

EXISTENTIAL CURIOSITY

Existential curiosity, as distinct from intellectual curiosity, is an attitude worth adopting in Zen practice. It can be the backdrop awareness brought forward from time to time, or it can be consciously adopted as a menu practice tool, to be used for a specific time period, such as an entire day or specific number of days.

When we're *intellectually* curious, we try to understand something with our minds, we try to analyze it into its constituent parts, we try to grasp an idea, we try to add to the storehouse of our personal knowledge. And from a practice point of view there's nothing wrong with any of that, as long as we keep it in perspective and avoid getting caught up in it as the ego's strategy for maintaining its own primacy.

In contrast, when we're *existentially* curious, we maintain an open, aware interest in all that's transpiring in this moment: We might notice the physical environment—the colors, shapes, sounds, smells, and tastes, reminding ourselves to simply experience them all as wordlessly as we can at that moment, even as that moment. We also notice our own inner states, our emotions as they come and go, whether negative or positive. We notice our self-centered thoughts, especially as they constellate into automatic and unexamined story lines. We also bring awareness and curiosity to so-called neutral states when nothing particularly negative or positive is going on.

In fact, paying attention to neutral states is especially useful in this kind of curiosity practice because, among other things, it opens up the possibility of seeing and experiencing—more than just the typical roller coaster of likes and dislikes, which tend to capture us and thus render us asleep. Noting our neutral states makes our awareness more granular, on the one hand, more wide and inclusive on the other. We can see the forest and the trees—the ant on the bark of one tree, and the dome of the sky above us all, as it were. It's possible to experience a so-called neutral state, once you open to it, as actually deeply satisfying—satisfying in a way that transcends the opposites of typical negative and positive emotions. And practicing curiosity with neutral states can eventually lead us to experience that same depth of satisfaction even in the midst of negative and positive emotions.

A simple reminder for practicing existential curiosity is to ask ourselves the following question: "What is this?" The key point in asking is not to wait for an inner verbal or mental answer, not to use it as the prelude to analyzing phenomena or psychologizing our own pasts, but to use the question to immediately drop us back into the raw experience, the ineffability of *just this* moment as it is unfolding—the sounds and sights of the environment, our bodily and emotional reactions, and even the growing sense of spaciousness and pure being always already there, closer than our jugular veins, as the old Zen saying goes.

THE TRUE SELF AND SYSTEMS OF COPING

We've all developed systems to cope with our perceived loss of the True Self. As infants we were nothing but the True Self; even now we are still the True Self, though out of touch to a greater or lesser degree. As infants we were not conscious of being the True Self. Now, as adults, we can learn to be the True Self. But it may take some long, hard work.

Why would this be so? If we are the True Self, why the need to "recover" it? As an infant develops, inevitably a time comes when pain and loss of love (usually the mother's) is experienced—and this has nothing to do with the mother's actual withdrawal of love, which may or may not happen; it's all in the infant's perception and therefore personal experience. At this perceived loss of love, the infant is plunged into terror. Almost immediately, the infant begins to develop strategies for minimizing, denying, covering over the terror. By the age of 5 or so, the child has a more or less airtight system of survival strategies in place, which keeps the worst of the terror at bay.

Two important points: the terror is always in the body, while the system is always in the mind; it is purely a mental construct. The mind can override the body—more or less. But there's a huge price to be paid: the body's experience becomes discounted, minimized, or even denied and, therefore, the individual is literally "out of touch" with reality, i.e., out of touch with the True Self.

What is the solution to this human problem? Two practice methods seem particularly apt here, for slightly different but related reasons.

First, daily, still, silent meditation—the bedrock of Zen—brings us back over and over to the here-and-now of our bodily and environmental experience, along with awareness of our emotional and mental states. In doing this, over a long period of time—say 5 to 10 years for starters—we build the capacity to re-experience some of that initial existential terror, but in small increments we can handle. We gradually begin to realize—in our bones, as it were—that the "terror" is not so bad, really; it's just composed of bodily sensations and an accompanying soundtrack. We discover the fear itself actually cannot hurt us.

Secondly, once we have a good feel for the particular style of our own system and its subsets (the enneagram, for example, can be helpful here), we can begin to experiment, as a practice, to "go against it." What does this mean, exactly? We simply notice when something upsets us and then notice the particular strategy we are thrown to as a coping mechanism and we consciously, deliberately go against it. For example, if I know that I tend to be a perfectionist, I can deliberately do something in a half-assed way—just to allow the terror to surface. Terror here may be overstated—perhaps it'll be nothing but distress and anxiety; nonetheless, we allow that to surface and then consciously experience it in the body.

Both these practice methods, little by little, clear the encrusted surface layers of "me stuff" (ego) allowing the True Self to sparkle through, perhaps even shine steadily at some point.

HOW IT SHOULD BE AND HOW IT IS

Practice always comes down to the difference between how I think I should be and how I actually am. Or how I think the world out there should be and how it actually is. On a very ordinary and practical level, we have to become more and more aware of what our beliefs are about ourselves and the world, and shift to being aware of how we and the world actually are in any given moment. And to do this, we have to be willing to be honest with ourselves.

My old teacher, Joko, used to say the one thing we can count on—the only thing, really—is that *we are the way we are* and *it is the way it is*. That is, right now we are the way we are; it is the way it is. And “right now” is all there is. Everything else is an idea, i.e., a thought, a belief, a mental construction. And thoughts and beliefs and mental constructions are, from a practice point of view, to be recognized as such and therefore seen through. The more we accustom ourselves to seeing through them, the more we stay in touch with reality—the “suchness” of this moment. And the more we do this, the more truly satisfying our lives become.

To do this is the hard work of practice. Because none of us wants to recognize our beliefs as just beliefs, our thoughts as just thoughts. We’ve been so conditioned by them, we feel our very survival depends on their upholding. We’ve used them to construct a substitute reality. We literally live in a world of our own imagining. We’re like the character in the old story who’s in a darkened room terrified of the coiled snake in the corner. Until the light is turned on and he sees it’s just a rope.

Turning on the light seems dramatic and sudden. But for most of us who take up a practice like this one, it’s probably more like a dimmer switch ever so gradually turned up—and sometimes, down again—until we one day see the rope as a rope. How do we turn up the dimmer switch? What helps us to finally see the rope as just a rope? Of course, many of the practice techniques and exercises we already discussed are useful for this. Probably, they can all be collapsed into the simple but difficult practice of coming back, over and over, as often as we can remind ourselves, to our own raw, wordless experience of just this moment. This includes recognizing honestly where we are in our emotional states, our bodily sensations, the actual outer environment (sights, sounds, smells, etc.)—all without judgment, or at least recognizing the judgments as they arise.

Once we’ve had a taste of ordinary reality, which is nothing more nor less than a simple awareness of BEING—wordless, thoughtless, timeless—we’ll never be quite as seduced by the lure of the mentally-generated life again. Or, perhaps more accurately, when we find ourselves being seduced, we just might catch ourselves at it sooner and be able to return to the more genuine life more quickly. And little by little, on and off the meditation seat, we find ourselves spending more and more of our time there.

PEAKS AND VALLEYS

One of the hardest things for people to get when they take up a Zen practice like this one, is that it's NOT about reaching some permanent high state, some vantage point where the view stretches for infinity and all human problems are permanently put away. Nor is it about getting rid of all the valleys and troughs of our lives, eliminating all pain, sickness, old age, and death. True practice is about being with *what is*—whether it's on the peak, in the valley, down in the mines, in the swamp or at any and all points in between.

In our achievement-oriented modern lives, this is at first truly hard to get—and get in our very bones. In taking up Zen practice we can't help but apply the typical criteria of chasing after results. For example, if I wish to gain strength by building the muscles of my body with weight training, I know that I must start gradually, slowly adding weights and repetitions, paying attention to my technique. And I know that before too long, I'll start to see results, and if I persist, I should end up being successful at reaching my strength goals.

On the surface, meditation and life practice can seem very similar. After all, in Zen practice we are building a kind of muscle, you could say, the "muscle of attention or awareness." And repeated sitting meditation, movement awareness practice, and engaging with daily menu items do, indeed, begin to shift who we perceive ourselves to be. We begin to find a degree of ease and acceptance and equanimity entering our experience. And we might reach a peak state or two along the way. But it's very important to remember, especially when we sit down to meditate, to let go of all the normal, conditioned desires to achieve something or to "get somewhere." This may have to start with just simply noticing those ambitions in our selves and bringing ourselves back to the present moment of breathing, of feeling our bodily sensations, of noticing the immediate environment.

No matter how experienced we become as practitioners, we might still find ourselves craving more, being impatient with where we are, feeling like this is not it, etc. In other words, we find we're still subject to the deep cultural conditioning of seeking gain and avoiding loss. And then our practice has to be about seeing that, until we eventually see through it.

One of the beauties of simple Zen sitting is that it is both an emblem and expression of our actual human situation. And what is that human situation? Nothing more nor less than that we are *always where we are*—physically, mentally, and emotionally. We can—at any moment—be no other than what we are. Practice is about recalling this fact, over and over *experientially*, and is what actually slowly transforms our lives—but not necessarily by depositing us on some romanticized high peak from where we may gaze down unperturbed for ever more. Rather, it shows us quite simply and directly that it's fine to just be as this very moment.

POSTURE AND STILLNESS

Why are posture and stillness important in sitting meditation?

We can answer this in a number of ways. When we sit—whether on a cushion or a chair—and we keep our spine erect, one vertebra stacked atop the other—it helps promote the natural stability necessary for the quiet work of self-observation and of simply experiencing being here and now. When we establish the body with stability on its meditation seat, a certain kind of dynamic relaxation can begin to unfold. And with that, we can begin to feel the invitation to Silence.

However, this dynamic relaxation needs to be consciously maintained. That is, the muscles of the back, abdomen, hips, legs, shoulders, and neck are all engaged in keeping the body erect and still. If we notice our shoulders beginning to slump, our spine bending, our chin jutting out, or our head tilting forward, we can make the subtle effort to straighten our posture again, perhaps feeling as if an invisible thread is drawing our spine up through the top of our head.

Another way of putting this is that an erect, dynamically but easily held posture actually supports the body's ability to remain still. After all, if we're uncomfortable, the tendency to adjust and readjust will be more or less continuous. We'll never actually settle down. During meditation, bodily stillness does at least a couple of important things. First, it provides us with a reminder of the "no escape" of practice, our commitment to be with what is. Or, more accurately, the attempt to sit still shows us how often we might use little movements as escapes from this moment (scratching an itch, shifting a foot, waving at an insect, etc.). Second, the more we can make the conscious commitment and soft effort to remain completely still during a meditation period, the more chance there is that we'll enter the larger Stillness and Silence out of which all of our human experience arises. And the more we taste that, even if only for seconds or minutes at a time, the more we're likely to be aware of it and informed by it throughout the normal busyness of daily life off the meditation seat.

However, it's important not to view this larger Stillness and Silence as a goal to strive for. Our job as meditation practitioners is to sit as physically still as we can, which means to stay present to whatever is going on with us (thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations) while also being aware of the environment around us (sounds, smells, etc.). And in that physically quiet state, we can find ourselves opening more and more to this moment just as it is.

It's important to remember to hold physical posture and stillness seriously but also lightly. In other words, it's fine to move if we must because of extreme discomfort, but it's important to do so as consciously as we can. And it might be useful to ask ourselves before we move if we really need to. Is there a sensation we could actually allow ourselves to fully experience before we decide we don't wish to feel it? The key points are to commit to posture and stillness, do our best, and then take what we get.

INTENSIFYING PRACTICE THROUGH ORDINARY BEING

One way to intensify practice is through bringing close attention and awareness to any of the various aspects of ordinary being.

Try this meditation exercise: close your eyes and begin by being aware of **sounds**, that is listen fully and completely to all the sounds that are present second by second. Listen to them without judgment or evaluation, even without description., i.e. without identifying them to yourself verbally, as in “That’s a truck, that’s a motorcycle, that’s a blue jay.” Just listen fully and attentively, but without any tension. Include all sounds—from the furthest to the nearest.

Now, while still listening, bring into your awareness the **sensation** of the tip of your left pinkie finger. Just allow yourself to include the ever-so-subtle sensation of the alive beingness of your fingertip. And keep listening as you do so. Now, add to your awareness the other nine fingertips.

Important sidebar: the “success” of this meditation exercise is in the trying, not in the so-called succeeding. More than likely you’ll have the experience of flitting back and forth among the objects of attention—first sound, then fingertips. It’s also entirely possible that you will be able to “hold” both sounds and sensations at the same time. Either way is fine.

Now, while still paying close attention to sounds and fingertip sensations, add awareness of **breathing**. Of course, awareness of breathing can manifest in multiple ways—as the breath entering and leaving the nostrils, as the diaphragm moving forward and backwards, as the lungs filling and emptying, etc. You can gently put thoughts aside as they arise, such thoughts as “Am I doing this right?” “I should slow my breathing down, etc.” Keep returning to the sounds as they arise, the subtle fingertip sensations, and the breath coming and going. To anchor the sensation of breathing a little more, you can feel it entering and leaving the heart space, if you like.

For the last aspect of being, still your eyes closed, become aware of your **vision**. Just notice the experience of seeing with your eyes closed—the sense of lightness and darkness mingled together behind your eyelids. Now, gently and slowly open your eyes, keeping your gaze downward and just include the field of vision that opens, noting the forms and colors, but refraining from looking around. Just let your gaze fall on what’s there. Because vision tends to be such a dominant sense, you might notice its tendency to overtake awareness. You can just continue to make the gentle effort to still keep the sounds, the sensations of your fingertips, and breathing also present.

For this exercise you can add more elements of being, as many as you can hold in your awareness at the same time (though 4 seems plenty for most folks). A key point is to have an “anchor” that works for you in the present, something you can always come back to when your mind drifts off. In this version of the exercise, sounds or hearing is the anchor. If you make up your own version, you might prefer breathing as the anchor, or being aware of the space in the room or immediate environment.

THE HABIT OF ABSTRACTION

The “habit of abstraction” refers to our automatic and mechanical tendency to take raw experience and change it into words and then to believe the words as The Truth, as Reality. It’s a habit because we do it over and over, usually without awareness. And like all habits, it’s not so easy to break.

The habit of abstraction seems inextricably tied to us because we are language users. Our language, among other things, allows us to separate out parts of the world, naming them, and helping us manage them. On an immediate level the habit of abstraction makes our lives easier and more efficient, allowing us to travel down familiar, well-worn pathways. Just think how difficult life would be if we had to stop and really pay close attention to every bush and tree and house each time we drove down a familiar street.

But more to the point, what about when someone criticizes us for something? It’s not long—perhaps a microsecond—before we’ve taken that initial stab of pain to the heart or gut and covered it over with our own words, that is abstracted it, whether we’ve thought them internally or spoken them externally. In an almost automatic response to the hurt, we may find ourselves denying, justifying, arguing, or withdrawing, all under the mechanically conditioned protection of our words. So much so that the words themselves seem to be the true reality. And then our words can quickly take us even further down the track of abstraction: we might make an irrevocable decision about that person or, even more sadly, about anyone who even reminds us of that person. So that when we meet someone reminiscent of the offender, we’re already seeing them through a screen, a filter of our own conditioned thoughts and attitudes, our abstractions. How can there be a real meeting then? Soon we’re living entirely in our heads, even though the initial experience of hurt was purely wordless and visceral, surfaced in the moment, and like everything else in the universe, stayed a while, and sooner or later left.

In other words, our experience of anything is always in the moment, here and now, in fact, constitutes the moment. But we color that moment to our own detriment with all sorts of extras that really don’t serve us, don’t contribute to our wakefulness, shut down the vitality of our living, and hem us in with attitudes and inflexible beliefs. Where’s the freedom in that?

From a practice perspective, it’s important to see how automatic and unconscious this abstracting is, how pervasive, how much like water to a fish. And how as practitioners it’s important for us to be vigilant about it. How do we do that? Be vigilant? Many ways, but all come down to being aware of what’s being thought and felt in any given moment. Being more and more aware of the thoughts as just thoughts, i.e., conditioned responses of the little self to keep itself always front and center. And the ongoing practice is to be aware of it all and return again and again to the raw experience of this moment.

REGARDING SPACE—OUTER AND INNER

Here are two practice techniques you may find useful. The best way to apply the first one is during a chosen day as a menu item as you go about daily life. Remembering to practice it even just a few times in a day can be useful. The second one is best used during actual sitting meditation.

Outer Space: This technique has you consciously turning your attention to space as an object of awareness. You can divide the technique into a number of specific steps:

First, look at the space between any two objects in your field of vision. For example, if there are two trees in front of you, look at the space in between, exactly along the plane made by the two trees. In other words, focus your eyes along that spatial plane. Then you can shift your vision and attention to the space between two other objects. Do this three times, i.e., with three sets of two objects.

Now, pick a single object and look at the space immediately around the object. Again, do this with three different objects in your field of vision.

Finally, look “into” a single object (car, tree), sensing the space inside it.

Making this small shift of conscious attention to space instead of to physical objects themselves, which of course you’ll also continue to be aware of, breaks up the normal pattern of seeing the world and begins to allow for a certain sense of “spaciousness” and presence to show up. “Things” lose some of their sense of solidity, while, paradoxically, becoming more vivid.

As a final step, notice the space between your own hands, then the space around them, then the space inside your own body (head, chest, belly, limbs).

Advanced technique (“advanced” only in that it might take more practice): While doing the above also maintain awareness of the breath coming and going into and out of the center of the chest (heart center).

Inner Space: Here, too we, focus on space, but in this case specifically on the “space” or gap between the words of our thoughts. In sitting meditation, this is best applied when you find yourself caught by thinking (i.e. obsessing, repetitive gerbil thinking, monkey mind, obsessive planning, fantasizing, strong negative emotions, or revisiting the past). First, take a single short thought out of all the thoughts you’re having and say it back to yourself just as you would in thought labeling. Secondly, say the thought to yourself again, only this time consciously slow it way down, repeating the sentence with distinct pauses of a few seconds in between each word. Actually focus your attention on the “space” or gap between each word as you slowly repeat the sentence, e.g.:

“It’s just not fair.”

You may note how the space or gap gets “filled” with the present moment, i.e., sounds, breathing, body sensations, etc. And how the thought itself takes on a quality of insubstantiality the more the sense of space brings you back to just this moment.

TWO DIRECTIONS OF PRACTICE

You could say that Zen practice—at least for a fairly long time for most of us—is done in two directions: inwardly and outwardly. In other words, our practice consists of paying close attention to what we experience inwardly (thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, interior events) and what we experience outwardly (the world, the environment, or ordinary physical reality, as experienced through our ordinary senses).

We pay attention to these two directions, until they become one, or until we get their non-duality, which is just the timeless realization of non-separation. Through practice we eventually see there is not a solid, fixed, unchanging “I” that experiences things separate from itself. So, for example, when we hear something, conventionally we say: “I (subject) hear the barking dog (object).” But in reality, there is just the sound and its awareness, inseparably so. There is no “I” to be found anywhere in that experience.

Now, to say any of this is to make an intellectual claim and to understand it requires only intellect. But to experience nonduality takes something else—luck, accident, or practice—probably in some combination. Certainly, the practice of still, silent awareness meditation gets us closer to it. Paying attention throughout our day to what’s going on inside and outside ourselves also helps. But let’s not kid ourselves. Our ego sense is highly developed. The sense we have of ourselves as a solid, fixed identity is what we have been conditioned to believe—even in the face of contrary evidence. For example, have you ever found your “I”? Can you point to it? Where is it located, exactly? And if we can’t locate it, how can we say it actually exists? Furthermore, our identities (plural!) seem to shift from moment to moment. Which is the real one, then?

To really get the nondual nature of reality—from our perspective as conditioned egos—appears frightening. In fact, a certain kind of “death” may be required. This is why oftentimes when practitioners get close to so-called “ego death,” they shy away and return to the familiar sense of separation, which, despite the suffering it causes—in actuality, that separation is the very nature and definition of suffering—seems more familiar and therefore falsely reassuring. A certain willingness to remain in the “groundlessness” of being (no fixed identity, nothing to hold on to or stand on) may be required to see through the sleep of the self, the waking dream of conventional reality.

In meditation, this invitation to the groundlessness of being arises naturally, and we can begin, slowly, to open to it. Doing this is neither difficult nor easy; it just requires our willingness and our on-going close attention. Every “conventional” aspect of reality—sights, sounds, smells, tastes, emotions, sensations, thoughts—are literal doorways to the nondual, are in fact nothing but the nondual, and that also includes our awareness, which is not separate from any of them. So we practice the two directions—inward and outward—until the distinction becomes meaningless, and suffering no longer has a reason to arise.

WAKING UP, GROWING UP, SHOWING UP

Another way to slice up the pie of practice is to consider it from three distinct but related perspectives touching on intended outcomes, the realizations they might suggest, and the practices they might entail.

Waking Up. Traditionally, Zen practice is viewed as first and foremost hours and hours of still silent sitting meditation spread over months and years. The fruits of this long practice may show up in all sorts of ways—in sudden realizations of non-duality, wisdom, compassion, or love, or in various internal states from which we learn something about our fundamental nature and the nature of reality, or perhaps in a gradual lessening of fear and anger with more room for joy, or as one teacher calls it, “unreasonable happiness.”

However, for most of us the kind of monastic life at the heart of traditional Zen practice is impractical and perhaps not even wanted or needed. So then the question arises, how does Zen adapt to modern life without losing its core? This is a question many teachers have asked since Zen moved West and have answered along a very long continuum, from throwing the baby out with the bathwater, to keeping the baby, to even keeping the bathwater.

Because of the advances in Western science, medicine, and psychology, a growing recognition has arisen that intense spiritual practice—at the expense of dealing with ordinary life—can fall into various traps of the shadow, or of “spiritual bypassing.” In other words, practitioners can slip into one kind or another of avoidance, denial, or non-recognition. This doesn’t have to happen, but it often does to most of us at some point along the practice path.

Growing up. Indeed, what the West has provided us with, slowly through the years of modernity and postmodernity, is the realization that people can continue to grow and develop beyond the age of 18, that there is something called adult development and its characteristics have been increasingly noted. And this development happens on both an individual and collective level. The details of this we’ll look at in further talks and discussions. For now, let’s ask ourselves in what ways can we point to our own growth and development—or its lack? Because where there is the potential for growth, there is also the potential for stagnation or arrested development. What practices, in addition to meditation, might we engage in to further our growth and development?

Showing up. We can’t NOT “show up.” We are who we are and that’s what is in the world. However, psychology has taught us we can hide—from others and, indeed, from ourselves. Perhaps it’s possible, psychology tells us, to “show up” more authentically, more fully. What this means in all its rich details, remains to be explored by each of us individually and collectively.

For now, let me claim that the fruit of our “waking,” “growing,” and “showing up” practices is revealed in us—in our presence, in our behaviors, in our being. The question for all of us, then, is how to foster the best of that. This, we’ll continue to explore further.

A QUICK REALITY CHECK: WHAT ZEN PRACTICE ISN'T—AND IS

Zen practice is not a self-improvement program. It won't make us smarter, sexier, healthier, wealthier, more popular, more successful, or guarantee better relationships. Zen practice is not about boot-strapping ourselves up to some exalted state where we will be able for evermore to look down on the trials and tribulations of lesser mortals—members of which we will no longer have to be. Zen practice will not do away with the physical and psychological pains that, sooner or later, come along for all of us.

If we recall Buddhism's Eight Worldly Winds—the notion that our suffering is manifested in our bouncing back and forth among four sets of positive and negative opposite conditions—praise and blame, pleasure and pain, fame and disgrace, and gain and loss—Zen practice makes no guarantee that the positives (praise, pleasure, fame, gain) will become our permanent lot; nor does it promise that the negatives (blame, pain, disgrace, loss) will never come our way.

So, what then does Zen practice promise, if anything at all? And what's it good for, then?

In fact, Zen practice offers us the rare opportunity--rare from the mainstream culture's perspective--to awaken now and in every moment to life, just as it is.

At first, when we begin this practice, we can't be faulted for thinking that "life just as it is" hardly seems enough, does it? After all, we can be quick to tell ourselves that we already have more than enough of "life just as it is," thank you very much! Who needs more of what we see all around us—pain, suffering, violence, confusion, meanness, duplicity, and even the good stuff which we see quickly passing? Isn't all that "life as it is"? Perhaps not. Those are all pictures and stories of our life--very convincing ones from a certain perspective. But if we're honest, we'll see that "life as it is" has much more to do with the ordinary moment-to-moment reality manifesting in and around us, always right now, always right here. And, of course, depending on multiple factors it may range from very pleasant to extremely unpleasant indeed. But the main point is that it's just our life, not our interpretation of it, our story about it, our hopes and dreams about it, or, especially, our fears about it.

The "promise" of Zen practice, then, is that over long months and years, it opens our awareness, and gradually allows us to truly "be" our lives as they unfold moment by moment. And in the gradual unfolding of that capacity, a certain equanimity, a sense of freedom, and even a quiet joy grow, even as the Eight Worldly Winds continue to blow, as they always will. Only now, perhaps the winds don't have quite as much to blow up against, perhaps they increasingly blow through us. And perhaps, most importantly, we also begin to see in us an activating and opening up of our capacity for compassion—both for others and for ourselves. After all, we're all buffeted around by the winds together until we learn we may not have to be quite so much at their effects.

RETURNING TO REST AS AWARENESS

Here's an inexact analogy for the kind of practicing I've been suggesting recently: We're like the old nineteenth-century forester who routinely goes into his forest and chops down dead and dying trees, hauls the wood out and uses it as fuel, burning it up to provide warmth for himself, his family, and anyone who visits. Even as he does this hard work, he's mostly concerned about the overall health of the entire forest.

When he is in the forest, he's acutely aware of how it's doing, intuitively picking up information from the greenness of the leaves, the songs of the local birds, the activities of all the forest critters, etc. If he's a good forester—i.e., good at his calling—he's also occasionally filled with joy as he goes about his work, deeply appreciative of the mystery of all that growing, changing life around him. Perhaps, at times, he may even feel at one with it all.

Does the forest need a forester? Not really. It would undoubtedly go on living without him for a long time, feeding off the mulch and dead trees, playing out its natural life span. Nonetheless, the forester is there and has taken on the job of husbanding the forest. After all, he needs fuel for his own life and actually depends on the forest for it. And the forest has somehow accepted his interventions and has adapted and also thrives.

So, as we (Zen foresters) work on our ego structures (dead, dying, or sick trees) and their many requirements laid down over the years, seeing through them, and clearing them out to some degree, more of the living, healthy forest (life just as it is) becomes obvious and available to us.

When we quietly walk through the forest or perhaps sit down on a log and just be (meditation), the true nature of the forest slowly reveals itself for the mysterious wonder it is.

Here's a meditation exercise you might enjoy: Try this one at night, in bed, lying on your back, in darkness, eyes closed. Or you can also do it in a sitting position, but make sure the room is quite dark. Firstly, engage in whatever your regular meditation practices are (following the breath, breathing in and out of the heart space, deep listening, or just lying there quietly). When you feel settled (it's perfectly fine if there are still thoughts, sensations, feelings), become aware of the darkness, its spaciousness. You can even play with trying to find its outer edges in all directions, but mostly just rest in that dark spaciousness. Now, here's an instruction not normally associated with meditation: ever so gently, begin to very slowly move your head side to side a few times. What do you notice or discover? Then, stop moving your head and return to still meditation, to "resting as awareness" as best you can.

In terms of the analogy, we are the forest and the trees and the forester. Can we truly see that?

FROM ROLE TO FUNCTION

"Pay attention not to what you are but to
that you are!" from *The Cloud of Unknowing*

Self-centered thinking is sourced in our identity patterns. Many of these patterns are determined and sanctioned by culture, are habitual, and are almost always unconscious. Until and unless we begin to see through them and they loosen their grip, we continue along the path of unconscious suffering.

Many people, before they begin some form of the "examined life," say through taking up Zen practice or some other spiritual path, experience their roles as synonymous with their identities. Their identities are unconsciously felt as who and what they truly are.

We may fully identify with being a parent, a student, a spouse, a successful entrepreneur, a football fan, a teacher, a boss ... on and on endlessly. The roles can come and go depending upon life circumstances, but, certainly, the stronger the identification with the role, the harder to see through it.

One of the main effects of Zen practice is that it gently but persistently drives a wedge between our believed identity roles and the simple fact of our being, letting us experience more and more of that being and gradually teaching us how to rest in it, or to even rest *as it*. This usually happens slowly over months of quiet sitting and off-the-seat practice as a simple effect of bringing our attention back again and again to just this, just now—just to "life as it is" (Including resistance, upset, pleasure, pain, etc.)

At some point a momentous shift takes place (it doesn't matter if it's sudden or gradual): as we become more comfortable with just being, we begin to find our *roles* changing more into what could be called *functions*. Now, we begin to notice that we're not really a boss; we're simply functioning as a boss. Can you sense the difference? One is a form of ego-driven behavior, the other a way of simply dealing with what's up at any given moment, i.e., taking appropriate action based on the objective facts. If someone needs firing, we just fire them. We don't endlessly second-guess ourselves, or worry about whether we'll be liked or not, or feel pointlessly guilty about functioning in an appropriate and necessary way.

It's worth asking yourself as you move through your day, "What role am I being right now?" That can be followed up with a number of other self-inquiries, such as, "Can I drop this role and simply function appropriately?" "What might that be in this situation?"

A brief meditation exercise: Close your eyes and choose a role you strongly identify with. Imagine a difficult situation that might come up for you in that role. Imagine how you'd deal with it *as one completely identified with the role*. Now imagine dealing with the difficult situation as a simple, direct *functioning* of your own creative intelligence and problem-solving capabilities. Can you see a difference? Open eyes and share, if you wish.

PRACTICING DURING THE HOLIDAY SEASON

For most of us a certain amount of reactivation can be expected during the holiday season. It's not surprising given that so much is tied into this season in the West and here in the United States.

First of all, from a purely natural point of view, this is the beginning of winter, the approach of the shortest day and longest night of the year, the winter solstice, the time when everyone and everything tends to hunker down into sleep, hibernation, darkness, and rest. Perhaps Jungian psychologists are right when they refer to it as a time for quiet, almost unconscious transformation, a time for licking psychic wounds, and building strength both to get through the winter and to prepare for the far-off spring. Everything in Nature seems to be giving us the message to slow down, rest, recover, and prepare for rebirth.

However, against that, our culture has other messages: We are supposed to gear up, become energized, active, even frenetic. After all, there are presents to be bought, cards to be written and sent, friends and family to be seen. And above all, we're expected to spend money on all the increasingly ephemeral gifts spilling off department store shelves. We are supposed to elbow our way through crowds searching for the best deals, treating our fellow shoppers as, at best, irritating inconveniences.

Yes, it's a time to acknowledge and celebrate the birth of the Christ child, or Chanukah, or, if you're not particularly religious, the coming of Santa (though he of course was originally a saint) and a chance to have some good eggnog. To a lesser or greater degree, though, any of this can produce additional stress, especially if we add on the unresolved history and unrealistic expectations we might be still carrying around having to do with our families.

And stress, among other things, can simply cause us to forget to practice, i.e., forget to maintain awareness. Frankly, we can easily lose ourselves in mindless activity, emotional reactivity, and the numbing sleep of cultural expectations.

So, against all this, how can we remember to be present? The familiar techniques of practice come to mind, if we can remember to apply them: 1. Daily sitting, 2. Maintaining awareness as we go about our daily activities—especially the ones that are connected to the holiday season. For example, perhaps we could design a few "menu" items specific to this time of year, such as remembering to be present when meeting folks socially, or taking a couple of slow, conscious breaths just before we step into the Mall for holiday shopping. 3. Making note when we are reactivated and perhaps asking a couple of the simple practice questions like, "What is this?" and "What is my most believed thought right now?"

Most importantly, we can remember to go easy on ourselves and others. After all, aren't we all just trying to be happy?

SUFFERING AND SLEEP

If you're suffering you're asleep."
Anthony de Mello, *Awareness*

The quote seems paradoxical, doesn't it? Normally, we think of sleep as unconscious—sometimes blessedly so—so where's the suffering in that? The opposite way of saying this might be, "If we're truly awake, there can be no suffering." "Waking" and "sleeping," in this context, of course, are metaphors for awareness and its lack.

Suffering, the way Zen talks about it, includes an element of resistance, resistance to what's so in any given moment. When we suffer, we're caught in our self-centered thoughts, typically believing them completely, e.g., "This is not good; I don't like it; I want it to go away." Behind them is the biggest self-centered thought of all, that I shouldn't have to have this experience that seems to be causing me suffering, that it should be another, better way. It's just not right, we say to ourselves, usually unconsciously and with total conviction.

Zen and other spiritual traditions that come equipped with practice methods and techniques often distinguish between suffering and pain. Pain is seen as the physical, neurological sensations that happen to us when we are injured or ill. Suffering is seen as what we add to the pain, as in the Buddha's famous second arrow. However, because of our human conditioning, it's very hard for us NOT to add to the pain with all our resistances, requirements, and emotional reactions. Hard, but not impossible. (I have a 91-year-old friend, who has chronic and at times severe back pain, and when I ask him how his back is doing, more often than not he'll reply, "It's just pain." And he really means it—he's a man of great equanimity and presence, gained over years of awareness practice. Despite the pain he remains cheerful and engaged in all situations.) The capability or capacity to see suffering as optional, as something we've put on top of our pain, is what develops—usually slowly—over months and years of practice.

What about psychological or emotional pain? In some fundamental sense, it's no different except that our self-centered thoughts seem to play an even more prominent role in upholding the suffering. Yes, there's definitely psychological pain—grief, fear, anxiety—and we all know it can be acute at times. But usually when experienced directly, it need not lead to suffering.

Our practice, through still, silent meditation, employing a variety of techniques as needed, and our ongoing "soft efforts" to be as present as possible off the meditation seat, all bring us slowly more and more into the sphere of present-moment-awareness and reveal the sheer perfection of every moment, just as it is, right here and now. And when we "taste" that—i.e., life unfolding just as it is—things are never quite the same even when we occasionally fall back, as we will, into believing what the voices of our little self tell us.

PRACTICING WITH HABITS

From the dictionary: "Habit--a settled or regular tendency or practice, esp. one that is hard to give up."

Simple, ordinary habits are the mind's way of laying down grooves along which it can thereafter travel to make life easier, simpler, and more efficient. However, there may be a corollary loss of awareness when we're in the automatic mode of habitual action.

So it might be worth considering our habits from a practice perspective, i.e., how we might use them to return to the present and be more aware.

Here's a simple three-step process for practicing with habits:

Step one: make a list of your ordinary, every day habits, the things you do over and over in the same way. It might help to generate your list under a variety of categories, for example:

- postures (how you stand, sit, and recline)
- hand gestures (how and when you use them, what kinds, etc.)
- facial expressions (frowns, smiles, "neutral" expressions, which facial are muscles used when)
- ways of walking (is your father walking in you, your mother, your childhood hero? Do you walk differently at different times?)
- ways of talking (verbal expressions used habitually--"you know," "you got it," "awesome," etc.; greetings, slang terms, phrases, "ums" and "ahs," etc.)
- mood habits (disgruntled, ironic, overly cheerful, depressed, etc.)
- thoughts, fantasies, images (anything that tends to repeat itself)
- how you do things (brush teeth, eat, drive, read, watch TV, etc.).

If you have trouble generating any part of the list, you might consider asking loved ones and friends what they see you doing and saying habitually. They may have noticed things about you that you haven't yourself.

Step 2: Pick a particular habit from one of the categories above and choose to observe the habit in action for a specific time (could be an hour, a day, a week). When you catch yourself in the habit, notice as best you can how it feels. Don't try to change it or get rid of it yet. Once you have a good sense of how the habit functions, you can begin the last step.

Step 3: Make a soft effort to modify, change, or stop the particular habit. Whether you succeed or not, notice what comes up as you are more aware of the habit and as you try to work with it. Particularly, notice any bodily sensations of discomfort and emotional feelings of anxiety or anger or sadness. And notice the thoughts that come up. "This is too hard." "I like my habit." "I'll never change"—whatever. Finally, from time to time, remember to include an awareness of the "surround"—sounds, sights, smells, etc.

It's important to get that this exercise is not about ridding ourselves of bad habits, or fixing or improving ourselves. It's merely meant to bring more awareness into our ordinary moment-to-moment living.

TAKING ON THE PERSPECTIVE OF AN OTHER

Learning and practicing taking on the perspective of an other is a simple and effective way to develop and expand consciousness. While taking on another's perspective or point of view is something most of us do naturally, it can be made even more intentional and therefore useful in practice. It can allow us to regularly get outside our own limited ego-centered perspective, or even outside our limited group perspectives. Doing this, of course, helps lead to compassionate awareness and natural kindness. After all, before we can be compassionate and kind, it's necessary for us to see how another might be experiencing the world.

Perhaps you've heard of the famous experiment the child psychologist Piaget designed and conducted: An adult experimenter shows a four-year-old child a ball whose hemispheres are colored red and green, i.e., the ball is half red and half green. He twirls the ball around a few times clearly showing the child the two colors. Then he places the ball between himself and the child, green side facing the child, red side facing himself. When the adult asks what the child sees, the child correctly says green. Now, the crucial finding of this famous experiment: when the adult asks the child what he, the adult, sees, the child says green. Though the four-year-old has seen the two colors of the ball, he is yet unable to imagine seeing through the eyes of the adult, i.e., he is unable to take on a perspective other than his own. Somewhere around age five, most children given this experiment, are able to correctly identify the color the adult is seeing, signifying that a mysterious, developmental step has taken place. Somehow, the child has learned how to take on another's perspective. And of course this developmental step is crucial for the child's socialization, individuation, and maturation.

We, too, as adults can regularly remind ourselves that our ways of seeing, perceiving, and responding to the world—outside and inside our body boundaries, outside and inside our group identifications—are not necessarily the only ways available.

Here's an exercise you can try: at a few points throughout your day, decide that you will take on someone else's perspective. Adopt an attitude of curiosity as you imagine for a moment or two that you are this person. Observe the world and your experience *as this person*. What do you see as this person, how do you feel as this person? There is no right or wrong way to do this, though a caution is in order. You are not being asked to accept or adopt the other person's views or beliefs; you're not being asked to abandon your own normal boundaries as an individual. You're simply engaging in an imaginative, consciousness-shifting exercise. With curiosity and some imagination, you should simply be able to get a felt sense of how this person may be experiencing a particular moment in time. If you find yourself reacting strongly with negative emotions (anger, disgust, depression), this may be a sign that you're projecting onto the person rather than neutrally "getting" them.

THE PRACTICE OF NON-AVOIDANCE

As near as we can tell, whatever arises moment to moment is our experience of reality. It is what we are aware of, if we remain aware. We are witness to what is—in that second-by-second experiencing. However, for most of us, that quickly seems either too much or not enough. We seem to be automatically attracted by some things that arise and repulsed by others.

In some practice traditions, the idea goes that from our natural, primordial state (the Absolute) we fall into the relative world, the world of pairs, the world of picking and choosing, the world of this over that or vice versa, in short the world of suffering. At some point, if we come to a practice like Zen, we slowly find ourselves training in accepting whatever arises, in being this moment just as it is, with nothing added and nothing taken away.... Or, at least that's what we aspire to. In fact, though, it may be more realistic to say that we may get good at seeing how much we don't accept what's given moment to moment.

But then, at least, we learn to practice with that avoidance, by seeing it, allowing ourselves to experience it, which means feeling it in the body and seeing the thoughts connected with it. In so doing, we begin to accept our avoidance. We train ourselves to be more and more present with whatever is arising—and we catch ourselves when we are in avoidance. We actually begin to catch and experience the tightness or contraction of trying to avoid the reality of the moment.

Radically "non-avoiding" all that arises moment by moment can be a very specific practice to be activated on and off the meditation seat. While meditating, we can observe our body-mind meticulously, paying special close attention to where avoidance appears (I don't like that fly buzzing around my nose; I wish the traffic noises were not so loud; I'm hopeless, I'll never get this right; yes, I want more of that pleasant feeling, etc.). Thus, in observing the arising events of physical reality, the emotions and thoughts, the body's sensations, we can make a silent gesture of assent, of opening to all of it. Not just once—but again and again. And so, on the meditation seat, this can become a powerful practice, meticulously engaged in for the duration of a sitting period. Off the meditation seat, going about our daily life, we can become more and more aware of exactly when and how we try to avoid what's arising.

A helpful word we can use in this practice is simply to ask ourselves when we realize we're reacting: "avoiding?" Much like the practice phrase, "what is this?" silently asking "avoiding?" points us back to our present experience, including any resistance, upset, bodily tightness, and unexamined believed thoughts. Slowly, this begins to work on us, making more room for things and us to be exactly as we are.

“CONTINUOUSLY RENEWED IMMEDIACY” AND STAYING

Thomas Kelly, a Quaker, who lived from 1893 to 1941, used a wonderful phrase in the context of discussing the spiritual life, which in my view is a perfect definition of meditation—and practice—“*continuously renewed immediacy*.” And Pema Chodron has called meditation nothing more nor less than *staying*, staying with the present as it unfolds and changes, staying with our ups and downs, staying with a watchful awareness of what we’re up to and what’s going on around us. Very simple, nothing fancy, just the willingness to be.

Kelly’s phrase also implies that the meditator assents to or allows the immediate to continuously renew, which of course it does anyway, but usually without much awareness from us. To bring Pema in again, what goes on in meditation is that we learn over time how to simply stay—which is, at least in the beginning, an act of will (we *will* sit without moving, we *will* sit without scratching that itch, we *will* tolerate that fly on our face). And over the months and years of practice, we also learn more and more to appreciate both the flux of change and the stillness of something which includes the change—call it immediacy or call it the eternal moment or, more traditionally in Zen terms, *samadhi*. By staying and continuously renewing immediacy we learn the wisdom of no escape.

Of course, the bedrock of our practice is sitting meditation, but we also practice off the meditation seat. The training of sitting meditation allows us to stay more and more with the flux of our lives but increasingly from a background of stillness, silence, or equanimity. It’s not that our health or psychological issues become somehow magically resolved, or that we will be guaranteed success in the world’s eyes; it’s just that these things are included more as what our life is—the constant change AND the unchanged underneath and through it all.

Ken Wilber, in describing our relationship to pain after we’ve meditated for some years, says that we actually may feel pain more acutely, but somehow that matters less. This is another way of drawing the important distinction made in Zen—and other traditions—between pain and suffering. Pain comes when and if it does and is inevitable and inescapable, whereas suffering—what we add to the pain with our egoic preferences and fears—is always optional. The more we practice with diligence the more it becomes clear to us that suffering is, indeed, optional.

In sum, then, saying yes to “*continuously renewed immediacy*” and learning to stay with our life as it is, moment by moment, we learn the wisdom of no escape, and with that we discover we are already and always free.

UPPING YOUR GAME: GROWING UP, WAKING UP, SHOWING UP, CLEANING UP

The following is a very brief outline of Ken Wilber's framework for looking at our human life. Over the next months, little by little, I'll go into each of these areas in some detail, and we'll have a chance to explore ways of practicing with them.

Growing Up is concerned with relative truth, the movement of maturing, developing, and even evolving. It deals with the recognition—and experience—of moving from one level to the next higher, and refers to gaining in perspective. For example, a 10-year old child sees and understands more than its former 7-year-old self. Robert Kegan, a well-known Harvard developmentalist, has said, "I know of no better way to summarize development than that the subject of one stage becomes the object of the subject of the next." Thus, as we grow and develop, who and what we were becomes obvious to us as we become the newer, more developed self. All Growing Up, deals with changes in form, both individually and collectively. The individual, the group, evolve (or sometimes get stuck), changing their exterior and interior forms as they go.

Waking Up refers to the potential that each of us has to awaken to our true nature. Enlightenment, realization, liberation are some of the names for this awakening. When it happens, it happens outside of time and space, in other words outside of form. Waking up is, therefore, unlike growing up, though how we unpack our waking up depends on where we are in our growing up. For example, a realized Japanese Zen master of the World War II era can still be at the level of "mythic membership" (one of the levels of growing up), believing in and acting from such things as imperialism and patriarchy.

Showing Up refers to the fact that who we are in terms of both our development and our depth of awakening shows up in our actual life—in our actions and behaviors. In other words, wherever we are along the path, that's what shows up, informing our attitudes and behaviors. As we develop and deepen our practice, we tend to show up with more wisdom, compassion and kindness.

Cleaning Up is an ongoing process, which acknowledges that at whatever level we find ourselves, and at whatever degree of awakening, we inevitably carry with us elements of unconsciousness—shadow, in other words. Our shadows are the parts of ourselves that have been denied, repressed, or disowned. By definition, they are outside our immediate awareness. We can access shadow material indirectly, especially by noticing what we project on to others and by paying attention to and working with the elements of our dream life.

By paying attention to and working with the four "ups," we can make our practice more rounded and complete. Over the next months, and under each of the "ups," we'll focus on very specific practice techniques, which you're invited to try out.

FROM STRUGGLE TO PERSEVERANCE

“The fool who persists in his folly will become wise.” William Blake

Let’s distinguish for a moment between struggle and perseverance—in our lives, but especially in our practice. Struggle has the strong sense of “me” wanting something—to improve, to overcome, to win, to escape, to cease suffering. And, in fact, struggling shows up in our lives over and over—when seen from an ordinary perspective. We struggle to get ahead in our jobs, to raise families, to stay healthy, to overcome an enemy or rival, to make all sorts of choices that let us feel like we are “winning,” that we’re in control. We may bring this same way of being to our practice, at least in the early months and years. We feel like our practice should get us somewhere and we approach it with the same ambition we have our lives. And we can easily turn practice into a grim struggle to achieve some desired goal—enlightenment, peace, or, more modestly, just less anxiety and stress.

But somehow—and this is indeed one of the mysteries of practice—over time, as we “persist in our folly,” we learn to simply do the practice, be the practice and thus build our capacity for perseverance. And the kind of perseverance I’m referring to is essentially free of struggle. We may even come to see in a moment of clarity, that doing and being the practice requires no special or heroic efforts, no endless fighting with ourselves, no desperate measures taken to improve ourselves, pull ourselves up by the bootstraps. At that point, we let go of the struggle. As one writer put it some years ago, we cease in our attempts to “push the river.” But we do persevere in our commitment to flow with the river, which in our practice includes our commitment to regular sitting meditation, to remembering to be aware and present in more and more of the moments of our daily life.

The move from struggle to perseverance is an important turning point in practice, as it signals a kind of acceptance of our lives that may have been lacking up to that point. And the good news then is that practice actually can and often does take on a kind of simple, natural, and even joyful quality. As we reside more and more in the willingness to just be with what is arising, moment-to-moment, things naturally settle down. We become more at one with the “eternal present” *through* the very attention we pay to the “passing present.” We may even occasionally have a glimpse of the fundamental “all-rightness” of everything, the sense that there’s nothing really to do, nor anywhere to go, nor anyone special to be outside of right here and right now.

At that point you could say there’s a subtle but profound blending of practicing and living. Yes, we continue to practice—diligently and mindfully—but somehow it seems less and less separate from just living our life.

DIRECT EXPERIENCE

One way to describe Zen practice is that it is both the *intention* and *experience* of “immediate lived awareness” (Ken Wilber). Zen practice has to be *intentional* because so much of our time is not spent in “immediate lived awareness”—rather we spend it in fantasies, regrets, projections, and troubling emotions. We have to make the silent reminder to ourselves to wake up, to be present to all that’s going on with us and around us. And because we forget, we need to constantly remind ourselves. Then, after 10,000 reminders, we notice that our *experience* of lived awareness does, in fact, take on more of a seamless quality. And we end up spending more time in and as lived awareness.

Of course, our ongoing sessions of sitting meditation are the training ground for this, a royal road, so to speak, where returning to lived awareness—the sound of traffic, birds, air conditioner, our own random thoughts, fantasies, any arising emotions along with their specific bodily sensations—all these are the forms of our lived awareness, our direct experience.

From one perspective, say a beginner’s, we might legitimately ask is this enough, is this all there is? Surely there must be more to the so-called spiritual path than just “immediate lived awareness”? The paradoxical answer, like so many in life and Zen practice, is yes—and no.

A funny thing seems to happen as the months and years of practice go on, as we put in the “hard yards” of conscious awareness training on and off the meditation seat. On the one hand, as we turn away from all our pointless me-centered mental activity—by seeing through it—and return over and over to ordinary “immediate lived awareness,” just that experiencing seems to suffice. On the other hand, perhaps it does so because we have seen more fully into the actuality of lived experiential awareness. That is, the awareness of lived experience takes on a deeper, richer, more vivid aspect, as if we’ve stepped out of the shadows into bright sunlight.

In traditional Zen, it’s said we’ve seen into the emptiness of all forms and, paradoxically, have come to appreciate them even more because of it (because ultimately the emptiness and the forms are not separate). But however we describe the unfolding effects of practice with abstract generalities, we eventually know enough to know that those descriptions are not it. Our practice is to return again and again to “immediate lived experience.” In the early months and years of doing this, we may have to simply have faith in the process, but at some point faith comes to be replaced by the certainty of our own ineffable direct experience. We will know in our heart of hearts what it means that sugar tastes sweet and lemons taste sour—not because we’ve heard or read about it, but because we’ve experienced it to be so.

p.s. We may never know WHY sugar and lemons taste the way they do, but that won’t matter anymore.

THE FRONT AND BACK EXPERIMENT

Here's something to try as you sit in meditation and as you go about your day:

Provisionally, take the position that there is a Front and Back to your experience, to your life. Determine that you will explore this notion *experientially* for a part of your sitting sessions for the next weeks or months (up to you how long you try this out) and randomly throughout your days as it occurs to you.

In essence, the experiment consists of shifting your attention (awareness) back and forth from Front to Back. Now, most people have absolutely no difficulty with focusing on what's in Front. It's when they try to focus on what's in Back that difficulties and confusion may arise. So, for our purposes, let's define what's in Front as everything and anything that can be experienced as an object of awareness. So this would include everything seen, heard, smelled, tasted in the outer world: trees, birds, the voices of friends and strangers, cherry yogurt, etc. It would also include—and this is a tricky part—any of your own body's senses and sensations, and, yes, any of your thoughts and emotions. After all, we know when something in our body is feeling something, just as we know when we're angry or hurt; just as we can know our own thoughts—when we're not subsumed into them or taken over by them.

What's in Back, then, is what allows for the experience of what's in Front. It is the Subject that holds the objects of experience in awareness. From our normally limited perspective, though, the problem is that the in Back (Subject) cannot be made into an object—though try and try we will. In fact, it can be said that the Subject turned falsely into an object is the ego, the small self, any of the mini-me's we routinely take ourselves to be. How do we know all those are forms of unreal selves? Because we can stand apart from them and see them as objects of awareness.

One description of the intention and fruition of practice might be the sudden or slow recognition that all those small selves are not real, and that we've been living out of what has been famously called "me, a case of mistaken identity."

The Front and Back experiment is nothing more than an on-going experiment to come to that realization—or if the realization has already happened, to deepen and embody it more thoroughly. No matter where we are in our practice, it seems we can go deeper and wider, including more of what we've believed is "not me." We can continue to build, as Joko used to say, a bigger container. And in the "building" of that container, some of the side effects are more equanimity and true contentment, even in the midst of the so-called problems of living.

We might even come to the experiential realization at some point that Front and Back are just convenient pointing-out tools and are not separate, just as Subject and Object are really not-two. The important thing is to see what you can discover for yourself.

