Exalted, Unexalted and Other Mindstates as Foundations for Mindfulness

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Tonight I want to continue looking at the third section of the Satipatthana Sutta, the contemplation of mind. Last night we looked at the first three exercises: to know when the mind is or is not under the influence of greed, anger, and delusion.

The next line of the Sutta reads, "One understands contracted mind as contracted mind and distracted mind as distracted mind." Contracted mind is understood as being under the influence of dullness and lethargy, while distracted mind is what we normally call restlessness.

We can distinguish this exercise from our work with the corresponding hindrances. When we keep falling asleep, we're dealing with the hindrance of dullness and lethargy. The mind will be contracted, but we won't be able to discern this because we're too dozy. After working mindfully with the hindrance for a period, we may find that awareness steadies and we can observe the state quite closely. We still feel dozy, dull, but we're not asleep. We're aware of dullness. We might also be aware of the underlying feelings, which are usually pleasant feelings.

To rest attention in the third satipatthana, we focus on the mind that knows these pleasant feelings. "Contracted mind" describes this very well. It only knows those pleasant feelings. It doesn't know anything else. It's as if we've retreated from the world, locked ourselves into a comforting stupor.

In contrast to this, we have distracted mind. When we're fidgeting or can't keep track of the multitude of thoughts that keep cropping up, then we're dealing with the hindrance of restlessness. Again, after working with this mindfully, awareness may come to rest in the third satipatthana, and we can then experience the mind that's continually moving, searching for something. It's the same mind state in both cases, but because awareness is now focused on the mind state, those distractions can't get very far. They only disturb us to the extent necessary to register in awareness.

In contrast to the pleasant feelings associated with the contracted mind, the feelings associated with the distracted mind are usually unpleasant. The habit is to resist unpleasant feelings, and so the mind moves around trying to get away from the disturbance. Whereas in the case of dullness and lethargy, the mind contracts around the underlying pleasant feelings.

The two states can also be contrasted in terms of subjectivity and objectivity. In the contracted mind, the mind is subjectively oriented. It's all me. There's no room for anything else, anything objective. If it could

summon the energy to describe experience, it might say "this," because we use the word "this" to describe what's immediate, present, within my grasp, mine. This chair I'm sitting on, this idea I'm considering. We use the word "that" to describe something that's external, not part of me—that chair you're sitting on, that idea you're putting forward.

The distracted mind is looking outwards. Its orientation is objective. It's searching the external world to escape its own displeasure. Each moment it lands on something new to call "that."

At times we might see the mind transiting between the two states. One moment it contracts around a pleasant feeling, perceives it as subjective, as "this" and "mine." The next moment it detects an unpleasant feeling and bounces away, calling it "that." When awareness is steady enough to see these transitions, we get a chance to see how the mind constructs such radically different versions of reality based on feelings. Pleasant feelings are perceived as here, within our grasp, internal, mine. They are readily labelled as "this." Unpleasant feelings are perceived as external, objective, something that can be pushed away, not mine, labelled as "that."

"This" and "that," subjectivity and objectivity, mine and not mine—they feed off one another. As the Buddha says in the discourse on the destruction of craving, "When this exists, that comes to be; with the arising of this, that arises."

The better we can steady awareness around contracted and distracted states of mind, the better we can see how craving causes us to construct two separate worlds. One is internal, contracted around pleasant feeling. The other is external, extensive, allowing the mind to bounce from one object to another. When we fully understand these minute movements of mind, we'll see through the delusion caused by craving. When consciousness stops, even for a moment, clinging to the idea of this self as the ultimate reference point for the world, then the multitude of "thats"—that person, that challenge, that obligation—also disappear, and we're liberated from the stress of false view. It might only be momentary, but it punches a little hole in delusion.

Thus we should welcome lethargy, dullness, and restlessness whenever they come our way. Work mindfully with them until the mind can rest in the third satipatthana. They teach us what is meant by contracted and distracted mind and how we create our world out of pleasant and unpleasant feelings.

The next instruction is, "One understands exalted mind as exalted mind and unexalted mind as unexalted mind." An exalted mind, sometimes termed great mind, is based in one of the four Brahma Viharas, the divine abodes, the ways that wisdom manifests in the world. The divine abodes all have goodwill as their basis, wishing ourselves and others well.

Metta, friendliness, is the form goodwill takes by default, when there is no especially joyful, sad, or challenging atmosphere associated with the encounter. If we meet someone who is going through a hard time, goodwill takes the hue of compassion. We wish that their troubles might cease.

When there's something to celebrate, goodwill takes on the flavour of mudita, appreciative joy. And when we come across limitations or unskilfulness in ourselves or others, the response is equanimity—a tender understanding and acceptance of worldly imperfection.

On this side of liberation, we'll often miss the mark in relationship, believing we're acting with pure goodwill but in reality hooked by what's termed the near enemy of the Brahma Vihara. Friendliness is often mixed in with attachment. We're anxious to sustain the relationship, needing the other person's company, good humour, esteem. Often we don't even notice the subtle expectations we have of our friends. It's only when we feel let down that we realise how many strings we were attaching to our acts of friendship.

Pity can masquerade as compassion. We overblow the problem, underestimate the person's resources, forgetting that their essence has not been diminished by whatever misfortune has come their way. We think they can't cope without our help, but then get overwhelmed and feel burdened by responsibility.

The near enemy of mudita is excitement. We build too much out of the occasion, go to excess in our efforts to celebrate.

Finally, we can mistake indifference for equanimity. When some challenge comes up in our relationship we ignore it or shrug our shoulders rather than feel whatever disappointment, fear or anger may have been evoked, rather than work through those feelings to acceptance of the limitations of the relationship.

To get to know the exalted mind, we can practise metta with a degree of curiosity about our experience. You might experiment with the Buddha's guidance for metta practice: "One dwells suffusing one quarter with a mind filled with loving-kindness, then a second, then a third, and a fourth quarter. Thus one abides, suffusing the whole world—up, down and across, everywhere, all around—with a mind filled with loving-kindness, expanded, immeasurable, free from hatred and ill-will."

This doesn't mention any categories of people. In fact, it doesn't mention people at all, not even other beings. It puts aside the usual ideas of self and other that we use in metta practice. Instead, we use the concept of space and radiate loving-kindness up, down and across, everywhere, all around. Whatever this might involve at an ultimate level, we can also see this as an exercise in imagination. We're training ourselves to imagine a world pervaded with kindness. If we imagine this often enough, it will become our inner reality.

If and when metta seems stable, we can become curious about the mind that practises metta. The Buddha describes this as expanded, immeasurable. Can you sense how imagining space around you requires a mind that itself is spacious? The mind expands to meet the space it imagines.

But of course there will be challenges. Our imagination will reach limits where we cannot conceive of kindness. This shows us the unexalted mind.

At times the unexalted mind involves some form of ill-will. We project demons into the space around us instead of good wishes, becoming frightened if these demons seem angry, feeling they're preventing us from practising metta. Or we might just turn away from the difficulty as the mind shrinks into dullness.

At other times, the unexalted mind may involve greed. We project an exalted, saintly image of ourselves into the space around and then believe ourselves to be this great person with a big open heart. We might also get excited by all the good deeds we could do and all the people we could benefit, in which case restlessness forms the basis for the unexalted mind.

Alternatively, when our imagination reaches its limit, we start wondering what's going on. Is there really all this space around me? Can I really fill it with metta? In this case, the unexalted mind is based in the hindrance of doubt.

Because the sutta asks us to get to know both the exalted and unexalted mind, we don't have to think of the latter as a failure. In fact, the more curious we can get about it, the better. This positive attitude helps us work through whichever hindrance emerges.

The unexalted mind isn't necessarily based on any of the hindrances. We can also experience this as quite peaceful—the mind as simply knowing. There isn't active goodwill being generated, but there's no ill-will either.

The Buddha's pairing of exalted and unexalted mind helps us foster a beneficial relationship between these. At one moment we pervade the space around us with warm good wishes. The next moment we get curious about the mind that practises metta. We sense the expanded consciousness, the exalted mind. Quietly the image of space filled with metta disappears. For a while there is just the knowing mind. Awareness gradually lands on other aspects of the being who meditates—feelings, body, perception, unexalted mind. The memory of the vast metta-filled space fosters acceptance of our conditional nature, gratitude for the Dhamma which allows our being to learn its true nature.

Metta flows into the being with unexalted mind until it is ready once again to pervade the space around it with goodwill. Thus unexalted mind can provide a skilful break during metta practice, allowing us to rest and recharge our metta batteries.

The next instruction is to understand unsurpassed mind as unsurpassed mind and surpassed mind as surpassed mind. This is often taken as referring to jhana practices, where the highest jhana represents the unsurpassed mind. In his book *Satipatthana: A Practical Guide*, Analayo suggests that this can also be used in vipassana, asking ourselves: has the mind been developed to its maximum capacity for this particular meditation, or can we continue to develop?

The standard vipassana instructions don't explicitly include developing the mind. We are simply to register what we experience without judgment. Within non-judgmental awareness the mind develops of its own accord. The factors of enlightenment strengthen as the mind moves through hindrances towards

greater clarity and ease. When the factors of enlightenment are strong, we have the unsurpassed mind.

There is mindfulness—we can maintain focus in present experience. We're not repeatedly getting lost in thought or falling asleep. There is concentration—we can focus on some aspect of experience and track this. There is equanimity—we're able to maintain an objective, balanced stance rather than being sucked in by desires, identified with views and thoughts. There is tranquility—preferring calm to excitement, we keep dropping desires and aversions. There is energy—we have the will and resources needed to maintain mindfulness, concentration, and the other factors of enlightenment. There is investigation—the mind is intelligent, curious, discerning. There is joy—we are interested in experience, glad to be learning the Dhamma.

This exercise in the Satipatthana Sutta asks us to look back into that well-balanced mind, to recognise it as unsurpassed. The word "unsurpassed" might make the exercise seem impossible, as if we should be looking into the mind of a saint. But we can interpret it to mean that awareness can't detect a flaw that can't be fixed.

If awareness detects grasping, the factors of enlightenment can step up to put this right. For example, we could shift focus, let attention rest in the breath or other neutral, calming sensations. Energy could be stepped up a gear in order to resist the pull of desire, the push of aversion. Mindfulness could become more alert to the fading away of experience, moment after moment, which helps us acknowledge the futility of grasping. Equanimity might draw attention back from detail to see the larger picture. These adjustments happen naturally, organically, without forcing. The factors work together as a team to restore their formation.

Bhante's wild geese analogy is very useful here. At times their V-shaped formation gets disturbed—some flying too fast, others going too slow. But then the instinct for coordination comes to the fore. Various birds come forward, others fall back, until order is restored. The flock needs to get to their destination, and each individual is willing to fall into line with that overriding objective.

In the same way, the factors of enlightenment get scattered—for example, when we get too curious and fall prey to the desire to know and understand experience more clearly. Unwittingly, we start forcing our agenda, put ourselves under pressure to hurry towards enlightenment. This is the surpassed mind. But mindfulness detects the problem, and then the adjustments start: changing focus, widening attention, noticing that everything is always slipping away, fading out. Our overriding objective is to maintain the objective observer stance, and so traits like curiosity and even tranquility take a back seat as the mind steadies itself to resist the pull of grasping.

If order can be restored—if we again sense awareness brushing against experience rather than digging in, shaping it—then we can again reflect that the mind at this moment is unsurpassed. It knows how to maintain its own objectivity.

Analayo describes the unsurpassed mind as one which can continue to develop. For example, we can use the unsurpassed mind to develop one of the factors of enlightenment, or a virtue like patience. Often we're developing wisdom. We're seeing that sensations and feelings, moods and emotions, thoughts and images—all experience—arises and passes away. That any attempt to cling brings dukkha. In other words, we're learning about the three characteristics of existence: anicca, dukkha, anatta. Transience, unsatisfactoriness, and not-self.

But there comes a stage when we can no longer sustain equanimity. The hindrances are threatening to overpower us, and we sense it best to draw the meditation to a close. Here we have an example of the surpassed mind—one which, using Analayo's description, cannot be further developed.

We've run out of meditative steam and need to let daily life recharge our batteries. What I often do here is make the determination to wait until there is equanimity in the movement from sitting to standing. For as long as I feel impatience, the desire to plunge straight into daily life, I keep relaxing, allowing that desire to burn off, reminding myself that this is the surpassed mind—the mind that has reached its limit of development—a worthy satipatthana for mindfulness.

Aversions and judgments may emerge, but again I note these, reminding myself that this surpassed mind is what I have to work with in daily life, so I might as well make friends with it. At some stage I notice the mind readying itself to stand, the body starting to sway, or the eyes beginning to open. Until it happens, I never know how the body will actually do the business of standing up. These movements are sensed as an equanimous follow-on to the earlier decision to bring the meditation to a close.

These final minutes of meditation are an exercise in making peace with limitations, accepting that the mind has done its job and cannot be further developed in this particular setting. The transition back into daily life is wiser and more peaceful as a result. Knowing our limitations is a great asset in life—knowing when we need to stop pushing ourselves to achieve some goal, when we need to step back, rest, recharge our batteries.

The label "surpassed mind" can also help us make peace with the mental limitations we detect in daily life. For example, when we sense the mind as dull or stuck or lazy, we might not even have enough energy to work out which of the hindrances is overpowering us. We just know we're not in the most wholesome condition. The phrase "surpassed mind" lets us put all such states into a box, helps us see them objectively, and draws out the awareness which can then start to tease some wisdom out of the situation.

The next pairing is between the concentrated and unconcentrated mind. These refer to the two levels of concentration we encounter in vipassana, termed vitakka and vicara in Pali. Vitakka is described as applied thought. Here we're making an effort to focus the mind. We could be trying to follow the breath, but images and fantasies keep intruding, and we have to keep reminding ourselves of our goal. The notes "rising, falling" provide that reminder, like a lasso we throw around our scattered mind, drawing it back home.

The image of a bee seeking nectar from a flower is also used. The flower is bobbing around in the breeze while the bee hovers a few inches away, tracking the flower to and fro, waiting for the exact moment to alight. When that opportunity comes, we have vicara, described as sustained thought. This is a deeper, more restful level of concentration. Just as the bee is now being carried about by the flower, no longer needing to hover and track, we are being carried along by sensations and feelings, no longer needing any effort to maintain mindfulness.

When we're following this particular exercise on the contemplation of mind, we're not so much trying to focus attention on the breath or other object as detecting whether or not we're focused. Are we putting some effort into containing images and thoughts, gathering them in? Or is the mind resting, being carried along by present experience? This is especially useful if we sense poor concentration as a problem in meditation, feeling that we're failing because we don't have good concentration. It takes the pressure off, as it no longer matters what the level of concentration is—only that we know whether we have to make an effort or whether we're relaxing.

There are a number of other benefits to this exercise. One is that when we get interested in the unconcentrated mind, we find we can now focus on this. So the lack of concentration actually leads to concentration. What I find is that the unconcentrated mind is divided. One desire chases a certain stream of thought, while another desire wants to chase another. The bee is hovering around a big bunch of flowers, unable to decide which to alight upon. The general feeling of division is unpleasant, aversive, and thus we easily link this state with a sense of failure. Instead, we should simply recognise it as unconcentrated mind and see it as a worthy satipatthana exercise. A level of equanimity and tranquility develops, allowing us to make peace with the tendency towards restlessness and getting scattered.

Focusing on the concentrated mind, we sense the pleasure of tranquility. Of course, there is the danger of identification with this pleasant feeling, thinking "I am calm," and then grasping at the feeling. So here we are seeing the opposite to restlessness—the mind closing up within a pleasant haze, growing dull and lethargic. The bee has landed on the flower but is sucking it dry. You do sometimes see a bee going to sleep on a flower, and in the same way we can actually lose consciousness when the mind is very concentrated. We're still sitting upright but not registering anything consciously.

Curiosity about the concentrated and unconcentrated mind prevents this closure, and paradoxically I find I can actually start looking forward to losing concentration. I'm curious to discover what will be lost when concentration moves back to vitakka. What I sometimes find is the mind moving from subjectivity to objectivity. If you remember back to the sutta on the destruction of craving, the Buddha asks us to study the relationship between "this" and "that." The concentrated mind, I find, is focusing on what it terms "this," thinking of sensations and feelings as subjective—which is to be expected, as the feeling of a concentrated mind is pleasant. So we tend to think of this experience as me and mine.

As concentration weakens, we notice unpleasant feelings which we label as "that," as external, objective.

Now we sense a division between the observer and the object. If there is enough equanimity, we can then focus more closely on the unpleasant sensations, and concentration returns.

We're again in the realm of subjectivity, but making peace with unpleasant feelings that we would normally externalise as some storyline about how badly the world treats us. The bee has alighted again, but on a thorny flower, needing constant encouragement not to fly off, to keep detecting the nectar on offer within the pain.

Thus, the pairing of concentrated and unconcentrated mind can develop into a very helpful relationship, where the unconcentrated mind is recognised as an opportunity to expand our mental horizons, to make peace with a world that doesn't satisfy. Rob Burbea, for many years the resident teacher at Gaia House, has a series of dharma talks titled "In Praise of Restlessness," which I find very inspiring. He identifies the danger of overvaluing tranquillity so that we ignore anything that disturbs concentration. He uses Greek mythology to inspire us to value instead the mind that lacks tranquillity, that struggles with concentration, seeing this as a valiant, heroic attempt to embrace the tragic, crazy world with all its contradictions.

The final pairing in this section of the sutta is between the liberated and unliberated mind. Full liberation will only come at the moment of enlightenment, but the Buddha obviously wants us to practise this exercise before then. Analayo suggests we interpret the liberated mind as one which is liberated from the view of self.

Our usual effort in vipassana is to be the objective observer, not interfering in any way, just observing. Bhante uses the analogy of a sailor on lookout duty. The sailor climbs up the mast to the crow's nest, a lookout post giving a broad overview of the ship and its surrounds. Without this lookout, the ship could strike rocks or run unprepared into a storm. In the same way, our position as objective observer lets us spot the telltale signs of desire, aversion, grasping. Instead of getting caught up in these, mindfulness lets us steer safely through the storm.

Here we have the unsurpassed mind. The factors of enlightenment are strong. However, we are identifying as the observer, and to that extent bound up in the dukkha which comes with identification. We usually aren't aware of this attachment until we lose the observer position. As far as we know, we're just watching equanimously, not interfering. But when thoughts begin to get sticky again, we realise we're slipping from our lofty perch on the crow's nest, falling into the bedlam we've been watching from above.

Mindfulness of the dukkha which accompanies this fall from grace helps us lose attachment to the state of objective observer. It becomes easier to see the tough times—when we get caught up and identified with thoughts and emotions—as opportunities to develop compassion for our unenlightened condition.

At times, when the factors are strong and we're in our crow's nest observing objectively, the sense of ourselves as observer can simply disappear. There are sensations and feelings, perceptions and mental states, but these are just happening of their own accord. They no longer seem to be happening to me.

There's no central reference point for it all.

When we say that the sense of self disappears, this sounds like a form of death. But the disappearance is quiet, undramatic. It's not that there's a long struggle and we eventually surrender. It happens at times when we're not struggling, just watching. The sense of self is simply a mental construction, a perspective we're putting on experience using our cognitive abilities. Cognition puts a shape on the millions of sensations, feelings—what we could call atoms of experience—registering each moment. It helps slow things down mentally, makes it all more manageable.

One of the ways we frame experience is through the concept of self. We identify some of the atoms as me or mine, and some as yours or his or some other way outside ourselves. But this distinction is learned. As a baby we weren't able to do this, so it's not essential to life. It takes effort to frame experience like this, although the process is so habitual we don't notice that it's actually voluntary. We're willing ourselves to see the world as either self or other.

At times in meditation the mind relaxes, stops making that effort, and the sense of self quietly disappears. This is the liberated mind, the experience of not-self, anattā. Sensations, feelings and so on continue to appear, but we stop dividing these into boxes of mine or not mine. It's a joyful experience. We've dropped the burden of thinking of ourselves as someone with a future and a past, with so many roles and responsibilities to uphold. In fact, there's seldom any desire to think. We're so riveted by present experience. Bhante uses the analogy of a baby who's so fascinated by what they're seeing that the jaw drops. They stare open-mouthed at the world in a state of total wonder.

Although we probably won't want to think, the Buddha wants us to reflect that we are experiencing a mind that has been liberated from the view of self. This can actually be a challenge, as the absence of self may not be immediately apparent. We might not be able to work out what's happening. We just know we're seeing things differently. Experience is felt more intensely. There's no interest in anything but present experience. But other than that, everything continues normally.

In her book *The Experience of No Self*, Bernadette Roberts describes how she knew something had changed during a particular meditation, but couldn't work out what it was.

She went about her daily business—she was a mother with teenage children—for a few days, until she suddenly realized that her sense of self had dropped away.

Although the absence of self does not immediately trouble us, reflecting on this may trouble us. We fear what we do not understand, and thus the very uptight self might emerge, wanting to know what this implies. How can I be absent? How can the world be surviving without me? A multitude of contradictory thoughts may surface. Rather than follow these, we should simply reflect that this is the unliberated mind and feel the push and pull of desire and aversion underlying our fears and doubts.

As we work mindfully through our fear of anattā, we start to appreciate the joy and freedom of this state,

trusting that nothing essential is lost when we stop framing experience in terms of I, me, mine. At times we may be able to study the transition from liberated to unliberated mind, or vice versa. We see the effort of will that goes into framing experience in terms of self. We notice the relaxation as we stop.

We might think that the liberated mind is always superior to the unliberated mind. But on this side of enlightenment, anyhow, it is essential to be able to construct a sense of self at times. For example, we can learn to bring forth a sense of self that attaches firmly to notions of restraint in order to resist desires based in greed, hatred, and delusion. When that work is done, our knowledge of the liberated mind helps us let go of attachment to the self who has just rescued us from this latest peril.

In summary, then, this section of the Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta gives us five ways of probing the mind. We ask whether it's contracted—meaning dull and lethargic—or distracted and restless. We ask whether or not it's in an exalted state of goodwill. We ask whether it's unsurpassed, meaning it can be developed further, or surpassed, having reached its limit for this session. We ask whether it's concentrated—has the bee landed on the flower, or is it hovering about, trying to track a flower that's bobbing about in the breeze? The final exercise is to ask whether the mind has been liberated from the sense of self, or whether we're identified as the observer.

For each pairing we have the refrain, three variations on the basic exercise. First, we have the option to practice externally, to notice these mind states in others. When we've detected that our mind is now exalted, we can reflect that others experience the exalted mind. And when we move to the unexalted state, we can reflect that others experience an unexalted mind. We can do this for all of the five pairings. Realizing that these states are part of the general human condition will loosen attachment, help us feel less ashamed of what we deem the less worthy states, less proud of those we judge as terrific achievements. It also strengthens our goodwill and respect for others when we reflect that they too can experience states like exalted mind, unsurpassed mind, and liberated mind.

The second option is to notice that these states arise and pass away. Again, this helps us let go of attachment. We might feel mightily proud of an unsurpassed mind. But if we reflect that this wasn't here a few minutes ago, we might also realize that this is just a temporary visitor. We should enjoy it while it's here, but not be too surprised when it fades away.

The final option is simply to note "there is mind." We're no longer trying to identify whether the mind is concentrated or surpassed or in any of the other states. This final option requires no effort whatsoever beyond focusing on the mind, the knowing aspect of experience. We could use the Mahasi note—knowing, knowing—to help maintain focus. The mind may pass through many of the states described: exalted, non-exalted, contracted, distracted. We're letting all this happen quite naturally, organically. However, we're not making the effort to note exactly which state the mind is in. We're getting to know the mind intuitively, rather than by deliberate reflection. This is actually our normal vipassanā practice, except that we're focusing on the mind, the knowing of experience, rather than our more usual focus on sensations

and feelings.

Let's finish with a verse from the Dhammapada:

Mind is the forerunner of all evil. Speak or act with wicked mind, then suffering follows, even as the wheel follows the hoof of the ox. Mind is the forerunner of all good. Speak or act with pure mind, then happiness follows, even as the shadow that never leaves.

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