

## Introduction

*Its positive qualities are inconceivable,  
Like the revelation of a king's treasure.  
The one who rests within its true meaning  
Enjoys the inexhaustible wealth of its fruition.*

*—from The Seven Mirrors of Dzogchen, a Bön dzogchen text<sup>1</sup>*

I once did a television interview that began a bit awkwardly. When I arrived at the studio, the host was acting moody and distracted. He was shuffling papers and gulping his coffee, and it seemed like all he wanted was to be somewhere else. But as soon as he was cued that the show was about to go live, he sat up tall and with a big smile said brightly to the camera, “Good morning, everyone!” I was so surprised by his instant transformation that it took me a minute or two to relax into the interview.

We all know what a real smile looks like. It arises naturally from an open heart and comes with lightness, warmth, and spontaneous laughter. The eyes sparkle, the gaze connects. Few people who receive a genuine smile can help but smile back. But the smile of that TV host had nothing to do with authentic joy or liveliness. It was superficial and forced, and glossed over his bad mood. Clearly this man had learned how to switch on a big, bright smile, but not how to access genuine warmth as he did so.

How many of us dread going to work each morning? We may wear professional smiles all day and then carry our stress and unhappiness back home with us every evening. While we look like we have everything—a job, a home, a family—we may be feeling dark and depressed inside. We may be struggling to find happiness, never fully satisfied with what we have. The sense of disconnectedness and dissatisfaction in today’s society seems pervasive. Many people lead active lives and accomplish a lot, and yet it can be hard for any of us to recognize and reflect on our pain and discontent, or understand what is causing it.

We are missing something essential that is actually deep within us. Spontaneity, creativity, ease, and playfulness are qualities of our natural state of being, but we fail to realize this. From the Tibetan Bön perspective, when we lose the connection to our natural state, we lose our soul. The good news is that we can fully retrieve what we have lost. Recall a moment in your life when you felt complete, satisfied, fully alive, at home in yourself. Imagine that it is possible for you to feel that way not only now and then but most of the time. This is what soul retrieval practice offers.

### ***What Is the Soul?***

In the context of the Bön soul retrieval practice, the soul (*la*) is understood as the balance of the subtle energies and related qualities of the five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space. The ancient Tibetan teachings tell us that everything in life—in fact, everything in the universe and any experience we can have—is made up of these five elements. Without the external elements of soil, water, and air, or the heat of the sun, we could neither exist, be sustained, nor receive nourishment. Similarly, our soul cannot remain nourished without the inner essences of the five elements.

Our inner experience of these elemental qualities includes a sense of groundedness and connectedness (earth), comfort and fluidity (water), joy and inspiration (fire), flexibility and movement (air), and openness and accommodation (space). If one or more of these five natural elements is lacking or diminished in us, our soul will be damaged. When these qualities come into balance, it is said that our soul is healed. In the practice of soul retrieval, what we retrieve are these elemental qualities. It may be that you only need to retrieve a single quality in order to bring every other quality into balance.

### ***Causes of Soul Loss***

According to Tibetan astrology, damage to your soul also diminishes your life force, your vitality. Soul loss can lead to physical weakness and illness. It can affect you emotionally, energetically, psychologically, and spiritually. In extreme cases, soul loss can lead to death. The imbalance of the elements related to soul loss is usually a result of the inevitable challenges we face in life. The challenges might be anything from an unhealed childhood trauma to a sudden shock such as the unexpected death of a loved one. Soul loss can also happen gradually as a result of accumulated stress. Collectively, entire nations can suffer soul loss as a result of wars and natural disasters.

How do you know when your soul is injured or depleted? Often this is experienced as pervasive, chronic dissatisfaction. You might try to distract yourself by watching lots of television, surfing the Internet, mindlessly eating or drinking, or engaging in any number of other diversions, and yet the feeling of dissatisfaction is always in the background. While you cannot pinpoint the cause, you know that you are not happy.

A sense of exhaustion can be another sign of soul loss. Perhaps you are caring for an aging parent while juggling the demands of your own life. Your intention is to be compassionate and generous in all the right ways, but you feel stressed out and depleted. The problem is not the amount of time you are spending on helping another; it's that you are acting from a disconnected place. When we are connected to our natural state of being, giving to others involves no stress or mental exhaustion. Like a genuine smile, our actions are spontaneous, effortless, and joyful. They energize both the giver and the receiver.

But when we feel disconnected, there is a sense of lack, a sense of wanting or needing more for ourselves. Anything can seem wrong: where you are, what you are doing, who you are with, how you feel in your body. You may feel a sense of loneliness or a lack of trust in yourself, in others, in your world. This chronic sense of needing more becomes your identity.

When soul loss is severe—for example, when it happens in connection with a major trauma—it can manifest as post-traumatic stress disorder. People with PTSD can have recurring nightmares, flashbacks, or disabling anxiety, and can have a hard time functioning in everyday life. This severe loss of soul can happen to combat veterans and victims of violent crime. It can also come from a traumatic event like witnessing a terrible car accident, suddenly losing your job, or having a heart attack.<sup>1 2</sup>

### ***A Path to Healing***

No matter what has happened to you in life, or what type of pain you have, or how much or how little pain, the soul-retrieval practices in this book offer a direct way to address your suffering. Through these practices it is possible to clear the negative emotions and energies that are blocking your joyful nature and to retrieve and cultivate the elemental qualities that nourish you. The act of retrieving is essential for healing.

*Chapter 1, Looking Closely at Your Life*, helps you identify the element you need most at this time in order to heal your soul. *Chapter 2, Retrieving from Nature*, explains how to retrieve the element you need directly from the natural world. We retrieve not only from the raw element, whether it is earth, water, fire, air, or space, but also from the subtler essence of that element. Water, for example, is not just the clear, life-giving liquid that flows through rivers and streams; water is also its qualities of fluidity, comfort, and ease. On an even deeper level, each element is associated with a different wisdom. Water can be experienced as mirror-like wisdom, which recognizes the non-judgmental reflective quality of the essence of your nature. Through deep meditation practice you can connect with each element in its purest form, as a quality of light or luminous awareness.

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**Table 1. The five elements and their associated qualities, wisdoms, and pure lights\***

Element	Basic qualities	Wisdom	Pure light
Earth	Groundedness, connectedness	The wisdom of equanimity	Yellow
Water	Comfort, fluidity	Mirror-like wisdom	Blue
Fire	Joy, inspiration	Discriminating wisdom	Red
Air	Flexibility, movement	All-accomplishing wisdom	Green
Space	Openness, accommodation	The wisdom of emptiness	White

\*To learn more about these elemental aspects, see *Chapter 2, Retrieving from Nature*.

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*Chapter 3, Retrieving by Taking Inner Refuge*, points you to your inner refuge: the openness, awareness, and warmth of your authentic nature. This is the source of all the elemental essences. We refer to it as *refuge* because it is the only true source of comfort, relief, and support. Normally, when facing difficulties in life we seek refuge in people, places, and things outside of us—for example, we depend on a friend’s advice, or on finding a different job or place to live to resolve our problems or make us feel better. But any external source of support is impermanent by nature and is sure to be lost to us one day. The inner refuge is also the source of love, compassion, joy, and equanimity—known as the four immeasurables—as well as all other virtuous qualities. The meditation practice described in Chapter 3 helps you enter this refuge through the three doors: the stillness of your body, silence of your speech, and spaciousness of your mind.

*Chapter 4, Retrieving from Relationships*, explains how, through the practice of inner refuge, you can retrieve the elements lost in your interactions with loved ones and other significant relationships. *Chapter 5, Overcoming Loneliness*, highlights loneliness as a pervasive human suffering that is yet another aspect of soul loss, and discusses how reconnecting to the source within you can heal it.

*Chapter 6, Nourishing Your Inner Being*, and *Chapter 7, Nourishing Your Physical Body*, go to the heart of soul retrieval, emphasizing the importance of routinely nourishing yourself at all levels. You can look at nourishing as keeping your internal battery charged. In today’s fast-paced, industrialized, technological lifestyle, many of us are losing pieces of our soul every day. We can be drained by the challenges of a daily commute, juggling family and work obligations, even noise pollution. When we recognize how frequently we are drained, we can find opportunities to reconnect to the inner refuge and recharge every day. Chapter 6 offers guidance for nourishing your inner being. Chapter 7 explains how to use certain practices to ease physical pain and even prevent or heal disease.

Each chapter closes with a series of actions you can take. Included are instructions for formal practice—the time you set aside each day to sit undisturbed in meditation—and informal practice, bringing what you learn from your formal meditation into your daily life. For additional support in your practice, I have recorded a guided meditation focused on the practice of Retrieving by Taking Inner Refuge. You can access this recording at [LINK].

### ***The Best Remedy***

Soul retrieval involves inner work. A common response to troubling thoughts and feelings is to either push them away or distract yourself. But when you try to deaden your thoughts and feelings, they just become more insistent. There's much to be gained from noticing difficult feelings, listening to them, and in certain instances, expressing them.

However, if you dwell on your thoughts and feelings, one thought almost always leads to another, which inevitably reinforces the pain. The mind that is in pain cannot think its way out of its pain. As a traditional Tibetan saying goes, you cannot remove blood from your hands by washing them with more blood. I call the mind that tries to think its way out of pain the "smart ego." It is often difficult to recognize the smart ego for what it is, because we are continually giving ourselves advice that seems positive, attractive, and solution oriented. The smart ego can be a frequent guest at our meditation sessions, mixing itself into our moments of insight and proclaiming itself as wisdom. But this so-called wisdom is not the result of true self-reflection. It is an obstacle to true wisdom, to recognizing the nature of mind.

Another way we try to overcome our problems is by expressing them in a journal or to a friend, counselor, or therapist. This can put us more in touch with difficult emotions so they can be worked through and released. There is clearly a place for psychotherapy in healing, but I wonder if people are talking about their problems from the right space. Many spend years in therapy or support groups talking about the same issues over and over, unable to transform their suffering because they lack higher awareness.

How can we access higher awareness? By taking what I call *the three precious pills*—stillness, silence, and spaciousness—which connect us to the inner refuge. From this unbounded sacred space, if we recall our negative emotions or other painful experiences and host them without judging, criticizing, rejecting, or grasping them, we engage the process of healing. By hosting, I mean allowing the pain to freely arise, abide, and dissolve. This experience is like being a gracious host who allows guests to come as they are, stay as long as they wish, leave when they're ready, and even return. Hosting pain in this way allows it to fully dissolve into the sacred space of the inner refuge, which gives rise to awareness that is fresh and creative.

What truly sets these practices of soul retrieval apart from most forms of therapy is that the primary work begins once the pain subsides. It is common for people who succeed in overcoming pain and conflict to think *Okay, now I'm clear of this problem. Good riddance!* and then look for the next problem to solve. They clear a space for the next problem to arise, and so it does! But when we move from one problem to the next we do not cultivate familiarity with the presence of awareness of the space that is free of pain. This space is the source of the qualities that are natural antidotes to the pain. When, through awareness, we connect to this space, we receive nourishment.

Sometimes it's better not to think and talk so much. For it is only when we can be with our pain fully and host it from the space of the stillness of the body, silence of speech, and spaciousness of mind that we can connect with infinite awareness and warmth, from which healing qualities naturally arise. It is only from the space of openness that the disturbing emotions can be fully acknowledged and released, and the soul retrieved. When the soul is restored, there is greater continuity to our happiness.

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*Reprinted with permission from The True Source of Healing: How the Ancient Tibetan Practice of Soul Retrieval Can Transform and Enrich Your Life, by Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche (Hay House, June 2015). Note: This excerpt is from a work in progress rather than the final book.*

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<sup>1</sup> The Seven Mirrors (rdzogs chen me long bdun pa), Volume 177, pp. 295-323  
Bon Kanjur, Edited by smon rgyal lha sras, khreng tu'u, 1999.

<sup>2</sup> MedicineNet.com, accessed July 31, 2014.

[http://www.medicinenet.com/posttraumatic\\_stress\\_disorder/page3.htm](http://www.medicinenet.com/posttraumatic_stress_disorder/page3.htm)

<sup>3</sup> Edmondson D, et al. (2012) Posttraumatic Stress Disorder Prevalence and Risk of Recurrence in Acute Coronary Syndrome Patients: A Meta-analytic Review. PLoS ONE 7(6): e38915.

doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0038915

(<http://www.plosone.org/article/info%3Adoi%2F10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0038915>, accessed April 30, 2014)