



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

By Rodney Smith

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*[The [first part](#) of this article, addressing the first three stages of practice, was published in the last issue of this newsletter, in February 2016.]*

### The Stage of Separating Form from the Formless

One of my early revelations was how the intrusion of my will into practice created a backlash. As I established mindfulness, the thought would arise that I could try harder and be more continuously aware. As soon as I exerted that effort, the mindfulness would become more ragged and disconnected. The more prominent I became, the less aware I was. The quieter I became, the more awareness came to the forefront. How could this noble desire to improve my awareness be having the opposite effect? I began to understand that the sense-of-me was the disrupting influence. This inquiry sparked an even deeper understanding of the nature of form and formlessness.

To realize what was occurring I needed a very simple way to probe the essence of form and formlessness. Spontaneously a kind of urgency to this quest arose, an almost compelling need to know what this sense-of-self was and how it worked counter to my spiritual intention. The practice turned back on me at this point, and instead of looking out to see what was arising, I became the focus of the seeing. I began the ancient practice of inquiring into my own nature: What am I? Who am I? What is the “I” built upon? What is true?

I now look back upon those times and realize I chose the most straightforward and uncomplicated practice possible. I was not interested in changing anything but in simply seeing what was going on, and the discerning power of awareness was the only tool that allowed that honesty of purpose to shine forth. For awareness to perform at such a high standard, it had to be cleansed of all identification with noise, which meant purged from of all aspects of the sense-of-self.

The remnants of self do not abate because we want them to. We have to look at the noise the self is making and see whether it is relevant or not. Once something is seen as being untrue and therefore irrelevant, it falls away on its own. This process is active discernment. When we use discernment as a tool, we are actually turning the sacred dimension upon itself. What will become obvious as we move through this stage is that awareness is the sacred, but in the beginning we do not recognize it as such. Paradoxically we try to employ awareness to discover where the sacred resides.

We cannot approach the sacred dimension of life through our thinking mind. Thinking about life holds us back from the oneness of existence, while discernment is intuitive wisdom born from life and free of any alternative interpretation. Discerning is pure and simple seeing, and therefore the perfect application to use for separating the true from the false.

Two practices, inquiry and contemplation, require active discernment; both have a timing that coincides with an inward urgency to know the truth of the dilemma. Inquiry, or investigation, holds a question

silently and allows the question to probe the depths of our consciousness. The question is not forced, but seeks its own level and gently rests until the truth is released. To seek the truth is to undermine ourselves. The sense-of-self will be exposed for what it is. If we ask a question about the confusion the self is having: Why am I so nervous? Does she like me? The question reestablishes the security the self needs to continue to believe in itself. In contrast, active discernment asks a question about the nature of reality. It moves with courage and tenacity into the deepest and most profound existential issues: What is the source of life? Who am I? What is really true? Ultimately discernment threatens our stability because the nature of reality is that we are not what we seem to be. We have to pass through what we think we are to get to the sacred.

Patiently the line of questioning moves through all levels of identification with our self-image, all the judgments and assumptions about who or what we are. Active discernment itself will remove all that is false through simply seeing. Discernment is a process free of thought; seeing does it all. When we unleash discernment, we release the unifying power of non-separation. That force goes across all distances and boundaries until there is complete atonement. Once active discernment has explored every possible division and link to identity and its belief system, then it rests in stillness, and the work finishes itself in passive discernment.

Contemplation, or reflection, the second process using active discernment, blends an active inquiry with the passive discernment of letting the question be in quietude. In contemplation, we simply let something that we are curious about – it could be a phrase, word, or image -- float in stillness while being sustained by interest until a revelation occurs and something new is seen and understood. Unlike inquiry, contemplation has no driving energy and need for resolution; the subject simply rests in the mystery of the unknown until a seeing comes forth.

As the revelations come, thoughts may arise about what is being revealed, but instead of letting the mind lose itself within the thinking, we simply return and sustain the phrase in quietude once more. Perhaps thought will arise with another perspective or find its way toward another contemplation. If so, we bring the new contemplation into the quiet of wonderment and see what comes from that. Unlike inquiry, contemplation really has no point or goal. It is not trying to uncover the truth; rather it springs forth from the pure love of knowing. It is love for the love of knowing.

Thought and stillness can co-exist in beautiful *simpatico*. Most of us do not take advantage of this because as practitioners we worry about using thought at the same time we are trying to see without the influence of thought. At a certain stage of practice, the two can be used symbiotically. Within either inquiry or contemplation, a question, phrase or word may perplex and interest the mind, but enough wisdom has arisen to know that additional thinking is not going to add clarification. We become still and allow stillness to receive and add to the understanding, and it does, simply by floating the subject within the raptness and quiet. Thought stimulates an exploration and stillness reveals where thought cannot go. Thought may return and ask, “Well, what about this?” and then assume a quiet poise so stillness can answer.

Inquiry and contemplation give us confidence in being and allow us to stand on our own, free of external authority. We may not know, but we know we can know, and this frees us from all forms of dependency and all traces of doubt. There is no question we are afraid to ask and no knowledge we are afraid to hold. Questioning closes all the loopholes by tying everything together in its natural state of unification.

## The Stage of Discovering the Sacred

Passive discernment is the inactive expression of awareness. It is meditation without the meditator. It takes a pure receptive pose of letting everything be just as it is. Passive discernment does not interfere or

interpret, but simply leaves the mind completely alone to be what it is. If the mind thinks, it thinks; if it does not think, so be it. There is no leaning on the mind to be one way as opposed to another. However it is, that is what is seen. What arises from this absolute stillness of being is formless awareness or sacred presence. The sacred is alive and timelessly vigilant. It stands at the very center of being and is the reason there is anything at all. Because it is the center of being, it cannot be experienced through the senses. The senses all come through as mental formations, but it is awareness that allows the sense data and accompanying mental activity to be known. Awareness at this stage is not what you see, but the fact that you can see, hear, smell, taste, sense, or think. These processes are held within the ubiquitous and still presence of the sacred.

It dawns on us that we are just getting our first significant taste of a sacredness that has always been. All life is and has always been eternally sacred; we have just been confused about where and how to see it. When we focus on forms for the pleasures we derive from them, we simply do not care about the formless, which does not offer the same benefits. Over time, wisdom intervenes and our desire for objects fades. We become more open to seeing life in its formless shape. As we dwell more and more with the formless, it is like coming out of a cave and into light -- we have no interest in turning back.

When the sacred is present, an intimation arises of an unknowable darkness and mystery at the center of being that gives birth to the entire expression of form and the formless, including the sacred. Very little can be said about it except that it is. At the right time, this dark center can be called upon to take its rightful place as the origin of seeing. Once the sense-of-self is no longer identified as the seer, then within that stillness of being comes a felt sense that everything is emanating from this absolute mystery. When life is viewed as arising from this unfathomable darkness, it is healed from all boundaries and polarities, and the world of form and the formless opens up beyond dimensions.

### The Stage of Surrendering Form into the Formless

The sense-of-self is now understood as form, and as both unreliable and impermanent. Unless it is continually supported through a personal narrative, the self dissolves quickly into the formless. Since the noise of reactivity is the only way it stays alive, it is seen as an unsatisfactory place to reside. Now when the self arises, it is released without resistance, and surrendering the need to be someone becomes our practice.

Surrender is the act of releasing our separation -- not surrendering to someone or something but simply releasing the need to perpetuate an untruth. If the sense-of-self is untrue, then it is better to just let it go than to falsely sustain it. We do this not by making a problem out of the arising of self, but by releasing the story that sustains it, and we do not allow a new story to form itself about how noble we are to release it. We surrender into silence, which means we surrender into the formless truth.

When we surrender form, we transform form into the formless. If we assert our will upon this process, the very act of control keeps us within form, but once our personal will is surrendered nothing can pull consciousness back into separation until belief in the next storyline of our narrative arises. This continual return to form through our story and the eventual surrender of the story back into the formless continues for some time. At some point the pull of the story is no longer strong enough to draw us out of the formless, and the formless surrounds and engulfs form.

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