

Meditation against pain

Miscellaneous Reflections-April 2019

By Jacques Vigne

Etymologies: at the roots of pain and suffering.

- In Old French, the term "doloir" which means axe, is close to pain, in Latin *dolare* means to give blows (with an axe to cut the wood) and *dolere* "to take blows", therefore to suffer. One way to make sense of pain is to understand that it sculpts us and can produce in us like a beautiful wooden statue. Psychic pain, on the other hand, is related to loss, to mourning, and the very French term *deuil*, mourning, comes from the Latin *dolus* and is of the same root.
- In German, *der Schmerz*, the pain, comes from the Indo-European root that leads back to the Sanskrit *mrinati*, for example, it grinds. It is the same root as *mortar*, the place where a matter is ground or the substance that has been ground. By the Greek, we find the same root *marasmus*, the state in which we find ourselves when we have been crushed. This root is close to the *-mer* root, to die.
- Another German term for suffering is *Leiden*, it is the same root as *Leiter*, leader in English, the one who leads. Suffering leads, directs our consciousness, and it is not so easy to escape its directives...
- The term "suffering" comes from the Indo-European root *behr*, to carry, therefore "to carry from below", to support. This suffering can lock us up like in a coffin, a "bière" in French, a term that is of the same root, or on the contrary become an offering, another term that is also of the same root. If instead of trying to repress suffering "from below" and no longer see it, we look at it in the face (*ob-*), at that moment it becomes an offering, it is useful for the development of consciousness. And this will decide our "fortune", a word of the same root too, in the sense of what is brought by fate.
- The English term *pain* is of the same root as punishment, in the sense of what one must pay, and also as "penaud" in French, meaning *stupid*. It is as if the "rental" of our housing in a human body will sooner or later lead to a payment, and when we have to do it, we feel *tout penauds*, quite stupid...
- A strong and continuous pain tends to settle at the center of our psyche, *das Leid* (grief) or *das Leiden* (suffering) becomes *der Leiter* (the leader), we have seen it. It stimulates our attention, which corresponds to an intensification of the sympathetic system. We also know that deep meditation, even ecstasy, is very much linked to a co-stimulation of the sympathetic and parasympathetic systems. We can therefore consider pain as half an ecstasy. To achieve complete ecstasy, all that remains is to intensify the parasympathetic at the same time, that is, to relax completely. Of course, this is not so easy, but in the long term it is the way out of suffering, the light at the end of the tunnel. Elsewhere in this book we talk about the example of a Zen monk who had just healed from a terribly

painful back abscess. He almost regretted it, because he testified that, during this period of intense suffering, he had been able to benefit from a long *satori*, a state of continuous absorption. Considered from a biochemical point of view, pain releases endorphins, and the more continuous and significant the pain is, the more the release of endorphins will be with their positive effects of concentration and inner joy, however paradoxical it may be in this context. It is a common experience for Christian mystics to experience the joy of the resurrection while meditating on the crucifixion of the Lord. To return to the basic scheme, the first corresponds to the stimulation of the parasympathetic, the second to the sympathetic, and it is precisely the association of the two that induces ecstasy.

- The two most common terms used to express the notion of pain and suffering in German are *der Schmerz* and *das Leiden*. Even if *der Schmerz* is not scientifically of the same root as *der Schmer*, fat, and *schmieren*, to grease, (cf. English *to smear*,) the two words are intimately associated for a Germanic ear. Pain is something that coats us, like a glue that is difficult to get rid of. This already was the fundamental idea of the Jains, 25 or 30 centuries ago, who described bad karma as a subtle substance that stuck to our skin. Hinduism supports his sense too: it insists on bathing in the sacred river as a religious action, to free and “clean” us from the karma that binds us. Here again, we have a good indication of the complementarity of opposites! A “cream” gives pain, another one relieves it. Thus, the work consists in being able to change the polarity of the “pain cream” and transform it into a healing cream. In its common sense, *der Schmerz* represents mainly physical pain, but also the psychological states that accompany it: bitterness, anger, anxiety. All its associated qualities are like a coating that covers our true nature of happiness-consciousness.
- Interestingly enough, the word suffering has an etymological meaning which is identical to the French term for relief, *soulagement*. In both cases, it is a question of supporting, but also of subtracting, of “pulling underneath”. Suffering draws below our energy of consciousness, relief, *soulagement* “draws below” suffering itself... The two form a kind of couple, sometimes stormy in their relationship, but who remain together for life! They are mirrors, like the left and right of the body.
- The other German word for pain, as we have said, is *das Leiden*. It is inextricably linked to *die Leidenschaft*, passion, as if psychic passion were the companion, the muse of physical pain. In general, this term is associated with suffering, hurt, ache, rejection, not being able to suffer someone, but also with enthusiasm as in the expression *leidenschaftlich eingemommen*, “passionately taken by something”, that is, enthusiastic about something. This leads us to a very important notion, well put forward by Tantrism: in the factors of affliction, including physical pain and psychological passion, there is a disguised energy. This energy is a goddess, and the practitioner seeks to see her naked. At that time, as in the case of a bare electrical wire, he will be able to benefit directly from its current. For practicing women, they will be able to see this naked energy no longer as Shakti or Devi, but as Shiva himself. Of course, this god is able to destroy someone out of anger by opening his third eye with a cone of flames that comes out of it, but on the whole, he deserves his name of Shiva, good, or *Bholonath*, “the Lord of Good”. His energy penetrates everything, including the smallest details of our daily lives, in that sense he is called *Nimneshwar*, “the God of little things”. It is this intriguing and interesting name of Shiva that gave the Indian author Arundhati Roy the idea of the title

of one of her book "The God of Little Things" which was honored in her time with the *Booker Prize*. To return to German, here no longer in the form of scientific etymology, but of poetic resonance, one cannot miss the association between *leiden*, to suffer passionately, *kleiden*, to clothe and *verkleiden*, to disguise. We come back to this idea of pain-suffering as a disguise for the fundamental energy. We will stop being caught in the game of pain when we stop being identified to it as "mine".

Dislocation and reunification

- Another way to recover and transform the energy of fragmentation induced by intense and prolonged pain is the traditional notion of sacrifice. According to the Vedas, the former Master of the gods *Prajapati*, when he presided over the creation of the world, made a sacrifice where the animal was cut into pieces. It is by reassembling the parts of the animal and bringing them back to life that the world was created. The sacrifice and fragmentation of pain (the very root of the term *pain* means, as we have seen, "breaking up") thus has the power to move us from an old world to a new one, it is certainly a destruction, but also a re-creation. Wisdom does not mean crying over the past but orienting oneself towards the new world that is emerging. To say the same thing in other words, it is not a question of focusing on cutting, but on gluing again. It is the crucifixion-removal side of pain, which leads to a resurrection if we know how to manage it "from the bottom of our coffin" like Christ did on Holy Saturday, that is, with intense parasympathetic stimulation. This results in a new resurrection of movements that thaws and circulates the energies blocked by the crucifixions of suffering as ice blocks of a frozen river start moving and circulating again when a spring breeze occurs. In Zen also, they advise to see one's life from the bottom of one's coffin.
- When the pain is strong and relatively continuous, we will reach a point where we have the impression that the body is falling apart. This perspective elicits panic in most people, as it awakens the anxiety of psychotic fragmentation. However, there is a way to reverse this phenomenon by seeing it as a process of falling asleep. Indeed, when you fall asleep, in a way, the body schema starts going to pieces with feelings of limbs floating in space. As this is associated with a much-needed rest, this type of fragmentation, called hypnagogic, is experienced as very pleasant. Just as there are many more links between pleasure and pain than we think, there are many more common points than we imagine between the physiological fragmentation at the threshold of falling asleep and the pathological fragmentation which is full of suffering during the onset of psychosis or in the event of severe pain.
- In another image, pain can be compared to a black hole: indeed, it absorbs these stars that are sensations like small pieces of food with its force of gravity. However, as the new astrophysics says, a black hole is also the origin of "tunnels" to access other universes. In our analogy, from the very inside of strong and continuous pain, we find "tunnels" that lead us to this other universe that is ecstasy, this intense and paradoxical happiness that allows us to go beyond pain.

- We know that pain prevents us from sleeping, so the antidote will simply be “taking it as a pillow”. If we “fall asleep on it”, the sympathetic intensification of the ache itself will be rebalanced by the parasympathetic stimulation of relaxation (and further falling asleep), and, as we have seen, this will lead us to a type of ecstasy, which will in fact be highly therapeutic.
- *Pain as a predator*: For hundreds of millions of years, lower animals and to some extent higher animals in the evolution of species have used the mechanism of feigned death. When the predator approaches, they pretend to be dead and so, often, the predator leaves them. Indeed, in its youth, it tried to eat dead animals and remembers having been very sick, and therefore instinctively avoids repeating this experience. The visualization-meditation in this case is to consider pain as a kind of tigress, and oneself as a little animal that plays dead, this being the only way to avoid being eaten. The difficulty, of course, is to be able to play the dead man well, but with enough training, we can do it. It's like playing aikido with pain. Basically, it frightens us because it reminds us of our mortality. Still, if we completely accept this strong pain by playing dead, it is as if we were using our energy to catapult it, invert it, and eventually get rid of it. It is this kind of practical awareness that led an American author, Darlene Cohen, to title her book on her approach to pain: "Turn suffering upside down", just as you turn a garment upside down. The subtitle is "A Zen approach to living with physical and emotional pain". She herself has suffered crippling and painful rheumatoid arthritis while trying to practice Zen meditation, and her intuitions for self-therapy have both the depth of tradition and the concrete know-how of the person who has been put to the test.¹
- Since time immemorial, human beings have sought solutions to overcome both physical and psychological pain. Trance was the answer of prehistoric religions and still represents today that of shamanism. In more advanced stages, the physical trance has been transformed into a hypnotic trance of meditative absorption. Originally, pain was associated with the presence and action of the gods, then with the presence and trials sent by one God. However, this point of view was sometimes challenged from within this very monotheistic tradition. For example, a Jewish sage suffered considerably from a disease that would take him away. His rabbi friends came to give him the "consolations of religion" by suggesting that the Almighty send great pain only to those he loved particularly. Hearing this piece of folk wisdom, the experienced man joined his hands and exclaimed: "O God, stop loving me so much! "... Moreover, and in parallel, movements that can be considered secular have long since developed, for example Jainism and Buddhism in the Indian subcontinent. Buddhism in particular in its presentation represents a very direct return to basic reality: we need to find ways to overcome suffering and its causes, the explanations centers on this by leaving aside the perspective of salvation from an external entity, and focus on what could be above all considered as a spiritual psychology.

¹ Cohen Darlene *Turning Suffering Inside Out - A Zen Approach to Living with Physical and Emotional Pain*. Shambala, Boston and London, 2002.

- The altruistic interpretation of pain is to be taken seriously. In Tibetan Buddhism, it corresponds to the *chöd* meditation where you accept that your body be broken up, as in the case of intense and prolonged pain as we have said, but in addition, you offer it to greedy and hungry spirits so that they can feed themselves. In Christianity, pain is valorized in association with the redemptive sufferings of Christ on the cross. Certainly, very primitive religious traits can be discerned in this image of an almighty Father God who needs to drink the blood of his own son to be momentarily appeased, like a vengeful and angry dictator who would regularly need victims to temporarily calm his rage. Despite this rather violent and tribal foundation of understanding in a religion that otherwise seeks to be evolved, there is a sensible basis in the idea of interpreting this suffering that primarily tends to confine us to ourselves as a form of gift to others. Generosity is based on the idea that you are able to abandon something and give it away to others. When you suffer, you have to give up a lot of things, hence the natural association with the gift to others. Taken in a secular context, the gift to others that we can offer through pain and suffering can be understood on many levels: already, if we give the example of serenity while going through our trials and upheavals, our younger or even elder friends who are afraid of suffering and death will be comforted. In addition, we will develop more compassion and empathy for those who suffer. Otherwise, we could be taken by pride, pretending that we have understood everything about psychosomatics, diets and healthy lifestyles – all this only because we've not yet fallen seriously ill...
- Deep and effective meditation is based on the complementarity of observation and focusing meditations, such as the two legs of a walker or the two wings of the bird. Those who have only trained in so-called mindfulness or Zen meditations may tend to become dogmatic in their approach, and neglect the powerful effect of focusing meditation. Yet, they return to this focus when they accept the importance of finding a “place of refuge”, which may be a little different in their body location depending on the traditions. For Zen, it will be the *hara*, for Theravada Buddhism, natural and conscious breathing, for devotional traditions, it will be the heart, for Raja yoga and the way of knowledge, rather the third eye. For all traditions, relaxation and abandonment serve as a fundamental refuge. Even if this abandonment is expressed in relation to a divine person, it amounts in practice to a letting go of the breath and thus a return to natural breathing. This is and will remain a fundamental place of refuge.
- The well-known "refuge" in acupuncture treatments is the symmetrical zone of pain. For example, if you have pain in your right shoulder, you will focus on your left one. To do this, if we practice with the posture of the classical hands in meditation, we can bring the thumbs of light that also touch each other in the center of the area to be stimulated. We could also imagine a sun or a flame in the middle of this area. We may also inhale and exhale through this area as you would through a handkerchief. If we want to transform pain into a yoga experience, it will be enough, for example, to imagine the “two thumbs of light” with the root of one at the level of pain and the root of the other at the level of its symmetry, and to visualize their point of contact in the central axis, a little above. This will induce a “confluence of two rivers” whose currents will continue to rise until the third eye. There, the fire of knowledge will consume the "little wood" of pain and transform it into heat and light, that is, from the deepest point of view, into altruism and

attention, or else, benevolence and vigilance. Thus, what may initially appear to be a waste of bodily functioning, i.e. pain, will be transformed into an opportunity for spiritual progress. The various spiritual paths revolve around this law, perhaps the one that expresses it most directly and systematically is the *lojong*, the "change of attitude of the mind". It is a school of practical spirituality from the Tibetan Middle Ages that is still very popular today.

- Pain puts the mind back into a "conical" functioning, meditation returns it to a spherical functioning. This brings us to the next point:
- Pain is both unified and heavy. More precisely, it is the first piece of a puzzle to be reconstructed; thanks to meditation, everything else can be completed to arrive at a global experience of the body and mind, the painful fixation then will represent only the first piece of the puzzle. Through the global, spherical mental functioning, the "conical" fixation of the mind on pain is overcome and resolved, we manage to move deftly from the first isolated piece of the puzzle to the complete puzzle.
- Intense and prolonged pain tends to occupy the entire space of the mind as sunlight invades the sky. If we abandon ourselves to it like in sunbathing, we will return from agitation to a deep state of mind. The sun corresponds to attention, and therefore to a stimulation of the sympathetic system, sunbathing to relaxation, and thus to an activation of the parasympathetic system : we thus find a situation of co-stimulation that leads to *enstasis*, to use the term coined by Mircea Eliade, that is to say, an all-inner ecstasy, induced by a deep understanding rather than a devotion to an external divinity.
- Like tinnitus, pain can be considered a reminder: it is a tiger that you learn to ride. When you succeed in riding the tiger, you will also become able to "drink the tigress' milk". This is a feat attributed to ancient yogis. Symbolically, it means, from the point of view of consciousness-energy, that we can feed on this pain which at the beginning was only good at tearing us apart.
- Even in the greyness of chronic pain, one has the right to enjoy distractions, as a normal human being does. My spiritual master, Swami Vijayânanda, had been meditating for about 70 years when he realized that he liked to read Tintin. So he was offered the whole collection little by little, which he then gave back to young children. He said that when he was reading Tintin, he forgot everything. And since he suffered from severe osteoporosis of the spine, a condition known to be very painful, he had to forget a lot. In the medical literature, we know about cures through laughter, for example by passing on comic films to people with severe rheumatological pain. One of the likely involved mechanisms is the release of endorphins and oxytocin, but there must be many others, as brain biochemistry is a complex matter. When I look back at the medical professors I had during my studies, I don't see many who would have recommended laughter therapy... They were far too serious! Moreover, they would certainly have been afraid that their patients would not understand them. Yet, it works to some extent. The next step consists in deepening this therapy, overcoming the "gross laughing" that has only a momentary relieving effect, in order to move towards the subtle and stable dimension of this fundamental humour towards our human condition. If we practice smiling to the point where it becomes dissolved in the atmosphere, physical pain and psychological suffering will also be dissolved in the same move. This is sometimes referred to in the Sanskrit tradition as *atta*

hamsa, cosmic laughter. Hence could we announce a new Beatitude, which could have been stated by Lapalisse: "Blessed are the happy, for they will not remain sad! "... Behind this joke, lies the deep truth that happiness is a decision. There will always be sources of misery, but there comes a time when you have to decide to be happy. Happiness is a practice, and as a Tibetan master answered a visitor who asked him for advice on the practice: "Do it! " In this sense, the reader will be able to find a 5-minute video on YouTube called "*Stop it!*" by Bob Newhart. The patient comes and the comedian who plays the role of therapist responds to each of her complaints by exclaiming: "Stop it!" except from time to time when he says there's nothing special to do: after 5 minutes, he reaches out to her and concludes: "Five minutes, five dollars!"² This video has a deeper sense, this is why it is warmly recommended by B Alan Wallace, one of the greatest teacher of Buddhist meditation in the West.

- *Broken molar, breaking molar:* at the time I was writing these lines, I had the chance, if I can say, to wake up one morning and realize that I had a broken molar, and therefore my nerve was raw. It took me a few days to contact a dentist because I was out of town, and another two days on antibiotics before he performed a root canal treatment. So I didn't get much sleep, but it was a good opportunity to check the practices of my book in the making. I didn't take antalgics, because I felt that this pain was something alive, and I don't like to kill what is alive, even with what the English call in a rather brutal way "pain-killers"... I came out of this experience having understood many things and having confirmed quite a few insights. That said, I am not a fan of painkiller abstention, I was still happy to have an anesthesia during the root canal treatment itself where the raw nerves are directly destroyed... A broken molar is "breaking" too in the sense that it breaks our automatic idea of the right to perfect good health forever. It dissociates our sense of body unity, and awakens the fundamental fear of dislocation. However, this is greatly attenuated when we accept this fully by keeping in mind that there is a connection between the dislocated pieces of our experienced body, and this binder which is a presence, a feeling of consciousness and happiness spread in space. This subtle "glue" allows the thicker, dislocated pieces of the body to be glued back together. It's not that easy to do these "re-gluings", but when we succeed, things go well again and you can exclaim as the French would put it: "Ça colle!" "It fits!"
- There is a profound relationship between the feigned death of small animals such as amphibians and reptiles when attacked by a predator, and amorous submission in the case of a relationship of domination. In both cases, there is immobilization in front of the predator-aggressor. This is a phenomenon present in the general public, and it is estimated that 30% of the general population uses sexual dominance games to titillate and rekindle fleeting desires. This trend, which some sexologists consider almost normal, can be transformed somehow for therapeutical use by considering pain itself as the dominant predator-aggressor. At that point, we can use this very old reaction in the evolution of species, feigned death. The predator will go his way without paying any more attention to you. From a physiological point of view, this corresponds to the stimulation of the posterior nucleus of the parasympathetic nerve, which is like the hand brake of the physiological system (already present among primitive animals), compared to the anterior nucleus which would represent the pedal brake, much more subtle and refined, present

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MCng3qnkrRo>

only with mammals. The posterior nucleus gives a massive and complete immobilization of our physiological system, and this can of course help a lot in the face of severe and prolonged pain. Actually, by inducing intense stimulation of the parasympathetic system, we obtain intense relaxation. As we have said, since this is associated with no less intense stimulation of the sympathetic, by the very attention caused by severe pain, we find ourselves again in a situation of intense costimulation, and therefore close to deep absorption, even ecstasy.

- We can continue in this direction by reflecting on the post-traumatic inhibition reaction: someone who is "in shock" after a physical or emotional trauma is inhibited in body and mind. This can be considered an attempt at self-help, just as in behavioural therapy, phobias or other traumas are treated by associating them with a feeling of deep physical relaxation of the body. Thus, instead of just being related repetitively to tensions, the phobias or problems become associated with relaxation. The suffering then dissolves in this very abandonment, just like a piece of salt in the ocean.