A Mind Like Rock

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The Pali word for sila is very close to the word for rock. Sila, of course, means virtue. Sela is rock. In the cinemas you often hear of the taija, John Uttaya, when he was talking to the monks a couple of days back. He mentioned that it’s the quality of mind that you’re trying to work toward. As you develop your virtues, there’s the virtue of following the precepts. There’s the virtue of restraint at the senses. Use your mindfulness or use your knowledge to restrain whatever defilements are coming up as you look at things and listen to things. In other words, you try to look at things and listen to things in a way that doesn’t give rise to greed or doesn’t give rise to aversion. Then there’s a level of virtue that he said is the virtue of normalcy of the mind, where the mind is just not affected by things. There is this element of awareness in the mind, another point he was making often, that doesn’t die, doesn’t age. In other words, even though your thinking processes may begin to deteriorate as you get older and stop when you die, there’s still a quality of awareness that’s not affected by the aging of the body. The mind just knows things that it may not know, the names of things that it may not understand, but it’s aware. That keeps going. Try to get in touch with that as you meditate, because that enables your practice to be stronger. I’ve been reading a few books on mindfulness practice recently, and they’re all pretty depressing. They always go way out of their way to make sure that you’re not doing too much effort. Efforting is actually a bad thing. Everyone likes the image of the lute, the lute is tuned just right. But your sense of just right may not be the Buddhist sense of just right. The practice is always going to demand more out of you than you would expect. Sometimes if you’re very protective of your body, very protective of other things, you know life, very protective of your pleasures, you’re not willing to put yourself out, you’re not going to get the results. After all, the Buddha’s take on the Middle Way was something he discovered after six years of austerity, starving himself. So his idea of what the Middle Way was, was what’s a middle practice or a medium practice. It’s probably a lot more extreme than our idea, or at least our definement’s idea of what a middle practice would be. You have to be prepared for that. And one of the things to prepare you for that is to develop this quality of solidity in your mind that whatever is required, you’re up for it. Whatever happens, you can survive it, you can take it. Because we’re going to have to meet with unpleasant things in life. Aging, illness, and death are not fun. And they’re not going to come only in the Middle Way. They can be pretty extreme as well. So you have to be prepared for extremes. It’s funny how these books on mindfulness, on the one hand, tell you, “Don’t push yourself too hard. You don’t want to have a painful practice.” And on the other hand, they tell you that you have to be equanimous in the face of whatever pains or pleasures arise, as if pains or pleasures were totally divorced from your activities, your choices in the practice. The Buddha himself says that if you look at your practice, if you’re living according to your pleasure and the mind is developing, that’s fine. No problem. But if you find that you’re living according to your pleasure, there’s still greed, aversion, and delusion. That means you have to push yourself harder. Now, for him, painful practice doesn’t necessarily mean sitting through a lot of pain. That may be one aspect of it. But it also means sometimes taking up meditation themes that you don’t particularly like. Contemplating the foulness of the body to get at your lust, contemplating death to get at your complacency, having a strong desire to really want to get to the end of the path. Those are things he actually encourages. Then he encourages you also to have a mature attitude to the fact that there are things you haven’t discovered yet, things you haven’t learned yet. In other words, you have to learn how to live productively with this knowledge that there’s more going to be required of you, and you have to work up your abilities to get there. Now, you may not be on the verge of awakening right now, so you have to be prepared to be in it for the long haul. In other words, you don’t want to be on the loose side of the goal, but at the same time you don’t want to push yourself so hard that you break down. But again, that middle way between not pushing yourself hard enough and pushing yourself too hard is probably going to be harder than you expect. So you want to develop this quality of the imperturbability of the mind, that whatever’s required, you’re up for it. This is why we work with the precepts. As you see, different impulses coming up in the mind, and you have to learn how to resist them, say no to them. If you find yourself giving in, you’ve got to figure out why. What’s the attraction there? What’s the part of the mind that says, “I can’t take it, I’ve just got to give in”? Do you have to believe that voice? What are you identifying? And this is why the precepts teach you so much about the mind. Do you learn to find where your resistance is? It’s like building a tower and discovering as you go up that the winds are getting stronger and stronger the higher you go. It wasn’t Frank Lloyd Wright who was going to build a skyscraper that was a mile high. He wouldn’t have known that unless he’d done some experiments, taken a plane up there and measured the wind. It’s the same with the precepts. You’re experimenting with the currents of the mind. When you put up a little resistance to those currents and you begin to see how strong they are, you have to learn how to make your resistance stronger. This is why the Buddha, when he gave those instructions to Rahula, before teaching him how to do breath meditation, he said, “Make your mind like earth.” You throw disgusting things on the earth, and the earth doesn’t react. This doesn’t mean that you make yourself like a cloud of dirt. It means that you are learning how to be resilient. When good or bad things happen, they don’t happen to you. You have to have an impact on the mind. That’s that part of the mind that just watches, that’s aware. You want to be in touch with that. Because it’s from that perspective that you learn how to see a lot of things you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. If you’re running away from pain or running toward pleasure, everything’s going to be a blur. You have to be in a position where you can see. When you do this, there’s going to be pleasure. When you do this, there’s going to be pain. Conducive to skillful mental states, these pleasures are conducive to unskillful mental states. The same with pain. Some pains are conducive to skillful mental states, and others are conducive to unskillful ones. It’s a basic distinction that the Buddha makes. You have to learn for yourself which ones are which. And some are pretty easy. Sensual pleasures are not going to take you in a good direction. The pleasure that comes from getting the mind to settle down and be still, now that’s something else. That’s to be developed. Same with some pains. Some pains get the mind all worked up, especially some mental pains. Other mental pains are actually useful, like the pain of seeing other people going past you in the practice. There’s a pain there. But you should learn how to use that to fire yourself up to practice harder, practice more intelligently. So there are good pains and bad pains, good pleasures and bad pleasures. There’s even good equanimity and bad equanimity. How are you going to see these things? You have to have a point in the mind that’s really resilient, that can watch causes and effects, and not try to push the experiment in the direction of the results that you want. You have to learn from these things. There’s a lot that you’re not going to know from the beginning of the practice. You have to be willing to put yourself out so you can learn these things. After all, the cessation of suffering is not something you’re going to comprehend from the beginning. It’s not even something you comprehend. It’s something you realize. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha says so little about nibbana. He says enough to let us know that it’s a desirable goal and it’s not a wipeout. There is an awareness there, but how is that awareness related to the awareness you have now? You’re not going to know by thinking it through or reading words. You’re going to know by working on the problem of suffering. Do you let go of the cause? When you let go of the cause, that’s when you know, “Oh, this is the kind of knowing the Buddha was talking about.” It’s something to discover. It’s not something to understand beforehand. And a lot of the path is like that. You have to discover it through the developing. There’s the discernment that comes from reading things and listening to things. There’s the discernment that comes from thinking things through. But there’s the discernment that comes from developing qualities of the mind, which is what meditation is all about. That’s going to be something else entirely. It’s like reading about swimming or thinking about swimming rather than actually swimming. It’s a different kind of knowledge. And the knowledge comes from being willing to jump in the pool and push yourself harder. All the great athletes are people who push themselves. They learn how to push themselves and maintain their stamina. And there is a middle path in that kind of practice. But again, the middle path is usually more demanding than most people would like to think. So you want to develop this quality of the mind as a rock, that being its normal state. So that whatever’s required, you’re up for it. Whatever things you’re going to have to learn, pleasant or painful, you’re willing to learn them. You’re willing to push yourself harder than you might have thought was going to be necessary. And this quality of mind is what enables you to do that, gives you the strength, gives you the solidity, gives you the resilience you need so you can really get the results you want.

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