The Touchstone 7: Faster Than the Speed of Thoughts

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When you come back to the touchstone of the breath, in the moment of really coming back and allowing yourself to open to the sensations, there is a change in perception. The degree to which you'll experience this will depend on how your attention is arranged in that moment and was prior to feeling the breath. But whether subtle or obvious, however you experience it, there is a shift in perception and there is a direct relationship between that shift and opening attention to the sensations of the breath and body. It might be just a split-second flash of recognition, or it may be as pronounced as would be the experience of seeing the world in three dimensions when previously you were seeing it only in two, as though it were a flat photograph. There is a depth, a breadth, a sense of spaciousness in feeling the breath and body that in contrast to the claustrophobic folding in of thoughts and feelings is unmistakable.

We begin by coming back to the touchstone of the breath, but we also feel into the sensations of the rest of the body. If you also feel into the sensations of the whole body, without leaving the breath but instead feeling into breath and the rest of bodily sensation at the same time, the experience of spaciousness, of ease, of there being room within experiencing for anything that is going on or anything that might come up, becomes even more obvious because the real process of practice is a process of opening that continues to unfold into further openness.

It's not either/or — feel the breath OR feel the body. In some traditions of Buddhist practice teachers instruct students to feel the breath. And that's good. However, in our practice of Dogen's Zen, the emphasis is on feeling the breath TOGETHER with opening attention to whole bodily sensation at the same time. It's not enough to just feel the breath and it's not enough to just feel the hands and feet and legs and arms. Or to move attention from one thing and then another. You need to feel into the sensations of the breath and at the same time, in the same breath feel into the sensations of the whole bodymind – top to bottom, front to back, all at the same time.

Why? Well, because they are all going on at the same time in the first place. The question is not why you should feel all of these sensations all together but why you were not feeling them all together. Attention becomes directed and focussed into interpretations and thoughts. Directing and focussing attention towards something other than thoughts, such as the breath alone or the seeing alone or the hearing alone, or the feet alone, or the hands alone, or the knees alone, or the back alone, or the elbows alone is all just more focussing and tunneling of our experience.

The Straight Path of the Buddha's mindfulness is a journey of the whole bodymind from dukkha and contraction into release and sukkha. This is what all of our Awakened Ancestors have realized and practised as the *Shobo* or Complete Dharma.

And so we practice with the breath, with the seeing, with the hands and feet, the elbows and knees, the belly and the back, all together and whole in this whole moment.

And practise this with the next breath, and the next in the next moment, and the next.

Breath, bodymind, the world, all that you are experiencing arises together, at the same time, so why would

your practice occur in stages? When this seems to be the case, it is because you are shuttling attention from one thing to another instead of allowing it to simply fall open.

You don't need to direct attention. In fact, you really can't direct attention. All you can do is make things absurdly complicated. But we are masterful at making things complicated so we should talk about what to do when you find you've done just that.

What you can do is just drop everything you think you're doing for a moment, even the idea of being 'mindful' because that's not mindfulness. Pay attention to the simplest of details. If you're sitting down, feel the bodymind sitting down. If you're standing, feel the bodymind standing. Open attention to the space around you. Where are you? In a room? Outside? How do you know where you are? Well, you know where you are because you can see the space around you and you can hear it. You can also feel such things as temperature, air currents; you can smell whatever scents there might be in the environment. And if you do just this what you are experiencing is a kind of honesty and simplicity that is close to mindfulness.

Mindfulness is not a technique or a strategy. It's not a kind of state or a mood. Mindfulness is an activity and that activity involves simultaneously opening and releasing. What you are opening to is the details of present experiencing. What you are releasing is fixation and focussing. Opening and releasing are not separate from each other. To open you need to release; to release you need to open. Releasing and opening move together like the ocean and the waves of the ocean. There is nowhere in the ocean you can point to, to say "this is where the wave ends and the ocean begins" or "this is where the ocean ends and this is where the wave begins". In our practice, opening and releasing are a ceaseless movement that occur simultaneously. Although we can use two words to describe the movement, the words are not what it is.

You can't experience experience by labeling it, or by thinking about it. You can only experience experience by experiencing it. Each time you come back to the touchstone of the breath you can experience opening and releasing. You can use the touchstone as a place from which you can begin to release the ways in which attention has narrowed and congealed. Each time you come back to the touchstone of the breath you are simultaneously opening and releasing attention into the sensations of the whole body and the colours and forms and sounds.

It's rather like choosing between viewing your life as a flat photograph or being able to see what is in three dimensions. Once you begin to understand the difference, you will find yourself more often choosing the wider, and more accurate view of course. The narrower, flat-photograph view leaves out more information than it provides and when information is missing the chance of misunderstanding what is really going increases dramatically.

The reason I chose the metaphor of a flat photograph to describe the mutterings of self-image is because there is a flatness to it. The cartoon-like images of other people or situations that decorate your thoughts are very inaccurate, very flat representations of how they actually are. The statements you make to yourself are not true to life, they have no nuance. They too are flat. Self-image, as a process of contraction, will make use of bits and pieces of reality to shore itself up, to prove itself right or worthy or intelligent, but it's really just reducing the view to tattered photographs that it can obsess over and be reactive about.

We spend much of our time losing ourselves in the push and pull of reactivity. We are reactive about our circumstances, about what goes on around us, about our own thoughts. Who we think we are, who other

people think we are, how they respond to us, how we respond to them, fills us with a kind of habitual anxiety. One moment we are completely lost in thought, swept away by some storyline of hope or fear; and in the next moment we are desperately trying to control how we are, to put our best face forward whether that so-called-face is the face we like to imagine in the privacy of our thoughts or the face we wear when walking into a room to speak to someone. The face in the photograph. You know, the photograph we invented but that really doesn't exist.

Coming back to the touchstone of the breath is not a way of forming yet another argument to counter the countless arguments we already have with ourselves about how we should be or how anything else should be. Coming back to the breath stands outside of all of our accounting and equations and internalized maps about what everything is. As attention begins to open to the touchstone of the breath, there is the possibility of releasing of the structures of attention that form the framework of how our perceptions are arranged and bind them together – the same structures of attention that make up our views and attitudes towards ourselves and everything else.

It's not a matter of distracting yourself from thinking by directing your attention to the breath. Nor is it a matter of rearranging yourself in some way. It is touching something that is true, something that is going on right now that isn't of your invention. For a moment you stop lying to yourself quite as convincingly. For a moment a crack appears in the storylines. But as I mentioned previously it's not enough to just cling to the touchstone. You need to touch and then let go by releasing attention further into the breath and the sensations of the rest of the bodymind. And further still by releasing attention into the breath, the sensations of the whole bodymind as well as seeing and hearing. All together, all at the same time.

If there are thoughts, you don't need to wait until the thoughts go away so that you can begin to practise. Begin in the midst of the thoughts. Continue in the midst of the thoughts. Open attention to as many details as possible – details of bodily experiencing as well as practising environmental mindfulness. The thoughts might continue through this, but they are not obstructing anything. They are just details that can be noticed, but there is no need to move attention toward them. The very fact that you are noticing means they've already been given enough attention. What you need to do is give them context and the context is the space in which they are occurring. They are occurring within the context of whole bodily sensation, the space of the room, the space of seeing and hearing. If the thoughts are allowed to completely eclipse sensations, seeing, hearing, why is that? It is because you've agreed to let attention fold in on itself.

It isn't necessary to think about anything while you are practising zazen, but thoughts will naturally arise and fall. The deeper that your practice is, the less that thoughts condense into anything with words, images, or feeling-tones; instead they are movements of meanings. But this is only so for students who practice deeply as monastics and deshi with not only a very full schedule of formal practice but are engaged in *gyoji* , continuous practice. So, in general, let's face it – you are going to start thinking about stuff. There are times, and sometimes long stretches of time, during which you become very passive. You let yourself be stupid because it's easier. But you're not stupid because you do, in fact, know that you are doing this.

So instead of taking the approach that says that you have to label thoughts or make thoughts disappear so you can sit in a nice quiet little bubble before you can practice, what you can do is practise with the thoughts that come up. They are, after all, something you are experiencing. The problem is that you make them the most important thing you are experiencing when in reality they are one of the least important things you are experiencing. You're not going to learn anything new from them because….they are your thoughts. You

already know everything that's in them. But people are addicted not just to thinking, but the whole process that gives rise to thinking as well as the content. Sometimes it's gossipy, sometimes it's (ahem) creative, sometimes furious, sometimes self-pitying and sometimes completely insane with a slightly comedic twist performed by the worst comic in existence that only they find funny. People love their thoughts. Even when you protest about them and say that you wish they would stop, you're loving it. Because even your protesting is more thinking.

But you don't get off the hook that easily because the truth of the matter is that it doesn't matter how peaceful or noisy your mind seems to be, you still need to feel the breath, open to bodily sensation and seeing and hearing and nothing else is going to cut it. Why? All of the living details of the breath, bodily feeling, seeing and hearing are all actually going on and if you are not open to them then you are avoiding your own life. You are lying to yourself. And if you try to justify that to a Dharma Teacher then you are trying to lie to the Buddhas and Awakened Ancestors.

And the truth is: you can do this, no matter how much you might protest that you can't — because remember, all that protesting is just you getting all tricksy finding another way to feed your addiction to sit there and think about shit.

Feeling into the touchstone of the breath is faster than any thought you could possibly come up with. Opening to whole-bodily sensation together with the breath brings your two-dimensional self-created view into three dimensions, in technicolour, with surround sound. There is simply no way to compare the pixel density of the best video screen to the countless colours and numberless details of actually seeing. Do you really want to argue with me that that little fart-in-a-treetop line of thinking you get so invested in is worth your forgoing that? I don't think so. In fact, almost every thought that you get invested in and lose the vividness of your life in is almost immediately forgotten by the time you get lost in the next thought. Do you remember what you were thinking about when you got lost in thought on Wednesday? Or Thursday? Or Friday? Or this morning?

Remember, Zen practise isn't just about your practice on a zafu. It's all the time, because as long as we are alive, we are alive all the time. You practice on a zafu facing a blank white wall because your attention is in such a mess you don't know how to attend very well. So you're given absolutely simple conditions to practise in with a minimum of distraction. And although you might find it all rather boring, what is happening as you apply the instructions is that your attention is getting stronger. And stronger. And clearer. You're learning to distinguish between a lie (meaning most of the content of your thoughts) and what is actually being experienced. How can you tell if you are lying to yourself or someone else is lying to you when you don't know the difference between something you're actually seeing – i.e. the wall – and believing the imaginings you have going on in your head about yourself or other people? I truly cannot think of a better skill to have than the ability to distinguish quickly and clearly between what is false and what is true. And of course that's just ONE of the skills that practising zazen will teach you. The thousand arms of Avalokitesvara bodhisattva represent only a fraction of the possibilities of upaya or skillful means, the activity of wisdom.

And so when you get up from your zafu, you're not done. As I mentioned previously, self-image is an addict and grasp after highs from anything you weave attention into. So it is very important that you continue your practice, during kinhin, during kata, as you walk down the stairs and out of the building; as you make your way home and while you are at home. With everything you do. If you are sweeping the floor, practise while sweeping the floor. Are you really sweeping or are you 'multi-tasking' – moving the broom around while you

watch home movies in your head? While you're eating lunch, washing the dishes, standing in the bank line, anywhere, all the time, you can make the choice to open attention or to fold down into nonsensical day-dreams.

Are you only practising when something 'big' jogs you into remembering to? Like the sight of an expanse of water, or the sound of wind, or perhaps noticing you're in a particularly nasty state and don't want to feel that way, so you remember to practise because maybe you can manipulate it, turn it into something else like a feeeeeling of openness. That's not openness.

Opening is opening attention by coming back to the touchstone of the breath, by coming back to bodily sensation, to seeing, to hearing. It's not just some memory of having been mindful at some point in the past that you can slosh over yourself now. It's not a feeling about yourself that you can have. It's not a discursive thought about mindfulness. It's something that you actually do.

In coming back to the touchstone of the breath, come out to the whole moment with the whole bodymind. This is where the jewel of your real life really is.