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East Meets West: Transformational Learning and Buddhist Meditation

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Abstract: *This roundtable will discuss a recent study of the transformational learning process within Insight Meditation and compare this process with Mezirow's and Boyd's views.*

Transformational learning is a growing field of inquiry that is contributing to our understanding of adult learning. Several scholars in the adult education field suggest that a major goal of adult education is transformation.

Mezirow's (1991) view of transformational learning is generally considered the leading theory; however, it has been criticized for being too cognitive, lacking a spiritual dimension. The strand of transformational learning theory represented by Boyd and several other adult education scholars call for additional research of the spiritual dimensions of the transformational learning process (Boucoulas, 1993; Boyd & Fales, 1983; Boyd & Myers, 1988; Dirkx, 1997; 1998; MacPherson, 1996; McDonald, 1998; Miller, 1990; Scott, 1997; Taylor, 1998; Tremmel, 1993; Wacks, 1987). A spiritual approach toward understanding this process considers inner as well as outer influences; it is a holistic approach. Spiritual dimensions such as the unconscious, and the collective consciousness play vital roles in the transformational learning process. Boyd and Myers (1988) argue for greater consideration of the spiritual dimensions of transformation. Another response to reviews of Mezirow's (1991) predominantly rational theory is to view transformational learning from an Eastern viewpoint.

The perennial philosophies of the East, more specifically Buddhism and its practice through Insight Meditation, are approaches to transformative learning allowing us to step outside of our Western linear constructs regarding the nature of reality and that may be useful in gaining a deeper understanding of the spiritual dimensions of the transformation process and in developing ways to foster transformation. A review of the literature suggests several points of connection between the Western view of the transformational learning process and Insight Meditation: the spiritual dimensions, the unconscious, and collective unconscious; the importance of context, one's personal biography and history;

the "reflection" process, similar yet significantly different; and the aim of fostering maturity of thought, insights, and wisdom.

This phenomenological study is in progress at the time of this writing. Participants or co-researchers are accomplished meditators who teach Insight Meditation in adult education and health care settings. The researcher has practiced Insight Meditation for more than 10 years.

Preliminary findings suggest that Insight Meditation is a transformational learning process that is holistic in nature. It generally supports Mezirow's description of the transformational learning process; however, it goes beyond his largely cognitive description of the elements of the process and how perspective transformations come about.

Findings suggest that the Insight Meditation process includes the following elements: readiness factors, withdrawal from external stimuli, observing mind and body, social interaction, and developing a new relationship with self. The first element in this process is *readiness factors*, what leads co-researchers to their Insight Meditation practice. Several external factors and internal factors are identified.

Withdrawal from external stimuli is the second element in this transformational learning process. This element includes multi-day retreats away from daily activities and preparation for formal sitting meditation practice - a sitting posture, and an intention to quiet the mind and body.

Observing mind and body, the heart of this process, is the third element. It parallels Mezirow's critical self-reflection process, however differs significantly in that the process looks much deeper into the inner workings of the meditator's mind and body. Attention is focused at the most fundamental of levels. This process has two aspects operating simultaneously: focused awareness (concentration) and expanded awareness (mindfulness). Focused awareness is sitting and observing mind and body

phenomena such as the physical sensation of the breath without judgment or expectations. Expanded awareness of observing mind and body is observing whatever arises in consciousness, thoughts and emotions, with the added intention of inquiry.

As concentrated awareness strengthens and expanded awareness deepens, insights and wisdom arise. These insights have to do with knowing one's self on a deeper level, being more mindful or present in the moment, and open to other ways of knowing.

There are two aspects to *social interaction*, the fourth element of the Insight Meditation transformational learning process. First, dialoguing with others and interest groups helps to solidify and further clarify insights from formal sitting practice. Secondly, social interaction was viewed as an outgrowth and natural component of conscious living, that is, living a life of service to others. This is reflected in co-researchers' outlooks and career paths.

The fifth element of this transformational learning process is *developing a new relationship with self*, and hence with others and the environment (community, world, universe). This is the major transformation of the Insight Meditation process and is comprised of four aspects: knowing self, acceleration of normal development, other ways of knowing, and a sense of connectedness.

The primary mechanism for change is a deliberate, focused awareness on the inner workings of one's own mind and body. A new relationship to self emerges as one learns more about one's self; as normal development is accelerated, as one becomes responsive rather than reactive to people and

situations, as other ways of knowing and wisdom develops, and as a sense of connectedness emerges or is strengthened.

Understanding this process, its insights, and the new relationship to self, intellectually is often difficult because the process is subtle and personal. Understanding deepens as one does the practice. It's a matter of being, of experiencing; it's a different way of knowing that is experiential. However, this transformational learning manifests itself in daily living in many ways. Usually taking years, the process is gradual, iterative, and non-linear.

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