On Solid Ground

July 30, 2020

There’s a story in the commentaries about King Ashoka that his father was still king. Ashoka had many brothers, and there’s always the question of which of the brothers would become the next king. One day the family went to visit an astrologer, and some of the brothers were sitting on the little portable thrones they had brought with them. Ashoka happened to be sitting on the ground, and the astrologer predicted that of the various sons, the one sitting on the grandest seat would become the next king. Ashoka said to himself, “What could be grander than the earth?” So here we are, sitting on the ground. Remember that the Buddha, on the night of his awakening, was sitting on the ground as well. And John Fung used to say that this was his favorite place to sit, on the ground. He said he felt like he was rooted. Think of the breath energy and the energy of the spine going down through the tailbone down into the ground. So his posture was solid. From there, of course, you try to make the mind solid. If you’re going to be in the same place where the Buddha was, it’s not just a matter of sitting on the ground. Remember, when he gained his full awakening, he was coming out of the fourth jhana. So if you want to see the same things the Buddha saw, you have to get the mind in a concentration as well. Try to put aside all your thoughts of the day, all the narratives of who did what, all your concerns about things inside, all your concerns about things outside, and just be right here. You think of the various modes of knowledge the Buddha had on the night of his awakening. There was the narrative mode, where he could remember his previous lifetimes. There was the cosmological mode, where he could see the world as a whole. But those modes didn’t lead to awakening. It was being right with things as they’re happening in the mind in the present moment. As you’re getting the mind in a concentration, that’s exactly what you’re doing. It is possible to concentrate on things far away, but that’s not right concentration. Right concentration is grounded in the body, in and of itself, right here. Feelings in and of themselves. Mind in and of itself. Dhammas in and of themselves. In other words, you don’t look at these things in terms of the world and the various narratives that you could create around them. You look at them simply as they’re experienced right here, as types of fabrication that the mind is engaged in right here. The mind wanders off in the other direction, and you just bring it right back. You want to see what the mind is doing as it fabricates. And if you wander off, you’re going into the fabrications, into those little states of becoming that it creates. As the Buddha said, “Wherever there’s becoming, there’s going to be suffering.” So you create this state of becoming, which has a minimum of suffering, the state of becoming of the mind in right concentration. So you can watch the other ones. Watch them, but watch them from the outside. And as you get the mind in the concentration, you begin to realize that the concentration itself is composed of those same fabrications. So everything you need to know is right here. You’ve got the body, you’ve got feelings, you’ve got the mind. That’s one way of dividing up right here. Then you’ve got bodily fabrication, which is the breath, verbal fabrication, direct thought and evaluation, mental fabrication, perceptions and feelings. They’re all right here. They’re all coming together to create this state of concentration. But for the time being, don’t try to analyze things too much. Just put things together. Try to keep them solidly together. So think of taking strength from the earth. John Lee talks about solid breath energies in the body coming out from the soles of the feet, going up the spine. And then try to bring that same quality of solidity into your mind. Because ultimately, of course, you want the mind to be more solid than the ground. The ground has earthquakes. The ground is shaken by heavy lightning strikes. There’s a passage in the Canon where Mara tries to scare a group of arhants with a big thunderclap, but their minds don’t shake at all. That’s the kind of quality you want, because we live in a world where there are a lot of things that can easily shake the mind. Aging comes, illness comes, death comes, separation from the people we love. And if we build our identity around things that can be shaken like that, then of course the mind is going to be shaken. You have to construct a different identity inside as part of the path. The identity that refuses to be shaken looks for something solid inside. So even when really bad things happen, you don’t have to suffer. As the Buddha said, this is one of our motivations for practicing, is that bad things are going to happen. Either to us individually or to society as a whole. So you want to practice so you can find something inside that doesn’t need to be even constructed as solid. It’s solid of its very nature. But to get there, you start out by creating solid concentration. So as you meditate, try to think of this quality of solidity. It doesn’t have to be heavy. It doesn’t have to be dense. But it’s solid and unmovable. That’s the quality of mind you want to develop. When the Buddha was telling Rahula to make his mind like earth, he was hoping that he would use that perception as a mental fabrication to help strengthen the mind. Well, whatever perceptions you can think of that help strengthen the mind, use those. Those are the things you’re going to be able to depend on. The ways in which you fabricate the path inside for yourself. Turn your breath, direct your thought and evaluation, turn your perceptions and feelings into the path. That way, wherever you go, you’ve got something you’re going to depend on. If you look at the world right now, a lot of things are getting shaken up. And to live in a world like this without suffering, you’ve got to make your mind unshakeable. So you take these different processes, different kinds of fabrication, and make them as unshakeable as you can. As the Buddha said, they will provide an opening to something that really is unshakeable, something that, even when there are earthquakes, doesn’t shiver or quake, something even more solid than the solid ground we’re sitting on.

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