

I was a Buddhist

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Chapter 1: A grey world

No, I don't want to live here

It's such a vivid memory, but I cannot pin it down to any particular time - a flat grey expanse of landscape pervaded by a sense of cold emptiness. Perhaps it is the wintry landscape of northern Holland where I was born, perhaps it arises from the depths of my self-conscious – whatever, it expresses my very first perception of the world. Although I don't seem to belong in this landscape, still it stirs within me a very early sense of self-awareness. I can still recall a very stubborn streak within me, an inner cry: "No! No! I don't want to live here!" It was almost as if I was fighting against having been born.

This rebellious attitude was also evident in my relationship to my mother. I would cry a lot, because I knew that she would appear and I would have all her attention. She cared for me as best she could, but I somehow felt inwardly torn apart. On the one hand I craved her presence, yet at the same time I rejected her. But at least I did receive a lot of attention because of the fuss I made!

I recall an intense feeling of loneliness during my childhood, not only within, but also around me. In the succeeding years as I grew up I spent a lot of time creating my own fantasy world in order to escape from this grey world, withdrawing from reality with its demands and responsibilities, and giving my imagination free rein.

I often treated my parents as if they had no authority over me. I was determined to make my mother in particular submit to my will. Often, it became too much for her; she wouldn't know what to do with me, so she would become irritated and punish me.

With the arrival of my baby sister I found a new victim. As she couldn't defend herself I attacked her both physically and emotionally. Strangely enough, my memories of myself are those of a good child who always meant well. All my actions were absorbed into my own little dream world, where they were transformed; I began to play hide and seek with myself. Much later, when I became a Buddhist, a guru demonstrated how my inner self had behaved. We met quite unexpectedly one day and I reacted in a startled fashion. He looked at me, ducked and shot past me like a cat! I knew at once that he had seen through my inner game of hide and seek. It was to be a long time however, before this torment would end.

Moving to a new environment

When I was five, my parents left the bleak northern part of the Netherlands to move to an area reclaimed from the sea by dykes. In order to receive permission to live in that area, the new residents had to have specific qualifications, and be imbued with a pioneering spirit. We were among the first residents to set up home there. My father, who was a farmer, was offered the opportunity of setting up a new farm in Flevoland, amidst a community who were attempting to find a new way of living in community on this virgin soil. They were seeking to create a lifestyle which would be more people-oriented rather than being influenced by old traditions.

The area had been planned and thought out down to the smallest detail. The roads didn't meander naturally; they were all straight, with occasional groups of newly planted trees. The canals and fields were similarly laid out. The residents sought to imprint a vision of the future on the bare landscape. On this flat plain where the rooftops formed the highest points in the area, chilly winds would sweep across the landscape or mists would roll in and linger. And so my vision of a cold, grey world deepened.

My parents had freed themselves from the traditions of the Church. However, the need for a sense of community and a certain religiosity were catered for in a so-called "Protestant Centre for Free Thinkers". The Sunday school stories that I heard there meant little to me. My most vivid memory is of a nativity play in which I played the honourable role of a camel's backside. Looking back now, I think it was the most fitting role for me. The camel's hump holds the water supply which it can live on for days in the desert, and I too often felt as if I were living in a deep inner desert. Often I felt like a stranger in my own family and wondered whether I really was the son of my parents.

This yearning for security often overwhelmed me. At school we used to sing a song about home: "At home it's warm and comfortable, yes at home the dinner's ready..." I could scarcely hold back the tears when we sang this song! The desire for security and closeness on the one hand, and yet the strong urge for freedom on the other created a continual conflict within me. The fear that I would end up possessing neither made me permanently rebellious as a child. When my mother would ask me to do something, my first reaction was always to protest. Then, after a while, my conscience would trouble me, and I would want to obey instead.

When I finally realized that I was only punishing myself with my negative attitudes, I looked for clear guidelines from my father. I used to provoke him just so that he would exercise his authority. My father was a good-natured man who frequently came home very tired from his work. He was often absent-minded, a trait that I inherited from him. But I needed him to "be there" for me - completely, in body and in spirit. Sometimes I would provoke him to such an extent that he would jump up in anger, chase after me and send me to my room. Only then would I calm down, knowing that this time I had overstepped the boundaries. Deep within I longed for someone to guide me, especially my father. I wanted to be obedient ... but I remained disobedient.

My day will come

Throughout my early teens, I kept thinking that the time must surely come when I would show the world what I knew and what I could do. When that day came I would proclaim: "See, I was right after all! Once I'm free, I'll do anything I want. Then I'll show you what it's really like to be free!"

In the meantime I entered high school, an achievement I was very proud of at the time. The school was ten miles away, but I cycled there almost every day, rain, hail or shine. Inside the dreamer was a fighting spirit.

Later, as an adolescent, my goals changed. Instead of good grades – which initially I had fully intended to achieve – relationships with girls became all-important. However, as my face sadly was covered with acne, I again spent hours dreaming and escaping from reality. Still one burning desire consumed me: “If I am to find freedom, I must get out of this place.”

Finally the time came! At the age of eighteen, I graduated from high school and my parents acknowledged this achievement by financing a trip to America. For me, North America was too cold and too expensive to stay for any length of time, so I decided to go to South America. With a minimum of luggage and very little money I determined to prove my independence. Much to my surprise my mother, with whom I had constantly been in conflict, wept on my departure, even though bringing us up to be independent had always been her goal. In the letters which I wrote home later, my homesickness must have been evident. Although I had often felt like a stranger there, now I was realizing that I was more attached to home than I cared to admit. However, I had firmly decided to prove that my time had come, the time to discover the world, to discover people, to discover myself, but most of all, to discover freedom.

Yearning for freedom

The aeroplane broke through the thick layer of clouds covering Brazil. A short time later, around eight o'clock in the morning, our plane touched down in Rio de Janeiro. The passengers, for the most part native Brazilians, clapped their hands in relief, or beat their chests with their crucifixes.

My first stop in this country was the Dutch colony of Holambra. Friends had given me the address of a Dutch family who lived there. I exchanged some money at the airport, and the friendly lady behind the counter told me how to get to the bus station. She spoke English, so I hoped that at least I would be able to communicate in this foreign country. Soon, however, I was to be bitterly disappointed.

I had no problems purchasing my bus ticket. I just mentioned the name of the place where I wanted to go. At the bus station the atmosphere was frenetic: passengers carrying heavy cases hurrying past me, mothers calling to their children, and the air thick with fumes - because some of the bus drivers kept their engines running. In every direction people were standing in long queues. I was glad when I was finally able to get on to the bus, which I assumed was going to Holambra. The trip took about a day. Every few hours the bus would stop so that the passengers had an opportunity to freshen up, but what should I drink? A glass of tea would be nice, because at least the water would be boiled. Unfortunately, however, no one understood the English word “tea”. All sorts of drinks were brought to me, but no tea. In the end, I managed to make myself understood using gestures - and so I learnt my very first Brazilian word: “cha”.

We reached Holambra in the middle of the night. It was pitch dark, I was absolutely alone in this foreign country, and the houses were few and far between. How was I going to find the address I was looking for? I mustered all my courage and knocked on one of the doors. Timidly, I asked if anyone spoke Dutch. The man of the house

realized that I was looking for people from my country, and after thinking about it for a while, he took me to a barely furnished house, the temporary abode of two young Dutch people. It was dirty and uncomfortable, but at least I had a roof over my head.

The next day, I found the family that I was looking for. They were a retired couple whose children had already left home. They showed me around the area in their car, but clearly I was not particularly welcome, so I stayed for only three days.

I left Holambra, and ended up in the city of Curitiba. I had a few typical Dutch products in my luggage which I was supposed to give to some Dutch families there. The journey took about sixteen hours, so once again I reached my destination in the middle of the night. My hosts in Curitiba lived on the other side of town, and I couldn't possibly call them at that time of night. Neither could I stay on the street, so I discovered a warehouse with a large sliding door that squeaked as I forced it open. I pushed myself in and spent my first night in Curitiba on the hard floor of this warehouse.

I was overjoyed by the warm welcome I received from the Barkema family the following day. Pieter Barkema had been a sailor. He told me that he had met God at some point and had then given up sailing and got married. Later, he had built an excavator and made a living for himself and his family selling sand to large businesses. I started helping him at work. Together with two Brazilian workers we sat on the noisy machine in the middle of an artificial lake. The work was monotonous, but Pieter often took the opportunity to talk about his faith in Jesus Christ. I was impressed by the joy he radiated when he talked. It was surprising to see how he and his wife took their daily troubles and requests to God in prayer, and how they even thanked God for me and my presence there. Perhaps this was the reason why, many years later, I kept dreaming about Jesus Christ.

A group of farmers from Holland had founded the colony of Carambei after the second World War, in the hilly green landscape not far from Curitiba. Being a farmer's son, I easily found work there, mostly living and working with a young family. On Sundays we drove in a small car along the dusty roads to the Dutch Reformed Church. I found the service rather old fashioned and wasn't interested in listening. My eyes wandered up and down the pews, and I discovered a young girl with blonde curly hair and clear, blue-green eyes. She was my exactly my type, so I tried to attract her attention.

On New Year's Day the Dutch met up at a small lake. It was the middle of summer. People were just hanging around, swimming or water-skiing. I thought I'd create an impression in a diving competition, so I attempted a dive from the three-metre board. It was a real belly-flop! I stood at the side, looking rather lost and pathetic, when suddenly I noticed the blonde girl from church. She was looking at me with such love in her eyes that I almost melted into the ground. Love like this just had to be out-of-this-world!

For the next few days I was on cloud nine, but too embarrassed to talk to anybody about it, let alone approach the girl herself. I would have done anything to be able to hold on to that "divine" sense of love. At the same time I felt totally incapable of getting involved in a relationship, much less to sustain it. I just wasn't mature enough – of that I was only too aware. In my helplessness, and in a naïve attempt to find my

feet and to “purify” myself, I left my shoes behind and travelled barefoot for three weeks, as far as Argentina. I knew I just wasn’t ready for such a relationship.

Being in love appeared to have awakened an unquenchable desire in my soul. I longed for this love, but I longed to be free as well. In the end freedom won out. I didn’t want to be tied down in any way. My goal was to get to know the local people and their country, so I left the Dutch colony and hitch-hiked, though sometimes this meant waiting at the side of the road in the scorching sun for hours, or even days. The asphalt under my bare feet was often so hot that it was impossible to stand on it. I hurried along the dusty roads as if I were being pursued.

When, wearied with all the travel, I’d walk through a town looking for somewhere to sleep, I would often see groups of young people who had gathered in the cool of the evening on the street. The girls whistled at me when they saw my blonde hair and blue eyes. *That* had certainly never happened to me in Holland! These happy occasions were short-lived, however! I was concerned with my freedom, and didn’t want to be tied down by people or involvements, so I often remained alone, sleeping rough in empty houses or in ditches at the side of the road. After a restless night on a hard floor I would wake up feeling incredibly lonely.

But as I hitch-hiked through the country I enjoyed the scenery, the amazing blue sea, unending yellow sands and vast forests through which mighty rivers forced their way in thundering waterfalls towards the ocean. Fellow travellers often poured out their hearts to me, and I was frequently invited to stay with local families. Although the huts where I was permitted to hang my hammock were generally poorly furnished, the families still allowed me to be a part of their everyday life, and gave me a sense of acceptance and of being loved. After a short time, however, this sense of security would be overtaken by the fear of being tied down, and so I would have to move on immediately for the sake of my freedom.

On one occasion a young man who picked me up in his fast car invited me to spend the weekend by the sea with some of his friends. They were all smoking hashish, and fell asleep within half an hour. “How stupid!” I thought sadly, as I walked alone along the beach. What was the point of it all?

During this time I met many people who were seeking self-gratification in many different ways. In South American culture, sex plays an incredibly important role, often expressed in music, dance, movement and fashion. Women like to dress provocatively; even little girls of five or six wear make-up and are concerned about their appearance. Homosexuality is openly practised in the cities. One day a man took me into his filthy dwelling. I had no idea that he wanted to use me to satisfy his lust. It was only with great difficulty that I managed to hold him off. He masturbated the whole night. I was hugely relieved when I was able to walk free and outwardly unscathed through town the next day.

I must have presented a strange figure walking through the hot streets, attracting a lot of attention with my blonde hair, blue eyes and bare feet. As a symbol of my freedom I always wore a pair of shorts and a red Dutch neckerchief which protected me from the sun. In my little army bag, the only luggage in my possession, I also had a pair of long trousers which I wore at night to protect me from mosquitoes. People

often came up to me quite spontaneously to offer me a pair of shoes. Before long I was able to earn a living selling shoes.

However, in Buenos Aires my appearance obviously caused offence. One day, I felt a rough hand grab me in the middle of the road, and I was dragged - actually quite brutally - to an official building, without a word being uttered. Fortunately, my Dutch passport got me out of this dangerous situation. Still in shock, I made my way to the Dutch Embassy. I was glad when a responsible Dutch official talked some sense into my head about my foolish behaviour. She sent me to the Salvation Army, where I was the only European to sleep and eat in their overcrowded accommodation, among the poorest of the city. It may well have been more sensible to sleep at the Salvation Army hostel, but it would have been a lot quieter in one of the empty houses in the vicinity.

I couldn't afford a hotel room. I had to be careful with my money, even when it came to buying food. Sometimes, though, I was wonderfully provided for. One day I ordered a soft drink in a restaurant, and the waiter brought me a plate full of food without a word of explanation. One evening, after a very hot day in Buenos Aires, I bought a big bottle of Coca-Cola and some dry bread in a little shop. As usual, lots of people were sitting in front of their houses. Hungry and thirsty, I sat down on the edge of the pavement and started to eat. People came up to me without uttering a word, gave me cheese and ham, and stuck money into my hand. My heart overflowed with gratitude and a sense of security.

One dark night, tired of walking and waiting for someone to pick me up, I decided to lie down in a ditch at the side of the road. I put the red neckerchief under my back to ward off the cold. Next morning when day dawned I opened my eyes to see about twenty dark faces staring at me in shock and disbelief. "Good morning!" I said. No one answered. One after the other, they all slunk away, the last one muttering that they had thought I was dead. In my immature foolishness I hadn't thought about the dangers of the road...

My next stop was Rio de Janeiro, where I intended to enjoy the Carnival. After the carnival my journey continued up to the dry, poverty-stricken North, from where I took a boat from the Amazon to Manaus, and then travelled on by plane to Brasilia, the capital.

As I was walking through a modern shopping centre, a few hippies called out to me: "Hè, Logo (funny bird), come here!" I stopped and we chatted a little. They asked if I had any money. I admitted honestly that I did have a traveller's cheque. They said we could have a party. Soon these four hippies were following me, looking for a bank where I could cash my cheque. We attracted the attention of a few policemen, who put us up against a wall with our arms raised. Once again, my Dutch passport came to my aid. The hippies were not so fortunate and were carted off, while the police officers took me to the bus station and forced me to leave town that very day.

A few days later in another town, a young man, about my height and with a tough expression on his face, asked if he could buy my shoes. I had walked barefoot for three weeks, and when I had been offered a pair of shoes, I had accepted them gratefully. However, I now needed some money, and was prepared to sell them. The man tried them on, and when he realized that they fitted he refused to pay, but

neither did he want to give them back. Right there on the street, he started to fight. I defended myself against his threatening fists with karate kicks. The fight looked vicious and a crowd of spectators soon gathered. Just as suddenly as it had started, it stopped. My opponent took off my shoes, threw them at me, told me that he would kill me next time, and left the scene. I stood there trembling. From then on, the world no longer seemed quite so innocent.

During this time my emotional life went through highs and lows more than ever. Until then, I had been protected from thieves and sexual temptation. A few spontaneous and innocent love affairs quenched my starving soul for a while, but the urge for freedom always won out. Apart from that, my longing for true love was stronger than the desire for the sort of sexual excesses that some of my so-called friends pursued. In my heart, I wanted to go back and see the girl in the Dutch colony again. So I went back to Carambei. One Sunday, when the youth group from the Church was singing in an old people's home, they took me with them. My blonde flame was there too; she was just as beautiful as ever. But I had the feeling that she loved those old people more than me. The Christian songs that they sang didn't mean anything to me, but I was amazed to see the commitment that the young people showed.

When I visited the girl's large family, her mother asked me what I wanted to do with my life, to which I grandly replied that I wanted to be a pilot. I could just imagine how one day I would land in Brazil and fetch my bride!

But after eight months in South America I had learned that freedom comes at a price – loneliness. I couldn't find a way to reconcile it with my desire for love and recognition. Finally I returned to Holland, with the firm intention of becoming a pilot.

Yearning for love

Back home, my family and friends gave me a hero's welcome. At first it felt good to be in the security of my parents' home, but I soon felt trapped again by the old bonds. The results of a psychological test for admission into Pilot Training School revealed that I had become too strong-willed to be accepted on the course. My application was rejected. A short time later I was called up for military service. I was so used to freedom in my lifestyle that I found the military discipline ridiculous. I couldn't help laughing when the officer gave us our marching orders, so I was constantly out-of-step. This caused infectious laughter among my colleagues, with the result that our entire troop would end up in chaos; I was punished on a regular basis.

Since they didn't know what to do with me, I was transferred to Germany to work in the office of the Dutch barracks in Seedorf. Again I was in another country with a different culture and a different way of thinking. But even in Europe the methods I used to find satisfaction and to escape from the daily boredom were exactly the same methods I had used in South America: sex, finding a woman, alcohol, drugs and discos. The vulgar conversation of my comrades bored me, so I sought out other contacts. I often talked for hours with a young woman who had two children. She was frustrated with her life as a wife and had been toying for a long time with the idea of leaving her family. I finally helped her to put her plan into practice. Shortly after that

we ended up sleeping together. I had hoped that my hunger would be satisfied by this relationship, but it didn't last long. No, I was still determined to find true love!

After completing military service, I decided to study psychology. It had become an existential necessity for me to have deep conversations with people, in an effort to research into and discover my soul. Furthermore, I was certain that I no longer wanted to live with my parents. I rented a small room in the University town of Nimwegen where I successfully completed my first year. My vacation was spent in warmer climes, hitch-hiking through France, Spain, Morocco and Portugal. Yet again, the feeling of freedom was accompanied by a gnawing loneliness. Increasingly I felt the need for transcendental experiences.

Somewhere in the South of Spain I met up with a young couple from Yugoslavia. The young man, Ecio, asked me if I wanted to accompany them to Morocco. As I had been wandering around all alone for two weeks, I gratefully accepted his offer. For three days we smoked dope together and walked around "stoned". My awareness seemed to expand and my unquenchable hunger for adventure was temporarily stilled. Before crossing back over the border at Gibraltar, Ecio had stuffed hashish into his shoes. We tried to look as innocent as possible and managed to cross through customs without being checked by the customs officer. Ecio and his girlfriend wanted to get their loot home as quickly as possible, but I still couldn't see any point in becoming addicted to drugs, so I continued on my trip to Portugal without taking any marihuana with me. My recent experiments had not touched the emptiness within, instead it had increased my longing for fulfilment. Some young Portuguese people welcomed me into their families, and for a while I was able to forget the experiences of the past weeks. The sincerity and warmth of my hosts was like a plaster/Bandaid? over the gaping wound of my loneliness. After all my bizarre adventures, normality had become something abnormal.

In September I resumed my studies with new fervour, and took courses that were actually meant for third year students. On one occasion our Practical group spent a whole night together; I was so tense and wound up inside that I laughed nervously at every trivial little thing during the entire time. This rather odd behaviour so aroused the interest of one of the young students in the group that she began visiting me on a regular basis.

Even though I hadn't noticed her earlier, her unexpected visits stirred my curiosity. She looked as if she moved in "alternative" circles. She wore jeans, a brown suede jacket and a purple Arafat shawl. Her brown eyes and ample bosom radiated a sort of uncomplicated motherliness. We would smoke cigarettes and talk all night long in my cosy little room. She spent a couple of nights with me, but she already had a boyfriend and didn't want to break up with him. This relationship led me into an undesirable dependency. We were in love but couldn't decide to stay with each other. As a result, I felt torn inside and became aggressive and uptight. I could no longer flee into my dream-world, so I tried to relax by smoking hashish. For a short time, then, all my human problems would seem totally irrelevant.

In the course of my studies I opted to take a module in sexology. Our lecturer was of the opinion that nothing was as gratifying as the contact between a man and a woman and their mutual stimulation. We students did not agree. We thought that was too simple and too "basic". We thought, "Let him talk. Those who take drugs know

that the truth lies elsewhere.” The paper I wrote for this course was entitled: “Sexuality in Tibetan Buddhism”. In my research, I read about the transformation of sexual energy using tantric practices, which I found very interesting. I was enormously frustrated with my broken relationships; therefore overcoming this worldliness seemed to be a good way out. Reading these books intensified my longing - however, I would need someone to instruct me.

After a conversation with the daughter of a neighbour, I started entertaining the idea of travelling to India and Nepal. She had been there, and had already accepted Buddhist teaching. She seemed to be surrounded by an aura of a “knowing” yet mysterious silence. In her quiet voice she spoke of the Tibetan Lamas (teachers) and told me about the guru Lama Zopa in Nepal who offered meditation courses in English, also for beginners.

Something stopped me from doing this right away, even though, as a result of my frustrating love affair, the drugs and my fascination with Buddhist teachings, I had lost all motivation to continue my studies. I was disturbed inside and was desperately searching for peace.

I still had one further source of hope. My unusual travels had already helped me see myself and my life from a different angle. Maybe it would work again. Separation from my friends, meeting new people, the challenge of living as cheaply as possible while maintaining my freedom would surely allow me to forget my dependency on others, and give me new confidence and peace. So, in the middle of the semester, I set off for Koper in Yugoslavia to visit Ecio, the friend I had met in Morocco, who by this time had broken up with his girlfriend. My visit gave him a reason to celebrate in style. He spent all his money on hiring a car, and we made quite a reckless trip to a punk concert in Ljubljana.

We arrived on time at the packed youth club. The stench of beer, sweat and smoke was overwhelming, the atmosphere electric. The musicians were dosed up with alcohol and drugs. After producing an ear-splitting noise for about fifteen minutes, they expressed the futility of their existence by smashing their instruments. This sparked off a wave of destruction in the gathered crowd. Beer bottles flew through the air. Chaos, fear and turmoil reigned. Everyone realized that he could become the next victim of an invisible enemy. The only option was to get out! We forced our way through the mass of people and were relieved to escape unharmed.

Our next stop was a subterranean student hang-out. Under the stone vaults the music resounded so loudly that it was almost unbearable. Alcohol and drugs were freely available. Ecio told me that one of his friends had committed suicide a few weeks before. The news didn't surprise me at all. I could imagine how empty and meaningless life must be, if it consisted of nothing other than what I was observing here. Looking back on that week with Ecio, I cannot remember one moment when we were not intoxicated by alcohol or drugs. Everywhere we went there was booze and drugs. Although we stayed in Ecio's room a couple of times, he avoided all contact with his parents. He thought they wouldn't understand his lifestyle anyway. After a week of continuous parties and concerts, meeting people, and consuming great amounts of drugs and alcohol, an absolutely exhausted Ecio said: “I've never been so bored in my whole life.”

My hitch-hiking trip now took me to Greece. It was March and the weather was still cold. On the South Yugoslavian mountains I trudged through snow in my light sports shoes. It was not just the cold weather that exhausted me - my heart was frozen with loneliness. This country and its people were foreign to me. This journey was pointless. I didn't even know what I was looking for. I was running away, and at the same time I wanted to prove something by travelling through foreign countries absolutely alone.

Israel, the Promised Land, beckoned. I took a ship from Athens across the Mediterranean. What was so "promising" about this country? The Israelis seemed so arrogant. They would drive by and leave me at the side of the road, in the exhausting heat. I was much more likely to be picked up by Arabs. After two weeks I had had enough of Israel and booked a flight to Istanbul. Once again I was invited to stay with a few students. We talked a lot about the meaning of life. However I couldn't find much meaning myself, either in meeting and talking to people, or in travelling through foreign lands.

When I returned home after six weeks, I did not experience the same sense of fulfilment that I'd felt upon my return from Brazil. My attempted escape and the daring urge for adventure had failed to provide me with the peace that I was longing for. This strengthened my desire to take even more radical steps in my search for the meaning of life. Could Buddhism be the way to peace and to life in all its fullness?

Chapter 2: The Search for Enlightenment

In the Land of impersonal gods

Despite all that was going on, my studies progressed so well that six months later, I was able to take a longer break to go to Nepal and India. I wanted to find out all I could about Buddhism, this unknown religion, to experience it, both in India and in the inviting English-medium beginners' course in Nepal. My methods of travelling were inexpensive. I rented out my room and made an initial attempt to hitchhike to India. However my efforts failed, as I was unable to obtain a visa for Iran, so in the end I had no choice but to hitchhike from Istanbul to Athens, and from there fly to India.

My arrival in Bombay was a shock! The heat, the stench, the masses of people and the poverty took my breath away. No sleeping somewhere on the edge of the road here, and there were certainly no empty houses around. In the circumstances, I decided to take a train to New Delhi as soon as possible, to a Buddhist guesthouse I'd heard of. It was easy to buy a ticket without a reserved seat. Like many other people, I waited for hours on the platform until the scheduled departure time. Almost everyone seemed to be apathetic. It was as if they had long since surrendered to their fate. Now and again a beggar reached out his hand to me for money, but that too seemed to be part of the routine here. In accordance with good English custom, the waiting passengers formed a queue. This made me feel quite hopeful, as I was sitting at the front of the queue. However, when the train finally rolled into the station the assembled masses suddenly and unexpectedly stormed into the carriages, everyone trying to find a seat at the same time.

I headed for a compartment. A local Indian who had managed to get there first obviously earned his living by saving seats and selling them to uninitiated tourists like me. He offered me a window seat, which seemed like a good idea for a twenty-four hour journey. I accepted the seat, but later found out that there would be three more people crouching at my feet. Throughout the entire journey I had to keep my legs drawn in uncomfortably, which was possible only because we all assumed a trance-like state, in order not to feel the pain in our limbs. It was impossible to sleep or even go to the bathroom, because three passengers had chosen that spot, of all places, to be their patch for the journey. Thankfully, hot tea in clay cups was sold at the noisy stations. The vendors pushed their way through the crowded aisles of the train, or handed their wares through the open windows.

The shock of my first impressions of this country with its thousands of impersonal gods was almost unbearable. Conversation, which had become so important to me, was impossible. It was as if people had become impersonal, no longer even aware of themselves, just absorbed in the mass. Of course they would often speak to me, but the questions were always the same: "What's your name? Where do you come from? What type of camera you have?" Only later did I realise that these questions were a necessary part of the greeting ritual. But it seemed to me that nobody here was interested in me as a person. Maybe, I thought, I'll have to surrender my ego in this country...

I was glad when I arrived at the Buddhist guesthouse in New Delhi. It was a comfortable house in a wealthy neighbourhood, run by a young English Buddhist lady. The guesthouse provided a convenient stop-over for many travellers on their way to visit the Buddhist monasteries of North India, or the centres in the mountains, or for those who were returning home. On my first evening there, a middle-aged Australian told us crazy stories about the Tibetan teachers, which obviously amused him greatly. An English woman with a shorn head, clad from head to toe in the red robes of Tibetan nuns and monks, described in a mysterious voice the fascinating abilities of her gurus. In contrast to the Buddhist schools of Thailand, Burma and Sri Lanka, it is important in Tibetan Buddhism to have a personal guru whose instructions are followed to the letter. The gurus all seem to have clairvoyant abilities. Their counsel is extremely important in order to progress quickly on the path to Enlightenment. All this mysterious information naturally increased my curiosity. The beginners' course in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, was due to begin in November, and as it was still only mid-October, I decided to visit a few places at the foot of the Himalayas where many Tibetans live in exile.

My journey took me through the North of India in overcrowded buses and trains. I stayed mainly in cheap accommodation, so that I could get to know Indian culture better. I was able to endure these experiences only by smoking hashish, which also made my personal boundaries dissolve in the smoky haze. My annoyance over how incredibly impersonal the people were would disappear for a short time, and my self would seem to become one with the smells and images around me. I was apparently by no means the only one with this attitude; trance-like consciousness was part of everyday life for many Indians as well.

Compared with the noisy, turbulent Indian towns, the areas where the Tibetan Buddhists lived were real oases of peace. The Dalai Lama, the political and religious leader of the Tibetans, lives in the North Indian town of Dharmasala. I had heard of his holiness and omniscience. The Dalai Lama is supposed to be an incarnation of the Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha with one thousand arms, who had one eye in each hand as an expression of his omniscience and his great compassion. I had also heard that the Dalai Lama had particular clairvoyant gifts, which meant that he could recognize the *karma* of every person. I had the vague feeling that he had already seen me, although we had never met. During the night prior to my arrival in Dharmasala, I smoked marihuana around a little camp fire at the train station with a *sadhu* (a Hindu holy man and wandering preacher) and some men who were obviously very poor. A wonderful, mysterious atmosphere seemed to surround us, and although we were not able to say much to each other, it was as though we sank together into the noises of the night. In the hectic din of the following day, however, this experience sadly evaporated and now only a dull sensation pervaded my soul.

After a six-hour bus ride, I eventually reached Dharmasala, the town where the Dalai Lama is enthroned. I breathed a sigh of relief. How the passengers on the roof of the bus had survived this journey was a mystery to me.

The climate was quite pleasant, and the view of the mountains with their tall pine trees reminded me a lot of Switzerland. However the corrugated aluminium roofs, the smallish dark-skinned people, the monkeys begging for food and the smell of the sewage mingling with the smoke of the wood fires provided quite a contrast to the beautiful landscape.

The pictures and figures in the Tibetan temples had filled me with awe from the very beginning. I was fascinated by the other-worldly, mystical atmosphere. Walking through the temple where the Dalai Lama's throne is located, I felt ashamed about my numbed, dull condition. What *an enlightened person* Buddha had been!... To my amazement, I discovered that there were many people from the West in the town. They were very interested in Tibetan Buddhism, regularly participating in the teachings, and gathering afterwards to have deep and meaningful conversations about what they had heard.

I also went to public classes given by different Lamas, or Buddhist teachers. At these events and in my numerous conversations with western Buddhists, I kept hearing that people who are accepted into Buddhism have a good karma, a positive life energy, which has built up during this or a previous life. I drew the conclusion, therefore, that I too must have a good karma.

Just as our neighbour's daughter in the Netherlands had recommended, people here advised me to join the beginners' course in Nepal, starting in November. Since I had some time before the course, I wanted to visit the northernmost point in India, where mainly Tibetan people live. The town of Leh is situated 4000 meters above sea level. In order to get there, I spent one day in a train and three days in an overcrowded bus that struggled up the dangerous mountain road. Apart from in the town itself, neither trees nor greenery were to be seen anywhere - only grey mountains and crumbling, reddish rocks.

It was quite an experience to be in Leh. During a hike over a sand-stone mountain in the area, I experienced absolute silence for the very first time. A wasp, flying past at quite a distance from me, made as much noise as an aeroplane flying across the valley. This, I thought, was the sort of inner stillness I wanted to achieve through meditation, in order eventually to attain enlightenment. It had a magical effect on me. The Buddhist monks that I met on the way seemed to have absorbed some of this stillness, for they were very friendly and smiled broadly whenever I met them. I felt that they had found true religion. This conclusion was confirmed by something I experienced on my way back over the highest pass in the world.

As it was already late October, the traffic was suddenly brought to a halt by a heavy snowfall. The bus I was travelling on could not continue beyond Kargil as the passes were closed. Two other buses which had already left Kargil before the weather changed had got stuck in the snow. The passengers had to sit on the bus for days in their thin Indian clothes before the military could clear the road again. Together with some western tourists and other passengers I had to wait for ten days in Kargil. Every day we were told "We'll be leaving tomorrow"...

At the time, the Muslims in Kargil were celebrating a festival during which the men go through the streets flagellating themselves. They rhythmically beat their backs with knives attached to chains and hammered their chests with their fists. A few women stood weeping at the side of the road, trying to dissuade their sons from taking part in this hideous display. The bloodied snow, the clanking of the chains, the creepy singing, and the thudding fists were frightening and repulsive. This gruesome atmosphere pervaded everything. I was glad when we were eventually able to leave the place.

With greater intensity than ever before, I experienced in India the first of Buddha's four noble truths: "To live is to suffer." My heart longed desperately to meet up again with peace-loving Buddhists.

I take refuge in Buddha

On the day before the course began I arrived in Kathmandu, the capital of Nepal, weary from the long bus and train rides. As usual, as soon as the bus stopped several young men descended on the tourists, trying to persuade them to go to "their" hotels. At first, I ignored them all, but later as I was walking alone through the darkening city, I was glad when two young men accompanied me. They told me that three Dutch men were already staying at their hotel. That made my decision to go with them much easier.

Imagine my surprise when I saw two friends from my home town in the hotel! They had also been travelling through India with two other friends. We felt that this encounter couldn't just be chance, and that it must hold some deeper significance for us. When I told them of my plan to take a beginners' course in Buddhism here in Kathmandu, they all wanted to come with me next day to have a look at the monastery.

Next morning we hired bikes and rode through the bright autumnal valley to the large Buddhist *stupa* in Bodhnath, about six miles (10km) from Kathmandu. A stupa is a Buddhist religious building, a monument without an entrance. It has a specific three-fold form which symbolizes the enlightened nature of the Buddha: a square foundation bearing a dome, in the middle of which is a square tower with painted eyes, and on top a pointed spire that reaches toward the sky.

Bodhnath is a small place visited by masses of pilgrims, mostly Tibetans. The village houses are grouped around the massive stupa. There are small restaurants and simple stands where you can drink *chai* (tea), as well as souvenir shops and booths offering *chang*, a weak home-brewed beer.

When we arrived there, a strange and colourful spectacle spread out before us. Pilgrims, monks and tourists were walking clockwise around the monument, most of them praying out loud. Others sat in meditation, spinning prayer wheels and reciting certain words (*mantras*). I noticed how some people at different points near the stupa were throwing themselves prostrate on a long board. Buddhists believe that this sacred place emits a special spiritual energy. Going around it, lying face-down and repeating mantras brings positive karma. We cycled around it a few times out of curiosity. Then we climbed the hill which led to a small monastery called Kopan, where the beginners' course was to take place.

The monastery buildings were not very exciting. One of them housed a grubby kitchen and dining room, a temple with bedrooms for the two monastery lamas, and some very simple sleeping accommodation for about thirty young Tibetan monks as well as for the many guests. The only wash facility was a water-tap in the middle of the monastery grounds. The six stone toilet blocks produced an overpowering

stench, due to the fact that – as I later learned – people constantly suffered severe bouts of diarrhoea. The toilets had no flush, were absolutely filthy, and it required a lot of courage for us Europeans to use them.

However, we were impressed by the peaceful atmosphere and by the fantastic view over the valley, which was drenched in sunlight. After talking to a young English woman who was processing the course registrations, two of my friends decided to join me on the course.

Participants were obliged to follow the monastery rules, which meant that we were not allowed to leave the monastery grounds, nor to communicate with the outside world by letter, nor to smoke. Narcotics and stimulants were forbidden, and we were required to attend classes regularly.

Together with 150 other participants we started the course, which was geared mostly to Westerners. We all signed a document agreeing to submit to the monastery rules for a month. This was a bold step for me, for it meant that I had to subject my wild urge for freedom to the strict monastery rules and, in fact, to be “locked up” for four weeks. However, my longing to be free from this painful and tortuous world had become stronger than all other emotional desires, so I went for it.

Every morning we were wakened at half-past-five. Three of us slept on the hard wooden floor of a tiny room. At six o'clock, we went to the meditation tent, which had been specially designed for this course. Meditation was led by a student of Lama Zopa's, a stocky, bearded American in his thirties, dressed simply in jeans and a sweatshirt.

Wrapped in woollen blankets to keep out the cold, we forced our stiff legs into the unaccustomed meditation position. Our American teacher told us that our negative karma was causing the pain in our legs and the restlessness in our souls. This could have come about because we had been driven to pursue our desires in a previous life. After years of training, he was now able to sit with ease for a full hour, motionless, in the meditation position.

With clenched teeth we strove to sit absolutely still. An additional and even greater difficulty was trying to keep our thoughts from continually wandering. Finally, when the breakfast bell sounded, everyone dashed to the kitchen, so that they could be first in line to get a large portion of the simple Tibetan food. Often we would talk about the delicious food that would be on the table right now back at home.

All sorts of insects lived in the rooms, bugs which liked to live and feed on us, since we were relatively clean compared with the Tibetans. Sometimes one of these creatures would be crawling up my back during the entire meditation period. Killing any living creature was absolutely forbidden, so as soon as the meditation was over, I would run outside, tear off my T-shirt and set the insect free.

When the Tibetan guru Lama Zopa, a little man wearing large spectacles, entered the tent, we all stood up and bowed with our hands folded across our chests. He bowed even lower and then prostrated himself three times on the floor before sitting on his brocade-adorned throne. To my amazement, I saw that many of the western participants also threw themselves on the ground. Without giving it much thought, I

imitated these movements. We were told that we were not bowing to the person, but to the Buddha-nature in every person. In this way, we could bow to anyone. Before a lama, of course, one would make an even deeper bow, as it is assumed that his Buddha-nature is more highly developed.

The little Lama spoke English with great difficulty. He had trouble breathing, and kept coughing. The American meditation teacher was of the opinion that this was caused by the bad karma of the new course participants. Our impurity was contaminating his purity and causing him to cough.

We began classes with one of Buddha's writings, the so-called Heart Sutra, which we read in English. It was quite unusual and almost revolutionary that this text was available in translation and was now being explained. Most Tibetans only recite the Sutras in Tibetan or Sanskrit, without understanding a word of what they are saying. They believe that the sound itself is enough to produce positive karma.

The text was about a secret conversation between the Enlightened One and his disciple Sariputra, where Buddha explains omni-transcendent wisdom to him. Since the Lama could speak only a little English, his wording was often clumsy. Initially, I felt that nobody in Holland would have listened to such incoherent nonsense for even one hour.

However, those who had been following Buddhist teaching for some time found his lectures fascinating, and were really enthusiastic. After a while, I too began to find his words extremely appealing. In the rather sombre atmosphere of the classes I often had to laugh, however, especially when the Lama stumbled repeatedly over certain English words which he found almost impossible to pronounce.

After some time, I would burst out laughing when he told the simplest of stories. Lama Zopa told us about his childhood, and I laughed when he condemned himself for being ungrateful towards his parents. Sometimes it seemed as if he was saying just whatever came into his head, looking around like a naughty little rascal while he spoke. The American meditation teacher pointed out to us that Lama Zopa was being led in his speech, so that he was telling us what we needed to hear at that particular moment in time.

We came to understand that Buddhist teaching cannot be grasped with the intellect. Instead, we should relinquish our reason and leave room for transcendental, intuitive knowledge. The stories were intended to break our resistance, so that one day we would dissolve into nothingness and reach Nirvana. Perhaps, I thought, I will one day discover for myself this longed-for emptiness or Nirvana.

After some time I felt that I was indeed able to experience this emptiness. In the afternoons, we would talk in small groups on different topics. The beginners could question the more experienced participants. When we talked about Nirvana, the only answers we got were very vague. They said that this was intentional; Nirvana was not a topic for discussion, it could only be experienced. It could also come upon a person suddenly, perhaps when one's eyes were totally relaxed, not focused but seeing beyond everything, lost in a completely different perspective on reality.

I tried constantly to cultivate this special look, and once, when I was staring into the distance, not focusing on anything, I thought that I did have a fantastic experience. Another time I was sunk in deep meditation in the temple, when, all of a sudden, my physical boundaries seemed to fall away, and I felt that I was a much larger spiritual being. These were surely steps on the way to enlightenment, I thought. Small ones, but nevertheless....!

Lama Zopa's sense of humour and sensitive thinking started to impress me more and more. My curiosity was awakened by the mysterious Tibetan intoning which we chanted. At times we were forbidden to talk to one another for days on end, so that we would not be distracted by superficial talk and would discover instead the importance of striving for enlightenment.

At the end of the month several solemn ceremonies took place. One of them was the ceremonial expression of personal commitment to the Buddhist Way. Everyone who confessed the Buddhist faith had to repeat three statements loudly, "I take refuge in Buddha" (Buddha: the enlightened consciousness embodied in the founder of the religion); "I take refuge in the Dharma" (Dharma: the emancipating teachings of Buddhism); "I take refuge in the Sangha" (Sangha: the fellowship of Buddhist believers).

As far as I can remember, all of the participants took part in this ceremony. And so, we formally became Buddhists. Those who felt a special bond to the Lamas of this monastery were given new names by their teachers. I was one of them. One of the monks presented me with a piece of paper with my chosen name. I did not particularly like the name and soon forgot it, but now at least I felt that I was accepted as a Buddhist.

One hundred thousand Mantras for the green Tara-goddess

At the end of the month, everyone was glad to leave the hill on which the monastery was situated, to enjoy a warm shower and good food in town. However, I got a serious attack of diarrhoea and had to stay behind in the monastery on my own. In feverish nightmares, I lay there and assumed this ordeal was my way of working through the many new experiences of the past few months. No one bothered with me during this time; I don't even know if anyone knew I was there. Five days later, when I was beginning to feel better, the second course was already commencing. Only the very keen enrolled on this course. I was determined to do everything in my power to reach enlightenment, so I signed up.

Ceremonies and rituals are a part of Tibetan Buddhism. A sacrifice ritual is carried out, for example, to appease and satisfy the spirits of the region. Another ceremony is carried out in order to receive certain protective blessings. Only a few gurus are permitted to pass on this blessing. They are considered to be Tulkus, reincarnations of former well-known gurus.

Tibetan Buddhism teaches that the spiritual heritage of a person can be transferred to the next incarnation. Lama Zopa, who taught our group, was supposed to be the incarnation of a well-known spiritual personality, and so he had been given the title of

respect “Rinpoche” (“Precious One”). He had the authority to pass on certain practices.

A month later, at the end of the second meditation course, the Lama held a ceremony of initiation into the worship of and union with the Tara-deity, a green female Buddha figure. This ceremony was open to anyone who was interested. We had to make a commitment to take part in a two-week meditation on this deity, and to recite her mantra one hundred thousand times. A mantra is a certain sound recited in honour of a deity, and is supposed to effect a transformation of consciousness.

I participated in this initiation too, for I found the idea of a female deity quite appealing. A divine mother who surrounded me with her love seemed like a wonderful prospect. This desire for a female deity is expressed in various religions: Muslims honour Fatima, Mohammed’s favourite daughter, Hindus worship many goddesses and Catholic Christians honour Mary, all expressing a similar human longing for a divine mother. The neighbour’s daughter who had encouraged me to explore Tibetan Buddhism came from a Catholic family, and it seemed to me that the step she had taken from Catholicism to Tibetan Buddhism was probably quite a minor step for her. Both these religions resemble each other in the performance of similar practices and in the use of similar objects, such as ringing little bells or burning incense.

During the following two-week retreat, we began each meeting by reciting several specific prayers in honour of the peaceful, motherly green Tara. Next we recited the instructions of the Sadhana, prescribed meditation texts about becoming one with the goddess Tara. For example, we imagined that we looked like Tara, and that we were also green.

At the end, each individual was supposed to recite the mantra silently at his or her own pace, in the awareness that he or she was this deity. We counted off the number of mantras on a rosary with one hundred and eight beads. The completion of one rosary chain counted as one hundred mantras. The additional eight beads were meant to cover for any possible mistakes, or just in case we had been careless when reciting a mantra.

I had the impression that I always made more than eight mistakes, for my thoughts often wandered. Sometimes I felt homesick, thinking of a delicious meal back home, or even occasionally about a pretty girl-friend. Again and again I had to focus anew on the task in hand. It was the same with the others, we were all in the same boat. We were not supposed to become tense, because then we wouldn’t be open to the intuitive wisdom of the goddess.

After two and a half months of retreat in the monastery, having spent hours in meditation each day, I walked down the valley into town with a few other participants, I had the feeling that I was floating a couple of feet above the ground. I had the sensation of being on a high without having taken any drugs. We bowed and offered small sacrifices at every place of worship which we encountered on our way. At the stupa with the eyes of Buddha painted on it we offered a lot of candles. We then circled the monument clockwise, convinced that our karma would thereby be improved.

I would have loved to stay in the monastery to meditate further. Other people from the West had already become monks or nuns and walked around the monastery in their dark red robes. Since I had a tendency to go to extremes, and since I was determined in my goal of enlightenment, I was prepared to pay the price of total devotion to become a monk. However, I needed to receive some sign, a confirmation that I was on the right track.

One evening, I was hanging out with a young lady from Australia in front of the Tara statue which was situated in the middle of the temple grounds, somewhat lower than the level of the temple. It was already dark. We were walking around the statue, according to Tibetan custom, mumbling Tara-mantras, when suddenly Lama Zopa came out of the temple walking towards us, together with a Spanish nun. I had already met him a couple of times, but each time I was so overcome with awe that I hadn't known how to react to him. Each time he had asked me my name, and enquired about my health. This time, he asked me the same questions, but now I was prepared to answer and sensed an amazing calm. Laughingly, I replied that he had already asked me that before. He laughed too, like a little boy who has just been caught playing a trick. He then said a few words to the nun, and she, in turn, asked me to shut the door of the temple, as she had forgotten to do so.

I can still clearly remember climbing the long, steep steps that led up to the temple and shutting the heavy iron door. When I came back down, I again greeted the Lama with a certain awe. He had been talking to the Australian girl, and was now on his way back to his apartment which was situated in the temple building, but with a separate entrance. Through this simple encounter, the closing of the temple door took on a symbolic meaning for me: it gave me the inner assurance that I was not to become a monk. What I was searching for could not be found in a temple, it had to be discovered in the world!

Purification, Sacrifice and Good Karma

Looking back now, I think that I could have actually gone straight back home after receiving this guidance. Yet I was still obsessed with the desire to be enlightened, and so I left Nepal and travelled back to India, this time to Bodh-Gaya. For Buddhists throughout the world, this is a sacred place. It was here that Gautama, son of the king, found enlightenment around 500 BC while sitting under a *bodhi* tree, and received the title of Buddha (Awakened or Enlightened One). A mighty bodhi tree still stands there, supposedly having grown from the seed of the original tree.

Next to the tree there is a tall sandstone temple resembling a tower. This is the main temple and it contains a large statue of Buddha. Around the temple are many other monuments of people who received great insights as they followed Buddha. The place looks like a cemetery, with Buddha statues and stupas instead of crosses.

A crowd of beggars sat daily at the entrance to the walled grounds, loudly and sometimes aggressively demanding generosity from the Buddhist pilgrims. The beggars were Untouchables, who wouldn't have dared behave in this way towards their fellow countrymen. They were hoping for alms from Buddhist pilgrims, for they knew that they and their founder had rejected the Hindu caste system.

A few enterprising Indians had set up money exchange booths offering small change, so that the pilgrims could dispense alms in order to improve their karma. Others caught a few goldfish in a pond in the temple grounds and showed them to the Tibetans, threatening to kill the fish unless the pilgrims paid up. According to Tibetan belief, these fish could actually be an incarnation of a previous Lama, so the pilgrims handed over the money, went to the pond, and released the fish again "into freedom".

As well as the main temple, every Buddhist country has built a temple in Bodh-Gaya. Pilgrims come from all over the world to offer sacrifices, to purify themselves by performing certain rituals, or by means of other deeds to achieve good karma - necessary to reach enlightenment. Purification, sacrifice and good works do not of course erase the guilt and the bad karma from previous lives, but they do create good karma. By prostrating themselves in front of the Buddha statues, for example, pilgrims submit to the Buddhas who can help them become enlightened. Although the state of enlightenment, otherwise known as Nirvana, is like dissolving into a cosmic nothingness, those who have already been enlightened are supposedly still present as omniscient energy, so that they can help others who are also striving for enlightenment. These are the beliefs of Tibetan Buddhists who accept the Mahayana teachings. The Hinayana Buddhists from Thailand, Burma, Sri Lanka and other countries reject this teaching, because it does not originate from their religious founder, Gautama.

Although I wasn't exactly clear about my guilt and negative deeds, I was still convinced that I had to be cleansed. Naturally, I decided to subject myself to rituals similar to those performed by the pilgrims. Apart from distributing sacrificial gifts, I decided to perform daily prostrations. One was required to throw oneself face down on a flat wooden board as many times as possible, while reciting a certain prayer. This exercise was to be done in close proximity to the temple, as most of the Buddha energy was to be found there.

Since it was the end of February, and very hot in this little town in the middle of India, I realized that I could perform these exhausting exercises during the night, when it was cooler. However the temple grounds were locked at night, so I climbed over the high wall each evening so that I could prostrate myself on the wooden board many times before dawn. The darkness made the place seem sinister, and it was particularly unpleasant at dawn, when all the mosquitoes awoke and became really active. By the end of three weeks, I had prostrated myself 60,000 times and was as skinny as a beanpole. The simple Indian food in the Thai ashram where I was living was not particularly nutritious, and I was not getting enough sleep during the day due to the intense heat. I was thoroughly emaciated.

A German girl who was also staying at the Thai ashram asked me one day why I was doing so much for my religion. I couldn't give her a satisfactory answer. Almost all the Westerners there were following their own ideas on the way to enlightenment. Many looked quite neglected and dirty. In an effort to flee from rigid Christian traditions and from the pressure to perform in a wealth-orientated society they had turned to Buddhism and the simple lifestyle of India, not realizing that they had come under a new sort of pressure to perform, in the outworking of their religious practices.

One day, the word got around that a highly respected Lama was going to hold a week of important teaching sessions in Tibet House in Delhi. So, like many other Westerners, I set out for Delhi, hoping to receive a special blessing from the Lama. This eighty-year-old master, Ling Rinpoche, was one of the Dalai Lama's gurus, the main reason why he was so highly respected. During the week, however, his blessing seemed to pass me by. I understood scarcely anything of what he was teaching. I was staying with a few other young Buddhists in a cheap place in the city centre and the hustle and bustle of the city made me uptight.

My physical condition was also causing me some concern. In spite of eating plenty and regularly, I was getting thinner and thinner. At the end of the week, I heard about a special initiation in the North Indian town of Dharmasala where I had already been. I hoped that initiation into deeper practices would open the door to real freedom for me. For although I was striving for inner peace and harmony, in reality I felt more and more hunted. It seemed that I was being driven by an external force.

The statue of the red tantric goddess

I was pleased to find out that the initiation was being held by Lama Zopa, whom I had got to know during my first meditation course in Nepal. Together with Lama Yeshe, he had built meditation centres in Kathmandu and Dharmasala. As they were willing to teach in English their students came mainly from the West, and as a result they enjoyed financial support for the construction of these centres.

In my meditation on the green Tara goddess I had become acquainted with one of the simpler tantric practices, but now I wanted to experience it at a higher level. Tantra is a complicated system, by which one can achieve enlightenment in the fastest possible way through the application of certain philosophies, visualizations and practices. tantric philosophy is a view of life which affirms desire, and uses worldly pleasures as a means on the way to enlightenment. During visualization, one imagines a supersensory sphere with a Buddha figure at the centre. The aim of the practices is to reach enlightenment in deep inner union with the central deity through the *sadhanas* (particular regulations concerning the form of meditation, visualization techniques, and mantra recitation).

On the evening before the initiation, Lama Zopa delivered a serious speech. During an ominous storm which sent heavy rain drumming on to the corrugated roof of the centre, he warned us against abusing this high tantric practice. Only those who were seriously prepared to commit themselves to a later two-month retreat should participate – a retreat in which they would recite the mantra of the tantric goddess four hundred thousand times.

He made it clear that this was no elementary tantric practice, like that of the peaceful, motherly, green Tara goddess. This had to do with the red Vajra-Yogini-goddess who displays an aggressive, bloodthirsty, sexual aura. As a result of this warning, several participants actually left the centre. I was not to be scared off, for I believed that these Tantra-meditations were supposed to be a shortcut on the path to enlightenment. So far, the path had been rather tough, so the thought of a shortcut was quite appealing!

Our teacher explained the tantric practices. We were told in great detail what we should envisage during meditation. In order to help us develop our imagination, a statue of this female Buddha was set up at the front of the classroom. Since Lama Zopa was a chaste monk, he had arranged for the naked statue to be draped with a cloth. The image of this fiery goddess had to appear in detail before our inner eye, so that we could internalize it completely, before finally ourselves becoming this brilliant apparition.

Although pride is generally rejected in Buddhism, we were allowed to develop a divine pride, conscious that we were internalizing this deity. It was also claimed that this advanced tantric exercise would free us from compulsive eating and drinking, from sexuality, and from other worldly necessities. We were told that it was possible even to include worldly pleasures, and then to transform them into positive energy. This of course appealed to most of the Westerners: quick enlightenment without having to forfeit worldly pleasures!

Despite the prospect of combining enlightenment with life's pleasures, I didn't get involved with a German girl who was also taking part in the initiation, and who had apparently fallen in love with me. I was on the steep path to enlightenment and felt that a partner would only be a distraction.

After this exhausting course, all I wanted was peace and quiet, which is extremely difficult in India. When I heard that another important Lama was teaching in the town of Dehra Dun, where our neighbour's daughter from Holland was staying, I decided to go there. Perhaps in Dehra Dun I would be able to combine both my need for peace and my obligation of fellowship with those on the same path! For, according to the teachings of Buddha, not only are the enlightened consciousness (Buddha) and holy teachings (Dharma) important, but also fellowship among the disciples (Sangha).

The classes took place in a large English villa that had been rented by some Westerners with the aim of carrying out intensive practice sessions there. My Dutch neighbour was staying in the villa as well. She wanted to commit herself to Buddhist teaching and meditation, and had decided to stay for three years. When I asked her about her practice methods she shrugged, indicating that one didn't talk about these mysterious things. However, she had also learned not to be too inflexible, so she occasionally invited me to go into town with her to eat Indian pancakes and smoke a cigarette. We would sit in a tea-shop and reflect on the banalities of life.

There were many different opinions about the way to enlightenment. These views could be very far apart, especially among Westerners. During our discussions, the tension could be cut with a knife, since everyone wanted to attain their goal as quickly as possible.

The Tibetans themselves didn't seem to suffer from this "prestige pressure". The teachers meditate daily from childhood and are used to dealing with philosophic questions. Often they would laugh at us and our petty little problems, and encourage us not to take things so seriously. They said the many practices were merely aids on the way to enlightenment. Despite their encouraging words, I regarded the tantric practices as particularly important since they offered a quicker path to enlightenment.

At the beginning of June, I returned to Holland. My parents were intending to celebrate their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and since Buddhism teaches that parents should be honoured, I wanted to please them. My eagerness to become a Buddha had not abated, and I was determined to return to India.

A Buddhist on my parents' farm

I arrived in Holland and experienced my second culture shock. The apparent order seemed to stand in stark contrast to people's inner restlessness and driven-ness. My parents, friends and acquaintances were taken aback by my emaciated appearance. I didn't tell them much about my secret meditation practices, because I believed that only a person with a mature karma could be open to Buddhist teachings. I saw no need therefore to preach. The power of Buddhism is supposed to lie in inner change, where the Buddha nature is hidden. The outer person is just an illusion. True renewal and enlightenment take place within and work their way outwards. I was living under the crazy illusion that no one could observe my inner transformation.

My Buddhist way of thinking was virtually incompatible with the Western way of life. This became obvious even in my immediate environment. As a farmer, my father had to ensure a good harvest, so he thought he needed to use strong chemicals to protect the crops against insect infestation. I had learned in Nepal that killing animals should be avoided if at all possible, because it brings bad karma. Naturally I expressed my concern about my father's bad karma and refused to help him in this work.

In general, I wasn't the most joyful person to be around! The basic principle of Buddhism, "life is suffering", had taken root in me and was confirmed all too often. I once again retreated into spiritual withdrawal, just as I had done as a child. In my dreams and meditations, I erroneously imagined I had reached an enlightened condition. One day, when a friend who had been with me on the course in Nepal paid us a visit, he explained to my parents in more detail what we had experienced. Meanwhile I withdrew to do something "more important". My father still tells me how he looked for me after a while, and eventually found me in my room "in silent meditation", completely oblivious to the world.

I decided to forego my studies; I gave up my apartment in Nimwegen and sold or gave away everything that I no longer needed. During the summer months I worked on my parents' farm, but I was already secretly preparing to go on my next big journey. One evening, when I was watching a wonderful sunset on our patio, my father hesitantly approached me. He sat down next to me and cautiously asked about my plans for the future. I told him that I wanted to go back to India, whereupon he offered me part of my inheritance so that I could fulfill my plans. At this point we did not communicate very much in our family, so I was very surprised that my father had recognized how serious I was about this. Nevertheless, I initially refused his offer, remembering that materialism could be a hindrance on the way to enlightenment.

I am sure it was difficult for my parents to cope with the skinny, somewhat distant person that I had become, but they still tried to understand the background of the Buddhist faith. I had had a *tanka*, a Buddhist brocade picture, made for them in India.

It was a picture of the Buddha Maitreya, who is expected to come some time in the future. This Buddha is sitting on a chair but both of his feet are on the floor, indicating that he is ready to stand up and come. This brightly coloured work of art was given a place of honour in my parents' living room; and so Buddhism entered our home. A year later, my sister went to India as well, and became a Buddhist.

Buddhism in the West: Enjoyment and Worldliness

In the meantime, a Tibetan Buddhist centre had been established in the southwest of Holland, in an old manor in a village near Rotterdam. I was surprised that this centre was called the Maitreya Institute. The same tanka that I had given to my parents was hanging in the temple of the institute. A Tibetan scribe, a so-called Geshe, was living there with a few Dutch monks and nuns. When I paid a visit on a meditation day which was open to the public, I was immediately received as a Buddhist. Proudly I was able to demonstrate my prowess by sitting in the meditation position without any difficulty for half an hour, something that very few people can accomplish.

The leader of the centre told me about a three-week retreat which was going to be held by a Tibetan teacher in France. This teacher, Sogyal Rinpoche, belonged to another school of Tibetan Buddhism.

On the spur of the moment I decided to participate in this retreat and hitchhiked to France. About two hundred people came together in an old castle in a suburb of Paris. The hall, which had once been a Catholic chapel, had been converted into a Buddhist temple using Tibetan cloths, special tankas and Buddhist statues. There was a little shrine in which one of Buddha's teeth was kept, a supposedly powerful relic. The arched hall had assumed the magical aura of a Tibetan temple. We dined in the vaults and slept in different halls inside the castle.

People had come from many different countries. I was shocked when I noticed that men and women were not only sleeping in the same rooms, but often in the same bed. During similar courses in India, men and women were strictly segregated. It was made clear that sexual contact could become a distraction and was therefore forbidden. I decided not to let my surroundings distract me, and to continue carrying out the practices which I had learned.

The Tibetan teacher spoke fluent English, since he had completed his studies in England and now lived there. He seemed to me somewhat worldlier than the teachers in India. He was a plump little man with spectacles. He was single, but obviously very interested in pretty young females. A young lady told me about his approaches, but I didn't want to believe her at first. As far as I was concerned, Sogyal Rinpoche was a guru, and I didn't want to hear anything negative about a guru. He was to be honoured, since he proclaimed the sacred teachings of Buddha. In India, I had been taught that it was necessary to honour gurus, the Holy Scriptures, and those who were seeking enlightenment.

Sogyal Rinpoche's lessons were interesting. His examples were more worldly, and thus more understandable for Europeans. The topic was the Tibetan Book of Death. He had a sense of humour and tried to make the book comprehensible to us, although parts of it were quite frightening. His teaching was very different from what I had heard up to this point, but I knew that one had to be flexible on the way to enlightenment, and that all teaching was profitable. For most of the course participants the retreat was just an interesting "further education" course - they had never been to India and had no idea how serious Buddhist practices are. I was the only one who meditated first thing in the morning and missed my evening meal to carry out other exercises.

At the end of three weeks, a pretty French girl appeared. She reminded me in some ways of the blonde girl that I had liked so much on my trip to Brazil. Joelle, however, was not nearly as reserved as she had been, and tried to get my attention immediately. Her English was good enough for us to have interesting conversations with each other. On the last evening of the course there was a party with alcohol and music (unheard of in India), and she was determined to spend the night with me. I gradually began to loosen up. The strict teachings and practices which had me in their grip began to lose their power, but I still didn't want to spend the night with Joelle.

Twenty-four hours later, however, infatuation took over, and I spent the following week in Joelle's apartment in Paris. Like me, she had studied psychology and was fascinated by my stories. In telling her everything that I had experienced in India, I began to sense how hard and stony my heart had become. In this unexpected environment of trust, I began slowly to soften. A new desire for tenderness – which I had fled from in recent months - returned. I pacified my troubled conscience by reminding myself of what some gurus taught, namely that the enjoyment of worldly things can be permitted in tantric doctrine.

Manjushri, Iris the medium and Guru Ling Rinpoche

Despite the intensity of this experience, I was still driven by a desire to progress in Buddhism, and so I decided to go to the North of England, where there was a large Buddhist centre in an old castle in the Lake District. When I arrived, the evening sky was a dazzling red. Buddhism encourages taking signs seriously, so I interpreted the glowing sky as a special omen, and hoped that something essential to my enlightenment was about to happen.

"By chance", the Tibetan teacher who lived there was performing an initiation for the Tara-goddess. This very gentle, skinny little man had the title of Geshe, and seemed to me to be a model of humility. He was an active meditation master, who was endeavoring to gain intuitive wisdom. This centre was therefore named after the Buddha of wisdom, Manjushri. Greatly inspired by this teacher, I sat in the men's dormitory every day, meditating, absent from the world.

My craze for enlightenment was disturbed one day by a small Dutch woman with short reddish-blond hair, who was also staying at the centre. Iris wore jeans and a jacket made of Tibetan material with a coloured border. She had been a Buddhist for

some years and was, according to her, in telepathic communication with her Tibetan gurus, who were still guiding her. Her attention had been drawn to me by her spirit guides.

As it turned out, her guru was the old Lama, Ling Rinpoche, whose teaching I had attended in New Delhi without understanding anything. Although this woman seemed to me rather confused and agitated and was soon telling me strange stories about her childhood, I was curious about her contact with her guru. He seemed to be high up in the hierarchy of lamas; indeed, a photo of him was hanging in a place of honour over the altar here in England.

A personal guru is absolutely vital in Tibetan Buddhism, and I was looking for one. I hoped that this lama might accept me as his disciple. My hopes were soon realized when Iris received a telepathic message saying that he wanted to be my guru. Initially, I had planned to go back to India to look for a personal guru to instruct me. However, about two weeks later, Iris explained to me that the guru didn't think it was necessary for me to go. He could instruct me telepathically through her.

Telepathic guidance and relationship therapy

Iris held all sorts of therapy conversations with me. She had experienced unusually difficult traumas in childhood and was basically a very needy person. On the one hand she was seeking help to experience healing, but on the other she also wanted to help others through her abilities as a medium. She was powerful and powerless at the same time. Iris had been abused as a child, both spiritually and sexually. Her parents were involved in occult practices, and she had been a helpless victim. She was determined that this would not happen again. Iris had acquired a lot of knowledge through Buddhist teachings, and had been going for years to healers and therapists in the "alternative" scene.

She had given up her job as a High School teacher so that she could be free for her own healing process. The advice of spirit guides with whom she communicated telepathically was her main source of help in coping with life. These guides often gave their names: Ling Rinpoche, the Dalai Lama, Padmasambhava and Tara. For example, they told her exactly how she should react towards certain people and in certain situations, what she should eat, what to buy, and where she should go. They also gave her information about people she met.

Iris had explored Buddhism, the teaching of Bhagwan, Anthroposophy and New Age. Her Buddhist beliefs were an amalgam of different beliefs from various sources, something I had noticed was common among many Europeans. Her goal was not just enlightenment; she also wanted to be a medium for the gurus. It was necessary, therefore, to get rid of all inner blockages, including her unhealed wounds, for only then could the guru speak freely through her.

In Tibetan Buddhism compassion is an essential component, a requirement for reaching enlightenment. This so-called "Bodhisattva ideal" contains the desire to free other beings from their sufferings. My dogged pursuit of freedom and my "loner"

lifestyle had required a certain toughness of me, but I hoped that some sense of compassion could now develop in me. I realised I had still much to learn in that area.

And so I was prepared to help Iris. In order for me to do this, however, I had to enter into an all-inclusive relationship with her. Even though Iris was a lot older than me, and not really my type, I nevertheless got involved with her, believing that this step was essential on my path to enlightenment. In order to become compassionate I had to change.

Firstly, before I could be enlightened, I had to be willing to awaken from my dream world, where, according to Iris, many blockages lay hidden and needed to be removed. She wanted to help me by using her healing methods. And so, our relationship was based on our mutual agreement to help each other on the way to enlightenment.

On a secluded beach, we began our therapy treatment. Iris encouraged me to scream, in order to express all the pain in my heart. Memories of childhood hurts, unmet needs, and frustrating experiences rose to the surface, and I screamed out my pain until my hands cramped from hyperventilation. Up till then, I had either suppressed all these feelings, or I had been unaware of them. I had always considered them to be an unavoidable part of life's experience.

With the goal of enlightenment in mind, I swallowed all the difficulties that presented themselves. My relationship with Iris had now become more than just a friendship. For the sake of enlightenment all taboos had to be broken, and sexual contact was one of the methods we used during this therapeutic process. Iris said that she loved me a lot, and she felt I loved her, too. I was amazed at how she felt, because I certainly didn't reciprocate her feelings! Was I perhaps suppressing it? Slowly I began to doubt whether my perceptions corresponded to reality. I struggled through all the difficult conversations we had with one another with determination, rather than with love.

One day, as I left the castle to go for a short walk, an English lady called Margaret spoke to me. She was a Buddhist too and lived with her two children near the Buddhist centre. I was astounded to hear that she had dreamt of me six weeks earlier. Without ever having met me, she had seen me in a dream, coming out of the sea with my guru, and she noticed that everyone, including the leading Geshe, had bowed down before us. At the time of her dream, I was still looking for a guru and had not even arrived in England, so this seemed like a special sign confirming the path I should take.

Margaret's words flattered and encouraged me. She was also amazed about her dream, and tried to find out what mysterious gifts I possessed. From now on I felt called to proclaim to her and to others in the centre what I had recently learned, namely that enlightenment must be sought in real life, and not in the seclusion of a monastery. At the same time I didn't really know how to proceed, but I was sure that my guru would help me.

Margaret reminded me of my mother, not in looks, but in her personality. This became clear to me because I noticed that, whenever I was in the midst of philosophical conversations with her, my strength seemed to evaporate. I'd become

furious with Margaret and forcefully express my anger. She would stare at me, baffled, whereupon I would explain that my outburst of rage was a necessary step in removing the blockages which stemmed from the relationship with my mother. I had no intention of entering into a sexual relationship with Margaret, but we ended up in bed together. After all, my new motto was: "Anything that contributes to your freedom and well-being is permissible."

Later, I asked the leading Lama in a Tibetan Buddhist centre in Scotland, Samyé Ling, what he thought of sexual practices. He said that Buddhist teachings warn about excesses in this area, and advised me not to continue. When I then told him that my guru had affirmed me in such activity, he replied that I should follow my guru's instructions. In Tibetan Buddhism, a guru's word is generally considered to be of greater authority than the teaching of Scripture, and may sometimes even contradict it.

I was still spending time in meditation, but gradually it became less and less important. Instead I laid more emphasis on my inner healing. I wrote books full of observations about myself and my memories. Since beginning this therapeutic process with Iris, I felt I had become aware of how much my parents had hindered me in my life. Suddenly, many of my problems and inner blockages were being explained.

Findhorn – the world as enchanted unity

These new insights stirred hope of an expanded view of life. In encounters with other people, yes even in trees and plants, I now recognised part of myself. The world seemed to consist of a magical unity in which parts of me were reflected again and again.

This perspective became evident in a therapeutic step that I took. As I said earlier, I had always been torn apart inside, particularly vis-a-vis my mother. She had usually been consistent and strict in her upbringing. It was a case of two strong-willed personalities clashing. Since, being a child, I was the one that usually had to give in, I did so by escaping into my dream world, and by taking out my anger mainly on my sister, and sometimes on my two brothers as well. On Iris' advice, I searched for a tree in the woods which was to represent my mother. I yelled at it (or rather at her) putting my anger into words. This was supposed to allow deep-rooted, suppressed energy to flow again.

After a few weeks, I left the Buddhist Centre and travelled to "Findhorn", the New Age Centre in the North of Scotland. Before the centre was built in the seventies, the land had been barren, and no one wanted to live there. It had been chosen with the help of spirits as a place where special ley lines coincided. Now it was green and fertile. One of the secrets was that in this place, sun, moon, trees and flowers were worshipped as deities in specific rituals, songs and dances. In the therapy sessions offered in Findhorn contact with the powers of nature was included. These powers promoted self-realization, by supposedly having a supportive effect on body, spirit and soul.

Iris had already made her way to Findhorn on the instruction of her spirit guides. According to them, at the New Age centre we could learn a lot, especially about how to construct a centre like this. Usually Iris heard the guides as inner voices, and wrote down their words immediately. In certain messages these guides had already indicated that, one day, we too would head up a centre where the very latest “tantric method” therapies would be practised.

This prospect and the new experiences in Findhorn seemed really enticing and vibrant. After a while, though, I felt under tremendous pressure. I thought that I had to comprehend, analyse and categorize all of my actions and reactions in order to attain ultimate freedom. Iris and her spirit guides confronted me about my inconsistent behaviour on a regular basis – which wasn’t easy to take!

It was already the end of November, and quite cold. We were continually on the move, rucksacks on our backs, looking for affordable accommodation. The situation was irritating, but we thought that we had to accept it because we had been wanderers in a previous life. Messages from the spirit guides had confirmed the “fact” of our previous existence, and we were now working through our previous lives as part of the purification process.

Whereas Buddhism associates reincarnation with repeated suffering on earth and so tries to *avoid* being born again, esotericism, on the other hand, sees in reincarnation an opportunity to *make good* the mistakes made in a previous life. This concept renders good and bad behaviour relative, often leading to the lightly spoken phrase: “...maybe in my next life”. Similarly, people who cannot explain or accept their current problems try to cope with them by concentrating on events in their previous life. This is the basis of reincarnation therapy, in which the therapist tries to lead the client back into his or her previous life, to help the client ascertain the connection to his or her present situation.

In Findhorn, as in other parts of Scotland, there were so-called enchanted locations which are supposed to radiate a certain energy. We enquired about these places where, centuries ago, heathen ceremonies, rituals, sacrifices and festivals had been carried out. As soon as we would find out about one of these places, we would go there.

Iris claimed to sense this energy clearly, not only from people but also from places, objects and plants. These powers would often take hold of her, and cause her to have panic attacks. These attacks took her back to the negative energy which was influencing her and making her impure. As a result of her traumatic childhood, Iris suffered from acute insomnia, and she was also trying to control digestive problems through dietary means. In a way, we were not actually becoming free, we were simply fleeing from damaging influences.

I was fascinated on the one hand by all the new discoveries we were making together, but on the other I was experiencing an increasing resistance to all the demands being placed upon me. I soon learned that the cause of this rebellion was my “ego”; I should listen to my “higher self” instead. I often doubted the authenticity of these messages from my guru. But I was so determined not to lose contact with my guru and the other spirit guides that I submitted, often with gritted teeth.

Higher self and deepest conflict

We spent about a month travelling through Northern Scotland, and then Iris wanted to return home to Amsterdam. She would have liked me to accompany her, but said that I should meditate and be led by my higher consciousness. By this time, I had had a lot of experience, but I still found meditating on my higher self no easy task. (I was so insecure that, when we returned to the Manjushri centre, I prayed to every Buddha figure asking for help and advice. Unfortunately it didn't help much.) My inner being was ripped apart. Was it my ego? After an intense inner struggle, I finally decided to return to Amsterdam with Iris. Unlike me, she was of the opinion that this decision had come from my higher self.

This inner conflict left me feeling – at first unconsciously - that I was no longer free to make my own decisions. My freedom, which had meant so much to me, was now limited by continual analysis. Whom did I have to obey, and when? Was it my will, my “true” will, my higher self, my guru, or the advice and help offered by my girlfriend? It seemed as if I had been unthinking and ignorant in the way I had understood myself until now. It had brought me neither peace nor freedom, which meant that there was still something that was missing. My self-confidence waned more and more. This inner conflict, combined with the fear of losing both my freedom and my self-worth, reached a temporary peak on our journey to Amsterdam.

Before boarding the ferry for Holland, we stayed at a cheap place in London. We waited in our hotel room until late afternoon as we had booked the night ferry from Harwich to the Hook of Holland. It was already dark as we prepared to leave. Suddenly we started arguing over some triviality. Iris did not mince her words as she swore at me. Then she ran out of the room and down the steep staircase. Deeply hurt, and consumed with rage, I stormed out of the room after her. Beside myself with anger, I kept hitting her brutally like one possessed, until she was screaming in pain. That finally brought me to my senses.

During the crossing Iris could barely move, and had a stabbing pain in her chest. I was deeply ashamed of my behaviour. After a miserable journey we reached Amsterdam early in the morning. We were just about to board a bus going to Iris' apartment, when she collapsed on the street. A taxi driver ran over, lifted her into his car and took us to the nearest hospital. He asked what had happened. Writhing in pain, Iris told him about our fight. How I wished that the ground would have opened and swallowed me up, but judging from his reaction the taxi driver had heard worse.

Iris was taken straight into intensive care as a couple of her ribs were broken. I felt so ashamed that I didn't know how to behave towards her. This feeling of shame led to even greater dependence, and I felt more obliged than ever to help her.

Iris let me sleep in her apartment, and gave me exact instructions about how I should behave there as, in fact, her place was a temple. The walls were covered with tankas depicting Padmasambhava and Tara. Photos of the Dalai Lama and Ling Rinpoche as well as tiny sacrificial dishes of water stood on the little altars. It reminded me of the different sacrificial rituals in India, so I soon felt almost at home.

During my visits to the hospital, I was unable to show any sympathy or compassion, yet it was this very principle of Tibetan Buddhism, the so-called Bodhasattva ideal, that I wanted to cultivate through my relationship with Iris. I felt paralysed by guilt. Despite the pain that she was suffering, Iris continued to write out messages that my guru was sending me. She said that she could clearly hear the guides' voices inside her, and that she had to spend all her time writing down the messages. She felt that the love of her spirit guides was a great gift.

Now and again the telepathic messages were encouraging. For instance, I was welcomed to my new abode. Often, however, the messages were very challenging. It seemed as if my negative thoughts and the attitude of my heart were no secret to the guides. Nevertheless, these confrontations were supposed to help me on the way to enlightenment.

I had always told my family and friends that I wanted to return to India, but now I suddenly found myself in Amsterdam, living with a Buddhist woman. I was aware that nobody would understand this change of plans, but I saw it as a step of obedience to my guru. During the first few weeks, I didn't tell anyone where I was staying. According to our spirit guides, this process was in place of the meditation retreat that I had originally intended to do in India. The goal was to know myself, so that I could deny myself.

The way of enlightenment meant freedom from self. This could happen only if all bondages were broken. The *means* we were using were Buddhist, but the *methods* were New Age methods. Buddhism allows for such a mixture, because methods are just a means to an end on the way to enlightenment.

Tantric Therapy – the vision of a life without blockages

According to higher Buddhist tantric philosophy, everything that contributes to freedom - even sexuality, or New Age therapy and beliefs - can be included in the therapeutic process. Worldly pleasures like sexuality can be transformed into enlightening energy, a unity with the deity on all levels, including the sexual. Should habits or taboos from our upbringing or social environment hinder this union, they must be cleared out, eliminated or transformed. tantric therapy was supposed to help in this process.

This is where Eastern religion and Western thinking merge. The central theme of this unity is described in words such as enlightenment, unity with the cosmos, and other fascinating concepts. Blockages are obstacles that must be cleared out of the way. According to Western thinking, the greatest blockages arise during childhood, and consist of certain habits and patterns of thinking, of behaviour and emotion. It is necessary to discover them, to express them, and to correct them in order to break the hold that they have. Otherwise, these bonds can hold people captive, terrorise them or even make them ill. In India I had been taught pure Buddhist beliefs, but now I was living in Europe, more in New Age beliefs, where great emphasis is put on feelings and self-awareness.

When Iris was discharged from the hospital the therapy began in earnest. Together we re-decorated her apartment. Everything we did was of symbolic value and represented something within us that needed cleansing. For example, painting the living-room white represented the purification of our hearts; the hard work of cleaning the large living-room windows on the third floor symbolized cleansing the windows of our hearts. We argued about almost everything we did, but that was how it had to be, because the blockages in our hearts had to be revealed first, and then resolved.

However, scarcely would we have got rid of one blockage, than the next problem would emerge. Finally, we found relief from our stress by smoking marijuana together, though we took drugs only if we thought they would give us deeper insight. Under their influence we could see our problems from quite a different perspective. We were able to observe ourselves as spectators and we had a good laugh at all our struggles. Appallingly though, the next day all our deep insights had vanished into thin air, and the arguments would start all over again.

I usually dealt with Iris in the wrong way, according to her. My attitude towards her often triggered serious disagreements that made me feel guilty, even though I wasn't supposed to feel that way, but rather to learn from my mistakes. Although I constantly expressed my feelings of guilt and recognized their cause, I still couldn't get rid of them; instead I became increasingly frustrated. The daily arguments with Iris left me clueless. She usually knew better than me, as if she were much more aware of what was going on in her soul and in mine. My day-to-day awareness seemed to function at a much more basic level. When I was under the influence of marijuana or deep in meditation, I had the impression that I was moving on a higher level of consciousness, from where I could observe my normal state.

It was as if there were tension between these two levels of consciousness. Naturally, I wanted to remain on the higher level, but I simply couldn't manage it. I imagined the experience of enlightenment to be a state in which I would daily, continuously live at the level of my "higher self". There my ego, which had been conditioned by my upbringing and life-experiences, would no longer exert any influence on me. In enlightenment, so I thought, there would be no separation between Buddha consciousness (the divine light) and earthly, every-day reality. I assumed that my enlightenment would be complete when it penetrated my day-to-day life. The words "light falls on earth" became my life's motto, for this accurately expressed the essence of enlightenment for me.

Iris was on welfare, and earned some money on the side by giving therapy sessions. She had never been trained to do anything like that, but was led by her spirit guides during the sessions. She also started to give *me* sessions, to help me clarify my relationship with my parents, and so purify it. Afterwards, I had to lead *her* through a session, in which she tried to process the extremely difficult relationship with her dead parents. She would instruct me how to walk her through this, which led of course to more arguments. When neither of us knew what to do, her spirit guides would send her a message, telling us what we still needed to learn.

I wrote down my feelings daily and spent a lot of time writing a long letter to my mother, blaming her for all the frustration that her upbringing had caused me. However, merely writing it down was not sufficient for me to express all my emotions. During therapy, we practised the conversation that was supposed to take place

between me and my mother. I “trained” by trying to put myself into her shoes; I would then respond to her arguments in such a way that she would really hear what I was trying to tell her.

So, prepared through these practice-conversations with Iris, I went to visit my parents a short while later. Without much consideration, I told my mother that I had to talk to her alone. She came with me into the bedroom, where I proceeded to vent upon her my anger and my pain. My mother sat opposite me on the edge of the bed like a wall made of concrete. She didn’t know how to react. My outburst was totally unexpected, and I probably hurt her deeply.

I had to talk to my parents for a long time that day, in order to calm them down, explaining that this was part of my therapy, and was intended to establish communication between us. For a farming family like ours this was very unusual behaviour, but my parents did their best to try and understand me. Actually there never had been serious conflict between my parents and me, but we had also never really had much to talk about either.

After the conversation, I left for Amsterdam immediately, so that I wouldn’t be tempted to revert to my old behaviour patterns. I repeated this process several times. I opened fire on my father too, sometimes on the whole family, if they happened to be there. Once, as we were all sitting in the living room, I spoke about how taboos had to be broken. For example, there were no smokers in our family, and I felt that this taboo had to be broken; I offered them all a cigarette. We actually sat in the living room with lit cigarettes in our fingers, smoking and laughing. Only my mother refused to be a part of “this nonsense”

As I look back on this part of my life, I think it is a miracle that my parents didn’t throw me out. Hard as it was for them to bear my criticism, these conversations and even this abuse began to have an effect. Sometimes, after a few days had passed, my mother would call me to admit that our conversations had brought a certain sense of relief, for she knew that she had made mistakes in some of the areas that I had mentioned. Apparently, I was not the only one to be liberated when old mistakes were brought to light.

I held these enlightening conversations with my friends, too. During a weekend on an island with a group of friends, the atmosphere became extremely tense when I told one of them the truth about how I felt. They were appalled at my new behaviour, although I had done nothing but express my feelings. It took several further conversations to bring our relationships back on track.

The therapy had changed me; I wanted to make that clear to everyone. Of course I now saw how many people hid behind masks, and how much suffering and alienation was caused by suppressed feelings. The change in me did not bring peace into my relationship with Iris, however. It seemed as if there was no end in sight to the changes we needed to make in our behaviour patterns, both hers and mine. How could we ever succeed in screaming out all of our negative feelings and purifying them? Yet, we simply had to!

In the meantime, this continuous grinding-down process had become extremely burdensome. We were only concerned with ourselves. Since this was becoming

intolerable for both of us, we decided that I should get my own apartment. I went back to college, to resume my study of psychology, this time at the University of Amsterdam.

Chapter 3: Everything within me is divine, everything is permissible

Alternative “spiritual” psychology

My studies had little spiritual content. Their rationality was in stark contrast to the variety of alternative education which seemed to be shooting up all over the place, and which we had experienced. I could not imagine improving my low level of consciousness with the help of this rational science, so we spent a lot of time on Bach flower remedies, reincarnation therapy, yoga, Zen-meditation, spiritual dancing, faith healing, Reiki, and many other New Age methods. We sought the help of exorcists and mediums who claimed to be in contact with the dead.

Iris often felt that her apartment needed to be cleansed from the powers of darkness, or from souls which had not come to rest. Suffering permanently from insomnia, she grasped at every straw, in the hope of finding healing and inner peace. This brought us into contact with a lady who practised a special type of therapy called “rebirthing”. It is a method of breathing which originates in Hindu yoga, and was further developed by an American. A person has to breathe deeply without pausing between inhaling and exhaling. The theory behind it is that the breathing helps release inner tension that has built up through blockages over the years. The tension resulting from the trauma of birth, in particular, can be relived using this method, in some cases leading to enormous relief.

I experienced “rebirth” for the first time during a week-long seminar in France. It took place near Périgueux in Dordogne, at a camp-site especially equipped for New Age activities.

Two young ladies who were as yet inexperienced in this type of therapy instructed me to relax and lie on my back in a sunny meadow, and breathe deeply. Breathing deeply means that the body has a lot more oxygen than usual, which may lead to spastic muscle cramps. This is exactly what happened to me after about half an hour. While my arms, legs and face were contorted with terrible cramps, one of my trainee companions ran to find the leader of the group. She came and lay on top of me, instructing me how to breathe so that the spasms would be relieved.

I learned that it was necessary to view my negative thoughts, feelings and cramp from an external perspective, as it were. One was not supposed to get caught up in them and feel guilty, but simply to concentrate on breathing deeply. The basic idea was that everything was permissible, including spasm and fear. That is part of life, part of being human – and therefore part of me. I don’t have to feel guilty about anything, because I am innocent and essentially good. Anyway, explained my instructor, I was no longer alone. She was going to help me “through the birth canal” and into freedom.

It took another few minutes before the cramps suddenly eased, and a warm, tickly current ran through my body. A glorious feeling of openness coursed through my being, and I felt as if I were in the seventh heaven. As if new-born, I skipped across the meadow. I would have loved to experience this sensation all the time. I was sure that by using this method I would always feel fantastic, even without drugs.

In the group we sang songs about Mother Earth, God, gods and goddesses. Incidentally, we ourselves were supposed to be goddesses, as expressed in the song "I am the goddess". We sang about nature and the elements, whose power we wanted to receive. Tears of emotion and grief often ran down my cheeks. Today I believe that these songs addressed my deep, unconscious longing to be united with God. But at that time we learned that the divine nature lay within us; it had been covered over by the rubble of our upbringing, our hectic lifestyle, illness, problems and many other things. Now we were to dig it out again. At the time, I thought that my emotions were the result of my desire to become divine, to return to the security of my original state, and the very real prospect of being able to do so.

Buddhist philosophy agrees with this New Age idea, if one simply replaces the word "god" with the word "Buddha". Whenever we sang about the spiritual world, or about God, I thought about my beloved Buddhist gurus.

Rebirth therapy: Permitted to be a child again

My experiences in this seminar were convincing, and Iris and I agreed that it would be useful if I took a course in the alternative therapy method of rebirthing alongside my studies. This training took place in Holland and Belgium, in different places designed especially to accommodate group therapy. I signed up for the required individual lessons, which were very costly, hoping that I would overcome my identity crisis and improve my level of awareness.

Initially, the training involved experiencing the therapy for myself, aiming at my own inner healing. I felt that this experience was important not only for me, but also for the many people who had suppressed their childhood experiences to such an extent that they couldn't readily call them to remembrance.

It was important to re-live all of the emotions that were revealed during these sessions. In the training group, I had the wonderful opportunity of living out my need to be a small child, not answerable to anyone, and to having whatever I wanted.

Reliving one's birth was a very special experience. Fortunately my birth had gone smoothly, but there were enough other participants who had had traumatic birth experiences, or who had been rejected by their parents. Held by a therapist or by someone else in a warm pool, we breathed under water using a snorkel. The feeling of being in the womb came back to us. The intensive breathing stirred memories, together with the fear and grief we had experienced when we had to leave that safe and secure environment. The realization that my parents were not looking forward to my birth caused me grief and pain. The healing process consisted of gradually recognizing these wounds and becoming aware of their causes, the loving attention and acceptance communicated by the therapist or companions, and coming to terms with what we had just discovered.

Most New Age therapies have their roots in eastern philosophy and its worldview. Perhaps it was the spiritual relationship between the rebirthing method and Buddhism that gave me the confidence to embark on the two-year course. We not only learned breathing methods, we also learned a type of massage to relieve blockages in the

body. In the course we were also taught certain conversation techniques known as “voice dialogue”. Through this technique different voices, which are activated when decisions are to be made or an inner conflict is taking place, express themselves. Each voice could vocalize its point of view until “the truth”, i.e. what was best for me in a specific situation, was clarified. The aim was not only to accept the different voices, but also to accept the different parts of our personality.

I still remember vividly how, during a training weekend, we had to get to know the “monster within”. As preparation we were led into our inner being through meditation. This might consist of imaginatively going into a house and looking into each room until we came to the door of the cellar. We opened this door and went down the stairs, where there were more different rooms and corridors. With our inner eye we looked at everything carefully and then decided to venture into one of the dark rooms. There we came face to face with our inner monster. After we had recognized it, we acted out this part of our personality in front of the group. This was meant to deepen the acceptance process. Meeting our monster was not frightening, because each of us knew that this was a part of the self, and therefore permissible. Failure to accept this part of our personality would have caused a blockage.

While the other group participants acted out their newly acquainted monsters, some screaming, roaring or crawling through the room, I sat quietly in the meditation position. My monster was my withdrawal into the Buddha posture. What did that mean for me? To be quite honest, this discovery was of no further consequence to me. In the general atmosphere of acceptance, it didn't penetrate my consciousness enough to make me think that I might need to change.

During the rebirth training, we daily discovered new truths about ourselves. We breathed deeply for as long as it took till the pain, grief or other feelings surfaced and we had overcome them through the loving affection of the other participants. We could often laugh at ourselves afterwards. On the one hand I was becoming more liberated, because I was learning to accept myself with all my thoughts, deeds and desires, and laying aside my inferiority complex and my guilt. But at the same time I was also becoming more and more dependent on the affection of others. Many needs which I had until now suppressed, perhaps because of shame or guilt, suddenly had to be met.

Not only did this kind of therapy appeal to one's spiritual desires, but emotional and physical needs were also aroused. If we were divine, as was taught, then all of our needs were also divine, and had to be fulfilled and satisfied. Every desire was divine. Therefore, because everything – anger, grief, sexual experience and much else - was permissible, we had to learn to express everything without a sense of shame.

In pairs, we shared any personal feelings of guilt, and then declared each other innocent in whatever areas we had shared. At last, I didn't have to conceal my anger and then scream it out in some lonely place. The other participants thought that I was very courageous to express my anger so publicly. I was very open with the group leaders as well. I criticized them and complained ruthlessly. As genuine therapists they would certainly understand that my anger was not personally directed at them, it was only a projection.

However, I gradually started to feel an inner conflict arise. I was not being faithful to Buddhism and its methods of meditation. The gap between my meditation experiences and my everyday life was becoming larger. Sometimes I wondered if I wasn't getting further away from my goal of enlightenment, rather than closer. But then I would suddenly have an extremely impressive experience in a rebirthing session or in meditation, and the hope that enlightenment was near would return. I reassured myself by thinking of all the people who advocate tantric philosophy who say that everything that is effective can be used in the process of enlightenment.

I was absolutely determined to reach this goal, even should it kill me. But I still lacked sympathy and love towards other people. Since Buddhist teaching sees this as a necessity, I felt that I had to change. I often noticed a deep hate within me, usually towards Iris. She, however, expected me to comfort and help her in her difficulties. These expectations usually made me withdraw into a bad mood or into various diversionary tactics.

The Dalai Lama in London: "Give me your hearts!"

Once we went to a conference in London where the Dalai Lama was teaching. I was looking forward to meeting him for the first time, since I had not met him in when I was in Dharmasala. However he had given me guidance through Iris because he was one of the spirit guides whose voices Iris heard. His messages were usually particularly encouraging and sympathetic.

The lecture series that the Dalai Lama was delivering to around five hundred of his followers were extremely demanding. I understood very little of the highly philosophical speeches, and began to feel frustrated. Like many others, I just yearned for a single glance from this man who was considered to be a reincarnation of the Avalokiteshvara, the Buddha of Sympathy. I was sure that one look from him would take away all my frustration at one go. Iris of course was hoping that she would be healed from her insomnia.

Apart from these lectures, the Dalai Lama gave public lectures in Westminster Abbey, among other places, and in a large theatre. On these days we made our way to the appropriate building, together with a crowd of "fans" dressed in brightly coloured garb. During one of these public speeches in a theatre, a lady from the audience shouted out her despair about her temptations and lack of discipline. The Dalai Lama answered with the simple statement: "Try, try and try again!" We were all moved to applaud, not so much by the content of what he said, but rather by the clear encouragement in his friendly voice.

We assumed that there was incredible depth in even the simplest of his words. He said that he himself was not yet enlightened, and that he needed to meditate each day, just as we did. We considered him to be a Bodhisattva, someone who has renounced Buddha-hood in order to help suffering creatures on their way to enlightenment.

The Dalai Lama's birthday fell on the fifth and last day of the lectures. People asked what they could give him. After a birthday song, he explained that as a monk he

didn't need any material things. He just wanted one thing, "Give me your hearts!" I was immediately prepared to do so...

We had just left the lecture room when Iris accused me of not having shown enough sympathy for her situation. She was overtired and I felt that she was accusing me. Her words were enough to trigger off a chain of negative feelings and thoughts. The verbal blows which we gave each other left more scars on our already wounded souls.

We soon felt nothing of the blessings that we had experienced. It seemed that our arguments had developed into a storm during the conference. The freedom I so loved seemed to be in danger. I suspected that I was having to spend more time caring for Iris than investing in my own spiritual development. What or who was my priority? I much preferred seeking refuge in meditation and not bothering about Iris' problems.

The spirit guides intervened telepathically via Iris and told me I had to examine my behaviour - Buddhist meditation without the right behaviour was useless. I admitted my selfish attitude and was very ashamed. However, this was not the end of the argument.

Humiliated by the spirit guides

During the ensuing summer months, we not only went on a rebirth training course in France, but we also planned to participate in a Buddhist retreat, where the instruction and initiation were being given by advanced Tibetan teachers of the Nyingmapa school.

There are several large Buddhist centres in the South of France; in one place there is even a large stupa where people gather in hordes to receive blessings. I wanted more than anything else to withdraw into meditation, and as a result, I didn't bother about Iris at all - which made her more and more angry.

One evening Iris showed me a message from our Buddhist spirit guides, to the effect that they felt it necessary for me to leave this place of initiation and blessing because of my behaviour towards Iris. My self-centred attitude was the wrong basis for Buddhist blessings to be effective. Instead, I was to return to the camp-site at the New Age center where we had attended the rebirthing seminar.

When I read this message, my whole world fell apart. I felt that I had been caught out and was being downgraded. In my opinion the New Age practices were just a preliminary stage to the tantric blessings of Buddhism. I spoke to other Buddhists about my situation, and they could not understand why I didn't just stay there, since every problem would disappear anyway during meditation.

For me, however, obedience to my guru was of more importance. Deeply humiliated, I submitted to the will of my spirit guides and hitchhiked the 200 km back to the centre. I wanted to get to grips with the therapies that I had just learnt, hoping that this would help me overcome my deeply rooted selfishness.

With two partners on the way to Enlightenment

Although the practice of loving relationships was part of my training, and even though I was now feeling rather more confident in this area, I still felt unable to give Iris the time and attention that she needed. Her reprimands were hurtful, but they did show me how things really were. I became more and more aware that I had not yet reached enlightenment.

By this stage Iris and I had been together for more than two years. She was still plagued by sleepless nights, and during the day she was mostly restless and driven. Her spirit guides gave her promising visions of the future, which motivated us to continue to work on ourselves. However, the mood of our daily interaction was characterized by considerable tension. Our frequent fights caused increasingly deep wounds. We resolved again and again that we would improve, but the results were discouraging.

After a frustrating day I often had the most magnificent dreams. I would awake bathed in bliss. In my dreams I met a woman who radiated pure love towards me. I held on to these visions tenaciously and believed that enlightenment was near. Buddha himself had said that life is suffering. Even he had felt powerless when faced with the suffering of this world and had sought a way out. The Buddhist scriptures say that he found the way out of the prison of suffering only at the moment of his enlightenment. Buddha taught that it is actually possible to achieve enlightenment in this life. So I hoped that my glorious dreams were predicting my future.

Of course my search for a woman who would lead me to enlightenment, this wonderful state of pure love, was not confined to my dreams. This did not have to do first and foremost with sexual desire, but rather with my belief that the divine was manifested in feminine form – a form in which my craving for love, security and intense unity would be satisfied.

At the end of the rebirthing course, quite unexpectedly I started an affair with a young Dutch nurse who had done the same course. She didn't live far from Amsterdam, so I was able to visit her easily.

She desperately wanted to start a family. Actually so did I, but my first priority was my spiritual development. Iris, who was generally in favour of breaking taboos, became very fearful and resistant when I told her honestly about this new relationship. She had always said that she wouldn't mind if I had another relationship, because one must "experience everything". But now she wanted me all to herself!

In my dreams I had already begun to look for another relationship. To me it didn't seem possible to experience deep spiritual growth with only one woman, so I thought that different aspects of my ideals would be found in several women. After all, the enlightened Master Padmasambhava, founder of Tibetan Buddhism, had had two wives. I was sure they had helped him to reach enlightenment. I wasn't really the

type to have more than one girlfriend at the same time, but if this was to help me on my spiritual journey, I would make the most of the opportunity.

Retreat in India: Rats, Gurus and Demons

Having two girlfriends in Holland caused more tension than I was used to tolerating. I didn't have the peace necessary for meditation. So, in the midst of it all I took off for India to do a Buddhist retreat. During my first visit to India, I had been initiated by Lama Zopa in Dharmsala into the practices of worship and of union with the red Tantra goddess. At that time I had committed myself to carrying out a two-month retreat in which I would utter the mantra of the Tantra-goddess four hundred thousand times. I decided for the time being to make good half of my promise.

Before starting the retreat I travelled to Dharmsala. I wanted peace and quiet to prepare myself there for what I was about to do, and to receive the necessary spiritual blessings. I moved into a little house near where my guru, Ling Rinpoche, had lived. He had died a short time before, but I believed that his power was still present and at work in the place where he had lived. Special measures were being taken to preserve his body. A sculptor from Canada, who had been a disciple of Ling Rinpoche, had been commissioned to make a special sculpture to enfold his embalmed body. Occasionally I was allowed to look in on her work. She declared that she felt very honoured and blessed in undertaking this difficult assignment.

The death of the guru had not changed anything as far as his telepathic connection with Iris was concerned. His enlightened being was believed to be in an intermediate state called *bardo*, and would be reincarnated at a specific time in a human body. Secretly I hoped I might recognize him in a little Tibetan baby. Ling Rinpoche's spiritual achievements had already been transferred into various living masters, such as the Dalai Lama, for example.

I was told that a tantric mediation master lived nearby, and that he could answer several of my questions about meditation exercises. It was also quite possible that some of my late guru's knowledge might have been transferred to him, as they were both of the same school.

One rainy afternoon I visited the guru in his hut. He was a gaunt little man in monk's robes sitting in a narrow room full of tankas and holy writings. It was obvious that he had just finished his exercises, because he seemed to be hovering in other spheres as I performed the customary three prostrations and presented him with a gift. He seemed to be a particularly gentle person and answered my questions very patiently. He told me that I could ask him further questions about my meditation practice at any time. Later, in the course of my retreat, I realized with some astonishment that he had meant his offer literally. It seemed as though physical distance was irrelevant, and that he appeared before my inner eye the moment I called upon him.

On the recommendation of this meditation guru I chose for my retreat the small town of Kulu in North India, where the founder of Tibetan Buddhism Padmasambhava had once meditated with one of his wives. Kulu is a sacred place for Tibetans. They

believe that even now, about 1200 years later, the enlightening energy of this great guru is still there.

Legend has it that the king in those days, on the advice of some wicked men, planned to kill the enlightened guru and his wife (the king's daughter) at this very place. They were put on a pyre and the fire was lit. At that very moment, a deluge of rain fell from the sky and filled the little valley with water so that the wrong-doers, who had lit the fire, drowned, while the guru with his wife in his arms sat on a lotus flower in the middle of the lake that was formed. As a result, the king became a disciple of the Tantra Guru. Today the little lake in the valley serves as a reminder of this legend, and is called by the Tibetans Tso Pema (Lotus Lake). Legends like this were often related to us by the Buddhist teachers.

After a gruelling overnight bus ride, when I arrived in the town situated on the banks of the lake, I immediately noticed the Tibetan influence. There were three Tibetan monasteries, and many Tibetans were walking around the lake and praying out loud. When China captured Tibet in 1959, many Tibetan holy men fled into exile in India. A few monasteries had been built here, financed by Westerners interested in Buddhism.

I mingled with the pilgrims and walked around the lake a few times. Soon a few young monks who spoke English approached me. When they learned about my plans, they offered me a room in their monastery. I was befriended by a young meditation teacher who spoke hardly any English, but his students, two boys aged about twelve, appeared as translators. The teacher suggested that I carry out my retreat on the mountain above the village, and not in the noisy town. Apart from the peace and seclusion of the place, the great power of the Padmasambhava was supposed to still be at work there as he had also meditated on that mountain.

The teacher offered me the use of his shack up there, which he had specially set up for meditation. His young students would bring me any foodstuffs that I needed. This seemed like a good idea to me. It felt like everything had been prepared for me in advance. The teacher also helped me with the many preparations I had to make. In a large town nearby, I bought necessities such as rice, flour and candles. The right day for the start of my retreat was determined according to a lunar calendar by the teacher and by the leader of one of the three Tibetan monasteries by the lake.

On the auspicious day, I carried my things up the mountain with the help of the two young students and set myself up in the hut. It was made of mud and had a tin roof. The back wall was part of an overhanging rock. The only pieces of furniture were two old wooden beds. A little light entered the room through a small window. I gave the teacher money so that he would instruct the young monks to bring me fresh vegetables and milk every other day. As I wasn't allowed to speak, I wrote out a shopping list.

I cooked my food in the hut on a small gas stove. The area around the hut served as a toilet. A few hundred metres away there was a water pump where I could fetch drinking water and wash. I shared the pump with some Tibetan nuns who lived nearby and were also on a retreat.

I built an altar of course and sat and meditated in front of it on one of the beds, so that I didn't have to sit on the cold floor. Several photos of my guru were placed on the altar, along with many little offering dishes which held the prescribed requirements for the ritual, such as rice, water, incense and flowers. I had also commissioned *tormas* to be made - different symbolic figures made of dough, which also adorned my altar.

Unfortunately, the local rats were attracted by the food. Each day they attacked the food on my splendid altar. At first I defended it with my hands and feet, but by the end of the first week I threw the chewed figures away, because I was getting little rest at night. One day I observed a rat crawling into my backpack which I had hung high up on a beam. I grabbed the opportunity, seized my bag, held it tightly closed with both hands, and carried the rat a few kilometres away, so that I could release it (I was not allowed to kill animals).

It was a lonely month. I was alone with myself, with the rats, the gurus, who were supposed to be spiritually present, and the local demons. I meditated daily on the red Vajra-Yogini- goddess. The only words that I was allowed to speak were the *sadhanas* (the stipulated meditation texts), and the mantras in honour of the angry, female Buddha figure. Nothing else!

People are usually inclined to compare themselves constantly with others. This possibility was now removed from me. I could only observe myself, and I noticed how restless I actually was, and how much effort it took to concentrate on anything. After two weeks more and more negative thoughts arose. In an attempt to resist them, I decided to pray very loudly, and to hit a tin can with a stick at the same time, hoping that this would chase the demons away.

Buddhists believe that energies, spiritual powers and local demons affect meditative practices. It is said that Padmasambhava brought Buddhism to Tibet by trying to win over the demons using magical practices. Even today before they meditate, Tibetans say prayers aloud and bang loudly on drums in order to drive the negative powers away, and then they offer sacrifices to the positive spiritual powers of the region in order to gain their favour.

It was the rainy season. The heavy downpours drummed on the tin roof of the shack. Humidity and rain seeped in through the many cracks and holes. When I washed my clothes I had no idea how I was supposed to get them dry. When it was not raining, it was mostly foggy, so that I could not even enjoy the view and use this as some sort of diversion. Sometimes a tiny light bulb gave a little light on the dark evenings, but usually there were power cuts. I was then forced to read the prescribed texts with a candle in my hand.

Five times a day I repeated the long texts and fulfilled the specified visualization exercises. By using certain breathing techniques I tried to attain altered states of consciousness. To be honest, I noticed scarcely any effects of the meditation. I was happy to have survived a two-hour session without too much pain. After my retreat, it took a lot of effort for me to walk long distances.

When the month was over, I was happy to put this experience behind me. I invited the meditation teacher, the two students, and the nuns who lived nearby, for a meal.

It was a cosy get-together. The nuns were amazed at my cooking skills. Humorous stories were told of famous Yogis and gurus. But it was strange to be with people again and to converse with them, even though the conversation was difficult, as my guests spoke very little English.

None of the guests present had an easy life. They survived on the gifts of others. The teacher was worried about providing for the two boys. He was ill, and often suffered from severe stomach pains, but he couldn't go to the doctor, because he didn't have any money. He downplayed the pain, and said that enlightenment would make him well again. I had once met a monk somewhere else who asked me for money, because he had a stomach ulcer and needed to go to the doctor. He was very scared that he might die.

After the retreat I went back to Dharmsala to carry out the stipulated burnt offering ceremony. A number of different seeds and herbs which I had never heard of had to be burnt whilst certain prayers were said. Two monks helped me buy the ingredients and carry out the ceremony exactly in accordance with the stipulations. Because of the continuing rain a covered fireplace had been built for the sacrifice.

The ceremony lasted for hours. The two monks who had helped me said it was a favourable sign that all the ingredients had been consumed by the fire. Later, we met with all the others who belonged to their section of the monastery and celebrated a festive *puja*, a special sacrificial ceremony, because I had provided a meal for all the monks.

Face to face with the Dalai Lama

In the meantime, Iris had sent me a letter to Dharmsala, asking me to inquire of the Dalai Lama about her sleeplessness. If it had been up to me, I would never have dared to ask such a great spiritual person for an appointment and request healing.

In order to visit the Dalai Lama, an appointment had to be made with his secretary. In fear and trembling, I knocked at the secretary's door. He led me into the spacious apartment, where other guests were also waiting. I told them about my purpose and the retreat I had just completed. Everybody was very impressed by my story, and the secretary said that he would try and find some spot for me in the Dalai Lama's already full schedule. The Dalai Lama is the political leader of the Tibetan people, as well as a spiritual leader, so he receives a lot of emissaries from different countries.

On the day before my departure, I actually had the opportunity of meeting him. With a pounding heart, and carrying the present that I had specially commissioned, I sat awestruck in the waiting room. The present was a candle-holder in the shape of a heart, meant to represent the gift of my heart. I had managed to rescue some clean clothes from the incessant rain, and had wrapped the present in a white cloth.

After a while, a Tibetan dressed in a black robe approached me, and asked me to follow him. He led me into a reception room decorated with Tibetan carpets. The walls were dressed in simple brocade. The atmosphere was more official than religious.

As I stood there in anxious anticipation, the man in the black robe brought the Dalai Lama in. He looked just like his pictures in the media, wearing glasses, a dark red monk's robe, and a freshly ironed, yellow shoulder throw, which the gurus of his school, the so-called Gelugpa School, wear during official teaching appointments or ceremonies. He walked slightly bent, perhaps to express his humility.

He approached me surprisingly quickly, so that before I had a chance to prostrate myself on the floor, he had taken my hand. He looked deep into my eyes, patted me on the shoulder in a friendly fashion, and asked me how I was. I stammered out a few clumsy words, and offered him my present. It was as if I was seeing all my problems from a different perspective in his presence. I was so fascinated by his personality that I could hardly speak.

The Dalai Lama admired my present for a moment, and seemed to be delighted with it. He then gave it to a servant, dismissing him with a few Tibetan words. We were now quite alone. He then showed me to a seat next to him on a sofa, and asked me quite directly why I had come.

After he had patted me several times on the shoulder in a soothing sort of way, I tried to explain to him the complex problem of my girlfriend Iris. When I mentioned that he was one of her telepathic guides, and indirectly mine also, he hardly reacted at all. He didn't seem to take any notice. At the same time, he didn't seem to really comprehend the therapeutic process in which Iris and I were involved. His answer was accordingly disappointing. The solution he suggested for Iris referred only to Buddhist healing methods and meditative practices.

He then questioned me about my retreat, and asked how many mantras I had said to the Vajra Yogini, the angry female Buddha figure. It seemed that the number was an indicator of my spiritual condition. He praised my endeavours, encouraging me to keep up the good work, and bade me a fond farewell.

Impressed by his personal aura, but a little disappointed by his answer to Iris' great affliction, I left the Residency. The first thing I did was to run to the toilet. I don't know if it was my nerves, or the cleansing influence of this meeting, but I was finally "healed" of the constipation from which I had been suffering for days. In the nearby temple, I lit many candles to add more power to the prayers for Iris's healing, and the cleansing of my relationship with my parents and my sister.

In the evening, I met two young women who lived close to where I was staying, one from England and the other from Israel. They were also deeply interested in Tibetan Buddhism. We ate together and then smoked hashish. Under the influence of drugs it seemed that the whole world was constructed of the words we spoke. This was such an incredible experience that I thought I was experiencing a spiritual realization, becoming conscious of a spiritual truth that until now had been hidden from me. I was sure that I had earned this step on the way to enlightenment by my intensive meditation during the past month, and through the blessing of the Dalai Lama.

My head was full of the experiences and impressions of the last few days, as I got on the bus for Bombay to catch my plane to Amsterdam - where my two girlfriends were waiting for me. I was soon to discover that my so-called spiritual realization, the

insight that the whole world is made up of certain words and sounds, brought very little, if any, change into my daily life at all. This most recent experience had the same effect as my experiences with meditation and drugs. It was like a leaf blown in the wind.

The Rhine boat 'Cornelia' – my own Therapy Centre

My second girlfriend broke off our relationship. She didn't want to share me with another woman, and I didn't want to abandon Iris. Shortly afterwards she married and got pregnant, just as she had wanted.

Iris had converted the apartment which we had renovated into a therapy centre. Inasmuch as she was able, she offered courses on "inner healing through light meditation", as well as private therapy sessions. I also began to gradually build up a private practice, and offered massage and breathing (rebirthing) sessions. We were officially living on the unemployment benefits which we both received.

I bought myself a second-hand car with the money that I earned, but ended up on the edge of the road after an all-night celebration on New Year's Eve, having fallen asleep at the wheel. I had spent the whole night meditating with others and saying mantras. It was a miracle that I had a soft landing in a ditch, and that only the car was damaged. The second car that I bought shortly afterwards lasted only a few months, also. After a huge fight with Iris, I drove home aggressively. I hit a half-open manhole, spun out of control, and hit an oncoming taxi head-on.

This crash was a warning to me. This time I had got away with only a shock, but how long could this continue? Constant bickering, walking out on each other, wanting to end the relationship, long talks into the night, and then celebrating reconciliation had become the norm in our relationship. It was very frustrating and had to be worked through. Deep down, I always felt that I was a loser.

At this time, we unexpectedly came into contact with a man who, together with his boyfriend, had converted an old Rhine barge, "Cornelia", into a therapy centre. He now wanted to sell the ship as his friend had left him. I decided on the spur of the moment to buy the ship, and my father lent me the necessary money. Owning and managing this therapy centre raised my level of self-confidence. My living quarters were in the bow of the ship, where the former captain had lived with his family.

The former loading area had been converted into treatment rooms. There was even a large warm-water pool in which underwater breathing sessions could be held. There was no need to worry about making any noise because the boat was anchored some distance from a small harbour, at the edge of a little forest. Alternative therapy groups often hired the "Cornelia" for weekends, and I was able to pay most of the overhead expenses with this money.

I wanted finally to get my psychology degree finished, so I did an internship in the psychiatric department of a hospital. I conducted a survey there, which I used to write up my dissertation. It seemed almost like a miracle when I finally had my diploma in the bag. That also helped my self-confidence to grow again, slowly.

My parents were proud of me and sometimes helped me on the boat. My father had just sold his farm since none of his children wanted to take it over. My parents were happy to have time for themselves, and they hoped that this would be the first step into a new life. Perhaps this was the reason that they were even prepared to do breathing sessions with me. They showed their confidence in me and their practical support for my future, a future which suddenly looked quite promising, as a psychologist, a specialist in alternative therapies, and the leader of a centre for New Age Therapy.

Father's underwater therapy on my ship

For the most part, the people who came to me for therapy were not mentally ill. They had areas in their lives where they were experiencing difficulties, for example in their jobs or in a relationship with a partner. Often they were simply unhappy with the quality of their lives. They usually went away fulfilled and satisfied, having been able to let go of their fears and anxieties through deep breathing and the relaxation that followed. In the beginning, I too had nearly always felt good after my breathing sessions. However, as the novelty wore off, the sensation faded.

While I was sitting beside my clients, who were usually wrapped in a blanket and lying on a mattress breathing deeply, it seemed to me as if spiritual forces were working on them. I was more or less just an observer. I usually felt empty afterwards. In time, I became more and more dissatisfied with my work. At the beginning it seemed as if all sorts of fantastic things were happening. In the end, it turned out that it had only been an impression; there was actually no real change.

What meant most to me was that my parents started having therapy sessions with me. After the difficult confrontations over the years, our relationship had now become positive. Perhaps they were impressed by my new status in life, possibly my greater openness had made them curious and stirred in them the desire to communicate more openly.

My father was the first one to take up my offer of a rebirthing session, and he really did surrender himself completely to this method of breathing. Sometimes he lay in my arms like a little child. I knew that his mother had died when he was six years old. I now realized for the first time how alone he had often felt. We got to know each other from a completely different perspective. This was a huge miracle in my eyes.

My mother followed my father's example. Since I had always had the most difficult conversations with her, it was a challenge for me to lay aside my negative feelings and my anger during therapy. By recognising the wounds that she had had in her childhood, I learned to accept my mother more. She had also in the meantime begun to clarify the relationship to her parents, and so my grandparents too were drawn into the cleansing process.

Through my two-year supplementary training, I had got to know a therapist who organized training on the topic "Loving Relationships". I invited him to lead a weekend course in generation training. This meant that people could come with their

parents, and if possible their grandparents, in order to work on their relationship with each other. My parents and my mother's parents came to that weekend on my ship. Through simple exercises, we expressed our thankfulness and forgiveness to one another. Many of the participants were deeply touched by words which normally remain unspoken, but which could now be expressed in this safe environment. Even my grandfather, a proud Friesian farmer, was very moved when his daughter thanked him for something for the first time in his life.

As I have already said, these encounters were the main reason for my work as far as I was concerned. A good year later my conviction was confirmed by an underwater session with my father. As this new, alternative therapy was really quite sensational, the Dutch public television service was interested in broadcasting my work.

One day a camera team came to film for a television programme. This was obviously a great marketing opportunity for the centre and my work, but I needed people who would be prepared to appear publicly in therapy. Most of my alternative friends refused. At the last moment, somewhat in desperation, I asked my father if he would come. He immediately agreed.

The camera team had never experienced a session of this kind before. It was decided that they would record a group session first, following which one of the people present would be chosen for the recording in the pool.

I began the session with directed light meditation. The participants were instructed to concentrate on their body and their breathing, and to imagine that light was flowing into their body through the crown of their head and streaming into each part of the body. It was necessary to open up (at least the crown of the head), so that the light that comes from the cosmos can pour inside. After this meditation conscious breathing exercises began.

By now the participants had relaxed, and the presence of the camera crew was unimportant. As leader of the group, I could obviously not get into the breathing process as deeply. After a while I noticed that negative and positive feelings were being churned up in several participants, so I told the group to open their eyes and make contact with each other again. All feelings could be expressed. This invitation created an atmosphere of complete acceptance, which caused some to shed tears of grief or emotion.

My father had joined in this group process with heart and soul which impressed the camera crew greatly, because as a "normal farmer" he wasn't part of the usual alternative scene. Because of this, and because he was so "normal", he was chosen for the underwater therapy session, as this would emphasize the credibility of the method. So all four of us got into the pool: the cameraman, a colleague who was helping me, my father and I.

Following our instructions and under the watchful eye of the cameraman, my father did his best to breathe deeply under water using a snorkel. The combination of the warm water and the breathing technique rapidly brings back the sensation of being in the womb. The process of birth itself can also be recalled. According to the difficulty of the birth and also its consequences, the person breathing will experience corresponding thoughts and feelings.

After a very short time, my father began to have difficulty breathing. Cramps started. Normally I wouldn't have let him continue breathing under water with the snorkel in this state. I would have reduced the breathing to a minimum, and held him in my arms whilst he lay on his back. However, the cameraman asked me to continue for a little while, because he wanted to take a particular underwater shot.

As I was encouraging my father to continue a little longer, I felt the fear that arose within him. His birth had been very difficult. Everyone had feared for his mother's life. She had never fully recovered from the birth, and died six years later as a result. Perhaps for this reason there had been more concern for the mother than for the new-born child.

While my father was under water and continuing to breathe deeply, some words came to me which I spoke out with absolute sincerity, and which apparently were very significant, "You belong to us completely!" My father, whose face was still under water, turned around spontaneously and looked at us as if he wanted to say, "Yes, I belong to you!"

The cramps disappeared immediately. It was as if he felt really accepted for the first time in his life and joy radiated from his face.

After we came out of the pool, the journalist asked him how he felt. My father answered, "I feel like a little boy in a flower meadow!" It was self-evident! Everyone present was surprised at what had happened and started tending to him as if he were a new-born child. They spoke to him in loving voices, gave him tea to drink, and gently dried his back.

This experience made such a deep impression on my father that he decided to do the rebirthing course. When the documentary was shown on Dutch television six months later, on prime time right after the evening news, I was again deeply moved by it. Many who saw the show were also moved and rang up to make appointments to have a rebirthing session.

My practice could now have blossomed, were it not for the fact that I had decided to give it up. I had my reasons for this decision.

The woman with deep blue eyes

The tension with my girlfriend was a real thorn in the flesh. Increasingly I was dreaming of an ideal woman. An esoteric therapist suggested that this ideal woman existed only in the spiritual realm, but I couldn't quite accept that. Although I had already meditated on female deities, I still wanted to find my dream woman in this world. It became clear to me that I would have to work on any relationship with an ideal woman, but at least the basis would be right.

And that basis was what was missing in my relationship with Iris. My repeated promises to change didn't help; my feelings of guilt just increased. In the depths of

my heart I didn't want the relationship. The so-called spiritual reasons - helping Iris, and growing as a Buddhist in love and compassion - didn't really hold water.

At last, in the course of long conversations, I gathered up the courage to tell her I wanted to end the relationship. Iris understood my desire, but she said it had to wait until she had finished working through certain things. The result was that our relationship continued as before, because there was no end to this process.

One day someone advised us to try the new chemical drug Ecstasy. This would give us a new perspective on our relationship. We took the drug, and went for a walk in a park in Amsterdam. While we were walking, waiting for the drug to kick in, we got into another big fight. Full of anger and mutual rejection, we stormed off in different directions. I was just heading for the exit of the park, when the pill started to work. A tremendous feeling of ecstasy spread through me.

Suddenly I caught sight of Iris. She was coming from another direction, going towards the exit and walking hand in hand with an African man. She didn't see me. In astonishment I watched the two of them leave the park. Shaking my head I heard myself say, "Children of the world!" This episode made it clear to me that the relationship didn't have to be maintained, but still I didn't have the courage to come to a clear-cut decision.

One day I went to a gathering of all those who had completed the alternative therapy training in the same institute. People had come together from Belgium, Holland and Germany to spend the weekend together. Iris had come with me to spend the weekend in the nearby Buddhist Maitreya institute. As always I arrived very late, but that didn't bother me. I was feeling great! Everyone was sitting in a large circle, relating in turn what had been going on in their lives since they had finished their training. When I entered I was greeted with a loud "Hi, Martin!", which made me feel really welcome.

After I'd found a seat in the circle, I looked around at all the faces, many of them so familiar to me. I suddenly saw a young woman whom I didn't know looking at me with her deep blue eyes. There was an unspoken longing in those eyes, a craving that up till now I had encountered only in my dreams. This eye contact stirred memories of my recurring dreams about the ideal woman. Perhaps this was the woman that I had always been looking for? Well, this weekend would give me enough opportunities to get to know her. When I greeted her after lunch, she said, somewhat apologetically, that she was German.

I proudly told the group that I now had a therapy centre on a boat. Everyone encouraged me, praising this positive development. It was as if years of tension dissolved. That weekend I felt as if I were in the seventh heaven.

In the evening we had a party. A little marihuana put me in an exuberant mood. I danced in high spirits with every woman I fancied, and of course with her, the woman with the blue eyes. In a brief conversation she said to me, "You're quite something, but you're not everything." Although she had meant this to bring me down a little, her words brought a sort of release and made it easier to try and get close to her. She seemed to be friendly with another man in the German group, but I was certain that

this relationship was of little significance. At the end of the weekend, it was clear to both of us that this was not the last time we would meet.

Elke's story, told by her

When I looked into Martin's eyes for the first time, I felt that I could let myself go, consciously and without fear. The word "surrender" came to mind. For a few years now I had been looking for a new partner, a partner to whom I would be bound by more than wedding vows, a sexual relationship, children, a certain sense of security, and superficial daily routine. I yearned for genuine, deep communion on all levels.

And yet, I was married and had everything that perhaps many other women would have longed for. My husband allowed me a lot of freedom. We had been living with our two children in the country, in a comfortable house with a garden. I enjoyed financial security, and I had a car, which I felt made me more independent. I was constantly restless, though. I always felt that I was dependent and wasn't recognized for who I was.

After six years of marriage, I went back to school and then on to college. First I undertook an expensive course as a Gestalt-psychology therapist, followed by breathing therapy training. Of course it was up to me to make sure that I managed to keep up all my commitments, and organize my time, because my husband worked on construction sites which were mainly far away from home. He often came back only once during the week and at weekends.

Inside I felt driven, and didn't have a clue what I was looking for. When someone asked me years later, "What are you actually looking for?" I could only answer: "I don't know, but it's got something to do with love and absolute devotion." It was therefore obvious to me that this desire could be fulfilled only in a personal love relationship.

My sense of aloneness had started with a feeling of discontent at being a housewife. In a performance oriented society, I felt that I was being sidelined, dependent on my husband's salary. We spent the first few years of our marriage in Kaarst, a place near Düsseldorf, where the population had increased fivefold within a few years. Most people who lived there were young middle-class families from different parts of Germany. The men had found work in nearby towns. This had been our reason as well for moving there from the little town of Uelzen in the Lüneburger Heide.

House after house was built on the fields of the former village of Kaarst. From our apartment we could see the motorway and hear the cars roaring by. By five o'clock every Monday morning we were regularly awakened by the smell of exhaust fumes. The first time I pushed the pram through the area, I desperately tried to find a patch of green somewhere. The only green I found was in the graveyard – and even it was near the highway.

I had grown up in the countryside. Whenever I had a problem, or just wanted some peace and quiet, I sought refuge in nature. As a child I often sat for hours on the bank of the Weser, watching the water flowing by and the clouds passing overhead.

When I felt a particular need for protection and security, I took my bike and rode into the forest, sat down in the shade of the trees on the edge of a clearing, and watched deer and hares grazing peacefully, fully soaking up the tranquility of the forest. Sometimes, when I went to bed, I was overwhelmed by a deep, indescribable yearning. I would get up, sit on the window seat and watch the starry sky. There was a little forest not far from our house where we children often played and climbed trees. I was so at home there that, when the yearning came upon me and it was full moon, I would climb out of the window, lie down at the edge of the forest, and watch the moon and the palely lit landscape with its meadows and fields.

In Kaarst my life as a wife and mother was restricted to a three-bedroom apartment with a balcony, forty sq metres of lawn, two little children, and waiting for my husband to come home. When he came, he was always tired and wanted to relax for a while, whereas I was dying to talk to him. Then, once the children were in bed, we usually ended up in front of the television.

Although I tried to make contact with other women, it wasn't possible to build up real friendships. Almost two years later, I read an ad in the paper: two women wanted to meet other women and discuss all sorts of issues. I wrote a letter telling them about my situation and my desire for company. Another two women had also responded, and so we all met for the first time in a pub. We had a lot in common: hard-working, successful husbands, small children, the need for conversation, and the desire to reactivate our mental faculties. A few years as housewives and mothers already meant that we could no longer give our whole attention to a book or concentrate on a conversation. I was so used to being interrupted by our children in whatever I was doing, that if this didn't happen, I automatically lost the thread of the conversation after a while. Meeting these women was a streak of hope on the horizon.

Our goal was to restart our intellectual lives. Within a short space of time, this get-together was no longer enough for us. We wanted to be taught by real teachers, and so we signed up for courses in a Training Centre for Women, or went to Adult Education classes.

One day I signed up for a "creativity weekend". Before marriage painting had been one of my hobbies. I hoped that the course would help me reinvigorate my hobby. It turned out, however, that this was a self-awareness group led by a psychotherapist. Without knowing what I was letting myself into, I joined in and drew a memory from my childhood. The big oak tree in our yard came back to me. My two sisters and I had often played under this tree. We loved the large swing which my parents had put up there for us. To me being under the tree was synonymous with security. However the therapist and the other members on the course thought the opposite when they saw my picture of the tree. They wrote words like "loneliness", "alone", and "coldness" on the back of my sketch, and explained their interpretation by saying that the tree had no leaves and no deep roots. At first this made me sad and thoughtful. When the therapist dug a bit deeper, I could no longer hide how upset I was by their interpretation, and I began to cry.

I was now invited to recall other memories, and in fact I did have to admit that I had often felt alone because my parents had had little time for me. Reference was also made obviously to my current situation, and I recognized that I often felt just as alone in our marriage.

At the end of the weekend, I came home in a total emotional mess. I was angry with my husband and my situation as a housewife and mother. In view of my recent discoveries about our marriage, I invited my husband to participate in group therapy with me. He refused, however, saying that as far as he was concerned, our marriage was fine. The pain was so great that I just wanted to scream.

My only refuge was the therapist. He knew what was going on within me and what the causes of my sorrow and pain were. He was prepared to listen to me and give me attention. Individual therapy was necessary to prevent what could have become a psychosis.

I now know how my emotions distorted reality. At that time I thought that it was necessary to let all my feelings hang out. From now on I thought I had to be open and honest towards everyone with whom I had a relationship, and to let them know what was going on inside me. Consideration for others just meant suppression, and this was no longer going to happen.

I suddenly realized the wretched emotional state of the people around me. I discovered how they too were suppressing a lot. In their lack of awareness and ignorance about themselves, they didn't allow their feelings the space that they needed. They were letting themselves be shaped by others and by the situations they found themselves in.

"Becoming aware" and "experiencing oneself" became two of the most important concepts in my life. Nothing could be taken for granted any more, everything was analysed, and should serve to liberate me. Ignorance about oneself meant wanting to remain mired in staleness. Remorselessly I began to address weaknesses in friends and acquaintances, and was shocked when they became defensive. But it wasn't my intention to hurt them, I just thought that I could see their needs and by exposing them could help them tackle and overcome their problems.

My own inner crisis led me to want to become a therapist, and in order to be qualified I had to study, and so despite having two children I started on the long training – as already mentioned. This was possible only because we lived near Düsseldorf, where I could easily commute each day to college.

Whilst I was still studying, I started an *additional* course to become a Gestalt-therapist. I was now confronted with New Age methods for the first time, although I didn't realise it. I thought that it was just part of the training. I didn't associate anything in particular with the term "New Age", and certainly nothing harmful. On the contrary, I was fascinated when the main therapist did an exercise with us. We had to "establish" ourselves firmly on the ground by standing with our legs slightly apart and our knees relaxed and a little bent. We had to try and get in contact with the cosmos by mentally opening the crown of our head and letting cosmic energy pour through our mind and down our spine. We were told that when the energy reached our coccyx it went like a ray into the earth giving us a "third pivot leg".

This exercise was unexpectedly the means of giving my childhood yearning a name, it was "craving for God". At the age of eighteen, I had given up my traditional childhood faith. A frustrating experience with the pastor in our village was the trigger.

I felt that he was condemning me and said to myself: "If God is like his representative, I don't want anything to do with Him. I'll go my own way."

As I did the exercise and the old yearning was reawakened, it seemed that now was the time to satisfy it. I was revived and happy to have found a way which was not bound up with old, and as far as I was concerned, dead rules and traditions. It offered me an alternative way to achieve unity with God. This thought comforted me a lot, and I slept that night better than ever before. I took this as a sign that this was the right course for me.

I later read in books that I didn't have to use the term "God"; the words "elemental force", "cosmic power", or "energy" meant the same. I was impressed by this freedom of thinking. This was quite in contrast to what I had learned about faith up until now. I was again ready to get involved with God or the divine again. I began to meditate now and again, to open myself to cosmic powers.

Shortly after I came in contact with this type of exercise, and after doing it frequently at home in order to "establish" myself (as I had been taught), I went on vacation to Belgium with my husband. We stayed in a small mediaeval town whose main attraction was an old castle which we duly visited. During the guided tour I suddenly felt "I've been here before!" When we came to a room with a hole in the floor, through which prisoners had been thrown into the dungeon, I got very frightened, and felt that I had to get out immediately.

The following night I experienced absolute horror. I had one nightmare after another. When I awoke in panic between dreams, I got up and walked back and forth in the room, very scared, trying to calm down, telling myself that it had only been a dream. But I was certain that these dreams were connected with what had happened to me in the castle.

I had vaguely heard of the notion of previous lives, and I wondered if my experience could be evidence of that. I could not shake off what had happened that night. I wanted to know if it was possible to have lived previously, and to be able in some cases to remember it. One of my fellow students had studied parapsychology, and I thought that he would be competent to answer such questions. His answer confirmed my thoughts. From now on I was convinced that people have several lives, and that these lives can influence the present.

From that terrible night onwards, I often had nightmares. During the day too, images, which I thought were memories of a previous life, arose more and more frequently in all sorts of different situations. It wasn't only my dreams that scared me. I would sometimes wake up in panic, my heart beating wildly, and see demons around my bed. When I tried to deal with these things during private consultations with my therapist, he didn't really know where to begin. He said that these were reactions of fear resulting from bad experiences in my childhood. He personally didn't believe in either a past life or demonic powers. As far as he was concerned everything that happened was an expression of personal problems that I had not come to terms with.

In my Social Work course, I was being confronted more and more with the issue of women's emancipation. I read the associated literature, and over the next three years my attention was directed to the suppression of women, and its catastrophic results

on our society and environment. Feminist books and magazines challenged women and society to reflect again on feminist values. This meant rethinking, getting away from rational thought, for example, and embracing emotion or intuition. Values like relationships should be esteemed more highly than performance.

By this time, I was obviously struggling to cope with my three occupations and suffering from the pressure to perform, a pressure I had placed upon myself. I was still a housewife and mother, I was studying Social Work and was doing an additional qualification to become a Gestalt-therapist. My husband didn't help, as he was often away from home, but I still felt that I had to complete my training, so that I could firstly help others and secondly be recognized as a woman.

According to the feminist movement, feminist values were not only to be upheld in social and emotional contexts, they should also serve as a door to the roots of ancient feminine knowledge. This knowledge was to be found in matriarchal cultures and in heathen religions. It was founded on the idea that people should be and live in unity with nature. Women drew energy from trees and places where special ley lines supposedly existed, they lived in unity with the lunar cycle, and were acquainted with the energy of plants and stones, and used the position of the stars to tell the future. Women were often burnt as witches in the Middle Ages because of their knowledge, in particular in the sphere of healing.

I offered courses for women in Adult Education Centres, so that I could acquaint them with what to me was *positive* knowledge about witchcraft. I started by applying old Red Indian rituals, and used the elements of water, air, earth and fire in my personal meditation as well as in therapy sessions, or in group work. Consulting the elements was a symbol for holism and a ritual that was supposed to bring the seen and the unseen world into focus.

Nature conservation was very important to me. As women we were still able to make our views against suppression and destruction known, whereas nature was completely subordinate to human mastery. I joined the Association for the Protection of the Environment, so that I could at least make a small contribution to a more wholesome world.

The more I thought about the destruction of our environment, the consequences of a profit-oriented society, and the more I communicated this knowledge in my courses, the more threatening the state of the world seemed to be. I saw how quickly we were rushing towards the end, and that no one could stop this process. I gave my children a very bleak view of the future; I myself suffered from angst and depression, which I tried to break out of by aggressive criticism and desperate offers of help to others. I slowly realized what it meant to be weary of life.

Since I had become conscious of the loneliness in my marriage at the self-awareness weekend, I had tried to still my hunger for affection and recognition in several love affairs. Each time the glowing feelings made me think that I was living life to the full, but it didn't last. It always ended in the fear of becoming dependent again, and I usually realized that I actually wanted to stay with my husband. Spellbound and blinded by the idea that I wanted and had to go my own way, I thought that neither my husband nor my children would ever notice, let alone suffer from my actions.

My desire to be loved could not be satisfied in love affairs, so I blamed this on the men. I gradually became more and more negative towards them. My own inner conflict, the contact with women who no longer wanted to have anything to do with men, the books that I read, and the destruction of the environment (which was, as far as I was concerned, the result of male politics and attitudes), all this led me to the conclusion that men were the worse half of humanity. As the result of an experience which I had during my lifestyle therapy training, however, I was set free from these extreme views.

In one of the seminars the topic was on "Men and Women". The group divided according to gender and everyone could talk about the negative experiences that they had had with the opposite sex. Since we were still together in one large room, I suddenly became aware that several men were weeping about the hurt that they had been through because of women. This touched me to a certain extent, but I only became really softened that evening, when after the work was over, a few men began to dance in one of the rooms. Attracted by the music I entered the room and saw them dancing, relaxed, and free from their hurt. The music was light but expressive, and the men were even making contact with each other, and with those who joined them. Unexpectedly I heard the question within me, "Can it be true that half of humanity is good and the other half is bad?" I answered, "No". It became clear that my crass opinion had been a lie which I had convinced myself of, as a result of the literature that I had read and the seminars I had attended.

From now on I began consciously and deliberately to look for a new partner, since my husband was still not prepared to do joint therapy with me. I wanted my new partner to have the same interests, values and goals as I did. In New Age terminology I was looking for my "twin-soul". A fortune-teller confirmed that I would find "my" man. My trust in men grew slowly again, and I began to believe that a genuinely close relationship between a man and a woman was possible. I could now admit to a desire for closeness, which in my anger I had radically denied and suppressed for about a year.

It took nine years from the time I attended the "Creativity seminar" until I had completed both my Social Work studies and my Gestalt-therapy qualification. During this whole period I had not had a single year without therapy. As soon as I thought I had worked through a problem, another one emerged. Therapy sessions were also an obligatory part of my training. By this time I was living out my needs and emotions, but I was becoming more and more lonely in my family. I was going my own way, which I considered to be crucial. I thought that I was on the way to a higher goal. But the hopeless development of the world and my own helplessness in the face of this shattering perspective had thrown me into a crisis from which I could see no way out.

A woman friend told me about an innovative breathing therapy called "rebirthing". She told me of deep new experiences in connection with her childhood and her previous life. Perhaps this method could bring me a step further in my development.

I signed up for a session. It took place in a beautiful old house in Düsseldorf. Candles, flowers, incense sticks, a mattress on the floor - all of this created a special atmosphere. The therapist was about my age. He seemed to be very open and sensitive, and I soon had confidence in him. Wrapped in a woollen blanket, I lay on the mattress and breathed. It was a really wonderful experience being led into fears

and blockages, with few words, just breathing, and then to glide out of them. Apparently it was possible to overcome fears after all.

Later I realized to my great dismay that the therapist was also on the path to self-realization, just as I was, a path on which all sensitivity soon reached its limits. Ruthlessly, considering only his own needs, he started one relationship after another. He basically held up a mirror to me, showing me the way I was behaving. I should have taken note and asked myself if this really was the right kind of lifestyle. I did not. Of course I realized and sensed the many hurts that were bound up with the path of self-realization, but I still thought that they had to be taken on board if I wanted to reach my "higher" goal of being free and independent.

The therapist's apartment was used as a New Age centre. Every few weeks, a large group of people met to sing spiritual songs. Again I sensed my longing for contact with God, and was glad to have found people who were also on a similar search. I had been meditating regularly for a long time, so that I could be open for cosmic energy. At last I was no longer alone with my spiritual desires, but found myself in a group of like-minded people who could help me as well in my spiritual development.

After a few months, I decided to train as a rebirthing therapist. I learned that nothing at all was outside my control. Visualization exercises brought us inner light, money, a parking space in town, and other things. We were even told that we, as unborn souls, had chosen the place and family into which we would be born, so that we could learn specific things in this life.

Increasingly I was developing the skills of a medium, of which I was very proud. I took it as a sign of my advanced spiritual development. On the one hand, I was becoming more and more sensitive, and on the other, more and more adamant. By now I had told my husband quite openly that I was looking for a new partner.

The teachers on the course were Dutch. They had founded an institute, and were training people in Holland, Belgium and Germany. After I had been on the course for about a year, they arranged a meeting in Holland for all those who had completed the training or were still part-way through. Anxiety and agitation on the journey there forewarned me that something significant was about to happen. I was so nervous that I kept running to the bathroom

As soon as I arrived I went through all the rooms and had a good look at the people taking part. But I couldn't find anyone who particularly terrified me! Had I been mistaken? Still feeling a little tense, I sat down in the circle of participants.

An hour or so later the door suddenly opened and a young man, who reminded me of a German friend, entered. My first reaction was a trip to the bathroom! When I came back, I observed him at a distance. Our eyes met. At this stage I had given up looking for the man of my dreams. Perhaps this was one of the reasons why at that moment I was able to surrender totally and yet when we met later that evening, could offer some resistance with the words "You are quite something, but you're not everything."

Martin - as he had introduced himself - baffled me by his reaction. Instead of being put down a peg or two, he thanked me. Then he said, quite out of the blue, "Look at

me, we know each other.” I was doubtful, but he encouraged me to continue looking at him; he said we would be given more information. What an exciting and fascinating situation! I had never before met a man who gave the impression that he was so much more advanced in his spiritual development than I was. I followed his lead and looked into his eyes. We faced each other for some time, and then images and stories arose within me, in which Martin had been my unfulfilled love. He asked me what I saw and I shared my discoveries with him. He had received the same impressions.

I went to bed that night in complete turmoil. Early the next morning I felt myself forced out of bed; I took a long walk in the forest to restore my equilibrium. I kept trying to convince myself that though the encounter had been exciting, it wasn't binding, and that I could return to Germany leaving it all behind. This, however, was not to be the case. A week later Martin called me at home and invited me to come to Amsterdam to his therapy boat. I accepted gladly.

Chapter 4: Wild love

Martin: Elke's first visit to my dream ship

My heart was beating wildly as I lifted the telephone and dialled Elke's number. I had stupidly misplaced her address, but since I was desperate to see her again, I went to visit the leader of our rebirthing course, and quite casually asked for it. I didn't even know her last name.

She picked up the phone immediately and seemed very pleased that I had called. However, when I suggested that I might visit her, she said that it would be better if she visited me, as she didn't know when her husband and daughter would be at home. "Oh no!" the thought flashed through my mind, "she's married with children! Hands off!" Was it the voice of my conscience? I quickly suppressed the initial shocked reaction, because my longing to be with Elke had higher priority. I wanted this love relationship at any cost; so I invited her to my ship.

There was only a little over a week until our first private meeting. I started redecorating the rooms with great enthusiasm. Over the following few days my father and I built a new couch for the living area of the ship. I made a new bed for my bedroom and painted the whole room white. While I was busily engaged in all these preparations, I asked myself why on earth I was going to all this trouble. Not being able to come up with any answers, I took refuge in marijuana, and in grandiose visions of the future. None of these visions, in which I fathered many descendants for Buddha, were fulfilled - but they inspired me in my work. I seemed to be driven by some inner force/power. Finally, when the anticipated day came, and Elke called to tell me where I should pick her up in Amsterdam, I quickly lit a few candles. I had already put flowers in the different rooms of the ship, and my Buddhist altar was replete with fresh offerings.

Proudly I led Elke on to my dream ship. She was amazed at this reception, and felt like a princess being welcomed by her fairytale prince.

Elke, like Iris, was older than me. This did cause me a little concern, but I was so infatuated that I had lost touch with reality. All the obvious factors against this relationship no longer mattered. Only we two and our feelings for one another were important. Elke told her husband that she wanted to move in with me in Amsterdam. Apparently he had guessed that something like this would happen, so he didn't even try to stop her.

Now I had to break up with Iris, which was no easy task, because of our therapy business relationship. As well, for a considerable time now we had been planning to lead a two-week workshop in Portugal, and ten people had already enrolled. I drove to Portugal with very mixed feelings, while Iris flew to avoid the long, exhausting trip. Needless to say, we had major problems with one another during this time. It was only with the help of drugs, therapeutic exercises and meditation that we managed to get through the fortnight. The participants were satisfied in spite of the chaotic circumstances. Most of them were fascinated by their first experience of the spiritual methods that we taught. Yet I felt like a blind man leading the blind.

Iris was so tense that she could hardly sleep at all. She wanted to stay on in Portugal after the workshop, resting and relaxing at a camp by a lake. I took her to the beautiful, isolated place where she wanted to stay, told her that I was going back, and that our relationship was over for now. Even though the end of our relationship had been coming for a long time, a dramatic row ensued! To ease her shock, I stayed for the night. I wanted us to break up on good terms, but in the end I just felt that I was abandoning her. I set off for Amsterdam on my own as if I were fleeing. During this period I hardened my heart so that I could finally keep to my resolve to break free from my girlfriend.

In fact Iris didn't give up so easily. She kept calling me at all hours of day or night, sometimes several times a day. She even called from France and America, where she was staying to enhance her spiritual development. The high costs of these calls – especially from America - ended up on my bill, but I paid for them, because I was feeling terribly guilty about the situation.

Elke tried everything in her power to help me extricate myself from this relationship. In fact, at the end of the day I succeeded only because of her. However, she could not free me from the hardness of my heart - which she was soon to experience. A new relationship doesn't come with a new heart.

Elke: The long search for spiritual leadership

Because of my love for Martin, I often crossed my own physical and emotional boundaries, hoping that I had found in him the spiritual leader that I so desired. In my mind, I could sense the danger he was in because of his relationship with Iris, and could recognize, both from a therapeutic and human point of view, that he was losing himself. I felt that the situation was somehow linked to invisible powers, but couldn't imagine that these powers would ever attack me in order to prevent me from influencing Martin.

At the end of the two weeks which Martin spent in Portugal, I was constantly experiencing extreme restlessness and fear at night. On one occasion I woke up in panic, thinking that I could sense an enormous dark ghost in the corner of the bedroom. My heart almost stopped. I crawled under the bedcover and with great difficulty convinced myself that it had just been my imagination. The following morning my legs were covered in bruises.

On one of the early weekends in Amsterdam, I accidentally left my earring on the ship. When Iris found it, she thought I was trying to spread negative energy with it. She repeatedly said that she wanted to finish the relationship with Martin, but that the therapeutic process must first come to an end. This meant that they should both be able to part from each other in peace and harmony. All behavioral patterns that had any sort of claim on the other person had to be dissolved and purified.

One day when I called from Germany, I only got the answering machine. Martin's voice sounded distant and eerie, almost disembodied. Aghast, I organized all the essentials for my family and set off in great haste to offer Martin support. When I arrived, he was saying goodbye to a client. He was very happy to see me on the one

hand, but on the other he was very churned up, saying he had to go to Iris's as quickly as possible; they had arranged to meet at 5 o'clock. He didn't seem like himself, and in my concern I tried to stop him from going. With a stony face and cold eyes, he refused to stay, packed his things and left. His facial expression revealed a completely different person whom I didn't recognise, and it scared me.

I stayed up until about 3 o'clock in the morning waiting for Martin. My concern had now turned into jealousy. I picked up my things in anger and was just about to leave the ship, when he appeared. He seemed more relaxed. I was furious and started yelling and screaming at him. I was simply not going to put up with this situation any longer! He was shocked at my violent reaction, and emphasized again the necessity of talking to Iris. I gradually calmed down and gave in. I didn't want to be an obstacle to him in sorting out this old relationship.

Martin: Testing the relationship with hard drugs

About six months later, Elke moved in with me on the ship, though she went back to her family for two or three days every week, to look after her fifteen-year-old daughter and do the housework, in an attempt to ease her deep feelings of guilt. Her son had already moved out and was living in a household with other young people.

We had so much to discover about each other that I gradually reduced the time spent on my work. Sometimes we would lie in one another's arms for hours, holding each other tightly, lest we lose all the good things we shared. We both thought we had found true love in the other.

Elke was convinced that we no longer needed any gurus. The love we had for each other would suffice to guide us in the right direction. Various New-Age friends also said that our relationship was something special; some of them even prophesied that we would have a wonderful future together on a higher level of consciousness.

To test our true feelings for each other I suggested that we take the drug Ecstasy together. Elke had never had anything to do with drugs, but she agreed to do it with my assistance, with the aim of deepening our relationship. It was an exciting adventure, for I had already experienced this drug. That time I had taken it with Iris, and in doing so had realized that I had to end my relationship with her.

Now with Elke it was exactly the opposite. It was as if everything in us affirmed our bond; the external world lost its importance. We were being guided by our feelings for one another and I was confident that this relationship would help us progress more quickly towards Enlightenment. This was all confirmed by the drug – from which we assumed that it would lead us into deeper levels of awareness, reveal truth to us and at the same time enable us to experience superior guidance.

Naturally, difficulties couldn't be ruled out all together. My hardened heart often got the upper hand, and I thought I could see how Elke too was carrying around suppressed anger. I would fiercely challenge her to express her anger, which outraged her. I took this as proof of her hidden aggression. After that, the mood would be ruined for the rest of the day.

Then there was the continuing difficulty of breaking up with Iris, a situation fraught with anxiety and annoyance for Elke. As well, we were both suffering from a nasty skin-rash – which we interpreted psychologically as our ardent love “getting under our skin”. After seven months I could no longer envisage life without a constant itch. Several times a day I would take a hot shower, which relieved the itch for an hour or so. We tried all sorts of alternative remedies, but in the end had to have recourse to allopathic medicine.

In the meantime, we had started working together, and we noticed how fragile our love was. Despite our desire to be devoted to one another, we were scared that we might each lose our “self”, or that one of us could dominate the other. During our leisure time, everything was wonderful, but when we were working with other people, things became more difficult. Love alone didn’t seem to be a good enough foundation for our work together. Obviously we needed to sort out the areas of leadership and competence.

During the first therapy weekend that we led together, we very soon had some differences of opinion, and an argument arose between us. For me, it was very embarrassing arguing in front of the group, but the participants said they didn’t mind as they could learn from it. Influenced by my bad experiences with women, I now felt it wiser to keep my private and professional life separate. This idea, however, was met with great resistance and anxiety on the part of Elke, because it shattered her dream of our experiencing everything together. Apparently there was no easy solution for this source of tension.

Elke was under the impression that the ship was a blockage to our love. We sometimes felt threatened by all sorts of powers, whose presence was confirmed by a clairvoyant who was in contact with the spirit world. She came on board a few times to exorcise the many spirits of the dead who lived there. As well, she taught us to say a so-called “Christian mantra”, in which the name of Jesus was used as protection against demons.

My work as an alternative psychotherapist was becoming less and less enjoyable. Countless methods of therapy were now being offered on the market, and I had the creeping suspicion that my knowledge was only superficial. In the hubbub of methods and liberation philosophies, we were trying desperately to listen to our inner voice. That’s when one of our friends, an American reincarnation therapist, sent us an invitation to go on a spiritual trip to Egypt. Elke felt we absolutely had to go. After thinking about it for a while, we booked two places, hoping that in Egypt we might receive new direction for our future.

Martin: Burning our boats behind us

All 25 participants in the group were “spiritual seekers” from Holland, England, America and Germany. Several worked as alternative therapists themselves. A small-set, elderly American gentleman walked around the sights with a pendulum to help him answer many of his questions. He wore different chains around his neck with symbols on them, including the druid star.

Each of us was curious to know what kind of life we had previously led in Egypt. In directed meditation, we immersed ourselves in the past, in order to follow with our “inner eye” or in our imagination events which arose in our memory. Most people thought that they had been high priests who served in the temple, or even that they had been Pharaoh.

We travelled down the Nile in a cruise ship for a week, we wandered through the mighty temples, climbed up one of the pyramids by night, and meditated at the foot of the sphinx. It was important to us to sense the powers that were still present there. For our Egyptian travel guide, our group was certainly an exotic sight. At the end of our travels, we even had a laugh at ourselves and our affected spiritual behavior.

Barely three weeks later we were back in Amsterdam, and I felt a deep aversion towards the ship and our therapy work. Out of the blue, I said to Elke, “I don’t want to work here any longer! It doesn’t feel right any more!” The next morning I expressed my reluctance once again, as I was supposed to hold a group therapy session that afternoon. We put our laundry in the washing machine, which was in the kitchen on the lower deck of the ship, and then sat down at the breakfast table.

Not too long after, we heard thudding steps on the deck. We looked out and saw two men running towards our living quarters. At the same time we saw a thick cloud of smoke coming out of the middle of the ship. *Fire!* I rushed downstairs to see if I could possibly extinguish it. Black smoke belched towards me, and I knew right away that it was hopeless. The two men had already called the fire brigade, who came immediately and very soon had the fire under control. Luckily, the ship wasn’t completely destroyed. The kitchen, however, where our new washing machine had been, was totally destroyed. The cause of the accident was probably a short circuit in the washing machine.

Elke and I didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Our entire working area was now unusable; only our living area had been spared. Now I simply couldn’t continue with my work! For us this was a sign that we really should leave the ship. Thankfully, it was well insured, and we were able to repair the damage and sell the ship without suffering any loss. In spite of this sign I was tempted once more, though, to keep the therapy centre going. Just when the renovation work was almost complete, the film about our therapy was broadcast on television. It included the underwater shots of the breathing therapy with my father. The pictures were obviously very moving and made such an impact on viewers that many called up after the programme, expressing their desire to undergo similar therapy.

However, after briefly considering it, I stuck with my decision. The ship was sold to another therapist and we set out on a world trip. The Dutch idiom “burning your boats behind you” had suddenly taken on a literal meaning for us.

Martin: Planning our travels by listening to our ‘higher selves’

For a long time Elke had been dreaming of travelling around the world. She had become a mother at a very young age, and then got married. She had never enjoyed

the freedom that I had experienced on my many travels; so she thought that this was now the perfect time to fulfill this long cherished dream. I was actually tired of taking long trips, but since we were still very much in love, I agreed.

We started planning. We meditated in order to get into contact with our “higher selves”. Our higher self would advise us about the countries we should visit and the best route. I had completed only the first half of a commitment I’d made to go on a two-month retreat, so I felt I should fulfill this commitment first. We decided to go and live in India for three months. During meditation Elke thought of Indonesia, and so this country became our second destination. We received no further information, however, so we decided to sleep on it and try again the next day.

Elke: Farewell, and departure for India

That night I had a strange dream. I saw the continent of Australia, and a voice said to me, “You will find your heart here!” The leader of the rebirthing course had said to me once, “When you find your heart one day, your work will really take off.” I intuitively felt that I was keeping my heart closed for one reason or another. I thought of the fairy tale of the frog king. In that story, one of the king’s servants had had a ring put around his heart after the king had been turned into a frog, so that his heart would not shatter with pain. Next morning I related my dream to Martin. He said immediately, “Ok, let’s fly to Australia then.” From there we would return home to Holland via New Zealand, New Caledonia, Tahiti and America.

We had two months to prepare before embarking on our adventure. We stored some of our few possessions at Martin’s parents’ place. I put all the things that I felt belonged to me in a small room in my family home. It was a difficult time. While sorting my things, I experienced a deep sense of mourning, and wept a lot. It seemed like a process of dying. One after the other, I had to let go of everything that until then had any meaning in my life. I looked back on what had been my ideal of marriage and family, and saw how it had dissolved into thin air. Why was it so difficult to lead this perfect life?

My daughter, who was fifteen at the time, said nothing about what was happening, and I didn’t have the courage to bring up the topic. I tried to convince myself that she was old enough to be on her own for a few months. It helped to know that my husband was working nearby, and came home every day. We didn’t even argue any more. According to him, he considered our relationship to have ended several years before. This brought me a little relief, but it didn’t stop my mourning. Clearly, a completely new stage of my life was beginning.

At the end of October, at two-thirty in the morning, we arrived in the sweltering city of Bombay. Martin had seen the poverty of this city before, so he didn’t want to stay there for long. We decided to fly on to New Delhi, and left that same afternoon, after some hassle and difficulty in obtaining a ticket. We were both weary and in need of some sleep and rest, so we spent our first night in one of the most expensive hotels in the city.

I was fascinated by the bright and noisy turmoil of Delhi. The many rickshaws and suffocating car fumes didn't bother me. The air was so heavy with smog and dust, that after only two days my hair was standing like straw on my head. My eyes feasted on the sumptuous Indian materials, the carvings and the jewelry. The Muslim quarter was completely different. Women walked through the streets dressed in black, veiled from head to toe. I felt awestruck and sometimes insecure in this strange world.

Two days later, we took the train and then the bus to the northern town of Dharmsala, where Martin had spent some time a number of years previously. He insisted that we stay at the Buddhist centre, where he had been initiated some years earlier. This meant that we had to abide by the rules and sleep in separate rooms. The rooms were each fitted out with one bed and a little table. Black patches on the walls gave evidence of damp.

One night, I had just crawled into my sleeping bag when I felt itching on my skin, as if the sleeping bag was crawling with tiny worms. I jumped up and knocked urgently on Martin's door. He shone his torch into the sleeping bag, and we actually discovered lots and lots of little maggots inside.

I had had enough. Every evening, there was a huge spider on the ceiling; every day I had to battle the monkeys which tried to steal my food; now there were maggots visiting my sleeping bag! In spite of my protest, Martin wanted to observe the rules of the centre and the commandments of Buddhism: no animals were to be killed. He got dressed, hung the sleeping bag outside on the line, and by the light of his torch, patiently removed all the maggots one by one with tweezers.

I felt really out of place. I didn't even feel any affinity with the Western tourists, most of whom had already taken meditation courses or been in initiation ceremonies. Nevertheless I was determined to wait for Martin during the four weeks of meditation that he had planned. During that time, I was asked how long I had been a Buddhist. I answered that I was not a Buddhist, I was a Christian. In my heart I sensed that, though I found Buddhism interesting, I didn't want to belong to it.

Martin: Seeing the Dalai Lama again

In the meantime I was having serious doubts about completing the second half of my meditation retreat. For some inexplicable reason, I was no longer wholeheartedly committed. I spoke to different Tibetan clerics, hoping to receive some advice. One of them laughed as I described my dilemma, and told me not to take it so seriously, but to try another time.

In general Tibetans seemed more laid back. In their eyes, western Buddhists like me probably seemed like restless spirits, driven by the pressure to perform. Still, I didn't want to take this decision lightly, and continued my quest for the right guidance.

A few days later, the Dalai Lama was to give an audience for western visitors. Perhaps meeting him would bring me clarity! We joined a long queue of people waiting in the courtyard of his residence. After a few hours, the line started moving. The Dalai Lama stood with a few other monks on the bottom step in front of the

building, greeting everyone with a handshake. When we were still about five metres away from him, the loving, simple and humble charisma of his presence touched us so much, that we both broke down in tears. All human problems seemed to dissolve before him. All questions disappeared like snow in sunshine.

When we finally stood in front of him, he looked into my eyes in such a friendly way, and held my hand in both of his, as if he knew me well. I felt as if I was in a higher state of consciousness, just as I had often felt during meditation. I thanked him for his spirit-guidance, and told him my name when he asked. He seemed to be looking, not at my visible body, but at a greater being within and around me. My human form seemed meaningless in his presence. His aura lifted me above every perception of reality.

This elevated feeling lasted a little while, but it vanished as suddenly as it had come, in the cold, damp air of mid-November. I was rather disappointed. It was as if a drug had just stopped working. I experienced no clarity, no actual direction for my plans, in this encounter. I was left with a sense of not knowing where to turn.

Chapter 5: This word to my soul

Martin: My Guru in a glass case

In India of course we visited the house of my deceased guru, Ling Rinpoche. By this time, the preservation work on his corpse had been completed. Now he was in a glass showcase in one of the rooms, sitting on a throne in the meditation pose. It was said that his spirit had been born again in a little boy who was found under the guidance of Tibetan mediums when he was three years old. To test the authenticity of the Lama's incarnation, a number of different objects were put in front of him, and he had to choose the ones that were the personal effects of the old guru. Having recognized the right objects, and so passed the test, he was brought into the Lama's house with his mother, in order to undergo rigorous training, despite his tender years.

When we arrived at the house and saw the little boy running around in his red monk's robe, I was a little confused. I didn't know to whom I should pay my respects - to the boy or to the old master in the glass case? When the little one saw us, he stopped playing, ran to us and raised his hand to bless us. Elke, who was not accustomed to this ceremony, reacted towards him as a mother would. She felt sorry for him because he was surrounded almost entirely by adults and was already subject to so much discipline. A Tibetan teacher quickly picked up the young Lama and set him on a little "child's throne" on the veranda. There I bowed before him. The little boy, now conscious of his status as a guru, immediately laid his hand on my head to bless me.

As he was in other respects just a normal Tibetan child, I could obviously not expect wise advice from him. So, I decided to sit in front of the glass showcase and make telepathic contact with the spirit of my guru. The room with the embalmed body of the Lama had only one tiny window and so was quite dark, even though it was bright outside.

According to custom, I respectfully bowed three times before the body, and sat down in the meditation position. Elke sat down next to me. The room seemed filled with a spiritual presence. Immediately a sort of telepathic communication began, an inner question-and-answer game. Suddenly a thundering voice cried loudly within me, "Go your own way!" I caught my breath: I was horrified at this unexpected challenge. Thoughts raced wildly through my head. This guru had been like a father to me. Now it was as if my loving father was showing me the door.

Could he really mean it seriously? In a state of despair and confusion I left the house. On the way to the Buddhist Centre, I asked Elke what she had experienced. She told me that she had held a telepathic conversation. The guru had said to her, "Martin always wants to be something special. He must first learn to be a normal human being." After long and difficult conversations, it eventually sank into my shaken soul that both messages were suggesting the same direction. Little by little, it became clear to me that Tibetan Buddhism had been nothing but an escape into another culture. Just as, many years before, the closing of the temple door in Kathmandu had been a sign to me that I was not meant to become a monk, now another door to Buddhism was closing. The challenge of the guru to go my own way meant that I should leave this culture trip behind, and discover my own way as a Buddhist in the world. This path was now one I shared with Elke. Talking with her eventually calmed me down.

We paid one last visit to another Lama, who again encouraged me to postpone my commitment to meditation. That settled the matter. We finally decided to leave the cold North, and head South.

The town of Agra enticed us, with its beautiful tomb called the Taj Mahal. A Mogul Emperor had built it out of love for his wife, who died after giving birth to their fourteenth child. We felt that something of this love still pervaded the monument like an aura. The dome-like white marble building, with its slender minaret-like towers, reflected different colours, whether gleaming in the sunlight or illuminated by the full moon. In the proximity of such grandeur people seemed to be happier.

One morning Elke and I left our cheap hotel (50cents per night) to have breakfast in town. We couldn't agree on whether to walk or take a rickshaw. I preferred to walk, in order to avoid the usual haggling over the price with the rickshaw drivers. (Only once during our travels had we had a positive experience with a rickshaw driver: we were exhausted at the end of a sightseeing tour and the rickshaw driver actually asked for the agreed fare! To our astonishment he explained that he was a Christian. His honesty made a deep impression on us.) However, that morning the rickshaw drivers didn't look particularly friendly or accommodating. Against Elke's wishes, we ended up walking, which resulted in a terrible argument. A young man approached us and asked if we were having problems. We told him why we were arguing, and quite out of the blue he invited us to visit his family. For me it was a welcome diversion from our argument. I had never been invited to an Indian home before, so I accepted with some curiosity.

We drank tea in his large, richly furnished house. He then introduced us to his brother, who was a merchant of precious stones. After some small talk about our travels, he told us that he exported gems to countries all over the world, and that he also had a business partner in Australia. However, because he had already exceeded his export quota of precious stones, he could no longer deliver any supplies to him. He asked us if we could help him. We would buy the stones from him and take them to his partner, who would repay us. Since, however, we weren't planning to arrive in Australia for the next three months, we could mail the gems to Sydney ahead of time, and hand them over to the dealer when we arrived. Naturally, we would also profit on this deal.

Somewhat taken in by the circumstances of our unexpected meeting, we drove with our hosts to their gem store. Behind the door of the office was a little altar with an elephant god. The man bowed to it and mumbled a few incomprehensible words. I thought to myself, "If he is so religious, there can't be anything fishy about this business." Even when he asked us to keep the deal a secret, I still didn't suspect anything. After all the formalities had been completed and the stones had been delivered to the post office, the two brothers drove us to the Taj Mahal, so that we could admire the beautiful building in the evening sun.

In the middle of the night, Elke suddenly woke up in a panic. She had had a dream telling her that this whole business was rotten. She should cancel her account right away, since we had paid for the gems with her MasterCard. However I was so convinced of the legality of our agreement that I calmed her down, and took full

responsibility for the whole business. Not until we arrived in Australia was her dream confirmed. It was indeed a bum deal, after all.

The following evening we continued our journey South. Wrapped in a woollen blanket and wearing ear plugs, we sat huddled together in a clattering, draughty bus. There were no headrests, so many passengers leant their heads on their neighbour's shoulder for support. Every few hours the bus stopped at a tea stall or so-called restaurant, or at a bus station. Despite the late hour there were always lots of people lingering around. A few of them had fallen asleep on their vegetable carts, or were standing together smoking and shivering with cold. One man who was still trying to sell samosas (little balls of dough filled with vegetables), even though it was the middle of the night, affected me deeply. I cried as I saw how he was faithfully struggling to earn a few rupees for his family. The people around us seemed to have starving, thirsty souls. It was as if they were looking for something, not knowing what, but hoping desperately to find it nonetheless. Elke and I were probably in a quite similar state. Looking at this man with his samosas, I recognized my own search, my poverty and my hopelessness.

Since the telepathic message from my deceased guru that told me to go my own way, Buddhism had lost its attraction for me, even if I refused to admit it. Finally, when we visited the town of an ancient Buddhist king, I could no longer find anything in the temple to remind me of blessing or power.

Elke: Illness and guilt

By now we had been on the move for a few weeks, and I had been having intestinal problems for some time. I was completely worn out by the tiring train and bus trips, the many people who constantly besieged us, begging or trying to sell something, by the poverty, the cheap hotels, the food that I wasn't used to, and the many attacks of diarrhoea. My biggest concern was that I could no longer see my daughter. I thought of her being alone at home so often. Once I woke up Martin in the middle of the night and asked him to drive me to the post office so that I could call her. In my heart of hearts I hoped she would tell me how much she missed me, and that I must come home. However she didn't, so our journey continued.

We tried to get some rest in Khajuraho, a town of four thousand inhabitants, and home to more than twenty empty Hindu temples, each one dedicated to a different deity. Both the interior and the exterior are decorated with sexual motifs, making them especially popular with tourists. Even though the town is small, it has an airport where a plane lands twice every week. Most of the passengers being tourists end up spending only two or three days in Khajuraho, since the town has simply nothing else to offer.

We spent about two weeks in this rather strange place. I spent most of the time in bed. I was running a fever and the abdominal pain got so intense that Martin had to call a doctor, who gave me some medicine. Alone in bed, I had plenty of time to think about my life. I wrote letters and wept a lot. There was an enormous battle going on inside me. I felt torn between this adventurous journey, wanting to be with Martin, my desire for spiritual development, and the guilt feelings and my longing to be with my

daughter. Thankfully, I was able to let go of my son, who was already leading his own life.

I felt abandoned by Martin. The “love of my life” didn’t prove to be so in times of difficulty. He didn’t really pay any attention to me, but spent hours meditating in temples. On one occasion I observed him sitting motionless in the holiest part of a temple with rats running around him. He stirred briefly only when one of them started nibbling at his socks.

Now and again, though, I would visit the temples as well. One day, as I was walking alone through a temple, looking at the tantric figures, I began to dance slowly and softly across the room. Inside of me, I could distinctly hear some kind of Indian music. The term “temple prostitution” came to mind, and a story was already developing before my inner eyes. It was a story that had happened to Martin and me at that very place, a thousand years ago. And how surprising - even then I had felt abandoned by him! I became angry, and had one single thought: escape!

Shortly afterwards, I had a massage with an older Indian man, called Omre, who had become our friend. As he loosened my tense body limb by limb, my anger dissolved into mourning. In tears, I told Omre my story, and how I had abandoned my family back in Germany. He didn’t know how to handle it, but tried to comfort me anyway.

Martin: At death’s door - twice

Omre invited us to his little straw-thatched mud hut. It had two rooms - one for him, and one for his son, the son’s wife and his family. Most of the cooking was done in a low, stall-like building next to the hut, in a room set apart for the purpose. Here Omre’s daughter-in-law prepared the meal, crouched in front of a small fireplace made of baked clay. Water was fetched from the river, and a field nearby served as the toilet. As we waited for our food, we smoked Indian cigarettes and Omre showed me how to make peanut butter. His wife only came home occasionally on a visit, he told us, as she was looking after a small farm a few kilometres from the town, where she kept cows and goats. With this visit, we got to know the country and its people a little better.

On one of the Indian religious holidays, Omre took us to a garden restaurant. People were sitting outside at covered tables. We could see cups and teapots everywhere. As it turned out, the teapots were filled with beer, since alcohol consumption was prohibited on religious festival days. Omre didn’t want to be seen, so we drank whisky out of teacups in a secluded room. Soon our souls were floating in other spheres, and conversation became muted.

Alcohol and drugs were frequently consumed in this little place. Emptiness seemed to hover over the entire town. It was as if the numerous abandoned temples served as a rendezvous for all sorts of spiritual powers. These powers and the deities that used to be worshipped there seemed to stimulate spiritual activity. Elke and I, too, often smoked marihuana, imagining we had reached divine consciousness, a state which caused fears and emptiness to disappear.

Meditating in the temples only deepened the emptiness I felt inside. Since hearing the call of my guru to go my own way, my inner self seemed to be falling ever deeper into a hole. Even though I thought my call was to abandon the culture-trip and find my personal way as a Buddhist in the world, yet I remained puzzled about the true meaning of this advice and its practical outworking

Selfish thoughts consumed me, making me incapable of giving Elke any attention. During this time she was facing a serious intestinal problem, and was increasingly suffering from guilt about her daughter. She needed me to show her more compassion and to be close to her. I couldn't understand her concern and often felt that she was just being demanding. Inevitably, two weeks later we had a bitter argument, and decided to continue our travels separately. However, we "happened" to catch the same bus, and made up again.

Our journey took us to the far South of India. The landscape was extraordinary, with palms, paddy fields, and many gloriously colourful plants. There was a lot more water than in the relatively dry North, but we were surprised to learn that the population here was even poorer. A Frenchman, who lived as a Buddhist monk in Sri Lanka and was travelling through India at the time, told us about an ashram led by a woman (a building where people live together under the leadership of a guru). This woman was called the "Holy Mother". He told us about the miraculous healings that happened simply as a result of this woman's embrace, and recommended the place to us.

In order to get to the ashram, we had to cross the river in a ferry. When the ferry reached the riverbank all the passengers gave the ferryman a few paise (a fraction of a penny) on disembarking. However, he demanded five rupees from each of us. I flared up. He started to yell and refused to let us off the boat. I pushed him aside and in anger threw the money into the water. With our hearts still racing, we reached the ashram.

We were disappointed to learn that the "Holy Mother" was on a lecture tour in Australia. Only a few of her followers were there, most of them Westerners. Since it was almost evening, an English woman wearing a sari (a garment wrapped around the body and covering the head) offered us a room and a meal. She instructed us not to leave the grounds of the ashram after nine o'clock; the people of the neighbourhood were apparently hostile towards them.

The atmosphere in the ashram was cold. The meal was eaten in absolute silence. No one approached us, or tried to converse with us. We wondered what had happened to the "Holy Mother's" love, and where she had got it from in the first place. Perhaps she had taken all the love with her. We didn't sleep well that night. Elke felt quite threatened. At four in the morning, we were wakened by the sound of little bells used by the residents in their early morning "worship service". The following morning we went through the different rooms again, meditating here and there, trying to find answers to our questions. Nothing happened. This emptiness confused us even more. In the end, we were only too glad to flee from the ashram. We then spent half a day travelling down the river by ship, and stayed overnight in a little place on the South Indian coast.

The next evening, when the fishermen were dragging their full nets to the shore, I went for a short swim. As I was wading through the shallow water I suddenly felt a

sting in my toe. Startled, I ran out on to the beach, but couldn't see any wound. When I woke up the next day, my leg was stiff. I feared that something had bitten me. When I examined my toe closely, I noticed two tiny dots close together that looked like a snakebite. In panic, we found a taxi and were driven to a small hospital in the town. My leg continued getting stiffer, and I became feverish.

The doctor's office was behind a curtain. He said he would have to give me an injection. There were several syringes in a glass of water on his desk. When I saw him reach for one of them I got even more scared. Terrified, I asked whether the needle had been well disinfected. He responded, "You can choose: either you have the injection this way or you die." There was no choice; I had to let him give me the injection. The doctor advised me to stay at the hospital for observation, but we drove back to the hotel. I stayed in bed the whole day with a high fever, having nightmares, and wondering if I was going to die. The next morning I gradually began to feel better.

A few days later, we decided to spend Christmas at the tourist resort of Kovalam, only a few miles away. With some difficulty we were able to get a little room on the beach. I had hoped I would be able to recover, but instead, I developed digestive problems. Elke wasn't really fit either. Her stomach was bloated, she was in a lot of pain and suffering from diarrhoea. We needed to pay another visit to a doctor. This doctor said that we desperately required rest, and should not continue travelling in the meantime. He saw my weakened body and gave me an injection to build me up. When we returned to our room a little later it began to take effect. My temperature shot up so suddenly that my body went into spasms. I was shaking and trembling, and sweat poured off me. Elke tried to give me some water, but due to the severity of the spasms I could hardly open my mouth to swallow.

She then ran back to the doctor as quickly as she could and told him what was happening. He asked her if I didn't take sugar, as a rule. She replied that normally I didn't. The doctor said we should have informed him, as - being unaware of this fact - he had given me a glucose solution, which was now causing me to go into sugar shock. He gave Elke two tablets that should take effect in about twenty minutes. Elke returned to the hotel to find a lot of people at the door, standing around helpless and shocked at my condition. She tried to bring my temperature down with cold compresses. The ghastly attack was all over in about two hours. I realised I had been close to death twice in the past few days.

In the meantime, Christmas had arrived. The place was packed with Western tourists who were all trying to enjoy life in one way or another. The hotels and restaurants had prepared for this Christian festival and were offering special menus. Outwardly, everything looked wonderful, the palm trees, the beach, the sea, the exotic food, and people dressed up in their finest for Christmas Eve. In spite of this we couldn't shake off a sense of meaninglessness, or at least of being on a quest for meaning.

Of course we tried to celebrate Christmas, even though it didn't really mean anything to us. Elke gave me a little book with the words of Jesus, saying that it couldn't do any harm getting to know him a little. On a palm-covered hill near the sea, we sat under the brilliant red evening sky, and read a few of the words of this Jesus from the book. Unfortunately we understood very little, and so had no interest in ever looking at the book again.

On the beach Western and Indian customs collided harshly. The tourists went swimming almost naked, while Indian women went into the water in long saris. We were a little ashamed by the insensitivity of the tourists, and were glad when we were able to leave this offensive scene behind us.

Elke: New Year in Bodh-Gaya

Our journey continued by train to Northern India, because Martin wanted to spend New Year in Bodh-Gaya. The journey took about 72 hours. After two days and almost two nights on the train, we had to change trains; we reached a station in the middle of the night. In the North-West of India it is very cool at that time of year. A few people, wrapped in woollen blankets, but with sandals on their feet, stood around a little fire which they had lit in a corner of the train station. Others crouched, huddled together, or slept under the porch in the entrance to the station.

We also wanted to get some sleep, so we went to check out the men's waiting room, since there were rats running around the people sleeping in the women's waiting room. The men's waiting room seemed a little more promising, and we managed to find a little spot in front of the toilet doors. We spread out our raffia mat on the floor, and lay down to sleep.

We reached the town of Gaya after a further ten-hour trip in a passenger train that went through the fairytale town of Varanasi on the Ganges. The slow train that we took stopped every two or three km for no apparent reason. A packed motor-rickshaw, pouring out toxic fumes, then took us to the small town of Bodh-Gaya. The place was full of pilgrims, and there were only a few hotels. In the middle of the village barbers crouched at the side of the road, shaving their customers, while cows wandered in and around them and the few market-stalls. Luckily we were able to get a room in a newly built house. It still smelt of fresh plaster and paint. The walls were still damp, and there were lumps of cement everywhere.

Many young Westerners had also come here trying to follow the instructions of their meditation gurus. Some were learning Tibetan, others were getting some kind of spiritual training. We spoke briefly to a young lady who had spent more than six months in Bodh-Gaya. She seemed not to have washed for a long time, as is common among the Tibetans. Her neck sported obvious black rings and her eyes looked empty and distant. Were they a reflection of my own pointless search?

The small town of Bodh-Gaya is a meeting place for many cultures. Temples and monks representing every Buddhist country make Bodh-Gaya a place of pilgrimage for people from all over the world. I was amazed and fascinated, as, in the early evening, we entered the central holy place where the bodhi tree stands, the tree under which Buddha attained Enlightenment. Thousands of burning candles surrounded the grounds near the tree. Near the bodhi tree there was a paved square filled with sacrificial candles and burning butter-oil lamps.

A few hundred monks, reciting prayers in deep tones, were sitting in front of the bodhi tree in their red-gold robes. There were several tables under the tree, all covered in sacrificial offerings like bread, rice and fruit. Believers, mostly Tibetans, lay prostrate

on the ground, or sat a little to the side, spinning their prayer wheels. In another part of the garden, a Lama sat on a throne teaching a group of Western visitors. In my effort to fit in, I dressed appropriately and lit candles, but I still felt like a spectator observing a foreign culture with interest and amazement.

On New Year's Eve a small celebration for people from the West was held in the Japanese Zen temple. This included a longish period of meditation and circling of the temple. At about midnight we stood in a long queue, and everyone was allowed to take a thick wooden beam and strike it against a 1.5m wide gong. The number of hits had to be exactly one hundred and eight. Finally, we kicked off the New Year with a small meal.

During the meditation, we sat in rows behind each other, in absolute silence. Suddenly, to my horror, I heard someone being struck pretty hard with a stick. Every fibre of my body became tense. What was this supposed to mean? Slowly, I opened my eyes, and saw a monk going through the rows with a big stick. Memories of my childhood came alive. My father had often hit me; it was his idea of punishment. I was not under any circumstances going to let that happen again. Inside I was screaming, "No!" I made a firm decision that I would jump up and run away if the monk came near me.

All attempts to find inner peace and "lose myself" were useless after that. I followed the monk out of the corner of my eye, and saw how one of the participants bowed before him, even offering him his back. The monk then aimed and struck him right next to his spine. Later, Martin explained to me that this was supposed to wake up a meditating person. Well, I was certainly awake!

A few days later we treated ourselves to a meal in the most expensive restaurant in town. To our surprise, the Zen monks were also there. These men, who were otherwise so disciplined, seemed to have undergone a complete transformation in their conduct. There was an incredible difference between the strict discipline of the temple and their behaviour here, in "everyday life". Somewhat bewildered, we watched them attack their food like wild animals, talking loudly and all at the same time. We felt we now understood why Zen meditation had developed in this particular culture! Being so frenetic by nature, to compensate they probably needed the iron discipline of Zen in order to attain peace.

Martin: The pointlessness becomes evident

Seven years earlier, I had thrown myself 60 000 times on the temple ground in Bodh-Gaya. However, now my perspective on this place had changed. Somehow, to me the people seemed to be empty. Their souls were searching for the truth just as I had done seven years ago. But up to now, my search had been unsuccessful, and the futility of all my efforts was becoming very clear. Although in the days that followed, I still meditated in the different Buddhist temples, and every evening went around the large Stupa with Elke several times in a clockwise direction, lit numerous candles, and brought sacrifices; yet, the temples with their Buddha statues had rather lost their charm.

Nevertheless, because I was still a Buddhist, I hoped to receive a special blessing for the New Year in this place. My guru, little Ling Rinpoche, arrived during this time and was staying in the Tibetan monastery. Before continuing on our journey I really wanted to receive his blessing. I sacrificed money for a sacrificial ceremony held by a group of Tibetans, called a *puja*. Moreover, since my guru was still a child, I also sacrificed an amount of money for his education.

Some days later, when we were in Bombay, I quite unexpectedly felt the spiritual presence of the Tibetan Lamas, who were probably praying for my well-being. For a short time I felt comforted and reaffirmed in my Buddhist lifestyle. Yet, as time went on, I sensed less and less of this blessing.

Martin: Indonesia, fear and depression

Mentally and physically, we were preparing ourselves to face the next country we wanted to visit: Indonesia. The flight was to depart from Bombay. Completely exhausted from our numerous experiences, we decided to relax at an expensive hotel in Bombay for a few days.

The huge difference between rich and poor is especially obvious in this city. Every time I visited India, I experienced culture shock on arrival in Bombay – this would express itself in aggressive reactions. This time I experienced it again. Towards the end of our stay in Bombay, a beggar girl pulled at my shirt. I seethed with rage, and hit her so hard that she fell. Afterwards I felt horrible about my behaviour.

The poverty, the many beggars, the hawkers, the taxi drivers, they all seemed to invade my space constantly with their demands and close proximity. Their apathy on the one hand, their persistence and their hostility on the other, left deep scars in my subconscious. Elke wondered too why India was regarded in the West as the country where one can develop spiritually and through meditation come to a place of peace. This is presumably only possible in the sheltered atmosphere of an ashram. However, we had certainly not come to rest. Instead, we were longing for our departure.

Various tourists had told us that Indonesians were a lot friendlier, but our first experience in the large city of Djakarta gave us quite the opposite impression. We arrived at the airport in the middle of the night and two taxi drivers, one after the other, demanded double the sum we had initially agreed on. Furious, I flung our rucksacks down at the entrance of the very expensive hotel they'd brought us to, and shouted, "Welcome to Indonesia!"

The very next day we left for the island of Bali. People seemed to be a lot better off than in India, and things seemed much more organized. New cars and comfortable hotels had taken the place of dirty, noisy rickshaws. We had arrived in the middle of the rainy season, so the beautiful vegetation was a vivid green. Yet the skies were threateningly dark and hung with clouds.

We were amazed at the profusion of pretty wicker baskets holding flowers and food in front of the doorways of shops, hotels, private houses and apartments. We thought

they were a very nice form of greeting in this culture. Later, we found out that they were sacrifices placed there through fear of evil spirits. This fear was very evident. When we would take a short walk in the dark without a flashlight, people would look at us shocked and with suspicion. Being enlightened Westerners, we did not share their fear of spirits, but soon we were also to experience how real they were.

It was as if the demonic world was almost tangible. We couldn't even enjoy the most beautiful spots in peace. We felt restless and driven, and could hardly sleep for nights on end. It wasn't just the spirits of the island that plagued us, but the spirits of our past were on our heels as well. Elke suffered more and more from feelings of guilt, and I found life increasingly pointless. I suddenly regretted that I had given up my practice to travel aimlessly from country to country. Furthermore, much on the island reminded me of Iris. She had visited Bali several years earlier and had talked a lot about it.

I fell into deep depression. As far as possible, we tried our best to control the situation, to feel good, to enjoy our travels and each other's company. However, even daily three-hour meditation and therapy sessions didn't help. We traversed the entire island, but still couldn't find the peace we longed for. The long scooter rides, the beautiful landscape, the delicious food, and the conversations with other people provided a slight distraction, but they did not take away our desperation. Why were we suffering so much? It was as if every hope within me was being dashed, as if my soul was stagnating, empty and miserable.

We had come to a slightly more prosperous culture, but had not seen any improvement in our condition. Increasingly we felt that life was nothing but suffering. We finally breathed a sigh of relief when, a month later, we were able to leave the island of Bali and go to Australia.

Martin: Australia and farewell to drugs

We had arranged that our arrival in Sydney would fall on Elke's birthday, because of the dream in which she was promised that she would "find her heart" in Australia. We had been hoping to start a completely new chapter in our lives; however, due to the increasing frustrations of our journey we had forgotten this hopeful promise.

At first we enjoyed the clean streets, the luxurious buses and the modern shops, where we could walk along without being harassed by someone trying to sell us something. We celebrated by eating a huge piece of cream cake in a bright, cosy café. An oppressive burden seemed to have fallen from our shoulders. At last we could enjoy being in a westernized country with so much freedom and prosperity. Not even the significantly higher prices could dampen our spirits.

The very next day, however, we experienced our first disappointment. We found out that the precious stones which we had already paid for in the Indian city of Agra, so that we could sell them in Sydney, had not arrived in the mail. The office of the "business partner" of our dubious Indian merchant didn't exist. The address we were given was a building frequented by prostitutes, pimps and drug addicts. We had been cheated out of more than 4000 Marks. Since I had taken on the responsibility for the

deal, and invested my last penny in it, I wanted to do everything in my power to make up the lost money.

My parents had given me the address of a Dutch family who had emigrated to Australia many years before. They got us a job picking apples and pears on a fruit farm. The farmer had built a house specially for his workers on the edge of his orchards. Elke was shocked when she entered our room for the first time - a concrete floor, and furniture consisting of a bed with a sagging mattress, one small cupboard, and a chest of drawers with mouse droppings in it. Probably no one had been living there for the past year. Close to tears and despair, we submitted to our fate.

From that day on, from seven o'clock in the morning, we would stand on metal ladders, picking fruit from the high trees. The fruit was first put into a bag that hung on a belt around the picker's waist. When the bag was full, the fruit was carefully transferred into a large wooden crate. Later in the evening, a tractor would take them to the storage sheds. We were paid according to the number of crates that we filled.

We shared the house with several other pickers who had been moving around Australia doing this kind of work for years. They plucked the fruit like clockwork. Their vulgar language and fiercely competitive spirit were often a source of tension. On their one day off, their only idea of relaxation was to consume great quantities of alcohol. One of the young pickers had the habit of swearing after every third word, which upset and shocked me greatly. He was always trying to pick a fight with me, so I tried to keep out of his way.

In this environment, I decided to give up drugs. I had already given up smoking in India, but I always carried a little marihuana in my wallet for "emergencies". If the customs or the Australian police had discovered it, I would have been sent straight to prison. I offered the remainder of my drugs to my fellow pickers. They were thrilled, and immediately organized a party. One last time, I floated with them in the realms of fantasy, and shared my delusions of grandeur with others.

Today I don't really know how it happened, but it became clear to me that "getting high" was no way to handle my suffering or my life; it was merely a distraction. Although at that point no other alternative presented itself, I was expecting something better. So, for the sake of this "something better", I decided to give up drugs and surrender the last source of support that I knew.

Chapter 6: Desperate, disappointed, discovered

Martin: Something really alternative

After several weeks of hard work, we left the farm in South Australia and travelled by bus to Byron Bay, a seaside resort two hundred kilometres from Brisbane. We stayed in a backpackers' hostel with many young travellers from all over the world. By now we were tired of hearing fantastic travel stories, the usual topic of conversation. We were fed up with our nomadic lifestyle, and wanted only peace and quiet. We longed for a comfortable, normal home.

This made us all the more grateful for our friend Jack's invitation. We had met him in India, but he lived near Byron Bay, in a place called Mullumbimby. His house was on the edge of the rainforest, with no telephone and no electricity.

It was a Saturday, and on that day there was no bus service to Mullumbimby, so we decided to hitch-hike. Within a short time a large American car stopped. The young man at the wheel was called Ron. He immediately started talking to us with an infectious joy that seemed to bubble out of him. After all that we had recently experienced, we couldn't believe that anyone could be so joyful without being on something! We asked him if he had been smoking hash. To our amazement, he replied that his happiness was not the result of drugs, but of his relationship with Jesus Christ.

We'd never heard anything like that before, but we believed that "many roads lead to Rome", so there was no reason why one of them shouldn't be Jesus Christ. Ron asked us what we did and we answered, somewhat embarrassed, "We are alternative psychotherapists." Although this job had a certain status, we still felt inside that we were utter failures. Ron's response was unexpected, "Do you want to experience something *really* alternative?"

What an intriguing question! We had wanted to be *really alternative* for a long time. Somewhat hesitant, but also curious, we said yes. "You'll have to come with me to my church on Sunday then," he replied. Ron seemed to be an honest person, and as we were in any case open for anything, we accepted his invitation. Also being in a foreign country, we wanted to make contact with the people.

We met Jack at his sister's house in Mullumbimby. He looked just as "alternative" now as he had done in India, where his stocky little figure had caught our eye. He was solid, but rather introverted. His bright clothes were reminiscent of the hippy era, and created an unusual impression. We wondered whether his "uniqueness" had something to do with his Jewish heritage.

Jack drove us in his old Land Rover to the house that he had built for himself in the rain forest. We were very impressed by the creative, inviting lay-out. A large picture of a reclining aboriginal warrior was painted on one wall. Jack said that that whole forest area had previously been under a spell, particularly affecting women. Young men had had to survive here for a few weeks without weapons, before they could officially be counted as men. Jack felt that something of the spell still lingered over

this piece of land, because women could hardly endure living there. That was probably the reason why his wife and two children had moved out.

Jack earned his living making jewelry. He offered us his house for a week while he went to a market in the town to sell his merchandise. We were delighted with his offer and decided to come back on Monday with our luggage.

The following morning, a Sunday, Ron arrived punctually at our backpackers' hostel in Byron Bay to pick us up for church. Twenty minutes later we arrived at the parking lot of a school-type building. A white banner with the words, "Byron on Fire" was hanging over the entrance. We were curious and a little nervous. Ron took us into a room where a lot of people had already gathered.

There was an atmosphere of joy and expectation. Some people came up to us and greeted us. There were musical instruments set up on a stage, making it look as if a concert was about to begin, and not a church service. And indeed a little later a band really did begin to play lively songs. Everyone present stood up and sang along, clapping or moving to the music. It was as if they believed that this God to whom they were singing was actually present. Later we realized that it was the pastor who was playing the drums, and his wife was singing with the band.

This sort of service made a deep impression on me. Its liveliness reminded me of some Hindu or Buddhist gatherings. I thought to myself: "If people can sing to God or Jesus Christ from their hearts like this, and their joy is so evident and tangible, then there must be a living God behind it all. Perhaps this Jesus Christ is a good guru!"

My memories were of a dull, almost dead atmosphere in Christian churches. I had rarely been in church, but each time I did go, I had noticed that people sat bored in the pews, sucking on candy, looking at their watches, waiting for the boredom to end. To me church meant tedious yawning. This church, however, presented a very different picture.

Elke: A power greater than me

The enthusiastic atmosphere didn't inspire any confidence in me. I missed the measured, and in my opinion, "holy" atmosphere that I had experienced in church as a child. I was somewhat sceptical of the whole thing, and kept moving closer to Martin during the service, holding his hand as if he had to protect me from this gushing spontaneity. Coffee was offered to everyone after the service, and we were also invited to stay. Suddenly a dark-haired young woman approached me. She said her name was Mary and asked me, "What's your name?", "Where do you come from?" and "May I pray with you?"

I had no problem answering the first two questions, but I was taken aback by the third. I was even a little startled and became defensive, but she seemed so open and friendly that I didn't dare refuse her offer immediately. I answered that I would have to speak to Martin about it.

My hope was that, being a Buddhist, he would never agree to a Christian prayer. Also, as a man, he usually initially rejected my spontaneous suggestions, because he always wanted time to think things over. I hoped that this time he would react similarly, and so I could refuse Mary's offer and not feel bad about it.

To my amazement, when I asked Martin he answered enthusiastically, and even joyfully, "Yes, go ahead!" He even offered to come with me. Without further ado, we all went out to the balcony, since there was apparently no other quiet space available. Mary had fetched the pastor, and she began to pray. Her prayer was so full of power and authority that I immediately sensed, "These words are not coming from her."

Her prayer centred on my feelings of guilt. I could no longer hold back my tears and my grief. All attempts to justify myself melted away like snow in the sunshine. It was obvious that there was a Power here, greater than any power I had hitherto experienced. I knew that it was God Himself who was speaking to me through this woman.

Suddenly Mary uttered the words, "Your sins are forgiven!" If someone had asked me half an hour earlier whether I sinned, I would have denied it immediately. Of course I made mistakes, but I thought that sin was deliberately doing harm or wrong to other people.

As I heard these words of forgiveness, scenes from my life played out before my inner gaze. I realized that I had always behaved as I thought best, or did what was most convenient for me. I had never asked God what His will was. I had thought that I was in contact with God through all sorts of means – meditation, rituals, breathing techniques, special ways of behaving and living, relationships, and many other things. I now suddenly realized that all this time I had been living apart from God, always concentrating on my own interests, wishes and desires. God was supposed to make sure that everything went all right. Everything was focused on *me*. I had made myself, and certainly not Him, the centre of my life. In a fraction of a second I realized that my biggest sin had been living without God. I was shocked!

At that point, Mary asked me if I wanted to live my life from now on with Jesus Christ, and if so, to repeat a prayer committing myself to Him. Even though, at the time, I didn't really know what was so special about Jesus, I still felt that He was the one who made contact with God possible. I also knew that I had the choice of saying "Yes" or "No". However, I knew that if I wanted to achieve the most important goal in my life – spirituality and union with God - I could do nothing other than give my life and heart to this Jesus. This realization led to my spontaneous decision to take up Mary's offer of prayer, and I expressed out loud my desire to live for Jesus from that moment on.

Martin: The moment of my Enlightenment

When Elke asked me if she should pray with this lady, I was also surprised by my immediate agreement. I felt very much at home in this lively atmosphere, so I even offered to accompany her, for I could sense that she was afraid. When a Buddhist

Lama in India had asked her what her religion was, she had replied, to my astonishment, that she was a Christian. However, as yet I had seen nothing of her Christianity. I did a lot to live out my Buddhist faith, and to match up to its demands. Now I hoped that Elke could perhaps become a real Christian. I thought, "A real Buddhist and a real Christian – that's a good match!"

When we were standing with Mary and the pastor on the narrow little balcony, I was amazed at what happened. During the prayer, it was as if this Jesus to whom Mary was praying was actually there. I didn't see anything, but I felt His clear spiritual presence around us. When I had met the Dalai Lama, I had felt lifted above myself, but now, in contrast, my whole being was being held by a superior Reality.

A pervasive, deep joy spread through me. When Elke started to weep, I felt that they were tears of release. I was extremely pleased that she said the prayer, stating that she now wanted to live for Jesus. Now she had become a Christian! I intuitively grasped the situation, and I knew: "Everything that is happening here is the truth."

After this Mary turned to me and asked, "May I pray with you?" I was feeling fine, and thought that actually as far as I was concerned, everything was O.K. I didn't really think it was necessary to pray, but I didn't want to disappoint her, so I agreed somewhat hesitantly. I liked her prayer, and the pastor's prayer that followed, but then Mary asked *me* if I wanted to repeat a prayer after her.

As a Buddhist, I was quite familiar with prayer. I prayed to my guru and to the spirit guides that I imagined were in spiritual contact with me. Now I also felt the spiritual presence of the Person to whom the lady was praying. I had no doubt it was not about her own power, or a special aura that she had as a person. This power didn't need a medium, for He himself, Jesus, came to me directly. Amazed, and acknowledging the presence of His power, I accepted her offer.

One of the first sentences that I had to repeat after her was, "I renounce all other religions!" She had not made this demand of Elke. My first reaction was indignation. I shouted inside, "No, I won't!" How did this woman know that I belonged to another religion, anyway?

A sort of religious pride arose within me. For almost eight years I had been striving for Enlightenment, I had put a lot of effort into it, and I imagined that I had already reached a higher level of consciousness. Was I supposed to throw all of this away in a moment?

I was still standing with my eyes closed. The others were waiting for my reply. My inner rebellion against this demand to renounce my other religions felt like a fiery ball of energy in my heart. At the same time, I remembered that Buddha had taught that one should test everything that one saw or heard to see if it was true. I could sense the resistance in my heart, but also the presence of Jesus. The reality of His presence was apparent. It was clear, loving, peaceful, and it didn't force itself upon me. It was much bigger than my resistance, and seemed to surround us completely. Despite my resistance, I trusted my perception, and said: "I renounce all other religions!"

This enormous inner struggle took place in a fraction of a second, but to me it felt like an eternity. When we opened our eyes after the prayer, Elke and I were absolutely baffled. We scarcely realized what had happened, but Mary seemed to know better, because she said enthusiastically, "Jesus Christ has drawn you out of this world to Himself."

I looked over the balcony at the overcast sky and the bare sand dunes. The miserable, arid, sandy dunes reminded me of my early images of a grey world. However, now this grey world with its depressing atmosphere no longer seemed to have access to my soul. I only perceived this as a fact. My heart was filled with a joyful, warm glow. I was certain that I, as a person with all my idiosyncracies, was known, accepted and loved. I had not been lifted out of myself as when I met the Dalai Lama; I was at peace within myself. I, Martin was finally at home!

As I stood there, still a little bewildered, thinking over what had happened, I suddenly remembered a sentence that had been so important to me: "Light has come into the world." It seemed that these words were being spoken to me now. In the truth of this hour, I knew that the moment of my Enlightenment had come. As a Buddhist, I had imagined it would be different, that Enlightenment would come from within. But no! Here the Light in the person of Jesus Christ had come to me from without. In speaking these words to me, words which expressed the deepest longing of my whole person, I became aware that He knew me in the depths of my being, and He would fulfill this yearning. He, Himself, was the Light that had come into the world, and as I joined myself to Him, Enlightenment became a reality for me. There was a deep peace within me, and a love that I had never before experienced.

Elke seemed to be in a similar position. We were both speechless. The Pastor invited us to lunch, where, unusually for us, we didn't feel the need to talk much. Once we returned to the hostel where we were staying, we sat on a bench to peacefully observe the still, grey landscape. For three days we felt enveloped and saturated in this unutterable love. We knew that we had finally found what we had been looking for all this time.

The pastor had given us a New Testament and recommended that we read it. In the days that followed, I began reading but the stories meant nothing to me. Elke, who was watching me as I read, observed my stony expression, and said that I would be better off if I stopped reading it, as my heart was becoming closed.

In the meantime, we had moved into Jack's rainforest home. We told him about our wonderful encounter with the Christians in Byron Bay. Jack saw it as an interesting religious experience. He took guidance for his life and spiritual development from his Indian guru. Since we didn't realise the extent of what had happened to us, we left it at that.

Jack showed us around the area and took us to a friend of his, who, like Jack, had bought a large piece of land for little money. He had built a five-storey hexagonal house of wood and glass. It was painted red, yellow, blue and green, and looked very impressive. The interior, however, was practically empty. There was only a little gas cooker, a mattress and the man's sleeping bag on the first floor. The house had taken eleven years to build, and Jack's friend had invested all his money in it. Later

he told us that it was supposed to be a temple for each and every deity, but up till then, no deity had moved in. This was true; we could feel it...

While we were impressed by the friend's masterpiece, it also exuded an emptiness that reminded me of my search. Wasn't this house an image of the inner emptiness that we had been experiencing up till now? This made the new feeling of peace and love in our hearts all the more wonderful.

Martin: The feelings are gone

Three days later, the good feeling inside of me disappeared. Jack had gone off for a week to sell jewelry. The only condition for staying in his house was that we clear his garden of the wild jungle bushes. As I worked, one thought chased after another. I was starting to despair. At times I would think about the good teachings of Buddhism, and then at others I would remember the way I had met Jesus Christ. It seemed like Buddha and Jesus were fighting within me.

Elke felt my unrest, and began to worry that the newly-won peace could be lost. She attempted to discuss it with me, and before we realized it, the discussion had turned into a fierce argument. This calmed down by evening, but my doubts recurred regularly in the days that followed.

When we went to church again on Sunday, Mary asked us how things were going. Elke told her about our difficulties and our inner struggles. Mary began to leaf through her Bible so that she could teach and encourage us with certain Bible verses. Two more women joined her and started talking to me. For me however, the Bible carried no authority; I couldn't imagine how it might help me with my personal conflicts. I saw all their efforts to help simply as a total failure to understand my situation. As a therapist, I was used to taking my feelings very seriously. They were the gauge for what was right or wrong in my life, so it was necessary to find out why I was feeling the way I did. The truth, as I saw it, was dependent upon my feelings. I now had the impression that they were talking over the top of my head and not engaging with *me* and my feelings. They seemed to be just using my feelings to teach me something. The captivating atmosphere of the previous Sunday seemed to have changed into mere fanaticism. Disappointed, we drove back to Jack's house.

When we visited Mary a few days later, we were a little disappointed by her lifestyle. As therapists, we thought that Mary would benefit from a few sessions. At that point, however, we didn't know what the next step would be.

Elke: The onslaught of threatening powers

The radical forgiveness through Jesus Christ filled me with love and peace. My critical attitude towards the world and towards people had vanished. In this state, all therapy was superfluous. All that I wanted was for this feeling to last forever. Life's purpose seemed to be fulfilled.

I then discovered to my horror that within Martin the battle was beginning. Was he blind? Did he not realize that our desires seemed to have been fulfilled, and that we could now live in love and peace together? I tried to convince him that we were on the right path, but nothing seemed to help. His mood swung between aggression and depression, and gradually doubts began to affect me too. I saw images in which I thought I saw myself in a previous life as Doubting Thomas. I was sure that I couldn't hold on to my faith in Jesus Christ without Martin. Even now, it was starting to slip away like quicksand under my feet.

The situation came to a dramatic climax in the evening. We were alone in Jack's house in the rainforest. The rain was drumming on the roof. Martin sat next to me on the sofa, sunk in a deep depression, with a hard expression on his face. I felt clearly the presence of invisible, threatening powers. Fear and helplessness started to engulf me. I felt that the house could probably not stand up to the onslaught of these powers, and that the roof would collapse over our heads any moment. In my need, I cried to Jesus Christ within me, "Jesus, help!" I didn't dare scream out loud, for I feared that Martin might become aggressive and resist.

When I thought that I could no longer cope with the fear, and cried to Jesus a second time, there was suddenly peace again. I knew that Jesus had acted, and had freed us from the attack. We could breathe normally again, and enjoy each other's company.

The fighting started again the next morning. We had had enough. We decided to escape, leave everything and travel to Sydney.

While standing with our luggage at the side of the road, in the hot sun, waiting for a car to come by and pick us up, we had a terrible argument. In my anger, I wanted to leave Martin. I threw our backpacks on to the edge of the road, tore them open, and in a blind rage, separated our things, throwing Martin's clothes all over the dry grass. He watched my agitated behaviour impassively, with that stony expression on his face. At last, I had the things all separated, and my bag at least was neatly packed again. Somewhat relieved, but still angry, I waved down a car that was approaching.

A young man stopped to pick me up. He immediately realized what had happened, and asked: "Shouldn't the man be coming too?" The question softened my heart a little; I nodded hesitantly. I called to Martin, and he started slowly packing his scattered clothes one by one. Thankfully, the young man at the wheel had a lot of patience! And so we left Byron Bay, still fighting, but still together. The meeting with Jesus had been a good experience. It would certainly remain in our memories as a special experience, but could obviously not be the absolute truth, as we didn't seem to be the slightest bit enlightened at the moment!

Martin: Meeting an angel

We again moved into a cheap backpacker-hostel in downtown Sydney. It was a relief to be able to disappear in a mass of people. We now had time to think things over. The experience with Jesus had indeed been wonderful. I had given Him a place of honour among my other gurus. I was sure that He, together with them, would lead me

on in my spiritual pilgrimage, but I wasn't sure what form this would take. Elke and I were initially happy to have made up again. Our churned up spiritual experiences were attacking our relationship. At least we wanted to stay together, no matter what happened.

We stood hand in hand in the middle of Sydney, waiting for the pedestrian light to turn green. Together with many other pedestrians we started crossing the wide road. Among the people coming from the far side, one man attracted our attention. He seemed to glow as he walked directly towards us. As his eyes held our gaze, I grasped Elke's hand more tightly, and walked on resolutely. He, however, turned and walked beside us, asking in a persistent voice, "Do you know God?" His appearance left us in no doubt that *he* knew God. Taken aback by his direct question and his radiance, we recoiled a little and stammered, "Yes, yes, we have heard about Him." He didn't give up, but as we walked on, he told us that his church had organized a Bible exhibition in the City Hall in Sydney. He gave us an invitation, and pointed out the entrance from a distance. Then, he was gone, as suddenly as he had appeared! We stood there, stunned. It was up to us to accept or refuse the invitation.

We talked it over as we walked around the building that he had pointed out. We didn't actually want to get involved with any more Christians, but because we realized that we had been spoken to again in such a clear way, we decided to go and have a look.

I cannot remember the exact content of the exhibition. I only remember different display boards with pictures of the world, under which different statements from the Bible were written. We were a little tense and couldn't really concentrate on the exhibition, because we kept seeing people holding Bibles, and kept trying to avoid them! We didn't want to be bashed with the Bible again.

Perhaps the organisers sensed our caution. They invited us to have a cup of tea, chatted with us, and let us go. At the door, they gave us an invitation to a service.

The service was held on a Sunday evening. Right up to the very last moment, we were unsure whether we should go. That afternoon we enjoyed a lovely walk in the botanical gardens, but I was rather anxious, not knowing what to decide about the evening. Rather preoccupied, we sat down on a park bench.

"Oh, for just one more cigarette!" I sighed. I had, in fact, recently decided to give up smoking, but in the face of this unresolved question, I thought I needed the nicotine and the distraction. I looked around and discovered, just about half a metre away, a packet with one last cigarette left in it. I enjoyed it gratefully. It was indeed the last cigarette that I ever smoked.

When it was almost too late to get to the service on time, we both decided that we would go. What happened next was simply incredible. The church was on the far side of the city. We were able to catch a subway train right away, and when we got off, there was a bus waiting to take us on the next part of the trip. And the next bus was waiting, too! When we got off and looked around for the building, complete strangers approached us and asked if they could help, and took us to where we wanted to go. We entered the building exactly on time.

The songs spoke to us, and we thoroughly enjoyed them. It was like coming home. We were invited to join a house group in this church, and so we started to learn a little. From then on, we knew for certain that we must follow this Jesus.

We never again saw the man who had spoken to us in the street, although we went to the church service there three times. The encounter with him had left a deep impression on me. As a Buddhist, I didn't know a personal God, but when this man with the glowing countenance asked, "Do you know God?", I understood intuitively that there was a living God, and that this living God had come to me in Jesus. No, Jesus didn't belong in the ranks of my other gurus. I knew finally that He is the Living God in person.

Elke: The New-Age therapist

During our time in Sydney, the name of a Dutch friend, a New-Age therapist, came to my mind several times. This was linked with the instruction to call him. I decided to follow this instinct. His wife answered and to my great surprise told me that her husband was right then in Sydney! Delighted at this coincidence, we took it as a sign that we should visit him in his hotel. He invited us to take part in his seminar, as he was just about to introduce his form of reincarnation therapy to Australia

During the weekend seminar, I took the opportunity of having an individual session to work through my relationship with my daughter. I kept feeling the desire to cut short my travels and go back to Germany to be with Stefanie. I hoped that the session would give me clarity about what to do, and also free me from the ever-recurring feelings of guilt towards her. A few weeks before in Byron Bay, Mary had told me that God had forgiven me, but I could not take His forgiveness seriously in this one area of my life. My feelings were telling me something else.

According to the therapist, my current problem could have had something to do with a previous life. In the course of guided meditation, I did indeed see images and immediately assumed that they arose from a previous life. I thought that I could see how Stefanie had once taken her life because of me. This was the reason for my guilt. Once I realized the cause, I obviously no longer needed to feel guilty, for I had not been responsible for what she had done, and the situation now was different from the situation then.

Then the therapist asked: "Do you really want to go home?" When I was asked like this about what I really wanted, when I listened to my heart, I had to admit that I didn't necessarily want to go home. Travelling around and seeing the world was actually a lot more interesting. As far as the therapist was concerned, the question was answered. The important thing was for me to do what I really wanted. I didn't need to worry about Stefanie any more, for I would be missing the goal of self-realization.

At first I was quite content with this outcome; I could now be totally free in my relationship with Martin. But my thoughts about Stefanie didn't cease. The urge for freedom and adventure was wrestling with my desire to see my daughter.

One night I woke up streaming with tears. When I was asleep, I could no longer suppress my grief, my guilt or the desire to be there for my daughter. This was a sign for me. Instead of letting myself be led by what had happened in previous lives, or being guided by my desire for self-fulfillment, I should listen to the voice of my heart. Or was it God's voice? Hadn't I dreamt that I would come to my heart in Australia? I had long since forgotten all that.

Martin encouraged me to act according to what my heart said. I suddenly realized that when I met Jesus, He, not I, had come into my heart. By listening to my heart, I could expect to hear His voice. I had a deep inner peace as I thought of going back to Germany and seeing Stefanie again.

Martin: The end of the search, the end of the escape

Recognizing God's voice became quite a new challenge for me. We were regularly encouraged to do this in the weekly home group that we attended in Sydney. The leader was a simple young fire-fighter, always in an unbelievably good mood. He said that this had been the case since he had turned to God. I was amazed, because I was still often in a bad mood.

Shortly afterwards, Elke and I spent a few days in the Blue Mountains, a location inland from Sydney. During this time my mood sank to an all-time low. Although I loved Elke a lot and enjoyed being with her, on this particular day I couldn't bear to be near her. I set off on my own to hike through the dark ravines of the deep canyons. I walked through the woods and felt deeply unhappy. I didn't know how I should pray, so I finally began to cry out my need. I expressed my lack of understanding of my negative feelings and my bad mood. Why couldn't I feel like the home group leader in Sydney? Then I'd be joyful all of the time. But nothing like that happened.

That evening, when I came back to the mobile home where we were staying, I had nothing to say. Despite her anger, Elke began to pray for me quietly. As I waited in silence, something inexplicable happened within me. It was as if my inner being was suddenly turned inside-out. All my negative and depressed feelings turned to glorious joy in a moment. Everything within me rejoiced. This radical change occurred without any action on my part; it was not brought about by substances like drugs or by therapeutic breathing techniques. No, the change came from outside, from a God who was prepared to intervene and heal me in my personal difficulties.

Elke, who was scarcely aware of what had happened, noticed the change in me, and she was happy that I had come to my senses. I now knew for certain that this living God whom we had got to know was able to take away all my suffering and all my worries.

After this experience, I began to hear God's quiet voice. I realized that we had to go back and put our life in order. I suspected that this would not be easy, and that my joy would often disappear, but I was sure that God would lead us. Although we would have liked to continue our world tour and circumvent the globe - we still had our tickets to New Caledonia, New Zealand, Tahiti and America! - we decided to book a

direct flight back to Europe. Deep in our hearts, we knew that we had reached the goal of our travels. Elke should at last give up trying to escape from her God-given responsibility towards her daughter. I too had to learn to take on responsibility in a new way, for my own life, for Elke and for others.

We had been searching, but we hadn't really known what we were searching for. We had been searching for Enlightenment, for divine leading, but we had had no idea what the actual source was. After God had spoken to us quite clearly three times - in Byron Bay, in Sydney and in our mobile home - we knew that we had found what we had been searching for all the time, God himself.

It was not through *our* searching that we had reached our goal. Rather, God had been searching for us and *He* had found us. We recognized that *He* had taken the initiative in our encounter with Him. Later we discovered that He had not only orchestrated the first meeting, but that, in all our difficulties, He would remain absolutely faithful to the relationship that He had initiated. With that, not only had our searching come to an end, but also our attempts to escape life's responsibilities.

Chapter 7: Light comes into the world

Elke: Not without my daughter...

Despite our clear decision to return home to Europe, and despite the peace that we both felt about it, I cried uncontrollably at the airport, although nobody had come to bid us farewell. We both knew that a turning point in our lives had been reached. In Australia Martin had recognised in his moment of Enlightenment, in the hour of truth, that Jesus Himself is the Light that comes into the world. Yet it was not at all clear to us how this realization would work out in our daily lives.

Our family and friends had already seen us change direction many times. They would think that this was another fad that sooner or later would give way to the next craze.

It was May when we arrived in Germany. The fresh green of spring welcomed us. Naturally, we stopped off first with my daughter, Stefanie. She was pleased to see me, but disappeared shortly afterwards as she had made plans to see someone. Disappointedly I let her go. Stefanie had not been waiting for me as I had thought; she was now living her own life.

My husband didn't mind us staying for a few days, but understandably Martin didn't want to stay long. I also recognised that "I no longer belonged there", so we soon went on our way, to try our luck in Holland.

It was the same there. Martin registered himself as living in his parents' village. He was eligible for welfare benefits, and we were soon offered a house to rent, with enough space to use a few rooms for therapy sessions. But Martin sensed that if he were to accept welfare and the proffered house, we would soon fall back into the old routine again, and be trapped in our old patterns of thinking and behavior.

The social worker was very surprised when Martin returned the money he had already received, and declined further financial aid. He preferred to earn money himself, so he spent a few weeks working in a factory that did the laundry for institutions such as hospitals and retirement homes. There were no prospects in this job, though. During that time we lived in a friend's mobile home. We struggled to receive guidance, and in the end we went to Switzerland, where Martin's parents had a house. We decided to stay there until God told us how we were to proceed.

By now we had been in Europe for two months. In Sydney, we had found people who had invited us to their Bible studies and services. They had given us a bit of spiritual leadership, but here we were alone. The Bible still held no authority for us, so we sat down every day, meditated, prayed, observed our dreams, and read books which we presumed would give us wisdom. Sometimes we thought that we had discovered deeply meaningful things, but it was the end of the summer before we got the answer to our questions.

My concern for Stefanie was growing, and it became increasingly clear that I should live near her. It was time to put my family relationships in order. In the hope that Stefanie might live with us for a few days a week, we moved to Krefeld. Again I was

disappointed. Stefanie did visit occasionally, but she preferred to stay with my husband.

Martin: When there is no solution to guilt

The encounters with Jesus Christ had given us surprising insights into a totally new way of life. At first we were full of love and peace. Gradually, however, the effects of our extraordinary experiences began to wear off. We had no stable foundation for our life as Christians. Old thoughts and behaviour patterns showed up again, to be followed by doubt and frustration.

It was as if God had allowed us a little preview of heaven in Australia. But now he had given us the task of cleaning up our lives, of bringing them into line with this preview - just as a person's final height, appearance and particular characteristics are settled at birth, but he must grow up to realise his potential. We were to hold on in faith to God's promises, despite the irritations of everyday life.

After the heavenly experience of indescribable joy which I'd had in the Blue Mountains, I secretly hoped that my life would consist of endless joy, happiness and fun. It troubled me that after this experience with Jesus Christ, I was no longer in the seventh heaven.

I soon realized that my expectations were affected by Buddhist and New Age concepts of Enlightenment. According to them the highest spiritual state of a person has been attained when he is free of all the limitations caused by the human body.

In therapy sessions we had often experienced people crying because of their condition - still imprisoned in their bodies, instead of moving as free souls in the cosmos and therefore having access to so-called "cosmic knowledge" (omniscience). They longed for this state of total union with the cosmos, or in other words, with the divine.

The ultimate consequence of this idea, however, is the rejection of our existence as people. Human existence becomes pointless, or, as Buddhism clearly expresses it, to live is to suffer.

Years later we had the opportunity of telling our story in a New Age store. At the end, one of those present expressed an opinion which we too had shared for many years. He said that since our experience of Enlightenment, we surely must be floating three feet above the ground. "On the contrary," I told him, "only since meeting Jesus Christ have I become a real person for the first time!"

While we had previously tried to escape the reality of this world, now we were prepared to live as people in the world, because God created us as people. His purpose for man is good, for, in the creation account in Genesis, God created man and woman as the crown of creation, and then He said that "...it was very good!"

This must mean that God didn't originally plan suffering. The biblical view of life stands in great contradiction to the fundamental Buddhist belief that "to live is to

suffer". If all of life is just suffering, then either I fall into a state of depression, or I can become free only by fleeing from reality. Although the New Age has not consciously adopted this fundamental tenet of Buddhism, in practice its desire to flee into transcendent spheres is very similar. How can it be otherwise, when there is no real solution for guilt?

"Enlightenment through Jesus Christ does not mean that He makes us into floating beings," I explained to the young man in the New Age store. "His light shows us two things: first, God's love for us, and secondly, we recognize who we really are in His eyes. In the bright light of God we recognize all our thoughts, all the inclinations and deeds that separate us from Him. We can only bear this fact because we know that God loves us, and that He forgives all that separates us from Him. Only under His guidance are we in a position to lead our lives according to God's standards."

He looked at me somewhat confused. He didn't seem to be particularly impressed by what I had said. I could sympathize with him. How difficult it had been for me to understand these things, and to put them into practice, even after meeting Jesus. Only when I started to read the Bible was a completely new understanding of reality revealed to me. This reality was directly related to my original basic principle: "Light has come into the world?."

Elke: The Brethren Fellowship and female participation

By now, we had settled into our new routine. I was living mainly on a small financial allowance from my husband, while Martin worked here and there. Every so often we gave therapy sessions, but we noticed increasingly that we were no longer convinced by the alternative therapy methods which we had previously learned.

Another worry was that, on our own, we were not progressing in our Christian walk. We sensed that we needed the support and fellowship of other people who could be alongside and teach us. One day, as I was walking through our neighbourhood, I discovered a Christian bookstore. There was a note on the door with the address of a Free Evangelical Church. Later, I heard that they were also called a Brethren Fellowship, which meant that they did not have a Pastor, but they came together under the leadership of several elders, like the Early Church in the New Testament. I had never heard of such a fellowship, and before meeting Jesus, I would probably have described it as a sect.

When Martin and I went to the service on a Sunday, I felt a little strange at first. However, after we had sung a few songs together, and three or four men had prayed extempore prayers, I knew that God's Spirit was present. With that, I felt at home, and was thankful and full of joy.

The atmosphere was obviously not as effusive as in Byron Bay, but I thought, "This is Germany." I often observed the elders through my therapist eyes. One of them in particular didn't seem to breathe properly, and I thought that he could use a few of our breathing sessions from me, so that he could loosen up and accept his own feelings.

I was also surprised that women didn't pray or preach in the service. On my first visit, I was barely able to suppress a spontaneous desire to pray out loud. Although this attitude about the role of women struck me as somewhat strange and outmoded, I found the division of roles here reassuring. I could just sit back and listen. When I had been concerned with women's emancipation, I had always thought that I had to be breaking new ground, so that I wouldn't have to admit I was not acquainted with some "male" domain. I was always wound up. Over time, these demands I was putting on myself had become a heavier burden than I could carry.

Amazingly enough, Martin had a lot more problems with the absence of female participation in the fellowship than I did. According to his esoteric understanding, feminine and masculine energy had to be in balance, otherwise harmony was impossible.

A few weeks later, I decided to go to a beginners' Bible study. Martin became curious, too, and joined us the following week. The new friendships we made here were like a healing balm over the wound of my broken relationship with Stefanie.

One evening we were invited to visit one of the elders and his wife. We told them our story, and were surprised to discover tears of emotion in the elder's eyes. During the services, we had noticed that he didn't express his feelings, or his "feminine" side. However, the couple were amazed at God's work in us.

We then told them about our work as psychotherapists. They listened intently, asked questions, and were open to our world. We felt completely accepted. On that evening, I began to learn to discard my first impressions and prejudices about people.

Martin: Buddha in my head...

It took another year before I really began reading the Bible seriously. At the time we often participated in the services in the Krefeld Fellowship. One day a member of the church visited me and gave me a Dutch Bible. As a result of my experience in Australia, I thanked him for the gift, but said, with my Dutch bluntness, "I don't know if I'll read it. I wouldn't know where to start!" He looked rather shocked, but left the Bible with me anyway.

A week later, I did decide to read it, and was amazed that I suddenly found the stories fascinating. I now plucked up the courage to go to the beginners' Bible study with Elke. In a relaxed atmosphere over tea and biscuits, we talked about the Bible texts in a very personal way. Gradually I understood that I could get to know Jesus Christ better through the Bible. And I really wanted to.

After we had settled in Krefeld, I contacted a few of my former clients, and travelled to Holland every other week to offer therapy sessions in my parents' home. My heart was no longer in the therapy work, though. By now it was clear to me that therapy could work up to a certain point, but that it could never free people in the way that God could. Gradually my enthusiasm for the work started to dwindle.

Elke and I tried to lead a Christian meditation event in the fellowship. We produced an attractive invitation card with the picture of a meditating Buddha on it; but when – in all innocence and proud of our creativity - we distributed a few of them in our little Bible study group, one of the leaders was absolutely shocked. Without a word of explanation, but with an unambiguous refusal, she gave the invitation back to Elke. Elke was devastated. It wasn't until later that she realized why it had been rejected, namely, that we should serve no other gods beside God. Even though the Buddha on the invitation was only meant to be a symbol of meditation, it still revealed our association with him. I didn't believe that Buddha was a god, but I still secretly hoped that the method of Buddhist meditation would help me.

Although I had renounced Buddhism in prayer in Australia, I had not put that decision into practice. Basically in my heart I was still attached to it, and I was practising a mixture of Buddhist meditation and Christian prayer. The brusque reaction from the Bible study leader challenged us to test our attachment to Buddhism and other religions. Also we were learning not to make our faith and our reactions dependent on other people and their behaviour, but rather to forgive as Jesus forgives us, again and again. With considerable difficulty we were able to forgive the lady for her insensitive reaction. Today she is still one of our best friends.

Basically, we were not yet spiritually mature enough to lead such an event. God knew that we were spiritually still just infants - and anyway the event was called off due to lack of participants....

Elke: The wounds in my life

Our life was changing very gradually. I knew that God wanted me to take the important step of sorting out my relationship with my husband. In order to do that, I needed to get some space away from Martin, to spend time with God. I found a poster in a Catholic Church advertising an inexpensive trip to Taizé. I went and spent a week in silence and prayer, and finally received peace about my relationship with Martin.

I was nevertheless a little unsure about the peace that I had experienced. I wanted to tell my husband, in all sincerity, that I was prepared to go back and live with him. If he agreed, I would see this as being the will of God. It wasn't easy for me to go to my husband and share my thoughts with him. As it turned out, he didn't want to live with me anyway; he said that his life was better without me. A short time later, he filed for divorce.

As far as Stefanie was concerned, she didn't show any reaction to all that was going on, neither sorrow nor anger. It was seven years before her real feelings surfaced. Only very gradually did I become aware of the deep wounds that my lifestyle had caused in my daughter. On one occasion she gave me a photo of herself, with her lips pressed tightly together. "Is this supposed to draw my attention?" I wondered. "Is it a cry for help? Or is it both?"

Whenever we met, we always had enough to talk about, but the communication remained more or less superficial. Our meetings were usually limited to a few hours at a time, then she would want to go home again. A few times I asked her to forgive

me for what I had done, but it always seemed that she was the one comforting me, and not the other way around.

So one day I decided to visit her, with the express purpose of talking to her about certain things that had happened during her childhood in our home. During a seminar that I was attending at the Free Church Theological College in Korntal, I remembered something that Stefanie had shared when she was about twelve years old. She had told me then that when she was a little girl and went to the toilet at night, she would always sense the presence of two invisible figures talking to one another. Terrified, she would run back to her room and crawl under the bedcover.

I too used to be under the impression that there were ghosts in our house. Now when I broached the subject with Stefanie, she again described the nocturnal encounters, telling me of the fear that they had aroused in her. She was still suffering from nightmares. Since I had just been reading about such phenomena in the seminars, I knew how such experiences could burden people's lives. I said to her directly, "You know that only Jesus can free you from these fears and powers. Don't you want to put your life under His leadership?"

Martin and I had often talked to her about our faith. She had always listened politely, but also always refused to give a clear "Yes" for herself. When I talked to her this time, to my amazement she said that she had already decided to accept Jesus in her heart. I asked her if we could pray together. It was one of the few moments of real, deep openness between us. I commanded the powers of darkness to leave in the Name of Jesus, and asked for healing for Stefanie's wounded soul.

Suddenly she opened up, and acknowledged for the first time how terrible my departure had been for her. We wept together, and I asked her for forgiveness. I knew that God had forgiven me, yes, but only when Stefanie forgave me did the heavy load fall from my shoulders. It was not the burden of guilt itself; God had already taken that from me. It was the burden of the *consequences* of my guilt, which had resulted in Stefanie's loneliness and our broken relationship. At last, this burden slipped from my shoulders!

It was clear to me that I too had to forgive Stefanie for her withdrawn behaviour during recent years. On the one hand, I couldn't really blame her, because I had driven her into this defensive attitude. On the other hand, I had so often waited for her to say just once, "Please come back home!" But she never said it, and so I felt rejected.

Freed from the influences of dark powers and of her past, Stefanie could now admit to her wounds and her sorrow, and express it. The forgiveness that comes through Jesus Christ moved into her heart. In this hour of truth, real reconciliation happened between us. Now Stefanie was also able to put her life consciously into God's hand. That evening we parted relieved and full of joy.

For the second time in my life I had experienced the wonderful power of Jesus in a very concrete way!

Martin: A sign for the invisible world

It had now become evident to me that I should just give others the love that I had received from Jesus, rather than lead meditation events. An announcement in the fellowship made me prick up my ears. A cook was needed for a children's retreat in Norway. Now I couldn't cook, but I loved contact with young people. When the person in charge couldn't find anyone better, he took me on as an assistant cook!

In Norway I realized where my heart lay. I wasn't interested in cooking, but in speaking to young people about Jesus. They enjoyed talking to an adventurer like me. The way that I had become a Christian encouraged them. I was also encouraged to hear how they lived out their faith.

I came back from the retreat filled with enthusiasm. I knew in my heart "I want to do something for Jesus" - but what would it be? Clearly, the first thing I had to do was to make my relationship with Jesus visible through baptism, not only for those around me - my parents, my friends, my church - but also for the invisible world. Elke decided to join me in this step. We registered for the next baptism in the church. This led to a visit one evening by two elders, who had come to talk to us about baptism. There were still many brightly coloured Buddhist wall-hangings in our modern down-town apartment. The elders didn't make any comment, and we weren't concerned about it either.

One area of our relationship that had been bothering us for several weeks was that we were living together outside the bond of marriage. Although nobody had spoken directly to us about that, we sensed that it wasn't right. I decided to try and separate our beds, but that attempt failed. The fact that Elke was not even divorced only added to our troubles. We were afraid that the elders might refuse to baptise us. With some anxiety, we told them about this fresh realization and about our efforts to live a godly life. We openly admitted our weakness and the struggle we were going through.

Both men listened patiently, now and again asking questions to try and understand our situation better. Finally, one of them spoke. We expected him to rebuke us, but he said, "I can see that the Spirit of God is working in you. He will show you what is right, and so I have no problem baptising you." We breathed a sigh of relief, and looked forward to our baptism. We also talked about my desire to tell others about Jesus, and to work for Him, but they advised me to go to a Bible School first.

We were baptised together with ten other believers. We were very nervous. My parents had specially come from Holland for the occasion. Everyone sensed how important this event was, rather like a wedding. However, I can't remember experiencing anything out-of-the-ordinary.

In the Brethren fellowship, it is the usual custom not just to sprinkle the baptism candidates, but to immerse them in water, as it was done in the time of Jesus. My father later wrote to me about his impressions at the time: "When you went into the pool, were immersed and came back up, I thought, 'Now I have lost my son.'" He was very sad because he felt that now I "belonged to someone else."

His perceptive insight surprised me. My parents, like me, had not been baptized. However, without knowing the deeper meaning of baptism, my father had understood its significance. It was true: through my baptism, I publicly declared that I now belonged to my Heavenly Father.

Martin: Panic at the prospect of marriage

On the advice of the elders, I initially went to Bible School alone. Elke stayed in Krefeld for the time being, until her marriage-on-paper was finally ended. She decided she would attend the Bible School if we got married. A day after our baptism, she took me to the Bible School in our little car, and classes started the same day. I had a small room, and was looking forward to learning more about the Bible.

The programme at the Bible School demanded a lot of my time, but I still kept my promise to pray every day at the same time as Elke, after our evening meal. This kept our “inner bond” alive, despite the distance. And I did have the time and space here to enable me to think more deeply about our relationship. Being at the School, I didn’t have to deal with the specific challenges which inevitably arose in normal everyday life together.

For as long as we had known each other, we had felt and lived like a married couple. We had fallen madly in love, and had dived into a committed relationship, but really, we’d hardly ever thought seriously about our situation. It all felt so good, that we thought it must be good!.... However we *had* left a little back door open, in case we didn’t feel the love any more. If that happened, we could simply walk out.

In the meantime, we had become aware that such a casual relationship was not necessarily what God wanted. I realized that God wants committed relationships, so that we can be safe and secure. In a marriage relationship, escape would no longer be possible, especially if we were to enter the covenant of marriage in the presence of God. That was very clear!

Marriage, however, was completely at odds with my old ideal of freedom. Everything within me rebelled. I was terrified! Furthermore, the fear of commitment or of making a mistake eclipsed my love, which had been so deep until now. In the face of a possible marriage, I only felt pressure.

I despised the bourgeois way of life, so the word “marriage” had never been part of my vocabulary. I wanted my freedom, but at the same time I knew that I had become totally bound. I knew the freedom of escape, but not the freedom of decision! And now I was being required to make a decision.

I spoke to some of the Bible School teachers about my concerns. The more I brought my doubts and fears to light, the more confused I became. But God’s still, inviting voice worked even in the midst of my inner chaos. I heard it during a lecture, when one of the teachers explained: “If you don’t get a message from God, then do what He told you to do the last time He spoke.” I knew immediately what that meant for me: marry Elke!

When I hesitantly told one of the elders about our intentions during a visit to Krefeld, tears came to his eyes. His joy was so surprising that Elke and I took it as confirmation from God. We got married that December. The Fellowship in Krefeld organized the complete wedding and the reception for us. We knew only a few of the members personally at the time, but there were many guests at our wedding. It was a wonderful celebration and an encouragement to all those who took part.

In January Elke moved with me to the South of Germany, and started Bible School. Another confirmation from the Lord was a beautiful, cosy little apartment that God had prepared for us, just when we needed it.

Sometimes I found the Bible School courses quite difficult. For example, some of the violent stories in the Bible caused me major problems. It took several years before I understood their significance. Biblical and Buddhist teaching are often in stark contradiction. It was in this confrontation that my Buddhist ideology became clear, and my faith in Jesus and my loyalty to Him were put to the test.

Resistance, doubts and questions arose in me. I found it very difficult to accept that there is only *one* way to redemption, and *one* absolute truth. Jesus Christ says of Himself, "I am the Way, the Truth, and the Life. No one comes to the Father but through me." In this He is saying that He came into the world as the absolute truth. In contrast to that, Buddhists reject the idea of absolute truth in a world of suffering. Absolute truth exists only outside of this existence, in the enlightened state of Nirvana. According to them, in this world there is only relative truth, which means that there are many possible ways to Enlightenment.

But each time that I battled through to say "yes" to Jesus and His claims, I was filled anew with deep peace and love. I felt secure in His divine presence. I sensed that God was giving me quite a different quality of life, life in His Light, a truly "enlightened" life.

Chapter 8: The strong roots of Buddhism

Martin: The terrible, lonely emptiness of Nirvana

I was often disappointed with my “Christian life”. I didn’t really know what I was supposed to do as a Christian, so I was often moody and listless. Then I would feel incapable of sharing my Jesus experience with others. I thought that I had to be in a good mood all the time in order to do something for Him. Furthermore, I couldn’t imagine that he still loved me even if I was in such a bad mood and feeling so drained.

The basic principle of Buddhism, “Life is suffering”, seemed to me to correspond more to reality. Sometimes I thought to myself, “Perhaps it *is* right in some ways. Its peaceful attitude towards all living things is exemplary. Many Christians could learn a thing or two from Buddhism.”

Whenever I harboured such thoughts, an indefinable emptiness would creep into my heart for days, leaving me very passive, especially with regard to praying and reading the Bible. I was able to unmask this emptiness only when I realized that I had been flirting with Buddhist teaching. I would immediately ask God for forgiveness, and the inner emptiness would melt away like snow in sunshine.

I realized that individual Buddhist teachings could not simply be incorporated into another system. They are inseparable from the whole structure. In other words, I cannot nibble at the sultanas in the fruitcake without also eating some of the cake. As soon as I accepted even parts of Buddhist teaching again - though they might seem good from a human point of view - I was committing myself once more to the whole spiritual structure.

Only now did I recognize the real face of Buddhism. Its peacefulness and its excellent moral standards appear initially very attractive, but it turns out to be a subtle spirit that wants to take me over and drag me down into the terrible, lonely emptiness of Nirvana, where there is no relationship with a personal God, and where there is no life.

Now I *knew*. I had to distance myself from Buddhism completely if I were to keep on experiencing the fullness of Jesus Christ, his love and his forgiveness.

The peace-loving Buddha and the suffering Jesus

It took years for the joy of this gift of God to become anchored in my heart, and for me to grow in confidence. Gradually I accepted the fact that faith is also part of the gift and has nothing to do with my ability. What began as an initial tentative suspicion blossomed into a glorious certainty and a sure foundation within me. I now had firm ground under my feet, like a child becoming increasingly aware of its parents’ love.

How often in the past I'd had the feeling of hurtling into a bottomless pit, when I had yet again been a failure and realized how far I still was from the perfection of Buddha. At such times the frustration almost tore me apart. The chasm between my depressed state and the imperturbable harmony of Buddha seemed impossible to bridge

The look of harmony on the face of a Buddha statue had always fascinated me. I longed to possess this serenity. It was as if the world could come to an end and he would still be at peace within himself – or was it “at peace” in *nothingness*? In spite of much physical, mental and emotional effort I could not make this become a reality in my daily life.

Sometimes following a period of deep meditation the goal of enlightenment seemed very close. But five minutes later I would be involved in a fierce argument with my girlfriend over some petty issue. The wonderful experience was gone, extinguished. All that remained were feelings of guilt and frustration. What was the way out? Would it take me as many years as Guatama, the king's son? Would it eventually take several lives for me to escape from this suffering? I suffered enormously from this sense of hopelessness, from the disharmony and the guilt in my life.

Even though the peaceful appearance of the Buddha statues still enthralled me, my devotion didn't bring me any peace. The harmonious serenity that emanated from these statues remained distant. *I* didn't come any closer to the harmonious inscrutability which radiated from the statues – nor did *it* come to me. At most I experienced *moments* of a higher existence, an inner alienation from everything that meant “life”.

Daily life with all its demands seemed to become more and more threatening, because it became mercilessly apparent how far I still was from my goal. I just wanted to do one thing – to run away, even from myself, for I thought I was the barrier to my own enlightenment.

If I compare a statue of Buddha sunk in silent meditation with the shattering image of pain seen in the suffering man Christ Jesus on the cross – what a contrast! Initially

after trusting Christ I didn't want to take this image on board. It was so contrary to all that I had learned and considered worth striving for.

In our church in Krefeld they often preached about suffering and the cross. I didn't find it a very joyful message. "I suppose that's why many Christians don't look happy", I thought. To my amazement some church members, who had become good friends in the meantime, told me how helpful they had found these messages!

For them the image of the suffering Jesus meant freedom, freedom from their guilt and failure, because they believed that on the cross Jesus had carried it and borne it all away. As if he had said: "Come! I know that you're not perfect. You can't bridge the gap between yourself and God. I'm taking your failure and guilt, so that you can be free to have a relationship with God, the Father."

To me this was such a strange idea! Jesus Christ, the Great Master, who had met with us in Australia and filled us with peace, does not reveal himself to me in a glorious enlightened figure like Buddha, but in this pathetic, suffering condition. But I had to admit, this image of suffering somehow appealed to me more. It corresponded to my condition and the condition of the world. Even Buddha taught "To live is to suffer". But he had fled from the world's suffering. He had distanced himself far from man's suffering. Clearly Jesus hadn't done that.

And so I realized more and more that the picture of the suffering Person on the cross was speaking to me. Yes, I realized that it was precisely this Jesus whom we had come to know in Australia. He came to me and accepted me exactly as I was, with my despair, my frustration and my suffering. From the cross he called out to me, "I have suffered for you, for your striving, your fleeing and your guilt".

It wasn't until two years after my "enlightenment" that I understood this shattering but at the same time incredibly good news; it happened during a sermon. Up till then, I could not and would not believe or admit that in Jesus Christ God had carried such a burden for me, thereby showing me his love and his desire for fellowship with me.

During that sermon, however, Jesus met me in an entirely new way. It was as if He were personally speaking to me. I acknowledged the deep love of what happened on the cross. There He had re-established the connection to me. My misery and His love met at the cross. – At last, at last I had rest!

With God it's not a case of "to live is to suffer", but "God himself bears my suffering and gives me life". Through a screaming image of suffering God has built a bridge towards me. I understood it – the chasm has been bridged! Tears rolled down my cheeks and I allowed them to, oblivious to the people around me. At last I had found a place where my failures, my rebellion and my guilt could be laid aside.

Half-hearted farewell to the goddess Tara

In order to make a complete break with Buddhism, not only did I have to renounce its doctrines, but I also had to get rid of all the objects I had used in particular practices and rituals. I didn't quite have the heart to throw them all away, so one day I drove to the Maitreya Institute, the Buddhist centre in Holland, to give them my statue of the Tara goddess. I spoke to the Geshe there, the resident Tibetan scholar, but I told him nothing of my Christian faith.

Relieved, I went back to the car after my conversation. I just wanted to get off the premises as quickly as possible, so I reversed out of my parking space with gusto. However, my speed - or rather my escape – was brought to an abrupt halt with a sickening crunch and a resounding crash..... I had reversed into a tree stump! The huge dent in my car bore testimony to my cowardly behavior – I had not confessed the truth. Instead of talking about my faith in Jesus Christ, I had behaved as if I was doing a good deed. I was deeply ashamed, but hadn't the courage to go back and tell the Geshe about my encounter with Jesus, and all that that entailed.

To dedicate our lives entirely to Jesus, we had to get rid of all our Buddhist and esoteric books. This was 't at all easy, not only because they had cost a huge amount of money, but also because their content had, for many years, determined the course of our lives. However we decided to take this radical step, so that we wouldn't leave ourselves open to the temptation of consulting them again in times of uncertainty. Just as an alcoholic has to throw out every bottle of alcohol in order to remain free, so we too, in this simple act of obedience, had to sever our dependency on Buddhism.

Separation from the books themselves, however, didn't bring us freedom. It was their substance more than anything else that had us in its grasp, although we had not realized it.

There were still tiny corners in my heart where I believed that the Tibetans and esoteric believers were happy in their own way, and that they were walking a good path. Everyone should find his or her own way of salvation.

At the same time I overlooked the fact that I myself had not been saved through Buddhist or esoteric practices. I also forgot the fact that my encounter with Jesus Christ was not something that I had earned. God had given salvation to Elke and me, as a gift.

The Christians in Byron Bay had simply shared with us the message that had set them free. Was I not also obliged to tell this good news to my friends and to other Buddhists? Until then, however, my attempts to tell them about my experiences had not met with much success.

Whenever I thought of sharing my "enlightenment" with them, was I just trying to ease my conscience by telling myself that they too were possibly on a good path?

I didn't find any real peace in these thoughts, nor in my attempts to justify myself. The truth was that my commitment to Buddhist and New Age philosophy was stronger than I liked to admit. Using the image of the tree-stump that I'd reversed into, even though the tree of these teachings had been sawn off, the stump of old influences was still within me, and kept trying to produce new shoots. It had to be dug out systematically, roots and all.

It was almost three years after our conversion before we experienced release. A Christian lady recognized that invisible forces were still trying to win us back, whispering doubt into our ears, telling us how good, or perhaps even better, things had been without Jesus. She suggested that we should renounce everything in the Name of Jesus, so that we no longer gave these powers any right to have a hold on us. We spent several days with her. In prayer, and under God's guidance, we became aware of our earlier practices. We wrote it all down and laid it prayerfully at the foot of the cross of Jesus. We then asked Him for forgiveness and release from our inner bondages.

What a comfort for us to know that Jesus accepts us without reservation! At first, we didn't notice any significant inner change or relief, but in the course of time we recognized that our joy in Jesus and our faith in Him were actually growing. We were often still like little children - after every good deed we demanded a treat.

So many other voices...

One of the roots of the tree-stump of my convictions which had to be dug out was the way I expected to receive guidance for my life. I still found it difficult to discern clearly the voice of Jesus. So many other voices spoke, which often seemed louder. Concerned that I might listen to the wrong voice, I failed to recognize that Jesus had been leading me for a long time, for example by introducing me to people who had known Him longer, and from whom I could learn.

My problem was that I couldn't see Jesus physically, in human form, like the Dalai Lama or my other Buddhist teachers. During his public lectures, the Dalai Lama gave clear instructions about what one should and shouldn't do. I doubted that Jesus could guide me as the Dalai Lama had done. Although I no longer wanted to listen to Buddhist teaching - because I knew that it couldn't lead me to God - I was still unconsciously dependent on the person of the Dalai Lama and his way of giving guidance. I didn't recognize how strong this bondage was until after I'd been a Christian for seven years, when the Dalai Lama was on a visit to North Germany to deliver a series of lectures.

About ten thousand people were participating in these events, in Schneverdingen in the Lüneburger Heide. Some committed Christians wanted to invite people to information evenings being held nearby at the same time. I was asked to come along and tell about how I had moved out of Buddhism and into the Christian faith. My immediate response was "Yes! Absolutely!" But then when I asked about the date, it turned out to be at exactly the same time as we had planned to go on vacation. I demanded of Jesus that He should tell me whether I should still go. The conflict

between my spontaneous “Yes” and our holiday plans remained. Did this imply that the choice lay with me? Or had that “Yes” been the voice of Jesus?

I was struggling with the decision, so I discussed it with Christian friends. They advised me to go on our well-deserved holiday. In the end reason prevailed, and a few days later Elke and I drove to the South of France.

Before we reached our destination, however, we had the strong sense that we were heading in the wrong direction. We hoped that these thoughts would disappear when we arrived at our destination and we would be able to enjoy our vacation. Our inner unrest, however, increased.

Finally, I booked a flight back to Germany, and informed the organizer (much to his relief!) one day before the event that I would participate. During the three public information evenings such an overwhelming peace came over me that I thanked Jesus on my knees, asking His forgiveness that I hadn’t trusted His guidance. Only then did I realize that my spontaneous, wholehearted “Yes” had indeed been *His* voice.

He *had* wanted me to go to Schneverdingen, but He didn’t put me under pressure, not even for a moment. At the same time He had given me the inner unrest to help me decide. He waited until I was willing and prepared to go, and then He supported me. Even if I hadn’t obeyed, He would have forgiven me! But I would have missed the blessing that I received through being obedient. Today I know how wonderful, sensitive and faithful the guidance of Jesus was and is.

The crippling fear of making mistakes and being punished

Of course I could have called on my Buddhist spirit-guides, but the essence of their guidance was basically quite different. The tone of their messages through Iris, the medium, had always been positive. However, sometimes I was very clearly given to understand that if I didn’t do precisely what they said, I would have to do without their guidance. That really scared me. So I sought to follow the instructions exactly. Fear lay at the root of this zealous obedience to the instructions of my gurus. I was afraid that I might miss the way to Enlightenment again, as had clearly happened in my previous life, due to negative karma. Otherwise I would have already been enlightened, and it wouldn’t have been necessary to be re-born as a human being.

Buddhism puts a lot of emphasis on following instructions exactly. My first Buddhist teacher, Lama Zopa, had made it clear to me that every action and every body posture had a bearing on whether one attained Enlightenment or not. If, for example, we prostrated ourselves too long, it would mean that we would remain in the dust of suffering. If we bent our fingers while praying, we could become a bird or an animal with bent claws in the next life.

The different exercises and ceremonies therefore had to be carried out exactly as specified; otherwise they would inevitably produce negative rather than positive karma. This is why some Buddhists prefer to let the monks offer certain sacrifices, because they are more familiar with the correct stipulations. Because of all these

past experiences and practices, a crippling fear lay dormant within me, the fear of doing something wrong. I preferred to do nothing, rather than make a mistake.

Unconsciously I transferred this fear of making mistakes into my life as a Christian. The fear was particularly strong whenever I suspected that I might not be obeying the voice of Jesus. I thought that He too would leave me, just as my gurus had sometimes threatened to do. Whenever I didn't have exact instructions, I preferred to keep doing nothing, and wait, just as I had done as a Buddhist.

Through sermons, through Bible study and discussions with other believers, my erroneous thought patterns were changed. I came to recognize my very limited human thinking. I was amazed at God's love and His liberating freedom. This filled me with deep joy, and I was even more thankful that my "enlightenment" was not something that depended upon me, or my actions, but that it was a gift from God; a gift which He gave me through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. It is not my deeds that count, but His. He simply invites me to believe and accept this, and then pass it on to others.

Epilogue: “Here I am, here I am!”

About fifty young people were listening attentively to us one Saturday evening as we were telling them about our experiences. “This isn’t *our* story”, I explained, “it is God’s story, the story of how He worked in the lives of two contemporary people.”

Another exhausting day was behind us. The organising team had asked us to lead a weekend on the difference between Buddhist-Esoteric beliefs and the Christian faith. It had been hard work that morning presenting the two contrasting world-views to the participants. Elke and I knew both belief systems inside out, so we were able to bring out clearly the striking fundamental differences between them.

Critical questions were put to us. Even those who considered themselves Christians had apparently not recognized the difference between the two, and so they were using esoteric healing techniques or practising Eastern meditation, without giving it a second thought. Our words had challenged them to think about whether an apparently helpful method can be taken from a completely different belief system, and then applied in a new context for one’s own benefit. It had been quite a struggle to try and bring out the truth.

Elke and I were exhausted. We had already told our story at several public events, and we knew the different stages of our journey and of our presentation inside out. However, this was *God’s* story - as I emphasized this point, I suddenly became a listener myself. I found myself paying attention as if I were hearing the story for the first time.

I encouraged Elke to share those elements of our story that I usually liked to tell. I noticed just how united we had become in this - God’s story! I was aware of the intimate bond with her, with Elke, my wife, and that feeling of love was only a part of this all-embracing bond.

Notwithstanding the weariness and lack of concentration that the participants had often evinced during the day’s lectures, now they were suddenly listening with rapt attention.

Each sentence carried depth and meaning. The existential significance of our encounter with God was so clearly evident that the group couldn’t help laughing repeatedly at our earlier futile efforts. Yes, it had been a pointless search, so totally human: we were searching for acceptance and spiritual unity; we wanted love, we wanted a home, we wanted all that everyone is searching for. However, in the midst of our search the unexpected happened. Inconspicuously it crept up on us. It led us in a way we didn’t recognize and then was revealed in all its power and love in the *person* of Jesus Christ! *He* was God!

Only in retrospect did we realize that it was *His* work that had left its mark on our lives. The story captured me afresh, and God was revealed to me in a new way.

We were no longer the centre of attention. The young people listened spellbound – not because of us, but because they were moved by this completely different perspective. I opened my Bible and read a verse from the prophet Isaiah (65:1). God

says, "I revealed myself to those who did not ask for Me; I was found by those who did not seek Me. I said, 'Here am I, here am I'."

Or: Isaiah 65:1 in *The Message*: *God says, "I've made myself available to those who haven't bothered to ask. I'm here, ready to be found by those who haven't bothered to look. I kept saying 'I'm here, I'm right here'..... (to a people that ignored me)." You can omit the words in brackets.*

Contrary to all expectations

Fourteen years have now passed since our first encounter with Jesus Christ. Against all the expectations of our parents and many of our friends - who thought that our faith was just another spiritual fad, and, like all the previous phases, would be of short duration - our relationship to Jesus Christ has deepened. They are amazed at what God has done in both our lives. Looking back, we too are amazed at the changes in our lives and in our circumstances.

Elke's sister and her husband are not just amazed; they now confess Jesus as well, and have experienced how he has worked with healing and love in their lives. Elke's mother and of course her daughter Stephanie have experienced Him too. My parents have also recently become interested in Jesus; they are reading books about Him and occasionally dip into the Bible.

After Elke had been following Jesus for a few years, she became aware of the extent of the damage she had caused in her first marriage. She asked her ex-husband to forgive her, and thanked him for the many things that he had continued to do for her, in spite of her withdrawal from him.

She and I also asked her son Björn for forgiveness; he had been even more aware than Stefanie of past developments. Björn, however, says that precisely because of what happened he has been able to come to know God.....

We soon realized that we could no longer continue in our professions as alternative therapists. The freedom offered by these methods now seemed utterly insignificant compared with the freedom we had experienced in God. So we went off to Bible College for a year, and then went to Tanzania where we managed a small orphanage. Upon our return to Germany, our Church in Krefeld asked us if we would like to work there full-time.

This completely new type of work gave us the opportunity to speak with many people about our faith in Jesus Christ. We led Bible studies, arranged special church services, talked to needy people, and, along with other Church members, built up a small Christian coffee shop.

After working there for three years, we felt the desire to strengthen our foundations and to acquire more theological knowledge, so we studied for two and a half years at a Free Church seminary. During this time, we were asked increasingly to speak about our life; this we did, as well as regularly offering seminars on "Buddhism and the New Age", which we continue to do to this day.

In the meantime we have been appointed co-pastors of a Free Church in Hessen. And so our life has undergone radical change, not just in our faith, but also in our professional careers.

Text for Publisher: I was a Buddhist by Martin Kamphuis

“I was a Buddhist” is a fascinating story about a man’s search for the meaning of life and for Enlightenment. When Martin Kamphuis reaches his goal, however, it is not as a result of New Age techniques or his beloved Buddhism. It is the end of God’s search for him, when he is confronted by Jesus Christ.

As a young adult, Martin visits and tours South America alone, but soon realizes that there must be more to life than “love”. He does not see fulfillment in his father’s life as a farmer, either. On a neighbor’s recommendation, he travels to India and attends a meditation course. His impressions are rather mixed:

Initially, I thought that nobody in Holland would listen to such incoherent nonsense for even an hour. However, those who had been interested in Buddhist teaching for a while found his lectures fantastic, and were down-right enthusiastic. After a while, I found his words extremely appealing, too. We learned that Buddhist teaching cannot be grasped with the intellect, but we should relinquish our reason and leave room for transcendental, intuitive knowledge.

At the end of the course Martin became a Buddhist. His desire to reach Enlightenment led him to participate in initiations, meditation, and many rituals, some of them quite extreme and tiring. He returns to Holland, with the intention of returning to India, where he hoped to find his personal Guru, but it remained just a wish. In England he met a Dutch Buddhist, Iris, who claimed to have telepathic contact with several Buddhist Gurus, one of which would later be Martin’s Guru. The relationship with Iris was meant to help them both on the way to spiritual Enlightenment, and was quite important to him,

Martin studied psychology, but he also learned many New Age therapy methods, since according to tantric Buddhism, any means that might be helpful in reaching Enlightenment are allowed. The relationship with Iris is under constant strain, however. Martin is weighed down with guilt because of his lack of sympathy for her, necessary to reaching Enlightenment. Even though he is determined to end the relationship, it is not an easy step to take, because she served as a medium of his guru.

Finally, he meets a German lady, also seeking Enlightenment, and who has come to live with him on his ship. This enables him to break free. Elke is an alternative therapist, who, blinded by the ideal of self realization has been seeking her soul mate to the detriment of her family. Even though they both feel that their search has ended, they are still restless, and unfulfilled in their work as a therapists.

I felt a deep aversion towards my ship and our therapeutic work. Out of the blue, I said to Elke, “I don’t want to work here anymore! It doesn’t feel right any more!”

They embark on a trip around the world, and end up deciding to visit two destinations, India, so that Martin can fulfill a month long ritual, and Indonesia. They

have no clear direction on their travels, but Elke received guidance in an unusual way:

That night I had a strange dream. I saw the continent of Australia and a voice said to me, "You will come to your heart here!"

As they progress through India and Indonesia, their sense of meaninglessness and frustration grows. In Australia they realize that they have been victims of a dishonest Indian merchant, and have lost a lot of money. Forced by their circumstances, they work on a fruit farm, and later visit an acquaintance who lives in the Australian rain forest. Hitchhiking on a Saturday, the couple meets a joyful young man. Elke and Martin think they know where that joy comes from - drugs. However, to their surprise, the man explains that his joy comes from his relationship with Jesus Christ. He invites them to experience something really alternative; he invites them to his Church. Open for almost anything, and somewhat curious, they agree.

At the end of the Sunday service, Mary asks Elke if she can pray with her; Martin goes along, too. Martin and Elke are used to sensing invisible powers, but now they sense that there is Someone there, Who is greater and stronger than all other powers that they had come in contact with. They meet Jesus Christ and experience Light entering their hearts. They had expected that they would reach Enlightenment from within, through New-Age and Buddhist methods. Now they recognize that the Light has come from outside, and that this Light had been searching for them all of the time.

After several days of inner peace and joy, Elke and Martin begin to feel a struggle within them. Well-meaning Christians that try to help and encourage them with scriptures only make the situation worse, as Elke and Martin don't consider the Bible an authority, yet. They come to the point where they are willing to put Jesus alongside other Gurus and ideas, perhaps even give Him a special place, but do not see His unique significance. Their search for God goes on, this time in Sydney where their new faith grows, and where God takes hold of their lives. It becomes clear:

No, Jesus didn't belong in the ranks of my other gurus. I knew finally that He is the Living God in person.

God's story with Elke and Martin didn't stop here. They returned to Germany, to Elke's daughter. In the course of time, God made reconciliation possible, and started to heal the wounds in their relationship. God took them on to marriage and Bible school, to Tanzania, and then a pastorate. He also gave them the opportunity to share their story with others:

During the lectures and discussions that took place that day, the participants had often seemed tired and unable to concentrate, but now, they were completely absorbed.

Every sentence had a deep meaning. The existential significance of our meeting with God came out so clearly, that often the group couldn't help laughing at our previous, futile efforts. Yes, it had been a pointless search, so exceedingly human. We had searched acceptance and spiritual unity; we wanted love, a home, and everything that everyone else in the world is looking

for. However, in the middle of our search something unexpected had happened. Discreetly, it made itself perceptible. We were led by it, without even knowing it, but then He revealed Himself in all of His power and love, in His personal existence. He met us in Jesus Christ, God in person!

(Quotes from 'I was a Buddhist')

Summary

Book is written by Martin and Elke Kamphuis, hardback publ by Brunnen Verlag in 2000, ISBN 3-7655-5863-X and/or Pattloch Verlag ISBN 3-629-00853-4. I believe that edition was limited and has now reached the end of its run. M & E felt it was expensive and have been trying to publish in paperback.

Chap 1 (17pp): Martin's early life in Holland, a difficult child. Travels to S America in search of "freedom", wandering from place to place. Brief encounter with a Dutch Christian family, falls for the teenage daughter. Returns to Europe, drugs and sex.

Chap 2 (30pp): To India and Nepal to explore Buddhism. Takes courses in Dharmasala; initiation into and acceptance of Buddhism. Ever deeper into Buddhism, still on his search for meaning. Returns home, tries to integrate Buddhist ways into his life in Holland. Search for release thro' telepathy and relationship therapy. Lives with Buddhist/New Age woman (Iris) in Amsterdam. Experiences that Buddhist beliefs give only temporary relief and don't transfer into daily life. Goes with Iris to Findhorn. Longing for a life free of bondages. Tries to live separately from Iris - she won't let go.

Chap 3 (40pp): Rebirth therapy, involvement in New Age therapies, some relief, but still self-focussed, no compassion for others.

Encounter with Dalai Lama in London. Spirit guides. Retreats to India, under tutelage of Buddhist guru, leads life of an ascetic.

Personal meeting with Dalai Lama in Dharmasala.

Returns to Holland, sets up New Age Therapy centre on a Rhine barge. Very successful, featured on prime time TV. His traditional parents undergo "therapy" on the barge and are "converted" to his way of life. Meets Elke, "the lady with the blue eyes", who is married with children.

Elke now takes up the story. (This back-and-forth between Martin and Elke continues, interwoven, for the rest of the book, each giving their own reflection on events.) Her progress via feminist movement, women's emancipation from tyranny of men (!), women's rights, hatred of males, environmental issues, till she encounters the New Age. By now she is disheartened and disillusioned.

Chap 4 (13pp): Martin finally, with great difficulty, breaks off the relationship with Iris. Elke moves in. They decide to go to India - a difficult decision for Elke. They meet the Dalai Lama again.

Chap 5 (19pp): Back to Dharmasala, M consults dead guru and his reincarnation (young boy). Cheated in India. Illness and guilt plague Elke. Martin has 2 near-brushes with death. Really shaken. Spend Christmas in S India (half-hearted attempt to celebrate), New Year in Dharmasala; disillusioned with behaviour of Buddhist monks in "normal" life. Continue their travels to Australia. End up working on a fruit farm. Martin decides finally to finish with drugs.

Chap 6 (18pp): Invited to Christian church by guy who gives them a lift. Word of knowledge over Elke. Both accept Christ - but are still very confused. "Good feelings" evaporate after short time. Elke esp is attacked by demonic powers. Slow, slow realisation that JESUS isn't just another guru, but "the Living God in person". Realise their search has ended - He was searching for them!

(Then follow 16 pages of photographs.)

Chap 7 (15pp): Return to Europe. Difficulties for Elke in resolving relationships in Germany with husband and daughter. M & E are accepted into a small, loving fellowship - with no female participation! (Obviously Brethren!) Strangely gives her a sort of security, she doesn't have to "fight" any more. Martin realises he still combines Jesus and certain aspects of Buddhist teaching. Reconciliation between Elke and her daughter; husband files for divorce. Water baptism, marriage, Bible School.

Chap 8 (10pp): Final, clean break with Buddhism. (Sent as Attachment)

There is also a 2-page Epilogue, in which they describe one of their workshops with a quite hostile Christian audience, how God intervenes and takes over. Also a Postscript on what they are doing now "9 years later".....now of course 15 years later!