OPENING TO STILLNESS

During the last few years of my meditation practice I have been benefitted by the writing of Rodney Smith. The books that have been most effective are “Stepping Out Of Self-Deception-The Buddha’s Liberating Teaching Of No-Self” and “Awakening-A Paradigm Shift Of The Heart”. More specifically, the concept of *stillness* is most useful in my practice.

On page 54, he quotes from the Anguttara Nikaya (the Numerical Discourses), Udana 8.1:

For one who clings, motion exists;

But for one who clings not, there is no motion.

Where no motion is, there is stillness.

Where stillness is, there is no craving.

Where no craving is,

There is neither coming nor going.

Where neither coming nor going is,

There is neither arising nor passing away.

Where neither arising nor passing away is,

There is neither this world, nor a world beyond,

Nor a state between.

This, verily, is the end of suffering.

He describes a “graphic” way of understanding the process of awakening. In the universe, there is the *vertical*, which is timeless and dimensionless, and there is the *horizontal*, which encompasses the past, present and future. The sense of self operates in the realm of the horizontal. Here is a quote from page 27 in ““Stepping Out Of Self-Deception”:

…From the horizontal perspective, the present is a moment between time past and time future, a deprived moment on its way to some other time. The future holds the hope and potential, the present holds the pain of who I am now, so the momentum is to move as quickly as possible away from the present of what I am, in the direction of who I will become.

The vertical perspective of the here and now is very different. Since the moment is not being squeezed between the rock of the past and the hard place of the future, it is open and expansive. In fact, it is infinite and total, encompassing all the things including thoughts about past and future, because all thoughts are occurring here and now. So the vertical universe actually encompasses the horizontal universe. Nothing could possibly escape the moment or ever be outside it, so the vertical universe is always abiding and never moves. Moment after moment we are taking birth in the vertical universe; the problem is we think we are in the horizontal. Occasionally we pause sufficiently to see the intersection of these dimensions and not merely think our way past them. It may be in a moment of wonder, mystery, beauty, or a moment too precious to deny”.;

This moment when awareness has “paused sufficiently” represents stillness. This refers to the quote of the Buddha mentioned above, “for when one clings not, there is no motion. Where no motion is, there is stillness.” How does one find the ability to “cling not”? In my experience, the cultivation of samadhi/passadhi sets the stage for this. I first develop the ability to steadfastly rest awareness on present-moment awareness of the sensation of breathing, then begin to practice the systematic investigation of subtle “vibration” sensations throughout the body. As this process develops, there comes an opportunity to open to all the phenomena of awareness, physical as well as mental, with little or no attraction to thoughts, or even awareness of where the “body” leaves off and the rest of the universe begins. Sounds, thoughts, physical sensations of pain or pressure all become a flowing process through the present moment, with no particular preference for any of those various functions.

There is just openness, non-clinging, non-defining, being in the moment. Another quote from “Stepping Out Of Self-Deception” can be useful in understanding this process and practice, on page 71:

“the vertical universe is unformed within stillness. A question is an entry into the vertical dimension because the nature of a question is unfixed and wide open, and therefore unformed. It shatters our worldview and is the essence of the Buddha’s pointing, “Cling to naught.” The state of inquiry is a return to innocence because it is a complete suspending of everything that is known.

There is no way for the sense-of-self to acquire that stillness. Stillness is what remains after we stop trying to find it, and therefore there is no strategy we can impose in order to stop; there is just stopping. In stopping everything is its own fulfillment. Restlessness, wanting, fearing are all fulfilled in stopping. In the vertical dimension these states of mind become complete in Now because they have lost their unconscious reference to a personal narrative and are no longer tied to aversion or wanting.

In the horizontal universe these states of mind are fulfilled only after we obtain what we want. Satisfaction occurs after states of mind have completed their mission, after we find we need to offset the emotional hunger. If the horizontal stops at all, it is temporary and conditional upon discovering the objects that will allow us to feel satiated. We begin to recognize that horizontal language produces a conditional and incomplete stopping, and therefore remains ultimately unsatisfactory.”

Also important in this practice is the development of the ability to persistently let go, surrendering to the flow relentlessly. This manifests as stillness, a quiet, detached, expansive quality of awareness. This experience can be alarming, as it seems that there is an equally relentless “need” to identify with some aspect of identifying with transient feelings and thoughts as “myself”, and disregarding this identification threatens the self’s very existence. It involves opening, releasing, suspending, including all that arises in awareness without preference. There is no benefit in considering the past or aspiring for a future—just here-and-now suchness. The Buddha didn’t speak with personal pronouns such as “I” or “me”; rather, he used the term “the Tathagata” (tah-tag-uh-tuh), which can be translated as “thus gone” or “abiding in suchness”. Here is what Smith writes about stillness, on page 79 of “Stepping Out Of Self-Deception”, talking further about the organizing and impersonal function of intention:

“Another reason our intention is often partial is that we think a spiritual journey is literally a journey away from here and now. We glance away from reality toward our destination of enlightenment, contentment and tranquility, and calculate our continued progress. We measure out development as if we knew exactly where we were going, and we compare the qualities of the present moment to our imagined objective. The contentment or love we feel never lives up to the promised land, and we begin to feel an ever-growing sense of fatigue and lethargy.

This accumulated pain of failed expectation begins to take its toll, and since the here and now carries this pain, the here and now is avoided. We try to compensate by staying busy or increasing the intensity of our life with entertainment and drama.

By far the most difficult reason for our lack of dedicated intention is the nature of silence itself. When we stop moving, stillness arises, and stillness holds nothing of “me” within it. It swallows us in an instant. The purpose of much of our thinking has been to keep this silence at bay by imposing a layer of noise between this gulf of quiet and us. All our becoming is an attempt to fill this absolute hole of nothingness with something, anything, to disturb it. Silence overwhelms everything the sense-of-self holds dear, so for most of us, abiding in stillness is too much to ask.”

As this practice is activated repeatedly over the hours and days of the retreat, my aspiration is to become more quickly and thoroughly aware of this flow process and cultivate an ability to appreciate the open awareness within which these phenomena flow. The word “within” is problematic, as in the silence and stillness, there is no interest in a spatial context regarding the arising and passing away of the phenomena. Arising and passing away can even be a misperception, as any notion of beginning (arising) and ending (passing away) still operates in the realm of the horizontal.

Of course, the notion of finding the “destination of enlightenment” is a misperception, as stated above. However, the intention to persist in investigating the flow of mental phenomena in a holistic, inclusive manner is my aspiration. It will be interesting to report on these practices and results during the first Wednesday night in January, when the retreat experience will be reviewed. Here is another excerpt from “Stepping Out Of Self-Deception”, on page 94:

“Wise View is now exclusively directing the discovery. A great shift occurs when effort is used to comprehend rather than surmount our limitations. As our efforts move toward understanding the mind and body, we begin to release the need to control our emotions, because influencing our experience interferes with this investigation. We settle back and experience what we are without trying to become anything, and we no longer look to the future to meet an ideal or to gauge progress toward an expected result.”