Buddhist Meditation Helped Boys Stay Calm While Trapped in Thai Cave

By Associated Press, adapted by Newsela Staff on 07.11.18

MAE SAI, Thailand — At a gilded temple in Thailand's mountainous north, Ekapol Chanthawong honed a skill that served him well as he sat trapped underground in a dark cave: meditation.

Before the 25-year-old was a coach to the young boys on the Wild Boars soccer team — 12 of whom were trapped alongside him — he spent a decade as a saffron-robed Buddhist monk. He still stays at the temple from time to time and will meditate with the monks there each day. "He could meditate up to an hour," said his aunt, Tham Chanthawong. "It has definitely helped him and probably helps the boys to stay calm.

More than 288 hours had passed since Ekapol and the boys got trapped in Tham Luang Nang Non cave. On June 23, they went exploring when monsoon floodwaters rushed in. The group was discovered July 2 after 10 days totally cut off from the outside world. While they were mostly physically healthy, experts say the ordeal has likely taken a mental toll that would have gotten worse the longer the situation lasted.

"It's very likely that while the boys were in the cave but not yet discovered by rescuers that they experienced various degrees of anxiety, fear, confusion, vulnerability and dependency, and perhaps hopelessness," said Paul Auerbach. He works for Stanford University's medical school.

Videos taken inside the cave July 2 showed the boys, ages 11 to 16, and their coach interacting with Thai navy SEAL divers. The divers had been sent in to supply them, provide medical care and to keep them company. Though they were visibly skinny and weak, the boys and their coach appeared to be in good spirits, smiling for the camera as the SEALs cracked jokes.

**All Have Been Rescued**

On Sunday, July 8, four boys were rescued and taken to nearby hospitals for treatment. On Monday, July 9, four more boys were rescued and on Tuesday, July 10, the remaining four boys and the coach were rescued.

For the group left in the cave over the weekend there was no timeline for their extraction. The only way out of the cave would be for the boys to dive through the same complicated route of narrow passageways that their rescuers entered, something that is extremely dangerous even for expert divers let alone children with no such experience. Yet that is what happened to get the boys out before storms could have worsened the floods.

Cave rescue experts said it would be safest to simply supply the boys where they were, waiting for the water to go down either naturally or by pumping. That could have taken months, however, given that Thailand's rainy season typically lasts through October. "Being discovered was a moment of elation," Auerbach said. It was followed by worries about being rescued.

**Players, Coach Are A Tight-Knit Group**

Experts say the Wild Boars came into their situation with some advantages. "Adolescents are especially social creatures, and having friends with them as well as their coach would be a tremendous help," said David Spiegel. He is a professor of psychiatry at Stanford University's medical school.

The boys and their coach are known to be a tight-knit group who go on adventures, including swimming in waterfalls, cycling trips through the mountains, river rafting and cave exploring. Experts say Ekapol's meditation — a mainstay of the Buddhist faith — likely served the group well. "I'd speculate it could be helpful — even if it functioned solely as a way for the children to feel like their coach was doing something to help them," said Michael Poulin, a professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Feeling loved and cared for is very important, he says.

**Coach's Calming Influence**

Spiegel agreed that meditation can allow "their fearful and negative thoughts to flow through them like a storm passing, rather than fighting their fear." Aisha Wiboonrungrueng, whose 11-year-old son Chanin was trapped in the cave, has no doubt that Ekapol's calm personality had influenced the boys' state of mind. "Look at how calm they were sitting there waiting. No one was crying or anything. It was astonishing," she said, referring a video that captured the moment the boys were found.

**"They Shouldn't Be Ashamed To Be Scared"**

Omar Reygadas spent 69 days trapped underground in Chile in 2010 with 32 other miners. He said faith and prayer, as well as humor, were very important to the miners at times when they doubted they would get out. "They shouldn't be ashamed to be scared," he said of the boys. "Because we were scared, too. Our tears also ran. Even as adult men, we cried."

If safety concerns had forced the boys to stay in the cave for an extended period, it would have been important to their mental health for there to be organization and daily routines, said John Fairbank. He's a psychiatry professor and co-director of the UCLA-Duke University National Center for Child Traumatic Stress.

He said that could include "daily hygiene routines, regular meal times, age-appropriate cognitive activities, regular physical exercise to the extent feasible in limited space, religious or spiritual practices." There also could be "specific times for daily briefings on their situation and for communicating with their families."

**Challenges Still Lie Ahead**

All the experts agreed that the group will continue to face challenges. Thailand's Department of Mental Health said hospitals had made preparations to care for the boys and will monitor them until their mental health is fully regained. The hospitals also worked with the families to prepare for how to interact with the boys once they got out, such as not digging for details about what they went through. Coming back to the real world will get the boys massive attention from media, family and friends, Auerbach said. "The world soon loses interest and moves on to the next story, so it is extremely important that these survivors not be forgotten and be closely monitored so that they can receive the best possible support