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Gabriele Goria

Active Silence

Reinventing spirituality through art-research



CIRPIT REVIEW

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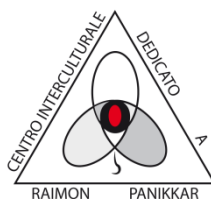
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www.mimesisedizioni.it

Via Risorgimento, 33 – 20099 Sesto San Giovanni (MI)

Telefono e fax: +39 02 89403935

E-mail: mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it



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To Father Anthony Elenjittam

CONTENTS

11	FOREWORD - by Kaija Kangas
13	PROLOGUE AND THANKS
14	INTRODUCTION
18	BEFORE
19	Art-pedagogy
23	Spirituality
29	PART ONE – MOVING THE SILENCE
30	WHY SILENCE?
33	Ling
35	LIVING THE SILENCE
37	Time perception
40	Perception of silence
42	Active silence
45	PLANNING
47	Preconceptions
53	Vipassana
57	MOVING THE SILENCE
59	Meditation
63	T'ai Chi Ch'üan
70	Orazio Costa mimic method
75	Creative interactions
78	PERFORMANCE
79	Rehearsals
81	Master silence
85	Basic structure
87	How can meditation be a performance?
91	How can a performance be meditation?
98	SILENCE PEDAGOGY
100	Teaching
104	Facilitating
108	Looking back and forward
110	PART TWO – HERMITS IN PROGRESS
111	WHY HERMITS?
119	PRACTICES

121	Contemplative practices
126	Body-mind energizing practices
131	Solitary artistic practices
135	RETREATS
136	Retreat 01 – Breathing in the Woods – September 2013
139	Retreat 02 – Urban Seclusion – October 2013
143	Retreat 03 – Roaming Contemplation – November 2013
146	Retreat 04 – Daily Mysticism – December 2013
149	Retreat 05 – Simple Living – January 2014
154	Retreat 06 – Walk your Path – February 2014
158	Retreat 07 – Meeting Hermits – March 2014
163	Retreat 08 – Homeless Night – May 2014
167	Retreat 09 – Full day Meditation – May 2014
171	Retreat 10 – Sharing Practices – June 2014
174	Retreat 11 – Living Forest – June 2014
178	Retreat 12 – Empty House – October 2014
183	MAKE YOUR RETREAT
192	Examples of rules
194	AFTER
195	Art-pedagogy
199	Spirituality
203	CONCLUSION
206	AFTERWORD – by Henri Järvinen

Foreword

You are holding a unique and special book in your hand. It is unique in many aspects. In western contemporary art the spiritual and religious elements exist primarily as cultural historical references, personal faith and religion being understood as the most private and intimate issues. It is indeed a brave and rare statement for an artist to confess that a spiritual quest is the foundation and basic element of his work.

Born in a multi-religious family, Gabriele Goria started his own spiritual odyssey at a remarkably early age. He devoted his life to the practice of meditation and training in martial arts. Not a very common combination of activities for a young person.

Drawing on his lifelong training in T'ai Chi Ch'üan and Ch'i Kung together with working on meditation techniques and philosophical and spiritual enquiry, Gabriele has developed his own approach to making and teaching theatre.

In this book the writer describes vividly his long and multi-dimensional way from the crucifix of the Roman Catholic Church to Paramahansa Yogananda to arrive at a synthesis which he has named Experiential Pluralism.

Gabriele Goria also tells us how naturally his multi-religious background and all his other interests form the basis for his creative work.

In his two long-term projects *Moving the Silence* and *Hermits in Progress*, Gabriele Goria walks the talk: he is fearlessly testing his way of thinking in practice in very demanding surroundings.

During these processes the complexity of different philosophical theories is embodied in movement and silence.

It is interesting to follow a narrative, in which all words become useless, and making and teaching art and a personal spiritual search flow into a single process.

Gabriele Goria writes about his own process in very honest and sincere words. The reader becomes convinced that Goria has a lifelong mission, which is anything but dogmatic and restrictive. His concept of Experiential Pluralism is a true and living ecumenism. What could our times need more!

Gabriele may not like to be called exceptional or unique, but all I can say is that I've never met anyone like him.

Kaija Kangas

Actress – Lecturer in Theatre Pedagogy - Theatre Academy / University of the Arts of Helsinki

Prologue and Thanks

I am grateful to Maria Roberta Cappellini and to the whole staff of CIRPIT (the intercultural centre dedicated to Raimon Panikkar), since they made possible the publication of the present work.

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I thank Miso Macura and Mikael Ahlfors for their beautiful pictures and Samuli Luhtala for the cover-image.

A very unique thought goes to Mirjami Heikkinen and Maija Rissanen for their presence, trust, encouragement and love.

I am grateful to my large family and in particular to my mother, who is always able to respect my silence. I thank my son for his young wisdom and my father for his sharp comments on my writing.

My gratitude goes also to my dear friends and collaborators: Henri Järvinen, Daniela Falconi, Alberto Severi, Alessia Pratolongo, Giulia Randone, Armando Buonaiuto, Antonella Maina, Lisa Erdman, Francesco Susan and Maria Prokhorova; to Riitta Vainio for her enthusiastic support and participation; to my supervisor Kaija Kangas and to all the artists, hermits, nuns and monks who have sustained my project with their spiritual and professional advices.

I thank my wonderful research-team: Tanja Eloranta, Gesa Piper, Saija Luukkonen, Harri Rantala, Jyri Sucksdorff, Joni Valtonen, Katerina Zherbina, Tero Kaunisvuo, Helena Romppanen, Katja Luhtala, Elio Messina, Renzo Mozzone, Clara Balaso, Björn Engdahl, Veera Turunen, Wioletta Anna Piascik and Elina Perttola.

Finally, I want to thank my research-partner and precious friend Eerika Arposalo, without whom this work would be much poorer.

Introduction

*Test all things, hold fast what is good.
(Saint Paul)¹*

Three years ago I began an exciting artistic research in the field of spirituality at the University of the Arts - Theatre Academy of Helsinki (TeaK)². I was still attending my Master's studies and I could not even imagine that what seemed to be just a routine-schoolwork would become my vocation in life. I was supposed to develop a brief research, both practical and theoretical, by leading workshops and by analyzing my pupils' feedbacks, on a topic of my choice. I decided to combine my passion for art with my love for meditation: the main aim of my research would be to look for meditative approaches to performing arts and on the other hand to maintain a creative attitude towards spiritual practices.

Now, three years later, I realize that such research is undertaking a much wider mission than the mere development of creative interactions between different fields. In a very unusual way and with artistic sensitivity my research-team has been carrying on interreligious dialogue, by diving into solid artistic and spiritual traditions and by breaking their dogmas in order to reach their own essence. Passing through failures and exciting revelations, we have been contemplating the birth of what I have baptized as 'Experiential Pluralism': an artistic way of dealing with spiritual practices, respectful of their own philosophical backgrounds but still flexible and free from any religious boundary; an art of understanding different spiritual paths 'from within', by sharing practices and not just by the mere reading of books; a place where people like me, with a multilayered spiritual background and the difficulty of choosing one single path and worldview, can find a direction or at least encouragement and support in their own spiritual search.

In this book I will describe the whole experience from my own personal point of view, as I was a participant in and the leader of the research-project. Even though the following pages may look like the tale of a lonely researcher, I have been blessed by the active collaboration of many companions: our research-team is currently composed of artists, monks,

¹ *1Thessalonians*, 5, 21

² I attended the Master's degree programme in Theatre Pedagogy (2011-2013)

nuns, hermits and spiritual seekers from different religious backgrounds. Many other versions could be written for each one of the participants in the project, and I have the impression that they would appear rather different from mine. Yet, I am pretty sure that one fundamental common denominator would emerge: we all had the precious opportunity to walk within ourselves, to challenge our own beliefs, to reinvent our way of being artists and spiritual seekers. Our lonely paths were like small rivers all running towards the same ocean: the deeper we went with our personal researches, the closer we came to each other.

The first part of this book, *Moving the Silence*, will describe the beginning of our research. Throughout the two years of my Master's degree programme I focused on the topic of 'Active Silence': a quiet dimension of being, calm but not passive, characterized by a high level of awareness, openness and concentration at the same time. Our experiments began in the form of workshops and culminated with the production of a performance. I will provide a detailed description of this work and the development of my personal conceptions about teaching.

According to the different phases of the research process, my research question developed into three consecutive steps:

- How did the participants of my workshops experience Active Silence?
- How can I develop a dialogue between different disciplines related to the practice of active silence such as meditation, T'ai Chi Ch'üan (the Chinese 'Supreme Polarity boxing') and expressive movement, without the use of speech?
- How can meditation be a performance and vice versa?

In March 2012 I led a one-day-workshop with the title *Living the Silence* in seven different environments (among them: a school, two monasteries and a Theatre Academy), where I explored many possible combinations of art and meditation, making use of analogic drawing, Ch'i Kung (Chinese breathing techniques developing inner energy), T'ai Chi Ch'üan, the Orazio Costa mimic method (an Italian method of body expressivity), writing and reading exercises, in order to understand how the participants experienced Active Silence. I collected their written feedbacks, which became the main material of my analysis.

In September 2012, I further developed my experiments on the uses of silence in teaching arts, by creating a team with the dance-pedagogue Eerika Arposalo.

Together with the University-Chaplain Rev. Henri Järvinen, we organized a two-week-workshop, where we explored several meditation-techniques, expressive movement and dance. Furthermore, we made use of Ikebana (the Japanese art of arranging flowers) and T'ai Chi-techniques. An exceptional characteristic of the workshop was that, after a brief introductory explanation, work proceeded in silence.

The working team developed the project into a performance, by deepening various methods of analysis and use of silence. The working method was reminiscent of silent retreats: each rehearsal began with a one-hour meditation and continued in silence, including pauses and lunch-breaks. The same method was applied later on during the performances.

The *Moving the Silence* – performance had its première on 9th February 2013, after four months of work without use of speech³.

The second part of this book, *Hermits in Progress*, will report the further development of my research, after my graduation: a one-year process which gave birth to a series of artistic-spiritual retreats, named *Hermits in Progress*. This long-term journey aimed to develop ways of making ascetic practices available to a large audience and to produce retreats opened to the general public. The possibility of creating a performance out of this is still work in progress.

Initially, our basic idea was to gently taste hermitic life (= voluntary seclusion from the world), exploring some of its various possibilities. The *Hermits in Progress* project provided twelve experiences of voluntary solitude in the form of short retreats, throughout a whole year.

We spent days living in a forest, cloistered in a city-building or sleeping on the road, we had walking-retreats in the countryside, we lived without electricity or money, we experienced fasting and full-day meditations. But, most of all, we focused on developing simple ways of transforming daily actions into opportunities for awakening mindfulness.

The main questions of our research were:

³ Gorla, G. *Moving the Silence*. In: *Mimesis Journal*. Accademia University Press, Torino, 2014. Vol. 3. N. 1, pp. 66-77

- How did the participants in the retreats experience their encounter with nature?
- What kind of strategies or tools did the participants develop throughout the retreats in order to maintain a high level of presence and awareness?
- How did participants experience solitude?

These questions will be answered in the *Make your retreat* Chapter.

The private practices I planned to individually work with were:

- Contemplative practices: Catholic Rosary, Kriyā Yoga and Vipassana
- Body-mind energizing practices: Pa Tuan Chin and Energization Exercises
- Artistic solitary practices: Kung Fu and Chess

The reasons for the choices of silence and hermit-life as topics of my research are very personal and they will be presented in two chapters on this topic (*Why silence?* and *Why Hermits?*), respectively opening the first and the second part of this book.

In the *Before* and in the *After* –Chapters I will share some aspects of my art-teaching and spiritual life, in the attempt to illustrate how such a passionate research process effected changes in my worldview.

Gabriele Goria
Helsinki, 14th September 2014

Before

When I read back through my own diaries and writings, I find interesting to observe the evolution of my thoughts and worldview throughout my research in the field of Experiential Pluralism.

The reader will excuse my long digressions: since this research has been a profound inner process for me, I will run the risk of opening many windows on my private life, sharing personal reflections apparently far from each other, in order to offer a view on the process that is as wide and human as possible.

In this chapter I will describe the changes of my life-situation in the period of the *Moving the Silence* production, culminating in the first attainments I reached in the beginning of the *Hermits in Progress* project.

I will focus only on two aspects of my otherwise too complex existence: my pedagogical style as a drama-teacher and my approach to spiritual phenomena. I will come back to these topics at the end of the book, in the attempt to report the developments which happened throughout the last year.



Hermits in Progress – photo by Eerika Arposalo

Art-pedagogy

*In the pursuit of learning, every day something is acquired.
In the pursuit of Tao, every day something is dropped.
Less and less is done
until non-action is achieved.
When nothing is done, nothing is left undone.
The world is ruled by letting things take their course.
It cannot be ruled by interfering.
(Lao Tzu)⁴*

Once upon a time, I was an efficient executive art-teacher. I had good skills in giving clear instructions and in motivating pupils by means of my charismatic personality and passionate speeches. I was talented in sensing when seeds of distraction began to grow in the class and I could quickly break my rhythm, in order to re-capture attention from my audience. I was acting a role. When I arrived home, I felt exhausted. If I had success in leading my class, my memory continued to recall the glorious moments of my working day with pleasure and excitement. If I could not attain my goals, a disturbing feeling of failure generated negative thoughts.

Throughout my career, I have been teaching drama, acting, Kung Fu and stage-fighting in primary schools, secondary schools, universities and theatre academies.

When I moved to Finland I had a pause of five years from working life, which ended after my Master studies in theatre-pedagogy.

During my studies I began to work with silence. I had the inspiration to explore the potential of a pedagogical path which could be developed without the use of speech: I started the *Moving the Silence* project⁵.

It took two years to understand that, among all the interesting aspects of my research, the most remarkable result was the deep revolution that had started inside of me. I realized that I had always been striving to shape my pupils according to my own ideals. I never gave them the possibility to choose their own goals. I was fighting to put my good will and enthusiasm into their heads without taking the risk of giving them time and space to explore their own real needs and interests.

⁴ *Tao Te Ching*, 48

⁵ Goria, G. *Moving the Silence*, cit., pp. 66-77

With me, silence worked as a microscope, pointing out without mercy any nuance of tendency to control my pupils' learning process. My struggle against my ego became even deeper. Even though during my experimental silent classes we were not allowed to talk, communication among the group began to work on an intuitional level. I began to notice how my own reactions were affecting the others and how my worries and expectations were still alive in me and were emerging through my eyes, postures and gestures.

Slowly but unavoidably, I had to learn to surrender: I began to trust the process and the group, and I became aware of the potential of self-education relying on my pupils. Sometimes it felt humiliating to accept that students were much more committed and present in their work because I had stopped teaching them. Even though I could not force my pupils to learn perfect technical skills, the more I put myself apart, the more the inner teacher of each pupil started to awaken.

Through humiliation, I began to learn something about humbleness.

Among all the positive after-effects of our practice of silence, I can affirm that our working atmosphere has been a concrete answer to the problem of the stress caused by a dispersive environment. At the beginning of our experience, for example, I had to fight against my rooted habit of looking for false relaxation by means of distractions, especially during the pauses: it was not easy to accept just to be. I noticed that at the end of our working days I was tired, because of my effort in concentration. I felt tired, but not stressed at all. And little by little I became capable of working for many hours in a condition of complete and relaxed concentration. I could observe similar changes in the whole group.

But I was still working in a 'laboratory': the protected environment of Theatre Academy, together with the fact that all the pupils chose voluntarily to participate in my project, were two fundamental factors positively affecting my research. A bigger challenge arrived when I had to face 'real' life.

After my studies, I went back to work.

I had to put silence apart and dive again into chaotic classrooms full of energetic teenagers. Many years had passed since the last time I had taught to fourteen-year-old pupils. And I had never done it in Finnish before. Suddenly I felt that all what I had learnt from my silence-research was gone. I met challenging groups, hostile situations and, in the worse of

cases, I was totally ignored by pupils: I did not receive answers to my questions and students did not want to work. On the other hand, I felt that I could not come back to my old executive style: I did not want to force my pupils to learn skills just because they were provided by the school-curriculum, by acting the role of a charismatic teacher once again. I was facing a new kind of challenge.

Was I supposed to fight in order to earn my authority? Would it be really useful and educational to put my pupils in a situation where they could not escape learning? Especially in such a case of an artistic subject, would it make any sense to create a military discipline in the classroom? Or was I too weak and old to shout for respect? Should I show again my skills as an entertainer, maybe? Would that not be just another more pleasant way of bringing pupils' minds into the direction I wanted? But what would be so bad in that approach, since pupils would learn something at least? On the other hand, where would all freedom and joy go? I panicked. I was close to the point of giving up and quitting my job.

Some friends of mine, sincerely worried at my negative mood, suggested me that I take some medicine rather than quit the job. I did not take any medicine. But I went back with stronger commitment to my beloved practice: silence. That was the moment when our *Hermits in Progress* project started.

Suddenly I was motivated by the responsibility and the excitement of transforming my life into a hermitage, I felt the support of my team and I was willing to bring my life-challenges into my artistic and spiritual experiments.

I doubled my private meditation-periods and I began to listen to my groups of pupils more carefully. I did not quit, but I did not fight. Sometimes I just went to school and I sat among the students, letting them talking, discussing, getting angry and having fun. I did not penalize them if they were late. I accepted to spend some of my teaching hours without teaching at all. I just listened and observed attentively. I was not ignoring them, I was simply present there. I began to observe my inner feelings, whenever I felt hurt or humiliated, and I let all emotions free to pass and go. I could notice that every now and then there were good moments of harmony and concentration, when pupils were sharing some common interest or were cooperating in constructive ways. At the end of the lesson I said a few simple sentences, underlining those positive moments and encouraging my pupils to be aware when they happen.

Little by little, passing through many difficulties and failures, classes began to work. Every group developed an artistic project. I was simply offering my support to achieve it. Pupils began to call me by my own name and sometimes asked me to join their own projects as an actor. Commitment and enthusiasm emerged spontaneously. I felt I could face my teaching days in a much more relaxed frame of mind. And most of the time I had real fun.

I was full of questions. What kind of teaching was that, when I was teaching without teaching? Should the whole school-system take into account a preliminary period of listening sessions, encouraging teachers to step aside and pupils to search for their own needs and interests, before forcing them into a fixed curriculum? Could it be a general rule that before teaching any skill there should be an interest in learning from the students' side?

My adventures at school were just in the beginning. I had no idea how much my *Hermits in Progress* experience would affect my teaching strategies. I had to wait six months before seeing the outcome.

Spirituality

I was about ten years old, when I decided to start a paramount enterprise: manually copying the whole Bible. I was fascinated by the idea that in past ages monks were actually working like ‘human-printers’. Patiently, with reverence and dedication, books were born by means of a meticulous activity of handwriting. There is no laser-printer in the world capable of recreating pages so full of life and warmth as in the codes of the Middle Ages. I felt it was a pity that such a meditative and human way of publishing books had been definitively abandoned.

I would revive it!

I drew the cover, and then I began: “*In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth*”⁶. I had never read the Bible by myself before, yet I was ambitious enough to attempt the monumental work: isn’t it true that many children first learn to write and only afterwards they learn to read? I was able to read already, but that was the first masterpiece of literature that I had ever approached in my life and I wanted to write it! The simple words of *Genesis* were somehow easy to understand and to accept. Creation of the universe (inner or outer? I am still struggling with this question...) was described in a symbolic way, which allowed even a child to grasp at least the literal meaning of the allegory: a human-like thinking God was planning to give birth to our own world, by means of consequential steps. Each day God was creating some important new elements.

Handwriting was slow. As all children of technology-era are, me too, I was unaccustomed to enduring long-term processes. Even though theoretically I was sincerely captivated by the idea of dedicating my whole lifetime to such a noble aim, I was still too much ‘result-oriented’.

I gave up on my project after the third day of Creation.

In my own handwritten Bible, the world got ready within three days, together with the birth of plants and trees. No animals, no Sun and Moon, no humans. Some might argue that my version of universe would not be so bad in the very end, especially because of the absence of nasty insects and human beings...

⁶ *Genesis*, 1,1

That was a lesson of humility: maybe, I should orientate my own ambition towards more achievable goals. Yet, a voice within me was whispering that I needed impossible goals, my thirst for the infinite was encouraging me not to give up in front of my own failures. I did not know the Chinese Master Lao Tsu yet, but I could anyway develop his same intuition: “A journey of thousands miles starts with one step!”⁷

One year later, I decided to read the whole *Mahabharata*: the longest religious poem in the world.

I gave up after a few pages.

The same scene was repeated with *Autobiography of a Yogi*, written by Paramahansa Yogananda.

One thing was clear: I was extremely fascinated by spiritual literature, yet I was still too young to commit to the remarkable effort of diving into such a sea of symbols and difficult words.

Time proved that maturity was needed in order to awaken in me a deeper interest towards religious books. I read the Bible entirely for the first time when I was twenty-five. I did not miss a single comment either: I was captivated both by the spiritual content of the texts and by historical researches about the gradual composition of the books. The Bible was full of stimulating contradictions: the Old Testament was a collection of four different traditions at least, and it was fascinating to notice how they disagreed with each other; the New Testament was even more provocative, since it included four different versions in a row of the same episodes describing Jesus’s life. I did not feel disturbed by such contradictions: the Bible was not a list of answers in form of spiritual teachings, but rather it awakened questions. By reading the first words of Genesis, I recognized the evidence that the Bible was not a book of history. Myths, symbols, history and poetry came up together in order to form a special text, capable of resonating within myself on many levels.

A few years before my Master studies, I felt I was ready for a new challenging adventure: learning by heart the whole Gospel of John.

I could store in my brain about eight chapters. Then, what a surprise... I gave up!

⁷ *Tao Te Ching*, 64

It is hard to argue whether I am just stupid or if I am a real fighter, but every time I had to face a failure I found new ways to challenge myself. My interest towards spirituality seemed to grow anyway. My next step – and here we arrive at the period of my first experiments with silence throughout my Master studies – was to deepen my own understanding of holy scriptures, by reading famous comments and putting them in dialogue with my own thoughts and beliefs. The *Moving the Silence* project had started and I had the opportunity to benefit from my intensified practice of meditation. Suddenly it felt easy to develop a totally personal exegesis of mystical and religious texts, by putting them in dialogue with the inner voice of my conscience.

The greatest intuition arrived when I began, once again, to read John's Gospel: "*In the beginning was the Word.*"⁸

"*Another Genesis!*", I thought. In the Old Testament, Genesis takes care of explaining creation as a sort of gradual development, where all things come in sequence to their own birth, being interrelated to each other, sometimes in a counterbalancing opposition, such as the heavens and the earth. But actually Genesis does not tell much about the nature of God and the way He operated in order to create and sustain the universe.

But John's version of Genesis continued: "*And the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*"⁹

I remember I have been questioning a lot: could not John find a better attribute in order to define the essence of God and His own way of working? Why did not he choose, for example, 'Light' (as he does just a couple of sentences later) or 'Love' (as he does in his letters)? They would sound more reasonable. Why such an awkward beginning: a word? Was there somewhere an enormous mouth ready to shout out a whole universe?

I have read many comments on this glorious and mysterious sentence. In my debatable opinion, Augustine's, Eckhart's and Yogananda's comments are remarkable. But there are so many other original interpretations, that I would commit an injustice if I claimed that only these few masters have been opening windows of light in my heart. I must admit that I feel especially grateful for not having consulted exclusively Christian interpretations. Linguists affirm that if you know only one language you do

⁸ *John, 1,1*

⁹ *Ibid.*

not really understand even your own language, but by knowing at least two different languages, you are on the way to understand all languages. I believe that, to a certain extent, the same principle could be applied to religion and spirituality.

One thing is certain: John's choice made a spiritual masterpiece out of his Gospel's opening sentence.

With my timid understanding, I could grasp at least two interesting nuances contained in the symbolic term 'Word'.

I have no intention of bothering the reader by displaying all my exegetic comments, but I will share one in the belief that it may be an example of how the mind is capable of brave connections, when it is put in a condition of freedom and relaxed concentration. If such 'brave connections' do not sound so brilliant, well... I hope the deficiencies of the author will not diminish your opinion about the generative potential of silence-practice.

From a physical point of view, 'Word' is sound. Sound is vibration. Vibration provides a flow of ups and downs, an alternation of two opposites, Yin and Yang waves. Modern science explains that our universe is ruled by duality: particles and anti-particles are constantly counterbalancing each other¹⁰. Hindu scriptures suggest that Cosmic Aum-sound was the 'tool' Brahman used in order to manifest Himself into reality: different frequencies of such a vibration originated causal, astral and physical sub-particles, which are the fundamental scaffolding of the three realms of the universe, of which the human being is the micro-cosmic counterpart¹¹. I find it interesting to notice the assonance connecting the Hindu 'Aum'-sound, with Tibetan 'Hum', Islamic 'Amin', Christian 'Amen'¹². In this sense, the 'Word'-attribute explains how creation has happened: from stillness to movement, from oneness to duality, from infinite to definite, from eternity to temporality, but also from nothing to something (if we follow the current main stream of quantum physics)¹³, by means of vibration. Such a Word-vibration creates and maintains in existence all things.

From another perspective, then, I would say that 'Word' is connected to its own 'meaning'. Language was born in order to

¹⁰ Krauss, M. L. *A universe from nothing*. Simon & Shuster, London, 2012, p. 189

¹¹ Piano, S. *Sanātana Dharma*. San Paolo, Milano, 1996, pp. 187-190

¹² Yogananda. *Verso la realizzazione del Sé*. Astrolabio, Roma, 2006, p. 395

¹³ See: Krauss, M. L. op. cit.

communicate. Words are pointing at their own content; otherwise they are just empty sounds. They are generated by the need to manifest and communicate their own meaning. But that also means that words are symbols 'par excellence', since their own real content is always somewhere 'beyond'.

The above mentioned Taoist Master Lao Tsu began his own masterpiece, *Tao Te Ching*, by saying: "*Tao which can be explained by means of words is not the real Tao.*"¹⁴

If we simply substitute the Tao-term with the God-name, how can we not agree?

"*The Word was God*" is an exception: the word and its meaning are one. That seems to suggest that there is a condition outside time where there is no separation between symbol and content: a place where questions are answered, where possible and impossible share the same nature. Such a paradoxical fulfillment could be compared, maybe, to the Cosmologic Singularity of modern theories concerning the birth of our universe: an inexplicable starting point, preceding the Big Bang, where all values tend to infinity¹⁵.

Consequently, I found an intriguing hint: if the perfection of such a Supreme Mystery manifested itself by means of its own Word, which is a Cosmic Vibration, carrying in itself its own divine meaning, the existence of the universe and our own existence as well must be meaningful!

And here I stopped.

Hermits in Progress began and I was thrown straight into the core of my spiritual search. I asked myself: "*Does all that reasoning transform me into a better person?*". I felt the need to put into practice the very basics of spiritual life: simplicity, listening, meditation and most of all learning every day something more about love. It was time, at least for a while, to close my books - and to open my heart.

I realized that I could not really grasp anything about God by means of my intellectual attempting to define the undefinable. I wanted to *experience* God, to feel His presence, to live His Word. I took the resolution

¹⁴ *Tao Te Ching*, 1

¹⁵ Tipler, F. J. *La fisica del cristianesimo*. Mondadori, Milano, 2008, pp. 102-123

to dedicate my year of *Hermits in Progress* retreats to deepen a very personal question: “*What does God mean to me?*”.

Would that end up being another failure? I did not really care. I felt attuned with the words of the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita: “*It is better to strive in one’s own dharma than to succeed in the dharma of another!*”¹⁶

At the end of this book I will try to share the evolution of my perception of God in simple words, explaining the surprising turn overs that happened throughout several phases of my life, till I arrived at the interesting questions awakened after the *Hermits in Progress* experience.

¹⁶ *Bhagavadgita*, 18, 47

PART ONE

MOVING THE SILENCE

Why silence?

*I have spent much time seeking
without knowing that I was seeking.
Now I seek knowing
that I am seeking.
I hope to arrive and seek, knowing
what I am seeking.
(Sufi poem)¹⁷*

I was born in a multi-religious family: grandparents Catholic and parents followers of Paramahansa Yogananda (the first great Indian master who spent most of his life in the West, author of the spiritual classic *Autobiography of a Yogi* and founder of the Self-Realization Fellowship). As bilingual children naturally accept and learn two different languages as though they were one, I grew up with the Christian Gospel in one hand and the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita in the other. In the Catholic Church I was baptized with the name Gabriele, which means ‘the army of God’, and in the Self-Realization Fellowship I received a second baptism with the name Shanti Deva: ‘divinity of peace’. ‘War’ and ‘peace’: this was the first symbolic contradiction of my life. As soon as I began to develop critical thinking, I started to notice differences between the two religious beliefs, and to question which one was the best, which one was my own, or should I abandon both and live without. At the age of nine I met my first master of traditional oriental martial arts: my thirst for spirituality awakened in a new perspective, and I became familiar with the concept of dynamic meditation too. Later I met the theatre, which opened me to the horizon of self-expression.

During my teenage years, I felt the urge to choose one path and at the same time the impossibility of doing so. I began a painful internal struggle to decide which discipline I should sacrifice. I was captured by the trap of rationalism and logic: the opposites exclude each other, they cannot live together.

When I graduated as an actor from the Italian Theatre Academy¹⁸, I started to mix my competences together, developing combinations of theatre

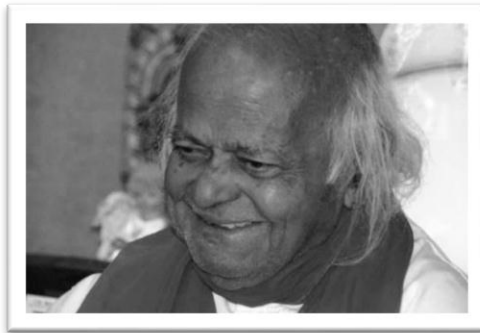
¹⁷ Mandel, G. *La via al sufismo nella spiritualità e nella pratica*. Bompiani. Milano, 2004, p. 53

¹⁸ Accademia Nazionale d’Arte Drammatica Silvio D’Amico, Roma, 2001

and martial arts, experiencing art's potentialities in relation with particular areas of spirituality, such as Eastern meditation, Christian prayer and personal dialogue with the holy scriptures.

My internal struggle began to calm down when I realized that there was a very concrete link between all my passions, a place where everything could live together in peace at the same time: myself. But still there was a distance between this theoretical understanding and its practical realization. I felt the need to dig deeper into my spirit.

I have been trying for years to learn the habit of meditating regularly morning and night. I gave up many, many times. I could not sit still longer than five minutes, because I had intense cramps in my back, probably related to my nervousness. I read many books about meditation, joined meditation groups, spoke with monks. I could not come out of my difficulty.



Anthony Elenjimittam (1915-2011)
Disciple of Mahatma Gandhi and Dominican Father,
founder of the Welfare Society for Destitute Children,
of Aquinas Publications and of Sat-Cit-Ananda Mission

In 2009 I went to Assisi and visit an old Indian monk: Father Anthony Elenjimittam, direct disciple of Mahatma Gandhi. I had already read some of his books and I had heard of him since my childhood: my parents had met him thirty years before; he was a legendary figure in my imagination. He was ninety-five when I met him the first time: a fragile, small old man, not more than five feet tall, sitting in silence at the far end of a little room full of people. He had his eyes closed, he looked as if he was sleeping, but I felt his magnetic presence filling the whole room. I was attracted by the wave of peaceful energy emanating from the monk. Then I noticed with disappointment that I had to sit on one of the most uncomfortable metal chairs I could imagine for my poor back. And it was

very far from the exit door: I was locked among all the people, with no way out.

After a few minutes, the monk opened his eyes and prayed aloud in a sweet low voice: he pronounced mantras in Sanskrit, Latin, Arabic and Italian, drawing by heart from many different religious traditions. Even though my back pain had already started, I felt I did not want to move from the chair: there was no other place in the world where I wanted to be. The room was poor, the people around me simple, the monk was humble and delicate, but at the same time he had a charismatic presence and, most of all, I trusted him without reserve: I had the intuition that he really embodied the words he was saying. He was a living example of a life dedicated to spiritual seeking. For the first time in my life I succeeded in meditating for one hour. After that day, I had no more difficulties in sitting still longer and longer, intensifying my daily meditation periods. Little by little, my pain was increasingly reduced.

Silence entered my daily life. It helped me face my own inner reality: it gradually became the ground where all the aspects of my life could find a connection. I began questioning what kind of silence this was. I realized that the direct responsibility for my internal change lay not with silence itself, but with my attitude towards it. I was no longer passive; I was tasting the silence with a constant effort to remain alert, awakened, opened and focused. I was walking on the path of the 'active' silence and I felt the urge to share my experience with other people.

Father Anthony Elenjmittam passed away at the age of ninety-seven in my native city Turin, where he went for his last conference. In the same period I was planning to structure my first silence-workshop: *Living the Silence*.

This splendid master awakened in me a stronger will and determination with the gentle touch of his focused stillness. He did not impose on me a path to follow, but he offered me his own living example. He made me realize that we are the main cause of our internal separations and that we have the duty to find the source of peace, unity, light and joy within ourselves.

Every time I close my eyes and sit still, I like to think that his lovely presence continues to whisper silent blessings within my heart.

Ling



Ling: quick, alert, efficacious, spirit, soul.

The ideogram originally designates a magic ritual: man is offering something precious to the sky by means of ritualistic dances in order to propitiate an abundant rain, essential in a civilization based on the cultivation of rice. In fact the image is composed, starting from the top, of the sky, clouds, falling rain, containers of jade and dancing people between the earth and the sky. Through the ages it came to mean not only a supernatural power, but also the transcendental energy, that subtle spiritual substance proper to human beings: the soul¹⁹.

This ideogram is part of the suggestions for the correct practice of the T'ai Chi Ch'üan: oral instructions taught by master Yang Ch'eng Fu and recorded by Ch'en Wei Ming in T'ai Chi Ch'üan Shu (The Art of T'ai Chi Ch'üan), first published in 1925 by Ch'en's school²⁰. In that context 'Ling' designates a refined inner readiness, essential for transforming the practice of T'ai Chi Ch'üan into a dynamic meditation, together with Hsü, emptiness.

When I saw the ideogram during my studies of the philosophies connected with traditional Chinese martial arts, I immediately related it to the practice we developed during the long process of research of the event *Moving the Silence*. The image was like a picture, a photo of a magic instant that happened in China thousands of years ago, and by some fascinating chance being repeated in the rooms of a Theatre Academy: here we are, our group of people, miming elements of nature contained in some vessels, or practising the T'ai Chi form, working on the boundaries between performance and meditation, just as those men were acting a ritual which

¹⁹ Fassi, R. Cuturello, I. Magni, D. & Tomatis, F. *Corpo e preghiera*. Roma: Città Nuova. Roma, 2012, p.187

²⁰ Wile, D. *Yang family secret transmissions*. Sweet Ch'i Press. New York, 1989, p. 9

was at the same time a sincere prayer. The ideogram could also become an inspiration, a challenge and the core of our practice: would we be able to develop the same kind of attention, magical awareness, with a reverent feeling of waiting, as those ancient Chinese men were certainly experiencing during such special ritualistic moments?

Living the silence

As I wrote in the introduction, in March 2012 I led a one-day-workshop with the title *Living the Silence* in seven different environments where I explored many possible combinations of art and meditation, making use of analogic drawing, Ch'i Kung, T'ai Chi Ch'üan, Orazio Costa's mimic method, writing and reading exercises, in order to understand how the participants experienced active silence. I collected their written feedbacks, which became the main material of my analysis.

This represented the first step towards the *Moving the Silence* project, which I will describe in the following chapters.

While choosing silence as the topic of my teaching practice, I knew I was challenging one of my safety tools as a teacher: my speaking ability. I often use words to vehicle my own enthusiasm and to build a generative working atmosphere. During the *Living the Silence* workshops I forced myself to reduce the explanations to short essential sentences. Then I had to let my pupils work, without any possibility on my part of interfering during the exercitations. I realized in that way that the use of words was not exactly my strong point: my speech was shaping the creativity of my pupils into a structure I had in my mind, robbing them of the possibility to discover new surprising solutions. I previously used to talk during pupils' exercitations, with the intention to lead them quickly to a better and more focused result. My words were actually affecting the pupils' execution, leading them to my own personal goal, but preventing them from responsibly and freely exploring their own potential. I did not trust their capacity of self-education.

Now, as I wrote in the *Before* Chapter, I had a shocking surprise: the more I put myself apart, the more the inner teacher of each pupil started to awaken.

On some occasions, the working atmosphere became so focused that I joined the practice of my pupils. I was no longer a teacher, but a researcher with the others. I just put my energy together with my pupils' energy, we worked in silence and that was all. Somehow, the same energy that I used to impart to the class by means of my words was now running free from my mental patterns. I was offering my pure presence. The teaching process, if there was any, was happening on a 'spiritual' level in the form of a mutual silent sharing of being.

Externally, I think it was not possible to observe any remarkable sign, since all the activities, both the meditative and the creative ones, were quite minimalistic. But the intensity of the experience emerged clearly from the feedbacks of the participants: both the positive and the negative feelings (peace and difficulty of concentration, awareness and embarrassment, acceptance or irritation) were quite often related to their own life situation, expectations, will. The practice of silence became a useful tool to find a connection between the deep centre of the participants and their own everyday life. Even though in that context we had not further developed the experience, for example by reversing the process so that a meditative attitude towards everyday life could affect one's creative expression, I began to think that silence could facilitate an artistic and spiritual exchange in attunement with the thought of the American pedagogue John Dewey (1859-1952):

The task is to restore the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events.²¹

²¹ Dewey, J. *Art as experience*. Penguin Group. New York, 2005, p. 2

Time perception

I experienced a feeling of peace and the feeling was that of letting go of sorrow or anxiety, as in the silence they could be received ‘from on high’. In the dimension of ‘shared’ silence, I had the feeling that the time was moving in another dimension. I would like always to have that sense of time, the rediscovered inner time.²²

After the *Living the Silence* workshop sessions, I analyzed the participants’ feedbacks in terms of perception of time and perception of silence. I collected three different typologies of feedback regarding the perception of the time-flow during the practice of active silence.

First typology. Some participants wrote that they lost the sense of time and that they had the relieving feeling of being in the moment. Atemporality is one of the basic qualities deriving from the operations of the right hemisphere of the brain, together with intuitional capacity, concrete perception of things as they are in the present moment, spatiality, global and synthesized view of reality²³. In this case, the participants had been able to step aside from the usually predominant hegemony of the rational side of the brain.

Second typology. Other participants wrote that for certain exercises the time was too long and demanding in terms of concentration, or challenging in terms of embarrassment, and on the other hand for other activities the time was too short for an exhaustive exploration. I think that in this case the participants could not find a way to release the rational control over themselves. Frustration may occur when the rational mind desperately attempts to lead processes such as meditating or drawing, where the brain’s activity is non-verbal and non-rational. Characteristics of the functions of the left side of the brain are an analytical and symbolical approach towards problems, abstract and logical elaboration of data, linear and temporal thinking²⁴.

Third typology. A third kind of feedback indicated an agreeable status of awareness of the time-flow with a feeling of harmony between the

²² Quote from a participant’s feedback, *Living the Silence* workshop in Torino Spiritualità, Torino

²³ Edwards, B. *Disegnare ascoltando l'artista che è in noi*. Longanesi. Gravellona Toce, 2011, p. 60

²⁴ *Ibid.*

proportion between tasks and durations. In my opinion, this represented a condition of balance between the right faculties and the left faculties of the brain, in which they helped each other to transform the workshop's practices in real time into a deep experience.

If the first and the third typology of answers manifest feelings of pleasure and openness, the second is the voice of discomfort. I have tested different durations with the same kind of tasks, during the course of my teaching practice, and I have noticed that the discomfort areas seemed to be disconnected from the timing factor, even though the participants were stressing that time was the problem. For example, I proposed the exercise of looking into a partner's eyes with variations of timing: sometimes the task lasted twenty minutes, others ten or five, according to the different places where I held the workshop. The discomfort-answers were always related to the difficulty of looking into another person's eyes for a "*such a long time*". So, I began to think that the discomfort was related more to the exercise in itself than to its duration. But the analysis of the feedbacks showed that positive and negative feelings were actually equally distributed in every kind of task and the same person could experience the same task differently, when it was repeated twice. I argued consequently that the real cause of these different ways of perceiving the experience of silence should be connected with the inner attitude of each person. How to help it? How to awaken an inner attitude of openness and acceptance, without forcing it?

Already from the beginning of the workshop silence was quite deep and deepened towards the end. I found it a very different kind of silence when we spent 20 minutes looking into each other's eyes. The silence itself was the same but one was very deeply aware of another individual. The presence of her made the silence, I think not deeper, but somehow it was on two levels: in me and between her and me. When we were in the chapel I was very aware of the presence of the others, and again in the beginning of that meditation the silence was on two levels: in me and among us all. Then there was only the silence, nothing more, no feeling or awareness of the others.²⁵

Observing the evolution of the quality of the participants' presence during each workshop and comparing it with their own feedbacks, I have noticed that time has been the protagonist of positive internal changes. The gradual lengthening of the duration of silence and the repetition of some exercises offered the participants the opportunity to find an internal source, which helped them to handle the discomfort. I found a clear resonance with

²⁵ Quote from a participant's feedback, *Living the Silence* workshop in Tammisalo Church, Helsinki

the Zen provocation: *“if something is boring after five minutes, try after one hour!”*.

Perception of silence

I've experienced silence as a moment of peace, in which I had no worries; it's very unusual that my class is concentrated on being quiet and I've discovered it gives a feeling of pleasure. It has been a new experience which has enriched me from the point of view of self-control, because I've realized better that being in silence doesn't just mean closing your mouth.²⁶

This is a representative feedback of a participant in the *Living the Silence* workshop, where it emerges how silence in itself has been experienced as a natural generator of peace and positive feelings. 'Pleasure', 'natural' and most of all 'peace' are recurrent words in participants' feedbacks. In many cases these feelings are described in terms of surprise or discovery of something precious and necessary. The participants have often expressed the wish to make the practice of silence become a part of their daily life, making use of poetic images, such as in the following feedback:

The workshop was interesting, useful and I shall continue on this path. After the workshop I felt really good both days and felt that I am a tree (a common idea for me but I tend to forget it) and most significantly started to feel more conscious.²⁷

They have usually described the silence by means of short expressions, adjectives or words, as if they were attempting at the same time to let the silence 'be in silence' such as in the following definitions.

Silence was:

- natural
- comfortable
- peaceful and light
- energy
- calming
- a reservoir of peace
- the space between me and my problem
- interruption to the daily noise

²⁶ Quote from a thirteen-year-old participant's feedback, *Living the Silence* workshop in a school in Gassino, near Turin

²⁷ Quote from a participant's feedback, *Living the Silence* workshop in NÄTY, Tampere

Among the participants who already had the practice of silence in their own background (meditation, T'ai Chi, Yoga, silent prayer), the structure of the proposed exertions offered them the possibility to explore silence from new perspectives or to deepen their own self-awareness.

Some of them enjoyed comparing their own meditation methodologies with those of the workshop, finding analogies and differences. In some cases, they felt relief when they could meet something apparently distant from the context of spirituality, such as drawing, which was experienced as an exercise of self-expression, shaping emotions and at the same time allowing the participants to take their distance from them.

The practice of silence aroused thoughts connected with participants' personal life situations. They often wrote that they could look at their problems more objectively and they could find something new and helpful to deal with them. Some of the participants manifested frustration because they could not be focused without being disturbed by their own thoughts. Especially the thirteen-year-old participants had a demanding attitude towards themselves concerning concentration.

Many thoughts expressed the need for silence in the world and in daily life. Some participants underlined the importance of silence as a tool for inner balance and for peace in society. Even though the activities of the workshop did not provide moments of verbal sharing, I observed a progressive attunement among the participants, and their written feedbacks manifested a spontaneous impulse of opening their personal discoveries to the rest of the world.

Active silence

The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will. An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence.
(William James)²⁸

Attention has been defined by psychologists as the process through which some parts of sensorial information are codified and elaborated, while others are not taken into consideration²⁹. The greater the concentration, the greater the possibility to retain data and consequently to elaborate an experience. Silence can be a privileged field to train the capacity of attention, whenever it offers the conditions to develop an active perceptive attitude.

The Italian biologist Giuseppe Barbiero suggests a distinction between *passive* and *active* silence.

Passive silence is externally imposed. The mind is like an *empty* container which needs to be continuously filled with new impulses. The attention is *captured* by means of increasingly entertaining and distracting stimulations. The frenetic race for stimulations which force the attention to be passively and easily attracted, typical of contemporary society, seems to be one of the causes of the increasing diffusion of diseases such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Active silence, in contrast, is an act of commitment which comes from within and opens the attention to a new dimension, making the action, physical or intellectual, fluid and effective: the mind is *full* of awareness. Active silence *forms* the capacity of attention, by giving time for waiting, listening and elaborating. Meditation may be considered a basic exercise of active silence, training the attention and generating a state of calmness: the heartbeat slows down, as do the brain's waves; other areas of the brain, usually inhibited by the flux of thoughts, are activated.³⁰ The effect is generally temporary, but regular practice over time seems to gradually

²⁸ James, W. *Psychology: Briefer Course*. Harper Torchbooks. New York, 1961, p. 424

²⁹ Valenza E. & Simion F. *Attenzione*, in Bonino S. *Dizionario di psicologia dello sviluppo*. Einaudi. Torino, 2002

³⁰ Barbiero, G. Benessia, A. Bianco, E. Camino, E. Ferrando, M. Freire & D. Vittori, R. *Di Silenzio in Silenzio*. Anima Mundi Editrice. Rimini, 2007, pp. 33-34, my translation

modify the anatomic structure of the brain and its correlated functions, and to make the transformation permanent. Active silence has been found to be an effective tool for preventing hyperactivity, improving the capacity of sensing the world and nature, developing empathy and compassion.³¹

Active silence, making us aware of the flow of our thoughts and emotions, helps us to observe them with non-attachment, as they are, without judgment. It helps us not to identify ourselves with the products of our mind - 'our' thoughts, 'our' emotions – but to realize we are other than them, attaining little by little an awareness which is no longer only cognitive, nor only emotional, but deep.³²

I have found an interesting parallel with Barbiero's scientific view about 'passive' and 'active' silence in the words of Thomas Merton:

Silence has many dimensions. It can be a regression and an escape, a loss of self, or it can be presence, awareness, unification, self-discovery. Negative silence blurs and confuses our identity, and we lapse into daydreams or diffuse anxieties. Positive silence pulls us together and makes us realize who we are, who we might be, and the distance between these two.³³

The experience of the *Living the Silence* workshop reinforced my conviction that many artistic disciplines may be included in the practice of active silence, since they offer the same kind of conditions, facilitating processes of self-awareness, and I believe that a parallel practice of meditation and art may produce empowering creative interactions, helping participants to achieve a balanced human growth.

It is true that, historically, the path of silence has always been a common feature of the mystics both in the West and in the East, but we can find it also among philosophers, scientists and artists. Nowadays bridges of mutual exchange are arising between eastern and western traditions, offering opportunities for new explorations in the practice of active silence. Yoga and Zen meditation, for example, have been brought into hospitals as therapeutic tools against stress and depression, and into Theatre Academies as mind-training for actors and dancers. In the last twenty years, neuroscientists have started observing the cerebral activities during sleep, dream and meditation, discovering the existence of mirror neurons and

³¹ Ibid, p. 49-51

³² Ibid, p. 46

³³ Merton, T. 1969, article originally published in *The Baptist Student*, the student newspaper of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Merton, T. *The Baptist Student* (vol. 48, no. 5). Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. Louisville, 1969 <http://www.monasticdialog.com/bulletins/67/merton.htm>

working out new concepts like the idea of the ‘embodied mind’.³⁴ Meditation has also been introduced into primary schools’ curriculums, in order to help children in “*developing attention, listening capacity, contact and observation of the emotions, expression of creative abilities (...), calmness, a sensitive and more aware relationship with the natural environment.*”³⁵

At the end of the sessions of the *Living the Silence* workshop, I felt I had opened a remarkably fruitful process that could not simply stop there. I had started my research focusing on the effects of silence on people, but probably the most ‘affected’ person was me, both as a teacher and as a human being. My workshops had actually provided intense but very short experiences to the participants, while I had the possibility to deal with silence for one entire month. What kind of potential was hidden behind the curtains of silence? Would it be possible to develop a ‘pedagogy of silence’, maybe looking for new exercises? How could I use the results of my first research? These became topics of the following workshop, *Moving the Silence*, where we used silence as a privileged space for the exploration of possible interactions between meditation, T’ai Chi Ch’üan and expressive movement.

³⁴ Barbiero, G. et al. Op. cit. p. 16

³⁵ Ibid. p 17-18

Planning

Moved by the curiosity towards new possible developments, I desired to dig deeper in the ground of silence, creating a research-team which could commit for a longer period.

When I first met Eerika Arposalo, I did not yet know that she had led dance workshops in silence and had written her own research seminar work on the same topic as mine. The title of her seminar paper was *Hiljaisuutta Iholla*, which I could translate as *Silence on Skin*. I did not even know that Eerika was a committed meditator, regularly practising Vipassana meditation (an ancient Indian technique of meditation, transmitted by Buddhist tradition).

But I felt attunement; I was fascinated by her joyful and meditative life style. We had the opportunity to get to know each other at the end of my first year at Theatre Academy (TeaK), when Eerika came back to school after a maternity leave. I had the good fortune to plan my final work with her.

We agreed that silence was a good starting point to look for meditative ways of working in the field of art: we could for example search for interactions between meditation and some discipline of movement, maybe inventing new exercises, attempting to improve our own strategies of teaching without use of words.

We decided in the first instance to share one by one all the experiments we did in our previous workshops about silence, organizing open classes and inviting friends in the hope of finding some partner willing to join our research-team. Eerika showed her own way of building dance choreographies in silence, introduced us to a training composed of several exercises in self-awareness like walking and running at high speed combined with extremely slow walking, meditation moments, minimalistic somatic warm-up which gradually became powerful expressive dance, exercises of sensorial memory in slow speed and many other practices.

After eight encounters we started to select the topics we were most interested in teaching in a potential workshop of two weeks, with the possibility to develop the experience later in the form of a performance: this could guarantee us an even longer time for our research. Among the friends we had invited to our experimental meetings, Rev. Henri Järvinen, the University's chaplain, decided to join our team. His presence has been an

unexpected gift: his own knowledge crossed many traditions and beliefs and he has been able to offer us important tools to begin an inner work of self-discovery.

At this point our procedure had a remarkable shift. We started to meet and meditate in silence. Our meditation sessions went on regularly for one month. Then we established one extra day every week of one-hour meditation open to all the students of the school. We discovered that many other students were interested in meditation and little by little our silent meetings gathered together a small but committed group. I realize now the value of our silent meetings: the establishment of a spiritual attunement between me, Eerika and Rev. Henri, reinforcing our mutual trust and becoming soon a warm relationship of friendship.

If meditation was a common background for all three of us, for my part I decided to take special care of the T'ai Chi Ch'üan. Among the methods of expressive movement, my contribution has been Orazio Costa's mimic method. Eerika decided to develop further some topics of her own previous research project, among them: slow walking, weight shifting and movement patterns. Rev. Henri was in charge of the meditation sessions, teaching Zen and Christian meditation (the Ignatian spiritual exercises), Mindfulness and the Japanese art of arranging flowers: Ikebana.

Preconceptions

Before starting the *Moving the Silence* workshop, many doubts and preconceptions were still bothering me.

Sitting meditation and T'ai Chi Ch'üan have common roots, at least in the environment of Taoism, and share the same goal of enlightenment and emptiness (not apathy, of course, but freedom from the restless flow of thoughts and emotions: an expanded level of awareness). But I was not sure that the same connection could be found with the teaching part of Rev. Henri: what about the presence in the same workshop of Christian meditation and Mindfulness? Because of my own personal experience, a part of me felt sure that in the very end it was possible to find a meeting point, but how would the participants of the workshop react? On a theoretical level the differences between the philosophical and historical backgrounds of such distant traditions were hard obstacles to deal with.

The choreographic potential of T'ai Chi Ch'üan is a clear link with performing arts and expressive movement. But again, I could not guarantee that Eerika's approach towards movement explorations would work in attunement with the basic principles and purposes of the T'ai Chi Ch'üan. What if the dance-explorations worked in the opposite direction? What if the workshop were to become a struggle between too many and too different disciplines? Furthermore on my side, I was still looking for deeper meeting points between T'ai Chi Ch'üan and the Orazio Costa mimic method. I am aware now that I was giving too much space to abstract intellectual doubts, instead of focusing on a more constructive attitude of planning. There came back to the surface an ancient preconception still rooted in me: the never-ending fight between East and West, between my being Christian and disciple of Yogananda at the same time. The coexistence of these two natures in me was still an unsolved problem. A part of me was already in peace and whispered: "*Just go on, the work and the practice of silence will take care of everything!*". But my rational mind was secretly working to point out differences. As soon as I realized that, I decided to face the question openly and to treat it intellectually with the same tools of interreligious dialogue: I had to be ready to motivate our pedagogical choices on a rational level too, since my doubts might also awaken in the participants. I needed to start my teaching practice on a clear ground, starting a personal confrontation between eastern and western philosophies connected with the respective artistic traditions. I began to read theoretical

books about meditation, T'ai Chi Ch'üan and interreligious dialogue: this has been a marvelous opportunity for me to understand my roots and to become more aware of my own patterns.

In the artistic field, there is an apparently insuperable wall between the eastern 'analogic' pedagogical pattern and the western 'digital' one. Think for example, in the theatrical environment, of Stanislavski's method in the American version, the Strasberg method: the original is very slow, profound and 'spiritual'; Strasberg's is more rapid, structured and 'scientific'.

Generically speaking, in the West art has been mostly used as a vehicle of ideals, culture, provocations and emotions, and we could say that its main focus has very often been the effect on the audience, even in the extreme cases where the spectator is deliberately not considered. In the eastern tradition art has been most of all regarded as a path of introspection whose main goal was the spiritual fulfilment of the artist.

We can observe many significant details, confirming this statement: Indian classical dance is characterized by closed figures and inwardly turned gestures; western classical dance movements and postures are directed outwards; in the West, classical music has developed the polyphonic system, which allows the sounds to 'travel' in many directions, filling the space; in the eastern musical tradition we find a meticulous exploration of melody, as sounds are digging deeper and deeper in the same chord, like a spiral, entering directly into the soul; among the arts of fighting, the West has focused its efforts on developing disciplines based on explosive muscular power, such as boxing, or in other cases athletic fighting sports such as fencing, in which the main goal is 'killing' or hitting the opponent, while in the East we have such a unique case in history, where martial arts are inseparable from spirituality and their strength lies in the development of internal energy, promoting a philosophy of non-violence. It is not a matter of chance that the two most popular styles of traditional Chinese Kung Fu, the Shaolin Ch'üan and the T'ai Chi Ch'üan, were structured in a Buddhist and in a Taoist monastery respectively.³⁶

³⁶ See: Chang, D. Y & Fassi, R. *Corso di T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi. Prato, 2008

In order to facilitate a real encounter between religions, the renowned theologian Raimon Panikkar³⁷ (1918-2010) suggests an approach of “*interpenetration*” and “*mutual fecundation*”³⁸ and he points out three basic criteria to make that possible: honesty in the search for truth wherever you can find it, intellectual openness without biased opinions and deep loyalty towards your own tradition.³⁹ I began to think that the essence of these suggestions could be applied to the dialogue between artistic traditions as well.

The first point, “*honesty in the search for truth*”, opened the enormous question: what is truth in art? I cannot imagine a universally valid answer for such a wide subject, and fortunately I think it is not even necessary: the question touches me when I start to reason about my personal and relative perception of truth. I could translate the word ‘truth’ into the more subjective concept of ‘interest’. I believe that meditation, T’ai Chi Ch’üan and expressive movement are co-operating whenever I find in them common aspects belonging to my current interests, such as the possibility of working in silence, looking for meditative approaches towards art and attempting at the same time to maintain a creative attitude in meditation.

The second suggestion about “*intellectual openness without biased opinions*” invited me to get rid of the commonplaces in eastern and western traditions, looking at the different disciplines as they are in the present moment for me. I immediately reminded myself that there are also western teaching methods whose main purpose is spiritual seeking. According to the Christian tradition, the ‘spirit’ (*pneûma*) is defined as the central or superior part of the ‘soul’ (*psyché*): the sphere of will and intuition, of faith and love.⁴⁰ Therefore spiritual search could be defined as the search for the ‘God within us’, abiding in our own inner self, or, from another point of

³⁷ Raimon Panikkar had a paramount role in my research. Looking for bridges between eastern and western traditions, I have found a source of high-quality comparative studies in the works of Panikkar. As well as Father Anthony Elenjmittam, Raimon Panikkar had a multilayered religious and cultural background. His interest towards interfaith dialogue was not merely intellectual, but it came from his own direct experience of participating in a plurality of traditions: Indian and European, Hindu and Christian, scientific and humanistic. Like Elenjmittam, Panikkar preached a concept of ecumenism much wider than its traditional ‘Christian’ meaning.

³⁸ Panikkar, R. *Il Cristo sconosciuto dell’induismo*. Jaka Book. Milano, 2008, p. 70

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Boff, C. M. *Come fare meditazione*. Edizioni San Paolo. Alba, 2010, p. 24

view, the development of our own highest potential as human beings⁴¹. With a sense of relief I discovered that Orazio Costa too had a deep sense of spirituality and defined the actor as an “*acrobat of the spirit*”: in his own pedagogical philosophy there was the idea that before forming good artists, the teacher had the duty to form good persons⁴².

The third point, “*loyalty towards your own tradition*”, suggested to me not to be in a hurry to mix together meditation, T'ai Chi Ch'üan and expressive movement: together with Eerika we took the decision to dedicate time to a separate practice, in order for the participants to first experience their own independent potential. I believe it is important to proceed in an organic way, allowing the ‘dialogue’ to happen spontaneously when the time is right. This has been a fundamental point, affecting our procedure of leading the workshop. First of all, the decision to structure our process in two separate phases: one week of practice of several disciplines without any conscious attempt to mix them; a second week open to creative experiments of interdisciplinary dialogue.

An authentic encounter may happen only where the two ‘realities’ mutually come in touch.⁴³

I finally opened my eyes and I started to find everywhere signs proving that nowadays the meeting points between eastern and western traditions are exponentially increasing because of an internal need of the new globalized society. Paraphrasing another thought of Panikkar, I could say that while in the past artistic research was essentially directed towards the unidirectional deepening of the specific artistic tradition of a single culture, the longing for authentic art of our times cannot ignore “*this thirst of opening and of mutual understanding*”⁴⁴. I realized that in the field of arts and in pedagogy as well this ‘interpenetration’ is already happening on the practical level, even though the theories behind the traditions each reflect a different history and philosophy.

To take an example: the American educator and curriculum theorist W. Doll proposes a pedagogical reform based on the post-modern principle of self-organization, with the idea of an educational path without pre-

⁴¹ Kriyananda. *Le rivelazioni di Cristo*. Ananda Edizioni. Roma, 2008, p. 118

⁴² Fisher, E. *Eremiti*. Castelvechi. Roma, 2012, p. 165

⁴³ Panikkar, R. *Il Cristo sconosciuto dell'induismo*. Jaka Book. Milano, 2008, p. 70, my translation

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

selected goals⁴⁵; the traditional oriental pedagogy works in function of a single pre-selected goal, the most demanding one, which wholly challenges students' capacities: perfection. Many eastern philosophies share the same starting point with post-modern thought: reality is relative, inexpressible. However, while post-modern thought is focused on dialogue as a creator of realities, oriental thought is entirely focused on the inexpressible reality. But from a practical point of view, since perfection is an infinite, this Utopian goal may correspond to the post-modern idea of a never ending, always expanding search. For example, the physicist Sabbadini (1943-) defines Taoism as a philosophy which is able to embrace the reality that quantum physics shows, because it places the act of experience as primary and fundamental, and the two poles subject-object as co-emerging in this act⁴⁶.

In the very end, art is always a means of self-expression, and the eastern and western approaches are less and less in contrast: in order to facilitate the best involvement of the audience, you need to improve your self-awareness and human potential; if you want to reach the goal of spiritual fulfilment, you should include the others in your expansion of consciousness. Without minimizing the challenge of the co-existence in the same workshop of different kinds of meditation, T'ai Chi Ch'üan and expressive movement, I finally found good arguments to go beyond the layers of preconceptions concerning the eastern and western ways of making art. Art is a tool. It can be used in many different ways and for various purposes. My purpose is to look for a meditative approach towards art and at the same time to develop an artistic, creative attitude in spirituality, in order to keep it spontaneous, genuine and alive. The inspiring words of Rev. Henri and the unforgettable example of Father Anthony Elenjittam encouraged me to let go this fight of thoughts and to jump as soon as possible into practice. The importance of practical, subjective and direct experience would become a fundamental basis of my concept of Experiential Pluralism.

Another unexpected help arrived from Eerika, the day she told me that in a forest close to Helsinki there was the opportunity to participate in a ten-day Vipassana retreat. I felt that I wanted to experience Vipassana meditation, in order to better understand Eerika's background, and even

⁴⁵ See: Doll, W. E. *A Postmodern Perspective on Curriculum*. Teachers College Press. New York, 1993

⁴⁶ Sabbadini, A. S. *Tao Te Ching, una guida all'interpretazione del libro fondamentale del taoismo*. Urra, Milano, 2009, p 26.

more to get rid of my restless thoughts: what a golden opportunity to meet the silence, before my work would start! For ten days I could be in total silence, without talking, reading or writing, and in isolation, since even eye contact with the other participants was forbidden. The meditation period was remarkably long: from 4 a.m. till 10 p.m.

I had never meditated so much before, especially sitting on the floor would be challenging: I applied.

Vipassana

*Sisters of instants
clouds change,
while I am sitting.
(Dinajara Freire)⁴⁷*

As soon as the retreat started, my own ego was crushed against the ascetic discipline we had to follow in order to climb the mountain of introspection. I realized how much I was attached to my own personality and I perceived there was a subtle difference between my ego and my real 'I'. If my ego was the sum of my memories, experiences, thoughts, desires and habits, my real 'I' was somehow beyond all that.

During the retreat I was not allowed to practice any other meditation technique but Vipassana, I could not pray according to my own religious belief, I could not train in Kung Fu and I could not have any contact with the external world. This challenge put me face to face with my strongest attachments, those fundamental elements which constitute the essential traits of my personality: Kriyā Yoga-meditation, my being Catholic, the practice of Kung Fu and my beloved five-year-old son.

I began to feel like a prisoner in a rigid structure which gave me no space to breathe: we woke up at 4 a.m. and we had no time to do anything else but meditate, sitting in very uncomfortable postures on the floor, training in a meditation technique which was at the same time close to but different from the one I am used to practising. Every contact with the others, including eye contact, was forbidden. We did not eat dinner and we went to bed at 10 p.m. Small differences in the details of meditation technique and most of all the Buddhist philosophical context in which we had to merge were the most disturbing points for me. We were not working with inner energy and meridians or *cakras* like in Ch'I Kung in Taoist meditation or *prāṇāyāma* in Yoga meditation, and there was no space for prayer or any kind of devotional approach. As far as I could understand, Vipassana (Sanskrit: *vipaśyanā*), which means 'to see the things as they really are' or 'insight into the true nature of reality', is an ancient Indian technique of meditation based on the attentive and impartial observation of breathing, body sensations and thoughts. The search for God is somehow translated

⁴⁷ Barbiero, G. et. al., op.cit.

into a very practical principle, which is the search for true happiness and freedom. By training myself to avoid reactions dictated by attachment or aversion, by being an impartial observer towards both pleasant and unpleasant experiences, I can finally be capable of free actions in life moved by real inner wisdom.

Being forced to meditate about eleven hours a day, together with the rule of silence, was a combination of elements that operated a therapeutic action in me. Without any apparent connection with the situation, I started to face memories of my past, unsolved questions, painful points, mistakes, persons that I have hurt and so on. But I could not share my inner struggle with anyone; I had to stand on my own two feet. The seventh day I arrived at such a pitch of exhaustion that I could not focus at all on the meditation. My mind was captured in the stream of my thoughts and I had no power to stop them. I felt I was in hell, even though the environment around me was a real heaven: I was surrounded by many persons willing to improve their own lives, meditating together with me, and we were all served by a team of volunteers who cooked for us and took care of every single need and detail. The place in the forest, close to a wonderful lake, was enchanting. I realized that the keys to happiness or sorrow are in our own hands and that, no matter what the external conditions may be, we can always find the 'kingdom of God' within ourselves. I was close to the point of quitting the meditation hall and giving up the retreat. But then my heart exploded with a silent shout: I said to myself "*Mother, help me! No matter if I can't concentrate, no matter if my mind is somewhere else, I'll not move a single muscle, I'll not open my eyes until the meditation period ends!*". A tear fell from my eyes and suddenly I felt free: I could focus entirely on the meditation and I felt no more strain or pain for the rest of the days, devoting myself without reserves to Vipassana technique.

Training myself to observe my thoughts, acts and emotions, cultivating a sense of non-attachment and of open acceptance, showed me an unexpected side of reality: the unreality of what I usually considered real, and the reality of something that I did not consider at all. If before this experience I blindly identified myself with my own personality, that is to say my natural inclinations and interests, my gender and nationality, my being a father and so on, now I began to perceive my personality more like a sort of 'coat' that I was wearing: we may be many different persons in the period of a single day, with contrasting changes of moods and thoughts. And how many lives we live in one lifetime! Observing with equanimity the

reality as it is, without adding my own beliefs and preferences, I started to understand what Bhuddist tradition names *anicca*: impermanence.

A fascinating question came to my mind: who then is that ‘being’ who has been impartially observing these processes since I was born? I am not talking about the brain-memory, which may work better or worse, according to the seasons of life and health. I mean that inner sense of basic awareness which is before and beyond my own thoughts, which simply makes me perceive that I exist now. That inner witness, who has always been at peace, came gradually to the surface.

If we analyse the history of spiritual search, undertaken by saints and sages in the course of the ages, we discover that the spiritual perfection sought by means of introspective meditation could be attained only after having operated the discrimination between the ego and the true Self⁴⁸. Taking into consideration for example the teachings of the philosophical-religious Indian thought, such as the monistic system Advaita Vedānta, Reality is somehow divided into two levels: the transcendental Reality, *paramārthika*, and the concrete, daily reality, *vyāvahārika*⁴⁹. Similarly, in the micro-cosmos of human beings we may operate a distinction between the Self and the ego. With different nuances the same intuition can be found in Zen Buddhism and in many religious scriptures such as the Bible, the Koran and the Avesta⁵⁰. Our own ego, which is the sum of our own memories, experiences, thoughts, desires, passions, is described as a sort of ‘mask’, which our own true Self uses in order to manifest and operate in the world as body and mind⁵¹.

This sense of self-awareness, never changing, never touched by the most terrible storm, that does not cease to exist even when I am sleeping: could that be me, my own real, true ‘I’? I started to re-consider the relativistic worldview typical of post-modernism. I began to perceive intuitively that there could be something ‘solid’ beyond the ever-changing reality of my own personality. And I felt free, released from the attachment to all the expectations that I might have towards my life.

⁴⁸ Elenjmittam, A. *Meditazione per la realizzazione del Sé*. Milano: Mursia. Milano, 1995, pp. 19-20

⁴⁹ Piano, S. *Sanātana Dharma*. Edizioni San Paolo. Milano, 1996, p. 172

⁵⁰ Elenjmittam, A. op. cit. p. 20

⁵¹ Ibid. p. 21



Moving the Silence – photo by Henri Järvinen

The retreat gave me the courage to take more risks for *the Moving the Silence* workshop. I knew now by experience the advantages and the problems of working in complete silence. Together with Eerika, we decided to lead the workshop in total silence and to ask the participants not to talk even during the pauses and lunch-breaks. At the same time I felt that the lack of eye contacts could be an obstacle if we were aiming towards a dimension of shared meditation and opening interactive creative processes. So, the second point we fixed was to allow communication to happen on a non-verbal level among the group of participants.

Moving the Silence

The two-week *Moving the Silence* workshop was shaped as an artistic-spiritual retreat. The only rule we asked the participants to respect was the silence, even during the breaks and lunch pauses. Breaks and changes of exercises were marked by means of a bell. The first three days Eerika and I took the liberty of spending a few words in order to explain some technical details related to the practice, and then we began to work in complete silence. We planned two moments for verbal sharing, the last hours of Fridays. On all the other days our meetings ended with half an hour of silent sharing, which could consist simply in looking into each other's eyes or in more articulated actions.

We were pleasantly surprised to find that we were working with fifteen extremely committed participants, coming from very distant spiritual or artistic backgrounds: among them there were practitioners of Yoga, Mindfulness, Vipassana, Zen, Christian meditation, T'ai Chi Ch'üan, together with people absolutely new to meditative practices. We shared the same space and silence, but everyone was free to follow the methodology s/he felt was most attuned to her/his own actual needs.

The first week was centred on the separate practice of different meditation techniques, Ch'i Kung and T'ai Chi Ch'üan, Orazio Costa's mimic method and movement explorations.

The second week we worked with free improvisations, looking for possible interactions between the different disciplines, sharing the leadership with all the participants who were invited to write new tasks for the whole group day by day. Everyone was free to choose whether to explore the performing aspects or the meditative possibilities in each improvisation.

Even though the selection of the contents of the workshop had been the fruit of a preliminary dialogue between me, Eerika and Rev. Henri, I cannot deny that this choice responded perfectly to my need to combine together the main passions of my life, looking for unity in an apparently contradictory group of disciplines.

In this chapter I will describe my own background in meditation, T'ai Chi and expressive movement, entering when necessary into some more detailed explanation about the practices. The description of each one of these disciplines will be followed by the explanation of their respective

roles in the *Moving the Silence* workshop, the interactions that happened among them and the effect of silence in my pedagogical strategy.

Meditation

My background in meditation is mainly related to the Kriyā Yoga taught by Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952): a spiritual path including some techniques of meditation which, according to the Indian master, if regularly practised leads towards the goal of Self-realization, or realization of God⁵². I have recently included in my practice Vipassana meditation, from the Buddhist tradition, and I have some basic knowledge of Taoist meditation because of my experience in the field of martial arts, in particular with the practice of Ch'i Kung.

Yoga, from the Sanskrit 'yuj' (union), means the union between the individual soul and the Spirit. Yoga also designates the methods through which it is possible to reach this goal⁵³. Yoga is one of the six orthodox systems of Hindu philosophy: Vedānta, Mīmāṃsā, Sāṃkhya, Vaiśeṣika, Nyāya and Yoga. There are many Yoga-methods, such as Haṭha Yoga (a system of physical postures to purify the body), Karma Yoga (selfless service to the others), Mantra Yoga (repetition of certain root-word sounds representing a certain aspect of the Spirit), Bhakti Yoga (devotion to and worship of the Divinity in all creatures and in everything), Jñāna Yoga (the path of wisdom, emphasizing the application of discriminative intelligence to achieve spiritual liberation) and Rāja Yoga (the royal path of Yoga, formally systematized in the second century B.C. by the Indian sage Patañjali, which combines the essence of all other paths)⁵⁴. The Kriyā Yoga taught by Paramahansa Yogananda is considered a Rāja Yoga path, since it includes the essential characteristics of all the other methods, but the core of this practice is a technique of *prāṇāyāma* (life-energy control).

Kriyā reinforces and revitalizes subtle currents of life energy (*prāṇā*) in the spine and brain. The ancient seers of India (*ṛṣis*) perceived the brain and spine as the tree of life. Out of the subtle cerebrospinal centers of life and consciousness (*cakras*) flow the energies that enliven all the nerves and every organ and tissue of the body. The yogis discovered that by revolving the life current continuously up and down the spine by the special technique of Kriyā Yoga, it is possible to greatly accelerate one's spiritual evolution and awareness.

Correct practice of Kriyā Yoga enables the normal activities of the heart and lungs and nervous system to slow down naturally, producing deep inner stillness of body and

⁵² Yogananda, P. *Verso la realizzazione del Sé*. Astrolabio. Roma, 2006, p. 401

⁵³ Ibid. p. 411

⁵⁴ SRF. *Undreamed of Possibilities*. Self-Realization Fellowship. Los Angeles, 1997, pp. 8-9

mind and freeing the attention from the usual turbulence of thoughts, emotions, and sensory perceptions. In the clarity of that inner stillness, one comes to experience a deepening interior peace and attunement with one's soul and with God.⁵⁵

I initially had a personal doubt about proposing eastern meditation techniques together with Christian ones, since it had happened before in my working experience, especially in Catholic environments, to meet some theoretical resistance to accepting practices apparently discordant with the Christian religious tradition. Meditation, intended as the application of concentration on our own inner reality⁵⁶, has been considered in many philosophies and religions one of the most effective means to Self-realization. However, in particular in the western cultures, the term 'meditation' has little by little been 'rationalized', becoming a synonym of 'intellectual reflection'. This is the result of the cultural stream of modernism, which has produced a pattern of education based on mechanical and logical efficiency, and relegating the creative intuition to a mere question of personal, accidental, individual skill⁵⁷. But, as the most recent researches about the functions of the two hemispheres of the brain demonstrate, intuition can be trained and improved: it is not an unchangeable gift⁵⁸. Fortunately Rev. Henri proved to be exceptionally open-minded, being an expert himself in Zen meditation and Ignatian spiritual exercises. He also explained to us that in the ancient Christian tradition there was something extremely close to the concept of 'meditation' as intended in the eastern cultures: the practice of contemplation.

Talking by contrasts, the theologian Clodovis Boff (1944-) underlines the importance of involving the right faculties of the brain in the process of meditation:

Meditating is not science, but wisdom. It's not knowledge, but taste. It's not talking about God, but talking to God. It's not learning, but experiencing.⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Srf website: <http://www.yogananda-srf.org/>

The_Kriya_Yoga_Path_of_Meditation.aspx#.UO7guHePSSo

⁵⁶ Yogananda, P. op. cit. p. 404

⁵⁷ See: Doll, W. E. *A Postmodern Perspective on Curriculum*. Teachers College Press. New York, 1993.

⁵⁸ See: Edwards, B. *Disegnare ascoltando l'artista che è in noi*. Longanesi. Gravellona Toce, 2011

⁵⁹ Boff, C. M. *Come fare meditazione*. Edizioni San Paolo. Alba, 2010, p. 21, my translation

I would add, more extremely: meditation is not thinking, but listening. As Rev. Henri explained, recently Christian meditation has rediscovered the ancient goal of ‘contemplation’: the last step of the meditative process, where the intellectual reasoning ceases and gives way to listening and intuition. In the Catholic tradition contemplation is defined by listening, silence, union and communion of love⁶⁰. In this sense, the Christian tradition shares the same target as Eastern schools of meditation: emptiness. “*In contemplation the man knows without any effort*”, wrote, as early as 1600, one of the greatest mystics of the Society of Jesus in France⁶¹. But paradoxically, in order to attain such a result, a long regular effort is required. Here below I quote, in my own translation, the words of the renowned Taoist master Da Liu (1904-2000) about emptiness, including a simple suggestion for beginners in meditation.

The condition of emptiness described in the classics refers to the last level and the supreme goal of the meditative practice. For the beginner it is a mistake to fight against distractions or to cast away the thoughts. It is much better to focus on the processes which happen during the meditation, such as the slow and rhythmic flow of the breathing and the energy-flow along the psychic channels.⁶²

Meditation was the biggest commitment that I, Eerika and Rev. Henri made throughout the workshop: every day we began our practice with one hour of meditation, taking the risk of embarrassing or displeasing the participants. It did not happen. All of them, including the persons who were totally new to meditation, appreciated this practice and were able to overcome their initial difficulties, improving their own determination, concentration and personal commitment towards the whole of the activities of the workshop. In the very beginning Rev. Henri took charge of three meditation-lessons, during which he taught three different possible approaches to meditation: Christian meditation, Zen meditation and Mindfulness. On all the other mornings we practiced free silent meditations: everybody could follow her/his favorite practice, and possibly walk or lie down or move. Sharing the same space in silence and concentration proved to be an intense and creative starting point for the activities that followed.

I soon felt that there were no more boundaries between the meditation and T'ai Chi Ch'üan or expressive movement. Every action,

⁶⁰ AA.VV. *Catechismo della Chiesa Cattolica*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. Città del Vaticano, 1999, pp. 713-714

⁶¹ Surin, J. J. *Guida spirituale*. San Paolo. Milano, 1997. P. 340

⁶² Da Liu. *Tai Chi Chuan e Meditazione*. Ubaldini. Roma, 1988, pp. 72-73, my translation

including the actions during breaks and lunch, was executed with such a high a level of awareness that I could not perceive any interruption in my flow of concentration. I think that the main contribution of meditation to the other practices has been this opening of our capacity of attention, which happened as a natural consequence of our regular training.



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

T'ai Chi Ch'üan



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

A discipline that I consider a perfect conjunction between meditation and performing arts is the T'ai Chi Ch'üan (太極拳). This ancient discipline is at the same time a healthy exercise for the body, a form of dynamic meditation and a martial art⁶³.

My first approach to martial arts dates back to my childhood. I was eight when I tried a little of Judo, but I did not feel comfortable in such a sport-like activity, competition-based, characterized by a narrow range of techniques mainly focused on projections and falls and I quit the classes after a couple of months. I was nine when I began to regularly practice Ju Tai Jutsu (a Japanese martial art or, in my case at least, a creative western reinterpretation of the ancient Ju Jutsu⁶⁴) at the Yoshin Ryu in Torino, and I continued for five years. There I learned the basics of a spiritual attitude towards a dynamic physical training and the respect for tradition, master and fellows in the practice. My master Alessandro Nepote encouraged me to go

⁶³ Chang, D. Y. & Fassi, R. *Corso di T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi. Prato, 2008, p. 5

⁶⁴ I have never been able to discover the true origins of the school where I was training.

beyond the techniques and to develop my own personal 'poetry'. Despite his wonderful personality and remarkable pedagogical skills, I felt that Ju Tai Jutsu itself was lacking in a deep knowledge about the human body and mind with their interrelated dynamics.

At the age of fifteen I met Sergio Volpiano, my present instructor of Kung Fu, from the Kung Fu Chang school of Torino. For over 18 years I have been studying and training with him in the classical Kung Fu of northern China, as transmitted by the renowned Master Chang Dsu Yao (1918-1992). This meeting has deeply affected my life: Sergio's teachings went much further than the mere practice of a martial discipline. Kung Fu has helped me to find a method to proceed with my school studies, to deal with life crises, to survive in the challenging period of the Theatre Academy in Italy.

Kung Fu (功夫) means 'exercise acted with ability', 'work executed with mastery' or in a wider sense 'thing well done'. This term is also used to define the whole of traditional Chinese martial arts, together with Wu Shu (武術, martial technique). These disciplines are extremely wide and complex and in order to be mastered require the commitment of a whole lifetime. The curriculum of studies in Kung Fu Chang School includes both internal and external styles. The first category (Nei Chia, 內家) comprises all those 'soft' and 'internal' styles, so named because of the importance given in them to the development of the internal energy. The second group (Wai Chia, 外家) is composed of all the 'hard' or 'external' styles, so named because of the importance given in them to a vigorous practice, where 'external' characteristics of speed and power are made evident⁶⁵. Kung Fu's main external style is the classic Shaolin Ch'üan (少林拳) of northern China and the best known internal styles are the T'ai Chi Ch'üan (太極拳), Pa Kua (八卦) and Hsing-I (形意)⁶⁶.

T'ai Chi Ch'üan (太極拳) literally means 'Supreme Polarity boxing': it is therefore a martial art based on the principles of Yin-Yang, rooted in the non-violent and highly mystical philosophy of Taoism. T'ai Chi Ch'üan is the art of softness. As logical consequences of its practice there are the health of the body and the capability of self-defence. But in

⁶⁵ Chang, D. Y. & Fassi, R. *Enciclopedia del Kung Fu-Shaolin*. Vol. 1. Mediterranee. Roma, 1986. P. 17

⁶⁶ Ibid.

order to reach such results it is necessary to breathe in the correct way, allowing the Ch'i (氣, breath-energy) to go down to Tan T'ien (丹田, the 'Cinnabar's field'), which is an important area situated about four fingers below the navel and four fingers inside the body, related to Taoist meditation and traditional Chinese medicine⁶⁷. In order to attain the most elevated status of awareness, the Ch'i (氣) should then be refined into a more spiritual form of energy, Shen (神), by reaching the top of the head and from there, reaching the point between the eyebrows, the energy may expand the mind into a state of super-consciousness: Hsü (虛), emptiness⁶⁸. The breathing techniques used in T'ai Chi Ch'üan deal with the same energy-channels common to other oriental practices. That is why the practice of this discipline may be helped for example by a preliminary training in simple breathing exercises from Ch'i Kung and Yoga⁶⁹. In the *Moving the Silence* workshop we always preceded the practice of T'ai Chi with meditation and Ch'i Kung.

The basic form of T'ai Chi Ch'üan should be executed slowly, without interruptions, in complete relaxation, the spine straight, in order to allow a free circulation of the breathing energy (氣, Ch'i) along the meridians, in the whole body. The body moves as if it was plunged in a dense liquid. The names of the techniques sometimes recall animals (birds, monkey, snake) or elements of nature (clouds, mountain, sea). This has been the first theoretical connection that I have found with the basics of the Orazio Costa mimic method, which encourages a spontaneous approach to the elements of nature.

Relationships between T'ai Chi Ch'üan and static meditation have been explored for hundreds of years, and they are considered by Taoist tradition two complementary aspects of the same path:

After the practice of T'ai Chi Ch'üan for a long period you should stop and pass to the meditation. After you have reached a remarkable calmness, you should start again to practice the movements of T'ai Chi Ch'üan in order to stimulate the blood circulation, freeing yourself from the bodily inactivity and relaxing the mind.⁷⁰

Recently the ascetic and mystical aspects of T'ai Chi Ch'üan have awakened the attention of Christian theologians, who have encountered the

⁶⁷ Chang D. Y. & Fassi, R. *Corso di T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi. Prato, 2008, p. 351

⁶⁸ Ibid. p. 69

⁶⁹ Da Liu. *Tai Chi Chuan e Meditazione*. Ubaldini. Roma, 1988, p. 25

⁷⁰ Ibid. p. 14, my translation

ancient Chinese discipline as an experience of prayer and meditation, not only in isolation but also in relationship with others⁷¹. This dimension of 'shared' meditation was one of the cores of the *Moving the Silence* workshop.



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

During the workshop I taught the first part of the long form of T'ai Chi Ch'üan Yang-style, as transmitted by the renowned Master Chang Dsu Yao, composed of 108 techniques. Chang Dsu Yao (1918-1992) was one of the most skilled pupils of Liu Pao Chün (1892-1947?), who was a direct pupil of Yang Ch'en Fu (1883-1936): the greatest promulgator of the practice of T'ai Chi Ch'üan in China. Master Yang Chen Fu belonged to a renowned family of Masters that for three generations had been developing the art of the T'ai Chi Ch'üan (before that, the secrets of T'ai Chi Ch'üan were the exclusive property of the Chen family). Yang Chen Fu developed some simplified forms (without martial applications, shortened, and without detailed explanations of traditional Chinese medicine), in order to promote a healthy and still precious exercise of dynamic meditation among the people.

⁷¹ Fassi, R. Cuturello, I. Magni, D. & Tomatis, F. *Corpo e preghiera*. Città Nuova. Roma, 2012, p.145

At the same time he continued to teach some sophisticated forms of T'ai Chi Ch'üan, complete with martial applications and refined breathing techniques, to a few pupils selected with care⁷². Among those advanced forms is the one I was teaching in the workshop.

By teaching the form in silence, I encouraged the participants to follow it without fear of mistakes and without the pressure to remember the movements exactly: the purpose of these sessions was simply to gain confidence with the form in order to taste a combination of movement and breathing technique. Silence has forced me to find new ways to teach the techniques. I was often questioning myself: should I explain some important detail or not, should I correct my pupils or not, should I just show the form as a model, letting the participants make their own mistakes and proceed at their own speed or is there a way to help them to grasp more quickly some fundamental skill...? I was afraid to step back to the old Chinese pedagogy, where some masters never gave corrections to their pupils, since they thought it was useless to do so:

A pupil will always repeat the same mistakes as long as he is unaware and when he becomes aware he'll need no more corrections.⁷³

On the other hand I did not want to take the opposite position: to impose my procedures on the others, forcing them to learn 'correctly'. Of course, the technique is something which presupposes precise rules, but I believe that every person has the right to attain the same skill walking on a personal path: I think knowledge can be really learnt only if there is an interest from within. I cannot force the awakening of this interest, but I can help it somehow, offering opportunities. Master Chang Dsu Yao believed it was important to correct the pupils with words, but most of all with practical examples, giving them the possibility to visualize the master and to observe themselves at the same time without the use of sight, just becoming aware of their own body-sensations⁷⁴. Since I could not use words, in the beginning I just invited the participants to follow the whole form of T'ai Chi Ch'üan several times, and then we repeated a single movement together several times. With the use of gestures every now and then I underlined some important details. Sometimes I showed the martial application of one movement, in order to help the understanding of the dynamic. In some cases

⁷² Chang D. Y. & Fassi, R. *Corso di T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi. Prato, 2008, p. 10

⁷³ Fassi, R. Cuturello, I. Magni, D. & Tomatis, F. *Corpo e preghiera*. Città Nuova. Roma, 2012, p. 41, my translation

⁷⁴ Ibid.

I adjusted a participant's posture by touching her/him. I still felt I was instructing too much from outside, leading the attention of the participants where it was supposed to go, but somehow forcing them to follow my own logic and speed.



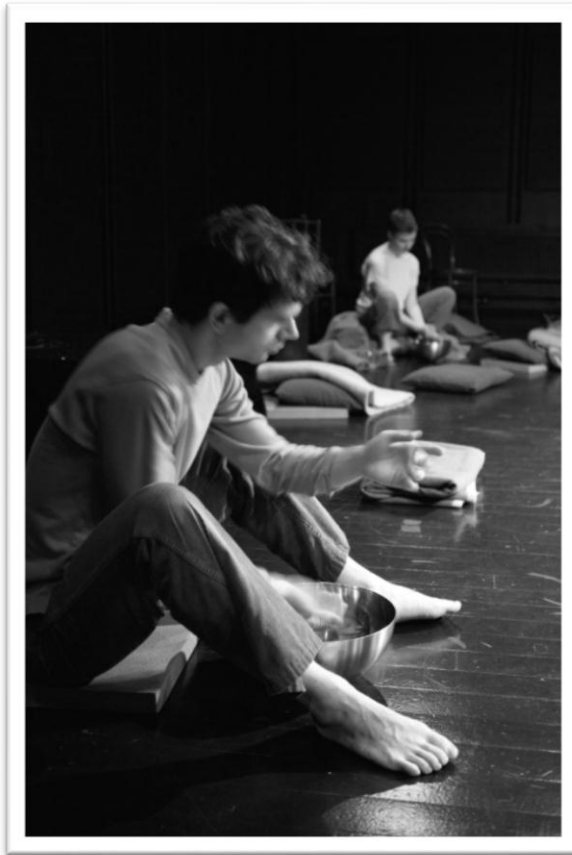
Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

Silence and repetition anyway led me naturally and gradually towards a change of attitude, which accidentally helped me to get closer to the original spirit of T'ai Chi Ch'üan: slowness, relaxation, meditation. I began more and more to slow the rate of execution of the form together with my breath-rhythm and I attempted to work as deeply as possible for myself. In the place of detailed explanations on single techniques, I just remained still in one single posture for several minutes, giving time to the participants to feel their own bodies in that posture and to grasp from me all the details they wanted, according to their own interest and attention. This is actually an ancient Chinese practice, the Chan Chuang (站桩, 'standing like a post'), extremely useful to accustom the body to a correct execution of the techniques⁷⁵. Among the participants there were two pupils of mine, from my ordinary Kung Fu classes: it was interesting to notice how they could

75 Ibid.

learn faster and more precisely by following my silent classes. In particular, they improved the sense of unity, the flow connecting all the steps and figures. Silence, repetition, stillness and slow pace somehow awakened from within their own capacity to watch, memorize and perform, as I could not do previously by means of many words.

Orazio Costa mimic method



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

I studied the Orazio Costa mimic method in the Theatre Academy of Italy (Accademia Nazionale D'Arte Drammatica 'Silvio D'Amico'). My teachers Alessandra Niccolini and Giuseppe Bevilacqua had been pupils of Orazio Costa. They encouraged us at first to develop a spontaneous approach with the elements of nature, as children naturally do: by touching, smelling, tasting, playing. Then we had to translate the sensorial experience instinctively into movements, which had to be combined with voice and words. We worked with water, earth, grass, trees, fire, air and little by little we shifted towards animals and then we started to perform abstract concepts such as emotions or ideas. We worked finally with theatrical texts,

condensing the movements into an internal attitude of the body, making them no longer externally visible, but still affecting the quality of the voice and the presence on the stage.

Orazio Costa Giovangigli (1911-1999), was an Italian director and one of the best exponents of theatrical pedagogy in Europe. Inspired by the teachings of his master Jaques Copeau (1879-1949), he developed a mimic method to train the psycho-physic flexibility in order to help actors to interpret a role. His method is based on a sequence of exercises meant to stimulate the capacity of the actors to empathize with any element of nature, animate or not.

Even though the method encourages the use of voice in synergy with body movements, the basic practice of experiencing the natural elements with the five senses is a fundamental training of active silence, which allows us to establish a strong link with our ‘sylvatic’ dimension in order to recover our physical and psychological balance, and also to build a spiritual resonance with the natural world. It is interesting to notice that the spiritual importance of such training is underlined by many masters of T’ai Chi Ch’üan. Here below, for example, are the simple words of Master Chang Dsu Yao, as recorded by his pupil master Roberto Fassi:

Improving the sensorial perception is important not only in martial arts but also in meditation and... in everyday life. ‘Perceiving’ means: to become aware.⁷⁶

In the *Moving the Silence* workshop I proposed the basic work on air, water, earth, stone and fire: I believe this instinctive mimic approach could open new ways in the practice of the T’ai Chi Ch’üan, traditionally rich in symbols related to the natural elements. It is also interesting to notice that exercises of sensorial training with nature are part of many eastern schools of meditation. In particular the tantric tradition has promoted practices surprisingly close to the Costa method, in order to help the practitioner to develop the inner sensitivity necessary to recognize the most subtle processes happening in meditation⁷⁷.

Orazio Costa describes the mimic process in these words:

From ‘imitating’ you will move towards ‘miming’. From the pure and simple repetition you will move towards a function which is at the same time interpretative and creative. Interpretative because, since it cannot replicate, it translates. Creative because the

⁷⁶ Fassi, R. Cuturello, I. Magni, D. & Tomatis, F. *Corpo e preghiera*. Città Nuova. Roma, 2012, p. 33, my translation

⁷⁷ See: Osho. *I segreti del tantra*. Bompiani. Milano, 2011, p. 389

choice of the expressive acts is not mechanically automatic but it relies on the nature of the individual.⁷⁸

The basic procedure in the first classes of Orazio Costa's method consists in a very simple exercise, completely free from any technique. The main point is to develop a personal approach with the elements of nature, without following any external example, without copying each other, just by opening the heart to intuition and body-instinct.

In my teaching strategy, I have developed five consecutive phases:

- observe, touch and sense the element
- gradually 'transform' the whole body into the essential qualities of that specific element
- increase the magnitude of the movements
- condense the magnitude of the movements
- in stillness, maintain the movement inside the body

I give only three rules:

- keep every single part of the body alive, treating them as working material without any distinction between their own ordinary different roles (hands, feet, head...)
- find infinite constant variations in the movements in terms of dynamics, directions, speed, maintaining alive the essential qualities of the element
- give time to every one of the five phases

I have found that this exercise has been extremely suitable for working in silence. Differently from the T'ai Chi Ch'üan sessions, the mimic moments did not require me myself to be initially a model to be followed: very soon everyone developed a personal method of approaching the elements and making them become alive in their own bodies. The teacher was the element. And when the time came to find contact among the others, the previous individual work became reinforced by the interactions with other 'living' elements. Water became more aware of its own fluidity

⁷⁸ Costa, O. *Lettera al nipote Nicola* – quaderno XVI, 29/8/66.
<http://metodomimico.myblog.it/>, my translation.

by crushing against a solid stone, while wood could discover its own specific life-power by digging into the earth, and so on.

A remarkable experience was the moment when T'ai Chi Ch'üan and mimicking the elements began to interact. I could distinguish two possible ways of interaction.

The first modality was a very slight and inner work of keeping the element's quality alive inside the body, while performing the T'ai Chi Ch'üan form. This happened as a spontaneous consequence, whenever we were practicing the T'ai Chi Ch'üan immediately after a long exploration of an element: after the water-mimic, for example, I become extremely aware of the fluidity connecting the movements of the T'ai Chi Ch'üan form and I felt I could connect one posture to the other much better. After mimicking the stone, my T'ai Chi Ch'üan became remarkably slow and rooted and I could distinguish much better the shifting of the weight from one leg to the other, in particular experiencing a sensation of fullness in the body parts which were more Yang (heavy and strong).



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

The second way was maybe more performing, since the interaction between the mimic of the element and the form of T'ai Chi Ch'üan became externally visible. The T'ai Chi Ch'üan form was in this case a sort of

flexible structure, a modifiable path where the element was running powerfully, sometimes breaking the pattern in order to follow its own instinctive needs of expression and coming back to the rails of the form every now and then in order to canalize its creative energy along the channel of a known movement.

In both cases I felt that the aspects of self-expression and inner awareness were present at the same time: the action was developing along the borderline between performance and meditation.

This topic became crucial when we proceeded towards the performance.

Creative interactions



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

During the second week of the workshop, Eerika and I shared the leadership with the whole group: everyone had the possibility to suggest an exercise which could offer the ground for creative interactions between the matters we had been studying in the previous days. Even though the interactions already happened as a spontaneous consequence of the parallel practice of each discipline, now we wanted to directly encourage dialogue. Some of those exercises became the starting points of the following performance. The creativity of the group exploded in a variety of stimulating tasks, moving on the border line between performing and meditative improvisations. Each exercise was briefly described on a piece of paper, which we put into a container. Every day we randomly chose one or two of them, and we practiced without limits of time, until we felt the exploration was exhaustive.

Ch'i Kung dance:

- Do the Ch'i Kung breathing technique

- Practise your dance choreography maintaining the concentration on the Ch'i Kung breathing technique

Creation of five elements:

- Divide into groups of 2 or 3. Choose an element
- Feel the element within you and in your group
- Perform the elemental creation: WATER nourishes WOOD feeds FIRE creates EARTH ages into METAL condenses into WATER, ...

T'ai Chi mimic:

- Do the mimic of one element of your choice
- Practise the T'ai Chi, maintaining in your body the quality of your element

Back to back:

- Sit or stand with your partner back to back
- Listen and sense your own and your partner's breathing. Sense the temperature
- Feel the movement that comes from the breath. You may follow if some movement appears. Don't try to lead it, just follow
- Find an ending together

180° scanning:

- You are standing. Turn your head very slowly from left to right side
- Watch and become aware of everything around you
- Imagine how it feels to be the objects you see

Floor, skin, air:

- Lie down on the floor
- Feel your skin touching the floor
- Let your skin open up and breathe in touch with the floor. You can breathe wonderfully lightly through your skin
- Start moving, sensing your open skin on the floor
- Let the movement and the skin lead you to dance freely

T'ai Chi composition:

- Listen to your breath
- Let the breath take you to movement
- Start to add movements from T'ai Chi into your movement
- Gradually add more and more T'ai Chi until you end up doing the whole combination. Try to be in sync with the others

The *Moving the Silence* workshop opened up so many possibilities of interaction between T'ai Chi, meditation and expressive movement, that it looked like an infinite process. Exploring ever new interactions could widen the research on silence too much in a quantitative way. Maybe the exercises we developed could be the beginning of the construction of a method, or maybe the starting point for new workshops. But I wanted to understand the meaning of our work: since I began to believe that meditation and performing arts are not in conflict, could I not research more deeply in that direction? When do performance and meditation meet each other and when do they not cooperate any longer? I decided that the boundaries between performance and meditation would be my new research line throughout the construction of the performance.

Performance

At the end of the first week of the *Moving the Silence* workshop we planned an open discussion, giving the possibility to all the participants to share their own experiences. I was expecting to hear a lot of questions, doubts or some frustration but I discovered that we were all remarkably attuned, there were no questions, just peace and the desire to continue. The silence had somehow helped everyone to find a personal inner motivation and answers to many questions. Many participants experienced a change in their lives, a shift towards a deeper inner calmness, a need for silence. Many beginners in meditation had conquered the initial difficulties in the morning silent meditation without the need of any external help: time, silence and repetition day by day had awakened their own inner source of determination and peace.

At the end of the two-week workshop, the participants shared that the working atmosphere was free of any form of ‘oppressive’ power: they felt free to be themselves and to research in peace and concentration.

Some external students of Theatre Academy began to join our morning meditations every now and then (we decided to open them to the whole school) and they observed that the room was full of peace and creative energy and that the free silent meditation was already an interesting performance, where everyone was extremely focused even though we were practising different techniques at the same time.



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

Rehearsals

Immediately after the two weeks of workshop, we started to rehearse the performance with those participants who wished to continue the experience of silence with us. Five of them joined in: Tanja, Harri, Jyri, Joni and Katerina. We maintained the shape of ‘artistic-spiritual retreat’ and we further developed the material of the workshop, rehearsing five hours a day, in silence, with the possibility of sharing some feedbacks verbally during the last hour of Fridays. On all the other days, we ended with periods of silent sharing.

The central question of our work focused on the exploration of the boundaries between meditation and performance.

During the first rehearsal-week Eerika and I stepped back into the role of teachers, in order to introduce some new topics such as the mimic of animals and new movement patterns. Then we re-opened the group to a creative process, asking the participants to contribute with their own ideas, proposing directions of work.

Rev. Henri visited our rehearsals every now and then, and we decided that his role in the performance would be to introduce the audience into the space giving them some tools to enter at once into a meditative attitude. He would then be in charge of making an Ikebana-composition during the event.

A new entry in the production was Tero, the musician who was to ‘play the silence’. He had already participated in some of our meditation sessions and he had already been a practitioner of Buddhist mantra-meditation himself for many years: he embraced our project with enthusiasm and artistic sensitivity. He came once a week to try out some delicate sounds to be carefully used on the main soundtrack of the silence.

We had as yet no idea of what the performance would look like. We decided not to fix any definitive structure yet, but to try out many possibilities, sharing the responsibility with the whole group. I proposed the first structure; the following day it was Eerika’s turn, then Joni, one of the participants, wrote the third structure for the next day. But already at the end of Eerika’s experiment, before Joni could present his own structure to the group, Eerika and I felt that our work was running too far from the topics we had been working on in the previous weeks: as in the second week of the workshop, the risk was again that of working on the surface inventing

infinite new possibilities. We realized that the group was starting to feel lost: it was difficult to maintain a meditative attitude while rehearsing a new performance every day and we all began to ‘show’. We decided to define a precise structure containing the main topics we had been working on, in order to make the whole group feel safe in a more canalized direction.

Before Joni could propose his structure, Eerika and I announced our decision: we broke the silence saying that, after Joni’s structure, we would not work with other new propositions, since we wanted to create a basic structure which could allow the group to work ever more deeply, without wasting our energies in searching for new creative directions, relying on the evidence that we had already plenty of material to deal with.

We said this before Joni’s turn, in order to avoid him believing that our change of direction was determined by his own ‘bad’ proposal. As he shared later, on the contrary he felt that we announced the news at the wrong moment, since his task was diminished of its potential. But, most of all, we felt that we had been moved to react by the fear of being lost and we stepped back, avoiding the other participants thinking of and offering other possible structures. Anyway it was still true that we had not time enough to allow the creative explorations to dissipate our energies in any direction.

Christmas time gave us a pause to rethink our strategy.

After the Christmas holidays we re-opened the possibility of modifying the basic structure, trying at the same time not to go too far from the main direction. The group suggested some variations, working more and more on little details, until we could define the exact sequence of the event.

One peculiarity of the event was to be that every evening we would exchange our roles, in order not to develop preferences. Before each performance we would practice one hour of meditation and the performance would start immediately after, with ten minutes more of meditation together with the audience. The audience would be free to choose whether to continue to meditate for the whole event or to watch the performance.

Master silence

There is silence, a silence which is not an absence of sound but which is the object of a positive sensation, more positive than that of sound. Noises, if there are any, only reach me after crossing this silence.
(Simone Weil)⁷⁹

More and more seldom, during our rehearsals I still sometimes broke the silence with a few words in order to introduce some new concept. I began to feel guilty at ruining such a holy space and soon Eerika and I started to write any instructions on a piece of paper, realizing often that the words we were going to say were not necessary at all, and sharing the paper with the group only in the rare case that it was really needed.

The working atmosphere became definitively so open that everybody was trained to accept any interruption or accident as a natural component of the silence: the flow of concentration and awareness was less and less disturbed even when people came late or some observer came to visit the rehearsals. Silence had trained us to develop a meditative attitude throughout our meetings. Even breaks and lunch-pauses were part of the meditation. Even the sounds of the school's students shouting in the corridor or in the other rooms were welcomed with love. The apex of environmental disturbances happened one day when we had to rehearse close to a room where another group was rehearsing a performance with disco-music. The speakers were against our wall and we started the one-hour meditation with this very loud soundtrack. I felt that was a limit-situation: the whole meditation and the following run-through could easily be ruined if we could not focus. But nobody opened the eyes, nobody moved; we started to accept the vibrations of the speakers on the floor as part of our meditation. After one hour we were extremely focused. Eerika arrived late with her two-year-old son: the little boy began to run curiously around us and to interact with the performance. I felt that he too was part of the event and we all could work happily and relaxed: silence was inside of us!

Silence became more and more the only facilitator; we were all teachers, pupils and matter at the same time of a process of self-knowledge and group-sharing.

⁷⁹ Weil, S. *Waiting for God*. Harper & Row. New York, 1951, p. 71

An interesting accident happened some weeks before our première, one Saturday that Eerika could not come to the rehearsals.

We had developed a new little variation on the basic structure to be tried out. I gave the paper with the new instructions to the group and, after they had read it, we did a run-through: one hour of meditation plus one hour of performance, following the new rules. Joni had to gently approach another performer of his choice during an exercise of weight-shifting. The other performer would have to mime fire and then each performer would start following the same task, till the whole group would 'become' fire. Unfortunately the other performer did not understand the new rule and nobody started to mime fire. Finally I solved the situation by miming fire myself and the run-through reached its conclusion successfully. Later on, I found interesting the tension caused by such misunderstandings and I have learnt to accept those accidents as privileged opportunities for waiting and listening. But in that situation I was mostly worried that the group did not interpret the instructions correctly. So, after our run-through, I used our moment of silent sharing to show on paper, with a simple gesture, the point of the basic structure where the accident had happened and I made the sign to rehearse the same part again after the lunch break. Here is the description of my educational mistake, in the words of Joni:

On Saturday 19th of January I was taking part in the *Moving the Silence* rehearsals at Teak. There was a new structure to the performance and it was a bit more complicated than before. Everybody was supposed to study the structure beforehand and keep in mind the structure: the length of each particular element and the right order of elements. All went well until the so-called gentle contact impro which I rushed into. Besides that, the person I was in contact with didn't stay in weight shifting position as it was planned. And even more he didn't mime fire as he was supposed to do. That led to totally unplanned fire improvisation among all the participants. At the end of the performance there was a sense of failure to be explored. The hands-on decision by the pedagogical leader was to point out the mistakes and encourage us all to try the failed part again. He did that in a quite neutral way. But as we are all humans there can be a day when just a little notion of failure can lead to a big disappointment. I was feeling very fragile that day and after the first run through during the lunch break I was seriously wondering whether I could give it a better shot anymore.⁸⁰

As soon as I was pointing at the paper where the basic structure of the performance was written, I felt that I was hurting the sensitivity of my group. I wanted to indicate the part of the structure which had been misunderstood, worried that the others did not understand it correctly, and I

⁸⁰ Feedback by Joni, performer in *Moving the Silence*

suggested with a gesture that we try that part again after the lunch break. I was again trying to control the process, pointing out mistakes in order to make it improve according to my plans. When I realized it, it was too late: in silence a single little gesture is as powerful as an earth tremor. I felt I had cut the enthusiasm of the group, diminishing the two hours of work that they marvelously did just before. Was it not a success in the end that the group could face and solve the accidents in the rehearsal in real time, following their intuitions? Was it a real problem if someone did not exactly understand what was written on the paper? In the very end, was it not clear that the real value of our work did not rely on what we were supposed to do, but in how we were doing it? The silent lunch-pause worked as a healer: I had time to deal with the discomfort caused by my pedagogical mistake and I realized that there was a way out, in order to give back freedom and possibly re-awaken the joy of my fellows: accepting my mistake, forgiving myself and giving back the responsibility of the command to the whole group. I wrote on the top of a paper: “*how do you feel today?*”. And below, I gave four options: rehearsing the part of the fire-impro; doing a new run-through of the whole basic structure; having a T’ai Chi Ch’üan session; having a relaxing massage-session in pairs. The group voted unanimously for the run-through. I saw them smiling again.

But during the lunch break I had a sense of the pedagogical leader wondering whether he was a little too harsh on us. Before the second run through he handed us four different options to continue. And above the options was written “How are you feeling today?” That was a big relief for me to have options to choose from. It wasn’t this feeling that we failed and the leader really just wants to make it happen in a certain way. It felt like it was totally a performance influenced by us all equally again. And it felt good! And the question about how we are feeling made me feel less anxious or afraid of the outcome. There was this feeling of freedom and acceptance which made the second run through a success. At least that was my feeling about it. I really wanted to give it a try because I was not told to do so but there was a possibility of doing it. I just feel that the difference between teacher and facilitator might lie here in not having the authority but more showing the way(s) to go. The facilitator is also interested in creating the right atmosphere for everyone to flourish.⁸¹

I began to trust silence as the closest of my friends, as a master whispering wise suggestions: the solution always came out of us whenever we opened our attention with faith. As the Brazilian pedagogue Paulo Freire (1921-1997) wrote, faith is “*an a priori requirement for dialogue*”⁸²,

⁸¹ Ibid.

⁸² Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. The Continuum International Publishing Group. New York, 2006, p. 90

together with love, humility and, as a natural consequence, trust⁸³. By means of an increasing feeling of faith in the pedagogical potential of silence, an intense dialogical process started to happen within and among us, facilitating a working atmosphere of mutual trust.

Silence taught us the power of waiting: waiting in stillness, waiting by going on with the same task for a long period, patiently working through the initial sense of boredom, frustration or exhaustion, repeating the same exercises for many days, without notable changes, working through a feeling of being lost or wasting energies in wrong directions, accepting mistakes and failures as temporary and relative components of a process whose destiny cannot be other than success.

⁸³ Ibid. p. 91

Basic structure

The basic structure of the performance included long moments of stillness and silent meditation, mimic explorations of air, water, earth and stone, an exercise of movement based on a mental visualization of a tree, weight shifting combined with a Ch'i Kung breathing technique, T'ai Chi Ch'üan interacting with the mimic expression of the previously mentioned elements, a mimic improvisation with the fire element and a final form of T'ai Chi Ch'üan which we performed all together. Throughout this, an Ikebana composition would be created by Rev. Henri and our guest friend Gesa Piper would be meditating in the lotus posture for the whole event.

The space would be flat, with no separation between performers and audience, the sitting places would be meditation cushions arranged in two concentric ellipses; in the center, a wide empty space for the main actions.

The following list contains the final instructions of our basic structure, developed in silence within three months of rehearsals.

- *Meditation:* 60 minutes before the performance plus ten minutes with the audience.
- *Tree impro:* when the meditation time is ended, two performers will take their own time to be clear about the feeling coming from the image of a tree. Without any rush, when they feel ready, they will start the movement in super-slowness, moving at first only one single part of the body (hand, finger,...) and little by little involving the rest of the body. Trees grow slowly. Let's give every spectator a chance to see where the movement develops from. The individual work is even more important than the following work in pairs: the time for the individual tree-impro could be longer, while the contact with the partner may last a bit less: it is just the tip of the iceberg. When the meditation time is ended all the other performers are free to watch the tree-impro and to have eye contact with the audience. But let's try never to relax our meditative attitude. One possible suggestion could be to keep the focus on the area of our heart and from there mentally spread love towards the audience and our group.
- *Mimic:* when the tree-performers touch each other, the rest of the group will still wait in stillness for one minute in order to respect the encounter. Each performer will have a blanket on her/his shoulders and a metal-bowl containing one element of nature at her/his feet.

After a while, they will take away the blankets from their shoulders and will grasp the bowls as working men do daily. Until that moment, some possible eye contact with the audience is still welcome. But then our focus will go to the elements and the sensations emerging. The mimic could start extremely slowly. Be faithful to your element. When the two tree-performers become still, the rest of the group will explode into a very expanded mimic. They will finally end together going to stillness.

- *Weight shifting*: after a good period of stillness, the whole group will start a very small weight shifting, focusing on the Ch'i Kung breathing technique.
- *Gentle encountering solo*: after a good period of stillness, one performer will join another one and will find a gentle way to be in contact-attunement with that person. Very little is enough, one or two things. Do not act but follow your intuition.
- *T'ai Chi Ch'üan mimic*: the group will practise the T'ai Chi Ch'üan form, each playing with the quality of her/his own element.
- *Fire*: the one performer who has been reached during the gentle encountering solo will continue the weight shifting and at a certain moment will begin the mimic of the fire, moving around the others. When the fire spreads among us, let it influence the rhythm of your moving. Open yourself to others, audience included, dare to see and to be seen. Be yourself in the movement.
- *T'ai Chi Ch'üan*: after the fire, we will walk at normal speed and suddenly we will practise the T'ai Chi Ch'üan form in sync, as slow as possible.

How can meditation be a performance?

If it is right to advertise chewing gum, it is better to advertise real wisdom and thoughts which people can chew mentally, and assimilate for their highest spiritual nourishment. (Paramahansa Yogananda)⁸⁴

One day close to the première, I took the decision to step out of the rehearsals together with Eerika a few minutes before the run-through, in order to help the group not to rely on us, and to make the performance become their own meditative practice. For the first time in over three months I opened my eyes during the meditation. I saw the enchanting image of six persons perfectly still, with eyes closed in an attitude of concentration and ecstatic calmness. It was beautiful. Magic. My mind went back to the first day of our workshop in November, how worried I was: could they stand one hour of meditation? Among them, there were some who had never meditated before: how could they manage such a rigid discipline every morning from November till February? And now, here they are: a group of yogi-performers!

Beyond the surprise and my enthusiasm, I started to question whether it was correct to let the meditation be part of the performance; could it not be interpreted as an act of ‘showing’ what good meditators we are? That would mean ruining the spirit of meditation. This question forced me to go back to my primary motivation. What was the reason for all this work? Why did I start to research silence? Why did I want to make a performance of it?

As a pedagogue of art, I have felt in the last years the responsibility to help my pupils to explore and develop their own inner motivation. One of the main temptations of the impulsive type is to escape such questions: why am I seeking to become a professional in this field? What could my art give to me and what can I give to the world through my art? What is the highest goal I can reach through my discipline? I have observed that professional improvement does not necessarily correspond to improvement in human qualities and I believe that growing as an artist should go together with becoming a better person.

Now it was time to search for an answer for myself.

⁸⁴ Yogananda, P. *The second coming of Christ*. Amrita Foundation. Dallas, 1982

I began to reflect on the question of what point I had reached. Why did I want to mix meditation and performance? Was I mature enough to put myself as a meditator in the performance? How could I analyze myself?

I found help in an ancient Indian theory about the progressive steps for the spiritualization of the inner motivations moving human beings in life: the same theory that, misunderstood in the course of the ages, produced the rigid and inhuman system of the castes in Indian society⁸⁵. These were the questions I asked myself, by means of my personal and questionable reinterpretation of that old scheme.

The sensual motivation: I am the goal. How much was I willing to perform meditation because moved by the motor of my own narcissism? How much do I depend on others' opinions? In order to go beyond such a dependence, I usually point out, as a teacher, that a better self-discipline will lead towards a stronger self-esteem. I encourage actions which could project 'outwards' the ego-centered and 'inwards'-directed attitude of the 'sensual' motivation: creating a stimulating artistic project, for example, may awaken the curiosity for research and may stimulate the cooperation with other possible partners. Even though the whole process was already oriented towards research and empowerment of self-discipline, could not I find in myself any seed of sensual motivation?

The active motivation: art is the goal. To what extent was I looking for personal profit? Am I looking for selfish success or power? Am I looking for people who could share my path? Am I living for my art, identifying myself as an artist and feeling somehow 'different' from the rest of the world? I would need in this case to rediscover links between my own art and the everyday life, in order to become aware of the "*events and scenes that hold the attentive eye and ear of man, arousing his interest and affording him enjoyment as he looks and listens*"⁸⁶: wonder, humbleness and respect are positive attitudes balancing the passionate temperament generated by an 'active' motivation. How could I remain humble but enthusiastic at the same time? Was I not proud of my work? Was I emotionally too attached to it?

The warrior motivation: art is the means. Do I perceive art as a mirror of life? Am I using it to discover and fight against personal

⁸⁵ See: Kriyananda. *L'essenza della Bhagavadgita*. Ananda Edizioni. Roma, 2007

⁸⁶ Dewey, J. *Art as experience*. Penguin Group. New York, 2005, pp. 4-5

limitations and to grow as a human being among other human beings? Is art for me a means of Self-realization?

The spiritual motivation: I am the means. Could I say that I, meditation and art are one? Is art for me an instrument of inspiration and love? Do I want to give myself to the world and life without any egoistic expectation? This could be the motivation of a genuine master, who has intimately realized that there is no difference between the artistic moment and everyday life, since life is the supreme art: that is, maybe, the sole motor behind the concept of ‘artless’ art mentioned in the Zen tradition⁸⁷.

I actually could find in me components of all the first three motivations in varying amounts, in particular the third one: I felt it described quite well the phase of the process in which for the most part I was. I recognized in myself both egoistic and unselfish motivations, according to the thoughts I allowed to develop out of fear or love. They were often mixed together.

Sometimes I make and teach art in order to have partners in my search for fulfilment and happiness. I have a fear of being alone and I feel encouraged when I can share my path with someone else. In other moments I have the urge to transmit the human knowledge that I am carrying in me. As an artist-pedagogue, I perceive myself as the link between the past tradition and the new generations. In other situations I am striving to help my pupils or my audience to discover their own inner creative sources: I want them to become opened, free, aware. But my strongest motivation is the joy of searching. Expanding the artistic and human potential of my students or inspiring my audience offering them an opportunity to mature a true meditative experience is a way to open them, and me with them, to a deeper perception of reality.

The fourth motivation was somehow still potential: I would like to say that I am moved by pure love and that I am moved by my mature realization of cosmic unity, but that is at the moment my potential goal. Hopefully I am on my way.

But was not the direction of our efforts in the end more important than our actual results? It was not my intention to ‘show’ or to ‘entertain’ anyone. If performance means to ‘entertain’, certainly that is not the place

⁸⁷ Herrigel, E. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Penguin Books. London, 2004, p. 30

for the practice of ‘active’ silence. But is performance only that? Could it not be for example an opportunity for ‘sharing’ an experience?

If my experience with silence had been so intense and transforming, why should I not wish to share it with other people? I could not avoid some member of our audience condemning the presence of meditation as an act of exhibitionism or as a boring provocation. I could not even guarantee that my own narcissism would already be completely vanishing, but was it so fundamental to be perfect? I think that meditation should not be confused with its goal. We were not pretending to be enlightened saints, offering ecstatic experiences to the audience: we would just be there meditating, as human beings in front of other human beings and maybe, why not, together with them.

How can a performance be meditation?

*In your silence, God's silence ceases.
(Paramahansa Yogananda)⁸⁸*

The last run-through before the première was open to the audience. For the first time there was a huge number of spectators and I felt I could not keep my attention focused on the inner processes of the meditation throughout the performance. When the audience came in, after the first hour of meditation, my heart began to beat faster and a part of me was sensing all the reactions of the people around me. It was a struggle. Fortunately, the structure of the event was so meditation-oriented as to recall my attention back to my inner work many and many times. At the end of the run-through I felt tired and I could recognise the same kind of doubts on the faces of my fellows: could it be that it is impossible to meditate, in the presence of spectators? Cannot we definitively learn not to be afraid of others' judgements or dependent on others' expectations?



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

Then we looked at the audience. Some of them did not move from their sitting places and remained with their eyes closed. One woman had

⁸⁸ Yogananda, P. *Nel santuario dell'anima*. Astrolabio. Roma, 2004, p. 49

tears in her eyes: she shared later that she felt a healing process happening in herself during the performance and some deep trouble of hers melted into peace: this was the first of a long series of similar sharing that we have collected after each performance. Here below is a short quotation from an article published on the web, talking about our performance, which describes the process from the point of view of one spectator.

But is there a place for judgment, estimation, or interpretation when the meditation is brought to the stage? And how does the spectator's experience change if he stays non-judging, non-estimating and non-interpreting?

The brightly lighted lotus-ikebana is truly captivating. The performance is over now and I have none inner impulse to leave this space but a strong one to stay witnessing. Still body, non-judging mind. I recognize my kinesthetic response to this space – space full of silence.⁸⁹

We realized that the audience was not actually looking at us: many people were witnessing our actions, dealing with their own inner processes, just as we were doing. I felt great relief: we were not responsible for the success of the meditation of the audience; we had to leave it in the hands of the spectators.

On the day of the première I no longer had anxiety. When the audience came in, I was so focused in my meditation that I did not experience any remarkable change in my inner peaceful attitude. The sole variation was that it felt easy to spread my love all around me, towards our 'guests'.

Of course, I cannot force myself to love, if I intend love merely as an emotion. But love is not just feeling: it requires will. Love is an inner attitude which may be trained in order to become a stable habit, it is "*an act of courage*"⁹⁰, as Paulo Freire wrote, and "*commitment to the others*"⁹¹: in the case of our performance, that meant for me to welcome the audience in the silence of my heart, in an attitude of acceptance of every single spectator as a special person, taking the risk and the commitment towards them of being just myself, without acting for the whole duration of the event, remaining faithful to my tasks. An inner silent dialogue between me and the

⁸⁹ Prokhorova, M. *Moving the Silence: the most silent performance in the busiest time*. <http://www.liikekieli.com/archives/5671>

⁹⁰ Freire, P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. The Continuum International Publishing Group. New York, 2006, p. 89

⁹¹ Ibid.

others was aroused without use of any mental word, in the simple terms of being present with them, sharing the same silent space. As Freire said:

Love is at the same time foundation of the dialogue and dialogue itself⁹².

I started to enjoy the new situation of shared silence. Day by day, I was able to deepen the interaction between my creative expressivity and meditation, keeping my attention focused on my inner processes and letting the movements happen freely.

Some feedbacks from the audience underlined the importance of such events in contemporary society, describing the performance as a beautiful and ‘holy’ space where people could just be, free from any definition. Even though in the *Moving the Silence* performance we put on the stage our own specific spiritual practices, the artistic event was free of any religious connotation. Differently from churches, synagogues or meditation centres of several traditions, our space was not selecting people in terms of beliefs and religion, since it was a place for art, but still it maintained a declared meditative purpose.

The renowned Catholic theologian Romano Guardini (1885-1968) defines a ‘holy’ place as “*a space denied to any profane use and consecrated to the religious cult*”⁹³: Guardini wrote that “*a place becomes holy just if God consecrates it, and that happens when God enters into it*”⁹⁴, reminding the reader that of course Christians believe that God is omnipresent, but there are places where God is present in a “*new and particular way*”, which are “*separated from the purposes of everyday life*”⁹⁵.

I think that the stage of our performance became ‘holy’, to the degree that it opened us to an honest attitude of introspection, to the wonder of witnessing, and to the ‘religious cult’ of worshipping the presence of the ‘God within us’: our own deep essence. For example, many spectators shared that they had an opportunity to reflect about their own inner silence or about the place that silence had in their own life. Some others were able to face their automatic tendency to judge and could train the counterbalancing attitude of witnessing.

⁹² Ibid.

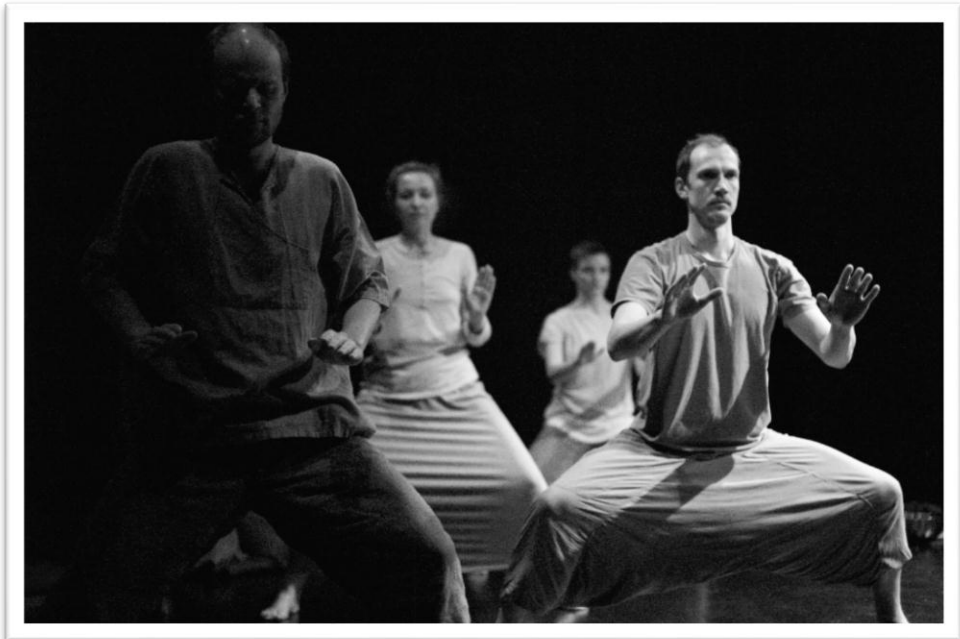
⁹³ Guardini, R. *Il testamento di Gesù*. Vita e Pensiero. Milano, 2005, p. 54, my translation.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ Ibid. p. 55

The most recurrent words in the feedbacks of the spectators were:

- Being
- Beauty/beautiful
- Peace/calmness
- Holy
- Inner silence



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

The structure of the event proved to be rich in symbols, which I could not even imagine before. For example, the two polarities Yin and Yang came out from the presence of Rev.Henri and Gesa, disposed on the two opposite sides of the room: one man working with water, scissors and flowers and a woman meditating with her eyes closed, in perfect stillness. Action and peace, daily life and spiritual search: they were harmonically mirroring each other.

Entering the space, some people felt that we were isolated, separate beings in the same place, and the whole performance was a slow process of mutual attunement until we could move in sync performing the T'ai Chi

Ch'üan: the ending represented our perfect attunement, transforming our own individual meditation into a shared meditation. Other spectators could discover uplifting messages of hope, recalling human beings to their own noblest ideals. The following quotation is another fascinating interpretation in the words of a spectator.

Beautiful and strong, also a holy experience. It made me think of all the monasteries, meditation places, temples, people who meditate together or alone as a net of silent oases around the world that actually keep this crazy world together and prevent it from falling apart.⁹⁶

Personally, during the performances I experienced the same kind of challenges that I face in meditation, such as restless thoughts and emotions coming and going, and the same processes/effects, such as concentration, expansion of a sense of inner peace, awareness, vitality. The slow rhythm of the performance and the silent atmosphere allowed us to spend a long time in each phase of the structure in waiting and listening. On many occasions I had the feeling that things were happening by themselves just at the right moment and surprisingly they were different every time.

The performance resonated in tune with the different backgrounds of the spectators, allowing them to grasp new meanings and links with their own professional or spiritual interests. Some of them were glad to have the challenging opportunity not to analyze, but just to be there. Some others spontaneously wanted to write their own feedbacks and in many cases I had the impression of reading the descriptions of many different performances. For example, here below I quote two feedbacks, describing the performance.

The first one clearly reflects the professional-dancer background of the spectator.

Gradually and slowly like a flower blossom two of the performers move out of the blankets. Eyes closed, movements abstract and formless still not chaotic. The two happen to meet each other and remarkably the duet does not get captured into a movement flow common to contact improvisation technique. It simply keeps the two aware and curious about each other.

As gradual and slow other performers come out of still meditation. And after a while with all my knowledge and experience in Authentic Movement, an expressive improvisational movement practice, I find myself witnessing its session happening as a performance. I witness the participants sensing their inner body-mind processes, recognizing their intuitive impulses and following them expressing movement. Nothing is

⁹⁶ Feedback by a spectator of *Moving the Silence*

directed nor predicted to them. And as an essential part of Authentic Movement practices the movers are passively observed – observed by us, the audience of the performance.⁹⁷

The second feedback was written by a spectator with a Christian religious background.

I heard the murmur of the water. The meditator sitting close to me seemed to be rinsing his hands in the bowl in front of him, dropped his cloak and began to open himself. I do not know if he was washing away some stain from his past but as he rose up gently he was more and more light and was moving with firm and light steps, with ability and control, raising his arms and legs. In the end all the meditators had risen up and were moving alone, without looking at each other. I thought they were together but alone. It made me sad.

When all the meditators had ‘opened up from their shells’ and had danced, each on his own place, now light without their own burden, the dance became happier and they danced in a circle, together, happier and happier. They smiled at each other mildly and looked happy together and their faces were shining. ‘Alone together’ became ‘all together’. Only one meditator sat during the whole performance still on her place with a calm face. Maybe the cup of her prayers had not yet been filled enough for the purification.⁹⁸

I suppose that this variety of interpretations has been possible because of the simplicity of the structure of our performance. While building the sequence of our actions, we attempted to apply the basic principle of the Ikebana, the Japanese art of arranging flowers: taking away all the unnecessary and keeping only the few elements which gave harmony. We attempted to never push the action and we tried to let it happen, listening to the same silence together with the audience. The ten minutes of silent meditation with the audience, at the beginning, and the long period of standing meditation during the weight shifting, halfway through the performance, were in this sense very important moments to restore our capacity of listening. There were no sounds, no entertaining movements.

We took the risk of breaking the rhythm generated by the flow of the movements. But we never interrupted the inner flow of meditation. I believe that especially these two moments allowed our performance to become a meditation: both the performers and the audience had the opportunity to go back into themselves. As performers, I think we were able to use those periods to root ourselves in meditation, and to maintain a meditative attitude during the phases of movement. In other words, I believe that our

⁹⁷ Prokhorova, M. *Moving the Silence: the most silent performance in the busiest time*.
<http://www.liikekieli.com/archives/5671>

⁹⁸ Feedback by a spectator of *Moving the Silence*, my translation

performance could become a meditation because we were not performing meditation, but we were meditating while performing. The performance was like a ritual, a prayer without words.

Silence pedagogy

The delicate passages from the first to the second week of the *Moving the Silence* workshop and then from the workshop to the rehearsals of the performance represented for me and Eerika the gradual shift from the role of teacher to the role of facilitator. As a teacher, I found myself working both as an instructor and as an educator. As a facilitator, I began by actively offering opportunities to our group for developing experiences and I ended up passively tasting the experiences of our work as a group, my role as a facilitator having vanished in the process.



Moving the Silence – photo by Miso Macura

In this chapter I will report some reflections about my pedagogical approaches during the process of the workshop and of the rehearsals of the *Moving the Silence* performance. Many of these concepts have been familiar topics to me throughout the two years of pedagogical studies in the Theatre Academy of Helsinki. Working in silence has helped me to attain a sense of

order, comparing the contemporary theories of pedagogy with my own spiritual needs and background. In silence, every gesture and inner impulse were magnified, allowing me to become aware even of the smallest pattern rooted in me: as a consequence of this process of self-analysis, as a pedagogue, I could recognize the main characteristics of my own style.

Teaching

The presence of T'ai Chi Ch'üan and Orazio Costa's mimic method in the same workshop made me become aware that I change teaching approach according to the subject I am dealing with. Silence magnified this process since I could not smoothly pass from one discipline to the other accompanying the participants by means of intellectual arguments to connect the two practices together. Silence made it clear that, as a teacher, I was in the challenging position of covering the roles of both instructor and educator, shifting alternately from one extreme to the other. In the case of the T'ai Chi Ch'üan, I had to transmit my skills and knowledge 'externally' to my pupils by means of my example (*to instruct*, from the Latin *instruere*: to build, to shape, and also to inform). In the case of the mimic method my task was to facilitate a process of awakening of their own creative and original sources, from the 'inside' (*to educate*, from the Latin *ex-ducere*: to lead out). Here I found a clear parallel with the pedagogical definitions of 'executive' and 'therapeutic' approaches to teaching: I am an 'executive' teacher when my work is finalized to the transmission of a specific skill to the pupil; I have a 'therapeutic' approach whenever I encourage the pupil's self-expression⁹⁹.

This has been a great opportunity to reflect about the different purposes of methods in the pedagogy of art, and to reason about the distinction between techniques and methods.

The techniques are, in my opinion, exercises directed to the development of the 'athletic' potential of the artist. In order to build an efficient channel to transmit the creative energy, the artist needs a daily discipline: all those exercises expanding and strengthening the performing possibilities of the artist's instrument, such as body and voice training for actors or basic postures and steps in martial arts, belong to my idea of 'technique'. In this case, the goal of my teaching is a precise result, to be conquered step by step: it takes time to learn a correct posture or a breathing technique and then to transform it into a rooted habit.

The path that I walk in order to learn a technique is what I define as an 'instructive' method.

⁹⁹ Fenstremacher, G. D. & Soltis, J. F. *Approaches to teaching*. Teachers College Press. New York, 1998, p. 1-4

Methods finalized to the mere learning of a technique require a behaviouristic approach: there is right and wrong, even though they are relative to the level of each pupil, and technique itself is a behaviour to be acquired¹⁰⁰. According to the theory of the specific functions of the two hemispheres of the brain, I would guess that learning a technique is an operation mainly led by the left side of the brain, since it requires, especially at the beginning, rational understanding, conscious control, focused concentration¹⁰¹. I often compare the training technique to the first step in Zen archery: the simple action of grasping the bow¹⁰². The pupils learn how to handle their own instruments. In the case of a performer, the first focus of awareness will be her/his own individual expressive tool: the body-voice ensemble. It is interesting to notice the parallel with the first level of ability to be attained in the practice of the T'ai Chi Ch'üan. The Taoist philosophy names it 'Ching' (精), the 'external ability' level: when, after a long training, the technical level is good, the structure is ready¹⁰³. Nevertheless, a technical execution is not enough. Feelings, emotions and creative energy are not yet running freely.

But methods may have even wider purposes than the mere training of techniques: in these cases techniques, if there are any, are functional to the purpose of the method. Such methods are not 'instructive'; rather I would define them as 'educative'.

'Educative' methods are paths composed of ordered steps designed to stimulate the 'creative' potential of the artist. Whenever I help my pupils to discover and liberate their own creative energy, my approach is constructivist: I leave space to the pupils for personal choices and reflections¹⁰⁴. I usually offer a structure of action and I leave the artist free to work and explore. There is no right or wrong, even though I could identify a positive goal: the conquest of a state of freedom, joy and openness. An 'educative' method relies on the thought that we have solutions inside us: we all have an inner source of energy ready to be

¹⁰⁰ See: Phillips D.C. & Soltis J.F. *Perspectives on learning*. Teachers College Press. New York, 2004

¹⁰¹ Edwards, B. *Disegnare ascoltando l'artista che è in noi*. Longanesi. Gravellona Toce, 2011, p. 60

¹⁰² See: Herrigel E. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Penguin Books. London, 2004

¹⁰³ Chang D. Y. & Fassi, R. *Corso di T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi. Prato, 2008, p. 34

¹⁰⁴ See: Phillips D.C. & Soltis J.F. *Perspectives on learning*. Teachers College Press. New York, 2004

discovered and opened. I think that in this case the learning process is mainly led by the right side of the brain, since the rational mind has to be set aside throughout the exercitations: imagination and intuition, together with the emotions, especially at the beginning need to work in the absence of intellectual judgments¹⁰⁵. The main skills that I am training with these methods are awareness, listening, opened attention and free expressivity. In Zen archery this could be the step of shooting the arrow¹⁰⁶: the artist's expressivity may be projected outwards because the connection with her/his own inner reality has become stronger and operates as a source of power. Attention is not focused on coordination-control aspects as in the technique-training, but it is peacefully witnessing the changes of feelings and moods, allowing them to emerge spontaneously. The artist may feel relaxed independently of the speed or intensity of the action, with an enjoyable sensation of freedom. In T'ai Chi Ch'üan practice this is named the 'Ch'I' (氣) step, the level of 'internal energy', strictly related to the liberation of the energy of breathing¹⁰⁷.

Our experience with silence reinforced my belief in a balanced cooperation between 'instructive' and 'educative' methods, stimulating a prolific interaction between left and right brain faculties. In music, for example, the left side of the brain takes care of rhythm and notes, while the right side works on the interpretation and expressivity¹⁰⁸. It is necessary to build an effective channel in order to transmit the creative energy. But I should never forget to leave my pupils free to discover and expand their imaginative potential in parallel with a work of discipline. The limits of a technical training are to produce a perfect, skilled but cold artist, while a too free impro-based training will liberate the inner passion of the artist at the cost of a considerable waste of uncontrolled energy, weakening the power of the performance.

Already at the end of the first week of the *Moving the Silence* workshop, T'ai Chi Ch'üan and the mimic method arrived at the point where they could spontaneously interact, helping each other: the qualities of the elements explored with mimic became a glue allowing the T'ai Chi

¹⁰⁵ See: Edwards, B. *Il nuovo Disegnare con la parte destra del cervello*. Longanesi. Gravellona Toce, 2011

¹⁰⁶ See: Herrigel E. *Zen in the Art of Archery*. Penguin Books. London, 2004

¹⁰⁷ Chang D. Y. & Fassi, R. *Corso di T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi. Prato, 2008, p. 34

¹⁰⁸ Edwards, B. *Il nuovo Disegnare con la parte destra del cervello*. Longanesi. Gravellona Toce, 2011, p. 23

Ch'üan to be fluid, personal and full of creative energy; on the other hand the structure of the T'ai Chi Ch'üan form was working as a rail giving a powerful direction to the movements without uncontrolled dissipation of energy.

Facilitating

The moment arrived, when Eerika and I had to take the risk of stopping teaching, in order to let the group stand on their own two feet. We became facilitators: our task was now just to take care of the working atmosphere, making the group feel safe and free to explore. We were offering wide structures to help the research to develop into a creative and meditative flow, being careful not to impose any pre-selected goal. The group surprised us with an energetic response: in many moments of the rehearsals I had the impression that the process was completely out of our hands and it was expanding by itself. The whole group leapt into the unknown, beyond all the tools we had built previously. At this moment it became clear to me that art is not the mere product of methods and techniques. We all just began to listen to each other, letting our explorations happen on the rhythm of the silence. We had to create and recreate new paths, according to our sensitivity and interests, being rooted in the present moment. Art became intuition. Maybe, this could be compared to the third step in Zen archery, hitting the target: the performer learns to adapt every single moment of her/his action to the infinitely various changes in the surrounding environment. Her/his own body vibrates of power on the stage, even when she/he is not moving a single muscle. Taoist philosophy names this ‘Shen’ (神): the ‘spiritual and mental energy’ level, characterized in particular by an increase of ‘brightness’ in the eyes of the artist¹⁰⁹.

Eastern philosophies actually also mention a fourth step: the ‘emptiness’ or ‘egolessness’, named in Chinese ‘Hsü’(虚)¹¹⁰. Every now and then during the performance, it has happened that one of us felt that she/he was no longer moving, but somehow she/he was ‘moved’ by the movement. In Italy (and maybe in other countries too) there is an appealing expression to define this phenomenon: we say that the performer is ‘in a state of grace’. As in sports the athletes may experience moments of performing ‘apex’, the same may happen in the arts and in meditation as well. Unfortunately those moments are not under the control of the artist: they happen by accident. But I think that they may increase proportionally with the dedication of the artist in her/his own field. It is my conviction that

¹⁰⁹ Chang D. Y. & Fassi, R. *Corso di T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi. Prato, 2008, p. 68

¹¹⁰ *Ivi*, p. 73

these unexpected experiences were facilitated by our daily practice of active silence.

My role as a facilitator vanished in silence. I felt an increasing sense of unity with my group, and later with the audience: a sort of common empathic attunement due to the mutual sharing of an experience which was at the same time personal and collective. I reflected that a true experience is not the quantity of things I have done or tried, but the intensity of the awareness I have applied to an action, no matter whether it involves the body or just the mind. A true experience implies the search for a meaning and it increases our capacity to love¹¹¹.

Silence itself proved to be a platform suitable for generating true experiences, since it helped us to develop our capacity to listen first of all to ourselves. As a second step, I felt that this attitude of objective observation without pre-judgments gave me more clearness to judge the events of my life fairly in their own real value, without making absolutes of them, relating them to my ‘inner silence’: my own source of balance and wisdom.

If in the modern age the main qualities of a pedagogue were professional preparation, expository skill and intelligence¹¹², I was able to identify for myself a new goal, which I consider a peculiar need of this post-modern age: wisdom. Wisdom is in my opinion the skill to distinguish the good from the evil or, in a more post-modern perspective, the capacity to recognize uplifting directions and to avoid the degrading ones in order to become better persons, rather than exclusively efficient professionals. I think wisdom does not rely on personal talent or intelligence: it is related to the faculty of intuition, which is the fruit of a meditative attitude towards life experiences. The practice of ‘active’ silence may be a privileged soil for cultivating wisdom and intuition, since it is a marvellous starting point for a free, non-dogmatic, creative spiritual search.

I quote below a thought of Swami Kriyananda (1926-2013), direct disciple of Paramahansa Yogananda and founder of the Living Wisdom Schools, about the need for wisdom in contemporary pedagogy and the problems related to the promotion of this quality as an essential component in the ordinary scholastic system.

¹¹¹ Giussani, L. *Il rischio educativo*. Rizzoli. Bergamo, 2005. pp. 126-127

¹¹² See: Doll, W. E. *A Postmodern Perspective on Curriculum*. Teachers College Press. New York, 1993

If wisdom were appreciated, many more teachers would attempt to achieve it; the obstacle to its attainment is that wisdom itself is widely considered as something merely relative, subjective, and, from a scientific point of view, probably non-existent.¹¹³

At the beginning of my research I still tended to think of wisdom as something merely ‘mystical’ and, finally, disconnected from my concrete life. The experience of ‘active’ silence forced me to change my mind, by means of simple daily lessons of practical wisdom, such as the training of detached observation and attentive listening. For example, silence gave me the space to ‘metabolize’ my mistakes reducing the sense of failure to its real, relative position, diminishing my tendency to make failure an absolute and welcoming it as an opportunity for greater success.

I realized that at a certain moment I was tempted, as an extreme counter-reaction, to deny the existence of failure. Failure is often related to the frustration of a positive expectation: whenever I have a positive expectation, the fear of failure may come. I was thinking: if I have no expectations, I will never again experience failure. To a certain extent I still think it is true.

If the ego belongs to the ever changing world of phenomena, ruled by the law of cause and effect, the Self exists beyond relativity. Since failure is a relative passage in any educational path, I could say that it is experienced only by the ego: failure does not touch the Self. And since the Self is already in a condition of fulfilment, there can be no expectations in it. But, as Śaṅkara (789 CE, the most rigorous master of the non-dualistic Indian philosophy) teaches:

Before the awakening (*prabhoda*), we have to admit the reality of the world¹¹⁴.

By means of our daily training in silent objective self-observation, I arrived at admitting that, if it is true that our real essence is already free and at peace, most of the time we are not aware of this: we have to make the effort to awaken our awareness. How could we start this enterprise without at least the expectation that in the end it is possible to attain the supreme goal of Self-realization? The intuition that reality is not as it appears to be does not mean that reality is non-existent. And failure as well: maybe it is not real in an absolute sense, but it still exists in its own relative position.

¹¹³ Kriyananda. *La religione nella nuova era*. Ananda Edizioni. Roma, 2009, pp. 163-164. My own translation.

¹¹⁴ Piano, S. *Sanātana Dharma*. Edizioni San Paolo. Milano, 1996, p. 172, my translation

I finally began to reason in a practical way. Without a sense of failure, there would be no sense of risk. And without a sense of risk, there would be no challenges, no growth, no success. In silence I had the opportunity to let the uncomfortable feelings, derived from temporary falls in my pedagogical process, calm down. I had the space to operate a distinction between the real happenings and my own thoughts and emotions. It became clear that the problem in itself was never too big, the obstacles were never insuperable. Less and less I found myself thinking: I can't. My new 'mantra' became: not yet! As the guru and philosopher Paramahansa Yogananda used to say to encourage the seekers of all paths, with words close to the Christian tradition:

Saints are those sinners, who never gave up!¹¹⁵

Precisely success has been one of the feelings shining in the hearts of our group, at the end of our adventure, together with the humble awareness that this is just a small step towards the real fulfilment of the soul, as emerges for example from the feedback of one performer of our team:

Thank you for this unforgettable opportunity to work on something so essential and so relevant in our time. I believe, or know, it has changed my life and moved the silence within me. My practice has gotten much, much deeper and still I know this is just the beginning.¹¹⁶

Speaking now about my own personal experience, I feel able to affirm that the practice of 'active' silence has helped me to embrace risks with courage, with clearness for learning from mistakes, non-attachment towards the final result of my actions, developing at the same time a feeling of trust in the process and in the group without losing passion for my work: one of the fruits of this long adventure has been the maturation of a 'passionate' non-attachment¹¹⁷, allowing me to work with enthusiasm, but at the same time aware that the products of my work were not in my hands. How can I not find a resonance with the popular sentence that the Christian tradition attributes to Ignatius Loyola:

Pray as if everything depends on God, work as if everything depends on you!

¹¹⁵ Yogananda, P. *Dove splende la luce*. Astrolabio. Roma, 2002, p. 127, my translation

¹¹⁶ Feedback by Jyri, performer in *Moving the Silence*

¹¹⁷ Kriyananda. *Educare alla vita*. Ananda Edizioni. Roma, 2011, p. 166

Looking back and forward

The first week of the *Moving the Silence* workshop represented for me and for many participants a radical turnover in our own lives, offering us the opportunity to taste a new creative and meditative life style.

But now, after about four months of daily practice of silence, I could not see any revolutionary change in myself. I think that the process went so deep that changes were meant to be revealed little by little. I just had the perception that my life was starting to move towards a more clear direction, I felt silence to be a part of my life and I knew that I had to go on, developing my research in the field of Experiential Pluralism: the potential of the mutual interaction between meditation and art felt precious and wide.

Silence proved to be a fruitful ground for a dialogue between art and spirituality. In silence we have been able to build a 'holy' space, allowing our artistic/pedagogic research and our spiritual research to become one, or at least to walk together. Silence proved to be a generative platform for developing meditative ways of working in the field of art.

The stimulating cooperation with Eerika Arposalo and Rev. Henri Järvinen represented for me the first great step of this process.

Working together with Eerika has been the most educational human exchange that I have experienced in the years of my Master studies. Eerika's spontaneous wisdom has taught me much about acceptance, calmness, patience and, most of all, the courage to be positive-minded. Eerika said that I have been an example of commitment, capable to work with determination till the full accomplishment of my goals. I felt that our two charismas were balancing and empowering each other. I matured a profound respect towards Eerika's attitude of welcoming any happening or person as the best opportunity to learn something important about life. The friendship born from our encounter was an encouraging sign, full of meaning, which fills my heart with gratitude and hope.

And the wonderful group with which we were able to build the *Moving the Silence* performance was another gift, increasing my courage to attempt new ways and to take new risks.

How not to mention at this point the remarkable help of my supervisor teacher, Kaija Kangas? Her presence throughout the first two years of work has been powerful and respectful at the same time, revealing

an empathetic attunement with my procedures and with the topic of silence. One day she told me that silence and meditation had been an important part of her own personal artistic path. She supported me with the wisest suggestions that a pedagogue-artist could offer to a student: her own personal silent meditation and a lot of open questions!

Throughout our rehearsals of the *Moving the Silence* performance, I realized that the core of my interest was not silence in itself, but the meditative attitude generated in silence. I began to think about future developments of our research, where silence would be considered as an inner attitude, rather than a literal absence of sounds. I had not yet a clear plan of how to proceed further, but I felt that all our work was a good start. As had happened for *Moving the Silence*, the idea for our next project arrived spontaneously and unexpectedly, brought by the turbulent circumstances of my artistic and spiritual life. It did not take long after my graduation at Theatre Academy, before *Hermits in Progress* was entering my imagination.

PART TWO

HERMITS IN PROGRESS

Why hermits?

The world has forgotten the joys of silence, the peace of solitude which is necessary, to some extent, for the fullness of human living. Not all men are called to be hermits, but all men need enough silence and solitude in their lives to enable the deep inner voice of their own true self to be heard at least occasionally.
(Thomas Merton)¹¹⁸

A hermit is a person who lives, to some degree, in seclusion from society.

The word hermit comes from the Latin *ĕrēmĭta*, the latinisation of the Greek *ἐρημίτης* (*erēmitēs*), ‘of the desert’, which in turn comes from *ἐρημος* (*erēmos*), signifying ‘desert’, ‘uninhabited’, hence ‘desert-dweller’.

In Christianity, the term was originally applied to a Christian who lives the hermitic life out of a religious conviction, namely the Desert Theology of the Old Testament.

Other religions, for example, Buddhism, Hinduism, Islam, (Sufism) and Taoism, also have hermits in the sense of individuals living an ascetic form of life¹¹⁹.

Is a hermitage an escape? Do hermits feel lonely? What is the difference between solitude and loneliness? How to balance our own social nature with our need to withdraw within ourselves? Is hermit-choice an introvert choice? And if it is so, which are the strengths and the dangers of such a life of isolation?

With the head full of such questions, I decided to follow my intuition and allow myself one year of hermitic retreats. Actually, not me alone: I was blessed by the support and participation of a lot of companions! Among them, Eerika, Rev.Henri and Joni stepped into the project, together with a few new entries and with a network of monks, nuns and hermits which were available to support us with their experiences and advices.

The reason for the choice of hermitic life as a topic of my artistic and spiritual research is extremely personal and requires an introduction.

¹¹⁸ Merton, T. *The Silent Life*. Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. New York, 1975. P.167

¹¹⁹ See: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hermit>

I have passed through isolation several times in my life, in contexts very far from each other: Catholic Church, Self-Realization Fellowship and Goenka's Vipassana-organization. It is important to say that in each one of these environments, I have spent years of dedication, attempting to put into practice and worship all the spiritual principles, traditions and meditative practices they were promoting.

Throughout the following chapters, I will describe some of the benefits related to the meditation-techniques I have been practicing in these three different spiritual paths. But for the moment, I prefer to focus on more uncomfortable aspects related to my experience, knowing that many other people are living similar struggles: I hope my honest sharing will be beneficial to those persons who, like me, have been living isolation in spiritual organizations, but still believe there is a great treasure behind the controversial side of every walk.

When I decided to deepen my understanding of the Catholic religion, I made the commitment to go to Holy Mass every Sunday, to pray morning and evening about one hour per time, regularly attending the sacrament of confession, giving time to welfare, and I began to study and practice Christian mysticism. I became a fan of the Rosary prayer, in particular. Yet, also being baptized in the SRF, I felt the wish to keep alive the Yoga-side of me as well. I felt the Christian tradition was lacking in practices exploring the connections between body, mind and energy. Furthermore, I could not take many teachings of the Church literally, especially dogmas, which were dramatically cutting me off from my Yoga background without creating any opportunity for a fair dialogue.

The Catholic Church is very complex. There are still many suspicions towards eastern meditation-techniques, in particular connected to the fear that they are too much related to their own specific religious/philosophical background to be acceptable in Christian environment. Yet, things are rapidly changing and throughout my life I have met many priests, nuns and monks who are not only open-minded towards oriental philosophies, but are practicing eastern meditation-techniques themselves. In their own Christian spiritual path, they were able to receive great benefits from such practices: Yoga and Zen meditation, for example, were considered by them as a 'treasure of humanity'. Recently, Pope Francis wrote:

The same Spirit everywhere brings forth various forms of practical wisdom which help people to bear suffering and to live in greater peace and harmony. As Christians, we can also benefit from these treasures built up over many centuries, which can help us better to live our own beliefs.¹²⁰

Despite of such bright personal attempting to shape the Church into a more inclusive system, the institution is still far from being that universal (= catholic) ‘nest’ which welcomes all human beings without generating exclusion or distinctions in different classes. I remember, in my childhood, the feeling of being very careful in expressing my own beliefs: at the age of eight I had to stay out of my class on the Catholic religion, together with a Jehovah’s Witness boy, since I explained that I believed in reincarnation.

I had to be even more careful when talking about my Yoga-meditation practices in a Catholic environment: if I did not meet the right persons, it was easy to start never ending quarrels... which often ended up, among boys of my age, with the stigma of being labelled as the ‘odd one’.

Another crucial theoretical ‘heresy’ I was afraid to share openly was that I did not believe that Jesus was the only Son of God: Christ was, not Jesus. According to the Gospel, the Logos (the Son of God) existed before this universe was shaped, He spoke through prophets; He fully embodied Himself in Jesus. I believed the same Christ, who is one, spoke through prophets of all religions and was embodied into many ‘avatars’ (incarnations of God) of the world: Jesus, Krishna, Buddha, Lao Tsu, ... Jesus’s awareness was so profound that he could identify himself with the only Christ, and he could say aloud, according to the Gospel:

I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father but through Me.¹²¹

Similarly in Bhagavad-Gita Krishna affirms:

I am situated within the heart of all living entities. I am the beginning, the middle and the end as well of all living entities.¹²²

Therefore, Christ is the “*true Light which gives light to every man coming into the world*”¹²³, and is potentially abiding in every one’s heart. By following one ‘avatar’, you are attuning yourself with the only Christ.

¹²⁰ Papa Francesco. *Evangeliu Gaudium*. Paoline, Milano, 2013, p. 254

¹²¹ John, 14,6

¹²² Bhagavadgita, 10, 20

¹²³ John, 1, 9

When I got married, then, the restriction of not being allowed to use contraceptives did complicate our sexual life considerably.

After about eight years of daily Christian meditation and rare Kriya-Yoga practice (in secret and full of a sense of guilt), my divorce put me in front of a choice: continuing to be an active member of the Catholic Church, with the limitation of not being allowed to eat the Holy Bread and therefore being labelled as a ‘public sinner’, or looking for a place where I could feel fully accepted for what I am. I was not worried about preserving my honour, but I took such a challenge as an opportunity to come out of the hypocrisy of denying my Yoga-background and beliefs. Without any act of definitive cutting off from the Church, I just chose not to become a victim of it. I took my distance.

I decided to deepen my Kriyā Yoga –practice and to become an active member of the Self-Realization Fellowship. The founder, Paramahansa Yogananda, preached that Yoga is for all, no matter their race, nationality, religious background. And his religious sense was so wide that it embraced all faiths: I felt I could breathe again. Unfortunately, SRF did not recommend practicing other meditation techniques but Yogananda’s.

The motivation for such a restriction sounded reasonable.

SRF was teaching that:

Steadfastly following a single path and applying its prescribed methods will take you most quickly to your Divine goal. Once you receive the Hong-Sau and Aum Techniques, we recommend that you concentrate on them (rather than concurrently using techniques of other paths) in order to reap the highest results from your practice. Students who are already following a given faith may of course continue to participate in such forms of worship they wish.¹²⁴

But what to do if my Catholic faith already provides other meditation techniques, such the Rosary, Ignatian meditation, contemplation and so forth... and what if you sincerely experience that such techniques are actually helping each other and they are not working ‘concurrently’? Once, an SRF –monk told me: *“Life is short and you are free to choose how to employ your own time in the best way”*. He wanted to encourage me to choose whether to continue my Rosary practice or to fully commit to Yogananda’s techniques. I began to feel guilty every time I was praying

¹²⁴ SRF. *Answers to frequently asked questions*. Self-Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles, 1998, p.7

Catholic Rosary, or practicing some Christian contemplation-exercise. My own experience was telling me that I was doing right, but I felt guilty because I was supposed to take a decision I could not take. I felt deprived of the support of a group or of a competent spiritual father, capable of understanding me.

SRF then adds that the highest technique taught by Paramahansa Yogananda is Kriyā Yoga: that is the quickest method to attain union with God, since it works directly with life-energy, which is the intelligent dynamic power underlying universe. But if you wish to take that step, you have to abandon other religious practices:

Those students who wish to dedicate themselves wholly to the Self-Realization Fellowship path may formally take this step by receiving Kriyā Yoga.¹²⁵

In practice, you may continue to attend other religious practices and be member of SRF, but you will have no access to the ‘pearl’ of Yogananda’s teachings, just as in the Catholic Church I could still be integrated as a ‘public sinner’, because I was a divorced, without access to the ‘body of Christ’.

Furthermore, I realize now that Yoga-philosophy contributed to exacerbate my conflicting relationship with the sexual sphere: how not to feel guilty of wasting life-energy, every time you have sex?

Anyway, I just continued to practice Kriyā Yoga regularly, two hours a day, throughout two more years.

Then I had a twelve-day break, when I attended a Vipassana course. As I explained in the first part of this book, Vipassana technique, as taught by S.N. Goenka, is based on mere observation of body sensations, and eventually, of the thoughts that derive from them¹²⁶. No *pranayama* (breath-energy exercises), no *mantras* (inner chanting or praying), no visualization. No God.

It has been a shock, but also a great relief, to meet such a neutral spiritual technique.

I did not feel perfectly comfortable, since the lack of pranayama-techniques was confusing all my ideas about meditation and the lack of

¹²⁵ Ibid.

¹²⁶ Hart, W. *La meditazione Vipassana*. Artestampa, Modena, 2011, pp. 122-127

prayer was cutting my spontaneous attitude of connecting to God in a dialogical way.

I did not understand why meditation techniques based on inner visualization were considered by Vipassana-practitioners to be methods working just on the surface level of the mind. I think that imagination is a faculty as real as our faculties of listening and observing, and it may be used as an effective tool to expand our awareness, within and outside the body: why struggle for ten days attempting to feel a sensation on my hand without imagining my hand, when, just by mentally visualizing it, I am able to bring my attention there immediately, and therefore feel all sensations in that area?

Another doubt was that, even though pranayama was not mentioned as being part of Vipassana technique, Taoist masters wrote in many books that “*Wherever there is conscious thought, there is Ch’i*”¹²⁷, that is to say: *prana*, life-energy, concentrates wherever I focus my attention. And actually the training in passing my awareness throughout my body systematically was producing a spontaneous flow of vibrating subtle sensations running up and down, and I was wondering if Vipassana-teachers were just avoiding labeling the theory of inner-energy in order to remain grounded on the mere objective phenomena of perceiving specific subjective sensations.

Yet, I felt such a technique was integrating some aspects of meditation that were not so much enlightened by the Christian or Yoga traditions: that is to say a pure contact with reality, purified of the forms (and the poetry) of specific religious theories, a kind of mystical way, non-dialogical with invisible realities, but digging into the depths of our own body-mind. I got the impression that I had found something extremely important to improve my meditation, something that helped me also to better perform the other contemplative techniques which were still in my background.

I practiced Vipassana-meditation regularly two hours a day throughout two years, every now and then ‘refreshing’ my other techniques.

As an art-pedagogue, in my workshops and classes I make use of concentration, meditation and contemplation techniques. I am also open to the encounter with new spiritual practices, in order to better understand my brothers and sisters coming from other religious cultures. And of course,

¹²⁷ Chang, D.Y. & Fassi, R. *T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi, Prato, 2008, p 55.

being myself an instructor of Kung Fu, I have been practicing Ch'i Kung exercises for twenty years and I am currently teaching simple techniques of Taoist-meditation.

That was the tip which generated my third isolation experience. As I had already completed one Vipassana course, Goenka's organization was not able to accept me again for a new course, unless and until I would completely discontinue my teaching of meditation. I was not allowed to participate in other Vipassana retreats, since I was already teaching other meditation techniques, and it was expected that I would be completely satisfied and confident with the techniques that I was teaching, and had no need to practice any other technique.

In that moment, I realized that my life-vocation is what I define as Experiential Pluralism: I will never be able to understand my spiritual fellows just by reading some books about their religions; I must share, till a certain extent, some of their spiritual routine, living it 'from within'.

Now more than ever, I feel the importance of the support of a group or a spiritual father, yet I am tired of feeling guilty of 'ruining' or 'delaying' my attainment of the final goal, whether you name it 'union with God', 'enlightenment', 'liberation', 'salvation'... just because life enriched me with the encounter with different beautiful spiritual paths.

This is the reason why I felt the initial need to withdraw as a hermit. I needed time and space to recover, to understand what I really believed in, to find a direction. But I have a son, a family, I have pupils. I could not give up my responsibilities. And I am an artist: if I leave for an hermitage, then such a place should be a space of dialogue between art and spirituality, a place where I could bring all that I am, including my family and working responsibilities: I did not look for an escape from the world, but for an encounter with Reality!

"If such a place does not exist yet", I thought, "then I'll create it!". That is how the *Hermits in Progress* idea was born. I did not know yet that I had not to go far to look for a material space: hermitages were going to reach me straight into my daily life.

As I mentioned in the introduction, the *Hermits in Progress* project provided twelve experiences of voluntary solitude in the form of short retreats, throughout a whole year.

We spent days cloistered in a city-building, living in forest or sleeping on the road, we had walking-retreats in the countryside, we lived without electricity or money, we experienced fasting and full-day meditations. But, most of all, we focused on developing simple ways of transforming daily actions into opportunities for awakening mindfulness.



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

Practices

*It is much easier to have a fleeting vision of reality
in the perfect conditions of formal meditation
rather than 'practicing the presence of God' in the middle of nuisances,
bothers, constant temptations of professional and family life.
(Aldous Huxley)¹²⁸*

In this chapter I will mention the various practices I have been willing to explore throughout the twelve *Hermits in Progress* retreats. These practices should have the possibility of being performed in solitude, but for the rest we were free to choose whatever activity we were interested in.

Even though other participants worked with different subjects, I had the impression that we were sharing a common path: each of us was bringing her/his own most important passions, questions and needs into the journey, and was ready to put them into discussion, to break patterns in order to discover new approaches, to abandon one path and to build new ways in her/his own personal spiritual and artistic research.

One year is a long time, compared to the normal rehearsal-periods of average theatre-productions. But it is not so long if we think about spiritual-training: real hermits live in isolation throughout an entire life, yogis are capable of committing to one technique of meditation forever, mystics of all religions agree that many years of faithful dedication in one single spiritual path are required in order to observe some evident progress in the practitioner. Yet, my artist heart did not allow me to make such a severe selection among my interests: I was curious in many fields and I calculated that I had time enough to bring them all into the process, in the right amount and at the right time.

I was able to divide my research subjects into three categories: contemplative practices, body-mind energizing practices, solitary artistic practices.

Into the first category, 'contemplative practices', fit the three main meditation techniques I have been practicing throughout my life: the Catholic Rosary, Kriyā Yoga and Vipassana.

¹²⁸ Huxley, A. *L'uomo e Dio*. Piemme. Asti, 1996, p. 118

With ‘body-mind energizing practices’ I mean two basic methods of warming up I usually perform in the morning, before any other meditative or artistic activity: the Chinese Pa Tuan Chin (= Eight Pieces of Brocade) and the Energization Exercises, structured by the renowned guru Paramahansa Yogananda (1893-1952).

Among the ‘solitary artistic practices’, I chose to develop my skills in the Kung Fu of North China (an ancient martial art which may be considered a form of dynamic meditation as well) and in Chess (one of the oldest board games in the world, born in India around AD 600 and nowadays considered as an intriguing combination of mental sport, art and science).

Now I will describe these three fields, in relationship with my subjective practical experience.

Contemplative practices



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

In this section, I will attempt to compare the three contemplative practices which proved to fit into my *Hermits in Progress* experience and which actually represent important phases of my spiritual life: the Catholic Rosary, Kriyā Yoga and Vipassana meditation. The following reflections will be limited to my own direct experience and are not meant to be interpreted as definitive statements or judgements on the religious philosophies supporting each practice.

I devoted myself exclusively to one path at a time, throughout at least two-year-time for each practice. I practiced every day for about one or two hours. Considering that commitment and patience are two elements of primary importance in spiritual practices, I have to admit that my own experience is very basic in every one of these paths. Yet, I had the opportunity to taste three approaches to meditation extremely different from each other not only because of their religious and philosophical background, but also because of their peculiar ways of affecting my body and mind.

The Catholic Rosary has been defined often as a simple prayer, good only for retired people who have plenty of free time. If you practice it only once in a while, I agree it may be experienced as the most boring way of repeating never ending medieval refrains, begging for mercy by means of praises and attestations of guiltiness, with the sentence “*pray for us, sinners*” closing each ‘Ave Maria’. On the other hand, the Rosary has been compared to the Orthodox ‘Jesus Prayer’¹²⁹ and to eastern mantras, which are renowned methods of contemplative prayer¹³⁰. No doubt, the Catholic Rosary too belongs to such a picture of religious phenomenology, yet it contains some unique characteristics responding to typical needs of Christian specificity¹³¹, such as the ‘Lectio Divina’ structure, with precise spaces for reading (*lectio*), reflecting (*meditatio*), praying (*oratio*) and silence (*contemplatio*)¹³².

In my own experience, the Rosary was not an empty and monotonous chanting at all. The calm rhythm of vocal prayer was helping me in grounding words in my own inner silence, supporting concentration. The cyclical repetition of the Ave Maria prayer was creating a spiral-like inner movement, facilitating a gradual overcoming of intellectual control, leading me towards a deep feeling of openheartedness.

One of my struggles was the unclearness of my position towards all religious characters such as Jesus and Mary: I could not understand if they were for me kind of ‘tools’ or spiritual ‘doors’ rather than real persons. I began to question: does it make any sense that I continue to pray as if there were an imaginary friend besides me? Isn’t it more realistic to admit that I am dealing with myself, when I am praying? I was looking for a way to become a better person, open to love, happier, at peace with myself first of all, and prayer was useful to the extent that it could cause a real change in me. The Rosary practice itself, gave me sometimes a feeling of forcing myself into a ‘charitable mood’, which was not a genuine product of my

¹²⁹ Lanfrance, J. *Il Rosario*. Ancora, Milano, 1996, pp. 37-42

¹³⁰ See: *Racconti di un pellegrino russo*. Città Nuova, Roma, 1997, p. 36. Even though the fascinating introduction by Tomas Spidlik does not directly mention Rosary, it brings the focus on the breathing combined with words, such as in the third method of prayer by Ignatius Loyola. Spidlik’s parallel between yoga and Jesus Prayer can be easily referred to Rosary as well.

¹³¹ Papa Giovanni Paolo II, *Rosarium virginis Mariae*. Paoline, Milano, 2002.

¹³² Boff, C. M. *Come fare meditazione*. San Paolo, Milano, 2010, p 29

heart. A sense of hypocrisy and feelings of guiltiness were bothering me in those moments.

Kriyā Yoga, as taught by Paramahansa Yogananda, is the spiritual path I have mentioned in the previous part of this book¹³³. *Kriyā* meditation technique is composed of three main steps: concentration (focused attention on one single point), meditation (concentration applied to God) and *pranayama* (control of life-energy).

In my experience, the most remarkable aftereffect of such a practice was the powerful feeling of joy. The *Kriyā*-technique was much more demanding in terms of body and breathing-training compared to the Rosary, where the main goal was opening the heart by means of repetition of vocal prayer. My biggest limit lay in handling the complexity of the technique: if I had only one hour time for meditation I was supposed to pass through all three phases of the technique, and in between them I had to spend some time in silent prayer... That made my hour very restless. Furthermore, I found the additional difficulty of surrendering to a Guru that I had never met in my life, even though undoubtedly I feel attunement with all his wise writings.

Vipassana meditation, as taught by S.N. Goenka, is the Buddhist technique of meditation I already described in the first part, which is based on attentive and impartial observation of body sensations and thoughts¹³⁴.

This is the technique that, till now, has been positively affecting me the most. Even though it did not produce ecstatic feelings of joy like in the practice of *Kriyā* or passionate devotional love like in the Rosary prayer, in this case I was able to attain remarkable body-stillness and lasting peace of mind. Plus, the training in accepting reality as it is has proved to be therapeutic towards my own tendency of readily complaining and, even worse, of looking for supernatural effects. I began to accept myself as I am, with positive consequences in my social relationships too.

I questioned a lot: is this the way I should devote myself to? I cannot hide the discomfort I felt towards Yogananda's institution, and previously towards the Catholic Church, and that I feel now towards Goenka's organization. But of course, that is not a good excuse to question the value of the *Vipassana* technique in itself. Yet, would it not be a pity to neglect the possibility to awaken my inner potential of attaining the highest statuses of

¹³³ Yogananda. *Autobiografia di uno yogi*. Astrolabio, Roma, 2009, pp. 220-228

¹³⁴ Hart, W. *La meditazione Vipassana*. Artestampa, Modena, 2011, pp. 123-127

enlightenment, by means of pranayama-techniques? I am sure that Kriya Yoga would serve that scope perfectly. And what about developing a personal and dialogical relationship with God, such as in the Catholic Rosary and Christian prayer in general?

I believe such questions will sound ridiculous to people who are far from being involved in spiritual seeking. And I have to confess that they make me laugh at myself too, sometimes. But there are moments when I really understand the concept of ‘spiritual indigestion’ that Paramahansa Yogananda often talked about¹³⁵: it is painful to dive into a mix of different religions and spiritual practices. When you are clear-minded enough to grasp similarities, you feel blessed by the variety of your experiences. When you are stuck in differences, that is a real mess!

Throughout the *Hermits in Progress* retreats, I had the opportunity to refresh the practice of all these three contemplative systems and to become free from the boundaries of their single religious and philosophical backgrounds. I do not know if this has been positive or not. The Dalai Lama Tenzin Gyatso (1935-) wrote that we should not try to “*put the head of a yak on the body of a sheep*”¹³⁶: that is a clear admonition not to develop syncretistic philosophies which, in the very end, would spoil the treasure of ancient and solid traditions. But the artistic side of my own research sounded to me as a reasonable excuse to look for a more flexible spiritual path, where single contemplative techniques are not owned by a specific religion or worldview, but are shaped around me, taking into account on my interests and needs, leaving space for my critical doubts as well.

¹³⁵ Yogananda. *L'eterna ricerca dell'uomo*. Astrolabio, Roma, 1980, p 334

¹³⁶ Dalai Lama. *Incontro con Gesù*. Mondadori, Cles, 2010



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

Body-mind energizing practices

In this section I will introduce and compare the two fascinating systems of warming up, respectively belonging to Kung Fu and Yoga paths, that I brought into my *Hermits in Progress* journey: Pa Tuan Chin (八段錦, literally: Eight Pieces of Brocade), structured in the twelfth century by master Yüeh Fei (岳飛, 1103-1142), and Energization Exercises, developed in 1916 by Paramahansa Yogananda.

I will also attempt to share my personal experience with both practices, describing, as honestly as I can, my opinion about the benefit deriving from an alternating training.

Both sequences are composed of exercises deriving from ancient spiritual traditions which enlighten the interconnection between mind and body, and were systematized by two extraordinary experts in such disciplines: their work was bound to leave important marks in the history of psycho-physical practices.

Pa Tuan Chin was originally developed by a famous Chinese hero: Master Yüeh Fei. He was a military general, an expert in medicine, calligraphy and martial arts, best known for fighting the long campaign against the invading Jurchens, himself standing on the side of the Song emperor. Paradoxically, he was put to death by the Song government in 1142, betrayed by the emperor's Chancellor¹³⁷. Legend attributes to Yüeh Fei the birth of several Kung Fu styles. Pa Tuan Chin was meant to prepare the mind and body for the practice of martial arts.

¹³⁷ See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yue_Fei



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

Pa Tuan Chin (Baduanjin, in the Pinyin transliteration) is nowadays one of the most renowned methods of warming up belonging to Traditional Chinese Martial Arts. The name ‘Eight Pieces of Brocade’ refers to the fact that the form is composed of eight different exercises. Brocade is a precious textile. Filaments composing the textile symbolize meridians: channels delivering energy throughout the body. Every exercise is meant to stimulate some specific body-organ, according to Traditional Chinese Medicine¹³⁸.

But firstly, Pa Tuan Chin presents three basic goals: warming up the body, training basic postures of Kung Fu and studying the interconnection between movement and breathing.

In the course of several hundred years, Pa Tuan Chin spread all around China and oriental countries, and ultimately it has reached other continents too. At the present moment there are many different forms bearing the same name and it is impossible to be sure about their closeness to the original sequence. I have been practicing the Pa Tuan Chin taught by Master Chang Dsu Yao (1918-1992), for over twenty years.

¹³⁸ Chang, D.Y. & Fassi, R. *T'ai Chi Ch'üan*. De Vecchi, Prato, 2008, p. 26

I find it especially effective whenever I feel contracted, nervous or uncomfortable with my body or mind: Pa Tuan Chin exercises, with their remarkable component of lengthening and stretching, re-establish my inner balance and open my attention. After the practice, I feel more rooted in the ‘real’ world and I feel open and stable, but also flexible and relaxed. I could say that Pa Tuan Chin makes inner energy flow freely in my body. Traditional Chinese Medicine teaches that contractions and obstructions throughout meridians impede the circulation of inner energy, producing sickness and diseases. Therefore, good health is supported by a free flow of energy¹³⁹.

Pa Tuan Chin is an art combining inner work (breathing, stimulation of meridians, concentration etc.) with a very detailed and sophisticated body technique: think about the characteristic postures and gestures, directly challenging our abilities in performing precision, balance, resistance and body coordination.

The Energization Exercises were developed in 1916 by Paramahansa Yogananda and are based on ancient Yoga-techniques, whose purpose is to prepare the body for meditation¹⁴⁰.

By making use of breath, life force, and concentrated attention, the Energization Exercises enable one to draw abundant energy consciously into the body, purifying and strengthening all the body parts systematically in turn. The Exercises rely on the basic idea that it is possible to draw Cosmic Energy into the body through the point where the skull joins the spinal column: the ‘medulla oblongata’, known in the Holy Scriptures as the ‘Mouth of God’¹⁴¹.

Throughout the execution of the Exercises breathing is free, exception being made for those parts where movements are combined with ‘double breathing’ technique, a special technique of breathing allowing a greater exchange of air in the lungs.

At the present moment, after almost one hundred years, small differentiations in the teachings concerning Energization Exercises are beginning to become visible. Just to give an example: the Self-Realization Fellowship, founded by Paramahansa Yogananda, is currently teaching a

¹³⁹ Ivi, p. 44

¹⁴⁰ SRF. *Undreamed of possibilities*. Self-Realization Fellowship, Los Angeles, 1997, p. 13

¹⁴¹ Yogananda. *Autobiografia di uno yogi*. Astrolabio, Roma, 2009, p. 328

series of 38 Exercises; the communities of Ananda, founded by Kriyananda (disciple of Yogananda), are teaching a series of 39 Exercises¹⁴². I have been learning and practicing the 38- exercises series.

From a muscular point of view, the main difference between Pa Tuan Chin and Energization Exercises consists in the quality of movements. In Pa Tuan Chin the main stress is on lengthening, while the Exercises provide a constant and gradual alternation of contraction-relaxation.

In the Energization Exercises, body parts are treated separately, one by one, while in Pa Tuan Chin the body is considered as a whole.

I practice the Exercises whenever I feel I have low energy or am sleepy: they awaken my body and mind, strengthen my muscles, and fill me with a feeling of ‘sparkling joy’, typical of activities which increase the capacity of oxygenation. They stress the interdependence between will and energy, and they help me to emerge from statuses of doziness or depression, empowering my determination.



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

¹⁴² Kriyananda. *Conversazioni con Yogananda*. Ananda, Assisi, 2011, p.414

Pa Tuan Chin makes inner energy circulate inside the body. The Energization Exercises store extra energy in the body. Both forms require about ten minutes to be executed. Even though these two practices have been conceived as warming up, preparing body and mind for more sophisticated activities, I consider them as arts in themselves, and I give them a special place in my daily life. Practitioners of Kung Fu and Yoga probably would not agree with my statement, especially as it is recommended by masters not to mix different methods. I can only say that throughout the *Hermits in Progress* retreats I found a special benefit in practicing both forms, starting from the Exercises and following with Pa Tuan Chin: that was, indeed, a wonderful way to begin my day!

Solitary artistic practices

What do martial arts and a board-game have in common? And how can they fit into my *Hermits in Progress* research?

About the latter question, my intuition told me that some element of ‘disturbance’ was needed, in order to generate a dialogical interaction among all the serious spiritual topics which I had called into the research process.

About the first question then, a quick superficial answer could be that both Chess and Kung Fu are related to war. Chess, being a strategy game where two armies are fighting against each other, could be perceived as a real war between two players’ minds. Kung Fu similarly could be merely intended as an art of fighting, where every form and technique is functional to some martial application.

I agree with such an answer to the extent that we share the same concept of war: that is to say, in my opinion, an inner spiritual fight rather than a competition against external opponents.

I have to state at once that I am a simple amateur Chess player, but this is my favorite board-game and I am fascinated by its unique way of stimulating my brain, combining logical thinking with visualization, imagination, intuition and developing surprising nets of interrelated functions, symbolized by the relationships among the pieces. And I am not a Kung Fu master either, even though I have practised this art throughout two decades, I am currently teaching it and it has become my absolute number one daily psycho-physical training.

Both disciplines were born in the East.

Legend tells us that the Indian king Balhait asked a Hindu saint to create a game based on mental skill, designed to enhance the mental qualities required to analyze and reason. The king’s intention was to oppose the teaching of all those games where chance decided the outcome. The saint invented *Chaturanga* (from Sanskrit: ‘army composed of four members’). This ancestor of modern chess traveled to China, where it

became known as *Xiang Qi*, and to Persia, where it took the name of *Chatranj*¹⁴³.

The playing board was composed of 64 squares: how could one fail to notice an analogy with the 64 symbols of *I-Ching*, one of the oldest scriptures of the world? Black and white colors (even though they were introduced much later, when the game arrived in Europe) remind me of T'ai Chi T'u, the Chinese drawing of Supreme Polarity: Yin and Yang. T'ai Chi is considered the origin of all things and the 64 symbols embrace all possible relations and actions in life¹⁴⁴.

Furthermore the *Bhagavad-Gita*, one of the most renowned holy scriptures of India, develops its highest spiritual teachings around a battlefield, *Kurukshetra*, symbol of the human body, where two enemy armies are going to fight each other: the Kauravas and the Pandavas, respectively symbolizing evil and good tendencies of human beings¹⁴⁵. I believe this is not an accidental analogy: Chess is not meant to be a fight against an external opponent either. The real fight happens within you, at each single move: every decision you take is a problem of mathematics, requiring memory-skills, calculation, but also intuition, creativity and imagination. On a deeper level, the battlefield becomes your own heart whenever laziness invites you to give up with the prolonged effort in concentration, or anger, frustration and excitement bind you to the final outcome of the game, preventing you from tasting the process of your own personal inner journey, in dialogue with your partner's choices.

Throughout my *Hermits in Progress* journey I focused on solitary study of Chess-strategy, but I had also pleasant opportunities to play with some friends, in the periods in between the retreats. In both cases, I had the sensation that such an intense mental activity required me to generate a space of solitude within myself, a sort of inner hermitage, where I was free to let my intuition work.

As to war disciplines, in the East we have such a unique case in history, where martial arts are inseparable from spirituality and their strength lies in the development of inner energy, promoting a philosophy of non-violence. It is not a matter of chance that the two most popular styles of

¹⁴³ Shenk, D. *The immortal game*. Doubleday, New York, 2006

¹⁴⁴ Wilhelm, R. *I Ching*. Adelphi, Milano, 1991

¹⁴⁵ Kriyananda. *L'essenza della Bhagavadgita*. Ananda, Assisi, 2006, p. 35

traditional Chinese Kung Fu, the Shaolin Ch'üan and the T'ai Chi Ch'üan, were structured in a Buddhist and in a Taoist monastery respectively. Actually the term Kung Fu is not related to war at all, literally designating any kind of honorable activity executed with ability, requiring effort, concentration, devotion and commitment. We could say that in Kung Fu every action, including martial technique, is sublimated into a form of dynamic meditation.

Considering such premises, it should be evident that violence and the aim of winning are concepts that cannot be combined with the highly spiritual historical background of Chess and Kung Fu. Rather, I believe their purpose is correlated with the great lesson taught by the Hindu Bhagavad-Gita: learning to develop the capacity of passionately performing every necessary activity with a spirit of non-attachment. And of course, expanding our own inner potential by means of constant dedication.



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

Chess and Kung Fu have in common the fact that they are difficult. They require hard training and such training is beneficial to the practitioner. Kung Fu empowering body-training is well known: think of the athletic performances of old practitioners, who are able to maintain flexibility and good health even in advanced age. Moreover, neuroscience has shown how

permanent improvements occur in the brain-structure of advanced chess-players¹⁴⁶.

Before starting the *Hermits in Progress* project I felt especially excited by the idea of allowing Kung Fu and Chess to interact in the frame of our retreats. I could not imagine how they could work together with meditation and I have to admit that, initially, especially my study of Chess theory was disturbing my ability to focus on the present moment. But, after one year of practice, I can say I have been rewarded by unexpected consequences. For example, I could observe a remarkable improvement in my capacity of memorizing, planning and maintaining prolonged concentration throughout processes of analysis. It felt easier to develop meditations by remaining focused on one single subject and my skills in visualization and story-telling took some steps forward as well. On the other hand, the practice of Kung Fu felt extremely vital in order not to lose myself in an excess of ‘brainy’ activity and worked as a bridge connecting contemplative practices – where actually both mental and bodily work slow down – to my daily life – where both rational thinking and movement are equally fundamental.

¹⁴⁶ See: <http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/eyes-the-brain/201107/chess-and-the-brain>

Retreats

This chapter is dedicated to the *Hermits in Progress* retreats. The description of each experience will go together with my reflections and thoughts, which were arising during the retreats. Running the risk of losing the continuity of the narration, I hope to offer the reader a more ‘alive’ and human painting of my journey. I will share my challenges, failures, successes, frailties and doubts as honestly as I can.



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

Retreat 01 – Breathing in the Woods – September 2013

We began our research by spending two days in the forest of Nuuksio (Finland).

A single weekend spent in the forest was a very short time to deal with one of the most important topics of our research: nature. We were three participants. I had prepared a sort of daily schedule, allowing us to experience total solitude in the forest, but giving us the opportunity to share some meditation periods. As soon as we reached the forest we agreed to break with my plans: we realized that we were different people with different needs and such a structure would represent an obstacle rather than a help. We decided not to force ourselves into any kind of schedule. We would follow the single rule of silence. We would make our own individual journeys in nature and we would meet again only at the end of the retreat. Eventually, we could mentally ‘attune’ each other during our meditation-hours.

I have to say that in the forest we were not completely alone, since some tourists were crossing our paths every now and then, and at night a group of them stayed in the camping area: they were partying all night, filling the whole forest with their voices.

I was the only one among the three of us who grew up in a big metropolis, far from nature, and the impact of my first encounter with wild life was shocking. I got lost a couple of times by leaving the tracks and I felt I was like a small and fearful squirrel surrounded by tigers. Actually, the night before our leaving for the retreat, I had an interesting dream about tigers, which well represented my hidden fear. Here is a quotation from my own diary:

I saw a dream, that suddenly I was alone in a harbour. White and bright colours, plastic and metal. Water made the situation unstable. In the water, very close to me, a ship with a cage speeds up. Inside the cage I can see tigers. The ship turns over rapidly. Tigers notice me and one of them throws herself against the metal cage, towards me. The ship continues to turn over in the harbour, and then it docks on the opposite side of the bay.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Quote from my own diary

The first day anyway, I had a plan for myself. I wanted to practice meditation, Kung Fu and study Chess-theory: it is my belief that adding a small disturbance-element into a research process, such as my Chess-book, can generate new layers, illuminating some unexpected possibilities, keeping creativity alive in the exploration and avoiding an excess of ‘seriousness’.

My surprise was that nature was overwhelming and I could do nothing: too many impulses and sensations were passing through my body: smells, sounds, colours, changes of temperature and humidity, places so irregular, unpredictable, which required me to climb, to walk slowly, to rest...

At a certain moment, I wrote in my diary:

I have been a few minutes in ‘real’ forest and I was afraid. Reading my own Chess-book takes me away from my presence here and now. I was tired of walking and I did not practice T’ai Chi. I am worried for the evening. Am I bored? Among other human beings it feels better.¹⁴⁸

Before starting our retreats, one of my doubts was: will a few days of solitude per month be enough to understand the potential and challenges of hermit-life? Till now, I feel I have gathered only more and more questions. Yet, month by month, I realized that a deep change was happening inside of me: there was no real break from one hermit-retreat to the next. A gradual change of attitude towards things and people was leading me to reconsider my own daily habits and life-style, step by step bringing me towards new directions. I felt the need to find more space for developing a connection with nature and I realized that if I want to be present for the others, I have to reserve a special time for being alone with myself every day.

On the second day my mind settled down and I began to become aware of my own frailties, challenges and questions. This is what I wrote in my diary:

I would have preferred to sleep in isolation in the forest. I was afraid of going far from the camping area. My Chess-book plus the voices of the guys which were partying diverted me from the magic and beauty of this place.

I am scared of leaving the tracks.

Also T’ai Chi -practice felt unnatural, out of place. It feels as if I am clinging to actions which have been taught to me: anchors which connect me to something else.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid.

Meditation: if on one hand it calms me and, maybe, centers me, on the other hand it takes me out of this place.

I have already found three ticks. None of them attacked me, but I will check at home...

Do I have, maybe, to choose between the nature around me and the nature inside of me? Could not I make such a passage more fluid and interactive?

Fear of whatever is wild, uncontrollable, animal. City imprisons me but gives me a feeling of safety. Home. Streets are different, but there, the scary things are human beings. Here, they are insects and animals. And then it is cold, wet and hard. I cannot feel free. Not yet. I have the feeling this is just the beginning of a walk towards freedom. In the city, being closed inside an apartment, I have the illusion of being free. In reality, I have been a prisoner throughout a lifetime. Prisoner of fear. I want to free my own wild nature."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Ibid.

Retreat 02 – Urban Seclusion – October 2013

Our second retreat consisted in spending one day in seclusion inside the Kamppi Chapel, an artistic and provocative building in the center of Helsinki. Located in the heart of a vast shopping area, the Chapel is dedicated to silence, offering visitors the opportunity to recover from daily rush and noise.

Together with my report, I will add a few thoughts about the practice I chose to follow throughout the one-day-retreat: Vipassana-meditation. As usual in my life, I was conflicted as to which method would be the best for me to practice. I ended up choosing Vipassana because of its simplicity and because of its versatility: in a period of inner religious struggle, a ‘neutral’ contemplative technique would be the best.

One question could arise spontaneously: do we need a method for contemplation?

If we use the term ‘method’ in a wide sense, I am afraid the answer will be: yes. Even in a case when you could say “*I am just following my own inspiration*”, well, in my opinion that is your method! It is true that other methods are more structured and rely on solid traditions, but even people who affirm they just let God to act within themselves, perfectly know how difficult it is to be simple: such an attitude of opening and surrendering requires constant vigilance and committed efforts¹⁵⁰.

A possible danger of relying too much on a method is to transform it into a mechanical routine, believing that our own technique will work automatically, and forgetting our goal of going ‘beyond’ or ‘within’, penetrating and being penetrated by the mystery of life. No matter the background of our own practice, all great spiritual traditions agree in saying that the ultimate step of penetrating the heart of mystery does not rely on our own will, but it is somehow a ‘grace’ given by the mystery itself: think about enlightenment in the Zen tradition, ecstasies in Christian mysticism, Samadhi-experiences in the Yoga path...

Very far from such high attainments, I began my one-day-retreat with the smaller ambition of exploring seclusion in a public space.

¹⁵⁰ See: Raguin, Y. *Il Tao della mistica*. Fazi, Roma, 2013, pp. 129-133

Five minutes spent inside the Kamppi Chapel can really make the difference: the mind calms down and you come out of the building with the feeling that something good has happened inside you. Your batteries of inner balance are recharged.

Spending a whole day in there may be perceived as a very different experience: you have time to get bored! It is possible you come out of your meditation questioning: “*Did I just waste my time?*”. Yet, I believe the peace attained in eight hours of meditation is more rooted, compared to the rapid calming down of five minutes of silence.

Our *Hermits in Progress* team decided to stay inside the Chapel from the opening until the closing time: 10 a.m.-6 p.m.

We were allowed to develop whatever practice we wanted, being respectful of silence and of other visitors.

I planned to practice Vipassana-meditation throughout the day, with small breaks every one or two hours.

In one single day I could face many changes of mood: drowsiness, boredom, pain, fear and a few moments of brilliant intuitions. It is hard to admit that I did not feel great joy or happiness or love... but that is the raw truth. In my own experience, some positive aftereffects of such contemplative retreats become visible only afterwards, when I come back to my daily life and I realize that I am more courageous, more capable of embracing adversities, relating with people, smiling, and in some blessed moment I perceive a hidden flow of peace sustaining me. But throughout the process of meditating, I am facing the worse sides of myself, and the heavy inner work feels like I am cleaning a very dirty floor using a toothbrush!

From 10 till 12 a.m., I practiced a concentration technique, named Anapana in the Pali language: a very simple method of concentration, extremely effective to prepare the mind for meditation¹⁵¹.

My first two hours of Anapana-concentration felt very pleasant and easy. Too easy. I was sleepy and periods of proper concentration happened briefly and seldom.

This is one of the reasons why beginners get discouraged after their first attempt to concentrate. Accepting that it takes a long time before you

¹⁵¹ Hart, W. *La meditazione Vipassana*. Artestampa, Modena, 2011, pp. 94-97

notice any small improvement in terms of concentration-capacity, together with the fact that it is not easy to stay alert and to remain interested in one single object without the fake help of any kind of entertaining stimulation – all that may sadly destroy the heavenly expectations we may have towards meditative practices. If we add our rooted habit of giving up after a few failures and our own self-criticism, we finish our journey even before starting it.

So, I had to accept my own limitations. Every now and then I could recognize that the seeds of my ingenuous expectation of experiencing special sensations were still alive in me. I wanted to feel pleasant sensations. I let go my expectations. I fell again into sleepy daydreams. I could concentrate for a few seconds, then again some distraction. And so on, with patience...

After a short break I began to practice Vipassana –meditation.

Throughout the process of meditation, the attention works in a different way. Concentration is applied to a more complex subject, in certain cases it is inserted in a flow, or it deals with a wider or deeper focus. The attention may reach the point of expanding into a sort of open awareness.

In Vipassana-technique, as I already explained, the object of meditation is the whole body, with all sensations and correlated thoughts arising inside it. The concentrated mind follows sensations moving methodically through each and every part of the body¹⁵².

When I switched from concentration to meditation, I met other interesting challenges. First of all: pain! Because of the increased intensity of mental activity, drowsiness gave way to uncomfortable sensations caused by the sudden awareness that I had been sitting without moving for a long time. Paradoxically, sometimes I felt that pain was helping me to stay focused: at least, I was really awake and present!

Then, another typical trap: I began to compare myself to my fellows. I noticed how still and deeply concentrated one of my partners looked, and I realized how weak I was. I understood that my inferiority complex was hiding a superiority complex as well: I wanted to be special, and it felt frustrating to admit that anyone could attend such a retreat, with even better results than mine!

¹⁵² *Ivi*, pp.134-136

I took the resolution: *“After this day, I do not want to be proud of what I did!”*. After another hour of meditation I surprised myself adding to the previous thought: *“but I do not want to humiliate myself either!”*.

After the retreat, I had the opportunity to play Chess with a friend. Suddenly I felt agitated: I had been training for two months and I wanted to win... so, I completely failed the opening and I lost! Later in the evening I played another match on the web: same opening, but now I was calm, I went back to my inner peace and I played well. I won, actually, but that was not the point. I have noticed that whenever I am at peace, I can look at reality in all its complexity: it is easier to make the right choices and to have fruitful results. But if I am in a bad mood, if my mind is restless, I play blindly, without paying attention to all the interconnected elements moving on the ‘chessboard’ of Life...

My own self-esteem changed many times in one single day.

I came out of the retreat with the precious intuition that, no matter what happens, I am no more and no less than what I am. Was it necessary to sit in a chapel eight hours in order to understand such a simple truth?

Well, I am a slow person... I need my time!

Retreat 03 – Roaming Contemplation – November 2013

This is the place where I am supposed to report about our third *Hermits in Progress* retreat: one entire day spent walking in solitude, along random paths in a random place anywhere in Finland. We were supposed to meet at 8 a.m. in Helsinki – railway station and then to separate from each other, taking different trains towards different destinations. We would walk all day long and, in the evening, take a train back to Helsinki in order to meet each other again at 6 p.m. at the same starting point.

Unfortunately I felt sick, and I could not attend the retreat.

When I woke up with fever and nausea, it really felt like a big failure. This unexpected event, however, turned out to be a fundamental lesson for me, concerning spiritual seeking.

In the two previous retreats, it had already happened that some of my partners could not participate. Afterwards, they shared their disappointment at not having been able to attend the retreat and they felt ashamed to continue being part of our project. I spontaneously encouraged them: from my point of view, belonging to our hermit research was not about fulfilling tasks, rather it was about wanting to explore and staying attuned in the flow of our solitary spiritual and artistic adventure. They could jump into the next retreats without regrets.

It felt easy to accept others' limits, but now it was my turn to skip a retreat: suddenly I realized how difficult it was to forgive myself. I could clearly understand what was going on in my friends' heads when they were in the same situation. Actually, such a mental trap may capture us whenever we commit to any kind of self-discipline practice. Let us say, for example, that I decide to meditate regularly, twice a day. I commit seriously and, overcoming my initial difficulties, I see it begins to work. I feel empowered by my own successes. Then for some reason I miss a couple of my daily appointments with meditation and I begin to feel discouraged: I criticize myself, I feel guilty, I think I am not capable of maintaining my self-discipline, and finally I give up. I learnt a great lesson: perfectionism is the greatest obstacle to perfection!

My friends left without me and I stayed home, sick.

It took some hours to process my discouragement, to forgive myself, to put myself in the condition of learning something from such an accident.

Then I began to feel a comforting warmth coming from within. I am not talking about my fever of course, but I mean an inner feeling, which came from the thought that my friends were walking somewhere outside at that moment, we all were far from each other, yet we were sharing an experience: we all were aware that something special was happening that day.

I could understand why ‘real’ hermits, living apart from the world, affirm that they are not alone. Solitude and loneliness are two very different concepts: people sharing the same spiritual direction are somehow connected by an invisible network, even in such extreme cases when they are living separated from all other human beings.

Maybe – in my fever I attempted a brave hypothesis – this invisible network is the Church Jesus talked about in the gospel of Matthew. Not the institutional organization, but the group of real ‘disciples’: spiritual seekers of whatever religion or path, who are not wasting time calling “*Lord, Lord*”¹⁵³, but rather make a commitment in order to follow the divine will, the inner Christ abiding in the core of our hearts.

And I say also unto thee, that thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.¹⁵⁴

A few sentences before, Peter was able to recognize the ‘Christ’, beyond the external appearances of Jesus’s human personality.

Blessed are thou, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.¹⁵⁵

In return, Jesus emphasized the paramount quality expressed by Peter’s words: Faith, born of divine inner intuition (= the “*Father*”) and not of externally constructed belief (= “*flesh and blood*”). Such a Faith is the rock, not Peter himself. As the long tradition of commentators demonstrates, the Bible is not a history book meant to be interpreted literally, but it allows us to constantly dig within symbols.

Is it necessary to be hermits, in order to belong to such a ‘holy invisible church’? Well, in my humble experience I could perceive such a connection just by laying in my bed, with fever and nausea... So, I would

¹⁵³ *Mathew*, 7, 21

¹⁵⁴ *Ivi*, 16, 18

¹⁵⁵ *Ivi*, 16, 17

answer: “no”. Tolstoy says it beautifully, in his own remarkable work *The Kingdom of God is within you*:

The greater or less blessedness of a man depends not on the degree of perfection to which he has attained, but on the greater or less swiftness with which he is pursuing it.¹⁵⁶

In other words, the Christian Orthodox tradition says:

When we pray, there is at that moment nothing to distinguish us from the Saints.¹⁵⁷

Therefore, it is not a matter of our own level of spiritual realization, but it is a matter of the direction we walk towards.

When our *Hermits in Progress* team met again, a few days later, I felt we had developed a deeper connection. My fellows Eerika and Joni were smiling and, unexpectedly, they came and thanked me, with shining eyes, for having created the opportunity of such a walking retreat. I felt a unique closeness, as if our hearts were beating at the same pace.

I understood I participated in our roaming contemplation in my own way.

¹⁵⁶ Tolstoj, L. *The kingdom of God is within you*. Barnes & Noble, New York, 2005, p. 40

¹⁵⁷ *Racconti di un pellegrino russo*. Città Nuova, Roma, 2000, p. 221

Retreat 04 – Daily Mysticism – December 2013

The English writer Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) compares meditation to scientific experiments in a laboratory: the environment is clean, the working conditions are perfect, yet there is a wall separating laboratory-results from their application in the real world, where complexity and disturbances reign. If both aspects are equally important in science, the same rule should be valuable in the field of spirituality. In spiritual seeking, the work of formal meditation should be integrated with “*applied mysticism*” in daily life¹⁵⁸.

Our first three *Hermits in Progress* retreats, actually, were bringing us out of our average life-conditions. A forest, a chapel and random paths outside the city: they all were optimal environments for exploring solitude, naturally facilitating the development of a meditative mind-attitude. But one of the goals of our research was to make hermitic experiences possible in everyday life and available to average people.

We decided to walk a more challenging path, looking for different kinds of hermitage. We structured the most useful retreat I have ever done.

We attempted to awaken our ‘inner hermit’, spending a normal working and family week according to the following lines:

- Perform all duties being focused on the present moment
- Never complain but smile often
- Find at least two hours a day for solitude or meditation
- Sleep on the floor
- Eat with moderation
- Avoid unnecessary distraction
- Let people you meet go away from you better and happier
- Be happy

The retreat began with one hour of common meditation together with all participants and it ended one week later in same way.

At first sight, these few rules may look rather innocuous.

I supposed the most challenging rule would be, for me, sleeping on the floor, but anyway participants were allowed to rewrite their own rules

¹⁵⁸ Huxley, A. *L'uomo e Dio*. Piemme, Casale Monferrato, 1996, p. 118

according to their own needs and interests, and a couple of them decided to skip the ‘night-torture’! In my case, sleeping on the floor proved to be the easiest task.

The first great challenge for me was not to complain. After a few hours I clashed with the evidence that without complaining I could not find topics of conversation with those closest to me: what a horrible revelation, what an enormous blind side of me was revealed! I became aware of how many times I was tempted to regret the past or to worry about the future. Sharing such restless thoughts with others was a way to hide my emptiness or fear. I began to be afraid of not finding topics of conversation at all. But was it so? Did not I have any real interest in the people around me, other than using them as containers for my complaining?

I took the risk of not talking and accepting silence, till something genuine and true would come to my mouth. With my nearest and dearest, I discovered that conversations become happier and more grounded in the present moment, little by little. I could give time to listening to my beloved ones and to letting my own inner turbulence calm down. Without the cover of negative thoughts, my own inner light was able to come to the fore. Yet, in some situations, dealing with people who were not attending the retreat, it happened that they could unconsciously perceive that I was giving them more space than I used to do, and they took the advantage in order to show their own most childish and complaining sides... What a temptation of falling back into my old habits!

Smiling often was another challenge: in the beginning I had to force myself a little bit. But after one day I began to feel that this simple gesture of turning the corners of my lips upwards was affecting my mood positively¹⁵⁹. The first smile generated a new smile, and so on, spontaneously.

In general, throughout the week, I lived my normal life without any special change: working, taking care of my child and spending time with my girlfriend and beloved ones. My routine was same. But the idea of making a retreat out of it transformed my daily life into an interesting experience.

It felt easy to make others happy, especially people who did not belong to my closest circles. But with my family, I did not succeed in being present and loving them all time. I realized that I needed my moments of

¹⁵⁹ See: Kahneman, D. *Thinking fast and slow*. Penguin Group. London, 2011, p. 54

solitude: they were recharging my batteries. And when I was meditating, I had to be present only for myself. I also fell into computer-distractions and I played a bit too much chess on line. The challenges were so many and so overwhelming, that I had to surrender to the fact that it was impossible to live a perfect retreat, but compromises were needed. I felt it was easier and easier to look at myself with an attitude of forgiving compassion: what else could I do in front of all my limitations and imperfections? By truly loving myself, I could learn something about sincerely forgiving others too.

In general, I felt happier. I woke up enthusiastic about facing a new retreat-day and my 'sleeping on the floor' –task worked as a good reminder: I could never relax too much, I just rested the exact time I needed. I felt I was more alive. An interesting challenge happened halfway through the retreat, when I thought I had lost my mobile phone. After my spontaneous negative reaction, I reminded myself to smile, but my mind began to enumerate all the possible problematic consequences of my loss: should I write an announcement on Facebook? How could I advise all my pupils? ... The concept of being in a retreat helped me not to fall into deep negative moods or anxiety and transformed this accident into a stimulating competition against my destructive habits of complaining and going into panic. Anyway, my restless thoughts did not completely calm down, till I discovered I had just left my mobile phone at home!

I laughed at my frailty.

Differently from our previous *Hermits in Progress* retreats, this time the experience released long-term-aftereffects in me: I spent all the Christmas holidays smiling, keeping a special lightness inside me, as if I had overcome a dangerous enemy. For sure, the retreat gave me the opportunity to fight against some of my poisonous negative patterns.

If my most insignificant daily actions and thoughts could be transfigured into meaningful moments or stimulating trials by means of such a simple retreat-frame, how blessed must be those people who choose to dedicate their entire lifetime to spiritual growth: they are metaphorically living in a retreat, without necessarily being hermits, nuns or monks! That is indeed the provocation I got from such an experience: my positive mind-attitude is the key to making a masterpiece out of my life. Why not use it?

Retreat 05 – Simple Living – January 2014

“Dear friends: tomorrow, Saturday and Sunday I will not be reachable by phone or internet. If you want to talk with me, write me a letter or ring my doorbell. I love surprises!”: this was my last announcement on Facebook, before starting our fifth *Hermits in Progress* retreat.

The idea was to continue exploring ways of making spiritual hermitages available to people who cannot interrupt their daily working and family responsibilities.

If in our previous experience we focused on developing a positive approach towards everyday-life, by being present in the moment, this time we decided to take a more challenging step towards simplicity: performing our own material duties in the frame of voluntary poverty.

We spent three days according to the following lines:

- Total or semi-fasting (fruits allowed)
- No use of money
- No use of electronic devices (mobile-phones, computers and, possibly, electrical lights)

To some extent, I felt close to Saint Francis of Assisi (1181-1226): the poor Brother who lived exclusively on the charity of God. He used to walk along the streets of Assisi bare-footed, wearing a simple sack, he did not touch any money, he used to fast many days during his hermit periods, and of course, living in the Middle Ages, he had no access to electricity at all!¹⁶⁰

That ended up being the longest weekend of my life...

I was not worried about abandoning electric lights: candles awaken my romantic side! In wintertime, Finnish mornings are as dark as nights. Once accidentally I switched on the toilet-light: *“A life-long habit!”*, I said, and I switched off the light immediately, laughing aloud.

I started to appreciate the value of sunlight. It was difficult to read books in the evenings or early mornings, so I experienced the sunrise like a miracle and it was a joy to open my curtains and welcome brightness into my apartment.

¹⁶⁰ See: Petrocchi, G. *Francesco d’Assisi – Gli scritti e la leggenda*. Rusconi, Milano, 1983

Computer and telephone are my daily tools for working and communicating, yet I felt brave enough to challenge my patterns. Actually, switching off my mobile phone gave me a sense of justice: after years, my own privacy was restored. If somebody wanted to reach me, physical closeness was required. The world suddenly became more human.

Not using money was not problematic either, since I did not need food for myself and my son was spending the weekend at his mother's place. There was actually a complicated situation concerning the financial support which I was supposed to solve with the social services, but I decided to defer the business till after the retreat: surprisingly, at the end of the retreat I discovered that the situation had already been resolved. The only temptation happened on the second retreat-day, when I accidentally ended up in a market place selling wonderful wooden toys: I was disappointed not to be able to buy one of them for my son. But I reflected that I just gave him his birthday present the day before and it came up into my mind how many times I have been spending money too easily in order to satisfy some of my most superficial desires or just for an unconscious habit.

My only fear concerned avoiding food.

I never had a three-day fast before and I remember that the few times I did not eat for an entire day it was very difficult for me to sleep at night and the day after, when I began to eat again, I felt depressed.

I woke up on Friday morning at 4 a.m. with a terrible sore throat. I reflected aloud: "*I still ate yesterday evening: it cannot be caused by my fasting!*" . I did not want to repeat the scene of my third retreat, which I spent lying in my bed, but my son had just recovered from a two-week sickness with very high fever and my symptoms were rather similar...

I practiced meditation, Energization-Exercises (an empowering sequence of exercises meant to recharge the body with life-energy) and Pa Tuan Chin (a renowned traditional Chinese warm-up, mainly based on stretching and lengthening movements). I began to feel very relaxed, even though I had the impression of being closed inside a bubble... The first retreat-day had started.

I had a performance at midday, and my energies were still high. In the evening I went to my son's birthday-party. He knew that I would not eat those delicious cakes, candies, pizzas, and so on. He never criticizes my self-discipline choices. It was clear that he was just happy to have me there: for the rest, whether I were sleeping on the floor, fasting or singing Sanskrit

mantras, I believe he is used to having such an original parent and in the very end love is the only thing that really matters. It was, anyway, a paradoxical situation: being surrounded by loud, happy voices and plenty of food, without feeling hungry at all, keeping an unusual peace inside of me.

One of the first obstacles to fight against when you decide not to eat are friends and family: our ancestral fear of death may awaken many worries and consequently our nearest and dearest may begin to argue that such an extreme decision is wrong, undermining our determination¹⁶¹. In my case I was lucky. Or maybe, more realistically, people around me are used enough to my own extravagancies to respect them. A friend of mine commented on my fasting choice, defining it as ‘a privilege’. I loved that comment. It encouraged me.

On Saturday morning I woke up at 5 a.m. with an even more painful throat, feeling weak and definitely hungry. I ate two spoonfuls of honey and managed to fall asleep again. But the whole day seemed to be never-ending. I had to perform again at midday: I began to feel sick and I had no power, yet I could collect energies enough to endure my acting.

Some of my family members, not realizing my need to collect energies in order to endure my day, began to feel irritated because I was striving to practice meditation and my Exercises and I had no power to give them proper attention. My question was still open: to what degree is solitude possible for people who, like me, are living in the world, with a family and a job? What are the limits of ascetic discipline undertaken by a person with human worldly responsibilities? Our society seems to feel threatened by such choices of introspection: being outgoing and social are still considered the ‘right’ behaviors.¹⁶² My difficult situation put me against the wall: I had to admit that, at least in my specific case, in order to be able to stay with other people I needed solitude.

When I arrived home I had a high fever. I realized that feeling so awful was not caused by my fasting, but it was a sign that I was ill. Now, the biggest obstacle became me myself: I began to question whether I should interrupt my fasting, if I would seriously damage my body by prolonging such a severe discipline, if it would be better to eat some warm soup or porridge. In the evening I was hot. I had no possibility to measure

¹⁶¹ Yogananda. *L'eterna ricerca dell'uomo*. Astrolabio, Roma, 1980, pp. 111-116

¹⁶² See: Cain, S. *Quiet*. Broadway Books, New York, 2013

my temperature, but I would have not taken any medicine anyway. I decided to eat an orange and a banana: at least, they belonged to the ‘allowed’ foods in semi-fasting practice. I went to bed exhausted. My sleep was restless and I continually woke up. I was wet and my body was shaking.

Then the magic happened: suddenly, in the early morning of Sunday, I felt fresh and full of energy. I was not hungry at all, and I was easily able to perform one hour of Kung Fu training. I thought: “*My virus died of hunger!*”. And probably I was not so far from the truth: voluntary fasting has been proved to be an effective therapeutic tool, regenerating and detoxifying our body¹⁶³. Of course, for prolonged fasting it is necessary to have the supervision of an expert therapist and there are cases in which fasting is not recommended. An important point is to take care to drink enough water¹⁶⁴.

Throughout the first day of fasting, the body simply ends the digestion-process started with the food of the previous day. But it is absolutely false that after a few days of fasting our organism starts immediately to burn proteins, consequently consuming our muscles! This mechanism, named gluconeogenesis, may happen only after a remarkably prolonged fasting, practiced without proper advertences¹⁶⁵. What actually happens after one day of fasting is, indeed, miraculous.

Since sugars are no longer introduced by means of food, the organism activates a surviving mechanism generating a substance, starting from the dismantlement of fats, which optimally replaces glucose. This process is named ketogenesis and the substance produced is D-beta-hydroxybutyrate: a constructed of ketone-bodies which replace glucose as a principal fuel for the brain, reducing the work of the liver and kidneys and protecting cells from the exposition to toxins responsible for many neurodegenerative ailments¹⁶⁶.

The spiritual benefits of fasting have also been advertised by a long tradition of ascetics, belonging to many different religions¹⁶⁷. On my last retreat-day, I could really feel the difference in my meditation, in terms of depth, inner peace, capacity of concentration and energy.

¹⁶³ Riefoli, M. *Mangiar sano e naturale*. Macro Edizioni, Cesena, 2011, pp. 466-473

¹⁶⁴ Yogananda. *L'eterna ricerca dell'uomo*. Astrolabio, Roma, 1980, pp. 111-116

¹⁶⁵ Riefoli, M. *Mangiar sano e naturale*. Macro Edizioni, Cesena, 2011, pp. 466-473

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

On Monday, I began to introduce food into my stomach, little by little.

Even though I did not have a great urge to eat, a part of me felt really happy at tasting again the joys of good food!

I did not feel depressed at all.

Retreat 06 – Walk your Path – February 2014

After five challenging retreats, our team gathered together in order to share our experiences and to plan further developments for the *Hermits in Progress* project. We realized that a great change had happened already, inside and among us. In the very beginning of our journey we explored hermitic life in ‘protected’ environments, which were clearly separated from daily routines. Think about the forest of Nuuksio, in southern Finland, or the chapel of Kamppi, in the center of Helsinki. Then we shifted our attention towards daily life and we began to search for intriguing ways of making solitude and ascetic practices encounter the challenges of average working and family life. If in the beginning we were sharing the same framework, then we began to spread and work separately. If initially we were a group of individuals striving to walk together on the same path, later on we became a network of interconnected persons, each one of us living her/his own life individually: in freedom and solitude, a greater feeling of unity could develop among us.

After our first retreat I had the chance to interview a real hermit and when I introduced our artistic project to him, he warned me not to hope to grasp the essence of hermitic life just by having short retreats once a month. He said that the hermit choice requires the aim of embracing solitude forever. Solitude, he said, not loneliness. I agreed. Partly. Another side of me trusted my idea: our project was not just a matter of having short relaxing experiences once in a while. It emerged from a two-year research on silence, which was the spontaneous fruit of our lifelong searches: what greater commitment could there be, than our own unstoppable, sincere thirst for spiritual and artistic seeking?

This thought received confirmation during our meeting. We all expressed our feeling that there was no actual separation between the retreats: every time that we were learning some important lesson, it became natural to keep it alive throughout the month. We were gradually transforming ourselves into full-time-urban hermits.

The next challenge we decided to face was, for me at least, the subtlest one: listening to our own real needs.

The idea was to spend three days attempting to fulfill our own image of a perfect hermitage, focusing on those aspects of spiritual discipline which appealed to us the most, and which could help us to be in contact

with our own deepest self and with others. Adjustments according to working and family challenges were welcome as part of the retreat.

I found it very difficult to become aware of my actual needs. I could not take a decision about my retreat's rules till a few hours before the start. I reflected that I always had problems in making choices. Since my childhood I had been struggling with cosmic decisions, such as 'married life or monastic life', 'saving nature or being a warrior', 'becoming Superman or the Pope'. Later I met the challenge of deciding on which side to stand: Catholic or Hindu religion, Yoga practice or Christian prayer, acting in the theatre or practicing Kung Fu? Recently this fight has changed into: Kriyā Yoga meditation or Vipassana meditation, believing in God or in human beings? Usually the end result is that life puts the answer in front of me and I realize that my real difficulty is just to accept it. Letting go my own expectations towards myself and accepting myself as I am right now, accepting my life as it is right now: what a simple and painful process! Yet, without such an act of realism, I find it impossible to generate real changes and growth.

However, after questioning myself throughout a whole week about my basic needs, I was finally able to figure out three retreat-wishes:

- Sleep properly
- Eat fruits
- Meditate at least three hours a day

It was clear that such a retreat was not aiming to test my own limits, rather it was a space for taking care of myself: I needed to give rest to my body and to my stomach, and I desired to consolidate my habit of practicing long regular meditation-sessions.

This easy routine was not so far from my own average life, especially after I started the *Hermits in Progress* project, but by performing my actions within the retreat-frame, they assumed a deeper meaning. It was not the first time, actually, that the feeling of being in a retreat had helped me in maintaining a high level of awareness all day long. During one of my meditations I suddenly experienced a remarkable peace: I realized that I had just forgiven an old friend of mine, for a bad mistake that he committed years before. I had the intuition that I also have the potential of behaving really badly and hurting defenseless people as well as the potential of becoming a saint. I felt a sudden sympathy for my friend and something deep within me went to the right place.

At night then, I surprised myself having ‘spiritual dreams’. Once, in my dreams I was arguing with some monks about the nature of God, and I realized that I had not to continue begging for some external miracle to happen, in order to improve a certain situation, because God was not somewhere outside of me: my feeling of a need for a change was actually the ‘God within me’, asking to manifest His own presence by means of my own action. I was responsible for operating the miracle. In my dream, I manifested my doubts about the existence of God to an old monk. He answered me that it does not matter whether I believe or not in the existence of a God: I can practice the ‘presence of God’ as if God ‘did exist’ or in order to ‘make Him exist’, and that would be a much more constructive habit for me, compared to my own tendency of practicing the ‘presence of problems’, dwelling on my worries all day long!

Another night I saw a dream of my grandmother explaining to me how I can recognize a true experience of enlightenment. She said something like this:

When we are healthy, we do not pay attention to our own body. When we have some disease we start to have pain in some part of the body and we give our attention to it. In meditation we are asked to become aware of our body. When you are enlightened, you will not pay attention to your own happiness. You will simply be happy.¹⁶⁸

I know there is nothing original in such statements, maybe my subconscious was recollecting old knowledge I got from some books and shaping it freely into new forms by means of my dreams. Yet, I felt that in those days I was merged in an intense spiritual atmosphere, which did not abandon me even during my sleep.

Comparing my own retreat-structure with the rules my fellows decided to follow, I have noticed that this time we all gave priority to self-care. We were gentle to ourselves. We aimed for simplicity, following somehow the Zen golden rule: eat when you are hungry, sleep when you are tired, and drink when you are thirsty... being present in the moment.

At this point, we were exactly in the middle of our research process: six retreats more were in front of us. Six months more. I had no idea where all that would lead us. I felt excited, curious, and my heart whispered that such a process was much greater than I could see. “*Maybe*” - I started thinking – “*it is no longer a mere question of producing a performance out*

¹⁶⁸ Quote from my own diary

of this experience. It seems to be such a deep spiritual journey, that our research has begun to capture the interest of other people too. But what I desire the most is just to go on with the simplicity of a child, letting the results rest in the hands of Life.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁹ Ibid.

Retreat 07 – Meeting Hermits – March 2014

After six experiences of ‘self-made’ hermitage, our *Hermits in Progress* team had the opportunity to dive into a solid mystical tradition, spending one afternoon together with Catholic Carmelite-nuns. It may seem a short time, compared to the one-week retreats we had developed previously, but to me this was an encounter which shook me and awakened contradictory feelings of hope and suffocation and filled me with a sense of romantic fascination.

In the middle of a forest close to Espoo there is the only Carmelite cloister in Finland. For over 25 years a small community of nuns has been living secluded within the boundaries of this peaceful wooden monastery. They never leave that place unless for exceptional reasons and for very brief periods: it may happen once in three years. Their main activity is praying for others. The only reason for such a choice is, in their own words, their love for Christ.

After an intriguing interview with the nuns, we shared with them their evening routine: Vespers, prayer, chanting, reading and one-hour silent adoration.

I arrived at the place filled with memories of my Catholic period, when my favorite authors were Terèse de Lisieux (1873-1897), Teresa of Avila (1515-1582) and John of the Cross (1542-1591): the mystical spirituality of the Carmelites was not unfamiliar to me. I was excited to meet people who were embodying such an ascetic path of prayer and seclusion.

Despite my theoretical preparation, I felt overwhelmed by waves of love and joy as soon as the first nun came and welcomed us in front of the monastery door. It is hard to explain, but I believe that many persons who shared my experience could recognize that feeling of being in front of a ‘living’ person: the nun was full of life, in a way which looks more complete and at the same time more spontaneous and simple than our average way of being alive. It was like watching a soul without filters, and that soul was beautiful, joyful and extraordinarily approachable and humble. She showed us the chapel, where we spent a few minutes in silence.

Then another nun invited us into a small room, divided into two halves by a wooden bar. Behind it, four nuns came in one by one and sat on

chairs, smiling at us. They invited us to do the same: there were chairs for us as well on the other side of the bar.

They explained that in the monastery there were only four nuns. One of them passed away a few years ago and another one went back to Sweden in order to become a hermit: “*She will be my next target*” - I thought...

As soon as we started talking, I realized that the nuns were interested in my Catholic background. They admired my devotion to the Rosary prayer.

I felt locked: I could not express myself freely, for example opening the discussion towards a more ecumenical perspective. They put Christ before everything: Christ was the center of every action, and there was no space for doubts or questioning the very basis of their own belief. I felt that the depth of their spiritual work was not balanced by a curiosity towards other beliefs. I questioned whether that was fear, which prevented them creating the conditions for a fair dialogue, or maybe just ignorance.

In a way, it was a pity that such a great mysticism was so limited by the boundaries of their religious convictions. I admired the Carmelites for their commitment, but I felt suffocated by their unidirectional belief, which put me in the uncomfortable attitude of cutting off a huge part of myself.

Yet, I must admit that their simple presence was captivating. I perceived the power of their provocative choice in such an outgoing, extrovert and globalized society. Their life reminded me that my own value as a person is not necessarily related to the great things I do, but relies more simply in the way I do what I do. The inner motivation is actually more important than the external action.

The nuns live the same simple routine every day, throughout their entire life, performing normal actions which do not put their skills in evidence and which do not reveal any immediate utility for the rest of humanity, but that does not matter: the nuns are striving to fill every single breath with love.

I also reflected that these persons have been able to develop a great strength by being secluded in a few square meters, but probably they would feel lost if put into the ‘real’ big world. Yet, again, I realized that they were a perfect micro-cosmic example of everybody’s life-condition: maybe I feel I am a mature adult in my own society, but what if I were eradicated from my place? Furthermore: I am so proud of my independence, but could I survive outside of the ecological system of my planet?

The nuns explained that they are attempting to live each moment with the awareness of the 'presence of God'. I began to reflect on whether such an attitude is fundamentally different from the Zen attitude of living here and now. In the first case I am projected outwards, annihilating my ego in the fire of a greater love, which is rooted in the dialogue with an invisible living presence: the Christ. In the second case my attention is turned inwards, overcoming my ego by means of the deepening of my attention, looking for a contact with my real Self. On the other hand, at a certain level of contemplation it is possible to perceive the presence of Christ within, while the Zen goal of emptiness will be fulfilled by becoming fully present in the world. In both cases there is an attempt to overcome the ego. In both cases the meeting point between my real Self and Infinity relies on a positive change within me...

This is a very hard question to evaluate by means of theoretical comparisons. I can just say that when I met Zen nuns, they seemed to be more grounded in present real life while the Carmelites were more projected towards the coming heaven. Zen nuns were developing human compassion, while Carmelite nuns were in love with the humanity of the Divine. In both cases there was a great love and care in their actions and words.

I started to think that *Hermits in Progress* was leading us much further than we imagined: looking at spiritual seclusion phenomena with artistic eyes was offering us the opportunity to develop more creative approaches towards ascetic practices, free from the boundaries of a specific religious philosophy.

In the previous year I had had the opportunity to interview two Catholic hermits. In Assisi I spent one night sleeping on the street, close to an unusual monk which was attempting to live in the same condition of poverty as Saint Francis.

Despite the gentle approach of these hermits, I perceived a subtle pride for own religious belief: I felt that their wisdom vanished every time they pointed out the superiority of Christian belief compared to other spiritual traditions. As in the case of Carmelites, they were too 'partisans', without giving space to different worldviews for a fair comparison.

As I mentioned in the first part of this book, in order to facilitate a real encounter between religions the theologian Raimon Panikkar suggests

an approach of “*interpenetration*” and “*mutual fecundation*”¹⁷⁰ and he points out three basic criteria to make that possible: honesty in the search for truth wherever you can find it, intellectual openness without biased opinions and deep loyalty towards your own tradition. He wrote that “*the religion of my brother should be my religious problem as well*”¹⁷¹.

The Dalai Lama adds other provocative suggestions¹⁷², such as:

- Organizing meetings of academics with different religious backgrounds, discussing differences and analogies of respective traditions, in order to better empathize with each other.
- Promoting encounters between people of different religions who have had profound spiritual experiences, sharing what they were able to understand by means of their own practices, in order to enlighten each other in a deeper and more direct way.
- Regular meetings where leaders of different religions can pray together, in order to facilitate mutual understanding and tolerance.
- Encouraging people of different religions to go together on pilgrimage, visiting each other’s holy places.
- Meditation: when inner balance is established in me, following my own spiritual tradition, I will begin to experience a natural humility which will better allow me to communicate with people of different religions and cultures.

Coming back to my visit to the Carmelite cloister, I think that if on one hand the power of that way of living relies on the deep commitment towards its own specific mystical tradition, on the other hand the great risk of such a mono-religious worldview is fundamentalism: everything could become too black and white, right or wrong, and the inclusive mission of Christianity would end by producing separation and exclusion. I do not say that I met such an extreme contradiction there: the one-hour silent adoration together with the nuns actually gave me a remarkable feeling of union, pacifying my mental storm. Among all those points facilitating interreligious dialogue that I listed above, I am sure that the most important suggestion is already part of the daily routine of the Carmelite nuns: meditation! But I believe that a bit of sincere curiosity towards other spiritual practices could transform such a place into a universal (= catholic)

¹⁷⁰ Panikkar, R. *Il Cristo sconosciuto dell’induismo*. Jaca Book, Milano, 2008, p. 70

¹⁷¹ Ibid.

¹⁷² Dalai Lama. *Incontro con Gesù*. Mondadori, Cles, 2010, pp. 8-12

house of prayer, where for example people like me, with a stratified spiritual background, could feel accepted for what they are and find a fuller communion with those beautiful nuns, who did not escape the world because of fear, but who through seclusion are attempting to be one with each of us in the love of Christ.

Retreat 08 – Homeless Night – May 2014

One experience we had not faced yet was to live in the city. I mean, without a home. Our intention was to better understand the challenge of people who are forced to sleep without a roof, and to see whether the city as well, like the forest, could be transformed into a field for spiritual seeking.

The actual retreat was supposed to start on Saturday evening and to end on Sunday morning. By accident, I happened to anticipate the beginning of my homeless experience to the early morning of Saturday: I gave my Kung Fu class outdoors, in a beautiful park of Helsinki, close to the sea. I trained about three hours under the sun, and then I spent the rest of the day with my pupils, sitting in a sunny square in the city center. I just entered my apartment once, for a few minutes, in order to pick up my jacket for the night: in May, the difference of temperature between day and night is still remarkable, especially for my made-in-Italy body!

Yet, I immediately had to fight the coming sense of guiltiness: homeless people do not have a deposit for extra clothes. That thought reminded me to stay humble: I should avoid making a ‘perfect’ imitation of homelessness out of such a retreat and I had to learn to let go and surrender to my own limitations. Again, I ‘reviewed’ the paramount lesson I learnt from *Hermits in Progress*, which is valuable for both artists and spiritual seekers: perfectionism is the greatest obstacle to perfection!

At 9:15 p.m. I found myself sitting on a rock, in a small park close to my own area. I had a terrible headache, probably because of the excess of sun I had been exposed to throughout the day. It was still bright, the street lights were still off, and I began to read a book I had with me. Two ducks, clearly a male and a female, appeared from behind me and stopped a few paces from me. They began to eat something in the grass. I started to read again. Then a hare crossed my path. I followed it with my eyes, till it disappeared behind some trees. I started reading again, but it got darker. I was not cold and I began to explore the area, in order to find a possible sleeping place for the night. I met another special guest: a hedgehog. I began to reflect that night time is the only moment when humans leave some space to other creatures for living in peace and freedom.

I actually found a nice place to sleep, between two trees, but it felt not safe enough: too close to human streets. I went to another park and suddenly I realized why those comfortable benches are divided by an

awkward metallic armrest: so that people would not fall into the temptation of sleeping on them! Oh, kind and welcoming city! Under the warm porticoes of the railway station it is forbidden to sleep, and the police remove you immediately. You cannot sleep in parks, so, where can you go if you have not a roof over your head? I continued walking till I reached a small island, close to a bay of Helsinki. I found a wooden structure built on the sea which, in daytime, photographers use for bird watching. I entered it, I sat and meditated.

I opened my eyes and, in the darkness of the sea, I saw two swans. I finally felt tired and I slept on the wooden bench. In the middle of the night my phone rang: a participant in the retreat was willing to join me if I was not too far away. I gave her instructions how to find me and I fell asleep again. When she arrived, we still slept for a few minutes, then the humidity of the sea entered our bones and we had to move back to the city. We walked silently and rapidly, in order to warm our bodies. We found a round space in the shape of an amphitheatre. We sat on the stairs and meditated for about twenty minutes. My headache continued. The other participant felt too tired and decided to end her retreat. I escorted her home. I waited in the courtyard till she brought me a painkiller for my headache. I walked a little further towards the center, then the weight of a full day of outdoor life made me feel exhausted. A couple of drunk people passed by.

I compared my feelings with the emotions I experienced when I spent one night in the forest. In the woods, I was aware of the noises of nature surrounding me, I was afraid of wild animals but I felt safe in the arms of Mother Nature: in the very end, that is the place where we all come from and we have built our prisons-cities in order to feel safer. Yet, now it was clear to me that my greatest fear was not wild nature, but human beings!

In the forest everything is organically interconnected. Our bodies are supported by the life which pulses everywhere around us: trees purify the air we breathe, rivers bring water we share with other creatures, we walk on soft grass, nurtured by living earth, where insects build their paths, mushrooms and roots are digging in silent communion, bird-songs embrace the whole environment and there is no clear separation between me and the rest of the world, since everything is for everybody and I am a gift to the forest as well. Wild animals have the natural tendency to respect you, if you respect them.

In the city there is separation, fragmentation and disconnection. Street-lights, advertisements, cars, buildings are producing an artificial network which actually suffocates the sense of unity and kills life. Human beings go crazy and become the greatest danger you could meet.

After a moment of reflection, where I considered how humans have the unnatural tendency to humiliate themselves, avoiding their own wonderful potential to expand freely and allowing themselves to become prisoners of their own fears and destructive habits, I realized it was time to stop thinking like as if I were an alien from another planet. I felt a kind of empathy for my human fellows and I prayed for us all. I think that many of us are sincerely trying our best to bring light into the world. Maybe we should stop trying: let's just do it straight away!

My idealistic moment passed in a few minutes and I realized that I was, maybe, too tired for philosophical considerations. My feet brought me back towards my area. I sat on the stairs of the amphitheatre once again and I just read my book till my headache ceased.

The sky was bright again when I finally came back home, at 3:45 a.m.

I had been outdoors only 18 hours, but it appeared to me like an eternity. My feeling was that I had done something special and magical. I had been able to face and overcome one of my great limitations: staying out in the city at night. Even though I did not spend a lot of effort in spiritual or artistic practices, I felt that there was a lot of happening inside me. Buddhists say: "*Zen-mind = beginner-mind*". I was indeed a beginner in such a foreign situation and everything tasted fresh and intense. I was there, present in the moment. Even while sleeping or reading, the challenging external conditions were grounding me in the actual situation.

I happened to read somewhere that spending a homeless night is a Buddhist practice meant to develop empathy and understanding of our poorer fellows. Furthermore, it helps to develop non-attachment towards pleasant or unpleasant external conditions, reminding us that peace and happiness can be found exclusively within ourselves.

One year before, I had already spent one night sleeping under the porticoes of the small holy town of Assisi, in Italy. Now I was in a bigger metropolis and I perceived a much more restless surrounding environment: it was not a matter of chance that the only place where I felt safe enough to fall asleep was in nature, close to the sea. In Assisi I was easily able to fall

asleep sharing my stony bench with a friend of mine and I woke up full of energy. In Helsinki I was afraid to fall asleep and I arrived home very tired.

Even though my rational mind could not put into words the meaning of such a hard retreat, when I went back to work, the day after, I felt I had added a new stone of joy to my inner castle of peace and happiness.

Retreat 09 – Full day Meditation – May 2014

Since in April we skipped one session of hermitage, the weekend after our homeless night we organized a full-day-meditation in the Sesshin style (攝心, literally ‘touching the heart-mind’): in one room of the Theatre Academy of Helsinki we practiced an enjoyable system of Zen-meditation which alternated sitting, walking periods and short breaks as well, all performed with the same mindfulness. The session was guided by Rev. Henri Järvinen, and it was open to all interested people.

Some students of the Theatre Academy and some members of the school-staff attended the meditation as well.

In the field of spiritual seeking, I am more and more convinced that nothing happens by accident. At least, this retreat came just at the right moment of my life and it worked on me as a powerful reminder of the benefits coming from silence and stillness.

Throughout the last month, I had gradually replaced my daily practice of meditation with more intense sessions of Kung Fu training. I consider Kung Fu an effective system of dynamic meditation and, for certain reasons, it feels very suitable to my personality. Because of some feelings of rejection, I had drastically reduced my sitting periods of Vipassana-practice. This was not a new issue in my life: I have a rooted tendency to alternate more dynamic phases with more introspective periods, in the course of a year. I believe this is not necessarily a bad thing: Yin and Yang, the two dynamic principles of the universe, are supposed to vibrate together in a spontaneous dance of waves, where the rising of one aspect marks the diminishing of the other and vice-versa, giving rest to each other and maintaining a balanced relationship of harmony. The renowned Kung Fu –Master Da Liu (1905-2000) reminds us that even within the frame of a single day it is important to alternate the practice of dynamic meditation (such as T'ai Chi) with moments of sitting meditation¹⁷³.

But I was probably abandoning the middle path of balance, becoming the victim of my habit of looking for extremes: I was starting to work unidirectionally, by overtraining Kung Fu and suspending sitting meditation. And this attitude brought me to exhaustion: if on one hand

¹⁷³ Da Liu, *Tai Chi Chuan e meditazione*. Ubaldini, Roma, 1988, p. 14

sitting meditation appeared to me like a boring practice, on the other hand Kung Fu -training was becoming too heavy.

The Sesshin-practice that Rev. Henri offered us proved to be extremely therapeutic. I was a bit afraid that jumping straight into a full-day-meditation after a one-month-break could simply pull me definitively apart from any spiritual routine. But the session was structured in a clever way: twenty minutes of sitting meditation, ten minutes of walking meditation, twenty minutes of sitting, five minutes for a break, and then again, in the same order. Unexpectedly, it felt easy to stay there. And without any apparent effort, I found myself in a deep status of awareness. At the end of the session, my mind was calm, fresh and renewed. I recognized the same condition of quiet that I had experienced many times when I used to practice my daily meditation.

How could it happen that meditation became boring to me? Where did my rejection-feelings come from? Why was I about to quit that practice? Maybe, previously, I had exaggerated in the opposite sense: meditation practice had become more important than my daily life; my 'ego' had begun to identify itself with meditation and got frustrated when I did not find more time for that practice. In other words: I became too attached to meditation practice and I confused the tool with the goal. I got restless if I had only twenty minutes for meditating instead of a full hour and sometimes I did not start at all. I had become stressed and perfectionist. And the same thing was going to happen with my Kung Fu practice. Attachment and repulsion go together, like Yin and Yang.

However, after the full-day meditation, it was absolutely clear that a part of me was longing for such a calm status of mind.

I reflected about the meaning of spiritual practices and about the criteria for choosing them.

Starting from the last point, I believe that a simple criterion is what Saint Paul suggested: "*Test all things, hold fast what is good*"¹⁷⁴! If meditation or Kung Fu give me results of wellbeing and mental peace, they are good practices. It does not make sense to give time to an activity in the mere hope of some future benefit, just because I have been told or taught that it will happen. My personal experience should be the main testing room. It is true: sometimes results do not arrive immediately. A bit of faith,

¹⁷⁴ 1 Thessalonians, 5, 21

trust and commitment are required. But it is not wise to sacrifice an entire life waiting for something good, if waiting makes me become sad, closed, frustrated or depressed. Life is not very long: I should fill it with actions which help me to be a better person right now.

And here comes the first point: the meaning, or purpose of spiritual practices. They should help me to be a better person right now. To feel better now. To live my life and not to renounce my life. Whatever choice I make, whatever challenges and obstacles will come, I will get frustrated, bored, stressed. I will experience doubts. My spiritual practice is good to the extent that it sustains me also in such critical phases. Whenever I am aware that my spiritual practice starts to reduce my inner potential, maybe it is wise to stop it. But how can I be sure whether my practice is sustaining me or weakening me? It is possible that, in order to eradicate some negative habits, I have to make an effort which apparently seems to be against my own nature. It is possible that in such a case I would feel (my 'ego' would feel) diminished and humiliated.

In the midst of doubts, commonsense suggests to me to use wisdom: whenever I notice that love towards myself includes others as well; whenever the respect towards myself develops together with kindness towards others; if I do not obsessively attach myself to my own spiritual practices, but I firmly keep in mind the goal of living a full life; well... these are all symptoms revealing that I am working towards an uplifting direction.

On the other hand: whenever my spiritual practice becomes more important than my life; when my ego is so identified with the practice that I begin to believe that I cannot live without it; when I get nervous or restless and I love myself, excluding others – in such a case I am maybe walking in a degrading direction.

Furthermore, it is possible that I come upon a good spiritual practice, but after a while I start to feel a sort of repulsion because I am afraid of suffering: sometimes it is painful to eradicate degrading tendencies, and I may experience feelings of discouragement, boredom or restlessness as well. I would say that these were precisely the kind of feelings that brought me to my crisis. I became blind and incapable of seeing that I was actually working to improve myself and I was preparing a 'gift' to the world at the same time. My mind was confused, but I did not travel in the wrong direction till my actions started to follow my thoughts: little by little, I was giving up daily meditation and I was close to reaching a peak of exhaustion

with Kung Fu too. In such a peculiar case, the fault was not my choice of ‘wrong’ spiritual practices, but my attachment to them, which definitely was an attachment to my ego and led me towards repulsion.

Providentially, the *Hermits in Progress* retreat rescued me.

After that day I started again to harmonically integrate Kung Fu and meditation, paying a special attention in order to avoid fanaticism.

In the very end, if I am fully aware and I do it with my own whole heart, isn't it much more fruitful to spend the whole evening playing with my son? At that point, who could tell where is the difference between life and spiritual practice?

Retreat 10 – Sharing Practices – June 2014

Think of a small flower growing in the remotest spot on the top of a mountain. Nobody ever sees it. Nobody ever rejoices in its perfume. The flower receives nourishment from sun, rain, earth, and lives its life in tune with the laws of nature, till it dries up and dies. Why?

You can imagine, if you like, that the purpose of such a hidden beautiful life is giving joy to its Creator. Or you may think the flower is a gift to the whole world, no matter where it is, since all beings are interdependent. If you believe in reincarnation, you could assume that the flower is in the best possible condition, according to its own karma, for its evolution.

All these theories are great tools to defeat the feeling of powerlessness it may come when you question the meaning of life. Furthermore, they may help you to live fully and with hope, whether by offering you a direction, a goal, the feeling you are beloved, that you are not alone, or encouraging you to focus on the present moment.

Of course, you are free to decide that there is no meaning at all, and live happily as well.

We do not know if the flower feels lonely or not. We do not know if solitude unavoidably carries with it a feeling of loneliness or not. Whatever interpretation you may choose, one thing is sure: that flower lives its solitary life.

We could say the same thing about a hermit.

Ten months had passed since we began our *Hermits in Progress* research. The moment came to gather together and find a way to share some of our discoveries.

We spent two days at Luova Kasvu (a beautiful retreat-place in the countryside, close to Espoo), sharing, showing or teaching one of our personal daily spiritual/artistic routines to each other: our ‘solitary flowers’ growing on the top of a mountain had the chance to be seen at least once, receiving respect, tenderness and love.

Between the sessions we observed silence.

Is there any purpose in creating a window through which you can look at the ‘solitary flowers’? As an artist, I believe it is my duty to offer the

audience a chance to become aware of their own undiscovered beauty. And that often happens whenever I give something honest of myself, when I offer the audience my own hidden ‘flowers’.

But the second question is: how can the hidden flower remain so pure when it is hidden no longer? What happens when a solitary practice is shared?

That was, indeed, our challenge this time.

We decided to start our retreat by preparing lunch together. While eating, our spontaneous conversation naturally ended up focusing on the experience we had just begun. We realized that the retreat did not need any rigid structure, but it should maintain such a nature of spontaneity. After lunch, we found ourselves speechless: it was clear that words were needed no longer and that we would continue in silence. We gave ourselves one hour to rest and think what kind of ‘solitary flower’ we were willing to share.

I did not think, I just slept. After one hour, I went to the dance-hall and sat on the floor. Little by little we all gathered together. Without a word, we began to meditate. After another hour, without any common sign, we started to move: someone was stretching, someone else was practicing yoga asanas, I warmed up as I usually do, with the Chinese Pa Tuan Chin exercises. That was an absolutely unpredicted solution to the challenge of sharing private practices while maintaining the freshness of a spontaneous action. We were in the same space, aware of the rising up of a common, powerful dynamic energy, even though each of us was focused on her/his own personal practice.

Another hour passed, when one participant wrote that she was going to walk in the forest, looking for special herbs for our dinner. Some of us followed her in her trip. In the forest, we ended up hugging trees, practicing Ch’I Kung and improvising a dance choreography in slow motion, each of us following different needs and impulses.

When we came back I began to practice T’ai Chi. Some of the others joined the practice and followed my movements. Some others just watched. I felt the mutual trust was already so deep that I never had the feeling of ‘being on stage’. There was no separation of roles between observers and practitioners. After dinner, we meditated together for another hour. I went and slept in a separate building, where I could be completely alone.

When I woke up in the morning, most of the participants were gathered in the dance-hall and were moving. I just watched. It felt easy to observe without judgment. I think that we succeeded because we were very careful to preserve personal freedom throughout the retreat. Silence and shared meditation helped us to be attuned with each other. Mutual trust followed as a natural consequence.

Then we moved upstairs, we sat in front of a cross and we meditated in silence for one hour. Coming down from meditation, I found one of the participants in the dance hall, in the midst of her daily ballet warm-up. She was focused on repeating simple and extremely difficult gestures. It was clear she had been repeating the same actions throughout an entire life. The energy and concentration she was expressing reminded me of the way I usually practice my Kung Fu basics when I am alone.

And I was convinced once more that everything may become meditation. Even the simple ritual of washing your face in the morning, if performed with full awareness, no doubt: it is meditation!

The second day proceeded with a series of small, beautiful, unexpected events, including a touching duo of authentic movement under a flowering tree. We broke our silence during lunch. I realized that everything that happened there could be considered a performance. But nothing else happened but meditation, in a wide range of possible expressions.

I think this has been the first concrete hint about how to develop a performance out of our *Hermits in Progress* research. Furthermore, the reason for such a performance became very clear to me: encouraging the world to be aware of its secret beauty.

Retreat 11 – Living Forest – June 2014

After our first retreat in the forest, in September 2013, we never had other opportunities to experience such a deep connection with nature again, till the end of June 2014. Finally, we were able to organize a new retreat in the woods.

This time we chose a mountain, on the beautiful Italian island of Sardinia.

In the picturesque area of ‘Sulcis Iglesiente’ there is a small town named Nuxis. Right at the foot of the town, a wonderful mountain covered in olive trees, prickly pears and junipers embraces the whole valley.

We spent one week on the top of the mountain: a friend of mine had inherited a small part of the forest and decided to make an artistic retreat-place out of it. No one had taken care of that area for many decades, so our main activity would be to clean and rebuild the narrow paths which were covered by undergrowth and thorns. Furthermore, we had to identify a few areas where we could create some space for sleeping and for having artistic activities.

Even though we were aiming to stay on the mountain throughout the retreat, we had actually to visit the town once a day to pick up food, because, I must admit, we were not expert enough with long-term-retreats in nature. At least, we learnt a lot about how to survive on the mountain and next time we will be prepared for a more radical full-immersion.

The first day we visited the forest and we checked all the boundaries of my friend’s property, we identified an area for sleeping and we built our tents.

We had our first meditation around a giant 500 year-old-olive-tree. We baptized it with the name of ‘Elios’. The powerful energy and calm majesty emanated by the tree left profound marks in my heart. We all agreed that before cutting any brush or tree, we had to ask permission of the forest, and whatever change we were aiming to do in that area, it should be suggested by nature itself.

As had happened in my first retreat, I felt that the enchanting beauty of the mountain was counterbalanced by a lot of small disturbances: mosquitos, ants, ticks, a lot of bushes full of thorns, a pitiless Sun which

burned our skins, and, in addition to this, I had an injury to my ankle which made every step painful.

Fortunately, I could always go and take rest in the shadow of our old Elios.

We decided not to follow a structured program, but we agreed on how to behave in the retreat. We were free to talk: this time we were confident that an intense day of hard work in nature would automatically reduce our talks to very essential sentences.

I was afraid that I would not to be able to fall asleep on such dry ground full of stones and actually every night I felt very uncomfortable. But in one way or in another, I always fell asleep, at least for a short while.

The sleeping place was situated in one of the few areas where the slope was not too steep. But the most evocative thing was that our tents were built around an ancient metal-cross, which is visible from the town and which used to be the destination of the Christian 'Via Crucis' procession: before going to sleep, from that privileged point of view we could admire the whole valley and meditate in front of the infinity of a starry sky.

Days passed and we built our own routine. We woke up at 6:30 a.m., with the sound of the bells arriving from the church of Nuxis. We had a one-hour-meditation at the feet of Elios, then breakfast, followed by one hour of T'ai Chi practice. Then we began to work. The days were ending the other way around: one hour of T'ai Chi and one hour of meditation under the cross.

Among all the *Hermits in Progress* retreats, this was the only experience where we explored the dimension of a common rule of living, like in monasteries. The curious thing was that it just happened spontaneously: we actually never discussed our routine and we knew we were free to break the rhythm and do something else.

Our work of cleaning the forest was hard and I decided to live it as a session of *Karma-Yoga*: the path that, according to Hindu philosophy, leads towards God by means of unselfish actions, accomplished without attachment to their results¹⁷⁵. By altruistically serving, by offering your deeds to God, you free yourself from the boundaries of your ego and you

¹⁷⁵ Yogananda. *Verso la realizzazione del Sé*. Astrolabio, Roma, 2006, p. 401

may come to know God¹⁷⁶. This thought was giving me the strength to resist.

On the other hand, we attempted to adjust the areas and the paths according to our own artistic sensitivity, taking into account the esthetics of the natural environment and attempting to act in communion with Mother Nature. In this sense, the strain was tempered by the excitement of shaping the environment.

During the last days, we found time to arrange small artistic installations making use of stones, woods, and other material we collected in the forest.

I felt very tired and I started to experience ups and downs with my mood. I surprised myself being the victim of negative and restless thoughts, feelings of emptiness and discouragement.

Before leaving, I went to the feet of Elios.

At that moment I was thinking of my beloved grandmother. I was sure she had died with a beautiful thought in her heart: her own great-grandchild, my son. I realized that was also my own beautiful thought. I felt rich. There was no longer space for depression.

After the retreat, we all had a talk in front of a big Italian pizza.

We shared the feeling of having re-encountered our own origins as human beings. We felt sorry for all those moments when we were working mechanically, because of the strain, and we were temporarily losing the awareness that we were dealing with a 'living thing'. Every single tree, each leaf, the whole forest, the mountain, everything was pulsing and breathing.

We felt grateful for the profound lesson of presence and awareness we received just by being there.

I realized that, as the small ants were inhabiting Elios by moving on its surface and digging their caves inside its bark, we are all inhabiting the Earth, which is, indeed, alive! It is hard to understand it, when I am living in a much less alive environment like the city, spending most of my time closed inside those cement-boxes which we name 'houses'.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid.

We expressed the desire to commit even more to listening to nature, maybe adding the rule of complete silence in a future retreat, and orienting every activity towards the goal of being in tune with the Life which surrounds us and which, as a matter of fact, we are part of.

Retreat 12 – Empty House – October 2014

Our twelfth and last *Hermits in Progress* retreat was a surprise.

The day before the start we were told that the place we had booked was no longer available: we had twenty-four hours to find another location.

After a few hours of calls and e-mails we accepted the offer of a friend of a friend, who had an empty apartment of two-hundred square meters in a small town close to Helsinki. There was no furniture and a lot of rooms. We chose the biggest room for the meditations and for the movement improvisations, then we all spread around the house and each of us chose a spot for sleeping. I found an appealing space downstairs, inside a closet, where the roof was so low that I could just sit or lie, and the darkness was perfect. It reminded me of the narrow caves in the renowned ‘Eremo delle Carceri’: the mountain where Saint Francis of Assisi and his Brothers used to have their hermitages.

There were nine participants.

Throughout the retreat we observed silence and we followed a simple and flexible program, which provided two hours of meditation per day and a lot of time for free personal practices.

The personal practices could include: meditation, prayer, reading, moving, dancing, T’ai Chi, Yoga, drawing and any other silent practice facilitating concentration and awareness that responded to our needs and interests. The personal practices could be performed in solitude or sharing the same space with the other participants. Furthermore, we could choose to share the same practice with someone else, with mutual agreement. We were free to seek isolation and to break the rules according to our intuitions of the moment.

After our first meditation, some of the participants wanted to practice T’ai Chi, so we had a one-hour session of collective training which felt extremely powerful and energizing, in the frame of silence. One of the participants was taking pictures. Another went out for a walk. After the T’ai Chi session, I spent some time alone reading a book that I would recommend to all spiritual seekers: the *Imitation of Christ*. This book, traditionally attributed to Thomas a Kempis, is a classic of the Christian literature of the Middle Ages which had the good fortune to be welcomed in many other religious environments as well because of its grounded-to-earth

approach to asceticism. Exception made, maybe, for its fourth chapter, which is more strictly related to Catholic specificities, the book provides a sort of ‘transversal’ language, human and simple, able to speak to people of different beliefs and ages.

Before dinner I still had a session of contact improvisation with another participant, which ended with a brief meditation as a pair, looking into each other’s eyes. At the same time another small group of participants improvised funny silent experiments in the forest, such as climbing trees blind-folded or jumping in a circle onto dry bushes. I must confess that these ‘crazy’ artistic moments had a liberating effect in the context of our retreat: by alternating periods of introspection and concentration with periods of freedom and open awareness, the retreat had a breathing pulse, where inner work and self-expression, solitude and shared practices were balancing each other, avoiding the creation of an atmosphere of ‘fake holiness’, where seriousness combined with the automatic habit of smiling to each other could lock us inside a forced and non-honest mood.

After the evening meditation I entered my ‘cave’ in the closet and I had a hard night on a hard floor.

On the following morning I meditated in the big room, where two participants were actually sleeping. The co-existence of sleep consciousness and meditative awareness in the same space felt fascinating, like a symbol representing the subtle boundary separating the sleeping humanity from its awakening through the experience of enlightenment.

I went out for a walk in the forest. As usually happens when I start a period of introspection, this time too I soon came to face my inner heaviness, my negative thoughts and emotions. I felt that the natural surrounding was able to receive my suffering.

Before the *Hermits in Progress* project had started, I had decided to involve the practice of Catholic Rosary too in my research. But one year had passed already and I had not practiced it yet. I knew why I did not pray for such a long period: I had lost my faith and I will probably have religious certainties no longer. Spiritual theories become dogmas and therefore truths to the followers of a religion. But a ‘scientist’ of spiritual seeking unfortunately never forgets that theories are the imperfect and always relative attempt to give unity and understanding to the few objective phenomena we can really name as truths: we live, we die; we do not know

what life and death are; we suffer and we look for happiness; we do not know the reason for all this and we do not know if there is any answer at all.

However, I had the intuition that meditation without prayer was missing something. Meditation helped me to know myself, to explore my mind and heart, to enter the depths of my center. But I still had the vivid memory of how praying and chanting had given me, in the past, the feeling of expressing myself from the depths of that center. Self-awareness and self-expression nourish each other like inhalation and exhalation in the act of breathing.

Within the structure of the *Hermits in Progress* research, this was my last chance to pray. After a half an hour of walking I met a small lake. Gazing at the calm water, I took the Rosary out of my pocket. I had the impulse to pray, even though I did not know any more what or whom to pray to and what prayer actually was.

Since it was Sunday, I chose to focus on the Catholic Glorious Mysteries: the Resurrection of Jesus, the Ascension, the Descent of the Holy Spirit, the Assumption of Mary into Heaven and the Coronation of Mary. Before praying the first series of ten 'Ave Marias', I meditated on the first topic: the Resurrection. I realized that I was overwhelmed by a desperate sensation of disbelief and I did not want to force myself into an act of worshiping which would insult my honesty towards myself.

Suddenly, I was surprised by a simple idea: I will pray the Rosary through my doubts! My prayer will share my inner debate with the Unknown. By doing that, I will express myself.

I looked at the mystery of the Resurrection with a new courage. It would be easy to take such a magical story literally, yet it seemed to me a very partisan and partial explanation for overcoming the human fear of death: by coming back to life, Jesus proved that death is not our end; furthermore in the Gospels we can find a few allusions to the resurrection of the bodies. Personally, I have no problems in accepting that Jesus rose from the dead. But I have no preconceptions either in interpreting the resurrection of the bodies as a symbol representing the renewing of our 'inner temple' of consciousness from unawareness to awareness. I cannot even exclude that the myth of the resurrection of Jesus was built by fanatical disciples: it is sufficient to look at how easily the followers of modern gurus tend to create an aura of magic and to attribute miracles to their spiritual leaders. Furthermore, in our globalized era we have access to other reasonable

theories developing the same topic, adding interesting nuances to the question of life after death, such as the theory of reincarnation, the law of karma, or the Buddhist concept of rebirth, which actually eliminates the idea of an individual soul.

As in physics different theories can be regarded as aspects of the same underlying theory, I can imagine that in spiritual seeking too different religious theories can be regarded as attempting to enlighten different aspects of the same question. Yet, while in science we have been able to imagine the unifying M-theory, which may be understood as a ‘family’ of different theories, in spiritual seeking the problem is still open, since there are no objective phenomena we can observe and analyze in a third-person modality and we rely on our subjective experiences. Religious theories are therefore remarkably more fanciful and affected by cultural traditions than scientific theories are, and this specificity is also the reason why religions easily resonate in tune with our human hearts: in saying that I do not mean that science is better than religion or vice-versa, but that for spiritual theories we need a different treatment. I think that building a syncretic universal religion would correspond to creating an artificial universal language out of the many existing on our planet: it would flatten and kill the bio-diversity of our living human society which is a fundamental factor for its survival. That is why a pluralist approach to religion, which promotes coexistence and acceptance of all religious paths as equally valid, especially if it is grounded in subjective direct experience, sounds to me like a more reasonable tool for spiritual seeking.

And that is why sometimes I feel full of fear: I have no more solid truths on which I can build my worldview. I have only flexible directions. Without dogmas life looks unstable. But that is the price for being completely honest with me. This path requires a lot of courage and there are moments when I feel I am lacking in it.

After this long, detailed reflection, I finally started to recite the series of ‘Ave Marias’ without focusing on the literal meaning of the words of the prayer, but simply opening my doubts, thoughts and feeling to the Unknown. The prayer was a channel helping me to connect my deep heart with the trees around me, with the lake, with the birds, my fellow humans, the rest of the universe, Life. The effect was calming and comforting. Probably the same consequence could happen with any other system of prayer, but it felt easier to use a method I had practiced for years.

I came back to our hermitage and I still practiced some spinal-adjustment training on the floor, then the whole group gathered for the final meditation.

When we finally broke the silence, we understood that each of us had had the precious opportunity to deal with important aspects of her/his life. The abundance of free time in the flexible retreat-structure allowed surprising discoveries, encounters and experiments to happen between and inside of us. It was intriguing to observe how easily we could shift from isolation to collective action and vice-versa. On myself, I could analyze and observe the regular wavering of my emotions from discouragement to fun, from anger and frustration to enthusiasm and hope.

The thing I will always remember is that this was the first time in my life that I participated in a retreat where silence was broken every now and then by sincere and full-hearted laughter!

Make your retreat

Three years of artistic experiments with silence and solitude have passed.

Even though I feel that this research is just a ‘newborn baby’, I cannot deny that some results are available already. In particular, I can affirm that we are holding in our hands stimulating tools for creating artistic/spiritual retreats.

In this chapter I will recollect the main points of the *Hermits in Progress* journey, attempting to offer the reader a recipe for creating a personalized retreat in the frame of an average life-routine.



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

In the event you are interested in experiencing a hermitage in your daily life, I believe it is important not to rely exclusively on my descriptions: the challenges and the revelations that I have met throughout my journey do not always correspond to the difficulties and discoveries that the other participants in the retreats have faced. Therefore, in the next few pages I will give space to the feedback of my companions, in the hope that their comments will help you to approach the experience a bit more prepared.

Let us consider, for example, the way the participants have experienced nature. The variety of the feedbacks seems to suggest that when we encounter nature with the intention of working spiritually we must be ready for surprises.

My experience with nature changes according to my moods. In general, for me nature is a source of energy and peace, but when I am not at peace with myself it becomes threatening and claustrophobic.¹⁷⁷

This feedback describes nature as a ‘mirror of the soul’, reflecting our inner changes and, even more, magnifying them positively and negatively as well. Throughout the retreats in the forest, all of us experienced nature as a powerful and living presence.

I experienced nature like this: as an immense welcoming home where the walls are alive and vital, heavily populated but with room for all; where you may touch balance and harmony and where - if you are not accustomed to respecting the rules of this harmony - you are given an opportunity to learn and rediscover them and, by doing so, simply, you learn to know and rediscover yourself.¹⁷⁸

Yet, as the first feedback showed, we were not always in the condition to receive the energy of nature. However, the frame of the retreat allowed us to look at our emotional changes with awareness. The first feedback continues like this:

On the retreat-day, being myself in a status of distress and having disturbing thoughts, I felt vulnerable in nature.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Feedback by participant 1, my translation

¹⁷⁸ Feedback by participant 2, my translation

¹⁷⁹ Feedback by participant 1, my translation

In this case the participant was aware of his inner turbulence and his awareness made it possible for him to transform suffering into an opportunity for meditating. In fact, he concludes:

I had the opportunity to face my fears and some negative experiences of my past on a deeper level. The retreat helped me to bring my thoughts to the surface, to observe them and to better understand myself.¹⁸⁰

The other side of the coin was the energizing effect of being merged in nature, when the inner status of the participant was open to creative interactions:

I found myself being naturally related with my environment, grateful for the air and the nature and the people all around me. My creativity was also growing out of natural alignment with my focusing on perceiving impulses emanating from inside into momentary manifestations of movement and silent actions.¹⁸¹

In some cases, nature became an object of contemplation:

On the surface level nature seems to be calm and peaceful but if you take a closer look there is a whole lot happening in there – the whole cycle of life and death. The decay is a reason for all the beauty around us.¹⁸²

And from contemplation, some were reached by a moment of pure bliss, such as in the following example.

One night, I entered the bushy forest and my attention was captured by the dark blue sky, intense, with no moon, a spectacle of stars, without lights polluting this miracle of nature. Glorious and breathtaking! Such a number of stars that seldom you are able to see! This scene captivated me, I sat on the ground in a small glade and I opened my mind and imagination and I began to sail through those stars and wondering whether in all those suns there is, there has been or there will be an inhabited planet. What if up there, there is some intelligent living form? Letting my imagination free I felt like I was expanding and I felt I was part of that infinite universe, so I was no longer just part of the forest, but I was part of that infinite universe. For a long time I stayed in that ‘dimension’, suspended in bliss, then the chilliness and the humidity of the night brought me back with my feet on the ground and, constraining myself, I went back to my tent, to my hard bed, and I fell asleep again.¹⁸³

As I have mentioned already in a previous chapter, in my opinion meditation and prayer could be described as the ‘inhalation and the exhalation of the soul’. The natural environment seemed to encourage a similar dynamic of alternation between introspection and self-expression. Some participants described this shift from contemplation to artistic creation

¹⁸⁰ Ibid.

¹⁸¹ Feedback by participant 3

¹⁸² Feedback by participant 4

¹⁸³ Feedback by participant 5, my translation

and vice-versa as a spontaneous pulse, where it was not possible to really distinguish meditation from art and art from prayer.

I was doing dynamic meditation in the forest and it felt very holistic in a way that I was going through all my emotions through my body which nature intensified and kind of embraced. I began to think of being as the ultimate art form. Then there are different kinds of techniques to strive for the ultimate art form. Many times I felt like I was witnessing the dance of my body through time. There is no need to do anything – just be aware.¹⁸⁴

The crucial challenge of our experiments was, however, the combination of silence, solitude and freedom.

It is very difficult to guess in advance when solitude will become loneliness and when it will work as a space facilitating an encounter with life.

Throughout the *Moving the Silence* process we had already discovered that silence may not only be active or passive, but it can be perceived also as positive or negative. Unfortunately, the interconnections between these two possible layers of silence are not at all obvious. It is very subjective, for example, when a situation of passive silence such as watching a movie generates a positive distraction, maybe giving rest to a stressful obsessive mental activity, and when it can produce an excess of restlessness. Active silence, moreover, like meditation, or maybe concentration applied to an artistic activity, may trigger reactions of frustration or peace, according to the moment and to the temperament of the person.

Our *Hermits in Progress* retreats provided long periods of free time to be spent in solitude and silence, without strict rules and with no guidance.

I had the opportunity to observe and to understand my solitude. I have been rather lonely in my life and I have realized that in this moment of my life I am oriented outwards. I am looking for and I am longing for interactions with others. I am realizing that previously I have loved and looked for solitude because of my fears of other people and as a form of escape from myself and others, rather than as a search for myself.¹⁸⁵

A remarkably interesting result, in my opinion, was that despite the initial shock all participants found a personal solution to the challenge. Free solitude allowed everybody to get in touch with their inner source of creativity. The author of the previously quoted feedback, in fact, continues like this:

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Feedback by participant 1, my translation

I did not understand and I was not prepared to autonomously deal with all those hours of silence and solitude, mostly without organized activities and in sharing with others. In this period of my life I keep myself busy with work and hobbies, and it has been a very powerful experience to suddenly and unexpectedly find myself with all those free hours in front of me. I expected to have more contact with all other participants and I experienced a feeling of isolation which generated distress in me. I have to admit that I was not able to meditate except for a few minutes. Silence, as a form of meditation, gave me the possibility to express myself through writing. I wrote down my thoughts and images that came into my mind. I have used some of those images to write the text of a song.¹⁸⁶



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

In different words, we can find the same dynamics described in the feedback of another participant:

The challenge for me at first was to accept that there were no rules, which at first counteracted me, because in all retreats that I had attended there had been some kind of clear definition of purpose and schedule that I could use also as a ‘workout routine’ for my psychological resistances and defence mechanisms inside safe frames. Instead, I was left to rely on my own creativity and willingness to participate and take actions without considering those aspects in me that I wished to improve during the retreat. Being deeply fostered in a spiritual culture about being in need for receiving guidance and passively participating in the event of silent unfolding during the retreats, I first was thinking that do I really have to do it all by myself to get it going for me, but as I soothed my frustration, I found out the happiness of being free to create my own experience, not because somebody else was telling me so and would take that as my task and trying to perform and execute my chosen discovery of my retreat, but merely because of the growing joy of doing so and

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

acknowledging my inborn guidance, happiness and freedom to do it and be willing and desirous about doing so.¹⁸⁷

Like in the *Moving the Silence* experience, this framework of freedom allowed the ‘inner teacher’ of each participant to awaken.

I was rebelling a lot against the rules though most of the rebellion was internal. One hour meditation periods troubled me the most because I used to do that kind of long sitting meditation and I feel repulsion against it now.¹⁸⁸

Throughout the *Hermits in Progress* retreats, some participants were feeling abandoned because of the absence of a strict structure, while others were suffering because of the presence of rules. Again, this apparent contradiction demonstrates that each experience is subjective and you cannot predict how you will feel until you are committed to the retreat.

In a few situations, some were longing for a deeper solitude:

Solitude was easier than sharing the space with the others. When I am alone I usually feel relieved. The challenges come when I am with the others. Then I feel I have to be something that I am not capable of being, I immediately start to judge myself from outside.¹⁸⁹

Sometimes in the retreats I felt anxious around people and I felt that the schedule didn’t allow me to experience real pearls of hermit life and solitude.¹⁹⁰

However, I find it interesting to notice that despite the variety of participants’ experiences, one common denominator among their feedbacks can be found: no matter whether the participants experienced solitude as a source of loneliness or peace; no matter if they felt they were escaping the world or diving into the depths of reality; all participants enjoyed the moments of interaction with the others, as if solitude and silence would offer the perfect conditions for a profound and intimate dialogue.

I have to say that the general feeling of participation was the most important thing for me. It felt important that some other people were doing the same thing at the same time.¹⁹¹

What was surprisingly interesting for me throughout the whole series of retreats was to discover that I didn’t feel any need or desire for being isolated or detached from anything in order to achieve more space or peace in my life. (...) I was happy about the

¹⁸⁷ Feedback by participant 3

¹⁸⁸ Feedback by participant 4

¹⁸⁹ Feedback by participant 6

¹⁹⁰ Feedback by participant 7

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

retreats being open and inviting me to tend to my own practices during the weekend retreats together with others. Also being silently watched, seen and accepted was a revelation that brought out a lot of relief. But as I was safe with having my space and needs respected and fulfilled, I was more actively looking out for chances to align myself with other participants and desiring more ‘learning and sharing’ with us all together. There were occasions of everybody meditating silently together that were planned and doing practices all together that were deeply fulfilling, and I found that connection with others easy.¹⁹²

You may of course have a retreat without any companion. I just want you to be aware of the potential of connection of such an experience, whether it will be challenging or pleasant. At least, for me this has been a good motivation for going on.

As the feedbacks of my friends prove, I was not the only one to have met challenges in inserting the retreats into the frame of my family-life. I have no intention of discouraging you from trying this experience, but, again, I feel bound to prepare you to be sensitive and wise when your hermit-choices will affect your family members too. Furthermore, family life in itself may represent a challenge to your spiritual work.

A participant, for example, wrote:

The challenges arose from the demands the family life brings. It is a lot of work starting to see all the work you do as a spiritual practice. Leaving out the daily moments of solitude slowly makes me restless and unhappy.¹⁹³

And here below you can read the honest words of another participant:

Most of the challenges concerned our relationship. Sometimes it was not clear for me if it was my inner motivation to do the retreats or if I did them because of him. This caused irritation and difficulties in accepting and understanding that he was so deep into those retreats, especially when they were in our daily life. Then I felt it was not even my choice to attend but that I had to since he was doing them (not eating, having candles etc.) I was involved if I wanted to be with him some time of that week and of course I wanted to. Sometimes it was unclear where the border was of being in a retreat or being in a relationship. In the last retreat this was clearer and it was my favourite retreat and I think that was also good for our relationship.¹⁹⁴

¹⁹² Feedback by participant 3

¹⁹³ Feedback by participant 7

¹⁹⁴ Feedback by participant 6



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

Now, let us talk about a few practical suggestions.

First of all, if you have never attended spiritual retreats before, I recommend you to try a one-day experience, or a weekend retreat.

If you are a couple or a group of people, remember to walk your paths autonomously: do not make comments about your experience before its end and give each other the opportunity to face challenges and difficulties alone, at least for a while.

Keeping a retreat-diary can be a useful tool for individually handling your experience and for a possible self-analysis afterwards.

Choose a few simple rules and be determined to follow them throughout the retreat. Yet, perfectionism is the greatest obstacle towards perfection: be flexible and ready to find compromises with the responsibilities of your daily life and business. Let go any sense of guiltiness if you are not able to perfectly accomplish the rules of your retreat: accept the humanity and the simplicity of this experience.

Among the infinite possible rules, there is at least one that I always wanted to follow and that I feel bound to recommend as the vital core characterizing an *Hermits in Progress* retreat: find at least two hours a day for practising active silence. I remind the reader that, according to my previous research, I believe that many artistic disciplines may fit into the practice of active silence, to the extent that they provide the same conditions facilitating processes of self-awareness as in meditation.



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

Therefore, active silence –practices may include: meditation, prayer, reading (better if combined with writing, in order to facilitate a dialogue with the text), moving, dancing, T'ai Chi, Yoga, drawing and any other silent practice facilitating concentration and awareness that responds to your needs and interests. Active silence –practices can be performed in solitude or sharing the same space with the other participants. Furthermore, you can share the same practice with someone else, with mutual agreement.

The idea of spending two hours being in silence may look very challenging, if you are not used to it. But you may divide the two hours into smaller units of time and creatively distribute them in different moments of your day.

Examples of rules

In conclusion of this chapter, I will list a few examples of optional rules you may use to build up your *Hermits in Progress* retreat: you may choose one or two of them (following them all would be purposeless and dangerous!), you may adjust and modify them according to your needs and interests, or you may simply get inspired and invent your own retreat-rules.

The golden rule:

- find at least two hours a day for practising active silence (we already talked about the possibility of exploring the artistic aspects of it as well, and of dividing the time into smaller units)

Rules stimulating self-awareness:

- perform each action staying focused on the present moment
- avoid superfluous distractions
- do what you really want, not just what you desire
- do not dwell on negative or superficial thoughts
- when you are alone, be fully with yourself; when you are with others, be fully with them

Rules of ascetic self-discipline

Attention: they provide a temporary interruption or a challenge to your daily routine: be aware of your limits and health, before choosing one of them.

- do not use electronic devices
- do not use electricity
- sleep on the floor
- do not use money
- eat with moderation
- practise one day of half-fasting (you can eat fruits or something light, according to your diet)
- observe one day of silence
- spend one day outdoors
- spend one night outdoors
- spend one day of enclosure (seclusion in one place)

Rules for working on your inner attitude:

- do not complain

- do not smile out of politeness
- smile often (this apparent contradiction with the previous rule is here because we noticed that different temperaments need different rules)
- behave so that each person you meet will go away better and happier
- work in order to fix a mistake
- work in order to be able to forgive
- visit a neglected person
- be happy



Hermits in Progress – photo by Mikael Ahlfors

After

As I promised at the beginning of this book, I will attempt to describe the latest developments in my life-situation, connecting them to the lessons I have learnt throughout the last year of my research-process. I will maintain the same structure, dedicating one section to my art-teaching and the other section to my approach to spiritual phenomena.



Hermits in Progress – photo by Eerika Arposalo

Art-pedagogy

*I take no action and people are reformed.
 I enjoy peace and people become honest.
 I do nothing and people become rich.
 I have no desires and people return to the good and simple life.
 (Lao Tzu)¹⁹⁵*

It is time to report the conclusion of my adventure as a substitute drama-teacher in a comprehensive school in Finland.

At the beginning of this book I described how, after the *Moving the Silence* experience, I began to shift my teaching approach from an executive style as a drama-instructor towards a more flexible approach as a facilitator, giving freedom to my students to choose and develop their own goals by themselves, trusting their own capacity of self-educating.

Recently I happened to read an inspiring book by Susan Cain: *Quiet*. It talks about the power of introverts in a world that cannot stop talking¹⁹⁶. I realize now that the whole *Hermits in Progress* process has been a systematic deepening of my strategies as an introvert educator, as I believe I am.

To be an introvert does not mean to lack communication skills and it does not prevent you to being a leader or a teacher, even though you may appear smarter in expressing yourself via the web rather than in a public speech. As Cain explains, introverts are the ones who prefer listening to speaking; who innovate and create but dislike self-promotion; who favor working on their own over working in teams¹⁹⁷. In my case, there are many contradictory nuances which make me not perfectly fit in that scheme: being myself an actor, for example, makes me capable of dealing with huge audiences as well, and I enjoy social relationships too. But in the long run, my true temperament is the solitary one, privileging the care of genuine relationships rather than wide groups of friendly people. Maybe, I am a social hermit...

As Jung wrote:

¹⁹⁵ *Tao Te Ching*, 57

¹⁹⁶ Cain, S. *Quiet*. Broadway Books, New York, 2013

¹⁹⁷ Ivi, p. 11

There is no such thing as a pure extrovert or a pure introvert. Such a man would be in the lunatic asylum.¹⁹⁸

As a teacher in a comprehensive school, I soon realized that I could not stand every day acting the character of the pedagogue-entertainer, constantly fighting to conquer the attention of four young classes of restless teenagers. I definitively acknowledged that I was working against my own intimate nature and I decided to risk: I would take my mask away, I would be 'teacher' or 'adult' or 'actor' no longer. I would simply be myself and treat my pupils as persons. I realized that the more I put myself apart from ruling the pedagogical path of my pupils, the more they took responsibility for their own studies, shaping their curriculum more closely to their own real needs.

Being an introvert myself, I could easily recognize similar characters among my students and therefore help them to be aware of different possible approaches for the realization of their own plans. Introverts may have some difficulty in working in a big group, but in optimal conditions they may become very good connectors, helping the whole group to interact in harmony. And in acting as well, there is space for all: sometimes an intense sight is more eloquent than a beautiful speech.

One class was challenged from within: some difficult relationships among students were threatening to prevent any kind of work. As soon as I noticed it, I reacted passively: instead of shouting and imposing my presence as an adult in order to solve the conflicts, I encouraged the pupils to discuss among themselves, with me as a simple witness. My inner hermit was beginning to awaken.

They suddenly began to listen to each other, as they never did before. I cannot say that the problem was solved immediately, but it got better and better throughout the school semester. And I earned the trust of some of the most turbulent boys, who confessed to me later that in their opinion I was a "*real teacher*". The class ended up working in two groups. Initially this felt like a failure, but in the long run I realized that the class was not ready to work as a whole yet, and I believe that this division allowed both halves to become aware of their own strengths. One group produced a gangster movie full of amazing action scenes, while the other

¹⁹⁸ Ivi, p. 14

edited a humorous reality show, playing with many clichés of TV programs, cleverly dealing with the topic of inclusion in group dynamics.

Another class was definitely unwilling to spend time with drama-lessons. They wanted to play football. I allowed them to do that. They were, indeed, very skilled at sports in general. After one month they began to get bored and I suggested to them to make a movie about their own talents. They started to invent new ways of playing football and they ended up performing amazing tricks with elastic mattresses, jumps, mixing ping pong, football and basketball. No doubt, that was the most creative way of making art I have ever experienced in a drama-class! They made an intense and spectacular short-movie.

A third class was somehow hostile towards the idea of learning new skills or being directed by a teacher. They had already had drama classes the previous year. We had a brief talk: I told them that I was not interested in teaching people who are not willing to learn, but that I trusted that they knew what they wanted and that they were certainly capable of attaining their goals without me. I told them that art is freedom and I would offer them a free space, with no rules, where they could do what they thought was enjoyable, interesting, useful to them. If they were late for my classes, I would not punish them. I also gave them the right to skip one of my classes within the school semester, with mutual agreement.

That was a risk. But their school life was actually already full of rules, tasks, evaluations and expectations. I reminded myself that I wanted to be a hermit in order to create a life style that was more respectful of my real needs and not governed by any external tradition or community.

It worked amazingly: some of the students alternated in the role of leaders, and the class worked as a compact team. They produced a theatre performance, written and directed by themselves, and a video for the ending of the school year. Furthermore, they played a lot of role games: by means of fun they were able to remarkably improve their acting skills! My role with them was simply to give them some feedback every now and then. Sometimes I just felt I was invisible and useless. But at the end of the year I got a surprising reward. In their last video they interviewed each other asking their own opinions about their teachers. One question was: "*Which teacher is the least disappointed with our class?*". Most of them answered without hesitating: "*Our drama teacher!*".

The fourth group was eager to make a thriller-movie. They already had a project. I could not believe it: one class was actually willing to work! With them, I gave myself entirely. Since they allowed me to teach, I offered them my competences as an actor and director. They wrote the plot and I borrowed them my own camera to start making experiments. They needed some extra-actors: I invited professional actors to the school, friends of mine who agreed to act side by side with my students. Of course, the artistic growth of my pupils was amazing. They could taste the dynamics of professional movie-making, including acting, writing and editing. I can say without exaggerating that I served them with love, admiration and respect, as if they were colleagues of mine. After the première of their movie, they received a lot of beautiful feedbacks from their schoolmates. I could read the satisfaction at such an accomplishment in their eyes: one school year of intense work was finally rewarded with an incontestable victory. At the end of the year, we said goodbye to each other as friends.

That is the end of my six-month-adventure as a substitute drama-teacher. In a way, I believe it is inseparable from my *Hermits in Progress* journey, since they started together. Furthermore, the boundaries between the retreats and my daily life had vanished little by little, and it feels unnatural to exclude my professional life from such an experience.

I think I have learnt a lot about being myself. Years ago I felt exhausted after my classes: I was acting as an extrovert all the time. Sometimes it may be useful, but in the long run it is not.

I had the opportunity to develop a teaching approach closer to my own temperament. I finally began to embrace my weakness as a strength. And at the end of my classes I began to feel energized. Or, at least, relaxed.

Spirituality

At the beginning of this book, I illustrated the evolution of my approach towards spiritual phenomena, starting from my childhood till the beginning of *Hermits in Progress*. In this concluding part I will share the development of my perception of God and the way it has been affected by our research.

Because of the complexity and fragility of such a topic, I apologize if once again I will start the narration from my first memories, till the ending of *Hermits in Progress*.

One day in primary school, I was asked to make a drawing of God.

A challenging task for Michelangelo, this was not an awkward request for an eight-year-old boy: I remember I had a very clear image in my mind and my art work ended up representing an enormous transparent human being floating among stars and planets, amiably looking down at the Earth.

At that age, I had no doubt that God was a human-like spirit, capable of human-like thoughts and emotions. Probably because of the Catholic matrix of surrounding society, plus the fact that I was a boy, unconsciously I pictured Him like a man.

I did not pray or meditate except very rarely and God meant to me a sort of invisible friend with magic powers.

Later on, when I began to search for a direct experience of the presence of God, I found myself asking a wise woman: “*What is God?*”. She asked me in return: “*What is the first word we say when we learn to speak?*”. I answered a bit surprised: “*Mom?*”. The woman smiled: “*And what is the last word we say before dying?*”. I said: “*Mom?*”. She smiled again: “*That is God!*”.

I was intrigued by her provocation: could God be a woman? Or what did the wise woman mean with her simple answer? Then I reconsidered an old prayer that my parents repeated when they used to follow the teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda. The great Indian guru began all his prayers like that: “*Heavenly Father, Mother, Friend, beloved God...*” And I realized that the wise woman wanted to tell me that God was not a matter of gender or miraculous powers: God is a matter of love.

God has always been present in the main frame of my worldview, as an extra value to the scientific theories which were striving to explain how the universe works. God was the answer to the very human question: “Why?”. Yet, it became clear little by little that I was absolutely ignorant about the answer: God was escaping any definition, the ultimate result was impossible. I just wished the answer to be happiness, fulfillment, beauty, something like the Hindu definition of Brahman: Sat Cit Ananda, ever existing, ever conscious, ever new joy¹⁹⁹. I was no longer believing in the existence of God: I was hoping that God could exist.

The physician Stephen Hawking (1942-) wrote that our universe was generated from nothing and there is no need for a Creator to justify the laws of physics: quantum physics open the possibility to a universe not modeled by a superior intelligence²⁰⁰. Hawking was contesting the medieval idea of a human-like Creator, external to His own creation, ruling it from outside, yet I knew that was no longer my own image of God either. Many atheists often contest some idea of God which is actually unbelievable to many believers too...

Scientific evolution theories have been too often putting their own focus on the non-loving, egoistic, negative aspect of natural selection, pointing out as basic elements of evolution competition and aggression, ignoring altruism and empathy as components which enlighten intelligent love and interconnectedness between living beings²⁰¹. I felt that such an approach was mutilating the reality of life: it was a dogmatic atheistic view, uniquely stressing the cold, machine-like mechanism of blind particles of matter randomly and accidentally generating miracles in the cosmos.

When I asked my three-year-old boy why we cannot see God, he answered without hesitating: “*Because God is within!*”. Wisdom of a young child! My mind opened to some words of the Gospels about the ‘Kingdom of God within us’²⁰² and the ‘Kingdom of God as a small seed, becoming a giant tree’²⁰³: I started to imagine God as a loving intelligent potential relying in everything, operating ‘from within’.

¹⁹⁹ Yukteswar. *La scienza sacra*. Astrolabio, Roma, 1993, p. 40

²⁰⁰ Hawking, S. & Mlodinow, L. *The grand design*. Bantam Books, London, 2011, p.216

²⁰¹ See: Dalai Lama. *The universe in a single atom*. Three Rivers Press, New York, 2006

²⁰² *Luke*, 17, 20

²⁰³ *Mathew*, 13, 31

God became synonymous with the highest human potential I could imagine for myself. And, on a larger scale, the highest evolutionary potential of the whole universe.

When I met Buddhism I had the shocking surprise that there is no need for a Creator to follow a spiritual path. It is possible to experience the Divine without even naming it. I found a kind of resonance with the first words of Tao Te Ching:

Tao which can be described by means of words is not the real Tao.²⁰⁴

And I felt a kind of relief: I had spent too many years being attached to a human-made description of infinity, which made God become very narrow and disconnected from my daily life.

I considered that there are at least two ways of working for spiritual improvement: one way starts from within; the other way starts from without.

In the first case, by observing myself with ever more deeply focused attention I can arrive at perceiving the flow of consciousness beyond my own thoughts and emotions, getting in touch with that part of me which is always in peace, capable of real love, connected with the whole: here there is no need to name God or saints, yet I could say I am dealing with the Kingdom of God within myself.

The other way starts from outside, and it is often rooted in a religious or philosophical world of symbols, where there is room for personal dialogue with the human aspect of divinity. Yet, in this case too, sooner or later a concrete change from within will transform God into a real subjective experience. If it does not change me, if it does not touch me, prayer is useless.

Throughout my *Hermits in Progress* journey my conception of God shifted from an objective but invisible Person or Spirit, easy to describe intellectually, to a subjective but concrete experience, escaping definitions. Is this the dramatic consequence of my Experiential Pluralist approach? Probably yes.

Science works a lot with an objective third-person approach to reality, while spiritual seeking operates by means of a subjective first-person approach to experience: that is why, in my opinion, in some cases it is hard to admit that both scientific and spiritual worldviews enter into dialogue.

²⁰⁴ *Tao Te Ching*, 1, 1

Yet, just as science demonstrates that matter is not as solid and still as we perceive it to be, Experiential Pluralism has been leading me to the discovery that God is far beyond my own human imagination.

I believe that the ‘nothing’ from which our universe has come into existence is that God I am striving to grasp. The fact that reality is not as it appears, does not mean that reality does not exist. It is the same with God, I think.

Probably I have to try out a second version of my first drawing of twenty-six years ago. However, I am afraid that this time I will simply put myself in front of a mirror...

Conclusion

In the light of all the work done, in this conclusion I will attempt to update my definition of two of the key-concepts of my research: Active Silence and Experiential Pluralism.

Active Silence is a term which includes artistic and meditative practices facilitating the attainment of a quiet and receptive dimension of being, relaxed and awake, opened towards listening and sensing but at the same time ready for action and expression, characterized by a high level of awareness and concentration.

Experiential Pluralism means an artistic approach to interfaith dialogue where all religious paths are accepted as equally valid; where coexistence and mutual understanding are promoted by means of the practical sharing of experiences rather than relying on the mere exchange of intellectual knowledge; where there is space for doubt and need for experimenting; where art and meditation are fundamental tools for a first-person research.

Throughout the pages of this book I have explored the potential of Active Silence in facilitating interdisciplinary encounters and I have illustrated some of its possible applications in art-pedagogy and the performing arts. In a wider perspective, I have shared my intuition that Active Silence can be a valuable starting point for the development of Experiential Pluralism.

This thought finds resonance, for example, in many recent ecumenical experiments: the new Christian ecumenism is attempting to avoid the mistakes of the twentieth-century Ecumenical Movement in “*diverting its energy into committees and agreed doctrinal statements*”²⁰⁵. As Professor of History of the Church Diarmaid MacCulloch (1951-) reports:

Many seekers are united in a shared search for silence and, through it, sanctuary. Structured religion, and not just Christianity, has a formidable armoury of approaches to silence to aid societies which have been growing intolerably noisy since the first spread of steam power in the Industrial Revolution. [...] Silence has now become the highest symbol of community action in secular liturgy. It unites those of diverse faiths and those of none, and it is chiefly manifested in the growth of the public remembrance of the dead in silence.

²⁰⁵ MacCulloch, D. *Silence – a Christian history*. Penguin Group, London, 2013, p.228

This is something without much precedent in previous periods of recorded world history, but it is the mark of an irretrievably pluralist society, in which any specific religious statement is bound to exclude someone.²⁰⁶

To a certain extent my concept of Experiential Pluralism, which is grounded in a personal practice of Active Silence, may look attuned with the typical Hindu tendency of being more focused on orthopraxy (straight behaviour) than orthodoxy (straight opinion). In Hinduism, interfaith confrontation may manifest itself for example in the form of ‘multiplicity’, in which elements of different religions co-exist peacefully, remaining theoretically unchanged even when mixed. Another possible option, in the various landscape of Hinduism, is the so-called ‘hybridity’, which, by contrast, implies fusion.

I believe that both approaches have had something to do with my experiments with Experiential Pluralism. For example, I followed the principle of multiplicity whenever I was practising different techniques at different moments of the day, keeping them separated from each other and remaining faithful to the respective philosophical theories; on the other hand, I was following hybridity any time I attempted to mix different practices together, producing an artistic combination out of their interaction.

In other moments our research reached peaks of syncretism: the unifying potential of Active Silence sometimes led us to perceive a kind of unity beyond the different meditative and ascetic practices we were exploring.

Yet, as the renowned American indologist Wendy Doniger (1940-) explains:

The trouble with both multiplicity and hybridity (as well as syncretism) lies in the assumption that the combinatory elements are separate essences that exist in a pure form before the mix takes place and that the combination either does (for hybrids) or does not (for multiplicities) change them in some way. But there are seldom any pure categories in any human situation, certainly not by the moment when history first catches up with them.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Ivi, pp.230-231

²⁰⁷ Doniger, W. *The Hindus – an alternative history*. Penguin Group, London, 2009, p. 47

Therefore there have been aspects of our work which did not fit in any of the previously presented approaches to interfaith dialogue: the possibility of challenging dogmas and beliefs of different faiths in their very foundation, respectfully acknowledging that there are no pure traditions and looking for concrete spiritual benefits rather than theoretical truths; questioning the validity of religious theories and their correlated practices, relying on personal, debatable and subjective experience as a basic methodology of research; keeping open the possibility to jump from one approach to another without fear of inconsistency, in order to better respond to the real spiritual needs of each seeker.

In the post-modern age of globalization and pluralism, I believe it is vital to facilitate encounters between cultures and traditions. I hope my work will encourage other artist-researchers to walk the adventurous path of Experiential Pluralism, illuminating new aspects of such a wide subject and raising questions about the place of silence in a society where noise and high speed seem to fragment our lives.

Gabriele Goria
Helsinki, 7th December 2014

Afterword

The famous Old Testament story describes how the prophet Elijah goes to meet God on Mount Horeb. Apparently Elijah is waiting for God to appear in some kind of devastating revelation, and at first he indeed wrongly interprets God passing him in earthquake, wind and fire. But finally God appears in the sound of sheer silence instead of wind, rumble or spectacle. This famous story has been an example for the contemplative approach of spirituality in the Christian and also the Jewish and Islamic traditions. The passage theologically tells how the power of the divine can also be in silence instead of cosmic spectacles, and how silence can be an important spiritual element. And the prophet Elijah has been seen as an ancestor and patron of mystics, especially when he discovers this surprising and unpredictable view of transcendence and essence of the Truth.

Silence has been and still is an essential part of religious faith and spirituality. Almost all religious traditions see silence as an instrument for prayer and self-discovery. Silence has been a life-companion of ascetics and ‘elevator music’ of monasteries. Silence is so obvious in many religions that usually it is forgotten and the value of it has to be rediscovered, as has happened in many Protestant churches. Today’s interest in retreats, meditation, yoga and monasticism tells us about this.

But why silence? There are of course a million different theological and practical reasons. Another famous religious personality, a Christian Egyptian hermit, Saint Anthony of Desert (c.251-356), described the meaning of silence for spirituality. He suggested a perfect isolation by retreating into the desert. In the desert one can achieve the perfect circumstances for silence and solitude. Saint Anthony tells us that in the desert there is nothing particular to see, nothing to hear and no-one to talk with but your own heart. Through silence and solitude, eventually one can find ‘the Truth’. In that way silence and solitude can be valuable instruments for discovering the real essence of reality.

Silence has an important part in art too. Many times we think of and see art as a performance (movement, interaction, atmosphere), music, material. But equally important in the arts are emptiness, free space, distance, pauses, rest and various liminals. Especially in 18th-century classical music, silent compositions are found. For example the composer Ferruccio Busoni (1866-1924) wrote how “*within our present-day music,*

*what most nearly approaches the essential of the art, is the Rest and the Pause. Consummate players, improvisers, know how to employ these instruments of expression in loftier and ampler measure. The tense silence between two movements—in itself music, in this environment—leaves wider scope for divination than the more determinate, but therefore less elastic, sound.”*²⁰⁸

Silence is an absolutely essential but many times forgotten element of art. When art creates a different point of view to reality and its matters by elements of silence, it can go much deeper towards an understanding of the metaphysical nature of reality. Maybe through silence art can also see better into the ‘heart’ of a human being.

I think that Gabriele Goria, by his artistic research and personal journey, has realized something essential about the importance of silence in art and spirituality. And combining these in his artistic approach has made his work more valuable. I feel gratitude that I have had a chance to be involved in his talented work. Somehow he is like the prophet Elijah climbing his mountain to wait for something important to pass, then realizing the importance of silence and eventually finding a totally different approach to his art. As with the prophet Elijah, Gabriele Goria’s approach is a path to discover reality and truth, instead of spectacles, sounds and lights, by means of sheer silence.

Silence has many dimensions. It can be a regression and an escape, a loss of self, or it can be presence, awareness, unification, self-discovery. Negative silence blurs and confuses our identity, and we lapse into daydreams or diffuse anxieties. Positive silence pulls us together and makes us realize who we are, who we might be, and the distance between these two.²⁰⁹

Rev. Henri Järvinen

University Chaplain in the Helsinki University of Arts

²⁰⁸ Busoni, F. 1911. *Sketch of a New Esthetic of Music*

²⁰⁹ Merton, T. 1979 *Love and Living*. Used in prelude instructions to the audience before a *Moving the Silence* performance