

## INTRODUCTION

### *Moving Beyond Meditator's Guilt*

When I am invited to teach a new group of meditators, I like to know how each person meditates and, generally, what kinds of experiences they have. So I begin by asking them to say a little something about their meditation practice. The first thing almost everyone says is, “I don’t meditate every day.” This is said with a hint of shame.

I might then reply with this compassionate suggestion, “You can meditate when you feel like meditating.”

But then someone will usually say, “But aren’t we supposed to meditate every day?” And then they sometimes ask me, “Don’t you meditate every morning?”

This is meditator’s guilt. It goes deep into the fabric of how we learn to meditate. Because when we learn how to meditate, we try to do the instructions perfectly, setting high standards for ourselves. We consequently experience periods of failure and inadequacy, along with the occasional moments of success, but it all adds up to guilt at not meditating often enough, not doing it well enough, not being the ideal meditator. And then we may also push ourselves too hard, sit with too much pain for too long,

become intolerant of being caught up in our thoughts and feelings, and feel ashamed by the strength and tenacity of undesirable emotions.

I've met quite a few people in the past two decades who, at one time or another, have either given up on meditation out of frustration or kept doing a meditation practice that is giving them more grief than peace. It doesn't have to be this way. There are alternatives. The method I teach, called Recollective Awareness Meditation, is one of them.

Just as we go through a period of learning how to meditate, we can also go through a period of *un*learning meditation. This book will provide guidance on how to engage that process and in doing so will present the meditation experiences of people going through it. By reading other people's experiences, you may find you are not alone in this—that others have been through a period of unlearning the unwanted habits of their meditation practice and have arrived at a new commitment to meditation, along with a greater interest in, and appreciation of, their inner worlds.

I encounter many people who, once they hear that I am a meditation teacher, tell me that they can't meditate because they think too much. Some of them are professors, scientists, and psychologists, who use their thinking in their work and have developed as human beings through using their minds. Because they have gotten a picture of meditation as requiring a quiet, thought-free mind, they feel they can't do it. That is a real loss, a true shame. Recollective Awareness is an approach to meditation that not only doesn't prohibit thinking, but teaches a way of looking into your thoughts so that you can learn things about the thinking process itself. By taking this approach, paradoxically, many people find that their thinking minds actually quiet down, and they find themselves more able to focus on the physical and emotional sides of their experiences.

The effects of unlearning meditation can be many and varied. A wide range of emotions can arise. What has been hidden from awareness can be revealed. And people open up to a wide range of calm, tranquil states of mind. This can be a powerful meditation

practice. But it is not for everyone; no single meditation practice is. It meets the needs of those experienced meditators who are seeking a gentle, open, and insightful form of meditation, as well as those who are new to meditation and are looking for a simple and effective way to begin a meditation practice.

*Unlearning Meditation* is *not* a book that rejects traditional meditation practices. You are not asked to drop your existing meditation practice for good and take up an altogether new form of meditation. Instead, this book provides observations and insights into how people meditate, what they experience, and what would be useful and skillful ways of being with what comes up in meditation sittings for most people. In my two decades of teaching meditation, there have been many instances of people who have unlearned specific meditation practices, only to return later to those practices with greater flexibility and interest, move on to another practice, or even develop their own way of meditating.

This approach to meditation comes directly out of my practice and study of the Dharma. It may appear to be more psychologically oriented than many other approaches, since it is a meditation practice for becoming aware of your thoughts and feelings; understanding your views, ideals, and beliefs; and seeing into how your mind functions both skillfully and otherwise. The kinship between psychotherapy and meditation is there, naturally, but the agendas are often different, and their direction (or trajectory) is different also. The value of Recollective Awareness, and I would say of Buddhist meditation practices in general, is to become aware of the dependently arisen nature of all mental phenomena and, through that way of knowing one's experience, to become wiser, gentler, and more peaceful.

The Buddhist concept of dependent arising, or dependent origination, is a way of looking at things that lies at the heart of meditation practice. The basic principle of dependent origination is, simply stated, that certain states, or conditions, naturally and inevitably lead to others: "When one thing is, so is another; when one thing arises, so does another." Our inner worlds are complex and varied, and each experience is composed of interrelated elements. Dependent

arising is fundamentally a way of knowing how our experiences are put together and how they are kept alive.

With this method, we are first trying to get to know our mind by being gentle and permissive rather than starting out being disciplinarians. Meditation does not have to be an exercise to do, a chore to get through, or a thing to accomplish. It is through gentleness and kindness to ourselves in meditation that we can learn how to become genuinely interested in how our mind operates: we can make astute observations, pursue avenues of exploration, test out hypotheses. When you are interested in the dependently arisen inner world of your meditation sittings, meditator's guilt has no hold or sway over you. Your reasons for meditating are your own.