

"As-It- Is" and "The All of It" **September 2007 newsletter**

One of my earliest insights in this life of awakening revolves around the fundamental importance of 'now-ness'- the living moment- as the most basic access point to intimacy with life. Without this immediacy, our experience becomes filtered, one step removed from its inherent vibrancy. Through sitting meditation, one learns to fall back into the 'as-it-is' of the moment. Amidst all the thoughts, plans, regrets, hopes, disappointments and expectations that the mind is constantly producing, basic sanity requires falling back into and befriending what the Zen world likes to call 'as-it-is'.

It is the nature of a certain aspect of mind to keep this churning going, it is not actually a problem in itself. As Uchiyama Roshi would say, "just as the stomach secretes acid, the brain secretes thoughts". No problem. When we learn to differentiate the helpful thoughts from the irrelevant ones and we no longer take the unhelpful thoughts seriously, we are well on our way toward a harmonious relationship with mind.

One image I often use is that of 'stepping off the train of thought'. It's as if the constant inner dialogue has its own momentum that is carrying us through life in a kind of separated or insular way. In the practice of stepping off the train, we interrupt the flow of inner verbalization and focus directly on some aspect of the present moment. For example, we can focus on three breaths from beginning to end. I recommend that my students pause five times a day and follow three breaths without interruption (maybe try it right now). If you take up this practice, don't be surprised if the mind rebels vigorously against this interruption. Even thirty seconds can seem like too much to the 'executive self'- that organizing aspect of our consciousness, sometimes called the 'planner' or the 'doer'. The effect of this simple practice is often startling; the quality of the entire day is influenced.

The good news is that there is always the second train, the train of Being or True Self. It does not matter how deeply immersed we are in the story line of the moment, the second train is always right there. Stepping off one train IS stepping onto the other. On this we can rely! What truly good news this is. We don't have to be good, smart, wise, enlightened or have twenty years of meditation experience- RIGHT NOW, stepping off the train of habitual thinking, we can return to presence.

From this picture it seems as if coming into the present moment requires stepping out of time. In one sense this is absolutely true, we must step into the eternal moment. Yet, it seems to me that this understanding is incomplete and can create great confusion. It is helpful if we explore 'the all of it'.

The 'all of it' is an expression I use to convey the sense that the living moment includes the past, the present and the future. In fact, it includes all thoughts, feelings, images that live in the background of one's moment. Nothing is left out and all is welcome. There is a rich complexity surrounding even the simplest of events. For example, my present moment includes the fact that I had tea and toast twenty minutes ago and that I need to be at an appointment in about an hour. It includes the fact that my daughter is away starting college, that I am wondering how she is and that my wife is also away and there is a longing to speak with her. These past, future and background events feed into the living experience of Now. To separate this moment in time from the gestalt of 'the all of it' in which it is embedded distorts it and creates an inherent conflict between: 1) the aspect of mind that is constantly creating a description/plan/judgment/narrative, 2) the reality of bodily life that is always influenced by past and future and 3) Being or True Self. The 'all of it' literally includes all of it. So this moment includes digesting that delicious toast, sensing a mild caffeine high from the tea, feeling a pull to dress for the appointment, the tingling expectation of talking with my loved one's and being right here with fingers typing as I seek words to convey what I mean and why I think it is

important.

I used to imagine that 'being present' involved a certain separation from all that was not physically contactable in the moment. There is something very incomplete and unreal in this picture. Without diminishing the vital significance of 'as-it-is', which emphasizes dedication to the "present moment", we want to include 'the all of it'- this rich embracing of our ever-changing living reality.

How wonderful it is that even with our addiction to certain mental/emotional/physical patterns, right now we can open to 'as it is' within the 'all of it' and through this openness uncover true freedom, joy and peace in this very moment. So again I invite you to a living experiment- 3 breaths 5 times today.