

## *A Mind Like Earth*

*September 2, 2018*

Years back we had a woman from Thailand who came to practice meditation at the monastery, and she let everyone know that she was going to be practicing restraint of the senses. And then one day she came and complained to me. Apparently people down at the kitchen were talking while she was meditating, and she was telling me, “Don’t they know I’m practicing restraint of the senses?” And I had to point out to her that her restraint of the senses wasn’t their business, it was hers. It was all about not reacting—to what you hear, to what you see—in an unskillful way.

You can’t go out and make the world a perfect place and then practice. You have to practice in an imperfect world. You have to deal with difficult people, people who have ill will, people who have all sorts of unskillful intentions. And you can’t hope simply that because you have good intentions they will magically prepare the way for you, smooth things out in the world.

I was in correspondence recently with a monk over in Europe. He’s involved in setting up a monastery, and there’s some controversy about the monastery. He was saying that he felt his good intentions should take care of everything, and I had to remind him No, the Buddha never said that good intentions are enough. Your intentions have to be skillful. And you can’t expect that just because you have good intentions everybody will honor those good intentions and that things will come out okay. You have to be circumspect and careful about what you do.

Remember the teachings to Rahula. You start out with good intentions, but then you have to test them. You have to act on them, and if you see you actually did cause trouble, then you’ve learned something. You’ve moved from just simply good intentions to more skillful intentions.

And there are other instructions to Rahula as well. There was another time when the Buddha was asked by Rahula how to do breath meditation, and before he said a word about breath meditation, he gave a long series of contemplations to do first. One of the first was a set of instructions in patience and endurance. He said, “Make your mind like earth.” People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth doesn’t shrink away. “Make your mind like water.” People use water to wash disgusting things away, but the water doesn’t get disgusted. “Make your mind like fire.” Fire burns garbage, but it doesn’t get disgusted by the garbage. “Make your mind like wind.” Wind blows disgusting things around, but the wind itself doesn’t care. And this was a preliminary to breath meditation.

Now, it's interesting: He's not simply saying just be passive, because the instructions for breath meditation are very proactive. You try to breathe in certain ways. You try to breathe in a way that gives rise to rapture, breathe in a way that gives rise to pleasure. He doesn't say how. You have to figure that out for yourself. Ajaan Lee gives some advice on thinking about the breath energies in the body, allowing the pleasure and the rapture to spread. But it's all very proactive. It's something you're doing. You need the mind to be like earth, though, in order to see clearly what you're doing, the results you're getting, and to put up with difficult things outside you as you meditate.

There's a passage where the Buddha says that there are four qualities by which you help other people and, in doing so, you help yourself, and one of them is patience. You have to learn how to be patient with other people. That's a gift to them, but it's also a gift to yourself. So if you find yourself getting worked up over things, that's the end of your restraint of the senses. It destroys your concentration and you create lots of needless difficulties.

This means you have to be content with your surroundings. Remind yourself, this is good enough to practice. Otherwise, you get what they call vipassana mind, where every little thing becomes a major disturbance.

Years back, I was talking to someone who worked at a meditation retreat center back east, and I asked him if there was a difference between the people on their metta retreats and the people on the vipassana retreats. He said yes, two things. One was the people on the metta retreats use a lot more honey when they fix tea for themselves, and the other was that the notes left on the bulletin board tend to be a lot nicer. "I saw you looked a little sad today, so I wanted you to know someone was spreading goodwill in your direction"—that kind of note. Whereas in the vipassana retreats, the notes were, "Who's wearing that loud jacket? Don't they understand other people are trying to be mindful?" Well, being mindful doesn't mean you have to have silence all around you, doesn't mean you have to be surrounded by perfect people. Because after all, mindfulness means remembering, remembering what to do in situations where the mind is relatively tame and what to do in situations where the mind is getting upset.

In other words, the practice is not for just perfect places. We don't have to run away to retreats to do it. The practice is for an imperfect world, because where else are you going to practice?

The Buddha didn't say once you make up your mind to practice, everything will go smoothly. There are going to be people who don't like it. I mean, there were people in the time of the Buddha whose families didn't want the Buddha's followers to practice. There are stories of young men and young women whose

parents stood in the way, and so they had to go through lots of obstacles in order to practice, but they saw that the practice was important because they didn't want their minds to be subject to the conditions around them. They wanted to train their minds to be independent, and the first thing you've got to, the first quality in this independence, is patience, endurance.

This doesn't mean you just grit your teeth and put up with hardships. The trick to endurance is that you don't focus on the things that are difficult. You focus on the areas where you have a source of strength, you have a source of sustenance inside that you can draw on.

This is one of the reasons why we develop concentration, to have a sense of well-being inside that provides our food, our nourishment, that allows us to be patient with things outside. That means you can't wait for everything to be quiet and everything to be neat and everybody to do everything you want them to do, and *then* you're going to develop concentration. You have to develop concentration in the midst of a life where there's noise outside, where people are not perfect. And don't equate perfection with what you want.

So when there's noise, let it go through you. Ajaan Chah says the problem isn't that the noise is disturbing us. We're disturbing the noise. We have to make a comment on it. We can't just let it be. A perception I find useful is that when there's a lot of noise, it's like wind going through a screen on a window. Try to make your sense of the body, make your sense of the mind in the present moment, like the screen on a window. When the wind blows through, the screen doesn't catch the breeze and, as a result, the screen isn't disturbed by the wind. It's when you put up resistance: That's when you get blown around.

So the nature of sound is to be loud. Then it stops. But our problem is that the mind doesn't stop. It reverberates like a gong. So you have to learn how to be matter-of-fact. The sound comes. It stops. You don't have to keep commenting on it. Even when the sound is there, it doesn't destroy your breath. Your breath is still there. Just focus on that. Remind yourself: If you're going to get through difficult situations, you need something to feed on, and the breath gives you free food. You learn how to breathe in a way that feels refreshing, feels nourishing—energizing when you need energy, relaxing when you need to be relaxed, soothing when you're feeling wounded.

This practice is meant to be done in a world that's not perfect. That doesn't mean we don't try to adjust things and improve things when it's possible, but there comes a point where you can fix the world up so much, so much, so much that you don't have any time to practice. Ajaan Fuang used to say that we have what he called the internal *wat* and the external *wat*. The word *wat* in Thai can

mean both monastery and it can also mean your schedule for the day, your practice for the day. He said that your internal wat, the one that's your practice, is the one you have to maintain. It should get top priority. The external one should get secondary priority.

Now, when you go out in the world, the world tends to be very insistent: They insist that they get top priority, but you remind yourself that by developing patience, goodwill, a mind of sympathy and harmlessness, you're being good for the world, and that goodness comes back to you. It's good for your mind to be patient, to have goodwill. It's not that just the people outside who are benefitting from that. You're benefitting as well.

So these are qualities you can create from within, and they're an important part of the practice. All too often, people come to the practice, they learn a little bit about mindfulness, they learn a little bit about the four noble truths, and then just plunge right in. They don't have a foundation, and everything gets skewed. Start with the basics, and one of the basics is to make your mind like earth. Make that the foundation for your practice, and it'll be solidly based.