



HOSING DOWN THE GODS

Thursday, May 18, 2017 – Bodhgaya (India) Mahabodhi Temple

24.696039,84.991224

Why on earth does the wrong thing seize me always? Here I am, standing at the fulcrum of the Buddhist world, the very place at which Prince Siddhartha gained enlightenment – 600 years before Jesus Christ opened his eyes in Bethlehem. Above me soar the branches of the descendant of a mighty peepal tree under which Gautama meditated till he attained Bodhi, until lust and anger fell away from him and he became the Buddha: «Awakened». At my feet, a stone platform marks the place Siddhartha had sat on that eventful full moon night. The stone is called Vajrasana, «Diamond Throne», and for Buddhists it is akin to the valve of the cosmic rubber boat. When the universe is completely destroyed, when air escapes from everything, Vajrasana will also disappear. And when the cosmos revives, that platform

will be the first thing that will emerge from nothingness.

A myriad pilgrims dressed in brown, orange and yellow robes surround me. Placing their hands and foreheads against the stone they sit there with their eyes closed in silent reflection. Behind one of the many stupas that encircle the central temple, a monk prostrates over and over again, for half an hour, an hour, two hours. A young German woman wearing a t-shirt with the words, «I am Paleo», dissolves into tears, and is gently seated on a stone by her boyfriend, and provided with paper tissues and a Mars bar.

What the Kaaba in Mecca is to Muslims, the Mahabodhi temple of Bodhgaya is to Buddhists. And every country in which Buddhism plays an important role has erected shrines and monasteries



in its unique local architectural style here. The Indosan Nipponji Temple is a restful retreat even in the enduring Indian excitement, the Thai temple bears a regal golden roof and the Bhutanese temple a resplendent interior, and the Tibetan Tergar Monastery looks like an elegant palazzo on the outside but feels more like a tent inside. About twenty more countries are present in Bodhgaya with their temples, and every street is imbued with reverent solemnity.

What peace these structures radiate. They promise a gentle falling asleep as well as a waking up that can be something other than a nightmare. Would there be a better place in which to be changed, transformed? Hardly. I'm also taken. But the wrong thing grabs my attention. I stand there like a little boy and am transfixed by the sight of a man spraying water with a hose on the statues on the temple facade as if they were terribly hot. A hose knows no respect, this is not god washing, you cannot cleanse with awe.

On the temple's northern flank a series of 19 stone lotuses soar out of an elongated platform. They mark the path along which the Buddha is said to have practised a long walking meditation after his Awakening. At the moment, the summer

sun is beating down so ruthlessly on the floor that the marble slabs are turning into glowing hot stones on which you could well roast rotis. In order to cool down the floor for barefoot pilgrims, the caretaker has laid down a hosepipe, which suddenly criss-crosses the area, acting like a little dragon. Buddha's Jewel Path (Chankramanar) becomes a slapstick catwalk where pilgrims prance like goats to avoid the wet bite of the garden hose snake. I can go on and on watching them – at least as long as the monk prostrates between the stupas.

I am unashamed that I'm preoccupied with such trivialities here. I have become friends with the fact that I always get stuck in the episodic. But I am a bit dissatisfied, dissatisfied with myself (I have forbidden myself to reproach the world). Because wouldn't this be the place to open up a bit to more important principles, at least to «smell the big», as my mother would have said. An old man limps towards me, lifts his shirt, shows me his emaciated belly, in which his breath seems to rage like a tornado, reaches out and silently takes my small note. Certainly, begging is forbidden in the temple precincts, but at a certain age perhaps everything is permissible. In a fairytale, the skinny old man would actual-



May 18, 2017 – Bodhgaya (India) Mahabodhi Temple



ly be a magician. Out of compassion, he would don his true form and give me a deeper insight into the secrets of the world. But Bodhgaya is not fairyland, for me definitely not. Or is it that my rupee is just too small? Certainly, mercy also has its price.

I allow my gaze to wander through the garden and discover two Japanese women in red robes, sitting in meditative repose under a Flame of the Forest tree with bright orange flower tufts. The women keep their eyes partially closed and slowly let small prayer-beads slide through their fingers. Delicate rays of light streak through the branches and sketch points on their garments, which flutter slightly when a breeze whispers through the crowns. Again, it crosses my mind that this would be the place... Repetition is an important aspect of

Buddhist practice. But that is certainly not meant as a mantra in conjunctive.

Behind me, a man-sized stupa shines in the midday light. I sit down for a moment to photograph it in the direct sunlight. Returning to the shade of the Bodhi tree, I wonder why I've chosen this stupa from among the countless monuments in this garden. I take a closer look at the picture and notice a small weed that disturbs the strict order of the figures. Again I've searched again for the episodic, and again it has found me. Once again I have reached for something, and once again I've missed it. I will attain no deeper insight at this point. But I confuse though, what I do and what happens to me. At least that.

Translated from German by Gunvanthi Balaram.