

# The Touchstone 1

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A touchstone is something that we can use to tell what something is and what it isn't. When we hear the word "touchstone", most people have a sense of what the term means but might not be that clear about it. So, first of all, what is meant by the term "touchstone"?

A touchstone is a simple but reliable tool used to distinguish real silver or gold from look-alikes. A lump of ore pressed against black quartz left a streak of metal that could be compared to other samples to determine authenticity. For instance, most of us even as kids knew about fools gold, or "pyrite" which might have the brightness and shininess of gold, but a quick test with a touchstone would reveal its hardness and brittleness, completely unlike real gold. The word "touchstone" is also used as a metaphor for judging the relative merits of an idea or concept. In either case, what is basically being spoken of is a means of discerning what is true from what is false.

Similarly, we use the touchstone of the breath in our practice, as a means of distinguishing between what is true and what is false. If we are not feeling the breath, then our attention is not open; if we can feel the breath, then we can open attention further to reality. Anything can seem to be true because our thoughts are like fools gold - shiny, shiny. You have only to reflect for a moment on the number of ideas you've had in the past that seemed truly wonderful at the time but turned out to be truly awful to see this is true.

Self-image, as a process of contraction, is very good at distorting context or even creating the illusion of contexts that do not exist in reality. We see this happen each time we get lost in thought, each time we wake up from a storyline about who we are and what everything else is, and what seems to be going on. So we need a way of seeing our experiencing in the light of open, expansive attention, and for this we use the touchstone of the breath.

There are many suttas of the Buddha directly concerned with mindfulness of the breath and this topic has been spoken of in numerous teisho and Dharma Talks presented by the Roshi as well as Dharma Talks by Dharma Teachers and practice advisors. There is extensive instruction during preliminary interviews with students before acceptance and review of the instructions during interviews after acceptance. As well, the Roshi has provided commentary on the Sattipatana sutta in his book "The Straight Path: Zen Teachings on the Foundations of Mindfulness". So this is an extremely important aspect of our practice.

During daisan with students, once they have taken their seat and are settled into posture, I frequently ask if they are feeling the breath. Usually they will say "Yes". But when I ask them where they are feeling the breath I often see confusion in their faces. Sometimes they will place one hand on their midriff, the center of the belly, much as one might do if one were experiencing a stomach ache. At other times they will place their hand in the center of the chest or wave vaguely towards the nose and throat. And they are dismayed when I say "well, that's not what you were instructed to do". I need to keep coming back to this point because it is a very basic aspect of mindfulness practice, but students' understanding drifts and they will often rework or forget the instructions. Not that that's a problem because practice advisors and Dharma Teachers will review the instructions again and again as many times as is needed, just as the Roshi did with us when he met with us in dokusan.

The instructions are to feel the breath at the diaphragm and tanden simultaneously and in the same breath. And to use these sensations as a touchstone to open to the sensations of the whole body sitting, together with seeing and hearing. Simultaneously. In the same breath. Perhaps we should talk a little about why we do this instead of directing attention to the belly or the sinuses or the trachea or upper chest.

The activity of thoughts seems to take place not just in the head, but around the head. We have a cluster of sense bases in the head - eyes, nose, mouth, ears - so the head receives a lot of attention to begin with. When you are lost in thought, your attention has moved to the area of the head and you can become so absorbed in the swirling of thoughts that you can forget altogether that there is more to the body or to reality than just what's going on in your head.

The activity of feelings and feeling-tones takes place in and around the area of the chest. Feelings and feeling-tones tend to 'pool' in the area of the chest. Thoughts and feeling-tones are not separate. In fact what usually happens is that a feeling-tone will come up and then thoughts will spring up out of the feeling-tone to justify or explain the feeling-tone. The more thoughts you engage in about the feeling-tone, the more you propagate the feeling-tone and the more thoughts it will produce. So a kind of 'loop' forms - thoughts, feelings, thoughts, feelings, and your attention is drawn into the loop. This is why, when you have a really juicy storyline going, it can seem so difficult to let go of it. It's not enough to try to stop the thoughts because as long as the feeling-tone persists, further thoughts will come up to fill it out. In any event, this area of the head and the chest is a high-traffic area and it receives a LOT of attention.

What feeling the breath and body and opening to the sense fields while sitting zazen reveals and expresses is the open space of your own experience beyond your stories and misunderstandings about who you are. Feeling the breath is a way of undercutting the traffic - the movement of attention - towards the head and chest, and the fascination with the endless looping of thoughts and feeling-tones. Instead, we mark the moment with the touchstone of this breath. We touch the breath and ground ourselves in this moment.

Feeling the breath is not about air-flow. It's not particularly about the movement of air entering your nose, or moving down your throat or filling your lungs. It's about feeling the diaphragm and the tanden. The diaphragm is the large muscle that runs across the top of your stomach, just under the ribcage. It is the movement of this muscle that causes your lungs to fill and empty, and without it, your lungs would be useless sacks. The movement of the diaphragm is quite a large movement and easy to feel.

Feeling the sensations of the tanden together with the sensations of the diaphragm is important because the sensations of the tanden are lower still in the body. To release your storylines, the ways in which you confuse and delude yourself, you must be able to ground yourself in whole bodily sensation.

The tanden is a hand's width below the navel, just above the pubic bone. It's an area of the lower belly that always remains soft, even if you were to tighten all of the rest of the muscles of the abdomen. And the blades of the hands should be in contact with that area of the belly wall if they are positioned correctly in the Dharmadattu mudra. Many people say initially that they can't feel the sensations of the tanden. That isn't actually true. You can feel the belly wall with your hands and you can feel your hands with the belly wall. It's not that complicated. But as your practice continues and attention becomes subtler, what will happen is that you will notice more and more sensations in and around the tanden.

So let's say you're just beginning your practice at the start of a sitting round, or you're refreshing your

practice during one, or perhaps when you're doing informal practice. You notice that there are thoughts. Not a problem, just don't bother completing the sentence. Instead be intentional about what you are doing. Open attention to the sensations of the diaphragm and simultaneously feel the sensations lower still, at the tanden. Use these sensations to open to whole-bodily sensation and the seeing and hearing — all at the same time, all in the same breath. It's not something that's done in 'stages', one thing at a time. Attention can open to many sensations, many details simultaneously and that is what you need to practise. And you need to practise it with each breath, breath after breath, as continuously as possible, throughout your sitting round.

Now, of course you're going to drift. And that's not a problem either. As soon as you recognize that there are changes occurring in your posture, or that your eye gaze has shifted, or that you're starting to follow a storyline, come back to the breath at the diaphragm and the tanden. Use these sensations as the touchstone from which to open to the whole of your experiencing instead of becoming distracted by wandering attention.

Now for a bit of 'trouble-shooting' — complexities that students bring to this very simple matter of feeling the breath and the tanden simultaneously.

One concern that students raise is that they can't feel the sensations at the diaphragm and the tanden at the same time. That's not true. You do have to practise it though. And the more you practise it, the easier it becomes. If you're used to focusing on one sensation at a time, what you will find is that the sensations change as you open to more sensations. For example: If I told you to focus all of your attention on the middle finger of your right hand (and I mean really focus), you would experience the sensations of that one finger as being quite defined in their own way. If I then said "Okay, so now release the focus on that one finger and allow attention to open to the sensations of the whole hand, as well as all of the fingers while still feeling the middle finger", what you will find is that you can indeed feel the whole hand, all of your fingers, as well as the middle finger. But the sensations of the middle finger will feel slightly different because you're feeling it in the context of the sensations of the whole hand. Similarly, when you feel the breath at the diaphragm and the tanden simultaneously instead of focusing attention on one or the other, you will notice that the sensations of both together seem lighter, more effervescent, not as defined as "this" and "that".

The next area of complexity students fall into is what we sometimes refer to as 'mapping'. "Mapping" involves self-image taking up the stance of a watcher that is guiding and directing your practice. This is what happens when knowing is congealed into the sense of a knower or self or watcher. So what will often happen is that it will come up with a list of 'stuff' for you to pay attention to. It may even MC your sitting, announcing "feel the breath at the diaphragm; now feel the breath at the tanden; now feel your hands". etc. etc. etc. That is no more than habitually and self-consciously watching yourself. Don't follow it, don't avoid it, don't bother struggling with it. If you're really doing the practice, your attention is much lighter and much quicker than that. By the time it says "Feel the tanden" you're already feeling the tanden. You'll soon realize that there's nobody, no real intelligence that's there listing all of this stuff. It's almost like the words to a song echoing meaninglessly in your mind for no reason at all. It doesn't mean anything about you or your practice or what is really going on. It's just thoughts doing what thoughts do - thinking. Just stay with the instructions and continue to do your practice and it will dissipate by itself.

What often happens is that students will ignore both the diaphragm and the tanden in favour of the belly or upper chest or nose. Or they will skip the diaphragm and direct attention to the tanden; or they will skip the tanden and direct attention to the diaphragm. But anything you do in your practice will have an effect on the

whole bodymind, so it's important to understand and apply the instructions as clearly as possible. When I say that changing the instructions, doing something differently has an effect on the whole bodymind, I mean that quite literally.

Over the last twenty years or so of presenting these instructions, I can often tell when a student comes into the daisan room to meet with me, how they are feeling the breath just by the way they walk into the daisan room, their facial expression, their posture, their deportment. The students who skip the diaphragm and direct attention to the tanden are usually engaging in a kind of concentration practice. This tends to make them quite heavy-handed, quite joyless, not only in their practice, but in their lives. The students who skip the tanden and direct attention to the diaphragm will tend to be more spaced out and prone to engage in feeling-tones and storylines, and not just in their practice but in their lives as well.

It's not that we need to cut off all concentration, or cut off all ability to feel. But these must be balanced with the rest of the ways in which we perceive ourselves and the world around us: our sense fields, whole bodily sensation, environmental mindfulness. To use the musical metaphor of an orchestra: Having only piccolos or only bass drums makes for a very dull composition. You need a range of instruments, a range of notes. You have these at your disposal, but your preference is to make use of far less than you are capable of.

Paying attention to the sensations of the breath, the real details of the real breath as it really is just brings about what is actually going on. It is not a matter of drilling down into the sensations to dig up some special thing, some kind of hidden ore that will make us spiritual or saintly. Or to construct some miracle device out of them that can let us float above our real lives. The simplicity of the practice is so honest and direct that it allows us to be really honest and direct. This kind of integrity is really rare, really special, it is certainly more essential and spiritual than what labels itself as being spiritual.

Today, during this Dharma Assembly, please let's use the time we have to practise the Suchness of the posture, the Suchness of breath, the Suchness of our confusion, the Suchness of our clarity. Let's use the precious touchstone of the breath to unfold Suchness and be enfolded within Suchness.