

RECOGNIZING, REFRAINING, RETURNING

The purpose of Zen practice is to awaken the real self, and to live openheartedly, grounded in reality. As the last line of the Practice Principles says, “Being just this moment, compassion’s way.”

This requires cultivating present-moment awareness, as well as seeing how our skewed perceptions and ego-filters block reality. This in turn shows us that we’re not who we’ve taken ourselves to be: we’re far from limited to our body, drama, skill set and personality style. A more spacious, inclusive sense of self starts to awaken, and we find that there’s plenty of room to encompass whatever delusions and confusion arises, and to see through it clearly and objectively.

However, an interesting phenomenon often occurs when we discover how incomplete and inaccurate our old me-self is. It goes into high gear, as if the inclusive self that’s emerging is a threat. So, up comes resistance, and perhaps the fear that practice is too hard, the script of the ego trying to stay in charge. This is predictable, even if we know that, as the Practice Principles tell us, “staying caught in this self-centered dream” – sometimes closer to a nightmare - blocks the genuine happiness of waking up to what our life truly is.

The ingredients in our ego combo-plate of selfhood seem to be the main barriers to equanimity and compassion: self-images, attitudes, and behaviors. Some familiar ones are: clinging to old negative self-images; focusing on what’s wrong; blaming others for how we feel; dwelling in hopelessness; being easily bugged or dissatisfied - what’s yours?

We know that it isn’t refreshing or healing to dwell on these things, yet our relationships, work experience, and even Zen involvement are often impacted by them. These familiar patterns might seem comforting in the short term, yet over time our suffering escalates.

Because our ego-identity is so persistent, equally persistent efforts are required to wake up. We need to distinguish between *tender efforts*, which are gentle and persevering, and *tough efforts*, which are closer to struggle, and can worsen the fatigued attitude that's already on board. One helpful *tender effort*, when the old mind tries to take over, is *recognizing, refraining and returning*: *recognizing* our patterns, *refraining* from indulging them unconsciously, and *returning* to the unfolding moment.

Here's how it works: bring to mind some painful attitude or reaction that you know blocks openness and increases disconnection. Is it closer to fear, sadness, the anger family, or something else? Do you know the main thoughts that hold this pattern in place? This is *recognizing*.

Now for *refraining*. After *recognizing* the pattern, we make a conscious decision not to let it keep running, either inwardly as thoughts, or outwardly in words or actions. This isn't denial or repression, because we're conscious of what we're refraining from indulging, through *recognizing*.

Immediately after *refraining*, we *return*, coming back to the physical reality of the present moment:

- First, feeling any physical residue or discomfort that's present in the wake of the disconnecting pattern. Check for a body sensation that you'd like to avoid, and feel into it for a few breaths. If nothing stands out, sense the overall body feeling.
- Next, feel the *breathing sensations*, and let them provide company for any unwanted physical feelings that remain.
- Now, include the *environmental ambience*, feeling the air temperature, and allowing the sounds in all directions to invite awareness to open into the spaciousness that's always right here.

Now we're back in the moment, with the dual-awareness checkpoints of breathing and environment to remind us of what's present, even if it has been tuned out.

Sometimes intense or painful things arise. When this occurs, we can put the reactions on "call waiting" for the time, and gently let

the unpleasant bodily feelings that remain be felt, along with the breath, in the chest center -- the heart's breath – and then *return*, as above.

Recognizing, refraining and returning is a wakeful alternative, whenever some familiar pattern tries to pull us away from reality. We know that when we try to stuff it, or “just let go”, it backfires, and the painful things will soon be back with a vengeance – a bit like a small child who has been ignored for too long – and what's needed is compassionate attention. *Recognizing, refraining and returning* can be engaged for a short time on our meditation seat, or in brief pauses during daily life.

With some practice, the process allows old conditioning to dissolve into the mix of breath and environment. As things begin to flow together in experiential awareness, we sense the physical and spatial interconnectedness of life, without needing words like nonduality or oneness. So instead of being tempted to *think* our practice, we can experience life straight.

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