

Pilgrimage to India, 2011

Zen Master Bon Soeng

Editor's note: *The following article is from two sources. The main talk, from Zen Master Bon Soeng's talk at Lumbini at the Whole World Is a Single Flower conference in October 2011, is in our standard typeface, placed between two sections set off in a different typeface, taken from Gong Mun, the newsletter of the Empty Gate Zen Center.*

Pedestrians, bicycles, scooters, tuk-tuks, bicycle rickshaws, cars, trucks, busses, cows, goats, pigs and dogs vie for limited street space. Everyone and everything within one inch of disaster, going in every direction with horns blaring . . . if you are lucky enough to have a horn. Fortunately, no one is hurt today and we make it to the temple for full-moon chanting. On the road to Ranakpur to visit an amazing Jain temple constructed exclusively of carved marble, we share the road with hundreds of sheep, goats and camels. Some of the camels carry the babies of the herder families. Getting 22 kilometers from the airport to our hotel in Varanasi takes over an hour and a half. Patience, patience, patience: the code words for travel in India!

In the darkness before dawn the eighty or so Kwan Um pilgrims set out on foot from our hotel to chant and sit under the Bodhi Tree at the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, where the Buddha experienced his great enlightenment. In the quiet before dawn, the cows and dogs own the streets. Sellers of beads, buddha statues and fabrics are slowly setting up their wares. Beggars are lining up with one hand extended, the other pointing to their mouths. . . We pilgrims walk single file in silence, allowing the place and our intentions to become one. Under the Bodhi Tree we meet up with other fellow Kwan Um pilgrims who have spent the night under the tree. These overnight pilgrims watched as a flashmob of Thai gilders applied gold leaf to the fences that surround the sacred tree. All night long, as these pilgrims were bowing, chanting and sitting in their mosquito-netted tents, dogs were howling and fighting. Joining together for chanting, voices from Hong Kong, Singapore, Korea, America, Germany, Lithuania, Russia, Canada, South Africa and Australia merge in reverence for

the place, the teachings and our ancestors. As our chanting ends we immediately hear beautiful chants sung in Thai, Cambodian, Korean, Chinese and who knows what else. All of us practitioners from all points around the globe and all styles of Buddhist practice chant as one, revealing the beautiful voice of the mahasangha echoing the Buddha and his disciples, who wandered and practiced deeply in these very same places of our journey.

It is a few days later and we have rolled our way through the Indian countryside into Nepal. This small-town border crossing is choked by colorful trucks full of merchandise from India trying to pass through customs. In the other direction these same colorful trucks are now empty, slowly, slowly, rolling back into India. We wait, more patience required, as all our passports are checked for visas. Finally, in darkness, we arrive at the Korean temple in Lumbini, Nepal, Buddha's birthplace. With no one to greet us we again wait and we laugh. Twelve hours on a bus and now this?

It's dawn the next day and we pilgrims walk in silence, two by two, toward the stupa and pillar marking the "exact" birthplace of the Buddha. As the sun rises, for the first time on the pilgrimage we can actually see the bright yellow sun. Gone is the pollution-filled sky of India with its hazy red sun. The path to the stupa is beautifully kept, the landscape calming and lovely. The silence, beauty and warm sweet air are almost intoxicating. A sense of peace and aliveness comes over me. I realize that I haven't heard this silence since arriving in India. I haven't seen the bright yellow sun in days. Then I realize that there are no beggars around; no one is trying to sell me anything. Alone with my fellow pilgrims I am in heaven. Ahh . . . wonderful!

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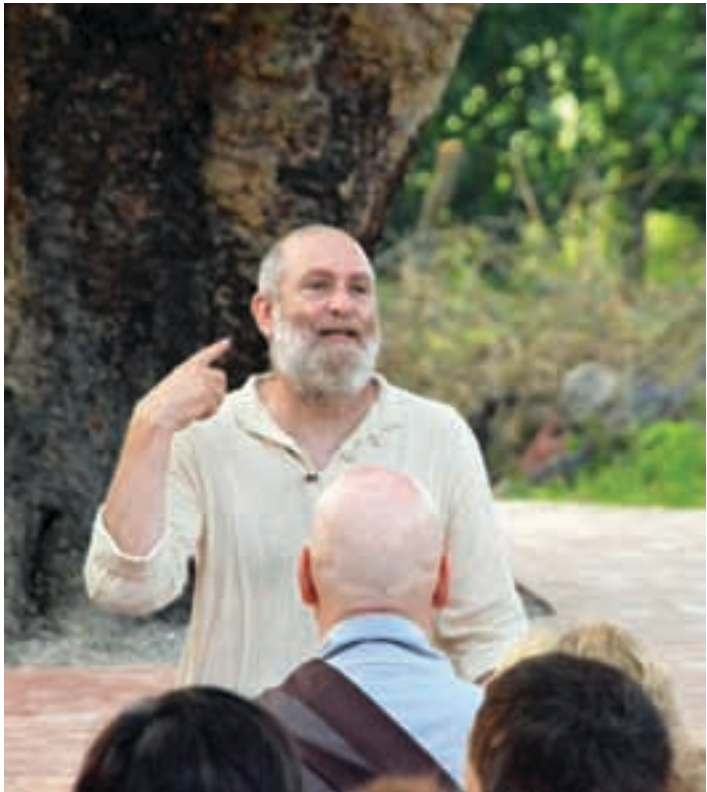
We are here in Lumbini, the birthplace of the Buddha. This is the last stop on our 10-day pilgrimage, which has been retracing, in a very odd order, the major places of the Buddha's life. Every major spiritual tradition has some kind of pilgrimage as part of their tradition. It is the duty of every Muslim who is able to go to Mecca once in their lifetime. Jewish people travel to the Wailing Wall, the last remaining section of the Second Temple, in Jerusalem. Many Catholics travel to northern Spain and walk a route of many churches culminating in a visit to the Cathedral of Saint Jerome.

I was thinking this morning as we were walking here that maybe now we are in heaven. There was no honking of the traffic. Nobody was coming up to us trying to sell us beads. We didn't have to look at beggars, naked children with their hands out or children singing Buddhist chants, not really as a spiritual practice but as a performance so that we would pay them money. But here it is silent. The sun is rising, bright and yellow. The air is cool. The birds are singing. And I thought, we're in heaven.

And that's the kind of life the Buddha was born into. The Buddha was born into heaven. He was born into a world where there was no suffering. Every wish he had was granted. His father tried to make sure that he couldn't see the suffering of the human world. So he pampered him and kept him cloistered in the palace. Every whim was granted.

But something happened in the Buddha's mind. The Buddha eventually saw suffering and realized he was human. He couldn't live in heaven anymore. In the mythology of the heavenly realms, you can live there and you can have a wonderful life, but ultimately you dissipate your karma. You eventually lose everything. This world is impermanence and your good situation will end. So the Buddha somehow intuitively realized this and he jumped over the wall of the palace and he left heaven. In doing so he entered into the suffering world of human beings. Without a moving mind, unflinchingly, he looked at the suffering of this world. He cried with the people when they cried. He suffered just like everybody else suffered. And he didn't need to. He could have dissipated his karma in the palace but instead he jumped over the wall. And in that jumping, he set our practice life in motion. Our practice is to unflinchingly be with the suffering of the world. Not to separate ourselves off, but to be with the suffering that is all around us.

All of us traveling on the buses have seen the poverty, the pain, the sadness, the despair, along with the joy and the wonder of life in Northern India. We have no choice but to witness the pain. Our pilgrimage is to be touched by the truth of all of it. We all know our joy. We all know our happiness. We crave these mental states. But we also know that they don't last. And it is our deep practice vow



to unflinchingly be with the pain and the suffering of this world. That is the bodhisattva mind.

On this pilgrimage, we learned about the life of a man named Gautama Shakyamuni, who became the Buddha. We have also learned about his disciples. We learned about his cousin, Ananda. We were told that Ananda argued with the Buddha when the Buddha wanted to leave Vaishali and go to Kushinagar to die. Ananda said, "What's wrong with my hometown?" Forty years practicing with the Buddha and still he argued with the Buddha! So even the disciples of the Buddha were human beings just like us.

When our guides speak about the Buddha he is called Lord Buddha. And when we bow to the Buddha on the altar it's very easy to think of him as a god. But he's a man. We learned about the Buddha's aunt, who argued so forcefully with Buddha to allow women to become nuns, to be part of the sangha. We were told that the Buddha couldn't quite agree. He couldn't say yes, but he didn't say no. Perhaps even the Buddha's mind wasn't completely clear when he was arguing with his aunt.

Practice is nonstop. It's easy to think we get enlightenment and we're done. Zen Master Seung Sahn used to say, "Enlightenment is easy to get, hard to keep." Moment to moment to moment, what are we doing now? We learn a very simple practice: keep a don't-know mind. But we all know how difficult it is to keep this don't-know mind. But we keep a try mind. Only try, try, try. What am I? Don't know.

This don't know is the light that brings us into our life.

So I talked about the pilgrimage as a journey over land, but a pilgrimage is also an inner pilgrimage. What am I? As we have been traveling on this trip, all of us have been confronted with our own karma, by our own conditioned mind, this I-my-me. We have likes and dislikes. We think that some things are good, some things are bad. All of us at one time or another on this trip have tried to change India. "If only they did it this way, then it would be a good country." I realize that it is not really possible that I am always right, and six billion other people are wrong. But that is how our minds operate.

Just as we unflinchingly face the suffering of this world, we also go inward and unflinchingly observe and wonder, what am I? It's so easy to jump into the heaven realm and ignore the truth of our experience. Our practice is to face the experience that we have right now. But we shouldn't be fooled by our idea of that experience. That's just our mind. We're always asking, what is this? What am I? Don't know!

So here we are at Lumbini Garden, the birthplace of Buddha. We are having our conference at the Korean temple here in Lumbini. This conference is called the Whole World Is a Single Flower. That name points to a calligraphy that Zen Master Man Gong, our great grandteacher, penned or inked when he was told that the Japanese had been defeated in World War II. So I thought I would recite a short poem by Man Gong for us today. It's called "Prajna Ship." He said,

Everything is impermanent.
But there is truth.
You and I are not two, not one.
Only your stupid thinking is nonstop.
Already alive in the Prajna ship.¹

Everything is impermanent, but there is truth. When we were at the Mahabodhi Temple there were many different groups coming to pay respects to the Buddha's enlightenment place and sit under the Bodhi Tree. There was Thai chanting. There was Burmese chanting. Our Kwan Um group was doing Korean chanting. Together we chanted the Heart Sutra in English, Korean, Chinese, German, Lithuanian and Polish. At the Mahabodhi Temple there were people from all over the world. All these different practice forms come and go. We all like to think my way is the right way, but really it's just "my way." Our way is a wonderful way. We should practice it single-mindedly. But it is only one way.

The diversity of our world is always changing. Zen Master Man Gong could never have imagined that all of us from all these different countries would be here in Lumbini celebrating the dharma that's been passed down from the Buddha to Man Gong to Zen Master Seung Sahn to us. Never in his wildest dreams could he have imagined it. This world is always changing.

You and I are not two, not one. We are one, we are two.

How is it we are not two, not one? The whole world is a single flower. All one thing. And, each individual flower in this world is the whole universe. From one to many, from many to one. Where do I stop and you begin? Don't know.

But only our stupid thinking is nonstop. We're always thinking, thinking, thinking, making ideas. Before I came here to India, I made many plans. I packed many things. Half of them I haven't touched. I had so many ideas of what it would be like. And India is not what I thought. Only stupid thinking—making making making, judging judging judging.

So we raise this don't know mind. Cut off all thinking. This doesn't mean we don't have a thinking mind; it means we don't attach to our thinking. We say don't make anything. That doesn't mean we don't have an idea. But we don't hold our idea so tightly

In this last line of the poem, Zen Master Man Gong says, "already alive in the Prajna ship." We have this magnificent life. What will we do with it? *Prajna* means wisdom. Can you bring this wisdom mind into your life? Without really digging deeply—what am I?—there is no wisdom. There is only opinion. It might be a good opinion but it's only an opinion. You have to cut through everything, and from that place become alive.

The Buddha is alive right here, right now. The Buddha is not some fantasy who walked this land 2,500 years ago. Right here, sitting under these lovely trees in this beautiful garden, the Buddha is alive. How will you manifest it?

Back in Varansi after the Kwan Um pilgrimage, and it is the night of Diwali, which is like Christmas, New Year's Eve and Independence Day all rolled into one. We take an auto rickshaw down to the river on the main ghat (path or stairs down to the river). The driver tells us that he he can't get any closer than a half-mile from our hotel because the traffic and crowds are too great. Rolling our bags behind us, we move into the crowd. We sort of know where we are headed, but are unclear how to get to the exact location of our hotel. Fireworks are exploding, families are shopping at the street stalls, and as usual the cows meander from garbage pile to garbage pile. A man comes up to us and asks us where we are going. After telling him that we are going to our hotel he smiles and says "follow me." We trail behind, trusting him because we have come to trust India and Indians. We weave through the crowd, entering the space he has cleared for us. When we arrive at the hotel, tired and exhilarated by our walk, we offer him some money for his guidance. He smiles, refuses, and wishes us a happy Diwali. ♦

Notes

1. Seung Sahn, *The Whole World Is a Single Flower* (Rutland, VT: Tuttle, 1992), 106.