

MY THOUGHTS

Study trip turns into spiritual odyssey

■ BY OW YEONG WAI KIT

IT'S not every overseas learning trip that promises enlightenment along with education, but sometimes small miracles do happen.

As part of a global programme under the National University of Singapore's University Scholars Programme, I joined 10 students and two professors on a trip to study the role of Buddhism in India and Thailand. For me, it was a modern pilgrimage. As a young Buddhist, I had been eagerly anticipating the visits to numerous Buddhist sites. It was also a voyage into the unknown – before the trip, India in particular was completely foreign to me.

Yet it was India that turned out to be the highlight of my journey. As the land where the religion was founded by Siddhartha Gautama more than 2,500 years ago, India has remained the location of choice for Buddhist pilgrims to visit sacred sites of the Buddha's birth, enlightenment, first sermon, and death. I'd heard it said there's nothing like watching the sun rise over the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhi Gaya, but it took a visit to bring home the sheer magnificence of the sight.

Coming face to face with the Mahabodhi Temple was awe-inspiring. Here was history and modernity combined, with the majestic architecture juxtaposed with pilgrims wearing the latest brand of sunglasses. This was the place where the Buddha is said to have attained enlightenment.

The temple was crowded with devotees and filled with the chanting of hundreds of monks and lay people from a dozen countries. It became the soundtrack to the procession of a motley crew of worshippers: awed Westerners armed with cameras and Buddhist rosaries, devout Tibetans swinging mandalas, solemn Thai monks with a large entourage of white-clad pilgrims, cheerful Indian Hindus chatting as they observed the tourists, the list goes on. Perhaps, for many, it was the next closest thing to being in the very presence of the Buddha.

The trip wasn't just about loud sounds and colourful sights. In Chiang Mai, Thailand, we visited a meditation centre in Wat Umong. Aside from practising meditation, we met several Westerners who were attending a retreat there, carving a niche of peace in a noisy and chaotic world.

If there's one thing I've learnt from the trip, it's the realisation that religion provides rich symbols and vocabulary that colour our consciousness, and pilgrims embody these symbols in the very act of pilgrimage. Every pilgrim has a name and a story to tell; and despite greater mobility today, their purpose remains the same – to fulfil a longing of the body, heart and mind. After all, pilgrims inhabit a special position; they are both at home and not at home, for although they venture out of familiar territory to explore unknown lands, they are paying homage to the centre of their spiritual universe.

In a sense, I have occupied a liminal state – being part student, part pilgrim – by observing and participating in the pilgrimage. It has been a private and emotional journey for me: going to places I had never imagined I would get to visit, experiencing the culture, visiting local organisations and meeting the people; these are precious memories.

This has been far more than a study trip; this has been my *yatra*, my spiritual odyssey – it has opened my eyes to a new understanding of the sacred and the secular, and the experience has been unforgettable.

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