

“Intermediate” Meditation

There is a disturbing aspect to meditation practice that occurs for some people after concentration has been stabilised. It is a period of difficulty, or recurring periods of difficulty, in which the meditator feels plagued by confusion, and/or physical pain, and/or deeply disturbing emotions, and/or horrific imagery, and/or some other sort of agitation that just seems to be waiting for them every time they practice.

In most traditions that I am familiar with, this period is certainly recognised, but there is often little specific advice other than keep going and get through it. The person is reassured that the ultimate ground of being is still there, still waiting for them on the other side of their personal demons, and that they will make it through the turmoil if they simply continue with their practice. While this advice is ultimately true, and is often sufficient in a context where there is a caring teacher and fellow practitioners in a community who share their own experiences of working through these layers, many people today are practicing in relative isolation, or feel isolated with their experience despite being in a community. I have encountered numerous people who have dropped their practices at this point.

For many practitioners at this stage there is a felt double bind. If they try to push past the upset and go for the calm, peaceful, expansive awareness that they have experienced in previous periods of meditation, they generally fail, and then often get into a shame based dynamic where they criticize themselves for not being better meditators. Or, if they attend to the upset, they generally persevere on a series of thoughts and negative feeling states without coming to any sense of resolution, feel that they have wasted their meditation time, and then often get into a shame based dynamic where they criticize themselves for not being better meditators. They have either brought to their practice or have been encouraged to adopt an attitude of overcoming obstacles. They are, as one old metaphor goes, beating the water in an attempt to subdue it. Softer, more heart centered methods can often be helpful at this point, and wise teachers will often point in this direction for their students.

What many traditions lack, and which may also be helpful at this stage, is a psychological framework. From a modern psychological perspective we can say that there are various layers to the mind. There is, as Freud pioneered many years ago, a layer that we can call the dynamic unconscious, the place where our personality gets hooked into certain beliefs and ways of being in the world that have to do with our personal past and upbringing. There is also, now well established in the research literature, something we might call the implicit unconscious, the realm of biases and deeply held beliefs from our language and culture that skew the way we even perceive what is out in the world to be perceived. Then, there is also the relational mind, the limbic system that gets formed through early attachment sequences between the last trimester in utero and the third year of life postpartum. All of these systems overlap and interact, and all of them connect with our bodily sensations as feelings and felt qualities of being in the world. Meditation aims to get beneath all these layers and have them unravel of their own accord. If we can sink into the ground of being, personality traits just seem to melt away. Even the

perceptions of common objects and things we usually take for granted like gravity and time can suddenly cease, or seem to cease for a period. Yet, while the ground of being is ultimately true, it is not always helpful. Especially when a person has some kind of trauma in their background, they can be so anxious as to simply not be able to sink into the ground of being. People who have significant trauma histories are also much more prone to shameful states, and the well meaning advice to stick with their practice or try an adjunctive practice can sometimes feel caustic.

Even if nothing particularly traumatic has occurred, it is a rare person that has not had at least a few adverse experiences in their lives. We all have personal blind-spots and interpersonal wounding experiences of one sort or another. Ever been belittled by a teacher, frightened by parental anger, devastated by a divorce in the family, bullied, misunderstood? Life can leave scars in the best of circumstances. Children are often stressed and virtually alone with their problems and questions, and being left alone with your meditation can feel retraumatizing. At the risk of annoying traditionalists, let me propose that psychotherapy may be a useful adjunct to meditation. It can be helpful to have some skill with emotion and feeling, and to have some understanding of how our bodies express and hold experiences. It can be helpful to have someone to talk to. It can be useful to have a period of time dedicated to working with emotion, so that our precious time for meditation can remain devoted to sinking deeply into the ground of experience. Especially for those with serious trauma in their past, a skilled therapist can be a critical resource for helping them learn how to soothe and work through the deep wounds of our lives.

In the modern American spiritual scene there are some teachers who have addressed this issue. Jack Kornfield and John Wellwood are trailblazers on the intersection of psychotherapy and spirituality. A meditation manual that explicitly mentions this stage of working through is Adyashanti's little gem, "The Way of Liberation." Judith Blackstone offers workshops and books with many explicit tools for holding and healing these wounded parts in the service of spiritual growth. The American born Zen master Robert Aitken used to recommend students learn Focusing, a method of emotional work pioneered by Eugene Gendlin and Carl Rogers back in the 1970s. There are many wise teachers and methods out there, just realize you are not alone with this dilemma if you encounter it. It is a natural part of your unfolding more completely into an embodied awakening.