

## *A Mind Like Earth*

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As you start meditating, remind yourself of the only responsibility you have: to be with the breath and body in a comfortable way. Learning to work with the breath and the way you focus so that they feel easeful, steady, and pleasant makes meditating easier and more interesting. If the meditation is just “in out, in out, in out,” you’ll get bored very quickly and soon you’ll be “out” looking for something else to think about. Take the following challenge: “How can I get the mind to settle down with the breath in a way that feels good and nourishing for the body, so that I’m not stirring up unusual energies, and I’m avoiding the two extremes of either clamping down too tightly or drifting off?” Think of this as a puzzle to understand. To solve it, you need what the Buddha calls the four bases for success, the four qualities needed for success in any endeavor: the desire to do something; persistence, a really “stick with it” attitude; intentness, paying very careful attention to what you’re doing; and the powers of analysis coupled with ingenuity, teasing out the problem by coming up with and evaluating new solutions.

Try to see which qualities the mind lacks. Normally, one or two may be stronger than the others, but you need them all. If there’s no desire, you’ll think of something else while sitting. If you lack persistence or aren’t paying careful attention, the mind will slip way off without any idea of how it got there. If you have no way to figure out solutions to a problem, the mind gets stuck as well. So you need to bring all four of these qualities to your meditation.

In Thailand these four qualities are a common theme when discussing how to succeed at anything in life: wanting to do whatever is involved, sticking with whatever’s required, paying careful attention, and figuring out ways of continually doing it better. Similarly, meditation depends a lot on your willingness to apply these qualities. It’s not just a matter of receiving and following instructions, and then blaming the teacher if things don’t work. You take instructions, and if they don’t seem to work quite right, you ask yourself if you’ve misunderstood the instructions or if you’ve applied them improperly.

After all, the problem is in your own mind. Although there may be some imperfections in the instructions, where are you going to get perfect instructions in life? You take what you’ve got and you make the best use of it. You’re responsible for the meditation. As the Buddha said, he only points the way. Each person must do the actual work for him or herself. The Buddha didn’t cause our suffering, so he can’t remove our suffering. If someone else caused your suffering, that person would need to solve your problem. However, we’re each suffering because of our own ignorance, craving, and clinging. Fortunately, though, we also have good qualities to solve the problem inside.

So, bring your full attention to this and try to figure it out. If you don’t seem to be getting anywhere, just stop and watch for a while. Look at what’s going on. As you get more into the present moment, enlarge your awareness of the body. One term for concentration is the enlarged or expanded mind whose awareness is alert throughout the body, from the top of the head, down to the tips of the toes, all-around, surrounding the skin. This larger sense of the body is a lot more solid than a one-pointed focus. If your concentration depends on being focused on one point, even the slightest distraction will knock you off. If your framework is large, things can come through without knocking you off. Your framework surrounds them. This way the mind gets a lot more solid.

The Buddha talks about developing a mind like earth. One way to do this is by making it large and putting it in a position where it’s not easily knocked over by things. He described this in two different contexts.

The first is as you’re sitting down to meditate. Make your mind like the earth. Whatever comes up, you don’t react. If anything disgusting or unpleasant happens, you don’t run away. You sit with it, just as when people throw disgusting things on the earth and the earth doesn’t shrivel up or run away. The Buddha is not

suggesting total non-reactivity in meditation. He's calling for the patience to stay with things and watch them. The steadier your gaze, the more reliably and clearly you can see things. It's like running a scientific experiment. If the equipment for the experiment lies on a wobbly table, or the table is in a wobbly building, you can't trust the results. You may get very precise numbers, but they mean nothing. Things have to be solid and stable so that when you detect slight movements, you know they're really in the things you're measuring rather than in the equipment. As you sit with the breath, observe very carefully, making the mind as solid and nonreactive as the earth. When you see something wrong, it's because you've been watching very carefully, not because you're reacting out of habit. You know it's not right and you can act from a much more solid place to correct it.

The Buddha also talks about the mind being expansive like the earth when you're meeting with difficult situations in life. People say horrible things to you. They lie about you or say mean things deliberately to hurt your feelings. They lie about people you love. They hurt people you're concerned about. They attack you physically. Or, unrelated to what anyone else does, you simply experience really severe pain. The Buddha says, "Make your mind large like earth." There's no way for anyone to do anything to the earth to prevent the earth from being itself. They can dig into it, spit on it, urinate anywhere or even demand the earth be without earth, but that doesn't change the nature of the earth, because earth is so large and expansive. In the same way, you want your goodwill to be large and expansive like the earth.

These two earthlike qualities—the strength or the solidity of the mind and the expansiveness of goodwill—go together. When your mind feels really solid and secure, you don't feel threatened by other people's unkind actions, and you can still maintain goodwill for them.

As you're making your mind stronger, the people around you can be relieved of your greed, aversion, delusion. So others are also benefitting. To maintain the strength both of the goodwill and of your focus, you have to use your discernment. Simply willing yourself to be strong leads after a while to your breaking down. You have to know your limits and avoid unnecessary burdens. If you're carrying huge burdens, there's no way you can help anybody else. After a while, you give up, collapsing under the pressure of their added burdens.

So investigate the ways you're burdening the mind. What things are you holding on to? This is the reason for the Buddha's teaching on not-self. He always avoided the metaphysical issue of whether or not a self exists. Instead, he wants us to let go of the claims we make regarding what's us or ours. Death is the big teacher of not-self. You'll have to let go of your body and of all the people you've loved. Before that happens, though, it's good to learn how to drop selectively. Consider what things are unnecessary: ways of thinking that weigh you down, the imperatives yelling at you to do this or that. Where did those imperatives come from? Whose idea was that? Is it really necessary? Is it mandatory? Ask these kinds of questions, investigating what you're holding tightly to see if it's placing unnecessary stress on the mind.

So, strengthening the mind requires concentration: an enlarged frame of reference, an enlarged awareness filling the body, that at the same time allows the breath energy to flow freely. Concentration strengthens the mind because, as the Buddha said, it's like food for the mind. When the mind settles into right concentration, it develops a sense of ease, refreshment, and rapture that you can spread throughout the body to refresh it, in the same way that you would knead water into dough, moistening it so it's not so dry. The refreshment of concentration is nourishment. It gives you strength.

At the same time, you need your discernment to see where you're placing unnecessary burdens on yourself. When you detect them, drop them. The key is seeing that they're unnecessary. You don't need to hold onto the burdens or continue to worry about them. Often you take on much more than you really can. You take responsibility for things you're not really responsible for. Although you want to provide happiness for other people, you can't. You can provide support up to a point, but there are parts of people that you'll never be able to reach, just as there are parts of you that other people will never be able to reach. The parts within you that are unreachable to others are your real responsibility. Look after those to ensure you're not causing unnecessary suffering deep down inside.

It's good to question the burdens you place on yourself. To what extent are they helpful for you or others, and to what extent are they accomplishing nothing at all? To what extent are you carrying these burdens around out of pride or a sense of exaggerated responsibility? That may be a challenging but important lesson to explore. Otherwise, you waste strength that could be put into much more useful areas, both for yourself and for others.

So strengthen the mind, making it more and more like the earth, strong and forgiving. In the Pali language, the word for earth, *khama*, is also the word for patience and tolerance. It's also the word for forgiveness. These qualities are intimately connected. Your inner strength and the goodness you spread around to other people are intimately connected in the same way. The compassion builds on strength, and the strength builds on concentration and discernment. These are things we can develop. So do your best to make the mind like earth.