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, he teaches some lessons on patience, 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 and 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 is not excited that this is its task for today. Or if it’s used to wash away dirty and 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,” he says. As the wind blows things around, the wind is not affected by whether it’s pleasant things or disgusting things that are getting blown around. In other words, it’s a prerequisite for getting the mind to settle down. You’ve got to develop a certain quality of patience, resilience, equanimity, so that you’re ready for everything. But in particular, 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 learning how to focus your desires, where to focus your desire, 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 not only do it while you’re here, sitting with your eyes closed, but just keep with the breath in all of your activities. As continuously as possible. After all, this is a big job we’re taking on here, rooting out the mind’s habits, causing suffering for itself and 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. I can be with an elephant for a week and an hour, and by the end of the week I will know all of that elephant’s tricks. But the human mind has lots of tricks and takes more than a week to get to know them.” So you’re in here for the long haul to try to have a mature attitude towards your goals, a mature attitude towards being on the path, even when it seems like the path is endless. It’s not endless. This is one of the few paths in life that actually has 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 like you have this bottomless pit. You’ve got to keep throwing these things down into it. It never gets full, and it’s never satisfied. Those are activities that don’t have an end, even the work of the world that you have, whatever job you have. It’s not that you stop working when the job is completed. It’s just that you get too old or too tired or sick of the work, and you stop. But the work is not really done. Someone else is going to have to come in 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 towards something that does come to an end, brings about an end to all suffering. And if you’re not on this path, you’re just kind of 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 it’s still just comfortable for a few moments, and then you have to get up and wander around aimlessly and endlessly. It’s much better to be on a 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 you really want to do the work of the path, because this is good work. What in the path is something that’s asking you to do, something you’re ashamed of, or something that you don’t feel quite right about? It’s all good stuff, all 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 toward the results. Sometimes it’s going to take longer than you might like. This is what that attitude of keeping your mind like earth comes in. You can sit and meditate, get a nice sense of ease, calm, peace in the mind. And you get up and it’s not too long before it’s shattered. You’ll ask yourself, “Did I maintain the causes properly?” Because this is a fabricated path of ease you’re getting here. It’s not Nirvana. 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 will have to come. If not as quickly as you want, well, 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, your patience and equanimity for the results. You’ll find it a lot easier to keep on the path. You’re going to be patient and equanimous about everything that’s happening. It’s pretty hopeless. The idea that we just accept everything as it is and that’s what awakening is, 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 was tuned in only to one station. It’s a pretty lousy station. And if that were your only choice in life, your only opportunity for entertainment, you’d have to put up with this lousy TV station. But it’s not that way. It’s more like an interactive game. You’re shaping 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 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. You want to stick with that choice because 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. It means that this is a long-term practice. It’s going to take a while, but it does yield results in the end that really are worth being patient for, that really are worth 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. So they talk about the attainment of Arahantship. The holy life has been fulfilled, the task done. That’s it. There’s nothing else you really have to do after that. Whether it’s 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. 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, you can get back on the road. Because that’s our 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, it’s got a name. So develop that mind like earth, water, wind, and fire. Because that’ll help you get there.

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