

Sunset over Serbia

*You too shall pass away.
Knowing this, how can you quarrel?
The Dhammapada*

Ajahn Sobhano

For the third leg of my pilgrimage through the Balkans, I was joined by my brother, Rupert, who was then director of Scottish European Aid, a charity working in Romania and Bosnia. Visa restrictions at that time were very tight, so our route through the Eastern region of Serbia was to be determined by my success in obtaining official permission to continue. Fortunately we were to find help from unexpected sources ...

23rd May Nis 6 pm

Another hot day on the track.

Last night we stopped under the stars beneath the village of Brecher, a small farming community at the foothills of the mountains before Nis. We waited until it was dark and the moon was out before lighting a fire and settling down to a cup of tea and some black chocolate. There was a well which excited Rupert no end, and we clambered around the undergrowth in search of twigs and such things. My dreams were scorched with beasts and dragons of mild intent.

The birds were singing before dawn, a ringing like a thousand alarm bells sprinkling down over the damp earth. I writhed in my bag of sleep, hiding from creeping and biting things that swarmed overhead, until the light cracking through the blanket confirmed that the birds were right, dawn had come. I lit a fire and argued with Rupert over whether or not to make a cup of coffee. Villagers were walking to their fields already (it was about 6 am) armed with the weapons of their trade. Picks and shovels with which to furrow the dry earth, to tease the grasses that shouldn't be there from those that should.

Further into the village, enquiries for milk led to coffee, bread and cheese in a farmer's kitchen. Temporarily revived we strode purposefully hill-wards. We passed an ambling couple with a family of goats, a pig and two yapping corgis heading for the grazing grounds in the forest. As we walked higher the leaf-covered road became a dirt track and Rupert shot off ahead. I shouted and called for him and I began to imagine that the woods were full of angry Serbian policeman, or worse. When we finally caught up with each other we soon broke

into infantile carping and I swore and lamented his exuberance. Of course it was always so with us.

We clambered on through the glades which gave relief from the searing sun. We reached the summit of the pass and took the meal by the side of the track, where a trickle of water dripping from the banks sufficed as liquid for our repast. In the heat our appetite was waning. We argued again over useless views and opinions as to the veracity of my statements concerning the exploitation of the Third World by the West; only to be thundered down by Rupert as an outmoded Marxist argument as he made a mud dam out of the trickling stream.

I lay down to be devoured by swarming ants and we drank jasmine tea in desperation. We walked down the hill pausing once in a while to inhale hot air, contemplate baby tortoises with soft shells and soak our thighs in a real stream. As we emerge from the forest Rupert stepped on the gas to obliterate the pain of his blisters. We tumbled past the villas and chalets of suburban Nis in a cloud of sweat and clanking sticks, pass gardens with artfully arranged irrigation channels. Plum trees hanging in the heat, green fruit growing fat. Children's fluorescent purple slip-ons gathered before a doorway. Women, big breasted with a lifetime of motherhood, ambled around porches with their washing. Infants waving from the balcony, villagers look askance. And all the time we crave only liquid, and rest, and some respite to this endless walking.

In the late afternoon we wait in a Cafe before heading into town. The atmosphere between Rupert and I is still tense. There is only one person who can infuriate me with such ease, and he is the one who is closest to me. In the Balkans everyone knows this, but how many understand?

26th May 2.15 pm In the hills above Vrelo

We stayed in Nis a while.

My visa was running out, and Rupert's feet were on strike. Arriving at dusk we are met by the boys from the Sri Chimnoy¹ group who shower us with reverential salutations, wide eyed with the glee of spiritual aspiration. They take us to a flat of one of the disciples, where our feet are bathed in warm salt water. In the background the *Deva* (heavenly beings) sounds of the Sri Chimnoy singers. The guru's face adorns every cranny. In the meditation room a large image of the master in *Jhana* (a higher state of consciousness), eyes half closed, mouth slightly twisted. An entry into the divine.

We plunder sleep and in the morning Rupert, Sasha (who translates for us) and I call on the Nis police. We are sent from room to room in search of the Chief Inspector, who we learn is out at the shooting range. After a lunch of potatoes

and salad I return alone with Sasha to visit the Inspector-in-Chief of the Department of Aliens. With him is another officer, blond with ice-blue eyes. A little English and an intelligence, electric and sharp, keeping you on the edge of uncertainty. The interrogator and the bon-ami. A professional. His laughter checked now with a cooled out expression of inviolable ruthlessness. I whip out letters of introduction as No. 2 gets on the blower to Belgrade. The time drags on and I listen uncomprehendingly to the policeman discuss my case. Resigning myself to what appears to be the inevitable conclusion I turn my attention inwards. The heart rests in the silence of this moment, letting go of any thoughts of ill-will I have towards these people - "may you be well, may all beings be well." I am beginning to enjoy myself, it is as though a cloud has lifted. Sasha turns to me and says, smiling, "they've decided they're going to try to help you!" We leave without a final conclusion in the hope that tomorrow we will return to find good news.

That evening it was *Wesak* (the day of the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha). The budding yogis invite me to their meditation centre at the edge of town. A shrine, replete with Jhana portrait upon blue flowing silks and scattered rose petals. My little Buddha looks slightly awkward and maladjusted beneath the photograph of Sri Chimnoy's athletic feet. I chant my verses of homage and they respond in turn with songs of worship. I offer them words on Dhamma which they listen to, hearts glowing in anticipation of the sublime.

The next day I am passed from disciple to disciple, each one announcing the feats of the Guru; how many paintings, books, songs, track and weight-lifting records he has accomplished, his predictions for the year, his views on diet, exercise, surrender and making tea. I can only nod respectfully, and throw in the odd mild fabrication about my own teacher's thin accomplishments - but it is no use. They want to tell me. They are like children, which is endearing, and we are thankful. For their gifts, their hospitality and for their enthusiasm. Anticipating every whim; one disciple dashes off in search of a Camping Gaz canister, another gives up his bed for us, they escort us to the police station, the meditation centre and now to the bus stop. They are exulted at the arrival of a 'real' Buddhist. Although being a monk doesn't quite fit into Sri Chimnoy's ideal, not to worry; he opened the 1993 World Parliament of Religions with an outstanding three minutes of silence, performed 39 concerts in memory of Swami Vivekananda,² and all religions worship the one God and it is great, it is good and I am glad this night if I can pass on even a sliver of the Buddha's peace.

We clamber on a bus to Topolniza. I am sapped by the zealous ones, but delighted by the Nis police who beat up truck drivers and walk the streets of Milosavonic's evil empire. I am standing at the heart of his misanthropy. Blue camouflaged policeman - with lives no doubt at their hands - and they are helping me! Two days of telephone calls, and typewritten reports. The Chief Inspector

puts his reputation on the line to give me a visa for 15 days, so that Rupert and I can wander the hills between here and Belgrade.

We step off the bus and on our right is a Fanta stall. A gaggle of girls giggle at the sight of us and gather as we sit down for a drink. We while away the time ordering more Turkish coffee. One of the girls reads our fortunes from the coffee grains at the bottom of our cups. She is a free spirit, you can sense she has some kind of psychic power even if it's wild and untamed. We are destined, she pronounces, to meet a tall, dark beauty. "But I am a monk" I protest. So it is with Rupert that she ambles arm in arm down the road to Vrelo as I trail behind chatting to her friend, the English speaking girl with the dyed red hair and dog. I talk about Buddhism and I talk about renunciation. She tells me that her friend is a patient in the psychiatric home opposite the Fanta stall. We find them playing in the stream by the onion fields, and they leave us as they walk off into the woods. I give the girl with the red hair my last Amaravati leaflet. She asks me why I am not married. I begin to wonder how much longer I can ward off her advances, or if Rupert has succumbed to the lithesome charms of the mad eyed girl at the Fanta stall. But Rupert is mad she says, because he cannot go with her. (He redeems himself by announcing in broken Serbian "I am a monk too!") She is crying when we leave her by the cherry tree where the boys from the village are picking the fruit. She cries because we are good. Because the world has no use for her joy and she is lost: even in her half drunk revelry, in her splashing laughter and royal bearing. She knows that she must return to the mad-house, or to the world that wants nothing of her save her sex which she freely offers only to be spat out, half-mad, without an answer.

We walked on as the sun was setting. Somehow the experience of the girl at the Fanta stall has dissolved the last vestiges of our reserve towards each other. There is a new trust and when we let down our guard we were able to talk about the women we have loved and lost. Who loved us in spite of our weaknesses and fears, that we could never admit to each other. We lingered, talking by the well of a village with white street lights. Later we lay under the full moon, falling asleep to the sound of trickling water beneath the lime trees.

Saturday 28th May Rtn

Sitting beneath Rtn (pronounced Retun), a sacred mountain and apparently the only place where no traces of radiation from the fallout of Chernobyl had been found. We strike camp by an abandoned shepherd's cottage with a garden of nettles and an orchard of fruit trees long left to the weeds. There is a large open wall with a dead bird and live snakes. A saddle of scrub forest and moorland stretches down behind us towards Soko Banja. We have spent the day drying our clothes, soaking up the sun, boiling and collecting the water, sleeping and letting our limbs recover from the last days exertions.

We arrive at the foot of the mountain late in the afternoon. There was a dishevelled mining town populated with refugees from Bosnia who were living in some old office blocks. A 16 year old boy with the body of a man, a face of a nine year old and teeth like an old hag shows us to a footpath. Black rain clouds posture over the crags above as we walk straight up the path, at each step breaking sweat under the weight of the pack which now carries four litres of water. The path begins promisingly enough with neatly painted red and white circles. Inexplicably, but true to form, the markings run out leaving us trailing confusing networks of tracks that lead inexorably towards a steepening rock face. Rupert, his strength suddenly revitalised at the prospect of some rocky scrambles, lures me on as I curse and sweat and wonder what the hell I was thinking of, attempting such an ascent after a long day's walking.

As we climb higher the forest turns to rock and I soon find myself hanging precariously hundreds of feet above a gaping void, pulling on grass roots and clinging to crevices as I nudge me and my flimsy pack over one agonising cleft after another. Although something in me realises that in certain circumstances this could be fun, with my robes and my sandals slipping and my pack getting caught under branches of sideways-growing trees, I can't quite rise to the spirit of adventure. Only my stubborn pride stops me from accepting Rupert's help, determined not to be defeated by what we were foolish enough to have begun.

We reach a kind of narrow plateau, the mountain, still huge in the distance a good few kilometres away. Rain clouds are swirling ominously on the peak. The wind is building up and I begin to feel terribly lost, tired and at risk. We dip down into the hollowed-out part of the hill where there is a forest of low trees. Inside there is a vaulted space with sheep tracks zigzagging in and out of the wood. Hastily we erect my rain-poncho to act as a wind break and light a fire as the rain starts pelting down in earnest. Without any other waterproofs I am helpless and huddle down as Rupert springs into action arranging the cover at a steeper angle, winding long lengths of cord from branch to branch. I melt into my sleeping bag feeling washed out, my lungs hurting and the sound of rain and wind inches from my ears, not caring any more whether the rain comes in.

The next day we emerge from a drug-like slumber in the cold morning air to survey the wreckage. The ash from the fire had blown all over us leaving us covered in a grey pall as though after the holocaust. We pick ourselves up from out of the debris and over several hours manage to dry some of our belongings in the morning sun as we figure out our next move. Rupert dashes over the hill to check out the shepherd's cottage and I rest feeling queasy and irritated. It doesn't take long though before I begin to wake up to the beauty around me. The heath and the wild grasses, flowers growing in profusion and the vast landscape beneath the plateau stretching all around into the distance. I begin to feel like staying a while as we make our way down to the shepherd's cottage.

The next morning

Our plan had been to reach the summit of Rtn late in the afternoon when it was cooler. However, due to the ferocity of the forest between, we had underestimated the length of time it would take us to get to the foot of the mountain. The paths were constantly leading to dead ends so it was well over an hour before we started to climb. The mountain is an extinct volcano and, at 1,600 metres above sea level, towers over all the other ranges for as far as the eye can see. It is pyramid shaped and perfectly formed. Behind there is a narrow ridge where the mountain connects to an extended knee of hill.

We walked in spirals towards the summit, the mountain's shadows and our own merging on the far hills. By the time we reached the top, the sun was tipping the clouds on the Western horizon. We circled around the ruins of a chapel and then sat quietly together for a few minutes. After, I chanted a recitation of the *Karaniyametta Sutta* (the Buddhas Words on the Loving Kindness) to the ten directions. As I finished the last line, "not born again into this world", the sun disappeared behind the distant mountains, the whole sky turning a soft red over Serbia.

We made our way back down the spine of the hill chasing the falling light. By the time we reached the bottom, darkness was upon us and we plunged into the thickness of the forest, picking and weaving our way through the undergrowth. We twisted and tore ourselves on the thorny bushes, stumbling down rocks and clambering past branches and stony crevices in the half light. With only the starlight to guide us, we began to feel limp with exasperation at this endless meandering. Several times in those hours we became completely lost and it seemed as though the only sensible thing to do was to sit down and give up. Then, as my weariness overtook me, I stopped in a clearing to gaze at the canopy of the heavens above, laughing at us in our human desperation. At the absurdity of our futile struggling as, like blind men, we fumbled our way towards out refuge by the abandoned shepherd's hut.

When we finally reached the end of the forest we became even more disorientated because the landmarks, as we had remembered them, didn't add up. It was beginning to feel like a jinx, and I was quite ready to believe that we had been caught in some kind of Bermuda triangle; that we would soon arrive at the intergalactic reception desk to join the ranks of other half-witted stragglers who had also lost their way in the eerie forest dusk under Rtn.

We did the only thing we could and back-tracked towards where we thought the cairns (that was our landmark for the shepherd's cottage) would be. At last we saw them above us, standing like sentinels silhouetted against the night sky. Two pillars heralding our return to the world of the known. Edifices of reason beneath the bold unmoving presence of the massif.

2nd June Donje Milanovec

Now we are in Klokočevac, the atmosphere in the town is one of finality. This is the end of Serbia. Across the expanse of water before us (known respectively in English, German and Romanian as the Danube, Dunau and Dunarea) is Romania. Scrutinising the terrain, I try to make out something of the land I am to travel through.

So our sojourn together will soon be over. Rupert and I have mellowed towards each other these past ten days, although we have certainly not restrained our old habit to bicker and argue about everything under the sun. Ironically the familiarity of our nastiness to each other is what makes us feel so at home. It's always been like this with us, being so close in age, but so different in temperament. However getting to know Rupert again, or perhaps for the first time, has had its own rewards. He is straight with people, sometime to the point of bluntness, but you know where you stand. And he has the kind of unassuming integrity that I could never recognise (or admit to) before I became a monk.

One man asked us, "are you friends?"

"No brothers."

"Ah brothers ... not friends ... brothers!".

7th June Timisoara

Sweating lightly on the bus from Donje Milanovec, we approached Belgrade sailing through an endless sea of wheat fields, speckled with industrial estates and small towns. My previous observations about the Serb's imperviousness to the blockade was checked as I saw evidence of the country's prior wealth.

Reaching the outskirts of Belgrade, stretching in rippling concrete and metal waves far into the distance, traffic was noticeable only by its absence. Huge interweaving tarmac tracks; four, five, six lanes wide: gyrating ghosts with the occasional truck or scooter: to and fro, beside, above, below and all around - an interpenetrating concrete super-highway of a once great metropolis. Now, with the absence of belching fumes, miles of grinding jams and inter-city rushes, the roads have an almost gothic splendour, a Roman dignity. A relic of a bygone age.

It is not that there is no traffic. No, the Serbs are craftier than that, smuggling the necessary tonnage of petrol to keep up a semblance of normality. Householders slug barrels of the stuff from Romania, making enough marks to make the risk seem worthwhile. Everyone is doing it. Meanwhile the omnipresent, but to my innocent eyes, invisible Mafia handles the diesel which is

big money. Lotsadollars'. And it is true that by the time we reach the centre, and you keep your eyes focused on the traffic lights, there is a certain pressing in of cars, a jostle of accelerating motorbikes and the screeching of trams. The trolley-buses however, which don't seem to bother about fares, are always shoulder to shoulder full. Everywhere, flagons of petrol. Drivers turn off their engines and free-wheel their cars down the hills. The pavements, a tumultuous mass of pedestrians. Cars gather dust on the pavements, unused, their rusting registration plates permanent reminders of that word which is spat out - "blokada!" And always the memories of those empty spaghetti junctions and the motorway intersections like the ringing of a long dead church bell, reminding the stars of its uselessness as the wind blows against the rafters and the birds settle in the roof.

Still, the markets looked bustling. The markets where the smugglers sell Swiss chocolate, Macedonian tobacco, American Levis and useless dayglo plastic gismos. But it wasn't really in the trading places that the blockade was felt hardest. It was something that could only be felt if you lived there. It was a constant bitter pill that spoke of a war that was over as far as the majority (we met) was concerned. It spoke of the West's apathy towards this war, the denied knowledge of the massacre of the innocents, the retaliation to come and all the wars before when the Serbs, as now, had stood defiant against the world.

We were taken to visit an orphanage where we met the director, his skin as grey as the cigarette smoke hanging in the air. When he quietly informed us how he will "personally hang the chief of the UN sanctions committee for delaying and refusing and obstructing aid for my children", you knew what it meant to be humiliated. Why the Serbs cannot admit to their own atrocities, pointing with what's left of their shattered pride at the Bosnians, the Albanians, the Croats who have "burnt our houses, raped our women and slaughtered our people". And what does it matter if it happened fifty years ago or a hundred, it is happening again. And the Serbs must be strong.

The Buddhists have gone underground. Those who had hoped that their practice could change anything are bitter. One woman comes to where we are staying on the Sunday. Her strong warrior face becoming glazed with the intensity of outrage, with the scrutiny of death and horror and the creeping dread of violence that never seems to come to any end. She protests, she can't help herself, she declaims and fires the air with slogans of powerlessness and frustration at the failure of acquiescence. Where now is the patience of the wrinkled sage, assuming the stork posture? Where is the fine bone silken refuge that so embraced her in its delicate airs, offering a world beyond this coarse and fanatic farce of extremity? Is it only in the rolls of ink-washed landscapes, where one brush stroke becomes a mountain pass, another a gust of wind? Or in the imagination of the Orientalist with his archives of esoteric mastery? Images of a remote perfection that the war mocks at.

Our five days with the Belgrade Buddhists flowed between days of meditation, a public talk, walks through the city and an endless stream of new friends and old. Now I know why I came to the Balkans. No time is wasted, people are hungry for Dhamma. In the silence we find the place where it all fits.

Everybody likes Rupert, and Rupert likes everyone. He is like my alter ego who eats hamburgers in the afternoon and goes to see Reggae bands³. He sleeps and eats like a normal person, and brings me back to being who I am without the mask of a teacher or the serious manner of a monk. Who knows better, who is better and frightens you away with his own virtue and unintended (but nevertheless crushing) blandishments on ultimate reality.

Rupert and I have come out the other side of this adventure firmly bonded; our differences have been clearly aired, our strengths and abilities accepted, our failings weighed, assessed, presumed to be of no importance, and discarded because we know each other too well to be impressed or disappointed. Simply curious to discover what there is within us that we haven't seen before and that which we haven't dared ask.

Notes

1. Sri Chimnoy is a disciple of Sri Aurobindo, one of the most influential Indian thinkers and saints in modern times. Based in New York City, Sri Chimnoy has an international community of devotees that in the last ten years has spread throughout Eastern Europe. He is renowned for his Peace concerts as well as his enthusiasm for athletics which is encouraged amongst his followers as an integral part of their daily religious observances.
2. The foremost student of the greatest Indian saint of the 19th century Ramakrishna. Swami Vivekananda came to world renown during the World Parliament of Religions at Chicago in 1893, where he expounded Ramakrishna's vision of the universality of all religion. His speech is included in the pamphlet 'The Universal Religion' by Swami Vivekananda, available from the Ramakrishna Bedanta Centre, Blind Lane, Buckinghamshire, SL8 5LG. Also recommended 'The Great Swan' Meetings with Ramakrishna by Lex Hixon available from Shambala Books."
3. In the new Serbia any cultural influence without a nationalist association was frowned upon. The only acceptable alternative to Western music was reggae, the music of the Rastafarians, who are loosely associated with the ancient seat of the Syrian Orthodox Church in Ethiopia.