

## *Like Earth and Space*

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The world is swept away. We look outside and that's what we see. We look inside and we see that our minds, as Buddha said, are very quick to change direction, even faster than anything in the world. So where are we going to find anything sure and stable and reliable in our lives? Well, it is possible to train the mind. The mind that the Buddha compares to a fish thrown up on the land that flips and flaps about can be turned into a mind that's like a stone column. That's a common image for the arahant's mind: a stone column, sixteen spans tall, eight spans buried in the ground, so that no matter which direction the wind blows from, the column doesn't shiver or shake.

Now, to get you training the mind in that direction, a lot of images in the Canon talk of making the mind like earth. There's one comparison where the Buddha says that as you live in the world, people can say all kinds of things, things that would ordinarily get you upset. They can be critical of you in ways that are helpful or not very helpful, kind or ill-meaning, true or false. You have to accept that as part of the world: This is human speech. So you make up your mind that your goodwill is going to be as solid and as large as the earth. A man can come along with a hoe and a shovel and a basket, and try to make the earth be without earth—spitting here and urinating there, saying, “Be without earth, be without earth”—but the earth is never going to be used up that way. You have to have goodwill that's that solid, that immense.

When the Buddha gave instructions for his son to meditate, he started out by saying, “Make your mind like earth.” People throw good things on the earth, bad things on the earth, but the earth doesn't react. That's the basis for doing your meditation.

Now notice, his instructions don't just stop there with non-reactivity. In the case of making goodwill like the earth, you do have to keep on extending goodwill to all beings, regardless. It's just that your foundation for that goodwill has to be really solid.

You have to practice making your goodwill that large so that when people behave well or don't behave well, you still have goodwill for them. It basically means, in the light of kamma, that you want them to understand the causes for true happiness and be willing and able to act on them. Now, for some people, that seems a very far-distant wish, but you want to make that your wish for everybody

you encounter. Whether they're going to get there or not anytime soon, you're not going to do anything to get in the way of their true happiness.

Of course, you have to back up your goodwill with equanimity, realizing that for a lot of people, this is going to take time. This is why the Buddha's instructions to the monks on the Ovada Patimokkha begin with endurance, patience, as a basis for burning away your defilements.

As for the instructions to Rahula, on making his mind like earth, he didn't stop with non-reactivity. He then gave on breath meditation, which are actually very proactive. As a build-up to doing breath meditation, he also taught Rahula to develop the brahmaviharas, and to contemplate the unattractive nature of the body. He was telling Rahula to engage in some thinking that was proactive in developing skillful qualities of the mind, protective qualities in the mind.

When you have that kind of foundation, that kind of protection, *then* you do breath meditation, because the mind is more solid now. You can see more clearly when you're actually training yourself properly and when you're not, because a lot of breath meditation requires that you be really observant.

As Ajaan Fuang once noted, the commentaries say that breath meditation is appropriate for everybody but, he added, that's not the case. You have to be very observant, because you're going to be looking for subtle things. And the mind has to be very still to see those subtle things: the difference between breathing that's easeful and not easeful; that gives rise to rapture or doesn't; that calms the mind or doesn't calm the mind; that steadies the mind or doesn't steady the mind. You have to be very sensitive.

The more you can make your mind solid like earth, the more you can detect these sensitive things. It's like having scientific equipment that's extremely sensitive. If it's going to be useful for measuring anything, it has to be very solidly based.

So we're not here just to be non-reactive. We start out training the mind to be less reactive so that it can actually see what's going on, to gain some insight into what it's doing and the results of what it's doing. And also get into concentration. When you have those two qualities working together—tranquility and insight—that's when they both get strong.

In fact, earth is one of the topics of concentration. As the Buddha said, you're off in the wilderness and you're away from the disturbances of household life, but you still have the disturbances of being in the wilderness. There are animals in the wilderness. There are non-human beings in the wilderness. There are diseases. If you think about those things, it can be disturbing. So you put them out of your mind and you just focus on the fact that everything around you is earth. Your

body is earth. The things you're sitting on are earth, the trees above you. Here we are in a building, the building is earth property.

As the Buddha said, it's like taking a cowhide and stretching it with a thousand pegs, so that it's free of wrinkles. In the same way, you can just think of all the earthness of everything around you, not anything of the details of the shape of that earthness. Just hold that in mind. You can develop a good strong state of concentration that way.

But then you see that even that has some disturbance in it, so you go to space. It's more wide open. Think of all the atoms in your body, all the atoms in the floor, all the atoms of all the other people around you: They're mostly space. And the space in all these things connects. There's no limit to it. That gets you into an even more solidly based state of mind: It's an amazing paradox that space should feel so grounding. There's no place to land, no place to be established, but it's a more calming state of mind, a more calming perception.

The Buddha uses it, too, as an image for goodwill. He says people can try to write things on space, but the letters don't stick. In the same way, things that people do, things that people say: Think of them as not sticking in your mind because there's nothing for them to stick to.

Now, these are just perceptions you're dealing with—the perception of earth, the perception of space—but they help train the mind in the right direction. After all, perceptions are mental fabrications. These are the things that have an impact on the state of your mind. So learn to use fabrications that are impervious to other people's activities, like the man with the hoe and the shovel and the basket. Even if there are many, many people with hoes and shovels and baskets, the earth is still more than they can dig away. That's the kind of quality you want: large, deep, solid. Then you alternate it with space, where nothing sticks. There's no surface.

If you maintain that state of mind, then as the world gets swept away, you don't get swept away with it. It may offer no shelter, but you've got shelter in your perceptions and the qualities of mind that you can develop. It has nothing of its own, but you can make these perceptions your own. You can make this solid state of mind your own. You know that the world may be a slave to craving. You can watch it be a slave to craving, but you don't have to flow along with the cravings. This is why that perception of space is so useful. Everything just flows right through, but space doesn't get pushed around.

When you hold these perceptions in mind, you can withstand a lot of things by letting them through. That gives you a good foundation for developing more concentration, more goodwill, all the brahmavihāras, more discernment. You hear some people saying that the non-reactive state of mind is the goal, but that's just

the beginning of the path. Still, it's your protection in a lot of ways. In the Buddha's discourse on protection, the Maṅgala Sutta, patience, endurance, is one of the protections.

So develop it as much as you can, because we live in a world where it's really needed. And by developing these perceptions, you train the mind so that it's not just a fish flopping around on the land. It's the land itself. The space permeating the land. That's when you can be really secure.