

From the Fear of the Epidemic to the Epidemic of Fear

Reflections in the Light of Yoga and Meditation

by Vigyananand (Dr Jacques Vigne, MD, psychiatrist)

At a time when many individual and collective projects are being cancelled because of the coronavirus epidemic, it is a time to remember the words of Mâ Anandamayî: "Often you don't have to go looking for renunciation, it comes to you of its own accord! "This leads to a good meditation on the fact that in this world, things are as changeable as the waves of the ocean; that is why it is necessary to know how to make impermanence one's friend. People usually consider impermanence as their worst enemy. This tendency needs to be reversed.

Internalize the slowdown imposed by the epidemic for one's own good.

The coronavirus epidemic is a serious slowdown, not only for the economy, but for the very acceleration that had gradually crept into our daily lives. Whether we like it or not, we must learn to look at things more slowly. This slowness, this perspective where death is also more present can give us greater depth, as we see more deeply with two eyes than with one, and we see further spiritually with the opening of the third eye of yoga, which is that of Shiva. It is finally when there is a slowing down, and even better, when the automatisms stop, that we wake up. To understand this, we only have to remember those moments when one is drowsy, rocked by the hum of a night train and suddenly wakes up when it stops.

Faced with this obligation to slow down, this sort of stop-start of fate, we have the choice between being more internalized and at the same time finding new solutions to help others who are in difficulty, either because of direct infection by the virus or because of the material problems caused by travel restrictions. The other choice is to let oneself go in the direction of anger or of distraction-destruction: unfortunately, even when one is confined to one's home, one still has access to Internet and those sites where one can see millions of films, books or music practically free of charge. It is therefore quite possible not to become interiorized at all by spending the whole day confined within four walls! You have to be aware of this temptation, and know how to make the right choice.

This general downturn in the society, caused by the current restrictions, is also a kind of "slowness-therapy" clinic, and in that sense it does us good. This reminds me of a reflection by Swami Vijayananda. He was a former French doctor who became a disciple of Mâ Anandamayî and spent 60 years in India, 18 of them in solitude in the Himalayas. I worked with him for 25 years, and from time to time he was asked why he had spent so much time in solitude. He often replied : "It was a way for me to slow down the mind". This may seem too simple and even a little disappointing. However, in the conception of Yoga, when the mind slows down, the mud

it contains can settle, and one can see its bottom directly. It is therefore a long-term work. In this sense, good retreat centers serve as "slowing clinics" for a society that suffers from acute or chronic "acceleration". Another piece of advice from Swami Vijayânanda in order to intensify spiritual progress was to save one's energy. The self-centeredness of confinement goes directly in this direction, as long as one understands its message. As Nietzsche said, true courage is the one that emerges in front of oneself. Simply staying at home is a first step in developing this type of courage, and has a kind of initiatory value, especially when you have done this very little in your life. In primordial cultures, the initiation of the adolescent often takes place over a period of a few days alone in the forest. Beyond the ability to survive and feed oneself in this completely natural environment, there is the separation from the family, from the social cocoon and the direct learning of solitude. For many modern 'hyper-socialized' individuals, having to stay at home for a few days or weeks will undoubtedly be a great first. It is their responsibility to have it done for their own betterment.

One finally oscillates between two extremes, taking refuge in multiple distractions to kill time, and on the other side, remaining paralyzed by a frightened fixation, obviously also maintained by the media. In the first case, one will be a kind of drug addict who guzzles films to avoid seeing the external and internal malaise. There are unfortunately a lot of people in this case. I recently read a study that explained that in France, people spend an average of two hours a day on a screen, mainly watching films and using social networks, knowing that these are polluted by easy verbal violence where people take it out with impunity and in a basically irresponsible way. Even the news that appears to be of a higher level and interest is on average only two minutes out of two hours. When we see this, we have the right to be sad and we are reduced to make universal wishes for happiness of this kind: "May all beings be well, happy and at peace" ...

There is a middle way to find, on one hand by taking advantage of relative solitude to slow down one's mind as recommended in yoga, and on the other hand by keeping oneself sufficiently aware of the reality of the external situation. Suddenly freeing time represents a door that opens to the light of deep experience. It must be pushed through, and not let any draught, i.e., any whim or entertainment, cause it to close by slamming it. To take a critical point of view, we could say that there is a formula that seems banal but is actually pernicious: "Yes, but I'm watching this because it's interesting!" "There are billions of interesting things, yet our lives are limited in time, which is what this epidemic period also reminds us of. So one's has to know what he is looking for. A relative emptiness in one's schedule is already a way of touching this emptiness, a term by which Buddhists refer to the underlying Reality. The Buddha once took a handful of leaves from the ground in a forest and asked his disciples if they understood what they meant. When they looked intrigued, he explained: "These few leaves represent the teaching I am giving you, the teaching that leads to Liberation. It is much less in quantity than all the possible knowledge, which is as numerous as all the leaves of the forest! »

The root causes of the epidemic and the temptation of omnipotence.

When we look at the causes of this epidemic, there are two main possibilities, and both are clearly related to a drift of humanity afflicted by ideas of omnipotence. The official version is that it is a virus that comes from wild animals killed and sold in the markets of China. Why then do human beings want to feed on killed animals when plants are sufficient? There are a

few hundred million vegetarians on this planet who are living proof that plants are indeed sufficient. Isn't it a feeling of omnipotence that leads a certain number of human beings to say to themselves that it is normal for animals to sacrifice their lives to satisfy not their needs, but only their desires?

Ideas for treating fear in this time of epidemic.

Already some attitudes and general remedies are good for preventing or curing fear. I talked about them in my article *abhaya*, the non-fear, which can be found on my site. There is of course the general idea that thinking is creative, so by having a lot of fearful thoughts, one has more risk of self-fulfilling prophecy. However, this is an argument that also has its limits, because even a little bit of anxiety can push us to take stricter measures to contain the epidemic on an individual and collective level, and this is a priori a good thing. Here again, we must not lose our sense of middle ground or common sense.

Since we are in a yoga perspective to deal with this epidemic, we can reflect on the archetype of the *Tandava* dance, Shiva's dance of death. The story goes like this: because of a conflict with her father King Daksha who had refused to invite her husband Shiva to a great sacrifice he was organizing, Sati committed suicide by throwing herself on the pyre lit for this sacrifice. Shiva ran, took his wife's body on his shoulder and fled, sowing death and destruction in his path, because of his fury and also because of his grief. Vishnu, seeing this and being himself responsible for the protection of the world, came discreetly from behind and cut the body of the goddess into pieces to get rid of Shiva. Fifty-two parts came out of the body, which fell to the earth and gave birth to a temple to the goddess. One can distinguish at least two levels of interpretation of this story, metaphysical and psychological: from the metaphysical point of view, it means for Hinduism that there is only one great goddess, the Mahâdévî, and that the multiple goddesses worshipped in these 52 temples are only facets of her. From the psychological point of view, this account represents a critique of the passionate attachment that leads to destruction. Can this apply to our present situation? Yes in a certain sense: already on a concrete level, those who are very attached to their lifestyle and who absolutely do not want to change it will not take adequate protective measures, and will risk more their own destruction and the one of those they would contaminate. That is one aspect of it, although it is not the only one. On the first level and for many people, going out in the evening, going on holiday on the other side of the world is the best part of life, but they don't see the death that is also from behind in this period, just as Shiva didn't understand that his wife had died and that he was attached to her as if she was going to come back to life. Mâ Anandamayî made a play on the word meaning in Hindi, *vishaya*, *visha*: the objects of the senses, *vishaya*, are poisons, *visha*. She even said that they are slow poisons that undermine our energy without us noticing it. Of course, this is not in the sense of a consumer society, but rather in the sense of deep wisdom. However, let us recognize that to meditate properly on this subject, we will be considerably helped by the fact that we have already awakened a certain level of inner joy. In this period of confinement, Sati's "beloved-body corpse", which we must let go, corresponds to our short and medium-term projects, and even for many, to our livelihood. If we let go of it willingly, it will be an aid to spiritual progress; if we do so with acrimony, it will be an obstacle. A good solution will also be to do as some Italians do, who let go of their freedom to move around...by singing on their balcony! In the way of *bhakti*, of Hindu devotion, it is said that if one exhales without chanting a mantra, one exhales for nothing.

One treatment for the fear of the epidemic is to know how to laugh at death: for this, Mexican culture is expert, it offers lots of ironic representations around this subject, like skeletons dressed as brides and grooms, or with the top hat and cigar, or riding a bicycle! Taking reasonable steps to protect yourself and others from the virus doesn't stop us from laughing at our current situation. We know that laughter boosts immunity, so we must know how to use it wisely at this time.

On the whole, human beings do not like so much uncertainty, and yet that is the situation we are in. No one, not even experts, can, for example, estimate the duration of the epidemic situation. This is all the more reason to let go and, for example, to meditate on the Zen adage: "From moment to moment, open your hand, open your mind". In this sense also, a great meditation master of the Thai forest, Ajahn Shah, advised a meditation to which he attached great importance, and which he even defined as crucial: that of "Not sure!". Every time a sensation, an emotion, an impulse rises up in us, we respond with "Not sure! "This does not mean that we should doubt the fundamental values of the human being or the need to do spiritual work, but we should simply question our automatic functioning, our sensations-emotions that carry us in one direction or another, without us really being aware of it. It is therefore good to be able to accept that the future, even the near future, is not sure, and to be able to smile about it.

In this sense also, there is this Zen poem whose first line says: "In the morning, I wake up and smile". Every day has its portion of uncertainty; if you see it in advance and smile, you start off on the right foot for your daily activity. And even more, it is not just in the morning when you wake up that you have to learn to smile, it is in front of everything that wakes you up mentally, that is to say, all those small or big things that don't happen as you would like them to. And obviously, an epidemic is not what human beings want. So it wakes us up, and if we take that waking up with a smile, it can become a cause of Awakening. There's just few letters more in between to go from one term to the next... In French, it is just an *r* dropped in between "réveil", *wake up* and "l'Eveil", *Awakening*, it's like the "rrrra" of irritation...

The tendency of human groups is to stimulate their energy and unity by seizing a scapegoat. This mechanism is regularly negative and creates a lot of problems, but taking the coronavirus as a scapegoat to stimulate our fight against it is, on the other hand, an acceptable attitude. Moreover, we cannot speak of the fear of this present epidemic without mentioning the tendency to predict, or even wish for, the end of current civilization, through a kind of domino effect or "collapsism", as the English say. Indeed, an epidemic that would kill a good part of the population would go in that direction. From a psychological point of view, what is behind these fears? Certainly an enormous feeling of guilt which is particularly pronounced in the West. For example, in Hinduism and Buddhism, the notions of the end of the world and of Apocalypse are much less present, even if they also have their own vision of the end of the world. The modern West feels well that deep down, there are a lot of wrong behaviors, and that modernity itself has become the greatest predator the planet has ever known. Hence a repressed guilt that tends to manifest itself in the form of delirium. The real difficulty is to draw the line between reasonable fear, a frankly negative possibility of the future that should not be overlooked, and outright apocalyptic delirium.

In the Yoga Sutras of Patanjali, II, 16, we say *heyam dukhamañāgatam*, "one should avoid future suffering". This evokes the central teaching of the Buddha in the Four Noble Truths,

ariya-saccha, suffering, its origin, its end and the fact that it can be completely overcomeⁱⁱ. This avoidance comes from understanding, and in the present circumstances, already from preventing contamination as well as providing for correct treatment if one is contaminated, but more generally, one prevents suffering due to change by undoing, disintegrating one's own mental fixations, whether coarse or subtle.

Staying at home provides a great rest, and it becomes food for the soul. Doesn't the French language wink at us by bringing the words "repos", *rest* and "repas", *meal* together? Moreover, the discipline to be had in this period of epidemic gives us limits, they can in themselves become a meditation if we remember the Zen adage: "When we accept our limits, we become limitless". The meaning is clear, it is up to us to integrate it into our lives by understanding how it applies to each particular case.

This pandemic situation, in its unexpected side, stimulates our attention. If we add altruism to it, we will have these two fundamental qualities that allow us not only to be happy, but also to make others happy : vigilance and benevolence.

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ⁱⁱ We will see in this regard the very interesting book by SN Tendon published by the Vipassana Research Institute of Igatpuri *A Re-Approasal of Patanjali's Yogasutras in the Light of Buddha's Teaching*. It can be ordered from the United States. Another book, larger in number of pages on the same subject and with about the same title, is due to be published in June by Routledge and Keagan, by Prtadeep Gokhale.