

GROUNDED BY THE EARTH

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We did a few different things together just now. We observed our breath. We used a certain kind of attention to incorporate the breath into a purifying practice, which is common in many Buddhist, especially Tibetan, traditions. And we were open to whatever images or memories or thoughts might arise for us.

Then we began to focus on what we can, in general, call *grounding*, which is to say we became open to being aware of the power of support which is holding us in this beautiful room. We were opening to a certain sensitivity to the solidity of this floor, lest it go unnoticed. Then we experimented for a moment with taking this sense of solidity in more deeply, to more subtle areas of our bodies. From a peripheral sense of grounding, which is easy to sense, we moved to internalize this and bring it to a deeper, more cellular level in the body. Finally, we became open to the possibility of bringing that sense of grounded stability to our own mental focus.

The grounding part of our practice is drawn from my work in teaching *Buddhism in the Body*© retreats and workshops with Phyllis Pay (Director, Center for Intuitive Processing in Berkeley); the grounding practices she uses are implicit, but rarely clearly stated, in traditional Buddhist practice.

Our sensing the solidity of the earth is drawn from Tenzin Wangyal Rinpoche's teachings on the elements,¹ and the *Om* chant is a synopsis of and entry to Vajrayana, given to me to use in such introductory contexts by Adzom Paylo Rinpoche.² Any one of these elements could be the focus of an entire retreat.

Regarding the elements, you are probably well acquainted with the Buddhist teaching that we are composed of the five aggregates of mind and body. There is also a parallel narrative, important in the Tibetan traditions, that we are constituted by the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind or air, and space. Each of these has its own particular quality. Today we are focusing upon the power of earth and its capacity to ground us and help us be more steadfast.

Many traditions honor the earth for her power of nurturing. There is a healing energy that comes to us from the earth. And there is an enormous ground to settle upon and to settle into. In Buddhist traditions the earth is used as an example of equanimity and great patience. All kinds of filth gets plopped into the earth; she doesn't mind, she takes it in and recycles it. The earth is a model of how anything that occurs can be transformed through patience and equanimity. And just as it can be

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1. See his book *Healing with Sound and Light* or visit Ligmincha.org.

2. See www.dawnmountain.org; *Buddhism in the Body* programs listed here as well.

Good morning everybody. It's nice to see you all here. Let's start with a morning meditation. Let me suggest that for the first part of this silent meditation you do whatever part of your meditation practice is more on the calming and focusing line of things. For example, if you typically watch your breath, please do that. We'll sit in silent meditation for just a bit and then I will begin a guided meditation which will meditatively introduce some of the themes we'll be talking about today.

So just take a moment to take your posture—with your spine long, straight, your neck tucked down a little bit, which also serves to lengthen your spine. Rest comfortably and deeply on your cushion or on your chair; settle into the bottom of your body and allow yourself to be really held by your cushion; allow your awareness to rest on its focus, such as your breath.

[Silence.]

As you continue to breathe, be aware of your breath as an entering into your being of refreshing air, clarity, that clarity taking the form of light as you inhale. Feeling that your breath, along with the clarity and purification it brings, actually moves through your body all the way down to the bottom of your spine. In this way your breath is a clarifying gift for you. And as you exhale, you are exhaling all the way from the bottom of your spine. Exhale into the distance anything untoward that you may carry at this moment emotionally, energetically, somatically, physically, anything that you may carry that is an impediment, a resistance, to your practice. Especially anything connected with desire, hatred, ignorance. Take three deep breaths in this way: inhaling clarifying and purifying light; exhaling desire, hatred, ignorance and any other impediment you feel you carry at this time.

[Silence.]

And as you continue to breathe in your own natural rhythm, feel the breath, the sensation of it moving over your upper lip and also through your nostrils and also coming down through your lungs, opening your chest, opening your heart, your presence, and descending all the way down energetically to the bottom of your spine. As you feel the sensation of your breath moving through your body in this way, see if you are aware of anything in your body, in your field, in your mind, in your energy, that impinges on you at this moment, that you would like to exhale or allow to dissolve. And if so, since we're still in this purification of breathing part of our meditation, exhale it, far into the distance, till it disappears. If images come to you, memories, be aware of them and allow them to flow out with your breath if you do not need them.

[Silence.]

And continue to feel the sensation of your own breath gliding through your body, refreshing you, allowing you to empty out what is stale and old. Breathing continuously down to and from the bottom of your spine, let your awareness settle there for the moment. The bottom of your spine. And feel the sensation of your cushion, your chair, against the bottom of your body. With your awareness, gently inquire in your muscles if there is any part of you that would like to relax a little more. And allow this cushion, this floor, this earth, to support you more completely. Perhaps you've been doing something to hold yourself up in a way that now seems to you excessive effort, perhaps coming in part from a lack of trust that this earth can actually hold you. You can sit on it now in a different way, and allow it to support you.

[Silence.]

So even though your spine is straight, soaring up from the bottom of your body like a radiant, supple plant, still at the

bottom of your body is trusting, receiving support from the earth, not strained, not tight, not ready to take flight, but here.

[Silence.]

Feel, through your own relaxed sitting, the supportive power of this floor, held as it is by the layers of earth directly beneath us and those further layers beneath and beneath and beneath. The depth of our seat is as deep as this planet. Feel that solidity really emerging from the entire globe of earth itself. Feel its impact on you in this moment, coming through the bottom of your body. The earth is unmoving, unjudging. Once you can feel the sense of solidity which it provides in the outer contours of your body, see if you can also begin to allow this sense of steadiness, concreteness to come in more subtly through your skin, entering more deeply inside the tissues of your body, steadying you, cell by cell.

[Silence.]

And as cell by cell this sense of support becomes contagious, this sense of presence and solidity—which, if you lose the feeling for a moment, you can always tap back into the solidity that is supporting your body right now—see if it can move, layer by layer, continuously more deeply into your tissues, your bones, your marrow. All celebrating their affinity with the earth element. And so, in a very natural way, bringing also deep steadfastness to your mind.

[Silence.]

And bring your steadfast awareness again to the bottom of your spine, meeting and greeting again this supportive solidity, and feeling into the bottom of your spine, this first chakra area, so connected with your embodied presence. Almost there's a yearning for it to connect with the large body that supports your own. So that from the bottom of your spine there is an energetic extension, which might image itself to you as a rope or a chain or a tree trunk, moving down and extending from the bottom of your spine, through your cushion, through this floor, through the layers of earth supporting us, directly beneath us, gliding down, anchoring us more concretely in the present. Gliding down 50 feet..., 500 feet..., 5,000 feet...coming to rest and connecting us with the very center of the earth directly beneath you. And take a moment to breathe down to the center of the earth, to feel the support coming to you from the center of the earth, to hold you and support you in carrying forward your intention for this day and for your life purpose. Then just continue to breathe. Feel your breath moving through your body. Feel the support that comes to and through this seat on which you sit—that you are held, in fact, by the entire earth, directly connected with, and sitting directly above, the center.

[Silence.]

And in closing let your awareness move up the center of your body to rest now at your heart, feeling the alignment of your heart with the bottom of your spine, with the center of the earth. And your crown is in alignment, too. And so from the very center of this point of alignment, from your very heart, the sound of steadfastness and gathering into presence, the sound "Om", just that—"Om"—and we'll sound this sound together three times. And just feel whatever you feel as this sound emanates from the center of your heart, touching each fiber and cell of your body and being, harmonizing you.

Om (everyone sounds it together)

Om (everyone sounds it together)

Om (everyone sounds it together)

[Bell.]



transformed at the level of earth, so also can it be transformed at the level of energy and mind.

In order to heighten the grounded inclination, we focus some awareness at the bottom of our spine. This is a place that tends naturally to resonate with issues of awareness of suffering, mortality, death, and very basic questions of why I'm here. It is also the seat of our energetic presence, and we might even recognize in this part of our bodies a natural longing for steadfastness and connection with the stability of the earth.

I know this is not the sort of language one hears in the early *sutras* of the Theravada tradition, but even there we find the powerful symbol of Buddha sitting under a tree. And experientially, we often seek in our practice to become like a tree in the sense of growing deep roots. We send down, in a manner of speaking, from the bottom of our spine the grounding cord, something that extends deep into the earth and gives us a channel of connection with the earth and its powerful stability. We do these visualization exercises in order to discover the earth as a resource for enhancing our capacity for steadfastness.

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Many spiritually inclined people are not interested in their bodies and are not so happy to even have them. Many of us find on our own path that we have issues about our bodies—how they look, how they function—which may impede connecting with the wisdom of our own bodies. If we feel rational thinking is the only access we have to information, then we may lose out on the information present in our knowing body. I was such a person—a practicing head—for many years. I was fascinated by the intellectual brilliance of many of the systems of Buddhist philosophy, and implicitly felt that enlightenment was something that would occur in or through my head.

When I was just starting to hear about Buddhism in high school and college, there was not much information available, but I was fortunate early on to come into the brilliantly luminous field of some outstanding teachers from the Tibetan tradition. My earliest teachers were from the Gelug tradition, which quite rightly takes pride in its intellectual acumen and the things it can tell you about how to practice. It is a very well formulated teaching, and for this I was

grateful. But, through no fault of theirs, I was largely feeding my head, my brain, my intellect with this information. I was studying the teachings and learning Tibetan, but this enhanced what was already a deep inclination in me to ignore or forget my body.

All this changed dramatically when I went to Tibet for the first time. At that point, I had already been involved in Tibetan practice for 17 years. As you know, Tibet was not open to foreigners until the early 1980s. When I finally got there, I found it was a startlingly powerful and visceral experience to walk around those mountains, to see those glaciers gliding down to the road. There is a lot of earth element in Tibet—even *I* had to notice it. Now perhaps Tibet has been over-idealized in some ways, but it really is a different kind of place than, say, Texas or Massachusetts. The earth is shooting up all around you to 20,000 feet, and it's all solid, strong, *rock*. The earth element is powerful there, and it constantly brings you back to your body and your embodiment.

When I got back from that first trip to Tibet, many people told me I looked different. I *was* different—I realized I had a body. This led to more involvement with energy work, which has been an ongoing project ever since. I began to discover the energies of the body were absolutely integral to my meditation practice, and though I had a lot going on in the upper three *chakras* of the heart, throat and crown, I didn't have much going on in the lower part of my body. I was unanchored. No wonder I had trouble focusing my mind.



When you have a human body, you have—we have—the capacity to connect profoundly with the earth. Just like that tree the Buddha was sitting under, with its roots going deep into the ground, its willingness to be held and nourished by the earth allows it to grow and allows its flowers to open to the sky. So too when our body is grounded, it

allows our mind to be steadfast, present, and, finally, really open at the crown. It can be easy for us to understand mindfulness as a way of engaging the mind as if it were separate from the body, but mindfulness is really a full body practice. It's an embodied practice. When we are unable to stay focused it is not just a fault of mind. There is also an energy associated with the mind in resistance for whatever reason.

When seeking to be mindful, we are seeking to be grounded in the present. It sounds simple enough. So why do we fight it so hard? Why don't I just sit down, have everything fall away, and just feel connected to and supported from the center of the earth? The Buddha just sits, doesn't he? It's not like he's half ready to jump and answer the telephone, get on e-mail, or make shopping lists of all the things he has to do tomorrow. Look at the statue here. There he is, just sitting. You see it in the images, you see it in your teachers, and sometimes you see it in yourself. You know what that is, to just *sit* and be there. Yet there is so often such resistance to this. Much of this resistance has to do with the resistance to what I'm also calling *grounding*.

In Tibetan medical traditions, as well as in tantric and Chinese traditions, the mind is said to be like a lame person, with wisdom and eyes but no legs. What carries the mind is the energy—*lung* or *prana* or *chi*—and they always go together. Tibetans also use the image of a horse and rider, where the mind is the rider and the horse is the energy. So when you are taming your mind, you are also taming the energies of your body. Asian teachers take this for granted, so they don't always talk about it. It took me fifteen or twenty years to recognize this. So it has been very helpful to me, in my practice and also in my overall understanding of what we're trying to accomplish as practitioners, to take account of the body and its energies.

This is not just a Tibetan thing. Similar experiences are discovered in the

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body sweeping exercises taught by Goenkaji, the Indian vipassana teacher from Burma. After cultivating some *shamatha* (calming) by observation of the breath, one takes the heightened or sharpened awareness very slowly and methodically through your entire body, just seeing and feeling what you see and feel. It's really simple; and it's really powerful. All these things start happening. People shake; people shout; your body dissolves; all kinds of things happen. And this is not happening just in your mind. It is happening because, in the language I'm using today, your energy is actually beginning to spit out some of the things it's been holding, things that have been keeping you in resistance.



If we are not grounded in the present, where are we? We're not in our bodies. But there is really no other place to be. I know what it is like to be always leaning forward to get to the next thing, living my life at a sort of 30 degree tilt. But what are we leaning into, and why are we doing it?

The thing about sitting down, about being grounded, is: there we are with ourselves. That's the good news and that's the bad news. We are all intimately immersed in the existential issues Buddhism likes to put in our face but which we don't always welcome. Here we are dying from one moment to the next, and we don't like to face that. Maybe we think, "Oh, I'm just going to try to be mindful today." But mindfulness will bring up mortality and other existential issues like, "Why am I here?" or even, "Am I here?" None of us know when we'll die. And that's really hard to get. It's one of those things that's intellectually so simple we glide right over it. "I know, I'm mortal." But to actually come to grips with our own mortality is a whole meditation unto itself. Usually, if I don't know why I'm here, or if I don't like the challenges of being in a mortal body, then I can focus instead on what I have to do tomorrow. Then I won't notice my fragility, my poignant vulnerability, that is present at every moment.

Yet this is, in fact, our human condition. It's *true*. And it's *grounding* to recognize that. Buddha sat under the tree and remembered

many of his past lives, his births and deaths. He saw the round of beings taking birth, dying and being born. It's one of the great visions of all time. And, you know, he got it, that this is how things work. And then he touched the earth. Traditional Buddhist teachings on the preciousness and vulnerability of life are fundamentally grounding contemplations. They establish us in the reality of our actual situation, and from there we can address our natural, inevitable human resistance to these facts by cultivating an energy of being grounded, as we did in our meditation today.

We clothe ourselves in stories about the past and future. These can be very comfortable clothes to wear because in them we know just what to do. But in all that *doing*, am I losing some of my *being*? Am I losing some of what I actually am without all that stuff? We're asked to take off some of that clothing when we practice meditation, and it makes us feel naked. It can be very scary to take off the layers of self representation that comes with relinquishing the stories. I remember, in the first retreat I ever did coming back from India, holding on for dear life to the stories I loved so much. No matter what else we do in meditation, just by the fact of sitting down and giving up the tasks with which we normally clothe ourselves, we are challenging our very sense of self. We're testing the possibility of giving up these roles and just being what we actually are.



This takes trust. You have to trust yourself to the ground when you sit on it. You have to trust yourself to the practice, to let yourself be held by it and give up, surrender. You want to say, "I've got to do something." But you can't *do* this. We can't, finally, *do* our practice, just as we can't *do* ourselves into a state of calm or a state of keen discernment. We can set up the conditions for it to arise, and that's where grace or blessings or inspiration comes in.

Something arises out of the wisdom that is inherent in the practice itself; inherent, I would even say, in our bodies themselves. When we get grounded, we are reaching a

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New England Zen garden (marsh on a road near the study center)

state that is actually very natural to us. We just haven't trusted it enough to simply be there. We feel assaulted by the world and feel the need to construct these various self representations, and to some extent of course that's true. But then we buy into and believe we really *are* these selves we have constructed in relationship to our circumstances as we grow up in this world. We need a kind of trust in something greater than anything we have yet imagined, because this isn't going to be something we can or necessarily even want to imagine. This is going to be something we enter into through the direct experience of our practice, without knowing ahead of time how it is going to be.

You can't relax into your nature, relax into your wisdom, relax into your awareness, unless there is some trust. One reason we come to a protected place like this to practice is because we know there is something trustworthy about Barre, about its teachers, about its tradition. We know there are no busy

city streets, and we can relax a little bit. We don't have to defend ourselves in quite the same way. We can be here without some of our usual defenses. But of course, stuff comes up when we just "be here." It's not all that glorious sometimes.

The mindfulness we all practice is deeply challenging to us as an organism. It's a challenge psychologically, because stuff comes up and we have to sit with it. And it's a challenge to us energetically, because we're used to running our energy in a scattered, defensive, untrusting way. But it helps to know intellectually that with mindfulness come many attendant positive good qualities. This is axiomatic in all the Buddhist traditions: when you cultivate mindfulness you cultivate a wholesome state, and other wholesome states immediately and necessarily attend upon it. When our bodies sit in a different kind of energy, grounded by the earth, practice begins to open for us.

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