

INNER PROCESSING IN MEDITATION

Processing of psychological material is not often seen as something one does in meditation, and yet most meditators do a fair bit of internal processing of emotions, memories, and plans when they sit. With Recollective Awareness, where all of a person's thoughts and emotions are allowed, such psychological processing occurs quite frequently, and will often lead to greater self-acceptance and new insights. But it can also lead to something that is definitely in the realm of meditation: calm, focused, and clear states of mind. It even engenders these "optimal" states of mind in the service of processing and looking more deeply into the causes and conditions of certain psychological issues, whereas such states in more traditional forms of meditation are utilized to focus on prescribed objects of meditation or follow a set progression of deepening concentration.

In my theory of meditative processes, I sketch out a progression that some meditators may experience. It starts with how one begins a meditation sitting. In this case, it is carrying the thoughts and emotions that one experiences into the meditation sitting. There is no stopping of those thoughts and emotions in order to focus on the breath, take refuge in the Triple Gem, think thoughts of loving-kindness, or any such preparatory practice. One just adopts one's meditation posture and allows what was going on before the sitting to continue. By doing so, one is immediately open to one's thoughts and emotions, usually getting caught up in them. This way of orienting oneself to one's inner world at the beginning of the sitting will naturally lead to going along with anything that beckons for attention, and will facilitate a kind and gentle way of relating to oneself, especially since there is nothing else one is supposed to be doing (such as bringing one's attention to the breath).

Someone who is just embarking on this way of meditating may find the thoughts and emotions going on for some time in the first sitting or two, but I would caution about being discouraged by this. For there may also be times when the thinking dies down or a particular emotion subsides, and a period of being calmer and less preoccupied follows, even for just a short while. At such times, one may find one's attention going to the breath, bodily sensations, sounds, light, images, colors, or anything else that might arise.

At some point, one may notice that instead of getting caught up in the thoughts and emotions regarding a particular issue, one is looking at the thought and emotions and uncovering different things about it. Here is an example from a meditator's journal: *I became curious about familiar processes, the way in through awareness of tension in the body and then opening into associated conditions. What emerged was acknowledgement of desperation, a whole mode of desperation and its various associations and conditions, current and*

developmental. It was associated with a specific pattern of physical tension, especially across the upper back and neck and into the rib cage as well as the jaw and cheeks in the face. Then tensions in the belly that went lower in the body spreading to the buttocks and legs. Desperate about money, finances, what to do, how to develop a meditation community, buying a Christmas tree, canceling the party, work issues: a process of suppressing desperate survival emotions in order to participate in the world. Opening and allowing and arriving at this desperation, this fear. In the process, deepening calm and silence and much more space between thoughts and stories. Not completely dropping desperation, but much more aware of it and much calmer.

There may not be a realization or insight at this point, but there is a way the material is getting processed so that an insight might be possible. If one looks for insights early on in processing emotional states, such as “desperation,” then one may be pushing oneself toward quickly ending the processing. But if one gives oneself time to process further in meditation (and also outside of meditation), then something that one hadn’t known or acknowledged before about oneself can come to light. The meditator’s journal continues: *Seeing how other people cannot provide this security, I recognized something about the practice itself providing it, being a true home, but what about it?*

Doubts/curiosity/wanting to understand... sensing I wasn’t quite getting it somehow, not quite articulating it... seeing it is not a thing to understand but a trustworthy process of deepening understanding... and one shared with others. Recognizing that this is something I need to cultivate more in my life, wanting to, needing to—this emerging through questions of how to navigate current life that are both arising through the desperation and then settling deeper than the desperation where I also recognized trustworthy directions in life. This emerged in a more crystalized form after I had stopped meditating and sat down to journal the practice, for I dropped into the meditation again and there was the desperation again and it shaped in the form of the inner traumatized child.... not feeling safe at all... and the sense of myself as trustworthy adult responding, addressing my parents briefly, reprimanding them on their emotional deprivation of me in childhood, hearing “their assent” to my way of seeing them. I did not spend much time on these familiar processes that are slowly evolving over time—instead discovering how refuge is what I described above, these processes of understanding within myself and shared with others, that this is refuge, this is safety, this is the direction that needs, and, is worthy of, cultivation.

In this kind of processing, there may be no “Ahah!” moment, but rather a gradual building up of an understanding, one that seems to arise again and gets worked on as it is applied to the issue at hand. Though spontaneous realizations or “epiphanies” may also occur, they are less frequent, and one may still have to

go through a process of applying the understanding to the issue and seeing if it makes sense from various angles. Such an exploration does seem to produce a new, more refined and intelligent narrative of the issues that have been processed, one that is more firmly based on having gone through the psychological issue within one's meditative process rather than having thought it through or having it interpreted by another person.

Recollective Awareness meditation does help people question narratives that are faulty and dysfunctional. If that were all it did, it would be worth doing. But it also helps people find narratives that are more accurate, authentic, and beneficial. Isn't that something meditation should be able to help us with? Isn't that what a mature search for truth is about? Not looking for some transcendent or ultimate reality to change everything, but rather looking within at what is true about one's psyche and what kind of life is truly beneficial.

Jason Siff