

cloister 2 practice

five omnipresent factors

LISTENING / input - ingesting

Our work over the last few weeks has helped us begin to develop a semantic understanding of the five omnipresent factors. By now, we know and remember these factors readily. This is the prajna, or precise knowledge, arising from listening.

To review once more: **Sense contact** is a moment of raw sense data unaccompanied by conceptualization: a shape with color, a sound, a scent, taste, or texture. **Attention** is the orientation of the consciousness, a directionality that points awareness to the sense contact, like the space that holds the contact in awareness. **Feeling** is the valence, or tone of the sense experience: pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral. **Discrimination** identifies characteristics of the experience, applying concepts, names, labels and the like to the raw sense data. **Volition** is the subtle impulse, a nascent prompting, urging, or inclination to act.

CONTEMPLATING / instill - digesting

Working with the listening prajna (semantic understanding) in our own experience over the last few weeks, including discussing the fine distinctions between them with each other, clarifying our semantic understanding, reviewing that, and doing this it again and again is the contemplation component for this practice.

For example: you scratch your arm. Looking into that action, we perhaps identify the five universal factors as follows. **Sense-contact** is a tactile sensation, perceived by the body sense consciousness, devoid of conceptualization or value. **Attention** is the directionality of consciousness being aware of the sense contact. **Feeling** experiences it as unpleasant. **Discrimination** labels it “itchy” and the like. **Volition** is the rising swell to scratch.

The understanding we develop through this process is still an intellectual understanding—the prajna, or precise knowledge, arising from contemplating. The more we have contemplated up to this point, the more surefooted our contemplating prajna, and thus, the easier the practice will be.

MEDITATING / integrate - absorbing

The first two elements of integrative practice—listening and contemplating—build on each other, and form the foundation for the third, meditating. This is the high point of integrative practice, where things start moving away from the more coarse and dualistic approaches of

listening and contemplating toward a more deeply inward, and ultimately direct experience.

In the context of the five omnipresent factors, the practice is very much like the early Buddhist approach to observing our body-mind complex in its moment to moment flux.

At heart, the practice is to observe the five factors arising, existing, and passing away, as we sit in formal meditation. After completing a basic level of shamatha, we simply watch the mind through the subtly analytical mental faculties of examination (coarse) and investigation (subtle). This is called “analytical” meditation to contrast it with the “resting” phase of the meditation, and because these very subtle faculties are at play.

It is not thinking. It is meditative inquiry.

Watching mind with the light touch of observing the breath in shamatha, we discern what is arising each moment, identifying the five omnipresent factors within it.

Be slow. Be deep. Be soft. In a word, be meditative. Do not think. Do not ruminate. Recognize.

The identification of the factors is a vehicle to intimacy with our experience—our mind. Sitting there thinking about the experience is not the intention. Rather, we allow a subtle inquiry to experience with intricate detail the a play of shadow across from us, a sound drifting through the window, the wafting scent of incense, a lingering flavor of toothpaste, the rise and fall of the belly, or whatever is happening.

There is always something happening. No shortage of material. Ultimately, we work with the five factors to become thoroughly acquainted with the arising of a volition, that swell of the wave of consciousness that propels action. Hone your inquiry more and more, seeking to sense, to experience, palpably the very instant when volition occurs, recognizing it, learning the felt sense of it particular to your own mind.

Why? By gradually coming to an understanding of these factors we understand experientially that they are not I, me, or mine. Over time, instead of narrating a story that we immediately swallow whole, unexamined, we perceive experience in a more granular way. Here is a sense-contact, with attention, provoking a feeling, discrimination of characteristics, and a volition to react.

In essence, we spy on our experience to see how a chain reaction feeds the idea of an I, of an itch, an unpleasantness, an urge to scratch. In formal meditation, we identify these and stay still, not responding to the volition’s urge for a bit. Very likely we will find that the experiences passes away. If we let it.

Watching these factors arise, remain for a bit, and dissolve progressively softens our idea of self, inserting a pause in the reflex to act as volition demands, a tool for our arsenal to weaken the habitual tendencies that drive us to respond to experience as something to judge and control.