

## Reflective Presence and Reflective Practice

Self-Reflection is the core of Reflective Presence – a way of being and being with - of relating to others, to events and situations, to oneself, and to life in general. To be truly present we must be aware of ourselves and others. We must be able to notice and to reflect on what we perceive. To reflect is to pay attention in a certain way. For this kind of reflection we use the practice of mindfulness, which involves a quiet open-hearted attention to one's moment-to-moment experience whatever it is, without judgement, without preference, without avoiding or efforting to make something happen.

This practice of mindful reflection is life-changing. It moves us beyond our robotic trances, beyond our old automatic habits, beyond reactivity and impulses toward a more conscious way of choosing creative responses to life. In this way, it is liberating. It opens the door to compassion, to peace, and to true happiness.

There is a natural sequence of steps involved in this practice of mindful reflection that help to cultivate reflective presence and the capacity to be present for others and for life. We can describe these steps with seven "R" words as follows:

1. Reflect
2. Recognize
3. Refrain
4. Relax
5. Review
6. Realize
7. Respond ...

And then back to Reflecting.... This is a circular process, not a linear one. And it is an ongoing journey, one where the destination is actually the journey itself and so, on the journey, one is always "here"... Let's look again at this sequence as a way of understanding Reflective Practice.

1. Reflect: this is the simple intention to use mindful awareness for self-reflection. It is just remembering to pause, to notice, to reflect.
2. Recognize: what's happening already. What is habitual and automatic? Moshe Feldenkrais used to say that you cannot do what you want until you know what you are already doing.
3. Refrain: interrupt what's happening on automatic. Create a little space for something by simply refraining for a moment. Pause.
4. Relax: take a deep breath. Release bodily tension, for example in your shoulders, your jaw. Soften especially around your heart.
5. Review: take another look, at the person or situation you're with. See it with new eyes. See differently. Look deeply. Perceive anew.
6. Realize: seeing differently allows us to realize something... looking at a person or situation as if it is a gift, or a source of inspiration, for example. See beauty that inspires appreciation, or see suffering in a way that opens your heart of compassion.
7. Respond: this is different from an automatic reaction. Your response after seeing differently, and realizing something new, will be less about old experiences and more appropriate to the present moment. This way of responding, rather than reacting, is

the key to *reflective presence*... being fully present and awake... simply being and being with.

Finally, reflect again... notice what's happening now...

There are no end of opportunities to practise this way of moving from reactivity to creative responding... to reflective presence... being and being with. You can create a practice time to cultivate this self-reflection as a healthy habit. Right now, perhaps, simply notice your breathing as you are reading this. Decide to simply pay attention to your breath for a moment. No need to make it different or try to do it "right"... just notice the breath coming in and going out... feel yourself being breathed.

If you think of a stressful situation in your life, or a person you find difficult for a moment, you might notice something changing in your breathing pattern. What starts to happen? This reaction will be automatic and habitual... even when you are only imagining a situation. Just pay attention to this reaction for a moment with curiosity. Then, interrupt it... refrain from thinking the same thoughts... relax any part of your body where you feel tension... breathe into the tension and feel it softening... soften around your heart...

Think again about that person or situation... look with new eyes, as if you were seeing for the first time... what looks different? Can you see signs of suffering in the person? Can you step back from the situation and get a different perspective?

Can you see anything about this person or situation that touches you, or inspires you, or seems like a gift? (This might seem like a real stretch... it is more important to have the intention look this way that to actually succeed at first.)

Check in with your breathing again... with your bodily experience... with your impulses and thoughts and feelings... take time to simply be with whatever is happening... if you feel differently, can you imagine a new kind of response?

Finally, just reflect on this whole experience. Give yourself a few more moments to simply be with whatever thoughts, feelings, insights, memories, images, or bodily experience is unfolding for you now...

A simple practice like this, mindful reflective practice, takes only a few minutes at a time. It may transform the way your day goes. It will change the quality of your experiences and responses to others and to life. It will help you to cultivate what we are calling *reflective presence*. Remember:

1. Reflect
2. Recognize
3. Refrain
4. Relax
5. Review
6. Realize
7. Respond ... and then Reflect again...

This version of reflective practice is inspired by Buddhism, by yoga, by Hakomi, and by many wonderful teachers of mindful awareness including Eleanor Leatham, Paul Brenner, Pema Chodron, Thich Nhat Han, Eckhart Tolle, Ron Kurtz, and Flint Sparks.

With gratitude,  
Donna Martin