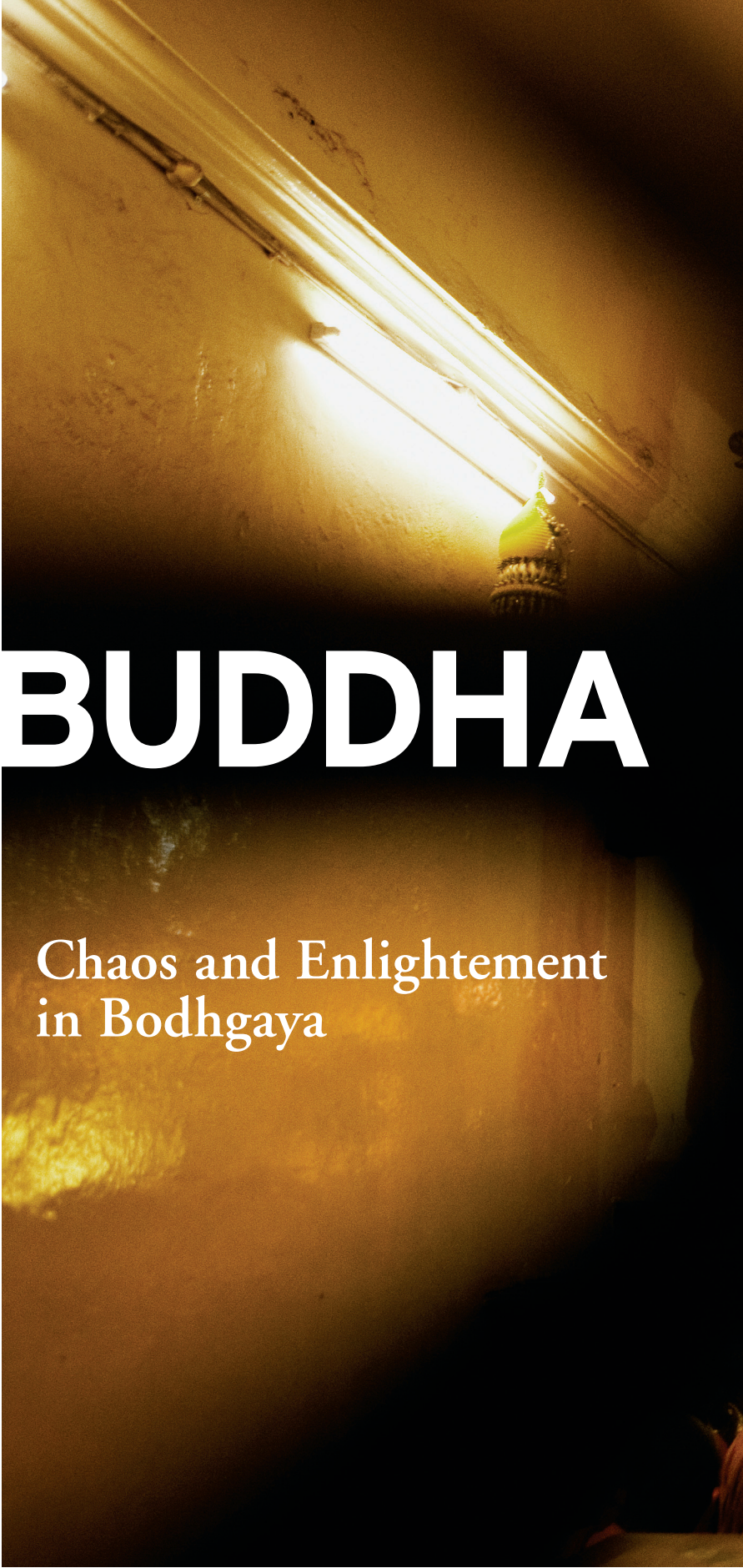




WHERE THE **BUDDHA** WOKE UP

Chaos and Enlightenment
in Bodhgaya

By Noa Jones



PHOTOGRAPH BY BUT-SOU LAI, 2009, FOR KHYENTSE FOUNDATION

Some pilgrims, not just a few, prostrate themselves all the way from their villages in Tibet, crossing the Himalayas, risking banditry and crocodiles through India's most rogue state, Bihar, until they arrive in Bodhgaya.

Most are propelled by their devotion. I was propelled by a vague sense of duty and very little effort—I arrived by plane. The effort came only once I stopped busying myself with the outside world.

Things happen quickly in Bodhgaya, site of the Buddha's enlightenment. People say that karma cooks faster here. As if the Mahabodhi Temple is a hot plate and we pilgrims have just tumbled out of an egg carton. What has been hidden in the fragile shells of our egos comes sliding out. We fry. Our hearts are exposed. Another thing: Possessions disappear. The last time I came to Bodhgaya I was robbed blind en route on the night train from Varanasi. I arrived with no passport, no money, no practice materials. And the very day I arrived, my seemingly solid romance of one year ended. I'd been stripped of everything and sent back to the source. The navel of the earth. The Bodhi tree.

But I'm not thinking about that. I've got work to do. I enter the flood of pilgrims who cram the main mall outside of the temple. I call it the mall. It reminds me of the Pearl Street mall in Boulder, Colorado, with its brick promenade and open-air shopping opportunities. But where Boulder is fortified by Abercrombie & Fitch and Starbucks, here there is stand after stand selling dusty offerings—flowers, incense, gems, white ceremonial scarves (*katas*), Bodhi leaves, malas, everything a practitioner could need. Here there are beggars and hawkers, people with twisted limbs, blind men, *sadhus*, curious goats, everyone angling to impede us. A man is selling pomegranates covered in flies—a microcosm of the mall, which is crawling with red-robed monks and nuns who walk in clusters, all with black buzz cuts.

In the midst of all this, I stand a head above most others. I am pressed from all sides. I stumble over something on the ground. An adolescent girl lies on a piece of cardboard at the entrance of the temple, both legs amputated at the highest possible point. She is absorbed in the play of a twig she twirls; there is a single leaf attached, upon which she focuses her attention with the zeal that her Western legged counterparts might pour into texting. Maybe if she twirls the lopsided stick long enough someone will get the message.

I am body-checked by a hefty Burmese monk carrying a staff. Seven nuns dressed in white, faces behind masks, march

by led by a monk chanting into a megaphone, one of the hundreds of megaphones cranked to the highest decibel level that contribute to the arpeggio of mantras and trumpets and “Madame! Flower? You need mala?” that surrounds me.

The Burmese monks wear rust-colored robes. Sri Lankan and Thai pilgrims come in bright white, their lamas in ochre. Zen practitioners from Japan, China, and Korea wear elegant gray, sometimes with a brown sash. There is a smattering of easy-to-spot Westerners, conspicuous in their funny pants, pants that billow, pants with a crotch that hangs below the knee MC Hammer-style, candy-striped pants. There is a *sadhu* in a patchwork quilt, a yogi with dreadlocks, pilgrims in traditional dress. There are robes the color of pumpkin and of neon plastic pumpkin. But today they are all a minority.

It is the Nyingma sect's Monlam. The Monlam is a Tibetan Buddhist prayer festival “for world peace” that draws tens of thousands of pilgrims to Bodhgaya each year. It's a rare congregation of the greatest living Buddhist masters, yogis, tulkus, and khenpos. They come, they pray. The gathering is also an opportunity for these great masters to meet and discuss the practical issues they face as lineage seat-holders and heads of ever-growing organizations. Each sect takes a turn reserving the temple grounds for their gatherings. Kagyü in December, Gelugpa in early January. The Nyingmapas are the largest gathering, the third week of January.

The Monlam makes sense. In ancient Tibet, people didn't register for teachings and book flights; rumor would spread that a lama had set up camp somewhere and pilgrims would gather, pitch a tent and spend a month receiving teachings. After the Chinese Cultural Revolution and the arrival of the Tibetan diaspora in India, there was chaos and a desperate effort at preservation. Prayer festivals were put on the back burner. The diaspora stumbled and struggled back to its feet. The first Nyingma Monlam, organized by Tarthang Tulku Rinpoche in 1989, was a sign that the exiles had regained their strength. Now tens of thousands of Buddhists come every year. These festivals have become the active and significant nucleus of Tibetan Buddhism.

The Monlam costs money. Orgyen Tobgyal Rinpoche tells me that thirteen thousand monks showed up for the free lunch the monastery is offering this year. Every day for ten days. Piles

of offerings are given to the monks and practitioners who attend, thousands of dollars are given out in coin and in kind, *tsok* (offerings of food and drink for purification and merit), butter lamps, incense, food, *dana* (personal donations) and texts. Even Westerners find tea and biscuits and the occasional one hundred rupee note left on their cushions and prostration boards. The beggars watch hungrily, sometimes gathering in tribes and ransacking the *tsok* offerings while the security guards pretend to whack them with sticks.

The place is pulsating. It feels more wrathful than peaceful, not negative but not resting. It makes one wonder about the mechanism of bringing world peace. How do a bunch of monks sitting under the Bodhi tree affect the Middle East Peace process? Is their influence an abstract concept, or is there some global impact? I wonder.

I reach the gate that opens to the Mahabodhi temple and press through the pungent traffic of mala-swinging pilgrims circumambulating, four abreast, on the upper section of the temple complex. The main temple appears to be built on a sunken platform but actually the complex, which contains countless smaller stupas and temples, three levels of walkways, a lake, fountains and trees, is built upon the ruins of a once grand university. There is a debate about whether to continue Sir Alexander Cunningham's excavation work. But most practitioners are against it. This is a living temple, not an archaeological dig.

That night I have dinner with Gene Smith, who has just been honored by the entire Nyingma sect for his contributions to the preservation of the buddhadharma. It's to record the milestone of this ceremony that I have been summoned here. There is an entire story to be told, volumes of stories, about Gene alone. He deserves a great deal of attention. But the ceremony is over now, and in the morning Gene packs up the gong and is gone.

I have no return ticket, a last-minute decision that was made when I was otherwise engrossed and not thinking rationally. As I wave good-bye, I suddenly realize I am completely alone, with



no real plan. I have been so focused on Gene—it was my job to accompany him on the flight over—for the past two days that I haven't even said a proper hello to the temple. It occurs to me that perhaps I had no real purpose coming here. Instead I've been led to the temple by an egotistical sense of duty so that my ego could be struck down and given nothing to do but practice. A karmic trick.

I take one last good hot shower at the fake-fancy hotel where we've been hosted, watch some female professional wrestling on the television and eat some bonbons. An eleventh-hour luxury binge. I have a vague memory of what harshness the real Bodhgaya is capable of, like the memory of what lime pickle does to my salivary glands—powerful, but buffered by the soft quilt of time. I am about to get my first fresh taste. I check out of the hotel and find a place for a fraction of the price at the Burmese temple on the other side of town. I drop my bags in the cold concrete room filled with mosquitoes and head back out to greet the Mahabodhi.

One of the rickshaw drivers waiting outside the Burmese gate stares like he knows something about me. He gives me a look like we've got some shared history. Maybe he was the one who gave me a ride one night when I was sobbing with heartbreak. Maybe we had a moment about that back then. Or maybe he's just a pervert. So I avoid his eyes by looking up. The sky is the uniform periwinkle blue of flat places, the plains and



PHOTOGRAPH © PETER ADAMS/GETTY IMAGES

the sea. It's the same color of the sky in the only photograph I have of my parents together, smiling on a windy day in front of the Statue of Liberty.

The Mahabodhi is a whole other kind of statue of liberty. It is breathtaking and simple, soaring into the sky from its recessed foundation. A monument of liberation. True liberation, no matter what color robes, at least we Buddhists agree on this. This is what we are working toward. And this is the best place to practice.

No one knows for sure who built it or when. King Ashoka came and erected something of some sort near a tree at this spot in the third century BCE. Most likely the current temple, intricate brickwork 55 meters tall, was built in the fifth or sixth century, during the Gupta period.

I wish I could travel faster than the speed of light, perch on a distant planet and look back on earth so that I could see back in time to the day when Siddhartha sat under a pipal tree in the sylvan fields of what was then known as Uruvela. I want to know exactly what happened, if there were witnesses to his enlightenment, what the weather was like, if there were wild hogs sipping from the river. Whatever the case, the place is saturated with thousands of years of practice. Think of a great cathedral like Chartres, then think of Auschwitz. These places have power because of what happened here. And what happened here is that a mortal man meditated very deeply and saw the true nature of mind. The exact spot of his enlightenment is

known by Tibetans as the Vajrasana, the Diamond Seat. You have to come here to experience it.

"The Karmapa said that it's a hundred thousand times more powerful to practice here than any other place. Zopa Rinpoche said seven times more powerful," says Yogi Mike, who is my neighbor at the Burmese Vihar. "I don't know, one doesn't seem enough, one sounds a bit much." Mike has been here almost continuously since 1984. If you've been to Bodhgaya, you've probably seen him, the American guy sitting in meditation in the same spot night after night, clad in white, long beard, topknot. "But in the context of the Monlam, when there are so many great realized masters sitting there, and a whole sangha; in those key

moments, it could be a hundred thousand times. That's why I'm here so many years."

Yogi Mike also answers my earlier question about world peace: "If there is a relation between transforming individuals' minds and the impact that has on the larger world, then there's definitely something major going on here."

In the incubating container of the temple, everyone can begin to seem slightly insane or needy or cross. I go to Mohammad's—Bodhgaya's most popular restaurant—to ground myself with some *momos*. A woman asks if she can join me. She begins forcefully signing and folding a stack of letters. She's leading a passionate environmental campaign to stop the use of plastic in Bodhgaya. She is from London but lives in Bodhgaya full time. She speaks fast. I ask her what we should do if we don't drink bottled water: can we trust the water fountains at the temple? "Drink hot water. That's what I do." Just as she finishes folding her letters, the waiter brings a plastic bag with two dinners packed in tinfoil and cardboard. She's ordered to go, and I must practice nonjudgment.

International sponsors have donated several UV filtration systems at the temple. Upkeep is integral. Last time I was here I drank only from the fountains, but this year I'm afraid. I ask the Management Committee Office where the water comes from. I'm told it's pumped from the river. The river is a drybed and polluted, as are many rivers in India. But the drinking water comes from 250 feet below the river and then chemicals are

added, I am assured. No bacteria.

I will meet a beautiful swami who will tell me the story of that hidden river.

I go home and take a shower, after which I feel as though I've gone through a final rinse at the car wash. Slightly waxy. I dutifully fill my plastic bottle with the filtered water, and within a few hours I get sick. Really sick. I think I'm going to die here in my dark room. The mosquitoes sing. I am alone; I develop flu symptoms on top of everything else. Nobody knows or cares. I am not a survivor. Buddha was a survivor. How am I to follow in his path? I look at the Theravadins and I know I am not capable of the austerities they willingly endure. Nothing seems possible. Liberation is for greater souls than this one.

I am so incredibly congested, I cannot string two thoughts together. They call it Bodhgaya Blessing. "You must be purifying something," says a man next to me at Mohammad's where I've gone to get ginger lemon tea with honey. Here everything bad is considered good. Your lama is avoiding you? Mazal tov! You're losing your mind? Excellent news! Everyone gets the blessing. With all the pestilent snot flying directly from nose to pavement, all you can do is a little side-step dance and pray.

Yogi Mike affirms the virtues of suffering. "Especially during the season, I have the impression that the amount of purification and wisdom is far greater than what you could accomplish on your own," he says, stirring the embers of his smoke offering back at the Vihar. "The problem is, if you want to take the quick path, it means purification has to be quicker, which is inevitably harder. How can there be an increase in wisdom without purifying obstacles? Hardship is, I'm thinking, the greater of the two blessings. The purifying rather than the blissful, insightful ones that we all like. The ones that make it so hard you want to run away are perhaps the greatest blessing."

Even though I'm sick, I go to the temple. I practice all day long. When you come to Bodhgaya, you will see. You can't stay away. The tree is calling, the temple is calling. And once you get there, any direction you turn you end up bumping into a rinpoche or a *drupchen* or a five-thousand-person feast. So I just plop down somewhere, anywhere—I prefer dappled sunlight under the tree—and do my practice in the midst of it.

There is too much to look at, it's dizzying, so I just look at the feet of the circumambulating pilgrims for a while. No shoes allowed. What we get is lots of dirty athletic socks, calloused feet, mosquito-bitten feet, henna feet that look as if they have been dipped in pink ink, feet in plastic bags, knitted footies, Japanese two-toed tabi, a pair of slippers from the Hyatt Singapore, old pedicures, new pedicures, paws. Yogi Mike calls this inner section "the washing machine" when it gets crowded.

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The spin cycle. So many people. A Thai tour group in matching outfits and Mind Vacations baseball caps moves in with a megaphone, and the silence is pierced with call and response followed by a long nasal chant. It sounds like they are saying: "Someone no can pee pee so caca, why..." over and over again. I move around the corner and another group is chanting to the exact tune of the Smashing Pumpkins' song "Bullet with Butterfly Wings," which immediately imbeds itself in my brain.

It gets overwhelming, so I go back to my cool dark room and sit, febrile, amid the shadows. The mosquitoes describe the air above my bed with manic scribbles. Despite all my rage, I'm still just a rat in a cage replaying in my mind. The blood drinkers. They hover, hide, cling to the walls, lie in wait. A debate people here like to abbreviate and avoid is whether Mortein brand insect repellent actually kills them or just stuns them. Even the most devout Buddhists I encounter seem content with the connivance that despite the obvious derivation from the Latin *mortuus*, "dead," Mortein is harmless. I hear an Indian guide tell a tour group that Buddha sat under the Bodhi tree for a week without blinking. He demonstrates what that looks like. He looks like an Indian Don Knotts. And I think, if Buddha did that, he probably didn't swat away mosquitoes. So I try it. I sit, and I let them bite me. I feel the intensity of their blood-thirst. I feel sorry for them. And then one bites me in the ear and I think screw this and purchase some Mortein. I'm careful to plug it in only long enough so that the mosquitoes start to fly drunk, which makes it easier to catch them in my hand and release them outside. But then I accidentally kill one and freak out. And so in one afternoon, a lifetime passes.

I go to the temple with a question about this episode in mind, knowing that I will find someone with an answer. The question is: If I need this precious human body to attain enlightenment, then why should I sit and let mosquitoes who might have malaria or Dengue fever bite me? Why not swat? I understand *ahimsa* [nonharming]. But why the perfectly-still part?

The all-knowing rickshaw driver is standing outside the gate; I slip by him, deciding to walk the long way through the Indian village. There is a plot of land next to a school, covered in garbage, and in that garbage there stands a spavined mule crippled by disease and about ten geese. The geese have been painted fluorescent pink. "You have like this in America?" asks

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Noa Jones writes fiction and creative nonfiction. She is from New York and Colorado and is currently working on a novel while traveling.

a man wearing a vest that looks as if it has been hewn from the pelt of a slain Muppet, Fozzie Bear, perhaps. "Sort of," I say. "Like this size or big size? Big size, or small size?" He shows me different sizes and I say, "Yes. No. Yes." He seemed very pleased with this answer. There are wild hogs, baby goats, naked children with lice leaping from their heads as garbage burns in small piles.

It is said in sacred texts that Bodhgaya is going to be the last place left on earth when the universe is destroyed. Even if I hang around here, I will be a goner. But these families living in tents, cooking with motor oil as fluorescent pink geese crap in the drinking water, might not even notice. Life is an apocalypse. I bow down to them. I am in awe. They have so much more than I do because they require so much less. I am probably painfully wrong about all of this.

I cut across the traffic on Bypass Road, wheezing against the particulates that fill the air, skirting past the mala sellers and beggars. I am speedy and then I come to a full stop, slammed back into practice mind by the sight of the temple. As always, magnificent, inviting.

Instead of finding an answer to the mosquito question, I find a swami. Just one look at his graceful stride and I realize how much pain I am in—the fever and chills and rickshaw rides and prostrations. I need yoga. He looks like he does yoga. I ask for an introduction. Swami Santoshananda of Gaya says he will

teach me. I spend the next five evenings receiving his glowing instructions and start to feel like a human again. He tells me about the Niranjana River, how it was punished for lying. He shows me how to breathe. He tells me that if one is in meditation, one won't feel the mosquitoes. And anyway, they aren't doing it on purpose. They don't see me as a human, I'm just dinner. Have some sympathy.

It's a nice concept but difficult to put into practice. There is one Thai nun who comes with solar regularity and sits in what looks like mosquito-repellant deep meditation. Immoveable, even when the UV rays are burning down with midday ferocity. I ache to slather some SPF 30 on her. Instead, I take a photo of her covered in flies.

I start to feel better, and then I have to leave. I've lost ten pounds, I can see it in my face. Why is Buddha ever portrayed as chubby? I leave Bodhgaya in the middle of the night. A taxi to Gaya and then the Rajdhani Express. On the way to the station I feel an extreme shift. A pressure release. A too-heavy quilt lifted. But like when a quilt is lifted, the heat is lost. I could go on. ▼

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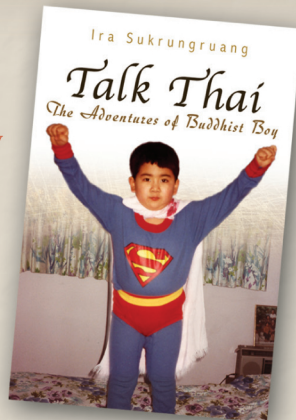
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