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Visited by spirits

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Visited by Spirits – 'betwixt and between' in meditation and solitary confinement in Myanmar

Liv S. Gaborit

Abstract: This article takes point of departure in surprisingly similar, yet significantly differing experiences of hearing voices among prisoners in Myanmar. It discusses why these experiences of a similar phenomenon, that of hearing voices, are described by prisoners as an occasion to share compassion when occurring during meditation retreats, and as torture when experienced in solitary confinement. The article approaches this phenomenon as spiritual experiences and uses the concept of liminality to make sense of variations in the experiences. It shows that three factors affect the differences in these experiences: the presence or absence of communitas, a master of ceremony or other guidance; and whether the experiences takes place based on the volition of the person or is forced upon him. This leads to the conclusion that solitary confinement, due to the absence of communitas, guidance and its forced nature, represents a situation in which the prisoner is at risk of prolonged liminality and social harm which can unhinge him from his interrelational self.

The *Sayadaw*[1] was imprisoned several times because of his participation as a pro-democracy activist. He was among the monks who rose up against the oppression by the military regime in the 2007 Saffron Revolution, named after the colour of the robes of the thousands of monks that took to the streets. After arrest, the Sayadaw was subjected to severe torture in interrogation camps before he ended up in prison, where he was put in solitary confinement. He was released and re-arrested several times. Each time he returned to prison he was placed in solitary confinement, to distance him from the political movement he was part of. Inside the cell, the Sayadaw started seeing and hearing things out of the ordinary. Though he was alone in the cell, he heard the voices of other people. He heard the voices of friends, family and military generals. When asked about the voices, he described them as torture, as something inflicted upon him by others:

[1] Sayadaw is used as a pseudonym instead of the name of the monk. Sayadaw means great teacher in Burmese and is used to respectfully address senior monks.

> *Sayadaw: The torture, yes. I don't know how to call that torture. I could hear, I could hear voices from the prison walls…. I could not see them, but they talked to me. They talked to me a lot.*
>
> *Author: What did they say?*
>
> *Sayadaw: They talked about politics and then about social [issues] and then about love. Yes. Ehrm, it is a kind of torture. Yes, I don't know how to call it. (Former prisoner, Interview, June, 2018)*

Such experiences are common in solitary confinement, which has previously been shown to lead to suffering and a number of symptoms of mental disease (Guenther, 2013; Haney, 2002; Reiter, 2016). It is therefore not surprising that the Sayadaw went through such experiences while in solitary confinement, possibly aggravated by the torture he went through. More surprising however, is that similar experiences were described in a more tranquil part of a prison: in the meditation centre of Insein Central Prison, *Dhamma Hita Sukha Geha*. In the meditation centre, prisoners similarly described hearing voices. The yogis,[2] however, ascribed the voices to being visited by spirits during meditation, and seemed at peace with the experience:

> *"Sometimes I also heard whispers in my ears. I was not sure what they said, sometimes it was just passing by. I think maybe they were spirits looking for compassion. It did not happen all the time, only sometimes." (Yogi prisoner, Interview, June, 2018)*

Sometimes yogis were disturbed at first, but then consulted with their teacher. After being consoled by the teacher, they accepted the experience and the presence of spirits. The yogis did not describe what the voices said, but rather the experience of encountering a spirit and offering compassion.

The phenomenon described by yogis and the Sayadaw appeared very similar – they heard voices and saw figures, but in solitary confinement, the experiences led to suffering and were even described as torture, while in meditation the experiences were accepted and seen as an occasion to exercise compassion towards spirits. This raises the question: how can such similar phenomena cause such different experiences? And, in addition, what do these differences reveal about the factors which affect liminal experiences?

[2] Participants in mediation retreats are referred to as yogis. This reflects emic language and does not imply that the meditators are practising yoga.

This article approaches these questions by discussing differences and similarities between these experiences. In doing so, it deviates from the standard conceptualisation of such experiences in solitary confinement as pathological (Haney, 2002; Smith, 2006). This article is not the first to argue for a reconceptualization of reactions to solitary confinement. O'Donnell (2014) has previously argued that researchers over-emphasise the pathological reactions to solitary confinement, thereby overlooking possible benefits of solitary confinement. In present article the motivation for going beyond the pathological conceptualisation is significantly different. This article argues that the suffering is caused by the structural violence of solitary confinement, not a result of inner states of those who go through it. Suffering in solitary confinement is a result of structural violence rather than mental disease. This conceptualisation differs from the argument proposed by O'Donnell, but is in agreement with the data of this study, which shows that even prisoners who experience growth in solitary confinement describe their experiences as characterised by intense suffering. This stance positions this article in agreement with William James' critique of medical materialism, in which he argues that even if medical origins exist, spiritual experiences deserve to be studied in their own right: *"By their fruits ye shall know them, not by their roots."* (2012, p. 19). The article explores two different ways of experiencing the same phenomenon and shows it is not hearing voices that is pathological or problematic. Rather, it is the suffering, which accompanies the experiences in solitary confinement that is the problem, a problem caused by the inherent structural violence implied by placing interrelational selves in solitary confinement.

First, a note on why and how these experiences are conceptualised as spiritual experiences in this article. The yogis describe experiences they go through when practising Vipassana meditation. Vipassana means insight, and refers to a structured practice of meditation, which aims to gain insight into the self and the world, ultimately realising the illusionary nature of the self. These experiences easily fit within common understandings of spiritual experiences. Complication occurs however, when trying to describe similar experiences in solitary confinement, where the experiences are not results of a systematic practice tied to a religion or philosophy and are not necessarily conceived as connected to some kind of greater power. The Sayadaw himself was not sure how to describe his experiences. He resisted calling them hallucinations and insisted his experiences were real, though he recognised that the people talking were not there. To avoid imposing a terminology resisted by the people going through the described experiences, terms such as hallucinations or other terms with pathological connotations are therefore averted. Instead, for lack of a better term, both types of experiences will here be referred to as 'spiritual experiences'. In

this article, this term refers to experiences of things or people, which cannot be seen, heard or felt by others. With respect of those who have gone through the experiences, and with reference to Max Weber, William James and Bruno Latour's work on religious experiences (James, 2012; Latour, 2005; Weber, 2013), these experiences are conceived as real. This conception is in line with the ontological turn within anthropology, in which different ontological stances can be used to explore *'how things could be'* (Holbraad and Pedersen, 2017, p. 293), if conceived through different ontologies. Thus, this paper explores how understandings of solitary confinement could be, if such experiences are conceived as real spiritual experiences instead of pathologies.

One might be tempted to believe that the occurrence of spiritual experiences in the two contexts described above can be attributed to the culture in which they take place. While animism is recognised even among Buddhists in Myanmar, as the belief in the 37 'Nats' (guardian spirits) (Maung Htin Aung, 1962), the experiences in this article are not unique to the Burmese context. In 1983, Grassain proposed creating a psychiatric diagnosis for the 'syndrome' he had observed among prisoners in solitary confinement in an American supermax prison. Among the symptoms included in the syndrome were perceptual disturbances such as hallucinations and in the descriptions of findings Grassain reports that 7 out of the 15 interviewees reported hearing voices (1983). Similarly, Haney (2003) reported in a more recent study, that 41 of 100 prisoners interviewed at the Secure Housing Unit (SHU) at Pelican Bay in California reported experiencing hallucinations while in solitary confinement. Lastly, hearing voices has been described within various meditation traditions (Kaselionyte and Gumley, 2017). Within centres that practice Vipassana according to the U Goenka tradition, it is normal practice to screen participants for previous experiences of mental health issues. People with a history of serious mental health issues are recommended to seek medical advice or therapy instead of participating in meditation retreats. This suggests an awareness of the connection between meditation, spiritual experiences and pathology. It has thus been established that experiences like these take place in different contexts, across different cultures. Thus, the phenomenon of hearing voices and having visions has a universal character. Culture in this specific context does thus not appear to be the cause of such phenomenon, though it has an effect on how these experiences unfold and which meaning is ascribed to them. The existence of animism and the absence of Western psychological concepts in everyday language in Myanmar, increases the likelihood of these experiences being conceived as visits by spirits rather than hallucinations indicating pathology. As the analysis below shows, this can affect how experiences develop over time.

To understand these experiences, this article applies a conceptual framework that approaches them as liminal experiences, in order to create alternative understandings of the experiences and explain the different reactions to them (Stenner, 2017; Szakolczai, 2015). It proposes that reactions which have traditionally been classified as mental disease occurring in prison can be understood as a break with the social structure the prisoner was in; and, that such a break is a consequence of imprisonment in present analysis, but is by no means a phenomenon that exclusively takes place within prisons. Conceptualising imprisonment as liminal experiences allows us to understand breaks with reality (structures) and how some people get stuck, unhinged, in liminality. By terming this phenomenon as 'becoming unhinged' this article points to the arbitrariness of distinguishing between inner mental disorders and prison as outer environment when conceptualising selves as interrelational (Guenther, 2013). Becoming unhinged is a direct consequence of the process of imprisonment leading to liminal experiences.

The article starts with a short presentation of the data, and the two contexts in which the experiences took place. It then goes on to present the theoretical contribution liminality offers to prison studies. It continues with a presentation of how the yogis in meditation and the Sayadaw in solitary confinement experience hearing voices as either being visited by spirits or being tortured. This section is followed by a discussion of how experiences of symbolic death lead the yogis to experience freedom, while the Sayadaw on the other hand is pushed to such desperation that he attempts to commit suicide. In the conclusion, the article sums up the value of studying experiences of imprisonment as liminal, implications for other studies of liminal experiences and consequences for the use of solitary confinement.

Methods and context

The article is based on 15 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Yangon, Myanmar in 2016-18. Most of the fieldwork took place outside of the prison with former prisoners; four days of fieldwork were spent inside Insein Central Prison interviewing ten prisoners who had taken part in Vipassana meditation retreats inside the prison, sitting for meditation with prisoners and conducting a workshop with senior prison staff. Additionally, ten days were spent sitting for a meditation retreat in a meditation centre outside the prison, where I also joined weekly group sittings and interacted with former prisoners who had continued their meditation practice after release (Gaborit, 2019, 2017). The article draws on two types of data: interviews, with former as well as current prisoners,

and field notes. The analysis features quotes with the ten yogi prisoners and with one former prisoner who spent five years in solitary confinement.

The prison system in Myanmar has the capacity for 66.000 prisoners but hold approximately 92.000, with Insein Central Prison having the capacity for 5.000 but holding approximately 12.000 at the time of fieldwork (World Prison Brief, 2018). Prisons in Myanmar are thus crowded spaces with many prisoners loitering with few activities to keep them busy. Majority of prisoners are convicted of drug related crimes. Similarly, among the prisoners who participated in this study, several had been involved in drug use or distribution. Others had been convicted of murder and one had been imprisoned because of political activity.

The Sayadaw is a former prisoner who spent around five years in prison and who was a monk before his imprisonment. His first imprisonment took place after his involvement in the Saffron Revolution in 2007. As one of the leaders in the revolution, he faced severe torture in the military interrogation camp where he was questioned, and was later placed in solitary confinement once he was moved to the prison. Even after he was placed inside prison, he was subject to regular beatings by prison staff. He spent all day inside the cell and was only allowed to go outside for 15 minutes to shower and empty the toilet bowl from the cell. Inside the cell, he started hearing voices and later also seeing figures. Though he was a monk when arrested, the authorities had taken away his robe. He tried to continue his practice of praying and meditating, but found it hard to do so without his 'Sangha'[3] brothers. His narrative is selected due to his particular detailed descriptions of spiritual experiences.[4]

The ten yogi prisoners were interviewed in Insein Central Prison. The interviewees had participated in 1 to 43 retreats and had served between 3 and 14 years inside the prison. The group consisted of five men and five women, aged between 30 and 59 years old. The meditation retreats are ten-day Vipassana retreats in the U Goenka tradition, which take place in a special meditation ward.[5] These are standardised retreats conducted after the exact same schedule across the world. The instruction

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[3] *Sangha* refers to the monastic order and is one of the three jewels in Theravada Buddhism. The other jewels are the *Buddha*, the fully enlightened one, and the *Dhamma*, the teachings of the Buddha.

[4] For concerns of confidentiality, I refrain from giving a detailed description of the Sayadaw. Due to similar concerns, quotes are marked by year and month, while exact date and place is kept confidential.

[5] There are two prominent schools of Vipassana in Myanmar – Mahasi and Goenka, named after the respective Sayadaws who are seen as the original teachers. The Goenka tradition practice layman meditation and emphasises that it is non-sectarian and open to people from all religions, though the philosophical foundation and the Dhamma talks still draw on Buddhism. The Mahasi tradition is more closely connected to the Sangha and is practiced within monasteries where laymen are also welcomed.

for meditations is given via an audio recording of Sayadaw U Goenka himself in English, accompanied by a Burmese translation. U Goenka played an important role in establishing a school for Vipassana meditation for laymen and imported this tradition to Indian prisons (Vipassana Research Institute, 1994). In 2008 the method, which originated in Burma but underwent significant development in India, was implemented in Burmese prisons for the first time. Today, there are meditation centres in the three central prisons in Oh Boh Prison near Mandalay, Thayerwaddy Prison and Insein Central Prison in Yangon. During retreats prisoners observe noble silence,[6] and are thus only allowed to speak when consulting with the teacher, and sit for meditation for 11 hours a day.

It should be noted that the prisoners who have contributed to the data of this article are likely not representative of the average prisoner in Myanmar. The prisoners who were interviewed inside prison have gone through a double selection process. First, they are the ones who have the mental resources to engage with meditation retreats in a context where daily survival can be a struggle. Though there are cases of prisoners joining the meditation retreat mainly due to the promise of better food, the prisoners interviewed in this study were dedicated yogis, people who found the capacity within themselves to undertake a spiritual journey. Further, the group consisted of the people who volunteered themselves when a high ranking member of prison staff asked for people willing to speak to a foreigner about meditation. To volunteer when faced with a senior member of staff and the prospect of answering questions from a foreigner will likely have demanded a certain amount of courage from the prisoners otherwise used to being at the bottom of the hierarchy, humbly squatting down in silence when I and this same senior staff member passed them in the prison.[7] The experiences they, and the monk in solitary confinement describe do however provide vivid examples of spiritual experiences (James, 2012). Such examples have the potential to enlighten us about the nature of human experiences in situations like these, even if they do not represent experiences that all prisoners go through.

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[6] Noble silence is one of the rules during meditation retreats. During the retreat, yogis are supposed to abstain from communicating, verbally and through gestures. Speech is only allowed during consultations with the teacher or to communicate special requests to the Dhamma helpers.

[7] The interviewees did not seem to have been instructed in what to say beforehand and the presence of one interviewee who spoke limited Burmese lead me to believe that the selection process had not been manipulated by the authorities to present a certain image of the prison. I had feared such manipulation, as I was the first foreigner to gain access to the prisons for research purposes and the authorities could therefore be expected to be cautious about my visits and interviews.

In this article, the yogis describe visits by spirits in connection with meditation retreats and the Sayadaw describes the voices he heard while in solitary confinement. Some yogis have however spent time in solitary confinement and the Sayadaw stayed in a monastery before his imprisonment. Thus, this data reflects the experiences of people who have been in situations that can contribute to positive as well as negative experiences of liminality. The patterns of their experiences in other contexts support what the analysis below shows: that the phenomenon of hearing voices unfolds in different ways in the two different contexts. The fact that the Sayadaw did not describe suffering from voices while in the monastery, and that the yogis who had spent time in solitary confinement reported negatively about spiritual experiences while in solitary confinement, supports the hypothesis that situational rather than individual factors affect the amount of suffering from such experiences.

Imprisonment as liminal experiences

For prisoners, life is disrupted as they are arrested and taken to prison. They are in a liminal position in terms of space (the prison) and time (the sentence). They are betwixt and between, as liminal subjects, their identity is suspended and so is the social structure they came from. In this liminal phase, prisoners are 'both/and' and 'neither/nor'. They are convicted as criminals, to become reformed citizens, they represent the potential to be both, but they are also no-longer-a-criminal and not-yet-a-reformed-citizen (Stenner, 2017).

This article focuses on liminal experiences defined as "…experiences that happen during occasions of significant transition, passage or disruption." (Stenner, 2017, p. 14). In liminal experiences, "solid psychosocial structures melt down into liquids, the better to be reformed into a new pattern." (Stenner, 2017, p. 16). It is through this framework that this article approaches spiritual experiences of prisoners, as examples of what happens when psychosocial structures liquefy. This explains why such experiences break with hegemonic conceptions of reality and raise ontological questions.

Liminality is not an unknown concept in prison studies (Gaborit, 2020). In some cases, the word is used without its theoretical definition by researchers who have identified it as suitable to describe what they see in prisons (see for example Guenther, 2013). In a few cases, the theoretical concept has been imported from anthropology and used for analysis of different aspects of prison life. Moran (2013) analyses prison visitation rooms as liminal spaces, Jewkes (2005) writes about

liminality and identity management for long-term prisoners and Green (2016) adds an empirical analysis of imprisonment as ritual in his dissertation. Though previous research does exist, much is still to be learned from approaching prisons through the conceptual framework of liminality. This article approaches spiritual experiences in solitary confinement and meditation to fill a gap in research identified by Peter Scharff Smith by addressing “some of the more dramatic effects of solitary confinement” (2006, p. 506).

As the variety in the studies of liminality in prison above shows, liminality can be studied on various levels. Thomassen (2015, p. 15) has suggested that liminality is classified according to *space, subject* (individual, group or population), and *time.* According to such classification liminality can be used as an analytical concept for levels as different as modernity – a global phenomenon, for all human beings, lasting for an epoch – to individual enlightenment – in a specific space, for one person, in a moment. Similarly experiences of imprisonment, as they take place for the full duration from arrest to release, can be conceptualised as liminal experiences on one level. This article however works on a different level. The following analysis will focus on experiences which are spatially contained within the meditation centre or solitary confinement cell; which happen to a group or yogis or to an individual prisoner, and; which are limited to the duration of the spiritual experiences in which a voice is heard or a spirit visits. Thus, the analysis zooms in on a particular type of liminal experiences within imprisonment.

In addition to the classification of types of liminality described by Thomassen, Stenner has proposed a set of binaries to describe different types of liminality. According to Stenner, liminal experiences can be *spontaneous or devised*, *structured or unstructured*, *staged and unstaged* (2017). While there appears to be some overlap between the different binaries, they do offer insights into the different characteristics of liminal experiences. For experiences of meditation and solitary confinement in Myanmar prisons, the difference between devised and spontaneous liminal experiences is imperative.

> *“In traditional rites of passage, the ‘passengers’ are guided through by an experienced master of ceremonies or Shaman for whom liminal experience is the norm rather than the exception. In spontaneous liminal events, such guidance is typically lacking, and there are no guarantees about what will be made of the situation. The seed of fabulation that arises through ‘separation’ is delicate and vulnerable. It is easily dismissed as a mere hallucination.” (Stenner, 2017, p. 63)*

Stenner points to two main differences between the devised and spontaneous liminal experience. Firstly, the person is guided through devised liminal experience in some way, whether it be through the presence of a master of ceremony, like a meditation teacher, or a set of guiding principles. Secondly, spontaneous liminal experiences are vulnerable and risk being dismissed as hallucinations – since there is no pre-defined structure through which others can understand these liminal experiences. In the case of prisons, this explains how spiritual experiences can be perceived as rehabilitative when part of a programme such as a retreat, and pathological when arising in solitary confinement. While solitary confinement is an extremely devised practice, it is the liminal aspect of the experience, which is spontaneous in the case of Myanmar. Solitary confinement, as it has been used against many political prisoners, is a means of separating the prisoner as much as possible from contact with the outside society and the political world he took part in before. Solitary confinement is thus not used with the aim to change the prisoner.[8] The absence of guidance in solitary confinement offers a possible explanation for why prisoners in solitary confinement describe spiritual experiences as leading to suffering, while yogis describe them as passing experiences, which may be painful while ongoing, but which diminish after guidance from the meditation teacher.

While these binaries draw attention to important aspects of liminal experiences, it is important to understand that they are scales, which can fluctuate during an experience. These binaries can describe characteristics of experiences at certain moments in time, but must be understood as dynamic and changing across time.

The case of the prison draws attention to another binary of importance: whether the experience is *forced or voluntary*. Imprisonment is characterised by being a transitional experience forced upon individuals by the state. It is rarely the case that a prisoner has chosen to go to prison to reform himself. Rather, the state has deemed his actions unacceptable and sent him to prison as a punishment and to reform. Thus, understanding the general framework of imprisonment as liminal, means studying forced liminal experience.

Therefore this article proposes to add the binary of voluntary or forced liminal experiences to understandings of liminality. To do so, it draws on experiences that take place in two different yet

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[8] In some other countries, solitary confinement is used with the purpose of creating change. Originally, its purpose was to be a calm space that would give the prisoner time to reform through self-reflection (O'Donnell, 2014). Such use can be described as devised liminal experiences, though the absence of guidance have still led to suffering for many (Guenther, 2013).

similar situations. The situations are similar in that both situations entail people spending many hours in silence and introspection. However, there is a significant difference between the described experiences and the meaning attributed to them. Generally, meditation retreats are voluntary while solitary confinement is a forced experience.[9] Here again, it is important to think of this binary variable as a dynamic scale that can change over the course of an experience. For example, some yogis report that there are times when they want to leave the meditation retreat but feel they have to stay due to pressure from family or the rules of the prison. Similarly, O'Donnell (2014) has described instances of solitary confinement becoming appreciated by prisoners and leading to spiritual experiences. In spite of the fluctuations, it is a key characteristic that meditation retreats are initiated based on the volition of prisoners, while solitary confinement is forced upon them. This new binary contributes to understandings of liminality in other contexts, and offers a possible explanation for why spiritual experiences are permeated by suffering in one context but not in the other.

The following section unfolds descriptions of spiritual experiences had by prisoners in meditation and solitary confinement. These descriptions show significant differences in how prisoners relate to the voices they hear. Voices heard in mediation are spirits in need of compassion, while those in solitary confinement inflict suffering that even amounts to torture.

Visited by spirits while meditating

Spiritual experiences during meditation were often accompanied by passing discomfort and anxiousness. Discomfort and anxiousness was relieved after consultation with the meditation teacher. Teachers often give standardised advice to students, along the lines of: 'It is normal to have such experiences, continue and you shall succeed' (field notes, March, 2017[10]). Given that experiences are perceived as illusions within Theravada Buddhism, the teacher has no reason to delve into the content of the voices or the suffering and ascribe meaning to the experience. Instead, a simple confirmation tells the yogi that he will be okay and allows him to let go of the sensation, as

[9] In some countries, segregation can also take place for prisoners who chose it voluntarily for their own protection, in such cases it would be possible to speak about voluntary segregation (though if fearing for one's life it can be questioned how free the choice is).

[10] From a retreat I participated in myself at the meditation centre in Yangon, which coordinates the retreats inside Insein Central Prison. Teachers in the U Goenka tradition are taught to conduct the retreats in a very specific manner, so yogis across the world go through the same retreats wherever they participate in the retreat. The advice from teachers to yogis inside the prison is therefore likely to be similar (see Pagis, 2010 for a similar description of the answers of meditation teachers).

he is learning to let go of other distractions that disturb his meditation. After such guidance, the discomfort associated with visiting spirits subsided. Since the teacher encouraged them to accept these experiences and let them pass, the yogis did not describe them with many details, though several of them recounted such experiences (5 out of 10). One yogi even described a shared experience of hearing voices:

> *"Once, there were 30 members of 'Satipatthana'*[11] *[retreat] so I could not participate because it was full. But I heard they heard things and felt them move around. This does not happen to me because I share compassion. People could not even sleep. This does not happen to me because I share. It happens sometimes, the people who experience it asks the teacher, all together they share their compassion and the spirit goes away. The spirits are everywhere. In the life cycle, if they are owners of a house they will ask to stay and rest for a while. After meditation the teacher had a tape, she opened it and the tape said: please forgive us for the things we have done. In the morning they opened the tape with U Goenka, then when they opened the tape only for the Dhamma workers it said this new thing." (Yogi prisoner, Interview, June 2018)*

The spirits are understood within the cosmology that includes Theravada Buddhism in the Burmese form and animism in the form of belief in 'Nats'. There are 37 recognised Nat spirits and in addition to these spirits, as those described above, belonging to ancestors or spirits in the process of finding their way to reincarnation (Maung Htin Aung, 1962).

Several yogis described compassion as the key to co-existing peacefully with spirits. This is similar to the approach yogis are taught to co-exist peacefully with other human beings. Thus they describe how before they were angry and short tempered, but after a meditation retreat, they would feel compassion with the other prisoners and understand their motives for acting as they do. This makes it easier for yogis to cope with prison life and avoid conflicts. Being able to exercise compassion towards spirits and co-prisoners alike is seen as reflecting that the yogi has a 'right mind', that he is able to practice the lessons from the Dhamma in his everyday life. It also highlights the connectivity between all human beings described in the teachings of the Dhamma. Through compassion the yogis strengthen their social connection to others – spirits as well as human beings. Thus, while

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[11] Satpatthana is a meditation retreat for experienced yogis. To qualify for this retreat the yogis must take part in at least three standard retreats. During these retreats the Dhamma talks explore the Satipatthana Sutta in detail.

what the Sayadaw experienced can be described as 'becoming unhinged', we might say that the yogis are strengthening the joints of their interrelational selves through compassion (Guenther, 2013).

The Dhamma is taught to yogis through daily evening lectures during the retreat called '*Dhamma talks*'. Dhamma talks are often given by a monk or teacher, but in the case of Vipassana courses in the U Goenka tradition they are given through video or audio recordings of U Goenka himself. Thus, every ten-day retreat listens to the same Dhamma talks. U Goenka delivers the Dhamma talks in English, followed by a Burmese translation.[12]

Connectivity as it is described in Dhamma talks - as the reason for compassion with all beings - is similar to what Turner, with reference to Buber, describes as the community going through liminal experiences together:

> *"Community is the being no longer side by side (and, one might add, above and below) but with one another of a multitude of persons. And this multitude, though it moves towards one goal, yet experiences everywhere a turning to, a dynamic facing of, the others, a flowing from / to Thou." (Buber 1961: 51 in Turner et al. 2017:126–127)*

More often, Turner works with the Latin term 'communitas', to emphasise the different character of the communitas in liminality, compared to the community outside liminality. Communitas represent the antistructure of the social during liminality, which is defined by shared spatiality and temporality and by the qualities of the liminal personae who are detached from their previous status and not yet placed within a new status.

> *"Communitas is of the now; structure is rooted in the past and extends into the future through language, law, and custom." (Turner, 1979, p. 113)*

Within this spatially and temporally, the demarcated area the communitas is formed by the liminal personae who are betwixt and between.

[12] Audiofiles are available in most major languages of the world and some ethnic languages from Myanmar. Teachers emphasise the importance of listening in your native language. One of the interviewed prisoners however only spoke little Burmese and was not offered an alternative. He was afraid to ask for it in spite of describing the Dhamma helpers as his friends (who were also from the same ethnic group as himself). Audio recordings were reported to be used for foreign prisoners (Thai and Chinese).

There are striking similarities between Turner's description of communitas and how the Dhamma talks teach yogis that everything is connected and their previous status is nothing but an illusion. When the yogis sit in meditation together, they are, in every sense of the word a communitas. They are separated in time and in space and they are experiencing energies flowing together. However, when the yogis leave the meditation hall and the retreat, they bring the teachings and their experiences with them and continue their practice. As they continue their practice in the ordinary wards, they extend their compassion and the sense of communitas even to the people who have not participated in the retreats. As such, they act as though they are in a state of prolonged liminality, where they bring parts of what Turner connects to liminal experiences, outside the liminal situation in which they originated. By doing so, they enact a new form of prolonged liminality, in which they act as if they are in communitas with people who have not gone through this liminal experience and who do not share the same conception of the communitas.

From solitary confinement to meditation centre

While this article differentiates between experiences in solitary confinement and at meditation retreats, some prisoners live through both. Two of the yogis, who had both participated in meditation retreats and spent time on death row where solitary confinement is used, described having spiritual experiences before they participated in meditation retreats. Thus, the prisoner who was quoted above, speaking about spirits in meditation, also described how she was visited by a spirit in a solitary cell. She stayed on death row during the first part of her sentence, but was later moved as her sentences was commuted to lifetime imprisonment through an amnesty. She described a classic nightmare where she was ridden by a spirit:

> *"Once I was sleeping and a bad thing rode me. I could not move. I wanted to pray but I did not know the prayer by heart. I read out a prayer three times then it disappeared. In the execution cell [solitary, death row] I saw a ghost with a very long tail. Now I don't see them anymore." (Yogi prisoner, Interview, June, 2018).*

She explained that the reason she no longer had such experience after she became a yogi was because of the compassion she had developed. For her, the spirits were still present, but the compassion she had developed during meditation retreats made the spirits friendly. It appeared as if she experienced he compassion being requited by the spirits.

Another yogi explained how, before he meditated, when he sat alone in his cell on death row, he would look out the cell and see the branches of a tree turn into his friends face. He described it as if he was losing his sense of reality. For him, these experiences stopped once he started meditating, but he had a different explanation as to why they stopped. For him, it was a question of meditation technique. He was not able to do all kinds of meditations without being thrown back into such experiences. The U Goenka method helped him stay grounded through the technique of body scans. The meditation during the U Goenka retreat consists of three days of concentration meditation, where the focus is on sensing breath on the spot below the nostrils, followed by seven days of body scan. In the body scan, the focus is guided downwards and upwards through the body interchangeably, either part by part or in a free flow. For the yogi, this structure helped him stay focused on his bodily experience and not be distracted by visiting spirits. For him, the visits were a negative experience he hoped to avoid. This might be due to the fact that his first experience of a visit was inside solitary confinement, before meditation retreats took place inside the prison. Generally, spirits are described as something external and their harmfulness depends on the mental state of the yogi. Several yogis described, like the female yogi above, that when you were committed to right living and exercising compassion, spirits are no longer a threat.

Though there are differences in the experiences described by the yogis and the Sayadaw, those who have lived through both describe them as similar. The main differences are that the yogis have a structure within which to understand the experiences, which they are offered by teachers who serve the role as master of ceremony. The monk on the other hand is without guidance and finds it hard to describe in words what his experiences are. Still however, the experiences share similarities which make them comparable. The phenomenon, that of hearing voices remains the same, and the descriptions by the two yogis above suggest that the similarities make them comparable.

Haunted by voices in solitary confinement

For the Sayadaw who was imprisoned in solitary for around five years, the spiritual experiences were not just passing, as the ones described by yogis above. While he was imprisoned, he started to hear voices inside his cell. He spoke of the voices as the worst kind of torture he was subjected to. The torture methods in Myanmar at the time of his imprisonment were brutal and include forced standing, rolling of a metal stick on the shins until the skin peels of, electric shocks and water

torture (AAPP, 2019, 2005). Still, it was the voices that caused him the greatest suffering and pushed him to the breaking point where he tried to commit suicide.

The voices he heard spoke of politics, like the propaganda of the military regime. They reasoned for the actions of the military and sometimes even convinced him that he was colluding with the military himself and that they were simply carrying out his orders. The voices also represented his social life, when they either were the voices of people he knew or spoke about people he knew.

He described the voices as external to himself and perceived them as allied with the military he was imprisoned for opposing, rather than with himself.

> *"They know my mind, yes they know my mind, they know me, how I think, what I think. They know me, the voices know me. Yes. So they annoy me all the time. And I could not know their thinking, yes." (Former prisoner, Interview, June, 2018)*

While alone in the cell, he experienced voices whose thinking he could not know. His mind was breaking into parts that were conflicting and unfamiliar with each other. He was becoming 'unhinged' (Guenther, 2013). Without connection to the social world with which his self was constituted in intersubjectivity, his subjectivity was breaking into parts that did not know each other and who were in conflict with each other. One part wanted to overthrow the military regime, and that was how he ended up in prison, while another part told him that he was allied with the exact same military.

> *""[B]ecoming unhinged" is not just a colloquial expression; rather, it is a precise phenomenological description of what happens when the articulated joints of our embodied, interrelational subjectivity are broken apart." (Guenther, 2013, p. xii)*

Thus, rather than liminality as it takes place during a transitional rite, where the subject moves from one status to another (Turner, 1970), the Sayadaw went through a liminal experience that unhinged the joints of his self and left him unguided, alone, and with no new status to enter. In a state which is similar to Turner's description of liminal experiences, but in a process which lacks the final phase of re-integration where the liminal personae would return to the structure of his self and the social world.

Through compassion, yogis were able to see and hear spirits without distress and suffering. Through their connection to the communitas and by including the spirits in it, they found peace. The Sayadaw, on the other hand, became unhinged. While the voices represented the community in which his intersubjective self was formed, they took on a harmful character. Inside the cell, the voices became torture which broke him down, and cemented the loss of connection to the loved ones the voices represented.

Symbolic death and suicide

These experiences caused the Sayadaw great suffering and drove him to attempt suicide. In doing so, he broke with the foundational rules of Buddhism, the 'Sila'. The Sila consists of ten precepts, five of which apply to all Buddhist, 8 of which apply on special occasions such as a meditation retreat and all 10 of which apply to monks and nuns. Suicide breaks the first precept, which prohibits killing. Within Buddhism, all life is seen as suffering, and enlightenment happens in acceptance of this reality. For a human being (a high reincarnation) to commit suicide because of suffering is therefore seen as giving up an important chance to learn and come closer to enlightenment (Maurice Nyunt Wai, 2002). When the Sayadaw attempted suicide, he is thus not only trying to take his own life, he is committing an offence against the rules of his religion, thereby removing himself further from the chance of enlightenment.

The first time the Sayadaw attempted suicide, he tried to choke himself with the fetters[13] between his feet. An officer heard it happening and prevented him from taking his own life. The fetters remained on his feet months after the event. He was then transferred to another prison, where he again got close to killing himself. He had obtained a knife and intended to cut his throat. This time, his suicide attempt was triggered *and* stopped by the voices:

> *Sayadaw: Second time in [Lashio[14]] Prison. At that time the voices told me, a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, many guys, many political persons, many armed strikers and generals. And my parents, my relatives, they talked a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot, a lot. So I got dizzy and had a headache. And I didn't want to hear their voices, so I tried to kill myself by a blade. A knife. By the blade of a knife. Yes.*

[13] Fetters are a restraint mechanism consisting of anklets connected by a chain.
[14] Lashio is a pseudonym. At this point in time the Sayadaw was in another prison in a similarly remote area.

> *Author: To your arms or?*
>
> *Sayadaw: No to my neck. But, at the time, my girlfriend, she, I couldn't see her, just on the wall. My girlfriend told me, please think deep, think deep, don't do it. Think a lot, don't do it, it is, it is a mistake, it is not correct she said. I think, I think yes I must do it for my country, I must work for my country and then I threw the blade. Yeah that is the second time. The last time. (Former prisoner, Interview, June, 2018)*

Though the voices triggered the suicide attempt, it was also one of the voices that convinced him not to go through with it. On this occasion, the voice was accompanied by a visual representation. He described how he saw people 'on the wall', as if through a projector. When he remarks he did not see her 'just on the wall', it suggests awareness of seeing her differently than if a person was standing in front of him, but still experiencing her presence. The voice that saved him was the voice of his girlfriend before imprisonment. Though he was a monk, they had been able to talk and exchange letters before his imprisonment and he had fallen in love with her. After his release, he went to her village, hoping that they could become a couple, but she was already married to someone else.

The intersubjective nature of his self continued even in the solitude of his prison cell, as he was visited by his parents, relatives and girlfriend. These people had been crucial to who he was outside and continued to be crucial for him inside. His interactions with their voices became a matter of life and death in these liminal experiences.

Experiences of death, though in symbolic form, also feature in the accounts by several yogis and in Turner's description of the first phase of transitional rituals. Contrary to the Sayadaw's experience of physical death as a final way out of current suffering, the yogis describe a changed conception of death as giving immediate relief of their suffering.

When speaking about death, the yogis framed their understandings through 'anniche' (impermanence). In Dhamma talks and instructions to meditations, the yogis are repeatedly reminded to be mindful that everything is impermanent, including themselves. In the teachings, U Goenka repeats many times 'anniche', meaning everything is impermanent. It is a reminder for yogis to not attach themselves to anything, not to pleasurable sensations or painful sensations and not to an idea of the self. Everything is impermanent and as such, attachment to sensations will

inevitably lead to suffering – either when pleasurable sensations stop, or when a yogi gets impatient for a painful experience to stop. It also means that no suffering is eternal, whether it be pain from sitting, from a recent operation or the pains of imprisonment (Sykes, 1958). '*Anniche, anniche*', U Goenka chants in the recordings guiding meditations, it will all pass. This knowledge helps yogis on a practical level, as they remind themselves when sitting becomes uncomfortable, that the pain will pass, or when they miss comforts of life outside the strict discipline of the retreat and the prison. One prisoner recounted how this understanding was useful when, outside the retreats; she became ill and went to hospital for an operation:

> *"The best part is that the Dhamma is a reminder, now even in my situation with the operation I just had, I remind myself this body is just changing. It will die too. I had stomach surgery. They removed a ball of inflammation. The operation was dangerous and life threatening, I was not affected. In May, I had the open stomach surgery. I am still in pain. The body is just a dead body – to know that helps for the pain." (Yogi prisoner, Interview, June, 2018)*

Though she had gone through the operation only a month before the interview, she did not seem concerned with it and she only mentioned it in passing to explain how the Dhamma teachings had helped her cope with it. She had managed to bring the teachings with her out into her everyday life in prison, where it helped her deal with physical pain. She knew, through anniche, that this pain too would pass.

Other yogis explained how death was connected to non-being, not existing. They spoke of a death beyond the body, a death of the self:

> *"When I breathe in there is [Zaw Win[15]], when I breathe out there is no [Zaw Win]. Things disappear, nothing is permanent. When I exhale I don't exist anywhere. Dhamma is to overcome the fear of death. Buddha says when you breathe in you can feel the body, when you breathe out that does not exist anymore." (Yogi prisoner, Interview, June 2018)*

> *"The real Vipassana is to lose myself, there is no me, just waves that comes and goes." (Yogi prisoner, Interview, June 2018)*

[15] Pseudonym, male Burmese name.

In this aspect Vipassana diverges significantly from other psychological rehabilitation practices used in prisons (though no such practices are available in Myanmar prisons). Therapy might be about changing the self who is there and rebuilding something else, but not about simply taking apart what is, and leaving the client with a sense that 'there is no self'. These accounts however correspond well with Turner's description of the symbolic death that takes place in the first phase of transitional rites (Turner, 1970). For the yogis, death of the self not only pertains to the experience of the ritual process during a meditation retreat. The quotes above demonstrate how the conception of the losing the self remains even after retreats. This can be understood either as prolonged liminality akin to monkhood or as part of a new structure in which the self is conceived differently – as *'waves that comes and goes'*, as a state of being rather than an entity. This conception stems from the Dhamma talks in which U Goenka combines the teachings of the Buddha with modern physics as he explains how everything consist of vibrations of energy, and how particles of atoms as well as minds are made of such vibrating particles.

Both the Sayadaw and the yogis describe experiencing a deconstruction of the self in connection with what has here been conceptualised as liminal experiences. The yogis describe the relief of *letting go* of the self, while the Sayadaw describes the pain of *becoming unhinged* from his own self. The Sayadaw, a monk himself, is familiar with the kind of training and conceptions of self the yogis describe, but it did not help him when he was alone in solitary confinement. When I asked him about the differences between life at the monastery and life in prison, he described them as very different and added that it was a great challenge not to be able to pray with other monks. While he was still allowed to speak out his prayers, it was not the same for him without his communitas. As a monk, he was no stranger to liminal experiences, but for him, the qualitative difference of imprisonment and monastery life was so big that he saw no similarities. Liminality in the monastery was shared through communitas and was a life he appreciated and chose for himself. This was a kind of liminality he wanted to return to when he was released from prison. Life in prison, however, was full of suffering.

Conclusion

Very similar phenomena, that of hearing voices, can be experienced very differently depending on the situation in which these experiences take place. Three key factors appear to explain why hearing voices can be experienced in such different ways. Firstly, the yogis chose to go through meditation

retreats on their own volition, while the Sayadaw was forced into solitary confinement. This sense of having a choice lead the yogis to experience a sense of freedom within a regime that regulates every hour of their day and in which there are stricter disciplinary rules than in the rest of the prison. The Sayadaw on the other hand does not experience freedom, but experiences levels of suffering that place him on the verge of suicide, even if suicide is conceived as immoral within Buddhism. Secondly, through guidance by a teacher and Dhamma talks, the yogis are shown a path, an anti-structure separate from the social structure outside the retreat, while the Sayadaw lives without such guidance. For the yogis, the teacher and philosophy function as a master of ceremony, that lead them through their spiritual experiences by ascribing meaning to them and connecting them to the ability of being compassionate towards spirits and other beings. Without such guidance, the Sayadaw remains uncertain about how to describe the voices he heard. The most accurate word for him to describe the voices was 'torture', as something external to him, which knows him intimately and which breaks him down. This understanding of the voices ascribes a meaning to them, in a way which make them more harmful to the Sayadaw. Lastly, the yogis go through their experiences with a communitas, while the Sayadaw must do without. The voices he hears become his only communitas, and as such, they become so influential they are able to drive him to attempt suicide.

These conclusions have consequences for the conceptualisation of liminality and for understandings of solitary confinement. Stenner's division between devised and spontaneous liminal experiences point to some of the differences between the two cases considered. Thus, the guidance yogis receive through Dhamma teachings and the presence of a communitas, with whom they have a shared liminal experience, corresponds with his description of devised liminal experiences. Similarly, the fact that the experiences of the Sayadaw are not shared, and easily rejected by others as unreal, corresponds with Stenner's argument that spontaneous liminal experiences are easily disregarded as hallucinations, since it is hard to change social structures based on individual liminal experiences.

This article, however, questions whether the categorisation of liminal experiences as devised or spontaneous can explain the extreme amounts of suffering connected with liminal experiences in solitary confinement. Is this only a matter of the absence of communitas and a master of ceremony, or are other factors at play? It suggests that understandings of liminality can be enriched by considerations of the degrees to which liminal experiences are sought out voluntarily or forced upon a person. Imprisonment and solitary confinement serve as extreme cases of forced liminality, that highlight a dimension also present in other liminal experiences. For example, people can go through

transitional rites based on differing degrees of individual motivation and social pressure, the balance between which can have consequences for the liminal experience. Exploring such differences represent a potential for deeper understanding of the experiential aspect of liminality.

Lastly, these findings call for reconsideration of the meaning of the high prevalence of mental disorders among prisoners in solitary confinement. Solitary confinement continues to be used across the world, though it has been shown long ago that it leads to suffering rather than reform through introspection, which was its original purpose (Guenther, 2013; Haney, 2002; Reiter, 2016; Smith, 2006). This article adds to the voices that speak up against the suffering enforced upon prisoners through this practice and points to key characteristics of solitary confinement as contributing to liminal experiences that are characterised by suffering. Solitary confinement is often: forced upon the individual, experienced without guidance and removed from the community. This combination suspends prisoners in prolonged liminality, as they enter a transition with no end goal (Szakolczai, 2015; Thomassen, 2015). In this state, spiritual experiences such as hearing voices and seeing figures are a logical reaction, an attempt to stay connected to the intersubjective self of the prisoner. Conceiving such reactions as pathological is a wrongful understanding of causalities. These reactions are direct consequences of the social harms of solitary confinement.

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