

BUDDHA HAS NEVER DIED

VISITING INDIA

After finishing some charity work in Tonle Sap area, I left Cambodia to get ready for the trip to India. The Thai Airport was paralysed by the protestors just the day after I left it. I was lucky because if I had gotten caught there I would have had to stay there for a long time. Another lucky thing for me was to be picked up at the airport by Brother Tanh Tue and Sister Lien That because that was my first pilgrimage to the land of Buddha without knowing anybody there beforehand. This area belonged to Gaya province with sacred Buddhist places like Bodhigaya, Uruvilva, Lilajana River...The aim of this trip was to go over what Eyes of Compassion had done in the past years and to see if we could do any more for our Path and ease some of the difficulties the poorest people there had to go through.

Perhaps because this place was sacred, everything I had planned was accomplished miraculously. The first thing I did was to decide to stay at a Vietnamese pagoda (instead of a hotel) with this following monastic schedule: chanting at 4 am, listening to dharma talks at 5, and breakfast at 6. The pagoda was still under construction and had not yet had any room for guests. It was temporarily built with metal, the walls had cracks, letting winds and dusts flow through. It was located in the field, therefore it was swarmed with mice. At night, stray cats from nearby villages came to run after mice noisily. The first day there, I went to my room, sat on the bed with both feet up, with net around me so mice and cats would not hit me while running after each other! And then I chanted the Great Compassion mantra. After a little while I felt calmer and could follow my breath. Although I was born in the year of mouse, I was very scared of mice. I thought of Prince Siddhartha leaving his palace to live in the forest all by himself, befriended with wild animals. He led a life of a wanderer, having nothing, just the sky over his head, and the ground under his feet. The example of his search for the Truth with a lot of obstacles more than 2500 years ago helped me stand the suffering caused by living with mice. They (cats and mice) seemed to feel my suffering of "living together while not liking each other", and consequently, left my room three days later for the unoccupied store rooms.

I remembered in 1997, thanks to thinking about the King Tran Nhan Ton and his cultivation for the Truth I could climb up to the top of Yen Tu Mountain. At that time there were no cable cars yet. Sister Nhu Minh organized that trip so that my husband and

I had a chance to visit Yen Tu Mountain. On our left was the wall of the high mountain, on our right, was the bottomless ravines. I blamed myself to be so stupid to be there. What if I missed a step and fell down into the ravine? To calm up myself, get rid of stupid thoughts and build back the energy to go on with the climbing, I brought up the image of King Tran Nhan Ton climbing the mountain alone. When stepping up on the pine roots, which served as steps for the climbers, I heard somebody said that the King himself planted the trees while he was living on the mountain. I began to have more steady steps, mindful of the path and of what our ancestors had left us. I might have stepped on his very steps when he climbed up the mountain more than 700 years ago. My fear vanished. I was not affected by the dangerous path anymore, and more mindful of my steps and the wonderful image of the old, courageous monk.

Back to the story of the land of Buddha, I had to face the unappetizing food after enjoying the pleasure of not living with mice. The dry food was donated by Vietnamese pilgrims. Some of it was transported from afar, which took about 2 years to get to the pagoda. Instant noodles were broken, and rice was mostly damaged. Because this pagoda belonged to the Bhiksu Buddhist Shanga, we could only have two meals a day, breakfast and lunch (before noon). When the same food was repeated day after day, I began to lose my appetite. Worrying about my health in the severe winter in India, I had to think of a way to bring food into my body pleasantly.

The dharma talk of Thay at Plum village about eating in mindfulness helped me solve the problem right away. In the 1993 winter retreat, at breakfast, Thay taught everyone to chew a morsel of bread at least 50 times mindfully. At lunch time, again, Thay reminded us to chew food at least 80 times, counting each time mindfully, and chewing food only, not chewing anything else. When biting a piece of green bean, we knew that we were biting green bean, not biting our worry, our sufferings, our anger or our plans... Remembering Thay's teaching, I chewed each morsel of bread, knowing that I was chewing bread, not fresh bread or stale bread, just bread. I did not swallow it until it became fluid, mixed with saliva. After the first success of chewing the morsel 80 times, I could enjoy the sweetness of the steamed bread instead of its tastelessness. I believed in the mindfulness while eating, and mealtime became an interesting moment of practicing eating in mindfulness.

Every day, after breakfast, Brother Tanh Tue, Sister Lien That and I went the villages to check things we had done and planned to do more. I learned a lot from the monks and nuns' experiences in doing the charity work in India. We came back before 11 o'clock to

have lunch. After a nap, Dieu Thuan and I walked to Bodhigaya or to other Vietnamese pagodas in the neighbourhood to do the evening chanting. It took us about 20 minutes to walk from the pagoda where I stayed to Bodhigaya.

BODHIGAYA

Bodhigaya was opened from 4am to 9 pm. The place was always crowded with pilgrims and Buddhists. A lot of Tibetan monks came to practice. Their fire yellow robes were seen almost everywhere (about 80%). Tibetan temples were built next to almost every sacred Buddhist place. Tibetan monks lived there to practice and to take care of the sacred places as well. Buddhism in India would have been very poor and lifeless if Tibetan Buddhism had not participated in the religion activities. The misfortune which Tibetan Buddhism had to go through for the last 50 years brought up its glory: the revitalization and growing of a religion that had almost disappeared for a long time in India.

In winter when the severe heat had been replaced by the cold, groups of monks came here to practice with their utmost determination. Thousands of pilgrims were present at Bodhigaya at that time, too, among whom from 300 to 400 were considered residents. About 90% of the residents were Tibetan monks. The daily schedule was from 5am to 9pm, lasting from one month to three months. Each picked his own way of practicing, chanting mantras, chanting sutras, bowing, purifying mind and body, meditating... Just like hundreds of rivers flowed to the ocean, they all tried to practice with all their hearts. The harmonious energy of practicing permeated through the nature, to every cell of trees, plants, rocks, soil and practitioners.

To support the practitioners, Brother Tanh Tue, Sister Lien Tha and EOC made a money donation to 375 monastic residents. Before the donation ceremony, we prayed before the statue of Avalokitesvara. Coming to Bodhigaya many times, Brother Tanh Tue, who knew which monk was the resident, guided me to every resident to offer the donation so that no one would be missed. I prostrated respectfully before each to offer the envelope. Sometimes it seemed that my legs would fail me, I had to follow the breath to bring each breath to each movement. When each breath and each movement could go together harmoniously, all I had to do was to be aware of the offering. By that way I could find

peace and attention to do the offering to the last monk. During the two days after those four hours of prostrating, I was aching all over. Because of that event, I deeply admired the Tibetan monks who practiced prostrating to purify body and mind. Every day they did about 2500 prostrations, and they did so from one month to three months. A very strange thing was that they all looked very happy and healthy though they did not have anything special to boost up their health.

TO NURTURE THE PURITY

Besides thousands of people who came and left Bodhigaya during daytime, there were dharma groups from Asia (mostly from Thailand) who registered to stay from 9pm to the following morning to nurture the purity. Individuals can register to do that, too, with a fee of 100 rupees per person. The quiet and pure atmosphere there during the night time was quite different from the daytime. Those who stayed there at night really wanted to look for a total quietness. Each practitioner with his own way to practice looked for a suitable place to stay and spent all his energy and time to do it.

Before leaving for India, I had planned to do a lot of things, to learn a lot, too. For the past 15 years, we were supporting the Tibetan monks in their studies; and this time we wanted to look at their real situations so that we could make some adjustment if necessary. But then, as I had already mentioned above, I really made a contact with my own peaceful energy. The time I stayed there became the quietest time, from the walking meditation through the poor neighbourhoods with the resounding evening chanting voices of the Tibetan monks to the sitting meditation at quiet nights. All of those created a kind of deep, soft, and full of loving that made you feel that there was nothing else needed to be done. I made up my mind to spend all the time to look deeply into myself. I longed to practice and do charity work in mindfulness.

The abbot of the Vietnamese pagoda where I stayed had to go away on some Buddhist mission, so from then on I went to Bodhigaya around 6 pm to watch people passing by or share stories with dharma friends. Later I would go inside to do some prostrations before Sakyamuni statue and do some chanting. Dieu Thuan said that when I chanted wholeheartedly in Hue (my native province) accent, the Tibetans around us stopped chanting then looked at each other, smiling. After 9, I put up the tent and did the sitting. At nearly midnight I did some walking meditation, then back to my tent to rest. There we had endless time and boundless space; we got nothing to do, no aim to achieve. We did not

have to race with time. I could undo many ties of affiliation in a very short time; and the fruits of which still have some affect on my daily life until now.

My tent was put up outdoors right beside the road. It was very cold at night in India. The cloth I put over the tent as a protection against the wind got wet because of the dew. The cold seeping up from rocks under the tent was heated up by a thin blanket. The tent was made to keep out mosquitoes and only suitable for sitting meditation, not for lying down. Luckily, I was small so I could draw myself up and lay like a foetus in my mom's womb. I smiled to myself happily and went to sleep slowly and easily. Sometimes during the night I heard the sound of strayed dogs fighting and chasing each other. At 4 o'clock, it was still dim but the sound of strong steps and the voice of sutra chanting of the Tibetan monks entering Bodhigaya woke me up. I sat up, blanket around me, following my breath, and did "watching meditation" about the activities of Bodhigaya in the morning.

Waking up, I smile,
Having 24 pure, new hours
I vow to live completely,

To look at life with compassionate eyes.

At five o'clock, the air was still chilly and dewy, but the sound of steps could be heard, noisier and noisier. People came in groups, one after another, a few at first then more and more later on, to their spots to practice. The sun rose slowly, lifting up the dew curtain and bringing warmth to everything. I stepped out of my tent, folded my things up, and got ready for breakfast. In the yard in front of Bodhigaya, there were only two types of food for you, whether you were rich or poor, milk tea and chapatti (a kind of pancake made from wheat). A cup of milk tea was 5 rupees, and chapatti was 10 rupees each. This was very noticeable, too. You were living in a world in which everyone was equal; everybody was sitting on the roadside with a cup of hot milk tea to warm up their hands and a piece of chapatti for breakfast to begin a new day.

DANNA PARAMITA

In one morning on the Tripitaka, Bodhigaya was swarmed with people. While I was doing the walking meditation after the purity nurturing, I heard loud voices coming from the main gate. Later I found out that it came from a group of Buddhist laypersons (Taiwanese, perhaps) speaking Chinese. They hired Indian children to offer bread and milk to

everybody in Bodhigaya. They worked quickly as if they were afraid that somebody might get out without being offered. They offered according to your need, regardless whether you are monks or laypersons. Fresh bread and hot milk were put in your hands. They came before me to offer. I received the gift quietly, the warmth transferred from the hot milk to my hands, to tears rolling down my cheeks. I spoke to myself: "How happy! How happy to see that people could live with each other in the vast ocean of love."

GOING TO MARKET

Once I went to the market at the back of Bodh Gaya and happened to see a Tibetan nun. After choosing a papaya and handing it to the seller, she returned to her prayer beads and recited mantras. After the selling man told the price, I asked for her permission to pay as a donation, and asked whether she needed anything else. She chose a few green peppers and gave me to pay. She looked at me with warm eyes and nice smile, and I looked at her with high respect and greeted with my two hands forming a lotus bud to show my thanks to her for giving me the opportunity to make a donation. After this time, several other times I met her again in Bodh Gaya. Since we spoke different languages, we simply greeted each other and walked side by side in silence to the end of the lane, then we bade farewell with warm smiles.

THE NEGATIVE

When making donations to monks and nuns who were practicing in Bodh Gaya, I came to notice the sanghas who lived together and mutually supported; chose suitable and nearby practice locations; made rituals, prayed and recited throughout the day. These monks and nuns can be considered to be careful and serious practitioners. However, there were other cases in which if we were not cautious, we might be victims of religious abuse. Once I happened to see an old monk sitting alone in Kuan Yin place in Bodh Gaya. This so-called "Lama" spoke good English and was joyful and enthusiastic to everybody coming to see him. When a Buddhist came near, the "Lama" would start to recite mantras to a bottle of water, then would take the water and apply to the head of the Buddhist, then gave him or her some water to drink. After the "Lama" finished "the procedures", he would tap on the table as a reminder of donation to the Buddhist. And so, Buddhists would bring their money out and donate, hoping that the mantra the "Lama" recited would be more effective to them. Besides this "Lama", I saw another old monk usually sitting alone in a corner near the gate to Bodh Gaya. This monk did not speak English. Whenever a person passed by, he would point to his belly and make a sign to tell that he was hungry. So, many passers-by took out their money and donated to him.

Taking trouble to travel here over thousands of miles, many serious practitioners usually would not draw attention of visitors to get donations. If they ever received a donation, they would express their gratitude by forming a lotus bud with their hands, smiling gratefully, and then would continue to practice their method. Life in India is hard and poor, it is impossible to avoid the negatives that happen everyday. We hope that our caution will spare those who are abusing others' beliefs bad consequences later on, and will not make the image of Buddhism superstitious.

MATANGI (luring beauty)

One late morning, I followed Ms Dieu Thuan to ĐỘ Sanh pagoda to chant sutras, where I met a young monk who just came over from Vietnam to take care of the pagoda on behalf of his master. As this was the first time he left Vietnam, everything was new to him. He told that his room did not have window, so curious neighboring girls would stop at the door and look into the room, all were stunningly beautiful. He was a little worried that he would be lured by their beauties, and that this time he might not be able to escape from the disaster of "Matangi". But one morning, coming to the top floor for physical exercise, looking down to the field around the pagoda, he saw that his "stunningly beautiful" neighboring girls were going number two there in the open air; and, to more disappointment, the beauties sat near each other and chatted clamorously. Other mornings, he saw a girl with a glass of water and a toothbrush in her hands wandering around the village toothbrushing. Such images brought their beauty down a lot, which he said saved him from the disaster of "Matangi". That's in India! In so poor places, there is no toilet at all, that's why people must go number two in fields.

STRAY DOGS

In the mornings I shared my breakfast with dozens of stray dogs. No one fed them. Garbage dumps were the very places for them to go to look for food and shelters. They went in herds. And there were a lot of them. Dieu Thuan and I bought dozens of chapatti then tore them up to throw to each of the dogs.

One day when passing a village I saw a dog from afar wagging his tail and barking vigorously. It was a Pomerine one, very pretty and well taken care of. I came nearer and played with it. Suddenly it stopped barking and smelled me all over then jumped up licking my face. It was so lovely. I hugged it and kissed its head. Dieu Thuan told me: "Stop and get moving, it's getting late." The first days I asked Dieu Thuan to help me feed the dogs, she seemed not to be very willing to do so.

Then, every day we went to Bodhigaya to practice together, and usually some stray dogs would follow us. One day I found out that a black one, which I named Muc, had followed us for a long distance, to the outskirts of Bodhigaya. How lovely! I said to Dieu Thuan: "When we get the pagoda, I will stay outside with him while you go inside to get him some food, OK?"

Dieu Thuan did not agree: "No, do not get him any food. People in the pagoda wouldn't like that."

Right after her answer, I saw Muc went to the pagoda gate then turned back to the village. I did not say anything but rushed to the kitchen, got some pieces of stale bread and hurried back out. I didn't see him anywhere. Holding the pieces of bread, I walked up and down the village to looking for him, calling him in my mind: "Muc, Muc, where are you? Please come back to me." But he didn't come back. I told Dieu Thuan what had happened with much regret. From that day on, she did not try to stop me from "loving dogs" anymore and helped me to tear up the bread and feed each of the dogs willingly. One day I was so happy because on the day, seeing that there were so many of the dogs present, she told me to buy some more bread, afraid that it was not enough for all of them.

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The sunrays gradually receded to give place to the twilight. I went into the Bodhigaya mingling with monks and nuns as well as lay persons coming from all over the world. It was indeed the Pure Land. I walked slowly, mindfully, feeling the peace in each step. The even breaths made flowers blossom under my feet.

I bathed in a kind of unexplainable happiness. In the vast atmosphere, vaguely I caught the sacred image of Buddha standing under the Bodhi Tree at the end of the wall. With a faint smile and compassionate eyes, he looked at me encouragingly. It was not a dream, neither an imagination, but a true contact from a clear mind. This happened to me several times during the time I was practicing at Bodhigaya. Only when I was truly in peace and completely mindful could I have that miraculous contact.

I strongly believed that Buddha had never died. His dharmakaya illuminated all over. With my quiet steps, I clearly realized the mind of an enlightened person. I shared that idea

with my husband so many times during my stay here. Buddha wanted us to depend on ourselves, so he pretended to die. He was still with us, he was everywhere, and he was still under the Bodhi Tree. He never left Uruvilva, never left Nairanjana River. All we had to do to have a contact with him was to be completely mindful of what we were doing.

Today I sent you some memoirs of the happy days at Bodhigaya as a warm share. In the season of the Buddha's Birthday, Buddhist Calendar 2553, with all respect I offer Buddha the incense of my mind to wish all of us to have enough courage and energy to continue our path to enlightenment. May all reverend ones, monks and nuns always be in peace and happiness.

Tâm Tịnh An - Tôn Nữ Diệu Liên

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