

Ātma vichāra and its Pathways to Freedom

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***Ātma vichāra (Self-enquiry)* is a spiritual practice that has attracted a lot of western attention since 1934 when Paul Brunton (Brunton 1970, 126–157) made Ramana Maharshi from Indian Tiruvannamalai known to the world. Some phenomenological and methodical aspects of *Ātma vichāra* are dealt with in this article in order to develop its didactics. The outcomes of *Ātma vichāra* courses conducted by the author throughout 40 years were also taken into account in this regard.**

1 Introduction

Sanskrit term *Ātma vichāra* stands for the English word *Self-enquiry* and denotes a method of contemplation best known through the teachings of Ramana Maharshi (1879–1950). The method has already been researched (e.g. Glenn Friesen 2005; Dojčár 2013, 1–11; Dojčár 2017, 65–103; Dojčár and Gálik 2017, 121–135), its didactics, however, was not comprehensively developed yet.

Dojčár and Gálik (2017) came to the conclusion that “mystical death” was the key to achieving *vidyā* or *jñāna*. The phenomenon of the so-called *mystical death* is recognized in various religious traditions (Campbell 1988, 245). The *alchemic tradition*, for instance, is one of such symbolic ways of showing that one has to renounce everything if one is to discover the secrets of life (Jung 1993, 232; Roob 1997, 122). In alchemy, thus, *mystical death and resurrection* constitutes a central part of the so-called “great work”.

There are also examples from the tradition of yoga where *sādhaka* gets through *mystical death* when the *life experience*, as we usually understand it, recedes suddenly to give place to the *Life itself*. One example is of Ramakrishna who is reported to claim following: “*Almost despairing of the attainment of nirvikalpa samādhi, I then opened my eyes and said to the naked one [Note: Paramahansa Totapuri, his master]: no, it cannot be done. I cannot make the mind free from functioning and force it to dive into the Self... He said: ‘Collect your mind here into this point.’*” (Saradadananda 1952, 251). “*With firm determination I sat for meditation again ... there remained then no function of the mind, which transcended quickly the realm of names and forms, making me merge in samādhi.*” He, however, had already completed his preparation in a dualistic kind of *samādhi* (Saradadananda 1952, 241). Description of basic



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2 The Background

types of *samādhi* in the context of Indian yoga is given at Patañjali's *Yoga Sūtras* (1986, 73–90).

In case of Ramana Maharshi, he underwent a *mystical death experience* without prior preparation (Dojčár and Gálik 2017, 128).

In the course of an informal discussion, Maharshi pointed out that Self-realization is possible only for those who are prepared. “*The vāsanās must be eliminated before jñāna dawns. One must sacrifice everything for the Truth. Complete renunciation is the index of fitness.*” (Venkataramiah 1968, 284). This means one has to be willing to give up all attachments for this process.

As a significant part of the process of *Ātma vichāra* is not accessible to mental processing, sometimes it is called a *secret*. In this paper, it will be attempted to distil from the bibliographical indications given in the available sources complemented by personal experience the structure of the process of *Ātma vichāra* – partly by using *narratives* recorded in various ways by followers and visitors of Ramana Maharshi, partly by using *introspection*. In his *Who am I*, Maharshi provides basic tenets of his method (Maharshi 1966, 1–12). There is also a number of dialogues of Ramana Maharshi with his followers, where an effort is made to make the process comprehensible to the reader (e.g. Osborn 1971, 8–253).

In this regard, the following questions are investigated:

1. How the mind that is to be transcended can be used in the process of *Ātma vichāra*?
2. Whether the process of *mystical death* is necessary for achieving the state of *mukti*, “liberation”?
3. In what way is the *prānarodha* a usable pathway to *mukti*?
4. Whether surrender is a practicable way for a contemporary practitioner?
5. In what ways were courses on *Ātma vichāra* contributing to making this approach practiced in the Czech Republic, Slovakia (former Czechoslovakia) and Hungary?

Ātma vichāra is close to the *neti–neti*, “not this–not this” approach of Advaita Vedānta (Maharshi 1966, 1–2; Sankaracharya 1982, verse 56–58). Both South and North Indian yoga branches declare that *mukti* or *jivanmukti*, i.e. liberation from *samsāra*, can be achieved. Further, in this way individual human being can regain his/her highest status as a human through whom the Being is shining forth. It means not only a one way ‘implosion’ into the Being, but also a ‘re-emergence’ of the human being with his/her *ahamkāra*, i.e. individuality (Kumar *et al.* 2005, 61–68). Now, however, it is restructured in such a way, that he/she seems to be the same individuality but is expressing the information and energy flow from the level of Being, not the previous *ahamkāric* pattern of one living in *avidyā* (see Fig. 1). Ramana Maharshi said in this respect, “*All these vrittis are doubtless mental concepts of the mind. The wise say that pure abidance in the Self alone is jñāna.*” (Ganapati 2016, 29).

Dyczkowski (1989, 40) explains that the vedantin’s way is one of withdrawal from the finite in order to achieve a return (*nivṛtti*) to the infinite is similar to the results of *Ātma vichāra*. The concept of Brahman or Being is discussed in many philosophical treatises including *Yoga Sūtras* of Patañjali (1986, 28).

Before a full success in yoga practice, that is *samādhi*, *ahamkāra* makes us feel as a conscious individualized beings. The term *ahamkāra* is often translated as Ego, even though it is our individualized consciousness that is serviced by the *śen-su lato* mind including *manas*, *buddhi*, and the other *tattvas*. This servicing is done also through processing of information from the outside environment through senses and from data stored in memory that are seamlessly blended into the perceived image of the environment. This process is colored by the reactions from individuality traits that are in turn influenced by *prarabdha karma* as present in *karmashaya*, “pool of karmas” (Patañjali 2001, 146).

Still, any activity performed or experienced under individualized reception of beingness (*pravṛtti*) results in *karma*: favorable, neutral or unfavorable. Ramana Maharshi explained the *prarabdha karma* as “[t]hat which has already begun to bear fruit”, and *sanchita karma* as “[t]hat which is in store and will later bear fruit” (Venkataramiah 1968, 43).

3 Description of Ātma vichāra on the Basis of Bibliographical Research

The whole process of *Ātma vichāra* – simple as it may seem to be – needs a good understanding of the relevant model of human structure involved in the *sādhana* (practice). Understanding of the human structure in Advaita Vedānta is literary fixed in the *Upanisads*, specifically in the *Sarva Upanisad* (1921, 624, verses 11–13), where appear references to *koshas*, *tattvas*, and *prānas*.

Ramana Maharshi refers to the *koshas* in Venkataramiah (1968, 234): “*Annamāya kosha*’ is the gross body sheath. The senses with the *prāna* and the *karmendriyas* form the *prānāmāya kosha*’. The senses with the mind form the *manomāya kosha*’. They are the *jñānendriyas*. The mind is formed of thoughts only. *’Idam*’ [Note: this] is the object and *’aham*’ [Note: ‘I’] is the subject; the two together form the *’vijñānamāya kosha*’.”

The available accounts of the process of *Ātma vichāra* (Maharshi 1966, 2010; Venkataramiah 1968; Narasimha 1968; Osborn 1971; Ganapati Muni 1977, 2016; Shankaranarayanan 1978; Rao 2010; Ramamohan 2016; Godman 2015, 2018; Timčák 2018) all indicate analogous *sādhana patterns*.

In the *Sri Ramana Gita* (2016, 15, 2:2), the essence of *Ātma vichāra* is described by Ramana Maharshi as follows: “*In the interior of the Heart-cave (hrdaya) Brahman alone shines in the form of the Ātman with direct immediacy as I–I (aham–aham). Enter into the cavity of heart (hrt) with questing mind or by diving deep within or through control of breath and abide in the Ātman.*”

Kavyakanta Ganapati Muni, one of the eminent followers of Ramana Maharshi, who collected the dialogues for the *Sri Ramana Gita*, gave seemingly another type of instruction: “*Find out wherefrom this Ego ‘I’ springs forth and merges at its source; that is ‘tapas’* [Note: meaning austerity, practice]. *Find out wherefrom the sound of the ‘mantra’ in ‘japa’* [Note: the repetition of a *mantram*] *rises up and merges there; that is ‘tapas’*” (Shankaranarayanan 1978, 6). These are versions of the *majjana* and *margana* types of *Ātma vichāra*.

In *Ātma vichāra* the so-called *spiritual heart* is a central concept. Usually it is termed as *hrt-ayam* or *hrd-ayam*, meaning “Heart–That”, where “That” stands for the Self. The *hrt* is

considered as “*the centre which sucks in everything*” (Ganapati 2016, 35, 5:5), so if the mind merges there, it results in *samādhi*. It is considered to be a non-physical center situated in the space of the chest cavity, on its right side. Thus, at the beginning one can only intuitively locate it, but if we do the practice, we will find out which area gives us a perceivable response. As shown above, it is the source of the I–I impulses that give us the awareness of consciousness (Ganapati 2016, 71–75, 9:5–14). It is described as a “cave”, so there is a *space*. Conceptually it is analogous to the *spiritual heart* in the “prayer of the heart” as researched in Louchakova (2007, 83–84). If the attention is merged into this area, then a movement of energy in the *sushumna nādī* can be experienced. *Nādīs* are channels within the *prānāmāya kosha* (Woodroffe 1974, 103–115). *Sushumna* is one of the *nādīs* and connects *mūlādhāra chakra* and *sahasrāra chakra*. *Mūlādhāra* is an energy cum information center at the lower end of the spine, while *sahasrāra* is located at the top of the skull (Woodroffe 1974, 116–142).

As regards the technique of *Ātma vichāra*, Maharshi gives another explanation to a visitor (Venkataramiah 1968, 22–23):

Ask yourself the question: The body [Note: annamāya kosha] and its functions are not ‘I’. Going deeper, the mind [Note: manomāya kosha] and its functions are not ‘I’... This analysis leads to the conclusion that the individuality is operative as the cognizer of the existence of thoughts and their sequence. This individuality is the Ego [Note: ahankāra], or as people say ‘I’. ‘Vijñānamāya kosha’ is only the sheath of the ‘I’ and not the ‘I’ itself... ‘I’ must therefore be the unqualified substratum underlying these three states [Note: waking, dream, and dreamless sleep] is transcended. ‘I’ is in brief, beyond the five sheaths. Next, the residuum left over after discarding all that is not-Self is the Self, Sat–Chit–Ānanda, i.e. Being–Consciousness–Bliss.

Mudaliar (1968, 242, 370) recorded the following response giving further clarification whether ‘Who am I?’ should be repeated as a *mantra*:

‘Who am I’ is not a ‘mantra’. It means you must find out where in you arises the ‘I–thought’, which is the source of all other thoughts ...

There is an 'I' which comes and goes, and another 'I' which always exists and abides. So long as the first 'I' exists, the body-consciousness and the sense of diversity or 'bheda buddhi' will persist. Only when that 'I' dies, the reality will reveal itself.

Further Maharshi said: "*Ahamkriti* [Note: the Ego, *ahamkāra*] is not the same as 'aham'. The latter is the supreme Reality, whereas the former is the Ego ... The supreme Being is unmanifested and the first sign of manifestation is 'Aham sphurana' [Note: the light of 'I'] ... That is the original name of the Reality" (Venkataramiah 1968, 500).

The described processes still do not resolve the challenges when using the mind for searching for its origin. Thus, it is to be discovered how to get the mind not to work and disturb the silence in *chittākāsha*, "working space of mind" (Satyananda 1973, 18–19). The key to understanding the process is to execute the recommendation from the *Sri Ramana Gita* (Ganapati 2016, 15, 2:2).

The first point to discover is that on the *right side* of the chest bone there is a non-physical area called *hrdayam* or *hrt-ayam* or the Heart in short, where the quanta of 'I' consciousness-impulses (*aham*) appear and expose the rest of the body – all *koshas* through *nādīs* (Ganapati 2016, 35, 5: 6–7). As mentioned before, the *nādīs* are energy cum information channels that penetrate the *koshas*. The *koshas* are non-physical structural and functional units of humans described in yoga. The actual practice is to *immerse* one's attention into *hrdayam* and keep it there until *Ātman* is realized. This is called *margana*, "quest".

The other method is described as *majjana*, "diving deep", which means to relax the body and mind to such a degree that there would be no attachment to any perceivable process outside or inside the body or mind. Ideally this process is to be practiced so that we "dive into" the *Heart-cave*.

The third method is through *prānāyāma*, called here as *prānārodha*, regulation of the flow of *prānā*, where the incoming and outflowing breath is observed whilst giving our attention also to the meeting point between the exhalation and inhalation – as described also by Laksman Joo (1994, 42)

and in *Vijñāna Bhairava* (22, verse 26): "*The energy of breath should neither move out nor enter; when the center* [Note: *madya*] *unfolds by the dissolution of thoughts* [Note: *nirvikalpa*], *then one attains the nature of Bhairava* [Note: the Absolute]" (2002, 22–23). These practices should lead to *kumbhaka*, "breath retention", or more exactly *kevala kumbhaka*, "involuntary breath retention".

In *Upadesa Undiyar* (Maharshi [undated], 13–16) three verses are important in this regard:

By restraining the breath within, the mind will also subside, like a bird caught in a net. This [Note: practice of breath-restraint] *is a device to restrain* [Note: the mind].

Mind and breath are two branches, which have knowing and doing; their origin is one.

When one makes the mind, which has subsided by restraining the breath, go on the one path [Note: of knowing and becoming one with the Self], *its form will die.*

If this is not giving the desired result, then *prānāyāma* practice is given, "*where the exhalation and inhalation should be one unit of time long and the breath retention after inhalation is to be kept for four units of time.*" (Ganapati 45, 6:7). It is usually an *ujjayi* type of *prānāyāma*, where the epiglottis is gently contracted during exhalation and inhalation. The length of the stages of *prānāyāma* gradually increases through practice and should not be "forceful". In *Vijnana Bhairava* it is mentioned that "[w]hen the [Note: energy of breath] is retained either outside or inside, at the end [Note: of this practice] the peaceful state [Note: *santah*] is revealed by means of shakti" (2002, 23, verse 27). As shown by Hirai (1974, 69), during Zen meditation the tidal volume increases, but the oxygen consumption decreases, just as the respiratory rate. The *prānāyāma* mentioned above leads to a similar state, which enables the organism to lower the metabolic rate and prepare it for longer meditation. The *Sri Ramana Gita* does not mention any *mudras* or *bandhas*, even though they can be useful at the initial stages of the *Ātma vichāra* practice (Timčák 2020, 41–49).

3.1 The Mind That Is to Be Transcended & Its Use in the Process of Ātma vichāra

The yogic concept of the *mind* is a complex one. Usually it includes *manas*, *buddhi*, and *ahamkāra*. A wider concept of the mind is described, for instance, by Bernard (1958, 81–119). It is the attention, which activates the data processing, evokes the emergence of all relevant data and presenting it to the individualized consciousness. The *mind* (*manas*) can be modelled as a unit responsible for processing information from outside and from memory and presenting it through *ahamkāra* in front of the individualized consciousness. *Buddhi* can be defined as the decision-making unit. *Ātma vichāra* is a process, where the attention, instead of being directed to outer processes presented by the mind, is directed into “searching” for the source of the cognition of ‘I’. Ramana Maharshi, when asked about his advice on the point that the mind, which is to be “subdued” is used for a search of the Self that is beyond its reach, answered: “Of course we are employing the mind. It is well known and admitted that only with the help of the mind can the mind be killed. But instead of setting about saying there is a mind and I want to kill it; you begin to seek its source and you find it does not exist at all. The mind turned outwards results in thoughts and objects. Turned inwards, it becomes itself the Self.” (Osborn 1971, 140–141).

Still, he admitted the “risks” as expressed in the following quotation: “To ask the mind to kill the mind is like making the thief the policeman...” (Osborn 1971, 140). It means, that the mind often deletes our effort by presenting us some interesting motive, which defocuses our attention. He further claims, “when in this manner the mind becomes quiescent, in its own state, Self-experience arises of its own accord, without any hindrance.” (Maharshi 1994, 12). This is identical with the implication of *sūtra* 1:2 and 1:3 of the Patañjali’s *Yoga Sūtras* (Patanjali 1989, 93–114).

On a practical level, Maharshi recommends during *sādhana* that “one should remain as a witness to whatever happens, adopting the attitude ‘Let whatever strange things happen, happen, let us see!’ This should be one’s practice.” (Maharshi 1994, 4). This is a direct reference to the *witness*, or a *mirroring function of consciousness* termed in Vedānta as *Sākṣī*. It also means that the process is not related to will. In an answer to the question of Maurice Frydman, Maharshi responds, “Why the Ego is not cut down at one stroke and destroyed so as to gain Supreme Bliss?” (*Mountain Path* 1981, 69), Maharshi asked him to hold out his Ego so that he could strike it down.

As for the position of the *witness*, when the mind is not allowed to move and create its usual constructions, the

manonāsa, “destruction of the mind” happens, cleaning the way to *jñāna* (Maharshi 1994, 4).

If one starts a practice of disentangling the mind and the sense of individualized sense of Self from all sensual perceptions, until comes a state when there is no more perceptible information, then there may manifest an unbelievably strong light and *ānanda* through an extra-sensory cognition. As Vallalar comments, “The unalloyed state of overflowing bliss is comparable to the state of total unconsciousness. Those who have transcended even that state will be like the rays of the silvery moon of the Self, moving in the ambrosial essence which lies beyond the sphere of consciousness.” (Vallalar 2013, 78). In fact, the yogi, who does not stop at this *ānanda* experience would melt into the Being. When this becomes reality, the yogi gets manifested as a direct outlet of the Absolute will (Fig. 1). This is mentioned also by Ramana Maharshi (2010, 14): “True knowledge is Self-effluent: it is neither knowledge nor ignorance,” meaning that the real knowledge is not coming from perceptual or dualistic mental knowledge, but it manifests through abiding or melting/merging into the Being. Maharshi also says that “[t]rue knowledge is neither knowledge nor ignorance. Objective knowledge is not true knowledge. Because the Self is Self-effluent, having no second to know or be known, it is supreme Knowledge, not empty nothingness.” (2010, 14, verse 12). So, this is a way, how the mind can be ‘used’ for *Ātma vichāra* and how it gets transcended.

3.2 The Process of Mystical Death & its Necessity for Reaching Mukti

When researching the history of reaching *sahaja sthiti* or *natural state of being* in the teachings of Ramana Maharshi, the first indication of a crucial stage of liberation (*mukti*) are his *death experiences* (see also Dojčár and Gálik 2017, 121–135). The *first one*, which happened when he had a fear of death during his stay at home (before leaving for Tiruvannamalai), experiencing that if the body is dead he still remains alive, then he had a strong experience of “light” and absorption in the Self (Narasimha 1938, 22).

The *second occurrence* of the *death experience* that happened on Arunachala seems to be more dramatic (Grimes 2016, 52). A *light* coming from the right wiped out all perception of the world, but he remained conscious of the body where the heart and blood flow stopped. Then, after 15–20 minutes, an outburst of energy from the right towards the physical heart

made the heart to start working again. So, in a way the *death experience* was the first process that has led to the absorption into the Being.

The second one did not change his state of Being, only shows how the body loses and regains its ability to carry the Self. If one gets the possibility to experience the “death” of the body and the continuity of consciousness without it, this is a very important stage of the path to *samādhi*. It has to be said that if the *guru* is willing to help to part with the perception of the outer world and where the perception of the body also vanishes (one has to leave behind all that was perceptible before), it needs great courage to yield-in to this process. Godman is referring to such experience of Ramana Maharshi’s devotees, when they asked for enlightenment, and when Ramana Maharshi rested his sight and energy on them, they suddenly were not able to bear the feeling of “dying” and the process was interrupted (Godman 2015). The author’s experience with this process of letting go everything known and knowable in meditation happened during the inner guidance of an eminent Indian yogi Deoraha Baba. It was a process, where all had to be left behind and the body was as if left to die. It seems that very often this process depends on the help of a qualified yogi.

3.2.1 Mystical Death & Lokās

As shown in Timčák (2018, 19), there may be also a question how to avoid reaching higher levels of beingness (*lokās*) during the *sādhana* and *mystical death* that requires sometimes more than one life span according to the Indian understanding of life, instead of merging into the Being. Ramana Maharshi himself noted, that some of his followers due to a sudden emergence of desires at the time of death, were to be born at a higher *lokā* (Godman 2015a) instead of liberation. Godman (2015, 2018) gives references to situations, when Ramana Maharshi expected that to happen. Venkataramiah (1968, 201–202) narrated the following events:

It must be remembered that Sri Bhagavan has been with his mother from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. until she passed away. He was all along holding her head with one hand, the other hand placed on her bosom. What does it signify? He Himself said later that there was a struggle between himself and his mother until her spirit reached the Heart.

Evidently the soul passes through a series of subtle experiences and Sri Bhagavan’s touch generates a current

which turns the soul back from its wandering, into the Heart.

The samskāras, however, persist and a struggle is kept up between the spiritual force set up by his touch and the innate samskāras, until the latter are entirely destroyed and the soul is led into the Heart to rest in eternal peace, which is the same as Liberation.

Its entry into the Heart is signified by a peculiar sensation perceptible to the Mahātmā [Note: Ramana Maharshi] similar to the tinkling of a bell...

When Maharshi attended on Palni swami on his death bed, he took away his hand after the above signal. But Palni swami’s eyes opened immediately, signifying that the spirit had escaped through them, thereby indicating a higher rebirth, but not Liberation.

The quotation shows that the *vāsanās* in the *ahamkāra* are not easy to annihilate and here qualified help is needed. In case of Ramana Maharshi, only a few of his followers were helped in this process as only a few people appear to have been prepared for this. Nevertheless, even a partial success can make the inner journey to *jñāna* easier to follow.

3.3 Majjana or “Diving” into the Heart-cave

Majjana is characterized as acceptance of the transitoriness of the body (willingness to let go any identification with the body) and non-attachment to sense objects, either internal or external (Ganapati 2016, 55, verse 11). Maharshi himself provides us with the following description of this kind of *diving*: “*Diving into the Heart – restraining both speech and mind and seeking where shines the I-consciousness – is the direct means of winning the awareness of the Self*” (1991, 21).

The *diving into the Heart* is practiced in a way, that one lets go everything, so that virtually one’s perceptible consciousness ‘sinks’ out of the perceptible domain. As mentioned, it is advised to do it in the direction of the Heart-cave (*hrdayakuha*). One of the tasks is to relax from the head-centered feeling of identity to the *hridayam* one, as the natural tendency is to identify with the body parts as sensed through the cortex (see Fig. 1).

When successful, it brings necessarily the silence of the mind. It may happen, that if the perception of sinking that is still felt at the beginning was too speedy, the mind can bring in the feeling of fear. It comes from the association with an earthly fall, where the consequences may be painful. We can note, that in *holotropic breathwork*, if one happens to get into the fourth *Basic Perinatal Matrix – BPM 4* (Grof 2014, 97–101) there may be a feeling of falling into an infinite depth and also a perception of death/rebirth, liberation or emergence into the *light*. The crossing to the experience of identity with unlimited existence can be accompanied also with moments of intense fear due to the “guarding principles” (Grof 1992, 88, 96). That may appear projected into consciousness of the *sādhaka* before merging into the Being. During the *majjana* type of practice, one can also be in a state, where the EEG would show an increased *delta activity* (0,1–4 Hz), and in this case one would not be able to recall the experience during this phase of the practice (Hirai 1974, 32), even though there is no sleep.

Thus *majjana* is very effective, but only in case one can disentangle one’s attention from all the processes created and executed by the mind. It also means – as explained by Maharshi (1966, 3) that one has to be able to lose interest in *vāsanās* – tendencies coded in *ahamkāra*.

3.4 The Application of Prānārodha as a Pathway to Mukti

Ramamohan (2016, 26) directs the attention to the applicability of *prānāyāma* in *Self-enquiry* by becoming aware of the “content” of the points, where exhalation ends and the ‘I’ notion rises. Similar practices are described in *Vijnana Bhairava* (2002, 21–25). Laksman Joo (1997, 43) recommends maintaining an undisturbed movement of the breath. The breath should be slow, inaudible and without any pause. The continuity of the movement of breath is very important, and it should be maintained with full awareness focused at the point where the incoming breath reaches its completion and the point where the outgoing breath is born. The observation of the source of the starting impulses for inhalation and exhalation is also a means to quieten the mind.

Ramana Maharshi had specific comments on *kumbhaka* in *prānāyāma* and meditation when answering the question, “*When one meditates, the whole body appears overheated. Why so? And is it good?*” (Nagamma 1973, 446):

Yes, would it not be so? When the mind gets concentrated, the act of breathing stops involuntarily. When that happens, the body does feel over-heated. What of that? In due course one gets accustomed to it.

In Vicharasangraham (Maharshi 1994, 21–22), the following dialogue is recorded:

Q: Of the means of mind control, what is the most important?

A: Breath control is the means for mind control.

Q: How is breath to be controlled?

A: Breath can be controlled either by absolute retention of breath [Note: kevala kumbhaka] or by regulation of breath [Note: prānāyāma].

Q: What is the absolute retention of breath?

A: It is making the vital air [Note: prāna] stay firmly in the Heart even without exhalation and inhalation. This is achieved through meditation on the vital principle [Note: prāna] etc.

Q: What is the regulation of breath?

A: It is making the vital air [Note: prāna] stay firmly in the Heart through exhalation, inhalation and retention, according to the instructions given in the yoga texts.

This method is relatively easy to practice, though it takes a lot of time to perfect it to the above-mentioned level.

3.5 Surrender as a Practicable Way for a Contemporary Sādhaka

All the above-mentioned practices could relatively easily take us to the critical point, where we would have to abandon the services of the mind and to relax our attention from all the products of *ahamkāra*, specially the sense of the individualized Self but will be unable to get through. It is a critical process and it may be necessary to have the help of a *guru* or of grace of the Absolute. Ramana Maharshi, when asked how to attract grace (Venkataramiah 1968, 283), answered that *by surrender* to the *guru* or the Being. Godman

(2018) in a video report on surrender indicates the difficulty in keeping the surrender to stay with one and to prevent the mind to try to solve issues in its own way and thus to scatter the attention away from meditation and the state of surrender. Surrender has a very specific algorithm. If the surrender is oriented towards a qualified *guru*, then there a subtle connection is created, where for any life experience a gentle hint comes regarding what to do mentally or physically. This hint manifests through the *viññānamāya kōsha*. If the surrender is oriented to the Being, the algorithm is similar, but the hint is even more subtle. Sometimes it turns out that our action is not needed. Looking at surrender from another point of view, if one follows one's own *dharma* correctly, then one can speak about a surrender to one's *dharma*. *Dharma* is defined in a way that is difficult to comprehend, but it is life in harmony with the will of the Being. *Dharma* can be understood also as virtue, i.e. living an "optimal life" (Patanjali, 2001, 131).

Mudaliar (1968, 99) recorded the following dialogue related to this issue:

Q: Are only important events in a man's life ... or are trifling acts of his life ... also predetermined?

A: Yes, everything is predetermined.

Q: Then what responsibility, what free will one has?

A: The whole program is chalked out. Not an atom moves except by His will ... As for freedom for man, he is always free not to identify himself with the body and not to be affected by the pleasures or pains consequent on the body's activities.

Balsekar (Timčák 2015, 55–61) pushes the issue into an extreme advising the surrender as the logical way of accepting the lack of possibility to go against the will of the Absolute. Vallalar (2013, 71) gives the following advice: "Unless it is revealed to you, you cannot know the Self." Surrender seems to be an easy process, but in fact it is very difficult, as one has to walk "on a razor's edge" – and to act only as advised through the above-mentioned intuitive hints coming from a *guru* or the Absolute. For this the inner perception is to be opened, which enables to perceive and accept the guidance streamed to us. This, in case of a *jñāni*, means a life, where life events follow the logics as given in Fig.1.

4 Supportive Processes of Ātma vichāra

As we can see in the life of Ramana Maharshi, he was constructively active – he took walks every day, he was reading and/or editing papers or books, answered questions, helped people, he accepted what his *karma* brought to him, when he was inspired to accept a goal like adding new buildings to the āshram, he made managerial choices, e.g. to find the right individual to carry out the job and got the projects completed. He kept to traditional vegetarian principles regarding food and nutrition and kept to the simple āshram diet.

Venkataramiah (1968, 19) recorded the following dialogue:

Q: What diet is prescribed for a sādḥaka?

A: Sattvic food in limited quantities.

Q: What is sattvic food?

A: Bread [Note: called chapat and roti], fruit, vegetables, milk, etc.

It is natural to expect from an *Ātma vichāra* practitioner an adherence to the *yamas* and *niyamas* (Patanjali 2001, 2:30–32; Ganapati 2016, 23). It means that unless we optimize our life processes and the way how we deal with life situations; it is impossible to expect the *Ātma vichāra* practice to bear adequate fruits.

5 Ātma vichāra in Everyday Life – Feedback from Ātma vichāra Courses

As can be expected, practicing *Ātma vichāra* does not automatically warrant getting established in *samādhi*. Our dispositions, life situation, lifestyle, depth of involvement, available help and other factors influence the course of path toward the ultimate result of *Ātma vichāra*. But on this road no effort is wasted and what we invest into the practice as regards lifestyle amendments, mainly effort and time, will bring the aim closer to fulfilment.

As it can be clear from the above text, it is impossible to shape an *Ātma vichāra standard procedure* to be followed, as the process in its key steps defies full objective description and depends on the possibilities of the practitioner. This holds true in spite of the fact that the structure of the de-

scribed *Ātma vichāra* processes do not change. The quality of the *ahamkāra* including the *vāsanās* of the practitioner will always bring into the *sādhana* also individualized elements.

In this way, we have to rely on the available resources for finding a solution to our *Ātma vichāra* related problems. Fortunately, there is a number of sources, e.g. the books on dialogues with Ramana Maharshi, in the *Mountain Path* published by Sri Ramanasramam or in the texts and videos of David Godman (2015, 2018) and of other commentators (e.g. Dojčár 2017, 65–103) that contain valuable information in this respect. Further, courses, where the basic techniques related to *Ātma vichāra* are taught are also a way, how to learn the basics.

To give an example, Rao (2010, 9–19) describes the process of *Ātma vichāra* as transcending first the *koshas* through dissociation from their products caused by *vāsanās*. He also mentions that there is a stage of the process, when there is no effort possible. This is when we have reached the limits of the instruments included in the *ahamkāra bundle* (Venkataramiah 1968, 283). Here, as already noted, the help of a *guru*, i.e. a qualified expert, may be of importance (Maharshi 1966, 9, verse 20). Much more so as he also noted regarding the practice of *Ātma vichāra* that in this way the mind and the *vāsanās* – other than that which enables *Ātma vichāra* – are willing to subside during the practice. They melt into the Heart and rest there and – after *jñāna* happens – re-emerge in a new, attachment and *māla* (impurity) free form (Maharshi 1966, 5, verse 12).

There is undoubtedly a strong reason to visit the Ramanasramam in Tiruvannamalai, South India, because that locality is conducive to *sādhana*. Further, we may also experience that sometimes a strong, fiery inner purification may occur during a stay in the āshram. We could say that Ramana Maharshi acts also as an inner ‘fire’, that burns up all the inner *granthis*, “inner obstacles”, to all who came near him physically or inwardly with a genuine desire for enlightenment. His imprint in the psychospiritual environment is such that the help in *sādhana* can be felt even now. So our psychophysical structure can be burnt clean of its predispositions, vanities and ignorance (*Who is a Genuine Guru* 2020, 3–7). It is like a deep, intensive fiery burning sensation in the whole body and mind, which one could sometimes experience during meditation in the Virupaksha Cave, where Ramana Maharshi lived for some years and where sage Virupaksha is buried.

The way of *Ātma vichāra* is usually a long one. The author learned about Ramana Maharshi and *Ātma vichāra* in 1965, but had to meet and get help from yogis like Shri Deoraha Baba (in 1977), through whom the process of *mystical death* and also of *Ātma vichāra* could be truly opened. As the author is also a yoga teacher since 1979, on some yoga courses, *Ātma vichāra type sādhana* was also practiced. Since 1980 a number of such courses were held in various countries and up to 1000 participants attended them. Some participants attended the courses repeatedly, some not. The practices were aligned around the techniques described above. The *sādhana* thus included *prānārodha*, *ajapa japa* that is resting the attention during involuntary inhalation and exhalation on the sound produced in the upper respiratory parts, then *pratyāhāra*, i.e. withdrawal of attention from all mentally perceivable processes, and finally withdrawing attention from all processes and states that need the energy of attention, and *majjana*.

These courses were not designed for research, so only the feedback from the participants can be summed up as follows:

1. Depending on the personality type of the participants, thus on the content of *ahamkāra* with its databases, the disentanglement of mental processes from the energy of attention and merging the attention to the *spiritual Heart* was variable. Only people with more thorough meditation practice had experienced the first stages of passing beyond the realm of the ‘world created through the mind.’ This means a perception of inner stillness.
2. Only very few people could achieve significant slowing the breath rate, maximum 1 cycle per 90 seconds, was observed. Only about a dozen participants experienced longer *kumbhaka* as a result of longer *prānārodha* and *ajapa japa* practice. Involuntary breath retention was seen, however on holotropic breathwork sessions, where the involuntary suspension of breath lasted maximum for 6–8 minutes and brought about a deep state of meditation.
3. *Majjana* as a part of the *Ātma vichāra sādhana* was very interesting in the sense that this was where the course participants realized how many desires are keeping them from really “diving into” (here the “diving into” has no directional reference).

4. The *mystical death* type of experience was described only by even fewer people and it lasted for a relatively short time, thus did not bring a break-through. This may be so as the moment where all knowable and known has to be left behind can evoke a strong fear.
5. The process of surrender was difficult to monitor as it is a longer process, with many self-delusional traps and no one reported any significant progress in *Ātma vichāra* using this technique. Nevertheless those, who reported keeping up with the practice shared that they became aware of the necessity of staying with their *dharma* as precisely as possible. For that, information coming from the above described mechanisms of surrender are necessary.

6 Conclusions

Ātma vichāra is not a mental process (Dojčár and Gálík 2017, 131), but is a process of relaxing from all functions of the mind and from the perception of the individualized consciousness that results from *avidyā*. As indicated above, the inner mechanisms of *Ātma vichāra* – after the initial stages are transcended – are identical.

The process of disentangling from all that can be felt through the mind and then through making all mental functions immobile, results in the emergence of the Being. The “vanishing” mind that was ruling all our life processes turns into a servant, which helps to live an inspired life in wisdom, *jñāna*. The *sādhana* related to *Ātma vichāra* is challenging as – in contrast to what is usually understood under the term meditation – it requires the *sādhaka* to give up all what he/she had known before or what he/she considered to be him/her. This *sādhana* is impeded by *vāsanās*, *mālas* (tendencies, ill habits, impurities) etc., that form an obstacle not easy to cross. The aid of a qualified individual helps to bridge the gap between that which is achievable by effort, and which is beyond that. Conditions for a success in *Ātma vichāra* was stated by Ramana Maharshi as: “*He who has been purified through upāsana, i.e. sitting close to a competent individual and other means or by merit acquired in past lives, who perceives the imperfections of the body and sense-objects, and feels utter*

Thus, it can be stated, that *Ātma vichāra* needs a far longer and deeper effort than the one accessible through a week-end-long, week-long, month or yearlong course. Specially, in case of a life of a householder living in a usual social and working environment, the process is demanding and needs years of diligence and proper life management. We also have to note, that the number of yogis, who are competent in helping *Ātma vichāra* is also low, but those practitioners, who are prepared, will surely meet them.

distaste whenever his mind has to function among sense objects and who realizes that the body is impermanent, he is said to be fit for Self-enquiry.” (Ganapati 2016, 55).

The *sādhana* units described in this paper may help to achieve the goal of *Ātma vichāra* by pointing out different pathways indicated by Ramana Maharshi, and pointing out how to relax from all that is in the domain of usual knowledge and ignorance. That, which always exists is waiting to be uncovered by us. The needed support processes are also discussed. The aims and results of *Ātma vichāra* courses show that this path takes usually a long time and a lot of energy.

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