

Ode to Vincent
Visiting with Tattwa Bodha
By John Ransley
3 May 2012

I arrived in Vincent 20 April courtesy of a lift from Paris with Tattwa Bodha's friend, Yogini Ratna (YR). YR is a senior yoga teacher with Swami Nishchalananda in Wales (he is her 'swamiji'). Her partner Hermie is a Chilean communist who was working on a PhD at the time of the Pinochet coup in 1973. He was a French translator for President Allende. Just after the coup he and others would patrol the stadium just before curfew to escort released detainees to safe houses (so they could avoid being rearrested). He was fortunate to have very good French and when he arrived in France he received a lot of assistance from French communists. He retired 2 years ago from a job proof-reading French legislation. Before that I understand he worked as a Spanish-French translator of technical material. Yogini Ratna (Helene) speaks very good English as well as Hebrew, Spanish and Sanskrit. Talented people!

Yogini Ratna stopped for a cigarette/coffee at a motorway rest stop on the trip down from Paris. One wall of the cafe had a row of about 10 large automatic coffee and hot drink dispensers (the French seem to love technology). The big disappointment was the fridge packed with prewrapped "sandwiches": they looked like genuine French baguettes, which I love, but they turned out to be horrible Subway-type soft rolls.

I was tired for most of the first week, partly because of too many late nights during my Greek tour (which was fabulous).

The countryside in this region is quite beautiful despite being devoted to industrial scale monoculture, the two main crops being corn (maize) and rapeseed (corza). Everything is very green and there are attractive low wooded hills in the medium distance. But this is not a human partnership with nature, it is complete human domination of nature. No bit of ground is left unused for one purpose or another. There are wild deer and even some wild pigs but these exist on sufferance.

There are artificial lakes and ponds, some of which are regularly drained so the fish can be harvested. But Tattwa Bodha's neighbour, Jean Marc, says the fish are not much good.

Most of the first week was cold, squally and on some days very windy. Spring! We kept the fuel stove going night and day (I love fuel stoves). I managed to walk my circuit around the village most days, past the fields of corn stubble, the horse paddocks, two sheep, a handful of donkeys, small herds of white cows and the woods. There are even some of the black and white cows the Jura region is famous for.

The woods are very homogeneous and exist purely as a firewood crop (each village household has an entitlement to a section or coup of the woods). The main firewood tree appears to be coppiced (multiple trunks emerging from one centre), although this may be how it grows naturally. There are older oak trees scattered throughout the woods but these have probably been planted as well. I have seen a couple of mature wild deer, although not in the woods but in the

village.

The soil to the west and north west of the village is very clay-rich and there is quite a bit of surface water; two years ago I saw a machine as big as a Mack semitrailer burying large diameter pipes in 3m deep trenches in a corn field, for drainage. Jean Marc says many fields around the village have received this treatment, after which it is only necessary to spread weed killer and then proceed with mechanised seeding (ie no ploughing). It is surely very expensive but obviously made worthwhile by the guaranteed prices/subsidies of the Eurozone agricultural policy. On the flatter ground to the south east, the soils appear to be more loamy, either because they are based on limestone or on alluvium. The corza is mostly grown on these soils: vast fields of yellow flowers.

Because of the excellent quality of the local clay, there is a tiling factory in the next village to the west. Jean-Marc works there. He says it was originally a family concern with the clay dug by hand and transported by wheelbarrow. It is now a fully automated business owned by a multinational American company, Merys, which exports the tiles all over the world including to Australia and Japan (they must be good). It employs 50 staff although only 2 staff at night. There is a workers union. The factory produces 33 tiles/minute and consumes 30-40 tonnes of clay per day. The company is experimenting with Australian clay with the view to setting up a factory, but JM says the Australian clay is like chewing gum.

Jean-Marc also owns a small tractor for odd jobs, including cutting and transporting firewood from his personal allotment or coupe in the woods (all able bodied villagers are expected to manage their own firewood; TB has hers delivered by a woodsman). JM is 43 and has 10 sisters, one brother died; his mother left home when he was 14. He lived with a partner for 10 years and her two daughters are closer to him than their natural father. He is a “good man” as TB says, a very eligible bachelor. He is always ready to help and she is very fortunate to have him living next door. All of her family live in the south of France, near Marseille.

Jean-Marc has just acquired 6 quail (for their eggs) and built a special cage for them. Must be the Spring.

The nearest villages are generally only 3-5 km in any direction. They exist in a sea of industrial farming, with the cultivated fields coming right up to their edges. Jean Marc says the land around Vincent consists of many small holdings which are rented to six big local farming families. Within Vincent many people have their own vegetable patches and flower gardens and as soon as the weather cleared they got out there digging and planting (the moon has been in the right phase too).

The population of the village is officially 314 (not 3,000 as I previously thought). There are no shops, only a (Catholic) church built in the 19th century and a primary school. The church has a statue of Joan d’Arc, who is given equal weighting with the famous virgin (they are arranged in their respective altars on the left and right of the big crucifix). Many of the older barn-like stone houses need repairs, but there are also many modern houses in good nick. The infrastructure is well maintained: concrete posts deliver nuclear powered electricity, the narrow sealed roads are in very good condition and there are deep robust drains. The main road through town has the

only footpath, a couple of hundred metres of gravel. There are some houses with large air conditioning units, presumably reverse cycle, but most people must use wood for heating and cooking given the large woodpiles that can be seen everywhere. I've seen only one house with solar hot water panels. A few new houses have been built since I first came here. I have not seen any migrants.

The village also has an extremely well cared for small cemetery, just like the cemetery in Walhenheim near Strasbourg, the only other village I've visited in France. Perhaps the excellent state of preservation of the 19th century graves reflects the fact there was no fighting here during WWII, although the Germans had direct control because of the close proximity to Switzerland. Many of the graves have fresh flowers, most have 4 or more permanent stone/metal plaques in addition to the headstone, and there are lots of Jesus crosses and a few statues of the lady. A few 4 metre high iron and concrete crucifixes are scattered around the village, including one in the middle of a paddock.

On the Saturday night after I arrived we went to the school to see the voting result for the first round of the presidential election. TB (Dominique) had arranged to give her proxy to the Mayor, in case she couldn't physically make it to the polling place. He and she voted for the Left candidate Melenchon. We were too late for the scrutineering but got the result. Of 247 eligible village voters 25 abstained and 5 voted informal ('blancs/nulls'). Of the remaining 217 valid votes 53 went to the soft left social democrat Françoise Hollande, 50 to the far right Marine Le Pen, 46 to incumbent Sarkozy and 29 to hard left Melenchon. Although happy with the combined left result (Hollande + Melenchon) the comrades were disappointed with the big vote for Le Pen. The following night we went to the Mayor's house to see the national result announced on television at 8pm. Hollande won of course, but there is a second round to go. Le Pen got 18% nationally, and Sarkozy is predicted to move even further to the right in an attempt to pick up the Le Pen vote in the second round. But even the right are sick of him. It was a very pleasant evening with the mayor serving up some excellent local cheese, a delicious chewy fatty pork salami, a very fine Beaujolais and of course the usual welcome baguette. Unfortunately the mayor's wife, has broken a heel bone and has been on crutches for weeks with more weeks to go, one of TB's helpers laid low since last year.

Another of TB's close friends, 60 yr old nurse Rojean, lives in Dole, the nearest town with a genuine cathedral. Since my last visit in October 2011, she has been diagnosed with a large urinary tract cancer. Obviously a big shock for her and for TB. She has lymphoma secondaries and is due to start chemo 7 May. It seems to be quite aggressive; swollen lymph nodes pressing on her lungs are restricting her breathing, and random egg sized lumps have appeared on her arms, trunk and head. TB is unable to drive and Rojean was the friend who always took her shopping on Mondays.

Another very good friend, Anike, who is also one of the home help personnel, has been caring for TB after her chemotherapy sessions when she can barely manage to get out of bed.

Yogini Ratna stayed for 2 nights and then returned to Paris for a court case on an unfair dismissal claim. She was doing serial contract training work for 11 years but has clashed with a younger manager imbued with American management ideas. The company is using all the usual tricks to

avoid paying her entitlements. She is basically without work until the case is resolved and the company has just managed to get it deferred to January 2013. Management is the same the whole world over. I met YR's parents. YR's younger sister died very suddenly 2 years ago and the parents are only just recovering. She was only 43 and it all happened in one day, from back pains in the morning to a doctor who arrived too late in the afternoon. YR's father is a retired sedimentary geologist/palaeontologist and has done research on mangrove molluscs in Australia. We had a brief but pleasant conversation. YR's baby boomer parents are quite comfortable financially, and are puzzled why their children's generation has not done so well.

Another one of TB's yoga friends, Mangala, arrived Friday 27 April from the Ardennes. Since July last year she has been caring for her 86 year old diabetic mother but before that worked for a year as manager of Nishchal's Mandala ashram in Wales (which I visited in 2008). She came to paint the kitchen walls white—they had been blackened by smoke from the stove—and to cook meals for TB. She left 2 May to return to her mother, and thence to a goenka vipassana retreat near Paris. And back to Wales. Before she left we visited Rojean in Dole, with me along for the ride—but not for the French conversation.

I brought with me a bunch of movies and quality TV shows. We have watched the Bible's Buried Secrets series (did Solomon's temple exist; did God have a wife; can we find the real garden of Eden: answers no, yes, yes), plus Persepolis, Blade Runner, A Dangerous Method and Call the Midwife. Lots more to choose from.

TB has recovered extremely well from her right mastectomy, the last staples were taken out a week after my arrival. She is a bit lopsided—and has lost weight—but she is very pleased that she no longer has chronic pain in her right chest and she has regained freedom of movement in her right arm. She needs oxygen at least 16 hours a day. Her spirits are very good, but she has been complaining of left neck and collarbone pain (collarbone primary, cervical secondaries) for some time, although this has not been bad enough to get her to her 'algologist' (pain specialist). She hopes the pain is because of a sleeping position but also says it could be her cancer. It is now 5-6 weeks since she finished her last chemo which she says laid her flat out. She is now being treated with a second tier chemotherapy drug, after the first taxotere style drug failed. She tires more quickly since I last visited, and sleeps more during the day. She is not looking forward to more chemotherapy, if that is what her doctor/friend Laurent recommends when she sees him. He has yet to advise a new appointment.

TB found cannabis to be very helpful during her chemo sessions, particularly as an appetite stimulant and nausea suppressant. But as a result of mixing it with tobacco, she has reacquired her nicotine habit (like many French teenagers of her generation—she is 62—she started smoking at 15 years and has smoked for most of her life). It may be one reason why she gets short of breath very easily. I got her to buy some peppermint tea as a substitute, but so far she has not opened it.

Because of her stage 4 disease (multiple bone and soft tissue metastases), TB receives a lot of government support—100 percent coverage of medical expenses, visiting nurses, home help, and oxygen tanks. The help—all women—bring the firewood in from the wood pile, clean the stove and take out the ashes, wash, clean and iron. I get a room with a view, an extremely comfortable

bed and regular changes of fresh sheets and towels: room service! Plus the delightful company of Tattwa Bodha and her cat Leela.

Extremely regretfully, there are no places offering takeaways anywhere close. The supermarket in Bletterans sells every kind of pre-cooked meal you can think of (French supermarkets are very ritzy compared to Oz). We did try a pre-cooked pizza but it was pretty awful. So I have had to dredge my memory for simple cooking skills like how to mash potatoes and make an omelette. Fortunately TB has very simple tastes, including her love for the French national breakfast: short black coffee, bread and jam (I'm sticking with muesli, and have given up on French coffee in despair).

Tattwa Bodha's older brother Jean-Jacques and his family were due to visit next week, but have postponed to the end of May, which suits TB because it spreads her visitors. JJ and his wife Martine are both nurses. TB says when they visit there is partying day and night for a few days. TB also set up a visit to the south of France where her family including her younger brother Pascal and his second wife live. This would have involved me driving almost to Marseille, an interesting challenge given I am still a novice for driving on the right side of the road.* I was up for it, but TB decided to cancel: she prefers the quiet life in Vincent, and anyway visitors are always welcome to come here. Pascal is a doctor but was recently suspended for 2 months for prescribing too many painkillers—once he started he had quickly become a honey pot.

TB has murmured a few complaints about the level of my internet use (she has ADSL access with wifi). In my defence I pointed out that my database is a major asset. It is my way of keeping up with the conversation about how the world works.

May Day is a holiday in France and TB was given little bouquets of the traditional Lily of the Valley flowers. Most of the shops were closed in Bletterans but there was a fabulous market, inside and outside, with a similar variety of offerings to the West End flea market, plus stuff you normally see in shops like (new) shoes, mattresses and ride-on lawn mowers. It looked like half the town was there, conversations were intense.

I don't know quite how to describe it but there is something special about the view from TB's front doorstep, whether it be during the day or by moonlight.

John Ransley
Thursday 3 May 2012

* Fortunately the foot pedals, manual gears and wing mirrors are the same as in Australia. Centring the car in the right lane takes a bit of getting used to. And all my instincts cry out to look left instead of right when I am turning left across the oncoming lane.

You can get the view from TB's front door by putting her address 7 Chemin du Clusiau, Vincent, France into showmystreet.com

And see if you can access these photos (connection can't cope with normal photo attachments). TB's house is the one on the right end. Jean-Marc is next door and her brother owns the rest.

[I will send separately]