

Silence, Ecstasy, Happiness

*How I Learned to Meditate as a
Monk and Discovered Spiritual
Tantra*

Armin Heining

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in Cham/Upper Palatinate

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Dedication

For all people on the path to self-actualization.

Acknowledgements

I sincerely thank my faithful companion, Diella C. Nsende, who has suffered through all the versions with me and whose creative power has contributed enormously to the telling of the story.

Together we have succeeded in working out the best possible telling of my life story, and in so doing, we have been truthful to the facts.

I have changed almost all the names in my story to protect the rights of the individuals mentioned and to treat the memories of the people involved in the events of that time with respect.

The two most important mentors on my journey to self-actualization have agreed to the use of their names:

Lejonidas August - theologian, psychologist and psychotherapist, author, and meditation guide for Christian contemplation and Prayer of the Heart, and

Margot Anand - Psychologist, founder of SkyDancing Tantra, trainer, and bestselling author.

I hope that the individuals mentioned feel very much appreciated. I am grateful that they crossed my life, and some are still at my side.

Gerda Alexander introduced me to physical self-awareness

through her book: *Eutonie - Ein Weg*, published in 1976 (Munich: Kösel), which gave me valuable support in approaching my body from within.

Emmanuel Jungclaussen's 1984 book *Aufrichtige Erzählungen eines russischen Pilgers* (Freiburg: Herder) was an important companion for me.

I quote Dietrich Bonhoeffer's poem "Von guten Mächten" after the musical version by Siegfried Fietz.

I encountered Gitta Mallasz in her book published in 1984, *The Answer of the Angels* (Zurich: Daimon).

All Bible passages refer to the Good News Translation.

The first Tantra book I ever held in my hands was by Nick Douglas and Penny Slinger, published in 1986, *Das große Buch des Tantra. Sexuelle Geheimnisse und Alchemie der Ekstase* (Basel: Sphinx).

The Author

Born in 1960, Armin Heining grew up in the small town of Cham/Upper Palatinate. After graduating from high school, he entered the Benedictine Monastery in Metten/Lower Bavaria and studied Catholic theology at the University of Würzburg.

After years of deep inner conflict and therapeutic processes, in 1990, he left the abbey by mutual agreement.

Following his heart, he founded GAY-TANTRA in Nuremberg in 1992 and became the author and director of numerous bestselling educational films. Heining lives today as an »urban monk« in Berlin. As an international coach, he travels the world teaching his philosophy of happiness: »Meditation is the most intimate way to be with oneself, and the tantric union is the most intimate way to be with another person.«

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Introduction

»Wow! The breadth and intensity of your experiences are just incredible!«

Never had I seen the American yogi so enthusiastic during my workshops. Until then, I only knew the dignified man with the rugged face and wild curls as quietly reticent. Now this exuberance.

»How do you pass on your insights? What do you offer people who want to learn more?« he asks me.

Is it not obvious? After all, he is taking part in the workshop I am giving.

»Well, I give my courses and, in so doing, hope that the participants take something with them on their journey, that they recognize their own way forward.«

I hesitate.

»I have also produced many educational videos over the years, and there are numerous interviews that deal more with my background.«

The answer is not satisfactory.

»But you can't flip through it, backwards and forwards, make doodles and dog-ear the pages, hear them rustle, or take it from the shelf and give it away, can you?«

»No, I guess not,« I reply reluctantly. The forcefulness with which Santosh speaks to me, the vastness of the desert landscape, which encourages me to think in completely new ways... All at once, new worlds open up inside me.

»Well, for many years, I've been keeping a diary where I record and draw my emotional worlds, ideas, and impressions. I also write down my dreams, of course. They're often filled with important messages!«

»But your story is not only your dreams, no matter how powerful they are,« Santosh points out.

»There's so much more to say. You were not spared anything.«

He is right, of course. When I think back to those years when I had such terrible difficulties with my life, between the age of twenty-five and twenty-seven. I documented everything in my diary in the desperate hope of somehow freeing myself from the enormous psychological pressure. When I write now, it no longer burdens my soul and thoughts. The paper carries the burden of my worries. Such is the ambitious idea behind it, at least.

»You managed to regain your strength. You were able to look back as often as you wanted on what you had achieved in other situations. How far you had already come. Or remind yourself what you already knew. You know...«

He pauses for a moment and looks up at the starry sky.

»By engaging with them, you bring your moments of happiness back to the present. At some point, you start seeing the world differently, for example, no longer experiencing rejection but seizing an opportunity in the same moment, not believing in a final destination but in the possibility of a new path that now lies ahead of you because the old one has ended. The situation around your deacon ordination is a great example of what I mean by this »mental courage,« if I may call it that. It gave you a whole new perspective on your life. Now ask yourself this question: Would you have made it this far on your journey without your diary, without the pages containing all your experiences that you were able to fall back on?«

The penetrating look and the benevolent words touch me deep in my heart. Is there not some truth in that? He is not wrong. I eagerly await his next words.

»Don't you want to make this library available to others, perhaps like you in those years, who believe they've lost control of their lives? Who wants more in their lives than to just »keep it up?« Who no longer believes they can achieve their dreams?«

»You really think so?« I say. I still have some doubts, although the idea of a publication does sound interesting. Maybe the description of my life's journey could really help other people to see their own path more clearly and could help

to direct their inner compass.

»Yes, of course, I mean it.« Santosh laughs. As if there were nothing more natural than for him to recommend my next big project to me - late at night in the Californian desert.

»That's where the excitement, the narrative value, and also the educational value lies: In how the tortuous paths finally lead to their destination. Even when the last glimmer of hope seems to be extinguished. Even on a seemingly dark night. A new day dawns, and with it, the light of a new day illuminates your way. And gives you courage. And gives you the strength to go on.«

»Yes!«

From the bottom of my heart, I agree with him. I must agree with him. That is the way it was for me. At the same time, I cannot ignore the downside.

»But it will take time. And how many times have I asked myself: ›When will it end?« I say.

»Of course, it takes time, Armin. Everything in life takes time. But what I find so encouraging about your story is that it shows that it's worth it to go a long way, with all its forks, apparent dead ends, and constant switchbacks. Even if it takes a long time and is exhausting, and history seems to repeat itself. Even in circles, things go on!«

How many times in the past months have I thought back to this nocturnal conversation around the merrily flickering campfire when the writing of the book only proceeded at a crawling pace, the multitude of discarded manuscripts straining my patience. Year after year, I waited for the right inspiration to bring me further: to tell lively and vividly what happened to me, to describe the surprising turns that gave my life new direction and unexpected momentum.

My story is not about you and me or about leaders and persons but about the greater plan that appears behind all our encounters, however, they may be arranged.

Chapter 1: Enthusiasm

I never opened up the way I did with Ulrich, Brother Ulrich, actually. But our intimate conversations – in his modest cell or during our long walks – make me forget that I am talking to a monk.

Somehow the words just come to me, and it seems the most natural thing in the world to simply say them. Merely wanting to express what drives me, stops me, holds me, or blocks me, brings me to a standstill, and makes me freeze. Maybe I will be able to cope with my life if I can finally tell someone what really happens to me.

»I would rather confide in my parish priest, Fr. Ellinger, than my father,« I say strongly.

I cannot imagine telling him about Arnulf and the recurring nightmare that has haunted me for so many years. I do not want to imagine how my strict father would react if he knew everything.

»Reverend Ellinger listens to me and doesn't judge. He seems really modern and open,« I conclude thoughtfully. »And he accepts me for who I am. I do not have to justify myself,« I say quickly, hoping to be honest without saying too much.

»Isn't that what a real priest is supposed to do?« Brother Ulrich says, looking at me seriously.

»Absolutely. I've always liked how empathetic and gentle priests are. I think that impressed me from the very beginning. That is definitely a reason why I would like to be a priest myself. They are generally respected, and they are the center of attention during the service. Furthermore, the people who live in our town respect the assistant pastor and pastor. I feel like there is just something special about them.«

»I completely understand what you want to say: clergymen stand out from society and get to enjoy special recognition – through their social position«, Ulrich says.

»Like you, I often felt more accepted in church than in my own home.« He is speaking my mind.

»My mother is vigorous in command at home; my father stays quietly in the background. There is a lot of tension.«

»My house is rather high-tension all the time,« I counter.

»That bad?«

»Yes!« I confirm energetically and add frankly: »My father is really hot-tempered and authoritarian, even though he is friendly on the outside.«

I take a deep breath.

»He helps friends with their tax returns, and he is always there for them in case of problems. He knows all about taxes and authorities because he works for the urban department of finances. But at home, he is usually in a bad mood around us.«

Ulrich appears troubled.

»Really. I feel that my father simply passed on to me the pressure and constraints he experienced in his childhood. At home, I have to put on a performance, even if it contradicts how I feel.«

»Care to share an example?«

»Every Saturday before lunch, he shouts: ›Armin! Shoeshine!«

I imitate Father's stern tone.

»Even now?«

»Even now. Even though I am sixteen years old now and doing other things.«

Talking about this Saturday ritual with a stranger not only makes me aware of how absurd it is but also reminds me how hopeless I feel: »Refusing is pointless. My father won't stand for it.«

»Oh, my mother is the same way,« Ulrich nods. »Compromises are completely foreign to her. Her will is the law.«

»Before, it used to be even worse than now. He would wait impatiently for me on the stairs outside our house. I had to rush to get all the family's shoes out of the kitchen and put them neatly outside the door. We cleaned the dirt off every single shoe meticulously with our brushes. Even when

cleaning, he commented on everything and never let me out of his sight, not even for a moment. »Don't make a fuss!« he would snarl at me harshly when I worked slowly. When I didn't work fast enough, he would shout: »Go on, don't give me a hard time!««

Encouraged by the parallels in our family histories, I became more open.

»If I still didn't do it his way, he would throw the dirty brush at me. The second step was to carefully grease the shoes and then polish them until they shone. But then he would say, »You can do that on your own!«. And so on Saturdays, I would sit outside our front door and polish shoes while my friends ran around and had fun.«

»That is humiliating. Especially in front of your friends.«

Yes, that is exactly how these Saturdays feel: humiliating. Although we hardly know each other, Ulrich says exactly what is on my mind.

»The worst comes at the end. When I was done, my father carefully examined all the polished shoes. This is the part I was most afraid of: if they were not shiny, he would beat me – in front of everyone else. Then I was ashamed and had to cry. And because I cried, he locked me in the bathroom.«

»Oh my. What a terrible experience!«

Ulrich's obvious dismay makes it even clearer to me how

little support I get at home.

»And I imagine there is no use talking to your father either, is there? Those who are authoritarian always think they are right. Isn't that true?«

I nod silently. He sums up my family's circumstances with remarkable astuteness.

»Unfortunately, in many families, it is the same way: parents see things differently from their children and defend their point of view no matter what. There is no point in protesting.«

Is he describing his own life? It sounds very similar to mine.

»Sometimes I just feel burned out and completely alone in a losing race.«

»I know what you mean. But what about your older brother? Does he stand up for you?«

»No, not really. I have siblings, but I am lonely. My sister is ten years younger. My brother is three years older and wants to do things on his own. He has completely different interests than me. He would rather spend time with our sister or his girlfriend than with me. Besides, he is much better in school. We do not really have much in common.«

»Is your mother nice? How do you get along with her?«

Good question. My mother is a very unique case; I like to think.

»Better than with my father, I guess.«

I pause. »She puts me back together, more or less, when I feel withdrawn and powerless.«

I take a deep breath.

»But if she is having a migraine, I can not depend on her anymore. Then she needs absolute rest and only wants to be alone. And I'm literally all alone and without anyone on my side like she doesn't even exist.«

»That is certainly hard.« Brother Ulrich nods.

Because he is a good listener, I feel compelled to tell him more.

»My mother actually chased me once with a kitchen spoon!«

»What? Really?«

He looks at me in disbelief.

»Believe it or not: One day, I was playing with my friends by a stream near our house after school. Suddenly there was nothing more important than climbing up the wall that rose up beside the bank. Of course, we did not notice how late it had become. But my mother did; she had her eye on the clock the whole time. Out of the blue, she was standing at the top of the wall with a wooden spoon in her hand and screaming: »Lunch's been ready for hours! I'm waiting for you, and you're fooling around! I was scared and worried – and what are you doing?« I

was embarrassed, of course, to be scolded like that in front of my friends. I wanted to apologize. But she didn't listen at all; she waved the wooden spoon as if she wanted to hit me. Then she chased me – with the spoon raised – all the way home as if I were a cow on my way back to the barn. Later, as she lay down on the sofa, I found out that she was having a bad migraine again. She wanted to rest, but instead, she had to run after me because I was thinking only about myself again. She expected more thoughtfulness from me, she told me.«

»Oh, that sounds familiar. That sounds just like my mother's strict temperament. I also suffered a lot from her moods. She was always very quick to criticize and blame. I never seemed to deserve her approval or praise.«

Lost in thought, his gaze wanders off into the distance.

»Exactly!« I cry out.

»Sometimes I wonder what my parents even think of me. I feel like I am never enough for them. I often make my mother worry about me, and I'm always afraid that my father wants to drive the happiness out of me.«

Tears come to my eyes at the thought of not being loved by my father as I am.

»Do you think it is possible that your parents still see the good in you?« he asks quietly.

»I can hardly imagine,« I said soberly.

Only the ringing of the bell tears me out of the silence in which we had been sitting for several minutes, a silence that often accompanies my conversations with Ulrich. On the other hand, I am becoming more comfortable with the bell calling me seven times a day to our service and prayer.

»To our service.« As if I were already one of them. I am here just to visit the Metten Monastery in Lower Bavaria. A six-day trial, and then we will see.

»Why are you visiting our monastery during your Christmas holidays?« was one of Ulrich's first questions.

»I have wished for a long time to get away from the boredom at home and have a different kind of Christmas,« I say with surprising honesty.

»I really want to spend more time in the presence of God and to seek dialogue with Him in prayer. During the two-week Christmas holiday, I would like to have more time for silent devotion and to get away from the world. My parents have other plans for the family. And their plans do not fit mine.«

»Hm.« Ulrich nods thoughtfully.

»I can understand that. When there is no one around to share your desire to be near God, it makes you lonely.«

I could not have put it better myself.

»That's right. It's just that nobody in my family understands that. At least I am lucky with my confessor: I can confide in

him without hesitation; he always knows what to do and ...«

»... and he told you about the monastery,« Ulrich says, summing up my story in a nutshell.

»He did. Because I told him I was looking for a community where I was not the only one who wanted to be closer to God. Church visits are too few, too short, too fleeting; they are only skin-deep.«

»Why did you choose us? There are several other monasteries in the area: Schweickelberg, Niederalteich, Plankstetten, Beuron, Weltenburg.«

»I guess it's just practical; Metten is the closest,« I reply dryly. We look at each other, and both have to laugh.

»I would say that your practical mind has led you in the right direction: the Benedictine order is committed to prayer but also attentive to the world – in contrast to the strict, contemplative religious communities.«

»I like the balance. It is also reflected in your motto, the Benedictine motto: ›Ora et labora.««

»Our service is to praise God. The work of the monks is prayer; even when we eat, it is worship.«

With a reverence that I have seldom experienced in myself, I reply: »You are not too radical; the pendulum does not swing too far in any direction. I also seek the right measure, this inner balance, for myself.«

»Time will tell,« Ulrich answers with a friendly smile.

»You are still young; you will be fine.«

I am too young – only sixteen– to be allowed to make a formal decision right now. I must first get my high school diploma, then I can ask for admission into the monastery. Nevertheless, my »monastery vacation« affects me strongly.

At home in Cham, I even get up early for my standards to attend the early mass before school, a very important routine. But here, the day begins at four forty. That takes getting used to. I am not really awake yet when I speak the first prayer together with the monks.

Prayers indeed – in the morning, at noon, and in the evening, along with songs to give thanks after lunch and dinner. Each time a different hymnbook: a thick one in the morning and evening, a thin one at noon. The language changes too: midday prayer in German, the others in Latin. That is confusing. But I have Ulrich at my side, who patiently tells me what to do.

My arrival was like a jump in cold water because the evening prayer was coming up, and I had no idea what to do. Monastic rituals have little in common with the service in my city parish church.

»How will I find my way around? I don't want to do anything wrong.« I did not want to mess up the routine or

anything.

»Just follow me and do what I do. You will be in the last seat on edge of the choir stalls. We will start by singing four Latin psalms,« Ulrich replied reassuringly.

Latin too! If he only knew: It is the subject I despise most.

Ulrich opened the Antiphonale, a thick, leather-bound tome, and showed me the different songs using the colored bookmarks.

»Then we sit down and listen to the Scriptures. Afterwards, we sing the Magnificat again, standing up. It is the solemn climax of the ecclesial evening prayer, the daily recurring hymn praising Mary.«

The corresponding page was marked with a purple ribbon.

At six o'clock on the dot, I stood for the first time with the monks in the half-moon shape of the choir room behind the baroque abbey church's high altar. In contrast to the cold vaulted corridors on the same floor, the apse is heated and comfortably warm. The dark choir stalls with their elaborate carvings form a semicircle with a view of the cantor's artistically carved lectern. Above the foldable seats is a small ledge for to lean against, a noticeable relief for the body after standing for so long. Frater Ulrich showed me the seat reserved for me on the very outside of the row.

At the first stroke of the bell, the organ began to play

softly. From the front, Abbot Berthold's high voice rang out:
»In nomine Patris et Filii et Spiritus Sancti.«

With a prolonged »Amen« all the monks answered at once. I sang the evening prayer with them in Latin. I watched the monk next to me very closely to see when I should bow or stand up and sit, stand or kneel.

But I am most impressed by the extraordinary ceremony of the monks leaving the choir to go to the dining room. When they step over the threshold of the choir room, the large, pointed hood, which is part of the Benedictine monks' robes, is pulled up far over their heads. Deeply veiled, they walk in a procession through the baroque cloister to the refectory. Behind them, dressed in civilian clothes, the image of detachment strikes me. Only when they enter the dining room do they remove their hoods again.

When I arrive in the brightly lit room, I stand behind my seat like the other monks. They conceal their folded hands under their black robes, and I lower my head as they do and listen to the abbot's grace. With a loud »Amen« we take our seats.

Symbolic of the monastery's seclusion, the monks once again pull on their hoods after grace has been said. Their gaze remains humbly lowered while the word is recited from the Holy Scriptures.