

Heightening the Mind

June/July 2001

There's a teaching in one of the Buddha's talks: *adhicitte ya ayogo*, commitment to the heightened mind. What this means is that we lift the mind above its ordinary concerns, as when we come here to practice meditation. Our normal cares of the day—looking after our own bodies, feeding them, being concerned with what other people think about us, how we interact with them, all the concerns of the day—we put those down, lift our mind above them, and bring it to the meditation object.

When we look at the affairs of the world, we see that they spin around just like the world does. There's a classic list of eight: gain and loss, status and loss of status, criticism and censure, pleasure and pain. These things keep trading places. You can't have the good ones without the other ones, the bad ones. You can't have the bad side without the good side. They keep changing places like this, around and around, and if we allow our minds to get caught up in them it's like getting our clothes caught up in the gears of a machine. They keep pulling us in, pulling us in. If we don't know how to disentangle ourselves, they keep pulling us in until they mangle our arms, mangle our legs, crush us to bits. In other words, if we allow these preoccupations to consume the mind, the mind gets mangled and doesn't have a chance to be its own self.

We don't even know what the mind is like on its own because all we know is the mind as a slave to these things, running around wherever they force it. So when we come to meditate, we have to learn to lift our mind above these things. All thoughts of past and future we put aside and just bring the mind to the breath, so that the mind doesn't have to spin around anymore. It simply stays with the breath coming in, going out, and gains at least a measure of freedom. From this heightened perspective we can look at our normal involvement with the world and begin to realize that, for the most part, it doesn't go anywhere. It just keeps spinning around, coming back to the same old places over and over and over again. All that gets accomplished is that the mind gets more and more worn out.

If we allow the mind to rise above these things so that it doesn't feed on them, doesn't run after them, we'll begin to get some sense of the mind's worth, in and of itself. As the mind gets still, things begin to settle out. Like sediment in the bottom of a glass of water: If you allow the water to stay still for a while, whatever sediment is in there finally settles out, and the water becomes clear.

This is what happens when you let the mind separate from its ordinary concerns and simply stay with its meditation. Even when you go back into your normal activities, you'll have a sense

of the mind, your awareness, as something separate. This sense is a very important part of the practice. It's part of the day-to-day work of practicing the Dhamma.

We all come to the practice hoping that some day some really great experiences are going to hit us while we're meditating. Well, they're not going to hit unless you do the day-to-day practice. This is why the Buddha insisted that there are four noble truths, not just the truth of the cessation of suffering, but also the tasks of understanding suffering, abandoning its cause, and developing the path. These are all very important parts of the teaching. They're all noble truths.

The development of the path is largely two things: one, developing qualities that enhance the mind's ability to know, to be aware; and then, two, learning how to let go of things that are burdensome to the mind. This is what it means to heighten the mind. Once you let go of the burdens, the mind gets lighter and begins to rise above things. Learning how to do this in all activities is very important because when the really technicolor experiences hit in the meditation, if you can't rise above them, you're just going to fall for them, too. And they eventually lead you back into the world again. Your attachments lead you back.

So a large part of the practice is learning how to lift your mind, stage by stage. You lift it above the ordinary, everyday activities and you get into a good state of concentration. In the beginning, the mind and the object seem to become one when you're really absorbed. But as you allow the mind to stay in that state for a while, it begins to separate out as well. You begin to see the object as one thing, your awareness as something else, and although they're right next to each other they *are* separate things.

This is what enables the mind to gain insight both into the workings of the mind and into the workings of its objects. It also develops the habit of learning how to let go, stage by stage. You rise from one level of concentration to the next to the next. You pull back. The image in the texts is of a person sitting up looking at a person lying down, or a person standing looking at a person sitting. You pull back bit by bit by bit, stage by stage. No matter how good the stage, you begin to realize you've got to lift above it.

This is especially important when really strong experiences come in the meditation. You don't jump to any conclusions. Again, you lift the mind above them and watch. Hopefully, by that time the habit has become built-in enough so you realize you can't allow yourself to get attached to anything, even the really amazing experiences. Lift yourself up rung by rung by rung along the ladder. You go from one attachment to a higher one to a higher one. Finally, though, there comes a point where you have to let go and just watch what happens. Only when you've developed this habit of lifting the mind up can you get through some of these experiences that waylay everyone else along the meditation path.

So we're not just here for the experiences. We're learning the basic skills we need so that no matter what experience comes to the mind, we don't fall for it. We don't latch onto it so that we don't become a slave to it, because the whole purpose of the practice is freedom and

yet the habits of the mind are basically enslavement. Even when great feelings of oneness or unity or unlimitedness come into the mind, you find on a very subtle level that the mind can become enslaved to them as well. And the question is how—instead of becoming enslaved or enthralled—you can learn even from that kind of experience.

So the mind ultimately has to become totally free, even from the state of oneness, even from the state of unlimitedness, because a lot of those experiences are just states of concentration. There's still a subtle level of attachment and conditioning going on. But if you develop the habit of learning how to let go and rise above things even while you live in the midst of them, then you've developed the proper habits, the skills you need that are going to protect you in all circumstances.

There's a fine passage in one of Ajaan Maha Boowa's talks where, at the time of Ajaan Mun's death, he sits and reflects. At first he feels lost. Here is the teacher he was able to depend on for so long, and now that teacher is gone, so what is he going to do? And then he begins to realize, well, what were the things Ajaan Mun taught when he was alive? Take those as your teachers. And one constant theme was, whatever arises in the mind, if you don't get caught up with it but just stay with that sense of knowing, with the knowing as separate from the event in the mind, then, no matter what, that experience will pose no dangers for you.

This ability to step back, step back, raise the mind above its level of ordinary concerns: This is what's really distinctive about the Buddha's teachings. This is what's distinctive about his approach to the really spectacular experiences in the mind. If you haven't learned how to develop that approach to ordinary experiences in the mind—looking for the *use* of the experience—then the spectacular ones are going to overwhelm you. This is why the habits developed along the path are so important. This is why the path is one of the four noble truths, on a par with the others.

So keep this teaching in mind, the issue of the heightened mind. Watch out for when you allow the mind to lie beneath its objects, under the power of its objects, and when you're able to lift it up above them, so that even though you live with them you have a sense of rising above them, of being able to use them, of not being caught up in them. That's the skill we're working on.