

The Heart of Darkness

Notes from the Darkness Retreat

by Vlad S.

Lago de Atitlan, Guatemala
January 2016

1. Introduction

I was vaguely aware of darkness retreats for a couple of years. I have watched a documentary about a Czech journalist spending a week in darkness (*Týden ve tmě, Week in the darkness by Silvie Dymáková, 2014*). I have read an occasional article and got few books recommended previously, 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 the Iboga experience at the end of May 2015. Primarily because it has removed last few of my addictions and also by significantly quieting my mind, both of which helped me a lot in the dark. I must stress, though, that I was first and foremost approaching the retreat as a psychedelic experience. I didn't do any special preparations besides the usual work in the ceremonies the prior three or four months, avoiding psychedelics roughly a month before the retreat and adding few supplements to my diet (B12, magnesium, calcium and zinc). I was more intensively preparing my mind only for about a month prior to the experience.

2. Before the retreat

Shamanic drumming journey

Lago de Atitlan, Wednesday December 31st

I have joined a Qigong workshop with Darren in the afternoon at the Cosmic Convergence festival where I was spending the last days of the old year. After the Qigong session, which was very pleasant, we lie down in a circle with our heads towards Darren. He starts drumming and guides us on our journey. He asks us to visualize ourselves lying alone on the shore of the lake on a sunny day. I follow his voice and guidance and the following unfolds: I see myself from high above resting in a relaxing position on the green grassy field by the lake. I turn to my side, lift myself and get up while leaving my body lying in the same position. I walk to the lake and enter its waters. I feel the water enclosing around me, it is neither cold nor warm. I walk deeper on the lake's floor till I get to the very bottom and deep centre where I find a big golden temple. I enter the temple and keep walking through the hallways until I reach the room in the very centre of the temple. The room is guarded by a creature. Darren mentioned its name, but I cannot remember now. It looks like a big humanoid bird holding some sort of a spear. I am encouraged to ask it if it has any massages for me, which it hasn't. I ask it for a permission to enter and it moves aside and lets me go into the main room of the temple. There is an altar in the middle where I am supposed to find my inner self or my spirit animal. The altar is empty for a moment and then a big golden lion appears. I am guided to ask it what messages it has for me. I am standing right in the front of this magnificent beast, fascinated by its mane hovering in the water all around its head. Then it says: "Let go of control" and "Trust in me". I thank it for the messages and follow Darren's voice outside of the altar room. I thank the guardian bird creature for letting me in and keep walking back outside of the temple, out of the lake and back to my body.

Dream

Antigua, Tuesday January 5th

I have been reading a lot about dark retreats the previous evening. In my dream I feel I am already in San Marcos, but it looks nothing but. Instead I am in a modern office building and I am setting my office space. Most of the dream I am preoccupied with building a terrarium for my bearded dragon lizard Alice. I start small with just a white cardboard box and few napkins as a floor. There are few pools of clouded white liquid that looks like sperm. I feel it is Alice's pee or poo and get on with building a better terrarium. Eventually I work my way to a huge glass terrarium with water features and spend most of the time designing a heating stone with a little cave below it where Alice can climb under and soak up the heat. I move the terrarium to its place on my table. It fits perfectly, but then it seems to me that it will look better when I turn it around so I do that. Alice crawls out of her hiding spot towards the front glass. There are two bunches of herbs that look like parsley or coriander. She starts munching on the leaves and she looks happy. I realize I need to get some wood chips for the floor and get her some crickets. My mum appears at one stage complimenting my efforts. There is also someone else present the whole time, but I don't remember who. I feel her/his presence as mildly threatening and feel like they are competing with me and not supporting my endeavour.

Walk

El Paredon, Wednesday January 6th

As the time is getting closer to the darkness retreat my anxiety is slowly raising. While walking on the beach I came back to explore my fear of the darkness experience that appeared in my mind few times recently. An illuminating insight soon followed and went something like this:

There will be only me and what comes through me in the darkness and there is no way I will be afraid of what is me or comes through me.

I need to be aware of and keep reminding myself of this simple fact.

Cacao Ceremony with Keith

San Marcos la Laguna, Sunday January 10th

Just a few short days before the retreat starts I have decided to join Sunday cacao ceremony in San Marcos. I have enjoyed myself even though the actual environment and Keith's "work" wasn't exactly my cup of tea. One thing he said during the course of the afternoon stuck with me though. It was a quote from Eckhart Tolle and a perfect piece of advice for upcoming weeks:

Suffering is necessary until you realize it is unnecessary.

2. Daily notes (as far as I remember)

Day 0

Tuesday January 12th

After an enjoyable afternoon at the bar in Maya Moon Lodge I took my backpack and shoulder bag and climbed first the many steps to the main road and then, via the Tzununá village, up the steep hill to the ashram. It was a pleasant exercise with the purpose of “working for it” on one hand and also to get me tired on my first night. Half way up the hill I have met a pretty young girl zigzagging the road with a basket on her head. I greeted her and she replied and started chatting to me. My poor Spanish wasn't of much use but it was a nice moment and I took it as a good omen. Her name was Josefina.

In the ashram I have met with Arpita and we discussed technicalities. I told her I want to get out on Sunday 24th in the morning. We talked about food, cacao etc. After the talk we went to the dome and she showed me around and how everything works. Then she said to take my time and when ready to leave my backpack outside and lock myself in. I did another round of inspection and found an enormous centipede in the sleeping area. I kindly escorted it outside – there is not enough space for both of us, buddy. Still only a mild anxiety at this stage, it felt like I went straight in. 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 reckon it made me feel little bit safer. For a while I was also looking for my mindfold (a special eye mask) in my backpack as I was so sure I have packed it, but it was nowhere to be found as I never did pack it. I have put my glasses away and left them in my bag outside, surely there would be no use for them in the dark. Last look around in a little bit of dying evening light and then I shut the door and locked up. Wave of unease washed over me. I brushed my teeth and went straight to bed.

Day 1

Wednesday January 13th

First few days are bit of a blur. I have slept a lot which was to be expected as my sleep patterns were adjusting. First freak out happened in the middle of the first night. I woke up not knowing where I was at first. Then I have remembered where I was, which didn't make things at all better. 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.

The very first one took place in the darkness retreat dome. I have discovered a hidden part of it that had windows and another food slot. In there I have found Arpita and her husband Arjuna sitting on the floor. I have asked her if she had a mindfold for me and she replied that that is too fancy a technology for this place. Her husband was holding my head away from the light that was coming through the windows. Arpita later shared her own dream which was similar to mine. In her dream she was travelling from one version of the dome to the next and those domes had eyes instead of windows and each version had more eyes until the last one was made only from eyes.

In another dream I have seen R. He didn't look good at all. He was a drug addict snorting some sort of powder and I got the feeling that he is asking for or in need of

help. I have explained to him exactly what I think of him in real life, that I can't help him unless he starts to help himself first by stopping blaming others for his misfortune and behaving like a victim.

In one of the other dreams I remember from that night I have seen an enormous whale emerging from the sea in the front of me. Need to look up the meaning of this dream symbol.

Probably sometime in the first hours of the day, after I have tasted the hardship of untrained mind trying to sit quietly in the dark, I have decided that twelve days is way too long and that ten is the maximum I will do. 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 at that time seemed like an unbearably long stretch.

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 has passed and how much is there still left, how many meals I already had and how many are still left. 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. Fuck! This will be a long hour.

Day 2

Thursday January 14th

In the first scene of the first dream I remember from that second night we are at the back of a bus. Next to me sits the girl from the Cosmic Convergence, the one that was looking after my bag. Belle? She is trying to get cosy with me by leaning on me and trying to rest her head in my lap. When I refuse her she starts swelling with blood. Soon the blood starts pouring from every pore of her body until she explodes in geyser of red. Some droplets of blood end in my mouth and I run to the toilet to spit it out and wash it off. I woke up. I was lying in pool of sweat under a soaked blanket. I noticed slight pain in my ear and my throat was sore. I remembered the testimonial I have read some time ago of a guy who got ear infection during dark retreat and thought to myself: Great! I hope I am not getting sick on second day!

In another dream after I fell asleep again E. is nurturing me back to health. It felt really good to be cared for and surely enough when I wake up I feel much better. In another dream I play with a little kitten that is really aggressive and keeps biting my right hand so hard that soon open gaping wound appears. Another health/injury dream which added to the feeling that the theme of the night is to deal with my fear of getting ill. I feel my guardians are with me and I thank them for their support. I also call onto the spirit of sapo (the frog medicine) that is in me to keep me strong and healthy. No illness has ever manifested during the retreat.

Food is rapidly becoming my obsession. Firstly, it is 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 usually a soup with home baked german style bread. Secondly, it is the only decent way of telling time, besides slight change of energy and barely noticeable noise from outside of a very soundproofed dome. That also means it is a great "food" for obsessive mind, because when the bell rings and the meal is served into the food slot it can be transferred from the section of "meals to have" to section "meals had" and all the numbers can be recalculated so the mind can obsess about them till the next meal. I am going to

bed and it is not even a quarter past yet!

Day 3

Friday January 15th

I am not sure if these dreams occurred on this day, as I have noted before the first three days were kind of a blur. In one dream J. appears. She dances around me making sure I notice her white hair. Her hair look like neurons made from candy floss. I try to reach for her and squeeze her, but when I do she pushes me away angrily. She keeps her back turned away from me so I never see her face. P. G. also appeared in the same dream.

In another dream I meet many of my female friends. First there is D. leaning on a table and showing off her hairy armpits. Later she returns but this time with white hair. I see her through a window walking in the snow and we have a snowball fight. Then S. appears who is to my surprise pregnant. Then A., M. and few others showed up. Thinking of it, it might have been that these dreams occurred on the third day as that is usually the day of the retreat for me when sexual content becomes dominant. Later I came back to this stage of the dreamwork and saw it as a connection to the layer of my subconscious that represents the importance of female friendship in my life.

The dome has sounds and life of its own. The ceiling extraction fan whose background noise fell bit annoying at first became a welcomed distraction. I suspected the switch I have discovered at the side of the bed was for turning it off at night, but I have never used it except the very last night. I don't know, I guess I felt that in total silence it would be much easier to loose one's mind but than again cave doesn't have any sounds either so maybe next time I will keep it turned off. 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 have 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 a 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 meditate, which wasn't working that well so I tried relaxation or Yoga Nidra and when that didn't work anymore returned to sitting meditation. Alternating this till lunch bell (around noon). The afternoon block was basically the same with addition of a yoga session half way through the afternoon. Evening bell (around 7pm) was a godsend. It meant the delicious bread was coming and also that when I will eat the dinner, brush my teeth and wash myself, it will be time to move upstairs for the night shift. If only that would mean to sleep all the way till the morning bell. In reality it was more like tossing and turning, trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep for couple of hours which was impossible as the mind was too busy and the body too wired up. I am guessing that about five or six hours long period of falling in and out of sleep and dreams followed. Then in the morning again tossing and turning for few hours waiting for the morning bell. Wash, rinse and repeat.

On this day in the afternoon, right after I ate my lunch and tried to relax, I have noticed something rising. No, it wasn't anything like consciousness, it was a panic attack. Beating heart, cold sweat, difficulty breathing with 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 have stayed behind. This happened few more times over the course of the retreat. Once when I irrationally panicked that I will suffocate inside if the fans will stop working. Vision of me opened the door and breathed deeply the outside air. Another time I felt like throwing up. Vision of me opened the door, crawled out and threw up on the porch. Each time I felt bit better instantly, neat trick.

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. When I later tried to go back and look for the source of the panic attack I couldn't isolate a solid reason. I don't know, though, could it maybe have something to do with the fact that I was LOCKED UP IN A FUCKING PITCH BLACK TOMB?

Various light effects were noticeable since the second day and were only getting more pronounced each day. I will probably dedicate a separate chapter to the visual and psychedelic effects at the end of this report.

Day 4

Saturday January 16th

I don't remember any dreams from this night, probably because I was too exhausted from the freakout the previous day. In the morning I have left a note for Arpita in the food slot asking her to air my blankets and towel and arranged to talk with her in the evening. As that day was January 16th 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 in the previous weeks. It's pretty simple. Each day in the week is dedicated to one chakra. I will meditate on and contemplate the aspects of the chakra, it's colour and elements. Second part of the exercise is a sort of a life review. Each day/chakra represents seven years cycle in my life. I will review those years, contemplate the key moments during those years and give gratitude for the important lessons I have learned in that period. So Saturday was all about the Root chakra. I have tried to visualize the colour red. I said the prayer to the Earth. I prayed to find a piece of land with fertile, unpolluted and healthy soil to build my Project on. I sang peyote songs to the north and to the mountain behind the wall of the dome. And I have reviewed first seven years of my life, making the connection between that part of my life and Earth by remembering the forest that grew not far from our home in the highlands, the fields where we used to play as kids and the power of the blizzard I had to walk through for four kilometres when being only about six years old.

Half way through the afternoon I have received my first dose of ceremonial cacao and thoroughly enjoyed meditating with it all the way till Arpita brought the dinner. I have also noticed for the first time 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. How does that work? What was I seeing when around was zero light? Something to investigate further.

It was very nice to talk to Arpita. She brought a mindfold for me to put on while she was using a torch to locate the blankets and I had to laugh and share the dream I had about the mindfold on the first night. I was in 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 freakout and she said that in this kind of long retreats the third and sixth days are usually the critical ones. She said she had a feeling she might find a note from me on that third day asking to leave. She also confirmed that the cacao

can smooth out the rough edges of the experience. As the next day was a half moon I told her I will try to fast with lemongrass tea, but asked her to bring the tea at the meal times as I have become quite attached to those times. When I was letting Arpita out and closing the door behind her I caught a whiff of the evening smells and warmth from the outside and it hit me like a narcotic. After four days in a stale, musty and slightly damp environment it was a smell to behold.

Day 5

Sunday January 17th

The cacao was probably still working when I went to bed. While waiting to fall asleep I was watching a cool little cartoon or platform game. A group of little characters, about five of them, one of them a little lion, were storming down the hill at a breakneck speed for a while then racing horizontally while in the last third of the race they were slowly ascending. My mind made a metaphor of me and my guardians going through the retreat. First three days down, three days at the bottom and four days climbing back to light. The resolution of these images was amazing, all sharp and rendered in beautiful green shades.

I remember consciously focusing at trying to invoke a lucid dream that night. I couldn't fall asleep for ages until I have noticed I am floating high above the jungle. In every direction there were stone temples and pyramids protruding through the trees. Whatever it was it didn't feel like a dream, more like astral travelling. The realization later came to me that what I was observing was an ancient Mayan city that was never discovered and destroyed by Spaniards and it is still out there, deep in as yet unreached jungle, waiting to be conquered.

When I snapped out of this vision I got back to my efforts to induce a lucid dream, this time with more success. I have noticed white seals and other white animals made from snow jumping around me. For some reason that was the moment when I have become lucid. I had a stroll around a bit and noticed two scientists in lab coats fiddling with something on the table and gesticulating towards me, they wanted to show me something. I came closer and recognized a pair of virtual reality goggles. I was intrigued - how does this work in dreams? They wanted me to try and I didn't hesitate. I put the goggles on and instantly woke up. Go figure.

I should probably stress at this point that not only was I trying to induce a lucid dream but I also wanted to have sex in it with a beautiful girl. This might explain why the next dream turned out the way it did. Not long after I fell out of the previous dream I was back in another lucid dream. I guess this must have been the longest lucid dream I have experienced so far, it certainly felt like that. I have appeared next to another person. Somehow I have assumed that he must know how to enter lucid dreams at will and I have asked him about it. He showed me some kind of a computer made of stone with three slots. Yes, he started, you just put the password in here, pointing at the first slot. But before he could finish or I could ask anything else he collapsed hitting his head on the table. It felt like he was another avatar in a shared dream and his dreamer just woke up. I got on with exploring the place looking for my date. It was a long walk through a bizarre place, something like a cabinet of desires. There was a moaning headless male torso with spread legs and gaping hairy vagina lying on a bed offering itself. No, thank you, I have gladly passed and kept looking. There was a corner with bunch of unicorns. Another section had a group of little girls in cute skirts, all looking alike only each of them had a head of a same sleazy baldish man. This has been going on for some time until I have reached a staircase. And there she was, standing right in front of me. The view of her perfect naked tanned body was filling my whole field of vision. It started

just above her breasts and continued all the way down right below her genitals. She was yelling something over my head which was concerning her daughter and from which I have gathered that she is a prostitute and has an apartment on a next floor. Perfect, all the information I needed. And then I have woke up! Damn!

In my next dream that night I have met my old friends. A group of dream characters, mostly males, who whenever they appear in my dreams all they do is causing havoc, mischief or full on bullying. This dream was no exception. I am in the bathroom closing the door of a wall cabinet in which these bastards hid a spray can. When I close the door the spray can sprays some sort of a political banner all over the top of my torso. I hear laughs from the next room and arguments trying to persuade me how cool and funny this all is. I am not amused, but am happy that I wasn't wearing my best t-shirt.

This day's exercise was all about the second, orange, Sacral chakra. At various stages of the day I have prayed to the water and prayed for a source of clean water at my Project and for plentiful rainfall for the crops. I sang songs to the west, for the river that runs behind the dome's wall even though at that time I had no idea there was a river. In one visualisation I went back into the lake to the temple where I have met my spirit lion few weeks back in the shamanic drumming session. I have asked him for the strength and guidance during my dark experience and he closed his eyes and nodded his head in acknowledgement. It made me so happy I shot out of the lake and danced above it in a huge swirl of water for a while. (I have just recalled a vision from few days back in which I have embodied a lion, feeling my mane floating around my head and looking down at my big front paws as I was walking. It might be my spirit animal after all.)

In my life review I have revisited the years between the age eight and fourteen. I have noticed the connection to water in the visits to a flooded quarry with my dad back in Czechoslovakia and also while wild camping with him and my sister in the rain when two huge deers were singing nearby in the night.

I have noticed the change in experience while fasting. I fell much lighter, the regular food had certain heaviness about it. I wasn't prepared to give up food for longer period of time so I opted just for fruit the next day.

Also, half past the whole hour! The bells rang loud that evening.

Day 6

Monday January 18th

The main dream of that night was one long horror movie. Literally streams of guts, blood, demons and gore going on for long, long time. I woke up eventually from what would normally be considered a terrible nightmare surprisingly unperturbed. There was other dream that night starring Simon Pegg, Ice-T, guns and shooting and this dream helped me to understand that I have 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 to 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 I consume through my eyeballs, what images and what content.

Second valuable realization of that night that helped me a lot in subsequent days was about my addicted mind. I have 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 intention for doing this retreat was to take a break from computers, emails, likes, posts, shows, videos, watching, listening and all that

constant technological stimulus that seems to be so pervasive in our society these days. What I didn't realize was how much my brain is addicted to these things and what effect going cold turkey would have on it. Once I have 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 bit more bearable. It was still giving me a hard time, yes, but now I was aware why it was doing so.

Third Solar Plexus chakra was the focus of the day's exercise. I have meditated on yellow colour. The fire was in my prayers. I prayed for a sacred fire to burn bright in the temple in the middle of my Project. I have prayed to the fire energy contained in the volcanoes around the Lake Atitlan and I sang songs towards the south where the Lake was, the biggest crater of an ancient volcano around. I have acknowledged I have power, strong will and control of which I can let go if needed as my spirit animal suggested. In the life review exercise I have contemplated years fifteen till twenty one and noted the connection with fire as this was the time when I started smoking.

I have received my second dose of cacao around midday. First it got me singing. Then it filled my heart with gratitude and made me a bit emotional. Finally, it put me in a very peaceful state and I have meditated in stillness.

In the evening 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 last couple of days.

On this day I have also noticed my enhanced sense of smell, which wasn't always welcomed like in case of my soiled and sweaty clothes.

Day 7

Tuesday January 19th

I was wondering when will she show up. The fact that she decided to do so on a day dedicated to the Heart chakra was surely no coincidence. That's E., the girl that taught me unconditional Love. She stole almost the whole dream that night for herself, but not from the very beginning. The dream started as Nazi Game of Thrones (don't ask me). That was apparently a show being filmed all around me while I was stuck hiding under a car simultaneously afraid I will ruin the scene and will be run over by the same car. Next scene and we are in T.'s flat. B. is there resolutely stating that he is going to have sex. Next moment I see him in his room with two half naked young boys. (The thought of B. being gay never even crossed my mind in the real life but in the dream it seemed like a no-brainer. Somehow I feel this one will be coming back for some time while back in London). It was around that time when E. entered the picture. Looking back I noticed that this was my first dream ever with her where she was not acting weird, ignoring me, playing hard to get or wrecking havoc. In here we actually cooperated as a team. We were on a mission. The mission was to built my Project and the adventure was to find enough money to fund it. We were actually on the way to discover those lost pyramids and Mayan temples and claim the finder's fee. It was very exciting, Indiana Jones like adventure, and for the first time in like forever we were working together as friends. The dream went on all night and for the first time (and only time) I have slept all the way till the morning bell. (To be completely precise here E. actually appeared in one of the early dream scenes around day two or so. But only briefly though. She appeared in a distance, shot an obese girl that was lying with me with an arrow and disappeared again).

The chakra meditation was about the Heart chakra. I meditated on colour green. I prayed for clean air not just for Mother Earth generally, but also for the place where my Project will be. I sang songs towards the east, to the wind. And in my life review I have focused on the age between years twenty two and twenty eight, the stage in my life when I have experienced true Love for the first time.

In the afternoon I did my Love and compassion meditation/visualisation. Starting with my family and followed with all my friends I could remember, I visualized each one of them, thanked them for their place in my life or for something specific, wished them happiness and good health and in the end I said I Love them. This took several hours and quite a bit of tears, but it made me pleasantly tired and I have slept nicely again the following night.

Day 8

Wednesday January 20th

I had a wonderful dream where I sat around the fire in a ceremony with ancestors and we consumed magic mushrooms in some sort of liquid concoction. There was also some healing performed by using some long leaves and I remember I thought about R. Later Keith appeared, curious if I will join them again for the cacao ceremony over the weekend. I said I am afraid I will not and explained why - that I like his cacao but his way of working with it is not really my thing.

Exercise that day was about the Throat chakra which is connected to language. In the morning I lied down and tried to flip the still obsessive, nagging mind into more productive mode. I wrote a letter to J. very smoothly, the words just flowed like water. I had a smoothies only diet that day and my last dose of ceremonial cacao. When that arrived around midday I drunk it, lied down 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 passed. During that time I have received, downloaded and co-written a Story. The whole experience lasted all the way till the following morning, 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 memorizing it, rewriting it, polishing it and - most of all - I have lived all the scenes as the main character! It was the peak of my retreat and an immensely beautiful experience. Once I will finish with these daily notes I am moving onto writing the Story down. I don't feel no rush, though, as the Story seems so embedded in me, I am not afraid to loose it.

As the Throat chakra is also connected to sound I did some singing, but that must have been in the morning before the download commenced. Life reviewed years between ages twenty nine and thirty five. I have moved to London in that period and language was definitely a big part of settling in a new and radically different environment.

Day 9

Thursday January 21th

It felt like I got no sleep that night thanks to the continuous download, but there are snippets of few dreams. The first one (which I am not sure happened on that night) is about me and my family living on a weird, tilted, container like structure above some lake or pond. When someone fell through one of the many holes in the flimsy floor to the lake tens of meters below, all we could do was to watch in horror how the person in the water was being slowly surrounded by tens and tens of swimming feral dogs and then ferociously teared apart alive. Another glimpse is of J. and M.

with bare breast (Geez, I don't even know her!). In last weird dream from that night me, M. and couple of others are stuck on a space station, each of us in our own small and tight pod, spinning slowly, silently and aimlessly through the dark space.

It was a pleasant day mostly because by this time I had decided I will leave the dome the following morning. I talked about it to Arpita in the evening, during our third and last chat in the course of the retreat, and although I have been preparing the talk in my mind for some time I still got swayed by emotions when talking about the Story. I was also little bit worried that she might be disappointed in me leaving two days earlier than arranged, but she was calm and cool as a cat as usual and we discussed the technicalities of me getting out in the morning.

I meditated on my Third eye chakra and reviewed last seven years of my life, noting that those years were the most awesome yet, especially because that was the period when my exploration of consciousness commenced in earnest.

In the evening when I was ready for my last night in the dome I have 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 have sat down for few more hours to observe the beauty and noted to myself that once I will return in the future there is definitely something to look forward to.

Right before falling asleep I was watching erratic cartoons being played on the walls all over the place.

Day 10

Friday January 22th

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. She also said - Don't miss the bell. I am mentioning this because this little sentence transferred right into my first dream.

The dream was pretty static. Four boys dressed only in some sort of loin cloths or swim trunks sat around a fire on the beach draining a fish. Yes, they were holding a squarish fish, or rather outside of the fish with missing insides, over the fire while oily liquid was dripping from it into the fire. I have woke up from this strange scene only to find out these four boys sitting in the same configuration in my bed! The one most to the left looked at me and said casually: You have missed the bell. I have freaked out a bit and my mind kicked in. If I miss the bell do I have to stay till the evening (exit is only possible before sunrise or after sunset due to the light intensity)? I have focused my hearing. Cicadas were in full swing outside and it certainly sounded and felt like a middle of the night. I have tried to remember if there were cicadas singing after dawn. For how long? Maybe if I will give it another hour they will stop and I will know I have missed the bell and still have enough time to emerge in time. It took me a while to settle down and realize my mind is playing tricks on me. The merging of the dream world and the real world left a disturbing aftertaste. I experienced false awakenings before, but if the part where the boys appeared in my bed was still a dream I don't remember waking up from that one and it certainly felt very real. I even climbed down the stairs when the boys disappeared, went to the toilet and listened with my ear to the door contemplating opening them before climbing back up and eventually falling asleep again.

In the second and last dream of the night I have arrived in a village in the jungle. I have been welcomed by a young couple, girl and boy that looked more like siblings. The boy told me he is the chief designer of the dark retreat technology (kind of like

Mouse in Matrix movie) and expressed his happiness at me returning from his creation. The mood was festive. We hang out in the indoor swimming pool with the villagers. At one point it looked like I will slip from the high place above the pool, but I wasn't ready to go to water yet and barely managed to pull myself up again. Sometimes at this stage P. and J. appeared. J. looked ubercool dressed in black and wearing sunglasses. I wanted to ask him about his travels but he was too cool to talk to anyone. P. was his usual laid back.

Soon after this dream ended I have noticed movement outside, the food slot opened and the bell rung loudly for a long time. I knew now that it was impossible to miss this sound. My heart skipped a beat and I have breathed in deeply and released a long slow breath of relief. What a sweet, sweet music to my ears.

I certainly took my time. Firstly I have opened the door and just inhaled the smells of the dawn. What got me 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 have 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. The senses were enhanced, all colours were super bright and sounds sharp and intense for most of the day.

Still by the dome I performed a little gratitude ritual and meditation and then slowly continued moving out from Joyti, the fabulous spaceship. I have brushed my teeth, tidied up the space, picked up my few bits and bobs, washed myself and put on my last set of clean clothes.

After I have settled in my new accommodation for next couple of nights I have 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 the background soundtrack. I have remained very much in isolation for the rest of the day, writing down these notes while Arpita was still kindly bringing me food at meal times. I have also finished my exercise focusing that day in meditation on my Crown chakra which is connected to the light and spirit. I have contemplated the next seven years of my life and what I would like to achieve in the upcoming cycle.

It was an amazingly beautiful day of integration after challenging but ultimately enormously fascinating and rewarding experience. And I was also blessed to have this experience in one of the most beautiful and peaceful places. I give my deepest gratitude for that! Time to emerge into the world tomorrow.

3. Conclusion

This is definitely a technique that demands to be explored further and there is no doubt in my mind that I will be returning to the darkness for longer periods of time. First and foremost prerequisite is to establish a strong daily meditation practice for which this retreat was a great motivator. To get more strong in yoga practice also seems beneficial. Recently I have become interested in Qigong and feel that incorporating this practice would bring further benefits.

The aforementioned issue of mental hygiene is certainly something to focus on also, although it didn't seem to be too big of an obstacle or an issue.

I am very intrigued to read and learn more about dark retreats and dark therapy.

And last but not least, it will be interesting to observe long term effects and benefits of the retreat in the coming months and years and also what influence will this experience have at my other practices and consciousness exploration endeavours.

Addendum: 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 a 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 few seconds and 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 was mostly undisturbed for the first few hours each morning.

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 slight colour 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 the front of me.

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 recognize 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 a head torch. Interesting twist to this effect was when I started with my yoga practice the light colour 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 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 is 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.

I have also mentioned the hypnagogic images 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. First thing I have noticed was very interesting pattern on the top of my t-shirt covering my upper torso. As it was the one of my glowing in the dark t-shirts I thought for some time that this is how it must look in the dark, which was 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 have 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 last few hours in the dark it has spread and covered the whole room. It was all around, glowing in a magnificent display and forming sort of a totem in the middle of the room. Strains of the green patterns were pouring from all around the room and cumulating and joining up in the totem or a strange object resembling at the same time organic and cybernetic thick tree trunk. It was a fabulous sight and I have spent my last hours in the dome sitting in meditation in front of this otherworldly object.

The last, mildly disturbing effect was the spilling of the dream content into the real world. This is something very interesting but at the same time I can see how this can be also quite disorienting.

These last two effects are something to look forward to and to investigate further in the upcoming longer retreats and I am positive that there are much more intriguing effects and elements awaiting behind the ten days boundary.

Assorted notes

- I think that it was Winston Churchill who said: If you're going through hell, keep going. It occurred to me in one of the few blissful moments that the opposite is also true: If you're going through heaven, keep going as well to avoid (as Terence McKenna put it) death by astonishment.
- There is a very weird song from an obscure Russian artist Vitas called Седьмой элемент (The 7th Element). I had this song stuck in my head on repeat for one whole afternoon and now I think I know how torture feels.

Thanks for reading! :)

