

## *Perceptions of Earth & Space*

*November 17, 2016*

As you get ready to meditate, it's useful to think about a series of comments the Buddha made about speech that also can be applied to the mind. If you're going to say anything, the Buddha said, it should pass three tests: One, is it true? Two, is it beneficial? And three, is this the right time and place for that? Applying that to your mind, to whatever thoughts or perceptions you have right now, you can ask yourself, "Are they true? Are they beneficial for helping the mind to settle down? And is this the right time and place for those things?" Any perceptions that are not helpful, you just put them aside. Try to cultivate the perceptions that are helpful.

There's a passage where the Buddha talks about a person going out into the wilderness and reflecting on the fact that he's now in the wilderness. The concerns of his village, the concerns of other people in the village, really don't extend that far. And he notices that the mind is a lot less disturbed with that perception of wilderness.

And here we are, surrounded by chaparral, far away from the concerns of our families, our jobs. So appreciate that fact, make the most of it. It helps the mind get ready to settle down.

Of course, when you're not here, especially if you go back to a city, you can't surround yourself with the perception of wilderness. But you can go on to the next perception that the Buddha recommends, which is the perception of earth, that everything around you is earth. Of course, that's not all it is, but for the time being, that's all you're going to pay attention to. Your body is earth, the people around you, the things around you are all earth, but you don't think about the particular features of the earth. You don't think about the mountains and the valleys, or the individual people or beings, or trees or whatever. Just earth. The image the Buddha gives is taking a hide and stretching it out with a hundred pegs so there are no wrinkles in the hide at all. So let there be no wrinkles in your perception of earth all around you.

That's even more calming than the perception of wilderness. Because after all, in the wilderness there are animals, there are diseases, there are dangers. But when you're earth and everything around you is earth, there are no stories, and you can help the mind settle down that way. That's one of the uses of the perception of earth, earth outside and inside the body.

There's also what you might call the earth perception of the mind. In one place, the Buddha teaches this to Rahula, even before he teaches him breath meditation. He says, "Make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn't react." This is a useful perception to have in mind before you meditate, because there are going to be some unpleasant things coming up in the meditation, and you don't want your mind to be knocked off by them. You need to develop some equanimity and some patience. That's what this perception of earth is supposed to supply.

When the breath is uncomfortable, you don't get upset. You watch it for a while and try to figure out, "Why is it uncomfortable?" We're making the mind like earth not so it can be just a clod of dirt sitting there, but you want to have the kind of solidity in the mind that can look at a situation with enough patience to actually see what's going on. Sometimes it takes time. The same with your mind: There may be some unpleasant things coming up in the mind, and you can't put an immediate stop to them, but make one part of your mind like earth. It's not going to react to these things, either yay or nay. It's going to sit there and watch. And then after a while you begin to see things unfold, because you had the patience and the equanimity to wait calmly.

After teaching the perception of earth, then the Buddha taught Rahula breath meditation, which was when he went into the sixteen steps. Now, these steps involve a fair amount of proactive practice. You try to breathe in certain ways and with certain thoughts in mind. But you do that based on the fact that you're a good observer, and to be a good observer you have to make your mind like earth.

So he's not teaching passivity here. He's teaching the kind of patience that watches and observes. Like the patience of a cat watching the hole where it knows a mouse is going to come out of the wall: If it's patient enough, it catches the mouse. In your case, you get to see things in the mind you didn't see before, understand things in the mind you didn't understand before, if you can make the mind like earth. So in that case, earth stands for patience and equanimity.

There's another case where earth stands for goodwill. The Buddha talks about the fact that people can speak to you in all kinds of ways: kind or unkind, true or untrue, helpful or very unhelpful. And he says you're not only patient but you're also able to extend goodwill to those people. Your goodwill should be as strong and as deep as the earth. It's interesting. We don't usually think of goodwill as a strength, we think of it more as a gentleness, but this is the image the Buddha gives: You want your goodwill to be strong—in other words, you're refusing to let yourself be affected by those people's words, and especially you're not letting your goodwill be affected. You want your goodwill to be there for everybody. You protect it, as the Buddha says, as a mother would protect her only child. But you also perceive it as something large. The image the Buddha gives is of someone coming along and trying to get rid of the earth by digging a little bit here and spitting there or urinating here, thinking that he can wash the earth away. The earth is not going to be washed away. It's much too big. You want your goodwill to be that big and that solid.

So as you're sitting here meditating and thoughts come into your mind, you may remember somebody who's done something harmful to you. Well, extend them thoughts of goodwill. Don't let your goodwill be shaken by them, don't let it be washed away by their little bit of spit or urine. If you can think in those terms, there's nothing that you can't stand, and your goodwill can stay strong. Because you *need* that goodwill in order to trust yourself in your interactions with other people.

So here we are: earth inside, earth outside. These perceptions can be really helpful to take a lot of the sting out of the stories of the world that might get in the way of your meditation. And they're perceptions you can carry with you wherever you go. Whether you're in wilderness or not in wilderness, there's going to be earth all around you.

The one drawback to these perceptions is that sometimes they actually get heavy. There was a period one time when I was meditating on my own, away from Ajaan Fuang. It got that as soon as I sat down to meditate, my body just clamped down. It was really hard to breathe. Everything felt stiff and hard. And I couldn't figure out what was going wrong. Finally, I had a chance to see him, told him what was going wrong, and in just a few words he said, "Oh. You're focused on earth. Focus on space instead." And as soon as he said "space," the solidity and the stiffness and everything just disappeared.

As you think about space, you can think about how space extends not only around objects but also through objects. Every atom, when you look at it very carefully, is more space than it is matter. In the walls here in the sala, for instance, there's space that goes through the walls—and space that goes through the mountains over there to the east and the west. Above and below you. You can hold that perception of space in mind, and it's a lot lighter than the perception of earth.

Here again, space is an image for not being affected by things. There are a couple of places in the Canon where they talk about how when you hold this perception of space in mind and have this quality of spaciousness—not spacey-ness, spaciousness—then if other people try to have an effect on your mind, it's like trying to draw pictures on space. There's no surface and it's bigger than the pictures, so nothing sticks.

So if you find the perception of earth getting heavy, think of space. But one drawback to space is that for the mind to gain real strength from the concentration, it has to go back to the form of the body. You can hang out in space for a while, but then in Ajaan Lee's image it's like someone who's worked and then gotten a big payment, one lump sum as a pension. They're just living off the lump sum and are not adding anything new to the lump sum. Eventually it's going to wear out. But if you're focused on the body, it's like working and gaining a salary. You keep working and the salary keeps coming.

So space is a good place to hang out when you need a sense of lightness, and it's a helpful perception to hold in mind. Even as you go through the day, you can think of everything around you just being space, space, space—space permeating everything. And you're offering no surface for the world to hit against.

So learn to use these perceptions at the right time and the right place. If you hold onto them in the wrong way, well, you can develop the wrong view that everything is just matter. There were people in the Buddha's time who said that everything was just matter, made out of atoms, there are no real beings there at all. They held to that as the whole truth about everything. Whereas here we're holding to perceptions *when they're useful*, and using them

for specific purposes. I mean, it is true there is space through everything, and it is true that the body's composed of matter, but that's not all you are. But for the time being, if that's a perception that's useful, you hold onto it.

You learn to see the thoughts going through your mind as actions that have results, like any other karma. Your thoughts, your emotions: They're actions. So take them apart. See what perceptions make them. Whatever acts of directed thought and evaluation, whatever you're focusing on, however you frame the issue, the questions you ask: See how those things shape your experience of the world. And then use them to shape them in a way that's conducive to keeping the mind on the path, to strengthening the mind on the path.

That's when you're following the Buddha's recommendations about speech and applying it to the mind—and gaining benefits out of your thoughts.