

In Praise of Silence

Our South African correspondent **Leela Verity's** sixth trip to India was, on the whole, very quiet. It was a one-month silent Vipassana and Mahamudra retreat in Bodhgaya, conducted by Ven. Antonio Satta from Italy, a Tibetan Buddhist monk for the last twenty-seven years. Post-retreat, she went on to Sarnath for teachings and empowerments by Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche, senior tutor of His Holiness the Karmapa. She reports ...

In India, extraordinary things happen as if they are ordinary, everyday things. We arrived a few days before the retreat started, and in that small window of time, His Holiness the Dalai Lama paid an unscheduled private visit to Bodhgaya for the enshrinement ceremony of sacred relics, and he gave an afternoon teaching under the Bodhi Tree. It was an incredible experience

to be there: stream-enterers immersed in the stream of Dharma that is flowing toward enlightenment, listening to a buddha in the twenty-first century giving teachings under the Bodhi Tree! The Dalai Lama ended by saying: "We are very privileged to be in this place that is blessed by the Buddha. We are very fortunate to generate the mind of enlightenment in this holy place." What an auspicious start to the trip!

Then the retreat: about fifty of us spent the next thirty days sitting on the same cushions, the day alternating between sitting and walking meditation, with breaks for meals. Doing nothing except watching your own mind. Reciting the Heart Sutra every morning and the Diamond Sutra every evening. Practicing so that your mindfulness and concentra-

tion get stronger and deeper. Dharma teachings by Ven. Antonio pointing you toward deeper insight.

The silence and non-activity allows your mind to settle and to become clear and still. The confines of the retreat force you to let go of all of the samsaric activities in which we are so caught up. It is only when you step out of them, that you realize just how caught up you are, and it is only when you let go of them, that you experience the joy of renunciation, letting go of all of the worldly cares and concerns that consume so much of our time and life energy.

On retreat, one seems to enter a timeless dimension. One is very aware of time, because you are following a strict schedule, and bells are rung throughout the day calling you to be on time for the next session, but time takes on a different quality. There is no stress to achieve anything, to accomplish anything. You are given permission to do nothing and just be. This is a true gift. It allows you to enter and live fully in the present moment, and then time falls away, because there is no past and no future, there is just now.

Sitting during the afternoon tea break enjoying a cup of tea on the dining roof deck which overlooks the surrounding fields, watching the green grasses and tiny yellow flowers swaying in the wind, some Indian ladies walking by in their brightly-colored saris, the sound of the wind blowing through the trees, the birds squawking ... suddenly the world

One of the many Buddha statues on the walls of the Mahabodhi Stupa.



around you becomes beautiful. Bodhgaya has no natural beauty, no mountains, rivers, lakes, just flat land wherever you look. But when your mind is relaxed and at peace, then there is beauty all around you and the smallest things become lovely – the squirrel, the clouds, the rain, the morning mist. As my teacher Thich Nhat Hanh says: “The miracles of life are all around you – do you have the eyes to see them?”

Only the eyes that are content with little can see a lot. When we have a little, then it is easy to appreciate things. When we have too much, then we don't appreciate it. When we have a lot, then we want a lot. In our materialistic world, many of us have far too much of everything, yet we still experience discontent and non-fulfillment. Here on retreat, living such a simple lifestyle, we are deprived of all sense pleasures, entertainments, activities and things that fill our lives, so much empty space is created. Space in your life creates space within your mind. During the last two weeks of the retreat, my mind became vast and spacious, and it was wonderful. Ven. Antonio quoted Chogyam Trungpa saying, “Boredom is transformed into exquisite boredom.”

Exquisite indeed, when time falls away and is replaced by vast open space. That space and simplicity gives birth to inner peace, a light, care-free, joyful mind, and contentment that saturates your soul and permeates your being. It reminds me again that less is more. Spiritual life is full of paradox – one such paradox being that the more you distance yourself from life, the more you understand life, because distance allows you to see clearly. When you are immersed in something, you have no perspective and your vision is close and shallow. The more you step out of life, the more free you become, and this paradoxically allows you to enjoy life in a lighter and more carefree way.

Returning back home, I feel the pressure of samsara starting to encroach on my mind. Suddenly there are things to do, things that need to be done, and I realize how lucky I was to spend a month in such a precious environment where you are given the gift of time and space to hear, contemplate, and practice the precious Dharma. I see how thought forms start to spin and weave a reality of plans and projects around me again. Back into the world of becoming, but hopefully a little wiser, a little freer, a little less attached. I try to hold onto my sense of just being for as long as possible. For the cycles of samsara seem to get tighter as the months go by, and I will be due for another long retreat again next year. I am thankful to have the good karma to step out of time and enter a dimension of grace, even if only for a while. ‘Till next time, I try to remember the last stanza of the Diamond Sutra, which reminds us not to get so caught up in life:

“Stars, darkness, light,
A phantom, a dew drop, a bubble,
A dream, a lightning flash, a cloud –
This is how all things should be seen.” ❁

Leela Verity is director of Sat Chit Anand, a Buddhist center in Plettenberg Bay, South Africa. Her previous contribution to Mandala, 'In Memory of My Sister Patricia,' appeared in the June-July 2006 issue.



Buddha statue in Bodhgaya.