

Dharmette: Full like the Sky

**Transcribed and edited from a short talk by
Gil Fronsdal on January 8, 2014**

I'd like to read to you a poem from the most ancient strata of Buddhist literature. Supposedly it was a poem that contains teachings of the Buddha. People often spoke in verse or something close to it, as it was a familiar part of the culture.

The verse goes like this in the translation:

*You should know from the rivers that those
in small channels flow noisily.*

The great rivers flow silent.

Whatever is not full makes noise.

Whatever is full is quiet.

The fool is like a half-empty pot.

One who is wise, a full lake.

I like this little verse because of the idea of a wise person being full. Sometimes in Buddhism we have the idea that you should empty yourself, not have a self, not have any desires – that it's better not even to exist somehow. I think

that is a misunderstanding or a caricature of Buddhism.

Often in the ancient teachings, people who have become wise or mature in the practice are described in very clear ways as becoming full and powerful. They are even talked about being great selves – *mahā atta* – like Mahatma Gandhi. It means “great self” in Sanskrit. Here, in becoming full, one becomes silent. If you become silent when you feel incomplete, insecure or inadequate, it might be more like just keeping you down, feeling more inadequate, or not having a voice. But you need to have a voice. If you become silent after you become full, then you don’t need to talk. Not needing to talk, you are not being repressed or restricted.

So, a practice that helps you to fill out is needed as much as a practice to help you empty out. The emptying out is perhaps emptying the ways we limit ourselves, the ways we restrict ourselves, the ways we become smaller or hollow. If we have attitudes of self-hating, self-criticism, greed, fear, of being at war with parts of ourselves, all of these things keep us limited, contracted, or small. Perhaps in the analogy of the verse, more like the empty pot. But to empty

ourselves of fear, of self-limiting thoughts, of self-hatred is to let go of them. It makes sense to let go of them because they are just activities of the mind. None of those things are inherent in who we are. Rather, they are learned mental behaviors. We don't have to do them.

The function of this practice is to recognize what is here, and also to relax the unnecessary activities of the mind that we carry with us. They say that fish don't see the water they swim in. Some of us don't see the self-criticism, the fears, the self-judgments, the ideas of shoulds and shouldn'ts that we're swimming in because they have been there our whole lifetime. As we settle into meditation, part of its function is that we start to relax the mental constructs of should and shouldn't – to empty ourselves of these, not so that we become less, but because then we can become more. We can fill out the goodness of our heart. We all have good hearts. The good heart can wake up and begin to flow, to move.

Part of the function of meditation practice is to let go of the things that limit us, so that we have space to become full. Concentration practice, in particular, is a practice that begins to fill us with good energy, with joy, with a sense of well-

being. To be awakened is not some abstract intellectual idea. To be awakened is to wake up to our human capacity to sense and feel and be alive with the full being of who we are. Our torso, our arms, our legs, our whole physical being fills out.

It is a paradox because the more it fills out, the more it can feel kind of empty in a very nice way. Not hollow, but full and translucent and fluid. Full like the full sky.

So you might think about how this little verse is useful for you. In what way might it be true for you?

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The great rivers flow silent.

Whatever is not full makes noise.

Whatever is full is quiet.

The fool is like a half-empty pot.

One who is wise, a full lake.

May you be like a lake!

Thank you.