

Conversation with Atma Muni Mertens

Interview by Annelize Festen

Lucien Mertens - Atma Muni - (°1937) has lived in Mechelen all his life. A city of furniture makers and he himself is the son of a woodcarver.

Aside from teaching yoga, he is also a tour guide - only recently to India. When he picks me up at the train station he says: "Did you know Mechelen has the oldest train station of the European continent? Do you see the memorial over there?" So, the trip to his yoga centre becomes an interesting sightseeing tour. And afterwards - in his yoga centre - he talks for hours about his experiences with meditation and yoga.

"Through circumstances I got introduced to yoga in a completely different way from the average Western yoga practitioner today. When I was only four years old, I suffered from an incurable liver disease. According to the doctors I would never reach adulthood. I missed most classes in primary school. Mostly I lay in bed - even reading was too tiring. Looking back, however, this disease has been the greatest gift in my life. Because I could not direct my spirit outwardly, I learned to focus very much on the inner experiences and so - without even knowing it - I spontaneously came to practices of meditation.

When I was twelve my health got better and I could attend classes regularly. "Maybe he'll grow to be an adult after all," the doctor had told my mother. "But probably he won't make it into his thirties." I knew that, I was always present when the doctor discussed my health. But it never bothered me - though I got really fed up with the medication and injections.

When I was fourteen I 'by coincidence' ended up in the class of a very erudite and well-read teacher. His name was **Willy Steep**, and he had a very extensive library with books on occult and spiritual matters, and Eastern philosophy. He was fascinated by this and occasionally talked about it. Furthermore he was an extraordinary educator. Although we were a class of 46, he managed to stimulate each and every student individually in his talents. He noticed my talent for writing poems and my philosophic-mystic orientation. He helped me to develop these two talents and under his guidance my poetry evolved to proper literature. One day he said to me by way of a challenge: "You think you know a lot, boy, but I will tell you something you don't know." And then he gave me a full explanation of the eight steps of the Yoga Sutra of Patanjali, complete with examples, always referring to the high spiritual development that had existed in India since ancient times. I still have notes of this at home. I reacted very recalcitrantly on what he had said and noted things like "Who does he think he is, etc.?", but in fact I was shocked to the deepest of my being. I thought: "This already exists. It is thousands of years old!" and I immediately asked him for titles of books, authors and publishers; but he refused to give them to me, he didn't want to take that responsibility, he considered me too young. Later I realized the main reason for his refusal was the fact that he was a teacher in the Catholic school system. At that time it was strictly forbidden for Catholics to pursue such matters. Of course I visited a lot of bookstores, but to my regret no bookseller could point me in the right direction, for this literature appeared to be unknown.

Ever since I was twelve I had often visited the bookshop **of René Van Gijssel**. In the days I was bedridden there were times I wasn't allowed to read, but sometimes reading was the only thing I could do. There weren't many books for Flemish children in those days. Most books were Dutch, with characters that carried Dutch names like 'Kees' and 'Joop', and they didn't appeal to us at all. I did use to read wild west stories. When I started buying my own books at the age of twelve, I suddenly entered the world of adults. René Van Gijssel was an exceptional bookseller. Every time you bought something he asked: "What did you think of the last book I sold you?" And then he would talk about it and advised: "Then I think you will like this very much." That is how he lifted all his customers to the level he wanted. He had a vast experience with meditation, and was a theosophist, hypnotist, magnetizer and worked together with a doctor for years. Of all people, he should be my bookseller.

I also asked him if he could help me. He said: "Without an author or a title there is nothing I can do for you." About two years later I found out however that he should be the only expert in these matters for miles around. When I asked him: "Sir, how could you? I have been looking for more than two years..., you are the only expert around here...", he looked at me and said: "You are still studying. If you ever read one of those books, you will be stuck for the rest of your life. I do not want to show you this path until you have finished your studies."

Then I ordered the complete works of Paul Brunton, but he refused. "Well, if you refuse I will look for another bookshop. You can help me..., someone else can't." I was just eighteen then. And he said: "I will help you, on the condition that you come and report to me regularly."

I did not simply read Paul Brunton's work, but lived it and turned it inside out. Now I distance myself from his work, but I am very grateful to it.

Another book, 'Hatha Yoga' by Yogi Ramacharaka, proved to be a priceless introduction to yoga. Today there is too much rationalizing about yoga in books, little is said about the attitude of yoga, which is very much present in this book.

Under the guidance of René Van Gijssel I also started meditating. So initially I didn't consult Indian Swamis.

The meditation technique René introduced me to, was a kind of jñāna yoga practice of meditating on a grain of corn. I was extremely disappointed. I was very fascinated by all comparative theosophy and philosophy, and I was expecting an exalted subject for meditation. Then this man gave me meditation on a grain of corn! I didn't dare to say I wasn't interested in this at all. And I regularly had to report on my progress, so I felt very much monitored. This is how I began meditating for twenty to thirty minutes every day; starting with breathing exercises of Yogi Ramacharaka to pacify my spirit.

And how I am grateful to that man for the grain of corn! For it has led to meditative experiences and an unimaginable evolution in my meditation. This grain of corn, this mere, simple grain of corn, which I could hardly picture during my first meditations, gradually provided me with a philosophical explanation, for everything. Not just in the sense of rational ideas about existence and the creation but a profound contemplative observation.

And when I reported to René, he refused to give any comment. When I asked a question, he replied: "If I answer you, the question is ruined. You must find the answer within yourself. When offered by

someone else, it is not a good answer. So I will never answer." His only help was a subtle guidance in my experiences.

I will try to give a general idea of what happened during mediation. As my mind became more quiet and I got in a contemplative mood, my thoughts slowed down so much that every thought occurred in phases. This enabled me to get a close look at how my thoughts were formed in my mind. It is unlike regular thinking in everyday life, but a contemplative observation of thoughts and their contents.

As I concentrated on the grain of corn, the meditative 'thinking' was focused on this, and so the grain itself came to life. I experienced no distance between myself and the grain, emotionally and consciously I was one with it. Thoughts emerged out of this meditative union.

When I told René about this, he was happy. But it happened occasionally I had experiences of which he said: "Better not pursue it any further." Thus he has guided me for several years in my meditation. And it has changed me completely.

((Intermezzo))

Before I tell you more about my meditation experiences, I want to tell you something about myself in those days. I was never able to participate in play or sports, and going to school sometimes proved true torture. Walking hurt incredibly. On photographs of me in those days, you see a much too quiet, shy kid. But at the age of 14-15 I was physically much healthier and stronger. I was even taken on as a member of an athletics club because of my endurance. But there they wouldn't train me in long-distance running... So I trained on my own and became a sporty young man, and a bit of a macho even. I painted the town red, liked girls (still do!), partied every day. All that as I attended a catholic school. In those days (about 1953) catholic students weren't allowed to go out, walk past a girls' school, go to supermarkets or bars or be seen in company of girls. If you were seen with your sister, your parents had to come to the school and explain that it was really your sister. But I was seen in all possible places in the company of girls, and no-one ever made a remark about it.

But every night I thought about what I had done that day and I realized I had once again wasted a day on superficial and useless youthful swaggering. I got angry at myself, because I wasn't living life as I should.

When I started meditating I put an end to my partying. I consciously focused on meditation, study, reading, with one exception: an Easter party. A friend talked me into it and said: "It is a private family party; not really a night on the town." "Well," I thought, "I mustn't exaggerate,... and that's where I met my wife."

In those days I still needed to go to the doctor's every two days to get injections for my liver disease. One day I asked the doctor how long I would still need these injections for. His answer was: "For the rest of your life." And that just wasn't acceptable to me.

Then I took up another practice besides the breathing exercises and meditation. I was not just shy, but also very scared and pessimistic. So I said to myself: "I am a negative person. But why? A friend living down the road experiences the same things, yet he is happy." I decided to change myself and started checking myself every moment of the day without ever having read something about this.

Every negative thought that came up was examined. "What is the purpose of this thought? Why must I accept it?", and then I turned the negative thought into a positive one. I didn't suppress these negative thoughts, but rendered them naked, and asked myself: "Why do they have such strong power over me, why need I think this?" Later I discovered in yoga study I had acted correctly.

That was an intense process. Psychologically and physically I changed so much from the person I used to be. In a very short period of time I gave up the injections and all other medication, although I worried whether this was responsible. So it suited me fine that I was called up for a medical check up for military service. I told the doctors about my incurable liver disease and asked for a thorough examination. The result was: "Sir, it is rare we get such a healthy young man like yourself in here. We found some scars of a severe liver disease but you are fit as a fiddle."

I have no proof this resulted from yoga practice, but there are no arguments against it, either. The big turn for the better came when I took up yoga practice. But without asanas. For nine years I only practiced meditation and simple breathing exercises. I only took up asana practice when my back began to hurt so much I couldn't meditate any longer. Yet I didn't start hatha yoga for health reasons, but out of a genuine spiritual interest. To me the basic questions in yoga are: "Who or what am I, why am I here, what is creation, what is the purpose of creation, what is the meaning of my life?"

Meditation experiences

Now I will try to describe my daily practice in detail.

I started by breathing rhythmically, following Ramacharaka's instructions: 2-1-2-1, retaining my breath for half counts. E.g. 6 counts in, 3 counts retention, 6 counts out and 3 counts empty. When this showed results, I gave up the rhythm after a while and surrendered to full breathing. The rhythm had its aftereffects, but I stopped focusing my mind on it. Then I began meditating on the grain of corn.

After about six months there came a day it didn't work. My first thoughts were: "It's not going to be for today then?", but immediately after this I realized I definitely had to persevere because otherwise I wouldn't get very far. And that is why I spontaneously changed my method and subject of meditation.

In this stage of my life I questioned my religious education and the concept of 'God'. In Belgium there used to be on every street corner a small statue of the Virgin Mary which I would curse: "You evil woman... You are a fraud!..." and even worse names than that. To remove this obstacle in my meditative process I focused my mind on a positive sentence. And the sentence that spontaneously entered my mind was: "God is Love." It appeared strange to me that I would pick this sentence. It did mean that much to me emotionally, but rationally it invoked a strong resistance. I started repeating this sentence: I closed my eyes, breathed in and mentally repeated it, breathed out and repeated it again: "God is Love." I was used to focus my attention on the Ajña Chakra. I imagined looking out through this centre of energy and pictured a sky spangled with stars (I had always been fascinated by this, even as a child I'd spend hours looking at the stars and I'd completely lose myself in them).

This sky was a dome full of bright stars, and when I said "God is Love", I projected this sentence out of my Ajña Chakra. I pictured a beam of light emanating from that point, and just like in the movie theatre I projected it on a big screen, in my case a starry sky. In huge shining letters the word 'God' e.g. would appear in flaming red. Then the next word 'is' in shiny blue and finally the word 'Love' in bright yellow. And every time I made the word dissolve. The projection followed the slow rhythm of my breathing... And then a lot of things started happening one after the other, or all at the same time. There grew an incredible silence in me and my breathing stopped. I felt I was not inhaling or exhaling any longer. It was a very strange experience. My breathing space resembled a room with two open windows and there was constant ventilation without the normal continuous inhalation and exhalation. At the same time I became conscious of the complete weight of my body. The body died, became like a stone, without any life, but this was no eerie feeling, but rather an experience of conscious satisfaction. Then suddenly bright waves flew up my spine and radiated, scintillated through my brain. At the moment these waves of energy rose my eyes painfully and automatically directed themselves to the Ajña Chakra.

Once they fully focused on this point, the pain was gone and my eyes remained locked there. This was followed very quickly by a completely opposite process: the body lost its heaviness and solidity and suddenly felt very transparent, spatial; I experienced a floating or expanding sensation and at the point in the middle of my forehead a dark tunnel opened through which I was sucked upward. I couldn't resist it.

At the end of the tunnel I was suddenly confronted with an obliterating vision of the infinite cosmos (this was not in my imagination anymore, but reality). I felt infinite, an all-embracing feeling. I could direct my attention to any one star and then I would feel the enormous force of the nuclear fusion processes of that star. I was filled with an all-embracing consciousness and an intense feeling of cosmic love. Then this entire cosmos dissolved and only empty space remained. In my awareness it was no 'empty space', it was nothing. There was just this intense experience "I am", stripped from all form and accompanied by a feeling of infinite bliss. This perception or experience didn't resemble anything that happens as a phase 'in time', but as an absolute state. Yet also this awareness of "I am" dissolved and only a state of 'pure being' remained, which cannot be described in words (any attempt sounds ridiculous: 'full emptiness', 'infinity in on point', 'without duality!').

I can only estimate the duration of this state of being by the time I began and ended my meditation; maybe half an hour. At a 'certain moment' the process reversed. First I became aware of "I am" again, then a feeling of being pulled down, which I tried to resist. Then things went very fast: awareness of myself as a person, in deep rest, aware of my physical body and the amazing perception of the 'breathless state'. I started to feel a bit uneasy and anxious, because if you hold your breath very long you are under much pressure, a feeling of suffocating. However I felt no tension at all, no need for breathing, it seemed like I could sit like that for ages. That's when panic struck. I thought: "This is impossible. I must be dead." The reaction of fear was a grasp at life and I forced myself to breath in and out. I became totally aware of my body and surroundings. Still very much impressed with what I had experienced, I said out loud: "I know now what God is, and no person I know knows what God is; I know now what happiness is, and no person I know knows what happiness is." Years later I realized that the experience I had had and which I did not discuss with anybody was a pure experience called samadhi.

It gave me an answer to feelings of unrest and discontentment that had been present in my mind for years. Especially during puberty, I was sometimes very desperate. I remember lying on the bed, cursing God out of feelings of powerlessness: "God, damn you, if you exist, you must reveal yourself. If you play hide and seek, you do not deserve to be called 'God'..."

This was my way of praying, a 'naked' form, which had nothing to do with believing, but with existence and consciousness. I was driven by an intense desire for 'truth'.

Such an experience of unity changes your mind considerably. To me this has always been a driving force. It is the mainspring of my teaching yoga.

Later I met Indian Swamis with whom I wanted to discuss these experiences... but I soon found out they did not have this experience and only possessed rational knowledge... Until in 1970, on my 33rd birthday, I read "Science of Soul" by Swami Yogeshwarananda Saraswati.¹

In this book I encountered for the first time someone who clearly and fully described my experiences. I wanted to meet this man very much, but thought: "He I probably will never visit Europe..."

Source: 'Tijdschrift voor Yoga' 4/96 Volume 7 - December 1996

¹Shree Swami Vyas Dev Ji Maharaj, "Science of Soul (Atma Vijnana)", Yoga Niketan Trust, Rishikesh, India, 1964.