A Well-grounded Fortress

August 11, 2023

When the Buddha gave meditation instructions to his son Rahula, he started by telling him to make his mind like earth. People throw disgusting things on the earth, and earth doesn’t react. Some people think that non-reactivity is the goal of the practice, but actually it’s a prerequisite for the more proactive work you’re going to be doing. So if you want to see yourself clearly, you have to get the mind in a position where it doesn’t react to things it doesn’t like and doesn’t overreact to things that it does like. Because as you meditate, you’re going to be watching yourself in action, and some of the things you’re going to see are things you don’t like to see. You see your greed come up, your aversion, your impatience, your irritation. And if you can’t watch these things, you’re never going to learn about them. You hide them, and they just go underground. There’s no way that you can dig them up unless you learn how to watch them and admit, “Yes, there are unskillful habits in the mind.” But you don’t have to let them invade the mind. That’s the image the Buddha gives. He says these attitudes sometimes invade the mind and then remain. They come in, they take over. Instead, you should think about the Buddha’s image of a fortress. As we’re meditating, we’re maintaining a fortress on a frontier where there are enemies, there are spies, there are soldiers from the enemy. So you need mindfulness as the gatekeeper. Ideas will present themselves, emotions will present themselves at the door. And the gatekeeper says either, “Yes, you can come in,” or, “No, you shouldn’t.” So you want to be able to recognize who should be allowed in and who shouldn’t. So just be conscious that something presents itself in the mind. It doesn’t mean you have to take it in. Think of it as old karma. Your new karma is when you take it in and you start embroidering on it. That’s where you go wrong. The fact that these things appear is normal. It’s natural. But when you bring them in, it’s like bringing in enemies into your fortress. So you have to get the mind really, really clear about what’s happening. The first prerequisite is to make your mind like earth. Then, from that solid position, you can pass judgment. As the Buddha said, the Dhamma is nourished by commitment and reflection. You commit yourself to doing something good, and then you reflect on how well you’re doing. And if you want to develop, you have to be able to admit, “Oh, that didn’t work,” or, “That didn’t give good results. This did give good results.” After the Buddha taught Rahula to make his mind like earth, he taught him breath meditation. His instructions for breath meditation are not simply to watch the breath as it’s going to come in, on its own. Once you get sensitive to what long breathing is like and what short breathing is like, the next step is to breathe in and out aware of the whole body. Then you calm the breath. Elsewhere, though, he says that before you calm things down, you want to energize things. So breathe in a way first that gives you energy. Try some good long, deep, in-and-out breaths. As long as that feels good, give it up. When it begins to get tiresome or mechanical, then you can think of it calming down. But as the breath gets comfortable, you don’t just want to go with the comfort. You stay with the perception of breath. You give yourself work to do. Wherever there’s a sense of ease or well-being, you think of it spreading through the body. You might think of the whole breath spreading through the body, because after all, breath is one of the elements in the body. And it can be felt anywhere. It runs along the nerves, it runs along the blood vessels. Here we’re not talking about the air coming in and out through the nose. It’s the flow of energy. So think of comfortable breath energy flowing through the body, the whole body. So you breathe in a way that gives rise to a feeling of fullness, a feeling of ease. So you’re doing something proactive here. You’re committing yourself to training the mind. As you’re settling in, you find there are some problems in settling in. You can ask yourself, “Is the problem with the breath? Is the problem with the feelings that you’re creating? Is the problem with the mind itself?” This is why the Buddha gives you different frames of reference for establishing mindfulness. If the problem is with the breath, well, you can change it. If the problem is with the feelings, you can ask yourself, “What kind of feelings would be good for the mind right now?” Because feeling, as the Buddha said, is a mental fabrication. It has an impact on the state of the mind. So which feelings are you focusing on? Can you create a sense of ease and well-being by the way you breathe? If you can, then use that feeling of ease to soothe the mind. Sometimes you can create a feeling of rapture, even. Rapture is more energizing. And if the mind needs energizing, think of breathing in a way that feels really full. Until it begins to feel too full, then you allow things to calm down. But you can also look at your perceptions. How do you visualize the breath to yourself? This, as I said, is where it’s good to think of the breath as flowing through the nerves, blood vessels, dissolving away any patterns of tension you may feel anywhere in the body. Or you can think of the breath energy coming in and out through the body, not only through the nose but also through the eyes, the ears, in and out through all the pores of the skin. See how that perception has an impact on the mind, allowing it to settle down. And, of course, there’s the mind itself. As you get sensitive to the state of your mind right now, you can ask yourself, “Does it need gladdening?” Because one of the prerequisites for getting the mind into concentration is the sense of being glad to be here. You can foster that in different ways. The Buddha says that living in a community where people are in harmony, that gladdens the mind, makes it easier to practice. So you begin to realize that the way you meditate is not isolated from the way you live. Then you have to look at your own behavior. Are you acting in ways that make it hard for there to be harmony while you’re harming yourself and the people around you? We in the West don’t appreciate harmony as much as they do in countries where Buddhism has been established for a long time. But it’s good to think about that as one factor that helps to help the mind to settle down, with a sense of being glad to be here. You can think about your generosity in the past. You can think about your virtue. You could have done something against the precepts and could have gotten away with it, but you stood by your principles. That can gladden the mind. There were times when you were generous. You didn’t have to be. It wasn’t Christmas, it wasn’t New Year’s, it wasn’t somebody’s birthday. But you just wanted to share. That can gladden the mind. It’s hard to find that the mind needs to be more concentrated. Give yourself one spot in the body where it seems congenial to settle in. Focus there. Even though you’re aware of the whole body, one part in the body gets more of your attention. Choose a spot that’s really sensitive to how the breath feels, like this candle in the front of the room here. Its flame is in all directions. It’s in one spot, but its light goes all over the room. Try to think of your awareness as being like that, settled, solid. As for anything that comes up that’s burdening the mind, just think in ways that help you let go. You’re not here to think about other things. You’re here to watch the mind. The process is in the mind right here. That’s what’s distinctive about the Buddhist approach to training the mind. When a thought comes up, you look at it, “Well, where is it coming from, and where is it going to lead you?” There was this line of inquiry that took him from the very beginning of the path. When he finally found the path, he decided to divide his thoughts into two sorts, those that were sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness, on one side, and those that were imbued with renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness, on the other side. He looked at where the thoughts were coming from. He looked at where they were going. Instead of entering into the thought world, he stood back and watched the process. This is how the mind creates an unskillful thought. This is how the mind creates a skillful thought. There’s that line of inquiry that enables him to see deeper into the processes in the mind, all the way to dependent co-arising. He started with a very simple question, but then he realized that that question could take him really far. What are the processes by which the mind creates a state of becoming? What are the processes by which it creates suffering? Can you change the processes? So instead of getting into thought worlds, getting into states of becoming, you stand back. If you see any thoughts that are weighing the mind down, try to stand back from them. Don’t go into them. It’s in this way that you can get the mind to settle down with a sense of clarity, with a sense of stability. As you notice, the way the Buddha describes breath meditation, you’re developing calm at the same time that you’re developing insight into the process. This is a fabrication of calm and insight working together. That’s why he didn’t teach a specific samatha technique or vipassana technique. He treated samatha and vipassana as qualities of the mind that are developed as you get the mind concentrated. You need them to get the mind to settle down. You need some understanding of the mind. You need to be able to be quiet enough to observe the mind. But then as the mind really gets quiet and solidly established, it’s a lot easier to gain deeper insights, deeper calm. That’s why when the Buddha gave instructions on how to meditate, then he told the monks, “Go do jhana.” He didn’t say, “Go do vipassana. Go do samatha.” He said, “Go do jhana. Get the mind into concentration.” When it’s rightly concentrated, you get all the factors of the path together there. But you can see this only if the mind is solidly based. This is why you try to maintain that attitude that whatever comes up in the mind, you’re going to notice it. You’re not going to hide it. You’re going to work with it. So that ability to keep the mind like earth is not just a first step. It’s a foundation. Based on that foundation, then you can commit yourself to the practice, reflect on it. And through those two attitudes of commitment and reflection, you can train yourself. As the Buddha said, he simply said, “It’s up to us to follow the way and to make sure that we’re staying on the path and not wandering off.” That’s why you want to keep your mind like earth all the way through.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2023/230811_A_Well-grounded_Fortress.mp3>