

Meditation and Early Recovery

Most Recovery Dharma meetings are meditation meetings. In practice, this means we sit together in silence for 20 minutes or so, and then we hold space to share, and somehow that is supposed to help us avoid the suffering of addiction. When we are first coming to this path, 20 minutes can seem like an eternity to be alone with our thoughts, unsure if we are even doing it right.

In the beginning, meditation is rarely enough to help with our addictions. Our bodies and minds require time to heal. Distance from the substances and behaviors we are trying to change does a lot of the heavy lifting behind the scenes.

When we are first starting out, the grooves of our old patterns run deep. A difficult situation may only look solvable with old solutions. Even if we sit every day, it can be hard to bring that calm to whatever life throws at us. Meditation is only part of the eightfold path, not the whole of it. Even the path itself is one part of a larger commitment that includes sangha, refuge, and time.

At some point in our practice though, our situation begins to shift. By watching the mind, we notice that our thoughts and feelings arise and fall away, regardless of whether we give them attention. And there is a gap of choice between an overwhelming situation and what used to feel like an inevitable desire to act on our old behaviors.

Wise understanding helps us see that everything has causes and conditions that led to its existence, including our own thoughts. With everything we perceive, whether it be sight, sound, touch, or thought, we must first make contact with it. The Pali word for this is phassa, or sense contact.

After this phassa, vedanā arises, often translated as feeling tone. This describes the mind's tendency to be drawn toward what we contacted, to push it away, or to remain neutral. This can be subtle, and it can be very difficult to separate the vedanā from what we do with it; often we can only figure it out after the fact.

But the story doesn't end with vedanā. Eventually we cling to an outcome (a thought, an action), and that is where we begin to suffer.

All of this happens constantly, so let's make it concrete with an example. Imagine standing in a grocery store line, and someone cuts in two people ahead of you. The eyes are drawn to them: that's contact. Almost immediately a feeling tone arises, unpleasant, probably. And then comes the reaction: the thought that's not fair, the heat rising in the chest, the impulse to say something.

And then the cycle starts again. The thought "I should say something" becomes its own contact. A new feeling tone arises around it. A new reaction follows. The chain doesn't run once; it runs continuously, each link generating the conditions for the next round.

Notice how fast it all moves. Without practice the contact, the feeling tone, and the reaction feel like one thing; with experience we can begin to separate the chain into the distinct moments they actually are.

It is worth exploring this in your own experience, to see if it happens for you. Thoughts that arise during meditation (and they always do) are a good opportunity to notice *vedanā*. You can even think back to old situations, or imagine new ones. Formal meditation is a good place to watch how the mind works without reaction, and to start to see *vedanā* as it manifests.

Awareness of the gap doesn't immediately remove the clinging. But over time, we start to see that craving is a conditioned response, and not the inevitable consequence it used to seem. That recognition is where the ability to choose enters, and where our karma is born.

A natural question arises here. If there was a gap of choice, does that mean we always had it and just kept choosing badly? Are we just guilty after all? The honest answer is no. The capacity to see the gap is new to us. It is something meditation can cultivate, not a faculty we always had and ignored. Our old patterns were too deeply worn and our seeing was too clouded. Practice gives us the ability to perceive what was previously moving too fast to see. The choice becomes available as the gap becomes visible.

Meditation alone won't stop our addictions. But over time, one of the fruits of sitting is to see clearly what once felt automatic, and to recognize that we do have a choice going forward.