

Dark Side of the Meditation: How to Dispel this Darkness

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of doing meditation, as perceived by us, is that it gives a lot of benefits to its practioners at the physical, psychological, emotional, cognitive, and the spiritual levels. But there is a dark side of the meditation, which is hardly highlighted, particularly by those spiritual masters who are earning a lot of money out of this spiritual business. No such master has ever claimed the adverse effects of their specific meditation technique. But it has been reported in some studies that some meditators, though in minority, suffer from bouts of depression, anxiety, confusion, disillusionment, and loss of meaning and interest for their life. A few of them have even attempted suicide. This paper is concerned about those who are going through periods of angst, disillusionment and hell due to the adverse effects or the dark side of the meditation. These spiritual travelers, suffering from spiritual depression, fortunately do not see themselves as suffering from clinical depression. Some of these souls view this phase as God given opportunity for reflecting on their lives and they treat this phase as a blessing in disguise for the beneficial change. This paper analyses the phenomenon of the dark night of soul and then attempts to show the path to those meditators passing through this serious phase and guides them how to come out of this crisis victoriously and see a brighter light at the end of this dark tunnel.

Keywords: Dark Night of the Soul, Dark side, Adverse effects, Transcendental Meditation (TM), Vipassana, Mindfulness.

1. Introduction

The word 'Meditation' comes from the Latin root "meditatum", which means "to ponder". Meditation in the classical tradition has an acceptable application, which is the transformation of the person to realise oneself in a state of total transcendence and freedom from all the existential constraints. Meditation is a technique for resting the mind leading to peace, happiness, bliss, and self-realization. Meditation techniques are found in most, if not all, of the world's major religious traditions. Meditation is found in Christianity (in the form of contemplation), Hinduism (from which Transcendental Meditation is derived), Buddhism (from which mindfulness and vipassana meditation originated), Judaism and Islam etc. Religious texts describe many meditation techniques that range from sitting quietly (such as Buddhist concentration practices) to physical movement of the body (such as Hindu-derived Hatha Yoga) or scriptural reading and prayer (such as in the Christian practice of *lectio divina*).

It has been established by the experience as well as through the scientific experiments that the meditation has a large number of benefits at the physical, mental, emotional, psychological, cognitive and spiritual levels. For example, meditation helps the practioner oxygenate the brain, reduce heart rate, blood pressure, get cured by many ailments, create calm brainwave activity and achieve immunity from outside mental disturbances. The theoretical and the experimental aspects of meditation technique have been analyzed scientifically by many authors [1].

Over the past fifty years, thousands of research studies have been conducted suggesting that there are many psychological and physiological benefits associated with meditation [1]. As a result, various meditation techniques have been incorporated into a number of therapeutic interventions and used as tools for the treatment of a variety of clinical issues. The media has also played a crucial role in driving public acceptance of meditation by positioning the practice as an inherently side-effect free, therapeutic technique that is 'good for everyone.'

So far, the large and expanding body of research on meditation has mostly focused on the benefits of meditation on health and well-being. However, a growing number of reports indicate that psychologically

unpleasant experiences can occur in the context of meditation practice. Across the internet you will find articles on how meditation can cure depression, improve your health, can create happiness and much more. Yet you will find next to nothing about the health risks of meditation. Side effects of meditation are real, though.

In modern society, meditation techniques that were previously taught within the context of religious traditions are now increasingly being practiced in secular settings. So-called 'secular forms' of meditation first came to mainstream public awareness in the early 1960s, when Hindu-inspired Transcendental Meditation (TM) gained popularity in the United States. In the 1970s, vipassana, a standardized residential 10-day meditation retreat undertaken in a secular format, also became popular. More recently, 'mindfulness' meditation, a form of secular meditation derived from Theravada Buddhism, has found widespread use as both a therapeutic intervention and a mainstream self-help tool. 'Meditation as self-help' has become a booming commercial industry, and alongside these practices there exists a variety of secular meditation courses, apps, podcasts and meditation-related wearable technologies. The popularity of such meditation practices has been due in large part to its acceptance within the scientific community. None of the modern spiritual Gurus or Masters, particularly those engaged in making money out of the meditation training, will have the courage to point out that their specific techniques of meditation might have some adverse effects in some odd cases.

Although the scientific studies and popular media coverage of meditation have been overwhelmingly positive, meditation has not gone without some criticism. In particular, a small but growing literature indicates there could be adverse effects associated with meditation practice, in both clinical and non-clinical settings [2, 3]. In religious traditions, these types of difficulties associated with the result of improper practice of meditation or due to individual differences. Additionally, in traditional contexts, meditation teachers are equipped to deal with complications that may arise. However both the academic literature and the popular media have largely overlooked or ignored the negative effects associated with certain meditation practices.

In a research study report [4], the prevalence of particularly unpleasant meditation-related experiences in a large international sample of regular meditators were taken in order to explore the association of these experiences with demographic characteristics, meditation practice, repetitive negative thinking, mindfulness, and self-compassion. Using a cross-sectional online survey, 1,232 regular meditators with at least two months of meditation experience (mean age = 44.8 years \pm 13.8, 53.6% female) responded to one question about particularly unpleasant meditation-related experiences. A total of 315 participants (25.6%) reported having had particularly unpleasant meditation-related experiences, which they thought may have been caused by their meditation practice. Participants with higher levels of repetitive negative thinking, those who only engaged in vipassana/insight meditation, and those who had attended a meditation retreat at any point in their life were more likely to report unpleasant meditation-related experiences. The high prevalence of particularly unpleasant meditation-related experiences points to the importance of expanding the scientific conception of meditation beyond that of a (mental) health-promoting and self-regulating technique.

Most of us are sandwiched between spirituality and material life. This is called a spiritual constipation. This means that we are stuck in spirituality and cannot go to the next level. We are not reaping the benefits of spirituality and at the same time we are feeling guilty because of worldly things. If not treated by a spiritual expert or the inner Guru, this spiritual constipation may lead to 'spiritual diarrhea', a state of turmoil, which may lead to meditators going insane or some of them attempting suicide. In this paper, we not only discuss about the adverse effects of meditation caused to some practitioners, we also go beyond this and recommend ways to come out of this dark night and see light at the end of the tunnel.

2. Dark Night of the Soul

What is meant by the dark night of the soul?

As the seeker moves on the path of the Spirit, there are periods when he feels utterly depressed and despondent. He feels that he belongs to neither here nor there. The Dark Night of the Soul is a period of utter spiritual desolation, disconnection, and emptiness in which one feels totally separated from the Divine. Those who experience the Dark Night feel completely lost, hopeless, and consumed with melancholy. The Dark Night of the Soul can be likened to severe spiritual depression. It is as though the sufferers are passing through a parched desert. Nothing appeals to them: Everything appears dull, dark, and pessimistic.

The Dark Night of the Soul is not the same as the clinical depression. Although clinical depression shares many of its characteristics with the experience of having a Dark Night of the Soul, it can often be treated and sometimes cured with medications, cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT), mindful practice, lifestyle changes, and so forth. Furthermore, clinical depression often has its roots in biological chemical imbalances and/or unhealthy thought patterns, and often comes as a result of personal loss, mental illness, physical illness, abuse, genetics, and so on. On the other hand, having a Dark Night of the Soul is a much different experience because it is primarily a spiritual and existential form of crises that can't be treated or cured with therapy or psychiatry.

When such people are on the verge of uniting with the infinite wavelength of eternal vibration, their old frequency can sometimes go through a crisis of stasis. It buckles and bends trying to adjust itself and tune into the cosmic orchestra. They tend to doubt everything they have known to be true. In the extreme case scenarios they tend to fall into an existential crisis, or Dark Night of the Soul. For a person passing through this phase of dark night, it is the feeling of negative emotions: anger, sadness, frustration, confusion, hatred, etc., without knowing why or being able to identify a cause.

Famous author Eckhart Tolle also passed through the dark night of the soul. He described his state of turmoil as [5]:

“I couldn't live with myself any longer. And in this a question arose without an answer: who is the 'I' that cannot live with the self? What is the self? I felt drawn into a void. I didn't know at the time that what really happened was the mind-made self, with its heaviness, its problems, that lives between the unsatisfying past and the fearful future, collapsed. It dissolved.”

According to Brunton [2]: "The Dark Night is not the result of any physical suffering or personal misfortune: it comes from a subtler cause. It induces a depression of enormous weight...The sombre loneliness experienced during the Dark Night of the Soul is unique. No other kind of loneliness duplicates it either in nature or acuteness... It creates the feeling of absolute rejection, of being an outcast...A terrible inner numbness, an unbearable emptiness, is a prominent feature of the spiritual dark night...The situation is really paradoxical and beyond correct appraisal by the conscious mind, certainly by the suffering ego. He is being made to learn, by the severest experience, that the divine reality must not be confused with his conscious reactions to it, nor with his mental reactions to it, nor even with his emotional reactions to it, that it belongs to an unknown and unknowable realm that transcends human faculties and defies human perceptions".

The term 'Dark Night' was first introduced by Saint John of the Cross, a Spanish mystic and Roman Catholic, who was canonized in 1726. He was born in 1542 in Spain and died at the age of 49. His efforts of reforms were not liked by his brothers and, therefore, he was imprisoned for nine months [6]. During his imprisonment, he wrote the following poem titled 'Dark Night' but over the years it came to be known as the 'dark night of the soul':

*On a dark night,
Kindled in love with yearnings—oh, happy chance!—
I went forth without being observed,
My house being now at rest.*

*In darkness and secure,
By the secret ladder, disguised—oh, happy chance!—
In darkness and in concealment,
My house being now at rest.*

*In the happy night,
In secret, when none saw me,
Nor I beheld aught,
Without light or guide, save that which burned in my heart.*

*This light guided me
More surely than the light of noonday
To the place where he (well I knew who!) was awaiting me—*

A place where none appeared.

*Oh, night that guided me,
Oh, night more lovely than the dawn,
Oh, night that joined Beloved with lover,
Lover transformed in the Beloved!*

*Upon my flowery breast,
Kept wholly for himself alone,
There he stayed sleeping, and I caressed him,
And the fanning of the cedars made a breeze.*

*The breeze blew from the turret
As I parted his locks;
With his gentle hand he wounded my neck
And caused all my senses to be suspended.*

*I remained, lost in oblivion;
My face I reclined on the Beloved.
All ceased and I abandoned myself,
Leaving my cares forgotten among the lilies.*

3. Examples of Some Famous Persons Who Underwent the Dark Night

Dark night of the soul has not only affected the ordinary spiritual travelers, even some the well known icons have not remain untouched by this psycho-spiritual depression. Accounts of struggle with the painful experience of the Dark Night of the Soul are often given by priests, monks, nuns or other deeply religious people, followed by the assertion of emerging from them transformed and invigorated by faith and certainty, with their religious vocations confirmed. Mystics and revered religious figures were not immune to the experience of the Dark Night and they were humble enough to record – some of them with admirable frankness – evidence of their spiritual sufferings in their writings and letters.

Given here below are some such examples [7, 8]:

3.1 Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa of Kolkata, a noble laureate, suffered through the Dark Night of the Soul for almost 49 years till her death. She was the founder of Missionaries of Charity. In her letters to the Father, published after her death, she confessed to have been leading a confused life, with no direction etc. The recently published book [9] about Mother Teresa (1919–1997), “Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the Saint of Calcutta” (Kolodiejchuk, 2008), contains the agonized testimony of a woman – widely known in her lifetime as a “living saint” – who confronted a terrifying period of darkness that lasted for nearly five decades.

It is interesting that, after the controversy caused by the publication of Mother Teresa’s private letters, many testimonies have appeared in the media of people who were experiencing inner anguish and sadness expressing how much reading about Teresa’s experiences helped them to cope and to put their suffering into a spiritual light. As an illustration of this phenomenon Borchard called Mother Teresa “my saint of darkness and hope” and wrote about how she assisted her in her “spiritual journey to mental health,” teaching her about how to live with inner anguish and giving a purpose to her suffering.

3.2 Jesus Christ

Jesus was the most well-known sufferer of the Dark Night, experiencing abandonment by God: “Why have you forsaken me?” (Matthew 27:46; Mark 15:34), said Jesus. He withdrew into the desert to fast and meditate for 40 days and 40 nights.

3.3 Saint Augustine

Saint Augustine (354–430 AD), by far the most important of the Fathers of the Western or Latin Church and one of the most influential figures in Church history, recorded in his Confessions (Confesiones) his personal Dark Night. Augustine’s tormented spiritual search and heart-rending grief is poured out in the pages of this book telling the readers how his heart was restless until it could rest in God.

3.4 Saint Paul of the Cross

Saint Paul of the Cross (1694–1775), founder of the Passionists (a Roman Catholic religious order), is considered to be among the greatest Catholic mystics of the eighteenth century but his life was not free of spiritual turmoil as he underwent – and overcome – a very long Dark Night which lasted 50 years: “I cannot remember, for fifty years, to have had a day free of suffering” [7]. His prolonged spiritual agony affected his physical health to the extent of making him ill for several periods of time. Saint Paul frequently talked about his “naked suffering” as a suffering deprived of any comfort; the cause of it coming especially from his relationship with God that turned violent: like experiencing a “laceration of the conscience that at times would like to be expressed with blasphemy”

3.5 Gautama the Buddha

After many years of failed attempts to find the meaning of life, Buddha became a recluse and went for 49-day meditation under the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya.

3.6 Ludwig Beethoven

German musical composer Beethoven became deaf in his late 20s. He became a recluse and went through the dark night of the soul. Once he returned to work, he was attuned to the inner music or the inner sounds and he performed much better than before [8].

3.7 Marie Curie

Marie Curie, a Physicist, Chemist and a twice Noble Laureate passed through the dark period of her life at a young age of 10, when she lost her mother to tuberculosis.

4. Reasons for the Spiritual Deadlock or the Dark Night of the Soul

Following are some of the reasons to explain the Spiritual Deadlock in one’s life [10, 11]:

(i) **Overdoing or Saturation in Meditation:** When someone is doing a particular type of meditation, a stage comes when this practitioner does not get the perceived benefits beyond a particular limit. His/her progress stops suddenly. In the absence of a right kind of spiritual Guru who could have initiated him/her to the next level of meditation, the meditator feels deadlocked. He/she becomes depressed which leads to disillusionment.

(ii) **Choosing the wrong and/or unguided meditation technique:** You selected a particular meditation technique and signed for a meditation retreat. You realize that the particular technique does not synchronize with your physical, mental and emotional system. You plan to quit in between but the organizers force you to complete the full duration of the course with an assurance that it work to your benefit. You are left with no option but to continue. You find yourself mentally and spiritually exhausted towards the end of the Course. When you return after this meditation retreat and continue the technique learnt there, you do not find any benefits from. Yet you continue with a hope that everything will be alright after some duration. Instead of fetching any benefits to you, it makes you a confused, depressed and dejected fellow entering into the dark night of the soul.

(iii) **Loss of interest in meditation or “too bored”:** You started with the meditation regime very ‘methodically’, attended all sorts of meditation classes, and got the best meditation guru to train you but to no avail. As the saying goes “repeat the dose till the patient dies”, and you did the same. You repeated your meditation dose so much that you ended up ‘dead’, not physically dead, but yes, metaphorically ‘dead’: listless!
!

(iv) **Unable to recover from a Trauma:** When a person undergoes a certain kind of trauma, like the sudden death of someone in the family, a severe accident, a sudden termination of job leading to unemployment, a heavy financial loss, he is unable to cope up with this and remains depressed and agitated. He tries to look for solace in intoxicants, drugs, an unguided meditation etc. These things further lead him to deeper in the sea of confusion and disillusionment. He becomes reclusive, loses the meaning of life and thinks of committing suicide.

(v) **Negative people around:** When you feel that there are too many people around you either in your workplace, in your neighbourhood, or among relatives talking ill about in your presence as well in your absence, and you take criticism personally, there is a danger that you may gradually slip into the dark night of the soul.

(vi) **Relationship problems with spouse or other family members:** When a person undergoes a difficult phase because of ditching, cheating or mistreating by an ‘unreasonable’ spouse, a fiancée or a family member, and no efforts to restore normalcy works for him/her, he/she feels lost, confused, depressed, losing faith in everyone in the world and even in the Almighty.

(vii) **Improper sleep patterns:** Due to a lot of dimensional shifts, energy pattern changing, many of us are either too deprived of good sleep or just over sleeping or even worse just can’t seem to enjoy sound sleep. It may not your fault but it definitely affects the normal body functioning. You are unable to enjoy the ‘simple’ things in life because ‘insomnia’ makes you feel like a ‘zombie’ all the time.

5. Symptoms and Adverse Effects or the Dark Side of Meditation

There are intense adverse effects of certain meditation techniques to a fraction of its practioners [12, 13]. You have the constant feeling of being lost or “condemned” to a life of suffering or emptiness. You possess a painful feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness. Your will and self-control is weakened, making it difficult for you to act. You lack interest and find no joy in things that once excited you. You crave for the loss of something intangible; a longing for a distant place or to “return home” again.

Following is the typical account of a monk living for many years in a monastery, describing **typical symptoms** of the person passing through the dark night of the soul [10]:

“I did not know what the matter was with me. I did not know where I was going or why I was feeling so miserable and sad. I felt unsatisfied, uncomfortable within myself. I broke into tears without a cause, I felt scared without a cause. At times, when I longed for Him so much, He seemed unattainable. it was as if the sky had become all at once dark leaving me in agony, in darkness...”

To summarize, following are the five **symptoms** of the person passing through the dark night of the soul [6]:

(i) Feeling negative emotions: anger, sadness, frustration, confusion, hatred, etc., without knowing why or being able to identify a cause.

(ii) You have tried methods and techniques to shake off the negativity, loneliness, and confusion, but nothing works. In fact, it might sometimes be made worse.

(iii) You have memories of childhood pain that you cannot seem to shake.

(iv) When you try to talk to others about what you are experiencing, you have a sense that they do not or cannot fully understand. You feel alone, even isolated from the Divine, a previous source of comfort and inspiration.

(v) You feel fatigued and listless; your energy is spent trying to resolve these negative feelings.

Following are some of the **risks of meditation** in practioners, who are in minority though [12, 13]:

(i) **Seizures:** One of the worst health risks of meditation is seizures. Research into epileptics has used neuro-imaging to study the effect of meditation. These studies have shown that entering a meditative state alters neuro-chemistry and neuro-physiology of the brain that can lead to epileptogenesis.

(ii) **Headache:** A milder side effect of meditation is that it can cause headaches. Many meditators are already aware of this health risk of meditation. When you meditate, there is often a struggle. You are consciously attempting to change your mental state, but your ego does not desire change, it desires to keep things as they are. This can, at times, lead to tension that causes headaches.

(iii) **Anxiety:** While some research shows that meditation can cure depression and meditation can cure anxiety, other research shows that meditation may in fact have an adverse affect on people with a history of anxiety and depression. Such people may feel increased anxiety, fear, stress, panic and low moods when meditating. They feel a deep sense of sadness, which often verges on despair (this sadness is often triggered by the state of your life, humanity, and/or the world as a whole).

(iv) **Panic Attacks:** Meditation can lead to intense painful feelings and emotions, it has been known to also cause panic attacks for some people.

(v) **Potential Death:** The most shocking side effect of meditation is: potential death?! There is some evidence to show that a seriously negative side effect of meditation is, well, death. While it is extremely unlikely that meditation will cause death, it is not completely impossible. It is known that seizures can cause death. And meditation can cause seizures... so this is definitely a health risk of meditation.

(vi) **Mental Atrophy:** Another study into the negative side effects of meditation states that meditation “deprives the mind of stimulus” essentially leading to sensory deprivation. Many people begin meditating and sign themselves up for a meditation retreat. Meditation retreats involve meditating for the entire day, for up to fourteen hours. The aim is to create equanimity and enlightenment. Such retreats are suitable for advanced meditators only. Sitting for hours on end focusing on your breathing (as meditation retreats do) is depriving your brain of stimulus. When this is carried out for long periods, it can lead to sensory deprivation and even atrophy of the brain. For the uninitiated they are potential death traps. The average person’s brain is unprepared to meditate for such a long period of time and in such intense conditions. The result can range from seizures to psychosis and even to death.

(vii) **Hypersensitivity:** Are you hypersensitive to light and sound? This is one of the negative side effects of meditation. Brown University researchers recently interviewed 100 meditators and meditation teachers and asked them about the side effects that they had experienced after meditating. A significant portion of the interviewees stated that they have been experiencing hypersensitivity to light and sound, as well as insomnia, occasional involuntary movements, and feelings of fear, anxiety and panic [13]. The degree of the hypersensitivity to light and sound, and the extremity of insomnia, ranged between different people. Some people were much less sensitive to sounds and light than others. This suggests that meditation may be good for some and less good (though still not bad) for others.

5.1 Given here below a list of **three meditation techniques**, out of several ones, which have shown to produce adverse effects on some of its practitioners:

5.1.1 Transcendental Meditation (TM)

A severe example of the potential adverse effects of Transcendental Meditation (TM) was reported in a case study by Alfred French and colleagues [14]. The authors describe the case of a 39 year old woman who, several weeks after starting TM practice, experienced altered reality testing and behaviour. The patient had no pre-existing clinical issues, after starting meditation she experienced euphoric fantasies with mystical elements, strange moods and unusual behaviour that resembled psychosis. The authors argued that the continued presence of an altered state of consciousness (which began within days of starting TM), and the occurrence of

"waking fantasies" (which began shortly after), suggested a causal relationship between meditation and the subsequent psychosis-like experience, and cautioned that "this form of meditation carries the risk of psychosis-like and potentially dangerous regression." Another study of TM by Leon Otis noted that adverse effects such as pervasive anxiety and depression occurred in a significant percentage of people who practiced TM (slightly less than half of the 1,900 subjects), and that the probability of such effects occurring was higher among psychiatric populations [15]. Of particular interest is Otis's finding that more adverse effects occurred among long-term meditators and TM teacher trainees than among novice meditators. He writes: These data suggest that the longer a person stays in TM and the more committed a person becomes to TM as a way of life (as indicated by the teacher trainee group), the greater the likelihood that he or she will experience adverse effects.

5.1.2 Vipassana

Adverse effects have also been found among meditation retreat participants. For example, Deane Shapiro conducted a study [16] on a non-clinical population (n = 27) at a vipassana meditation retreat and found that 62.9% of participants experienced at least one adverse psychological effect from meditation, including feelings of anxiety, panic, depression, confusion and disorientation. Two participants (7% of the sample studied) experienced symptoms so severe that they stopped meditating; one participant said the retreat left him "totally disoriented, confused, and spaced out," while the other participant reported "lots of depression, confusion, severe shaking and energy releasing." It was also found [16] a trend that, while not statistically significant, lent support to earlier finding that meditators who had practiced the longest (in this case, over 8.5 years) reported the highest frequency of adverse effects.

5.1.3 Mindfulness

Mindfulness derives from Theravada Buddhism, and is usually associated with the teachings of the Burmese monk Mahasi Sayadaw (1904-1982), and the canonical text *Satipatthana Sutta* (the Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness), Buddhaghosa's *Visuddhimagga* (Path of Purification) and other Pali sources [17]. The *Satipatthana Sutta* is generally regarded as the canonical Buddhist text with the most comprehensive instructions on the system of mindfulness meditation. In its clinical use, mindfulness is conceptualized as a type of 'open monitoring' practice whereby the practitioner is attentive, moment by moment, to anything that arises in experience, without focusing on any explicit object.

As mindfulness meditation and other varieties seep into many areas of life and health, and especially as more people do it on their own, a small group of experts and civilians are pointing out that it does not always do good for the human psyche. An academic research points to potentially negative consequences of practicing mindfulness [18]. It is felt that the scholarly and popular media discussions of mindfulness tend to be far too unbalanced. Negative findings in research studies and potential detriments of mindfulness are often swept under the rug.

6. How to Dispel the Darkness of the Soul

Following is the statement of a monk living for many years in a monastery, who describes how he could come out this state of the dark night of the soul [10]:

"In those moments when I felt that all was darkness and I could not cope; I reminded myself that God was with me and that this horrible time was going to pass, it was going to end because it was God who put me in that situation of suffering so, it was also He who was going to take me out of it. It is all about trusting God. If you trust Him, then you know He is with you and that He is going to take care of you and end things well for you. You cannot say that you trust Him and then, lose courage and despair totally. He gives me hope and strength to fight those moments of sadness, knowing that all is going to be all right at the end."

Polish psychologist Kazimierz Dąbrowski once coined a term Positive disintegration [13] which views tension and anxiety as necessary in the process of spiritual and psychological maturing. In other words, it is the friction within us that causes the mirror of our Souls to be polished enough for us to glimpse our True Nature. When the ego forgets its soul agreement its journey becomes 'soul-less', without the soul's partnership. It tries to battle the darkness with its own darkness instead of connecting to the light within [19]. Then life becomes a journey of fear, lack, doubt, and confusion. What is missing is the light of the soul, which is available to the

ego when it is willing to share the healing journey and follow it to wholeness and congruence, and to be open to the possibility of life beyond fear, because by itself it is not aware of that as a potential.

It has been argued by May [20] that, to the serious detriment of the individual's spiritual life, this difficult side of the darkness of the soul has been often trivialized and neglected in favour of an easier and more superficial spirituality, whereas the encounter with this Dark Night can be an enriching and healing experience that could lead to true spiritual wholeness. You are in the dark so that you can understand what Light is. You are disconnected so that you can know what connection is. You are lost so that you can find your way back Home. All of us, the co-travelers on the path of spirituality, must pass through the dark night of the soul, a period of loneliness and internal conflict before we can enter into Self-knowledge, true awareness of the Self. It is in this loneliness that we can shed our ego, and realise that we are not alone.

6.1 Steps to Survive the Dark Night of the Soul

Some steps are recommended here below to survive a Dark Night of the Soul [21, 22]

- (i) **Let the Old Die:** The more you think you know what life is about, the more you suffer. The more flexible your beliefs are, the smoother your ride, because you are more open to the present moment.
- (ii) **Welcome the Darkness:** Treat this state as the God-given opportunity to you; retreat and reflect more about yourself to ultimately hop to your next level
- (iii) **Notice How Your Mind Works:** You create your experience through the thoughts you focus on. You have thoughts about how life should be. You have belief systems that give rise to fears that then try to leverage you into fixing the perceived problem.
- (iv) **Nourish Your Soul:** Relaxation is the key during the dark night of the soul. Take long walks. Watch your favourite programmes on TV. Read books that motivate you. Go easy on yourself. Don't judge. Trust your own inner guidance as best you can.
- (v) **Meditate:** Meditation expands awareness. So do that part of meditation, which you feel comfortable with. Don't spend much time during meditation sessions. You don't necessarily have to even sit down and close your eyes. You can be mindful while you're taking a walk, lying in bed, or even watching a movie.
- (vi) **Live Now, Live in the Present:** Stay in the now as much as you can. Be aware of your body, breathing, thoughts, and even the space between all things. Your thoughts may try to pull you away, but you just keep coming back to the here and now.
- (vii) **Move and Breathe:** This is not all about the psychological aspects. We live in these biological bodies that need to be taken care of. What can happen is that as you feel worse, and you move less. It's a downward spiral. You need to keep the energy flowing. Exercising and breathing helps release stuck energy, plus it releases those feel-good chemicals. Move your body as often as you can. It doesn't matter what it is, as long as you enjoy it. Yoga, qigong, lifting weights, swimming: any exercise. It is all good.
- (viii) **Bathe in Nutrition:** Another aspect is what you eat. As we eat unhealthy foods, we feel worse. And as we feel worse, you again come to a situation where you were in earlier. This doesn't mean you have to deprive yourself from an occasional treat.
- (ix) **Check Your Gut Health**

The next step is to make sure your gut is healthy. Are you eating a lot of processed foods, sugar, and other goodies? It's okay to have some, but if you eat too much and you may be harming the beneficial bacteria in your gut. There are natural ways to boost the bacteria in your gut, such as good old fruits, nuts and vegetables. Clean up your diet. Eat clean, cut sugar. Sugar creates an acidic environment in the body, and only contributes to brain fog and mood swings. Cancer cells and other diseases grow happily in an acidic environment, so it is important to maintain the acid/alkaline balance of the body.

The gut is the primary producer of serotonin, a chemical responsible for feelings of happiness and well-being. When the gut is clogged with heavy foods, toxins build in the system, which also creates an acidic environment and can stop serotonin from being absorbed, leading to depression and lethargy.

- (x) Be kind to yourself during this time, and let yourself enjoy the downtime.

7. Symptoms to see that you have exited the Dark Night

The sugar cane yields its sweet juice only after it has been crushed relentlessly in a mill. Likewise the human entity yields its noblest traits and truest wisdom only after it has been crushed repeatedly in the mill of anguish. Khalil Gibran (January 6, 1883- April 10, 1931) was a Lebanese author, philosopher, poet and artist. On the dark night of the soul, he said: "Out of suffering have emerged the strongest Souls; the most massive characters are seared with scars".

Following are some of the indicative symptoms for you yourself to realize that you have come out of the dark night of the soul [23]:

- (i) You are experiencing, or have experienced, Ego Death. The "dark night" does more to detach a man from his ego, his interests, and his desires than the rapturous joys and emotional ecstasies. The awful feeling of being separated from and even lost forever to the higher power, works as a hidden training and secret discipline of all personal feelings.
- (ii) It is only when you are alone, that you realize you are never alone.
- (iii) You have a new-found appreciation of your mortality.
- (iv) The purpose of your life has taken on new meaning
- (v) You are more aware of the importance of your freedom.
- (vi) You are experiencing anomie and cognitive dissonance. Anomie is a term popularized by French sociologist Émile Durkheim. It is a nurtured condition that arises from the lack of morality and social ethics in one's culture. You have experienced the pain of this condition and you are in the process of embracing it and letting it go in order to discover your own sense of values.
- (vii) You realize that the ability to fall apart and coming back together again is real strength. Your strength comes from your ability to adapt and overcome to falling apart and coming back together again, from wholeness to brokenness and back to a stronger form.

7.1 Suggestions to Support Ego Death

- (i) Relax as much as possible in the down-cycle, Surrender and allow the process of the Dark Night [24].
- (ii) Make yourself comfortable without suppressing symptoms, without escaping to run away or propping yourself up with distractions and stimulants.
- (iii) A spiritual die-off is a free radical storm which may induce stress. De-stress and take good care of your body, potentially consume healthy foods.
- (iv) Drink at least 10 glasses of water a day, and take a bath to re-hydrate potentially in salt baths. The body has a huge demand for water and Biochemic Cell Salts during a die-off phase, detoxification and spiritual activation.
- (v) If one is accelerated in full detoxification of toxin die-off, one may experience Ascension Symptoms like Ascension flu. The immune system is essentially dismantling the body and all one can do is rest in bed, and not eat much of anything. One may create toxicity and tissue damage if you work against the natural break-down cycle and ignore the bodies request for rest, cleansing or fast.

8. Conclusion

In this paper we have highlighted the dark side or the adverse effects of meditation in the case of some meditators irrespective of the duration they have been engaged in their spiritual practice. In this state of dark night, the spiritual travelers experience depression, apathy, and loss of sense of being. Those of us going through the Dark Night often feel an increasing sense of hopelessness, unease, and despair as we discover that no one can save us but ourselves. Inevitably, this makes us feel even more alone, frustrated and confused about the world and about ourselves. In this state, these meditators are unable to see the true meaning and purpose of life; they are confused and bewildered. Many such people become reclusive and a fraction of them even attempt suicide. Some victims consult the doctors, psychiatrists, or psychologists and are wrongly diagnosed with 'clinical depression' instead of 'spiritual depression' or the 'psycho-spiritual syndrome'. We have further discussed in this paper, the ways and means of coming out of their darkness and see the bright light at the end of the tunnel. Once they come out of this harrowing experience, some of them retrospectively realise that this dark phase in their spiritual lives, which appeared as the deadlock, actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise. It was a call from the Almighty to compulsorily pass through this phase, so that they can leapfrog to higher realms of consciousness thereafter. We have discussed various steps which take the spiritual victims out of the dark night syndrome to the spiritually illuminating light.

We conclude this paper with the following prayer taken from Brhadaranyaka Upanishad (I.3.28):

*Om asato ma sadgamaya
tamaso ma jyotirgamaya
mrityorma amritam gamaya
Om shanti shanti shantih.*

Meaning: O Lord, Lead me from the asat (falsehood) to the sat (truth). *Lead me from the darkness to light.* Lead me from the death to immortality. Om Peace Peace Peace.

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