5 Ways to Know Yourself as a Spiritual Being

Basic Mindfulness Training is built around five Core Practices. You don't necessarily have to learn all five, although most people like to at least sample them all. Because these practices are strongly contrasting, the chances are very good that even if you don't take to all of them, at least one or two will really work for you. Furthermore, if a particular practice doesn't work at a give time, then it is very likely that one of the other four will.

A practice is said to "work" if, in a reasonable time frame, it delivers one or several of the following.

- Reduction of your physical or emotional suffering.
- Elevation of your physical or emotional fulfillment.
- Deeper knowledge of who you are.
- Positive changes in your objective behavior.

I sometimes refer to the Core Practices as Core Techniques or as the 5 Ways. These phrases all mean exactly the same thing.

Each of the 5 Ways plays four roles.

- Each is a skill-building exercise – A way to strengthen your concentration, clarity and equanimity muscles.
- Each is a basic response strategy – A way to deal with life's challenges and utilize nature's grace.
- Each is a way to know yourself – Revealing a facet of your spiritual essence.
- Each is a tradition – A modern and secular reworking of one of the basic approaches to enlightenment developed historically within Buddhism and other Eastern (as well as Western) traditions.

Here's a brief outline of the 5 Ways.

Focus In

Keep track of your subjective experience in terms of visual thoughts ("Images"), mental conversations ("Talk") and emotional-type body sensations ("Feel").

At the psychological level this clear tracking allows you to break negative states into small manageable pieces, thus loosening their power over you. By negative states I mean things like difficult emotions, limiting beliefs, judgments, urges leading to unproductive behaviors and so forth. By manageable pieces I mean individual images, individual self-talk phrases and specific body locations where the emotional sensations are arising. Learning to focus on just one of these at a give moment will reduce your sense of overwhelm. You stop being

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like a ping pong ball pummeled about by words in your head, emotions in your body and pictures on your mental screen.

At the spiritual level FOCUS IN allows you to become free from the "small self." The small self is the sense that your identity is limited to your mind and body. When you can clearly separate your subjective states into Feel, Image and Talk, those states will be a home where you can live, but from which you can venture out…venture out into a deeper, broader sense of identity. On the other hand, when Feel, Image and Talk get tangled and meshed, they become a prison that confines your identity. With enough practice, the FOCUS IN technique will allow you to break free from the prison of small self.

The name FOCUS IN comes from the fact that you are turning your attention inward to your thoughts and emotions, monitoring them as tangible sensory events. This technique represents a modern reworking of the early Buddhist "divide and conquer" strategies such as the Five Aggregates or the Four Foundations. In terms of modern neuroscience, it is a way of detecting when your brain's "default attentional network" has become active, pulling you into memory, planning, fantasy and judgment.

Focus Out

Anchor yourself in the present moment by focusing on external vision ("Sight"), external hearing ("Sound") and physical-type body sensations ("Touch"). This is based on a practice commonly given to new monks in Zen temples, allowing them to remain in a meditative state while effectively performing their daily tasks.

At a psychological level, this is similar to an approach known in psychotherapy as "distraction." When a client experiences meltdown in a session, the therapist may encourage them to "ground" themselves in external sights, sounds and so forth. A similar strategy is sometimes used by runners to increase endurance. However, there is a subtle but highly significant difference between distraction and the FOCUS OUT practice. FOCUS OUT is not a momentary coping strategy. It is a sustained and systematic apparatus designed to permanently increase your base level of concentration, sensory clarity and equanimity.

At the spiritual level, FOCUS OUT fosters an experience of merging with the outside world, and this in turn leads from an "I-It" relationship to an "I-Thou" relationship with your world.

The FOCUS IN method allows you to clarify how Feel, Image and Talk create the subjective world of past, future and fantasy. By way of contrast Touch, Sight and Sound are always now. Put succinctly, the FOCUS OUT practice is a tangible way to harness the Power of Now.

Focus on Rest

Learn to detect and enjoy naturally occurring restful states such as physical relaxation, mental blank, emotional peace and quiet moments in your head.

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These states often occur spontaneously. The problem is that people don't know how to detect them or how to utilize them. The FOCUS ON REST technique teaches you what to look for and where. You can then utilize these restful states for a wide range of purposes.

For one thing, the more intently you focus on restful states the better you feel, motivating you to focus even more intently. This clever strategy creates a positive feedback loop that revs up your baseline of concentration power. The restful states can also be used to create a container of equanimity within which emotions, physical discomfort and negative urges can come and go with less identification.

Finally, the restful states can evolve into a self-contained source of sensory fulfillment, one that is available on-demand, independent of external circumstances. This is particularly important for people who live in physical discomfort and also for people in recovery. People in physical discomfort need to have a source of pleasure despite the discomfort in order to avoid becoming depressed. People in recovery need a free, legal, healthy and anti-addictive "high" to replace that of the substance/behavior they are trying to abstain from.

In terms of traditional categories, the FOCUS ON REST technique represents a contemporary reworking of the classical absorption (*jhâna*) practices of early Buddhism.

Focus on Impermanence

Paying attention to how things change and when they vanish can be enormously liberating. You come to realize not "this too shall pass," but rather "this too *is* passing"—right now, second by second. When you're faced with physical discomfort, emotional discomfort, mental confusion, or urges leading to unproductive behaviors, focusing on their impermanence allows you to get some sense of *immediate* relief.

At a spiritual level, continuously noting when things change facilitates their break up into a kind of subjective "energy," which in East Asian medicine (and martial arts) is referred to as *qi* (*ch'i*, *ki*).

Also, by noticing the very moment when things vanish, your attention is directed to the Source from which they arise. This leads to the classical experience of "Cessation" referred to by the mystics of the world as True Self, No Self, Nothingness and so forth.

Loving Kindness

The four techniques described above represent different ways of (briefly) going beyond the human self. FOCUS IN "deconstructs" the self back to its sensory components. FOCUS OUT helps you merge into the oneness with the outside world. FOCUS ON REST replaces your ordinary body (physical touch and emotional feel) with a restful body (physical relaxation and emotional peace). It also replaces your ordinary mind (mental image and internal talk) with a restful mind (mental blank and internal quiet). FOCUS ON IMPERMANENCE dissolves everything into energy and vanishing. Each of these four represents a different flavor of No Self. But to *deconstruct* your self is only half of the story. To balance and complete the

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process, one must also learn to *reconstruct* your self into human goodness. That is what LOVING KINDNESS practice is for.

Like FOCUS IN, LOVING KINDNESS works with Feel, Image and Talk, but in a very different way. Instead of just observing Feel-Image-Talk as it arises, LOVING KINDNESS has you actively create positive Images and Talk. These then prime the pump of positive Feel—love, friendliness, compassion, gratitude, forgiveness and so forth. You then use your concentration power to spread that pleasant Feel over your whole body and then radiate it beyond your body out to the people and objects around you. In this way you subtly bless everything you see, hear or touch. When you get good at this practice it dramatically changes the way you relate to the world. Equally important, it changes the way that the world relates to you! Every moment becomes a moment of subtle service to those around you. Every day you deliver a silent sermon from all the pores of your skin.

The Core Practices in a Nutshell

The following sound bites summarize the five approaches described above. The phrases are short and catchy, *but if you really think about what the phrases mean* you'll come to appreciate that they're also quiet subtle and deep.

The Core Practices as strategies for life:

FOCUS IN – Divide & Conquer

FOCUS OUT – Anchor & Merge

FOCUS ON REST – Refresh & Release

FOCUS ON IMPERMANENCE – Flow & Go

LOVING KINDNESS – Love & Serve

The Core Practices as five ways to know yourself:

FOCUS IN – Know yourself as a sensory system

FOCUS OUT – Know others as yourself.

FOCUS ON REST – Know yourself as Serenity & Contentment

FOCUS ON IMPERMANENCE – Know yourself as Spirit & Source

LOVING KINDNESS – Know yourself as Unconditional Love

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