

from *Journey to Angkor Wat* \_\_\_\_\_

*Composed in 550 stanzas, Journey to Angkor Wat is Ukna Suttantaprija Ind's most celebrated poem. It recounts his first trip to Siem Reap, in 1909, when he was invited to accompany the Khmer provincial governor and his French counterpart to attend King Sisowath's official visit to the temples of Angkor. It was most likely written between 1909 and 1915, but was only published posthumously in 1934. The poem is in a Thai genre, nirat (pronounced in Khmer as "nireas"), that had recently been adopted into Cambodian literature. Nireas are poems of departure, with the poet reflecting as much on the journey taken as on the beloved left behind at home. Ind's text abounds with reflections on the shifting political landscape of Cambodia, the melancholy majesty of Angkor's ruins, and his own struggles with the ascetic strictures of Buddhist ethics. The excerpts selected here include stanzas 1 to 51 and 237 to 256. The latter is perhaps the poem's most famous passage, immortalized in countless Cambodian textbooks. TW*

[EXCERPT 1]

A journey to the gem of Angkor Wat  
weighs down my mind as I leave you behind,  
beloved partner of this life, my bliss, my love.



Of royal line our noble king descends,  
named Sisowath Preah Kaewfa Sulalai,  
ruler of the Kingdom of Kampuchea,  
who vows to tread the bodhisattva's way.

He's due to lead a rite at Angkor Wat  
to mark the restoration of the old,  
making lavish gifts of royal riches  
to one day reach the state of a Buddha.

He's set to leave during the waxing moon,  
the ninth day of the tenth lunar month,

Thursday, fifth of the week, a rooster year,  
right when the sun's bright rays begin to fade.



The governor of Battambang province,  
who leads the work of the new French regime,  
and the plenipotent *commissaire*  
are both honest and deeply loyal men.

When all is set and all are in their suits,  
they shall welcome the lofty king himself.  
The governor kindly invited me along  
that I may glimpse the ancient city too.

In the slightest dissent to his decree  
I fear the harm that would befall my life,  
so I resign to leave my beautiful,  
my fated mate as fate forces farewell.



Now's the time; the dignitaries must depart.  
They board the carriage pulled by peerless steeds.  
The skilled coachman takes hold of the reins  
and steers down toward the quay on the Sangkae.

Khmer, Annamite, and French civil servants  
have dressed their best for the dazzling departure.  
The black-booted soldiers stationed by the boat  
all stomp in step to stride and strut aboard.

The captain pulls the cord to sound three times  
a loud whistle while deckhands weigh anchor.  
The boiler fills and we head north along  
the watercourse's way to which we hew.

The Annamite captain deftly steers straight,  
guiding the boat between the river's banks.  
The thundering wheel slaps hard against the waves  
as townfolk rush from all around to watch.



I gaze out from my perch on the steamer  
as we speed toward a distant customs house.  
A lamppost stands in front of the cabin,  
barely befitting the rank of customs chief.

House, roof, and deck, crippled, crumbled, and cracked,  
its Khmerness lost, it's just a shack raised high.  
This customs crew could really use some cash,  
yet they hardly even check those who pass by.

No toll or tax to excise or extract,  
the staff simply let us swiftly steam off.  
This taxless customs house struggles to last,  
living off naught but its own fields and farms.

The Siamese regime built this office,  
but levies were not even properly charged.  
Impressive that the customs chief remains  
despite the new regime giving no aid.

The officers tend to their crops instead;  
they don't traffic or trade like city folks.  
Praise them who win their wealth without warped ways,  
who brave the muck and mud without a word.



How transient that lithe-limbed girl's life,  
stooping to sow seedlings, scorched by the sun,  
her face plastered with mud and dusty earth.  
I mourn the strife and strain of those born poor.

If she had riches, rank, and great renown,  
she'd dine and doze in lofty luxury;  
adorned with fine perfume and fair powder,  
hair trimmed and dyed, her complexion would shine.

she'd flaunt her charm to captivate rich men.  
she'd be looked over, never overlooked.  
But stained now by the sun and by the soil,  
she can ensnare and earn their love no more.

I eye the tiny girl and pity her,  
born to a wretched race with the wrong roots.  
Subject to struggle, strain, and suffering,  
she'll wait until she's far too old to wed.

Once aged she can't project her own beauty;  
rare is the man who would bargain for her.  
With her brideprice reduced, men feel deceived;  
coupling and consummation cannot come.

Fortunes failed, wealth withered, she's bound to bear  
the wear and tear of eking out a life.

Those with the means can brighten their bodies,  
unlike this fair-skinned one besmirched with mud.



I sit perplexed, my gaze still on the girl.  
We reach Ansong Sok, "Molting Monitor."  
The snaking stream divides into four channels  
and floating slicks of sticks and scum abound.

The captain guides the wheel to the debris  
to slice clear through, but the steamer sticks fast.  
Deckhands use bamboo prods to pole the boat;  
the wheel pushes the vessel back around.

The polemen poke away the sticks and scum.  
The steamer seems to briefly break away  
but stuck to sticks, the blades still strive to spin.  
Pity the wheel now clogged and choked by scum!

I see how tight the scum girdles the boat,  
as lust would mount flesh when morals fade.  
Our bodies soon are trapped in that dark place;  
the real is shrouded off, the light is screened.

Lust sears and singes creatures in the world  
to rue and regret base earthliness.  
The vessel's frame is like our human form;  
those short of insight cannot see the real.

The blades are wisdom that slices and shears;  
the floating scum is lust, now dropped away.  
Escape from the shallows of sorrow and strife  
depends on brave wisdom, the paddle wheel.

The boat's innards are our body's workings:  
earth, water, fire, and wind, the four bases.  
The helm's the post of wakeful remembrance,  
the bamboo pole's the clear mind's reflection.

The sticks and scum are meditation's foes,  
preventing us from seeing what is real.  
The water whirls around like birth and death,  
drowning creatures in this carnal abyss.

Alas, that this body does not spurn lust;  
instead it's spun around, as in a gyre.  
In woe we weep and wail, for we forget  
to follow our Lord's flawless words of truth.

Reflecting on myself, shaken and stirred,  
thwarted by thirst for all earthly delights,  
I've seen the truth, but it's for girls I pine,  
fodders for lust and fonts of mystery.

Lust yields not, for straining seals it tighter.  
My poor heart and its love are wrenched apart.  
Even if I take sacred writ as rule,  
worldly lust stands unhampered, unhindered.

Ditching the Dharma can't help douse this fire;  
desire's pitch-black, like night with shapes unseen.  
Seldom sloughed off, lust fades but never's gone.  
Can washing tar-stained silk remove the coal?

To scrub's no use, the color changes not;  
tar stains are ever bound to their blackness,  
as taints are tied to creatures thus enthralled.  
Don't fancy you could somehow wipe them clean.

Straining to let go I'm locked in tighter.  
Practice is stopped, not steady; stayed, not stilled.  
I sit to rule myself with the Dharma,  
like deckhands clearing all the scum at once.

Once we pass through, the sticks and scum float back,  
again settling into the selfsame clumps.  
The sticks and scum are like thirsting desire;  
we chop and clear but choked remains the stream.



Near an orchard the scum sticks to the shore,  
strewn with the carcasses of cats and dogs.  
They ooze, they fester, their entrails erupt;  
vultures and crows compete for carrion.

Seeing the corpses consumed by the crows,  
I'm shaken, thinking of my own body.  
These crows swoop in whenever death arrives.  
The dead, devoid of life, are jettisoned.

In life they're fierce, ferocious as can be;  
no other beasts would dare to nip their flesh.  
In death they're set adrift upon the stream,  
where carrion birds now feast voraciously.

How transient the lives of all creatures!  
Once bodies break apart and minds collapse,  
no one will dare approach the vile stench.  
Let us all dwell on life's impermanence.

I humbly strive to quake at corpses' sight,  
yet lust still must be burning inside me.  
For I think of my darling, my dear love;  
"impermanence" is only on my lips.

Reflecting on the foul should purge desire,  
crush lust, and take me to the edge of trance.  
A true yogi would seize upon the object;  
I've lost my calm and can't focus at all.

To see a dog's dead corpse as my body  
cannot help disenchant me, my dear friends.  
Oh what am I to do? Whoever's now  
protecting me, oh please point out the path.



Now I also doubt "Molting Monitor."  
A name that takes on such a sense is strange.  
Since when was there a monitor that molted  
so that it could give rise to such a name?

Monitor lizards never seem to molt at all,  
so why would a village take on this title?  
Perhaps some beast's shed skin was found near here  
and was inscribed as this village's name.

I strive to understand, yet cannot see  
how this strange name is anything but wrong.  
Whoever named this "Molting Monitor"  
his name remains up to this very day.

But maybe men of old deserve our praise  
for they came up with all the names we know.  
Though in the bush they lived, they still knew how  
to designate a proper toponym.

I mull and muse upon a cool, fresh breeze.  
The ship advances toward Krabau Canal,  
where water slows and flows not one bit more,  
deep black, yet shining pure and free from mud.

This water's clearly from the Tonle Sap.  
The stream counters its flow right where they meet,  
such that the current stops and flows no more.  
Still, I ponder this strange Krabau Canal.

Just where did this canal branch off?  
Here lies the end but where's its origin?  
Maybe it lies too low and now is clogged?  
Jungle channels must hide many secrets.

[EXCERPT 2]



I gaze upon the moat, a watery sea,  
a vast expanse that circles Angkor Wat.  
The kings of old had dug it for defense:  
a ditch, a dam, a dyke to ward off foes.

The moat's waters expand, a wide, wet field,  
all lined with stone, a dense array of rock,  
its steep walls carved in shells, spirals of gems,  
descending stairs sculpted in fragrant flowers.

In the center a bridge extends in stone,  
its road both long and imposingly wide.  
Yet its exact measure in length and width  
conforms to the secret manuals of old.

A triple courtyard sits where the bridge starts,  
guarded by standing lions at every edge.  
Some of the sandstone beasts remain intact,  
while other guardians lost their heads or limbs.

Pity these stone lions, the ancients' craft!  
Their posture roars with life amidst decay.  
But now they're chipped and cracked and smashed:  
alas that these sculptures meet such an end!

Perhaps some savage folk, cut off from thought,  
whetted their knives against the lions' backs,  
ruining what still remains of their fine form,  
without a shred of care for art of yore.

O lions! You stood rock-still, eyeing all those  
who sharpened swords and daggers on your spine.  
Why didn't you erupt in rage and crush  
your enemies between your fearsome jaws?

Damn those who damaged these lion sculptures—  
they don't know what's a puddle and what's the sea.  
How shameful, then, what artists made with care  
could be so heedlessly defaced by foes!



Down the causeway, I see the tight-packed rock:  
a board of stones, their edges closely set.  
Even an elephant can't make it sway.  
The bridge still works, despite some sinking blocks.

The balustrades are carved in naga form;  
each with ten heads, like a hand of bananas.  
Their hoods are raised: bold snakes ready to strike,  
a serpentine display, a knot of necks.

These naga kings, endowed with might and brawn,  
sport long bodies; their faces guard the gates.  
They slither along the bridge's balusters,  
their tails entwined above rock-lined courtyards.

O naga lords, undaunted by the garudas,  
your sworn rivals, you fight them with vigor.  
Should they dislodge you from your wall,  
just dive into the safe waters below.

O stone nagas, fashioned by the ancients!  
In days long gone, your beauty surpassed all.  
But now your bodies are broken and cracked;  
you're only a ruin, your glamor all but gone.

Your backs are split, your heads torn from your necks.  
Only the row of columns below remains.  
Alas, the masterworks of old must fade,  
unable to endure forevermore.

How transient the life of stone nagas!  
Meant to last for ages beyond count,  
they've gone to ruin, far before their time,  
falling to pieces, scattered here and there.

Is this our fate as beings in the world?  
No matter what, all that's born must soon die.  
And the Buddha's teaching is clear as day:  
all things, once aged, shall be scattered in death.

If even rock can meet its end in dust,  
then what of us, with our fragile bodies?  
Thus any pith of life to which we cling  
will be destroyed, the plaything of disease.

Born in this form, we're bound to end in death,  
our bones only a means to seed the soil.  
Grow weary of the world; lessen your lust;  
let Angkor's stone nagas weigh on your chest.

Though I still meditate upon these truths,  
my mind doesn't settle on its object,  
for thoughts of my beloved still arise.  
When we're apart, how our two minds wander!

Alas, my mind is no more than a monkey,  
never at peace, never silent or still.  
Seeing this, I think of that; I can't stop.  
These words? Useless. If I can't sit, no bliss.

*Translated from Khmer by Trent Walker*