

The Touchstone 10: Serenity Is Not Special

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At any moment that you recognize that you are lost in thought or are propagating a feeling tone or a state, you can use that recognition as a prompt to come back to the breath and the body, seeing and hearing. Experiencing this moment with the whole body is practising an intimacy of experiencing that comes about only when you simply allow yourself to meet your experiencing as it really is.

Meeting experience as it is might be feeling the breath at the diaphragm and tanden, opening to seeing and hearing while chopping vegetables. It might be opening attention while pulling wads of who-knows-what out of the drain in the kitchen sink because it's not emptying properly. It might be a moment of opening to seeing and hearing and bodily sensation while listening to birdsong as you walk under the canopy of trees on the way to the monastery. Or you might find yourself opening attention while someone nearby is expressing frustration and anger. It might be feeling the breath at the diaphragm and tanden and opening to whole-bodied sensation and seeing and hearing while listening to falling rain, or it might be while measuring out medication for someone who is ill. You don't know, from moment to moment, what will happen, what will need to be done, what someone might say. Yet each moment of your life is a moment of breathing, of feeling, of seeing, of hearing. Each moment is always a moment in which you can simply allow yourself to meet experience intimately.

If you were not practising at all, you might still walk down this street and hear the birdsong and you might still have to pull wads of who-knows-what out of the sink drain when necessary. And you'd still be interacting with other people and their states. But if you are practising, the difference is that you can do each thing you are doing more fully and completely. You can do each task with the whole bodymind instead of doing them with a sense of resentment. You can recognize how your attention is as you do them and choose to release attention into the sensations and colours and forms and the doing of the task instead of recoiling and holding yourself at a distance from it.

Self-image — or the process of contraction that gives rise to a sense of self — would much rather think about what's going on than really engage in what is going on. This is because through contraction, the sense of a 'self' sets itself up as the 'knower' of experiencing, as a some 'one' who is separate from what is being experienced.

When you sit zazen you can see this process of contraction and separation quite easily. You might begin by following the instructions to stay with the sensations of the breath and body, to open to seeing and hearing and pay attention to where you are and what is going on. But a few minutes later, you begin to drift into a storyline, in which the sense of self can seem to be at the center of the storyline.

In zazen, again, and again, when you come back to the breath and body, and refresh your practice, you see the storylines fall apart because there is no "one" at the center of experiencing. There is just this moment and the details that present themselves as the exertion of this moment which are constantly changing. Our practice is to release contraction, and instead of recoiling, learn to meet experiencing as it actually is. This is why we begin with this very simple practice of sitting cross-legged in the posture of zazen, opening attention to all of the sense fields instead of ignoring them to pursue internalized states and stances. And this is why,

when we practise Anapanasati, or mindfulness of the breath, we come back to the touchstone of the breath, we mark the moment with the touchstone of this breath. We touch the breath and ground ourselves in this moment.

Grounding oneself in this moment doesn't mean hanging on to the moment. It means letting yourself drown in the moment. If you try to hold on to the moment things can get quite complicated. So I will talk about that a little, because it is something that comes up in people's practice at one time or another.

In people's lives there is usually a lot they have to contend with that they don't particularly like. For instance, being bored at work; having to participate in social events they don't want to go to; being immersed in family issues that are not interesting to them.

Zen practice isn't about any of that stuff. But we are instructed to practice while those experiences are going on. So here's where a misunderstanding can creep in.

If you are practising Zen you will see more about your own states. And you will recognize more often when other people are in a state — because you recognize some of your own. Now, all this stuff that was going on before you started practising - the boredom and arguments and family foibles and all of the rest of it — that stuff is still going to be going on after you start practising. And what can happen is that you may make the mistake of trying to use your practice as a way of distancing yourself from all this stuff you don't really like.

So, for instance, there is a family member in front of you talking about an issue. It doesn't matter what the issue is. What matters is the stance you might take up relative to that person and the situation. If you recoil instead of releasing, this is not practising. It's taking up a stance about the situation and perhaps about the other person. And if you allow this recoil to continue, it can seem as though you are at a distance from what is being experienced, in a kind of special practice space that they don't share. Because, the story says, you're different. Because, the story says, you practice and they don't and that makes you superior and special. And if you allow this state and its story to continue, you may actually begin to feel quite serene about the whole thing. But what is being mistaken for a sense of serenity is actually a sense of flattening and withdrawal.

I do want to make it very clear that this has nothing to do with practising. This is merely the acting out of various patterns of contraction with a storyline about practice woven through them.

If you are in a social interaction and this comes up, open around it by coming back to the touchstone of the breath and actually do your practice. If you are in that situation it is because you agreed to put yourself in that situation. So be in that situation with the whole bodymind. If you don't wish to experience that sort of thing again, then you can change the activities you engage in. If you are in a relationship or are married, it is because you agreed to that. You can change that, but if you are going to change it then do it. Don't fence-sit, secretly holding yourself at a distance. Fully participate in your life and if you make a change, then fully engage in and take responsibility for that change. Don't use your practice as a way to avoid your life. This is not how a bodhisattva behaves - it is how self-image behaves.

When students make the mistake of recoiling from their own lives, and from the people around them, to some extent they will recognize that this is not good. And they will ask if Zen is devoid of feeling.

No, Zen is not devoid of feeling. If you are really practising, you will feel more, not less. But genuine emotion, real feeling, is a momentary flash. It does not colour or predispose, so it is not something you can

hold on to.

In Anzan Hoshin roshi's translation of the *Genjokoan, The Question of our Lives*, Eihei Dogen Zenji says:

Gaining enlightenment is like the moon reflecting upon water; the moon isn't wet, the water isn't stirred. With all of its radiance, the moon can still be seen in a puddle. Full moon, vast sky, can both be reflected in a single drop of dew dangling from a blade of grass. Enlightenment does not disturb you just as the moon doesn't ruffle the water. You can no more grasp enlightenment than the dew drop can restrain the full moon, the vast sky. As deep as the drop is, so high is the moon. As to how long such a reflection will last, just consider the water's depth, the moon's light.

We cannot grasp enlightenment and we cannot grasp mindfulness. Mindfulness is only mindfulness if we are really allowing ourselves to meet our experience as it actually is in this moment. It's not something we can 'oversee'. We can only enter into it, moment after moment. It penetrates our lives like sunlight through water and the longer and more deeply that we practice, the more transparent we become. And being transparent to experiencing allows us to see that all experiences arise within a much larger space.

To be transparent means that there is absolutely nothing you can hang on to. It means that none of your thoughts are solid, none of your feelings are solid, none of your views or attitudes are solid.

So when you are practising formally or informally, at home or at work, interacting with other people, the same is true. Practise this transparency by coming back to the breath and body, by opening to seeing and hearing, and allow experiencing to present itself to you. With other people, let them be how they are and don't hold yourself separate from them. Again, if you don't want to be with them you don't have to be. But if you ARE with them and this is what you agreed to, then let yourself fully BE in that situation. Don't be half-assed. You can't sit up straight as the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors if you are half-assed. You need to practise with the whole bodymind, both legs, both feet, both hands, and arms and legs and ears and eyes and the nape of the neck and behind the ears.

You can't do other people's practice for them. Do your own practice. If you just do your own practice, it includes all people that you know, all of the things that you do, all of the colours and forms that you see. In doing your own practice you practise the moment and everything that arises together as the moment. Meet the moment intimately and wordlessly. Don't recoil. Release. In this way you embrace everyone instead of holding everything at a distance.

You can release grasping at them and being entangled by their grasps as well, by embracing them and everything in the intimacy of experience. You are not people's ideas about you and they are not your ideas about them.

Zen practise is not an idea. And it is certainly not the ideas you can have about your practice, many of which are quite contradictory. Zen practice is something that you actually do. And in actually doing it, it does you, it changes you. Not into a special version of you, someone who is not only more spiritual or wise than you were but more wise and spiritual and special than your family and friends. It changes you so that you can live your real life, be a real person instead of a story about yourself, and really meet others beyond your ideas about them. We will explore more of this next time.

Right now, let's sit.