

## HEART OF DARKNESS

### *Sensory Deprivation and Darkness Retreat as a Psychedelic Experience*

*I will love the light for it shows me the way, yet I will endure the darkness for it shows me the stars.*

Og Mandino

The human animal has had for the most part of its evolutionary journey a very close relationship with darkness and isolation, after all, everyone spends a considerable amount of time before birth in the absence of light. There are still cultures around the world that nurture a very intimate relationship with darkness, but in the so called “dominant Western society” it has been pushed towards the edges of our collective awareness. Far beyond the original meaning of having an absolute or relative lack of light, the words dark and darkness have become synonyms for things sinister, without morals, conducive to hopelessness or lacking progress. Dark ages, dark thoughts and dark stories. Over a third of movies with “darkness” in the title are categorised in the horror genre. Together with dreams and death, darkness has become a member of an unholy trinity and I am prepared to argue that our dysfunctional relationship (or lack thereof) to these key concepts of human existence is a reason for many of our current ailments we are, as species, suffering from. Sensory deprivation has been considered to be a royal path to the inner self for centuries. Today, it is being used as one of the most inhumane forms of punishment with 20,000 inmates suffering in solitary confinement<sup>1</sup>. On a lighter note (pun intended), the healing and treatment of those dysfunctional relationships have already started. Partly in the form of the rediscovery of archaic techniques and practices, as well as with the help of scientific discoveries and advances in the field of human consciousness.

The aim of this essay is to draw parallels between psychedelic experiences and sensory deprivation. The parallels and similarities between these two seemingly distinct concepts are, in my opinion, obvious and hard to ignore. The evident difference is the way in which the experience is induced. The former is facilitated by the introduction of an exogenous substance, while the latter is promoted by blocking the sensory input which in effect produces changes of endogenous nature in the brain. However, both do similarly produce chemical changes in the human nervous system which are responsible for temporary altered states of awareness and consciousness and changes in the mental state. Both can lead to mystical and transcendent states ranging from a sense of connectedness to everything in the immediate vicinity, to a sense of oneness with everything in the universe. Psychologist Stanislav Grof's description of a LSD experience can be easily extended to describe the prolonged darkness retreat as they both allow “complex revelatory insights into the nature of existence... typically accompanied by a sense of certainty that this knowledge is ultimately more relevant and “real” than the perceptions and beliefs we share in everyday life.” (Grof, Zina, Bennett, 1993)

And last but not least, to be truly beneficial for personal development, it is essential that they are both approached in a respectful and well-informed manner by recognising the three stages of every experience – preparation, the experience itself and integration of the outcome into one's life.

The following text will present, in three main parts, the historic and cultural context of sensory deprivation techniques and practices used by indigenous people and religious groups, a brief summary of scientific research into sensory deprivation from the middle of

the last century onwards and a personal account of an extended period in darkness. Lights off.

### **Traditional and contemporary techniques of sensory deprivation and retreats to darkness**

Ancient Egyptians and Mayans practiced a form of dark retreat by entering into the center of their respective pyramids completely removed from light and sound. In Rome, catacombs were built for the same purpose and natural caves were used as places for retreats into solitude and darkness in various religions. A Mithraeum<sup>2</sup> is a place of worship for the followers of the mystery religion of Mithraism. The Mithraeum was either an adapted natural cave or cavern or an artificial building imitating a cavern. Mithraea were dark and windowless, even if they were not actually in a subterranean space or in a natural cave. Spiritual retreats connected to darkness and solitude are integral parts of Christian and Sufi traditions. Within the Shinto tradition of Japan, there is a practice known as *komori* (seclusion). It takes place in the darkness of a cave, a temple or even a room in a house that is specifically adapted. The practitioners and ascetics retreat to a darkness of windowless huts, known as the *komorido*, which can be found on various mountains in Japan (Heaven, 2007).

The following three paragraphs briefly describing three ancient cultures – Colombian, Indian and Tibetan – all of which incorporate in their traditions prolonged periods in total darkness, were adapted from the academic article *Dark Ecology - Embracing Darkness as an Ecological Resource* by Andrew G. Reece, who examines how different cultures have treated the experience of being in the dark as an important aspect of ecological awareness (Reece, 2011). While researching for this text, discovering Mr. Reece's article was a true revelation and I highly recommend it to anyone who is further interested in the topic at hand.

The Kogi people of northern Colombia, one of the last remaining pre-Columbian cultures in South America, use darkness as an unusual way of acquiring expansive awareness beyond the physical self. The Kogi base their lifestyles on their belief in Aluna or The Great Mother, the creator figure, whom they believe is the force behind nature<sup>3</sup>. From birth the Kogi attune their priests, called Mamas (which means sun in Kogi), for guidance, healing, and leadership. The Mamas are not to be confused with shamans or healers but to be regarded as tribal priests who hold highly respected roles in Kogi society. Mamas undergo strict training to assume this role. Selected male children deemed suitable for becoming a Mama are taken from birth and put in a dark cave for the first nine years of their lives (which, under certain circumstances, can be extended to 18 years or longer) to begin this training. During this time the only human contact of the Mama in training is with his mother, his caretakers and the Mama elders, who are training him in the ways and customs of the Kogi people. The extended exposure to total darkness allows the child's perception to develop in a unique way – a way which the Kogi believe enables the direct perception of the Aluna.

In ancient India, the retreats in darkness are usually called *Kaya Kalpa*. While the term *kalpa* means “ageless” or “immortal” and *kaya* means “body”, the *Kaya Kalpa* can be roughly translated as “bodily rejuvenation”. The practice was probably developed by the Siddha tradition of pre-Aryan India, although it also exists in Ayurvedic medical literature. Thus *Kaya Kalpa* is an Ayurvedic treatment for rejuvenating the body calling for seclusion in darkness and meditation, along with the application of various herbal concoctions. In its

most complete variation – *Kuti Pravesika Kalpa* – the individual remains isolated in a small room, hut or cave, usually for period of 90 days, taking only cow's milk and herbs and remaining in total darkness. This time spent in the dark, with a minimum of external stimulation, was traditionally considered to be an opportunity for reacquainting oneself with one's own physical body. Kalya Kalpa was a practice often taken on by middle-aged or even elderly individuals who were looking to extend the functional span of their lives and to delay physical death until one achieves *jivamukta* (spiritual liberation from the effects of karma).

Probably the most developed and understood techniques of using darkness for spiritual advancement can be found in Tibetan culture. Both of the dominant spiritual traditions of Tibet – Bonpo and Buddhism – consider the realm of formless spirit to be the ultimate foundation of the natural world. One of the most powerful methods employed in these traditions for realisation of this deep truth is the *Yang Ti*, an extended dark retreat, held usually for a minimum of 49 days and sometimes extending for many years. The practitioner traditionally remains in solitude, in a cave away from other people, and utilises the darkness to enhance his or her meditation on the casual realm – the ultimate natural state. This practice is considered conducive for navigating the bardo state at the time of death, requiring stability in the natural state and is thus only suitable for advanced practitioners.

The following is an excerpt from the book *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*:

*“In order that the novice may practice in perfect quietness the various exercises which that programme requires, it is nearly certain that the lama will command him to shut himself in tsams. The word tsam signifies a barrier, the border of a territory. In religious parlance, to “stay in tsams” means to live in seclusion, to retire beyond a barrier which must not be passed. There exists [...] more austere form of tsams: that of dwelling in complete darkness. [...] According to what I have heard from men who have spent long periods of seclusion in darkness, these hermits enjoy, at times, wonderful illuminations. Their cell becomes bright with light or, in the darkness, every object is drawn with luminous outlines; or again, a phantasmagoria of shining flowers, landscapes and personages arises before them. [...] The current idea in the West is that a man cannot maintain seclusion or absolute solitude for a considerable length of time. It is believed that these unavoidably bring in their train, brain disorders, finally leading to stupidity and madness. This is perhaps true about the individuals on whom the effect of isolation have been studied: lighthouse guards, travellers thrown on to desert island after a shipwreck, explorers lost in uninhabited regions, prisoners in solitary confinement, etc. But such observation do not apply to Tibetan hermits. The latter after ten or twenty years, or even a longer time, in the wilderness or in tsams khangs, are far from being insane. One may dispute the theories which they have conceived during their protracted meditations, but it is impossible to question their sanity. [...] Moreover, they are not inactive during their retreat, long as it may be. Their days are occupied by methodical exercises in spiritual training, the search for occult knowledge or meditation on philosophical problems.”* (David-Neel, 2007, p. 247-257)

Around the world there are currently several places that are equipped for extended darkness retreats (often as part of a yoga retreat) in the form of Kaya Kalpa (Guatemala, Mexico, Thailand), in the form of Tibetan Bon retreats (France) or as a mixture of Taoism and new-age in the form of group Dark Room retreats offered by Mantak Chia (Thailand). Czech Republic and Germany have a specific place on the map as places where darkness

retreats are widely offered in numerous facilities as a *dark therapy* or *dunkeltherapie*. The approach is more therapeutic than spiritual, the specially adapted houses are monitored during the retreat by medical staff while psychological help is also available. But probably the most accessible way of experiencing sensory deprivation for personal wellbeing in the western world is via immersing oneself into an isolation or floatation tank<sup>4</sup>. The technology, that has been enjoying something of a renaissance lately, has been developed by John C. Lilly in 1954. An isolation tank is a lightless, soundproof tank inside which subject floats in water mixed with a significant amount of salt that is warmed up to skin temperature. Peter Suedfeld and Roderick Borrie of the University of British Columbia began researching the therapeutic benefits of isolation tanks in the late 1970s and they named their technique “Restricted Environmental Stimulation Therapy” (REST).

### **Altered states of consciousness in the context of sensory deprivation research**

One of the key figures in the research on the effects of sensory deprivation on human experience and behaviour was Canadian of Slovak origin Peter John Zubek. He was especially interested in the areas of the brain responsible for distinguishing sensory modalities (Hebb, 1974; Suedfeld, 1980). The direction of his further work was significantly influenced by Donald Hebb, the head of the Department of Psychology at McGill University in Montreal. When the university received a grant subsidy from the Ministry of Defence in 1951 the series of researches began with paid volunteers – mainly college students. Their aim was to reduce perceptual stimulation to a minimum, to see how their subjects would behave when almost nothing was happening. The subjects were dressed in comfortable clothes (usually a kind of pyjamas), wearing socks and cotton gloves to limit the skin stimuli. The movements of limbs and kinesthetic sensations were further reduced by putting cardboard cuffs over joints and extending beyond the fingertips. Eyes were covered by translucent visors. Experimental sound-proof cubicles were equipped with comfortable bed and air conditioning. The noise with the intensity of 40 dB was played through the speakers (in another variant the person was wearing headphones). The experimenter was able to observe the behaviour of test subjects through a one-sided transparent mirror, he wrote down everything that the subjects said and how many times they tried to contact the experimenter. At the beginning of the experiment most volunteers fell asleep and after waking up they complained about boredom and irritation. These discomforts intensified with time. Further effects were more dramatic - volunteers reported hallucinations and delusions. They showed increased susceptibility to persuasion and cognitive performance, concentration and sleep patterns were disturbed and sometimes these irritating feelings persisted even after the experiment finished (Rathus, 1999).

In 1954 the funding for Hebb's research ceased. Zubek decided to establish a new center for research of sensory deprivation at the University of Manitoba (Suedfeld, 1974). A futuristic, translucent plexiglass dome was built. Inside it contained a soundproof chamber, which could create an experimental environment of constant darkness and silence (sensory deprivation) or light and sound (sensory overload). The room was equipped with microphones and cameras and there was also an emergency signal device that allowed to send a request for help in case someone panicked. Zubek himself was the first test subject and he entered the silence and darkness for the period of ten days. He reported experiencing hallucinations, loss of motivation, intense feelings of euphoria and inability to concentrate on intellectual activity (Kaye, 2009). Zubek and his team often met with criticism and warnings about sensory deprivation and social isolation inducing psychotic reactions and

seriously endangering mental health, which could lead to irreversible damage (Lyton, 1961). Within the experiments that Zubek conducted, however, there was not a single documented case of adverse reactions of a kind described above, which would not subside spontaneously after the interruption of the sensory deprivation experiment (Zubek, 1969). John Lilly, who also dedicated himself to sensory deprivation research, noted similar conclusions. In addition, some studies have concluded possible positive effects, especially for motivated individuals based on their expectations (Suedfeld, 1974).

Zubek and his colleagues began to publish the results from the first series of studies in early 1960. They primarily identified cognitive and perceptual-kinetic deficits in volunteers. They also noticed that people who have been in an isolation facility for fourteen days had abnormal EEG recordings for another ten days after returning to normal life. They also described examples of hallucinatory experiences, vivid imagination and waking dreams. Subjects were reporting states of severe anxiety and fears, but also just a simple boredom. Symptoms of the mental and physical restlessness were typical. Zubek and his colleagues also found that the negative effects were relieved by support from the experimenter, positive expectations on the part of the subjects and the possibility of physical exercise during the experiment.

An important factor in mitigating the negative effects of sensory deprivation and social isolation was the possibility of contact with another person - especially the leader of the experiment. If a person was isolated without any human contact, mental stress and unpleasant subjective experiences increased. If the experimenter remains in contact with the test subject (meets up with them at regular intervals), encourages them and tries to reinforce a sense of security, the symptoms of sensory deprivation (e.g. hallucinations, visions, emotional states) could be experienced as exciting and enjoyable (Zubek, 1969).

Naturally, Zubek's and Hebb's research wasn't the only one being conducted at the time. Out of brevity, I will mention only one out of the plethora other research centres where a similar approach to experimental sensory deprivation was studied. John C. Lilly, at the National Institute of Mental Health in Bethesda, Maryland, created and later modified sensory deprivation system based on water environment which will be discussed in detail in the following section.

## **REST - Restricted environmental stimulation technique**

The research into sensory deprivation and isolation in the original form of Hebb's and Zubek's studies ceases in the 70s. The laboratory, created by Zubek, was never functional again. Later research in this area has developed a technique called REST - Restricted environmental stimulation technique or Restricted environmental stimulation therapy.

The REST technique can be implemented as three basic forms that are currently reduced to two main methods being used. They were all experimented with by previously mentioned Zubek (Zubek, 1969), partly by Lilly (Lilly, 1997) and then mostly by Suedfeld (Suedfeld, 1974, 1980). Based on his description, we can distinguish between the following three variants:

- 1) *Chamber REST* – a person is placed into a small, simply furnished room. Bed, chair and a toilet are available. The person is placed into an environment of reduced stimulation (dark and quiet). Food and drinks are provided according to the subject's needs. Individual remains in this space usually for 24 hours or longer. Suedfeld reported that less than 10% of subjects discontinued their stay thanks to an unpleasant experience before the end of the initial time period – i.e. 24 hours (Suedfeld, 1980).

2) *Flotation REST* - is implemented by immersion into a tank of water (flotation tank), which is maintained at body temperature and a high concentration of salt, allowing the immersed person to lie safely on their back and be buoyed. The person has earplugs to eliminate outside sound. The flotation tank is closed, creating an environment of total blackout. Individual remains in this space usually for a duration of one hour.

3) *Immersion REST* – is similar to the previous variant with the difference of the person being completely immersed in the water including the head and breathing through a mask that provides oxygen. This technique was mostly experimental and nowadays is no longer being used therapeutically as it is considered significantly stressful.

## **Immersion and flotation REST**

From the report of John Lilly, who extensively experimented with the Immersion REST technique, the method can be summarized as follows: the subject's body is completely suspended (except for the top of the head) and submerged in a tank that contains slowly flowing water at temperature of 34,5°C, wearing only a blacked-out breathing mask which covers the whole head. Thanks to the temperature of the water the person feels neither heat nor cold. Lilly describes the following phases:

1. In the first 45-60 minutes the residues of everyday life are predominant and then slowly fade away.
2. Relaxation, which is perceived as pleasurable, gradually occurs.
3. During the following hour tension increases, probably instigated by the absence of external stimuli. The hidden methods of self-stimulation develop: muscle twitching, slight movements of the limbs, rubbing of fingers.
4. Tension may ultimately reach such an extent that the subject decides to leave the tank.
5. If the person in the tank overcomes this unpleasant state, the tension eventually subsides and fantasies and reveries of highly personal and emotionally charged nature begin to be experienced spontaneously.
6. If the person can withstand even this phase, an intensive projection of visual imagery and visions follows. Lilly writes specifically that:

*“the black curtain in front of the eyes (such as one “sees” in a dark room with eyes closed) gradually opens out into a three-dimensional, dark, empty space in front of the body. This phenomenon captures one's interest immediately, and one waits to find out what comes next. Gradually forms of the type sometimes seen in hypnogogic states appear. In this case, they were small, strangely shaped objects with self-luminous borders. A tunnel whose inside “space” seemed to be emitting a blue light then appeared straight ahead. About this time, this experiment was terminated by leakage of water into the mask through a faulty connector to the respiratory tube.”*  
(Lilly, 1997, p. 122)

The major modification in tanks used today consists in the absence of complete immersion and dependence on the ventilator and the mask. Also the atmosphere of the laboratory in which the deprivation tank (flotation tank) is located has been replaced with more civil environment - diffuse lighting, carpet, pictures on the walls, etc. The water is warmed to body temperature, saturated with salt in such concentrations that the face and the ventral surface of the horizontally placed body are above the water level. The body seems to

be floating and allowing normal and natural breathing, earplugs can be used to prevent water entering the ear canal and to eliminate any remaining sounds, hands are usually free by one's sides or behind the head. A person can choose between diffuse light or complete darkness while inside the tank and the choice between relaxing music or complete silence is also possible. The flotation tank is fitted with an emergency device, which can send distress signals in case of complications (Lilly, 1977).

## **Chamber REST**

To complete the brief description of the Chamber REST variant that was provided earlier, the importance of the room being sufficiently isolated against the penetration of light and sound should be added. The room is equipped with toilet, shower, comfortable bed and simple chair or cushion. Person undergoing the retreat in such environment should not be exposed to cold or excessive heat. They should be wearing loose clothes that make themselves feel comfortable. In some places there is also a facility for air exchange. There is always some way to call for help – a signalling device or a telephone. In many such modified rooms there is usually also a light switch that can be used in case of extreme or uncontrollable fear or panic. Food and liquids are provided as required. Everything is either already present in the room or it is supplied at regular intervals. Food delivery system is designed in such a way as to prevent any light penetration during meal times. Depending on the arrangement therapeutic visits could be arranged in the room during the isolation or interviews can take place over the internal phone line. An individual in isolation can have a tape recorder and record any observations. The client's motivation and preparation are also very important. In the interview before undertaking such experience any possible concerns of the client should be discussed. It is also important to closely survey the room in the light and get familiar with its layout before entering. All these preparations help to establish trust and sense of security.

Results of some studies suggest that the Chamber REST method in combination with other therapeutic procedures may have the potential to restructure attitudes and beliefs, to provide an understanding of one's own emotional patterns, to affect self-esteem and to also allow insight into one's current problems. It improves realistic thinking and ability to elaborate. Studies show a positive effect on serious diagnoses such as obsessive compulsive disorder, autism, reducing the incidence of psychotic symptoms in patients with schizophrenia, manic and hypomanic state, changes in addictive behaviour, primarily alcohol consumption, smoking and eating disorders. Again, the preparation of the client is always necessary before entering the dark to create an atmosphere of trust and safety. In therapeutic practice the time spent in the dark is usually 24 hours or more. Some complications might be caused by altered states of consciousness. While using both REST methods, there are cases of individuals who report strange experiences that could be described in traditional psychiatry as induced psychotic reactions. It is interesting to note that in none of the studies the test subjects decided to interrupt the experiment even when encountered such reactions. It was found, when comparing the effects of the Flotation and Chamber REST methods, that increased incidence of altered states of consciousness was observed during flotation. It is important to mention that altered states of consciousness are induced without any chemical substances and if the client is well instructed beforehand and it is explained that such phenomena may occur, they are subsequently not experienced as dramatic and can be even seen as interesting and useful (Suedfeld, 1980).

Both versions of the REST method also allow for a space for relaxation and quieting

down, which is something not easily achieved in everyday life in our contemporary culture. We are being overwhelmed and congested by many types of stimulation every day, often dividing our attention between several activities at once and dealing with various daily challenges and worries. Our minds and bodies are intensively exposed to stress, which is well understood to be harmless in the long term. Withdrawal from the overload of stimuli, attractions and entertainment for any period of time seems to be the most positive aspect of any retreat into darkness and silence and in the next part of this text I will subjectively describe my own recent experience.

### **Personal account of 10-days darkness retreat**

My first introduction to a sensory deprivation was via a lesser known book by American author Jack London called *The Star Rover*<sup>5</sup>. The novel describes a story of university professor serving life imprisonment in San Quentin prison for murder. The inmate is placed in solitary confinement where they try to break his spirit by placing him into a device called “the jacket”, which tightly compress his whole body. To overcome the hardship and suffering of this torture, the inmate experiences various dreams, visions of his previous lives and time travel. Much later, I became vaguely aware of darkness retreats. I have watched a documentary about a Czech journalist spending a week in darkness<sup>6</sup>. I have read an occasional article and have had a few books recommended, but it never crossed my mind I would ever undergo such an ordeal. Finally, in summer of 2015, the calling became so strong suddenly that it only took about six months from the idea to the realization. My suspicion is that the main reason for this development was my Iboga experience at the end of May 2015. Primarily because it has removed the last few of my addictions and also by significantly quieting my mind, both of which helped me a lot in the dark. I came across a few books by Mantak Chia, where he suggests that the human brain after a certain period in the dark starts producing its own psychedelic compounds, specifically DMT and 5-MeO-DMT (Chia, 2002; Goodwin, 2007). I wasn't able to find any scientific studies that would confirm these claims during my research I have conducted after the experience, but I feel I need to stress that I was first and foremost approaching the retreat as a psychedelic experience based on these claims.

I have chose Guatemala, specifically an ashram by the Lake Atitlán, firstly because I was travelling in the area and because the ashram is offering a solo experience as opposed to group retreat, an idea that wasn't appealing to me at all. At the ashram I have met with my guide Arpita and we discussed technicalities. I told her I want to get out on Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> in the morning, still aiming for my original plan to spend twelve days in the darkness. We talked about practical things like food, communication etc. After the talk we went to the dome and she showed me around and explained how everything works. Then she said to take my time and when ready to leave my backpack outside and lock myself in. The dome was a round structure about four meters in diameter, equipped with small door lockable from the inside, meditation cushion, toilet, sink, shower, few shelves and a bunk bed reachable by a ladder. There was also a double door system for food supply. At the last moment I decided to take my head torch in, just in case, and although I thought about using it quite a few times, especially at the beginning, in the end I never did. But I guess it made me feel little bit safer. I put my glasses away and left them in my bag outside, surely there would be no use for them in the dark. I took one last look around in the dying evening light and then I shut the door and locked up. A wave of unease washed over me. I brushed my teeth and went straight to bed.

The first few days were a bit of a blur. I slept a lot which was to be expected as my sleeping patterns were adjusted. My first freak out happened in the middle of the first night. I woke up not knowing where I was at first. Then, I remembered where I was, which didn't make things better at all. I couldn't see it, but I could feel the confined space of my bunk bed closing in on me. It took quite a bit of breathwork, but soon I was able to go back to sleep. Sleep time, and especially dream time, was the time of the retreat when I struggled the least. Dreams were plentiful and interesting.

Probably, sometime in the first hours of the first day, after I tasted the hardship of the untrained mind trying to sit quietly in the dark, I decided that twelve days is way too long and that ten is the maximum I will endure. I tried to justify this decision with practical reasons, that two days less would mean that I can get on with my travels sooner, but really, I just chickened out before what seemed like an unbearably long stretch at that moment. From then on, my obsessive monkey mind took over and with mildly decreasing intensity but constantly till the end of the retreat it was counting and measuring and nagging me about how much time had passed and how much was left, how many meals I already had and how many were still remaining. I even recalculated ten days onto one hour (so one day equals six minutes) and measured time like this for a while. I did so for at least the first half of the retreat. When I finally brushed my teeth at the end of what felt like the longest day of my life and laid my head to rest it was six minutes past the whole hour. Fifty four minutes till the end.

Food rapidly became my obsession. Firstly, it was very delicious. Oats with fruits, chai milk, cacao and cinnamon for breakfast. For lunch usually some sort of Indian style curry with vegetables, spices and rice. And for dinner a soup with home baked German style bread. Secondly, it was the only decent way of telling time, besides slight changes in energy and barely noticeable noise from outside of a very soundproofed dome. That also meant it was great "food" for my obsessive mind, because when the bell rang and the meal was served into the food slot it could be transferred from the section of "meals to have" to section "meals had" and all the numbers could be recalculated so the mind could obsess about them till the next meal.

The dome had sounds and life of its own. The ceiling extraction fan whose background noise felt a bit annoying at first became a welcomed distraction. I suspected the switch I discovered at the side of the bed was for turning it off at night, but I never used it except on the very last night. The plumbing produced gurgling sounds and I had a feeling the tubes from the whole ashram were running below the dome. Certainly they were more active in the mornings and in the evenings and I also sometimes used this fact to tell time. All these parts added to the sense of being in a womb. The fan being the wind pipe, the plumbing the digestive system, the food slot was the umbilical cord and I was the foetus.

I tried to establish some sort of a routine to get me through the day (later I read that this is not advisable), but it really wasn't rocket science as my options were highly limited. It looked something like this. Morning bell (around 6am), breakfast, brush teeth. The morning block meant to meditate as much as possible. When I couldn't sit anymore after few hours I lied down on the yoga mat and tried to meditate, which didn't work that well, so I tried relaxation or yoga nidra and when that didn't work anymore, returned to sitting meditation. Alternating till the lunch bell sounded (around noon). The afternoon block was basically the same with the addition of a yoga session half way through the afternoon. The evening bell (around 7pm) was a godsend. It meant the delicious bread was coming and also that after I finished eating dinner, brushed my teeth and washed myself, it would be time to move upstairs for the night shift. If only that meant sleeping through to the morning bell. In reality

it was more like tossing and turning, trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep for a couple of hours which was impossible as the mind was too busy and the body too wired. I'm guessing that about five or six hours of drifting in and out of sleep and dreams followed. Then, in the morning again, I tossed and turned for few hours waiting for the morning bell. Wash, rinse and repeat.

On the third day in the afternoon, right after I ate my lunch and tried to relax, I noticed something rising over me. It was a panic attack. Beating heart, cold sweat, difficulty breathing with a constrained chest, feeling trapped. It was the closest I got to opening the door and aborting the experiment. Instead, I had a very clear vision of me opening the door and crawling out while in reality I stayed behind. This happened a few more times over the course of the retreat. Once, irrationally panicking, I thought I would suffocate inside the dome if the fans stopped spinning. In the vision, I opened the door and took deep breath of the outside air. Another time, I felt like throwing up. I imagined myself opening the door, crawling outside and throwing up on the porch. Each time I felt bit better instantly. My afternoon freakout lasted all the way till bed time and took quite an effort to deal with. What finally put me to sleep was a decision to ask for support and talk to Arpita each night to help me get through this.

Various light effects were noticeable since the second day and were only getting more pronounced each day. *There is a section at the end of this report describing the visual and psychedelic effects.*

In the morning of the fourth day, I left a note for Arpita in the food slot asking her to air my blankets and towel and arranged to talk in the evening. As that day was January 16<sup>th</sup>, I set my mind on that being my lucky number and focused my determination at making this an enjoyable day. It was the first day of my seven day practice with which I came up with in the previous weeks. It was pretty simple, each day during the week was dedicated to one chakra. I meditated on and contemplated the aspects of that chakra. The second part of the exercise was sort of a life review. Each day/chakra represented a seven year cycle in my life. I reviewed those years, contemplated the key moments during those years and gave gratitude for the important lessons I have learnt in that period. I also noticed for the first time on that day that I can kind of see in the dark. It was more like seeing traces of objects rendered in different shades of greys, but it was definitely not a hallucination.

It was very nice to talk to Arpita that evening. I was in a much better place than the previous day and didn't ask for a daily support from her as originally planned. I told her about the freak out and she said that in this kind of long retreat, the third and sixth days are usually the critical ones. I told her I would try to fast with lemongrass tea the next day, but asked her to bring the tea at the meal times as I had become quite attached to those times. When I let Arpita out and closed the door behind her I caught a whiff of the evening smells and warmth from the outside. It hit me like a narcotic. After four days in a stale, musty and slightly damp environment it was a smell to behold.

I have noticed the change in experience while fasting. I felt much lighter, the regular food had a certain heaviness about it. I wasn't prepared to give up food for longer periods of time, so I opted just for fruit the following day. There was a sense of relief at the end of the fifth day as it marked the mid-point of the retreat.

The main dream of the sixth night was like a long horror movie. Literally, streams of guts, blood, demons and gore going on for a long, long time. I woke up eventually from what would have normally been considered a terrible nightmare, surprisingly unperturbed. I experienced another dream that night which helped me to understand that I had reached the level of my subconscious where images from popular culture were stored. The images from

all those horror movies I have enjoyed over the years were now pouring back into my consciousness through my dreams. The experience of that night brought to my awareness the question of mental hygiene and paying more attention to what images and content I consume through my eyeballs.

The second valuable realization of that night that helped me a lot in subsequent days was about my addicted mind. I understood that the obsessive monkey mind that kept counting days and hours and couldn't wait for all this to be over was partially overlapping with the part of my brain that is addicted to technology and interaction. One of my lesser intentions for doing this retreat was to take a break from computers, emails, likes, posts, watching, listening and all that constant technological stimulus that seems to be so pervasive in our society these days. What I didn't realise was how much my brain is addicted to these things and what effect going cold turkey would have on it. Once I understood that the mind is wrecking all this havoc and making the experience a big struggle just because it needs another fix soon, this awareness made the following hours and days a bit more bearable. It still gave me a hard time, sure, but now I was aware why it was doing so.

In the evening on the sixth day I had another little chat with Arpita, shared my insights with her and happily reported that there was no sixth day crisis. She said that by now it should be all much easier as the mind has settled into the experience and I had noticed myself that things were running more smoothly for the last couple of days. On this day, I also noticed my enhanced sense of smell, which wasn't always welcomed like in case of my soiled and sweaty clothes.

The peak of the experience happened in the afternoon of the eighth day. I lied down after lunch and said into the darkness: "What about a story?" Between that moment and the dinner bell about six hours later it felt like only fifteen minutes had passed. During that time, I received, downloaded and co-written a story about the importance of present moment and the cyclic nature of time. The whole experience lasted all the way till the following morning and it felt like some sort of trance. I went through all the aspects of the story many, many times over in a span of about eighteen hours. I was memorising it, rewriting it, polishing it and - most of all - I lived all the scenes as the main character. It was an immensely beautiful experience.

In the evening on the ninth day, when I was getting ready for my last night in the dome, I noticed I was tripping hard. Everything was covered in intricate glowing green patterns and in the middle of the space there was a huge totem made from the same patterns stretching all the way up way above where the actual roof of the dome was. I sat down for few more hours to observe the spectacle.

Arpita said she will ring the bell at 5:30am and from then on I can take my time to emerge. I had almost three hours till she would bring breakfast into my new room outside she kindly prepared for me the night before. Soon after my last dream ended I noticed movement outside, the food slot opened and the bell rung loudly for a long time. What a sweet, sweet sound to my ears. I certainly took my time. Firstly, I opened the door, took a deep breath and inhaled the smells of the dawn. What stood out most, was the loud and overwhelming sound of the river running right next to the dome. I had no memory of the river from before I entered and the fact that it was right there all the time and I didn't hear it at all inside blew my mind. I was very dizzy and spaced out for first few hours of the day. My senses were enhanced, colours were super bright and sounds sharp and intense for most of the day.

After I settled into my new accommodation for next couple of nights, I spent the day observing the gorgeous greenery surrounding the ashram, noticing every little bird, butterfly

and other insects while the beautiful melody of the running river provided a background soundtrack. I remained very much in isolation for the rest of the day, writing down my notes while Arpita was still kindly bringing me food at meal times.

### **Notes on visual, visionary and psychedelic effects**

The darkness didn't stay dark for long. Already on the first day some visual disturbances were noticeable. First there were flashes of light, kind of like strobe lights, that usually started in the corner of my field of vision and then extended over the whole field in wavelike patterns or horizontal lines. They could last anywhere between a few seconds and a few minutes. This effect was persistently yet irregularly present throughout the whole experience. These usually became more frequent later in the morning as it seems to me that the visual system was reset during sleep and the effects were gradually increasing in intensity during the day. There was darkness and visual field mostly undisturbed for the first few hours each morning.

The second interesting effect that I would like to mention already has a mildly psychedelic element to it. I shall call it "vistas". It only happened when I was sitting still for some time with my eyes closed. The whole space in front of me transformed and opened up into a dimly illuminated open space sometimes with a slightly coloured tint. These spaces could be anything from deserts, surfaces of other planets, temples, forests or just plain open spaces with large objects or statues formed right in front of me.

A very interesting effect started appearing about half way through the retreat and that was the aforementioned "seeing in the dark". It felt like I could recognise shapes and edges of objects which sometimes matched the objects in the real world and sometimes didn't (I was checking this fact regularly by touch). The scene always seemed illuminated by blueish light source originating somewhere on or behind my forehead like some sort of head torch. An interesting twist to this effect was when I started with my yoga practice - the colour of light always changed to red. In that red light, I was able to see my yoga mat quite clearly.

The "vistas" effect had one interesting variation. Several times when I was meditating, I felt like I was placed in the middle of some sort of a tube about a meter and half in diameter stretching up and down as far as I could perceive. My viewpoint was slightly off the centre of this geometrical configuration. At the centre, there was a spherical object resembling a big boulder or a human head. Somehow, I got an impression that this object at the centre was my mind and I was observing it slightly from behind. The inside of the tube (where the "mind" was) was totally empty, still and undisturbed. All the thoughts were buzzing behind the boundary of the tube. Whenever a thought occurred in my mind I could perceive it as a small object that penetrated the wall and entered the inside of the tube. To return to the still mind meant to push this thought-object back behind the tube's boundary. This exercise was enormously helpful and I am considering practicing with this "model" outside of the dark as well.

There were also various hypnagogic images appearing right before falling asleep that were mostly of very high resolution, cartoonish and quite fast and erratic.

During the last few days I have felt I got a glimpse of the more advanced "next level" psychedelic effects that were just starting to manifest. The first thing I noticed was a very interesting pattern on the top of my t-shirt covering my upper torso. As it was one of my glow in the dark t-shirts, I thought for some time that this is how it must look in the dark, which was a very silly idea of course after eight odd days of complete darkness, but I didn't think too much of it initially. It was quite a surprise when I got out and find out I had been

wearing the t-shirt inside out so the pattern I thought was responsible was on the inside the whole time. The pattern was of green luminous colour, resembling a back of a motherboard or a printed circuit only more organic and fluid. After the t-shirt I started to notice it also on my arms and the last few hours in the dark it spread and covered the whole room. It was all around, glowing in a magnificent display and forming some sort of a totem in the centre of the room. Strains of the green patterns were pouring from all around the room and cumulating and joining up at the strange totem resembling at the same time organic and cybernetic thick tree trunk. It was a fabulous sight and I spent my last hours in the dome sitting in meditation in front of this otherworldly object.

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For the complete version of this article, which explores Western industrialized cultures' relationship to the dark in greater depth, please email the author: [andrew.garrett.reece@gmail.com](mailto:andrew.garrett.reece@gmail.com).

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