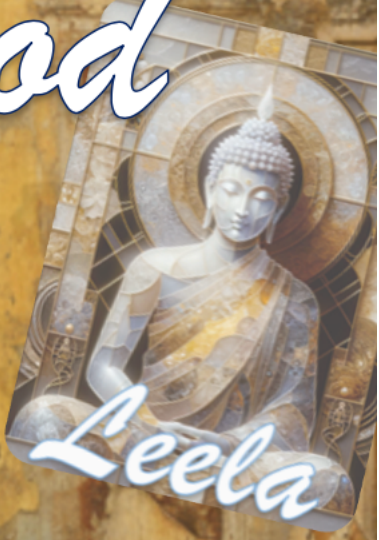
Joop van der Hagen

The Leela Method





A First Encounter

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VanderHagen Institute for transformative leadership

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"Life does not begin until forty. Before forty, you blame your setbacks and your suffering on your upbringing, your past, your parents, your ancestors. After forty, you begin to realise that you created all of it yourself."

— Carl Jung

Introduction

"Life is not something that happens to you. It is something you play."

— Nisargadatta Maharaj

There is a moment when you feel it. Not always loudly. Sometimes it is barely a whisper. A restlessness that won't go away. A tiredness that runs deeper than lack of sleep. A question that keeps you awake at night: is this really it?

Perhaps you have been working on yourself for years. You've read the books. You've attended workshops. Maybe you've tried therapy. And yet something persists. A pattern that keeps repeating. A pain that returns in a different form. A sense that you haven't found the real answer yet. Even though you're not quite sure what the question is.

Or perhaps this is the first time you've stopped. Life has forced you to. Because continuing was no longer an option.

Either way: you're here. And that is not a coincidence.

This eBook is written for you. For the person who senses there is more to life than its surface. For those who are tired of merely surviving and ready for something deeper. For anyone who has been through a crisis and suspects it wasn't there for nothing.

What the Leela Method is

The Leela Method is not therapy in the traditional sense. Nor is it a spiritual system with dogmas or fixed answers. It is more of an invitation. An

invitation to see life differently. To meet yourself at a level that goes beyond thinking. To discover what lies beneath the surface of your conscious life.

The word Leela comes from ancient India. It means: the manifested creation. It is the play of the divine. The way the intangible expresses itself in form, in colour, in sound, in your life as you live it today. Leela is the idea that life itself is a game. Not in the sense that it isn't serious. But in the sense that it is more playable than we think. We are players, not victims. There are rules to the game, and we can learn them.

The Leela Method was developed by Joop van der Hagen. He is a therapist and consciousness practitioner with more than fifty years of experience. He has guided hundreds of people through profound inner processes. His conviction is simple: a person is more than their story. Healing begins not in the mind, but in the deeper layers of consciousness.

This eBook is a first encounter with that approach. It is not a manual or a course. It is a mirror. A mirror that invites you to look at what is truly at play in your life.

How this eBook works

We take you through the core of what the Leela Method is and does. We begin with the unconscious. That vast, unknown territory that determines most of our lives while we think we are the ones in control. We look at what happens when experiences remain unprocessed. We explore the concept of the pain body and what it is trying to tell you. We examine the role of the past. Not as a prison, but as a source of information. And we show how the Leela Method approaches all of these layers: gently but precisely, deeply but with room for lightness.

This is not a heavy book. We write the way we work honestly, warmly, directly. Without jargon that keeps you at a distance. Without promises that

are too large. But with the genuine conviction that you have the capacity to grow in ways you may not yet believe possible.

A word on crisis

Many people come to the Leela Method through a crisis. A relationship that ends. A burnout. A loss. A sense of emptiness that, after years of hard work, can no longer be ignored. Sometimes it creeps up slowly. Sometimes it is an abrupt break with everything familiar.

What we see repeatedly in our practice is this: the crisis is not the problem. The crisis is the passage.

That is easier said than felt, we know. When you are in the middle of the pain, it is not comforting to be told this is your opportunity. But it is true.

The psyche has a built-in longing for wholeness. When something breaks, it usually breaks at the place where it had long since stopped working. The crack lets in the light, as Leonard Cohen sang. The Leela Method works with that crack. Not to seal it. To understand what it reveals.

What you can expect from this eBook

You don't need to believe anything written here. You don't need to do anything. We ask only that you read with a willingness to be honest with yourself. Notice where something resonates. Notice where something meets resistance. Notice where something perhaps comes a little too close. Those are the interesting places.

At the end of each chapter, we invite you to pause with a question. Not to answer with your head. To feel in your body. That is a small exercise in the

way the Leela Method works: not analysing but observing. Not solving but meeting.

And if, at the end of this book, you feel you want more, there is the possibility of reaching out for an introductory conversation. Without pressure. Without expectation. Just to see if it fits.

About Joop van der Hagen

Joop van der Hagen is a writer, trainer, and therapist. He is the founder of the Leela Method and has guided thousands of people through processes of personal and spiritual growth. He is the author of several books, including Leela: Het leven als spel and Werken aan jezelf.

His life's work is shaped by one central question: what is needed for a person to truly live? Not merely survive. But live, from a place of connection with themselves, with others, and with something larger. He has been asking that question for more than fifty years.

This eBook is a distillation of what he has discovered. An invitation.

We are glad you have taken this first step. Let us begin.

Part One
The Problem

1. You Are Not Broken

The crisis as a passage

"A person needs more pain than happiness to wake up."

— Eckhart Tolle

Life as sailing in the wind

Life is like sailing in the wind. Sometimes your course is slightly off and you risk running aground. You need to tack. To adjust your heading. It is time to come about. When a radical change is required, you need to put the helm right over. Both kinds of change are usually accompanied by confusion. The old must first die before the new can be born. That transition is a crisis. It doesn't matter what that crisis is called: burnout, midlife, depression, or stagnation. Your life is asking for change or deepening.

I have experienced it myself. I am now 79 years old. I have often been on course. And several times I have had to change course. That always comes with confusion and uncertainty. The feeling that the ground is giving way beneath your feet. That what was familiar no longer holds. That you don't know what will take its place.

What I have learned in those years, and what I have seen confirmed in the work with hundreds of people, is this: the crisis is not the problem. The crisis is the passage.

That is easier said than felt, I know. But it is true.

What gets stuck and why

Staying with the sailing metaphor: the aim of the Leela Method workshops is to refloat the ship, chart a new course, and integrate it into daily life. Let's make it concrete.

There are essentially two areas in which men and women between forty and fifty get stuck. The first is in relationship. Specifically in the committed intimate relationship. The second is in work: in a role that no longer fits, in a lack of meaning, in a lack of depth.

But beneath those two areas there always lies something deeper. The stockiness has a foundation, and that foundation is threefold.

At the emotional level, we get stuck in a feeling that is hard to describe. It is called existential emptiness. It hides beneath the heaviness of depression, beneath the restlessness of burnout, or beneath the armour of indifference. It is a sense that something is missing without being able to say exactly what. A kind of hunger without a name.

At the mental level, there is little awareness of the limiting beliefs that drive our lives. In our work we call this the saboteur. That inner voice that says: you can't do this, you're not good enough, who do you think you are? That voice has become so familiar that you can barely hear it anymore. It has simply become the background music of your life.

At the spiritual level, there is a lack of meaning or purpose. Not in a religious sense. But in the most basic sense: the feeling that there is something larger than the daily grind, and that you have somehow lost your connection to it.

What makes the Leela Method different

"Okay, Joop, we've heard this before. What makes your Leela Method so different?"

I hear you. Most methods work top-down. They begin with thinking, with the story, with the analysis of what went wrong. They give you insights, tools, strategies. And that helps. Insight has value. Understanding why you do what you do is a first step.

But understanding alone doesn't change the pattern. You can know in precise detail why you keep attracting the same kind of relationship and keep doing it anyway. You can know exactly why you erase yourself at work and still keep doing it. Knowledge about a pattern is not the same as freedom from it.

The Leela Method begins somewhere else. It begins with nature itself.

The breath of life

Life is like a breathing cycle. Breath in: the butterfly goes through the caterpillar's experience, through the cocoon, and emerges at the full inhale. It manifests its beauty. Then the breath folds back. The wings lose their lustre. It passes through dying. And in the silence between two breaths, it disappears beneath the ground. The Chinese call this the Tao: the natural order. It springs forth, it manifests, it decays, and it disappears. This is true of all life in nature. Of the seasons, of the stars, of the oceans. And it is true of us. Organisations, ideas, religions, marriages, relationships. Nothing escapes the natural order.

And what does that mean for your burnout or your crisis? It means you have been holding on too long to something that worked but no longer works. A role, a relationship, a belief, a way of living that once fit but has had its time.

It doesn't mean you did something wrong. It means you are human. People, like all living things, move through cycles.

The caterpillar that clings to being a caterpillar cannot become a butterfly. But the cocoon, that transitional space between what was and what is yet to come, is the hardest phase. In it, the caterpillar is no longer a caterpillar but the butterfly does not yet exist. There is only confusion, dissolution, not-knowing.

That is precisely where you may find yourself now. In the cocoon.

Why talking alone is not enough

What makes the Leela Method different is that it does not try to bypass the cocoon. It does not try to shorten it with clever techniques or positive thinking. It guides you through it.

Most Western therapies work with language. You talk about what is there. You analyse. You chew over your story until you understand it. And that has value. But language has limits. The deepest experiences of a person are not stored in words. They are stored in the body, in the nervous system, in the energy you carry with you.

To reach those layers requires different instruments than words. The Leela Method works with the Leela card system. A powerful projection tool that makes the unconscious visible in a way that bypasses the thinking mind. It works with energetic techniques that speak directly to the body. It works with the conviction that you are the expert on your own life. Not the therapist. Not the system. You.

You are not broken

There is one thing I have seen again in fifty years of working with people. I can say it to you here with certainty.

You are not broken.

You may be tired. You may be lost. You may have strayed so far from yourself that you no longer know who you are without the roles you play. But you are not broken.

The psyche has a built-in longing for wholeness. It wants to become whole. When something breaks, when a crisis arises, it is not proof that you have failed. It is proof that something in you is no longer willing to settle for half a life. That is not weakness. That is strength.

The sailing boat that runs aground is not a broken ship. It needs a course that matches the wind that is blowing now. Not the wind of ten years ago.

What a crisis can bring

I want to be honest with you: a crisis is not a pleasant experience. It is painful, confusing, and exhausting. There are moments when you don't know how you'll get through the next day. That is real, and it deserves to be acknowledged.

But I also want to show you something else. Almost everyone I have guided through a crisis, everyone who was willing to go through it rather than around it, has found something on the other side that they didn't have before. Not always what they were looking for. Sometimes something much better. A deeper contact with themselves. A relationship that was finally real. Work that aligned with who they were. An inner steadiness that didn't depend on circumstances.

That is not a guarantee. That is not a promise. But it is what I have seen, again. The passage is possible. And you don't have to make it alone.

A first exercise in observation

At the end of this chapter, we invite you to pause. Not to analyse, not to find solutions, but to feel.

Think of the crisis or stuckness you are experiencing right now. Large or small, recent or long-standing. Let the image come without judgement. Then feel in your body: where does that feeling sit? In your chest, your stomach, your throat, your shoulders? Bring your attention to that place, without doing anything with it. Breathe toward it.

Then ask yourself, not as a thinking exercise but as a gentle invitation inward: what has this stockiness already brought me that I would never have seen otherwise?

Perhaps nothing comes. Perhaps it is too fresh. That is fine. But perhaps something does surface. An insight, a feeling, a word. Something that has long been waiting to be seen. That is the beginning of the Leela Method.

In the next chapter we look at the silent director behind the scenes of your life: the unconscious. We explore how patterns form, why they repeat, and why understanding alone is rarely enough to become truly free.

2. The Silent Director

The unconscious as the engine of your life

"Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life and you will call it fate."

— Carl Jung

What you don't see determines what you do

There is an experiment psychologists like to run with new students. They have people make a series of decisions. Seemingly rational. Seemingly considered. Afterwards they ask: why did you make that choice? And the students give answers. Good answers. Logical answers. Answers that match who they think they are.

But the decisions were already made before conscious thinking had any part in them. The brain had already chosen. The story afterwards was reconstruction. An attempt by the conscious mind to understand what had already happened.

We think we are the directors of our own lives. That we think things through, weigh them up, decide, and then act. But the reality is different. The greater part of what we do, feel, think, and attract is determined by processes that unfold outside our conscious awareness. The unconscious is the real director. And that director has a very particular script.

A script that was written in the earliest years of your life. Added to by experiences you suppressed or never fully processed. Running ever since with a precision that is staggering once you see it.

How the script is written

In the first years of your life, you are entirely dependent on the people around you. Your brain is not yet developed enough to process experiences the way an adult does. You have no language for what you feel. No frame for understanding what is happening. No capacity to relativise or analyse. What you do have is a nervous system that registers everything.

The tone in which you are spoken to. The presence or absence of those on whom you depend. The atmosphere at the kitchen table. The way conflicts were resolved or not resolved. The messages, spoken and unspoken, about who you are and what is expected of you.

All these experiences are stored. Not as memories you can retrieve and examine. But as patterns. As responses in the nervous system. As beliefs about the world so fundamental that they feel like facts.

As a child, a girl learns that her emotions are too much for her mother. That her sadness is sent out of the room. That she is only truly welcome when she is quiet and agreeable. She learns: my real feelings are dangerous. She learns: I must adapt to be loved. She learns that I am only acceptable when I don't burden others.

That is not a conscious decision. It is a survival strategy. And it works as a child. It keeps her included, keeps her safe, brings her love. But thirty years later, in her marriage, at work, with her own family, that same strategy is still running. She says yes when she means no. She looks after everyone but herself. She can barely feel her own needs anymore.

And she doesn't understand why she is so tired. Why she feels so empty. Why she has the sense that she has lost herself.

The pattern that repeats

One of the most striking things you see when you work with people for a long time is how precisely patterns repeat. Not approximately. With an accuracy that is sometimes almost eerie.

The man who learned as a child that he could never satisfy his father keeps attracting managers who never acknowledge him, no matter how hard he works. The woman who learned that love is conditional keeps choosing partners who only love her when she meets certain conditions. The person who learned that they are only safe when they are in control burns out as an adult because they can never let go.

These are not coincidences. This is the unconscious script playing itself out. And the frustrating thing is that we usually cannot see this script. We see the consequences. The broken relationships, the exhaustion, the emptiness. But we do not see the cause.

We think it is the circumstances. The wrong partner, the bad manager, the thankless work. And so we change the circumstances. We choose a new partner. We take a different job. We move to a different city. And after a while, the pattern repeats. Because the script has not changed.

Why insight alone is not enough

This is the point at which many people get stuck in traditional therapy, or in their searching through books and workshops. They understand the pattern. They can describe it with precision. They know exactly where it came from, which childhood experiences formed it, how it manifests in their relationships and work. They have talked about it for years, thought about it, written about it. And still, it doesn't change.

That is not their failure. That is the limit of thinking. The pattern is not stored in thought. It is stored in the body, in the nervous system, in the deep

structures of the brain that are far older than language and reasoning. It is stored as a reflex. An automatic response that is faster than thought.

Neuropsychologist Bessel van der Kolk wrote it plainly in his groundbreaking work: the body keeps the score. Every unprocessed experience, every emotion that was never fully felt and integrated, leaves a trace in the body. That trace activates itself again and again whenever something in the outside world resembles it even slightly. Your nervous system recognises the situation before you do. And it responds the way it always has. Automatically. Inevitably. Until something changes at the level where the pattern truly lives.

The inner saboteur

There is one aspect of the unconscious that deserves particular attention. It causes so much damage while remaining so well disguised. That is the inner saboteur.

The saboteur is that voice inside that says: you can't do this. That whispers: who do you think you are? That makes sure you pull back just before the finish line. That when things are going well, it does something to derail them. That just when you dare to be vulnerable, it retreats you again behind your walls.

The saboteur feels like an enemy. But it was once a friend. It arose as protection. As a way of guarding, you from pain, from rejection, from failure, from the repetition of something that was once unbearable. It helped you survive.

But it has not grown with you. It has stayed fixed at the point where it arose. With the beliefs of then, the fears of then, the strategies of then. And it applies those strategies to your current life, even when they have long since stopped being relevant.

The saboteur cannot be rationally persuaded. You cannot think or argue it away. It operates at a different level than reason. What does work is seeing it. Recognising it. Giving it a name. Not to fight it. Fighting it only strengthens it. But to give it its place. To understand what it is trying to protect. And to gently let it know that protection is no longer needed. That is delicate work. That is the kind of work the Leela Method guides.

Making the unconscious visible

The question is: how do you reach something that by definition lies outside your awareness? That is the central challenge of any deep inner work.

One path runs through the body. The body doesn't lie. The tension in your shoulders when someone raises a certain topic. The contraction in your stomach when you think about a particular situation. The sudden fatigue that overtakes you when you approach something you would rather avoid. The body sends constant signals about what lives in the unconscious. Learning to listen to those signals is a first step.

Another path runs through projection. We are constantly projecting our unconscious onto the outside world. What irritates us most in others is often what we cannot tolerate in ourselves. What we most admire in others is often what we have not allowed ourselves to develop. The outside world is a mirror of the interior.

That is also the basis of the Leela card system. The cards are images. Rich, layered, archetypal images that activate something in the unconscious. When you choose a card and associate freely with it, without thinking about the right answer, material surfaces that your conscious mind would never have generated. It is like using a side entrance while the front door is locked.

What to expect when the unconscious speaks

When the unconscious begins to speak, it is rarely what you expected. Sometimes it is an image that surfaces during an exercise and makes you cry without understanding why. Sometimes it is a physical sensation, a warmth, a pressure, a vibration, that releases something long held. Sometimes it is a sudden insight that feels like something you always knew but had never put into words.

Sometimes it is uncomfortable. There can be resistance, confusion, sometimes even fear. That is normal. The unconscious has kept its material hidden for a reason. There was once good reason to keep that door closed. But in a safe environment, with the right guidance, with the time and space to feel what is there, that door can open a crack.

And what comes through is rarely as terrible as you feared. It is human. It is recognisable. It is yours. And that recognition is liberating. Not because the problem is then solved. But because you suddenly see what you were doing while you thought it was happening to you. Because you come to know the director. And because, once you know the director, you can also begin a conversation with the script.

An exercise with the mirror of the other

At the end of this chapter, we invite you to a small exercise that works directly with projection.

Think of someone in your life who regularly irritates, frustrates, or disappoints you. Someone who provokes a strong reaction in you. Write down one quality that bothers you most about that person. One word or one short phrase.

Then look honestly at yourself. Not to judge yourself, but with genuine curiosity. Is there a part of you, however small, however hidden, that also

knows that quality? Perhaps not in the same form, perhaps much more subtly, but present somewhere?

And if you find that part: what does it need? Not what should you do with it. But what does it need?

Let that question settle. It doesn't need to be answered immediately. This is what the Leela Method calls the mirror of the other. The outside world as guide to the interior. Irritation as invitation.

In the next chapter we go deeper into what Jung called the shadow: the part of ourselves we have suppressed, denied, or never come to know. We explore how the shadow governs our lives, how it manifests in relationships and work, and how embracing the shadow is one of the most powerful forms of liberation a person can experience.

3. Embracing the Shadow

What you refuse to see determines your life

The part of yourself you don't know

There is an old African saying: the fish does not see the water. That is how most people live with their shadow. It is so pervasive, so woven into who they think they are, that they simply do not see it. It is the air they breathe, the ground they walk on, the water they swim in. And yet it determines everything.

Carl Jung introduced the concept of the shadow as the part of the personality we have suppressed, denied, or never developed. Not because it is bad. Not because it is dangerous. But because at a certain point in our lives we learned that this part of us was not welcome. Was not accepted. Was too much, or not enough.

Every child begins life as a complete being. Full of energy, full of emotion, full of possibility. Anger and joy, fear and longing, vulnerability and strength: all of it is there, unfiltered and undivided. And then comes the upbringing. Then comes socialisation. Then we learn what is welcome and what is not.

Some children learn that anger is dangerous. That it poisons the atmosphere. That it puts the parent's love at risk. And so the anger disappears. Not really, because energy doesn't disappear. But it goes underground. It is swallowed, suppressed, buried under a layer of good behaviour and compliance.

Others learn that vulnerability is weakness. That crying is not allowed. That you must stay strong. And so vulnerability disappears from visible life. It goes

underground. Others learn that their liveliness is too much. That their enthusiasm is disruptive. And so the liveliness disappears.

All those vanished parts: that is the shadow.

The shadow is not evil

There is a misunderstanding about the shadow I want to address. It prevents people from doing this work. The shadow is not the same as evil. The shadow is not the bad part of you that needs to be suppressed. It is precisely the opposite.

The shadow often contains the richest, most powerful, most vital parts of who you are. The woman who suppressed her anger has also suppressed her strength and her capacity to set boundaries. The man who buried his vulnerability has also buried his capacity for real intimacy. The child who suppressed their aliveness has also suppressed their creativity and their joy.

The shadow is not an enemy. The shadow is a treasure chamber. Jung put it this way: the shadow is ninety percent gold. The work is not to eliminate it. The work is to integrate it. To bring those suppressed parts back into the whole. To become who you always could have been if circumstances had been different.

That is what we call shadow work in the Leela Method. And it is one of the most transformative things a person can do.

How the shadow manifests

The shadow does not disappear because you have suppressed it. It simply looks for other outlets. The most classic outlet is projection. We project our

shadow onto the people around us. What we cannot tolerate in ourselves, we see suddenly and sharply in others.

The man who has suppressed his own arrogance is constantly irritated by the arrogance of colleagues. The woman who cannot accept her own passivity sees people everywhere who don't take charge of their lives. The intensity of the reaction is always a signal. If something mildly irritates you, it is simply something you don't enjoy. But if something irritates you beyond all proportion, if it keeps you awake, if you can't stop talking about it, the likelihood is that you are looking at your own shadow.

That is uncomfortable to hear. I know. But it is also liberating. Because it means that the energy you spend judging others is energy you can reclaim for yourself. That the intensity of your reaction to something in the outside world is telling you where your gold is hidden.

Another manifestation of the shadow is what we call idealisation. What we admire in others, with an admiration that carries a hint of longing, something that feels like loss, something that aches, is often also the shadow. The energy you admire in someone else is an energy that is also present in you, but has not yet been developed. Not yet been allowed.

The shadow in relationships

Nowhere does the shadow become more visible than in intimate relationships. This is also why relationships are such a powerful and often painful area of growth. In an intimate relationship we cannot hide. The other person is close enough to activate our shadow and vulnerable enough to receive our projections.

We do not choose our partners by chance. We choose them, largely unconsciously, based on an inner map drawn in the earliest years of our lives. A map that contains the beliefs we absorbed about love, about safety, about

what a relationship is and what we may expect from it. And we choose partners who confirm that map. Not the conscious map. But the unconscious map. The one that says: this is what love feels like. This is what recognition feels like.

And recognition is not always healthy. Recognition can also be: this feels like it did at home. This feels familiar. And familiar is not the same as good.

I have guided people who, ten years after their divorce, with all the pain and growth that entailed, chose a new partner who activated the same fundamental dynamic as the previous one. Not the same person, not the same story, but the same pattern. The same dance, different music. Until the pattern became visible. Until the shadow was seen.

The shadow in work

The shadow also manifests powerfully in work, though this is less often recognised. When your work drains you while you objectively have every reason to be satisfied with it, there is often something in the shadow asking for attention. A longing you have never allowed yourself. A talent you have never developed. A value you have never followed because it seemed too risky or too different from what was expected of you.

The shadow in work often has to do with what I call the forbidden dream. The artist who became an accountant because that was safer. The teacher who became a lawyer because that had more status. The entrepreneur who became a civil servant because that offered security. That forbidden dream doesn't disappear. It simmers in the shadow and manifests as dissatisfaction, as lack of energy, as the feeling that you are living a life that is not entirely your own.

How the Leela Method works with the shadow

In the Leela Method we work with the shadow in a variety of ways. And none of them begin with the head.

The Leela card system is one of the most powerful instruments we use for this. The cards are stories. Archetypal stories that touch something deeper than thinking. When you choose a card that attracts or repels you, when you choose one that evokes a strong reaction, that is not coincidence. That is the shadow making its presence known.

What follows is not analysis but exploration. What do you see in this image? What does this feel like? What does this say about your life, your story, your pattern? And gently, step by step, what has always been standing in the wings begins to come into view.

We also work with the body. The shadow has a physical location. Some people feel their shadow as a contraction in the chest. Others as a heaviness in the legs. Others as a knot in the throat. By following that physical sensation rather than thinking it away, we can approach the shadow in a way that feels safe.

The gold in the shadow

I want to give you an example of what shadow integration can look like in practice.

A man in his early eighties. Successful businessman. Always the strong one, always the leader, always the one who carried others. He came to us after a burnout that had completely levelled him. In his shadow lay something he had suppressed for his entire adult life: vulnerability. The need for help. The longing to sometimes not be the strongest one in the room.

As a child he had learned that his father, a tough and largely inaccessible man, only respected strength. Weakness was not tolerated. And so he had buried his vulnerability deeply and had become the man his father wanted to see.

What happened in the work with him was not spectacular. There was a moment, quietly, without drama, when he cried for the first time in decades. Not from sadness, but from recognition. From the feeling: I am here too. This softer part of me exists.

What followed that recognition was a slow but irreversible change. Not in his strength, that remained. But in how he used it. He became a different kind of leader. More open, more accessible, more connected. His relationships deepened. His life took on a warmth that had not been there before.

That is the gold in the shadow.

An exercise with your shadow

Take a sheet of paper and write at the top: what do I find intolerable in others? Write everything that comes to mind, without filter, without judgement. Qualities, behaviours, attitudes that irritate, annoy, or repel you.

Then look at that list. Choose the one point that resonates most strongly. The one that provokes the strongest reaction in you.

Then ask yourself, with genuine curiosity and without self-condemnation: do I also know this in myself? Perhaps not to the same degree, perhaps very hidden, but is there something in me that recognises this?

If you find something, even something small, even something uncomfortable, give it a moment of space. Not to change it, not to judge it. Simply to see it.

That seeing is the beginning of integration. And integration is the beginning of freedom.

In the next chapter we look at the body as a gateway. We explore how trauma and unprocessed emotions become lodged in the body, why cognitive approaches have their limits, and how the Leela Method uses the body as a direct path to healing and wholeness.

4. What You Don't Remember

You are still carrying it with you

"The body keeps the score. The brains of traumatised people are constantly being restructured by experiences from the past."

— Bessel van der Kolk

The beginning, before words

There is a world inside you that is older than language. Older even than birth. A world that consists of sensations, of temperature and pressure, of the presence or absence of a warm body, of the rhythm of a heartbeat, of the biochemical language of hormones flowing through a womb before a single word has formed. A world shaped long before your eyes first saw the light, long before you had a name, long before anyone could recognise you as a person.

This is the world of the preverbal wounds.

Preverbal does not mean only before the words of childhood. It means prenatal. It means the birth itself. It means the first months and years after birth, when the brain is not yet capable of storing experiences as stories, but does store them as feelings, as bodily impressions, as a kind of cellular memory that has never been erased. They are not stored as memories you can retrieve and examine. But as patterns in the nervous system. As postures in the body. As automatic responses that activate without you knowing why. And they are more powerful than any conscious memory.

Your story began before you were born

Many people find it difficult to grasp that their story began before they were born. But the environment of the womb is not neutral. It is saturated with information, with emotion, with the inner world of your mother and the circumstances of her life.

Scientific research has shown ever more clearly that the foetus is a sensitive, receptive being that is continuously receiving information from its environment. Not through thinking, not through perception in the ordinary sense, but through the body, through the hormonal system, through the neurobiological development that unfolds in those first nine months.

A pregnant woman who is uncertain, who is afraid, who is overwhelmed by circumstances, whose body is producing cortisol from stress or fear: that biochemical reality reaches the child. Not as a message, not as an intention, but as a climate. As the baseline temperature of the world in which the child is forming.

And what does a child experience in such a climate? Not safety. Not being welcome. But something that feels like: the world is dangerous. I may not be wanted. I need to be careful. That imprinting is not rational. It is not fair. The child can do nothing about it. But it is real. It is present. And it lays a foundation beneath everything that follows.

The birth as first existential experience

Then there is the birth itself. We tend to think of birth as a medical process. Something the mother undergoes, that the child undergoes, and that is then over. But for the child, birth is the most formative experience of its existence so far. It is the transition from a liquid, warm, protected world to a world of

air, of light, of noise, of touch, of gravity. And that transition does not always go smoothly.

Based on what I have seen and heard in fifty years of work, I estimate that roughly half of all births contain an element of trauma. Not necessarily medical trauma. Not necessarily something visibly problematic from the outside. But trauma in the sense of an overwhelming experience that exceeds the child's system.

A long labour in which the child is stuck: that is an experience of being trapped, of being unable to move. A very fast birth in which the child is expelled without the normal gradual transition: that is an experience of sudden overwhelm, of having no time to adjust. A caesarean section, an umbilical cord cut too early, a child taken away immediately after birth for medical procedures: each of these touches the most basic need of the newborn. That need is simple. It is older than any other need. The need to be welcome. To be safe. To be received.

When that need is not met, when the first experience of the world is one of danger, pain, or absence, something imprints: the world is not safe. Arriving is dangerous. I may not be welcome here.

What the reptilian brain registers

The reptilian brain, the oldest and deepest layer of the human brain, is already present and active long before birth. It is the brain of survival. The brain of flight, freeze, or fight. The brain that continuously scans whether the environment is safe or dangerous. And the reptilian brain does not think. It does not feel in the emotional sense. It registers. It responds. It stores as bodily state: safe or unsafe, open or closed, present or frozen.

When a prenatal or birth experience has taught the reptilian brain that the world is unsafe, that assessment becomes the baseline. The default. The lens through which everything that follows is perceived.

And later, much later, when the person is an adult and the rational mind is fully developed, that rational mind tries to understand why it feels the way it does. Why it always feels slightly too much in company. Why in intimate relationships it is always waiting for the moment things go wrong. Why it cannot relax even when there is objectively no danger. Why it carries a chronic sense of unsafety that has no logical explanation.

And the rational mind constructs stories. It points to the critical father, the absent mother, the relationship that ended, the career that failed. And those stories are not untrue. But they are incomplete. They capture the tip of the iceberg, not the mass drifting beneath. Because the source of the feeling is older than those stories. It is older than language. It is older than memory. It lives in the body. In the architecture of the nervous system. In the baseline of a reptilian brain that decided long ago: the world is not safe.

How the Leela Method reaches the preverbal layer

The Leela Method was developed, in part, from the recognition that the deepest wounds are not verbal and therefore cannot be healed verbally. We work with the body as the primary gateway. Not the body as an object to be treated, but the body as a subject, a carrier of wisdom, an archive that is willing to open when it experiences safety.

In a session, a person is invited to be present in their body without agenda, without telling the story yet. We begin with sensation. With what is here, now, in this moment. A tension, a heaviness, an emptiness, a warmth. Something without a name that is nonetheless present. And we move toward it. Not to resolve it. But to meet it.

The Leela card system reaches the preverbal layer through the language of images. Images speak to the part of the brain that is older than language, that works through association and resonance, that recognises without knowing why. When someone chooses a card that moves them, a card that makes them cry or evokes a physical response they cannot explain, the image has reached something that words could not have reached.

The body as ally

What we see again and again in the Leela Method is that the body is not an enemy. The body is not a prison. The body is an ally waiting to be acknowledged.

The tension in your shoulders is not something to get rid of. It is information. It is the echo of something stored long ago that is still waiting to be completed. The fear in your stomach when someone comes too close is not something to overcome with willpower. It is the voice of an early nervous system that once learned that closeness is dangerous. And that now has the opportunity to learn something different.

The body does not want to hold on. It wants to complete. Every unfinished experience has a natural tendency toward completion. Every interrupted emotion wants to flow. Every suppressed feeling wants to be felt. Not to overwhelm, but to move through and release. And when that happens, when the body is given the space to open its archive and complete its unfinished business, something is freed that many people describe as coming home. As the feeling: this is me. I am here.

Not a new self. But the self that was always there, beneath all the layers of adaptation and defence and survival.

An exercise in bodily presence

Sit comfortably. Close your eyes if that feels easy. Take a few deep breaths and let your body settle.

Feel the ground beneath you. Feel how the ground supports you, without you having to do anything for it. Let that land for a moment: you are being held.

Then slowly scan your body from within. Begin at your feet and move your attention upward. Not to assess, not to improve. Simply to register. Where is there tension? Where is there space? Where does it feel alive, and where does it feel dead or empty or heavy?

If you find a place that draws your attention, bring your attention there. Breathe toward it. Imagine your breath reaching that place.

Then ask, without expecting an answer: how old do you feel?

Sometimes the body offers a number. Sometimes an image. Sometimes a sense of being very young, of before words, of before time. Let it be there without explaining it.

That is the beginning of a conversation with the deepest layers of your existence. A conversation that the Leela Method continues to guide. With the safety, the precision, and the depth needed to meet what was once unsafe, now safely.

In the next chapter we explore the heart of the Leela Method: the card system, the archetypes, and the rules of the game of consciousness. We discover how the game works as a mirror, a guide, and an instrument for transformation that begins where words end.

Part Two

The Passage

5. Leela: Understanding the Game

The rules of consciousness

"The game is not what you play. The game is who you are while you play it."

— Osho

A different language for the inner life

There is a moment in every therapeutic process when words fall short. Not because the person is not articulate enough. Not because the therapist is not listening well enough. But because the experience that needs to be described, the wound that wants to be seen, the pattern that wants to be understood, is simply not made of words. It is made of images. Of sensations. Of energy that moves or refuses to move. Of something that creates resonances deeper than the meaning of words.

In that space, where words end and something else must begin, the Leela Method works.

And although I have spent years working with Ayahuasca as a therapeutic tool, and although the depth that can be reached in those ceremonies is genuinely extraordinary, I have discovered over the years that the same deep layers are accessible without any substance at all. Not despite the absence of Ayahuasca, but through the power of the method itself.

The difference between Ayahuasca and the Leela Method is not the depth that can be reached. The difference is the path there. Ayahuasca opens doors quickly, sometimes overwhelmingly. The Leela Method opens the same doors more slowly, more gently, but just as thoroughly. And with an advantage that

should not be underestimated: the person remains fully present, fully conscious, fully able to integrate what arises as it arises.

What Leela means

The word Leela comes from Sanskrit and has no direct translation into English or any Western language. That is not coincidental. It describes something our language cannot easily hold.

Leela means play. But not the play of winning and losing. Not the play of strategy and counterstrategy. It describes the play of creation itself. The way the universe expresses itself in form, in movement, In Indian philosophy, Leela is the manifested reality as an expression of the divine. Not reality as a problem to be solved. Not life as something to be overcome. But life as play, as dance, as the way the intangible makes itself visible in your specific, unique, unrepeatable existence.

And that is precisely the shift the Leela Method invites you to make. From life as a burden to life as a game. From yourself as a victim of circumstances to yourself as a player in a larger whole. From crisis as failure to crisis as a move on the board, part of a movement that is going somewhere.

That shift is not naive. It does not deny the pain. It does not minimise the crisis. It only says: there is a perspective from which this can be seen differently. And that different perspective changes everything.

The Leela card system as a mirror

At the heart of the Leela Method is the Leela card system. It is not an ordinary card game. It is not tarot. It is not an oracle in the traditional sense. It is not a system of predictions or external answers. It is a mirror. A mirror that shows you what you already know but have not yet seen.

The deck consists of rich, archetypal images developed to activate the unconscious. To loosen associations that the conscious mind would never have generated. To offer a side entrance into the inner life of the player.

When you choose a card, you do not choose with your head. You choose with something deeper. Your hand moves toward a card that pulls, that pushes away, that evokes a feeling you cannot immediately explain. And in that feeling, in that immediate, prereflective response, lies information more valuable than anything analysis can produce.

Because the unconscious does not communicate in logical arguments. It communicates in images, in symbols, in resonance and resistance. The card system speaks that language.

What follows in a guided session is not interpretation by the facilitator. The facilitator does not say: this card means this for you. The facilitator asks: what do you see in this image? What does this feel like? What does this evoke in your thoughts, in your body, in your life? And the player discovers for themselves. Not because the facilitator told them, but because the image has opened something that was already present, already waiting to be seen.

That is the power of projection as a therapeutic instrument. The card is neutral. What you see in it is yours.

The archetypes in the game

The Leela card system works with archetypes. That word may sound abstract, but it describes something concrete and recognisable. Archetypes are universal patterns of human experience. They are not culturally bound, not personal, not historically determined. They are the great themes of human existence that recur in every culture, every era, every human life: the hero and the shadow, the mother and the child, the wise elder and the fool, the lover and the solitary, the warrior and the healer.

Jung discovered that these patterns are not learned but innate. They live in what he called the collective unconscious: the shared psychic inheritance of humanity. And they activate in our lives at moments of great transition, crisis, growth.

When you are in the middle of a midlife crisis, the archetype of death and rebirth is active in you. Not as a metaphor but as a real psychic force. Moving you, lifting the old and making space for the new. When you are stuck in a relationship, archetypes are active that have to do with the inner images of the feminine and masculine that you unconsciously project onto your partner.

The Leela card system makes these archetypes visible. It gives them an image, a face, a form that is recognisable. And when you recognise an archetype that is active in your life, you suddenly understand something that was incomprehensible before. The pattern no longer looks like your personal failure. It looks like a universal human experience you are living through. That is illuminating. That is liberating.

The rules of the game of consciousness

The word Leela, life as play, requires an understanding of the rules. Because every game has rules. Not to limit the game, but to make it playable.

The first rule of consciousness is: what you resist, persists. This is one of the most fundamental laws of the inner world. Everything you resist, everything you try to push away, deny, or avoid, grows stronger. Not because the universe is sadistic, but because resistance is energy. And that energy feeds precisely what you are resisting.

The second rule is: what you allow can move. When you allow a feeling, when you give it space rather than suppressing it, when you meet it with curiosity rather than fear, it begins to move. Not always immediately, not always easily, but it begins to flow.

The third rule is: consciousness heals. Not understanding. Not analysis. But consciousness. The act of giving something genuine attention, of truly seeing it without judgement, has a healing effect. This is what contemplative traditions have taught for millennia and what modern neuropsychology is now beginning to confirm: presence is transformative.

The fourth rule is: you are not your pattern. This is perhaps the most liberating rule of all. The pattern you carry, the wound you bear, the belief that limits your life: that is not you. That is something you have, something that happened to you, something that has made its home in you. But it is not the core of who you are.

Beneath the pattern, beneath the wound, beneath the belief, there is something that remains untouched. Something that has never been damaged. Indian philosophy calls this the Atma. The unchanging core of consciousness. And the work of the Leela Method is not to solve the pattern, but to return to that core.

The game and the player

There is a paradox in the Leela Method that I want to be honest about. On the one hand, we invite you to see life as a game. To stand more lightly in your own story. To see the crisis as a move on the board rather than a final catastrophe. On the other hand, the work we do is serious. Deep. Sometimes painful. It touches the foundations of who you think you are. It requires courage and honesty and willingness to see what you would rather not see.

How can those two things be reconciled? They can be reconciled because taking the game seriously does not exclude it from being a game. A good chess player plays seriously. A musician plays seriously. A child at play is completely serious. But at the same time they know: it is a game. There is a

perspective from which all of this is part of something larger. There is a space from which it is possible to play without the game being your identity.

That space, that distance between the player and the game, is what the Leela Method calls the witness. The part of you that watches, that observes, that is present to everything that happens within you without being swept away by it.

Developing the witness, learning to observe without immediately reacting, learning to watch your own patterns without disappearing into them: that is one of the central capacities the Leela Method trains. And with that capacity, life changes. Not the circumstances, not immediately. But the relationship to the circumstances. The space that exists between what happens and how you respond.

Viktor Frankl, who survived the horrors of the concentration camps and made them into his life's work, put it this way: between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space lies our freedom.

Enlarging that space: that is the work.

An exercise with the game

Take a moment of quiet. Breathe three times, deeply in and out. Then think of a situation in your life that is currently demanding energy. Something that is occupying you, that is difficult or confusing.

Let the image of that situation come to you. Then imagine taking a step back. Not away from the situation, but slightly further from it. Like a director watching their own film rather than an actor in the middle of the scene.

From that position, with a little more distance, ask yourself: if this were a scene in the larger game of my life, what is this scene trying to teach me?

What capacity, what quality, what insight is this situation asking me to develop?

Let the answer come. Don't force it. What arises, even if it is small, even if it is unexpected, is a glimpse of the wisdom that is present in you. The wisdom that the Leela Method helps to unlock, to deepen, and to integrate into the life you truly want to live.

In the next chapter we look at practice: what does a Leela Method journey look like concretely, what can you expect, and how do you begin the inward path that leads to the life waiting for you.

6. The Leela Journey

"The curious paradox is that when I accept myself just as I am, then I can change."

— Carl Rogers

There comes a moment when you have had enough of understanding. Enough of reading, of analysing, of mapping your own pain yet again. You don't want another insight. You want to feel something different. You want to live in a way that feels like home.

That moment is the beginning of a journey. Not the beginning of a solution. But the beginning of a movement: a conscious step inward that, if you dare to take it, leads to something you may not yet be able to imagine. A life that is genuinely yours. Not your fear's. Not your history's. Not the expectations you have used as a compass for so long.

In the previous chapters we have spoken about what happens at midlife, about the layers of the unconscious, about the role of the body, about the deeper dimensions of consciousness. Now it is time for practice. What does a journey with the Leela Method look like concretely? What can you expect, what does it ask of you, and how do you begin?

This chapter is not a recipe. It is more like a map. One that shows you what the landscape looks like without telling you exactly where you are going. Because that is something you discover yourself.

The difference between therapy and transformation

We live in a culture accustomed to treatment. You have symptoms, you go to someone who resolves them, you go home. This model works well for a broken leg, for an infection, for much of what happens to the body. But it does not work for the kind of pain that brings people to us at midlife.

That pain is not a defect. It is a signal of something that wants to move. Therapy, in the classical sense, focuses on reducing symptoms. That is valuable and sometimes necessary. But transformation requires something different: the willingness to take symptoms seriously as messengers. Not as enemies. To be willing to investigate what they want to tell you, even when that is uncomfortable, even when the message is that something essential in how you live must change.

The Leela Method is designed from this distinction. We do not work on the surface. We work with what lives inside. That means a journey with us feels less like a treatment and more like a voyage of discovery. A voyage in which you are guide and traveller at once. In which the destination is not fixed but unfolds. And in which each stage teaches you something about who you are beneath all the layers you have built around yourself over the years.

The first meeting: intake as opening

Every journey begins with an intake conversation. That sounds formal, but in practice it is something else: it is a first real meeting. A conversation in which we look together at what you bring, what you are looking for, and what in your life is asking for attention right now.

In that conversation we ask questions you may not be used to. Not only: what are your symptoms? But also: what have you always wanted to live and not dared to? Where do you feel the tension in your body when you think about

your life? When was the last time you felt truly free, and what did that feel like?

Those questions are not tricks. They are an invitation to take your own inner world more seriously than you may be accustomed to. Many people come with a story they have told a hundred times, to friends, to a therapist, to themselves in the mirror. The story is often accurate. But in the intake, we discover together that behind that story something lives that has not yet been put into words. A feeling, a suspicion, a longing with no name. That unspoken something is precisely where we want to go.

The intake is also the moment when we are honest about what the Leela Method is and is not. About what you can expect and what we ask of you. And about whether this journey is right for you at this moment. Not everyone is ready for intensive inner work. Together we look at what is appropriate.

The structure of a journey: layers and phases

A journey with the Leela Method has no fixed duration. Some people work with us for three months, others for a year. The length is not the point. The depth is the point.

What we do see is that journeys tend to unfold in recognisable phases, even though the timing is different for everyone.

The first phase we call dismantling. This is the phase in which the protective structures you have built become visible. The mask, the role, the beliefs that have come to tell you who you are and what you are worth. This is often the most uncomfortable phase, because you begin to feel things you have long avoided. Fear that seems to have no concrete cause. Grief that wells up from nowhere. Anger you don't understand.

We guide you through this phase with individual sessions, body-oriented exercises, and consciousness techniques that help you remain present with what arises without being overwhelmed by it. You learn the difference between enduring feelings and experiencing them. That is a crucial skill. Many people who get stuck at midlife have spent years enduring feelings rather than experiencing them.

The second phase is what we call integration. Here the pieces begin to fit together. The experiences you have had, the feelings that have risen, the memories that have returned. They now ask for meaning. Not the meaning you gave them before, but a new, wider meaning that fits who you are now and who you want to become.

This is also the phase in which Ayahuasca, if it is appropriate for you and you are ready for it, can play a role. Not as intervention, not as magic, but as a tool that facilitates access to deeper layers of consciousness in a way that other methods sometimes take years to reach.

The third phase is rebirth. Though that sounds grander than it is. It is actually simple: you begin to live from a centre that is yours. Choices that seemed impossible before become natural. Relationships shift or deepen. Your body relaxes. There is more energy. Not because there is nothing left to do, but because your energy is no longer entirely consumed by maintaining a self that was never yours.

What it asks of you

We would not be treating you honestly if we wrote this chapter without saying what a journey asks of you. It asks something, and that is more than a financial investment.

It asks courage. The courage to look at what you would rather not see. The courage to allow feelings you have long held at a distance. The courage to say: I don't know how to go on, but I want to find out.

It asks honesty. Toward yourself and toward us. If something doesn't feel right, if something moves too fast or too slow, if you don't feel safe: say so. A journey is not a course to follow obediently. It is a living whole that adapts to what you need.

It asks patience. Change that is real does not come quickly. You can feel something profound after one session and then find yourself back in the old pattern a week later. That is not failure. That is how it works. The spiral goes upward, but it does not go in a straight line. You sometimes return to the same point, but each time you look at it from a greater height.

And it asks a willingness to begin again. Not to throw everything away, not to turn your life upside down. But to hold your identity a little more loosely. To allow the question: who am I if I am not the person I have always tried to be?

When do you begin?

There is never a perfect moment. That is something we want to be honest with you about. There is always a reason to postpone: it is too busy now, I will wait until the children are older, until I have less stress at work, until I feel more stable. But the midlife crisis does not wait. And the need that lies beneath it, the need for a life that is yours, is there tomorrow. It is here now.

The best moment to begin is not when everything is ideal. It is when you feel that continuing the way you have been is no longer an option. When the pain of stagnation is greater than the fear of change.

If you are reading this and something in you resonates, if there is a feeling of: yes, this is it, this is what I am looking for, then that is the beginning. Not the

start of a journey, but the start of the willingness. And willingness is all you need to take the first step.

Three ways to continue

Below you will find the ways in which you can continue. There is no hierarchy among these options, no right or wrong choice. It is a matter of what is appropriate for you now.

The Personal Journey

A one-to-one trajectory designed for the leader who wants to go deep. We work in a series of private sessions at your own pace. Each session combines the Leela card system, body-oriented work, and direct conversation. Duration is flexible. We begin with an intake and take it from there. This is the path for those who want real change and are willing to invest in it seriously.

The Relationship Journey

Designed for two people who want to do meaningful work together. For the leader and their partner, because the threshold crisis is often rooted in private life. Two people at a threshold, ready to meet each other at a deeper level. The Relationship Journey combines individual sessions with joint sessions. It works with what each person carries, and with what moves between them.

The Transformation Week

A full immersive week in a carefully chosen location. Small group of four to six people. Each day brings sessions, silence, body work, and time to integrate. Meals together. Long evenings. The kind of depth that is only possible when you step fully out of ordinary life. Dates and locations on request. These weeks are held once or twice a year and fill quickly.

For pricing and availability of all three trajectories, please reach out directly. Every conversation begins without obligation.

The life waiting for you

We close this chapter with something that may be hard to believe when you are in the middle of a crisis: on the other side of this work, a life is waiting.

Not a perfect life. Not a life without loss or doubt or pain. But a life that is yours. That is grounded in who you truly are. That no longer wastes its energy defending a self that was never yours.

A life with more joy. Not because everything becomes easier, but because you are more present to what is there.

We have seen this, again and again. In people who came with exhaustion and left with a new relationship to themselves. In people who found the courage to begin something new. In people who, for the first time in their lives, were no longer fighting against themselves. But simply were.

Every passage begins with a conversation. Unhurried. Private. Without obligation. If you are ready to take the first step, we are ready to meet you there.

"The most important journey you will ever take is the one that leads you back to yourself."

VanderHagen Institute

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