

# What to Expect When You're Reflecting

Turning inward can help us reach out.

By [Stephen Schettini](#)

I can't count how many would-be meditators have come to me in despair and admitted that they just don't get it. [Meditation is beyond them](#), they say. Their minds are not suitable receptacles.

As a teacher I try to maintain a certain distance, but whenever this happens I want to jump up and hug these people—not out of consolation but from the pride of seeing them take their first baby steps, even if they don't know it. It's one of the great rewards of teaching to know they're turning tentatively inward. It makes all my efforts worthwhile.

If we judge the task by our initial, [naive view of meditation](#), then we're all doomed to be bad meditators. Like a child who conceives God as a white-bearded ancestor in the clouds, I first imagined that awakening was like going over Niagara Falls in a rush and that realising emptiness—*real*-ising it!—would transpose me instantaneously into some fantastical multidimensional universe. Such were my imaginings, and no doubt you have your own—perhaps simply that stopping the chatter is just a knack that you haven't yet mastered. What it all comes down to is that even if you practice meditation to become a paragon of love and wisdom, all it can do is put you face-to-face with who you are and with what is, which is where all meditation begins.

This realisation can be a little deflating, but by now you're accustomed to seeing disappointment as a learning opportunity—*right*? Well, it is. Why do you think the Buddha began his teaching career with the [Truth of Suffering](#)? If relaxation were the primary condition of life, nobody would care about what he or anyone else had to say. They'd be too busy having fun.

But it isn't, and so we sit and discover that the cause of stress is neither outside of us nor hidden in the inner chatter—it is the inner chatter. That's when my students come to me with their tails between their legs, and I rejoice—discreetly, for the feeling's never mutual.

The trouble is that as realisations go, this doesn't seem like much of one at all—more like a weight's fallen on your shoulders. You might even claim you want your ignorance back, but that's just old habits dying hard. The weight's always been there and you know it. This is just you facing the disorder of your own mind. With the realisation comes the workload.

The point is, we're all in the same boat. Born as we are in this human body, we can't escape the blessings and tortures of the human brain. From our first breath, we yearn for love and understanding in the most complicated ways imaginable. We find it most satisfying as we learn to give it. The ability to do this comes from acceptance of our frailties. By understanding the conditions of our own lives, we accept the conditions of others. [Compassion](#) is not condescension, but a levelling of the playing field, a recognition of yourself in others and an acceptance that their stress is your stress, that their happiness is your own. The gulf between us all is We're all faced with the same fundamental choice of calming the mind or letting it go its own scattered way. Leaving it to the caprice of unplumbed emotions leads to a life that's mysterious in all the wrong ways. Baffled by lack of control and thwarted hopes, we feel hard-done-by, retreat further into feigned self-confidence, and become immune to love. In fact, this is no choice at all. It's denial.

The alternative, the way through the brambles of self-deception, is old-fashioned, cold-blooded honesty. We're responsible for ourselves. No matter how hurt we feel and how much we deny it, we're driven by the need for love. We're all going to die but want to live life to the full. We're all afraid, but our attempts at security hem us depressingly in.

The Buddha's meditations lead us inward to unblock this resistance, but its results work in the opposite direction, pushing us to reach out to others and embrace life in all its unpredictable mystery. We become open to the creativity within and are freed to rediscover life as an adventure.

This is our full potential—unconditional, spontaneous love.



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