A Solid Mind (outdoors)

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John Fung used to say that his favorite place to sit was right on the ground. He said he’d like to imagine a root going down from the base of his spine, way down into the ground, anchoring him. He had that sense of the body being solid. Then you can try to get your mind solid as well. Think of the Buddha’s instructions to Rahula, “Make your mind like earth.” People throw disgusting things on the earth, and the earth doesn’t react. Now, the earth doesn’t know anything. Your mind does know, and it tends to react, but it can know without reacting. That’s the quality of mind you’re trying to develop in the concentration. So you’re not afraid of pain, you’re not afraid of pleasure, you’re not afraid of gain or loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. That’s the kind of mind that can go safely through the world. You want to ferret out the part of the mind that is not affected by anything. It knows, but it doesn’t react. Our perceptions, our minds, and our thought constructs tend to react quite a lot. But there’s a part of the mind that’s simply aware, and it’s capable of being aware of anything. That’s one of your safe spots in the mind. So you’ve got to develop a quality of solidity in the body, not solid in the sense of being burdensome, but solid in the sense of being unaffected. The breath comes in, the breath goes out, it feels good. But you’re not afraid of the feeling good. In other words, you’re not in a position where the mind could drift off into the pleasure, leave the breath. The Buddha said that one of the qualities he developed in the course of his awakening all the way throughout his practice was that he wouldn’t let either pleasure or pain penetrate the mind or stay there. He mentioned this to a debater one time, and the debater said, “Well, maybe you didn’t have any intense pleasures or pains.” So the Buddha went and told him about all the intense pains he put himself through during those six years of self-torment. Then he told him about all the pleasures he encountered as he got the mind on the right path, on the path of jhana. And in either case, he didn’t let the pleasure or the pain take over. He wanted to keep alert to see what is this doing to the mind. Is this pleasure skillful or unskillful? Is the pain skillful or unskillful? There are certain pains that are skillful. As the Buddha said, if you notice that by following your pleasure, unskillful qualities develop in the mind, then you’ve got to work with pain. That can either mean working with painful meditation topics, like the contemplation of the body or the foulness of food, or it’s just being willing to sit through pain. Not as a self-torment, but as an opportunity to learn about pain. After all, we’re trying to comprehend pain. And comprehend doesn’t mean just knowing it on an abstract level. You’re trying to see it as it’s happening right here, right now. What is it about the pain that you are holding onto? Can the pain be there? Without your trying to grab hold of it, take an account of every little pain that comes passing by. Can you breathe without trying to use the pain as part of the breath energy? In other words, allow the pain to be there, but other parts of the body are breathing. Try to figure out what it is about your relationship to the pain that has the mind so scared off by it. What allows itself to be driven by the pain? You see, a lot of the problem has to do with your perception and your sense of “me” or “mine” around the pain. That’s one of the reasons why the Buddha taught the teaching of not-self. Not to say that there is no self, but simply that we identify with things that give us pain. Is that worthwhile? Is it a useful identification? No. We identify with the pain itself. Why identify with the pain? What is it about the mind that keeps having to latch on to something and create identity out of it? It’s the process of becoming. Why do we keep doing that? If you’re not afraid of pain, you can ask these questions. And you can discover things about pain that you wouldn’t notice if you were just trying to run away from it. The same with pleasure. If you get a little bit of pleasure from the concentration and just wallow in it, then the concentration is gone, or it blurs out into a state of delusion concentration. No insight can be gained there. But no matter how intense the pleasure or how intense the equanimity, you still keep with the breath. You try to keep alert. Then notice, where is the stress even in this pleasure? And again, you’ll find that it’s related to the perceptions around the pleasure. The things you’re still holding on to. So either way, if you want to know pleasure or if you want to know pain, you have to not be affected by them. You have to see them as something separate. This is one of the big ironies of the history of Buddhism. So much was made of the idea of interconnectedness in the centuries after the Buddha that all of the oneness of everything and the interconnectedness of everything became the object of what you were trying to locate, what you were trying to uncover in your meditation. But the Buddha had already said that oneness is something you can encounter, but it’s fabricated, it’s constructed, just like everything else you construct. In the same way, that oneness has to have some stress in it, then. He said the ability to gain real insight, to gain independence from these things, is to see them as something separate, something other. The pain is there, but it’s not the body. The pain is there, but it’s not your awareness. The pleasure is there. It’s not identical either with the body or with your awareness. When you conceive these things as separate, then you’ll be very clear about when the mind is trying to glom them together again to create a new identity. And you can see the stress that comes with that. So this quality of having a solid mind is really important for insight. Because otherwise we run away from pains, run toward pleasures, without really looking at either one. The pain drives us towards pleasure. So we go running for any pleasure that comes by, and then we suffer. And then we wonder why. It’s because we allow these things to have power over us. So try to make the mind solid. Think of your body being solidly rooted here on the ground, like a John Foong. Don’t get pushed around with every little thing that comes your way. And it’s through this strength of mind that you’re going to find freedom.

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