A Solid Center Inside (outdoors)

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When the Buddha first taught meditation to his son, he told him, “Make your mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, but the earth 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 water. Water can be used to wash away dirty things. Wind can blow dirty things around, but they’re not disgusted. He’s not telling you just to put up with things, but it means that you shouldn’t let the mind get knocked around by events. Because if you’re going to be a good meditator, you have to be able to observe things. After all, when the Buddha set out the Four Noble Truths, he set out the duty with the first truth, the truth of suffering, which is to comprehend it. And to comprehend something, you’re going to have to watch it to figure it out. And if you can stay still and undisturbed, you can begin to see things you wouldn’t have seen otherwise. If all you can think of is how to run away, run away, or push it away, you’re not going to understand it. But wherever there’s pain, wherever there’s suffering, you have to ask yourself,”What’s here?” The physical pain is one thing. What’s really important, though, is the mental pain. There can be pains in the body, but they don’t have to pain the mind. There may be painful things happening outside, but again, the mind doesn’t have to be pained. That’s the essence of the skill that we’re trying to develop here. One way to make the mind like earth is to give it a good, solid place where it can stay with a sense of well-being. That’s why we work with the breath, adjusting the breath in the different parts of the body. When the breath is comfortable, think of it spreading around, holding in mind the perception that the breath is energy, and energy can flow anywhere. So when the Buddha teaches to make your mind like earth, he’s not saying just simply put up with whatever. There’s a skill for knowing how to be enduring. Given the way the world is, we’re going to need a lot of endurance. And the way the world is is not just because there’s a pandemic or there’s a war. There’s always aging, illness, and death. A king came to see the Buddha one time in the middle of the day. The Buddha asked him, “What are you coming from doing today?” The king, who was remarkably frank, said, “All the typical things that a person obsessed with power gets obsessed with.” The Buddha said, “Suppose someone were to tell you that there was a mountain moving in from the east, crushing all living beings in its wake. Suppose a person were to come from the south and say there’s another mountain moving in from the south, crushing all living beings, moving this way. Another person from the west, another person from the north. Altogether, there are four mountains moving in.” And given that human life is so precious and hard to find, and seeing this vast destruction of life, what would you do? The king told him, “Well, what else could I do but dharma conduct, right conduct, skillful conduct, meritorious conduct?” And the Buddha said, “Well, I tell you, aging, illness, and death are moving in, crushing all living beings in their wake. What are you going to do?” The king said, “What else could I do but right conduct, skillful conduct, dharma conduct, meritorious conduct?” This is the way of the world. It always has been. And it’s in the midst of this vast destruction that we’re trying to do something good. Now, it’s not hopeless. What the king was talking about is that when you do good things, those good things become your treasures. And those are things that even mountains can’t crush. But the important thing about those treasures is that you learn to train your mind. When they talk about meritorious conduct, they’re talking about generosity, virtue, and meditation. They’re all important, but the meditation is especially important. You have to make your mind really strong so it doesn’t get knocked off course by events outside. Give it a good foundation inside. Give it a sense of well-being inside. The Buddha compares concentration to food for the path. This is where you gain your nourishment. Because if you’re trying to gain your nourishment from the world outside, what have you got? You’ve got other people’s actions, other people’s words, and sometimes they act in good ways and sometimes they act in not-good ways. And so, as a diet, that’s not very reliable. If you take in the wrong kinds of things, you can make yourself sick. So it’s good to be able to produce your own food from inside. That way you can be strong in the face of whatever dangers the world shows. So work every day giving the mind this foundation inside, a good, solid center inside. Because if you’re going to have a good influence on the world, first you have to have some goodness inside you that you’re going to be able to share. And if your goodness gets knocked off course easily, then you’re not reliable. So the search for a good, solid center inside is not a selfish thing. The more you can produce inside, the more you have to share. So learn to get acquainted with your breath. When the Buddha gave instructions to his son to make his mind like earth, he didn’t stop there. He went on to talk about different ways of focusing on the breath, being mindful of the breath, different activities you can do, breathing in and out in a way that gives rise to pleasure, breathing in and out in a way that gives rise to rapture and refreshment, breathing in and out in a way that calms the mind, gets you sensitive to what the mind needs, gladdening the mind when it needs to be gladdened, steadying the mind when it needs to be steadied. In other words, you do take a proactive approach. But to see what needs to be done at any one point, the mind has to be in a position to really observe. That’s what the solidity of the earth is all about. As long as you’re not knocked off course by things, you can see clearly what’s happening. So commit yourself to training the mind and then reflect on it. The Buddha said this is how the Dhamma is found, through commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to doing it well, doing it as best you can, and then you reflect on what you’re doing. How could it be better? If something’s already good, how can you maintain it so you don’t lose it? Both the commitment and the reflection require a good, solid foundation. So you have the strength to commit and the clarity of vision to reflect well. So try to build this solid center inside. It’ll be for your benefit and for the benefit of the people around you.

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