

Fighting Attitude

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The fourth frame of reference for meditation, or the fourth foundation of mindfulness is dhammas, which can mean objects of the mind or mental qualities.

And it's interesting that of the various foundations of mindfulness, as described in the Satipatthana Sutta, this is the one that recommends the most active interaction with what's going on in the mind.

For example, if hindrances come up in the mind, you don't simply watch them come and go. First, you want to be aware that they're there—and aware of when they're *not* there. This is an important skill, because sometimes they're not there when you think they are; sometimes they're there when you think they aren't.

An example of the first case is when you're angry. The anger flares up and your blood starts racing, your heart starts beating faster. Then the actual thought of anger disappears for a while from the mind but the physical symptoms of anger are still there. And so you assume, "Well I must still be angry." And so that churns it up again.

It's important that you learn how to distinguish between the physical symptoms of anger and the actual mental act of anger itself, because they're two different things. You could have the physical symptoms—because, after all, the hormones are still there in your bloodstream—even though the actual thought of anger has gone away.

An example of having a hindrance when you don't think it's there is when you start thinking about things, insights into the Dhamma seem to be coming, and your thoughts swerve off into abstraction. If your thinking pulls you away from the present moment, that's restlessness—even if you're thinking about Dhamma. Those thoughts can get in the way of your actually seeing what's going on in the mind.

Sometimes an insight comes into the mind and you grab onto it. You don't wait to see, "Well, what happens next?" Once the insight leaves the mind, what's going to replace it? Does it really have a big effect on the mind or is it just a temporary effect?

So to detect these things, you have to be very watchful. Keep the breath as your anchor and as your test of whether you're able to stay with something or not. If staying with a line of thought pulls you away from the breath, you'd better let it go for the time being. And having the mind with the breath gives these hindrances something to bang up against.

In other words, if you don't have something to hold onto solidly here in the

present moment, thoughts come into the mind, mental qualities, mental states come into the mind, and you go along with the flow. If there's no resistance, you don't really realize that anything has happened. It's when part of the mind is trying to stay with the breath and another part seems to be going someplace else: when there's that resistance, you realize that something's up, something's happened in the mind. That helps to alert you that there's something you've got to look into.

So the first step is simply to be aware when these things come, when they go. But when they come, you don't just sit there and endure them. You try to figure out *how* do they come, *how* do they go? What do you do to put an end to them? That's the next step.

In other words, you're not a victim of whatever comes flowing into the mind. And although patience and equanimity are virtues, they're virtues with a proper time and a proper place. If you're in a situation where you simply cannot figure out what to do with an unskillful state that comes into the mind, then you watch patiently to see if you can detect something you haven't detected before.

But a lot of these hindrances are old friends. You already know them well. When anger comes, you know anger. And you know there are certain tools for dealing with it. The same for sloth and drowsiness, restlessness, uncertainty, sensual desire. There are ways of thinking, ways of focusing the mind that can help get around them.

With sensual desire, you want to focus on the drawbacks of whatever it is you're feeling attracted to. Actually, the object itself may not have all those drawbacks but the fact of being hooked on that object: That has a lot of drawbacks. But one of the ways of helping get you unhooked is to look to the negative side of whatever the object is.

If it's lust, you look for the unattractive side of the body—and there's lots to see. People are always complaining that Buddhism has a very negative view of the body. Well, when you take the body apart—what have you got? Which part inside the body is Buddhism lying about? Which part is something really lovely that you'd like to put on a shelf? And even though there are artists who take body parts and put them in the museums, it's for their shock value.

So when you find lust coming up in the mind, you try to counteract it, looking at the parts of the body, thinking of what the body's going to be like ten years, twenty years, thirty years, forty years from now. And you find the lust just withers away. Now, again, the physical symptoms of lust may still be there, but once the mental state is gone, do your best not to bring it back. Keep thinking about the drawbacks of the object, the drawbacks of the lust itself, and you find that everything begins to calm down.

When there's ill will or anger, we're often told that goodwill is the antidote

for that—and it is one of the antidotes. But actually, all four of the sublime abidings can function in this way. For example, equanimity in the sense of reflecting on karma: that if you get involved in wishing ill to other people, what kind of karma is that for you? Where is it going to take you? Does it take you someplace you want to go? Well, not really. If their karma really is bad, it'll take care of itself. You don't have to get involved.

Each of the hindrances has antidotes. If you're getting sleepy and drowsy, get up and walk around. Change your object of meditation. Meditate on something that wakes you up. This can sometimes simply mean changing the rhythm of your breathing; sometimes it means changing the object that you're focused on. If you've memorized some chants, repeat the chants in your mind. Something to get the juices flowing.

Or you can make the symptoms of drowsiness an object lesson, "What is it like? How do you know that there's drowsiness in the mind? What are the physical symptoms? What are the mental symptoms?" Try to take a catalogue of them. And the simple act of trying to take note of things will wake you up.

If you find that none of these approaches work, then it's a sign that the body may really need to rest. So give it some rest. But make a mental note that when you wake up again, you'll get up and meditate immediately. You won't just lie around or turn over and take another forty winks, which turn into a hundred, a thousand, ten-thousand winks.

In other words, you've got to test that particular defilement before you give in.

With restlessness it's often good to focus on how comfortable you can make the breath, because the physical side of a restless mind is a very uncomfortable physical state. Try to smooth things out in the body by the way you breathe. Calm things down. Think of the breath as a soothing energy that can penetrate through every little cell in your body. And work on that. Think of every little corner of the body. Make a survey. If the mind has the energy to think, well, have it think about the breath energy in the body and making a calming soothing breath spread everywhere.

If a particular issue has you worried, concerned about the future, then remind yourself, "If you're going to think through that issue properly, you've got to get the mind to calm down first." This is so that you don't give into the argument that says, "Hey, this is something really important, you've got to think about this. Otherwise dangers going to come; it's going to be a disaster." Say, "Well, let me get the mind in proper shape to think. Then we'll be able to think it through." And return to the breath.

As for uncertainty: There's uncertainty about yourself in the practice and there's uncertainty about the practice itself. In the second case you think about the type of people who've been teaching this practice, who've been keeping it

alive all these 2,500 years. What kind of people were they? They weren't out just to please other people. They made all kinds of sacrifices, found the truth, found a way to true happiness inside and then were willing to share it with anybody else who came along. If you can't trust people like that, who are you going to trust?

As for doubts about yourself, remind yourself of the Sangha, the Sangha of noble disciples. Throughout the past there have been all kinds of people: old people, young people; men, women, children; well-educated people, people with no education at all. Even cases of people who've contemplated suicide. There are a couple of verses in the Theragatha and Therigatha: people who run amok from their dwelling five or six times, going berserk just because they couldn't get the mind to settle down. But finally they *were* able to get it to settle down and gain awakening.

In other words, real human beings with real weaknesses but also some reservoirs of strength that they were able to finally able to tap into. They can do it; you can do it.

When you find the mind is ready to settle down, then stay with the breath. If other things in life are uncertain, at least you can know this: When the breath is coming in, you know it's coming in. When it goes out, you know it's going out. If you're going to find any certain knowledge in life, you have to start from something that's immediate like this and then build on top of that.

So in every case, no matter what the hindrance, no matter what the defilement, don't simply give into it. You've got to fight it. And if your resistance doesn't work this time, that doesn't mean it won't work the next time. At least put up a fight.

What we're learning here is called "warrior knowledge." Back in the ancient world they made a distinction between two types of knowledge: warrior knowledge and scribe knowledge. Scribe knowledge covers the kinds of things you can write down, things that can be defined and put into words. And anybody who learns how to write, anybody who learns how to read can pick up that kind of knowledge. Warrior knowledge, however, is a skill. It's something you learn by doing. And only the people who put themselves in difficult situations can learn it.

Buddhism makes a similar distinction: There's the insight that comes from listening—which also includes reading—and the insight that comes from thinking. These two correspond to scribe knowledge. Then there's the insight that comes from developing qualities in the mind. That's warrior knowledge. As you're trying to develop mindfulness, you learn new things about your mind. You run into specific defilements that you have to fight, but you also find reservoirs of strength in your mind that you might not have known before, through your determination to stick with it.

In Ajaan Mun's final Dhamma talk he said, "There are lots of things you've got to let go of in the practice, but the one thing you hold onto is your determination to see things through to the end of suffering." That's your inner warrior.

And so the knowledge that comes from developing the mind through meditation: Often it's unexpected knowledge. You learn things out in the battlefield that you wouldn't learn sitting at a desk and reading a book on battles in a room someplace.

And it's the same with your mind. You can read about sloth and torpor, you can read about all the different hindrances, but it's very different when you've got one right in your mind that's threatening to take it over. The question is, are you going to give in or are you going to put up a fight? If you're going to put up a fight, what tools do you have, what approaches do you have? Some are the ones you can learn from the texts, but there's a lot you've got to develop on your own by using your ingenuity.

Of course, there *are* things you can learn simply by being patient and being equanimous about what comes into the mind. But it's not nearly as good as the knowledge you gain when you actually have overcome sloth and torpor, actually have overcome sensual desire in your mind. You see what works. And you realize you don't have to sit there and put up with this stuff. You put in the effort, you get around these unskillful states of mind, and you develop skillful states in their stead. That's a much better place to be.

So wisdom doesn't lie in simply accepting things as they come. It lies in seeing what you have to accept and what you don't have to accept. And you don't know the difference unless you try to work your way around unskillful states.

Wisdom lies in realizing how much power you have in the present moment. Some of the things you experience in the present moment come from the past, but there's an awful lot that comes from the present: your intentions right now. And again, you won't know the difference until you try to change your intentions. See what difference that makes.

This is the principle we learn as we work with the breath. If you simply let the body breathe in and out on its own, it's going to fall into its old habits. And often those old habits are based on certain expectations that you've developed over time but you've never really examined. The only way you get to know them is to question them: Try new ways of breathing, try new ways of conceiving the breathing, try new ways of focusing. You'll find yourself running up against a lot of things in the mind that you hadn't seen before.

It's like being a scientist. Scientists don't simply watch. They experiment. They try changing the causal conditions in any particular situation to see which conditions really make a difference and which conditions don't. It's through

the doing that you gain knowledge.

Here the doing is trying to develop skillful qualities in the mind.

So take the attitude that you're learning warrior knowledge here. Warriors don't just roll over when someone comes and attacks them. Even if the situation may seem hopeless, at least they try to put up a fight. If they're in a position where they can choose their battles, they do choose them. They don't go out scrapping all the time. But once something comes up and it's unavoidable, they do what they can. And they find victory in unexpected places.

So always keep your warrior alive: the determination that there must be an end to suffering and if it's possible to find it through human effort, you're going to do it. That's the attitude that will see you through.