



## Bodhi Tree, Bodhi Mind

A ZEN GARDENER'S PILGRIMAGE TO INDIA

On New Year's Day I flew to India with my 23-year-old daughter, Alisa. She had won a journey to India in the annual employee raffle held at the fine restaurant where she works in North Berkeley. "Come with me, Mom," she implored, and since this grand prize coincided with her college graduation, we set forth together on a pilgrimage to the birthplace of the Buddha.

Auspiciously, my close friend Shantum Seth, a fellow lay dharma teacher in the Order of Interbeing and a longtime student of Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh, was coleading the 2012 winter pilgrimage In the Footsteps of the Buddha with Bernie Glassman, seasoned Zen teacher and founder of Zen Peacemakers, an organization committed to the practice of socially engaged

Buddhism throughout the world.

In India, Alisa and I joined the diverse pilgrimage sangha assembled from a patchwork of wanderers spanning eight decades of life experience and hailing from around New Delhi, Switzerland, Japan, the Netherlands, Israel, the United States, Canada, and China. Each of us committed to 14 days of practicing on the pilgrim path. "Friends," Shantum welcomed us at our first gathering, "we have arrived." Bernie simply encouraged us to plunge into India and bear witness to the Unknown.

I put aside my camera, cell phone, computer, and all reading material, including my indispensable India guidebook. Pilgrimage advice from Rebecca Solnit, a Bay Area author and practitioner, guided my journey: "That

thing the nature of which is totally unknown to you is usually what you need to find, and finding it is a matter of getting lost." In India the futile search for the historical Buddha hidden in the creases of modern-day Lumbini or Kushinagara was abandoned for the stark presence of the living landscape. I lost myself in the folds of unfamiliar terrain.

Traveling with Bernie helped us hew to the unmarked edge of intention. Early in the pilgrimage we climbed Vulture Peak, where the Buddha taught the *Heart Sutra*, the *Surangama Samadhi Sutra*, and the *Lotus Sutra*. The First Buddhist Council was said to have been held on this craggy mountain fastness shortly after the Buddha's death. We sat zazen on Vulture Peak, bearing witness to the present moment. The sun set,

and a full moon rose behind cold winter mist. We descended the mountain in the dark. A closing phrase from the insight poem by the 5th-century B.C.E. nun Citta rose like a raptor in the night:

Robe thrown down,  
bowl turned over,  
leaning on a rock  
great darkness opened.

Honing courage, we entered India sideways. Guile and expectation dropped away. For some the pilgrimage path was a sacred journey; for others, it was a reentry into lapsed practice; for all, a plunge into the powerful poverty and pollution of India. I began to find fresh ground in the core teachings of the Buddha as they germinated from the raw nerve of the landscape—a vast green wanderer's robe stitched from scraps of rice and wheat fields intersown with patches of lentils, maize, cotton, and sugar cane, all bordered with a solemn band of bodhi trees growing at the edge of every empty field.

These bodhi trees, or *Ficus religiosa* plants, claimed me. They helped me walk new in the footsteps of the Buddha

without yearning for past or future. In the Bamboo Grove presented by King Bimbisara to the Buddha millennia ago, a few of us climbed into the pale ash cradle of ficus tree limbs stretching 50 feet above the valley floor. On Vulture Peak, I heard the dark rumor of bodhi in the night wind. Among the ruins of Nalanda, heart-shaped leaves echoed the dialectics of Nagarjuna and Shantideva. In Bodhgaya we sat under a descendant of the original Tree of Awakening while 300,000 Buddhist pilgrims assembled for the Kalachaka teachings being offered by His Holiness the Dalai Lama. Later in the day we practiced walking meditation along the Niranjana River, pushing through shin-deep litter of bodhi leaves mixed with plastic garbage. In Varanasi, one of the oldest cities on earth, I noticed a scraggly bodhi tree growing near the shore of the Ganges, protecting the Manikarnika cremation ghat. The timeless truth of birth and death was told there in lengthening shadow as corpses were returned to the dark currents of the sacred river.

Our final day of pilgrimage in India was celebrated in the Jeta Grove at

Sravasti, where the Buddha taught 25 years of rain-season retreats. Entering the ruins of this grove, we paused at the massive Ananda Bodhi tree near the gate, planted from a cutting taken from its venerable Bodhi ancestor established in 288 B.C.E. by King Ashoka's princess-nun daughter, Sanghamitta. Just beyond this grand tree, Shantum offered the Five Mindfulness precepts to seven pilgrims in our sangha. A visiting saffron-robed monk waited nearby in mindful attendance. At the close of the ceremony he presented us with a tiny bodhi tree seedling that we planted at the edge of the Jeta Grove, marking the close of our pilgrimage. Lost and found together in India, we listened as one of our sangha members chanted these verses from the Gate of Sweet Nectar ceremony:

Calling all you hungry hearts,  
Everywhere through Endless Time,  
You who wander, you who thirst—  
I offer you this Bodhi Mind! ▼

Wendy Johnson is *Tricycle's* longest-running columnist. She is the author of *Gardening at the Dragon's Gate: At Work in the Wild and Cultivated World*.

