

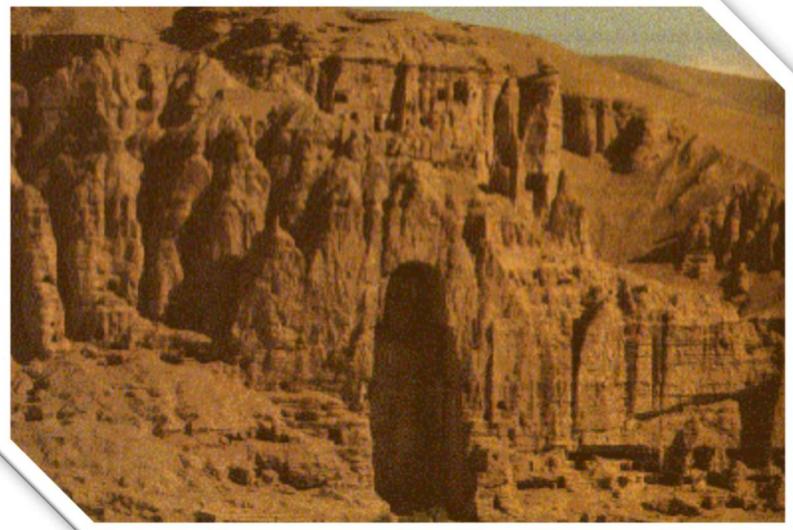
News

and

Musings

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By the summer of 1971, my obsession with Buddhism had reached a point where I decided to put my career on hold and go East. I had no clear plan but felt that my journey should be done in the spirit of pilgrimage. I sold my little house; told my agent I would be away for a bit and on September 1st set off. A month later I was in Afghanistan. I can't remember now whether I knew of the of the giant Buddhas of Bamiyan before I reached Kabul or not. I rather think I'd heard of them, then the largest Buddha Images in the world, the two of them hewn out of the cliff face, the larger standing 180 feet and the other 125, but it was when I was in Kabul that I first seriously thought of visiting them. I don't now know when or why, all I know is that I was soon going back and forth to the tourist office in a state of suspended indecision desperate for reliable information. What I discovered was, that, yes, it was possible to get to the Bamiyan Valley and it wasn't really very far, certainly not as the crow flies, but the terrain was very difficult and the road awful, which meant a very long and uncomfortable bus ride that took from the early hours of the morning almost all day. The alternative was to fly, but the planes didn't appear to be too reliable and they only flew twice a week, which meant being stuck there for at least three days – and that depended on the next flight actually happening and then getting a seat on it back. Added to all of this, no one seemed able to tell me if there was anywhere there where I could stay. None of the photos of the Buddhas showed any sign of there being a village, let alone some form of hotel or guest house. So back and forth I went, questioning and yet again questioning the lady in the tourist board and being none the wiser. The bus, I was told, was cheaper and went from somewhere in downtown Kabul at about three or four in the morning. I decided to check it out and one afternoon wandered down to where the bus was supposed to leave from. Well! What a place! There were all these murderous looking, moustachioed, bandit like chaps strolling about with bandoliers of bullets strung across their chests and cutlasses stuck in their belts – and little me was supposed to come down there at three in the morning by myself! I mean, I'm not very big and the idea of risking going down there in the early hours of the morning seemed absolute madness. Later I met someone else keen to see the Buddhas and we discussed going together – but then I was offered a ride all the way to New Delhi. And fool that I was, I thought, 'I'll go to see the Buddhas next time.' And I took the lift.

Well, there never was a next time. And now there never will be. In 2001 the mighty Buddhas of Bamiyan that had stood there for 1,400 years, in a feat of supreme vandalism were blown up and destroyed. Their destruction hit the headlines, never mind that hundreds of people there and in other parts of Afghanistan were existing in almost unendurable conditions, cold and starving or that hundreds had been killed in desperate struggles for power, for a

little while the world stood still, mesmerised by the image of those unique and ancient images being blown to smithereens.

Since then occasionally someone has kindly said to me how sorry they were that it happened, expecting, or believing, I suppose, that I was upset and mourning their loss.

Well, I wasn't. Instead, I asked myself what there was for me to learn from this. What had it to teach me?

First of all, I'd made a mistake. I'd had the chance to go to Bamiyan and I hadn't taken it. Basically, don't put off to tomorrow what can be done today. Remember, that in a sense tomorrow never comes. Or at least, if it does, it's never a hundred per cent quite what you expected. Really and truly we can't be certain of the next minute, never mind the next day. I'd had my chance and I should have taken it. The risks were slight and had I flown there and had to stay three days; I would have managed. So, don't pass up your opportunities, you may never get the chance again.

Next, don't things change? Those Buddhas probably didn't look anything like they had when they were first completed. It's a pretty exacting climate in which they'd stood for 1,400 years and they'd obviously aged and deteriorated. Isn't that what happens to most things, us included? And don't we and just about everything else eventually die? Isn't Impermanence what the Buddha taught as the first of the Three characteristics of all conditioned things?

I imagine that all those hundreds of years ago when these Buddhas were created, that was a thriving Buddhist community. As well as the Buddhas, the cliffs are honeycombed with caves in which monks lived and there must have been a sizeable and prosperous Buddhist population to support them and to make and care for these huge images. I wonder if it ever occurred to them that in just a few hundred years Buddhism there would be supplanted by another religion and disappear from that part of the world entirely. There's a lesson for us, as generation by generation people, especially young people, take for granted the democracy, the freedoms, the rights that previous generations fought so hard for and were prepared to defend with their lives. Don't be complacent. Don't take those freedoms and rights for granted, they might just disappear if you don't watch out.

Of course, it's perfectly natural to be upset and to be angry when things you cherish are threatened, insulted, damaged or destroyed. But is that right, is it any use? Doesn't it defile and spoil your mind and your life bringing no peace and happiness. Don't you harm yourself more? So, what did the Buddha have to say? Over and over again, whatever the circumstances, the Buddha counselled against holding onto anger and resentment. Don't feed it, don't go on and on thinking about whatever it was, there's no need to be offended, don't be upset, let it go, let go.

My absolute best wishes to you all.