

THE ACCIDENTAL MONK

For Paul Ngo, a Vietnamese-born American, the spiritual path leading to his ordination as a monk was “kind of accidental”. Having grown up in Los Angeles, the son of Vietnamese refugees, Paul left college with a degree in economics and a debt of \$20,000 to pay off. Needing a job that would pay, he went straight (after a stint with the Peace Corp in Africa) into banking.

His work took him to Hong Kong and then onto Bangkok in the early 1990s just as the Asian economy was starting to take off. With English being the international language of finance and banking, Paul found it easy to get a job as a financial analyst with ING Barings, one of the top international brokerages in Thailand. But he was under intense pressure.

“As a stockbroker, my life revolved around information, a constant flow, sometimes a whirlwind, of information. A large part of the job is to be able to sift through the stream of information and determine which piece of news will have an impact on the stock market. There is a relentless search for the most updated news. By nine o’clock in the morning I would have read four newspapers, scanned the computers for news updates from Reuters and Bloomberg, and checked with the research department regarding recent company developments as well as broad economic and political trends.”

Working in such an adrenaline-fuelled environment, the momentum continued throughout the day. After work, he rushed to the gym for a quick workout, met up with friends and colleagues for drinks and then dinner. He would be out until about 10:30–11:00 p.m. two or three times during the week. Weekends were filled with brunches and lunches, dinners and clubs. He would literally run from one appointment to the next. Rarely would he be home before midnight. Often on weekends he took trips to the playgrounds of Asia: Phuket, Chiang Mai, Hong Kong or Singapore. It was not uncommon for him to go to the airport from work on Friday night and come back to the office on Monday morning straight from the airport. “I was brought up with the motto: ‘Work hard, play hard’. Unfortunately, nobody told me about contentment.”

In spite of all the activities and options available to him, Paul began feeling bored and disenchanted with life. “Things started to slow down at work due to the economic recession. But regarding my personal life, I began to notice that no matter

where I was or what I was doing, there was this undercurrent of boredom and existential anxiety. I would be at some ‘fabulous party’ or the ‘in’ club and then this feeling would come over me and I would look around and realise that everybody looked as lost as I was. They seemed to be trying to fill up their lives with the same type of material possessions: clothes and cars, and sensory diversions like going to restaurants and clubs and travelling to strange and exotic places, or self-annihilation through drugs and alcohol.”

The irony in such a ‘glamorous’ life geared to success, was that everything ended in boredom or, worse, oblivion. Most of the time Paul couldn’t remember what he did yesterday. He remembers thinking: “I got cheated somehow! I have done everything I am supposed to do. They all told me that if I worked hard, followed all the rules, and paid my dues, success would come, and with that, everlasting happiness. By all accounts, I am the poster-child of success. I am barely in my thirties, bringing home six-figure paychecks, dining at the best restaurants, taking holidays anywhere in the world and buying whatever I want. Yet I feel so bored and discontented. This is utterly, utterly unfair!!”

As a nine year-old, Paul’s family escaped Saigon just before the Communists took over in 1975. His mother had been working for the Americans so the family was evacuated to the Philippines, then resettled in Los Angeles. The Catholic Church supported them with housing and schooling, but growing up as a refugee was still a struggle. Surrounded by material excess, Paul idolized wealthy people assuming they must be happy. He thought he wasn’t happy because he was poor. Working in the finance industry made him realise that rich people still had their issues, they got stressed, paranoid, and no matter how much money they had, it was never enough.

In 1998 the Asian economies suffered a dramatic crash. While continuing to make a good living, Paul found that he had more time on his hands than before. Curiosity led him to visit an American friend who was staying at a nearby Buddhist monastery. Arriving with a fairly cynical attitude, his first impression was not positive. There were Western kids sitting around, “a bunch of high school drop-outs and hippies that were kind of bumming around”. He reflected, “It’s a path about letting go but you have to have something first to let go of. It’s easy for you guys because you don’t have a job to let go of.”

One of the monks at the monastery, Phra Peter, was English, had written a couple of books on Buddhism and could answer Paul’s questions. When he first heard

some of the Buddha's teachings, something resonated in Paul even though the concepts were all new to him,

“It was as if he was expressing something deep inside my consciousness. The teachings on kamma and sila [morality] — if you do good then good things will happen to you and that your goodness will protect you from harm — these were teachings that I believed and have always tried to live by.”

Born into a Catholic family, Paul had become disillusioned with morality and its association with Christian Puritanism and self-righteousness. Buddhist morality seemed to have a different tone. He actually found the teachings on keeping precepts quite attractive, as something that you offer the world, not something demanded from above.

“Another appealing aspect of Buddhism I found is that we are responsible for our own enlightenment. The Buddha discovered the path to Nibbana but it is up to each one of us to make the effort and walk down that path.” The first time Phra Peter discussed the goal of Buddhism, which is to do good, refrain from doing evil and to purify oneself, “it felt so natural and familiar that I thought to myself, ‘If I were to verbalize the criteria or goal of my life, this would be it’.”

Phra Peter was teaching meditation and offered the training to Paul, but his natural skepticism surfaced again. “Growing up in Los Angeles, a place of never-ending new-age spiritual fads and fashion, I was prejudiced against meditation. I lumped it in with all that trendy stuff. My initial impression of meditation and yoga was that it was something for bored, rich corporate types to do before they visited their spiritual guru to have their aura examined.”

But Phra Peter engaged his interest by describing how, if you're a good meditator, you can see the future. “As a stockbroker, I was really interested now.” Motivated by monetary gain, he hoped to apply what he learned to stock analysis. “That weekend, I didn't want to talk to my friend, I just wanted to focus on my breath.” During this meditation intensive Paul was trying to attain the kind of psychic powers that would help further his career but still felt something at a deeper level.

Back at work with not a lot happening, he decided that he would take a year off, do more meditation then go back to New York and ‘clean up’. “That was my motivation to join a monastery”, he recalls with some mirth.

With too many distractions in the city, Paul wanted a more conducive atmosphere for meditation. He transferred to a quieter monastery in the country.

Although he was only one hour's flight from Bangkok, his lifestyle as a stockbroker seemed worlds away. Coming from such a fast-paced and sensory-driven world to Wat Pah Nanachat, where it seemed that the only sounds were from the swaying bamboo bushes and falling leaves, was a bit of a shock. Immediately he felt strong conflicting emotions.

"I remember feeling at times quite lost and ill at ease with the calm and stillness of monastery life. I can recall experiencing many mood swings during my first week." He had his share of frustrations and disappointments dealing with the conditioned thoughts that sabotaged his progress, but overall, was attracted to the simple and peaceful life of the monastery. "And the structured environment of having scheduled activities throughout the day really appealed to me."

At the end of most meditation sessions, he felt a refreshing sense of being calm and centered. Perceptions of his surroundings seemed to be enveloped in a mist of goodwill and gentility. "The irony was that in contrast to my blind pursuit of happiness and excitement in my lay life, which ended up in boredom and desperation, I was finding enthusiasm and contentment just sitting in my kuti counting my breaths."

At the end of the year, 1999, he was quite happy to return to the US and apply what he had learned to his stockbroker life and stock analysis. But after his first rains retreat, a time during the rainy season when monks and nuns stay inside the monastery for extended meditation, Paul was asked if he would like to come along to visit some revered, perhaps even enlightened, masters in their forest monasteries.

It was during this visit that Paul, somewhat cynically, thought he would test out a monk who had a reputation for psychic powers. Not understanding any of the Thai being spoken, he tried to communicate telepathically with the monk, "OK, if you know what I'm thinking, why don't you show me?" So I closed my eyes. Suddenly I saw this dragon flying at me."

In Hong Kong as a bored young stockbroker wanting to make a statement beneath his suited office uniform, Paul had had a dragon tattooed on his arm. "So I thought, OK, maybe he does have something", he laughs. But more impressive was the vibration of loving kindness that emanated from these monks. The effect on Paul was deep and profound. "They were just so peaceful. Not super soft and fuzzy, but something solid, something otherworldly. I was very curious." Something triggered in

him. “They impressed me as having something I wanted to have, some quality I could aspire to.”

That was the inspiration to ordain for another five years and see what happened. “The thing is, it was never a long-term thing. I never thought, ‘Oh, I’ll never have another relationship, never have sex again’. I just thought ‘OK, I can do all this, one year at a time, for five years’.” Worried that there might be some adverse physiological effects from staying celibate for so long, he asked some monks. They said, no, that they’d been celibate for sixty, seventy years and it wasn’t a problem.

Paul couldn’t conceive of lasting that long without sex “In retrospect, my decision to commit to the five years of celibacy was quite fortuitous because a lot of people obsess about it, ‘Oh, I’m never going to do this again’, and they get very nervous about it. But if you say to your mind, ‘Well, you can do what you want in five years time’, then it’s no problem.”

He never thought he was giving up the world. Even now, he keeps the option open of returning to his old life but because things are going well, he’s happy where he is. “When I talk to my friends they’re doing the same thing, so the world is still sitting there, out there. If I really want to, I can pick it up anytime.”

At the Thai monastery, Paul heard some tapes by an English monk, Ajahn Brahm, the Abbott of Bodinyana monastery in Western Australia. This eventually led to him going to live there. In recalling his reasons for the move, Paul explains “Ajahn Brahm is special because his teaching is focused on deep absorption states. He set his monastery up in a way that encourages lots of meditation and not too many external duties. He does all the teaching and admin work. He encourages you to go back to your hut and meditate. That’s the main thing that impressed me.”

The other side was his teaching style that includes a lot of humour. “I’m not so thrilled about his jokes but he has a gift for communication. He says that’s how people learn, so, fair enough. They’re nice the first time you hear them but you hear them hundreds of times. “Oh here we go again!” he moans. “When we complain that we’re bored, ‘Can you tell us new stories?’ he says, ‘No. I’ve only lived one life. How many stories can you get out of one life?’”

Despite the stale jokes, his meditation practice at Bodinyana gave Paul, now known as Ajahn Khemavaro, a way to achieve deep peace. From there, he says, it is possible to contemplate reality. “That’s when you’ll see clearly. And it depends upon

your karmic inclination. Everybody has their own path and things to work on. It depends on whatever arises for you and you just work through that.”

Ajahn Khemavaro is speaking in the office of Wat Buddha Dhamma, an isolated forest monastery set in Dharug National Park north of Sydney, on the other side of the Australian continent from where he trained. The dragon tattoo features on an arm bare under his monk's brown robes. His outgoing, assertive manner and American accent belie his shaven-haired Asian appearance.

The Wat was established in the 1970s. A photo album recounts its origins as an alternative Buddhist community founded by Sister Ayya Khema, a German nun and Bikkhu Khantipalo an Englishman. They were both highly respected, world-renowned authorities on Buddhism who attracted many people to live here. He eventually disrobed and married, setting up as a lay teacher of meditation. Ayya Khema died in 1997.

Stressed professionals coming from Sydney and surrounding areas appreciate the unique experience of being in the middle of a national park with no one else around for miles. Access to the monastery is via Wiseman's Ferry and a scenic drive along the Hawkesbury River. A turn-off onto a dirt road leads into a dramatic landscape and the opportunity to appreciate the natural world. The swooping flight across the road of a pair of rare red-tailed black cockatoos are reminders that civilisation and its environmental destruction has been left behind.

Just before the Wat, at Ten Mile Hollow, the road intersects with the historic Old Great North Road that features beautifully preserved examples of stonework bridges, the oldest in mainland Australia. It might be some consolation to the convicts who hauled the massive sandstone blocks and laboured in chains to construct this road, discarded before it was completed, to know that it now leads to a place of peace and renewal.

Taking a break from her job as a coordinator at Sydney West Area Health Service, Kerry Rogers* came to Wat Buddha Dhamma over New Years to participate in a six-day retreat. Enjoying the isolation and complete withdrawal from city life and the pressure of work, Kelly finds that practising mindfulness meditation brings her into the present moment. She's not as distracted and more able to cope with whatever arises in her job. Asked if she really notices a difference, she is emphatic, “Oh, absolutely!”

Rachel Edwards is taking time off from working as weekend manager of a bookshop in Tasmania to get clarity about her life, career path and future direction. The incredible peace she finds here makes it hard to leave.

For Marie Delaney, her job as a social researcher and consultant to government means she is always thinking and planning, evaluating government programs. At this point in her life, she is taking the opportunity to rest and reflect. She's happy not to access emails in the three months she is spending here.

In the early morning, they are drawn from their warm beds to meditate in the beautiful meditation hall, or 'sala', to give it its Thai name. This exotic structure stands in stark contrast to its environment of gnarled eucalypts, pink-skinned angophoras and xanthorrhoea grasses. Designed and constructed by a boat-builder, the interior ceiling beams evoke the upside-down frame of a long boat. The spacious modern building gleams with polished wood as sunlight streams through the slatted windows. At one end is a golden Buddha statue surrounded by flowers.

Locals Joan Oproek and Ian Elton have come to an open day at the Wat to hear a talk by Ajahn Khemavaro and experience an introductory meditation session. They say that nearby residents in the McDonald Valley are mostly unaware of this Buddhist settlement, but the community is very accepting of alternative groups, with many having their centres in the area. Mia Letzbor, the ten-year-old daughter of St. Alban locals, Rebecca and Peter, thought the meditation was relaxing, and 'pretty cool'. She says she'd even like to come back for a couple of months.

One long-term resident is Scott Ermer, a builder-carpenter renovating some of the original huts huddled amongst the sandstone cliffs designated for monks and nuns on retreat. Through mindfulness meditation, Scott found relief from the pain of arthritis that was driving him crazy. Born with a curvature of the spine, he developed an inflammatory arthritis (ankylosing spondylitis) that targets the joints of the spine. Causing himself greater problems through self-medicating with alcohol and drugs, Scott discovered that meditation gave him quite a bit of relief. To him, everyone is in some kind of physical or mental pain and meditation can help to relieve it. The practice has worked for him for 24 years.

With Ajahn Khemavaro in residence, Scott believes the future of the monastery is assured. "He has a talent for teaching and is very disciplined in his practice. He has all the qualities to guide people who want to experience the Buddha's teachings." Scott likes the lifestyle at the forest monastery. The schedule allows for

plenty of meditation time as well as the opportunity to give service. People offer their skills in a variety of ways. Help in the kitchen is always required, as the resident monks need to be fed, as well as the guests.

Support comes from the Asian community in Sydney, particularly Cabramatta, where Ajahn Khemavaro visits once a month to do alms round. This traditional practice allows Buddhists to gain merit by giving to the monks. The Vietnamese appreciate his presence even though he can't speak much of the language. When his family escaped Vietnam, they knew they would never be returning to live under a communist regime and focused on assimilating into an English-speaking society.

While Ajahn does not discourage the busloads of Asian Buddhists from visiting the monastery to give donations of food and seek his blessings, he would prefer to attract people interested in learning meditation.

Thu La is a Vietnamese woman from Sydney who loves to cook. The spring rolls she made are delicious and she readily shares the recipe. Along with the food and her family, she brings with her an atmosphere of joy. Thu La works for Australia Post sorting mail in a big facility employing more than a thousand people. She used to feel the job was too hard. Since starting to meditate, she is able to be more accepting and do the work without stress. "When leader puts pressure on us for deadline, I don't react, just do my best. Only have two hands!" For Thu La, knowing how to meditate makes life easier.

Ajahn Khemavaro offers a welcome to anyone wanting to learn meditation and gain the benefits of a calm mind. People who practise a different kind of meditation to the one taught here are able to continue practising it during their stay.

Born into the turmoil of war in Vietnam, then, as a refugee, growing up in California and becoming a world-traveller with his work in the high-stress finance industry, Ajahn Khemavaro has now found sanctuary in the peace and serenity of this unique setting. When asked what he likes about it here, he reflects, "It's just this spot. Everything is beautiful and perfect. I like the trees, the flowers, and the isolation is great."

For information regarding Wat Buddha Dhamma and the schedule of meditation retreats or to pay a casual visit, call 02) 43233193 or look on the website: www.wbd.org.au.

*Not her real name