

A Short Dark Retreat of the Leap-over

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[I have written this short account at your request, dear friend. I hope it will benefit you in some way. Even though the particulars are expected to vary according to people's abilities and characteristics, they might be a source of inspiration. For context, solitary retreats in total darkness are part of some cycles of teachings in the Dzogchen tradition of Tibet ('The Great Perfection').]

The 22nd of December 2025, I reached Shenten, a *domaine* in rural France, close to Saumur, which was repurposed twenty years ago as a Bön retreat centre, with residing lamas all year round. The Bön is a religious tradition of Tibet that is hardly distinguishable from some other Buddhist schools: different scholastic, texts and lineages, but the same view and similar methods.¹

A resident practitioner had me sign a document listing the possible negative effects on my mental health of being secluded in the dark for a long period of time, and requiring that I agree to a dark retreat after this fair warning and under my own private responsibility. This is really important, as I have noticed over many years how Buddhist institutions in the West tend to attract people with all sorts of mental illnesses. One contributing factor is that too many psychotherapists recommend their patients to practise some form of Buddhist meditation. I could expand considerably on this topic, the

relationship between psychotherapy and Buddhist meditation (or the secular and misguided so-called mindfulness), the widespread use of psychotherapy in the West (to the point that when someone says 'therapy' it means 'psychotherapy') without ever mentioning the possible negative outcomes, or its possible uselessness etc. But, given that isolation in a cell is the worst punishment in prisons, and that I was not only going to do it willingly, but also in total darkness, I think the warning and disclaimer were more than fair: they were absolutely necessary.

After dinner, the lama in charge of the retreat, Geshe² Geleg, a tall, warm man with a high reputation, sat with me at the dining table. He told to me in English that it will be crucial to relax. I understood that in the Dzogchen sense, that is, to remain as much as possible in the knowing of the primordial ground, *rigpa*. Rigpa has two aspects (when not considered a process for exposition's sake): *primordial purity* and *spontaneous presence*; the former is, in rough terms, emptiness inseparable from wisdom, and the latter, manifestation of that potential wisdom into displays of clear light visions. The cultivation of primordial awareness is achieved by practising *trekchö* ('Breakthrough (the solidity of the ordinary mind)'), and the knowing of the spontaneous presence require a practice called *tögal* ('Leap-over'). The Leap-over can be practised

¹One difference with the Buddhist syllabus is the study of poetry, which goes to my heart.

²An academic degree in the Bön tradition — and others —, translating as 'virtuous friend'.

with daylight, moonlight, even candlelight, and also in total darkness, but familiarity with *trekchö* is needed for its progress and success.

So Geshe Geleg reminded me that the traditional duration of a dark retreat is seven weeks,³ but modern, busy life calls for more flexibility. He told me that there are no specific instructions. Usually the retreatants would simply practise what they practise daily. I was surprised, because the dark retreat in the Yangti Nagpo cycle of the Nyingma school comes with complex, bizarre yogas, as well as strenuous physical exercises meant to exhaust the discursive mind.

Geshe Geleg added that, should any inner or outer obstacle arise (the latter I understood refers to some mischievous, mundane spirit), he recommended a simple tantric practice. Visualise in front of me the Tibetan syllable *so*, which he drew on an envelop, coming from my heart, and imagine it in a bright, pulsating red light. Then repeat the *so* sound, while the bright syllable multiplies and fills the space entirely. Next, I should imagine myself as a wrathful deity in red, without focusing on the external syllables anymore. He used his arms to show me a threatening posture often found in *thangkas* (the religious paintings hung on walls). Usually, when practitioners visualise themselves as a wrathful deity, the goal is to cut at the root attachment to the ego. But in this context, the goal is to scare away evil spirits, as they naturally can see the contents of our mind. Then Geshe Geleg told me that I should imagine the syllables entering my crown wheel (the *cakra* a few centimetres above the head), descending into the central channel where they pile up, then filling up my entire body. Finally, I should dissolve the entire visualisation into the vastness of space.

³A number corresponding to the time someone is supposed to migrate from death to rebirth.

Armed with those simple instructions, I walked behind him in the field to the retreat house. It was already dark, as we were far from any town. He was holding a stick of incense, and I did not know if that was relevant to the retreat, or if he simply needed some light. He was singing softly, and I asked him: ‘Geshe-la, you seem happy.’ Without looking at me, he shrugged and replied: ‘What else is there to do while we remain in *saṃsāra*?’

The wooden house was built on stilts (as tradition mandates). I followed him over the threshold, and left my shoes next to two other pairs of women shoes. So I had neighbours and I will be the only one snoring... With this happy thought I entered the cell, a tiny but cosy room with a window, a bed, a meditation cushion, a desk and a bathroom. More unusually, the window had both (inside) blinds and (outside) shutters, and a box in an external wall with two doors, one opening from the outside, one from the inside. The purpose of that box is to provide food without letting light in, but also to talk once in a while with Geshe Geleg when he comes to check in and counsel. But by far the most perplexing was the presence of a sheet of paper and a pen. Would have been funnier if the paper had been black, though.

He asked me to sit on the cushion; he used the bed. He was going to recite a prayer in Tibetan to Tapihritsa, the great master of the past, whom he instructed me to visualise in front of me, dispensing his blessing. Afterwards, Geshe Geleg told me: ‘Your moment has come. Eat your food. Do not wash often, as this would allow the wind element in your body to escape. You should practise at least four times per day. I will come to speak with you regularly.’ Back on the threshold of my room, he flipped a hidden electric switch, and I heard the door close, but no goodbye.

Yet the room never went pitch black for me.

Immediately, white lights shone forth. Not bright,

but veiled like street lights and car headlights seen from behind a curtain in a dark apartment. Just white, slowly moving and nondescript shapes slowly changing and moving before disappearing. This gave me the false impression that there was light in my cell, and shadows. I was not surprised by the displays of white clear light, as I was already familiar with them, but by how suddenly they manifested, without transition. Of course, this is obvious if we understand that they were already shining before the cell was plunged into darkness. A dark retreat forces the retreatant to focus on what is there, hiding in plain sight. Now, not everybody has the same experience right off the bat: it depends on karmic predispositions and one's achievements in this lifetime. But everyone *can* see them, because they are the manifestation of the primordial ground, better recognised by prior training in the Breakthrough.

I remember the first time I saw the clear light shine as an adult. At the end of my twenties, I had started to practise *zazen*, the sitting meditation of the Japanese Buddhist school known as Sōtō Zen. It is a meditation without object: one focuses on a rigid physical posture, and on the breathing, while facing a white wall. After a couple of years of regular practice, after some time in meditation, when the mind was calm, I used to notice on the white wall, or my bathroom door, a change in the lighting of the room, then yellow light, then blue,⁴ the deeper the contemplation went and the more I imagined my breath enter the central channel and descend into my heart wheel.⁵ The change

⁴The five colours of Buddhism are white, blue, yellow, red and green. This is not a random coincidence: the tradition chose those because practitioners actually were seeing them.

⁵The Zen uses an enigmatic instruction: 'Have the breath descend even on expiration.' At least, it was my interpretation that that refers to the *internal* breath (a so-called subtle wind), not the external breathing of air.

in lighting was actually a white clear light shining. This prompted me to question my Zen teachers but they either did not understand or recommended me to ignore this extraordinary phenomenon, lest it would become an obstacle. I chose to leave and find a teacher in Tibetan Buddhism who, after a moment of surprise, assured me that my experience was actually a very positive sign of progress. My point here is that I did not practise the Breakthrough to plough the field, but *zazen*.

What really surprised me was how easy it was for me to find my belongings in the dark room, or walk in the room. Darkness turns a concrete experience of the world into an abstract one, and I am rather good at mental abstraction and memorisation.

During that night, I had at least three dreams in black and white. In the one I remember, I knew that I was supposed to be in a dark room, but I kept seeing white light, which I assumed was coming from outside, and so I kept looking for the supposed leaks, confused at their moving location, like a cat chasing after the spot on the ground made by a laser pointer. This confirmed, if need be, that the visions were continuous, self-arising, not produced by the ordinary mind as in tantric visualisations. Those visions are not external: they take place in the heart wheel, and are perceived by the brain as taking place in front of us.

The following day was the first day. The emergence of white light was less intense, and I slept almost all day.

The second day, I started to see impure visions. I call them impure in opposition to the previous visions, because the impure visions are figurative, not abstract shapes. Nevertheless, I knew that they were the same clear light emerging spontaneously from the primordial ground, but now the ordinary mind, exactly like in a dream, would *interpret* them into something familiar, corresponding to an emotional state for instance, instead of letting them

arise and disappear on their own. Fortunately, I was not taken aback by what could be construed as a reversion (from pure to impure). It was indeed my experience of meditating without object, at least after some months or years of experience, that the first moment of contemplation can be deep but unstable, and then I would have to cut through a jungle of paradoxical injunctions, of doing something without doing anything, for example.⁶ Now I am reminded of a quote from a Chan⁷ master who used the following analogy: when we want to traverse a field of thorny bushes, the first step can be relatively easy, but not the subsequent ones. I do not remember the context, but this analogy could fit within the famous historic antagonism between the Northern and Southern Chan schools, summarised by: Is Enlightenment sudden or progressive? I personally like to think instead of meditators as pearl hunters who plunge from a cliff into uncertain waters: they can easily go very deep at first, have a glimpse of the secret life down there, but they are inexorably drawn up to the surface, and going back down requires skill. Another analogy I read in a teaching by Trungpa Rinpoche was: when we approach a painting on a wall, we first *see* it, and, as we get closer, we *look* at it. The context was to contrast two kinds of wisdom: *jñāna* and *prajñā*, respectively. This seems counter-intuitive at first, because we are used to think that learning, therefore knowledge, requires gradual effort. This is not the view of Dzogchen, where the unveiling would be a more accurate metaphor. (Socrates would perhaps agree with this ‘remembering’ too.)

Back to the impure visions of the second day. They would be vast scenes (think IMAX cinema), white, yellow and black. Each time, at first, a pure

vision would arise, then it would transform into a static scenery before disappearing, then another would arise — without cease. The transition from pure to impure felt like an optical illusion: even if we are prepared to see an optical illusion, no matter our knowledge and resolve, for a fraction of a second we see an abstract shape, but once the brain tricks itself, it cannot revert back to the original vision. And so my visionary experience of the second day felt like a repeated fall into a profound state of forgetfulness and ignorance of reality, of the process that led me to this point. It was not as if an impure vision was part of the whole and my sight was confined to it. No. It was more that the turning into an impure vision was the visual display of an inner fall into ignorance. Those visions arise from the primordial ground, they are not separated from us. They are beyond morality too: they are not evil, not even because they are impure; instead, they are impure because we have not exhausted yet the seeds of conceptuality, and what was sown will inevitably ripen, in this life or the next — better this one. This confusion about reality, the duality between subject and object is typical of dreams, where the ignorance is even deeper, as the sense of being an observer is lost (except during lucid dreaming, as in dream yoga), like in an hallucination. Anyway, it was difficult for me to attend to those impure visions because they were growing in number and frequency, all the while I was feeling very confused — uncontrollable and innumerable thoughts would be depicted in front of my eyes at high speed.

Geshe Geleg came knocking. He asked about my dreams, so I did not tell him what happened the first evening, that I did not need to have signs of progress in dreams, but I did tell him that I was having lots of dizzying thoughts. He told me that this was a positive sign, as it means that the mind is calming down enough to start noticing the plethora

⁶Another school of Zen, the Rinzai, verbalises such paradoxes, or *kōan*, to exhaust the logical, rational mind, and hopefully experience a clearing beyond, a breakthrough.

⁷The ancestor of Zen in China.

of thoughts that are normally constantly simmering, and now express themselves, and by themselves. He told me to attend to the visions, but never engage with them, just let them be. Finally, he told me: 'Do not create the past, do not fabricate the future. Don't forget to enjoy it. This is a unique occasion to know yourself.'

The third day, the runaway train of thoughts slowed down by itself, and now the common denominator of all the impure visions was that they were all peaceful *to me*. For me, since childhood, peace can only be found away from people, in nature. And, since I have a fondness for the night sky in the country side, the moon, rivers, lakes, clouds, tall forests, stone villages, majestic crags, snow, I had two days and nights of such peaceful, impure visions continuously appearing. But, despite their peacefulness, those images appeared frozen, veiled, and I felt compelled to like them. Their scale and depth seemed tremendous at times.

I started to undertake my four daily sessions of practice. I always liked *guru yoga* and purification. Unfortunately, it would take us too far afield into these here. I normally choose the Bön *guru yoga*, but keep the Nyingma purification. On the one hand, I quickly realised that *guru yoga* would not only not disrupt the visions, it would stabilise them, or, equivalently, my contemplation of them, because of the focus on the central channel. On the other hand, the purification did not work well, and I wondered why. It occurred to me that the main difference between them was that *guru yoga* was barely figurative (a white tige), whereas the purification was much more elaborate (Vajrasattva), more tantric in a way. So I simplified it and it started to fit with the self-arising of the visions. Again, this shows, if needed, that the visions are natural, uncreated, whereas tantric visualisation are forcefully imagined and projected, hampering the emergence of the clear light. In passing, since I did not want to

disturb my neighbours, I would whisper my mantras, which made me discover that I could use the inspiration to pronounce the syllables, yielding a continuous recitation.

I would intersperse practice and sleeping. I noticed that simply lying on the bed was not good, as I would drift into thinking about the past or wonder about the future. Fortunately, I had in me the discipline to get up, even in the middle of the night in case of insomnia, wash my face and sit on the cushion until I felt tired enough to actually fall asleep. That night, I had a dream that was a sign of progress with purification: I was looking at my right foot and ankle, and I would pick up insects that had been sucking my blood. It was neither scary nor painful, more a calm relief. The phasm-like⁸ insects would come out easily in the pinch of two fingers, with a bag of blood attached to their bodies. I remember reading in a book by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche how he had a similar dream when practising the purification in the preliminary tantric practices.⁹ So purification was finally working in the dark.

The fourth day, I realised that I should have not exclusively practised on the meditation cushion: my lower back was aching a lot. Even lying down, whatever the position, was very painful. I also had a cold and a piercing headache that turned into a migraine that lasted twelve hours. Zazen teaches us to remain still no matter what. If the nose runs, let it be. If something hurts, let it hurt; actually, observe the feeling without interfering. Who is hurting? When beginners would tell me of such and such cramp or physical discomfort after a session, I would tell them: 'How lucky you are to have such distractions. I only had my messy mind to contend

⁸Pun intended.

⁹The *ngöndro* is meant to establish stability in the practitioners, to bring to the fore glimpses of insight, to enable them to benefit from other teachings. It is like the making of the foundation of a building.

with.’ So I believe that that training helped me to keep going without struggling — a needless fight only adds suffering to the suffering. That day was rather dull and dim. The vast and peaceful visions had become rare and nothing seemed to happen. This was also a potential source of worry, therefore a threat to the entire process I committed to. So I took everything in my stride. This is also why faith is essential.

Sitting on the chair, large impure visions rose again, but this time they all had in common being aggressive imagery, scenes of war, of street fights, of town destructions; an army would be walking in a forest at night, people would fight, kill or threaten each other etc. It is perhaps worth mentioning that those scenes were not aimed at me, the me sitting on the chair, but rather had to do with something in me that was coming out. This realisation was as unsettling as it was unexpected. Moreover, there was a second kind of impure visions, albeit rarer than that of violence: depictions of couples kissing, sometimes the woman would have her eyes open and stare at me while kissing the man, or there would be an attractive naked women bathing on the other side of a wide river, and many other uncountable sultry scenes — all rather tame and chaste for today’s standards.

This lasted three days. When Geshe Geleg came to advise, I told him about the Everests of anger manifesting themselves into shocking visions. He said that these were karmic seeds being purified: I would not have to be slave to them anymore, and I just had to let them express themselves loudly and they will pass, like the peaceful visions. He said (in substance): ‘People wrongly believe that karma can disappear without traces at this stage in the spiritual path. Do not engage with the visions. Remember to dwell in the recognition of *rigpa*. To bring it about, to avoid getting stuck in the contemplation of impure visions, in order to regain the freshness

of the open space, focus on the dissolution phase of guru yoga: give it 100%! And don’t forget to enjoy this retreat.’ I asked him whether I could stay a day longer, as I wanted to see what was in store after this phase, and I had planned enough days. The answer would come back with a meal the next day: yes.

It turns out that I was rather mistaken about the dissolution phase of guru yoga... I believed that Tapihritsa had to descend into my central channel down to my heart wheel, and then my body had to contract and merge with his body and transform into a drop of pure white light (*thigle* in Tibetan), which would then suddenly expand to infinity, but this had a different effect than returning to *rigpa*: I was sensing a sudden great heat in the heart region, rapidly expanding to my whole body; this would happen at the same time that I would lose feeling of my body while being acutely conscious, and feel that I was exiting my body. Just before that I would worry about my breathing (as I would not feel my body) and forcefully breathe in, rather perplexed. I could not check in my booklet what the dissolution phase was, so I imagined something softer.

After three days, I had a couple of dreams that confirmed an astonishing transformation I was barely starting to fathom. The first dream I remember is me at my second job in my career. My boss was aggressively accusing me of some exaggerated or imaginary wrongdoing, as often used to really happen, but, this time, in what had started as one of my many recurring nightmares, I laughed and explained to her that she was mistaken in her accusations. Of course, this concluded the dream, as, in real life, she never got to hear that from me. The other dream is stranger. I had a business partner who, without my permission, used the company’s money, our money, to invest in what resulted to be a scam, and I lost everything. Instead of feeling betrayed and desperate, I went to the scammers. They

presented themselves as an investment fund, with an office within a large building. They were a handsome couple in love. The woman was smiling at me, but denied any wrongdoing. Instead of confronting them, I spoke with the manager of the building, a beautiful blonde with straight hair. I told her what happened and she believed me, but could not help me without proof. She nevertheless thought that she should secretly keep an eye on those scammers to avoid others falling into their trap. Meanwhile, I decided to put my (actually nonexistent) skills as a computer hacker to access the scammers bank accounts and realised that they had defrauded many people. Moreover, there was not enough money to refund them, so, instead of recovering my money, I decided to transfer to them what was available. Then the scammers realised what I had done and went after me, inside the building. I had had to bypass some security to access the bank server, and they knew that and were coming after me with ill intent. I tried to open some office doors in order to hide, until I succeeded to get into an empty office room. Suddenly, the office manager also entered the room. Surprised, I told her: 'This is not what it looks like.' I meant that I was not stalking her, and she understood my meaning. She replied, with a smile: 'And what if it were?' She approached and kissed me — *Scene*. When I woke up, I realised that all my bottled up anger at being treated unfairly for decades had evaporated. I just could not find it anymore! I would conjure a painful memory that would normally make me angry or resentful, but I would not feel *that* anger, only peace. Furthermore, I also understood what the sensual visions meant. I always used to find attractive and interesting women to be rather inaccessible; I always felt jealous of happy couples — gone as well. Completely gone. I tested my theory by then summoning rather painful memories of past rejections, of being used, abused and betrayed by women; memories of beau-

tiful and intelligent women who were being spoken for: no hurt feelings, no self-pity would come up!

Interestingly too, on the sixth day, I started to see pieces of pure visions amidst the fading angry ones: those were like stars in the night sky. They were essential drops, known as *thigle* in Tibetan, the next stage of the visionary experience according to the teachings.

The seventh day, the visions of aggression had completely vanished, leaving the stage to lots of discursive thoughts. I was also contemplating peaceful impure visions again and more thigles on the background or in front of them (the latter more difficult to discern). At the same time, I was thinking entire paragraphs about sundry topics. Fortunately, it felt easier to interrupt those thoughts, but the flow of them was overwhelming. The thigles slowly started to appear clearer and in greater numbers: they were actually arranged in a square lattice, and I felt that there were other, innumerable similar arrays behind. I also started to see some large thigles: they appeared close like disks either white, red or blue (rarer). At some other moments, I would only see circles of said colours. The difference is due to the depth of the contemplation: ultimately, all thigles are of the same nature, they are the (hobbit) doors to the arising of the deities. So I would see on the lower part of my vision field¹⁰ stacks of thigles of the same colour. They were not seen clearly yet, though. I needed more time and those discursive thoughts were very distracting, as I love writing. I was writing an entire book in my head, like the man condemned to death in Borges' short novel *The Secret Miracle*!

This continued the eighth day, which was unfortunately the last of my retreat. Geshe Geleg entered my room in the evening and read a closing prayer.

¹⁰In a manner of speaking, since this was taking place in my heart wheel.

The shutters were unlocked from the outside, and the blinds rolled up. I was to stay in the room until noon the next day, as tradition mandates. The natural morning light will help my eyes to recover their normal sensitivity. I had anticipated a disruption in the production of melatonin in my body, so I had asked the cook to put on my tray a pill with every dinner — I didn't want to be jet-lagged without moving. Nevertheless, it took me some time to use my eyes while I did things, and when I did I felt slightly dizzy, but everything went back to normal in time.

It is my intention to return and do a longer retreat of three weeks, as I want to see beyond the eighth day. The therapeutic side-effect of this retreat was entirely unexpected and welcome. It achieved results where, I am certain, talk therapy would have not. Psychology is like dealing with the foam of the waves; a dark retreat is plunging into the depth of the ocean. It would be a mistake to envisage Buddhist practice as a therapy, even if therapeutic side-effect do occur — just like paranormal abilities can arise. Motivation is key to the result.

Now, as a postlude, I would like to gather some random elements that otherwise would have slowed down even more the narration.

Firstly, a curious vision. I remember seeing it twice. Both times, it was a yellow pure vision (therefore abstract). Like yellow water spurted from a pierced balloon, a group of what looked like Tibetan letters were ejected from a vision. They were not Tibetan letters, but seemed familiar nonetheless, and it took me a few moments to remember where I saw something similar. Twenty years ago, I came across an example of a so-called *ḍākinī script* from a revelation of the kind 'Liberation upon seeing' (see figure 1). At the time I thought that the meaning was that those who saw the script *in print* would hopefully be liberated. After my experience, I now think that the actual meaning is that whoever sees



"Those who see this script will not experience the three lower realms and will be liberated from the fear of falling into the lower realms; will be purified of the five poisons and freed from the results of one's karma; will be freed from the fear of remaining in samsara." — Tertön Migyur Dorje.

Figure 1: 'Liberation upon seeing'

this script in a Leap-over vision will likely be liberated. I guess I will see.

Secondly, what about the effect of the exhaustion of the peaceful, impure visions, at the beginning of the retreat? My take is that my longing for living in remote, somewhat isolated places¹¹ has diminished, but it is difficult to test. And what of the discursive thoughts? I did not conclude that stage, but perhaps my obsession for writing will perhaps be somewhat less spellbinding. Clearly, this is not yet the case. (Today, in writing this in one sitting, I forgot lunch and dinner.)

Lastly, I would like to close with an excerpt from the *Vajra Heart Tantra* by Düdjom Lingpa:

Now as for the stages of the main practice, at first you determine the ground by way of the Breakthrough, then the initial moment of impure consciousness emerges in the aspect of an object, a subsequent conceptualisation fastens onto it, and delusion sets in. Now, in contrast, in the Leap-over, the initial moment of consciousness is transformed into an appearance of clear light, and by experiencing the very nature of con-

¹¹I did went for a job interview in the Faroe Islands.

sciousness, all impure appearances dissolve into the absolute nature and vanish. Knowing how that occurs is the indispensable, sublime point of the Leap-over, so recognise it!

If you do not recognise this vital point, however much you meditate, you will go astray on the path of dualistic grasping, and you will not progress along the grounds and paths of liberation. Thus, once you have truly realised the manner in which the whole of saṃsāra and nirvāṇa is none other than your own appearances, finally all mental states and appearances of the impure cycle of existence will forcefully be transformed into displays of the clear light, reality itself. So this is the practical guidance on the great transference. By truly recognising the entrance to this path with the wisdom of realising identitylessness, originally pure reality-itself, beyond mental investigation, the absolute nature free of conceptual elaboration, will be experienced with the eye of expansive wisdom. Unlike nebulous, obscure meditations and intellectual fabrications, with the eye of wisdom you directly see the precious, spontaneously present absolute nature, the reality-itself of the expanse of clear light.