

A Mind Like Earth

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When the Buddha taught meditation to Rahula, his son, he started out by saying, “Make your mind like earth.” People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t shrink away in disgust. Make your mind like water, wind, fire. Water washes away dirty things, wind blows dirty things around, fire burns garbage, but none of them are disgusted by the filth. It’s important to see this as a first principle in the meditation, but not as the whole meditation. Because then the Buddha goes on to teach Rahula many other contemplations and finally gets him to work with the breath. And in working with the breath, there’s a lot of work to be done. You breathe with certain aims in mind and you try to bring about certain mental states. So you’re not just like a clod of earth, sitting there with whatever. You take the earthness of the mind that’s not reactive and you make it a foundation for doing really good work.

There are a two main reasons why you need to have a steady to mind to effect good change. One is that if you spend a lot of time reacting to things—“This person said this, that person said that, this person thinks this, I had this feeling about that person”—you’re just wearing yourself out and, as result, you can’t think straight.

I know a therapist who was once working with some kids in a school for kids who had a jail record. The kids she was working with were going to be integrated back into regular schools. She presented them with a series of hypothetical situations that would be stressful, and asked them to gauge how much stress they would feel. Everything ranging from *your brother has been stabbed* to *I’m going out on a date tonight and I don’t have a good dress*. And the kids couldn’t rank them. They all pegged out at ten—full stress over everything. This she identified as one of their problems—they couldn’t monitor stress because whatever happened that would get them upset would get them totally upset, and they’d end up doing stupid things.

This is one of the reasons why you want to learn how to keep your mind in that earth mode, non-reactive. You don’t waste your time stressing out over things

that are minor. You learn to get a sense of proportion—which things are important, and which things are not.

This connects with the other reason you want to make your mind steady. It's so that you can see things clearly. As the Buddha said, one of the qualities he was looking for in a student was that the person be observant and true—admitting his or her own faults, but at the same time being able to see things that are not pointed out. The *ajans* like a lot of this quality. Say that you're meditating alone in the forest and a problem comes up, and you can't figure out a way to solve it: What are you going to do? You can't go running off to your teacher all the time. You have to learn how to solve your own problems.

This comes from being observant. You experiment—you try this and you try that and you try to make your mind steady enough so that it can be a good judge of what's working and what's not. That way, you can remember clearly what you did, and clearly gauge what's coming up as a result.

So try to develop this quality of being non-reactive as a basis for your experiments and explorations. The breath helps a lot with this. If you have good, steady breath and a sense of healthy breath energy in the body, then you feel really grounded. You're not pushed off of your center so much. And when you're not pushed off of your center, you're in a position where you can see what's up and what's down, what's left, what's right. In other words, you see more clearly what's going on, what's skillful and what's not, and you begin to see the areas in which you're adding a lot of unnecessary complication to the situation.

Because that's mainly what we're looking for: "To what extent is this stress that I'm feeling in my mind right now the result of my own actions?" There is the stress that comes just from the three characteristics, i.e., the fact that things change, that they're inconstant. They're dependent on conditions, and anything dependent on conditions has some stress built into it. But that kind of stress doesn't have to weigh down the mind. It's the stress that we add that really weighs the mind down.

But you can't see what you're adding if you're in the midst of adding it all the time. You have to step back into one part of the mind and look at the other parts of the mind, to see what they're doing. And the breath gives you a good place where you can stand. So you work with the breath. And also in working with the

breath, it takes your mind off a lot of other things that it could be making itself miserable about.

At the same time, the breath is something that you can work with and see results. You change the way you breathe, you change the way you focus on the breath, you change the way you conceive the breath energy in the body, and there will be changes in how you experience the body here in the present moment. If there are pains in different parts of the body or there's an old injury, think of the breath energy working around them, working through them.

You begin to notice that there are patterns of tension that you built up around the pain or around the old injury. As you release those, then other patterns get released as well. It's like a whole series of connected rubber bands—when one gets loosened, then lot of the other ones get loosened as well.

So there's a lot to explore right here. As you get more and more skilled with the breath, it gives you a greater sense of confidence. But again, to observe the breath, you have to make your mind as steady as possible, as non-reactive as possible. And then you'll be a better position to see clearly which choices would be good choices to make.

They have that phrase in the Zen tradition, that the Great Way is not hard for those who have no preferences. That doesn't mean that you don't prefer the end of suffering to suffering—you *do* prefer not to suffer. It's simply that once you see in all fairness, in all objectivity, what needs to be done, then whether you like it or not, you do it. As for the things that need to be abandoned, even if you like them, you talk yourself into letting them go. Willingly. In other words, you can't let your preferences reign. You want your powers of observations—the steadiness of those powers of observation—to be the basis from which you make your choices. And as the mind feels steadier, it's more likely to make better choices.

Now, the simple fact of concentration is not enough to guarantee that you'll be wise. Concentration can foster discernment, and in some cases, the discernment seems to follow naturally. But in other cases, you have to actively think about things, think things through, analyze them. So again, the concentration is a basis, the steadiness is a basis, but there is more work to be done on top of that. It's good work. Think about all the many lifetimes in which you've been creating suffering for yourself from not being able to observe what you're

doing, from having a mind that's not like earth, water, wind, or fire, from having a mind that's reactive—that goes by its likes and dislikes. Now's your chance to do some work, to step back from that, and to be a new person—not the reactive person you used to be, but a person who is steady, who doesn't get blown around by things.

So whatever comes up—good or bad—don't spend a lot of time and energy reacting. Just notice what's happening and realize that these things can just wash past, wash past. They don't have to sink in. We think that they sink into us, but we're the ones who actually pull them in. We feed on them. It's like somebody throwing poison on a table. It's not going to get into your stomach unless you eat the poison. If it just sits there on the table, it's just there on the table. When you don't feed on it, you don't get sick. It's the same with all the things in the world that you don't like—and with the things you *do* like. A lot of the things that you do like may end up being poison, too. They may taste good and look good in the beginning, but then they get down into your stomach...

There's a phrase in Thai, *aroi paak, lambaak thawng*, which literally means it tastes good in your mouth but it causes a lot of trouble in your stomach. A lot of Thai food is that way. But it's the same with a lot of things we like in life in all areas.

Years back, when I was a lay person in Chiang Mai, a group of us would get together every week and fan out to the different markets and buy northern Thai food. One market was good for barbequed chicken, and another market was good for pepper sauce, and another market was good for other northern Thai dishes. We'd get back together, have a picnic, and then everybody would get sick the next day—we'd all have diarrhea. And the following week, we'd do it again.

That's the way a lot of us go through life. We just gobble down the things we like, and we say, "I'll just put up with the fact that I'll get sick from it later on." But here's the Buddha saying there are things that you can feed on that won't get you sick. In fact, they'll get you strong to the point where you don't have to feed any more at all.

So remember that when you're reacting strongly to something outside, or even just reacting to little things that come in throughout the course of the day, it's not that they're moving in on you. You're going out and feeding on them.

The earth doesn't feed. The earth just notices and stays solid. When the breath energy in the body is solid, it helps give you that quality of mind that's like earth. Again, this doesn't mean you sit there and just take whatever comes. But you're in a much better position to see what really needs to be dealt with and what doesn't, which issues are important and which are not.

In particular, you get to see your own mind in action. Because there will be parts of the mind that are still not like earth, and they'll want to react. But if you can side with the earth side of the mind, you can see those reactions for what they are. See how they're a waste of energy; see how they muddy up your thinking, muddy up your powers of observation.

So when the Buddha talks about patience and equanimity, understand what he means. You're not a clod of earth, but you're solid like earth. Once you make that distinction, it clears up a lot of issues. And once you follow it through, it clears up even more.