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On the Search for the Meaning of Life

By Susanne Bobek

Using the example of two extraordinary people - the Tibetan nun and the world star of architecture.

The name Waldzell is based on Herman Hesse's 'Glass Bead Game.' For the second time a meeting is taking place on spirituality and wisdom at Melk Abbey this weekend. The organizers Andreas Salcher and Gundula Schatz succeeded in bringing together the 'brightest minds' there. The list of participants includes Craig Venter, who decoded the human genome, to the conductor Franz Welser-Möst. Patron of the event is Paulo Coelho, who together with Erwin Pröll will open the section of the Road to Santiago between Göttweig Abbey and Melk Abbey on Monday. *Kurier* readers have the opportunity to experience the bestselling author up close on Monday evening in the Vienna Gartenbau-Cinema. He will introduce 18 young Architects of the Future who will be examining ideas on a 'Future with Meaning'.

Experiments take place in the mind

Thom Mayne, 61, is Pritzker prize recipient 2005, which is the highest distinction architects can receive. Mayne lives in California, is married and has two adult sons.

Why are you at the Waldzell Meeting?

Because I believe that this is an interesting event. As I see it, it is also about whether we explain the world through the genesis or evolution theory. The USA is split into two camps in this matter, on the one side the religious fundamentalists and on the other the secular groups, who value DNA, philosophy and culture, so the individual values. I am surely a skeptic and, if you wish, the opposite of a Buddhist nun. Or not: She was in a cave for 12 years, I have also experimented for many years. My cave was my mind.

Thom Mayne comes to Austria often. His most famous construction is the Hypo Bank in Klagenfurt. His good friend is Wolfgang Prix (Coop Himmelblau) and his favorite restaurant in Vienna is "at the moment Fabio's, yesterday I was there again with Prix." Mayne calls himself an artist architect: "All have a similar career." At 45 years of age he was angry because he still did not have any larger commissions. At that time, Frank Gehry (Guggenheim Bilbao), comforted him: "Everyone feels that way. Your career will pick up at 55." Today Gerry is 78 and "at the top of his game".

Are you not afraid of getting older?

By no means, the body may be getting older, but I have just begun. Each phase in life is important, you have to use it. When my kids were younger we lived in a small house in Venice. Happily. Every Sunday the boys had to help me in the garden. They hated it but I thought it was important. My grandfather was a farmer; they shouldn't lose this tradition completely. I love gardening and my sons now see it differently today, too.

You are an optimist?

Of course. The world is changing. We change. We must think globally and locally and network everything. We can like it or not. It is about the consequences that we must conclude from it. I love change.

Twelve Years in a Cave, Meditating

Tenzin Palmo, 61, is a Tibetan Buddhist nun and founder of a Buddhist convent in northern India. The daughter of a fish merchant from London, she went to India at 20 years of age and was the first woman from the West to be ordained as nun. She is also famous because she meditated in an isolated mountain cave alone for 12 years and lived off rice, vegetables and lentils. Then she went to Italy.

When did you discover Buddhism?

I was 18 years old. In 1962 my mom, my sister-in-law and I went on tour through Europe. At that time I also came to Austria to Innsbruck. And then we got stuck at the airport in Cologne. Due to fog there was a delay of 8 hours. I did not have anything to read except a thin booklet on Buddhism. I read perhaps half of it and then said to my mother: "I am a Buddhist." She laughed: "Oh, how nice, dear." It was an incredible discovery, because everything in that booklet I had already known – these were my rules. Perhaps, in other words, but it was exactly how I felt. At age 20 I then went to India, because I needed a teacher. At that time there weren't any in Europe. At that time I lost all interest in the Western culture.

Has that changed?

Oh yes, but much later.

Tenzin Palmo does not talk very much about her self-awareness years in the cave, at least not during the relatively short interview. But one can read about it in her book. After the experience with absolute loneliness, she lived with friends in Italy for five years.

Why Italy?

I was in Umbria in a very spiritual place. Where Francis of Assisi lived. I love Italy, the music, the culture, the churches. That was very healing.

And today you live in your convent on the Indian side of the Himalayas?

Yes, with 35 young nuns. And most of the time I sit in front of a computer. I have to organize everything. But to each his own.

The meaning of life?

In five seconds: find your inner light and let it shine outward. That's it.