

8. Standing Firm, Part 2

September 16, 2017

Does anyone remember the band Chumbawumba? They were a British political anarchist band in the 90s, and they only ever had one hit in the US. I want to play you a bit of that song. It's called "Tubthumping."

(You can see a video of this song here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2H5uWRjFsGc>) The lyrics are: "I get knocked down, but I get up again. You're never gonna keep me down."

That's my theme song sometimes. That's this guy's theme song.



This is a Daruma doll that I picked up in Japan. It's a good luck charm and a talisman for success. They were first made about 300 years ago by farmers who would have them blessed by monks so they'd have a good harvest. Back then, the luck was entwined with the hard work of the farmers, so the doll gave silent encouragement to keep working the fields diligently. In fact, even now, the dolls often are decorated with kanji spelling out the common saying, "Seven times down, eight times up." These days they are ubiquitous in Japan, like a four-leaf clover here in the west, and mean much the same thing: just another good luck symbol.

Like all superstitions about good luck, the Daruma myth was based on fact. Daruma was a historical person, (he is called Bodhidharma in Sanskrit). He was a monk who lived in the 5th or 6th century and is credited with bringing Chan buddhism to China. In Japan, *chan* is pronounced *zen*. Thus, Bodhidharma, or Daruma, was the founder of Zen buddhism. He's a big deal in Japan. (By the way, if you pronounce Da-Ru-Ma with equal emphasis on each syllable, you can hear how it is a just a Japanese accented pronunciation of *Dharma*.)

And, like many historic role models, a lot of legends also grew around his memory. For example, it is said that Bodhidharma sat in meditation staring at a wall for nine years without moving. So steadfast was his posture that his arms and legs atrophied and fell off. That's why the Daruma doll is only a body with a face, with no arms or legs. He has such wide eyes because Daruma supposedly cut

of his eyelids so that he would not fall asleep during meditation. Before he was a good luck charm, Daruma symbolized determination, resolution, and sticking-with-it-ness. He symbolized Standing Firm, the Eighth of the Ten Most Excellent Practices. This characteristic is also built into every Daruma doll: they are weighted such that if you push one over, it will pop back up to a standing position.

That's what Standing Firm is about. "As a rock, even while the wind beats upon it on every side does not tremble nor quake but remains in its own place, you must likewise [stand firm on your foundation.]"

And what is our foundation? Well, I can't speak for you, but what I teach as the foundation of this practice is suffering and the end of suffering: the understanding that our unhappiness is rooted in our own clinging, aversion, and ignorance. I hope by now this sounds familiar. Our foundation is the wisdom that we are cultivating with these Ten Most Excellent Practices. It is that which "those who know" know. Our foundation is the knowledge, for ourselves, that we can put an end to our suffering, and that this is the way to do that. The practice of Standing Firm is a commitment to following this path, no matter what storms disrupt our lives. We are the rock that does not tremble nor quake. To put it in less poetic and more practical terms, Standing Firm means sticking with our practice, no matter what happens. When you are standing firm, giving up is no longer an option.

As always, this practice encompasses both an ideal and a practice with which we move toward that ideal. The ideal is being that rock, never faltering. Our actual practice is our committed intention to never give up: our solemn promise to ourselves to stay on this path no matter where it takes us. The practice of Standing Firm is therefore not about specific actions or about never making a mistake. It is about trust in the efficacy of what you are doing; a trust which overrides your mental and emotional fluctuations. You are committing to not throwing in the towel when things go awry. And things *will* go awry. You will face circumstances that challenge your confidence and your desire to stand firm. Even when you choose to persevere, you will nonetheless sometimes fail to fulfill your intentions. You *will* fall down. You *will* get knocked down. Standing Firm means that you get up again. Nothing's going to keep you down. You commit to starting over again and again.

Even Bodhidharma fell down. Seven times down, eight times up. But look at the long term result. Eventually Bodhidharma was able to stare at a wall, motionless, for nine years. (Well that may

be an exaggeration, but he was in reality known for his determination and steadfastness.) Even the great Zen patriarch had to learn this skill. You can too.

How do you learn to be a rock? Just like you did with the other practices, you start where you are. You do what you can, and over time, your skill increases. Even if you aren't sure right now that you want to commit with such finality to following this meditation path, you can still train your resolve in less dramatic ways. Strengthening your resolve muscles has immediate benefits, and also, as you might expect, it tugs your inner state toward that ideal. Standing Firm is not a Nike commercial: you can't "just do it." It's something you have to practice and develop. And guess what? there are ways to work specifically with this.

There is a classic and very effective technique for working on Standing Firm skills (which I will call *resolve*). It is called Strong Determination meditation. (The Sanskrit name of this practice is actually the same word as what is translated as "Standing Firm.") Strong Determination meditation is making the decision before you start that you will not intentionally move a muscle for the duration of the sit. I know many of you do this already. If you really want to strengthen your resolve, sit longer. And then longer. In its purest form, you do not move to relieve discomfort, or to correct a sagging posture, or to sniffle if you have a runny nose. You observe the pain and resist the urge to straighten your back. You just let your nose run. Down your face. For the duration that you have previously decided, you do not move, no matter what.

At first glance, this looks like some sort of endurance test. But the point is not to be able to bear more and more suffering. Remember why we started meditating in the first place? In order to *reduce* our suffering. We decide to commit to this practice because we know that that's the way to do it. Strong Determination practice is saying "OK, this is how you get free? Then I'm going to just sit here until I get free." It forces you to learn ways of working with suffering and developing equanimity, but in small, controllable doses. Even if you aren't able work with your discomfort or arouse equanimity in a particular Strong Determination sitting, by sticking with your resolution, at the very least you are strengthening your ability to resist the temptation to give up. I'll speak more about Strong Determination sitting next Thursday.

For those who are not ready to sign up for zen boot camp, you can develop your ability to stand firm in gentler, real-life ways. You can turn any decision or intention into Standing Firm exercise. Start small, with things you already tend to do, and make a firm resolution to do it, no matter what may come up. Set a duration so that you have a clear goal to reach. For example, you might resolve to meditate every day for a week, or to read a book you've had on your bedside table since last year. You could sign up for a retreat before the end of the year. When you go to the retreat, try resolving to follow every rule strictly, even when you are alone in your room: not talking, not making phone calls, whatever. Don't follow them because you are supposed to follow rules or obey the teacher. Follow them because you have resolved to follow them.

Start with resolutions that are pretty easy to keep, and that won't be that big a deal if you don't keep them. Initially, your main goal is to strengthen your resolve skills. What you have resolved is not that important; it's only a tool for practicing determination. When you begin, notice the subjective difference between casually deciding to read that book that you've been wanting to read for so long, and making an intentional, conscious, and committed resolution to do it. There is an added seriousness about it that carries more weight than just thinking you want to do something. Once you get the feel for making firm resolutions, then you can branch out to things that you really do want to work on in your practice.

Do this with compassion for yourself. It takes time to learn things. When you make a resolution, be clear and determined. Then watch the internal activity that arises if it becomes a challenge to keep your resolution. Remember the commitment you made. Look to Bodhidharma for inspiration, who fell down, but just kept getting back up. Notice your reactions to your self-encouragement. If you should fail in your resolve, then show yourself compassion. And then get up and start over. Seven times down, eight times up.

Don't think you have to do this alone. Use whatever means necessary to help. Ask a friend to keep you accountable. Put post-it notes all over the house. Join a group. Avoid temptation, or situations where it will be difficult to keep your resolve. Using skillful means to help you is not weak. It is wise.

Sometimes in Japan the Daruma doll is still used as a support for determination. Did you notice that the eyes have no pupils? When you make a resolve to do something, you draw in the left pupil with

paint or a marker, and when you complete the task, you add the other. You keep your one-eyed Daruma in a place where you can see him so that he reminds you of your resolution. When he finally has both pupils, he reminds to you that you *are* able to stand firm.

Lastly, when you complete whatever it is you resolved to do, celebrate! Acknowledge the effort you put in and allow yourself to feel good about your success.

To help you start practicing today, I've made you all little Daruma dolls. (Hand out). In a moment will sit quietly for a few minutes so that you can think of something you want to make a strong determination to do. Maybe it'll just be to finish the retreat today. Or to resist checking your cell phone at lunch. Maybe it's something else. Be realistic. Start with something you won't have trouble doing. There are some sharpies on the counter. During the coming walking periods, once you have resolved to do something, use one to draw a pupil in the left eye. (There are also dry erase markers if you want to reuse Daruma.) Take him home with you and put him somewhere where you can see him frequently. Then send me an email when you fill in the other pupil, and we'll celebrate together.

This is an exploration, and a learning process. Please remember what Standing Firm means: you get knocked down, but you get up again. Nothing's gonna keep you down. If you don't complete your task as you planned, then get up and try again. Seven times down, eight times up. That's the training.