

The Touchstone 3: Sticks and Feathers

by Ven. Jinmyo Renge sensei
Dainen-ji, March 23rd, 2013

“Beginner’s Mind” or *shoshin* 初心 is practising the recognition that this moment is always fresh. Zazen is not taking up a stance about the world; it is sitting down and sitting up straight and opening past our stances to allow reality beyond our thoughts and images and states. And so, just as each moment is always newly this moment, in each moment of zazen we always begin again. If you become lost, you find yourself back here with the touchstone of this breath.

As you practise 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. And that you will then begin to see what gives rise to those gaps, how they happen, how you get lost. I mentioned this in the previous Dharma Talk in this series and I will talk about it a bit more now. In fact, you will hear about this again and again and not only from me but in many teisho and Dharma Talks because it is such a big and such an important topic.

This is a big topic because there is not just how these gaps in mindfulness happen, but the strategies that students might apply to them if they are noticed at all, which can further complicate things.

For a long time in one’s practice it can seem as though things are fairly open and clear in one moment: You know you are sitting on a zafu, in a room; you can feel the sensations of the body sitting, the breath; you can see the wall and hear the sounds in the room. It’s all going quite well. But in the next moment, it can seem that you are finally waking up from a dream-filled dazed state that you might have been lost in for moments, or days, for all that you know. It can seem that way but, of course, one doesn’t go from one state into another state with nothing in between. Between a more open state and a state in which your posture and your mind have slumped, there was a succession of movements of attention, of thoughts and feeling-tones that your attention was following.

Wandering mind and sinking mind are not that different. Both involve shrinking back and away from reality, inverting and internalizing attention further and further. Wandering mind is not as dense as sinking mind, however. You can quite easily follow a storyline for a period of time while simultaneously knowing what is going on around you. We are well practised in this as we do it all the time – at work, at home, in the middle of a conversation with another person, for example. For all intents and purposes you seem to be listening, but you’re really up behind the eyes already formulating a response before the other person has even finished speaking. It happens all the time.

In the series “*Sitting Up Straight*” , the Roshi says,

Sinking mind, konchin , and wandering mind, sanran , are not all that different. In order to become lost in thought, your attention must already invert and narrow. This inversion and narrowing is of course much stronger with sinking mind. But even within sinking mind there is wandering. There are bits and pieces of discursiveness, there is imagery, and of course a flux of feeling tones.

Wandering mind is a slippery slope. You may think you can multi-task practising as well as follow your favourite stories, but this is not practising. It is fragmenting and dividing your attention which is not what

practice is. And in the process of doing this, you are engaged in the activity of piling up and propagating the three klesas of passion, aggression and stupidity.

There's no middle ground with this. It's as with the forms. You are either doing them or you are not. A small example: when you take care of your cushion, it should be rotated clockwise, pressed four times, and while doing that, you should be feeling into the sensations of the body, the posture, feeling the fabric under your hand, as well as feeling your hand pressing the cushion. If you're turning the cushion counterclockwise because you're thinking about something else while you are doing this very simple task, well, what's that about? You're not doing the form, you're just paying lip service to it while going about the usual wandering about in states and storylines which is so habitual that much of the time you don't even notice you're doing it.

Sinking mind is much denser than wandering mind and there is no mistaking it. It's completely abandoning your practice as you allow your posture to slump and your mind to sink into nonsensical half-dreams. You may fall asleep, or you may just spent a period of time in a kind of no-man's land, in which you have abstracted yourself to such a degree you don't even really know where you are. Or care. When you become lost in thoughts and fragments of dreams, your attention has withdrawn from the colours and forms and sounds and sensations, from the details of present experiencing — where you are and what is going on around you. The colours and forms seem to flatten, hearing becomes less distinct; sensations seem quite far away or dulled down.

But you always wake up from these states. Eventually. Even if you do nothing you will become more and more contracted until the contraction passes through itself and then you will wake up. But you don't have to wait that long. You can be much more intentional about waking up. What usually happens is that some external sound or a strong sensation, such as a pain in your knee, or the unexpected touch of a practice advisor adjusting your posture will break through the swirling fog of dreams and you'll find yourself back on the cushion again.

And so you straighten up and begin again.

Now, there's something in this I'd like to bring to your attention. Students who have been practising at Dainen-ji for any length of time understand that there is a tendency for attention to move to the area of the head. You can see this very easily when you get lost in thought, for example. The activity of the thoughts will seem to take place in and around the head and there appears to be little bodily sensation. This is because you're so fascinated by the false reality you've created with thoughts and ideas and concepts, that you've abstracted yourself from basic physical reality - the fact of the bodymind sitting on the cushion in the space of the room, surrounded by colours and forms and sounds. This is obviously not good. If you don't know where you are and what's going on around you, how can any of your thoughts be balanced, practical or realistic? They're occurring in a space that seems entirely separate from the rest of the world, the gravity free, consequence free space of your "personal" thoughts and feelings about who and what everything is.

On realizing that attention has become congealed and contracted, students will often straighten their posture and open their eyegaze. Wheeee! You just got three inches taller and the world got very bright. It's certainly a quick way of cutting through the fog, but there's a snag with this because it's not enough. It's not that there's a problem with straightening up and opening the eye gaze. But if that's all you do, you are going to get lost in thought again within a short space of time. Straightening the posture and opening the eye gaze

is good, but if you don't go further, you've turned those two elements of practice into a strategy, a bit of a cheap trick. And so sometimes, during a sitting round, all around the room there are people bobbing up and down, straightening, slumping, straightening, slumping. It's a lot of work doing all of that and you don't need to do it, actually.

What you need to do is feel into the sensations of the whole body sitting as well as open to peripheral vision and the hearing and the sense of smell. You need to practise opening all of the capacities of bodymind, not just one or two. You need to feel the breath at the diaphragm and tanden, as a place from which to open to the whole of experiencing. And stay there, sit still, resting in the openness of experiencing instead of wandering in and out, in and out, bouncing up and down, slumping, straightening, slumping, straightening. Just stay in posture and practise the posture of mind AS WELL as the posture of the body. Stay with what you're actually doing. Begin with the breath as a touchstone and with the next breath, use it as a touchstone. If we can feel the breath, then we can open attention further to reality.

And here's another place where students get stuck. Sometimes they will hunker down around the sensations of the breath and body, as though doing that could save them from their thoughts. If you direct attention 'downward', to the breath, as though from a point behind your eyes, that's not really practising either. And what will happen is that although you may notice some sensations associated with the breath, again, in a matter of minutes, you will be lost in thought again.

The ways in which your attention arranges itself to make it seem that the storylines and feeling tones and states are real and should be given all of your attention are such that you become so enfolded in them, so convinced by them, that you cannot imagine an existence free of them. Sometimes students actually worry that if the stream of thoughts and feeling tones stopped, they would be incapable of intelligent thought. Nothing could be further from the truth. If you want to open intelligence, you need to first let go of all of the ways in which you habitually cut yourself off from the world and all of the information the world offers you moment after moment.

These states of wandering and sinking mind do not spring up from the zafu to infect you and do not come up because you are sitting zazen. What you see when you sit zazen is a closer glimpse into how your attention tends to move ALL of the time — when you're at home, when you're alone, when you're with other people, when you are doing anything at all that you do.

What you do everything WITH is a matter of how your attention is, and is experienced by attention.

So of course, the quality of your attention, your ability to make intelligent use of attention, will have a profound effect on the course of your life. It will affect every decision you make, large or small; it will affect your relationships, your job, all of your choices. Attention moves continuously. It opens, closes, shifts, wanders, sinks, opens again, becomes focused, obsessive, and sometimes loosens so much you lose all sense of direction. Sometimes it will spontaneously open, presenting you with rare flashes of simply knowing what to do and how to do it (which you later take all of the credit for, as though you made it happen). But that is all very random and most of the time it's just moving from this to that without any real intentionality. It is why you have such difficulty doing things in a straight line, why it's so hard to follow something through to completion, why you never get around to doing all of those things you say you have always wanted to do.

The difference between these movements of attention occurring during zazen or occurring when you're in

the midst of doing other things is that when you are sitting zazen, it's not about you or any of the things you 'do' or want to do. It is about your attention. It's looking into the one thing that determines all else about your life.

Shikai O-sensei's cats love to play games. But they're very intelligent cats. If you first dangle a feather tied to a string, hanging from a stick, they'll be mildly interested in the movements of the feather but FAR more interested in where the movement of the feather is coming from. And within moments they have figured it out and are not fascinated by the feather, but instead are looking at the stick and beyond that, your hand holding the stick.

In a manner of speaking, zazen is not about the dangling toys of life. It's about what they really are, what everything really is, what is true and what is untrue, what makes sense and does not make sense. It's about seeing and releasing the fascination with 'knowns' to begin to understand what the Knowing is in which all knowns arise. And obviously not being clear about this is not really even knowing which end is up when it comes to the feathers and sticks, life and death and everything in between.

By sitting zazen, you have the opportunity to see how attention moves, how you are convinced by your own deluded storylines and ideas and notions and how to wake up from them. Instead of acting out storylines, ideas and impulses in your life and having to put up with the consequences of buying into chunks of fool's gold, you can save yourself a lot of trouble by simply learning to differentiate between what is true and what is false. And as your practice deepens your ability to discriminate between the two becomes stronger and clearer, thus helping you to make stronger, clearer decisions about everything that you do.

It's not that we have to try to make the mind still or calm. Thoughts will come up. Storylines spring up seemingly out of nowhere. It's not even that you are 'doing' these. They just bubble up out of the chemistry of bodymind. So there's no need, when noticing a thought, to try to punch a hole in the space where the thought is, or to try to replace one form of thought with another. For example, tying yourself in knots by noticing a thought about a conversation you had yesterday and trying to replace it with a thought about mindfulness. That's just swapping one thought with another and shows you nothing about the mechanisms that are generating the thought.

This is why, in the series "*Sitting Up Straight*" , the Roshi says,

Opening to and attending mindfully to this moment, you find that there is an infinite infinity of sensations, of sounds, variations in temperature. Even the colours of the wall, although white, are many different shades of white.

Rather than struggling and trying to survive... just let yourself die away. Let that thought die away. Let the past moment die away. Let the moment drop through itself. Do this, and you will know shinjin datsuraku, dropping through the bodymind.

You just have to be willing to enjoy this moment as it actually is.

If there is sinking, feel that, feel what it's actually like, without attempting to push it away or steel yourself. And without snuggling into it, without collapsing, without becoming someone experiencing the sinking. All around the sensations of sinking, everything is quite bright.

Thoughts and feelings will come up. You will experience wandering mind and sinking mind while you are sitting. That is inevitable because this is how attention will tend to move unless you are being intentional because it is being manipulated by the mechanisms of self-image. Self-image wants to lose itself in states, it wants to hide and allowing attention to wander or sink are two of the ways in which it can play out an agenda of distraction and abstraction, to render you so dulled that you won't notice what it is really going on.

Even when there is wandering mind or sinking mind you can open to reality. You can use the touchstone of the breath to cut through the murkiness. There can be the noticing of discursiveness, the fragments of thoughts or dreams, the noticing of sleepiness, the noticing of dukkha, a feeling of unsatisfactoriness. And you can practise with these. You can feel the breath, keep your eye gaze open, feel the sensations of the legs crossed and the hands resting in the mudra. You can hear the sounds. Whatever states there are that arise are transparent to reality. You can feel through them, hear through them, see through them. And in allowing mindfulness to meet them without moving attention toward or away from them, over time you will come to realize that you can practise through any state you experience.

This is how the gaps in your mindfulness will shorten, how your practise can become more continuous. Nothing is excluded from this practice, no state of mind or body, no conditions, nothing at all. Your age, your gender, your state of health, everything that you experience is the display of awareness moving as Awareness as a ceaseless coming and going and ever-changing display of Awareness which itself never moves.

Stay with what is simply true, beginning with this breath, in this moment.