A TIME FOR QUESTIONS

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I am sitting on a hilltop outside of Sravasti, with the other members of our tour group. The day is coming to a close; the sun is starting to set. Graceful women in brilliantly colored saris return from working in the fields; men follow oxcarts filled with hay; cows and goats amble back to their homes. We can see a great distance, across lush green fields splashed with yellow mustard and blue coriander. Everywhere we look is where the Buddha might have walked, 2,500 years ago. Suddenly I am startled by a bicycle riding across the irrigation dikes. The bicycle is going the speed of a rocket ship in contrast to everything else. Anything faster than walking seems too quick. I feel transported to another time by the slowness of the pace of life.

I am in India, travelling with 11 other Americans, our guide, Shantum Seth, and his wife, Gitanjali Varma. The 3 week tour is called "In the Footsteps of the Buddha." We've visited the Buddhist pilgrimage sites - Nalanda, Vulture Peak, Bodh Gaya, Sarnath, Kushinigar, Lumbini, Kapilavastu, and now, Sravasti.

Pilgrimage, for me, involves making a journey into the unknown, opening to the possibility of seeing in a different way. It's wandering around, often lost -- internally or externally, travelling in sacred territories, asking sacred questions. These are some of the questions I asked and some of the experiences I had during the time I was following the path where the Buddha walked.

WHAT'S GOING ON ?

Because going to India was such an extraordinary event in my life, my attempts to be mindful and to be present were much more heightened than in day-to-day life. The first days travelling long distances on our bus were excruciating and exhilarating. At every moment I felt compelled to see, to hear, to smell, to take in and understand what was so new and so vastly different.

I could feel my greed, wanting to know what is this, what is that? So much was unfamiliar. I was like a child trying to learn about a grown-up world that doesn't compute. I was constantly attempting to create a whole from many unknown parts. I felt the vulnerability of living with beginner's mind, not knowing , and trying to live with the insecurity of not knowing. Who am I if I can't figure out what the round things on people's roofs are after seeing them 100 times,? Later, when I finally understand that they are gourds, I still don't have a clue why they are there!

I felt so lost, so overwhelmed. It all just didn't make sense. Trying to understand what was going on in this new world led to questioning life in general. What is going on?

WHO WAS THE BUDDHA?

Each of the Buddhist sites we visited had something unique to teach. Each had it's own tone, it's own flavor. Our first major stop was Vulture Peak, a hill upon which the Buddha liked to teach and watch the sunset. As we slowly climbed the path, I imagined the Buddha covering the same ground, looking out at similar trees, breathing similar air. Being in these places, knowing he had been there, made his presence and the feeling of history so palpable.

At the top, in a slightly enclosed area, was an altar filled with marigolds and burning incense. When we arrived, a group of Burmese monks and nuns were just beginning to chant the Metta Sutra in Pali. Soon after they left, a Japanese group dashed up, sat down, and began chanting the Heart Sutra. When this group arrived, with cameras flashing wildly, I judged them as typical crass tourists, even here. But as they settled into their practice, I felt their sincerity. Listening to them, my heart filled with a sense of how many people's lives have been touched by the Buddha's teachings. I felt a surge of hope for the planet.

I totally fell in love with Bodh Gaya, a town filled with the color and the sounds of Buddhism. Many years ago, visiting Israel with my family, I was amazed at the impact of being in a country where for the first time in my life, as a Jew, I was in the majority. I had a similar feeling in Bodh Gaya, a powerful feeling of belonging.

Bodh Gaya is a celebration of Buddhism, a complex, multi-faceted, huge energy center with fabulous temples from many Asian countries and practitioners from all over the world. Lumbini, festooned with thousands of prayer flags, is also a celebration, of a particular moment -- the Buddha's birth. Great joy is radiated around that moment. In contrast, the celebration in Bodh Gaya, at the Mahobodhi Temple, has more the feeling of awe, acknowledging lifetimes of practice culminating in Enlightenment.

Because we were in Bodh Gaya for five days, it was possible to return to the MahabodhiTemple and the Bodhi Tree many times. Each time my connection with the Buddha and my connection with myself deepened. One morning, meditating close to the Bodhi tree, breathing in the fragrance of the myriad marigold offerings, I understood, viscerally, something basic in the Buddha's teachings. My experience was far beyond intellectual comprehension. It had the feeling of profound insight. I could feel, deep within, the suffering involved in "I want" or "I don't want." I could feel the pain of self-centeredness, the "I-ness," which doesn't allow the flow of the river of life. The teachings are all so utterly simple. Again I felt such gratitude for the dharma.

I went on this trip not so hot about the Buddha. I have been a devotee of Buddhism, but not of the person. Still, it was moving to me to see the tremendous amount of devotion displayed towards this historical person. I experienced the power of his teachings, seeing so many people practicing, basing their lives on them, people wanting to be happy and using these teachings as the vehicle to move them in that direction, teachings that can bring happiness and peace to a sick and confused world.

WHAT IS SUFFERING?

Because Bodh Gaya was one of our earliest stops, it was also the place where we had our first major experience of begging. At the beginning of the trip, I wrote in my journal a list of intentions for this pilgrimage. Among them was my aspiration to open my heart to suffering. From the moment we walked out of the gate at our Buddhist guest house until we entered the grounds of the Temple, we were surrounded by beggars and hawkers. Many were children; some were adults with leprosy or some deformed limb. In

their desperation and single-mindedness, none of them would accept "no." They kept repeating over and over, "Mama, mama," or "Eat, eat," or "Want some post cards? I give you good price."

Every evening, after dinner, our group would gather to share our "strucks," that which had most struck us during the day. It was a valuable time for seeing what others had seen, hearing what others had heard. It also served to bring our group close to each other, as we each spoke from the depths of our experience. When we were in Bodh Gaya, most of our "strucks" centered around our individual responses to the beggars.

One person in the group cried, saying that he was completely bewildered about what it meant that one week's salary could probably feed the entire population of Bodh Gaya. It was difficult not to be overwhelmed with guilt and to find a way to stay open to the suffering.

Because I work as an acupuncturist, I am constantly touching the people I work with. I like to be physically connected to the person I'm with. My practice with the beggars was to touch people as I spoke to them, with a hand on the shoulder and a look in the eyes. Direct contact helped me remain open, rather than hardening to the pressure and the pain. It required a lot of focus and energy to carefully manage this touching, and it was easier for me to do with children than with adults. When I was too tired, I found myself putting up an emotional wall. I would cut myself off from the humanity of the beggars and want to avoid them. But when I could do it, this tool of touching helped me feel something was shared between us.

One day, sitting on a ledge at the Temple, loving all that I was witnessing, I felt peaceful and happy. Practitioners were doing prostrations on their wooden boards, people were praying with their mala beads, others were doing walking meditation around the Temple. There was soft chattering in many different languages, melodious chanting, bells ringing, birds chirping. A Tibetan monk with a beautiful smile on his face walked directly up to me. He held out a piece of paper upon which he had written, in English, a request for money, to support his practice.

I felt violated. I didn't know monastics ever directly asked for money like this. I had felt so trusting and open as he approached. I wasn't prepared. I

was completely flummoxed. Reaching into my pocket, I gave him some money, but I was dismayed. Was no place sacred? Again, the hardest part was how much I recoiled and separated myself from this sincere human being.

Another day, our group went to visit a village just outside Bodh Gaya. Shantum introduced us to a local family, and we spent a lovely afternoon having tea with them. They showed us their two room house – one room was where they slept, the outer room was where their cow slept. Later I wandered around the village by myself, taking photos, and holding hands with several of the children who accompanied me everywhere.

Having heard that it is nice to have something special to give to children, my husband and I packed large boxes of pencils. I had intentionally brought them along to this village, thinking it would be a good place to hand them out, because we would have a more personal connection with the children here. As we were ending our visit, I dug into my backpack to bring out the pencils. I handed them out to the few children who were nearby. Within moments, the place was swarming. The atmosphere, which had been quiet and easy-going became tense and frightening. If one of the adults hadn't intervened, I think it is quite possible that I would have been hurt in the children's desperate push to have something. I felt shocked at how quickly a moment of connection turned into greed and suffering. I felt like an ugly American – that my lack of understanding of what these people's lives are like had in fact produced this painful scene.

WHAT IS DEATH?

In India, many of the aspects of life and death that are considered private in the West are available to be seen. When our bus would leave at 5 in the morning, we would witness people everywhere walking out into the fields, squatting to defecate. It was amazing, and yet, it seemed totally natural. People would wake up and go outside for their morning constitutional.

Similarly, death was more visible. From the windows of the bus we could see dead animals lying by the side of the road, besieged by vultures or dogs picking the meat off the bones. In other places there would be stacks of bones turning white from the sun.

In Varanasi, the holiest place for a Hindu to die, our sense of death was heightened. We pilgrims celebrated a special ceremony on the Ganges at sunrise. One member of the group had brought the ashes of her friend to spread into the holy river. As we rowed up the river watching the dawn emerge, we saw carcasses of animals and enshrouded bodies of children float by. There are several categories of people, including small children, who are not allowed to be cremated, and their bodies are put into the river directly.

Later that day, a few of us returned to the river, to the cremation ghats. We arrived just before sunset. There were seven funeral pyres burning brightly. Men and boys huddled near the fire of their loved one. They seemed to be chatting. All quite ordinary. Our guide explained that the women were at home wailing, while the men come here. The men cry before they come to the ghats, and they will cry afterwards. But while they are here, they are able to feel the utter naturalness of death. In this large community of mourners they are comforted by the impersonal and universal aspect of death.

I was touched by the sight of a young boy, possibly 14, who, as the eldest son, performed the Hindu ritual. His head was shaved and he was wearing the white garment of mourning. Several older family members surrounded him with love and support. They were so close, leaning into him, almost holding him. He would have the job of taking a long stick and smashing the skull, as part of breaking the body down. The attendants used sticks to poke and prod the bones, so that ultimately the body is coalesced into a small black glob, perhaps 6" long, maybe an inch or so in diameter. The son would then use two long sticks to pick up the black substance from the fire, carry it down to the Ganges, walk out waist deep into the water and toss the remains of his mother or father as far out into the water as possible, for a good rebirth. I couldn't quite imagine what that boy's experience of being so tangibly connected to his parent's death was like for him.

After Varanasi we went to Kushinigar where the Buddha died, between two sal trees, facing the sunset. The Buddha was born under a tree, as his mother held onto the branches to support her during labor; he was enlightened under a tree; and he died under trees. The energy in Kushinigar was very different from that of Lumbini or Bodh Gaya. Here, everything pointed to the contemplation of death. Even the Buddha died.

Our group spent an afternoon discussing our thoughts and feelings about death. We began on a lofty philosophical level, speaking about no self, about death simply being a transformation of our energy. As the discussion continued, we began touching our more personal experiences with death. One man suddenly began speaking, with urgency, saying he was remembering something he hadn't thought about in many years. When he was 11 years old, his best friend, who was 14, lived next door. When he came home from school one day and rang his friend up on their tin can walkie-talkies, there was no answer. He ran over to his friend's house to see what was up and found that he had just died. For the first time, the man was understanding that he had made a decision at that devastating moment never to love anyone like he had loved his friend. We all sat quietly feeling the suffering of this death.

WHO AM I?

Pilgrimage continues for me, in my inner exploration of what I have learned from this journey. I come home knowing that I have had an extremely powerful experience, knowing that I feel different from who I was before this sojourn, and quite unable to define all that happened for me. I see changes in myself since I've returned. My eyes are more open. I am noticing and appreciating nature in a far deeper way than I ever have. My heart is more open. When I attended a fund-raiser recently, I found myself drawn to interacting with a group of physically and mentally disabled people who were on the periphery. I am able to see suffering and touch it more easily. I remember the slow pace of life in India and move my own life more in that direction. I don't know where these changes will lead, but I feel quite happy to remain in the river, to watch the continual unfolding.

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