

Bed is a wooden plank. The last meal of the day is at 10.30am. And when you finally meet the monk you hope will guide you on the path to wisdom, all you want to do is scream how much it hurts. Welcome to Club Meditation.

By Virginia Haussegger



UP THE BAMBOO PATH

I AM FOLLOWING ARIYA NANI, AN elegant and beautiful Swiss Buddhist nun, up rickety bamboo stairs in a rambling forest monastery in the heart of Burma. In a few minutes, my private ordination ceremony will take place as I kneel before one of this country's most distinguished Buddhist monks; I will take eight "precepts" – religious vows – initiating me into a long, silent period of intense meditation.

In its 2,500 years Buddhism has grown and developed into a "family of religions and philosophies", with three major schools of thought. Here the teaching is Theravadan – one of the oldest and more conservative schools of Buddhism – and the meditation discipline is known as *vipassana*, a rigorous technique laid out in ancient texts and practiced by an increasing number of Australians, particularly women.

Why anyone would want to spend between 10 days and three months in silent stillness intrigued me. Finding out how they achieved inner peace and happiness was a seductive challenge – as was whether I could find it myself.

On arrival I had been given a thin piece

of paper with the precepts carefully scripted in English. I was told to learn the list by heart: no eating after noon, no sleeping on "high and luxurious beds", no stealing, no sex, no telling lies, no intoxicants or mind altering substances and no killing. Lastly, "no dancing, singing, music, entertainment" or the wearing of adornments.

And this is what *wasn't* specified in writing – but I was soon to learn for myself: sleep is not highly regarded here, but if one must, a bed of wood and bricks is provided; no "mind altering" substances are needed because one's mind will be well and truly "altered" enough; and "no killing" means a daily battle of will to calmly ignore the mosquitoes that feed on you, the cockroaches that share your concrete "cell", and the odd scorpion that might cross your path.

By formally chanting the precepts in the presence of the *Sayadaw* – or teacher – I would commit to live as a Buddhist novice here in Burma, among the monks and nuns of Chanmyay Yeiktha, a forest monastery and meditation centre located outside the small village of Hmwabi, north of Rangoon.

This place attracts ordained Buddhists from Sri Lanka, Laos, Thailand, Korea and even Japan. Some come for intense periods

of study. Many come for months, even years, of silent meditation.

Within days of taking the precepts I could barely lift my head. At times it would be pounding with pain. My knees would scream with the torture of 18 hours per day spent either sitting in the lotus position or walking the jerky steps of slow, mindful meditation. My body would ache and groan and fight for release. My muscles would slow to such a pace that walking 10 metres would take possibly an hour. And I was to have some of the most terrifying, nightmarish illusions I've ever experienced.

I'd come half way across the world for this. Fortunately, as I prepared to prostrate before the great teacher, I was blissfully, perhaps foolishly unaware of what was ahead.

MOST OF US HAVE NO IDEA HOW MISERABLE meditation can be. But it's not as if I hadn't been warned. "Hellish" is how Australian Buddhist scholar and former monk Patrick Kearney described the practice I was about to begin. He likened it to "a civil war situation... a battle which invariably you lose".

But curiosity and western bravado had gotten the better of me, along with the promise of an audience with the revered



teacher Sayadaw U Pandita – the “pop star” of vipassana meditation.

Whereas the globally famous Dalai Lama is the spiritual leader and champion of the Tibetan school of Buddhism, the lesser known U Pandita is the greatest living master of the Theravadan school – a Buddhist tradition that predominates in Burma, Thailand and Sri Lanka.

He is also one of the toughest. Kearney, once a student of the venerable teacher, describes U Pandita as ruthless and “an extraordinary authoritarian”. Yet also as a Buddhist for whom he has deep respect. “When he teaches,” he says, “and you connect with him, you realise what he is teaching is the purity of investigation.”

Sayadaw U Pandita and his rigorous, and at times physically vicious, method of vipassana meditation is attracting hordes of western practitioners, with a rapidly growing number of Australians among them.

Vipassana has become “vogue” in meditation parlance. There are a number of different methods taught and practiced in Australia, but the central objective is the same – to achieve insight and awareness.

ABS census figures reveal Buddhism was Australia’s fastest growing religion during the decade to 1991, with a 300 per cent increase in practitioners. During the ‘90s the growth trend continued despite

women. An average profile runs to late thirties, tertiary educated, professional and often from a Christian upbringing. Lena Bruselid, the library’s manager, has noticed that more men have joined over the last two years and there’s been increasing participation from younger people. “There is definitely a growing interest in Buddhism with more and more people turning up,” she says. “Over the past few years our introductory courses are always booked out with people on waiting lists.” But why are a growing number of people turning towards Buddhism, and what do they find there?

ACCORDING TO PATRICK KEARNEY, Buddhism in Australia has developed as more and more Australians look for a richer meaning and purpose in busy lives. He says many arrive at Buddhism’s door with a vague desire to achieve a deeper understanding. Some are seeking answers to questions that are difficult to articulate, and others are motivated simply by a nagging sense of discontent.

Unlike Christianity and most theistic religions, Buddhism is not a set of prescriptive rules. American Buddhist scholar Stephen Batchelor explains the growing appeal of Buddhism to westerners in light of the *dharma* (Buddhist teachings) being something not to “believe in” but rather

school, taken such a hold in the West?

In the middle of the last century in the USA, Zen and Tibetan schools of Buddhism became popular, but Theravadan practice hadn’t reached the West. It took American Buddhist scholars like Jack Kornfield and Stephen Levine to travel to far-flung Thai and Burmese monasteries and seek out teachers of vipassana, or “insight meditation” as it became known in English. They described vipassana as “the heart of Buddhist practice”, and took aged Theravadan masters back to America to teach the technique in the ‘70s. There are now dozens of Theravadan monasteries and hundreds of vipassana centres across the USA, Europe and the UK.

Australia boasts 91 Theravadan temples and countless vipassana meditation centres. The Blue Mountains with its 10 Buddhist centres has become akin to a meditation “mecca”. On a sprawling property at Blackheath the Vipassana Meditation Centre began in 1983 by running a course for around 30 people. This year it will run 29 courses of between 10 and 30 days and expects more than 2,000 resident students. It has just doubled the size of its meditation hall to seat 300, but according to one of the centre’s volunteer managers, Philip Werner, the centre is still bursting at the seams. He says: “We had 160 students turn

up for our January course and due to a shortage of dormitory space about 40 of them had to pitch tents and sleep outside.”

PERHAPS THE ATTRACTION of vipassana meditation is best explained by its

apparent simplicity. It begins with a simple focus on the rise and fall of one’s breath, a non-confronting concept for anyone new to meditation. The aim is a deepening of concentration. The process can lead to awareness and insight, with the ultimate promise being self discovery and true happiness – an attractive drawcard by any standard.

For those seeking vipassana teaching in its most pure and untainted form, Burma is the primary destination. The shortest period a monastery or meditation centre in Burma will accept a foreigner is usually six weeks. It’s argued that it takes at least that amount of time to come to grips with vipassana.

An elderly monk at the Mahasi Centre in Rangoon explained to me in broken

something “to do”. As Vickie Mackenzie, author of *Why Buddhism?* said during her recent visit to Australia, “Buddhism is something to test in our daily lives. It is not a philosophical pursuit. Test it!” She wrote: “The Buddha was interested in one thing, the alleviation of suffering, not just now, but for all time, through the method of self discovery and self release. This is what the West is examining now.”

But Buddhism is varied and has given rise to a number of different schools and meditation techniques. It is said the Buddha himself spoke of 40 different methods of meditative contemplation that could lead to enlightenment.

So why then has vipassana meditation, the technique taught by the Theravadan

Built by followers of Sayadaw U Pandita specifically to cater for western comforts, Panditarama sprawls over an 80-acre site north of Rangoon. For as little as US\$3,000 a meditator can sponsor the building of their own private *kuti*.

the fact, as noted by authorities, that “many people, including those of Anglo-Celtic background... attend courses in Buddhist teaching or meditation but would not identify themselves (on the census) as Buddhist”. By 1995 there were 167 Buddhist organisations registered in Australia. In 2002, 361 are scattered throughout the country.

The boom in Buddhist following is not simply due to increased Asian immigration. The people you will see sitting, kneeling or prostrating at meditation meetings or discussion groups are middle Australian. Three in four attendees at the Sydney Buddhist Library, a non-denominational facility that hosts two group sittings or discussions every night of the week, are



PEACE PALACE

Wooden meditation platforms are scattered through the forest; nuns file into the dining hall in walking meditation; not to be taken literally.



English, as he flapped his arms up and down and ran around in dizzying circles, that the first few weeks of vipassana are like being on an airplane in the midst of uncontrollable turbulence. "And one needs time for the plane to settle, and the passenger to feel calm," he said.

But it seems some Australians must like a rough ride. People like Patrick Kearney have sat it out in Burma in silent, mindful meditation for up to a year at a time. Others have pushed the two-year barrier of a technique developed for autocratic Asian cultures, where obedience is a high virtue. Kearney says the Burmese, as meditation students, are a lot more disciplined than westerners. "They are calmer and can concentrate much better than we can. They are unquestioning of their teachers and they have a lot more faith."

Such obedience and unquestioning devotion doesn't sit well with an Australian culture. Helen Brennan, a 38-year-old Buddhist, laughs out loud when I ask her if she eats meat and drinks alcohol. She's a corporate lawyer, a workaholic and also a director of the Wat Buddha Dhamma – a forest meditation centre at Wisemans Ferry in northern NSW. All I want to do is check the Buddhist precepts of no killing and abstinence from "any kinds of intoxicants".

Helen's answer is direct: "Yes and Yes. And what's more, I don't want to be dogmatic about vegetarianism and nor do I want to give up drinking!" Such a frank adaptation of Buddhism has helped make

it mainstream in Australia. The heart of the practice, meditation, is treated with great seriousness by people like Helen, yet she is not rigorous about the routine:

"I'll go for periods when I don't sit each day. But when I don't do it – I miss it."

Another Sydney lawyer, renowned social justice advocate Julia Cabassi, explains her own adaptation of Buddhism this way: "I don't treat it as a discipline, I have a lot of discipline in my life already – I'm an over-disciplined person – and I don't want my Buddhist practice to become another stress." Julia, 37, says she may go two or three weeks without doing her daily meditation practice, "It depends on the rhythm of my work, but my practice is not only on the cushion." Julia says she uses compassion meditation throughout her day: "Before a meeting, when I know I might be faced with someone with a counter opinion to mine, I'll try to bring mindfulness into the equation, which helps me handle difficult situations more skilfully." And yes, Julia enjoys a beer, too. "Buddhism is not prescriptive. I use the meditation and practice to unravel the challenges in my life."

NO AMOUNT OF RESEARCH COULD HAVE prepared me for the shock of Panditarama, Burma's largest and most prestigious forest meditation centre, run by the revered Sayadaw U Pandita. Here, among acres of thick bamboo forest,

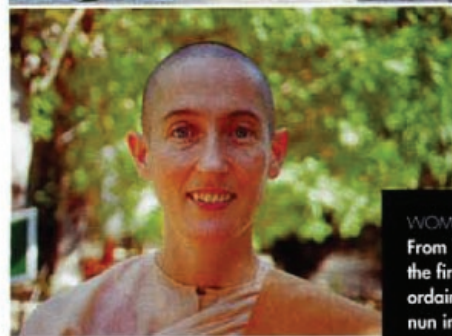


are some 70 robed and bald-headed western meditators – or "yogis" as the locals call them – wandering slowly, aimlessly among the rubber trees and scrub, looking like wounded or drugged animals, learning to walk for the first time.

Built by followers of Sayadaw U Pandita specifically to cater for western comforts, Panditarama sprawls over an 80-acre site north of Rangoon. Most of the accommodation *kutis* have been funded by foreign donations. For as little as US\$3,000 a meditator can sponsor the building of their own private kuti complete with bedroom and western-style bathroom. Patrick Kearney calls it the "Club Med for meditators".

And westerners are flocking here in their hundreds. Some will wait up to six months to get a foot in the door. More than 100 Americans attended the last three-month retreat, ending in January, alongside dozens from the UK, Europe and a handful of Australians.

But the heavy demands of a western audience hungry for guidance and leadership has taken its toll on the 80-year-old teacher Sayadaw U Pandita. Although I know he speaks English, he chooses not to



WOMEN OF THE CLOTH
 From left: Ariya Nani, the first western woman ordained as a Buddhist nun in Burma; a nun poses for the camera; nuns in conversation.

in our interview and instead relies on the very dubious translation of a Burmese interpreter. Fearing this might happen, I've brought along my own interpreter, a young fellow called "Cho-Cho", who freezes in the presence of the great teacher and fails to utter a word. Needless to say, our discussion is somewhat stilted. But one thing becomes clear.

While U Pandita is happy to discuss why westerners are drawn to Buddhism – "they come when they suffer," he says with a simple smile – he does not believe I can write about the western experience of vipassana meditation until I have experienced an intensive retreat, following the strict training method he advocates as taught by his own teacher, Mahasi Sayadaw. But right now Panditarama is full and the teacher is midway through a 12-week retreat. I must start at the beginning I'm told. I don't have three months to spare, so I agree to a compromise of three weeks. The only meditation centre that will accommodate me for a short stay is the rambling forest centre Chanmyay Yeiktha.

And this is why I find myself climbing rickety bamboo stairs behind Ariya Nani,

in the dark of night, with candle in hand and sweat on my brow. I knew intuitively that this is what I had come for. I had spent the previous two years traipsing the world as a television journalist, reporting on other peoples' lives and other peoples' wars. I knew that by coming here I had climbed into a trench for a breather. It was time to tackle some of my own internal battles. But I had no idea how.

The ordination ritual is short and simple. I stumble through the written precepts in a reverent whisper, while kneeling at the feet of an orange-robed monk. I've been told not to look at him directly and to keep my head bowed at all times.

At the end of the formalities the Sayadaw asks me where I'm from. "Os-trail-ee-aa," he repeats slowly, while nodding approval. It appears they like Australians here.

Now committed to "Noble Silence" for the duration of my stay, I quietly follow a group of nuns along a dark forest trail back to my little concrete room. Tears are streaming down my face. I'm not sure if it's sudden emotion due to the prospect of enforced isolation and loneliness, or sheer "out of comfort zone" panic.

My room is best likened to a cell. The walls and floor are concrete. It has a padlock, a low wooden plank for sleeping, a mosquito net strung up with plastic bags and a large bamboo mat covering part of the concrete floor. A small barred window allows a little air and a single globe hangs

in a corner. Ariya Nani has given me candles, matches and a roll of toilet paper. I'm also given a heavy brown cotton *longi* – the Burmese version of a long sarong – and a brown sash to wear over my shoulder to indicate my status as a novice.

THE FOLLOWING MORNING, THE 3.30AM gong pounds right outside my window. I've never been an early riser, and this feels more like my bedtime after a big night out. Soon a trail of women carrying torches and candles slowly and silently weave a path through the forest towards a bamboo meditation hut. Inside I'm surprised to see I am the only western-looking foreigner. Nuns from Sri Lanka, Thailand, Korea and Japan fill the hall, along with lay Burmese women and nuns.

The mornings are for chanting followed by silent meditation until breakfast at 6.30am. Meals are the only time males and females share the same space. The dining hall is clearly divided along gender lines, with monks receiving the first offering of food. Although my head was bowed so obediently low that it took several days before I even realised there were monks in the same room.

We kneel at little round tables and slowly, ever so slowly, eat from bowls of rice, stewed vegetable and sliced fruit. Lukewarm brown liquid in a plastic cup is set down before me. It's so sugary I can't tell if it's tea or coffee, but I sip at it, desperate for some warmth, or comfort, or both.

The very disciplined days of slow walking meditation, sitting meditation and slow

mindful eating quickly become familiar and routine. While the early mornings and evenings are cool, the days are unbearably hot and sticky. I notice many of the nuns use umbrellas to guard against the pounding sun as they walk the long stretch between meditation halls. I have neither umbrella nor hat. But unlike everyone else here, at least I have hair on my head. I figure that'll provide some sun protection.

Given I've arrived at Chanmyay Yeiktha without a cache of basics such as my own soap and towel (I normally rely on hotels to supply that stuff), I have to improvise a little and ration what little shampoo I have for much needed body, hand and filthy feet washes. I ration my toilet paper to three squares a day.

As walking meditation is a key element of vipassana, Chanmyay Yeiktha is purpose-built with long, narrow pathways stretching into the forest. But I quickly realise I'm just not made to sit cross-legged on either the lino floors of the meditation halls or the wooden platforms found along the forest paths. I need some padding, and though I can't see anyone else using a cushion I decide to use the small flat pillow Ariya Nani left on my wooden bed.

By day three my stomach is beginning to rebel against the oily vegetarian food and my hunger for something solid is becoming an obsession. At one point I'm convinced I can smell a BBQ. Oh for a beer!

The second meal of the day is at 10.30am. And that's it, until the following morning. My hunger is making me miserable. And so too is the pain. Sitting cross-legged for some 10 hours throughout a day is taking its toll. Although I'm reasonably fit and flexible – thanks to years studying classical ballet and a “semi-regular” routine of daily 4km runs – my knees and my upper back begin to pound with pain. Meditation seems impossible while I'm transfixed on how much I'm hurting. The more I try to push it away and ignore it the fiercer it becomes, tightening its grip on me.

Every now and then I sneak a look at the meditating nuns around me to see if anyone else is slouching or rubbing their knees. All I see are perfectly stiff and straight backs, sharp as blades. Their necks are so long and their bodies so still that I wonder if they have steel rods hidden under their robes.

On the morning of day four Ariya Nani

informs me that I'm to have an interview with the Sayadaw about my meditation practice. At last I'm going to get to talk, spill my guts and vent my spleen about the debilitating pain and shocking frustration I feel.

Unfortunately, it doesn't quite work like that. There are strict rules surrounding a meditator's interview with the teacher. I'm told to enter the interview room slowly, mindfully, eyes down and head bowed. I must kneel before the Sayadaw, bow three times and take care not to point my feet in his direction. I'm told to report precisely my experiences during meditation and listen carefully to the Sayadaw's response, as translated from Burmese by Ariya Nani.

Once in front of Sayadaw I melt. My prepared speech whimpers to a few garbled sentences about back pain, sore knees, aching legs etc. The Sayadaw listens, nods and tells me I'm doing well. And that's it. The interview is over. Back in my concrete cell I lie flat on my wooden plank and draw my aching knees up to my chin, hugging the pain, and burst into tears.

Back in front of Sayadaw, I briefly outline what's happening, taking particular care to illustrate with my hands how hard the pounding in my head is hurting. I even thump my clenched fist into my palm just to make sure he gets the point.

As the long days pass, I stop fighting the pain and start watching it instead. I stop feeding on my misery and start observing it. My body eventually adjusts to the pace of mindful walking meditation. I begin to move around the forest as if I'm doing a slow moonwalk. Mentally noting every movement, every sensation as I go. Heel lifting, lifting, knee rising, rising, foot swinging, swinging, heel placing, placing, touching ground, touching, pressing, pressing etc. And so minutes, hours and days pass.

INTO MY SECOND WEEK THE SENSATIONS IN my body, the flow of air, wind and the experience of heat, all take on a life of their own. As soon as I sit and close my eyes I am rocked by movement, pounding, shaking, pulsating and vibrating. At times I feel my head is rattling around so much I'm sure something is going to come loose. Physically it's wearing me down. And emotionally it's scaring the shit out of me.

Back in front of Sayadaw, I briefly outline what's happening, taking particular

care to illustrate with my hands how hard the pounding in my head is hurting. I even thump my clenched fist into my palm just to make sure he gets the point. Again Sayadaw sits smiling, fanning himself against the oppressive heat, and with a little nod once again tells me I'm doing well.

A few nights later I wake up to the sound of someone crying out in the distance. Then I realise it's me. Desperately trying to lurch myself out of a terrifying nightmare, I had called out so loudly I'd woken myself up, and evidently some of the nuns in cells around me. I hear scratching around as candles are lit and feet move in the dark. But no-one actually comes near me. No-one knocks on my door. Soon the candles are blown out and the women go back to sleep. Except of course me. I wet my wooden plank with tears.

Around day 10, just when things are beginning to calm and my pain and misery have almost subsided, a sudden and shocking illusion shatters my peace. It's not what I see or hear, or even imagine – it's what I feel

rip through me. A terrifying dread grips my body. The force of it is so hard I feel fear itself is crushing my bones. A hole blasts through my chest and I feel as though I'm being sucked into the forest around me. The fear of it pins me down. So powerful and violent is the sensation it sends a winding blow to my stomach and leaves me gasping. I try calling out, but no sound comes. I'm mute. The experience leaves me exhausted and my confidence is shot.

I return to my little cell and pull out the clandestine book I'd secretly tucked in with my few belongings. One of the rules of a vipassana retreat is no reading and no writing. Nothing allowed that might influence or impinge upon mindful meditation. But I couldn't imagine life without a book. So I'd cheated and snuck one in – *In This Very Life*, a meditation guide by Sayadaw U Pandita, the person responsible for me being here in the first place. And right now I need some guidance or at least a clear explanation. Something to assure me I wasn't going slowly insane.

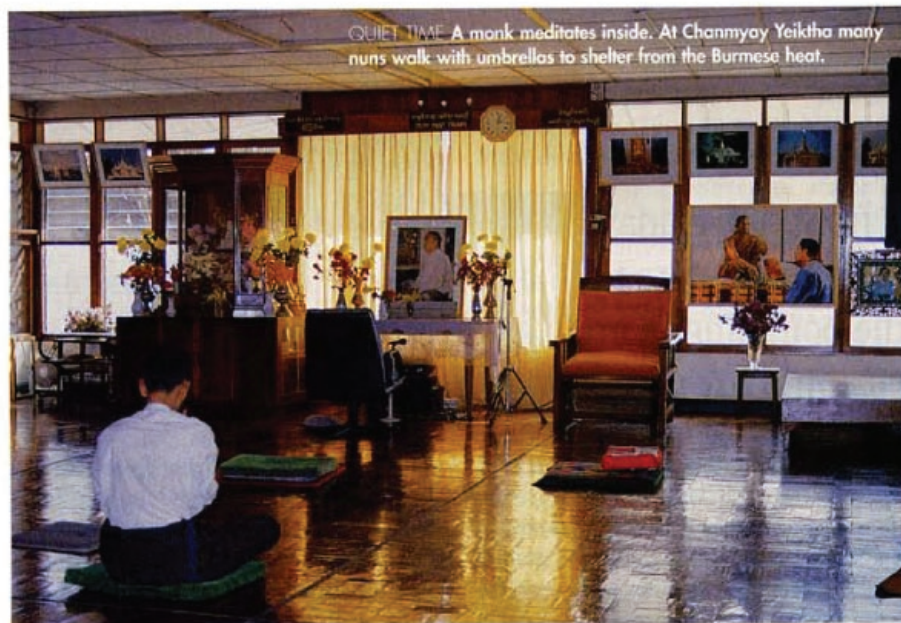
And there it was: "The overcoming of difficulty in vipassana practice is, again, like warfare. The yogi (meditator) will use an offensive, defensive or a guerrilla style of combat depending on his or her abilities. If he or she is a strong fighter, the yogi will advance. If weak, he or she may withdraw temporarily, but not in a helter-skelter fashion, reeling and running in disorder. Rather, the withdrawal will be strategic, planned and executed with the aim of gathering strength to win the battle at last."

OK, so maybe I'm a strategic player making a temporary withdrawal. I decide I'm getting overtired and simply need more sleep. Sleeping on a plank of wood is hard at the best of times, but a low hanging mosquito net hovering just above your face, and knowing each time you turn is

a slow and deliberate process. I felt like an interested, but distant, observer of myself, unsure, yet unconcerned at who was doing the observing.

ON MY LAST NIGHT AT CHANMYAY Yeiktha I came the closest I've ever been to sudden death. And in hindsight, it may well have been my slow motion "moonwalk" that saved my life.

Given the dense forest surrounds, it was not unusual to see the odd mangy dog, mice and occasional rat crawling around the meditation halls. On the evening before my departure, with candle in hand, I slowly made my way towards the women's hall with the intention of possibly sitting out the whole night in meditation. As I walked, a sudden gust of wind blew my candle out.



going to hurt because you're so bruised, makes it pretty damn awful. Eventually, exhaustion dulls the discomfort.

Nights, mornings and afternoons rolled on with the rigid routine of meditation practice slowly becoming a little easier, a little lighter.

My movement had become incredibly slow. I walked in slow motion. I sat in slow motion. I took over an hour to eat soup from a tiny bowl. Even turning my head took a painfully long time as my eyes saw every shift and my mind noted every thought and every sensation during the process. So intense was my mindful "noting" of everything – a thought, a feeling, a perception, a physical sensation – that even wondering about wondering became

Given the heavy forest canopy and the lack of moonlight, I was surrounded by darkness. I've never been good with direction but pushed on in what I thought was a straight line. Slowly bending knee, bending, lifting heel, lifting, swinging foot, swinging, placing heel, placing, touching ground, touching... and so on.

Suddenly there was a noise at my side. A flick of a switch. And a monk standing to my left, illuminated by a dull glow of battery light, handed me his torch.

I was in mid foot swing, about to place my bare heel on the ground, when I saw it. Crossing my path with its tail arched ready to sting was an enormous, deadly, black scorpion. I froze. Watching, watching, waiting, waiting. The creature stood still,

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maybe aware of my foot poised, about to come down on top of it. Moments passed. My foot hanging. My breath held. The scorpion unsure.

Then a funny thing. It turned around and headed in a different direction.

The monk had disappeared. I held my silent pose for what must have been minutes, before I eventually put my foot down and carried on.

On the morning of my departure I look around my little cell with a fondness and for a moment even wonder if I might miss its cold concrete simplicity. But as I straighten the bricks under my wooden plank, I know I won't miss that.

Before I leave, I sit down with Ariya Nani. For the first time in three weeks I am sitting on a chair. My talk is slow, deliberate and a little self-conscious, given I have barely uttered a word for weeks. I ask Ariya Nani about happiness and what that concept means for her. "Happiness," she replies calmly, "is when I'm not taken away by what is happening. When I'm not involved with the pleasant or the unpleasant things. Normally happiness is when you're exalted and then you cling to that, wanting it to last. And when it disappears again, it is gone and you are sad. Happiness for me comes in another sort of way. It is not about a happy or unhappy feeling, but about being in the middle – an equanimous mind."

We hold our hands in the prayer position and bow to each other. Then I'm gone. **HQ**