

Four Letters, Four Steps

There is another way in which the four letters of the Name provide a map for awakening. So far, we have looked at the importance of *kavanah*, right intention, and how to activate your *kavanah* through noticing, acceptance and realizing that *you* the noticer. These actually correspond to the four letters, as well as the four worlds we have discussed earlier. Let's look at these four steps more linearly, listing them as together with their relationship to the four letters. In this way, you can get a sense of how this plays out in real time.

First, you must have the *intention* to wake up now; this is just a matter of *remembering*. Remember that it is possible, and that you wish to awaken for its own sake, simply because it is the right thing. It is good for you and it is good for everyone else as well, so you do it out of love and service of the truth. This step is represented by the last letter of the Name, *Hay*. This *Hay* symbolizes the physical world. With this intention, we accept our mission in the physical world to awaken and free ourselves from the *Mitzrayim* of ego, as hinted at by the first of the Ten Commandments.

Second, *notice* your inner state- notice your thoughts and feelings. Take a few deep, conscious breaths. Be aware of everything that is happening within your field of experience- the qualities of your emotions, and everything you perceive with your senses. This is the *Vav*. When the *Vav* appears as a prefix to a word, it literally means "and". Just as the word "and" adds one concept to another, so we remain alert to everything within our experience, "adding" anything that comes along, without resistance. We take a "yes and" attitude toward everything that arises.

Third, completely *accept* everything in your experience. You can even say to your self, "I totally accept all this as it is". Let everything just be. This is the first *Hay*. When the letter *Hay* appears as a prefix to a word, it means "the". "The" makes a word stand out as special in some way; without "the", a thing is just one among many. Similarly, when we fully accept everything in our experience in this moment, we give up judgment. We are not comparing this moment to other possibilities. We are simply accepting that this is *The* Reality. This moment is the Truth; this moment is "it". This is where we have arrived.

Fourth, notice that as you accept your thoughts and feelings, you are *not* your thoughts and feelings. You are aware of them. You are the awareness of them. *Feel* the quality of your own attention. This is the *Yod*- the letter that represents consciousness itself. The letter *Yod* is the tiniest of the letters, and in Kabbalah it is described as a dimensionless point. In this way, it represents consciousness: just as a point is the beginning of all shapes yet itself has no dimension, consciousness is the place from which experience

arises. Consciousness itself has no specific shape, but it is aware of all shapes- meaning, all thoughts, feelings and perceptions.

At this point, you may want to stop reading and practice these four steps. Do each one slowly, allowing yourself to get a feel for each level. In fact, it would be good to practice these four steps as often as possible. At first, they may feel like discreet stages. With practice, all four can be accomplished in an instant, the moment you remember. This brings us to the next subject- what we might call a fifth step.

The Fifth Step

After you have raised yourself from unconsciousness to consciousness, you then have to face whatever the next moment “asks” of you; you need to receive the “commandment” of the moment. In the case of the baby in the road, the task is obvious. The situation itself evoked the right intention, and “commanded” the response; the situation, the right intention, and the action were all one.

Most of life, however, is far more ambiguous. Learning to bring your wakefulness to each moment without getting dragged back down into ego takes a lifetime of practice. In a sense, each new situation is like a kind of test. If we use the moment effectively as our spiritual practice, our consciousness is reinforced, and the depth and experience of wakefulness increases. Actual change takes place; this is spiritual transformation. On the other hand, if we fail the test, our connection with the experience of wakefulness decreases, and the ego’s power increases. Each moment is crucial. We are constantly faced with the task of increasing consciousness or building up ego.

Digging the Well, Walking the Path

So, if we wish to take on the spiritual mission of increasing consciousness and decreasing ego, we need the tools to approach each moment effectively. Once we have divested ourselves of ego and entered the fullness of the present, we are then left with the task of expressing the *midot*- the spiritual qualities of the four elements mentioned earlier- such as gratitude, loving kindness, service, perseverance, and so on. The tools we need must help us to express these *midot* while protecting us from the many forces in life that can drag us back down into the egoic qualities.

In fact, it is through using these different tools over time that the actual *experience* of awakening is deepened. Up until now, I have been talking about the “treasure” under the “stove” of this moment. From this, you may have the impression that if only you were to wake up and be aware of this moment, you would immediately find the “treasure”. Then, if you were to follow the four steps outlined above and nothing special happens, you might be inclined to give up. But, while waking up can be instantaneous, it can take time

for the *experience* of awakening to fully blossom. And even if you were to experience the most profound awakening and freedom from ego, the egoic forces can come back in the next moment (remember the story of the *hazzan*- “look who thinks he’s nothing!”) So it is essential to continuously apply the tools of practice as you walk the path. For many, the path is like digging a well: it takes no time at all to start digging, but it does take time before you hit water. Once you hit the water, there is still the work of drawing up the water. As you draw up the water, there is still the task of keeping your focus on drawing the water, and not being seduced by the egoic forces which come in many disguises.

Let’s look again at the parable of Yitzhak. In the story, the treasure he sought was buried under his own stove all along. But from the time he realized this to the time he uncovered it, there was a process: first, he had to travel home. Then, he had to remove the stove. Then, he had to dig in the earth. Finally, he found the buried treasure. These steps are analogous to the spiritual process. On one hand, it is true that awakening takes no time at all- you simply awaken now. On the other hand, there can certainly be time between the moment you begin to *practice* being awake and the time you begin to *experience* the profound freedom inherent within it. We can understand this from the parable: just as Yitzhak had to dig through the dirt to get to the treasure, so we too each have a certain amount of inner blockage, composed of mental and emotional material, which can prevent your awareness from experiencing its own nature. These inner barriers, called *klippot* (husks or shells) in Kabbalah, must be “cut through” or “dissolved” or “made transparent” (pick your metaphor), and this can take time. Still, to *begin* cutting through takes no time; you begin now with the right intention, which is the intention to bring yourself fully to this moment, for its own sake.

Questions

1. Describe, in your own words, the Four Steps
2. What are the two metaphors used for the spiritual path?
3. What is the Hebrew word for the inner barriers?
4. How long does it take to cut through the barriers? How long does it take to start cutting through the barriers?