The Four Frames of Reference

The four frames of reference *(satipatthana)* are a set of teachings that show where a meditator should focus attention and how. This dual role — the "where" and the "how" — is reflected in the fact that the term *satipatthana* can be explained etymologically in two ways.

On the one hand, it can be regarded as a compound of *sati* (mindfulness, reference, the ability to keep something in mind) and *patthana* (foundation, condition, source), thus referring to the **object** kept in mind as a frame of reference for giving context to one's experience.

Alternatively, *satipatthana* can be seen as a compound of *sati* and *upatthana* (establishing near, setting near), thus referring to the **approach** (the *how)* of keeping something closely in mind, of establishing and maintaining a solid frame of reference.

Scholars are divided as to which interpretation is right, but for all practical purposes they both are. The Buddha was more a poet than a strict etymologist, and he may have deliberately chosen an ambiguous term that would have fruitful meanings on more than one level.

In the practice of the frames of reference, both the proper object and the proper approach are crucial for getting the proper results. In fact, as we shall see, the taking of a proper object entails the beginning of the proper approach, and the approach ends by taking as its objects the qualities of mind developed in the course of pursuing the approach itself. In other words, as we mentioned in the Introduction concerning the Buddha's Awakening, the "what" merges with the "how" as the "how" of the investigation ultimately becomes what gets investigated.

The texts give two different pictures of the role that the frames of reference play in the practice. Some [§§33, 34, 36 See original article cited at end of this excerpt] state that developing the frames of reference is a precondition for jhāna, which then forms a basis for transcendent discernment. Others [§§27, 43] make no mention of jhāna, stating that one goes directly from the frames of reference to the transcendent. On the surface, this would seem to indicate that there are two alternate paths: one with and one without jhāna. This reading, though, contradicts the many passages maintaining that jhāna is necessary for the development of transcendent discernment [§§165, 166, 171, 173, 178; some of these passages simply say "concentration" instead of jhāna, but there seems to be every reason to assume that concentration here means right concentration, which is nothing other than jhāna].

Thus we must look for an alternative reading, and we find one suggested by passages indicating that the development of the frames of reference implicitly entails the full development of the seven factors for Awakening. Because these factors are closely associated with jhāna, this would indicate that the proper development of the frames of reference necessarily incorporates, in and of itself, the practice of jhāna.

This reading is confirmed by §29, which states that the way to develop the frames of reference is through the noble eightfold path, which includes jhāna. It is also confirmed by §31, which describes how the frames of reference relate to the sixteen steps of breath meditation. As we shall see in III/E, these sixteen steps are also a description of how jhāna is developed and then used as a vehicle for fostering discernment and ending the effluents of the mind. Thus, we can view the outline of frames-of-reference practice as a description of the stages in the mindful mastery of jhāna and its application to the ending of the effluents.

The proper objects that act as frames of reference are four: the body in and of itself, feelings in and of themselves, the mind in and of itself, and mental qualities in and of themselves. The "in and of itself" here is important. To take the body as a frame of reference in this way, for instance, means that one views it not in terms of its function in the world — for then the world would be the frame of reference — but simply on its own terms, as it is directly experienced. In other words, one is not concerned with its relative worth or utility in terms of the values of the world — its beauty, strength, agility, etc. — but simply how it appears when regarded in and of itself.

The four objects that act as frames of reference fall into two classes. The first class — the body, feelings, and the mind — act as the "given" objects of meditation practice: what experience presents, on its own, as an object for meditation. The meditator takes any one of these objects as a frame of reference, relating all of experience to his/her chosen frame. For example, although one will experience feelings and mind states in the course of taking the body as a frame of reference, one tries to relate them to the experience of the body as their primary frame. A feeling is viewed as it affects the body, or the body affects it. The same holds for a mind state. An analogy for this practice is holding an object in one's hand. When other objects come into contact with the hand, one is aware that they are making contact, but one does not let go of the object in one's hand in order to grasp after them.

The second class of objects — mental qualities *(dhamma)* — denotes the qualities of mind that are developed and abandoned as one masters the meditation. The list of "dhammas" given in §30 would seem to belie the translation "mental qualities" here, as they include not only the five hindrances and seven factors for Awakening, which are obviously mental qualities, but also the five aggregates, the six sense media, and the four noble truths, which would seem to fit better with another meaning of the word *dhamma,* i.e., "phenomena." However, if we look more closely at each of these other classes, we will see that they actually deal with variant forms of abandoning the hindrances and developing the factors for Awakening. The section on the sense media focuses less on the media than on the abandoning of the fetters — passion and delight (SN 41.1; MFU pp. 52-53) — associated with those media. The section on the aggregates describes a state of practice that is elsewhere [§149] identified as a developed form of concentration, in which the aggregates that comprise the state of jhāna form the object of analysis [§173]. The section on the noble truths describes a state of practice that elsewhere [§169] is said to require the sort of mental stability and clarity found only in jhāna. Thus all the approaches to "dhammas in and of themselves" would appear to be variations on the abandoning of the hindrances and the development of the factors for Awakening. Because the stated function of the frames of reference is to bring about the culmination of the factors for Awakening, and through them the development of clear knowing and release [§92], the translation of *dhamma* as "mental quality" seems an appropriate way to keep that function in mind and to avoid getting lost in the details of its different aspects.

There is historical support for this interpretation as well. The Vibhanga, an ancient Abhidhamma text, includes only the hindrances and the factors for Awakening in its discussion of this heading. The same holds true with the Sarvastivadin version of this discourse, preserved in Chinese translation. Scholars have questioned whether these two texts should be taken as evidence that the original discussion of *dhamma* here included only these two topics. The issue is impossible to decide from the texts available to us, but a case can be made for concluding that, regardless of what the original version may have been, the early tradition regarded the abandoning of the hindrances and the development of the factors for Awakening as encompassing all the factors that might be included under this heading.

Each of the four objects of mindfulness is said to be sufficient for bringing about Awakening [§44]. This point is easy to understand if we look at the approach taken to each of the objects, for then it becomes clear that the approach ultimately involves the development of mental qualities in and of themselves, regardless of what object is first taken up for meditation.

That approach falls into three stages. **The first stage** — here taking the body as an example — is simply called the frame of reference [§29]:

"There is the case where a monk remains focused on the body in and of itself — ardent, alert, and mindful — putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world."

Four terms in this passage are key. "Remaining focused" *(anupassin)* can also be translated as "keeping track." This denotes the element of concentration in the practice, as one tries to stay with one particular theme in the midst of the welter of experience. "Ardent" *(atapi)* denotes the factor of effort or exertion in the practice; the Commentary equates this with right exertion, which contains an element of discernment in its ability to distinguish skillful from unskillful mental qualities. "Alert" *(sampajano)* means being clearly aware of what is happening in the present. This, too, relates to discernment. "Mindful" *(satima)* literally means being able to remember or recollect. Here it means keeping one's task in mind. The task here is a dual one — remaining focused on one's frame of reference, and putting aside the distractions of greed and distress that would come from shifting one's frame of reference back to the world. In other words, one tries to stay with the phenomenology of immediate experience, without slipping back into the narratives and world views that make up one's sense of the world. In essence, this is a concentration practice, with the three qualities of ardency, alertness, and mindfulness devoted to attaining concentration. Mindfulness keeps the theme of the meditation in mind, alertness observes the theme as it is present to awareness, and also is aware of when the mind has slipped from its theme. Mindfulness then remembers where the mind should be focused, and ardency tries to return the mind to its proper theme — and to keep it there — as quickly and skillfully as possible. In this way, these three qualities help to seclude the mind from sensual preoccupations and unskillful mental qualities, thus bringing it to the first jhāna.

Passage §33 confirms this reading by equating the successful performance of this first stage in the practice with the first jhāna, whereas §§35-36 give advice on how to bring the mind to concentration if this method does not work: focus on the problem of the mind's not settling down, and bring the mind to an inspiring theme that will accomplish the desired end.

When the method does work, §33 describes the next step as a variation on the basic exercise:

Remain focused on the body in and of itself, but do not think any thoughts connected with the body.

This, it says, takes the mind to the second jhāna, where directed thoughts and evaluations are abandoned. From there the mind can go up to the third jhāna and the fourth [§72].

These points may be illustrated with some meditation techniques that are currently popular in the West: In a "mental noting" practice, mindfulness is a matter of remembering to keep up the noting, alertness means seeing whatever phenomena arise to be noted, and ardency is a matter of sticking with the noting relentlessly and being ever more quick and precise in one's alertness. In terms of the factors constituting jhāna practice, the mindfulness and alertness here would be related to directed thought, ardency to singleness of preoccupation, while alertness aimed at evaluating the results of the noting — and ardency in keeping the "pressure" of the noting just right — would be related to evaluation. If this practice is then conducted in line with the texts, it should reach a stage where the mind settles down into the singleness of the first jhāna. Then the meditator would be encouraged to stop the noting, so that the mind could engage in the subtler mindfulness and alertness leading to the second jhāna.

In a "scanning" or "body sweep" practice, mindfulness means remembering to stick with the process of scanning the body, while alertness would mean seeing the subtle sensations of the body being scanned. Ardency would mean sticking with the scanning process and trying to be ever more sensitive to the subtlest sensations. As in the previous case, these activities are related to factors of jhāna, and the process, if conducted in line with the texts, should culminate in a state of full-bodied singleness, at which time the motion of the scanning can be brought to stillness, and the mind can enter deeper concentration.

In "breath" practice, mindfulness means keeping the breath in mind as the theme of the meditation, alertness means being sensitive to the sensations of the breath. Ardency means sticking with the process relentlessly, as well as taking up the stages of "training" [§31; III/E], in which one tries to be aware of the entire body with each in and out breath, and to let the breath sensations grow calm. In terms of jhāna factors, mindfulness would be related to directed thought, alertness to evaluation, and ardency to singleness of preoccupation. As awareness fills the body and the breath grows calm, one's alertness stays steadily with the breath, and the mind enters the singleness of jhāna. At this point, one no longer needs consciously to direct the mind to the breath or to enlarge one's awareness any further. Thus the mind, as above, can develop subtler mindfulness and alertness to enter the second jhāna.

According to §32, once concentration has been established on one's own body in this way, it may give rise to a similar "knowledge and vision" of the bodies of other people. Knowledge and vision, here, seems to denote intuitive knowledge through the psychic powers that some people develop through concentration. If used properly, this knowledge can help develop a sense of dispassion toward the processes of existence, as one sees that all bodies, even the most desirable, are subject to the same common shortcomings of being inconstant, stressful, and not-self.

Whether one pursues this meditation with one's own body or the bodies of others, it comes under the first stage of practice, as indicated by the following phrase:

"In this way he remains focused internally on the body in and of itself, or externally on the body in and of itself, or both internally and externally on the body in and of itself."

Once the first stage has produced a solid state of concentration, **the second stage** — the development of the frame of reference [§29] — can begin:

"One remains focused on the phenomenon of origination with regard to the body, on the phenomenon of passing away with regard to the body, or on the phenomenon of origination and passing away with regard to the body."

The "phenomenon of origination and passing away" covers three sorts of events: conditioned occurrences in the object that forms one's frame of reference itself (in this case, the body); events in the other two "object" frames of reference (feelings and mind); or events in the "approach" frame of reference, i.e., the mental qualities that are developed in (or interfere with) the process of taking a frame of reference to begin with. For instance, when focused on the body, one may notice the arising and passing away of breath sensations in the body. Or one might notice the arising and passing away of feelings of pleasure or mental states of irritation while one remains anchored in the body. Or one might notice lapses of mindfulness in one's focus on the body.

In each of these cases, if the origination and passing away is of neutral events, such as the aggregates, one is directed simply to be aware of them as events and to let them follow their natural course unimpeded so as to see what factors accompany them and lead to their origination. As for events connected with the presence or absence of skillfulness, however, one is encouraged to manipulate and experiment with them so as to observe and further understand their causal interrelationships. This will enable one to become skillful in maximizing skillful mental qualities and minimizing unskillful ones. In other words, one develops insight into the process of origination and passing away by taking an active and sensitive role in the process, just as one learns about eggs by trying to cook with them, gathering experience from one's successes and failures in attempting increasingly difficult dishes.

The need for active participation in the practice explains why meditation must begin by mastering a particular technique, rather than passively watching whatever may arise in the present. The technique gives shape to one's present input into the present moment and makes one more sensitive to this aspect of this/that conditionality. It also provides an active context for appreciating mental qualities as they help or hinder one's success in the technique. Eventually, when one's sensitivity is sufficiently well developed, one can go beyond the technique to explore and master the process of causality as it functions in developing skillful qualities in the mind.

This process can be illustrated with the passage devoted to equanimity. In the first step, as one is still in the beginning stages of observing the mind in its attempts at meditation, one simply discerns the presence and absence of equanimity.

There is the case where, there being equanimity as a factor for Awakening present within, he discerns that 'Equanimity as a factor for Awakening is present within me.' Or, there being no equanimity as a factor for Awakening present within, he discerns that 'Equanimity as a factor for Awakening is not present within me.'

In watching the course of this arising and passing away as one tries to bring the mind to the equanimity of jhāna, one should begin to see patterns of cause and effect in what does and doesn't work. This enables one skillfully to give rise to equanimity even when it is not present of its own accord, and — once it is present — can strengthen it until it reaches the point of utmost development:

"He discerns how there is the arising of unarisen equanimity as a factor for Awakening. And he discerns how there is the culmination of the development of equanimity as a factor for Awakening once it has arisen."

A similar process is recommended for events in the "object" frames of reference. This is shown by the standard description of the sixteen steps of breath meditation [§31]. One trains oneself to breathe conscious of the entire body, or to breathe sensitive to feelings of rapture and pleasure, as this training fosters the factors of jhāna. One trains oneself to satisfy, steady, and release the mind, as this training brings mastery over the stages of jhāna. Passage §179 makes a similar point, directing the meditator to replace unskillful forms of distress, joy, and equanimity with more skillful versions of the same emotions, and then replacing skillful distress with skillful joy, and skillful joy with skillful equanimity.

As this process leads to stronger and more refined states of concentration, it refines one's sensitivity to the fact that the grosser one's participation in the process of origination and passing away in the mind, the grosser the level of stress that results. This leads one to let go of the grosser levels of one's participation as one is able to detect them. This can have one of two results. (1) It may lead to even more refined states of concentration, as one abandons the factors that obscure equanimity, or as one focuses one's equanimity on ever more refined objects. (2) Or, as one becomes able to focus on the activity involved even in refining equanimity, one comes to realize that it, too, is a process of input into the present, fabricated for the sake of non-becoming [§182]. Thus, as a sense of dispassion develops toward equanimity, one goes beyond it to the state of non-fashioning *(atammayata)* [§179], through **the third and final stage** of frames-of-reference practice:

"Or his mindfulness that 'There is a body (feeling, mind, mental quality)' is maintained (simply) to the extent of knowledge and recollection. And he remains independent, unsustained by (not clinging to) anything in the world."

This stage corresponds to a mode of perception that the Buddha in *Majjhima Nikaya* 121 terms "entry into emptiness":

"Thus he regards it [this mode of perception] as empty of whatever is not there. Whatever remains, he discerns as present: 'there is this.'"

This is the culminating equipoise where the path of the practice leads unmediated to a state of non-fashioning and from there to the fruit of Awakening and release.

Some meditators, reading the two preceding passages, try to step immediately to the stage of non-fashioning without first having gained the inner sensitivity to cause and effect, action and non-action, that comes from developing concentration. In practice, though, this doesn't work. Only through that sensitivity can the basic causal relationships of dependent co-arising and this/that conditionality be discovered. This discovery is needed to give rise to a sense of dispassion, as one grows more and more disenchanted with the inconstant and artificial nature of all mental phenomena and develops a strong desire to gain release from them. It is also needed to uncover the precise point of non-fashioning between becoming and non-becoming where that release can be found.

As we shall see in later sections (in particular, III/E and III/H), the basic pattern of the three stages in frames-of-reference meditation —

- focusing on events in and of themselves in the present moment,
- understanding their causal relationships with other events by learning to manipulate them skillfully, and then
- arriving at a state of fully developed equipoise, transcending even one's skill, free from any present input into the causal network —

is basic to all aspects of Buddhist meditation practice. Among other things, it underlies the stages in breath meditation, the mastery of concentration, and the strategy of discernment leading to the transcendent. Thus it should be kept firmly in mind when reading passages not only in this section but also throughout the entire book.

The texts contained in this section, for the most part, provide added details to the outline sketched here. For example, §§45-46 provide a variation on stage two by showing how mindfulness can be developed into equanimity by manipulating perceptions, viewing loathsome objects as unloathsome, and unloathsome objects as loathsome, etc. Anyone attempting these perception games needs firm powers of concentration and sharp discernment so as not to become obsessed with perceptual distortions *(sañña vipallasa).* If handled properly, though, the process of manipulation gives important insights into the way the mind labels its objects, and can drive home lessons on the arbitrary nature of perception and the need not to be deceived by it.

The same point holds true for the contemplation of body parts mentioned in §30. This contemplation has been denounced in Western circles for promoting a negative self-image, but here it is necessary to distinguish between healthy and unhealthy negative images of one's own body. An unhealthy negative image is one that views the bodies of other people as attractive, and one's own as unattractive. This is unhealthy in that it creates feelings of inferiority concerning one's own body, compounded by lust and desire for the bodies of others. A healthy negative image sees that all bodies, no matter how attractive, young, or healthy they may seem at the skin level, are composed of the very same parts, all equally unattractive. The livers and intestines of even the most attractive people, if paraded down a walkway, would never capture a title in a beauty contest; if featured in an advertisement, they wouldn't sell. Thus there is no real reason to feel that one's body is inherently inferior to theirs. This perception of the equality of all bodies, if handled properly, is healthy in that it helps liberate one not only from feelings of inferiority and superiority, but also from the disease of lust and desire, promoting a sense of dispassion toward lustful thoughts in general.

As this theme of contemplation is developed through hands-on manipulation of one's perception of the body, it enables one to realize that, when reduced to their simple "bodyness," as bodies in and of themselves, all bodies are on a par, and that questions of attractiveness and unattractiveness derive ultimately from the context of one's frame of reference. One sees that the obstacles to equanimity and higher insights in the practice are not so much the objects of lust or hatred as they are the terms and contexts in which those objects are perceived. This insight can form the basis for perceptual skills that can act as a very liberating antidote to the mind's tendency to self-delusion.

One passage contained here that does not deal with the stages of frames-of-reference meditation is §47. This passage focuses on a charge that has been often leveled at Early Buddhism: that the practice it recommends is essentially selfish, in that one is striving simply for one's own welfare. The Buddha answers this charge by denying any radical distinction between one's own true welfare and that of others. To work for the true welfare of others is to work for one's own true welfare; to work for one's own is to work for theirs. The first point can be illustrated by a number of passages in this collection — showing, for example, how expressions of gratitude to one's parents can foster one's own true happiness [§§123, 124], how support for contemplatives enables one to hear the Dhamma [§128], how virtuous conduct toward other people and their possessions strengthens mindfulness [§27], and how attitudes of good will, compassion, empathetic joy, and equanimity foster concentration and release the mind from obstructive mental qualities [§98]. Thus, the quality of one's assistance to others cannot help but have an effect on the development of one's own mind.

As for the reverse dynamic — the way in which working for one's own welfare also works for the welfare of others — the Buddha illustrates this point with a perceptive analogy for the interaction of living beings: two acrobats balancing on the end of a pole. If one acrobat loses balance, both will fall. For both to stay balanced, each must maintain his or her own balance. This analogy indicates that the act of developing good qualities in one's own mind is, in itself, an act of kindness to others. One protects them from the detrimental effects of one's uncontrolled anger, etc., and exposes them to the beneficial effects of one's own mindfulness, equanimity, and other skillful qualities. Thus it is not possible to practice the frames of reference properly without the rest of the world's benefiting to a greater or lesser degree. And in a world where no one can keep the balance of another person, the example of one's own skill in keeping balance is an instructive gift for those with the eyes to see and the intelligence to take one's example to heart.

Once one has attained full Awakening and needs to do nothing more for one's own welfare, one continues to act for the welfare of others within the framework of three frames of reference (or "establishings of mindfulness") [§179], different from the four discussed in this section. The three are: the ability to remain (1) untroubled, mindful, and alert when others do not respond to one's teachings; (2) equanimous, mindful, and alert when some do and some do not respond to one's teachings; and (3) untroubled, mindful, and alert when others do respond to one's teachings.

In other words, one's mental balance is so firm that others' success or failure in responding to one's help cannot disturb the mind. It is only in this context — the three frames of reference following full Awakening — that the Buddha allows for the possibility of helping others with no thought for one's own welfare, for at that point one's true welfare has no further needs. The Awakened person lives out the remainder of his/her life, insofar as his/her kamma allows, for "the welfare of the many, the happiness of the many, out of compassion for the world" [*Mahavagga* I.11.1].

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