



## The Realm of Practice (Part I)\*

By Rodney Smith

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Our species has been waging an internal and external struggle since we first appeared on the plains of Africa. In the beginning our mostly external struggle had to do with escaping the countless predators. We adapted by learning to think ahead of ourselves. Language was the first survival mechanism that evolved; the ability for abstract thought and reasoning followed.

Today our internalized need to struggle remains even though our predators disappeared long ago. Struggle reconfigures itself in psychological terms as a free-floating insecurity. This insecurity needs an object to confirm its reality, and so we develop a list of imaginary predators. We feel we still have enemies, so we find them – whether in Islamic “terrorists,” the economic threat of China, the neighbor with a barking dog, or our own thoughts and emotions. Nothing is really wrong with us. The feeling is just a remnant of our primordial selves.

Faced with this onslaught of perceived attacks, we fall back into survival mode and try to think our way through. But while thought works well enough to establish a plausible defense, it cannot see beyond its logic to the origin of the feeling that something is wrong. Though many of us have tried, we cannot think our way out of any emotion, much less one that is genetically inscribed. When we see the world as a divided landscape between friends and enemies, the emotion of insecurity becomes our organizing worldview, and suspicion and anger inevitably follow. We go into survival mode, which distorts reality to create our perceptions of isolation and separation, further activating the survival reflexes of fear and desire.

Our need to think our way through each obstacle complicates it all. Although it has been of great value in providing for and protecting ourselves in the world, the thinking mind affects how we see and perceive that very world. Thoughts establish the central thinker. The sense of someone thinking creates the “someone” who needs to be defended and fed. The thinker now generates a narrative full of survival stories with accompanying fears and desires. All this thinking, struggle, and insecurity, which have been encrypted into our DNA, make us – first and foremost – a formed entity. With this disposition, we start our spiritual journey weary and battle-worn, confused, and frightened.

There are many stages on this journey that can be grouped and ordered in various ways. This article describes seven common stages, from initial curiosity and enthusiasm through self-judgment, determined effort, insight, active discernment, discovery of the sacred, and ultimately surrender. The article is divided into two parts. This part discusses the first four stages; the second, to be published in the next newsletter, will address the final three.

### The Stage of Inflated Enthusiasm

Given our history, we can see why we experience so much turbulence when we begin to look within. Our unconscious mind is filled with the primordial beasts, both real and imaginary, and our genetic conditioning is to fight or flee. We stay in constant movement, alternatively avoiding and pursuing fears

and desires while shadow boxing imagined threats. But whether we are escaping or resisting, the primary tool we use to sustain ourselves through it all is our thinking mind.

A glimpse of a possibility that offers relief from this turmoil launches our spiritual journey. We hear a talk, read a book, or deeply sense something that is foreign to the struggle we know so well. Something calls us beyond ourselves toward a mystery that reprioritizes everything. It provides a context for our suffering, but we have no way to package this information. Although it does not fit neatly within the context of how we have been living, this calling will not go away. Something has been ignited within us, but we do not know what to do with it.

This first glimpse of another life is a fleeting view of the transcendent formless realm. It is a foretaste of the sacred. The spark awakens a knowledge that transcends the genetic conditioning of our past, but we remain deeply confused about where the sacred lies and what we need to do to access it.

This happened to me when, by chance, I went to a lecture by a spiritual teacher. Something in me knew that what he was saying was true even though I did not fully understand the content of his message. The change in me was more dramatic than in most. Overnight I became a vegetarian, and began a yoga, pranayama, and an intensive meditation practice. At one point, without any training or support, I confined myself to a closet for an entire weekend. Although a little extreme, the behavior came from a deep level of sincerity that has remained the cornerstone of my life.

This first glimpse was not a formal awakening moment per se, which often, though not always, occurs much later in the process. It was more like a re-awakening moment where I remembered what had been long forgotten. I sensed a dormant potential in myself that I needed to access. It led me to test the limits of who I was.

We enter a spiritual practice with a laundry list of problems we hope to resolve and we bring with us our historical strategy of thinking our way out of difficulties. But meditation is asking us to do something radically different – to put our thoughts aside and experience the problem directly. Most of us are not prepared to release the need to think, and to do so evokes vulnerability much like we must have felt long ago before we developed the capacity to think. Without thinking, we feel we have no control over the solution, and that initiates a survival reaction of confusion and fear.

At this stage of practice, we emphasize mechanics. The practice represents a salvation from being the person we think we are and the only hope we can see of living the vivid glimpse seen. Our practice is under tremendous pressure to perform – we are only going to work this hard for so long, and we want the practice to show us it works. Often small changes do occur; perhaps our attention span increases or we become a little less reactive, a little steadier. These superficial changes are not enough to satisfy our hunger, but they give us encouragement that something positive is happening.

### The Stage of Self-Repulsion

During this stage, we feel we are moving toward an ideal self, one that has all the right spiritual qualities, but when we see what is left to clean up, we may despair. Idealizing where we are going and what we will look like when we get there is common to most spiritual practitioners, but this view brings heavy judgment that lingers with it. Repulsed by ourselves, we also revolt against the state of the world and want it to straighten up in concert with our efforts to purify ourselves. We are so laced with negative judgments and opinions that practice can become precarious and end abruptly if we remain here for too long. The amount of early childhood conditioning layered on top of the preexisting survival conditioning usually determines the intensity of this stage. When we are inclined to look at ourselves through this lens

of brokenness, all we see are the mistakes we continue to make, and that, of course, reinforces our ideas about how dreadful we are.

Soon after I began to practice meditation, I felt this backlash of personal disgust. I saw the vanity, selfishness, arrogance, and fear that had driven my entire life. I saw why I hated myself – I had good reason. This was my first taste of seeing myself up close and personal, and the taste was sour. I did everything I could to change this negative self-view, including loving kindness, cultivating generosity, and trying to see from a more inclusive perspective. Although the pain lessened over time, the feeling that something was wrong with me did not end until much later when I began to question the truth of the narrative itself.

The Buddhist meditation instruction of just seeing what is there, without adding any narrative is the saving grace of this stage, and the heart does begin to open. Although our self-dislike does not end, the heart's opening begins to reveal the beauty and loveliness in the world, and that we too might be a part of that. This expansion is usually enough to keep us going.

But even with a growing capacity to care, we still have not been able to accept our humanity. A strong urge to fix ourselves and to try to assume a particular shape and form remains. At this point, although still driven by the vivid glimpse from the first stage, we only know the visible world of form, and see no other forward except through self-improvement. We are still operating within our genetic predisposition of survival through conquest. We feel the ancient scarring that something is wrong with us, and with meditation that prehistoric tone seems louder and more personal. We are thrown into survival mode where our intention is now to meet that voice and eliminate it once and for all.

## The Stage of Operations

Hard work will be our salvation – seat to the cushion, breaking the habits of thought, and returning and returning back to the primary object. Arousing the qualities of mind that are conducive to insight takes time, and for much of that time nothing seems to be happening. Like a revolving door, the heart is open in one moment and closed the next. We do everything we can to keep it open, but the effort seems to be creating a dryness and distance that is very far from the warmth we feel when the heart shows up on its own. Somehow the real heart remains disengaged from our practice. From our view of conquest, we have not yet tried hard enough.

We are getting a sense of the egoic self-centeredness that shadows us and we may even be getting a sense that willful effort is limiting, but we know no recourse. Effort has always served our life, and if it fails, what else do we have to offer? Words and phrases like “no-self” and “emptiness” fascinate us but make little practical sense to us. Where we are located, everything the mind says seems very personal and important.

At this stage we are practicing humanistic psychology, changing our personal patterns while trying to remain open and accepting of ourselves. Our concentration is improving. Our consciousness seems to be steadier, more reliable, but little is being insightfully seen and understood.

Still, despite our hard work, something seems to be getting through. We actually have brief moments of personal contentment and the stirrings of self-appreciation. We find that we can easily get lost in these moments, and we struggle vainly against the many moments of self-judgment that still occur. We are still operating mostly on the belief that something will fix us; any real wisdom seems distant and remote.

## The Stage of Insight

At one point in my own practice I was fed up with input. I was tired of other people telling me about the Dharma and all the truths that I should be seeing, but wasn't. I felt like I was suffocating on other people's wisdom.

Fortunately I was in Thailand at the time and found self-isolation in the forests, far from anyone I knew or anyone who even spoke English. Then I asked myself a startling but honest question. "What do I actually know about the Dharma for myself and what do I really want to know?" What was true was that I knew very little, though I had read many spiritual books and listened to many lectures. What startled me was the ravenous hunger I felt for the wisdom I was missing. I was desperate to know what was true and knew others could not impart that knowledge.

This stage makes the practice our own. After the prolonged struggle to steady our attention, the mind becomes reasonably well behaved. We have put in the hard work, and there is a payoff. But insight – seeing below the level of thought – is another beast entirely. For most of us a steady attention is very useful for insight, but effort and striving are not.

Insight is the ability to see another dimension of being beyond the dictates of thoughts and opinions. A spiritual insight is a tie in between the sacred and mundane levels of existence and can show us the possibilities that such an existence holds. Insights can be spiritual or secular and are simply an immediate access to the creative expression of reality. What determines a spiritual insight is the intention behind it, and the intention determines what will be revealed and the depth of revelation. If we sit and ponder fixing our lawn mower all day, perhaps, in the quiet, the problem may resolve itself as an insight. If we contemplate the nature of our existence and truly want to know, insights will arise around that topic as well.

The universe does not sit upon its knowing; it shares it openly and freely. Knowing flows in abundance within all areas and at all times, but our intellectual knowledge or our fear of what will be revealed obstructs the knowing. Insight can penetrate those obstructions, but it cannot remove them. Insights are not the final answer, but they do provide an unshakeable confidence in what lies ahead.

When I opened to the stage of insight, I was amazed at the number and depth of the revelations, like thousands of flashes in a darkened stadium with each flash representing a moment of insight. Wherever I would ask a meaningful and intentional question of the heart, the answer would arise. It was as if I had discovered a portal through which information poured. At first I attempted to capture the insights by writing them down, but this proved futile and completely unnecessary. There were far too many, and they were unlimited. I finally learned to sit back and enjoy the view of revelation. It is easy to understand why this stage is accompanied by great joy and wonder.

Over time the individual flashes start making sense in relationship with the whole of the journey we are on. It is a little like connecting the dots and watching a fully-fledged picture come slowly into focus. Two things are going on simultaneously that have, up until now, been totally confused. Insight is understood as a crossover phenomenon between a mysterious awareness that cannot be known through the senses and the person having the insight. Though the person who is receiving the insight (form) and the awareness transmitting the information (formless) are more understood, the two feel like they are in separate camps with one communicating through insight to the other.

Practice has shown us that there is a difference between the object the senses receive and what the mind does with that object through memory and knowledge. Awareness sees and holds the object, and the mind translates what it sees into what it knows. Through the repetition of seeing just what the senses see and

observing how that seeing is translated into a mental image by the mind begins the process of separating form (the object) and the formless (awareness of the object).

*[The second part of this article, addressing the last three stages of practice, will be published in the next issue of the newsletter.]*

\*Adapted from Rodney's forthcoming book, *Crossing the Divide: A Practice Guide through the Buddha's Four Foundations of Mindfulness*.