

The Fourth Frame of Reference

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Ajaan Lee often made the point that when you're focused on the breath, you don't have just the first frame of reference or the first foundation of mindfulness. You have all four right there. The breath is the body in and of itself. That's the first frame of reference. The feelings of pleasure or pain that you're encountering as you deal with the breath count as feelings in and of themselves. That's the second. As for the mind state you're trying to develop, you find that it's either defiled or not. Or as you get further into this third frame of reference, you start noticing when the mind is concentrated or when it's not; when it's expanded or enlarged, or when it's not; whether it's released or not; whether it's ever been excelled or not.

And then there's the fourth frame of reference, the dhammas. Often we don't have a real handle on how to make use of that fourth frame of reference, because it looks like little more than a list of Dhamma teachings. But it's much more than that. It's a list of different ways you can look at problems that come up in the course of your practice. You can look at things in terms of the five hindrances, the five clinging-aggregates, the six sense media, the seven factors for awakening, or the four noble truths. Each of these lists provides a useful framework for looking at what's actually going on in different aspects of the practice. And not just looking: They also give you guidance in what to do. These are not exercises in bare awareness, because each of the different members of the list carries a specific duty. Once you've figured out what's happening in terms of that particular framework, you know what to do in response. You know what to do proactively.

For instance, as we're going through daily life, one of the main issues in practice is restraint of the senses. This is an area where it's good to use the framework of the six sense media. As the Buddha said in this context, when you're looking, try to notice: Where is the fetter in the looking? If you're listening, where is the fetter in the listening? And the "fetter" here is defined as a sense of passion and delight for what you're looking at, or for why you're looking. It's not always the case that a sense of delight comes up after you've noticed something. Sometimes you have a very clear idea of what you want to look for: You want to get riled up about something, you want to get attracted by something, so you go looking for it.

This is especially true with thoughts. Notice, when a thought comes up, "What's the appeal of this thought? Why do I go for this particular kind of thinking?" Once you've looked at the appeal, then look at the drawbacks. What are the drawbacks of going along with that kind of thinking? If you gave that particular kind of thinking free rein in your mind, where would it lead you? If you notice a fetter—in other words, you really are delighting in something to the point where it pulls you away from your center—don't just sit there and say, "Oh, I'm fettered," and leave it at that. You've got to do something to cut the fetter—because those fetters are the cause of suffering, which means that your duty with regard to them is to abandon them as soon as you notice them. Of

course the big problem here is that we often enjoy our fetters. We actually create them for the purpose of enjoying them. So we have to do something we usually don't like to do: to look at our enjoyment and see where it's causing problems. It may seem pleasant and entertaining right now, but where is it going to take you down the line?

So that's a framework you can use as you go through the day. And you can use it during your meditation as well. You're sitting here focusing on the breath, and all of a sudden your mind is off on something you saw last week, something you read yesterday, or something you're anticipating tomorrow. Look for the fetter. Where is the sense of passion? Where is the sense of delight in that particular thinking? What can you do to see through it to pry yourself away from that enjoyment? As the Buddha noted, the best thing is to pull yourself away from these unskillful ways of thinking and to encourage harmless ways of thinking instead. From there you direct the mind into concentration.

This is where the two frameworks of the hindrances and the factors for awakening become useful. When you sit down and try to get the mind concentrated, it's useful to figure out exactly, "What's going on here? Which hindrance is bedeviling me right now?" Once you're able to classify a disturbance as sensual desire, ill will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, or uncertainty, then you know what to do with it. And sometimes just recognizing it as the problem gets you over the hump.

This is because one of the characteristics of the hindrances is that they deceive you. When desire arises, your mind is usually already on the side of the desire. You don't see it as a problem. The thing you desire *really is* something desirable. When you have ill will for somebody, that person really is awful. When the mind is torpid, well, it's time to get some rest. It's time to sleep. The mind is getting too tired. And so on down the line. You have to learn to see these things as genuine hindrances, as real obstacles on your path, and not be fooled into siding with them. Ask yourself, "What is this hindering me from?" Well, for one thing, it's hindering you from learning about the potentials of concentration. You sit here rehashing your old ways of thinking and will never get out of your old ruts.

We read about the ajaans, about the people in the Canon who gained strong states of concentration. We read about the descriptions of concentration. But what's the reality of concentration? Exactly what do those words correspond to? If you spend all your time playing around with the hindrances, you never get to know. The only way to gain direct knowledge of these things is to bring some appropriate attention to the hindrance, seeing that it's a cause of suffering. Try to look for where the stress is, look where the limitation is, to see how that hindrance is squandering your energy. And then look for ways to abandon it.

When you do this, you're developing the first three factors for awakening: mindfulness, analysis of qualities, and persistence. Mindfulness is what helps you remember to look for what's skillful and unskillful; analysis of qualities—which is nurtured by appropriate attention—is what enables you to recognize skillful and unskillful qualities as they arise; and persistence is what carries through with the desire to develop the skillful and abandon the unskillful ones. Analysis of qualities actually helps you in many ways. It not only recognizes what's skillful and not, but also helps you figure out how to undercut an unskillful state of mind, like a hindrance, and how to develop the remaining factors for awakening in its place. As a set, these seven factors for awakening are

a good framework for understanding how to get the mind to settle down. In particular, you look to see that these factors are balanced. If they're not, how do you bring them into balance?

There's a sutta that compares this balancing act to getting a fire to burn at just the right level of intensity. In other words, you're trying to develop the fire of concentration, the fire of jhana, a steady flame of centered awareness. Sometimes it looks like it's about to go out because the level of energy is too low. In cases like that, you don't want to emphasize qualities like serenity or concentration or equanimity. You want to emphasize more active qualities. Get the mind moving again. Analyze things as to what's skillful and unskillful, and then put in whatever effort is needed to get rid of the unskillful qualities and develop the skillful ones. In taking this more active role, you can develop a strong sense of rapture, refreshment, as the skillful qualities get strengthened. This further energizes the mind. If, on the other hand, your mind is too active, that's when you try to calm it down. Go for serenity. Get the mind to focus on easing the breath, calming the breath down, working through tension in the body, until the mind gets more solid and can come to a state of equanimity and equipoise.

So, again, these frameworks of the five hindrances and the seven factors for awakening are not just guidelines for bare awareness. They're frameworks telling you what to do if you find yourself facing a particular type of mind state as you're trying to bring the mind to strong concentration. They help you get a sense of what your duty is, where you can find the path out of that particular unbalanced or unskillful state. Or if you find that you're balanced and the mind is doing fine, then your duty is to maintain it. You don't just say, "Oh, that's what concentration is like," and just let it drop. You try to keep it going, you try to understand what causes it so that you can maintain it. This is where you try to bring in an element of will power.

A couple of years back, I was talking to a group of people in training to become vipassana teachers. I was mentioning just this element of trying to keep the mind steady, and one of them said, "Well, it sounds like you're talking about using willpower, but I know that that's not what you mean." And I said, "That's precisely what I mean." The element of intention is willpower, and it's something you've got to use in the practice. But you can't use just strength of will to get things done. You also have to use your understanding of cause and effect so that your use of willpower is a skillful use of your will. This is what the categories of the fourth frame of reference are for. They're there to help give you guidance, once a particular state comes up in the mind, as to what you've got to do if you really want to find true happiness. In other words, they're not just instructions in how to respond to situations. They're also instructions in how to take a proactive role in giving rise to the path.

This is even clearer in the categories of the four noble truths. You analyze things first in terms of the first noble truth—the five clinging-aggregates—to understand where's the stress here, where's the suffering here, where and how you're clinging to these things. In particular, you want to learn how to identify each of the clinging-aggregates—form, feeling, perception, fabrication, and consciousness—as events, activities, to see what spurs them into action and how they stop. Then you try to notice how you're clinging to them: how you keep compulsively repeating them. Then you take your clinging apart. If something's disturbing your concentration, take it apart in terms of these five clinging-

aggregates: Where's the clinging? What kind of clinging is it? Is it sensual clinging? Is it clinging in terms of habits and practices? Views? Ideas of what you are or what belongs to you? Try to comprehend it—which, after all, is the duty with regard to the first noble truth.

Once you've comprehended the suffering, you should be able to see where its cause is. What's causing you to cling? Where's the craving? Try to catch it happening. When you can catch it happening, the duty there is to abandon it. As for whatever aspects of the path that can help you see these things, you develop them, all eight factors of the path, and particularly right concentration. This is where you get proactive.

When you've mastered concentration, the framework of the five clinging-aggregates comes in again. When all the factors of the path are in a good state of balance, you start analyzing the concentration in terms of the five aggregates to see where it, too, is stressful. Even the equanimity of the fourth jhana has its element of stress. You've got to look for that so you can develop dispassion all around.

This is why, when you've mastered concentration, it's useful to take these states of concentration apart in these ways. Where is feeling playing a role there? Where's the perception? Where are the thought fabrications? Where's the consciousness of this? Which aspect are you clinging to? Can you see the drawbacks of that clinging? It's helpful here to look in terms of the three perceptions—or of any of the perceptions that help to develop a sense of dispassion. You look for the inconstancy. Once you've perceived the inconstancy, you look to see that that's stressful. When you see the stress, you realize that it can't possibly be a happiness you'd like to claim as your own. Or you learn to perceive the aggregates that make up your concentration as empty, a disease, a wound. There must be something better.

This line of perceiving, this approach, is what finally gets you past all your attachments and brings you to something really solid, something unfabricated. At that point, you can put even these strategic perceptions down, for they've done their work. You've been carrying out these skillful duties to arrive at something that doesn't carry a duty. As Ajaan Mun once said, nibbana carries no duty for the mind at all. Each of the four noble truths entails a duty, but nibbana is something beyond the four noble truths, something outside of the framework of the four frames of reference and their attendant duties. It's not an activity in any way.

So it's helpful to look at this fourth frame of reference as a series of guidelines. When a problem comes up, figure out which framework is useful for analyzing where you are in the practice and for pointing the practice in the direction you want to go. Learn to see what's going on in your mind in terms of these frameworks, so you can figure out what to do, what's the duty here. This helps you to step back from just being in your thought worlds in a way that allows you to take them apart in terms of their elements: the events and activities that put them together. This in turn gives you a much better idea of what to do with them, instead of what you have been doing, which has been to cling to them and suffer.

This is how you take apart this big mass of suffering in the mind. If you learn how to take it apart, you really see it's not a solid mountain of rock. It's just a pile of gravel. And each little piece of gravel is not all that heavy. You can deal with it

much more easily as a piece of gravel than as part of a solid mass of rock. So try to familiarize yourself with these different frameworks and you'll get a much better handle on how to deal with the problems of the mind.