

# RETURN TO THE SOURCE

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# SOMETHING FROM NOTHING

For millennia the number One was thought of as the first and simplest number and the basis of all others. In modern mathematics that role has been taken over by Zero. Zero is defined as the number of things in the set that contains no things. In spirituality Zero may be used to describe a special kind of no-thing-ness – The rich and fulfilling nothing from which each something arises and to which it returns – *Nihil per excellentiam* – The Source of Consciousness.

Since there are 6 Basic Spaces, there are in theory...

**6** possible ways to pick just one of them – the Basic Spaces themselves.

**15** possible ways to pick exactly two.

We typically use about half of those possibilities (i.e., the subjective dyads, modality dyads, Image-Touch Space (where restfulness is readily available), etc.)

**20** possible ways of picking three of them at once.

We typically use only two of those possibilities (i.e., the Objective Triad and Subjective Triad).

**15** ways of picking four of them at once.

We typically use only one of these possibilities, Bodymind Space, aka Touch + FIT Space, although covering Sight + FIT Space or Sound + FIT Space can also be instructive.

**6** ways of picking exactly 5 of them.

You might sometimes use one of these, Bodymind + Sound Space, which is a sort of closed-eyes version of working in the All Senses. (Note that picking 5 out of 6 for inclusion is equivalent to picking 1 out of 6 for exclusion, so the number of ways of picking 5 = one of the ways of picking 1. By same principle the picking 4 out of 6 for inclusion is equivalent to picking 2 out of 6 for exclusion, so the number of ways to pick 4 = the number of ways to pick 2, i.e., 15.)

**1** way of choose all 6 of them at once.

Now...

$$6 + 15 + 20 + 15 + 6 + 1 = 63 = 64 - 1 = 2^6 - 1$$

Something seems amiss here. Things would be simpler (Occam's razor) and more beautiful (Einstein's criterion) if the total number of possible choices could be made equal to  $2^6 = 64$ , i.e., 2 (the simplest number after 0 and 1) raised to the number of Basic Spaces. Moreover, the pattern of possibilities would become perfectly symmetrical if we added a 1 at the beginning of the sequence:

$$1 + 6 + 15 + 20 + 15 + 6 + 1 = 64$$

The **1** at the beginning stands for the possibility of choosing nothing whatsoever as your focus space, i.e., focusing on a state of consciousness that has no sensory content at all! This would represent contentless consciousness, or mathematically speaking, the empty set.

One might be tempted to defined contentless consciousness as the state of dreamless sleep, but it turns out to be much more productive to work with what in ancient India was referred to as *turīya*, meaning literally "the Fourth." The Fourth is a state of consciousness without specific content and hence different from ordinary waking consciousness (the First) and dreaming consciousness (the Second). But it is not utterly embedded in unconsciousness the way dreamless sleep (the Third) is.

This experience has been known and cultivated in all ages and in all cultures inside and outside of all religious traditions. Hence, there are many synonyms for it, some of which seem to contradict each other! The following partial list of synonyms will give you an idea of the ubiquity and importance of this experience.

Pure Consciousness (*Purusha* in Yoga)  
Cessation (*Cittavrittinirodha* in Yoga, *Nirodha* in Buddhism, *Cesó* in St. John of the Cross)  
The Source (*Ha Makom* in Kabbalah, *Kongen* in Sasaki Roshi)  
The Witness (*Drashtri* in Yoga)  
True Self (*Atma* in Hinduism)  
No self (*Anatma* in Buddhism)  
The Unborn (*Ajata* in Buddhism and Hinduism)  
The Undying (*Amrita* in Buddhism and Hinduism)  
Emptiness (*Shunyata* in Buddhism)  
Fullness (*Purna* in Hinduism)  
Nothingness (*Nihil* in Christianity, *Ayn* in Judaism, *Ākiñcañña* in Buddhism)  
Ground (*Grund* in Christianity, *Gzhi* in Tibetan practice)  
Peace of Heaven (*Shalom bimromav* in Judaism)  
Void (*Shunya* in Buddhism, *Xū* in Daoism)  
True Love (*Shinjitsu no ai* in Sasaki Roshi)

Now a person might reasonably object that focusing on “nothing whatsoever” is impossible, both practically and logically.

On the practical side, in order to experience “nothing” it would seem that one would have to push down all sensory activity. But to push down all sensory activity is 1) not feasible and 2) not desirable.

On the logical side, nothing is in some ways like a dimensionless point without extension in space or duration through time. It contains no room for *experienter*, *experienced*, or even *experience*. To speak of “experiencing” such a thing would seem to be a contradiction in terms.

Let’s address each of these objections in turn.

## ***The Practical Objection***

Instead of trying to turn off experience, consider instead simply noticing whenever an experience vanishes, i.e., goes from being something to being nothing. Each time you note “Gone,” for just a fraction of a second your attention is averted (turned toward) nothing-whatsoever-ness.

Remember that when you define a certain “X” to be your focus space, it is expected that “non X” will occur. All you are asked to do is highlight X and let non X be in the background. So if you define “nothingness” to be your focus space, it’s fine if there is still a lot of somethingness in your awareness. All you have to do is get fascinated with the periodic sequence of vanishings and let all the arisings “do their thing” in the background.

So much for the practical difficulty. Now let’s address the deeper, logical difficulty.

## ***The Logical Objection***

Logically, how can anyone experience something that is not an experience? Well, of course you can't! But what you *can* experience is a continuous sequence of “momentary advertings of awareness toward nothingness.” After a while, this string of acknowledged vanishings sum to a deliciously fulfilling sense of nothingness.

That “deliciously fulfilling sense of nothingness” is not nothingness itself. It is a human sensory event—the closest *experience* a human can have to direct contact with the non-human nothing of the Source. The only closer thing is the “singularity” of direct contact itself; but in that instant there is no knower, known or knowing; there is just the One Zero.

## ***Standard Procedures for Returning to the Source***

In Basic Mindfulness the standard way of working involves choosing a focus space and then applying one of two standard focus methods to that space: Noting States or Even Coverage.

### **Focus Method 1: Note Vanishings**

The categories you can note are classified into active states, (i.e., Touch, Feel), restful states (i.e., Relaxation, Peace), and Impermanence states (i.e., Flow, Vanishing).

For all categories other than vanishing, “to note” is described in terms of:

“Acknowledge, soak in and open up.”

For vanishing, “to note” takes a simpler form, just:

“Acknowledge.”

That's because if you take Nothingness to be your focus space and Noting States to be your focus method, then the only state you can note is “Vanishing.” The relevant instructions would then be:

1. You don't need to position your attention in any particular way.
2. Every time you are aware that something has vanished, note “Gone.”
3. The thing that vanishes could be simple or complex, intense or subtle, well-defined or ill-defined. The vanishing may be dramatic or subtle. Either case is fine. “All nothings are *uncreated equal*.”
4. It is not particularly important that you have a clear sense of what has vanished. Your interest is in the “going” rather than the “what.”
5. After each note, just hang out until something else vanishes. The wait for the next vanishing may be short or long. Any pattern is fine.

Thus, it is possible to incorporate “noting nothingness” into our standard repertoire of procedures by following the above instructions.

## Focus Method 2: Do Nothing

How about “even coverage of nothingness”? This *certainly* would seem to be impossible! How can you cover something with awareness if it is not extended in space and does not last through time? Well, let’s look a little more carefully at the *exact* wording in the definition of “even coverage.”

1. Spread your attention over as much of the focus space as possible without straining.
2. Beyond that, do nothing intentionally.

Clearly part 1 is not relevant to experience nothingness, but part 2 is *very* relevant!

If your focus space is Nothingness, then “cover and do nothing intentionally” is reduced to “do nothing intentionally.” The relevant instructions would then be:

1. You don’t need to position your attention in any particular way.
2. Let whatever happens happen, but as soon as you notice that you are doing *anything* intentionally, stop.

We’ll refer to this process as “Doing Nothing.”

The second part of the instruction requires some clarification. We will *define* “intentional” to mean something you can voluntarily control, meaning you have total control over initiating and stopping the action – like raising or dropping your arm. Therefore, by definition, you can always stop an intentional act. So if you *cannot stop* doing something, it is not really intentional and you don’t *need* to stop. The instructions are very clear; only stop doing what you easily can stop doing. Let anything else happen as it will.

Examples of things that you *can* stop doing are:

- Intentionally thinking (as opposed to thinking that just happens to you)
- Trying to focus on a certain thing
- Trying to have equanimity
- Trying to keep track of what’s going on
- Trying to meditate

Thus, amazingly, it is actually possible to explore Nothingness using the two standard focus methods as long as you realize that in this special case:

- Note States reduces to “just acknowledge each vanishing” and
- Even Coverage reduces to “do nothing intentional.”

Although “just acknowledge each vanishing” and “do nothing intentional” may seem to be very different procedures, they lead to similar experiences.

Two other methods that will lead you in the same direction are the method of “Not this, Not this” (*neti neti*) and the practice of Self Inquiry (constantly asking *who* is experiencing). If you find either of those approaches useful, you can consider them to be “special exercises” to be used in addition to or instead of the standard two methods described above when your focus space is “Nothingness” (True Self, No Self, Source of Thought, etc.)

# HOW TO NOTE VANISHINGS

## **Basic Instructions**

If your focus space is Nothingness then “Noting States” reduces to “Noting Vanishing.” This is because vanishing is the only state that points to contentless consciousness. Here’s how to Note Vanishings:

- You don’t need to position your attention in any particular way.
- Every time you are aware that something has vanished, note “Gone.”
- The thing that vanishes could be simple or complex, intense or subtle, well-defined or ill-defined. The vanishing may be dramatic or subtle. Either case is fine – “All nothings are *uncreated* equal.” It is not particularly important that you have a clear sense of what has vanished. Your interest is in the “going” rather than the “what.”
- After each note, just hang out until something else vanishes. The wait for the next vanishing may be short or long. Any pattern is fine.

## **Guidelines**

### **Guessing**

This procedure often involves a good deal of guessing and groping. It’s okay if you’re not entirely sure how accurate your noting is.

### **Let go of ordinary ordering**

As you Note Vanishings, try to let go of the need to find meaning or get comfortable. If this brings about a state of chaos, confusion or disorientation, note whenever a piece of that chaos vanishes

### **You’re not trying to get things to vanish**

You’re not trying to get things to vanish or prevent things from happening. Just hang out until something vanishes, however tiny that may be. The vanishings may occur frequently or just occasionally. Any pattern is fine.

### **You don’t need to fixate on intensities**

If something intense arises, you don’t have to fixate on it until it *all* disappears. Even very intense arisings usually have some parts that disappear instantly. Moreover, *an intense arising in one part of consciousness almost always causes many small vanishings elsewhere.* If you can, become fascinated with those micro-vanishings rather than fixated on the macro-intensity.

## What to do about rapid-fire vanishings

If vanishing occurs only occasionally, that's fine.

On the other hand, if vanishings are so frequent and quick that you can't note them individually, just note "Gone" every few seconds to acknowledge that you're detecting rapid-fire vanishings. In such cases, you need not try to note each "Gone" individually.

## Positive Effects

### Tranquility

It can sometimes happen that Noting Vanishings creates a pervasive sense of tranquility. That's because each moment of vanishing represents a moment of *Absolute Rest*. That moment of Absolute Rest may spread a wave of *relative rest* through your body, mind and even out to the scene around you. If that happens, enjoy that restfulness but keep focusing on the vanishings.

### Continuous nothingness

It can sometimes happen that the individual moments of vanishings start to connect together with rather little something-ness in between. It's almost like you "Stay Gone" until the next "Gone."

### Richness

When you focus on vanishings, you may sometimes have a paradoxical experience. The vanishing is a kind of nothingness yet seems to deliver a deep sense of richness and fulfillment. If anything like that happens, enjoy it. Remember, the word nirvana means both extinction and fulfillment!

### Figure-ground reversal

As you Note Vanishings, it can sometimes happen that a kind of figure-ground reversal occurs. Instead of *observing* the vanishing point, you *become* it! You become the nothing—the ground—and you "un-become" thoughts and body sensations, which are now like insubstantial figures continuously rising from and returning to the TRUE YOU.

### What Comes Between

You may notice a loss of interest or a loss of clarity with regard to whatever is occurring in between the vanishings. Ordinarily a loss of interest or clarity is considered a bad thing, but in this case it's actually good because it indicates that you're interest and clarity are shifting from the "somethings" to the "nothings." It could also happen that the only thing that seems to occur between vanishings is "polarization," i.e., a sense of simultaneous expansion and contraction. If so, great! In the parlance of my teacher Sasaki Roshi, you're now "participating of the activity of the Source."

# HOW TO DO NOTHING

## ***Basic Instructions***

If your focus space is Nothingness, then “Evenly Cover the space and do nothing” reduces to “Do Nothing.” Here’s how to Do Nothing:

- You don’t need to position your attention in any particular way.
- Let whatever happens happen, but as soon as you notice that you are doing *anything* intentionally, stop.

The second part of the instruction requires some clarification. We will *define* “intentional” to mean something you can voluntarily control, meaning you have total control over initiating and stopping the action – like raising or dropping your arm. Therefore, by definition, you can always stop an intentional act, because if you *cannot stop* doing something, it is not really intentional and you don’t *need* to stop. The instructions are very clear; only stop doing what you easily can stop doing. Let anything else happen as it will.

Examples of things that you *can* stop doing are:

- Intentionally thinking (as opposed to thinking that just happens to you)
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## ***More About Thinking***

Some thoughts are intentional. It’s possible for you to make a decision to think about something and it’s also possible to decide not to think about that thing. Other thoughts are not intentional. They just sort of happen to you. They are not under conscious control. You may find that your thoughts are mostly intentional or mostly not under your control.

The important point to remember is that the “Doing Nothing” as we’ll define it does not require you to stop all thoughts. You just stop *intentionally* thinking. If you can’t stop thinking about something then you don’t *need* to stop because you’re not thinking intentionally, by our definition of that word. So by this definition, “Doing Nothing” is actually a very easy-going process. It just means stop doing whatever you *can* stop doing and don’t worry about the rest of the stuff.

## ***Doing Nothing and the Experience of Nothing***

Doing Nothing is a way of moving toward the experience of nothingness. When you Do Nothing, you let go of the intention to go any place or achieve any goal. You even let go of the intention to get focused or have clarity or avoid chaos. In essence you let go of the intention to “meditate.”

At first this may be a bit disconcerting and uncomfortable, but after a while you begin to get the sense that something is pulling you, taking you on a journey. If you Do Nothing long and continuously enough, nothing will begin to tug on you, taking you on a journey to Zero, Groundless Ground, the Source of consciousness. In other words, you don’t have to try to get to the Source—you just stop doing anything and wait for *it* to get to you!

To sum it up, when you practice “Doing Nothing” it doesn’t mean that the goal is to have nothing happen. In fact there may be a lot happening. That’s okay, as long as you keep letting go of the intention to *do* anything about what’s happening.