

Seeing Behind Forms *-Reflections on NYBC India Tour 2006-*

By T. Kenjitsu Nakagaki, Sensei

Behind the scene before our eyes, things were and are happening. When we know this unseen, surface forms often change their meaning. We appreciate forms in front of our eyes but our gratitude deepens when we see the things behind the forms. On this tour, especially when our group visited various sacred sites of Buddhism, we had to have eyes to see behind the forms. It was obviously important to know the history behind them; otherwise, we would just see a piece of brick or a rock or tree. Therefore, visiting various Buddhist sites meant learning the great history of Buddhism. We needed imagination to see how they must have been at that time. Our tour became meaningful thanks to our skillful and knowledgeable tour guide, Anil Kumar, who accompanied us for the entire trip and explained the history and meaning of various sites.

The experience of being physically there is always different from what we learn from writings, and even photos. I was amazed at Ajanta Cave and Ellora Cave, which I did not visit on my last trip in 2003. I said imagination is important, but it is hard to even imagine how people carved such huge caves from the 2nd century to the 9th century BCE. I can tell that Buddhism was alive with vital energy and importance in India over that long period of time. Needless to say, I have seen many photos and articles about Ajanta and Ellora, but seeing them with my own eyes, and standing in huge caves, and even chanting sutra in the 1st and 26th cave of Ajanta were indescribable and beyond words. All I can say to you is “Go there, then you will know what I mean.”

In fact this phrase, “Go there, then you will know what I mean,” applies to many things that we experienced in India. For example, sunrise at the Ganges River—even a photo cannot capture the red sun that we saw; It is hard to describe the atmosphere of the Buddhagaya, the place where the Buddha attained Enlightenment. We heard chanting from different traditions of Buddhism from various countries and saw many people sitting in meditation, doing prostration, or walking around the Maha-Bodhi Temple. How individual group members digest each place is different according to their understanding and interest. In any case, each of us had a great experience of India.

The above points about knowing the unseen and experiencing it for yourself apply to learning the Buddhist Teaching as well. We all need to experience the Dharma, then “you will know what I mean.” The words of the Buddha are gates or symbols, through which you will see something behind and even beyond.

Lastly, timing is another important element, I believe. I felt that I was very fortunate to be in Buddhagaya on the special day of December 8, at the special place of Buddha’s Enlightenment, at the special time of dawn on full moon day, in the special year of 2550 in the Buddhist calendar, chanting Shoshinge facing the Bodhi Tree and Vajra Seat of Enlightenment, and walking while chanting Sambutsuge and Juseige, as well as the Nembutsu. I feel sorry for those who wished to go with us but could not make it for various reasons. In any case, it is a rich experience to learn Buddhism by visiting India. Thanks for all your support for our trip!

Incredible, invaluable, and (sorry) indescribable!

Nothing can adequately describe what we encountered.

Dear friends, I wish to share my experiences with you.

Inconceivable Light and immeasurable Life,

Amida is a summary of my visit to sacred sites. 🌸