

Chapter 5: Notes & References

The walk with Ajahns Sumedho and Sucitto through the Pyrenees was in 1992 and started in Lourdes where we stayed in a pilgrim's rest house where they insisted I couldn't pay as my companions were monks – it didn't matter that they were Buddhist. Then we climbed into the French Pyrenees, going up and over ridges, through alpine meadows awash with flowers and along conifer-clad valleys. Ajahn Sumedho was tired for the first few days, worn down by his duties. His digestion was also giving him problems. At one point he simply sat down beside the track and didn't budge. Ajahn Sucitto quietly suggested we move on a bit and give him time to recover. As a consequence we arrived late into the town where I was to buy food for the meal that day. Instead I took them into the first restaurant we came to: a pizzeria. That evening by the camp fire, Ajahn Sumedho commented that he'd been having daydreams of steak and chips because of his digestion difficulty but had managed to refrain from telling me that in the town.

The next day we were back to eating cold bread and cheese, the kind of meal he was having trouble digesting, as our route took us up and along the side of a mountain. Studying the map closer, I realised by the meal time we would be passing a small mountain hotel. When we got there I suggested we eat our picnic on their patio which had half a dozen empty tables, and went inside. There was just one young guy there, both chef and manager, who said he could have three plates of steak and chips ready in twenty minutes. When I came back to pay him afterwards I explained how my companions were Buddhist monks to which he replied in a heavy French accent.

"I know. But Buddhist monks they not eat meat, non?"

When I replied that we were on holiday, he responded with a knowing Gallic shrug.

"Ah. Of course."

I did then explain that Buddhist monks can eat meat according to their rules, it's just that they usually prefer not to. But for a Frenchman the first explanation seemed to be all that was needed. Ajahn Sumedho got steadily better after that. The next day was the lightning storm I describe and two days after that we crossed into Spain.