

Above the World

September, 2003

In one of the talks where the Buddha summarizes his basic teachings, he concludes with the phrase, ‘*Adhicitta ca āyogo*’: being committed to the heightened mind. “The heightened mind” means raising the state of your mind to something higher than the ordinary state. It specifically refers to concentration practice but then beyond concentration to discernment and then ultimately to release. That’s the mind that’s really heightened. In other words, instead of spinning around after the world, we lift our minds up above it, so that no matter how the world spins, what direction it spins, whatever its ups and downs, the mind isn’t effected by them.

Some people feel concerned about this. Is this cutting yourself off from your interconnections? In one way, yes. In one way, no. It’s not that you aren’t aware of things outside you. It’s not that you behave in an irresponsible way. It’s just that you maintain a part of your mind separate: safe and secure. If you let your mind go up and down with this roller coaster ride of life, what strength do you have to work either for your own good or for the good of other people? You let yourself get knocked around and sent spinning, and then you have no time to really look at what’s straight up, what’s right up, what’s upside down, and you don’t have the strength to do what you know is right. So it’s not that we’re cutting ourselves off from the rest of the world in the sense of being cold-hearted. It’s simply a matter of finding a firm basis for ourselves so that whatever we do, say, or think comes from that firm basis. It’s not easily knocked askew.

When the Pali texts talk about the four wrong courses of action, the Thai translates them as four ways of being *lamieng*, which is related to *ieng*, which means “tilted.” The mind normally tilts in different directions when it goes off course. Either it goes off course because it likes something or because it hates something, because it’s deluded about something or because it’s afraid of something. In other words, we do the things we know are wrong because we tilt into one of these four attitudes: liking, hatred, delusion, or fear. Only when you can get the mind away from that spinning around can you keep it from tilting in those directions. It won’t get blown over no matter which direction the wind is coming from. That’s a mind you can trust—and a mind that other people can trust as well.

So this is the purpose of heightening the mind: to develop it so that you can trust it, so that you can depend on it, so that you have a reliable sense of what’s

right and wrong, a reliable sense of what should be done and shouldn't be done. And you can rely on your own powers to see what the situation is wherever you are, because the mind isn't spinning around with other things. It has a solid vantage point. It sets itself apart and is still.

Ajaan Lee makes an analogy: water in the ocean. The ocean may be full of waves, but if you take a dipper of water out of the ocean and put it on the beach, the waves in the dipper die down, and the water can be still.

You have to separate the mind from its objects, separate it from its ordinary concerns, and give it time to settle down and be still. Once it's still, then you can look into it to see what's really there.

This is why we work on this principle of having a part of the mind separate from everything else. Get the mind with one object. Get it really solid and secure with that object and then turn around and look at the quality of awareness in and of itself, which isn't tainted by the object. It knows the object, fully aware, but there's a sense of separateness. Things separate out in the mind just like cream separating out of milk. You don't have to go searching through the milk and—bit by bit by bit—take out every little molecule of fat. Let things sit long enough and they begin to separate on their own.

So we're here to heighten the mind. We heighten our virtue. We heighten our discernment. We heighten our concentration. If we don't do this, we're down on the same level as the world and we spin around with it. The spinning of the world isn't innocent. It's not like a simple wheel. It's more like gears in a machine—gears with teeth. As they turn, turn, turn, if you're not careful, you'll get something caught in the teeth. Your shirt sleeve or any other article of clothing will then get pulled in, pulled in, pulled in, and if you don't let go, you get pulled in, too. You get mashed by the gears. Because when the world turns, it doesn't always turn in a nice direction. Things go up and then they go down. And then they go up again and then they go down again—back and forth like this. The “down” tends to smash you and then the “up” catches you again. You've got to be careful that you don't get caught either by the ups or the downs.

But realize that what the world has to offer is there for you to use as a tool. Even your own body is a tool. It's made out of the elements of the world and will go back to those elements when you leave it. So in the meantime, try to get as much use as you can out of it. You can see what the appropriate use is when you allow the mind to be still and watch carefully what's going on. Have a sense of what's useful, what's not; what's skillful and what's not; what the body is good for; what potentials in the body are not worth following through. These are all things that you can come to see clearly when you allow the mind to be still.

The stillness in and of itself heightens the mind to a great degree. Then you can see things a lot more clearly. It's the difference between running down a road and standing still. Say you run past a tree and then someone then asks you, "What were leaves like in the tree? Were there any birds? Any flowers? Did you see any animals hidden in the branches?" If you simply run past, you can't see any of this. It's all a blur. But if you stop and stand still, you have a chance to see. But here you're not just looking at trees. You're looking at the way you run your life. When you stand still and you're not swept up in the currents of things, you can begin to get a better sense of which is the right direction to go, what you've done in the past that was helpful or not helpful, what possibilities you have in the future that may be helpful or not helpful, what opportunities present themselves in the present. You see this clearly when you've got that part of the mind that's still.

The practice of concentration is a matter of clearing away the debris that covers up this sense of stillness and then learning to make that your basic foundation. So even on the level of concentration there's a sense of separating out and greater stability, greater well-being for the mind.

All the more so as your discernment grows sharper, as both the stillness of the mind and the insight develop together. You get a better and better sense of what it means to be skillful and unskillful, and of how far skillfulness can go. Above all, you can see the really subtle things the mind is doing that are causing stress, suffering, a sense of burdensomeness to itself. You see these things and you can clear them away. That brings the mind to an even higher state of awareness, a more heightened state, in the sense that nothing can touch it. And again, it's not a question of being hard-hearted or cut off from other people. It's just this sense that your mind has a more and more secure foundation. You can rely on it more. Other people can rely on it more as well.

And that's an important quality for living in this world. Otherwise, we just spin around along with everyone else in the world. If everyone's spinning, who can help anyone else? Who can help themselves? We have to get out of the spinning. Fortunately, we can do that. Being with the spinning or not being with the spinning: That's our choice. The problem is that we're not aware that we've made the choice. We're not aware of the alternatives.

When we meditate, we begin to see that there are alternative ways of relating to the world and that we have a choice. We're not bound to a particular way of relating to the world just because it's a long-term habit. We can change. That's what the Buddha's teachings on kamma are all about. Some things in your life are influenced by past actions but a lot is influenced by what you chose to do right now. We have that choice either to keep on spinning or to step out.