
EMMANUEL CARRÈRE
YOGA
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Yoga

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97,196 Words

EMMANUEL CARRÈRE

Yoga

Translated from the French

by John Lambert

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LONDON

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‘If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.’

—Apocryphal Gospel of Thomas

I

The Enclosure

The arrival

Seeing as I have to start somewhere in relating the story of these four years – during which I tried to write an upbeat, subtle little book on yoga, confronted with things as downbeat and unsubtle as jihadist terrorism and the refugee crisis, plunged so deep in melancholic depression that I was committed to Sainte-Anne Psychiatric Hospital for four months, and, finally, in which I bid farewell to my editor of thirty-five years who for the first time wouldn't be there to read my next book – I choose to start with this morning in January 2015, when, as I finished packing, I wondered whether I should take my phone, which in any event I wouldn't be able to keep with me where I was going, or leave it at home. I selected the more extreme option, and no sooner had I left our building than I was thrilled to be under the radar. It was just a short walk to the Gare de Bercy, where I'd catch my train. From this annexe of the Gare de Lyon, small in size and already quite provincial, dilapidated train carriages take you straight to the French heartland. The old-fashioned compartments, with six first-class and eight second-class brown and grey-green seats, reminded me of the trains of my distant childhood in the sixties. A few army recruits slept stretched out on the seats, as if no one had

told them that military service had been abolished long ago. With her face turned towards the dusty window, the only person near me watched the tagged buildings file past under a fine, grey rain as we left Paris and passed through the suburbs to the east. She was young, and looked a bit like a hiker with her huge backpack. I wondered if she was on her way to go trekking in the Morvan hills, as I'd done long ago, in weather conditions that weren't any better than they were today, or if she was going – who knows? – to the same place I was. I'd made up my mind not to take a book, and spent the trip – an hour and a half – letting my eyes and thoughts wander in a sort of calm impatience. Without knowing exactly what, I was expecting a lot from these ten days I'd spend cut off from everything, out of contact, beyond reach. I observed myself waiting, I observed my calm impatience. It was interesting. When the train stopped at Migennes, the young woman with the big backpack also got off, and, along with me and twenty or so other people, headed over to the square in front of the station where a shuttle bus would pick us up. We waited in silence, seeing as no one knew anyone else. Everyone sized up everyone else, wondering if they looked normal or not. I would have said they did, or at least normal enough. When the coach pulled up, some sat down together, I sat alone. Just before we left, a woman in her fifties with a handsome, solemn, sculpted face climbed in and sat down beside me. We said quick hellos then she closed her eyes, indicating that it was fine with her if we didn't talk. No one spoke. The coach soon left the town and headed down narrow roads, crossing villages where nothing seemed open – not even the shutters. After half an hour it turned onto a dirt road lined with oak trees, and stopped on a gravel driveway in front of a low

farmhouse. We got off, picked up our bags from the luggage bay and entered the building through separate doors, one for the men and one for the women. We men found ourselves in a large, neon-lit room fitted out like a school dining hall, with pale yellow walls and small posters bearing bits of Buddhist wisdom written in calligraphic letters. There were some new faces, people who hadn't been in the coach and who must have arrived by car. Behind a Formica table, a young man with an open, friendly face – dressed in a T-shirt while everyone else was wearing either sweaters or fleece jackets – welcomed the new arrivals one by one. Before going up to him we had to fill out a questionnaire.

The questionnaire

After pouring myself a glass of tea from a big copper samovar, I sat down in front of the questionnaire. Four pages, back and front. The first didn't need much thought: personal information; people to contact in case of emergency; medical situation, medication, if any. I wrote down that I was in good health but that I'd suffered several bouts of depression. After that, we were invited to describe: 1) how we'd become acquainted with Vipassana; 2) what experience we'd had with meditation; 3) our current stage in life; 4) what we expected from the session. There was no more than a third of a page for each answer, and I thought that to seriously tackle even the second question I'd have to write an entire book, and that in fact I'd come here to write it – but I wasn't about to mention this here. Prudently, I stuck to saying that I'd been practising meditation for twenty years, that for a long time I'd combined it with tai chi (putting in

parentheses: 'small circulation', so they'd know I wasn't a complete beginner) and that today I combined it with yoga. However I didn't practise regularly, I went on, and it was to get a better grounding that I'd enrolled in an intensive session. As to my 'stage in life', the truth is that I was in a good way, an extremely favourable period that had lasted for almost ten years. It was surprising, even, after so many years when I would unfailingly have answered this question by saying that I was doing very, very badly, and that that particular moment in my life was particularly catastrophic, to be able to answer candidly, even playing down my good fortune, that I was doing just fine, that I hadn't suffered from depression for some time, that I had neither love nor family nor professional nor material problems, and that my only real problem – and it certainly is one, albeit a privileged person's problem – was my unwieldy, despotic ego whose control I was hoping to limit, and that that's just what meditation was for.

The others

Around me are fifty or so men, in whose company I will sit and be silent for ten days. I eye them discreetly, wondering who among them is going through a crisis. Who, like me, has a family. Who's single, who's been dumped, who's poor or unhappy. Who's emotionally fragile, who's solid. Who risks being overwhelmed by the vertigo of silence. All ages are represented, from twenty to seventy, I'd say. As to what they might do for a living, it's also varied. There are some readily identifiable types: the outdoorsy, vegetarian secondary school teacher, adept of the Eastern mystics; the young guy

with dreadlocks and a Peruvian beanie; the physiotherapist or osteopath who's into the martial arts; and others who could be anything from violinists to railway ticket-office employees, impossible to tell. All in all, it's the sort of mix you'd find at a dojo, say, or in any of the hostels along the Santiago de Compostela pilgrimage. Since the Noble Silence, as it's called, hasn't yet been imposed, we're still allowed to talk. As night begins to fall, very early and very black behind the misty windowpanes, I listen to the conversations of the small groups that have formed. Everything revolves around what awaits us in the morning. One question comes up again and again: 'Is this your first time?' I'd say about half the group are new, and half are veterans. The former are curious, excited, apprehensive, while the latter benefit from the prestige that comes with experience. One little guy reminds me of someone, but I can't say whom. Since I'm a negative sort of person, my attention focusses on him. With a pointed goatee and a wine-toned jacquard sweater, he's annoyingly smug in the role of the smiling, benign sage, rich in insights into chakra alignment and the benefits of letting go.

Teleportation in Tiruvannamalai

The first time I heard about Vipassana was in India, in the spring of 2011. To finish my Russian adventure novel *Limonov* I'd rented a house in the former French enclave of Puducherry, where I stayed for two months almost without talking to a soul. I started my days, which invariably followed the same routine, reading the *Times of India* in the only café, as far as I knew, where you could get an espresso. Then, following the

streets that intersect at right angles and which, lined with run-down colonial buildings, bear names like Avenue Aristide Briand, rue Pierre Loti or Boulevard Maréchal Foch, I walked pensively back to the house to work on my book. I went to bed very early, around the time when the innumerable stray dogs in Puducherry would strike up a chorus of barking in which I could make out a few voices, and I got up very early too, woken by the first rays of dawn and the croaking of geckos. This sort of homey routine, without visits to museums or monuments or touristic obligations, is my ideal trip abroad. One time, however, I did go to Tiruvannamalai, which is a hotspot of Indian spirituality because that's where the grand mystic Ramana Maharshi lived and taught, and where his ashram is still located. The hotspot made a very bad impression on me: a fairground of gurus and spiritual seminars that attracts hordes of gaunt, grimy, fake Western sadhus oozing both pretension and suffering. Now when people who practise yoga talk to me about retreats in India where they hope to benefit from the ancestral teachings of the great masters, that's what I think of. For me Tiruvannamalai and Rishikesh – said to be the cradle of yoga – are the places where you stand the least chance of benefiting from the teachings of a great master: as little chance, say, as you do of meeting an original artist on the Place du Tertre at the top of Montmartre in Paris. Bertrand and Sandra, the only two friends I'd made in Puducherry, had given me the address of a French guy who lived there. Dressed in a lilac-coloured robe, he was called Didier but he had people call him Bismillah. When I asked him about his spiritual journey, Bismillah told me that one big step for him had been a Vipassana training session: ten days of intense meditation that, as he said, really cleaned out your head. As I practised meditation in my

own small way and on the face of it wasn't against getting my head cleaned out, I was curious. However I was a little put off when I found out that on the next step of his spiritual journey Bismillah had come to Tiruvannamalai, attracted by a seminar on teleportation. He'd been disappointed, he said. That left me thinking. Teleportation consists of travelling instantaneously from one place to another, simply through the power of your mind. Disappearing, say, in Chennai, and reappearing the next moment in Mumbai. A variant of that is bilocation: being in two places *at the same time*. Several traditions credit such exploits to a few rare, distinguished saints, such as Joseph of Cupertino. But religious authorities – to say nothing of scientists – remain cautious on the subject. I couldn't help wondering if a guy who registers for a public seminar on the Internet in the hope of having such an experience – a bit like signing up for a day of scuba diving in the hope of seeing manta rays – demonstrated exemplary open-mindedness, or whether to swallow such a load of fiction, and then to say you're disappointed, you had to be a bit of an idiot.

My room

The question of accommodation worries me. There are individual rooms and shared rooms, and of course I'd prefer a room by myself but I imagine so would everyone else, and I have no reason to say I need one more than anyone else. In another setting money would solve things: the best rooms would go to those with the most money and I'd have nothing to worry about. But here we're put up free of charge. The teaching, the room and board, it's all free. All

they do is suggest you make a donation at the end, as much as you're comfortable with and without anyone knowing how much you've given. There must be another criterion. The order of arrival? Or they draw lots? Or it's completely random? When I'm done filling out my questionnaire and take it over to the nice guy who's collecting them, I ask him about it with an amused, complicit little smile, in the unlikely case that it depends simply on his goodwill. No, he tells me, also smiling, they don't draw lots: the rooms are assigned according to age. The single rooms go to the most elderly participants. So I don't have to worry after all. The nice young man gives me a key, which I take, and I go out into the soaked garden behind the main building. To the left there's the big empty hall where we'll spend ten or so hours a day for ten days, to the right three rows of prefab bungalows. Mine's in the first row. Just over a hundred square feet, linoleum floor, a single bed – under it a plastic box with sheets, a blanket and a pillow – a shower, a sink and a toilet, a little cupboard: the strict minimum, all perfectly clean. And well heated, which is important in the winter in the Morvan region. The only source of light, apart from the window in the door with a pull-down blind, is a frosted glass ceiling light. It's not what you'd call cosy, I'd have liked a bedside lamp, but seeing as we're not supposed to read . . . I make my bed, put my things in the cupboard: warm, comfy clothes, thick sweaters, jogging bottoms, slippers, this is no time for vanity. My yoga mat. A little terracotta statue representing Gemini twins. Five inches high, with full, round curves: a woman I loved gave me this discreet fetish, which I take with me wherever I go. No books, telephones, tablets, or any of their chargers. When we spoke, the nice young man asked if I had any such

objects to leave in storage: lockers are provided. I answered proudly that I'd left all that at home. Is everyone as compunctious in following the instructions I'd received when I signed up two months earlier? Fine, we'd signed and agreed to do without such distractions and not communicate with the outside world for ten days. But if we cheat, who'll find out? It would surprise me if they made surprise checks and confiscated any books or phones people had snuck in.

Or perhaps they would?

North Korea?

Vipassana sessions are the commando training of meditation. Ten days, ten hours a day, in silence, cut off from everything: hardcore. On the forums, a lot of people say they're satisfied with, and sometimes even that they were transformed by, such a demanding experience. Others denounce them as a sort of sectarian indoctrination. The place is like a concentration camp, they say, and the daily meeting a form of brainwashing, with no room for discussion, to say nothing of disagreement. North Korea. The duty of silence, the isolation and the poor nutrition demean the participants and turn them into zombies. What's more, leaving is forbidden, no matter how bad you feel. No, defenders argue, if you want to go you can go, no one's stopping you, it's just strongly discouraged. Above all, the participants themselves commit to staying until the end. I was intrigued but not put off by such discussions: I feel immune to sectarian indoctrination, I'm even curious about it. 'Come and see,' Christ said to those who had heard all

sorts of contradictory rumours about him, and that still seems to me to be the best policy: come and see, with as little prejudice as possible, or at least with an awareness of whatever prejudices you have.

A zafu in Brittany

I've been married twice, and both times I made albums of family photos. Then when you separate, you never know where these albums will end up. The children look at them with nostalgia, because they show the times when they were little, when their parents loved each other like they should, when things still hadn't gone wrong. My first wife Anne and I spent the summer holidays in Brittany, at the Pointe de l'Arcouest, where we rented a house that was marvellous but completely run-down because it was jointly owned and none of the co-owners saw why they, and not their brothers or sisters, should change a light bulb. Facing the Île de Bréhat, it had a superb view of the sea, which we reached by walking down a wooded path that was so steep and so wild that each summer it had to be cleared with a machete. Anne was incredibly pretty. She wore blue-and-white-striped jerseys and a bright yellow raincoat, I had unruly locks of hair and little round glasses. I would have liked to look mature, I looked like an adolescent. In the mornings we went to get crêpes at the village bakery, in the evenings we bought crabs down at the docks. Among the many photos of our two little boys, one in my album shows me on the beach with Gabriel, aged three or four, doing the canonical series of yoga

postures called the salute to the sun, and another shows Jean-Baptiste sitting on a zafu, laughing the happy laugh of a child. These photographs date the practices I'm discussing here, and attest that at the beginning of the 1990s I already had a zafu. I was already sitting on it, early in the mornings, taking pains to wake up before everyone else to observe my breathing and the flow of my thoughts. A zafu, if you don't know, is a round, compact, Japanese cushion, specially designed to help you sit upright while meditating. Our boys liked to call this black zafu Zafu, as if it were a pet, a second dog – the first one being a mangy, one-eyed mongrel we called 'the poor old guy', who lived somewhere in the neighbourhood and came to see us every day. I know that these memories only interest Anne, the boys and me, that we're the only four people in the world whom they can make smile, or cry, but too bad, too bad for you, reader, you'll have to put up with the fact that authors relate these kinds of things and don't delete them when they're rereading what they've written, as would only be reasonable, because they're precious, and because one reason to write is also to save them.

Tai chi on the mount

As I wrote in the questionnaire, I started to meditate thanks to tai chi. You know what tai chi is, I believe? Those very slow movements that people – often quite old – do in parks, dressed in padded Chinese jackets? Is it a dance? Gymnastics? A martial art? Originally it was a martial art, but unfortunately it's often taught as if this dimension didn't exist. I thank my lucky stars that I first ran across the Dojo de la Montagne on Mount Sainte-Geneviève, a hill on the Left

Bank in Paris, rather than one of those new age groups that were springing up all around, where you were invited to open your chakras by burning incense sticks. Burning incense sticks wasn't the thing at the Dojo de la Montagne. The oldest karate dojo in Paris, it was established in the fifties by a pioneer called Henry Plée and headed, when I arrived, by his son Pascal. Pascal got his white belt on his third birthday and has since trained a generation of karatekas, but with time, seeing that intensive training hurt the back, the knees and the joints, he started to look for more gentle, less arduous techniques, focussing less on force and more on flexibility. That's how he came to study tai chi under a Chinese master called Yang Jwing-Ming – *Dr* Yang Jwing-Ming – who wasn't only a practitioner but also a very high-calibre researcher in the practically boundless field of what's known as the 'internal' martial arts. I still have half a dozen of his books, which I studied fervently at the time. Because after a couple of months at the Dojo de la Montagne I was hooked, and stayed that way for almost ten years. Practically ten whole years, with three or four classes per week – not counting Dr Yang's annual seminar – I spent immersed in the strange culture that is the dojo. More than dinners or parties, I've always appreciated this sort of get-together where you don't just meet to talk or *see each other*, as they say, but to do something together. No matter what: hiking, football, motorbiking. My ideal would have been to meet up with a few friends and play chamber music, say the viola in an amateur string quartet: you arrive at one of the members' place and exchange a few perfunctory words, then very quickly you unfold the stands, spread out the music and pick up where you left off, at the sixteenth bar of the andante con moto. Unfortunately, I love music without being able either to read or play it. But I think

that doing tai chi is much like singing or playing an instrument. It requires the same perseverance, the same blend of rigour and abandon, and I think with fondness of all the people of such different backgrounds and temperaments with whom I spent so many hours, practising and perfecting infinitely slow movements the way a pianist practises and perfects the equivalent of this infinite slowness on the piano: the *larghissimo*. I was going to say that we all came for the same reason and were united by the same desire, but that's not quite it. There were two families at the Dojo de la Montagne: on the one hand the pounders, Pascal's close guard, made up of robust karatekas who, notwithstanding all the talk, were there to learn how to beat up their fellow men, and on the other those I'll call the spiritualists: and by that I don't mean the new age chatterboxes who were quickly put off by the dojo's demanding routine, but people who were interested in Zen, in the Tao, in meditation. And the great thing was that under the double leadership of Pascal and Dr Yang, these two families not only got along peacefully but also shared each other's interests. Very naturally, and while both groups would have been horrified if you'd told them this was where they were heading, the spiritualists like me found themselves doing karate *as well as* tai chi so as to make the tai chi they were doing more martial, while the pounders increasingly found themselves sitting motionless on little cushions and observing their breath.

It's complicated

Sitting motionless on a little cushion and observing your breath is what's called meditation. It's a practice that's

becoming more and more widespread, and it would have been the sole subject of this book if life hadn't taken it, as you'll see, towards stormier terrain. Dr Yang taught it with care. He was Chinese, he appreciated technique – bless his heart –, he didn't rush things and he considered meditation the apogee of the martial arts, but also a dangerous practice due to the powerful forces it awakens. He put us on guard against these dangers, which it seems to me I've never faced, either because I was never aware of them or more probably because I've never reached and never will reach the level at which they become a threat. As he didn't want us to go astray on the dangerous paths leading to the chasms within us, a bit like the way you give to novices a taste of the raptures they'll later experience, Dr Yang taught us the rudiments of meditation by means of numerous diagrams, meridian pathways, normal breathing (Buddhist) and inverted breathing (Taoist), small and large circulation. And – as I just wrote on the page of the questionnaire dealing with my experience with meditation – what I know a bit about is the small circulation. After that I practised with another master, Faeq Biria, who gained his profound knowledge of Iyengar yoga from the founder himself, B. K. S. Iyengar. Faeq Biria goes further than Dr Yang, and maintains that to start meditating you need at least ten years of assiduous practice. You have to have opened the pelvic region, opened the shoulders, aligned the *bandhas*, aligned the *chakras* and mastered all the techniques of *pranayama*, and only then does this grand, mysterious, transformative thing called meditation happen, and it happens on its own. Everything you did before was merely aimed at making it possible. Someone who shows up at an Iyengar yoga school and asks naively if, in addition to postures, it's also possible to do a bit of meditation is treated with indulgence, but

at the same time like a bit of a nitwit. He's told nicely that there's as good as no difference between what the fashionable gurus and books on personal development call meditation and twiddling your thumbs: that without long preparatory work you can spend thousands of hours on a zafu focussing on your breath or the point between your eyebrows, but you could just as well be taking a nap.

It's simple

These two masters, both of whom I knew personally, are true, great masters, equally researchers and artists: I do not call their authority into question. However, from the height of my minute experience, I believe that you can gain access to meditation over a path that's less steep, a shorter path that's open to everyone, and that all the technique you need to take it can be learned in five minutes. It consists of sitting down for a while and remaining silent and motionless. Everything that happens inside you during the time you remain seated, silent and motionless, is meditation. I've often looked for a good definition – as simple, accurate and all-encompassing as possible – and while there are others that I'll unpack as this story progresses, this one seems to be the best to start off with because it's the most concrete and the least intimidating. I repeat: meditation is everything that happens inside you during the time when you're seated, silent and motionless. Boredom is meditation. The pains in your knees, back and neck are meditation. The rumbling of your stomach is meditation. The feeling that you're wasting your time with bogus spirituality is meditation. The telephone call that you prepare in your head and the desire to get up and make it are

meditation. Resisting this desire is meditation – giving in to it isn't, though, of course. That's all. Nothing more. Anything more is too much. If you do that regularly, for ten minutes, twenty minutes, half an hour a day, then what happens during this time when you remain seated, silent and motionless changes. Your posture changes. Your breathing changes. Your thoughts change. All that changes because in any case everything changes, but also because you're observing it. You don't do anything in meditation, the key thing is not to do anything, except observe. You observe the appearance of your thoughts, your emotions, your sensations in your field of consciousness. You observe their disappearance. You observe what buoys them up, their points of reference, their convergence lines. You observe their passing. You don't cling to them, you don't repel them. You follow the flow without letting yourself be carried away by it. As you do that, it's life itself that changes. At first you don't notice. You have the vague feeling that you're on the cusp of something. Little by little, it becomes clearer. You detach a little, just a little, from what you call yourself. A little is already a lot. It's already enormous. It's worth it. It's a journey. At the start of this journey, a Zen saying goes, the distant mountain looks like a mountain. As the journey unfolds, the mountain never stops changing. You no longer recognise it, it's replaced by a series of illusions, you no longer have any idea where you're heading. At the end of the journey it's a mountain once again, but it has nothing at all to do with what you saw from a distance, long ago, when you started the journey. It *really is* the mountain. You can finally see it. You've arrived. You're there.

You're there.

Meditating while drunk

We drank a lot during the summers at the Pointe de l'Arcouest, and the friends who came to visit drank quite a lot as well. Less, however, than the writer Jean-François Revel, whom we'd run into at the supermarket in nearby Paimpol, pushing his trolley full of wine bottles. Revel was a scowly, no-necked apoplectic, yet he wrote dazzling books full of lucidity and acerbic wit. I don't know anyone who knows as much about Marcel Proust as he did, or with a more accurate, Orwellian take on the totalitarianism and obscenity of leftist intellectuals, and I love the fact that this one man cultivated such diverse interests. I had no idea that thirty years later his marvellous anthology of French poetry would practically save my life. What I also didn't know is that he was Matthieu Ricard's father. At the time no one knew who Matthieu Ricard was, that he was the Dalai Lama's right-hand man or that he would become the best-known propagator of Buddhism and meditation in France – in a way that gets on my nerves a bit, because I have a problem with saffron robes and monks who tell you: 'Religions are sectarian and specialised: what I'm teaching isn't a religion, it's simply the truth.' Anyway, we drank a lot, we drank too much, so that even though I remained true to meditation, I often did it with a

hangover or even completely drunk. It was while I was completely drunk that I practised circulating the breath and energy, first up my back to the crown of my head, then down the front of my body (that's basically the small circulation), all with heaps of autosuggestion and amid a maelstrom of parasitic thoughts that I was not only not able to calm, but which also struck me as just terrific. That was short-lived, of course. When you're drunk or stoned – I was often both – you think you're finding nuggets of gold, then you come down and realise they're lumps of turd. With age, I've mellowed out. I still like getting drunk, but I have less and less tolerance for alcohol. Now it takes me three or four days to get over a binge, whereas at l'Arcouest I was up and drinking the very next night. Meditating while drunk is absurd, I agree, but at the time I persuaded myself that I was observing my drunken state. Because the interest of meditation – this could be a second definition – is that it awakens a sort of witness inside you, who monitors the whirlwind of thoughts without being swept away by them. You're nothing but chaos, confusion, a bundle of memories, fears, phantoms and vain longings, but inside you someone calmer is looking on and making a report. Of course, alcohol and drugs turn this secret agent into a double agent who can't be trusted. Nevertheless I didn't stop meditating, I've always more or less kept at it, and if I persist in writing this book – my own version of those personal development books that sell so well in the bookshops – it's to say what personal development books rarely do: that those who practise the martial arts, Zen, yoga, meditation, all the big, radiant, beneficial things I've sought all my life, are not necessarily wise or calm or serene, but sometimes – often, even – pathetically neurotic like me, and that that doesn't prevent them from, in Lenin's strong words,

'working with the available material', that in fact you have to do just that, and that even if it doesn't get you anywhere, you're right to persist on this path.

In the clear?

I wrote these jaded lines two years after the incidents they relate, in a room in Sainte-Anne Psychiatric Hospital, where between electroshocks I tried to keep my weary, roaming mind in check by patching together this story. However on the night of 7 January, 2015, lying on the narrow bed of my bungalow in an isolated farm in the Morvan region and waiting for dinner time to arrive as a heavy rain pounded down on the soft, black earth of the garden, I saw things in a less cruel light. At that time, even if I didn't see myself as calm, appeased and serene – not entirely, not yet – at least I saw myself as someone who was no longer pathetically neurotic. For Freud, mental health is being able both to love and to work, and to my great surprise for almost ten years I'd been able to do both. If someone had told me when I was younger that that would be the case, I wouldn't have believed them. I didn't expect that much from life. The fact is, though, that one after the other, and without long or torturous periods of dryness, I had written four big books that many people had liked, and I thanked heaven each day for a marriage that made me happy. After so many years of sentimental drifting, I believed I had arrived at berth, and that my love was sheltered from storms. I'm not crazy: I know full well that all love is endangered – that in any event everything is endangered – but from then on I imagined this danger as coming from the outside, and no longer from within me. Freud has a second

definition of mental health, just as striking as the first: no longer prey to neurotic misery, but just to common unhappiness. Neurotic misery is a state we ourselves create in a horribly repetitive way, ordinary unhappiness one that life holds in store for us in ways that are as varied as they are unpredictable. You have cancer, or worse yet, one of your children has cancer, you lose your job and are plunged into poverty: ordinary unhappiness. I myself have been largely spared ordinary unhappiness: no great sorrows, no health or money problems, children who're making their way in life, and the rare privilege of having a career I love. As far as neurotic misery goes, though, I'm second to none. Without wanting to brag, I'm exceptionally good at turning a life replete with all it takes to be happy into a veritable hell. And I won't have anyone making light of this hell: it's real, terribly real. However, against all odds, it seems I've escaped it. In January 2015, it seems I can say I'm *in the clear*. Of course, I'm careful not to get smug, I know it could be an illusion – but is an illusion that lasts for ten years still an illusion? What makes this moment of my life so good? What's behind this progress? Psychoanalysis? Frankly I don't think so. I've spent almost twenty years on couches without any noticeable results. No, I think it's simply love. And maybe meditation. Yoga, meditation: I use these two words more or less interchangeably. I think that like love and writing, yoga and meditation will accompany, support and carry me with them until I die. I view the last quarter of my life – because statistically, at almost sixty, that's the phase I'm entering – in line with Glenn Gould's maxim, which I've copied so often into so many successive notebooks: 'The purpose of art is not the release of a momentary ejection of adrenaline but is, rather, the gradual, lifelong construction of a state of wonder and serenity.'