

A mountain of hardships

By Ruth Ostrow

I HAVE come to hear the wonderful Tenzin Palmo -- the Englishwoman who secluded herself for 12 years in a remote cave 4000m high in the Himalayas, in search of enlightenment -- speak about how she turned adversity into spiritual triumph.

She is only in Australia for a short time and I'm desperate to learn the lesson she has brought here: how to embrace, rather than seek to escape, the hardships and difficulties of life.

Hers is an amazing story of endurance, of coping alone cut off from the world by mountains and snow, of dealing with near starvation, bitter cold, wild animals, and avalanches. I've come an hour early to ensure I hear her words of inspiration. But there's hardly a space on the floor of the hall free of human bodies.

I make my way through the crossed-legged throng, all looking very Eastern in coloured clothes and facial jewellery, trying to find somewhere to sit. Finally I wedge my bottom between two life forms. People start to push into me. "Ouch," I moan, getting squished, prodded, jabbed.

"Please practise compassion," says one of the organisers over the microphone. "Make room for other people," she says, as I try to be calm, try to be kind. But with more and more people streaming into the hall, it seems there are going to be some very intimate moments.

"Ouch," a musical instrument presses into my spine, a shoe knees me, a duffle bag swipes me over the head. Moans are heard as toes are being trampled. Eyes are being gouged out.

Hardship. It is the healing way. Without difficulties, there is no potential to evolve, according to Tenzin Palmo (formerly Diane Perry), who talks about this in her best-selling biography: *Cave in the Snow*, by Vicki Mackenzie.

"Please all stand up and move forward," says the organiser. "Share your space," she implores.

We move forward into impossibly tight spaces. I can hardly breathe for the smell of pungent geranium oil and stale incense dousing the hair and clothes of those around me. And just when my suffering becomes too much, someone takes off their shoes. The smell of stinky feet mingled with perfume is knocking me out.

"What can I learn from this difficult experience?" I ponder, in a bid to turn adversity into spiritual triumph.

Because I'm feeling bad about feeling bad. Tenzin Palmo lived in a tiny, barren cave. She slept in a traditional meditation box, a metre square, never laying down for over a decade. "Is it too much to ask yourself to sit still for two seconds?" I yell at myself inside my head.

The woman next to me is meditating. Making low vibrating noises with her throat as she chants herself into a non-aware state. She looks ecstatic, inwardly happy, until someone kicks her in the kidney.

Ten minutes go by. My legs are numb. My feet are dead. People start stomping to get rid of the pins and needles. Twenty minutes. People around start hitting themselves to increase the circulation. Thirty minutes, and people start to hit each other.

Just joking, but I do fear that if we have to wait any longer there might be a scrum over those 10cm spots. How long can the human being rise above it all? Finally Tenzin Palmo arrives. A Buddhist nun since the 1960s, and in Australia to raise awareness and money for a convent she is setting up for women in the Tibetan region, she begins talking slowly, thoughtfully, about her life.

Her teachings are profound. That as humans we often behave like animals, questing after pleasure, wanting to be comfortable in our chair, wanting to have sex and food, be cuddled and stroked. We fear discomfort and suffering, and yet, they are our greatest teachers.

Growth is what we are here for. Suffering helps us evolve. We can be happy in a cave, or in a crowd, once we have embraced this truth because we see every experience as helping us on the path to inner wisdom.

I want to nod, but fear I'll headbutt the woman in front who has a sharp chopstick sticking out of her hair.

And suddenly I get a profound insight. That small hardship is very undervalued. That big suffering always gets big press: war, famine, disease, earthquake. Even our bodies rally to help us cope with the big S emitting heavy-duty, fight-or-flight hormones, our friends rally, we pray to God who occasionally sends down an angel to help us through.

But no one has any sympathy or time for the little sufferings caused by noisy neighbours, congested buses, home renovators who drill on the weekends, lawnmowers, traffic lights. Being crammed into the sardine-can of life with snoring, snorting human beings with stinky feet.

And yet this is the suffering that afflicts most of us most of the time. Like the horrible suffering we endure at the cinema when people start chomping on Jaffas. Or when a woman with very big hair and a hat on top sits in front of us, and the sheer strength of character it takes to stop from pulling her hat off and yelling: "What sort of selfish cow wears a hat to a movie?"

Almost reading my mind, the marvellous Tenzin Palmo tells the story of a famous French nun who went to live in a monastery, but passionately hated one of the other nuns who kept making bizarre clicking noises with her tongue.

The sound was so insistent that the nun believed she couldn't cope. But instead of committing strangulation, she befriended the woman, gave her gifts, opened her heart. As a result she cared more about the woman, felt pity, and the annoyance bothered her less and less.

Her hardship taught her tolerance, love, compassion. It was a gift not a curse because it helped her grow, says Tenzin Palmo, watching the throng elbowing each other in the ribs.

At the end of the talk everybody files up to the stage to get more insight into a woman who has truly chosen to expose herself to untold deprivation. My turn comes. Her eyes are huge, pale-green pools of serenity. She has transcended irritation.

A question is burning in my mind. As a hugely social creature, I must know: "Didn't you ever hate being alone?"

Tenzin Palmo smiles warmly. "No, never, never," she says, shaking her head. "Never!"

Looking around the room, and pulling the chopstick out of my forehead, I finally understand what she means.

www.ruthostrow.com

© Ruth Ostrow

First published in The Weekend Australian SAT 19 AUG 2000