

The Point of Wisdom: Minding Your Own Bodymind

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Dainen-ji, September 27th, 2003

The Point of Wisdom: Minding your Own Bodymind. This is what has been talked about for nearly 2600 hundred years, since Gautama Siddhartha sat down after having tried all sorts of crazy...perhaps; dubious...perhaps, practices, to find out what's really going on here. What is this? What is this thing we call a human being? What is this bodymind? What's going on?

That same question is still being asked and it does seem to be being asked more and more often. Each one of you asked that question at some point in your lives and look where you ended up - on a Saturday morning, nice warm autumn day and here you are indoors, sitting, facing a white wall with your eyes open. What is the point of this? The point of this is to afford yourselves the opportunity to look into the actual process of the bodymind, the actual process of perception and cognition in your own bodymind, not someone else's, your own.

We do live at a time when the spoken word and the written word seem to have taken precedence over any other form of experience or expression. We fall for those written or spoken explanations and we believe the limitations that are often expressed by them. No word is the experience of which it is speaking. Experience can only be experience-ed. At this point let me say I am not saying that words are not useful. I'm certainly not saying that they are not valuable and I am not saying that they are not fun. In fact, they are all of those things especially when we look into what is actually being spoken of; especially when we question into what's meant when we are asked questions. Words are a small part of our experience in each moment, actually, but we consider them to be so important that we will ignore 97 percent of the other things that we are experiencing and feed all of our attention into a word or a phrase or a thought expressed in words and phrases, or in colours and sounds, images.

This practice teaches us to notice what's going on right [O-sensei strikes shippei on the floor] now. There were a myriad of dharmas or moments of experience that expressed themselves for you as the knowing, to notice when that sound occurred. All you, as knowing, need do is learn to notice them. So this practice is looking into that process of perception and cognition and you do that by feeling the breath moving the bones in and out. That means you are alive and you still have a chance to Wake Up from the dream that we often call our life, because when we believe only the stories we tell ourselves about our life, we are robbing ourselves. And this does get expressed all over the place all the time. People will seek out help from almost anything because they feel something's missing in their life. They feel there is a hole and often if we are looking at someone who is saying there's a hole in their life they will actually point to their abdomen or have their hands on their abdomen or around the area of the heart. They say, "I feel so empty. There's no meaning. I want to have meaning, I want things to be meaningful. I want this void to be filled." So of course we get very busy running after many, many, many things to try to fill that void.

We run after dresses and cars and land and guns and drugs and alcohol and cross-word puzzles. We run after television programs and movies and friends that we gobble up like some strange cannibal, to try and fill something that really doesn't exist. This void does not exist. It simply is caused by our obsessive feeding of attention into one or two areas of our life in each moment and that tends to be thoughts and feelings which it would seem - almost a consensus - are the most important things.

When we use the noticing of thoughts and feelings to notice the rest of what's going on: the heart beating; blood coursing through the bodymind; hair growing on our head; random signals from various locations which we often will tend to interpret as something wrong. So we do have this tendency to pay attention to the flesh and the bones only when we think there's something wrong with it. We do what we do with everything else and objectify the bodymind rather than simply learning to experience it fully in this moment.

Because of the nature of the material that I'm presenting, that you are noticing and working with today, we know that actually we have established a certain maturity in our practice. Because if we were to talk at an Introductory Workshop about the skeleton, about feeling the sitz bones and recognizing we can know them and with a thought make them press down into the cushion so that as we breathe, the lungs inflate and the spine lifts up and the head rebalances and the eyes open so that peripheral vision is present. If we were to present that and only that at an Introductory Workshop it wouldn't be long before this would be understood to be another bodymind practice, another way of "working with the body". This is, of course, not what it is. It is a way of helping us know more clearly the actual nature of our experiencing in each moment.

The point of wisdom is balance point. Balance point is the fine, delicate balance of the spine, the skull, the ribcage, the pelvis, on your cushion. If we were to take that instruction about how to establish and recognize balance point and make rules out of it then people would tend to sit rigidly, forcing themselves, using muscles to sit upright. And that is a stance and we wouldn't recognize it as such. We would think that we were doing "the right thing". In our practice we mature and we start to understand that when we talk about this moment - it's already the past moment - but this moment is experienced before any words about it. So we start to understand through our own experience that we need not label things for them to be happening. In fact, the experience comes first and then the label about it. And this has been the case since the beginning of human beings. Experience always comes first. Language was developed to talk about experience.

The bodymind is such a nested systems of knowings and causes and effects that when we even think about a word, it produces an effect in the bodymind. Thinking about something over and over again embeds that particular response, whatever it may be, in the bodymind. We all have had innumerable experiences of that. It can be called obsession or it could just be called "having a bad day", but the bodymind itself does not have the capacity to discriminate and decide whether something that it is doing is useful or not. You do. You, as the knowing, as experiencing, as Awareness Itself, have that capacity. And you are developing it each time you remember to feel the breath, feel those sitz bones, feel the spine, balance the skull so that the chin is moving a bit towards the neck so that the back of the head is rising up, so that the top of the head is flat and parallel to the ceiling.

Each moment of practising anapanasatti, mindfulness of breath and body is helping the bodymind release old patterns of attention. In the "Satipatthana sutta", the "Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness", people who had listened to Gautama Siddhartha speak or who knew people who had, wrote down - some say maybe 200 to 300 years after it was actually spoken - what was said to have been said by the Buddha. This is wonderful that we have such things in existence that we can use because just as the Lineage is there as an active reminder that we have not popped this practice out of nowhere, that in fact men and women just like we have done this very practice of mindful sitting for 2600 years, so the written words can be useful. However, when you are listening to them, when you are reading those written words, feel the breath, sit up straight, open the eye gaze, actually practice what is being spoken of and recognize that people who wrote down these things were human beings just like you and I; they will do things exactly like you and I and they

did things exactly like we do, which means that they will take things out of context; they'll believe them rather than actually doing them. So, often distortion occurs. And in the sutta it begins, of course, with the "Evam Me Suttam, Thus Have I Heard: Once the Generous One was dwelling"... So immediately we have a problem - "the Generous One" - those of us who have a predilection for deifying things will do it immediately. "The Generous One is up there, somewhere, looking at me, looking out for me so I'll just have to listen to what's being said, memorize it, believe it, and everything will be okay". Not true.

They are saying something to the effect that "You know I heard this guy. Or I actually didn't hear him but my great-grandfather knew someone who'd heard this guy and he said something like, 'You know you can Wake Up. There'll be an end to all of this suffering'".

And so you say, "Well, yeah? How?"

"Well you come with me and we'll listen to someone who'll tell us all about it."

And then we get told things like,

"Breathing in, one is mindful; breathing out, one is mindful. Breathing out a long breath, one understands, 'I breathe out a long breath.' Breathing in a long breath, one understands, 'I breathe in a long breath.' Breathing out a short breath, one understands, 'I breathe out a short breath.' Breathing in a short breath, one understands, 'I breathe in a short breath.'"

So before we know it, there are groups of people who are going [O-sensei makes the sound of someone inhaling heavily] "I am breathing in a long breath". [O-sensei makes the sound of someone exhaling heavily] "I am breathing out a long breath". And it's not long before we have counting the breath, because if something can be misunderstood, we will misunderstand it.

So, rather than just saying "So this is what's going on: Yes, we are breathing and we can know it" we human beings want to nail it down.

We say "Yes, but what am I supposed to do?" We say "Well, just notice the breath. That's all, just notice it."

"Yeah, but how many times a minute am I supposed to notice it?"

We want prescriptions for everything.

Just notice it and feel your bones, open your eyes, notice the peripheral vision. And now you notice the next thing. So let's say the next thing is a thought about how what these people really need to do is come up with better directions as to how to do this and we feed attention into it; then something happens, perhaps someone comes along and adjusts our posture and we go "Oh!", the bodymind itself releases the breath at that point. We sit up straight and we open the eye gaze and that thought is gone. Because in order to maintain thoughts, we need to compromise the integrity of balance point; we need to compromise the integrity of the bodymind in this moment. By minding the bodymind, by noticing what's going on, what has happened, that we have woken up from that thought to the larger space and we remember to notice the breath [O-sensei makes the sound of someone inhaling strongly] to allow the bodymind to breathe and to balance the head, we have practised mindfulness of the bodymind in that moment. We've released the capacities of the bodymind that were caught up in propagating a thought that could be poisonous because if

we've been in the habit of propagating critical thoughts, say, about ourselves, or about others and so on and so on, they literally do result in - and nobody knows how - into the byproducts of metabolism to lots of atoms being released that set into motion all sorts of previous patterns which contract the bodymind down and we become a "self" with these certain habits and patterns and tendencies that obstruct us. And we had demonstrations of that during the "Daishin Dharani". Obstructions are not useful. They're not necessary and they are not inherent to the bodymind.

An obstruction is a Dharma Gate, it's a moment of experience that we notice and when we notice it and practise it, it ceases to be an obstruction. It opens. And our language may be that we "open around it" because language can be useful, but language will be understood in different ways by different people at different times, so it is important for us to keep things fresh and to have as many different ways of talking about something as is possible.

Back to the sutta. In the sutta there is discussion of images of the body.

"And moreover, monks, upward from the soles of their feet and downwards from the hair on the crown of the head, one observes the body covered with skin and filled with impurities."

Gag. [O-sensei laughs]. It's not that they're impurities really. We just have what the bodymind does. That's it. As the Roshi has said in "Flowers and Worms", we are this 25 foot worm coiled up within a bony structure with teeth at one end and an aperture at the other end for letting out the only thing that we produce as human beings.

"Within the body there are hairs on the head, hair on the body, nails, skin, teeth, flesh, muscle, bone, marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, bowels, intestines, stomach, excrement, bile, phlegm, mucous, sinovic fluid, and urine. If a double-mouthed sack filled with various grains like paddy, hill rice, kidney beans, masa beans, sesame and husked rice were to be opened by somebody, with his eyes, he would discern: this is paddy, this is hill rice, these are kidney beans, these are masa beans, this is sesame and these are grains of husked rice."

And that's quite colourful but again, can just fall into legend, something that we just memorize and go "Oh yeah" [O-sensei makes several "tsk" sounds]. Something incredibly interesting, to me, was I realized that we do have very little knowledge of the reality of the bodymind. In fact, these people who were practising, these monks, these home leavers who were practising with Gautama Siddhartha, had more actual knowledge of what's "inside" than we do. Why would that be? Because they practised in charnal grounds. They practised where the bodies were. They did that in order to mature their practice. This presents a very interesting point of divergence because we could look at it and judge it one way as being just something really awful that you have to push yourself, your way through, or we could recognize that this probably meant that these people had a much better sense of the skeleton than we do. If we ever see a skeleton today it will most likely will be because we are in a medical practitioner's office or we are in a museum and somehow or other we have the capacity to divorce ourselves from that reality entirely. This is something else. It has nothing whatsoever to do with us. If we break a bone, that is a different matter. We'll run to the bone setter who can fix that for us. But actually integrating the information that this is what we are; we are this bony structure that the old guys observed as bodies rotted.

When I was a little girl we went to get a new pair of shoes once a year, about this time of year. We would go to a shoe store where they had a “fluoroscope”. I think that’s what they called it. One got to stand in it, put the feet into two little openings and look down and there were your bones, the bones of your feet, and you could see the outline of the shoe that you were buying to see whether it fit. So we are not allowed to have those anymore in shoe stores because those X-rays were deemed to be dangerous, but it was pretty interesting. We’d think, “Gee, bones. I’ve got these bones; there are 26 of them in each foot”.

So we will ignore the reality of that skeleton entirely.

“And monks, see the body, abandoned in the burning ground, a skeleton bloody and fleshless, tied together with tendon and sinews, and remember that, “This body is also of that nature; it will come to this, it cannot avoid this.”

And monks, see the body abandoned in the charnel ground, its bones not bound together but scattered in all directions, here the bones of the hand, there the bones of the foot, here the shin bone, the thigh bone, the hip bone, the spine and the skull, and recollect that, “This body is also of that nature; it will come to this, it cannot avoid this.”

Well, inside each and every one of us there is a skeleton just waiting to get out. Early on in my practice when I was sitting in the middle of this bloody hell called practice with everything hurting and not able to pay much attention to anything else other than how much I hated this, I was called up for dokusan and I dragged myself in a foul, foul, foul state, into the dokusan room. After doing the bows and so on, the Roshi says to me, “What is it that drags this corpse upstairs?” Damn.

As long as you are breathing you are not a corpse. As long as you are noticing the breath you have an opportunity to practise the bones just as people in this Lineage have been doing since the beginning. The Hakukaze Soto Lineage recognized that practice was the practice of this body in this moment. This is what Dogen zenji taught. In “Shinjin Gakudo” he speaks of practising the whole bodymind in this whole moment. And that’s all there is to it. It does sound incredibly simple, but we do become obstructed because of forgetting that the patterns and habits and tendencies are not who we are. We are the knowing of the bones, the marrow, the thoughts, the feelings. By using the structure of the skeleton to return again and again to balance point when we have gone away from it by feeding attention into our thoughts about what’s going on, we are allowing the bodymind to be itself, to do what it does best, which is be the bodymind and take care of business.

The bones are not dry things. They’re very flexible. The living bones are very flexible, very active, very strong; as strong as steel but as flexible as aluminum. There’re about 206 bones in each one of us. The precise number may vary from person to person. Our main concern when we are sitting zazen is what’s called the “axial column”, which is the central bones: the pelvis, the vertebrae, the ribs and skull. The other bits, when we are sitting, the arms and legs, can be put into position with the mudra, the hands resting in the Dharmadhatu mudra allows us the opportunity to feel the breath moving the body in and out and each time we feel that - breathe in, breathe the body up, allow the lungs to expand like balloons, allowing the spine to stretch out and the knees to drop down and open - over time this will happen. When you move the bodymind at the end of the sitting round, forget about the soft tissue; forget about the thoughts you are having about the soft tissue. Use them to feel the breath and the bones and to allow experiencing to open, to

allow knowing to open to what it really is. Move slowly with as much intelligence as you can, allow yourself to notice that the bones have a lot of information. They're very busy even as we are sitting here with me talking on and on. They're busy. They're producing red blood cells and white blood cells. They are flowing with information. They can be reshaped, realigned while they are alive.

During this Dharma Assembly there will be more postural alignment, and with this practice, anything raises opportunities for practice. Postural alignment is not criticism of how you were. None of the instruction in practice is criticism, but hot-damn, boy, we certainly will take it to be that, often, and again I am speaking only from my own experience. When that comes up, say a tendency to be reactive, that's the bodymind being reactive; that's the bodymind doing what it thinks it's supposed to do because it's done it before. It is not you. You are the knowing. So when you notice anything like that, feel the breath [O-sensei audibly inhales], feel the bones. Use it to open up beyond that obstruction.

The point of wisdom, this moment, is available to you all of the time. All you need to do is notice it. And so far you are doing everything right. You are here. You have that opportunity. You've overcome all sorts of obstructions since you began to practise.

During Dharma Assemblies, part of the form is that there is only functional talking, which means that only if something needs to be communicated about something that needs to be done or where something may be, do we talk. There's no reading. But during this Dharma Assembly, please have a look at Bob. Bob is standing on top of the refrigerator in the Dining Hall. Bob is that little plastic skeleton. Please don't flock there, but just if you have a moment and you are in the vicinity, have a look at Bob. And after the Dharma Assembly, spend some time with bones, wherever you can find them. It's a really interesting thing - other than your own of course, but to get a sense of what they're really like, what the alignment is like. And during the course of the rest of the day, in every moment you will have opportunity to practise point of wisdom with the whole bodymind by minding your own bodymind, returning to balance point as it becomes clearer and clearer as you notice that point where the torso basically does become weightless for a moment as things are aligned. In order to get into anything, any state, any feeling bad, any feeling good, any pain, you have to compromise the integrity of that balance point.

"The Great Matter is birth and death.

Life slips past and time is gone.

Right now, Wake Up! Wake Up!

Do not waste time."

Thank you for listening.