

From Elizabeth Hamilton

*UNTRAIN YOUR PARROT - AND OTHER NON-
NONSENSE INSTRUCTION ON THE PATH OF ZEN*
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Being-Awareness and BBSTSBB

“When we try to pick out anything by itself, we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. The sun shines not on us, but in us; the rivers flow not past, but through us ...” John Muir

After the Korean War, my father took pictures all over the world, mailing back rolls of film as he traveled. As it turned out, all of them were blank, since a mechanical problem made the cover over the lens of his new camera close every time he took a picture. The human equivalent of this lens-cover malfunction is self-centered thinking, including both memory and the kind of planning and fantasizing that snap awareness shut. When this happens, ego-centered thoughts block the view that life is offering at the moment. If it weren't for this phenomenon, awareness of whatever is present would come naturally, and we might not need meditation techniques to help us see through the mind's lens cover.

The first practice steps here include tuning in on bodily sensations and environmental sensory phenomena. This allows a sense of being-awareness to develop. Occasionally there's a perceptual flip, where the body and surroundings are sensed as a merged reality, providing a taste of the

undivided nature of things. A three-dimensional quality starts to emerge, and we notice that, as with stereo speakers, there's a different sound mix in each ear. The landscape also reveals a depth that we don't usually perceive.

As our sense of identity becomes increasingly all-encompassing, the body and mind become part of the scene, enmeshed by awareness and air. This fullness of the moment, or sense of presence, is who we are, and is hardly limited to the ego's habitual role as star player on our stage.

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Luckily, the wonder of life is always knocking on the windowpanes. Let's invite it in right now; just pause and notice what is present, starting with the breath, seeing all the way to the horizon and listening to the farthest sounds. Open awareness is sufficiently vast to contain all the intermingling densities and intensities of the moment. One way of opening to it is to use BBSTSBB:

BBSTSBB

A Palindrome of Being-Awareness Checkpoints

BBSTSBB is a palindrome composed of the first letters of seven words that beckon us into being-awareness: balance, breathing, sensations, touch, senses, boundary, and boundlessness. These sensory wonders can lure us from our apparent enclosure by the body (balance, breathing, and sensations) to the interface between our body and surroundings, the contact touchpoints that connect body and environment. Then awareness transcends this sense of

boundary, of being confined to what's inside our skin, into the *boundlessness that encompasses the body*, surroundings, and the open sky.

These seven checkpoints can add some variety to our sense of awareness, tricking the easily bored mind into staying present a little longer than it might otherwise tolerate during meditation or daily activities.

1. *Balance*. Feel your body surrounded by air. Notice your posture and balance, letting your weight drop so your muscles don't have to work overtime.

2. *Breathing*. Feel the air in the body as you breathe, the movements of your torso filling and emptying.

3. *Sensations*. Scan your body for strong physical sensations, feeling them, as they are, for a few breaths.

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4. *Touch*. Feel the subtle pressure or texture of the contact points between your feet and the floor, your hands and your lap.

5. *Senses*. Let awareness open into the world of hearing, seeing, smelling, and tasting (even the inside of the mouth has a taste).

6. *Boundary*. Feel your total bodily gestalt or presence, including the body outline and everything within it.

7. *Boundlessness*. As these experiences infiltrate one another, let life's inclusivity have its way with you.

You can focus on the checkpoints individually, sequentially, or cumulatively. If seven checkpoints sounds daunting, pick any pair. Choosing even one to pay attention to is practicing presence.

In light of the magnitude of our conditioned aversion and indifference to things that haven't been of interest to us, applied practice with being-awareness requires not only active cultivation, but also discovering what blocks its presence. This means we'll need large doses of patience and humor, and an honest look into our long-standing consumer orientation, even in spiritual matters.

Zen has assured us for a millennium that, as illusions fall away, there's a shift from self-as-person, to self-awareness, to self-as-awareness. Zen ancestor Shih-t'ou describes this phenomenon in "The Identity of Relative and Absolute" this way: "The four elements return to their nature as a child to its mother . . . cause and effect must return to the great reality." Note *identity* as used here embraces both the relative dimension of things and the absolute nature of that very relativity. That's our actual identity; it's the identity of everything.

If we take comments like this as a working hypothesis - not just believing them without investigation - we still need to remember that the fog is unlikely to clear up all at once and

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evermore. Clarity is more likely to be a state that we visit, rather than our fulltime home address, for quite a while.

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POLEMIC: People sometimes wonder why this openness, or being-awareness doesn't arise naturally through immersion in nature, music or art: shouldn't all that grandeur pull us in, effortlessly? Sometimes, but it usually doesn't last long. If it did, people who take the most vacations and attend art events regularly would be quite awake. It doesn't seem to work that way; in part, that's what drove a professional musician like me to zen practice.

Ironically, it seems that the very experiences that we associate with good feelings can keep us closer to obliteration than liberation. One of the main things that keeps so-called pleasurable activities from being more deeply enjoyable is that when we're engaged in them, our attention is likely to be captured through fascination, which is a passive, rather than as an actively conscious state, likely to be lacking in crisp planetary alertness. Nor are we particularly aware of bodily sensations, except for the extremely pleasing or uncomfortable ones.

There's no problem with taking an occasional immersion bath in things we find enjoyable, as I sometimes do with music, provided we don't equate this with being awake. Even if self-consciousness disappears for a while, the ego has hardly been transcended, and will soon be back, raring to go, like a child after a nap.

