The Touchstone 8: The Nobility of the Truth

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Feeling into the touchstone of the breath, as with all other aspects of our practice, is always actually about seeing how our attention is.

When people first begin practising they are often quite shocked at seeing how often and unpredictably attention drifts and sinks, becomes fragmented into the range of states they experience, and the volume of thoughts those states seem to generate. It's not that the states or the thoughts were not there before, it's just that through practising mindfulness, one is able to see them more clearly.

Someone asked me, not long ago, if practising mindfulness could deepen the states they experience and cause them to become even more contracted than they were before they started practising. No, not if you are following the instructions at all. But you would experience the contraction, the actual density of the state, more clearly. And you would be less able to fool yourself about whether it is "good for you" or not.

And that is actually at the root of that question: Although it presents itself as being fearful of Zen practice and looking to blame Zen for the painfulness of contraction, that's just how self-image tried to warp and corrupt what grew from the root. The root is the recognition that contraction hurts, that it is dukkha, or suffering, which is the First of the Buddha's Four Noble Truths. The Second is that this dukkha has a cause, and that too is there: the cause of dukkha is contraction or grasping of attention. The Third Noble Truth is that, just as the dukka has a cause it can also have an end. The Fourth Noble Truth is that there is a way to do this and that way is the path of the practise of mindfulness and insight through zazen.

Whether you are sitting for 30 minutes once a week or 30 minutes a day, every day, the instructions are the same. Attend to the sensations of the breath at the diaphragm and the tanden; attend to the sensations of the posture as a whole; attend to seeing and hearing. Attend to the details of present experiencing by opening to the sense fields.

Thoughts or feeling tones will continue to come up out of sheer habit. But it becomes clearer and clearer to the practitioner that there is a huge difference between what is actually going on and whatever version of reality they are fabricating and that they need to make the choice to open to reality and do that again and again and again, countless times within even a single sitting round.

Each half-hour round you sit zazen must be dedicated to actually sitting zazen.

Za means "sitting"; *Zen* means "practice"; *Zazen* means "sitting practice". The instructions are clear: Practise sitting. Practise opening to whole bodily sensation, mindfulness of the space in which you are sitting (the room around you); practise where you are and what is actually going on in this moment. It is NOT a time to talk to yourself about your theories about yourself or other people or what you think of as your life. It is not a time to figure stuff out or wallow in feeling tones of poverty or despair or anger. It is not a time to lose your mind in so-called "inspiration". It's time to sit zazen and follow the instructions.

If you make the choice to attend to the details of present experiencing, to open to this moment, you will begin to see how attention moves toward and away from whatever is noticed. When attention moves towards

something it does this by narrowing and focusing. When it moves away from something it does that by ignoring and recoiling.

When you fall into a state and really identify with it, it is because your attention has become so narrowed and focused that you've made a feeling-tone or a storyline or something you are reacting to the point of your experiencing. It seems to be most or all of what is going on. It's a very strange thing, really, because you would think that when we feel so completely sure, so definite, about something it would occur to us to question what that feeling of certainty really is. But it doesn't. Instead, attention clenches and locks onto something and we become convinced that the clenching means something solid and true and certain. We get so caught up in the content of a state and the feelings it generates for us that we forget completely that any state, any thought, any feeling, is always arising within a larger context and unless we are opening to a larger context, anything we believe about ourselves or other people or situations is going to be skewed.

In a series of classes presented by Anzan Hoshin roshi in the late 1980s, entitled *The Development of Buddhist Psychology* , the Roshi explains for us the traditional meanings of the terms applied to states from about two and a half thousand years ago. He says:

> *The Dhammasangani , the "enumeration of the dhammas", is the first volume of the pitaka, and begins by classifying mental states into "kusala"and "akusala". "Kusala" has been translated in many ways: good, pure, or wholesome; "akusala", literally "not kusala", has been translated as bad, evil or unwholesome. These translations derive not from only the translators' penchants and predispositions but also reflect nuances in the tradition. Whereas it is often common in Western contemporary Dharma to view "akusala" as "unwholesome" rather than "evil", the basic connotation in the classical texts is often that certain mental states and certain things are inherently evil, and, in fact, that anything which is impermanent and compounded (and everything is) is the cause of suffering and thus evil.*

What makes a mental state or anything else "wholesome" or "unwholesome" is how it is related to. Anger, for example, is regarded as "akusala". If anger is identified with and acted out, then harm comes to oneself and others and this certainly is not wholesome. However, if anger is attended to with mindfulness and insight, then it helps to deepen one's practice and has given one a measure of greater freedom. Thus something that is unwholesome can become wholesome. As well, if the energy of anger is known without judgement, identification, or avoidance but is simply attended to openly, then the gathering of factors (such as the tightening of muscles, the postural configuration, tightness of breath, focusing and contraction of the senses and sensory fields, thoughts, and so on) which is conventionally understood to be "anger" is disengaged from the factors which make it "anger", then anger is no longer anger. It has not been rejected, suppressed, acted out, or denied but has been opened through direct insight. The energy of anger thus becomes available as simply energy, which can then be applied as strength, determination, or whatever is appropriate. This way of working with states is not characteristic of the Hinayana or Abhidhammic approach although it has developed from their consideration of each thing being a gathering or compounding of many other things. The Hinayana approach would be to simply cut off the state.

If we approach certain elements of our experience as if they were inherently "evil", they are then no longer available to us as tools for greater clarity. When I teach, I emphasize the quality of attention, the process of the occurrence, rather than the content, and so *kusala* would be a moment of open attention, *akusala* would be contracted attention. Defining something as unwholesome or evil or bad as such reifies and objectifies it.

As well, our basic tendency seems to be to want to read a list of good things and bad things about ourselves so that we can know what not to let show.

A practical example of this might be that of anger – a state that comes up all the time, even about small things, and it can be "neutral", "wholesome", or "unwholesome". An example of "neutral" anger might be dropping a pencil on the floor and realizing you have to pick it up. The silent "Oh damn!" that comes up is not harmful, it's just a little flaring of energy. As long as it's not propagated and weighs upon whatever event follows.

An example of "wholesome anger" might be the burst of energy that arises that allows you to drag a small child out of the way of an oncoming bus.

An example of "unwholesome anger" might be getting into a real state, letting someone have it in a way that is harmful to them (and harm can take place in many ways), and then thinking "There! I'm glad I did that". Not good.

Anger that comes up and is vented on others is not wholesome. It presupposes that there is a "self" and there is an "other" towards whom the anger is directed. This is why we need to practise opening around it. If there is a sense of "self" underlying the anger (and there almost always is), then real communication with another person is not possible because we have taken up a stance towards them that cuts off any possibility of meeting them where we and they are most human.

When anger is practised with, the energy of it can open and when it opens, it can become a kind of clarity and determination that has no "edge" to it. When this happens, we can be more intelligent about the situation and it is often possible to see ways of responding, actions that can be taken, that would not normally occur to us. So in this way, anger can become very useful. Left to its own devices, though, it will just cause further difficulty. As Roshi often says, *Contraction only leads to further contraction* .

And this is precisely why you should come back to the touchstone of the breath whenever you notice anything about how you seem to be – angry, sad, confused, anxious, tired, sick, happy, enthusiastic, energetic — whatever it is that seems to become dominant in your experiencing needs to be open to question. Feeling into the touchstone of the breath when you're really angry at someone might seem to be incredibly inconvenient and an unwanted interruption, but that just shows you how vitally important it is that you DO feel into the sensations of the breath, open to bodily sensation and seeing and hearing. It's very simple, really. If any state you are experiencing cannot be open to colours and forms and sounds and sensations, what does that say about the state?

Sometimes students will notice something about how they are, some state or some way in which they have behaved, and they will say something along the lines of, "My self-image was very strong today". Which makes it sound like we have some kind of ghostly entity living inside of us that misbehaves and overpowers us.

The thing to understand about this is that the thing that seems to be watching self-image — that is ALSO self-image.

So what's the relationship between self-image and attention again? Well, that's exactly what we have been discussing. So, first off, there is no such thing as self-image. It's an illusion. And it is an illusion formed out of

the contraction of attention into a ‘knower’. The structures of attention that give rise to self-image are what we need to be able to notice in order to release them.

I know that there can be a bit of a problem with that phrase “seeing how our attention is” because that can be misconstrued to mean that one should ‘watch’ attention — as though one were somehow separate from it and could watch it. Which makes no sense at all. So let’s look at what is meant by the word “attention” and then we’ll go into what’s meant by “the seeing of it” and why that is important.

The Roshi defined the word “attention” in *Painted Cakes: a Zen Dictionary* , as this: *When directed towards or away from an experience, this is the primary mechanism of delusion. When clarified of fickleness, distraction, and sinking, it refers to mindfulness without the need to apply effort.*

Attention can move towards and away from whatever it attends to. It can move towards an object, toward a thought, a feeling, a state, a sound. And it can move away from any of these by ignoring details or distracting itself from whatever might be noticed. But mind and body are not separate so these movements towards and away from what is noticed affect the whole of the bodymind. You can see this in a very simple and direct way when sitting zazen. If attention is leaning into a state, you are not sitting straight. If attention folds down or becomes narrowed and congealed, the bodymind will begin to slouch or tighten.

If attention can move toward and away from an experience, how then does this become the primary mechanism of delusion? If you move attention toward an experience (and focus on it) or move attention away from an experience (by ignoring), both of these will just create distortion. You are either viewing whatever it is that is noticed as being far more important than it really is or far less important than it really is. It’s rather like changing the magnification of a lens you’re viewing the world through. You’re not seeing it as it is, relative to everything around it — you’re making it larger or smaller, according to your own agenda. You are distorting reality and thereby deluding yourself. And this is THE most common way you cause delusion for yourself and for those around you.

Seeing how your attention is in this moment is not falling into how you usually tend to be but it is also not something you do by stepping forward or backward or to the sides from what is going on. See how your attention is with the breath, with the mudra, with the knees. with the wall, with the sounds, with the right elbow and left elbow and the belly and the back, in this moment.

Practise the nobility of this moment, the truth of this moment, and be the Buddha of this moment.