

Bonnie in Bodhgaya

By Nandini Sarkar

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In this charming short story, Nandini Sarkar traces the pilgrimage of three friends to Bodhgaya, and the insights it offers them



Bonnie groaned and banged her head on the pile of Bare Acts stacked on her table. It was 9 pm and a senior partner had emailed her, asking for an immediate brief. One more day of reaching home at 11 pm!

Shanta looked up sympathetically. “Need help?”

“Loads of it,” said Bonnie in a muffled voice. “I didn’t bargain to become bonded labour when I joined Asia’s largest law firm. I haven’t seen the sunrise or sunset in the whole year that I’ve been here; I am on the verge of a burn-out.”

Shanta tapped Bonnie playfully on the head, “Pallavi and I are off for a weekend trip to Bodhgaya, historic site of the Buddha’s enlightenment; why not join us? Maybe you too will get enlightened!” Bonnie looked up with alacrity, “Will I get leave?” “Trust me,” said Shanta, and returned triumphantly after some time. “Leave approved!”

Shanta was in the midst of a spiritual search after her brother’s sudden death. Pallavi had witnessed the traumatic end to a six-year relationship. Both were exploring Buddhism.

“I have a vague recollection that the Buddha never spoke of God. Then why do Buddhists believe in pilgrimage?” asked Bonnie.

“The Buddha was no dry monk, preaching the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path and expecting people to follow like robots. Demonstrating a great, loving heart, he spent 45 years after attaining Nirvana with the lay public, encouraging and teaching. The Buddha saw pilgrimage as a way to reinforce his message when he was not around and said: ‘There are four places, the sight of which will arouse strong emotions in those with faith. Here the Tathagata was born; here the Tathagata attained enlightenment; here the Tathagata set in motion the Wheel of

Dharma; here the Tathagata attained final Nirvana. The person who has faith should visit these places.’”

The trio arrived at Gaya station on a Friday morning and enjoyed the 15-km drive from Gaya to Bodhgaya. Vast stretches of fields lay on either side of the road, and small hillocks dotted the countryside. Sun-kissed white kash flowers bloomed in the river Phalgu. At Hotel Om International, barely 200 meters away from the Mahabodhi temple, a leisurely breakfast of stuffed paranthas, Sujata’s kheer (named after the lady who helped break the Buddha’s fast with her kheer), and mango lassi followed. Bonnie thought of her usual rushed breakfasts, and tucked into the spread.

Pallavi remarked, “Bonnie is unknowingly practising the Buddhist tenet of mindfulness. When we are mindful of even simple actions like eating and walking rather than rushing through them, we develop a refined awareness. Pure joy wells up in our hearts, grateful for the human experience. Our intuition blossoms. As the Buddha started getting known, people would flock to him and ask:

‘Are you a god?’

‘No,’ said the Buddha

‘An angel?’

‘No,’ said the Buddha

‘A saint?’

‘No,’ said the Buddha

‘Then what are you?’

‘I am awake,’ the Buddha replied

“Awake to what?,” asked Bonnie, “I guess we all have to be literally awake, to fulfil responsibilities.”

“Being awake is to be aware of the causes of worldly suffering, dukkha, and how to end the suffering. If you dive into the ocean of samsara equipped with the right gear, you swim happily; otherwise you sink.” Shanta remarked.

“I can see that,” said Bonnie, “My life has been a typical rollercoaster of moving from one target to the other, one relationship to the other, filled with insecurity and dread.”

They spent the first day getting a feel of Bodhgaya. Sauntering through various temples set up by Buddhist countries like Japan and Thailand, they finally reached the Root Institute, a Buddhist retreat centre. As Bonnie clicked the imposing statue of Nagarjuna and the Wheel of Dharma,

she saw the figure of a slightly stooped old man, walking in the garden. “Uncle Prasad!” she exclaimed, and ran up to him. “Meeting you after years, what brings you here?” “Kiran and I travel a lot, visiting all faith centres,” said a smiling Uncle Prasad, a retired bureaucrat with several published books on religion to his credit. Bonnie looked at his serene, unwrinkled face behind giant spectacles, and a wave of peace rolled over her being. She coaxed him to a seat in the garden. “How do you manage to exude such peaceful vibrations?” she demanded, laughingly.

“You saw me walking,” he said, “I was doing Japa at each step. I am in a 24×7 divine romance; that is my secret,” he said.

“But don’t worldly storms run you down, Uncle?” asked Pallavi.

“They would have, my dear, had I not learnt to cherish others as much as I cherish myself. In the Second Noble Truth, the Buddha taught that the cause of life’s dislocation is tanha. When you see yourself as separate or tanha from others, you judge them and react to them negatively. But when you reflect on the kindness you yourself have received from countless sentient beings and your interdependence with them, you learn to see disappointments as an opportunity to give back love, patience and forgiveness. Reflect: your parents gave you birth and undertook many hardships for you; your teachers or masters kindly educated you; your employer’s kindness allows you to earn money; the kindness of farmers and transporters reaches food to your table; the kindness of those who praise you and give you a good reputation boosts your morale; the kindness of those who have been your mother in countless lives gives you an intrinsic confidence; thinking along these lines, you annihilate dukkha.”

Mugs of green tea were handed out by Shanta, picked up from the adjacent cafe, to fuel the engrossing conversation.

“I have been greatly hurt in a relationship,” said Pallavi, thoughtfully. “How can I cherish the person or feel compassion?”

Uncle Prasad tapped Pallavi encouragingly with his walking stick. “Are you hurt as much as you are angry? The Buddhists would say you can be grateful to this person for teaching you patience, and an opportunity to practise forgiveness. For creating the trigger to embrace Dharma and become bigger than the problem. When we are bitter and anger is arising, we can stop and look at the situation from the other person’s point of view. When we do this, we recognise they want to be happy, and because they aren’t happy, they are committing actions we find objectionable. Then we will be more compassionate and understanding. But how do we do this when a quarrel is just about to start or we’re already in the middle of one? We have to practice beforehand. When we become mindful that we are upset, irritated, angry, disappointed, we can come back to our breath, come back to our kind heart, and do a purificatory action instead of throwing out our negative energy in the world. In this way, we “clean up” emotionally, and resolve any uncomfortable feelings or misdirected actions that may have arisen during the day. Having done this, our sleep will be peaceful. When you lie down, imagine the Buddha sitting on your pillow and put your head in the Buddha’s lap. This is very comforting and attracts mystic grace in your life. Your burdens are miraculously lifted.”

“And how can I forgive a boss who is a slave driver?” asked Bonnie petulantly.

“By feeling grateful for the opportunity to be gainfully employed when millions are unemployed; for the opportunity to learn new skills under duress; for the opportunity to earn good karma through diligent efforts in the present job that may lead to more fruitful opportunities in the near future.”

“I am driven by impulse and peer pressures, Uncle,” said Shanta. “Sometimes, I think it will take me a million lives to get to enlightenment.”

In reply, much to their delight, Uncle Prasad sang in his melodious voice:

“I was sinking deep in sin, far from the peaceful shore,

“Very deeply stained within, sinking to rise no more;

“But the Master of the sea, heard my despairing cry,

“From the waters lifted me; Love lifted me! Love lifted me!

“When nothing else could help, love lifted me.”

“Nagarjuna said the greatest myth created by the ego is to think that Nirvana is a distant goal waiting to be attained through strenuous efforts and hard tapasya. No! Nirvana is hovering lovingly near us. Cultivate the kind heart, send out a powerful soul cry to the masters for help; chant as often as you can; Nirvana is your birthright and you will certainly reclaim it,” concluded Uncle Prasad, beaming at the rapt company.

At dawn the next morning, they trooped into the Mahabodhi temple, greeted by a sea of maroon, ochre and white robes. Monks and laypersons went about quietly with their devotional practices. Some people were stretched out under trees doing prostrations. An assembly of lay persons from Sri Lanka were sitting with their teacher under a peepal tree listening to his discourse. It was a forest scene straight out of Amar Chitra Katha. Finally, they were under the Bodhi Tree, the great seat of the Buddha’s enlightenment. Bonnie sat with closed eyes, and was immediately drawn within. She felt no urge to question or to seek answers. For nearly 40 minutes she sat unmoving, effortlessly suspended in a state of happiness, dimly hearing the chanting around her. Then Shanta gently nudged her to rise, and they moved to the Animesh Lochana Chaitya. The Buddha had spent an entire week there in standing meditation, gazing at the Bodhi Tree in gratitude. The girls spent a long time at the fascinating Muchalinda Sarovar, filled with playful fish, where the Buddha spent the sixth week after enlightenment. When the Buddha was in meditation by this lake, a severe thunderstorm had broken out.

The snake king Muchalinda came out of his abode and protected the Buddha from the violent rains with his upraised hood. The six sites where the Buddha sat after enlightenment led to a complete circumambulation of the temple, thus completing the Mahabodhi pilgrimage.

Bonnie felt the Bodhgaya trip had been a major turning point. “Grateful, guys; hope everyone has seniors like you.”

The parting shot came from Shanta, the walking encyclopaedia, “The Buddha stressed the importance of having spiritual friends – ‘noble friendship is the entire holy life’; but in the end, he asked each individual to proceed towards Nirvana by confronting their individual situation and predicaments. ‘O Ananda, be a lamp unto yourselves. Take to no external refuge. Work out your own salvation with diligence.’”