

In Buddha's Footsteps

"The Buddha encouraged his followers to visit four primary pilgrimage sites: Lumbini (his birthplace), Bodh Gaya (where he attained enlightenment), Sarnath (where he delivered his first sermon), and Kushinagar (where he attained Mahaparinirvana)"



Over the years I have been blessed to visit all four of these pilgrimage sites and recently I have spent extended time in Lumbini, Nepal and Bodhgaya, India.

Having recently been in Bodhgaya during January and February as part of my last winter retreat, I welcomed the opportunity to return and departed the UK earlier than normal for this year's retreat and flew out mid-July. This is the height of the monsoon season in India.

The differences in Bodhgaya since January/February are dramatic and this is especially demonstrated in terms of visitors. The people of the Himalayas from Tibet, Sikkim, Ladakh, Nepal and Bhutan are not here in the same large numbers. In winter, they come down in a great movement when the snow falls in the mountains and queues of thousands at the Mahabodhi Temple (place Buddha became enlightened) start to build before 04.00 each morning to await the opening at 05.00.

In July there are smaller groups of Buddhists from South Korea, Vietnam and Thailand, while the main group is of Shiva (Hindu God) devotees dressed in orange.

As a consequence of significantly fewer pilgrims, most of the restaurants are closed, as are tea stalls, shoe shines, bread sellers and fruit stalls. The town itself has a population of 48,000 but without the winter influx it feels like a ghost town.

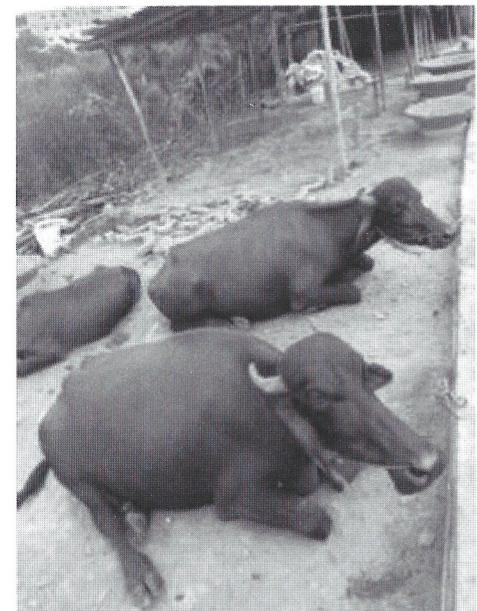
My morning starts at 03.00 when I awake to commence my Buddhist practice of mantras, prayers and meditation before leaving my guest house at 04.30 to take a stroll to the Mahabodhi Temple where I continue with my meditations as I queue with monks from India, Tibet, South Korea, Vietnam and Thailand.

My time at the Temple consists of 5, 4 or 6 walking meditations (rotated over 3 days) while circumnavigating the Temple. Due to the humidity of the monsoon, an hour later my kurta is often soaked with sweat.

It could be said that Buddhism is nothing but the study of the mind. To assist this, I engage in an 18-hour daily intermittent fasting schedule. The remaining 6 hours are when I consume my daily food. I do take water throughout the day. Intermittent fasting originated with Buddhist monks to enable them to devote more time to their Buddhist practice. I find this to be exceedingly beneficial.

With heavy monsoon rains, the rest of my day is spent in my room at my guest house, which I refer to as my monk's cell. Simplicity is everything. My monk's cell is to assist with my meditation, mantras, prayers and reading.

At the end of each day, sleep comes very easily.



The Water Buffalo