



Inside a faith:
a
Buddhist
view

Dominique Side runs an educational website about the way of the Buddha



A few years ago, I went on pilgrimage to India to visit the sites related to the life of the Buddha. I had studied the Buddha's life through books, but in India his entire existence became real for me for the first time. It was no longer a story, or part of history; it was a living experience. I could imagine the Buddha as a human being walking in these various places. I could sense the luminosity of his presence in Anathapindika's Park, and in Varanasi I was transported into the heart of the Indian spiritual tradition, of which the Buddha was part, through the Brahmin rituals on the banks of the Ganges.

Above all, in Bodh Gaya I discovered the power of sacred place, which until then was unknown to me like this. It is as though the place is a person – vibrant and alive, full of energy and feeling, connecting the heart to dimensions beyond space and time. The lasting impact of this pilgrimage was to strengthen my confidence in Buddhism.

I was brought up a Catholic and became a practising Buddhist in my mid-twenties after meeting several Tibetan lamas in the UK. At 14 and 15 I would visit a Benedictine convent in Normandy on holiday. I was very moved by the peace and kindness of the nuns, by their uplifting chanting of vespers, and by the nourishment and contentment I found in silence and in solitude.

For decades I did not travel in relation to my Buddhist practice. It felt unnecessary to do so, because Asian Buddhist masters would visit London. I simply connected Buddhism to my everyday life, for although pilgrimage does feature in the Buddhist culture it is not

an obligation. Instead, my job as a writer on environmental issues in developing countries entailed extensive professional travel throughout Europe, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. I brought my understanding of Buddhism to these travels and learned to open my mind to different cultures, drop my tendency to colonialist attitudes, connect deeply with nature and wild animals in the African bush and develop the personal strength to journey alone as a young woman in foreign lands. For me, all this has been part of my spiritual journey, and I feel the wiser for it.

I believe meaning can be found at any time and anywhere: at home, in the process of travel and at the destination. By 'meaning' I refer to the insights that arise in different situations. Planning for pilgrimage and taking the plane or the train has been meaningful for me in terms of clarifying my priorities in life and seeing what is most important. But equally, I have also had transformational experiences at the destination. Why distinguish the two? The spiritual journey is about the mind, and the mind continues regardless of whether the body is in a plane or in a temple.

My first visit to Bodh Gaya was in 2010. I had been invited to a small gathering of Buddhist teachers by the Bhutanese lama Dzongsar Khyentse. He was, and still is, concerned that those who teach Buddhism in countries other than those that have been traditionally Buddhist do so with the best possible training, education and understanding. Those discussions led to the creation of the Milinda Training Programme, a small-scale part-time study programme for Western teachers from a number of groups within Tibetan Buddhism. The fact Bodh Gaya was chosen as the venue for our initial discussions ensured the project had an auspicious beginning.

Pilgrimage can certainly become an empty ritual. The difference between empty ritual and meaningful ritual depends entirely on one's mind. If the mind is engaged,

maintaining attention and open curiosity, then anything can be meaningful. If the mind and heart are switched off, then whatever we do will be empty of meaning. One way of making pilgrimage personally meaningful is to pray on the journey and to pray at the destination.



'Life is like a journey': Buddhists can learn from the scriptures, can learn from teachers and can also learn from life. Only with an inquisitive attitude does life become a process of continual learning and change, development and movement. But crucially, the so-called journey of life is not taking us anywhere that we are not already. It is a journey without a goal in the sense that there is no external objective one is trying to attain and no physical or spiritual place to go. The goal of nirvana or enlightenment is inherently within us. The point is to uncover that reality.

Dominique Side's book *Discovering Buddhism* (Philip Allan 2005) covers material for AS and A2 Buddhism. Additionally, Dominique is launching *Windows into Buddhism*, a website with educational resources on Buddhism for ages 5–18. Contact: windowsintobuddhism@gmail.com Dominique's educational website: en.prajnaonline.org/