

The Four Frames of Reference

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When people first come here to stay for a period of meditation, it's important to keep the four frames of reference in mind as a way of getting the mind into seclusion. But it's also interesting to note that when the Buddha gave parting instructions to his monks, one of his themes was to stay with the four frames of reference. The teaching is the same, but it serves different functions when you're coming and when you're going.

When you're coming, you come from being involved with other people: Physically you've been around other people, near them. You interact with them, and mentally you're entangled with them. When you come out to meditate, it's important that you come out not only for physical seclusion, but also for mental seclusion, to start untangling some of those tangles in your mind. The Buddha's recommendation is to just be with the body in and of itself, to be with feelings in and of themselves. In other words, instead of putting a lot of interpretation on the top—thinking about past, thinking about future, what you've left or where you're going after you leave here—you just sit here with what you've got.

This is his interpretation of mental seclusion. You're just one with the present moment, and you're not two with the past or two with the future. And usually it's not just two. It starts multiplying: four, sixteen, 256. It just keeps growing exponentially—all the entanglements you could create and carry around with you. It's important to realize that you *are* creating them. It's an old habit. They seem to be automatically there, but as you sit down and observe the present moment, you begin to realize how much you're actually creating them, how much you put them together.

So the first reminder is just to take them apart as much as you can. When you catch yourself putting things together like that, you just drop the whole project. There's a temptation to want to see a particular thought out to the end. It's like watching a TV show. You sit down for a few minutes, and all of a sudden you feel you've committed to the next half hour, even though you know that nothing earthshaking, nothing really worthwhile, is going to happen in the show. Usually the ending is pretty predictable, but for some reason you feel committed anyhow.

It's the same with thought patterns in the mind. A thought pattern gets started, you start getting involved in it, and you feel you've got to see it all the way through. Well, you don't have to. After all, it's your choice. They're just constructs of the mind, so you can take them apart as you like. Get back simply to the

sensation of the breathing, right here, right now. How does it feel when you breathe in? How does it feel when you breathe out? We have certain preconceived notions about where the breath comes in, how it comes in, how it goes out. But allow yourself to put those notions aside and explore just the actual sensation of breathing. The immediate sensation.

If you allow your mind to open to different possibilities, you can ask: Where does it actually feel like the energy starts? Where does it feel like the energy stops? How do you know when a breath is long enough? How you know when it's too long? How do you know when it's not long enough? Try to get in touch with these sensations in and of themselves. Give yourself something to explore. That's how you can maintain interest in the present. Don't think of it simply as tying the mind down with a leash to the breath. Give it a reason to want to stay, so that even though there is a leash on it, you don't feel constrained, because there's something interesting here: getting in touch with the energy flow in your body, seeing how it actually feels in and of itself.

This way, you can cut off thoughts of past, thoughts of future, because you're making the body in and of itself in the present your frame of reference. You don't look at the body in terms of how it fits into the world or how it fits into your worldview: just simply the sensations in and of themselves, right here, without any other implications. You find, as you do that, that it's easier and easier to cut off distractions as you get more and more absorbed in exploring this process of breathing here in the present moment. When you breathe in, how does it feel in different parts of the body, not just the nose, not just the chest? Explore the different parts of your body, and you begin to see that there are different sensations for the in-breath, different sensations for the out-breath, even in parts of the body you might not expect.

This anchor of your physical sensations in the present moment is the only thing that's going to keep you from wandering off. Otherwise, the mind is like a balloon. If it doesn't have something to hold it down, it just floats where the wind will blow it, and who knows where it's going to come down.

So use these present sensations as an anchor—for developing seclusion, for taking the physical seclusion you've got here and adding mental seclusion on top.

Now, when you leave here, you want to take that seclusion along with you. You go back to being entangled with other people, involved with other people, but you want to maintain this inner sense of seclusion. Learn to realize that physical entanglement doesn't need to mean mental entanglement. Carry the wilderness back with you into society.

Because when there's entanglement, there's also going to be separation, and the Buddha's pointed this out many, many times: "I will grow different, separate from all that is dear and appealing to me." How do we protect ourselves from the grief that can come from that? Well, as the Buddha said, you take yourself as your refuge. You take the Dhamma as your refuge. "Dhamma" here can mean not only the Buddha's teachings, but also dhammas in the sense of mental qualities. Learn how to look at the events in the mind simply as that, simply as mental events in and of themselves. They come and they go. You watch the coming and you watch the going from this anchored position, being with the breath, being with the body.

At some point in the practice, it's got to hit you. What kind of happiness are you going to find in these different mental states? They come and they go. They're just things that come and go. And the happiness that you create out of them? It's based on a very unstable foundation.

So again, you want to strip things down to their basic elements. That's why you stay with body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, mind in and of itself, mental qualities in and of themselves: the events that come and go in the mind. Keep things at that level. Then, if you start building relationships outside, it's possible to have actual relationships with other people, but not to have your hopes for happiness dependent on those relationships.

But you have to learn how to deconstruct all the constructs your mind creates around them. How do you do that? By looking at the mental states that come and go in the mind simply as that: simply as mental states, without looking into their meaning, without getting involved in the story, the narrative. This has a solvent effect on a lot of the constructs we create. It helps us keep in mind the fact that they are constructs, and because they're constructed, they're going to come crashing down someday.

So try to keep yourself as close as possible to the basic elements. Usually, the more you start constructing stories out of them, the more you start taking other things as your frame of reference, then the more you're setting yourself up for a fall. You have to start looking more and more closely at: What are these basic elements that you're constructing things out of? You begin to realize that there's nothing at all that you could make out of them that could be lasting.

It's like building a house out of frozen meat. It's hard enough to get the house constructed, but you'd realize that as soon as it reaches the heat of a normal day, the whole thing is going to collapse. It's at this point, the Buddha says, that you incline your mind to the deathless. You see that even staying as close as possible to the raw materials is no guarantee of true happiness, either. It's a safer position

than allowing yourself to construct all sorts of elaborate Rube Goldberg constructions, but still, it's not totally safe. Total safety comes with inclining the mind to the deathless, opening up to the deathless. That can happen only when you're really good at deconstructing things in the mind, keeping things at their most basic: physical sensations in and of themselves, feelings in and of themselves, mind states, mental events in and of themselves.

This is called taking the Dhamma as your refuge. You're taking the dhammas of mental qualities as your refuge: in other words, keeping things in their deconstructed state as much as possible. There's refuge there, so that you don't get crushed by them, as would happen if you tried to create all kinds of fancy domes and arches and seven-story buildings out of them. If the bricks are on the ground, they're not going to fall on you. And when you see it clearly that they *are* just bricks, you say, "There must be something better than this."

That's what opens you up to your true refuge, that can sense the Dhamma—here meaning nibbana, the deathless. The unconditioned. That's the ultimate refuge.

So the Buddha's greeting when you begin to meditate is to stay with the four frames of reference. When you leave, when you part, again, the instruction is to stay with the four frames of reference. That's your safety. That's your protection as you go through the world. In other words, you don't take the world as your frame of reference. You stay on this level as much as you can.

That, he says, is an island. The word *island* here is part of a much larger simile where he talks about the floods in the mind: the floods of sensuality, the floods of views, the floods of states of becoming, of ignorance. These things come flowing out of the mind, and if you don't have an island, you drown. It's by staying with these four frames of reference that you create an island for yourself that the flood waters will not overcome.

Keep this in mind as you come and as you go. This is the way you take the seclusion of the monastery and carry it back with you into the world. In other words, you take the causes for seclusion, the skills that help create that sense of inner seclusion. That's what you can take back with you. You can't take the atmosphere or the outer seclusion of the monastery, but you can take these skills that create inner seclusion, which is the most important type of seclusion there is.