

RATRI-YOGA

Withdrawing into the Darkness to find the Light

Withdrawing into complete darkness... at first glance, this idea may seem strange. Darkness is often associated with fear, a lack of control, and the sense that something dark and dangerous lurks within it. And yet, as we shall see, the opposite is actually true. Since time immemorial, in various traditions, dwelling in darkness has been the culmination of the quest for spirituality—the clear light of the mind, as the Tibetans would say; the translucent, dazzling shadow, as Saint Dionysius the Areopagite would say. As surprising as it may seem, darkness is a teacher, the mirror of consciousness gazing at itself in the reflection of incarnation. In this “divine darkness”¹, everything is capable of transformation: the body, which discovers a new chemistry; the subconscious, projected onto the black canvas as if onto a giant screen; perception, which opens up to realms that are not embodied but are just as real as our daily lives—perhaps even more so.

Some history

Prehistoric caves must have been places that provided access to the invisible. Indeed, cave paintings are found in nooks and crannies that are completely shielded from light. Many traditions hold that caves are filled with a “spiritual presence”; among the Tibetans, for example, this is called *gnas*.² In Ireland, caves are gateways to a magical and mysterious underground world.³

According to anthropologists Jean Clottes and David Lewis-Williams⁴, it seems certain that people in the Stone Age experienced altered states of consciousness.

Indigenous peoples, heirs to a shamanic tradition with roots stretching back to the Paleolithic and Neolithic eras, also have a special relationship with darkness. The Kogi Indians of Colombia create their own dark rooms, which serve as initiation sites for child shamans. Michael Harner, the renowned expert on shamanism, recounts his own vision quest: at midnight, he entered a pitch-black cave in the hope that some revelation would appear to him. Sure enough, shortly thereafter, a horse came to visit him, followed by a woman, whom he could see clearly with his eyes wide open.⁵

¹ Expression of Saint Dionysius the Aeropagite again.

² Holley Moyes, *Sacred Darkness, a Global Perspective on the Ritual Use of Caves*, University Press of Colorado 2012, p. 26.

³ *Ibidem*, p. 27.

⁴ Jean Clottes and David Lewis-William, *The Mind in the Cave - the Cave in the Mind: Altered Consciousness in the Upper Paleolithic* in *Anthropology of Consciousness* 9(1): 13-21, American Anthropological Association, March 1998, p. 14.

⁵ Michael Harner, *Caverne et cosmos, rencontres chamaniques avec une autre réalité*, Mama éditions 2017, p. 41 à 46.

In the Himalayas, it is common for yogis to live in caves. In Madhya Pradesh, Gorakshnâth, the famous teacher of the Nâth lineage from which classical Hatha yoga originated, lived underground for twelve years, deep within a series of increasingly lower passages adorned with bas-reliefs, far from the light of the sun.

All kinds of structures associated with darkness have been built around the world: catacombs, pyramids with underground chambers, and windowless temples of Mithras (*mithraea*).

In India, Ayurveda codified a number of body-shaping practices (*kaya kalpa*)⁶, one of which involves staying in the dark. Indian medicine has long recognized that incurable diseases can be miraculously cured in the dark.

Taoism also advocates spending time in dark caves in order to reconnect with the original source, *wu chi*. Darkness is seen as the perfect alchemical chamber, allowing one to connect with one's own immortality and the body's longevity. The only place currently offering large-scale group retreats in darkness, Tao Garden in Thailand, was founded by Mantak Chia, a renowned Taoist teacher. Tibetan Buddhism also offers the possibility of retreating into darkness. It is in the texts discussing the Kalachakra that we find the expression "ratri-yoga" or "yoga of the night." This is, however, an advanced practice, reserved for those capable of facing illusions without wavering, the goal being to break free from conditioned existence. Darkness literally confronts the practitioner with the worlds of the *bardo*⁷ in the afterlife. In other words, this kind of retreat is training for death.

Biology

Meditation retreats bring the heart and brain into coherence. This phenomenon is all the more significant in the dark, so that the spiritual experience can unfold fully. The organ that brings the brain into coherence is the heart. Thus, its openness will play a key role in the inner process. Scientifically speaking, the goal is to train the heart to enter a state of cardiac coherence that is as stable as possible. *Pranayama*, of course, helps us greatly in this regard. Next, it's a matter of imprinting the frequency of compassion and gratitude between heartbeats, in the midst of diastole. The heart is the organ that emits the body's most powerful electromagnetic fields—far stronger than those of the brain—synchronized with cardiac coherence. This work on the heart serves both as energetic protection and as a passport to what must truly be called a "revelation," given how surprising the insights can be.

The reason why periods spent in the dark are so powerful is that they activate biological functions that are usually on standby. These include the enhanced functioning of the pineal gland, the lengthening of telomeres—markers of age located at the ends of our chromosomes; their growth signifies that biological age is reversing and moving toward rejuvenation—cell regeneration, and so on. These biological changes affect both mental health and physical health.

Several glands play a major role in darkness. Known as the "Cave of *Brahmâ*" in the *Siddha* tradition⁸, these glands begin to function differently than usual, allowing contact with very high frequencies and, consequently, with states of consciousness specific to darkness that cannot be matched during the day.

⁶ *Kaya* means 'body' et *kalpa* comes from the root *KLIP*, 'manufacture, shape'.

⁷ Literally "in-between," that is, between two incarnations, or between the ultimate reality of *rigpa* (*sushumna* in Sanskrit) and that of the conditioned world, which manifests in the form of gods, demons, humans, animals, hungry ghosts, and hell.

⁸ Ananda Bosman, *Puissante pinéale* in *Science & conscience* (Scienza e conoscenza vol. 32), May 2010.

The hypothalamus is a gland that is influenced by the circadian rhythm; therefore, in the dark—when the day-night cycle is absent—it sends different signals to the body. The hypothalamus influences the biological clock; consequently, in the dark, in the absence of the circadian rhythm, the gland appears to undergo a reset—like a reset to zero, a biological fresh start. But the gland that truly reigns over the darkness is, of course, unquestionably the pineal gland, which provides a chemical foundation for these experiences.

The name "pineal gland" comes from the Latin word *pineae*, meaning "pine cone," which it resembles in shape. It is no coincidence that the pine cone is associated with the third eye. Indeed, lizards, for example, actually have an eye located beneath the skin at the top of their heads. In birds, the third eye has migrated closer to the center of the head, but it remains sensitive to light despite the thin bones that separate it from the rest of the skull. In birds, the third eye has migrated closer to the center of the head, but it remains sensitive to light despite the thin bones that separate it from the rest of the eye. In humans, this eye migrated to the center of the brain and changed shape, while retaining cells similar to those that line the retina.⁹ The concept of the "third eye" isn't as purely symbolic as it seems... this eye is capable of perceiving the subtle, and animals possess it as well.

The pineal gland is the organ that secretes melatonin every night and serotonin upon waking. In the dark, it will begin to pulsate, triggering its extraordinary mode of operation and, through a chain reaction, releasing all the chemical components necessary for the spiritual experience.

In many people, the pineal gland might be atrophied and stiffened by fluoride deposits from food or water. However, when the pineal gland begins its extraordinary function, it needs precisely to be able to pulsate freely. Prolonged practice of *mûla-* and *uddîyana-bandha* allows cerebrospinal fluid to flow back into the meninges more quickly. This fluid accumulates in the fourth ventricle near the pineal gland, exerting gentle pressure that induces the gland to move rhythmically.

Chemistry

During their stay, participants in the darkness retreat will intensely experience the effects of three primary substances naturally produced by the body: melatonin, serotonin, and DMT (dimethyltryptamine). However, other substances will play a role in the effects often felt at the end of the retreat, such as deep relaxation and the sensation of having been renewed from within: endobenzodiazepines and antioxidants.

Melatonin is a tryptamine; its full name is N-acetyl-5-methoxytryptamine. It is the hormone of darkness. In the dark, the pineal gland secretes melatonin. Our modern world, which is overly illuminated by artificial light at night, actually interferes with its proper functioning. We know that melatonin allows the body to stop producing cortisol, the stress hormone. It is also known to boost the immune system and play a role in cell replication. Because it neutralizes free radicals, melatonin acts as an anti-aging agent.

Using melatonin as a starting point, the pineal gland secretes other molecules that are crucial to understanding the chemical process that takes place in the dark. This biological process, which allows molecules to be derived from melatonin, is called methylation. The substance that plays a key role is called DMT. DMT provides the basis for all kinds of visions on various levels. Melatonin also breaks down into

⁹ Rick Strassman, *DMT, la molécule de l'esprit, une recherche révolutionnaire dans la biologie de l'expérience au seuil de la mort*, éditions Exergue 2017, p. 82-83.

benzodiazepine, inducing unparalleled relaxation and a sense of peace and confidence, completely dispelling any fear of the dark. Methylation also produces pinoline, a powerful antioxidant, and subsequently betacarboline, an even more potent antioxidant. These substances, in addition to playing a role in the experience of the subtle dream world¹⁰, help neutralize mutant cells and environmental stressors such as electromagnetic pollution. We should also mention the release of 5-methoxytryptamine, which induces a kind of deep hibernation; together with melatonin, this forms the basis of the restorative sleep that people often experience during the first three days spent in darkness.

Experiences in the dark

With all the chemical and hormonal changes that are about to take place, the body will enter a state of altered functioning. In exploring altered states of consciousness, Jean Clottes and David Lewis-William suggest viewing consciousness as a spectrum: at one end lies ordinary waking consciousness. From there, we move on to daydreaming, dreaming, and states of light trance. At the very opposite end of the spectrum are deep trances, in which one leaves behind one's perception of the world to enter a different realm. Western hyper-rationalists would regard these as hallucinations, whereas other cultures place great value on these experiences at the threshold of other dimensions. What is considered madness in one community is a divine revelation in another. Our interpretation of altered states of consciousness is thus shaped by social and cultural factors.¹¹

Thus, before surrendering to the darkness, one must free oneself from labels and cultivate an open-mindedness that challenges one's certainties. Be ready to encounter the unexpected. Be ready to receive. Aspire to know the Truth—which will allow you to lift the veil of matter and look beyond. Consensual reality is not everything: a subtle world, usually invisible, becomes accessible in the dark.

Every experience is unique. Darkness is a mirror; it shows each person what they need to see or understand at any given moment. Encountering darkness is a very powerful experience for almost everyone. This manifests either as energy in the form of symbols and colors, or as a flow within the body. Darkness is the in-between world, providing access to all kinds of parallel realms. In fact, we travel there more with our subtle body than our physical one, and it is common for people to gradually feel the need to move less. Indeed, vital energy (*prana*) has come to serve another aspect of ourselves. Practitioners experience all kinds of lights and luminosities. Visions are common: cosmic, dreamlike, reflections of the subconscious, or even a gaze penetrating matter—for example, into water molecules or cellular structure. The emergence of places and beings of a different kind. The range of possibilities exceeds the imagination. More important than these visionary aspects is an opening of the heart. Gratitude and affection flow naturally; forgiveness becomes possible. Past karma can be resolved. Beyond physical light, we discover the light of the spirit, which leads us back to the Source. Darkness offers us the chance to finally see our true nature. Thus, what ultimately matters is above all our ability to let ourselves be shaped by the spirit of the depths; in the darkroom, it is the spirit that calls the shots. As we let ourselves be lulled by the secret song of the universe, we enter a state of boundless relaxation. By allowing ourselves to be loved by the invisible source, we reach a shore where nothing is lacking. Body and mind relax so deeply that they melt gracefully into an ocean of intensely intelligent energy. Letting go, trusting, and

¹⁰ Ananda Bosman, *Puissante pinéale* in Science & conscience, op. cit.

¹¹ Jean Clottes et David Lewis-William, *The Mind in the Cave*, op. cit., p. 15.

breathing in... that is all that matters. The rest happens spontaneously, and no one knows in advance what it will be.

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