

## The Experience of Being in 12 Practices

By Tony V. Zampella

Have you ever attended a seminar that offered prescriptive behaviors to adopt, processes to implement and content to remember? I recently had this experience.

What's missing from this scenario depends somewhat on our expectations of learning and, more importantly, our view of being human. Do we react to, manage, or adopt change? Or are we co-creators of change?

To accept the former view implies an understanding of *being human* as fixed, separate selves, independent of our circumstances that respond to change.

If we accept the latter view, as co-creators, we shift:

- From doling out prescriptive **behaviors**, *adopting* “norms” to conform
- To discovering descriptive **practices**, *accessing* “being” to co-create

To make this shift from *behaviors* to *practices* – a distinction unappreciated by many learning designs – first requires a fundamental paradigm shift in our *understanding of being*.

### What Is Being?

Most psychological models relating to the self and human functioning imply that the self exists as a discrete, separate, and independent entity. However, ontological models relate to the self (being) or all phenomena not as a discrete stand-alone entity but as mutually dependent on numerous causes and conditions.

Consider the human body (part of our being), for example, as mutually dependent on the wind, sun, oceans, plants, and animals. Each offers us the vitamins and energy to breathe in and out of our cycle of life.

Being is not merely an internal state of thoughts, emotions, and sensations, nor is it some set of identities or discrete or separate self, independent of its world and experiences. Indeed, our thoughts and experience – an arising-together phenomenon – result from causes and conditions that interact with our world to give meaning to our existence.

This is a departure from our rational mindset and normative view, which seeks to find discrete causes to explain our experiences rather than appreciate the interdependent nature of our role in reality.

### An Interdependent Awareness

The implications of being with our world are profound!

— **We are related to the world** in ways that are inextricably linked to our thoughts, experiences, multiple identities, and history, which is continually revealed in our mind, body, and language as we interact.

— **Our presence in the world discloses our potential**, which is not yet realized or confined in the present and is always projected toward the future, and emerging in the present. The future we look forward to reveals a unique context: a possibility that brings aliveness as we co-create our moment-to-moment existence.

— **Our consciousness precedes being in two unique ways.** First, we are aware of the notion of past and future in the present. Second, we are aware of the inevitable certainty of our own death. This awareness gives life meaning. Our experiences reveal this unified *temporal nature*, as three dimensions of future, past, and present.

Key to accessing this expansive view of being centers on adopting an awareness as co-creators of our world – a mindset of continual inquiry that discovers and discloses ourselves with each interaction.

## **A Different Experience of Learning**

As co-creators of our world, our experience can both reveal dimensions of our being and realize our potential with each interaction.

The fact that phenomena are fundamentally interconnected and interdependent (even without discrete boundaries) means that they are “empty” of a fixed essence or solid *self*. This nature of “non-self” is both “empty” of an inherently existing self and yet “full” of all things.

Zen Master and author Thich Nhat Hanh describes such an experience as “Interbeing,” dispelling any notion of “solitary beings.” He views us and the planet as one giant, “living, breathing cell, with all its working parts linked in symbiosis.”

*“Ultimately, the purpose of learning, here, evolves from knowing and doing more to being more.”*

Learning professionals, however, seldom appreciate this *interdependent nature* of being nor the generative capacity it reveals. They both impact learning and require unlearning.

- **Learning** occurs between a fear and a need. The growth imperative is met by fear of the unknown, which reveals many causes and conditions that defy rational-only analysis; too many variables to codify in “behaviors” or to reduce to empirical measures.
- **Unlearning** occurs between certainty and possibility. The willingness to let go of outmoded assumptions and beliefs often challenges our self-perception with latent doubt, guilt, and old insecurities. The remedy here requires greater wisdom and imagination rather than more knowledge and concepts.

To live between *learning* and *unlearning* entails a primary focus on intention, inquiry, imagination, and contemplation.

We must clear our minds to sort out identities, penetrate distractions, prioritize concerns, disclose concealed impediments, and tune in to experience for co-creating our existence. Indeed, the experience of our presence matters. To listen, relate, witness, and to be seen – all support connecting deeply with phenomena internally and externally.

Ultimately, the purpose of learning, here, evolves from knowing and doing more to *being more*. Tapping into our interdependent nature, we access new dimensions of humanity to expand intentional meaning-making as co-creators.

If we can become open to this possibility, the question then becomes how to clear ourselves to reveal and tune into the vessel that we are?

## Why Practice?

Such profound questions and claims about our existence require a view of “self” beyond a rational, epistemological knowing self to also include an ontological felt sense of being.

Most pedagogical designs dismiss the tensions between concepts of knowledge and experience of being. We still view content and process as distinct, instead of inseparable phenomena. We separate language, time, energy, and action, managing each independently. And we’ve now begun to view *intention* and *impact* as distinct dynamics, preferencing the latter.

As we interact with our world – not via knowledge of concepts or singular events but as the connective tissue of our existence – we do not merely understand content, achieve goals, or experience impact. We also clarify our views and discern our intentions to discover the obstacles and choices that reveal the deep interconnectivity between thought and experience.

Ours is a journey not of *increased performance or understanding concepts* but of gaining new levels of clarity by examining the *content of our consciousness*.

- *Our aim* is to experience being: to witness, experience, and co-create our existence.
- *Our ultimate goal* is to calm our mind: to clear away the obstacles for tuning into the unfolding of wisdom.

If we can become open to this possibility, the question then becomes how to clear ourselves to reveal and tune into the vessel that we are?

## Getting Closer to the Experience of Being

This journey requires much more than mere knowledge of theories and concepts.

We are not proposing practice in *what* we know or *how* we do things. We are proposing practice for differentiating being to clarify *who* we are.

This kind of practice requires becoming present to our humanness as a fluid, interdependent, interconnected being – to become aware of the felt experience of being. The practice of *being* opens up a dimension of our humanity that can increase performance without increasing the compulsion and wants that also increase anxiety.

Practice precedes performance. We become intentional to test our understanding of knowledge, to question our assumptions and to reveal the causes and conditions that intersect to create experiences.

These practices discovered through research and contemplative learning will expand our presence to reveal our interdependent being: our temporal nature, internal state, and our possibility as co-creators.

## Our 12 Practices

As we have grown to become *Bhavana Learning Group*, we have also codified our multi-year inquiry into the practices for developing an interdependent awareness.

Part of our shift involved exploring and examining rigorous practices that access our being to expand our presence: To weave together our past and future, reveal impediments, integrate lessons and realize possibility.

I have organized these 12 Practices in **three vessels**, each preparing learners to integrate wisdom into an interdependent awareness.

- **Grounding Vessel**– Practices 1 through 4 – develops a foundation for our view, speech, and actions.
- **Fruition Vessel**– Practices 5 through 8 – expands grounding to cultivate commitment and possibility.
- **Fertile Vessel**– Practices 9 through 12 – extends and deepens the previous learning to co-create.

The *key for each practice* below denotes how we exist *with* or *without* each practice. We provide resources for each practice on our website for [12 Practices](#).



= With PRACTICE



= Without PRACTICE

### 1. AWARENESS



This practice cultivates my attention so that I observe my experience – the perceptions, emotions, thoughts and other causes, conditions, and contexts that influence me.



I react to events and circumstances, and I allow deadlines and tasks to determine my actions.

### 2. INTEGRITY



This practice honors my word as *whole and complete*, and it affects my speaking, action, livelihood and agreements to cultivate trust.



My fragmented attention and casual speaking create incongruences between my words and deeds, causing confusion, uncertainty and distrust.

### 3. INTENTION

 The practice of bringing conscious thought to the present moment. Being deliberate and responsible in my motivation, attitude, and direction, manifesting as mindful choosing, speaking and action.

 My reactions rest on sentimental wishes, wishful thinking, and my casual aims and heartfelt desires.

### 4. AUTHENTICITY

 With this practice, I take custody of my unified being – who I’ve been, who I am and who I will become. My interactions reveal the possibility of being fully human.

 My preoccupation with fitting in, adapting to norms and my self-image guides my priorities, concerns and actions.

### 5. CONTEMPLATION

 This practice focuses my awareness of deepening concentration below the surface to gain insight.

 I automatically react to events and tasks, skimming and scanning communications. I am unable to delve below surface thoughts or emotions for a sustained period.

### 6. COMPLETION

 I practice reflecting on things *as they are*. I recreate others, acknowledge situations and receive concerns from a foundation of wholeness and background of possibilities.

 My split attention leads to stepping over items, ignoring details and taking shortcuts. I learn to tolerate unnecessary missteps, which requires more time and energy.

### 7. DEEP LISTENING

 My practice of bare attention and receptive awareness allows things to be revealed — for me to be with others as they are and to receive their concerns fully.

 I listen only for the information I need to manage my tasks and solve my problems.

## 8. COMMITMENT

 With my practice of devotional resolve – cognitively, emotionally and volitionally – I find serene direction in surrendering to something larger than myself.

 My life consists of obligations and perpetual, monotonous tasks that find me aimlessly drifting without direction.

## 9. IMAGINATION

 My practice of envisioning possibilities opens untapped potential beyond daily activities, problems and what seems conceivable. This practice also seeds my empathy to relate to others' experiences.

 I am a practical and analytical problem solver and effortlessly discover solutions to resolve problems. I am seduced by quick fixes and immediate results.

## 10. DISCERNMENT

 With the practice of rigorous focus and attention, I can cut through noise and distractions to choose wisely among different needs, concerns and priorities to gain clarity.

 My indecisiveness has made me unable to scrutinize, evaluate, or penetrate the morass of choices and distractions, becoming inattentive to the quality of my output.

## 11. INQUIRY

 This practice challenges me to live in the question and explore situations with humility, curiosity and interest in the face of the unknown.

 I reflexively seek out answers and solutions and stop questioning once I discover them.

## 12. COMMUNITY AS CONTEXT

 This practice ultimately determines what it is to be a person, because becoming a “self” happens in community. This practice expands my view of “self” and community as mutually dependent on causes and conditions – a point of view that unifies and views coherence in the flow of experiences.

 I believe I am a discrete, fixed and solid entity. I am an independent and individual identity to protect and defend.

## Practice Cultivates Wisdom

The experience of practice is quite different from behaviors, knowledge or “tools.”

1. Each of these 12 Practices expands our view to cultivate the experience of being as interdependent.
2. Each is connected through a progressive sequence: the first vessel (Practices 1 – 4) is fundamental, and the subsequent vessels (Practices 5 – 8, and Practices 9 – 12) expand on previous vessels.
3. Each lives beyond conceptual understanding to include experience (not simply knowledge) for deeper understanding.
4. Each also opens a new perspective and framework with techniques and trainings that establish routines and rituals to cultivate wisdom.
5. And finally, each includes resources (from our website for [12 Practices](#)) to begin an ongoing practice.

The practice of practice leads to greater clarity and wisdom by 1) applying new understanding 2) internalizing our learning, and 3) embodying our experience of learning on the way to 4) expanding to an integrated being.

Many programs promise these same results, but such promises stem from a mistaken conclusion about learning, unlearning and wisdom: to *know the content* (about the thing) is not *living the context* (felt experience of being).

*“We are not proposing practice in what we know or how we do things. We are proposing practice for differentiating being to clarify who we are.”*

I’ll leave the larger implications for another paper. Suffice it to say that only greater clarity of causes and conditions reveals the beliefs that lead to our consumption and desires that impede the experience of greater satisfaction that already exists.

Our (dis)satisfaction is rooted more in unexamined assumptions rather than one more “missing” thing to consume, acquire or leverage. As the Buddha taught, *“Those who act with few desires are calm, without worry or fear.”*

With this deeper awareness of being, we view concerns about performance as mutually dependent on the wisdom found at the source of our freedom.

And that begins with *practice*.

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As an instructor, researcher, and designer of contemplative learning programs and practices, Tony’s work explores the human side of change by bringing wisdom to learning. His focus includes ***ontological inquiry***, ***Integral meta-theory***, and ***Buddhist wisdom*** to sustain contemplative practice.