The Touchstone 5: Washing Rice with Water

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When you feel into the sensations of the breath at the diaphragm and tanden, you are opening attention to something that is going on right now. But of course there is more going on right now than just the breath. The whole bodymind is the display of reality and all that arises around the bodymind is also the display of reality. Reality is beyond your thoughts and feelings and interpretations about what is going on.

The breath is not a kind of life raft that you can hang on to, to fend off thoughts and feelings. It's not a 'pure' thing in the midst of some kind of corruption that you can turn to for a cure. It's not some bit of you that is more 'essentially you' than any other bit of you; it's not mommy or daddy or some kind of magic force that's going to look after you. Of course not. It's just the breath. And of course not, there is no such essence because there is no solid self, there is no magic mommy or daddy. And the cure for the sickness of dukkha or suffering that the Buddha diagnosed with the Four Noble Truths is to recognize the search for those kinds of ideas is part of the sickness and instead to simply and directly pay attention to reality. And this what the practice of anapanasati or mindfulness of the breath is for.

The breath is a touchstone, a point from which to begin to open past the states of contraction that compromise mind and body and hold it captive. We come back to the touchstone, we touch the breath without focusing on it, and immediately open attention to whole-bodily sensation and seeing and hearing without moving away from the sensations of the breath. And we do this breath after breath after breath. Touch, release, open all at the same time, all in the same breath.

States of mind can capture the breath. You can notice this when, for example, feeling anxious. The breath will sometimes become shortened, the sensations seem to tighten. Similarly with fear or anger or confusion, there can be an effect on the breath. And this is why it is so important to also feel into bodily sensation while feeling into the sensations of the breath. You're not going to notice that you are tensing or acting out a state with the body – as well as with the breath – unless you're feeling the whole body at the same time.

When you feel into the body and the breath together, all at the same time, all in the same breath, there is a kind of releasing that naturally occurs. What is being released is the cruft and fluff that accumulates when emotional and mental states are propagated. In releasing these states, you are freeing and opening the capacities of bodymind to see, smell, touch, taste, think and feel without interpretation.

The thoughts and feelings generated by states that come up are rather like ghosts flitting around a tombstone. Just flitting this way and that all around the tombstone. But the tombstone is reality. That's one of the Roshi's jokes and it's a really good one if you consider it for a moment. Heh. He means that reality is the death of self-image, the reality of the impermanence of even stones and the presencing of Suchness as everything you can touch and see and hear and experience.

And so that's not to say that all thinking is bad. There is nothing wrong at all with the capacity to think. But there is a difference between intelligent thought and just thinking about stuff. When we talk about releasing the thoughts and feelings, what we're really talking about is all the junk we waste swathes of time on. Intelligent thought is quite a different matter.

The capacity to think, for most people, is filled with the ceaseless mutterings of self-image. The ghosts flitting around the tombstone, nattering on about hope and fear. This is just having lots and lots of thoughts about stuff, usually very repetitive, echoing back to oneself what one already knows. You can see this quite clearly when you're trying to think about something that has a lot of emotional weight for you, or when trying to make a decision you're anxious about. And in seeing it there are some details that you can also notice quite clearly, about how you think – the form it takes.

Some people think primarily in words, others think primarily in pictures, others may think in feeling tones and textures. We are all capable of all three of these and often there will be two or even all three running at the same time. Understanding this is useful because when you notice you are thinking in words, you can use the noticing of that as a reminder to open to what you are actually hearing with your ears instead of listening to what's going on inside your head. If you notice the thoughts are coming up as pictures, you can use the noticing of that as a reminder to open attention to what you are seeing with your eyes instead of following the internalized imagery of people and situations that are not at all accurate. If you notice that you're getting caught up in feeling tones and textures, you can use that as a reminder to open to whole bodily sensation – to feel the body instead of feeling the feeling tones.

Most people believe that the decisions about small and big things they have to make occur at the level of thoughts and feeling tones. That isn't actually true. The process of making a decision – about anything – can actually occur very quickly and one's thinking can be very clear. But what slows the process down, complicates and clouds it, is the habit of worrying it to death like a dog tearing up an old shoe. People tend to think and think and think about everything. They think about events that have already happened and why those events happened and what was going on with all of the people involved in those events. They think about what's going on right now and what that might mean about themselves or about other people or other situations that are affected by what is going on right now. And they think about the future and what might happen to them and what that might mean and how other people may behave and the effect that might have on everything else and on and on and on.

Junk.

All junk.

But why is it all junk?

Well that's very simple. What you have already experienced is now in the past. You were there when it happened. You experienced it. You've learned everything there was to learn about that stuff while it was happening. So if you start thinking about it now, all you are doing is echoing back to yourself what you already know and confusing yourself by weaving more and more interpretations into it.

What you are experiencing in the present is not going on inside of you and stands apart from anything you think or feel about it. In fact it has very, very little to do with you. To experience what is going on in the present, you need to get out of the way and that means dropping the tendency to want to draw comparisons and associations and interpretations about it and following the habit of just reacting to it all. In short, what you need to do is shut up and pay attention and what IS going on will reveal itself. Everything is already telling the truth about itself and the only way you can confuse yourself about it is by following your own interpretations instead of paying attention to what is being presented to you.

And then there is the future. What will happen in the future isn't here yet. It hasn't happened. And whatever will happen will unfold in ways and to an extent that cannot be bound within your language, imagery, or feeling tones. The future is not science fiction. It is not fiction at all. It is a range of possibilities and probabilities that are nothing at all until they are no longer the future but are simply the present. So any thought about it that you may have is just more of the nattering of self-image lurching between hope and fear like a drunk with a knife.

So what we're talking about here is all of the thoughts you have ABOUT stuff. The junky thoughts. The thoughts generated by an addiction to generating thoughts. Making a grocery list involves intelligent thought. But thinking about a grocery list when you're sitting on a zafu and don't have a pen or paper is just having thoughts ABOUT making a list. Is there really anything you could think about while sitting that would fall into the category of intelligent thought? No. Because you're sitting and there's nothing you need to think about sitting. Sitting involves a kind of 'doing' or as the Roshi would say "doing not-doing' and that not-doing includes not indulging in that little stone you get off of talking to yourself. Getting lost in states and generating wave after wave of thoughts about the state is rather like being stoned.

That's why you need the touchstone of the breath. When you're under the influence (of a state) you need a way to begin to ground yourself in reality to wake up from it. So we come back to the breath, we touch the breath and the touchstone of the breath shows us what is true of this moment of experiencing. But we get so drunk on mental and emotional states that just feeling the breath is not enough. It needs to be felt together with the rest of the sensations of the body as well as opening to reality through seeing and hearing. If you just try to hang on to the breath as though it might save you, you'll get lost in thought again very quickly because you haven't opened attention enough to stay with reality.

Thoughts will come up while you are sitting, but as I've said, any thought that comes up while you are sitting is junk. It doesn't matter what it's about, how important or creative or intelligent or open or compelling it might seem — it's junk.

There are a few kitchen sink matters, things that occur in the kitchen that a tenzo notices, that I'd like to tell you about concerning thoughts and thinking and how to clarify the way in which you are using that capacity.

You will be eating rice for lunch. So let's talk about washing rice.

When we wash rice, great care must be taken. Aside from dust and insect eggs, bits of husk and who knows what else, rice has a lot of chalk mixed into it, to prevent the grains from sticking together. That's why you can pour it out of the bag instead of having to handle bricks of rice. But chalk isn't good for you and it has a weird texture on the tongue. Some people find it actually upsets their stomach. So the rice needs to be washed well before it's cooked. At Dainen-ji we measure the rice, then tip it into a stainless steel mixing bowl, watching carefully as it is poured into the bowl to spot any pebbles that might have got mixed into it. We cover the rice with a generous amount of cold water and then gently stir it with one hand. You don't need to work it as though you were kneading bread – the simple action of gently moving the grain through the water is enough to loosen anything that needs to be washed away.The water turns a milky white and is poured off, being careful not to lose any of the grains of rice down the drain. This is repeated as many times as necessary until the water is only very slightly clouded. At that point it's not chalk that's turning the water cloudy but starch from the grain itself, which is harmless. It's then tipped into a mesh colander and we shake it to remove excess water before putting it into the pot or rice cooker.

When washing rice, you need to let the water do the work of washing the rice. If you knead it and rub it together with your hands you'll break the grain and ruin it. In your life, the choices and decisions you make don't require that you knead and mash your thoughts and feelings together to clarify anything. It's simpler than that. Let reality show you what needs to be done and how to do it. Let reality do the work by aligning with what is most true of your experiencing.

There is another, more classically Indian, metaphor about clarifying butter. To make clarified butter (ghee), unsalted butter is melted in a pot. As it warms, the milk solids rise to the surface and are skimmed off. The skimming takes a little time but at the end of the process one is left with a clear golden oil.

When you are trying to think about something, perhaps because you have to make a decision, a lot of thoughts will come up. Many of them will just bubble up out of feeling tones you have about the issue – fear, confusion, doubt and so forth. These thoughts and feeling tones are like the milk solids. Let them come up but keep releasing them. Just decide that for a period of time you're not going to settle on any of the thoughts. They're all junk. Each time you notice a thought, instead of giving it your attention, choose instead to open attention to the sensations and colours and forms — to where you are and what is actually going on around you. This is how you can release attention wherever you are, no matter what is going on. Now if you continue to do this for a time, what will happen is that the volume of thoughts will gradually lessen and perhaps just a few will begin to repeat. Keep skimming those off too. Not this, not that. Don't propagate any of them. They're all still junk. Continue to open around them. You'll want to follow the thoughts because that's your habit, but you can release them. And if you do this what will happen is that a much simpler understanding of the situation can begin to present itself.

Knowing is not the same thing as thinking. Knowing does not require crunching your attention into distorted patterns and internalized maps in order to understand something. Knowing, which we also refer to as Luminosity, is very, very different from thinking and thoughts. Attention following thoughts is like a drunk with a knife lurching about in the dark shadows trying to tell you what to do, while Knowing is more like the sun coming up over the horizon spreading light across a landscape so that you can see where you are, where you need to go and what you need to do.

Sitting is the best place and time to practise releasing the thoughts. Not this, not that. If anything seems to become the point, open attention past that. But you can practise this at other times too. You can learn to trust Awareness instead of hoping that you need to cram attention into your head to think your way through every situation you encounter. If you do that, you're only going to repeat old habits of thought and feeling again and again and again.

During this sitting and the next, and the next, there is nothing you need to think about. You have this precious time to practise, so please don't waste it. When the thoughts come up, practise like washing rice with water, like making ghee, by choosing to open attention to the breath, to bodily sensation, to seeing and hearing. Simply let the breath breathe.