

Even the Best Meditators Have Old Wounds to Heal

by Jack Kornfield

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In spiritual life I see great importance in bringing attention to our shadow side, those aspects of ourselves and our practice where we have remained unconscious. As a teacher of the Buddhist mindfulness practice known as vipassana, I naturally have a firm belief in the value of meditation. Intensive retreats can help us dissolve our illusion of separateness and can bring about compelling insights and certain kinds of deep healing.

Yet intensive meditation practice has its limitations. In talking about these limitations, I want to speak not theoretically, but directly from my own experience, and from my heart.

Some people have come to meditation after working with traditional psychotherapy. Although they found therapy to be of value, its limitations led them to seek a spiritual practice. For me it was the opposite. While I benefited enormously from the training offered in the Thai and Burmese monasteries where I practised, I noticed two striking things. First, there were major areas of difficulty in my life, such as loneliness, intimate relationships, work, childhood wounds, and patterns of fear, that even very deep meditation didn't touch. Second, among the several dozen Western monks (and lots of Asian meditators) I met during my time in Asia, with a few notable exceptions, most were not helped by meditation in big areas of their lives. Many were deeply wounded, neurotic, frightened, grieving, and often used spiritual practice to hide and avoid problematic parts of themselves.

When I returned to the West to study clinical psychology and then began to teach meditation, I observed a similar phenomenon. At least half the students who came to three-month retreats couldn't do the simple "bare attention" practices because they were holding a great deal of unresolved grief, fear, woundedness, and unfinished business from the past. I also had an opportunity to observe the most successful group of meditators - including experienced students of Zen and Tibetan Buddhism - who had developed strong samadhi and deep insight into impermanence and selflessness. Even after many intensive retreats, most of the meditators continued to experience great difficulties and significant areas of attachment and unconsciousness in their lives, including fear, difficulty with work, relationships wounds, and closed hearts. They kept asking how to live the Dharma and kept returning to meditation retreats looking for help and healing. But the sitting practice itself, with its emphasis on concentration and detachment, often provided a way to hide, a way to actually separate the mind from difficult areas of heart and body.

These problems exist for most vipassana teachers as well. Many of us have led very unintegrated lives, and even after deep practice and initial "enlightenment experiences," our sitting practice has left major areas of our beings unconscious, fearful, or disconnected. Many American vipassana teachers are now, or have recently been, in psychotherapy in order to deal with these issues.

It should also be noted that a majority of the 20 or more largest centers of Zen, Tibetan, Hindu, and vipassana practice in America have witnessed major upheavals, centering on the teachers themselves (both Asian and Western), related to issues of power, sex, honesty, and intoxication. Something is asking to be noticed here. If we want to find true liberation and compassion what can we learn?

Some Helpful Conclusions for Our Practice

1. For most people, meditation practice doesn't "do it all". At best, it's one important piece of a complex path of opening and awakening. I used to believe that meditation led to the higher, more universal truths, and that psychology, personality, and our own "little dramas" were a separate, lower realm. I wish it worked that way, but experience and the nondual nature of reality don't bear it out. If we are to end suffering and find freedom, we can't keep these two levels of our lives separate.

2. The various compartments of our minds and bodies are only semi-permeable to awareness. Awareness of certain aspects does not automatically carry over to the other aspect, especially when our fear and woundedness are deep. This is true for all of us, teachers as well as students. Thus, we frequently find meditators who are deeply aware of breath or body but are almost totally unaware of feelings and others who understand the mind but have no wise relation to the body.

Mindfulness works only when we are willing to direct attention to every area of our suffering. This doesn't mean getting caught in our personal histories, as many people fear, but learning how to address them so that we can actually free ourselves from the big and painful "blocks" of our past. Such healing work is often best done in a therapeutic relationship with another person.

3. Meditation and spiritual practice can easily be used to suppress and avoid feeling or to escape from difficult areas of our lives. Our sorrows are hard to touch. Many people resist the personal and psychological roots of their suffering; there is so much pain in truly experiencing our bodies, our personal histories, our limitations. It can even be harder than facing the universal suffering that surfaces in sitting. We fear the personal and its sorrow because we have not learned how it can serve as our practice and open our hearts.

We need to look at our whole life and ask ourselves. "Where am I awake, and what am I avoiding? Do I use my practice to hide? In what areas am I conscious, and where am I fearful, caught, or unfree?"

4. There are many areas of growth (grief and other unfinished business, communication and maturing of relationships, sexuality and intimacy, career and work issues, certain fears and phobias, early wounds, and more) where good Western therapy is on the whole much quicker and more successful than meditation. These crucial aspects of our being can't just be written off as "personality stuff." Freud said he wanted to help people to love and work. If we can't love well and give meaningful work to the Earth, then what is our spiritual practice for? Meditation can help in these areas. But if, after sitting for a while, you discover that you still have work to do, find a good therapist or some other way to effectively address these issues.

Of course, there are many mediocre therapists and many limited kinds of therapy. Just as in meditation, you should look for the best. Beyond the traditional psychotherapies of the '40s and '50s, many new therapists have been developed with a strong spiritual basis such as psychosynthesis, Reichian breath work, sand play, and whole array of transpersonal psychologies. The best therapy, like the best meditation practice, uses awareness to heal the heart and is concerned not so much with our stories, as with fear and attachment and their release, and with bringing mindfulness to areas of delusion, grasping and unnecessary suffering. One can, at times, find the deepest realizations of selflessness and non-attachment through some of the methods of transpersonal psychology.

5. Does this mean we should trade meditation for psychotherapy? Not at all. Therapy isn't the solution either. Consciousness is! And consciousness grows in spirals. If you seek freedom, the most important thing I can tell you is that spiritual practice always develops in cycles. There are inner times when silence is necessary, followed by outer times for living and integrating the silent realizations, as well as times to get help from a deep and therapeutic relationship with another person. These are equally important phases of practice. It is not a question of first developing a self and then letting go of it. Both go on all the time. Any period of practice may include samadhi and stillness, followed by new levels of experiencing wounds and family history, followed by great letting go, followed by more personal problems. It is possible to work with all of these levels in the context of a spiritual practice. What is required is the courage to face the totality of what arises. Only then can we find the deep healing we seek - for ourselves and for our planet.

In short, we have to expand our notion of practice to include all of life. Like the Zen ox-herding pictures, the spiritual journey takes us deep into the forest and leads us back to the market place again and again, until we are able to find compassion and the sure heart's release in every realm.

<http://www.buddhanet.net/psymed1.htm>