

WCCM PILGRIMAGE TO INDIA AND NEPAL

The Way of Peace

MATTHEW EVANS

I share my reflection of a pilgrimage that I attended hosted by The World Community for Christian Meditation (WCCM) which was their Way of Peace event for 2013. It marked the fifteenth anniversary of the first WCCM pilgrimage to India, which initiated the Way of Peace programme. Of that original pilgrimage, His Holiness the Dalai Lama recently wrote: 'In 1998 I joined as historic pilgrimage of practitioners of both the Christian and Buddhist traditions in prayers, meditation and dialogue in Bodhgaya... Each morning under the Bodhi tree, we all sat together and meditated, which I think was historic.'

Rather than provide a travel log of the whole pilgrimage I would like to share my reflection on three places that spoke to me especially: Sarnath, Boudhanath and Bodghaya. I will share my experience of each in turn.

Sarnath

Sarnath is where the Buddha gave his first teaching at a place called Deer Park. We meditated as a group at this site and the meditation and the setting was peaceful, open and relaxing. I experienced it as a much needed break from the frenetic pace of travel. I was touched by the stillness and tranquility that inhabited this place. The restfulness and the sacredness of the site acted on me as something of a salve soothing my weariness. Up to that time I hadn't had much quiet time in India. We had arrived in Sarnath *via* an overnight train trip from Kolkutta, and our timetable in Kolkutta and surrounds had been very busy.

Sarnath was billed as the highlight of the

pilgrimage as we enjoyed a day of dialogue, prayer and meditation on Saturday January 12, led by the Dalai Lama and Fr. Laurence Freeman, OSB. I will share a few thoughts from the speakers on the day. When introducing the Dalai Lama, Fr Laurence said of him that 'he doesn't play a role, that he is the same, when he is on his own, with friends or in public life'.

Fr Laurence spoke about being a disciple of Jesus, 'My centre of gravity is in the person of Jesus...the centre of gravity straightens me out little by little...we awaken to the inner Christ...the historical Jesus is present within us...at the heart of the human is the possibility of inner expansion. There is an experience of awakening to him and in him. It is a continuous one. I experience Christ in me and being able to recognise the kingdom in each other-Christian or not...For me the connection between the historical Jesus and the inner Christ is the most interesting and mysterious connection in my life. And to feel connected with that makes me feel connected with everything in this world.'

The Dalai Lama spoke about the Buddhist way as using 'human intelligence to transform our human emotions. The non-soul theory tries to help reduce human pride and arrogance and self-centeredness. Arrogance is the basis of all destructive emotions including hatred and anger... It's our ego that holds onto resentments, wanting to punish, to be right. It is important to sit in silence in order to build spiritual relationships in harmony together...the way to enlightenment is through serious practice- the practices of morality, concentration and wisdom.'

The Dalai Lama added that ‘I think it is very interesting to see Jesus, ‘The Christ’, not just as some kind of historical symbol, but as each of us carrying something like the nature of God, or a blessing of God. That is what Christ symbolises. We carry that cross in a real sense in our heart. Because God blessed it. That is, in a different sort of words, but quite similar with Buddha Nature’.

Boudhanath

Boudhanath in Kathmandu, Nepal is a world heritage site and a place of sacred pilgrimage to Buddhists. Boudhanath means Lord of Wisdom and is considered to be a protective, purifactory and wish-granting stupa. I didn’t experience any of those effects but I found it had a peaceful and prayerful ambience; indeed I experienced it as grace-filled.

A friend and I enjoyed a morning tea on a terrace overlooking the stupa and we were joined later by another of our group for lunch. Much of the time we sat silently taking some well needed time out on this sunny terrace. I wrote in my journal at the time, ‘The stupa had a softening and relaxing effect on me—it was something like the effects of the sun’s rays calming my soul’. The peace and ease of this place was a welcome contrast to much of the bedlam of northern India.

Boudhanath is strewn with miles of Nepalese prayer flags with the wind blowing the prayers and mantras of the pilgrims to spread good will and compassion to all in that place. I appreciated this devotion and I bought some prayer flags myself in Nepal and have hung them on my deck at home. I love to see them flutter in the breeze, blessing my home and the people therein. It reminds me of the nearness and loving kindness of God whose presence can be sensed in the gentle breeze.

Bodhgaya

Bodhgaya is the most important of all Buddhist pilgrimage sites. We initially visited Mahakala cave, where the Buddha practiced



Matthew Evans works as a psychologist in private practice in Sydney’s Inner West. He attends the weekly Christian Meditation Community meeting in Erskineville, Sydney. He is currently training in spiritual direction.

a strict asceticism prior to his enlightenment which had a prayerful, meditative atmosphere. We then visited the place where the Buddha renounced the extremes of asceticism. Under a banyan tree he accepted rice pudding from a milk maid thereby taking up the middle path and thankfully avoiding starvation.

And then the most holy of holies for me was visiting the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment, the Bodhi tree. Our group held Eucharist and had an extended group meditation at the site which I found very moving. I wrote in my journal at the time, ‘I was charmed by Bodhgaya—it felt like a truly holy and spiritual place’. It was full of the sights and sounds of thousands of monks praying, chanting, prostrating and circumnavigating the Bodhi tree and temple. Though the sacred site was very active and filled with movement and sound, it exuded a sense of stillness and calmness. I felt blessed to have been there.

One final experience which touched me was travelling with a group of fellow pilgrims who were from across the world and of different ages and backgrounds. I enjoyed sharing prayer, meditation, good conversation and visiting and discussing exotic places with the other pilgrims. We had a lot of fun and laughter and our share of difficulties on the journey. Yet we were joined by regular meditation together and a common desire to understand and to experience more deeply our own and one another’s spirituality. An effect of the pilgrimage on me was that I grew in appreciation of my own Christian faith and developed a greater understanding and respect for the Buddhist path.