6.30am, but although a few more started they soon left so that by the end only Arunabodhi, Indecara and I were still meditating. The three of us were very still and peaceful and I felt great joy as I meditated on the Buddha. Three men from three very different cultures, yet like brothers bonded by our practice. I felt very inspired, and so clearly did Arunabodhi who was very emotional at the end expressing his joy and gratitude.



Ellora was never lost and the statuary there is badly defaced, probably largely as a result of Muslim iconoclasm, but also just general vandalism over the last 1400 years. Almost no frescoes remain. Nonetheless the Hindu Kailasa rock cutout temple is a stunning piece, it is the largest rock cutout structure in the world. The whole form is roughly 60m long and 30m high, cut out from the basalt and ornamented sumptuously with scenes from the Ramayana, Mahabharata and many images of Shiva. It was built by King Rashtrakuta, commencing around 760 CE. Clearly this Hindu king wanted to impress and outdo the older Buddhist caves, and one has to admit that he succeeded. Using only chisels and taking 150 years, 200,000 tonnes of rock were removed to reveal this temple. The skill in geology is awesome with huge cantilever overhangs impossibly dangling below 40m of rock, yet they have stood the test of 1400 years, not one of those overhangs has collapsed. It is hard to know with what words to describe such an awesome undertaking, it takes the breath away.

After visiting the Kailasa temple we went in search of a Buddhist cave where we could do a puja, and found a relatively quiet vihara in cave 8. Ellora on a Monday was much busier than Ajanta on Sunday, so we just lit our candle and incense and started chanting. As the echoes of Pali verses filled the hall, a little group of Russians came and sat with us listening intently. Once again the magic of chanting ancient words in ancient temples began to work on us and I felt a peace and stillness descend upon our little group - which had been a little fractious up until then.

Finally we climbed the hill above Kailasa temple from where one has an even more impressive view of the achievement, seeing the incredible ornamentation of the roof. Although we didn't manage to see all that much of Ellora compared to what is there, we left satisfied and happy.

Ordinations at Bhaja



The last event of my stay in Maharashtra was attending the Ordination retreat at Bhaja centre in the ghats (mountains) between Mumbai and Pune. Suvajra had invited me to join him and the ordination team to support 32 men commit themselves to the Buddha, Dharma and Sangha and enter our Order. In the event this turned out to be one of the highlights of my time in Maharashtra. Perhaps it is one of the skills that senior preceptors are trained in, for Suvajra and the ordination team seemed very adept at taking two steps backwards when it came to the Dharma teaching on the retreat. So I did a lot of the teaching including talks on the archetypal Buddhas - always a tricky issue in India with the need to distance the Buddhist "pantheon" from the Hindu one - and teaching the meditation on the six elements. Or perhaps it was just

Suvajra's wisdom pushing me forward, for I personally benefited tremendously from the teaching I did; I had to get much clearer on a number of points in order to teach them effectively. I remember feeling totally exposed when it came to the contemplation of consciousness. There is nothing that puts a Dharma teacher on the spot so much as trying to talk about the nature of mind! In the event I was happy with the session, and I think we avoided the various wrong views that one can fall into. The sessions were workshop style, since I encouraged people to interrupt and ask questions at any time. This meant that we went down some very interesting and unexpected avenues of reflection, so although I was "leading" the sessions, they were really co-created.

However more than the teaching and the appreciation that came with that, it was just a pleasure to see 32 men get ordained; the freshness and immediacy of their inspiration was palpable. As always with an ordination retreat there is a sense of a special bond between all of us who witnessed this most crucial step in the spiritual life of a fellow human being. It is hard to really describe what that is like; words like brotherhood and fellowship seem rather weak approximations to the connections that arise.

Kalyan the Beautiful

After the spectacular celebrations of the public ordination ceremony at Bhaja - about 1000 people descended on our retreat - I headed off for Bodhgaya. I was offered a ride from Bhaja to Kalyan Junction station, which was a hot, long but easy journey through some stunning mountain landscapes. The gnarled weathering of the Maharashtran ghats gives the land a very ancient and timeless feeling. The shapes of the mesas are at times utterly improbable, looking more like abstract architecture than rock formations. As we dropped down onto the plains from Lonavala and the other smaller hill stations the heat and the dust got more intense.

After almost 3 hours driving past parched fields and rocky outcrops we arrived in Kalyan, which means beautiful. It is indeed a beautiful setting with a large lake surrounded by dramatic hills. Arriving at our intended destination, the house of Mr Jadhav, our plan was thrown into confusion. The lift was out of order and his family live on the 7th floor. Our group of middle-aged and slightly over-weight men and women were reluctant to make the climb. They dithered for about 10 minutes, and in the end I just said "we've been driving for 3 hours and we're here now, let's go!", grabbed my backpack and started climbing. It wasn't an arduous labour really.

The adult members of Mr. Jadhav's family are almost all Dhamma mitras. Also in our party were two Order members, Silarasmi and Achalanand, so it was a little Sangha gathering. I was given tea and had a shower which was very refreshing. Since I had a few hours before my train I suggested that we do a puja, which in my naiveté I imagined was just for our host family. Before I knew what was going on a programme had been arranged, about a dozen additional people invited and flower garlands sent for! I thought that I was leading the puja but Achalanand just launched in. Once again in my Indian travels all control of events was out of my hands, though I was very mindful of the time ticking towards my train's departure.

Dr. Ambedkar

After doing some puja I was asked to give a talk, so I spoke about Dr. Ambedkar and conversion to Buddhism - a very topical subject since earlier that day we'd witnessed 32 ordinations. Perhaps it was the memory of that event, but I spoke with an energy which obviously moved the listeners greatly. Rejoicing in Dr. Ambedkar's merits is such an easy thing to do, since he is a giant of modern political and religious thought. His stature is growing here in India and his influence is beginning to be felt in the West. I can honestly say that he is one of my heroes and has much to teach, especially in understanding the interaction between the political and the religious within society. He really is the most potent modern expositor of the ideals of the French Revolution: liberty, equality and fraternity. These ideals seem to be more alive in Dr. Ambedkar's life and work than they are in most western countries.

Finishing a programme in India is never a quick affair, and after my talk some of the young men were intensely keen to talk and have more contact. It is so clear that the network of TBMSG Dhamma teaching provides a very strong base for people like me to come and make a contribution. I was pleased that there was some backup for these bright young guys from the local Sangha, otherwise my talk would have felt like a bit of a con - inspiring people but with no follow up. As I was collecting my things and preparing to go Achalanand told me that we were going to visit someone else on the way to the railway station - my heart sank at the prospect of a *second* programme being crammed into the time before my train left. I expressed my unhappiness at this, but it seemed like the decision was made. In the end I had to put my foot down to the point of rudeness and insist that I just get a rickshaw to the station.

Mr Jadhav's son, Santosh, accompanied me to the railway station and scrupulously refused to let me pay for any of the snacks and purchases that I required. He just brushed my attempts at payment aside saying "you're our

guest." Indian generosity and hospitality at times take your breath away. In the event we had over an hour to wait for my train and Santosh insisted on staying with me, though it was getting late. I was very pleased he did since Kalyan is the epitome of Indian travelling chaos with 1000s of trains passing there every day. Since there seemed to be no central display from which to find out the right platform, one was purely reliant on platform announcements. Although these were in English as well as Hindi, I would have been utterly lost without Santosh's help, having no idea which platform I should wait on.



The platform of an Indian railway station is so much more than a point for alighting a train. It is a microcosm of much human and non-human life. Every corner of the platform is filled with life or the detritus left over from life. And every life on the platform fights for its space. So the man from the little kiosk in front of which Santosh and I found a rough pillar base to sit on was constantly battling to make a pathway to his shop through the unrelenting piles of families and possessions that tried to park there. As each train arrives huge movements of beings ensue, but somehow the platform never gets any less crowded, no matter how many

people cram onto one of the passing trains. Perhaps the Indian railways have a quantum field that creates new people whenever there's a void! As for the non-human life well it's pretty mangy but obviously making a "living". Scavengers from dogs to rats to lizards to birds and every form of insect help recycle the detritus of human movement that is represented by this awesome movement of humanity. Each day some 20 million people travel on the Indian railways!

I met Vikram and Santhane on the train, two interesting guys who were both meditators going to Bodhgaya for a Goenka vipassana meditation course. Santhane and I taught some meditation to two young men in the next berth, one of whom was heart-broken by a recent lost love and the other who wanted to know how to control his anger. It never ceases to amaze me how far you can go in communication with strangers in India!

One of the most immediate things about having left Maharashtra, and in particular Bhaja, is that I am once again a nobody. On the retreat I was a special somebody - certainly in the eyes of the ordines, and it is very hard not to subtly appropriate the praise and appreciation that comes with this. Ceasing to be a "somebody" I find both uncomfortable, in that it brings into question what I'm doing with my life in a very visceral way, but also helpful in that I can see the attachments I've made to being a somebody. This period of my life seems to be an oscillation between these two experiences of nobody and somebody - who knows what new learnings will come out of this!

Bodh Gaya



Hi, just writing to let you know that I've arrived safely in Bodhgaya. It's hot and friendly here - monks, beggars, tourists, touts and pilgrims all mixed together. I'm staying at Mohammed's guest house, the best budget accommodation in town, and being a friend of Lalitavajra's means Mohammed has given me the best room! He and his wife have just had a baby daughter, a few weeks old, of which they are justly proud.

I had a pleasant train journey here - two days sharing one's life with some strangers. I met Vikram and Santhane who were both sharing my berth area and heading to Bodhgaya for a meditation course that starts today. We had some interesting discussions about meditation and I've arranged to do a little tour with Santhane to Rajgir.

I've already made several friends here. I went looking for Buddhist friends who live on the FWBO/TBMSG land here, but the site is way out of town and I couldn't find the place. As I was wandering about in the heat a young lad called Anud befriended me, he's studying in tenth standard at school but had the day off because his teacher was away. He helped me to find the land, including cycling me on the back of his bike across the fields. There I met Sachin and others who live in the community there. Anud then kindly cycled me all the way back

into town. He said he was having some trouble with his maths studies so I've offered to meet him later and give him some coaching. Later I met another young guy called Deepak, who's studying to become an engineer. He lives in a village where the milkmaid Sujata came from. She is famous for offering milk rice to the Buddha just before his Enlightenment. So Deepak has invited me to visit his family and wants feed me some milk rice - but I'm not expecting to make any life and death vows about attaining Enlightenment after I visit! I was a little wary of these young guys at first, suspecting that they were just after money. But I've met 3 today who just wanted to practice their English and be helpful... Bodhgaya is a special place like that!

I'm very happy to be here again, this pivotal place for all Buddhists. I love just walking and chanting along with the Tibetans, Koreans, Japanese, Indians and sundry westerners. Or just looking at the Bodhi tree and contemplating the momentous change that took place for the Buddha in this place. I am looking forward to a simple week of meditation and puja, no doubt interspersed with lots of new friends,

Bodhgaya, Bodhgaya! From here all the rivers of Buddhism find their source, and paradoxically all those rivers flow back to modern Bodhgaya as one can see Buddhist pilgrims from many many countries of the world join together in worship. As Jerusalem to the Christian or Jew, Mecca to the Muslim and Varanasi to the Hindu so is Bodhgaya to the Buddhist - it should be visited at least once in a life. The Mahabodhi temple has been lovingly restored after centuries of neglect, work that took many decades to achieve, especially wresting control of the site from former "owner", the Hindu Mahant, who was very hostile to Buddhism. This was largely achieved in the late 19th and early 20th centuries through the efforts of the great Sri Lankan Buddhist missionary Anagarika Dharmapala. All Buddhists who come to Bodhgaya and bask in the atmosphere owe Dharmapala a great debt of gratitude.

The climate of Bihar is such that the worship space is in a lovely small park surrounding the main temple building. Here, outdoors, and in the presence of the Bodhi tree one can hear the collected voices of Thai, Burmese, Tibetan, Korean, Japanese, Western... and many others singing praises or just meditating on and contemplating what the Buddha achieved. For me Dharma practice at the temple is always significant, one is lifted by the atmosphere and majesty of the place. Of course in March it can be punishingly hot in the middle of the day. As with many Asian temples one is required to remove one's shoes and sometimes it was like a hot coals walk to get across the burning marble slabs to a patch of shade where one could sit. Perhaps this is the nearest Buddhist equivalent to penance!



I spent many days just drifting in and out of the Temple, eating in the cafés and making new friends. Bodhgaya is notorious for its "educational" scams. For instance a boy comes and asks you to help buy books for his education, and if you fall for it he takes you to buy an expensive copy of the Oxford English Dictionary, which he will later return and get the money for. The scams you'll find in India are so ingenious!

I spent some time with Sachin, Manish & Santosh from the community on the our FWBO land at Bodhgaya. Also visiting was Siddhisvari from the London Buddhist Centre and we enjoyed doing yoga together. One evening I did some study with the community, studying an early Buddhist text, the Sutta Nipata. Once we got going it became clear that we were straddling four languages; English, Indian English, Hindi and Marathi which was quite a challenge! Manish was translating but he is very bright and would get quite excited, wanting to translate everything in his own words and add his own points - which really didn't work. It dawned on me what a skill good translation is, and my appreciation for my friends Nagamitra,

Amoghasiddhi, Sudarshan and others who'd translated for me in various teaching situations was greatly increased.

In the end I felt that there was almost a seductive air to Bodhgaya. One could just stay there indefinitely basking in the atmosphere, a kind of vicarious spiritual attainment, but with no real purpose. When it came time to leave I felt very sad, but also that it was right for me to go, a confusing mixture of feelings.

A programme in Gaya

Gaya is really the pits! If Bihar is one of the roughest parts of India, then Gaya is one of the grottiest towns in Bihar. Apart from its proximity to Bodhgaya, the place of the Buddha's enlightenment, it is hard to think of a single redeeming feature. The town is dirty, badly laid out, with poor roads and sanitation, full of rough characters, aggressive touts and mangy dogs. It feels like it's 20 years behind much of modern India. Wandering the streets as a foreigner is not a good idea, the assault of men wanting to offer you a rickshaw or sell you

something is unrelenting. On one occasion I took refuge in the down at heal Ajatasatru hotel just to find somewhere to get away from them all.

So when I was asked to give a talk at a local hostel for Scheduled Castes (aka former Untouchables) I said "yes!". The programme was a rough and ready affair. The hostel is in an ageing and decrepit government building opposite Gaya prison - I shudder to think what conditions would be like for those incarcerated there. In front of the building was a concrete platform and it was here that a makeshift shrine was created and our little team of TBMSG people were installed. There were about 100 boys and young men there and a few little girls. The programme was organised by Ranjit from the hostel. Anne, a lively Glaswegian resident of Bodhgaya, and I sat either side of the shrine, which comprised solely a picture of Dr. Ambedkar and flowers. It turns out that 80% of the boys there were not Buddhist and barely knew anything about Buddhism, though they are followers of Dr. Ambedkar and wanted to become Buddhist. I spoke with vigour and passion, and didn't spare the faults of Hinduism and caste, something that Dr. Ambedkar was wont to do. My sense was of a mixture of excitement and boredom amongst the listeners. At the end Anne led us in a song and group dance to Auld Langsyne, which was hugely popular with the audience. It was an abrupt but useful change of mood!

Visit to Uruvela



Sachin, Siddhisvari and I went to Dongesvari or Uruvela hill, famous as the cave where the Buddha practised his fearsome austerities. Uruvela is one of the large rocky hills that punctuate this great northern plain like a sand-locked archipelago. Here the Buddha spent 6 years mortifying the flesh; starving himself, enduring cold and heat, no comfort was given. In the end he realised that this was a mistake and gave it up - one of his greatest achievements; it's so hard to admit you've made a big mistake. From there he wandered to the Neranjana river and took milk-rice from the cowgirl Sujata, before settling beneath the Bodhi tree and setting his determination to gain Enlightenment.

To reach Uruvela from Bodhgaya, though only a few km as the crow flies, requires a long detour via Gaya where one can cross the dusty expanse of the dried up Neranjana river bed. The sprawling monsoon river is over 1km wide so there are not that many bridges. Our rickshaw rocked and jumped as we ran over the rough village tracks that lead to the peak. The village beneath Uruvela could have been unchanged for 1000 years apart from the new road that is partly built through the middle. Water buffalo chewed indifferently, children ran and screamed, men sat around idly, women were busy working... a timeless scene.

The climb up to the cave was demanding in the morning heat. Both Siddhisvari and I were experiencing knee pain so we took it slowly. The usual selection of beggars awaited us, in fact they were more aggressive than usual. I gave a few coins to some of the disabled and older ones. Then we had to face the touts pushing their wares, and finally it was the monkeys ready to snatch anything easily to hand. As we got to the temple halfway up the cliff I heard shouts and suddenly off scurried a large female monkey with a packet of biscuits. The touts were desperate for business, they even tried to get us to buy biscuits for the monkeys.



The cave was small, smoky, sweaty and airless. On the main alter was a rough copy of the austerity Buddha - all bone and sinews - seated in meditation posture. Despite the roughness the image had a certain power; gilded and gazing from sunken socket eyes, telling of terrible struggle and hardship. To the side, covered in orange cloth, were two Hindu images probably Vishnu and Ganesh, but it was hard to tell. We started doing a Pali puja, chanting the ancient words of worship to the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha. As we chanted the mantra of Sakyamuni a number of Indian people came into the cave, they seemed happy just to sit and listen. We started chanting the refuges and precepts and to our astonishment they joined in. We finished the puja all together. It was a beautiful moment of spontaneous fellowship. Four generations of the family were on Buddhist pilgrimage together from Maharashtra. Afterwards we exchanged photos and asked each other questions, parting warmly with a "Jai Bhim." On the way down the beggars were very

vocal I even thought one rather crazy woman might strike me as she started shouting and pursuing us. Such are the extremes in India, from fellowship to harassment in a few moments!

Sikkim

Dear Friends,

Here is my latest travel letter from Sikkim, I hope you're not too bamboozled with the volume of my letters, let me know if you want to drop off the email list! Janaka and I are just back from a 6 day retreat at a Buddhist nunnery in the hills above Kathmandu. We had a wonderful dose of meditation and being mothered! We've finally had confirmation that our Tibet trip is cancelled, the border is still closed. So my plan is to go to China as soon as possible and work my way east to Shanghai and take the ferry on to Japan. I hope to take in some wonderful sites on the way. I am rather stranded here in Kathmandu by the land-route being closed, the closest route I could take without flying would be to go back to India and get a boat from Kolkata to Thailand, then to Laos and finally into Yunnan at the Laos-China border. This will all delay me quite a while, so I've decided to take a short flight over the mountains to Chengdu in Sichuan province and continue the journey that way.

I am in good health and still inspired by the new people and places, lots of love rijumati

The Road to Khacheodpalri

It was a beautiful sunny morning as Janaka and I left Pelling for our three day trek around the great monasteries of Sikkim. Pelling is the site of Pemayangtse, the royal monastery of the Chogyals of Sikkim and seat of Kachu Rimpoche, one of Sangharakshita's main teachers, who was abbot here. However since we were doing a circular walk we decided to see Pemayangtse at the end.

As we descended from Upper Pelling, high on a precipitous ridge above the Ranjeet river, it became clear that our path was to take us to the very bottom of the valley, a drop of some 400m, and all the way back up the other side. This is really the essence of trekking in Sikkim, the major destinations are often perched high on the hillsides and separated by deep cut gorges and fast moving rivers. The Sikkimese forest-jungle is unbelievably fecund, seamlessly passing from high mist-encircled pines to low luscious evergreen broadleaves in a steamy humidity.

Down, down, down. The descent to the rickety old suspension footbridge seemed to go on interminably and both of us were trepidatious about the inevitable ascent that our descent entailed. Our destination on this first day was the high level Khacheodpalri lake, sacred to Tara the Buddhist goddess of compassion.

After about 1.5 hours we made the river crossing and stopped to enjoy the pristine fast moving waters of the raging river Rangeet. Surrounded by verdant vegetation, ebullient bird calls and stunning scenery I stripped off and took an icy plunge in the refreshing river. How wonderful to bathe in the purity of mountain waters!

Our ascent was indeed long and arduous, taking another 4 hours to climb up to Khacheodpalri, though as the crow flies we'd probably only travelled 10km. Janaka is amazingly fit for his 66 years, he carried a heavier pack than me (though we swapped later on) and steadily kept up with my bursts of enthusiastic trail-blazing.



Khacheodpalri lake (pronounced "catch-a-perry") is a very special place. Encircled by steep protecting hills, forest dropping to the water's edge, the only sound the fluttering of 1000s of prayer flags and exotic bird-calls, it radiates a calm and peacefulness suffusing one with a sense of ease and joy. Along the pathway from the tiny village to the lake the rocks are carved with many sacred verses and mantras, the sign of the great esteem in which Khacheodpalri is held by Sikkimese Buddhists. Here we sat, contemplated and recited devotional verses to Tara. I arose early the following day to greet the lake in its morning aspect and was blessed with a deeply refreshing meditative concentration.

The place where the Three Lamas meet

Our destination on the second day was Yuksom, which means "the place where the three lamas meet" - a fine example of the efficiency of the Sikkimese language! The three lamas in question are those who came from Tibet in the 17th century and converted Sikkim to Buddhism. Here at Yuksom they met and crowned the first Chogyal, or Buddhist king of Sikkim. So Yuksom is the spiritual and political foundation stone of Sikkim, and site of the old capital.

The path from Khacheodpalri to Yuksom is a wonderful forest-jungle trek, once again with a long descent followed by a steep ascent. To get there by jeep requires a huge detour of 30-40km, but the walking distance is only 9km. We were trekking without a guide, along largely unmarked though well-trodden paths and there aren't any hiking

maps of the area (this is no doubt partly because Sikkim is a politically sensitive area, China still disputes Indian sovereignty). So all these factors meant we were navigating by common sense, rough compass bearings and frequent petitions of local people, hoping they would understand my wild gesticulations and attempts at Sikkimese place names. Given this we missed our path surprisingly few times, the only significant mistake was by-passing the famous Kanchenjunga Falls and ending up several km further along when we finally dropped down onto the road.

As one labours through the dense forest-jungle from time to time one alights upon a little village, clinging improbably to the tumbling contours. Narrow stepped fields of corn, wheat, rice and vegetables are carefully tended, all done by manual labour. Usually as the chickens scurry away, the goats bleat and the dogs announce one's arrival there seems to be no one in evidence. However looking more carefully one might see a face peeping through the aperture (not really a window) of a rough mud and timber dwelling - though often these have a corrugated roof. If one calls out a friendly "namaste" usually the greeting is returned, especially enthusiastically if little children are about. I suppose by western standards these people are incredibly poor (though occasionally I saw a rather beaten up satellite dish attached to the roof), but these forest villages didn't strike me as impoverished. Rather this was a very very simple and basic existence, in a sense rather timeless. Perhaps poverty isn't really to do with one's level of material wealth, but rather whether one has a *choice* about the amenities of life. I suspect that most of these people would opt for more material comforts if they could have them, so in that sense they were very poor. But in another sense there was an abundance to their world of children and animals, vibrant flowers, clean air, clear mountain spring water, rich and fecund soils, and sublime vistas.

After two days in the forest Yuksom seemed a veritable metropolis. Although it is only the size of a village it boasts many hotels, guest houses, restaurants and shops. This is largely because it is the trailhead for trekkers heading up to Mount Kachenjunga and the restricted trekking regions of northern Sikkim. Janaka and I checked in our gear at the cheapest place in town - unpolished concrete floors and paper thin walls - and headed off to Gupta's restaurant where we downed a rather too strong bottle of refreshingly ice-cold Sikkimese beer. After several hours exertion and on an empty stomach this left me rather light-headed until a large bowl of noodles arrived to fill the belly.



The setting of Yuksom is incredibly dramatic, a small plateau surrounded by row upon row of towering forested peaks, it is like being in a high alpine glacial valley. One can see why the lamas chose this place for the coronation of the first Chogyal. The Norbugang, or coronation throne, is perched on a high-point above the village. It is a protected archeological site, though in India this is a rather loose designation; it means that there is a wall and the little park is fairly well kept. However children were playing, climbing heedlessly over the ancient ruins of the three tiered throne. In front of this seat of royal and religious power is a huge and recently restored stupa said to contain soil and water from all parts of Sikkim. It is encircled by towering ancient hemlock trees and the site has a dark green calm about it. Below the Norbugang is a delightful little lake or pond, the Kathog-Tsho, or soul-lake of Lama Kathog-Rigdzin Chhenpo who performed the coronation. The hand-painted archeological sign says that he sanctified the lake for his "oracular practices" and that each year a purification ritual takes place to maintain its sanctity.

One can't pass an account of our peregrinations without referring to the weather. The mountain views in Sikkim of the Kachenjunga peaks and the eastern Himalayas are absolutely stunning - so we'd been told. For the entire period of our time in the hills of West Bengal and Sikkim the mountains were hidden by a veil of cloud and haze. Each morning around 5.30am I rose expectantly, for the haze is least at that time of day, only to find that the clouds were hiding their treasure once again. Occasionally the mighty drama of a powerful thunderstorm entertained us of an evening, though we were fortunate enough to avoid a major soaking as we walked. I suppose it was disappointing not to see Kachenjunga and the great Himalayan peaks, but on the other hand I was entranced by the mystique afforded by the swirling mists; forest slopes emerging from and reemerging with the cloudscapes. I was left with the sense of Sikkim as wonderfully mysterious and full of hidden surprises.

The Magic of Tashiding



Our last day's walking was to take us to the magnificent monastery at Tashiding. There is a forest route but the patron at Gupta's restaurant strongly advised us against it. He said it was a much slower route, one really needed a guide to find the correct path and with the current levels of rain there were bound to be many leeches. I couldn't fault his reasoning, and having had a brush with a few leeches the previous day I was convinced that we should take the road option, Janaka agreed!

The walk was a long steady haul rising and falling for about 20km. By now rather fitter, we fell into a silent steady pace. A sort of hypnotic state of walking settled on my mind; step by step, soaking in the views. The road was not a busy one. A few vehicles passed

us after an hour or two going to Yuksom, it was about 3 hours before a vehicle came the other way! The roads of Sikkim are a remarkable achievement, and testimony to the huge amount of money poured into the BRO (Border Roads Organisation) by the Indian government in an attempt to stamp Indian sovereignty over the region. Most of the roads cling desperately to the slopes with just a tiny verge marking the precipitous drop through the forest. Each year during the monsoon there are major landslides in which whole chunks of road just disappear. Nonetheless the BRO keeps repairing and rebuilding. The BRO promotes itself with little slogans dotted along the highways like "BRO can build a road anywhere except the sky" which I found rather charming for a government institution! Compared to the state of roads in nearby West Bengal, not to mention parts of Bihar, the Sikkimese do very well.

During the 5 hour walk we passed the dramatic Phamrong Falls where a tributary river plunges about 40m over the cliffs. What is the undying human fascination with waterfalls? Somehow this particular combination of elements is ever awesome and inspiring.

As we counted off the kms in the final stretch, the road switched back 180° and a path lead onwards; I sensed the possibility of a shortcut. We followed the narrow rock path around a sharp bend and were suddenly confronted by our first sight of Tashiding monastery; perched atop a conical peak with deep river gorges on either side and encircled by mountains, connected to the highlands by just a sweeping narrow ridge. It is indeed a sublime setting, like something out of a fairy tale!

We found a cheap hotel in Tashiding village, which is on the saddleback of the ridge, and coaxed our tired legs into life for the climb to the monastery. After our 20km walk that last 45 minutes up the hill was demanding, but our efforts were amply rewarded. The monastery of Tashiding is astoundingly beautiful. At the summit a little cluster of old wooden buildings huddles around the main gompa (temple). Behind this is a grove of chortens (stupas), one of which, the Thongwa Rangdrol, is said to be so holy that merely gazing at it will purify one's evil deeds (I tried this out, but being of a scientific bent I like to test things in experience and I realised I was unable to verify whether the purification had worked!). Every inch of the long wall that encircles the chorten grove is carved or painted with Buddhas, sacred symbols and mantras. The whole monastery complex is then surrounded by tall ancient hemlock and pine trees and decorated with many thousands of gently fluttering prayer flags. The effect is spellbinding; Tashiding is a truly magical place. It is here that one of the greatest Tibetan lamas of the 20th century, and one of Sangharakshita's main teachers, Jamyang Khyentse Rimpoche, died and is commemorated.

The gompa itself is also outstanding. The frescos, which cover every inch of wall and ceiling, are exquisitely executed, depicting every imaginable Buddhist deity, and many that I couldn't imagine too! Janaka and I sat inside, gazing in wonder at the splendour and exuberance, in fact I would say I was awestruck.

We would have stayed there much longer, perhaps even meditating or chanting, but some young monks ushered us out. Though it was yet the early afternoon they wanted to lock up the gompa. I went to sit on a large rock at the back of the chorten grove and recited the mantra of compassion which one sees inscribed so often on the rocks here *Om Mani Padme Hum*. Here too I was moved on by a couple of young nuns who informed me that it was too sacred a rock to sit on. These two experiences left me a little sad. I realised that though I felt a kinship with the Buddhists of Sikkim, and wanted to express devotion and do some Dharma practice at their holy sites, to the monks and nuns I was just another tourist, tolerated but a bit of a nuisance. I had felt this in almost all the places we visited, a desire for some recognition that I was a serious Dharma practitioner, not just another tourist. I can't blame them for their assumption, from the outside Janaka and I certainly looked like tourists, even if our

behaviour didn't really fit with that assumption. One would have to be quite acute to realise that we were anything different.

Tashiding village is barely a one horse town. At the Siniolchu guest house, our jovial host had offered to cook us a meal. However when Janaka went off to order something he returned looking rather frustrated and thwarted. Apparently our host's wife and sundry daughters had lined up outside the kitchen and abjectly refused to cook us any food and after several minutes of blank refusal sent Janaka off with a flea in his ear! Despite the inconvenience I was deeply impressed that even in this utterly male-dominated culture the women of the house were really calling the shots! We "dined" at the only place in town, the Blue House, which boasts rough wooden tables, an open front onto the street and intermittent electric light. The food was delicious and the service from the young Bengali family was very friendly.

Returning to the Perfect Sublime Lotus

The next morning we had an early start to catch the jeep back to Pelling. There are two points in the day where one has a chance of getting some public transport out of Tashiding - between 7am and 8am or late afternoon. However on this occasion the usual rules didn't apply; perhaps they never apply. By 7.45am the only transport to pass through was going to Gangtok, the wrong direction for us, and then it began to rain, and rain, and rain even more. As our little group of office workers, manual labourers, sari-clad shoppers, and two bemused westerners huddled under the corrugated frontage of the taxi stand "café" the heavens seemed to open as never before. Great torrents of water flowed down the steep bazaar street. Apart from the water element everything seemed to come to a standstill, Janaka and I thanked our luck that we weren't walking that day. Finally around 8.30am the rain had abated and two jeeps to Geyzing, on the way to Pelling, arrived. However there were now about 20 people waiting and the jeeps were already fairly full. In the flurry of activity, gesticulation, shouting and negotiating that ensued Janaka and I were totally at sea. At one point it seemed that everyone was going to cram into the two jeeps apart from us, one young man said "you'll have to wait many hours." Janaka and I tried to wheedle ourselves in to one or other of the jeeps but we were completely out manoeuvred. Suddenly something amazing happened, the group of sari-clad women got out of one jeep and squeezed into the other, and a friendly young man from the taxi stand indicated that we should get in. There was just enough space for the two of us and our baggage. I don't think we'll ever really know what went on but I like to think that somehow the whole bustle of people in Tashiding village were trying to accommodate the needs of all the travellers at the taxi stand, including the two clueless strangers, and they arranged the seats so as best to achieve this. There aren't many places in the world where complete strangers would look after you in that way. Waves of gratitude washed over me!

Back in Pelling another practical hiccup awaited us. Despite having arranged with Dewosh, the young receptionist at Hotel Garuda, that we were returning that morning, all our spare clothing and other gear was locked up and the owner had gone off with the key for an indeterminate period. "She will be back in the afternoon" is a deeply dispiriting statement when one considers the looseness of Indian attitudes to time. Unable to shave or change out of our rancid gear after three days walking was very inconvenient! We went for breakfast and then decided to head up to Pemayangtse monastery in the hope that by the time we got back the owner and key would have arrived. However just as we were going out I decided that I would express the full extent of my frustration about his lack of foresight to Dewosh. His face dropped and he started shouting to a little old lady who was at that moment going upstairs. Suddenly he broke into a big smile and said "go now", I was rather bemused but it seems that the little old lady had a spare key. Why this information wasn't forthcoming an hour earlier was entirely beyond me! Janaka said "well done" as we retrieved our belongings, leaving me to ponder the unfathomable differences between oriental and occidental modes of communication. In the end I came to the conclusion that Dewosh was probably under instructions to let no one into the lock up without the owner being present, since a theft would obviously be very troublesome for the hotel. However the force of my annoyance had somehow overridden that injunction and found a way to the magic key. Janaka seemed unperplexed just saying "I'm surprised you haven't had to use that tone more often in India."



So finally to Pemayangtse royal monastery, who's name means "perfect sublime lotus". I would like to tell the story of our visit on the way to the PDC school for children from poor tribal families, and our meeting with its principal, Tashi Dorjee Bhutia. However compassion for you, the undeterred reader of these verbose travel letters, stays my hand.

Pemayangtse sits high on the ridge about 3km beyond Pelling, and is a pleasant walk along the road through the pine forest. At least a pleasant walk for the little parties of westerners who ventured up there; large numbers of Bengali tourists arrived at the monastery in a posse of jeeps.

The royal monastery is large and imposing, dominated by the main gumpa. At the front is an arch and a grassy space where sacred masked dances are carried on special festival days, but really the gumpa is the main attraction. The building is on three floors, and although like Tashiding it is adorned with ornate frescos they were in a poor state of repair. The walls of the ground floor were cracked and the plaster had fallen away in many places, the frescos seemed faded and dull. Perhaps it was the bustle of Bengalis, but I didn't feel much of a sacred atmosphere there. The second floor was more peaceful; a large shrine dedicated to the semi-mythical founder of Tibetan Buddhism, Guru Padmasambhava. There were about a dozen life-sized statues of Padmasambhava representing his various aspects, from peaceful to wrathful, all executed with great attention to detail. As I sat contemplating these forms, with the piercing eyes of the main image, a middle-aged Bengali gentleman came and sat next to me and we chatted. He tried to convince me that the gumpa was 3800 years old, though it was actually built in the 17th century. I managed to convince him that I knew something about Buddhism, to which in astonishment he asked if I was a scholar of some sort. As we looked at Padmasambhava I asked him what he saw in the figure depicted on the shrine, he said swiftly "I see a cruel person" to which I replied "I see a demanding intensity." At that point he seemed a little uncomfortable and we parted cordially.

The third storey of Pemayangtse gumpa houses the justly famous 3D mandala of Padmasambhava's Pureland. It took several years to make and was the work of one lama. Each tier of the 3m high construction is lavishly decorated with tiny figures, rainbows and embellishments, an amazing work. However it was the frescos that really caught my attention, in this case they had been vividly restored and were clear and colourful. In several places a cloth was hung over the images, hiding from view images of archetypal figures in sexual union. The Bengali women tittered loudly as they lifted the cloth to see these forms, with perhaps a mixture of fascination and embarrassment. These images are considered especially sacred. The traditional view is that they represent the complete union of compassion and wisdom, represented by the male and female figures. The impact on me was somewhat different, especially the standing forms enveloped in flames; the figures were definitely arousing, though not in a pornographic way. Rather I felt a sense of tremendous energy, potency, fascination and aliveness - as if the inner experience of an awakened mind is full, intense and exciting. It was these forms in sexual embrace and the piercing eyes of Guru Padmasambhava that left the strongest impression on me at Pemayangtse. And perhaps the piercing eyes of Padmasambhava is a fitting image with which to leave Sikkim!

To be continued...