

# HEALING TRAUMA WITH MEDITATION

ALTHOUGH SILENT MEDITATION CAN REAWAKEN PAST TRAUMA, IT CAN ALSO WORK TO HEAL IT. VIPASSANA TEACHER AMY SCHMIDT AND PSYCHIATRIST JOHN J. MILLER TELL US HOW.

**MANY BUDDHIST PRACTITIONERS** who have experienced trauma seek relief, consciously or unconsciously, in their meditation practice. The range of traumatic experiences is broad and can include being the victim of or witness to violence, such as sexual or physical abuse, rape, assault, torture, or military combat. Trauma can also occur following a serious illness or accident. Victims of trauma may experience feelings of powerlessness, low self-esteem, and self-blame. Trauma can also affect the ability to trust, form intimate relationships, and find motivation and meaning in life.

According to clinical psychiatrist Paul J. Fink, one out of every four girls and one out of every six boys worldwide suffer significant trauma before the age of eighteen. The National Comorbidity Survey of 1992 found that 8 percent of all Americans will experience a traumatic incident at some point in their lives that will result in a condition known as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). PTSD is characterized by significant distress and psychological impairment.

At first, symptoms may arise as prolonged feelings of panic while meditating. One practitioner recalls, "Initially, I felt an inexplicable terror. I would sit in the meditation hall, and all the hair would stand up on my body. I described it as 'terror from another planet' because there was no story, but it was still completely debilitating." Following this, the practitioner experienced a series of kinesthetic flashbacks, including involuntary physical contortions related to acts of sexual abuse. Later, visual flashbacks surfaced. Family members eventually verified the traumatic experience that had spurred these flashbacks, and the meditator was able to heal significantly through therapy and meditation practice.

When flashbacks of memories arise, they tend to occur spontaneously during periods of concentration. They can be experienced through any sensation, and are commonly visual or kinesthetic. For some, a whole scene is played out moment by moment, while others experience only broken images. When a meditator experiences a flashback, often the intrusion of these painful memories into conscious awareness can be an indication that the meditator needs to stop practice and address the trauma through psychotherapy; a teacher is usually the best person to make this determination.

Survivors need to consider the potential effects the silence of a retreat environment might have on the resurfacing of traumatic experiences. On the one hand, it can reenact the feeling of being isolated and silenced by the perpetrator, the family, or society. But a retreat can also provide a stable and safe space in which they can begin to relax—often for the first time. There is a predictable schedule, no intrusions from the outside world, and a communal agreement to follow basic ethical rules. One practitioner noted that a retreat was "the first time in my life I felt without fear."

In addition to the safety of the retreat environment, the practice of meditation offers a variety of effective tools for healing trauma. While the suggestions here are aimed at meditators with trauma histories, they can apply to any practitioner coping with difficult emotions. The following are five mindfulness tools that can help practitioners navigate traumatic experiences.

## 1. AWARENESS OF BODY AND BREATH

The body and breath are anchors for awareness that can be returned to again and again. Mindfulness of the



*"Untitled, 1983," by Martin Disler, courtesy of Gallery Elisabeth Kaufmann, Zürich. Chalk and acrylic on paper.*

breath is especially useful for trauma survivors, who tend to hold their breath as a way of not connecting with the present moment. Holding the breath is an unconscious response to anxiety, and may also be part of the process of dissociating from the experience. If, however, the trauma was related to the act of breathing (such as choking or oral sexual abuse), then the breath is obviously not the best meditation anchor. In these cases, during "sitting" periods, try listening meditation, body sweeping, mantras, or touch points (for example, notice the sitting bones touching the cushion, the hands touching the legs or each other, and the feet touching the mat, and rotate your attention among these points).

Body awareness needs to begin gradually. One way to start is by observing the body during times when it feels comfortable. One woman found that the only safe place in her body was her hands, and she would mindfully watch every sensation in each hand for hours at a time. Feeling comfort is a simple thing that trauma survivors often overlook—or sometimes aren't even aware can exist. These practices can be done for five minutes in bed, right before sleep:

- Notice the sensation of gravity. Feel the weight of your body on the bed. How does gravity feel?
- Scan your body for a place that feels relaxed and even a little bit comfortable. Perhaps it is a finger, a toe, or somewhere deep in your body. Focus on that place. Notice what "comfortable" feels like. See if you can describe it.

## 2. REVERSE-WARRIOR TEACHINGS

People with trauma histories often have a tendency to push themselves to extremes; they are more than willing to stay up all night, fast for days, or sit for many hours without moving. Unfortunately, practices that override the body's natural signals of discomfort can end up creating further trauma. One therapist explains, "The way trauma folks survived was that they taught themselves to persevere and to be driven. It's what they learned worked. They didn't learn about kindness to themselves or their internal signals. There wasn't the sense that internal signals could be a support or were worth trusting. It takes survivors a long time to come to listen to internal, intuitive messages and believe them." One practitioner

discovered, “The difficulty with trauma as it unfolded was how compelling the story was and how I was driven by the thought, ‘I’m going to work through this.’ I had to watch this combination of fascination and drivenness and remind myself to back off.”

As a result of this overzealousness, it can be helpful for survivors to practice in a way that seems contrary to the traditional Buddhist teachings. In the sutras, the Buddha advocated a warrior-style practice: “Let only my skin and sinews and bones remain and let the flesh and blood in my body dry up; I shall not permit the course of my effort to stop until the end is reached.” Instead, trauma survivors need to learn what one teacher calls the “reverse-warrior” practice:

- Practice for shorter periods of time.
- Get plenty of sleep and eat regularly.
- Focus on balance and equanimity rather than effort and progress.
- Build in breaks, and remember that it’s not a weakness to be gradual.
- Working with trauma is like having two jobs: You’re doing the practice of meditation and the practice of healing at the same time. In this regard, the meditative focus needs to be on simple, small steps. One therapist notes: “Trauma survivors always feel they are not working hard enough and that’s why they are stuck. But this isn’t true. It’s okay to relax and stop constantly trying to change.”

### 3. EXPERIENCING STRONG EMOTIONS

The core practice in healing trauma is learning how to feel strong emotions without becoming overwhelmed by them. During meditation practice, survivors often respond to overwhelming emotions by dissociating, a relic of the psychological defense they used to remove their awareness from the trauma while it was occurring. One meditator described dissociation this way:

“My mind enters a state outside my body, captive in some dimension where it is at least safe and alive, yet also powerless and terrified. To settle on the breath is impossible. To get up or move in any way is impossible. After some time, my mind returns enough so that

I am able to pull my blanket around me, draw my knees up, and just sit.”

How does a meditator learn to feel strong emotions and bodily sensations without dissociating from them?

- When a difficult emotion, sensation, or memory arises, learn to touch up against the pain in small increments. To do this, bring your attention to a place in your body that feels comfortable or neutral (see “Awareness of Body and Breath,” above). Feel this comfortable place for a few minutes. Then slowly move the attention to the difficult emotion. Feel that for a minute, then move back to the comfortable place again. Keep moving the attention patiently back and forth between these two areas. This gradual re-experiencing can modulate the intensity of the emotion and create a sense of mastery over the feeling.

- Train the mind to listen to the body with tenderness and intimacy. Throughout the day, when you are engaged in activities, check in with your body, asking yourself, “Does my body like this or not? What does my body want? Is it okay to keep going, or do I need to stop now?”

*“Untitled, 1990,” by Martin Disler, courtesy of Gallery Elisabeth Kaufmann, Zürich. Woodcut.*



### 4. AWARENESS OF MIND

One of the characteristics of severe trauma is that past emotions and experiences invade the present and become overwhelming. A Vietnam veteran recalls, “When the memories hit, they literally knocked me off my cushion. Through meditation, I eventually found balance with them.” The practice of mindfulness develops the ability to observe these memories in a way that

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facilitates equanimity and balance by learning that all thoughts come and go.

- Notice “trauma mind,” the habit of always looking over one’s shoulder, expecting the worst to happen.

When fearful memories arise, ask yourself: “Am I okay in this moment? And this moment?” Remember, you have resources and choices now. Try breathing in compassion and breathing out fear.

- Take a day to observe positive emotions as they occur. When did you feel joy today? Curiosity? Humor? Because healing from trauma can involve repeated focus on difficult emotions, it’s important to train the mind to notice the positive emotions that exist.

- Try microlabeling stressful thoughts and feelings: When they arise, meticulously note your reactions as “thinking,” “imagining,” “fear,” and so on.

- Question self-judgments and negative beliefs: “Can I absolutely know this is true? Who would I be without this thought?”

- It’s also useful to identify neutral moments. Were there moments today when you didn’t feel difficult emotions? When you were brushing your teeth? Drinking a glass of water? Reading? Sleeping?

- If you feel completely overwhelmed, try distraction. One meditator went to a 24-hour Wal-Mart and walked the aisles at 2 a.m. The noise, the lights, and the stimulation shifted his focus away from self-hatred.

### 5. LEARNING TO LOVE AGAIN

*Metta* (lovingkindness) and compassion practices offer essential ways to mend the heart after trauma. Trauma survivors are often plagued by a sense that they are unworthy or inherently flawed. They may have trouble doing the “normal” meditation practices or fear that they are not mindful, diligent, or concentrated enough, which can lead to self-hatred and shame.

Trauma victims have had their trust and sense of connection shattered, and often have a hard time feeling kindness toward themselves and others. *Metta* practice can slowly rebuild these connections.

- An image from Buddhist texts that one can use to generate *metta* is that of a mother cow looking at her newborn calf. Imagine a young animal or pet and try extending lovingkindness toward it.

- Feel your heart center and breathe from this. Gently offer *metta* phrases to yourself such as: “May I love myself just as I am,” or “May I be happy, may I be peaceful, may I be safe, may I be free of suffering.” Some people find it useful to bring to mind an image of themselves as a young child when saying these phrases.

It’s important not to force the *metta*. At certain points, working with the *metta* can feel like silencing the pain. In this case, try the following compassion practices instead.

- When difficult emotions arise, try holding each one as you would a crying child.

- One trauma survivor uses a form of *tonglen* (the Tibetan practice of giving and receiving): “In *tonglen* I was taught to breathe in the heavy, dark air and breathe out the light, clear air. When I meditate, as the memories come I breathe in the silence and terror of the mute six-year-old. I breathe in her inability to speak and her terror. On the out-breaths I send the aspiration that one day she will be able to tell her story in her own words, and I send her a feeling of my holding her—safely, protectively. She is so little that it takes feelings, not words, to reach most of her, and this takes time.”

**THROUGH STEADY PATIENCE**, facing trauma can become part of the awakening process itself, and difficult emotions can become workable. Healing trauma is a day-by-day journey requiring courage, persistence, and faith. Buddhist meditation practices offer positive ways to transform trauma. Although not a substitute for psychotherapy, meditation can be a crucial support in the journey from trauma to wholeness. ▼

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