

## *The Lightness of the Concentrated Mind*

*December 14, 2020*

When people hear that the factors of jhana include directed thought and evaluation, the question sometimes arises, “How do we start doing directed thought and evaluation?” And the answer is, “You’re doing it all the time.” It’s the Buddha’s way of describing how we talk to ourselves.

The mind spends a lot of its time talking to itself. It just chatters away. If it has nothing to say in particular, it has plenty of random things coming through. And there are many levels of conversation going on. The part of the mind that monitors your digestive system, monitors the placement of the different organs in the body, your limbs, your legs, your arms, and has a sense of where you are, what time of year it is, what you’re going to do tonight, what you did last night: A lot of these conversations are all going on at once. You’re going to have to plow through them as you settle down, because you’re going to change the topic of conversation. You’re going to focus it on the breath—or, as the Buddha said, the breath in and of itself, the body in and of itself.

You don’t want to connect the body to its meaning in the world—in other words, whether people like it, whether it’s attractive, whether it can do the work that needs to be done. Just focus on the fact you’ve got the body here, and make that an important part of the concentration. Otherwise, once you start thinking about the body, it connects up with a thought about this and a thought about that, and the thoughts begin to spread out to create a web of all kinds of different meanings—how the body fits into a larger pattern of things.

It’s like language. The words point to one another. Some of them point outside the net of words, but a lot of them just point to other words. And they all point in a way that has meaning. What you try to do as you settle down is to remove the pointers, remove the meanings, so that the events of the mind and the events of the body can be just there, in and of themselves, on their own, unconnected with anything else. As for whatever comes up with regard to the world, just regard it as meaningless.

The Buddha calls it putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world. We have greed and distress over things that have meanings. So try to cut things down to individual events just happening on their own: coming, going away.

This is why the Buddha says discernment deals with penetrative insight into arising and passing away: seeing things as they come just as events, seeing them go

away as events, and realizing that some events will be useful for the practice. So for the time being, let those events have some meaning. But as for everything else, allow it to be meaningless.

As you settle down, you'll be surprised how many conversations are going on. You clear out one level of conversation and you find another. Clear out another, you find one below that. This is a lot of what concentration is: cutting all the ties, cutting all the meanings. As one web of meanings gets cut through, you see another one that you didn't realize was there. You cut through that. The need to keep talking about things—there's a very insistent web of meanings. There are a lot of implications, a lot of assumptions behind that. And you want to learn how to question them.

You can try an experiment. Which direction is your mind facing right now? When your eyes are open, obviously it faces toward the front of your face because that's where your eyes are, or that's how it seems. But once you close your eyes, why do you have to think that the mind has a face in any direction at all? The face belongs to the body. The mind doesn't have a face. Think of it as centered in itself. As for the solid parts of the body, remind yourself, as the body sits here very still, that you don't have to think of it as being solid. You can think of it simply as being breath. We think of it as being solid because we have to move it around: which muscle pulls which other part of the body. There's a lot of memory and a lot of commentary going on in governing that process. But you can drop that for the time being because you're sitting very still.

The only movement is the movement of the breath. Then you realize that you have the perception that the breath comes from the outside. Actually, though, the breath comes from inside. It pulls air in from outside. But it's the energy in the body that allows that air to come in. If it weren't for the energy in the body, the air wouldn't come in. So the real active force in the breath is something that originates here, inside the body. Hold that perception in mind and see what other perceptions that you ordinarily carry around that you're going to be running up against.

This ability to question your perceptions is an important part of concentration because you're unburdening the mind. You begin to see how many preconceived notions you carry around with you. You start first with your notions about the body. Now, these notions are useful for moving the body, looking after it. If there's a pain someplace, you're able to identify where in the body it is. But for the time being, you don't need those perceptions. We're like that old lady in the Thai proverb who carries a big load of straw around on her back. Wherever she goes, she carries the straw because you never know when you're going to need some

straw. Of course, when you need the straw, it may not be all that much. And often you don't need any straw at all, but she has her straw on her back all the time—and she's bent out of shape as a result. In the same way, we carry around a big set of notions, just in case.

You don't realize how heavily burdened the mind is with its assumptions until you can sit down and put yourself in a position where you don't need them, where you're allowed to question them, allowed to drop them. You begin to see what the Buddha said when he set out dependent co-arising. There are a lot of details, but the big thing to notice is how much happens before sensory contact. Even before we run into sights, sounds, smells, tastes, tactile sensations, or ideas, we've got a lot of stuff going on. And because that stuff is done in ignorance—that's why it leads to suffering.

So when you sit down to meditate, as the Buddha said, first your thoughts of sensuality fall away. Your thoughts of unskillful qualities fall away. Then your directed thought and evaluation falls away. Then the movement of the breath falls away. These different layers of *sankhara*, fabrication, fall away one by one by one. And the mind can become very light.

The reason we don't experience lightness in our meditation is because we're not willing to let go. We feel that we're going to need some straw. So we keep that big load of straw on our backs. The purpose of the concentration is to put us in a position where we can let it go. We don't let it go forever, but for the time being, there are a lot of things you don't need. As the ajans used to like to say, when you sit here with your eyes closed, what race are you? What gender? There's nothing in your range of immediate experience right now to tell you. Of course, those questions are meant to apply to a lot of other things that you carry around, too. You realize that, as you're sitting here with your eyes closed, you don't need them.

So allow these perceptions to fall away, allow these various levels of conversation—as soon as you discover one—to fall away. In the beginning, you hold on to your one conversation about the breath and its relationship to the mind. But once the mind and the breath get snuggly put together, then you don't need that. Some people get really scared. "If there's nobody talking inside, then where am I?" That's the fear. Well, there still will be some subtle perceptions going on. After all, concentration is a series of perception attainments. But there are a lot of perceptions you can let go and you're perfectly okay, a lot of activities in the mind you can let go and you're perfectly okay. And if you identify yourself with that inner conversationalist, you have to realize sometimes you're identifying with some pretty crazy things.

If you need to identify, try awareness itself. This is why the ajans talk about being with just awareness itself, so that you can get out of the conversations. Eventually, you'll be able to let that go too. But get used to just being aware without commentary, fully alert, and you'll come to appreciate how much lightness there is. Then you can make that your skill: picking up assumptions when you need them; putting them down when you don't.

Our minds are like those old tank water heaters. They keep water boiled at a high temperature all the time so that it's there when you need it. But it's a huge waste of energy. So they developed tankless heaters and learned how to save a lot. As someone once said, using a tank water heater is like keeping your car running all the time in case you need to jump into it and drive someplace. If you're wise, you learn to turn the car off when you don't need it and turn it back on when you do. Heat the water when you need it. Turn the heater off when you don't. Use your assumptions when they're needed. Drop them when you don't. You don't have to carry them around. And give yourself time like this when you can set as many things down as possible.

When the breath gets still, the sense of the body begins to turn into a mist, because your shape of the body is defined by how the breath energy runs through it. As it gets still, and there's that mist, the perception of form can be dropped. You don't even need to have the idea that there's a body sitting here.

This is how you go through the different levels of concentration: realizing that you're holding on to a perception that's really unnecessary for the purpose of sitting here very still. So you peel the perceptions off one by one by one—and yet you're fully alert and fully mindful. You gain a sense of how light the mind can be. That way, you have concentration that gives you a pleasant abiding, you develop mindfulness and alertness, and you gain insight—all at once.