

The Bodhgaya Shadow

What we fear about the dark may just be ourselves

By Marie-Claire Van Hasselt

I decided to undertake a two-month backpacking trip after my 28-year marriage fell apart. I wanted to stretch my limits, meet new challenges, do things differently as that was to be my new reality. I had to face it. So off I went to China and India with my 10kg backpack. I was a little nervous, I have to admit!

It was in Bodhgaya, India – the place where Buddha attained enlightenment under the Bodhi tree – where I learned my own Universal Truth. Bodhgaya is in Bihar, one of the poorest provinces of India. Julane, my travel companion, had warned me that Bodhgaya is not the safest place in India. But the remote little town visited by hundreds of devout Buddhists from all over the world seemed too peaceful to associate with violence.

Electricity and Internet connections there are irregular. I finally managed to send my emails from a café late one evening and returned ‘home’ to our lodgings at a Tibetan monastery alone and well after dark. On my return Julane was surprised I had walked instead of taking a trishaw. She asked whether I was scared. To be honest, fear had not crossed my mind.

The next evening my Internet session lasted later. As I walked home in the dark, I started to feel uncomfortable. I saw the shadow of someone coming towards me. There was no one else in sight, there was no way back, so I had only one option: move on, looking as confident as possible.

I crossed the street. The other person crossed as well. My heart beat faster even as I tried to convince myself that all was okay, that I shouldn’t have such negative thoughts. When I crossed the street yet again and ‘he’ continued to follow, a sense of panic overwhelmed me. But what could I do?

I tried to maintain my composure as my heart beat out of control. I could hardly breathe. How would I reach the monastery? I decided to let it all go. What would happen would happen and if I was destined to die in Bodhgaya, I would just die in Bodhgaya. Maybe not such a bad place to die after all since the Buddha had found enlightenment here. I clung to my torch, increased my pace and concentrated on moving my feet through the dark... when realisation suddenly struck me. I saw two llooong legs moving rhythmically with my *own* feet, and at the end of the legs... my *own* ‘scary’ shadow.

As I start my new life as a student, I often think about that fear I felt and how it was entirely a making of my own mind. It is sometimes frightening to realise we can be our worst and most powerful enemy. Although I am thrilled and excited to be studying art history, at times I feel intimidated and insecure. But then I remember that shadows disappear in the light.

Epilogue: It’s now a year after I originally wrote this piece and I’m sitting at exactly the same spot in my summer beach house. I’m struck by how often I have thought about ‘my scary shadow’. I have passed all my university exams, but to be honest, what gives me a real boost is the fact that I did not give in to my fear of returning to school full time for my first degree (even though it has meant studying with kids the age of my own children!) Yes, ‘fear’ can be one of our biggest enemies, debilitating and paralysing, but I find the sense of victory in overcoming fear is uplifting.

Marie-Claire lived in Singapore from 2001 to 2008 where she was an active docent at ACM and STPI and also initiated Field Studies Singapore in 2006. She now lives in The Hague in The Netherlands and studies at Leiden University.
