

Mississippi Pilgrimage:

**The Journals of Venerable Jotipalo
Bhikkhu and Austin Stewart on a
Spiritual Journey up the Mississippi
River Valley**

**From New Orleans, Louisiana USA to
Thunder Bay, Ontario Canada**

March 1st – July 8th, 2005

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An impossible task?

Day One: New Orleans, Louisiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 1, 2005

It's 1 pm Tuesday, March 1 and I'm on a pier above the Mississippi River.

Taking the train from Chicago to New Orleans made me feel like we have an impossible task ahead of us. It seems like an eternally long way. A little bit of doubt has crept in and last night I came down with a sore throat and a low-grade fever. Just something mild.

On the train, I was reading John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*. He mentions a similar apprehension at the beginning of his journey:

"In long range planning for a trip, I think there is a private conviction that it won't happen. As the day approached, my warm bed and comfortable house grew increasingly desirable and my dear wife incalculably precious. To give these up for three months of the terrors of the uncomfortable and unknown seemed crazy. I didn't want to go. Something had to happen to forbid my going, but it didn't. I could get sick, of course... "

We've been staying with Chris and Billy Finney, two of Austin's friends he's known since high school and Austin admitted feeling a little apprehensive and nervous about the trip. I was feeling like, "Oh, God, what are we getting into." And Chris and Billy were saying, "We'd give anything to go—you guys can't really be talking this way!" Everyone is excited about the journey but we're the ones doing it, and I think it has occurred to us: "Just what are we getting into?"

This morning we just decided to go for it; if I wait until my health is great, I'll never get started. And today is an absolutely beautiful day in New Orleans. Billy Finney said they get this kind of weather maybe three weeks out of the year—mid-60s, completely sunny, a gentle breeze.

We've decided to walk along the levee at first. We've walked three miles so far, and we're going to try to walk about nine miles a day. We have no idea where we're going to stay tonight, but we did see a couple of plantations up the way with some long, beautiful

lawns. We're going to stop and ask if we can sleep on one of them. The owners will probably say no, but Billy said the people have a reputation for kindness, so we'll just ask and see if we can't spend our first night on a plantation!

Monday, I had the best cup of coffee I've ever tasted. They put chickory in the coffee and it was so good. My first taste of New Orleans. Then Billy drove us through the river delta where the Mississippi empties into the sea and down to Pilottown, where we stood by a sign that said, "You are now on the southernmost point in Louisiana."

On Sunday we came here to Rivertown and a Greek man came over and started talking with us. He said, "Ah, yes, I have a neighbor who went to a Buddhist monastery in Germany, and it's been very good for him. Buddhists—now they're the ones who ride horseback blindfolded and shoot at targets, right?" He has inspired us to start writing down all the stories we here when someone says, "Ah, I know about Buddhism . . ."

As we were standing on the same pier, four kids from the neighborhood, ages six to ten, came up to us. They were great, and we talked to each other for a long time. Then one of them looked at me and said, "Why do you wear them ugly clothes?"

Billy asked him, "Do you go to church?"

"Yeah."

"Does your minister wear robes?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's what Jotipalo is doing."

"Oh, yeah."

The people we've been staying with have been wonderful. Billy's brother, Chris, does musical mixing as a recording engineer and he was working last night with a famous saxophonist, a Grammy winner.

On the train down here I was walking back from the view car and a man put his palms together in anjali (a greeting of respect). I talked with him later and found out he is from the Missouri Zen Center. We had lunch together and I asked him if he knew the monk Santikaro. He said he'd once driven with him all the way to Missouri. We exchanged emails and he's going to try to set up something for us when we show up in St. Louis. It's such a small world.

Still, I'm kind of worried about this first week. We'll be on the levee, at least until Baton Rouge, and a couple of miles north of here are a lot of chemical plants—they call it "Cancer Alley." Finding places to sleep might be hard for us, and everything's wet. As a monk, I'm allowed to ask someone if we can sleep in their backyard under one of these trees. Or if they ask us in, we could spend the night indoors. But I hope we spend most of the nights outside.

On the train ride down I watched the scenery—extremely flat and extremely poor. People in the South have told me that the poor people will probably be more receptive to us. I could see many places from the train where we could sleep when we come back

through—wooded lots and abandoned shacks.

We've been walking now for just an hour and a half. We're excited to be getting started, but also aware that this is a big task. Much is unknown.

Pushing the envelope

Day Two: Destrehan Plantation, Louisiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 2, 2005

We continued our walk up the levee from New Orleans to the Destrehan Plantation. Established in 1787, she (here they refer to such graceful homes in the feminine form!) is the oldest documented plantation home in the lower Mississippi River Valley.

We reached the Plantation just before dark, but the place was closed. We hadn't seen anyplace to camp that night, so we sneaked to the back corner of the plantation and slept under the stars with just a sleeping bag and bug net over our heads. We didn't see any other option. We were in a grove of 200-year-old live oaks covered in Spanish moss, absolutely beautiful, but a bit scared that we would get caught.

This morning was as beautiful as yesterday and we walked the levee again. We noticed a small grocery store / hot sandwich shop on the River Road and went down to go on alms round. We got out our bowl and stood to one side, so as not to impede anybody going into the store. Several people asked what we were up to, and when the store owner came out to inspect us, we told him what we were doing. He wasn't overjoyed at our presence, but permitted us to stay.

As we watched people come and go from the store, we couldn't help noticing the number of conversations about just how dreadful it was that communities couldn't put the Ten Commandments on the courthouse lawns and how bad it was that Louisiana had just banned prayer in school!

Then a woman pulled in and walked into the store, emerging moments later after asking the owner who we were and just what we were doing. She walked over to us, smiled, and offered us anything we wanted in the store!

She ended up buying us a large roast beef sandwich, some chips and a drink. We offered her a traditional blessing chant, and I explained how "giving" makes us happy. She jumped in and said, "Yes I feel so good right now!"

Just as we were about to leave, the store owner came out and asked if we needed a soda! We had what we needed so we thanked him and headed back up to the levee, thinking to ourselves, Hey, maybe this walk will work out fine.

The levee had been paved but gradually transformed into a seashell base, which was great for walking on. Most of the neighborhoods along the river road were very poor the further we went along, though every now and then we would walk pass an area of great wealth, immediately followed by more poor neighborhoods. The disparity was very sad to see.

If we saw people outside in their yards, we stopped to ask them for a place to stay, but nobody was willing to help us, and Austin and I got more depressed with each rejection.

We finally found a thin strip of land between the levy and the Mississippi. It was only ten yards wide but it had a few trees to give "some" privacy.

I went to get water and I saw a sign for a beauty salon and walked inside—I can just imagine what they must have thought when I walked in to ask for water, but they seemed happy to give it.

The whole walk so far feels like we're pushing the envelope—what are we doing disrupting these people's lives, this Buddhist monk walking into a beauty salon to get a gallon of water? They have to be thinking, "What in the world was that?!" It's almost like a joke—a Buddhist monk walks into a beauty parlor—a beauty parlor, with my head shaved!

I returned to our campsite and at dusk heard a rifle being fired behind us. I got up and noticed a man on the levee. So I made myself visible, then approached him. He said he didn't see our tarp, which is possible as it is a dark green.

At this stage in our walk, we were still trying to engage people and tell about our pilgrimage. I walked over and said that we were a couple of wanderers on our way to Canada, staying on the land. He asked why we were doing it.

"To support peace," I said.

He looked at the way I was dressed, and I explained that I was a Buddhist monk.

His expression changed completely. He said, "I like what your doing, but I disagree with your faith." I don't think he knew anything about Buddhism, but he said that "some people say there are many ways to the mountaintop, but if you really believe in Jesus Christ, there's only one way."

He wasn't hostile, but immediately I could feel this shift of energy, like he cut me off.

"I see it this way," I said. "Some people excel in English, some people accelerate in mathematics, but these are just different ways of talking about beauty and truth."

He looked at me and said, "I can appreciate that, but I can also cordially disagree with

you.”

Then he looked at his watch and said, “Well, I only have three more minutes to shoot,” and he left. I learned from this encounter that mentioning a peace walk to somebody with a rifle may not be so wise! We have learned that if I mention that I’m a Buddhist monk, 90 percent of the time the result is a negative reaction.

Unbeknownst to us until later that night, a tug boat dispatch center was only 30 yards up river from us, so we heard a constant coming and going of huge diesel engines powering these mighty tug boats all night long. The engine noise wasn't bad, though, because it gave some rhythm to the constant hum of the huge factories all around us. Though it was noisy we didn't find it annoying or disturbing. Maybe we had just gotten used to it.

It rained that night, so we ended up being pinned under our tarp for about 10 hours. In retrospect, that may have been why the next day we were in a pretty low mood. Too much lying around dulls the mind.

The devil's seed in our midst—we can't trust stereotypes

Day Three: La Place, Louisiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 3, 2005

It was raining when we woke up but stopped right at dawn. We packed quickly and headed towards La Place, where we'd been told there were several grocery stores. The manager at the first one refused to let us stand anywhere near the store, so we went to a bigger shopping complex down the road.

While walking we found our first of what would become a constant stream of Mardi Gras beads littering the ground. For the next two days we're continually walking over these beads on the pavement, even on Route 61.

A levee policeman stopped us and asked us what we were up to and, upon hearing our tale, gave Austin ten dollars!

But La Place turned out not to be such a friendly place, though the rainy weather certainly helped shape that impression. So did our visit to a Popeye's Chicken place, where Austin used the money the levee patrolman gave to us to buy our meal. We sat in the back where an older African American man was studying the Bible. He was watching

us and he started engaging Austin in conversation. But what he was saying didn't make sense. Even though he was speaking English, we couldn't really understand exactly what he was saying. The gist of it was: "You guys are really strange, way out of place here in the South, and Jesus Christ is all you need to lose your burdens: can't you see it? "

As politely as I could, I said, "There's a time and place for religion and a time and place for eating, and we're in a restaurant, I've got food in front of me and I'd like to eat."

That kind of made him angry and he stopped talking. We were already losing our appetite but as we tried to finish the biscuits Austin had bought, a woman came over and started talking to the man.

"Can't you see, right here, even in our midst, the Devil is planting his seed," he told the woman. "Right here in our midst."

That didn't feel very good at all. And as we were walking out town and thinking about walking on the grass of a ballpark, a guy came running out of his house and yelled, "That's closed, you can't go there."

Great. We got back up on the levee.

That evening we found no help in finding a place to stay, though we started asking sooner. We did find a place eventually and in some ways it was beautiful. The river side of the levee was getting even more industrialized and land was starting to be posted with "No Trespassing" signs. But the place we found was completely in woods and was swamp-like. The only problem with the campsite, besides the usual local shooting in the woods, industrial noise and probably the chemicals in the soil, was the amount of debris left after flood waters had receded. Anything that could float was deposited here. I cleaned a twenty-foot stretch of ground to do walking meditation, and in this small space I counted eight plastic bottles, three glass bottles, one motor oil bottle, several sheets of plastic, three aluminum cans, and lots of Styrofoam. If you didn't look at the ground though, you would have thought the place was a beautiful campsite.

Austin took our gallon jug to get some water at 5 pm as he saw a gas station just down the road. He said he felt intimidated as he approached as a group of African Americans in their mid-thirties were hanging outside the store drinking Colt 45's. As Austin approached, they asked what he needed then suggested he go inside to ask the owner. The owner told Austin to get the water outside and around the corner, right where the men were hanging out. The guys helped Austin find the spigot, discovered it was broken and started razzing the owner in a friendly way and telling him to let Austin use the bathroom sink. That was broken too. So the guys started yelling for the owner to come out of the back and get this man some water, and he did it!

Then the biggest of the men—6' 6" or taller—offered to drive Austin wherever he need to go. He said, "The guys at the other end of town are pretty rough, but we take care of everybody down here."

Austin and I are learning that we can't trust stereotypes.

Snowy egrets and cranes grace the sky

Day 4: Gramercy, Louisiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 4, 2005

We got a relatively late start but we had the meal purchased from the previous day, so didn't need to find a store.

At 10 am the local sheriff's deputies came to check us out for Homeland Security. We heard that the way up to and beyond Baton Rouge would be even more industrial along the river, so we decided to leave the levee and try our hand at Route 61.

The walk was beautiful as it cut right through some of the most spectacular swamp, with snowy egrets and cranes gracing the sky, fresh green and red leaves emerging from the trees, and peaceful fishermen in their bass boats.

We joined Route 61 at Gramercy, Louisiana and hoped to walk about ten miles to the Interstate 10 crossing and hopefully find water and a camping site. But there were no campsites and no water along this stretch. Fortunately we got water at a welcoming center right at the start of our walk down Route 61.

While filling our water bottles I noticed for the first time that my face has been disfigured by sunburn and mosquito bites (dozens on my forehead). There was a lot more traffic on this road, but it wasn't oppressive and the blast of air from the semi trucks was cool and refreshing.

By the time we reached the town of Sorrento we had walked twenty-two miles, we were exhausted, without prospect of a place to spend the night and we decided we needed some help. We decided to call Bryant in Baton Rouge (as Bryant was awaiting our call and had offered us a place to stay). Sometimes it seems as though Louisiana isn't ready for Buddhist monks.

Have patience with it

Day 5: Baton Rouge, Louisiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 5, 2005

We had showers last night—our first since we started. We did laundry and got to check emails.

We are staying at the home of another of Austin's friends. Austin met these two guys (Billy from New Orleans, and Bryant here) while working at a Boy Scout camp in New Mexico. This friend's name is Bryant Taylor and we are staying with his parents, C.A. and Bob Kelso.

Very wonderful and kind people.

Bryant is the one who picked us up outside a gas station in Sorrento, Louisiana about 8 pm last night. He drove over an hour round trip to get us! Some people are very kind indeed.

Actually, during the ordeal of that twenty-two-mile day, one person offered Austin their cell phone in the center of Sorrento because the town had no pay phone. The look of exhaustion on Austin's face must have moved the stranger to compassion. Unfortunately we couldn't reach Billy and we had to walk another hour to the pay phone. Then after plans had been made to get us picked up, two women pulled over in their car at the gas station and said we looked so peaceful that they trusted us to give us a ride if we needed one!

As I've said, we've met some very kind people here.

I spent most of the morning doing some research about the Natchez Trace Parkway and sending out a few emails. We found a Thai restaurant in Baton Rouge and went there for the meal. They generously offered the meal for no charge and gave Austin some cash as well. The owner was from Laos and was pleased to hear that one of the monks at Abhayagiri was from Laos, too. I gave her a card that had the Abhayagiri contact info on it.

I also talked to Ajahn Pasanno, the abbot and my teacher at Abhayagiri, on the phone. He was very encouraging and gave us some good advice. He told me there was a monk from Japan with whom he had trained named Ajahn Gelasko. He did a long walk through Japan and Ajahn Passano said it was very difficult. Even though Japan is a Buddhist country, people didn't know what he was or what to make of him. It took him a long time to get some momentum established on the walk. In the end, it became a national thing with the press following him. But it took a long time for him to figure out how to do it.

Ajahn Pasanno encouraged me to have some patience with it.

The "Old Farts" and chanting against fear and despair

Day 8: Port Gibson, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 8, 2005

Bryant drove us up to Natchez and to the Natchez Trace Parkway, which will be our route for the next several days. In some ways, it felt like a fresh start.

We knew it was supposed thunderstorm yesterday so we spent the whole day in camp, meditating and taking it easy.

Then we had a really bad thunderstorm for about an hour last night. Uncomfortable, cold night that way.

We got up and started walking to the entrance of the national park, figuring there would be a phone there but there wasn't. We saw on the map that there was another town a few miles up and we thought we could walk up there, but a guy told us, "there's nothing in that town—no phone, no grocery, no food."

I'm laughing about it now, but my first thought was, Oh great—we've just been dropped off twenty miles from Natchez, no food, no nothing within twenty miles ahead of us.

Then this other guy walked up to us and said, "Hey, you guys need a ride anywhere?"

We weren't planning on it, but we took it. And he gave us a ride to Port Gibson, which jumped us up about twenty-five miles.

We had a great time with this man and his friends. They said that if we wrote about them in this journal, I should call them "the Old Farts." One of them is an East Indian, a Catholic priest, and the rest are retired guys who said they just wanted to travel from their town of Vidalia, Louisiana to Vicksburg for the day to get out of the house, forget their worries, and have a fun day. They saw us and said, "Hey, let's help these guys."

This was really our first contact since we've been here with people (outside of our friends) who were actually interested in what we were doing, asking questions and

generous in that way. They asked us what we believed, why were we walking, what we were eating—they ended up giving us some money and before we left them they asked me to perform a traditional blessing for them in the Pali language, which I did. It felt nice, like we're in Mississippi and being a little better received.

In our first entry in the journal at the beginning of the trip, apprehension and uncertainty were the themes. Now we're working with pure fear. Fear and uncertainty and negativity.

Austin wrote in his journal as we were in the campground yesterday, almost shell-shocked after leaving Louisiana, both talking about the fear aspect of the walk, the way we were received down there. Austin wrote, "If anybody says they have no fear of death, I challenge them to walk through Mississippi the way that we are dressed."

If we had been just two guys wearing blue jeans and t-shirts in Louisiana, people probably would hardly have batted an eye. But to wear the Buddhist monk's robes and to have the shaved heads seemed almost a threat to them. At times we felt real hostility towards us.

Once we got to the park here on the Natchez Trace, we set up our tents, we meditated for a while and then I went for a little walk. I was remembering Ajahn Mun and how he was notorious for walking out into the forest or jungle, not telling anybody where he was going. He might spend years in the jungle and his students would have to go find him. That was an essential aspect of this tradition in the early times—the monks would just disappear into the jungle, and this was back when the jungle was tiger and malaria infested, full of venomous snakes. The monks would go out there and live. Most of the villagers weren't Buddhist and they didn't know how to take care of Buddhist monks either. So the monks were really putting themselves on the line. As I was remembering this, I realized that's why the monks do this practice—to confront fear and discomfort and unpleasantness from people.

We are meeting generosity, too. But as Austin said the other day, "It's there, but it's not enough to sustain you emotionally."

We do have the tools through meditation to look at this as mind states, to not get caught up in it. So I've tried to do more loving kindness practice. I've started to do a lot more chanting in the evenings, consciously not allowing the mind focus on the discomfort, fear, and despair.

Still, we definitely carry a sense of despair now. Our tudong (pilgrimage) right now is just to get to Jackson. We know we have to do something different with the walk. We're trying to figure that out now. The biggest hassle has been finding places to stay. It just makes us feel ill that we can't find places to stay. I think every cell of both of our bodies is screaming, "Stop this! End the walk." But we don't want to either, because so many people are supporting it.

And maybe it is just our fear screaming. That's one way we're working at this through

our meditation, for when we look back at the first four days, there wasn't anything there that was really threatening or menacing.

But I've seen a lot of people with guns around here. It's just a part of the culture. It doesn't feel safe that way. And if we're sleeping on someone's land, people have such strong views about property rights—if a farmer were driving by and saw our tarps pitched on his land, he could get quite enraged. But when we ask people for permission to stay on their land, they say no. So, what do we do?

This is our first day to walk in three days, and we've put six or seven miles in so far. Port Gibson was a very friendly town. We've got a three-day walk before we can get to the next town and get some food. That's the hard thing right now. I thought my backpack was too heavy already. This afternoon we'll have to carry about five pounds of food and twenty pounds of water. The highway we are walking, the Natchez Trace, is absolutely beautiful. We have a hope that we can make this work.

It's hard to look forward to carrying a fifty-pound pack, but one thing that's coming out of this journey so far is that is every time we try a new plan or think we've got something figured out, it always turns out to be otherwise. I might feel despair now with how heavy this pack is, but I might just end up doing great with it, too.

I have a questionable optimism.

Sharpened senses/loving kindness to coyotes

Day 8, Part Two: Port Gibson, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 8, 2005

As we walked through Port Gibson, we were getting a lot of stares but they weren't unfriendly. More inquisitive. So we started smiling and waving at people when they'd stare, and we got very positive responses from that.

The Natchez Trace Parkway is not a heavily traveled highway right now. In the mornings when we walk, we see about one car per hour. So we've begun waving at every car that passes. People are looking at us because they don't know who, even what, we are; but as soon as they see us smile and wave, they realize, "Okay, they can't be too bad." I think that's creating a positive energy around us. And we feel happier, too.

We walked five miles from Port Gibson, found what looked like some high ground, so we set up our tents there. And Austin and I began talking about our fears—noticing how a lot of our mind states throughout that first week had been downright counterproductive to making this walk happen. We realized that we need to be much more mindful about what we're thinking, and acknowledging unskillful thoughts but not going along with them. And not necessarily burdening each other with them, either. I don't need to tell Austin I'm having a particular negative thought. So we're trying to work our meditation that way—being much more mindful of what we're thinking and what we're proliferating.

We had been talking a lot about fear that evening, and just as my head hit the pillow that night, I heard a large pack of coyotes to the west of us, probably within a half mile. They were close enough that we could hear them yipping and playing with each other.

I haven't been around coyotes much and my heart started beating more rapidly. Even though I knew they don't attack humans, I was responding with fear. When I realized that, I consciously started sending out loving kindness around Austin and myself, trying to create some sort of protective barrier and wishing the coyotes well.

I fell asleep but woke up about midnight and heard the coyotes again—they had moved to the north of us. I sent out loving kindness as I fell back asleep and when I awoke just before dawn, they were to the east of us. They'd done almost a complete circle around us, but hadn't intruded into our camp.

That night I started noticing too that my senses are beginning to become much more attuned to nature. A blessing of this time along the Trace. Smells and sounds and an awareness of the clouds and weather (especially as we look out for storms) all seem enhanced. When I woke up this morning, I could tell that the atmospheric pressure was dropping.

An earlier morning when we were walking, I could smell the moisture in the air several minutes before it began to rain. Trusting that sense, we threw our tents up and when it started raining soon after, we didn't get wet.

It's not that I've never noticed any of this in my regular daily life but out here it's vital information to know, and our senses seem sharpened to perceive it.

A timeworn path

Day 9: Rocky Springs, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 9, 2005

We were really looking forward to getting a shower, but there wasn't one here.

We would learn later from Tami that along the Natchez Trace there are what she calls "power spots," and that Rocky Springs is one of these. We were met with a lot of kindness there. People gave us food and about a mile before we got there, someone offered us a ride. He had seen us earlier in the day, we'd waved at him so when he saw us later he wanted to help out. We didn't need to take it, but we were grateful for his offer.

So my mood was very good this morning.

We got to Rocky Springs about 2 pm. I smelled moisture in the air and we immediately put our tents up, finishing just before it started raining. I got under my tarp so I could see out from underneath it and watching it rain, I felt a deep despair come over me. Watching the cold rain on this gray day hitting the dead brown leaves. It all reminded me of death and a deep sadness came over me. I didn't want to deal with death right then. But I needed to look at this. I immediately got up and sat at meditation and contemplated "Now, what's this all about?"

An hour later, the sun came out. But I was fascinated by how quickly my mood had changed from happiness this morning to deep despair—all triggered by a little rain!

When it stopped raining, we went for a walk to the site of old long-abandoned town of Rocky Springs. It still had an old Methodist church, built in 1837. The church was open, so we went in and signed the guest register.

A plaque the bore this information about Rocky Springs:

"Once a thriving rural community, Rocky Springs was settled in the late 1790's. The town grew from a watering place along the Natchez Trace, and took its name from the source of that water—the Rocky Spring. In 1860, a total of 2,616 people lived in this area covering about twenty-five square miles. The population of the town proper included three merchants, four physicians, four teachers, three clergy and thirteen artisans; while the surrounding farming community included fifty-four planters, twenty-eight overseers and over 2,000 slaves who nurtured the crop that made the town possible—cotton."

All that's left of the town today are the remnants of an old foundation and a few artifacts.

Walking back to the campground we walked a half-mile section of the original Natchez Trace. It's pretty amazing. Ten to fifteen feet wide, flat as you'd expect a road to be, and in certain places it was cut through the banks ten to fifteen feet deep. There was a sign at the beginning of the section and it carried this saying, so beautifully written.

The Old Natchez Trace:

"This is the Natchez Trace. For many years it served man well, but as with many things

when its usefulness passed, it was abandoned.

“Over the years, this timeworn path has been a silent witness to honor and dishonor. It bears the prints of countless men. Walk down the shaded trail— leave your prints in the dust, not for others to see, but for the road to remember.”

The Natchez Trace

Some historical background

Anonymous

March 8, 2005

In response to requests for some additional information on the Natchez Trace, here's a little historical background:

The 444-mile Natchez Trace Parkway commemorates an ancient trail that connected southern portions of the Mississippi River to salt licks in today's central Tennessee.

Over the centuries, the Choctaw, Chickasaw and other American Indians left their marks on the Trace. The Natchez Trace experienced its heaviest use from 1785 to 1820 by the “Kaintuck” boatmen that floated the Ohio and Miss. rivers to markets in Natchez and New Orleans. They sold their cargo and boats and began the trek back north on foot to Nashville and points beyond.

Today, visitors can experience this National Scenic Byway and All-American Road through driving, hiking, biking, horseback riding and camping.

The following description was published on the GORP website:

The Natchez Trace

This is the story of human beings on the move, of the age-old need to get from one place to another. It is a story of Natchez, Chickasaw, and Choctaw Indians following traditional lifeways, of French and Spanish settlers venturing into a new world, and of Americans building a new nation. At first the trace was probably a series of hunters' paths that slowly came to form a trail from the Mississippi over the low hills into the valley of the Tennessee.

As early as 1733 the French were familiar enough with the land to make a map that showed an Indian trail running from Natchez to the northeast. By 1785 American settlers in the Ohio River Valley had established farms and in a search for markets had begun

floating their crops and products down the rivers to Natchez or New Orleans. Returning home meant either riding or walking, for the flatboats, too, were sold for their lumber, and the trail from Natchez was the most direct. As the numbers of boatmen grew, the crude trail was tramped into a clearly marked path.

Over the years improvements were made and by 1810 the trace was an important wilderness road, the most heavily traveled in the Old Southwest. Even as the road itself was being improved, other comforts, relatively speaking, were coming to the trace. During these years many inns—locally called stands—were built. By 1820 more than twenty stands were in operation. Most of them provided no more than a roof over one's head and plain food, though two, the stands at Mount Locust and Red Bluff, were substantial, well-known establishments. But even with these developments the trace was not free of discomforts. Gangs of thieves added an element of danger that was only one more hazard in a catalog that included swamps, floods, disease-carrying insects, and sometimes unfriendly Indians.

A new chapter in transportation dawned in January 1812 when the steamer New Orleans arrived in Natchez. Within a few years steamboats were calling regularly at St. Louis, Nashville, and Louisville. Travelers liked the speed and comparative safety of steamboat travel more than the slow pace of going overland. Soon the bustle of the trace had quieted to the peacefulness of a forest lane, which is its character today.

Not the impossible task I envisioned

Day 10: Along the Natchez Trace

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 10, 2005

Only a brief note today: The Trace has been good to us so far.

The extra weight has been heavy, but not the impossible task I had envisioned.

"Yellow next to red, leaves a fellow dead"

Day 10, Part two: Rocky Springs, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 10, 2005

This morning we got up at Rocky Springs, it was 37 degrees—too cold to sit and meditate. So I got up and walked for about an hour just warming up. Austin got up and made some hot chocolate and instant grits for us—delicious and warming.

Thunderstorms were predicted, so we decided to stay another night in Rocky Springs. Spending the day in the campground, we met many people there. One particular couple, Dave and Michelle from St. Louis, were especially interesting. Dave is part Native American and as we sat around the campfire that night he spoke of a real longing for spirituality in his life. He's studied a lot of Eastern religions. It was interesting seeing someone else with that spiritual desire.

Dave had also been an Eagle Scout and had been to the national Boy Scout camp at Filmore in New Mexico, an experience he had in common with Austin. Dave and Michelle suggested we contact them when we get closer to St. Louis and we hope to see them again. They gave us some food, too. They were generous in many ways.

I also met Jim and Phyllis Massey from Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada—the planned endpoint for our pilgrimage. Jim explained that “snowbirds”—the Canadians who spend the winter south in the United States—usually had back north at the end of March (their leases here usually end then). The migration is a national phenomenon there.

At one point, they were talking with another Canadian couple (from Quebec), conversing in French one moment, then English the next. Their bilingual agility was fascinating.

Ron, the ranger from Mt. Locust, told us how to watch out for coral snakes, “Yellow on red will leave a fellow dead; red on yellow is a friendly fellow.” Ron also knows all the towns on the Trace north of Jackson so we got out the map and he pointed out the places where we could find campsites not marked on the map, places we could find food and water. He was a blessing and helped us out quite a bit.

Austin met a guy who called him over to his campsite and gave him three oranges for us to eat. Austin noticed his license plate was from Indiana. Later the guy from Indiana came over and gave us two bags of groceries! Bread, Fritos, peanut butter, fruit, coffee creamer. He left and his wife came over and gave us two cold Pepsis. That gave us enough food so that we didn't have to make an extra trip for food—all the food we needed to get to Jackson. I realized then that, thanks to the generosity of others, we haven't spent any of the money we'd originally brought in case we needed to buy food.

By the end of this day Austin and I were feeling high as a kite! I have to say that both of us commented that our meditation was really good that night; happiness is a base for success in meditation—it was happenin' that night!

But we were also very conscious of the importance of not getting attached to that,

because getting attached to happiness is as much a cause of suffering as is attaching to miserable mind states. So we were cautious.

Poison ivy

Day 11: Junction of Highway 27 and Natchez Trace

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 11, 2005

We had hoped to get up early and walk this morning but it was raining when we awoke, so we got a later start—about 8:30.

But it turned out to be a beautiful day. We walked twelve miles and reached the junction of Highway 27. We were tired, it was hot, and we were carrying a lot of water. So we found a woods that looked pretty deep, a campsite that look quite peaceful.

But as we were sitting down, Austin noticed poison ivy beginning to sprout. We'd just finished pitching our tents and I sat down on my ground cover and noticed that practically every square inch around us was poison ivy—the stems, just starting to bloom. I looked at this and thought, this is a bad idea.

Austin had just finished pitching his tent, too, and we were tired from the day's walk, but I told Austin I thought we'd better move. I thought he might be mad at that suggestion, especially after we'd just gotten the tents set up, but he responded, "I was hoping you'd say that."

So we found a bamboo grove free of poison ivy and set up only one of the tarps. The downside of that was that you can't really mat bamboo down very well—it was like setting up a tent over the stalks in a cornfield. It looked like bamboo was growing in Austin's tent. I slept outside under the stars that night.

We found a small stream and washed ourselves as best we could to get any oil from the poison ivy off of us. That whole event felt good to me—we're starting to learn how to take care of ourselves. We knew we were in a bad place and used our better judgment and moved; then we washed and took care of ourselves.

Another change I've noticed: I'm not a lover of insects and bugs and at the monastery in California when I see a spider or ant approaching as I'm meditating, I'll put my finger down to scare it away rather than allow it to crawl on me. But we're learning that sometimes you just can't do anything to avoid such encounters. We've adopted a theme in such situations: do something if you can, but if you can't, don't worry.

Now the bamboo grove where we slept last night was full of spiders, and ants and spiders were crawling on me as I slept, but all I found myself worrying about was not crushing them when I rolled over. One morning I woke up and I tapped my lighted alarm clock to see what time it was and it illuminated just enough that I could see there was a snail about two inches from my nose. And I really had no reaction. I realized that of course there's going to be a snail here; this is where it lives. So I just moved him along.

I've been tickled (or not!) at how such things aren't bothering me now. These creatures are just part of what belongs here. We put ourselves out here in their place—what do we expect?

But I must admit that I still have an aversion to mosquitoes.

Jotipalo earns his merit badge

Day 12: Utica, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 12, 2005

Today was a town day for us. We lowered the tarp and hid everything in the forest and walked into Utica. The town looked run-down, but there were many people there. About seventy-five percent of the people we waved to waved back; kind of a rougher-looking town, but also friendly.

I knew it was a good place when we got to the center of town and saw a pickup truck looking very similar to others we've seen drive by—they usually have gun racks in the rear window. I noticed this truck had a gun rack, too, but instead of guns, it carried an umbrella and a cane in the rack. Austin and I got a chuckle out of that. I like the new South!

We emailed people from the public library there, then went to the grocery store where they had some booths inside where we could eat. On the back wall surrounding these booths they'd hung composite shots of all the senior classes that had graduated from the local high school from 1947 to 1992.

Looking at these photos was like looking at the history of the South during that period. In the earlier shots, everyone was dressed identically; conformity was the theme. Up until 1965, the women all wore dresses with high-necked collars, all in black, and every woman wore a pearl necklace. Almost the same hairstyle, too. The guys wore suits and ties and the haircuts were pretty much the same.

By 1966, the pearl necklaces were gone and the high-necked dresses were replaced with a high-V neckline. But they were still all were wearing the same style of dress. When you got into the 1970s, the guys were wearing tuxedos; several of the guys had sideburns and many of the black students had huge Afros.

One thing I noticed was that from 1947 through 1970, the high school was all-white. From 1971 to 1982 there was a balanced mix. And after that all the students were African American. The photographs stopped at 1992. They seemed to tell the history of the town.

I received a very helpful email that day from Ajahn Sudanto at the monastery. He was talking about Ajahn Gunha, who had about 100 monks living in his monastery in Thailand. For about six months of the year, Ajahn Gunha would have his monks out on the road, with all their tudong gear, walking on busy, noisy highways under the hot Thai sun. And it's very hot in Thailand this particular time of year.

People asked Ajahn Gunha, "Why do you do this? Why don't you just stay in the monastery where it is peaceful and calm?"

He responded it's to teach the monks to endure; otherwise they will get fat and complacent. And this practice develops many skillful states of mind helpful to realizing enlightenment.

We walked back from town in the heat of our own day, completely sweaty after fourteen miles of walking. I insisted that Austin take a shower and we washed our clothes. We needed to figure out some way to take better care of our bodies—part of the learning we're pursuing on this trip is how to take better care of ourselves. So we washed ourselves, we washed our clothes. It felt good. And we need to start having some discipline about looking out for our health. The episode with the poison ivy made me realize that we need to be more aware of this, and Austin and I had a good conversation about taking care of our health.

Ironically, a moment later, Austin needed a clothespin to hang out his robes and I told him how in Thailand they make their own clothespins out of bamboo. Austin found some bamboo and his pocketknife and began to carve a clothespin. I noticed he was pushing down on his knife with a lot of pressure. Then I said, "Austin, don't do that—you're going to cut yourself." At that second, Austin almost cut his thumb off. The bamboo split and the blade sliced about a half-inch into Austin's thumb and his index finger. Being an Eagle Scout, he immediately knew how to apply pressure to slow the bleeding but it looked pretty bad—there was blood all over his hands. I had some Neosporin and he had some butterfly splints, and we took an hour to get everything in place.

Meanwhile, his body was going into shock: his right hand was shaking uncontrollably. I made him eat—even though we're under the precept of not eating after noon, this situation demanded an exception. So he ate and took it easy that afternoon. So far, the cut is healing very well, and Austin's feeling fine.

So that's how Jotipalo earned his merit badge.

That night I was contemplating the generosity we've received thus far, and the times we've wished someone would stop and pick us up, even when we haven't been asking. I think that in the future if I see somebody walking along the highway, I'm probably going to ask the driver to stop and see if they need help.

I now have much more empathy for other people's suffering. I was thinking about the years when I used to drive for a living when I was in New England and I'd see hitchhikers, and there would always be a part of me that wanted to stop but I couldn't trust, I wouldn't stop. Makes me sad to think of those opportunities that I had to be generous but wasn't. But I think I'm learning—it's not too late.

Walking feet, running nose

Day 13: Near Raymond, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 13, 2005

We rose at 4 am, sat and meditated for an hour, then were walking by 5:48. We walked about ten miles, more than halfway to the town of Raymond. I started noticing many more farms as we got nearer to Jackson. At the ten-mile mark and at 10 am we found a place to pitch our tents.

The night before my nose had started running, and I took some cold medication but it wasn't really working. I ended up spending most of that day lying on my back—sniffing and blowing my nose every few seconds when I stood up was getting to be a nuisance, and it couldn't have been much fun for Austin to listen to, either.

So I laid on my back and, at one point, I noticed from the color of my urine that I might be getting dehydrated. We were out of water, so I laid on my back began doing loving kindness practice again.

That evening I felt full, comfortable, not thirsty, and I noticed from the color of my urine that I didn't seem to be dehydrated at all. That was interesting—really weird. I do believe in “other powers,” that my own loving kindness thoughts and people praying for me and wishing me well do create power and protection. So, somebody out there—thank you.

That night, we didn't have any water and a large thunderstorm was brewing. So Austin and I decided to set up my poncho as a rain catcher. Austin and I are actually starting to

have some fun with this survival stuff! We have more energy than before, so we're trying different things like this.

We've also gotten into the practice of doing evening chanting together and sitting for an hour in the evening. We had just started chanting when the thunderstorm hit, but we continued our chanting. The storm came from the south, then seemed to jump five miles north ahead of us, where you could see it was striking pretty violently—but all we received were a few drops of rain. A second storm came through and in about ten minutes we'd been able to fill our water jugs from the rain catcher.

We continue to learn how to be here.

A blessing for Eddie J.

Day 14: Part One

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 14, 2005

We got onto Highway 467 this morning and we noticed two black guys outside their house. They called out, "Good morning."

We responded, "Good morning."

One of them looked at us quizzically—especially at our backpacks.

"Were you out in that storm last night?" he asked.

"Yeah."

"Man, that must have been terrible," he said.

"Ah, it wasn't so bad," I called back.

"Yeah it was," he said.

"Yeah, it was," I admitted. And we started laughing. They had big smiles on their faces. And I noticed as we walked into Raymond that when people were looking at us, they seemed to realize we'd been out in that storm, and the looks we got were almost looks of respect.

We walked into a laundromat and saw an older black man looking at us like we were

very strange. We were stripping off our clothes and putting them in the washing machine, which had to seem even stranger. We asked him where the bathroom was and he stared at our backpacks.

“What are you guys doing?” he asked.

“Walking up to Canada,” we told him.

“What are you doing that for,” he asked, and we explained that it was part of our religious training.

“Are you Christian?” I don’t even remember how I answered that one.

“You got a gun?” he asked.

“No.”

“What about coyotes? You need a gun. You get up the road and into those coyotes and you’re going to be wishing you had a gun,” he said.

“I’m just going to be praying to Jesus to protect me,” I said.

He warmed up to us after awhile, and later I heard him sum up our trip (and possibly our appearance) as he was talking with Austin: “Damn—this is the strangest thing I’ve ever seen!”

As we were waiting for our clothes to dry, two other guys came in to pick this man up. One of them was really mean-looking—had scars on his body from knifings, alligator skin boots, and he just stood there and stared at us. When the first man told these two what we were doing in Mississippi, one of them said, “Do you have faith in Jesus?”

I said, “When you’re doing something like this, you have to.”

He looked at me and said, “My name is Eddie J. If you’ve got faith like that, then tonight you say a blessing for Eddie Johnson.”

Then they all three walked out, and Austin heard Eddie say to his friend, “Man, those guys got way more faith than I do. Hell, they’ve got more faith than any preacher I ever met.”

So tonight we’ll say a blessing for Eddie J.

A first Word from Austin

Day 14: Jackson, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 14, 2005

Well, after a small misunderstanding I will begin to regularly contribute journal entries onto the website. Jotipalo and I are going to try not to overlap our stories too much; or if we do, to offer two perspectives on the same situation. With no further ado . . .

Today has been a big day. We are in Jackson! This is the two week mark. Tami, our host, is a Rieki Master. She gave me quite a wonderful massage; I am still floating a little. Jotipalo will not get this treatment, unless we run into a male masseuse on our walk. You give up so much being a monk.

My spirits are pretty high right now, but this is due to conditions conforming to my preferences. I have a roof over my head, climate control, and little fear that I will be shot by a hunter mistaking me for game. People do not appreciate these little things. They have no idea how amazing a shower is after being in the woods for several days. Sponge baths in public restrooms with someone watching the door are really the bare minimum of bathing. We take so much for granted; until you do without something, it is impossible to fully appreciate it. On top of that we have room to complain about the things that we take for granted if they do not meet our preferences.

This morning we hiked into Raymond, where we had arranged to be picked up. We were early so we found a washeteria and did a load of laundry so that we would have clean clothes when we showered. Raymond was where the last battle took place before the siege of Vicksburg during the Civil War. The washeteria appeared to have weathered that battle. I thought that I had frequented the country's roughest laundromats when I lived in Chicago, but I don't even believe that Bad, Bad Leroy Brown would have chosen to do his laundry at this rust bucket! Now, you might think that I am complaining about this laundry. That is not the case; I have a deep level of respect for something that vibrates with such a strong frequency of decay, yet still cleans your clothes.

The old black man inside wore a glorious handlebar mustache, used an old detergent cup as an ashtray and was sipping something out of a paper cup. He communicated in a mix of English and grunts; he saved words for only those moments when he really needed them. I never heard a complete sentence leave his lips. He looked at us with a sideways glance the entire time we were in there. I got the sense that he had not been saving that glance for us, but that he looked at everything that way. Upon learning what we were doing he could not believe that we did not have a gun. He just kept shaking his head saying, "This is the strangest damn thing I have ever seen." He kept telling us that we would need a gun to fend of the coyotes and pumas. Our attempts to explain to him that we couldn't carry a gun were an utter failure.

A like-minded soul

Day 14: Jackson, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 14, 2005

Tami Rose met us in Raymond, Mississippi. She drove us to her recently purchased home in Jackson. It was 11:30 am and we had not eaten yet, so we threw together a quick meal, including some fresh vegetables!

After eating we each took showers and did another load of laundry. A much more friendly laundry facility (surrounded by flowers, Buddha images and smiles) than we've experienced previously on the walk, where the laundromat was dirty and had a TV blaring Bob Barker's voice and *The Price is Right*. Bob Barker!?! He didn't look any older than when I last saw that show, twenty plus years ago! We think Bob might be a yoga master and spreading his wisdom by giving gifts away to strangers and exemplifying the power of yoga to stop the aging process! Who knows?

Tami is great. She is an energetic and kind person. A like-minded soul, you might say. She works as a massage therapist, Reiki Master and crystal healer. We spent a while sharing stories and I was amazed to find that, after only a few hours acquaintance, friendship and mutual respect had developed between us.

Later in the afternoon Michele and Jerry stopped by. Michele has a yoga studio in Yazoo City and we have been invited to go there to visit with her students later in the week. It was Michele's birthday and Tami was offering her a massage, and the three of them were going out to dinner that evening.

Jerry and I had a nice conversation about religion and it was nice to hear about Jerry's beliefs as a Jehovah's Witness. I appreciate their views about war and non-harming, and about staying out of politics. I also appreciated hearing Jerry talk about how she and her sister's are received when they go out to talk to people about their faith.

Jerry had many questions for me, too, and I think we made a good connection. Jerry offered to drive Austin and me to Vicksburg the next day and we gratefully accepted, as we have not had the opportunity to experience many of the historical resources along our walk. When you are walking twelve miles to get to a water spot and you see an historical marker that will take you several miles out of your way, you tend to keep to the straight and narrow of the road!

This evening Austin and I got caught up on emails and also made contact with Luke

Lundemo from Jackson. Luke led a community leadership training program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center in Marin County, California. Ajahn Amaro, another of my teachers and co-abbot of Abhayagiri, was part of that training program. Luke asked if we would be available to meet with a group that gathers on Wednesday evenings. We agreed and made plans. We also were invited to go on almsround outside their store the next morning.

It is a bit strange sleeping in a bed tonight, but I remember how to do it!

Chanting on the battlefield

Day 15: Vicksburg, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 15, 2005

Last night I got my own bedroom and Austin slept on what looked like a very comfortable couch. We got up at 5:30 am to the smells of hot coffee brewing in Tami's automatic coffeemaker. We gathered in Tami's massage room and did some chanting and meditated for an hour.

Since Tami just recently moved into this house, she requested that we do some blessing chants. She knew we did blessing chants after hearing about Eddy J.! So I invited her to see if any friends wanted to be part of the ceremony and we decided to do it that evening.

Austin and I got directions to Luke and Charlotte's computer store, and we walked there with umbrellas at the ready. The part of Jackson we are in is a bit strange. It is a residential area but there are few sidewalks, and on the busiest streets usually only on one side.

The computer store was part of a complex that contained a health food store, so many people came in and out. It appeared that a not so undercover police officer was watching us. He was wearing all black with huge letters across his chest that read, "Police!" He kept appearing and disappearing around various corners, near and far away.

Several people greeted us warmly, and one woman gave Austin twenty dollars! Charlotte invited us into the health food store and bought us a wonderful meal. We made plans with Luke to connect on Wednesday evening and Charlotte gave us her cell phone number and offered any assistance we needed while in Jackson.

We ate the meal at Tami's and then waited for Jerry to take us to Vicksburg. It started raining just as Jerry arrived. The drive to Vicksburg was about an hour, or what would

have taken us three days to walk. The day had turned grey, wet and cold. Even though we were inside a warm, dry truck and with a friend, the rain was still draining my energy. I am so grateful that we have places to stay for the next couple nights.

Vicksburg was interesting. Jerry paid our admission into the Vicksburg Battlefield Museum. It was shaped like an iron-clad war ship. Most of the exhibits were scale-model warships, and there was one large diorama of the battlefield. We also saw an informative movie about the forty-seven-day siege of Vicksburg.

The Battlefield Park was a beautiful park and is in an excellent state of preservation. It includes 1,325 historic monuments and markers, twenty miles of reconstructed trenches and earthworks, a sixteen-mile tour road, antebellum home, and 144 emplaced cannons. Because of the rain we didn't get out of the car much and only saw a fraction of the park. We did stop at the Illinois Memorial, which is modeled after the Roman Pantheon. The monument stands sixty-two feet in height and is made out of marble.

The monument had an open dome and it was raining inside the building! On a whim I started chanting, "Namo tassa Bhagavato arahato samma-sambuddhassa." The chant resonated throughout the building for at least five full seconds after chanting. It was amazing! So I chanted the Buddha's "Words of Loving-kindness" and dedicated the merit of that chant to all those who suffered due to the terrible siege. It was so beautiful to chant here; if we had more time I would have stayed and chanted all day long.

Jerry drove us back to Jackson and told Austin and I some amazingly funny stories about her seventeen years of being a truck driver. She drove all over the United States--all of those miles alone. She sure is an amazing woman, kind and generous too.

Once we were back in Jackson, Tami had invited a friend named Rebecca over for the House Blessing. We did a simple ceremony, chanting some of the Buddha's teaching over a bowl of water that had a blessing cord wrapped around it. We also had a candle burning over the water, which symbolized the coming together of water, fire, air and earth. After chanting over the water we took the blessed water and sprinkled it throughout the house.

Generosity in mind

Day 16: Jackson, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 16, 2005

We have been in Jackson for two days and our time here has already been very blessed. I

have to say that I am aglow with all the generosity we have encountered.

Generosity is the major theme of the walk for me right now. I reflect on all of those that we have met and gratitude arises in the mind and overwhelms any negative feelings. It is such a blessing to be able to live on the kindness of others. Living on the kindness of others forces the heart to open. It allows for a strong sense of humility to arise in the mind. Only a true fool would be able to hang on to arrogance while a beggar. One begins to see that though it is up to the individual to investigate his/her own mind, spiritual practice is a group effort. I am able to practice right now due to the kindness that so many have shown me, starting with my parents raising me up through the owner of the Thai restaurant that fed us today. Being able to live and practice on the kindness of others makes it so you are not just practicing for yourself, but you are practicing for all those who support you. The sharing of blessings chant conveys how I feel best.

Through the goodness that arises from my practice,
May my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue,
My mother, my father and my relatives,
The sun and the moon, all virtuous leaders of the world-
May the highest gods and evil forces;
Celestial beings, guardian spirits of the earth
And the lord of death;
May those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile;
May all beings receive the blessings of my life.
May they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the
Deathless.
Through the goodness that arises from my practice,
And through this act of sharing,
May all desires and attachments quickly cease,
And all harmful states of mind.
Until I realize Nibbana,
In every kind of birth, may I have an upright mind,
With mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigor.
May the forces of delusion not take hold nor weaken my resolve.
The Buddha is my excellent refuge,
Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma,
The solitary Buddha is my noble lord,
The Sangha is my supreme support.
Through the supreme power of all these,
May darkness and delusion be dispelled.

I cannot add anything to that. The support we receive living on alms brings a humble confidence to my practice that did not exist before. I contacted a friend we will be staying with in Memphis. I know her from Gunnison, but we were never very close. She joyfully offered to help in any way that she could. I keep seeing how blessed I have been in this life, those who I have kept as friends are amazing. May you all be well!

Thai generosity/talking with Father William

Day 16: Jackson, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 16, 2005

We awoke again to the smell of coffee this morning as we gathered and chanted the Buddha's first discourse, called the Dhamma-cakkap-pavat-tana Sutta. This teaching was given to the group of five ascetics who had helped the Buddha during his many years of struggle before his Enlightenment.

In this discourse, the Buddha describes the dangers of indulging in the extremes of pleasure and self-mortification, then goes on to explain the Four Noble Truths. At the end of this teaching, the disciple Kondañño understands what the Buddha was teaching and becomes the first student to reach a stage of enlightenment.

We had a relaxing morning, and I spent some time catching up on my journal. Around 11 am Charlotte picked us up and drove us over to The Thai House Restaurant. We were warmly received and ushered into a private room for the meal. The owners (Burane Bunniram and Prawat Bunniram) have lived in Jackson for over thirty years and have three children in college now. One of the boys was our waiter and it was funny to listen to him speak, as he spoke pure "Jackson" English.

The restaurant was beautiful and I noticed all the chairs, tables, counters, and wall dividers were hand carved. The owner's family was in the wood working business in Northern Thailand, and she designed all the woodwork in the restaurant. Her family in Thailand made and carved all the wood. They were some of the most beautiful carvings I have ever seen in that style. All the wood has three- to four-inch-thick pieces of teak, with deep relief carvings! This is the second Thai restraint we have visited on the walk and again they didn't charge us for the meal and they made a generous donation towards the walk.

Last night I started an email conversation with Father William Skudlarek, a Benedictine monk from St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. I met Father William last year when he was in California for a meeting about Monastic Interreligious Dialogue. We have been in contact with each other about this walk several times as we hope Father William will be able to join us for a period of the walk, probably in July when we reach Minnesota.

My first impression of Father William was formed when he responded to an email by

asking if my formal name “Bhikkhu” in my signature “Jotipalo Bhikkhu” should be used in addressing me. He said, “I have a feeling Bhikkhu means, ‘monk’ and it feels like I’d be calling you ‘Jotipalo Monk.’” I immediately liked Father William.

Father William gave me some advice and contacts to call in Jackson to see about developing a relationship with Catholic churches along the way. I think we will be fine between Jackson and Tupelo, but I like the idea of starting to see how this new twist of the walk will unfold, and how it will work. Part of me wants to resist planning anything, but at this point I think we need all the help and generosity we can get.

Today I did talk to a woman named Mary Woodward who graciously extended an offer of support. She had already sent emails to the churches in Kosciusko, Houston, and Tupelo. She said she would call them as well and pass our email address along to them. Ms. Woodward also extended an offer to assist if we have any problems along the way.

“Just give me a call,” she said.

This feels like a very good beginning.

She also extended an offer to contact the local papers, but I declined that offer. I said, “Every action has an opposite and equal reaction.” She said, “Yes, and you are in Mississippi.”

Also, my friend Art Howe from Chicago contacted a friend of his who lives in Oxford, Mississippi. This friend has offered assistance too, and I hope we might meet up with him after we reach Tupelo. Art’s friend is a Dean at Ole Miss (the University of Mississippi). So I offered to talk with any students or faculty who might be interested in meeting us.

Tonight around 7 pm Luke and Charlotte will pick us up and take us to a Zendo here in Jackson.

"What the bleep do we know?"

Day 16, evening: Jackson, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 16, 2005

Luke and Charlotte picked us up at Tami's around 6:45 pm and drove us a short distance to B.B. Wolfe's Zendo. She has an art studio and a lovely wooded property, but unfortunately development on all sides has encroached on its beauty.

The zendo was designed and built by B.B. and her husband. About eight people came. We chanted the Buddha's Words of Loving-kindness. I chanted it in Pali at the beginning and Austin joined in at the end of the evening in English. We talked about the walk, emphasizing how we were using it as a meditation and how we were working with the various mind states.

After the gathering Luke and Charlotte invited us to their place to view the movie: *What the bleep do we (k)now?* It was a fun movie about quantum physics, spirituality, and the human body. It mentioned the book *Hidden Messages in Water* by Masaru Emoto. Tami just gave a copy of this book to us.

Levitating in Yazoo or: first Jesus, now the Buddha

Day 17: Yazoo City, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 17, 2005

We slept in this morning, and I noticed Tami was meditating when I got up. She said we inspired her to start a practice each morning!

After Tami went off to work, Austin and I did laundry of all the things we got dirty during our stay (bath towels, bed sheets). We even started to pack our backpacks again. Oh, it felt so heavy again. How did that happen?

I was finally able to part with a few of my items (a pair of sandals that Larry Restel donated for the walk (I put about 300 miles on them while training at Abhayagiri, so don't feel too bad about sending them ahead). Thanks, Larry, for understanding!

Tom, a friend in Grand Marais, Minnesota, offered to deliver to Thunder Bay any packages I send to him. That will allow us to not have to pay expensive international postal rates.

Luke and Charlotte took us out to eat at a lovely restaurant called Pan Asia. It is an Asian-Fusion stir-fry restaurant. If anybody reading this is going to be in Jackson, I highly recommend having a meal here (as well as The Thai House).

In the afternoon Tami drove us up to Yazoo City, where Michele wanted us to meet with some of her yoga students. On the way, we stopped at a camping supply store to pick up a few items (camp stove heat shield, fuel bottle, collapsible water bucket for doing laundry,

and a sleeping pad).

While in the store I had the most unusual experience. People were gawking at me—and from only a foot or two away. I mean staring at me with eyes bulging, mouths dropped open, eyeing me from bald head to toe, up and down.

It was most unusual because the people were doing this full well knowing I was watching them do it! It was odd to me, too, because I was just observing these people gawk without having any uncomfortable feelings or even being self-conscious. It wasn't until after we left the store that I realized how odd it had been. Made we wish I had said, "Hello, I'm alive." I know it is best that I didn't.

Yazoo City is known for kudzu vine. Cotton is king, but kudzu is queen, so they say. It is a nonnative plant introduced to help control erosion. That it has done, but they didn't know it would thrive in this climate and is reported to grow as much a foot a day during the summer! A pair of goats is the only way to keep it at bay.

Tami said Michele is pretty much single-handedly holding the light in Yazoo City. Michele told us when she was considering moving here she was hoping to see a sign, as nothing was drawing her to come here. She is from England, and was living in Georgia at the time. She was watching the Blues Brothers movie and in one scene they flash a shot of a sign that reads, "Yazoo City." I'm sure Michele is one of the few people who ever noticed that scene. I asked Michele if the sign might have been telling her to go to Yazoo City, Illinois.

After all she has done and been through in Mississippi, I think she could have killed me for even suggesting that!

Tami explained that she was once giving a massage to a long-distance runner who hated to stretch, and thus had lots of injuries. Tami mentioned that maybe he should consider doing some yoga. He said, "Oh no, I could never do that. That would be breathing for Satan." I guess that's a very common attitude down here about yoga. Interestingly enough though, there is a "Christian" yoga center in Yazoo City. Instead of doing the Sun Salutation they do the Son Salutation. I guess that makes it okay?

Unfortunately the word of our arrival didn't get sent out until that day and only a few people were able to attend. One of the messages got a little mixed and the woman heard that a Buddhist monk was levitating at the Yoga Studio (I hope she wasn't disappointed).

Those that came seemed to appreciate the talk and meditation. They saw many similarities to the guided meditation I led and what Michele teaches.

We have been hearing a story about a man dressed like Jesus carrying a cross. We first heard this story on our second day in New Orleans. Several times we have heard a similar story and he is always about two weeks ahead of us. If these stories are of the same person we don't know. But we did hear that the guy had passed through Yazoo City and

later was “run-out-of-town” in Indianola, Mississippi.

People around here must be getting very nervous—first Jesus walks through town, now the Buddha.

These sandals are made for walking: On the Trace again

Day 18: Ross Bartlett Reservoir, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 18, 2005

We are back on the Trace. Jackson was very busy for us. We met so many wonderful people filled with generosity. Luke and Charlotte, Tami, Barbara, Michelle, Jeri, the entire Jackson Sangha, Karen and several others whose names we never caught. Also, in the three major towns over our next stretch the Catholic churches have offered us places to stay. Everyone has been giving in their own way; some give in money, others in time, others in food, and some in all three! Each gift helps us along for one more day. A park ranger stopped today and asked if we were alright. Jotipalo and I both saw the question of where we were staying cross her mind, but then she chose not to ask. That was a great act of generosity.

I feel close to all of the people we have met on this walk. I now have friends in Jackson! They are all welcome in my home if they ever find themselves in Gunnison.

Our time, when we are in town is our gift to those who support us. They have many good questions, speaking with them about the walk creates the walk. We are experiencing things while we walk, and then put them into words on our down days in town. It allows us to share, as well as to reflect on the lessons we have learned. It is good to be walking again, now the mind sees that spring is well underway and wants to be further north to keep away from the inevitable heat. It loves to seek comfort.

My faith in the practice is growing more right now than it has in a very long time. I feel that it is moving closer to unshakeable. Faith is beginning to be the motivating factor behind practice. As I grow sure of the truth of the practice, why would I spend any time with unskillful mental qualities? When I witness the outcome of both skillful and unskillful thoughts, words, and actions and when I see that these things create the world there is no longer any desire to dwell in unskillful action. So when I slip into old habits I catch myself quickly.

A generous gift; safe from harm

Day 18: Ross Bartlett Reservoir, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 18, 2005

Austin and I slept at the Yoga Studio and did chanting there in the morning. Karen, who works for Michele, volunteered to drive us down to Jackson, as she'd missed our talk the previous evening because she was meeting with her church group.

So Karen picked us up at 8 am, took us back to Luke and Charlotte's house. There they offered us a call phone for the duration of our walk! They are hoping people will donate towards the cost of the calling plan. I think their expense is around thirty-five dollars per month. We only intend to use the phone to make calls in case of emergencies or to make arrangements for places to stay. It was a most timely offering—Austin and I had just been talking about how rare the pay phone is becoming, and how difficult it has been for us to find one when we need it. We had decided it would be nice to have a phone, but we would not purchase or request one. And then Luke and Charlotte make this offer. Some people are just in tune!

Karen turned out to be another like-minded soul. She was very happy and exuded positive energy. Karen was more open-minded than many that we have met in Mississippi, perhaps because she spent a year and a half living in Europe and twenty years in California.

Karen dropped us off at the Ratliff Ferry Campground, which is on the north side of the Ross Barlett Reservoir. This is a beautiful body of water about fifteen miles long and two miles wide. We got dropped off at 11 am so Austin prepared a meal and we ate at the lakeshore on a picnic table.

We found the campsite a bit noisy as the caretaker was using a leaf blower attached to a tractor, and the site was also a boat launch site. Since it was still early we decided to start walking.

After only about three miles of walking, we found a beautiful spot in a pine forest. Covered with pine needles, these forest floors are very soft.

We have a thirty-five mile walk to Kosciusko where the Catholic Church has graciously offered us a place to stay. The weather forecast does not look promising for the next few days; lots of rain and thunderstorms predicted.

We are starting to get a fair number of emails. Rev. Heng Sure wrote to let us know that

they chanted the Great Compassion Mantra on our behalf and for world peace. We are so blessed!

I also got an email from my aunt and uncle telling the good news that one of my cousins who had been in Iraq just returned safely from his tour of duty. I had given him an amulet that was specially blessed by Ajahn Jumnian. These amulets protect whoever wears them from being killed by violent means.

Later I sent my cousin a bag of fifty-two amulets which Ajahn Jumnian again blessed, and when I saw my cousin on his brief visit to the States at Thanksgiving, he told me that nobody who wore one of these amulets had been injured!

A water day

Day 19: Natchez Trace, north of Ross Bartlett Reservoir, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 19, 2005

Today has been a water day.

We got up at 4 am to the distant rumble of thunder, meditated until 5 am and quickly packed. We are getting better at packing and were walking by 5:35 am (just at dawn). We use our head lamps on the road for the first thirty minutes so cars can more clearly see us. The Trace has a large gentle grass shoulder so it is not difficult to get out of cars way, if they do not see us.

By 7:30 am the rain had caught up to us, and we walked for about two hours in a light to medium rain. It was not a constant rain, but we heard thunder at times; it was often quite close. I had the distinct feeling that the weather gods were doing all they could to hold back the storm and were wishing we could have walked a little faster than our 3.3 mile an hour pace.

By 10:30 am we had walked ten plus miles and we were near a nice-looking woods. We think the young shoots may be poison ivy, but there are not so many of them, and we asked them not to spread their oils on us, and in return we wouldn't do anything to harm them either (and in fact we would wish them well). Tami told us that we could ask the mosquitoes not to bite us, and they won't. Austin said a friend of his said the same thing about poison ivy. I'm game!

Today is a water day also because we used our water filter for the first time. We are a bit concerned about the water we are attempting to cleanse, because there are a lot of cattle farms and the water doesn't flow very much, if at all. We filtered about two gallons of water. When we reached our campsite, we did some blessing chants over the water. I'm reading Masaru Emoto's book *The Hidden Messages in Water*, and one of the most beautiful photos in the book is of an ice crystal from water that a Buddhist monk chanted over.

We don't know if this will purify our water, but maybe it will make it pretty.

Water, water, water A day of firsts

Day 19: Natchez Trace, north of Ross Bartlett Reservoir, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 22, 2005

This was a day of firsts. We got rained on hard today while we were walking. We could be quite miserable right now, but all of our preparations paid off and I am happy they did. The sky is very hard to read here. When it is overcast, there is a very subtle change that tells you it is about to rain. I have gotten used to the high desert of Colorado where rain is a dramatic thing. Rare is the daylong storm. Most often one can observe thunderstorms sweeping across the landscape, blue sky all around. They resemble jellyfish, the thunderheads are bodies, trailing rain are tendrils sliding from mountain to valley.

We have been at this for nineteen days now and if I look to the future it seems that Canada is an impossible distance away. I think that at our current pace it will not be possible to make it in the time we have left. We have both let go of the idea of walking the whole distance. We are finding that this trip really is taking us. We have so little control. That is much more apparent when you are on foot. We are at the mercy of the earth and sky, the seasons, and the people we encounter. Not to mention the limitations of the body. Days pass quickly on the road; it is amazing how twelve miles can slide past. The only constant is the present moment and out here it is never dull. Always something for the mind to grasp at! Lessons are never far away.

Our other dealing with water today was purifying our first batch with the water filter. The filter has two steps. The first gets out all the microbial stuff and then it runs through charcoal, for what purpose, I don't know. We added a third level of purification. First we requested the water from the local Nagas, or water spirits, and when we returned to camp we chanted a blessing over it. I do not feel that we are being superstitious, but that we are

being humble. We could have just filtered the water and drank it without ever considering the string of events that led us to that particular water source. There is much that goes on behind the scenes. We are thankful that we are able to live consuming what we consume.

There is very little litter along the roadside here, but whenever we walk off the Trace it is dense along the road. It speaks to me of so many things. I believe that it is a sign of decay. It shows the personality of our nation. Litter laws, adopt-a-highway programs, and litter awareness have become the norm. It is well known that one should not litter, and yet we are still swimming in it! It shows how disconnected and selfish people can be, a condition I have seen reflected across this nation. I do not know what would possess a person to throw trash out the window. Every gas station you stop at has a trash can. The only reason for it is that we fail to see the consequence of our actions. We all have the tendency to live like this. We lack a proper respect for the way the world works. Being mindful of our thoughts, words and deeds we can begin to observe the impact that our actions, and even our thoughts have in the world. When we throw a piece of trash out the window what kind of world do we create? When we reside in negative mental states what kind of world do we create? What happens if we pick up litter when we see it? What happens when we cultivate loving kindness?

Filled with joy and gratitude—in the rain!

Day 20: South of Kosciusko, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 20, 2005

Almost an identical morning to yesterday, except there was no thunder when we got up. By 9 am we had walked nine miles. We sat under the cover of a display about beavers, and had a light snack. Did you know Mississippi beavers can reach sixty pounds?

A light rain started just as we left the protected cover of the display. I wear a rain poncho that covers my pack, a pack cover that Bryant gave me back in Baton Rouge, plus a large umbrella. With the combination of these three items, we have now walked for two days in the rain and my shoes only got damp!

I tell you, the weather gods are looking out for us and we are grateful! If I attach to having dry shoes I'm sure to suffer, though.

About two miles down the road I saw a man pull into the driveway of a house which was only 100 yards off the Trace, so we decided to go and ask for a gallon of water. Here we

met our second hard-selling Southern Baptist! I could have kicked Austin when he freely offered up that we were Buddhist. Didn't he see the large painting of the Last Supper right in front of him?

In defense of Austin, I doubt there would have been a way to avoid the subject of Baptist beliefs with this man; any conversation would have led there. The encounter was actually friendly, partly because Austin and I didn't take it personally or seriously. I saw right away that we just didn't have a common language to discuss religious thought, and he didn't seem interested in finding one.

We sent him loving kindness and I was looking for a way to get out the door without insulting him. Bless her heart, the woman who owned the house must have sensed my desire and she went over and opened the front door. She may have been a Baptist, but she was a Bodhisattva in my mind.

Austin said the encounter showed that our practice is making progress, but that it also shows we have work to do, as we kept talking about various things he had said for the rest of the day's walk.

At about the twelve-mile point of the day's walk we came across a bridge that went over a small stream and a seldom-used dirt road. We stopped here to get out of the rain and eat our meal. Most of the land we passed today was open fields; I bet they are breathtakingly beautiful when the wildflowers bloom. We are a couple weeks ahead of spring, which is fine, because that means we are also two weeks ahead of the copperheads and rattlesnakes.

We ended up walking about fourteen miles before we found a place to camp. It had stopped raining about a half hour earlier and it stayed rain-free until we pitched our tarps, then it started raining again.

Last week at Rocky Spring Campground, an afternoon rain shower left me feeling depressed. Today as we sat under our tarps, I was filled with joy and gratitude. I was enjoying watching the tiny slugs make my backpack their temporary home. The sound of rain was so peaceful and relaxing, and my shoes were still dry (how did that happen?).

The generosity we have received and the well-wishes we are being sent are helping to make this walk be not only enjoyable, but a true blessing for all beings.

We were expecting to have to walk ten miles tomorrow. We used our cell phone for the first time to call the Catholic Church in Kosciusko. Wilma was so happy to hear from us; she wanted to come out right away to pick us up! We wanted to meet her at a picnic area the next morning, where there was running water so that we could sponge bathe and put on clean clothing before we met her. We predict that site is five miles away, so we told Wilma to come find us about 9 am. We plan to start walking at 6 am.

"What is the purpose of Buddhism—what is your goal?"

Day 20 -- Part two: south of Kosciusko, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 20, 2005

Some additional notes and thoughts about our conversation with a Southern Baptist man who gave us water just south of here [[see Day 20](#)]:

During that conversation, I mentioned that Austin had grown up in the Catholic Church, and I had grown in Methodist Church.

He said, "Ah, so you haven't had the true experience of Jesus."

We told him about a kind Jehovah's Witness we had met, and the man rolled his eyes.

He spoke of "meeting Jesus," and I imagine the experience had been quite beautiful for him. In terms of Buddhist understanding and deep states of concentration, it sounded as if his experience was what is called piti, a Pali word describing joy, almost to the point of rapture.

In the Buddhist sense, you can get to that state when you're meditating. But then it gets more and more refined, and becomes more and more peaceful. So I think this man had a very blissful experience of Jesus, but I think it's probably quite coarse. It's very energetic and very enlivening, but if you stay in that state, it's very exhausting.

As you learn to meditate, you can actually get into that state just by watching your breath, believe it or not; then you learn to let go of the discomfort of it, and you enter states of real peace and tranquility. There are different levels of this, but each becomes more blissful but at a much more peaceful level.

The man asked me, "Have you ever had the experience of Jesus?"

And I said, "I have."

Before I was a monk, I experienced some very profound states of peace and calm, it came through meditation, but it was what I believe people might describe as experiencing the Godhead, very personal.

He asked an interesting question a couple of times: "What is the purpose of Buddhism—

what is your goal?”

I told him: “The ending of suffering.”

I think that resonated with his heart—he stopped to contemplate it, as if he hadn’t heard it before. But it didn’t fit anywhere into his context, so he immediately changed the subject. He let it roll off. We got the impression that anywhere the conversation went, he needed to be right. Anything that didn’t match his paradigm, he’d listen and take it in, but then he’d immediately take the conversation in a different direction.

Austin wrote that this man was doing what he believed was his Christian duty, but from our perspective, what it showed was not his love for Christ, but a lack of faith.

We still can’t get over that one denomination really thinks they’ve got the only right way. We just drove through this town of Kosciusko, there must be at least a dozen Baptist churches in this town—the First, Second, New, Southern, New Southern—and I imagine each Baptist church argues with the other about which is the “right” church. We just find it mind-blowing.

The Buddha said that any religion is a true religion as long as it teaches the Four Noble Truths. It doesn’t have to state it in those terms, but carry within it the understanding there is suffering; that suffering is attachment and craving; that if you let go of the craving, it’s the end of suffering; and that there’s a path of meditation that leads you there to that letting go.

I would love to see someone take this on as a PhD thesis or independent study—take all of the world’s religions and write out where they carry implicitly these Four Noble truths. I think that would be an awesome project.

Our conversation with this man probably lasted no longer than 10 minutes. Austin probably would have liked to have stayed a little longer. I think he was hoping for another 'Eddie J.' experience [[see Day 14, Part one](#)]
—I had to kick him in the ass and get us out of there. (Figuratively, of course!) We’ve been laughing about that one.

Others we have met, like Dave from St. Louis, saw us as just two more seekers on the path. This man did not. But he gave us the water we needed. He was quite pleasant, and we were grateful.

Going soft in the desert: Damp dry

Day 20: South of Kosciusko, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 20, 2005

We made easy work of fourteen miles today, despite the rain. In the morning it was overcast, but the rain didn't start up until later in the morning. The only time we saw the sun today was right at daybreak. It peeked out over the horizon, the color of a hot ball of iron, though lacking the intensity that image provokes. Dawn was quite beautiful; a light fog that glowed red with the sun, the forest was wet and still. A few deer tentatively crossed the Trace. We aroused the suspicion of a few dogs that barked loudly, but did not approach. We passed a number of horses that approached the fence and paraded for us. Their movements were so graceful. We covered our normal mileage quickly attempting to make camp before the rain found us. In this pursuit we failed.

I think that all my years in the high desert have made me soft. Let me explain the term, high desert: it is an arid climate that is at high altitude. Gunnison, where I make my home, sits at 7,700 feet. Most people feel that the desert makes you hard; water is scarce the sun can burn exposed skin quickly and without mercy. The altitude and a geographic oddity make the winters in Gunnison long and cold. To give a sense of cold, in December it was -29°F without windchill. There are tales of colder weather that cracked many a radiator. I feel that this has made me soft because rarely am I wet without my consent. There can be a lot of snow in the winter, but it is so cold that it does not melt on you. And as I have described before, summer thunderstorms pass over quickly. If you are caught unprepared a thunderstorm at high altitude can be quite dangerous. The risk of hypothermia is very real as is the risk of a lightning strike.

Everything is damp here. I can feel the moisture on my skin, in the air that I breathe, and in all of my belongings. I must have lived the first twenty-three years of my life in the Midwest without being aware of all this water. I have found that in the cycle of physical birth and death water is a crucial factor. The more of it that is around, the denser life is, the more birthing occurs. The same can be said of it in regard to death and decay. In my arid home I have found dead standing juniper trees that have been dead so long that the wind has whittled their branches thin and oval. Here a tree can be consumed quite fast. Most downed branches I try to move when setting up camp fall apart in my hands. Earlier in this walk I would get depressed every time that it rained. Now I find myself soothed by the sound of rain on the tarp. I think that we take personal offense at many of the unfavorable conditions that occur to us every day. Why does it have to rain on me? It is just raining and I am out in it.

Three weeks of tudong! May we have some water?

Day 21: St. Therese's Catholic Church, Kosciusko, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 21, 2005

Last night the rain continued well after dark with small waves of sprinkles coming in all night. While we packed up this morning a heavy mist fell around us. Everything in the forest was shining with moisture. We had a short walk and then called Wilma, our contact through the Catholic Church, who was already out looking for us. She is wonderful, in fact all the women we have met today have been very gracious. They are so willing to help. We have decided to stay here an extra day due to the forecast of tennis ball-size hail and tornados. If it weren't for Father William we would probably be out in that. Blessings to Father William!

It is amazing to me how narrow a person's view can be. Yesterday we saw a house right off the Trace and went to ask for water. It was a Sunday morning and the folks living there happened to be Southern Baptists. I would not call what transpired a conversation, nor was it an argument. I think that you must speak the same language before either of those can occur. Our spiritual language barrier made most communication fruitless, though it is pretty sure that we are headed for the gates of Hell. We are not alone. Catholics, Methodists, Jehovah's Witnesses, and everyone else, except Baptists, are walking beside us right into the fires of eternal damnation. We will see you all there! I am attempting to understand how such a narrow view comes about. He and I are both human beings. Therefore, my mind must be capable of that level of self-righteousness. I am beginning to see that his self-righteousness is not a sign of strong faith, but of weak faith. Any doubts that arise must be silenced rather than contemplated. The faith is so weak that a blind adherence to the dogma of his particular faith is all he has got. There is no room for anything else. That is why a thorough knowledge of the scriptures is commonplace in faith of this sort. Weakness of understanding is veiled in fervor and intellectual knowledge. I may be very wrong in my assessment of this man. There is a chance that he is right. I don't know, but I do know that living as the Buddha taught allows a sustained sense of peace to arise in the mind. I hope that he may find peace within his faith.

The last time that we were preached to with such fervor was in Louisiana. We lost our appetite and felt ill the rest of the day. This time we left with smiles on our faces and peace in our hearts. I think that is a sign that the practice is working. We did hold on to our conversation with him all day, a sure sign of work left undone. Here is the Buddha's advice on how to evaluate self-righteous teachings.

As they sat there, the Kalamas of Kesaputta said to the Blessed One, "Lord, there are some priests & contemplatives who come to Kesaputta. They expound & glorify their own doctrines, but as for the doctrines of others, they deprecate them, revile them, show

contempt for them, & disparage them. And then other priests & contemplatives come to Kesaputta. They expound & glorify their own doctrines, but as for the doctrines of others, they deprecate them, revile them, show contempt for them, & disparage them. They leave us absolutely uncertain & in doubt: Which of these venerable priests & contemplatives are speaking the truth, and which ones are lying?"

"Of course you are uncertain, Kalamas. Of course you are in doubt. When there are reasons for doubt, uncertainty is born. So in this case, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are unskillful; these qualities are blameworthy; these qualities are criticized by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to harm & to suffering' -- then you should abandon them. . .

"Now, Kalamas, don't go by reports, by legends, by traditions, by scripture, by logical conjecture, by inference, by analogies, by agreement through pondering views, by probability, or by the thought, 'This contemplative is our teacher.' When you know for yourselves that, 'These qualities are skillful; these qualities are blameless; these qualities are praised by the wise; these qualities, when adopted & carried out, lead to welfare & to happiness' -- then you should enter & remain in them."

AN III.65
Kalama Sutta

This quote is from <http://www.accesstoinsight.org/>
It was translated to English by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.

"Wilma—I just saw your monks on the Trace"

Day 21: St. Therese's Catholic Church, Kosciusko, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 21, 2005

This marks three weeks on the road—two weeks longer than Austin and I would have predicted if you'd asked us during that first week!

I woke at 4 a.m., sat, and packed. We were on the road by 5:45. It had rained from 4 a.m. to 5 a.m. We walked five miles to Hollyhill Picnic Area. It was raining again. We took a sponge bath at the picnic area and called Wilma in Kosciusko.

Earlier in the morning, a friend of hers had been driving on the Trace and she saw us as she passed by. We found out later that she had called Wilma and said, “Get your butt out of bed—I just saw your monks on the Trace.”

“Are you sure it was them?” Wilma asked.

“If I’m sure of one thing,” her friend said, “I’m sure of this: It was them.”

“Were they wearing their Buddhist things,” Wilma asked.

“Oh, yeah,” she replied.

So Wilma got up and was driving to get us when we reached her on her cell phone. At the time she was slowing to admire some deer beside the road.

Wilma made us feel welcome the moment we met her. She offered any assistance we needed. She offered to drive us to the St. Therese’s Catholic Church Center where we’d be staying, or to get some food, or to take us out for a bite to eat. She grabbed our backpacks and helped us with them—she was wonderfully welcoming.

We hadn’t eaten, so we opted for the meal. But Kosciusko has only fast food restaurants, so we had a Big Deluxe breakfast at McDonald’s. The first McDonalds food I’ve eaten in over 10 years! Like Bob Barker and the “Price Is Right” show we saw at the laundromat a few weeks ago, I don’t think McDonald’s has aged or changed in all those years.

Is McDonald’s Bob Barker’s anti-aging secret? (See journal entry “A blessing for Eddie J.” for additional background.

The center is lovely. We were given a large, comfortable room that looks like it could have been any family’s living room from the 1960s. We have bright green carpet, a gas log in the fireplace, oak veneer wall paneling, a couch and several golden easy chairs.

One night we’re sleeping in a pine forest with spiders and slugs next to you, the next night we’re sleeping in what could be the living room from a 1960s TV show. And the heart is serene and grateful through it all.

The center has a laundry, a huge kitchen, and nice huge dining room an office with a computer. The church is connected to it by a covered walkway.

There’s not a priest here anymore—not even a nun. A sad trend we’ve noticed among Catholic churches. We met Barbara Stureaum, and she’s the assistant pastor—she does

all the office work and counseling, a layperson doing the pastoral day-to-day things. The priest visits on Sunday to say Mass for this and two other churches. The priest we met in Vidalia, Mississippi and who kindly gave us a ride had come all the way from India to serve as a priest in the U.S.

The people we've met thus far in the Catholic Church are just the sort of people we'd hoped to meet. Not just because they're being generous to us, but they're fun people. Open-minded, intelligent, good-natured.

We've met five people from this particular parish who say they're amazed that we are walking through the South. They'll say, "We have difficulties down here just being Catholic—I can't imagine what it's like dressed like you guys." They can have a difficult time here being Catholic—this amazes me.

Bonnie, who had just moved here from Chicago, also came to welcome us. She had some wonderful questions. She was intrigued about what we were doing, and what Buddhism was about. She was going through the process of joining the church, and she was telling us about her own spiritual search.

Barbara and Wilma were concerned about our being on the road the next day, as severe thunderstorms were predicted, with a potential for tornadoes. They asked us to consider staying for two nights. We decided that the Lord was providing for us, and we stayed.

Barbara allowed us to use her office. I spent about five hours reading emails sent to us and answering them. I was grateful, both for the correspondence and Barbara's allowing us to use her computer.

In the meantime, Wilma and her friend, Lou (the woman who had seen us on the road earlier), took Austin to Wal-Mart for much need supplies. He enjoyed his time shopping with them and commented: "They sure are wild women!"

Wilma invited Austin and I for a meal. She takes care of her elderly mother and she wanted us to meet her. Wilma's mother, Louise, is from Peru, Indiana. And one of her sons is a Catholic priest outside of Indianapolis.

I'm looking forward to meeting Louise. Any woman who brought a son up to become a priest is okay in my book.

St. Christopher

Day 22: Kosciusko, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 22, 2005

We are starting our fourth week of "Tudong." When we started I never thought that we would make it this far, but here we are, in Kosciusko, Mississippi. Today we were given images of St. Christopher, the patron saint of travel. They were a gift of Wilma's mother, Louise. I feel very blessed to have been given this for the walk. I would like to find out more about St. Christopher's life. We ate a great meal of sausage, homemade biscuits and gravy, eggs, juice and coffee today with Wilma and her mother. It is still sitting with me right now.

We had "company" over this afternoon. Wilma, Lu, Lu's brother Tom, and Bonnie came over to the center we are staying at to visit. It was a great afternoon. I feel that our contact with the Catholic Church is crucial to this walk. We have had the great fortune of meeting many wonderful folks. The predicted thunderstorms would have opened up on us right as we started walking this morning, if we were out on the Trace. It rained hard with high winds. I am glad that the whole crew here offered to house us another evening.

I am getting curious as to what challenges await us after we leave the Trace. We have become comfortable with the challenges of this portion. It is like meditation, at first there are obstacles that get in the way. Eventually, if you are persistent and resourceful, you gain understanding of those obstacles. With understanding they fall away and you achieve a level of peace and tranquility in the mind. At first peace and tranquility are shaky, but the more you become acquainted with those mental states the firmer they become: you become at home in those conditions. As these conditions develop you see that there are other obstacles that at first you could not see or didn't have the inner strength to face. Our walk is the same way. Obstacles that at first either depressed us, or stirred us up are now not affecting us. We have moved past them. All of those obstacles were hollow. We can look back and see that now. They were like a movie set. From one perspective it seems real, but once you go behind the scenes the realness falls away.

Hardship and burdens lifted by others—I can learn from joy

Day 22: Kosciusko, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 22, 2005

We are amazed at our good fortune.

Today as the bad weather came in, Austin and I were talking about this: We've been on

the road for three weeks, we've lived through three thunderstorms in the forest that have practically skipped over us; we've been in several rainstorms but without getting our feet wet; then the one storm that hits with conditions ripe for tennis-ball-sized hail and tornadoes, and we already had this place given to us where we could stay. Who's looking after us?

The one really violent storm that hits happens to do so the morning we're safe inside of a Catholic church. Some would call that luck—I'm not so sure.

And Barbara and Wilma's concern for us was so touching and generous.

I wasn't expecting my faith to be strengthened by good things happening to us.

I guess I expected faith to come from having to endure hardships and suffering. I thought the test would show me strong enough to overcome the difficulties. I figured it would be like my high school football coach said—"pain is gain."

I've carried this belief that you only learn through suffering. No pain, no gain. But this last week I'm finding that I can also learn from joy and happiness.

I never imagined that the hardship and burdens would just be lifted from my back. Just contemplating this, I'm on the verge of tears.

I thought the faith would come because I would be the one strong enough to overcome. But I'm discovering faith because others are looking after me! And I'm open to receiving that generosity and providing the opportunity for people to do that.

Wilma came by at 9 a.m. and drove us to the house where she and her mother Louise live. Wilma made us a good old Southern/Indiana-fusion biscuits and gravy breakfast, complete with fried eggs and sausages and orange juice and coffee.

While Wilma was cooking, we had a wonderful conversation in the living room with Louise. She mentioned that she had just finished her prayers when we walked in. She was interested in our journey and seemed to see little difference between what she believed and our journey. She was so accepting. A wonderful conversation, in which she asked us about our walk, and we asked her about her faith.

At mealtime, she asked us to do a Buddhist blessing. I explained to her what it was, and we spoke it in Pali. Then I asked her to do a blessing, and she did.

She told us stories about her own travels, how when she had problems, she had said a prayer to St. Christopher, and how miraculous things had happened to her. Things similar to what we've experienced during our walk.

I was thinking in silence how wonderful it would be to carry a St. Christopher medal with us on our walk. Just then Wilma pulled out her prayer chain, with images of St. Christopher, St. Francis, Jesus, and Mary, and she gave it to me! I'm wearing it now.

Then Louise went to her room and got a St. Christopher medal for Austin. It had this prayer on the back:

"O Saint Christopher, hear our prayer keep me in your loving care whatever the perils of the way let me not add to them this day. So to our caution and attention, we add a prayer for your protection, and beg God's blessing on this journey that we may travel safely near and far."

While watching the Weather Channel this morning at the Church center, we found out that the storms that passed through had indeed been very strong, some producing golf-ball sized hail. The type across the bottom of the screen noted that the Catholic Church had released a national poll showing the majority of Catholics now oppose the death penalty. I was encouraged, and amazed to be reading such news on the Weather Channel, and inside a Catholic church!

I thought about Ajahn Pasanno's work with Jay Siriporn at San Quentin Prison [read "The Last Breath" by Ajahn Passano at

<http://www.abhayagiri.org/index.php/main/book/159/>

The execution was actually against international law, as Jay wasn't a U.S. citizen. I thought about Jay and the people who have come to our monastery and supported us as a result of that tragedy.

To hear that the Catholic church was coming out stronger against the death penalty was encouraging. As was hearing Jerry's stand against the death penalty last week. It's a subject that has come up in discussion several times during our journey.

So Austin's hand, cut by a knife a few days ago, is healing really well.

But this morning, I was shaving my head and I set my razor in the sink. I was shaking some shaving cream off my hand and my little finger struck the blade and I nearly cut my fingernail in half!

So we're learning all about faith, patience, and endurance, and starting to have real joy, and our meditation is going quite well; still, we haven't developed mindfulness of sharp objects or discernment around knives!

But at least I haven't been preaching peace to anyone with a gun lately.

God's offering

Day 23: French Camp, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 23, 2005

Today we started walking on the Trace again at French Camp. We ate at a cafe that I have to say it had the most Firebrand feel of any place I have been on this walk. For those reading this who have never experienced the Firebrand it is the deli/breakfast restaurant that I work at in Gunnison. I think that the very young, but perceptive Ever Peacock described the Firebrand best when he said, "The Firebrand isn't a restaurant mom, it's just a place." It really is much more than a restaurant. It is a meeting place for the community. Sure people eat there, but the atmosphere allows people to stay long after they finish their food. Kate and Heidi work some magic that makes people want to stay for hours. I know that I have sat down to eat at 8:30 am and left at 11:00 am. Everyone in town is likely to come in if you sit there long enough. It is a center for news and rumor, philosophical discussions and ski stories. The town is blessed to have it; it keeps our blood flowing. If you are ever in Gunnison allow yourself the pleasure of spending several hours there. I must say that if you are ever in French Camp go to that Cafe! It is part of a Christian school that from what we heard seems to be doing really good works. The atmosphere was one of peace. They had us sign our names on the kitchen wall. I felt very honored to be asked to sign my name.

We picked up some homemade fudge and we were off! At three mph. Slow and steady win the tudong. That seems to be a steady pace for us now. I have to admit that we were a little chatty while we were walking. Our minds were both really active. I think that we are still trying to process everything that is happening. What happened this evening didn't help any. We are staying at Jeff Busby Campground at the base of little mountain. It's the second highest peak in Mississippi (elevation 603 ft.). I think that all those who like to "bag" peaks should put this one on their list. Actually the view is spectacular. The forested hills of Mississippi roll out in all directions. There is a sign saying that before white settlers came in and fouled it up, a squirrel could have traveled from Maine to Texas without touching the ground. After ascending this mighty peak we returned to camp and our neighbor approached. If his hair had stayed on his head it would be akin to Einstein's, but all of it had migrated to his jaw and flowed regally down his chest. We had spoken with him earlier and told him about the walk we were doing. He had been very supportive and we discussed the power of prayer and generating goodwill. He told stories of his experience with prayer. His wife was really ill with cancer and had people all around the world praying for her. She was supposed to go in for surgery and then the doctor checked her out again and things were back to a more normal level. The doctor was shocked. She still needed chemo but things were better. When he walked into our camp after our ascent of the "mountain" he said that all we could say was, "yes sir," and, "You can't say thank you because this is not from me." He said after we left God told him to offer us a coat. He then gave us a very heavy coat. He spoke of a friend who had fallen into a church that believed that their faith was the only true faith. He told his friend not to

be surprised when he got to heaven to find good people of all faiths surrounded him. We spoke some more and then he said the most beautiful blessing. It was a perfect prayer. I wish I could remember his phrasing. He left telling us that if we needed anything to knock on his trailer. We inspected the heavy jacket to find fresh fruit and cash stuffed into the pockets. Suddenly Jotipalo's load was lighter and mine was looking heavier. We had told him that we were doing this walk as a spiritual practice, but we said nothing about living on the generosity of others. His gift, like so many we have received, was spontaneous. We suspect that he is a Bodhisattva.

One more gift to us

Day 23, Part One: French Camp, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 23, 2005

It's been another day of blessings. Got up a bit later than our "normal" in the woods schedule, but still early by my standards. We packed our packs after spending another night in the safety of the St. Therese Catholic Church. Miraculously I found a few items I could part with and sent them off to Austin's brother in Gunnison, CO.

Wilma and Lou arrived at 8:30 to take us back to the Trace. First we stopped at the post office, Austin mailed a hawk feather, which we found on the side of the parkway, to a friend. Lou treated us to refreshments and I got a strawberry freeze. I couldn't get warmed up again until we started walking.

They drove us 10 miles up the Trace to a village called French Camp. It is a beautiful reconstructed historical site where they run a Christian Academy. The student population can be as many as 200, and they have about 180 right now.

We ate our meal at the French Camp Cafe with Wilma and Lou. Mary Brewer was our hostess. She warned Austin and I about the size of their sandwiches, especially because we ordered potato soup and brocolli salad (which were both excellent). Mary said, "You need to ask about the size of sandwiches when they sell whole and half sizes!"

I accused her of putting more roast beef on my sandwich than she does other customers. She joked, "No I didn't, you are not special. You are in the South now. We treat everybody special."

At the end of the meal, Mary said she didn't want to be rude, but she just had to know where we were from. That led to her asking what we were doing. She was amazed at our story. I asked if I could write about her in my journal and Mary introduced us to her co-

worker Melody Boatman.

Then they invited us back into the kitchen and asked us to sign our name on the walls, which many people, mostly students, had done.

So Mary—I guess I was special after all!

We really enjoyed the food and camaraderie at the cafe. Since we wouldn't order the Mississippi Mud desert, Mary told us she had just put some fresh peanut butter fudge in the gift shop. So we went to investigate.

The cashier at the store warmed up to us when I mentioned Mary Brewer's name, and she told us a bit about French Camp and the Academy. The school seems to do good work and the entire place gave off a sense of peace.

Then we said our farewells to Wilma and Lou. They kept thanking us for coming into their lives. Austin and I had received so much warmth, hospitality, and generosity from these women—we were the ones to be thanking them. Their gratitude was one more gift to us. I will always remember Kosciusko with a warm spot in my heart.

Before leaving French Camp though we saw a school bus full of kindergarteners arrive for a sack lunch and an Easter Egg Hunt. One of the volunteers told us they had just hidden (semi-hidden) 800 eggs. The kids were all so excited! Ah, the joys of finding the unexpected!

Little Mountain with a Bodhisattva

Day 23, Part 2: French Camp, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 23, 2005

We didn't start walking until 11:15 am, but fortunately it was a cold and overcast day. The clouds looked like they could let loose at any moment, but never did.

It turned out to be perfect walking conditions, except we were walking in the afternoon. What we do in the morning, is walk 5 miles then stop for a light snack and maybe take another at 8 or 9 miles, usually dried fruit and bread. The energy from this helps to give us the strength to walk for 10 or 12 miles.

On today's walk, though, we couldn't eat anything all afternoon (by rule) and we were pretty tired after walking 12 miles.

Earlier along the Trace we had been walking along the southern edge of the Mississippi Delta. Not anymore. We were into hillcountry now. Very beautiful, and it reminded Austin and I of our childhoods.

Tonight we are staying at the Jeff Busby campground. Many Canadian Snowbirds are staying here. These campgrounds have been a fun place for us to stay, as we meet many people here. The sites are not as quiet, but they are nice for a change of pace, plus campgrounds have bathrooms and water.

After settling into our site we went for a walk to the summit of Little Mountain, the second highest peak in Mississippi at 603 feet! Before walking up we met a man who was traveling with his wife from Georgia back to Texas. He was incredibly kind and he talked to us for a long time, and we shared stories about prayer and faith.

The man told us some amazing stories about his wife's fight with cancer. Right before her surgery the doctor came to tell him, "I've never seen anything like this before—your wife's numbers are all normal. I can't explain it."

The man told the doctor, "I can explain that."

"Oh?" the doctor said.

"Yes. It was prayer."

Then the Doctor said that the man's wife still needed chemotherapy, and he gave him a recommendation of several doctors.

"Why not Dr. Jones in Beaumont?" the man asked.

"Oh, he is one of the best in the country, and it would take four months to get an appointment with him. Your wife can't wait that long."

"Well, one of my relations is his secretary and she took the liberty of asking the good doctor if he would take my wife as his patient. The doctor said if I had her papers to him by Friday, he could see her on Monday."

The doctor smiled, shook his head, and said, "I'll have her papers ready by Friday. And keep up those prayers!"

After we returned from our mountain climbing (beautiful views from the summit, I must admit), the man came to our campsite.

"You can only say, 'Yes Sir', as this isn't coming from me," he said. "Right after you left, God told me, 'That young man doesn't have a coat, give him one of yours.'"

So he gave me what felt like a four pound coat! We talked some more and he said, "My wife asked if you guys were Christians, I told her I knew you were by the way you talked."

He told us of a friend who, as he explained it, "fell into a church that believes that their faith is the only faith that will lead you to heaven."

The man had told his friend, "Don't be surprised if when you reach heaven, we (Christians, Jews, Hindus, Muslims...) are all there to lovingly welcome you."

Before leaving, he joined hands with us and said the most beautiful prayer of thanksgiving (for meeting us), wishing us safety on our journey.

Austin and I saw this man as a Bodhisattva.

Investigating the four-pound coat, I found that the pockets were filled with fresh fruit and dollar bills. So, the coat is now nice and light, but Austin's food cache, being over stuffed already from Wilma and Lou, might cause Austin nightmares!

Austin and I have noticed that the goodwill coming our way, even just smiles and waves, seem to be coming more frequently and at closer time intervals. I don't think I will ever cease to be humbled by people's generosity. It makes us feel so good, and those that give tell us they feel such joy in making the offerings.

What will tomorrow bring?

Alice's Wonderland

Day 24: Jeff Busby Campground, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 24, 2005

Last night before falling asleep, I realized that it has been about two weeks since I've felt negative. I wondered how much longer that would last.

About ten hours.

We got up at 4 am and did our walking routine. It was 40 degrees at 4 am, and I think it might have dropped to closer to 35 degrees by dawn. Good thing I had a nice warm coat! My feet were really sore from a few "hot spots" and I have one blister on the inside of my right heel. That blister really threw off my normal walking gait, plus I was tired and my

body felt very heavy. For some reason my backpack feels like it weights 50 lbs. Maybe it does.

Amazingly I have thought of few more things that I will send ahead of me. I designed this robe that I am required to carry as part of my vows to be more functional for this walk than the robe normally would have been. But with all the modern polyester and fleece clothing I am using, I have yet to wear that robe. So, though I love dearly the polyester, I think it will finish the journey via the United States Postal Service.

I talked Austin into sending the stove, the new cook shield, the fuel bottle and the cooking pots to his brother. Austin said his brother hiked most of the Pacific Crest Trail last year and he mailed back eight packages of gear. So, we are following a noble lineage of modern walkers, casting off gear via the post office. Also we couldn't get the water filter to work today, so, unfortunately, we will send it back to Abhayagiri.

I was moving so slowly today that we only made 8 1/2 miles in 4 1/2 hours. We stopped for our meal at this point and I slept for a half hour. Austin meditated. Then he fixed a hot meal using the soup that Dave and Michele offered to us one week ago in Rocky Springs. After lunch my energy picked up some, but it was difficult walking with the blister. My legs felt like lead. My mind was tired too and I found myself talking to Austin about all kinds of trivial things. I wanted to be more composed and level headed with my thinking, but it just wasn't to be. Austin was kind and didn't tell me to stop talking. He is great.

We walked 12 miles by 2 p.m., found a thick grove of old pines, and called it a day. I was exhausted and it appears Austin is coming down with a cold. I'm glad he didn't try to walk any further.

We are close to U.S. Highway 82 and we hear the trucks off in the distance as a constant hum. Nothing like the industry on the levy in Louisiana though.

Here in camp I notice the beauty of the unpolluted forest floor and the health of the trees. The pine needles that drop from the older trees have created a cone around the base of the trunk that are sometimes 24 to 30 inches tall. The tiny pine cones are beautiful, too, and I'm admiring the spirals that emerge from the base of the cones. There are many tiny puff ball mushrooms on this forest floor. At lunch we noticed a pinkish-red mushroom that would have looked right at home in Alice's Wonderland.

Austin and I discovered today that it takes 24 days before you start telling your hiking partner stories that you have already told.

Enlightened conversations with the sisters

Day 25: Houston, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 25, 2005

I was tempted to just sleep under the stars last night. Good thing I didn't. We got a light rain that started around mid-night. But by the time I awoke at 4 am, besides a little water on my tarp, you could hardly tell it had rained.

I was worried we might have to walk in a thunderstorm all day, as one was predicted for tonight and Saturday. But when I got up, the stars were out again. Austin was still feeling the effects of his cold, and the cold medication he took made his mind kind of warped. He wanted to walk, though, so we headed off at 5:45 am.

We noticed that we might be able to start walking about a 1/2 hour earlier now, so might start getting up at 3:30. That isn't so bad when you go to sleep at 8 pm!

The sun came up like a red-hot iron ball and it was a warm day. Luckily we were walking only slightly slower than our normal pace and made 8 1/2 miles before 9 a.m. We walked another hour and stopped for our meal after walking 11 miles.

Yesterday evening we had called the sisters at the Immaculate Heart Catholic Church in Houston, Mississippi. They said they were glad to come pick us up on the Trace as long as we didn't call too close to their 5 p.m. mass. I had hoped we would get closer to Houston before calling, but with Austin not feeling well and looking very tired, I called Sister Rosemary. We struggled with a weak cell phone connection, but we finally got enough info passed between the phones breaking up so that she knew where we were, and she set off to pick us up.

Both Sister Rosemary and Sister Pat are wonderful. I've been sitting at their computer typing the past three days journal entries and checking emails between enlightened conversations with the sisters.

I feel very welcomed here, and my experiences and beliefs are so similar to the sisters that you would think I was Catholic!

We have been discussing the war in Iraq, race issues in the south, prayer. Sister Pat asked where I was from and upon hearing I was from Crawfordsville, IN, she told me that staying at the Crawfordsville Holiday Inn was part of their family tradition. Her family used to travel from Dayton, OH to Dubuque, IA all the time, and they always stopped in Crawfordsville for the night to break up the journey!

Both the sisters have roots in Iowa, so I hope Austin gets to feeling better. I'm sure they will have a fun time talking to each other.

This morning early on the walk a man pulled up in a pick-up truck very slowly and came

to a stop 20 feet behind us. I heard his truck door open and I thought, oh no—prepare yourself."

But we heard a shout of, "Hello."

As I turned around I heard him say, "Are you a Theravadan monk? I'm a Zen monk and have been trying to reach you on your cell phone. I live just a few miles from here and wanted to put you up for a night. I'm off to Jackson though and won't be back until Sunday."

His name is Tony Bland and he is the teacher of Bebe Wolfe—the woman who hosted Austin and I at her Zendo in Jackson. We will try to connect with him Sunday evening, as he knows where we hope to be camping that evening.

Well, I'm tired and need to go check on Austin. The sister's just brought me some orange juice for Austin, and I've yet to shower myself. We are planning to attend the 7:30 pm services and I need to get clean.

Happy Good Friday!

Good Friday—a beauty in joining hands

Day 25, Part 2: Houston, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 25, 2005

Austin has a fever and is very tired. He slept all afternoon while I was visiting with the sisters and doing some computer work.

We both took long showers in the newly remodeled bathroom (I must believe that if I shower only once every three days, longer time under the shower will make me cleaner).

This new bathroom was created by a Catholic mission from Minnesota. The church in Minnesota comes down to Houston several times a year and does mission work here, building and helping the community with Bible study (bringing all the materialst hey need at no cost tothe community here). A friend was telling me that the Catholic Church now sees the United States as a target mission country. It is good to see this church receiving that support.

Sister Rosemary asked how long I have been in robes. Usually, when I say five years, people are surprised and impressed. Sister Rosemary just nodded. I asked how long she

has been ordained.

"Well, we don't count the first two years," she explained. "But I entered the order in 1955."

" So, I guess I'm just a beginner," I said.

She grinned in her beautiful way.

"May your next 45 years bring you as much joy as mine have brought me," she said. That joy is visible.

Later I was telling Sister Pat what I had written earlier in my journal—that listening to our conversation, some might think I was Catholic. She jumped in immediately and said, "Or we are Buddhist!"

I really like these sisters. They live very simply and humbly, too. When they were showing us the Parish house and opening up the cupboard and offering us everything that was there, one noticed reassured us:

"Oh, the expiration date shows this expired 4 March 04, but I've eaten one of these bars every morning and I'm fine."

They invited us over to their house for breakfast tomorrow. They thoughtfully asked, "What would a meal for a Buddhist monk look like?"

"What would you normally eat?" I asked.

"Oh, just a bowl of oatmeal."

I suggested vegetarian, which was not a problem, and rice.

I just returned from the Good Friday church service. Everybody welcomed me warmly, and several people came up to me after the service to hear about the walk. The service was simple, and I appreciated several things about it.

Listening to the readings I had the insight that Jesus's death on the cross doesn't free us from our sins in a one shot deal, but that the death on the cross is significant because of the way Jesus did it. He was terribly misunderstood and he didn't fight that. He was mistreated, but he was humble.

Jesus's death was a beautiful example for humankind as to how to face the suffering that we all must face. And if we can face that suffering with the same courage and compassion that Jesus did, we will be saved. I told this to Sister Kris, after the service and she said, "Amen!"

I was also touched by the saying of the Lord's Prayer. It was the second time in three days I've joined hands with others to pray. I felt a power and a beauty in joining hands—we don't do anything like this in Buddhist devotional practices, and I think the lack of touch in the last eight years for me, heightened this sense of touch.

I was also amazed that I remembered all the words of the Lord's Prayer. I had been watching several little girls who, during the service, were more interested in sneaking peaks at me and playing under the pew than to listening to the service. Yet I imagine they are benefiting from being here, as even I remembered the Lord's Prayer from my own days as a kid in church:

"Forgive me my sins as I forgive the sins of those who have trespassed against me....
Lead me not to temptation..."

What a beautiful prayer.

Sister Kris also raised the question, "Why do we suffer."

Reflecting on this I saw our walk in a new light. The suffering and difficulties that Austin and I are willingly putting ourselves through are helping us to see the pain that all beings can suffer.

I mentioned this before, but I really do see that I am much more in tune with others who are in need, and I hope that I will be more kind and willing to offer support when I see somebody in need.

Lifting the body of Jesus from the cross

Day 26: Immaculate Heart Catholic Church, Houston, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 26, 2005

Austin was feeling better this morning, but his fever seems to come and go, so he is hoping to take it easy again today. We did go over and had a wonderful meal with the sisters. We discussed the service and the insights I had, plus several other relevant topics. It amazes me how similar our views are. Of course, the sisters didn't see eye too eye on all subjects, but neither do we Buddhist monks.

After the meal, the sisters needed to set up the church for tonight's services. An extension ladder miraculously appeared, and they asked if I could assist by doing some of the harder physical work. I was asked to help lift the body of Jesus from the cross!

We all think there was some significance to the fact I was here and able to do this task. Don't you?

Unfortunately, or maybe fortunately, no camera was easily available. I might have gotten run out of Houston if the photo got into the wrong hands.

Tomorrow we are expecting to get picked up around 9:30 am and be taken into Tupelo to attend the service at the Unitarian Church. The Unitarian Church in Thunder Bay, ON was very supportive of the walk and offered any assistance we needed. We have only been in a few cities that have a Unitarian Church and we had other contacts in those cities, so this will be our first contact.

After those services we are planning to be dropped off at a camp site just outside of Houston. The Zen monk we met yesterday, Tony Bland, will try to connect with us that evening too.

I have been enjoying the e-mails I've gotten while on the walk. If more people start writing, we may need to third person just to read our mail for us! Below are parts of a few letters we got (re-printed with permission), most of them were in reference to the Southern Baptist encounters. I hope you enjoy them as much as I did.

From: Ajahn Pasanno (co-abbot of Abhayagiri)

It is always good to have the unwanted side of existence somewhere on the radar. Just in terms of keeping you on your toes so that you aren't shaken by it is a good thing.

As well, it helps to have the reminders of disenchantment close to hand. As monastics, we have the opportunity to relate to the world with compassion, kindness and a certain lightness, but the reflections on the limitations of samsara are crucial for raising the heart to a place of real stability.

I remember Ajahn Liam's reaction when I asked permission from him to go on tudong to India—"Great, now you can go somewhere where people will curse and revile you!" He immediately pointed to the things that would aid the internal faculties of discernment and equanimity, rather than the opportunities of boosting faith by being in the Land of the Buddha.

You are definitely not in the Middle Country, so there is lots to work with to keep the sights on disenchantment and dispassion.

From: Jude

I have had many encounters with the so-called "self-righteous" Bible beater. I have

learned that my contempt for them arose from a lack of certainty in my own practice. The more I practiced, the more I found the things these folks expound arose from fear and lack of understanding. The more I understood where they were coming from, the more I could let go of their criticisms and sometimes insults.

[I would wonder] "Well that is really not true, so why is it bothering me so much?"

I realized that it was only because I was putting my "views" in opposition to theirs and holding that my beliefs were right and theirs were wrong.

"How could they be so stupid" was a common thought. It was not until my practice produced results that I lost my doubt and gained a certainty based on experience, rather than dogma.

I have found that people don't really remember the way you looked or what was said, but rather the way you made them feel. Since all wish for some type of comfort and happiness, making others feel at peace, nomatter what their background or belief, is key. If others see one as peaceful and content, they may become interested and want to know more. I found this is the best way...

From: Tamara

Be safe and don't let the Baptists bother you. You may be going to hell in a hand basket but they are living there. We manifest our own realities remember. They focus a lot on that hell stuff, it can't be good karma.

I got these guys, you just enjoy the trip. They are just around for a little bit of contrast. They are just window dressing to make folks like me shine a little brighter.

A day of rest

Day 26, Part 2: Immaculate Heart Catholic Church, Houston, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 26, 2005

Austin's fever was lower this morning, but returned in the afternoon. We had planned to attend the Saturday evening church services, but when we got there, Austin's fever was

burning, and I was feeling under the weather. So, we went to the beginning of the service to say “ Hello” to Father Pete.

After a ceremony outside of lighting a fire and ceremonially lighting a large candle, Father Pete led the congregation back into the church; Austin and I returned to the Parish House. We apologized to the Sisters before doing this, but they knew Austin was not well and gave us their blessings. Austin and I went back and meditated for an hour and chanted the Buddha’s words on loving-kindness before calling it a night.

Earlier in the day, I spent a few hours on the computer, sending e-mails and writing journal entries, while doing a load of laundry. I, too, was slightly feverish and took a long nap. My Dad, over the phone, told me that the state of Mississippi was experiencing a fever outbreak.

Sister Pat gave me some reflections on Holy Week that look very interesting. I took the printout with me and hope to read it while on the road. We called it an early night, but I took inventory of my gear before going to sleep.

Itemized list of Jotipalo’s belongings:

| | |
|--|--|
| backpack | ditty bag #2 (straight razor and blade, Sensor razor and blade, dental floss) |
| quilt/sleeping bag | ditty bag #3 (long sleeve shirt, long underwear, two polyester t-shirts, a fleece-hooded pullover, three pair of socks, and a windbreaker) |
| pack raincover | ditty bag #4 (9x9 tarp, 8 tent stakes and rope) |
| poncho | ditty bag #5 (water filter) |
| tin coffee mug | Zip-loc bag #1 (zinc oxide spf 45 sun protection, Bic lighter, lip balm) |
| mosquito netting | Zip-loc bag #2 (towelettes, hand sanitizer) |
| umbrella | Zip-loc bag #3 (disposable camera, carrying temporarily) |
| sleeping pad | Zip-loc bag #4 (first-aid kit) |
| ground sheet | large Zip-loc bag #5 (maps and journal) |
| sun hat | Zip-loc bag #6 (chanting book) |
| wool cap | Zip-loc bag #7 (Buddha amulets) |
| small towel | Zip-loc bag #8 (cough drops and Rescue Remedy) |
| (2) hand washclothes | loose in pack lid is toothbrush and toothpaste, headlamp, and elastic ankle support. |
| one pair of running shoes | |
| spoon and small pocket knife | |
| small address book | |
| journal and pen | |
| ID and phone card | |
| watch | |
| (2) quart water bottles | |
| (1) gallon water jug | |
| three robes | |
| almsbowl and stand | |
| ditty bag #1 (bottle of soap, deodorant, hand lotion, needle and thread) | |

When I complain about my pack weighing 50 pounds, perhaps it actually does!

Actually, most of the items are quite small, and the total weight is probably only around 30 pounds. It is amazing to me that we use just about everything in this pack, everyday, or we have it because if we need it we will really need it (example: mosquito netting) The extra weight comes in when we have to carry lots of water (sometimes 20 pounds) and food.

Outlandish stories

Day 27: Unitarian Church, Tupelo, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 27, 2005

We bid farewell to Houston today, after spending two nights at the Immaculate Heart of Mary Catholic Church. I came down with a fever on the 24th that lasted until this morning. It really wiped me out. I would feel all right in the mornings, but the fever would come on stronger as the day went on and the energy would wash out of me. We were very fortunate to not be walking while I was sick. Now I am back to good health. I used the illness as a contemplation on impermanence, and on the body not conforming to the wishes of the mind. It is amazing how outlandish the stories that mind tells when overcome with fever. I would catch myself engulfed in a sci-fi thriller in my mind. I had a great deal of trouble sleeping both nights so I watched the breath. Being ill is a perfect opportunity to meditate. Most of us just take a good tranquilizer and escape from illness with sleep. I found that confronting illness was very fruitful.

I find it hard to describe the sisters other than to say that they are the embodiment of joy and peace. Sister Rosemary has been a nun for fifty years. Sister Pat and Sister Kris are junior to her, but their forty-five and thirty-five years are nothing to scoff at. As with many senior monks in our tradition, the outcome of living a spiritual life is apparent in every movement. They were all well-informed and willing to stand up for peace and justice. I am honored to have met them.

Unitarian Easter Sunday

Day 27: Unitarian Church, Tupelo, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 27, 2005

We got up at dawn and meditated. Austin made the last of the hot chocolate, as we were about to ship the stove to Minnesota. I called a friend from high school, named Bindi, who has repeatedly offered support for this walk. I'd never needed anything when she offered, though. So I called and asked if I could mail the stove and stove parts to her. This will be nice because we might need the stove again when we get to Minnesota.

Oops—the previous sentence should read, “...if we get to Minnesota.” Ajahn Chah said if a statement doesn't take into account impermanence, it isn't Dhamma.

My talking to Bindi was timely, as during our senior year in high school, we were in a classroom together when a fellow student walked in and started shooting another classmate. This was in 1983 when school shootings were very rare.

I had only briefly heard about the school shooting in Red Lake, Minnesota. Father William wrote and told me how that school had recently been a mission for St. John's, and some of the monks knew the students involved. Not being around the media and news makes me pretty unconnected to worldly events. This isn't bad, though, because we are seeing suffering every day.

Just today, when John Wages was driving us to Tupelo, we had pulled off the Trace at the Davis Lake exit. When we were about to get back onto the Trace, an elderly woman flagged us down. She was disoriented from the stress caused when her mother had a stroke and had just been rushed to the Tupelo hospital. She had driven past Tupelo a good 15 miles and didn't know what to do. John offered to lead her to the hospital, and we actually drove all the way to the emergency entrance. The woman yelled out, “Thanks. What do I owe you?” John said, “Nothing.” She yelled out, “Blessings to you.”

Before John and Gwen picked us up, we had another fabulous meal with the Sisters and a friend of theirs named Elaine. Sister Rosemary said that Elaine was one of the best cooks in Mississippi, and she meant it. Later, Sister Pat wanted to break Lent with a huge rhubarb pie. Sister Rosemary asked Elaine if she knew how to make rhubarb pie. Elaine responded, “I'm the queen.” And she meant it.

This reminded me of an elderly couple who used to live behind our house when I was very young. Occasionally, my friend Terry and I would go to their back porch door and ask our neighbor, whom we called Mr. Rhubarb, if we could have some rhubarb.

I remember him as being very old, but he would get up from the kitchen table, where it appeared he was always sitting drinking coffee with his wife. He would slowly walk out to his garden. He would look for just the right stalk, and cut it with his pocket knife, then, slowly walk back to the kitchen, where his wife would wash and cut it up for us. We would eat it raw. As I well telling this story to the Sisters, and just now as I was telling it to John as we are typing it in to the computer, they were all were surprised to hear you

could eat it raw. I was surprised nobody else ate it that way!

The Sisters fed us way too much food and we didn't have room for the rhubarb pie. So, they saved it for later in the day. The day before, I saw the friend of theirs who brought them this pie. I was facing the Sisters as they received this gift. Never in all of my life have I seen a more beautiful receiving of a gift. All three of the Sisters' faces lit up with joy and love as they accepted the gift. They really looked divine. If everybody could receive gifts like these Sisters, I think the world would be filled with everybody giving everything they own away.

John and Gwen arrived at 9:30 to take us to Tupelo. John is a fascinating person. Besides many other things, he organized a peace vigil in 2003 right before the current Gulf War, and last week he organized another vigil to end the war. Sister Pat attended that vigil, and told us a bit about John.

John was also the first Green Party member to win an election in this county—a seat on the Lee County Election Commission. It's surprising that he won, as we met three of the total of five official Green Party of Lee County members today. Austin sat in the back of the car with Gwen, so he will inform you about her. She sounded equally as interesting as John.

About 20 people gathered for the Unitarian meeting. Hank Jaeckel had been a delegate to the National Rehabilitation Association who visited China to give a series of presentations. He gave a very interesting and informative slide show about the visit. At the time of his visit to China, not much was known about acupuncture. Many of the slides focused on this aspect of Chinese rehabilitation efforts.

After Hank's talk, several of the members stayed and talked with Austin and myself. One young man had spent several years in Korea and was interested in Buddhist meditation. I had a long conversation with him about the difference between calming meditation and insight meditation. He seemed very appreciative. We gave this man Tony Bland's name, as he was looking for a teacher. That felt good.

After the meeting, a woman named Valerie Angeloro said she would open her health food store ("Years to Your Health") for Austin to purchase some groceries. Several people, including John, Gwen, and Margi from the church, made donations. Then they refused to let Austin pay for any of the groceries we got at Kroger or at Valerie's. And, Valerie didn't charge us for our goods either.

I am amazed at all the generosity, and I tried my hardest to look angelic with the offerings. I hope someday my face looks as angelic as the Sisters at receiving the simplest of gifts.

Outlandish stories

Day 27: Unitarian Church, Tupelo, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 27, 2005

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Vivid dreams and power spots—four weeks on the road

Day 28: Davis Lake Campground, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 28, 2005

Today may be our last day walking with backpacks for a while.

We camped last night at Davis Lake National Forest Campground. It is a beautiful site on a small lake, with a new bathroom-shower facility. The building is brand-new, but already falling apart. The men's bathroom door is falling from its hinges, toilets don't stop flushing, and no place to hang clothing while you shower.... Impermanence is always

at work.

It rained on and off all last night with some very strong winds, but we stayed dry. Neither of us slept very well—maybe too much rest in Houston?

Austin was feeling much better last night, and I was feeling okay too. This morning, Austin was very sore, I hope it's just because of the amount of time lying down and not a cold.

Last night, I remembered that Tony Bland, the Zen monk we met on the Trace Friday morning, had given me his phone number. We were in an area that got questionable cellphone service, but we connected just long enough to pass information between us and set up a meeting for this morning.

We plan to eat a late lunch and hopefully walk about 8 miles by 3 PM, setting up camp halfway to John and Gwen's. Tomorrow, John hopes to join us in the walk. Gwen will drive him to wherever we are on the Trace. She will then take our packs to their house, and the three of us will walk the rest of the way.

Tony arrived shortly after 8 a.m. in his hybrid Honda Insight, the same car Luke uses in Jackson—60 mpg. We had a nice meeting with Tony. His lineage is from the Soto Zen school of Japan, and his teachers are mainly from France. The two biggest centers he goes to for receiving teachings are in New Orleans and Bloomington, Indiana. Tony has students mainly in Starkville and Jackson, MS, and Tuscaloosa, AL. Tony is from the area, and I think very pleased we are doing what we are doing in Mississippi.

It was a short visit, but I'm grateful Tony made the effort to join us and drive to Davis Lake to meet us. He had offered us a place to stay, one day before reaching Houston, but the day we passed, he was in Jackson, MS. Austin took a photo of the two of us beside the lake. We met a REAL Mississippi monk!

It was cold all morning, and very windy. We ate a big meal and headed out on the road at 11:08 AM. About a mile down the road, we came across a cluster of Indian mounds. At the base of the largest mound, we chanted the Buddha's words on loving kindness and circumambulated the mound three times. From the signs around the mounds, it appears that archaeologists do not know what the sites were used for, but they expect that it was ceremonial. Few artifacts have ever been found during digs at these sites.

Tami told us that there are "power spots" along the Trace and I wonder if the Native People's prayers and rites created these spots. Just after leaving Jackson, and Ratliff Ferry campsite, that night I had a very vivid dream that Austin and I were chanting in that forest (where we were camped). During the dream I looked over my shoulder and saw the entire forest behind me was illuminated and hundreds of Devas (angels) were sitting and chanting with us.

The next morning I shined my flashlight to the area where the most light was coming

from and it hit the largest tree in that forest. I think that was one of the “spots.” We also feel the kindness we received at Mt. Locust, Rocky Springs and Jeff Busby may have been caused partly due to those being “power spots” as well. So I don’t take these sites lightly and treat them with respect.

We stopped at a trailer house right before getting onto the Trace, four miles from Davis Lake, to get water. It appeared a tax auditor was helping the residents fill out tax forms. Sister Pat told us the State of Mississippi provides free tax help for families who earn less than \$36,000 a year. They were intrigued by what we were doing, but Austin was afraid I was going to kick him in the butt, and he told them we were doing it just to test ourselves.

Later, I told Austin, “Hey, that guy wasn’t wearing camouflage, and I didn’t see the Last Supper hanging on their wall. Maybe we could have told them.” It’s tricky to know what to do. We decided that when people ask what we are doing, maybe we should mention it as a peace walk. And, if people further question, and they seem genuinely intrigued, maybe we’ll mention that we’re Buddhists.

We walked about 7 ½ miles, just to the edge of the National Forest. We walked a good 200 yards into the forest and found an absolutely lovely grove of pines. The pine needles formed a bed often 6 to 8 inches deep. We decided to sleep under the stars, only the second time this trip (the first time being the first night out, at Destrehan Plantation).

I called John, and he hopes to meet us at 6:30 AM. We may have a connection in Oxford now. John and Gwen knew someone from the Quaker Meeting named Nan, and she has offered us a place to stay. We’ll see what the Internet brings when we get to John’s, in terms of connections at Ole Miss.

John also informs us that the local newspaper wishes to do an interview on the 30th. They will send out a photographer tomorrow to photograph us walking on the Trace. I have turned down several interview requests, but decided to do this one as we are about to leave Mississippi.

Holding steady

Day 28: Davis Lake Campground, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 28, 2005

So I am not over the illness yet. It does not seem to be getting any worse, but it is holding steady. I have trouble sleeping at night, then the symptoms vanish in the morning and then in afternoon my face gets hot with fever and I get a dull headache. If anyone has any ideas what I might have I would love to know. I have been drinking a lot of water to keep

hydrated. I find it quite hard to write in this condition. Really it is hard to arouse effort to do much of anything in the afternoon. Fortunately, we will walk tomorrow without our packs and then we have several days off as we head to Oxford and then on to Memphis. Well it is hard to keep my eyes open so this is the end of the entry.

Why live like this?

Day 29: Tupelo, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 29, 2005

Gwen and John have been great hosts. They are funny, wonderful people. I am going to devote this entry to a question Gwen raised in the car the other day. What makes someone want to pursue a life like this? I have a feeling that this question is common in the minds of many people. I will attempt to answer it as best as I am able.

I can only answer for myself and even that is difficult. I think what drives someone to live a life like this are the very things that make others veer as far from this life as possible. We can see that facing our fears and dealing with hardship and discomfort can teach us how to break through and realize peace. The first week of this walk we wanted to quit; the mind began to think that this would be impossible to do. At that point I was full of fear. I was constantly afraid of everyone we met. So I asked myself, "What good is this fear doing you?" None. "Is being afraid going to help any even if your fears come true?" No. At that point the fear's power began to fade. It still creeps in a little here and there but it is more a gentle breeze than the howling tempest that followed me at the beginning of the walk.

There is a lack of satisfaction with worldly ways that also drives me. I watch the world around me. It spins on and on. I look at all the time we spend laboring for material comfort, an inherently selfish act. Does that bring any lasting happiness? Or does the quest for comfort in worldly ways only bring more stress?

My grandfather's death also affected me deeply. I loved and respected my grandfather, but I could see that at the end of his life he was no more wise to the cessation of suffering than I am. Seeing his life come to an end I contemplated the end of mine. None of us know what is going to happen at the breakup of the body. If we are reborn, where will we be reborn? It is quite a blessing to be born as a human. The Buddha said this is the best place to seek liberation. So a sense of urgency arose. Each breath we draw brings us one closer to death.

The uncertainty of the future coupled with the fruitlessness of selfish endeavors brought me to the realization that the most fruitful life would be a life free from harmful acts, full

of good acts and devoted to spiritual practice. The Buddha said he taught only three things, "Cease to do evil, learn to do good, and purify the mind." It sounds so simple, but it is very difficult. It is difficult because you cannot stick with what you know, you have to question everything. That is why I offered to accompany Jotipalo on this walk. I had to question the fears and confidences that arose when I contemplated doing the walk.

That is the best that I can answer. I hope that it proves fruitful for those who may not understand why a person would do this. I thank Gwen for posing such a great question.

Plagued by illness

Day 30: Tupelo, Mississippi

Austin Stewart

March 30, 2005

Tonight we are staying at the first hotel of the trip. The Catholic Church in Tupelo offered to put us up here. We graciously accepted. It is nice to have an evening of good bed rest as I am still being plagued by illness. Wait, nothing is plaguing ME, because there is no one to plague. The body has illness. It needs time to heal. Today was Jotipalo's birthday and a little bit of everyone's generosity took him out for pizza! We went to Pizza Hut because they have a salad bar and pizza buffet. John went with us and we had a great Dhamma discussion.

Now for you who have worked at Philmont Scout Ranch, if it had been my birthday this would have been the icing on the cake. Who should walk into Pizza Hut in Tupelo, but Nate Lay. We worked together at Black Mt. in '98 and then we both spent several years at other camps. I had a strong feeling that if Nate was in Tupelo, I would see him while I was here. Also, Nate's dad is John's boss. If the world is so small, why is it taking us so long to get to Canada?

For the record Nate is doing well and going to school. I now have his contact info so if anyone needs to get in touch with him, let me know.

Jerry Rice fan club

Day 31, Part Two: Oxford, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

March 31, 2005

Gwen told us another humorous story about Errol Castens, the religion editor of the Tupelo Daily Journal. Errol just did an interview with us, and it should be in the paper on April 2nd.

Gwen said Errol got his job at the Journal because of a short story he wrote titled: "Chivalry is not dead—and wear a belt."

The story goes that Errol pulled over to help a stranded motorist. Her tire was flat and she didn't have a spare. Errol removed the tire and while he was carrying it to his vehicle, the conditions became right for his pants to fall around his ankles. He ended up mooning a lot of traffic and caused a fair amount of people to laugh.

Gwen got us to Oxford without any flat tires. We found the international affairs offices and we met Sara, who was organizing a talk we would give that evening. I could tell immediately that the evening probably would go well. We were met by a Thai staff member, Gai, who offered us assistance if we needed any. Sara and the director of the department Michael were very warm and gracious hosts. A large room was reserved for 6 pm and an all-campus notice was sent out that morning. It was a surprise when 40 people attended!

We had no plan, but decided to discuss the walk for about 15 minutes, and then open the floor for questions and answers. We got some really great questions.

One freshman, Franko, asked a question about how "insight" meditation worked. I was explaining that when we start to explore the 3 characteristics (unpleasant nature of existence, how everything is changing, and how none of that is personal or self) when Franko asked, "But wouldn't that lead to dispassion?" That was an amazing response to my answer because it showed that Franko had not only understood my answer but he had internalized the logic and gone a little deeper in his questioning.

We talked to people for about an hour after the meeting. It felt like everybody appreciated the gathering and though we were very tired by 8 pm, we were glad we made this connection.

Gwen needed to drive us to Nan Johnson's house, and she had a long drive back to Tupelo, so we pried ourselves away. Gwen teased us and thanked us at the same time by saying, "You keep dropping these words of wisdom all around me, you are forcing me to be more honest with myself. Thank you for coming into my life."

The last story Gwen told me concerned Jerry Rice, the future Hall of fame football player, who had been in Gwen's high school class. Her dad never missed a high school game Jerry played in, even taking the family to one game played in a tremendous downpour. And I thought I was a big Jerry Rice fan!

Regrettably, Austin and I were very tired by the time we got to Nan's. We had some time

to talk, but not enough. We have been invited to stay longer, but Austin already has plans in motion to get to Memphis, TN.

Left-handed lunch

Day 32: Oxford, Mississippi

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 1, 2005

Awoke earlier than I expected, about 3:30 am. I took the time to meditate and catch up on my journal. We had such a fun time with Gwen and I wanted to capture as much of our conversations on paper as I could remember.

Nan set out breakfast and left us with strict instructions that EVERYTHING in the house was ours to use. She joined us for a cup of tea around 6 am before she set out to feed all the animals. They have a farm that they allow children to come visit. The farm contains goats, chickens, rabbits, dogs, cats and a very rare breed of ducks called Silver Appleyards. She has five of perhaps only a hundred in the world!

During our tea Nan told us some stories about living in Mississippi that made me laugh, even though the stories were true. Her husband, Stewart, was recruited by the City of Jackson, MS because of some success he had working with homeless in Boston, MA. Stewart was from Mississippi and he wanted to move back, so he took the job.

Unfortunately, due to his time in Boston, when he got to Jackson he moved too quickly and too aggressively. His leftist views also scared a few preachers. In order to get him to resign, the preachers accused his wife of being a Satanic Witch. They even flew her down to Jackson from Boston to hold a literal inquisition. She denied it, but they found her guilty! Stewart was forced to resign. This was in 1992. Nan finds it funny, but Stewart has yet to find much humor in the episode.

Nan may be able to hold it lightly because she is used to being called names. Lately some are calling her a Marxist lesbian, because of her short hair cut. She is neither but probably would rather hang out with those people rather the ones who are calling her these names.

Nan is proud of the fact that a local group, of which she is a member, held the first Quaker meeting in Mississippi since the 1860's. As we travel north we hope to meet with other Quakers. If we do, Nan asked us to tell these groups about the Oxford meeting, as she doubts many know they exist.

This morning Nan gave us a quick tour of the medicinal plant green house at Ole Miss,

where Nan works. Then we headed over to the Health Center, where a meditation group invited us to participate in their Friday sit. The group meets three days a week and is heavily influenced by Zen Buddhism. We did notice the center is run on Dana. Dana is a Pali word that means generosity!

The group asked if I would lead a meditation from the Thai Forest Tradition. I did two meditations over the hour period, the first being a body scanning and the second on the breath. Afterwards we answered questions and were asked to do some chanting. We did a blessing chant in Pali and the English version of the Buddha's words on lovingkindness.

A friend of Austin's from Gunnison, CO has a sister who lives in Oxford. Her name is J.J. and she invited us out for the meal. We met at 10:30 and went to the 'Square' in Oxford. J.J. took us to an Italian restaurant that served very good food.

We were also blessed to meet J.J.'s newest angel, a 13-month-old boy named Owen. He cried when I got into the vehicle but soon realized I was harmless and we became good friends.

At lunch we realized that both J.J. and Austin are left handed. I asked then if they experience any inconveniences being left handed. They quickly came up with a short list; writing in spiral note pads, reading measuring cups and utensils, reading the writing on ball point pens, using scissors, and working the controls of the car stereo. Being right handed, I never thought about any of that.

After the meal it was raining very hard, so Austin and I went into the Square Books bookstore on the Square. It was a pleasant place to wait for another friend of Austin's who was coming to take us to Memphis.

Austin found out today that we won a young writers award contest! I saw the contest posted in the Turning Wheel magazine and immediately thought of Austin. He wrote an article about this walk.

As I'm writing this Betsy, Austin's friend, is driving us from Memphis to a lake side cabin in Arkansas. We are waiting for a train to pass. This is the second train delay we have had in as many days. The delays remind me so much of my youth in Indiana, impatiently waiting for the train to pass. For the past 15 years I have lived in New Hampshire and California and rarely experienced trains crossing my path.

"We'd like to suffer, but we don't have the time"

Day 33: Horseshoe Lake, Arkansas

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 2, 2005

We are at a lakeside cabin in Arkansas. Betsy grew up around this lake and she is house sitting here for a family friend. As we entered the cabin last night I set my pack down next to a large dresser and looked up. I was staring into three Buddha images! My first impression of Arkansas was seeing a Buddha image. This seems very promising.

As is typical behavior at most lakeside cabins, we are having a lazy morning. I got up with dawn and took my medication, but lay in bed just watching my breath. Austin and I shared a room. I think the medication was disturbing his sleep as he was noisy and talking in what sounded like either Japanese or Native American tongues most of the night. I didn't get much sleep.

At 7:30 am I hear the first movements in the cabin other than my own or Austin's. It is Markus, Betsy's boyfriend, and he is off to work.

This lake is called Horse Shoe Lake and it once was, and could become again, a part of the Mississippi River. The river flows through such flat land that it often takes a very windy and twisted route to the sea. Occasionally the river will shorten itself by cutting a new channel where a U-shaped bend forms in the river. In "Life on the Mississippi" Mark Twain writes that a prosperous river town could find itself 10 miles from the river and land locked, over night. Or better yet, slaves in Mississippi could wake up and find themselves on the west side of the river and be free!

This morning I was checking out the TV guide to see when the NCAA men's basketball quarter final games were being played. Just out of curiosity, of course. We are passing through the states of Kentucky and Illinois, both with teams in the Elite Eight. We need to know what is going on.

While looking at the guide, I noticed "A Yankee in King Arthur's Court," based on Mark Twain's book. We turned it on near the end of the movie, but caught the line, "We'd really like to suffer, but we just don't have the time" being sung in a musical number. "Maybe that could be our motto?"

Today I phoned Father William to inform him that we are leaning towards walking along Rt. 61 in Arkansas. Father William informed me about the Pope's passing away. We later checked out CNN and they were not reporting this news. I thought maybe I got Father William's message wrong. But later the news was reporting the story. Was I getting insiders information?

Being a monk I have definitely found myself at times being treated much better than I ever did as a lay person. In Thailand when I flew into the country, as soon as the passport

/ immigration officers saw me, they opened a new line and ushered me to the front. This is common for Thai officials to do for Buddhist monks.

A few years ago Laung Por Sumedho was leading a retreat at Spirit Rock in Woodacre, CA. The retreat was for the teachers of the center. Most of these teachers had been my teachers before I became a monk. Now here I was sitting up front with the monastic community.

Elvis lives!

Day 34: Memphis, Tennessee

Austin Stewart

April 3, 2005

I just witnessed one of the most beautiful sunsets I have ever seen. The clouds were like layers of the finest silk balled around the sun. In the foreground were darker clouds that looked as if they had been smeared across the sky. The lake reflected all of this, but it took the sky apart and re-assembled the sky according to its nature. I can only describe the effect of the sky on the choppy water as psychedelic. No other word comes close to enclosing the image of rings of vibrant color undulating with the waves.

A man said he was interested in religion today and alarms went off. He was really only interested in his religion. He tapped several times on a book bound with fine paper edged with gold. I never saw the cover and he never said anything directly about the son of God, but I am pretty sure which book he held. He asked us how we knew when a faith was right. We responded with the Buddha's teaching. Jotipalo said, "When it eliminates suffering." I said, "Yes, when it works." He looked like he hit his head lightly on our answer. I saw a smile sneak across his face. Then he spoke to us briefly of miracles and he told us that we should come to his church and see some miracles. We unfortunately had other plans, like going to Graceland.

We did not enter the hallowed grounds. It was a moderately sized home of indistinguishable architecture. I guess that it is a little racier inside. The wall out front was the centerpiece of the whole place. It was five feet tall at the lowest point, made of stone and was completely covered in graffiti. Individuals, couples and even entire families wrote fondly of Elvis. Underneath the freshest layer were decades of fading names and dates, some names now only a stain. It felt much like the rubbing of gold leaf on the Buddharupa. People were offering prayers up to Elvis. I have heard that he died of a drug overdose on the toilet. I have not, in fact, checked this.

Across the street you could stay at the Heartbreak Hotel, eat at the Rock 'n Roll Cafe, and

purchase all of your Elvis needs. He may be dead and buried, but the plastic version will outlive us all

The Lorraine Hotel

Day 35: Memphis, TN

Austin Stewart

April 4, 2005

This is the anniversary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s death. We spent the day at the Civil Rights Museum, which is the old Lorraine Hotel where Dr. King was killed. Whenever I see footage or photographs of nonviolent protest and the violence used against those protestors it brings me to tears. The tears form because of the power of the courage that these people show. Clearly the courage it takes to be beaten like that and maintain nonviolence must come from a spiritual source. Imagine all the emotion bound up around being treated like a second-class citizen for your entire life. To be able to keep that in check while exposing yourself to physical violence from the very people who have oppressed you takes a deep discipline.

There is the aspect of empathy as well. In November of 2002 I was arrested at the Free Trade Area of the Americas protest in Miami. I had been to many large protests before and never had I witnessed the intimidation and violence that was brought upon us there. I was arrested while walking down a sidewalk on my way to the bus after the protest had been violently broken up by the police. They said they were arresting anarchists, but I met maybe one or two in jail. There were many more retired airline pilots, hardworking middle-aged steelworkers, firefighters and journalists. As soon as the police cruiser pulled up over the curb and five officers in riot gear jumped out I knew that we were being arrested for our appearance. I knew we were stuck. Whatever the officers said happened was the truth unless we spent several years fighting it in court. In our case the police made one serious mistake. They arrested our host who was a journalist for the major independent paper in Miami. They looked at her press pass and threw it in the street. Not surprisingly, when the police realized what they had done, our charges were dropped. Few others were that lucky. Many people think that the images of bloodied and beaten protestors a thing of the past, but it is not. Oppression is alive and well in this country.

In the museum we had the great fortune to meet the young Rev. Walter B. He held a Bible under his arm and at first we thought we might get proselytized again. My eyes were quite wet when our conversation ended. Walter told us that he felt Dr. King's speeches were not all that important, but it was the path he walked: the path of love, compassion, and nonviolence. He also talked about following the path of Jesus and the path of Gandhi. It was so beautiful to see a young Christian who understood the teachings as well as he did. It seems as though he is reading an entirely different book than some of the "Christians" we have met.

"We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us"

Day 35: Memphis, TN

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 4, 2005

Thirty-seven years ago today Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel. We drove by the motel as we entered Memphis and it was very powerful to see the balcony from a distance. The motel is now a national Civil Rights museum, and tonight we plan to attend a vigil there.

Before we go to the museum, Jane, who owns the HART Center, has invited us out for a meal. We were contacted by Jane thanks to a Buddhist teacher by the name of Leigh Brasington. Jane, in turn, got us in touch with Tami.

Yesterday Betsy loaned Austin her car, so we drove into Memphis to do some research and journal writing at the library. After the library we went to Graceland! We had no intention to pay the admission fee and we arrived after hours. Many people were still milling about.

Next to the main gate is a long stone wall, perhaps 150 feet long by four to six feet tall. It was amazing to see, a complete surprise and worth the visit to see this wall. It appears that for years people making the pilgrimage to the wall have been signing their names and prayers to Elvis. I was looking for a Dhamma quote to photograph, but after walking the entire length of the wall, I realized the wall itself was speaking the Dhamma of impermanence, as only the freshest signatures can be read and the rest have all become blurs in the background.

Last night when we got back to Horseshoe Lake we witnessed one of the most spectacular

sunsets.

Today at Saigon Le, a Vietnamese restaurant, Jane taught us how to eat egg rolls in the traditional way. You take a lettuce leaf, put cilantro, mint, the egg roll and hot sauce, and roll it up in the leaf and dunk it in a fish sauce.

We continue to be blessed by the generosity of those we meet. Jane has invited us to come to a Wednesday night Community Circle, where all the services are offered on a dana basis. Jane said she would make sure a male masseur would be available so I could have a massage! Austin and I offered to do some blessing chants as our offering.

After leaving the restaurant we stopped at Outdoor, Inc., a wilderness outdoor store, to look for a shirt with an SPF 30+ rating (sun protection). The clerk who waited on me had been to Thailand and knew I was a monk. He was very respectful and interested to know why I was in Memphis. We told him about the walk. When we went to pay for the shirt, he hesitated for a second then said, "I'd like to make this my offering for the walk."

Austin and I went to the Civil Rights Museum that afternoon. It is a must for anybody visiting Memphis. You could easily spend a week here, if you read all the information they have posted.

The biggest impression I came away with could be summed up in the final line of the litany, which was read at the ceremony this evening. It reads, "We stand on the shoulders of those who came before us, but we reach down to lift up those who come after us."

This pilgrimage is definitely influenced by many peace marchers, pilgrims, and especially the Thai Forest monks who have kept the tudong (wandering) tradition alive in Thailand.

The ceremony was attended by several hundred people, and many pastors came up to me after the event to welcome and thank me for attending.

As we were leaving the director of the ceremony came over and asked about us. When she heard our story, she said she would have mentioned us, and had us be part of the ceremony if she had known. I'm glad she didn't.

On the drive back to Horseshoe Lake we witnessed another spectacular sunset.

“Appreciate each moment of the walk, as it could unexpectedly come to an end”

Day 36: Memphis, Tennessee

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 5, 2005

Austin and I are taking today as a down day. I plan to make a bunch of phone calls, but not do much other than that. Father William gave me a contact in Memphis, who knew most of the churches in the area that might be able to help us.

Our bronchial infections still are around: Austin is feeling much better, though the medication upsets his stomach. I've felt tired and have a headache. All of these symptoms are side effects of the medication, so we don't know if we feel bad because of the infection or the medicine. Our medicine will be gone by Sunday, so we hope we are feeling better by then.

Tomorrow severe weather is predicted and we will be in Memphis most of the day. Our plan is spend one more rest day at Horseshoe Lake and start walking on Friday (April 8). We are grateful for the recovery time, but we are also looking forward to walking again.

Later in the day I took a walk through the neighborhood. Spring has caught up to us in full force. The trees all have light green, tender leaves, lots of flowering trees, and almost deafening birdcalls from all directions (north, south, east, west, above and below, even from the water). This probably isn't the favorite time of the year for those with allergies. Fortunately Austin and I don't have that affliction.

One of my phone calls today was to Abhayagiri. I had the distinct pleasure to speak with my brother Dhammaso. It was a joy to hear his voice.

I also spoke to Ajahn Sudanto who we hope will join us during the walk in mid-May. Ajahn Sudanto passed along a great reflection to us. Paraphrasing, he said, "Appreciate each moment of the walk, as it could unexpectedly come to an end, broken bone, illness or a death."

This is such wise counsel, and it can be easy to forget when things are going smoothly.

Grateful to be indoors

Day 37: Memphis, Tennessee

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 6, 2005

We had a big thunderstorm last night. Sure makes us grateful to be indoors on nights like those. It cleared up at dawn but right now the backside of the storm system is moving in. I can hear the not so distant rumble of thunder rolling across the lake.

Betsy designed and painted a proposal for an art competition yesterday. Artists were asked to design a pattern for Adirondack chairs. Those judged to be the twenty best designers will be given a chair and asked to paint it. The chair will go into a museum and the artist will receive five hundred dollars, plus an additional four awards for best of show. Her design is unique and beautiful. It shows a cotton field across the back supports, and cotton balls on the arm rests. I can't imagine twenty designs being better than hers.

Right now her "Daddy," Brian, is here trying to make some contacts for us along Route 61. He knows several of the farmers and those on the levy board. The local sheriffs were nice, but not willing to give us permission to walk on the levee. Brian doesn't think it will be a problem, though. We hope to start walking in Turrell, Arkansas on Friday and it will be a forty-mile walk to Oscella, where we might have contact. It is another eighteen miles to Blytheville, Arkansas where the Catholic Church again has offered us a place to stay.

Today we had lunch at Bhan Thai in Memphis, a beautiful restaurant which is known for their good food. The staff seemed overjoyed to see us. As has happened at every Thai Restaurant on this walk, we were not charged for the meal and the staff made an offering for the walk.

Tonight we will go to the HART Center to participate in the circle. I'm looking forward to seeing what Jane has helped to create here. We are officially in the Midsouth now and though Memphis can be rough, we do seem to be meeting more people who are involved in "spiritual" practices. We have been politely proselytized in the Memphis Library, though, so maybe we'll see more extremes in this area? From what I've seen in Arkansas so far though, I have a good feeling.

If I have any reservations about the walk now, it is that we need to start learning how to ask permission to sleep on people's land. With all the spring rain, finding dry places to sleep might be difficult in and of itself. Only one way to know about these things though, and that is to face my fears and try it.

Back on the road?

Day 38: Horseshoe Lake, Arkansas

Austin Stewart

April 7, 2005

With the fading of illness we find ourselves ready to start walking again. There is a slight nervousness due to some new challenges we will face. We have been dodging asking people to stay on their land for some time now. The hour of truth is at hand! We have some contacts, but they are spread pretty thin. I am not too worried about it. Either we find a place to sleep or we don't. We have no control over it, except how we ask. I think that will make it or break it for us. I am interested to see how this part of the walk works out. It will determine how possible the rest of the walk is. If the beautiful generosity that we have met thus far is any indication we should have few problems. And those problems will most likely be self-created.

We had the meal yesterday at Bahn Thai in Memphis. We showed up unannounced and were immediately met with the greatest kindness and generosity. The chef took care of our meal and the staff put together more dana for the road. The owner was quite gracious also. The food was very good as well. If you ever travel through Memphis, stop there or stop at Saigon Lee. We ate the meal at Saigon Lee a couple of days ago and they are glorious people: friendly, generous, and quite good cooks.

In the evening we were invited to go to the HART Center for a free community event. They do a lot of energy work and other forms of therapy as well. The space feels good. It feels as though there is a very stable and grounded heart at the HART center. The other people who came to the event were quite wonderful. They were insightful, educate and open-minded. I would not be surprised if Memphis becomes a center for Buddhism and other forms of spiritual practice. I felt a crackling enthusiasm for spiritual teaching in the air. I may be wrong, but the conditions just seem ripe for interest in the answers that spiritual practice can provide.

In other news Ciella, age four, was very excited to meet the "chipmunks." Her mother, Marconi attempted to explain what we were, but her words fell on deaf ears. Ciella picked out a page from a Winnie the Pooh coloring book and colored it for us. "It's a lovely day to take a walk in the woods!" says Pooh. "Perhaps Piglet and I can find something fun to do." The other side read, "Oh, bother," says Pooh. "We've been walking and walking, but I haven't found the fun part yet." "What will we find today?" asks Piglet.

The question is which one of us is Pooh and which one of us is Piglet? I think that we swap roles all the time. Sometimes while one of us thinks he hasn't found the fun part yet the other is excited for what today will bring. Sometimes we are both Piglet, sometimes we are both Pooh.

Healing arts and rehabilitation training

Day 38: Memphis, Tennessee

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 7, 2005

Yesterday evening Austin and I went to The HART Center. Jane and Keith, the co-creators and another practitioner, Ana, welcomed us warmly.

HART is an acronym for: Healing Arts and Rehabilitation Training. They used the evening as a dana-based introduction to Reiki therapy. I am not qualified to explain what Reiki therapy is all about, so I'll just tell you about the session and the center.

Keith led my session. We started by his asking me what my highest aspiration for the session would be. I told him that I was starting to feel apprehensive about starting to walk again. Our health was not good yet, and I am feeling fear about asking people to sleep on their land. I realize if I am coming from fear, it will make it more difficult to connect with people. So, my highest aspiration was to feel comfortable with whatever the next move is about this walk.

During the session Keith asked me to feel in my body the tension that was caused by the feelings of uncertainty. I was well aware of a knot in my stomach and an upset digestive track. Later in the session Keith asked me to think about the times on the walk, when things had flowed synchronistically—when things were in harmony. Immediately the tension in my gut was replaced with energy flowing through my body, head to feet, and it seemed like I remembered every positive encounter on the walk, hundreds of them.

I enjoyed the session and the center as a whole. They have spent much time, love and care into creating a positive, supportive center for people to come for healing, meditation and rest. We offered a blessing a chant as our offering to the evening's program.

Today will be a day of laundry, packing and getting ready for the road again. Austin's lymph nodes swelled again today. We'll just have to play it by ear and hope the medication works. We have about three more days worth of medication. I'm noticing a slight fever still and an upset stomach, which might be caused by the antibiotics.

Betsy's father, Brian, made some phone calls and got permission from the Levee Board for us to walk along the levee. We are looking at maps and the weather and it looks like a severe storm is predicted for Monday, April 11 and the next two days. The Catholic Church in Blytheville, Arkansas, has offered us a place of refuge from the storm, but we can only reach it by Monday if we walk Route 61. Walking the levee would be great, but it will almost double the length of our walk and we won't be near towns or water.

A time to rest, a time to heal

Day 39: Amtrak enroute to Chicago

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 8, 2005

Awoke this morning feeling as bad as I have on the whole trip. No energy at all. Austin doesn't look good, either. Am I just being lazy and not wanting to walk? Am I letting my fears get the best of me? I don't think so. I know I have some reservations, but I've also experienced enough "miracles" on this walk to have a confidence that we will be taken care of, especially knowing Betsy's father will be able to talk to the farmers if they are nervous about letting us camp.

We got up before dawn and headed out for breakfast. Betsy was planning to take us to Turrell, Arkansas where we were hoping to start walking. We stopped at a Shoney's and ordered a breakfast bar. I thought if I started eating my appetite would return. I rarely don't have an appetite. I ate half a biscuit and couldn't eat any more. Austin managed to eat a little more than I did. After the most expensive biscuit I've ever eaten, we went next door to Wal Mart to get a few items. While we were there, Austin's energy collapsed.

What do we do? We have been Betsy's guest for almost a week, and we don't want to be a burden to her. Betsy's friend Marconi, and Father Joe Pallo (isn't that a great name?) of the Catholic Church in Blytheville, Arkansas have offered us places to stay. We don't feel comfortable accepting these offerings though, because we have no idea how long it will be before we feel like walking. Our strength seems to be dwindling as we get further into our course of antibiotics. We still have two full days of medication to take. What do we do?

I had an idea, but wanted to get Ajahn Pasanno's blessings and my parent's permission before moving on it. I thought, let's get on a train and go spend some time at my parents in Indiana! It sounds absurd at one level, but the clincher was that I remembered a friend, Dr. Jerry Douglas, who is a family practitioner and has offered medical assistance while we are on the walk. I called Jerry and he strongly suggested rest and said he could look at us next week.

So at 10 pm we were standing on the train platform in Memphis, Tennessee waiting to board the City of New Orleans bound for Chicago, Illinois (the same train taken to start the walk). Some friends of mine, Art and Kathie, are going to pick us up and Art has a condo in downtown Chicago which he is letting us use!

I feel good that I'm finally able to call on some of my friends to help with this walk. They've been very generous in their support, but we had previously not met up with them

'on the road.' Austin's friends have been the one's who have helped us out physically so far. Now my friends will be able to help as well, and I look forward to seeing them again and offering my thanks in person.

Where will the wind blow us next?

Day 40: Chicago, Illinois

Austin Stewart

April 9, 2005

When we woke up yesterday we had no idea that we would find ourselves in Chicago today.

We started the day as planned, setting up to start walking again. Neither Jotipalo nor I felt good. We forced down a little bit of Shoney's which can be hard to do even if you are in the mood. I felt a little perky after the meal but quickly crashed. I wandered through the monstrosity that was Wal Mart in a zombie state. The pharmacy seemed to keep getting further away with every attempt I made to approach it. I was looking for ibuprofen.

I am not a Wal Mart shopper; any item I need I have to search for. Going with other people I have found that they keep a detailed blueprint of the store in their heads. Contemplating it must be akin to the Tibetan visualization practice where they visualize complex images as a meditation. I see shoppers who barely acknowledge the shelf when they reach for a product, so thorough is their knowledge of Wal Mart. I wander in a daze through big stores. I generally forget what I am looking for as soon as I pass through the doors and only find what I need by pure luck.

Leaving Wal Mart I knew that I could not walk that day. Jotipalo felt the same, but Betsy had been so generous of her time and energy that we did not feel comfortable staying any

longer, and besides she had other guests coming in. I am very thankful for all the time she and her family and friends gave us and, of course, the best chicken pot pie I have ever eaten. A wonderful woman named Beaver offered it to us.

We quickly formulated a plan to get a medical opinion whether we should walk, then catch a train to Jotipalo's parent's house in Indiana to recuperate. The doctor said we had no business walking in our condition and that even after we finish the antibiotics we may feel bad for a few days. We also wanted Ajahn Pasanno's blessing before catching a train and greatly altering our plans. We left a message at the monastery.

All this time I felt as though I was failing. What was the wise decision? Should I walk on and suffer every step? Is it wisdom or weakness that makes me want to rest? Or am I attached to the set plan of action, unwilling to change it?

I sat and brought my attention to the body. I let the ego slide out of the way and tried to look at what was going on in the body. It was ill. I have felt no perceivable change over the entire time we had been here. There was no indication that this illness would let up anytime soon. I realized that this is part of the walk. We have no control over the body. If it is ill we must tend to it, if we don't there could be dire consequences. We all think that we control our lives. The only thing we control is how we view the world. Do we want to seek awakening, or do we want to continue sleeping?

I spoke to Ajahn Pasanno later, while Jotipalo was showering. He felt that our decision to rest was appropriate. It was good to hear his voice. He gave me a brief teaching about the body, illness, and tudong practice. Everything he said I felt like I knew but had forgotten. Being ill, my mindfulness has slipped off a lot. It is amazing how quickly the teachings can slip away when the mind wanders.

So now the south suburbs of Chicago are rolling into the south side of Chicago and soon into skyscrapers. I lived here for five years. I find myself smiling looking at familiar sights. I like this city. It always strikes me as odd how I can be in love with little Gunnison, and still have a spot in my heart for Chicago. It is a city of memories for me. Everywhere I go a memory arises. Most are good memories with a few bad scattered in for variety.

I am a very different person from the Austin that lived here a few years ago. Many of my memories are of bars or of staggering down specific streets drunk. I was very lost while I was here, spinning my wheels.

However, this is the place where I was introduced to Buddhism. I remember the evening before the Buddha's birthday in May of 2001 when I was reading the chapter titled, "The Fool" in the Dhammapada. I came upon the passage, "Milk curdles suddenly in the heat, but the bad deed pursues the fool like a smoldering fire." Reading that the direction my life was headed became vivid and clear.

The truth of what the Buddha taught became obvious and here I am, rolling back into this magnificent city on tudong.

Above Chicago—we do not take a trip; a trip takes us

Day 40: Chicago, IL.

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 9, 2005

Awoke this morning at 3 am in a very odd position, half-lying down, half-sitting and completely uncomfortable. How had I just slept for four hours? The train was in Carbondale, Illinois. We had hoped to walk through this town, but hadn't expected to get here until May. This new twist to the walk is a great reminder that our plans and reality are two separate things. How did John Steinbeck say it?

"Once a journey is designed, equipped and put into process, a new factor takes over. A trip, a safari, an exploration, is an entity, different from all other journeys. It has personality, temperament, individuality, uniqueness. A journey is a person in itself; no two are alike. And all plans, safeguards, policing, and coercion are fruitless. We find after years of struggle that we do not take a trip; a trip takes us . . . Only when this is recognized can the blown-in-the-glass bum relax and go along with it. Only then do the frustrations fall away. In this a journey is like a marriage. The certain way to be wrong is to think you control it. I feel better now, having said this, although only those who have experienced it will understand it."

I am completely open to the new twist of events, seeing it as humorous, actually. I do hope the rest and a visit to Dr. Jerry Douglas helps to restore our health though. At times we feel fine, but the slightest exertion of energy and I'm tired.

Austin slept all afternoon and after being up for a few hours is ready for more sleep. Working with the uncertainty of the illness has been good practice too. It shows me how vulnerable we are as humans. Life requires a lot of well-controlled circumstances to be set in place. Even simple things like showering and finding drinking water have been difficult for us at times. I can see from this experience that somebody who gets ill and does not have a support system would feel extremely vulnerable, especially if they did not have a strong mind established in Dhamma.

As I mentioned at the very beginning, I enjoy taking the train and this was no exception.

We met an interesting man named Kevin on the train platform and he asked some thoughtful questions about Buddhism. When we got into the train we chose to sit next to him, just in case some less-friendly person got on later. We talked for a long while as the train pulled out of Memphis.

An elderly woman sitting in front of us was talking on a cell phone to her grandchildren who were waving good-bye just outside her window. They continued to talk on the phone for another half hour and at one point the train passed a line of cars waiting for the train to pass, and the kids were in that line of cars. I felt a bit of sadness that grandma's departure was drawn out so long; she may have been comforted though by feeling connected.

Kevin was a self-proclaimed atheist, but found religion very fascinating. He had obviously done a lot of reading, everything from Carlos Casteneda to Joseph Campbell. Kevin had many funny stories and once asked, "How can people feel so threatened by a Buddhist monk? They are devoting their lives to peace, right?"

Kevin bought us juice in the morning and invited us to use his sauna while we were in Chicago!

Kathy was waiting for us when we arrived in Chicago. We went to her condo and met Art. They took us out for a wonderful lunch at a restaurant called Wishbone, which features "southern" food. My appetite is alarmingly low, though I did manage to eat a bit more than I did yesterday. After the meal Art took us to his condo and we have the place to ourselves. Art said the ground floor is at 630 ft. (higher than any point in Mississippi). Art's condo is on the twenty-sixth floor, so the height is making me a bit dizzy.

We watched a spectacular sunset from high above the city. We are just to the north of the largest sky scrappers in the city and have spectacular view of the city to our south and of the horizon to the west.

We hope to take it easy for a couple days here, before getting back on a train and heading to my parent's house, in Crawfordsville, Indiana.

"Learn to be silent"—greetings from an old friend

Day 41: above Chicago, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 10, 2005

Last night I feel asleep to the most spectacular view. To the south I had a view of downtown Chicago from 3,000 feet in the air. Immediately below the skyscraper are about two city blocks of low buildings, and then you see a gradual layering of taller buildings creating this awesome view of lights, the tallest being the Sears tower.

Yesterday Art and Kathie took us to a Whole Foods Market to supply us with fresh breakfast goods, mostly fruit and yogurt. When they were shopping I couldn't imagine I'd want to eat any of it. This morning we took the last of our antibiotics. My appetite seems to be returning, I ate about half of what I might eat normally, so I take this as a good sign. Austin looks about the same, but he was able to eat today as well.

While eating a light breakfast, Austin and I read our emails. We are used to getting mail from all over the country and occasionally from places like Budapest, Hungary. It was a complete joy to see in one subject box the words: "Greetings and salutations from India." It was a letter from my teacher Ajahn Amaro! I was so happy to hear from him.

He wrote that he had recently heard about our online journal and was reading it. He said this endeavor was the first time he had been behind a computer since May of 2004!

Ajahn ended by writing the following words of wisdom: "P.S.—I found it of great value to reflect on Ajahn Sumedho's words as Nick and I left Chithurst and headed out on our own narrow road to the Deep North: "Actually there is nobody going anywhere, there are just conditions of mind that are changing."

We made train reservations and will go down to Lafayette, Indiana on Monday evening. Doctor Jerry will pick us up as he lives near the train station. The next morning he has offered to give us a checkup and run any tests we need. The plan now is to stay with him Tuesday night and my parents will pick us up on Wednesday.

I've heard so much about and met so many people from Gunnison, Colorado and Philmont, New Mexico (the Boy Scout camp) that I'm glad Austin can meet some of my friends and see where I grew up.

I'm so surprised by this change of events, about being in Chicago. At one level I feel really good that we are able to respond to conditions as freely as we did. I could have imagined a time in my life when I would have been so determined to walk the entire way, that the deviations we have made would have been unacceptable to me. I could even imagine that I would have gotten mad at Austin for getting sick.

The night before flying out of Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada I stayed with a friend, Winston and his father. While there I read a book that Ajahn Bhramavamso just published. In the introduction was an Ancient Chinese proverb.

Grant yourself a moment of peace,
and you will understand

how foolishly you have scurried about.
Learn to be silent
and you will notice that
you have talked too much.

Be kind,
and you will realize that
your judgment of others was too severe.

Reading the above proverb, I'm very happy my life has taken a different twist in the last ten years. I could not imagine all the kindness I am experiencing being showered upon me if I had continued to live my life as a goal-oriented, self-motivated, money-seeking individual.

Reflecting on sickness and how unpredictable this entire walk has been is really good material for our meditation. The amount of kindness and support we are shown is humbling and worthy of contemplation too. Today another friend of Austin's took us out to lunch and he has invited us to his place for the meal tomorrow. I am still totally amazed that even with the expense of the train trip and staying in one of the most expensive cities in the world, we still have not touched a dime of the funds that were donated before the walk began!

The sun is just starting to set, and it looks promising that it will be another beautiful one. So I'll end for today. You know, our train ticket is reserved, but the way this walk has gone I could easily imagine we'll get on the wrong train and end up in some unpredictable place, but be met with kindness and showered with generosity all the same.

Coming Full Circle

Day 42: Chicago, IL.

Austin Stewart

April 11, 2005

4/11/05

Day 42

Today we are set to leave Chicago. Stephan, my old roommate, has offered to make us a home-cooked meal today. We will travel back to my old apartment. On the tour of historic sights of Austin this is a key location. I can point out the very spot where I was sitting when the insight that led me to this very moment occurred. The room where I made my first fumbling attempts at meditating is there, the computer where I first found Abhayagiri's website and read the simple and profound teachings of Ajahn Chah. It is a

power spot for me. It was a place of beginnings and endings.

Yesterday afternoon I spent with Stephan traveling around the old neighborhood. There is a great deal of change going on right now. Prosperity is in the air. New businesses catering to a new demographic are popping up and thriving right now. Streets that I remember as rundown are sparkling with new glass and the bright brick of new buildings. Any business that sells itself as hip is overflowing with customers eager to own some hip-ness, or eat some hip-ness, or find their inner hip-ness through yoga. America is very good at assimilating whatever 'hip' is at the time and making a killing on it. The quest for enlightenment is no exception. You can spend a lot of money on meditation gear and "excessories." Though I do not study Tibetan Buddhism I remember the story of when Milarepa's attendant asked for a teaching and Milarepa mooned him showing all the characteristics needed for a solid meditation practice on his beaten up bum. He lived for years in a cave and sat on what he had. How would he react to all of the money we spend to create conditions that fit our preferences? I am guilty of it as well. I have spent hours looking at expensive Buddha images that are not crucial to my meditation practice, but would be nice to have. I don't even own a sitting cushion, yet I am pricing out Buddha images! I only ever bought one Buddha image and I found it at a museum store for a dollar. I now have several Buddha images all are gifts from friends.

It is amazing how the mind comes up with needs and wants. It can create logic around the wildest desire. If we are not mindful and aware of moral discipline we can justify anything.

Moral is a poorly used word in this country. Politicians have slaughtered its meaning over the last several years. Many people who claim to be moral have no problem lying or sending others to kill. What does it mean to live a moral life and why would one want to live a moral life? In Theravada Buddhism there are five basic precepts that you are supposed to keep. The first is not to kill any living being. The second is to refrain from takings that which is not given i.e. don't steal. The third is not to engage in sexual misconduct. Which means not cheating on your partner and only having consensual sex. The fourth is to refrain from false and harmful speech. The fifth is not to consume intoxicants, which lead to carelessness. I am very fond of the wording of the last precept. It is not the consumption of intoxicants that is immoral; it is the carelessness that it leads to that is immoral. The Buddha said that it was impossible to keep the other four precepts if you were intoxicated. I have heard people argue against this. Have they ever been drunk? Have they ever seen somebody blow coke and start telling the tallest tales and most outright lies you have ever heard? I know that in my life alcohol and other drugs led to some of the worst decisions I have ever made and often times put me in dangerous situations, but most of the time they seemed harmless and were a lot of fun. Well if you only make poor decisions every once in a while it is okay to drink a little bit. Then there I am my suffering face reflected in the water of an unfamiliar toilet bowl.

So the question is why live a moral life? If you understand karma, which is to say that you understand that actions have consequences then the reason to live a moral life is simple. The Buddha said that by abiding by the five precepts you set the conditions that allow peace to arise. If you couple that with generosity then the foundation is set. All of us can intellectually understand that actions have consequences, but how often do we live our lives like they do not?

This is the very realization that I came to sitting on the floor of my bedroom in the

apartment where I now stand. For the first time I clearly saw the results of my actions. Even things that I had kept hidden from others were beginning to bear fruit. Whether or not others knew about the harmful acts I had done it did not matter. I knew that I had done them, I felt horrible having done them and they haunted me. A few ghosts from the past still haunt me from time to time. After seeing action and its consequence it was impossible to continue living in the same way. There is a lot of work to do. Old habits are hard to change. If you want to change old habits you must set up rules for yourself. The precepts act as a guide for how to live. There is a lot of gray area in life and the precepts help in those situations where the mind could very easily convince you that an act wasn't all that unskillful. The majority of spiritual practice is letting go of unskillful habits and replacing them with skillful habits. It is ironic that on the path of letting go we must first build a solid home to reside in before we can experience liberation.

The apartment is as I remember it. Stefan has made some changes, but several of my former possessions are still there. I keep seeing little things and remembering the story behind them. I peek into my old bedroom at the spot where this path began, it is fairly nondescript, just a place in the room. Jotipalo told me of an insight he had during meditation. He posed the question, "Where do I hold my attention?" The answer came back, "It is not where, but when." It is a beautiful insight and fits where this all began for me. I saw what I needed to see at a special time, not so much a special place. One moment of clear seeing was all it took for me to take the steps to transform my life.

While in a dream

Day 42: Chicago, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 11, 2005

Awoke this morning while in a dream. In the dream, I was reading the *Dhammapada*, inspirational verses spoken by the Buddha.

I went online to <http://www.accesstoinsight.org> and read a few verses of Thanissaro Bhikkhu's translations. The following verse caught my eye:

Winning gives birth to hostility.
Losing, one lies down in pain.
The calmed lie down with ease,

having set
winning and losing
aside.

—Verse 201

This verse seems to speak to me on many levels. Obviously with our health going up and down, and with us taking a long break from walking, there is a slight feeling of “losing.” Concerning the delay in the walk, there is more a sense we are lying down with ease though.

This verse also speaks to me in terms of many of the religious people we have encountered who want to convert us to their belief. It often feels like those people have a world view of “winning and losing.” The Buddha described the worldly life as endlessly following eight conditions: gain and loss, prominence and obscurity, praise and blame, happiness and suffering.

We have encountered all of these worldly conditions on the walk, and as long as we don’t cling to any of them we have not suffered. Working with praise and blame has been interesting. Many people express genuine appreciation for what we are doing, saying it really inspires them. This sentiment is nice, but if we were walking to receive this praise, all the blank stares, double takes with frowned faces, and proselytizing would leave us quite depleted.

Of course, it isn’t pleasant to receive the latter of these reactions, but more and more when I see this reaction, I feel compassion. Walking in downtown Memphis I met several people walking towards a baseball game. They saw me approaching them, and they had looks of bewilderment on their faces. As I approached I smiled and said, “Hello.” Usually you get at least a smile back, but on this evening three individuals in a row gave me looks of contempt. My reaction was to think, “It is so sad that these people live their lives in such a way that when they see a Buddhist monk, they naturally react in that way.”

In terms of “gain and loss,” being in Chicago and seeing northern towns from the train has been shocking to me in ways. We have been in the South so long that I was getting used to seeing towns falling apart and poverty everywhere. I didn’t consciously see anybody begging in the South, but everything seemed to be falling apart and many people seemed to be getting by on very little.

Once we entered Illinois, I noticed immediately that the towns looked cleaner—nicer homes, better sidewalks. In Chicago we are actually seeing construction! But yesterday when I walked on almsround, we were approached by beggars and few people even attempted eye contact with us.

Last night Austin and I did our evening chanting and meditation together. It was the first time we have had enough energy, and my throat felt good enough for chanting. The group practice was wonderful and I had perhaps the most relaxed sitting in about two weeks. Gain and happiness—finally!

Mono-A-Go-Go

Day 43: Lafayette, IN.

Austin Stewart

April 12, 2005

We are in Indiana, having seen DR. Jerry Douglas we are waiting on the results of a blood test. I was the one whose blood was drawn. Before the needle was anywhere near my arm I started sweating. I could feel myself getting light-headed. I can map to the moment I started having this reaction to blood draws. It was the second time that I gave blood on a blood drive. The first time I watched the needle go in and was fascinated seeing the blood flow from my arm into the bag. Getting a shot was the same I had no fear. The second time I gave blood they missed my vein and didn't know it. I kept trying to squeeze the hand thing to help blood flow and the muscles in my arm would constrict around the needle and it would stab me. I almost passed out. The next time I gave blood the same thing happened. Now if the mind sees an implement designed for the removal of blood and it goes into a full panic. I am aware of the foolishness of this reaction, but all it takes is one moment for the chemicals to release and cause a physical reaction that lasts several minutes. Often times when the mind feels the initial flow it latches on releasing more chemicals and so on until you pass out. The woman who took my blood this time did an excellent job. When I looked at the bare sensation I was feeling it was barely an itch, but if I let the mind run away with it my vital essence was being drawn from me! Danger! Danger! Will Robinson.

And the virus says "thank you very much!"

Day 43: Chicago, Illinois to Lafayette, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 12, 2005

Yesterday morning I felt almost "normal." We took the bus to the apartment of Austin's friend, Stefan. Stefan cooked us a delicious real Bavarian meal, dumplings with a creamy

mushroom sauce.

Four years ago, Austin had shared this apartment with Stefan. Austin kept pointing to things in the apartment and saying, “Those orange coffee mugs used to be mine, that lamp, that table, these CDs used to be mine. . . .” Austin showed me the very spot he had his first Buddhist insight and what propelled him along the Buddhist path. On the way to the apartment, he also showed me the exact spot where he got sick after partying on his twenty-first birthday!

Speaking of sickness, by the time we got back to Art’s condo, I was exhausted, My throat was sore and I had a slight fever. I see the mind wanting to ask, “What is wrong?” Wrong. As if perfect health is “right.”

I doubt viruses have the ability to express thoughts, but if they do, I doubt they are asking, “What’s wrong with this body?” Maybe they were while I was still taking the antibiotics. I suspect the viruses are now thinking that this warm, wet, receptive body is just fine, and “thank you very much.”

Regardless of what the viruses think, I’m happy we got on the right train last night, Amtrak’s service to Lafayette, Indiana, The 318 Hoosier State. “Hoosier” is one of Ajahn Sudanto’s favorite words, and Kurt Vonnegut loved to make fun of fictitious Hoosiers in his novels. Austin just asked me if they sell t-shirts here that read “Hoosier Daddy.”

Anyway, Dr. Jerry Douglas was waiting for us at the beautiful train station along the Wabash River in downtown Lafayette. You get a very lovely view of the city from the train station. The city still has the trees decorated with Christmas tree lights. This doesn’t surprise me—not because of any religious fundamentalism in the town, but because Indiana is always a bit slow. Most of Indiana doesn’t observe daylight savings time, which leads me to my favorite Hoosier joke— “In Indiana we don’t change the clocks, it’s always 1959.”

Jerry drove us the few blocks to his spacious apartment/loft. We each have our own room and shower! I’m really missing camping under my tarp, but ever since we got diagnosed with respiratory infections we have stayed in some incredibly beautiful places; Nan and Stewart’s beautiful home in Mississippi; Betsy’s friends’ cabin on Horseshoe Lake, Arkansas; Art’s condo in Chicago; and now this wonderful loft in Lafayette. I feel so incredibly blessed and grateful for all the hospitality.

Yesterday I was reflecting on “praise and blame.” Later in the afternoon I got an email from Ajahn Sudanto saying that National Geographic was trying to contact us. The famous photographer Steve McCurry is writing an article about Buddhism and he came across our journal in their research. Steve’s research assistant, Jennifer, wants to know our schedule for April and May. Wouldn’t it be great to have a research assistant? Steve is one of my favorite photographers so it is blowing my mind that he is contacting us. You can see some of Steve’s work at: <http://www.stevemccurry.com>

During most of Austin's sickness I have only had mild symptoms of what he was feeling. It is interesting that now that we've arrived in Lafayette, I'm starting to feel myself get more ill as the hours pass. When I was in high school I had a bad case of strep throat, which left a few scars in the form of holes in the back of my throat. Last night I noticed one of those holes was filled with a black pus, and I'm starting to feel more feverish.

I find this interesting, in that I wonder if I was able to stay healthy because of a sense of responsibility to Austin. Now that I have gotten him to a doctor and soon to my parents' house, I wonder if in some way my body knows it is now okay to get sick?

All for now. I'll attempt to write more this afternoon and post what Doctor Jerry says.

"Nobody is going anywhere"

Day 44: Crawfordsville, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 13, 2005

Yesterday, the conditions were such that my mind could have been very disturbed.

It was cold and raining outside. Austin and I were diagnosed as having mononucleosis. The tax auditor we wrote about on day 28 of the journal had read our online journal entry where we describe our interaction with him, and he misunderstood what I wrote.

I was laughing to Austin that with all the train travel maybe I could be called the Hobo Bhikkhu. Now I'm wondering if it should be Mono Bhikkhu. Hobo Jotipalo, Oh no— Mono!

We are investigating our options right now. We might be catching another train to who knows where! Funny walk this is turning out to be. I was joking with Austin when we started, saying that if we stay open and not fixed, we could end up anywhere on this walk— maybe even Bhutan.

Dr. Jerry examined us yesterday during his lunch break. He was fairly certain it was mono, but decided to do a blood test on Austin. Dr. Jerry said the only cure for mono is rest and taking care of the body.

I called Ajahn Pasanno and we discussed several options for where to recover. We

made phone calls to several monasteries, and are now waiting to see if any of their communities will allow us to stay.

While on the phone with Ajahn Pasanno, I asked him if staying at Abhayagiri was an option. He said it was, but suggested I take advantage of my time away from Abhayagiri, to experience new things.

“But Ajahn, I’m sick. Tomorrow I’ll be with my Mom, the next day I want to be with you. Please take care of me,” I jokingly protested.

Ajahn gave me one of his hearty, healing laughs, which is what I wanted to hear.

As Austin has said: “When Ajahn Pasanno gets into a hearty laugh, it’s the best thing in the world.”

Last night I got an email from the Mississippi tax auditor we wrote about on Day 28. I was sad that he misunderstood my journal entry. The man thought I wanted to kick his butt, but the comment was meant as a joke and the kick was intended for Austin, not that man. Austin and I sat down and composed a letter to him and apologized for any misunderstanding that occurred. I was impressed that the man contacted us and allowed me the opportunity to explain things. Signs like these show me there is a lot of good in people out there, and maybe I need to be a little more careful about how I write about people we meet.

I’m grateful for Ajahn Amaro’s comments that, “Nobody is going anywhere; it’s only conditions changing.”

With the diagnosis of mono and then being misunderstood by the man in Mississippi who read our journal, yesterday could have been an emotional roller coaster for me. Instead, I felt very even throughout the entire day. The walk is not going how I expected it would, but I’m enjoying it, and watching it unfold is absolutely fascinating!

Later—the same day:

Dr. Jerry drove us down to Crawfordsville. I kept trying to point out things to Austin—where I played football 22 years ago, where my 95-year-old grandmother lives (she was probably out driving at the time), where my art studio used to be ... Every time I looked back Austin's eyes were rolled into the back of his skull!

My parents were waiting for us, and we thanked Dr. Jerry for all his efforts and support. Austin went to sleep almost immediately in my Mom's sewing room. I made a few phone calls, trying to sort out where we will stay long term. My parents are more than willing to host us during our recovery, but I have a feeling the humility and simplicity of a Buddhist monk's lifestyle might drive them crazy after a few weeks. My mom, jokingly yet knowingly, suggests that maybe she and Dad will drive me crazy.

My dad has always said, "When you kids return home, I am always the one to open the door and welcome you in. By the end of your stay, I'm also the one who opens the door to usher you out."

"This walk is changing the way I view the world"

Day 45: Crawfordsville, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 14, 2005

The Buddha once said that if we carried our parents on our backs and tended to their every need for the rest of their lives; we would still not be able to repay our debt of gratitude to them. The only way to repay them for ALL they have done is to establish them in at least the first stage of enlightenment.

So here I am adding to that debt. When I first discovered Eastern philosophies, especially the teachings of Ram Dass, I became a bit of a nuisance with my proselytizing. I remember making copies of Ram Dass's tapes and mailing them to all my family members.

"Won't they be happy to hear this good news?" I thought. I was amazed when they were worried about me!

So I've been proselytized and been the proselytizer. I figure the only way I can establish anybody in the Dhamma is by establishing myself in at least the first stage of enlightenment. Actions speak much louder than words.

This walk is really changing the way I view the world. The Buddha set up the monastic order in such a way that decisions that effect the entire community need to be decided by consensus. In the not so distant past, when controversial topics were being discussed—like how often teachers travel or if certain people would be allowed to stay at the monastery—I always had a strong sense of what was right and wrong. It would take a good debate to get me to change my view.

Because of experiences on this walk, especially being so vulnerable and dependent on generosity and kindness of others, I feel like I will be much more open to the needs of others. I can imagine that at a business meeting at Abhayagiri, if somebody wanted to come to Abhayagiri to recover from an illness, my sense would have been, "But they might get ME sick—besides, there have to be better places to recover than here."

Of course, I might have thought that, but I would have said, "We have lots of work to do this summer and of course we can't take the risk of anybody getting sick."

I was discussing this with Ajahn Pasanno on the phone yesterday as we were discussing options for where Austin and I will go to recover. I told Ajahn I get a strong sense I now probably will be the person arguing in favor of allowing the person a place to stay.

Life was so much simpler before, when my views were more narrow-minded and I "knew" what was right and what was wrong!

This walk is definitely changing me.

Today we plan to rest. We might go to an herbal shop and see about getting some herbal remedies for improving the immune system. I found a few good web sites on this topic this morning. Everybody tells me to take lots of raw garlic. I like the idea, as Venerable Phasuko at Abhayagiri does this for illness and it seems to work.

I'll wait until we leave my parents house before starting this treatment though.

Greetings from Crawfordsville, Indiana!

Day 46: Crawfordsville, IN.

Austin Stewart

April 15, 2005

4/15/05

Greetings from Crawfordsville, Indiana! Jotipalo's hometown has quite a postcard feel to it. The Wabash College campus is beautiful. All of the buildings are red brick with white trim and simple white pillars. Brick walkways and old knobby trees wind through grassy lawns. The old part of town is pretty and quiet. Homes are old but well kept and each is unique. The new part of town, the part that was still turned by farmers every year when Jotipalo was a child, is like any new part of town in America. I could have been in a suburb of Chicago, or it could have been Jackson or Denver. Home Depot and Super Target and Wal-Mart and the new suburban condos that spread over several repetitious acres were all there. Aversion arises in the mind toward these new developments. As a child I watched cornfield after cornfield fall before subdivision after subdivision. Now there are miles and miles of suburbia that did not exist when I was young. I worry about the impact that this rapid development will have in the future. Despite how little wisdom

I may think goes into the "planning" of communities, I am not going to be able to stop this juggernaut of development. I must wait and see what the outcome is.

We are in a strange space right now. Not that Jotipalo's parent's house is strange, it is actually quite comfortable, but where we are on the walk is strange. The monsoon will run its course and there is nothing we can do about it. Right now we are trying to find a monastery with space for us to stay for upwards of a month. So we are in a limbo state waiting for our next move to be played for us. I can feel the mind wanting to revolt. It is getting anxious. I have the amazing ability to be very patient, sometimes. Other times I have the amazing ability to be very, very impatient. This is a good test for me. I am young and generally I am of good health. I have little experience with extended illness and fatigue. I am at the point in my life where as I continue to age the body will begin to show more and more signs of wear. It will slowly become incapable of what it once was. There is an old rancher who lives outside of Gunnison who still works his ranch. He is in his early eighties and has replacement knees and hips. His hands are disfigured with a lifetime of hard labor. About five years ago he was run over by his tractor and laid out in the hayfield for an hour before his wife checked on him. On a good day he relates entertaining, if often unending, tales of his life. On a bad day he curses the failings and pain of the body with language so harsh that my eyes get large and I am no angel. Being around him I have had the chance to see the process that awaits all of us. There are those who will die sudden violent deaths and will not know the aging process, but most of us will age, get ill and die. I know that I do not like to think that in five short years I will be in my mid-thirties and in a few short years after that my forties and so on. When I think of all the time and energy I have spent on activities that are of no benefit other than at the moment they were done it scares me. I do not want to be closing in on death cursing the inadequacies of the body because I am holding on to the idea that I should be able to do what I can no longer do. All I have is this moment. To what purpose do I wish to dedicate it worldly or spiritual?

"The mind is never satisfied"

Day 47: Crawfordsville, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 16, 2005

Being in one place and having access to a computer has allowed me to read the journal entries. I'd almost forgotten what a fun time we were having. The memory of going to sleep each night amazed at the wonderful people we had met that day, and filled with excitement about what the next day would bring was so real two weeks ago.

Each day has still brought with it a wonderful surprise and an amazing unfolding of

events, but we have been planning and making a lot of the contacts ourselves. The experiences haven't felt as spontaneous as while we were walking. But I know the circumstances of the walk have changed and we are doing what needs to be done.

Three weeks ago when I first noted that I was feeling like my backpack weighed fifty pounds, and my legs were like lead, I remember all day during the walk, looking into the woods and just wanting to go lay down under one of the tall pines. Now as I'm laying in bed I'm longingly looking into the woods across the field behind my parents' house, and thinking, "I wish we were outside walking."

The mind is never satisfied—at least not mine. Despite these occasional thoughts, I'm not disappointed about having mono.

I have a suspicion that I might be chronically susceptible to getting mono. I had a bad case of it in high school along with strep throat. My mom said the strep was so bad that my throat blistered and that is why the scars are in the back of my throat. Two years ago I got mono while living in Thailand, and I don't think mono exists in Thailand, as it took an American trained doctor to diagnose it correctly. I think I may have had mono several times as an adult and not know about it. For several years I have been saying, "I'm either a sick person who thinks he is healthy, or a healthy person who thinks he is sick, and I don't which it is."

The herbal remedies seem to be really helping. Ajahn Pasanno sent us a list of things to get and the herbalist in Crawfordsville knew exactly where Ajahn got the list. She had her own ideas, slightly different than the list, and we trusted her. We ended up getting a large bottle of multi-vitamins with Vitamin A— 25,000 IU, Vit. C—1,200 mg, Vit. E— 400 IU, plus lots of other stuff. We also got a bottle of B-Complex 100, which has mega doses of B-1,2,3, 6 and 12, Acidophilus, Mega-Zyme and Oregamax. The herbalist swears by the oregano and talked about it as if it would cure us by itself. She also sold us a bottle of Vcaps Beta-1,3/1,6-D-Glucan with 160-mg Maitake Mushrooms. She said after we finish the oregano, we should continue to take the Vcaps for the rest of the walk, and for the rest of our lives. Austin had \$98 in his funds. When we left the herb shop he had \$2.

Yesterday two friends of mine contacted me wanting to make offerings. The friend who lives in Crawfordsville, Missy, took up a collection from several of my high school friends (she mentioned Peter and Janis and she may have contacted several more)! The donation was intended to provide me with a new pair of sandals. I had a pair I sent off to Canada because rocks kept getting stuck between the sandal and my foot. The sandals had been nice as it prevented the running shoes from breaking down too quickly, as I could switch which I was wearing several times a day.

Yesterday another friend, Sarah, who lives in St. Paul, MN and who has been following the walk, wrote and told me she works at REI and asked if we needed anything. So Sarah is providing me with some new Teva sandals and Austin with a lightweight windbreaker! I called Missy to inform her of this, and she said, "Great, now you can use the donation

towards your other expenses!”

Austin’s parents and mine have volunteered to help with expenses to get us to whichever monastery we end up going to.

We got word from Bhante Rahula at the Bhavana Society in West Virginia, that they found a place for us to stay. Bhante Rahula contacted a neighbor who has a house a quarter mile down the road. The owner wanted to talk to Dr. Jerry before he felt comfortable letting us stay—now that has all been worked out.

Personally I really would like to go here, as a Thai monk friend of mine is living there right now. His name is Tahn Dhirapanyo. He is the doctor who diagnosed me as having mono when I lived in Thailand! I remember Tahn Dhirapanyo’s father came to Wat Bah Nanachat, where we were living. When I told his father I was from Indiana, he responded, “Indiana—one U.S. president was born there, but two were buried there.” He even knew the names, dates and places. Tahn Dhirapanyo has an equally sharp mind.

Right now we are waiting to hear if the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center in Hinsdale, Illinois will be able to host us during our recovery. This is a Thai monastery, and all the monks want us to come. The abbot is away, though, so the board of directors needs to make decisions about long term guests. In terms of traveling, this would be the easiest monastery to reach.

It looks like right now we will stay at my parent’s house until at least Wednesday morning. Then we will board a train either for Chicago or Washington, D.C. Mono Bhikkhu soon to become Hobo Bhikkhu again. I’m really looking forward to moving-on, as it’s getting harder and harder to find things to write about.

Both Austin and I have noticed our meditations are going well, probably because we are not having to spend too much mental energy worrying about travel issues, or about food. My mom, as you might well imagine, is enjoying taking very good care of us.

Later in the morning—

Ajahn Pasanno called. He talked to Ajahn Pra Git at the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center. They have invited Austin and I to come! So, it looks like we will take Amtrak Wednesday morning to Chicago. Art Howe has offered us his condo for the afternoon and will drive us to the temple after he finishes work.

A Buddhist Monastery in America?! I almost forgot they existed!

Day 48: Crawfordsville, IN.

Austin Stewart

April 17, 2005

4/17/05

We are headed back to Chicago on Wednesday to recuperate at the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center. It is a Thai monastery in Hinsdale, a suburb on the south side of Chicago. BDMC sounds like a wonderful place. I am excited to go because I have no idea what to expect. Every monastery is run differently, so what is expected of us is up in the air. I have a feeling that there may be quite a language barrier at times as neither Jotipalo or I speak Thai. This should be an interesting part of the tudong. It will be much different than our experience of America up to this point. I almost forgot that the monastery we are headed to is in America! It seems so foreign to the America that we have been walking through.

We live in a large and diverse country. Traveling it as we have you get a sense of the vast difference in view that exists here. That is beautiful, but it is also problematic. Here is a country full of unenlightened human beings and being unenlightened we are all subject to greed, hatred and delusion. We cannot make decisions on national scale without ignoring if not harming the interests of another group. There is so much difference in this country that defining what is the common good is very hard. Even if you did come up with a working model getting people to agree that it was indeed the common good would be impossible. Being in Mississippi where being a Catholic is odd, I can see how requiring prayer in school and wanting to have the Ten Commandments in front of the courthouse may seem okay. There are only a handful of non-Christians down there so it does not seem offensive to suggest this idea. But elsewhere in the country this idea is repulsive, offensive and demeaning to non-Christians. Even most Christians believe in the separation of church and state. I am sure that many a Southern Baptist would raise concern if his/her child were required to bow to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha every day in school.

This is a country of regions; each has its own majority opinion and its own etiquette. In "Travels with Charley" John Steinbeck was concerned that with superhighways and national media that regionalism was soon to fade out. That was in the early sixties. From what I am seeing it is still the way this country works. It may not be as obvious as it once was, but it has not gone away.

I made breakfast for Jotipalo and his parents today. It was based on Firebrand, albeit loosely. It was good, but just not the same. I think there is a Deva (angel) living in the kitchen of the Firebrand that has been endowing the food with special goodness. Or maybe like the Beatles, who put out better music together than any of them did on their own, the Firebrand is more than the sum of its parts.

We have had the beautiful luck to witness the peak of the Japanese Magnolia bloom from New Orleans to Indiana. Every time we left a place the blossoms were easier to find on the ground than they were to find on a tree. We would move a little further north and it

was peak season again. I think that we have run out of that season now. The rosebuds and dogwoods are coming into full bloom now. They are so beautiful it is an amazing time of year. I forget about flowering trees sometimes. I have this idea that trees do not flower, and then I see a forest with bright purples, and the cream color of dogwoods spread throughout and it shocks me. The mind rarely remembers things with much accuracy. Sure we can remember equations and phone numbers and other concrete things, but when it comes to memories of our life, they are completely subjective. Often times two people who experienced the same thing remember it differently. There is a story I sometimes tell where I always thought it happened to someone else. I would relate the story secondhand, but then a friend informed me that the story had actually happened to me and he was right! But for some reason the mind did not remember it that way. So these memories that we use to define who we are terribly inaccurate.

Fatigue is an interesting thing for me to contemplate because I see how much of a roll it plays in old age. The elderly need more naps and wear out easily. This is what awaits all of us. This should inspire a sense of urgency and a sense of caution. Urgency, because we only have so much time, and caution, because if you look at the elderly many of their health conditions are a direct result of habits they kept while they were young. Likewise, those elderly who are in good health are a beacon of how to live well. We must not act without considering the consequences of our actions. Earlier on this trip I cut myself deeply because, despite training and commonsense, for one moment I did not consider the consequences of cutting toward myself. Now I have no feeling in part of my thumb.

The cumulative effect of things is very interesting. One cigarette is such a small thing and probably has no effect on your long-term health, but a lifetime of smoking? Just as this breath seems insignificant, it is one of maybe a million in a lifetime, even so this breath pulls you one breath closer to death. If you view the world in this way you begin to see the importance of this moment and the importance of our actions. Each act we make moves us in a certain direction in our lives, but most of us are wearing blindfolds, completely unaware of the direction we are moving in. Often times in blizzards, or dense fog people tend to think they are walking a straight line, but end up walking in circles. Where are you going?

A quote for your thoughts, borrowed from freewillastrology.com.

"The day came when the risk it took to remain tight inside the bud was more painful than the risk it took to blossom."

Anais Nin

"Mother Nature is so cruel!"

Day 48: Crawfordsville, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 17, 2005

Didn't sleep well last night. I don't have much energy but all the resting and sleeping during the day doesn't leave me very sleepy at night. The symptoms of mono come and go, but I've noticed the lows don't seem as low. The symptoms are unpredictable too, I might feel fine right now, but it is uncertain how I will feel even an hour from now.

I'm not so sure how wise it was but Austin volunteered to cook his famous Marachi sandwich for the meal today. I know my parents appreciated not having to cook. I was joking with Austin, telling my parents the only time Austin cooked for me on the walk was to heat up instant grits. Then he made me walk 200 miles with two pounds of cooking fuel, which we never used.

It seems the dandelions all bloomed in the field behind my parents' house this morning. We have had the most beautiful weather for the last two weeks. It was even sunny and in the 70s while we were in Chicago last week! All this warm weather is accelerating spring, and the growth of new leaves. By the time we leave on Wednesday morning spring might be here in full force. Then we can experience yet another spring when we get to Chicago.

This morning while showering I noticed all the blisters on my feet, which were turning into helpful calluses, all peeled off. So, I'm probably physically back to where I was when we started the walk. I'll probably have to go through all the blistering again, and it may be even worse as it probably will be warmer when we start walking again. It's all uncertain, though.

Yesterday, James Noah, a Zen Buddhist monk from Avon, IN (near Indianapolis) started a meditation class here in Crawfordsville! I wanted to go to show my support and to sit with a group, but decided it wouldn't be wise with my health.

I did tell my friend Missy about the class and she went. Missy has read many of Abhayagiri's free distribution books and right now she is reading the book that the nun's produced called Freeing the Heart. Missy said eight people came and it was her first time to get meditation instructions (both sitting and walking). I'm so happy for Missy and for Crawfordsville!

Having mentioned the nun's book, I now want to tell a story that Austin has told several times on this trip. I feel this story is becoming part of the walk. Austin said he was sitting on the front porch of the main house at Abhayagiri with several lay guests and with Ajahn Sundara (the senior nun in the Amaravati community). While they were sitting there a hummingbird flew up to the flowers and was humming away. Austin said everybody was admiring the bird and exclaiming how wonderful it was to see this bird. Then Ajahn Sundara exclaimed, "Mother Nature is so cruel. Look how hard she has to work to get her food." Ajahn Sundara has a wonderful ability to see things as they really are.

Seven weeks on the road

Day 49: Crawfordsville, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 18, 2005

We have made some wonderful friends while being on the road. I'm not going to mention all of them by name, as I don't want to exclude anybody by accident.

Even though I didn't meet him on this walk, Father William is one such person who is becoming a dear friend. We talked on the phone last night. He called to check on our health and to see if we might be interested in staying a Catholic monastery for our recovery. Father William will also contact a Father Gregory who I met at Abhayagiri. Father Gregory lives in Chicago and is part of the Inter-Religious Dialogue group. I look forward to seeing him again, if that works out.

I got an email from our friend Tami this morning, and I want to share part of her wonderful story:

“When I was little my grandmother would tell me menehune stories before bedtime. Menehunes are basically Hawaiian nature spirits or devas, but in my grandmothers crafty hands they were kind of like tricky leprechauns that helped good people and messed with those who were unkind or disconnected from nature. She used to say leave the dishes and come visit with me—the menehunes will wash them!

“I always wanted to meet one but haven't until just recently. I have a big pine tree in my yard with a planter box around it. The guy who lived here before knew nothing about landscaping so he just filled it in with rocks. Well, I decided it would be a fine place for some of my shade loving plants if I took the rocks out, which really seemed to be a formidable job. (about six wheelbarrows full of rocks). But then the blessing kicked in and Andre' showed up to investigate me.

“Andre is a six-year-old black child who upon learning that I had no husband and no children and no family in the area decided that this was unacceptable and he would be my new stepson. He then marshaled all the children within three blocks into an efficiently run landscape detail and the rocks were quickly stripped away. It took us about three days, but all the rocks are out of the planter and flowers are now living there happily. My house and yard are full of joyous happy kids and my dogs sleep good at night having fetched endless balls and toys. “

Speaking of friends, I also got an email from another high school friend, John Peebles. John's father, Hall, was a religion professor at Wabash College, where I was a student. Hall had the ominous nickname, "Yahweh Peebles", and I was terrified of him because of this! It wasn't until I was a monk that I had the courage to have a serious conversation with him, and now I love going to see him. John has offered assistance, and might be able to drive Austin and I to St. Louis, MO after our recovery.

Ajahn Pasanno also called yesterday and informed me that John Cianciosi hopes to come visit us at the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, where we are going for our recovery. John, formally Ajahn Jagaro, used to be the abbot of Wat Pah Nanachat when Ajahn Pasanno was a junior monk there! I've heard and read several of his talks and really appreciate his clarity. I remember the first time I heard one of his talks. I asked Ajahn Pasanno if it might be possible to go live with him for a while after I completed the initial phase of training. So I'm really looking forward to meeting him.

Another friend from Abhayagiri, Ginger, said her family might get to come see us in Chicago. Ginger's cousin, Tahn Moshe, is a monk at Wat Pah Nanachat. We ordained during the same year, but Tahn Moshe is senior to me. When I arrived in Thailand two years ago, Tahn Moshe and I sat next to each other, but he didn't say a word to me. I asked a friend, Tahn Acalo, "What's up with Tahn Moshe?"

The next morning before the meal, Tahn Moshe leaned over and said, "Tahn Acalo tells me you are afraid of me."

We have been great friends ever since!

Thoughts on karma

Day 50: Crawfordsville, Indiana

Austin Stewart

April 19, 2005

When you cease to believe that things are "just coincidence" and you see that all that occurs in life is the outcome of past and present action, then you can take no blessing lightly. I contemplate all the conditions that led me to this moment. In 1995 I was on a twenty-one-day backpacking trip in New Mexico at Philmont Scout Ranch. During that

trip there was a section called solo. The rangers would blindfold you and take you out to a spot in the forest and leave you alone for two days. They would check on you in the morning and evening and bring you food and water. These were the first two days I had ever been alone in my life. How many of us have had the chance to spend many days alone? My ranger gave me a copy of Chief Seattle's Speech to Washington. The speech represented a view of the world that I had never encountered before and instantly resounded within me. The copy belonged to another Ranger named Wyatt. I met Wyatt on that trip and then worked at Philmont for several years with him. A few days after I moved to Gunnison I ran into him at a coffee shop. We are now very close friends. Our lives have interwoven more than once. Likewise, I think that it is no accident that I came across Abhayagiri in my search for places to study meditation. There are meditation centers all across the country now, but Abhayagiri is unique. It is one of the most strict monasteries in America. I have met other practitioners who have heard horror stories about how strict the monks are at Abhayagiri; it has quite a reputation. I do not think that I came across this incarnation of the Buddha's teaching by accident. It fits me so well; left on my own I can be very undisciplined. I also have always been more attracted to grand sweeping ideas than following all the little details. This is why I feel that it is a perfect fit, because it is in direct opposition to all of my tendencies.

I do not believe in beliefs—and a more mystical aspect of the path

Day 50: Crawfordsville, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 19, 2005

During my journaling, I've mentioned several times how Austin and I are amazed when we meet people who have narrow views about religious life. Yesterday, when I was looking through my Dad's books on Buddhism, I discovered several letters I had written to him, some of them on this very subject.

Over five years ago my Dad researched and gave a speech about my ordination. Below is part of a letter from me that was in response to some of his questions/research. My Dad gave me permission to share this:

“Dear Dad,

About my “beliefs:”

You might notice I used quotations around the word beliefs, because one of my main beliefs is that I do not believe in beliefs. One thing that really attracted me to Eastern Philosophy and Buddhism in particular is the use of reflection, observation and

investigation to seek Truth. Buddhism teaches that Truth can only really be known through direct experience. An intellectual understanding does not always help.

Let me give you an example; If I have an intellectual understanding (belief) that if I “let go” of anger—that “letting go” will make me happy—that belief will not help me when anger arises if I have not trained the mind to “let go” or if I have never had the experience of “letting go”.

Once I have the direct experience of “letting go” of anger, and experienced that freedom of release, then that direct knowledge can be of assistance in the future. When anger arises in the future, there will be a part of the mind that knows to “let go”. With practice, this knowledge to “let go” will come sooner and sooner—if I condition my mind to do so. Eventually the training of the mind can get so refined that you can actually see situations where anger might arise and you are able to avoid the situation altogether.

I guess beliefs to me are too rigid. They do not leave enough room for new possibilities. I’m sure you have heard the quote, “For the expert there are few options, for the beginner there are infinite possibilities.” I think that religious dogma’s, doctrines, and beliefs if blindly followed do not lead to peace and freedom. Dogma’s, doctrines, and beliefs need to be questioned, examined and experienced. You examine and experience these teachings by paying attention to your mind. Paying attention to your feelings, views, perceptions, opinions, thoughts, etc. You can learn how to do this through meditation. When the mind is developed and you are able to study religious teachings by reflecting about your daily life, then religion can be of great value.

The Buddha was quite clear that his teachings should not be “believed”.

There are two suttas that come to mind. The Kalama Sutta is one. In the other teaching, the Buddha has just finished giving a talk and he turns to his chief disciple and asks, “Sariputta, do you believe what I have just said?”

Venerable Sariputta says, “No Lord.” Can you imagine? So the Buddha asks him why not.

“Because I have never heard you teach this before and I have not had the time to examine it to see if it is in accord with my own experience.”

The Buddha then praises Sariputta and says this is indeed a wise answer.

The final thing that I would like to share—and probably the most important to me—is the fact that I “do not know”. The more I study and the clearer my mind becomes the more I realize I haven’t a clue. That is a good thing.

Last week I was trying to install a fire hydrant by the house. The water pressure on the line is about 150 psi. Well, I was having a terrible time trying to get it to work. The line leaked or broke three times and I was getting opinions and feedback from everybody. I

saw myself getting uptight and noticed my reaction was to “do” the things I had done before which worked, and I was not open to new information.

On the fourth attempt to hook up the hydrant, I was standing over the pipe when we turned the water on. The joint violently exploded right in my face. (Nobody was injured—physically!). This amazing clarity immediately came over me, while I was covered in mud and water, that I didn’t have a clue how to fix that water line, and that if I would just stop clinging to my views, maybe the answer would appear. The next morning WE solved the problem.

This admitting and actually developing the “not knowing” mind allows for investigation and observation to be present and healthy.

Well Dad, it’s getting late. I hope I don’t sound too preachy. These were just a few of the things I’ve been contemplating lately and thought I’d share them. If they do not meet your experience or you don’t agree with my thoughts, that’s okay.”

Reading the above letter, I find it interesting that my “beliefs” and understanding of how meditation works have not changed much these five years. Having read the above letter, you might also get a better understanding of why Austin and I find it so difficult to understand people who cling to their views.

Some of the experiences of this walk though, have opened me up to explore what I would have called a more mystical aspect of the path. I’m beginning to question how intention and prayer are related. Some of the events that have happened on this walk I truly believe were the result, at least partially, of other people’s prayers.

Well, Austin and I will be doing laundry today and packing our backpacks again. We have enjoyed our stay in Crawfordsville, and I think we are getting out of here before our welcome was worn out. (It helps if you sleep 10 to 12 hours a day.)

When we get to the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, I don’t think I’ll have much access to a computer, so won’t be checking emails very often. I will try to keep my journal going, as I’m sure many wonderful things will happen in Chicago. The journal probably will only get updated once a week though.

So please be patient.

Rested and well-fed

Day 51: Crawfordsville, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 20, 2005

Austin and I plan to be getting on an Amtrak train, headed for Chicago in about an hour.

Our stay with my parents has been very restful and we were well-fed.

I would have liked to have visited with more of my friends, and been able to show Austin a few more of my favorite spots in the county, like Shades State Park and Sugar Creek. There are many places on Sugar Creek where you can find fossils and geodes. We might stop back down here after our recovery period in Hinsdale, Illinois.

All for now.

Honoring our elders—a noble tradition

Day 52: Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 21, 2005

The train was delayed forty-five minutes into Chicago, due to heavy freight train use. Amtrak does not own the tracks, so the train system gives priority to freight lines. The conductor told us as we were departing the train, “As long as we are within an hour of our destination time, we are on time.” The forty-five minutes just gave me more time to sleep.

I had a splitting headache when we arrived into Chicago, so instead of taking the subway, we ended up taking a cab to Art’s condo. Once there, Austin called a pizzeria that he knew and ordered us a small deep-dish garlic and mushroom pizza. It was a delicious pizza, but I only ate half of what I “normally” would eat.

Art picked us up around 6 pm and purchased some groceries for us (raw garlic, ginger and ginger tea). He then drove us to Hinsdale and dropped us off at the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center. Ajahn Sunya and Ajahn Phra Kit warmly welcomed us and took us to a small house in the back of the property. Here Austin and I paid respects to the two

monks. This a noble tradition of honoring our elders by bowing to any monk who is senior to us. Many Westerners rebel against this custom, but once it has been practiced, a real sense of beauty can be detected in this form. It creates a harmony in the community and a noncompetitive attitude. Nobody is trying to outperform anybody else to get more seniority.

Awaiting us at the center was a wonderful care package, which I think Pamela produced at Abhayagiri. It was filled with lots of healing energy in the form of vitamins, herbal teas, energy drink packets, maple sugar candies, dark chocolate, Altoids, a phone card, and well-wishes from the community. If I had not been so tired, I'm sure my face would have looked angelic at receiving such a generous and thoughtful package.

Back among Buddhists

Day 53: Hinsdale, IL.

Austin Stewart

April 22, 2005

The grounds of BDMC are very pleasant. The lawn is long with a variety of fruit trees in full bloom in neat rows. There are two houses at the back of the property. We are residing in one with a Thai monk, Phra Phrakit. The main building is quite large and sits at the front of the property. It used to be a Christian church. The Dhamma hall is simple and clean with a beautiful Buddha image surrounded by magenta faux-lotus blossoms. Faux flowers can be very tacky, but these are absolutely gorgeous; plump plastic lotuses. There are at least 100 blossoms ringing the Buddha image. There are still many pews left from the past.

None of the monks who live here have the best English and our Thai and Singalese is nonexistent. This makes even basic communication very difficult. Actually, Jotipalo can ask where the bathroom is and say that he doesn't know how to speak Thai. I don't think that they even knew that I was coming. Being that there are no other anagarikas here I do not even have anyone to watch as an example for how to act. It is a good mindfulness practice but often I am left without praise or blame either, so I do not know if I am stepping on any toes or not. The mind wants to worry about it, but what can I do? I will abide by the precepts, be respectful, humble and mindful. The only other layperson here is the cook. She is an old Chinese woman who speaks a little Thai with a heavy Chinese accent and less English with the same accent. She is a very good cook, but as far as someone to ask about how to act . . .

Each monastery operates in a different way and with the communication issues it is hard

to know how it all works here. It is a strange sensation to know that to be polite you must act in a different way than you are used to, but to only have a hint of what that way is. I find myself hesitating a lot and waiting for invitations to act rather than just acting on my own. These are the challenges of the moment, how do I make use of this moment? What can I learn from this situation?

There have been some great moments. Last night the Sri Lankan monk, Bhante Seelaratana and another visiting Sri Lankan monk did the chanting. The Thai monks were all gone for the evening, so the chanting was in the Sri Lankan style. It was so beautiful. They have a whole different rhythm and use a five-tone system and they articulate the Pali extremely well. In our tradition we just use three tones.

After Puja we had a Dhamma discussion with Bhante Seelaratana. It was good to hear a Sri Lankan perspective. A major part of their training is to learn the entire Pali Canon. The Tipitaka in Pali is the oldest teaching and it is considered the direct teachings of the Buddha. He was adamant that we read the entire canon and learn it well. He said that it is important that we know it because we are the ones who will teach the Dhamma in this country. He is afraid that the Buddha's teaching will get distorted here. I think that he has reason to be afraid. Yesterday we walked by a bookstore with two of three display windows full of Buddha images and all the latest flashy books. Buddhism sells especially if you water down the teachings a little bit and leave out things that may make readers uncomfortable. We are apt in this country to conform spiritual practice to our views rather than conform our views to spiritual practice. We have a long history of this. There are over 300 branches of the Christian Church in this country. By contrast there are around thirty in Europe. If we don't like something we change it and then say it is the same thing. Look at all the yoga in this country; how do you know which one to choose? Bikram yoga has been patenting poses and suing other teachers for teaching them. Gyms often have weekend sessions to "train" yoga instructors. The spiritual aspect is totally left out and it is sold as exercise rather than the spiritual training that it is. Fortunately there are still yoga instructors out there who have studied many years with Indian masters and can transmit a true teaching.

Buddhism could easily become diluted in this country. The cost of this move is drastic. Without the complete teaching there is no Nibbana. This generation is responsible for laying a strong foundation for future generations. Out of compassion for later generations we must be true to what the Buddha taught. Little you can get in this country is built to last. If it breaks get a new one. We must build Buddhism to last in this country. We cannot be driven by preferences. It is up to us to make the sacrifices to insure that the next generation has a wealth of good teachers and a wealth of good centers for study. When we practice we must sustain effort not only for ourselves, but for every being born after us. This is our duty as seekers in this country, the Buddha's teaching is still young here, we need to blaze a reliable trail through this dense wilderness we call America.

I realize that what I just wrote sounds a little preachy. A little Tipitaka thumping if you will, or even if you won't. These are my views, and they are only that, views. I am sure

that they will change, but I do feel that it is important that we do not let the Buddha's teaching sway under our preferences.

The hunter and the prey

Day 55: Hinsdale, IL.

Austin Stewart

April 24, 2005

Last night when I posted this journal entry, I mulled it over in my head. After speaking to my mother, she had just read it and asking Jotipalo about it, I decided to add an introduction. Both thought that people may question my sanity when they read it. I started writing about the tribe in Africa with some other intention in mind and this is what happened. I offer it up for reflection. I am still reflecting on it and though I like it I am still unsure about it. In the flow of my writing and reflecting it is something of an oddity. It is much more visceral and intense than I tend to write, or tend to view the practice. I have wandered into a phase of trying to shake things up for myself. I have found that I am very set in my views and a lot of my questioning has ceased. So perhaps that is where this erupted from. With out further ado . . .

There is one tribe in Africa that still hunts the way our ancestors did; they run their prey to death. They take advantage of our biped nature to outdistance quadrupeds. They also make use of our ability to carry and store water. Those two skills are not enough however. The "runner" is a master tracker. Seeing someone do this is to watch a person in a deep state of concentrated awareness. First, the animal is split off from the herd and then he must follow the animal's trail. If he loses the trail he embodies the animal, confused, frightened, exhausted. Which way would it run? Finally he closes in on it; it has collapsed and would die on its own, but he lobs a spear, out of ceremony, into its side and says a blessing over its body.

The grasping mind is the animal awareness the hunter. We must track down our animal and slay it. To do this takes conviction, effort, persistence, mindfulness, wisdom. We must use all of these skills to chase our prey, to weary it, to root it out, and finally when it has collapsed we see that what we have chased down is our "self." Staring into our watery, frantic, life-craving eyes, are we able to throw the spear?

Reflections and relations

Day 56: Hinsdale, Illinois

Austin Stewart

April 25, 2005

The earth's sprinkled
with rain, wind
is blowing, lightning
wanders the sky,
but my thoughts are stilled,
well-centered
my mind.
[Theragata I.50]

There are times when truth strikes you like a cool breeze on a hot day. It is at once shocking and refreshing. Then the mind coils around some desire or concern and it is forgotten, but if you put effort into meditation those brief winds of truth can become a constant steady flow that relaxes and lifts the mind, letting it float gently with the rhythms of life.

The time here at BDMC has been wonderful. The mind has surrendered in regards to not knowing what is going on most of the time. I do my best but that is all I can do. I am falling into the rhythms of the place. I have had the great fortune of conversing quite a lot with Bhante Seelaratana. He is a Sri Lankan monk who recently came to America. He is trying to learn spoken English. He speaks well, but struggles for words sometimes. There must be a potential for great frustration to be very well educated in the Dhamma, in the truth the Buddha taught, and then struggle to communicate it with those who are hungry for it. Jotipalo and I gave the Dhamma talk on Sunday. Many of the supporters were very happy to have us here. It has been a long time since they have had someone who could speak fluent English at the monastery. Even the Thai people were happy because their children do not understand much Thai. They are American kids. I think that it would be of great benefit to the community to have a resident Western monk, or perhaps to host Western monks for a few months at a time. People here are excited for the Dhamma, but the language barrier is difficult to overcome.

After the Dhamma talk Bhante Seelaratana asked to meet with me in the evening. I must admit I was a little intimidated. He ordained in 1973! That is four years before I was born. He had been the abbot at a large monastery in Sri Lanka for many years. He decided that he wanted some time off. His students jumped at the chance to run things and he came here to live a simple life and try and teach Dhamma. When I met with him in the evening he told me that he could only understand a little of what we said and so I explained our talk to him. We started out by reading the Metta Sutta, or the Buddha's Words on Lovingkindness. Ajahn Pasanno had suggested that we use it as a theme for the walk. In turn we used that connection as the theme of our Dhamma talk. The Metta Sutta

is beautiful because it is all- inclusive for how one following the Buddha's path should act. It was first given by the Buddha when two monks came to him relating a story of being chased from a forest by the devas, or spirits living there. He gave this sutta and told them to return to the forest and chant it and they would not be harmed. It is a vibrant teaching because when you are chanting it you are expressing to all beings the ideals by which you seek to live. Upon hearing this they are put at ease and it allows you to recollect how the Buddha said to live your life. If you chant it sincerely you are setting intentions to live that way. Repeating it often you condition the mind to reflect on those words. Oftentimes during the day the mind pulls it up of its own accord. It is like a catchy song that the mind plays over and over again.

After a long conversation revolving around aspects of the Dhamma we conducted evening Puja and then I told him how many people ask me about Buddhism and that I start with the Four Noble Truths. "No, no, no," he said. "You must start from the beginning, with the four signs." With that he laid out a beautiful exposition of the Buddha's path to awakening. I realized that he was right; if I start with the Four Noble Truths I skip a very important part of the equation. The questions that Buddha tried to answer about life are as important as the answer. They are the staircase leading to the door of wisdom. Even though I have heard them countless times, going through the logic that began his search is still illuminating. I will use my next journal entry to go into the specifics of his journey.

One thing that Bhante Silaratana stresses is to teach from the Suttas to show people the words of the Buddha and to do that we must learn them thoroughly. And teach only from them. In the Thai Forest Tradition you are chastised for researching and planning out Dhamma talks in advance. The emphasis is on spontaneity and direct experience. At first it seems hard to reconcile these two views on how to teach, but I think that they can be reconciled. The Buddha taught in many different ways for all the different kinds of people. The more of the Suttas that you read and can recall as a teacher the more dynamic you can be. On the other side, a strong meditation practice allows you to directly experience Dhamma and teach from that experience. Developing both sides allows you to give deep, rich teachings and transmit the Dhamma to many different kinds of people.

I also had the great fortune to edit a small introductory Dhamma booklet that Bhante is producing for Vesak, the full moon commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and death of the Buddha. It is the full moon of May. It is his first gift of written Dhamma in English. I think it will be very helpful for those who are interested in Buddhism and need a firm place to start.

It snowed two days ago and now a warm day has met us in a way that almost wipes away the memory of my so recently red ears and nose. Ah spring, the most bipolar of seasons.

Assault of the fleas

Day 53: Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 22, 2005

Last night Austin and I were feeling good enough to attend evening chanting. The Thai monks were all away, so Bhante Silarattana and another Sri Lankan monk led the chanting. They chant in a different style and it was absolutely beautiful. I couldn't chant with them because the rhythm and cadence was so different, even though I knew most of the words.

After the evening sit, Bhante Silarattana asked me what kind of meditation I use. I said, "Budd-dho meditation", meaning anapanasati or breath meditation.

Bhante said, "Oh Buddhanussati—very good reflection on the Buddha's wholesome qualities."

Miscommunications are common when you have several nationalities living under the same roof. The cook is a seventy-eight-year-old Chinese woman who speaks very little Thai and her English is in a Chinese accent.

Now that we are not staying at my parent's house, Austin and I have added raw garlic to our diet. If it doesn't kill the mono virus, it might give us more solitude!

I'm still able to sleep most of the afternoons. When I got up this afternoon, I noticed Austin was sitting on his bed with a dejected look on his face.

"What's wrong?" I asked.

"I was just assaulted by an army of fleas," Austin replied and smiled.

He managed to carry most of them outside. Austin then asked the remaining fleas not to bite him, and they have not bitten so far.

Big Sadhu

Day 54: Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 23, 2005

Austin tells me it snowed today.

I wouldn't know, as I slept most of the day. I'm feeling much better though. I'm actually forcing myself to lay down for a good portion of the day. I'm sitting more, but even this can get me tired after awhile.

About 30 Sri Lankans came to offer the meal today. It was a joy to see about ten pre-school aged children wobbling around the grown ups legs, sneaking looks at the monks in our bright colored robes.

The Sri Lankan community invites Bhante Kondanno from New York to come teach their children Dhamma. They fly him here once a month and have been doing this for six years! He is a wonderful monk and very skilled with children.

After the meal Austin and I went to hang out with Bhanta Kondanno. He was sitting on the floor talking to a group of three young children. Shawn, who was four, pointed to Austin and said, "Sadhu."

Bhante responded, "Yes, someday Austin will become a Buddhist sadhu."

Austin noticed everybody here says, "Will become," not, "Will you become?"

Later in the conversation, Shawn was again pointing at Austin, this time saying, "Big Sadhu."

At 5 p.m. Ajahn Phra Kit arraigned for Austin and I to go to Wat Dhammaram. Twelve bhikkhus from several monasteries gathered there to recite the Patimokkha.

Every new and full moon, if four or more bhikkhus are gathered in a monastery or territory, the monks are allowed to formally chant the monastic rules. It takes a skilled chanter about 45 minutes to chant all 227 rules. This is done from memory, while another monk will read along silently in a book to make sure he chants it correctly. It is a very impressive experience to be part of such a ceremony.

I was very happy to be in attendance for the chanting of the Patimokkha, as it was the first time I had heard it in six months. Living with Ajahn Punnadhammo this winter, our ceremony was much shorter, especially as we were the only two monks there.

During the drive back, Austin mentioned that it was wonderful to be at Wat Dhammaram and at Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, as we have had several good Dhamma conversations with people here. The Buddha taught that one of the highest blessings is to "discuss the Dhamma."

We make a good team

Day 55: Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 24, 2005

Today was a fun day, despite the fact that my throat is slightly more irritated than it had been in previous days. I didn't sleep well last night—not surprising considering how little physical activity I do and how much I've been sleeping during the day.

This morning the temple had a 9 a.m. service for the local community. About 10 people came for the 9-9:20 meditation (five of the 10 were monks, and Austin was the sixth). About 25 people were in attendance for the chanting, and about 50 were here for the Dhamma talk. It looked like closer to 75 were here for the meal!

Austin and I were asked to give the Dhamma talk. We discussed a general outline for the talk beforehand and decided to discuss the pilgrimage and how we have used the Metta Sutta as our main theme of contemplation during the walk.

The local community (and the monks, too) were appreciative to have native English speakers give the talk. I can appreciate this, as I have often struggled listening to skilled teachers try to talk in English. Though they were very knowledgeable, something can get lost in language.

I was very impressed with how effortlessly Austin was able to speak and draw his stories back to the Metta Sutta. I felt like we made a good team.

The meal was excellent, lots of Thai curry and other Thai food. I told Austin that I'm glad they don't eat like this everyday, as I might not want to leave. After the meal I spent some time talking to people before I went to get some rest.

This evening they didn't have a formal puja, so I took the time to do some computer work. While in the office I could hear Ajahn Sanya counseling some lay guests. He is such a wonderful host, giving cookies to all the children who entered the office and cake to the adults. He made me a cup of coffee, which I hadn't requested but appreciated nonetheless.

After leaving the office I found myself locked out of the house which Austin and I are staying. It seems that Ajahn Phra Kit has moved into the main house, probably as a precaution against getting mono. I figured that Austin was probably back at the main building and, sure enough, found him in conversation with Bhante Silarattana. Bhante couldn't understand our Dhamma talk, as we spoke too quickly. I guess he liked the idea

of the talk, but he feels you should only read the suttas when you talk, or quote from them throughout the entire talk.

The Thai forest tradition gives Dhamma talks in such a different style than Bhante's Sri Lankan tradition, so it was easy to receive his criticism, especially knowing the following story:

When Laung Por Sumedho was a junior monk, his teacher Ajahn Chah, informed Tahn Sumedho that he was going to be giving his first Dhamma talk in a few days time. So Tahn Sumedho planned out his talk in advance, researching it quite well. After the talk he got lots of praise from the other monks for giving such a thoughtful talk. It wasn't until a few days later that Tahn Sumedho saw Ajahn Chah for the first time since giving the talk. Expecting praise, he was met with these harsh words: "Sumedho don't ever do that again."

Even good things can be a source of suffering

Day 56: Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 25, 2005

Nothing happened today.

That isn't exactly true, of course. We had French toast, scrambled eggs and bacon for breakfast.

I called Abhayagiri this morning and spoke to Ajahn Sudanto. While talking to him I heard myself say, "If Austin gets better a lot sooner than I do, maybe you could meet him in St. Louis, Missouri and walk in my place while I recover."

On one level this is an interesting idea, but just saying it made me depressed.

"Maybe I won't be able to continue walking," I hear the mind protest.

I don't like this thought, but I'm allowing it into my consciousness. It is interesting that after three days of feeling better, just two days of a sore throat has me down. Even good things can be a source of suffering.

Today I saw myself running through various possibilities of how we could get to Thunder

Bay if my condition doesn't improve to the point where I will be able to walk again.

But in reality I just need to be patient. We will definitely stay at the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center for another 10 days, and our health could improve a lot during that time. Already I'm not nearly as tired, and my fevers have disappeared.

We are considering going down to Champaign-Urbana, IL to visit Sandra Hammond and her meditation group, possibly participating in several days of teachings on May 8th and 9th.

Though on many levels I'm feeling better and my throat is the only real concern right now, I did notice for really the first time on this walk that I was annoyed at Austin yesterday. After speaking so eloquently during the Dhamma talk, the rest of the day his speech pattern went more like this: "I was just..." or "The clock seems to be..." Austin wouldn't finish a sentence until I prompted him with a statement like, "The clock seems to be what?"

This was fine the first few times, but after the sixteenth time I let him know it was annoying me.

When I asked Austin if he minded that I write this, he just laughed and said, "No, because it is true."

The Promised Synopsis of Buddhism

Day 58: Hinsdale, IL.

Austin Stewart

April 27, 2005

Illness slips out like the tide. Energy crops up with abundance where once the waters of illness camped. Tide pools of exhaustion can still be found, but even they will slowly drain. Will I soon forget what it is to be ill only to be taken unawares the next time it floods the body? Or will this experience impact how I lead my life? Eventually, if this body does not meet a violent end, the endless tides of illness will drown it.

This body is fragile, something as tiny as a virus can ravage it and sometimes leave it quaking on the edge of death. How many times do we make resolutions to do something better in the future? Do we consider how uncertain the future is? I guess that is the nice thing about resolving to do something in the future. You never have to do it. If you resolve to do something right now in this moment you have to actually do the work and that is no fun at all. We are all subject to birth, aging, illness and death. Do we bring that to mind often, or would we rather not think about being old and arthritic on an oxygen tube and in diapers? Death awaits all of us, and old age awaits most of us. Do we just live to have fun all the time? What happens when we get ill or have a major accident? Are we prepared to deal with the depression that rises as happiness sets? Is there a deeper happiness that does not fade in the face of adversity, a lasting peace? How do we access it, and what must we sacrifice to attain it?

The Buddha, before he was known as the Buddha was a prince. His father attempted to shield him from suffering of every kind, from minor irritations to the reality of death. It is said that before he left home on the search that would lead to his enlightenment he saw four signs an ill man, an old man, a corpse, and a wandering mendicant. The question arose in his mind, 'Being subject to aging, illness and death why do I seek fulfillment in that which is also subject to aging, illness and death?' He could see that everything in life was impermanent including himself. He went out to seek something permanent. He studied with various teachers and attained what they had attained. Through investigation he saw that those attainments were themselves impermanent and so he struck out on his own and practiced asceticism so extreme that he was barely alive. He saw that starving the body dulled the mind, just as living a life of abundance also dulled the mind. He saw that there was a middle way namely taking only that which you need to sustain a strong practice. Living thus he sat under the Bodhi Tree. He entered deep concentration. Through observing the world with "clear seeing" or vipassana he was able to see that all conditioned things, i.e. everything in the universe, had three characteristics. They were impermanent and because of their impermanence they were inherently unfulfilling and there was no lasting self to be found. Seeing the truth of the way things are, or the Dhamma, he attained Nibbana. He described Nibbana as the deathless, the uncreated, and the unconditioned. Nibbana is only understandable through direct experience. It is beyond language because it is beyond the conditioned universe. At first he thought that he would be incapable of teaching what he had discovered, but then he formulated four truths to point the way. He called them noble truths because they were not absolute truth, but they were noble in that understanding them one can penetrate the absolute truth for oneself.

The Four Noble Truths:

1. Life is stressful
2. There is a cause of that stress.
3. There is a ceasing of that stress.
4. There is a path leading to the ceasing of stress.

The cause of stress is ignorance to the way things are. We seek fulfillment and a sense of self in things that are inherently bound to change and thus we suffer. The stressfulness of life ceases with the arising of wisdom about the way things are, and there is a path leading to wisdom. That path is the Middle Way, or the Noble Eightfold path.

Much like squeezing an orange to get orange juice I have squeezed the Buddha's teaching to get the nectar. To get something useful for those who may be reading this with little exposure to how the eyes of a Buddhist view the world. I request that if you feel moved by the Buddha's teaching examine it before adopting it. You only know what a lemon tastes like if you have tasted it yourself. Belief in something is an act of laziness, but understanding of something is an act of effort. Do not be complacent and just believe things because others do. Question everything!

Fear

Day 59: Hinsdale, IL.

Austin Stewart

April 28, 2005

It is strange to write this journal knowing that it will be posted on the internet for anyone who comes across it to read. Most of the entries are reflections and interactions that I have had on this walk. I would not say they are truth, but one person's view on the world around him and within him. Hopefully my reflections will come to some benefit to others. Generally anything that I write fails to see an audience. This is because I tend to be shy about my writing. I can see that this shyness has stemmed directly from seeking praise and being fearful of criticism. Winning an essay contest I feel more confident of my writing, but if I send writing in to other places for publication will I lose confidence in my writing if I am turned down?

During most of my life aversion to being thought poorly of has given rise to many lies. Rather than be honest with others about my failings I would lie about them. I was fearful of blame and the consequences of my actions. The first step on this path for me was honesty. Often I can feel the old nagging habit to cover a mistake I make rather than be honest about it. An open heart must be an honest heart. Whenever the urge to disguise a fault arises I can feel the heart close a little, but answering honestly the heart is unclenched. There is something about facing the consequences of my actions that feels good. It is the feeling of letting go of a burden and not being so concerned for the self.

On this walk I have had glimpses into the personal lives of people from all across the country. Out of sensitivity I have held back many stories that sang in my ear as it is not my business to propagate the specifics of the way others suffer. But I have seen one constant in my travels thus far: people suffer. We are all infinitely skilled at it. Often despite pleasant conditions we still find a way to create stress. This does not just apply to those we have met, but it also applies to Jotipalo and I. Whether monastic or layperson, rich or poor, under a tarp or under a roof, we can find something to hold onto or try to get away from and create stress around it. Much as with the fears I discussed about writing and accepting the consequences of my actions we must ask why does suffering arise, and how can we let it cease?

I have also had the opportunity to witness beautiful acts of generosity and gratitude, and compassion and lovingkindness; acts that have calmed and brightened the heart. Often on days filled with struggle we would find ourselves beset by generous acts. When I reflect on the fact that it has been almost 60 days since we started I am humbled and joyful. I know many of you who have donated so many of your resources to us are reading this. I can recall every act of generosity from day one, just as I remember your act so should you. May the memory of what you have done bring as much joy as the memory of receiving it does me. Acting out of kindness and generosity and responding with gratitude are toxic to selfishness. I am beginning to see that these qualities are the foundation for spiritual practice. They redefine the world and through that redefinition the stage is set for spiritual practice. Selfishness diminishes in the glow of these virtues.

If only we can all persevere on our paths, whatever tradition they may be, and try to lift the veil of ignorance and shake loose our views; being free from our views all the various ways we induce suffering in our life will collapse having removed the foundation. What will we see when our obstacles are gone?

This is a quote from the front of a book of Venerable Master Chin Kung's works. I must admit I have not read the book. While I was formulating this entry I saw the book on the shelf and opened it up and this is what I found,

“Remember the kindness of others: Repay that kindness with gratitude.”

Fitting, don't you think?

"I can't believe you are here"

Day 59: Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 28, 2005

I've been wondering if I would run into anybody on this pilgrimage that I knew. Today when I came over to the main building for the meal Ajahn Ritthi from Atammayatarama in Seattle, Washington was here. I've met him several times at Abhayagiri. This past winter a student of his, Lee, was living at Abhayagiri. Lee told Ajahn about our walk, so he was surprised to see me here. We both kept looking at each other with big smiles saying, "I can't believe you are here."

Ajahn Ritthi walked with Austin and myself around the property and main buildings, pointing to various work projects which he had helped to undertake. The assembly hall has a beautiful hardwood floor. I had assumed it was there from when this was a Baptist church. Not so. Ajahn told us they put the flooring in by hand and it took six months to complete. Ajahn had such a joy in his heart seeing how well the fruit trees were doing which he helped to plant five years ago. I also noticed he was examining several projects that were not done correctly; he was examining them to learn from the mistakes.

I know the joy Ajahn was feeling, as I have a similar experience walking around the grounds at Abhayagiri. With the exception of the work that is happening there right now, I can almost point to everything at Abhayagiri and know how I contributed to the growth of the monastery through the building process. This wholesome livelihood is very good for building non-remorse and gladness in the heart, which is a foundation for meditation practice.

When I walk around Abhayagiri and know all the things that I and others have done to build the monastery it also makes it easier to appreciate the hard work that other communities put into building their facilities. It is so easy to show up at a retreat center or a monastery and just view the place like it has always existed. But when you see something come into existence, you also get a real sense that it too is impermanent. The Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center was not long ago a thriving monastery that offered retreats and had a thriving monastic community. That isn't the case right now and the future is uncertain as to how it will unfold.

After the meal, Austin and I, both feeling better, decided to go for another long walk. We discovered a small pond that is also a state park just a ten-minute walk from here. The neighborhood is lovely with several multimillion dollar houses and manicured lawns. We can stroll through their neighborhoods for hours and not meet a soul. It's probably a bit noisier during the summer, judging by all the basketball goals in the driveways. We ended up walking for about an hour.

This evening John Cianciosi picked up Austin and me at 6 pm. We had agreed to speak to his yoga class, which he teaches through the College of DuPage County. About ten students came, which was about half what John was expecting.

At one point somebody asked a question about how to evaluate a particular meditation method. Not having experience teaching meditation to others, I tried to pass the question off to John. He was much too clever, and threw it back at me.

The students really liked the stories about the walk, and several students followed us all the way out to the parking lot, still asking questions as we got into John's vehicle!

When I was living at Abhayagiri, for two summers I took on a little of the teaching responsibilities by leading the discussion on the monk's rules. Often after leading these classes I was not able to sleep that night. Last night that happened to me again.

Dumb As A Post

Day 59: Hinsdale, IL.

Austin Stewart

April 28, 2005

Last night we went to Ajahn John's meditation and yoga class he teaches at a community college. Ajahn John was a monk for many years, his name was Ajahn Jagaro. He was ordained in the same lineage that Jotipalo has ordained in. The class was very interested in what we were doing and had many questions about Buddhism, meditation and the walk.

In response to a question on meditation I brought up a contemplation I have found helpful. I am an intellectual person. The mind is always full of great ideas and solutions and words. I have a great fondness for words. Beautiful alluring sentences and lines of poetry often arise in the mind when I sit. Like a spooked horse the mind will go charging off into the underbrush of language and I can barely stay in the saddle, much less stop it. A few days ago the mind kept grasping at thoughts and feelings doing its utmost to distract the attention from the breath. The image of a fencepost arose in the mind and the cliché, "Dumb as a post," followed it. The mind lit up, what are the qualities of a fencepost?

Generally a post has good posture it is well-grounded and does not slouch. If it is hot it

doesn't care, if it is cold it is not worried, even if it gets covered in bird excrement it stands strong. It has no judgments about how it, or its environment should be, it just is. As the years pass its form slowly decays but still it does not protest it withers and finally collapses and returns its elements to that from which it drew them. So when my mind attaches to a peaceful state I bring up the image of the post, when it is very chatty, the post, when it complains, the post. Once I contemplate the post the mind quiets down and observes the breath and other phenomena without interfering, just as the post stands in the rain without opening an umbrella.

A good example for the President?

Day 60: Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 29, 2005

We are both showing more signs of better health. I've felt good now five out of the last seven days, and two in a row. So we are starting to make plans to move on. We still feel we need to wait a good three weeks before we start walking again though.

Our plan right now is to stay here until May 5th, then go into downtown Chicago and stay at Art's condo. We'll take a train down to Champaign—Urbana on the afternoon of May 7th. Sandra Hammond has a meditation retreat schedule for the 8th and asked if we could come down and participate in that retreat, possibly giving the talk that evening. I visited with this group before the pilgrimage began, and many people in this sangha are following our journal, so we wanted to support Sandra and the group in this way.

We also got word from the Bhavana Society in West Virginia that we are welcome to visit. So after spending a few days at my parents house (I hope), we will board yet another train for Staunton, VA. From there it is a one-hour bus ride to Winchester, VA, where the Bhavana Society can pick us up. So we hope to spend a week here, and will leave shortly after Visakha Puja on May 22nd. We are hoping that we will get to spend a day or two in Washington, DC.

I've been kidding Austin that I want to go to the White House and sit out front with a placard that reads, "We are not protesting, we are sitting—to set a good example for the President."

Maybe we could start a mass sit-in, in front of the White House? I'll start it, but then I'm leaving for Missouri.

Austin called his friend Betsy, who graciously hosted us in Memphis, TN and Horse Shoe Lake, AR. I was happy to hear that she did not get our illness and that her design for the art competition was selected as a finalist. She won \$500 just for her design and now she gets to produce the art work, which she could win an additional \$200— \$500 depending on how the judges view her work.

The great flood

Day 61: Hinsdale, IL

Austin Stewart

April 30, 2005

For now the mind is clear and bright, but soon enough my mindfulness will slip out and identification with nama and rupa, or mind and body, will slip in. Even now there is a sense of "I," but there is awareness of that sense of "I." The slipping in and out of mindful-awareness is natural. The mind desires the thrill of immersion in experience, not the peace of detachment from experience. The bounds of the mind are determined by how it conditions itself. It is like an anthill. There are times in life when the hill of self gets brushed away, but the ants are busy immediately rebuilding it. Often there is a sense of anguish with the fading of the peace felt from concentration. Greed arises around it. The mind craves it now, but what does that craving do? It acts as a block to the whole process. Desire arises from thinking of the "self." The goal of Buddhism is to dissolve that sense of self and transcend the endless reconstruction of the anthill. But how does one seek without seeking? In the following sutta the flood is the entire conditioned universe:

From the Samyutta Nikaya:

As she was standing there, she said to him [The Buddha], "Tell me, dear sir, how you crossed over the flood."

"I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place (or: unestablished)."

"But how, dear sir, did you cross over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place?"

"When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place."

What does the Buddha mean by this? I have been contemplating not going forward and not standing still a lot recently in reference to the practice of mindfulness. Standing still is being complacent and going forward is desiring to accomplish something. The Buddha's path is to do neither of these, but to be actively aware of the present moment.

Grateful for my teachers

Day 61: Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

April 30, 2005

A few days ago I was asked to "prepare" a Dhamma talk for Sunday. So I've been doing a bit more reading the last couple days than I normally do.

I'm just about finished with Paul Brieter's book, *Venerable Father: A Life with Ajahn Chah*. It is an insightful and often humorous account of Paul's six years as a monk, during the days when the Western Sangha was just getting started. I've read this book several times and continue to gain more from it each time I read it. Reading it, in the context that Austin and I are staying in a monastery that is run in a drastically different style than Abhayagiri, has made this reading even that much more potent.

It would be safe to say that the first three years of the monastic training were difficult for me. I was able to do what was required of me for the most part, but my mind rebelled against the form. Why can't we have more free time? Why do we always have to have to have morning puja? Why do the senior monks always travel so much?

The mind was never happy or at peace, and the cause of that suffering was always coming from the schedule or from those with whom I was living. "If they would just do things the way I want them to be done, nobody would suffer," I'd hear myself complain.

Paul elegantly describes Ajahn Chah's teaching style by saying, "More than merely teaching people, Ajahn Chah trained them, creating a general environment and specific situations where they could learn about themselves." So I think his emphasis was on training, not teaching to understand. This is not to say that he did not teach "profound" Dhamma.

Paul also wrote this: "I often felt that his methods were drastic and extreme, and maybe he didn't make the absolutely best decision in every particular case, but it didn't matter

because the practice was to take things as they come. We could trust that he really cared about us and that ultimately we were guided by his superior wisdom and the monk's discipline itself.”

What he was trying to accomplish was of itself pretty drastic, i.e. to deliver people from the clutches of Mara (the Evil One—the Tempter).

It has been wonderful to read these reflections about how the training works and how Ajahn Chah used Vinaya skillfully. The longer I stay in this training I feel a real sense of appreciation and gratitude towards my teachers, Ajahn Pasanno and Ajahn Amaro.

I once heard the difference between appreciation and gratitude is that with appreciation there is a feeling of thanks. With gratitude that feeling is there but there is also a sense that you want to do something to pay back that appreciation. I've felt all along that this pilgrimage is one way that I can help to establish the Thai Forest tradition in America. With a deep sense of gratitude I offer any merit that arises from that intention and the actions of the walk to be shared with my teachers.

Forced to look at the craving mind

Day 62: Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 1, 2005

So the Dhamma talk I was asked to “prepare” was delivered. Yesterday I discussed several topics with Austin. I saw the talk could wander in many different ways depending on my mood, so I stopped worrying about it and prepared to just see what happened when I opened my mouth.

One subject I had thought I would discuss, but didn’t, is the following conversation I had with a layman I met here a few days ago. He said he was struggling to make sense of his life, to find meaningful work and how to be happy. He said that he grew up Catholic and still attended the church, but also viewed himself as a Buddhist. He said the only thing he didn’t like about Buddhist teachings was that he was now aware of his aging. He was one year younger than me.

At one point he said, “I can see that you are pretty happy being a monk, but don’t you think maybe being a monk is copping out of the world?”

I answered him by explaining how the precepts and the monastic form don’t allow you to escape from the world; the monastic form in fact makes you experience life in the raw. The experience of difficulty most people feel comes from not getting what they want or being separated from what they love. By using precepts, and training with them, you are forced to look at the craving mind. When a desire to eat a snack in the afternoon arises and you have undertaken a vow not to eat after noon until dawn the next day, the only thing you can do is look at that craving. If you could just go to the refrigerator and grab a bite to eat, you never get to see how the mind works.

In response to his comment that he didn’t like the fact that he was now aware of his aging, I told him how when I got on the train to come up to Chicago I saw a fragile man who may have only been about sixty-five years old enter the train. He wasn’t really old-looking, but you wouldn’t think he was in the prime of his life. I was watching him find his seat and I was thinking to myself, “He is probably only twenty-five years older than I am.”

I then went on to explain the five subjects for frequent recollection. The way we chant them at Abhayagiri is as follows:

I am of the nature to age; I have not gone beyond aging.

I am of the nature to sicken; I have not gone beyond sickness.

I am of the nature to die; I have not gone beyond dying.

All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become separated from me. I am the owner of my actions.

Ajahn Geoff at Wat Metta in Southern California translates the first three lines:

I am of the nature to age, aging is unavoidable (sickness is unavoidable, death is unavoidable).

I have always preferred this translation because it directly points out that these are issues I need to be reflecting on right now. Ajahn Geoff also points out another skillful way to use this same reflection is to use the words, “May I be happy even while aging (sick or dying).”

May I be happy while dying? Or maybe use the words, “Could I be content watching a loved one die?” Have I developed a mind that can be content in these situations? If not, then the reflection, “What am I doing in my life right now that will allow me to be content in those situations?” It points to the fifth of the reflections about kamma. “Am I creating the conditions right now, so that when sickness and death do occur I can be at ease with the situation?”

So in response the layman’s desire to find meaningful work, I suggested that he keep these five reflections in mind. If you understand that death is unavoidable and that we are aging, that seems to me would help you to seek work that is skillful.

So that is what I had intended to talk about this morning

Looking into the forest

Day 63: Hinsdale, Illinois

Austin Stewart

May 2, 2005

Ours plans for the next step are shaking themselves out. We are parting ways for a brief time. I am going to make a short visit to see my parents in Iowa. Then Jotipalo and I will reconnect on the train and head out to West Virginia to spend a week at Bhavana Society. After that we will fly to St. Louis and hope to start walking again!

I was hoping to be in Iowa when my brother and sister were there, but even though that will not happen I am excited to see my parents. There is a large forest preserve across the highway with a great hiking path. The Raccoon River winds along one side of the preserve. In the summer the woods are deep, shaded and dense. The land is quite steep and the hills are made of topsoil draped over clay. Rocks are few and far between except at the bottoms of the deep ravines, where shale and a touch of limestone poke out of the

dark black soil and the ochre clay. The terrain grows calm as it nears the river and then flattens out entirely.

It is easy to walk through the woods taken by this or that tree, but what about stepping back and looking at the entire forest. The flora varies greatly from hilltop to ravine to floodplain. The oaks grow on high dry ground with good drainage; cottonwoods and willows crowd each other to be close to the riverbank. The nettles agree that saturated ground is best, whereas the poison ivy and Virginia creeper are at home with the oak. I have by no means covered the full range of flora to be found in this patch of forest, and I have yet to speak of the wary whitetail deer, or the plump chatter-prone red squirrel. Ajahn Chah said that all we need to know we can learn from the forest, if we pay attention and if we have the right view.

The law of kamma (Sanskrit: karma) is key to the Buddha's teaching. Kamma translates as "action." Actions have consequences. If there is an early frost plants will wither. If you hold your breath too long you will pass out. Every moment is supported by the moment before it and the changes that occur from the last moment to this moment condition the next moment. All of the events in our lives lead up to this moment. I am on this pilgrimage because I was born to my parents, because of how I was brought up and how I reacted to being brought up. Some of those reactions were to deeply question the ways of the world. I tried various other paths before Buddhism.

For a long time I thought that art held the answers that I was looking for, or that it was truly important, but after a while I learned how miserable many of the great artists and writers were, perhaps more so than an average human because, like me, they had gone looking for answers to questions that art cannot answer. I do not mean to diminish art, as I still create it and enjoy it, but we should be careful not to overesteem it. It is after all impermanent, unsatisfactory and not-self, which brings us back to the forest.

When we look at it what do we see? Or maybe the better question is, how do we see? Do we see directly or do we just see a bunch of labels "tree," "vine," "flower," "me," "you." Are there really distinct permanent unchanging objects? The "tree" we see is there a moment that we could say that it ceased being a sapling and became a tree, what about its slow process of death and decay?

Labels are necessary for language, they make it possible for the communication of ideas, but we must not take them to be what they represent. If we view the world with labels it is a very narrow world we live in, but what if we look another way and sweep all the labels away and observe the world directly?

When we look out at the world in this way we must not forget to look in at the mind in the same way because the mind is of the world. Look to see if "I" exists in the arising and ceasing of perceptions, thoughts, feelings and emotions, in views and opinions and in this body, this frail and failing body.

Deciding to part ways

Day 63: Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 2, 2005

As we were leaving the monastery this morning for a donated meal at a restaurant, it began snowing!

Only a few flakes, but it was snow.

The restaurant was a Chinese buffet and served wonderful food. At a certain point there was a line to get inside. Two Burmese monks were being treated to a meal by their supporters as well! We figured we had Theravadan monks from Burma, Laos, Sri Lanka, Thailand and the U.S.A. in the restaurant all at the same time.

I spent a good portion of the day behind a computer screen looking at various options for how to get to St. Louis, Missouri from Washington, D.C. Before becoming a monk I spent five years in sales and a good portion of my day was spent scheduling business trips. I actually enjoyed this aspect of the job, so I was conscious today of enjoying what I was doing. It was fun, only because I could put it down when I found the information I needed.

Austin and I have decided to split company for a week. We will leave the Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center on May 5th and spend two days in Chicago. I'll take a train down to Champaign-Urbana, Illinois. Austin will get on a train headed for Iowa. He will go spend a week with his parents, then get back to Chicago on the 14th to board the train we are scheduled to take to Virginia. So hopefully we will meet up again on the 14th around 11 pm.

The idea for Austin to go to Iowa was initially a hope on Austin's part to see his siblings. His sister is leaving the country and he probably won't get to see her for a while. So our parting has nothing to do with being ready for a separation. Austin has been the most excellent traveling companion.

While in Champaign-Urbana, Illinois, Sandra asked me if I would be willing to give the precepts to anybody who asked for them. I have yet to perform this ceremony so, I wrote to Ajahn Pasanno and asked his advice. One question I asked was, "How should I establish my mind?" Ajahn's answer kind of surprised me, but it is so simple and clear. Real truths do tend to be simple don't they?

"As for your question about giving precepts, it is probably good to remember that we do not give precepts. People want to make the determination and we lead them through it. They are taking on the refuges and precepts themselves. This allows us to step out of the way. The best way to establish the mind is in mudita—that people are willing to look for a refuge in the right place and want to live their lives with virtue at its center. Another aspect is in the wish for those people to use the tools or refuge and precepts skillfully and that they see the benefit that can come when life is lived with Dhamma as the foundation."

Rethinking caffeine

Day 64: Buddha-Dhamma Meditation Center, Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 3, 2005

We were invited out for the meal again today. Orachon and Narong were the donors. Narong is a longtime supporter of this temple.

Ajahn Sunya said, "Narong supports us when things are going well and when they are not. He is always there." That commitment is beautiful to see. Narong said he has sat retreats with Ajahn Amaro at the Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center. Orachon has been to our centers in England.

Buffet style restaurants are popular in the Chicago area. It takes a lot of mindfulness to eat at one of these buffets. They usually serve four or five completely different styles of food (Italian, Mexican, country-style American, vegetarian). So it takes a bit of restraint

not to eat too much or get greedy. I'm 0-2 at buffets.

My interesting observation last night was about the effects of caffeine. I've refrained from drinking coffee and other caffeine drinks since being diagnosed with mono. Last night I had my first small cup of coffee—the first one in about three weeks. My heart raced through the entire evening meditation and for a couple hours longer.

I used to drink two cups of coffee every morning at Abhayagiri and one in the afternoon. Most of the time I didn't feel any effects of the coffee, and could actually drink a cup late in the evening and fall asleep with no problems. After seeing the effect that the caffeine had on me last night, I'm beginning to wonder if a lot of my anger in the beginning stages of the monastic training were related to my eating habits and caffeine consumption.

This evening John C. is picking Austin and me up to visit with his meditation class. We are really enjoying our time with John. I'm trying to talk him into visiting Abhayagiri, but I don't think my sales pitch is polished enough. John says he likes to use all his vacation time to visit family. Fair enough, but couldn't he stop by Abhayagiri for two or three days between flights?

This morning I was rereading a couple of the early day journal entries. On Day 13, I was talking about the effects of receiving the blessings from other people's prayers. That day we ran out of water and I was starting to feel dehydrated. But later in the day I noticed that I was feeling full and not dehydrated any longer. A week later we found out that the community at the City of Ten Thousand Buddhas had dedicated the Great Compassion Mantra Sutra to our behalf, on or very close to that same date. This reminded me of an insight I had this winter while living at the Arrow River Forest Hermitage in Thunder Bay, Ontario Canada.

My grandmother on my mother's side, whom we called Mumu Ida, passed away five years ago on Feb. 11th. I remembered this and asked my Mom if she would be interested in sponsoring the meal at the monastery and offering the merit from that meal to her Mom. At about that same time I heard a Thai monk answer a question about how sharing merit works, sharing it with deceased relatives. The monk said, "If that person was reborn in a realm where they can receive the merit, they will receive it."

In the same talk the monk described a situation where Ajahn Chah was living alone in a jungle far from any village. He got malaria and it worsened to the point where Ajahn Chah couldn't get to the village and at a certain point he was sure he was going to die. Then one day his strength returned to him and he was able to go and get help. Ajahn Chah was so struck by the change in his health, he made note of the date. A couple years later when he finally had contact with his family again (mail was nonexistent in rural Thailand back then) he asked them if they had thought he had died. It turns out that they had, and had done a ceremony to offer food in his name and dedicated the merit to him. The dates were identical!

I was thinking about the monk's comment that, "If that person was reborn in a realm

where they can receive the merit, they will receive it.” I was also thinking about the nature of Mumu Ida. She was Finnish and enjoyed having fun by playing games. She told me a few years before she died, that she felt like she was a thirteen-year-old girl stuck in an eighty-year-old body. So, I imagine when her consciousness took rebirth (if that is what happens), she probably took rebirth as a girl into a Finnish family. Then the thought hit me, “There are a lot of Finn’s in this area—if Mumu Ida did take rebirth as a Finn, maybe Mumu Ida is now a four-year-old little girl in Thunder Bay! And maybe the merit I share with Mumu Ida is being received by a four-year-old little girl!”

That reflection then made me consider that I’ve often wondered how I came across Buddhism, especially growing up in Indiana. If my sending merit to a deceased relative could be received by a young girl in Thunder Bay, maybe my parents in the last life were Buddhist and they are sending merit to their deceased child. I have a premonition I died in Vietnam. If my parents had been eighteen years old when I was born and if I died when I was eighteen that would put my previous parents at seventy-six years of age. Maybe an old Vietnamese couple are diligent meditators and they are sending merit to their deceased son, and maybe I’m receiving the blessings of their good intentions?

There is a part of my heart that feels there could be some validity to these reflections. And the thought of a little girl receiving the blessings of my life makes me want to cry. The idea that a seventy-six-year-old couple sitting next to me on the train may be wishing me the blessings of their life work inspired me too.

Of course I have no idea if these observations are correct. But I’m open to the possibility.

Of geese and men

Day 64: Hinsdale, Illinois

Austin Stewart

May 3, 2005

How do we learn? This question has arisen in my mind over and over again while I sit listening to people speak a language that I know nothing about. They could just be a chattering flock of birds so little meaning is there for me in their words. At first there was just a maze of sounds that had no rhyme or reason, but slowly I can start to hear words pop out of the noise, and then I begin to mouth them, to try making the sounds on my own. I still do not know what these words mean, but I am learning.

So it is with writing, I look back at the past couple of journal entries and I can see the influence of what I have been reading cropping up in my writing. When I see admirable

qualities in another's use of the language, I emulate them in my writing. Recently I have been reading Bhikkhu Nyanasobano's *Landscapes of Wonder*. He has a meandering style that weaves rich imagery with potent Dhamma. I can't get enough of it and Jotipalo can't get into it. Jotipalo prefers a more direct style of writing but I have a fondness for writing that wanders from its theme only to stumble upon it again later in a profound way. I am not disparaging direct writing, I like it as well, but there is a fondness in the heart for Nyanasobano's style. I was given the book by Art, our friend in Chicago who has graciously given us many of the requisites and other luxuries. Little did I know until I arrived that Nyanasobano lived at this monastery for several years. Perhaps one day we will find ourselves at the same place at the same time. I would like to hear him speak.

The time here at Buddha-Dharma I have gorged myself on Dhamma teachings. My journal entries over the last few days have been part of the digestive process. It is part of learning. The test to know if you have absorbed what you have consumed is to reflect on it and then try to render those reflections into language. Wherever you stumble is where you failed to adequately contemplate. That is what these last few entries were. Fledgling attempts to make sure that I was dotting the I's and crossing the T's of my understanding.

The great honking geese dance and posture asserting dominance. Nearby wary parents hiss as I come too close. A pair glides by on the water— silent. They are all "goose," but so very different. They remind me of my mind: sometimes silent, sometimes posturing and sometimes wary

Going to Liberation Park

Day 65: Hinsdale, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 4, 2005

It was nice meeting with John and his class last night. I talked for thirty minutes about the monastic form and how the lifestyle and vinaya (monastic code of behavior) help to support the meditation practice. We then opened up the floor for questions.

After the class one student, Nate, who had also been in John's yoga class last Thursday, wanted to know how he could visit Abhayagiri. I would not be surprised if Nate does visit. Several other students expressed similar interests, and one couple gave us their phone number and address, asking us to call them if we need a place to sleep.

Today was our last full day here at the Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center. John is

planning to pick us up tomorrow after the meal and drive us to visit Santikaro and his Buddhist center which is called Liberation Park. We plan to spend two nights in Chicago.

Last posting until May 14

Day 66: Chicago, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 5, 2005

May 5

I've decided to stop journaling for a short while. I'll be traveling a lot the next three weeks, and a week of that will be at the Bhavana Society, where I hope to devote more time to formal practice. I'll probably keep a short journal of any interesting things that happen, but probably won't post anything again until May 14th, and not again until around May 24th.

Our intention is to start walking again on May 25th or 26th from some place north of St. Louis, MO. So hopefully my journaling will continue after the 26th.

Next week my friend John has offered to drive me down to Bloomington, IN to visit the Tibetan Cultural Center and Buddhist Monastery. H.H. the Dalai Lama's brother lives here, so maybe I'll get to meet him? So, I'll keep notes and post something about my travels on the 14th. Austin might post one or two entries about his travels if you are interested in checking out the site before the 14th.

Today Austin and I were reflecting that though we have walked maybe 300 miles on this pilgrimage, by the time we start walking again, we will have traveled about 4,000 miles!

Today I'm feeling a slight sore throat again. Several people who we have seen recently have had colds, so I hope it is only a mild cold.

Caring and sharing

Day 67: Chicago, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 6, 2005

Yesterday John Cianciosi picked Austin and me up after the meal and drove us to Oak Park, Illinois.

This is a lovely suburb/small town, just outside of Chicago, where Santikaro has temporarily set up Liberation Park. He lives in a quiet neighborhood, which is within walking distance to both train and bus station, making it an ideal location for a community sitting space and library.

Santikaro made us all coffee and we had a wonderful Dhamma conversation for a couple of hours. I particularly liked Santikaro's ideas about the Parinibbana Sutta. We discussed the six conditions for the welfare of the Sangha. Santikaro broke this down into two themes—caring and sharing. We talked about sharing in terms of not only wealth, but mainly in sharing of time, ideas, views, and about sharing a common practice.

John had to teach his yoga class that evening, so we left sooner than perhaps we would have liked. John drove us into Chicago, where we stayed at Art's condo. Art has been so very kind to let us use his place like this. It is getting difficult for Austin and me not to think it is our place! Not really—but we did vacuum, sweep and do laundry before we left.

Horoscopes are nonsense

Day 68: Chicago, Illinois

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 7, 2005

May 7

Our time in Chicago was very laid back. Austin did visit one friend yesterday. Despite

going on a long almsround in Chicago yesterday, I didn't do much.

This morning all of the subway trains we needed to connect with were waiting for us when we got to the platforms, and there was a very short line at the Amtrak ticket counter when we got there. So we ended up being about an hour and half early for Austin's train, and three and a half hours early for mine.

At lunch I read our horoscopes. Something I never do. Austin's read, "Don't be worried about low energy, tomorrow you will have extra." Mine read, "Don't rush into a financial transaction!"

Right after Austin boarded his train for Iowa, I heard his name being paged from the ticket agent where we got our boarding passes. "Maybe Austin left his ID," I thought. The ticket agent was overjoyed to see me but said, "Where is Austin?" We had had a pleasant encounter earlier with this ticket agent, so I was not surprised he remembered our names. I told him Austin just boarded the California Zephyr. A man standing behind the agent yelled, "That train hasn't pulled out yet, it's on Track 5!" The agent jumped up and exited a back door and ran off for Track 5. I decided to wait and see what this was all about. A few minutes later the agent returned with a huge smile on his face and all his co-workers were giving him congratulatory slaps on his shoulders. It turns out he had made Austin's ticket out for \$1,600, not \$16. So his cash drawer was short \$1,584! The agent explained that he would have been held responsible for the difference until the ticket was returned.

So, see—horoscopes are nonsense. If I hadn't rushed into that action the financial situation for another human being would have been devastating, or his life would have been filled with anxiety.

Let it Be

Day 69: Urbana, IL

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 8, 2005

May 8

Steven met me at the Champaign-Urbana train station yesterday evening. Steven has volunteered to drive me around to the various activities happening here in Urbana.

We stayed at Matt Boden's apartment last night. He is away but graciously opened his apartment to Steven and myself. I was a bit concerned because the apartment is in the middle of a student-housing neighborhood and Matt has a pair of earplugs next to his bed. School must have just finished because it was relatively quiet last night.

Steven took drove us to a small park and we walked for about half an hour. Steven told me that he had been involved with a popular religious movement that basically uses brainwashing techniques to get its followers to give the founder all there money. This founder wrote a poem that suggests he may be Matraiya Buddha.

Some of the stories about how this organization is run sound pretty scary. Steven had been involved for ten years and it wasn't until he met his wife that he was able to see what was happening.

Steven said the philosophy at the beginning can be very beneficial, but as you "progress" further into the "teachings" you are required to make longer commitments and give more of your money to the organization. Steven summed it by saying, "At a certain point the structure was more important than your spiritual progress."

One thing Steven had to do once he joined the inner circle of the organization was to make a billion-year vow of allegiance! Steven was able to laugh at this, so I asked him, "Shouldn't religion be trying to free us from re-birth, not requiring us to come back to fulfil a billion-year vow?"

Hearing Steven's stories reminded me that Santikaro told us about a similar group that used to proselytize Suan Mokkh, Ajahn Buddhadasa's monastery in Thailand. These westerners would target Suan Mokkh because a lot of westerners attended retreat here. This group would start a conversation by saying something like, "We believe in being open-minded, do you believe in being open-minded?" "We believe in dialog, do you believe in dialog?" Once they got you to agree to a certain number of conditions, then it was difficult to have a conversation with them. Santikaro said, "I wish just once I had told them I didn't believe in dialogue."

Today Steven and I went over to Sandra Hammond's house for a half-day meditation retreat. The group met at 9 am until 1 pm. The day was broken up into 45-minute periods of sitting and walking, and a period at the end for questions. Eight people came—half what normally would come, but not bad for Mother's Day.

The group asked many good "practice" questions, mostly about precepts and refuges. We somehow got onto the subject of "Letting go". I told the group how Ajahn Sumedho used to use his ability to visualize, to create this neon sign that read "Let go". He would visualize this sign during all his waking hours, and have it there as a reminder.

After the retreat ended, Sandra's husband, Patrick, played a hilarious song that he wrote. Ajahn Amaro and Tsulkne Rinpoche were his two inspirations for the song. In this song, Patrick is driving up Hwy. 101 and picks-up a hitchhiker who is wearing saffron robes.

He sings about their Dhamma conversation and the cosmic experience they have. The refrain of the song reads, “Look, see, let go and let it be.”

As we were driving back to Matt’s apartment, I told Steve how I had just read in a Reader’s Digest how Paul McCartney came to write, “Let It Be”. I find this fascinating because the day Betsy loaned her car to Austin so we could go into Memphis to see Graceland, she had loaned her car right before that to another friend. When we got into the car a large CD storage case was open on the passenger seat. I went through case and the only CD I wanted to listen to was a Beatles CD. When I opened that CD case though it was empty. “Oh well, too bad,” I thought. Austin decided to check, and, sure enough, that CD was in the car stereo! “Let It Be” was one of the songs on the CD.

While on the way from Graceland to Horse Shoe Lake, AR, I told Austin how as a child I had loved that song. I owned it as a single and used to play it continually, to the point my sister threatened to break the record. Oddly, I used to have this fantasy as a five- or six-year-old that I was returning from a war and would be riding into Crawfordsville on a tank, and I’d be singing this song, “Let it Be”. Silliness or madness, I’m not sure which.

The Reader’s Digest article states that Paul McCartney wrote that song while he was struggling with several issues. The Beatles were on the verge of breaking up, the band members were all married now except him, and he was heavily into drugs and alcohol. He said also at the time he was disturbed because he could not remember his mother’s face. Then one night he had this crystal clear vision of his mother in a dream. In his hour of darkness she came to him speaking words of wisdom; she said, “Let it be”. Paul immediately got up and wrote the song. Shortly after this he met Linda, and the first thing they did together was record that song. Paul’s mother’s name was Mary.

I’ve had a low grade fever for the last two days. Guess I’ll just have to let go and let it be.

Democracy Now

Day 70: Urbana,IL

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 9, 2005

May 9

Today was a relaxed day for me. Sandra arranged for the meal to be at a Thai restaurant and invited everybody from the local sangha to attend. Six of us came, and as is the case with all the Thai restaurants we have eaten at, the food was very good. The restaurant was

walking distance from Matt's apartment, so Steven drove back to Lafayette where he lives and will come back to pick me up right before the evening gathering tonight.

Steven and my plan to stay at Matt's apartment tonight, then drive to Crawfordsville tomorrow morning. I was contemplating staying in Urbana until late tomorrow evening as Amy Goodman of Democracy Now is giving a public talk here in Urbana. Democracy Now is my favorite source of news, but I rarely have time to listen to it. It is a daily one-hour newscast that can be watched or listened to at: <http://www.democracynow.org>

Also speaking were Seymour Hersch (see the New Yorker for articles by Seymour) who besides many things broke the news about the Abu Ghraib prisoner abuse scandal.

The third speaker I wanted to meet is Naomi Klein, here is an article by her: <http://www.harpers.org/BaghdadYearZero.html>

Due to my sore throat and slight fever I decided not to attend, but to return to my parents' home and to get some rest. That should give you some indication of how I'm feeling. My main priority is to get healthy so Austin and I can continue to walk. Last week in Chicago I was feeling like I was maybe getting over this Mono, so we set a May 25th date for when we want to start walking. That date doesn't seem reasonable right now, as we were hoping that we would feel "normal" for about two weeks before we start walking.

We are scheduled to arrive into St. Louis, MO on May 24th, and we may just have to look into other means of finishing the pilgrimage, like using Amtrak instead of our feet. We have been invited to visit seven communities between St. Louis, MO and the Minneapolis, MN area. So maybe we will travel to these destinations and hopefully get better along the way. We can start walking from wherever we choose. We only walked the first 300 miles of the pilgrimage; maybe we'll only walk the last 300, too.

City of trees

Day 71: Urbana, IL

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 10, 2005

May 10

Last night about twenty people came for the evening sitting and Dhamma talk. Sandra wanted me to talk about precepts and refuge and the group wanted to formally request the

three refuges and five precepts at the end of the evening. I decided to first talk about the precepts and how Ajahn Chah used them in his training of the monastics.

Having just read Paul Breitter's book "Venerable Father", it was easy to discuss this subject. I warned the group that Ajahn Chah would often push his students by talking late into the evening, sometimes until dawn. The group last night was so hungry to hear Dhamma I think Ajahn Chah would have sat up all night with this group.

Paul wrote that Ajahn Chah often gave his best teachings when he was with a receptive or inquisitive group. Even though I was tired, it was a pleasure to be with this group last night.

Sandra later told me that her husband, who was present at the Dhamma talk, was coordinating the public talk that Amy Goodman was giving. So if I had wanted to go, I probably could have met and spoken with Amy Goodman, Seymour Hersh, and Naomi Klein.

If my not going prevents them from getting sick, I'm glad I didn't go.

Urbana is a lovely little city. It must look odd from the air, though. Urbana probably was founded in the early 1800's, like most mid-western towns. So now these towns and cities all have very large and mature trees, especially in the residential areas. The area surrounding the towns is mostly farmland. So, from an airplane the towns probably look like small forests surrounded by open agriculture land.

On my way down to New Orleans I was struck by how flat the Mississippi Delta area appears to be. Many writers comment on this topic. Why people don't rave about the flatness of Illinois is a mystery to me. Mississippi doesn't have anything over Illinois on flatness of the land

Day of rest

Day 72: Crawfordsville, IN

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 11, 2005

May 11

Not much to say today. Spent most of the day sleeping. My parents went to visit my

brother and his family in Fort Wayne, IN. I would have enjoyed going to see them, but was too tired and worried the long drive wouldn't be good for me either.

My sister-in-law told my Mom that there are a lot of Burmese monks in Fort Wayne, she said it is quite common to see Buddhist monks walking around town. I guess the political situation there has caused a lot of them to flee their country.

One of my nephews was disappointed that I didn't come, because one of his school friends is a Thai girl and she is from a Buddhist family. My parents drove up to see his school play.

I did have enough energy to walk over to the Wabash College library and checkout a video on Martin Luther King and his speeches.

I have a body

Day 73: Crawfordsville, IN

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 12, 2005

May 12

It was another slow day. I'm feeling slightly better; my throat feels less irritated.

Yesterday I called Ajahn Pasanno and we discussed options for the walk. I'm hopeful we will get to walk again, but do not want to put undue stress on our bodies.

Ajahn Pasanno agreed that maybe the most important thing I'm learning from this pilgrimage is that I have a body, and that I'm not in control of this body. The mind is willing to go, and is encouraging the body to recover, but it isn't that easy, is it?

Father William just sent to me the following words of wisdom:

It's clear the body is saying something and needs to be listened to. (Which reminds me of something I just read in John Cowan's book, "Taking Jesus Seriously": "Mother Theresa [of Calcutta] was asked what she says to God when she prays. She answered: 'I say nothing, I just listen.' Well then, what does God say to you? 'God says nothing, God just listens.' Then she added: 'If you don't understand that, I can't explain it.'")

According to Father William, John Cowan's book "Taking Jesus Seriously" is written

with a vipassana meditation slant. John is a member of the Episcopalian Church and we have recently been in contact, as John is helping to set up a few contacts for us in Minnesota if we get that far in our pilgrimage.

My friend John

Day 74: Crawfordsville, IN

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 13, 2005

May 13

Today my friend John took me out for the meal. John attended the conference where Amy Goodman, Seymour Hersh, Naomi Klein and others were speaking. John wrote an article about the conference. If you are interested in reading his article, below is the link information.

<http://www.ucimc.org/newswire/display/35036/index.php>

Colorado?

Day 75: Boarding Amtrak for Staunton, VA

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 14, 2005

May 14

My health has gone up and down the last couple days. I was hoping by now that I would be healthy and we would wait two weeks before walking again. It is pretty clear that I'm not going to be ready to start walking by May 25th. So, I'm brain storming for ideas. One option Austin and I have is to go to Colorado, and camp out on wilderness land for a month and see if our health improves. I think being outside and doing a meditation retreat would be good for us. Below is Ajahn Pasanno's response to my proposal.

"I think Colorado is a good idea. If you are both low on steam and not ready to start walking, it gives a good situation to not have to be entangled much with anybody or anything. Some time out in nature both to rest and meditate could be the appropriate cure. You are having to learn how to let go of how you would like things to be and deal with what actually is. This isn't how you thought the tudong would be, but that is really how tudong often turns out to be. You end up in places you had no idea you would be and doing things that you couldn't have conceived of at the beginning. Tudong comes from the pali, dhutanga, which is often translated as "doing that which is difficult to do". So being with the mind when it is tired and listless is tudong. Looking after the body and its needs is tudong. It is just not what you thought it would be."

Tonight at 11:15 pm I'm scheduled to get aboard Amtrak headed for Virginia. It is a twenty-hour train ride. Austin is boarding the train in Chicago. It will be good to see him again. We are expecting to arrive at Staunton, VA around 3:20 pm on the 15th and George from the Bhavana Society has volunteered to come pick us up. This was great news, as we were looking at a four-hour layover to get a bus, which would take us to Winchester, VA. This stop is still 30 minutes from the Bhavana Society.

We plan to be at Bhavana Society until May 23rd or 24th. We have a flight out of Baltimore, MD in the afternoon on the 24th. So it appears our Trains, Planes and Automobile Tudong Adventure with Mono is about to resume. If we do go to Colorado it will be in late May.

Thank you Mom and Dad, for taking care of me once again!

On the Rail Again

Day 75: Chicago, IL.

Austin Stewart

May 14, 2005

Saturday out in the park, I think it was the fourteenth of May. Millennium Park does not feel like Chicago. I saw an employee cleaning the side of a garbage can. I saw no litter on the ground. Chicago is a gritty city. A myriad of foul smells greet you while walking through the streets. Millennium Park felt completely out of place.

While in Iowa I wrote an article for the Permaculture Activist Magazine. John who gave us so much support in Tupelo is guest editing this issue and requested that I write a piece about Buddhism and Sustainability. I found it very hard to condense all that I had to say into 1,000 words. A picture, if you will. I apologize to those who look forward to hearing from me for my lack of entries.

Met a young man on the train today I think he thought he was enlightened. He may have been. He talked a lot about Amanita Muscaria or magic mushrooms. He praised them as being good for spiritual practice. He said that they showed you a state of enlightenment that you could trace your way back to through meditation. Having never consumed Amanitas I do not know if this is true. I do know that he was an interesting fellow and seemed to have a good understanding of spiritual practice. The thing he said that stuck out the most was, after learning that I was on a journey, "A journey in itself can be a distraction to practice." This stuck out because in Bhante Gutaratana's book on the Jhanas it says that journeying can be an impediment to concentration practice. It makes the mind very active and is not conducive to the tranquility needed for deep states of concentration. It was quite interesting to hear this seeing as I am headed to the Bhavana society today. All things have positive and negative aspects. This pilgrimage is one manner of practice. Solitary retreat is another. They both have their benefits and their detriments. I do not know what this man's intention was, but his words were reminders to me.

So it is Saturday—in the park—in Chicago. I find myself here on layover waiting for the departure of my next train. Union Station was the busiest I have ever seen it, and it was sweltering, now the cool afternoon breeze graces across my neck. I am people watching thinking about the infinitely complex set of conditions that bring all of the people into the park and then disperses us in the next moment. I am sitting in an endlessly changing landscape of humanity. People wash up into the park and slowly flow out. And here I go losing into the out-flowing current.

There are some spontaneous moments of beauty that awe you out of your self. Taking the train out of Chicago at sunset a dilapidated factory pops into view, the structure is coal-soot black. The windows are variously intact and broken out. Withstanding panes flash with the gold reflection of sunset—the broken out suck light into the dark of the building. The mind makes the large, black carcass of a mythic animal. And then the factory is gone and the mind takes up the next object.

The Mountains of West Virginia

Day 76: Bhavana Society, West Virginia

Austin Stewart

May 15, 2005

We have been reunited. I heard a knock on the door of the sleeperette while I slept and then struggled for several minutes to open the door. It has a trick to it, which I didn't know and in the fog of sleep I had quite a time figuring it out. Being able to lie down while traveling is a luxury I have not known since I was a child. Being tall has its disadvantages. The rocking motion of the train really does lull you to sleep especially when you are horizontal to begin with.

I awoke this morning to a hazy sunrise in the Appalachians. Green forest ridges floating in pools of fog, all of it colored in the peach-orange light of a fresh day.

I have only seen these mountains once before several years ago on a road trip from Chicago to DC. The character of the Appalachians is completely different than the character of the Rockies. Overall the Appalachians are subtle mountains engulfed in life, but often they surprise you with hidden waterfalls and cliff faces. The Rockies stab toward the sky barren and sharp. They shrug life off and the forest looks as though it has slid down the steep faces. They are immense and formidable. They never let you forget how small you are. The large flat valleys between the ranges amplify the enormity of the mountains.

The mountains in West Virginia sneak up on you; they are humble rolling mountains of thick forest that make the world seem very small and close. I understand the term "hollow" now. The variety of hardwoods is shocking here: Maple, Sycamore, Oak, and Apple along with many other species blur together as the train speeds past.

Arriving in Staunton we detrained (the official verb for getting off the train) and met George who had come to pick us up. George had been to Abhayagiri before and it just so happened that I was visiting at the same time. It was good to see a familiar face waiting at the station.

The monastery is really beautiful. Everything is green and alive and the landscape sucks you out of modern America. It closes in on you and makes it easy to forget that you are only a few hours from the throngs of people living on the coastline.

My kuti is quite basic: four walls, a roof, two windows, a simple bed and furniture. There is no electricity. My light source is an oil lantern. The smell takes me back to my

summers working at Philmont. Our accommodations were as simple as this. I wrote many letters by the light of like lamps.

This isn't the Mississippi River

Day 76: Amtrak - New River

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 15, 2005

May 15

Awoke this morning to a beautiful scene. The sun was just about to rise above the horizon. The sky was pink and a large lazy river was reflecting all of this. Of course the river wasn't the Mississippi—it was the Ohio.

Today is our 76th day into the pilgrimage and we have only seen the Mississippi River maybe seven of those days. We've crossed the Chicago River more times than we have the Mississippi!

The first four days we walked on the levee and slept right on the edge of the river. Then we didn't see the river again until Jerry took us to Vicksburg. The last time I saw the Mississippi was while in Memphis, driving over to Horseshoe Lake, Arkansas. Austin saw the mighty river on his train trip to Iowa.

We have passed through hundreds of miles of lush forests and steep mountain terrain. The scenery is absolutely beautiful this time of year. We followed the Ohio River for a ways, and then the New River through much of West Virginia. In fact as we neared our stop in Virginia, we are no longer in the Mississippi watershed. The water now drains directly into the Atlantic Ocean and not into the Gulf of Mexico.

Having been a whitewater kayaker for much of my adult life before being ordained, my eyes were instinctively on the lookout for whitewater. The water was pretty low but I saw many places where the river was full of huge boulders. These, I'm sure, are excellent kayaking spots.

While I was at the Buddha Dhamma Meditation Center, one of the board members told me that he was a whitewater kayaker, too. He emailed me to ask, "Do you know the first chapter of the *Samuttaya Nikaya*, where the Buddha talks about crossing the flood? Have

you ever contemplated that in terms of a kayaker using the current to ferry his boat across the stream?”

I had not, but it is a good analogy. If you do not have the right balance of your boat, you can easily flip over while doing this maneuver. You also have to know how much effort to make. If you use too much effort, you end up fighting the current. If you don't make enough effort you might get washed down stream.

We arrived into Staunton, Virginia, on time. Staunton appeared to be a lovely old town; some of the streets still had the cobblestones.

George was waiting for us when we arrived. It turns out that George was a guest at Abhayagiri last spring while Austin was visiting too. They were both there when the Saranath Buddha Rupa was delivered and installed in a large outdoor shrine.

The drive to Bhavana Society was almost as beautiful as the train trip, lots of rolling hills covered in freshly leafed foliage. The leaves are full-grown but still a tender green color.

We arrived at the monastery just before evening meditation, so were able to pay respects to Bhante Gunaratana. I was immediately taken by Bhante's calmness and the feeling of kindness that generated from around him. He has penetrating eyes and a beautiful smile.

My friend Than Dhirapanyo was there to welcome me, and he helped George get me settled into a cabin

Haven't budged an inch

Day 77: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 16, 2005

May 16

It is nice to have the structure of a monastery again. Morning meditation began at 5 a.m. for an hour, followed by a half hour of chanting. There was an optional breakfast which I chose to pass on—sleep was more appetizing.

I got up for the second time this morning at 10:30 and walked down to the house, startling four deer just outside my door. Once they saw it was a monk, the deer settled down and started foraging for food. Bhante Gunaratana, affectionately called Bhante G., was talking with one of the monks (Venerable Sangharatana) when I walked into the house, so I joined them.

Bhante G. reminded me of the following sutta:

“I tell you, friend, that it isn’t possible to walk to the end of the world. But I tell you that there is no making an end of the suffering and stress without reaching the end of the world.” The way to reach that end is to understand the Four Noble Truths. (Stress, the origin of stress, the cessation of stress and the path leading to the cessation of stress.)

Bhante G. also told a story about two monks. The junior monk thought he knew it all (we all laughed at this—Venerable Sangharatana and myself laughed nervously of course, we weren’t sure where the story was going). The younger monk pointed out that he had traveled to fifteen different countries and the elder had never left the country. The older monk replied, “This may be so, but your mind hasn’t budged an inch.”

Venerable Sangharatana asked Bhante G. if he was going on a walk today. “Oh yes, I think I’m going to walk about twelve miles.” Bhante G. is seventy-seven years old and he walks at least five miles every day!

Not going anywhere

Day 78: High View, West Virginia

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 17, 2005

May 17

At some unconscious level I must like complication. Bhante Rahula was asking about our

travel plans. When he heard about our idea to go camping in Colorado, he asked, “Why don’t you stay here?”

My parents have already purchased our tickets for traveling to St. Louis, Missouri. The tickets are nonrefundable and the penalty to change the itinerary is more than the value of the ticket. So we either use the tickets or lose them.

Austin and I really like it here. It is a good community of people and Bhante Gunaratana is scheduled to be here until the end of July. This is also an ideal place for us to recover from our illness. The food is good, much better than what Austin would prepare for me! We have a roof over our heads, daily showers and laundry facilities. Plus the spiritual companionship of the community and teachings from well-respected senior monks.

I called Ajahn Pasanno and when he heard that Bhante Gunaratana was planning to be here, Ajahn Pasanno suggested we stay and if we are still too weak to walk after June 22nd, to go to Colorado at that time.

This morning Than Dhirapanyo informed me that he is going on almsround every morning, so I joined him for the forty-five-minute walk. Besides two passing cars, we didn’t see any human beings. There were lots of friendly and not-so- friendly dogs, several cats, horses, squirrels, etc.

City of Bricks

Day 79: Winchester, VA

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 18, 2005

May 18

This morning Bhante Rahula, Tahn Dhirapanyo, and myself went on alms-round in the town of Winchester, VA. I called it the city of bricks. It seems a large proportion of the buildings are made of bricks, at least compared to the midwest and west coast standards. The alms-round was strikingly similar to the one we do at Abhayagiri. Both monasteries go once a week, they receive food from a bakery and a Thai restaurant and only three monastic go. They go bare feet on the alms-round here, like they do in Thailand.

On the drive back to the Bhavana Society, Bhante Rahula was pointing out various mountain ridges and telling me about the trails and camping sites on them. The region is absolutely beautiful with mountains and long valleys. It turns out Bhante G. isn’t the only walker in this monastery. Bhante Rahula likes to walk and did one long pilgrimage in the

Himalaya Mountains, a good portion of it without a lay supporter.

Sister Subhano also has done a lot of walking. She recently was exploring a series of trails that would take you from the Bhavana Society to Washington, DC; the route connects to the Appalachian Trail and would be about 200 miles in length. She also hiked the entire 2,200-mile length of the A.T. before she was ordained.

This afternoon the community had a business meeting. It started at 2:30 and when I came in at 5:30 for evening meditation, the meeting was still going on. So Austin and I had the meditation hall to ourselves. The meeting broke up at 6:30 in time to join us for the end of the sit. (I was happy to see that long meetings are not just a phenomenon of Abhayagiri.)

After the sit, instead of doing chanting, Bhante G. asked George to give a presentation on the five Khandhas. He did an excellent job and the conversation that followed was riveting. Bhante G. has an extremely sharp mind and I was impressed by how precise and detailed his answers were.

New Path for my Journal?

Day 80: Bhavana Society, WV.

Austin Stewart

May 19, 2005

My writing is infrequent and the posting has been even less frequent. We have decided to stay put for a while. We can stay here until June 22nd, but if we feel better before that we will take leave of Bhavana at that time. A wave of relief broke over me when Bhante G. said that we could stay. I think it would be safe to say that I was road weary. It took mono to curb my enthusiasm for travel. I appreciate the opportunity to be still (perhaps only in body) for the next few weeks.

My journal entries are going to make a turn in style for the next few weeks. I hope to post only a few, but polish them more than normal, perhaps wander from the walk a little more, or perhaps just post poems. Whatever the case I am going to use this time to focus more on practice and less on writing, but hopefully replace quantity of writing with quality and variety.

Tomorrow I have the mundane honor of taking Bhante G. to the doctor. It will be nice to have some alone time with him, though I am conscious that he is one of the most sought-after 77 year-olds in the world and I do not want to drain too much of his energy. Also, there is an element of self-consciousness that arises in me when I am around highly esteemed people and makes me a little shy to ask questions. Some people yammer on without end if they are nervous, I clam up.

I had a dream around a year ago that was incredibly vivid. It stuck out because it did not feel like a dream. I don't know what it felt like. In it I had the sense that I was in India or Sri Lanka. I saw an old man learning yoga from a middle-aged man. I started talking to him about yoga and meditation and he took me aside and we sat in meditative posture looking into one another's eyes. He said that he was going to show me something and then reality vanished and he became a row of eight Buddha heads on an infinite field of Buddhas. The only colors were reds, gold, and black. While this was happening there was a strong pull towards him, the magnet was a strong feeling of bliss and my craving was pulling me in, but something felt sinister about it so rather than diving into the bliss I was mindful of all the sensations I was experiencing. Suddenly reality came back and before I could catch my breath it was gone again and he turned into a different Buddha comprised of blue, gold and black with the same sensations. Again I maintained awareness of the moment. Then I awoke. I mention this dream because the first image I saw is on a poster here. I stopped dead in my tracks when I saw it. It is shocking when an element of a dream that intense is hanging on a wall of a monastery.

Jammin' on the Edge of Creation

Day 80: High View, WV

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 19, 2005

May 19

We arrived at The Bhavana Society just in time for Tahn Dhirapanyo's presentation of perhaps the most complicated set of rules in the Vinaya, Nissaggiya Pacittiya 10, 18, 19 and 20. These rules cover the proper procedures for dealing with money. So it was great that I was here to go over these rules once again.

Yesterday I got a letter from Patrick and Sandra Hammond of Urbana, IL. Patrick sent to me a CD which contained the song he sang. I wrote about it on May 8th (Let it Be). Here are the lyrics of Patrick's song. He gave me permission to put the audio on our web page, but that might take a while to accomplish:

Driving north on 101 with my thoughts on fire. Once upon a starry night between Eureka and Ukiah, saw him, walking, as I came around the bend. I pulled over, opened the door and he got in. His eyes were clear and his head shaved and he was wearing a saffron robe. I asked where he was going. He said, "Where there are no roads." And for some reason I began to tell him about my troubled mind. And his face shone with compassion and my old Honda filled with light. Then he said, "Look, see, let go and let it be. Look,

see, let go and let it be.”

Then the road disappeared below us. All around, empty space. So I loosened my seatbelt and we drove out across the Milky Way. The stranger laughed and smiled at me and I lost all hope and fear as he gently put his hand on my shoulder. I let go of the steering wheel. Then he said, “Look, see, let go and let it be.”

Faster than the speed of light we blazed through galaxies. I looked into the rear view mirror, but there was nobody, nobody following me. The stranger put on sunglasses and tuned in a cosmic station, and there was Bach and Jimmy Hendrix jammin' on the edge of creation. Jimmy said, “Look, see, let go and let it be.”

Then a semi blared out a warning and I swerved back into my lane, and the sun rose over the mountain and burnt the mist away. I watched as the stranger beside me dissolved into the universe, but he left me his sunglasses and the wisdom of his words. “Look, see, let go and let it be.”

Silent rain

Day 81: High View, WV

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 20, 2005

May 20

It started raining last night after evening chanting and continued through much of the today.

After the meal I was conversing with Venerable Kemaratana, who recently spent time at Abhayagiri. I said, “This morning I saw my mind want to go into a fantasy about ten minutes before the end of the sit, to get away from a sore back. But, because we have been chanting The Noble Eightfold Path twice each day, the reflection arose in my mind, ‘Samma-vayamo – Right Effort: effort to prevent unarisen unwholesome evil states of mind from arising by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind’ Why don’t I stir up some energy and apply my mind to watching this body?”

Ven. Kemaratana laughed, “While at Abhayagiri I kept thinking, their style of chanting is great, and we don’t have to chant The Noble Eightfold Path all the time.”

I think the Sri Lankan style of chanting is beautiful. It is a five-tone chant instead of the three that we use at Abhayagiri. I’m sure that the change is what I’m noticing, and after

awhile it would get old, too. Learning how to stir up energy and exert the mind when things are familiar—that is the tricky part of the path.

Another chant they do each day is as follows:

Through many a birth
I wandered in samsara
Seeking, but not finding
The builder of this house
Sorrowful is it to be born again and again.

O house-builder! Thou art seen.
Thou shalt build no house again.
All thy rafters are broken.
Thy ridge-pole is shattered.
My mind has attained the unconditioned.
Achieved is the end of craving.

This reminded me of a poem that Ajahn Amaro wrote in his book *Silent Rain*.

The Arahant

The lone remaining wall
Of a long-since fallen house,
No more inside, no more outside,
No more trespass for the mouse:

Where a doorway and five windows
Allow the wind to pass
Unobstructed as they billow
Through the woods, across the grass;

Where the sun and moon and starshine
Illuminate the scene
For all the folk that pass it by
When wandering in the green.

“I wonder who the person was
Who built this mighty house,
That’s now a bramble garden
And a home for grub and louse?”

A broken ridge and rafters smashed
Lie strewn across the floor
And all that stands, quite ownerless,
Five windows and a door.

Has anybody heard from Austin?

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 21, 2005

I do see Austin around occasionally, so I do know he is alive.

Winnipeg, Manitoba

Day 82: High View, WV

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 21, 2005

May 21

No, we are not planning to go to Winnipeg.

The photographs of The Bhavana Society never do justice to the beauty of the forest here. It might just be that I'm here at the right time, though. A

few years ago I was fortunate to go on a long trip with Ajahn Pasanno and several other people from Abhayagiri to Canada. We stopped in Winnipeg, Manitoba. I found the city to be charming. Ajahn Pasanno said I probably wouldn't have that view the other 51 weeks of the year. Ajahn Punnadhammo told me that he once heard a story that, on the coldest of Winnipeg days, your spit would freeze before it hit the ground. He didn't believe this story for the longest time. But now... let's just put it this way: He was in Winnipeg during the winter and now he "knows" the story is true.

Speaking of Winnipeg, this reminds me that on the day we stayed at Davis Lake campground (around March 27th), a couple from Winnipeg were staying there, too. When I mentioned Ajahn Pasanno was from The Pas, Manitoba, they were amazed. Then I told them the town has a wonderful museum and they should go visit it someday.

They exclaimed, “You have been to The Pas?!”

If you look up it’s location on a map, you’ll know why they were surprised I’d visited.

Yesterday, I mentioned Right Effort. The complete set is as follows: 1) effort to prevent unarisen unwholesome evil states of mind from arising by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind; 2) effort to abandon unwholesome evil states of mind that have already arisen by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind; 3) effort to develop wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind; 4) effort to maintain and perfect wholesome mental states that have already arisen and not to allow them to disappear, but to bring them to growth, to maturity and to full perfection of development by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind.

Speaking of ‘Effort’, an occupational therapist from the U.K., who works with chronic fatigue patients wrote. Here is what she wrote, “The key to recovery lies in how you pace your activity. It is important that you don’t plan how much to do on a day-to-day basis dependent on how you feel at the time, but on a plan based on your current sustainable minimum. So even if it feels like too little, it is better to do that amount for a week or two. Then when you are confident that amount of effort doesn’t make you feel worse, then you can up your effort by 10-15% (both time and effort wise).”

So when I read this, what I hear is, “Figure out what the minimum level of activity you can do is, and do even less.” Maybe that is Wrong Effort mixed with Wrong Understanding?

This afternoon I was preparing a letter to my parents. Somebody gave me an envelope that had two 23-cent stamps on it for the postage. In seeing these two stamps, two things came into my mind. First, I realized that being a monk, I don’t know how much a first-class letter stamp costs! (Not all monks lose this much perspective). But I suspect the person used two post card stamps that they had with them, instead of making an effort to get a first class stamp. This brought to mind a story that Tahn Hasapanyo told about Ajahn Maha Boowa.

Ajahn Maha Boowa is perhaps the most respected monk in Thailand. One of Ajahn Maha Boowa's disciples was cleaning his cabin, and he threw away a couple of used matches that were sitting by the base of the candle. When Ajahn Maha Boowa noticed this he called the monk over and asked, “What happened to those matches?”

“I thought they were used, so I threw them away”, said the monk.

“I use those matches to light other candles at various times during the evening”, explained Ajahn Maha Boowa.

Tahn Hasapanyo told this story during a morning reflection to illustrate how a monk should be circumspect and frugal in our use of items that are donated. I’m grateful that he

shared this story, as it obviously made it into my consciousness.

This journal entry started with the forest at The Bhavana Society. This morning I finally figured out what makes it so beautiful to me. The first branches of the trees are about four or five feet above the ground. There are a lot of ferns and short vegetation on the forest floor which only comes up to about the height of two feet. So you get this three-foot high window into the forest that stretches to the hills way off in the distance. The vegetation is all the same color right now, so the forest can appear just a wall of light green and light. But this narrow window creates this wonderful sense of depth. It's magical.

Vesaka Puja

Day 83: High View, WV

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 22, 2005

May 22

While staying at the Buddha-Dharma Meditation Center in Hinsdale, IL, I was asked to write a short reflection for their Vesaka Puja ceremony. I don't have exactly what I wrote for them, but I can recreate something similar here.

When Austin and I started our pilgrimage and we began walking from New Orleans, spring had just barely started. Now people are busy with the jobs of moving their lawns and weeding gardens. By late fall the grass will again go dormant, the gardens will be harvested, and winter will be soon upon us.

Winter hasn't arrived just yet, and today is Vesaka Puja. Another occasion to honor the Blessed One and his teachings. During the full moon day of Vesak (month of May) three important events occurred in the Buddha's life: the Buddha's birth; the day he became fully enlightened (at the age of 35); and the day he entered Parinibbana (at the age of 80). We can also look at these days as: the day the Buddha was born; the day He completed His work; and the fruition of His work.

Viewed in this way, Vesaka Puja should become a motivation for us to evaluate our own spiritual path and see if we still have work to do. "The days and nights are relentlessly passing; how well am I spending my time?" The Buddha encouraged the monastic Sangha to reflect daily on this teaching, which is part of the Ten Subjects for Frequent Recollection. The complete reflection is as follows:

- 1) I am no longer living according to worldly aims and values. This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.
- 2) My very life is sustained through the gifts of others.
- 3) I should strive to abandon my former habits.
- 4) Does regret over my conduct arise in my mind?
- 5) Could my spiritual companions find fault with my conduct?
- 6) All that is mine, beloved and pleasing, will become otherwise, will become separated from me.
- 7) I am the owner of my kamma (action), heir to my kamma, born of my kamma, related to my kamma, abide supported by my kamma, whatever kamma I shall do, for good or for ill, of that I will be the heir.
- 8) The days and nights are relentlessly passing how well am I spending my time?
- 9) Do I delight in solitude or not?
- 10) Has my practice born fruit with freedom or insight so that at the end of my life I need not feel ashamed when questioned by my spiritual companions? This should be reflected upon again and again by one who has gone forth.

I am very happy to be spending Vesaka Puja in Bhante Gunaratana's monastery and with the monastics and lay community of The Bhavana Society. They have been very kind and supportive to both Austin and myself. My health seems to be improving, but I'm not sure if it is just because I'm doing so little physically, or my immune system is actually starting to build some momentum.

On this Vesaka Puja I'd like to thank everybody who has helped Austin and myself on this pilgrimage; be it material support, prayers or words of wisdom.

Many blessings to you all!

Bhante G.

Day 84: High View, West Virginia

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 23, 2005

May 23

Of all the medicines in the world,
Manifold and various,
There is none like the medicine of Dhamma;
Therefore, O monks, drink of this.

Having drunk this Dhamma medicine,
You will be ageless and beyond death;
Having developed and seen the truth,
You will be quenched, free from craving.

The above lines are chanted each morning in the "Homage to the Dhamma." I've been finding many gems in the chanting. Sometimes hearing a different translation of a familiar passage helps to bring new insights.

Bhante G. has also been teaching the last couple of days. I'm starting to notice a trend; I could sum his teachings up as, "Practice—do it," and an emphasis on the Bhrama Viharas.

The Bhrama Viharas are the four heavenly states of mind, which are metta—loving friendliness (also translated as loving kindness), karuna—compassion, mudita—joy at other's good fortune, and upekkha—equanimity. It is said that of these four mind states, mudita is the most difficult to perfect.

Early in my monastic training one of my duties was to carry Ajahn Pasanno's robes and any gear he wanted to his cabin at the end of the day. One cold winter night it was raining real hard and I had just dropped Ajahn's belongings off at his cabin and was about to reach the highest point in elevation on the road going out into the forest. Abhayagiri is built on the side of a mountain and at this point I had walked about a half-mile, had gained about 400 feet in elevation, and it had taken me twenty minutes to get there. Because the heat from my body was being trapped by the poncho I was wearing, I was soaked with sweat. Well, just as I was about to reach the top of the hill the monastery van passes me and the thought entered my head, "I could be happy for them." If I had been happy for those dry monks in the van, that would have been mudita.

Yesterday during the Vesak celebration, Bhante G. gave a great Dhamma talk. It was filled with humor and insights into the meaning of Vesakha Puja. He also focused a lot of time on the difference between knowledge of the teachings and putting the teachings into practice. To illustrate his point he used the story of Tuccho Pothila, which is interesting because Ajahn Chah used to use this story too.

Tuccho Pothila was a famous disciple of the Buddha and he was known for his vast knowledge of the Buddha's teachings. The Buddha though, called him Venerable Empty Scriptures several times in front of all his students. Tuccho Pothila realized the Buddha was trying to teach him something and he realized what the Buddha was pointing to was the fact he had not attained Liberation. The story goes that nobody would teach Tuccho Pothila due to his reputation as a teacher, but finally a seven-year-old enlightened novice taught him and he attained enlightenment. The entire story is quite beautiful, but I don't have time to write it all out. It is contained in the book *Food for the Heart, the Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah*, (Wisdom Publications).

After telling this story Bhante G. challenged everybody. He said, "You have all come here today to pay respects to the Buddha. What the Buddha wanted you to do was to learn how to end your suffering. Now let me see a show of hands, how many of you meditate? Oh see, not very many hands were raised. Aren't you ashamed? If you really respect the Buddha, he wants you to meditate."

So Bhante has a tough side, but pervading though that you feel a love coming from him. I wonder if that is the same feeling that those who knew Ajahn Chah often speak about?

A couple days ago Bhante G. gave the most detailed teaching on the Seven Factors of Enlightenment that I have ever heard. The teaching was so detailed there is no way I could sum it up without writing out the entire talk. But one thing he said that struck me was the following:

Once we master the equanimity factor of the Seven Factors of Enlightenment, then we turn to look at the Four Noble Truths. His face lit up with a huge smile and his eyes shone as he then said, "With perfect equanimity practicing the Four Noble Truths becomes easy!" He explained that when we normally look at dukkha (often translated as suffering or the dis-ease we feel in life), we recoil from it and thus can never come to understand dukkha. But with perfect equanimity we do not recoil and it is easy to observe our suffering. Then he said that when we near nirodha (cessation of suffering) normally we get excited, "look the end is near" and that anticipation or excitement leads us astray. So again with perfect equanimity we are not moved but just observe peacefully the process unfolding.

The other thing he said a few days ago that shows his emphasis of the Bhrama Viharas is that metta (loving kindness) has to be well-established in oneself before one can reach deep states of concentration. He also said that the foundation for jhana is metta and the tone of what you experience in jhana is a feeling of metta. I have heard this from other teachers as well, but usually the emphasis is on a strong base of sila (morality). I once heard Ajahn Geoff say that super states of concentration lead to super concentrated greed, hatred and delusion unless you are established in morality.

So this is my attempt to express some of the teaching I've been hearing from Bhante G. He is an amazing teacher and I would highly recommend anybody interested in sitting a

retreat or wanting to spend time in a monastery to consider coming to the Bhavana Society.

Impressions

Day 84: Bhavana Society, WV

Austin Stewart

May 23, 2005

The aged monk in front of me looks so like an immovable mountain when I come
To the meditation hall in the morning, yet
Walking ahead of me the frailty of the human body pushes through his robes.
Will I ever know the touch of seventy-seven years? Or will the universe break these four
elements apart sooner leaving mind inhabit some new form?

Riding in the back of a pickup, rain pouring down, feeble umbrella battered in the wind, I
must have looked the fool smiling in such discomfort.

After the storm—forest scattered sunlight hovers on my skin amid the green hum of early
summer. The wet air heats quickly, steam curls off the nearby road slow and steady.

We want you to be very strong!

Day 85: Bhavana Society, WV

Austin Stewart

May 24, 2005

So I have been told I am to get rest. For the past few days I have been helping Bhante Dhammaratana around the place with some of the heavier chores. Then Bhante G learned more about mono and that was the end of that. He said that he knew that I really wanted to help out around here and he was very thankful, but he wants me to be "very strong!" It is really hard for me not to help out, or do physical labor. I really enjoy doing it.

Bhante Dhamma has been a monk for twelve years and is probably one of the most gentle, humble people I have ever met. He was a mechanic in Detroit and speaks with a heavy Michigan accent. He got interested in Buddhism after seeing a television show that featured a meditation retreat. I really like working with him. He is unlike anyone else that I have met at a monastery.

Yesterday's entry was a little more poetic about the walk I had with Bhante G. The walking actually felt good; begin sedentary as I have been the last few weeks makes the blood feel stagnant. Getting the circulation flowing brings energy back to the body. So I will continue to do light yoga and light walking. I think it helps, but too much activity could be detrimental.

I have been thinking quite a lot about the body with regards to meditation. I can see where the body is a limiting factor for concentration. To have deep concentration the body needs to be in good shape. It takes much energy focused tightly to break through some of the barriers in the mind. Hell, it takes a lot of energy to just watch the breath. Being ill, I see the importance of practicing to the fullest while young, healthy and energetic. There is no guarantee of good health and good health is a good condition for meditation.

Invite to Africa

Day 85: High View, WV

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 24, 2005

May 24

Our flight from Baltimore, MD to St. Louis, MO left yesterday at 3 pm. We weren't on it.

Yesterday I mentioned a story about a seven-year old Arahant. Today I got an email from my friend Brian, whom I call Codypalo. Palo means protector.

Brian's son, Cody, is an eight year old who keeps coming up with gems of wisdom. The latest was this: "Cody told me last week, as I was getting ready to sit: "I bet crystals are forming in your bones", (in reference to Arahant relics!)" Often when fully enlightened beings pass away, their remains turn to crystals when they are cremated.

The previous two days have been pretty full with activities. I was excused from most of the set-up and cleaning, but I noticed yesterday afternoon I had a slight fever. I'm pretty tired again today. The previous three or four days I was starting to feel a lot better, and a actually could contemplate carrying my backpack, without the thought making me feel noxious. Mind you, the actually carrying of the backpack would probably knock me out. Austin still feels pretty low in energy, so I'm not getting hopes up too much.

Later in the day: I decided to take a short walk this afternoon; walked for a half hour, to see how some physical activity affects me. The result was that I came back and slept for three hours. I guess at that rate we could cover about six miles a day, and it would take us a year to reach Thunder Bay.

Last night before falling asleep, I was feeling a bit of despair about having a fever again. "Will we ever get over this Mono?"

Then my mind started to think about going to Colorado if we do not recover by June 22nd. I watched my mind create the following scenario. "Going to Colorado won't be bad: We'll have the advantage of not being near a computer, and I can take a break from writing. But what if something exciting happens that you want to write about? 'Like what?' What if a huge African lion jumps into our campsite (escaped from a traveling circus, maybe), and it attacks?" Fortunately I didn't let that train of thought go on any further.

This morning Venerable Buddharakkhita, who is from Uganda, found out about our pilgrimage. He was very excited about this and said, "We must do this in Uganda!" He has a beautiful slide show from a recent trip he took to visit his family in Uganda and to

teach meditation in Kenya. One photo shows him teaching meditation to several of his young nieces. It is lovely to see Buddhism taking root in Africa. I hope to write more about Venerable Buddharakkhita later.

The half-way point

Day 86: Sick in bed

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 25, 2005

May 25

The walk started on March 1st and has to end before August 20th, so today we have reached the halfway point! It is interesting that Austin and I arbitrarily set May 25th as a cut-off-date for ending the pilgrimage if our health was not improved. Maybe as a way of showing me that we have no control over this body, I'm feeling as bad today as I was a month ago. I'm trying to reflect on the Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection as much as I can, especially when I start feeling sorry for myself.

We are not ready to call the pilgrimage off, but I'm starting to find it hard to imagine we will be well enough to walk anytime soon. Each time I start feeling better, I have a return to fevers and low energy. Maybe I'm just thinking this, because I have low energy. On the other hand; I am of the nature to sicken, sickness is unavoidable. I am of the nature to die, death is unavoidable. All that is pleasing and beloved will become separated from me (even the pilgrimage). So why should I be disappointed by that which is unavoidable?

I plan to sleep as much as I can today. That is out of my control, too., But I'll do my best to create the right conditions.

How did they know?

Day 87: High View, WV

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 26, 2005

May 26

Between the Meditation Hall and the main buildings is a narrow hallway. This hallway has several large windows that look over a beautiful landscaped pond with a brass Buddharupa on an island. Right next to one of the smaller windows is a pine tree with a robin's nest, just a foot or two from the window. We have all been watching a robin sit on her eggs and occasionally moving the eggs around.

A couple days ago the eggs hatched, and it appears that there are two chicks. While watching the pair care for the eggs and trying to feed the young, I keep wondering, "How did they know to build the nest? How did they know to sit on the eggs and rotate them?"

How did they know?

Is it instinct?

If it is, how much of what we do as human beings is instinct? Maybe everything we do is instinct and part of that instinct is to 'think' we are above instinct. His Holiness the Dalai Lama says that the meaning of life is to seek happiness. All that we do as human beings comes from a desire to be happy. Even all the destructive and unwholesome things we do are done with a belief that the result will bring peace and happiness. Viewed in this way, it is easy to have compassion for somebody who is doing destructive things. We do not condone the activity but try to find a skillful way to help that person find real happiness.

The best place to start in helping others is to free our own hearts/minds of unwholesome thoughts and intentions; then we can really be of benefit to the world.

Soon the robin chicks will be too big for their nest and will glide to the forest floor. It will take another week for their tail feathers to mature to the point where they can fly to safety. The odds are against these chicks; only one in five survive to adulthood.

The days and nights are relentlessly passing; how well am I spending my time?

In the past few journal entries I've been including some lines of the chanting. Today I thought I'd start from the beginning of the Noble Eightfold Path.

This is the Middle Path which the Perfect One rediscovered and expounded, which gives rise to vision and knowledge, which leads to peace, wisdom, enlightenment and Nibbana—the Noble Eightfold Path:

Right Understanding:

Of suffering, of its origin, of its cessation, of the way leading to the cessation of suffering.

Right Intention:

Of renunciation, free from craving; of good will, free from aversion; of compassion, free from cruelty.

Right Speech:

Abstaining from false speech, abstaining from malicious speech, abstaining from harsh speech, abstaining from useless speech.

Right Action:

Abstaining from taking life, abstaining from stealing, abstaining from sexual misconduct.

Truce

Day 87: Bhavana Society, WV

Austin Stewart

May 26, 2005

Mono.

A change has occurred within the mind. I have been fighting Mono for two months now and all I won was misery, so I have surrendered. At first surrender may sound negative, but it is not so. I have made peace with the conditions of the body. I have been trying to "get well"—i.e., escape illness, the entire time I have had this disease, and all the home

remedies, vitamins and even more vitamins have failed to free me from Mono. At best, the medicines have kept me afloat through the worst of it, but now it just holds on and comes in waves.

So I have made peace with it. I am contented in this moment. Even small amounts of vigorous exercise leave the body fatigued, walking anytime soon will not be possible and that is okay. Contemplating my present conditions, I could not ask for anything better. I am in a place that is highly conducive to practice, the forest is lush and quiet, the community is harmonious and the Dhamma is frequently taught. What more could I ask for?

Good health? Poor health is the reason I am here. We have traversed many varied landscapes on this pilgrimage, whether on foot or in a car or on a train. Mono is another landscape that we must cross one breath at a time. It is not a pleasant landscape, but I don't need to suffer over it. If I cannot be on peaceful terms with this illness how will I be able to be at peace with old age and death? Those will surely be much more trying times than I am facing right now.

The monastic rhythm is harmonious with mono. The open periods during the day allow for the needed nap. The general lack of strenuous work keeps down the fatigue. I do an hour of cool yoga a day. Mainly postures done while seated or lying down.

I cannot imagine working in the fast-paced environment of the Firebrand right now. I think it would kill me, or my co-workers would kill me because I would be pretty useless. A full day there wipes me out when I am healthy!

It was wet, grey and cold the last three days, but now the sky is a deep, pure blue, without a smudge of cloud to be seen. The leaves yield to the wind, catching a little of it and tugging at the tree. Is there a specific word for the sound windblown leaves clapping? There should be, because it is not so much a roar as it is a rush. A roar seems more of a deafening and awesome event, but the rush of water over stone is more appropriate approximation to the sound of the leaves. The leaves rush in a late spring breeze?

Grounds for laziness and the arousal of energy

Day 88: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 27, 2005

May 27

Tahn Dhirapanyo used to be a doctor before he ordained. I think he is a better monk than a doctor. He looked at my throat yesterday, as my lymph nodes are again swollen. He said, “Yes, your lymph nodes are swollen. Remember you are not the owner of the body.” I think he was pointing out that the mono cells think they are the owner of this body as well. His Dhamma is true, but I wish his delivery was bit more positive.

I noticed yesterday that the robins are leaving the chicks unprotected as both parents are out searching for food. It appears that three chicks are in the nest. All you can see of them is their featherless heads, complete with greedy beaks and still unopened eye. “Feed me, feed me”, these open beaks seem to be saying.

About ten years ago I was sitting a Metta (loving-kindness) retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA. One beautiful afternoon I was sitting out in the lawn watching a pair of robins hunt and feed their young. If anybody has ever observed a robin, they will know what skilled and relentless killers these birds are. I was just sitting there wishing the robins well, when a frog hopped about five feet in front of me. So I turned my attention to the frog and started sending Metta to my amphibian friend. Now for those of you who have been reading my journals, you probably know where this story is going.

That’s right the robin flew over to the frog and gave me a look—to see if I was going to attack, I guess. Then the robin killed the frog! Wow, that was a mind blower: wishing happiness to two beings and then one kills the other. It was odd because I could still feel Mudita (joy at another’s good fortune) for the robin and the chicks, while feeling compassion for the frog. I guess we are able to hold a lot of contradictions in our experiences.

The last couple days I’ve spent a lot of time under the covers of my sleeping bag. Am I being lazy? How should I gauge what is the right amount of effort? The illness seems to come and go and I can see no pattern to the illness. I’m trying to put more energy into formal practice of sitting and lying down, not so much walking meditation. I’ve never done much lying down meditation, so I’m finding this posture difficult to maintain mindfulness. Good thing to know about myself.

The following sutta keeps popping into my mind. . I just heard this is one of Bhanta Rahula’s favorites; mine, too.

Anguttara Nikaya VIII.80
Kusita-Arambhavatthu Sutta

The Grounds for Laziness & the Arousal of Energy
Translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu.
For free distribution only.

"Monks, there are these eight grounds for laziness. Which eight?"

"There is the case where a monk has some work to do. The thought occurs to him: 'I will have to do this work. But when I have done this work, my body will be tired. Why don't I lie down?' So he lies down. He doesn't make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the first grounds for laziness.

"Then there is the case where a monk has done some work. The thought occurs to him: 'I have done some work. Now that I have done work, my body is tired. Why don't I lie down?' So he lies down. He doesn't make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the second grounds for laziness.

"Then there is the case where a monk has to go on a journey. The thought occurs to him: 'I will have to go on this journey. But when I have gone on the journey, my body will be tired. Why don't I lie down?' So he lies down. He doesn't make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the third grounds for laziness.

"Then there is the case where a monk has gone on a journey. The thought occurs to him: 'I have gone on a journey. Now that I have gone on a journey, my body is tired. Why don't I lie down?' So he lies down. He doesn't make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the fourth grounds for laziness.

"Then there is the case where a monk, having gone for alms in a village or town, does not get as much coarse or refined food as he needs to fill himself up. The thought occurs to him: 'I, having gone for alms in a village or town, have not gotten as much coarse or refined food as I need to fill myself up. This body of mine is tired & unsuitable for work. Why don't I lie down?' So he lies down. He doesn't make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the fifth grounds for laziness.

"Then there is the case where a monk, having gone for alms in a village or town, does get as much coarse or refined food as he needs to fill himself up. The thought occurs to him: 'I, having gone for alms in a village or town, have gotten as much coarse or refined food as I need to fill myself up. This body of mine is heavy & unsuitable for work, [like a load of soaked beans—the Pali Text Society's translation] as if I were many months pregnant. Why don't I lie down?' So he lies down. He doesn't make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the sixth grounds for laziness.

"Then there is the case where a monk comes down with a slight illness. The thought occurs to him: 'I have come down with a slight illness. There's a need to lie down.' So he lies down. He doesn't make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the

reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the seventh grounds for laziness.

"Then there is the case where a monk has recovered from his illness, not long after his recovery. The thought occurs to him: 'I have recovered from my illness. It's not long after my recovery. This body of mine is weak & unsuitable for work. Why don't I lie down?' So he lies down. He doesn't make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the eighth grounds for laziness.

"These are the eight grounds for laziness.

"There are these eight grounds for the arousal of energy. Which eight?

"There is the case where a monk has some work to do. The thought occurs to him: 'I will have to do this work. But when I am doing this work, it will not be easy to attend to the Buddha's message. Why don't I make an effort beforehand for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized?' So he makes an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the first grounds for the arousal of energy.

"Then there is the case where a monk has done some work. The thought occurs to him: 'I have done some work. While I was doing work, I couldn't attend to the Buddha's message. Why don't I make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized?' So he makes an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the second grounds for the arousal of energy.

"Then there is the case where a monk has to go on a journey. The thought occurs to him: 'I will have to go on this journey. But when I am going on the journey, it will not be easy to attend to the Buddha's message. Why don't I make an effort beforehand for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized?' So he makes an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the third grounds for the arousal of energy.

"Then there is the case where a monk has gone on a journey. The thought occurs to him: 'I have gone on a journey. While I was going on the journey, I couldn't attend to the Buddha's message. Why don't I make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized?' So he makes an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the fourth grounds for the arousal of energy.

"Then there is the case where a monk, having gone for alms in a village or town, does not get as much coarse or refined food as he needs to fill himself up. The thought occurs to him: 'I, having gone for alms in a village or town, have not gotten as much coarse or refined food as I need to fill myself up. This body of mine is light & suitable for work. Why don't I make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized?' So he makes an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the fifth grounds for the arousal of energy.

"Then there is the case where a monk, having gone for alms in a village or town, does get as much coarse or refined food as he needs to fill himself up. The thought occurs to him: 'I, having gone for alms in a village or town, have gotten as much coarse or refined food as I need to fill myself up. This body of mine is light & suitable for work. Why don't I make an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized?' So he makes an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the sixth grounds for the arousal of energy.

"Then there is the case where a monk comes down with a slight illness. The thought occurs to him: 'I have come down with a slight illness. Now, there's the possibility that it could get worse. Why don't I make an effort beforehand for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized?' So he makes an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the seventh grounds for the arousal of energy.

"Then there is the case where a monk has recovered from his illness, not long after his recovery. The thought occurs to him: 'I have recovered from my illness. It's not long after my recovery. Now, there's the possibility that the illness could come back. Why don't I make an effort beforehand for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized?' So he makes an effort for the attaining of the as-yet-unattained, the reaching of the as-yet-unreached, the realization of the as-yet-unrealized. This is the eighth grounds for the arousal of energy.

"These are the eight grounds for the arousal of energy."

www.accesstoinsight.org/canon/sutta/anguttara/an08-080.html

Getting old isn't for sissies

Day 89: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 28, 2005

May 28

I really appreciated Austin's journal entry "Truce." Before I opened it I thought it was titled "Trace" in reference to the Natchez Trace Parkway where we walked through much of Mississippi. "Ya, I really want to be walking again too," I was thinking before I read his entry.

I admit I have not stopped fighting. Buddhist monks are Sakyan warriors. After being at Wat Pah Nanachat in Thailand for three months, one of the novices told me, "When you first got here you had the air of a warrior, now you remind me of Piglet in *Winnie the Pooh*. I thought I was being insulted! Fighting the mono hasn't gotten me any healthier and certainly not any closer to being happy.

Last night I called my parents and my Dad pointed out that I am not twenty years old any longer, "It is going to take you a lot longer to recover."

"This getting old isn't any fun is it?" I asked.

"Getting old isn't for sissies," was my Dad's response.

The Five Subjects for Contemplation have been my main theme of contemplation lately and just yesterday I read the sutta in its entirety. It is located in the *Anguttara Nikaya*. I have only heard the entire sutta quoted once before and had not remembered the closing three contemplations before the poem.

Below is the sutta, as translated from the Pali by Thanissaro Bhikkhu (for free distribution only, www.accesstoinsight.org):

Anguttara Nikaya V.57

Upajjhatthana Sutta - Subjects for Contemplation

"There are these five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained. Which five?

"I am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging.' This is the first fact that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.

"I am subject to illness, have not gone beyond illness.' ...

"I am subject to death, have not gone beyond death.' ...

"I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.' ...

"I am the owner of my actions (kamma), heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator. Whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir.' ...

"These are the five facts that one should reflect on often, whether one is a woman or a man, lay or ordained.

"Now, based on what line of reasoning should one often reflect... that 'I am subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging'? There are beings who are intoxicated with a [typical] youth's intoxication with youth. Because of that intoxication with youth, they conduct themselves in a bad way in body... in speech... and in mind. But when they often reflect on that fact, that youth's intoxication with youth will either be entirely abandoned or grow weaker...

[the same line of reasoning for the next four subjects]

"Now, a disciple of the noble ones considers this: 'I am not the only one subject to aging, who has not gone beyond aging. To the extent that there are beings -- past and future, passing away and re-arising -- all beings are subject to aging, have not gone beyond aging.' When he/she often reflects on this, the [factors of the] path take birth. He/she sticks with that path, develops it, cultivates it. As he/she sticks with that path, develops it and cultivates it, the fetters are abandoned, the obsessions destroyed.

"Further, a disciple of the noble ones considers this: 'I am not the only one subject to illness, who has not gone beyond illness.'... 'I am not the only one subject to death, who has not gone beyond death.'... 'I am not the only one who will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me.'...

"A disciple of the noble ones considers this: 'I am not the only one who is owner of my actions, heir to my actions, born of my actions, related through my actions, and have my actions as my arbitrator; who -- whatever I do, for good or for evil, to that will I fall heir. To the extent that there are beings -- past and future, passing away and re-arising -- all beings are the owner of their actions, heir to their actions, born of their actions, related through their actions, and have their actions as their arbitrator. Whatever they do, for good or for evil, to that will they fall heir.' When he/she often reflects on this, the [factors of the] path take birth. He/she sticks with that path, develops it, cultivates it. As he/she sticks with that path, develops it and cultivates it, the fetters are abandoned, the obsessions destroyed."

Subject to birth, subject to aging,
subject to death,
run-of-the-mill people
are repelled by those who suffer
from that to which they are subject.

And if I were to be repelled
by beings subject to these things,
it would not be fitting for me,
living as they do.

As I maintained this attitude --
knowing the Dhamma
without paraphernalia --
I overcame all intoxication
with health, youth, & life
as one who sees
renunciation as rest.

For me, energy arose,
Unbinding was clearly seen.
There's now no way
I could partake of sensual pleasures.
Having followed the holy life,
I will not return.

July 5th

Day 90: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 29, 2005

May 29

The spell check on this computer gives “monk” for the word, “mono.” Why am I not surprised?

Yesterday I admitted to myself that the walk is probably over. I think a lot of you knew this already. Austin and I realize that even if the mono were to abate (which it isn't showing signs of doing), we won't have the strength or stamina to walk anyway.

Austin and I have decided that if by July 5th we are not free of all signs of the mono, we will call the pilgrimage off completely. Being a monk I need to spend the Vassa (full moon of July until the full moon of October) in one place. I have the option of entering the Vassa a month late, but I was going to do that only to give us enough time to walk all the way to Canada. If my health is not improved by July 5th I need to make a decision about where to stay.

I would just go to Thunder Bay, but I'm worried that with both Austin and myself not able to work, that would place a big burden on Ajahn Punnadhammo and the community. They have a lot of hard physical work that needs to get done before winter (mainly splitting and hauling firewood), and our staying there would mean two potential workers would not be available.

So if by July 5th, I'm still not well, I'm considering several options but need to discuss them with my teachers before I can say anything about that. If we get better, we may consider doing a pilgrimage from the Bhavana Society to Thunder Bay using car, bus, train, barge or airplane to travel. I hope this option works but I'm not holding my breath.

Not being able to finish the walk has brought with it a bit of sadness. It has also made me contemplate the body, ageing and death. Perhaps the scariest of these contemplations is the one about death. This illness has shattered any illusion that I am in control of my health, and is giving me a taste of what old age may be like.

Mono is a virus that lives in the body and you never get rid of it. If the immune system gets weak the virus can take over. Knowing this I see that I am going to have to change a lot of my habits and learn how to care for myself in a new way, with new objectives. So having the mono flare up like this is a blessing for me. The sadness about this comes in that I was hoping I wouldn't have to learn this lesson for another twenty or twenty-five years!

The second reason I'm feeling sad is the fact we were having fun. Part of my wanting to do the walk is because I wanted to see if humanity was good enough to support us in our efforts. We learned after four weeks on the road that “yes” this is the case. Living the way we were is next to impossible to describe. The simplest act of kindness brought an unbelievable amount of joy and our faith was growing deeper every day. I remember writing about the experience at Jeff Busby Campground that each night I would go to

sleep thinking, “Wow that was an amazing day, I wonder what tomorrow will bring?”

So, I'm feeling a sadness because we hoped to have more experiences like the ones we had with Eddy J. (see Day 14) or at Rocky Springs Campground, or meeting another Buddhist monk on the road. Admitting the walk is over brings that hope to an end.

Using the Reflecting on The Five Subjects for Contemplation, I realize the Mississippi Pilgrimage is also subject to ageing, sickness and death. I will continue to investigate the sadness and see what I can learn from this emotion.

In conclusion I thought I'd finish with the last of the Noble Eightfold Path. When reading the factors of Right Concentration, read what I wrote about the encounter with the Southern Baptist in Mississippi (Day 20: "What is the purpose of Buddhism—what is your goal?"). Here is how the Buddha described the levels of concentrations that I was discussing:

Right Livelihood:

Giving up wrong livelihood, one earns one's living by a right form of livelihood.

Right Effort:

Effort to prevent unarisen unwholesome evil states of mind from arising by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind;

Effort to abandon unwholesome evil states of mind that have already arisen by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind;

Effort to develop wholesome mental states that have not yet arisen by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind;

Effort to maintain and perfect wholesome mental states that have already arisen and not to allow them to disappear, but to bring them to growth, to maturity and to full perfection of development by making effort, stirring up energy and exerting mind.

Right Mindfulness:

mindful contemplation of the body, mindful contemplation of feelings, mindful contemplation of the mind, mindful contemplation of mental objects.

Right Concentration:

Quite secluded from sense pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states of mind, one enters and dwells in the first jhana, which is accompanied by applied thought and sustained thought, with rapture and happiness born of seclusion.

With the subsiding of applied thought and sustained thought one enters and dwells in the second jhana, which has internal confidence and unification of mind, is without applied thought and sustained thought, is filled with rapture and bliss born of concentration.

With the fading away of rapture, one dwells in equanimity, mindful and discerning; and one experiences in one's own person that bliss of which the noble ones say: "Happily lives one who is equanimous and mindful" – thus one enters and dwells in the third jhana.

With the abandoning of pleasure and pain, and with the previous disappearance of joy and grief, one enters and dwells in the fourth jhana, which has neither-pain-nor-pleasure and has purity of mindfulness due to equanimity.

Like a Minnesota snow day

Day 91: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 30, 2005

May 30

The three robin chicks are getting bigger. Yesterday they slightly resembled Groucho Marx, with a tuft of fine feathers above their now-open eye, making them look like they had huge eyebrows. This morning was sunny and you could see about a dozen frogs and tadpoles in the small pond. I hope those frogs know what a desperate robin will do to feed their young.

I've been going for a short walk each day after the meal. Fifteen minutes down the small country road are several horse farms. The first one has four horses. The first day I walked past, they eyed me nervously and didn't approach. The second day they were close to the fence and I found a tulip tree blossom on the ground and fed it to the black mare. Now all four of them come over when they see me coming. I don't know what I'll give them once the blossoms stop falling.

Just beyond the first farm, there are six horses and two newborn colts. The colts were so weak the first day I saw them they would get up to nurse them fall down and sleep. The mothers would stand directly over them. When I saw the colts lying down, I thought, "Oh look it's Austin and Jotipalo."

Today I talked to Father William on the phone. He said something like, "It sounds like your illness is a blessing, it's just like a Minnesota snow day. You don't like them, but what are you going to do? It forces you to relax and let go of your agenda."

"Tout est grâce"

Day 92: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

May 31, 2005

May 31

Every evening after chanting the Bhavana Society has some program, either a Dhamma talk by one of the senior monks, a sutta presentation by a community member, a discussion about the Dhammapada, Pali study or a book report. Last night I volunteered to give a sutta presentation. Instead of reporting about one sutta I decided to discuss the topic of stream-entry, or the first stage of enlightenment, as it is discussed in the suttas. There is some interesting information in the suttas and I wanted to get Bhante G's opinion about some of the material. He is in California right now, so Austin and I gave a talk about the pilgrimage instead.

It was good for me to talk about the pilgrimage, as yesterday we decided not to wait until July 5th to make a decision about the walk. Ajahn Punnadhammo and I spoke on the phone and he is very enthusiastic about my returning to Arrow River and said as long as I can carry my own water and spilt my own firewood he saw no problem with my coming to stay. So Austin and I are in the process of looking into what to do after June 22nd, which is when we will be leaving the Bhavana Society.

It is ironic that we decided to end the walk one week after mentioning we were at the midpoint between March 1st and August 20th (the day the pilgrimage had to be completed). We still have about five or six weeks before we plan to reach Thunder Bay and I anticipate continuing to write about our experiences until we get there.

If my health is still not improved Dr. Jerry invited us to come stay with him in Lafayette, Indiana and he will run a series of tests on me. From Lafayette we might take a train to Minneapolis, Minnesota and stay with a meditation group in the area. Father William will be away until July 5th, and we want to end the pilgrimage with a visit to St. John's Abbey. Father William has offered to drive us to Thunder Bay, Ontario .

It is interesting to me that on the day we finally decided to end the walk, the batteries in

my L.E.D. flashlight finally died. Those were the batteries that I installed in the lamp back in mid-February right before leaving Thunder Bay.

When we left New Orleans I had fifteen contacts along the proposed route. Austin had a few more. Today as I look at my address book I count fifty-eight, and that doesn't count the dozens of people who wrote just to express good wishes! We certainly were blessed with support.

I like the way Father William summed up my explanation about exploring the sadness of facing the end of the pilgrimage. Here is what he wrote, "They weren't at all the events you anticipated, but they have, in their own way, been moments of great grace. The last words of Georges Bernanos' novel, *The Diary of a Country Priest*, say it all. "Tout est grâce." Everything is grace.

Touche!

A Belated Ode to Iowa

Day 92: Bhavana Society, WV

Austin Stewart

May 31, 2005

Before I came to Bhavana

Society I had the pleasure of spending a week with my parents in Iowa. I have held off writing about Iowa because I wanted to do my parents and the state justice with my words. Before this my energy has been so low, or I have so little time between naps that I have not been able to devote the proper effort to it.

I spent the first six years of my life in the suburbs of Kansas City. I remember staring out over the fence in our backyard and seeing fenced in backyards run to the edge of vision. I wanted to explore what was out there, but you weren't allowed to explore on other people's property. Then in first grade we moved to a house outside of Des Moines, Iowa with a creek running through the backyard that flowed down to a pond, and beyond that under a road and into the forest preserve across the road. I thought that I had landed in heaven. Yes, like in the Field of Dreams. I spent hours a day exploring those woods, finding all sorts of living and dead things, pleasant things and the ever-feared poison ivy and stinging nettles, and rock, clay and mud. The last two things often returned home with my brother and I.

Eventually with adolescence the creek that had once seemed endless grew small and the boredom of living in Iowa grew endless. I wanted to be anywhere, but there. Somewhere exciting where “things” were happening. For years I held some grudge against Iowa, it was flat and plain and thoroughly unexciting. After many years away I can now see the beauty that had gone grey in my mind. It is one of the greenest states I have been to. The grasses, the trees, the vines, the weeds and the crops create endlessly refined shades of green. Its steep hills are often hidden from those who pass through on the interstate. One must venture off onto the highways that connect all the little Iowa towns before you really see Iowa. There are many hills that drop away quickly enough that at the right speed you feel weightless for a second. Acres of pasture open up the forest and allow one to view the land that it is built upon. Large Oaks hold the hilltops and create shade for wandering livestock or the sun-weary farmer. In the lowlands below the hills one can still find a few of the once plentiful wetlands that still the water and allow sediments to fall out before it passes on, keeping some of the topsoil out of the Gulf of Mexico. This is the Iowa that my views and opinions stopped me from seeing. Because I had labeled it unappealing I could see nothing beautiful in it.

The people by and large are friendly and courteous. Even though they may find your manner of living strange they are not afraid of different things, but are curious about them and are interested in learning. Walking around as I am I definitely received many stares, but they were never harsh.

Iowa does have its problems. It is one of the leading producers of methamphetamines in the country. Des Moines, particularly its suburbs, are growing quickly and with no regard to developing sustainable communities or city plans. More and more you have to drive further to get from home to work and to the shopping districts. Small town economies are diminishing as Wal-Mart and other Big Boxes beat out local business and make many people need to drive to the larger town to buy their goods. Many of these problems are endemic to the nation.

Seeing my parents was relieving in a sense. I felt as though I had nothing to do while I was there. The days they would be at work and I would have several hours alone. I hoped to go on a walk in the forest preserve, but while I was there it rained six inches, which translates to sticky, deep mud. There was no walking for me. The rivers rose several feet and came close to spilling over their banks onto the floodplain. Perhaps enlightenment is like that, we rise and crest over our banks. Spilling out beyond what we would normally call “self” flooding that which we call “other.”

While I was there I just wanted to lay spread eagle on the floor and do nothing. I am not talking about meditation I am talking about heedless laziness. Depression had arisen and I had picked it up and was using it to cut a deeper and deeper trench to live in. I didn't feel self-pity because I didn't have the energy to feel pity. Paul Breiter was a monk in Thailand for seven years. He wrote a book about his time with Ajahn Chah called Venerable Father. At the beginning he is a novice in a city temple in Bangkok.

“A dreary grey afternoon in a dreary place in a dreary life. I had just read a dreary letter from a friend back home and was feeling rather depressed... There were a few other

Western prisoners-of-Buddha living in the temple...we usually met in the afternoon to drink coffee and pass time. When I came out of my room someone asked me what I wanted to drink. "Hemlock," I said.

There wasn't and hemlock so I settled for cocoa."

Though I wasn't that depressed I was on my way there. I tried to be more alive around my parents because I was glad to be able to see them.

My mother and father are all that I could ask for. They have stuck it out through so tough times and always have shown my siblings and I love and support. I have met so many people who were raised in dysfunctional families and I see the great fortune I had to grow up in a stable environment. I think that my parents provided my brother, sister and I very fertile soil to grow from. We are all quite indebted to them. The Buddha said that there is little you can do to repay your debt to your parents. I am grateful for all that they have given me. I hope that I may be able to repay my debt to them.

So while I was there I did little, I would take my mother to work and then pick her up and we would go out for her lunch break. In the evenings the three of us would relax.

Depression is an interesting thing, when the mind is occupied it can be held at bay. I enjoyed my time in Iowa, but whenever I was not being distracted I would fall back into despair. That is the hard part about watching the mind. There are many times that the last thing you want to do is to watch it. Being under the eight precepts I have started to renounce things. Right now at the monastery with even less means of distracting myself I can see the mind getting more desperate to find something to fixate on. Yesterday I could not get the image of savory French pastries to leave the mind. I could taste mushroom sauces and rich spinach and the buttery, flaky pastry followed by an exquisite mocha made with dark chocolate and an espresso with a complex flavor and whole milk. I enjoy pastries like the one mentioned above, but I only have them maybe once a year, why am I craving pastries?

So my views and opinions, like the ever-changing weather have passed into a sunlit time. The fog of depression has rolled back and now my concerns are different. The Buddha gave a teaching in one of the Sutta's saying the correct way to view feelings. He said to view the pleasant as painful, the painful as a thorn, and the neither pleasant-nor-painful as impermanent. When you apply this to depression it immediately lightens it. It is no more than a thorn, not the end of the world. It too will pass. You do have to remember though, that there is a cause for the depression, but it usually isn't what you think it is. Mom and Dad I love you, thanks for all you have provided for me in the last 27 years.

“The Reverend Austin Stewart”

Day 93: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 1, 2005

June 1

Start of our fourth month on the road.

Yesterday morning I had one of those vivid dreams that you might have once or twice a year—the ones you feel have a deeper meaning. In the dream I was reading a newspaper and saw a story about an old man who died in a house fire. The man died because the exit to the house was upstairs and he was unable to climb the stairs. The story was even more tragic because three of his young grandchildren also died in the fire. In the dream I started crying and the crying felt real. Then all of a sudden I realize actually I'm not crying because of this news story but because the pilgrimage is over. I immediately woke up at that point.

Later I was telling Ajahn Dhammaratana about this and I saw the significance of the dream. The old man dies because of his own negligence in living in a house where the exit is someplace difficult for him to reach. The sadness in the dream comes when I realize that his error costs the life of his three grandchildren. So in real terms, I knew there was a possibility I would not be healthy enough to do the walk. But Austin and I started it anyway and began writing about our experiences. Now many people are reading the journals and our getting sick is ending the walk for those who are vicariously living the walk through the journal. Now if this is one of you, you will have to finish the walk on your own!

I very consciously wanted to do this walk to experience the generosity that I had read about in other people's pilgrimages. These stories really inspired me, and I hoped that having similar experiences would inspire other people to risk a bit and to follow their own dreams.

I did have a premonition that I would get ill during this walk. Austin and I discussed it several times before the walk began and at the beginning of the walk—you might recall on day one I was not feeling well. Even though we didn't walk as long as I would have hoped, I am very happy that Austin and I attempted the walk. If we had never left the comfort of the monastery or Austin's situation in lay life, we would always be wondering, "What if?"

Having experienced spontaneous generosity, seeing "miracles" happen, and meeting such wonderful people really did make all the difficulties and disappointments worth the effort.

It is interesting to me that once I finally surrendered to ending the walk, things became easier. Last night I had perhaps the clearest meditation I have had in a while. Several of our contacts immediately contacted us and said, "Yes come." We found out yesterday afternoon that Steve McCurry of *National Geographic* was scheduled to arrive

at the Bhavana Society that night! We had missed Steve several times and I gave up hope of ever meeting him.

Today Steve took Austin and me for a short drive around the country roads to find a suitable site to photograph us walking with our backpacks (like we were on pilgrimage). My pack was stuffed with pillows, so it was nice and light. Why hadn't I thought of that before?

Most of the Bhavana community went into Winchester, Virginia, so Steve could photograph the almsround. Six of us went, including myself. We ended up going early to give Steve more time to photograph. As a result we walked for almost an hour and a half. Twice as long as the longest walk I've taken in a month. Fortunately we passed our parked cars and I was able to stop and rest. With just that little amount of energy I ended up sleeping three hours after the meal.

That experience was good for me, as the day before I was feeling about as good as I've felt since getting ill. It was a good reminder that I really need to stop.

While on almsround Austin used the time to register himself with the Universal Life Church as a Reverend. He is going to Oregon in August to perform marriage ceremonies for several of his friends and needed to do this in order to marry them. Now he will be impossible to live with; I'll have to call him, "the Reverend Austin Stewart." One line in the chanting we do here reads, "Those to whom the Dhamma is clear, are not led into other doctrines." Austin said their (now his) doctrine is all religions are great and do what ever you think is best. Sounds pretty hedonistic to me.

Sharbat Gula, the Afghan girl

Day 94: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 2, 2005

June 2

This morning I read the April 2002 edition of *National Geographic*. This issue describes how a team from *National Geographic* took Steve McCurry to Pakistan to see if they could find the woman who was photographed and put on the cover of the June 1985 issue. The photo is probably the most powerful portrait I've ever seen. The story tells of Sharbat's difficult life. Her story is as tragic as the original photo is hauntingly beautiful.

Her brother says, “Sharbat has never known a happy day except perhaps the day of her marriage.”

I was moved by the article to write Steve and see if it would be okay to include in this website journal the information about a charity that *National Geographic* set up to help educate Afghan girls. I wanted to make sure the fund was still operational or to see if there might be any other options. Here is the response from Steve’s assistant:

“Steve McCurry, the *National Geographic* photographer whose 1984 portrait of the Afghan Girl is world-renowned, has just visited the Bhavana Society in West Virginia for his current NG assignment on Buddhism.

"Sharbat Gula, the Afghan girl, was rediscovered in March 2002. Sharbat asked that the society start a charity to help other young Afghan girls in need of an education, instead of receiving monetary compensation. Contributions can be made online to the *National Geographic* Afghan Girls Fund, or by sending a check directly to:

National Geographic Afghan Girls Fund, Development Office
National Geographic Society
1145 17th Street NW
Washington, DC 20036

Also, Steve recently started a nonprofit with a group of colleagues called ImagineAsia:
<http://www.imagine-asia.org/>

"The first project is in the Bamiyan region of Afghanistan, working with local schools to provide salaries for teachers, school supplies, and to open a health care center on site. Over the course of the next few years ImagineAsia plans to open similar programs in India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Burma, and Tibet.

Thanks again for your support and interest. Watch for the National Geographic Buddhism article, released December 2005.

Mississippi Odyssey

Day 95: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 3, 2005

June 3

It is amazing what a diet of insects and worms will produce. The menu at Bhavana Society is vegetarian for the humans, but the robins are free to choose what they eat.

We have been closely watching the robin chicks. It is amazing to see how fast they are growing. Every day the change is tangible. Two days ago it appeared the chicks almost doubled their size overnight. Yesterday their feathers had all matured and the nest was looking crowded. This morning the cruelty of the world was made manifest by the absence of one of the chicks.

The two remaining chicks seemed to understand that having one less mouth meant more food. They now seem to be trying to push each other out of the nest. These chicks are acting frighteningly similar to human beings.

Yesterday a retreat started here at the center. It is a woman's retreat with Susan Stone and Sister Sobhana leading. It appears that about twenty women are in attendance. Since it is a woman's retreat the male community is not using the meditation hall, which means we are allowed to continue our practice at our cabins.

Last night I started reading a book called *Mississippi Odyssey* by Chris Markham. The author hitchhikes down the Mississippi River on tugboats and other watercraft. I probably shouldn't be reading this book as I'm starting to get the wanderlust again. The idea of traveling right now, even getting to Thunder Bay, Ontario, doesn't sound appealing to me. But, next spring maybe . . .

June 3rd update

Maybe the first robin chick is okay. The other two chicks flew the coop this morning as well. The parents will still need to feed the chicks for a while. This is a dangerous time for them as they are not able to fly and it will be more difficult for the parents to locate the chicks to feed them.

I also discovered why the forest is free of vegetation from about two feet to five feet from the forest floor. The deer eat all the leaves from the trees as they are growing. I spotted a deer eating a fresh shoot from the side of a medium sized tree and had that realization. Learning from observation is a lot of how the monastic training works.

Often the rules are taught in a class, but if somebody really wants to practice the rules, it takes an ability to observe. That is one reason why it is good to associate with people who are supportive of the practice and who are willing to train. It is also wise to practice with those who have been training under the rules a lot longer than you, so you can learn from observation.

Molly the cat

Day 96: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 4, 2005

June 4

With help from Ajahn Sudanto at the Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery, we posted a few more photos. Several are from the first day of the walk and a few more are from West Virginia. I'm trying to photograph the horses that I walk past every afternoon. Today the horses all came right up to the fence, even one of the colts, but the camera battery was dead.

It is striking to see the photos from Louisiana and see how early in spring it was when we started. No leaves can be detected on the trees. I bet the trees in New Orleans don't look that bare right now. Spring over took us in Memphis, Tennessee. Today felt like the first summer day. It has been raining and right after noon the sun came out, causing a lot of humidity. Washington DC is known for its hot and uncomfortable summers. I'm glad we are planning to go to Thunder Bay. My Finnish blood feels more comfortable in the cold.

On the coldest night of our camping it reached a degree or two above freezing. I loved it and God manifested a coat for me that night. Walking on those cold mornings was comfortable for me, as we didn't need to worry about overheating.

Bad news for robin chick lovers. The monastery cat, a male named Molly, appears to have gotten one of the young. Last night I needed to get some supplies for cleaning the bathroom. Molly's bed is in the hallway where they keep most of those supplies. I saw him there in his bed just purring away, so I went over to pet him. All around him were tiny two-inch long feathers. Compassion and mudita (happiness for another's good fortune) all at the same time again.

I saw the robin parents flying into and out of the bushes by the meditation hall all afternoon, so I suspect at least one of the chicks is still there and hungry. Those bushes are in the photo showing the Bhavana Society Meditation Hall. (See photo gallery in Abhayagiri News)

What Austin has been up to

Day 97: Bhavana Society, West Virginia

Austin Stewart

June 5, 2005

There are times that I direct a lot of energy out and there are times that I direct a lot of energy in. Writing is an outward push and recently I have been focused on the inner life and not so much the outer.

Inner work is often hard to write about because sometimes there are not words to describe what is happening and it is very poor taste to boast about any kind of spiritual attainment. The very act of boasting shows that whatever you may have attained it sure wasn't enough to push you out of selfish views.

I was recently trying really hard to attain jhana, or absorption. It is a state of deep concentration where one becomes completely absorbed in the object of meditation. In order to reach this state there are five hindrances of the mind that must fall away: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt. Jhana is supposed to be very blissful and it is useful in that it makes the mind like a microscope. It can focus very pointedly on the present moment and allow deep insight to arise. People often attain jhana and think that they are enlightened, but this is not the case it is just another step on the path. Any time that someone says they are trying really hard to attain something in meditation they have set themselves up for failure.

I spoke over the phone with Ajahn Pasanno about the struggles I was having with meditation. He said that the very desire to attain something was what was keeping me from it. I had forgotten the most basic requirement of the Buddha's teaching, let go. This simple instruction led to a whole new way in which I practice. I consciously let go in meditation, and though I did not attain jhana the mind was no longer striving. A sense of peace in the present moment arose. It was not complete peace, but it was more than the striving mind was capable of. Then a realization occurred. I looked into the nature of the peace and I realized that it manifested as the four sublime abides lovingkindness, compassion, covet-less-ness, and equanimity. These are qualities of the mind that before I had always been generating. I thought that they took some doing to be present, but that is not so. If you let go of the self they are right there. They arise in absence of the negative qualities that are their opposites.

This realization changed the way that I looked at meditation and at mindfulness practice.

I had always practiced bare awareness of the present moment without connecting it to peace. It was a very mechanical practice and I was doing a lot to be mindful, rather than letting go of a lot to be mindful. I kept thinking that there were different parts to the practice, concentration, insight, the four sublime abides and mindfulness. I had them very separated, I thought they were like oil and water and that they didn't mix. I was wrong they are all aspects of one practice and blending them together is very beneficial.

After meditation that night I found myself entrenched in the normal sufferings of the mind, and I thought, "Let go," and the mind released and I was at ease. The next day I dedicated my yoga practice to the welfare of all living beings and let go of "me" and "mine" suddenly all the struggle was gone. "I" was no longer doing yoga. Though the body is still tight I found it could go deeper into the postures and the breath stayed calm and even. My yoga instructor always says create space in the body. It is easy to think that it is just a matter of semantics, rather than stretching we are creating space, but that is not the case. Creating space is a form of mental flexibility; it is an act of letting go of the attachment to the body. Create space in the mind and you will create space in the body.

During the meal I dedicated to action of eating to the welfare of all living beings and then dedicated the act of cleaning my bowl to the welfare of all living beings. I was not eating to feed myself, nor washing to clean my bowl. I was eating to give the body, which is my form in this lifetime, proper nourishment so that spiritual practice can continue. Rather than rolling through all selfish desires to get on to the next thing I let myself be present cleaning the bowl. The Buddha teaches that all is transitory, unsatisfactory and not-self. Dedicating all the activities of the day to the welfare of all beings creates space around the selfish patterns that cause all of our suffering. When you let go and let peace arise joy comes along with it. Whatever you do in that peaceful state is joyous, be it eating a bowl of ice cream or cleaning a neglected toilet bowl. I often get upset at home when I only have so much time and energy and there is a big pile of dishes to do, or many other activities and I don't have time to sit and meditate. What if I approach all those activities not from a selfish place, but what if I do all of these mundane activities with lovingkindness?

I have plenty of moments everyday that I miss the mark. In fact most of the time I am acting out of the self-centered view. It is an old habit and it will be hard to break, but just catching the mind in the act is part of the training. Day by day one can expand the periods of mindfulness.

In this journal and all along the walk the act of generosity and the act of gratitude have been key elements of the experience. The question has now arisen in my mind how can I give in every moment? I have seen that acts of generosity no matter how small create peace not only in the mind of the giver, but also in the mind of the receiver. Thus, generosity creates a peaceful world. Often when I do a little act of generosity like washing a senior monk's bowl the mind is trying to find a way to get out of doing it because it has Much More Important Things To Do. The act of generosity puts all those self-centered activities to the side for the benefit of another being.

I offer this up for reflection. I hope that these words are helpful to others.

Without a project

Day 97: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 5, 2005

May 5

Plans have been made for our getting to Thunder Bay. A few details are still untied, but nothing to worry about. For perhaps the first time in a few years I feel myself without a project. As a result my meditations have been peaceful and relaxing. I'm going to see if I can let go of any temptations to get involved in any projects or issues for the next two weeks.

I may not write much the next two weeks. If this is the case, you can practice mudita for me, as the lack of writing hopefully will signify I'm spending more time on a meditation cushion than at the computer.

Tomorrow the weather forecast is predicting 90-degree temperatures and thunderstorms. In Jean Shepherd's novel, *In God We Trust: All Others Pay Cash*, Ralph the main character, is reflecting about his boyhood in Indiana. At one point he says something like, "The humidity was so thick you could cut it with a knife, you could cut out a block and put it in the freezer."

Contemplating patience in the slow humid afternoons

Day 105: Bhavana Society, West Virginia

Austin Stewart

June 13, 2005

The mind has been pouting more than usual lately. It isn't very fond of humid weather. It dredges through the day lamenting about how terribly uncomfortable it is to have a sticky, greasy feeling body. It doesn't like to sweat while doing nothing in the shade.

The cat here at Bhavana is old and senile. If he realizes that nobody else is around he cries and cries. It sounds as though he has come to some terrible injury, but if you peek out at him there is nothing wrong. The mind has been behaving in exactly the same way. It seems to be set on making itself suffer over something beyond its control. It needs constant reminding that this is not the end of the world. I had forgotten how strong the aversion to sweaty weather was after living in arid climates for so long and never spending summers in this climate.

Many people have commended me for my patience, but though outwardly I may have control most of the time, inwardly it is much different. I can be especially impatient with myself. The practice of meditation can often go at a very slow plodding pace and I get impatient and that leads to anger.

The other day I caught myself entrenched in a Very Important Thought, so important that a few minutes later I had completely forgotten it. Regardless of the daydream impatience arose at my lack of mindfulness. I realized that far from helpful this inner impatience was a form of mental violence directed at myself, leading to self-hate. Then I reflected on all the times in my life I have witnessed outbursts of mental, verbal and physical violence and how many times those outbursts have been linked to impatience. This in turn led to the contemplation of patience and how to develop the habit of patience in this life. I saw how many of the moral precepts that I keep lead the mind away from impatient acts.

Everyday I lift up my cushion to make sure that no insect or spider has climbed under it. I watch where I step so that I can avoid smashing anyone under my foot. I do not swat flies or mosquitoes. When I drive I drive slower so that I do not hit wildlife on the road, and also so that I do not cause an accident that could kill other humans. I try to take as many precautions as I can to insure that I harm no living being. The rule is specifically focused

on intentional acts of killing, however many unintentional acts could be prevented with being mindful of your surroundings. This practice is opposite of how I lived before Buddhism. I wanted to get where I was going fast, I wanted those mosquitoes off of me now! Roaches and wasps, where's the Raid? All of this was the product of an impatient attitude. But through the precept of non-harming I have been able to check the outer expression of impatience and have an insight on the inner.

Patience is sometimes misunderstood to be sitting miserably through whatever life throws at you. That is not patience. That is an endurance based in self-centered views. Patience comes from a different view. It comes from a self-less view where no one is there to endure anything. It is an accepting of the conditions of the present moment a letting go of preferences.

Perhaps you think that I am crazy to be so concerned over the welfare of insects, but acting appropriately towards insects also paves the way for acting appropriately toward a species that can be infinitely more irritating, human beings. Being a member of that species, my habits and idiosyncrasies irritate me a great deal. I am sure that any who know me well have also found these faults to be irritating from time to time.

There is a dark comedy to impatience. It is the product of desiring happiness and in only leads to anger, ill will and violence. How happy is an impatient mind?

Every aspect of this walk has taught me to cultivate more patience with myself and with others. It has shaken off some of the desire to have things my way. Mono continues to hammer the lesson into my head with waves of energy and fatigue rolling through everyday. I keep thinking I am coming out of the shadow of illness only to be overtaken once again. I am slowly learning to let go and be patient when things are not going my way.

Ajahn Chah's birthday

Day 108: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 14, 2005

June 16

Today is the 108th day since leaving the comforts of the Finney's home in New Orleans. At this point in the pilgrimage I thought we would have been closer to Sperry, Iowa or Joy, Illinois. In terms of latitude I think we are about on course, longitude-wise we are

about 850 miles to the east.

I decided to write today for two reasons. June 16th is the date of Venerable Ajahn Chah's birth. This day is celebrated at his monasteries all over the world. In Thailand many monks will show up at Wat Pah Pong, the monastery Ajahn Chah established, to pay respects and listen to teachings. June 16th, 2000 was also the date of my Bhikkhu ordination. So I'm five years old today! My novice ordination was in July of 1999, so I like to say I was ordained in two different centuries.

The 108th day of the pilgrimage falling on Ajahn Chah's birth date seems auspicious to me. The number 108 is considered to be an auspicious number in Buddhist cultures. Tahn Dhirapanyo was explaining that 108 comes from the multiplication of 12 and 9. The number 12 signifies a life cycle (like the 12 hours on a clock or twelve months on a calendar). The word for the number 9 in Thai means to start anew. Tahn Dhirapanyo thinks this is because many Asian cultures used to use an eight-base counting system.

This past week I have been reflecting a lot about the pilgrimage. It dawned on me that March 29th was the last day we walked. I was still thirty-nine years old that day. The next day was my birthday— so I have yet to do any walking tudong since I turned forty.

I've also been remembering some stories I had forgotten to write about.

Like Day Four: We had just walked twenty miles to reach the town of Sorrento, Louisiana. Austin went into a small grocery store to see if they had a pay phone. They did not, and that meant we had to continue walking even though our feet were blistered and we were exhausted. While Austin was inside the store I looked around the corners of the store hoping to spot a pay phone. What I did find, to my surprise, was a "live bait" vending machine! For a dollar it would give you a Styrofoam cup full of your choice of crickets, leeches, worms, night crawlers, suckers or larvae. I remember looking at that machine and thinking, "What in the world am I doing in Louisiana?"

On Day 23 we met a man we thought was a bodhisattva. I remember going to sleep that night thinking, "It's been a week since I thought negatively." I remember wondering at the time just how much longer that would last? The answer to that question turned out to be ten hours! I also asked the question, "I wonder what tomorrow will bring?" As if the answer to that question was going to be positive and cheery. I now realize that the answer to that second question was, "Mononucleosis!" Day 24 was exhausting for me and I wanted to stop walking all day long. That evening Austin had his first high fever.

March 24th was almost three months ago. A pattern seems to be emerging with the mono. It appears that I feel ill for about five days, then feel good for about three. So far the trend has been to feel slightly better each cycle and not as bad on the low end. It feels like the recovery is a slow upward moving spiral. On the good days I see myself contemplating doing a section of the walk next year if conditions allow it. On the low energy days these thoughts make me nauseous. "Why would you even consider doing something so stressful to the body," I hear my mind complain.

I've been trying to look at this desire, the desire to walk on tudong. Why can't I just let it go? What is it I hope to accomplish? Is walking the best way to accomplish that? Do I think I'll find something more bizarre than a "live bait" vending machine? I have no answers as of yet, I'm just looking at the desire.

Our plans right now are as follows: On June 23rd we fly from Washington, DC to Indianapolis, Indiana. My friend John will drive us to Lafayette, Indiana where Dr. Jerry has offered to run some tests on me. Once the tests are complete we will take Amtrak to Austin's parents in Des Moines, Iowa. Austin's dad has offered to drive us up to Minneapolis, Minnesota on July 2nd. I have several high school friends in or around Minneapolis and have made friends with several of the Common Ground Meditation Center people. Several people here have been very kind and supportive to us during the walk, so we just had to visit Minneapolis.

On July 5th Father William will pick us up and take us to St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Health permitting, either on the 7th or 8th we will drive up to Lake Itasca, which is the source of the Mississippi River. J. from Abhayagiri gave us some stones to throw into the lake, and we have been carrying them the whole pilgrimage. Father William has arranged for us to stay the night at the Red Lake Reservation, where the high school shooting happened this spring. St. John's has a mission there. Then Father William will drive us to Thunder Bay. We hope to arrive on July 9th or 10th.

I'm a bit worried about Austin's health. If I continue to have mono for six months or a year, that would be unpleasant but it will mainly be a burden to the communities where I live. Austin has to go back into the world and get a job. His old job at the Fire Brand sounded stressful for a 100% healthy person.

One lesson the Bodhisattva of March 23rd taught us was the power of prayer. It is interesting that at the beginning of the walk we connected with a lot of people by talking about prayer and we seemed to be on the receiving end of a lot of well-wishes. Maybe we still are receiving well-wishes and that is the reason our health has not gotten worse. So, I'm asking for prayers and sharing of merit to be spread towards Austin. May he quickly overcome this mono.

Attacking the illusion of self

Day 109: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 17, 2005

June 17

Please forgive this long journal entry. With all the sleeping I was doing, due to the Mono, it appears that I pinched a nerve in my neck. The pain kept me awake all night, so I decided to write. Here is what I came up with.

I have been experimenting using sound as my meditation object. While sitting in meditation the predominate sounds that I hear are coming from the air entering and exiting my nostrils; and from what Ajahn Sumedho calls the nada sound. This is a high-pitched ringing that appears to be coming from inside the ear itself. Ajahn Sumedho says it is not important to know here the sound comes from, but my theory is that it is the vibration of all the cells that make up the inner ear.

I first discovered the nada sound on my own while I was on staff at the Insight Meditation Society, in Barre, Massachusetts. I had taken all my days off in a ten-day chunk so I could sit the Monastic Retreat with Ajahn Amaro and Ajahn Punnadhammo.

I remember one morning while about halfway through a sitting period, I began to hear what I thought was an alarm. Between the office and the staff dining room is a small passageway, in this passageway is the fire alarm control panel. If anything ever goes wrong in the system, the control panel emits a high pitch alarm. For the next twenty minutes I sat in the hall wondering why nobody had turned the alarm off.

As soon as the sitting ended I made out like I needed something in the office. I was surprised that as I neared the office the sound wasn't getting any louder. When I checked the panel it was functioning normal. "Oh no, this sound is coming from my head!"

The rest of the day I could not get that sound to leave me alone. Then in the late afternoon Ajahn Amaro gave some meditation instructions. He said something like, "When you get settled down and become quiet you might notice a high-pitched ringing sound. This sound is called the sound of silence."

"Did he say it is the sound of silence? Silence! You mean I'm averse to that which I'm seeking?" The story of my life as a meditator.

Hearing the nada sound has always been easy for me, and it is not because my mind is

always settled and peaceful. Even around very loud noise, like while meditating along the Mississippi River below Baton Rouge. All I have to do is think about the nada sound and I can hear it, much like all you need to do is remember to watch the breath and there it is. The nada sound comes so easily for me that I also get bored with it rather easily too.

I once asked Ajahn Sumedho how to best use the nada sound and he gave me the following teaching. This is what I remember him saying, "When you develop any meditation object be it following the breath, observing feelings in the body or listening to the nada sound, whenever you develop the ability to be with that object every waking moment of the day, that object becomes solid. Your meditation object becomes like a movie screen and life becomes an ever-changing show of lights on that solid screen. In this way you will see life as impermanent (annica) and not self (anatta)."

Last week I was sitting in my cabin listening to an approaching thunderstorm. Most of the time they build up slowly and you can feel the barometric pressure drop, the humidity rise, and you can hear the thunder getting closer and louder as the storm approaches. Then just before the first drops of rain start to fall I can often taste the moisture in the air. As the first drops of rain start to fall you can also notice the temperature drop a few degrees.

For almost a week we had violent thunderstorm every afternoon—several with lightening bolts and thunder happening simultaneously. The hair on my arms would stand on end at those times. It amazes me that Austin and I slept out in the woods during a good number of these storms. They seem to be bigger and more violent here in West Virginia, but I don't think that is the case. Being out in nature as we were at the beginning of this pilgrimage made us able to adapt to the storms. I remember on several occasions feeling quite frightened as a storm was approaching, but I would check my tarp, make sure my gear was covered, and adjust my umbrella to shield me from blowing winds and chant the Metta Sutta. After doing all of this I would often fall asleep before the storm actually hit.

Using sound as a meditation object has been interesting in that I find I do not have a lot of judgments about sound. The only sound that really gets on my nerves is somebody else's breathing. I find most sounds to be neutral or pleasant. The sound of the factories along the Mississippi River were not pleasant, but they were not a distraction either.

Man-made noise used to disturb me, especially while meditating. Then one day while I was living at the Kripalu Yoga Center in Lenox, Massachusetts, somebody was vacuuming the hallway by the meditation room. They vacuum the halls in long lines, the way you might mow a lawn. Each time the person came down by the meditation room they would bang the vacuum cleaner against the wall, causing a rush of aversion to arise in my mind. After they banged the wall three or four times I had the realization that actually the noise of them hitting the wall was waking me up from a slothful state of meditation. From that moment on, rarely have I view sound as an obstacle.

Sitting in the meditation hall at the Bhavana Society has been a joy. Having Bhante G. sit in the front of the room like a solid rock is always an inspiration. They have many

windows on all four sides of the meditation hall and being so hot those windows have all been open, so we have lots of sounds from nature drift through the room.

I did notice one particularly odd sound though. Occasionally I'd hear a loud "thunk" or a sharp "tink" sound coming from the back of the hall. There was no pattern to the sound but often it would last for ten or fifteen minutes once it started. Finally I asked Ajahn Dhamma if he knew the source of the sound. He said it is a pair of cardinals that fly into one of the large glass windows.

Yesterday morning I was reading in the library and heard the sound. Sure enough the two cardinals were sitting in the tree that grows from the island in the little pond. It appears that they see their reflections and attack! Attacking the illusion of self.

If beating your head against the wall is painful...

Day 110: An interview by Steve Charles

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 18, 2005

June 18

Having a pinched nerve in my neck is a real blessing. I've forgotten that I have Mono. I was walking down to the main buildings this morning and saw where they had cut down two sick trees. The thought entered my head, "If my neck wasn't so sore I'd volunteer to use the chainsaw on those trees to help make firewood." The pinched nerve sends waves of sharp pain down either my back under my shoulder blade, or down into the right side of my chest and always down my right arm, often leaving my right hand cold and numb. I have only gotten a few hours of sleep the last three nights due to the pain.

The pain really has been a blessing though. While sitting in meditation I can relax into the sensation and not suffer about it for about thirty minutes. It takes a lot of mindfulness and determination, but it can be done. This pain is also teaching me that I really don't want to be born again, "Enough of having a body, lets aspire to something greater than that."

Below is a link to an interview that Steve Charles conducted with me back in November 2004. Steve has been editing this journal from the beginning of the walk. Often I would

write my journal entry in a book and later read it to Steve over the phone, he would transcribe our conversation and publish the entry to the web site.

Recently Pamela Kirby at Abhayagiri has been helping to edit as Steve had less time due other projects.

Thank you Steve, Pamela and Ajahn Sudanto for all your help in making this web journal work.

http://www.wabash.edu/news/displaystory.cfm?news_ID=2523

Rambling Without Going Anywhere

Day 110: Bhanava Society, WV

Austin Stewart

June 18, 2005

I have not felt inspired to write recently. The days roll past quietly—a light breeze in the trees. Sweat seeps from my pores at all hours of the day and the mind feels as stagnant as the humid air. The perfect setting for letting go, but not quite so perfect a setting for writing. In college I took a fiction/poetry writing workshop for two semesters. My professor said that while getting her graduate degree in creative writing one of her professors had said that to become a writer they must write for four hours a day whether inspired or not. This is good advice good writing takes effort and often it takes several pages before something of use arises.

This is the same type of advice given to spiritual aspirants. Every waking moment should be part of your meditation practice. No matter what the conditions you must meditate. There can be times when the mind refuses to cooperate and those times can sometimes last for weeks. It can lead to a deep depression and the more one desires concentration the deeper the depression goes. I have gotten caught in that spot so many times, but until recently I have not been able to spot the cause for the depression.

It is based, of course, on clinging and aversion due to an ignorance of the way things are. I do not know why I never made this connection before perhaps I was too involved in being depressed about the terrible conditions in my life. When we are wise to the cause of suffering we pull out its support and it loses all its power and fades away. However, it is not one instant of wisdom that topples a negative mind-state, but sustained wisdom that slowly eases it away. When the mind is conditioned by a negative mind-state it takes a while for the neurochemistry produced by that state to get used up and during this time the mind inclines toward depression, or anger, etc.

The opposite is also true. One can drop into a very concentrated state and become quite blissful. After meditation the bliss continues for a time before it expires. How often have I desired that the bliss last forever? The Buddha said that all suffering is caused by holding onto something impermanent as permanent. So holding onto the pleasant is also a cause for suffering.

In the past my spiritual practice focused on not suffering in the future. Working so hard to attain something majestic I would skip over the present moment. Perhaps the most profound revelation for me then has been that if I let go of the desire to attain I can be at peace in the present moment. In fact if I let go of other cravings and aversions in the present moment then the peace is even stronger and more stable. As the peace gets more stable and coarse attachments fall away more hidden attachments reveal themselves. Meditation is like a river that slowly erodes the land and exposes all the sedimentary layers below the surface.

Equanimity is one of the four divine abodes. It is a way of examining all phenomena without attraction or revulsion. It is often misinterpreted as apathy, but that is not the case. Say you are walking down a sidewalk and you see the most attractive person in the world. A little later you approach a homeless person asleep on a vent in the sidewalk that is blowing the acrid stench of a filthy ill human body all over the block, a bit later you notice that a large rough-looking man is coming down the street toward you. So in one walk you have longing, aversion and fear, this could be a very stressful walk if it goes on any further. In all of these cases the constant is suffering, but what if you were to look at others with equanimity? Where is the suffering? What happens in the heart?

Some would argue that there are people out there who wish to do harm to others so fear is well founded. I have to say that on this pilgrimage there were many instances that I felt intimidated only to find that the mind was the only one fixed on making me suffer. Many times those I feared turned out to be very helpful generous people.

There are some people who do have ill intentions, but having fear isn't going to do you any good. You do have to have wisdom about staying out of situations that put you at a great risk of harm, but I would not label that fear. If I smoked I would not light a cigarette while filling a car with gas out of care for my safety. In the same way I take precautions to not end up in other potentially dangerous situations. I am not afraid of conditions that could lead to harm I am just aware of them.

Often those most difficult to have equanimity toward are not strangers, but those who we come across every day like our significant others, co-workers, teachers or students, and friends and relatives. What do you see when you look at them without attachment to your shared past and without attachment to your Self?

Living in a conditioned universe when certain things cease that sets the conditions for others to arise. When you let go of attachment to views and opinions about a person what else ceases in the heart and what arises in its stead? What does equanimity feel like?

I have found that a lot of times the four sublime abodes are discussed conceptually, but not experientially. Currently, the mind has become very interested in the experience of peace. Before it was more interested in the concept of peace and, being focused on the concept, it kept the experience of peace at arms-length. In a similar fashion when you view others not with equanimity, but out of accumulated habit you experience them at arms-length. In other words when you see your concept of a person you fail to see the person. To view others from equanimity you must also view yourself from equanimity. As you begin to get a clearer picture of your nature you also get a clearer picture of the nature of others. When this is perfected experiencing yourself you experience others.

I must request that you take none of what I have written as Truth. I do not mean to pose it as such. This is just the line of questioning that I have been following in the last week. It is 'truth' as it is truly the view I have at this moment, but like everything in the universe that view is subject to change. My hope is that others will find reflecting on these things as useful as I have.

Hoosier Daddy

Day 111: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 19, 2005

June 19

Yesterday evening Bhante G. gave a Dhamma talk on the Five Subjects for Frequent Recollection. This has been a major theme of mine since arriving at The Bhavana Society. It was also interesting that he talked on this subject because of his comments on Kamma.

Yesterday I posted an interview that Steve Charles conducted with me on the subject of Refuge. Well last night Bhante G. was going through all the Pali words and giving a more detailed explanation than the usual one or two word translations we usually chant. At the end of the reflection on Kamma Bhante G. said, "Taking refuge in the Buddha, Dhamma and Sangha is really an external refuge, what we really take refuge in is our Kamma."

Wow! I had never thought about it that way before, but that is what I was trying to say in the interview with Steve. It is our actions, be they skillful or unskillful that we are taking refuge in. Thus it is very important to know what our intentions are in each moment. If our actions are skillful it is best to carry them out mindfully, knowingly, with a mind that is evaluating the consequences and knowing that the results of that action will be our responsibility. Likewise if we see a desire to do an unskillful action, know that carrying

out that action will have results too.

Our stay at The Bhavana Society is drawing to a close. I feel I have benefited greatly being with Bhante G. and the entire Sangha here. I had thought at some point it would be nice to visit the Bhavana Society and had not expected to be doing it this spring. But here we are, and I'm grateful for having the opportunity to study and live with Bhante G.

Happy Father's Day to all the Hoosier Daddies and Daddies everywhere.

I will not kill

Day 112: Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 20, 2005

June 20

Being at the Bhavana Society has allowed me to have daily access to a computer. When I log-on the screen opens up to Google. It is so easy to select the news section and read all the headlines. Rarely do I read the stories but I was intrigued by the stories of the Downing Street Memos.

The initial reason for thinking about doing the pilgrimage was because I felt the war in Iraq was the wrong thing to do. Though I had no support for my view, I felt that the rationale for going to war was a lie.

When I first started to meditate I had four very powerful experiences that I feel were past life memories. The first one happened when I was visiting Wat Pah Nanachat in Thailand. I was returning from a town trip with two other visitors. We were walking on the berm of rice paddy heading towards the wall of forest that was Wat Pah Nanachat. To the east were several ominous black clouds. Then all of a sudden a line of five or six military helicopters flew below the clouds. It looked like a scene from a Vietnam War movie. When I turned my head to look where I was walking the two men in front of me were wearing military fatigues and carrying their rifles across their shoulders. The image lasted only a second but it was shocking. I just thought maybe I'd watched too many war movies (which was not my taste in movies).

A year later I was sitting a three month long retreat at the Insight Meditation Society in Barre, MA. I had just finished the first three weeks of the retreat and had focused my practice on Metta (loving-kindness). I felt very peaceful and my concentration was pretty stable. Then one afternoon I was outside doing walking meditation. At a certain point I

heard what sounded like a large transport helicopter just beyond my range of sight. One moment I was walking on a path as a meditator and the next moment it appeared that I was walking in a jungle. Not only was I in a jungle but also I could see that I was carrying a large machine gun and I was wearing army fatigues. The image I got was not like a photograph of yourself, but the view you would see looking out from your own eyes.

The next moment I was back as a meditator. Over the next few minutes the images switched back and forth several times. It wasn't even just an image. When I was seeing out of the soldier's eyes I could feel the humidity, smell the jungle, taste the salt on my lips, feel the fear in my gut. These experiences were very disturbing. They continued to come for about a week and in several of the visions I could see the soldier aim this rifle and shoot people.

The nada sound that I wrote about a few days ago was very pronounced at this time too. After a few days I started to get the sense that the nada sound was a child's voice screaming in the soldier's head not to kill anybody. I had the sense that the soldier felt 45% that he didn't want to kill, but 55% of him was influenced by his training. The training that said, "They are the enemy, if you do not kill them, they will kill your buddies, will destroy the USA, it is your duty as a soldier to kill."

As the week progressed I had more and more of these disturbing images. I noticed the nada sound was getting louder and louder, it was if the child was screaming. I also noticed that the feeling from the soldier was becoming more like 49 / 51. Then one sitting while having a vision I realized that the killing of the "enemy" was actually killing me. In the vision I put the gun down and refused to pick it up. I remember thinking, "I will not kill anymore. I do not care if I am attacked, I will not kill." I can't really explain what happened next, but as soon as I made that resolve everything opened up and a healing began.

On two later occasions I had visions of a similar nature, and both of those were triggered by the sound of helicopters. The last time this happened I was an anagarika at Abhayagiri. I was fortunate to have the wise council of Ajahn Pasanno to help me work with this, because I was getting afraid of concentration practice. The last three experienced happened while I was doing a lot of meditation.

I asked a famous meditation teacher Ajahn Jumniun if these experiences were past life memories. I asked how do you know if a memory is a past life memory or just a strong thought. Ajahn Jumniun said, "With a past life memory you know."

My gut feeling to this answer was, "Oh no."

Ajahn Jumniun is the monk I wrote about earlier in the journal who gave me a bag of 52 amulets that he blessed. These amulets I sent to my cousin in Iraq. Not one of the soldiers who wore one of the amulets was harmed in their year of duty. Ajahn Jumniun wouldn't say if the visions were past life visions, but said they very likely were. He also pointed

out that if they were, that is not who I am today.

I've been reflecting about these visions the last few days as I've been struggling with the pain in my arm and neck. If I was a soldier in Vietnam in my past life and if I did kill people, it shouldn't be surprising that I have a lot of illness and physical pain in this birth.

I do not know if those experiences were past life or not, but I do use the reflection on kamma to motivate myself to practice.

Yesterday I had the idea to do a journal entry just listing all the US service women and men who have died in Iraq since we started our pilgrimage. I'm sad to say the number of names would have been very long. I was shocked and very saddened to read all the names. I think it was close to 240 soldiers. I've also heard that for each soldier killed 6 to 8 are serious wounded or maimed. Of course the Iraqi casualties, to both police and civilians, are enormously higher than that of the US soldiers.

There is a pull in me that wants to get verbal and wants to get involved in a campaign to end the war. I'm resisting that pull and I feel the most important thing I can do is meditate and free my own heart of suffering, greed, anger, delusion. If I'm able to understand these things in own being then maybe I'll be able to help others.

Monkey Mind

Day 112: Bhanava Society

Austin Stewart

June 20, 2005

Currently the monkey mind is inhabiting the highest reaches of the canopy of imagination. It swings past the end of the pilgrimage and far into the future. In all instances it is the hero accomplishing all of its goals with ease and grace. It is thinking up situations and conversations that will never happen and has the right answer for all of them. It always knows what to say and do. Bravo! Lets give it a pat on the back and then a nice firm kick in the pants. Does the monkey mind wear pants? Of course it does, that is what Tiggers, er monkey minds do best!

Over the last week my energy has, to reply in understatement, returned. So much so that it is very tiring. I sit unflinching in meditation with no drowsiness and little pain, but the mind will not sit still. I made the mistake of having a cup of green tea a couple nights ago before meditation. It was as though I had consumed an entire pot of coffee. I usually have tea before meditation without ill effect. I felt very high, like at any moment I was going

to sail off into another dimension. If this sounds at all pleasant let me assure you it wasn't. I tried diligently to ride it out peaceful, but it was so rambunctious that it kept bucking awareness off.

Mono trained me to work through low energy and poor health. It taught me how to be at ease with fatigue and how to posture the body and mind to ward off dullness. It left me completely unprepared to deal with the dervish of good health! Before I had to stoke the fire and now I have to reduce the boil. Or, not so much reduce the boil as learn how to put the energy to use. I think training the mind is like building a dam. Whether flood or drought it releases an even flow.

We are coming to the end of our time here at the Bhavana Society and as much as the mind wants to race off into the future endings tend to inspire reflection. The practice of Buddhism is very subtle. Though the Buddha's teaching is right here at each moment it is hard to see. One must uncover it with concentrated effort and then investigate it deeply. I can see that a constant effort is required for the practitioner to achieve understanding. Old habits grow back as quickly as the Kudzu vine overtakes the forests of Mississippi.

When this pilgrimage is over I will return to lay life. I have the intention to eventually become a monk, but I have significant student debt to repay before I can act on that intention. It has been such a blessing to be able to devote this period of my life solely to practice. I think of all the acts of generosity that have allowed this pilgrimage to take place and I feel quite humble.

Knowing the strength of habit I worry that my old pal laziness will cuddle up next to me and whisper sweet nothings in my ear lulling me towards delusion. Yet at the same time I know what practices lead to an experience of joy and peace that trounces any other experience I have ever had. Though what I have experienced is not the final fruit it calls me to come and see. Once you have faith in a way leading to freedom from suffering why take refuge any place else?

I was just about to write good acts lead to peace of mind, but that is only true in part. As important as the act itself is awareness of the act. If one does not pay attention to the heart while acting then one misses the full benefit of the act. When you lend an elderly person support to get up a staircase do you do it out of habituated manners, or with the desire to receive praise? Or, do you do it having set aside selfish notions and habits and fully offer yourself to that person for the duration of the act? Being mindful of the heart while acting is transformative. How could I ever neglect this?

The Buddha talked about the highest blessings for the spiritual life. Two of those are associating with the wise and hearing the Dhamma frequently taught. These two things are the highest blessings because they are teachings, one by word, one by action and they are also constant reminders to practice. Without these things present in your life it is easy to have larger and larger gaps in mindfulness. I am afraid of acting heedlessly. I have seen how harmful the outcome of heedless actions can be with direct experience. Even if the actions are not harmful they are not very useful if you are not paying attention to

them.

I believe that Jotipalo just wrote about how Karma is our refuge. In other words our actions are all we have got. Bhante G. said, "If we own one thing it is our actions." Volitional actions are the only thing in this universe that we have control over. We chose whether to act in a wholesome way or an unwholesome way. This seems simple enough, but many times what we tell ourselves is wholesome is not really wholesome at all.

This is why moral restraint, concentration and wisdom are the three elements of practice that all things stem from. Moral restraint points the way to good action while concentration and wisdom are still weak. It also provides the Karmic foundation for both. Refraining from harmful acts allows peace to arise in the mind, which in turn allows wisdom and concentration to develop. As they mature they deepen the understanding of what a wholesome act is and lead to the release of self-serving ideals. Eventually with the perfection of concentration and wisdom moral restraint becomes effortless. I only know this last bit through indirect experience. I have seen many unwholesome habits of mine fall away and in situations where before it would take effort to be skilful before, now I can be skilful with ease. Based on this experience I assume that at the end of the path there ceases to be any desire to do anything but wholesome acts.

I do love him though

Day 114: Last day at the Bhavana Society

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 21, 2005

June 22

Today is our final full day at the Bhavana Society. My preference would have been that Austin and I would have remained healthy and that we were still walking at this point, but our bodies and the mono didn't ask for our feedback. Coming to the Bhavana Society was a blessing. Just as we are leaving I'm starting to feel much better, mono-wise. And getting to know Bhante G. was a real blessing.

Here is part of a note that I sent to Ajahn Pasanno yesterday:

Getting to know Bhante G was very special; I feel a love for him. Today Bhante G. organized a walk partly because he wanted to walk with me. I disappointed him by not going. I have not walked for more than five minutes at a stretch for over two weeks. Their walk turned out to be a four-hour trip. That would have destroyed me.

When I told Bhante that I would not be able to go, it was at the closing of the Patimokkha. So I said, "Well Bhante I may try to finish part of the pilgrimage next year, maybe you can walk with me then." Bhante said in total seriousness, "I could only join you for a month" (remember he is seventy-seven years old). The other monks all groaned as they are trying to find ways to keep him at home. I don't think I would be able to keep up with him.

Another amusing Bhante G story: He said they once had a group of students from a ministry college come visit him and he gave them a talk. Bhante G. said, "Even the name of their school sends a chill down my spine." After the talk several of the students came up to him and said that was one of the most insightful talks they had ever heard but it was too bad that he was going to go to hell. Bhante G said, "I told them, 'If I'm going to hell and you die before me, please come and welcome me when I arrive.' "

Yesterday I had a funny dream about Bhante G. In the dream Bhante G. took me up on the offer to walk on the pilgrimage next year. But in the dream Bhante is driving us in a big Cadillac, I'm sitting shotgun and Austin is in the back seat. Bhante had just told us an amusing story and we are all laughing. In the dream I say, "That reminds me of a story that Kurt, one of my ex-bosses, told me about a business trip he took to Alabama. Kurt pulled over at a farm stand to ask directions. The man said, "Ya, I know where that company is located. Drive down this road six C's and take a right. Drive until you see the sign with the big chicken on it. When you get there you have passed the road you want so turn around and take the first right. You will go down four C's and you'll see it on the left." Kurt said, "I understand about the big chicken, but what is a C?" The man said, "You drive as far as you can see and that is one C."

In the dream Bhante G. looks over at me with his eyes spinning and says, "That is crazy man!" Perhaps I'm feeling too close to Bhante G. and need to remember he is a very well-respected monk and worthy of respect.

I do love him though.

I know what they are thinking

Day 116: Lafayette, Indiana

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

June 24, 2005

June 24

Our visit to the Bhavana Society started with George and ended with George. He drove

us to Dulles Airport outside Washington, DC yesterday morning. Our flight to Indianapolis went smoothly. We actually arrived thirty minutes early.

My friend John picked us up and drove us to Crawfordsville where we had a nice visit with my parents. My sister even showed up and I got a treat by seeing my niece and nephew. They are growing up so quickly it seems. I'm grateful for each time I see them.

We made it safely to Lafayette, IN and are staying with Dr. Jerry. Today he took three vials of blood from me and is having various tests run to make sure my condition is 'only' mono. The traveling was exhausting for me, and all I had to do was basically sit the whole time.

Austin and I went to a diner just around the corner from Jerry's apartment for the meal. I told Austin I felt very self conscious walking around town because when people were staring at us, "I know what they are thinking because I grew up twenty miles from here."

When we got to the diner it felt like we walked into the 1950's. I hear the new governor of Indiana finally got the state to introduce daylight saving's time. This ruins my favorite Indiana joke. I used to say, "In Indiana we don't change the clocks it's always 1959."

This evening Austin and I decided to go for a short walk. It still must be in the 80's even though the sun has set. Just as we started walking a young man named Jeff came up and asked if we were Buddhist. He asked if we knew any meditation groups in Lafayette as he had read a lot about Buddhism but was looking for a sitting group to help support his practice. Unfortunately there is nothing in this part of the state. After leaving Jeff, several pre-teenaged kids on skateboards came over and talked. They thought it was cool that we were monks, but even cooler that I lived in California. I think most Indiana boys would have this same view.

We crossed over the Wabash River and circled a shopping complex. As we were about to head back to Jerry's and were walking past an ice cream shop Dr. Jerry stuck his head out the shop and invited us in for a cold drink!

On the walk back we ran into a homeless man named John, whom we had met earlier and talked to for about fifteen minutes. We talked for another fifteen minutes and John introduced us to every homeless person who came by. Just as we were about to leave a young man joined us, he looked a little strung out on drugs or was really tired. I heard John ask him as we were leaving if he was okay and if he had a place to sleep. It was very touching this community looked after each other.

When we started the walk Austin and I had the feeling once we got out of the south that people would be more receptive to our pilgrimage. We made almost as much contact with people walking around Lafayette for a hour than we did the entire time we were in Mississippi. As Austin said, "Our hourly rate of contact in Lafayette was pretty high."

Tomorrow John will drive us to Chicago and we plan to get on yet another Amtrak train headed for Iowa.

Truth and consequence

Day 117: Des Moines, Iowa

Austin Stewart

June 25, 2005

Jotipalo's friend John was kind enough drive us from Lafayette through the northern plains of Indiana up into the south suburbs of Chicago and finally to Chicago itself. We snaked up Lake Shore Drive, only one of thousands of cars flowing north into the city glittering in the bright sun and heavy heat of June in the Midwest. John kept a watchful eye on the engine heat as the air conditioning was blasting and barely keeping the interior of the car cool.

The south side of Chicago looks battered. I can see the stress of poverty expressed in the forlorn glances of liquor stores, abandoned buildings, and run-down apartments. The buildings look disheveled and forgotten. Slowly as we head north, the cityscape begins to change and a dash of new housing is cast into century-old parts of the city. As the commercial towers of downtown Chicago grow near, we find ourselves humming past clean glass and brazen brick leaving behind the servers and merging with the served.

We pull up alongside Union Station and give John our thanks and farewell wishes. Leaving the relative calm of John's car, we climb a few stairs to the door of the station and then begin our descent into the throng of summertime tourism. This weekend boasts baseball games, the Taste of Chicago and the Gay Pride parade. Union Station hosts the intersection of divergent desires. One by one we become a crowd, one by one we go our separate ways.

Jotipalo and I find seclusion in the closed section of a bar in the train station. We pull the chairs off a table and sit away from the busyness of the crowd. All of the individual attachments and aversions in a crowd feed each other. It is as though anxiety is attractive. Everyone rushes ahead and looks over his or her shoulder at the same time. There is a sense that if the right signal is given order will cease and chaos will erupt.

Our seclusion gives us breathing room, but it is not perfect. Heavy metal sears the air from an overhead speaker. I know one or two songs that in my early adolescence I would have been excited to hear; the rest all blend into a background of angst that no longer fits me. Angst is so common in suburban America. It is a thread in the garment of national identity. Angst is the product of realizing that the values we are taught are terribly

misplaced. Most rebel and stop there with anger and an inner anarchy. Eventually the anger burns out and without the heat of its flame the rebels fall back on the same values that they once had opposed so thoroughly. Few understand that the culture and the counterculture are only different expressions of the same source. One becomes the other ad infinitum.

As the present moment crept closer to our departure time we found our way to the gate we would be leaving from. The room was an incarnation of purgatory. The air was flavored with human odors; the light florescent and the color scheme the unassuming tans of suburbia. A frantic woman was visibly shaking as she wove her way to the front of the room. I could clearly see that she was suffering and that it wasn't helping her any. How much better would her day be if she could let go of whatever had put her in that state? The rest of us waited. During the whole of the pilgrimage this afternoon in purgatory was the best cross-section of America I had seen yet. It felt like everybody was there. I caught several wide eyes and "nonchalant" nods in our direction. Yes, yet again we were objects of great interest. The Amish don't even get as much attention as we do. I hope that doesn't give them a bone to pick with us.

Eventually we were allowed to proceed to the train and begin boarding. It was a frantic slow march of people burdened with luggage. The anxiety of the crowd was present again. Anxiety arises from thinking of the self and I knew what everyone else was thinking because it entered my mind as well. "I want to get a good seat before they are all gone!" So under the awkward weight of their luggage, people struggle to get ahead of others. On the train every car looks identical. The seats are all the same size. There are two options, window or aisle. Yet, every time I board a train I experience the same urge to get the "best" seat.

Once on the train we found that every seat on the train had been sold. We had to work our way through two train cars before we found empty seats. A Presbyterian youth group had the majority rule in our car. They wore sky-blue t-shirts with pictures of Jesus on the front and the text, "The Mob Squad." The connection between the image and the text has eluded me. I have contemplated it off and on since seeing it and I am baffled. It could simply be that they call their group the Mob Squad and they pasted Jesus on to insure that others knew this was no secular group, but my mind wants to believe that there is a more cryptic message that I am missing.

I publicly make the prayer, may I never be put in charge of more than twenty teenage boys and girls for the rest of my life. Please. Looking at the chaperones for the group I saw that the end of the rope was close at hand. Their only relief for them was that they had made it onto the train with all the kids and were on their way home.

I ventured out to the lounge car to procure some beverages and met a man originally from Monserrat, a small island in the Caribbean. He asked me to sit with him and we spent several hours deep in conversation. His name was Ijah and he was the first Rastafarian I had the opportunity to speak with in a profound way. I do not believe in coincidence. We meet people when we need to meet them. I have gotten stuck here unable to express what

happened between us. All I can say is that it felt as though we were supposed to meet.

Ijah is a recording artist and is spreading the ideas of peace and love through his music. He said that he used to write more secular lyrics, but has transformed his lyrical body into a mouthpiece for something that goes deeper than the ego. The train was propelling him westward to San Francisco where he was to join a band called Bamboo Station for a few shows.

The train stopped one town from our destination for a smoke break. Only a few years ago there was a smoking room on every train. Now they are smoke free. We got off to stretch and mill about Ottumwa for a few minutes. Sunset was approaching and the air was still thick and hot. A man with a ponytail was swaying toward us, hiccupping and barely keeping his balance. He came up and spoke to us. His speech was a deep slur enunciated by hiccups that threatened vomit in the same way that thunder threatens a storm. He confessed his drunkenness. He spoke about pillars of conduct. He said there were eight, but he only ever got to the second. He made it there several times, but could not find his way past it. He burned with suffering. We spoke with him smiling and generating peace. Everyone else on the train gave him a wide berth and had condescending eyes. Having experience with alcoholics I knew that our words with him would bear no fruit, but what about trying to just be there with him?

Honestly, I do not know the outcome of our conversation. Most likely I will never see him again. He told us that he had just gotten out of rehab after shooting dope for twelve years. Clearly he was not ready to be out on his own without any support. Compassion moved me to want to act. His words related not only the blindness of having lost all hope, but also the understanding that his actions were not wholesome. We could have flooded him with Buddhist rhetoric, but then we would have been the Southern Baptist planting seeds by telling us we were hell-bound. What despair would have greeted him if we explained the concept of not self to him? We could not answer the questions that he didn't ask.

So this was the moment. In past journal entries I have written about being generous in every aspect of the day. What could I give this man and what could he accept? Upon contemplation one thing arose in the mind, "I don't know." I don't think that there was anything to be done other than to shower him with love and look at him as an equal. He was desperately alone and what I could do was reach across the void and be with him right now.

What does it take to do that? It takes letting go of the fear that at any moment he was going to puke on my sandaled feet; it takes letting go of the aversion I feel towards someone who cannot control himself and it takes letting go of the barriers that I construct against the world. What good is all the yoga and meditation in the world if I leave it on the mat or cushion?

I do not know where he was headed or what old friends and old habits awaited him there, but may those who read this send goodwill and love in his direction. He is going to need

all that he can get to overcome his addictions.

My father was waiting to pick us up at the station and a new chapter began, where Jotipalo gets to meet my family and see the role that I play with those with who I am closest. We waited as the train slid past out of the station carrying those we had shared a few hours with on to their futures.

Iowa

Day 123: West Des Moines, Iowa

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

July 1, 2005

July 1

We have been in heaven, in Iowa now for a week. Traveling from the Bhavana Society to here wore me out. After a few days rest though I'm feeling better. I get the sense it will take me a few months to slowly build up my stamina. Dr. Jerry called me with the blood work results right before we left Lafayette. The tests all showed "normal." It is nice to know my condition is probably only mono.

Austin's family is great. I'm a half-generation between Austin and his siblings to their parents. I'm twenty years older than Austin's sister Paige and nineteen years younger than his father Jerry. I'm thirteen years older than Austin and fourteen years younger than his mother Fern. I think this allows me an interesting perspective. They have a very close family and I've been welcomed in to the clan.

They live in a very peaceful neighborhood. The woods that Austin wrote about in an earlier journal entry are real: huge white swamp, burr and pin oaks plus a few elm trees, forest a deep ravine just yards from the house. I can easily imagine Austin and his brother exploring these woods and swimming in the small pond just down the road.

In the evening after the heat and humidity drops, we have taken a few short walks through the neighborhood. Austin points to thirty-foot tall trees and says, "We used to be able to jump over that tree." Most of the neighbors have beautiful lawns with mature trees. It is easy to imagine them as barren lots with grass seed just being sown after the houses were built.

Last night as we were walking a young man drove past and slammed on his breaks. He yelled out to us, "Are you guys going to a toga party?" That was a first for me.

The days have been unusually hot for Iowa so we have stayed inside most of the time. I'm staying in Austin's old room, which is in the basement. It feels like I'm living in a cool dark cave.

Tomorrow we leave on a bus for Minneapolis, Minnesota. Several of my friends from high school are planning to meet us and take us out to a Thai restaurant. On July 3rd the Common Ground Meditation Center is having a gathering and we will get to see several people who have been in contact with us during the walk.

On July 5th Father William is planning to pick us up and take us to St. John's Abbey.

I am looking forward to our time in Minnesota and I'm looking forward to getting to Arrow River.

You know what I'm saying?

Day 126: Minneapolis, Minnesota

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

July 4, 2005

July 4th

This journal started by talking about John Steinbeck's *Travels with Charley*. Near the end of John's travels he knew the journey was over, even though he had not gotten to his home. I understand what John was feeling. Many wonderful connections and events have happened since arriving in Minnesota, and we are hoping to connect with Father William tomorrow. Even so, I feel little interest in writing. I'll attempt to write anyway. With meditation practice you meditate when you want to and when you don't.

July 2nd we got up early and Austin's parents drove us to the bus station in Des Moines. The bus was pretty full but we were able to find two aisle seats next to each other. The sun was just rising when we boarded and most of the passengers were still asleep, or pretending to be, so nobody would ask to share their seats. My experience taking long distance bus trips has usually been unpleasant, but this six-hour trip went smoothly. The man I was sitting next to got several calls on his cell phone and I only heard him speak Spanish. He spoke very quickly and I noticed a beauty in the sounds of his words.

Just after we entered the state of Minnesota a muscular black man who might have been in his yearly thirties and who was sitting behind Austin started a conversation with a young black man sitting in front of me. It was obvious that these men knew each other, probably from having a conversation the night before. It was also obvious that these two

men had spent time in some pretty rough neighborhoods. I wish I could convey a sample of their conversation that would do justice to the poetry, power and beauty of the way they communicated. Their use of the English language was unlike anything I had ever heard before. Though I understood every word they spoke, it took me ten minutes to figure out what they were talking about!

"You know what I'm saying? I was being on the up with the man. He knew the hussle and I just wanted to get in and get out. I told him, 'I'm cool, no jive let's just do it.' He had two of his niggas working for him, I hate working with niggas, you know what I'm saying? These guys knew the rules and they knew I was from out of town. But I knew what those niggas were up too. Can't be that way. We flew to L.A. with 20K, and after we laid down the track and paid for the time, we 'cut up' the rest. What was cut, that is what you got. You know what I'm saying?"

It turns out he was a recording artist and had been to L.A. to make a CD. The band had a \$20,000 fund to produce the CD. Recording fees might be about \$2,000 to \$3,000. After all other expenses were paid, they "cut up" the remainder of the fund and that was what he made in terms of salary. His life sounded pretty miserable with always having to defend himself from a hussle.

At one point he was telling the young man in front of me about how the hussle works in L.A. He and several friends had been invited to a party. They suggested if he brought his new truck with him, some of their women friends would probably find him attractive. When he got to the party he immediately knew he was in trouble. He was separated from his friends and forced to hand over his ATM card. They asked him to drive to the ATM so they could get money to buy alcohol for the party. He said, "The whole time they was just waiting for me to say 'no.' I knew if I said "no" that was THE END. I asked them what I should do about the truck. They said 'Report it stolen and everything in it too.' "

Though his life sounded like hell to me, he had an incredible understanding of human nature. He also said a few very wise things. The thing I was most impressed with was the following conversation. At one point he was telling the young man that the Hood in Arkansas thought they were pretty bad. He said that if they ever went to New York or L.A. their attitude would get them killed though. He said, "They have no give in their talk."

Before arriving in Minneapolis the older of the two men started a conversation with Austin. It was interesting that his English changed completely, the tone, volume, sentence structure, choice of words, topic, everything. I heard him say, "When I saw you with your sandals on I thought you guys walked right out of the desert." After Austin told him about our walking from New Orleans to Memphis he had to tell his friend about us. Right in front of our eyes we were turned into legends. "These guys walked from New Orleans to Memphis barefoot and they walked all day and all night long . . . they are like Moses you know." I couldn't hear all of their conversation but I hope Austin will write about it in a journal entry.

When we got to Minneapolis my high school friend Sarah and her partner Tom were waiting for us. They drove us to a nice Thai restaurant where several of my friends from Crawfordsville were waiting for us. Sarah, Bindi, Ron and I all were in the same class and Treena was few years younger. Ron and I have a bond in that we spent a few hours in jail one night. We continue to have a laugh about that event. It was great to see my friends and their families again, unfortunately we were tired from the bus trip and didn't get to spend as much time together as we would have liked. Separation from the liked is dukkha (suffering).

We are staying with Patrice and Dan. I met Patrice back in November and she graciously invited us to stay in her home when she heard we were coming through. They live one block from the Common Ground Meditation Center, so that was a real blessing. Minneapolis is a lovely city. It has a small-town feeling to it. Austin comment today that people here stare at us too, but they seem to be happy to see us.

On July 3rd the Common Ground Meditation Center held its quarterly meeting and potluck meal. About forty-five people came and it was an opportunity for the community to hear a talk and formally take the Five Precepts. After the meal Austin and I gave an informal talk about the pilgrimage. That evening about twenty people gathered for a meditation and I gave a formal talk, again talking about the pilgrimage.

I can hear the 4th of July fireworks in the not-so-far-off distance, and I'm starting to lose energy for writing. Hopefully I'll have a chance to write once more before we get to Thunder Bay. I hope to write an entry or two from Arrow River as well, perhaps a few parting thoughts.

St. John's Abbey

Day 128: Collegeville, Minnesota

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

July 6, 2005

July 6

We've arrived at St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, Minnesota. Father William picked us up late in the afternoon yesterday. He had just been on a ten-day trip driving to St. Louis, Missouri and Chicago, Illinois.

Our stay in Minneapolis was lovely. On July 4th the meal was offered by Joanne and David. They also invited two of their friends, Amy and Niomi. After the meal we sat and discussed Dhamma until 3:30 pm. My experience of Minneapolis in my two visits to the

Common Ground Meditation Center is that people there really love the Dhamma. Back in November I gave two formal talks in the evening and people stayed until midnight to continue the discussion.

Our hosts Patrice and Dan took us to get a few gifts in the early evening of July 4th and we visited Lock and Dam #1 on the Mississippi River. They have this lock set up as a tourist and educational facility. We saw them lower the lock once while we were there for two kayakers.

Yesterday Veronica offered us the meal and we shared it with Mark and Wynn Nunberg. Mark and Wynn are the main teachers at the Common Ground Center. They have a very large committed community. I made a point of complimenting Mark and Wynn for their commitment to offering the teachings on dana (generosity). They have been teaching in this area for eight years, using their home as a meeting place, and have always refrained from charging.

Father William has been busy catching up on a bit of office work today, but has made time to make us feel welcome and shown us around the campus too. St. John's, besides being a monastery, is also a small liberal arts college. About 1800 students attend. So the campus is quite large. The property has several thousand acres of hardwood forest and about seven lakes. I'm tempted to go for a walk on one of the many trails they have through the forest, but I don't have the energy. I'm also tempted to take out one of the canoes. Last night after evening prayer services Austin and I walked outside to look at a statue of one of Jesus' disciples that looked strikingly similar to a Buddhist monk, especially the way he was wearing his robe (except he was wearing a hair shirt). After being outside for two minutes the mosquitoes found us. I got my first bite of the year.

That reminds me of a poem that Patrice and Dan had in the guest room. The first two lines of the poem read: "It was evening all afternoon. It was snowing and it was going to snow."

"I got bit and I'm going to get bitten." There sure is a lot of "I" in that sentence. Maybe I should write: "Mosquitoes bite and they are going to bite." Sounds a bit better, but still suffering happens.

“Fourteenth week in ordinary time”

Day 129: St. John's Abbey

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

July 7, 2005

July 7

Tomorrow morning we will be leaving St. John's for Arrow River. Our stay here has been very good. I've enjoyed spending time with Father William. They have worship services four times each day and we have attended all the services. Often after the prayers I question Father William about why they do things a certain way, or words things as they do.

Last night I was commenting on how often they say, “forever and ever” and words like “eternity.” I mentioned how as Buddhist we are always focusing on impermanence. So words like these strike me as being “wrong view.” These conversations are held respectfully and I think we both appreciate each other's perspective. Father William has had to explain the historical perspective of much of what we have heard in order for it to make sense for me.

Even the way things are worded can be amusing to me. When I point out things, it can shed new light on things for the monks here. The program heading last night read, “Fourteenth week in ordinary time.” I found this humorous for some reason and could easily see how it would seem ordinary if you lived here.

After the noon meal Austin and I had an interview with the abbot, Father John Klassen. I read a quote from Ajahn Chah's reflections, *No Ajahn Chah*: “Sometimes teaching is hard work. A teacher is like a garbage can that people throw their frustrations and problems into. The more people you teach, the bigger the garbage disposal problems.” Father John really appreciated this reflection.

Tonight one of the rec. rooms has been reserved and Austin and I will make ourselves available to answer questions. Already we have had several nice conversations with community members. Being a fellow monastic, the monks here have some things in common with me and thus find it easy to approach me. I think many times they can get insights into their own faith and monastic discipline by hearing about how Buddhist monks live. I think the dialog is valuable and I'm happy we took the time to visit.

"You are all the way away from Thunder Bay"

Day 132: Thunder Bay, Ontario, Canada

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

July 10, 2005

July 10

We made it!

Early in the walk I mailed my journal ahead to lessen the weight of my pack. Today I was pleased to read on the first page, "I commented to Billy that we were a long way from Thunder Bay." Billy responded, "You are all the way away from Thunder Bay."

Arrived at the Arrow River Forest Hermitage on Friday evening July 8th. Father William graciously drove us the seven hours from Collegetown, Minnesota. The drive was beautiful, especially the 150 miles along Lake Superior. Seeing that stretch of Rt. 61 made me regret that we were not able to walk that section.

When we arrived at Arrow River it took me only a few seconds to realize that maybe it was a blessing we have not been walking the last three months. Before we could unpack the car, we were already swarmed by mosquitoes. Ajahn Punnadhammo said it has been a very wet year and thus the mosquitoes are really bad.

Most of the pilgrimages and peace walks that I read about, at the conclusion of the journey the participants went through a period of depression. I thought that wouldn't happen to me since the "walk" stopped back in March. But today I feel an empty pit kind of feeling in my stomach and I see my mind want to label it as depression. Part of the feeling could be the inconvenience of the mosquitoes and it is unseasonably hot here right now.

Despite the low feelings I'm experiencing, I'm also happy to be here. Yesterday afternoon Austin and I waded across the Arrow River to cool off in a deep pool below some waterfalls. While I was drying off in the sun, sitting on a rock in the middle of the river, I got a sense that all the life and energy from the forest will be good for my health. The eighteen hours of sunlight each day is also conducive to energy as well. It stays light until 11 pm. This is due to the fact that Thunder Bay is in the Eastern Time Zone. Thunder Bay is several hundred miles west of Chicago!

This morning we said good-bye to Father William. He has hoping to make a mass in

Grand Marais, plus he has a long drive to get back to St. John's Abbey. I told him I was sorry I was not able to show him around to the bookstore, library, guest lounge . . . I was able to show him his cabin, the pit toilet and the bathing hole in the river. We laughed that now Father William may know what it was like for the first residents at St. John's Abbey back in the 1850s. Who knows maybe in 2150 Thunder Bay will have a small Buddhist University with a monastic community.

So the pilgrimage is over. What happens next is uncertain. Several options exist and more may unfold. Last week Ajahn Pasanno gave me his blessings to continue the walk next year, but I'd need to get Ajahn Amaro's permission as well. Austin likes the idea of attempting a section of the walk, but his main priority right now is to pay off some college loans.

My health would need to be fully recovered and even then I'm not sure if i would want to stress my body again so soon. But, I'm keeping the possibility open. We started the pilgrimage with a fund. These funds were provided by many people who wanted to see us succeed. Today Austin told me that the fund is just about at the same level as when we started, even after all the train travel and one airfare! We have also had some gear donated which we received after we stopped walking. Also we made many contacts with people in Iowa, Wisconsin and Minnesota.

I have to admit right now the idea of walking makes me ill. But on my more energized days, I see the desire to give it a try. The hardships of weather, insects and uncertainty of finding places to sleep make the prospect of another attempt look not so inviting. Father William pointed out the miraculous aspect of the pilgrimage we just completed. When we needed shelter we were inside a church, when we needed a ride one materialized . . .

It's all uncertain.

I will attempt to write at least one more entry. I would like to take this opportunity to thank everybody for the support we received. We know we could not have completed this walk without the kindness and support of the hundreds of people who helped us. Thank you!

Crash Landing

Day: 6 Canadian

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

July 14, 2005

July 14

Tomorrow will be the end of our first week at Arrow River. I've never suffered so much in a one week period! They are having a rare heat spell in Northern Ontario. Ajahn Punnadhammo said the normal high might reach 80. All week we have had temperatures in the low 90's! The temperatures are not so bad except it has been a very wet year and thus the humidity is nearly 100% and the mosquitoes are relentless.

The cabins are all built with the idea of trying to keep the heat in, not to evacuate heat. (It gets down to -40 in the winter!) Ajahn Punnadhammo's cabin sits in the middle of a sunny field and by late afternoon it is much warmer inside his cabin than it is outside. I went to make a phone call one afternoon and within minutes my clothing was soaked in perspiration.

Our one solace is the Arrow River. The water is cool and there are several deep pools where you can go to bathe. The breeze from the flowing water gives a reprieve from the mosquitoes and causes the air temperatures to be comfortable as well.

I am starting to adjust and have discovered ways to avoid the mosquitoes. The conditions here are very primitive. There is electricity in only two of the buildings and only one building has a telephone. They have no shower or bathtub; you either sponge bathe or wash in the river. In the winter we use the sauna several times a week. All laundry is done by hand and you have to carry all the water you use at your cabin. The cabins are all heated by wood-burning stoves, which means you do a bit of wood splitting and hauling too.

This past winter I loved the primitive conditions here. It helped make the adjustment to being on pilgrimage go more smoothly. At the beginning of the walk we found it difficult to find places to get clean. If I had gone right into those conditions, not being clean could have caused a lot of suffering. As it were, it was only an inconvenience. The past three months of the pilgrimage though, I got used to daily showers, laundry facilities and while at Austin's parents a near-constant supply of root beer.

Coming back into a world of sense deprivation was pretty shocking for me. I have to admit the contrast was pretty severe, but fortunately I knew I would adjust and thus tried not to make a problem about it. I also knew I would like the conditions here once I adjusted. In no time I'll be loving it here. (I hope).

Being here has been good for my health. I'm going for several walks every day. I hope in a week I'll be able to start helping Esko, one of the long-term residents here, build his cabin. I'm planning to work for only a half hour every other day at first and slowly add time as the endurance builds. In the meantime Ajahn Punnadhammo has made me the abbot's assistant. I'll be answering emails and other odd correspondence jobs.

In terms of walking in the future, I have decided to "let go." Austin and I both have a desire to continue. Austin needs to pay off his student loans so he can be in a position to ordain if that is to be his path. I could use that time to deepen my practice and it will give

me plenty of time to recover from the mono (and see if I can find ways to prevent it from returning). If the opportunity for doing another pilgrimage doesn't materialize I'll be okay with that. If the conditions do arise, great.

There are literally hundreds of people I could thank for helping to make this pilgrimage a success. My teachers and parents come to mind, as well as all those that we met along the way. There are too many people to mention as I'm sure we will forget to mention a few by accident.

In closing I would like to thank Austin for being my steward, walking companion, friend and fellow practitioner. I might be able to find a walking companion who would be as good as Austin but I doubt I'd ever find one better. Thank you Austin for everything!

Final note from Jotipalo

Day 10 Canadian

Jotipalo Bhikkhu

July 18, 2005

July 18

The adjustment to life in Northern Ontario is going smoothly. It is still unusually hot though. When I wrote my previous journal entry I tried to call it " My Final Words," but I wasn't ready to end the journal and I had a sick feeling even writing those words. Today I'm ready to end. Life here is as interesting as when we were on the road and I'm sure I could write about many fascinating things that happen at Arrow River, but I'm not going to.

Austin still has a few journal entries to submit, five from the first few weeks! We are discussing plans to put the journal into a book. We like the idea of printing it as a free distribution book. We may use the funds that are left over from the walk to help fund the printing. Just like everything else with this pilgrimage, if a book materializes it will all happen because of generosity.

In closing I would once more like to appreciate everybody who has been reading these journals and who helped us along the way. This pilgrimage was dedicated to peace, and I'd like to close by printing the Sharing of Blessing Chant. If any goodness comes from our efforts, may that goodness be shared with all beings!

Peace with every step,

Jotipalo

Sharing Blessing Chant

Through the goodness that arises from my practice,
May my spiritual teachers and guides of great virtue,
My mother and father and my relatives,
The Sun and the Moon, and all virtuous leaders of the world -
May the highest gods and evil forces:
Celestial beings, guardian spirits of the Earth and the Lord of Death;
May those who are friendly, indifferent or hostile;
May all being receive the blessings of my life.
May they soon attain the threefold bliss and realize the deathless.
Through the goodness that arises from my practice,
And through this act of sharing,
May all desires and attachments quickly cease,
And all harmful states of mind.
Until I realize Nibbana,
In every kind of birth, may I have an upright mind,
With mindfulness and wisdom, austerity and vigour.
May the forces of delusion not take hold nor weaken my resolve.
The Buddha is my excellent refuge,
Unsurpassed is the protection of the Dhamma,
The Solitary Buddha is my noble Lord,
The Sangha is my supreme support.
The supreme power of all these,
May darkness and delusion be dispelled.