

# The Touchstone 6: Not a Tourist

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The breath is always immediate, simple, direct. This is why it is the touchstone for mindfulness. It is something you can open to anywhere, at any time, for as long as you are breathing. It's not even really something you "do". The breath is already going on and all that is needed is for you to release attention from the ways in which it is usually bound, in patterns of contraction and recoil, and attention can just open to it. Simply. Directly.

And the touchstone of mindfulness of the breath is a path to greater and vaster simplicity. Let go not only of what attention seemed to be bound within. Let go not only of the habits of discursive thought and daydreams; let go also of the strategies of attention of being someone who is being mindful of the breath. Let it be just the breath breathing the breath, in just this moment. Let mindfulness be mindful.

If there is the sense that you are watching the breath from above it, from somewhere up behind the eyes viewing down, you've taken up the stance of an 'observer'. When this happens, you're not entering fully into your practice. The 'observer' has little discrimination. Watching is watching, whether it's watching thoughts, watching feeling tones, watching theories, ideas, concepts, about this or that, watching the breath. It doesn't really matter to it what it's watching providing it gets to watch, because as long as it's just watching it doesn't have to really do anything. It doesn't have to take any responsibility, it doesn't have to engage in what is going on at all. It can seem to be quite removed from what is really going on, free to maintain whatever agendas it views as important while ignoring almost everything that is really going on around it. A tourist.

This is a quote from the *Fukanzazengi: How Everyone Can Sit* by Eihei Dogen zenji:

*In this and all other worlds, in India or in China, every place is marked by the seal of Awake Awareness. Upholding the essence of this Way, devote yourself to zazen, completely do zazen. You might hear about ten thousand ways to practise but just be complete and sit. What's the point of giving up your seat to go wandering around in dusty lands and countries? Take a wrong step and you'll miss what's there.*

*You've got what you need, the treasure of this body and birth, so don't waste your time. Keep to this as the basis of the Way of Awake Awareness. Don't be attracted by just a spark from the flint. Anyway, your body is like dew on the grass, your life a flash of lightning; vain for a moment and then vanished in an instant.*

*You who are in this excellent Lineage of Zen, don't blindly grope only a part of the elephant or fear the true dragon. Put all of yourself into this Way which directly presents your own nature. Be grateful to those who have come before and have done what was to be done. Align yourself with the enlightenment of the Awakened Ones and take your place in this Samadhi-Lineage. Practice in this way and you'll be what they are. The doors of the treasure house will fall open for you to do with as you will.*

We miss so much of our lives through being inattentive. As the *Gokan No Ge*, the traditional Five Remembrances Meal Chant, says, *Delusions are many, attention wanders*. No matter where you are, no

matter the circumstances you find yourself in, if you are not attending to experiencing, if you are not questioning into the nature of experiencing, you are missing most of what is really going on.

A tourist doesn't gain real insight into the experiences of people living in other lands and countries. They skim the surface of experiencing, noticing only the coarsest details. People will often say they want to travel to this place or that because they want to experience a different culture. You can't experience a different culture unless you live within that culture for many years, forming relationships and interacting with people, speaking their language, eating their food, reading their books, listening to their music, engaging in all of the details within that culture to take on its characteristics so thoroughly that you know it inside out. That is understanding another culture. Anything else is just being a tourist.

Being a tourist in one's own life is one of the characteristics of self-image. Self-image is very concerned with how things appear to be so the most superficial details will tend to stand out. We learn to dress according to what we think is our 'part', we learn to speak our 'part', play our 'part', fit in. It's really not comfortable and we tend to complain a lot, but we don't really have any better ideas about how to go about it all so we go along with it. But if there is a glimmer of real questioning within all of this, eventually we may find ourselves sitting on a zafu, facing a blank white wall, coming back to the touchstone of the breath, in order to question further into what it is that we are really experiencing - past the expectations and associations and assumptions that make up so much of what we think of as 'our lives'.

When you come to the monastery to attend a sitting once a week as an associate student or perhaps a few times a week as a general student, it's easy to forget that practice isn't just about the round and a half of sitting you do in the Hatto or the Zendo. It's about the WHOLE of your life. What you see while sitting in zazen is how your attention tends to move towards and away from whatever is noticed - a thought, a feeling, someone on the other side of the room coughing; the sound of a bird, the breath, back to a thought, an itch, a reaction to the itch, a reaction to the reaction. And on and on. Attention waxes and wanes, closes down with contraction, opens, sinks, opens, sinks again and you fall asleep. And then you're wide awake, feeling the breath for a moment, then lost in thought. And so it goes, throughout the round just as it does all of the rest of the time, through all of your waking and sleeping hours. But the difference between what is going on when you are sitting zazen and what is going on for the rest of the hours in your day is that if you are making an effort in your practice, that effort is to be more intentional about how your attention is moving.

Now, when I say "that effort is to be more intentional about how your attention is moving" this doesn't mean that being intentional means directing, aiming or focusing attention. The intention that is needed is to release attention from exactly that directing, aiming and focusing you engage in most of the time. The intention is to release attention into reality, beginning with the simplicity of the breath. And by 'reality', in this context I mean simply something that is going on, something you can verify through your actual experience. You are breathing. That is unarguably true. So we start with something that is very simple and completely true. We come back to the touchstone of the breath as a starting point from which we can open to more of what is true of our experiencing. We are breathing, but we are also experiencing the sensations of the whole bodymind sitting. Those sensations are not something we make happen, they are already going on. All that we need to do is let go of continuously distracting ourselves with thoughts and feelings and release attention into the breath and the sensations of the body. The bodymind is also seeing. You can see the white of the wall. That is unarguably true. You are hearing the sound of my voice, the pauses between the words I speak.

These sensations, this breath, these sounds and colours and forms, the experience of the bodymind and the space in which the bodymind arises - this is your life. You are not a tourist, visiting temporarily to have some kind of special experience. The practice of your life is the practise of whole bodymind in this moment, just as it is. You've heard the expression *Progress into the ordinary* ? Well this is what it means.

Tourists like to watch other people's lives. They like to just pass through without having to do anything. They pick and choose the kind of experiences they think they want to have, living temporarily in a kind of bubble that floats above 'ordinary' life which allows them to watch what is going on and interact with it as little as possible.

This is just like the sense of being a watcher that can obstruct true mindfulness. It is like just being a tourist in the land of Zen.

A point of interest about the 'watcher' is that it likes to believe that it is being very subtle, very covert. It's as though it were back and away from what is going on, off at a safe distance from which it can observe and generate various judgments and notions about what seems to be going on. All by itself, all very secretive. Sometimes people will refer to the movements of contracted attention that are really what this observer is, as their "innermost thoughts and feelings".

But through the process of mindfulness practice, one begins to realize that in fact there is no 'inside' or 'outside' and the appearance of a secretive "self" or "me" who is at the center of experience watching and making judgments is nothing more than the self-image attempting to set itself up as a 'knower', a voyeur, a tourist just passing through, who watches, makes judgments, but never really engages in anything that is actually going on. Because it doesn't really consider itself part of what is going on.

Now sometimes the observer will show up as that thing that seems to be looking over your shoulder making judgments about everything you do. "You shouldn't have said that, you sound like an idiot". Sometimes it will do replays of events that occurred previously, echoing them back to you over and over again, re-writing what you should have said or should have done. It likes to pretend it's much more intelligent than the rest of you is, much more worldly. But it's only AFTER the fact that it has anything to say. And that is a dead give-away. There's actually nobody inside of that thing that's doing the observing, no entity that is more intelligent or more knowing than you are the rest of the time.

For many people, taking up the contracted stance of an 'observer' is so habitual that they don't realize they are doing this most of the time. It comes up in dokusan, daisan and practice interviews with students quite frequently. An extreme example of this would be when a student is facing the Teacher or a practice advisor waiting for some kind of 'big' experience. Like a tourist waiting to be entertained.

I was an associate student when I first started having dokusan with the Roshi and I used to get into quite a lot of this in the beginning. I used to sit opposite him and as he spoke I would be coming up with all kinds of thoughts and opinions about what he was saying and how he was saying it and what it all meant about me and how I felt about it, whether I agreed with it, how it fit into what I thought I already understood, and on and on and on. All from up behind the eyes, in 'secret'.

What I didn't realize at first was that he was seeing all of this.

I don't mean that he was reading my mind or anything like that. Reading other people's minds even if it were

possible would be very rude so he wouldn't do that. No, it was simply that he could see how my attention was. When attention is more open that is quite obvious. When it is contracted, that is quite obvious. Different kinds of contraction generate different kinds of textures that can be felt. And how a student responds or doesn't respond shows quite clearly how willing they are to be exposed to and by the process of practice. Again and again and in so many ways the Roshi invited me to come out from my hiding places to meet with him and receive the Dharma. In some of my other Dharma Talks I've provided a few glimpses of exchanges I've had with the Roshi. Sometimes they were very uncomfortable; sometimes he could be quite fierce; sometimes very kind; but always in speech and action, through example, what I was being shown was the Dharma. I remember on one occasion a particularly snippy comment I made, which was *I'm not learning anything*. The Roshi responded simply by saying *I am Teaching you, moment after moment in how I am. Pay attention*.

The great debt of gratitude I owe my Teacher can never be repaid.

When you are called for daisan or a practice interview, the first question you are usually asked is *How is your practice?* This is first and foremost a reminder to practice, to really make use of the opportunity to meet with a monastic. A practice interview or daisan is meeting with the mind of practice. So it is about speaking from your practice, about your practice. Other topics may come up about your life or your activities outside of the monastery, but these are only relevant at all if the reason you are bringing them up is to clarify how you can practise with them. If you bring up something like your relationship with your husband/wife/girlfriend/boyfriend or work concerns or health concerns or the state of the universe, there is nothing a monastic really has to say about any of this unless you are speaking about it from the mind of practice, with the intention to practice with the reactivity that comes up about it. It's important to understand that your practice is your life. Your life is not your practice, not unless you're practising with it. Difficulties you may experience in your life would be going on whether you were practising or not. They don't come up because you're practising. And what a Dharma Teacher or practice advisor can offer you in the way of advice about these is to really allow mindfulness to inform your decisions; to practise as continuously as possible. That is what we do; that is what we are trained to do; that is what we are here for and that is what we have to offer you.

In the teisho series, *Entering Completely: Commentaries on Bodhidharma's "Two Entries and Four Practices* by Ven. Anzan Hoshin roshi:

*A thought comes up, and we think that we have thought it, even though we don't know where that thought has come from, or where it goes. We pretend that we have thought the thought. We pretend that we are the thinker. And we are coloured by the contents of that thought, as we propagate the next thought, and the next thought, and the next thought, and continue this game of dancing around pretending that we are the thinker, pretending that we are the contents of the thoughts. We bind our experiences together into lumps and heaps, into piles of junk.*

*We get up in the morning, and once we get over that moment of panic of the first opening our eyes and realizing that there's a world there, and we collect together all of our thoughts and feelings for the day. We start to ramble around inside of our head, feeling a grudge about this, feeling anxious about that. We wake up in our usual bed, in our usual way, get out of bed into our usual room, and wander around through our usual world for the day, looking for some kind of satisfaction someplace, something interesting to happen to cut through this usualness, this pettiness. Desperately searching for something to*

*make us happy, or at least give us some sense of being alive.*

*And yet, things are not bound together, nor are you tied. Sounds come and go. Thoughts come and go. The world comes and goes over and over and over again. When a thought comes up it is instantly gone. It is impossible for you to hold onto a thought. It is impossible for you to hold on to a sound. It is impossible to find any place to hold on, let alone to be able to pile things up in ugly heaps.*

*The world is not usual. The world is amazing. The world exerts itself as world, simply for the fun of it. In our search for something to make us happy, we pass over this basic joyfulness that is existence. And so the reason it is not manifest is only due to being wrapped in external objects and deluded views. We have a deluded view if we think that the world is the same moment after moment. We have a deluded view if we think that we can hold onto anything. We have a deluded view if we think that we are anything at all. We have a deluded view if we believe in time and space and body and mind and self and other. We have a deluded view if we think that we have to become Buddha. We have a deluded view if we think that we are not Buddha. We wrap ourselves in external objects when we hope that something will make us happy. Wrapping ourselves in external objects does not just mean collecting cars, and houses, and mink coats. Giving up wrapping ourselves in external objects is not as easy as selling your property and going off to live in a cave. Ceasing to wrap oneself in external objects means to come out into the open, to stop hiding, and to come out and play.*

Practise the simplicity and honesty of opening attention to things just as they are. Release the strategies self-image entangles you in by coming back to the touchstone of the breath. Do this as much as you are able while sitting in zazen and then follow through and practise mindful speech while meeting with monastics in daisan and interviews. And beyond that, practise this simplicity as often as possible the rest of the time too. You're not a tourist in your life or in the monastery or in your practice and this is not some 'spiffy Zen thing' you do now and then. This practice IS the practice of your life as it really is, beyond your ideas and interpretations about it. And as the Roshi would say, *Please, enjoy yourself* .