FROM COPING TO INTEGRATION

Meditation as an effective tool for coping with illness and death

NGO L'Arrel

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This work was awarded
the Humanistic Essay Prize from the
Fondation Europa Cultural

http://www.fondationeuropa.com

FREE ISSUE

Document access:
https://vimeo.com/ladiferencia/facingdeath

Edited for free circulation Fondation Europa Cultural 2023.

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This work obtained the Fondation Europa Cultural Award for Essays, awarded in Geneva in 2022.

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FOREWORD

The pages you hold in your hands are meant first and foremost to be comforting. The story that begins here aims to explore, with humility, some of the aspects of what a wise man once called 'the human situation', in order to potentially reach a sense of caring through words. And like the closeness of a hug, a smile or a caress, words—which have been inevitably linked to the mind and the body from time immemorial—have the ability to welcome, comfort and affect us. They can take us to warm, intimate spaces where inner dialogue is allowed to become alive and pleasurable.

And it is with the written word—which very early on humankind understood as aligned with memory, and which over the course of history has contributed to expanding our capacity for abstraction, reflection and creation by means of honing our thought processes—that we set out towards a discourse on the human situation. It is a discourse about living and dying, about our capacity to embrace ourselves, which necessarily means taking care of ourselves. It is about illnesses that become serious, about the powerful influence of our social environment and its constructs, which interfere with human development in general, and specifically, with an issue as essential as the process of dying, etcetera. And all this

leads us in the end to a sanctum that has decidedly and undeniably contributed to human well-being and health since remote antiquity: the practice of meditation.

As explained later, meditation has a clear capacity to offer the opportunity for dialogue between the body and the mind. In fact, it is the meditator him- or herself who extends that offer. Meditation brings substantial improvement in all areas of one's health, and, consequently, one's senses and being, and is an invaluable resource for people living with serious illness. It is also an ancient practice that, according to various schools of thought, connects a stillness and serenity to the *two boundaries* that mark our human experience: birth and death.

For all these reasons, the pages that follow aim to combine caring that fosters reflection—also through the depth and power that comes from and reveals itself through poetry—and caring that promotes the practice of meditation, through interviews with two meditation experts and a group of patients from the Catalan Institute of Oncology who meditate weekly, who are going through or have gone through the process of cancer, and who describe their experiences and their daily progress to allow us to draw conclusions that span this project as a whole.

THE TWO BOUNDARIES

One must first consider birth, the fact of being born, to lay out a path of reflection, contemplation and self-perception that will lead one to face the inevitable condition of our death. It is not paradoxical that one must first engage with and explore our beginning in order to then be able to face our end, insofar as our human situation allows this, with all our uniqueness and particular capacity for feeling. And, beyond the biological aspects that scientifically explain these two boundaries (birth and death), in essence, very little can be said about these existential experiences of humankind.

We can agree that the inexplicability of the facet of death that brings about our demise is related in every sense to the inexplicability of birth, to the fact of, almost suddenly, being and being there. The difficulty therein is evident: how can we understand that we come from *nowhere*? How can we explain to ourselves that before we were neither here nor there, and then, suddenly, we are an *absolute beginning,* as the scholar Josep Maria Esquirol calls it, especially if we ourselves are not even our own explanation? And the fact is that there is no thread to trace back, for any human being, to before their beginning.

One of the poems written by the poet Maria Mercè Marçal while she was dealing with cancer—published in her posthumous collection entitled *Raó del cos*—led her to a sudden consciousness of the proximity of her death. Good poetry enables one to undertake, if even only marginally, the action of examining (in an experiential, non-scientific sense) the two existential boundaries that define us. It should come as no surprise, then, that the poet takes her story, her reflection on death, to a place without form or contour, and that we can conclude that this place is, as before, *nowhere*. And so, how can we conceive of this final *nowhere* if it is so difficult for us to conceive of the initial *nowhere*?

If we continue to explore the poet's verses, we begin to grasp both the power and capacity of the word to wound us —in other words, to affect us—and to establish a dialogue with ourselves, again, as with the relationship between the two boundaries of life, which, the author establishes in the last word of the poem with the prefix des- (in *desnacer*, or the prefix un- in unbirthing). It is no longer a question of dying, but of 'unbirthing', a poetic device of great power, that leads one to reflect on the inexplicable nature that the two events share.

Similarly, we can deduce that Maria Mercè Marçal presents the final *nowhere* as a return to the initial *nowhere*, which she calls the *matriz de dios madre* (mother God's womb): before the mystery of 'unmaking', the prior mystery

of becoming—or, rather, the mystery of having been made, of finding oneself made; before the mystery of 'being absorbed inwards', for example, the philosopher Martin Heidegger's concept of 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*), of being cast into the world as an individual who is given a name and endowed with a *self*.

In any case, one understands that life is the incredible thing that exists and happens between these two boundaries, and, paradoxically, one can only place these boundaries, experientially, in the *nowhere*. For this reason, in this text you hold in your hands—and founded on belief in the word that embraces us, and, therefore, engenders the will to care—we would like to reflect and expound on various aspects of what we will call *human edification*, the situation that shapes us while we are and where we are.

AQUEST PETIT ESPAI
prenem-lo i fem-lo gran

Fem gran aquest espai
en què la parla és íntima
i escomet la follia
d'aquell murmuri aliè,
metzina acabalada.
Fem créixer aquest espai
que ens obre a allò sincer
i ens peix des dels orígens,
quan la llum fou mamífer
a trenc del batec.

Lluny del brogit obtús
—pou i llangor de l'ànima—,
com la planta que ens metja
fem ampli aquest espai
on cap el silenci
i és lliure la paraula.

Joan Urpinell

THIS LITTLE SPACE
let’s take it and make it bigger

Let’s enlarge this space
where speech is intimate
and attacks the madness
of that foreign murmur,
well-heeled poison.
Let’s enlarge this space
that opens us to what is sincere
and nourishes us from the origins,
when the light was mammalian
at the break of the heartbeat.

Far from the obtuse noise
—well and languor of the soul—
like the plant that medicates us,
let us enlarge this space
where silence fits
and the word is free.

HUMAN EDIFICATION

You become, friends become, acquaintances become, strangers become; I become. Each is an ineffable becoming because, as mentioned earlier and despite biological and scientific explanations, what happens between the *initial nowhere* and the *final nowhere* is full of meaning. It is an absolute becoming, all meaning. And in light of this, it asks for a response, even if one cannot be received. And it is our *human edification* that elevates us with the capacity to know ourselves in what one philosopher called the *mystery*; in other words, a situation that cannot be resolved; and yet, 'it traps us and involves us: we are in the mystery [...] the mystery demands our attention and respect. Time, life and the presence of the other have to do with mystery' (ESQUIROL, 2018:13).

As paradoxical as it may seem, in order to talk about the experience of life one needs to go beyond what is, what is tangible, and what we can embrace in one way or another. Life arises not only with that which ends; rather, on the contrary, infinity and ineffability are its essential characteristics. Indeed, poetry, with its particular approach to language, writing and thought, takes us into the *mystery* in which we find ourselves.

In a suggestive poem by Antoni Clapés[1], the image of a leaf, which takes on the poetic I, reveals to us—and the poem seeks to do this—the becoming that characterises us, in which the very force of life 'drags us along' while we are in the *mystery*, from 'silence to silence'—the *initial nowhere* and the *final nowhere*—between 'the place from which we have departed' and the place where we will arrive, which are the same, i.e., *nowhere*. In this case, however, the leaf in the poem has a specificity and a uniqueness that identifies and defines us experientially, which must be investigated in order to understand it, given that it is essentially what shapes us.

We see how, through the particular capacity of language—of thought—to penetrate us, we can have a direct impact on this essence of ours, in which the *mystery* is one of the cornerstones.

1 Antoni CLAPÉS. *Clars, aquest matí, són els teus records (Obra reunida, 1989-2009)*. Barcelona: La Breu Edicions, 2020, p. 197.

THE FEELING OF FEELING

I feel alive. How many times have you said to yourself, or shared with someone else, this assertion, which has an absolutely reflexive basis? It is often associated with moments in life when one feels good or peaceful and so is associated with a certain state of mind. However, beyond this aspect, the statement contains the essence of human distinctiveness, the essence of our lives.

The fact is that this reflexivity comes to us involuntarily; it's not something we have to do intentionally, rather, it's a foundation on which we are built, that is present to us passively and gives us the capacity to feel that we feel. As pathetic beings, founded on the classical concept of pathos[2], we have the unavoidable capacity—which makes us human beings—of being unable to stop ourselves from encountering, feeling, affecting and hurting ourselves. We find ourselves in reflection. We are reflection, the fruit of our feeling, which becomes our world. This feeling occurs passively, without us having to actively will it to occur.

This specific capacity to feel, which leads us to the situation of always finding ourselves immersed in it, is clear and constant, and is where states of mind are produced. 'The

2 One of the ways in which this concept is understood refers to the human capacity to arouse vivid emotions.

wonder of life is the clarity of the seeing, of the feeling, which is its foundation.'[3] This clarity means that we are always in a position to be affected, whether by beauty or by suffering. It is in this sense that we speak of the *permanent wound*; *the human essence is that of the wound, of always being inside the wound, the fruit of the capacity—passive and reflexive—to feel that we inevitably feel at all times.*

3 Josep Maria ESQUIROL. *La penúltima bondat: Assaig sobre la vida humana*. Barcelona: Quaderns Crema, 2018, p. 33

ILLOTS

L'illa increpa amb la seva
solitud integrada,
amb uns gestos salvatges
que sense esforç s'acoblen,
amb l'hàbil erosió
d'allò que no té cap pressa
i s'avé a amarar-se
de les aigües del temps.

Les mateixes en què
s'emmirallen aquells
que —humanament— ho intenten,
—com el magma imparable,
així es peix la ferida—
i un altre cop, ho intenten.

Joan Urpinell

ISLANDS

The island threatens with its
inherent solitude,
with wild gestures
that effortlessly fit together,
with the skilful erosion
of that which lingers
and agrees to soak
in the waters of time.

The same waters that
are gazed upon,
humanly, by those who try
—like unstoppable magma,
this is how the wound is nourished—
and try once again.

The experience of being born opens us to the ability to feel that we feel, to be in this world in our own specific way. To be born means opening the senses through the body, which is the concretion of the *self*. We are born, and the “paintbrushes” of the senses begin to touch us, to smear, to blend; we are welcomed by a passive and reflexive feeling that shapes us, a capacity to perceive so intense that it folds in on itself and is offered up by our “blood”, the essence of the body.

WOUNDED

'Salt in the wound', exclaimed the great Maria Mercè Marçal. This poetic image is charged with a significance the author herself explains in *El senyal de la pèrdua* (the sign of loss). Indeed, the wound is conceived as an opportunity to build a bridge, a relationship, between the inner world of the individual and the outer world, in which all reality, as well as otherness, takes place. The wound enables a relationship between the different spheres on which the general mystery of life rests, and our poet calls for this relationship to be strengthened; the image of putting salt in a wound is clear and powerful.

These spheres are experientially central to us, the aspects that principally constitute our wound, the *self*, the *other* and the *world*. Within this framework of our capacity to constantly feel that we feel, and finding ourselves immersed in this dynamic in which we are constantly affecting ourselves through the bodily senses and their intrinsic reflexivity, we can conclude that these three aspects (*self*, *other*, *world*) are the three *primary affections* of human beings.

Every individual concretises the *self* through their body and experiences their individuality through their physical home, which opens the door to the mystery of all that occurs

within, and which is linked to the mystery of the external world and the other. Individuality entails the awareness of one's own uniqueness and brevity, and leads to dialogue with oneself. One can say that this awareness of finitude is an awareness of the existential abysses which define us throughout our life. Finitude is a threat to the pleasure of living, which is implicit to life. To feel that we feel is something pleasurable in itself, and the possibility of it ending is a threat, and gives rise to fear.

In keeping with the self, our specific capacity to feel—with its associated ongoing internal dialogue—affects us in both pleasurable ways and ways that make us suffer. This duality can often become quite pronounced, and it is here, as we will see below, where the ancient practice of meditation can help to stabilise us, to empty us, to create space, to calm us, and so much more. These are all achieved through the almost non-action that meditation calls for, as incongruous as that may seem.

However, the wound we began with, mentioned in the poet's quote, is also caused mainly by our relationship with *otherness*. Otherness is the desire to share, to love and to be loved. It's the possibility of delving from one's own finitude into the infinite and mysterious that the *other* has and is. Even the practice of meditation, which takes place in apparent solitude, is infinitely more welcoming, and may therefore be considered somewhat more beneficial, with the

trust that comes from sharing it in a group. As discussed later, the dynamic that the practice of meditation creates between body and mind tends to improve in quality when it is done together with others. There is also the obvious element of communion with others who share in the comfort of being in the *mystery.*

This much it does offer: the trust of a child who allows themselves to be picked up and carried, who falls asleep in the powerful arms of love. Love: the laughter of the grass, the people around me who don't know how to tell me of their pity or their sympathy, the gestures that are sometimes clumsy, sometimes frightened, sometimes invisible, but firm and true. A strange loneliness filled at the same time so full of warmth, with so much feeling enveloping you.[4]

The author's reflections and thoughts arising from her wounded *self* cry out—through the intimacy of writing—to be heard, although they are not meant to receive any kind of response. The wound in this case is directly related to the affection for the *other* and for the *world,* which are always connected; a world that sometimes contains serious illnesses like cancer.

4 Maria Mercè MARÇAL. *El senyal de la pèrdua.* Barcelona: Empúries, 2015, p. 41.

In situations such as this, humans sense their own vulnerability to be very present, and can feel that they are easily gripped by helplessness and suffering. However, this specific capacity to feel leads directly to sheltering, caring for and protecting oneself and others: the yearning that drives the life project of being, without hesitation and with vehemence, towards the goal of healing. Desire is paramount in life because, among other things, it moves us forward, away from death.

We can find this sheltering sense in the *other*, through affection, love and speech, as well as in ourselves, through these same three virtues, which have a precious reflective capacity.

Similarly, the practice of meditation also offers a powerful refuge, with the consequential health benefits that always follow. Meditation welcomes us into the infinite that we hold inside ourselves and desire, with infinite affection, and invites us to feel a clarity that is sustained by stillness and calm, like an impregnable cradle.

CONTEMPLATING OURSELVES

To understand the human condition and situation is to consider and embrace its constant and infinite affection, its desire to project the self forward, and its conscious finitude. This leads one to think of oneself with a clarity that reveals our intrinsic *non-fulfilment*, as well as the *paradox* that shapes us.

HO DIRÉ D'UNA TIRADA:

que surem permanentment
en un tot que ve del buit
que a l'inici fou la nit
i amb l'esclat tot va anar sent
dels instints fins a la ment
i tinguem un decorat
que ens acull i ens da substrat
però tot és contingent
i tendir a l'aferrament
és motiu d'estar cardat
d'inquirir n'acabes fart.
Què diantre és l'atzar?
I tu i jo hem coincidit.[5]

5 Joan URPINELL. In: *Reduccions*, 115. Vic: Eumo, 2020, p. 40.

I'LL SAY IT IN ONE BREATH:

that we float always
in a whole that comes from the void
that in the beginning was the night
and with the bursting forth everything became
from the instincts to the mind
and we have a stage
that welcomes us and gives us footing
but everything is contingent
and the tendency to cling
is a reason to be buggered
to wonder you've had enough.
What the hell is chance?
And you and I have converged.

A full life is impossible if one considers all of the above-mentioned core considerations. A full life is not human. Fullness is homogeneity and is far removed from the heterogeneity that shapes our essence, full of voids, which are the product of constant desire, which, at the same time, is a feeling of missing something that can often be ineffable and, therefore, infinite again.

To think of oneself in terms of the infinite *wound*, with the constant desire that casts one into life—if desire is not life itself—is to invite the conscience that embraces us. To think of ourselves in terms of our own finitude is, in reality, to shun pessimism and a view that leads to pathology. Quite the contrary, it places us even more in desire, in life, in the pleasure and enjoyment that life itself holds, as it opens the way for our specific capacity to feel.

Similarly, to consider the *paradox* is to understand the human situation in which the self is never quite satisfied and fulfilled in the present. On the one hand, constant desire—the impetus of life—drives us forward to try to attain what we desire, and, consequently, causes us to never fully complete rooting ourselves in the present. Living is already pleasurable in itself, but never-ceasing affection, which is infinite by nature, and our constant desire position us in the realm of infinity. On the other hand, this exists alongside our awareness of finitude, one of the main human affections, which defines

us throughout our life journey and reminds us of the brevity of the *self*.

This act of pondering ourselves, as mentioned before, not only needs to go hand in hand with feeling ourselves, but also has its roots in it. Feeling—the offering of the senses and the gift of sensing them—is endowed with primary intelligence; it is the wellspring from which our rationality and reason spring, flowing from our foundation.

In the face of the inclemency that the elements can often bring us, meditation offers a way to return to the clarity of that ability to intelligently feel, which ultimately leads to caring and comfort. Just as words envelop us in poetry, the practice of meditation, with origins lost in the abyss of time, always brings us back to the feeling of infinity, and to the necessary 'four steps that return directly to me'.[6]

6 'Quatre passes tornant de cap a mi', is a verse from Nicolau Dols's poem *El vent dins la pineda*. In: *Veus baixes*, 5 (veusbaixes.cat/veusbaixes/5_files/%2318%20Dols_creació.pdf).

THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCT OF DEATH

At first glance, the title of this section may seem a little disconcerting; it is evident that death transcends any human contingency. However, one should observe certain aspects surrounding this final stage of life, such as the approach we take to the process and manner of dying, the way in which we experience facing death, how we think of death, one's notion of one's own death, the concept of the death of others, and so on. And so, taking this line of thought and following it, we might realise that these questions do not always have the same answers for different individuals, and that, therefore, even death itself—however drastic, absolute and irreparable it may be—is viewed through different lenses, with different nuances. These nuances are of paramount importance, as they shape a vital and essential part of how we think of our *self*.

It is clear that humans are social beings, and that from birth our development is affected by socially determined factors. We see this in a wealth of different contexts, such as the socio-cultural sphere. It is also true that we are malleable beings and, as such, the culture we are born into and grow up in significantly determines the system of our thinking and our understanding of life, the *other*, and the world. This is particularly acute during the period of our body's

development towards its fullness, and goes hand in hand with the formation of the personal *self*. Thus, it is a process in which the body and the personality are linked—always influenced by significant social processes that channel us in our environment—so that both the body and the self are understood necessarily in the social context in which they have been shaped.

Contemplating the subject of death, it is important to consider the peculiar relationship we have with our physical body (the organism) and our *self* (the personality). At some point in one's life, when personal consciousness has already surfaced, every human being has probably, on the one hand, realised that they *are* a body (like any other animal organism), and, on the other, has thought that they *have* a body. The significance of this is important, because it reveals that human beings 'view themselves as an entity that does not fully coincide with their body, but rather possesses it.'[7] This leads to a constant search to strike a balance between these two facets throughout our lives, and prompts us to enter into a dialogue with ourselves, a dialogue that inevitably leads us to think about death, the event that involves the evident disappearance of the body that we *are* and *have*.

7 Peter L. BERGER and Thomas LUCKMANN. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Barcelona: Herder, 1996.

ENSENYANÇA

L'instant abans de l'acufen,
l'embranzida del brogit
que el cervell vol escopir
fent-lo insistent tornaveu.

La no-escolta esdevé crit.

Com espurnes les paraules
de la carn s'encaminen
al missatge sense filtre,
al discurs nítid del nervi,
a abraçar allò que hem enfosquit
i no defugir els senyals.

Pregó d'incipients cossos,
miralls de la saviesa.[8]

8 Joan URPINELL. *Eixam de claus*. Barcelona: Parnass Edicions, 2022.

TEACHING

The instant before tinnitus,
the rush of the noise
that the brain wants to spit out
making it an insistent echo.

The non-listening becomes a scream.

As sparks the words
of the flesh are directed to
the message without filter,
in the crisp discourse of the nerve,
to embrace what we have obscured
and not to shrink from the signs.

Proclamation of incipient bodies,
mirrors of wisdom.

Furthermore, from a diachronic perspective, it is readily apparent that the passage of time and the consequential technological advancement of human beings and, with it, the advancement of societies, is also a factor that determines our view of a wide range of life situations, including death. For this reason, it is important to focus on two facets inherent to human beings, which lead us directly to an assessment of all of the above-mentioned concepts of death. These two facets are habits and institutionalisation.

Human nature tends to turn most activities, whether they be social or individual in nature, into habits. This responds to the need of the individual to reduce the number of multiple possible ways to act when faced with the diversity of life situations that arise, which is psychologically beneficial and also gives rise to the possibility of specialisation, and, with it, the possibility to maximise the achievement of results that are favourable to one's own interests. Some of these habits have been preserved to a greater or lesser extent across history, while others have changed over time in accordance with the evolution of human societies.

An examination of religious preaching, for example, reveals how from the late Middle Ages, with the rise of cities, and especially from the 13th century onwards, various habits such as prayer were democratised. This, together with the culture of books—which until then had been the elitist domain of monks and nuns in monasteries and cloisters—reached the

public. This was especially thanks to the new mendicant orders (Franciscans and Dominicans), which, once they had settled in the cities, went a step further and established a reciprocal standardisation of how the different actors involved in preaching should act, as well as the nature of the actions they engaged in, thus leading to institutionalisation of their activities. The institution, in this case, of the new mendicant religious orders, stipulated that certain actions should be done by certain actors in certain locales. Thus, the process of Christianising the laity—the objective of preachers, including leading figures such as Francis of Assisi, Francesc Eiximenis and Vicent Ferrer—embarked on a new course, within the grasp of the vast citizenry, who attended multitudinous sermons with preaching that often proved to be cathartic, preaching that followed a specific structure known to the audience that laid out a context of action for both the preacher and those listening, and, with it, a predictable situation that ultimately led to social control.

The whole historical process leading up to this institutionalisation is important. Institutions are not created and established from one day to the next. Habit, in this case, essentially arises in a specific socio-cultural context, which generally evolves over time and so weaves a particular history. This is why institutions have a history shared by their actors and areas of influence, which is a key factor in their gaining the capacity to control people, since they 'establish

predefined patterns of conduct that channel behaviour in a particular direction from the many theoretically possible directions; [...] this control is inherent in institutionalisation itself'.[9]

A last factor of great importance in this regard, to conclude this whole discourse on the experience of death, is the fact that, thanks to the aforementioned historicity, institutions became objective from the social point of view. In other words, they became entities that exist above individuals, entities with coercive capacity, as if they were endowed with a reality of their own that exercises authority over them. Humans have the particular capacity to construct a world in which they themselves live and which they conceive as a product removed from their actions.

In order to answer the questions about death and the process of dying raised a few pages ago, we must undertake a historical review leading to the present day. Such an examination makes it clear that, on the one hand, death has to a large extent become institutionalised, while on the other, it has become taboo and, therefore, a dehumanised occurrence.

In the western Mediterranean, prior to the Middle Ages, everyone wanted to be intimately aware of the proximity of their own death, as this would allow them to

9 Peter L. BERGER and Thomas LUCKMANN. *The Social Construction of Reality*. Barcelona: Herder, 1996.

prepare for their demise in their immediate environment, surrounded by family and friends. Death was received calmly and serenely, and was viewed as a natural stage of life. Usually lying in a room, the dying person played the central role in the situation, with people circulating around the room in what was clearly a social and shared act. Death had a distinctly domestic quality.

Later, during the late Middle Ages, death began to take on a rather dramatic tone. This was due to the emergence of a new and very important notion, namely the emphasis on the uniqueness of the individual—in the context of the concept of the "final judgement"—geared towards the assessment of the individual's life. Once dead, the individual would make their way to the "afterlife".

The process of dying shared similarities with the process in previous times, in which the dying person, exposed to the community, was surrounded by those close to them and was the central figure. There was, however, a new and very dramatic factor of note: being judged by an all-powerful God. This meant that death itself became an important moment of self-awareness, something not contemplated before.

In the 18th century, during the so-called Age of Enlightenment in the West, death took on new meaning. It was now surrounded by exaltation and drama, and became something impressive and all-encompassing. An important facet of this is that the death of the other was thought of as

more than one's own death, which would pave the way for the emergence of Romanticism, in which longing and the feeling of loss would take centre stage in all domains.

Far from the familiarity and naturalness that once surrounded death, it was now conceived as a shocking break from everyday life, a break that brought with it obsession and great pessimism. Those participating in vigils for the dying were gripped by a whole range of new emotions and new actions. There was weeping, fervent mourning, prayer, and displays and externalisation of deep grief. The idea of death was socially shocking. It was not accepted; on the contrary, it was rejected outright.

Our view of death changed completely after the second half of the 20th century. The process of dying was now deemed taboo, something unworthy of being confronted in person, and liable to be silenced and ignored in a kind of completely pathological social fantasy. Happiness became one of the few reasons for being, for existence. And death, as it puts an end to this objective, was therefore something in opposition to society, which is why it was considered better to ignore it, to pretend it did not exist. A dying person was to be isolated, hidden from the sight of others, and silenced.

All this was embodied in the staging of the processes of death, which gradually lost its dramatic weight in the context of the social environment. Several substantial changes

have shaped the process of dying today, namely the standards established for its institutionalisation.

Today, citizens in the West no longer die at home with those close to them, but in a hospital and alone. Hospitals are the designated place, the socially appropriate place to die, because death has become an inconvenience for others, who reject and ignore it. The dying person's death is now the realm of his or her family and doctors, who control its pace and the circumstances that surround it. The dying are often unaware of their own pending death, and the tendency of others is to hide the real situation from them based on the underlying idea that 'an acceptable death is one that can be tolerated by the living'.[10]

The current day social construct of death in the Mediterranean West dictates that strong emotions are to be avoided within the margins of society. Emotional expression must be reserved for each individual's private sphere. Death should be noticed by others as little as possible, and, as such, mourning has apparently disappeared, in a totally dehumanising repression that equates discretion with dignity.

The institutionalisation of death, with all the norms and standards that it imposes on society, ensures that citizens do not lose sight of the goal of happiness, which is inextricably linked to capitalist consumption. This is a line of thought that,

10 Beatriz OGANDO and César GARCÍA. "Morir con propiedad en el siglo XXI". In: *Revista de Calidad Asistencial*, vol.22, no.3, Madrid, 2007, p. 147-153.

if followed, reveals itself to be increasingly inhuman, a line of thought that denies sadness as a human emotion because it is deemed to go against the established socio-economic system, and that even results in disguising images of death to make them more pleasant.

Rethinking the act of dying is now the order of the day. One hears much talk of the concept of dying with dignity, which is associated with dying without pain, surrounded by those close to you, and with awareness. However, deaths that happen in violent, tragic or sudden circumstances, which are not covered by the terms mentioned here, must also be taken into account, which leads to an examination of the concept of *dignity* and its possible applications.

Death, and also birth—the two great moments of life—now should have no manner of suffering; they should be comfortable. Pain is a facet of life that is to be fiercely avoided from the outset. This is why the fields of medicine and pharmacology are moving in this direction, even if it involves a certain emotional screening, in which the disappearance of pain entails a loss of awareness: the so-called 'analgesic culture'.

Although death has clearly been institutionalised, the actuality of the dying process is under review, and there is once again an awareness on the part of dying subjects, who are demanding to make decisions in certain situations together with their family members. Examples include

euthanasia, assisted suicide, different therapeutic processes, and medical interventions, a host of issues that are the result of the current medicalisation of life in the West. These lead one to reflect on the meaning of the life and death of each individual, and to examine the possibility that subjects may once again play a central role with the moral autonomy to decide for themselves about the end of their lives, and to delegate this decision to whomever they see fit.

CURA

Dels dos temples, sentir-se ferm devot
un cop acollida la llum del plom
que ens va macant i ens desvela el que som,
i amb la set d'inquirir: flor, espina i mot.

Dels dos temples, cobejar un ferreny om
que s'embranqui i, airós, ho abraci tot
bastint-nos el nord en l'abisme ignot,
arrels, semença i direcció amb aplom.

¿Com desplegar el torrent —present i baula—
sense el sincer palp que anihila la maula,
immensa ofrena del do dels sentits?

A trenc d'alba, amb el metall d'uns crits,
s'erigí la carn que defuig la faula,
llampegà el misteri de la paraula.

Joan Urpinell

CARE

Of the two temples, to feel firmly devoted
once we have received the leaden light
that mauls us and reveals to us what we are,
and with the thirst to seek: flower, thorn and word.

Of the two temples, to covet a sturdy elm
that branches out and, gracefully, embraces everything
constructing our north in the unknown abyss,
roots, seed and direction with poise.

How to unfurl the torrent—present and linking—
without the sincere touch that annihilates the deception,
immense offering of the gift of the senses?

At break of dawn, with the metal of screams,
the flesh that shuns the fable arose,
the mystery of the word forked lightning.

THE CULTURE OF INTEGRATION: INTERVIEW WITH TEW BUNNAG

Dying is an art, like everything else.
Sylvia Plath

QUESTION: *Do you think in the West we live with our backs turned to death?*

TEW BUNNAG: I think that's true all over the world. Maybe, what I've seen in the West, as a person who grew up in the West as well as in my country, Thailand, is that there is less education. I mean, it's an issue that still not addressed, an issue that's still being avoided. And it seems to me that has consequences. Conversely, in my culture, and in many other Asian cultures, it's a subject that's part of your education starting in childhood—using language—so you can talk about it and share experiences, situations, etc. I think in this society, what's lacking is education in which death is better integrated and which, instead of being taboo, is part of it.

Q.: *You were just saying now that this has consequences. What are they?*

T. B.: I think the consequences of not including the subject of death, of dying, of how to experience it, how to help others, are that citizens—including professionals—continue to lack confidence and to be afraid. This is the most serious consequence. The fear of something that's going to happen to everyone.

There's no knowledge about this issue, no preparation. And the consequence is that there is even more fear, more anxiety, more mistrust, etcetera.

Q.: *Is death viewed as a failure?*

T. B.: Well, I think that in the world of medicine, which I know since I work in medicine—I didn't train as a doctor, but I've worked in palliative care, provided support and training for professionals—I'd say yes. With all the technology, the drugs, the pills that exist in the world of medicine, with all these very sophisticated things, death is unfortunately seen as a failure. Not for everyone, but for many people. With all the science we have, not being able to control death, not being able to stop it is considered a failure. This is a fact I've come across many times.

Q.: *Do you think that not talking about death is a natural strategy, an instinct, or is it something cultural, something acquired?*

T. B.: I think it has to be something cultural, because death touches everyone, it affects every family. There always comes a time when someone in a family dies. But what worries me is that there's no preparation for how to live through that process. If, for example, the process of dying takes a long time, there's no way to handle it well. And in the case of a sudden death, which might be a violent death, a suicide, murder, an accident, or whatever, there's a deep shock that's part of mourning, part of the sadness. There is also no preparation for how to handle this shock, this deep mourning.

Q.: *What are the benefits of making death a part of our everyday lives?*

T. B.: For me it's very beneficial. I come from a culture where we start each day remembering our own and everyone else's condition as mortals. This shows you another way of living. It frees you from all kinds of lies, from deception, because death is a context that completes life. It is not the opposite of life; it's part of it. Every day you die; every day you start again. So, it's a natural thing. It's neither poetic nor philosophical.

Apart from that, scientifically—strictly speaking of the body—millions of cells die every day. Death is a fact, this constant transformation and change. In a society that chooses

to separate life and death, or to conceive of death as the end of life, death goes against the values of that society.

If we lived, for example, in the knowledge that we are united—apart from ethnicity, politics, education—but that in the end we're all mortal and we all will die one way or another, then things might change. For example, this is the basis of empathy.

Q.: *You have sometimes said we're taught to live well, but not to die well. What does dying well mean?*

T. B.: Well, some people say that there's no such thing as dying well. I've met people at conferences shouting that there's nothing good about death. But myself and others working in the field have experienced good farewells accompanying people through the process of their death. It can happen. What does it involve? Peace, deep peace.

Q: *What does this work of accompanying someone through the process of death consist of?*

T. B.: Accompanying someone in death is very normal. Accompanying means being at someone's side. It's breaking bread with them, being there with them. In childbirth, for example, a midwife is sometimes not necessary because the baby is born on its own, naturally. But sometimes it isn't, and

a little help is needed. Sometimes the mother is fine. Sometimes the mother panics. But the midwife being there is important, to assist in what's happening, in a natural way. In the dying process, accompanying someone is similar to the job of the midwife, but at the end of life. The dying person is about to cross the door into another dimension, about which there is no need to speculate.

Most people I've met need to have someone by their side, a family member, their partner, someone… if they know what to do. Often, however, the family member or partner are overcome by emotion and can't be there for them to the best of their ability because they're suffering. So, the companion is someone trained in this area who has the confidence to be there with the dying person, at their side.

Q.: *Why is a conscious death important? What's the point of it?*

T. B.: Yes, it is relevant. But you can't pick the kind of death you'll have. Of course, the ideal death is to fall asleep and feel fine. But that's not necessarily the best for your partner, who could wake up and be deeply shaken because their partner is gone. So, it's out of your hands. You can't choose it. I've learned this from working through some families' grief after an accident.

Death is death. How you'll die will always be a mystery. But if you're talking about a normal death—normal meaning the result of an illness, at the end of that process—having someone to help you and support you through that process is something you need. And the process can be a long one. Right here in this garden, I've worked with people with ALS, for example. With ALS, you don't die in two weeks. It can take two or three years, but the process is inevitable. There are people who want to prepare for that end.

Q.: *Should everyone be taught to prepare to accompany people in the process of death?*

T. B.: In my opinion, yes... with all due humility. It's a topic that's avoided, a heavy topic, but an important one because it's something that affects us all. And since it affects us all, why don't we have proper education?

Q.: *What method do you use to accompany someone in the process of dying?*

T. B.: Well, going back to education, in a society where there's preparation, discussion, a conversation, a dialogue on this issue, no training is required since everyone will be prepared when someone close to them starts the process. Unfortunately, we live in a society where there's

almost total ignorance. I know this from direct experience. Often people call me saying their partner is dying and they don't know what to do. I'm always struck by the lack of preparation.

On the other hand, there are more and more people who accept their death—maybe due to their spiritual practices or books they've read—but they don't feel prepared either, because there are no tools. The question is, are tools important and necessary? I'd say yes. Even in societies with a Buddhist culture—this is my background—tools have to be nurtured and developed. You do this as part of your spiritual life. In other words, the life in which you face things like death.

Q.: *So, death is an opportunity to continue growing?*

T. B.: Of course, it is. It's a great opportunity to change your values. For example—something I've seen many times—profound changes and transformations that come about as the result of losing someone. Or similarly, profound changes when someone finds out they have cancer and they're entering the terminal phase. I've heard people say to me, 'Now I realise I'm alive. Before I was asleep, doing routine things.' Death is the great gift, the great teaching.

Q.: *Could you tell us more about specifically what the process of accompaniment in the process of death is?*

T. B.: Well yes, but there are no recipes. I should start by saying that there are no recipes, but there are points of reference, there are very important qualities. Three essential qualities in all accompaniment work are *presence*, *compassion* and *transcendence*. Every year I've worked in this field, I've focused on these three aspects. Everyone understands *presence* intellectually, as an affirmation of 'I am present. I am here'. But deep presence is something else. I've learned this from the children I've helped. Children don't want your fairy tales. They don't want your philosophy, belief, politics, science, etcetera. They want your authentic and compassionate presence. This has a certain energy and vibration, without words. Words are not necessary. That's *presence*. How do you get there? Not through belief or conviction, but through your practices, which are very important.

Compassion—not to be confused with pity—empathy, the drive to lighten another person's suffering, is in everyone. But with practice this becomes more than just an attitude. The desire to help is palpable. It's something that's transmitted by your eyes, your touch, your presence, but it takes practice. It's like music. If you play an instrument, you have to practise every day.

Transcendence is the most difficult thing for many people who've rejected religion and distanced themselves from it. *Transcendence* is about spirituality, which is not belief, not the church, not the temple, but one of the layers of our humanity, the deepest layer, the one that asks, 'What am I doing here? Where am I going? Why have I suffered so much?' *Transcendence* is connecting with something that might not provide answers, but is palpable. For example, here, where we are now, everything that has form is material, even voices. It's a type of existence. But formlessness is what is not seen. It's the environment of this space, the energy between us. That's *transcendence*, that which transcends the visible and tangible, nothing more. For me *transcendence* is the source.

Q.: *So, what's important is awareness, presence?*

T. B.: *Awareness*, *open awareness*, *intuitive attention* are words that I use that are effective if you put them into practice. How do you learn to experience intuitive attention? By the way, intuition is essential for accompanying people through the process of dying. It's not science or your intellect or analytical mind, but intuition. So, feeling what's happening with your whole being, with your senses.

Q.: *Apart from the moment of facing death, wouldn't these tools be useful in our everyday lives?*

T. B.: Of course, they would. Everything you practise to know how to accompany people, and how to die yourself, is useful for living well. There's no difference.

Q.: *It's interesting that learning how to die helps you to live better.*

T. B.: Learning to die is learning to live. Many people come here and tell me that they are afraid to die. But, in truth they're afraid to live.

Q.: *In general, everyone avoids death. But you've chosen to dedicate yourself to it.*
Why?

T. B.: It was part of my education. Almost 50 years ago I studied to become a lay teacher of Buddhist meditation, as well as a teacher of martial arts, combining the two.
Since day one, I've been accompanying people through the process of dying, as well as attending to bereaved family members and so on. In in 2000, I had the most profound learning experience, with the death of my first wife from cancer—after seven years—and then my niece's suicide that

same year. I made the decision to dedicate my life to this partly as a tribute to these two people who were very dear to me. I started in my country, in a very poor neighbourhood in Bangkok, with adults and children who were dying of AIDS at that time. That was my apprenticeship. They taught me. All of this was after my Buddhist training, with all its teachings, practices, answers, etc. With those children I learned the difference between the applicable and the philosophical.

Q.: *How can you free yourself from the fear of death?*

T. B.: It's not easy because most people live in fear, fear of living, fear of what's to come, constructs of fear projected onto tomorrow—someone who makes you afraid, a situation that makes you afraid, etcetera. We live in fear and are manipulated by that fear. We saw this with Covid-19. So, it's normal that when you get to the process of dying, it's even more pronounced.

What I've seen with the people I've accompanied, and what I'm trying to do with myself, is to explore the possibility that fear—which is an energy—can be transformed. In other words, transforming fear into peace and acceptance. And this relates to the good way of dying we talked about earlier.

The last phase in these processes is acceptance. While the other phases (denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and so on) can be explained, this one cannot. Acceptance is very

mysterious, because it involves an irrational leap of faith. Acceptance is not resignation. That's when you give up. It's an extension of depression. Acceptance is luminous and very powerful. People touch this peace and cling to it, because they are about to lose their body.

In these last five years, I've discovered a deeper thing about acceptance. We have a habit of thinking anthropocentrically. That is, when you talk about acceptance, you assume that it's you and I who are accepting. But in the process of dying—and this is something I learned from the children, but didn't quite understand—acceptance happens when transcendence, the universe, accepts you, embraces you, welcomes you. This moment is the key for everything, for a having a good farewell.

Q.: *Why do you think we avoid thinking about death? Do we live with our backs to it?*

T. B.: Fear. Fear of the end. Because death—as a good friend of mine, Dr Enric Benito, who doesn't like this word, says—creates fear by itself. That's why he uses a term of his own, '*morimiento*', to describe the action of dying, because death is a process of transition between this dimension and another.

Q.: *Can this process also be done well with someone who doesn't feel spiritual?*

T. B.: Yes. People who are convinced that the death of the body and the brain is the absolute end of everything can certainly do the process well. But I'm quite convinced that they'll be very surprised minutes after they cease to function.

Q.: *When someone dies, what really dies? Can what stays die, while what leaves does not? Is mourning a selfish sentiment?*

T. B.: No. Grief and sadness are normal. Just as the sadness of the dying is normal. Someone who's dying is already grieving, sad about losing loved ones, etc. What is death? It's the death of form and function, the brain and the motor stops.

Q.: *Would you like to add anything else?*

T. B.: I'd conclude by saying that the most important thing is to normalise the subject of death. Not to create more fear, but to normalise it. We will all die. The sooner we're aware of this fact, the better. The better to live better, to have values that aren't misleading. We have to know how to let things go, to forgive, to keep our lightness. This is the consequence of taking our mortality into account. It's a huge

issue, not philosophical one, but an existential one, about how to live.

Q.: *Isabel Fonseca, a Colombian psychologist, said that we're so worried about death that we don't realise that we die and are reborn a little bit every day, and that we have to experience it differently.*

T. B.: I agree fully. And the Greek word apoptosis—which refers to the season when leaves start falling—scientifically refers to cell death, which happens constantly. And if cells don't die, you have problems. For example, cancer emerges when cells don't die. They accumulate and form tumours. So, death is a necessity. It's change, transformation and growth, all at the same time.

CONTINGUT

La casa és simple,
si és que pot ser
simple la pell
que es fa present
entre el buit de
dins i el de fora.

És ferm, el límit,
si és que pot ser
ferm el teixit
que s'atreveix
a irrompre en el
baterell del no-res.

La casa és simple
i el límit, ferm.

Erigit el continent,
com un cop d'aire que es trenca
queda la feblesa i la
complexitat d'habitar-nos.[11]

11 Joan URPINELL. *Eixam de claus*. Barcelona: Parnass Edicions, 2022.

CONTENT

The house is simple,
if skin can be
simple that makes
itself present
between the emptiness
inside and the emptiness outside.

The boundary is firm,
if the fabric
can be firm
that dares
to penetrate where the
nothingness batters.

The house is simple
and the boundary is firm.

The continent rises
like a burst of air that shatters
and the weakness and complexity
of inhabiting ourselves remains.

AN ANCIENT PRACTICE

Meditation as it is presented to us today, especially in the Western world, is a practice with its origins in the countries of the East. India, Japan, China, Nepal and Tibet are some of the places where the practice of meditation plays a very important cultural role. However, similar practices are also found in other parts of the world, including the West Mediterranean, the Americas, Africa, and other places. Meditation, in its diversity of forms, has been practiced by humankind for millennia and probably goes back to the abyss of yet earlier times.

In the East, meditation is generally framed in the context of religion, and one should also bear in mind the spectrum of religions specific to the East. But beyond official religions, meditation can be regarded as having a religious basis if one considers religious sentiment as that which consciously desires and seeks to promote the welfare, protection and peace of all beings, without the need to label this as one official religion or another.

In this core aspect, we might say that meditation is always healthy for practitioners while at the same time being beneficial for the other, due to the effects it brings about, as we shall see.

In today's highly interdependent world, individuals and nations can no longer resolve many of their problems by themselves. We need one another. It is our collective and individual responsibility to protect and nurture the global family, to support its weaker members, and to preserve and tend to the environment in which we all live.[12]

It is a fact that meditation, among other things, without the need for an explicit will, fosters the religious feeling mentioned above, which inevitably creates a powerful foundation of caring and sheltering, embracing oneself and the other.

Even so, what is the essence of this millenary practice, a practice that provides significant health benefits, that shelters and protects us, and which shares us with the other, always from a basis of well-being?

12 His Holiness the Dalai Lama In: *A Policy of Kindness: An Anthology of Writings by and about Dalai Lama*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1990, pp. 113-114. [*La política de la bondad*. Alicante: Dharma, 2018].

A PROCESS

In the practice of meditation, body and mind become the two core elements that enter into a constant dialogue with one another, a dialogue that fluctuates constantly from one sphere to the other, a dialogue that, by nature, never stops exclusively in either, a dialogue which therefore always has two alternating presences.

We do not live separately in the mind and in the body, because the two do not exist separately. On the contrary, we inhabit the two spheres jointly and interrelatedly, in an ongoing dialogue, like affection and reflection, and again, like feeling that you feel.

Meditation is thus a process that gives rise to a dynamic interplay between body and mind, 'it is a process of concentrating on and drawing your attention to the phenomena of body and mind, without judging them or holding onto them'.[13] Far from falsehoods like 'letting your mind go blank' or 'not thinking about anything', meditation is based on paying attention to the phenomena that occur in the spheres of the body and the mind and to the dialogue that takes place incessantly between them. This attention and concentration are crucial, especially because of the specific manner in which they are understood and approached, a view

13 Lluís NANSEN SALA. *Meditació zen*. Barcelona: Viena Edicions, 2017, p. 55.

that shuns judgmentalism and any possible attachment to it, a view to which one may therefore be unaccustomed.

The nature of the mind is one of thoughts and emotions, of constant dialogue between the more physical and the more mental realm. That is why meditation never tries to stop this natural process—which would be absurd and counterproductive—but observes it attentively and with no intention of making judgement, and then lets it pass and fade away without attachment or aversion.

If one remains aware of the nature of mind, one can only have a capacious and receptive attitude, with compassion towards one's own thoughts and emotions, because this is our most natural, closest and most familiar realm.

EN TRÀNSIT

Origen i destí
idees fonedisses
bressol de melangia.

Tan sols el transitar
mena al sadoll de l'ànima
i ens peix aquest vaivé
de deix umbilical.

Ser enlloc és placentari,
una llar damunt d'un llac.
Així els teus ulls clucs
plaçats al retrovisor.[14]

14 Joan URPINELL. *Eixam de claus.* Barcelona: Parnass Edicions, 2022.

IN TRANSIT

Origin and destiny
fused ideas
cradle of melancholy.

Just the journey leads
to satiety of the soul
and nourishes us with this swaying
of umbilical vestige.

Being nowhere is placental,
a home on a lake.
Thus, your closed eyes
set in the rear-view mirror.

From the outset, the practice of meditation clashes with the dual mind that typifies the everyday of human beings, accustomed to weighing thoughts and emotions, and placing them either on the side of pleasure or, conversely, on the side of displeasure, and remaining attached to one side or the other. Meditating breaks with this dynamic to create one in which calm and clarity find a deep space in which to express, nurture and protect us, and reveals to us a latent nature in the background that dwells in all things, including ourselves.

Rather than think about thoughts, one lets them flow and fade away. Similarly, meditation allows you to adopt an approach of accepting emotions and bodily sensations without thinking about them in terms of labels. Eastern traditions maintain that there is always an interval between one thought and another. In other words, the mental flow is not a continuous process. The aim of meditation is to allow your thoughts to slow down so this interval becomes more and more evident.

At first, thoughts will come one after the other, without interruption, like a rush of water down a mountain. Gradually, as your meditation advances, the thoughts become like the water in a torrent in a narrow gorge. Then they are like a great river slowly meandering down to the sea. And, in

the end, the mind becomes akin to a calm and serene ocean, disturbed only by the occasional wave.[15]

15 Rinpotxé SOGYAL. *El llibre tibetà de la vida i de la mort*. Sabadell: Editorial Dipankara, 1993, p. 95.

A MATTER OF ATTITUDE

Wanting to induce or force meditation is quite pointless; just as it is to try to impose sleep, thirst or hunger upon oneself. We can, however, create conditions and an environment conducive to entering the meditative state, and, from that point, begin the process.

This does not mean that you have to influence or act upon your physical or mental state when you want to meditate, as if one has to be in a certain mood in order to meditate, or that there is an ideal way of being for meditation. Far from that, one must cultivate an attitude that is open and receptive to oneself, an attitude nourished by several vital aspects.

As mentioned earlier, non-judgement is one of the essential qualities of meditation. However, one must bear in mind that it is in the nature of the mind to assess and judge; thus, if one becomes aware that one is acting in this way, one must simply observe it without taking a special interest, and banish any possible intention to stop the judgement or, on the contrary, to nurture it.

DE MI, S'INTUEIX MÉS QUE NO ES VEU.

Però se sent, com en tots vosaltres,
aquell que busca en el so i el silenci,
incansablement, un seu cos que
—com el blau que tot ho colga—
s'aboqui, sense embuts, a sa ànima;
l'afable indret d'alguna nostra
trobada.

Joan Urpinell

OF ME, ONE INTUITS MORE THAN ONE SEES.

But one feels, as in all of you,
the one who searches in sound and silence,
tirelessly, for a body of their own that
—like the blue that covers everything—
pours, unambiguously, into their soul;
the peaceful place of some meeting
our own.

To conceive of oneself as a spectator of one's own mind may seem at first a confusing or perhaps strange idea, since our identification with our own mind tends to be rather emphatic and engrossing. Everything it contains, all the thoughts, sensations and emotions that appear and disappear in it, and our constant appraisal of them, refer us directly to our closest and most vivid self, which always seems to need to categorise our experiences.

It is essential to adopt an impartial approach to the ebb and flow of the mind, which, by its nature, tends to be active. Unhurried and calm non-judgement creates a fertile environment for meditation. In fact, this is indeed the practice of meditation itself, as one discovers and awakens an essential part of the mind that eludes more routine dynamics.

Some Eastern traditions speak of the *beginner's mind* as the mind that observes everything as if it were for the first time, free of preconceived notions, much as a child would. A Japanese master, Shunryu Suzuki, used to say, 'In the beginner's mind there are many possibilities, but in the expert's, there are few'. The concept of the *beginner's mind* can help one to take an open and unbiased view, which will be useful throughout the meditation process.

This view also includes an element of trust in one's own experience when meditating. One must place trust in what happens while meditating, in the experiences of all

areas—body, thoughts, emotions, images, etc.—because this experience is reality, and we have to face it with determination. Meditation requires determination, even if this determination lacks the more directed effort of will.

Like so many things in life, meditation requires striking a delicate *balance*, with the paradox that the desire for this balance can cause us to move away from it. It is a balance between relaxation and alertness, between letting go and being attentive to the phenomena that are occurring. It is a question of positioning ourselves in this back and forth without tipping too far to one side or the other, while at the same time avoiding the urge to seek any kind of balance, because even that is too binding.

Be alert, be alert; but relax, relax. This is an essential aspect of meditation.

BREATHING

Something as fundamental as breathing, which we do passively throughout our lives, is a very powerful bridge between the body and the mind, a link between the two facets of the duality that has immense power and which helps one considerably in the practice of meditation for several reasons that we will now examine.

Being aware of one's breathing allows one to be attentive, on the one hand, to the phenomena of one's physical body and, on the other hand, to one's emotions. One can feel discomfort or pain in some part of the body, tension, tingling, while also feeling sadness, happiness, euphoria, depression, etc. Breathing opens the door to an awareness that helps one to connect with the self.

At the same time, observing one's own breathing provides a point of anchorage within oneself and a certain detachment from one's thoughts and mental activity in general. This detachment, as mentioned, is crucial for deep practice.

Focusing on breathing generally brings one into the present moment, the so-called here and now, since breathing itself is the truest indicator of real time. Breathing and paying attention reveals how real time passes, the time one

perceives biologically and consciously, far removed from the physical time of clocks and telephones.

Developing the ability to focus on breathing provides peaceful concentration and puts one in touch with the inner *self*. By doing this, we make room for a process that brings mental clarity and enables us to reduce stress and deal more creatively with life's possibilities.

Apart from focusing on breathing through passive observation, one can go a step further and focus on how breathing occurs in the different parts of the body. Starting with observation of nasal breathing with the mouth closed, attention is then drawn to breathing in the chest and other areas involved, such as the rib cage, shoulder blades, shoulders, etc. Lastly, focus is drawn to the abdomen, which is considered to be very deep and conducive to meditation. In the words of Zen master Lluís Nansen Salas:

Focusing on abdominal breathing is like diving into the ocean. On the surface, the waves of sensations and thoughts are agitated, while underwater everything is calm and serene. Afterwards, even if you can't avoid coming to the surface to take a breath, even if thoughts and emotions appear again and are distracting, one can become aware and return, again and again, to the calm of deep breathing.

INTERVIEW WITH ZEN MASTER LLUÍS NANSEN SALAS

We are very fortunate to have the presence and proximity of a leading expert in the field of meditation, one who has vast experience in practicing and teaching it. Zen master Lluís Nansen Salas, a graduate in theoretical physics from the Autonomous University of Barcelona, also offers an empirical and objective view of Zen meditation based on scientific experience, which also addresses the health benefits of this age-old practice.

With over 30 years' experience in meditation, Lluís Nansen Salas was ordained a Zen monk in 1996, under the tutelage of Japanese masters Taisen Deshimaru and Yuno Rech. In 2016, he received the Dharma transmission, an unbroken tradition tracing back to the Buddha himself that recognises profound experience in meditation and a solid knowledge of the teachings related to it.

Zen Master Lluís Nansen Salas runs the Dojo Zen Barcelona Kannon with a community-oriented approach, where hundreds of people practise Zen meditation every day to balance the practice with their everyday lives and receive the master's teachings.

QUESTION: *In your vast experience, what do you think meditation shows us and teaches us about human beings, life and death?*

ZEN MASTER LLUÍS NANSEN SALAS: Zen meditation makes us realise precisely the impermanence of all things, the birth and disappearance of all things, material and immaterial. Everything from a thought to your life is temporary, not permanent. When you truly understand this through the practice of meditation, you don't see it as something negative, rather you come into harmony with this reality. This allows you to be free, to free yourself from your conditioning and suffering.

Q.: *Can meditation offer experiences that bring one closer to the nature or to the fact of death?*

Z. M. L. N. S.: Practising meditation regularly can give you experiences of all kinds, especially in intensive meditation retreats. Meditation can help you connect with past lives, but that's not aim of Zen practice. So, if they come, you should let them go, not be attached to them, not identify with them, not turn them into a memory, a mental fabrication. The practice of Zen meditation goes beyond life and death.

Q.: *We understand human life as a state between birth and death, between a (physical) not-self and another not-self. Do you think meditation connects us in some way with these not-selves, the self before life and the self after life?*

Z. M. L. N. S.: Meditation connects us with what is beyond the self, beyond being a self separate from others and from the universe. This beyond self is also beyond the not-self. That's why a Zen master once said, 'To be is not to be; not to be is to be'. If we identify with the self, we are not being our true self. And, if we abandon the self (the separate self), we find our true self, which means being with all existences and the entire universe. This true self is beyond our limited life, beyond our small self, beyond our birth and death, and we can connect with it while we are alive.

Q.: *Would you like to highlight any personal experiences of any kind that you've had while meditating, either during meditation or afterwards?*

Z. M. L. N. S.: *Peak experiences* can occur and we have to recognise them as such and then let them pass, as one does with everything. For example, in the course of a day of intensive Zen meditation, you might have an intense feeling of pain. If you do not escape from the present and remain immobile and in meditation, you may experience the

disappearance of the pain/pleasure, inner/outer duality of the body and so the abandonment of the ego. At that moment, the liberation of body and mind becomes real.

Q.: *Considering your scientific background, what health benefits does the practice of meditation provide?*

Z. M. L. N. S.: Zen meditation not only soothes anxiety and cures depression, but it also has a regulating effect on the whole body. It brings the body back into its natural state of balance through its effect on the deepest part of the brain, the most primitive brain, which regulates the body's organs. What better medicine is there than this? Continuous Zen meditation has been shown to have an impact on brain plasticity. In other words, the brain changes shape with years of constant practice. It's revolutionary.

Maybe we should rethink the concept of illness here. Who is really ill, the person whose body is ill, but who has freed themselves from attachments, or the person who is unable to be happy now or ever? Zen meditation is the gateway to true happiness. By ceasing to feel separate from others and from the universe as a whole, we cease to fear for our health or anything else.

Q.: *Do you think meditation can help with illness? If so, how?*

Z. M. L. N. S.: Zen meditation, when practised with faith and trust, helps one, first of all, to observe, ‘What’s happening to me?’, to know how to identify what the problem is, what the real origin of the illness is. And secondly, to accept that I am ill. I cannot deny it. I am not deluding myself. I accept reality as it is. Thirdly, to stop fighting, to stop rebelling against this reality, to stop feeling the illness as an injustice and to stop constantly saying to yourself ‘Why me?’ This helps you to forgive yourself and to stop feeling guilty if the illness brings up these emotions, and also to forgive others.

The emergence of compassion from Zen meditation is very healing. If you experience illness, meditation enables you to accept your weakness, your impermanence, and to use it as a path to liberation. This alone serves as an example for others. We can practise compassion towards others. We can give to others, because we do not feel separate from them. Instead of considering it a curse, you can consider your illness, or your difference, as an opportunity to awaken your true self.

MUSHOTOKU

Al peu
del saltant
d'aigua
soc pedra.
Ara
—freda fosca—
m'embolcalla
la gebrada
i l'insecte
em defuig,
adés
—càlid jorn—
em vesteix
la calitja
i l'insecte
em deleja.
Un núvol
engoleix
un falcó,
un llum
s'encén
a la vila.
Al peu
del saltant
d'aigua
pedra soc.

Joan Urpinell

MUSHOTOKU

At the foot
of the waterfall
I am stone.
Now
—cold darkness—
the frost
envelopes me
and the insect
shuns me,
then
—warm day—
the haze
dresses me
and the insect
longs for me.
A cloud
engulfs
a hawk,
a light
is lit
in the village.
At the foot
of the waterfall
I am stone.

REFLECTIONS ON MEDITATION AND ACCOMPANIMENT by Laura Casadó

The aim of meditation isn't to not experience emotions, but rather not to be a slave to them. In the mind, emotions trigger motion, but everything depends on what that motion is like, and that is exactly what we work on in meditation sessions. There is no point in trying to block or avoid emotions and thoughts, because they inevitably appear in your mind. When distressing emotions enter the mind, they make us uncomfortable and cause us to suffer. But if you let them pass the moment they arise, you can experience all kinds of situations very differently.

At first it's difficult to respond to an emotion when it arises, but as one becomes accustomed to the practice of meditation, this ability becomes second nature. The aim, then, is to increase your sensitivity to the subtlety of emotions so you can control them before they create a conflict.

There are three facets that develop mindfulness which have their roots in Buddhist philosophy. The first is the philosophical position, which is clearly a constructivist stance. This tells us that, as people untrained in meditation, most of the things we perceive from the outside and most of the experiences we have internally are wrong.

The second is the belief that one can fine tune the inner compass through meditative practice, so that eventually one can experience the true nature of mind and reality.

The third is the consequence of the first two, when perception is no longer tainted and we transform our personality, enabling us to accumulate and reduce suffering. In other words, through experience-based practice, by training the mind, one gains a clearer view of the different states of consciousness, which allows one to discover the essence of reality.

All the work of accompanying in the death process, starting with the work of caring, is based on three central tenets: presence, compassion and transcendence.

In particular, I would like to emphasise *compassion*, a term that is often misunderstood and is therefore rather neglected in our cultural environment. It is important to understand it and to differentiate it from *pity*.

Sogyal Rinpoche, in *The Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, comments, Everything I have been saying up until now about caring for the dying can perhaps be summed up in two words: love and compassion. What is compassion? It's not simply a sense of sympathy or caring for the person suffering, not simply a warmth of heart toward the person before you, or a sharp clarity of recognition of their needs and pain; it is also a sustained and practical determination to do whatever is

possible and necessary to help alleviate their suffering. Compassion is not true compassion unless it is active.

The compassion we're referring to here is not an emotion, but an action on behalf of the other to alleviate their suffering.

In the course of the meditation meetings with the group, compassion begins with inner stirring, which is then transformed into 'caring for the other'. This involves putting one's heart into being there with the other and alleviating their pain and suffering. It means offering our full presence, and, from there, empowering them to discover themselves by connecting with their own core.

Throughout all the sessions with cancer patients at Bellvitge Hospital, the meditation and work focused on helping the patients to understand that they were not alone in the process, that their idea of being alone and separated from others was only a dream from which they needed to awake in order to find their wholeness as a person. This is why the process of non-identification in one's approach to meditation is so important: not believing the reality our mind makes us identify with.

One could say that state of calm may arise once the mind has learned to be free of the notion of *subject-object*, once it can remain calm and clear for some time. This knowledge comes naturally; it is not dependent on words or analytical reflection. It arises from direct, naked perception.

This compassion is a result of the union between the self and other human beings. One can transmit confidence and security in this state to the extent that one, as a companion, has at some point experienced in oneself the depth that is perceived when perception stops and one exists without time, when one has gone through a place of suffering and has seen how consciousness continues and expands. In a way, one could say that compassion is the result of the practice of silence.

In this process, the importance of cultivating one's spiritual domain must also be stressed, as mentioned earlier, compassion and presence must be nurtured.

The spiritual realm is the realm of person-to-person meeting. The meeting of the personal and spiritual sets us on symmetrical footing and confronts us with our human condition. That is why it is so difficult. That is why we face a very important personal and professional challenge. When we speak of spirituality, we understand it as the deep and intimate aspiration of the human being to a vision of life and reality that integrates, connects, transcends and gives meaning to existence. We also associate it with qualities that foster love and peace.

Although spirituality is an innate evolutionary capacity as well as an integral part of our existence, not everyone develops it in the same way, nor does everyone have the same awareness. This awakening is the fruit of the specific evolution of each individual. It involves the emergence of a

new sense, which could be called intuition, and which is associated with a series of special moments; moments of great suffering, of mourning or approaching death; moments of great happiness and love; of coming into contact with beauty, art and nature, such as in prayer or contemplation.

Spirituality is a movement of personal searching that unfolds in three directions: inward, *meaning*-oriented; outward, *connection*; and beyond, *transcendence*.

EXERCISES USED IN MEDITATION SESSIONS AT THE CATALAN INSTITUTE OF ONCOLOGY

All of the meditation sessions conducted at the hospital are based on Tibetan Buddhism, Vajrayana. Although the theory of Buddhism is not explained in the sessions, this is the foundation the whole approach rests on.

Mindfulness is a tool used to train oneself in meditation and introspection. The manner in which it functions is subject to fluctuations. It varies in intensity and cannot be produced artificially. During introspection, practitioners must be aware that it is the nature of the mind to move forward in order to receive the next object that comes into awareness, to focus on it for a moment, and to abandon it in the next instant. The exercise of touching and letting go is constantly practised.

Techniques are also used to achieve a state of calmness of mind. This allows practitioners to reach greater depth and increase the quality of the state of calm. Its effectiveness lies in repetition and continuity. A command is given to the mind to obey for a short time. It is this very simple thing that serves to bring one closer to state of calm. It is about the practitioner leading the mind, instead of the mind leading the practitioner wherever it wants.

The following are some of the techniques that we've developed:

Breathing and counting: Practitioners ask the mind to observe their breathing, each breathing cycle is counted from one to ten, with each inhalation and exhalation considered as one. Counting is done with each exhalation. When a cycle of ten breaths is completed, counting starts again from one.

Natural breathing: The body is kept relaxed, with the palms face down on the knees. The chest is relaxed, breathing in through the nose, naturally, and inhaling a little deeper, filling the navel area. On exhaling the first three times, the fingers are extended with each breath. With the first breath, one imagines physical impurities leaving the body through the fingers and dissolving into space. On the second breath, one imagines inner demons and obstacles, such as nervousness, depression and anxiety exiting through the fingers and dissolving into space. On the third breath, one imagines all ignorance, hatred and attachment exiting and dissolving into space. The next inhalations fill the lower abdomen.

Resting in the pause: This technique entails keeping the body relaxed and breathing naturally. On exhaling, and prior inhaling, the practitioner checks a natural pause has taken place. The practitioner rests during the pause and, when a breath is taken again naturally, they do not pay particular attention to the inhalation. Then the practitioner

continues to rest their mind in the newly opened space. When they breathe in again, the space becomes larger and larger.

Blue light in the heart: The practitioner visualises a very small blue light in the centre of their heart. It is the size of a lentil and blue like the sky. The light begins to expand. If the mind goes to sleep, one visualises a white light between the eyebrows to wake it. The light can also be visualized in the *hara*[16] to help achieve a state of calm.

Other techniques are also used, such as moving meditation, meditating while observing an object, visualising the flame of a candle, then visualising it between the eyebrows, observing the tip of one's nose, and so on. All of these help to work on holding one's attention on an object for prolonged periods. This serves to increase attention.

So, one can say that meditation is a very effective method to improve mental concentration, since it stimulates the production of beta, alpha, theta, delta and gamma waves in the brain, which are related to relaxation, calmness, creativity, better memory, problem solving and insight, as well as other aspects.

16 The *hara*, a Japanese word, is the abdominal area of the body. It is considered the body's centre of gravity, gifted with great strength and capacity for will and direction, reflecting the energy of one's different vital organs.

INTERVIEWS WITH CATALAN INSTITUTE OF ONCOLOGY PATIENTS

#1

QUESTION: *Can you tell us how you felt when you found out about your diagnosis, and how it changed your perception of life?*

RESPONSE: Well, when I was diagnosed with cancer, I was very afraid of sinking to the bottom. And I was scared. I just wanted to go into the oncology system here, to have all the tests performed, to have them check out everything and start ruling things out. Of all the bad things, let it be the least bad one. Thank God, it turned out it was only my breast. From that point on, I internalised it. I was able to relax a little, of all the bad things, it wasn't so bad. And, from there, I changed therapies. I started to do reiki, another type of meditation. And I found these therapies, meditating and inner meditation, helped me a lot to face fear, life and so on. And it changed me. I mean, it really changed my whole way of thinking starting from when I was diagnosed with cancer—which I no longer have since I've had surgery.

Q: *What were your most recurrent thoughts? What came to mind most often after you were diagnosed?*

R.: The most recurrent thoughts I had when I was diagnosed were living or dying, so the time I had left in this world. It was hard. It was a difficult thought to live with. And that's where I've changed. I've changed. I've driven the fear out of me. And I've prepared myself, especially spiritually, with meditation and all these different therapies, so that if I stay in this world, I can enjoy myself. I can be happy, spread happiness to everyone around me, and not be afraid. And if I go, I'll leave ready for change. Since I believe in many things, and in the universe, I think that energy doesn't run out. It continues beyond the earthly plane we're on.

Q.: *How has your scale of values, your priorities, changed due to your diagnosis?*

R.: My scale of values, and my priorities, have changed so that what you're used to experiencing in a materialistic, stressed-out way, thinking about work and all the things you have to pay for... money, all that stuff, I now see as superfluous, unimportant. What matters is health, friendship, family and so on. I'm going to cry [smiles]. That's the most important thing. So, it's a drastic change of my understanding how things should be. You could say it's the old

way of thinking and the old way of life, I think. And we've forgotten them. In the old days, we talked more, we felt more about family, friends, friendships, your environment, etc. And believing in whatever one chose to believe in, spiritually, made people come together. And I think we lived better, with less technology and, above all, without stress. That's what I think made me change completely, and what I'm not going to change now. It's not that I won't go shopping again. I will go shopping, but it's very different. For me, what's important is my family, my friends... that they're happy and well. And that the transition through this process that I'm going through is also as easy as possible for them, that it's not traumatic for them, because the trauma belongs to me and the people near me who love me. That's the most important thing for me.

Q.: *How has your perception of your everyday life, and of time, changed?*

R.: Of time and my day-to-day life... the present. I don't think about the future, only the present. Getting up every day and enjoying the day, the present, and the things you've got to do every day. If you're more tired, you do less. If you're more active, you do more. And allow yourself the peace and the wisdom to say, 'Today I am tired, today I feel', 'Today I'm active and I'll take on whatever comes my way'.

But always in the present. I don't think about the past or the future. I don't spend energy on those things.

Q.: *And in view of what you've said, do you think you can control your state of mind?*

R.: Yes, I think so. Sometimes it can be more difficult. Or there are people who will find it more difficult. I'm managing. Here, with meditation, I'm having a bit of a hard time because I've been doing it very little. But with reiki, for example, which is another form of meditation—and, the truth is it does help you to feel calm, to have inner peace, to see things from another point of view that gives you calm and peace, more than anything. Some days you get angry as well. We're human and there are things that... but they're minor.

Q: *Did you meditate before?*

R.: No. I'd read some things and quite a few books on this subject, but I hadn't done it. I had to find the right moment. I didn't know how to start. I looked at it as something I couldn't do, and so on. And, at the beginning of this stage of my life, I discovered it. And honestly, I'm really glad because... I should have started before. And I encourage other people to do it, because it gives you a lot of satisfaction from the peace and tranquillity. You can't imagine the

tranquillity that meditation gives you and the fact of being spiritually connected with yourself.

Q.: *And besides the tranquillity, how else do you think meditation helps you? Apart from being aware of the present moment, what else does meditation do for you?*

R.: I'm discovering things through meditation. It is a very broad subject and I am sure that I'll be learning things until the day I leave, since there's always something new to learn. There is always someone who tells you something new, something you didn't know, that works well for them. Reading, meditating, etcetera, moving forward and learning new things every day, in keeping with this philosophy.

Q: *What meditation exercises do you think help you the most?*

R.: I'm finding it hard to immerse myself in it, because it's really hard for me to breathe. It's complicated for me. Breathing isn't that easy. It's complicated. And if I get nervous, it's even harder. Maybe if I'm at home and I'm lying down, my breathing is more fluid. Here, it's hard for me and it slowly falls apart. It's not something you learn in a day. It takes time, and every day you gain a little more wisdom, and it takes less time to reach your goal. But it is worth it.

Q.: *What changes have you noticed in yourself after taking part in the meditation workshops?*

R.: Meeting people. When you come, you don't know anyone and you immediately make a family. A special family bond is created that, no matter how few days you're there, lasts on forever. You say whatever you have to say, because you open up to the people with you at the time. You're not ashamed. You're not afraid. You have nothing. You let yourself go and be yourself from the inside. You let it out, which, for me, is the most beautiful thing. So, you don't hide, and they don't hide from you, and you make a bond. I've felt this and I've only had three sessions. And I'm very content and looking forward to September, since we're on holiday now. This therapy should be obligatory for everyone. For people in transition from cancer, chemotherapy, who have these fears, it should be a must. A psychologist is very good, but this should be mandatory.

Q: How would you describe your state of mind when you enter and leave the class?

R.: I go in happy and I come out happier. My mood is always great, always very positive. When I come in, I'm not coming to see if the therapy or meditation we're going to do is

going to go well for me or not. I come in, I do it, and when we leave, it's to go out for a couple of beers, we can't really do that, but it creates a very nice bond and you feel like sitting outside with the people who are there with you going through the meditation. That's what I feel.

Q.: *Do you think positive thoughts and having a relaxed attitude can have a positive effect on your health?*

R.: Absolutely. Having a positive attitude when you've got an illness, whatever it may be, is fifty percent or more. It's very important. You can't give in when you're dealing with an illness, because then you'll be distressed, you'll suffer, and you won't let your body do its best. Your cells remain negative. The most crucial thing in any illness, especially the one I have now, is positivity and joy, even if it seems contradictory. You have to be happy. You have to laugh and be really cheerful. When the time comes, you have to face it with all the joy in the world, even if it seems contradictory. I'm content. I'm happy. I feel 'beautiful' and I'm moving forward with positivity. You have to live in the present with all the positivity and joy you can muster. Not crying. You can't live crying, since you'll surely wind up even sicker in the end, if not from that, then from something else. That's what I think.

Q.: *Did you think about death before you were diagnosed? And what do you think about it now?*

R.: Yes, I thought about it. But, as I said before, the priorities were work, bills, shopping, etc., and you forget the essential and important things in life. Love is the engine of life. Love is what makes me move right now. 'It is the axis of my body, my existence and my life'. There is nothing else. It is love. Love for my family and love for the whole world. If you exude love from your body, people are happier. There are a lot of people who are bitter and sad. They're not looking for love or they don't know how to find love. It's about finding love and diving into it. That's all there is. The other things are necessary. They have to be done. But they don't have to be a priority. If you are good to yourself... meditating or doing whatever you can, and you put love above everything else, and you're happy and content, the rest will come naturally, fluidly. It won't be hard. It won't make you bitter. This is very important, but we seem to have forgotten it. It might seem like love is only the love of couples, of boyfriends and girlfriends, or parents and children. But it's not. Love is animals, nature. It's what surrounds you. It's when you go outside and go across the park here, with its grass and four pine trees, and you say, 'How beautiful! What a joy to pass through here. I'm so lucky. This park, small though it may be,

fills me with love.' For me it's very important. It's what made me change as well.

It's not that I didn't attach any importance to death. It's just that it wasn't in my day-to-day thoughts. And when you face it, you realise love is great, that it's very important and that it's essential for life. With that love, little by little you open yourself up more and more. It fills your body, your heart and your inner light. You notice how light flows out from all over your body. And, that light, which is love, you realise it's joy. And people notice what you transmit with the love that flows out of you.

#2

QUESTION: *How did you feel when you learned your mother had cancer?*

RESPONSE: I already had a feeling. And when she told us, I thought 'the day's come when it had to happen'. It was a mixture of emotions, absolutely. It was as if I knew. And, at the same time, I wanted to cry. I was angry. It was like an explosion. For me the toughest day was the day I came here to the centre. That's when the reality hit me the most, when I felt I was feeling it. But when she said it, it was 'Okay. Maybe

nothing will happen...' I'm crying, I'm upset, I'm fine, etcetera, all the emotions.

I'm quite realistic. I try to accept things as they come. So, the day we came to the centre, the first visit... The idea was that it was just in the chest. And, of course, then all of a sudden, they say, 'We're going to have a look at everything'. I asked myself, 'Everything? Why?' At that moment, I was really scared, because when you understand that it could possibly be in the other parts of your body, and you can't control it, then the fear comes out. I remember holding it in while we were with the doctor. When we left, I looked up so it wouldn't be obvious that I had really been affected, because I wanted to be by her side. And I left the clinic and started to cry. And I said to her, 'Mum, you see I'm crying. Together until the end'. I told her that we had to change our attitude, we had to rise above. 'High vibrations, light. I am Ms Reiki and Ms Energies.' I said to her, 'Reiki, psychologist, whatever. Something to vibrate strongly. We can't be low. Because that will eat us up. And we can't live in sadness'.

Q.: *How has this diagnosis changed your day-to-day life?*

R.: It's helped me in my day-to-day life. It sounds a bit selfish, but it's 'making the best of the situation'. I was going through a bad time emotionally. And it's like life said to me,

‘Get a grip, this is important’. And then—I had returned to my parents’ house—I felt that I was in the time and place I needed to be. Suddenly, it was also hard to see my mother so vulnerable, to see that she’s a person and that she is afraid. Feeling that I was the one who had to help her, support her and be there with her gave me strength. I saw a part of me that I could never have imagined. I thought I would be crying in a corner and I was not. ‘Together with her until the end’.

Q.: *Why did you decide to take part in the meditation workshop, and what did you think of the first session?*

R.: I’m a believer in the whole meditation thing. To me, everything introspective, energetic, meeting each other, all those teachings enrich everyone. At times like this, it helps to nourish a part of us we never nourish in the culture we live in. So, it’s a disease and it’s there, and through meditation... I think it should be compulsory in all hospitals. Meditation is key for people finding themselves. To come here and see how everyone is saying it, since, in the end, it’s a process of information, and everyone’s got their time. It helps us to accept and respect each other’s times. You learn to accept yourself through meditation, to respect yourself, to believe in yourself and to love yourself.

Q.: *Do you think your state of mind is able to influence your mother's state of mind?*

R.: Yes. But you have to consider how each person has worked on themselves. For me, with where I am and what I've worked on, it's easier for me to handle the situation. But, for example, at home there are three of us living together. You can't ask more of my father. I'm convinced that my way of handling it and supporting her has helped her to do it, to meditate. Since I can't help her, I can be there for her. If she doesn't want to, then it won't work. But in my case, it's been easy. She's listened, digested and reacted. She's taken action, done something. In other words, in the end, it's been positive and I recognise that.

Q.: *How do you think meditation helps apart from knowing oneself?*

R.: Now that I'm acquainted with it, meditation helps me in my daily life. You have to adapt it to the world you live in. I mean, I live in a society with a different pace of life than in, for example, La Garrotxa. So, with my lifestyle, it's about finding my own mechanism, adapting meditation for me, using its foundations. For me, meditation means stopping the ego for a moment, the automatisms, and connecting with yourself.

And then you suddenly see the simplicity of life. Life is simple. We complicate it because we're in the mind. And we believe it. And we fall back into negative thinking. But no, let's stop for a moment, listen to ourselves and ask, 'Okay, what's going on?' Reality is what it is. I can't change it, whether it's cancer or anything else. I've gotten very upset and been really emotional when, for example, I couldn't find my keys. 'No big deal. Just make a copy and that's it. See how easy it is?' But if you fall into being upset and feeling guilty... Meditation means stopping for a moment and seeing the simplicity of things. When I was little, I imagined there was a monster behind the door. Then, since I believed it, I saw it. And so it goes every day. And it happens to everyone. Meditation means sensing there is no monster. If you stop, the mind flows to something else, a song, for example. Refusal and judgement are in the mind. We are our own worst enemy, a person against themselves.

Q.: *What changes have you noticed since your mother attended the meditation workshops?*

R.: My mother used to be very active. I wouldn't say she was aggressive, but she was a warrior, let's say. It's a good outlook, since that's how she's facing her process. She's not doing it out of grief or self-pity. Meditation has restored her

balance. And, for example, my father has his own way of being. He's of a certain age and manages as best he can. She's had to slow down because she's had to listen to how everyone's dealing with the process, and she has to accept it. I think meditation has helped her to find balance and relax a bit, because she was in a in a state of shock. For me, who was by her side, it was easy.

Q.: *Do you think that meditation, which has helped her to function in a calmer manner, has made her more loving and kinder towards herself?*

R.: Yes. Yes, being kinder and allowing for moments of calm affects others in the same way, and so it helps them to have moments of calm as well. All these meditation processes like introspection, calm, listening to oneself, meditation is being in oneself, have a mirror effect. In other words, if I give myself space, I give others space; if I respect myself, I respect others. It's a trade, if I'm kinder and more loving towards myself in my process, I will be the same way with the processes of others. Meditation is about reconnecting with one's essence, and not being rooted in the ego, which is the personality.

Q.: *How would you describe your state of mind when you go into class compared to when you leave?*

R.: I feel a notable difference between when I go in and when I come out. As far as the pace is concerned, there's a clear difference. I go in with a very disciplined, even rigid attitude. But as I meditate, I relax. I'm with myself, listening to myself, in my processes. And I realise that I am letting go of my judgement. I relax, and then in the last meditation is when I notice myself the most. It's when I connect with myself the most, without judging myself, and I allow myself to feel myself. When it's over, I feel that everything is love, because I love myself. That's how I experience it.

Q.: *How have you coped with your situation in terms of the subject of death, which is always difficult to face?*

R.: When I hear the word 'cancer', I think, 'It's dying. It's going away.' In my case, it's been kind. I've been able to listen throughout the entire process, everything from information about the situation to acceptance, but without resigning myself. I remember when my mother had to go in and have tests done. I spoke to her in a direct, realistic way, and said, 'What are you going to you do? Are you going to shave your hair off? Are you going to wear a headscarf? Are you

going to you wear a wig? Let's talk about it. Let's make it feel like a normal situation.' I spoke plainly, using the terms as is, 'cancer', 'tumour', etcetera. I didn't hide the words, because that's a way of hiding the disease. It is a process. And, for me, it has a meaning, which makes me examine what it's doing for me. If you look at life through the lens of victimhood and misfortune, you learn nothing, and you live through sorrow. Death exists because there is life and vice versa. I believe that the soul is immortal, so there's a little more magic. I think things happen for a reason. Another thing that works for me a lot is humour. I would say to her, 'Since you've got the cancer card, you don't have to clean the kitchen'. I use the word to accept that anything can happen. We don't know. We have to understand that we can't control anything and just relax. It's about accepting and observing the process. In my case, it's been kind. We haven't had to admit her and there's been no terminal situation. With meditation, you learn to be in the present moment. Doing things in the present offers you many gifts.

3

QUESTION: *Can you tell me how you felt when you were diagnosed?*

RESPONSE: I felt very bad, very weak, because four months earlier I'd lost my husband—also to cancer, although in his case, it was different because it was terminal and he couldn't have surgery or anything. But I equated mine with his, even though I was told mine had a good prognosis. And I fell into a pit I couldn't get out of.

Q.: *Did it change how you perceive life?*

R.: I perceived life as a very deep well. But with two meditation sessions, what I've done today—that's very few—I realised there are moments when my mind is no longer in that well. But then it comes back from time to time. Even in such a short time, I see it's helping me a lot.

Q: *What were your most recurrent thoughts?*

R.: The thoughts that kept running through my mind were that, even though I was being treated, I, my mind, imagined that it would be futile, because of what I'd

experienced. Now I realise that if I'm well—they've given me a good prognosis—I, who have to get through the treatment, I'm well thanks to what I'm doing, thanks to the meditation I've started doing. Otherwise, my thoughts would always be in the same place, in a loop I couldn't get out of.

Q.: *Were you afraid?*

R.: Yes, I was very scared. When I was diagnosed, the truth is they didn't tell me anything. They thought it, the cancer, could be in other places. And I had been feeling a bit bad for a while. Despite the grief I was going through, I wasn't going to meditate.

They told me they didn't know what they might find. But even after I had the operation and they saw there was no metastasis or anything, I continued to think negatively. My thinking was negative all the time, until, as I said, I came here, to the meditation workshops.

Q.: *Meditation has helped you...*

R.: A lot. I've seen that, over this week—even if it's in bits and pieces, because, of course, I can't just suddenly get all this stuff out of my life, I'm aware that won't happen—but I can concentrate on myself and, for now. I can be me. And

I'm beginning see there's more to life, not just what brought me here.

Q.: *How has your scale of values, your priorities, changed since you received the diagnosis?*

R.: I was very scared from the diagnosis until the operation. After the operation, I hoped I wouldn't have to do chemotherapy. But when they called me to tell me that I would have to do some sessions as a precaution, I sank down even lower. After that, I had a really hard time coping with the chemotherapy. But as I said, this week—I went yesterday—I've dealt with it much more calmly. I saw there were other people who were there with me. And then I said to myself that 'It's not just me. I can get through this.' But if I hadn't come to these meditation sessions, I don't know when I would have come out of that well. I would find my way out—I suppose, or not—but I'm not sure when that would happen. I never get tired of repeating that this; these meditation sessions are helping me a lot.

Q.: *Do you feel you place more importance on some things now that you couldn't see before?*

R.: Yes. One of the things I find more important is that I'm about to have a new grandchild. Although I'd been very

excited about the three previous ones, I wasn't about this one. It's not that I wasn't, it's just that I didn't think about him. Now I'm looking forward to him more. I'm thinking about the months ahead. I'm thinking about seeing him, etcetera. When they gave me the news, it was as if he wasn't part of me. But now he is. I'm starting to feel that way.

Q.: *Has your perception of your day-to-day life also changed?*

R.: It's changing. I have moments when I can't say that I don't feel that I'm not sinking. But then I start to think about the meditation. And I stop for maybe fifteen minutes. And then I become more relaxed again, because the tension I had was making my muscles ache. My face, my whole body ached and I thought, 'I must have something.' And now I realise—like this morning when I came here—that I'm fine. I feel relaxed. I feel really good.

But I know that any moment in the day I can start to feel down, since I've only been in this for a little while. And I've to go through a whole process, but I'm very happy. What I don't like is that now, in August, I've got to stop.

Q.: *Do you think that you're learning to control your state of mind through meditation?*

R.: Yes. That's what I didn't know how to do. I didn't know how to control myself. I've always been a very nervous person by nature, even without being ill. And now with all this, I haven't felt that this capacity for self-control is mine. But, with time, I'm seeing I'm getting better every day. I notice an improvement. At the very least, at some point in the day, I'm able to laugh, because I didn't even know how to laugh anymore.

Q.: *Had you ever done meditation before?*

R.: No, never. I had never really given it any thought. In fact, I'd been told to do it before, because it's been three months now, but I didn't dare come. I thought it might be bad for me since I didn't know what it was. But one day, on my way to doctor's, I said to myself, 'I'll take a photo [of the number] and call them today'. And I did it. It's a shame that I missed two classes, one because of a misunderstanding about the time, and the other because it was a public holiday. I've only had two. But, with only two, I can already see what it's done to me. Imagine when I've had more.

That's what I think. This keeps me going. Before, I was always behind, far behind. It helps me to reach a goal: to try, even if it's really hard, to move on to a new life. For me it's like starting life anew.

Q.: *What exercises do you think help you the most?*

R.: The exercise that helps me the most is the one that relaxes me, the one where you put a dot on your forehead. I'm also starting today, since the other day, the first time, I didn't get too deeply into the exercise where a light is projected from your heart. Today it was hard for me, because, sometimes it went away. But I see I'm getting it. In the first session I didn't get it, but I had only started not long before. The mind exercise, from the point to the top of the head, and the connection the teacher pointed out was something I also really loved.

Q.: *What other changes have you noticed in yourself since coming to the meditation workshops?*

R.: This week, I've noticed when my kids call to ask me how I'm doing... Before, my answer was always to start crying. Everything was negative. They told me to think positively, not to think that there was something wrong with me, that something had already been taken away from me. They told me to think I had to heal myself. I never had a proper conversation. I always thought about the bad things and I wound up making them feel bad. This week I noticed that, although there are times I want to go back to 'my point'. I can draw a line and ask them other things. And they'll talk

about other stuff. They had tried before, but I always wound up bringing it back to the same thing.

They helped me as much as they could and I didn't give back any light, any chance for them to feel a bit better. Everything was always totally negative. I've changed this week and they've noticed.

Q.: *Do you think positive thoughts and having a more relaxed attitude can have a positive effect on your health?*

R.: Of course. My operation was a colon operation. And, for me, when I get nervous, even my stomach knots up. It's like I can't control it, and I never thought it was because of what was happening to me. Now that I'm relaxed, I see that I'm normal and my stomach is not in knots. Everything is quite normal. I'd recommend it to everyone. It's helping me a lot.

Q.: *Would you recommend meditation to other people?*

R.: Yes, to everyone. Meditation was something that had never crossed my mind. In fact, when people told me about it, I didn't give it much thought or consideration. Now I see it's very important, especially for those who need it. I read about meditation here, in the oncology clinic. In my case, nobody recommended it to me. Here, in the oncology

clinic, I was referred to a psychologist. But I see that what's helping me most is the meditation.

Q.: *Before you were diagnosed, had you thought about death?*

R.: Yes. Yes, I'd thought about death before. Especially because it was four months after my husband had died. And, at the time, I thought that my process would be the same, the same illnesses and so forth. But it was completely different, like the doctors told me from the outset. You can never compare what happened to my husband to what I had. But, like I said, my mind couldn't get out of the loop, and I didn't know how to get out of it either. I was very afraid. And afterwards as well. There are times when I'm afraid. But this, the meditation, is helping me to see that I don't have to be afraid. A lot of people have got better. Others haven't. But still, many have. There's the same chance that tomorrow a person who does not have cancer will get it as there is for me to get it. That's what I want to think. This is what comes into my mind now, the positive. But this is since I've been doing meditation, not before.

#4

QUESTION: *Can you tell me how you felt when you found out about your diagnosis?*

RESPONSE: I was shocked, because I was actually with my husband when we realised that there was something between the two of us. My cancer is right in this upper left breast area. I come from a family where I've already dealt with cancer, and I've helped three patients through it—that's the word we like to use instead of sick people. And, of course, I rushed to the doctor and I said, 'You have to see me right now because I've got cancer and I know where it is'. And, sure enough, the doctor confirmed it immediately.

I got into a dynamic where everyone listened to me, where everyone treated me really well and I was able to do all my tests. Also, I went for my biopsy on my own. I didn't let anyone come with me, because I thought I was strong enough and ready for it. And I remember when the doctor was doing the biopsy, he said to me, 'I'm sending you to the other hospital so we can operate sooner there and we can take it out sooner'. I asked him, 'You already know it's malignant, right? And he replied, 'No, no. They'll call you back in fifteen days...'. But no. They called me back in a week.

The doctor at first hospital thought the tumour would be bigger and sent me to the oncology department for an MRI in addition to the CAT scans I'd already had at the other hospital. And because of that, they found out the type of cancer I had was of a size that at the time was of interest in the area of European research. And that's when I was admitted—thanks to my angels, that's how I think of it—to this new treatment, which I think is the future, because my diagnosis was surgery, chemotherapy and radiotherapy, in other words, a full course of treatment. It's invasive breast cancer, so you have to be quick.

Today I can say it's half what it was. It's been reduced by half with four sessions... in three months. Very good.

Q.: *In general, did it change how you perceive life?*

R.: Well, I suddenly discovered there was a lot of pent-up anger inside me. It wasn't so much about my environment. I just didn't know how to handle my emotions well. It's shameful that I would get angry at people for no reason, firstly, because they didn't deserve it, and secondly, because the feeling of derision is awful. You get the feeling that you're spewing out your emotions on someone you shouldn't be spewing them on.

I immediately sought psychological help at the oncology clinic. That's when I found out that here, at the

oncology clinic, we had the possibility to do meditation, as well as the—I call it—psycho-oncology reading, which I also attend. And they also do art therapy. The people who run that workshop are really wanted me to tell you about it since they'd like to be interviewed.

Thanks to all the support here in the oncology centre, I've found myself again. Thanks to meditation, thanks to being able to talk to other patients. Because cancer is a curious thing, as I always say—I've only had surgery once—that cancer awakens a lot of fear. For example, we've got a grandmother who is 89 years old at home. And I had to tell her it's not contagious, not to worry, and that we can talk about it. Cancer is sort of a nasty disease.

What we really need to do is to see that we're really lucky to live in the 21st century, where this whole thing has been studied for years, and that it's not a rare disease. Every cancer is specific to each person, to each individual. And what they can do for me will be completely different from what they can do for someone else. Because the good thing about this whole oncology system is that they tailor it to each person. We know what drugs work. But they have to be tailored to your weight, the stage you're in, etcetera. I mean they do everything very carefully, and you always have to rush. That's why prevention is very important.

So, what now? How can we as patients manage it? Well, by centring ourselves. And what works very well is

meditation. I won't tell you to go for a walk, because your brain is always racing. I won't tell you to go to work, because the same thing happens. And I also won't tell you to go to sleep. The enemy lives within us. And we have to control it. And how do you control it? Well, by breathing, with meditation. It's helping me a lot, to the point that the other day they called me to remind me that on the 22nd I had an appointment with the psychologist. I said, 'Well, I think I can cancel, because I'm handling everything quite well now'. And they answered, 'Let us see you and we can decide together.'

Q.: *What were your most recurrent thoughts when you had received your diagnosis prior to starting meditation?*

R.: Well, I've done some work previously since I've always been very interested in everything about helping people. I've not had good health in my life. I've always looked for alternative things. It's like finding something I'd lost again. It's true that when you're told you have cancer, you think you'll know how to handle it. But really that's not when it all starts. It starts when you have your first treatment—in my case, unlike people who have to have surgery. At that moment, chemicals enter your body that make you feel like you've never felt before. It's not that you have ups and downs —as a woman I've always had them from hormones and menstruation, until menopause—it's that your life suddenly

becomes a merry-go-round. This is because of the treatment, which helps you, but at the same time your body doesn't know how to handle it. Your head is a mess, your stomach hurts, you can't digest, your legs get weak, etcetera. Since I started treatment, I've been walking 20 minutes a day because I have to. But I've always been someone who does three-hour hikes in the mountains.

So, my body is having a hard time. It changes in everything in you. Your everyday routine is going out to enjoy yourself for 20 minutes and then coming home to lie down. The breathing when you meditate makes you feel like nothing is going on, that you're in a process. But your life is different. For me, this is all like a parenthesis. That's how I see it.

Q.: *Were you afraid?*

R.: Fear is very relative. I mean, fear of dying... no, because I know we're all going to die. I was born four days after my older sister died. And death is something that's always been around me. I've had two brushes with death and I've always been able to overcome, thanks to the doctors. Dying doesn't frighten me.

But I'm 60 years old. You could say I've done everything—planted a tree, had a child, and so on. I have a full life. I don't feel I'm lacking things to do. But there's the fear of not knowing how to handle the farewell. And that's

something they're working on here in the oncology unit. Now they're making a leaflet so patients can get in touch with all the people close to them.

It's very important to be able to leave this world with a different kind of attitude, not denying death, but accepting it as just another step, and being able to leave with dignity, saying goodbye in the way you want to.

I had a kind of ambivalent fear, 'I'm not afraid. But I'd like it to be like this. How can I deal with it? You become vulnerable just thinking that the day will come when you won't be able to stand up for yourself. And you have to have closure with people who aren't ready to listen, because they think it's not the right time. I've already spoken to my husband to tell him what I want the day I'm not there. But there always has to be feedback. You have to talk to your kids and the rest of the family. And you need some tools for this. Maybe when I see the psychologist, I'll ask how I should approach it.

You don't think about these things when you don't have cancer. You can get hit by a car and die. However, with cancer, you know they'll treat you. But your body has already started to age in a way, and you have to prepare yourself. It's not so much the fact of being afraid, but how to handle it.

Q.: How has meditation helped you with this?

R.: In every way. I'm not a steady person; I'm a born adventurer. If I'm at home and a friend calls me for a coffee, I say yes, even if it's just to listen to her. You have to make the most of life. Meditation has helped me to say to myself, 'Put yourself first'. Even if a friend calls me, I come first. If I need to rest, I'll see her tomorrow.

Meditation has centred me. I'd been putting it off. Thanks to the workshop, I'm more aware of it. I sit, I stop, I start breathing, and so on. If I can't, I do the four exercises they taught me and one of them will work for me. And that's it. It doesn't have to be an hour, or half an hour, or a perfect space. Nor do you need a Buddha at home. I don't have one. It's just about connecting with yourself, with your breath. That centres you so much! I remember once, in the middle of meditation, it was like my brain was asking me what I was doing, telling me that my stomach hurts. And I realised that and so I let myself cry a bit—all this inside—and I was so happy. You can only do that with meditation.

I know there are drugs. I could take diazepam or one of those things—sorry about the brand name. I could take something to get through it all. But I think the body, the brain, if it's all balanced, can give you that strength and energy.

Q.: *How has your perception of your everyday life, and of time, changed?*

R.: I'm very much a realist now. I mean, now I value things a lot. If I valued them before, now I value them even more. I don't let a single thing slip by me. If I have to say no to someone, then I say no. And if I have to say yes, then I dive right in.

Q.: *Do you think you can control your mood?*

R.: Now, yes. Three months ago, no. I think I can control my mood thanks to meditation. In fact, when my mood sours, I know I get it back with meditation. Those little moments of silence with myself allow me to remain at peace with myself, to be calm.

Q.: Of the exercises you do, which one do you think helps you the most?

R.: I like the ones where I don't have to strain my neck, because that's where I've got problems. But they all work very well for me. I can't say that one works better for me than another, because there are days when, for example, we do one with a candle. But if I'm in the kitchen, I won't light a candle. You know what I mean? And I won't sit on the floor, but I'll sit on a chair with my back well positioned, in a posture as conducive as possible to meditation. And whether it takes me two minutes or ten, I do my breathing exercise.

Q.: *What changes have you noticed in yourself since attending the meditation workshops?*

R.: Peace. I even speak more calmly. I remember the first session I came to—I'm a not a Europeanist; I'm a citizen of the world. I like to talk to everyone. I'm very tolerant. I like to travel a lot. I've always done that. And I like to have contact with the people in the place I go to. I talk, I exchange opinions, etcetera. I almost got into it with a woman. It was a disaster. I started crying and felt ridiculous. All the new drugs in my body came out however they could.

And you know what? Today I was just put on the same medication and you heard what I was just saying. If I hadn't started the meditation, I'd probably be a wreck. So, meditation is great. I suppose it's also thanks to the art therapy—I wouldn't want to get in trouble with any of the other groups—and the psycho-oncological counselling. It all helps. All the interaction that goes on here at the oncology clinic helps.

Q.: *Do you think positive thoughts and having a more relaxed attitude can have a positive effect on your health?*

R.: Yes, absolutely. I know my psychologist would be angry, but I am convinced that this cancer has emerged

because I had a really upsetting family trauma. At the time, I believed very much that everything in life, you have to know how to handle it, you have to work on it. I was afraid something would happen to me. I suppose because I was afraid and wasn't meditating at the time, I couldn't control the fear, and I developed something—the cancer—that I shouldn't have. I'm not saying I shouldn't have cancer, but it could have happened to me when I was in my 80s, or in my 90s, which is when people are considered old in the 21st century.

It's a question of not letting your guard down, of always thinking positively and seeing you have to work on things, through forgiveness, love, breathing and self-awareness, above all.

Q.: *Did you think about death before you were diagnosed?*

R.: No. A series of things coincided. I've got quite an intense life. In fact, I have an 89-year-old grandmother at home, with her pathologies and so on. The first two months before starting the treatment—since I discovered it on 20 February and started the study on 21 April—I mean, look how long they've been running tests and so on. So, I didn't have time. The surprise came on the 22nd, when my body was given that chemical treatment bomb.

Q.: *What was the experience like for you—knowing that we're accustomed to living with our backs turned on death, when really, we're very near it—to suddenly get news like this and find yourself staring death in the face? How do you think meditation can help you?*

R.: Since death has been so present to me—it's been part of my life practically since I was born—it wasn't something that I felt first hand. Rather, to my surprise, I saw it in the faces of my relatives and in the reactions of my friends. I was very optimistic, because I'm very outgoing, and maybe too spontaneous. I always think positively. I've already had two powerful experiences. And, if they help you, you can get out of them. But when you see the faces of the people who love you, you think you have to tell them about it, but in a certain way. And, for me, this is where meditation came in, learning how to communicate with others without getting angry—because I've been angry a lot—because the people close to you have a lot of goodwill. But you can't tell someone who has cancer what to do, because cancer can kill you.

Meditation is good because you learn to breathe when the person is talking to you. And you know they're talking to you with all their love. But they're telling you what to do... and you'd send them away. So, you say to yourself, 'take a deep breath, relax'. And when they've finished telling you everything they wanted to tell you, you thank them and tell

them that they don't need to tell you what to do. Meditation helps you every day.

If you talked to my family now, they'd tell you I've been quite uneasy this past week. But if I hadn't meditated from time to time, I would have been very angry, very moody. Meditation gives you peace of mind.

AFTERWORD

One walks eagerly, with a desire that—infinitely—beats in the sake of the fact living, by human nature, pumping everything possible to be and to be there. A desire that pushes into the immensity of paths that the mystery—the indomitable and ineffable flower that anchors it and welcomes it—propitiates, that it undertakes with the precious capacity of its own strength, will and direction. One feels that one feels, pleasantly and passively, from a spring that shapes—with a weft of roots that one wants below, towards the wild and earthy soil, but also upwards, towards the blue and volatile abyss of the sky—by human nature, and that hurts and wounds again and again, ceaselessly, infinitely.

In spite of walking and feeling, one knows oneself, more or less consciously—like a termite gnawing intermittently —to be a passer-by, a spark, a fleeting trace, merely passing through.

In the face of the human essence, illness and death naturally become situations that endanger the pleasure of living and lead us to the unknown abyss of what death—what we have termed the *final nowhere*—roughly means for us. It's extremely hard to understand, especially from the mentality of the West, that our human situation, which occurs between

physical birth and death, can be a part of the whole picture, of the whole form. One could rightly say that it is an approach based on certain beliefs and is therefore just as convincing as an approach pertaining to others. And intellectually, who can be convinced by hypotheses, philosophical arguments or well-crafted eloquence if human life in itself is loaded with meaning, or rather is all meaning, and death is an absolute rupture?

Scepticism, on the one hand, on its own, can be a personal tool, an essential tool that leads to self-reflection, to introspection, to inquiring, if necessary, into the marrow that binds us to existence, and therefore a completely healthy and necessary tool. But we must be wary that this scepticism leads neither to resignation and laziness—free of will and, therefore, to pessimism that flirts with nihilism—nor to a possible refusal to face our familiar human destiny, turning our backs on it. As we have seen, that turning away entails a decoupling of our experience of life, which will be thus imbued with an unconsciousness that sooner or later will become sadly pathological and, always in the shadow of and governed by fear, will undermine each individual's reality and truth.

Our conscious involvement in life makes us aware of a series of facets that if viewed only from the rational sphere can in some way contribute to the magnitude of our fear. Thinking of ourselves from our finitude, from the paradox that

is intrinsic to us, from the non-fulfilment that shapes us, from the often-ineffable wound, is a luminous and wise path, but one that requires a significant foundation of life experience. Sensory experience is indispensable for integrating the above aspects, and thus for allowing them to become a true, fraternal and loving accompaniment of one's own.

SERÉ

Em vestiré amb la meva
més exultant nuesa.
Tan sols la llum del cos
i els mots de cada òrgan.
Tramaré un sincer ardit
—a través del silenci—
que vincli la intempèrie.
Abraçat i a redós,
de la mà, mort i naixença.

Joan Urpinell

I WILL BE

I will dress in my
most exultant nakedness.
Only the light of my body
and the words of every organ.
I will devise a sincere artifice
—through silence—
that folds the elements.
Embraced and sheltered,
hand in hand, death and birth.

As discussed throughout these pages, before the ability to reason, human beings have the ability to feel, which is intelligent in itself. This gift of the senses is, in essence, clear and welcoming, and therefore serene. However, the paradox is that this gift is clouded by other, equally essential, human aspects that overwhelm and frighten us.

Moreover, as we have seen, fear does not always manifest itself with the same degree of intensity, or even in the same form or direction. It depends on the culture in which one lives, grows and develops. But in particular, in today's Mediterranean West, we approach life and death as an extreme duality, one in which our position and our attitude are those of intense confrontation—that is if we dare to challenge the taboo and invest time in thinking about death, almost a battle in which one fact and the other, opposing and irreconcilable, confront each other: one, that of life, with weapons directed by fear and denial; and the other, that of death, simply from its natural existence, as a real and unavoidable fact.

Faced with this position, with this way of conceiving the reality of the human situation from the two poles, we have seen how a possibility arises which embraces the two moments—life and death—in a different way, and integrates them, forming a whole from both. And in this integration—although a spark is already ignited in the mental and conceptual realm—the important thing is that there is an

existential basis and essence sustained in sensory experience that leads to a luminous clarity that brings us closer to the peace that Tew Bunnag speaks of, and that frees us from fear.

To place oneself in this form of thinking and feeling, understanding it as a goal one wishes to achieve, we can conclude that one needs certain factors and tools that must be conducive, consistent and compatible with this goal. On the one hand, as can be seen from the interviews with Zen master Lluís Nansen Salas and master Tew Bunnag, it is clear that the education and cultural context in which one grows and develops are of paramount importance in maintaining awareness of human finitude. Therefore, one can agree that it would be healthy, in every sense of the word, to bring Western countries closer to the more Eastern mentality, in terms of education about death, and thus avoid the approach of turning our backs on it, an approach that is specific to us. Let us remember the words of Master Tew Bunnag, 'I come from a culture where we start each day remembering our own and everyone else's condition as mortals. This shows us another way of living. It frees us from all kinds of lies, from deception, because death is a context that completes life.' Therefore, education about death is a major tool, and should be geared towards the goal of integration.

On the other hand, we have seen how, through each person's personal experience, the practice of meditation is seen—one might say unanimously—as a balm and a tool for

empowerment, a process that transcends the principal agents that disrupt life. ‘The main benefit of meditation for me is peace,’ said the last of the Catalan Institute of Oncology patients interviewed, while the third expressed the calm she feels as a result of the control she is gaining over her own mind. So why does meditation lead to well-being?

Peace and *calm*, nouns that naturally embrace and welcome us with a full force that allows no room for doubt. Anyone who has ever felt peace or calm has done so with the absolute certainty of those two essential complements, which permeate the subject in their entirety with all their inherent clarity. It is therefore an awareness that the practice of meditation, the dynamic between body and mind—between conscious breathing, bodily sensations and the non-judgmental, non-attached observation of the phenomena of body and mind—leads to a gradual liberation of the *self*, which is attached, on the one hand, to the various human constructs that lead to acquisition-orientated behaviours—the engine of stress and inner turmoil—and, on the other hand, to the constant wounding that defines us.

Meditating helps to reduce existential fear and terror, to transcend the attached and fearful *self* that arises from conceiving one’s own finitude as something dehumanised, positioned in a polarity that seeks to be in the shadows, relegated to the rear, which shapes the dissolution that occurs when life and death, unknown to each other, are set in

contrast and confronted with each other. Liberation from the dual dynamic of the *self* brings us closer to the peace that Tew Bunnag speaks of, and is, at the same time, a very powerful means of self-accompaniment, which becomes even more relevant in processes of serious illness and death.

A priori, the fact that through the gradual transcendence of the *self* through meditation, one connects with one's essence, which reveals itself to be serene, detached, without fear, and thus able to feel a peace that—although at first not experienced wholly consciously—is brought about by perceiving life and death as integral parts of a whole, parts of a form that is complete, and which, in the words of Zen master Lluís Nansen Salas, is where '*We find our true self* [...], *which means being with all existences and the entire universe*. This true self is beyond our limited life, beyond our small self, beyond our birth and death, and we can connect with it while we are alive.'

Knowing that to *accompany* is to *care for* and *support* someone, it is therefore of fundamental importance that each of us can carry out our own accompaniment in processes of serious illness and death through education that embraces, on the one hand, the reality of these processes—and thus breaks the taboos and concealment associated with them—and, on the other, the regular practice of meditation with its potent benefits, and conceives them as a form of knowledge that, like the human being, resides in mystery, such as the poetic

experience that leads us to 'the existence of an intimate state of mind which, due to its elevated spiritual warmth, is very difficult to express[17] and yet safeguards us, supports us, and accompanies us.

17 Dolors OLLER. La poètica de Gabriel Ferrater: Accions i intencions. In: Dolors OLLÉ y Jaume SUBIRANA (ed.). *Gabriel Ferrater. In memoriam*. Barcelona: Proa. 2001, pp. 73-99.

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