

Considerations at the transition between meditation and psychotherapy

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“Something inside me has expanded to the place where the world breathes.” (Kabir)

From the experiences of two meditating psychiatrists working in psychotherapy. We would like to take you on the winding journey on the tightrope between meditation and psychotherapy.

As meditating psychotherapists, we have been dealing with spiritual crises for around 20 years. We noticed some recurring peculiarities among the clients. In this article we would like to provide examples and give recommendations on how these obstacles can be overcome.

“Open space” as a meditative experience.

Many meditators experience a state of 'open space' during meditation and can open themselves up to it. Others shy away from the experience in fear. Keith Dowman calls this state “spaciousness” and explains this, among other things: in his books “In the Eye of the Storm” and “Spaciousness”.

Thomas Metzinger calls this state “Minimal Phenomenal Experience – MPE”.

The condition occurs in many people after some time of meditation practice, whereby the feeling of the body changes and transitions into an awareness of wide, open space. This space is absolutely empty, without a center, without an edge, without a boundary, without any objectivity or quality that one could orient oneself to or hold on to. If you get involved in this experience and relax into the open dimension, this space expands further and further and the immense immensity of this spatiality becomes noticeable as a reality. It is understandable that this experience scares some people.

Huang-po, a 9th-century Zen master, describes this state as follows: “The substance of the Absolute is internally like wood or stone, because it is immobile. Outwardly it resembles emptiness because it has no boundaries or inhibitions. It is neither objective nor subjective, has no specific location, is without form and cannot disappear. Anyone who is drawn to it does not dare to enter it because they are afraid of being thrown down into the void without being able to cling to anything or be protected from falling. So they stare at the abyss and retreat. This applies to all who seek to achieve such a goal through reflection. These are the many, while only a few achieve the intuitive (actual) knowledge of the path.” What an impressive statement.

Is this fear a fear of the open space or is it a fear of dying? David Loy discusses this question in detail in the text below.

Even in meditation classes, people often immerse themselves in this state and are afraid of it. It's hard to say if you can even call it an experience. Actually, it is an internal state - a text by Shabkar, a 19th century Tibetan lama, says: "If you are in this state, relax into its open dimension." But that's exactly what most people find difficult because they feel like they're falling into an abyss inside. For some, this condition feels like dying. In fact, a kind of dying process takes place as identification with the ego dissolves without the person dissolving. States of deep meditative experience are at the same time states of felt egolessness and dissolution of boundaries and structures, which often causes fear. If I can get involved in it, it is a great liberation combined with joy and love.

If these fears solidify and block the deepening of meditation, experience has shown that this has to do with the person's life history. It then often becomes difficult to continue meditation. This can result in anxious depressive states. With the right disposition, it can even lead to a clinically relevant, anxious-depressive illness. We consider this to be a complication of meditation, which can also be understood as a meditative crisis or spiritual crisis. This cannot be assumed to be a “side effect” or a pathology, because this dissolution of boundaries is a central state on the meditative path to a “stateless state”.

Open space as a refuge from trauma

Here is an example of a crisis and a helpful way to deal with it to overcome it.

A woman has been meditating for many years. She notices that meditation slowly calms and organizes her thoughts. Thinking fades more and more into the background. Then the meditator notices how her space expands internally. At the same time she feels an emerging restlessness and worry. As an observer, ego consistency remains clearly intact. "It's as if someone inside is preventing me from feeling the infinite space within." Further restlessness and slight fear sets in. When talking about meditation, the woman reports that she keeps getting to this point and can't get past this threshold. It later turns out that she experienced mental and physical violence several times in her early childhood and can remember that during these events she withdrew internally, drew herself into herself, internally into a wide but protected and held space has fled.

As the dialogue continues, it becomes clear to her that, on the one hand, she desires this state of inner security in meditation, but at the same time she sees this state as an escape space into which she was able to immerse herself again and again as a child, but which today fills her so much with old memories connects that she no longer wants to enter this room.

This inner ambivalence means that she is constantly on the threshold and does not dare to relax internally enough to immerse herself in this inner space in meditation and entrust herself to the open dimension. The threshold is formed by the fear of being touched by trauma again. In further conversations it becomes clear that in these moments of meditation she again feels like the helpless little child who was in such distress.

She's willing to try something with me: we meditate together, and when she comes to that threshold, I remind her that she's an adult now. I encourage her to imagine that she is taking the child she once was and was so frightened with as an adult, with the idea that she is safe and secure with her as an adult today. Little by little she's getting better and better at it. She feels increasingly confident in confronting this interface. Little by little she realizes that the fear lies not in the adult, but in the remembered inner child. She also notices that as this threshold is confronted, the remembered fear subsides.

As she progresses, she can differentiate more and more clearly between the child's escape space and the adult's open space. Eventually she comes to the point where she realizes that she can both enter into the earlier reflex to flee and remain on the threshold as an adult. Her anchor at this point is her breath, which she can always fall back on. Breathing always takes place in the now. She experiences that she can suddenly immerse herself confidently in the inner space and that it opens up further. At first she is still excited, but more and more she can trust herself in this infinitely wide space in which she no longer sees herself as an ego, but as a state of observation.

This is an essential difference: the ego remains intact in the child's escape space. In the inner, meditatively wide space of adults, the sense of self dissolves more and more, while at the same time being awake and noticing that intensive observation is taking place. This awareness becomes more and more a state: not a person observing something, but observation takes place.

The art lies in allowing the stateless state and relaxing into its open dimension, as described above. It is the moment where introspection, I observe myself, turns into pure observation. Subject and object collapse into one and only observation takes place, without an entity that observes and without anything that is observed.

It is in this awareness that "seeing" takes place. In many traditions it is called "witness consciousness." In the process, my feeling for myself also dissolves. This de-identification with the self feels as if there is no longer an "I"! This also dissolves further until a state of pure emptiness, the "absolute", appears, which is beyond nothing and something. Meditation and enlightenment are an absolute absence, as Dowman says. In this respect there is no enlightenment and no meditation. In fact, the ego remains intact and you can "fall back" on it at any time. We need the ego as the central authority in order to find our way in the everyday world. Whenever things get tight, being aware of your own breath is an important help and support so that you don't lose yourself. Feelings

of anxiety are reduced through slow, conscious exhalation.

We would like to make it clear that this point and other transitions and thresholds are normal in meditation. Sometimes there are blockages that can even lead to the spiritual, depressive-anxious crises described. A knowledgeable companion in the sense of a “mountain guide” is usually helpful and it is often enough to point out the accuracy of the experience. This accompaniment is supportive as an external witness. As it progresses, it can then transition into inner witnessing, which can then more easily dissolve into impersonal witnessing. It is important that the meditator can trust and believe in these unusual changes.

Early childhood experience and open space

There is a variety of evidence that the baby is in this stateless state after birth. In this dissolution of boundaries there is no difference between mother and baby, between me and you. For the baby there is no outside and no inside. The world is one big open expanse. Only with the acquisition of language and the development of cognitive abilities does the difference, the demarcation, come into the child's experience. I and you are differentiated just as inside and outside are differentiated. In this development into an individual, most people lose their experience and connection to open space. This makes it understandable why the texts always point out that we are already enlightened and that we know this space.

On the one hand, meditation serves to reestablish this contact. It is also important to know that this condition can be accompanied by the experience of very strong and violent energies. A coherent interpretation of the traditions says that meditation helps to accustom the entire organism, body, mind and soul to these energies. In this process, the awareness of the slowing breath continues to be an important support in not losing yourself. Both the energies in the body and the breath are often experienced as vibrations. Indian tradition says everything is vibration. The Greeks say everything flows.

In dialogue with people in spiritual crises, we noticed that for some people such experiences occur spontaneously. This happens relatively often after yoga exercises in the final relaxation phase. This often leads to the problems described above and raises the question of how exactly this happens. In the psychotherapies we carried out, especially in trauma treatments after experiencing sexual violence as a child, it occasionally happened that women suddenly went into this state. At first it was fascinating to see that these women have always lived with this condition as a matter of course. As adolescents, they notice that this condition remains unknown, incomprehensible and closed to other people. These clients had now gotten used to this and no longer talked about it with others. They found various ways to integrate this state of open space into their everyday lives or to adapt their everyday lives to this state. However, this is usually only achieved incompletely because the difference in the modes of experience is preserved and often consolidated, sometimes to the point of dissociation. Accordingly, it remains a disturbing complication.

This leads to the question of whether the experience of this open space could generally be an escape space for the traumatized child. In various conversations with patients and women with meditation experience, this interpretation was confirmed to us again and again. In the circle of the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1882-1960) such states were described as defense mechanisms. But if these states are identical to deep meditative experiences, then one has to ask whether it makes sense to call this defense. In any case, it must be checked to what extent there is dissociation. It is important to eliminate this dissociation and to deal with the trauma using classic depth psychological therapy.

Suggestions for Overcoming Spiritual Blockages

If psychotherapy is carried out through classic work with the inner child, the inner child is also available as an important companion for meditative practice. Psychotherapeutically it is about

distinguishing between the child self and the adult self. If the adult self is stable, then it is helpful to integrate the child self into the adult self. Once this is done, both of you can explore this open space together. After that, any difference can dissolve and pass into pure vision.

Another aspect worth noting is that the experience of the open space is reminiscent of the traumatized child's disorientation. Even after therapy, this can lead to regressive processes, which then lead to the feelings of previous distress. If the adult self is stable, one can try to find clarification by confronting this challenge. This requires a safe and trusting framework and appropriate support.

Most people find it difficult to lift their heads into the clouds when there is good ground contact. However, some people live in the clouds and need contact with the ground. In such cases, we recommend, for example, Qi Gong exercises to establish and strengthen contact with the ground. A stable personality structure and physical grounding are important prerequisites for these and other exercises.

The following confrontation exercise is an integral part of many spiritual traditions. In Kashmiri Shaivism the method is called Shaktopaya. It's about looking at the challenge. It is helpful to find an inner image of the challenge and visualize it. The gaze is directed inwards and centered on the image of the challenge. You remain silent and stubborn about the feelings related to this confrontation. As I said, this requires good grounding in the sense of grounding and a stable ego structure.

This condition can feel quite threatening and requires strength, patience and trusting support. Often an inner spiritual space opens up all of a sudden, replacing the visualized image. But sometimes it is a slow change that only becomes noticeable later.

This exercise is also helpful for other obstacles in meditation. For example, if certain thoughts and feelings arise again and again in the silence, it makes sense to take a closer look at them. In the confrontation, the content no longer plays a role, but rather the attitude towards what persistently appears is brought into focus. It's about feeling and aligning with the underlying sensations and physical reactions. This can be very difficult for people who are familiar with psychotherapy because they are used to analyzing and thus evaluating the problems. But that doesn't make sense here; you should remain neutral in your view. The prerequisite is that any old traumas have been sufficiently processed, otherwise retraumatization can occur.

Here is an example of this inner transformation in motion:

I stand upright in the room. I feel my feet firmly anchored in the ground. My spine is straightened, I feel upright and open overall. I direct my attention inward, I let my breath flow freely, I feel my body center, I am centered. I surrender to the body as it stands.

Now I turn my attention inward and imagine a challenge that seems to me like an inner threshold. The challenge, for example, is an old insult. I empathize intensely with this feeling of hurt, of being rejected, of being alone, of fear. I observe how the body changes through this inner image. Some muscles tense up. A rigidity becomes noticeable. More and more I let the body take on the state of inner challenge. An attitude emerges.

The content doesn't matter, the feeling is expressed by the body. The body increasingly finds a static expression or gesture. As soon as the body remains in this position, my attention remains internally focused on the feeling of being offended. The breathing has changed, the breath stops and it feels tight. The heart is pounding. The rigidity in the body hurts in some places.

It is not easy to remain in the inner confrontation of the challenge. At the same time, you can notice how the body slowly releases itself from its frozen position, starts to move on its own and moves for a while as if by itself. The breath gradually relaxes and flows again. Little by little the movement comes to rest and the body comes to a standstill. It slowly becomes quieter inside, the emotion of hurt gradually loses its power, the idea can no longer be sustained, it dissolves completely.

The feeling of your body has changed. The tension has been released. The body is firmly connected to the ground and at the same time without its own weight. The breath flows very gently, the view inside shows a wide space, open and held at the same time.

I stay standing for a while, then I go to my place, sit down and end the exercise with a silent meditation. None of this has to be done standing up. It is also possible to start sitting or on the floor. Especially the first time, this exercise should be witnessed by another person from outside. This is how a feeling for external and internal witness develops. Later you can also do it on your own with appropriate practice. Afterwards it becomes possible to let yourself fall deeper into meditation. Identification with the open space still remains. Later this identification will also dissolve. Any prefabricated structures of perception, evaluation and comparison disrupt this process.

Another way to overcome meditation blockages is the Authentic Movement according to Janet Adler. This method helps to immerse oneself in immediate perception through physical expression. In an exercise for two people, one person is the observer and the other is the mover. The person moving assumes a posture as the starting position. In a relaxed state, she waits until movements arise on her own and allows herself to be guided by the gestures and movements of her body. She is asked to follow the movement impulses of the body without letting thoughts guide the movement. After a while, the movement ends in a gesture. After a pause in silence, both exchange information about the process.

With these exercises it is important to disregard the content and only pay attention to the feeling of the body and the emotions associated with the body sensation. This weakens and eliminates identification with the content. It's about trusting the body, which processes the situation through movement and can lead to a surprising result. So this result is not pre-programmed by thinking. Particularly inspired by the work of Janet Adler, it became increasingly clear to us that it makes sense to include the body in meditative exercises.

Return to everyday life with a social connection

In everyday life we need structures to find our way in the world. In mediation it is possible to eliminate this completely. Then it becomes clear that the challenges and obstacles are also empty and have no meaning of their own. In doing so, consciousness opens up to the original state, a stateless state that is always the basis of everything and identical to our everyday consciousness. An oscillation between the inner space and the outer everyday life helps to restore the unity of experience. Living into this change of consciousness helps you to behave in a relaxed and appropriate manner in everyday life. By integrating spiritual states into everyday life, the world becomes different and at the same time remains the same. This is important and helpful in many social situations. In his book *Consciousness Culture*, Thomas Metzinger goes into detail about how important it is to achieve honesty in the challenges ahead, which helps to prevent increased division, fear and anger.

He says: "Intellectual honesty, compassion and a certain form of inner awareness are what we urgently need for mental and political resilience. The concept of a culture of consciousness forms the starting point for a new debate."

Ms. Arawana Hayashi also works with Otto Scharmer in this attitude. She recommends movement work similar to that of Janet Adler and includes constellation work in groups.

We would like to emphasize that these are all new and experimental considerations. They are based on old and current suggestions that are related to psychotherapeutic action and meditative experiences. In this text we are concerned with critical developments in meditation. Threshold situations can be managed well in normal meditations. We would like to receive comments and feedback from the bottom of our hearts.

“Time, otherwise goal-oriented – suddenly speaks to us of space” (Hölderlin, Hyperion)

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This is very similar to working with the inner child

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Texts from us, e.g. “And lead me in the face of temptation” or "Merkmale der Erleuchtung"

can be found on our website: <http://www.parasamvit.de> (2024) see Texte

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