

THE ELDERLY FRENCHMAN WHO BECAME ELDER ACCORDING TO THE WISDOM OF INDIA

Vignanânanda (Jacques Vigne)

Vijayananda is an elder. At the time of the interview below, he was eighty years old, he is now ninety. He worked all his life in the sense of wisdom, intensively as a monk in an ashram - and also as a hermit in the Himalayas for seventeen years. We will not give here a global idea of his experiences with Ma Anandamayee and the way he transmits his teaching, this has been the subject of a published book. I merely asked him a few simple questions about the relationship between old age and wisdom that could be accessible to a wide audience, and added a brief account of my contact with him over the years.

How can an elder show wisdom?

- Vijayananda: By adapting to his age. You can be happy at any age. The true proof of wisdom of an elder is to know how to face reality: his life will soon come to an end; how to prepare himself to die with dignity, how to find the key that can make one go beyond death, that can open consciousness and allow one to know if there is an afterlife, and of what kind is it? In this area as in others, "burying one's head in the sand" is of little use.

Those who are "a little" believers can say to themselves, "Oh, I will think of God at the moment of death, that will be enough! ». But the fact is that it is very difficult to guide the mind at the moment of death; it is the strongest desires and attachments that rise up out of the weakened state of body and mind. In the East, it is believed that it is the last desire that will decide the next incarnation. Ma Anandamayee told the following story about this:

"A stingy old woman was dying. She had been an oil merchant, and all her life she had said to beggars who asked her for a little oil: "I won't give you a drop! Not a drop! ». And when she was at the point of death, her family told her over and over again to repeat the name of God, the only word that could come out of her mouth was "Not a drop! Not a drop! »...

We talk about life experience; but isn't another way to gain experience to live with someone experienced? Isn't that what you chose to do while living with Ma Anandamayee?

Vijayananda: Fundamentally, one must make one's own experience; certainly, a spiritual master can give advice, indications, and guide in difficult moments, but one must rely on one's own strength as much as possible. It's always bad to rely on someone else. A mother can say ten times to her child, "Stay away from the fire", until he gets burned, he won't really understand.

One does not benefit from the experience of a spiritual master; on the other hand, he can give strength, vigilance of spirit, power that helps the disciple to make his own experience. Finally, he will be able to tell his master what Churchill said to the Americans when he asked them for weapons after May 1940: "Give us the instruments, we'll do the work".

To give an example of the absence of fear in the face of death is this not a fundamental part of the wisdom of the ancients?

Vijayananda: If you are realized, you are already dead, that is, you have experienced the death of the ego that terrorizes even more than physical death. Otherwise, one does not know how one's mind will react: one thing is to say when one is healthy, "I am not afraid of death", another is to not really be afraid at the moment of death. This is done by saints or yogis. They can direct their departure from the body, in particular by causing their vital energy (*prāna*) to exit through the place in the body that they wish, generally through the top of the head. People who do not have this ability can help themselves by focusing on the vision of Paradise, those who have a spiritual master in his image, for it is said that he must come to the rescue of his disciple at the last hour. The help one receives will depend on one's faith, for all phenomena are of the order of the mind. Someone who believes in nothing can still help himself by seeing his death as a sleeper. It seems, when reading accounts of near-death experiences, that often one does not even realize that one is dead.

In India, there is the example of four spiritually advanced elders who receive the Supreme Teaching from an adolescent Guru, Dakshiramurti. Without going that far, isn't part of the wisdom of the ancients to know how to learn from some young people, even from some children?

Vijayananda: Of course, we can learn from everyone, at all ages; even animals can teach us. There is a story about this in India about a wise man, Dattatreya, who had twenty-four gurus: one of them had been the bird of prey that had just stolen a piece of meat. He was attacked by other birds that wanted to take it away from him. In the end, the only way he found to be quiet was to give up the piece. Immediately, the bird that took it back began to be attacked in turn... [Dattatreya also learned from the spider and its patience: when its web is destroyed, it starts it again as if nothing had happened. From the waves of the sea, he learned smiling humility: indeed, when they break on the shore, they give rise to a smile that stretches continuously on each side. One day Dattatreya saw two women weaving: one of them had two bracelets on her wrist. With the movement of the weave, they would collide and make noise. On the other hand, the other one had only a bracelet and could weave without noise. Dattatreya deduced that there is a deep connection between silence and Unity.]

It is said in the East that the complete experience of meditation destroys time, and also destroys death. How do I understand that?

Vijayananda: When one is identified with the Supreme, the Universal Consciousness, there is no more time. In order to evaluate time, one needs changes, movements, whether those of the sun in the sky or those of the watch hand. When one becomes identified with the Supreme Consciousness which is the witness of all movements and in this purely static, time is destroyed. Likewise, space is a mental concept. Seeing the Absolute as omnipresent and filling an infinite space does not fully correspond to this basic consciousness, to this unified field towards which modern physics also

tends. It is *consciousness* that gives reality to these concepts. Take a banknote: in itself, it is only a piece of paper; but it is the authority of the Banque de France, and the trust that people have in it, that gives it its value. Both universal and inner consciousness mark the transitory world with its stamp of reality.

At the time I collected this interview, I had known Vijayananda for nine years, and I had been living with him for four years. Now I have known him for nineteen years, and I live perhaps a fifth of the time with him in the plain at Hardwar, for I often go to be in hermitage in the Himalayas. I divide my time between satsang for two or three hours every evening, on the banks of the Ganges in a quiet village that is also a place of pilgrimage. It's not so easy to talk about an experience you're having. Moreover, a yogi does not have to talk about his inner experiences. Nevertheless, I will try to evoke some of the elements that led me to come and reside with an elder to benefit from his wisdom.

It can already be said that in the spiritual realm, the notion of retirement is meaningless. Consciousness develops until the hour of death, and only the exhaustion of the body can veil its transmission. I have long been fascinated by the experience of solitude entirely devoted to the development of this consciousness, and I found in Vijayananda someone who had gone a long way in this direction. For example, he spent seven years in a mountain hermitage meditating and walking, without the help of any reading. He had read before, but had decided to dive inside himself. He verified Nietzsche's words in this way: "True courage is not that which one shows in front of others, but that which one has in front of oneself".

When one embarks on prolonged retreats where one meditates for most of the time, a phenomenon similar to blurring of vision can occur when one fixes the same point for a long time. Things that seemed to be becoming clearer and clearer suddenly become blurred. This is where the external reference of someone who has much more meditation experience than you is useful. As soon as there was an intense spirituality, whether within monastic communities or outside, the role of the Elders took on a decisive importance. They were obviously those Ancients who had succeeded in their spiritual path. In India, the term "ancient" (*purâna*) itself has given its name to an important part of sacred literature, so deeply are the notions of ancient and sacred linked. In the Gîtâ (8 9), we are advised to remember the Self as *kavi*, the Poet, i.e. the omniscient, *purânam*, the Elder, the ultimate organiser of everything, more tiny than the atom, and yet the support of the whole. The Elder can both give intensity and moderate the excessive ardour of youth: "He who wants to go far spares his mount". Of course, each one must make his own inner experience, but as regards the relationship of a Westerner with India, which he may find interesting, the directions given to me by Vijayananda have been most useful to me. There is such a wealth of schools and practices in this country of one billion people that it is easy to get lost. Moreover, one is directly influenced, in the good sense of course, when one lives with someone for whom mastery of the mind has become natural. One

then understands better the significance of the words of Evagra the Pontiff: "See, my son, understand what I have said to you so far: do not despise the words of my old age...begin with the small things, and by them you will reach the great ones".

The advantage of being close to an Elder is that it represents a strong relationship, and therefore there is much less need to resort to other relationships. Thanks to him, one can be alone without being alone, without drying out, but blossoming on the contrary. It's a very different relationship than with a therapist or analyst where you pay to be listened to. This is not about money. The only way to repay the debt of gratitude one has incurred is through practice and deep understanding.

What is surprising about Vijayananda is how disidentified he is from his very role as a spiritual teacher. I have very rarely seen him take the initiative to tell someone to meditate or simply advise them to go to the ashram shop and buy one of the many books on Ma Anandamayee from which he has lived for thirty years. Neither does it ask to serve a movement that would have the ambition to go on a mission to the four corners of the world, which attracted me from the beginning and continues to do so. We will return in the section on *missionary illusion* to the many weak points of the mentality of religious zeal in all directions.

The vital energy of an old man who has truly followed a spiritual path is all transformed into wisdom energy. Didn't Victor Hugo perceive this inner alchemy, analogous to the Kundalini process in India, when he said in the "Sleeping Booz"?

"The old man who returns to the original source...
Entering the eternal days and leaving the changing days.
You can see the flame in the eyes of the young people...
But in the old man's eye, you can see the light. »

Finding an "Elder" avoids spiritual dispersion, which is quite possible even when one remains within a single tradition: there are so many schools, styles of practice and personalities that the coming and going represent a leakage of energy within themselves from a certain level.

There is a kind of lack of movement in wisdom that can be frightening. Indeed, the ego of the wise man is dead, and this death frightens, even if it leaves the entire field free to the light of the consciousness. Yet, it is this death of the ego that enables the wise man to manifest purified compassion and to be not only in Reality, but also to be Reality.

(Vijayānanda 'leaved his
body' at 95 years old, on Easter Monday, April 5th 2010)

ⁱ Vijayânanda *A Frenchman in the Himalayas* Land of Heaven 1997. Also available on the website www.anandamayi.com (ashram/French) with another book that he did not wish to be published by a publisher, *A Way of Joy*.