

Pilgrimage to Sri Lanka March 2011



Pilgrims at Polonaruwa Gal Vihara

Left to Right:

Mike, Rob P., Noirin, Sarah, Dea, Bhante, Richard, Jayne, James, Robert W.

Dea

Can we really do this? But what about work, and the boys, and the dog and... Following lots of discussions about the practicalities we agreed that come what may, we really should take up this offer. I think we knew that from the start.

My fears were plentiful: fear of losing people at airports, fear of flying, fear of being trapped far from home if the system broke, fear of monsters and murderers in the dark at night, of snakes and disease and never the mind

the cockroach that got me at our Kutí!

Following our arrival at Columbo airport, waiting for Mike and Rob (who we'd lost!), and standing outside in the heat and bustle I felt someone push me in the back on my rucksack. Immediately I was on the defence and turned to see a young boy staring at me, along with a group of other boys, and some older girls. I looked, he looked, he carried on looking, I was ready for trouble..., he smiled 'what is your name?', 'my name is Dea'. His hand came out to take mine and he introduced himself, followed one by one by the other children with him, and then the girls, all smiling, then laughing, telling me their names, and me telling them mine. Well this was different.

Time and again these fears of mine were put to rest and in their place came a softening and trust.

I did not do a lot of mental, or other preparation beforehand, (except for my extensive medical supplies) because I knew that this journey would require an open mind and heart and a willingness to go with the flow rather than force of will. It was such a joy and relief to be with people all looking essentially in the same direction, to the Buddha, the Dhamma and the Sangha.

My gratitude goes to 'ooh, that will not do' Bhante, my Mother who brought me to the door of Buddhism, to the pilgrims including Moneybags, Giggly, Chatterbox and all, the monasteries for shelter, food, guidance and beauty, to driver par excellent Upali, assistant 'ari ari ari' Sameera, to Chínki who provided our bus, our guides at the sites (invited and otherwise), the mangy dogs for their company, and for an experience that widens and deepens with the memories. There is much to reflect on.

Jayne

Ten pilgrims happy and bright, one driver generous and steady, one conductor cheerful and diligent and all encased in a bus - great gift of Chinky - giving shape and form to the ten days of pilgrimage and like a healthy body and organs all passengers and bus working together in harmony generously surrendering the individual within to the needs and direction of the all and Bhante Bodhidamma with the vision, leading us each and every day forever Onward!

Monasteries and mountains, temples and caves, stupas and Buddhas all around. Every day full full full: Sigiriya before breakfast; the sacred tooth before dawn; Sri Pada through the night and always harmony and good cheer even through the aching calves.

Monks and nuns, offerings and bows, refuges and precepts at the Sacred Bo Tree - little sister to the Buddha's very own - and connecting it all the ever reliable steadfast bus, picking us up putting us down, a shelter and refuge from the heat and dust

*One bow to the Buddha,
One bow to the Dharma,
One bow to the Sangha,
One bow to the Air Con!*

What else, what else? Precious moments in companionable meditation under mozzzy nets in the early morning. Spontaneous tea with venerable Abbot and a privileged glimpse of shards of bones said to be the Buddha's very own. Spontaneous tea with an English monk at Nyanaponika Thera's old abode; Shangri La in the forest with flowers and butterflies all around. Sumptuous

dinner of eye popping proportions at the monastery in the North where if one was lucky one shared ones room with a family of frogs. Tea with Venerable Upali and a surreal, cosmic, sci fi experience - sorry you had to be there!

And all throughout the ever present thread of good heart, harmony and cheer, generosity and care shown by each when needed, experienced by all - Sangha in action in the world.

And so finally a BIG cheer for Bhante and a resounding thank you to him for imagining , planning, visualising, leading - not forgetting inviting - us all on our brilliant pilgrimage of Sri Lanka's sacred sites.

Mike

*help with every step
from holy mountain hawks
(enlightenment's free)*

Noirín

Perhaps the greatest challenge was to get myself to the starting point! I'm not a keen traveller and didn't know many of my fellow pilgrims, not did I have much knowledge of Sri Lanka. I couldn't work up the enthusiasm to do any background reading and was secretly hoping that something would prevent my journey. A few weeks prior to the trip, life obliged and presented a plausible excuse. Such sweet relief in the decision to pull out! But unwelcome thoughts arose arguing that staying home would just reinforce old habits whereas going on pilgrimage could be a step in the direction of the

Dhamma. I protested and found other excuses e.g. the risk of Delhi-belly. But doubt niggled away, reminding me that every opening to truth had involved a journey through reluctance, yet had always brought happiness. Eventually I was persuaded to give myself as whole-heartedly as possible to the pilgrimage.

I would renew that vow again and again throughout the 10 days. Not that there were many external challenges. Thanks to Bhante's careful preparations it was virtually stress-free for the rest of us! We had the luxury of an air-conditioned mini-bus taking us around, the monasteries and hotels we stayed at were comfortable and welcoming. The Sri Lankan people we met were invariably friendly and cheerful and there was natural beauty in every place we visited – sometimes lush tropical vegetation, sometimes spacious, rocky hillsides, once a dramatic mountain climb (Sri Pada). But at the time I was more aware of the strangeness, the temperature, the anticipation of the onward journey. I never really felt settled – perhaps that's the essence of pilgrimage.

*I was most relaxed when we were on the move. Our minibus became 'home' for the 10 days. It offered cool relief after every visit, and the chance for friendship – sometimes simple chit-chat, sometimes our challenges in putting the Dhamma into practice, sometimes solitude, sometimes misery. While the body relaxed, the heart continued with its inner pilgrimage through the joys and woes of relationship. Then we would arrive at our destination to assimilate Sri Lankan Buddhist culture, where my heart would attempt to thread its way through dullness or anxiety to find inspiration in temple carvings or paintings or the history of a monastery or stupa. Afterwards, *phew*, back to the bus!*

The pilgrimage honoured Bhante Bodhidhamma's years of practice in Sri

Lanka, and thereby my own link with the Buddha-Dhamma. It nourished the seed of Sangha. Now, in the comfort of home I can remember and appreciate the loveliness of each place of worship. Overcoming my pre-pilgrimage anxieties and the repeated effort to honour the pilgrimage of the heart - this is my karmic inheritance. On all accounts I am very, very glad to have participated.

Richard

More Tea Bhikkhu?

It was in the spring of 2010 that Bhante Bodhidhamma invited us to join him on a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka. The first thought was of the cost, and the second of an opportunity not to be missed. Fortunately the latter prevailed. What an opportunity!

Then came other fears. Being in an alien country (I was the only pilgrim who had never visited the tropics). Doing without supper (or indeed tea!) - I needn't have worried. Tea, biscuits and cakes were in plentiful supply - albeit it very sweet and milky tea (one pot flavoured with cockroach). Climbing mountains with dicky knees ... the list goes on & on.

But the trip was beyond all expectation. Bhante had us organised, so everything went like clockwork (why does so-and-so's name keep coming up?). Our fellow pilgrims were a wonderful group, and we all gelled so easily. Numerous and varied conversations flowed on the bus (our haven, courtesy of Chinki). The sights and the sites were awe inspiring and beautiful. Our guides were a joy. The Sri Lankan people were so friendly and welcoming - I'll never forget the endless smiles ... "where are you from?"

As for the wildlife - the cheeky monkey who reached over Robert's shoulder to steal the sugar bowl, wading out into a river to help to wash an elephant, then there were the lizards, the eagles, the squirrels....

And at Gal Vihara we knelt before the reclining Buddha and chanted and took refuges and precepts, with a Sri Lankan family joining in. What a wonderful and inspiring moment. My mind had it's own ideas - a picture formed of three of my friends peering over the hill behind us, beer mugs in hand, giggling. It raised a smile.

Now, back in the humdrum, we have the 1,000 plus pictures, the trinkets and the memories, but I know I have brought so much more back from this beautiful, spiritual country.

What an opportunity!

Robert W.

I was taken by many things on the pilgrimage but in particular by the Sri Lankan smile. Just about everyone in Sri Lanka smiles and at the least opportunity. When you smile, the muscles in your face relax and when you breathe out you release. To smile at someone is to take him or her in, to recognise and acknowledge him or her. A smile shows a sense of empathy. When you receive a heart felt smile the same thing happens. The practice of smiling is therefore a nourishing one.

We came across many Bodhi trees on our pilgrimage. This tree is from the fig family and can live for many hundreds of years. The Bodhi tree at Anuradhapura is purportedly from a cutting of the tree under which

Buddha sat on the night of his enlightenment. Pilgrims from all round Sri Lanka and further afield come to this tree to give offerings and to worship. This grand tree is loved so much that there is a department at the botanical gardens in Kandy dedicated to its welfare. Bodhi trees can be found in nearly all temples and towns on the island and whilst not all receive the attention of the head gardener at Kandy they do all receive the attention, devotion and prayers of practising Buddhists. The trees are adorned with ribbon, dressed with flags and accommodate shrines festooned with fresh flowers, candles and incense. These Bodhi trees witness the prayers, resolves and aspirations of thousands of Buddhists throughout the island every day. Sacred places indeed.

I must admit to harbouring an expectation from the pilgrimage, namely that my faith would receive a much-welcomed boost. I cannot in honesty say that that's what has happened but I have returned with a greater sense of the need to "let go."

Sri Lankans face many practical difficulties. Their country is still seeking to recover from the effects of the Tsunami and 20 or so years of bloody civil war. The infrastructure of the island is poor, the housing stock basic and we were told that unemployment is high. However in spite of these adversities I found Sri Lankans to be essentially positive and content. I put this down to their attitude of acceptance to what is. They seem to possess an ability to let go and accept. I wonder if this is the fruit of their Buddhist faith? In contrast, most of the time I seem to grasp and rebel and it is not as if this achieves anything. In fact all it does is bring home to me how unsatisfactory life often is. I know that there is a sense of release if one can only accept and surrender to what is. So in conclusion, I record my renewed resolve to practice letting go. Sadhu.

Sarah

The ancient temples, monasteries, stupas and statues had the atmosphere and energy of generations and generations of people's devotion to the Dhamma. They stirred in me a strong sense of connection to the tradition and a joyful appreciation of how it has been passed down to us through people practicing , through the centuries.

I felt very privileged being driven from one wonderful place to another in our luxurious bus. We didn't have to think about anything as Bhante Bodhidhamma had booked and arranged everything beforehand and our excellent driver and helper (Upali and Samera) took good care of us.

I loved spending time with Sangha. It brought me great joy to share our stories and insights on the bus and spend time getting to know each other. There was a great balance of energies and we all got on very well with each other. It was also a real pleasure to spend some time with Bhante Bodhidhamma. With his wonderful balance of wisdom and humour, he is both inspiring and great fun to be with.

My heart was often deeply moved by the Sri Lankan people's devotion to the Dhamma. It seemed so natural for them to bow and offer flowers at shrines or to bow to show their respect to monastics.

We saw many amazing examples of the strength of people's devotion to the Dhamma during our monumental night time climb up Sri Pada, a big mountain with a footprint at the top that people believe to belong to the Buddha. Even though it was a long and difficult climb, elderly women and men would hobble up, parents would help their children up and even carry their little babies up. Many were singing and chanting on the way, to pay their respects to the footprint in the temple at the top and do this in time for

the magnificent views at sunrise.

It also felt very special when we did our chanting at the different temples and shrines along our journey. One time we were chanting before a beautiful statue of a laying down Buddha at the ancient city of Polonnaruwa and a Sri Lankan family who were sitting nearby started joining in with us. When we were finished, their beautiful little girl who could have only been three or four years old came and bowed to Bhante Bodhidhamma. It was a very sweet moment.

The only thing I found a bit difficult on our trip was my paranoia of leeches and other creepy crawlies. The cockroach tea that was served to us in one particular restaurant didn't help me at all with this!

Sharing with Sangha, experiencing the tradition in the context of a Buddhist culture and the general warmth and openness of the Sri Lankan people was all nutritious food for my heart, mind and practice. I now feel an appreciation for the tradition that is more heartfelt than it was before and this has inspired my enthusiasm to practice. I am also beginning to understand how devotional practices can be very purifying and how it is very wholesome to develop and give expression to gratitude and reverence for the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha..

James

I was surprised and felt privileged by an invitation from Bhante Bodhidhamma to join him on a pilgrimage to Sri Lanka over a year ago. I wasn't quite sure what how a pilgrimage fitted into my overall practice and understanding of the practice but my respect in Bhante was enough for me to accept it graciously. I had felt that a pilgrimage was a ritual dominant in most religions including Buddhism but not really part of my practice. My

only recent experience of a pilgrimage was a few years back when I went on the Camino De Santiago De Compostela, in which I had taken a month to walk across Northern Spain. I therefore asked how many kilometres we would be walking on an average day and was told nothing on that scale, we would be travelling around primarily on a hired bus. The itinerary showed that we would be staying at a number of monasteries, so my next guess was that we might be meditating a lot, much like a retreat around visits to religious and historical sites. I was told by Bhante that we could hopefully find some quite in which we could practice some meditation but it was not going to be a prominent feature of the trip, it was going to be more of a holy holiday. So with this, I had finally to let go of generating expectations about the pilgrimage, and just see how it goes.

The pilgrimage did include the following (in no particular order): early mornings; long bus journeys; gallons of tea; lots of food; guided tours of historical sites; dancing around mosquitoes; hot weather; wonderful scenery; taking too many poor quality photographs; dynamic drivers; meeting lovely locals; avoiding hawkers; lazy mangy dogs; nice hotels; a cheeky monkey; pious people; buying books on Buddhism; mid-night mountain climbing; Cricket World Cup results; amazing sights and sounds from Sri Lanka's wildlife; and many more of the things that a visit to Sri Lanka offers. What was different to the average trip was the access to the monastic environment, without being subject to many of its disciplines, and meeting some very interesting monks. But what made this trip a pilgrimage to me, was the company. Meeting fellow practitioners of the same Buddhist tradition and realising the wealth and variety of backgrounds and personalities that share a common faith, was enriching. The conversations on the bus, in the restaurant, while walking around a religious and historical site gave me a deeper sense of the wisdom developed and practice as applied in my fellow pilgrim's lives. Together with the kindness and generosity they show me (including that of a stranger, Chinky), means that I

can give my fellow pilgrims no higher compliment, than they have inspired me to redouble my efforts in all elements of my own practice. But out of the wealth of experiences that this pilgrimage has given me, what stands out (apart from the incredible work of organising this pilgrimage) and will remain long in my memory is the company, illuminating conversations and banter of Bhante Bodhidhamma.

Rob.P.

I write this, sitting at the foot of a large standing Buddha over looking the bay at Trincomolee on the east coast of Sri Lanka, just three days after leaving Bhante and my fellow pilgrims at Summathipala monastery at the end of our pilgrimage, and before continuing my travels around the east and south of the Island.

The pilgrimage was a great success in large part due to Bhante's rather eccentric, possibly unique, approach to the role of tour guide, there being so many hours in the day when you rise at 4.30am that so much can be done, and so enjoyably. We were a happy bunch on our bus, nurtured by Noirin and her endless lotions and potions. Travelling in a group for a pilgrimage added real value to our travel experience, but also provided an insight, not usually experienced in the West, of a devotional life.

Bhante and the guides he organised were able to gain access for us to see Holy Relics and we were always invited for tea and shown great kindness. We also certainly visited sites of importance and beauty that I would not have seen as a lone tourist, or even known existed.

I have my memories, perhaps the fondest being the Sri Lankan family joining us for puja at Gal Vihara, and the young child of the family offering

her own puja to Bhante, a simple gesture in a place of great beauty, but there are many memories mingled amongst the places visited.

I am by training cynical and have struggled over the years with devotion, or perhaps not thought it important enough, much beyond a cursory bow before and after meditation, yet over the past two weeks I have remembered my first contact with Buddhism and Hinduism and how I was struck by the effect on the heart of simple devotion. If done with good intention I am sure that puja can only enhance the mind and the heart, but that these aspects of practice underplayed in the past also reflect the poetry and the beauty of Buddhism and, it seems to me, presents the outward face that completes the picture.

Bhante

You never know what you are taking on until you take it on.

I was afraid that organising a pilgrimage for ten of us would be full of misadventures. I was not very confident of setting up lodgings and organising the visits. And then there was the group. How would they get on? Surely their meditation practice would facilitate harmony.

All fears turned out to be fantasy. With the help of friends in Sri Lanka, I was able to organise lodgings and we used mainly the Government bungalows, the lodgings for British officials when the country was under colonial rule. They were all very comfortable and the food was excellent.

And there were two great strokes of luck. Firstly, there was the office man, Mr. Ramachandra, at Sumatthipala Monastery (where we began and ended our journey) had been a professional tour guide. Unfortunately he was

unable to come with us all the way, but did manage to join us at Kandy. And it was thanks to him that we were able to see the Casket that holds Tooth Relic. But he also put us in touch with 'Uncle Eddy' who took us around Anuradhapura. Uncle Eddy had a wonderful military style and he had us jumping to it. He left us with this insight into marriage. 'There are three rings to any marriage - the engagement ring, the marriage and .. suffering!' And there was Sunil who gave us a grand tour of Polonnaruwa and was in the habit of showing us where things were by tossing stones at them.

What surprised me was that although I had visited these sights before, how little I'd seen. How important it is to have a guide.

The second piece of good fortune consisted both of Chinky (Mrs. ..) who not only organised the hire of the twenty seater, air-conditioned bus, but who also paid for it. And the driver and 'bus conductor. Upali drove the bus as if he were carrying precious cargo and avoided on more than one occasion the possibility of crashing. Sameera, a young man, was ever ready to pick up our bags and heave them and onto the bus and luckily spoke enough English to mediate.

The good luck for me culminated on the final day when we were on the back to Sumathipala after climbing Sri Pada over night. The group would break up the next day and I felt we needed a last meal together. There was only one town of any size on the way back and lo and behold a hotel with a very good Sinhalese cuisine.

So from a tour operator's point of view, the whole pilgrimage went off without a hitch. And I would say to anyone who wants to do the Sri Lanka pilgrimage, that they will find it easy to negotiate and delightful to experience.