Mind Set Tall, The

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To understand your defilements, you have to see both their allure and their drawbacks. The reason that we’re a slave to them is because we either see one or the other, but not both. Say, for instance, anger comes in. You get really frustrated with your anger. No matter how frustrated you feel 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 a side of the mind we don’t like to see. The nasty little kid inside that gets some sort of gratification about being angry. 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 up in the open, you’re not going to be able to deal with it. On the other hand, there’s lust. We often focus on the good side of the lust without wanting to look at the bad. Again, you’re not going to be able to uproot that until you look 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. Then you have to look at the drawbacks. That’s a very important part of the mind that would really flourish if it weren’t subject to lust, if it weren’t constantly hankering after nice smells and sounds and tastes and things to look at. This is a very important part of the mind that is why these defilements flourish. It’s because of delusion, things that the mind hides from itself. The reason it hides from itself is because it really is painful to look at them. This is why we need to practice concentration to get the mind really firmly settled so it can be in a place, be in an inner space. It’s where it’s willing to look into what’s painful, the embarrassing things you begin to see about yourself, why you like anger, where your lust comes from, where your greed and fear and jealousy come from. 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 be able to take up the defilements. They’re going to maintain their hold. So this is why right concentration is such an important part of the path. When you know that you’ve got a place where you can go, where there’s a sense of ease, a sense of pleasure, even a sense of rapture that you can tap into when you need it, that helps boil you up. And you feel less threatened by the things you learn from discernment. It’s a basic principle that real discernment is when you begin to see your own stupidity, your own lack of honesty with yourself, and 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 have they learned? It’s not that they’ve learned anything miraculous or abstract. They’ve simply seen their own stupidity, seen their own perfidy. They’ve seen their own dishonesty with themselves. And freedom comes from being able to shake those things, get yourself free of them. So it’s important that you 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. But the sense of ease, the sense of well-being, that comes with the meditation, that comes with right concentration, gives you the strength, gives you the sense of support, gives you the sense of well-being, even the sense of good humor about the whole thing, that you’re really going to need. It’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 that chant, “Having Respect for Concentration,” because many times we overlook this. It seems so ordinary. And you wonder, “When are you going to get onto the real stuff?” Well, you’re building all the skills you’re going to need for the real stuff. You’re going to need to be able to tap into this 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. Because it’s not the case that you’re going to work, work, work on nothing but concentration, and then when you’re all ready, then you work on discernment. The two go together. Because issues are going to come up in your meditation. You’re going to have to deal with them as best you can. Anger comes up, and what are you going to do? You’ve got to deal with it with whatever powers of concentration and discernment you’ve already mastered. And it’s in the dealing with it that they get stronger. It’s like the muscles of your body. It’s by using them that they get strong. You can’t just 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 you. You make use of the powers of the mind. You make use of what you’ve got. And you don’t have to worry about being a dumb 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, one hundred percent. But you’ve got to test yourself against them. Sometimes you can make little inroads, little victories. That may not totally uproot a defilement, but at least weaken it for the time being. Give yourself some more space to get the mind settled in even more firmly. So the two qualities work together—concentration and discernment. The image is of two hands washing each other. You can’t just wash your right hand with your left hand. You need your left hand to help wash the right. The right hand washes 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 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. You go back into concentration and 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 in order to gather your forces. And when the mind is settled in and it seems to be refreshed, then you can tackle the problem. 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. Remember, we’re training the whole mind, and you can’t train just one quality without training the rest. You’re going to analyze and emphasize one quality, but the others have to get in the act as well. It’s like exercising the body. You don’t exercise just one muscle at a time. They come in groups. So remember, the training here is both insight and tranquility. The Buddha never really made a sharp distinction between tranquility methods and insight methods. They’re 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.” With 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. So there’s a sense of sanghvega that comes when you see how foolish you’ve been all along. It doesn’t get you depressed. The response is not aversion, but simply dispassion. You’ve had enough. I sometimes use the word “disgust,” but that has partly the right and partly the wrong connotations. Disgust in the sense that you’ve been eating these things all along and you finally decide, “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 there’s release. And it comes 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 backwards, and then finally reaching the spot where the mind is just right in place. The word that John Lee uses is “set tall,” where all the good qualities of the mind are matured together. In the course of the practice, it may seem like a mad scramble. This quality is weak. That one’s a little bit too strong. That’s simply the way it is. 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 and all that’s left is freedom. That’s all you need.

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