

The Day that Changed my Life

Lokamitra



It was 25 years ago that I came to India with a small group of Yoga pupils for a course with Mr. Iyengar in Pune, and at the same time to visit some of the Buddhist holy places in North India, as well as Dharo Rimpoche in Kalimpong. It was during this trip to India that I decided to live and work here. For those who are interested I am writing down some of my memories of that visit for this and the next issue of Articles Shabda.

I had been practicing hatha yoga according to Mr. Iyengar's method since the end of 1970. I had become very ill on a recent seven months' rather aimless, but none-the-less rewarding, visit to India in 1969 and 1970 and yoga seemed a way to take responsibility for my health.

After my first class with Mr. Iyengar in London in 1973 I remember becoming very confident that through yoga I could overcome ulcerative colitis which by now I had been diagnosed with. I started to teach yoga within the FWBO in 1974 and soon built up an enthusiastic yoga group with some serious practitioners. Since taking yoga seriously it had been my desire to return to India to study more intensively with Mr. Iyengar. This gave me a reason to revisit the colour and chaos of India which I very much wanted. Of course not all memories were pleasant. Since my first visit two images had refused to go away. The first was of a leper in Jhansi with only holes for his eyes, nose and mouth. The second was of a woman in the street in Mangalore, who seeing a broken biscuit in the dirty gutter, snatched it and swallowed it immediately. It was only after returning to India that these two images ceased to haunt me.

On the previous visit I experienced for the first time a very different culture, freeing me from some of my cultural conditioning and giving me a wider perspective on life. The more time elapsed since that visit, the more I felt myself becoming submerged in British culture in a way that I experienced as limiting. It was time to leave again. The opportunity came in 1977 when Pundarika, the North London centre, of which I was the chairman, was to be pulled down. I resigned as chairman, took a summer retreat in the West country in preparation for starting activities in Bristol, Bath, Gloucester and Cheltenham when I returned from India, and spent some time working intensively with the yogis accompanying me. I also spent time at Padmaloka where Bhante needed little encouragement to talk about India, especially about his dream of having centres in the holy places. He suggested I might visit Sravasti where his old friend Venerable Sangharatana had a vihara. I decided there and then that I would try and do a retreat there. He also suggested that eventually it would be good to have some Order Members as anagarikas in India as they would be taken more seriously in robes. If he was hinting at me becoming an anagarika, I was not aware, but a few days later, from Cambridge, I rang him up and said that I would like to become an anagarika for the trip to India if he felt it suitable. He seemed very pleased indeed and a couple of weeks later he led me through the new vow at Padmaloka in one of those very special ceremonies of which he is a master in bringing just the right balance of joy and solemnity to.

Our group included Abhaya, Dhammadinna, Surata, Mike Scherk (Dhammapriya), Tony (Anandjyoti), Annie Leigh (Varaprabha), and another woman whose name I do not remember and whom I did not teach. On 28th September we boarded an Arian Afghan Airways flight which seemed to make unscheduled stops in several towns in Europe before reaching Kabul where we changed planes for Delhi. We spent a few days at the Singalese Pilgrims Rest House, near the main railway station. I was now wearing robes full time (they were my only clothes) and felt at ease and comfortable. Not only did they seem to simplify life, but most people seemed to take one seriously because of them. The fact that I was so obviously different from others, the nature of the robes themselves, as well as their traditional significance all helped in the practise of awareness.

After acclimatising we left for Sarnath where we stayed at the Mahabodhi rest house. As everywhere I received a very warm welcome from the Singalese monks, one of whom, the secretary (and now the General Secretary of the Society) insisted on me sharing his room, and giving up his bed for me when I got ill. I was really happy to be in Sarnath, as I think we all were. Bhante had brought the holy places to life in his seminars on the early Buddhist texts, and I had been looking forward for a long time to visiting them. Now I was grateful just to be there. It was quite easy to imagine the Buddha together with his first disciples in the lush green of the end of the rainy season. The area around the Deer Park was pervaded by a very strong peacefulness which was continually being added to by the devotions of the inhabitants of the many nearby temples. The only disturbance was the very noisy and incessant gambling of the Tibetan pilgrims.

From Sarnath, Surata and I left the others and set out for Bodh Gaya, where we arrived in the middle of a Hindu ancestor worshipping ceremony which centred on the Maha Bodhi temple itself. This was then, as is now, managed by a committee of eight, half of whom are Hindus, and presided over by the local District Magistrate who has to be a Hindu. We were so upset by the filth, noise, confusion and general lack of reverence for the temple, that we would have left that same afternoon if we had been able to get a bus out. One Hindu purohit (Brahmin priest) even tried to chant the Refuges on my behalf at one of the many shrines. This was too much for me. It seemed to me that very little had changed since Bhante's visit with Ven. Sangharatna 27 years previously, as recorded in "The Thousand Petalled Lotus". However, we found a place nearby to sit for the Order metta, and the noise and confusion immediately melted away. Even I seemed to melt away, absorbed by all-powerful waves of metta which seemed to radiate out from the depths below the Vajrasana.

The next day we left for Nalanda, 60 miles away. We found Dharmajyoti (a Malaysian born Chinese, ordained as an Upasaka and immediately after as a sramanera by Bhante in New Zealand in 1974) living with a Laotian monk in a small Chinese vihara not far from the Nava Nalanda Mahavidhyalaya. He was obviously happy in his studies and the simple life, and delighted to meet us, the first members of the WBO he had met since leaving New Zealand almost three years earlier. We stayed two days at the Chinese Temple, relaxing properly for the first time since arriving in India. Dharmajyoti showed us around the Mahavidhyalaya founded by Bhikkhu Jagdish Kashyap, and the vast ruins of the Nalanda vihara. It was awe inspiring to imagine thousands of monks there, studying, living and meditating in the same

place. And apparently only a small proportion of the ruins had been excavated so far, and those were impressive enough!

We walked up to the vultures' peak, the name expressing the place very well; it was probably still almost as isolated as when the Buddha stayed there, if not more as apparently the town of Rajagriha used to be in the hollow of the hills below, whereas now there is only jungle there, the town having moved a few miles north. Unfortunately the peace was shattered by the noise of the air lift to the near-by Nichiren Shanti Stupa near by, and the incessant drum beat so familiar to those of us from Balmore Street (where Pundarika, the North London Centre was situated) and Sukhavati (as the London Buddhist Centre was known then). Returning to the vihara I had my head shaved for the first time, in a roadside one-seat barber shack.

Dharmajyoti guided me through it reciting the words that a monk is supposed to contemplate at the time. It was certainly a shock to my image of myself (shaved heads were not at all fashionable in the West at the time), and completed the outward transformation started by the wearing of robes.

From Nalanda we set off for Kalimpong. We left at 10.30 am, the same time that Dharmajyoti and his fellow monk had to leave for a lecture. At 7.45 am we were each presented with a very large and heavy wheat pancake and hot milk. This would have lasted me until late in the afternoon in the normal course of things. However we found that the two bhikshus were soon busy cooking again. Because they could not eat after 12.00, and because they would still be out then, the second and main (meaning massive) meal of the day was prepared for 10.00 am, less than two hours after finishing the first meal! I struggled to get through half of what I was expected to although Dharmajyoti was obviously well accustomed to such a life, and Surata proved a very enthusiastic novice.

Until now travel had been fairly straight forward and finite along major routes with timetables. Now however we set off into the infinite, having to get a series of buses and trains from and to towns we had not heard of before. Travelling like that in India involved delays, frustrations, weariness, confusions and very varied interactions with people; but despite all these life was being lived all around in the open, with great colour, and so such travelling in India was always a very rich experience. The journey to Darjeeling (one could not go directly to Kalimpong in those days but had to get special pass in Darjeeling) was accomplished by three or more buses and two trains fairly efficiently in about two and a half days, bearing in mind we had no reservations, no time tables, and no clear idea of the route. Arriving at Siliguri station from Barouni, we were told that as foreigners we had to have a pass for Darjeeling. After realising that the office to get the pass would not open for some time (and assuming difficulties as I think we should have got the pass in Delhi or Calcutta and would probably have to return to one of these places to get it) I suggested that we just get on the departing bus whose conductor was at that moment beckoning us. I do not think Surata was very happy about this, but he came along with me. The bus stopped at police check points on the way and somehow we got through them. However I had quite reconciled myself to getting off the bus and walking through the jungle to Darjeeling if the need arose. As it was I had only a small and very light shoulder bag to carry. Looking back on that with the experience I have now, it was naive and foolhardy to say the very least and

I dread to think what would have happened if things had come to that, although I am sure we would have managed in the end.

We stayed in Kalimpong a week, being put up the small stupa-shaped temple at the back of the Dharmodaya vihara, run by an old friend of Bhante's, Bhaichand Pradhan. We shared the temple for spiritual practise with the 84 year old incumbent, a very small Nepali with the name of Mahabir, who had been a samanera for 2 years. His family still live in Kalimpong and he went to visit them every day, despite the fact that his wife remarried as soon as he took the robes. For the first several days he insisted on prostrating before me whenever we met. I have heard the Refuges, Precepts and Tiratana Vandana chanted in many different ways out here and at various speeds, all faster than us in FWBO, but Mahabir shot through them in record time.

The first person we visited in Kalimpong was Dhardo Rimpoche. He was clearly deeply moved to meet disciples of Bhante's and hear news of him and the FWBO. With tears in his eyes he talked of Bhante as his oldest friend in Kalimpong. We presented him with an image of Vajrasattva made by Aloka, and some FWBO publications for the school library, as well as a silk scarf from Bhante. I had been wondering how to greet him, but when it came to it I found myself spontaneously prostrating in front of him. Bhante said that he chose Dhardo Rimpoche to take the Bodhisattva vows from (when there were other Tibetan teachers in Kalimpong) because he most exemplified the spirit of the Bodhisattva, or words to that effect.

What Bhante had said came alive for me in that first meeting. After leaving Kalimpong, on several occasions when I felt spiritually dry, I refreshed myself by just recalling Dhardo's image to mind.

We made a pilgrimage to Bhante's vihara, the Triyana Vardhana Vihara which was empty and in a poor state. Although all the trees that Bhante had planted had been cut down, it was still an exceptionally beautiful location. Indeed it was easy to see why Bhante stayed in Kalimpong for the best part of 14 years. Not only is it dramatically beautiful, and the mixture of Tibetans, Nepalese, Chinese and Indians very refreshing, but the mountainous environment and air seemed particularly good for meditation. I found it easier to visualise the bodhisattvas than ever before, as if it was their natural abode.

In Kalimpong we also met Ven. Pragnaloka, a Tibetan who took the sramanera ordination from Bhante. In fact he had heard of our arrival before we got to him and had several people out looking for us. He was little old man, in poor health, living alone in a small one-roomed vihara (which he called a Maha Vihara!) high above Kalimpong at 10th mile. The small room was full of Buddhist images and thankas, although he did have a picture of Satya Sai Baba of Karnataka. Some ash had mysteriously appeared in his shrine; this was said to be one of Sai Baba's ways of communicating. He was clearly very happy to meet us and hear news of Bhante. He had kept in contact through the FWBO Newsletter until 1970 but had not received it since then. With his poor health and obvious isolation, and our hearts went out to him, especially as he was a disciple of Bhante's.

I soon realised that when Bhante left India Buddhist activities in Kalimpong came to a standstill except for the internal functioning of the monasteries and school. Indeed from all the conversations I had had with Buddhists since arriving in India, it soon became apparent that Bhante must have been the most active Buddhist in India since Dharmapala. He ran a spiritually active vihara which quickly became known as a place of practice, organised Buddhist activities in Kalimpong and the wider area, edited the Maha Bodhi Journal, started his own magazine Stepping Stones, helped local students, helped Dhardo Rimpoche, and, as I was soon to find out, had been the most active and effective bhikshu among the newly converted Buddhist followers of Dr. Ambedkar, to say nothing of his considerable correspondence. At that time we in the West knew the bare bones of these facts, but little more (by then he had not written about his life in Kalimpong and other Dharma work) but they took on real meaning for me after arriving in India. Bhante had clearly touched the lives of many, many people in India, and talking of him brought light to so many peoples' eyes.

Such was the joy that I experienced that I could almost feel devas dropping down flowers in joy.

It was soon time to leave for Pune for the Yoga course. It took us 4 or 5 days with brief stops.

In Calcutta we visited the head quarters of the Mahabodhi Society where we were able to meet Ven. Dhammaratana, one of the last remaining disciples of Anagarika Dharmapala and the editor of the Maha Bodhi Journal at the time. He seemed somewhat lonely and disappointed although he was so pleased to see us that we had to make an effort to get away in time for the train. He was keen to know my views on Dharma activities in the UK, and regretted the fact that while there were many German monks few seemed willing to return to Germany to work for the Dharma. As for the Mahabodhi Society headquarters its main function seemed to be to serve lay Singalese pilgrims and travellers. It can't have been easy for the young monks with so many beautiful young Singalese girls around!

We had not been intending to visit Nagpur, but rather put off by the length of the train journey from Calcutta to Bombay and noticing that it lay roughly half way, we decided to break the journey there for a few hours to meet two people on the list Bhante had given me, of people to meet if we had time. We arrived at the station to find the town in a state of great festivity. We went straight to Advocate Kulkarni's (who used to translate for Bhante in Nagpur) who told us the reason. It was Ashok Vijaya Dashmi, the day that Dr. Ambedkar had converted to Buddhism 21 years ago, and of course the day that the great king Ashoka is supposed to have converted to Buddhism so many years earlier! In the early evening Kulkarni took us to the Diksha Bhumi, the place where Dr. Ambedkar had converted to Buddhism.

After being led through milling crowds, the like of which I had never seen in my life, we found ourselves in a huge open area, many times larger than a football pitch, and just filled with seated people. There was supposedly a crowd of between five and six hundred thousand.

Everything then seemed to pass out of our hands and take on a surreal dimension. Unknown escorts just appeared and as they took us towards the bhikshus' platform the crowds just seemed to part spontaneously to let us through. This was next to the main platform on which the politicians who were clearly the focus of the evening were seated. And, I noted, the bhikshus' platform was lower!

Space was immediately made for me at the front of the platform by two monks. One was Raj Bhoj of Pune, a political leader of the Chambhar community in Maharashtra, who had taken the robes as a sramanera for a month. He was head of the Indian Buddhist Society. Although sounding very impressive it was obviously very limited in terms of outreach. I met him the next day and a couple of times in Pune. Although my first impressions were somewhat sceptical, my respect for him increased as I began to understand more about caste politics in India. As a leader of the Chambhar community in Maharashtra, he was very heroic in converting to Buddhism and risking losing the support of the majority of his caste fellows who did not follow him into Buddhism and in fact have ever since consistently discouraged their fellows from doing so by using the grossest of caste practices against them.

The other bhikshu I found myself seated next to was Sumedha, an old acquaintance of Bhante's, whose name Bhante had given to me before leaving UK. On the stage itself he took out an album full of photos of himself with various political leaders. This practice of maintaining such a photo album was not uncommon amongst bhikshus I was to meet over the next few years. Sumedha clearly wanted to talk to me, so much that I decided to leave the next day, instead of later on that night.

At about 10.45 p.m. after the politicians had finished monks were led onto the main platform.

Raj Bhoj managed to seize the microphone first and tried get a response from the crowd.

After that someone leapt up from the crowd and seized the microphone, I think probably criticising Raj Bhoj, who was a controversial figure in that at one point he had parted ways with Dr. Ambedkar, only later coming back to the fold after the latter's death. The word "Sangharakshita" was like magic and I was soon asked to speak. I knew little or nothing about the conversion movement, and Bhante had given me no clues as to what to talk about in lectures. But now I understood the twinkle in his eye as we parted at Padmaloka. Tired after three days' travelling, not having the slightest idea what I ought to say, not knowing what anybody else had said, with no knowledge of Dr. Ambedkar and the Indian Buddhist movement at all, and hungry, I was somewhat bewildered. Added to which I had probably not talked to more people than could fit into the Pundarika shrine room before then. I was not helped by a rather slimy bhikshu in silk robes who kept suggesting I should talk on the chapter of the flowers from the Dhammapada. In the end I did manage to speak coherently for about ten minutes to a massive and very rapt audience. Clearly Bhante was remembered with great feeling and appreciation

I arrived back at Kulkarni's after midnight to find the best meal of my stay in India so far, awaiting me, as well as long discussions with Kulkarni. Bhante has described him in his

memoirs, although at that time these were not published. A Brahmin, he had left home at the age of 49, in 1944, to spread the Buddha Dharma, taking his wife with him. He still called himself a Hindu, not because he believes that the Buddha was an incarnation of Vishnu (a view however which he did not seem particularly opposed to) but because he thought that all the best elements of Hinduism have come from Buddhism, and by calling himself a Hindu he hoped to persuade other Hindus that they are really, although they know it not, Buddhists.

This rather suspect view of working on Hinduism from within was a view, I later understood, shared by other Brahmins who were deeply influenced by the Buddha. Although he must have been 80 years old by then he was clearly a very lively person and so it was very frustrating that he was largely deaf, and communication only one way for much of the time.

The next day after listening to another hour's worth of his life, Sumedha collected us to take us to his sister's where we had the next best meal so far. Surata had by now realised that he was onto a good thing travelling around with someone in robes. The combination of the fact that I was a monk (and a foreign one and a disciple of Bhante) and the hospitality of Vidharba (which I am now well used to) meant that food was being continually piled on my plate and I was clearly expected to keep on eating. Signs of disinclination would be met with various whiles and grimaces and even a show of force. On some previous occasions I had had to insist on no more food, but at Sumedha's sister's flat, more than ever. But this was the first time I saw Surata insist on no more.

I spend some of the afternoon walking round the Diksha Bhumi, where I met Ven Anand Kausalyayana, who lived in the vihara there. He knew Bhante well (see Bhante's memoirs) and asked me about Bhante's land in Nagpur. Although he was the most respected monk in the Ambedkarite movement, despite being born a Brahmin, it was quite clear that he was also quite controversial. Most of the afternoon I spent speaking to some of the many people still gathered there, although I did not know how to cope with the constant prostrating to me and requests for blessings. Seeing so many Buddhists, with such obvious devotion, I realised quickly the significance of what Dr Ambedkar had done, although in factual terms I still knew next to nothing about him or the situation. As a result of his guidance, millions of people were now receptive to the Buddha Dhamma, an incredible accomplishment. At the same time it was very clear to me that there was little effective Dhamma teaching taking place among the new converts, and many were frustrated with the monks for not teaching the Dhamma in a meaningful manner and the politicians for trying to usurp the Buddhist movement for political ends. Not only that, the newly converted Buddhists had been largely ignored by the Buddhist world. The limitations and dangers inherent in the situation were immediately apparent - the economic difficulties, educational backwardness, the politics, the dangers of caste-based practice of Buddhism, and confusion with Hindu conditioning all combined to pose a very serious threat to the new Buddhist movement. If Buddhism was not practiced seriously at least by a strong core of people, for which there had to be teachers who could communicate the Dhamma in a meaningful manner, it could just end up the name of another Hindu caste in India, and it was clear how that would fit into the caste hierarchy. The future of the Dr. Ambedkar's attempts to revive Buddhism in India was in a precarious state.

Bhante's 1976 series of lectures on the Sutra of Golden Light showed how inextricably linked the personal and the social dimensions of the Dhamma were. In doing so they had brought together two hitherto seemingly opposed pulls in my relationship with life, and opened up a more wonderful and meaningful vision of the Dhamma, a vision I realised I had been seeking for years. But it was not just a question of vision. I had confidence in the actual two fold transformation of self and world (the basic teaching of the Sutra of Golden Light) from the very small beginnings we had made in UK at that time in communities and right livelihood projects. However it would take years, possibly generations, for that to have a significant affect on the wider society in the West. Here in India Buddhism could bring about a social revolution. The lives of millions of some of the most oppressed people in the world could be transformed by Buddhism, and the course of Indian history take a radical turn. Buddhism would be re-established in the land of its birth, and in an age when social questions were receiving increasing attention, oppressed people throughout the world would have before them the example of a peaceful, Dhamma revolution.

Dr. Ambedkar's great vision and the potential of the Buddhist movement he had initiated seemed to complete Bhante's lectures on the Sutra of Golden Light and affected me like nothing in my life until then. Surely there could be no better situation for the practice of the two-fold transformation of self and world? While I did not consciously decide to live and work in India until a couple of months later, I have no doubt that the die was cast then, and I look back on those thirty six hours as the hours that completely changed my life.