

Setting out

Dear Brothers and Sisters, By the time you read this I will be somewhere in the Arabian Sea on a freight ship bound to Sri Lanka. This is the start of a period travelling around the world which will last a year or more and marks the end of an era of living in Cambridge. I've decided to travel without using any aeroplanes, hence the freight ship travelling to Colombo. This is partly because I want to avoid the carbon emissions implied in long haul air travel, and partly because I dislike the mode of travelling that ties one into airline deadlines and schedules.

As I got on the train from Cambridge it really felt like I was leaving - after 24 years of living there. Of course many of my friends, people I love, and my possessions are still there, but somehow leaving for an open period with no definite commitment to return felt like a parting. I leave behind a lovely girlfriend, a great community, dear friends and a meaningful job - and yet in the end I felt caged by the nice life that I had in Cambridge. It's crazy to give all that up, and yet I know in my guts that I'm doing the right thing, although I can't explain why. It's as if some part of me was pining away, despite all the wonderful things in my life. So I am cut adrift, wandering in the open sea of possibility.

Sent: 27 December 2007

Subject: Port Said



Dear Friends,

We're steaming ahead across the South Cretan Sea for Egypt

at about 24 knots, due to arrive at Port Said (the start of the Suez canal) about 2am. I won't be waiting up, but tomorrow will be able to send this email off to you first thing since we'll still be in the Suez convoy that all ships are required to join. Did you know that for a ship this size it costs \$200,000 to pass the canal and with 100s of cargo ships a day you can see why Nasser and Eden fought over the rights to the canal in 1956. One of my fellow passengers, Paul Dove, did his national service here in 1954 just before the Suez crisis so he has a fascinating knowledge of the place and the British influence here.

Our Xmas Eve party (being a German boat) was a boozey affair, with lots of turkey and meats consumed, not really a place for a Buddhist. I did however participate in a Filipino Xmas sing-song which our head cook led on guitar. The decorations were hung still in their packaging and Capt Ziems read a rather worthy Xmas message from the management at NSB head office in Buxtehude - most of the crew seemed to bear it with a bored resignation before tucking into their turkey and Budweiser there was barely a vegetable in sight! I was offered rice and spring rolls. The emotions of the evening seemed to be an imperative to boozey abandon and the sense of missing home and the family. I chatted with the bosun, who is a youthful 51, and he expressed his longing to see his family, when he retires he wants nothing to do with the sea anymore, he thinks he will live in the mountains. So perhaps it goes with the life of a seaman!

The food has been plentiful here, but severely lacking in vegetarian protein. Most meals I'm given rice or potatoes with vegetables. I've tried to explain about beans, lentils and eggs as protein equivalents to meat, but it hasn't really got through. So every other day I just ask the cook to do me lentils or beans and then he seems happy to oblige.

Today the sea has been a glassy still mirror. Hardly any wind other than that the ship itself has created, as we've headed for Port Said. The bosun and his team have been rust proofing around the focsle so it was noisy there and I didn't stay long. The air temperature has dropped, so though the sky is clear it feels chilly when not in the direct sun. Tonight I went up to the bridge and saw the most beautiful starscape - Orion in full view to the east, the Milky Way stretching across the sky with Mars glinting like a red eye above Taurus, the occasional hint of a shooting star. The night sky at sea is indeed a wonder.

A sense of classical history rests in my soul, as I think of Aeneas, Odysseus, Jason and so many mythical heroes who sailed these seas - we've passed the sites of Carthage, the island of Vulcan (north of Sicily) the Messina Strait

where allegedly Jason passed Scylla and Charybdis, Calypso's cave on Gozo where Odysseus was held captive by the nymph, the ancient Cretan civilisation at Knossos where Perseus slew the Minotaur and soon we pass the great university of ancient Alexandria where Archimedes and others studied. The history of Europe finds its source in these waters.

Yesterday I taught the steward Ricky, and my passenger friend Paul the mindfulness of breathing, they'd both expressed an interest. We had a pleasant evening together and they both seemed to enjoy it. We'll meet again in a few days to do the metta bhavana and see how they're getting on.

Lots of love, happy new year

Rijumati Xxx

Sent: 21 January 2008

Subject: Sea farings

Life on board ship revolves around the rituals and liturgy of the seaman's world: duties, eating & drinking. The meals offer a regular social context, for much of the work is either solitary or anti-social e.g. tending to the noisy engine. In the officer's mess each person has a fixed position at table, so one always gets to talk with the same people. After having heard the Chief Engineer hold forth a couple of times, with more or less identical topics, one wonders that they don't run out of new things to say. I found the rigidity of the seating arrangement a bit shocking at first, though one gets used to it. Last night at the new years party I wanted to sit on the crew table, but felt too shy.

Now, out in the ocean with no other boats in sight, one feels the awesome aloneness of life on board. This is the universe, this "little" metal tub of 26 souls, 278m long by 40m wide. To leave the safety of this world would be tantamount to death, the chances of surviving falling over board being virtually nil. How does each man come to terms with this paradox of vastness and tinyness of life on board? Perhaps in the drinking he can just forget. The third mate seems to have a sense of this, alone on the bridge with his chart corrections, love of the stars and silence of the expanse. He told me that he doesn't like to drink, it affects his work too much.

Last night at the party the head cook told me that modern telecommunications have radically changed life on board. Previously one got a letter every two months and it was not possible to have real-time awareness of life on land, but now one can get an email everyday so there is real relationship to family. Most of the men seem to miss their families greatly and see life on board as a necessary sacrifice for their good wage. As I've related elsewhere, the bosun said to me that when he retires he wants nothing to do with the sea anymore and will go and live in the mountains. Money is the main or only reason that they are here, for instance the chief engineer has been trained in tanker ships, even though it is much more hazardous and could threaten his health, just because the pay is better. What is this power that money has to force men to do that which they don't want to do? Money is like a god, an archetype that animates the very fibres of being, it represents freedom, security, power... how bizarre is this world we've created!

The elements are strong here; sun, wind, water and space are all raw and visceral in their power. Today the wind buffets our ship and 70,000 tonnes of metal rocks back and forward as if it were a tiny toy in a breeze. Yesterday the sun's intensity cooked my skin, and I am tenderly pink, underestimating the fierceness of the fire out here. Vast unfathomable blue/black waters as far as the eye can see, apparently a watery desert, yet the wonders of yesterday's sights (shark, dolphins, turtle, flying fish) leave me excited by the hidden depths and secrets that are kept in this ocean. How wonderful to chart those unseen worlds! The force of the wind can almost push you back walking on the focsle, I'm sure at times it is powerful enough to sweep a man away. Out here our only connection with the earth element is what we bring with us, this tiny world of man, moving on the ocean, a temporary guest in a country one can never really belong.

Each member of the boat finds their place in the hierarchy. The 2nd officer, Herr Masera, must be in his late 20s or early 30s. He is a stereotypical young German: quick tempered, likes everything to be neatly ordered, has strong opinions (he hates India for its lack of punctuality and mess), says what he thinks without qualms e.g. your drink smells like a toilet... In his naïve way he is very likeable, helpful, honest and probably will make a generous captain one day. Talking with him is sometimes like talking to a child, this afternoon I came on the bridge and unwittingly broke his concentration by opening the door, to which he retorted "Now my life will be one year shorter!" I guess he was playing some sort of game. He sports a tattoo of the grim reaper on his shoulder of which he is proud, but then in a candid moment he asked me whether I thought it looked good. Early on during

our voyage he started to quiz me about vegetarianism, more or less his opening gambit was "you know that vegetarians live shorter!" however the Capt quickly diverted him by calling him to the radar - obviously wanting to avoid any unpleasantness. I didn't bother following it up with him since it wasn't really a thought-out remark.

Capt Ziems, friendly, stout, jovial, likes his drink and likes his ship to run in a friendly easy manner. He will always be happy to talk about himself when prompted, and rarely asks you about yourself. Come to think of it almost no one on board has asked me about being a Buddhist, most of them have not even asked enough questions to find out. He dislikes the trivial rules of running the ship, but will pander to them when necessary - for instance he wears his uniform when someone off the ship might see. He is very experienced, having been a seaman since he was 17, probably now he's in his mid-50s. He likes his crew to attend things and everything to have its place, so has made a few pointed remarks when I turn up late to the meal or drinking sessions (purely as a social spectator!). He's been generous with the food and drink on board, and also with letting me send emails for nothing.

Sent: 11 January 2008

Subject: Kandiyian Rains

Dear Friends, another brief update...

I hope this email finds you well. I'm in the old Sri Lankan city of Kandy where it is damp, warm and the air is filled with the smell of jungle and smog.

The train ride from Colombo to Kandy is amazing, snaking up through granite hills, deep valleys and passing volcanic plug plateaus. The air heavy with the smell of jungle spice, everywhere surrounded by lush & fecund growth.



I'm now alone, a welcome break from the social roller-coaster of life within our Sangha here in Sri Lanka (see [FWBO News](#) for some stories of it) though I've really enjoyed meeting everyone. I've offered to meet up with all the mitras here and to lead some study. Shantigarbha is also here, leading events on NVC and mediation among other things!

I'm sheltering from a warm drizzle in the Kandiyian Royal Botanical Gardens. Some beautiful & vast trees, exotic bird calls & large fruit bats make for an exciting exploration. It is also obviously the place where young lovers court, lots of Sri Lankan young boys & girls shyly holding hands. The rain is now really bucketing down, like standing under a shower.

Yesterday I visited the Sri Lankan holiest of holies, Dalada Maligawa, the Tooth Relic Temple. Sadly the atmosphere of guides after tips, tight security & strict religiosity left me cold, I felt very little devotion in the temple itself. Outside are 3 great Bodhi trees and circumambulating these felt more alive and meaningful. A gilded statue of Anagarika Dharmapala reminds you of his reforming efforts. Walking around the lake I discovered the BPS bookshop and popped in, since their books are found all over the world. I got chatting to the manager Bertie who knew of Bhante and the WBO. He asked me lots of questions about the Order. We also talked about Bhikkhu Bodhi's work and how much it is appreciated by western Buddhists; BB is the BPS president. I bought a Wheel publication about Col. Olcott for 5rpl! as well as a translation and commentary by Bhikkhu Bodhi of the

Mulapariyayasutta - which Bertie recommended and had a large reflection on the 4 elements. Reading about Col. Olcott is very inspiring, if they don't have anything in the Order Library I will donate this booklet.

I am planning to stay in Sri Lanka another week or two, which means I can lead some study for the friends and mitras and see people as well as visiting some other holy sites. I'm also trying to find a ship to take me to India, since there is no regular passenger ferry. All this means that I probably won't make it to the Order Convention after all. Depending where I land in India I will either head for Poona and try to find Suvajra or go to Nagpur since I want very much to visit the Diksa Bhumi.

Please pass this email on to anyone else who you think would like to read it

Love Rijumati

Sent: 15 January 2008

Subject: Heaven & Hell in Anuradhapura...



Dear Friends, a cameo of life here.

Arriving here late afternoon I went for a walk into Anuradhapura, not thinking much about where I was going, or the consequences of being out at night in a city on the edge of a war zone. After walking for a bit I picked up a tuk-tuk to take me to the Sri Bodhi Tree, just on an intuition, said to be the original tree that was brought from Bodhgaya in 3rd century BCE. Walking up to the temple I felt very happy, there were lots of people about. The soldiers were friendly. As I approached the most ancient and sacred of trees, the sound of chanting wafted through the air. The tree was surrounded by lay worshippers, with the occasional monk. After sitting observing in a quiet corner for a while I felt moved to do my own puja and I recited the Tiratanavandana, and then the 7-fold puja. I gradually became aware that people began to sit all around me, though I had my eyes closed. I enjoyed the puja and felt a great sense of joy, being part of the river of devotion to this sacred tree. It makes such a difference that one can go there and practice without having to pay as if one was a tourist. When I finished and opened my eyes, a young man next to me said "hello" and then walked away smiling, in fact there were many smiles from the white clothed devotees. As I left the temple I was uplifted, looking heaven-wards the sky was brilliant with stars and I even saw a shooting star. An auspicious & beautiful night for opening the heart to the Buddhas.

The sense of human connection made me bold to take a chance and ask a stranger for a recommendation of a place to eat. The man and his wife recommended the Tissawewa restaurant but there were very few tuk-tuks to be seen. He arranged one with a rough looking boy, who was so off-hand with me that I nearly got out. We set off, including his mother too, in the opposite direction to that my friend had indicated and started to get further and further away from the built up area, Anuradhapura is a city of huge parks. I began to wonder if they planned to take me somewhere dark and rob me or worse, I even tapped his shoulder and wondered about jumping out, however we soon reversed direction and seemed to be heading back into town by a back road. Then we met a checkpoint. The two soldiers pulled us over, something was wrong. They demanded the papers of the driver, he and his mother became fearful and conciliatory - were they perhaps Tamils, dangerous for them to travel after dark. The soldiers swaggered, brandishing their machine guns aimlessly. I felt it best not to get out of the Tuk-tuk, but the situation wasn't looking good, just tense silence for 10 minutes, 15 minutes with occasional bursts of talking. The younger soldier, only 18 or so had a slightly hyped up look in his eyes, he seemed to giggle

disconcertingly as he asked me where I was from. The older soldier had a hard tired look in his eyes, no smile or softness there. The driver and his mother had all the papers out, there was a kind of pleading in their voices. I thought it is impossible that they would do anything violent with a foreigner involved, but then perhaps they would, it flashed before me that they would have to kill all three of us if there was any trouble. Other vehicles came and went unchecked, it was only about 8pm. In the end the sought-for relief came, when for no apparent reason the older soldier suddenly let us go. We drove onwards for another few kms before the boy deposited me at the wrong hotel, however a friendly lady gave him clear directions and eventually we got to Tissawewa Grand, which is situated in the royal pleasure gardens and certainly is grand. However the food was disappointing, it arrived cold and then was too spicy to eat. I was decidedly jumpy about another trip in a tuk-tuk, especially as it was now much later, and the city was silent as if under curfew. My friendly waiter said it would be fine, but they couldn't find a tuk-tuk. Eventually one was acquired, and I shared it with a couple of friendly Milanese ladies who were going the same way. The roads were almost completely empty, but we didn't have any trouble at a different checkpoint. The city seemed to have been taken over by the stray dogs, a few even tried to harass our tuk-tuk. When humans fear to go out the dog becomes king! Truly heaven & hell live side by side in Asia, both more intense and immediate than their European equivalents!

Please don't be alarmed for my safety, I am now very aware of the risks here and won't take any rough rides after dark.

Love Rijumati

Sent: 30 January 2008

Subject: Fawly Lamps or Madness in a Minor Key?

Dear Friends, here is a little story from my last night in Sri Lanka to cheer you up when the little things in life seem to be a real struggle. Love Rijumati

I arrived in the highway town of Seeduwa, a lengthy sprawl of shops and office buildings along the two lane A3 highway to Negombo, to find the Copper Lamp hotel, only a few miles from the airport, the next morning I had an early short flight (40 minutes) over the Palk Strait to Trichy in Tamil Nadu.

Ostensibly the Copper Lamp is a modern establishment, with a generously built four storey building and nicely tiled rooms. However the upmarket veneer was very thin. On showing me the room I queried whether the sheets on the bed were clean, was assured that they were, but could see they were covered in hair and even a nail clipping. Like a good natured Buddhist I shook the sheet out, but also demanded a fresh sheet - the pillow cases I just covered in a shawl. The staff were friendly and ever helpful, it's just that the hotel was slightly shambolic. I was brought a bowl of hot water for washing by the old man, "Uncle", who had a genuinely warm glint in his eye. He made small talk about Lady Diana on discovering that I was English (if one can small talk about such a tragic life), and at my request even swept the floor which was also covered in hair. So far so good, the room was shaping up. The only missing ingredient was a mosquito net and although I have my own there was no hook on which to attach it. I went down to see the reception and was assured some help, but on returning to my room couldn't get back in. The manager had had problems with the lock when he gave me the key, but since the door was already open took no further action. The key definitely didn't fit, and looking more closely I saw that it had the number 101 in small hand written ballpoint scrawled across the bottom, whereas my room was 102. I pointed this out to the manager but he seemed uninterested and persisted in trying to force this key to work. After several exasperating minutes of key wagging, he demanded "Was this the key I gave you", as if I'd somehow magiced a false key into his hands.

Eventually he gave up and went to find the spare keys, none of which of course were numbered! One of them did indeed open the door. He seemed to express a great deal of satisfaction at his foresight as he said to me "there is a small problem with this key," pointing to my original key. Now it is hard to imagine what relative magnitude of problem could affect a key more than the fact that it patently doesn't open the door for which it is intended. I'd say this key had a large problem! At this point, the door now open, he seemed ready to depart, but of course he didn't offer me the spare key. He said that as long I locked the room from the inside no one could get in. Well that's great, I'd figured that out about 20 minutes earlier. "What if I want to go out" I demanded, "ah yes, if you want to go out" he echoed thoughtfully as if this was a novel idea. I once again pointed out that the number on the key was for a different room to mine. At this point he decided to try the key for a third and completely different room, 103. This key miraculously worked, it said it was for room 103 and it opened the door to room

103. Perhaps we were getting somewhere, even though it was for a room which had no guest! Finally the I decided to force the logic of the situation and asked him to try the key he'd given me in the door for room 101. He sent his obliging young man who had arrived with the air of trying to help. Bingo, it worked! There was no "small problem" with the key when taken to the right door. At this point a penny seemed to drop and in a short time a new key marked 102 was procured and, to our mutual relief, it opened my door! There were smiles all round, and some mutterings about the lady at the front desk giving the wrong key.

As he was about to depart I once again asked for a hook to be put up on which I could hang my own mosquito net, the very reason the whole key saga had happened. He said "ah yes I have the same problem with mosquitoes, I can give you a mosquito coil" clearly evading the "difficulty" of putting a simple nail in the wall. I explained that with nearly 30 bites currently on my body I seemed to qualify as the main dinner course for most local blood-sucking creatures and would feel much happier sleeping under a net, either one belonging to the hotel or my own. He pointed to a rusty protrusion from the ceiling that wasn't above the bed and clearly any net hanging from it would get entangled in the fan. Having pointed out the impossibility of this option to him he once again assured me they could assist me. When I asked whether it would be now or later, wondering whether to postpone my shower, he started asking what time I would like to go to sleep - it was currently 3.30pm so he seemed to be envisaging a time scale way beyond that which I normally allow for simply putting up a nail in the wall. In a moment of desperation I offered to do it myself if he could provide me with a hammer and nail, at which he smiled and said "there is an Uncle here, he will come to your assistance". An hour later I'm still waiting, it seems 50-50 whether Uncle will materialise with a nail and hammer.

PS: Uncle did finally come at about 8.30pm after several more petitions and a stalemate where I refused to leave the reception desk until the manager did something. Uncle slung a rope across the whole length of the room to which I was able to attach my net. He explained that the walls are solid concrete and putting a nail into concrete doesn't work - so in a crazy way it all made sense! I had a good night's bite-free sleep.

Sent: 26 January 2008 11:44

Subject: Pics from life on the South Asia Road

Dear Friends, I'm leaving Sri Lanka on Monday, the shortest flight possible is to Trichy in Tamil Nadu. Sadly the war situation here has made it virtually impossible to get any sort of ship or boat. From Trichy I head for Mount Arunachala and Ramana Maharishi's ashram where Bhante had a famous vision of Amitabha – see ['The Thousand-Petalled Lotus'](#) on his website. I hope to escape from the great Asian chaos for a few days and do some meditation and devotional practice there.

love Rijumati

Sent: Sun 17/02/2008 09:47

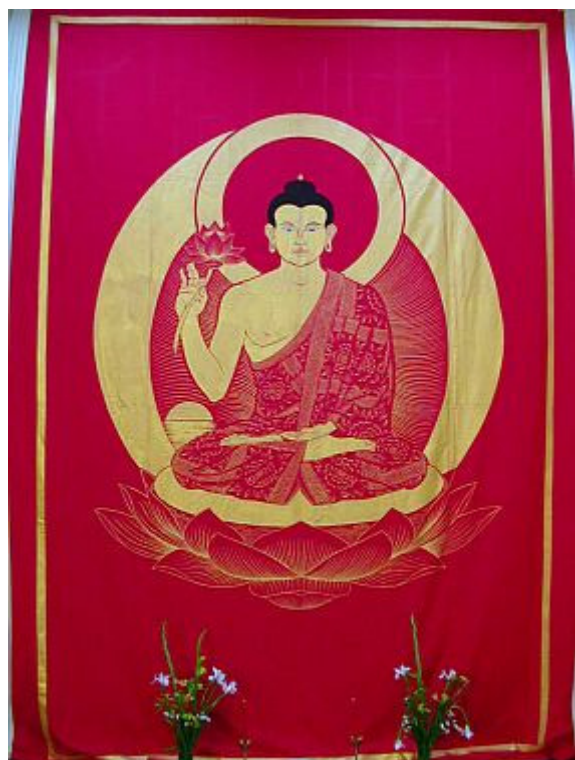
Subject: Visit to the Cave



Arriving in Thiruvannamalai I was immediately struck by the friendliness of the people here compared to Trichy and Pondicherry. The hotel recommended in the Bible (aka Lonely Planet guide) could only offer me one night,

but the owner went to some lengths to help me find an alternative and seemed genuinely pleased when I managed to get a cheap room in one of the ashrams. At the Ramana Maharshi ashram, where one usually has to book months in advance, I spoke to Mr Mani, the brother of the president, explaining that I was a disciple of Sangharakshita who had stayed in the ashram 50 years before and met Ramana Maharshi. He was interested and said although he had no room now, I should go to the next door ashram and come back in a couple of days. He promised to get someone to show me the way to the Virupaksa cave, where Bhante and Satyapriya had stayed. No one had been so accommodating as either of these two gentlemen in a week of travel in the rest of Tamil Nadu, so I was warming to Thiruvannamalai fast!

Next morning after settling-in at the Seshardi ashram I set off to find the Virupaksa cave. From the rear of the Ramana Maharshi ashram, at the foot of Mount Arunachala, a path climbs steadily up the mountain, lined with stones. As one leaves the town behind, the path slips between the mountain and large hill; surrounded by trees and protected by the rocks suddenly all the din of India is silenced and a beautiful tranquillity pervades the forest. Butterflies and flowers, lizards and tiny squirrels; nature is astonishingly peaceful, away from the bustle of mankind. The climb, in the morning heat, was arduous and sweaty. Firstly one reaches the Sankarashram cave where the Maharshi and his mother lived for some time. It is a tiny dark space with a kuti (hut) built onto the rock. A couple of westerners were resting there, soaking up the atmosphere.



From there one descends rapidly to the Virupaksa cave where Bhante had a vision of Amitabha holding a lotus. Behind a huge boulder one climbs to a little platform, and once again a kuti is built up against the cave itself. Entering the cave itself I was disorientated, slowly becoming aware that there were a couple of motionless figures meditating in the pitch blackness. The atmosphere was hot, stuffy, airless, slightly oppressive. The cave has been heavily moulded with concrete so that it has large flat surfaces, with a central 1m cube surmounted by a Hindu "lump" which was decorated with an orange cloth. Only the sharply descending roof tells one that this was once a natural rock formation, and even that has been painted and sealed. I sat there for some time silently chanting the Amitabha mantra in the blackness. The signs asked for silence so I felt constrained, even though I would like to have done a puja. After a while I found that I was the only person there so I chanted out loud, the echo was impressive. However people soon arrived and I didn't feel free to carry on, or to do the puja - leaving me with a feeling of disappointment. I began to feel the heat and the airless atmosphere overcome me, drifting into a soporific state, so I left the cave and lay outside on the supporting wall of the kuti's platform. It is truly a lovely spot, surrounded by flowers and trees, huge boulders included in the building of the platform and kuti, giving a pleasing harmony with nature. The sounds of car horns and the city can be distinctly heard, since one is out of the protected valley between the two peaks. Below one sees the Hindu Arunachaleswar temple, huge and imposing, with its four great gateways adorned with hundreds of gods. I retraced my steps with a little sadness, the plan to do some spiritual practice in the Virupaksa cave having been thwarted for now. Perhaps another visit would work better.

The next day I visited the Virupaksa cave again, but in the afternoon. After sitting for short while in the cave, I realised that its airless oppressive atmosphere was no good for meditation, so I sat outside on the kuti platform. The gentle breeze, surrounded by flowers, was very conducive and I had a deep, still and effortless meditation, almost as if the atmosphere of the place itself lifted me. Returning I met a Dutch-gone-native swami, who's been living in India for 20 years, with his Japanese girlfriend silently in tow. He was a painter and played the flute, as well as the whistle, and spent his time travelling all over India. He ranted a little about the "government" - it didn't seem to be the government of any particular country - and extolled the beauties of Tamil Nadu's rural landscape. I didn't dare ask him if he painted landscapes for fear of being labelled too plebeian!

The next morning, leaving around 6.30am, I headed for the mountain itself. My intention was to climb Mount Arunachala, sacred to the god Shiva, rising nearly 1000m above the plain. Supposedly the summit is the place where the supernatural burning lingam first appeared in this world, heralding the phallic cult of Shiva. The summit was shrouded in mist as I started; perhaps it was the smoke from the burning organ! Within minutes a man was asking me "where are you going," "to the top" I replied, to which he seemed amazed and perplexed. He quickly spoke to another man, and I sensed that I was being seen as a potential money-spinner. The second man said I should follow him. The first man pointed to the left fork in the path, whilst the other was heading to the right. I followed the left path for a little way, but my own judgment told me it was wrong. I doubled back to find the two of them bickering over me and which was the way to the top. In the end I just headed up the right path, to the evident satisfaction of the second man. I avoided his friendly overtures, obviously he wanted to be my guide and to be paid, and I even said to him "I don't need a guide." He said that he worked on the mountain for the forestry board, though he had no uniform; the lies people tell in India are sometimes paper thin. He walked ahead of me some way, we weren't really together, but when I stopped he waited for me.

The climb up until the caves was straightforward; there were a few bare-foot western devotees already there. The sky was gray with haze and cloud, a good day for the climb in the tropical heat of the South. Soon we left the main path following roughly daubed paint marks "to the mountain." Thorai, my "guide's" name, waited for me to catch up, we started to ascend rapidly. Soon I was sweating heavily, Thorai lithe, wiry and fit seemed to effortlessly make his way up. He said that he'd been working on the mountain for many years. The path was evident but rough, with many small boulders jammed into place creating a makeshift stairway, but very uneven. The vegetation changed, thinning a little, and some new plants appeared, including a large leafed rubbery shrub with beautiful pink flowers. The din of the town drifted up the mountain as if we were standing on the main road. We took two breaks, both times on a lovely rock, and I was so soaked in sweat that it was a big relief to rest. I felt a bit of lightness in the head at times and wondered if I would have to turn back. Thorai took me an easy route, and his guidance was helpful, even though he gave it without my consent, I decided I would give him 50rps.

As we got close to the top, nearly 2 hours on, the mountain became one solid granite mass. Also the rubbish became more dense; plastic bags, wrappers, strewn along the path of this holy site. Finally, reaching the summit surrounded by lazy mist, we saw two makeshift shacks, thrown together with plastic, bits of string and wooden poles. Thorai entered one and amazingly there was a young sadhu called Jodi, ready with a filthy coconut cup brimming with hot chai - a most welcome arrival. We sat there sipping the tea, enjoying the sense of achievement. Thorai lifted his cup saying "OM Arunachala." There were a couple of healthy looking dogs and a few very cheeky monkeys who kept trying their luck, especially when I peeled an orange and offered it around. Jodi said that he sometimes slept on top, that he went up and down collecting milk and food, doing puja. I said that I wanted to do puja and he gave me a little mat saying "the top is covered in ghee". Sure enough, after our tea break, as we climbed onto the top rock we found it black and greasy - to the point of being in danger of falling off. During the annual Shiva festival the granite mass of the summit is drenched in ghee and set alight. Thorai cautioned me to be careful and took me to a nice spot, free of ghee, where I could do some puja. At that point, catching me by surprise, he asked for payment - I had imagined that he would stay on the summit for a while, but he wanted to be off. I gave him 50rps, but he was very unhappy, protesting that he'd come 3000ft, he was a poor man. In the end I made it 100rps, he left rather disgruntled.

Sitting on the mountain, soaked by the climb, and appreciably colder, I wrapped myself in a shawl and did seven fold puja. The verses rolled out, but whether it was the strain of the climb, or the headache, I felt little depth of devotion. Yet the effort to do it made it meaningful. I meditated, but again rather superficially, until I came to visualise Amitabha, in the form of Bhante's vision, and chant the mantra - at which point I became more absorbed. After an hour or so I let the concentration fade and played my whistle for a while. "Stairway to Heaven" by Led Zeppelin seemed to just roll off the whistle, not the most spiritual of tunes perhaps, but very fitting for a sacred mountain!

On the way back I gave the young sadhu Jodi his mat and 10rps donation - which he didn't seem to want. I couldn't tell if he really wanted nothing, or felt 10rps was far too small a donation, anyway I just gave it to him and left. The combination of money, westerners and Indians is sometimes unfathomable! Descending alone, I felt the thrill of the solitary climber, one mistake, a broken ankle and one would be in trouble with not many people around. I rushed the descent somewhat, but enjoyed spectacular views of the Tamil Nadu landscape, as well as watching a lively troop small gray monkeys. They eyed me up for a while; threat or treat? But then I was just ignored.

Thiruvannamalai also sports a large and varied western community from young adventurers to aged devotees. For instance in my ashram, the room next door, an old western lady, deeply wrinkled, wearing a long flowing white Indian dress, chants her pujas every few hours with a halting, breathless voice, yet with a deep look of sincerity on her face. In contrast to the Indians of Thiruvannamalai, the westerners seem rather distant and unfriendly, as if absorbed in their own world of spirituality. They are mostly taking part in various "satsangs" or spiritual meetings where you can learn just about anything "spiritual" that you care to mention. I noticed one course emphasizing that it was teaching traditional Advaita Vedanta, another boasting to teach neo-Advaita Vedanta. Both had a hefty price tag coming in at several \$100s. There are courses on obscure energy-healing methods - most of which I'd never heard - all types of yoga, meditation, and courses where one simply just meets an Awakened person (also costing \$100s). Most of the teachers being advertised were westerners; many of them claimed to be Awakened or awakened - I couldn't tell what the difference was!

However I did make the acquaintance of a few westerners. According to one elderly, yet very lively lady from Kent, Thiruvannamalai is a bit of a spiritual supermarket, and that was indeed my impression. A sort of international Glastonbury in south India. I made one good friend, an Israeli yoga teacher in her late 50s called Aytana. We practiced yoga each day and talked about life, the path of spiritual practice and Israeli politics. Although we found common ground on the first two issues, politics was rather a different story! I liked Aytana for her no-nonsense yet devoted practice, and her youthfulness of spirit.

One day over my huge and tasty 25rp (32p) ashram thali, I met an English woman in her early 40s. Or rather she met me, since she sat at my table and made conversation. She seemed like a "hardened" Advaita seeker. There was not much innocence in her eyes, but she was beautiful nonetheless; I guessed what it was she wanted from me. She was with a very silent German, to whom she seemed to pay no attention, and in truth looking at his rather boorish appearance it slightly surprised me that they were together at all. The only time they spoke to each other was when he asked for the rice from her thali, she kept it back for a while saying that she might have some more, but then gave it to him. Having stayed a few days, seen the cave and climbed the mountain, I started to feel "I don't really fit in here, it's time to head north and find Buddhist India!"

Next up – Nagpur, Nagaloka, and the TBMSG. To be continued...