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Tudong

by Ajahn Jitindriya

The idea of going on tudong conjures rather romantic and inspirational images and feelings, for me at least... “Ah, the real wandering life!” But reality is never contained or represented fully in ideas and perceptions, and remains always unexpected and unknown.

In the spring of 1997 four of us set off on a five-week walking tour from Amaravati Monastery in Hertfordshire to the South-West of England. Ajahn Siripanna, Sister Uttama, Anagarika Joanne and myself were going to take up residence in Hartridge Monastery in Devon and had thought this would be a wonderful way to go, and in keeping with the practice of the Forest Tradition and alms mendicancy.

However, the journey wasn't all inspirational by any means. In concept and theory and in philosophical retrospect... yes, perhaps... but the nitty-gritty of it at times was quite challenging — physically, mentally and emotionally — but then that is what this kind of walk (*tudong*) is all about. It's a kind of stripping away of the usual 'comfort zones' that one can retreat into, so as to contemplate the sense of insecurity that is thus laid bare in the face of the unknown.

This is much of what the monastic training is about too, to train the mind to be more fully present with life as you experience it in the raw, creating the possibility for direct insight into the true nature of things. In doing so one notices how habituated the mind is to controlling and manipulating circumstances, in both gross and subtle ways, in an attempt to not have to feel the natural pain and insecurity of life. But by doing this we effectively cut ourselves off from true wisdom and understanding and the way to freedom, and can eventually wind ourselves into a tight ball of alienation and despair. So these walks are a monastic practice, intended to help deepen mindfulness, to cultivate a heart of faith, and to develop qualities such as patient endurance, equanimity and gratitude. Having said that, it's true to say that they are also undertaken with great enthusiasm as an opportunity to get out of the monastery for a while and enjoy life in the open countryside!

All in all, one could say that the walk was a great success in that we survived, and we arrived in Devon to many people's enthusiasm for our presence there. We also arrived still friends and in reasonably good humour! Five weeks together (literally 24 hours of every day, side by side), there were naturally and expectedly some moments of difficulty, as we each went through our different moods and cycles. In fact, I find relationship and communication in community life one of the most challenging areas to continue to be honest, open, and yet responsible in. So I find there's always much to be

learnt... primarily about myself and my own ways and tactics in communication, and also about others. Learning about how to express oneself more clearly and unconditionally, and learning to be more and more open to *others'* minds and moods of all kinds in an honest and unconditional way too.

Walking is a good pace for this kind of contemplation. There's time to feel and to be with suffering as it arises, to find its cause and source, to try to understand it and let go of it. Always moving on is helpful; not going backwards or hanging on to what's gone before. Also not knowing what's to come, but knowing only each step as it is, and constantly seeing all imagined futures to be pure projection, things rarely or never unfolding exactly as expected.

When the four of us set off on the 1st of May, the weather was warm, sunny and beautiful. All of April had been like that. We heard an ominous report of rain to come, but we remained hopeful. However, after only two or three days the weather turned and most of the first three weeks were cold, wet and not great walking weather. We had planned to camp out in bivvy-bags but found we often had to ask for shelter in barns. All but once we were met with warmth, kindness and sometimes remarkable hospitality.

Despite the adverse weather conditions, our hearts were being nourished by the kindness we met along the way. There were some nights that seemed very bleak to us at the time, very cold or very wet, not being

able to find shelter or anywhere semi-decent to stop and sleep, and having to walk on till almost dark or after dark (after 10 PM in that season). But we always survived, and in the wake of the new morning it never seemed quite as bad as it had the night before.

The first few days were inevitably rather painful as we got used to the weight on our backs and extra stress on our feet. Ajahn Siripanna and myself hadn't really had time to prepare ourselves physically beforehand so we knew the first part of the walk would be painful. I was also breaking in some new sandals. Although we gradually felt a bit fitter as the days passed, we never really felt on top of things physically. Even on the last day of our walk we battled with low energy and fatigue. Perhaps it was an accumulation of tiredness as there were many nights with little sleep because of cold, discomfort, throbbing feet, exhaustion, or all of it!

It might sound rather horrible as you read this but actually, it was alright. It was just how it was and there was no alternative to be had so although not particularly pleasant, it was all good stuff to practise with. We were never in any danger. Much of the time, despite the difficulties, a certain kind of ease or quiet joy could be detected in the heart, in just the simplicity of it all — not having to think too much, being 'unburdened' (bar the weight of the pack) and wandering as we were. It was good not to have any planned rendezvous, which meant we didn't have to stress ourselves out in covering miles or making deadlines that inevitably become

difficult to meet. We could rest when we needed to, and move on when we were ready.

The first few days weren't so great. It wasn't easy to find water or anywhere to camp, and the countryside was not so striking. But before long, once we entered into Oxfordshire, then Berkshire and Wiltshire, things were very different — beautiful countryside and kind, interested and hospitable folk.

We stayed in all sorts of situations — barns, sheds, a caravan, in someone's spare attic room one night; in dense woods, in open fields, on the moors, in a strip of land between barbed wire and electric fencing (it was at least flat ground, often hard to find!) — on lounge room floors, a redundant church, someone's back lawn, a garden, a porch in a cricket ground, some guest bedrooms, a night at a Christian Abbey, and finally, a B&B! We also spent a night with a Buddhist Community in Devon. Oh, and a night on the beach! But more about that later.

Apart from one arranged meal invitation the day after we left Amaravati, we didn't arrange any other meetings beforehand, just wanting to take each day as it came and to go on faith. Anagarika Joanne had been given a bit of money by various people to help support us along the way and so was able to offer us food at times, so it wasn't the complete 'faith tudong,' but we did go on alms-round as often as we could in various towns en route and were always met with an astounding response from people, nearly always getting much more food than the four of us could eat that day.

It was remarkable that people in these places were so keen to help us. They weren't particularly Buddhist, or even knew that we were, much of the time. They were just kind, thoughtful folk all too happy to give. Most tried to offer us money at first but we would gently explain that our monastic rule did not allow us to accept or use money. This always amazed people — some could not fathom it, others apologised and some even tried to convince us that it was alright to take their money. Almost always people would come back with food once they had understood what our alms-bowls were for.

When we go for alms in villages, we find a suitable place to stand so we won't be in the way of people, but where they would naturally pass us and see us, and we stand there silently with our bowls. We are not allowed to ask for food, begging is against the training. The attitude is more one of making ourselves available to receive alms, as in Buddhist practice the virtue of generosity is held in high esteem and its cultivation of prime importance in developing the spiritual path.

Being Westerners, and not living within a Buddhist culture however, this practice of alms-round can feel quite uneasy at first. Having been brought up with ideas about being independent and self-sufficient; pulling your own weight; not being a drain on the society and all that, and with most of us coming from a rather middle-class background, to actually stand there with our bowls, defenceless, open to whatever... can feel quite embarrassing at first. It's not easy to learn to be fully

open and to ‘receive’ whole-heartedly and unconditionally. But it helps us remember again, in quite a sobering way, what we are doing as Buddhist nuns and what the commitment to this form actually means. Then, in receiving such positive response from people generally, a deep ease arises.

For me, and I think for all of us, these alms-rounds were the high points of our walk. It’s so powerful to receive people’s generosity in this way (especially in Western countries) — such a touching and poignant reflection in that simple interaction for both giver and receiver, and a deep and strong sign in the psyche of the path and fruit of the religious life.

The feelings of gratitude and blessing that can well up within one in those moments are ‘other-worldly’ and feel quite transformative. Memories of those who offered us hospitality in various forms would often come to mind at later times bringing again warm feelings of gratitude and a deep, sincere well-wishing towards them. And one knows that they will also feel happiness as a result of their unconditional giving. And when recounting these acts of generosity to others, one sees a kind of ‘magic’ still working as people are both amazed and gladdened to hear that it *is* possible to live this way, that there *are* generous, kind and sincere people everywhere.

It was about five days after we set out that we first went for alms, in a place called Wallingford. The weather was freezing and we had stayed overnight in a

redundant church (with permission). We walked into the centre of town and stood silently with our bowls. The first person to stop and offer nourishment actually recognized us as nuns from Chithurst and Amaravati where he had visited a few times.

The weather seemed to be getting colder all morning. After having received ample food, with blue fingers and chattering teeth we walked briskly back to a park we had passed earlier to eat our lunch. Then it started to sleet and snow on us. We continued to eat however, as it was nearly one o'clock (after which time we could no longer take solid food) — our priorities were clear!

Afterwards, we walked by a launderette and having joked all morning about the possibility of somehow getting our clothes washed (which by this time were in good need of such), it seemed now to be not such a crazy idea after all, as it also offered the opportunity to sit against a warm dryer for an hour or so to thaw out and digest lunch. Problem was, we were wearing all our clothes! But with the kind understanding of the woman there and the help of our trusty raincoats, the operation was successful. We all remember Wallingford as being good to us.

It took us about ten days to reach Avebury, a tiny little village of great fame for its ancient stone-circles and other archaeological formations. But it should be known that it's not such a great place to find somewhere to camp! That was one of the more difficult

nights we had. We later found out that Lord Avebury is a Buddhist, and we believe we actually walked by his large estate at least twice that dark, rainy, cold evening looking for somewhere to stop.

The following day and evening was rather wet too. We got caught in some storms while walking and our rain gear was beginning to flag. But fortunately the sun came out and dried us in the late afternoon. Despite the amount of rain we had, we actually always managed to dry out before the day's end.

That evening we were having some trouble finding a suitable place to stay — we had been looking for a barn to take shelter in as the storms were still brewing around us. We headed towards some farm buildings in the distance and stopped to ask a woman in her garden about who might be the owner of this hay barn down the road, as we wished to ask for permission to stay there overnight. She pointed us to the cowherd's place. We walked briskly, directly to the barn as the storm was beginning to break, and in the sky appeared a fantastically brilliant double rainbow... we thought it a good omen indeed.

It felt like heaven to reach the barn and see that there was hay (warmth!), a decent roof with walls, and no cows!... the promise of a protected, dry night's sleep. When the rain lessened a little, two of us set out to ask for permission to stay in the barn when we were met by the woman we had stopped to talk to earlier. She said she couldn't bear to think of us there for the night and

she and her husband (plus two young boys) invited us to stay with them. They said later that they couldn't quite believe their eyes when they first saw us, four Buddhist nuns on the road, (actually, we looked more like Franciscans in our long, dark brown, hooded rain coats.) They had a spare attic room and were very hospitable to us indeed. They weren't particularly religious, just very kind people and very happy to offer support.

It was lovely to walk through some very old and interesting villages on route — those that you would never set out to see deliberately or even know were there but for the fact of accidentally stumbling on them whilst lost and trying to make sense of some twenty year old map of non-existent country footpaths. 'Twas lucky we never really had to be anywhere! As we meandered further south the pace of life became perceptibly slower, the folk we met more open and friendly, often stopping to talk, curious of who and what we were.

About two weeks into the journey we took a two-day wash and rest break in a place called Frome with some friends of the Sangha who offered us hospitality. This time for recouping a little energy was much appreciated. We stopped for another couple of days when we walked by the monastery a week or so later. Then, from just outside Exeter we walked towards Dartmoor. This last leg of our walk was a bit more structured. We'd heard the weather report of more rain so we thought it wise to have some contacts on Dartmoor, as it might turn much too cold for us to

sleep out up there. But as it turned out, that week brought lovely weather... a welcome relief for us.

Dartmoor is a very beautiful place to walk. Many ancient stone circles and settlements scattered around and its landscape is quite magical. I don't think I have the skill to describe it here. Predominantly space; its grazed, green form is scattered with rocks of all shapes and stories; its great, rocky tors and tumuli evoke a sense of power and mystery against the timeless, wild sky. The ancient Dartmoor ponies, the goats and sheep are quite at home here. Fresh water springs run into streams and winding rivers. It is sparsely forested in parts and the ground underfoot can at times become boggy without warning. But if the weather turns, it can become a dangerous place to be — many rescues have happened on Dartmoor apparently. However this was our sunny break!

We spent about three days and nights on Dartmoor itself, staying with friends on two nights, both in beautiful, magical places, and camped out for one night. That particular morning we sat around our campfire savouring a cup of tea in the middle of nowhere, quietly taking in the misty landscape of the moors, when suddenly over the hills charged an army squadron of about 40 young men in full combat gear, packs on their backs and machine guns under arms, their commanding officer loudly and roughly urging them on.

They looked rather tortured, running (some limping) in those hard, black boots. They were quite

surprised by our presence I think — probably looking somewhat like over-grown Brownies to them — and they had to run right by us to avoid the bogs, some looking rather longingly at our relaxed formation and our steaming tea, others obviously interested in our army-style bivvy-bags still laid out from the night's rest!

“Keep away from them, gentlemen,” the commanding officer shouted, and we watched still silently as they charged over the stream and up the next hill. When the clamour of their manoeuvre had faded back into silence we all just looked at each other and laughed at the impressions this surreal scene had left.

Some twenty minutes later, another squadron burst over the crest of the same hill. We hadn't moved much at all, and we watched again as the same scene took place. Was this 'take-two' of a Monty Python skit? This group seemed a little more chirpy though, and in better humour...

“Good morning, ladies, that's a cosy little scene you have there!” They all looked quite interested as they ran by.

“How long have you been out?” I asked.

“This is our fourth day, we're on our eighty-ninth mile.”

Hmmm, pretty impressive... we were certainly taking things a little easier at about ten to twelve miles a day! Strange to think that people think *our* lives are too tough, but they do this voluntarily as well! Not long after, a third troop charged over the hill but headed off

in a different direction, and we knew it was time then for us to head off as well.

We walked on for several days towards the coast, then from Dartmouth took the blustery, coastal walk to Torcross. We spent our last 'out-doors' night at the far, secluded end of Slapton Sands beach. You might remember the history of this place... where the allied troops had their practice runs for D-Day. This turned into a tragedy actually. Two ships wrecked and many lives lost in some bungled operations. All villages for miles around had been evacuated so they could do these operations in secret.

Anyway, we staggered up the far end of this pebbly beach at dusk, exhausted (me at least), to find our own privacy near a rocky niche. It felt nice to be there: clear weather, no worries about private property, having a camp-fire or making noise, and finding the sand quite comfortable... (at last, completely level ground!); to fall asleep and wake to the sound of crashing waves at the shore some fifty yards away. We didn't rouse early that morning, we only had a few miles to walk to Joanne's father's place in time for lunch, so we took our time over breakfast and enjoyed the solitude and relaxed atmosphere for a while.

At around eight-thirty some people started trudging up the beach towards us. Typical British, we thought, with wind breaks under arm, not a great beach day but the sun was up and it was the beginning of a long weekend. But why make such an effort to trudge

all the way up this pebbly end, there was plenty of beach, about five miles of it?

Soon more people were turning up, then as one rather weighty man and his wife who settled in just a few yards from us undressed, completely, we began to realise what was so attractive about this part of the beach. It wasn't us. When this man began to strut up and down proudly airing his naked glory right in front of us we knew it was time to go. It felt quite ridiculous at the time to wrap ourselves up over both shoulders in dark robes, don packs, and covered from neck to toe walk back past all these 'nature-loving' bods!

A few days later we arrived at our destination, in Totnes, where Ajahn Siripanna was due to give a public talk at a Buddhist college/community called Sharpham.

After the talk, we were given a lift back to the monastery to begin the process of settling in and settling down. There was one monk who waited for our arrival to ceremoniously hand over the Relics and left a day or two afterwards, the other monks had left earlier. We all felt very comfortable and at home straight away and really appreciated having beds to sleep in and electric kettles again. Over those five weeks, if nothing else, we gained a deep and profound understanding of why it was that humankind began to settle down in houses and create such things as central heating!

The journey is not really finished though — only now we don't strap on the rucksack and change location, but attempt to maintain the spirit of tudong: of not

getting stuck in one place, of not struggling with things that are bound to change, cultivating the heart of faith and the power of renunciation; to keep seeing that the only true stability is non-attachment.

Evam.