

The Touchstone 9: Honestly

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You are not your thoughts or feelings. You can never be any of the thoughts or feelings you experience because no thought or feeling can be what your life is. Thoughts and feelings arise within your life, as a coming and going of reactions to what is being experienced. Thoughts and feelings bind together as views - of yourself and of the world. And although the view keeps changing, you can still convince yourself that THIS view is THE view. THIS is how it really is. THIS is what's really going on.

The ways in which we know tend to be based upon habituality and limitation, upon what we have already known. The binding together of thoughts and feelings and reactions into what I am referring to as "views", is the result of the activity of the five skandhas, or in Sanskrit, the panca upadanaskhanda , the five binding groups.

The five skandhas, or the five maha-bhutas, which describe the piling up of mental factors, are rupa (form), vedana (basic reactivity), samjna (symbolization), sankhara (habitual patterning), and vijnana (consciousness). The five skandhas are compulsive and occur through glossing over the details of experiencing: not noticing that a thought arises, dwells and decays; not hearing how a sound is actually heard. So the five skandhas refers to how experiencing is conditioned rather than to how Knowing shows itself as what is known.

Because we focus on the known, we don't understand how the known is known. We do not understand what Knowing is. And because we do not understand what Knowing is, we presume that there is a knower.

Now, let's pause here for a moment and just feel the breath at the diaphragm. Feel into the sensations at the tanden. Just feel that area, without making it move. It isn't linked to respiration, it has its own sensations. it's right where the blades, or the 'edges' of the hands in the mudra contact the lower belly so it's easy to feel. But it's down at the belly so feeling the tanden can help to ground or balance the tendency or habit to try to feel downwards and outwards from the head, from behind the eyes. Open to the sensations of the whole body sitting on the zafu. Open to seeing and hearing. Release any thoughts or feelings into the sensations and colours and forms and sounds.

Any thought that comes up is a known. Any feeling that comes up is a known. That is not what we are practising. What we are practising is knowing, which includes the knowing of thoughts and feelings but is not about them. However, thoughts and feelings tend to be quite sticky, so it is important to begin to question into the processes that give rise to them instead of just being caught up in the content. It might seem, at first, that just by magic, without any reason you can see, you get lost in a storyline or a feeling-tone. But once you see the mechanisms that create them and perpetuate them, they become much less of a mystery, much less 'sticky'. I have spoken about practising with thoughts in previous talks in this series, but not a lot has been said about feelings and feeling-tones so we will go into this a little.

Beginning students find the way we use the terms "feeling" and "feeling-tone" to be a bit confusing.

The word "feeling" as a verb, refers to feeling into the sensations of the body. The sensations of the hand, for example, are felt by the hand. Only the hand can feel the hand; it does not require that you "think" about the

sensations, but instead that you feel into them. In feeling into them it can be noticed that some sensations stand out; others are more subtle, but the sensations are not separate from one another – the hand is not separate from the wrist; the wrist is not separate from the arm. And so the more that we practice opening to the sensations of the breath, the tanden, feeling into the sensations of the rest of the body, the more we find that each sensation opens out into every other sensation and so we can learn to feel the whole body simultaneously. And that is the point – to feel whole-bodily, to feel all of the sensations of the body, all at the same time, all in the same breath, rather than as bits and pieces.

The word “feelings” as a noun is different. Feelings are not really directed towards anything when they first come up. They are simply an acknowledgement of something that is going on. Not how we “feel” about what is going on, but acknowledging that it is happening. For example, a feeling of grief may come up as an honest and direct acknowledgement of the fact that someone we know is gone. It does not require thoughts about it, does not require us to move attention towards a thought or a feeling about that. It is simply there as an acknowledgement of something that is true and is already being felt, simply and directly, without commentary, without storylines, without any kind of embellishment. But if we begin to focus on a feeling, give it too much attention it will begin to distort into what we refer to as “feeling-tones”.

Feeling-tones are distortions or misinterpretations of feeling that come about through turning attention to a feeling and propagating it. Feeling-tones condition or “colour” our experiencing. For example, when we are sitting feelings frequently come up as an acknowledgement of what we are experiencing while sitting. We are practising opening attention and so perhaps a subtle feeling of anticipation springs up simply because we are acknowledging that we do not know what our experiencing might be in the next moment, what we will notice. There is just a brightness and freshness to things because we are paying attention to what is going on and the feeling is not really about anything specific, is not directed towards anything. If attention begins to move towards that subtle feeling of anticipation and focuses on it, then we begin to propagate it by giving it too much attention. The word “propagate” comes from the Sanskrit word, “prapancha”, which means “five times too many”. Giving the original feeling too much attention will cause it to distort and it may begin to take the form of perhaps a kind of grasping – wanting to know what it is that we are anticipating. If we continue to propagate, a feeling of unsatisfactoriness can begin to form because we want to know what is coming up before it comes up. The more we propagate, the more feeling-tones we generate about our experiencing and in a very short time we can go from a simple feeling of anticipation, to a feeling-tone of unsatisfactoriness to a feeling-tone of confusion. This is just an example of how a feeling-tone can move from one view of things to another, to another, in a short space of time.

Feeling-tones, as I mention, colour or set the tone for how we are experiencing things. They have an “environmental quality” to them. From the feeling-tone, thoughts begin to spring up to justify or explain the feeling-tone. And so we might start talking to ourselves about how we want to have some kind of “break-through” in our practice so that we know we are “progressing” and perhaps how hard we’ve tried to do the practice and blah, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. As we continue to propagate these thoughts, they generate more feeling-tones, which generate more thoughts, which generates more feeling-tones and a loop begins to form.

States of mind are not separate from states of body, so the more that we do this, the more we will tend to act out states with the body. If there is a feeling-tone present that is perhaps about anger, we will act that out with the body and so the breath might become tight and constricted; the shoulders may rise; the jaw

clenches; the facial muscles tighten; the thumbs, held in the mudra may begin to push against one another. If there is a feeling-tone present that is about sadness, the shoulders may become rounded, the chest becomes somewhat concave; we begin to sigh; the mudra collapses. We habitually act out states with the body during our waking hours and even when we are sleeping and dreaming.

However, when we are sitting, we don't do this. We let the body sit as body. Regardless of whatever feelings or feeling-tones or thoughts there are that come up, we stay in posture and refrain from acting them out. Instead of acting them out or propagating them, we use the noticing of them as a reminder to re-initiate our practice - to open to whole-bodily sensation, the colours and forms and sounds.

Most of what people describe as "feelings" are not actually feelings, they are feeling-tones. Most of us are thoroughly addicted to feeling-tones and to such a degree that there is a continuous flow of them. We also swap feeling-tones all day long with other people and help one another to propagate them. I am sure you have had the experience of going to work feeling just fine, encountering someone, having a brief conversation with them, and for the rest of the morning feeling unsettled or confused or angry etc.

Sometimes another kind of confusion comes up for people that isn't so much about whatever feelings there are that might seem to presence, but rather that they don't seem to be feeling anything at all. This can come up so strongly that they wonder if there isn't something wrong with them, if perhaps they are "dead inside". When this perception is present, we believe that it is due to an "absence" of feeling, when in actual fact what we are experiencing is a presencing of something - a feeling-tone that registers as "absence". If you are noticing that feeling-tone, it is because you are feeling it, so, in fact, it is not true that you are not feeling anything - you are feeling something that you are calling the absence of feeling. What came before that may have been any number of actual feelings that were not about anything in particular, just acknowledgments about what was actually going on - perhaps noticing that one was sitting in a room and there was nothing going on. There isn't really anything to think about while sitting, or to have feeling-tones about. It's quiet, open, spacious. There are sensations and colours and forms and sounds, and none of this is really about "you". It's about paying open attention to what is going on around "you" instead of having thoughts and feeling-tones and storylines and states about "you".

Things begin to open a little, and then there is a tendency to want to fold down again, to make things small again. We are used to having feeling-tones and thoughts fill up the space of our experiencing. They keep us busy with storylines and theories and so forth. When we are sitting, we are not trying to fill up the space of experiencing with feeling-tones and thoughts about ourselves or anyone else. We are opening to a far bigger space, a vast space that is not about us. When we begin sitting, we can open for brief moments and then we will want to fill up the space with something, anything, to distract ourselves.

And this is precisely what we are doing when we identify with and propagate a feeling-tone about not being able to feel. This really comes down to finding a way to distract ourselves from having to do the practice. It doesn't matter whether a feeling-tone that comes up is one that we "like" or one that we "dislike". In either case, if we are giving a feeling-tone too much attention, we do that by narrowing and focussing attention. What should you do about that? Use the noticing of any feeling-tones, thoughts, storylines that come up - whether you "like" them or "dislike them" as a reminder to re-initiate your practice and open to this moment of present experiencing. It doesn't need you to comment on it or feel any way about it. The practice is not about cultivating a state of mind or a certain feeling. It is about paying attention to this moment of present experience as it is, without interpretation.

When you are sitting and you notice a feeling or a feeling-tone, practise with them. This is important because feelings and feeling-tones come up before thoughts do. Thoughts spring up to explain or justify a feeling or a feeling-tone. So unless you release the feeling or the feeling-tone, the thoughts are just going to continue. Feel into the sensations of the breath. Where does the feeling or feeling-tone seem to take place relative to the breath? Is it in front of the breath, behind the breath? Does the breath run through it? As soon as you begin to feel the breath at the diaphragm and the tanden, and open to whole bodily sensation, there is recognition that no thought or feeling-tone is as solid as one might have assumed. It has no real substance. It can have an effect on the whole bodymind if it is propagated, but you don't need to propagate. Just continue to sit up straight, do your practice and open around any tendency to want to lose yourself in a feeling.

This isn't a matter of suppressing or ignoring feeling. It's about being honest with feeling. You don't need to contract in order to feel. You don't need to squeeze your eyes shut or let your posture collapse. You don't need to abstract yourself from bodily sensation or block out colours and forms and sounds in order to feel.

Feel, but allow feeling to arise together with all of the details that make up your life as a whole. Allow feeling to open into a larger context instead of wadding it up into a tight little painful ball in the middle of your chest. Feel the breath, feel the body, open to your life. And allow feeling to open to the knowing in which it too arises.

You might really like some of the feelings you experience - feelings of happiness or euphoria or excitement. And you may hate some of the feelings you experience - feelings of despair, or anger, or self-loathing. With any feeling you experience, come back to the breath. Feel the movement of this breath which gives you life with each breath. Be honest about feeling, by being mindful of the breath and bodily sensation and seeing and hearing. You don't need to exclude sensations and colours and forms and sounds in order to feel. And if you are excluding them.....well, what does that tell you about how honest you are really being about what you feel?

Thoughts, feelings, feeling-tones, storylines, memories are all really quite tricky because they will condition how you experience what you experience. Open feeling-tones and ground feelings by opening attention to things just as they are, beginning with this breath, right now.