Obstacles

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If you look at the world, then it can give you a very strong sense of sanghvega. That’s why you’re trying to establish mindfulness and get the mind in concentration. Sanghvega is a good way of developing that attitude where you can put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. If you look at the world, there’s nothing to be greedy about. But the same time you look at it, there’s nothing to get distressed about. Because distress can overwhelm the mind. This is why equanimity has to come together with sanghvega. That’s the way the world is. We do what we can to help when the time is appropriate, but also we look into our own minds. If we hadn’t gotten involved with the world to begin with, we wouldn’t be in our own minds. So take some time to think about how the real problem is inside. That’s where we want to focus. There are times when the world seems to press on us and doesn’t give us time to focus inside. We can still breathe, and as long as you can breathe, you can be with the breath. And you can learn to observe yourself. Because even though there may be constraints outside, the big constraints are inside. We have to learn how to not be so upset about the world that it actually gets in the way of our concentration. And Jhammahabhava talks about how singleness of mind, ekakatha, cittassa ekakatha, means a mind that is solid in all situations. Not only while you’re doing formal practice, but also while you’re just going around, doing your work in the world, having your mind really solid and unmoved. You see what needs to be done and you do it. But without developing greed or distress with reference to the world. It’s because we want certain things out of the world that we get distressed by it. But when you’re training the mind, you have to say, “The world is the way that the world is going to be. In my situation, as long as I can be alert, be aware, it’s good enough.” Because again, the real problems are not out there, they’re in here. When the Buddha described suffering, he said it’s clinging. He talked about birth, aging, illness, and death, not getting what you want, having to be with those you don’t like, being separated from those you do like. But the suffering in all those things lies in the clinging. And those things don’t cling to us, even people who hold on to us. We’re not suffering from their clinging, we’re suffering from our clinging. And when the mind is affected by clinging like this, it affects even our goodness. So the good things we do in the world can often get skewed by the fact that we’re holding on to a certain idea about what we want to accomplish. We’re the type of person we are in doing those good things for the world. You do good for the world, and you leave it to the world. Otherwise, as Saint John Lee says, you’ve got magnets. If you do something and you are still attached to it, that’s a magnet that’s going to pull you back. So we have magnets outside, but the big magnets are inside. So see what you can do to cut their power. Because unlike magnets, it’s not a natural part of the element of the mind that it has to cling. These are more like those magnets that are created by putting a current through something. Or you can learn how to stop the current. Look at your craving as to what you want and how you want it. Ask yourself, “Is that what’s making you suffer?” There are skillful desires that are part of the path, but there are ways of clinging and craving the path that can actually make you suffer. This is where it’s a very delicate matter. You want to practice. You want to get results. But how do you adjust your wanting so that it doesn’t just pile more suffering on? That’s something you learn with experience. But just holding that possibility in mind helps alert you to the fact that the problem is inside. As Ajaan Fon used to say, “The suffering is not up there in the sky. It’s not in the weather. It’s not in things. It’s in the mind.” The cause is in the mind, but also the suffering is in the mind. The solution is here in the mind as well, qualities that we can develop. So look for those qualities inside. Ardency, alertness, mindfulness. Mindfulness reminds you that whatever the situation is, there’s a skillful way of dealing with it, and you want to find it. That’s what the ardency is. And alertness is looking around, when you haven’t figured it out yet, to look around and see what the solution might be. And part of learning how to deal skillfully with issues inside your mind starts with learning how to deal skillfully with issues outside as well. In other words, dealing with problems so that you can resolve them and not have to suffer around them. And when you develop your ingenuity in that way, then it can get applied inside. Not often do we want to run away from the world, but that leaves certain qualities of the mind undeveloped, and they’re going to show up in the meditation. I have a student who went off into the wilderness. He was just chafing for years. He wanted to get out in the wilderness. His health wasn’t good enough to begin with, but when it was finally good enough, he just went. After a couple of years, he finally got in an ideal situation where he was living alone with nothing to do all day but meditate. And for months, his mind was a mess. So it’s not the case that when you get ideal circumstances outside, that everything will get settled in the mind. Oftentimes, working with less-than-ideal circumstances is what strengthens the mind, strengthens your ingenuity. Trying to figure out, “How can I live in this situation and still develop my mind?” How can I be confronted by obstacles and yet not be hemmed in by them, find a way around them? All too often, we find a wall facing us, and we just push and push and push against the wall. We forget to look around and see that the wall is not more than a few feet wide, and we can get around it. Even though we’re stuck in certain situations, it doesn’t mean that there’s no opportunity within those situations. As the Buddha said, the arrow is in your heart. The arrows that come from outside don’t get into the heart. They just get to the skin. You’re the one who shoots the arrows into the heart, and you’re the one who’s going to be able to take them out. So when there are obstacles, don’t let them get you down. See them as opportunities to develop your perfections. There’s a saying in Theravada, “Where there are no maras, the perfections don’t get developed.” In other words, obstacles are a normal part of the practice, and you’re using your ingenuity to get around them. This is what develops your discernment that will go deeper into the mind. So right now we have ideal circumstances, so take advantage of them. There will be times when they’re not ideal. Learn how to take advantage of those. And John Lee talks about the ways of the world, their status, loss of status, gain, loss of gain. That means material gain. Praise, criticism, pleasure, pain. These are things we all have to deal with. Even when we run away from the world to get into the monastery, we find out there’s gain and loss, status, loss of status, praise, criticism, pleasure, pain, just as there is in the world outside. It’s learning how to be with these things and take advantage of them. There are things you can learn from gain. There are things you can learn from loss of gain. Status, loss of status, both of these have their lessons. Praise, criticism, these have their lessons too. And John Lee’s statement is that wisdom or discernment is when you can make good use of whatever comes your way, good or bad. So see these things not as obstacles, but as challenges, and try to be up for the challenge. That’s one of the reasons why we meditate, is to give the mind strength, give the mind energy. So things that would defeat it otherwise begin to seem smaller and more manageable. And you have the strength to develop the discernment that will see you through.

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