

Open Dharma @ Telscombe

I couldn't believe it until the very last moments that Jaya and Gemma were coming to my island. Yes, I know they are Open Dharma, but I still sent an email to the Dominique on Thursday

a. Can i bring a dog b. Who is giving the teachings?

(The dog (Kali) I found a home for - what was I thinking coming to a landscape of SHEEP, let alone me being on retreat!)



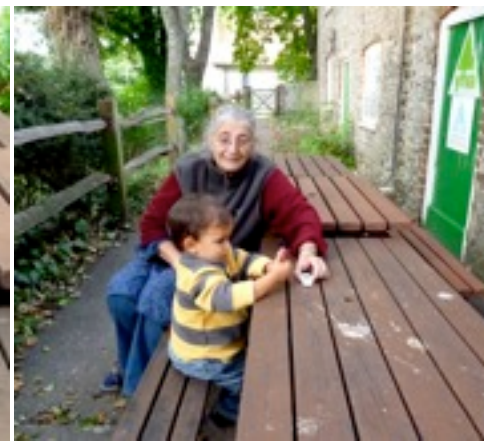
Putting trust in Sat Nav I turned right up a narrow No Through road, and coasted down to Telscombe, a name I did not know how to pronounce until Gemma spoke it on the last day, as Tel-es-comby, and it remains just so. I'd arrived at the South Downs on a glorious September afternoon, slanting sun on green and generous curves of hills, on which were spotted horses, sheep and cows, necks lowered timelessly feeding off grassland on chalk soil. Where was I, and were Jaya and Gemma and Gyan actually here too?

'India', said Jane to me, outside, while registering. Connected in that memory, we walked

together up to the dead end of the road, declaring our fault lines, sistahs of the road, and at the top beheld the SEA, and gave each other a bear hug.

And there was Judith, playing with what must be Gyan, the child of Jaya and Gemma who I had met only in photographs. First seen in Tiru, and last in Sattal, Judith was another mystery of time and place: from Israel she'd sought the company of Open Dharma, arrived in Spain at Dharma Loca and so followed them here. Brrum, Brrum, she spoke in French, playing motor cars with Gyan, transfixed with the game.

'He is hard wired into motor cars', Gemma explained. In the flesh, I saw them, here in England. Gemma with round belly, carrying she tells me a girl. Jaya radiant and - naturally - a wonderful fulsome mother.





The Managers talk gave no details of how many times the water had been boiled, or how the salad was soaked in purifying chemical so safe to eat, or how to avoid mosquitoes, or Indian toilet practicalities, or hot water days. Outside was bird song and somewhere a child playing, no Horn Please, or Wall of Death (Indian design).

So we settle in, Open Dharma style, in a quintessential village hall more used to coffee mornings, floor lined with retreatants laying down on self made beds of varying compositions, usually based around the yoga mat, with sheep skins, sleeping bags, cushions, pillows. Yes, 50 souls laying down. There were a few of us from the old school who sat conventionally cross legged, including a mustard clad Theravadan monk, but even we - I notice - gave in to the luxury of laying down, sinking into the allowed ease.

'There will be snoring', said Gemma, helpfully. And there was, mine perhaps among it all, I do not know for soon I slept, words wafting in and out as deep rest arrived and took me by surprise.

Old memories easily return, warm in feeling: My first retreat 1998 Budhgaya, at the back of the hall near a protective wall, someone with a place reserved labelled 'JAYA' beside me, who became my silent teacher before I knew it, and who I watched and aspired to in her stillness. The coughing man, (and we have one here), 'Goldilocks' who sat in effortlessly in full lotus, the old man who became Sugata, arriving late. The memory of the thought visitors came: Ravi whose argument filled my head those days (where is it now?) my immense gratitude to John Little my Godfather who died that year and who I never told. From the distant past to the unknowable future, my monkey mind swings from branch to branch.

For the first time I am seeing Jaya and Gemma through glasses. It is possible I am the oldest person here! Four years ago I said to Barry 'we will learn to ride a horse'. Now I know that will not happen, I no longer aspire to, want or need to ride a horse. Now I know I will no longer master my irrational fear of blood and become a Medicine Sans Frontier doctor working in the field, grapple with debate and be a politician, venture to become a war correspondent, marry a farmer and sit on a refectory table with my 6 children, know our solar system despite my love to study it. Now I can look at a mountain and not want to climb it. Along with the closures, there are still a few doors I aspire to hold open, more modestly: to paint again, to find a home to share with others

who pass through, to plant some trees, to garden when it rains in a polytunnel amongst the smell of sweet basil, and be forever curious.

Swinging back and forth through the vines of thought. Ah yes, I remember it well. But I am not discontent, or as chastising as I used to be, here is the change too. I can watch the familiar play of mind, which will change and change again, quieten soon as the silence allows, then rise again.

Silver Disobedience is the intriguing title of Jaya's Dharma talk. 'My friend Rachel' she says in her story, and warms the cockles of my heart. Her first visit to England aged 10 had memories of such green swords as we have here, and poppies, cutting her to the quick with delight (while her parents busied themselves with practicalities). She gave us a poem by ee cummings

Because
without any doubt he was
whatever (first and last)
most people fear most:
a mystery for which I've
no word except alive
- that is completely alert
and miraculously whole.

... Most people have been heard
screaming for international
measures that render hell rational
- I thank heaven somebodies crazy
enough to give me a daisy.

There is another way. A story from the life of the Buddha which Jaya cuts through divisions of time: of how the Buddha spent 6 years struggling (at his time through dramatic austerities) then realised one day that they were fruitless (in his search for non suffering freedom). So we may well look at our lives and find our struggle fruitless, and we too can change. The invitation to live another way. While somethings do get easier, she said perhaps of herself, new challenges arrive to keep us completely alert and miraculously whole.



There are only a dozen houses in this hamlet, counted up and down the single street on Walking meditation, and pondered. There is no shop nor pub. The houses are grand: the most impressive a Manor House, the most expansive a Stud, and an elegant substantial Rectory. They speak of another time, more feudal, more sharply divided; the days of grand Rectories for Parish Priests went in my parents generation. The place could be used as a film set, so quintessential English protected and nestling in the folds of the hills around, softened by mature woodland of sycamore, beech and ash, with footpaths lined with wind worn hawthorn.

Yes, I know well the given instruction on retreat: let go of your everyday props, your ipods and your books. So I watch my habit of finding words to read - at my first retreat in Budhagaya I found

myself reading the packaging of the Thai temple building materials 'This way up' ! Two little tracts on 'Telscombe - Do Not Remove', lay helpfully on a window ledge our Youth Hostel. Irresistible. In such a way I came to meet two distinct characters who have shaped this very particular dead end village: Mr Ambrose Gorham and Mr Ernest Thorington-Smith. Indeed, I discover, it is by the grace

of Mr Ambrose Gorham that we practice our OpenDharma here at all, and most appropriately as it turns out.

Ambrose Gorham made his money on racing horses, one - Shannon Lass - famously winning the Grand National after which he set about spending his winnings on buying up land around Telscombe - 260 acres of it - renovating the Church, and building a meeting place for the good people of the village (where we now sit, and which is now - somewhat grandly - called the Town Hall). Most famous of all, Gorham, at his own expense, had mains electricity and water supplies fed to the flint-walled houses and indeed Telscombe was the country's first all electric village in 1930! He had a particular vision - to retain the natural beauty of this village, and to such end he would not allow a shop or tea shop of any description. His love of children he manifested every Christmas with gifts of Wellington boots and books for every child in the village. He was unmarried. These details of a life. Wellington boots, how practical.

While the entrepreneur of the day, a Mr Charles William Neville, gradually bought up all the land from the coast inland one and a half miles that would become Peacehaven, he was unable to buy Telscombe Tye from Ambrose Gorham. Gorham refused to sell it. In 1933 Ambrose Gorham died and was as specific on his death as in his life: No shops or tea-houses! Under the terms of his will he requested that the patronage of Telscombe Village and the rights over Telscombe Tye be assigned to Brighton Corporation for 'recourse thereto for quiet and peaceful recreation and MEDITATION'. (My caps!)

In 1978 the Board of Trustees bequeathed the row of flint cottages to the Youth Hostel Association, where we today are happily sleeping and eating. The author of my Do Not Remove booklet commends Mr Ambrose Gorham's wish that 'Telscombe remains unchanged, and has been successfully saved from the neighbouring Bungalowland of Peacehaven (that thankfully does not blot Telscombe's vista)'.



So there we have it. We merry souls fulfil Ambrose Gorham's wishes, and happily and thankfully meditate peacefully in his meeting hall, and sleep the sleep of the sinless and eat the food of beans and vegetable stew in his Youth Hostel which is provided with delicious hot water and 24 hour electricity - undreamt of in Budhagaya!

Come the war the Tolscombe Tye gallops established by Ambrose were ploughed up by the Ministry of Agriculture to be used for food.



Mr Ernest Thorington Smith's contribution to the village is less researched (it was only a 2 day retreat after all), but I gather he was keen horseman and preserver of churches. In an equal desire to share his living place with community, in 1960 Mr Thornton-Smith gifted the Manor House and 54 acres of the village to the National Trust, who manage them still.

These stories meander through my mind, as I pass from Sitting in the meeting hall (a painting of Shannon Lass hanging the wall), Walking up and down the Downs to the vista of Peacehaven, Standing in the graveyard by Ambrose Gorham 'Memorial erected by his friends', eating lunch on the bench keenly placed to watch the street, stable girls on horseback, sexy and confident.

I do love the dance of Jaya, the allowing of fun. Bekka took us on a great walk Sunday morning along the hawthorn lined footpath beside by St Lawrence church, along the valley, then down into it, and back around on the road.

Comfortable, is the word I find to describe how I feel these few days. Comfortable to be in the company of 55 fellow souls, in the silence. Comfortable to sink into the luxury of sleep, to have the time to sit and stay, watching restlessness, and see what comes around the corner. What thought visits, which way the wind blows the wind dial on the steeple, loiter by a tomb. Time to close the eyes from words, and ponder whatever is the unconditioned.





I had established on Friday that the church was locked, but had hopes for a glimpse on the open day of Sunday. I was not disappointed. Coffee and tea was being offered to the congregation of 30, who warmly invited me in. As I sat to contemplate the perpendicular windows, a forthcoming gentleman availed himself to me, as the writer of Telscombe churches history, and bought me up to date with the Manor House. Yes, still owned by the National Trust, but with a lease sold for a million pounds (his eyes widened to accentuate this amount) to a wealthy Jewish businessman, who lived there now. My friend, however, had no truck with the National Trust, who refused his request for money to restore Mr Thornton-Smiths dilapidated grave. I did not find the dilapidated grave, but instead, found that of Gracie Fields, yes, the Rochdale lass who sang to the troops. And a sad epitaph: 'Who exchanged this life for a better one.'





A cup of hot tea with Jaya, Gemma and Gyan at the end capped it all, exchanging news of friends (including her recent meeting of Bryan in New York, after a dance workshop), and places, particularly Sattal, and of their cultures difficulty in accepting 'laying down' as meditation. Ah these are the new challenges that arrive to keep us completely alert and miraculously whole.

'Shall we drive to Dharma Loca?' Suggested Jane, as she left, perhaps with an eye on my convertible Mercedes motor car. Why ever not.



Thank you Jaya
Gemma for your
venture to my island,
Dominika for
conceiving your idea
of doing it and Mr
Ambrose Gorham,
for your benefaction,
which has been our
vessel these past few
days.

