

The Third Frame of Reference

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One of the important skills we need to learn how to develop as meditators is how to read our own mind. This comes in the third frame of reference, keeping track of the mind in and of itself. Keeping track here means not only watching the mind, but also figuring out what the mind needs. This is the part that tends to get left out.

In other words, when the mind feels a desire for something, when it feels angry about something, when it's deluded about things, when it feels constricted, you don't just leave it there. You ask yourself: What is it lacking? This comes from the Buddha's explanation of breath meditation. As you know, those instructions come in sixteen steps divided into four tetrads, or sets of four. The third tetrad—which corresponds to the third frame of reference, the mind in and of itself—starts out by saying that you're sensitive to the mind as you breathe in and breathe out, and then you train yourself to gladden the mind, to steady the mind, and to release the mind, as you breathe in, as you breathe out. That's the active side. That's what you do in response to reading the mind and seeing what's there.

There are lots of different ways you can work with the mind. One is to work through the body. When the mind is tired, it needs to be energized. And here the breath is very helpful. What way of breathing is energizing? What feels really satisfying as the breath comes in, the breath goes out, healing the body, and through the body, healing the mind? This is an important skill. It requires that you learn how to read your breath and to notice how the breath has an effect on the mind.

This backs up a little bit into the second frame of reference, where you're aware of the process of mental fabrication. Among the mental fabricators are feeling and perceptions. This points to the fact that feeling can have an impact on the mind. If you can produce a sense of ease, a sense of wellbeing, a sense of fullness in the body, that can have a nice soothing or energizing effect on the mind.

There are topics or perceptions you can think about that are also energizing, or gladdening, as the Buddha says. You can think about the times you've been generous or virtuous. When you remember a time you were generous of your own free will, it gladdens the mind. It feels really nourishing and good. This is why it's so important that generosity not be forced. I was reading a while back someone, a monk, saying that if Buddhism was to be a good world religion, it would have to start having some good world charities. He was criticizing people who meditate for being selfish and self concerned. There's a very strong "ought" in that statement.

It's interesting the Buddha never had people say "ought" with regard to generosity. King Pasenadi once came to the Buddha and asked him, "Where should a gift be given?" And the Buddha replied, "Wherever you feel inspired." He actually made it a rule for the monks, that if someone asks them where a gift should be given, they can't say, "Give it to me." They can't say, "Give it to that person." They can't say, "Give it to this charity." What they're allowed to say is, "Give wherever you feel inspired, or you feel it would be well used, or would last a long time." The purpose of all this is to protect the act of generosity so that it's a nourishing act. It's not by struggling under a sense of obligation that you feel good about being generous. It's when you've given of your own free will. When the mind needs a certain sense of being uplifted, that's the

kind of act of generosity you can look back on, and say, “Ah, yes, of my own free will, I did that.” And it’s energizing.

The same with the precepts. The Buddha talks about the precepts as a gift, a gift you give to all. This is why the precepts have to be precepts without exceptions. You make up your mind that you’re not going to kill anybody, anything, under any circumstances. You’re not going to steal anything from anybody. You’re not going to engage in illicit sex with anybody. You’re not going to lie to anybody. You’re not going to take intoxicants at all. When you stick with that unlimited determination, the Buddha says you’re giving unlimited security to all beings. When you give unlimited security to all beings, you’re going to have a share in that unlimited security yourself. And the reflection that you’re not harming anybody in your actions: That’s nourishing. That’s uplifting for the mind.

So these are some of the tools that are useful in gladdening the mind, satisfying the mind, or uplifting the mind, when you feel that it needs that kind of nourishment.

Another step in breath meditation is to steady the mind. This is for times when the mind is really scattered all over the place. What can bring it into the present moment? What can give it some ballast to keep it here? Again, the way you breathe can do this. If you find the sense of fullness in the breath, try to maximize that. How do you breathe in a way that maintains that sense of fullness all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out? Sometimes there’s a tendency to squeeze the breath out, and you have to pull it back in, which depletes the sense of fullness. So instead, how about maintaining a sense of fullness all way through the in breath, fullness all way through the out, and in-between the breaths as well? If you notice any sense of squeezing, just stop. See how long you can maintain that sense of fullness. And that gets pretty riveting.

But if the mind can’t help but go out thinking about this or that, if it’s always making excuses for thinking about things, you can tell yourself, “Hey, what if I die tonight?” And you realize that all those plans, all those things you worry about, would have no meaning at all. So why bother with them? Or even if you don’t die tonight, there’s going to come a time when these things don’t mean anything at all. Imagine yourself already dead and looking back at this lifetime, to see: “Am I happy that I am worried about *x* for two hours that night when I could’ve been meditating?” Thinking like this helps give you a sense of distance from the thoughts that disturb you.

One of Ajaan Fuang’s students—an old woman who had started meditating late in life but was a very dedicated meditator—told me once that she had been sitting in meditation one night, and a voice came into her head, saying, “You’re going to die tonight.” And she had the presence of mind to say, “Well, if I’m going to die, let me die meditating.” So she sat there with the feeling that her body was falling apart, that all the different processes were working at cross-purposes. She looked to find where she could get a sense of comfort in the breath, but there was no place in the breath, no place anywhere in the body, where she could get a sense of ease. She said it was like a house on fire: There was no place where she could stay.

But then she thought of the space element. Space wasn’t affected by the turmoil in the other elements. So she focused on just thinking space, space, space and she developed a sense of space. One way to do this is to think of the different atoms in your body. They all have a lot of space in them and between them. So focus on that space and think of it spreading throughout the body, out beyond the body. She maintained that perception. Then later, as she withdrew from that, she found that everything in her body was back to normal. She didn’t die. But she learned

something important: When things get really bad in the body, you can go to space and just stay there with that sense of equanimity and ease.

So when you notice the mind popping around like popcorn, or even when it just has a loose fit with its meditation object, ask yourself: What's needed here? How can you plug-in to the meditation object so that everything is nice and secure and snug? Again, this requires not only reading your mind but also figuring what you can do to bring it back into balance.

Which is also connected with the third technique that the Buddha recommends, which is to release the mind. "Release" here has many meanings. It can mean releasing the mind from unskillful mental qualities so that you can bring it into basic concentration. In other words, you release it from hindrances, from whatever worries or concerns it may have. Then as you get into concentration, how do you release it from the grosser levels of concentration to bring it to more refined ones?

This is where you begin to gain skill in using your discernment in the meditation, to sense, "Where is there any unnecessary stress in the state of mind I've got here? What can I do to drop what's causing that stress?" If the mind is filled with defilements, filled with hindrances, you can use death contemplation to bring things back into focus. Or whatever technique you've found to work with sensual desire, ill will, all the other hindrances: That's one way of releasing it.

Or when you're sitting here contemplating the breath, evaluating the breath, there comes a point where, as Ajaan Fuang says, it's like putting water into a jar: There comes a point where the jar is full, and no matter how much more water you put into it, it's not going to get any more full than that. In other words, when you realize that you've been evaluating the breath, making it nice and comfortable, there comes a point where it's not getting any more comfortable than that. There's a sense of fullness, a sense of ease, and it's not going to get any better by evaluating it. So you just allow yourself to enter into that sense of fullness to be one with the breath. You don't have to evaluate it at all. Just stay with the breath sensation as it is. As you let go of the thinking and the evaluating, you become much more snug with the breath, one with the breath. So in releasing the mind, you're also making it more steady.

There will still be a sense of rapture, but after a while the rapture becomes tiresome. So you try to focus on a more refined level of breath energy to get past the rapture. But don't be in too great a hurry to get rid of the rapture. After all, it serves its purpose, which is to energize you, to give your nourishment when you need it. But when it begins to feel tiresome, that's the time to focus on the more refined level of the breath, so that you're no longer involved in the rapture. This is another level of release.

Then as you connect all the different currents of breath energy in the body so that they feed one another, nourish one another, you finally get to the point where you don't really need to do any in-and-out breathing at all. This is another level of release.

It's in doing these things that the Buddha says you're developing the third establishing of mindfulness based on the third frame of preference.

So this is not just a matter of noting whatever is there and then just being with whatever's there. You train yourself to figure out: "What does the mind need here? How can I bring it into a better balance? How can I provide for its needs?" Because, after all, the Buddha said the way you develop the establishing of mindfulness is through developing the noble path, and that includes all the factors of the path: right view all way through right concentration.

So this is not just a passive watching, or observing, or bare awareness. You're trying to develop every factor of the path and, in so doing, your mindfulness gets stronger. Because after

all, what are you mindful of? You're mindful of the body in and of itself, feelings, mind states, mental qualities in and of themselves, but you're also mindful of the tasks that go along with the path, particularly the path of abandoning whatever is unskillful and developing whatever is skillful. You keep that in mind as well.

This means learning how to draw on whatever tools you have as a meditator. You've got to have a wide range of tools. If you were a carpenter with only a hammer, you'd never get anywhere in trying to build anything. If you were a cook who knew only how to fry things, but didn't know how to boil, didn't know how to roast, didn't know how to do any of the other techniques, you'd be a very limited cook. And the same as a meditator: You've got to have lots of techniques, lots of approaches to deal with the mind because the mind has many, many conditions, many symptoms. You gain release from them not by just sitting there watching them, but by developing the factors of the path, including right concentration, learning how to read your mind and then providing whatever it lacks.

So remember that there are lots of skills you can develop. And when you've developed them, don't forget them. It's not the case that you go from one level of concentration and then when you hit the next one, you're never going to go back to the early ones. If, when you've learned how to bring the mind to equanimity, you just stay in equanimity, you're missing out on a lot of things that you need. Things begin to run out. The mind can get depleted; the body can get malnourished in terms of breath energy. So you go back and pick up a little bit of rapture, a little bit of ease, a little bit of pleasure to give yourself encouragement.

The same old woman, the first time I met her, came out to Wat Dhammasathit the first time I ordained. One night, as she was sitting there meditating in the group, Ajaan Fuang—who would often speak up to meditators as they were meditating—said, “Hey, you're focusing too long on cool, subtle breathing. If you do that all the time, it's not going to be good for you.” Here she'd been happy that she'd be able to get to that subtle level of breathing, but he said, “Look, you need to go back sometimes and give the body stronger breathing, because the body needs that. It needs to be nourished in different ways at different times.” This is an important part of using your discernment in your meditation: not just sticking with whatever you think is the highest stage you can reach, but realizing that the different stages have their uses, the different levels of concentration have their uses.

So keep in mind the fact that you've got a full toolbox. Try not to forget your tools when you need them.