

Etam Santam: Etam Panitam

(This is Peaceful, This is Excellent)

Reflections on Monastic Life at Aranya Bodhi Hermitage, California, USA

By Marajina, Samaneri

Sitting above the canyon, the forest disappears into a breathing river of conifers and oak trees. Green is ubiquitous, blending seamlessly into silvers and ochers and browns. So much so that defining it with precision—to say that this is green here—is remarkably meaningless. Meaning, it turns out, is all made up anyway.

A profundity of warmth and blue sky may dominate the saddle, but the creek, sheltered hundreds of feet below, is green, shady, and cool. The ferns are bright and cheerful. Moss tucks a millennial root sculpture neatly into the sloping bank. Water bathes the rock bed in a chorus of ponytail waves. Though clocks continue ticking, time here has dropped vigilance.

Beside the creek, one can forget language altogether and watch meaning slip away with the current. It is humbling and awe-inspiring to merge into the creekside, just another natural formation.

Aranya Bodhi is like a rare and priceless jewel, a prism of potential within a big-hearted Pacific forest. Rare in the West and rare in its intention for Buddhist women, it is also rare in its physical beauty and extended community. Aranya Bodhi is a great occasion for the Fourfold Sangha. But the hermitage is still in a tender phase.

The forest teaches as the Buddha taught, with an open hand. It can be cold and harsh in northern California beside the Pacific Ocean. It can rain sideways for weeks on end. The wind can take before we let go. In a single day, every heater on the lower and upper landing can experience failure and there will be no warm place to enter; no way to dry our



rain-soaked robes. The majority of our cooking is done outdoors year-round, regardless of the weather. Our toilets are at ambient temperature.

None of this matters when sitting on a bed of wild ginger or walking in the creek after a light rain. Aranya Bodhi's tender phase is a phase of leaning into the precipice, scaling a landslide, sitting at the creek before dawn, walking without a torch after midnight on the new-moon night... there is a taste of freedom.

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to be captured and defined. We abide with the unsettledness and uncertainty of wilderness living, knowing that plans change. Impermanent are all conditioned dhammas.

After completing our second Vassa Retreat, there is so much to Aranya Bodhi that cannot be grasped. Those indescribable moments connecting us to the forest, to forest beings and to each other, cut through our muscle and flesh and sinews...to our hearts. They arise with a taste of a skin-shedding freedom. They fall away without a trace. Amazing.

It is natural that our tender phase also includes sorrow, lamentation, pain, grief, and despair, union with the unpleasant, separation from the pleasant...these will arise in a coastal wilderness even for those with a coastal-wilderness affinity.

In walking meditation the other day, I was reflecting on the robe my preceptor, Ayya Tathaaloka, Theri gave me on my samaneri ordination. As I reflected that it is made up of mere elements and worn only to ward off insects and weather, the robe loosened and the sleeve came slightly

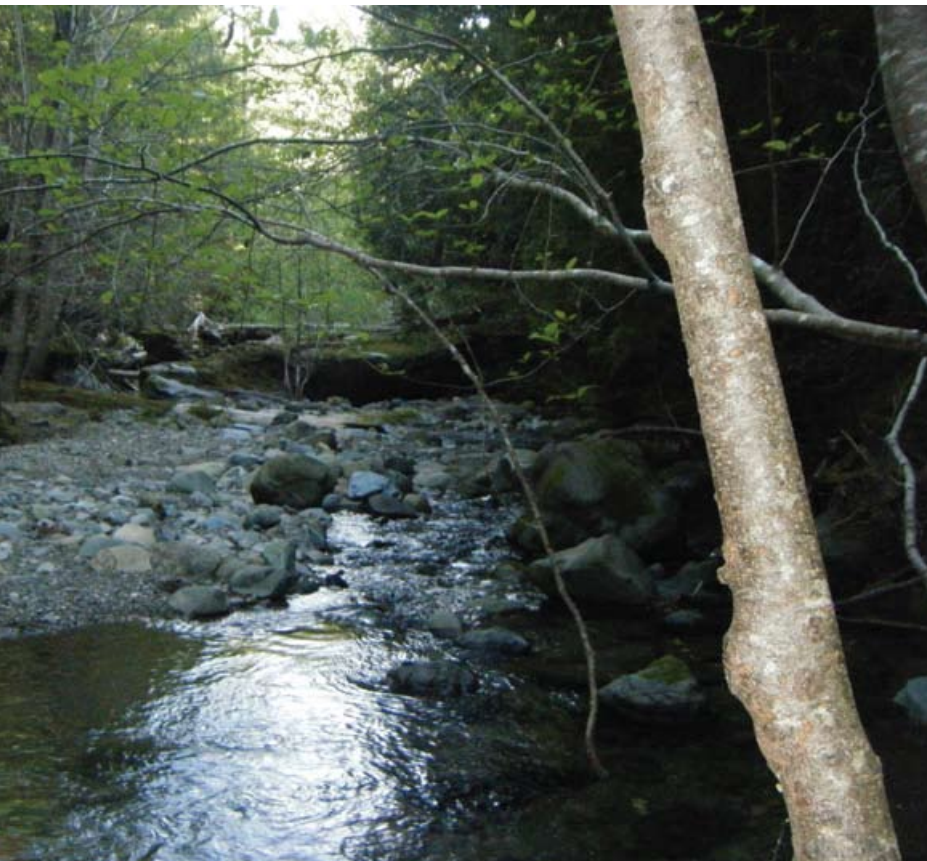
undone. I stood quietly on the early morning road, aware of the robe's inherently empty nature while I re-rolled it, thinking that it essentially had no meaning.

Looking up by chance to where the road arched over the hillside, I saw a shape in the distance. She was watching me roll the saffron robe. We watched each other quietly, a seeing of curiosity and goodwill. She saw the saffron robe of a Samana. I saw her seeing this. When I tossed the roll over my left arm, she turned toward the hillside and walked away, unhurriedly...a large doe.

To many, this robe is a sign of renunciation, harmless-



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ness, and goodwill. While in the final analysis it is inherently empty, it does not lack meaning in the world. So perhaps it is with Aranya Bodhi. To capture any of this...is not possible...but to hold it in a way that it is allowed to be all of this to every woman who is not only called to renunciate life but also to the traditions of the forest-dwellers. This is possible simply by abiding in the forest present, letting it be with a heart that matches the forest heart. Being content with this, desiring only this. How auspicious that there is a peaceful forest hermitage—still in its tender phase, with Theravada bhikkhunis living an ancient tradition in all its depth and significance—present in the world. There is meaning in this.

Samaneri Marajina resides at Aranya Bodhi Hermitage, California, USA. She is a former editor of Present and former board member of the Alliance for Bhikkhunis.