

# Writing-meditation or Meditation-writing: Guiding Trauma on a Path to Meaning

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Imagine bullets whizzing by, helicopters overhead firing at peaceful protesters, and paratroopers landing on the roofs of universities; imagine the police in tandem with political party goons chasing unarmed civilians with machetes and semi-automatic weapons; imagine thugs coming to your home, turning everything upside down, threatening your family, demanding that they hand you over. Or imagine being a fugitive from an invisible law that condemns any challenges to authority, and condones hanging a human being upside down and beating them, chained to the doctrines of disempowerment, discrimination, and despair. Imagine smelling the tear gas and tasting the saline drops of revolution rolling down your cheeks and into your lips.

Exiled from rights; exiled from liberty and destiny, this was the waltz with death we danced since 2009 in Bangladesh with a regime that would not hesitate to mow down thousands of its citizens. The government finally fell on August 5th, 2024 or, as the students are calling it, July 36th, 2024. The tears have not yet dried nor have the pebbles on the unmarked graves sung the song of heroes. Although the battle has been won, the war rages on.

Revolution is no utopia; chaos persists; uncertainties struggles sustain. I imagine the students and the masses whose sacrifices brought on this much-desired change have struck a chord in this uncanny opera of euphoria and agony; from distancing from the past but never forgetting it; to ushering in a new era of hope forged in the crucible of ideals and experiences; to generating new ideas on freedom, democracy, and unity, divorced from the darkness of populism, extremism, and exclusion.

Under such circumstances, what is one to do, either as a teacher or as a student? Various forms of violence – political, social, economic, institutional, moral, and ethical – are part of our everyday lives no matter where we are. And how does one feel, when you are no longer there to witness the current situation but can only observe from afar? Amid all these unforeseen events unforeseen, on August 31st, I left Bangladesh to study in Vienna. As a teacher and a student, I ask myself this

question: how do I escape the ruminations about what was, what is, and what will be? How do you facilitate learning among students who were at the forefront of a successful popular uprising, some of whom have seen family members, friends, and colleagues battered, bloodied, or blinded? Some of them are injured themselves. How do you ask those students to forget or, at least, put aside the events still fresh in their memories, to take up pen and paper? I propose meditation-writing or writing-meditation.

This essay is an experiment in approaching freewriting as a meditative experience. Whether you call it meditation-writing or writing-meditation depends on whether you emphasize writing or meditating. For me, meditation happens simultaneously as I write. It helps me cope with the intrusive thoughts that hinder not just learning but keeping up with life after witnessing the horrors I have seen over fifteen and a half years. Turning with the wheels of time means understanding that there is so much I cannot control. The only thing I can control is how I experience them. When I feel a complete loss of agency, I write-meditate or meditate-write and watch my thoughts and emotions unfold in the present as an epic of experience. The practice has helped me cope with the trauma of the recent past, and I hope that customizing it (as appropriate to the context) as a class practice will help both instructors/facilitators and students process their intrusive thoughts. Although there are a few principles to this practice, they need not be rigid. Remember, it is about individuating the flow of your natural rhythm of writing. Fluency is not a concern. If writing comes easy, great! If you feel like you must nudge and jolt and grind and squeeze the words on a piece of paper, even better! The latter, I imagine, is the experience of most of us. The key is to pay attention to the memories, thoughts, and emotions as you are writing.

In the following paragraphs, I will first describe a few ideas on how I meditate-write or write-meditate. Then, I will share a traumatic experience from 2018 and a two-paragraph piece that I revisited multiple times, trying to give the memories a shape or a structure. Next, I will delineate the patterns of thought I now follow in writing-meditation or meditation-writing to process the raw, unstructured emotions from recent events and bring myself back to the here and now. To do so, I give myself prompts to engage the five senses – to write about what I see, hear, touch, taste, and smell in the moment. Finally, I will discuss a strategy to implement meditation-writing or writing-meditation in class.

# 1 PRINCIPLES

How do you meditate-write or write-meditate? The process is akin to “stream of consciousness” writing, when you navigate your feelings and approach a way to come to terms with intrusive thoughts induced by trauma. You should not set a goal for yourself to heal, just pencil in your emotions and keep looking at them until they subside. Healing is a process that can take many years, but it begins, for me, the very moment I start writing and stop being afraid of the intrusive, disturbing emotions on a page. You learn first to respond, not react, to the external realities – to the stimuli that surround you. You engage with your senses, note what you can see, hear, touch, taste, and smell (in no particular order), and by noting, you notice that everything happens inside you. Finally, you put down what you feel and withhold all judgment (or reaction). Accept that you *cannot* change the past, no one *can*. What you can do is recognize the memories, thoughts, and feelings that are in your mind and be kind to them.

You take deep breaths: inhale and exhale. Pay attention to your breathing and feel your heart get lighter by degrees. Keep writing; do not stop! As you write, you let the past and the present, the external and the internal, the imagined and the real feelings interact and morph into self-compassion. By externalizing through the words you write, you accept the presence of psychological tremors that reverberate from the past. You gradually shift your mindset toward acknowledging that they are a part of you. You learn to live with them and approach letting go. Letting go is not an act of erasure; it is the flowing of a stream and watching the mist of experience flow up. It is a peaceful coexistence with what you are trying to let go of; deriving meaning *from it* or assigning meaning *to it* so the thoughts and feelings are no longer invasive.

To meditate in and through writing, we could first put aside the notion that we can sit in the lotus position and force meditation on ourselves. The workings of our minds tend to be counterintuitive. If I tell you, for instance, “Don’t think about an apple!” What are you thinking about? If you announce in a class: “TODAY WE WILL MEDITATE,” it is unlikely that anyone will do it. It becomes doubly difficult when one is going through post-traumatic stress. The point of meditation is to relieve stress, not augment it. Simply put, meditation is the observation of thoughts, feelings, and emotions, and using observation to distance oneself from the intrusive thoughts, feelings, and emotions. This is how I tried to process the brutalities we witnessed on the streets, in torture cells, and even in private homes invaded by ruling-party henchmen of the now-fallen regime. Let me give you a personal experience, a piece of writing that I tried to structure over myriad attempts, so you might approach a similar frame of mind.

## 2 A STRUCTURED PIECE OF MEDITATION-WRITING OR WRITING-MEDITATION

The door of a van thudded shut on August 3, 2018. “If you don’t want to disappear, don’t make a sound,” my abductors kept barking. Hung upside down in short bursts throughout the night in a dark torture cell, beaten from the ankles to the small of my back, the questions they asked repeatedly were: “Who’s the leader?” “Are you a leader?” “How many leaders?” “What’s the plan?” “Where are they going next?” I did not know; no one did! In fact, that was the point. “He’s useless,” one of them conceded in the wee hours of the morning. With my hands tied behind my back, blindfolded, I was dropped about thirty yards from home. “We know where you live,” no one told me. They didn’t have to; the silent message designed to deafen (or deaden) my conscience and consciousness hurt more than my legs, which limped over the next six months. “*We know where your family lives!*” They simply could not fathom that a leaderless, spontaneous, and self-organized mass protest could cause such an international ruckus; all they needed to quash it was a head to cut off.

What got me inside the van? On 29 July 2018, two college students were flattened on the Airport Road by a public bus. Though such “accidents” are a daily staple for Dhaka-dwellers, the students erupted on this occasion because of Shah-jahan Khan’s (the then Minister of Shipping and simultaneously the President of Bangladesh Road Transport Workers Federation) laughing response: “A road crash has claimed 33 lives in India’s Maharashtra; but do they talk about it the way we do?” Subsequently, schoolchildren, sixth to tenth graders, took to the streets by hundreds of thousands, maintaining discipline hitherto unforeseen. Emergency lanes opened up for the first time in over forty-seven years of the independent Bangladeshi capital’s existence, this in a city where patients inside ambulances suffer and die unattended in traffic jams. Seeing on social media that children were skipping school to “repair the State” in the rain that was intermittently bursting through the scorching sun, I thought of bringing them some food. As soon as I arrived at the Mirpur-10 circle, I was blinded by a sack over my head and put into a van. Admitted to the hospital, the slow ticking of time weighed heavily on my mind.

How did I escape the trauma of this ordeal? I didn’t. It is still here. Escaping grief is not the point, I learned. You make whatever meaning you can out of it and put it aside, gently, momentarily, until it rears its head again. Thoughts are intrusive, and so are the emotions associated with them. Sympathy can make a world of difference, and one learns to find it within. Sitting in class in Vienna, I find myself haunted by the memories of the recent past (July and August 2024). I let the thoughts come; I let the tears glide, not outwardly of course. I do not understand

but I accept, for pain cannot be blocked. “One must feel it to heal it,” or at least, process it.

How do I look past these thoughts and concentrate in class? Mindfulness and writing-meditation or meditation-writing help: whenever I get a chance, I jot down some thoughts on a piece of paper. Most of the time, they look like a series of questions and answers. It is a practice that mingles the past with the present. At the end of the exercise, I feel I can focus more on the present.

In the following paragraphs, I offer an example, an excerpt of the exercise in meditation-writing. Disclaimer: the writing is unpolished and unstructured, raw and emotional, stream of consciousness-style. It contains a few disjointed memories, thoughts, and feelings I jotted down between September 21 and 23, 2024. There is no fixed structure. Future iterations of this should adapt to the context and purpose. I set no goals to heal nor to find meaning in an experience. I gave myself the prompts and tried to engage the five senses. If you are patient and read carefully, you will see that the past and the present freestyle their way into cohabitation – at times, via humor. Though it is haunted by memories, the thoughts revolve around the desire to return to the present and do the work that is due. This is what meditation-writing is meant to achieve.

### 3 AN UNSTRUCTURED PIECE OF WRITING-MEDITATION OR MEDITATION-WRITING

*Question*

What do you see?

*Answer*

I see the branches of the tree next to my room dancing in the breeze. I do not know the name of the tree. The rays of the sun bounce off the foliage. I see the anguish in people's faces, the terror of uncertainty. The masses in protest undulate with the waves of time. I see the injured dragged off to the hospital. Hope seeps through the tension so palpable you can cut it with a knife. I see numbers add up as the cashier slides the bread and the salad across the counter. I see my parents at the airport. The look of forlornness that never fails to sing the song of love. Lost in all the forgotten faces, I look for Sisyphus as he rolls the boulder up the mountain. I watch myself watching fear: the sack over my face; the sack that keeps me from seeing. I stare at one of the 389 pages I must read this weekend. I watch the words on a screen. They hardly make sense. Incomprehensibility is a gift that keeps on giving!

*Question*

What do you hear?

*Answer*

I hear the leaves rustling in the wind. I hear the breeze rolling off the concrete. I hear the bells toll from churches: "For whom the bell tolls?" I hear students chant: "We want justice!" I hear my neighbor hum his prayers and a voice in panic from the past: "*Don't come home! They are coming for you!*" The voice, all too familiar for saying, "Where are you, son? It's getting late!" every time I stayed on campus past 20:00. The same voice, so far now; defamiliarized. Birds coo, machetes clang, clocks chime. Gunshots ring hollow. Suddenly the voice in the tram jolts me awake: "Schrankenberggasse." It's time to get off! I hear the goodbyes at the airport: "You'll be with us even when you're not!" I don't hear the pilot making the announcement; all I hear is my anxious breathing pulling up my chest, pushing it down – the constant push and pull that sustains universal suffering. I hear Sisyphus' boulder rolling down the mountain. I get Speechify to read the words to me; nineteen minutes later: "Oh, I get it! One down, 388 more to go!"

*Question*

What do you touch?

*Answer*

I touch the paper on which I am writing. The color is white, the texture is smooth, a bit rough around the edges. I don't write history; history changes. I notice the ink dry, and it speaks of countless feelings that remain just beyond my fingertips. The palms touch each other, they shiver like a lone leaf in a draught. I feel my cheeks

and remember the first time my nephew caressed them and said, “*Kaka* (uncle)!” How fast he has grown! I touch the silk scarf that reminds me of the sari I gave to my mother for Eid. “Oh, why?” She pretended I shouldn’t have, but I know her too well. She will never wear it but snuggle it just to fool herself that I’m still there. The warmth of a hug! I touch the ash: all they left of my books when they “*came for me*.” I touch the specks of dirt that have deposited on the panels of my computer and see them trickle onto the dustpan. Through the screen, I want to touch the readings I need to do in a day and a half: “381 pages to go!” I touch Sisyphus’ boulder. “You can have it,” he says. “Thanks! But, no, thanks!”

*Question*      What do you taste?

*Answer*      “I love the taste of coffee in the morning! Smells like victory!” – a joke too good to pass up! Oops, coffee is gone! No coffee on Sunday; everything is closed! How will I get through the day? I taste the taste of mother’s cooking. She gave me the recipe, wrote down every step with surgical precision and meticulous detail. I tried it; why does it taste exactly the opposite? Gasping for breath, I taste the soggy sack over my head. “Did you ever wash it?” I wanted to ask. I taste the words that ricochet off my tongue. Nineteen minutes per page times 377 pages equals 7,163 minutes. That is almost 298 days! It’s only 7:58. The night is still young. I’ll start reading at half past eight. Let me call home. Ah, it’s almost midnight there. They’re all asleep! What does Sisyphus eat? Where does he get all the energy? “To find that out, you need to shoulder my boulder,” he says. Time to start reading again; wait, let me make a sandwich first.

*Question*      What do you smell?

*Answer*      This will be tricky, for I have just come home from the Vienna Central Cemetery. It was chilly and rainy; I can hardly feel my nose. Even with a stuffed nose, you can smell the cold as the raindrops pierce your face like a thousand pellets. Okay, let’s try to do this. Spraying perfumes in the perfume class back home made me feel like a kid in a candy store! The air, drenched in fragrance! So excited to hear what the students smelt, thought, and visualized. There was another class in the same room immediately after we finished; it’s a wonder what they must have felt! I can smell the Attar transfer like a magical osmosis from father’s fingers to the prayer beads he flicked through. I wish I could smell the beautiful flowers in bloom at the Cemetery; how death begets life! I wish the readings I must do today gave off an aroma or a stench I could recognize, memorize, and internalize. I smell the tear gas and how it makes the protests grow stronger in number, in courage, and in faith. I smell the

molecules of the spray paint on armored vehicles sew revolution in patches: the whiff that makes fear disappear! Sisyphus, do you ever put aside your boulder and smell the sideritis? Enough rolling! Come, take my arm. Let's walk together through the labyrinths of the pages to read.



## 4 THOUGHTS ON STRATEGIES FOR IMPLEMENTATION

Now that we have seen an example of writing-meditation or meditation-writing, the question is: how do you implement it in class? I had no chance to try it out. The classes had not resumed before I left for Vienna. I imagined asking one of the questions mentioned above (engaging the senses) in each class and requesting every student to read out at least an excerpt from their response. In a class size of fifteen students or less, meditation-writing or writing-meditation can take up to fifty minutes. If there are twenty-five or more students in a class, the practice of reading out loud the responses of each question by all the participants could span over two sessions. True, it would take up a lot of time. It is, however, time worth taking to allow each individual to individuate the rhythm of writing. It will also free up the space for each participant to develop compassion for themselves and each other.

Since the instructors would be asking the students to write about their vulnerabilities, if the instructors/facilitators take the lead and show their own vulnerabilities to initiate meditation-writing or writing-meditation – at least in the first few classes (after a major traumatic event) – it would help the students to overcome inhibition and write freely. Whether the responses should be discussed would be decided by the class as a whole. The instructor will, of course, take precautions to moderate the discussions to prevent any hurtful remarks.

It could also be useful for instructors to mention that this exercise can help us be present with the past so we can be present here and now at will and without the intrusion of memories, thoughts, or emotions. A crucial step in developing self-compassion is to keep reminding ourselves that trauma is both individual and universal. An effective way to process the aftershock is to develop compassion for oneself and others. For compassion to be planted and disseminated in a community of learners with similar experiences, one should not be afraid to share the writings in class. One may also choose to revisit and polish the streams of thought simultaneously as they write, or at a later point. Revisiting and/or polishing the written-meditation can help in the process of finding meaning in traumatic experiences and memories. Meaning could arise out of the realization that all our experiences, including thoughts and feelings, make up who we are. It is the recognition of life, for life is experiential. In time, it is my hope, writing-meditation or meditation-writing can, if not silence the whizzing of bullets and rumbling of helicopters, then make them less noisy.