

*How to change the belief in a right way
Psychology of "un-conversion "*

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*"Believe in what you want,
but be not attached to it"
Nâgârjuna*

The “un-conversion” or “deprogramming” is a subject we did not hear much about in the religious literature, and this for good reason : if you leave a religion or spiritual movement, its leaders will experience this as a failure, and they will usually do their utmost to ignore it and to cover the causes of leaving. They are afraid of the domino effect, and that departures spread like an epidemic. Yet, this represents an important practical issue. Straightaway, let us be reassured : in recent classifications of psychiatric disorders according to the DSM, it is clear that religious or spiritual crises caused by a change in beliefs are not pathological. With the blessing of the august College of those Professors of Psychiatry who drafted the DSM, we can move forward ...

First and foremost, a question of word. The connotation of “deprogramming” evokes strongly exiting a cult. Still, I feel the question is much broader. In Europe for instance, most of the population left the various Churches in the span of three generation, this momentous phenomenon which peacefully changed a fifteen century old state of affairs is not due to deprogramming, but to a progressive “de-conversion”, so I will mostly use this new term in my text.

I myself was interested from the beginning by the transmission from master to disciple. I worked for four years in India with a scholarship of the French and Indian Government, both theoretically and in the field, to write my first book, *The Master and the therapist*, it's been over twenty years. It has now been republished in France. I also did a study on the relationship between master and disciples in Christianity, both this study in French and the book in English (*The Indian Teaching Tradition*) are available online on my websiteⁱ. A third study on this same relationship in Buddhism has been published in my book *L'Inde Intérieure*.ⁱⁱ

My writings have mostly been on topics of spiritual psychology, and the issue of deconversion is one. I have been living mostly in India for the past 27 years, and I followed for my spiritual formation, during a quarter of a century, Swami Vijayananda, until his death in 2010. He was a

French physician, close disciple of Anandamayi Ma, who has spent 60 years continuously in India. Since his death, I came closer to Buddhist practices and metaphysics, especially Tibetan, and mainly with Tenzin Palmo. She is the oldest ordained Tibetan nun among Westerners, with 50 years in the robe, and she spent 11 years of meditation in a cave in Lahul area of the Himalayas. However, I fundamentally feel myself as being beyond religions.

The ' deconversion' is an important topic, especially for the past half a century.

Certainly, the media do not speak enough of the great silent revolution that happened, say schematically, for the past half a century, that is to say since the Second Vatican Council : there has been the collapse of Christian practice in Europe. Only 3 or 4 % of the population now practices regularly every Sunday. All churches, Catholic or Protestant, are affected and this process too touches Jews. Even Islam, when you look closely at the statistics, undergoes a process of secularization in Europe which was unthinkable in Muslim countries themselves, although there is in some areas the countermovement of radicalization too. In my own family, I have experienced the process very directly : I had two very Catholic parents, including a father who had years of seminary before marrying and continued to study, all his life, theology, Bible and religions in general for his personal interest. In my many brothers and sisters, a little less than half are still practicing Catholics, the other not. Among my two dozen nieces and nephews, I know only of six who are practitioners, and even among them, three are still too young to have really chosen to be, and they may simply follow their parents to church. Often, the abandonment of the Catholic faith was progressive and natural, but it may also have been the source of painful spiritual crisis. Probably, a change of Pope will not play wonder either, since the causes of this fall are deep rooted and somehow consubstantial to modernity.

Should we broaden the subject beyond the religions, then we would notice that the great totalitarian ideologies of the twentieth century, be they communist or fascist were strong forms of belief. Their fall has led to a processes of "deconversion" which was massive, brutal, painful, even bloody . In a more quiet way, we can consider that China, which is still called communist, gave up 90%, of its Maoist dogma. Therefore, we have the case of one billion four hundred million people who have been "deconverted" in one or two generations. Again in this direction, a simple interpretation of the bloody chaos in which sink many Islamic countries now, is also more or less connected to this theme of deconversion. Even the doctrines of capitalism and scientism with its indefinite progress are challenged; there are profound changes in beliefs at that level too. This issue is much broader than simply shifting from a religious movement to another. If even physical objects change, what then about beliefs, which are quite on a subtle, I would say volatile level. The great religions themselves that we know today were formed by the gathering of sundry beliefs, and they tried to integrate them in a coherent system as much as possible... for some time only. In addition, the mystics of all traditions and those without tradition tell us that the great experience is possible, that is to say, the contact with the Ground beyond all views and all theories.

To be clear from the outset, it is important thoroughly to revise the difference often made between "big" religion and sects. All religions are sectarian in their way, and it is not because a religious movement is small, that it will necessarily fall into bigotry, it may instead be much more open than the exclusive sectarianism too often put forward by the theologies of major religions, especially monotheistic, sure of their power, at least in appearance. In addition, the so-called "sectarian" movements often have ideas that are not so new, dating back to the teachings of the ancient Gnostics. In this sense, they are not "New Age", as would have us believe the Church representative for instance. They continue, among other things, a movement against the

authoritarianism of the Catholic Church which is indeed very old. This is what for instance Frédéric Lenoir showed in his book *The Metamorphoses of God*ⁱⁱⁱ.

The seniority of a given religious belief is not a guarantee of its validity, perhaps even the opposite: it indeed means that it was created at a time when the understanding of the world was benighted by ignorance at multiple levels. The more a religion is ancient, the more reasons it has to be anachronistic, especially for those which have not been able to adapt themselves to the changing times. Of course, there be exceptions to this rule. When people say with admiration : "How old is this belief !" we could also continue in this way : " So much so, it may indeed be time to turn the page ! "The Conservatives will say: "People cannot have been wrong for so long." A simple reply to this could be: "Quite so, the history of science is just a long series of examples where people were deceived for so long! Why religions should be exempted of the effects of this law? " . To make a strong comparison about seniority who is not a criterion of validity, do note that if there is something that is passed from the old era, it is tuberculosis, and this is not for the good of humanity. It just proves that since long, Koch bacillus has found ways to circumvent the immune defenses of the body.

"One fine morning I woke up, and I did no longer believed ! "

This experience was told to me by a senior official of the European Parliament in Brussels, hailing from Italy. He was a devout Catholic and went to Mass almost every morning; then, one day, he woke up and realized that he did not believe any more in all that. From what he said, he indeed felt much relieved. He rebounded quickly on a sustained practice of vipassana meditation for ten years, then, in accordance with his new wife, he took initiation in another movement more closely connected with the feminine aspect of spirituality. The future will tell us where he is heading for, but in any event, this Italian friend feels very good psychologically and spiritually. Often deconversions are progressive and are prepared by an accumulation of doubts and questioning, but sometimes they are sudden, like a thunderbolt from a clear sky. Basically, it is a sign of the inalienable human freedom : just as one can convert suddenly , even so one can deconvert abruptly .

Falling from the sky

Beliefs, especially those which are one-sided, are often surrounded by a halo of naivety. When they disappear, the faithful literally "falls from the sky." Having sailed for quite a while comfortably on the white cloud of a system which was self-maintaining, believers fall to earth into a more direct reality. They realize, as the saying goes in psychiatry, that they may have had a "delirium in the field of their desires." (The French psychiatrist would say : "Un délire dans le domaine de son désir"). It is always better to face the truth, even if it has us "falling from the sky." That said, their old belief probably brought them something for some time, if not they would not have followed it. A key to understanding this phenomenon of deconversion lies in the ability to distinguish positive thinking from its interpretation. A study by the Institute of Noetic Sciences (IONS) has shown scientifically that positive thinking was really effective from a distance, for example to help a faraway patient get better. This phenomenon was more effective if the thought was supported by emotion. This phenomenon is well-known in the spiritual traditions, but with a different name, they will speak of "intense prayer to God" for instance. However, if our study could properly show the effectiveness of the law of positive thinking, it has never been able to demonstrate the existence of a foreign entity who would have listened to the prayer by the ears and would have given by mouth orders for it to be completed. In the language of psychology, the belief

in the efficacy of prayer is not a hallucination, but an interpretation, a questionable mental construction of a phenomenon that in itself is real.

"Go , your faith saved you ! "

These words of Christ after healing the sick have an important meaning. It is not fair to say, "the master, or God saved me ", but we should rather say, "This is my faith in the master, in God which saved me." This is an important key to access a real spiritual independence. It represents a sign of maturity. It should be differentiated from the pseudo- independence of a capricious and egocentric person, or of a beginner which do not even realize the usefulness of following any spiritual teaching. It is therefore important to understand that the benefits you receive are not mainly due to an absolute or exclusive value of the teacher or teaching, but in good part to your own faith. Thus, it will be easier to keep going on even if you change the belief.

Do not throw the baby out with the bathwater

Religions are certainly designed to exist for a long period of time in the landscape of humanity, and we must then live with them. However, we can estimate that there is now roughly speaking half humanity who leads one's own life honestly, but without religious practice. It is central to highlight the common basis to all humanity, i.e. what is ethical and what can help to develop oneself into a better person, whether one follows a religion or not. This leads to the concept of secular spirituality, whose practice will consist in meditations to cultivate positive emotions and to reduce the disturbing ones. Everyone will benefit from a culture of care and altruism. They are like the two wheels of the chariot of righteousness, which corresponds to the dharma in the deepest sense of the word. This law of inner righteousness is not enclosed in a more or less anachronistic Civil Code imposed on society by religious fundamentalists, but is felt in one's heart as clear and undeniable. That which helps develop attention and altruism, be it within religious movements or outside of them, should be retained. These last two factors are fundamental values, and indeed values more essential than beliefs. We need them like water, while beliefs are similar to different kind of tea to color the water. The slippery slope begins when belief is placed over ethics, and in this sense, monotheism has "slipped" much more than India. Conversely, knowledge which put ethics above belief represents the best safeguards against mental imbalance and paranoia, which can reach epidemic proportions in certain religious groups. Buddha was once asked what the signs of true inner progress were. He replied briefly : "Less ignorance , less greed, less anger ! "

Jean -Yves Leloup, a well-known liberal Christian writer, inquired once with the Dalai Lama which was the best religion. He was expecting that in one way or another, His Holiness would put Buddhism at the top of the pyramid but he only replied: "The best religion is the one that makes you better !" When you stick to this broad vision, the passage from one belief to another will become quite easy, and should not cause you to dive into the pangs of guilt. Similarly, if the transmission of a belief does not occur from one generation to the next, which has already been a very common situation in Europe for the past half century, it remains important that the transmission of values does happen. For this purpose, we should be able to separate these two poles, ethics and belief, a discernment that most of the traditionalists are unwilling or unable to do.

Spiritual separations can be as difficult as the emotional ones, or even more painful. Indeed, these are not just feelings, but the relation to the Absolute, which is involved in spiritual matters. In both cases, the visceral rejection of the former object of devotion is not right. If, after the great love, we "loose free the dogs", this is not the middle way, it is just being tossed from one extreme to the other. Some people have some sort of rigid basic temperament, biologists now say that this

is largely a genetic trait, and they oscillate between fanaticism or bigotry for or against a belief. In the history of the twentieth century, for example, there has been a series of examples of rigid communists who became no less rigid Catholics, and vice versa. The correct attitude is to recognize what we have received, and be able to be thankful for this. Buddha, for instance, had two gurus, he was able to integrate their teaching to his and kept on going further.

If one has the feeling of being manipulated by a movement or belief, this will be useless to fall into victimization, anger against those of his former group, or ire turned against yourself for having believed in what they were saying. This will only increase the pain. In this sense, the medieval Sufi poet Fariduddin Attar tells the story of an ascetic who had settled in the desert in the shadow of one of the few trees that stood there. He struggled and was not progressing in his practice. One day, a bird perched on the branch, which had the gift of speaking. He said, "I know why you linger in your practices!" "Tell me, you bird, I'm listening!" "It's because one day, you saw on the ground a piece of mirror, you looked in it, saw your face and then caressed your own beard with tenderness and pride, saying "How beautiful it is!". This very attachment blocks your further progress! "The ascetic, furious, began to pull one by one full clumps of his own beard, of course not without great pain. Then, the bird flew away, laughing, and concluded: "Now you have still better reasons to be obsessed by your beard ! "

Rumors about a teacher, if persistent, are hints of a truth not to be neglected. A Hassidic story comes to my mind, in the end of the 19th century in the Russia of the Tsars. One Jew was arrested by the police for suspicion of sedition, then his friend who was a saintly Rabbi came to plead for him. He did so with such a warmth and passion that the policemen suspected him to be an accomplice and brought him to the judge. The Public Prosecutor who wanted to corner the rabbi and humiliate him said : "There is a foolish story about this man: one night a burglar broke into his house and took many precious items, but suddenly our rabbi woke up and came, so the brigand started running away. The rabbi run after him shouting : 'don't feel guilty, I give you all that you took, I give it to you!' What a cock-and-bull story!" The judge became suddenly thoughtful, and after a while look straight into the eyes of the Prosecutor : "Do they tell such an episode on you ?" "No, of course!" "Neither on me! Liberate the man!"

This story may be used in a positive or negative sense. If a teacher is surrounded by waves and waves of scandals, they may be true. There is no smoke without fire.

The three points which may render a belief dangerous

a) The danger of infantilism

This danger is not only the characteristics of small spiritual groups, but also of large institutions. There are at two levels, the psychological infantilism and the metaphysical one. The first is not always present, but the second is always creeping in, by definition, in the theistic conception. Indeed, the basic belief is that there is a separate entity that dominates me and I will never become independent. As reassuring and comforting as this belief may seem, for the critics, be they jain, Buddhist or modern, it boils down to a metaphysical infantilism, regardless of how it is interpreted

Major religions, just as smaller movements, have their dose of psychological infantilism too, which facilitates the non-questioning of religious authority. Jesus' words : " Blessed are you, little children , because what is hidden from the wise will be revealed to you" has been widely exploited to get the infantile submission of the masses to the clergy. It had little scruples doing so as long as the consolidation of his power could be achieved. To stay in the field of monotheism, we know

that the most common interpretation of the word Islam is just "submission." Despite some intellectuals who would give other interpretations, the mass of imams and the faithful is happy with it, and so the system keeps on going. In the early history of Islam, the submission was not mystical, but clearly politico-military, the various tribes of the Arab world had to submit to this new power that was going up at the time.

This given dose of infantilism is frequent in beliefs, and just as a wall, it separates one from the reality. The work to do is then to gather enough stamina to pierce this wall in the way a supersonic jet, when speeding, pierces the wall of sound. This will make a noise like thunder, we may be very scared, but then we will really be able to progress fast. The important thing is to extract oneself from false security and comfort provided by short-term childishness. Moreover, it is clear that the need for love is strong: when this very need is pressing, "at any price", it will most probably distort the reality, even for just a "speck of love". And when the deformation becomes severe, the subject may slide smoothly in the field of psychosis, all this with much piety ... and of course, so much love!

Infantilism attracts the crowds. In India, the female stars of Bollywood often look and behave in an infantile way, and the masses adore them. Even their voices when they sing are childish. Certainly, there is a place for spiritual childhood, which enables us to get closer to our origin, return to the "basic software" in us and thus being able to somehow reformat our computer. However, we must be careful that this childlike side should not become childish. We should again underline that religious movements, be they large or small, have long understood that it was very convenient for them to exploit this weak trait in their followers to make them more pliable and dependent.

Infantilism is somehow like a drug. It brings immediate pleasure, and we want all the more to return to it. It develops as an addiction to figures that can provide the maternal or paternal love, like a religious leader or an institution. Here, it is important to disentangle oneself from confusion : we have two poles in us, that of the ego which is easy to understand, and that which is beyond the ego and which is less clear for most people. This is the center of the Absolute, the righteous Law, an eminently transpersonal pole. However, the human being in the weakness of his mind has the habit of completely identifying this transpersonal pole with an individual or an institution, so eventually with another ego. So it goes from bad to worse as he developed an addiction to this new ego too. Certainly, religious or spiritual communities have their value, and inner maturity leads us to know how to live with them, as we live in family or society. Nevertheless, it is saddening to see that sincere subjects are struggling to reduce their individual ego and fall nonetheless more into the trap of a collective ego.

b) The second danger : the delirium of omnipotence

This type of delusion is a major "banana skin", a threat that can drag individuals and religious or spiritual groups very low on the ethical scale. It has many avatars, from coarser to finer, from more stupid to more sophisticated, from more primary to more "theologized." These first two dangers are logically interrelated, they mirror each other: the inferiority complex related to childishness is compensated by the superiority complex linked to omnipotence. Thus, a pathological equilibrium get established, which unfortunately can remain fairly stable over time.

From the neurological point of view, the feeling of omnipotence is an inhibition of the center of separation between us and the other. In the mystical experience, this is positive and goes in the direction of the experience of the One, but everyone is not able to stay at this level. The other two cases in which the center of the separation is inhibited, are anger and sexual intercourse. Be it out

of love or out of anger, one jumps on the other and the sense separation is temporarily erased. Another link between meditative experience and sexual desire, is the release of endorphins. It is a neurotransmitter secreted in the brain that stimulates appetite at any level, be it for food, sex, or for the intellectual and spiritual knowledge. If the appetite is intense and remains unsatisfied, the frustration and anger that will ensue will be just as much intense. We must understand all these links and be vigilant about what may look like a delirium of omnipotence, as if allowed to develop, it will invade us, accompanied by a series of symptoms of religious psychopathologies.

When spiritual masters are put on a podium from a young age, they are somehow like over gifted children. Or the future of those is not necessarily as bright as their promising beginnings let people hope. For some time, these masters can hide their weak points, and then scandals occur, which leave the devotees flabbergasted. When they are trapped on this podium of divinization, they are like a cat which climbed a tree but is unable to go down. If a group divinize a leader, it is indeed fortunate that the rest of the world does not follow steps. Otherwise, the said leader could become megalomaniac. Divinization of a spiritual master is licit, why not, but this is much better that it remains an intimate delirium with the devotee, well felt but not so visible outside.

c) The third danger : mental constructions as opposed to the common sense

Again, it is not only a deviation seen only in small spiritual groups, major religions have their doses of these easy explanations which start from scratch, that is to say from unverifiable assumptions, such as the will of God. If you're happy, this is due to the grace of God or of the master, if you are unhappy, it can only be due to your ego. Should we receive something good unexpectedly, it will automatically mean that God or the master are nice, if you do not get what you expected, it will mean that God or master are angry and want to educate you for your own good. If you are ill and die, it is God again, who has taken you with him , if you recover, it is a miracle of God who loves us ... We are thus trapped in a system of beliefs which are comfortable – because we no longer have to ask questions – but unfortunately a system quite unscientific. Indeed, the first principle of the scientific way of thinking is that a hypothesis may be contradicted. However, in the pairs of opposites we have mentioned, God or the master can never be questioned. In addition, for those whose mind would really be too curious, the last word from the believer in order to cut any possible doubt will be: "Who are we, here, poor worms wriggling on earth, to probe the mystery of the Almighty and of his divine decrees ? " This is the last word for them, but it leaves deeply unsatisfied those who are not...

Just as a lie that will not be acknowledged by its author will lead to a series of other lies, even so a mistaken belief can induce a lot of side beliefs that protect the original one like a cocoon. However, all this accumulation of lies has little more density than a cotton ball.

I proposed to an old friend to read a book which was rather critical of her Guru. She answered me : "Yes, I will do so to please you, but I know in advance that it's a tissue of lies, because they told me so in the ashram!" How could we continue a reasonable discussion in this context?

The advantages and disadvantages of the guru-disciple relationship in India.

I mentioned my first book *The Master and the therapist* who is on the topic of the Guru-disciple relationship. Swami Vivekananda said that wherever there was an intense mystical tradition, this close relation from master to disciple was present. It upholds a steady traditional transmission, allowing large differences between the lines of masters, thus avoiding the pitfall of

mass ideology with its monotonous uniformity. Despite its paternalistic aspect, the guru-disciple tradition in India, be it in Hinduism or Buddhism is fundamentally egalitarian, since it is called in Sanskrit as well as in Hindi *parampara*, that is to say "from equal to equal." If a master crushes or humiliates his disciple, this will represent a perversion of the relationship, or, to put it even more simply, the sign of a remaining big ego in the guru. It is a relationship of spiritual love, very different from the background of highly ideological indoctrination in religious mass movements.

Tenzin Palmo has lived for half a century continuously in India, apart from three years in Italy and tours from time to time in the West. Although following the Tibetan tradition, she read met and heard of the gurus of Hinduism. Here is her impression: "Even among gurus, from the evidence I've read of some visitors, there is a recurring pattern. The ashram is centered on devotion to the master, meditation practices recommended are rather vague, and the guru, unlike in the Buddhist tradition, most often does not teach specific texts. The faithful are reduced in practice to have only devotion to his or her person as the path. The disadvantage of this system is that it suggests that most of the *sâdhanâ* is to become either the favorite of the guru or enter in a competition for parental love as if in a large family." One might add that singing *bhajans*, religious songs, although it may channelize emotions and give some experiences, often reaches its ceiling and ends in group excitation. Certainly, excitement pleases the crowds.

Traditionally, it is clear that a candidate teacher should stay a long time with his master before becoming a guru himself, usually after his death. If there is no master, or if the position of teacher is assumed too young, the risk of deviation increases correspondingly. Of course, someone may be gifted spiritually, as these children for piano, who are nicknamed little Mozart. But every little Mozart doesn't become the great Mozart. Moreover, a psychological study of a spiritual teacher should be allowed : some devotees will be shocked by the idea, but on the contrary, this could make the teacher more humane and show the trials through which he passed and how he solved them. Of course, this is a modern idea, but the freedom of enquiring and searching is fundamental and should not only be permitted, but encouraged.

Some aspirants are eager to see faults in every place they go, so they roam from a spiritual teacher to the other, indefinitely finding new critics to do. To quote a strong simile by Ajahn Chah, they do not realize they have dog turd in their bag of spiritual seeker, and that is because of this that they find it stinky smell everywhere. A Westerner who has lived for 60 years as a sadhu in India told us simply: "If you are looking for faults in gurus, you will always find faults and never gurus !". Somehow as in marriage, there an engagement to take. Small problems are not to move away from a spiritual teaching relationship that sustains us. However, new serious problems may occur, whether they are really recent or they have always been there, but we didn't see them, or we didn't want to see them. At this junction, leaving the teacher is probably the right option. If the disappointment was rather superficial, as in the case of a visitor for example, departure will be easier than if there was a deep commitment as a disciple. Anyhow, it could be a sign of rigid ego from this disciple, to refuse to see that he has been mistaken.

Ajahn Chah tells the story of a horse trainer : " The king hired a new horse trainer without taking the time to meet him personally. After some time, he saw that more and more animals in the royal stables began to limp. The king then came to the horse trainer and found him limping too. So, he solved the problem by hiring someone else. "A spiritual teacher may have defects , but they should not be imitated as horses have done for the lameness of their trainer. Nonetheless, the teacher tells us our true nature, and we should cling to this indication and implement it. The faith in the spiritual transmission in India is

based on the existence of beings who approached perfection. It was well expressed by this stanza Shankarâchârya I highlighted in my first book, *The Indian Teaching Tradition* (free download online^{iv}) :

*There are calm and magnanimous beings
Which, like the spring, do good to others.
They themselves have crossed the terrible ocean of life and death
And selflessly, help their fellows to also cross .*

Vivekachudamani 37

In the Tantric Tibetan Buddhism, the emphasis is on *samaya* , the deep commitment of the disciple with the guru. This is an important agreement, which shall not be broken lightly. However, if we see on serious issues that the master is not up to what he claimed to be, he becomes the one somehow responsible for the breach of contract , and we will be therefore released from this agreement.

This system of transmission from guru to disciple also has disadvantages. The guru may have his ego increased by the veneration of disciples, and the disciples in turn, behind a false humility, may inflate their own egos. The reasoning is as follows: "My guru is the highest in the world, I am the most humble and submissive disciple, I am the world's biggest number two! " This small or big megalomania pleases both parties, and this may lead slowly but surely in what could be called in psychiatry a "two people delusion". This being said, the teacher should be qualified. Indeed, we could also add that love in a couple has also some aspects of a two people delusion. And is it not the very charm of love to allow a little bit of dreaming? This megalomania shared by master and disciple can have an effect of contamination, and then a whole group, an entire religious school starts suffering from superiority complex. In fact, this is not what is expected to be in a true spirituality. If these schools are becoming major religions, they will make theologies to "prove" that they alone hold the divine teachings, this a well-known evolution.

It may also happen that the disciples take the emotional excesses of religious texts literally. They believe without distance to the deification of the guru, as explained for instance in the *Gurugita*. This is often the case with new good-hearted Westerners who come to India. They do not realize paradoxes and nuances which lie behind this notion of Guru. The perception of God in India is much more familiar than the all-powerful Creator of monotheism, metaphysically separated from his creation. In that sense the Hindu gods will be closer to the God of Christianity than of the one from Islam. You can negotiate with this type of God or gurus as you would with parents, they should definitely not behave like dictators, not even in backstage. There is also the difference to be made between theory and practice. Hindus know well that their texts are filled with hyperbolic exaggerations, and we should often take the spirit, and not the letter of what was written.

Let us now mention an important aspect of the guru-disciple relationship, although we often lose sight of it: in its flexibility and strength at the same time, it represented one of the important manners that have enabled India to resist, in a somewhat passive way, to the successive waves of Muslim military invasion and eight centuries of attempts to forced conversion, especially in North India. Thus, by the very multiplicity and diversity of its gurus, the country has avoided falling into the mass ideology of Islamism, whose main theological argument was unfortunately military force. Without the system gurus, and without that of castes in India we would have an extra-population of more than one billion Muslims, probably of the type of Pakistan, Afghanistan or Iran, rather than one billion Hindus. Probably the planet would not have won in this exchange, from the point of view, for instance, of the stability of democracy and the freedom from terrorism.

This is quite a real advantage which should never be forgotten when discussing this topic, even if the guru system, by its very flexibility and freedom, may easily deviate. Spiritual transmission is difficult anyway, and when it reaches a certain height, it becomes very difficult to do it in the somehow political context of an institution. It requires an adaptation by someone who is really competent, that is to say a spiritual master. If I were asked to summarize my four years of research and my book on this guru-disciple relationship, I would like to quote Winston Churchill's humorous word about democracy : "This is the worst system, except for all the others ... ! "

"Where there is dharma, there is victory"

Yathā dharma tathā vijaya : this is a famous sentence of Mahabharata, which could be somehow summarized in "Where is righteousness, there is victory". It refers to a story from Mahābhārata. Duryadhana, the leader of the side of the attackers, was about to begin the great battle of Kurukshetra against the Kauravas. So a lot of useless death would happen because of his ambitions which were as excessive as improper. In accordance to tradition, the first day of the battle before dawn, he came to prostrate before his mother and asked for her blessings. However, she happened to be a saintly woman, and did not at all agreed with this wrong war in which his son was about to embark. On the other hand, she could not curse him or tell him to go and get killed – he remained his son, after all. So, in the hope that he would understand, she simply told him the fateful phrase, "Where there is dharma there is victory!" The unrepentant son did not take into account the suggestion and went straight into the fray. The next day, he came to ask again his mother's blessings, and he received the same answer. This continued until the eighteenth day, when he was killed with his companions. Thus, when one does not follow the dharma, the righteous law, he will eventually be destroyed, even if he is lucky enough to have a holy woman as mother. This is not only the central lesson of classical Hinduism, but also of Buddhism. Dharma is not enclosed in a book, as an anachronistic Civil Code, but is perceived by everyone in the innermost recess of the heart.

We should remember Satyakāma's story in the Upanishads. He was a young spiritual seeker and the first thing his guru asked him when they first met was his caste, because mainly Brahmins were accepted for the teaching. He honestly answered : "My mother had several lovers when she conceived me, therefore she told me she did not know who my father was!". The group of disciples around became indignant, and insisted on the immediate exclusion of this son of nobody. However, the master said : " You said the truth, this means you are a true Brahmin, welcome here with us!". Being a Brahmin doesn't mean taking bath three times a day, polluting one's own lungs with smoke, sitting for long stretches of time in front of a fire sacrifice, or being able to recite by heart the Vedas. The one who tells the truth is the actual Brahmin.

If in a religious movement, one has the feeling that the leader or leadership team does not follow this righteousness, especially about truth and non-avidity, this is the responsibility of devotees to assemble and to ask them to mend their ways. Should they refuse, better to leave the ship before it sinks. Certainly, members of a religious group or Church will do everything to make you believe that if you leave, you will regress into a flat materialism, even fall in the "vices of the world ." This may happen in some cases, but overall, this threat is a ploy to ensure "customer loyalty" and keep believers in the institution playing on their fear of the outside. This is valid not only for small groups, but for the major religions. In the Old Testament, for example, which is the very basis of monotheism, pagans are regularly presented as debauched. Historians are now questioning this view, which indeed was not real. It was, to put it in a modern way, a clear disinformation from the authors of the Bible in their fight to keep together their small band of

people. In addition, the spiritual life is very wide, and is never entirely dependent on religious belief or limited education. It is rather a clear form of easy paranoia to believe that one stands as an island of purity in a sea of vices. Certainly, the world is not so bright and spiritual communities are expected to be purer than it, but better not to force the cleavage, otherwise there is an important risk of hypertrophy of the religious ego, which in turn will be a major obstacle to spiritual progress.

“Coping, relaxing and finding one’s balance”

This is a formula of Wangchi, one among the great teachers of medieval Zen, which is worth meditating deeply. It can be applied, among others, to the process of deconversion. The very idea of changing one’s own deep-seated beliefs can create a lot of stress, thus, we tend first to simply escape from this idea and repress it. However, if we faced it, we will see that this is not a herculean task, we will relax and then we can find a new balance. Is not the act of walking itself the result of successive imbalances? The need to change one’s beliefs is an obstacle only if one want to lead a good quiet life, but a fundamental spiritual law asks us to turn obstacles into opportunities for our progress on the inner path. Moreover, from the point of view of those, for example, who do not believe in an almighty personal God, losing faith in him is no more serious than the case of a child who loses his belief in Santa Claus; but certainly, experienced from the inside by the formerly faithful, the transition can be lived as much more difficult.

The inalienable freedom to change

Freedom to change his religion under normal conditions of liberty was a great achievement of the French Revolution. On the contrary, even today in the Muslim world, three out of four schools of law decree the automatic death sentence for those who want to deconvert from Islam. The fourth is also in favor of this death penalty, but said it should not be automatic and be subjected to a judgment. This type of recommendation is a good example of these laws which are in themselves highly unethical. It is surprising that the commission of human rights do not form more pressure on the civil and religious authorities in Muslim countries to repeal it. Fortunately, in "normal" religions and spiritual movements, people are not likely to be murdered when they want to change your faith. Of course, they may be submitted to psychological pressure in order not to go, see one’s reputation demolished , or undergo a “character assassination” and be considered a traitor. However, things fortunately stop there.

Changing beliefs may simply mean the transition from high school to university. It represents also a leap into the void : this is a great workout like jumping with a parachute. Certainly, it will give us on the spot a good adrenaline rush, but afterwards we will be proud and happy to have done it. In this sense, the proper psychological and spiritual health is to know how to bounce and to adapt to changing conditions. And even if we no longer have a spiritual teacher, one can remember that, especially when we have bases for the inner work, a good book is better than a bad teacher.

A simple method of psychology can help to confirm the separation and to have it reach our unconscious mind: let’s imagine a horizontal eight figure, blue in color. One should sit in one of its loops and in the other loop put the other person who symbolizes the belief that we want to detach from. We begin by respectfully salute him, thank him for all he has given us, and then using the Power of Above as a sword, require him to cut the knot of the eight. Then, the two loops will move away from each other as two streams which would flow in separate valleys. The evocation of the Power from On high is also used by the *Alcoholics Anonymous* to get rid of alcohol

addiction. Actually, a deeply rooted belief has something to do with addiction. It is sad to note too that some religious movements in their intolerance provoke more deaths than drugs and intoxicants put together.

Another meditation is simple: see things from the point of view of Sirius. Seen from very high, we are tiny ants moving from one group of believers to another. It's not a big deal, there is nothing to make a fuss of it. When we have a broad spirit, changing belief is "digested" more easily. As the Tibetan saying goes : " Pour a handful of salt in a glass of water, and it will become undrinkable. Pour the same handle in a lake, and the taste of it will not change! "

A comparison comes to mind as to know what is the right moment to change beliefs: this is that of stock market : you need to act quickly, when stocks fall, before it turns to the great market crash . Otherwise, instead of losing a little, you will lose a lot. Basically, we can change spiritual teachers, there are so many that we can find. For sure, there are some problems to be solved in order to make the transition. We must also understand that we do not need to find a teacher who has a worldwide reputation, we ask first and foremost someone who is simply consistent. It's both little, and a lot. As for the sadguru, the real spiritual teacher who knows us better than we know ourselves, we should acknowledge that he or she is a rarity.

Although disappointment leads to a phase of depression , do not be afraid to cross , and after being a "fan" , do not be afraid to go through the stage of a " faded, or wilted fan " ... Indeed , we must remember that wilted flower sow multiple seeds, which in turn give rise to multiple flowers. Even if we got fooled, we should accept our mistake and not remain bounded by the past. As usual in inner life, acceptance is already half of the solution.

Satyameva jayate

"It is truth that wins ," is one of the most famous Indian maxim. It can be applied to the phenomenon of deconversion. Religious movements or Churches, if they are sincere in their ethics, should thank those who expose their hidden defects, and should not maintain a system of forced silence. We are at the age of whistleblowers, who by their individual courage, are a challenge to systems that formerly seemed unassailable. There is a time when the truth finally comes out. As President Truman said : " You may fool someone all the time, you may fool all the people for some time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time! " In this sense, a psychologist told the Dalai Lama that he made a survey of the Buddhists spiritual teachers, especially the Tibetan ones, and most of them declared to have sometimes unethical sexual behavior. It jumped and said, "Give me the names, we will publish them, so that people do not take them as teachers!" Actually, the survey was anonymous, and teachers had a narrow escape, for this time at least...

"Love is blind." This formula, which speaks of the usual feelings can also be applied in a number of cases, but not always, to the spiritual realm. So let's be vigilant. Moreover, Truth and dharma are one. For Tibetan ethics, murder is the greatest violence at the physical level, and having other believe that we are realized while we are not, is the greatest violence at the level of truth. This should make ponder many spiritual teachers, including among those who are well-known. In addition, the respect of truth by the teacher is essential for a valid spiritual transmission. Indeed, the master speaks of his inner experiences and the disciple has no direct way to verify what he says, from his own position, which is external. However, he can do it indirectly by examining its integrity in the small things of everyday life, in matters other than spiritual. An ordinary person can invent some stories from time to time, for example to brag, but in the case of a spiritual master, let it be clear, this is completely incompatible.

For obvious reasons, religious movements or religions will not talk about deconversion, and even consider it as a taboo subject. This could evoke certain online newsletters or commercial websites which make the door wide open to register, but make it very complicated to unsubscribe in hiding the button for it in the corner of a remote page of their site...

"Sannyas is like being suspended in a vacuum"

This reflection of Ma Anandamayi could also apply to the situation of changing beliefs. You should dare to jump into the unknown, without the protection of a pious cocoon. We talk generally of a curve not to be missed, but precisely here, changing beliefs amounts to a curve to be missed. On missing it, we are suddenly projected into space for a glide into infinity. It does not follow the complicated and winding road of pseudo-justifications and rationalizations which we try to tell to ourselves in order to swallow the "unswallowable". Almost every day, visitors came to complain to Ma Anandamayi of the shortcomings and faults of their guru. She replied emphatically: "There is only one guru, it's God." That solves the problem. Moreover, Ramana Maharshi said that sometimes the Sadgourou, the perfect guru, was like the tiger which, once it has bitten its prey, never let it loose. That could be slightly frightening! But we should wonder who is Sadgourou. One day, someone asked Ma: "I left my Sadgourou, how should I consider my situation now?" Ma replied: "If you left him, this means he was not your Sadgourou!" . Simply.

Twenty-five centuries ago, the Buddha had already voiced a criticism about the path of devotional theism in general: "If you have installed in your mind a luminous entity, put it in front of you and developed a strong relationship with it, it will be very difficult for you to go beyond that." In fact, if the entity is a God who leads the violence, or a teacher who fell in his or her ethical behavior, dropping them may be the best thing to do. As a maxim of Tibetan wisdom goes: "Do not take down the gods at the level of demons."^v

The vacuum created by the loss of belief has a liberating side, and we should use it when in this particular situation. We may recall the story of a Zen master who at night handed a lit lamp to his disciple who was leaving to go home. When the disciple took it, he blew it, and the pupil got enlightened. When a comfortable belief is "blown up", the intense discomfort which is felt has the power to stimulate the spiritual vitality and to catapult one at a much higher spiritual level. So there is no deep reason to complain of such events, even if, as we say colloquially, we can lose some feathers in the change: downgrading of one's status in the group of believers, outside critics, misunderstanding of some friends, separation from a cozy web of relationships, etc.

In this sense, a text of Ajahn Chah can enlighten us:

A young Western monk studied with Ajahn Chah in his monastery of Wat Ba Tong in eastern Thailand. He could no more stand this very austere life and went straight to his home to tell him he was leaving. Among the long list of complaints, he also expressed a grievance against the master himself and told him: "Even yourself do not seem illuminated! You change all the time - once you are strict, another time you do not seem to worry the least of things or people. How do I know if you are enlightened?" Ajahn Chah began to laugh on hearing this, which both amused and irritated the young monk. "It's a good thing that in your opinion, I do not seem illuminated," he said, "because if I went into the pattern of your illumination model, this ideal of how an enlightened person must be would be activated in you, and you would still be limited, even shackled by your seeking Buddha outside yourself. He is not outside somewhere - he is in your own heart." The monk bowed and returned to his house to meditate and look inside for the real Buddha.

"Believe what you want, but don't be attached"

Nâgârjuna wrote *The Stances of the Middle*. The 27 chapters in it are called in Sanskrit Pariksha, that is to say "examinations". This could mean that the ideas and dogmas of different schools are indicted as delinquents before the judge. And unfortunately, we know in history that certain dogmas or ideas pushing for instance to racism against minorities, led to great crimes against humanity. Thus, setting a kind of medicolegal examination of these beliefs is not a luxury, this is definitely needed. Nâgârjuna was abbot of a monastery said to have eight thousand monks, in Andhra Pradesh in the second century AD. He knew that people needed beliefs, but also saw that they were losing a lot of time to argue about them. So he had this wise formula: "Believe in what you want, but be not attached to it." In the same vein, he said that the biggest mistake of mankind was to take relative things for the Absolute. This or that divine form, apparently related to a given culture, is taken to be a universal Absolute, and then people kill each other because they do not agree on the definitions of this universal Absolute, or even on a simple ritual or form of worship . It is as if you paid a very high price for a simple mistake, somehow always the same, i.e. taking the relative for Absolute.

Let's go back in conclusion to the change of beliefs. While we must keep on respecting those who have educated us, independence remains the goal, and already represents much of the way. Between the pretention of one who thinks he does not need any spiritual teacher, and the weakness of one who thinks he will never be able to do without it, there is a middle way. Following this middle way helps us achieve the goal. In addition, acknowledging that was wrong in a belief about a teaching or a person is not only an act of realism, but of humility, of non-ego too. It comes back to accepting one's limitations. And as the Zen proverb goes: " By accepting our limits, we become without limits ."

To go further :

In my book *The teacher and therapist* , I have given the classic vision of the guru-disciple relationship in India. There are few sources in French that make a synthesis on this topic. The last section examines the concept of transfer in psychology versus faith in the guru. Lilian Silburn organized a collective book documented the spiritual master of the Two Oceans in the Hermes collection. With regard specifically to the issue of abandoning belief or spiritual movement , Jack Kornfield has made a full analysis of good psychological and spiritual meaning in his book *Ask the Buddha ... and Listen to Your Heart* . For many fingers how the Buddha's teaching was his time deeply rebellious and anti authoritarian , Stephen Batchelor 's work will be very useful , already with Buddhism beyond dogma. For the specific problem of gurus and spiritual teachers who are not up to the traditional ideal was in English *Guru's papers* by Joel Kramer and Alstad Dina . For the ideal of humanity with a real but independent beliefs spiritual practice , see the latest book of the Dalai Lama *Beyond Religion -Ethics for the Whole World*.

The Buddha has strongly questioned the spiritual and religious authoritarianism, and even theism itself , which often is a form of authoritarianism projected onto the blank screen of the sky. We are working on the French translation of an English book written by a professor of Buddhism at the University of Sri Lanka , Dharmapala Gunasiri . It recalls in great detail the criticisms of Buddhism to theism , and applies it to the Christian concept of God. He then expanded his criticism

to various forms of religious and spiritual authoritarianism . This is an important book , I hope it will be available soon for the French public. I already gave a summary of his main ideas in thirty pages at the end of my book *The Missionary illusion*, in one of the last chapters " A Buddhist deconstruction of the monotheistic exclusivism ."

ⁱ www.jacquesvigne.com

ⁱⁱ Vigne Jacques *L'Inde intérieure* Le Relié/Guy Tredaniel 2010 for the pocket edition.

ⁱⁱⁱ In French , Lenoir Frédéric *Les métamorphoses de Dieu* Plon, 2004

^{iv} www.jacquesvigne.com

^v *Lojong, The seven points of Mind Training*. For instance with the commentaries of Dilgo Kyentse Rimpoche in *Enlightened Courage* or of B Alan Wallace in *Buddhism with an Attitude*