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Uncartesian Meditations on the Buddhist Phenomenology of the Nostril and the Dissolution of the Ego
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« *To one who experiences sensations, meditators, I teach the truth of suffering ...* »
Gautama Siddharta

Two thousand five hundred years after the Buddha attained Enlightenment at Bodh Gaya, at the age of thirty five, I took a ten day residential course in Vipassana meditation at Dhamma Giri, ‘the world's largest Vipassana centre’, at Igatpuri in Maharastra, India.¹ Vipassana meditation, as allegedly practiced by the Buddha himself and taught by S.N. Goenka and his Assistant Teachers, is not just a technique for the concentration of the mind. The concentration of the mind is only a means for the purification of the mind from the defilements and other inner negativities that cause misery. Presented as a universal method of insight into ‘the-things-as-they-really-are’ in the light of transiency, sorrowfulness and soullessness, and with Nirvana as the *summum bonum*, Vipassana it is thus literally (from *μεθοδος*) a way, a path or a road towards the truth that leads to the ‘good life’ by means of self-observation, -purification and -transformation. At the end of the road of self-transformation through meditative self-observation lies the end of misery and suffering, joy and happiness, or full enlightenment. Real happiness and full enlightenment - nothing less is promised by Goenkaji, but it is not given, though. The path towards enlightenment is steep and bumpy. One has to work at it consciously and continuously, methodically and diligently, *sine ira ac studio*, as the Franciscan monks used to say, meditating in absolute silence for 10 days, 12 and a half hours a day.

In this article I will give a personal account of my meditative experiences at Igatpuri. Vipassana meditation offers an experiential introduction to (Theravada) Buddhism. Buddhism will not so much be considered here as a religion, but as a philosophy of the mind and a metareligion, open to many religious practices, that offers a philosophical structuring of religion and a methodology for self-development. Even if I had read ten or fifty books on Buddhism, no doubt my knowledge would have remained abstract, because the insights it procures only become concrete when they are personally experienced. As the Buddha said : « Someone may recite much of the texts, but if he does not practice them, such a heedless person is like a herdsman who only counts the cows of others ». If I nevertheless start this article with a short introduction of the main tenets of Buddhism, it is only because the theory offers a perfect backdrop to its practices and allows me to better understand what I have already partially understood through meditation. Similarly, although I will describe Vipassana meditation by comparing it with the Cartesian meditations of Edmund

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¹ For information on Vipassana meditation, courses and centres, see the webpage of the International Vipassana Research Institute at www.vri.dhamma.org. The main information on Vipassana is also succinctly presented in Goenka, S.N.: *The Discourse Summaries. Talks from a ten-day Course in Vipassana Meditation* (Vipassana Research Institute, Igatpuri, 1987) and Hart, W.: *The Art of Living. Vipassana Meditation as taught by S.N. Goenka* (Vipassana Research Institute, Igatpuri, 1987).

Husserl, the founder of phenomenology, my primary intention is not academic. If I refer occasionally to phenomenology and contrast its transcendentalism with the one of Buddhism, it is only because my knowledge of the former has helped me to better understand the latter.

1) Dharma, or the teachings of the Buddha

Half a millenium before Jesus and more than a millenium before Mahomet, the Buddha attained Enlightenment at the age of thirty five.² Sitting cross-legged in meditation for 49 days under a Bodhi tree (*figus religiosus*) somewhere in the North-East Indian state of Bihar, with his back straight and the hands folded into his lap, Gautama Siddharta, better known under his honorific name of the Buddha or ‘the one who is fully awake’, gained full insight in the ‘truth-reality’ hidden behind things. Buddhism begins and ends with Gautama’s enlightenment experience, for this is the ultimate source of Buddhist teachings – or *Dharma* (or *dhamma*, in Pali, a vernacular language related to Sanskrit and close to that spoken by Buddha). At his enlightenment, the Buddha gained direct knowledge of rebirth, *karma* and the Four Holy Truths. His awakening is thought to have occurred in one single night. During the first ‘watch’ of the night, Siddharta acquired total knowledge of his previous lives, recalling each of them in in full detail. The cycle of repeated births is known as *samsara* or ‘endless wandering’. One way or another, most Indians accept the doctrine of reincarnation and believe that all living creatures are part of the cyclic movement of birth and rebirth and that they will be reborn till they reach ‘heaven (*nirvana* or *nibbana*). In the second part of the night, he attained the divine sight, perceiving a chain of causality (*karma* or *kamma*) which leads to rebirth of all types of beings in the universe and is therefore at the root of suffering. The doctrine of *karma* holds that the circumstances of future rebirths are determined by the moral deeds a person performs during his life. Individuals are thus not at the mercy of the gods, but through their karmic or moral actions, they ultimately determine their own fate. Finally, in the last ‘watch’ of the night, he came to fully understand the internal relation between craving, aversion and delusion on the one hand and suffering on the other. Having eliminated the defilements of the mind and rooted out craving, aversion and ignorance once and for all, he ‘had done what needed to be done’ and attained *nirvana* (literally ‘snuffing’ or ‘blowing out’). In recognition of this momentous spiritual event, nature itself responded with joy: ‘ten thousand worlds thundered’ and shook in celebration ; garlands of flowers rained from the heavens, for humankind now had hope of release from the endless cycle of suffering, birth and death.

Having attained enlightenment by virtue of good deeds done in innumerable past lives, the Buddha pondered his future. He hesitated whether he should become a guru or whether he should lead a secluded life, but following a personal appeal from Brahma, the upper god of the Hindu *trimurti* or trinity, he was moved by compassion and decided to bring his teachings and insights to the world. He travelled to Varanasi (Banaras), the sacred city of the Hindus on the Ganges, to join five of his former companions in ascetism who, unconvinced, had snubbed him before as a spiritual failure. Intuiting that they were currently in the Deer Park at Sarnath, some ten

² Leaving aside the question of how one can write a biography of the Buddha without including an account of his innumerable former lives, one can find information about his life and teaching in any book on Buddhism. I’ve mainly used the excellent book by Harvey, P.: *An Introduction to Buddhism* (CUP, Cambridge, 1990) – aptly summarised by Keown, D.: *Buddhism. A very Short Introduction* (OUP, Oxford, 1996).

kilometers from Varanasi, he set out to walk there to deliver his teachings. As he approached them, they immediately noticed that a great change had come over him and, in spite of themselves, respectfully greeted him and washed his feet. Gautama then gave his first sermon, known in the West as 'The sermon of the Deer Park' and in the East as 'The first turning of the wheel'. It contains his essential teachings as they are summarised in the canonical formula of the Four Noble or Holy Truths. This formula is structured like a medical consultation, offering a diagnose of the disease (suffering), an identification of its cause (craving), a possible cure (cessation of craving) and an outline of the course of treatment.

The first Noble Truth states that life is rooted in suffering. The nature of life is such that we are bound to experience pain, dissatisfaction, loss, disappointment and frustration. Life not only involves the physical pains of (re-)birth, (re-)ageing, (re-)sickness and (re-)death, but also the existential and psychological unsatisfactoriness deriving from the fact that one cannot permanently keep unpleasant things, persons and situations at bay, hold on to the pleasant ones or get what one wants. The second Noble Truth explains that suffering arises from craving for power, pleasure and long life, and that craving fuels the round of rebirth. Rebirth does not only take place from life to life, however, but it also takes place from moment to moment. The Third Noble Truth is the Truth of Cessation. By eliminating all craving, aversion and delusion, suffering ceases and *nirvana* is attained. *Nirvana* is not just beyond death, but it can also be attained during life. When desire, greed, hatred come to an end, at least temporarily, one experiences inner peace, deep spiritual joy and subtle awareness. The Fourth Noble Truth deals with the Noble Path which leads to the extinction of suffering and the good life. The path, which depicts a method of self-transformation, is noble in the sense that anyone who walks the path is bound to become a noble-hearted person, freed from suffering. It consists of eight factors (right view, right resolve, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration), but those are usually divided into the three categories of *sila* or moral virtue, *samadhi* or meditative cultivation of the mind, and *panna* or wisdom. Here as elsewhere, it is the intention that counts. Moral virtue consists of conscious and willed abstention from misconduct of the body (killing, theft and sexual misconduct), of speech (lies, slander and useless gossip), and of mind (covetousness, animosity and dogmatism). Its aim is to avoid any action which might harm someone else. To live a moral life, one has to learn how to control the fickle mind through meditation. In practice, meditation amounts to the absence of distraction, mental tranquility and perfect equanimity, leading away from ill-will and cruelty to loving kindness and compassion for all. If meditation is the means, wisdom is the ultimate end of the path. More experiential than intellectual, wisdom is a question of clear and precise vision, embracing the Noble Truths and seeing that all phenomena are impermanent, that all phenomena that are impermanent give rise to suffering, and that all those phenomena which are impermanent and give rise to suffering are without essence and can thus not be 'I' or 'mine'. Seeing is believing, and the one who has attained enlightenment becomes aware of his deliverance and declares: « I have realized the Noble Truths ; ended are rebirths ; I have lived the pure life ; what had to be done has been done ; henceforth there will be no further rebirth for me ».

2) Vipassana, or the teachings of Goenka

Just like Buddhism itself, the technique of Vipassana meditation was temporarily lost to India. It was maintained in its pristine purity in Myanmar (formerly Birma) where,

from generation to generation, it was transmitted by an uninterrupted chain of devoted teachers. Last in the line was U Ba Khin, who taught S.N. Goenka, who reintroduced Vipassana to India, as well as to more than one hundred other countries - Iran, Mongolia, Serbia and England included. Till the end of the sixties, Goenka, or Guruji as he's respectfully called by the Indians, was a successful businessman in Myanmar. Once his migraine headaches were miraculously cured thanks to Vipassana, the businessman turned into a 'moral entrepreneur', devoting his life to the teaching of Dharma and the proselitising of Vipassana. From 14 students in 1969 to almost 1200 students a month at courses in Igatpuri, and with landmark courses like the course for 1000 inmates in Tihar jail, New Delhi, Vipassana has spread faster through the world than Falun Gong through China. Vipassana spreads through the word of mouth of meditators who have become proselitising mediators of the wonderful technique of behavioural modification through self-observation. The Grand Pagoda of 325 feet high which is being constructed in Mumbai and will include relics of Gautama and a meditation hall for 10000 'living Buddhas' is not only a monument to Vipassana, but also a grandiose document of the remarkable global spread and success of the metareligious Church of Vipassana.

Travelling through India in the Winter of 2001, I suffered from an acute crisis of psycho-physiological insomnia. For twelve days and nights I didn't sleep; but as one can imagine, I wasn't fully awake either. I didn't know it was possible to go on (and on and on) like that. Afraid that I would end up in the Guinness Book of Records as 'the man who went to India for six months and didn't sleep', I eventually decided to pay heed to the suggestion of a friend in Hyderabad and to retire from the world for ten days to take a course in meditation. Although he hadn't dared to take the course himself, allegedly because it's too hard and liberates a lot of unconscious stuff, I followed his advice and called the Headquarters of the global movement for the promotion of Vipassana in Igatpuri. Unlike Indians who have to wait at least 3 months to get on the rolls, I was immediately accepted under the number of N(ew) M(ale) 324. Two weeks later, together with some 500 Indians and 5 Westerners, I arrived at the gates of Dhamma Giri, the Hill of Peace, three hours remote from the hecticcity of Mumbai.

Queuing up to inscribe myself for the course, which was offered free of cost and paid for by the donations of former meditators and other converts, I signed the Code of discipline and accepted thereby not only to conscientiously undertake the five moral precepts (to abstain from killing any living creature, from stealing, from all sexual activity, from telling lies and from all intoxicants), but also to stay for the duration of the course and not to run away. Consequently, I handed over my valuables and my passport (but not my books), brought my luggage to the sleeping quarters, and gave some advance credit to the store for the daily acquisition of mineral water and the laundry services. Chatting with two fellows who had taken the course before - and who complimented me for my courage and my bravery - I waited for the course to start. When the bell rang, the chatter stopped, the sexes were separated and the ten days of meditative incarceration and noble silence started with a delicious wholesome but simple meal and a video talk by Goenka on the Noble Eightfold Path.

Sitting next to his wife, probably to impress on the meditators that he was not a monk, but a householder, he asked us to strictly abide by the rules and to give the technique a fair chance. We were also warned about the initial difficulties and informed about the purpose of the course. Quite corpulent, yet smallish and rather badly dressed, with a pair of braces and a checkered shirt, Goenka looked more like a medical doctor than a charismatic guru. Nothing like Osho: no long hair, no beard, no moustache, no depth,

no transcendental promises, no theory, and hardly any philosophy. Just a pedestrian introduction to Vipassana, concluded by a recitation of a couple of meaningless sentences in Pali which he declaimed in a grave voice as if he were on the point of dying. « Make best use of your time, the opportunity, the technique, to liberate yourselves from the bondages of craving, aversion, delusion, and to enjoy real peace, real harmony, real happiness. Real happiness to you all. May all beings be happy ! ». Expressed with a finger in the air, those words of ‘acosmic love’ were the last words of the day with which we were sent to bed.

As fits monasteries, army barracks, prisons and other ‘total institutions’, life at Dhamma Giri is tightly organised by means of a detailed timetable which carves up the day into manageable temporal sections of prescribed activities, giving thereby a fixed regularity and rhythm to the course of the day.³ An ordinary day at any residential course, be it a 10 day, a 30 day or a 90 day course, looks as follows :

4:00 a.m.-----Morning wake-up bell
 4:30-6:30 a.m.-----Meditate in the hall or your own room
 6:30-8:00 a.m.-----Breakfast break
 8:00-9:00 a.m.-----GROUP MEDITATION IN THE HALL
 9:00-11:00 a.m.-----Meditate in the hall or your own room
 11:00-12:00 noon-----Lunch break
 12 noon-1:00 p.m.-----Rest and interviews with the teacher
 1:00-2:30 p.m.-----Meditate in the hall or your own room
 2:30-3:30 p.m.-----GROUP MEDITATION IN THE HALL
 3:30-5:00 p.m.-----Meditate in the hall or your own room
 5:00-6:00 p.m.-----Tea break
 6:00-7:00 p.m.-----GROUP MEDITATION IN THE HALL
 7:00-8:15 p.m.-----Teacher's Discourse in the hall
 8:15-9:00 p.m.-----GROUP MEDITATION IN THE HALL
 9:00-9:30 p.m.-----Question time in the hall
 9:30 p.m.-----Retire to your own room--Lights out

Meditators are kindly advised to closely follow the timetables. As a disciplining device, the timetable is so successful that any deviation from it gives rise to a sense of culpability, comparable to the one that schoolchildren feel when they play truant. But to avert any case of indocility, volunteers walk around with little bells in the corridors to make sure that each of the students is at the right place at the right moment. And those who are absent from the compulsory group meditations in the hall, get a ticket – or why else are their names carefully written down by the Dhamma workers in case of absence ? Anyway, the first day naturally started at 4.30 in the morning. Woken up by the bell, if not by the sound of the ritualistic clearing of the throat by my fellow Indian students, I brushed my teeth and zombified by a difficult night on a ultra-thin and extra-hard mattress, I hobbled to the meditation hall number 2, where each of us was attributed a number and a fixed place on a blue cushion.

³ On ‘total institutions’ and the role of timetables in the disciplining of docile bodies, see respectively Goffman, E: *Asylums : Essays on the social situation of mental patients and other inmates* (Penguin. Harmondsworth, 1991) and Foucault, M.: *Discipline and Punish. The Birth of the Prison* (Allen Lane, London, 1977), part III.

2.1 Anapana, or awareness of respiration

Two assistant teachers, impressively seated in front of the hall on elevated white cushions, were there to lead the meditations, to answer our questions, and to activate the fans and the tape recorder. By means of a prerecorded tape, we received our first instructions from Goenka : « Observe the physical function of respiration. Do not try to influence your breathing, but observe the natural, normal breath ; be conscious, be aware of normal, natural breath as it comes in, as it goes out. Work patiently, persistently and continuously ». In order to tame, train and sharpen the mind, we thus started with *Anapana*, awareness of respiration, natural respiration, and nothing else. Without influencing or regulating the breath, as is done in *pranayama*, I diligently observed the respiration, or at least I tried, as the mind kept on wandering from one object to another, kept on lingering in the past, contemplating the future, following images or whatever, but refusing somehow to stay in the present and to observe continuously the natural function of respiration. When we could not feel the breath, we were permitted to breathe slightly hard, just to fix the attention in the area of the nostrils, in order to come back at once to natural, normal, soft breathing. When I applied myself to the task at hand, I started to discover some of the subtleties of respiration. One does not simply breathe in and out through the nostrils, but by observing the respiration, I became aware that the breath passes through the left nostril, or through the right nostril, and only occasionally simultaneously through both. Although I had discovered this after the first hour, I nevertheless had to go on observing my respiration for the rest of the day. Bored to death, bored to breath, I tried to amuse myself by analysing respiration from a phenomenological perspective – hence a phenomenology of the nostril.⁴

Phenomenology involves the description of things or phenomena as one experiences (perceives, hears, touches, etc.) them by means of a detailed analysis of how the things are given to, or intentionally constituted by, consciousness as objects of consciousness. This may sound rather convoluted, but as phenomenology is notoriously difficult and difficult to explain, this will do as a first introduction to the breathtaking phenomenology of the nostril. In so far the breath is at the same time something that happens to us and something that is made to happen by us, something that functions both consciously and unconsciously, it is a phenomenologically complex and philosophically ambiguous phenomenon. Being both ‘in itself’ (*an sich*) and ‘for us’ (*für uns*), intentional and unintentional, it is something we unconsciously do as much as something we consciously have. When I observe my natural breath, objectively, I feel myself breathing like a mechanical pump, as something that I am but am not at the same time. The respiration I observe is mine; I can not observe your breath from within but I can observe mine from without. I am not a pump, yet the pump is me, as I can decide to breathe in a conscious way, somewhat harder, somewhat softer, somewhat slower, somewhat faster. I can even decide not to breathe, but just for a time. And yet when I stop controlling it, it continues without any prompting. Lying at the crossroads of the conscious and the unconscious, it is so to say the gate that allows us to consciously observe the unconscious. By maintaining awareness of natural breath, I intentionally constitute the unintentional as an object of

⁴ For an outline of the basic principles of phenomenology, see Husserl, E.: *Cartesian Meditations* (M. Nijhoff, Dordrecht, 1977). For a more readable introduction to transcendental phenomenology, see Hammond, M., Howarth, J. and Keat, R.: *Understanding Phenomenology* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1991).

consciousness, as a subjective-objective noetic-noematic object of analysis. I observe, and by observing I analyse, how I breathe through the left nostril or the right one, and at times simultaneously through both. I also realise that the state of my mind influences my respiration. When I'm at peace with myself and with the world, the breath is regular and gentle. When I'm nervous, anxious or irritated, my respiration becomes more rough, heavy and rapid, almost to the point of hyperventilating. Breathing in, breathing out, I come thus to understand the unity of mind and matter in interaction. Whatever occurs in the mind is reflected in the body. Thinking has its bodily correlate in the same way as the body has its noetic one. Observing my respiration without any presuppositions and without reacting to it, I simply record the mind-matter phenomenon as it is. 'Seeing things-as-they-truly-are', this is literally Vipassana. At this point the similarities between the Cartesian meditations of Husserl and the uncartesian ones of the Buddha become clear. Both have the common objective of investigating the pure data of consciousness for the honest description of the phenomenon.⁵ This rapprochement of the two sciences of the mind is not like the surrealist 'encounter of an umbrella and a surgeon's table' (Breton). The presence of the two copies of the Buddhist books in the private collection of Edmund Husserl and the annotations against the margins of the texts in his own handwriting are there to demonstrate his particular interest in Buddhist epistemology. We will later see, however, that the initial convergence between the two sciences of the mind will eventually lead to divergent conclusions. The careful analytic description of the stream of consciousness will lead to the transcendental ego in the case of phenomenology, to transcendental egolessness in the case of Buddhism.

On the second day, the phenomenology of the nostril was deepened. At five o'clock in the morning the assistant teachers instructed us to concentrate our awareness on the touch of the breath: « Observe the touch of the breath. Simply observe it, without reacting to it. Feel how the breath touches the inner wall and the outer ring of the nostril ». And do that for the rest of the day. I did it for half an hour and then my body simply started to resist the technique. I felt ill at ease. Convincing myself that the whole thing was 'a lot of fuss', I refused to meditate and to concentrate on my breath. Instead of considering the whole exercise as a way to truth, I redefined it as a mindless exercise in applied absurdity. Enter existential anguish of boredom and nothingness.⁶ The exercise throws me back on myself and while I realise that I am free, I also realise that I am not. I cannot run away, at least not without my passport, but I can refuse to comply. That's what my freedom amounts and is reduced to in the situation of extreme boredom. Everything happens as if the future had been cancelled. Time almost comes to a standstill, freezes and turns into space. It loses its fluidity and becomes something delimited, something to be calculated.⁷ Every minute counts 60 seconds, and every second is a fight against time. Closing my eyes, I tried to dream away and to phantasise, but that didn't help to speed up the passage of time. Exercising boredom by concentrating on time, I became a living stopwatch. Without counting, I could concretely experience time and almost correctly guess the lapse of time: 8 minutes, 3 minutes and 30 seconds, 1 minute have passed. At times, I also concentrated on my breath and observed how the breath softly touches the inner

⁵ For a comparison, cf. Varma, C.: *Buddhist Phenomenology. A Theravadin Perspective* (Easters Book Linkers, Delhi, 1993), chapter 4.

⁶ Cf. Sartre, J.P.: *Being and Nothingness. An Essay on phenomenological Ontology* (Methuen, London, 1958).

⁷ Cfr. Bergson, H.: *Time and Free Will : An Essay on the immediate Data of Consciousness* (Harper and Row, New York, 1960).

cavities and the outer ring of the nostrils. Realising that time passed slightly faster when I did the exercise than when I did not, I eventually ended up complying more or less.

When each of the sixty seconds of each of the sixty minutes that makes up the hour had lapsed, we were released from our self-inflicted bodily prison-on-the-cushion and allowed to stretch our legs for five minutes. Like all the others, I tried to steal time. Going to the toilet to urinate was a genuine feast. Doing absolutely nothing, 'like a beast', as Adorno used to say, lying flat on my back under a tree in the morning sun, looking at the leaves, the insects and the birds; anything that was not meditating was a joy, and every second away from the hall was a celebration of resistance. It's only when the bell summoned me for the third time, or when one of the Dhamma-workers begged me, 'namasteing' silently, to re-enter the meditation hall that I went back as slowly as I could to my designated place to meditate on being and nothingness for another three quarters of an hour. With malicious pleasure, I noticed how my neighbour on the left was continuously trying to adjust his position to avert the pain in his back. That someone else was worse off than me and that I had not reached the outer circle of Dante's hell, that was quite a comforting thought after all. The breakfast was quite a relief, so was the shower, the lunch, the dinner and any other break, but for the rest of the long day, it was just more of the same: Observe the touch of the breath, be aware of your respiration and nothing but your respiration, don't sleep on your cushion, don't let your mind wander, don't talk, don't stretch your legs, don't move, don't sleep, don't open your eyes, don't stay out too long, come back to the hall, meditate!

By the third day, I was convinced that Buddhism was absolutely right. The essence of life is suffering. We are bound to experience physical pain, mental dissatisfaction, psychic disappointment and utter frustration. Thus, I decided to have a lay-in. Although I was awake at 4.30AM, I decided to stay in bed till 6.30 AM. After breakfast and shower, I joined my co-meditators in the hall for another two hour session of advanced phenomenology of the nostril. The instructions were clear : « Observe the natural, physical sensations in the triangular area below the nostril and about the upper lip. Feel how the breath touches the limited area under the nose. Feel the temperature of the breath, slightly cold as it enters the nostril, slightly warmer when it leaves the nostril. Beyond that, there are innumerable sensations not related to breath : heat, cold, itching, throbbing, pulsing, tingling, vibrating. Just observe the sensations and don't react to them ». And do that for the rest of the day. Needless to say that I did not feel enthralled by the perspective of concentrating my mind for the next ten hours on how my moustache was slowly growing. My fellow students weren't either. The pauses after each hour lasted longer and longer, the faces became more and more expressionless, bodies became more and more uncomfortable, people coughed and one was even crying, not to mention the lucky one who fell asleep and started snoring, only to be woken up immediately by one of the zealous volunteers. And yet, when instead of reacting to the absurdity of the instruction and the pain in my legs, I did the exercises and observed the subtle sensations in the limited area under the nostrils, the difficulties passed away. By impassionately accepting my fate, it became more or less bearable. Perhaps the Buddha was right after all. By maintaining my poise, by not reacting and staying Zen, by accepting the situation as it is, it becomes more or less tolerable, at least for a while. By the end of the day, Goenka told us in his video-allocation that we had now laid the foundation of Vipassana, that we had learned to sharpen our mind and that the next day we would be taught the technique of Vipassana. This, however, only happened at three o'clock

in the afternoon. By then I had skipped the morning session and escaped from the interviews with the teacher. The whole thing seemed utterly absurd and deadly boring. I could not understand why we had to go on observing the condensation of the breath on the upper lip for twenty hours in a row. Why not rather listen to how the grass was growing ?

2.2 Vipassana, or awareness of sensations throughout the body

On the fourth day, we were finally taught the technique of Vipassana *sensu stricto*. Having practised the training of concentration for 36 hours, we had developed the practical capability to fix our attention on any bodily part of our choosing. Instead of focussing on the sensations occurring in the limited triangular area under the nostrils and about the upperlip, we were asked to concentrate our attention on the very top of our head and to record any sensations that might occur in that central energetic area. Like a searchlight, the inner eye was scanning and illuminating the apex of my being for any sensations. From there, we were asked to move awareness to every part of the body in orderly progression - from the top of the head to the skull, the left shoulder, the left upper arm, the elbow, the hand, the fingers, the right shoulder, the right upper arm, the elbow, the hand, the fingers, the throat, the heart, the belly etc., till the feet and each of the toes. « Everywhere within the limits of the body one experiences sensation, wherever there's life within the body » (Buddha). Scanning my body for sensations, I became aware that there were sensations everywhere. If at first there was no sensation in a part of the body, we were instructed to keep our attention there for a minute. « There is bound to be sensation there, said Goenka, but it is of such a subtle nature that your mind is not aware of it consciously, and therefore this area seems blind. Stay for a minute, observing calmly, quietly and equanimously. Don't develop craving for a sensation, or aversion towards the blindness. If your mind remains balanced, it will become more sensitive, capable of detecting subtle sensations. Observe the area equanimously for a minute. If a sensation occurs, move on to the next area, and stay there for a minute. Begin with superficial sensations, and gradually you will start feeling the more subtle ones as well ». And indeed, after a few hours of scanning each of the bodily parts, by fixing the attention on larger parts before reducing the area of attention to the smallest parts, my body was ablaze. Wherever the searchlight shone, there was light. There were sensations everywhere. It was breathtaking and sensational.

As I persevered in meditation, sensations cropped up all over the body, and then passed away. From moment to moment, they came and passed away, like twinkling stars. As each of the bodyparts was transformed into a radiating field of energy, I experientially realised the law of impermanence in almost every inch of my body : *παντα ρει* - everything flows.⁸ Nothing is permanent, everything is ephemeral, arising and passing away every moment – this is *anicca*, the law of nature. Heraclitus and the Buddha were perhaps right after all, and had it not been for Plato and his intuition of eternal ideas and unchanging forms, the philosophies of the East and the West might have converged into one single dynamic and vibrant world philosophy. Be that as it may, by following the stream of consciousness, by observing the experiences from moment to moment, I experienced my body as a body-in-flux. The solidity of the body, the bones and the flesh is an illusion. When we turn inwards to

⁸ On the imagery of rivers and the similarities between Buddhism and Heraclitism, see Collins, S.: *Selfless Persons. Imagery and Thought in Theravada Buddhism* (CUP, Cambridge, 1982), pp. 247-261.

explore the reality within, we break through the veil of *Maia* and come to understand that reality, both the reality within and without, is constantly changing. Like all reality, the seemingly solid body is ultimately composed of subatomic particles, called *kalapas* in Pali, that pass into and out of existence. Reality itself is nothing else but a dance of particles, a flow of vibrations, a turbulence of energy. The body doesn't matter; properly understood it dissolves into a constant stream of waves and particles. On the fifth day of meditation, I had my first 'ek-static' peak experience. Simply observing, with impassionate detachment, pleasant and unpleasant feelings as they arise and pass away, I regard them like clouds passing across a clear blue sky, or like a leaf floating on a river. While I was concentrating on the sensations on the top of my head, my skull and my face, my field of vision suddenly got blurred and scrambled, like when there's failure on television. Subsequently, the face was stretched out and started to disintegrate and fade, disappearing in the field of energy. The scrambled image turned into a field of pixels, pixels turned into white lines, and those faded into an empty white screen. As I moved down to observe the sensations in the other parts of my body, they also started to disintegrate. I had a feeling of lightness in the limbs and started floating, suspended in the air like one of Mahareshi's flying yogi's. I felt like a reed in the air, and as I disappeared with my body into nature, I experienced profound peace of mind, complete emptiness, perfect unwavering inner stillness. "Then only is there passive watchfulness in which the thinker is not, an awareness in which thought is entirely absent. Only when the mind is experiencing is there stillness, the silence which is not made up, put together; and only in that tranquility can the real come into being".⁹

As my body faded into nothingness, I also lost my self. I came to understand that my personality was as transient and impermanent as my body. My self is literally nobody. Behind the sensations, there's no hidden subject who owns the sensations. *Anatta* – there's no real 'I', no permanent Ego, no self. All that exists are the experiences themselves. The Ego to which we are so attached is an illusion. "All, the Buddha included, exist in name only. What receives that name is merely an assemblage of *skandhas*, 'aggregates' or 'groups of psycho-physical elements' which arise and perish from instant to instant, carried along for all eternity on the whirling wheel of lives".¹⁰ Contrary to what is believed by Hindus, there's no self and thus no soul. On this point, the Cartesian meditations of Husserl and the uncartesian ones of the Buddha so fundamentally diverge as to become incompatible. From the fact that the experiences of objects only exist in so far as they are experienced by me and constituted as my experiences, Husserl concluded that even if I can never be sure of the existence of the world, I can nevertheless be sure that I think and thus that I exist. *Cogito, ergo sum* - I experience, therefore I am. Buddhists, on the other hand, draw the opposite conclusion. Rather than deducing the apodicticity of the transcendental ego from the fact that any experience always already presupposes my intentional awareness, they draw on their experiences of a throbbing reality to validate the law of impermanence, and conclude that reality and the ego that experiences it from within is just an illusion. Those divergent conclusions point to a more fundamental difference between the worldview of the East and the West. Whereas the Western traditions of thought consider the transcendental reflection as a way towards the self and systematically link self-consciousness with self-maintenance, and thus with the

⁹ Krishnamurti, J.: *Commentaries on Living. Second series* (Krishnamurti Foundation India, Chennai, 1994, p. 27-28.

¹⁰ Lamotte, E.: "The Buddha, His Teachings and His Sangha", in Bechert, H. and Gombrich, R. (eds.): *The World of Buddhism* (Thames and Hudson, London, 1984), p. 43.

possibility of distancing oneself from oneself, the Eastern traditions of thought do not use the reflexive loop as a way to establish the self as the transcendental origin of reality, but as a way to suspend and transcend the self.¹¹ The self is not a thing, it is nothing, nothing but a “Clearing” (*Lichtung*), a “voiding void” (*das nichtende Nichts*) in which reality appears and disappears. In the East, reflection does not lead to the self as origin of Being, but rather to an intuition into the origin of Being that always already precedes the self and envelops it and to which the self returns and in which it disappears when it meditates on the ground of Being.¹²

Out of ignorance in the real ground of Being, we have a tendency to cling to the self. This clinging necessarily leads to unhappiness and suffering. *Dukkha* - attaching oneself to what is impermanent, transient and unsubstantial, that is the source of suffering. That to which I am clinging - this pleasant sensation, that great idea, that wonderful jumper -, all those things I call mine and identify myself with, are bound to pass away. This passing away can only be a cause of frustration, lest we accept the fact of impermanence and do not react to it by clinging or aversion. Clinging and aversion, hatred and greed and desire in general fuel suffering in the way that wood fuels a fire. Fire is quite an appropriate metaphor for craving and aversion, since they consume what they feed on without being satisfied. The realisation that there actually is no ‘self’ that has desires and that there are only fleeting experiences is the ‘entactogenic’ transformative insight that is supposed to trigger enlightenment and to extinguish once and for all the fire of greed, hatred and delusion which leads to rebirth.

Before we move on to the more doctrinal contents that inform Vipassana and transform it into a soteriology and a behavioural therapy, let’s summarise the internal connection between *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anatta*. Observation of the constantly changing sensations permits the realisation of one’s own ephemeral nature. This realisation makes obvious the futility of attachment to something that is so unsubstantial and transitory. The direct experience of the law of nature thus gives rise to detachment. By being detached, one averts reactions of craving or aversion. Thereby the production of *sankharas* that fuel the fire that consumes us is effectively stopped. Technically speaking, *sankhara* (or *samskara* in Sanskrit) refers to one of the five *skandhas*, segments or aggregate that make up individuality. Together with the physical body, sensations and feelings, cognitions, consciousness or sentiency, reactions and dispositions determine our personal mode of being-in-the-world. Various translated as mental formations, character traits or even conditionings, *sankharas* are the karmic seeds that one sows and that grow into a fruit and determine the seed of the next life. Indeed, according to the doctrine of reincarnation, the nature of the very last *sankhara* that arises in the mind will give a push to the flow of consciousness and thereby determine the very beginning of the next life. One reaps what one sows, and if the seed is sweet or bitter, so will be the fruit. In so far as *sankharas* always receive a negative evaluation in Vipassana, it’s better to switch metaphors and to conceive of them as mental pellets of wood that are formed by our mental reactions to external stimuli and that fuel the karmic reaction-formation that consumes us and makes us miserable in this life and in the next one.

¹¹ Cf. Henrich, D.: “Die Grundstruktur der modernen Philosophie”, pp. 83-108 in *Selbstverhältnisse*, Reclam, Stuttgart, 1982).

¹² The Heideggerian overtones are intentional and point to a possible convergence of thought between Heidegger and Buddhism. On the relations between ‘Zen & Sein’, cf. Zimmerman, M.: “Heidegger, Buddhism and Deep Ecology”, in Guignon, B. (ed.): *The Cambridge Companion to Heidegger* (CUP, Cambridge, 1993).

Systematically underplaying the mystical elements of Vipassana meditation, Goenka insists in his video-talks that the faculty of concentration is developed not in order to experience bliss or ecstasy, but rather to forge the mind into an instrument to remove the conditioning that causes suffering. Salvation or redemption from rebirth, that is what Vipassana promises.¹³ In so far as the technique of Vipassana meditation promises happiness through self-purification, i.e. through the eradication of *sankharas*, the belief in the existence and functions of *sankhara* is a central element of its soteriological doctrine. I must confess that I don't believe in *sankhara* or *samsara* for that matter, but obviously most of my co-meditators did and committed themselves to the behavioural programme of salvation through karmic purification. Although Vipassana can only work as a soteriology and behavioural therapy that fundamentally transforms one's life by methodically transforming the behaviour of the meditator if one believes in karmic reaction-formations, the belief is however not necessary to understand how Vipassana works, or even to benefit from it.

As an etiology of suffering, Buddhism locates misery in the merry go-round of craving and aversion; as a soteriology, it promises salvation through the eradication of craving and aversion. The specificity of Vipassana meditation lies in the fact that it concentrates on sensations. Lying at the crossroads where mind and body meet, sensations arise whenever the six senses enter into contact with their objects. When the eye sees a vision, the ear hears a sound, the nose smells an odour, the tongue tastes a flavour, the skin feels something tangible or the mind conceives of thought, there is bound to be a sensation. When we react to these sensations with craving or aversion, liking or disliking them, we inevitably generate *sankhara*. Sensations are the point at which craving and aversion begin and at which they must be eliminated. Meditation teaches us how to observe sensations objectively, as if they were someone else's sensations, and equanimously, without reacting to them. Given that sensations also function as an early warning system of impending negative reactions, such as fits of anger or spurs of hatred, it is important to learn to observe the sensations and to control the reactions in an almost experimental situation so as to be able to prevent that they express themselves blindly and start playing havoc in the real world, making oneself and one's fellows miserable. In any case, when one meditates and does not react to sensations, the wisdom of impermanence arises and one remains equanimous; supposedly, no new *sankhara* will be generated. Any moment in which one does not generate a *sankhara*, one of the old ones will arise on the surface of the mind, and along with it, a sensation will start in the body. If one does not react, it passes away and another old reaction arises in its place. If one remains Zen, the whole stock of *sankharas* will gradually be eliminated layer after layer. Eventually, when the wheel of suffering stops and starts rotating in the opposite direction, all the *sankharas* leading to new birth and to new suffering will be eliminated and liberation attained. "All *sankharas* are impermanent. When one perceives this with true insight, then one becomes detached from suffering; this is the path of purification" (Buddha). At the end of the path lies Nirvana. To strive for this, admittedly a subtle craving for it is needed.

Having somewhat prematurely attained an 'ek-static' peak experience on the fifth day, I informed the assistant teacher during one of the daily Q&A-sessions of my mystical experiences of floating and stillness. Smiling approvingly and compassionately, he congratulated me for my 'nice progress' and invited me to join the 'old students' in

¹³ On Buddhism as a soteriology and salvation religion, see Weber, M.: *The Religion of India. The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism* (Free Press, New York, 1958), pp. 204-230.

the Pagoda where I was temporarily allocated a personal cell. The fact that only one other 'new student' was sent to the Pagoda was a welcome confirmation that I was on the right track and that I had indeed found the stairway to heaven. Rather than looking at the centre of the Pagoda, as I was supposed to do, I sat down comfortably with my back against the wall of the dark cell. Concentrating on the sensations, chasing them, yes even craving for them, I experienced once again the transiency of the mind-matter phenomenon and the disappearance of the ego into light and stillness. In terms of the Buddhist developmental phenomenology of trance, I had now left the world of sensuous consciousness and attained the the first stage of the first sphere of the world of exalted consciousness. The world of exalted consciousness, which precedes the world of transcendental consciousness, is divided into the sphere of formal consciousness and the one of informal consciousness. The moral sphere of formal consciousness is in turn divided into five stages, the first stage of which is characterised by a sense of ecstasy: "The-first-stage-of-trance is the combination of five constituents of trance, namely, initially applied mind, sustained application of mind, thrill, pleasure and one-pointedness or complete absorption".¹⁴ Given that I was longing for strong, yet subtle and pleasurable sensations and for the ecstatic experience of the mystical *nunc stans*, further progression into the stage of hedonistic indifference, let alone beyond into the world of transcendental consciousness, was foreclosed for me. I would never become an *arahat*, a Buddhist saint, worthy of great respect, who has quenched all the 'fires' of the defilements of the mind.

"Be aware and equanimous at all times", this is the magic mantra of Vipassana that is supposed to open the gates of heaven. By remaining equanimous, one will find that painful, solidified and gross sensations become bearable and begin to dissolve into subtle sensations. This is not guaranteed, however. Although most of the time I was able to experience a pleasant flow of subtle vibrations in my head and the upper parts of my body, I still felt solidified pain in my back and the lower parts of my body. In order to make sure that there was no slack in the bio-political disciplining of the body, we were moreover supposed to show 'strong determination' from day 5 onwards and to remain still without moving an inch during the three compulsory two hour group meditations of the day. At the same time, in order to stimulate an overall flow of pleasant vibrations throughout the body, we were instructed to systematically survey the body from head till toes, and *vice versa*. At first the internal scanning up and down was to proceed unilaterally and then, from day 7 onwards, symmetrically. "Experience the flow from head till toes, and from toes till head. Where the body parts are blind, bland or unsensitive and the sensations solidified, survey part by part. When the sensations are subtle in one body part, move on till the next one, till you experience a uniform type of subtle sensations throughout the body, arising and passing away with great rapidity". Although at times I experienced and indulged in pleasant sensations, at other times I feared I had lost the plot and could no longer see the sense of the whole exercise. My legs were in pain, I got seriously frustrated and entered subsequently into a serious crisis of motivation, shying away from the self-inflicted torture of meditation whenever I could. At one time my despair and rage was such that I intentionally sabotaged the technique and destroyed my inner peace and composition by scanning chaotically and violently in all directions, twisting the inner torchlight erratically back and forth as if I wanted to erase at once all the disciplining endeavours of the last week. At another time, when I thought that I had understood

¹⁴ Varma, C.: *Buddhist Phenomenology*, p. 18.

the plot once again, I became overzealous and, almost like a fakir, I masochistically observed the pain in my limbs with perfect equanimity.

On the penultimate day, we were invited to explore the deepest recesses of the vibrating mind-matter phenomenon that we are. Instead of simply surveying the surface of the body, we were now asked to survey the inner organs part by part and to track the vibrations inside of our body from top till bottom. “Sweep through the entire body, from head till toes and toes till head, till you experience an overall subtle flow of sensations”. Because of the great rapidity with which the sensations appeared and disappeared inside the body parts and throughout the body, I experienced the entire body as a flow of subtle vibrations, as some kind of current moving through me and dissolving my body into a colourful rain of diamonds. As I swept fastly through my body, unwinding layer by layer, I slowly disintegrated into nothingness - like the invisible man.

Whether I was meditating, walking, bathing or eating, I was at all times fully aware of my respiration, of the movements of, and the sensations in my body. This hyperawareness kept me fully awake throughout each of ten the nights of the course. I didn't sleep, and my neighbours didn't either. I could hear them coughing and moving, and for the first time in my life, I was surrounded on all sides by fellow insomniacs. Yet, although I remained fully awake throughout the night, I didn't feel exhausted the next day. At one time I went to see the assistant teacher to tell him about my obsession and to voice my fears. Full of wisdom and compassion, he advised me not to worry about insomnia, explaining me that there are actually not three but four states of the mind: waking, sleeping, dreaming and the so-called sleep of the yogi, which easily compensates for the lack of sleep. If I would just lie down without worrying, my body would come to rest and, thanks to the continuous syntonisation of the body-arch by the mind, thanks to the constant registering of the omnipresent sensations by the mind, the unconscious mind would come to rest and compensate for the lack of sleep of the conscious mind, which will go to sleep when it needs to anyway, as is evidenced by the fact that Gautama himself on average only slept for two hours a night.

2.3 Metta bhavana, or vibrations of good will

Having attained *bhanga* – total dissolution of the mental-physical structure-, most if not all of us were now supposedly able to see ‘reality-as-it-is’ and to experience the ultimate truth of mind and matter: $\pi\alpha\nu\tau\alpha \rho\epsilon\iota$. By experiencing the truth, we also automatically had come to the insight that there's no point in clinging to the ‘I’ and everything else that is transient. Consequently we developed a perfect balance of mind. No matter what happens, no matter what arises, we were now perfectly Zen and equanimous. By remaining Zen in the face of adversity, we had also started to purify the mind from negativities, defilements and other ‘sins’. « No more sankharas ! » - from now onwards, this would be the maxim of our behaviour. Having understood what made us miserable and starting to work methodically on the transformation of our habitus, we had steadily advanced on the noble path of liberation and redemption. We were now experiencing a state of translucid serenity, internal peace and acosmic, or as Freud used to say, ‘oceanic’ plenitude. This ‘euphoria of apathetic ecstasy’ was not self-centred, however ; we were only too happy and eager to share it with all the beings around us and beyond. As universal compassion and good will prevailed, our love took on an ‘acosmic’ dimension, filling the expanding universes with radiations of love.

To round off the ten day course in meditation, we were taught the technique of *metta bhavana*, whereby vibrations of good will and happiness are sent to others. Instead of turning the searchlight of the mind inwards, the beam is now redirected outwards so that compassionate waves of universal good will and a cosmic love radiate in expanding circles to reach all beings : « Like a mighty wind the blessed one blows over the world with the wind of his love, so cool and sweet, quiet and delicate ». After ten days of self-enforced loneliness, the Noble Silence was finally broken and the sexes reunited. Resuming their never ending talks and discussions, babbling on till the wee hours, the Indians enthusiastically compared their physical difficulties and their noetic experiences of self-transformation. Everybody seemed to agree that all in all it had been more than a worthwhile experience. Free at last, we recuperated our belongings, bought a couple of books or tapes in the bookshop and queued up to make a donation, so that the continuity of gifts and counter-gifts would be assured and the next cohort of meditators could benefit from the ‘wonderful technique of Vipassana’ in the same way as we had. Having made a couple of new friends and exchanged addresses and phonenumber, we all left the next morning after breakfast, grateful and committed to go on meditating on a daily basis, once or possibly even twice a day, as Goenka had most strongly advised us in the early morning in his last video-talk. Notwithstanding my good intentions, I haven’t been able to meditate since I left the Hill of Peace. The hotel rooms I was staying in were just too basic and the ‘auditive pollution’ too unrelenting to bring me in the state of translucent serenity that meditation requires. Back in Mumbai, I once tried to meditate in a mosque, but having chosen the wrong moment, I had to follow the prayers and go all the way on my knees to Mecca. Notwithstanding my failure to meditate, my good vibrations lingered on for at least a week. That’s what I realised when a sensitive shopkeeper and meditator in the bazaar who could feel not only his own sensations, but apparently also mine, recognised me as a fellow meditator. No doubt the sensational impact of the course is gone by now – till the next course.

I am too sceptical to become a devotee of Goenka, ‘hooked’ on Vipassana. Although I am still seriously suffering from chronic insomnia, I nevertheless conclude now that the ten days of uncartesian meditation have been really fruitful. Not only did I learn to meditate properly, I also gained an experiential understanding of Buddhism. But above all, thanks to the phenomenology of the nostril, I was able to live in the continuous present, forsaking the imperious necessity to plan ahead. I had become so internally peaceful and relaxed that from then onwards I could wait for hours and hours for a train that never arrived. *Sadhu, sadhu, sadhu...*

May all beings be happy!