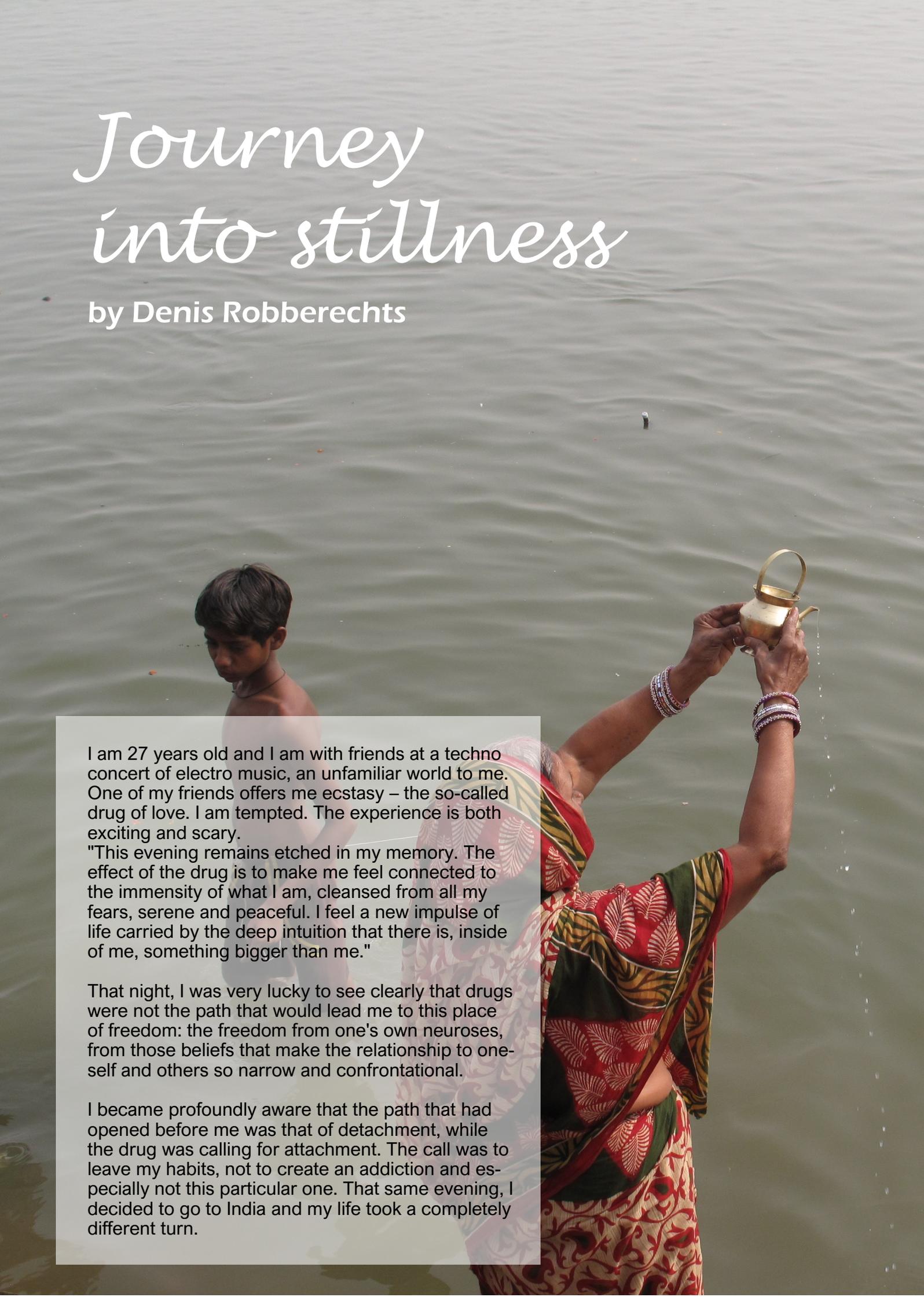


Journey into stillness

by Denis Robberechts

A woman in a vibrant, patterned sari is shown from the side, pouring water from a brass pot into the air. She is wearing several bangles on both wrists. In the background, a young boy is partially visible, looking down. The scene is set against a backdrop of calm, rippling water.

I am 27 years old and I am with friends at a techno concert of electro music, an unfamiliar world to me. One of my friends offers me ecstasy – the so-called drug of love. I am tempted. The experience is both exciting and scary.

"This evening remains etched in my memory. The effect of the drug is to make me feel connected to the immensity of what I am, cleansed from all my fears, serene and peaceful. I feel a new impulse of life carried by the deep intuition that there is, inside of me, something bigger than me."

That night, I was very lucky to see clearly that drugs were not the path that would lead me to this place of freedom: the freedom from one's own neuroses, from those beliefs that make the relationship to oneself and others so narrow and confrontational.

I became profoundly aware that the path that had opened before me was that of detachment, while the drug was calling for attachment. The call was to leave my habits, not to create an addiction and especially not this particular one. That same evening, I decided to go to India and my life took a completely different turn.

India

Delhi, early morning. "It's here," the taxi driver announces. My heart tightens: it had felt safe to watch the hustle and bustle of India from inside the vehicle. Although it is still early, there are already a lot of Indians on the streets, not to mention all those who sleep on the sidewalks. I take refuge in my hotel room. No window, not too clean, spartan, but it's enough for me to feel safe.

It's not until the afternoon that I venture out onto Pahar Ganj's main street. The street is teeming with people. In addition to the crowds of pedestrians, there are all kinds of vehicles, fruit stalls and other shops on carts, dogs and cows... Monkeys who watch the fruit from the rooftops and run on a jumble of power lines above our heads. "Hello my friend, how are you?" "Where do you come from?" "What is your name?" Questions come from every direction. I feel like I am the centre of attention. "Come to my shop" is usually the next sentence. An hour later and I haven't got very far.

It didn't take me long to figure out how to handle awkward situations, like learning how to get out of a shop without buying stuff I absolutely did not need. Very quickly, I had to learn to say no. The clearer my no became – and the

more resolute my tone of voice - the less people persisted and the less I found myself in positions from which it was difficult to extricate myself ... India's teaching had begun.

In Rajasthan, I met a friend who, like me, was tired of traveling by train or bus, going from one tourist trap to the next. We decided to trek through the Thar Desert, from Pushkar to Jaisalmer using donkeys to carry our luggage. We gave ourselves a week to get ready. It took us over a month.

India is slow, and our patience was severely tested. We used this time to learn the basics of Hindi and to cook with what whatever was at hand. People gave us recommendations, talked about the desert. "Do not sleep in hollows, that's where snakes pass through", "Do not set up your camp next to a water point, the tiger might come to

drink and attack your donkeys" ... Afterwards, I was grateful that life had organized all these setbacks. This imposed preparation time

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proved extremely valuable! I began to accept the fact that life has its own rhythm and intelligence, and that the spiritual journey is a constant invitation to let go of control and to be carried away by something beyond reason.

Finally we left: enthusiastic, and fearful. We had been





warned against gangs of armed robbers who loot villages, rape and kill. But our biggest fear was the leap into the unknown.

The entire village of Pushkar came to see us off. In Indian culture donkeys are considered impure, so they were confused to see two young, white (so obviously rich) people leave with donkeys!

We walked 600 km towards the West, without a map or compass. At every village we passed we were set upon by people touching our bags, wanting to know what we were carrying. The fact that we were traveling with donkeys provoked hysteria, and many of the desert folk

seemed to lose the innate respect they have for travelers. Fortunately, we always met wise people who were able to go beyond their cultural conditioning. Without them, it is likely that certain moments of hysteria would have turned into the looting of our luggage. And at the same time, because we were traveling with donkeys, we were invited in by simple and open people. In these meetings, we discovered a generosity like nowhere else. Rich or poor, they cooked their best food for us, invited us to stay for several days, fed our donkeys, and gave us some money to continue our journey. The elders of the family would explain: "You are far from home, it is our duty to take care of you". Or "It is the

Gods who have sent you to offer us the chance to help".

I was struck by how available people were. Throughout our stay, we enjoyed their genuine curiosity and caring attention. It made me feel ashamed to think how little time I spent with my friends. What can be more generous than being fully available?

This trek took five weeks and was full of adventures. Our donkeys were attacked by buffaloes, I thought I was dying of dysentery, we were greeted with open hearts and also had rocks thrown at us. I found myself running through the desert in the middle of the night, half naked, trying to catch my runaway donkey, so many stories ... I was entering deeper into the journey...

The spiritual journey is a constant invitation to let go of control and to be carried away by something beyond reason.

Alone

I stayed in India. Since the start of my trip, I had studied with a master of Indian classical music. He became like a father to me and I spent all my winters with him in Benares. As soon as spring arrived, I went walking in the foothills of the Himalayas: with no destination and always without a map or compass, with only a few provisions in a bag. I slept in people's homes, in caves, or under the sky ... I had very strong inner experiences, ranging from a total loss of meaning to a euphoric sense of freedom. It always inspired the same questions: "Who am I without my habits? Or "How does it feel not to know where we are going?" I think I was trying to lose myself, to be no one, to leave behind all my conditioning, my identity.



During one of these walks, I remember constantly thinking about my mother's death to the point where it felt like a premonition. It was on the third night, lying in a cave (I learned later that it had been inhabited for a long time by a highly respected hermit), that a new understanding emerged: "It's my mother inside me who is dying, my relationship to her is changing, I can let it go ". Another time, I saw myself as a boat leaving the shore to launch into the waves. Walking aimlessly was doing its work!

One day, I felt a need to reflect. Miraculously, a pretty little house appeared. Far from any village, it had been built by a hermit, who had died a few years before. I found the keys and settled there. I stayed there for five months. Alone, without reading, without music, without any distraction. Cutting wood, tending the fire for cooking and warmth, fetching water, gardening. I quickly learnt that the simple life is not easy! It takes a lot of structure and a thousand small skilful actions to provide the bare minimum. It was there that I really enjoyed the pleasure of simple

things, this deep feeling of not wanting anything and being truly satisfied. It's like a sweet, intimate, safe and peaceful joy. I realized that this feeling of wanting nothing is also a feeling of wealth, the very wealth that so many people seek through ownership and accumulation.

For several years, I returned to recharge my batteries in this small house in the Himalayas during the monsoon season with its torrential rains, so conducive to immobility and introspection. I practiced meditation, and was letting life take care of simplifying me.

My style of traveling began to change. I felt less and less need to move around, to discover new places and to live new experiences. My inner world became the territory I explored. It is there that, more and more, I discovered a great adventure.

I spent seven years in this country where "yesterday" and "tomorrow" are the same word "Khal". I continued my music lessons, solitary retreats, and visits to monasteries and ashrams.

Sometimes I went home for a few months. People would say, "Why go so far, everything is already here." Now I know it's true. But it is only far from home that I finally understood.

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If traveling is synonymous with "discovering", then it is more of a state of mind than physical displacement. The closed mind can change countries without changing

universes, the open mind can change universes without leaving home.

Today I live in a small village in France, with my family. I practice meditation: the inner exploration, the greatest of journeys. I share my experiences on retreats in France and abroad. Once a year, I take a group to India for a trip off the beaten track and share the experience of a country I love. It is an opportunity to come together around the same quest for meaning, to meditate together and to open up to a different kind of freedom and independence.

The next trip will take place in the November 2019. Destinations: the Himalayas, Dharamsala (where the Dalai Lama lives), Benares for the festival of light mandalas, one of the most beautiful festivals of India, and Pushkar, the gateway to the Desert.

Trusting the intelligence of life that is inside us - which is us - makes it possible to follow its path, without complying or seeking to copy. Just follow this path and you will go far.

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