

WEST WEEKEND

DECEMBER 7-8 2013

UNDER COVERS

ROBERT DREWE
DIGS UP THE
CLASSICS

Rob Broadfield

'IT'S GOT COMEDY WRITTEN
ALL OVER IT. COMEDY GOLD.'

HAPPY TALK

He lives in a cave south of Perth but is a celebrity feted by the rich and powerful in Asia. Meet the monk changing lives with simple stories.

ROS THOMAS

'I want you to
write what it's like
growing old.'

TOP DOGS

MEN & THEIR
FOUR-LEGGED
FRIENDS

plus »

SABRINA HAHN
IS GROWING
PRESENTS, RAY
JORDAN HAS
SPARKLING
IDEAS &
THE COUPLE
RALLYING FOR
A REASON

The Weekend West



feature

mind OVER matter

He may not have much
but this merry monk
doesn't want for a thing.
Colleen Egan meets a
most unlikely celebrity.

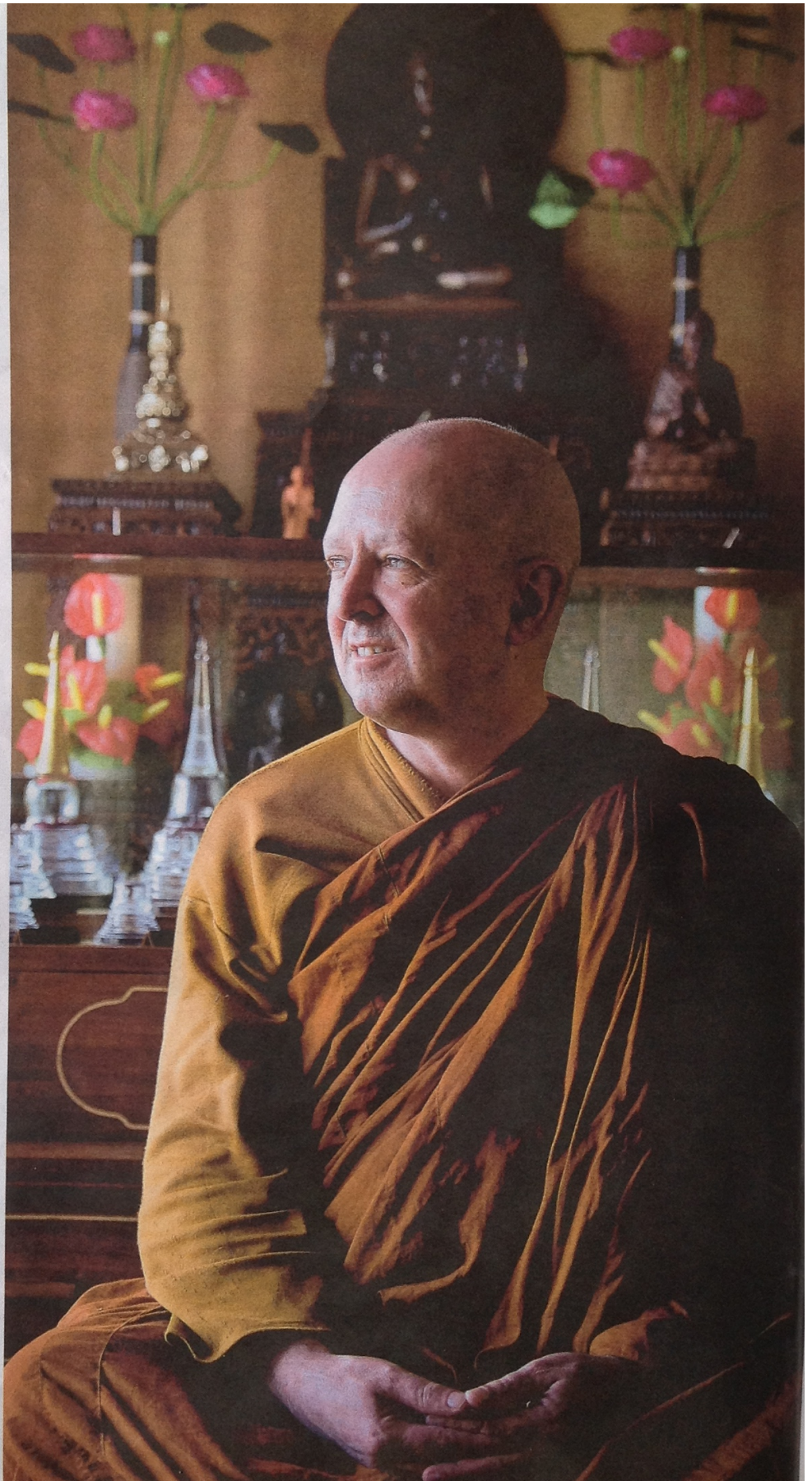
IN A SMALL, WINDOWLESS cave just south of Perth a bald white man in robes sits perfectly still, his mind in another place.

The clammy space, built with granite rocks in a pyramid shape, is just long enough at its base for a mattress on the floor. A dim light emanates from a statue of Buddha, perched on a shelf in the rock.

Ajahn Brahmavamso is at home at the Serpentine monastery, far away from his thousands — perhaps millions — of followers and fans all over the world.

The softly spoken monk is hardly known in Perth but when he goes to Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Sri Lanka he draws huge crowds and has been feted by presidents and a king. His books have been translated into 28 languages, including Lithuanian and Hebrew, and are estimated to have sold more than a million copies. »

PICTURE IAN MUNRO





The making of a monk Peter (pictured left with older brother Tony and his parents, Bill and Hazel) grew up very poor. Even as a celebrity monk, whose cardboard cutout pops up in Asian shopping centres, he shuns society's trappings.



TYPE AJAHN BRAHM into an internet search engine and see how many talks, quotes, YouTube videos and podcasts are listed. When he speaks at the Buddhist centre in Nollamara on a Friday night, he says up to 50,000 people listen online.

"Every second, on average, there are 20 people listening to my talks somewhere," he tells West Weekend. "It's all over the world in some amazing places like Iran, where you're not supposed to listen to anything other than the government stuff. They email me and say 'can you send us some books in a brown paper bag, otherwise they won't get through to us'."

Meditating for hours in his tiny man-made cave, the 62-year-old monk is also a long way from where he began: as a poor English kid called Peter Betts who was so brainy he won a scholarship to one of the most prestigious universities to study theoretical physics.

For much of his childhood, Peter's father, Bill, was ill with asthma and worked intermittently at a petrol station in London, while his mother, Hazel, worked in a typing pool.

"My elder brother Tony and I went to Derwentwater Elementary School, which we kids called Dirtywater," he says. "I recall an event from my childhood when my father placed a £1 note on the shelf above the coal fire. A freak blast of air lifted the banknote and it fell into the fire. My dad reached into the flames trying to rescue the note but only managed to badly burn his hand. My poor mum broke down helplessly into tears. They simply could not afford to lose so much money."

He won a scholarship to the best school in West London, Latymer Upper School, and, at 16, two major events occurred in Peter's life. One was the death of his beloved father. The other was winning a prize of books on the major world religions. "I realised that religion was an important part of life and also that I had the freedom to choose which one suited me," he says. "After reading my first Buddhist book, I realised that its philosophy and practice described who I already was."

He went on to win a scholarship to Cambridge University, where he joined the university's Buddhist Society and a few weeks later, aged 18, saw a monk for the first time. "I knew what I wanted to be," he says. "Obviously I believe in reincarnation and sometimes you see something in life that really hits you deeply inside."



Peter at primary school



Peter Betts spent just a year teaching at a grammar school after graduating and then headed to a harsh life in the forests of Thailand to train as a Theravada monk. After practising for nine years as a monk, he was sent to Perth by his teacher in 1983. He helped to establish the Bodhinyana Monastery in Serpentine, learning how to lay bricks and install plumbing as the head of what he jokingly called the BBC (Buddhist Building Company). The monastery, which is said to be the biggest of its kind in Australia, is home to 24 monks living in solitary huts dotted over the 98ha property.

Tours and technology have helped his popularity spread from a tranquil hideaway where there are no televisions or other mod-cons, apart from a phone and an internet-connected computer.

It is an unlikely base for a monk to gain an international following: so what is it that attracts people to his message? It seems to be a combination of compassion, wisdom and humour, all packaged in easily digestible storytelling. The amount of time Brahm spends alone belies his warmth with people, which is part of his popularity. He mixes a quick and cheeky wit with deeply personal stories and questions. His gently English-accented voice is slow and steady, ready-made for the many guided meditation recordings used by followers to find their inner peace.

Brahm's most popular book, *Opening the Door of Your Heart*, also published as *Who Ordered This Truckload of Dung? Inspiring Stories for Welcoming Life's Difficulties*, is a collection of simple stories and parables from his teachings, collected under chapters such as *Perfection and Guilt*, *Fear and Pain*, *Creating Happiness* and *Critical Problems and Their Compassionate Solutions*.

The first of the stories — how Brahm built his first wall only to find that two wonky bricks spoil the project, until someone pointed out how the 998 "perfect bricks" were far more noticeable than the two wonky ones — has been quoted all over the world, including in the home of this writer, whose children smile when they are reminded of how to appreciate the bright side of life.

Former WA premier Geoff Gallop developed a personal relationship with Brahm after meeting him when the monk was campaigning against the noise of clay trucks interrupting

meditation. (Brahm won that fight, which was at one stage in the Supreme Court, because "we wore them down, we wouldn't give up".)

"No one could read his *Opening the Door of Your Heart* without coming out feeling more emboldened as a human being who cares in all senses of that word," Gallop says. "He has given life, energy and intellect to Buddhism in WA, and joy and happiness to many whose lives were weighed down by unrealistic expectations or a disposition to be negative about all things. I like the way he encourages us to find our own way using religious texts as guides rather than as manuals."

Royalties go to the other Buddhist monastery in Perth: a group of nuns who owe their ordination to Brahm, who caused great controversy in the Buddhist world in 2009 by being one of the first senior leaders to ordain women. The ordinations made front-page news in Thailand, where "all hell broke loose" and he was excommunicated from his order for refusing to denounce them. "If I'd caved in, I wouldn't have been able to live with myself," he says. "I lost a lot of friends. People started gathering false allegations about what we were doing. But because I had such a good reputation and so many followers, I survived it. The mud couldn't stick to me."

Brahm forgives his detractors, who are "just human beings who aspire to the idea of a Buddhist being more compassionate, kind and peaceful, but it's an aspiration. Some people get close and some are still at the beginning of their journey. No one is a perfect Buddhist."



He is happy not to receive financial benefit, preferring his "royalties in karma". The 24 monks eat only food brought to them and survive on charity from visitors. The other monks live in huts, spread across the property so that no hut is visible to another. They wake at 4am and meditate in their huts until 6.30am, when they have a cup of porridge and meditate together.

The one meal of the day lasts from 10.30am to noon, when people from the lay community bring food and receive blessings from the monks, listening to their stories. "There's no roster but we never go hungry," Brahm says. "We don't know who's coming; they don't know who else is coming. If there's too much food, they take it back. Someone always comes; everyone has a wonderful time. The atmosphere is very light, nothing too serious, a lot of laughter and conversation."

After lunch, they have a rest and more meditation, then in the evening a cup of tea and more meditation. "We do very well through donations," Brahm says. "We don't waste money by having chandeliers or anything elaborate like that and much of the work, we do ourselves. My name is on our building licences. We do a lot of the building ourselves. We use our skills: we have a monk who was a great >

'He has given life, energy and intellect to Buddhism in WA, and joy and happiness to many.'



Rejuvenate this Summer ...with breakfast on us

This holiday season, escape your hectic routine with our rejuvenating summer offer from \$195 per night including breakfast. Children are invited to stay the night and enjoy a delicious breakfast, lunch or dinner in Montereys with our compliments*. Whether you are enjoying time for yourself, a family holiday or even a girls' getaway, you will leave feeling refreshed and revitalised.

To book, visit panpacific.com/perth and quote promotion code: YEAREND

*Terms and Conditions apply. Valid for stays until 28 February 2014.

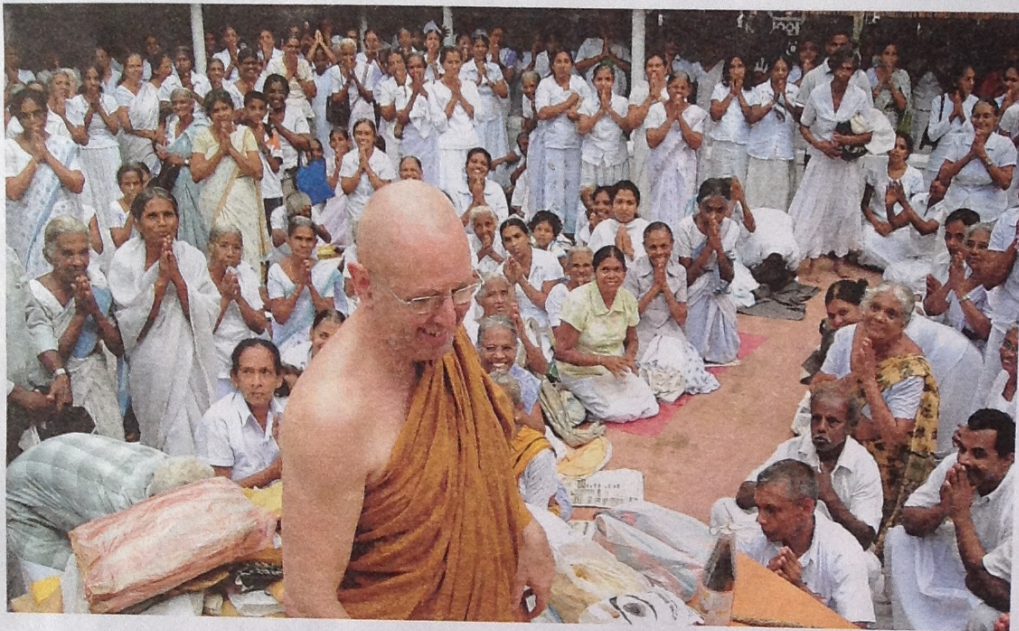
207 Adelaide Terrace, Perth, Western Australia 6000, Australia Tel +61 8 9224 7777 Toll free 1800 049 610 reserve.ppper@panpacific.com



PAN PACIFIC
PERTH

Hotels and Resorts | Bali • Dhaka • Jakarta • Manila • Ningbo • Perth • Seattle • Singapore • Suzhou • Vancouver • Whistler • Xiamen • New openings: Tianjin (2014)





Holy man Brahm draws crowds of followers in Sri Lanka, where he has also been served by the president (below).



'When you're at peace with yourself, you're never lonely.'

« mechanic, we have a doctor of chemistry, a guy who has two MAs — one in business and one in electrical engineering — there's all sorts of professions. We've got a psychiatric nurse, very helpful in case any of us goes a bit barmy. »

Indonesia Institute president Ross Taylor, who has a long involvement in counselling and supporting cancer patients, first met Brahm 15 years ago. "We would take groups of cancer patients to the monastery where we would eat with the monks, feed the kangaroos and then meditate before having an insanely funny audience with Brahm," Taylor says. "On one trip when we took a friend with us — as she was having some terrible difficulties with her young son — Brahm said to her 'Please don't worry about your son. He will be fine.' She was gobsmacked and so were we. It's interesting as today, 10 years later, her son has, indeed, turned out just fine."

Brahm first went to Indonesia in 2003 and he has spoken there more regularly as his following has grown. "In Indonesia, it is not unusual to have over 5000 people turn up for one of his lectures, creating massive traffic jams and a big headache for local police," Taylor says.

The monk has been served tea by the Sri Lankan president and been awarded an ecclesiastical title by the King of Thailand. Closer to home, in 2004 he was awarded the John Curtin Medal for his vision, leadership and service to the Australian community.

Brahm is often told by people that he has changed their lives, even saved them, with his simple stories and bite-sized pieces of advice. "I just extract philosophical messages from little stories and they have power. They're easy to read, they're fun and they capture the message."

"Just after the book was published, we had a Thai version and there were three families, expats working in the Australian Embassy in Bangkok. They came together and asked me to come over for a talk. One was already divorced and two were separated and they read the book and all the couples came together again. It was that two bad bricks story that just hit them in the heart. They thought 'Why am I separated from this guy or this girl, they aren't perfect but why do I focus on the two faults in them?' Those sorts of stories are moving. It's not just writing a book. It's people's lives coming back together again. It's amazing the power it has."

He does a lot of marriage counselling. "People say 'How can you give marriage counselling having been celibate for 40 years as a monk?' It's the obvious question but when you live outside the box, you can not

just think outside the box, you can see outside the box. You can see from a distance, obvious things that others just can't see."

When he is not counselling, speaking or officiating at funerals and weddings, Brahm is usually meditating, often for 12 hours a day. "Eight years ago I did a solitary retreat. I didn't see anybody or speak to anybody for six months," he says. "My food would be left in a box at a certain time and I'd pick it up, eat my one meal of the day, wash my bowl and put it back in the box. People were wondering 'Is he going to come out crazy?' I came out very peaceful, very powerful. When you're at peace with yourself, you're never lonely. I wasn't bored at all because meditation gives me so much bliss and happiness."

Brahm has been unsurprised by the growing body of scientific research and medical advice that points to meditation — and its recent western-style adaptation, mindfulness — as not only beneficial to the mind and body, but able to affect the brain physically.

Laboratory experiments on Tibetan monks have suggested that, over the course of meditating for tens of thousands of hours, the monks had actually altered the structure and function of their brains. A study suggested for the first time that changes in gene activity could explain the reported beneficial effects of meditation, yoga and prayer. "It's not New Age nonsense," Herbert Benson of Boston's Massachusetts General Hospital told the New Scientist. He and his colleagues analysed the gene profiles of volunteers whose beneficial genes had become more active and harmful ones less so.

Brahm hints that his mind goes to places of "bliss" that even scientists cannot understand. "One of the most important rules as monks is that no monk is allowed to say anything which is psychic or supernatural," he says. "We can't say whether we're enlightened or not, or about transcendental meditation or levitating, or our past lives. The reason is that monks are not supposed to be seen as freaks or as special. If I said I could levitate, you'd be coming down here with a camera asking for levitation for the camera and offering money for it. It just wouldn't be right."

He has kept in touch with his friends from Cambridge University. "They've been doing some really interesting stuff but most of them have retired now," he says. "I can't retire: for a holy man, life begins at 70. So I haven't even begun yet. Sometimes I do get treated like royalty in other countries and it's nice to go back to my cave and remind myself I'm a monk with hardly any possessions." 