

## *Fully Here*

*February 26, 2010*

You probably know the Buddha's story of the man shot with the arrow. His friends and relatives take him to the doctor, and as the doctor's about to remove the arrow, the man says, "No, wait a minute, I've got to know who made this arrow, who shot this arrow, what it was made of, what feathers it was made of, what kind of wood it was made of, before I let you take it out." As the Buddha said, of course the man will die before the arrow is removed. He told this story to a monk who'd come to him and said, "Look, I'm not going to practice until you tell me whether the world is eternal or not, finite or infinite, whether the soul is the same thing as the body, or different from the body, or that an awakened person after death exists, doesn't exist, both, or neither."

Those are issues that nowadays most of us don't really pay much attention to, but we do tend to have our issues coming to the practice. So it's good to remember that, when you come to the practice, you've got to put your issues aside—personal issues, social issues—because there is this unsolved problem of suffering happening, right here, right now. And as those chants we had just now reminded us, aging, illness, and death are normal. Illness and death can come at any time. You don't know how much time you have to practice, so when you know that you do have the time, you give it your full attention.

This is a quality that, in Pali, is called *citta*. You really want to be intent on what you're doing. You don't want to leave anything left over; you don't want to hold anything back. Starting right here, right now, you want to give all your attention to the breath, remembering that the breath is not just the air coming in and out of the lungs, but it's the flow of energy in the body. If you look carefully, you'll notice that the energy flow has many levels of subtlety and can be felt anywhere on the body. There's the background buzz of energy that lets you know where the different parts of your body are. And as you breathe in and breathe out, you'll notice there's a kind of movement throughout the body, and the movement happens at different speeds. There's one very subtle level of breath energy that, as soon as you start breathing in, has gone all the way through your nervous system. Another more blatant level of energy flows more slowly through the nerves along the blood vessels.

You begin to notice after a while that you have a tendency as you breathe in to pull the energy up or down, or when you breathe out, you squeeze the energy out. You might want to ask yourself: Is that the best way to manipulate the energy?

We don't think we're manipulating it, but it's something we've learned so thoroughly and done so consistently that it just falls into the background. It becomes a subconscious process. So one way of bringing it back into consciousness is to ask yourself that question: What direction does the energy go when you breathe in? Does the energy in the body feel coordinated? Or does one part seem to be fighting against another part?

Centuries ago, there was a Japanese master, Hakuin, who suffered from what he called Zen sickness. When you read his description of it, it was basically the problem where, as he was breathing in, he was pulling the energy up into his head. He learned the treatment for it was to imagine that you had a big ball of butter on your head, and it was melting, basically bringing the energy down, down, down, down your shoulders, down your back, to your hips, to your legs down to your feet.

That's one problem that can develop if you're not really paying attention to how the energy is going in the body as you sit here. Because if you have an unhealthy habit, then, when trying to focus on the breath, you'll force that habit onto the breathing process. If you stick with it long enough it's going to be bad for you.

This is why the Buddha talks about getting the mind into a state of concentration, developing a sense of ease, and then allowing that sense of ease and fullness to spread throughout the body.

His image is of a bathman or a bathman's apprentice mixing a lump of bath powder. Back in those days, they didn't have soap. They would take a kind of bath powder and would mix it with water until they had a kind of dough, as when you make bread. You'd rub it all over your body. When you're mixing it, you want to get it so that the whole lump of bath powder has been moistened and yet there's no water dripping out. In the same way, you want that sense of ease and pleasure coming from the breath to fill the whole body.

The best way to do that is to start by finding one spot in the body to focus on, a very sensitive spot. Ajaan Lee talks about the bases of the breath, which correspond pretty closely to what the Indians call chakras. These are the sensitive energy centers in the body. You can find one that feels congenial to you, one where you'll notice if you're putting undue pressure on the breath, either with the in-breath, or with the out-. Try to maintain a sense of ease and just-rightness there at that spot, all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-.

To do this, you've got to relax tension in different parts of your body. This is why this is called a center of breath energy, because it's connected with a lot of other energy channels, where energy flows in the different parts of the body. If you

can keep this spot open and relaxed, you'll find that its influence automatically radiates out through different parts of the body.

Then you think of the breath spreading from there to other parts as well. If you find that there are some areas where the energy doesn't spread, you go to those spots, focus there, and see if you can loosen things up, like the bathman kneading the soap dough. Again, keep in mind that, as you breathe in, you're not going to allow any tension to build up in those spots. And as you breathe out, you're not going to squeeze things out or hold on to any tension. Just keep things open and relaxed all the way in, all the way out.

When you've made a survey of the body and everything seems okay, go back to your center spot and then think of spreading that sense of ease again. This requires balance. On the one hand, you've got your one point that you're focused on, but at the same time you also have a larger frame of reference: the body as a whole, from the top of the head down to the tips of the toes. Sometimes you'll find that you're more in the one-pointed mode, and other times you're more in the full-body mode. But ideally, you want to have both going, and that requires a lot of attention.

This is why we say you have to give it your full attention. When everything is really balanced and fully engaged like this, it helps to prevent the mind from wandering off. It helps to prevent you from going on automatic pilot where the breath just comes in and goes out, and you leave it there so that you can go pay attention to something else. You want to give this your full attention.

Immediately the mind will say, "How long do I stay here?" You stay here as long as you can. This is an important skill. We've read so much about how vipassana is superior to samatha that it's skewed everybody's practice. For one thing, the Buddha never taught them as separate techniques of meditation. They're two qualities of mind that you bring to the meditation regardless of what meditation you're doing.

And you do want to bring the mind to stillness. The whole purpose of both the tranquility and the insight is to induce more and more stillness. The insight is there to ferret out where the disturbances are that, one, prevent you from getting into concentration and, two, prevent the concentration from deepening. And then three, they get you stuck on the concentration, so that you can't gain the kind of insight that really cuts through the defilements. But even that—cutting through the defilements—is with the purpose of bringing the mind to absolute stillness. So the insight and the tranquility have to go together.

When the Buddha talked about full awakening, he said it's both awareness-release and discernment-release. Awareness-release is the release from passion that

comes from getting the mind into really strong concentration. Discernment-release is the release from ignorance that comes when your insight and discernment are really sharp. You need both—and you work on both together. Sometimes you’ll be emphasizing one side, and sometimes you’ll be emphasizing the other, but the important thing is that you remember both have to go together.

The Buddha has another image, of a fortress. The wall of the fortress is discernment. It’s a slippery wall so that enemies can’t climb up the wall to get in the fortress. Yet if you just have that slippery wall but don’t have any food, the soldiers in your fortress are going to die. Concentration is the food. You need both the wall and the food to stay protected.

And in order to stay safely in the fortress, you fully inhabit this fortress of the body when your awareness really does fill the body. There’s another image the Buddha has for this kind of awareness. He says it’s like a solid door of hardwood. Try to throw a ball of string into the door and it won’t go into the door. It just bounces right off the door. But if your awareness doesn’t fill the body, he says it’s like a lump of wet clay. If you try to throw a stone into it, the stone goes right into the clay.

If your awareness doesn’t fill the body, lots of other things can start invading your body. Little thought worlds can develop. Have you ever noticed the fact that when a thought world appears in the mind, there’s also going to be a pattern of tension someplace in the body? That part of the body tends to get obscured. But if you’re fully inhabiting the body and staying on the level of the body, those thought worlds don’t have any niches that they can sneak into, no place where they can take hold. At the same time, you find that you’re not picking up energy from other people. As you fully inhabit the body, it’s as if an energy field develops around the body to protect you from other people’s negative energy.

So these are some of the advantages that come from being fully aware of the whole body, fully in space and fully in time, i.e., continually, without any gaps.

So this quality of *citta*, intentness, is something you want to bring as consistently as possible to your practice. As for other issues that you may be carrying around, you want to leave them at the door. The big issue in life is the quality of the mind, and if you let it get eaten up by things that are pressing but not important, that yell and scream for attention, you miss the point that we don’t stay here forever. Aging, illness, and death can happen at any time. Those chants we had on aging, illness, and death, and also the chant on how the world is swept away, it is not enduring, offers no shelter, there’s no one in charge, the world has nothing of its own, one has to pass on leaving everything behind: These are not negativity for the sake of negativity. They’re just statements of fact to

remind you, okay, you've got to be heedful. Death could come at any time. Illness can come at any time. That earthquake that they keep warning us about could hit at any time. Other things could happen as well. The body hasn't signed any contracts, saying that it's going to give you as much time as you like, or it's going to give you fair warning before things start to break down. It just does its own thing.

There are lots of ways that sudden and unexpected death can happen. You want your mind to be prepared so that you don't have to suffer through aging, you don't have to suffer through illness, you don't have to suffer through death. Things may happen. These things *will* happen of course, but when the mind is trained, it doesn't have to suffer.

And the mind doesn't just naturally develop good qualities. When the Buddha talked about the basis for skillfulness, the basis for developing good qualities in the mind, he said that it's not that there's an innate goodness there that you're trying to uncover. The mind has both good qualities and not-so-good qualities. The only way the good ones are going to get developed is if you develop a strong sense of heedfulness, realizing that your actions do make a difference, you've got to be careful, and you've got to get to work as soon as possible, because you don't know how much time you have.

That's the attitude that's going to bring you true happiness. It's not warm and fuzzy, but it's very practical. Those teachings are there as a kind of a fence. If you find your attention wandering from the breath back to other distractions, *bang* you run into aging, *bang* you run into illness, *bang* you run into death. So come right back.

These teachings have you surrounded as long as you keep them in mind. If you don't keep them in mind, it's as if there's a big hole in your fence. Other things can come in; you can go slipping out. Whatever food of concentration you have inside the fence gets stolen away.

So you've got to be careful. Try to be as fully mindful and as fully alert as you can all around—and as consistently mindful and as consistently alert all through time. Don't let there be any gaps. It's only when you give the practice your full attention that you can get the full results.