

ANAKHORESIS

The exercise of death and separation of the body
Elen Buzaré on April, 3rd, 2015

The instructions that follows are going to introduce you to a purely natural and therapeutic askêsis, the name of which is anakhôresis.

Anakhôresis, often translated by 'retreat in oneself' means more exactly a 'return' or a 'backward movement' from *ana* 'withdraw' and *khôrêsis* 'fold' or 'retreat'. In literature, it is the stylistic device which informs a return to the original subject after a digression was made.

The notion of anakhôresis is old, but it is however very present in Stoicism. For example, Marcus refers to an *anakhôrêsis eis heauton* in his meditation 4.3. Later, in Egypt, the term anchoritism and anchorite (from the greek *anakhôretes*. 'one who withdraws or retreats, i.e. a hermit') will be used in Early Christianity to refer to the Desert Fathers.

Why do we need an anakhôresis ? As individuals, we are plunged days after days into our buzzing industrial societies, and we have often lost contact with the natural elements of Nature, which form together our microcosm. This can lead to any sorts of discomforts, emotional disorders and diseases. Men and women feel inconvenient, foreign to the world and to themselves.

Thus living in accordance to our nature will be achieved by reconnecting us to the lower levels of Nature (*scala naturae* in latin) one after the other. These levels are the following ones : *hexis* (the mineral element), *phusis* (the vegetal element), *psuchê* (the animal element) and the *noûs* (the 'divine' element in the human soul)ⁱ.

We should find an isolated and quiet place, where we can be alone. We have to feel good here. If our house or our flat is big enough, it can be a special place in it particularly dedicated to this exercise.

The use of candles and why not some sort of altar with small objects evoking the four elements can be a good ideaⁱⁱ

Consider the the idea according to which we are composed of three parts : the body (*sôma*), the breath (*pneuma*) and the spirit (*noûs*). The first two are our own insofar as it is our duty to take care of them, but only the third is our own in the full senseⁱⁱⁱ.

1- Take care of our body^{iv} :

a) the instruction relative to the stability (hexis)

The first advice to be given to every person who wishes to practice this exercise is situated not at the spiritual level, but the physical level. Sit down, sit down as a stone. Sit down as a stone means taking roots, gaining weight, growing heavy.

The first lower level of nature allows us to find our earth, our roots, to be present with all our weight, motionless.

We should sit down so as to favor the vigilance of the mind but however without excessive discomfort. Best is that our hips are situated higher than our knees. This is why we will find useful to use a round, thick enough, firm but not flask cushion^v. This cushion will allow us, with the crossed legs, to find a firm and stable basis during a long period (a Buddhist zafu will be completely adequate).

Be not mistaken, to find the good posture is going to ask a little experiment^{vi}. We will find maybe useful to test the oriental traditional position, but it is not an obligation. What is important is that we feel comfortable and in our ease.

According to the buddhist tradition, to find a good posture has three objectives :

- it will get for us a stable sensation in our body and will allow us to release our attention from the concerns of balance, muscular fatigue and to be centered
- it will favor the physical immobility which will be reflected by the stability of the spirit. The habits of the body conditions those of the spirit
- it will allow us to remain seated during a long period of time without having to give in to the pain, to the muscular tensions or to slumber.

At another level, to meditate as a stone is in a way harmonising ourselves with the rhythm of nature and acquiring a certain sens of timelessness, of *kata platos*. Marcus-Aurelius declares that no one loses any other life than the one that he is living, nor does he lives any other than the one that he loses, so the shortest life and the longest amount to the same. For the present is equal for all, and what is passing must be equal also, so what can be lost is shown to be only a moment, for no one cold lose either the past or the future, for how can he be deprived of what he does not possess^{vii}.

b) the instruction relative to our orientation (phusis)

This askêsis is adopting a good posture, but is also an orientation.

The most important is to settle down with a straight back. Our head must be aligned with the rest of the vertebral column.

All this must be made in a relaxed way. No rigidity : there must not be muscular tensions that would come from the straight back. We are not soldier. Our vertebral column has to be as a flower with a straight stalk and the rest of our body is simply hung on it^{viii}.

Once again, it is going to require experimentation. Generally, our body is either full of tension and defensive postures when we walk or speak or totally slumped when we relax. None of these two attitudes is the good one.

At another level, this askêsis is also favouring the growth which is peculiar to human beings. We should be as a flower which turns to the light : if it does not turn to the light, it uproots and it rots. For a tree, it is the same thing.

What makes a human being grow ? It is turning ourselves, our sap, towards the good and beautiful (*to kalon*). We are to have an ever-flowing spring in us^{ix}, a fountain of good^x that is an attraction for virtue capable of triumphing over all the requests of the external things. We should turn towards this source, connect us to this source and adopt a positive state of mind^{xi}.

The observation of the plant element, the plants, the flowers and the trees is also a reminder of the brevity, the fragility of life and of the inevitable character of death. To 'ruminate' this though regularly is an antidote to excessive attachments.

2- Take care of our breath : the instruction relative to psukhê

This *askêsis* is a posture, an orientation, but also a breath.

Stoicism is a psychology of the *pneuma*.

The *psukhê*, term which we usually translate by 'soul' is represented as being a breath, *pneuma* : our bodies are livened up by a subtle network of breaths. It is a faculty of sensation. More exactly, in the stoic conception, the term *aisthêsis*, or 'sensation' describes the breaths which transport the information of our senses towards our *hegemonikon*. In a more general sense, this term also means 'perception by mean of the senses'. Since Plato, the ancient defined the *psukhê* in terms of activity, as being 'that which moves itself'. It is thanks to this basic mechanism that animals have the faculty to move.

Marcus –Aurelius plays in his meditations with the affinity which exists in the Stoic Philosophy between the sensory perception, conceived as a network of subtle 'breaths' and the breath of life^{xii}. So, referring to the set of three 'somâ, *pneuma* and *hegemonikon*' he writes : 'consider, too, what kind of a thing is your breath : a stream of air, and not even forever the same, but expelled at each moment and then drawn in anew.'

This observation of the breath will teach us that taking care of our senses is also made through the vigilance of the senses by learning to be in accordance with the subtle sensation, yet nevertheless very distinct, of your breath.

The first step towards the use of the breath in this *askesis* is to find it. What we are looking for is the tactile physical sensation of the air that goes and comes through our nostrils. Generally, we can find it just at the end of our nose, the precise place can vary from a person to another. Make a fast inspiration and notice where the sensation is situated. Now expire and notice the sensation on the same place exactly. This precise place will become our medium of attention in the observation of the natural waves of the inspiration and the expiration^{xiii}.

The movement of the breath are^{xiv} :

- deep inspiration
- short retention
- a slow deep expiration
- short retention (shorter than the first one).

Do not force ourselves with the breath, which must be deep and slow. There is nothing to measure or to count or to master.

Inspire deeply observing our breath, accompany with consciousness the inspiration, slowly, profoundly and let come the expiration without being afraid of going up to the bottom, to this silent space between the expiration and the inspiration^{xv}.

We should continue this way a few minutes until we think that we managed to maintain a certain concentration. We have to be relaxed but with a clear mind.

3- Circumscribing our *noûs*^{xvi}

First of all, we must examine and understand how works our *hegemonikon*^{xvii}, which is the organ of production of impressions^{xviii}. We continuously receive a lot of impressions in chains of causation. These chains of impressions work according to the principle of association^{xix}. Our mind is like a river which carries ceaselessly any sorts of things. For example, a sensation causes an image that will in turn cause a memory, that will be followed by a thought etc. This process is continuously accompanied with any sorts of impulses^{xx}.

It is not possible to stop this continuous flow of impressions and we see how fast this process incites our *noûs* to wander again. Because of the process of association, we are not master of our imagination. It is our imagination which is our master, although our imagination is of course shaped by our personal history (education, personality, experiences etc.). Jean-Yves Leloup calls our 'packets of memories' what may be the source of much of our reactive attitudes facing events.

Furthermore, these flows of impressions do not work together, far from there. One goes in a direction, the next one in the opposite. For example, we may want to do such a thing, but our taste is not inclined to it; our will would gladly follow such an idea, but our intelligence says something else^{xxi}. Hence, we are not 'united', we are 'legions', that is 'severals'^{xxii}. We thus created for ourselves a *eidechthes prosopeion*^{xxiii} (an ugly mask) which had developed from the wandering of the *noûs*.

This exercise will help us to channel this flow of impressions and to reorientate it toward a healthier behaviour.

Epictetus advises us to imagine that our mind as a basin of water. The impressions are as a beam of light which falls on the water. If the water is shaken, the beam of light seems to be also shaken while he is not^{xxiv}. The effect of the deep concentration which we are trying to maintain is to slow down the *pneuma*.

This will allow us to gather our *noûs* on itself, to push it not to the movement in a straight line (towards the outside), but in the circular and infallible movement (of return on himself)^{xxv}. The goal is to avoid that the *hegemonikon* gets attached to and

alienates to external things, *'putting away from itself'* the multiples sensory and non sensory impressions in order not to be carried by them. In doing so the *it 'collects and brings itself together'* to make itself, in Empedocles' words, *'a well rounded sphere rejoicing in the solitude around it'*

It is thus very important of us to continue to maintain the watchful attention^{xxvi} of our breathing continuously, in the present moment, in *'the more or less density'*^{xxvii} of the present moment.

Collecting the *noûs* on itself can also be described as a practice of *'circumscribing the noûs within the body'* instead of letting it scatter outside.

Our guiding principle must be trained not to attach itself to sensory and non sensory impressions that may be received. In other words, we should train ourselves to what modern therapists call cognitive distance.

For example, there is, a difference between being conscious of a thought and being attached to a thought. This difference, subtle, expresses well itself in terms of sensation or texture. A thought you are simply attentive to is felt as being very light in texture. There is a feeling of distance between this thought and the consciousness which perceive it. It appears and disappear without inevitably giving birth to the following one. The ordinary thought, the one to which we gets attached to, is of a heavier texture: it sucks up us and takes control of our guiding principle. It is obsessional by nature and leads directly to the next impression in the causation chain we have already talked about.

The same principle applies to physical sensations, outside noises, inside noises etc.

At the beginning, it will not be an easy thing at all. Saint Gregory Palamas notes:

"Those who have just begun this fight see constantly their spirit (noûs) running away: hardly collected; it is thus necessary to them to return it to them so constantly. In their inexperience, they do not realize that nothing to the world is more difficult to contemplate and more mobile than the spirit. That is why some people recommend them to check comings and goings of the breath and to retain it a little, to retain also the spirit by staying up the breath until by means of God^{xxviii} they progressed until they forbade their spirit all which surrounds it and cleansed it, and until they can return it really to a unified meditation. And we can notice that it is a spontaneous effect of the attention of the spirit there, because comings and goings of the breath becomes peaceful during any intense meditation, especially to those who are, of body and spirit, in the rest"^{xxix}

This askêsis was designed to allow us to develop a strong and energetic concentration, a clear vigilance which is a certain tension or *tonos*^{xxx} of the guiding principle. Hence Marcus- Aurelius precises that the sphere of the soul is faithful to its form when it neither reaches out towards anything outside itself nor contracts inwards, and when it

is neither dispersed abroad nor dies down, but shines forth with a steady light by which it beholds the truth of all things and the truth within itself^{xxxix}

The sphere is a powerful, profoundly hellenistic image. To understand what it evokes, we have to free ourselves from our natural tendency to spacial and geometrical vision. The sphere is a metaphor of the perfection : for ancient greek, it is an expression of the divine because it does not have either beginning nor end and can be infinitely travelled in every directions. The raid of hatred (*neikos*), principle of differentiation, appears from the outside and destroys the sphere. But friendship (*philia*) reconquers immediately its positions and reconstruct it. There is thus a permanent fight between hatred and friendship, the unity and the differentiation, that defines the future settled at the heart of the soul.

Jean-Yves Leloup^{xxxii} writes that by a simple meditation, a real silence, we can relieve ourselves from our 'packets of memories', release ourselves from our past and from the past of Humanity^{xxxiii}, to be new. A moment of just meditation can take us out of this chain of causality, take us out of the 'past-future' time. The meditation puts us back in the axis of what is beyond time, of what extends beyond the time.

The liberation, the awakening, is what puts back the history of the world, the men and the universe in the vertical axis of the essential life.

These terms are of course too spatiotemporal : it is neither at the top nor the below, but it 'opens' the world of causality, the chain au causes, to the world of freedom^{xxxiv}.



ⁱ Pierre Hadot develops the lower levels of Nature in *The inner citadel, The Meditations of Marcus-Aurelius*, Harvard University Press, p 184

ⁱⁱ According to Stoicism, each of us is our own therapist. For the ancient the term *therapeutès* had two meaning. It can be translated as either 'to serve, to take care, to worship' or 'to cure'. In this sense using an altar seems to be in harmony the first translation.

ⁱⁱⁱ Marcus-Aurelius, Meditation 12.3

^{iv} This script is much inspired from instructions transmitted in the Hesychast tradition when the latter is clearly inspired by ancient greek philosophy and Stoic philosophy in particular. I sincerely believe that the Hesychast tradition was originally a greek philosophical meditative exercise that have been later on modified to be incorporated into the Early Christianity tradition.

^v It is interesting to note that both the Hesychast tradition and the Buddhist tradition use a cushion to meditate. However, the Hesychast tradition did not develop such as elaborate corporeal positions as the lotus or semi-lotus ones. That does not mean that we should forbid ourselves to use them provided that our bodies are fit enough. .

^{vi} The original Hesychast training can be very long. It really looks like an initiation in four stages and each stage must be completely 'incorporated' before going to the next one. We can infer from the description of Jean-Yves Leloup in his books that the initial training lasts several weeks.

^{vii} Marcus-Aurelius, Meditation 2.14

^{viii} It should be noted that the Hesychast tradition adopted a prayer posture taken by the Prophet Elijah in I Kings 18 :42, namely to pray with one's head between one's knees. This the reason why christian Hesychast were mocked by their opponents as 'navel gazers' (omphalopsychites). However the current practice today seems to favour the straight back.

^{ix} Marcus-Aurelius, Meditation 8.51. The image of the sweet, clear flowing spring is from Plutarch, *On Contentment, Moralia* 467 A, 477B ; the image fits the standard Stoic claim that all humans have the capacity for virtue (e.g ; LS 61L).

^x Marcus-Aurelius, Meditation 7.59

^{xi} The image of the spring is also present in the Hesychast tradition.

^{xii} Marcus-Aurelius, Meditation 2.2.

^{xiii} These are the buddhist teaching here as not all of us can go near the sea, as did Jean-Yves Leloup, to learn to harmonise our breath with the rhythm of the waves.

^{xiv} The Hesychast tradition has introduced a certain control of the breath (this is not pranayama though). The Buddhist tradition on the contrary instructs to follow the natural rhythm of the breath.

^{xv} Have you ever noticed that during the retention of the breath there are no thoughts at all.

^{xvi} This part of the script relies much upon the work of Pierre Hadot in *The Inner Citadel, The meditation of Marcus-Aurelius*, Harvard University Press, pp 112-125.

^{xvii} In Stoicism the terms *noûs*, *hegemonikon*, *daimôn* and *dianoia* refer to the same principle.

^{xviii} 'impression' translates in english the greek phantasiai. 'Impression' is a very general term in Stoicism covering all thoughts, memories, images, sensations etc.

^{xix} This is a term used by the Hesychast tradition

^{xx} 'impulses' translates into english the greek *hormê*. 'impulse' is also a very general term in Stoicism covering our affects, that is our emotions, feelings etc.

^{xxi} See Marcus-Aurelius, Meditation 3.16 where he writes that we are 'drawn this way and that by the strings of impulses'

^{xxii} This reminds the state of hatred (*neikos*) in the metaphor of the sphere of Empedocles

^{xxiii} See. In the life of Saint Peter of Athos, 18, in Saint Gregory Palamas, *Apanta erga*, EPE Vol. 8, Thessaloniki 1994, p 298.

^{xxiv} Epictetus, *Discourses*, II, 3, 20-22.

^{xxv} Saint Gregory Palamas, *Défense des Saints Hésychastes*, trad. By J. Meyendorff, p 210.

^{xxvii} From the greek *kata platos*

^{xxviii} Saint Gregory Palamas were of course writing in a christian context.

^{xxix} From the greek *prosokhê*

^{xxix} Saint Gregory Palamas, *Défense des Saints Hésychastes*, trad by J. Meyendorff, p 90.

^{xxx} *Tonos* is a generic principle in Stoicism similar to the effort and the outside demonstration of which is the resistance

^{xxxi} Marcus-Aurelius, Meditation 11.12

^{xxxii} Jean-Yves Leloup in *Compassion and Meditation: The Spiritual Dynamic Between Buddhism and Christianity, Inner Traditions; Original edition (20 Aug. 2009)*

^{xxxiii} Epigenetics is demonstrating that we may inherit our ancestor's trauma. These trauma thus may influence the way our genes are going to express themselves.

^{xxxiv} See also the very interesting remarks of Pierre Hadot in the section 'the levels of cosmic consciousness' in *The inner Citadel, The meditation of Marcus-Aurelius*, Harvard University Press, p 179