

Ariya Baumann

Deeply rooted in Burmese Buddhism

I was born in Winterthur, a town near Zurich in Switzerland, where I grew up and went to school. I spent much of my childhood doing sports, skiing in winter, hiking in the mountains in summer. From a very young age, I wanted to become a teacher. I loved sports, music, and dance, and later I aspired to teach music and dance education. I took the entrance exam at the conservatory in Zurich and was accepted among many candidates; they admitted only twelve students each year. I was deeply happy to be able to pursue what I truly wanted. The training lasted three and a half years, after which I began teaching music and dance education.

I was raised Protestant. My parents were not particularly religious, but they sent my brothers and me to Sunday school and to the weekly religion classes at school. Around the age of fourteen, I began asking myself who God really was. If God was loving and kind, why was there so much suffering in the world? Why were children starving in Africa? Why were there wars? If this God was truly loving, why did He not intervene? These questions would not leave me. I wondered: What is this God? Who is this God? Or perhaps, what is this love? What is this love, or this absolute reality that might exist somewhere in the universe? I began exploring these questions by reading books on different philosophies and religions. My thought was: if something universal existed, true love or a divine presence, then every person should be able to experience it directly. I did not want to believe simply because a priest or religious authority told me to; I wanted to know for myself.

When I read about Buddhism, I discovered that the Buddha proposed a path, a practice through which one could experience what truly exists. This was very appealing. So I began meditating, following the instructions I found in books: observing the breath, noticing sensations in the body, cultivating mindfulness. Very soon I realized for myself that this was a path I wanted to follow because it was grounded in personal experience rather than belief. During the same period, I was still in my teacher training, and I meditated at home. My dance training felt like a form of moving meditation, an awareness of the body, the movement, and everything arising in the process.

I was quite happy, and after finishing my studies, I began teaching. Yet something was missing in my life. Everything appeared perfect, a profession I loved, a loving family, and life in Switzerland. This was in 1984.

I had had a few relationships, but none lasted long. One day, at age twenty-five, I thought: I will have to work another forty years until retirement. I felt: there is no way I can do that! So I decided to quit my job, pack my backpack, and travel around the world to discover what was out there. I left Switzerland and travelled through Western countries, Ireland, the USA, New Zealand, Australia. After a year I went to Asia, knowing that in Thailand it was possible to join introductory meditation retreats in certain monasteries. I attended a ten-day silent retreat for Westerners like me. When the retreat ended and they told us we could speak again, I did not want to. I felt I had come

home. This was what I wanted to do with my life: to discover who I am, what this mind and body are. I continued travelling until, after almost two years, I ran out of money and returned to Switzerland.

I did not want to go back to teaching music and dance to children. I wanted a very ordinary job, something many people do. I found work with the Swiss Railway and loved it. I worked in shifts, which gave me free time during the day to meditate or attend retreats. After two years, I had saved enough money to travel again.

I met an Australian man who was organizing a trek in Nepal. I joined him and his friends, and we fell in love. After Nepal, I wanted to go to Ladakh in the Indian Himalayas; he returned to Australia. A few months later, I travelled to Australia to be with him. At thirty, many of my friends were settling down, getting married, having children. I thought perhaps it was time for me too. With good intentions, I stayed for a few months, but soon realized: no, this is not my life. He worked during the week, and I was alone at home. I meditated a lot. I heard that a Burmese meditation master would soon be teaching a retreat. I was excited. I had done retreats in the Tibetan tradition, some in Japanese Zen, and in Thailand. Burmese Buddhism did not matter, it was all fine.

The teacher gave talks and meditation instructions. During daily interviews we reported our experiences. I felt an immediate connection with him, something clicked. Following his guidance, my meditation deepened dramatically; it felt like a new world opening. He understood what was unfolding in my practice and, at the end of the retreat, asked if I wanted to come to his meditation center in Burma and meditate longer.

I was in a meditative high and immediately said yes. This was in 1992. At that time, tourists received a seven-day visa, but with his invitation I could apply for a special meditation visa. It took several months, but in September 1992 I arrived in Burma. I had planned to stay for three months. My longest retreat until then had been ten days or two weeks, so three months felt huge. I imagined I might be enlightened, or nearly so, by then. In Burma it is possible to receive temporary ordination as a nun for a chosen period. Since monks and nuns cannot play instruments, dance, or sing, I had never considered ordination before. Music and dance had been central to my life. But now I thought: I want to meditate and deepen my practice, why not ordain temporarily for three months and immerse myself fully? Afterward, I could disrobe and return to my ordinary life, singing and dancing again.

The three months passed quickly, and I was nowhere near enlightenment, but the exploration of mind and body fascinated me. I had no relationship and no job pulling me back. I extended my stay by another three months. After six months, I stayed longer. In this way, I remained for three years, meditating almost continuously. During breaks I learned Burmese and helped in the kitchen. After some time, I realized I had not sung, danced, or played the piano for three years, and to my surprise, I did not miss it. I was happier and more at peace than ever before. Nothing drew me back to Switzerland. I ended up staying in Burma for twenty-one years. As I learned Burmese, I began tran

slating for meditation teachers who did not speak English, and eventually I started teaching foreign meditators myself. In 2000, I began teaching retreats abroad, first in Australia, then elsewhere as word spread.

In 2006, I was diagnosed with melanoma, already advanced. It was the most severe category. What a diagnosis. Fortunately, I was well prepared. Years earlier, as part of my meditation practice, I had done a three-week self-retreat reflecting on death, following the Buddha's instructions. All day, sitting, walking, eating, showering, I stayed with reflections such as: "Life is uncertain; death is certain," or "One day I will die, but I do not know the cause, accident, old age, cancer." It was not intellectual thinking; the words sank deep into the heart. By the end, I felt that an invisible burden had dissolved, the fear of death had fallen away. There was a profound lightness. This view remained with me. When I was diagnosed, my reaction was not "I have cancer," but "This body has cancer." There was no identification with the body.

Later, in 2011, doctors found that the cancer had spread into the bone of my left shin, forming an eight-centimeter tumor. They proposed several options, but the best chance of long life was amputation below the knee. After receiving multiple opinions, I reflected for weeks. Then one day, clarity came: yes, I was ready. The doctor was shocked, most patients would never choose that option. But I did, in 2012, and I have never regretted it.

I am still alive, healthy, with regular check-ups showing nothing. One doctor recently told me it was "almost miraculous" that I survived such an advanced cancer. In 2011, while staying with my parents in Switzerland during my European teaching trips, my mother was diagnosed with lymphoma and died within seven months. I was grateful I could care for her. Around the same time, my father developed Alzheimer's. After my mother's death, he could not live alone. Influenced by the Burmese tradition of caring for one's parents, I felt it was natural to look after him. As a nun with a shaved head and brown robes, I drew attention, which never bothered me while visiting. But when caring for my father, walking with him, shopping, I did not want him to feel self-conscious. Disrobing and appearing ordinary felt simpler. Reflecting on my limited remaining years after cancer, I reconsidered my priorities and concluded that continuing as a layperson would be more supportive of my meditation practice. Another reason was my lifelong perfectionism. I had been a model student, good at everything, and carried this attitude into monastic life. I aspired to be the perfect nun, and although my dedication was sincere, I realized the subtle drive to be exemplary was still present. As a Western nun, especially in the Burmese tradition, I had become a role model by default, something I no longer wished to reinforce. I wanted to step out of that position and simply be an ordinary human being.

These were the reasons I disrobed. Many Western monastics who leave the robes need to find ordinary work again, but since I was already connected with meditation centers worldwide, I could continue teaching retreats on a donation basis. This support allows me to live simply and comfortably. I teach for about six or seven months a year and spend the rest of the time in Winterthur.

In Burma, nuns do not receive full ordination and hold a lower status than monks, who receive far more respect and offerings. When I first arrived, I noticed the hierarchy immediately. During teachings, monks sat in front, then laymen, then nuns, and finally laywomen. As a Western woman, I found it deeply unfair, but at that time I had no influence. Later, as I learned Burmese and became close to a Burmese friend and her family, I understood that societal structures shaped over centuries cannot be changed by a single person. But I realized I could make small changes. When translating for teachers, I organized interview lists for Western meditators by placing nuns first, then laywomen, laymen, and finally monks. Fortunately, the teacher never objected. As a Western nun, I occupied a unique position between monks and Burmese nuns and received much respect. I eventually taught alongside the teacher for whom I translated, an exceptional occurrence in Burma, where it is rare for a woman or nun to teach with a monk. I wanted to make good use of this opportunity and show that women could teach as well.

My friend Ayya Virañani and I began co-teaching retreats, and later we organized a special Metta (loving-kindness) retreat for Western meditators with both of us and a Burmese monk teaching together, something quite rare and significant. Together with Ayya Virañani and other friends, we founded the association "Metta In Action." Having spent years meditating in Burma, we had deep ties to the people and the tradition. After Cyclone Nargis devastated southern Burma in 2008, killing 150,000 people, many asked how to help. We began collecting donations, and over the years our main focus became supporting nuns and nunneries, who receive far less aid. Their work is extraordinary: a few middle-aged nuns often care for 20 to 80 young nuns, some as young as four or five, many orphans or girls from conflict-affected regions. These nuns serve as builders, nurses, teachers, mothers, organizers, essentially social workers in a society with few social institutions. Seeing this, we committed to supporting them. Each year we travel to Burma to deliver donations personally.

Over time, I have come to understand that training the heart and mind, truly seeing what exists, developing a realistic view of oneself and the world, is the most important work in life. Only by understanding oneself and learning to live in peace, happiness, and contentment can one genuinely contribute to the world. Peace in the world arises from individuals embodying peace within themselves. Declaring "We want peace!" out of anger will never create it. What gives my life meaning is working on myself and sharing this with others.

There is a hunger in the world for something meaningful. People increasingly recognize the limits of materialism, the endless cycle of wanting and getting, only to want more. Many seek alternative paths, such as meditation or other spiritual practices. While not yet mainstream, the consistent attendance at retreats, such as those held at the Beatenberg Meditation Center, established twenty-five years ago, shows a growing interest. It is happening, even if quietly.

Winterthur, Switzerland

