Innocence

Ton Haarmans · Wide Open Windows



I was sitting alone in a van, parked somewhere in a small street in the south of France.

My friends were inside, visiting someone. I had chosen to stay behind. Not for any particular reason. I simply preferred to be alone.

The sun was out. Light fell through the windshield. There was nothing to do. Nowhere to go.

And then, without transition, without buildup, a deep sense of satisfaction and acceptance settled in.

Just like that.

No emotion peaked.
No insight arrived.
No story formed.

Something descended. Or rather: something released.

What followed was not happiness. Not relief. Not gratitude.

It was the simple, bodily certainty that nothing in this moment needed to be different.

Not innocence as goodness. Not innocence as purity. But innocence as the absence of inner prosecution.

There was a day when guilt was not present.

Not reduced.
Not managed.
Not “worked through.”

Absent.

It did not feel like an achievement. There was no sense of having reached a state, solved a problem, or completed a process. Nothing had been corrected. Nothing had been improved.

It was simply gone.

Out of the blue.

Thoughts still appeared. Perceptions continued. The street was still there. The warmth of the sun, the quiet inside the van, distant sounds. But something fundamental in the inner climate had stopped.

What stopped was not thought.
What stopped was the inner regime that normally evaluates it.

There was no background voice keeping score.
No subtle reference to how I “should” be.
No tension between what was happening and what ought to be happening.

Anger could arise without immediately becoming a problem.
Sadness could be felt without being framed as weakness.
Joy did not need justification.
Indifference did not need to be corrected.

Nothing had to be defended.
Nothing had to be improved.
Nothing had to be forgiven.

Not because everything was good.
But because nothing was on trial.

Not by me, not by anybody.

What disappeared

Looking back, what strikes me most is not what was present, but what was missing.

The inner court was closed.

The familiar structure of inner life: accusation, defence, mitigation, appeal, was simply not operating. There was no one prosecuting my reactions. No one monitoring my maturity. No one comparing this moment to a better one, a worse one, a past one, a future one.

This was not “I accept myself.”

It was the absence of the one who normally needs to.

Guilt did not dissolve into understanding.
Shame did not transform into compassion.
Fear did not become love.

Those are still movements within the same system: something is wrong, and something else must fix it.

Here, the system itself was quiet.

And with it fell an entire architecture:

- the idea that certain inner states are illegitimate
- the sense that experience must justify itself
- the reflex to manage, interpret, or redeem what appears
- the silent assumption that I am a project

What remained was not purity.
What remained was not bliss.

What remained was unpoliced experience.

Meditation without a meditator

Only later did the word “meditation” try to attach itself to this memory.

In most cultural forms, meditation is presented as something someone does in order to become something else: calmer, clearer, kinder, more present, more awakened. Even when the language is soft, the structure is usually the same: a subject applies a practice to itself in order to improve its condition.

Nothing like that was happening here.

There was no sense of “I am being mindful.”
No stance of observation.
No inner posture.

If anything, it felt as if the one who usually meditates had stepped out for a moment.

This is why I hesitate to call the experience the result of meditation. At most, meditation can sometimes create a context in which the inner management system loosens its grip. But it does not command what happened.

What occurred was not focus, but a lapse of control.
Not clarity, but the absence of governance.

Meditation did not produce acceptance.

It coincided with the disappearance of the need for it.

Acceptable without acceptance

We speak easily about acceptance.
Self-acceptance.
Radical acceptance.
Allowing what is.

Almost always, this still implies an agent who performs the act: someone who learns to tolerate themselves, forgive themselves, include themselves.

That day, there was no such movement.

Experience was not accepted.
It was simply not rejected.

And that difference is not subtle.

Acceptance still positions experience before a standard. It only changes the verdict. Rejection becomes permission. Condemnation becomes embrace.

Here, there was no courtroom.

No verdicts were issued.

This is why guilt could not arise. Guilt requires an inner law. A sense of how one should be, and an authority that enforces it. Without that background, guilt has nowhere to stand. It cannot even take shape.

Anger did not become “okay.”
Sadness did not become “allowed.”

They simply did not need authorization.

Afterward

Whatever had been absent that afternoon in the van did not establish itself as a new way of being. It did not stabilize. It did not become a baseline. It left no permanent state behind.

But it also did not vanish immediately.

For a few days, something of that absence remained. Not as a maintained state, not as something I could return to at will, but as a continued opening in the usual inner structure.

During those days, I remember experiencing myself as strangely pure. Or innocent, though not in a moral sense. Not good. Not elevated. More like unpreceded. As if reactions arose before they could be bent, filtered, or internally negotiated.

Within that short period, I was with a group of people. At some point, unkind things were being said about someone who was present. Normally, there would have been hesitation, calculation, inner positioning. Do I intervene? How will this land? What does this say about me?

None of that happened.

I spoke immediately. Without rehearsal. Without inner consultation. I simply said what was there to be said.

Only afterward did I notice the effect. The room had gone quiet. People were visibly struck. Not offended. Not defensive. Just… impacted.

It had not been my intention to say something “right.” There had been no intention at all.

Something spoke, and only later did “I” return.

Soon enough, the familiar economy was fully operational again. Guilt functioned as before. Fear of judgment resumed its role. Speech once more passed through inner corridors of anticipation and control.

Nothing was cured.

Nothing was resolved.

And yet I cannot treat those days as nothing.

Not because it showed me what I could become.
But because it showed me, briefly, what experience is when the inner law is not running.

Not a better version of me.

A different absence.

And perhaps that is all it ever was: not a glimpse of a destination, but a momentary power outage in a system that normally never stops governing itself.

Meditation did not bring it about.
Meditation did not preserve it.

At most, it now sits beside the machinery, stripped of promises, as a way of remaining close to the fact that the machinery is not the whole of what happens.

There are situations now in which I would give a lot to inhabit that absence again. Situations in which it would soften everything. Situations in which it would make speaking, or remaining silent, far less heavy.

But that is not how it works.

The wanting already reinstates the regime.