

The Mind Set Tall

July 8, 2005

To understand the defilements, you have to see both their allure and their drawbacks. The reason we're a slave to them is because we see either one or the other, but not both. Say, for instance, that anger comes in, and you get really frustrated with your anger. But no matter how frustrated you are with it, or how upset you are by it, you can't really uproot it until you see what you like about it.

Often that's something we keep hidden from ourselves. It's the side of the mind we don't like to see: a nasty little kid inside that gets its gratification from being angry, from the feeling of conceit, superiority, the way we treasure the sense of having been wronged, for fear that if we didn't have that sense of being wronged, we wouldn't exist, we wouldn't have any worth. A lot of that is what fuels our anger. Until you see that and bring it out in the open, you won't be able to deal with it.

With lust, it's the other way around. We often focus on the good side of the lust without wanting to look at the bad. And again, you're not going to be able to uproot that until you've looked at both sides. Exactly what gratification do you get out of it? Sometimes it seems obvious, but it's not really. You have to look a little bit deeper. And you have to look long and hard at the drawbacks. There's a very important part of the mind that would really flourish if it weren't subject to lust, weren't constantly hankering after nice smells, sounds, tastes, and things to look at.

This is why these defilements flourish: because of delusion, the things that the mind hides from itself. And the reason it hides them from itself is because it really is painful to look at them.

This is why we need to practice concentration, to let the mind get really firmly settled, so that it can be in a place, an inner space, where it's willing to look into what's painful, the embarrassing things you begin to see about yourself—why you like anger, exactly where your lust comes from, where your greed and fear and jealousy come from—and yet not feel threatened when you see these things. If you can't put yourself in a place where you don't feel threatened by embarrassing revelations about yourself, you're not going to dig up the defilements. They're going to stay in hiding, where they maintain their hold.

This is why right concentration is such an important part of the path. When you know you've got a place you can go where there's a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure, even a sense of rapture that you can tap into whenever you need it, that

helps to pull you out. You feel less threatened by the things you learn from discernment.

It's a basic principle that real discernment means seeing your own stupidity, your own lack of honesty with yourself. These are things we don't want to look at, things we don't want to see. But it's what we have to see, what we have to look at, if we want to be free. This is one of the reasons why awakened people have no pride, because what do they learn in awakening? It's not that they learn anything miraculous or abstract, it's simply seeing their own stupidity, seeing their own perfidy, their own dishonesty with themselves. Release comes from being able to shake off those things, to get yourself free from them.

So it's important to get a good place to settle in, a good sense of feeling at home being right here, because you have to get ready to see things about yourself that you're not going to want to see. What you gain from the sense of ease, the sense of well-being that comes with right concentration is strength, a sense of support, a sense of well-being, even a sense of good humor about things. That's what you really are going to need. That's going to see you through.

So this work we're doing with the breath—making the breath comfortable, looking at it, to see if it's too long, too short, bringing it back when it wanders off: This is important work. That's why we have the chant about having respect for concentration. All too often we overlook it. It seems so ordinary. And you wonder: When you are going to get on to the real stuff? Well, you're building the skills you're going to need for the real stuff. You're going to need to be able to tap into that sense of well-being, you're going to need to be able to pull the mind out of any train of thought that's beginning to get too threatening. It's not the case that you're going to work, work, work on nothing but concentration and then, when you're already, work, work, work on discernment. Actually, the two have go together. After all, issues can come up in your meditation at any time. You're going to have to deal with it as best you can.

Anger comes up and what are you going to do? Are you going to wait until your concentration is perfect? No. You've got to deal with it right now, using whatever powers of concentration and discernment you've already mastered. And it's in the dealing with it that they actually get stronger.

It's like the muscles of your body. Only by using them will they get strong. You can't sit around and wait for the body to get strong on its own. You've got to exercise it. And it's the same with the powers of your mind. You make use of what you've got. You don't have to worry about being a foolish, inexperienced cow, taking on things before you're ready. Of course, you're going to take things on before you're really ready to deal with them 100%. But you've got to test yourself

against them. Sometimes you can make little inroads, win little victories, that may not totally uproot the defilement, but at least weaken it for the time being and give yourself some more space to get the mind settled in even more firmly.

So the two qualities work together: concentration and discernment. The Buddha's image is of two hands washing each other. You can't just wash your right hand with your right hand. You need the left hand to help wash the right, and the right hand to wash the left.

So you experiment. The basic rule of thumb is that if an issue comes up, you try to deal with it. If the power, the stability of your mind gets shaken, or no matter how much you analyze the problem it doesn't seem to work, then you just pull the mind back into concentration, and say, "Save that for later." At the very least, make sure you've got your foundation, that you've got your safe place.

This is why the skills of simply cutting off trains of thought are very essential. They may not uproot the problem, but at least they give you the space you need to gather up your forces. Then, when the mind is settled in and seems to be refreshed, you can tackle the problem again.

There's a back and forth like this. It may not fit in with your preconceived notions of nice, easily distinguishable progressive steps in the meditation, but remember: We're training the whole mind. You can't train just one quality without training the rest. You may emphasize one quality at times, but the others have to get in the act as well. Again, it's like exercising the body. You don't exercise just one muscle. Muscles come in groups, so you have to exercise them all.

So remember that the training here is both insight and tranquility. The Buddha never really made a sharp distinction between tranquility methods and insight methods. These are two qualities of mind, he said, and you'll tend to be heavier on one than the other, but you want both of them together. When you have both of them together, then the mind can get into good strong states of concentration. And when the concentration is strong, these two qualities get further developed. These things all work together.

That way, the sense of samvega that comes when you see how foolish you've been all along doesn't get you depressed. The response is not aversion, but simply dispassion. You've had enough. Sometimes you might use the word "disgust," but there's a partly right and partly a wrong connotation to that word. You want to be disgusted in the sense that you've been eating these things all along, and you've had enough. "I don't need to eat that any longer. I don't need to feed on that any longer." Then there's dispassion, and then release.

These things come from a point of balance. A great deal of the meditation is seeing yourself leaning left and then leaning to the right, leaning forward, leaning

back, until you finally reach the spot where the mind is right in place. The word Ajaan Lee uses is “set tall”—*tang trangaan*—where all the good qualities of mind are matured together. In the course of the practice, it may seem like a mad scramble. This quality is weak, that’s too strong, but that’s simply to be expected. That’s how the mind grows. As the practice develops, you get a more holistic sense of what’s going on, a better sense of balance. That’s how you reach the point where things open up. Then all that’s left is freedom—and it’s all you need.