

# The Touchstone 2: Countless

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei  
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Breathing in, sky becomes breath. Breathing out, breath becomes sky. The breath comes and goes; thoughts come and go; feelings come and go; countless experiences come and go. Practising the posture of zazen, feeling into the countless sensations of the whole body sitting, feeling the breath and opening to the senses, we begin to understand, to experience directly, the vastness and richness of this life.

For moments here and there.

In truth, most students are really doing this practice of opening to Openness for only a split-second here and there in the course of a half-hour sitting round. It's not that you couldn't do this more continuously, that your practice couldn't be more open and clearer, but only that habitual patterns and tendencies are strong and attention will tend to follow them. Habitual patterns of attention are rather like dry channels that have been cut into a landscape by streams of water. Just as water will follow channels in the ground, your attention will tend to fall into and follow the narrow channels of habit and tendency instead of opening to richness.

So for a moment you may be sitting zazen, and you really are feeling into the sensations of the body sitting in an aligned posture, feeling the movement of the breath at the diaphragm and tanden, feeling your hands in the mudra, your legs crossed, your backside on the zafu. Peripheral vision is open and you are hearing whatever sounds there are that present themselves, and then a thought comes up: "I have a hole in my boot. I'm going to have to put my wet sock back on and my boot and it's going to be cold and nasty. Damn, I've got to remember to go look for new boots. I hate shopping and I don't want to spend money on boots. I'm saving for a new phone. Oooh, a shiny new phone. The breath. Right, the breath. I have to feel the breath. But oooh, that phone. No, feel the breath. Right. Breathing, breeeeeathing....hmmm. There's a hole in my boot."

Of course, that's a very brief description of something that could come up. But sometimes these channels are cut very deeply and the compulsion to follow them is quite compelling. It could be about one's child or husband or wife, or an illness or a situation at work or financial difficulties, some past event, or what to make for supper. Thoughts and feelings come up simply because they can and they'll go on for as long as you focus on them and give them attention.

Attention can be round and wide, or it can narrow and congeal. The tendency is to focus attention and allow it to congeal into knots of contraction. These knots can vary in duration, from a few moments to hours, days, weeks, months, even years of contraction. And they can be about anything. I'll just mention here that what seems 'light' or 'open' to you may not be light or open at all. It's just as easy to be contracted over thoughts about what enlightenment might be like as it is to be contracted over breaking up with your girlfriend. Contraction comes about through a narrowing of attention, a congealing, directing and focusing of thought and feeling that becomes increasingly internalized.

Most people don't really question into what the process of contraction is, what really happens. But some do recognize that there is this tendency for people to become very scattered and spaced out or to become overly focused, obsessed with thoughts and storylines and feeling-tones. And this has given rise to many techniques and strategies designed to calm the mind and control the scattering or the focusing.

Any strategy or 'technique' you apply to bodymind already has an agenda because it is the product of the presumptions underlying how you experience the world and yourself which are themselves products of the process of locating a sense of a "knower" or "self-image", an "I". The agenda is to strengthen the sense of an "I" or a "self" that is "doing" the practice. If you engage in such practices, what you will actually be doing is practising self-image and if you practise self-image, what you end up with is self-image.

If you truly want to Wake Up, YOU need to get out of the way and allow the bodymind to sit as bodymind. You need to shut up and attend to what is already going on and allow the countless experiences to reveal themselves as the Total Field of experiences as the radiance of the luminosity of Experiencing itself. The bodymind is already breathing and it doesn't need your help, your direction, or any interference from you. It doesn't need you to concentrate on it or regulate it or count it. All that you need to do is feel into the breath at the diaphragm and the tanden but don't stop there. Use the breath as a touchstone, a place from which you can open to the whole of experiencing.

Recently I had a conversation with a student about a technique they had encountered, called something like 'conscious breathing'. This involved following the instructions of a recording and deliberately regulating the breath by focusing on it and counting it. Counting the breath is a practice used widely by many groups and organizations and students sometimes ask me why we don't use it, so I will explain. I have done this practice of counting the breath. In fact, earlier on in my own practice, the Roshi instructed me to do it for a time so that I would understand it and would be able to explain to students why we don't do it. Its aim is to settle and calm the mind by directing attention to a point of focus — the breath and the counting. This will have the effect of seemingly 'calming' the mind, but it's important to understand what's really going on. You're not stupid and attention is not stupid. If you focus on something, what you are doing by focusing is seemingly making whatever it is that you are focusing on stand out or light up. It seems to become bigger, more important. It's much like looking through a telescope - something far away seen through the lens of a telescope looks much bigger than it is in real life. A cow standing on a distant hillside looks the size of Godzilla. But if you take the telescope away from your eye and see it in context, you'll realize you can barely see it, it's so small.

When you focus on the breath and count it, you're trying to limit experiencing to only the in-breath and the out-breath and the numbers. Those details can seem 'lit up' or much bigger, much more important than anything else because you've thrown a huge circle of darkness on everything around them. If you do that, you will be practising focusing. Of course the mind seems to become quieter — as I mentioned previously you're not stupid and attention is not stupid.

If you force the mind to pay attention to only one or two details of experiencing, you're numbing it. You're deliberately choosing stupidity. You're putting up a wall of attention to exclude everything else. But what will happen outside of your dull little place of quiet is that the patterns of attention that spawn all those pesky thoughts and feeling tones are regrouping and when your wall crumbles, which inevitably it will, they'll come back with a vengeance. Traditionally, it's compared to holding an empty gourd under water; when you let go of it, it pops back up to the surface and bobs about wildly.

You see, it's not the scattering that's the problem, it's the focusing. When you focus attention on one thing, you do that by excluding everything else. You become so used to focusing on one thing and then another, that if something comes up unexpectedly, it throws you off balance. Your attention becomes less and less flexible, less and less able to open to life as it actually is, full of interruptions and surprises, and change.

A single moment of seeing a thought rise and fall as you open around it is worth years of counting the breath. Why? Because counting the breath or applying any other strategy to the breath will not show you anything about how attention moves towards and away from what is noticed, including thoughts and feelings. You're just swapping one set of thoughts - your storylines - for another set of thoughts, counting and concentrating on the breath.

In Anzan Hoshin roshi's book on the Buddha's Satipatthana sutta, "The Straight Path: Zen Teachings on the Foundations of Mindfulness", he says,

*The practice is not to concentrate on the breath, but to just breathe the breath. If you try to "concentrate" on the breath, what will happen is that you will abstract yourself from the actual situation. You will create some kind of special realm and you'll enter into conflict with yourself by trying to screen out what is really just your own life. So, just sit and breathe the breath. When you get lost in a thought, or in a feeling, you have separated yourself from the rest of your experience. So when you have noticed this, gently return to this moment of breathing in or breathing out.*

He also says:

*The practice is actually just being aware. It is not really about following the breath or trying to produce some kind of feeling tone of "being one with the breath." Zazen is the practise of experience as it actually is. This begins with being mindful, and so you are using the breath to be reminded of that and to show you what your mindfulness is like. Just sit and breathe. Do not try to concentrate on your breath. You are not trying to make any particular mental state happen, you are just seeing what's happening by looking into the breath.*

Although some contemporary Soto Zen Teachers, especially those in the West, might have counted the breath and now instruct their students to do this, our own practice is based directly on Eihei Dogen zenji's foundations and those Awakened Ancestors who have come before him.

In the Eihei Koroku, Dogen zenji says,

*In our practice the most essential matter is sitting in the correct posture. Next it is important to release the breath with a calm mind. In the Narrow Path there are two ways of doing zazen. The first is counting the breath and the other is to contemplate the body as impure. So a practitioner of the Narrow Path would control the rhythm of the breath through counting the respirations. However, the practice of the Awakened Ones and Ancestors is completely different from the Narrow Path. A Discourse says," You should never follow styles of practice of the Narrow Path which are based upon 'cultivation'. (EK 2:97)*

and

*The Shibunritsu and Kusha schools that are active in Japan currently are of this sort. The Vast Path way of*

*balancing the breath is just to know that a long breath is long and a short breath is short. Breath rises and falls at the lower belly. Breathing in is breathing in and breathing out is breathing out. However the breath is, breathe in and breathe out from the lower belly. When you breathe in this way through the belly, the impermanence of your life becomes clear and the mind stills itself. (Eihei Koroku 2: 96)*

And so in “The Straight Path”, Roshi also says,

*The body breathes. It breathes in and it breathes out. Begin with this. Know this moment of breathing. Attending to the breath, attending to the body, attending to movement, attending to sitting, standing, walking, or lying down, is attending directly to the experience of body. To see directly the rising and falling, the coming and going, the birth and death of each moment, is the Straight Path. So we begin with this body, we begin with this breath.*

Note that he says “So we begin with this body, we begin with this breath”. He doesn’t tell us to focus on the breath or follow it or concentrate on it. Instead he is pointing to the practice of feeling into the breath and body, in the same breath, at the same time.

Just feel this breath as it is. Without focusing on it, without counting, without manipulating it, just breathe. Open attention to the sensations of the breath, but simultaneously open to the rest of the sensations of the bodymind sitting; open to seeing and hearing; open to as many details of experiencing as you are able, all at the same time, all in the same breath. Do this now, in this breath. And now again. And now again. At first it may seem very effortful, but that is because your attention is used to jumping about like a spoiled child. It has to learn to attend, to be available to the open intelligence of the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors. It has to learn to be a ‘big person’ instead of a petulant child. And as you practise this, coming back to the breath again and again with each breath, practising this ‘Beginner’s Mind”, over time you will find the gaps in your mindfulness will shorten.

Then you will begin to see what gives rise to those gaps, how they happen, how you get lost. But that will be for the next Dharma Talk.

As I mentioned in the previous Dharma Talk in this series, 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.

Breathing in, sky becomes breath. Breathing out, breath becomes sky. You have never experienced this breath before. Earth and water, wind and breath, nothing held and no grasping. Just breathe and experience this measureless moment with the sensations of fingers and toes and belly and spine and colours and forms. Attend to what already is.