

## *My Swabian stubbornness helped me with meditation!*

It is not every day that one encounters a Buddhist monk who has devoted his life to the destruction of ignorance (avijja), and who has lived in the Thai jungle with this purpose in mind for more than 15 years, spending between 12 and 16 hours a day in meditation. Meeting such a person encourages us to ask questions about how we are leading our own lives, where we are heading, and what our own relationship with Dhamma really is. It may even lead us to think seriously about enlightenment, and the possibility of ending, once and for all, the cycle of samsara.



People today are accustomed to seeing Buddhist monks from Thailand, Burma, Tibet or some other Asian country, but Ajahn Martin is European and German. Born in Stuttgart in 1957 and growing up in Swabia in southwestern Germany, Martin was a rather quiet and unobtrusive child. He was neither an outstanding student nor did he draw attention to himself by feats or special talents. From an early age, he had a penchant for tinkering with things, and he subsequently studied electrical engineering. With a Fulbright scholarship, he went to the USA to extend his studies to computer engineering and to work entirely in the university sector. After graduation, he was offered the chance to do his doctorate in the USA. However, another job in Hamburg came up, and – since he did not feel completely at home in the USA – he chose the job in Hamburg which involved working in a research lab on image analysis and artificial intelligence. During that time, he also became involved in the ‘Scientists for Peace’ campaign, and was earning enough money to be happy with his life. However, he was not. Instead, he felt

dissatisfied, as if something was gnawing at his heart, and he kept his eyes and ears open for something new.

In the 1980s, he became acquainted with Findhorn, a popular spiritual community in Scotland, and it was on a visit there that he discovered meditation. From then on, he practiced meditation regularly. Eventually, his girlfriend in Germany recommended that he visit a proper meditation teacher and suggested Vimalo Kulbarz. In April 1989, he learned how to meditate ‘correctly’ according to the Theravada tradition, using sitting and walking techniques; 45 minutes sitting and 15 minutes of slow, mindful walking. At first, it was hell for him to sit still and watch his mind for so long, but he stuck with it. It was at the end of another, ten-day retreat with Vimalo Kulbarz that he discovered a silence which filled him completely. "It was similar to coming out of a loud disco at three o'clock in the morning and finding oneself suddenly immersed in the silence of the street. Starry night is all around, the silence permeates everything, and the sound of the disco has fallen away", he recalls. From that moment, he vowed to continue with the meditation practice that had given him such joy. Of course, his meditative experiences were not yet connected with Buddhism in any way; at this point, his interest was only in this experience of silence. However, from this

point onwards, he built his life around meditation, practicing in the morning by sitting one hour before going to work, and for one hour again in the evening.

### ***The experience of peace and joy***

In the summer of 1990, he again went on a retreat with Vimalo Kulbarz, at the end of which a kind of 'breakthrough' experience occurred, a state of inner rapture (**piti**) that can occur when the mind comes to rest. This experience lasted for three whole days, and was the decisive catalyst for dramatic change. Martin decided to go into homelessness, but making the decision was a terrible heartache; as he says, "Whenever I thought about it, it seemed like sharp needles were piercing my heart."

Of course, such a change of lifestyle is not easy, and many others in a similar position would have given up. Here, however, his Swabian stubbornness helped greatly. It is generally recognized that when a person from Schwabia sets his mind to something, he carries it through to the end: any other course of action is out of the question. This was a very useful quality for Martin to have, for, over time, it has helped him to resolve many of the hindrances along the spiritual path. The two experiences of inner stillness and great joy, which deeply affected his heart, helped to sustain him on the path and to march forward without deviating, for they made the external sparkling world look pale by comparison. He still went to work, met friends and had a girlfriend, but none of these things had the same power to touch him, such was the experience of absolute silence and the 'uplift of the heart'. Finally, in March 1991, he decided to leave the research lab, gave away all his belongings and went into homelessness, i.e. without worldly goods and living in monasteries.

He wanted to explore his mind, but needed to be able to focus fully on this task. He realized that the meditation practice which he was doing regularly, and which brought some inner stillness, was still inadequate to that task. As Ajahn Martin explains, "Wisdom has to be developed, and it doesn't arise from thinking about this or that in the usual worldly way. Our thinking does not lead to insight; it remains stuck in the ordinary world, the world of ideas and concepts. Rather, we have to reach the heart (**citta**). A person who does not see through his worries, fears and troubles remains a prisoner of the darkness, for these are veils which cover and obscure our minds and hearts – and in darkness no realization is possible. In this darkness, we do not, in fact, rule our own lives, but are ruled by defilements (**kilesas**) in our hearts. As long as we have not gained any clarity of mind, we shall always be deceived by the false promises of the deceitful mind. We know that it does not make us happy when we give in to its enticements and promises, yet we follow them again and again. Maybe I would be happier in a new job? Maybe it would be easier not to tell the truth? Maybe today I should skip meditation and rest instead? In questions like these, we should ask ourselves, 'who is the one who suggests these things?' and 'where do these impulses come from?'. If we continue to ask such things persistently, always going back and anchoring ourselves on the meditation subject, usually the breath as it comes in and out, then we will arrive suddenly at a point of certainty. We will reach the 'observer' who knows. Once we become one with this 'knowingness' in the state of deep samadhi, in complete one-pointedness, then everything around us, including the world, disappears. If everything collapses into one point, no more duality is present."

It was this goal that Martin began to glimpse more clearly during the early stages of his practice, the goal that he desired to attain permanently.

### ***Finding his true home in a Thai forest monastery***

In June 1991, Martin was at Gaia House, a retreat center in the southwest of England, and thereafter he spent one year in various Theravada monasteries in England. From January 1993 until September 1994, he studied with Ayya Khema at Buddha House in Germany. Although these centres had a Buddhist ambience, based on the teaching and practice of the Buddha, Martin found that he barely had adequate time or opportunity to practice meditation. He was constantly involved in the activities going on in the centre or monastery, such as cooking for meditation courses, writing brochures, and helping in the production of books. Indeed, he was as busy as he had been while he working in a proper job, except that he was not earning money.

It became clear to Martin that he would not reach his goal in the West, and the decision matured to leave Germany and Europe to look for a teacher in Asia. From the beginning, the choice of teacher was clear – the famous Ajahn Maha Bua who was abbot of a forest monastery at Baan Taad in Thailand. Martin had read his book, 'Straight from the Heart' and, after reading the first few chapters, had tried to find more information about the author and where he lived. Instinctively, he realized that Ajahn Maha Bua knew the whole truth, and that if he himself wanted to discover it, he would have to take him as a teacher. In March 1995, Martin flew to Thailand, arriving in April at Baan Taad forest monastery. Residents in this monastery, mainly Buddhist monks, were expected to meditate all day long, and this was exactly Martin's burning desire. Of course, Martin had jitters before arriving; he spoke no Thai, was unfamiliar with the culture, and (most importantly) he had heard that Ajahn Maha Bua teacher was a very strict teacher. It was only after being accepted as a disciple by Ajahn Maha Bua that he learned that this great teacher had not accepted any new Western students for more than a decade. Ajahn Maha Bua made an exception for Martin, and told him on a later occasion, "I am your teacher. If you're going to drink coffee, just drink coffee and go back to your meditation. Do you understand?". Martin could not speak Thai at this time, but nevertheless the meaning became clear as Ajahn Maha Bua spoke to him. It was also clear to Martin that he had come to the right place; his first meeting with Ajahn Maha Bua was like coming home. "It was as if I had met my father and mother wrapped up in one person, and it was immediately clear that I was in the right place", he explains. After nine months in the forest monastery, Martin was ordained as a Buddhist monk (**bhikkhu**) in 1995, and has been a monk ever since. His monastic name is Than (Thai: venerable or reverend) Martin Piyadhammo, where 'Piyadhammo' is a Pali word that can be translated as 'the one who has perfect confidence in the Dhamma'. In Thailand, it is usual for a monk who has been ordained for more than 10 years to be called 'Ajahn', which means teacher. Its use stems from the monastic rules (**vinaya**) laid down by the Buddha, which say that a monk can ordain and teach younger monks if he has been ordained for 10 rains retreats (**pansa**) or more.

He spent the first five years living inside the monastery walls, except for when he went on daily alms round in the local village or when he went to the city once a year to renew his visa. During that time, he was under the tutelage of his teacher or the senior monks who guide the younger ones. Everything had to be learned anew: how to wash himself as a monk, how to sit down properly, and how to eat. It's almost as if he were a little child again, having to learn how to walk, speak and think. "It's much easier to learn while living among Asians than Westerners", says Ajahn Martin, as "Asians have infinite patience and are very loving and friendly, whereas Westerners are much more critical". Meditation practice was no cakewalk, of course, but Than Martin went deeper and deeper into practice as the years progressed. If obstacles arose, and problems came up, he used his previous life experience to overcome them, reflecting that whatever he had experienced in his life before had led to nothing but dissatisfaction (**dukkha**). In ordinary life, he had never experienced the satisfaction and joy that came from meditation, so he reflected that it would not be sensible to return to the 'everyday' world of a layperson. "And if those reflections were ineffective",

he says laughing, "I thought back to my childhood and youth. Would I want to repeat the confusions and torments of school or puberty? No thanks!". It was clear for him that he did not want to be reborn again.

These reflections were enough to make him continue practicing. His teacher, Ajahn Maha Bua, was also doing his part, however. "He kept coming at the right moment ", Ajahn Martin recalls. "Ajahn Maha Bua saw through all of us. Once when one of my fellow monks was sweeping the area around the monastery, Ajahn Maha Bua came past and said, 'If you're sweeping, you should just sweep, and not sing a song inside your head'. It turned out that the monk had been silently humming to the rhythm of a song in his head while doing the sweeping. Such was the quality of Ajahn Maha Bua."

### ***Dealing with Loneliness is difficult for Westerners***

When his five years of apprenticeship in the monastery were over, Than Martin went on 'tudong' (a journey alone through the forests) around the surrounding province for two to five months each year, returning thereafter to Baan Taad forest monastery to live with his teacher. At first, he spent his periods of solitude at a very remote monastery, initially with five other monks but eventually with only one other monk. He preferred to be alone on tudong, spending time in caves located far away from the villages and largely undisturbed, so that his daily alms round might take from one to two and a half hours, depending on the location of the cave.

In 2009, his solitary 'cave time' came to an end. He had begun to teach, and some experienced, practicing Western laymen were insisting on experiencing meditation in caves. As this environment was considerably more inhospitable than living in a monastery, difficulties arose within just a few weeks, and the laymen experienced tensions, anger and other emotions that they could deal with only in their usual unwholesome ways rather than in the more wholesome ways conducive to Dhamma practice . "Westerners normally cannot handle the loneliness which forests and mountains bring up", says Ajahn Martin. "Human beings are gregarious animals, and on the whole they need a focal point and a group to which they feel connected. This is rooted deep within us. Working on ones own loneliness and overcoming it is extremely difficult." As he explains, "The problem is not being alone in the woods, mountains or caves – quite a few people enjoy this solitude. It is the combination of Dhamma practice and living on one meal a day in a harsh environment without any distraction. It's not the case that you have a little stroll around the woods or caves, exploring them or doing whatever takes your fancy. In fact, your whole day consists of walking meditation (*jongrom*) and sitting meditation without having any contact with other people – it's not easy!"

Ajahn Martin has mastered being alone, without becoming anti-social. On the contrary, he exudes a warm inner peace, shows great interest in the well-being of his fellow human beings, and does his best to help them to develop their full potential. His main method is a directness that comes straight from the heart and hits the questioner at exactly the right point – the heart. Ajahn Martin does not beat around the bush, whether in his discourses or in his personal encounters with people. If he feels that someone is just about to understand something, he digs further in. He finds the relevant sore point and puts his finger on it, so that the person can understand exactly what he means and look directly into themselves for a solution.

If some people find this provocative, then so be it, for it is part and parcel of Ajahn Martin's great talent for getting straight to the heart of the matter. As he explains, "Buddhism in Germany, and also Theravada Buddhism in general, is often too scholastic. People talk and talk about it, with a superior attitude, but this is not the right way. Rather, it is one's own experience that counts." To illustrate the point, he uses a striking analogy: "It is like a loud

group of scholars sitting around a fire. They discuss the fire, arguing over whether it is hot, whether it is warm, or even, perhaps, that it is really cold. However, without direct experience, all they have are their assumptions about its true nature. None of them have actually put their hands into the fire! So, when someone comes along and asks them about fire, he will get a range of answers. But when, finally, he touches the fire for himself, he can turn his back on the scholars and leave without saying a word, for he knows the truth for himself and knows that trying to convince them would be futile.

It is surely as a result of his long years of meditation practice that Ajahn Martin manages effortlessly to reach into people's hearts. With every breath, his teachings knock continuously at the hearts of others, asking questions like, "Are you awake or asleep? Are you still alive? May I try to wake you up, at least a little?".

Asked what has driven him to move towards his goal of ending the rounds of rebirth with such energy and directedness, he replied: "The most important thing was that I had experienced the feeling of utter silence, and later the feeling of indescribable joy at the end of my first longer retreat. Everything was stale and bleak in comparison. I had found something that was more beautiful than all the promises that I had run after before. Later, I came to the firm decision that I wanted to make sure that this was to be my last life. And in all of this my Swabian stubbornness helped".