

Dear friends

The planetarium in KL was amazing. I didn't realise that Malaysia had put an astronaut into space but it was done in conjunction with the Russians and they blasted off from Baikonur in Kazakhstan. There were excellent exhibits and a film show. I, and I suppose we all know just how unimaginably vast the Universe is, but being reminded of it really affects you.

I have of course been reading various Buddhist scriptures and the sheer scale and mysterious depths of the Universe put me in mind of them – the scale of things is reminiscent of them. They talk of multiverses, various heavens and hells and millions of planes of consciousness – it really is mindboggling reading them – they are really surreal. I can't really describe them (I wouldn't dare!) because, with my puny knowledge and insight that would not be doing any justice to them.

Things do come to mind though (as they do!). The descriptions of Buddha's mother called Maya, bears an uncanny resemblance to the Blessed Virgin Mary in theological terms, both carrying the enormous weight of heaven within their finite wombs and birthing them physically on earth. Maya had a vision of a great white elephant being put miraculously in her womb, but that didn't affect the way she looked – to all intents and purposes completely normal. Buddha was born, not in the usual manner but out of her side. Maya says she is the mother of all bodhisattvas in all universes – making her a universal mother in the same way catholic Christianity frames Mary as a universal mother and mother of the church. To keep her womb from being defiled after his birth she apparently died – but after the Buddha's enlightenment he went to the heaven she was reincarnated in and preached the dharma to her. There are the three jewels of Buddhism – the Buddha, the Dharma (Divinely ordained action and thought), and the Sangha (the Buddhist community). Again, I can't help noticing similarities with Christianity on several different levels.

On the 29th of January we went to the area of the city called Brickfields, the modern centre of the Indian population of KL. They are Tamils from South India and Sri Lanka. We had lunch at a Tamil eat as much as you like community café for a donation. It was off the beaten track so we were the only Europeans in sight. The lunch was lovely and I donated a lot more than was necessary I'm sure. At home & at down to earth eateries, Malays and Indians eat with their fingers so that is what we did. We then walked to the main Hindu temple which was the customary riot of colour and statues (I've started reading the Bhagavat Gita – one of the Hindu holy books alongside the Buddhist scriptures just for a bit of variety by the way.) Unfortunately, the temple was closed but the outside was amazing.

Spiritually, I have now read the whole of the Bhagavat Gita and I am actually enjoyed it a lot more than I expected to. By tradition the book was "sung" by Lord Krishna to a man called Arjuna and the book is a record of their question and answer sessions about the nature of Life, the universe and everything (and no, the answer is not 42). Suffice to say it is fascinating and again I see the obvious overlap between Christ and Krishna. Both are an incarnation of God on earth and through them, are in all and through all things, and you gain access to heaven through them. Reading it I also see the immense overlap also between Hinduism and Buddhism. It really was a

fascinating read and I will re-visit it I'm sure. By the by, the ashram that we will be staying at in India later on in this sabbatical is Catholic but utilises Hindu symbolism and ways of doing things.

Monday we took first of all a van and then a boat to the Boko national park and the boat ride was hair raising – a little Malay fishing boat with a big engine on the back and it was a back to basics experience and I now know why it is called a “rain forest”. We spent the night there in the park which was as I say very basic but we saw Proboscis monkeys, silver leaf monkeys, and many more macaque monkeys as well as bearded pigs, and assorted frogs and stick insects.

Anyway, back to a hotel with modern facilities and a chance to dry off, shower and look forward to a river cruise tonight and probably a meal in China town afterwards. The reason I'm sending this now is because we are about to spend a couple of days in a remote Iban (The majority tribe in Borneo) longhouse in the jungle eating and sleeping with the Iban people and we have been warned that the accommodation is even more basic (I'm sure I don't remember signing up for this!) and electronic communication will be very difficult if not impossible.

Our guide in Borneo, Paul, is an Orang ulu (a minority tribe of Borneo) and grew up in a longhouse in the jungle. Most native people have converted to Christianity interestingly and Paul is a Catholic. The longhouses used to be decorated with hanging skulls in their head-hunter days to intimidate their enemies but since conversion have taken them and given them all a Christian burial.

The Prayer for Today is going to be the same one I'll be using throughout my Sabbatical which we read every day – the Jewish Traveller's Prayer.

**May the God who called our Father Abraham
To journey into the unknown,
And guarded him and blessed him,
Protect me too and bless my journey.
May his confidence support me as I set out,
May his spirit be with me on the way,
And may he lead me back to my home in peace.
Those I love I commend to his care.
He is with them, I shall not fear.
As for myself,
May his presence be my companion,
So that blessing may come to me
And to everyone I meet.
Blessed are you Lord
Whose presence travels with his people.**

Love and Prayers,
Martin