

The Touchstone 4: The Three Natures

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What you are practising when you are sitting is knowing. I don't merely mean 'knowing things', or 'knowing about something', or even having some kind of secret knowledge. I mean knowing as the sheer capacity to know, the activity of knowing. This is traditionally compared to the ability of a mirror to show images rather than the reflections themselves, or the capacity of light to illuminate the darkness. This is called the Luminosity of Knowing in itself.

We usually have the idea that knowing is just our thoughts and feeling-tones and imagery and concepts. And so at first it's difficult for us to understand at all that the kind of Knowing that we learn through Zen practice is not the same as learning, memorizing, regurgitating what we have already learned. In fact it cannot be thought about it in a way that directly captures it. This is traditionally called its Traceless or Ungraspable aspect.

The kind of Knowing we learn through practising with open attention is much more direct than that and much simpler. It is so simple that it can be and is whatever can be known. This is called the Unobstructed aspect of knowing.

When you feel into the sensations of the breath you are coming back to the touchstone, the place from which you can begin to open to the directness and immediacy of experiencing as it actually is, without interpretation, without thinking about it. The touchstone of the breath is beyond all of our strategies because we don't 'do' it. Breathing is something the bodymind does for us. Any strategy we bring to it, any thought we have about it, any label we try to plaster over it, misses the point.

Mindfulness can never become a kind of habit, not even a 'special habit'. And the reason it can never be a habit is because to be mindful is to be mindful of this breath, this moment of seeing, of hearing, just as it is. It's not something you can crank up and then just leave to let it run itself.

It is experiencing the bodymind, the environment, the world — in, as, and through the bodymind, together with bodymind, so that experiencing is all of one piece instead of being divided up into fragments that attention darts towards and away from.

In the *Satipatthana sutta*, the Buddha spoke of *knowing a short breath as a short breath; a long breath as a long breath*. He didn't say "okay, so whenever you take a short breath you should say to yourself "short breath". He was talking about practising the Knowing (capital K knowing) of a short breath - which is direct, immediate, without words. It's too fast for words because together with that short breath there is seeing and hearing, the temperature of the air on your skin, the hands in the mudra, thumbs touching, the set of your shoulders and head and neck and spine, your legs crossed, the tip of the tongue against the roof of your mouth — so many details that you could not possibly give words to them all.

He wasn't telling us to monitor the breath, to compare a short breath with a long breath, to categorize the breath as this or that or the other. He was saying "feel this breath as it is." It doesn't matter what kind of breath it is - long or short, but the knowing of long or short breath is felt without holding on to it, without considering it, without doing anything with the sensations of it at all. Because...you're still breathing. Let go

of the last moment – the last split-second of feeling the breath in order to feel the breath as it is now in this split-second and the next and the next. You don't know how the breath is until the breath breathes and then it's gone as the bodymind continues to breathe. Always new, always fresh.

He was speaking of feeling into the sensations of the breath with the sensations of the breath. The bodymind feels the bodymind. If you start thinking about the sensations of the breath or label the sensations of the breath, you've moved away from the directness of the sensations. You've gone back to believing that knowing is about memorization and regurgitation of what is already known. You have lots of labels, lots of words and phrases in your collection of already-known stuff. That has nothing to do with the practise of Knowing (capital K knowing). If you manipulate the breath, to make it long or make it short, or push it against the back of the throat so that you sound like a wind tunnel in the mistaken notion that this will help you to feel it more clearly, this is also giving rise to this wanting to be the "knower", the one who is "doing" the breath. Just let the breath be as it is. The bodymind knows how to breathe and does not need your interference. It does not need you to change it or think about it or label it. If this were not the case you would not have survived infancy because you'd have forgotten to breathe.

With the onset of spring, we often open the windows of the Hatto and because this room on the second floor is as high as the tree tops, birdsong can be heard very clearly. When you are sitting and your attention is more open, the birdsong is heard together with seeing the wall, feeling into the sensations of the body, feeling the clothing on your skin, feeling the temperature of the air — together with many, many other details that can be noticed. There is no focusing on this or that because these details are changing so rapidly that they are more a coming and going of details, a continuous streaming of reality.

But if attention begins to narrow, it will congeal around a narrow range of perception. Since birdsong is something we quite enjoy, when there is this narrowing and fixating, attention will tend to latch on to the sound of a bird. If this narrowing of attention is propagated, mindfulness is reduced to only the noticing of the sound and you may even find that you're visualizing the kind of bird it is, or where it is relative to where you are sitting. You may even say to yourself "bird", plaster a label over it as though you didn't already know it to be a bird. And of course, as soon as you do that, you're no longer even listening to the bird, you've retracted attention away from the sound and you're listening to yourself! Inside your head. As though what's going on inside your head is the world. Ewwwww. Good thing that isn't true or you'd be stuck with it.

When you do this, you are not practising environmental awareness at all, you've turned your practice into "This is what I know. Me, me, me and what I know". This is what happens when self-image lays claim to experiencing. Self-image sets itself up as the knower at the center of experiencing, doing the experiencing, listing all of the things it knows.

This is labeling experiencing and when we do this, we have shrunk back from the vastness and vividness of experiencing and have reduced it to just this one 'thing' that I KNOW. This reinforces the sense of locatedness, the sense of an I that is separate from what is being experienced, which is really quite the opposite of practice.

What you need to do is to open to ALL of the sounds, near and far – the sound of the bird together with the sound of your own breathing; the sounds of traffic; the apparent 'silences' between the sounds. And do this by coming back to the touchstone of the breath, together with opening attention to the seeing, the sensations of the whole bodymind sitting – the balance and alignment of the posture, the details of thumb touching

thumb in the mudra, legs crossed, your backside on the zafu. Don't focus on this or that detail because any detail is occurring in the midst of a vast number of other details. Your practice is to open all of the capacities of bodymind to hear, see, smell, taste, think and feel all together, all at the same time, not to regurgitate what you have already learned, certainly not to identify, categorize and label everything you already know.

At any moment you notice you are focusing on something, come back to the touchstone of the breath, touch the breath and use this touchstone to refresh your practise of mindfulness. This breath is always new and fresh. If you are really feeling into it, you cannot freeze it to reduce it to a thought or a picture or a symbol of something else. It is always.....this breath being breathed by the whole bodymind.

The internalization of attention that is required in order to give rise to the sense of a knower in the midst of your sitting is the same internalization that enfolds you in all of the other states you experience. All of the states you get lost in are really the products of the five skandhas. The word "skandha" means "heap" or "accumulation." The Roshi explains that the five skandhas are a way of describing how we experience what we are. The activity of these processes creates the illusion of an accumulation or localization of experiencing, and describe the basis of self-image, the illusion that there is a self doing the experiencing, a single entity in the midst of what is being experienced.

So whether you are experiencing wandering mind or sinking mind or "dukkha", a general sense of unsatisfactoriness, all of these are the result of internalizing attention and all of them have a whopping great big unhappy "I" in the middle of them that is refusing to open to the simplicity and clarity of experiencing as it actually is. To paraphrase something the Roshi once said in a teisho: It's rather like the guest who stubs out his cigarette in a plate of fried eggs generously offered him by his host. When you are in the midst of a state, that "I" that wants to be in the middle of it and have everything be about it, wants to hunker down, cut itself off from bodily sensation and seeing and hearing and all of the ways in which the openness of experiencing would cut through it. It doesn't want anything better than the toxic mindset it generates and it doesn't want to be interrupted. Opening to reality would interrupt its agenda, which is only ever about perpetuating itself. States don't give you anything. They don't teach you anything. They just cut you off from the depth and breadth of experiencing to keep you locked in the belief that your states are who you are. You are not your thoughts or feelings, you are the awareness in which all thoughts and feelings arise. Awareness is the context in which all knowns rise and fall.

The soft spring air, the morning light, the scent of incense arise together with this breath, this moment of seeing and hearing. Feel directly; see directly; hear directly without making anything 'the point'. Not even the breath. Use the breath as a touchstone, a place to come back to, to open to the whole of experiencing. This IS your life and nothing is more important than living it fully, in each and every moment, to the best of your ability.