

The Heightened Mind

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There's a story that on the full moon of February or March, the very first year that he was teaching, the Buddha gave a talk to a group of 1,250 arahants who had all gathered spontaneously. Then he sent them out to teach. The talk was basically to go over some of the basic principles of the teaching. Many of those arahants had gained awakening after listening to only one Dhamma talk, so some of them, at least, didn't realize the full range of the Buddha's teachings. So he gave a very general survey, from the very basics up to the highest.

One of the points he emphasized was what he called the heightened mind. *Heightened mind* usually means the mind in concentration. You lift the mind above its ordinary concerns. In the description of the first jhāna, the Buddha says you have directed thought and evaluation after you've put aside thoughts of sensuality and all unskillful qualities like wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, wrong action, all the wrong versions of the path. Then you direct your thoughts to the breath and you evaluate the breath.

In Thai, the term for a directed thought, *witok*, rhymes with the word *yok*, which means to lift. So often you hear the forest ajaans saying, "Lift your mind to its object." All the concerns of the day, think of them as being beneath you. You're up above. In particular, you're above sensual concerns. Sensuality is not so much sensual pleasures themselves, it's the mind's fascination with thinking about them, planning them.

You see this when you plan a meal. You're going to have this, well, no, how about that, how about adding this, or taking away that? Now you just drop all that kind of thinking and you're here with what's called form: the sense of the body as you feel it from within. And the most prominent aspect of form is the breath. So when you're with the breath, thinking about the breath, evaluating the breath, you've lifted the mind above ordinary everyday concerns. You've raised the level of your mind.

Of course, when you're up above things, you can see them more clearly. When the Buddha defines the first jhāna, it's not just the directed thought and evaluation. Those actually are the accompanying factors. The main factors are the sense of pleasure and rapture or refreshment that you get when you lift the mind above its ordinary concerns, when you get the mind away from sensuality, and you're just here with the body as you feel it from within, and you breathe in a way

that feels good. You're trying to develop this feeling tone, because after all, feeling is one of the mental fabrications, the things that determine the state of your mind.

So you want to soothe the mind with a sense of well-being that comes from just being with the body, being with the breath as you feel it from within. In that way, you're not so hungry for your other thoughts. As for the world outside, you're not so hungry for things to be a certain way.

We live in this human world and, as the Buddha said, the entry requirements are not all that stringent. He divides karma into four types. There's what he calls bright karma and dark karma. Then there's karma that's both bright and dark. And then there's karma that's neither bright nor dark, leading to the end of kamma. Bright karma, of course, is the good things you've done. Dark karma is when you break the precepts. Bright and dark is when you have a combination of the two. The karma that's neither bright nor dark is the karma that leads to nibbāna.

The entry requirement for the human realm is karma that's bright and dark. So we all come with a mixed bag. We all come with a mixed background, so we're dealing with people with a mixed background. Like the story I was told one time by a public defender who used to come here. She was defending five kids who had been accused of rape, and she was convinced that they were innocent. But she was also convinced they were pretty dumb. They actually took an IQ test and they were down around in the 80s. She was wondering if she could get them excused from the case on the fact that they had such a low IQ. But one of the other lawyers pointed out to her, well, 100 is basically the midpoint. Half the people out there are below 100. So she gave up that idea.

But it makes you stop and think. You're out on the road. Half the people out there are below 100 IQ, on average. So the world isn't a safe place. We can't measure anybody's karmic background, but we can assume everybody's got some good and bad in them. This is the world in which we have to live. And if we try to find satisfaction in this world, we're looking in the wrong place. This is one of the reasons why we turn within, to lift the quality of our minds. On the one hand, when the mind is lifted like that, then we start creating better kamma ourselves. And also the mind becomes more impervious to the impact of things outside.

One of the ways the Buddha says that you gain freedom, or at least respite from your own past bad karma, is by training the mind so that it's not overcome by pain, not overcome by pleasure. When you're working with the mind in concentration, you're getting practice in how not to let the mind be overcome by pleasure. You create feelings of pleasure, you try to maintain them, but if you just start wallowing in them, you destroy them—and you destroy your concentration.

If you want to maintain them, you have to learn how to be with them but not be overcome by them. When you can be with them like this, with a sense of alertness and mindfulness, the mind gets better fed.

Concentration is often compared to food. There's a famous analogy that practice is being like a fortress at the frontier of a country, where there's the possibility of spies or soldiers coming in from the neighboring country. So you need mindfulness as the gate keeper. You need soldiers inside the fortress in the form of right effort. The gatekeeper and the soldiers need food, and their food is concentration. So to be fully mindful and to have the energy to delight in abandoning unskillful qualities and to delight in developing skillful ones, you need concentration. This is what lifts the mind.

As you leave the monastery and head out into the world, think of having your mind lifted above everything around you. Not necessarily that you're better than other people, but it's in a position where it isn't attacked by things outside so easily. This requires a combination of concentration and discernment.

There's another passage where the Buddha compares a person of discernment to someone who goes up into a tower, looks down to the people below, and sees patterns that he wouldn't see if he were down there with people. If you lift your mind to a higher level like this and then look at other people's behavior, you begin to see where it comes from, where it goes.

Then you turn around, of course, and look at yourself. Do you have those qualities in yourself? If someone has a bad habit, you remind yourself that this person is not the only one with that bad habit. Maybe you might have that bad habit, too, so look at yourself. But if someone else has good habits, ask yourself: Do you have those habits too? If you don't, well, they're human beings, you're a human being. If you feel that your mind is not being attacked by things so much outside, you might be more willing to do the work to develop those skillful habits.

So when you think of heightening your mind, as I said, the main meaning has to do with getting the mind into concentration, but you can heighten it further by developing your discernment. Ajaan Fuang would often say that when the mind is in concentration and has settled in for a while, you lift your mind above your mind. In other words, you realize that you can observe what the mind is doing at the same time that it's doing it. It's as if you've got an inner observer watching what's going on. It's in this way that you begin to understand your state of concentration.

There was a famous Austrian pianist in the past few decades who was known to be very cerebral in the way he played the piano. He was interviewed one time about what's involved in playing the piano, and his description of the psychology

that goes on as you play the piano was really interesting. He said, “You have to be alert to what you’re doing. You have to be mindful to remember where you’ve been. And from there you have to decide where you want to take the piece. Sometimes you start playing a piece with a particular interpretation in mind, and you find that your playing is going in a different direction. You have to decide if you want to explore that direction or bring the piece back to its original intended interpretation.” Basically what you’ve got there is mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. And he saw that because he could observe himself while he was playing.

Well, we have that same ability while we’re meditating. We can observe ourselves as we meditate and begin to see how we’re using form, feeling, perceptions, thought fabrications, consciousness—all the aggregates—in this state of concentration. You can start analyzing it. Where’s the stress? In fact, one of the ways of improving your concentration is to step back a bit like this and ask yourself, “Where am I causing unnecessary stress, even in this pleasant state of mind?” You find that you can get the mind into deeper and deeper states of concentration because you’re able to observe it.

This seems to be the meaning of the Buddha’s statement that the mind is basically luminous. In other words, it can watch itself in action. It doesn’t mean that it’s originally pure, just that it’s able to observe itself. It’s because it’s luminous like that that it can develop concentration, can train itself. If you couldn’t observe yourself, you’d have to depend on somebody else to observe you. It’s because you have this luminous quality inside that you can see what you’re doing while you’re doing it, and learn how to pass more and more refined judgment on what you’re doing.

That’s how the mind progresses, both through concentration and through discernment. You’ve got tranquility and insight working together here: fully alert, fully mindful, fully ardent. That’s how you heighten the mind so that it’s more and more impervious to the things going on in the world, with its own secure sense of well-being inside that it can produce and maintain. This is how we lift the mind to higher levels.