

In and Out

by Ven. Chunen angya
Dainen-ji, October 29, 2009

When we start to practice, we are given instruction in anapanasati, or mindfulness of breath in order to begin to open to the simplicity and richness of our experience. Zen Master Anzan Hoshin says in “The Four Gates of Zen Practice”:

“Just feel the breath itself, abandon notions of the breath. Don’t even “watch” or “follow” the breathing. Just feel this breath.”

Sakyamuni Buddha said in the Satipatthana sutta:

*“And how, monks, does someone here view the body as body?
Here, monks, one... sits down cross legged and holds the body upright, keeping mindfulness present.
Breathing in, one is mindful, breathing out, one is mindful.”*

These are very simple instructions, but sometimes when we sit zazen to feel the breath, we find that we are everywhere but with the breath. We are consumed by all kinds of things and is everywhere except this moment of present experience.

We are so tangled in our anxieties, our obsessions, our memories, our interpretations, our worries, our fantasies, that there is hardly any room to hear what a sound actually is like, to see what the wall is actually like or to feel what the sensations of the body are actually like. We are so tangled that we don’t notice that we have been obsessing with trying to do the right things that will fit our fantasies or avoid something that will intrude on them, that we forget to actually attend to our experiencing.

After a while, we recognize this torrent of distorted and fragmented mental activity is obviously a problem for us, but then often misunderstand and think that we need to fix the content of our obsessions for the obsessions to stop. The content can vary from wanting to find what we think will be a better job, or getting someone else to change their behaviour, or getting someone else to appreciate ours. We fall for the delusion that if we can fix the content, then these obsessions will stop.

Most spiritual practices have this orientation. They work with either suppressing these obsessions and fixations, or shuffling their contents to make them more acceptable, or providing cosmologies that will soothe us in some way.

Our practice is different. The Complete Teachings of Reality presented by Zen Master Anzan Hoshin and the Lineage of Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors do not soothe, console, shuffle or suppress content; they point to the context in which these obsessions arise and show us the impermanence all around in which these obsessions arise and fall, and the very groundlessness of the suffering arising with these obsessions.

To open to this context, we have to start with the the body, we have to start in this moment. This should be obvious, as what is truly here is this body, and the only place where we are is this moment. Yet, we tend to ignore this body, and are holding on to the past moments, or trying to leap into the next one. We have to stop

doing this and begin see the arising, dwelling and decaying of various sensations, and qualities of perception, and difference qualities of experience.

Or on the other hand, sometimes we start to recognize the impermanence of the body, but we tend to view it in abstract terms. Recently, a student, having read of Buddhist monks having done charnel ground practice, asked why we do not do this practice. I mentioned this to the Roshi, and he said it was not necessary; and that all we have to do is feel the tongue in the mouth, against teeth, and with this fact see how this body is meat, and this body is impermanent.

Now, in all cultures (eastern or western, rich or poor, modern or ancient) usual people usually tend to treat the body as something to dress up in ways that will suit their personalities or their roles in that culture. They buff it up, shine it, paint it; or squeeze it into clothes that feed fantasies of fornication, or fantasies of status, or fantasies of being “so cool”. They think it is their tool to use to fulfill some fantasy, or they ignore it altogether. So usual people can have a hard time to just attend to and notice its basic functioning.

The Roshi reminds us of the basic functioning of the bodymind in his comments on the Maharahulovada Sutta, where in the teisho titled “The Worm”:

“We are learning how to treat the tube with some kind of dignity, this 25 foot tube, this 25 foot worm, that has teeth at the top, and is all wrinkled at the bottom. The tube grew some eyes so it could see, things growing around that it might be able to throw down itself. A little nose so it could sniff it out, ears so it could hear it. It grew a bony carriage, that it could carry the worm in, so that the worm would not get little pieces of gravel stuck in as it is slipping around in the ground. Some cases it grew four legs, in others two legs, and the other legs became arms, with little graspers on the ends.

We don’t understand that the entirety of the life of the worm is about getting, chewing, swallowing, digesting, excreting. That’s what the eyes are for, to find the food, that’s what the nose is for, that what the ears are for, that’s what the fingers are for, that’s what the legs are for, to mobilize the digestive system, to make it ambulatory and articulate it.

However this basic fact is a bit of a shock to us, because we want our life to have “meaning”, to be something special, and it can be difficult to accept this very basic fact that we share with billions of people today, and have shared with billions of creatures for billions of years. This has been the case from the time of a hydra evolved and started waving its tentacles to feed itself, a fish started flopping and writhing in a swamp 375 million years ago as it specialized its limbs to crawl on land, or antelopes started feeding on a grassland.

If we don’t recognize this basic fact, then we become confused by our romanticizing and glorification of the bodymind. We obsess about shape, height, weight, hair; we glorify our associations with our cultural history, or fantasize about what more wealth, or an ideal relationship will bring to it.

Now there is nothing “impure” about the body, there is no “problem” with it, but seeing it as a traveling digestive system will help up release our obsessions and attend to it as it actually is, and be willing to align to the environment it arises in and shares with billions of other beings.”

So allow yourself to notice and open to the actual functioning of the bodymind. Sit still, sit up straight, feel

the sensations of your own bodymind, open to the sounds around you. What are they actually like? Are you noticing sounds arise, fall and decay or you rushing in to make comments about what you are hearing?

Isn't it amazing that these sounds sound just like this, these sensation feel just like this?

Doing this moment by moment we will relate to the realities of the bodymind rather than the anxieties and the aversions and fantasies that cloud the bodymind ... and then, we can do it again and again with every breath.