

## *The Raft of Jhana*

*August 2, 2019*

There's a tendency when you hear the word "jhana" to think of some otherworldly state, something far removed from the mind as you're experiencing it right now. But what is jhana made out of? In the passage we chanted just now, from the Analysis of the Path, it says that in the first jhana there's directed thought, evaluation, pleasure, and rapture. What makes these faculties different from your ordinary directed thought and evaluation, your ordinary feelings of pleasure, and sometimes of rapture? It's that you're bringing them together to one thing. But you're using habits, abilities, tendencies that you already have, so it's not so otherworldly after all.

What this means is that you've got to take the habits you have and you've got to change them. Like directed thought and evaluation: That's the Buddha's analysis for our way of talking to ourselves. We focus on a topic and make comments on it in our minds. Then, of course, we break into speech. To get into jhana we have to learn how to take the language of our comments, the way we frame issues, how we interact with our thoughts, and the ways in which we evaluate things, and make them more skillful.

This is one of the reasons why right speech is a factor of the path. It's going to give you practice in how to talk to yourself. Both right speech and right concentration are very directly connected to right resolve: the resolve to practice for renunciation—in other words, to stay away from sensuality; for non-ill-will, and for harmlessness—in other words, for goodwill and for compassion. Right resolve in one direction goes to right speech: Try to make sure that your speech is compassionate. The Buddha asks that it be true, that it be beneficial, that it be timely. You've got to keep careful watch over your speech.

For so many of us, speech is like a faucet. You're not really sure what's inside the faucet, so you turn it on to see what's going to come out. But as the Buddha taught Rahula, you have to think before you speak: "When I say this, what are the results going to be? Is it going to be harmful? Is it going to be harmful for the community, harmful for the person I'm talking to, harmful for myself?" We have this fascination with our opinions. We think that intelligence is measured by how many opinions we can have. But when you come to the practice of the Dhamma, you have to think of intelligence in another way: intelligence in terms of seeing where your thoughts are coming from and where they're going to go, what they lead to. And realizing that what may seem like a really great thought, or something that someone else has to hear, may not be so intelligent or necessary after all in the terms that the

Buddha applies. Or it may be a good thing to say, but right now is not the right time to say it.

You have to think about these things because you need to get this process of directed thought and evaluation under control if it's actually going to become a factor of the first jhana. Because right concentration is the other factor that branches right out of right resolve. The Buddha has a definition for transcendent right resolve, and it basically comes down to the directed thought and evaluation that gets you into jhana. Again, it's based on renunciation, non-ill will, harmlessness. This is more directly focused inside, but the way you deal with other people is going to have an impact on how you talk to yourself. The way you talk to them, the kinds of things you think about, the ways you comment on things, is going to have an impact on the way you talk to yourself, the way you direct your thoughts, evaluate things as you're sitting here with your eyes closed.

So it's good to be very careful about your speech. Then, when the time comes to settle down and you're ready to focus on the breath, you've got these processes trained so that they will look at what's actually going on, making sure that the things you say to yourself are true and beneficial and timely. It becomes simply a matter of focusing on your breath and learning how to talk to yourself about the breath, without getting too wound up in thoughts about how things are not settling down as quickly as you'd like. And especially not in the thoughts that go from there to say, "Well, maybe I'm just a miserable meditator and it's never going to happen." Just forget about that. That's framing your directed thoughts and evaluation in the wrong way. If anything, you just remind yourself this is something that can be done, it just takes a different kind of intelligence. Not "smarts" intelligence, but the intelligence of noticing what kind of breathing is good and what kind of effects it's going to have on the body, the effects it's going to have on the mind.

You're really giving yourself over to this issue: "How can I get the mind to stay with the breath? How can I get the breath to act as a glue to keep the body with the mind right here in the present moment? How can I learn to question the breath in a way that makes it interesting?" If you have any recurring illnesses or injuries, see what the breath can do for those. Maybe there's a part of the body that tends to be tight, where things are pulled out of alignment. Can you breathe in ways, conceive of the breath in ways, that actually help bring things back into alignment? Think about the breath energies that Ajaan Lee says surround the body—not just the ones in the body, but all around. How do you sense those? How do you get use out of them?

Because that's the whole point of this. You want to make this conversation inside beneficial. Where does this internal conversation come from? It comes from your tendency to talk to yourself and then break into speech with others.

It's important to realize that as we practice we're building on habits we already have, using things that we've already been using, like the aggregates. As the Buddha says, when the mind gets settled in and you get really good at this, you start analyzing the state of concentration in terms of the five aggregates. Now, we all know that the aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self, but for the sake of the concentration you're going to make them more constant, easeful, more under your control. They can't become totally easeful—after all, if they were totally easeful they would be nibbana. There will be some stress in there. In fact, one of the big insights once you've gotten used to really appreciating the pleasure of a concentrated mind is coming around to the fact that even here there are ups and downs, there is some inconstancy. Even this is imperfect. That's how you can go beyond it.

Which is one of the reasons why, when the Buddha talked about getting across the river, he used the image of a raft you build, not an image of a nibbana yacht coming over to pick you up. You take twigs, sticks, leaves, and branches, and you tie them together with vines, all of which you find on this shore. It may not look all that pretty, it may not be perfect, but it's good enough to get you across. If you had to wait until everything is nicely planed and beautifully fitted, you'd be eaten alive. In the Buddha's image, there are snakes and vipers and thieves on this side of the river. You've got to get out of there as soon as you can. So you take what you've got. In this case, it's simply the way the mind talks to itself. Well, you learn how to talk yourself into jhana. And even though jhana is made out of aggregates, and the aggregates are inconstant, stressful, and not-self on a very subtle level, still they're good enough to get you across.

So the raw materials may not be perfect but you do try to get the twigs that will float, the branches that will float. You don't want to build a raft that's going to sink down into the bottom of the river. In other words, you've got to learn how to be more skillful in the habits you already have, both on an external level and on an internal level. But what it comes down to is just the mind talking to itself until it gets to a point of equilibrium where it doesn't really feel any need to talk to itself anymore. That's when you can go into deeper levels of concentration. But to lasso the mind into the present moment is going to require some internal talking.

So develop good habits in your external speech. Have a clear sense of what's the right time and place, what's true, what's not true, what's beneficial, what's not beneficial—all the qualities of right speech. Those qualities will then carry over into internal right speech that can get the mind to settle down. This means that when the mind is concentrated, there's still you in there, but it's a you that's been trained.

So take all aspects of the training seriously. When the Buddha set out the noble eightfold path, he didn't choose eight factors because he liked the

number eight. These factors were all necessary. So make sure you've got them all covered.