



Gelong Thubten reckons he owes quite a debt of thanks to Scotland. "It saved my life. Without Scotland and my Tibetan gurus, I wouldn't be here," says the Buddhist monk, whose quiet musings on meditation and compassion are making a big noise at the moment.

Dressed in red robes, with head closely shaven, the sanguine 47-year-old has experienced many lifetimes in one and teetered perilously close to the void.

He has also mined a ton of hefty karma to finally access a treasured portal to stable, lasting happiness, as outlined in *A Monk's Guide to Happiness: Meditation for the 21st Century*, his new book which has levitated to the top of Amazon's bestsellers.

And because of his "wild days", he is confident we can do the same. From schoolchildren buzzing from their iPads, to stressed-out executives in Silicon Valley, peace is always at hand, he insists.

At 21, Thubten had left Oxford University and was living a hedonistic life as an actor in New York, consuming fashion, the rave music scene and endless parties.

He was keen to follow in the footsteps of his mother, the EastEnders actress Indira Joshi, who played the mother in *The Kumars at No 42* before becoming Mariam Ahmed, aunt of Masood Ahmed, in the BBC soap.

However, in his teens, Thubten felt "knocked sideways" by his parents' divorce. Later, while at "a very progressive conservatory on Broadway", his pursuit of instant gratification and a wrecking ball lifestyle felled him.

His body and soul fractured, and a nervous breakdown and serious heart condition slapped him rudely awake. "One day I woke after a heavy night of partying, thinking I was having a heart attack. My heart was beating incredibly fast, I had chest pains and I was bathed in sweat. I could barely move. This led to a long, severe sickness. I was bedridden with burnout," he says.

"I had atrial fibrillation, a heart condition that can become dangerous. I was terrified and felt life was over."

Then something miraculous happened after a pilgrimage to Kagyu Samye Ling Monastery and Tibetan Centre, near Lockerbie in Dumfries and Galloway. Buddha's ancient teachings seemed to be an antidote his years of excess.

"My best friend from childhood told me about a Tibetan monastery in Scotland for people who wanted to become monks and nuns for a year. It seemed crazy but felt completely right."

Thubten liked the inner sanctuary he was exploring so much that he ditched his civvies, put on the maroon robes of

ZEN AND THE ART OF RESCUE

After a life of hedonism that was nearly the end of him, Gelong Thubten was 'saved' in Scotland. We can all learn from meditation, he tells *Jean West*

his kagyü lineage and embraced a life of austerity. He took one-year vows, followed by lifetime ones.

Thubten found safety and balance at Samye Ling as secretary to Akong Rinpoche, who he regarded as guru and a father figure. The lama was killed six years ago while visiting Tibet.

The Tibetans were not impressed with Thubten's colourful past. "I liked the fact that the Akong Rinpoche looked bored when I tried to tell him about my life. He was more interested in the present and moving forward," he says.

Twelve years later, Thubten was sitting upright in meditation on the island of Arran, watching his thoughts drift past and exploring inner space. The four-year retreat on the island – and a five-month vow of silence – plugged him into the still, peaceful reservoir of his own higher power. But even then he had no idea how relevant his experience would be as the digital age loomed with the same force as industrialisation.

Today, Thubten teaches stressed executives at Google and LinkedIn, and has

worked with staff at the United Nations, in prisons, schools and with Benedict Cumberbatch and Tilda Swinton, on the set of the Marvel film *Doctor Strange*.

His book explores the how to of meditation and mindfulness, in conversations about impermanence, compassion, loving kindness, and the notion that happiness is a choice. It follows up with simple exercises that encourage a feeling of connection and hope.

After his secluded retreat in the early 2000s, Thubten heard about the development of iPhones and the emergence of Twitter and Facebook, where "likes" awarded users with a dopamine high.

"We were completely cut off from the outside world, with no phones, internet or newspapers. It was hard, like having open-heart surgery with no anaesthetic. You're backed into a corner with painful thoughts and feelings," he says.

"When I left there, I discovered great changes in how people processed information. We seemed more stressed than ever, overstimulated and pressured. Life seemed to be spiralling out of control

with the speeding up of technology and addiction to smartphones. Don't get me wrong, technology can be used for amazing things, but I do think we need to protect ourselves from dependency."

Thubten cites neuroscience to show how stress changes the amygdala in the brain in response to a constant state of fight or flight. "But I don't feel hopeless about it. I'm really excited to see how many schools in the UK are taking on meditation in the curriculum."

People are wrong to think they should fight thoughts, he says. These will always emerge; what it's about is observing them and letting them go without reacting.

His friend and colleague, the comic Ruby Wax, is with Thubten here. She turned to meditation after a series of psychological traumas and met him at a conference in Sweden. They soon began to discuss parallels between spirituality and science. Later, Wax joined forces with Thubten and neuroscientist Ash Ranpura to write *How to be Human*.

All those years of quieting his mind and understanding that all change begins with the self have paid off. Thubten believes meditation and mindfulness should be available to everyone – not just to chill out but to access hidden reserves of joy. The world is catching on, as shown by courses such as a mindfulness MSc at Aberdeen University.

The monk is excited by research on the plasticity of the brain and its ability to remodel itself through the power of thought. He encourages us not to believe everything we think and outlines techniques to transform anger through forgiveness. Our enemies can be our most profound teachers, he says.

So why is meditation so popular? "The fact that we now have scientific evidence, data and research, to show what happens to the brain when we meditate has made a lot more people interested," he says.

"Twenty years ago, if you wanted to learn about meditation, you had to go to a Buddhist centre. Today the language used to explain the techniques is very natural and non-spiritual. Anyone from any religion, or no religion, can understand and access it."

Thubten's book is dedicated to the most important people in his life: his mother and Rinpoche. "I'm very close to my mother. I wanted to give this book to her for some inspiration in her old age. She has done so much for me," he says.

As for Rinpoche, who helped Thubten transform so much, he quotes one of his favourite comments: "Only the impossible is worth doing." And there is a challenge Thubten has not taken lying down.

A Monk's Guide to Happiness: Meditation in the 21st Century, by Gelong Thubten, is published by Yellow Kite, £12.99

Gelong Thubten, pictured on the shores of Loch Ness, teaches people ranging from school pupils to Google executives and Hollywood stars

NEVER MIND THE MATHS, MUSIC NEEDS TO BLOW ITS OWN TRUMPET

Festival director Fergus Linehan strikes the right note in his musical message, says *Lindsay Paterson*



Opinions on music are not hard to find in Edinburgh during August. The novelty this year is that the festival director, Fergus Linehan, intervened last week in the controversy about the cost of musical tuition in schools. Festival directors usually keep well clear of such involvement, but Linehan was forthright. Putting up financial barriers to musical participation, he said, threatened to confine musical understanding to a rich elite.

These comments seemed to echo a report of the Scottish parliament's education committee earlier this year. Musical tuition is expensive because, to be any good, it has to be one-to-one. Some cash-strapped local authorities have started charging for tuition. The MSPs noted that charging was obviously unfair to pupils whose parents couldn't afford the fees.

This may all seem good news for musical education. There is a consensus that everyone ought to benefit. But there are two ways of arguing for the widest access to appreciating good music, whatever the genre – classical or jazz, folk or brass bands. Only one of these ways respects music for what it is.

The one that is popular with policy-makers is not really about music at all. The argument goes like this: playing a musical instrument, we are told, has all sorts of knock-on effects. It can make people better able to do maths. Or learn how to read. Or be creative, or intelligent, or pass exams. It can improve their mental health. It might even make people into better citizens.

Some of this is quite plausible, and there is sound research underpinning a few of the claims. The best established evidence shows that music can strengthen young children's listening skills. Musical training refines the neural structure of those parts of the brain that enable us to discriminate between sounds. This leads children to better phonological awareness, which can in turn help them to speak clearly and accurately. Since early linguistic skill is necessary for almost everything else in education, there is a scientific case here for children being musically active before even they start school.

Music probably also strengthens spatial skills, such as being able to imagine how to rotate an object. So it might make you better at parking your car.

But, hearing and spatial skills aside, there's not much else so far as the scientifically valid evidence is concerned. There are many other correlations with music, but

the causal links are unclear, and may even be the other way round. Thus it is probably not the case that music makes us cleverer. It is more likely that clever people like complex music. Music doesn't make us better at maths, but the capacities of our brains that contribute to each of these overlap.

Now, arguing that playing music is good because it makes other things better may be effective politics in the short term. Many things are in the school curriculum because it is claimed, seriously, that they are useful for extraneous purposes.

The problem is that arguing for musical education on these utilitarian grounds leaves it vulnerable to being superseded by some other educational fashion that turns out to be more effective. Musical education can be secure only if it is valued for its intrinsic merits. That second way of justifying it was the basis of Linehan's case last week.

Music is not a mere

“It is probably not the case that music makes us cleverer

decoration. It is fundamental to being human. All musical traditions are capable of evolving complexity. All, crucially, are able to weave in and out of each other, and so music can absorb specific cultures without losing the essence of each. Music is both universal and local.

Music in education is then about much more than playing an instrument, although that is an important part of it. Children don't have to be taught to enjoy music. The electronic revolution of the past couple of decades has shown that. But appreciating the most demanding forms of music needs hard work. The reason the struggle with complex music is worthwhile is not because it makes us more intelligent or better at maths, or for some other irrelevant reason. It is simply because music is emotionally satisfying like nothing else.

Music education matters because music is indeed food for the soul.

Lindsay Paterson is professor of education policy at Edinburgh University