



Yes, between the theoretical futures of ‘never again’ and ‘must do more,’ is the simple balance of: ‘now is OK, keep going’ – and that has to be negotiated with the body. In this way faith and inspiration get balanced by a direct present-moment discernment.

But who could deny me a little romance? Turning 60, and having served in and managed monastic communities for some 30 years, as well as travelling all over to spread the Dhamma, it felt like time to get back to the roots. For myself, the love of hiking goes way back from before I became a monk, and was something I eagerly took up in with my first tudong in Britain in 1982, through tudongs in Thailand, New Zealand, India and Britain again. For some, monastic life is about being in a community of like-minded Dhamma practitioners. But for me the image that fits is one of being on the road – even when, and finally because, one finds that it’s a road to nowhere other than your own deepening centre.

This is how it is – times, places, events and weather rise up with their joys and struggles ... and dissolve again in the wake of opening to them and letting them pass. Through this one gets a sense that what remains was always there, before time and place confused us. Now it’s true to say that you don’t have to walk to know *that*, but in my marking year I also wanted to deepen the mark that many of us have made through wandering in this country by bringing the sign of the *samana* into the ordinary everyday consciousness of those who wouldn’t go near a monastery. This was how ‘Buddhism’ began, and so (in my opinion) wandering homeless and going to the town for alms has to be a part of a *samana*’s life.

However, even a fairly casual mention of my journey had brought forth a number of offers of food and shelter from the Buddhist (and nearly-Buddhist) community. As a chance to deepen the sense of connection and also to get a rest and a shower these offers were welcome and I gladly accepted those that lay in my path. Accordingly my first almsround wasn’t until entering New Alresford on

day three. The omens were good: before I could even get my bowl out of my pack, a group of men laying a pavement called me over for a cup of coffee, and took in my account of who I was and what I was doing with nods, appreciative murmurs and a donation of a handful of coffee sachets.

The sign of a *samana* is a pretty direct one that doesn’t need a lot of explaining. One of the ‘four heavenly messengers’ (along with ageing, sickness and death), it evokes a similar reflex response. I asked the woman who on seeing me promptly placed a sweet cake in my bowl: ‘Excuse me, can I ask you why you gave me that flapjack?’ She looked slightly embarrassed for a moment, then replied, ‘Oh ... well ... it seemed like a nice cake to me ...’, before scurrying off. Sometimes people would stop and give me a glowing account of meeting monks in Thailand, and then walk away having offered a smile and a few words of encouragement, but nothing to eat; while others would just say, ‘I saw you on the road’ and load the bowl with bread, cheese and a carrot or two.

At first I’d try to calculate what kind of person was likely to offer food. ‘Women with families, surely,’ I thought, ‘forget young men.’ But no, the offerings came as much from men as women, and of all ages including a group of teenagers in Cheddar who’d studied Buddhism in school and invited me to share a meal with them. Professed Christians as well as Buddhists and those of no particular persuasion offered almsfood and good wishes. The sign and its response are universal. Not that it’s that common. I calculated in those hour-long sessions of standing in silence, that about one in every two hundred people registered any interest in this gaunt solitary robed figure. Seen like that I could hardly blame them. In our fear-bound society, the stranger evokes more mistrust than compassion. However, one in two hundred is enough for a start; and who knows how many of the others obtained a peripheral awareness of someone who was simply calm and present. ‘Walk on tour for the welfare of