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# THE FOREST HERMITAGE Issue No. 3 of 2002 / 2545 NEWSLETTER

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NAMO TASSA BHAGAVATO ARAHATO SAMMASAMBUDDHASSA

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

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Every year in May or early June when we celebrate Vesakha Puja we remember the Buddha's Birth, Enlightenment and Parinibbana. Each of these important events in the life of the Buddha occurred according to our scriptures on a full moon of the ancient lunar month of Vesakha. Where the Buddha was born, achieved Enlightenment and passed away are three of the four particular places that the Buddha recommended as places of pilgrimage, the fourth being where he set rolling the Wheel of Dhamma with his first sermon. I together with a small party of monks and laity were privileged to go on a pilgrimage this year to these and other important Buddhist sites and I will continue my short account of that journey focusing especially on our visit to Bodh Gaya where the Buddha's Enlightenment took place, according to tradition some 2,490 years ago.

Our long awaited pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy places of India began in earnest at Patna where our party of four bhikkhus and thirteen lay people arrived from Delhi early in the morning of Monday, February 25th, Day 3 of our pilgrimage, after fifteen hours on not quite the most comfortable of trains. At Patna we picked up our coach and in the afternoon enjoyed a refreshing trip out to the ruins of Vesali. Then the following day we survived our first experience of an Indian traffic jam to make it to Rajgir, I believe India's oldest city and one of the longest inhabited in the world. By then we'd already seen something of the poverty and degradation of India. The slums the railway had shown us as it entered and left towns along the way were almost beyond belief and the smell of the rotting rubbish and filth that we'd practically paddled through to board our coach at Patna station was awful - and everywhere, of course, were the beggars! If like me you'd seen it all before and got used to it it wasn't half as bad but for those who hadn't it was clearly a shock. At Rajgir we celebrated Magha Puja and early the next morning, on Day 4, we climbed the Vulture's Peak to meditate where the Buddha and his great disciples had sometimes lived and taught. That was a marvellous morning and it seemed that from there our spirits lifted and the pilgrimage really took off.

Bihar, the state in which we were then travelling, has the unfortunate reputation of being a lawless place and when we were out visiting some of the more remote and scattered of the Buddhist sites we were continually being asked to stay together and not to go wandering off alone. By the evening of Day 4 we were supposed to arrive at Bodh Gaya, not a great distance from Rajgir

but a bad road and our Serendib Tours people were anxious that we should not still be on the road after dark. First though our journey in the earliest and hottest part of that afternoon had to take in a visit to Nalanda. The Buddha had sometimes wandered here and it was at Nalanda that his two chief disciples, Sariputta and Moggallana, were born. Then, about sixteen hundred years ago or perhaps even earlier, there was established here a university that by the time it was destroyed some seven hundred years later in the 12th Century had become one of the greatest universities the world has ever known, the Buddhist University of Nalanda. Following its destruction during the Muslim invasion the ruins were left to be gradually buried beneath the dust of ages and Nalanda slept, lost and forgotten until its rediscovery in the mid 19th Century. Now, a portion of the ruins has been excavated, stabilised and made safe for visitors. We walked and climbed amongst these huge silent and solid red brick walls and did our best to imagine them vibrating with debate and the bustle of eager monk students thirsting for knowledge. This had been a great international seat of learning where knowledge for its own sake was valued. No degrees were awarded but it was to here that monks once came from far and wide - at its height there were supposed to have been some ten thousand - to study and deepen their understanding of Buddhism, especially of the Mahayana. Our guided walkabout offered little hope of escape from the heat of the early afternoon sun and a little shade and refreshment when it came was a huge relief. Then it was back up into the coach behind the 'King of the Road', my

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## DIARY:

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### ANGULIMALA WORKSHOPS

(mainly for Buddhist Prison Chaplains)

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



### MEDITATION and a DHAMMA TALK

Mondays & Fridays at 8 pm

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nickname for our indomitable driver, and we were off on our way to Bodh Gaya, the place of the Buddha's Enlightenment.

I can't now remember the details of that afternoon and evening's drive. I've never been able to keep a diary and nearly always preferred actually living life to recording it but I'm almost positive it was bumpy and that there were some impressive traffic jams. We weren't terribly late but by the time we gingerly negotiated the last few miles the sun had gone down, the temperature had dropped and the coach's air-conditioning that had in any case only two settings, on and off, was no longer required. I thought I remembered the road from Gaya out to Bodh Gaya pretty clearly and as the evening wore on I kept squinting through the gloaming hoping to see some familiar landmark or other but unsurprisingly there had been changes and I'm not even sure that the road we were on existed thirty years ago, I certainly didn't recollect the bridge that brought us across the river and into Bodh Gaya, nor the road that now bypasses what was the market and takes you through where the Tibetan tent village used to be. From the Tibetan Gompa I recognised the pattern of the road as it wound down past the Chinese temple but what a difference! So many buildings, hotels, shops, internet cafes and the like where I remember fields and the Chinese temple that thirty years ago was so poor looked this time to have really prospered. We turned into the road that skirts the side of the lavish Thai temple and pulled up outside the Hotel Sujata where we were to stay for three nights.

Once checked in we had time to wash the dust off and even ease away some of the aches and pains of the day's travel in a hot bath. The room that I and tahn Manapo occupied was at the back and from it we had had a wonderful view of the Maha Bodhi Temple built over the site of the Buddha's Enlightenment. When those who were eating had finished we gathered in the hotel's small Buddhist Shrine Room downstairs adjacent to the lobby for our evening puja, meditation and a meeting we tried to have every evening when we reviewed the day we'd had and prepared for the one to follow.

The next morning, Day 5, our first stop was the Maha Bodhi Temple, the place where the former prince, by then a wandering holy man, had sat under a great tree on a full moon of the month of Vesakha and having attained Full Enlightenment emerged as the Buddha. We entered the temple precincts in procession and began slowly to circumambulate the temple and the ancient Bodhi tree, a fourth generation descendant of the original under which the Buddha had sat. All around even at that early hour there were pilgrims of all shapes and sizes, of various nationalities and representing different Buddhist schools. Some were sitting, some meditating, some chanting mantras, one had an elaborate bee-keeper veil arrangement to keep the flies and mosquitoes at bay, some were standing, others athletically performing standing to full length prostrations over and over again and some like us were walking and quietly drinking in the atmosphere of this wonderful and holy place. The small area immediately at the base of the Bodhi tree which includes the Diamond Throne where the Buddha is supposed to have sat and which is enclosed on three sides by ancient stone railings and on the fourth by the side of the temple was

in constant use - for a while as I watched a party of pious Sri Lankan ladies, all in white, patiently queued to enter and reverence this sacred spot - then for a moment it was empty and seizing the opportunity I rallied our group and led them in. At the foot of the Bodhi tree we prostrated, chanted and sat in meditation for a few minutes. Later, after our meal and in the early afternoon we crossed back across the bridge to step back in time and wander through the rice paddies and tiny ancient villages of mud huts and ox carts to visit the place where having given up on fasting the Buddha-to-be received milk rice from a woman called Sujata. Returning, we called at Bodh Gaya's Burmese temple and managed to leave Hazel Myint behind - buying us all presents! It was the only time we lost anyone anywhere and then it wasn't for long. Back and down a lane at the side of the Maha Bodhi Temple we found the modest Thai forest wat. It wasn't quite like the forest wats in Northeast Thailand that I know and love but they're planting trees rather than tons of concrete and the monks are encouraging meditation - two welcome developments that we otherwise didn't see much of. Later we returned again to the Maha Bodhi Temple and this time got permission to use the shrine room on the upper floor for our evening puja and meditation.

Back at the hotel that night, we were warned that our planned early morning visit the next day to a tiny cave temple that I had affectionate memories of might not go ahead. In fact we were told that we might not be going anywhere, that we might not even be allowed to leave the hotel. Hardship and danger are the hallmarks of a good pilgrimage and ours was not without some of both. In the latest fallout from an appalling argument over whether a mosque or a Hindu temple should stand on a certain patch of land, the day before at Godhra in the western state of Gujarat some Muslims had attacked a train full of Hindu activists and many had been killed. Now the next day a nation wide protest had been called for. At Bodh Gaya we didn't know how or even whether it would be observed but we went to bed that night hoping for the best and prepared for the worst.

Fortunately, on the morning of Day 6, we woke to nothing untoward and were soon settled into three ancient three wheelers that the Thais call tuk-tuks and on our way to the cave temple. Back in 1971, I and a Tibetan lama who I had befriended, Ven. Khorchak Tulku, with one or two others paddled across the wide shallow river and then walked for about two hours to this charming tiny Tibetan temple set in the hillside and built around some caves where it is said the Buddha-to-be practised fasting and breath control. This time it was quicker getting there but longer than expected getting back on a new road that in places was still only brick rubble. When we'd eaten, we went to the Tibetan gompa where I'd stayed last time and from a Tibetan monk who I remembered I got news of my old friend Khorchak Tulku. Then we went to the new Tibetan temple and admired its impressive murals depicting the life of the Buddha. The picture at the top of the title page of the assault by Mara is from there. Then after the big Thai temple we rounded off our day and our stay at Bodh Gaya with a last visit to the Maha Bodhi and a sitting under the Bodhi

May	4	11	19	26
June	3	9	17	24
July	2	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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