SILICON VALLEY MONK

From Metaphysics to Reality on the Buddhist Path

J.A. KEMPF

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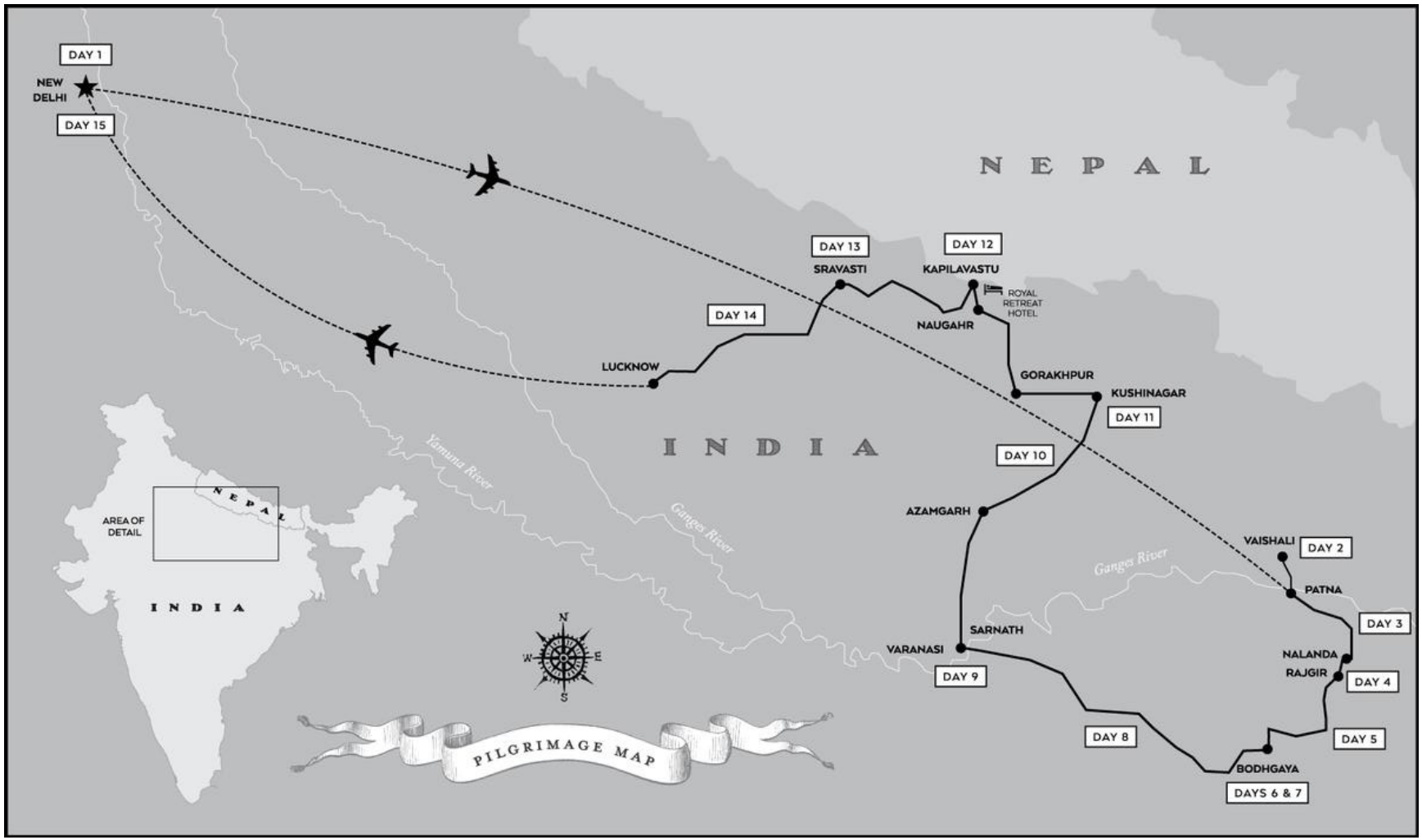
Table of Contents


DAY 1
NEW DELHI
DAY 15
NEPAL
DAY 13
SRAVASTI
DAY 12
KAPILAVASTU
ROYAL RETREAT HOTEL
NAUGAHR
DAY 14
LUCKNOW
GORAKHPUR
KUSHINAGAR
DAY 11
INDIA
DAY 10
AZAMGARH
Yamuna River
Ganges River
AREA OF DETAIL
NEPAL
INDIA
VAISHALI
DAY 2
Ganges River
PATNA
DAY 3
SARNATH
VARANASI
DAY 9
NALANDA
RAJGIR
DAY 4
DAY 8
DAY 5
BODHGAYA
DAYS 6 & 7
N
W
E
S
PILGRIMAGE MAP

Part 1 - Impermanence

"Nothing behind me, everything ahead of me, as is ever so on the road"

Jack Kerouac, On the Road

Prelude - January, 2010

After an early morning limo ride to San Francisco Airport, Renate and I straggle out of the limousine and into the terminal. We are on our way to India for a two week pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh with Stephen Batchelor, the renowned Buddhist teacher. The pilgrimage has been organized by *Tricycle* magazine, a Buddhist literary journal. Within a day of our arrival in Dehli, we will be in the wilds of rural Bihar without guaranteed access to drug stores, clean water, the Internet, or other amenities of civilized life. We have no baggage to check and I have printed our boarding passes the night before. We thread our way through the crowds as energetically as possible given the early hour, heading toward the security checkpoint. I'm carrying my backpack over my right shoulder and pulling my rolling suitcase behind me, occasionally stumbling as I step on a wheel due to inattention from sleepiness. We make our way to the long line leading into the maw of the checkpoint. A month before our flight, Richard Reid tried to blow up a plane in Detroit by setting his underwear on fire, throwing international aviation security into high alert. We are expecting the worst, but TSA has no unpleasant surprises for us and the security check proceeds smoothly, with little delay.

The airlines instituted new baggage fees during the previous summer in an effort to increase revenue, so now everyone is carrying baggage onto the flight to avoid the fee. Because we have no special frequent flyer privileges on Continental, our boarding group is number 4. By the time we board the flight for Newark; all the overhead bins are full. We are forced to check our rolling luggage just steps from the door of the plane. We do get to keep our backpacks though. I travel a lot for business, and checked baggage is an invitation for trouble. If our bags are lost, our departure from Dehli might be delayed, or we may have to depend on Continental to find us in Bihar, a situation unlikely to resolve in our favor. This triggers the feeling of anxiety in me that arises every time something doesn't go as planned during a trip involving air travel.

"But what if our bags are lost," I say to Renate in German, for the third time as we sit at the departure gate in Newark, waiting for the flight to Delhi to board. We usually speak German together when nobody else is around, "It's happened in the past. Don't you remember it was on our honeymoon when we also went to

India?"

"Yeah but that was when we returned to the US," she replies, "I think you're being too pessimistic. Let's just wait and see."

My mind has become obsessed with the prospect of arriving in Delhi without luggage. I can see us beginning the pilgrimage with only the clothes on our backs and the contents of our backpacks. Despite over thirty years of mindfulness and meditation practice, on my way to India for a pilgrimage, I'm caught in a round of obsessive thinking about myself and my future comfort.

I persist, "We only have one night in Delhi before we leave for Patna. That's not enough time to wait around for our bags."

She finally gives in with a sigh and agrees to go shopping with me in case our luggage doesn't show up in India. We rise from our seats and plunge into the shopping mall that is the air terminal. We find a men's wear store and I buy two pairs of underwear and two pairs of socks. At a souvenir store, I buy two "I (Heart) New York" T-shirts. We stop at a pharmacy and I buy a toothbrush, Clartin for allergies, and dental floss because I've packed all that in my rolling bag (toothpaste is in the liquids bag in my backpack). Renate declines to stock up, insisting that if our luggage really *is* lost, she'll find something in Delhi. With my new purchases, I think I could do most of the pilgrimage without any luggage, if not exactly in comfort, and my anxiety eases. After that exercise in consumerism, we buy a couple of smoothies and return to the departure gate to await the flight.

The plane for Delhi leaves on time. We settle into our seats, with water bottles and iPod near at hand, and then eat dinner. We spend much of the flight making extensive use of the wonderful in-flight entertainment system with several hundred available movies, and, surprisingly, sleeping relatively well. We land on time at the Indira Gandhi International Airport in Delhi after 24 hours of travel including the 4 hour layover in Newark. In the end, to my delight, Continental comes through, validating Renate's position that all would be well. Our luggage arrives, trundling around the luggage carousal and out into my gratefully waiting arms, none the worse for having ridden out the flight in the baggage compartment instead of four feet above my head.

After clearing customs and immigration, we meet our driver waiting near the exit with a small sign bearing our last name. He escorts us out of the terminal to his car, and drives us to our guest house through the dark streets of New Delhi. The weather is freezing cold and foggy; the air smells of sulfur from coal power plant pollution. I am reminded of the smell of the coke ovens from my youth in Pennsylvania, when the east wind blew the stench from steel-making toward our home. It is almost midnight when we arrive. The guest house is clean and comfortable, and after brushing our teeth and changing into our bed clothes we lay down on the double bed to sleep. I sleep fitfully, partially due to jet lag and partially due to the adrenalin from having travelled halfway around the world in a single day. Near 5 AM, I have a series of half waking dreams where I am trying to look at the clock but can't find the button for the light. Just before waking, I think I hear the sound of a mosquito, but is it a dream or not?

Flashback - The Early 1970's

Though I was the first on my father's side of the family to enroll in college, I was really only peripherally interested in academics. After expending little effort in high school, I did well enough to be admitted into a good university, but my primary interest in college was participating in the tidal wave of social and cultural change shaking the nation. Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut - known for being very liberal to radical - looked like a good place to do it. At the time, it seemed a great adventure. I believed the young people of America had an opportunity to change Western civilization in fundamental ways, to redefine the social, cultural, and political structure of the country. Indeed, it even seemed to me that we had the opportunity to redefine the nature of ourselves and the way we know and relate to the world.

Central among the tools in this quest were psychedelic drugs. LSD, mescaline, and psilocybin were widely available on campus. Many of my classmates treated psychedelics as party drugs, conforming to the middle class stereotype of the hippie college student. But for me, they were, instead, a way of exploring the nature of reality, no different in purpose than the scientific method taught in my organic chemistry class or the literary analysis techniques I learned in freshman English. My use of psychedelics was well thought out, not indiscriminate. I conducted my explorations alone, to avoid the complex emotional challenge of having to relate to other people while reality was fluidly changing around me. I took only a half to a quarter of the recommended dose and restricted my trips to once or twice a semester. On every trip, I had to confront the fear that rationality would desert me, and I would end up in a mental hospital or worse. My grades suffered, naturally, but I was able to keep them up and ended up graduating with a middle B average.

Another tool in the quest for liberation was books. Not the books assigned in my classes, but books that spoke to my yearning for spiritual adventure. The books of Evans-Wentz, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and *The Tibetan Book of the Great Liberation*, first introduced me to Tibetan Buddhist thought and meditation techniques. Through these books, and the *Way of the White Cloud* by Lama Govinda, I developed a sense of longing for Old Tibet. For a time, after reading Lama Govinda's book, I was convinced that I would travel to Tsaparang

in western Tibet when I finished college and become the first Westerner to visit since Lama Govinda. Tibetan Buddhism described a world where mystical experience - the very same experience I was encountering in my explorations with psychedelics - was accepted as a valid way of knowing reality.

Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, the dual sided book *Computer Lib/Dream Machines* by Ted Nelson introduced me to the possibilities inherent in the coming computer revolution. Wesleyan was one of the first schools to convert from the old batch processing IBM mainframe style machines, which were programmed with punched cards, to the newer interactive timesharing machines. The school bought a DEC 10 system which could be programmed through an electronic terminal with a keyboard and a screen, like a modern PC but with a character-based user interface instead of a graphical interface. Any student could get an account on the DEC 10 for unlimited computer time. I fell in love with the DEC 10, and spent evenings writing FORTRAN programs on the timesharing terminals. The programs drew pictures using letters, numbers or other characters instead of using lines and shading. None of the programs I wrote were assignments from my classes. Programs were never without their problems, and finding and fixing them required reasoning about how the program worked, suspending emotional or egotistical judgment. In computer programming, I was learning the art of rational problem solving. Rational analysis was almost the direct opposite of mystical experience, but I found no contradiction in pursuing it in parallel to my explorations with Tibetan Buddhism and drugs.

In my sophomore year, I took a course in Buddhist meditation. The teacher was a young woman professor who taught us Insight, or Vipassana, meditation, a type of meditation historically associated with Thailand, Burma, and Sri Lanka. We sat for a short period on plastic chairs in a room lit with fluorescent tubes in the basement of the new Science Tower, watching our thoughts, sensations, and breath in mindfulness. The professor then talked about the three marks of existence -impermanence (*anicca* in the ancient Indian language of Pali), suffering (*dukkha* in Pali) and not-self (*anatta* in Pali) - and how all of our life experience is woven through with these three strands. I could theoretically understand her point about impermanence but I didn't seem to be suffering, and I had no idea what she was talking about when she spoke of not-self. My life seemed to be just fine. I did enjoy the meditation though, so I resolved to take up a daily meditation practice, based on silently repeating the Tibetan mantra *om mani padme hum!*[1]

But with time, I began to understand. Suffering became real to me during a session in cell biology lab. We were required to "sacrifice" a lab rat, and then remove and grind up the rat's liver. Each team of students was provided with a miniature stainless steel guillotine to perform the procedure. That afternoon, the students in the lab were possessed by a peculiar mood. People cracked stupid jokes and there was a kind of tension in the air. Most of us hadn't been that close to death before, and we had little idea how to handle the proximity gracefully. I was selected to be the rat's executioner. A teammate held the rat down as I pushed the blade into its neck. The poor animal gave out a loud squeak and died. I suddenly had a realization that the rat had suffered and died due to my actions, just for us to be able to complete a lab assignment. Even if I didn't feel as if I was suffering, my actions had impact that caused suffering in others.

Impermanence, too, became viscerally real one Saturday night. I decided to take LSD and attend one of the free films provided by the student activities committee. The film that night was Akira Kurosawa's epic, *Seven Samurai*. The theater was packed, and I had to stand in the aisles because I had arrived too late to get a seat. As the movie started, the drug took hold and reality slowly began to slip from its moorings. I had trouble following the plot, the theater was hot, and I lost interest in the film. I walked out of the theater and back to my dorm room. I sat down in my desk chair, and watched the play of lights and feelings as the drug experience gathered power, then moved to the floor, put on my headphones, and tuned the radio to the underground FM radio station from New Haven.

The first few songs were unremarkable, but then, as the drug experience was peaking, a song called *Lucky Man* by the English progressive rock supergroup Emerson, Lake, and Palmer came on. It tells the story of a prince who has everything a man could want - fame, women, wealth, and a wonderful life - then he goes to war and is killed. Suddenly, I understood what the young woman professor had meant about impermanence. Impermanence was no longer theoretical. Reality seemed to be literally dissolving before my very eyes. As soon as something arose, it disappeared. The whole of the universe was radically and totally impermanent - with the single exception of the Witness, myself, - watching it all fall apart.[2]

Day 1 - New Delhi

The next morning in the guest house, we breakfast on scrambled eggs, toast, and hot tea. The T shirts I bought in Newark are too small for me, so I give them away to the guest house staff members that have children. I leave the toothbrush in our room and Renate takes the floss, since it turns out to be mint flavored, which I don't like and she does. We split the socks, which are warm and fuzzy and will no doubt serve us well in the cold Indian winter. Later during the pilgrimage, I give the underwear, which is too large for me, to the bus driver, who is somewhat portly.

After breakfast, we check out. We'll be spending the next two weeks with thirty people who, with the exception of Stephen Batchelor, we've never met. The pilgrimage will cover the area in India where the Buddha was born, grew up, met enlightenment, taught for over 40 years, and died. Local arrangements were made by Eleven Directions, a travel agency founded by Shantum Seth, the trip co-leader and a Buddhist teacher in his own right.

We are to meet our fellow pilgrims at Gandhi Smirti, where Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated in January 1948, just around the same time of year of our visit. At Gandhi Smirti, there is no evidence of a group gathering, so Renate and I do a short tour of the grounds. "Smirti" means "memory" or "remembrance" in Hindi. Gandhi Smirti is primarily here to help educate Indians, many of whom are illiterate, about Gandhi's work and to keep his memory alive. In the front is a Victorian house, where Gandhi stayed the night before he was killed. A small shrine is built over the exact spot where Gandhi was shot in a grassy courtyard. The courtyard is empty as we visit the shrine, standing in silence to contemplate the events that occurred in this spot 62 years ago. Then we walk back toward the house in Gandhi's last footsteps which are marked on the ground. It's hard to imagine what this peaceful place must have been like back then: the courtyard packed with people waiting to see the Mahatma, who was fasting to protest the partition of India; the Mahatma walking out of his room in the Victorian, weak from his fast and supported on both arms; Nathuram Godse, his Hindu nationalist assassin pulling out a pistol and pumping three bullets into the Mahatma's chest; Gandhi collapsing on the ground, dead. I wonder what the subsequent history of India and Pakistan would have been like had Gandhi lived.

Would they have fought three wars and developed nuclear weapons despite the grinding poverty afflicting both nations?

After checking out the rest of the courtyard, we head back to the gate. In our absence, someone from the pilgrimage has arrived. We introduce ourselves and I find out that he is Steve Wachinsky, a retired biochemist from Seattle. Steve is a husky guy in his late 60's with tattoos of Avalokitashvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, and some Japanese mythological characters covering his arms. Later, Bill and Patty Vogel show up, an elderly couple from Florida. We wait and wait, the time for the pilgrimage group to meet comes and goes but nobody else shows up. Bima, one of the staff at Eleven Directions calls Steve.

"Yes that's right," says Steve into his cell phone in a hoarse voice, "We're at the gate: Renate, James, and Patty and Bill Vogel."

He listens for a moment.

"No, I said Renate and James...", he breaks off and removes the phone from his ear.

"You better talk with her," he says, handing the phone to me, "She can't understand what I'm saying."

I take the phone from him and put it up to my ear.

"Bima, this is James. What's the problem?" I ask.

The voice of a young woman with a British-Indian accent comes on. "The group has arrived and is starting the tour. Where are you?" she asks concerned.

"We're at the gate," I insist.

"Can you see the bus?" she asks.

"Just a minute..." I reply. I remove the phone from my ear and look around.

Down the street from us sits a big blue bus. I return to the phone.

"Is the bus blue?" I ask.

"I'm not sure, let me check," she replies. I hear the sounds of muffled conversation, and Bima returns to the phone.

"Yes that's it!" she says relieved, "Please go down to the other gate and join the group."

I say goodbye and hand the phone back to Steve. We walk down to the other gate and leave our luggage with the driver, hurrying into Gandhi Smirti to catch up with the group.

I spot Stephen Batchelor at the back of the group, walk up to him and say hello. Stephen and I know each other from previous retreats. We had even spoken a few months earlier when Stephen and his wife Martine attended a reception we held at our home in California. The reception was for Insight Meditation South Bay, the local *Vipassana* meditation group where Renate and I sit, and Martine, who is also a meditation teacher, was the guest of honor. Stephen's credentials as a teacher are impressive: eight years studying with Geshe Rabten one of the most formidable Tibetan monk-philosophers of the mid-20th century, until he split with the Tibetan teaching over the question of rebirth, and three years studying Korean Zen together with his future wife Martine. Their teacher was Kusan Sunim, and they left the Sangha and married when he died. In the years since, Stephen has published many books on Buddhist philosophy and has founded a direction of inquiry called Secular Buddhism. Secular Buddhism attempts to strip Buddhism of the metaphysical baggage from premodern times and to return the emphasis to the essence of the Buddha's teachings: how to live this life, right now.

Shantum Seth, the other teacher and guide, is talking about Gandhi and after greeting Stephen, I turn to listen to what he is saying. Shantum is a short, pleasant Indian man with dark rimmed glasses, neatly dressed in a long brown coat and vest, and a round black cap. Shantum says that before he goes on a pilgrimage he always comes to Gandhi Smirti to reflect on Gandhi's life and work, since Gandhi's philosophy of nonviolence and social work inspired

Shantum's own commitment to engaged Buddhism. Because Gandhi was so revered for his philosophy of nonviolent civil disobedience by India and in fact the whole world, the consequences for the political party that shot him were severe. The Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, was effectively kept out of power for almost 50 years, only returning to the political scene in the early 1990's. We revisit the shrine and the footsteps, and then see some dioramas inside the Victorian house that explain Gandhi's life in simple terms.

We finish the tour around 2 PM and board the bus for the short trip through New Delhi to Shantum's house. We pass the Old Fort and cross over the Yamuna River. Shantum says the Yamuna, like many rivers in India, is an open sewer. We can see trash and black water from the bus, but the closed windows and pervasive stench of burning coal prevent us from smelling anything. Shantum says that the government has tried over the years to do something about the pollution, but the population grows so fast that as soon as some infrastructure is built, its capacity is already out of date. Alternatively, the demand is so overwhelming that the government doesn't have enough money to do a proper job.

Shantum lives in a nice, middle class neighborhood outside of Delhi. The houses are all multistory, reinforced concrete and closely packed, but they all have small yards with gardens and flowers surrounded by walls. There are no sidewalks and not nearly as much trash as out on the main streets. We meet Shantum's gracious wife and well-behaved kids, two daughters, both in elementary school, and have a delicious vegetarian meal with rice and various spicy Indian veggie dishes. I have a pleasant conversation during lunch with Burt. Burt is tall and heavy-set, in his mid-to-late 60's with sad eyes and medium length grey-black hair. We exchange some talk about our work lives, the usual topic for American men when getting to know each other. Burt is a retired structural steel contractor from the east side of the San Francisco Bay and he tells me about how he decided to close his company after a Chinese company outbid him on the contract to rebuild the Bay Bridge. I tell him about my job as a network system architect with a major mobile Internet infrastructure vendor.

After lunch, we gather in a circle and Shantum talks about logistics. With 32 people, we are too many to fit in Shantum's front living room, so Renate and I end up sitting out in the garden, even though it is freezing cold. We pull our fleece jacks tighter and I don the knitted watch cap that was a birthday present

from Renate many years ago. During the talk the sun peeks out from among the clouds and we warm up a bit. Shantum says that normally, the group would go around the circle and everyone would introduce themselves, but today we don't have time for that since we will be leaving shortly for the airport. I'm usually skeptical about that corny custom of having everyone go around and say a bit about themselves. Invariably some people take the opportunity to recite their entire autobiography from birth, which is perhaps the reason Shantum has decided to forego the introductions today. But I'm also disappointed, since it will make getting to know people in the group much harder for me. There is nothing to start a conversation about, and I am not a person who can just walk up to someone and start asking questions about their life. I had hoped to at least get a sense of the depth of people's Buddhist practice. But it seems we will have to start out the trip as strangers.

Shantum tells us that from the airport we will have an hour and a half flight to Patna, a city in the eastern state of Bihar, where the pilgrimage will start. We'll travel by bus between the cities, staying in middle class hotels which were, for the most part, built to house Buddhist pilgrims, and eating in the hotels or in better restaurants. The pilgrimage will trace a geographical route from east to west that covers the different periods in the Buddha's life in a more or less random order: Vaishali and Rajgir where the Buddha spent time periodically during his teaching career but which were most important in the last months of his life, Bodhgaya where he met enlightenment, Varanasi and Sarnath where he began his teaching career, Kushinagar where he died, Kapilavastu where he spent his childhood, and Sravasti where he spent most of his life during his teaching career. Then we'll travel to Lucknow where the group will split. Half the group will take the plane back to Delhi and the other half will continue on by train to visit the Taj Mahal and the Ajanta and Ellora caves, rock cut monasteries from the early years of the last millennium in western India near Bombay.

As Shantum talks, I'm reminded of the millions of other pilgrims whose footsteps we will follow. The path of our journey traces that of the two most famous classical pilgrims, Xuanzang and Faxian who were Chinese monks, but in the reverse direction. They started out in China from the city of Ch'ang-an and travelled along the Silk Road first by horse and then on foot. They approached the area where the Buddha lived and taught from the west through what is now Pakistan and the Punjab, and then travelled through Kushinagar, Sravasti, Sarnath and Varanasi, Vaishali, Bodhgaya, and Rajgir.

Xuanzang's travels lasted 16 years, from 629 to 645 AD and he spent a good deal of that time in Nalanda, the Buddhist university city, teaching and gathering Buddhist texts. When Xuanzang left China, the T'ang Dynasty Emperor Taizong was newly arrived on the throne and his political position was not yet solidified so there was a considerable amount of unrest. On top of that, the emperor was not sympathetic to Buddhism, so he forbade anyone from leaving China by the western route. Xuanzang left from Ch'ang-an, the great northern capital of the T'ang Dynasty, but he had to sneak out of the country at night because Emperor Taizong had ordered his arrest. Xuanzang's primary goal was to collect Buddhist texts for translation and return to China with them. In that, he succeeded since many of the Chinese translations of classical Buddhist texts derive from the documents Xuanzang brought with him. Upon his return to China, Xuanzang was celebrated as a hero and honored by the emperor. In the ensuing years since Xuanzang had left China, the emperor's political position had strengthened and he had developed an interest in and sympathy for Buddhism. Xuanzang's journey inspired a cycle of legends that became a 16th century novel, *Monkey* or *Journey to the West*, which remains a favorite children's story even today.

Faxian's journey predated Xuanzang's by 230 years and lasted 23 years. In addition to India, Faxian visited Sri Lanka, and Java which at that time was also a Buddhist kingdom. He too brought back texts which he translated while living out the rest of his life in Nanjing. Unlike Xuanzang and Faxian, we have the luxury of modern transportation technology so we don't have to spend years on the road. Though, by the look of the Indian traffic during our drive through Delhi in the afternoon, I wonder if a bus is really that much faster than an elephant, which is what Xuanzang rode on his way back to China.

After Shantum is done speaking, we all file out of his living room and pile onto the bus. On the trip to the airport, jet lag catches up with me and I start nodding. I'm roused from my half slumber by Shantum and Steve Wachinsky talking about the transportation system in Delhi.

"So how do people get around in New Delhi?" asks Steve.

"Up until recently, mostly by bus or car," Shantum replies, "The traffic is so bad it used to take 2 hours to travel from one part of Delhi to another."

"In Seattle, we have a pretty good transit system," says Steve, "Mostly busses and light rail, but we also have a monorail that was built for the 1962 World's Fair."

"Things have improved a lot in Delhi recently," Shantum says with pride, "The government is building a subway, you can see some of the stations still under construction."

He gestures toward a construction site outside the bus window, situated on the other side of the street.

"Many lines have already opened," he continues, "The subway has revolutionized urban life, despite the inconvenience of the construction. Now it now takes only 20 minutes to ride across town. The subway is used by all social classes, and the fares are subsidized so riding the subway remains affordable for most people. The cars are new and clean, and there's air conditioning in the summer."

At the airport, we file past the guards watching the terminal door, one by one, and form up as a group again at the Air India counter, where we give up our bags for mass checkin. Indian airlines only allow one carry-on, so Renate and I check our rolling luggage and carry our small backpacks. The group then gathers in front of the security checkpoint. Shantum tells us that we should go individually through security and wait for him on the other side. No batteries or flashlights are allowed in the carry-on, though cameras with batteries are OK. Each country seems to have its own set of arbitrary rules about what can and can't go through an airport security checkpoint. The checkpoint has two aisles, a men's aisle with male security agents and a woman's aisle with female agents. The facilities are pretty primitive: cloth curtains enclosing the checkpoint rather than plastic screens, no conveyer belt with X-ray machine for the luggage and no electronic body scanner for the passengers, just a table on which I am told to place my backpack. An agent looks through my backpack, while another agent pats me down, and then they wave me through. Renate emerges from the woman's side shortly after I'm out.

On the other side of the checkpoint, the group waits and waits, but no Shantum

yet. A short woman with dark eyes and dark hair cut short in a pageboy looks worried.

"What do you suppose is the problem?" she asks.

"No idea," I reply. I glance up at the clock. The plane is scheduled to leave in 15 minutes. I turn back to her. "I don't know about you but if we don't get down to that plane soon we are going to miss the flight."

I turn and run down the stairs to the departure gate where I can see buses waiting to take us to the plane. The others follow. As our bus is pulling out, I see Stephen Batchelor trying to get through the door to the bus, which has just closed, but still no sign of Shantum.

At the plane I settle into my seat next to the window in the tail section. The woman who had asked about what the holdup was after the security checkpoint sits down next to me and introduces herself as Sophia. I ask her if she found out about what had happened.

"Shantum said that somebody apparently forgot to get their boarding pass stamped," she replies, "So he had to go back to the airline counter."

"It's a good thing we didn't miss the plane," I reply.

"I guess travel bureaucracy is the same everywhere," she says, "If we were in the US, it would be some problem with TSA," and we both laugh.

After I explain to Sophia that I work for a company which makes some of the equipment running the Internet, I spend most of the flight to Patna answering Sophia's questions about how the Internet works. We are served dinner, it is quite good, chapatis with spicy dal and rice, then a couple of yogurt dishes. The air is hot and stuffy, but there is no room for me to take off my jacket and vest. After dinner, I nod off, succumbing to jet lag again, and wake up as the wheels hit the runway. Despite the chaotic beginning, we have left no one behind in Delhi, and everyone disembarks the plane. By this time, I'm completely wiped out, my right hip is killing me and I just want to get horizontal. Mosquitoes cruise around the door to the bus and my exhausted mind turns to anxiety about

dengue fever and malaria.

At the hotel we briefly gather in the lobby. Shantum has prepared a small pilgrimage packet for each of us with information about the sights we will see. Shantum wants to hand out the packet the next day but his helper, Jagdish, has already removed half the packets from the bus and spread them out on a table. One of the pilgrims insists that we should get the packet tonight, so half of us get packets while the other half must wait until the next day. Naturally, those who must wait don't know who they are, so everyone must file past the table and check whether their packet is out or not. Finally, after checking for our pilgrim packets (mine isn't there, Renate's is) and getting our room key, we queue up for the elevator.

The elevator is a small dingy box barely big enough for three thin people and a large backpack. Even though there already two people in the elevator, I squeeze in and motion Renate to follow since there is still some room. But she refuses a reflection of a basic personality difference between us. I'm ready to jump into situations where the risks are high and the payoff uncertain whereas she is cautious and hangs back until the risk versus payoff situation is clearer. Since I know the room number we are in and she doesn't, I have to jump out and push through the doors at the last minute as they are closing. The elevator makes a loud buzzing sound, like a duck with its foot caught in a trap, and the doors refuse to close. Have I broken them? I don't care; I am close to collapsing on the floor from exhaustion. We decide not to take the elevator but instead find the stairs and despite total exhaustion, haul our luggage up the steps by hand to our room on the second floor.

Once inside the room, I collapse on the bed - finally horizontal! - for a few minutes to rest my back. We quickly go through most of the three small water bottles the hotel has provided us for tooth brushing and flushing out the nose to rehydrate the sinuses after the flight. Then we chat about the day.

"You know," I say after the conversation has matured a bit, "I think we may be in trouble with the cold. Neither of us have much warm clothing along. It's much colder than the last time we were in India, in the November after we were married."

"I think we'll do OK," she says, "You've got your vest and polar fleece and I've

got my polar fleece plus long underwear."

When the conversation slows, we retire to bed and, after a short period of reading, it's lights out. Nine milligrams of melatonin helps me sleep through the night with only a few short awakenings.

Day 2-Patna and Vaishali

Breakfast is at 8, after which we board the bus for Vaishali. As we board, Shantum tells us to pick out a round black cushion for sitting on during meditation, and to find our pilgrim packet if we did not already get one. A woven plastic sitting mat and a white cotton pilgrim scarf are included along with the pilgrim packet, so we will at least have a comfortable and clean place to sit and something to keep our neck warm and shade our head from the sun, and a stainless steel cup for times when the teahouse cups look less than clean. I take a window seat up front right behind the driver, to avoid motion sickness and Renate sits down next to me. When all the pilgrims are on the bus, the driver closes the door and the bus grinds out down the hotel driveway in the direction of Vaishali. The driver, a robust Sikh of smallish stature, navigates deftly through the chaos of Patna's traffic. Indian drivers, it seems, don't use their mirrors and don't look around at what other drivers are doing. Instead, they utilize sound for "situational awareness", like sonar on submarines. That explains why Indian trucks and busses have "Horn Please!" tattooed on their back bumpers.

In 1979, Renate and I had come to India for our honeymoon on a trip around the world from Europe to the US, returning to finish graduate school. Though we had not gone to Bihar, we had spent some time in Delhi and rode the train north to Mussoorie in the foothills of the Himalayas where we stayed with some Western friends who were teaching at a private high school. At that time, India had struck me as being very poor and underdeveloped, but I was not particularly shocked because I expected it. Today, back in Silicon Valley, many of our work colleagues are Indian graduates of the well-regarded Indian Institute of Technology chain of universities. We hear a lot about how India is now developing a middle class, and about the growing high tech cities of Bangalore, Pune, and Gurgaon near Delhi, with their shopping malls and nice apartment buildings.

But we see none of that as we drive along National Highway 19 on the run up to the route over the Ganges. There are people *everywhere* along the side of the road, and most of them are children or teenagers. Men are working on three wheeled motorized rickshaws. Women are cooking around a fire. Half naked

children are playing in the mud. Looking out over the sand flats, here and there are people squatting down for their morning shit. The people seem to live out their lives on the street. Where you might see a couple dozen people walking around in a downtown area in Europe or the US, here there are crowds gathered on the banks of the river in small huts made of tin and thatch and run-down concrete structures lining the road, arguing, eating, conducting business transactions, and doing everything that we, in the developed world, do inside. The entire Indian tech revolution that has transformed the regions around Bangalore, Pune, and Gurgaon hasn't touched this part of Bihar. It is almost as if we have entered a time warp and gone back to 1979.

We drive onto the Mahatma Gandhi Bridge, a 5 km long, two lane structure that conveys National Highway 19 across the Ganges. Popularly known as the Ganga Setu, the span is the longest single river bridge in the world. Construction started in 1972 and completed ten years later. But the road surface is in such terrible condition it seems as if no maintenance has been done since the bridge opened in 1982. We bounce up and down, hitting concrete potholes, as our driver jams the accelerator to the floor. The Ganges here is huge, but mostly we're crossing riverbed, white sand now since it is the dry season. In the middle of the bridge right near the thin ribbon of the remaining river, Stephen asks the bus driver to stop. The driver pulls over to the side, but there is not much of a shoulder on the bridge so we end up occupying half the left lane. Traffic begins to back up behind us, and starts creeping around the right side of the bus, horns blaring.

From the front of the bus, Stephen gives a short talk about the role of Vaishali in the story of the Buddha's life, framing what we are about to see. Vaishali was the capital of the Vajjian Republic, a small state with republican government and a parliament. Contrary to popular belief in the West, republican government didn't start with the Athenians around 550 BC. The small states of northern India were flourishing republics at least a century before. But republican government wasn't on the upswing during the Buddha's life, it was in decline. At the end of the Buddha's life around 420 BC, Vaishali was the last state in northern India that had republican government. Authoritarian government was the new trend as the Buddha died, and democracy did not return to India for over 2,000 years, until India achieved independence from Britain in 1947.

The Buddha didn't spend a lot of time in Vaishali, but he did spend his last rains

retreat there in the months before he died. During most of the year, the Buddha and his monks wandered throughout the Ganges Plain, giving talks, teaching, and begging for alms. But the unpaved roads and paths in the fields became impassable during the monsoon, so the monks settled in one spot, usually at a "retreat center" donated by a wealthy individual. There, the monks would undertake a three month meditation and study retreat, together with the Buddha and his senior teachers until the rains were over. The Buddha spoke occasionally about his admiration for the republican government of the Vajjian Republic. He modeled governance of his Sangha, the organization of monks and nuns he founded to continue his teaching, on the republican form. But the Sangha couldn't escape the trend of the secular society around it, and it quickly descended into patriarchal, authoritarian rule after the Buddha died.

By now the cars and trucks backed up behind the bus have stopped honking and are taking turns filing around the bus, letting loose with a quick honk beforehand to let everybody know where they are. Stephen finishes his talk with an anecdote about the Buddha's bowl. A bowl is one of the few personal possessions allowed to Buddhist monks.

"When he headed north after his last rains retreat," Stephen says, "The Buddha left his bowl in Vaishali. The bowl was supposedly carried off by a Pashtun warlord to Khandahar in Afghanistan around 1000 AD during the Muslim conquest of India and was incorporated into the shrine of a minor Muslim saint, where it sits today."

After Stephen is finished, the driver releases the emergency brake and gingerly eases the bus into the flow of traffic wending around him. I turn around and look out the back window. A massive traffic jam has built itself behind the bus. Most of the drivers are waiting patiently for the line of vehicles to start moving. Despite the fact that the bus is now fully occupying the left lane, occasional motorcycle drivers brave a passing maneuver when a fleeting opening presents itself in the other lane. Indian drivers are, if nothing else, adventurous.

After an hour and a half drive, we arrive at Kolhua, a complex of brick ruins near where the old city of Vaishali was located. Kolhua is the site of a supposed miracle, where a monkey gave the Buddha a bowel of honey, then promptly died, being impaled on a branch as he did back flips in joy over his act of generosity. The ruins include foundations of monasteries excavated down 8 feet

below the current ground level, many small domed shrines, called stupas, and one huge stupa, the Stupa of the Monkey's Gift. All the ruins are constructed from red brick with stone foundations. Since the technology of brickmaking was unknown in the Buddha's time, the ruins date from around 200 years after the Buddha at the earliest, by which time brickmaking had become well established. There is also a rather simple Ashokan pillar with a lion capital on top, cut from a grey featureless stone. In the foggy January light, the red bricks and green grass glow in muted pastels.

When we assemble at the huge stupa, Stephen tells the story of Ashoka and the Ashokan pillars. From 269 to 232 BC, the Emperor Ashoka conquered a huge chunk of India, stretching west from Bangladesh to Afghanistan and south from the Himalayas to northern Kerala. In 261 BC, Ashoka fought a brutal war with the state of Kalinga, which he ultimately won, but at the cost of over 100,000 deaths. The experience of that war caused Ashoka to convert to Buddhism and he became a powerful patron of the Buddhist Sangha. He erected pillars at various points in his empire, many of which were carved with a collection of laws, called the Ashokan Edicts, promoting nonviolence, charity, and kindness. Because the pillar here at Vaishali is rather simply carved, and there are no edicts on the column, the column is thought to be one of the first to be erected.

Another short drive brings us to a Thai monastery where we are to have lunch. When we arrive, the road is so packed with cars and people milling about that the bus driver has a difficult time finding a place to park. The First Minister from the state of Bihar is having lunch at the nunnery across the street. In India, the First Minister is like the governor of a state in the US. Shantum tells us that, after years of corrupt and dysfunctional government, this First Minister is a reformer and is apparently doing a much better job at getting services to the people of the state, rather than lining his pockets and the pockets of his family and friends. Many of the people are there to present him with petitions for government action on specific issues. By the time we finish lunch, the minister has left and so has his entourage.

The upper floors of the monetary are left open to the outside instead of having windows, like a parking garage. We climb up the stairway and file into the second floor room where our lunch is set out. The sunlight from the morning at Kolhua has since disappeared and the fog has become thicker. Like most buildings in India, the monastery has no heating and is freezing cold. Our hot

lunch has turned cold waiting for us to arrive. Only the tea is hot. I have on my long underwear shirt, a vest, and my polar fleece jacket but I could use a parka too because a cold wind starts to blow through the openings in the walls.

After lunch, we spread our mats, drop our zafus, and sit meditation on the cold cement floor in the temple room. Stephen gives a talk about the importance of Vaishali in the Buddha's life after the sitting. Two basic sequences of events related to Vaishali proved important: one involving the first ordination of women and another involving the events around the last months before the Buddha+ died.

"The nunnery you saw across the street was founded by a Vietnamese nun because this location is where the first women were ordained," he says.

"That act formally established the bhikkhuni, or female, Sangha," he explains.

Once when the Buddha was in his home town of Kapilavastu in the state of Shakya, his stepmother and a collection of Shakyan women approached him and asked to be ordained. He turned them down, mainly because women at that time were expected to remain with their families and to tend to the household. Later, the Buddha wandered to Vaishali. The women followed him there and his stepmother approached him again. Touched by their persistence in wanting to achieve liberation, he relented and ordained them as bhikkhunis (nuns).

Stephen says that other ascetic movements at the time of the Buddha allowed women to join but put restrictions on them. The Jains, for example, allowed women to shave their heads and wander through the Ganges plan just as men did. But, unlike men, women renunciates were denied the goal of final liberation because they were not permitted to wander naked. After his initial hesitation, the Buddha accepted women into the community without any restriction. Liberation was open to them just as for men. The bhikkhuni Sangha eventually did develop 8 additional rules for women, the so-called *garu dharmas*, which men don't follow. One of the most onerous was the requirement that a man, even a novice, was senior to any woman regardless of the number of years the woman was a member of the Sangha. Today, Stephen tells us, most scholars agree that this was probably a later addition to reinforce the patriarchal nature of the Sangha governance.

Stephen describes how ordination worked in the Buddha's time and how the Sangha developed. One verse from the *Therigatha*, a collection of poems written or conceived by nuns during and shortly after the Buddha's life, records a nun having been invited into the Sangha by the Buddha simply saying: "Ehi bhikkhuni" which means "Come here, nun" in Pali, the language of the Buddha's time. This was the earliest form of ordination, no elaborate ceremony, just the Buddha inviting the person into the order. If the person was male, the invitation was "Ehi bhikkhu." The original Sangha had no rules. The existing set of rules we see today, called the *Vinaya Pitaka*, was put in place in response to incidents involving inappropriate behavior on the part of a monk or nun. The process was kind of like the development of case law in the US and Britain. The *Vinaya Pitaka* is one of three collections of canonical texts in the Pali Canon, the canonical scripture of Buddhism; the other two are the *Sutta Pitaka*, the historical record of the Buddha's teachings, and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*, called the *Abhidharma* in Sanskrit, a collection of philosophical texts on the nature of the mind written after the Buddha's death.

Stephen then talks about the other sequence of events in Vaishali that were important to the Buddha's life: those that played out near the end. Sutta 16 in the *Digna Nikaya*, a volume in the *Sutta Pitaka*, is the *Mahaparanibbana Sutta*. It records the events before and immediately after the Buddha's death. The *Mahaparanibbana Sutta* is the longest sutta in the Pali Canon. It begins when the Buddha was 80 years old and around 6 months away from death, with the Buddha and his attendant Ananda sitting on Vulture Peak near Rajgir, the capital of Magadha, where we will visit in two days. At that time, many of the Buddha's closest supporters were either dead or had deserted him. Coming up the road, the Buddha saw an adviser of King Ajatasatru, the authoritarian ruler of Magadha, approaching. After formally greeting the Buddha, the adviser told the Buddha that the king was thinking of invading the Vajjian Republic. The Buddha then turned to Ananda and said something to the effect of "Didn't I say that nobody could conquer the Vajjian Republic while the Licchavis remained united? That only if they succumbed to political infighting could they be conquered?" The adviser then said something to the effect of "Very good, sir, I will tell the king to use deception instead of force," and headed off back down the mountain. The sutta then continues with the Buddha moving to Vaishali. The Buddha instructed most of his followers to disperse into Vaishali while the Buddha himself and a small group of followers spent the retreat in a mango grove belonging to a

prominent high class prostitute in Vaishali called Ambapali, who was a lay follower of the Buddha.

The *Mahasihanada Sutta*, which is sutta number 12 in the *Majjhima Nikaya*, another volume in the *Sutta Pitaka*, describes some of the events that occurred during the Buddha's last rains retreat in the mango grove. Every morning, the monks and nuns went on alms rounds begging for food in a nearby village. One morning, Sariputta, the chief follower of the Buddha, was on a begging round in the city when he heard Sunakkhata, a former member of the Sangha who had disrobed, denouncing the Buddha to the Vaishali assembly. Sunakkhata was a member of the Licchavi Clan, the dominant clan in the Vajjian Republic. During an earlier period, he had served as the Buddha's attendant for a short period, a position that Ananda, the Buddha's cousin, occupied for most of the Buddha's life. Sariputta reported the following statement from Sunakkhata on his return to the Sangha's encampment:

> "The recluse Gotama does not have any superhuman states, any distinction in knowledge and vision worthy of the noble ones. The recluse Gotama teaches a dhamma hammered out by reasoning, following his own line of inquiry as it occurs to him, and when he teaches the dhamma to anyone, it leads him when he practices it to the complete destruction of craving." [3]

The Buddha's response to Sariputta is the following:

> "The misguided man Sunakkhatta is angry and his words are spoken out of anger. Thinking to discredit me, he actually praises me; for it is praise to say of me: 'When he teaches the dhamma to anyone, it leads him when he practices it to the complete destruction of craving.'"[4]

Indeed, the Four Noble Truths, the basis of the Buddha's teaching, are about the destruction of craving. The Buddha makes quite clear that his teaching is directed to that goal. But the damage was done, and many of the Buddha's lay followers start to desert him due to Sunakkhata's treachery.

The *Mahaparanibbana Sutta* goes on to describe how a collection of youths dressed up in party-colored clothing and with faces painted in colored makeup come out to meet the Buddha and invite him into the city for a meal. He declines, since he has already accepted an invitation from Ambapali, his sponsor. The overall impression left by the description of Vaishali and the Vajjian

Republic in the *Mahaparanibbana Sutta* is of a decadent society in decline, ripe for conquest by an authoritarian ruler. And that is exactly what happened. After a period of propaganda and treachery designed to undermine the Vajjian state, King Ajatasatru invaded Vaishali and incorporated it into Magadha.

When Stephen is finished, we get back on the bus to visit an ancient stupa in which archeologists think the ashes of the Buddha were interred. The *Mahaparanibbana Sutta* continues with the Buddha leaving Vaishali and wandering to Kushinagar where he died of dysentery and was cremated. When the Buddha died, 8 different countries demanded and were given a portion of his ashes. One of the eight countries was the Vajjian Republic.

The stupa itself is little more than a small mound of earth surrounded by stone walls on which a more recent covering of bricks was constructed. In contrast with the stupa we saw in the morning, the primitive nature of the stupa shows because it was not built entirely of brick. Some relics were found very far down in the stupa. The stupa and a small museum are on the site of a huge brick-lined rectangular pond called a tank.

At Kolhua and here we have been followed by a bus of Ladakhis. Ladakh is a province of India that lies on the Tibetan plateau east of Nepal. Like their Tibetan neighbors, who they physically resemble, the Ladakhis practice Tibetan Buddhism. The women dress in dark red and black dresses, with occasional flashes of turquoise and silver jewelry. The men are mostly clean shaven with occasional mustaches and dress in black and brown robes. The Ladakhis show up shortly after Stephen finishes telling us about the stupa. They circumambulate the stupa, walking in a clockwise direction, the traditional Buddhist way to experience a holy shrine. Occasionally one of them falls to the ground and prostrates, mumbling "Om mani padme hum!" One woman even has a silver prayer wheel which she spins as she walks. We fall into line and follow the Ladakhis in their circumambulation. Afterwards, we visit the museum next to the stupa. The museum is lit entirely by natural light, and dim because of the foggy weather. I can't make out much of the exhibits, so I walk quickly through. Once outside, I chat a bit with Jagdish, an Indian man of medium height with a thick mustache who is Shantum's assistant, and then walk over to the tank. Gazing out over the brown-green water, low now due to the dry season, I think about Xuanzang and Faxian and their visits to this area.

Xuanzang visited Kolhua to see the Stupa of the Monkey's Gift, but he had an

additional reason for visiting Vaishali. The city was reputed to be the home of Vimalakirti, a lay follower of the Buddha, who is the subject of the *Vimalakirti Sutra*, a Mahayana sutra written in Sanskrit[5]. The Mahayana (Sanskrit: "Great Vehicle") arose around the first century AD, more than 500 years after the Buddha's death, and survives today in China and Japan. Xuanzang was a follower of the Mahayana. The emphasis in Mahayana Buddhism is not on achieving final liberation from the world as it is for one following the *arhat* (Sanskrit: "perfected one") path of Theravada (Sanskrit: "Teaching of the Elders") Buddhism, which counts the Pali Canon, the historical record of the original teachings of the Buddha, as its primary text corpus. Instead, the Mahayana emphasizes the *bodhisattva* (Sanskrit: "enlightened being") path, working in the world with wisdom and compassion to help people and delaying final liberation to a lifetime in the far distant future. A bodhisattva strives to develop the mind of enlightenment in order to be of service to all beings. The Mahayana corpus includes legendary stories where the Buddha appears as a kind of superman, and the sutras are populated with bodhisattvas as avatars of positive character traits like wisdom and compassion, in addition to exemplary humans. The *Vimalakirti Sutra* is a description of how Vimalakirti bests Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, in a debate. The Vimalakirti legend was popular in China during Xuanzang's time and inspired much art work at Longmen, Ungang, and Dunhuang Caves. During the T'ang Dynasty the legend was the subject of numerous stories and songs. Xuanzang was the translator of the Vimalakirti Sutra, so naturally he would want to visit the city where Vimalakirti supposedly lived.[6] In addition, Xuanzang bought an image in Vaishali of the Buddha on an alms round, to add to the collection of Buddha images that he was planning to take back to China. This was the fifth of seven such images, and was sculpted of sandalwood.[7]

Faxian's account of the city, as with most of the record of his pilgrimage, is filled with stories and legends associated with physical locations. He creates a mythic landscape only tenuously connected with the actual world. He doesn't record much about the city, except to note a forest north of town and Ambapali's mango grove to the west. These are now gone. On all sides, there is nothing but rice fields. The mythic landscape Faxian described vanished with the disappearance of Buddhism from India in the 10th century.

In the fading light of the day, I reflect on the motivations of Xuanzang and

Faxian to undertake what at that time was an arduous journey, and compare them with my own. Both were pious Buddhist monks and had spiritual reasons as their primary motivation. But what would that have meant to them? What sort of spiritual benefit would they have expected from undertaking such a journey? In accordance with their Mahayana beliefs, they probably would have expected accumulating merit towards a favorable rebirth. This favorable rebirth would then have led to more favorable life circumstances where they could have more easily continued to perfect their generosity, patience, wisdom, and compassion towards their ultimate goal of becoming a buddha. My own motivations are considerably more modest. Somehow I'm trying to connect with that time, 2500 plus years ago, when the Buddha walked the earth and delivered his teachings of liberation, even if that connection is difficult to feel today with the natural environment being so degraded and the buildings nothing but piles of brick and stone.

The trip back to Patna as darkness descends is, if anything, more chaotic and bouncy than the trip out. I put on Renate's iPod and listen to David Parsons' *Yantra*, doze a bit, then wake up feeling vaguely nauseous. At one point, the bus has to turn right. Both lanes are filled with motorcycles, cars, trucks, and three wheeled rickshaw cabs all maneuvering for a way forward in whirring confusion. This being India, traffic moves on the left side of the road, as in England, so a right turn involves crossing the right lane. Without stop lights, it is a game of chicken getting across the other lane. The bus driver sits in the intersection for a minute trying to get the feel of the traffic flow, then slowly inches his way forward, because nobody in the other lane is going to stop. The bus, being the largest vehicle in the intersection, is like a mountain in the middle of a river. The vehicles coming from the other direction beep their horns and whiz by, veering off into the other lane and onto the shoulder so they can get around us.

That evening, we have a tasty Indian dinner and spend some time afterward in a group talking about the day. This is what Shantum calls "strucks", *i.e.* "what really struck me today was..." It is a nice way for the group to share their impressions of India and the pilgrimage. We will do this every evening after dinner. When my turn comes up, I talk briefly about being struck by the poverty, and in more detail about the presence of the Buddha as a historical figure, along the lines of my reflection at the tank.

"There's archeological evidence as well as the scriptural stories that a real person existed," I say, "Very little physical evidence exists for Western religious figures such as Jesus or Mohammad, or even for secular philosophers such as Socrates or Plato. We have their teachings preserved through the efforts of multiple generations, but even then the teachings have been altered by time."

Pam, a grandmother from Sausalito with grayish blond hair and a pair of glasses on a chain around her neck, talks about the begging children.

"They really tore at my heart," she concludes sadly, "I had to think of my grandkids."

Shantum nods and gently replies, "We actually didn't really see many children today. It will get much worse as the pilgrimage goes on."

Many of the others also speak about the begging children and their desire to help. After everyone has had a chance to add their observations, the group breaks up and Renate and I head to bed.

Day 3 - Patna Museum and Patna to Rajgir

Patna today is a sprawling city on the banks of the Ganges, replete with aging buildings, street beggars, tin-walled shacks, and horrendous traffic. But it was not always so. Although there were settlements at the same spot as Patna for many centuries prior to the Buddha's time, Patna became the capital of Magadha when king Ajatasatru shifted the capital from Rajgir a few years after the Buddha's death. Patna's fortunes rose even further when it became the capital of the Maurya Empire during the reign of Ashoka.

When Faxian visited the city, he found it to be a magnificent metropolis, so magnificent that he refused to believe humans could have built it. Faxian relates legends of a city so beautiful that he maintained it was built by spirits and not humans. He describes how the citizens were rich and prosperous, talks about the religious processions, and describes the charitable works of the citizens:

> The Heads of the Vaisya[8] families ... establish in the cities houses for dispensing charity and medicines. All the poor and destitute in the country, orphans, widowers, and childless men, maimed people and cripples, and all who are diseased, go to those houses, and are provided with every kind of help, and doctors examine their diseases. They get the food and medicines which their cases require, and are made to feel at ease; and when they are better, they go away of themselves.[9]

In contrast, 230 years later when Xuanzang visited the city, he found a wasteland of ruins. By around 500, while the Huns under Attila were busy sacking Rome, other bands of Huns succeeded in destroying the Gupta Empire[10] in India.

Patna was also the site of the Third Buddhist Council, convened by Ashoka in 250 BC. Ashoka's generosity in supporting the Buddhist monastic Sangha after his conversion led to many freeloaders and heretics posing as monks. The Third Council, under the leadership of Thera Moggaliputta Tissa was organized to

purge the Sangha of these corrupt monks. The council recited the *Sutta Pitaka* and other works from the Pali Canon for 9 months, and those monks who held heretical views disagreeing with the recitation were expelled from the Sangha. At the Third Council, the Pali Canon was closed to any further additions and organized into the three *pitakas*, or baskets, that we see today: the *Sutta Pitaka*, the *Vinaya Pitaka*, and the *Abhidhamma Pitaka*.

The Third Council catalyzed the organization of a missionary movement to spread Buddhism abroad outside of India. Burma, Thailand, and Sri Lanka - all Buddhist countries today - were among the destinations for missionaries inspired by the Third Council. In fact, Ashoka's son and daughter, who had joined the Sangha, became missionaries to Sri Lanka. But interestingly enough, another country on the list was Greece. Connections to Greece through the Hellenistic kingdom of Gandhara were strong. Gandhara occupied the approximate position of today's Pakistan, and was established by Alexander the Great during his expedition of conquest around 100 years prior to the Third Council. Missionaries spread the Buddhist teachings through Gandhara and the Hellenistic Near Eastern kingdoms to Egypt and Greece.

Today, our initial destination is the Patna State Museum, called the Jadu Ghar. The museum is housed in a run-down 1920's style building, constructed during the British colonial times. Our primary goal here is to view a small ceramic bowl containing a few objects. This is the funerary urn found in the stupa at Vaishali, which archeologists believe contains the relics of the Buddha. At the museum, a grand stairway leads to the room on the second floor where the relics are displayed. A guard guides us to the top of the stairs and unlocks the room. A glass case on the opposite side of the room houses a diorama of the site in Vaishali where the relics were found. The diorama contains a replica of the mud stupa we saw yesterday. A hollow hemisphere with a hole in the side facing the glass contains a small, round wooden pedestal and on top sits a small, round replica bowl covered by a lid, illustrating how the funerary urn looked when it was in place.

The bowl was found during the 1950's excavations at Vaishali. It contained some solidified ash, a square copper coin from the Buddha's time, some gold leaf, and a small bead. The ashes are reputed to be the Buddha's corporeal relics, one of the eight portions left from the cremation that were granted to the Licchavi tribe of Vaishali. Though Ashoka took some ashes out to redistribute

around 200 years after the Buddha's time, he returned the rest to the urn discovered in the stupa. Archeologists believe that these relics are authentic because the stupa where they were found matches exactly the location where the Licchavi tribe recorded the relics as having been interred, and where record-keepers during the reign of Ashoka recorded the disinterment, division and reinterment of the relics. In fact, when the stupa at Vaishali was excavated, a thin finger of differently colored clay was found between the surface and the location of the urn in the stupa, likely backfill from when the urn was reinterred.

Next to the diorama is a smaller case containing the actual bowl and the relics. When my turn to view the relics arrives, I move to the front, straining against the rope holding viewers back from the case. I stand riveted in wonder as I stare at that gray bit of dirt, representing the last physical evidence that there once was a man named Siddhartha Gotama. This small bit of dirt is proof that Gotama indeed lived and that the community in which he lived held him in such high regard because of his teachings - calling him "Buddha" ("Awakened One" in Pali/Sanskrit) - that his ashes were buried in a place of honor and its location carefully recorded. Those records allowed us, 2500 years later with our vastly superior science and technology, to verify that Gotama's existence was pretty much in accord with the stories in the Pali Canon. I think about all the "relic" scams during the Middle Ages in Europe: the thousands of pieces of the "true" cross that, added up together, were enough to build a small house, the "foreskin of Christ" set in a golden reliquary, even the Shroud of Turin, which was thought to be the burial cloth of Jesus, until radiocarbon dating in 1988 established it definitively as a forgery from the late 13th or early 14th century. This small relic makes the Buddha's teachings more authentic; grounding them in the remains of a physical person rather than in a story which someone told in order to promote their particular religion. My mind somehow needs something physical to anchor the sacred in reality.

After we all have a chance to view the exhibit, we sit down on the floor right in front of the exhibit for a short period of meditation. The Indians are quite cool with people sitting down in front of museum pieces and meditating or listening to talks, and we do this in other museums throughout the pilgrimage. The sitting lasts for around 15 minutes, and then Stephen talks briefly and quite movingly about the nature of pilgrimage and how the physical and geographical resonates with the interior and psychological, how the landscape of the mind manifests within the external, physical landscape. His talk matches perfectly with my

feelings about the relics. After the talk, I manage to sneak a picture of the relic urn, even though taking pictures is forbidden. The picture comes out quite sharp despite the glass and the flash.

We finish at the museum and drive to a restaurant in downtown Patna for lunch. The restaurant is on the top floor of a four story building housing various shops. On our way up the stairs, we pass a few floors that house the electronics market for Patna. I pause and tentatively enter one of the shops to check out the wares. Low end cell phones, inexpensive calculators, and electronic watches enclosed in plastic bubbles backed with colorful cardboard packaging hang in profusion from the racks. I crane my neck looking toward the back of the store and notice a small solar panel hanging behind one of the counters. I don't see any sign of the ubiquitous black slab smart phone which practically everyone in the West has, probably too expensive for the average Indian. A basic cell phone goes for around $5 here, which practically anyone can afford. I look out the door and see that my fellow pilgrims have already climbed up to the restaurant. I'm not inclined to do any shopping, so I hurry up the stairs to the restaurant behind the rest of the group.

We have a large hall for ourselves in the restaurant and the food is quite good, Chinese-Indian fusion. When we finish lunch, we end up having to stand around outside the restaurant waiting while the bus driver maneuvers through the crazy traffic to pick us up. The sight of a gaggle of Westerners standing around naturally attracts all kinds of attention. The parking area in front of the building is packed with multiple layers of motorcycles. Elderly Bill Vogel sits down on a motorcycle in the outer layer because he is beginning to tire. Soon, two young Indian men appear and hoist him up, supporting him under the shoulders. Bill sags between them.

"Hey Bill," Steve Wachinsky calls out, "Looks like you've got a couple of new friends!"

Everyone laughs and a few of the pilgrims snap a picture. A couple of beggar women show up, and get a few rupees out of some of the group.

Finally the bus arrives and we climb back on for the trip to Rajgir. We inch forward through the city, heading toward the east. There are no stop lights, and,

even if there were, no self-respecting Indian driver would ever let a mere machine control their right to move forward. Instead, several of the major intersections have traffic cops standing on shaded platforms in the middle of the intersection. By and large, the traffic obeys the directions of the cops (who are, strangely enough, mostly women), but there are so many vehicles that they back up from one cop-controlled intersection to the next in gridlock. On one corner, a broken stop light flashes amber at aperiodic intervals, an appropriate symbol of the futility of trying to regulate human behavior with laws and a machine. Finally, we exit Patna and the traffic volume lets up a bit, but the road conditions are terrible, big potholes and cracks, causing the bus to bounce up and down, and we pilgrims to bounce up and down in our seats with it. I give up trying to make sense of the chaos, and plug into David Parsons and some European trance music on the iPod. All is well.

Our route leads east along the Ganges River on State Highway 4. In this dry season, the river is a sandy wasteland under gray foggy skies. Every few kilometers along the river, a tall smokestack rises, with a Shiva trident on top as a lighting arrestor. Someone later tells me that these are brick kilns, responsible for making the bricks that seem to be the ubiquitous building material around here. Such kilns line the roads throughout Bihar and Utter Pradesh, the other Indian state we will be visiting next week, and are a constant sight as we bounce along the roads. Periodically, we pass a pickup truck with a papier-mâché statue of the Hindu goddess Sarasvati on it, surrounded by teenagers. Sarasvati is the goddess of learning, and her festival is happening now. The kids are there to earn a couple of points with the goddess so they do better in school.

In late afternoon, we stop for diesel and a pee break at a modern service station. I climb out of the bus, stretching, and head off to buy a candy bar. I'm feeling a sudden need for chocolate, and, unfortunately, Renate and I didn't pack any treats along from the US. My mouth is watering for an 80% cacao content Green&Black, but the best I can find is a Cadbury's milk chocolate, maybe 50% cacao content at best though the package doesn't say. Later on the bus, I pull the chocolate bar out as we are cruising down the road toward Rajgir. Carefully unwrapping it, I break off a few sections and offer them to Renate.

"Want some?" I ask.

Smiling, she nods, "Sure, thanks".

She takes the chocolate and bites off a piece. I'm about to lay into the rest, when she says, "Why don't you save half of it for later?"

I turn to her with a look of perplexed disappointment. "For later?" I ask.

She nods. "Yes, for tonight after supper."

Renate and I have two diametrically opposing theories about how to eat chocolate. Hers is to save at least half for another time, mine is to eat the whole thing up in one go because it tastes so good. I look down at the chocolate.

I sigh. "Well, OK." I say heavily. I was anticipating scarfing it, but I'm happy to leave half and with the anticipation of the rest later in the day.

I break off half the bar, rewrap it carefully in its wrapper, and stick the half bar into my pack. Then I settle down in my seat to enjoy the chocolate. To my surprise, the milk chocolate here is actually much better than milk chocolate in America. Because it contains far less sugar, it actually tastes like chocolate instead of sugar.

We arrive at the Indo-Hokke Hotel in Rajgir after dark. Built primarily for Japanese pilgrims, the Indo-Hokke is a Japanese-style hotel, starting with the cups of green tea offered to us when we peel ourselves out of our seats after the long and bumpy ride and walk into the lobby. In the wilds of Bihar and Utter Pradesh along the pilgrimage route, these hotels rate as the best. Renate and I swing a tatami room, smaller than the Western style rooms, but with a futon on the floor. The hotel features a huge circular temple room, open on all sides to the elements, with a large Buddha on the altar, and two Japanese-style *ofuro* (hot tubs) for group soaks.

A hot tub sounds like exactly what I need after the long and bumpy bus ride from Patna. The hotel only heats up one tub at time, though, so the guys and the girls need to take turns. The guys go first, and the soak is positively blissful. Towards the end the water seems to have cooled a bit. Renate tells me later that by the time the girls use the tub, it had cooled down considerably. Apparently, the hotel turned off the heat when the first group got in.

After the soak, we eat dinner in the meal hall. We sit at long tables and the waiters bring out the food in bowels and platters, from which we serve ourselves family style. I find myself sitting next to a small, trim woman with white hair and sparkling blue eyes. We introduce ourselves.

"I'm Helen Tworkov," she says.

Helen is the founder and first editor of the quarterly Buddhist intellectual review magazine *Tricycle*, and a long time Buddhist practitioner. *Tricycle* is also the sponsor of the pilgrimage.

"Renate and I have subscribed to *Tricycle* since it first started," I barely manage to mutter, "I always look forward to reading it. I hope we'll get a chance to talk more during the next couple weeks."

She smiles and returns to eating. I'm very excited to meet her, but both of us are completely wiped out by the long drive from Patna, and so not inclined toward conversation.

When we are finished with dinner, some of us gather in one corner of the dining room for the nightly strucks session. When my turn comes, I speak briefly about the theme of pilgrimage vs. tourism.

"Before leaving for India," I say, "People asked where I was going. I had to decide what to say. I told some that I was going on a tour of the Buddhist historical sites in northern India with a well-known Buddhist scholar, letting them think it was a tourist visit. For others, mostly people in our sitting group and other Buddhist friends, I called the journey a pilgrimage."

Shantum and a few of the pilgrims nod in understanding and the round continues until everyone has had a chance to speak.

Later on, lying in bed, my mind won't let go of the question. What *is* the difference between pilgrimage and tourism? My thoughts return to the contemplation from the day before at the tank in Vaishali. In addition to their spiritual motivations, for Faxian and Xuanzang, the distinction between

pilgrimage and tourism wasn't so clear cut. Both Faxian and Xuanzang took back volumes of Buddhist scripture for translation from Sanskrit to Chinese. Xuanzang even collected seven beautiful Buddha statues for his temple in China. Collecting souvenirs is, of course, one of the hallmarks of the tourist. This isn't a motivation for me. Modern life is so filled with stuff that I've no desire to acquire more, and Buddhist texts are available in English translation on the Internet at the click of a mouse. The physical circumstances surrounding pilgrimage today are much, much simpler than during Faxian's and Xuanzang's time. For Faxian and Xuanzang, pilgrimage was a multi-year ordeal, undertaken as part of their vocation as monks, during which they risked their lives and in a few cases almost lost them. For us, the pilgrimage is a 14 day break from a life of work and leisure, so it seems superficially more like a vacation.

For all that, there is a distinction. The distinction is in the attitude of mind one brings to pilgrimage, one of reflection and meditation, as in a retreat. For a pilgrim, adversity can become an opportunity for reflection on the *klesas*[11]: greed, hatred and delusion. For a tourist, adversity is an opportunity to rant about not getting what you want, or about ending up in circumstances that are less than comfortable. And as I realized yesterday at the tank in Vaishali, I'm looking to derive some inspiration from the Buddha's life, and from seeing the landscape in which he walked and taught. What had it been like during that exciting time 2,500 years ago when the Buddha was alive and teaching? Can I get a sense of that even today given the quite radical changes that have occurred in that landscape in the 2,500 years since he lived? The Buddha's teachings have had such a profound influence on my life, framing it in a way that would have made my life quite different if I had never encountered them. In the end, the motivation to undertake the journey is different for each pilgrim. Sighing, I roll onto my back and begin drifting off to sleep.

Flashback 1988-1989 - Breakthrough

After graduating from Wesleyan in 1974 with a degree in biology, I hitch-hiked around the U.S. for the summer, down to Mexico and back up to Boulder, Colorado. There, I took psychedelics for the last time, peyote buttons. I was learning nothing new from the psychedelic experience, it was becoming repetitive, and I began to realize that I was just doing drugs because I was bored with reality as it was. From Boulder, I returned home to the East Coast for a spell, and then spent a year in the Peace Corps in Micronesia. While in the Peace Corps, I kept up my practice of daily meditation on "om mani padme hum" for at least a half hour a day. I had no teacher, and in fact, wanted none because I figured if the Buddha could become enlightened without a teacher so could I. The news media in the late 70's was filled with stories of the Indian guru Bhagvan Shree Rajneesh and how he tried to politically take over a county in Oregon. I was convinced any teacher would simply try to exploit me.

When I returned from the Peace Corps, I enrolled in a master's degree program at the University of Arizona in Tucson designed to teach systems engineering to people with a non-engineering undergraduate degree. The primary attraction of the program was that it promised all the participants an opportunity to find a well-paying job. I was only able to afford graduate school through a research fellowship, and I had no money for a car or even for social events like movies since the Peace Corps hadn't paid very well. I lived in a succession of marginal but cheap accommodations: the back of a newsletter office, a cockroach-infested studio apartment, and house-sitting for a professor who was away for a summer. I was unwilling to take out a student loan even with the promise of a job at the end, because the economy was so unpredictable and uniformly bad that it was impossible to tell whether I would be in a position to pay back the loan when the program was completed. But beyond the promise of a job, I thought I might reconnect with my delight in computer programming from my undergraduate days, and that, in fact, turned out to be the case.

Renate and I met in Tucson, in August 1977. I was staying at the International House, a dorm for students from all over the world. My roommate Nick, from Greece, and I came downstairs one blazingly hot summer afternoon and found Renate and her friend Lydia sitting in the living room, surrounded by suitcases.

They had just arrived from the airport. Nick, on his way out to dinner, quickly invited Lydia to go with him and she accepted. I needed to stay in to study, so I was planning to cook dinner in the dorm.

"Want to join me for dinner?" I asked Renate, smiling.

"Oh, no, I'll just find a supermarket nearby and buy something there," she replied, looking toward the door.

I headed to the kitchen and began preparing the meal. The nearest supermarket was 2 miles away, the temperature outside was in the low 100's, and she didn't have a car, so I figured she might reconsider. I had just put on some rice to boil, adding a little extra rice in case she did, when Renate appeared in the doorway.

"Um, is the offer still open?" she asked tentatively.

"Sure, no problem," I said smiling even more broadly, "Come on in."

Unlike the American girls who wore discount store tank tops and shorts in the heat, Renate had a sense of style that was all her own. She made her own clothing and often decorated it with beautiful hand embroidery. She looked attractive without being provocative, even when she was wearing lightweight clothing. She also had a very slight but incredibly charming accent, more British than German. And she had a cheerful sense of humor that extended to times when she was in difficulty. Not long after her arrival, we met one day and her foot was trussed up in a bandage.

"What happened to your foot?" I asked, concerned.

"I was crossing the street in front of the university health clinic, and a Volkswagen ran over my foot," she replied. "Drivers in the US don't seem to stop for pedestrians when they are in the pedestrian crossing like they do in Germany."

"That's terrible!" I said.

"The worst thing is," she said, "it was a German car!" and we both had a good laugh.

Soon we were spending a lot of time together, and in the spring semester we moved together into an apartment near campus. After I graduated the next year, I was granted a research fellowship to work in Germany, and we were reunited. We were married in 1979 in her hometown in Germany. For our honeymoon, we backpacked through Greece, Turkey, India, Nepal, Thailand, Guam, and the island in Micronesia where I had been in the Peace Corps. After three months traveling, we returned to Tucson to continue our graduate studies. I completed my PhD in 1983 and we immediately moved to Silicon Valley, where, as promised, I got a great job with Hewlett-Packard. Renate continued working on her doctoral dissertation in linguistics while living in California until she completed her doctoral program as well, and eventually found a job working as a technical writer at a company making artificial intelligence software. Many working Silicon Valley couples opted for two cars, but we decided early on to have only one car, to reduce the burden on the environment. As a result, we mostly biked to work, or, if one person had an appointment one of us would drive.

In February 1988, I moved from Hewlett-Packard to a job at a Silicon Valley startup company, Sun Microsystems, and was feeling the stress. Life in Silicon Valley is all about work, but Renate and I made sure to take a long weekend away from work occasionally to let the stress dissipate. Late spring of 1988 found us spending a few days at Tassajara Zen Mountain monastery in the heart of Los Padres Wilderness, 30 miles south of Carmel Valley. In the spring and summer, the monks open the monastery to visitors, and we came because it was a great place to relax for a few days in the hot springs and to do some hiking. When we were checking out, Renate noticed a flyer for a small Zen center in Mountain View, called Kannon Do. We were living in Palo Alto, which is right next to Mountain View, so we would not have to drive far to participate in authentic Zen practice. We decided to investigate Kannon Do. After a few months, we became regulars at the Wednesday night sittings and even at the more extended program on some Saturdays.

The abbot at Kannon Do was Les Kaye, a successor of Suzuki Roshi, the saintly Japanese Zen master who had founded San Francisco Zen Center and its two

daughter centers, Green Gulch Farm and Tassajara. Les was a short, wiry man with the shaved head of a Zen monk, a large sharp nose dominating his face and deep brown eyes. To every sitting, he wore the formal Zen meditation outfit: a black Zen sitting robe called a *koromo* and the underlying white *kimono* held tight by an elastic sash called an *obi*, together with the patchwork brown shawl-like *okesa* over his left shoulder. Over the left arm was draped the bowing cloth, or *zagu*, which a Zen priest spreads out on the floor in front when performing formal bows, and in his hand he carried the teaching stick. The teaching stick and brown color of the *okesa* were signs that he had received Dharma Transmission, the formal approval giving official sanction to teach in the Soto Zen linages.

The Zen meditation technique is different from the Tibetan mantra repetition technique I had used during the 1980's while practicing by myself. Soto Zen, the sect in which Les and Suzuki Roshi held their teaching transmission, practice "just sitting". "Just sitting" is a basic concentration practice, consisting of sitting with a mind that is focused, clear, and without thought. Breath following is the tool to achieve enough concentration that thoughts drop off and the mind enters a focused state called *samadhi*. The meditator follows the breath at the abdomen, noticing the in and out movement. If the mind wanders into thinking, visualization, or emotional feeling, the meditator calmly notices the wandering and brings the mind back to the breath. If it is not possible to feel the breath at the abdomen or keep concentrated for at least one or two breaths, then counting from one to ten over and over is recommended until enough concentration is developed to follow the breath.

Kannon Do was housed in a small building located in a down and out part of Mountain View. The building was a former Christian church that Les had remodeled together with the community members in the mid-1980s. There were two rooms: a community room where the Saturday pot-luck breakfasts were held and the meditation hall which also served for ceremonies. My first impression of the meditation hall was quite positive. Despite the unfortunate location of the building, the meditation hall seemed a nice, cozy place for a meditation group to gather. Inside, the teaching platform with the altar dominated one side of the room. A meditation platform ran around perimeter against the walls. The walls were painted white and had no wall hangings or art except in the area of the altar. Spread directly on top of the meditation platform were grass mats, on top of which at regular intervals rested square black cushions, about the size of a

large easy chair cushion but thinner, called *zabuton*s. Perched on each square cushion was a smaller round cushion, the *zafu*. The *zafu* supported the buttocks during seated meditation, while the *zabuton* padded contact between the knees and the floor so that the legs wouldn't go numb during the 40 minute sitting period. That, at least was the theory, many times they ended up going numb regardless.

Arriving at Kannon Do, people would remove their shoes and put them into the shoe rack near the door. People who arrived early on Wednesday night sat on the meditation platform facing the wall as is usual in the Soto Zen style of meditation. Latecomers sat on *zafus* and *zabutons* on the floor between the teaching platform and the meditation platform or on chairs, and Les sat on the teaching platform. The community was a mixture of Silicon Valley technical types, young people in service jobs, and older folks some of whom had been practicing Zen for many years. There was a kind of energy at Kannon Do; people were really committed to Zen practice. Most people were willing to put in the extra effort to help the community by doing small tasks around the meditation hall and to show up regularly for meditation during the scheduled sittings.

One of the most committed, and the model for all the rest of us, was Misha. Misha was a young woman, slight of build, with short reddish brown hair that had been ordained the previous year as a Zen priest. Like Les, she also wore the robes of a Zen priest to every sitting, except her *okesa* was black instead of brown because she had not yet received Dharma Transmission. Misha worked as a librarian at a local private school and she had the kindly manner and direct way of speaking that many people who work with children have, but which is also a hallmark of an accomplished Zen practitioner. She lived up on the ridge above Palo Alto, about a 40 minute drive away. In the years I practiced at Kannon Do, she never once missed a Wednesday night or Saturday morning sitting when she was in town, even though she had at times to get up at 4:30 in the cold and wet darkness of the northern California winter and drive down the mountain.

Although Les had spent only one retreat with Suzuki Roshi - a 3 month practice period at Tassajara in the early 1970's - somehow, he had received an almost perfect transmission of Suzuki Roshi's Dharma. The phrasing of his talks and their content reflected perfectly the content and form of that Zen gem, *Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind*, a collection of Suzuki Roshi's talks. But his talks were in no

sense a shallow copy of the book. They were always spontaneous and fresh, and one felt that his answers to the questions after the talks could, indeed, have come from Suzuki Roshi himself. His manner of teaching was also very Japanese. In interviews, he said very little, but always had his finger on the student's mind state, and would drop in a comment that addressed it.

Les worked as a technical writer at IBM, so his practice was, just as for us, a lay practice. He wasn't a professional priest, but a member of the Silicon Valley technical community, just like we were. He had enormous dedication to the practice, and his primary goal was to make the practice accessible. He was there every morning for a few hours before work, every Wednesday evening for the weekly program, and all Saturday morning for the longer weekly practice session. As the energy built at Kannon Do over the years 1988-1989 and more people came to the regular Wednesday and Saturday meditation sessions, Les began holding longer retreats.

In 1989, Les held the first seven day winter retreat in December. The winter retreat commemorates the Buddha's enlightenment and is traditionally the high point of the Zen practice year. During the retreat, the practitioners sit meditation from 5:30 AM until 9 PM, with breaks for walking meditation between sitting periods, a short service before meals, and a short work period in the early afternoon. Usually, in the late afternoon or evening, the teacher also gives an hour long talk. The retreat is an opportunity to deepen practice, without distraction. Participants achieve a depth of mindfulness, even during meals and the work period, that is very difficult to achieve during daily life.

A few of the retreat participants slept in the meditation hall at night as the monks in Japan traditionally do during the winter retreat, but since Renate and I were still new to the practice there, we slept at home. We minimized our interaction with the outside world by not picking up the mail, not reading the newspaper, and not listening to the radio. Because they had to work, most of the retreat participants only attended in the early morning and evening during the week and all day on weekends. I had managed to get time off from my job at Sun, and Renate also took time off from her job, so we were both able to attend the retreat full time. Some members of the community who had to work or couldn't attend supported the retreat participants by bringing food for the meals, flowers for the altar, or by leaving cards wishing us well. There was an overwhelming feeling of

community involvement and support, as if we were held within their good wishes and they were urging us on to break free of our delusions and achieve clear seeing.

This was my first long retreat, and I threw myself into it with an energy and determination that I had rarely found for any activity previously in my life. I had complete trust in Les as an authentic, accomplished Zen master and was willing to follow his teaching wherever it might lead my mind and body. As was the case with all retreats, the first few days were mostly a matter of aches and pains in the body and struggling with the racing thoughts of monkey mind. Renate and I practiced yoga during the breaks to help stretch out cramped knees and stiff backs. I used the technique of mindful awareness of thoughts, which I had picked up from a book, to help settle the monkey mind. It wasn't a recommended Zen practice, but once the thoughts had settled down, I was able to follow my breath at the abdomen.

By Tuesday of the retreat week, my mind had settled and my concentration had deepened. The aches and pains from sitting had disappeared. The perception of time had slowed, so that the 40 minute sitting periods seemed to last for hours. But since there was no bodily discomfort, my mind slowly settled into a deep state of concentration and mindfulness that lasted between sittings and that renewed and increased when the next sitting period started. During the middle period on Tuesday afternoon, my mind dropped into a deep state of *samadhi*. Sense impressions disappeared and my mind became intensely focused. When I came out of *samadhi* slightly, I found my mind facing a white light of such brilliance and intensity I thought I was viewing the origin of the universe, the Big Bang. Shortly thereafter the bell rang. I stood up for walking meditation, but I was overwhelmed. Was this enlightenment, such as the Buddha had experienced it? What was that light? And why had it appeared to me? I didn't have an interview with Les until Thursday, so I tabled my questions and continued practice. But Renate noticed that I had become more inwardly directed. I stopped doing yoga with her and hung out more and more by myself during the breaks.

On Wednesday after lunch, I was walking out of the meditation hall into the community room when I overheard a conversation between Misha and another retreat participant. Silence is a critical part of every retreat situation, but in those days, Les was a bit lax about enforcing it and so the community was somewhat

casual about maintaining silence. They were talking about enlightenment. Misha was standing at the sink washing dishes and the other retreat participant was drying.

"Soto doesn't teach enlightenment anymore," Misha said, "We don't believe in a sudden enlightenment experience."

I stopped. I knew she spoke the truth. In Suzuki Roshi's book, he makes the analogy between enlightenment and fog. Enlightenment according to Suzuki Roshi is like walking in the fog rather than walking in a rainstorm. One slowly becomes wet while walking along rather than suddenly getting drenched. But I was still left wondering, if sudden enlightenment was just a fiction, then what was that experience of bright light I had seen the day before?

On Thursday morning, during the early morning sitting before breakfast, the meditation hall was cold. Everyone was wearing hats and socks. Kannon Do had a forced air heater suspended from the ceiling in one corner but we usually didn't turn it unless the temperature was near freezing because it was so loud. During the second sitting before breakfast, a woman started coughing, a wet, deep cough like that of the flu. My mind turned to the suffering being experienced by the woman, and I wondered why she had to suffer. Suddenly, a vision appeared to my mind. I was watching her previous incarnation, her previous life before this one. It was horrible; she was a small Jewish girl in the gas chamber in Nazi Germany, like a shower stall in a gym. I could hear people screaming as they died from poison gas. Compassion for her and for all of humanity became overwhelming and I began to cry. I tried to suppress it but tears were leaking out of my eyes. When the bell rang for the end of the sitting, I stood up and walked quickly out of the meditation hall. At the door, I pulled on my jacket and shoes, sniffing back tears, and ran outside into the winter darkness. Once outside, I let myself go and cried for the fate of humanity.

During retreats, the students have periodic interviews with the teacher to let the teacher gauge how the student is progressing. I spoke with Les about the vision during my interview that afternoon. The experience of the vision had driven out my questions about the light. I briefly explained what I had seen.

"Was it like a movie?" he asked.

"Yes," I replied, "Except it was faint, I could see through it as if it were being projected on a window".

He asked no further questions. Disappointed about his lack of interest in my experience, I bowed and left the interview.

The retreat ended on Saturday and after a celebratory breakfast with the rest of the retreat participants, Renate and I went back to our daily lives. For me, however, daily life mind was still very far away. When I arrived home after the retreat, I emptied the mailbox and sorted through the mail. As is usually the case around Christmas, the mail was filled with solicitations for donations to various causes. As a looked through the donation letters, I let out a wail because I did not have the financial means to respond to all of them. Somehow, the donation letters triggered a strong feeling of compassion that had been activated by the retreat. There seemed to be no separation between my mind and body and the world, as if my mind had been yanked into a place where the most mundane perception was somehow magical and compassion dominated my cognition.

When I looked at electrical sockets, I could see tiny blue lights, like glowing LEDs, in the two holes where the plug went. On a hike that Renate and I took in a redwood forested state park near Santa Cruz, I walked up to a redwood tree and laid my hands on its cinnamon colored bark. When I closed my eyes, I could hear and feel a faint sense of vibration and life, like a song heard far away, and knew that the life in the redwood was no different than the life in me. At times, I knew what people were going to do and say before they did and said it. One night we went out for pizza with friends, and as the waitress greeted us, I knew exactly which booth she would take us to even before she accompanied us to our seats. I could sense when someone was suffering and it tore at my heart. One day in the parking lot of a discount store as I walked to my car, I saw a mother with a boy who had what looked like a green stain on his forehead. As I walked closer, I saw that he was mentally disabled and his mother was leading him into the store. And I had strange dreams. In one, I dreamt about a baby Buddha who sat on a fountain surrounded by bodhisattvas singing a song celebrating his arrival, and the baby Buddha was me.

My experience of life seemed to be simultaneously more intense and deeper, as though I suddenly was able to perceive a mysterious deeper world, an "other

world". The perceptions were somewhat like that of my youthful experiences with psychedelic drugs, but not so chaotic, and cognition was always accompanied by a strong feeling of compassion. After about a week, though, I began to become anxious that something fundamental had changed in my mind, and I talked with Les about it at his home. He told me not to worry; the effect would fade with time. But that triggered another thought: did I want it to fade? My experience was now one of a wondrous, almost magical, reality, like the old Zen masters wrote about and far away from the mundane Silicon Valley life I had lived before the retreat. Unexpectedly, my experience of life had changed radically. I was faced with the question of whether I should change my life as well. Should I make some kind of radical change, quit my job and become a full time Zen practitioner?

Most of the literature on retreat practice recommends not making any life changing decisions in the first 6 months after a retreat, and so I decided to wait. Renate felt that my behavior during that period was "funny" and that I was not my usual self. My colleagues at work looked at me askance and avoided me. One afternoon, the project lead for the project I was on - William, a brilliant computer engineer with the social skills of a 12 year old - came into my office and started chatting about Zen.

"I really enjoyed Phillip Kapleau's *Three Pillars of Zen*," he said, "Kapleau interviews students who have had enlightenment experiences at Zen retreats. It was interesting seeing what their experience was like," and he looked expectantly at me.

I didn't know what to say, I certainly didn't want to talk with him about what had happened at the retreat since he never would have believed me and, besides, we were not particularly good friends. When I didn't respond, he walked out of my office.

One warm work day near the end of January, I went for a walk after lunch. I walked along a path running next to San Francisco Bay in Shoreline Park, watching as the pelicans executed their inelegant crash landings on the water and the other winter birds paddled about. I climbed up on a small hill and lay down on the grass in the sun to take a nap. I slept for a short time, maybe 10 minutes, but when I awoke, the effect of the retreat had completely disappeared. My perception of reality had collapsed into the mundane reality of the everyday

world and that sense of a mysterious "other world" - which only I could see and feel - had disappeared.[12]

Day 4 - At Rajgir

The next morning, we rise at 6 AM and gather in the lobby for a before-breakfast trip to Saptaparni Cave. Saptaparni Cave is where the First Buddhist Council was held 3 months after the Buddha's death. After a short bus ride, we disembark from the bus in a small commercial development of run down one story shops and huts. The wall surrounding the Rajgir hot spring compound is across the street. Trash is everywhere. At the trail head, we pick up a local Indian policeman carrying a rifle, as bandits have been reported in the area. Some pilgrims were attacked and robbed a few months back according to Shantum. We set off up the mountain, through the cold fog, accompanied by the policeman.

After leaving the settlement, the trail runs through scrubby brush. The group quickly spreads out along the trail and maintains an early morning silence, perhaps caused by the sound-deadening effect of the fog, as we hike up the mountain. In his memoir, Xuanzang describes this area as being in a bamboo forest. Now there is no bamboo in sight. Indeed, there is very little sign of any natural flora and fauna except for flies that buzz around our heads despite the cold fog, and scrubby thorn bushes decorated with colorful plastic bags and paper streamers, the remains of food wrappers and other trash.

The degraded landscape inspires contemplation on the relationship between impermanence and environmental degradation. The illusion of permanence masks the slow degradation of the environment over the more than 1300 years since Xuanzang's time. This dichotomy is especially visible in India because the population growth has so completely overwhelmed the environment. But despite the trash and dirt, lack of any animals except flies, mosquitoes, and domestic animals, and lack of any vegetation except scrubby trees, weeds, and crops, people here get on with their lives. Given the amount of environmental degradation they've experienced over the last 100 years, they probably figure that climate change will work out fine as well. On the other hand, it's entirely possible that it won't. The effects of too much carbon dioxide in the atmosphere may result in a different quality of degradation. The global climate system could be nonlinear, and a limit may be reached where the degradation is so sudden that agriculture doesn't work anymore. Rather than a slow and steady deterioration

such as occurred in Rajgir over the years since Xuanzang's visit, the environmental degradation in such a case could accelerate.

My dark contemplation is interrupted by the sight of a Jain temple. We stop for a moment to wait for stragglers. The Jains are a sect that predates Buddhism by 4 or 5 centuries, though its origins are somewhat obscure. At the time of the Buddha, Jain ascetic practitioners wandered through India practicing severe fasting and painful bodily austerities. Jains also practice a kind of meditation designed to calm the body and mind until the unchanging, eternal self, the *atman* of Indian religious philosophy, was perceived, which they believed was the source of the universe. Stephen tells us something about the relationship between the Jains and Rajgir. The Jains had a large presence in Rajgir at the time of the Buddha because the last Jain saint Mahavira, who was a contemporary of the Buddha, lived in Rajgir. There are still a few million Jains in India today, but their practices have changed over the centuries since the Buddha's time, and very few practice the kind of austerities common back then.

When the stragglers have caught up, we continue down to the cave and Stephen explains the circumstances surrounding the convening of the First Council. As recorded in the *Mahaparanibbana Sutta*, the Buddha explicitly refused the monks' request to designate a successor or to order the affairs of the Sangha after he was gone. Both Sariputta and Maudgalyayana, the Buddha's two lieutenants, had died before he did so there was no obvious person to take on the task. After the Buddha died, Mahakasyapa claimed to be his successor through a special, mystical transmission. The Zen tradition has a koan or teaching story regarding the claim, Case 6, "The World-Honored One Twirls a Flower" from the *Wumenguan* (*Gateless Gate*) a 13th century Chinese collection of koans:

> "Once, in ancient times, when the World-Honored One[13] was at Mount Grdhrakuta[14], he twirled a flower before his assembled disciples. All were silent. Only Mahakasyapa broke into a smile.
>
> The World-Honored One said, 'I have the eye treasury of right Dharma, the subtle mind of *nirvana*, the true form of no-form, and the flawless gate of the teaching. It is not established upon words and phrases. It is a special transmission outside tradition. I now entrust this to Mahakasyapa.'"[15]

Based on this claim, Mahakasyapa is honored by all sects of the Zen tradition as

the First Zen Patriarch. He also inherited the Buddha's robe after the Buddha died. For this reason, the Zen tradition took on the custom that the master in a lineage grants his robe to his successor.

On the other hand, the historical record in the Pali Canon lacks any evidence supporting Mahakasyapa's claim. The story about the flower and the smile on Vulture Peak isn't recorded anywhere in the Pali Canon and is therefore apocryphal. What the Pali Canon does record about Mahakasyapa is that he was a Brahman priest who converted to Buddhism late in life. Both the Buddha and Sariputta explicitly denied that they gave any special transmission and Mahakasyapa is never cited in the Pali Canon as having been called upon by the Buddha to give a discourse. Therefore, his claim to be the Buddha's successor based on some mystical transmission looks to have been a bit of a power play.

Nonetheless, Mahakasyapa convened the First Council, with the sponsorship of King Ajatasatru of Magadha, after he heard a monk make a disparaging comment about the Buddha. The goal of the council was to achieve consensus on what would be taught going forward. At the council the record of the Buddha's teachings and the monastic rule, the material that ended up in the *Sutta Pitaka* and the *Vinaya Pitaka* respectively, were to be orally recited. Someone who was present during the Buddha's discourses was needed to lead the recitation. The discourses had not been otherwise recorded since paper had not been invented yet. Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and personal attendant for 25 years, was present at most of the Buddha's discourses and had memorized all those he had heard since he had a kind of photographic memory. Ananda was therefore the natural choice to lead the recitation, but there was a problem. The council was only open to monks who were acknowledged as arhats, or fully enlightened beings, and Ananda was still a trainee.

Mahakasyapa tried to exclude Ananda on the grounds that he wasn't an arhat, but Ananda was really the only person who could actually recite the Buddha's words from memory. This put Ananda under some pressure to achieve enlightenment before the council convened so he could testify. Ananda was living in Vaishali and was so busy teaching that he didn't have enough time for meditation. On the day before the council, he retired to a secluded spot and practiced walking meditation all night, but was unable to achieve enlightenment. Toward the end of the night, he was tired and decided to lie down to rest. The tradition has it that

Ananda achieved enlightenment while in flight between standing and lying down to sleep, just before his head hit the pillow. He is reputed to be the only person not to achieve enlightenment in one of the 4 postures: walking, standing, sitting, and lying down.

While the story of Ananda's enlightenment is probably a myth used to justify allowing Ananda to attend the council, Ananda represented a political faction in the Sangha that saw a more social "this world" aspect to the Dharma, in contrast to Mahakasyapa's more mystical "other world" understanding. Political tension existed between the two factions throughout the council. Mahakasyapa sniped at Ananda throughout the report on the council recorded in the *Khandhaka* section of the *Vinaya Pitaka*. Ultimately, Mahakasyapa's mystical, patriarchal vision won and the tradition turned away from the world. Ananda recorded his disappointment in a poem:

> "They of old have passed away,
> The new men suit me not at all.
> Alone today this child doth brood,
> Like a nesting bird when rain doth fall."[16]

We arrive at the cave after about a half mile walk downhill from the temple. The cave is little more than an enlarged crack extending back into the cliff. In front of the cave is a large flat ledge, on which the council was held, probably with a good view out over the plain below in fine weather. But today the weather is cold and foggy, with not much of a view. Shantum thinks that the cave was probably much larger at the time of the Council, kind of an overhanging shelf, and that it collapsed at some point.

I plunge into the cave, joining the first group to enter, eager to see the site of Mahakasyapa's 6th century BC power play that shaped Buddhism for two millennia. The floor is quite uneven, and despite my flashlight, I can't see very well, which makes me a bit anxious and claustrophobic. Being careful not to hit my head, I walk to the end where the cave broadens out and take a quick look at the altars there before heading back out. Renate cautiously joins a later group including Shantum as a guide and stays longer. She emerges with shining eyes and seems quite entranced by the cave. We step away from the entrance to let the last of our group tour the cave.

"What did you see?" I ask curious to find out what prompted her happy expression.

"Shantum lighted a candle and chanted the *Heart Sutra*[17]," she says smiling, as we wait for the last group to finish, "The echo made it sound like we were in a cathedral."

"Well, I can't say much for my experience," I reply, sighing. "The floor was uneven and I couldn't see much outside the circle of the flashlight. I kept expecting to hit my head on the ceiling."

After the last of the pilgrims exits the cave, we leave on a path leading downhill. We cross a large stone platform at Pipphali Cave where Mahakasyapa supposedly stayed during the council. The fog has lifted some, and we have a good view down into the Rajgir hot spring area. The caves are the source for the water in the Rajgir hot spring. We walk down into the hot spring complex, which includes a few Hindu temples on the far end nearer the road. The hot springs are set in a walled courtyard open to the air and recessed into the ground. Hot water runs out of large pipes protruding from the walls and on one end there is a pool. At this time of the morning, from our perch above the courtyard we see only a few men bathing and we stop briefly to watch. They strip down to their underwear and wash in the hot water, squatting next to a pool and splashing water over their heads and upper body. Walking along narrow walls, we head back to the bus and breakfast at the hotel.

At breakfast, Renate and I sit with Gary and Sue. Gary is African-American while Sue is white. Both look to be in their early 60's. Gary talks a little about their background while Sue mostly listens.

Gary and Sue's Tale

> We met at SUNY in Albany during the 1960s. I'm originally from Albany and Sue's from New Rochelle. We were both involved in the civil rights movement, then later in protesting against the Vietnam War. My parents were pretty much OK with our relationship, but Sue's parents were kind of uncomfortable with it, especially her father. Her mother got over it pretty

quickly. Her father worked in the city road repair department and had that kind of Archie Bunker attitude toward black folks. Not hostile, but just that they were kind of foreign. Of course there was still a bit of racism, since back then interracial couples were pretty rare.

After we graduated, we got married. Sue's father at first refused to come to the wedding, but Sue's mother worked on him. We didn't know until the last minute if he would be there. He showed up but he was kind of stiff and stood off in a corner by himself at the reception. He was polite but he really didn't want to talk with any of my relatives. Over the years, Sue's father has loosened up and as we've had kids and they've grown up, he became a really super grandfather. He died a couple of years ago of prostate cancer.

We moved to Baltimore shortly after the wedding, since that city seemed more welcoming for an interracial couple than upstate New York. In college, I was on the track team and placed first in the Division I 10k one year. I've always liked long distance running, ever since I was a boy. I was on the track and field team in high school too. When we arrived in Baltimore, there were no shops selling running shoes, so I decided to open one. I also kept up running, and every year I compete in a few 10ks, still do today. One year I ran the Boston Marathon too but didn't place very highly in it. I was getting too old, I guess. The shoe business did really well over the years, but both Sue and I retired a few years ago.

Our kids are grown now. Walter is 28 and he took over the shoe business from us. Harold is 36 and he's running for the state legislature from a district in the city of Baltimore. The election is this fall and we were busy handing out leaflets and campaigning before we came on this trip. It's been kind of hectic the last couple months. So this trip has been a nice break for us.

We started to practice Buddhism through the Tibetan school. We still go to the Baltimore Shambala Meditation Center now and then when a well-known lama comes to town. But for the last 10 years or so we've been reading Stephen's books and attending the practice evening at the Baltimore Yoga Village most weeks. They practice Vipassana, and that's what we do for our daily practice now. Since we've been retired, we've had more time to travel and practice.

As Gary finishes his story, I nod and thank him. Gary looks down at his watch

and announces that its time to leave. We walk out into the lobby and join the other pilgrims waiting for the bus.

When the bus arrives, we head off to Venuvana, the Bamboo Grove, immediately outside the ring of hills surrounding the location of Rajgir. The Bamboo Grove was one of a string of retreat centers that were given to the Buddha by prominent citizens in the cities of the upper Ganges Valley. In Vaishali, Ambapali's Mango Grove was another. The centers were all located outside the cities, so the monks could live in a place that was secluded but convenient to the lay population for begging food. The Bamboo Grove was given to the Buddha by King Ajatasatu's father and immediate predecessor King Bimbisara, and was the first such center granted to the Buddha. Initially, the monks probably lived in small huts made of leaves and branches, but later small wooden meditation huts like those in Thailand and Burma, called *kuti*, were probably built for the monks by lay people. After the Buddha's time, brick monasteries replaced the wooden huts. Near the entrance we see a mound that archeologists think was such a monastery, but it has in the interim been used as a Muslim cemetery so it couldn't be excavated.

The grove area itself is beautifully landscaped, with actual bamboo, trimmed grass lawns, occasional trees lining the boundary of the grove, flowers in neat beds, and a large square tank in the middle. The grove stands in stark contrast with the trashed out streets and the dreary scrub and weed filled landscape outside and on the trail up to Saptaparni Cave. I find myself relaxing and my shoulders moving downward an inch or so as I take in the beautiful surroundings. The fog having lifted, the sun is bright and the air is warm. We find an unoccupied area of lawn surrounded by flower beds with a gilded statue of the baby Buddha off to one side. We sit down in a circle on our mats and cushions, and spend a pleasant 20 minutes meditating. Afterward, Stephen gives a teaching.

He talks about the role of Rajgir in the beginning of the Buddha's story, when the Buddha began his spiritual search and immediately after he had met enlightenment. In the time of the Buddha, Rajgir was an important city, the capital of the kingdom of Magadha, and the eastern terminus of the great North Road that ran from Rajgir to Taxila in present day Pakistan; with extensions further east into present day Iran and the Greek colonies in Anatolia. The North

Road served as a trade route. Being at the eastern end, Rajgir received the best of the trade goods, so the population was wealthy. Around sixty thousand people lived in the city at that time. The city itself was located inside a ring of hills that served as a natural barrier to invasion, but also impeded winds, causing poor air quality. The hills surrounded the city were the home of different philosophers, religious people, ascetics, and monks, fostering a good deal of philosophical debate. A large and wealthy population within the city ensured a supply of alms food for the ascetics, and the presence of King Bimbisara's court provided security for the spiritual seekers who congregated in the hills.

Though we don't know exactly what the Buddha did after he left home at 28, we can piece together a rough story from bits and pieces in the Pali Canon. When he was still Siddhartha Gautama from Kapilavastu in the neighboring kingdom of Kosala, the not-yet Buddha left home and wandered along the North Road to the south. He probably ended up at Vaishali and possibly did some meditation practices there. We know that he studied with a meditation teacher, Alara Kalama, who taught him a kind of deep concentration practice called *jhana*, in Pali, or *dhyana*, in Sanskrit. Siddhartha became an expert in *jhana* practice, but refused an offer from Alara Kalama to become his successor. He also studied with Udaka Ramaputta, another *jhana* teacher, who taught him ascetic practices like starving the body and not washing and also set him up as a teacher. Siddhartha was unsatisfied with the *jhana* practice, so he left Vaishali, crossed the Ganges by boat and headed to Rajgir to continue his spiritual search.

In Rajgir, Siddhartha met King Bimbisara. The *Sutta Nipata*, a collection of short suttas, has a striking passage recording the meeting[18]. The passage is regarded by scholars for various reasons as being one of the earliest elements of the Pali Canon. In the passage, King Bimbisara is standing on the rooftop of his palace and he spots Siddhartha walking through town. He is impressed by the way Siddhartha holds himself, so he requests a meeting. In the meeting, Bimbisara asks where Siddhartha is from and offers Siddhartha employment, to lead one of his armies. Siddhartha says: "I come from the lineage of the sun. My clan is that of the Shakyans. My country is that of Kosala. I come from a people who live on the foothills of the Himalayas." He declines the offer of employment, saying that he is content with his life of renunciation and quest for enlightenment.

Siddhartha wandered off, and after several years of ascetic practices together

with five other spiritual seekers, he abandoned asceticism and his comrades. He walked to Bodhgaya where he achieved awakening, becoming the Buddha. After a period of reflection practicing near Bodhgaya, he walked to Sarnath, near Varanasi, where he delivered his first discourse, the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*, or *Setting in Motion the Wheel of Dhamma Sutta*, to the five ascetics with whom he had practiced prior to abandoning asceticism. In that discourse, he laid out the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, the foundational principles of his teaching. The five ascetics immediately understood and became his first followers. The now-Buddha Siddhartha then spent some time wandering between Bodhgaya and Sarnath. After he had gathered a sizable group of followers, he returned to Rajgir.

In Rajgir, Siddhartha met again with King Bimbisara, but this time as an enlightened teacher, a buddha, with a growing following. King Bimbisara heard that a young ascetic was staying in the hills, and decided to pay the Buddha a visit. After paying his respects, he sat before the Buddha and listened to a discourse. When the discourse was complete, the king declared that his life had been fulfilled, what he had sought for all his life he now had heard, and the Buddha declared that the king had become a stream enterer. The day following the king's visit, he invited the Buddha and his followers to the palace for the midday meal. At the end of the meal, King Bimbisara washed the Buddha's hands. He then offered the Buddha the use of the Bamboo Grove, and the Buddha had his first retreat center.

Rajgir also played another important role in the formation of the Sangha. Rajgir was where the Buddha picked up two followers who became his lieutenants, Sariputta and Maudgalyayana. They were both Brahmans, followers of a big shot guru named Sanjaya who lived around Rajgir. One day, Sariputta was walking around town and met one of the five ascetics who were the Buddha's first followers. He was struck by the ascetic's noble bearing, so he asked the ascetic who his guru was. The ascetic replies that it was the Buddha. Sariputta then asked what the Buddha taught. The ascetic replied that his teaching is impermanence: whatever arises will ultimately also cease. Upon hearing that, Sariputta understood and also became a stream enterer.

After the teaching, we have a picnic on the lawn. The hotel has packed a picnic basket with different curries and rice, and a couple of waiters serve us by

spooning them out on a banana leaf. During lunch, a group of Thai pilgrims including a few monks and some lay people arrive and start chanting near the baby Buddha statue. A few step up to the statue and begin rubbing on it. Sophia stops eating and stares at the group. Kevin, a doctor from Cincinnati whose presence exudes a quiet confidence, stops too.

"What are they doing?" she asks leaning over toward Shantum and speaking in a low voice.

"They are honoring this spot as a place where the Buddha taught," he explains. "Thais like to rub gold leaf on statues, stupas, and all manner of sacred things."

"Oh, so that's how the statue became gilded," says Kevin, "I was wondering about that."

When lunch is finished, we have a few minutes to walk around the park. Renate and I walk over to the tank. We walk past an aquamarine pavilion on the far corner and onto the brick platform where a stairway leads down to the water. We look down the red brick stairs at the dark green water. The stairway is probably how the monks and nuns approached the water for bathing, like the men we saw that morning at the hot spring. I try to imagine what this peaceful park must have been like crowded with monks and nuns striving for awakening, but nothing comes up. Soon the group heads back to the bus for the trip to Vulture Peak.

By now it is late afternoon. The bus driver stops at the base of one of the other hills around the old site of Rajgir, near the trailhead for the path up to Vulture Peak. Vulture Peak is the setting for many of the suttas in the Pali Canon since the Buddha spent much time there meditating and occasionally giving a discourse. It is the setting for many of the Mahayana sutras as well. In particular the *Lotus Sutra*, which was so popular in China during Xuanzang's time, is set on Vulture Peak. As soon as we stop, the door to the bus is surrounded by begging children and vendors. The vendors are hawking various sorts of inexpensive souvenirs and pamphlets. The kids end up doing pretty well by our bus. Most of the pilgrims hand out a few rupees here or there to one of the children. I try sending them *metta*[19], but it's clear that what they really want is money, so I mostly ignore them, negotiating the crowd quickly and with little difficulty.

After working through the crowd, we start up the path. Since Stephen was last here, the path has been paved and now has the character of a one lane concrete road. There are no vultures in evidence, nor for that manner any other kind of wild bird or animal. The landscape along the path is the same kind of scrubby thorn brush as on the path up to the cave in the morning, but less decorated with trash. Above us on the next peak to the north, a large white stupa gleams in the sun, the Vishwa Shanti Stupa dedicated to world peace. It was built by a Japanese monk, Nichidatsu Fujii of Japan, founder of the Nipponzan-Myōhōji Buddhist sect, and is one of the 80 such peace monuments built by Fuji-san around the world after World War II. Among the other 79 monuments is the Peace Pagoda in Japan Center located in the Japantown section of San Francisco. The Peace Pagoda is a large concrete structure that stands on the edge of the concrete cliff overlooking Geary Boulevard, seemingly as out of place there as the Vishwa Shanti Stupa is here.

The view down into the site of old Rajgir on the south side of the path is splendid. The geologic bowl in which the old town sat is now mostly covered in forest. Shantum tells us that the area is a wildlife preserve, and it looks quite wild from where we are. But from our height, it is difficult to tell if the forest's character is any better than that in the hills. There is no trace of the city of 60,000 people that existed in the valley 2500 years ago. Mountain View, the city where I live in California, has a similarly sized population. I try to imagine what Mountain View might look like if all the people and buildings suddenly disappeared.

Xuanzang took a special interest in Vulture Peak since the events in the *Lotus Sutra* were set here. He visited Rajgir riding on the back of an elephant, and had two servants to attend to his needs. On his visit to Vulture Peak, he noted that the mountain side had clear springs, trees covered with thick foliage and extraordinary rock formations. The rock formations are still here, but as for the rest, there are neither springs nor trees. Xuanzang noted two stupas on the road leading up the hill, but we see no sign of them. Fai-Hein, two centuries before Xuanzang's visit, spent the night in meditation on the summit, and perhaps Xuanzang did also. On his way down into the city after his visit, Xuanzang obtained a golden model of the Buddha preaching the *Lotus Sutra* on the summit, the sixth of the images he took back to China with him. After visiting Vulture Peak, Xuanzang descended into the city through the hot springs that we visited in the morning.[20]

About three quarters of the way up to the summit, we check out some shallow caves where the Buddha and his monks very likely meditated. Many of the caves have gilded ceilings and walls from the Thais' efforts. One cave even has some candles burning in it. Continuing on, we reach the top after a short walk. On the east side of the summit area is a large pile of brown dirt with many flat boulders embedded in it, forming the peak. A few scraggly trees grow on both sides of the pile. The trees are connected with wires and the space between them is festooned with red, white, blue, green and yellow Tibetan prayer flags. On the west side of the summit is a flat paved area surrounded by a low wall, which runs along the top of the steep cliff dropping off into the valley on the north, west, and south sides.

In the middle of the paved area is a small brick shrine without any statues. A self-appointed priest sits at the entrance to the paved area, to make sure that we take off our shoes before entering, and of course to watch them for us and collect a little tip. Another guy takes care of cleaning the shoes. The priest also sells incense in case we would like to make an offering. Shantum buys some incense. We walk out into the shrine area. Shantum lights the incense and holds it out for us to take. I grasp one of the lighted sticks in both hands, hold it briefly to my forehead in offering, then bow slightly and stick the unlighted end into a crack in the brick base of the shrine.

The weather is now largely clear with dark clouds on the horizon some distance away. The view out to the cloud band is splendid. We all stand quietly watching as the setting sun slips closer to the horizon, spreading bands of yellow, salmon, and rose across the sky. After a few minutes, people start to break up into groups. Stephen and Kevin have moved to the east side of the shrine and are talking about the Mahayana sutras. I join them briefly.

"Most of the Mahayana sutras were supposedly taught by the Buddha on Vulture Peak," I hear Stephen say as I walk up, "Including the *Heart Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Diamond Sutra*. Naturally the Buddha didn't really teach the Mahayana sutras since the Mahayana didn't develop until the 1st century AD, around 500 years after the Buddha died. They were set on Vulture Peak with the Buddha as the presenter and written in the style of the Pali Canon to give them a cachet of authority."

"I've never liked the Mahayana sutras," I say breaking in, "The *Heart Sutra* is OK, but most of the rest strike me as kind of like science fiction."

The conversation grinds to a halt, but Stephen just smiles and Kevin looks away down the mountainside. Scowling, I turn and walk toward the west cliff where a group is still watching the sun set.

Despite the fact that I don't feel much resonance with the Mahayana Sutras, they are great works of literature in their own right and have inspired countless generations of practitioners in India, China, Japan, and elsewhere. And, in fact, the *Heart Sutra* has been and continues to be a deep inspiration for my own practice.

The problem is that I'm feeling vaguely depressed, and my habitual judgment is strong. The contrast between the dreary, trashed out Indian landscape, thick with human overpopulation, and the beautiful Bamboo Grove seems somehow an omen for the future: small pockets of beauty and space becoming increasingly rare and precious amidst the ugliness of poverty and overcrowded squalor. I had hoped to get some kind of feeling or be able to imagine what it must have been like during the Buddha's time on Vulture Peak. But just as at the Bamboo Grove during the afternoon, I can't imagine what it must have been like. The beauty of the sunset will soon be gone, leaving behind only a black night of suffering.

There is absolutely no trace of the Buddha's time here now, just the record of his teaching in the Pali Canon and what others have brought along inspired by it: the Tibetan prayer flags around the peaks and the caves, the gilded rocks in the caves from the Thais, small shrines in the various caves, the small shrine at the top. What **was** at the time of the Buddha has completely and utterly ceased to be and I have no feeling of what it must have been like. My mood is gloomy at having my nose rubbed in this reminder of impermanence in a way that I cannot avoid acknowledging. I have a sense of living on that narrow sliver of time between the past and the future, with the past disappearing rapidly and the future not yet here, but in any case unlikely to be better than the past.

I leave the group and spend some time exploring around the caves near the top. A couple of Tibetan women putting up prayer flags and chanting are surprised by my appearing in their midst. I nod and smile briefly. They smile back, and my

black mood lifts. Then I head off to continue exploring. We gather near the top after about a half hour and head back down to the bus.

Later, in the hotel, the staff heats up the *ofuro* again and we have a pleasant soak before supper. This time, the men go second and the water is, indeed, not as hot as the night before. The food tonight is Japanese-Indian again, and quite good, all vegetarian of course.

After dinner at strucks, I talked about my insight into environmental degradation and impermanence, and about the disappearance of any physical trace of the Buddha's time on Vulture Peak.

"If it weren't for the prayer flags and shrines, and the Tibetans and Thais coming as pilgrims, there would be no trace of the Buddha's teaching left here," I say plaintively. The memory of my existential anxiety attack earlier that afternoon suddenly arises, leaving me feeling a bit emotionally raw.

After I am done speaking, Shantum nods and looks solemn. The group is quiet for a moment, until Shantum calls on the next person to speak. The group breaks up after about another half hour and the pilgrims head off to bed.

Day 5 - Nalanda and the Trip to Bodhgaya

Our first destination the next morning is the site of the former Nalanda University located about 30 km from Rajgir or about an hour's drive. On the way to Nalanda, we stop in a small village where Stephen says there are two Gupta period statues that were once been part of the university. The villagers have set up the statues and incorporated them into their Hindu religious practice for maybe a thousand years. In fact, technically, the Buddha is an avatar of Vishnu and therefore a bona fide member of the Hindu pantheon. However, unlike other such avatars there are no temples to him in India, probably because the priests are afraid people will be "led astray" by his teachings and become Buddhists. In this case, the statues are part of the folk religion of this region and the people living here don't really make such fine technical distinctions.

When we arrive at the path to the village, Stephen is surprised by a cement walk about as wide as a bicycle path leading out into the fields. He had been expecting a dirt path. Evidently, as at Vulture Peak the day before, the Tourist Ministry of Bihar in the new reformist government has been busy trying to promote more tourism through improvements in the infrastructure. We walk up the path to a small shrine house set off to the right of the path. The Tourist Ministry has moved the statue from its original location in a field into the shrine house. Right now, the house is deserted but Shantum assures us that in another year, a priest will show up and start collecting donations. Inside the shrine house is a statue of Marici, the Buddhist goddess of the heavens and light. The statue is dressed in a fine robe. Like many Hindu statues, the face is smeared with red color making it difficult to distinguish the features.

We walk a bit further into the outskirts of the village where the second statue is set in a larger shrine house with a front that opens into a cement courtyard surrounded by a low wall. The courtyard is covered in red and grey patterned cloth, so that people can walk barefoot without getting their feet dirty. On the other side of the road are a couple of small stands selling trinkets, snacks, and soft drinks. Some of the villagers try to sell us stuff, but not with any particular energy. It seems as if they are still adjusting to having this commercial windfall

suddenly appear in their midst. A group of villagers is milling about in the courtyard. We take off our shoes and join them. Here, one of the villagers has already appointed himself as a caretaker and Shantum is solicited for a donation, which he gives. We are then allowed to enter the shrine to view the statue, two by two. The statute is a smiling Buddha, sitting in the meditation pose with his hands in his lap, again dressed in a fine, gold robe.

Our next stop is the excavated grounds where Nalanda University once stood. Nalanda University was founded in the 5th century AD by a king of the Gupta dynasty called Śakrāditya. It is considered to have been one of the first residential universities in the world and, at its height in the 9th century, there were 10,000 students from all over Asia, some from as far away as Java, and around 2,000-3,000 teachers. The curriculum contained material on Buddhist philosophy, meditation practice, logic, and other Buddhist topics as well as secular subjects such as metallurgy.

Xuanzang spent many years at Nalanda, working with his teacher, Silabhadra, the head of the university, who he met there. Xuanzang wrote extensively about the life and practice at the university. Here's how he describes the beautiful grounds and buildings:

> The whole establishment is surrounded by a brick wall, which encloses the entire convent from without. One gate opens into the great college, from which are separated eight other halls standing in the middle of the Sangharama[21]. The richly adorned towers, and the fairy-like turrets, like pointed hill-tops are congregated together. The observatories seem to be lost in the vapors of the morning, and the upper rooms tower above the clouds....
>
> The deep, translucent ponds bear on their surface the blue lotus, intermingled with the Kie-ni flower, of deep red color, and at intervals the Amra groves spread over all, their shade.
>
> ...the priests' chambers...have dragon-projections and colored eaves, the pearl-red pillars carved and ornamented, the richly adorned balustrades, and the roofs covered with tiles that reflect the light in a thousand shades, these things add to the beauty of the scene.[22]

In the 9th century, the university began a long, slow decline, partially as a consequence of a series of kings who supported a resurgent Hinduism that incorporated ideas from Buddhism rather than Buddhism itself. The final blow came in 1193 when an Islamic fanatic named Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Turk, sacked the university during the Islamic conquest. He was said to have asked whether there was a Koran in the library. When the answer came back "no", rather than making a generous donation of a volume, he had the library burned. Supposedly, the library contained over 9 million volumes, and it burned for 6 months. Thousands of monks were beheaded or burned alive as Khiliji tried to uproot Buddhism from India. In the end, he succeeded. Khiliji's intellectual successors, the Taliban, are still active today and are responsible for destroying the Great Buddha at Bamyan, Afghanistan, in 2001.

The remains of Nalanda are set in a large, beautifully landscaped park fenced off from the outside. We walk through the gate and up a long shaded drive to the area where the university once stood. The ruins have been carefully excavated and partially restored by the Archeological Survey of India. We spend some time touring the ruins, stopping occasionally for Shantum and Stephen to give commentary. Mostly the ruins consist of red brick walls of varying heights, surrounding what were formerly rooms or courtyards. We stop to view one room where a small, low door in a wall leads to a windowless meditation "cave". In the courtyards are red brick platforms on which chaiatyas were located. Chaiatyas are stone monuments like stupas with carved window-like frames surrounded by carved pillars in which sit small statues of a meditating Buddha. In a few places, the chaiatyas themselves have been restored. The central point of the ruins is a huge four story brick stupa dedicated to Sariputta, the Buddha's chief monk, surrounded by restored chaiatyas. Sariputta was born in a village near Nalanda and died there as well. Shantum says that sculpture from the Gupta period, like the ones we saw in the morning, can be found buried in the fields around the ruins.

By this time, the sun is out again and we find a quiet spot on the grass next to some flowers for a sitting and talk. The sitting this time is longer and I find my mind quickly settling onto the breath. My breathing begins to slow and my concentration begins to deepen as I relax. A vision of Nalanda at its height arises in my imagination. I can see a large statue of a standing Buddha, colorful banners, and a bustling community. The sounds of the traffic and people - at some distance away because of the large park surrounding the ruins - become the

sounds of Nalanda in its prime. I recall my work with the students and professors at Stanford and think that Nalanda, too, was once like that: a meeting place for people from all over the world where intellectual pursuits were prized.

After the sitting, Stephen talks about the development of Mahayana Buddhism at Nalanda. One of the key figures in the development of the Mahayana was a student at Nalanda in the 8th century named Shantideva. Shantideva was a rather poor student. Like some students today, he spent most of his time partying, laying about, and not applying himself to studying texts. One day a group of students who were upset by his lack of diligence challenged him to an exam at which he was to give a discourse. Everybody thought he would be a miserable failure, but he surprised his peers by reciting the text that today is known as *Bodhicaryāvatāra* or *A Guide to Bodhisattva's Way of Life*. The *Bodhicaryāvatāra* is a favorite of the Dalai Lama and was translated from the Tibetan by Stephen when he was a young Tibetan monk in India.

In the *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, Shantideva describes how a bodhisattva practitioner develops the mind of enlightenment, through the practice of the six perfections[23] (also called the *paramitas* in Sanskirt and *paramis* in Pali): the perfection of giving, virtue, patience, energy, concentration, and wisdom. The practice of the six perfections is one of the key practices in Mahayana Buddhism. The idea behind the six perfections is to continue refining these positive qualities throughout your life and, in the traditional Mahayana interpretation, throughout future lives until you have developed enough merit to become an enlightened Buddha. Shantideva devotes one chapter in the book to each of the perfections, describing practices to improve your positive qualities in the area of the chapter's theme. Legend has it that during the recitation of the ninth chapter on the perfection of wisdom, Shantideva floated up into the air, and when the chapter was finished he disappeared. The assembly was so profoundly affected by the text that they attempted to discover where he went, so he could be given a position of honor at the university. Their efforts were fruitless until many years later he was discovered living a lay person's life somewhere in south India. He declined an offer to return to Nalanda and assume a prominent professorship.

After the talk, we head out the gate and across the road to the grounds of the site museum. Carey, a short melancholy woman with bright red hair, begs off,

deciding to forgo the tour and lunch because her feet hurt and instead stays in the bus to take a nap. After a quick tour of the museum, we have lunch at the museum cafe, the usual north Indian food but somehow more oily and spicy. On the way back to the bus, we are assaulted by a mob of begging children and vendors. Unlike the day before at Rajgir, these folks are *serious* and are out in force. Despite the signs on the museum gate sternly warning visitors about giving to beggars or buying from vendors near the entrance, each pilgrim seems to have his or her own strategy for dealing with the overwhelming demand. Steve Wachinsky buys bananas and oranges at one of the stands lining the road and hands them out. Surprisingly, most of the kids seem happy about getting the fruit, but some of those who miss out end up fighting with those who get some. Mary Lee, a short, round middle aged woman with grey hair and blue eyes, veers off into the back of the crowd and begins checking out the vendors' wares. Shantum rescues her from a horde of begging children, and she is the last one into the bus. I somehow manage to escape the mob without parting with any money. Loading the bus back up takes almost half an hour as each person needs to negotiate with whatever begging kid or energetic vendor happens to confront them. When we are all back on the bus, Carey tells us that she watched from the window as the begging mob was organized by the kids' moms standing on the sidelines.

Back on the road, we follow National Highway 82 south through the valley between the hills surrounding the site of old Rajgir. We stop at a place that was once a toll collection center or city gate of the old city, which marks the eastern terminus of the old North Road. There are two grooves worn into the sandstone, where the ox carts were drawn along the last few feet of the old trading route and into the city. Some of the rocks are marked with strange, undecipherable writing that is probably some kind of marking for toll collection. I think about the scene earlier that afternoon, where the mob of kids and vendors extracted their toll from us before letting us back on the bus.

A short distance away from the site of the city gate, we stop at the site of the jail where King Bimbisara was imprisoned by his son Ajatasatru. Ajatasatru staged a coup and threw his father in jail, then attempted to starve him to death by giving him very little food. Bimbisara eventually died there, the Buddhist sources say he was murdered while the Jains claim that he committed suicide. The jail site is a stone foundation surrounding a dirt floor, a blue sign with English and Hindi provides information.

We continue south then west on National Highway 82, through the gap in the mountains and out onto the plain again, passing small villages and towns lit by the fading light of the setting sun. The roads are narrow and in terrible condition, with big potholes which our bus driver must maneuver around with care. Between the towns of Hisua and Wazirganj, in the growing dark we come to a narrow one lane bridge having no guard rail with pedestrian and bicycle traffic streaming towards us in the opposite direction. The bus driver stops briefly, then slowly inches the bus across the bridge to give the oncoming traffic time to disperse before the bus takes up the whole lane.

Further on we enter a small village with two and three story buildings on both sides of road, and grind to a halt in the middle of a huge traffic jam. It seems that a car full of Tibetan monks travelling in the same direction as we are has ended up on the wrong side of the road directly in front of a medium size semi. How that happened and why the two didn't collide is a mystery. The entire chaotic traffic flow has stopped. Naturally, such a large collection of now-stopped vehicles has attracted a crowd of villagers to view the fun and comment on how to fix it. The monks' car is completely wedged in on our side by people, 3 wheeled motor rickshaws, and other vehicles. The buildings present a barrier to movement off the road on the other side, and there are no side streets intersecting the highway were vehicles could turn off to relieve the congestion.

We sit for 10 or 15 minutes without anything happening. I'm a bit frustrated because I need to take a pee. I find myself wishing the California Highway Patrol were here to sort out the mess, though, normally I would prefer not to see a CHP patrol car, because back home it usually means they've set up a speed trap and are looking to give someone a ticket. Finally one of the Indians accompanying us climbs out of the bus and plays traffic cop. He first clears away the villagers, and then starts helping the other cars to maneuver until the monks can pull their car onto our side of the road. After another 30 to 45 minutes spent maneuvering, the monks are back on the left side of the road and traffic is flowing again.

In Bodhgaya, we separate into two groups. One group stays at the Japanese guest house, Daijokyo, the other at the Hotel Sujata. Renate and I first opt for the guest house, but when we arrive at our room, we find that the toilet doesn't flush. I return downstairs and talk to Shantum, who suggests we move to the hotel,

since he's reserved enough rooms there. The view from the guest house is more scenic, there is a huge, 80 ft. tall Daibutsu (Big Buddha) statue across the street. But our less scenic choice is validated when we find out that the guest house has no heating, a real problem since the weather here is even colder than in Rajgir.

The hotel room has both an electric heater and an open unscreened window. We plug in and switch on the former and go about eliminating the mosquitoes let in by the latter. I close the window and dispatch the mosquitoes I can reach to the next life with a whack and an "Om mani padme hum!" On our way downstairs for dinner, we stop by the hotel desk and ask them to do something about the remaining mosquitoes. They refresh a couple of the electric mosquito repellent dispensers and when we get back from dinner, the mosquitoes are gone.

The size of the group at dinner in the hotel dining room has been cut in half since the people staying at Daijokyo are eating there. I sit next to Shantum and we talk about Indian politics, specifically about corruption in the Indian political system.

"My Indian colleagues and friends back in Silicon Valley tell me that corruption in the Indian political system is much worse than in the West," I say, "I've been told that the Indian president has a criminal record, which is something that would be unheard of in the West."

Shantum deflects my comments on the political system.

"The president in India isn't elected; she's appointed by the parliament," he replies, "The Congress Party appointed her because she could be easily controlled. The president in India actually has quite a bit of power, not as much as in the US but more than in Germany, and the Congress Party wanted to make sure she didn't do something that would harm their political program."

We chat a bit more and from Shantum's comments it seems that Indian politics is much rougher and more directed specifically at getting power than in the West, but maybe not so different than the US at the moment, given the increasing polarization between the two parties.

Leaving politics aside, we then talk a bit about our background, and Shantum tells the story of his spiritual search.

"I was burned out after many years of working as a social activist," he says, leaning back in his chair and remembering, "So I travelled around India for a few years, going to various gurus and spending time with them just like the Westerners who come here."

"Did you find one?" I ask leaning forward onto the table with my elbows. I've never had the opportunity to hear the story about how a teacher came to meet their teacher and I'm finding Shantum's fascinating.

He shakes his head. "No, actually I didn't," he replies smiling, "It's kind of paradoxical given the abundance of spiritual teachings here in India, but I found a teacher in America instead. After I got frustrated with searching in India, I went to America and travelled up and down the West Coast in a VW bus with a couple friends. We visited various meditation centers and spent time with some teachers. I met my root teacher, Thich Nhat Hanh, in America."

"Then what happened?" I ask. I am surprised by his story. It is just exactly the reverse of most Westerners. Many serious Western meditation teachers - those who dedicate their lives to teaching meditation - come to India, Southeast Asia, or Japan for a few years and spend time wandering like Shantum did in America.

"Well," he continues, "I spent some time practicing with Thay[24] at various retreats. Then I went to Plum Village, Thay's practice center in France. I met my wife there and Thay married us. After a few years in Plum Village, Thay gave me the 5 and 12 Mindfulness Trainings and authorized me to teach."

The Mindfulness Trainings are what Thich Nhat Hanh's lineage calls the Zen precepts.[25]

Shantum then speaks about a foundation he's established, the Ahimsa[26] Trust, which runs a variety of programs for helping villagers in West Bengal. The foundation attempts to bring together Hindu and Muslim women into work collectives. The idea is to counter the history of sectarian violence in India by supporting collectives that don't discriminate against any religious background, while, at the same time, providing opportunities to alleviate poverty.

After dinner, Shantum announces that we will have strucks, and we move out of the dining room and into a nearby lounge. With the smaller group, Shantum decides to hold a discussion about begging.

"Begging in India is not like homeless people panhandling in America," he says, "It is really only a problem at tourist sites, especially ones that are visited by Westerners. Indian tourists rarely give to beggars. Usually, they'll dispatch the beggar with a rude comment, and if the beggar gets too close, maybe even hit or kick them."

"Well that's just downright cruel!" says Pam removing her glasses with a flourish. "Those poor kids!"

"The problem is when you give to beggars, you encourage them to engage in this kind of behavior and they become more and more aggressive," says Shantum patiently, "Certainly, many people in India are much poorer than in the US and in many case it is not their fault in any sense, but giving them money because they are begging will not help. In many cases, the children work for organized crime outfits or, like the children this afternoon, for their mothers, so they don't benefit from the money you give them. It is better to give to organizations that will direct the money to those who need it for things that they are lacking."

"I have that problem with homeless people in the US," says Kevin quietly, "You never know if they will use the money to buy alcohol or drugs."

"But if we only give to organizations, we don't have any personal contact," says Pam, "It was just so wonderful to see those kids' eyes light up this afternoon after I gave them a couple of rupees!"

"I don't know," I say. "I don't really feel any need for that. I don't even make eye contact with them and so they basically ignore me. Otherwise it encourages them to keep pestering. Same for the vendors."

The discussion continues and most of the pilgrims seem to feel that there is nothing wrong with giving to begging children. I begin to wonder if I suffer from some kind of compassion deficit because I don't really feel any need to give

them anything, and I can't really gush over the kids as some of the other pilgrims do. Shantum doesn't seem able to convince them that giving to beggers actually encourages harmful behavior.

When the discussion breaks up, Renate and I head to our room. We sit on our beds and chat for a few minutes before preparing for bed, riding on the momentum of the strucks discussion.

"You know," I say, "I think we should give some money to Shantum's Ahimsa Trust before we leave India. At least we can be sure it will benefit people that can really use it and will encourage some kind of socially useful goal. Maybe we can give whatever is left over from our travel money."

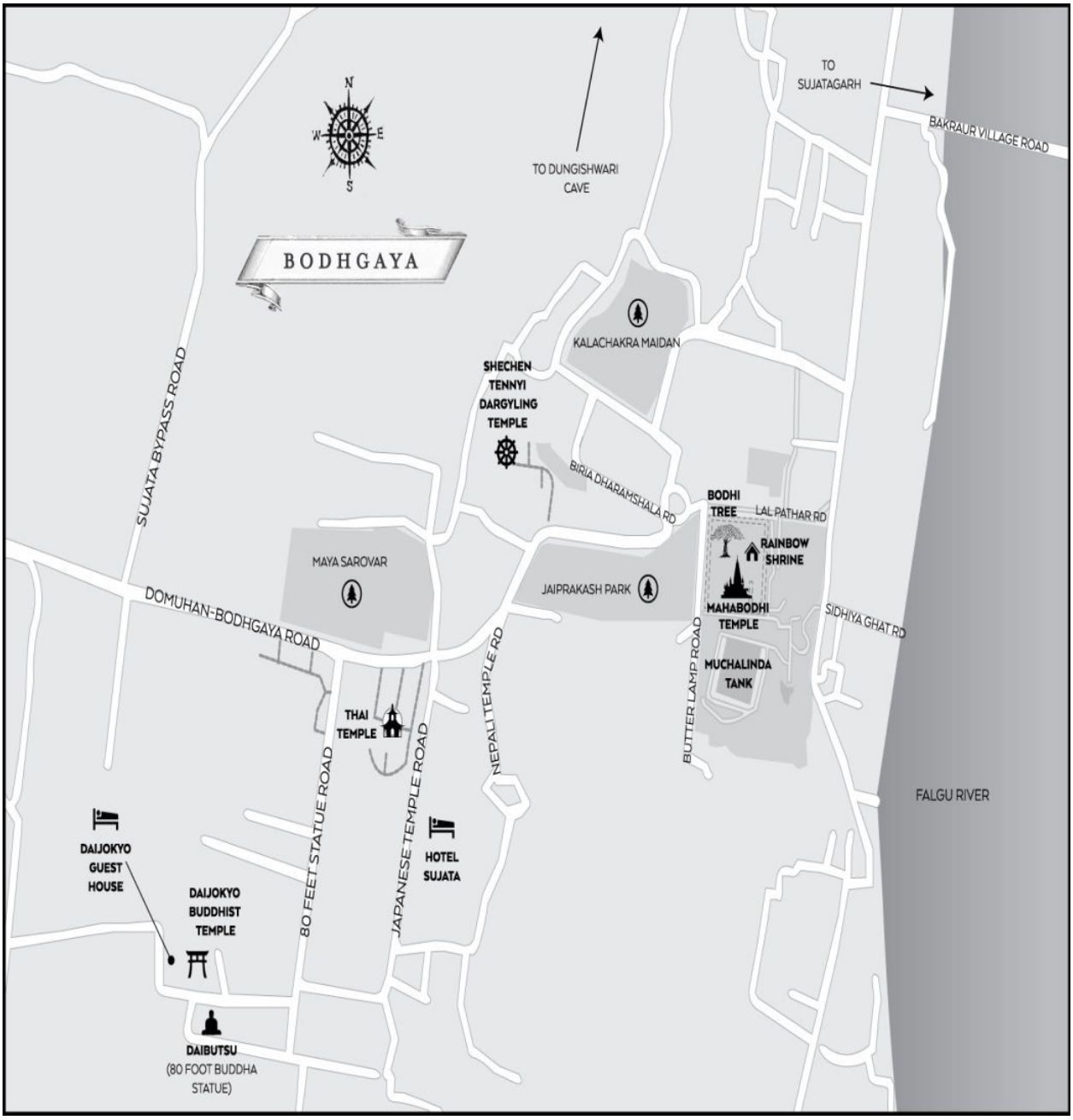
"That's a great idea," Renate replies, "At least we have some hope that the donation will benefit the people who the foundation works with, and the people who get the money will learn some skills not just a handout."

Begging poses a difficult problem for the group. Generosity is the first of the Mahayana *paramitas*, and turning down an opportunity to give seems not right. Compassion drives us to give, yet wisdom cautions holding back. It is exactly at this fault line where our practice lives. Begging is a theme that the group will return to throughout the trip.

Part 2 - Dissatisfaction

"That is, with ignorance as condition, volitional formations come to be.
With volitional formations as condition, consciousness comes to be.
With consciousness as condition, name and form come to be.
With name and form as condition, the six sense bases come to be.
With the six sense bases as condition, contact comes to be.
With contact as condition, feeling comes to be.
With feeling as condition, craving comes to be.
With craving as condition, clinging comes to be.
With clinging as condition, becoming comes to be.
With becoming as condition, birth comes to be.
With birth as condition, old age and death comes to be.
Such is the origin of this whole mass of suffering."

The Buddha, Book of Causation, VII(61), Samyutta Nikaya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SUJATA BYPASS ROAD
BIRIA DHARAMSHALA RD
BODHI TREE
LAL PATHAR RD
RAINBOW SHRINE
MAYA SAROVAR
JAIPRAKASH PARK
MAHABODHI TEMPLE
SIDHIYA GHAT RD
DOMUHAN-BODHGAYA ROAD
MUCHALINDA TANK
BUTTER LAMP ROAD
NEPALI TEMPLE RD
THAI TEMPLE
FALGU RIVER
80 FEET STATUE ROAD
JAPANESE TEMPLE ROAD
HOTEL SUJATA
DAIJOKYO GUEST HOUSE
DAIJOKYO BUDDHIST TEMPLE
DAIBUTSU
(80 FOOT BUDDHA STATUE)

Flashback 1990-1996 - Breakout

As the experience of the 1989 winter retreat slowly began to disappear in the rearview mirror of memory, I became more and more desperate to understand what had happened. I felt as if I had been given a fleeting glimpse of an "other world", a level of reality behind the physical world that influenced events in the physical world in mysterious but predictable ways. Small events, like taking this street instead of that on the way to work or eating a salad instead of a sandwich for lunch, and big events, like getting married to this person instead of that, or even gigantic events like this political leader being elected president rather than that. In my mind, the "other world" was like the operating system of a computer. Someone working on the operating system software has incredible power to influence the experience of someone using the computer, for better or worse. The "other world' was the operating system for the events in human reality, an Operating System for Reality in effect. I felt as if I had been given a brief glimpse of the "other world" before the window slammed shut.

My experience of and belief in the "other world" generated an intense craving, a craving for systematic access to the "other world". If I could only wrap my mind around the software for the Operating System for Reality, I could figure out how it worked and maybe influence events in the physical world for the better. Every Wednesday and Saturday we would chant the Bodhisattva Vow as part of service at Kannon Do: "I vow to save all sentient beings." But, really, how much could I do to save all sentient beings as a junior software engineer in a Silicon Valley company? And how was that possible anyway, given the constraints of everyday reality? With systematic access to the Operating System for Reality, I thought I could really fulfill that vow.

The contrast between this vision and my experience in Silicon Valley tore at my mind. While much of the hype around Silicon Valley is about startups trying to "change the world", most of the day to day grind of working in Silicon Valley is like working in any other office job. Office politics play a big role, and the competition between engineers pushing their views can be fierce. Everyone wants to get their ideas into product. Sometimes, the competition can lead to unethical behavior: backstabbing, stealing the results of others, spreading negative criticism of a competing engineer's solution or falsely upbeat

information about your own, or suppressing alternatives to your ideas so that decision makers don't find out about them. Contrast this picture of petty intrigue and one-upmanship with the vision that opened up for me in 1989: the potential to gain access to the Operating System for Reality. If I could learn how to change it, I could really, truly change the world - and not just change the world, but change it for the better! I felt as if the "other world" provided the answer, if only I could figure out how to access it predictably.

I knew from the Zen literature I had read over the years that monks from medieval Japan and China reported similar experiences, but nobody talks about such matters today. I thought the lack of any contemporary reports from people having a similar experience made the experience somehow "special" and something to be cultivated, and learned from, until I could enter and dwell in the "other world" at will. At first, I thought Les would provide me with some guidance. But Les completely ignored the experience in our interviews and I began to get frustrated with him. How could he be a true Zen master if he couldn't provide me with guidance about this rare and precious thing that had happened to me?

The frustration came to a head during the winter retreat in 1990. I kept expecting that I could recreate the conditions leading to the experience of the mysterious "other world", so I could enter into it again. But, rather than a sense of wonder and delight, my mind was consumed with anger and frustration. My concentration refused to deepen and I became enraged at my mind and at Les, blaming him and his teaching for my inability to find the entrance to the "other world". In the middle of the retreat, I walked out and didn't return until the last day. In retrospect, I had fallen into the trap of clinging to meditation experience, a serious error which meditation texts warn about. Clinging to experience, any experience, is like grabbing a swiftly moving rope with your hands. If you hold on hard enough, you'll get rope burn. My grasping at the experience of the year before was in the process of burning a deep, long-lasting groove in my mind, one that would take decades to resolve.

When I did the 1990 retreat, I was working on a project in the research labs of Sun Microsystems, developing a new research operating system for Sun's desktop computers. The group dynamics was dominated by political infighting between William, the chief engineer on the project, and David, the project

architect, who was a former professor from U.C. Santa Cruz. In software research and development projects, the project architect is responsible for the overall design of the system and the functional design of the individual components. The chief engineer is responsible for leading the engineering work involved in actually writing and debugging the software to implement the components, and for ensuring that the components fit together into a working system. David had very specific ideas about how the operating system should be designed, and William didn't agree with any of them. In design meetings, William was prone to break out in fits of anger and ranting. The rest of the project members sat in embarrassed silence until he had finished.

I tried to avoid taking sides, but I slowly ended up being pushed into David's corner simply because I was working on a part of the system that he insisted I implement in a particular way. As a result, William became an implacable enemy. William later became an influential technical manager at Sun while David left Sun a few years later. My career prospects at Sun were severely limited even when I moved to a different group because any promotion past a certain point would have had to be approved by William. But my primary interest in life wasn't pursuing a corporate career up the management or technical ladder. What I really wanted to dedicate my life to was finding a way that I could explore that mysterious world I had glimpsed in 1989 to help save all beings, if only I could find the key to the entrance.

In the fall of 1991, Misha went to Tassajara for the three month training period. The Soto Zen tradition as practiced in San Francisco Zen Center system requires priests to attend at least one training period so they can learn the mechanics of priesthood - chants, ceremonies, *etc.* - as well as to deepen their meditation practice. When she returned, Misha gave a talk at Kannon Do inspired by what she had learned. As I listened to Misha talk about her time at Tassajara, I was filled with jealousy. I wondered why she should have had the opportunity to attend a practice period at Tassajara and speak to the community though she didn't even believe in enlightenment. I wasn't so interested in learning the mechanics of priesthood, but I thought attending a three month practice period at Tassajara would certainly be a way to spend more time meditating. I resolved to find some way to become a priest myself. Unfortunately, it wasn't simply a matter of asking Les to ordain me as a priest. He had some mysterious criteria that he used to judge who was suitable. Merely asking wasn't likely to get me anywhere.

Another way I thought to deepen my meditation practice would be to live in Japan for a few years. There I could study at a Japanese Zen center with a Japanese Zen master. I thought that people who studied Zen in Japan, or in general with a Buddhist teacher of any school in Asia, typically had a more solid grounding in Buddhist practice because Buddhism had been part of the culture there for much longer. Many of the most committed meditation teachers in the West spend some number of years in Asia studying with Asian teachers. I convinced Renate to take a three week vacation in Japan with the idea of scoping out whether we might move there for a few years.

We had a really great vacation. The Japanese are hospitable and the temples and natural areas are beautiful. We stayed overnight in a Rinzai Zen temple in the Japanese Alps, visited the beautiful thousand year old temples in Kyoto and Nara, stopped by Rinso-in, the temple of Suzuki Roshi's son, Hoitsu-san, in Yasu City to pay our respects, and finally ended up at Taisoji, a Soto Zen temple in Tokyo, where Ann Sargent, an American woman, was an assistant priest. We talked with her about living in Japan.

"One thing you must understand about being a Westerner living in Japan," she said, "Is that the Japanese don't really want you here. They are more than happy to have you visit for a few weeks, but they don't like foreigners actually living in their country."

"Really?" I replied astonished, "They seem so friendly and welcoming."

"Not only that," she continued, "You need to realize that even if you could speak the language fluently, you would be functionally illiterate. Japanese school kids spend 12 hard years memorizing *kanji*, the Chinese characters, and you will be like a 5 year old kid who can't read. So you'll be unable to get a job, except as an English teacher. While there are a lot of opportunities for teaching English, that's about all you will ever do."

That evening, over a delicious meal of vegetable tempura and soba noodles with tofu misoyaki sauce at a vegetarian restaurant in Tokyo, we mulled over our plans.

"I'm not sure I can live in Japan without bread," Renate said, placing her

chopsticks on the little porcelain bench that the restaurants in Japan place on the table to avoid having food on the chopstick tips soil the table top, "I just don't think I can live on a diet of soba, rice and fish for any length of time. When I grew up in Germany, bread was what we ate every day and it is hard enough in the US with that soft squishy stuff you call bread. Fortunately, the Bay Area has some places where you can get good bread, but Japan would be just impossible."

In the early 1990's it was difficult to get good bread in Japan, outside of European-themed restaurants.

"But I don't have a problem with teaching English," she continued, "I've done it before in Tucson after I got my English as a Second Language degree, and I think I would be pretty good at it."

I nodded. "Right," I replied, "I think for me the primary problem is that I really enjoy the research aspect of software engineering, implementing a new piece of software and integrating it into a new system. I like working together with a team of people on projects, and I especially like writing up the stuff the team is working on for conferences and journals. I don't care about having a career path or anything like that, but I'm not ready to give up my high tech job as a software engineering researcher yet. I think it would be really difficult to get an interesting high tech job after spending two years in Japan teaching English."

We quickly dropped the idea of moving to Japan to study Zen.

On our return from Japan, Renate and I became even more active in the Kannon Do community. Renate was asked to become a member of the board, and we began attending board meetings. This involved us deeply in the politics of the community. More and more people were showing up at Wednesday night sittings, and even for the longer Saturday program. The meditation hall was full most Wednesdays. Since there was no parking lot, people had to park on the streets, and the neighbors had started to complain to the city. Kannon Do was operating under a conditional use permit from the city's Planning Commission, which the city occasionally threatened to revoke if the neighbors complained. At one Kannon Do board meeting, Les brought up the idea of buying a new property and building a new meditation hall as a solution to the parking problem and the growing crowd in the meditation hall. The board and the community

immediately accepted the idea wholeheartedly and plunged into envisioning.

The board decided to hire a fund raising consultant and several quarterly board meetings were dominated by discussions of finance and how to raise money. The board also set up a process to solicit members for money, in which a group of board members visited the community members in their homes and asked them for a donation. But the community at Kannon Do was not like the congregation at a Christian church or Jewish synagogue with many middle class families earning good incomes. Nor did it attract a large expatriate Buddhist community like the Vietnamese or Thai temples with wealthy business people ready to donate for the tax deduction, so the results of the solicitation process were not very promising. The topic of fund raising even came to dominate the conversation at the Saturday morning breakfasts. Renate and I thought that the sangha would probably need to spend years fund raising in order to gather enough money to buy a new property, and maybe they would even need to take out a loan, since the price of a suitable property in the Bay Area was astronomical. Eventually, the fund raising hysteria became so severe that we reluctantly decided to leave the community. We felt that the community was beginning to lose sight of the basic practice in favor of the goal of building a new meditation hall. Renate resigned from the board and we stopped going to regular events, though we occasionally showed up for the Saturday sitting and breakfast to meet with friends.

I was thrown back into practicing by myself. I continued my daily sitting, as I had been doing for almost twenty years, using the basic mindfulness technique of breath watching. Renate, who had never had a daily meditation practice even when we had attended Kannon Do, stopped meditating altogether. I sat retreats with Sayadaw U Pandita, a Burmese *Vipassana* teacher, and Robert Aitkin Roshi, a Rinzai Zen master who specialized in koan practice. I became an avid reader of Buddhist books. But I had no regular teacher.

In the fall of 1992, I signed up for a one day meditation course at the U.C. Santa Cruz extension taught by Yvonne Rand. I knew nothing about Yvonne, except that she had studied at the San Francisco Zen Center with Suzuki Roshi. The course was held in a modern industrial building that could have been part of any high tech company in Silicon Valley. The room was much like the room at Wesleyan where I had my first experience of Buddhist meditation, fluorescent lights and plastic chairs, except Yvonne had brought along cushions for us to sit

on the floor. Yvonne spoke about a practice called "bare noting": paying attention to a very specific bodily sensation, like the touch of your left big toe against the bottom of your shoe, when challenging emotions or negative thoughts arose. She talked about breath meditation, and we did a few rounds of walking and sitting meditation. Something about her manner, a kind of rough honesty, led me to feel that I could trust her.

Afterwards, I returned home and spoke with Renate about Yvonne.

"Well, what was she like?" asked Renate, eager to hear about my experience with Yvonne.

"She sort of reminds me of my two grandmothers," I said pensively, "She has short grey hair, a short, round build, twinkling blue eyes, and a scratchy, nasal voice like my Grandmother Kempf. Her personality is more like my Grandmother Ludwig, quick with a wisecrack, and she seems to have a kind of deep wisdom and a sincere desire to help."

I paused for a moment.

"But, you know," I continued, "I immediately felt a heart connection with her." I shook my head, spread my hands out before me and shrugged my shoulders, "I just don't understand it."

I brought along a flyer with a list of Yvonne's upcoming events. Since Renate had a few vacation days left, she decided to attend the winter retreat during the week between Christmas and New Year's Day at Yvonne's home in Muir Beach. I was not able to join due to work commitments. On a rainy Saturday after Christmas, I drove Renate to Muir Beach, about an hour and a half north of Mountain View on the north side of the Golden Gate. In darkness and pouring rain, we drove back and forth along Highway 1 a few times until I finally found Yvonne's mail box. I dropped Renate off with her luggage and drove back to Mountain View. After the retreat, Renate returned with even more glowing reports about Yvonne.

We started attending Yvonne's monthly weekend retreats and longer retreats in

the winter and summer. The community at Yvonne's consisted of people who lived all over north central California and beyond, so she didn't have a regular schedule during the week like Kannon Do. One student had a practice community in Fairbanks, Alaska and only came for the week-long retreats in summer and over the Christmas week. Dormitory accommodations for residential retreats were at a wide variety of creatively furnished outbuildings distributed around her property and in the library of her house. Sittings were in her living room, converted into a meditation hall by rearranging the furniture. The living room housed a spectacular collection of Tibetan art. Beautiful Tibetan thangkas, scroll paintings of Tibetan deities and bodhisattvas set in fantastic landscapes, hung on the walls and bronze statues of the peaceful and horrific Tibetan deities were displayed on antique Japanese *tansu* chests. I asked her about the art during an interview at a weekend retreat.

"Where did you get it?" I asked.

"In the 1960's and early 1970's, drug smugglers packed the statues with hashish in Nepal and shipped them to San Francisco," she explained, "When statues got to the US, the smugglers unpacked the hash and sold the statues."

She paused and looked down for a second before looking back at me and continuing.

"I hope that by rededicating the statues to spiritual practice instead of putting them in a museum, the bad karma that they accumulated on their trip from Tibet to San Francisco can be eliminated," she said.

In the early 1970's, the Cultural Revolution was raging in China. Probably the statues were sold in Nepal by Red Guard cadres that were less interested in ideology than in making money. By buying them, she had taken them out of the international art market and returned them to their original sacred purpose.

During the first year we were members of Yvonne's community, her talks sometimes focused on the events at San Francisco Zen Center around Richard Baker. Baker Roshi had been forced to leave Zen Center in the early 1980's because of his affairs with female students. Yvonne had been one of the leaders in exposing the corruption and helping the Zen Center community deal with the

after-effects. During a sunny spring wildflower walk through the green hills of the Marin Headlands with some members of Yvonne's sitting group, she insisted I spend some time learning about the damage a corrupt guru could do.

"I want you to read the book *Raven*," she said as we walked along the Miwok Trail, "It's about Jim Jones and the People's Temple."

I struggled to remember what she was talking about. "Wasn't that the guy who killed a Congressman down in South America?" I replied, "And then afterward, his entire community committed suicide by drinking poisoned Kool-Aid?"

Yvonne was talking about a book by Tim Reiterman that told the story of Jim Jones and the Jonestown Massacre. Jones was a Christian minister from Indiana who had moved to San Francisco and founded a cult in the 1970's. Members of the cult killed Congressman Leo Ryan from San Francisco and a TV crew from NBC in 1978 in Jonestown, Guyana. The whole cult including Jones committed mass suicide shortly thereafter. The incident was the largest loss of American civilian lives prior to the 9/11 attack on the World Trade Center.

"Yes, that's right," she continued firmly, "And if I ever start behaving like Jones did, I want you to confront me and call me to account. Too many people suffered at Zen Center from Richard Baker's manipulation, not only the women he directly had affairs with but the people who put their trust in him and who he betrayed. Buddhism isn't about generating more suffering it's about eliminating it."

Yvonne also had a fondness for animals, especially animals in trouble. Her practice center, officially named the Redwood Creek Dharma Center, was nicknamed Goat in the Road, after her habit of buying goats at the annual Muir Beach spring barbecue auction to rescue them from being grilled. Sometimes the goats would escape onto Highway 1 which ran through Muir Beach, hence the nickname. She always had a few cats or dogs around her place, usually rescue animals that the owners had given her because they couldn't handle their peculiarities. A deaf cat with a very loud meow lived in her library for a while. When we first started practicing with her, Fred, a large dog of undetermined breed, would come into the meditation room and flop out on the floor to meditate with us. Usually he ended up falling asleep with his head between his paws. When it came to animals and dying, Yvonne felt that animals, like people,

needed to take their own time to die. She was willing to minister to them until they found their time, and didn't believe in the practice of "putting to sleep".

Yvonne's approach to practice was more informal than at Kannon Do. She mixed elements of Zen, her base practice, *Vipassana* or Insight meditation, and Tibetan practice, which she had learned by working closely with Tara Tulku, a Tibetan reincarnate lama who had died a few years earlier. She was quite willing to allow her students to practice a mix of techniques, and even to be studying with other teachers. This was, for most Zen teachers, completely unheard of.

Yvonne recommended to me that I continue with my breath-focused meditation and mindfulness. For other students, she taught Tibetan mantra practice or Tibetan bowing practice. She never taught a practice which she had not tried herself or which she felt wasn't effective. She also selected the chants we sang at the weekend retreats from a variety of traditions. Behind her eclectic approach to Buddhist practice was a deep understanding and appreciation of the centuries old traditional practices from Asia. This understanding allowed her to modify the ancient practices in various ways to accommodate the needs of modern Western students without losing their essence.

Shortly after we became members of Yvonne's community, I asked her if I could take formal Zen priest vows with her and, after I asked her the third time, she agreed. One important aspect of being a Zen priest is having the proper attire. While Yvonne was not very restrictive about what her lay students wore for retreats, she expected a priest to wear formal Zen robes. These were the same robes that Misha wore at Kannon Do. Like Misha, I would wear a black *okesa* instead of the brown that Les and Yvonne wore because I was still a trainee. In addition, on less formal occasions a priest sometimes wears a small bib-like robe, called a *rakasu*, in place of the *okesa*. The robes weren't just worn for show; they were actually part of the practice. Their volumes of cloth required management, and seemed to have a mind of their own. Dealing with them in all kinds of daily situations - walking through doors, climbing into cars, eating, going to the bathroom - while maintaining mindfulness was a challenge, especially for a man who had no experience with such clothing, as woman do with dresses. Yvonne thought it would be excellent mindfulness practice.

The tradition in Soto Zen is that a candidate for priest ordination sews the formal robes (*okesa* and *rakasu*) and the bowing cloth or *zagu* themselves. The idea is

that by sewing the robes, the candidate learns patience and mindfulness. But Yvonne wanted to have my ordination after the 1993 winter retreat, giving me less than a year to complete the sewing. Since I didn't know how to sew, it would have taken me years to complete the full set of robes if I had sewn them myself. Renate, on the other hand, was an accomplished seamstress, and was making most of her clothing for work. Renate and I discussed it and she offered to sew the *okesa* and *zagu* for me, while I sewed the much smaller *rakasu*. Yvonne agreed to the plan. With some help from Misha, who, by that time, was leading a meditation group of her own, I spent the summer and fall of 1993 cutting and sewing the *rakasu*, including the difficult Pine Stitch on the back of the small tab in the middle of the strap by which the *rakasu* hung around the neck. I managed to finish the *rakasu* by the end of 1993, in time for the winter retreat.

In early January 1994, Yvonne gave me the vows of the *tokudo*, or home leaving, ordination in her living room, converted into a ceremonial space for the occasion. I shaved my head except for a small knot of hair on the top, which Yvonne shaved off before the ceremony began, and dressed in the basic sitting robes, the kimono and koromo. I was not yet allowed to wear the formal Zen robes, the *okesa* and *rakasu*, since I had not yet gone through the ordination ceremony. In the small outbuilding where I stayed during the retreat, Yvonne had hung a collection of photographic portraits of Buddhist teachers: the Dali Lama; Robert Aitken Roshi; Suzuki Roshi, who was Yvonne's first Zen teacher, from whom she herself had received the tokudo ordination; Dainin Katagari Roshi, the abbot of the Minnesota Zen Center for many years, from who she had received *inka*, or Dharma Transmission, which authorized her to teach; and others. Looking at those pictures, I felt the vows as both a burden - in the obligation to live up to that line of teachers stretching backward in time to the Buddha himself - and as a privilege - in that I had taken the first step toward joining the company of teachers committed to carrying forth the practice into the future. At the same time, I felt a kind of deep happiness that I had finally aligned my life with the cause of propagating wisdom and compassion to humanity, and I joyfully accepted the burden.

There are two elements to the tokudo ordination ceremony. One is repentance and confession to purify the mind, the other is the receiving of precepts and vows. First, the space and participants in the ceremony are purified with wisdom water, sprinkled with a juniper branch. Repentance is accomplished by having the participants including the priest candidate chant the Repentance Verse three

times:

> All my ancient twisted karma,
> From beginningless greed, hatred, and delusion,
> Born through body speech and mind,
> I now fully avow.[27]

Then the participants and priest candidate recite three sets of precepts and vows. The participants and priest candidate chant the first two sets together while the priest candidate chants the third set alone. The third set consists of the 10 Grave Precepts, which set the intention to avoid actions that cause harm and suffering. Reciting the Grave Precepts, I felt a renewed sense of responsibility, and a commitment to align my thoughts, speech and actions with the Buddha's teaching. When the precepts were complete, I donned my *okesa*. I was now a trainee, sometimes called *unsui*, a Japanese word that literally means "cloud water", signifying that, like the clouds, the Zen priest has no home but rather wanders the world with the sky as his roof and the ground as his bed, at least metaphorically. Yvonne gave me the Buddhist name of Zoden Yoko, which means "Elephant Field Under the Plow", a name taken from the Ancestor Chant in which the names in the line of Zen masters between the Buddha and Suzuki Roshi are recited.

A few months after my ordination, during a Saturday evening walking meditation session at the monthly weekend retreat, we were doing walking meditation in a circle in the meditation hall when I heard Yvonne making a rustling noise behind me. I was wearing my *rakasu* at the time, and I quickly sneaked a peak as I turned a corner. She was looking at the back of my neck. It was unusual for Yvonne to make any noise when performing walking meditation, since she had a very firm but light tread and always maintained mindfulness. The next day, during an interview, she removed her *rakasu* and placed it on her lap with the tab facing upwards.

"Take yours off and put it down next to mine," she said.

I did as she had requested.

"Notice anything?" she asked.

I looked at the two *rakasus*. Suddenly, I realized that I had done the Pine Stitch backwards.

"The Pine Stich is wrong," I said, consumed with embarrassment.

"Right," she replied, putting her *rakasu* back on, "Now how about making sure you get it right before next month's retreat?"

I gulped and nodded.

After I returned home, I spent the next week carefully removing the Pine Stitch and replacing it according to the diagram Misha had given me for sewing the *rakasu*.

My practice with Yvonne continued to deepen after my ordination. She had a saying about enlightenment, "Enlightenment shows in everything you do." I tried, in every way possible, to live up to my vows. I gave up drinking alcohol because I didn't like how my mind felt after I had had a few drinks. Yvonne told me that she had worn her *rakasu* every day for a year after she was ordained when she was living at Zen Center in San Francisco. For about a year after my ordination, I too wore my *rakasu* but under my shirt because it could have been seen as a way to separate myself from my colleagues at work if I had worn it outside, like the Muslim *hijab* is for women who wear it. I began to lose my obsession with trying to understand what had happened during the 1989 retreat at Kannon Do, and instead focused on applying the basic mindfulness practices that Yvonne taught to my daily life. And I settled into practice, attending the monthly weekend retreats and the week-long summer and winter retreats. But I wanted to do a longer meditation retreat. Yvonne and I agreed that I should plan on doing a 3 month practice period somewhere. I suggested Tassajara but from her experience in the early 1980's, Yvonne didn't think much of the teaching at Zen Center. Instead, she suggested I attend the 3 month *Vipassana* retreat at the Insight Meditation Center in Barre, Massachusetts.

Back in Silicon Valley, I had moved from Sun's research labs through a few other research projects and was working on a product project. The project involved porting the application platform and program development tools that Steve Jobs' company, Next[28], had developed for their computer workstation

onto Sun's operating system, Solaris, and onto Sun's SPARC workstation. Though the Next product was innovative, they had only a fraction of the market share that Sun had. The project was a way for Next to get more market share for their application platform and for Sun to offer a more innovative program development environment, a win-win for both sides. High level executive involvement on both sides ensured that a close eye would be kept on progress.

Like all product projects, this one had impossible deadlines that required working 12 hours a day and on weekends too. My primary goal was to accumulate enough "comp time" - time worked over the standard 8 hours per day/5 days per week - that I could make a case to take two months off in addition to the month of vacation I had accumulated, so I could go to IMS for the yearly 3 month *Vipassana* retreat.

Development was complicated by the tendency of Steve Jobs to make arbitrary decisions about what software he would let us have or how he wanted things done. Our manager, Ian, tried arguing with Jobs, but, in the end, Jobs inevitably got his way. Ian would then have to carry out the changes, causing delays in the release schedule. We finished the product development in late June of 1996, six months late, and the product was released to the market a couple of months later. Unfortunately, the market reception of the product was not exactly what we had anticipated. The product had exactly one customer - the Federal Housing Administration - and was on the market for about a month before Sun removed it from the price list and cancelled the product.

Ian approved my request for time off and in early September 1996, I flew to Massachusetts with a sense of excited anticipation. I would finally have an opportunity to test the reports from the old texts by Zen monks and monks in the Theravada tradition! Perhaps I would have an enlightenment experience that would be convincing enough for me to move away from my largely lay life in which my meditation practice was kind of a hobby, to a life of full time meditation practice in preparation for becoming a meditation teacher. I figured I had about a 50/50 chance of coming out of the retreat with an even stronger and more dedicated practice. I felt as if this retreat would somehow be a turning point in my life, and I was eager to do the work to make it happen.

In Southeast Asia, the Theravada tradition has a different relationship to robes and a shaved head than Zen. In the Theravada, Buddhist monks are celibate

renunciates and live separately from lay householders. They shave their heads and wear formal robes. In Japan, though Zen priests often shave their heads and wear formal robes, they live as part of the lay community and are even allowed to marry. The *Vipassana* tradition, which evolved from the Theravada in the West and is the tradition in which IMS is grounded, further distinguishes between meditation teachers and monks, a distinction that the Zen tradition does not make. *Vipassana* meditation teachers are mostly lay householders. They wear no robes, do not shave their heads, and they often have no long term relationship with their students. Students study with particular teachers while they are in retreat, and during the next retreat they may study with a completely different set of teachers. If the student attends a weekly sitting group, the same teacher may lead the group every week, but the teacher has no formal relationship with the students. Meditation teachers in the *Vipassana* tradition are more like psychological consolers than like religious leaders. In Zen, a student typically has one teacher as their primary or root teacher, though they might occasionally receive teachings from others. The root teacher is responsible for the student's spiritual welfare and psychological development, and a teacher takes that responsibility seriously.

Yvonne initially suggested that I wear my Zen robes, including the *okesa* and *zagu*, to the retreat and that I shave my head. Just before I left, she changed her mind, but by then I had already gotten used to the idea, since the robes were an intimate part of my practice. Although I didn't shave my head while in lay life, it also made sense to me that I follow the practice while in retreat, since I would essentially be living the kind of life that a Buddhist monk lives. The difference between Theravadan monks and Zen priests caused a bit of confusion among some people at IMS, since special rules applied to the Theravadan monks who attended retreats there. For example, they were always first in line for meals. These rules didn't apply to me, even though my robes and shaved head made me look like they did. My robes also seemed to be intimidating to my teachers who did not wear robes, or, at the very least, they were a barrier to developing a productive practice relationship.

As my concentration deepened during the first weeks of September, I began to experience unusual surges of feeling throughout my body, especially up the core along my spine. The surges felt like moving waves of energy. During some especially peaceful meditations, I sensed the same kind of blinding white light as I had seen in 1989 during my first retreat at Kannon Do, except, this time, the

light wasn't separate from my mind. After a particularly intense sitting on a sunny fall morning, when the bell rang softly to end the sitting, I stood up after the sitting and left the meditation hall for walking meditation and the presence of the light continued. As I walked through the forest paths behind the old IMS dorm, I could dimly see the path through the light. Then the light began to break up into multicolored sparkles and the sparkles turned into the colored leaves of the New England fall forest.

One morning I was sitting in the meditation hall in deep concentration following the sensations in my back as they appeared and disappeared. I noticed something peculiar, a series of icons like those used in computer user interfaces. The icons would appear one after another, starting with one that looked like a lightning bolt, followed very quickly by a tiny blip that I couldn't identify, then by another icon of hands pushing something away. The series always ended in awareness of pain, followed by a movement. I watched the series scroll by three times before my mindfulness weakened and my mind moved elsewhere. I was puzzled and I mentioned the experience to one of my teachers in an interview.

"What you saw was probably conditioned arising[29]," he said.

This was the first time I had ever heard of conditioned arising, and my face must have shown my confusion.

"Conditioned arising forms the basis of how the unenlightened mind operates," he explained, "A physical or mental sensation starts the sequence. That was the first icon, the lightning bolt."

"But what was that tiny blip?" I asked, "It went by so fast that I didn't have a chance to really examine it."

"That was feeling," he replied. "Every sensation is accompanies by a feeling tone, one of pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. In your case, the feeling was unpleasant even though you didn't fully catch it. These two steps are part of the body's physical reaction to outside sensations and are completely unavoidable."

"What about the rest?" I asked.

"The icon of pushing away was the step in conditioned arising called clinging. In this case, because the feeling tone was unpleasant, the reaction was to reject or try to get rid of the sensation," he said. "If the feeling tone had been pleasant, the clinging would have been to continue the sensation, or arrange to get more of it."

"And the experience of pain and movement?" I asked. "Are those also part of the sequence?"

"Yes they are," he replied. "The experience of pain is craving, when clinging works its way up to the conscious level. The movement is becoming, when the conscious craving manifests as some activity to get rid of or continue more of a particular sensation."

"So the sequence is: contact, feeling, clinging, craving, becoming," he summarized, "That's the central part of the conditioned arising sequence. There's more to it, actually twelve steps in all which is why it is sometimes called the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising, but that's enough for now. You can look up the other seven after the retreat."

"But what did you mean by 'unenlightened mind'?" I persisted, "How does the enlightened mind deal with the twelve links?"

"Applying mindfulness to the conditioned arising sequence causes the links to break," he replied, "So, for example, if you become mindful of a sensation and its feeling tone rather than simply letting the sequence proceed to clinging, clinging doesn't happen. The sensation is just a sensation, not something happening to you that you need to get more of or get rid of. Similarly for the other links. You can interrupt the sequence at any link after the physical ones, but the earlier you catch it, near the physiologically unavoidable links of contact and feeling, the less likely the sequence is to proceed to unwholesome thoughts, words, and actions."

"I don't understand," I said, my forehead wrinkling in concentration, "How can catching clinging with mindfulness have anything to do with enlightenment?"

"Thoughts, words, and actions not met with mindfulness are what cause *dukkha*," he said, "For example, the conscious unpleasant sensation behind pain causes suffering in you when you identify with it as *my* unpleasant sensation and

try to push it away. It could cause you to behave in a way that causes suffering for someone else too. If you can catch the pain with mindfulness at the bare sensation and its unpleasant feeling tone, it becomes just another sensation, not something that is happening to you. That's how the enlightened mind manages to maintain wholesome behavior and avoid propagating suffering in the world."

As the retreat wore on, the energy surges became so intense that I could barely sit still. I started to develop intense pain in my abdomen and I feared that I had reactivated an old back injury. I began to meditate lying down in my room, but the pain continued. During walking meditation, instead of walking slowly back and forth, I almost ran. One day, I noticed on a map outside the registration office that Quabbin Reservoir, the water supply for Boston, was within a day's hiking distance of Barre. I decided to walk to Quabbin and back to get away from the retreat and burn off some energy.

The next day I pulled on my hiking boots and set off in the general direction of Quabbin. I didn't have a map but Quabbin was a pretty big place so I had confidence that I would run into it eventually. The weather was warm and sunny, a perfect New England Indian summer day, and I made good progress. I walked through small towns and past farms. I walked and walked until I finally reached a hill that I thought overlooked the reservoir. As I climbed the hill, a flock of wild turkeys flushed out in front of me, but when I got to the top, I could see no sign of the reservoir. Tired and disappointed, I turned around and headed back.

On the way back, I walked by an old New England cemetery. I needed a rest by then, so I sat down in the warm afternoon sun with my back to an old maple tree in the graveyard. I looked around at the gravestones and began thinking about aging and death. Once, all the people in this graveyard had been young and now they were gone, some of them probably for hundreds of years. A vision of my mother as a young woman, from a picture I had seen of her, flashed in front of my eyes, followed by a picture of her now, as she looked over 40 years later. Soon, she too would die. I began to think about myself and I suddenly realized that, in some sense, my whole practice was not motivated by a desire to save all sentient beings, the Bodhisattva Vow I recited after every Wednesday night sitting at Kannon Do and during Yvonne's retreats. My primary motivation was to recapture that sense of exploration and excitement I had felt as a student at Wesleyan when I had first encountered psychedelics, and to escape the tyranny

of materialism that had overwhelmed my life with meaningless activity and petty boredom.

I realized that I was a pretty good software engineer and computer science researcher, and could probably continue to have a modestly successful career in Silicon Valley, even if I was not particularly taken in by the whole Silicon Valley startup mythology. I had no desire to join a startup or start my own company and enter the "startup bardo": an intermediate state of frantic activity between a normal life and success (heaven) or failure (hell) like the intermediate state between lives described in the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*. On the other hand, I had no ambition to work my way up in a larger company, because the company politics involved in establishing myself on a corporate ladder seemed unethical and inhumane, to say nothing of having to buy into a unconscious corporate agenda that included harming the environment and exploiting workers in Third World countries.

My ambition lay in a different place. I had wanted to become a meditation teacher, but now, that ambition had been shattered. I realized I would not be able to complete the retreat due to the pain I was experiencing. I felt a deep sense of failure, of having to give up something which I simply wasn't capable of achieving but which I really wanted to do. Without completing the retreat, I couldn't feel the confidence and sense of purpose needed to drop out of lay life and dedicate myself full time to training, thereby going against the whole stream of Western culture. It was the first time in my life that I had ever had such a feeling, since at other times I had simply shied away from becoming involved in activities where I thought I couldn't compete or couldn't at least do a competent job.

After I had rested, I stood up and returned to the retreat center. I continued to practice for a few days, but the pain continued to worsen. I spoke with one of my teachers about leaving and ultimately left the retreat at the halfway point. I had entered the retreat with a sense of excitement and optimism, and a desire to strengthen my practice enough to dedicate my life to becoming a meditation teacher. I left in anguish and in total uncertainty about where my practice would lead.

Day 6 Morning - The Mahabodhi Temple

The next morning the pilgrims straggle downstairs before dawn and gather in front of the Hotel Sujata for the short trip to the Daijokyo guest house. This morning, we will have a longer sitting at the guest house and then eat breakfast. Most of the pilgrims look half asleep, but I'm very awake, having risen at 4:30 and done an hour and a half of meditation already. At 6:30, the bus leaves for Daijokyo. When we arrive, we settle into the little temple in front of the guest house together with the other half of the group. The temple altar is decorated with a large golden Buddha sitting cross-legged in the meditation posture. On both sides, standing figures of Kannon holding a lotus flower on a long stem like a walking stick grace the altar space. Kannon is the Bodhisattva of Compassion in Korea, Japan and China, Avalokiteshvara's East Asian sister.

Arranging our mats and cushions on the floor, we sit for 20 minutes. The floor and air are cold, and I wrap my hands in my fleece jacket to keep them warm. The sitting is followed by 10 minutes walking meditation, walking swiftly in a circle around the room in the style of Rinzai Zen. The walking meditation helps warm me up, and afterwards we sit for another 20 minutes. Afterwards, Shantum asks someone to read a sutra, the essence of which is not to attach to past, present, or future. This is the first bit of formal practice we've had on the pilgrimage, and the combination of the long meditation after waking with the formal practice session has strengthened my mindfulness.

When the practice session is over, we walk through the garden to the Daijokyo dining room for breakfast. The weather is still cold and foggy. Due to the strong mindfulness developed from the meditation, I can feel aversion in my mind quite clearly. The aversion is a kind of cliff of negativity toward which everything I'm feeling, hearing, and seeing seems to be pushing me to cross. Should I cross that cliff, I would act out and snap at someone in irritation. But today mindfulness helps stop me from crossing that cliff, so I sit by myself and eat breakfast without talking to anyone, watching my mind quite carefully. I linger after breakfast, have an extra cup of chai, and find myself reflecting on my conversation with Stephen and Kevin at Vulture Peak two days ago, when I

spoke disparagingly about the Mahayana sutras. I am filled with profound regret that I spoke so judgmentally, since the Mahayana sutras are actually quite beautiful pieces of literature regardless of the truth of back story accorded them by the tradition.

After breakfast, we gather briefly next to the bus to say good-by to Helen Tworkov. Helen will be leaving us here to spend some time with her Tibetan teacher who is in town for Monlam, the Tibetan New Year. I feel a twinge of regret that I didn't have more of an opportunity to talk to Helen. Then we climb back on the bus for the trip to the Mahabodhi Temple. We pass the Hotel Sujata and then open fields and scattered houses here and there surrounded by low walls. A few strip malls with parking in front float by in the fog. The city appears in this outer district for all the world like a trashed out version of a 1950's American suburb. The buildings get denser as we approach the temple district, rows of three story buildings against the street, with the ground floor occupied by shops. On Lal Pathar Road, the driver slows and stops some distance from the entrance to the temple.

A wall made of cement and topped by an iron fence surrounds the temple grounds. The only entrance is a gate down Lal Pathar Road from where we are stopped. A veritable flood of red and yellow - Tibetan monks and nuns - is pouring out of the gate and down the street in our direction, stopping the driver from proceeding further. The Dalai Lama was in Bodhgaya a few weeks before for Monlam and some high lamas from the Nyingma sect are holding their semiannual Teaching for Peace on the grounds of the temple. We have arrived during the start of their lunch break. After being cooped up all morning sitting quietly listening to teachings, the monks and nuns are now all taking at once in Tibetan, making an unholy racket. The vendors and beggars crying out trying to get their attention and the occasional tuk-tuk add to the din.

We climb out of the bus and gather on the side. Shantum shouts instructions at us to keep together and asks Jagdish and me to bring up the rear. The group starts towards the entrance, struggling against the stream of red and yellow. Mary Lee begins to lag behind, checking out the vendors and beggars who are huddled along the temple wall side of the road, trying to avoid becoming road kill under the swarm of Tibetans. I walk back to help her.

"Mary Lee!" I shout over the din, "Are you OK?"

She looks up from the vendors with a sort of vacant expression on her face. She seems overwhelmed by the mix of beggars, vendors, red-clad monks and nuns, and other pilgrims.

"Yes, I'm OK, thank you James," she says and seems to regain a bit of composure.

I walk next to her side and we chat to help bring the focus back to our group. We slowly work our way through the crowd to catch up with the others.

At the gate to the temple grounds, the group has gathered and is buying camera passes. Everyone is expected to buy a camera pass since Westerners always carry cameras, even if they don't happen to have one along at the moment. We then walk over to the shoe check, remove our shoes and check them in with the shoe guardian. Because the inner temple ground is considered a holy site, shoes must come off. Fortunately, Shantum has warned us ahead of time so we all have donned robust socks to protect our feet from the cold and dirty concrete walkways.

The Mahabodhi Temple is set in a depression within a pleasant park surrounded by many smaller shrines, walkways, and railings. As we reach the stairway down into the depression, the main mass of the temple looms before us overtopping the smaller shrines, like a giant mountain. I throw back my head to take in the sight, and snap a picture. The temple is a symbolic replica of Mt. Meru, the cosmological center of the Buddhist universe but also an actual mountain in southeastern Tibet. The main mass of the temple sits on a square base, and is topped by the narrow, tall pyramidal roof around 180 feet in height. The roof is constructed in a step design, similar to a Mayan pyramid, with the steps becoming smaller as the roof reaches the top. The sides of the steps are covered in carved stone window-like alcoves with lintels and pillars, and on the top is a hemispherical stone stupa with a golden umbrella. At each of the four corners of the square base, four smaller pyramids rise up replicating the style of the main roof. The temple is made of brick with carved stone for the decorations. The square base, pyramidal roof, and four smaller pyramids are completely solid. A small cavity in the middle of the base with an entrance on the side facing us provides the only interior space.

The original temple was a smaller pyramidal structure built around the 2nd century during the Kushan Empire[30]. The temple we see today was constructed in the 5th-6th century, during the late Gupta Empire. But by the middle of the 19th century during the British Raj, the temple had become so run down that it was covered with jungle creepers. Alexander Cunningham, the British army engineer and archeologist who rediscovered Nalanda and many other sites we are seeing on the tour, restored the temple to approximately its original condition, as we see it standing before us today.

We climb down the stairs into the inner temple grounds. A group of old Tibetan women with braided black hair dressed in dark red and black chubas and multicolored aprons are sitting on the ground along the approach to the temple. They continually pour colored glass beads and shiny stones from one earthen bowl to another. The beads and stones make a tinkling sound as they flow between the bowls. The women are performing jewel offering practice, and recite a mantra in Tibetan timed with their pouring, offering the jewels to the Buddha. We stop near the entrance to the walkway surrounding the temple. Shantum suggests we do three circumambulations, and then regroup for a sitting and teaching. A whirling mass of people moving in a clockwise direction between the wall and the temple packs the ten foot wide walkway. We insert ourselves into the swarm.

As we round the corner, a branch of the Bodhi Tree comes into view. Quite suddenly, I am filled with emotion and tears well up. But there's no time to stop. I'm in danger of being trampled by the circulating crowd so I continue walking. The tree is right next to the back of the temple and is surrounded by a tall fence made of thick stone pillars connected with rails and an iron grid. The spot where the Buddha sat looking east, the *Bodhimanda* or Place of Awakening, is between the tree and the temple. I crane my neck trying to catch sight of it but without success. The view is blocked by the rails of the fence and the masses of offerings including flowers and Tibetan *katas*, the white cloth scarves that Tibetans drape over statues, temple walls, or wherever they want to honor something.

The crowd sweeps me along and I continue the circumambulation, past the low stone wall flush with the north side of the temple. The wall marks the place where the Buddha did walking meditation between sitting periods. Here, the wall

is covered with Tibetan butter sculptures, flowers, and *torma* -little offering cakes shaped like brightly colored flowers and Buddhist symbols in red, blue, and green. The *torma* have been put there by the monks and nuns for the Peace Teaching. Carried by the surging crowd, I swing around the front and down the south side again, around to the west side corner and back under the Bodhi Tree.

This time, I manage to extricate myself from the swarm and glue my face to the fence. There I can see it, the Seat of Enlightenment, where the Buddha sat two and a half millennia ago. It is marked by a small golden pagoda-like shrine. Another wave of emotion overwhelms me and tears well up. I now understand what Xuanzang felt centuries earlier at this very spot when fell to his knees and wept at his misfortune for having been born in an age when the Buddha was already gone:

> With the most sincere devotion, Xuanzang casts himself face down on the ground. Filled with grief, he sighs and says: "At the time when the Buddha perfected himself in wisdom, I know not in what condition I was in the troublous whirl of birth and death." To him, it is inescapably clear his evil deeds mean that he is condemned to live in this lesser age, when Buddhism is in decline, instead of the golden age of the Buddha's life on earth. His eyes overflow with tears.[31]

I reluctantly reinsert myself into the circumambulation and go for the last round.

As I walk down the south side approaching where the walk turns the corner to the Bodhi Tree, my mind becomes focused. Equanimity and mindfulness become strong. Suddenly, I'm aware of what is happening **right now**. I examine the emotion and realize that I am not reacting to the people jostling against my arms, the fog gradually dissipating, the sun coming out, the Tibetans muttering prayers, and the fluttering leaves of the tree. I am reacting to two and a half millennia of stories about the Buddha's awakening, and not to the reality that surrounds me. What is happening **right now** is just walking.

I finish my circumambulation and join the rest of the group. Several of the pilgrims are still walking, so we wait for them to finish. The Tibetans have cleared out by now, leaving mats, cushions, red shawls, plastic water bottles and other paraphernalia. When the stragglers arrive, we find a place where there are no Tibetan belongings and set up our mats for a sitting and teaching. Stephen and Shantum sit with their backs to the temple and we sit facing them. By now,

the sun is out and it is hot. I unwrap my white cotton pilgrim shawl and drape it over my head so my face and the back of my neck don't get sunburned. Stephen talks about the meaning and nature of the Buddha's enlightenment, as the Buddha spoke of it himself.

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In most of the Pali Canon, the Buddha talked about the Dharma rather than his own experience, but in the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*[32], the *Discourse on the Noble Quest*, the Buddha spoke of his experience practicing prior to his awakening under the Bodhi Tree. The sutta starts with the Buddha talking about practicing with two teachers, Alara Kalama and Udaka Ramaputta who we met before during our visit to Vaishali. Neither gave answers to his primordial questions: what does it mean to be born, to grow old, to be subject to sickness, and to die. The Buddha's awakening was an awakening to the answer to these questions, and, more specifically, the answer to the fundamental question underlying all of them: what does it mean to be alive?

In the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, the Buddha says that people by and large are more concerned with their position in life - their story so to speak - than the flow of experience as it is happening. This exactly mirrors my experience during my circumambulation of the temple. I had been consumed with the story of the Buddha's enlightenment and what it meant to me, and then suddenly dropped down into the flow of experience around the tree. The Buddha doesn't use the metaphor "enlightenment" in the sutta-shining a light into a dark place - but rather "awakening" - returning from a dreaming reality that is private to us, to the world of the phenomenal senses, to reality. What the Buddha woke up to was the Dharma. The Buddha describes the Dharma as, "... this dhamma I have reached is deep, hard to see, difficult to awaken to, quiet and excellent, not confined by thought, subtle, sensed by the wise."[33] In other words, the Dharma is something wise people tend to know, and is not something that is trivial or obvious.

The Buddha defined the Dharma as *paticca samuppaada*[34] in Pali, translated as conditioned arising. In a passage from the *Majjhima Nikaya*, the *Middle Length Discourses* of the *Pali Canon*, the Buddha speaks to a man called Udayin. He describes how the process of conditioned arising works: "Let be the past, Udayin, let be the future. I shall teach you the dhamma. When this exists, that

comes to be. With the arising of this, that arises. When this does not exist, that does not come to be. With the cessation of this, that ceases."[35]

In other words, all human events and all phenomena in the phenomenal world - literally everything - arise because of causes and conditions. Hence the name "conditioned arising". Phenomena arise when the conditions for them are ripe, continue to exist for a time, and then cease when the conditions for maintaining their existence disappear. Conditioned arising is the process that underpins the phenomenal world, but it is extremely subtle and difficult to see. Without paying careful attention, the causes and conditions behind the arising and cessation of phenomena often appear opaque. In the physical world, subtle causes require instruments to see. For example a microscope is needed to see bacteria and other microorganisms that cause disease. Without such instruments, the causes of disease are invisible to the human eye. In the world of human interaction, the reasons why we do what we do often seem mysterious, until we sit down and carefully watch our thoughts and sensations in meditation. In the bustle of everyday life, we tend to miss the subtle sensations and thoughts that drive us to act in certain ways.

The Buddha's message is that there is no transcendent reality behind the phenomenal world. By paying close attention to our experience we can see that it is just a collection of arising and passing moments with one moment setting up the conditions for the arising of the next. What prevents us from seeing this is our attachment to our views and habits and our place in the world. We have a view of ourselves as having a permanent "self" acting in the world with a particularly privileged viewpoint and a collection of views and beliefs that make up our identity. Our sense of self feels threatened when our views and beliefs are criticized and strengthened when they are praised. We identify with these views in order to create a safe, well understood place for ourselves in a world that is fundamentally quite insecure.

Intellectually knowing this isn't enough. To actually experience it requires a particular perspective of consciousness. As the Buddha said in the *Ariyapariyesana Sutta*, "It is also hard for those who delight and revel in their place to see this ground, the stilling of all inclinations, the relinquishing of all bases, the fading away of craving, desirelessness, stopping, *nibbana*."[36] These words don't point to the conditioned world of changing phenomena, but rather to the perspective from which the Buddha experienced the conditioned world. This

perspective is one in which the habits of mind, the conditioning that had prevented him from directly experiencing the world of changing phenomena, had somehow faded away. He described this perspective as *nibbana* in Pali, or, *nirvana* in Sanskrit. *Nirvana* means a blowing out or quenching of the impulses of greed, hatred, and confusion. The cessation of these impulses led to a state of deep stillness and peace for the Buddha. This state allowed the Buddha to witness the flow of the conditioned world from a perspective in which he did not privilege his own subjective viewpoint and his own identity above other phenomena, but rather viewed them with complete equanimity, as just another aspect of arising and passing impermanent phenomena, like the falling of a leaf from the Bodhi Tree.

In a fundamental way, the Buddha's awakening was diametrically opposed to the traditional goal of spiritual practice in India. That goal was the turning of attention to the source of experience rather than to the flow of experience. The spiritual seeker arrived there by withdrawing the attention from the external until the luminous source of consciousness was seen, the unconditioned and eternal *atman*. This is what the Buddha was seeking, but what he actually found was something quite unexpected. Rather than directing attention towards the transcendent, the luminous, the unitary, the eternal, and the blissful, the Buddha turned attention towards the mundane, the ordinary, the suffering, the impermanent, and the specific. He found that enlightenment isn't the discovery of a transcendent reality behind the phenomenal world because there is no such transcendent reality; but rather that true enlightenment lies in the perspective from which phenomena are experienced. This spiritual vision is unique both to India and to the world.

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Day 6 Afternoon - Sujatagarh

After Stephen finishes the teaching, we gather our mats and cushions and head back toward the entrance to the temple park. The Tibetan monks and nuns have started returning from lunch. As we climb the stairs from the depression in which the temple sits to the broad walkway leading toward the entrance, the crowd begins to surge forward against our group, into the area where the teachings are being held. We negotiate a path through the mob, sliding around the monks and nuns pushing in the opposite direction like cars in an Indian traffic jam. We eventually make it back to the shoe storage at the entrance.

Renate and I retrieve our shoes and sit on a bench watching the crowd while we wait for the rest of the pilgrims to retrieve theirs. Renate draws my attention to a group of monks walking past headed into the temple grounds. They wear orange robes, like the Thai monks, but do not shave their heads completely, unlike the Thai monks, and have Indian features. I step up to one and ask where he is from. His English is not good, but he manages to convey to me that he is from India, in fact, he is from Bihar, the province in which we now are. I am confused, Buddhism died out in India 700 years ago, didn't it? We in the West tend to think of Asian Buddhism as originating in three broad geographical areas: Theravadan from Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, Tibetan from Tibet, Mongolia, and Northern China, and Zen, from China, Vietnam, Korea, and Japan. These monks were not from any of those. I file my question away for another time when I can ask Shantum about it.

After everyone has their shoes on, we head back out through the gate and wait on the sidewalk for the bus. Near the gate, a group of small children have set up a little theater. A boy and girl begin their performance by doing a yoga/gymnastics routine. The routine involves the boy taking a kind of *supta virasana*, or reclining hero, yoga pose, in which the boy kneels, sits on his legs, then leans back and lays down while the girl hovers over him. After a while, the girl moves and exchanging places with the boy. Then another girl begins beating loudly on a drum and some kids bring out a large white rabbit dressed in a hat and a kind of apron. I am drawn in by the performance, so much more inventive and interesting than the beggar kids, and move over to watch. Just then, the bus arrives and we need to climb on for the trip back to the Hotel Sujata for lunch. I

am a bit sad, I would have loved to stay and watch and give the kids some money.

Lunch is in the hotel dining room and we are joined in the dining room by a group of Japanese pilgrims. Pam is picking at the edible but not outstanding Indian food. She stops and checks out what the Japanese pilgrims are having for lunch.

"They seem to be eating Japanese food," she says turning to Shantum, "Where did they get it? Does the hotel serve two menus?"

I check out the Japanese pilgrims' lunch myself. They've got rice balls, nori, and other Japanese dishes.

"The Japanese are paranoid about hygiene," Shantum replies, "They don't want to end up getting sick. So they bring their own food and a cook rather than have the hotel prepare it."

"Hmm, well, we've had luck so far. Hopefully it will hold," mutters Pam returning to her lunch, "But it would certainly be nice to have something different now and then."

Our destination that afternoon is Sujatagarh, the village where the milk maid Sujata fed Siddhartha Gotama, the soon-to-be-Buddha, his first meal of milk rice after he abandoned his ascetic practice of extreme fasting and before he began his meditation practice period in Bodhgaya that led to his enlightenment. A bridge leads across the sandy desert of the Falgu River, known as the Niranjara River in the Buddha's time. We turn left immediately after the bridge and follow the dry riverbed to the parking lot. We climb out of the bus, and, surprisingly, there are no vendors or beggars. Even more surprisingly, the parking lot is clean and covered in crushed stone, with no sign of trash in sight.

We gather near a path that leads off toward the village. Shantum has been here many times before, and has many friends in this village. Several years ago, Thich Nhat Hanh, Shantum's teacher, did a pilgrimage in Bihar and Shantum brought Thay to Sujatagarh. Thay instructed Shantum to buy some land, which, after consulting with the villagers, he did. A few years ago, they planted a sapling from the current Bodhi Tree on the land, and also a sapling from one of

the other trees important in the Buddha's life, the sal tree. The sal is the tree under which the Buddha was born and under which he died. Shantum's extended sangha has future plans to construct something here, perhaps a restaurant or a meditation center.

While Shantum is talking, a young Indian man appears and quietly stands near the back of the group. This is Rakesh, a resident of the village, who Shantum has known since he was 11, and who Shantum has supported in various ways at different times in his life. Shantum and Rakesh lead most of the pilgrims off on a path into the field to see the trees. I decide to wait until they return.

Steve Wachinsky is sitting down on a rock next to the path, gripping at his legs and grimacing. I walk over and sit down next to him.

"What's wrong?" I ask.

"I've got an infection in my knees," he replies. "Probably from all the walking and standing around. They've opened up and are draining."

"We've got some Cipro back at the hotel, you can have some when we get back," I say.

"Thanks," he says smiling through his pain.

"What's wrong with your legs?" I ask.

"I have phlebitis," he replies, "That's an inflammation of the veins in the legs. On top of that, I sometimes get neuropathy in my feet. I lose the feeling and then can't balance. I've got a pre-diabetic condition that contributes to these problems. That's why I don't eat any rice."

I nod. "Do you think you can manage on the rest of the trip?" I ask.

"Normally it's not a problem," he says, "And if it gets to the point where I absolutely can't walk, I'll spend the day in the hotel room."

By this time, the pilgrims are starting to return from viewing the trees. We reassemble and head off through the village. Unlike the trash-strewn collection of hovels which characterize the villages we've been passing through on the bus, this village is quite charming. The houses are simple but solid and well built, some in multiple stories. Many of the houses are clad in brown or white stucco, and have colorful doors. The streets are clean and the people seem friendly. Overall, the village reminds me of the simple villages in the back hills of the Greek islands Renate and I visited during our honeymoon in 1979, or even the villages I hiked through in 2000 when I was in Mustang, Nepal. Shantum tells us that this village has been the lucky recipient of large (for India) generosity from Buddhist pilgrims around the world. It seems the Japanese are especially heavy donors. In fact, many village boys end up marrying Japanese women and going to Japan with them, then sending back money to their relatives. The lack of poverty and squalor is therefore due to the special attention this village has received over the years from outsiders.

Once out of the village, we follow a raised walkway through the fields. The walkway leads to a complex of two small temples and a small brick-lined tank. Some village boys are busy dousing a statue of Sarasvati. The festival of Sarasvati has just completed. We saw a few processions on the trip into Bodhgaya the night before, as well as on the way to Rajgir during the first days of the pilgrimage. Traditionally the statue is made of mud and straw or paper and is drowned in water to decompose after the festival. Some of our group head over to the tank to take photos, and the rest of us continue on to the temple complex.

The complex consists of two Hindu temples under a banyan tree. Since the suttas say the Buddha ate his first meal under a banyan tree, the villagers decided this must be it. Near one of the temples is an information board explaining that here was the place that Sujata fed the future Buddha his first meal. Of course, trees aren't immortal and it is entirely likely that the event occurred under another banyan tree which, in the intervening millennia, died. But people in India never let reality interfere with a good story, especially when there is a religious theme. We check out the temples. They are obviously recent since they are made from reinforced concrete, and we discuss our skepticism about whether this was the actual place.

The usual collection of curious villagers and a few "helper" kids follow us,

practicing their English and providing tourist guide service for the possibility of a future donation to their school, or maybe just for fun. At the bottom of the raised roadway is a small tree. Beneath the tree sit two men who are obviously disabled. They have twisted limbs but they do manage to crawl up to Shantum as he approaches. Shantum stops and a short conversation in Hindi ensues. He reaches into his pocket and takes out some money. Instantly, there is a kind of electric tension in the air among the two disabled men, the villagers and the kids. Sort of like an alarm went off: "Red alert! Red alert! Cash has appeared!" He reaches down and gives the money to one of the beggars with a few gentle words of Hindi, and we continue on our way.

The incident again raises the whole issue of begging and how to handle it, since Shantum had recommended at strucks a few nights ago that we not give to beggars, and now he himself has given something to them. I hurry forward to where Shantum is walking with Sophia and Kevin at the head of the group.

"What do you think caused that kind of deformation of their limbs?" asks Sophia, "It doesn't look like it was an accident."

"Probably rickets," says Kevin. "That kind of twisted deformation is typical of rickets. Rickets is caused by a lack of vitamin D and calcium, especially when kids are growing up. In fact, they probably didn't get much food at all as kids."

"Shantum, I don't understand," I interrupt as I catch up, "You told us not to give to beggars. Why did you give money to that guy back there?"

"I know these guys," he replies, "They are quite poor and really have no way of earning a living because their bodies are so twisted they can't do manual labor, and we have no social safety net in India as you do in the West. Most poor people in India earn their living by doing manual labor of some sort, either on a farm or a construction site or something like that."

"What did you say to him?" I ask, "There was this funny kind of atmosphere like..." I search for a word.

"Like greed you mean?" Shantum asks looking over at me.

"Yes, that's right!" I reply.

Shantum smiles.

"Well, I told him to share it with his friend and also with another beggar who I know but was not here," he says.

I stop for a moment, thunderstruck, while Shantum, Sophia, Kevin and the rest of the group continue on. Rather than setting a hard and fast rule, Shantum allows his reactions to begging to differ depending on circumstances. A healthy kid begging for fun is one thing, a crippled middle aged man begging for his livelihood because he cannot do anything else is quite another. And he turned what was an occasion for greed on the part of the beggars - if the person he had given the money had kept it for himself - into a teaching on generosity.

Continuing on through the fields and back into the village, we make a stop at the house of Rakesh. He has invited the group for afternoon tea. His house is built from bricks but lacks stucco which the houses in the more prosperous part of the village have, and there is no door covering. I enter through the door and pause to look around. A little light falls into the interior through the door and a hole in the roof but there are no windows. A small oil lamp throws a pool of light in the corner. Next to the family's living quarters is the stall where Rakesh's cow and water buffalo are kept. The house smells of cow and buffalo, though there are no sounds coming from the stall right now. We climb a ladder up onto the roof where the family obviously spends most of its time. The stove and cooking utensils are there, and the roof has been spread with mats for our arrival. Rakesh's 15 year old daughter is making chapatis for supper, and his wife and son, around 12, and youngest daughter, around 8, join us for tea and a short chat. Rakesh's wife pours tea for everyone (all 30-odd of us!, fortunately we brought our cups along from our pilgrim packet), then Shantum encourages us to ask questions about their life. We ask, in English, and Shantum translates into Hindi.

Rakesh built his house himself and is a farmer. He farms the land that Thich Nhat Hanh's sangha bought. His dream is to build a restaurant on the land which he and his wife will then run. Right now, he grows a variety of crops, mostly vegetables like bok choy and spinich. His mother is a vegetable vendor and sells

what he grows. We ask questions about the girls' schooling. The youngest daughter is the scholar in the family. All the kids go to Buddhist donation schools, the oldest goes to a school supported by Christopher Titmus' (the English Dharma teacher's) Buddhist group in England. Like many women in India, his wife is illiterate. He uses his water buffalo for plowing, and he naturally has no car but he does have a bicycle. His youngest daughter needs a bicycle so she can go to a different school but unfortunately he can't afford one at the moment. He also, surprisingly enough, has a cell phone. Literally everyone in India seems to have one, even the poorest person. After we finish asking him questions, Rakesh asks us a few. He wants to know how much electricity costs in the U.S., and when we tell him, he is surprised by how expensive it is. And so on. In the end, we get a narrow but penetrating view into the family life of a lower class farm laborer in India, one of the most interesting experiences on the entire trip.

After thanking Rakesh's wife for tea, we head toward another part of the village where the actual Sujata site is reputed to be. As we walk, Shantum tells us more about Rakesh's life. Rakesh's family once had a house in the more prosperous part of the village, but his father died when Rakesh was very young, and his uncle proceeded to disinherit Rakesh and his mother. They were more or less living on the street until Shantum began helping them out.

We pass through an area where there are many cow pats out to dry on a wall. An old woman is screaming at two young men in Hindi, and the two men are cringing away from her. I ask Shantum what is going on and he says that the woman is accusing the men of taking more than their share of the cow pats to keep warm on the cold mornings.

As we approach the site, we see the red brick remains of a huge stupa to the left of the path. Clearly this spot has been honored for millennia as the place where the Buddha ate his first meal. It is therefore quite possibly the real thing, though it is not certain since the stupa was built after the time of the Buddha. Faxian doesn't mention the stupa in his account of having visited Sujatagarh. He instead mentions a large tree and a rock facing east:

> "...two le north from this (again) was the place where, seated on a rock under a great tree, and facing the east, he ate (the gruel). The tree and the rock are there at the present day. The rock may be six cubits in breath and length and rather more than two cubits in height. In Central India the cold

and heat are so equally tempered that trees will live for several thousand years and even for ten thousand years."[37]

Stephen says that the stupa was still covered with dirt when he was here several years ago, and must have been recently excavated. A similarly sized dirt mound with plants growing on it stands next to the cleared area where the Sujata stupa is located, a task for some future archeological expedition. In the end, the real evidence that this is the site of the Buddha's first meal will come if they open up the brick stupa and find inside a mud stupa like the burial stupa in Vaishali where the Buddha's ashes were interred. A mud stupa would indicate that the site was marked during or shortly after the Buddha's lifetime.

After viewing the stupa, we head back to the bus and return to the Hotel Sujata. Renate and I drop off our packs, and I pocket the bottle of Cipro for Steve Wachinsky. We walk over to the Daijokyo guest house and I give the bottle of Cipro to Steve to his thanks. A Japanese-Indian vegetarian dinner awaits us: vegetable tempura and curried vegetables. The food is not warm but tasty. After dinner, we have strucks in the guest house. When my turn comes up, I talk about the visit to Rakesh's place.

"You know, I work in the telecommunications industry," I say, "And I was struck today by what Rakesh said about having a cell phone. For the most part, his life is pretty much like it has been for centuries here in India. No electricity, no car. But he does have a cell phone. That's really amazing to me. I didn't realize what an impact the technology I've been developing has had on the people in developing countries."

Shantum nods. "Yes, cell phones are really cheap here, even the poorest farmer can have one," he says.

"I saw some at the electronics market in Patna that only cost $5," I reply.

When her turn comes, Sophie makes a suggestion.

"Why don't we buy Rakesh's daughter a bicycle?" she says. "It certainly can't be all that expensive. We could take up a collection."

"Hey, that's a great idea!" replies Pam, enthusiastically.

The group talks about it and Pam volunteers to act as the treasurer for collecting money.

After strucks, Renate and I head back to the Hotel Sujata for the night. When we are done brushing our teeth, we discuss the day.

"You know," I say, "Shantum's behavior with those beggars today was really outstanding."

"That is for sure!" replies Renate, "He used the occasion as a teaching opportunity. Both a lesson to the beggars about generosity and a lesson to us about not setting up hard and fast rules regarding when to give to beggars."

I nod my agreement.

"I certainly hope I can be that skillful if I ever get in the teaching seat," I say.

As we are tucking in for the night, I wonder what the Mahabodhi Temple is like before the crowds arrive.

"I think I'll get up at 5 tomorrow and go over to the Mahabodhi Temple for a sit," I say pulling the covers up around my chin, "Shantum said the temple opens at 5, so I should be able to do a sitting there before breakfast."

"Well you'll have to do it without me," Renate replies sleepily, "I'm going to be tucked in here nice and warm."

"No problem," I say. I leaning over, kiss her gently, and she smiles. "Sleep well."

"You too," she replies and rolls over on her side.

Flashback 1996-2003 - Breakup

When I returned home to California nothing was the same. My ambition to become a meditation teacher shattered, I became severely depressed. I started seeing a psychiatrist with some experience in Zen practice to help cope with my depression. After several misdiagnoses, a medical test finally determined that I had a herniated disc in my thoracic spine that could have been responsible for the abdominal pain. The herniation seemed to be pressing a nerve toward the front of my body controlling the abdominal region. I tried some physical therapy, began walking and practicing yoga again, and the acute pain gradually receded. My physical problems cut into my ability to bike to work, and, after years of bike commuting, we decided to buy a second car so that both of us could drive if necessary.

I returned to working at Sun. The old group I had worked with before the retreat had been disbanded, since the product had been cancelled. I started with a new group that was developing a software product for the Internet. The Internet was just beginning to move into the radar of the venture capitalists - it had been commercialized just the year before. Most people would have been thrilled to be involved in the beginning of a major technological revolution, but for me, work was just a daily slog. I was sleepwalking through the revolution.

In reaction to having left the retreat at Barre early, I thought that maybe, if I broke up with Renate, I could become a real monk, not just a Silicon Valley one, and go into a practice program at a monastery like Tassajara. Then maybe I could revive my dream of becoming a meditation teacher again. We talked about it one Saturday morning, over a delicious breakfast of toast and jam, parfait, fruit, and a boiled egg.

"But I have to do a practice period," I said after sipping my coffee. "If I can't do three months of meditation, I can't be a teacher!"

"James, breaking up isn't the answer," she replied taking my hand, "You know that. You are free to do a practice period. I'm not stopping you."

I looked down at my coffee.

"You're depressed because you had to leave the retreat early," she continued firmly, "And still having pain from the herniated disc. Why don't you give it a year and see if things improve?"

After pausing for a few seconds to consider, I replied "Okay," and nodded, still looking down at my coffee.

In the fall of 1997, Renate and I took a one week hiking vacation in northern California. The abdominal pain had finally decreased to the point where I was able to hike without any problem. At the end of the vacation, we spent a few nights at Point Reyes and hiked in Point Reyes National Seashore. As we walked along the Tomales Point Trail north past the majestic Tule elk, my spirits began to lift in the warm, sunny September afternoon. When we reached Tomales Point, we sat on the rocks, listening to the chiming of the sea buoys and talking about our relationship. I told Renate then that I really didn't want to break up. When we returned to Silicon Valley, my depression was gone.

Our practice at Yvonne's continued as before the IMS retreat. We were still attending the monthly weekend and longer twice yearly retreats, and I was still practicing with robes as a priest trainee. Until the abdominal pain lessened, I spent most of the retreats meditating lying on my back. But the strange energy-like surges that had started during the three month retreat at IMS continued and became stronger, even after the abdominal pain receded. The surges were strongest during retreats, but they sometimes also occurred outside retreats, for example when listening to music. I felt as if the base of my spine had been plugged into an electrical socket. Flashes of light, like lightening, accompanied the feeling. At one retreat as I was standing in the meal line, my back arched as the surges flashed through my body accompanied by blue-white lightning flashes. Most of the time, the energy surges were painful, but at other times, they were intensely pleasurable, almost like a whole body orgasm. I spoke with Yvonne about the energy surges, but she had no experience with such bodily sensations. She recommended I talk with another teacher, who taught at Spirit Rock, the *Vipassana* retreat center in central Marin County. I visited the Spirit Rock teacher at her beautiful home and we chatted for about an hour. She confided that she had also had such experiences for a while, but ultimately they had stopped.[38]

I looked into the literature but found nothing in the traditional Zen or Theravadan meditation texts nor in any modern books about the kind of experiences I was having. I ran across something similar in a Hindu tradition, called *kundalini*. The kundalini yoga tradition had a whole story about how subtle body energy from the base of the spine moved up into the head like a serpent and that the pain was the energy breaking through "blockages." While the story was fine as far as it went, it didn't shed any light on what was really happening. It was just a metaphor, not a mechanism. Even the word "energy" was just a metaphor. The actual sensations couldn't involve any real energy because the human body isn't capable of generating an electric current at a level that would elicit the feelings of an electric shock. There seemed to be no literature from Western medicine or science about the phenomenon either. But gradually the energy surges decreased to the point where I could sit a meditation retreat without feeling like I was plugged into an electrical socket, and I was even able to meditate sitting upright again.

By the summer of 1999, we had been sitting in Yvonne's living room for over five years and she wanted to reclaim her house as personal space. This coincided with her desire to move her teaching in a more formal direction. She decided to remodel one of her larger outbuildings into a small Zen meditation hall for 30 people so she could expand the practice and include ceremonies and other activities. The remodeling process took around nine months, but the result was a beautiful practice space with a warm red cork linoleum floor and lots of light from the overhead clerestory windows. Yvonne moved her antique Japanese tansu chests and her Tibetan sculpture into the meditation hall, and hung a selection of thangkas from her collection, rotated to match the theme of the retreat, on the walls.

Along with a more formal practice space came more formal practice activities. Previously, Yvonne had participated in the cooking, but with the growing number of retreat participants, her time was consumed with interviews and other teaching duties, so the students took over the meal planning and preparation completely. Our meals became more formal. We now had meal chants and practiced a semi-formal version of the meal practice using three bowels traditional at Zen Center and Zen monasteries in Japan. In other small ways, Yvonne tightened the practice and aligned it more with the traditional Zen way.

Back in Silicon Valley, my career had taken off. I moved back into the research labs and started working with the Internet Engineering Task Force (IETF), an international "volunteer" group responsible for maintaining the standards on which the Internet was built. While the initial group of engineers who formed the IETF in the mid-1990's might have been volunteers, by the late 1990's the organization was dominated by employees of Internet equipment vendors and Internet service providers looking out for their commercial interests in what was becoming, as part of the rapidly inflating Internet bubble, a multi-billion dollar business. I was involved in developing standards for the wireless Internet, a topic on which I had been doing research at Sun off and on since the early 1990's. After a while, I became a member of the technical leadership in the IETF. I was elected to their architecture board and served as the chair for several groups working on certain wireless and security technology standards.

Then, in 2001, the Internet bubble burst. Sun's business prospects deflated considerably and I started looking for something new. A few years earlier, NTT Docomo, a Japanese cellular service provider, had introduced a highly successful Internet-like service called i-mode, years before any other cellular service provider in the world had anything like it. Everyone at the IETF and in the technical community thought it was the future of the wireless Internet. I had met a couple of Docomo engineers the year before when they had visited Sun, and I was impressed by their story of how they had developed i-mode.

Docomo had established a branch research lab in San Jose, so I contacted them about whether they might have an open position. I had my reservations about working for a Japanese company. Japanese companies had a reputation for an authoritarian management style and a rigidly hierarchical organization. Nevertheless, I decided to set my reservations aside, because the business at Sun was rapidly falling apart after years of spectacular growth. In the fall of 2001, I started at the research lab of Docomo in San Jose. Docomo agreed to let me continue working on standards, as well as do research on wireless networking, and offered me a prestigious title, Research Fellow.

In the fall of 2002, Yvonne decided to sell her compound in Muir Beach just north of San Francisco and move to a more rural setting in Anderson Valley near Mendocino. She and her husband Bill were looking forward to being out of the urban bustle spillover from San Francisco. Besides, real estate prices in Anderson Valley were considerably lower than those in Muir Beach, so they

could buy a nice place and have some money left to live on. With Bill now in retirement, funds were chronically short.

Renate and I drove up to Muir Beach for the winter retreat in December as usual, but the atmosphere wasn't the same. Yvonne's talks were distracted and repetitive, revisiting themes from previous retreats but not bringing any fresh perspective. Often her phrasing was exactly the same as in previous talks. While she was still sharp and ready with suggestions for improving practice in public, in her interviews, she was distant and seemed preoccupied. This was an uncharacteristic shift. I had always found her to be fully present and ready with helpful suggestions and comments during interviews.

She spoke at one point during a talk about her work with dying people, and I suggested afterward in private that I was interested in joining her effort. I thought it might be a way that we could reconnect and I could become more involved in the kinds of service work that is expected of a priest. But she rebuffed my attempt, saying that she didn't think I would have time due to the pressures of my job. In retrospect, she was right.

On New Year's Eve and New Year's Day, some of the usual ceremonies were dropped. Normally during the winter retreat, we would write our regrets from the previous year on a piece of paper and burn the papers on New Year's Eve in the Mexican fireplace, but she decided not to do the ceremony because Bill was out of town and he usually managed the fireplace. On New Year's Day, we normally went around the garden as a group and Yvonne said a few words of greeting at each of the Buddha statues, but that was dropped. At the end of the retreat, she did lead us in a ceremony to set our intentions for the year. We all gathered in a circle and, one by one, talked about our primary intention for 2003. Yvonne insisted on keeping the focus on "intentions" rather than "resolutions" since intention is the primary force behind personal change in Buddhist practice.

A couple of weeks later, Renate and I discussed the retreat. We both had the same perceptions about the retreat, and we both felt somewhat confused.

"She seems to be drifting away," said Renate, "Both in her practice space and in geographical space."

I nodded.

"I can't see trading the hour and a half drive to Muir Beach for a five hour drive to Anderson Valley," I said, "I just couldn't do that three times a month. "

Normally the drive to Anderson Valley is about three hours but the freeway north of San Francisco only has two lanes from Sausalito through to Santa Rosa. On Friday evening when weekend trippers from the Bay Area are headed north to the Wine Country or Mendocino, the drive can easily take five hours in stop and go traffic.

"We have laundry, shopping and errands to do on the weekends, and we have to work during the week," Renate said, "We can't continue to do the monthly weekend retreat if we have to drive five hours to get there."

"To say nothing of the Saturday morning sits and the visit for my monthly interview," I concluded.

I also spent a lot of time thinking about my practice as a Soto Zen priest with Yvonne and about our relationship. Yvonne's constant criticism (which she called "feedback") of my sloppy *okesa* practice was beginning to wear me out. It seemed my effort at keeping my *okesa* neat and properly aligned was never enough. I returned from most retreats with low-level irritation that never developed into criticism of her or pushing back from my side because I had too much respect for her. Strangely, after I returned from IMS in 1996, for about a year she never mentioned the *okesa*. Only after my depression dissipated in September 1997 did the criticism return

What I didn't realize then was that her criticism was a practice tactic aimed squarely at my narcissism. Early in our practice together, she jokingly told a story told about Geshe Wangyal, a Tibetan lama who immigrated to the US and opened a practice center in New Jersey. One of his practice tactics was to blame his students for something they didn't do to let them watch the reactions that arose in their minds. He accused them of taking food from the refrigerator without asking, failing to clean up dishes, being late for practice, and all manner of trivial infractions. This tactic was designed to provide the student an opportunity to deal with aversive mind states arising from self-clinging. Yvonne's tactic of criticizing my *okesa* practice was of a similar nature. While I

was depressed, she backed off, because my ego was already in tatters from the failed retreat. But after it bounced back again, she got back on my case.

At the time, I didn't understand what was happening. It was only 2 years later, during a one month retreat at Spirit Rock that I realized how deeply and broadly my personality was permeated by narcissism, something Yvonne saw clearly. Most of Yvonne's students were, in fact, quite the opposite. They were uncertain of themselves and had such feelings of negative self-worth that she attempted to boost their egos with positive commentary. She often spoke in talks about the Dali Lama's surprise at discovering how many Westerners had negative feelings of self-worth; that they felt as if they were "the biggest piece of shit on the planet" as she put it. Curiously, she never spoke of the opposite, people like me who feel they are special and somehow destined for a glorious fate, like the Buddha himself. Traditionally in Asian Buddhist practice, narcissism is the primary personality defect and the Asian Buddhist teachers spent much of their time speaking about it and trying to undermine it.

But I couldn't see through the surface. All I could see was that I was driving an hour and a half up and an hour and a half back to and from Muir Beach every month only to suffer verbal abuse about my sloppy sartorial habits. And during the week, working in high tech was one humiliation after another. New technical areas were constantly coming along in which I was forced to frantically learn enough so I could keep an intelligent email conversation going. If I made one technical error, other more technically knowledgeable people would let me know in no uncertain terms what an idiot I was. On top of that was the struggle to keep on the right side of my Japanese management. They were constantly undermining my technical initiatives or flat out prohibiting me from exploring interesting challenges. The thought of having to drive to Anderson Valley, three to five hours up and back, to continue suffering abuse about my clothing was unappealing.

After a long period of refection following the winter retreat, I reluctantly decided to break off my training relationship with Yvonne in the spring of 2003. I had invested so much in the relationship, but I could not see continuing it with the difficulty and strain of the long commute. What really clinched the decision though was the realization that my personality wasn't a good match with being a meditation teacher. People didn't naturally come to me with their personal

problems, and I really had little interest in helping them anyway. I was more interested in the big fundamental questions, the spiritual quest. I arranged to talk with Yvonne at her place in Muir Beach a few weeks before she was scheduled to move to Anderson Valley.

On the drive up to Muir Beach, I barely noticed the beautiful early spring weather. A sense of foreboding filled my heart. I had invested a lot of time and effort in my practice with Yvonne. I had established an identity as a serious Zen practitioner, as a Soto Zen priest, as Yvonne's priest. I was the only person in her community who was ordained with the full tokudo ordination. Ironically, this sense of identity is exactly what Zen tries to undermine. Becoming a "true man of no rank" according to Master Lin Chi, the great T'ang Dynasty Chinese Rinzai master, or "just being ordinary" as Suzuki Roshi put it are the goals of Zen practice. I somehow identified with the outer form of a Zen priest without penetrating to the heart of what it meant, probably the worst possible situation to be in.

When I was ordained, Yvonne said that a priest could fill a number of roles. There is the obvious role of service, caring for people in a spiritual and perhaps also social or psychological way for example as a hospital chaplain. Another role is as a meditation teacher. Finally, there is the role of the scholar, reading and writing about Buddhist texts and topics. In the nine years that I was ordained, I was never able to work my way into any of these roles. After my failure to complete the retreat in 1996 at IMS, my ambition to become a meditation teacher collapsed. I didn't have the personality for teaching meditation or for the service role either. While I had read widely in Buddhist texts and knew something about Buddhist psychology, my formal training was in engineering and not Buddhist studies, so it seemed unlikely that I could ever become professionally successful as a scholar. Besides, I loved engineering despite the pressures of high tech, and wanted to continue working at it.

I arrived at Yvonne's Muir Beach compound in mid-afternoon, and parked outside the fence around her compound. Climbing out of the car, I walked to the compound gate carrying my *okesa* in its envelope, opened the gate, and entered. As I walked down the entrance walkway to the meditation hall, something seemed different. Puzzled, I stopped and looked around. The garden seemed neater than before; maybe the gardener had just been there? I shook my head and continued to the meditation hall, not really seeing what the change was. But

thinking over the visit a few weeks later, it struck me. Scattered about Yvonne's garden had been a collection of old, rusting industrial equipment: iron bars, gears, pulleys, and other sorts of junk. It was all gone now. In preparation for the move, Yvonne had arranged for the junk to be hauled away. I suddenly realized: the junk had been another teaching. It had been a visual reminder of impermanence. Where once it had performed a useful function in some industry, the disappearance of that industry had left it just a bunch of junk slowly rusting into the ground. But more tellingly, the presence of the junk as a teaching had never occurred to me until it had disappeared. I had never considered why Yvonne, who loved beautiful flowers and plants, would strew a bunch of rusted junk around her garden. I had not even seen it. And now - yet another teaching on impermanence - the junk itself was gone.

I sat down on the steps to the meditation hall and waited. After few minutes, Yvonne appeared, walking down the pathway from her house, and we greeted each other. In the rapidly fading light of late afternoon, we entered the small interview house. We settled on our cushions and bowed to each other to open the formal interview. Though she must have known something was up because I was carrying my *okesa*, she never looked at it. Her expression suggested calm composure.

"Yvonne, I can't do this anymore," I said desperately, "I can't be a priest. I don't know what it means."

She said nothing. I continued, speaking rapidly.

"You told me a priest could be a meditation teacher, take on a service role, or be a scholar. I'm none of those. I wanted to be a meditation teacher but I now see that I don't have the personality for that, and I don't have the academic training to be a scholar. People just don't come to me with their problems looking for help, they come to me when they want an engineering problem solved," I said.

"And besides that," I continued, "I'm completely hopeless with my robe practice. I'm simply too clumsy. It's constantly getting caught in doorways or ending up in my food bowl during meal practice. I'm sorry"

I handed the *okesa* back to her and looked down into my lap. She took it and set

it to one side.

"I can't help you, James," she replied. "I've tried everything but you just don't seem to see."

We talked a bit more about her impending move to Anderson Valley, and then after a while, the interview was over. I bowed to her with my hands folded at my chest in respect and she returned my bow, then I stood up and left the interview hut.

When I was outside the gate of the compound standing next to my car, I stopped and sighed. Looking up at the twilight sky, I felt an enormous sense of relief, as if a huge burden had been lifted from my shoulders, but at the same time, a deep sadness. I felt a heart connection with Yvonne, and I knew my leaving would be as difficult for her as it was for me. Breaking off studying with her felt like a couple getting divorced after a long and stormy marriage. I felt as if I had given up something that day which was truly worthwhile, perhaps the only thing in my entire life that was so, and I knew that I would regret my decision until the very end of my life. I could never return to priest practice. While I had started my journey as a Zen priest with mixed motivations, I had always strived to cultivate the best intentions. But I was never really able to penetrate to the heart of Yvonne's Dharma.

Day 7 Early Morning - Sitting at the Mahabodhi Temple

I wake around 4:30 the next day and manage to slip out of the hotel room without waking Renate, flashlight in hand, dressed in warm clothes, with my pilgrim's scarf wrapped around my neck. I've stuffed my backpack with my zafu and mat for sitting and our travel alarm, so I can keep track of the time.

Outside, the temperature is cold and the fog is thick. I switch on my flashlight and wrap the pilgrim's scarf around the lower part of my face for warmth. The only people on the street are a few taxi drivers in small three wheeled taxis, quite in contrast to the daytime, when the streets are packed with people. Occasionally, I hear some voices murmuring from the shacks built alongside the roads or see a stray dog wind by. I head down Japanese Temple Road in front of the Hotel Sujata, and then turn onto the Domuhan-Bodhgaya Road in the direction of the temple.

I'm on my way to the Mahabodhi Temple, to the Bodhi Tree, to find out what it was like for the Buddha sitting in the early morning light with the morning star beckoning, as dawn and his awakening approached 2500 years ago. But I'm not thinking about that now. As I walk, I'm thinking about a previous trip long ago, in 1978, when I finished my Master's degree and took off for a long-delayed summer in Europe. I had wanted to go in 1974 when I finished my undergraduate degree, but the $400 my parents gave me for a graduation present was just enough to buy an airline ticket with no money left over for traveling. The cost of a ticket had doubled in a year, and my grand tour plans were one more victim of the oil crisis.

I especially wanted to see the Sistine Chapel ceiling in Rome. When I was a kid, I had taken art lessons and I was a fan of Michelangelo, like other kids back then were fans of Willie Mays, the great San Francisco Giants center fielder, or are of Justin Bieber today. I saw the Pieta at the 1964 World's Fair in New York and read *The Agony and the Ecstasy*, a fictionalized biography of Michelangelo, when I was a teenager. The genius of his painting and stone-carving was so

breath-taking, something I could only aspire to. So I was really looking forward to seeing the Sistine Chapel. When I finally managed a visit in the summer of 1978, the chapel was packed with tourists shuffling along. The voices of priests shouted in Italian over the loudspeakers, encouraging people to keep moving. In the short moment that I had in the chapel, I was able to snatch a fleeting glance at the ceiling as I avoided being run down by the other tourists, but nobody was allowed to linger.

So I'm wondering: will this morning be like that? Will the sense of excitement and anticipation I feel at being able to meditate on the very spot where the Buddha achieved his breakthrough degenerate into disappointment under the sheer mass of people or some other diversion? Or will I gain some insight into what the Buddha achieved and what that means for me and the thousands of others here today?

I pass by the small shops lining Lal Pathar Road outside the temple. The street is deserted because it's so early, no sign of the beggars, vendors, touts, kid actors, or Tibetan monks and nuns from the previous day. I hope the temple will be just as deserted. The carnival atmosphere that prevailed during our visit the previous morning wasn't conducive to contemplative practice. Traditional Asian Buddhist practices in isolation can be quite moving. But when combined in the same place, at the same time, the effect is rather jarring, like the temple is a giant stage for performance art and each of the groups from the different traditions are the artists.

The iron gate to the temple park is open but the camera ticket vendor and shoe guardian are nowhere to be seen. I walk quickly down the broad cement walkway to the stairs, pause to remove my shoes and stuff them into my backpack. The hundreds of Tibetan monks and nuns are gone, probably still sleeping. The women pouring shiny stones between bowls are gone too. Instead of yesterday's whirling mass of pilgrims, the walkways surrounding the temple are deserted. Passing the shrines and paths leading off into the park, I enter the temple walkway at the south side entrance, and then turn down the west side toward the Bodhi Tree.

The Bodhi Tree is a specimen of *Ficus religiosa*, the "sacred fig", or as it is commonly known, the pipal. The Latin name comes from what happened at this place, namely the Buddha's enlightenment. The leaves of the tree, broad at the

base, taper to a sharp point and hang gracefully down from the branches. The bark is smooth and grey with occasional rough black patches, and like all tropical figs, the trunk consists of many separate stems.

This particular tree is not the same one under which the Buddha sat. After Ashoka converted to Buddhism, he spent a lot of time sitting under the original tree. His wife believed that the tree was inhabited by female spirits and became jealous, so she poisoned it. Ashoka's son and daughter, who were members of the monastic Sangha, had made a cutting of the original tree before it died and had taken it with them to Sri Lanka. Ashoka had a cutting taken from the Sri Lankan daughter and cultivated into a replica of the original. By the 1800's the British found the tree that Ashoka had planted in terrible condition. In the intervening centuries, the temple had been taken over by a family of Hindu priests who had neglected its upkeep. During their general rebuilding of the temple in the middle of the 19th century, the British again renewed it from a branch of the tree in Sri Lanka. The tree I'm looking at today is not even 200 years old.

I scope out the scene around the tree. Some Tibetans are sitting in the alcoves on both sides of the tree. One group is larger than the other so, after a circuit around the temple and back, I stop next to the smaller group. I position my mat and zafu on the wet stone against the temple and away from the circumambulation walk. I sit down on my zafu and set the small alarm in front of me so I can periodically check the time. Then I arrange my legs in meditation, close my eyes, and begin to follow my breath.

The sonic environment is less cluttered than the day before. The Tibetans on the north side of the tree murmur prayers, and the fog condensing in the leaves of the tree occasionally drips down on the stone walkway with a soft plop. I note the musty smell of decaying vegetation. Now and then pilgrims shuffle by on the walkway. My mind begins to focus inward as exterior sounds recede, drifting off the breath occasionally to think about what's for breakfast and where the day will go, then back onto the breath, off thinking and back on again. Noticing a small cramp in my right leg, I shift position slightly on my zafu, and then return to the breath.

After a while, the circumambulation parade begins to pick up steam. A Thai

monk leading a group of lay pilgrims comes by. The Thai monk group leaders all wear personal amplifiers, so they can project their chants with a big voice. This one is no exception. The group does several circumambulations. By this time, most of the Tibetans around me have cleared out, and the Thai group settles down in their place. Naturally, when they are settled, the Thai monk continues his big voice chanting, and the lay pilgrims begin to join in. Meanwhile, a group of Tibetan monks comes parading by, with blarting horns, bells, and deep chanting. The chanting from the Tibetans on the other side of the tree picks up steam to accompany the monks. I open my eyes and stretch.

I can't say I've derived any major insight into the Buddha's experience of that night so long ago, but I also can't say that I'm disappointed either. After all, the Buddha was at the end of a month and a half long retreat. Having done such retreats myself, I recognize that the mind state developed by a long period of walking and sitting meditation is quite different than that of someone in everyday life, even someone on a pilgrimage. But, in a larger sense, the Buddha's accomplishment wasn't restricted to his Night of Enlightenment just as Michelangelo's accomplishment wasn't restricted to the Sistine Chapel ceiling. I am here in India on this pilgrimage to honor that work and learn more about that life, and to let that life serve as an inspiration for my own practice. Even though the Night of Enlightenment is important in all the Buddhist traditions, what happened here was really only the beginning. That is the insight I've gained from this sitting, which is much more than I gained from viewing the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

The Thais and the Tibetans seemed to be competing to see who can do the best musical accompaniment to the oncoming dawn, though, due to the thick fog, the sun is nowhere to be seen. I look down at the alarm clock. It is 6:30 and time to get back to the hotel. Breakfast will be at 7. No chance of seeing the morning star today like the Buddha did! Standing, I stuff everything back into my pack and set off into the circumambulating circus, around the north side of the temple, and out of the temple compound.

Day 7 Morning and Early Afternoon - The Dungishwari Cave

Outside of Bodhgaya in the Uruvela Range near the village of Dungishwari is a cave. In this cave, the Buddha is reported to have lived together with the five ascetics, who later became his first disciples, while engaging in ascetic practices. These practices consisted of eating little, some accounts say just one grain of rice a day, and torturing the body in various ways. The Buddha undertook austerities in an effort to purify himself sufficiently to get to the unchanging source of his experience, the *atman* of the Vedic texts called the *Upanishads* that formed the canonical basis of the majority Brahmanical religion of the Buddha's time. Reaching the Dungishwari Cave will involve travel on unpaved roads, so we abandon the bus today for a collection of SUVs. Shantum's friend Rakesh, whose home we visited yesterday, arrives before breakfast to accompany us.

At breakfast, Shantum warns us that the beggars at Dungishwari are known for their aggressiveness. A few years ago, they apparently killed a South Korean man, then tore off his clothes and stole everything he had. Shantum says that the beggars will likely line the path up the mountainside to the cave, so we should be prepared. Most of the beggars at Dungishwari don't come from the village anymore, since the village has been the recipient of targeted and organized giving on the part of foreign Buddhist groups and therefore has become more prosperous.

After breakfast, we pile into the SUVs and drive in convoy north, following the sandy Falgu River. We cross the river and, a few miles east of the bridge, turn off onto a dirt road. For most of the way, we have been driving through irrigated green fields, but after we turn onto the dirt road, the landscape becomes brown and dry, like California in the summer. Stephen, who is sitting in the front seat, looks out the window.

"This road is in much better condition than the last time I was here," he comments to the driver, "I guess the new state government has been busy."

The driver nods noncommittally in reply.

On our left looms a dry ridge, the Uruvela Range, covered with rocks, scattered bushes, and a few low palm trees. This landscape is quite different from the view that greeted Faxian when he visited the same spot 1600 years before. Faxian reported that the village and cave were surrounded by forest.[39]

We climb out of our vehicles next to the high wall shielding the village of Dungishwari from the dusty road. A few beggars rise from their seats in the shade of trees across the road and hurry toward us. They are followed by a couple of guys in uniforms, with caps, wielding long bamboo staves - quite obviously cops. The cops exchange a couple of snarled words in Hindi with the beggars and the beggars back off. It seems the government, alarmed by the death of the South Korean pilgrim, has decided to do something about security. The cops are the response. Shantum, having had his share of run-ins with cops during his social activist days, keeps muttering under his breath, "...it has come down to this, we have brought this about..."

The cave is at the top of the ridge, reached by climbing a short gravel path that runs through a field fenced off from the road by a barbed wire fence with a gate. As we gather to begin the ascent, a mob of beggars comes streaming out of the gate. These are the beggars Shantum warned us about, but there is some greater attraction than our impending hike. Behind us, a bus pulls up; the beggars must have seen it coming from higher on the mountain. The beggars surrounding us then take off to join the mob which is headed toward the bus. The cops follow closely behind. A madhouse ensues. The cops are snarling and brandishing their sticks, the beggars are falling over each other, tearing at their competitors to get nearest to the bus door. The cops' threatening gestures manage to force the beggars into a rough line, though I never see anyone get hit by a stick. Out of the bus pops a Thai woman followed by more Thai pilgrims, and they begin to disperse gifts (we are too far away to see what, but it is probably money) to the line of beggars. The beggars paw at each other and at the pilgrims, with the cops wading in if someone gets too aggressive. The whole scene is one of the most blatant displays of greed and aversion I have ever seen. But it is, in a strange way, quite tonic since the Buddhist *klesas* (the defilements: greed, hatred, and delusion) are so evident here and so public that you simply can't ignore them or try to dress them up in fancy philosophical or ideological clothing.

We are in the West are not immune to this kind of thing. TV game shows seem

the most blatant example or maybe Walmart on Black Friday. But by and large in public discourse we wrap our greed in some kind of ideological sugar ("enlightened self-interest", "the power of the market", etc.) and try not to let it show too openly in public. Nevertheless, here generosity - one of the most sublime virtues that a person can manifest so highly praised by the Buddha - has triggered a crass display of greed. Naturally, if you look behind the generosity, you will find another kind of greed, a spiritual greed, namely the Thai pilgrims' desire for a better rebirth. Generosity is one way to ensure a rebirth as a monk, where one can practice to become enlightened, or, if one has a more secular aim, then rebirth as a deva[40] in one of the heavenly realms. Stephen's words of skepticism about rebirth come back to me. Here is a case where a belief in rebirth causes greed, nurturing a kind of deep spiritual harm.

Leaving the chaotic scene, we file through the gate and hike up the mountain in the gradually lifting fog on the now empty path. The only beggars we see along the path are a troupe of three large monkeys with long, rope-like tails perched on rocks, waiting for a handout. At the top is a small Tibetan monastery with a stupa. Next to the stupa is a shrine to Shiva and the mouth of the cave. A few other pilgrims are about, mostly Tibetans, and a few Tibetan monks who live here. We gather around the stupa, settle on our zafus and mats, and do a short sit, and then Stephen gives a teaching.

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In the *Alagaddupama Sutta*[41], the parable of the raft, we hear the Buddha talking with a group of monks about the practice of Dharma:

> "Suppose, monks, a man in the course of a journey saw a great expanse of water, whose near shore was dangerous and fearful and whose further shore was safe and free from fear. But there was no ferryboat or bridge going across to the far shore. Then he thought, 'Suppose I collect grass, twigs, branches, and leaves, and bind them together as a raft; then supported by the raft and making an effort with my hands and feet, I got safely across to the far shore.' Having arrived at the far shore he might think, 'This raft has been very helpful to me. Suppose I were to hoist it on my head or load it on my shoulders, then go where ever I wish.' Now monks, what do you think? By doing so, would that man be doing what should be done with a raft?
>
> 'No, sir.'

> By doing what, would that man be doing what should be done with that raft? Having arrived at the far shore, he might think, 'This raft has been very helpful to me. Suppose I were to haul it on to dry land or set it adrift in the water and then go where ever I wish.' Now monks, it is by so doing that the man would be doing what should be done with a raft. So I have shown how the Dharma is similar to a raft, being for the purpose of crossing over, not for the purpose of grasping."

The parable begins with a man on a journey. In our lives, at some point we become conscious of certain questions like, "Why am I here?" When we begin to take those questions seriously and live our lives with those questions in the foreground of our awareness, we have started on a spiritual quest. In a sense, the spiritual quest has its origins in our existence; it is an existential quest. The journey in the parable then is a metaphor for the spiritual quest.

The Buddha's quest began when he began to contemplate his impermanence. He had been born, and would experience the effects of aging, sickness, and death. This question was one that he simply couldn't ignore; it became a primary dilemma. What does it mean to be a person who has been thrown into this world at birth, the only certainty being that one will be thrown out again at death? And that death could occur at any time? On the other hand, the Buddha, like all of us, had a gut feeling that there was something solid and real inside of him, his self, that continued unchanged through life and, by extension, would continue after death. Most of our thoughts and feelings are basically a running commentary about how interesting and important it is to be this self. The contradiction between what he could see and know about the contingency of his life and his intuitive sense that he possessed an unchanging self became the central concern of the Buddha's existence.

In the Buddha's time, the dominant religion and philosophy of India was based on the Vedic texts, a collection of scriptural documents that form the basis of Hinduism. These texts claimed that the Buddha' intuitive sense was correct, that there was something unchanging inside him. They called this thing the *atman* and maintained it was one with a larger *atman* that underlay the universe. In the society of the time, people who faced the kind of existential dilemma that the Buddha did went on the road and became wandering mendicants. They literally went on a journey. This was an accepted part of Indian society, and it still is to a certain extent today. These wandering mendicants had as their goal to discover

the unchanging *atman*, and thereby to become liberated from death. They believed that if they discovered the *atman*, after they died physically, they would not be reborn as normal people were but would live forever merging with the luminous, unitary, unchanging, universal *atman*.

So the Buddha went on the road as a mendicant, leaving behind his wife and son, to find the answer to his existential dilemma. As we saw in Vaishali, the Buddha first studied with two meditation teachers, but he was not satisfied with the answers they gave to his question. After leaving them, he came here, to the Dungishwari Cave, and practiced asceticism with five companion seekers. Some scholars believe that the Buddha at that time was following the practices of the Jain sect. Jainism teaches that asceticism is a way to purify the body so that the universal *atman* is revealed and can be experienced. But at a certain point, he realized that it just didn't work. Asceticism didn't bring an end to his spiritual quest. It simply cut him off from life in a state of detachment. No transcendent reality appeared.

The parable continues to describe the man encountering a body of water, with a fearful shore on one side and a safe shore on the other. The traditional way to interpret this metaphor is that the near shore is *samsara* - the cycle of life and death - while the farther shore is *nirvana* - liberation from that cycle. A more relevant way to interpret it is that if our practice is a journey, then there are times when we become stuck. We've come so far with a particular practice or philosophy and we can't make any further progress. We continue to feel a resonance with certain teachings, ideas, and practices, but we don't feel any longer that these practices will move us toward resolving our primary dilemma.

But then we have this river confronting us. One response might be to start looking around for a bridge or ferryboat to take us across. Because the question has such urgency though, we can't hang around to wait for an answer. This is the characteristic of a spiritual quest; it is driven by a sense of urgency. Life is short and we need to deal with our questions now. The Buddha's advice, from the parable, is to improvise. Just gather up what happens to be at hand, build a raft, don't even bother to make an oar, and just use your arms to paddle across the river. The only thing that matters in terms of the materials made and the process is that the materials float and the process gets you across the river. In other words, you are responsible for resolving your own unique dilemma and you need

to use whatever is at hand to resolve it.

Life situations are constantly changing and we are never going to be able to find a practice that remains unchanged throughout our lives. That is consistent with the basic truth of impermanence. It is therefore important that we not grasp onto practices with which we have somehow lost a connection. Such grasping will lead to suffering. The part of the parable about the man hoisting the raft on his shoulders points to a need not to become attached to a particular practice. The sutta is encouraging self-reliance and discouraging becoming attached to a particular practice. This position is quite different from that taken by the founders of other religions. Most religions are very intent on their own preservation. But the Buddha is suggesting something different, that "religion" is something which serves a particular purpose, and when that purpose is achieved, we can move on to something else.

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After the talk, we spend some time wandering about and looking at the sights. Strands of Tibetan prayer flags in blue, green, and yellow flutter above the plaza between the Tibetan and Shiva temples and the cave entrance. I walk over to the cave. In front of the cave, where four platforms filled with flickering yellow butter lamps are positioned. The floor inside is smooth, unlike the Saptaparni Cave at Rajgir. I can enter without having to stoop down. Inside at the back of the cave is a golden statue of the ascetic Siddhartha Gotama, with protruding ribs and skeletal face, the not-yet Buddha as he looked during his austerity period. He is sitting on a round black dais and a single lamp burns before him. I contemplate the statue, then head back out and briefly peek into the shrine to Shiva. Most of the group isn't done yet, so I sit on a bench and look down into the valley. The sun has broken through the fog and there is a fine, sunny view through the Tibetan prayer flags down over Dungishwari village.

As I sit looking out over the sunny valley, I think about Stephen's talk. The answer to the existential question "Why am I here?" came for me when I first heard the Bodhisattva Vow: "I vow to liberate all beings." That answer is "I'm here to help". But then another question arose: "How can I help?" And on that question, I am completely stuck. The Buddha helped by teaching. Shortly after he met his enlightenment, he considered not teaching but realized there were people in the world "with little dust in their eyes" who would understand and benefit. Stephen also helps by teaching. His synthesis of scholarly work with

meditation practice puts the metaphysics of the traditional Asian schools in the background. This teaching is very approachable for Westerners who have a hard time accepting such traditional metaphysical teachings as rebirth. But I failed in my training to become a meditation teacher. It seems I am destined to help in only very small ways, like helping younger colleagues at work and donating money to worthy charities.

Maybe my desire to help in bigger ways is an echo of narcissism and ego. Yvonne used to say that we shouldn't be "ambulance chasers", looking for people who need help just to satisfy our ego. Yet she herself was always rescuing a stray dog, or taking someone into her house that, for some reason, was homeless for a short period of time. I feel like I'm standing on the river bank looking around for some materials to use to build a raft and trying to think of some process to get across but nothing is coming up. If I do manage to get assemble a raft, the raft gets attacked by an alligator or I end up falling off and I have to swim back to the shore. And all the while, the clock is ticking.

Sighing, I stand up and walk over to the group. I'm not going to resolve this dilemma today. Everyone has finished viewing the cave; it's time to head back down the mountain. When we get back to the road, a stack of white boxes containing our lunches awaits us near the gate at the fence. Shantum announces that those who want can come with him on a walk back to the river through a few small villages and fields. The SUVs will pick us up on the other side of the river. Those who don't want to walk can ride back to Bodhgaya now with Jagdish. Renate and I each grab a boxed lunch and water and start down the road with the walking group, back in the direction we came. About a quarter mile from the gate, we turn onto a smaller dirt road that leads into a village. Near the entrance to the village is a statue of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, the dalit, or "Untouchable", leader, and we stop for a moment while Shantum tells us more about him.

Ambedkar was, by all accounts, an extraordinary person. He earned a PhD. at Columbia University and the London School of Economics despite the deprivations of poverty and discrimination he experienced as a boy and young man because he was a member of the dalit caste. When he returned to India, he became the chairman of the constitutional convention for India, and played a major role in the writing of the Indian constitution after independence.

"Even though the constitution explicitly forbids discrimination against the dalits," Shantum says, "Ambedkar became convinced that the Hindu majority would never manage to muster the commitment to social justice necessary to treat the dalits as equals. In the 1950's, Ambedkar converted to Buddhism because Buddhism lacks any caste distinction and immediately 500,000 of his caste brothers did so as well."

"So that's what those monks were that I saw in the Mahabodhi Temple!" I exclaim, "I couldn't place them. They had on robes like Thai monks but they were from Bihar."

"Yes, that's right," replies Shantum, "But many of the dalit 'monks' you saw in Bodhgaya and elsewhere on the pilgrimage trail are poorly educated in the basics of Buddhism. And unfortunately, the precepts that converts to dalit Buddhism subscribe to are written to be negative about Hindu religious practices in order to force the converts to drop them. This can sound anti-Hindu."

In his later life, Ambedkar wrote a book in which he ascribed the origin of the dalits to the Hindu revival during the 4th century Gupta dynasty. Vegetarianism became almost legally required, and the eating of beef was prohibited on pain of death. Prior to the 4th century, most people in India were not vegetarians and ate beef. Ambedkar maintained in the book that the dalits are the descendants of villagers who, despite the prohibition, continued to eat beef from cows that had died a natural death.

In the village, the homesteads are spread out along the road in a single layer, with the fields immediately behind them. Judging from the number of cows and water buffalo we see, this village must be fairly prosperous. People are going about their business and Shantum greets them courteously. Flat cow pats, about the size of a large dinner plate, with three grooves in the top are everywhere: plastered to walls, telephone poles, rocks, and on the ground. The three grooves identify the cow pats as being from this area. Practically every village has its own recipe for cow pats according to Shantum, and its own way of marking them. We approach a woman sitting on the ground making cow pats, kneading the cow dung together with straw, and then flattening it out. The pile of dung in front of her gives off a kind of neutral, grassy odor, not particularly offensive but definitely smelling of cow. Shantum exchanges a few words of Hindi with her, then turns to us and offers us the opportunity to have a lesson from the woman in

how to make cow pats. Nobody takes her up on the offer.

We continue down the road, stopping for a moment to admire a kingfisher that is perched on a swaying tree branch. Later we see an egret walking through a small wetland near the road. About two miles outside the village, we turn off the road to the left and start hiking along the small dikes that separate the fields. The land is absolutely flat and reminds me of the Central Valley of California. In this dry, cold winter season, the fields are planted in irrigated wheat. We pass by a large pile of straw arranged in neat haystacks, remnants of the rice harvest, waiting to be made into cow pats or fed to livestock. We meet a farmer, and Shantum asks for a good place to have a picnic. The farmer points to a small grove of trees down a side road.

We spread our mats on the ground near the trees. A few villagers appear, a man and several children. The lunch isn't particularly inspiring: a white, cotton-like bread sandwich with some unidentifiable filling, and some fruit. Shantum chats with the villagers in Hindi. When we are done with lunch, we stand and begin preparing to leave. Some of the group head down the road to use the trees as a bathroom. A swarm of bees suddenly appears and flies off across the fields again. The villagers collect the boxes from lunch (including a few that remain uneaten) to eat the leftovers and use the rest as fuel in the cold mornings. I think about how the plastic that wrapped the sandwiches probably isn't such a good substance to burn since it produces toxic chemicals, but I don't say anything since I doubt they would take any warning seriously.

On the final stretch back to the river, we stop to admire a carved stone that was once the base of a statue or a tiny stupa. The stone is set on a low dike between the fields. The front is decorated with small carving of a person in the cross-legged meditation posture. The villagers have rubbed the face with red paint like the statues outside of Nalanda, but the stone is obviously very old. Shantum tells us that when some government workers were repairing a bridge near Nalanda, they discovered a cache of old Buddhist statues that had been used as fill for a bridge abutment. Much of the art and even the bricks in the monastery from the destruction of Nalanda were reused as building material.

Further on, we cross a small stream with very little water. Stephen and I end up walking together and talking about Dharma. I ask him about karma as a kind of nonlinear causality. At first, he is a bit confused by what I mean.

"Well nonlinearity means that the effects don't show up immediately after the cause but at some time, perhaps a long time, after," I say.

"Actually, the Buddha never said that everything was caused by karma," he replies, "Although that's the traditional view. Most Asian teachers, especially the Tibetans, maintain that karma is the cause of everything that happens to a person, and even postulate something called 'collective karma' which accounts for events that happen to whole societies. These interpretations are quite at variance with one of the early suttas, in which the Buddha said that karma corresponds to volitional action and that the effects are plain to see. They don't involve any mysterious, long delayed effect."

Stephen goes on to explain that, according to this sutta, disease, weather, and other factors unrelated to human actions are also causes behind events.

"But what about the other places in the suttas where the Buddha is quoted which support the traditional view, like for example that a person's karma influences their rebirth?" I persist.

Stephen explains his analytical procedure for determine the likelihood of whether a particular text originated with the Buddha or whether it is likely to have been a later addition.

"I use three filters to sort through the Pali Canon," he says, "The filters consist of three questions:

Is the particular text representative of common Indic religious and philosophical belief at the time of the Buddha or is it something unique?

Do the assertions in the text contradict what we know about natural science?

Is the text unique within the suttas or is it part of the large body of repeated material that often says the same thing?"

"If the particular text passes through these sieves," he continues, "Then it is

more likely to be authentic and report an innovative piece of thinking from Buddha himself or describe an actual incident that occurred in the Buddha's life. If not, chances are it was inserted during the years after his death when the Pali Canon was being systematized and a kind of theological uniformity imposed upon the texts. The same kind of philosophical procedure which is called hermeneutics was used by liberal theologians examining early Christian texts in the 20th century."

Our conversation ends when we reach the river. We walk across the dry, sandy bed, carefully avoiding the human shits and trash that lie scattered about on the sand. On the other side, we climb the bank, where the drivers are waiting to take us back to Bodhgaya. Since it is still early afternoon, we have a choice to either return to the hotel or continue on a tour of the Mahabodhi Temple with Shantum, and, afterward a "temple crawl"- analogous to a pub crawl - in which we visit a few of the nicer temples. Renate and I opt for the tour and temple crawl.

Day 7 Late Afternoon - Mahabodhi Temple and the Temple Crawl

At the Mahabodhi Temple, the walkways are unclogged because the monks and nuns are all sitting down attending the peace teaching. We walk slowly past the nun's section, looking out over a sea of red and yellow under the cloth pavilions set up to keep the bright sun at bay. In front of the gathering, two male lamas sit on a platform. Most of the nuns don't seem to be following the teachings very closely, though some of them occasionally glance in their large rectangular prayer books. On the loudspeaker, a male voice is reading a sutra or prayer or something in Tibetan. Two little girls, maybe around 6 or so, in red and yellow nun's robes play with each other and glace in our direction as we walk past. Up front, someone is handing out *katas*.

We continue through a gate in the temple park wall toward the Muchalinda Tank. Shantum points out a group of Hindus doing some kind of ritual off to the side. He explains that a shrine here is part of a complex ritual that Hindus in this part of Bihar must complete for dead relatives. The ceremonies require some time as there are numerous places the rituals must take place. The shrine is a branch of a larger shrine in Gaya. In the Mahbodhi Temple area, the Hindus and Buddhists share access, and have even set up a governing committee that ensures both religions are represented. The Mahabodhi Temple is governed by a committee which includes a couple of Hindus but also Buddhists, and, though not without the usual politics that accompany such ventures, it seems to be working out well. The Mahabodhi Temple is a happy exception to the general drift toward conflict between religions in the post 9/11 world.

In the middle of the tank, surrounded by water, stands a large, realistically painted statue of the Buddha in the meditation posture sitting on a coiled cobra. The cobra's gigantic yellow hood is spread out behind and above the Buddha, supported by a blue and white striped snake body and topped with a golden head. According to Shantum, the legend states that after the Buddha's enlightenment, he came to meditate on the side of the tank. While he was sitting, a thunderstorm swept in. Muchalinda, the king of the naga people (a kind of water spirit in the shape of a snake), rose out of the tank and spread his hood

over the Buddha so that the Buddha would not get wet. This legend is the source of the Nagabuddha motif, a statue with the Buddha sitting on a seat made of a coiled cobra. The cobra's hood, or often many separate heads and hoods, spreads over the Buddha's head where a halo would normally be located. The statue in the center of the lake is an example. This motif has special resonance for my practice[42], and we have a Nagabuddha statue at home. The naga was also symbol of wisdom in ancient India, so the naga rising and sheltering the Buddha is a symbol of the arising of wisdom as a result of his enlightenment.

Back on the walkway surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple, Shantum leads us to the southwest corner in view of the tree. We stop, letting the circumambulating pilgrims stream past behind us. Shantum points out several carved stone pillars in the stone fence surrounding the circumambulation walkway that date from the time of Ashoka, around 220 BC. Most of the rest are from the Gupta period, 320-550 AD, when the current Mahabodhi Temple was built. Continuing past the tree to the north side, we view the area where the Buddha did walking meditation. The site is marked by a low stone wall which today, just like yesterday, is covered by offerings from the Tibetans. We stop for a minute to admire the ephemeral butter sculpture and cakes erected by the Tibetans. We then turn and climb out of the temple walkway onto one of the radial paths leading through the stupas and small shrines - and thousands of Tibetan monks - which surround the temple proper.

Along one side of the path are positioned a line of wooden contraptions, consisting of a wooden platform about six feet long with two sliding boards located at the front end. They look for all the world like some kind of Tibetan exercise machine, but they are not. Tibetan monks and a few Westerners are using these contraptions to do prostrations. The prostration practitioners stand at the back end of the machine opposite the sliding boards, bow, then throw themselves forward, sliding the feet backwards and placing the hands on the boards and sliding the boards forward. I stop for a while to watch. The Tibetans do their prostrations over and over slowly and rhythmically, like somebody using the ab builder at the gym, but the style of a Western woman practitioner is quite different. She does 10 quick prostrations, then pauses to make a mark in a small notebook off to one side, then starts again. The Tibetan lamas typically assign a certain number of prostrations to tantric practitioners in the generation, or initial, stage of practice. I guess the Westerner wants to make sure she gets the number right, but the Tibetans are not so picky about objective measurements,

thinking that the spirit of the practice is more important.

We then continue down the path to one of the most important shrines in the Mahabodhi complex: the Rainbow Shrine. The Mahayana tradition holds that the Buddha's body emitted rainbow colored lights while he developed his theory of conditioned arising when standing here. A fence keeps us at a distance from the entrance. The three steps leading up to the shrine are covered in butter lamps and offerings of yellow marigolds and red camellias in small glass cups and metal bowls. The door to the shrine is an iron grid work draped with white *katas*, obscuring the central figure. Around the outside of the *katas*, gilded stone carvings are visible in the half-light inside the shrine. On each side of the door, two red banners with golden Dharma wheels and gold grid work are fastened between the sides of the door and the fence at our feet. I join a couple of Tibetan monks standing in front of the shrine, and am inspired to spend a few minutes contemplating conditioned arising.

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Conditioned Arising Interlude:

Conditioned arising,[43] despite its somewhat awkward name, is one of the most innovative ideas of the Buddha and the heart of the Buddha's teaching. As it applies to the human condition, it describes a series of twelve causal links that serve as the conditions for arising of the human experience of *dukkha* - suffering, dissatisfaction, stress. The traditional description is structured as the Twelve Links of Conditioned Arising. They are:

> Ignorance is the condition for the arising of *sankaras*,
> *Sankaras* are the condition for the arising of consciousness,
> Consciousness is the condition for the arising of name and form,
>
> Name and form are the condition for the arising of the sense bases,
> Sense bases are the condition for the arising of sense contact,
> Sense contact is the condition for the arising of feeling tone,
> Feeling tone is the condition for the arising of craving,
> Craving is the condition for the arising of clinging,
> Clinging is the condition for the arising of becoming,
> Becoming is the condition for the arising of birth,

> Birth is the condition for the arising of aging and death.

Each of the links is a precondition for the arising of the next.

In ancient India, conditioned arising was the single most important idea that unified all Buddhists. Ancient pilgrims traveling on the same circuit as we do took home souvenirs of small fired clay plaques engraved with the words: "The Dharmas which arise from causes" in Pali. These words are a shortened form of the following verse:

> The Tathagata has spoken of the cause and cessation of the dhammas which arise from causes; such is the teaching of the great renunciate.[44]

Here "dhammas" mean, in the Buddha's analysis, the mental and physical processes that make up human experience. So the quote says that the Buddha taught the causes behind the arising of these processes and the causes behind their cessation. The Twelve Links is a kind of shorthand for that.[45]

Western Buddhists and scholars have had a difficult time interpreting the Twelve Links. The traditional Theravada commentarial tradition, from the early part of the first millennium AD, teaches that the links spread over three lifetimes. Ignorance and *sankaras* (we'll discuss this term later) from the former lifetime cause rebirth as consciousness and name and form (body and mind) into this lifetime. Sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, and clinging operate in this lifetime causing becoming, birth, and the subsequent aging and death in the next lifetime. Contemporary Western teachers often teach that the twelve links operate in every moment of consciousness. But neither of these explanations is satisfactory. The Theravada interpretation fails the first filter of Stephen's hermeneutic because rebirth was a basic teaching of the Vedanta, the majority religion during the Buddha's life. It is therefore hardly likely to be part of the Buddha's most innovative teaching, even though the Buddha did, in other parts of the Pali Canon, teach rebirth. The contemporary Western interpretation has no explanation for how consciousness, which is itself one of the links, could also have all of the links operating within it.

A breakthrough in scholarly understanding of the Twelve Links came in 1999. Joanna Jurewicz, a professor at the University of Warsaw, showed[46] that in the Twelve Links, the Buddha was responding to the Vedic cosmology by presenting his own interpretation of how human experience arose, while, at the

same time, criticizing the Vedic interpretation. The Vedic cosmology taught that the universe was grounded on a primordial consciousness, the *atman*. Universal consciousness thus became the first principle from which the individual consciousness and all human experience were derived. The Buddha, on the other hand, had no interest in metaphysical speculation. His primary concern was the human condition as he found it, and he started from that in constructing the Twelve Links teaching. But he appropriated terminology from the Vedic cosmology and redefined it in a novel way. For example, the Buddha taught that consciousness arose in response to an object, not as some kind of universal metaphysical material. In addition, he structured the first four of the Twelve Links (ignorance, *sankaras*, consciousness, name and form) around certain Vedic myths and rituals. In this way, the Twelve Links functioned as both a description of how human suffering arose and as a critique of the Vedic interpretation of the same philosophical topic. His listeners, being intimately familiar with the Vedic tradition, clearly understood what he was talking about. The teaching was quite radical, as if Martin Luther, the father of the Reformation, had denied the divinity of Christ and the existence of God, then reinterpreted the Bible to present a psychological explanation of the human condition.

By the first century AD, the Vedic religion had changed so much, largely from the pressure of the successful Buddhist critique, that the context in which the Buddha taught the Twelve Links disappeared. The mystery deepened because the Twelve Links are one of the most frequently cited pericopes in the Pali Canon. A *pericope* is a piece of text forming a coherent thought that is taken from its original context in a text corpus and inserted at various other places. Because the Pali Canon was recited for over a hundred years before being written down, the compilers of the Pali Canon used pericopes and lists, like the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path, to ease memorization. The pericopes and lists render parts of the Pali Canon somewhat difficult to understand because they come across as formulaic and lacking background information. But the primary factor that caused understanding of the Twelve Links to sink into mystery was the disappearance of the original context in which it was taught. When the original context disappeared, subsequent generations, being unfamiliar with that background, have been left to puzzle over the actual meaning of the Twelve Links ever since.

Starting at the beginning, the "ignorance" of the first link is ignorance of what

causes a sense that your life is somehow not satisfactory, which, at its extreme, translates into suffering (i.e. *dukkha*). The kind of suffering the Buddha is talking about here has nothing to do with the pain of illness, with the aches that accumulate in old age, with the acute emotional pain you feel when a loved one dies, or even with your own death. What the Buddha means by *dukkha* - and the only thing he means by *dukkha* - is the kind of personal identification with the events in your life that leads to an exaggerated sense of self. So, for example, *dukkha* can develop out of the pain of illness when you ask, "Why am *I* suffering from this sickness? Who infected *me* at work?" Without that exaggerated identification, pain from illness is just a cluster of unpleasant physical sensations. This ignorance is not cognitive, such as the ignorance of the customs of a foreign country, but rather a deep seated habit. The habit arises out of a misdirected sense of the need for physical preservation, a need that had a purpose when humans were subject to great physical adversity in their daily lives, and still does today when such circumstances arise. But the mind tends to overreact and define everything in terms of the safety of the self even when physical survival isn't threatened. An example is my anxiety about losing my luggage at the beginning of the trip. This ignorance is what is spoken of in the first link.

The second link is that mysterious Pali word *sankaras*. *Sankaras* have been translated in various ways. "Karmic formations" is often used by Buddhist monk-scholar translators that favor the traditional Theravadan three life times interpretation. "Volitional formations" is more typically used by secular Pali scholars. But neither of these translations captures the real sense of the Pali word as it is used by the Buddha throughout the Pali Canon. They are both technical terms that contradict the use of *sankaras* in other places as clearly a description of how human psychology works. A *sankara* is an unconscious tendency that causes you to behave in a particular way. *Sankaras* only become visible when they manifest as thoughts, words, or actions. Blanchard[47] has used the word "drive" to translate *sankara*. So we could rephrase the first and the second of the Twelve Links as:

> Ignorance is the condition for the arising of drives,
> Drives are the condition for the arising of consciousness.

The drives that are spoken of in the Twelve Links are a very specific kind of drive, those drives that work to further the existence of an exaggerated sense of

self, to nurture it, to polish it, and to assert it at the expense of others. This kind of drive causes you to behave in a way that makes trouble for you and those around you. An example, again, is the misdirected drive toward comfort for myself that occurred at the beginning of the trip, and that led me to drag Renate around the shopping mall in Newark airport and spend money on stuff I didn't need because I thought my bag was going to be lost.

The third and fourth links, consciousness and name and form (*nama rupa* in Pali) are the only two which the Buddha identifies as being interdependent.[48] Consciousness here means a particular kind of consciousness, the kind that is associated with the drive towards feeding the sense of self. Driven by the need to exist, to protect itself, and to know itself in relation to other things, the drive to feed the self asserts in the way you pay attention to various ideas and sense data. The consciousness associated with the self-feeding drive constitutes the third link. Name and form, the fourth link, is the process by which that consciousness identifies sense data, ideas, thoughts, and feelings, and classifies them into those that support the self, those that threaten the self, and those that have no relevance. The first are embraced, the second rejected, and the third ignored. Returning to the Newark airport example again, the drive for comfort and memories of past experiences with lost baggage led to consciousness of thoughts and images that reinforced the feeling of a threat. Rejecting the thoughts and images, planning arose to mitigate the threat, namely a useless shopping expedition, and actions occurred to carry out the plan.

The identification provided by name and form feeds back into consciousness, driven by an all-inclusive need to feed the self with more process information. When immediately perceptible process information fades away, the drive to validate the self seeks out more experiences to feed it. During meditation, rather than maintaining focus on the breath, sometimes you slip off and start thinking about the upcoming day, whether your partner has responded to your friends about the party on Saturday, or whatever, because the breath is kind of boring in comparison with your social life. This is an example of the tendency of the mind to seek out experiences - in this case thoughts - that are perceived as more relevant to the self than what is going on right now. In this way, you create and polish your self-identity and distinguish it from that of others and from the environment.

The first through fourth link are part of an unconscious psychological process by

which the mind creates *dukkha*. Actually experiencing these links is rather difficult but their function can be mostly inferred through thoughts, words, and especially actions. But one experience in meditation makes the effect of the *sankara*-drive very clear.[49] If the eyes are closed, no external or internal sounds are heard, no strongly pleasant or strongly unpleasant bodily sensations are felt, no thoughts are arising, and the mind is focused, mindful and at rest, you can sometimes feel a kind of pressure in the mind for a thought to arise. If you slack off on mindfulness for a bit, you can feel the thought bubble start to form, then if you focus mindfulness in, you can feel it stop forming and sink back again. If mindfulness slackens off completely, the thought arises and it is invariably something related to *you*. That's the *sankara*-drive to define the self at work.

In contrast, the working of links five through ten - sense bases, contact, feeling, craving, clinging, becoming - is easier to see in meditation. One of the best ways to see the middle five links is to watch how the mind reacts in meditation to an unpleasant external stimulus. For example, suppose you are sitting in your daily meditation and your neighbor's dog starts barking. At first, you might just note the barking with the label "sound". At some point, if the dog keeps barking, you expand the note to "dog barking". Then the note becomes "neighbor's dog barking". Finally your mind begins to riff away on your neighbor's dog until, maybe a minute later, you notice irritated thinking about what a lousy neighbor you have and how you should call the cops because his dog is violating the dog barking ordinance and disturbing *your* meditation. Then you move your mind back to your breath. In a daily meditation, this entire sequence may occur very quickly, and you might not even notice the initial contact and feeling steps. I was able to track this sequence in detail at the 1996 IMS retreat because I had developed stronger mindfulness and concentration. Developing a high degree of mindfulness and concentration in a longer retreat can sharpen the observational skills and allow you to tease apart the initial links.

The last two links - birth-and old age-and death - seem to be about physical birth and death, supporting the traditional Theravadan interpretation of the Twelve Links. But another interpretation[50] is more in line with the psychological tone of the previous links, and is better supported by the original context in which the Buddha's critique of Vedic myth and ritual was embedded. In the setting of Vedic ritual, the birth which the eleventh links speaks about wasn't an actual physical birth. It was the birth into the world of the ancestors or into a world of bliss with Brahma, one of the Vedic gods. The Buddha's critique was that the

Vedic rituals would not result in a birth into a blissful state after death but would just result in more suffering in this world, especially for the animals that at the time were sacrificed as part of the ceremony.[51] From a psychological standpoint, the birth in the eleventh link is the birth of a false sense of a permanent self. Aging and death, in the twelfth link, are synonyms for impermanence and *dukkha*. In other parts of the Pali Canon, aging and death are followed by the words "sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair" indicating that what the Buddha is actually talking about has nothing to do with physical death, but rather with the fading of the conditions around the attempts of the *sankara*-drive to define a permanent self. No matter how many possessions you accumulate, how often you are praised for your great insights, nor how much you chase after happiness; the end result is always that conditions change and all your efforts are in vain. Everything you try to maintain a stable and knowable world for the safety of your sense of self will fail. Your self is completely dependent on transient conditions and is therefore, itself, transient.

Knowing what the Buddha is not talking about in the Twelve Links is as important as knowing what he is talking about. He is not saying that you shouldn't enjoy the impermanent events of life because they will ultimately go away. What he is saying is that you should not make your happiness contingent on events turning out in a way that supports your sense of self. As well, not all *sankara*-drives are those spoken of in the second link. Only drives that attempt to feed your sense of a permanent self are problematic. Drives involved in obtaining food, shelter, and the basic will to live are not at issue here. Similarly, not all sense data is a problem, only that which you interpret in a certain way, to support your exaggerated self-image. Finally, the Twelve Links are not circular, that is, aging and death are not a condition for ignorance, though the traditional three lifetimes interpretation might make it seem so. The Buddha only said that two of the links were mutually dependent: consciousness and name and form. The others operate in a linear fashion. The process starts from the deep ignorance of the first link, and the drive that kindles, over and over, to somehow confirm and support a permanent sense of self.

*

Back to the Rainbow Shrine:

After viewing the shrine, we walk down a radial path to the circumambulation

walkway, then into the temple itself. While the temple gives the impression of being a large building from outside, the inside is surprisingly cramped. There is a walkway wide enough for four people walking abreast leading into the depths. The ceiling seems to be far above us, but it is difficult to tell because the interior is dark. The corridor is crammed with people; some of whom are coming out while others, like us, are trying to get in. Both groups push against each other, there is no organized queue for the outgoing and incoming people. We move along with the crowd, squeezing through openings where we see them. The interior is hot and smells of human sweat.

Ahead of us against the back wall is a well-lit glass walled alcove in which a large golden Buddha sits. I manage to maneuver close enough to see what is happening, but the crowd around the Buddha is too tightly packed for me to move comfortably forward toward the glass case. Shantum and a couple others in the group manage to push their way to the front. The crowd parts for a moment, and I see a small Shiva lingam on the floor in front of the alcove, about the size of a half banana but thicker, a reminder that the temple, as with most of the original Buddhist shrines in India, has a Hindu presence too.

Someone is chanting loudly in Thai through a hand-held amplifier and there is activity going on in the alcove where the statute is located. A robust orange-robed Thai monk behind the glass is wrapping the statue in a golden cloth, making an offering of clothing to the Buddha. Cloth for a robe is one of the requisites that the suttas encourage practitioners to offer to monks, and here we see a kind of symbolic equivalent, with a rather rich and spectacular cloth. The Thai monk finishes the wrapping, and pauses for a moment to view his handiwork. Shantum returns and we head back toward the door. I am glad to be on my way out, the cramped, squeezing mob is making me claustrophobic. I breathe deeply in relief as we exit the door, glad to be out of the stuffy temple interior.

We climb up a staircase onto the outer temple walk and exit the Mahabodhi Temple complex. Our temple crawl starts at the Shechen Tennyi Dargyling Temple, a satellite of the great Shechen Nyingma Monastery in Tibet, and its offshoot at Boudhnath in Kathmandu, Nepal. The temple sits at the end of a cement driveway lined with boxwood hedges snaking off of Domuhan-Bodhgaya Road. The front of the temple is painted red, with intricate, swirling decorations in bright colors around the tops of the columns and the facing along

the roof. Two golden deer sit attentively above the door on both sides of a golden wheel perched atop a pedestal. These symbols are typically found above the door of a Tibetan temple. The wheel represents the "Wheel of Dharma", or the Buddha's teaching and the deer represent the Deer Park at Sarnath, which we will be visiting in a couple of days, where the Buddha gave his First Discourse. On the left and right corners of the roof are Tibetan prayer wheels, gigantic golden cylinders inscribed with Sanskrit letters. Inside the temple, a large golden statue of the Buddha sits cross legged in the "earth touching" pose - his right hand touching the earth - with a blue begging bowl in his lap. To his left and right are golden statues of Tibetan lamas, probably important masters in the Nyingma linage. The beams and tops of the columns are decorated with the same swirling cloud-like patterns as the outside, and the bases of the columns are painted with a pattern of two crossed *vajras*[52] with a bluish-white circle at the center. Some of the column tops have snow lions or images of deities on them as well. Sophia gasps in astonishment as we enter the temple, and Kevin expresses his appreciation for the Tibetan artists who created this lovely temple. The Tibetan art is a visual feast, and I take it all in with delight, indulging my love of Tibetan painting and sculpture that I developed over the my years of practice with Yvonne.

We spend a good three quarters of an hour examining the temple interior, then walk back down the drive and out onto Domuhan-Bodhgaya Road to the Thai temple. A cement wall topped with an iron fence separates the sacred grounds of the temple from the city. We enter through the iron gate. The main temple building is white with a red tiled roof. The ends of the roof beams are capped with upswept golden filigrees. The lintels above the windows and the facing above the door are also decorated with abstract golden carving. A seated Buddha, again in the earth touching pose, graces the altar. From the Buddha's head, a spike projects upwards, and his body is surrounded by a halo with filigrees like those on the roof in the traditional Thai style. Behind the statue, the wall is painted in blue and decorated with a regular pattern of golden flowers. On either side, two devas attend the Buddha with hands folded in respect. The rest of the temple is decorated with elaborate paintings of the Buddha's life.

In this part of the city, the temples have large grounds are spread out, so we face a long walk to the last stop on our temple tour: Daijokyo, a Japanese Zen temple associated with the guest house. Dusk is settling over the city as we enter the temple grounds. Unlike the elaborate decorations on the outside of the Thai

Temple and Shechen Tennyi Dargyling, Daijokyo is a simple white cement structure with a kind of tower like a radio antenna on the roof. The walkway leading up the stairs is lined with Japanese garden lamps made of stone. Inside, the decorations are more elaborate. A golden Buddha seated in the meditation pose - with both hands folded in his lap and with eyes closed - adorns the altar area. On both sides of the Buddha are golden statues of standing bodhisattvas and golden lotus flowers. A monk dressed in simple work robes is standing inside and we chat briefly with him. He is one of two monks there; they rotate back to Japan periodically, and they are members of the smallest Zen sect in Japan, the Obaku sect.

After the long walk from Dungshwari to the Falgu River and the temple crawl, we are just about crawling as we leave the temple and head back to the Daijokyo guest house. Before we departed in the morning, we dropped off laundry at the guest house and now we return to pick it up. But there is no one at the reception desk, and after a short search of all the public areas we discover that there is no staff around at all. They all seem to have left for the night. Shantum calls around on his cell phone trying to find someone who can tell us what is up with our laundry. Meanwhile, we sprawl out on the chairs in the guest house lobby, relishing the opportunity to be off our feet for a few minutes. Finally Shantum manages to contact the manager, and finds out that our laundry isn't finished yet, even though they had the whole day to do it. The manager promises Shantum that it will be ready after 9 PM. So we return to the hotel for a low key dinner and strucks. After strucks, Shantum asks if someone can fetch his laundry for him since he is completely wiped out and wants to go to bed. Since Renate and I are marginally less tired than the rest of the group, having been revived by dinner, we volunteer to pick up Shantum's laundry as well as our own. We walk back to the Daijokyo guest house to retrieve the laundry, but by the time we get back to the hotel, we are dead tired. We give Shantum's laundry to the reception and climb the stairs to our room for bed.

Flashback 2003-2010 -Beginning 2.0

In the fall of 2003, Misha and I scheduled a breakfast at Hobee's in Palo Alto, one of our infrequent meetings to compare notes on practice and catch up on the activities of our teachers, spouses, and mutual friends. Some years before, Les had given Misha Dharma transmission, formally known as *inka*, authorizing her to teach. Misha's practice community had grown over the years as her teaching had matured. By 2003 she had two priest trainees and a thriving group of Zen meditators in the central San Francisco Peninsula area. Though I was not at the time a regular member of her practice community, I relied on her for the kind of fresh perspective on my practice problems that only a good friend can provide.

Between bites of cinnamon French toast covered with strawberry-banana yogurt sauce, I related the story of my breaking off with Yvonne.

"Ah, "she said, "Then you are now *ronin*."

I looked up from my French toast. "What is *ronin*?" I asked.

She laughed. "You're without a teacher," she replied, "During the medieval period in Japan, samurai who lost their masters were call *ronin*."

I sighed. "Yes, I suppose I am." I said.

I had been doing formal meditation practice with periodic retreats for almost 15 years. Overall including the time when I mostly did daily meditation by myself, I had been practicing for almost 30 years. After my training with Yvonne, I felt I had a good understanding of the basics of mindfulness and the ethical precepts. I felt I knew what my mind needed in terms of a meditation practice. My practice was now moving more toward the *Vipassana* model. I continued daily sitting, using the *Vipassana* mindfulness technique. In the summer and fall, I occasionally took a week for backpacking and meditating alone in the Sierra Nevada or attended a formal retreat with Misha's Zen group at a local Tibetan retreat center. I had no real goal in practice and had no urgency to intensify my practice. I felt that it provided an important counterbalance to the craziness of

the Silicon Valley pressure to pursue wealth and fame.

In January of 2005, I was bicycling along Church Street near the Shoreline Boulevard intersection in Mountain View listening to an iPod. With one hand, I gripped the handlebars while I fumbled with the iPod to change the music using the other hand. The traffic light turned red and I gripped the brake with the hand holding the handlebars, causing just the brake on the front wheel to engage. The back end of the bike came up as the front brakes grabbed and the back wheel kept turning. As I was going over the handlebars, I felt my mind turn away from what was happening. I wasn't exactly unconscious, but I was not in control of my reactions, they were happening by habit. It was almost as if my mind saw that something disastrous was about to happen and did not want to deal with it. Instead of tucking my arms and rolling, I stretched out my right arm and took the entire weight of my body plus the momentum from the bike on my right shoulder. Since I habitually tend to lean on my right arm when sitting at my computer that is how I reacted. My mind snapped back when I was on the sidewalk, to searing pain in my right shoulder.

At the time of the accident, I didn't know how serious the injury was. I thought my shoulder had dislocated, so I tried to ride my bike home. But the pain was so bad that I couldn't even grip the handlebars. I had to hold my right arm with my left and push the bike home. When I arrived home, I collapsed on the couch. Renate was working in the garden and came into the house.

"What happened?" she asked in alarm.

"I had a bicycle accident. I think I dislocated my shoulder," I gasped, "Can you call the El Camino Hospital emergency room and tell them we're coming?"

"Oh no!" she exclaimed and rushed to the phone to call.

Within ten minutes, we were at the emergency room. My case was triaged and I was immediately taken to a doctor who examined my shoulder. A nurse wheeled me into the X-ray room and took an X-ray. The doctor told me my right humerus had snapped at the shoulder ball and the humerus had shoved up into the ball cause the ball to impact on the shoulder bone. He looked at my eyes and asked if I had passed out or had any head injury. I said I thought I didn't since I had been

wearing a helmet and wasn't going particularly fast. Then he gave me morphine. As the pain began to ease, I thought if there was ever a time I needed to be mindful, it was now. My breathing slowed from a combination of the morphine and my practice of mindfulness of breathing. As I closely watched my sensations and thoughts, I suddenly saw a little blip of intense self-pity arise. I was clearly aware of its arising and, just as it arose, I was clearly aware of its passing.

Later that week, as I was sitting on the couch in the living room looking out the window with my right arm in a sling and a hot cup of tea near the left, I thought about the accident and the follow-up visit to the orthopedist. The orthopedist had told me that my right arm would heal up shorter than the left, the range of motion of my right shoulder would be constrained, and I would likely develop arthritis in the joint. These consequences would stay with me for the rest of my life. The injury had divided my body into a before and an after. When I was younger, less serious setbacks had plunged my mind into a months-long orgy of self-pity. Yet I felt no sense of self-pity now. What had happened?

In the emergency room right after the accident when the intense pain finally began to ease, a short moment of mental talk arose about being a victim. If I had let that moment propagate down the Twelve Links, it could have literally destroyed my life. I could have developed a feeling of being persecuted by fate or that life had betrayed me, and ignored how my mind had reacted to the unexpected circumstances of the accident. I could have blamed it on the bicycle manufacturer, constructed a story about how they shouldn't have sold a bike where the brakes grabbed, and tried to sue them. But none of this happened. By simply meeting the arising of that moment of self-pity with mindfulness, the cause was established for the cessation of self-pity and it never reoccurred. This is what the Buddha meant by liberation.

My teacher at the 1996 IMS retreat had mentioned mindfulness as a way to break the Twelve Links and thereby stop *dukkha*, but now I had actually experienced it. The Buddha taught the Twelve Links not simply as a description of how the mind produces *dukkha*, but also as a way to liberate the mind from *dukkha*. Conditioned arising happens when you are not mindful of how your mind is reacting to the flow of thoughts and sensations. It is impossible to control whether something feels pleasant or unpleasant because the feeling is built into your biology. But you can control how your mind reacts. Mindfulness

applied at any of the Twelve Links cuts short the conditioned arising sequence. If mindfulness is applied at the arising of the pleasant or unpleasant feeling associated with the physical sensation or thought, liberation is complete. If mindfulness is applied closer to the birth link - the construction of another experience feeding the sense of self - some trace may linger, but the feeding is weaker, as if the sense of self was fed a dry cracker instead of a big, juicy steak. Mindfulness is so effective because it allows the mind to observe the sensation or thought in a context of equanimity and objectivity. Rather than defining the experience as "something <*bad*, *good*> happening to *me*", the experience becomes "something happening".

Reaching for the cup of tea with my left hand, I discovered that it had gone cold.

But the accident threw me into a state of confusion about my practice. Before the accident, I had been fairly relaxed, sitting daily and doing an occasional three day or week retreat, but with no desire to do longer retreats or become involved in a practice community or work with a teacher. My experience of mindfulness and the Twelve Links during the accident had confirmed the value of the practice, especially in difficult circumstances. The accident kindled a new urgency to push myself in my practice rather than simply drift along. I began to look around for long term retreat opportunities, and discovered that the Spirit Rock retreat center in Marin County north of San Francisco ran a sort of miniature version of the IMS three month *Vipassana* retreat every year in February and March. In February of 2006, 2007, and 2008, I arranged for a month off from work and attended the retreats.

My approach to the Spirit Rock retreats was to simply go there and hang out with my body and mind for a month, watching what happened. This approach was the direct opposite of the goal-directed, Silicon Valley style practice I had pursued in 1996 at IMS. Near the end of the 2007 retreat, I was sitting in the early morning before dawn, watching the arising and passing away of sensations, something that I had experienced in the past. But this time, mindfulness turned to my own body and mind. Suddenly, I perceived my body and mind as radically impermanent, arising and passing away in every moment. The sense of a fixed and unchanging self - the Witness - that I had experienced so many years before in college had vanished. It was replaced by a sense of arising and vanishing thoughts, emotions, and feelings with no continuity from one moment to the next. I realized then the crucial error I had made in my observations during my

experiments with psychedelics when I had witnessed the impermanence of the world from the position of a fixed self. The self too was subject to the arising and disappearance of conditions, contingent and fragile. I was experiencing "not-self", the lack of a fixed and unchanging self, what my teachers had been telling me since I had taken my first meditation course at Wesleyan. But now it was real, not just words.

In the fall of 2008, Renate discovered a new sitting group that had started in a church just a 10 minute drive from our house, Insight Meditation South Bay (IMSB), and we began attending the Tuesday night sitting. The group was grounded in the *Vipassana* tradition, but the teacher, Shaila Catherine, had practiced concentration meditation extensively and taught concentration meditation technique. Whereas mindfulness meditation requires the meditator to acknowledge with equanimity the arising, persistence, and passing away of sensations, thoughts, and emotions, concentration meditation has a different goal. This goal is absorption, an altered state of consciousness, known by its Pali name: *jhana*. *Jhana* practice is mentioned many times in the Pali Canon and Siddhartha Gotama studied *jhana* with two teachers before meeting his enlightenment at Bodhgaya and becoming the Buddha. In *jhana* practice, the meditator focuses the attention on one specific sensation - usually the touch of the breath on the upper lip - as the meditation object and keeps the attention there until the mind becomes absorbed into it. This technique is also used in Zen and mindfulness meditation to achieve a certain degree of concentration, but *jhana* meditation takes the technique to the extreme. Rather than acknowledging when the mind moves off the breath and moving it back, in *jhana* practice other thoughts and sensations are rejected as distractions.

According to the *Visudhimagga*, or *Path of Purification*, a 5th century meditation manual written by the Ceylonese monk Buddhaghosa, the mind gradually becomes more focused. Thoughts and sensations begin to recede. When the mind begins to unify with the meditation object, a small, white glowing disc appears at the focus of the attention on the upper lip, the *nimitta*, or counterpart sign.[53] This is an indication that the absorption of *jhana* is near. The *nimitta* expands until it fills the meditator's inner vision. *Jhana* itself occurs when all sensations and all thoughts, even wispy, tentative thoughts about the progress of the meditation, disappear and the mind is wholly absorbed into the meditation object. The mind at this point is simplified and is experiencing only a few entirely positive characteristics: happiness, energy, mindfulness, and

equanimity. There is a complete absence of the three *klesas* of greed, hatred, and delusion. As the mind sinks deeper, even the positive characteristics begin to drop off, through 4 stages, until only equanimity remains. The Pali Canon recommends *jhana* as an excellent starting point for *Vipassana* meditation because it enhances the meditator's ability to focus on the arising and passing away of various phenomena.

Before the IMS retreat in 1996, I had theoretical knowledge of *jhana* from having read the *Visudhimagga*. Buddhaghosa discusses many techniques for entering *jhana* in addition to using the touch of the breath on the upper lip, and describes the 4 stages of *jhana*. At the IMS retreat, I had asked my teachers whether the visual effects I was seeing were the *nimitta*, but they simply discouraged me from practicing toward more concentration. Over the years, I had spoken with other *Vipassana* teachers about *jhana*. They had all discouraged me from pursuing it, some claiming it was dangerous, and others that it led to super sensitivity to sensations which caused suffering. I was excited to finally find a teacher who could teach me how to achieve *jhana*, a teacher who assured me that practicing *jhana* had no ill effects.

Shaila was a kind of a "spiritual entrepreneur", with boundless energy and a fierce dedication to the practice, the perfect cross between spiritual practice and Silicon Valley. In addition to starting and leading the sitting group at IMSB, she had started sitting groups at various high tech companies in the Valley, held a weekly sutra study class, and planned various special events, including weekend study sessions and talk series for IMSB members and others. In her late 40's, her black hair streaked with grey, Shaila was always in motion except when sitting in meditation. She had studied with the well-known English *Vipassana* teacher Christopher Titmus and in the 1990's had spent some time living with the Advaita Vedanta master Poonjaji at his compound in Lucknow, India.

As part of the practice at IMSB, Shaila was gathering a small group of students who were interested in helping others learn meditation. She called it the mentor's group. Since she often spent 4 months or more out of town on retreat or teaching in places like Texas and Israel, she needed a core group of advanced students who could fill in for her at IMSB when she could not find a guest speaker. One evening, Renate mentioned that Shaila wanted to talk to me about possibly becoming a member of the mentor's group. I called her and we had a short

conversation on the phone.

"I'm not sure if I am a very good candidate," I said slowly, "I didn't manage to cut it as a Zen priest. I simply don't have the personality to teach. People don't naturally come to me with their problems."

"That's fine," she replied firmly, "I'm primarily interested in getting people with a range of experience in practice. You have the longest meditation practice of anyone in the group."

"Well it's true that I have had a daily practice for around 25 years or so," I admitted, "And I practiced on and off as I could for about 5 years before that."

"Most of the rest of the group are new to meditation," she said, "And very few of them have a strong a daily practice like that."

In the end, I agreed to join the mentor's group.

Shaila gave me some books by her *jhana* teacher, the Pinlaung Sayadaw, a venerable Burmese *jhana* master and abbot of a Theravadan monastery in Pinlaung, Myanmar, with whom she had done a one year *jhana* retreat. I poured through the books, and was astonished to discover that here, after such a long search, was a clear, systematic description of that "other world" I had glimpsed in 1989-1990 during and after my first long meditation retreat at Kannon Do. The Pinlaung Sayadaw covered some of the same material as the *Visudhimagga* - how to deepen concentration into *jhana* and how to use *jhana* as the basis for *Vipassana* with the goal of ultimately achieving one of the four stages of enlightenment recognized in the Theravadan tradition. But he also described some of the perceptions that arise in the highly concentrated state which occurs after the mind leaves *jhana*. Some of the perceptions were similar to those I had experienced in 1989 and over the years briefly at retreats, but the Pinlaung Sayadaw put them into a framework based on the *Abhidhamma*. Here, at last, I had a systematic description of how to cultivate the mind in a way that would allow me to enter into that "other world" in a controlled way, something I had sought fruitlessly during the early 1990's before I met Yvonne.

I plunged into the concentration practice with Shaila, increasing my daily sitting from forty minutes to an hour. *Jhana* practice is characterized by extremely long

sitting periods in retreat,[54] where the meditator sits for several hours to a half day or even longer without moving as the mind remains absorbed into itself. Becoming acclimated to longer sitting periods was necessary training for participating in a *jhana* retreat, like running longer distances was for participating in a marathon. I also attended three 10 day concentration retreats with Shaila in 2008, 2009, and 2010 at a retreat center in the redwood forest in Santa Cruz County. Because of the circumstances surrounding the retreat, I named them after three of the four elements -fire, wind, and water - in the *Abhidhamma* cosmology.

The Fire Retreat in 2008 was interrupted by a huge wildfire on the next ridge west, a few miles from the retreat center. Shaila gave us the option of leaving the retreat early and I took it. I was sure I would not be able to meditate with the fire so close, and having one less car blocking the roads if an evacuation was necessary would let other people who lived in the area more easily escape.

At the Wind Retreat in 2009, Shaila taught together with U Brahm, a French monk from Marseille but who had lived in Asia for more than 30 years and was one of the Pinlaung Sayadaw's senior monks. For several days during the retreat, a huge windstorm shook the redwood forest. Dried needles, small twigs, and even large limbs came raining down from the trees. During walking meditation one afternoon, a large limb came crashing down in the exact spot where I had been standing a minute before. I stood watching the branch quiver as it released energy, and I knew that if it had fallen a few seconds earlier, I would have been hit.

The Water Retreat in 2010 began with several days of intensive, slashing rain, after which the sky cleared. By the end of the Water Retreat, I was able to achieve a highly concentrated state where thoughts, feelings, and emotions receded, and my visual field was dominated by a dull blue light, speckled with sparkles like fireflies or twinkling stars. Occasionally, other thoughts and sensations would disappear for a second and the dull blue light would intensify to brilliant blue like the sky, but then some thought would arise and the light would dim. Despite my hard work, I couldn't generate the *nimitta*, the small dot of light on the upper lip over the nose.

For a beginner, concentration meditation requires much more effort than

mindfulness meditation because the mind must ignore any sensations, thoughts, feelings, and emotions as distractions and those distractions will inevitably arise. The first sustained experience with *jhana* is known to be notoriously difficult to achieve, and often takes months of retreat practice in a quiet setting. The noise of industrial civilization - airplanes, cars, air conditioners, computers, factory machinery, and the like - are all a definite barrier to entering the *jhana* state. But I was determined to achieve it, and to finally find a systematic entry into that mysterious "other world" that had eluded me for so many years.

Part 3 - Not-Self

"In this world, unsubdued and crazed elephants
Are incapable of causing such harms
As the miseries of the deepest hell
Which can be caused by the unleashed elephant of my mind.

But if the elephant of my mind is firmly bound
On all sides by the rope of mindfulness,
All fears will cease to exist
And all virtues will come into my hand."

> *Shantideva, A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life*
> *translated by Stephen Batchelor*

Day 8 - Bus Trip to Varanasi

Today we are scheduled to leave Bodhgaya for Varanasi. At breakfast, I am feeling a bit of sadness and regret so I mostly sit and listen to the others talking. The sadness is due to the fact that we are leaving Bodhgaya, the regret due to my judgmental and dismissive attitude toward the Mahayana sutras on Vulture Peak. I wonder if I will ever return to this wonderful place. Despite the circus-like atmosphere around the temple (or maybe because of it), the visit has made a profound impact on me. The sight of so many people from different walks of life and cultures peacefully performing their practices honoring the Buddha has really touched my heart. In a world where religion is often used to divide people and set them against each other for the benefit of the power and money elites, the atmosphere of joyful celebration at Bodhgaya shows that religion doesn't have to be divisive. Even though I had given up my desire to become a teacher, the visit to Bodhgaya has rekindled that desire, to introduce people to meditation and the Buddha's teachings.

The distance we will cover in 6 hours today probably took the Buddha two weeks on foot after he completed his practice period at Bodhgaya and decided to start teaching. He set out to Varanasi to find the five companions with whom he had practiced austerities at the Dungishwari Cave. For us, the ride will no doubt be as bumpy as it was from Patna to Bodhgaya. Fortunately, the weather is still cold and foggy, so the bus won't be stifling. I am on the bus early and in my usual seat next to the door. Charlie Marshel climbs up and sits down in the seat next to me and we end up riding to Varanasi together. Charlie is a small guy with a soft-spoken manner and a talent for listening. He works as a child psychologist, and this pilgrimage is only part of a longer trip through Asia. He has already been to Central Asia and Iran, and traveled through war-torn Afghanistan. He joined the pilgrimage at Patna because his flight was late, and promptly got sick, but by Bodhgaya he has recovered. We talk about work and practice.

"I quit my job a couple years ago and became a wandering monk," he says, "Until last fall I worked as a contractor at various institutions around England, without having a fixed home."

"Why did you do that?" I ask.

"Well, over the course of about fifteen years working as a child psychologist, I saw a change in the nature of the problems the children were encountering," he replies, "Instead of problems of relationship and circumstance; they became problems of too much affluence."

I nod.

"I attended a three month Tibetan retreat in the US and it really opened my eyes to what was going on," he continues, "I didn't know what to do. I couldn't tell their parents to stop earning so much money or give it away if they wanted to help their children."

"I guess you could have tried!" I say, laughing.

"Yes, but they wouldn't have listened to me," he replies, laughing too.

"What's next after this pilgrimage?" I ask.

"I'm planning to go to Dharamsala," he says.

"Do you want to visit with the Dali Lama?" I ask. Dharamsala is the seat of the exile Tibetan government and the Dali Lama's home town in exile, though he is often traveling.

"I want to study with some of the high lamas there, to follow up on what I learned at the retreat," he replies, "But mostly, I want to work with Tibetan children for a while. I don't expect they will have the same problems of too much affluence. I expect their problems will be more genuine."

As we leave Bodhgaya, I watch lines of elementary school kids trooping along the side the road, the boys in dark blue pants and white collared shirts, the girls in dark blue skirts and white blouses. Now that the festival of Sarasvati is over, it's back to school. We head south for a short period outside of Bodhgaya then turn west onto the Grand Trunk Road. The Grand Trunk Road is a four lane,

limited access highway, like a freeway in California. The Indians call it a "dual carriageway", a name they inherited from the British. The ride is smoother after that, though the Indians don't seem to get the concept of "limited access". Several times we meet farmers driving their carts in the opposite direction in the right lane on our side of the road. I'm reminded of what happens in California when cars end up on the wrong side of a freeway. Before they put up a median barrier on Route 17 across the Santa Cruz Mountains in the mid 1980's, wrong way drivers happened periodically, and the result was usually a spectacular collision as two objects moving at high speed in opposite directions came to a stop all at once, depositing their combined kinetic energy into the occupants.

Here, though, the appearance of a vehicle in the other lane, usually a buffalo-drawn cart, is not an unpleasant surprise but more or less expected. Consequently, our speed is limited by the need to avoid the farmers coming at us in the right lane, even though there is little other traffic. Shantum tells us a story of one particularly memorable tour he led before the dual carriageway was built. The two lane road, much like the roads we traveled to Bodhgaya, was blocked by a coal truck that had spilled its load over the road surface. They left the bus parked because an enormous traffic jam backed up on both sides of the accident, found lodging in a nearby town, and waited a day for the mess to be cleaned up.

We stop for lunch at what looks like a classic 1960's restaurant right out of the New Jersey Turnpike. During lunch I chat with Shantum about the Indian educational system.

"The government run schools in India are a sad joke," says Shantum, "The teachers often don't show up for work, and so the students really don't learn anything. Most Indians with any means send their kids to private schools."

"Is that where you have your two girls?" I ask.

Shantum nods. "Yes, they're in a private primary school in Delhi. But I'm worried about what happens when they become teenagers."

"What's the problem?" I ask.

"Well, Delhi is a big city. I'm worried that they'll get caught up in hair styles and new clothes and other materialistic stuff. Actually, I'd like to move to Dehra

Dun, in northeastern India near the Himalayan foothills."

"Oh, I know where that is!" I exclaim, "Renate and I stayed with the parents of a friend who were teaching at the Woodstock School in Mussorie when we came to India on our honeymoon in 1979."

"That's where I want to send my girls," says Shantum, "It's the oldest international boarding school in Asia, and they make an effort to teach personal responsibility and service."

"Most people in America complain about the quality of the public schools," I say, "But it's nowhere near as bad as in India. At least the teachers show up and the kids learn something."

"There are private schools in America too, and school districts that aren't as good as the one we live in," I continue, "But our friends in California send their kids to public schools and they seem to be getting a fine education. The teachers make a real effort and so naturally the kids respond."

"What about violence, like Columbine?" asks Shantum.

I frown. "You're right," I admit, "But thankfully incidents like Columbine don't happen very often. Incidents of bullying and intimidation happen far more frequently, and cause lasting harm to the kids. But most schools are now aware of the problem and have active programs to counteract bullying."

As we approach the city in the afternoon, Shantum talks about the history and culture of Varanasi. Varanasi was called Benares during the British Empire days. But it is also known by an even older name, Kashi, which means "The City of Light" because of the tradition of philosophical inquiry, religious teaching, and learning that have characterized the city for thousands of years. Varanasi is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world, and is considered the oldest in India. It was founded more than 3,000 years ago, so even in the time of the Buddha, it was old. Legend has it that the Hindu god Shiva founded the city and therefore it is sacred to Shiva. For Hindus, to die in Varanasi is to be released from *samsara* and bathing in the Ganges can wash away all sins.

Because of that Varanasi is a major Hindu pilgrimage site, especially for the terminally ill. But the city is also sacred to the Jains and the Buddhists. We are visiting to see Sarnath, a suburb where the Buddha gave his First Discourse, thereby launching his teaching career.

Xuanzang too noted Shiva's popularity in Varanasi:

> The city-wards were close together and houses being full of rare valuables... Of Deva (Hindu) temples there were about 100, and there more than 10,000 professed adherents of the sects, the majority being devotees of Siva"[55]

He also admired a 100 foot high statue of Shiva, and commented on the ascetics who wandered around with no clothing or smeared their bodies with ashes.

We cross the Ganges and pass the gigantic Varanasi Railroad Station, with a large crowd milling around in front. The houses here are larger and more solid looking than those out in the country and some even have front yards. A bit further on we pull up to the Radisson Varanasi, a much more modern hotel than the small places where we have been staying, although those hotels were the best that the small towns had to offer. After checking in, Renate and some of the other pilgrims head over to a crafts center next to the hotel to watch a silk weaving demonstration. Meanwhile, I head over to the coffee shop in the lobby and order a light chocolate pastry and a cup of decaf coffee. I sit down in the lobby to enjoy my treats, then fire up my cell phone, check email and browse the Web, my mind easily embedding itself back into work and friends at home, until Renate returns. Later in the evening, we eat dinner in the hotel's Indian restaurant, an excellent mixed tandoori grill, brought in incrementally by the waiters as it is cooked. At strucks that night, nothing particularly new comes up. We break from strucks early and head up to bed.

Day 9 -The Ganges and Sarnath

Shantum has planned an early morning trip to the Ganges today, so we head off by bus in the dark at 5:45 AM. The bus parks about a 10-minute walk from the river giving us an opportunity to stroll through the old quarter of the city behind the burning platforms where cremations take place, called *ghats*, which line the river bank. It's another cold and foggy morning, and the buildings and houses are shrouded in fog as we walk down the street to the river. A few isolated street lamps illuminate the fog in globes of fuzzy luminescence but don't cast much light onto the streets - for that we use our flashlights. We slowly accrete a shell of vendors as we approach the bank. But it's early and even those who try to sell us stuff don't have much enthusiasm. We arrive at a marina filled with large, flat-bottomed boats. In each boat, an oarsman stands in the bow awaiting tourists or perhaps Hindu pilgrims. Once everyone is seated in the boat (without a life jacket, which would have been obligatory in any Western country - guess no one worries about liability here), a young woman hands each of us a small flower offering with a candle in it.

We cast off from the quay, the oarsman pulling on the oars to propel us upriver against the current. I light my candle from a lighter produced by Shantum, and gently place my offering into the river, as do the rest of the pilgrims. The candles and flowers are an offering to the river goddess, Ganga, of Hindu mythology. Shantum tells us to make a wish. My wish is for civilization to finally solve its problem with carbon-based energy, so we don't end up cooking the planet. The offerings float out behind the boat, tiny specks of light in the foggy damp, until they eventually capsize due to some small wave. The cold fog lends a spooky atmosphere to the trip as we row up the river. I can hear sounds from the river bank - talking, music, chanting - but the activity generating the sounds is only occasionally visible. I see a man wearing briefs standing in the shallows splashing water over himself in a ritual bath. I notice the yellow glow of a cremation fire lighting up the fog.

After cruising upriver for a while, the oarsman turns the boat, pulls in his oars, and we drift back down stream. Two boats filled with vendors attach themselves to our sides like limpets. For a while, my fellow pilgrims seem to be taking in the morning and only occasionally glancing at the vendors' wares. But Pam

becomes interested in something and makes a purchase. This provokes a frenzy from the vendors: waving cheap toys in our faces, calling out to get our attention, gesticulating, and so on. The mysterious atmosphere is shattered. I feel as if I'm looking at my email account in a Web browser and there's a dancing dog in my peripheral vision, advertising cheap mortgages or discount car insurance. Except the dancing dog keeps moving so it is exactly in the center of where I'm trying to view this Varanasi morning. All hopes of contemplating the mystery of life and my place in the universe are lost. I don't understand why they can't figure out some way to sell to us that is more tasteful and respectful of our experience. I try to ignore the vendors, as my fellow pilgrims continue to feed the commercial frenzy with further purchases.

Just before we land, we see a large group of women doing ritual bathing in a sheltered area behind some boats. Their jewel-colored saris, the colors somewhat muted to pastel by the mist, cling to their bodies as they dump water over their heads. By now, the darkness has receded and the outlines of buildings and streets are visible. Back on land, another small crowd of vendors gathers around us, but instead of shoving stuff into our faces, they try to chat us up about their wares. Shantum asks if anybody has to use the bathroom, and I do. One of the vendors leads me away, past huge piles of logs for the cremations. I become a bit anxious that this guy is leading me astray, but the bathroom appears eventually, and I step in. It is totally filthy but I manage to use it without touching anything except the soles of my shoes to the ground. An attendant outside the door puts his hand out looking for a small baksheesh in exchange for the convenience of my not having to pee in the street, and my vendor-guide says I should give him 10 rupees. It seems a small price to pay.

On the way back to the group, my vendor-guide tries to sell me *bindis*, the small dots that Indian woman wear in the middle of their foreheads, but I've got little use for them. It puzzles me that he would even ask since I'm not female. As we approach the group, I offer him a small rupee note for his help, but, glancing quickly at Shantum, he declines. Shantum later tells me that the vendors were all known to him personally, and the guy who helped me probably declined because Shantum had told them not to shake us down too hard.

A cremation is just about to start. One of the young men hanging around the ghat, maybe the head cremation attendant, invites us to watch. The attendant

leads us up some stairs through a brick arch into a small open area with a view of the river. The corpse, bound in a cloth wrapping, has been laid out on a bed of fire wood and covered with wood. The attendant cautions us not to take any pictures. The family members are gathered around the funeral pyre and they empty ghee (clarified butter) and something that looks like sawdust on the body. The family members all seem quite calm about the departure of their loved one. No one is crying or expressing grief in any other way. A member of the Dom untouchable caste lights a ceremonial bundle of grass from a match, and uses the burning grass bundle to light the funeral pyre.

Sue becomes so fascinated by the cremation that she moves closer to the body and steps onto the ashes of the previous cremation. She fails to notice that the ashes are still hot, and soon the soles of her tennis shoes and the bottoms of her pants begin to smoke and melt.

"Sue!" Gary shouts, "Your shoes are on fire! Get out of there!"

Sue looks down at her shoes then quickly hurries away from the fire onto the brick surface of the ghat platform. She stamps a few times to put out the fire, but it is too late for the shoes.

"They're ruined!" Sue mumbles, turning her feet back and forth to check out the damage.

Renate walks over to Sue.

"I've got an extra pair," she says, "We look like we're about the same size. You can borrow them."

Sue looks up. "Don't worry about it," she replies, "I always bring an extra pair too but they aren't as nice as these. I mean, our son runs a shoe store after all." She laughs.

One of the young guys hanging around the cremation solicits me for money, ostensibly to support a home where poor people come to die. I politely decline, as do all of my fellow pilgrims who are also solicited. Though the solicitation is done quietly, such crass commercialism at a somber occasion like a cremation

seems even too much for my fellow pilgrims. Shantum later tells us that this is a scam, and, had we given money, it would certainly have gone directly into the pocket of the tout who had solicited it.

I watch the pyre to see if I can spot the flames consuming the body, but there is so much wood and cloth in the way that I can't see anything of the corpse. The yellow flames leap up from the grass and kindling around the body and catch on the ghee, sending smoke into the air. Then the cloth wrappings catch, smoke billows off the pyre, and the wood starts burning. The pilgrims rearrange themselves so they are upwind of the smoke.

I'm comparing this cremation to one I saw in Bali 5 years ago. The Balinese are also Hindu and cremate their dead in coffins shaped like animals, elevated ten feet in the air by stilts. They ignite the coffin with a large propane torch, like a flame thrower, and the coffin and contents burn through until the charred remains of the deceased come tumbling down in a mixture of bones and glowing coals. The Balinese cremation was more show, but that's pretty much true of their funerals and practically everything about the Balinese. While intensely spiritual, their devotion expresses itself in art, and especially, performance art. The Indian cremation, in contrast, is more subdued, and, with the exception of the tout and of course us watching, more like a funeral in the West. We watch the cremation for about half an hour or so. Shantum tells us that it takes about three hours for a body to be completely consumed, so I head back out through the arch with a few of the other pilgrims who have seen enough. We begin the climb up from the river bank into the old quarter, surrounded by our halo of friendly vendors.

We climb uphill away from the river through a narrow, winding alley of the old quarter. Life is returning to the city as the dim, foggy morning brightens, and we see a woman in a bright green sari carrying an aluminum pan filled with vegetables, children peeking out at the parade of foreigners, and a placid cow. We pass a guy with his face smeared in white like zinc oxide sunscreen, long dreadlocked hair, dressed in a kind of robe seated on a wall. It is a *sadhu*[56], but of a particular kind - the photo *sadhu* there for picture-taking tourists such as ourselves. Pam stops and takes a few pictures, then leaves a small donation. Whether the guy has any spiritual practice at all is uncertain.

I glance down a side street and see a large gray building with soldiers holding rifles standing near the entrance. I wonder what exactly *that* is all about, the building doesn't look like a government building and this isn't a part of the city where I would expect to find one anyway. Later, I ask Shantum and he tells me that the building is a mosque. It was built during Muslim rule on the ruins of an important Hindu temple which was torn down to make space for it. In a similar case, the Babri Mosque in the city of Ayodhya was built on the site of a temple to the Hindu god Rama that was razed by Babur, the first Mughal emperor, in 1527. In 1992, an angry mob of 150,000 Hindu fundamentalists stormed the Babri Mosque and tore it down in revenge. The ensuing communal violence killed 2000 people in several major Indian cities. This mosque in Varanasi and another one in another city have a similar fraught history to the Babri Mosque, and the Indian government has provided the soldiers to deter a similar incident from developing here.

When we reach the bus, the vendor situation escalates. Up until now, we have had our halo of friendly vendors, obviously known to Shantum, but between us and the door of the bus is a large crowd of vendors with all manner of goods to sell. Silently, they open a path to the door for us. I keep my head down and look straight ahead, but various stuff occasionally pops into view as one of the vendors thrusts his wares into my face. I'm pretty comfortable ignoring the stuff and them, which causes them to simply ignore me. But one look or word in their direction, even if it is "no thanks" is like gasoline on a fire. They take it as a signal that you are interested in what they have for sale and they pursue you back to the bus. Some of my fellow pilgrims can't seem to resist checking out the wares or saying something, though nobody seems to be buying.

Once everyone is on the bus, Shantum arranges a kind of fixed price auction. The vendors at the door give their goods to Jagdish, who plays the auctioneer. He holds the item up so everyone can see it and calls the price. Someone who wants the item then sends the money to the front of the bus and Jagdish passes the item back. With everyone needing souvenirs for friends and family, business is brisk. My seat right next to the door gives me a good vantage point to watch the proceedings. After about half an hour, Shantum declares that we need to depart, and the driver tries to close the door. A couple vendors are still hanging on, but they drop off as the bus starts moving. As we pull out, a trail of vendors runs after the bus.

Back at the hotel, we have breakfast in the hotel's Western style restaurant. The restaurant leads me to anticipate a good Western breakfast, maybe toast, parfait, and a boiled egg, but the food is still largely Indian, though not too greasy or spicy. After breakfast we leave for the ruins of the monastery at Sarnath, which was built in the Deer Park where the Buddha gave his first two teachings. In the Buddha's time, Sarnath was called Isipatana, which meant something like "place where the spiritual seekers hang out." Our route leads across the New Varuna Bridge, a two span structure crossing the Varuna River slightly east of the Radisson. Like the Ganges, the Varuna River is an open sewer. Plans to clean up both rivers have been made over the years but a combination of politics, India's population growth rate, and lack of money have conspired to thwart any real progress. Recently, though, the effort seems to have picked up speed and the local government in Uttar Pradesh, the state in which Varanasi is located, has re-committed to doing something about the problem.

In the park district of Sarnath, we bear right onto Dharmpal Road, and loop around toward the archeological sites. The bus grinds to a halt near a small fenced park where the Archeological Survey of India has excavated the ruins of the monastery complex. A crowd of vendors assembles around the door of the bus as we pull up. Like Moses parting the Red Sea, Shantum and Jagdish lean out the bus door, speak a few words with the vendors, and they clear a path to let us depart. The routine is the same as in the morning: eyes down and ahead, ignore objects thrust into the field of vision, avoid visual or voice contact. Everybody seems to make it OK, but, again, some of my fellow pilgrims get interested in the objects for sale and acquire a trailing vendor. The whole scene feels kind of creepy and threatening.

Once Shantum pays admission for us, we enter the iron fence and gladly leave the crowd behind. The park is almost deserted. The fog has lifted and the day has become sunny and fine, though not hot. The monastery complex is mostly just foundations, but in Xuanzang's time, Sarnath was the site of a thriving monastery with 1,500 monks. Xuanzang writes that the monastery was connected at the four corners by galleries with high turrets, like those at the university in Nalanda. He describes a pyramid-shaped temple, called the Original Hall of Fragrance, which housed a large metal image of the Buddha preaching his first sermon. He estimated that the Original Hall of Fragrance was about 200 feet high topped by a golden mango fruit. Today, a set of massive walls called the Main Shrine is thought by some scholars to be foundations of the Original Hall

of Fragrance.[57]

One stupa still remains standing off in the east corner of the park among the ruins. The Dhamek Stupa is an impressive brick structure. The Tibetans have draped *katas* high up on its sides. They must have wound the kata around a rock threw it onto the structure. We complete the traditional three circumambulations. On the last round, I notice that some vendors have moved over to the iron fence that separates the park from the nearby Jain temple. They are reaching through the fence with their wares and waving them about. Another vendor, having paid the entrance fee, stands next to the path. He has some relatively high quality buddhas for sale. Not satisfied with her shopping expedition on the river in the morning, Pam checks out the wares and makes a purchase.

When everyone has completed their circumambulations, we walk over to a nice sunny spot, spread out our mats and sit down in the grass, or for some on the nearby wall, for a teaching. A group of Indian teenagers visiting the Deer Park sees us and sits down a short distance away. Shantum exchanges a few words of Hindi with them, saying that they are welcome to listen quietly to "guruji". After a short meditation, Stephen launches into a teaching on the Buddha's First Discourse *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta*[58] the *Turning of the Wheel of Dharma*, which he gave to the five ascetics here in the Deer Park. In the First Discourse, the Buddha describes what he learned from his practice period in Bodhgaya, after he gave up ascetic practice, which he summarized as the Four Noble Truths.

*

From the sutta, the Buddha lists the Four:

> "This is suffering: birth is painful, ageing is painful, sickness is painful, death is painful, encountering what is not dear is painful, separation from what is dear is painful, not getting what one wants is painful. This psycho-physical condition is painful."
>
> "This is craving: craving is repetitive; it wallows in attachment and greed, obsessively indulging in this and that: craving for stimulation, craving for existence, craving for nonexistence."
>
> "This is cessation: the traceless fading away and cessation of that craving, the letting go and abandoning of it, freedom and independence from it."

> "And this is the path: the path with eight branches: appropriate seeing, thinking, talking, acting, working, trying, recollecting, concentrating."[59]

The Four are traditionally taught in a sort of backwardly causal fashion: that the second truth, clinging, is the cause of the first, suffering, and that the fourth, the Eightfold Path, is the cause of the second, the end of suffering. But this sequence is rather awkward. Descriptions of cause-effect usually state the cause before the effect, not afterwards.

The traditional interpretation was probably advanced as canonical after the Buddha's death to reinforce a metaphysical interpretation of the Four, involving karma and rebirth. The traditional interpretation is that clinging causes suffering because we accumulate unwholesome karma from which we reap the fruits in this life or the next. Similarly, the Path as the cause of liberation reinforces a metaphysical interpretation of enlightenment, that there is some metaphysical change which occurs by following the Path which causes all suffering to disappear. The traditional Theravadan interpretation is that the Path leads to stream entry (*sotapanna*) which is a kind of nonlinear change in consciousness, then ultimately to arhathood, after which one is not reborn.

From a practical standpoint, however, it is difficult to see how craving can cause physical suffering. Coming down with malaria or sustaining a painful injury in an automobile accident has nothing to do with craving. We don't crave the mosquito biting us or the whiplash, though of course our reaction to these kinds of unfortunate events can lead to craving and clinging. A more logical order for the Truths is exactly as they are set down:

> Suffering exists as an irredeemable, undeniable fact of a universe that takes no notice of our efforts to protect and cultivate our sense of a permanent and eternal self.
>
> Our response to this fact is to crave the pleasant events, sensations, thoughts and reject the unpleasant in an effort to protect our self view. This craving then leads to more suffering as our desires and aversions are not satisfied by the random evolution of the universe, and the suffering propagates out into our relations with others and with our environment.
>
> We can liberate ourselves by dropping craving and its negative counterpart,

> aversion, so that rather than hanging on to the pleasant and turning away from the unpleasant, we witness the arising and falling of the pleasant and unpleasant with equanimity.
>
> The absence of craving and aversion opens a space for a different outcome, a different approach to life that does not rank protection and cultivation of our self view as the top priority. The Path encodes that approach.

The touch point between the Four Noble Truths and the Twelve Links of conditioned arising is in the first link, ignorance. Our ignorance of the Four is what fuels the conditioned arising sequence. Again, the ignorance spoken of in the Links is not a cognitive ignorance, but a deep seated mental habit that evolved as a perversion of the basic self-preservation instinct which all animals have. The steps on the Eightfold Path are guidelines for living a life that is not dominated by the need to polish and protect that self-view. These steps are traditionally translated as right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration[60]. But using the word "right" in this context implies that there is a "wrong", and the implication in the traditional Theravadan teaching is that, for example, right view is "accepting the metaphysical Theravadan view of karma and rebirth" and wrong view is not accepting that view. A better way drops the judgmentalism, calling the steps "appropriate" and "inappropriate", in other words, an appropriate view for following the Path. The Path then becomes a guide for making wise choices in how to live our lives.

Most contemporary teachers simply stop there and leave the Four Noble Truths and Eightfold Path as the preeminent representatives of the many lists in the Pali Canon. But in the First Discourse, the Buddha in fact is not talking about some abstract concept. He includes at the end of the *Dhammacakkappavattana Sutta* a list of three actions to take with respect to each Truth:

> Recognize the Truth in one's own experience,
>
> Investigate the Truth,
>
> Know when the investigation is complete and one is able to say that one understands it thoroughly.

With these actions, the Buddha clearly intended the Four to be a guide for

practice, and not the justification for a metaphysical belief system.

*

After the talk we walk around the Deer Park and view the remains of the large monastic complex that once occupied the grounds. A few tame deer graze on the far side of the park, smaller and with shorter ears than our mule deer at home in California. We walk around the foundations of the monasteries, and view an Ashokan pillar, now broken. The pillar is inscribed in an early script with an injunction against causing schism in the Sangha. When Xuanzang visited more than 1300 years ago, the pillar was complete, with the lion capital, now in the Archeological Museum across the street from the park, still intact on the top. He described it "as bright as jade. It is glistening and sparkles like light."[61]

The pillar is surrounded by a fence, and I lean against the fence to better view the column. A bee or stinging fly lands on my neck, and I feel a sharp pain from a bite or sting. I brush off the bee, but Shantum, who is standing next to me, in a kind of visceral reaction moves to step on it. I begin to say something to stop him, but he is moving too quickly and the insect is crushed. I say an "Om mani padme hum!" silently to myself and wish the bee well in further wayfaring though *samsara*.

At lunch today, I am decidedly not hungry, so I eat almost nothing. In contrast to the usual traveler's medical complaints in India, I'm completely constipated, probably because I'm limited in the amount of water I can drink by the lack of a toilet on the bus and the need to get all my water from bottles. We spend some time hanging out in the restaurant chatting. Steve Wachinsky has smeared his face with sunblock, and I observe that he looks like the photo *sadhu* we saw on the way up from the ghats in the morning. Everybody laughs and Steve strikes a *sadhu*-like pose for a picture.

At the Archeological Museum in the late afternoon, we're welcomed by the famous lion capital from the Ashokan pillar we saw earlier in the park. The capital is carved from pink sandstone and is polished to a high gloss. The carvings consist of four Indian lions back to back, mounted on an abacus with a frieze displaying an elephant, a galloping horse, a bull, and a lion, separated by spoked chariot-wheels. The abacus rests on a bell-shaped lotus flower. The lions once held a Wheel of Dharma, but that was destroyed when the pillar collapsed. The capital, minus the missing Wheel of Dharma and the bell lotus, is the

national emblem of India and is found, for example, on the Indian passport, and the Wheel of Dharma itself is in the center of the Indian flag. This is actually kind of ironic: the major national symbols of India are from a religion that was wiped out indigenously by Hindu and Muslim opponents over 500 years ago, though it has since been reintroduced. One would have thought they would use something like a combination of a Muslim crescent moon and a Shiva Nataraja[62], though, I suppose given the amount of communal violence between Hindus and Muslims, picking symbols from a religion that was long extinct was probably less likely to cause tension.

In contrast to the other local museums we have visited, this one is well-lighted, though the explanatory text is sparse as usual and there are no wall charts to orient the viewer to the time and place when the various pieces were produced, as many Western museums have. The museum has an outstanding collection of Maurya and Gupta period sculpture and other pieces, primarily Buddhist. The quality of the work is quite high, especially on the oldest pieces. The faces have lifelike features and the poses are lively. Backgrounds of plants or animals are finely carved and recognizable. In contrast, the newer pieces from around the 12th century are all Hindu, and the craftsmanship is considerably less impressive. Features are less well defined, and the postures are somehow wooden and lifeless.

Near the end of one hallway is the world famous Sarnath Buddha, a stunning Gupta period statue. The statue depicts the Buddha giving the First Discourse, and was discovered in 1904 near the ruined Dharmarajika Stupa in Deer Park. The Buddha holds his hands in the teaching pose: both hands in front of his chest, the right hand palm forward, the left middle finger pointing to the right palm. Behind his head is a halo with intertwining vines, and two devas sport in the upper left and right hand corners of the halo.

As the statute comes into view, I stop and gaze at it in wonder. The Buddha's eyes are closed, the mouth is set in a half smile, and the face radiates calm. The upright posture of the body lends an impression of energetic yet composed attention, exactly the kind of mind state one needs for meditation. This statue clearly stems from the high point of Buddhist culture in India, and represents, in one condensed artistic form, all the qualities that were prized by that culture. When Xuanzang visited Sarnath in the 630's, he arranged to have a sandalwood replica made of the Sarnath Buddha, the fourth of the seven statues that he

carried back to China.[63]

When we leave the museum, the light is beginning to fade and the vendors have dispersed. On Kachihari Road in the dark, we fall into another traffic jam like the one on the way to Bodhgaya, and it is caused by exactly the same problem: somebody driving on the wrong side of the road has ended up face to face with another vehicle. This time, though, the offending vehicle is carrying a government minister. As we creep forward, Charlie Marshel decides he can probably make better progress on foot, so he jumps out the bus door and takes off running through the cars down Kachihari Road in the general direction of the hotel. As we creep forward, we occasionally see Charlie weaving through the cars. The traffic eventually thins out. On the other side of the jam, we start to make better progress. Eventually we catch up with Charlie. The driver stops and Charlie jumps back into the bus.

Dinner that night is not in the tandoori restaurant but in the hotel's Western restaurant where we had breakfast. The food is adequate but not as tasty as the tandoori from the night before. After dinner, we gather for strucks in a small lounge on the second floor of the hotel. The group is smaller than previous nights. Many people are skipping strucks because they are tired from the early start and the long, intensive day. An Indian family staying at the hotel for a wedding also joins us in the lounge, but their children are loud, one is crying. We have difficulty hearing each other talk over the noise of the children and the voices of parents disciplining them. Renate and I head up to bed after strucks is finished.

Day 10 - Varanasi to Kushinagar

Renate and I are having an argument before breakfast about what we will do in Delhi. As usual, we're arguing in German, which gives Renate a distinct advantage because she's a native speaker and I'm not, so she is quicker with a retort. But, on the other hand, she's not as skilled in rhetoric as I am, since I was a member of the debate club in high school, so we are about evenly matched. We had discussed hiring a car in Delhi before our flight leaves, seeing some sights, and going to the crafts museum, which has exhibits from the various states in India and small shops where the craftspeople sell their wares directly to visitors.

"But what happens if we get stuck in a traffic jam on the way to the airport and miss the plane?" I say, pleading with her, "Let's just go to the airport and hang out for the day. We can read or take a nap."

"For 12 hours?" she says disbelievingly, "There's no way I'm going to hang out in the airport for 12 hours!"

"And besides," she continues, "I haven't bought any souvenirs or anything on the trip up until now because I've been waiting until we visit the crafts mart in Delhi. We don't have to pay such a hefty markup and we can support the crafts people directly rather than let the merchants exploit them."

We argue for a while in a low key manner as we usually do. But as we head down for breakfast I have to admit that my fear of missing the flight, a constant source of worry for me when traveling by air, should not prevent us from doing some sightseeing. The problem is that I am not feeling well. I'm constipated from not drinking enough water, the greasy food, and sitting around in the bus all day. At breakfast, I eat foods with a lot of bulk in them, no grease, and a quarter plate of cooked figs hoping for relief.

After breakfast as we sit in the bus waiting to leave, people are talking about their plans. In Lucknow, we will split into two groups. One group will travel on by train to the Taj Mahal and the Ajanta and Ellora caves - two early Buddhist rock cut monasteries with beautiful sculptures and paintings in the vicinity of

Mumbai - before heading home. The other group will travel by airplane directly to Delhi and then home. We are in the second group since we both have to return to work.

Our destination today is Kushinagar, the small village where the Buddha died. Once outside Varanasi, the road is, if anything, even worse than on the way to Bodhgaya. In some spots, the road surface has deteriorated so badly that for miles the paving has become chunks of asphalt surrounded by gravel. The terrible condition of the road is not a deterrent to traffic however. The volume of traffic is about the same as before, mostly large trucks decorated in the typical gaudy colors favored by the Indian truck drivers. We cross the green-brown Gomati River, shrunken now in the dry season, on a solidly built bridge, wending our way north by northeast.

I spend most of the day staring out the window at the table-flat Ganges plain, occasionally listening to the iPod. The landscape is dominated by dusty fields interspersed with small woodlots, and packed with people and villages. From my travels in northern Nepal and Japan, I associate Buddhism with mountainous landscapes: wild forests topped with snow-capped peaks, mountain brooks rushing through canyons, old trees covered in lichen, in other words, a scenic landscape, and not this flat, dusty agricultural plain. In Xuanzang's time, the route between Kushinagar and Varanasi was densely forested, and the forest was filled with wild oxen, elephants, and bandits. If Xuanzang's reports are accurate, the landscape back then was wilder, more like the landscapes of rural Nepal and Japan even though the land was flat then as now. Today the inexorable crush of India's exploding population has left little room for wilderness.

The landscape reminds me of the Central Valley of California: flat and agricultural. There are, of course, big differences from the Central Valley, the road for one. It is as if all the traffic on I-5 in the Central Valley has been squeezed onto one small two lane farm road in terrible condition. And there are far more people here than in California. Many people here live out their lives on the streets and in the fields, not in concrete and steel buildings, cars, or otherwise isolated from their environment as in the Central Valley. Farming in the Central Valley is done with huge machines. Here some farmers have small tractors but many use a water buffalo and a plow. More of the natural ecosystem is preserved in the Central Valley, parks and reserves like Great Grasslands State Park or the San Joaquin National Wildlife Refuge. Here, they do not have the luxury of

reserving land for wild ecosystems, with 1.6 billion mouths to feed, and growing. This region is the rice bowl of India.

In late morning, we enter the outskirts of the city of Azamgarh and the traffic slows as more cars and three wheeled tuk-tuks clog the road. We stop for lunch at an Indian roadhouse but the food turns out to be too greasy for my stomach, so I don't eat anything. I crave a salad bar but fresh veggies are out of the question here, too much danger of microbial contamination.

In the afternoon, I move to a seat across the aisle next to Stephen. We talk about his theory, explained in *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, that the Buddha spent his young adulthood at Taxila studying. Taxila is a city in present day Pakistan, which at the time was an outpost of the Persian Empire. The Persian Empire was the superpower of its day, and Taxila had a large university at which many of the Buddha's contemporaries studied.

"What makes you think that?" I ask somewhat skeptically.

"It's explained in an appendix to my new book," he replies, "But briefly, the main evidence is that Siddhartha Gotama married and had his first child quite late, when he was 28. In India even today, most people who don't receive professional training marry in their late teens and have children right away. With lifespans so much shorter in ancient India, the pressure to marry in the mid to late teens and have a child was probably even stronger. Siddhartha's life is more consistent with the life of a young man who goes away to college to receive training as an administrator. Siddhartha was probably expected to take over his father's position as the head of the village when his Suddhodana retired. So Suddhodana would probably have wanted Siddhartha to receive professional training."

"Hmm, OK," I say, noncommittal, "Anything else?"

"There are other clues in the Pali Canon," Stephen says, "For example, in *The City*,[64] the Buddha describes an ancient city rediscovered by wanderers. In the vicinity of Taxila are ruins of Bronze Age cities from the Harappan civilization. The Harappans emerged in the Indus Valley around 2600 BC and developed an as-yet undecoded writing system, but, by the Buddha's time, their cities were

already in ruins. It's possible that the Buddha came across the ruins of a Harappan city during a hunting expedition with his friends while he was studying at Taxila, and that the sight of these once thriving cities, now completely destroyed, made a profound impression on him. In *The City*, he uses the revival of such a city as a metaphor for his teaching. Nothing like the Harappan ruins existed in the Ganges Valley."

"The Buddha also refers to the Greeks in the *Assalyana Sutta*[65]," Stephen continues, "Calling them 'Yona', a Pali form for 'Ionia', which was a name for the Greeks who lived in Asia Minor. Many Greeks lived in Taxila at the time of the Buddha, so if he had gone to Taxila, he would likely have met them. And the figure of Mara, the Buddhist devil-trickster, who appears periodically throughout the Pali Canon, is also quite striking. Mara is always trying to trick the Buddha into betraying what the Buddha discovered through his enlightenment. Mara is unlike any other allegorical figure in the Indian philosophical tradition. Siddhartha Gotama might have picked up this idea from the Persians, who had such a trickster personification of evil in Zoroastrianism."

"These are all strands of the Buddha's thought that seem unlikely to have arisen in the context of a young man growing up in what was then, as today, a largely rural, isolated village such as Kapilavastu," Stephen concludes, "Even though the great Northern Road ran through Kapilavastu, the travelers on the road were by and large merchants with more commercial interests, and therefore would not have had an inclination toward this kind of intellectual thinking."

"OK, I think you have a point," I admit, "The idea that the Buddha picked up these ideas from Persia, Greece, and other places before returning to Kapilavastu seems somewhat speculative to me but certainly plausible. Ideas are pretty portable, even though the merchants were basically interested primarily in business. Though I do think that his life history of marrying late is a bit more definitive as evidence. That pattern was certainly unusual for the time."

At sunset, the sun disappears into a thick fog which settles over the landscape like a blanket. The tempo of the traffic drops significantly. Driving has become extremely dangerous. Head on collisions are not unknown as motorists and truck drivers jockey for advantage. But our driver is skillful, and manages to negotiate a path around the trucks that have simply stopped in the middle of the road

because of the severely reduced visibility. We arrive at our hotel, the Lotus Nikko, shortly after 8. In gratitude for our safe delivery, the pilgrims break into applause. The Lotus Nikko is a hotel for Japanese pilgrims and we have a meal of Indian-Japanese food, somewhat more strongly spiced than was the case in Rajgir. I eat heartily since I am hungry after skipping lunch. After dinner, Renate and I head off to our room without attending the usual strucks.

Day 11 - Kushinagar

At breakfast, Shantum announces the plan for today, and for the end of the pilgrimage. After breakfast, we will go to the Makutabandhana Stupa (also called the Ramabhar Stupa) where the Buddha was cremated. After lunch, we will go to the Mahaparanirvana Temple where the Buddha died. In the late afternoon, we will drive to Kapilavastu, where the Buddha spent his childhood and young adulthood. However, we will not visit Lumbini, where the Buddha was born, because it is in Nepal and our visas won't allow us to leave India and reenter. There is not much of interest at Lumbini anyway, just an Ashokan pillar, according to Stephen. At a closing ceremony 3 days from now in Sravasti in Jetta's Grove, we will be given the opportunity to take the 5 Mindfulness Trainings. He encourages us each to compose a poem describing our experiences on the pilgrimage, to read aloud at the closing ceremony.

The Makutabandhana Stupa is barely a five minute bus ride from the Lotus Nikko. The stupa is a brick mound draped with a few Tibetan *katas*, surrounded by foundations of ruined monasteries and temples. We do three circumambulations in walking meditation. Two Thai groups are here with us, led by monks with amplifiers, though they are not chanting at the moment. A few Tibetans light candles and incense in front of the stupa. In the cold foggy morning, everyone is quiet, moved by the experience of walking where the Buddha was cremated. Our group shuffles off to one side away from the traffic around the stupa, so Stephen can give a short talk about the importance of this place in the Buddha's story, returning to the thread from the *Mahaparanibbana Sutta* where he left off in Rajgir.

When the Buddha died, he had very few family members left. With the exception of Ananda, the Buddha's cousin and faithful attendant for many years, the Buddha's family had been exterminated by the ethnic cleansing of the Shakyan tribe. The ethnic cleansing was perpetrated by King Vidudabha of Kosala in retaliation for a trick the Shakyans had played on Vidudabha's father, King Pasenadi, many years before. Pasenadi had requested that the Shakyans nominate a woman to be his wife. But the Shakyans tricking him by offering him the daughter of a slave girl. The slave girl then became Vidudabha's mother so Vidudabha was the son of a slave. When Vidudabha found out about the trick

many years later, he became enraged and vowed to exterminate the Shakyan tribe from the face of the earth. Vidudabha ignored the Buddha's exhortations not to retaliate and executed a campaign of ethnic cleansing against the Shakyans.

The monks who traveled with the Buddha to Kushinagar didn't know what to do with his body. The Buddha had rejected the Brahmanical religion with all its rituals, including the rituals around death. The monks took his body to the Makutabandhana Shrine, a shrine of the Mallas, the local tribe. There they set up a funeral bier. Just before the Buddha died, Mahakasyapa, who was not in the final entourage, received notice that the Buddha was ill, and sent back a request that the cremation not take place until he had a chance to pay his last respects. Mahakasyapa and his group hurried to Kushinagar and the cremation went forward when Mahakasyapa's group arrived.

On the way back to the bus, Renate and I discuss Stephen's talk.

"I felt the talk was very moving," she says, "because he said that the Buddha still made mistakes even after his enlightenment."

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Well, if the Buddha had told the king that his wife was a slave girl, maybe the Shakyans wouldn't have been wiped out," she replied.

"It kind of puts a different perspective on the Tibetan claims that the Buddha was omniscient," I say nodding.

"Right," she says, "And the whole story about how he went to investigate what happened to his people makes him so human. He could be a person today from some area of conflict, like a Rwandan Tutsi man returning to his home after the genocide in 1994. He wasn't distant and remote. "

We return briefly to the hotel for a Japanese-Indian lunch. After lunch, we visit the Mahaparanirvana Temple. Within a grassy fenced park, a stupa and a one-roomed temple are situated on a brick platform raised around 15 feet above the ground, surrounded by the foundations of a ruined monastery. The temple was

built in the 1950's and looks as if it is made of reinforced concrete. The stupa is behind the temple and is coated in stucco. Both the temple and the stupa are whitewashed. This is far different from when Xuanzang visited in 637. A large brick temple graced the grove and the area around the temple was wooded with sal trees, four of which were reputed to be the trees under which the Buddha passed away.[66]

By now the sun has come out and the park is bright and warm. Both the temple and the stupa glow in the sunlight. We climb up the stairs into the cool but well lit temple. Before us is a spectacular, 10 foot long Gupta-period statue of the Buddha in a reclining pose lying on his right side as he died, covered in a glittering gold cloth. Around the base are small carvings of the monks in his entourage, some weeping and tearing at their heads, and others, like Anuruddha, calmly seated in meditation. It is easy to imagine what the scene must have been like, and how poignantly the end of his life summed up one of the Buddha's most fundamental teachings: *anicca*, impermanence, everything that arises must pass away. In one sense, his death was the Buddha's final teaching to his monks and the world.

We disperse around the outer margin of the temple room and spread out our mats and cushions, taking our seats for meditation. During most of the meditation periods on this trip, my mind has slipped on and off the breath, occasionally settling down for a short period, but this time, my mind hones in on the breath almost immediately and stays there. A sense of deep calm pervades, and my mind is at peace. There is no energetic feeling, just calm and peace. After the half hour is over, I open my eyes and my mind is completely clear.

Kevin reads a short sutra on happiness; then we rise and spend some time examining the statue. Shantum asks a couple of Indian guys hanging around to remove the gold cloth so we can get a closer look, which they do, for a small donation. Some people take pictures. When everyone is done viewing the statue, we head out of the temple, down the stairs, and into the ruins of the monastery. Stephen and Shantum find a place where some of the older pilgrims can sit on walls, and we spread our mats and take a seat for a teaching. Stephen talks about conditioned arising and the nature of consciousness.

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From a modern Western standpoint, the Buddha's formulation of conditioned

arising may seem self-evident. We don't today expect events to happen without a cause, even if the cause may sometimes be hidden from us or unknown. In the Buddha's time, however, conditioned arising was quite revolutionary. The myth of creation told by the majority Brahmanical religion related that the world originated without a cause. Causality was, therefore, not a given in 5th century BC India. There is, however, one area where we often tend to deny our total dependence on conditions, and that is in our ingrained view that our sense of self is permanent.

The sense that some part of us is unchanging and will survive our physical death is deeply ingrained. We normally don't see it in operation because it is so deeply embedded in our psyche. The Twelve Links outline the operation of that process. They describe how our psychology tries to protect and enhance our sense of a permanent self, even though the process is doomed to fail. We unconsciously react in a way that attempts to transcend conditionality, impermanence and suffering. This reaction then causes us to become alienated from the flux of life, from the ceaseless flow of sensation, thought, and awareness that is constantly available to us. We cling to the sense of self for security and thereby try to attain a sense of permanence in a sea of impermanence. But when conditions change so that our self feels threatened, even just a little, we experience a sense of dissatisfaction or suffering. Boredom and restlessness arise when whatever is happening in the present moment doesn't feed our need for stimulation. The sense of self is greedy, we constantly want more, but more never satisfies us.

If asked to reflect on what in our body and mind constitutes this permanent self, most of us would reply that it is our consciousness. In the *Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta*[67] "The Greater Discourse on the Destruction of Craving", the Buddha addresses this point. He asks Sati, the fisherman's son, what Dharma is. Sati replies, "As I understand the dhamma, as taught by the Buddha, it is this same consciousness that runs and wanders through the realms of rebirth—not another." The Buddha asks, "But, what is this consciousness, Sati?" To which the Sati replies, "It is that which speaks, feels, and experiences here and there, as a result of bad actions." In other words, our consciousness is permanent and eternal, and survives our death to be reborn into another life.

The Buddha then chastises Sati and gives a lesson to the other monks:

> Misguided man, to whom have you ever known me to teach the dhamma in

> that way? Misguided man, in many discourses, have I not stated consciousness to be dependently arisen since without a condition, there is no origination of consciousness? ... Bhikkhus, consciousness is reckoned by the particular condition dependent upon which it arises. When consciousness arises dependent on eye and forms, it is reckoned as eye-consciousness. When consciousness arises dependent on ears and sounds, it is reckoned as ear-consciousness ... Just as fire is reckoned by the particular condition dependent on which it burns - when fire depends on logs, it is reckoned as a log fire, when fire depends on grass, it is reckoned as a grass fire ... Such is the nature of consciousness.[68]

Consciousness is not some kind of latent force within us that lies in wait like a lamp to illuminate things. Consciousness is a property that emerges out of the interaction between our body and mind and our environment. But because the process by which consciousness arises and passes away is so fast, we have the impression that it is permanent. The flow of sensations and thoughts scrolls by so quickly that the arising and passing away of consciousness seems to make up a consistent whole, a kind of "Story of Me", just like the flickering frames of a film depict the screenwriter's screen play. We feel as if there is a kind of Witness that transcends the given moments of experience, and that the experience is happening to that Witness. But consciousness is really just exactly those given moments of experience, nothing more and nothing less.

In another passage of the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the Buddha addresses the nature of consciousness:

> Then, monks, it occurred to me. When what exists, does consciousness come to be? By what is consciousness conditioned? Then, bhikkhus, through careful attention, there took place in me a breakthrough by wisdom. When there is name and form, consciousness comes to be. Consciousness has name and form as its condition. Then, bhikkhus, it occurred to me that this consciousness turns back, but it does not go further back than name and form. It is to this extent that one may be born, age, and die...[69]

Consciousness is dependent on name and form, the physical body and its mental functions. There is no prior consciousness, no transcendent awareness that underpins reality, no *atman* as the Brahmanical religion taught or a permanent eternal self as we somehow feel. The Buddha does not elevate consciousness

above matter. It is impossible to have one without the other. He gives an example, "I will make up a simile for you. Just as two sheaths of reeds might stand leaning against each other, so too with name and form as condition, consciousness comes to be. With consciousness as condition, name and form come to be."[70] This mutual dependence suggests our innate feeling that our consciousness will somehow escape its conditional dependence on the physical body is faulty. Consciousness cannot survive our physical death. But for the Buddha, that question was irrelevant anyway. The important point was that by applying mindful awareness to the present moment, we can break through the unconscious process by which the Twelve Links create suffering and can achieve an awareness of the contingent nature of life.

The fact that the self is totally dependent on conditions is called in Pali *anatta*, "an" being the Pali prefix meaning "free from", "free of", or "not" and "atta" being the Pali word corresponding to the Sanskrit *atman*, the word for the permanent and eternal self. In English, anatta is sometimes translated as "no self", but this is incorrect, anatta rather means "free from self". The Buddha did not say that we don't have a self just that the self is temporary and conditional not permanent and eternal. In later years, the Mahayana branch of Buddhism developed the idea of not self even further, applying it to all phenomena, the entire physical and mental world, and not just consciousness. Nagarjuna, a Buddhist philosopher who lived around 150-250 AD, founded the Madhyamaka school of Mahayana Buddhism based on this premise. This concept is known as *sunyata* in Sanskrit, which is often translated as emptiness. Just as consciousness is empty of any permanent and eternal essence; so too is all reality empty of anything permanent and eternal.

The principle of conditioned arising also underpins the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are an extrapolation of the principal of, "When this occurs, that arises." The Four Noble Truths describe a cause-effect chain, almost like a recipe, by which the causes of suffering are known and released, and a new way of living is cultivated. When suffering is fully known, the letting go of craving arises. When the letting go of craving arises, the cessation of craving comes about. When the cessation of craving comes about, the cultivation of the path begins. Nagarjuna in his work *Verses from the Center* developed this idea even further. Conditioned arising is both a pointer to the present moment and the principal that sustains the whole process of our evolution as human beings through time on the Path. The Path is not superimposed on reality either

conceptually or otherwise, it is embedded in the structure of the conditional world. By pursuing the Path, we pursue insight and understanding of the conditional world in which we are enmeshed. The Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path provide the framework for that pursuit.

Relating Nagarjuna's insight back to our practice, we need to deconstruct our sense of self to see through the fiction that the self is a kind of isolated, singular, permanent thing outside of space, time, and the conditioned world. We then begin to notice that our sense of self is something that arises out of complex circumstances from the past, and is also what is happening right now. We begin to appreciate the miracle of our life as it unfolds, as it appears, continues for a while, then vanishes.

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In the middle of the talk, Mary Lee stands up a bit wobbly and heads back to the hotel. She is sick with a stomach virus and also didn't sleep very well the night before. Patty and Bill Vogel came down with stomach problems too, but they seem not as seriously ill as Mary Lee. Renate and I have so far been relatively healthy, but we have been super paranoid about hygiene. We have washed our hands with hand sanitizer before every meal, not drunk any water except from a bottle - and certainly not the "filtered" water from the hotels - and only eaten vegetables and well cooked meat. At a couple of places, fish has turned up in our buffet meals, but fish is about the worst thing you can eat away from the coast here in India, since it is often kept unrefrigerated and spoils easily.

After the teaching, we return to the bus, and then ride back to the hotel to gather our belongings for the trip to Kapilavastu. The driver guides the bus out onto National Highway 28 heading west. The road is bumpy, and poor Mary Lee has to ride in the back so she can stretch out to rest, but the bouncing is worse there. Just outside of Gorakhpur we pass an Indian Air Force base, with long runways and a couple of fighter planes parked on the tarmac. While we are sitting at a stoplight in Gorakhpur, Sophie calls out, "Oh look, an elephant!" and stands up pointing out the right side of the bus. We all crowd over to the windows to have a look. The elephant is standing around at a construction site waiting for something to do. Some pilgrims snap photos before the light turns green, then we all sit down as the bus grinds through the gears on its way again.

During the bus ride, the seat next to Stephen is free, so I move over into it and we spend some time talking about Dharma. I'm interested in continuing the discussion from the talk. Stephen says that during his days as a Tibetan monk, he tried Dzongchen and Mahamudra, two Tibetan practices based on the idea of a primordial consciousness. He found that, contrary to their teaching, his meditation didn't lead back to a kind of primordial consciousness but rather to a deeper awareness of the body, in particular, to specific physical sensations.

I then bring up my experience with concentration practice as a preparation for *jhana*. In the Pali Canon, the Buddha often talks about *jhana* practice. Practically every sutta where he is speaking with monks about how to practice contains a section describing *jhana*.

"I've heard *jhana* called an 'altered state of consciousness'," I say.

Stephen looks skeptical. "That doesn't sound like something that is particularly useful to practice," he says. "But I guess I should take a couple of weeks some time and do a retreat to try it out."

I don't mention it, but achieving *jhana* for the first time is extraordinarily hard for most people, and usually takes far more than a couple of weeks, it can take months. Many people never achieve it. Instead, I continue.

"The Pinlaung Sayadaw uses *jhana* as a preparation for Vipassana, and also as a way to gain experience with past lives," I continue earnestly, "Not with stories, like 'I was a chipmunk' or 'I was Cleopatra', though he says those can be learned by 'psychic power', whatever that is. What happens is you use the intense mental focus coming out of *jhana* to examine the mind states going back in time to birth, then the first mind state in the previous life. Most of this is directly out of the *Abhidharma*."

Stephen continues to listen politely but it's clear he's not buying it. He was for many years agnostic about rebirth, as he explained in his book *Buddhism Without Belief*. After further study, he completely doesn't believe in it, as comes out in *Confession of a Buddhist Atheist*, his not-yet-published book, a proof copy of which is circulating among the pilgrims on the bus. He mentions an incident when he was a Tibetan monk, in which he spoke with Geshe Rabten regarding

his skepticism about rebirth.

"Geshe Rabten told me that the evidence comes through advanced meditation, which is exactly what *jhana* practice is," Stephen says, "The Tibetans call it *samatha*. The problem is that such a private, subjective experience can't be accepted as evidence. Rebirth makes a statement about the connection between the physical and mental that needs to be validated through physical evidence. Otherwise it would be necessary to accept the experiences of mystics who claim to have experienced the presence of God, or even people who claim to have experienced abduction by aliens on a UFO."

I continue to rattle on about the *bhavanga* - an *Abhidharma* concept, in which memories from the previous life lead to rebirth in the current life.

"What's the *bhavanga*?" asks Steve Wachinsky who is sitting behind us and has been listening in on the conversation.

"It's not something the Buddha taught," says Stephen quickly and firmly.

"That's certainly true," I admit since the *bhavanga* is never mentioned in the suttas.

By this time the villages are becoming less and less frequent and we pass through the Leha Forest. For a few miles, forest covers the land on both sides of the road. We see no people and there is far less trash alongside the road and fewer old plastic bags decorating the underbrush. The driver stops for a bio-break. Mary Lee stumbles off the bus to throw up into the weeds. Gary seems to be headed in the same direction. He has a fever and looks shaky, and he stumbles out the door too. I climb off and relieve myself further back in the woods. On the walk back to the bus I pause for a moment, looking around and listening to the sounds of the forest. Except for the road, there are no signs of people. A bird calls in the late afternoon half-light under the trees. The Buddha probably spent much of his life in a forest such as this. During the dry months of winter like now he wandered through the forest on his way from village to village. But back then there were far fewer people in the world and far less trash and pollution. Such a simple life appeals to me, to throw off the complexities of the modern overpopulated, polluted cyber-industrial world and become an

itinerant monk. Today, it seems just barely possible in this peaceful forest to imagine what it must have been like for the Buddha. In a few years, when this forest is plowed under to feed more hungry mouths, it will be much harder.

After emerging from the forest, we reach the town of Naugarh and continue north. Near sunset, the driver pulls the bus over to the side of the road briefly in an area with wetlands. We have a few minutes before darkness to watch some sarus cranes, the largest flying birds in the world, 6 feet tall at their tallest. Two birds are barely visible in the fading light, standing far off in the marshes to the west. We all climb off the bus to look at the cranes. But the driver is in a hurry to go so that we don't run into fog like the night before. We are soon back on the road again.

Around 6 PM, just before the fog descends, the driver turns off the highway onto a dirt road into the jungle. We bump along through the dim light. I figure we must be almost at the hotel; otherwise the driver would have stayed on the highway. The other hotels were just off the highway with cement drives and manicured grounds, like at most motels in the US. This road is more like the approach to a campground or trail head. Are we going to camp? But then the bus emerges from the jungle into a well-manicured lawn, with a circular drive. The driver pulls up in front of a two story white cement building with a deep veranda and nine square pillars. Shantum explains that our hotel is actually the hunting lodge of a maharaja, the Royal Retreat Hotel, a member of India's famous chain of Heritage Hotels.

We pile out of the bus, stiff, and in some cases sick, after the long ride. We carry our luggage onto the porch and line up our bags near the edge, as instructed by Shantum. An older man elegantly dressed in a well-tailored suit and tie is standing off to the side near one of the pillars, watching us arrive. I ask if he is the maharaja. "I am in the maharaja's family", he replies. Later, Shantum tells me that he is, in fact, the maharaja himself.

The lobby is decorated with flayed tiger skins on the walls and furniture and art work from the 1920's. We check in and our luggage is carried to our room by the hotel personnel. Dinner is in an open circular dining room built around a large fireplace in which a log fire is burning, but the fire doesn't heat much more than a small circle around the fireplace. The air has become really cold and very humid. The food is the typical north Indian cuisine, very tasty, and afterwards

we do strucks in the dining room. Most people, including poor Mary Lee who wasn't well enough for dinner, head to their rooms early. But a few are still here to share their experiences. It has been an incredible two days, starting out at the Ganges River in Varanasi and ending up in a hunting lodge sixty miles from the Nepali border.

"Well I thought the elephant was pretty interesting," says Sophie grinning broadly.

"He sure was big, wasn't he?" says Steve Wachinsky.

Sophie nods. "And not only that," she continues, "He also looked like he belonged there. He was kind of like one of the workmen."

Everybody laughs.

"How about you, Kevin?" asks Shantum, "What struck you today?"

"Mostly how different it is here than in Varanasi," says Kevin, "Like the difference between Cincinnati and North Vernon, Indiana, where I'm from."

"How is that?" asks Shantum.

"Cincinnati is on the Ohio River, like Varanasi, and North Vernon is in a very rural area near the Big Oaks National Wildlife Refuge," he replies, "That's kind of like here, in the jungle."

Shantum nods.

"I felt a bit like Kevin," I say, "I couldn't help comparing the area we drove through yesterday outside of Varanasi to the Central Valley of California. Very agricultural and really flat. There are naturally differences. People in India don't have as much money as in California, of course, so the living conditions are quite different."

Carey has been sitting off to the side listening to the others' comments. Shantum turns to her.

"How about you Carey?" he asks, "What struck you about today?"

Carey looks down at her feet for a moment, then looks back up and smiles.

"Nothing in particular," she says quietly.

We continue discussing the trip for a while, then break up and head off to bed. Our room is cold and damp, and I sleep fitfully, waking up constantly with one part or another of my body cold because the blanket keeps slipping off.

Flashforward Summer 2011 - Breakdown

After the 2009 Wind Retreat in October, Shaila told me that the Pinlaung Sayadaw intended to come to the US to do a four month retreat in the summer of 2011. Details were still being worked out, but the tentative plan was for the retreat to be held at the Forest Refuge, at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre. The Forest Refuge was a facility built for longer individual retreats, like those in Burma and Thailand. In the February of 2010, I signed up to stay at the Forest Refuge for July and August of 2011 and was accepted. In January 2011, the Forest Refuge confirmed that the Pinlaung Sayadaw would come for four months, from July 1 through October 31. Because I had already signed up, they allowed me to attend the retreat even though I would only be staying for two months. Eagerly, I applied for a leave at work and was thrilled when my manager agreed. I could hardly wait to get to Barre! I felt a sense of urgency, as if I had to achieve *jhana* in those two months because my life depended on it. I had come so close at Shaila's concentration retreat the previous fall, I felt that it was simply a matter of time and dedicated practice before I would finally be able to achieve a controlled entry to that "other world" which I had only been able to snatch glimpses of over the years.

In spring of 2010 after returning from the pilgrimage, Renate and I undertook an extensive remodel of our house to make it more energy efficient. As the reports from climate scientists became more and more alarming, I grew increasingly concerned about global climate change. We had been slowly working on reducing our carbon footprint since 2000, and now we were ready to make some major changes in the house. Renate was not as enthusiastic as I was. The work would involve tearing off the drywall and re-insulating about two thirds of the house, and we would have to live in the master bedroom and kitchen for four months, or so the architect said when the job started. We also had different conceptions of what the work meant to us. I thought of it as a partnership that we would plan and execute together, and thereby share the experience of building something. She viewed it as a gift to me, because she wanted to help resolve my heartfelt concern over global climate change, even though she really hated having her living space disrupted for so long and was unsure the changes would

have much of an impact.

We started the job in June but by September, it became clear that the job would take far more than four months the architect had promised. Renate had been expecting to be back in the house before Christmas and she was really upset that we weren't. One evening in early February we were sitting at dinner in our kitchen, walled off from the rest of the house by a plastic curtain, discussing the re-installation of the drywall.

"They haven't finished the thermal imaging yet," I said stubbornly, "Until that's finished, they can't start putting the drywall on."

"But if we wait another week, that's another week I won't have my kitchen back!" Renate pleaded.

I looked down at my food. "I'm sorry," I said, "But we have to make sure the thermal envelope is solid before we put the drywall on. Otherwise, the insulation isn't as effective as it could be."

Renate and I argued constantly. For every issue on which we had to make a decision, she seemed to want the opposite of what I wanted. In the end, we needed to decide on something, and we mostly did what I wanted. But it left Renate feeling bitter and angry because she didn't get what she wanted. I didn't enjoy having to spend weeks of arguing either; just to get what I thought was necessary to achieve our goals of energy reduction from a technical standpoint. The job took almost a year to finish, from June 2010 until May 2011. Though the new paint and refinished floor made the house much lighter than it was before, we achieved less energy reduction than we had planned because the architect made some major errors in the design. But the damage done to our relationship was much deeper. The failure to communicate our differing underlying conceptions of how we viewed the job poisoned the entire experience.

In early June 2011, just weeks after we had our house to ourselves again, I began preparations for the *jhana* retreat at the Forest Refuge. I spent two weeks shopping, and stuffed two large duffle bags with new clothing, my yoga mat, medicine for controlling my allergies, and even a small fan for some ventilation

during the hot Massachusetts nights. By the end of June, I was raring to go. Renate volunteered to drive me to the airport and drop me off. As we walked into the garage, Renate looked dejected. There was still a lot of tension between us about the remodeling job, and she was not happy that I was going off for two months, especially because she mistrusted the *jhana* practice. She briefly kissed me and said, "When you get back, we'll work on the relationship."

I arrived in Boston late in the afternoon of a hot June day. The drive from Logan Airport in Boston to the Forest Refuge took more than 3 hours. The van driver stopped at 4 other cities, and Barre was the last stop. When all of the other passengers were gone, the driver asked me where I was from and about the retreat. I explained that I lived in California and was attending a 2 month retreat with a venerable Burmese meditation master.

"That's a long way to go for mindfulness," he replied. I said nothing in return, but the driver was right. I was a long way from my home in California.

When I had attended the 1996 retreat at IMS, the area where the Forest Refuge is located was still undeveloped, a forest threaded through with walking trails. The Forest Refuge was built in the early 2000's and is somewhat isolated from the main retreat center at IMS. The facility consists of a series of five low buildings, including a two story dormitory, all connected by covered walkways, located well off the main road.

The sun had already set when we arrived at the Forest Refuge, but the sky was still glowing with summer twilight. Inside the office, Jan, one of the volunteer staff, was waiting for my arrival. Smiling, she explained the basic procedures of the Forest Refuge, the retreat schedule, and where my room was located. The route to the dorms led through the dining hall and a large stairwell that was topped off by a tower. The dining hall was in darkness, and the dorm corridor was minimally lit. I lugged my duffel bags back along the dorm corridor to my room, following Jan's instructions.

In a *jhana* retreat, having a comfortable and quiet room is an absolute necessity. Most *jhana* practitioners eventually leave the meditation hall and practice on their own in their rooms. Developing deep concentration depends on the temporary but complete absence of the basic negative tendencies of the mind - greed, hatred, and delusion, called the *klesas* in Pali - that warp thoughts and

feelings. The slightest noise can cause irritation and craving to arise, because the meditator wants to achieve *jhana* and the environmental conditions are inhibiting it. In this way, the physical conditions can become a major hindrance to achieving *jhana*.

As I stood taking in the room, I noticed a background whining noise, as if a fan was running somewhere. The noise was amplified by the cathedral ceiling inside the bedroom. In the low-ceilinged vestibule around the door, the noise seemed to dissipate. The room had a comfortable looking bed, a dresser, and a desk. I looked down at the desk. The surface of the desk was covered with a layer of dead insects, flies mostly. I looked around trying to find a source. There was a small metal fixture in the ceiling that could have been the source, possibly a ventilation outlet. I later discovered a heat recovery ventilation unit on the second floor, located in the space above my closet, which ran constantly. It sucked in insects from the humid summer air outside, and deposited the dead insects on my desk through the ventilation outlet. Periodically during the retreat, I would clean off the desk only to find it covered with even more dead insects the next day.

Leaving my luggage in the room, I turned the corner and walked toward the meditation hall. My room was the last one before the meditation hall and it shared a wall with two bathrooms in a small hallway leading off the main corridor. Since the retreat had over 30 people, I would no doubt be treated to the sounds of flushing and other bathroom noises while meditating in the room when people left the hall. I was grateful that at least the room was on the ground floor and so would not become excessively hot, but in every other respect, the room would not be a comfortable, quiet space for meditation.

With increasing alarm, I returned to the office to speak with Jan about it.

"Is there another room I could possibly have?" I asked plaintively, "The room you've assigned to me has the sound of some kind of fan running and I can't possibly meditate in that room."

Jan was not smiling now.

"You'll have to stay in that room," she said empathically, "We've made special

accommodations for you because you are only staying two months, and there isn't any other space available."

Dejected, I returned to the room and began to unpack. I had no choice but to accept the room I was given since they didn't seem to have another. But I felt as if I had walked into an environment where I couldn't trust anyone, since the staff members didn't really seem to care that my room was noisy.

The next day was the first day of the retreat. I was up early and in the darkened meditation hall before anyone else, eager to get started. After so many years, the end of my spiritual quest was in sight! I sat down facing the windows, closed my eyes, and began to meditate. Others filed in and soon the hall was quiet. After an hour was up, I opened my eyes. I could see that I was sitting at right angles to everyone else in the hall. The other meditators sat facing the altar at the front of the hall, while I sat facing the windows. I had not seen the altar when I had entered because the room was dark. Thoroughly embarrassed, I stood up, turned toward the altar, bowed, and walked out of the hall for breakfast.

During the first week of the retreat, my allergies overwhelmed the antihistamine that I was taking to control them. The pollen allergies from flowering grasses were exaggerated by the humid air. In addition the wool carpet in my room emitted a musty smell from mold which aggravating the mold allergy. Like retreat centers in Thailand, the Forest Refuge had no downspouts, so rainwater ran off the roof and into a border of small pebbles along the foundation. Since my room faced north, the pebble border outside the floor to ceiling window never dried out completely, becoming a petri dish for mold. Spores entered the room through the screen and infested the carpet. My nose became so stuffed up that I could barely feel my breath.

I began coughing violently in the meditation hall from post nasal drip running down the back of my throat. The other meditators gave me dirty looks in the meal line, since my coughing was disturbing the silence they needed for achieving deep concentration and *jhana*. In my room, I rummaged around in my luggage but could not find the nasal irrigation bottle that I normally bring to retreats for just this reason. I had forgotten it. I tried snuffing water up my nose from a cup but that didn't work very well. Finally, I sent a letter to Renate asking her to make up a package with my nasal irrigation bottle and salt. The package arrived a few days later, and I began irrigating my sinuses twice a day, but I had

to use one of the bathrooms near the dining hall for the early morning irrigation, because the process was so noisy. Even though I had managed to contain my coughing, the loud sinus irrigation was another reason for the other meditators to shun me.

Normally during the first few days of a retreat, the negative tendencies of the mind tend to become more visible, but gentle and persistent mindfulness leads the mind to settle down and the negative tendencies begin to lose their power. In a concentration retreat, though, the direction from the teachers is to simply ignore the negative tendencies and focus on the breath. In my case, this didn't work. In the first weeks of the retreat, I dreamt that my body was inhabited by two daemons. When I woke in the morning, my mind was consumed by negative emotions that I couldn't describe and didn't know how to deal with; though they were so strong my body was rigid. In the deep silence of the meditation practice, the negative emotions only gained power as I tried to ignore them. I was a long term meditator, with over 30 years of daily meditation practice and 20 years of intensive retreat practice; but now, I felt my mind going completely out of control, like a nuclear reactor with the control rods removed.

Interviews with the Pinlaung Sayadaw didn't help. This was the first long retreat I had ever done with an Asian teacher and the interviews were more like a formal ceremony than the intimate discussions of my practice that I had experienced at earlier retreats with Western teachers. I would say a few words about how close I was to attaining the *nimitta*, and Sayadaw would tell me to keep at it or gesture to his upper lip to indicate that I should keep concentrating on my breath. He didn't want to hear about my struggles with severe and growing anger and fear. Informal interviews with U Brahm, the Western monk who had helped Shaila lead the Wind Retreat and who was helping Sayadaw run this retreat, were also no help. While U Brahm was a Westerner, he had trained as a monk for over 30 years in the Theravada tradition, and he was not even able to recognize my problem, much less guide me in skillfully handling the extreme negative mind states.

Finally, in the third week of the retreat, I spoke with a Western mindfulness meditation teacher attending the retreat as a participant. She recommended I use the negative emotions, anger and fear, as the focus of my attention instead of the breath. She suggested I study them with curiosity, looking at how they arose and

changed and noticing especially when they subsided.[71] After practicing for a while, the iron grip of the negative emotions began to ease and I began to relax. But the subsiding of anger and fear didn't make the *jhana* practice any easier. Though I tried really hard, I was unable to achieve a *nimitta* stabilized on the upper lip under the nose. The white glowing disk appeared, but it was constantly moving around, drifting off to the left or right side of my visual field. After a month of trying, I became more and more frustrated. The end of the retreat was approaching and it seemed I was no closer to achieving *jhana* than I had been at the Three Elements retreats with Shaila in the previous years.

During mindfulness meditation retreats, one of the teachers usually gives a talk every night. The teachers pitch the talks towards the problems the students are struggling with, which come out during short interviews with the students. The talks are often really helpful when you are struggling with a problem. I've more than once managed to work through a difficult problem I've had in a retreat as a result of advice given during a talk. In this retreat, though, talks occurred only once a week, on Saturday evening. They were mostly directed toward encouraging the students to try harder. On the fourth Saturday of the retreat, U Brahm gave a rousing talk. He spoke of energy and effort, and making an all-out try to achieve your heart's desire. As he finished, I felt a bolt of energy split my heart and I sunk into a deep state of concentration. U Brahm was speaking about a desire to achieve *jhana*. But that wasn't my deepest, most heartfelt desire.

My deepest desire was to save the world from global warming which threatened to destroy humanity's future and even the future of all life on the planet. I recalled the words of the Buddha: no one knows the extent of the power of a concentrated mind. So I turned the concentration that had arisen from the bolt of energy toward global warming and how to solve it. My mind lit up with a vision. I saw a cloud of beings with heads having human faces on bodies that were long wispy tails, like the tail of a comet. They were devas, spirits of the air, who had come to help. I exhorted them to find a way to reduce carbon pollution 80% by 2050. They sped away to do my bidding. Like Prospero in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, I could command the spirits of the air. A rapid fire sequence of images came flooding into my mind, as if my mind was clicking through Web pages on the Internet as fast as I could move my finger. It seemed as if the devas were reporting back on what they had seen. Three images in particular stand out: an electric car and two green goblin-like figures. When the bell rang ending the period, I came out of the vision and almost ran out of the meditation hall. I was

totally psyched!

Over the next week, I began to see and hear devas even when I was not in meditation. They would come to me as ghostly presences on the edge of vision, and report in whispering voices on progress in the great Change they were preparing for the world: to free it of carbon-based energy and ecological destruction. In the afternoon, when I sat on the porch, I could see them in the winds that shook the trees. At night, I could hear their music, strange tinkling music coming from outside my window as they celebrated. When I took a short walk outside the retreat center one morning, I saw that there was no Change, that the outside world had gone on as before, but I refused to believe my eyes. My mind made up excuses why I was unable to see any evidence of the Change. In my mind, the world was undergoing a massive transformation to a more ecologically benign society.

I also began to experience a return of the intense energy I had experienced at and after the IMS retreat in '96. But now, the energy was overwhelming and I abandoned myself to it. My body was transforming from a thing of flesh and blood into a subtle body[72] of pure energy. I saw nodes of light form along my spine, which connected me into the raw energy of the Universe. At the base of my spine was a large pool of light from which I could draw. I did not have to eat or sleep, and periodically I would shiver and get goose bumps as a burst of energy released. I felt that I could control my emotions by opening little valves around my heart and at the base of my spine. Opening the valve at the base of my spine released lust into the raw white light running up my spine, and opening the valves around my heart released negative emotions such as fear, anger, greed, and irritation into the node of white light around my heart, which consumed them. The ability to control my emotional state directly led me to approach the fantastic images I was experiencing with equanimity, and a conviction that, above all, I was tasked with saving the planet from destruction[73]. I began to believe that I could directly control not only my own body with my mind, but the world at large.

I began to see other beings, daemons and humans whom I knew but who were not physically present. I constructed stories in which I was a hero with other humans and devas as allies, fighting against daemons and evil humans. I was living in a giant video game of my mind's devising. I was able to communicate with the characters through telepathic means. Yvonne showed up in one of these

visions and began to play a major role, as an enemy-evil-black-tantrik witch. She recruited Shaila, who was actually attending the retreat as a participant, to her cause, but the Sayadaw was on the side of good. A group of allies appeared which I called the Reverend Mothers. Their mission was to battle the evil black tantrik magic of Yvonne and Shaila, but secretly, so that Yvonne and Shaila didn't know of their involvement. The Reverend Mothers, characters in Frank Herbert's science fiction novel *Dune*, were led by "Elaine", my first meditation teacher from Wesleyan University more than 30 years before.

Tensions between Yvonne and the Sayadaw increased until, one morning, as I was sitting in the hall meditating, I saw them floating in the air with my inner vision, hovering over the yard outside the retreat center, circling around. They were screaming insults at each other. I knew something bad was going to come down, so I turned my inner vision away from the sight. I heard a terrible noise, clashing metal and screaming as they fought a magic duel hovering in the air over the lawn outside the retreat center. Suddenly the noise stopped. I opened my eyes and saw the Sayadaw lying dead on the floor of the meditation hall, his head bashed against the rock that served as the altar. I stood up and cut out of there as fast as I could, fleeing the retreat center to the village green of Barre.

After walking around town for a while, Elaine appeared in my thoughts and insisted I undertake a Quest: to walk to Middletown, which is about 75 miles south of Barre, and meet her on the steps of the Olin Library at Wesleyan. There everything would be explained. I set off on my Quest, walking through the late summer New England countryside in cloudy weather. But my mind kept questioning why I had to do this, since it didn't make any sense to me. I didn't doubt I could walk to Middletown, but I couldn't understand why. Elaine kept insisting I had to do it. Around noon, Elaine told me I had failed my Quest because I had questioned her instructions and maintained a negative attitude. I'd spent half a day walking where neither Yvonne nor the Sayadaw could hear my thoughts, walking, walking without stopping, eight miles out. My feet were torn up and bleeding from walking in Birkenstock sandals without socks. I turned around and headed back to the retreat center. It began to rain and soon my clothing was soaked.

I was walking along Williamsville Road near Barre when Yvonne showed up again. She was lurking in the trees on the right side of the road. I could just

barely see her, riding on her harpy.

- What do you want, Yvonne? - I thought at her.

The bird looked like a giant black falcon, with a hooked beak. The harpy flew out of the trees with Yvonne on its back and landed on my head, settling in my hair like a bird on a nest, with its beak pointed toward my back. It was near sunset and by that time I had been walking since early morning without food or water and without a break. The forest lining the road flowed by as I walked, barely seen as I focused on my internal state.

- You're in trouble buddy boy, - Yvonne replied venomously in her scratchy, slightly nasal voice, - Who's been helping you? I know it's someone; otherwise you wouldn't have escaped me today. -

The harpy stretched its beak and began gnawing on the back of my subtle body neck.

- Let me go, - I moaned, - That hurts. -

Yvonne laughed.

- You think that hurts? You're up for a hundred thousand years in hell in your next lifetime, and in every lifetime thereafter for the next 20, - she gloated.

- Yeah, right, - I replied, snorting with cynical laughter.

Suddenly it occurred to me how to get rid of her: the *metta* meditation, protection against all kinds of evil. I started silently repeating the words in my mind: - May I be safe and protected from inner and outer harm... -

The harpy squawked and took off.

- Hey! - she exclaimed, - How long do you think you can keep that up? -

I ignored her and kept the words circulating through my mind.

- Psst! - came a voice from my left pocket, - Give her this! It will help cut back on your time in hell. -

A small, hard object was thrust into my left hand. It was a Tibetan magic pill.

- Reverend Mo... - I began, surprised, and thereby breaking off the meditation.

- What was that? - asked Yvonne, - Reverend mother? Who is that? -

The Reverend Mothers were still helping despite my failure at the Quest. Perhaps I had a chance.

By this time, I was on the outskirts of Barre. The forest had transitioned into individual houses in the white New England clapboard style, separated by large expanses of lawn and farmland.

The harpy landed again.

- I have a present for you, - I replied in the sweetest, most gentle tone I could manage, given the circumstances: a big, dangerous looking hell-bird sitting on my head digging its talons into my subtle body scalp, with a female black tantrik master riding its back.

- For me? - she asked, surprised, - Why, how thoughtful! -

- Actually, it's for Siamuka, - I replied. Siamuka was the harpy's name. I threw the pill up into the air. The harpy took off with a squawk, snatched the pill out of the air with its beak, and swallowed it.

- But don't think that will get you off, buster, - Yvonne thought. Siamuka landed on my head again, but refrained from digging in. I felt Yvonne fumbling around on the top of my subtle body head.

- What are you doing up there? - I asked miserably.

- Psst! - came the voice from my left pocket again, - When she's gone, pull this tab. - I felt a small knob connected to a string appear in my left hand.

A sharp pain seared my subtle body scalp, and slowly my mind began to melt. Swiss cheese holes were opening up in my consciousness.

- There! - she crowed triumphantly, - That should take care of you! You won't

have to spend any time in hell, but you'll never work for a high tech company again in your life! - and with that, she laughed long and loud, like the Wicked Witch of the West in the Wizard of Oz. I began to panic.

- Don't worry! - whispered the voice on my left side.

Yvonne stopped laughing. - What was that? - she asked.

- What was what? - I replied miserably, - You've ruined my mind, what else do you want? -

She didn't reply. Instead, the harpy lifted off and hovered over my left shoulder. Yvonne looked down suspiciously. But the Reverend Mothers apparently had some way of concealing themselves, and she saw nothing. Convinced that nothing was amiss, she guided Siamuka back to the right side of the road. There, the harpy perched on a branch again, like a vulture, with Yvonne on her back.

- I'm finished with you for now, buddy boy, but we'll meet again, - Yvonne thought, - Now, you behave yourself and go back to the retreat center. Don't tell anyone what happened out here, or you'll be in real trouble, - and with that, the harpy took off with Yvonne on its back, heading east toward Boston.

When Yvonne had been gone for a while, I pulled on the tab and felt my mind start to slowly come together again. The Swiss cheese holes began to fill and the mush that had been my thinking began to clarify. It was clear to me what had happened. The retreat center had been attacked and taken over by a group of evil black tantrik humans and daemons, and that the daemons had killed the humans who had resisted them and taken on their external form. The Daemon Conspiracy was responsible for the failure of the Change orchestrated by the devas. I had no choice but to return to the retreat center, to fight the evil occupiers as best I could. I continued walking into town.

In Barre, I wandered around until I found Pleasant Street and started walking back towards the retreat center. Derrick, the retreat center director, pulled up in a car and asked me to get in. Though he didn't tell me at the time, they had been searching for me all day. I believed that he had been replaced by a daemon from the occupying force, but I cautiously climbed into the car anyway. On the way back to the retreat center, I was anxious about returning because I expected to

find a large scale police deployment investigating the Sayadaw's death. As we drove up to the center, there was nothing, no signs of police cars with flashing lights or anything like that. I was surprised but took the lack of any sign of official presence as an indication that the Daemon Conspiracy had managed to suppress an investigation.

"Would you like to drive around for a while or go in?" Derrick asked after we had stopped.

I looked at him suspiciously. "Drive around," I said but I didn't tell him why. I was looking for a chance to escape.

We drove back out onto the main road. Derrick asked me a few questions trying to start a conversation but I didn't reply. On a side street leading back to the center, Elaine appeared in my thoughts again. Ahead of us coming in the opposite direction, a car approached with its headlights on.

- See that car up there? - she pointed out to me, -Those are friends. They'll meet you down at the main road and take you away from Barre.-

-OK. - I replied.

After the other car had passed, I opened the door and tried to jump out. We weren't moving very fast but I got tangled in my seat belt and was unsuccessful. I closed the door again and settled back into the seat. Derrick asked me why I wanted to get out, but I said nothing. We turned onto the approach road and then into the center driveway. When we had stopped in the driveway, I lightly slapped Derrick on the face and told him that this is what it felt like to be harassed by daemons, if he cared to know. To his credit, he said nothing, simply opening the door and climbing out of the car.

Derrick took me into the teachers' lounge. There I met with Shaila, who had come out of silence to meet with me. I needed to be careful and not let on that I knew about the Daemon Conspiracy and that Shaila was one of the leaders; otherwise, they would gain final control of me.

"Hi James," she said, "We've been worried about you. You didn't come to lunch."

I said nothing, settling into a chair. She sat down across from me.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"I went out for a hike," I said warily.

"Are you hungry?" she asked.

"Well a bit," I replied, "But mostly I'm exhausted. I didn't sleep for the last three nights and had only two to three hours of sleep a night for the last week. I just want to go back to my room and crash."

She was silent for a moment.

"I'll get you some supper," she said gently.

She rose and walked into the kitchen. A few minutes later, she returned with some rice, curried vegetables and a tortilla, the first food I had eaten in a couple of days. The food smelled so good and I was so hungry after walking all day on an empty stomach that I gobbled it down as fast as I could.

After I was done eating, Shaila took me into a conference room and brought in another guy, who she said was a psychotherapist. He tried to get me to say something about what I was feeling but I was suspicious. I thought he was in league with the Daemon Conspiracy. I kept telling him that I was exhausted from my hike and asked whether I could have a place to lie down and rest. But he told me I couldn't go back to my room because I would disturb the other retreat participants. After the psychotherapist left, Shaila came back in with a glass of water and gave it to me. I sipped the water and it tasted bitter, so I threw it back in her face because I thought the strange taste was some kind of magic substance to turn me into a slave. That's when an ambulance showed up, accompanied by a cop with a gun. They strapped me into a gurney and took me to the emergency room of the local hospital in Gardner.

Instead of saving the world, I had gone stark, raving mad.

In the emergency room, I spent three days "under observation" imprisoned in a glass-fronted cage with a security guard sitting outside 24/7. My paranoia and psychosis became worse. I sunk deeper into my delusions. Every day, I watched CNN on TV and collaborated with a group of friends and allies, who were not present but who I could nevertheless see and hear, against the evil black tantrik group led by Shaila to foil their plotting of global catastrophe. After our meeting on the road to Barre, Yvonne had changed sides and we collaborated on bashing a few daemons and evil humans in my mental video game. Every night, I manifested as Avalokitashvara, the thousand armed Bodhisattva of Compassion, 12 feet tall, in the hospital parking lot, and I healed sick children who their parents brought to me.

I refused to eat and drink anything except frozen yogurt and apple juice, because everything else tasted horrible, like salt or dirt, and I thought it was poisoned. I was interviewed twice by a psychiatrist, who asked me if I was hearing voices. I told him no, because, after all, they were not random voices but rather the thoughts of people I knew and non-player characters who were part of the video game I was living in. Jan and Derrick called Renate, and she immediately flew out from California, forgoing a much anticipated hiking vacation in Yosemite to help me back to sanity. I initially refused to see her, but ultimately relented and we talked.

"Why did you come here?" I asked suspiciously, "You were supposed to be in Yosemite."

Renate looked concerned. "The center called me and I came to see what was going on," she replied.

"I've got to get out of here," I said desperately.

"You can't leave just yet," she replied, "We need to wait."

"But you don't know how many children I've saved," I pleaded, "At night, the parents bring them to me."

She said nothing but looked even more concerned.

After three days in the glass-fronted cage, I was still not improving. The hospital had a voluntary psychiatric admission ward, but according to the hospital staff my insurance didn't cover it and there was no room. Renate waved a credit card in front of their noses and they suddenly found a place in their voluntary admission ward for me. I was taken through the hospital to the ward at midnight strapped to another gurney. The portal to the ward was a steel door with a large lock on it. I was asked to sign the admission papers. They loosened my right arm so I could sign, and afterwards they wheeled me through the door. When I heard the door slam behind me, I thought I would never get out.

But it only took another four days for them to release me. A plate of spaghetti and Renate's visits helped break the feelings of isolation and paranoia. Some strong anti-psychotic medication prescribed by one of the doctors diminished the intensity of the hallucinations, and I ended up staying on the medication for another six months. The medicine not only reduced my psychotic symptoms, it also made my life more flat. Food had no taste, even the spiciest Indian dinner, but I ate it anyway because I really didn't care how it tasted. I had no sex life and I couldn't get excited about anything, nor depressed. On the other hand, I slept well, eight hours a night when I was usually only able to sleep six or seven. The contrast with my life after the retreat in 1996, when I had experienced energy surges and depression, couldn't have been greater. I just existed, though I was well rested.

We flew back to California and I spent the last two weeks of August bicycling and writing. I visited Yvonne at her new compound in Anderson Valley. Because we had fought together on the same side when I was in the emergency room, I sought her out for help. I described to her what happened but her response was guarded. She said that other people who had undergone a similar experience stopped meditating permanently. I said I didn't think that would happen to me.

I hadn't fully recovered however. I still felt an exaggerated sense of purpose, as if I had to perform some sacred duty to save the world, and I was still experiencing some hallucinations. I turned a trip to Europe in September into a mission to deliver an unknown message, received from a deva on Waddell Beach north of Santa Cruz, to an invisible being who I did not know in Geneva where I gave a technical talk at an optical networking conference. I had a feeling that my quest to walk to Middletown held the key to the whole experience.

When I returned home from Europe I spent some time trying to find the route I had walked on Google Maps. I finally found it by comparing Street View scenes with my memory of the scenes that I had seen as I had walked. It turned out that, in reality, I had walked north from Barre towards the border with Vermont, not south towards Connecticut where Middletown is located. I could never have reached Middletown. The entire experience was a fantasy. Realizing that, the last tattered remnants of my inflated sense of mission, to which my mind had clung in a desperate attempt to validate the experience, vanished.[74]

Day 12 - Kapilavastu

I wake early with a scratchy throat. A couple of pilgrims who were sitting behind me on the bus yesterday were coughing during the entire trip from Kushinagar. I gloomily contemplate my fate. I have no doubt that I am in for a sore throat and then a sinus infection, the usual progress an upper respiratory infection takes through my body. For good sore throat protection, I know I must gargle once a day with a quarter cup of Listerine™. But I've got no Listerine™ in my luggage. There is, after all, only so much you can fit in a small plastic liquids baggie. I doubt I'll be able to find any in the wilds of Uttar Pradesh.

Before breakfast, I sit up in bed with a blanket wrapped around me and write my poem for the end of the trip. The poem had been rolling around in the back of my mind as we cruised across the flat north Indian plain in our white bus, like a space ship flying through the void with film clips from the world projected onto the windows to keep us from getting bored - film clips of crowded towns with people occupying every square foot of outdoor space, film clips of crowded farmsteads with small muddy ponds where kids are swimming, film clips of the trashed out landscape, and even occasional film clips of mostly wild looking forest. And then, this morning, the poem comes out. Dark and foreboding, the words are there. Lurking in the background are images of suffering from a Tibetan thangka painting, images of the wrathful deity Mahakala[75]: human skulls, decapitated heads, and flayed humans being trampled on by the Great Black One himself with his fangs dripping blood and his crazy eyes. I scribble it down in my journal book as it comes pouring out.

We have breakfast in the breakfast dining room, also decorated like the lobby in elegant, 1920's style, much as it might have been during the Raj. White lace curtains grace the tall windows, while the room is furnished with high straight-backed wooden chairs, and a long wooden table set with fine china. Ceiling fans, off now due to the cold, hover above our heads and on one wall three tiger heads stare down at the proceedings. The breakfast is the usual: toast, eggs, curried peas and potatoes, with lots of hot masala chai but the setting seems to make it tastier. The hot chai feels good on my sore throat, and I signal to the waiter for seconds and thirds.

Renate, Sophie, Carey, and I sit together for breakfast and linger afterwards to chat. Carey is kind of a mystery to us, since she has mostly kept to herself and sometimes stayed behind in the hotel when the group has visited a site. She opens up a bit now, telling us about her background.

Carey's Tale

I'm a nurse by training and I met my ex-husband, who is from India, when he was doing his residency in cardiac surgery at the University of Colorado in Denver. I was an operating room nurse and worked with him when he was doing operations. I was originally attracted by his beautiful hands. When he was stitching up a patient, it was almost like a musician playing a violin. His patients were always out of the ICU before those of any of the other doctors. We dated for about a year before we married.

We went to India and were married in one of those large Indian weddings you hear people talk about. His family was from Hyderabad. It was wonderful! His female relatives painted my hands with henna and I wore a red and gold sari. Afterwards, we returned to the states and he took up a position at Houston Methodist. We were really in love. When we were together for about a year, we decided to have a child. I quickly got pregnant and was happy, but during the pregnancy, I noticed a certain distance. We never really recovered that feeling of the first year of our marriage. A couple of years later, I had another child. I took some time off from nursing to raise the kids, while he worked his way up to become the head of the department.

After the kids started going to school, I went back to working. Not in the ICU or surgery, but just as a ward nurse, so I didn't have so much stress. When the oldest was in sixth grade, I noticed that the other nurses on the ward were sniggering and making comments behind my back. One of them, who had become a close friend, took me aside and told me that my husband was having an affair with a nurse in the ICU. She told me that he had been doing that for years, and that he had a reputation around the hospital as a playboy.

Naturally, I was devastated. I confronted him with the story that night, and he didn't even bother to deny it. I told him that I wanted a divorce. He told

me that he would never agree to a divorce, it would be shameful for his family; that Indian families didn't divorce. I told him I wasn't an Indian woman and that if he had so much disrespect for me, I didn't want him to be around my children. He said they weren't my children; they were his children and that was the Indian custom.

I moved out of the house that night because I could not stand another minute living under the same roof as him. The kids stayed at home but he worked on them, telling them that I was responsible for the divorce not him. His lawyer managed to convince the judge that I was a poor mother, that I beat the kids which was a lie. I didn't bother to defend myself; I was in such emotional turmoil from having ignored the signs of his cheating for all those years. The judge granted me visitation rights only once a month, but the kids didn't want to come because of the lies he told them. After a while, I stopped the visitations because the kids would misbehave or just sit there in sullen silence even if I tried to do something fun with them.

So I've come to India to mourn the death of my family, my marriage, and, in a way, my youth. Travelling here I'm constantly reminded of the happy times of my wedding and how the whole thing ultimately turned out. But Stephen's teaching and being with you guys has cheered me up.

When Carey finishes, we sit a while in silence. Her sadness is almost palpable, yet she does not seem overly emotional. She is not close to crying. It is almost as if she has come to terms with the emotional part years ago and now all that is left is just a deep lingering sadness about what was and now is no longer. I understand why she has been so standoffish during the pilgrimage.

"I'm so sorry to hear that," say Sophie quietly. "Where are you now?"

Carey looks down at the table for a minute, and then looks up again.

"Well, the kids are teenagers now and I never see them," she says. "When I get back from the pilgrimage, I'm going to move to New York, see if I can't make a life there." She smiles briefly, and Sophie nods in return.

Then Shantum pops into the breakfast room and tells us that the bus is about to leave for the drive to the Kapilavastu site.

The distance to the site of ancient Kapilavastu is short, but the bus driver creeps along very slowly in the dense fog. We pass through the small village of Piprahawa and arrive at a fenced park where the ruins are located, a few hundred yards from the border with Nepal. This Kapilavastu is not part of the usual pilgrim's route, so there are no hordes of vendors and beggars. Most pilgrims visit the site in Nepal, a few miles north of us. A small crowd of curious villagers gathers near the bus to watch us depart, and a few small boys play at begging. Just visible through the fog inside the fenced park are the low brick foundations of ruined monasteries, and a brick stupa. Unlike the others we've seen, this stupa consists of a series of broad steps that become narrower near the top, like a small Mayan pyramid. The stupa isn't more than 10 feet tall. We have the park to ourselves. After circumambulating the stupa three times, we adjourn to a grassy area near a lotus pond and spread our mats for a short sitting. The fog has lifted some but it is still cold and damp, and the grass is wet with condensation. After the sitting, Stephen gives a short talk about the historical controversy surrounding the Kapilavastu archeological site and about the importance of Kapilavastu in the Buddha's life.

He begins with the uncertainty about Kapilavastu's actual location. Nepali archeologists claim another site west of Lumbini near Tilaurakot in Nepal is the real Kapilavastu. It has a gateway to a town and brick ruins. Xuanzang seems to have visited the Tilaurakot site and describes the brick ruins, ascribing various events in the Buddha's life to them. Since brick technology was invented after the Buddha's lifetime and no artifacts were unearthed providing direct evidence that the site is really the location of the Buddha's childhood home, the claim of the Tilaurakot site is based only on tradition. In addition there is no stupa at the Tilaurakot site, as would be expected at a site where the Buddha had grown up.

But the Indian site has its own problems. In 1898, W.C. Pepe the manager of the Birdpur Estate near Piprahawa, the village we passed through, announced the discovery of a relic casket in the stupa. An inscription on the casket seemed to indicate that the relics were of the Buddha. Pepe mentioned in his letter to the government that he was in contact with a German archeologist, Dr. Alois Fuhrer, who was working on a dig a few miles north of Piprahawa, with the implication that Fuhrer was responsible for finding the relics. A few weeks later, the government of Burma sent a letter to Fuhrer's employer, the local government of the Northwestern Provinces, accusing Fuhrer of selling fake relics to a Burmese

monk. Fuhrer was subsequently sacked from his position when the allegations proved true. The whole incident discredited the Piprahawa site, and attention returned to Tilaurakot.

Much of the difficulty in identifying the actual site of Kapilavastu stems from the destruction of the Shakyan villages at the end of the Buddha's life. The ethnic cleansing perpetrated by King Vidudabha of Kosala on the Shakyans left no Shakyans to receive the Buddha's relics, because Kapilavastu was destroyed. H. W. Schumann, the German Indologist, in his book, *The Historical Buddha*[76] championed the theory that the relics were interred in a stupa at a new settlement of Kapilavastu in Nepal by the remainder of the Shakyans, and that the site in Nepal is therefore the actual Kapilavastu.

In 1962, the Nepali government invited the Indian Archeological Service to conduct a survey of the archeological sites in southern Nepal, with the goal of scientifically documenting them. The report, which the Nepali government never published, was critical of the claim that the Tilaurakot site was the location of the historical Kapilavastu. Furthermore, in an appendix, the evidence discovered at the Piprahawa site was cited as more strongly favoring Piprahawa. The Indian Archeological Service then began an excavation on the stupa at Piprahawa. Under the brick stupa, a much older mud stupa was found. In 1972, some terracotta seals were unearthed with the inscription "Maha Sangha, maha bhikkhu Sangha, Kapilavastu," the English translation being "Great Sangha, great monastic Sangha, Kapilavastu." So the actual physical evidence seems to favor the Piprahawa site.

Although the area around Piprahawa is now a small, remote place on the border with Nepal, in the Buddha's time, the area would not have been so quiet. The great northern road ran from its eastern terminus at Rajgir through Kushinagar and Kapilavastu to Sravasti, where we will be tomorrow, and finally ending in the west at Taxila in what is today Pakistan. There was a lot of traffic along the road as traders travelled in one direction or the other. Kapilavastu itself was not a city, but rather a small town. There were no ornate palaces as traditional accounts of the Buddha's life claim, in fact, no stone structures at all. The houses were made of sun baked bricks or wooden frames plastered with mud, and the roofs were thatched. The archeological digs have discovered very little from the Buddha's day: a few clay objects, a few coins, some rusted farm implements, and shards of a distinctive black glazed pottery which is characteristic of the time

when the Buddha lived.

Kapilavastu's political standing in the Buddha's time was like a county seat. Shakya had been an independent republic, but by the time Siddhartha Gotama was born, it had already been incorporated into the kingdom of Kosala which had its capital at Sravasti. Shakya nevertheless maintained a measure of self-government and the elders of the different families met periodically in a council hall to discuss the affairs of the community, make laws, judge offenses, and levy taxes. Shakya probably had a small militia for maintaining public order, like a police force. Suddhodana Gotama, Siddhartha Gotama's father, was the head man of the community. Later reports of the Buddha's early life make Suddhodana out to be a king in an opulent palace, but he was really more like a tribal chief, controlling a local area, and his house was probably quite modest. Siddhartha Gotama's future was to succeed his father as the head man of the community and chair of the assembly. He was not in line to become king, but rather he would have had to pay tribute to the king of Kosala, which at the time of the Buddha's enlightenment was King Pasenadi, who resided in the capital at Sravasti.

The Buddha left Kapilavastu when he was 29 looking for "the deathless" as he put it, but what he found was the Eightfold Path. He spent most of the rest of his life wandering around the Ganges plain teaching that understanding, but he did on occasion come back to his old hometown. Near the village, the community granted him the use of a park, Nagroda, where a community of monks gathered. Many Shakyans, both men and women, became followers of the Buddha. Suddhodana himself became a follower but died shortly afterward. Anuruddha, Bhadrika, Bhrigu, Kimbala, and Upali, all members of the Shakyan nobility, became followers of the Buddha. Ananda and Devadatta, cousins of the Buddha, also became followers. Ananda became the Buddha's personal attendant for many years. Devadatta, on the other hand, led an unsuccessful rebellion that tried to kill the Buddha and take over leadership of the Sangha. At the very end of his life, the Buddha was trying to get back to Kapilavastu in order to determine what had happened, after having heard about the ethnic cleansing perpetrated by King Vidudabha. Tragically, he died about a 10 day walk away, in Kushinagar.

After Stephen's talk, there are many questions. Someone asks what "deathless"

really means. Stephen replies that "deathless" was a term already found in the canonical Brahmanical texts, the *Upanishads*. The English translation is "immortality". The Pali phrase is *amata* which literally means "not death." Buddhists translate this as "deathless" while Hindus translate it as "immortality". The phrase was just an expression for a common aspiration of spiritual seekers in the Brahmanical tradition at that time. Once the Buddha met his enlightenment, however, he recast his discovery as something that "goes against the stream", by which he meant that it went against the mainstream Brahmanical interpretation of what enlightenment was all about.

The Buddha had a whole different way of understanding death. Achieving the "deathless" for the Buddha meant not becoming caught up in the strategies of Mara, the killer. Death is not physical death, but a kind of inner death triggered by egotism, greed, and hatred. The freedom the Buddha offers isn't freedom from physical birth and death but freedom from the forces in your mind that keep you from living your life fully and totally. The Buddha discovered the Eightfold Path as a template for living a life in an authentic way.

When someone asks whether we take refuge in the Eightfold Path, Stephen replies that we take refuge in the Dharma. You integrate the Dharma into yourself, into your life. The Buddha made a famous statement at the very end of his life:

Atta dipa - self island
atta sarana - self refuge
ananna sarana - no other refuge
Dharma dipa - Dharma island
Dharma sarana - Dharma refuge
ananna sarana - no other refuge.

In other words, the only refuge you can trust is the Dharma as it has been internalized into your life. That is, in summary, the Eightfold Path.

Someone asks Stephen to compare his unorthodox view with the orthodox Theravadan view.

"The orthodox Theravadan view of the 'deathless' is exactly the same as the Upanishads," he replies, "Not getting reborn again. If you aren't reborn, you

won't die. The only way to be liberated from physical death is not having a body in the first place. Like Geshe Rabten used to say: 'No head, no headache,'" triggering a round of hearty laughter among the pilgrims.

We return to the hotel and are amazed to find an elephant and a mahout (his owner) standing on the circular driveway in front of the main house. Their presence is a gift from Shantum, who noticed how everyone had crowded to the windows to take pictures of the elephant in Gorakhpur yesterday. Riding on an elephant is, perhaps, the quintessential Indian tourist experience. Everyone is talking excitedly, but after a while, things settle down and half the group decides to take the ride. Bill and Patty Vogel wrap their pilgrim scarves around their heads, making a turban, and pose for pictures on the elephant's back as the Maharaja and Maharini. The elephant looks kind of sad and a bit humble, even though she is so big. I'm glad to see that the trainer doesn't seem to mistreat her in any way. Renate and I hang around a bit to watch, but aren't interested in a ride. In the end, we aren't really here as tourists, we're pilgrims.

Since we have a bit of time before lunch, Renate and I leave the elephant ride and head out for a short walk around the grounds. This is really the first time we are staying overnight in an area where the landscape isn't agricultural or urban. The grounds seem to be real jungle, though it isn't as tangled and overgrown as one would expect from a wild jungle. Broad grassy paths slicing through the trees and undergrowth invite exploration. Tall thick trees with large leaves form the backbone of the canopy, while, here and there along the path or in other open spaces, palm trees appear. We take one of the paths, cross over a canal on a wooden bridge and come to a pond. The pond has a statue of a Hindu deity in the middle. We walk around the pond a bit, looking at the flowers and trying to identify them, and then spend a few quiet moments standing and looking out over the pond.

"It's so different than the forest in California," says Renate quietly as we stand on the bank of the pond. A bird calls in the distance.

"Yes," I reply, "It seems much more alive, plants growing on plants, packed with underbrush. The forest in California is much more open."

"And it's so peaceful," says Renate, "No cars honking or people."

We stand quietly for a few minutes more, then walk back to the main house and lunch. After lunch, Shantum tells the pilgrims to pack up and we head to the final stop on the pilgrimage, Sravasti, the old capital city of the kingdom of Kosala. The pilgrimage seems to be accelerating, rushing to the time when we will all go our separate ways. Our route today does not follow the typical pilgrimage route, and we can see that in the behavior of the villagers. Yesterday most of the villagers ignored us; today the children are waving and smiling, and we wave back. We have an opportunity to watch village life as it unfolds, in short video clip-like views as we speed through the countryside. Young children swim in a muddy pond. Women dressed in colorful saris carry basins with their washing on their heads. Men cluster around small roofed sheds talking.

Around every 10 kilometers along the road is a small shed on top of which is a cell phone tower. The sheds don't have any wires running into them, so the radio equipment must run on diesel generators and use microwave links to connect up to the wired telephone network at a hub somewhere. With cell phones so cheap and everyone owning one, the radio network for connecting the phones into the wired network must be pretty busy. In the West, we tend to think of technology as being a matter of showing off: who has the latest smartphone with the coolest apps. But for people in India, especially farmers, it's probably more of a business, contacting their suppliers and customers for determining when to take and make deliveries, so they can get the best prices on what they buy and sell. Cell phones and the base stations in these sheds needed to connect them to the telephone network are an example of high tech in the midst of the abject poverty, but an example of how high tech can benefit poor people.

When we've passed through the villages and out into an area of rice fields, my mind becomes bored with the repetitive, flat landscape. Looking out the windows at the flat farmland dreaming in the hazy winter sunshine, I begin fantasizing about a technology where pods drop down from the sky into the fields. There, they grow like coral into apartment skyscrapers with clean water and abundant renewable energy. The people live in small, comfortable apartments having toilets but are still able to live out their lives on the streets like they do now.

Later, after a pee break, I find myself *really* wishing more people had toilets when I smell something funny as I'm sitting in the bus. Looking down at my

shoes, I see that, yes, I've managed to step in a shit. For some reason - bad karma, inattentiveness, dumb luck - the shit has worked its way from where its former villager-owner deposited it this morning onto my shoe. For a moment, I sit at a loss with what to do about my condition. I stand up and find a rag in the entrance well of the bus. Reaching down, I wipe most of it onto the rag, then stand there trying to figure out what to do with the rag.

"It's just a shitty rag," Charlie Marshal says leaning forward, "Throw it out the window."

Reaching over, I fling the rag out the open window in the door. But some shit has become embedded into the cracks of the vibram soles and will be difficult to get out.

Carey reaches into her handbag and pulls out a couple of packets of baby wipes.

"Here, try these," she says smiling and handing me the baby wipes, "They're damp, maybe that will help loosen it up."

I spend some time working at the cracks, and between the baby wipes and a small twig I find in the door well I manage to get everything out that I can find. The twig and baby wipes follow the rag out the window. Afterwards, a squirt of Carey's air freshener spray takes care of the lingering odor in the bus, and I wash my hands thoroughly with hand sanitizer just in case. As I sit down, I find myself feeling grateful for the help Carey and Charlie gave in a difficult situation.

Around sundown, the bus pulls up at the Lotus Nikko Hotel on the outskirts of the Sravasti area. The day seemed to float by. Before dinner, I wash my hands thoroughly again, and after dinner Renate and I head off to bed.

Day 13 - Sravasti

The next morning we drive about a kilometer down the road to a Sri Lankan guest house, where members of the Youth Buddhist Society are gathering for a peace march. The young people will walk around 320 kilometers from Sravasti to Sankasya, where the Buddha supposedly descended from the sky on a jeweled ladder after having preached to his mother in the Tusita Heaven. Some legends say that he also preached the *Abhidharma* there. Sankasya is another stop on the traditional pilgrimage route, but one that has little to do with the historical Buddha's life so we won't be visiting it.

But we do join the marchers for a low key rally before they set off. The room is packed with earnest looking young people in their early to mid-20s, most of them Indian or Korean. We old folks are given seats near the front and Stephen and Shantum are escorted to the teachers' seats in the very front facing the audience, together with some other teachers. Shantum is called upon to give a talk. He makes a low key pitch for looking at the march not as a demonstration but as spiritual practice. Stephen gives a short talk, and then people from the audience are invited up to say something. Among our group, Sue stands up and briefly talks about how she and Gary marched during the Vietnam War 30 years ago, and about Martin Luther King and his dedication to peace. A cute young Korean girl from the group of marchers called Honey talks for longer. Translations are done into Hindi and Korean. After about an hour, the group leader announces that the march will start. The meeting breaks up and the crowd moves outside to gather for the march. A certain amount of milling around in the driveway ensues as people gather their belongings and find their place in the march. A local politician comes by and gives a short speech.

I stand off to one side and watch the march assemble, remembering when I was young and the Vietnam War was raging. In 1968 at the height of the Vietnam War I was a junior in high school. I participated in an Advent peace march from Nazareth to Bethlehem in Pennsylvania, sponsored by the Quakers. My association with the Quakers led to my first experience of silent meditation. The next year, I attended a Quaker meeting near Nazareth. The Quakers practice a form of silent meditation in which the congregants sit and quietly wait to be moved by God. The experience stuck with me and later, during my college

years, informed my decision to take a class in Theravada Buddhist meditation. Since then, of course, the US has been involved in the First Gulf War, the Bosnian and Kosovo wars, the war in Iraq, and the war in Afghanistan. Anthropologists have discovered that chimpanzees, too, practice war as a form of enlarging their tribal territories[77], though bonbos are mostly peaceful. So war seems to be in our genes somehow, from a long way back. Peace marching, on the other hand, is not, or, at least, nobody has ever seen chimpanzees having a peace march.

Done ruminating, I strike up a conversation with a young Indian man standing nearby.

"Will you be participating in the march?" I ask.

He smiles. "No, I'm a college student," he replies, "I have my exams next week and I can't afford to take any time off. I must study."

"Ah, well," I reply, "Too bad. I participated in peace marches when I was in college, but not during exams either."

"Would you like to come to my house tonight for dinner?" he asks, "I live just nearby."

"Well, thanks for the invitation, but I'm travelling with a group on a pilgrimage," I reply.

He nods and turns to watch the marchers continue assembling, but it suddenly occurs to me that this is one of the few times I've had a personal interaction with an Indian person on this trip, other than the Indians who are part of our group, that somehow didn't involve begging or a commercial transaction.

A large banner carried by two marchers appears and the marchers assemble on the road outside the guest house behind the sign. We watch from the sidelines as the march starts off down the road. To my surprise, Charlie Marshel's wiry form appears, walking along with the marchers. Charlie is chatting with Honey, the Korean girl who spoke during the assembly. He's got a flower behind his ear and

looks right at home among the marchers. Perhaps it should not be so surprising that Charlie has joined the marchers. He likes hanging out with young people, which is maybe why he specialized in adolescent and child psychology.

As the last peace marchers disappear down the road, we climb back into the bus, minus Charlie, and drive to the ruins of old Sravasti. In the Buddha's time, Sravasti was the capital of the kingdom of Kosala, and was a thriving metropolis along the North Road. The king was Pasenadi, a friend and disciple of the Buddha. The Pali Canon records many dialogs between the Buddha and King Pasenadi. Sravasti was located on the banks of the ancient Aciravati River. In the intervening centuries, the river changed course and the city completely deteriorated into ruins. Today, the river is called the Rapti.

When Faxian visited the area at the beginning of the 5th century, he found only around 200 families living in Sravasti, so even at that time the decline of the city was well underway. He noted that the stupa of Agulimala and the walls of the house of Anathapindika still stood. Agulimala was a murderer who repented, converted to Buddhism, and became a monk in the Buddha's Sangha. One day he was killed by villagers while on begging rounds because they could not see past his crimes. Anathapindika was a wealthy banker who became the Buddha's chief lay supporter in Sravasti. Faxian also noted that a monastery founded by Mahaprajapati, the Buddha's stepmother and the first ordained nun, was still there but abandoned.

We climb up on the dome of the stupa of Agulimala. At our feet, the rounded hills of the city's ruins are spread around the stupa. Where the Archeological Survey of India has excavated, the brick foundations of buildings are visible. The hills show no hint that, underneath them, the ruins of ancient city lie, a city that was once a center of thriving commerce and the capital of a kingdom. Away in the distance to the north, a huge, hemispherical structure that looks for all the world like a giant UFO rises up from the flat plain. Next to it stands a single legged European construction crane like a service gantry for the UFO. Stephen says the structure is a stupa being built by a charismatic Thai woman who is a Buddhist teacher. The stupa is financed by donations from her students, who are in part very wealthy. Off to one side we can see a gigantic golden statue, glittering in the foggy sunlight. Stephen says that it is a statue of the Buddha that was erected by the Thai woman as part of the temple complex.

As I stand looking out over the farmland and ruins, I remember a vacation Renate and I took to Spain a few years ago. We hiked the Camino de Santiago, the St. James pilgrimage trail, in northern Spain from Santander to Gijon, ten days along beautiful farm roads and through forests and ravines, staying overnight in ancient towns along the Atlantic coast, then took the train from Gijon to Santiago de Compostela the endpoint of the trail. We walked part of the Northern Route, which was used prior to the Reconquista[78]. We are not Christians so the hike had little spiritual meaning for us. Yet in many ways, that hike felt more like a pilgrimage, because we were dependent on our own bodies for movement from place to place like people in medieval times. The physical act of movement, placing one foot in front of the other, seems a very appropriate way to honor a spiritual tradition. Faxian and Xuanzang both spent much time walking, though they also used camels and, in Xuanzang's case, an elephant. Of course, such a hike would have been impossible here in India today. The sheer number of people and the traffic, to say nothing of the distances, would have made hiking the Buddha's pilgrimage trail mostly an exercise in dodging cars and avoiding beggars and jumping over shits.

In other ways, the trip we are on feels more like a pilgrimage than our hike in Spain. For one thing, we are following the Buddha's life, and the Buddha's life has always been an inspiration for me. We've also had excellent teachers to point us toward the Buddha's teachings, and trying circumstances to test our ability to put them into practice, both important attributes of a pilgrimage. Though perhaps not as trying as Xuanzang. In 636, he was attacked by river pirates while floating down the Ganges with eighty other people. The pirates tied him up, intending to sacrifice him to the Hindu goddess Durga, but a typhoon arose. The typhoon convinced the pirates that Xuanzang was a holy man, so they released him and the other passengers and gave all the passengers back their baggage[79]. Thankfully, we've not had to deal with pirates on this trip.

We clamber down from the stupa to street level, heading toward the ruins of the house of Anathapindika. Some vendors have assembled and follow us hopefully as we walk from the stupa to the ruins. Tibetans are there, climbing around on the ruins, and we join them, navigating the narrow walls and small rooms of the house of the former banker from long ago. Of course, the bricks that make up the foundations of the house can't have been from Anathapindika's time, but at least we are on the site of his house. A few members of our group pose for pictures

with the Tibetans, a collection of monks and a few nuns. They seem to be enjoying themselves, smiling and joking with our group, and we join in the fun.

A short drive takes us just outside of the old city walls to Jeta's Grove, called Jetavana in Pali. For 25 years, Jetavana was the Buddha's home during the annual rains retreats when he was not wandering from village to village teaching. Many of the suttas from the Pali Canon are set in Jeta's Grove. The story of how Jeta's Grove came to be the Buddha's primary place of residence began when Anathapindika wanted to donate land in Sravasti to the Buddha for a retreat center. He talked to Prince Jeta about some land outside the city that the Prince owned. The Prince said he would sell all the land that Anathapindika could cover in gold coins. So Anathapindika set about carpeting the grove with gold. When his fortune was just about gone, Prince Jeta took the payment but doubled the size of the land. Anathapindika then donated the land to the Sangha.

Faxian reported that Jeta's Grove lay about 1200 paces from the south gate of the city. The grove itself had two gates, one facing east and the other facing north. Near the north gate were two stone pillars on either side of the entrance inside the grove. The stone pillar on the left had the figure of a wheel on top; the one on the right had a figure of an ox. To the left and right of the monastery buildings were ponds of clear water, luxuriant thickets of trees, and beautiful flowers. When Xuanzang visited Jeta's Grove in the 7th century, he found the ruins of a brick shrine that contained a 5 foot high image of the Buddha. Both Faxian and Xuanzang reported visiting many sites in and around Sravasti and Jeta's Grove where mythical incidents in the life of the Buddha were reported to have occurred. For example, near Jetavana is a spot where the Buddha supposedly engaged in a magic contest with the leaders of six sects, which the Buddha naturally won.

As we climb off the bus at Jetavana, we are met with a new form of vendor entertainment. A young boy has memorized the Buddhist refuges and chants them in musical Pali, looking for a tip: *Buddham sarnam gachami, Dhammam sarnam gachmi, Sangham sarnam gachami*[80]. He has a good strong voice, but he obviously doesn't understand what he is saying. Our group seems to be burned out on vendors by now, so we pass the boy by without tipping him.

Brick ruins sit near the middle of a grassy park with a grove of bamboo off to

our right, but we see no sign of the pillars and ponds reported by Faxian. Bird song fills the air and we can see monkeys cavorting among the bamboo. Our first stop is at the *Mulagandhakuti*, the "Fragrant Pavilion", so named because it was the site of the Buddha's *kuti*, or hut, and the Buddha's words were known for the "fragrance of their wisdom". The original hut was probably made of wood and was very simple, but later a monastery was built on the site. A brick platform stands on the site now. In front of the platform is a low brick pillar with a small golden stupa on top, surrounded by flower offerings. There is a sense of peace about the place, different from some of the other monastery ruins we've visited. Maybe it is just the sunny day that is finally - at the very end of the trip - warm. A group of dalit monks sits on the steps watching us as we approach.

We walk onto the platform and spread out our mats and zafus for a 20 minute sit. As I am calming my mind, a series of images flashes before my mind's eye: the Buddha as young man, then very old, then his body decaying, finally morphing into my face. I realize that the Buddha was a human being like me and the other pilgrims, not a god like he is depicted in some of the traditions. The images quickly disappear and the usual mind of slipping on and off the breath dominates the rest of the meditation. After the sitting, we move to a spot in the shade of the bamboo grove. Stephen gives a talk elaborating on his theory of stream entry with canonical citations to back up his ideas.

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According to the orthodox Abhidhamma/Theravada teaching, stream entry is caused by a fundamental change in the underlying mind processes, resulting from the contact of mind consciousness with a kind of metaphysical mind object, the *Nibbana* object, during deep meditation. The *Nibbana* object is considered to be unconditioned, deathless, neither existent nor nonexistent, in other words, much like the Brahmanical concept of the *atman* against which the Buddha taught. It is the only such object of any consciousness (i.e. eye consciousness, ear consciousness, etc.). All other objects are conditioned, and therefore subject to conditioned arising. The experience of *nibbana* is the result of developing a strong and properly focused meditation practice over many years. The first contact with the *Nibbana* object results in stream entry. Stream entry causes the potential for rebirth to be cut off to a maximum of seven lifetimes, none of which are in the realms of the animals, hungry ghosts, or hell beings, commonly called the states of woe. Further practice after stream entry may lead to the

further attainments with the further restriction of rebirth potential until, with the achievement of *arhathood*, all defilements are eliminated and there are no further rebirths.

But there is a somewhat different take on stream entry, less focused on meditative states and more on a philosophy of life. The following citation from the *Udana* (6.8)[81], a book of short suttas culminating in a verse uttered by the Buddha, illustrates this perspective:

> "What has been attained and what is still to be attained - both these are littered with dust for a frail person ... Those who hold training as the essence, or who hold virtue and vow, pure livelihood, celibacy, and service as the essence - this is one dead end. And those with such theories and such views as: 'There is no fault in sensual desires' - this is the second dead end. Both these dead ends cause the cemeteries to grow, and the cemeteries cause wrong views to grow. By not penetrating these two dead ends some hold back and some go too far."

While it is not surprising that the Buddha called sensual desire a dead end, most people would be surprised that he felt virtue and vow, pure livelihood, celibacy, and service are a dead end too. Most Buddhists would consider these appropriate ways to live your life and the Buddha actually isn't disputing that. What he is pointing out is that even such a way of life can become a dead end if you become attached to it or become dogmatic, using it as a tool to build up a sense of self. The Buddha seems to be pointing to a middle way between the extremes of worldliness and religious practice, a path that is neither monastic nor lay, neither mundane nor deprived of sensory enjoyment.

This passage conflicts directly with the orthodox view on the Buddha's teaching. It seems to suggest that the Buddha had a more fluid and dynamic idea of the Eightfold Path, that he didn't pin it down to specifics. It seems to shatter our preconceived ideas about stream entry and the Eightfold Path. Such a passage probably would not have been inserted by later generations of monks simply because it directly conflicts with the interests of a monastic clergy. This indicates authenticity.

But this passage isn't the only way the Buddha describes stream entry. In a passage from the *Samyutta Nikaya*[82], he emphasizes the four characteristics a stream enterer possesses. The first three are confidence in the Buddha, his

teaching, and the community of people practicing within that teaching: "Here, monks and noble disciples possess confirmed confidence in the Buddha, confirmed confidence in the Dharma, and confirmed confidence in the Sangha." [83] When the Buddha describes the Sangha, he doesn't include just monks and nuns, but anyone who has entered the stream. This could be a lay person, monk or nun. The fourth characteristic is that a stream enterer possesses, "the virtues that are dear to the noble ones, unbroken, untorn, unblemished, unmodeled, freeing, praised by the wise, ungrasped, leading to concentration."[84] These refer to the virtues of confidence, mindfulness, wisdom, and concentration that are held in high regard throughout the Buddhist tradition.

In other words, stream entry isn't the result of some advanced meditative state but rather is a simple basic practice, like that of taking refuge. Today, taking refuge has been relegated to the act of joining the 'Buddhist Church'. When you take refuge, you publically declare that you are a Buddhist. But from the passages cited, the Buddha seems to be declaring stream entry to be taking refuge. This is why so many of the suttas in the Pali Canon end with many of the listeners becoming stream enterers, even though they have never done any meditation.

One perspective is that this view devalues stream entry because it becomes too easy. But rather than devalue stream entry, this view causes us to reflect on the deeper meaning of refuge. To take refuge means to develop trust and confidence in something which can actually offer refuge, rather than trusting in something that doesn't offer refuge or only offers a false sense of refuge. Our lives are littered with instances of taking refuge in things that we think will somehow permanently enhance our sense of self. In the end, though, these things will fail because the world will change and they will no longer offer refuge. Taking refuge in the deepest sense means redirecting our lives from mere transient accomplishments, entertainments and possessions, to the values of awakening. This allows us to infuse every moment of our lives with a deeper sense of awareness, mindfulness, compassion, and care.

Stephen quotes his Tibetan teacher, Geshe Rabten, on refuge, "Every time you practice any aspect of the Dharma, you are taking refuge."

Taking refuge is actually to practice the Dharma, to support and develop

community, and to clarify what your life is really about. Stream entry is really turning toward what gives life meaning and purpose. When you recite the refuge verse, you are not taking refuge in something external to yourself, but rather reminding yourself of the core values that you are trying to live, moment to moment. There is a very deep sense of togetherness and openness in taking refuge, coupled with an ability to turn our lives toward what matters most in the world.

A relationship also exists between morality and stream entry. Verse 231[85] in the *Sutta Nipata* provides a definition that all orthodox Buddhist schools would agree on: "At the attainment of Insight, three things become abandoned: the view of individuality, doubt, and whatever rules of virtuous conduct and vows there may be." The orthodox interpretation of these words is that stream entry is a kind of metaphysical transformation catalyzed by the meditative attainment. The interpretation of stream entry as refuge is more about your public interaction with the world. In particular, the third point, abandoning rules of virtuous conduct, refers back to the citation from the *Udana*. Attachment to virtue and vow, pure livelihood, celibacy, and service are all abandoned as tools for reinforcing the sense of self.

The Buddha is saying something quite radical here: the idea of morality as strictly adhering to a set of rules or vows needs to be set aside at stream entry. Once you have entered the stream, you find your own authority and morality becomes an appropriate response to particular circumstances and situations. "Appropriate" here means infusing the response with wisdom and compassion rather than asking, "What do the texts say about this?"

An example of the Buddha's view on morality and stream entry is another citation in the Pali Canon. The text concerns a man called Sarakani the Shakyan, and is from the *Samyutta Nikaya*[86]:

> On that occasion Sarakani had died. And the Buddha had declared him to be a Stream Enterer, no longer bound to unfortunate realms. Thereupon, a number of Shakyans deplored this. They said, 'It is wonderful indeed, sir. Now who will not be a Stream Enterer, when the Buddha has declared Sarakani to be a Stream Enterer? Sarakani the Shakyan was too weak for the training. He drank intoxicating drinks.' Now when this was reported to the Buddha, he responded, 'If one is speaking rightly of what to say to anyone, he was a lay-follower who had gone to refuge over a long time to

> the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha, it is of Sarakani the Shakyan that one could rightly say this.'

Sarakani was the town drunk of Kapilavastu, the Buddha's hometown, and regularly broke the precept against consuming alcohol. Yet the Buddha declares him to be a stream enterer, one who is independent of others and who is destined for awakening. This passage cuts through the notion that the Sangha is only for those who are morally pure and never stray, it is also open to those who fail. The heart of practice - stream entry - is not definable in terms of outward behavior; it's about a fundamental change in perspective regarding the meaning and purpose of your life. Because a person does something that is unskillful, like Sarakani's drinking problem, doesn't mean that they are not worthy to be part of the community.

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Afterwards, there are many questions. Someone asks about the precept against drinking alcohol and whether the Buddha mentioned the five precepts anywhere in the Pali Canon. Stephen replies that the precepts are rarely mentioned in the suttas. There is one passage in the *Sigalaka Sutta* of the *Digha Nikaya*[87] where the Buddha describes conduct for lay people. He talks about the four primary precepts: not killing, not stealing, not causing sexual harm, and not lying. In a later section, he talks about alcohol. But the precept against alcohol has a different nature than the core precepts. The core precepts have to do with one's conduct in relation to the world, whereas consuming alcohol has to do with damage you may cause yourself.

Someone asks a question about the nature of Sangha. Stephen replies that we need the support of others in our practice. The Sangha is a community of people who support each other. The fact that we seek refuge in the Sangha acknowledges our weaknesses and our need to seek advice. We may not be entirely clear what to do on certain occasions, and friendships in the Sangha are important in helping us clarify our path. The purpose of Sangha is not to create a community where everyone believes the same thing, but rather to create a community where each person enables the others to live a fuller, richer, autonomous existence.

When the questions are over, we return to the bus. On the way back to the hotel, Renate and I have a short discussion with Kevin about our expectations for the

trip.

"I had no real expectations," says Kevin. "I was just interested in seeing the part of India where the Buddha lived. I had read a couple of Stephen's books and I thought he would be a good person to have as a guide on the trip."

"Do you have a daily meditation practice," Renate asks, "or belong to a meditation group?"

Kevin shakes his head. "No, not really," he replies, "I've visited a local *Vipassana* meditation group a couple times but I'm not a regular."

"Well that's interesting," I reply. "That seems to be the case for most people on the trip. Most people are retirees or employed in a way that provides them with plenty of time on their hands for travel."

"I guess you've had some experience with meditation and Buddhism," Kevin says.

I give him a brief summary of my meditation background. He nods.

"I've been thinking about sitting more," he says, "I always feel calmer and more centered after I'm done. It could help me deal with the stresses of my medical practice."

"I was really surprised by Shantum," Renate interjects, "I had expected he would mostly be a guide, but he's got really deep cultivation and skill as a teacher."

"That's true," says Kevin.

Soon we are back at the hotel for lunch.

That afternoon we return to Jeta's Grove for Stephen's final teaching: the Buddha's ideas about society and the individual.

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He begins by reading a passage from the *Samyutta Nikaya*, the parable of the city, which he mentioned before in connection with his theory that the Buddha spent his early adulthood studying in Taxila[88]. The passage offers imagery of a person wandering in the wilderness, finding an ancient city, and later asking the local ruler to renovate it. The Buddha then compared this story to his own life. The Buddha saw the Eightfold Path leading to a city, which metaphorically corresponds to the Four Noble Truths. Normally, the Four Noble Truths are taught as a way to attain *nirvana* and the Eightfold Path as a way to end of suffering. This passage however provides a different picture. The path does not lead to *nirvana*, understood by the Theravadan tradition as the transcendence of life and death, but to the recreation of a city.

A city is the foundation of a civilization, an environment with enough people who have different skills so they can divide labor and who live in close enough proximity so they can communicate more or less instantly. In such an environment, art, science, culture, and religion can flourish. This passage makes a direct connection between the Dharma and human life on earth. The Buddha seems to be suggesting that his teaching leads to another kind of civilization. He seems to be encouraging the Dharma as a way to transform this world rather than as a way to leave it.

Another example of the Buddha's concern for the implications of his teaching in this world was how he described his Sangha. The Buddha described his Sangha as an ocean[89], "Just as whatever great rivers there are, the Ganges... On reaching the Great Ocean, they lose their former names and identities and are just called the Great Ocean. So also, those of the four casts, Nobles, Brahmins, Merchants, and Workers, having gone forth from home to the homeless state in the dhamma and discipline, abandon their former names and identities and are just called recluses, the followers of the Shakyan son." This is a reference to the *Upanishads*, for example the *Mundaka Upanishad*, which describes the Brahmanical belief about what happens at death[90], "As the flowing rivers disappear into the sea, losing their name and form, so a wise man freed from name and form goes to the divine person who is greater than the great." Just as with the Twelve Links, the Buddha has repurposed this metaphor so that instead of referring to something metaphysical and transcendental, it refers to something psychological and social, which in the Buddha's time would have been considered spiritual. The Upanishad metaphor describes the loss of the ego identity at death; the Buddha's reframing refers to the loss of cast identity upon

joining the Sangha. The Buddha saw his teaching as a way to transform society, rather than a means for dissolving the individual person.

The Buddha continued the metaphor[91]: "Just as the Great Ocean has one taste, the taste of salt, so also this dhamma and discipline has one taste: the taste of freedom." The image of the ocean was an image of social change or transformation for India, and an image of liberation that occurs through breaking free of caste identity. The Buddha's message of social transformation was something that the he hoped would one day prevail in India but it failed. The reason it failed was because the Buddha failed to institute his teaching in a way that could fundamentally re-structure Indian society. The movement quickly became an organized religion after the Buddha died and lost any connection with social transformation. Professional monastics came to dominate the Sangha and they concentrated their message on individual liberation of a transcendental sort rather than social change.

The Buddha's teaching on the individual has often been problematic for Westerners, but it is integral to his view of how the ideal civilization contributes to the liberation of its members. The Buddha taught *anatta*, a Pali word that many Westerners translate as "no self" Anatta is one of the three marks of existence, along with *anicca*, impermanence, and *dukkha*, unsatisfactoriness or suffering. But you can't have a civilization or culture, of people working together, of an ocean where everyone is liberated to somehow realize themselves, without a notion of a self. What the Buddha meant by anatta is that the self is not a solid, fixed thing, but more like a process. In the *Sutta Nipata*[92], the Buddha said, "By action..." which is karma "...is one a farmer, by action a craftsman, a merchant, a servant, a thief, a soldier, a priest, by action one is a ruler. In this way, the wise see action as it is. They see conditions are rising and understand the results of action." In other words, the self arises out of conditions, is created as a consequence of conditioned arising, with the conditions in this case being one's actions. What you do in the world is what creates your identity.

In the *Dhammapada* verse 80[93], the Buddha said, "Just as a farmer irrigates his field, just as a fletcher fashions an arrow, just as a carpenter shapes a piece of wood, so does the sage tame the self." The self is something we have to work with, in the same way a carpenter works with wood, a farmer works his fields or an arrow maker works with his flint. The work we do is the work of practice: meditation, observing the precepts, and following the Eightfold Path together with others. The Buddha sees everything that constitutes human existence as

malleable. The self is a project to be realized by our actions, a project that will lead us beyond our self. This is a coherent vision of human life flourishing when we are on the path.

Other religions also have an idea of a trajectory with a destination. In Buddhism, that destination is awakening. The founders offer frameworks within which to cultivate life to allow life to flourish. The Greeks have a word for it, *eudaimonia*, which means "human flourishing." The practice of Dharma is more than meditation, it is also cultivating a way of thinking, speaking, and acting that leads to human flourishing. Dharma practices are not practices that lead to a private transcendental liberation but rather require the presence of others and are embedded in our social relations. They lead not just to our own independence, but also to the emergence of an awakened civilization and culture.

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Afterwards, Stephen takes questions from the pilgrims. One of the pilgrims asks Stephen to talk more about the relationship between the Four Noble Truths and the Path. He replies that you can summarize the Four Noble Truths by the following four short phrases: embrace, let go, stop, act. These spell out ELSA if you want to shorten it even further into an acronym. We (E)mbrace suffering, (L)et go of clinging, (S)top suffering, and (A)ct along the Path. You need to start with *dukkha*, the unsatisfactory feeling you have most of the time about your life. You need to confront that, embracing it in such a way that you recognize the unsatisfactory feeling is caused by grasping at things outside yourself as a way to enhance your feelings of self. Once you've recognized that grasping, you can notice moments when it stops. That is nirvana and the stopping opens up a path, the Eightfold Path, and an entering into the stream. But the Eightfold Path leads to a kind of loop. When you get to the end of the path, at mindfulness and concentration, the object of mindfulness and concentration is *dukkha*, suffering. The practice is not just a different kind of knowledge; it is a different affective relationship with the world.

Someone shouts out a question: why does stopping craving need to precede the path? Stephen replies that craving tightens you up and creates a kind of behavior that might be characterized as acting out. The Buddha described this as a trap, stuck without any possibility of movement. To get out of that trap, you need to let go of your grip on your exaggerated concern with yourself. As long as you maintain that grip, you won't enter on the path. Letting go of that grip allows the

energies of life to flow.

Another question pops up, a woman says that she thought the possibility of releasing clinging came at the end of the path and that the problem with the way the Eightfold Path was presented was that it was presented as a sequence, the first, then the second, *etc.*

"If you are ready to make a transformative change, you first need to unblock something deep inside yourself," Stephen replies. "You need to release whatever is keeping you captive, so that life can really flow through you. At certain key moments in your life, a significant shift in perspective takes place. It might be an act of taking refuge or some deep insight gained on a meditationretreat, where for a moment you see that things don't have to be the way they've always been, that a genuine transformation is actually possible."

Stephen pauses for a moment, then continues, "On the other hand, most of us have a very vivid sense that we don't change all that much. Our genetic inheritance, the neurological structures in our brains and our deepest psychological habits are pretty set. We can talk about change, but we need to realize that we are up against some pretty steep odds opposed to it happening, particularly for those habits and psychological traits that develop early in life. The notion of change needs to be seen in the context of the relative stabilities and constants in ourselves and the world around us."

Another person asks if there is such a thing as the "existential self". Stephen replies that this is precisely what the Buddha's teaching is addressing. It is concerned with such existential issues as what does it mean to be born, grow old, get sick, and die? And ultimately: what does it mean to be human? When the Buddha talks about entering the Eightfold Path, he's actually talking in metaphor about certain existential movements within our own identity. These movements shift our perspective and approach to life from one that is rather neurotic and compulsive to one that is more creative and open.

Someone brings up the three marks of existence: *anicca* (impermanence), *anatta* (the completely impersonal nature of the world or nonself), and *dukkha* (suffering). Stephen says that the three marks of existence are a very succinct way of describing the practice of fully knowing *dukkha* which is the First Noble Truth. *Dukkha* doesn't mean just *dukkha*; it means *anicca* and *anatta* as well. It is

the totality of our experience. The First Truth seeks to make that visible and one way to grasp this is to pay specific attention to impermanence and to the impersonal nature of all things and all events, *i.e.* to *anicca* and *anatta*. That is fully knowing *dukkha*.

A pilgrim asks a question about Stephen's view of practice as developing the self, whether that isn't somehow in conflict with *anatta*. Stephen replies that the problem arises when we draw the conclusion from *anatta* that there is no self at all. The self is an emergent phenomenon of systems interacting, very tentative and fluid. We need to strike a balance between grasping at self, ignoring what other people and the world need to just address our own needs, and not taking basic care of ourselves. He also says that he is aware of the danger of using terms such as "transformation of self" or "development of self", since these are used by flaky, New Age types, and he doesn't want to be considered some kind of New Age guru.

Finally, someone asks whether it makes sense to try to transform the self before transforming society. Stephen replies that in an ideal world, that would be the right direction to go, but we don't have that luxury. The crises of the modern world keep pressing in on us, demanding that we respond. Ignoring these problems until we sort ourselves out would not be an adequate response. You might decide you want to be a monk and work on yourself for 10 years, but life keeps throwing issues at us. If we are morally responsible, we need to do something about it. It doesn't matter if we are perfect.

After the questions are exhausted, Stephen and Shantum describe the plan for the next morning. We will have a closing ceremony and, since tomorrow will be the full moon day of January, the ceremony will be an Uposatha ceremony[94]. After that, we will recite our poems. Darkness is falling as we straggle out of the grove toward the bus. Above us, an almost full moon rides high into the sky. The pilgrimage is now just about over. Tomorrow, we leave for Lucknow, where the group will split into two. Shantum will take most of the group to Agra and Ajanta by night train, and Stephen will fly with those few of us returning to Delhi the next day.

ELSA

Embrace suffering -First Noble Truth

Let go of clinging - Second Noble Truth
Stop suffering - Third Noble Truth
Act along the Path - Fourth Noble Truth

Day 14 - Closing Ceremony and Lucknow

I wake up early this morning, thinking about the ceremony. Should I take the 5 Mindfulness Trainings today with Shantum and Stephen? Renate has signed up for them. I have been turning the idea over in my mind occasionally for the past few days. I mull this over for the thousandth time. I am certainly a committed meditator and a Buddhist. But a strong thought arises: I don't know what the responsibilities are. I have already taken the Refuges with other teachers and even the 5 Precepts as part of my Zen *tokudo* ordination in 1994. I did not know enough about the consequences or responsibilities of taking those vows at the time. Is my concern with responsibilities then an excuse for inaction?

I continue to think about the topic as I shower and prepare for the day. Stephen considers taking the Precepts and Refuges to be a serious commitment to turning away from the path of confusion and suffering and toward the Eightfold Path of release and peace. If that is so, then I have made this commitment long ago, and I don't feel the need to do it just now, here again. Does that make me merely some kind of spiritual tourist? I return to the question with which I started the pilgrimage, what is pilgrimage really? What differentiates a pilgrimage from a vacation? Riding on an elephant or not? Gathering photos and souvenirs? Even Xuanzang gathered seven Buddha statues to take home with him, and nobody could accuse him of being a tourist.

In the end, it comes down to this: I have the feeling that taking the precepts at the beginning of the pilgrimage, like one does on retreat to provide a kind of container for intensified practice, would have been better than at the end. I mentioned this to Stephen a few days ago when he first announced the plans for the end of the pilgrimage and he disagreed. He feels that people need to know what the precepts are about, and the pilgrimage provides that context. This is consistent with his view that the precepts are a major transition in one's life, rather than a transition from a basically lay lifestyle to a temporary monastic lifestyle which is the function they play when taken at the beginning of retreat. Stephen views taking precepts as a much more profound and transformational event than other meditation teachers. For him, it is the essence of stream entry.

After breakfast we head back to Jetavana by bus. Charlie Marshel has mysteriously appeared again after having spent the night with the peace marchers. After a short sitting on the *Mulagandhakuti* platform, we begin the closing ceremony. Shantum chants the *Heart Sutra*, in a version that Thich Nhat Hanh teaches, and then the group recites the 5 Mindfulness Trainings together. The Mindfulness Trainings are a reframing of the traditional Zen precepts with a more modern, affirmative slant, phrased to cultivate awareness about the negative mind states and actions the precept is designed to counter. For example, here are the first three traditional Zen precepts and Mindfulness trainings for comparison:[95]

> First traditional Zen precept: A disciple of the Buddha does not kill.
>
> First Mindfulness Training: Aware of the suffering caused by the destruction of life, I am committed to cultivating the insight of interbeing and compassion and learning ways to protect the lives of people, animals, plants, and minerals
>
> Second traditional Zen precept: A disciple of the Buddha does not take what is not given.
>
> Second Mindfulness Training: Aware of the suffering caused by exploitation, social injustice, stealing, and oppression, I am committed to practicing generosity in my thinking, speaking, and acting.
>
> Third traditional Zen precept: A disciple of the Buddha does not misuse sexuality.
>
> Third Mindfulness Training: Aware of the suffering caused by sexual misconduct, I am committed to cultivating responsibility and learning ways to protect the safety and integrity of individuals, couples, families, and society.

Each person who takes the precepts comes up to Shantum and receives a Dharma name and a small certificate saying that they have taken the 5 Mindfulness Trainings. The Trainings expire after three months unless the practitioner takes them again. The recommendation is to take them every full and new moon day, like the old Uposatha ceremony. The ceremony around the taking of the Mindfulness Trainings is quite beautiful and very moving. Only 5 people don't take the Trainings, and I am among them. To the very end, I cannot

decide and so fail to take them by default.

We then form a circle and recite our poems. Charlie Marshel does a stream of consciousness description of his experience with the peace marchers, acting out parts. Kevin's poem is in praise of our "white rhinoceros bus with its elephant horn" and our adept Sikh driver. I read my gloomy poem, *Night Plane to Varanasi*, and everyone is quiet. It is dark and terrifying, not full of light and peace:

Night Plane to Varanasi

What will happen when the climate changes?
When the monsoon stops and the wells run dry?
When the food is gone?

Will people kill and eat their sacred cows, and then, perhaps themselves?
Or will they share and then lie down and die peacefully?

The Mind of Compassion longs to find the World behind the World,
Where one small change causes an epidemic
Of Wisdom and Compassion.
Like a computer program controlling a virtual world,
Change three lines of program code
And the threat of extinction recedes.

Yet the Mind of Wisdom knows this is not so,
The Master, old Shakyamuni[96]*, said it.*
Each of us must find Wisdom and Compassion on our own,
all 7 billion and counting.

Person by person, breath by breath.

Afterwards, as we are filing out of the *Mulagandhakuti* platform, Sophie pulls me aside.

"You know," she whispers, "Your poem was really good but really scary."

"Well," I reply, "It's realistic. When the food supply runs out due to overpopulation, animals often start eating each other."

She nods and we follow the group back to the bus.

After lunch, we have a five hour drive to Lucknow. On the outskirts of the city, the road becomes something like a Bay Area limited access expressway or a New York parkway, having two lanes in either direction with defined entrances and exits but with occasional stoplights. It has three times the traffic of an expressway, however, and much of it is bicycles, pedestrians, three wheeled motor rickshaws, called tuk-tuks from the noise they make, and big trucks. At the Gomati River, the driver turns south and we follow the drive along the river. We arrive at our hotel, the Lucknow Taj, around 7:30 PM. The Taj is a modern hotel like the Radisson in Varanasi, but the rooms seem nicer and the common areas are more luxuriously apportioned, with art work and fine carpets. The hotel's patrons seem to be mostly wealthy Indians wearing nice clothing, in contrast to the clientele in the Radisson which was mostly tourists. At dinner we discover that the food is also much better than at the Radisson. There is a large buffet which has many types of food, including some non-Indian food, and, wonder of wonder, chocolate desserts! I help myself to a hefty portion when the dessert part of the meal comes around.

After dinner, we assemble in a lounge and do our last strucks. To start, Sophie passes around a small bottle of Echinacea in alcohol. It seems everyone has a sore throat or a cold. I take a couple drops because the sore throat has returned and seems to be moving up to my sinuses. Shantum requests that we all introduce ourselves and talk a bit about our lives, something he had said we would do at the beginning of the pilgrimage, but which we simply didn't have time for then. The effect is peculiar. Though there are some people with whom I have talked in depth about their background, like Charlie Marshel, others I know little about except their name. Bill Vogel does a sort of complete autobiography. I keep my introduction short. Most people have fascinating stories, and I listen with rapt attention, but some go on far too long. It is really a pity that we didn't have an opportunity to introduce ourselves at the beginning of the trip.

Then, sadly, we begin the transition from a community of the pilgrims into everyday life. Even though we didn't know much about each other's backgrounds, we've shared a lot: traffic jams, hordes of beggars and vendors,

food, elephant rides, beautiful sunsets, conversations over meals, to say nothing of great teachings and great meditation sittings. During silent meditation retreats, many meditators report feeling a strong sense of community even though nobody talks. The act of sitting together in shared silence can forge a powerful bond. The breaking up of the pilgrimage is not as drastic a transition as moving out of a silent retreat, but the feeling is there. The people visiting Agra and the Taj Mahal, which is most of the group, are leaving by overnight train from the Lucknow station around 11:00 PM so they must depart by bus immediately. As they walk out the door, even after we have said goodbye, I find myself following them, drawn as if the bonds we have formed are somehow physical, like rubber bands that don't want to break. I check myself as I near the door, and return into the hotel, and Renate and I head up to bed.

Day 15 - Lucknow to Delhi and the Conclusion of the Pilgrimage

We depart the hotel at 7:45 AM after a breakfast that is as good as the dinner the night before: eggs, pancakes and even chocolate croissants. Shantum has accompanied most of the group to Agra, so Stephen, who finds Agra too touristy and has seen it before, takes the rest of us to the airport for our flight to Delhi. Our much reduced group now consists of ten people, including Burt, Renate, and me. The airport is not crowded, but the breakfast coffee has had its usual effect on my bladder and I have to walk a long distance to the usual filthy Indian public toilet. We negotiate the checkin and security check with none of the chaos that accompanied our departure to Patna from Delhi at the beginning of the trip. In the departure lounge, I update my diary. The last few days have been so packed with activities that I have not had any time to write. So I write and write, about the brick ruins and UFO in Sravasti, the cheery Tibetans, the Jetavana and *Mulagandhakuti*, my gloomy poem, and about the fine dinner and breakfast at the Lucknow Taj. Soon our flight is called and we board the plane.

Sharda, one of Shantum's coworkers at Eleven Directions, meets us at the airport in Deli. Our baggage comes out on the wrong belt, which causes me a bit of anxiety though I had been relaxed up to that point. But we find it in the end and everyone's baggage arrives without incident. We assemble outside the terminal and Sharda presents us all with some gifts: incense, a bar of sandalwood soap, a book by Gandhi about *ahimsa*, and a four inch tall terra cotta replica of the Sarnath Buddha. Renate and I sign over our remaining travelers checks to the Ahimsa Trust and give them to Sharda.

Stephen will stay in Delhi for a few days with Shantum's family, then head off to the Ajanta and Ellora caves to meet with the others. The remaining pilgrims in our group will either stay in Dehli for a few days or leave late in the evening and spend the rest of the day in a hotel at the airport. Burt, Renate and I are also leaving in the evening, but we are planning to visit the National Museum and the Crafts Museum during the day. At the Crafts Museum, artists from all around India sell their wares directly to the public. Renate has been saving her souvenir buying until now so that she can buy directly from the artists. We all say

goodbye and Burt, Renate, and I head over into the parking lot to meet the driver that Sharda has hired for us.

The driver takes us around Delhi, showing us the National Parliament building before bringing us to the Crafts Museum. The exhibits of crafts are not particularly interesting, housed in dark buildings with very little explanation of social context, but the artists' wares, spread out in stalls around the courtyard, are quite beautiful. Renate purchases a beautiful shawl, some carvings and a few prints, and spends time talking with some of the crafts people. She has in the past done such artistic work herself and enjoys the conversations almost as much as the buying. Burt also buys a couple of items. In the gift shop, I buy a tin of ginger green tea. After our shopping expedition, we sit in the shade of the veranda by the museum restaurant and have a light lunch of samosas.

Next we visit the National Museum. We spend a lot of time in the exhibit on the Harappan civilization in the Indus Valley, which began in the mid to late 3rd millennium BC. Around 1900 BC, the civilization began to decline.[97] It seems plausible from the exhibit that the Buddha may have visited the ruins during a stay at the university in Taxila, but of course impossible to prove. We also spend time in an excellent exhibit of Ghandharan sculpture and visit a display of the cremation urn containing relics of the Buddha, which was excavated in Kapilavastu. It looks exactly like the urn on display at the museum in Patna. The Thais contributed a golden exhibit case, and a sign on the case warns not to leave offerings. I want very much to take a picture to complement the one I took in Patna, but I'm not able to because photography is forbidden and, unlike the case in Patna, there is a guard standing nearby, watching the exhibit case closely.

Our last stop is the Veda restaurant on Outer Connaught Circle, highly recommended to Burt by a friend back in the Bay Area. The driver circles around some, whining about parking and offers to take us to another restaurant, which no doubt gives him a kickback for recommending it, but we are adamant, and he finds the Veda and a parking space nearby. The restaurant is dark and practically empty. We order a vegetarian tandoori plate, one of the best meals we've had in India, and well worth the hassle with the driver. On the way out to the car, a begging woman confronts us and Burt gives her a 5 rupee coin. But it is too little, so she insists on more, following us back to the car. We ignore her, but this is something that has changed in India since we visited 30 years ago. In

the car, we talk about the incident. Perhaps it is due to rising prosperity or to inflation, or perhaps it is just that most Westerners are good targets for this kind of behavior, and inevitably pony up more money.

The driver drops us off at the airport. We pay him for the day and give him a nice tip. Burt's plane leaves later so he does not enter the terminal but takes a taxi to a nearby hotel to spend some time sleeping before his departure. The last of our pilgrimage group is dissolving. All day, I have been feeling a bit sad as the last remnants of our pilgrimage community break up. This is something I am not used to. Many people report this kind of feeling when a long retreat breaks up, but I have never felt a strong community bond during long retreats. Maybe the difference lies in the lack of speaking during a retreat. For me, community builds out of communication, and communication requires talking. Most of the pilgrims were not people I would normally practice with, but then most of them weren't really practicing Buddhists anyway.

The trip back to San Francisco is uneventful. I spend the night watching movies on the Continental in-flight entertainment system and napping. My sore throat and sinus problems worsen, but I drink a lot and resolve to take an antibiotic when we get back. In the Newark airport, I check my email on my cell phone and we eat a small breakfast. The plane into San Francisco departs on time and we land in San Francisco around 10:00 AM. The weather is sunny and cool, almost exactly like Delhi when we left. We arrive home around 11 by cab and, after showering and changing, I head off to work for a two day strategic planning meeting with the managers and senior technical people in our research group. Coming back from the pilgrimage, I feel relaxed and ready to meet the challenges of the day. My mind is now fully back in the high tech reality of Silicon Valley, and the last two weeks seem somehow like a dream.

Epilog - Mindfulness and the Tyranny of Transcendence

Renate and I are still happily married despite the severe lack of communication that accompanied the proverbial marriage-threatening remodel. A set of expensive marriage counselling sessions helped us unravel some of our misunderstandings. Two years after my breakdown in Barre, I made it up to Renate that I had forced her to cancel her hiking trip in Yosemite. I invited her on the six day High Sierra hike in Yosemite, where we enjoyed fabulous views and great food at the High Sierra camps. I'm still working in Silicon Valley, and mostly enjoying it. I didn't stop meditating after literally losing my mind at the Forest Refuge retreat in 2011. Life goes on as does my Buddhist practice.

But that experience shattered my basic approach to practice. With the exception of a few years while I was practicing with Yvonne, each meditation retreat since 1989 had been a new voyage in a life of exploration and discovery. The promise of transcendental vistas opening out into the "other world" and the possibility of transcending rebirth through enlightenment kept me coming back - retreat after retreat. Now, after going temporarily insane, I'm left with the real world and its stubborn imperviousness to change, myself included. I approach even short retreats with wariness, never knowing whether I will end up flipping out again. What I'm looking for in retreats now is mainly some release from the stresses of working in Silicon Valley high tech and an opportunity to rededicate myself to the fundamental work: to cultivate wisdom and compassion in a world of greed, hatred, and delusion, in myself and in the world. It is more than enough.

My dedication to environmental issues has not changed, but I've stopped believing that I can solve the problem by myself. Renate and I have managed to achieve a big reduction in our household and automotive carbon footprint since we began really trying in 2001. This was not possible 20 years ago. Industrial civilization now gives us choices for low carbon alternatives in many areas of life. Unfortunately in areas where we don't have a choice, the high carbon solution is still always the default. For example, I have to travel a lot by air for business which generates a lot of carbon, but I try to combine trips to avoid flying more often than necessary. Individual efforts won't save the world from

cooking though. Tough policy decisions which the politicians and decision makers have been putting off for 25 years are needed. And even if those decisions are forthcoming, they will only slow down the inevitable. More important now is helping the world adapt to a much hotter future. Impermanence is the first of the three marks of existence, in climate and ecosystems as well as in human life.

What happened in 2011? Concentration meditation, when practiced to an extreme, can result in an altered state of consciousness. The state is similar to but not the same as the altered states that are artificially induced by psychedelic drugs. Approaching concentration meditation with the wrong mindset can lead the meditator to see, hear, and experience an event as actually occurring when that event is really just constructed from the meditator's emotions and beliefs. Indeed, belief itself functions like a drug. A belief causes the person holding it to filter perceived events and construct explanations in a way that ignores data contrary to the belief and emphasizes conclusions that reinforce the belief.[98] If you had asked me in 2011, I would have said that I didn't believe in devas and daemons and rebirth, even though I did hold open the possibility that these metaphysical constructs existed and that transcendence of rebirth through enlightenment was possible. Under the influence of deep concentration, the metaphysical became physical to me. In a sense, the old saying "seeing is believing" was reversed to become "believing is seeing".

The problem is just that fundamental human belief in the possibility of transcendence can exercise a tyranny over the human mind. If I ask you whether, deep down, you believe that some aspect of your personal self - whether the *bhavanga* or the soul or the *atman* - will transcend your physical life you would probably answer yes - if you were being perfectly honest. For some people, this belief is what gives their lives meaning, for others it is just a comforting thought. But belief in transcendence is a delusion. Your self is not a fixed thing. It really is just a conditioned process with a beginning, duration, and end, the end being your death. Your attachment to your view of self-as-permanent-thing leads to a grasping at life and the events, people and things in it. This in turn generates a clinging to the notion that, somehow, in some form, something will continue past your physical death. It's almost like a reflex. But the reality of how life works means that when the physical conditions become unfavorable for the body and brain to continue functioning, our mental life will cease too. The belief in the possibility of transcendence reflects the larger problem: desire of the self for

more. Whether it's more of what supports and nurtures its feeling of existence as a real solid thing in life or a desire to have that feeling-real-solid-thing continue after death, the self wants more of it.

Mindfulness is the antidote to the reflex of self-attachment and the desire for more, and mindfulness can help us realize that there is nothing at all transcendent about ourselves. Applying mindfulness to the body, breath, and thoughts can lead to seeing the connections between them. Applying mindfulness to the self leads to seeing how we construct the self, sometimes many times in the course of a day, to handle various situations and people. Through this, you can achieve the realization that the Buddha spoke of in the *Mahanidana Sutta*: consciousness conditions the mind and body and the mind and body conditions consciousness, but the self doesn't go any further back than that. This, then, is the key to liberation from the tyranny of transcendence.

The traditional schools of Buddhism don't agree, and their narrative is based on rebirth and its transcendence through enlightenment. They point to parts of the Pali Canon where the Buddha was reported to have taught metaphysical content in support of their narrative. The Canon is full of stories about the Buddha talking with devas and daemons, reporting on the past lives of people, and consoling relatives of the recently departed with stories about their loved ones' rebirth in a higher realm or, if the deceased was a scoundrel, how he or she met justice in a lower realm.

I've seen three different reactions from Secular Buddhists to this argument. The first reaction is that these reports were not part of the Buddha's original teaching, and that they were inserted later, by religious monastics in order to reinforce a religious reading on the Buddha's basically secular teachings. This view ignores how deeply these reports are intertwined into the stories of the Pali Canon. The embedding of the metaphysical content in these stories lends credence to their having actually been a part of the Buddha's original words. The second reaction is that the Buddha was speaking metaphorically in his reports. This view can't explain why at other cases in the Pali Canon the Buddha actually does speak metaphorically and says so. The third reaction is that the Buddha used these reports of metaphysical experiences tactically, to advance his teachings on ethical topics or simply as a way to comfort people who were suffering even though he didn't believe in them himself. This seems totally out of character,

since it is completely at variance with the Buddha's own teachings on Right Speech, and is therefore highly unlikely to be the case in my opinion.

While there is evidence from the *Mahasihanada Sutta*, discussed above in *Day 2*, that toward the end of his life the Buddha had begun to teach that he had no special powers, I believe that for most of his teaching carrier the Buddha did in fact experience these metaphysical objects as real. This is based on my own experience with visions of karma, past lives, devas, daemons, and other realms. He probably experienced them in conjunction with concentration meditation, and reported on what he saw as accurately as possible. Like most people of his time, the Buddha probably believed that these visions corresponded in some sense to objective reality, for some time, possibly most of his life, after his breakthrough under the Bodhi Tree. No doubt this enhanced his reputation as a teacher, as can be seen by the *Mahasihanada Sutta* reports that some monks started deserting the Sangha when he stopped teaching metaphysical material.

Such visions are consistent with the premodern (and indeed modern) mindset. Here are a few examples of other people who have had such visions:

- In 366 AD Le Zun, a Buddhist monk was inspired by a vision of a thousand Buddhas, bathed in a golden light, to found a monastery at the Caves of a Thousand Buddhas in Dunhuang, western China.

- Jeanne d'Arc's series of visions of Saint Catherine, Saint Michael, and Saint Margaret starting in 1424 when she was 12 drove her to become a warrior and to lead the French army in ousting the English from Orleans.

- Herbert Weiss, a shepherd at the monastery of St. Stephen in eastern Franconia, had a vision of the Fourteen Protective Saints in 1445 which led to the construction of the beautiful Baroque church, the Vierzehnheiligen near Bad Staffelstein.

- Carl Jung, the well-known 20th century psychoanalyst and one of the founders of transpersonal psychology, had a series of visions from 1913 to 1916 which drove him to develop his theories of archetypes, the collective unconscious, and the development of the self.[99]

There are many such reports from all cultures and across thousands of years of history. They all differ, sometimes quite radically, in the details of their mystic or metaphysical story. None of them correspond to any aspect of objective

reality.

These experiences are cultivated by practitioners of various religions even today. T. M. Luhrmann, a professor of anthropology at Stanford, studied the fundamentalist Christian community in the US and found that a large percentage report hearing God talk to them and sometimes they even respond.[100] Many fundamentalist churches emphasize having a "personal" relationship with God and chatting now and then during prayer is considered to be a good way to do it. Another set of practitioners, loosely affiliated with Tibetan Buddhism, cultivate a vision of an imaginary friend, called a *tulpa*.[101] But keeping the vision alive requires a lot of work, basically concentration meditation. And hearing God's voice requires intensive prayer sessions, which are like concentration meditation. So, in a way, the beliefs of these fundamentalists and *tulpa* cultivators fill the concentration meditation and become real, just like mine did in 2011.

Perhaps more troubling is that the psychiatric profession, when confronted with reports about "hearing voices" treats these kinds of simple, harmless hallucinations as mental illness. In 1973, D. L. Rosenhan did a study in which volunteers went to a psychiatrist and reported that they were hearing voices.[102] The reported voices were not threatening or violent and the volunteers showed no other symptoms of illness. They were all committed to a psychiatric institution for 3 months. Though I didn't know about this experiment at the time, I'm positive that if I had told the psychiatrist in the hospital in Massachusetts that I was hearing voices, I probably would have been committed too.

On the other hand, my hallucinations were not entirely benign. While they were at times threatening, I was mostly able to outwit or otherwise resolve the threat, sometimes with help from other hallucinated characters. Most people with schizophrenia hear voices which are harshly commanding or threatening, and often crowds of people screaming hour after hour, day after day. My auditory hallucinations were accompanied by visual hallucinations, and they rather fit together into a consistent story, a story in which I was the hero and was saving the world. But to the extent that my hallucinations leaked out into my outward behavior and resulted in actions which were, charitably speaking, antisocial, those around me had justifiable cause for concern.

While the scientific and popular press have many reports about the positive

benefits of meditation (and there are many), very little is said about negative outcomes. They are more common than most people think, as anyone can see by searching for "meditation induced psychosis" on the Internet. Negative outcomes can result from any intense form of meditation. Their impact depends highly on the basic psychological stability of the student going into the experience and the actual content of the negative experience. Many students take years to move beyond their difficulties, and some never do. One woman I've met began hearing daemon voices from different parts of her body while on a long *Vipassana* retreat and almost ended up in the emergency room. Since that retreat, she has been unable to work and unable to meditate because the voices always come back. I was, in a sense very lucky in that the negative symptoms of psychosis subsided quickly, allowing me to resume my normal life.

Dr. Willoughby Britton, professor at Brown University, has been studying negative outcomes.[103] In particular, during certain phases of meditative development, students can experience real psychological problems with depression and relationships. These phases are collectively called the "Dark Night" from the Christian tradition's characterization of a related but distinctly different phase in Christian mystic spiritual development.[104] That stage, and another called "Re-observation",[105] in which psychosis can occur, can lead people to abandon practice altogether, especially if the teachers they are working with haven't fully trained in the stages of insight. Daniel Ingram has published[106] a map describing an updated version of the traditional Theravadan stages of insight which can help students put their difficulties in context (Footnotes 2, 10, 32, and 68 chronicle my meditation experience according to Ingram's map). Meditation is a powerful technique for achieving deep personal transformation, and in that process, negative outcomes can occur.

Most teachers, when confronted with a student having a negative outcome, will either insist that the student hasn't practiced the technique properly or that there is some basic flaw in the student's psychological makeup which caused the negative outcome. Dejected, those students often leave the community and silence about the events descends. On the other hand psychiatric professionals are by and large unfamiliar with meditation practice and the possibility of a negative reaction to it, and therefore may tend to misjudge a student's reaction as being more or less serious than it really is. Students feeling overwhelmed as a result of traversing one of the difficult stages of insight need to be able to get

medical help. If such help is not available or not delivered in a way that is understanding of the their situation, students can feel isolated, without any resources to overcome their difficulties.

The possibility of a negative outcome needs more discussion in the Western meditation community. Negative outcomes are to meditation practice what injuries are to yoga, something that can happen and students need to be aware that they can happen. With proper care and attention, just like with a yoga injury, students can work through a negative outcome and continue to make progress. Every teacher should periodically hold a talk about it in a straightforward way, and the information sheets for retreats should mention the possibility. Meditation centers should develop a protocol about how to handle a student that is exhibiting signs of having a negative reaction. If at all possible, treatments such as locking the student up in a glass fronted cage for 72 hours with a guard in front of the door should not be part of the protocol, unless the student is exhibiting signs of extreme agitation and violence. Unfortunately, the legal system in many states limits what centers can do. The treatment of mental illness has many problems in general, and much progress is needed in developing treatments that are both humane and safe, for both the suffering patient and those around him.

In a way, given the tendency of the human mind to construct hallucinations based on belief, the fact that the Buddha was able to separate out the more analytical, objective teachings based on his observations about how his mind worked from the more metaphysical, mystical visions is even more astounding. Most saints, holy men and women, and founders of religions weren't able to make the distinction. But the evidence from the suttas is incontrovertible in this regard, even though the traditional Buddhist schools and especially the commentaries to the Pali Canon tend to underplay the more analytical teachings and overplay the more metaphysical. With the development of Secular Buddhism, there is now some hope that this imbalance can be corrected. The Buddha clearly defined the need to maintain views, particularly on the self, that were in resonance with wisdom and compassion. That is why Right View is the first step on the Eightfold Path. I hope that this book may contribute to spreading the Buddha's teachings on the individual and society, which were abandoned or heavily watered down after the First Council, so that they can flourish again and contribute to reducing greed, hatred, and delusion in the 21st century.

Afterward

Unlike autobiography and history, memoir as a literary art form can include varying degrees of fictionalization. But unlike the historical novel, the amount of factual material must hover considerably north of 75% or the author's characterization of the text as "memoir" isn't credible. This creates a difficult tension between truth and fiction that every memoir author must juggle. Nobody can remember the exact words of a conversation had 30 years ago, yet including such conversations in memoir is vital to keeping the story lively and interesting. So constructing a conversation around the topic discussed and rendering the words based on the characters involved is usually necessary. Similarly, most people's lives aren't really interesting enough that a straight up recitation of day to day events would keep a reader's attention for more than a few minutes. At best, such a text would read like James Joyce's *Ulysses*. At worst, it would read like badly written journalism, perhaps published in a hyper-local newspaper.

While I have tried to keep the amount of fictionalization to a minimum, I have introduced the most fictionalization into the pilgrimage thread. With the exception of Helen, Stephen, Shantum, Renate and me, the other pilgrims are mostly composite characters. That is, I've taken the incidents experienced and the conversations had and overheard from multiple people and condensed them into a single character, and I've changed the personal details around. None of the conversations, incidents, or events is fictional however. With thirty people on the pilgrimage, it was impossible to keep everyone in the story, and having a person appear only once or twice did not allow enough time to build up a character and really relate it to the plot and theme. I apologize to my fellow pilgrims if I offended anyone. Fortunately none of them were stereotypes like the pilgrims in *Canterbury Tales*. They were all really great people, interesting, lively, and fun to travel with.

I have edited the talks given by Stephen Batchelor, in some cases heavily. In the talks about the Buddha's life and other historical events, I have added background material obtained through research after the pilgrimage to make the text more informative for readers who might not be familiar with the life and times of the Buddha. These talks are formatted in line with the preceding and following text flow. In most of the Dharma talks, I have removed redundant or

confusing material, moved some material around from one talk to another to reinforce the theme in the recipient talk, included references to the relevant canonical and non-canonical texts, and in many cases written up the talk based on my understanding. These talks have been set off from the preceding and following text flow as an indication of the changes. If, in any talk, I specifically cite Stephen, I either say that or set up the scene as dialog or monolog with Stephen talking, naturally reflecting what was discussed but possibly not exactly matching the words that were spoken.

In addition to these changes, I moved one conversation between Stephen and me from *Day 6 Afternoon* to *Day 11* on the bus. The topic discussed, *jhana* meditation, needed to be located after the general introduction to *jhana* in *Flashback 2003-2010* and before my disastrous attempt to attain *jhana* in *Flashforward 2011*. Given the somewhat foreshadowing nature of the conversation, the placement seems better from a literary standpoint and the actual discussion on the bus that day, at least from my side, was trivial and uninteresting.

The material in the Flashback and Flashforward chapters has been considerably more lightly fictionalized. I changed the names of all the people who were not Western Dharma teachers, with the exception of Renate and me. The actual words in the conversations are based on my memory of the topic discussed and, with a few exceptions, are not an accurate rendering of the actual words said. But, as strange as it may seem, the rest of the material in these chapters is all as I remember experiencing it. I am quite certain others present with me experienced these events quite differently. Given the nature of those experiences, I'm sure many readers will find this claim very surprising and some will perhaps mistrust that claim. Rest assured I did not make anything up.

The alteration between the pilgrimage thread, written in the present tense, and the Flashback/Flashfoward thread, written in the past tense, was a bit tricky to manage. It comes closest to being problematical in the Flashfoward chapter, which is an account of my experiences at a retreat in 2011. If I were writing with an actual objective account of time in mind, I would have written the Flashforward thread in present tense too, and positioned it at the end of the pilgrimage thread rather than near the end, since the retreat came after the pilgrimage. However, the Flashforward chapter represents rather a throwback to

a mystical, metaphysical approach to practice that characterized my early years and the years immediately prior to the events reported in the chapter, while the pilgrimage thread represents the rational and analytical approach infused with wisdom and compassion, the approach I try to follow today. Hence the subtitle of the book. So, in a sense, the pilgrimage was fundamental to changing my approach to practice, and I've written the verb tenses to reflect this understanding.

The primary theme of the book is the Buddha's core teaching, conditioned arising, or, as most American Buddhists call it, dependent origination. My motivation in writing the book was a desire to tell an interesting story that a Western reader would enjoy reading and that therefore would make conditioned arising easier to approach for a non-Buddhist audience. I think the theme is an important one, demanding larger attention outside the somewhat narrow subdemographic of Western Buddhists. Conditioned arising has a reputation even in the Buddhist community for being abstract and difficult to understand, and the Buddha also admitted that this was so. But he nevertheless tried to explain it as best he could, an example I've tried to follow.

An additional complication is that, for millennia, the most succinct expression of conditioned arising as applied to the human condition - the Twelve Links - has been understood in the traditional Buddhist schools as being a metaphysical or religious template. Lately, there has been an upsurge of interest in conditioned arising, especially in the Secular Buddhist community. The Secular Buddhist community has developed an alternative understanding of how the Buddha constructed his arguments about conditioned arising, based on the work of scholars, a few dedicated lay practitioners, and a few Western Dharma teachers such as Stephen. This understanding has nothing metaphysical or religious about it. I've reflected this understanding in my interpretations of Stephen's Dharma talks and in other cases where conditioned arising is discussed.

My reasons for emphasizing this theme are twofold. First, conditioned arising keeps coming up in my meditation practice, in some cases unbidden, so it would hardly do to ignore it in a practice memoir. Second, when I've had enough presence of mind to apply the teachings around conditioned arising in my life, they have had the effect the Buddha predicted, namely *dukkha* - dissatisfaction and suffering - has not arisen or has been reduced. In other situations, when that presence of mind has been lacking and I have not applied the teachings, *dukkha*

arose. This leads me to believe that the Buddha was on to something.

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Endnotes

[1] Literally in Sanskrit: "Om! Jewel Lotus! Hail!" This is the mantra, or sound sequence, associated with the Tibetan enlightened being (bodhisattva) Avalokitashvara, who is the avatar of compassion.

[2] Daniel Ingram in his book Mastering the Core Teachings of the Buddha, Aeon Books, London, 2008, lays out a map for meditative development based on an updated version of the traditional Stages of Insight from the Theravada. Stages of particular importance to this memoir are "Arising and Passing Away" (A&P for short), "Dissolution or the Dark Night", "Re-observation", and "First (and higher) Path(s)", which Ingram equates with the traditional Theravadan first (and higher) stage(s) of enlightenment. The A&P stage ends with an "A&P Event", which results in a profound shift in the meditator's practice and indeed whole life. Many people don't experience an A&P Event during meditation but rather as part of some other activity, sometimes spontaneously or sometimes, like I did, as a result of psychedelic drugs. The A&P Event imparts to the person experiencing it some deep insight into the three marks of existence. In my case, deep insight into impermanence resulted, and perhaps some insight into dukkha, as a result of the text of the song. Insight into anatta, not self, was definitely not part of the experience because of the presence of the Witness.

[3] Stephen Batchelor, The Pali Canon: Source Texts for Secular Buddhism, Web publication, Available: www.stephenbatchelor.org/media/Stephen/PDF/Stephen_Batchelor-Pali_Canon-Website-02-2012.pdf.

[4] Ibid. The original Pali has "suffering" for "craving."

[5] Texts with stories from the Buddha's life or, in the case of the Mahayana sutras, reputed to be from the Buddha's life are called "suttas" in Pali, a language close to the original language spoken by the Buddha, and "sutras" in Sanskrit, a later language that played a similar role in India to Latin in the West. Both words

mean "thread."

[6] Sally Hovey Wriggins, Xuanzang: A Buddhist Pilgrim on the Silk Road, pp. 105-106, Westview Press, Boulder, CO, 1996.

[7] Wriggins, p. 106.

[8] Indian caste engaged in agriculture and trade.

[9] A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, translated by James Legge, Forgotten Books, 2008.

[10] The Gupta Empire was founded by indigenous Indian ruler Mahraja Sri Gupta in 320 AD and it covered much of the Indian subcontinent. The Gupta Empire lasted until 550 AD and was known for its scientific, artistic, philosophical, and cultural creativity.

[11] "Klesas" is often translated as "defilements" or "poisons" because the klesas defile or poison thinking in a certain way that colors our outlook and results in conclusions that are neither wise nor compassionate.

[12] This experience can also be placed onto Ingram's maps. After consulting with people who have experienced the First and higher Paths I've come to the conclusion that this too was an A&P Event. In particular, the presence of bright lights tends to suggest the A&P. Others who have experienced A&P, and from my experience in the 1970's, note that one tends to relinquish ownership or agency involving the rules of external reality afterward, in that reality seems to be not under the your control anymore. But for this A&P event, I rather actually took even stronger ownership, in that I believed I had access to a privileged "other world" where I could literally change the world for the better. See www.dharmaoverground.org/web/guest/discussion/-/message_boards/message/5572547 for the discussion.

[13] The Buddha.

[14] Vulture Peak.

[15] Robert Atkin, The Gateless Barrier, p. 46, North Point Press, Berkeley, CA, 1991.

[16] Theragatha, Verse 1036.

[17] A short sutra that summarizes *i.e.* is the "heart of", the Perfection of Wisdom sutra collection, a monumental text that runs to thousands of pages. It is chanted at Zen and Tibetan temples and meditation groups throughout the world.

[18] Pabbaja Sutta, Sutta Nipata 3.1, Available: www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.3.01.than.html.

[19] A Pali word meaning "loving-kindness". A meditation technique taught in the Theravadan tradition involves imagining that one is radiating metta with concentration to various people; the effect generates an attitude of loving-kindness in the meditator. The technique is also useful in challenging situations when negative mind-states threaten, since the metta mind state excludes any negativity.

[20] Wriggins, pp. 121-124.

[21] Monasteries.

[22] Samuel Beal, trans. The Life of Hiuen-Tsiang, p. 111. Translated from the Chinese of Shaman Hwui Li. London, 1911; 2d ed. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1973.

[23] In place of practicing to achieve enlightment as in the Theravada, the Mahayana teaching specifies the practice of the "perfections", or paramitas in Sanskirt. The practitioner is encouraged to perfect these virtues over multiple lifetimes in preparation to become a buddha. When perfection has been achieved, the practitioner achieves enlightenment and becomes a buddha.

[24] "Thay" is a respectful word for "master" or "teacher" in Vietnamese.

[25] The precepts are a collection training rules for ethical behavior undertaken

by lay people in the Theravada and also by priests in Zen to facilitate practice. Abiding by the precepts is a way to reduce suffering and increase happiness, both in the person practicing and in the world at large. Lay practitioners take 5 precepts, Zen priests typically take 10. The precepts are said to be a framework by which one can determine whether someone is enlightened since the behavior of someone who is enlightened is said to reflect the precepts at all times.

[26] Ahimsa means "nonharming" in Sanskrit.

[27] According to The Illustrated Encyclopedia of Zen, by Helen Baroni, the Repentance Verse originated from the Avatamsaka Sutra, a 2nd century Mahayana text that served as the basis for the Huayan School of Chinese Buddhism.

[28] Jobs was ousted from Apple by John Scully in 1985 and founded Next to develop a workstation for scientific research based loosely on the design principles embodied in the Macintosh. In 1996, after Scully had left Apple, Apple bought Next and Jobs returned to helm of the company he had founded. Apple's iOS is based on the application platform developed at Next.

[29] Also known as "dependent origination," "dependent arising," or "co-dependent arising."

[30] The Kushan Empire was founded by tribal nomads from the Central Asian region of Bactria who spread down into modern Afghanistan and the Indian subcontinent starting in the 1st century AD. At its height, the empire stretched from Turfan in the Tarim Basin to Pataliputra, the current Patna, and was ruled by the Buddhist emperor Kanishka.

[31] Samuel Beal, ibid.

[32] Ariyapariyesana Sutta, Majjhima Nikaya 26.

[33] Batchelor, The Pali Canon: Source Texts for Secular Buddhism.

[34] In the U.S., paticca samuppaada is usually translated as "dependent

origination". Elsewhere, the terms "dependent arising" or "co-dependent arising" are sometimes used.

[35] Majjhima Nikaya 79, Culasakuludayi Sutta, Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikku Bodhi translation, p. 655.

[36] Ibid.

[37] A Record of Buddhistic Kingdoms, translated by James Legge, Forgotten Books, 2008. Faxian was a bit overoptimistic about the maximum age of trees. The oldest known tree today is the bristlecone pine in the White Mountains of eastern California, 5063 years.

[38] Painful/pleasurable kundalini experiences, wanting to break off long term relationships, and breaking off with mentors are all identified by Ingram as part of the "Dark Night" phase. By this time, I was deeply into Dark Night territory, and had been for many years, since just after the last A&P event in 1989.

[39] Legge, p. 96.

[40] A deva is a kind of angelic being in the traditional Buddhist cosmology.

[41] Majjhima Nikaya 22, pg. 224 in the 1995 Wisdom translation.

[42] My hypothesis is that the experience of energy or kundalini in meditation, similar to what I experienced during and after the 1996 IMS retreat, led to an artistic expression of the experience in different ways. In the Hindu tradition, that experience expressed itself as a story about snake energy moving up the spine. In the Buddhist tradition, it expressed itself in sculpture and painting, as the Nagabuddha. The experience is so intense and overwhelming that I can hardly imagine it having been ignored, though it is never mentioned in the traditional Theravadan meditation texts from the early 1st millennium AD.

[43] I am indebted to Linda Blanchard, author of Dependent Origination in Context, and the Oxford Pali scholar emeritus Richard Gombrich, author of What the Buddha Thought, for the theoretical background of this discussion on conditioned arising. The description of my practice experience is my own, as are

any errors in the interpretation of Blanchard's and Gombrich's work.

[44] Vinaya, I, 40.

[45] Gombrich, pg. 129.

[46] Joanna Jurewicz, "Playing with Fire", Journal of the Pali Text Society, 26, 2000, pg. 95.

[47] Dependent Arising In Context, Linda S. Blanchard, pg. 81.

[48] Maha Nidana Sutta, www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/dn/dn.15.0.than.html, translated by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

[49] Blanchard, pg. 66. Blanchard describes this experience in the sixth step, Contact, but it really is a lack of any sense contact that defines the experience so it is rightly part of the Ignorance-Name and Form sequence, perhaps at consciousness. I am nevertheless extremely grateful to her for pointing this out, as I have had this experience numerous times in meditation and have always puzzled over what it could be.

[50] See Blanchard, http://justalittledust.com/blog/?p=503, for a discussion of exactly how the sutta references on Birth might be translated.

[51] Blanchard, pg. 28.

[52] Literally translated as "thunderbolt" from Sanskrit, it is a ritual instrument used in Tibetan Buddhist ceremonies.

[53] Other counterpart signs can also be experienced, especially if the concentration object is something other than the breath.

[54] Most concentration retreats in the West run hour to hour and a half periods as opposed to forty minute periods for Vipassana or Zen retreats. In Burma and Thailand - or in retreats led by Burmese or Thai monks in the West - the starting

and ending of the period is not marked by a bell, so people can sit as long as they want, and are encouraged to do so.

[55] Wriggins, pg. 100.

[56] Wandering Hindu holy man.

[57] Wiggins, p. 100.

[58] Samyutta Nikaya 56, translated by Bhikkhu Bodhi, Wisdom Publications, Somerville, MA, 2000, pg. 1843.

[59] Batchelor, The Pali Canon: Source Texts for Secular Buddhism.

[60] See, for example, Samyutta Nikaya, pg. 1524, Wisdom Edition.

[61] Wriggins, pg. 101

[62] Shiva as Lord of the Dance, a statue in which a multi-armed image of the Hindu god Shiva appears dancing in a circle of fire.

[63] Wiggins, p. 103.

[64] Samyutta Nikaya, 12.65, Nidanasamyutta, Bhikkhu Bodhi translation, pp. 603-604.

[65] Majjhima Nikaya, 93, Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi translation, pp. 763-774.

[66] Wiggins, p. 99.

[67] Majjhima Nikaya, 38, Mahatanhasankhaya Sutta, Bhikkhu Nanamoli and Bhikkhu Bodhi translation, pp. 349-361.

[68] Ibid, pp. 349-350.

[69] Samyutta Nikaya 12.65, Nidanasamyutta, Bhikkhu Bodhi translation, p.

602.

[70] Ibid, p. 608.

[71] The technical name for this practice is cittanupassina, which means "mindfulness of consciousness" in Pali.

[72] The subtle body is a Tibetan concept, sometimes called the "light body" or "rainbow body" and is developed by tantric meditation. In this case, I was experiencing it as a side effect of the concentration meditation, which had nothing to do with the years Tibetan practitioners put into its cultivation.

[73] This was a sort of twisted, fantastic version of the Bodhisattva Vow, in which, rather than spiritual liberation, the goal was the physical liberation of life on the planet from the threat of ecological destruction.

[74] Ingram identifies psychosis as a particular risk in a stage called "Re-observation" which occurs just prior to the achievement of the Equanimity stage that leads to the First Path. Re-observation is kind of like a brick wall when the meditator can't make progress and seems to run into obstacles at every turn. Many meditators give up and quit practice during this stage. Because my practice at the time was strictly concentration meditation and not Vipassana/Insight meditation, it is not clear whether this was a Re-observation phase or not.

[75] Mahakala is considered to be a fierce and powerful form of Avalokitashvara, the bodhisattva of compassion, and is a Protector of the Dharma. He protects the Dharma from corruption and degeneration and from hostile attacks.

[76] The Historical Buddha: The Times, Life, and Teachings of the Founder of Buddhism, Hans Wolfgang Schumann, Motilal Banarsidass Publications, India, 2003.

[77] See "Chimps, Too, Wage War and Annex Rival Territory" by Nicolas Wade, New York Times, June 22, 2010, p. D1.

[78] The Reconquista is a period of around 781 years from the Moorish conquest of 718 until the fall of Granada in 1492. During that time, the part of Spain north of the Picos de Europa remained Christian, in the Kingdom of Asturia, while the rest of Spain was Muslim.

[79] Wriggins, pg. 86.

[80] In English: "I take refuge in the Buddha, I take refuge in the Dharma, I take refuge in the Sangha." The refuges are typically chanted three times at the beginning of meditation retreats, on other ceremonial occasions, and are in integral part of a ceremony in which a person declares their intent to follow the Buddhist path.

[81] Batchelor, The Pali Canon: Source Texts for Secular Buddhism.

[82] Samytta Nikaya, 55.2, Sotapattisamyutta, Bhikkhu Bodhi translation, p. 1789.

[83] Ibid. p. 1789.

[84] Ibid.

[85] Ratana Sutta, Sutta Nipata, Available: www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/kn/snp/snp.2.01.than.html.

[86] Samyutta Nikaya 55.24 and 55.25, Sotapattismyutta, Bikkhu Bodhi translation, p.1811 and p. 1813.

[87] Digha Nikaya 55, Sigalaka Sutta, translated by Maurice Wallace, p. 462, Wisdom Publications, Somerville Mass., 1995.

[88] Samyutta Nikaya, Nidanasamyutta 65, "The City", Bikkhu Bodhi translation, pp. 603.

[89] Khuddaka Nikaya, Udana, Uposatha Sutta, translated by Thanissaro

Bhikkhu, Available: www.watpahnanachat.org/books/access%20to%20insight/html/canon/sutta/khud 05.html.

[90] Mundaka Upanishad, translated by Sanderson Beck, Available: www.ancienttexts.org/library/indian/upanishads/mundaka.html.

[91] Ibid.

[92] Batchelor, The Pali Canon: Source Texts for Secular Buddhism.

[93] Dhammapada, 6 "The Wise Man", p. 46, translated by Juan Mascaro, Penguin Classics, New York, 1977.

[94] The Uposatha ceremony on the new and full moon days is an ancient practice that the Buddha incorporated into his regime to intensify practice and deepen commitment. Lay people make a conscious effort to keep the precepts, meditate an extra session, and perform some special act of giving at the local monastery or elsewhere. In a monastery with more than four monks, the monks confess any disciplinary violations then recite the monastic rule.

[95] The Mindfulness Trainings are from the Plum Village web site, http://plumvillage.org/mindfulness-practice/the-5-mindfulness-trainings.

[96] Another name for the Buddha, meaning "Sage of the Shakyans".

[97] Archeological evidence indicates that Harappan cities were abandoned and the craft work and art became less sophisticated shortly after the turn of the 2nd millennium BC. The Harappans began to stop using the script that they had been using for centuries, and the streets of their cities began to fill with rubbish. Around that time, the monsoon winds shifted and the rains decreased, causing agriculture to fail. See www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2014/02/140226110844.htm for a short discussion. The Harappans are an ominous precedent should global climate change impact the monsoon in the 21st century.

[98] See Michael Shermer's excellent book The Believing Brain, St. Martin's Press, 2011, for a lay person's introduction to the neuroscience behind belief and its role in perception and cognition.

[99] The Red Book, C.G. Jung, W. W. Norton and Company, New York, 2009 contains Jung's account of the visions.

[100] T. M. Luhrmann, "Is that God Talking?," see www.nytimes.com/2013/05/02/opinion/is-that-god-talking.html?ref=tmluhrmann.

[101] T. M. Luhrmann, "Conjuring Up Our Own Gods," see www.nytimes.com/2013/10/15/opinion/luhrmann-conjuring-up-our-own-gods.html?_r=0&adxnnl=1&ref=contributors&adxnnlx=1381943356-poI2kDtWHibMhJEAb6DXOQ.

[102] D. L. Rosenhan, "On being sane in insane places," Science, 179, pp. 250-258, 1973.

[103] See "The Dark Night of the Soul," Atlantic Monthly. Available: www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2014/06/the-dark-knight-of-the-souls/372766.

[104] See Ingram, "Dissolution, Entrance into the Dark Night," pg. 211.

[105] See Ingram, "Re-observation," pg. 223.

[106] Ingram, ibid.