

Abhaya, the fearless one

By Vigyananand (Jacques Vigne)

Fearlessness is a fundamental quality of yoga. It must be cultivated until the Realization. In this sense, the wise Yājñavalkya said in the Upanishads to his disciple the emperor Janaka: "Janaka, you are realized, because you have reached the fearless! "Of course, fear and anxiety are also signs of realism: they can simply be a sign of cautiousness. From the point of view of current medicine, anxiety comes from an excess of stress that is sometimes sudden, but most often chronic. So it is not always related to a single trauma, as in post-traumatic stress disorder, but it becomes a chronic way of being that becomes invasive, and this is the problem. From the traditional point of view, one may wonder why we speak of this quality of courage in a negative way, *abhaya*, which means absence of fear. There is a simple reason for this, because our true nature is peace, and if we refrain from making strategic and tactical mistakes in the management of ourselves, we will remain in this fundamental state, without artificially inventing all kinds of useless fears. The main point is to be in the rightness of actions, words and thoughts. If we come to that, we no longer have anything to fear from ourselves, and by some sort of natural extension, we have much less to fear from the outside world. This is the deep solution to anxiety, but before it can be achieved, many of the partial understandings and practical techniques are very useful.

Understanding anxiety

It is now 35 years since I completed my psychiatric training, and after working 5 years in a psychiatric hospital for my studies and my cooperation action, I left for India. I'm coming back regularly to France and a year ago I finished a major tour that had lasted 3 years. I travel from city to city, and during the summer, from place of workshop in the French countryside where I spend time for periods generally from 5 days to a week. I answer thousands of questions from thousands of people, and undoubtedly, anxiety, diffused fear, is a real underlying suffering for most people. The good thing of it is that it pushes people to take a look at themselves. When they saw that the best sedatives were only symptomatic, they understood that we had to look further to the root of things. When I was a psychiatry resident with heavy patients, I tried to introduce body techniques for them too, and the best way to enter their well-locked defenses was to offer natural solutions to insomnia and anxiety. No one, even the most serious patients, likes to turn around all night looking for sleep, and no one likes to live their lives with a big noose tightly tensed to the plexus or throat, and with jaws clenching like bolts on screws.... This explains the importance of psychocorporal practices.

Anxiety gives place to all kinds of associated disorders. For example, a study from the University of Upasala that I quote in my book on anorexia nervosa¹ shows that a group of about 270 teenagers with eating disorders had nothing in common in their personality profile, except anxiety.

¹ Vigne Jacques *La faim du vide* Editions du Relié, 2012

When stress becomes chronic, it turns into distress, and therefore anxiety. As we know, stress stimulates the sympathetic and inhibits the parasympathetic. This opens a large place, in the treatment of anxiety, to psycho-body practices that increase parasympathetic tone. Hathayoga and meditation are of course in a good place in the list of possible practices.

The fearless, when properly experienced, is therapeutic. On the other hand, the usual tendency of the mind is to flee. For example, by recording the movement of the eyes, we noticed this: by showing volunteers a large image with an unpleasant or even frightening representation in the lower left corner, we noticed that they were taking a first look at it and then, without even noticing it, they carefully avoided this part of the picture. The same is true when our attention turns to the body and the psyche. That is why it is very important to face up to it, when we want to find deep solutions to suffering. As the great master Buddhism of forest in Thailand, Ajahn Shah, says in a formula he often uses: "When you flee suffering, you flee to suffering". He uses the spine in the foot as a simple example. If we neglect it and don't want to think about it, we can keep it throughout its walk and it will continue to hurt us. So the right solution is to stop, look precisely where it is and find a way to remove it. Meditation already consists of this: knowing how to stop, examining your living body, identifying where the "thorns" are and working to extract them.

We know that Patanjali defines yoga as *citta-vritti-nirodha*. The vrittis are those whirls of the mind that rarely stop. The word is of the same root as "vrilles" in French. One could say that yoga meditation consists in preventing the mind from spreading in all directions, and in doing so, from spinning out of control... Being able to stop a mechanism that repeats itself automatically is already a sign of fearlessness. Perseverance is also, and despite the difficult ups and downs, it leads us to a state of harmony. In Sanskrit and Hindi we call perseverance *titiksha*, "tik" means what is stable, and *tik* he means in Hindi "everything is fine". If we persevere through multiple positive or negative inner states, we arrive in this place deeply buried in ourselves where "everything is fine". We become stable like the mountains, we start to deserve the name of Abhayagiri, a mountain of no fear, which was the one of a prince of Ceylon, then the name of the great Buddhist monastery that he founded in the capital at the time, Anuradhapura. It was inhabited for 8 centuries by more than 5000 monks. We can say that the central ideal proposed to them in this place was the fearlessness.

Some practices to stabilize the fearlessness.

- The posture:

We can already point out that hathayoga as a whole represents a practice of fearlessness within the body itself. ur body is afraid to go too far in a posture and resists, but little by little, it is encouraged to overcome itself and to go beyond its fears. Gradually, this development of the fearlessness spreads to the psyche and to our spiritual being. The position of the lotus also allows us to anchor ourselves, and thus to reduce our fears. By embracing the legs, it creates a direct awakening of the brain that gives us confidence by increasing our ability to react to unexpected events. It also gives the security of an embrace, a union that can be interpreted as a form of inner marriage. Indeed, the left part of the body is traditionally considered as feminine, and the right part as masculine. The embrace of the two can therefore evoke a romantic encounter. Many people avoid this posture by being afraid of the small pains it eventually causes after a while. It

is necessary to understand here a notable difference between two great schools of Buddhism, the one of the South, Theravada, and Zen in Japan: in this last tradition, monks must earn their own living, often with work in the countryside that involves all their physical activities in a significant way. They only sit in meditation at certain time of the day. In doing so, they can afford to perform the full lotus. On the other hand, Theravada monks live only on donations and on their teaching, and in some of their schools, they meditate for most of the day. At this point, the half-lotus is more suitable.

Anxious subjects tend to cover back on themselves. It is useful to let this inclination be manifested by advising often the posture of folded sheet and forward bending posture, then gradually moving towards opening, backward bending and twisting postures that will lead the student out of the psycho-bodily prison he has created for himself.

- *Breathing*:

We can develop here in particular the breathing with decreasing amplitude, also called "small breathing" which leads according to the texts of yoga to *kevala khumbaka*, where the body barely breathes at all. This is a fundamental practice of fearlessness and a good antidote to anxiety, where on the opposite, the subject is in need of air. Someone who is really quiet is not thirsty for air like an alcoholic of hard drinks, he is on the contrary a "little bit of a breather" as others are "little eaters". The small breath consists of simply taking a few cubic centimeters of air to breathe in and rejecting it as it exhales, usually at a relatively fast pace. What happens physiologically then is quite easy to understand: oxygen comes and goes in the nostrils and pharynx, while carbon dioxide does the same in the network of bronchioles and pulmonary alveoli, and there is thus no effective gas exchange. As a result, oxygen decreases in the blood, which automatically causes the heart to slow down, and carbon dioxide increases in the brain, which physiologically induces drowsiness. This, when one's back is straight and one is committed to meditation, is reinterpreted as an entrance into deep meditation. This state of calm of the actual organism is induced directly by the small breath (which is also widely used in Taoist meditation) and is deeply therapeutic. Practiced regularly and consciously, this small breath has the power to remove stress and its effects, as well as anxiety.

The term *kumbhaka* itself, which means "vase" in Sanskrit, refers to stability. I remember meetings with several hundred people I saw during Kumbha-mela: in the early morning, each pilgrim was squatting in front of a pot of water from the Ganges, and practiced kumbhaka, stopping with his lungs and abdomen full, which transforms the trunk into a kind of vase. This was one of the main exercises during this pilgrimage whose name itself means: "the gathering of the vase". This one, filled with water from the Ganges, is the symbol of the body filled with the Self. If the body is still, there will be no leakage of "water" from the Self, and therefore no anxiety that could exhauste us with a kind of energy hemorrhage.

An important advice for practicing this small breathing is as follows: the lack of air causes a global tension of the auxiliary respiratory muscles in the neck and by extension the jaw and face also contract. A basic guideline is therefore to constantly relax them. The effectiveness of this practice is precisely that we can bring out, to better dissolve them, the tensions in the neck that

are found in the anxiety where we are thirsty for air, and where we contract these auxiliary respiratory muscles located in the neck. It is a long work, similar to the one done by Hercules constantly cutting off the heads of the hydra of Lerne which were reforming over time... Moreover, when you start a session with the tensions of the activities just before, it is better to breathe more deeply to oxygenate the body. On the other hand, when you start to go into a deeper state, it is just a natural step to reduce the breathing amplitude to adjust to the real body needs and this is where the small breathing takes place quite naturally. It is not that one breath is better than the other, but what is important is to adapt them to the real needs of the body in each phase of the practice.

- *The focus on hara:*

Fear tends to make us curl back on ourselves, and therefore to stretch the great straight lines of the abdomen that support the hara area, three or four fingertips below the navel. The liberation from fear will therefore be very closely linked to the ability to relax this hara time after time. A fundamental method is to put energy into the corresponding antagonist muscle, i. e. the lumbar muscles that allow the kidneys to be dug and the back to straighten. By physiological automatism, these antagonistic muscles, the great straight muscles of the abdomen, will relax, and an important root of bodily fear will be cut off. The hathayoguis, who above all take care to avoid any risk of physical damage, can advise a different lumbar position in different postures, but in meditation, there is little risk in this regard and we can concentrate directly on the transformation of the psyche. At that moment, awakening and maintaining the fearlessness will be an instrument of choice to help it evolve. This work on the complete fearlessness can quickly lead to satori (awakening, *samadhi*) if we follow what the great 18th century Zen master, Hakuin, explains. With his experience both as a practitioner and a teacher, he attributed to each *koan*, to each traditional Zen enigma, a given number of days to obtain the satori. The fastest and most effective according to him was the *koan* below, and we will try to decrypt it as much as we can because it is related to the awakening of hara and the uprooting of anxiety:

*Kikai (the hara), tanden ("the ocean of cinnabar" two fingers below the hara)
It's the Emptiness of Tchao-Tchéou.*

Let's start by explaining the Tchao-Tchéou *koan* that Hakuin is talking about. It concerned a master of Chinese T'chan to whom a disciple had asked: "Does even a dog have Buddha's nature?", to which the master simply replied by shouting: "Soft!" , i. e. "Empty". Buddha's nature is related to emptiness, and it penetrates everything, including those animals considered traditionally impure as dogs are. From a symbolic point of view, the dog is an animal that can pass behind us and bite our calves, and is therefore associated with fear of the dangers that come from behind, and therefore with anxiety. If we see it as empty, which is to say completely relaxed, all these bodily tensions related to fear in us, will disappear completely and we will reach *abhaya*, that state of perfect fearlessness which is the spontaneous expression of Buddha's nature, or of the Self. Fear retracts the hara zone, from where the compensating image of the "ocean of cinnabar" which evokes on the contrary expansion and transformation. Cinnabar is an alchemical substance. The lead of fears and anxieties is transformed into gold in this ocean of light, that is how meditative alchemy is performed. Since birth, our umbilical cord has been cut, but we are now restoring it in a subtle way. It connects us to the ocean of light. In a similar

image, we can say that the awakened and relaxed hara is similar to the sun that dissipates anxieties, as if they were the mists of the valley in the early morning.

- *"un-fixation"*:

Fixation and anxiety are two sides of the same coin: if you "get stuck" on an object by craving it, you will automatically start to be afraid that it will spill between your fingers and disintegrate. One way of unfixing to which the Buddhist master Ajahn Shah gives great importance is the "not sure!". For example, we can do the usual scanning of the body and then welcome with a little smile every sensation that comes up and tries to attract, to seduce our attention, while pronouncing the magic word: "not sure ! "If you are sure of something, it is like shaking hands with an object you think is impossible to get away with. We'll always be afraid someone will come and rip it out of us by force. If you are not sure, it means that you have already left the object in advance, so you are no longer afraid for it being caught. This "not sure" is therefore a fundamental antidote to all kinds of fears, it is as liberating as Râmâna Mahârshi's "Who am I? The method of the former is to observe all the answers of the ego that can come up to this question, and not to focus on them, but rather to consider them as "not sure" so that we can go further each time. Just as there is only one permanent thing, that is impermanence, likewise there is only one certain thing, which is that "not sure". Let us assimilate this practice into our daily lives, let us live happily with humour and love, let us do what is right for ourselves and others, and the river of our existence will flow in a beautiful way.

- *Make your fear dance to dispel it.*

In Indian dance, one of the rules is for the dancer to regularly look at the movements of his hands. Since they move a lot from left to right, he very often makes sweeping eye movements. As a result, it induces in him a balance disorder that forces the body to release all tensions almost instantly, to find a new set of contractions that allow things to be rebalanced. In this way, the deep tensions related to the physical roots of ego and anxiety also suddenly leave us. The dancer can thus become a purified channel of the divine, and better play his role as embodying a divine form, because his ego has been attenuated, especially through the movements of the eyes.

This inner mechanism, intuitively perceived by Indian dance, has reemerged thanks to the now well-known EMDR (*Eye Movements Desensitizing and Reconditioning*) method. A whole literature shows its powerful effectiveness, even after strong traumas, such as those of having passed very close to death in war, etc. The first thing is to visualize and feel well in which part of the body the fear on which we want to work is rooted. Our motivation will also be nurtured by understanding that it is not isolated, but that it hides a whole range of other fears behind, which are experienced by our unconscious mind as similar to the first one. It is possible to start with a wide horizontal scanning movement of the eyes, and then reduce the amplitude of the oscillation. If we also add a reduction in breathing amplitude, we combine the drunken effect of eye movement with the one produced by the reduction in oxygen and the increase in CO₂ due to small-scale breathing, as we have seen above. It is not a question of working all the time with a great oscillation of the eyes, but of making a succession of series of movements of decreasing amplitude. Thus, we move from material to subtle, and we follow the Buddha's teaching, who told his disciples: "I have come to teach you the subtle".

- *Gratitude:*

By practicing it, we gradually touch a deep core of our inner being: the complaint of the baby who can't express himself otherwise than crying and the deep anxiety he feels due to his complete dependence on others. When you are happy, you are no longer afraid of being abandoned, and you are away from a root cause of anxiety.

- *Dissolve the fear of the stranger.*

Until about 9 months old, the baby is not afraid of strangers, then he learns to distinguish between people outside and those in the family. Psycho-spiritual work consists in returning to the origin, and thus overcoming this fear of the stranger. Basically, all human beings are made of the same flour, they all seek to find happiness and avoid suffering. Why then be afraid of others? We can meditate in this way on an answer from Mâ Anandamayî, when asked if she was not tired of seeing crowds of new people on a daily basis. She simply replied: "For me, there are no newcomers". Indeed, she saw in everyone the same Self as in herself. When asked if she was not afraid to go often, as she did, to unknown places, she replied: "the universe is my apartment, are you afraid to change rooms? »

- *Reduce desires to reduce fears.*

This is a proposal that will not be popular in a consumer society, where we are made to believe, explicitly or implicitly, that if we pay, we have all the rights. However, in reality, it is not at all like that. Fear is the other side of the coin in relation to desire, for the good reason that even if the object of desire is obtained, we will always be afraid of losing it. In this regard, we often hear simplistic advice in spiritual circles: "You are not sufficiently anchored, so you need to develop sexual activity to become more anchored". Here, we are playing the double or nothing: when sexual activity is carried out in good conditions of stability and fidelity, it can indeed help to anchor itself, otherwise, it will be rather destabilizing. And even if it's stable, who can say for how long? So we have to take this advice of anchoring through sexual activity with a grain of salt, I'm talking here from the point of view of a psychiatrist who has heard many people's stories over the past 40 years... If we want to be anchored inadequately, we'll end up being overwhelmed instead.

- *Stop breathing.*

To show how the development of fearlessness is related to practice, we can provide two answers from Ajahn Shah, the Thai forest master we have already mentioned. He was rather a deadpan, for example, when the eternal question was asked: "How can I calm my mind? " he could reply: "Stop breathing! "With the explanation we have given on the little breath, we can better understand the deep reason for this advice. Another recurring question of the practitioners was this: "How to manage my pains in the meditation posture? "He would sometimes answer, "Sit on it! "Some may consider this answer to be cruel and irresponsible, but in fact it reflects profound wisdom: indeed, when you sit down with all your weight, you relax, and so you start to break down tensions and discomfort. On the other hand, if we persevere even in small bodily

sufferings, endorphins are released. They have a powerful analgesic effect, which will eventually make the pain go away.

- *Understand that the fearlessness underlies the yamas.*

The fearlessness is both cause and consequence of the five yamas, the five observances. If we feel safe, we will not tend to attack others and we will therefore be in ahimsa, non-violence, without even having to think about it. If we are not afraid of the consequences of telling the truth, we will not have a tendency to lie and we will practice satya, the truth. If we are not afraid of emotional loneliness and a little sexual frustration, we will easily practice brahmacharya, sexual discipline. If you're not afraid to miss, why should you take what's not given, why steal? We will therefore naturally come back in possession of this jewel that is asteya, the non-theft. Finally, if we are not afraid of deprivation, why accumulate? We will thus easily lead to aparigraha, non-accumulation, "non-seizing all around us".

- *Lonely and fearless*

Loneliness is an excellent training for the fearless. When you are far from human housing, you have to do much more on your own. This is the testimony of Tenzin Palmo, the English woman who spent eleven and a half years in a cave in the Himalayas. She points out that one of the great advantages of this situation was to develop a strong autonomy, i.e. an absence for fear of being alone. When I asked my master Vijayânanda why he had spent eight years in an isolated hermitage in the mountains, one of his answers was often: "To develop the fearlessness". He elaborated on this by explaining that it was not simply courage in regard to external dangers, potential aggressors who could have murdered him to steal what little he had, as it does not miss to happen in the Himalayas. It was all about facing your inner fears, for example the fear of going crazy by being alone in front of yourself for so long. This fearlessness was maintained even when the body was weakened by the disease.

Isolation, this negative loneliness, can come from a fear of others. Let us mention the case of this Buddha monk who had fallen into excessive zeal and no longer wanted to see anyone, not even the brothers of the community. They found that he was probably exaggerating and brought him to the master. The latter explained to him that he had not understood true loneliness, which does not represent a fear of others. Rather, it consists in carefully keeping away from two crowds, one of memories from the past and the other of concerns for the future, in other words, finding refuge in the present moment.

To go further, from Jacques Vigne:

- *Healing your soul* at Albin Michel, and
- *Healing anxiety*
- *Practice of secular meditation*
at the Editions du Relié