

# Introspektion und Psychotherapie

## Introspection and Psychotherapy

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### *Kurzzusammenfassung*

Introspektion bildet die Grundlage für die Entwicklung einer therapeutischen Beziehung und wirkt auf Psychotherapieprozess und -ergebnis. Das Erlernen introspektiver Methoden erfordert angewandte Lernprozesse auf der Basis eines Verständnisses ihrer zentralen Elemente. Im Sinne einer transkulturellen Vorgangsweise wurden in buddhistischen Kontexten schulenübergreifend benutzte, essentielle Trainingstechniken an Psychotherapeuten, Psychotherapiepatienten und Studierende unterrichtet und hierüber deren Selbstbezugsentwicklung, Emotionsregulation und Empathie untersucht. Während es die Vorgabe gradueller Lernprozesse ermöglichte über die in buddhistischen Meditationskontexten derzeit vorkommenden Stereotypenbildungen und Superimpositionen hinaus zu reichen, erlaubte die Nutzung qualitativer Methoden eine Analyse des Sprachgebrauchs der Probanden für die entsprechenden inneren Prozesse. Die Kategorisierung der Ergebnisse in *Trainingstechniken, essentielle Aspekte, transiente Erfahrungen, Effekte* oder *Integration* ermöglichen eine weitere Annäherung an die spezifischen Einflussfaktoren für introspektive Lernprozesse, die Quantifizierung einzelner Faktoren und Theoriebildung. Die differenzierten Ergebnisse in Selbstreferenzierung, Emotionsregulation und Empathie beinhalten Implikationen nicht nur für Psychotherapeuten und deren Patienten im Kontext klinischer Tätigkeit, sondern auch für die Psychotherapieausbildung und Psychotherapieforschung.

### *Schlüsselwörter*

Selbstreferenz, Introspektion, Psychotherapie, Meditation, Achtsamkeit, Vajrayāna, Graduelles Kognitives Training, Lernprozesse bei der Anwendung buddhistischer Meditationstechniken, Empathie, Emotionsregulation, Tibetischer Buddhismus, Mitgefühl

### *Abstract*

Introspection forms the basis for developing the therapeutic relationship and impacts on psychotherapy processes and outcomes. The acquisition of introspective methods requires a thorough understanding of their crucial elements and applied learning processes based thereon. By a transcultural approach, essential training techniques that are used beyond Buddhist philosophical schools and traditions were taught to psychotherapists, psychotherapy patients and students. Their development of self-reference, emotion regulation and empathy was investigated on this basis. Whereas the specification of gradual learning processes facilitated to go beyond stereotypes and superimpositions occurring in buddhist meditation contexts, the use of qualitative methods enabled for an analysis of the idioms employed by the subjects for the corresponding internal processes. The categorization of these results as training techniques, essential aspects, transient experiences, effects or integration allows for approaching the determinants of introspective learning processes, the quantification of specific factors and theory forming. Not only do these findings provide implications for psychotherapists and their patients within clinical settings, but also for psychotherapy education and research.

### *keywords*

self-reference, introspection, psychotherapy, meditation, mindfulness, Vajrayāna, gradual cognitive training, learning processes during the application of Buddhist meditation techniques, empathy, emotion regulation, Tibetan Buddhism, compassion

## 1 Introduction

Although introspection is a vital factor within psychotherapy for psychotherapists themselves as well as their clients, there is a research gap concerning the development of introspection. In this regard, some detailed and subtle methods and the respective theories on training progress are represented in the course of education in Buddhist philosophy, oral transmission and Tibetan medicine in their original language contexts. This approach to training, which is said to develop gradually on *five paths* and in the course of *ten stages* (Attersee, 2014, pp. 46-51), is based on an applied approach to learning rather than a mere accumulation of theoretical knowledge. However, due to the currently undifferentiated commercialization of terms and concepts, the elaborate and detailed gradual methods conveyed in this context have experienced severe inflation, which has deviated them considerably from the clearly defined concepts and enhancements provided from the emic perspective and its application-oriented learning processes.

## 2 Main part

Introspection may be considered a core element of psychotherapy. C.G. Jung indicated the relevance of knowledge imparted by Tibetan Buddhism when he described how the *Tibetan book of the death* had provided him with essential insights (Jung, in Evans-Wentz, 1953, pp. 13-54). In particular, in the context of psychoanalysis and depth psychological treatment, the attitude of introspection has been emphasized (Mertens, 2008, pp. 369-374; Kohut, 1977) and considered a methodical instrument. As introspection itself provides a necessary condition for applying other methods, it is appropriate to have a closer look at this important tool. That was approached by examining the systematic and gradual application of a few basic training elements for beginners. Some elements handed down by Buddhist philosophy, Tibetan medicine and oral instruction were first acquired not only on the basis of studying them in their original language, but also through the indispensable applied experience for developing an understanding, to then be taught. Thereafter, the psychotherapists, students and psychotherapy patients, who have been taught these core elements by an application-based approach, implemented them independently in accordance with the needs of each participant.

### 2.1 Objectives

The objective behind this mode of conducting research was to evaluate the training progress of the participants, based on their individual training of simple *śamatha techniques with any focus*, completed by some further instructions on how to apply and when to use further methods. These were chosen because they are common with all Buddhist traditions (Coleman and Jinpa, 2008, p. 649; Tsepak, 2003, p. 229) and easily applicable for beginners. This technique was regarded a basic means for developing internal processes exactly as they are described within emic perspective. And this perspective is well taken when Coleman and Jinpa defined meditation as a "disciplined mental process" (Coleman and Jinpa, 2008, p. 64, transl. from German: Anders).

The other methods provided referred in particular to developing the ability of *an observing perspective*, a *change of perspective* as well as to explanations of the methods of single and multiple focusing and interpreting various experiences and their further processing (Attersee Anders, 2016, 2017). The intended objective was to identify and analyze the phrases and terms used for resulting internal processes in order to capture mediators in those progressive proceedings and for factors to quantify as well as to explore the fields of application within psychotherapy.

## 2.2 *Methods*

### 2.2.1 *Methods of intervention*

The above mentioned intervention was taught to small groups of probands up to twenty persons and then practiced together and further explained on this basis. On the day following these explanations, the subjects trained on their own, according to their individual needs and experiences. All of them participated for a minimum of one month, some decided to continue practicing every day as well as to fill in the questionnaires with open questions after three and six months. Based on their actual daily exercise of an average of ten minutes, the individual training of these 86 persons was evaluated after one, up to three or six months. The students recruited by way of the Peer-To-Peer-Mentoring program at Munich University were given a certificate of participation for the months of their training as a gratification, which helped to keep the number of dropouts as low as possible.

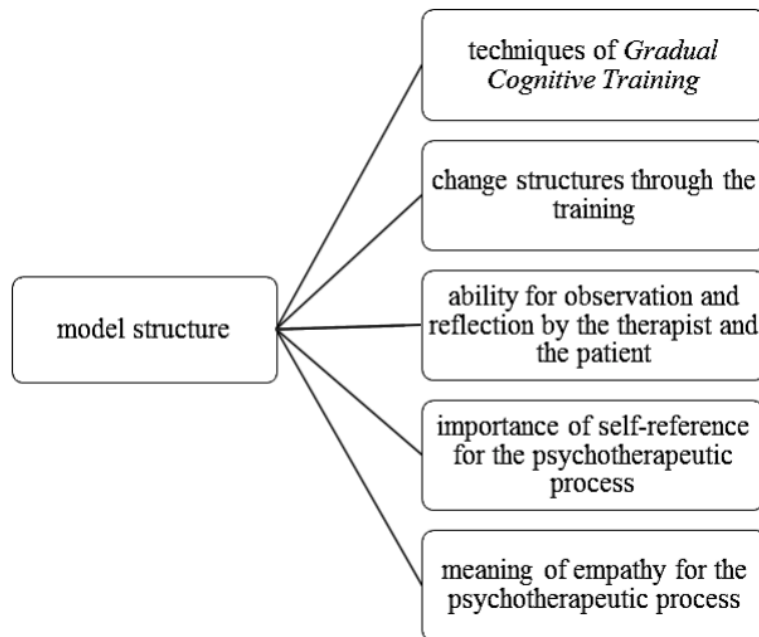
### 2.2.2 *Methods of research*

A qualitative approach was chosen to be able to determine the quality of experience in the subjects and assess some key elements relating to their wording. Relating these described experiences to the well-known terms and phrases in Tibetan and Sanskrit was culturally, psychologically and linguistically challenging. The quantitative approach, in turn, referred to factors on developing stability and strength in training techniques and especially on certain self-referential aspects, both of which were asked to be reported within a scale from 0-100%. That procedure has provided for answers to further research questions on self-reference, relaxation and chronic stress, which have been addressed elsewhere (Attersee Anders, 2016). After a brief overview of the theoretical background and some illustrations concerning the training techniques, the analysis and interpretation of the results of the qualitative investigation will be presented.

## 2.3 *Results*

### 2.3.1 *Background*

The following model structure can serve as a basis for an initial analysis of the respective aspects within psychotherapy processes (see Attersee Anders, 2017, p. 25, fig. 1):



Concerning the regular application of the training techniques, it was assumed that the process induced would lead to changes of structures and habitual patterns. This assumption is built on theories conveyed in Buddhist philosophy and corresponds well to the neurophysiological understanding of synaptic plasticity.

However, this is based on quite an individual training process whose specific characteristics the study design initially aimed at. Summarizing, it can be said that neurophysiological general knowledge and theories of Buddhist philosophy form the background of this theorization. The observational and reflective skills presented by the model can be assumed to be crucial trans-school aspects of psychotherapy in the sense of enabling for differentiation of the verbal or nonverbal communication required for healing processes. The development of self-reference, which is crucial for psychotherapist and client in many ways, was concluded from the procedures for acquiring the above mentioned skills. Although Buddhist traditions differ considerably in their emphasis on empathy and stages of empathic factors like *Bodhicitta*, the wish for liberation from suffering for the scope of everyone (Coleman and Jinpa, 2008, pp. 588-589; Tsepak, 2003, p. 183), empathy itself was assumed to occur on one's own, together with introspective training, for this kind of self-empathy is initially cultivated by merely allowing inner movements and needs to be perceived and observed nonjudgmental, to begin with. In this inner space the ability to empathize with others may show itself sooner or later.

To keep to the basics for beginners, however, the many available and sometimes quite complex techniques of empathy formation have not been explored further here. Following these conclusions, therefore, the application and skillful use of the techniques of training according to the individuals needs would lead to the development of self-reference. This, in turn, represents an essential factor in the analysis of transference and countertransference. If one concludes further, by focusing on the importance of self-reference for the psychotherapy process, it can be said that self-reference will have

a significant influence on the psychotherapy process and its outcome, especially together with the experience of empathy by the patient.

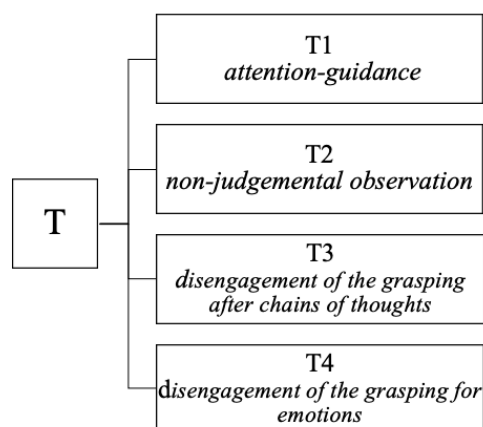
In sum, it can therefore be said that introspection in psychotherapy could be attributed with substantial implications for its further progression and outcome.

### 2.3.2 *Considering introspection with regard to the therapist and client*

Whereas the introspective abilities of the client form an essential basis for communication and respective processes within psychotherapy, the training of the therapist is crucial not only for the skill of observing and analyzing observations, transference and countertransference, but also for thus understanding and leading the process. Furthermore, the introspective abilities of psychotherapist and client will affect the quality of the therapeutic relationship, which is said to be of crucial importance for the therapeutic outcome (Barwinski, 2014, p. 2). In short, these introspective techniques were assumed to affect the quality of the therapeutic relationship via self-reference and empathy. Therefore, based on the formation of a self-referential theory from emic and psychological perspectives (Attersee Anders, 2016, pp. 37-139), the implications for the science of psychotherapy (Attersee Anders, 2017, pp. 353-356) may be understood to induce processes of healing through the means of changes of self-reference and reference to others. The following analysis starts with an initial overview of introspective techniques.

### 2.3.3 *Analyzing the introspective techniques*

To provide a clear foundation, four main introspective techniques were analyzed (see Attersee Anders, 2016, p. 129, fig. 16, modified):



*Attention-guidance* was based on an introspective direction and used for choosing the procedure with diverse objects of focus and deciding on training with one or more focus points. *Non-judgemental observation* refers to the mental activity to be performed thereafter. As the usual mental and emotional patterns may be weakened by disengaging from them, the following two forms of active disengagement were used: *disengagement from the grasping after chains of thoughts* and

*disengagement from the grasping after chains of thoughts*. The following list structures all the techniques which have been reported by the subjects in the above mentioned qualitative questionnaires (see Attersee Anders, 2017, p. 375):

<b>techniques of training</b>
1. <i>attention guidance [T<sub>1</sub>]<sup>1</sup>, techniques of attention guidance Abb. 7, directing attention [T] fig. 27, directing attention in the sense of maintaining [T] M<sub>2</sub></i>
2. <i>focusing [T] fig. 6</i>
3. <i>non-judgemental observation [T<sub>2</sub>] fig. 16</i>
4. <i>beyond judging [T] fig. 2</i>
5. <i>distancing [T] fig. 2</i>
6. <i>distanced observation [T] fig. 2</i>
7. <i>releasing cognitive and emotional grasping, releasing grasping [T]</i>
7.1 <i>disengagement from the grasping at (the chain of) thoughts [T<sub>3</sub>]</i>
7.2 <i>disengagement from the grasping at emotions [T<sub>4</sub>]</i>
8. <i>letting go [T] fig. 7, fig. 8, being able to release [T] fig. 12</i>
9. <i>introspection [T] fig. 8, fig. 9</i>
10. <i>concentration [T] fig. 8, fig. 13, increasing concentration [T] fig. 3</i>
11. <i>technique of training [T] fig. 12, increasingly subtle focus on objects, increasingly subtle focus [T]</i>
12. <i>releasing the focus [T]</i>
13. <i>breathing technique [T] fig. 8</i>
14. <i>directing the focus [T] fig. 27</i>
15. <i>single-point focusing [T] M<sub>3</sub>, maintaining a single focus [T] fig. 27</i>
16. <i>multiple focus [T] M<sub>4</sub></i>
17. <i>breathing focus (in case of stress) [T] fig. 11</i>
18. <i>through repetition effects are deepening [T] fig. 9</i>
19. <i>periods of rest [T] Abb. 9, daily periods of rest [T] fig. 7</i>
20. <i>intentional interruption of routines [T] fig. 10</i>
21. <i>limiting overwhelming stimuli [T] fig. 9</i>
22. <i>continuity [T] fig. 9</i>

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23. *abiding in in the present* [T] fig. 27

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24. *living for the moment* [T] fig. 9

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25. *self-improvement* [T] Abb. 2

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26. *developing the attitude of introspection* [T] M<sub>1</sub>

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27. *ability to alter perspectives (intra- and interpersonal)* [T]

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27.1 *intrapersonal change of perspective* [T]

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27.2 *change of perspective in the sense of putting oneself in someone's place* [T]

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27.3 *change of perspective in the sense of Tonglen - exchanging oneself with others* [T]

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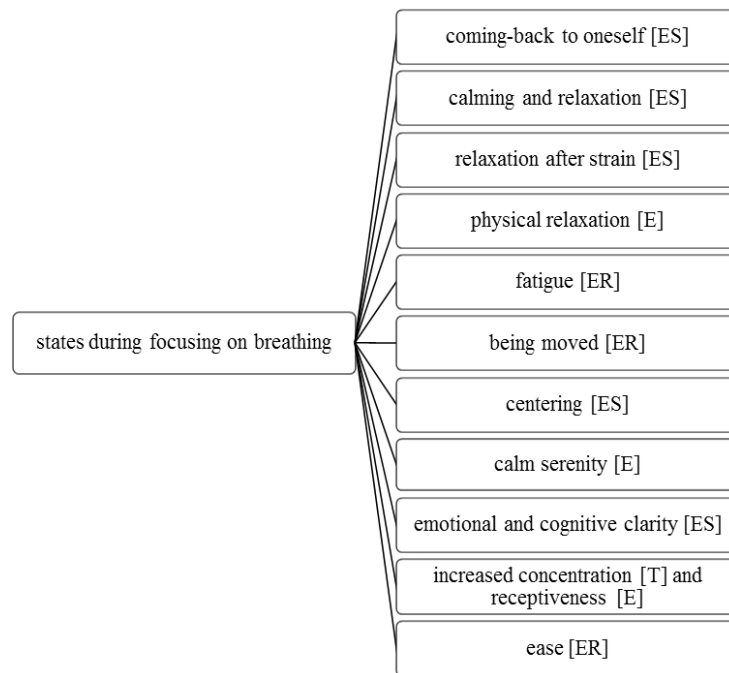
(1) for T<sub>1</sub>-T<sub>4</sub> and M<sub>1</sub>-M<sub>4</sub> see Attersee Anders, 2016.

In the instruction explaining the timing of and reasons for the use of these methods it was made very clear that trying to handle all of them simultaneously would make no sense. When at the day of exploring together people were still trying to start practicing with multiple focus before gaining any foundation and stability with single focus training, it became quite clear to themselves as well as to the group listening to their reports that this is pointless. After the application had been explained to the probands, each person has practiced independently according to individual estimation and needs. This special design was chosen in order to be able to understand the individual processes in the course of the introspective training and the corresponding terms used.

#### *2.3.4 Results on the condition when focusing on breathing*

When being asked about their condition when focusing on breathing, which was the technique they all started with, probands have described the following aspects (see Attersee Anders, 2017, p. 90, fig. 158):



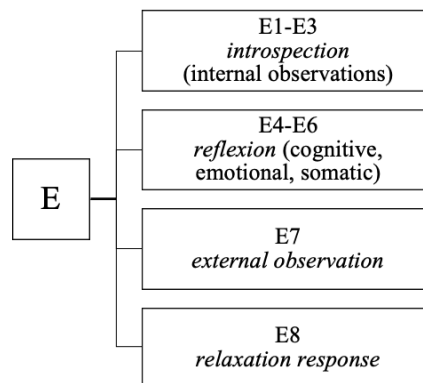


In the above presented figure all abbreviations in square brackets indicate the author's interpretation. Those analyzed with [T] were interpreted as actually being an enhancement of training techniques only, for example the *increase of concentration* in the above figure. Whereas those categorized with [ER] were interpreted to be just any *fluctuating experience*, [ES] was used to point out *essential aspects* having been successfully developed and leading further to *effects* [E]. [I] symbolizes *integration* and will be elaborated on later in the text. That is, the answers to the question on states during focusing on breathing varied from emphasizing the enhancement of a technique (*increased concentration*), to fluctuating experiences as well as to essential aspects and effects. The terms *being moved*, *fatigue* and *ease* were interpreted by the author to refer to rather fluctuating experiences [ER]. The phrases *centering*, *coming-back to oneself*, *calming and relaxation*, *relaxation after strain* and *emotional and cognitive clarity* were interpreted as essential aspects [ES]. And *increased receptiveness*, *physical relaxation* and *calm serenity* were interpreted as effects [E].

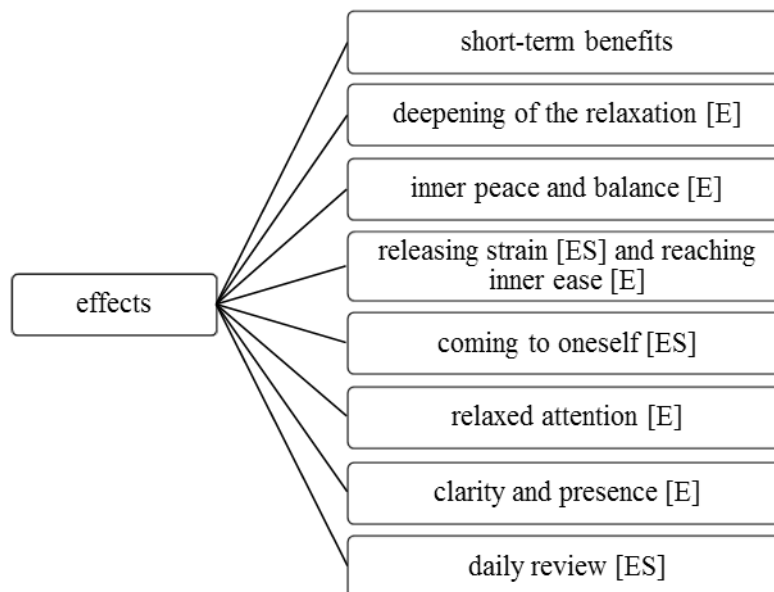
Therefore, based on choosing an appropriate timing and focus in using the techniques by the subjects, the results of the investigation allowed for a further categorization according to transient experiences, essential aspects and effects (Attersee Anders, 2017).

### 2.3.5 Results in terms of effects

A rather rough structuring regarding effects referred to internal and external observations referring to thoughts, emotions and body as well as reflecting on them. The basis for this was generally referred to as a relaxation response. (see Attersee Anders, 2016, p. 131, fig. 17, modified):



These factors were quantified and are found in the self-reference questionnaire (Attersee Anders, 2016, pp. 294-311). The actual training duration and frequency as well as the frequency of integration were assessed by means of additional questionnaires (Attersee Anders, 2016, pp. 291-293). After four weeks of training the probands mentioned the following effects having been developed by them (see Attersee Anders, 2017, p. 112, fig. 6):



Of all these replies to the question about effects of the training, *releasing strain* and *coming to oneself* were interpreted as being rather *essential aspects* [ES]. They may become important when making oneself aware of them and then transferring them specifically onto everyday activities, both of which may actually be found in the above context by the phrase *daily review*. The author argues that *essential aspects* [ES] impact on the *effects* [E] in some ways of their enhancement. The tags were used for some differentiation of categories, but were not always based on a straightforward procedure as it can be seen with *daily review*, which could be argued to be an essential factor itself for effects to take place as well as in terms of integration. Taking the phrase *daily review* as an example, it was tagged to be an *essential aspect*, because of effecting *integration* [I] as well as *effects* [E], whereas factors of high

relevance for integration were rather labeled as integrative factors [I]. This labelling procedure was necessary in order to be able to distinguish certain aspects from each other and to emphasize their importance in terms of theories on the subject of research. Furthermore, it was important for identifying quantifiable factors to be able to investigate further and in this way develop a sound scientific base of theory. From the above given list of effects described by the subjects, the following effects were also regarded as such by the author: *deepening of the relaxation, relaxed attention, reaching inner ease, inner peace and balance* as well as *clarity and presence*. Whereas in a traditional Buddhist context the majority of them would also be interpreted as being related to *Śamatha*, the last element possibly points to a progression into states referred to as *Vipaśyana* in that respective cultural context. The integrative aspect is covered by the Sanskrit term *Pr̥ṣṭhalabdha* referring to all states of mind in between training sessions. Beyond that, the following list of effects was compiled by the author on the basis of all responses by the subjects and then structured into main and subcategories (see Attersee Anders, 2017, p. 379):

<b>structures of effects</b>
1. <i>relaxation</i> (see "E8 relaxation response" in Attersee Anders, 2016, fig.17)
1.1 <i>general relaxation</i> [E] fig. 2, fig. 10
1.2 <i>relaxation</i> [E] fig. 7
1.3 <i>relaxed calmness</i> [E] fig. 2
1.4 <i>physical relaxation</i> [E] fig. 2, fig. 3
1.5 <i>calm attention</i> [E] fig. 6
1.6 <i>deepening of relaxation</i> [E] fig. 6
2. <i>calmness and serenity</i>
2.1 <i>inner calmness</i> [E] fig. 8
2.2 <i>reaching inner calmness</i> [E] fig. 6
2.3 <i>calm serenity</i> [E] fig. 3
2.4 <i>serenity</i> [E] fig. 7
2.5 <i>inner calmness and balance</i> [E] fig. 6, <i>evenness</i> [E] fig. 8
3. <i>self-referential aspects</i>
3.1 <i>aspects of self-reference</i> [E] fig. 5, fig. 9
3.1.1 <i>using observational ability</i> [E] fig. 2
3.1.2 <i>increasing reflectivity</i> [E] fig. 43.1.1
3.1.3 <i>integrating observation and reflection skills</i> fig. 33

3.2 <i>finding-yourself</i> Abb. 33
3.3 <i>being yourself</i> Abb. 33, <i>coming to be yourself</i> [E] fig. 7
3.4 <i>developing presence</i> Abb. 33
3.5 <i>inner calmness and balance</i> [E] fig. 6
3.6 <i>self-reliance</i> [E] Abb. 2
3.7 <i>improved processing/increasing receptivity</i> [E] fig. 3
3.8 <i>clarity and presence</i>
3.8.1 <i>clarity</i> [E] fig. 6
3.8.2 <i>presence</i> [E] fig. 6, fig. 10

The effect of *relaxation* response was also evaluated by means of the standardized psychological questionnaire *ASS-SYM* (Krampen, 2006a, Krampen, 2006b) and revealed a highly significant relaxation effect after only one month of about ten minutes of daily training (Attersee Anders, 2016, pp. 170-172). The topic *calmness and serenity* is definitely expected for an authentic training in *Śamatha with focus*. The *self-referential aspects* mentioned by the probands were further analyzed to cover three subgroups within the category of *aspects of self-reference* consisting of 1. *using observational ability*, 2. *increasing reflectivity* and 3. *integrating observation and reflection skills*, all of which have been extracted from diverse figures and therefore diverse questions to the subjects. Besides, whereas the following subcategories were structured to also show referral to oneself: *finding-yourself*, *being yourself*, *self-reliance* and *improved processing/ increasing receptivity*. For a comparison, the subcategories of *inner calmness and balance*, *developing presence* as well as *clarity and presence* may have to do with the clarity aspects, which in the respective Buddhist cultural contexts are rather attributed to *Vipāśyana*.

### 2.3.6 Results in terms of integration

Not only will the training itself be further improved by integrating its developed aspects into everyday activities its developed aspects, but it becomes even more profound and enhanced. This may be due to synaptic plasticity, the deliberate interruption of habitual patterns and the acquired understanding of the subject. Based on such theoretical considerations, some questions about integration were presented to the probands in the questionnaire (Attersee Anders, 2017). Of all the answers on *integration* (Attersee Anders, 2017, pp. 117-119), the following statements have been categorized to belong to either *training techniques*, *transient experiences*, *essential aspects* or *effects*. Some major *areas of application* were also mentioned, which are therefore listed separately and should be interpreted according to an understanding of the group of subjects, many of which were university students. The following table shows the areas for integration according to the above given categorizations (see Attersee Anders, 2017, p. 383):

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**training techniques**


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1. *suspending* [T]

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2. *introspection* [T]

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3. *breathing technique* [T]

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4. *concentration* [T]

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5. *breathing focus during strain* [T]

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6. *systematic interrupting of familiar sequences* [T]

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7. *releasing* [T]

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**transient experiences**


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*experiencing ease* [ER]

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**essential aspects**


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1. *self-reference* [ES]

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2. *creation of restfulness* [ES]

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3. *remaining in concentrated resting* [ES]

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4. *staying-to oneself* [ES]

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5. *emotion regulation* [ES]

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6. *awareness of oneself* [ES]

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7. *focusing during stress* [ES]

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**effects**


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1. *relaxation* [E]

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2. *inner calmness* [E]

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3. *evenness* [E]

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4. *presence* [E]

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**areas of application**


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1. *emotion regulation* [I]

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2. *changed stress handling* [I]

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3. *application for examination situations (students)* [I]

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The five groups found under *integration* cover seven *techniques of training*, which are: *suspending*, *introspection*, *breathing technique*, *concentration*, *breathing focus during strain*, *releasing* and, in the

sense of rather an advanced method, the *systematic interrupting of familiar sequences*. *Experiencing ease* was interpreted as being a *transient experience* only. This kind of development can often be observed with a deepening of and extending the *Śamatha* into states, which present any of the many types of *Samadhi* (Tsepak, 2003, p. 105). Although only transient, the latter tend to be mistaken for 'enlightenment' by people lacking key instructions, and from etic perspectives and because they generally provide a pleasant overall sensation. That is, although they are simply approachable, based on the stabilization and expansion of *Śamatha*, they are likely to be considered to be something extraordinary and therefore are interpreted as being somewhat unusual. That is why a combination of in-depth study and applied supervised experience is regarded a necessary condition for teaching in responsible ways within that field of knowledge. Moreover, it is precisely for this reason that the awareness of the individual is crucial for recognizing the key points of training. Distinguishing and understanding them are seen as being vital for progress. Beyond the above given systematization of answers according to a few subgroups, however, *integration* itself can also be regarded as a facilitating factor for both *essential aspects* and *effects*. Moreover, having discovered the relevance of these exercises individually, then this itself may become an encouraging feedback to continue. In particular, through the repetition of impulses in everyday life the plasticity changes of the brain through meditation training, which Williams (2010) spoke about, might thus be developed. This may refer to a repeated induction of a vagotonic state (Attersee Anders, 2016, p. 117) and its impact. Furthermore, one of the psychotherapy references is the neurophysiological effects that Madert emphasized referring to synergetics: until the "energetic activation of the system" is "transformed into a new state" (Madert, 2007, p. 264, translated from German: Anders). Given the importance of introspection for psychotherapy and the availability of systematized knowledge of the subject, the disentangling of the core aspects of introspective practice from cultural confinements allowed for the analysis of its effectiveness in a different cultural context. The systematization and categorization of the participants' responses concerning *training techniques*, *essential aspects*, *transient experiences*, *effects* or *integration* and their subcategories was intended to allow for a better understanding of influencing factors and learning processes and aimed at the development of theoretical understanding.

### 3 Conclusions

This research on learning introspective methods was based on introducing applied learning. The objective was to gain an inner and explicable understanding by applying the training techniques rather than accumulating terms lacking the inner meaning of experience. The findings emphasize the vocabulary of the probands who tried this systematic and gradual application, although theoretical knowledge of the models presented in Buddhist philosophy formed the background for the investigation and interpretation of the probands' statements. The self-reference aspects and emotion regulation are outcomes which seem to be well applicable in clinical settings and psychotherapy. As introspection is a crucial element in psychotherapy far beyond the confines of single psychotherapy schools, the results of the investigation can be used for further investigation on introspection in the context of psychotherapy research. Therefore, its impact refers to the methods for training in introspection for psychotherapy.

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