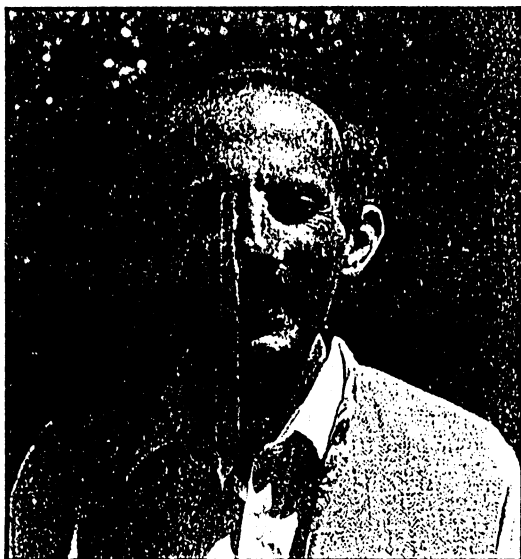


Even the Best Meditators Have Old Wounds to Heal

BY JACK KORNFELD



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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.

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 practiced, 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 insights into impermanence and selflessness. Even after many intensive retreats, most of these meditators continued to experience great difficulties and significant areas of attachment and unconsciousness in their lives, including fear, difficulty with work, relationship 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 aspects, 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

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