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NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

HONOUR TO THE BLESSED ONE, THE EXALTED ONE, THE FULLY-ENLIGHTENED ONE

Well we did it! And to prove it here is one of the many hundreds of photos that between us we snapped on that most memorable of journeys. I'm speaking of course of our long awaited pilgrimage to the Buddhist Holy Places in India and the picture above, which is of us four English monks from The Forest Hermitage in the Heart of England entering the Maha Bodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, the very place where Siddhattha Gotama achieved his Enlightenment and became the Buddha.

Our adventure actually began more than a year ago when one evening during the tea and chat session after meditation the conversation casually turned to the Buddhist holy places. Then at some point, we decided to make a pilgrimage to these holy places a celebration of my thirtieth vassa which fell last year and go last November but in the wake of the uncertainty that gripped parts of the world then we finally moved it to two weeks over February and March of this year. So, after months of preparation and uncertainty there we were on the evening of February 22nd, seventeen pilgrims that included four bhikkhus, being fussed over by Virgin Atlantic staff at Heathrow. The next morning found us negotiating the ponderous officialdom of Delhi airport and being greeted by Padmini and Mahinda of Serendib Tours, the small family concern that had organised our pilgrimage and in whose care we were now placing ourselves for the best part of fifteen days.

First stop was our hotel, one that appeared to have been built with the Coliseum in mind but with a roof, before a run round Delhi and a visit to a scruffy and little known park that contained an outcrop of rocks and an Ashoka inscription that apparently identified it as the site of the Buddha's celebrated sermon on Mindfulness, the Satipatthana Sutta. Back at the hotel that evening, we had the first of the evening meetings that we tried to have almost every night of the pilgrimage. We recited Evening Chanting, sat in meditation and I said a few words and read to the company. That night I remember asking everyone to look upon their pilgrimage to these holy places where the Buddha had lived and taught as an extended contemplation of the Buddha and then knowing that almost everywhere we were to go we would hear the name of the Emperor Ashoka I read to them something about this extraordinary monarch whose empire at its height around 250 BCE, encompassed most of present day India and Pakistan. This man at the pinnacle of his power and following his bloody conquest of the people known as the Kalingas, renounced violence and

resolved to serve his people as a righteous monarch. He embraced Buddhism and devoted the remainder of his life to the welfare and happiness of his subjects. As well as building hospitals for for both people and animals, promoting kindness, tolerance and respect for others, he also had erected commemorative columns at all the principal Buddhist holy places. I can't help thinking how the world might benefit were his story better known and his example followed by most of the present crop of prime ministers, politicians, presidents, monarchs and dictators.

The next day, Day 2, we went to Delhi museum where before wandering amongst some wonderful and ancient Buddhist images we were able to pay our respects to the relics of the Lord Buddha that had been discovered in the remains of a stupa amongst the ruins of Kapilavattu, the city in which he'd grown up. Then after a frantic rush through the traffic, we picked our way amongst the chaos of Delhi railway station and boarded a fairly basic air-conditioned train for Patna.

As I have explained before, to have visited the holy sites in their chronological order would have meant criss-crossing a vast area several times and obviously we had neither the time nor perhaps the stamina for that. Serendib finally came up with an orderly, practical route that took in my wish for us to be at Rajgir for Magha Puja on February 26th and which necessitated this long overnight rail journey from Delhi to Patna where a coach met us and stayed with us, taking us from place to place before finally depositing us at Lucknow railway station on Day 14 for the train back to Delhi.

So, on the morning of Day 3, Monday February 25th, during its brief stop at Patna we hurriedly scrambled off the train and made our way out from the station to our coach and on to the hotel and something to eat. Patna, now pretty run-down, is more or less on the site of the Emperor Ashoka's capital of Pataliputta which he established where the Buddha is said to have crossed the Ganges with one step. From Patna, that afternoon, we were able to make a very agreeable excursion fifty miles out into the countryside north of the city to the little that remains of Vesali. This, a place much loved by the Buddha, is said to have been a very beautiful city and the world's earliest known republic. Here at Vesali, Ambapali the courtesan worshipped the Buddha and made an offering of her mango grove, here too the Buddha announced that in three months he would be passing away and later, after his body had been cremated, at Vesali was enshrined one of the eight portions of the

DIARY:

SONGKRAHN - THE WATER FESTIVAL

Thai, Burmese and Sri Lankan New Year

April 14th from 10.30 a.m.



VESAKHA PUJA - WESAK or BUDDHA DAY

Remembering the Birth, Enlightenment and Passing of the Buddha.

May 26th from 10.30 a.m.



ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

(mainly for Buddhist Prison Chaplains)

June 15th & September 14th from 10 a.m.



MEDITATION, A DHAMMA TALK

a chat, a reading & a cup of tea

Mondays & Fridays at 8 pm

Buddha's relics. We wandered for a while amongst the ruins surrounding the monkey pond - a pond said to have been dug for the Buddha by monkeys - and the Ashokan Pillar, the best preserved of its kind. Then, a mile or so away, we paid our respects at the remaining base of the stupa which once had housed the Buddha's relics and sat in the garden that surrounds it and I read from the Buddhist scriptures of when the Buddha had been staying close by that very spot. Afterwards we sat and meditated until it was time to go back to Patna.

On Day 4, we set off after our meal for Rajgir and on the way encountered our first Indian traffic jam! I think it likely that never again will any of us complain of hold-ups on the M25, the M6 or anywhere else where it can sometimes seem as if whole generations will rise and fall while you sit stuck in a car that's going nowhere. Our driver, who I nicknamed 'the King of the Road', behind whom I sat and where it occasionally required quite a strong nerve, never tired of looking for any gap that might just let him through and going for it. Interestingly, despite all the trials of the appalling roads and chaotic traffic we never saw the slightest sign of road rage. At Rajgir we checked into a rather better, part Japanese hotel and then set out for Veluvanarama, the Bamboo Grove known as the Sanctuary of the Squirrels and the first place to be given for the use of the Buddha and the Sangha. That day the moon was full

and the occasion was Magha Puja. On the very first Magha Puja, the Buddha met at the Bamboo Grove with a great host of his close disciples and made it the custom for the Sangha to recite the Ovada Patimokkha on all subsequent full and new moon days. Later, he changed that to the Patimokkha, the fundamental rule that we observe to this very day. Still, wherever there are four or more bhikkhus on the full and new moon days the Patimokkha should be recited and that day, Magha Puja, we planned to have our recitation in Veluvana. Our good tour operators arranged with the gate keepers for us to be able to remain an hour past the usual closing time and so after wandering about the Bamboo Grove, having circumambulated three times and gathered our group to sit together for a while, we four went apart to one side and Tahn Dhammavaro recited the Patimokkha while we other three listened. Later, back at the hotel we and the rest of our band of pilgrims did the Evening Chanting together and meditated in the hotel's unusual shrine room into which, through a circular opening above, shone the Magha Full Moon.

I had hoped on the following morning, the morning of Day 5, to have greeted the dawn meditating on the Vultures Peak but things aren't as free and easy as when I was there last, a little over thirty years ago and it turned out not to be possible to arrange access so early. Serendib did however manage a suitable reward for the right person to enable us to get up there well ahead of the crowds. So although it wasn't that early it was still pretty early when we left our hotel and were dropped off at the foot of Bimbisara's road. This was a paved path leading up at a relatively steep incline to the caves where the Buddha and his close disciples used to stay on the Vultures Peak. It had been built originally by King Bimbisara, King of Magadha, to allow him a fairly trouble free access to the Buddha. Before his Enlightenment, the Buddha had passed through Bimbisara's capital of Rajagaha (Rajgir) and the King had then been so impressed that he had been desperate for him to stay or at least to promise to return. It was a promise the Buddha kept and later both the Vultures Peak and the Bamboo Grove were amongst the Buddha's favourite resorts. Once we'd all got up there - and let's say that some took longer than others! - we each paid our respects with candles and incense and then recited the Morning Chanting and meditated for about an hour in the crisp, early morning sunshine. We were so privileged to have that time to ourselves in such a sacred place. As we finished we could hear more pilgrims coming, Pure Land Buddhists singing and chanting their way up Bimbisara's road. Afterwards, on our way back to the hotel for our meal and to check out, we stopped at the site of the mango grove that had belonged to Jivaka, the physician who looked after the Buddha. And we saw the remains of the place where Bimbisara was imprisoned by the son who usurped him. That was the closest I came to a prison visit. By this time our hotel

was surrounded by Indian troops, there to protect the Minister of Defence who had come to discuss a proposed ordnance factory and we had some difficulty getting in and out. We managed it while he was out inspecting the factory site and just as he returned we got on our way to Nalanda and Bodh Gaya. **To Be Continued.**

UPOSATHA OBSERVANCE DAYS

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April	5	11	19	26
May	4	11	19	26
June	3	9	17	24

THIS IS THE NEWSLETTER OF VEN. AJAHN KHEMADHAMMO OF THE FOREST HERMITAGE AND ANGULIMALA, THE BUDDHIST PRISON CHAPLAINCY ORGANISATION

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