

From confinement to infinity: meditations for times of trial

*or the use of guided meditations on the Internet
in confinement*

Many teachers of yoga, meditation, or related practices are starting to give online courses in this time of confinement. I've been doing it myself, and I find it a good tool for the meditations I guide. This new situation inspired me to make a series of reflections, which I felt useful to put down on paper, or on the screen, while writing this document.

"When you accept your limits, you become limitless."

The first word that comes to my mind in the situation we are living in now is a Zen adage on which I have been meditating fruitfully for more than 30 years: "When you accept your limits, you become limitless" Of course, confinement is a physical limit, but the dispersion that leads to running feverishly, left to right, represents a strong psychological limit as well. What limits us psycho-spiritually is not so much the physical walls, but the resentment we have towards a situation that we have not chosen. However, wisdom, when one is in an unexpected situation, is of skill as if one had chosen it. At that point, one can derive all the inner benefit from it.

To provide a framework for my reflections, it is worthwhile to say a word about my itinerary. Coming from a Catholic religious family, and having a mystical tendency myself, I became interested in 'the spirit' from the point of view of my medical studies, that is to say, in psychiatry. I was already doing hatha yoga when I started medicine, and meditation for several years when I started psychiatry. From the outset, my understanding of psychiatry was guided by the question of whether a number of mental illnesses did not represent attempts to internalize, and therefore meditate in a certain way, that had gone wrong. I am not alone in thinking this, I refer for example to Dr. Edward Podvoll's excellent book "Psychosis and Healing"ⁱ.

When I look back on my own meditation experience, I see that I myself have practiced confinement for more than four in all, in hermitage. I usually went there for not too long periods of a month or a month and a half. The rest of the time I spent two weeks with my spiritual master, Swami Vijayânanda, a former Frenchman who became Swami in India where he spent 60 years continuously meditating and welcoming spiritual seekers. He lived in the plain, but he had spent eight years in this hermitage where I then went. For another two weeks or so, I spent my time on practical matters or guiding groups of French pilgrims who had come to explore the ashrams and religions of India. This was my rhythm for 12 years. In this way, I was able to better integrate my hermitage experiences into active life. In my

place of solitude itself, I stayed a lot in my room to meditate, read and write, with daily walks, as is now the case for a good part of the planet's population living in seclusion. I had very little contact with the people, living on a hilltop at 1700 m altitude with the ridges of the great Himalayas as a backdrop. I rarely went down to the village below, since I had arranged with a young man who helped me with the groceries. It was not an old-fashioned hermit's confinement, with practically no communication outside, since I answered the mail that arrived at the time on paper, and then the e-mails from the Internet. However, I did tell people not to use the telephone and they followed this instruction very well. So I had physical silence, and when I answered e-mails, I tried to do it with a silent mind, which is certainly not easy. To sum up, I don't pretend to be a great meditator, like Swami Vijayânanda who led a strict Swami's life for 60 years mainly practicing, or like Tenzin Palmo who spent six years in a small monastery in the Himalayan forest and then 11 and a half years in a cave even higher up at 4300m. I'm a writer, I do tours where we practice good periods of meditation with the participants in seminars and retreats. At certain times I have to speak from 7 am to 11 pm because I am constantly with people answering their questions, etc. I am also a writer, I do tours where we practice good periods of meditation with the participants, during seminars and retreats. I do not see this as a contradiction with my periods in hermitage, but rather as a complement. As a Father of the desert said to a disciple who asked him what was best, silence or words: "To be silent for God is good, to speak for God is good".

When you compare hermitage life to the situation of confinement and psychiatric patients, what is common is to be somewhat walled off. Patients are walled in themselves, but behind an apparent immobility, they actually suffer from a great acceleration of the mind which they cannot control, and this again is not without analogy to the current situation of confinement for most people. The advantage of living in a limited perimeter is that one is more likely to face this mental agitation head on, and therefore to be able to find the root causes. Treatment in any case will remain a capacity to curb associations that go too fast and, above all, go in all directions.

The situation of confinement puts us, in a way, in a position of strength before the reality of our cerebral homeostasis. It is a recent concept and has only been known to the public for about ten years. We have within us two systems: the parasympathetic calming system and the sympathetic stimulating system. In everyday activities we are used to experiencing a fairly fixed proportion of these two influences. When we decide to go on a meditation retreat, or when we are forced into physical confinement because of an external epidemic or because of an illness that keeps us bed-ridden, we have a period of much more tranquility in the body and therefore a period of parasympathetic activity. This creates an imbalance for our brain in relation to what it is used to, and it then tries to compensate for it by sympathetic overactivity which can manifest itself in the form of mental restlessness, difficulty concentrating and, at night, insomnia. So whatever the reasons for staying home, it is important not to forget to have sufficient physical activity, which is not so difficult: exercise at regular intervals, and at least one outing a day just for walking or running.

Knowing how to slow down your mind is more than a relaxation exercise, it can lead to stops for a while, it is the beginning of what is called in Buddhism and Yoga *nirvana* or *nirodha*. These pauses are both very therapeutic and capable of giving a great spiritual opening. They are therapeutic because they provide us with basic relaxation. When this is associated with memories of the past or worries for the future, these dissolve like a stain dissolves in soapy water. These moments are also spiritual, because they give us an incomparable peace, the Fathers of the desert would speak of *hesychia*, of deep appeasement.

Immobilization: From Biology to Wisdom

We are certainly living in a very special time that is a test for the human species. It reminds me of Jackson's (1958) principle of dissolution, which is a basic law of species evolution. When a higher function is affected for one reason or another, such as a stroke, the lower and more reflex functions take over. This is why we observe, for example, the return of the reflexes of the newborn baby in some cases of disconnection of the cortex by problems of strokes. And what deep reflexes do we have inside? In particular, the feigned death reflex. When our ancestors were small animals attacked by a predator, they didn't move at all, and the predators, having had experiences when they were young of eating corpses that were half decomposed to the point that they became very sick, knew not to devour a dead animal, and so they went away. This saved the life of the animal that had been attacked. By analogy with our current situation, we could say that the predator is tiny, that it is a virus, but that it is potentially much more dangerous to the human species than a lion or a tiger. We immobilize ourselves in the form of confinement, as if by feigned death, to escape it. However, the story does not stop there: this immobilization allows a spiritual opening, provided it is meditative. When one stops one's body and mind in a fully conscious way, one reaches a kind of crowning of evolution, because one has the immobilization of the deep state, whether one calls it *ecstasy*, or *enstasy*, in the manner of Mircea Eliade. It is the most useful in relation to the others that have occurred in the evolution of species: it goes beyond the primitive immobilization of feigned death, of the animal that orientates itself in the forest, of the mother who breastfeeds, of the lovers in physical relationship. One is capable of reaching this deep stop, not by natural reflex, but by a fully conscious decision and know-how.

In order to fully experience this externally imposed immobility, you need know-how, a toolbox. For this, guided meditations will be very useful. It is not a question of depending all the time on a recording or on someone else's voice, but we must be able to alternate practices redone from memory, which we then personalize to adapt them to our unconscious, with, from time to time, a listening to the basic teachings. Most of the time, we realize that many details had escaped us. It is not a question either of doing all the possible and imaginable practices, it is also necessary to focus on those which seem to us to have the greatest potential to make us evolve, even if they are not so easy at the beginning. The inability to concentrate has always been the great obstacle to entering into deep meditation and this obstacle is even greater with modern life. This one is interesting with all its capacities of connections and hyperlinks that it offers, but it is also deeply dispersing. This poison of dispersion needs an antidote, which is meditation: it directly favours concentration and calming and is therefore very useful in this sense.

Another aspect of group guided meditation, even when the group is brought together in 'videoconferencing' via the Internet, is that individual meditation becomes communal, and thus internalization is associated with pooling, as in the traditional group ritual, but this time through a network.

The period of withdrawal or confinement induced as a chemical reaction: atoms detach from the molecules to which they were attached to join together to form new molecules. One detaches oneself from all kinds of outdoor activities, taking the children to the sports club or going to dinner with old friends, to recompose one's activities and experiences in a new and more internalized way. So you have a process that is not only chemical, but almost alchemical in nature of *solve and coagulate*: "*solve*", that is 'dissolve', get rid of all kinds of adhesions that stick to external activities, "*et coagula*", that is 'coagulate', recompose within you different amounts of energy thus released, to create something new and more internalized. A period of confinement or retreat also helps to reinvent one's relationship with others, with less physical contact but more importance for prayer or the sending of positive vows to them, and a wise use of the means of communication: a well-placed phone call, or an

e-mail of a few lines can have a better effect in the end than a big family meal with superficial, repetitive and sometimes negative conversations?

Let's be realistic, confinement with a whole family where you walk more or less on your feet all day long is very different from that in a hermitage. However, there are some common elements: by taking the minimum out, you save a lot of energy that you can usefully use to deepen your inner experience and also have richer relationships with the members of your family. Hence the usefulness, beyond pious generalities, of having concrete practices that give us bases or renewed ideas on how to interiorize ourselves. At that point, the obstacle will be transformed into an opportunity for spiritual progress, an idea that is certainly central to spiritual teachings in general, and to the *lojong teaching* in particular, the "change of attitude of mind" in Tibetan Buddhism. This process is not reserved to one meditation club or another, it is useful for everyone, each at his or her own level. What is encouraging is that it is useful even for those who are beginning to have deep experiences, precious moments of stopping the mind, with a clear insight into the nature of mind. By analogy, when one is in a boat and puts one's little finger in the ocean, one really touches the water in the ocean, even if it is only a tiny part of it.

ⁱ Available for example via the website www.latemperance.fr, see also my long article on this subject: *How wisdom can help to get out of psychic suffering*.