

A Mind Like Earth

April 2, 2007

There's a passage in the Canon, where the Buddha is teaching breath meditation to his son, Rahula. Before he starts out with the steps of breath meditation, though, he teaches some lessons on patience and resilience. He says, start out by making your mind like earth, solid like the earth. When fragrant things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't get excited. When foul or disgusting things are thrown on the earth, the earth doesn't shrink away. It just stays right there.

Make your mind like water, he says. When you use water to wash away fragrant things, the water isn't excited that this is its task for the day. Or if it's used to wash away dirty or disgusting things, the water doesn't shrink away.

Make your mind like fire. Fire can burn nice things and disgusting things, and doesn't react differently in either way.

Make your mind like wind, as when the wind blows things around. The wind isn't affected by whether it's blowing around pleasant things or disgusting things.

In other words, as a prerequisite for getting the mind to settle down, you've got to develop a certain quality of patience, resilience, equanimity, that you're ready for everything. But particularly you're not going to react immediately to whatever comes up. You want to watch, because this is an important principle in the meditation. Not only does it help you sit through difficult things, but it also reminds you not to jump to quick conclusions. You're learning about cause and effect here, and to learn about them properly, you have to be willing to watch for a while, because not everything comes up immediately. Not every effect comes immediately from the cause. Some of them do, but some of them take a while.

So you want to learn the patience that's willing to look at things for a while before you come to conclusions. It's not that you don't want things to go well in your meditation. After all, that's why we're here. Simply learn how to focus your desires, *where* to focus your desire, and *where* to focus your patience. You focus your desire on the causes, what you're doing in the path. You want to be willing to stay with the breath not only while you're here, sitting with your eyes closed, but also in all of your activities as continuously as possible. After all, this is a big job we are taking on here, rooting out the mind's habits of causing suffering for itself and for the people around you.

There's another passage in the Canon where an elephant trainer is talking to the Buddha and says, "Elephants are easy; human beings are hard." He says, "I can

be with an elephant for a week and by the end of the week, I'll know all that elephant's tricks, but the human mind has lots of tricks, and it takes more than a week to get to know them."

This means you're in here for long haul, so try to have a mature attitude toward your goals, a mature attitude toward being on the path, even when it seems as if the path is endless. Actually, this is one of the few paths in life that actually have an end. Think of all the other endless things in life, the fact that, as long as you're alive, you're going to be eating every day, every day, every day, finding food, fixing food, cleaning up afterwards. There's no end to it. Food, clothing, shelter, medicine: All of these are things that you have to keep finding. It's as if you have the bottomless pit. You've got to keep throwing these things down into it, and it never gets full, it's never satisfied. Those are activities that don't have an end.

Even the work of the world that you have, whatever your job: It's not that you stop working when the job is completed. It's just that you get too old or too tired and sick of the work and you stop, but the work is not really done. Someone else is going to have to come along and take it on.

But the work of putting an end to suffering really does have an end point. So keep that in mind: that you're working toward something that does come to an end, that brings about an end to all suffering. If you're not on this path, you're just going to be wandering around in the wilderness, totally aimless: That's endless.

So you're on a path that has a goal. It's a lot better than being comfortably off the path but being allowed to stay still just for a few moments and then having to get up and wander around aimlessly and endlessly. It's much better to be on the path. So always take heart when the path seems difficult: At least you're on the path. You trip, you fall down, you pick yourself up, dust yourself off, and go on.

So focus your desires on the causes that will get the results you want. You really want to do the work of the path because this is good work. What in the path asks you to do something you'd be ashamed of? Or something that you wouldn't feel quite right about? It's all good stuff, nothing but honorable things that the Buddha is asking us to do. So keep your desire to do the path, to follow the path, strong.

Patience is the attitude you have to take toward the results. Sometimes this is going to take longer than you might like. This is where that attitude of keeping your mind like earth comes in. You can sit and meditate, get a nice sense of the ease, calm, peace in the mind and you get up and it's not too long before it's shattered. Ask yourself, "Did I maintain the causes properly?" Because this is a

fabricated path, the state of ease you get here is not nibbāna. It's a step on the path, but it's something you have to keep looking after.

So make sure you focus your desires on doing the causes, and your patience on the results that you get. As long as you're doing the causes right, the results have to come—if not as quickly as you want, maybe you've got to learn how to adjust your time frame. There are some things in life that really are worth waiting for, worth working for, over long periods of time.

So keep your desires focused on the causes, and your patience and equanimity for the results, and you'll find it a lot easier to keep on the path. If you're going to be patient and equanimous about everything, it's pretty hopeless. The idea that we just accept everything as it is and that's what awakening is, just being with things as they are, allowing them to be as they are: That's hopeless. There's no end in sight to that kind of stuff.

It's as if life were a TV station, you had a TV that receives only one station that's a pretty lousy station. If that were your only choice in life, your only opportunity for any entertainment, you'd have to put up with this lousy TV station. But life is not that way. It's more like an interactive game. You're shaping your life.

When they talk about accepting, you have to accept that fact as well: that you have a role in shaping your experience, so you want to do it well. You may have some karma coming in from the past that's going to make it necessary for you to wait for a while before the results you really want are going to show up. But you have the choice right now to start working in the right direction and you want to stick with that choice. You're being patient and equanimous, not because you have to accept things as they are for the rest of your life without any hope of change. Just that this is a long-term practice. It's going to take a while, but it does yield results, and they really are worth being patient for. They really are worthy developing equanimity around.

So it's patience with hope. Equanimity with hope. And it's not a vain and empty hope. You've got the word of the Buddha, the word of his arahant disciples. This is one job in life you can do that really can get done. When they talk about attainment of arahantship, you know that the holy life has been fulfilled, the task done. That's it. There's nothing else you have to do after that for the sake of true happiness.

But whether it's during this lifetime or some lifetime down the road, that's not really the issue. What matters is that you get on the road, stay on the road, and even if you fall down, you're still on the road. So pick yourself up and keep walking on the road. If you find yourself wandering off, get back on the road,

because that's your only hope. Off the road, it's endless and aimless. On the road, it may take a long time, but it's got an end, and it's got a worthwhile aim.

So develop that mind like earth, water, wind, and fire, because that kind of mind will help you get there.