

The Second Frame of Reference

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As you sit here with this bundle of feelings, there are lots of different feelings you could focus on. There are pains in some parts of your body, pleasant feelings in other parts, and nondescript neutral feelings in still other parts. It's not that you have just one feeling at any one time. It's not the case that there's nothing but pain. As Ajaan Lee once said, if your body were totally in pain with no pleasure at all, you'd die. You're alive, so there is pleasure someplace. Ferret it out. Look for it.

In the beginning, it may not seem all that impressive, but there already are pleasant feelings in different parts of the body. The mind has a tendency to focus on the pains because that's what its early warning system is for: to figure out where there's pain that you've got to do something about. But you can cut that switch and focus instead on where the pleasure is instead.

It's like that old book, *Drawing on the Right Side of the Brain*, where the author teaches you not to draw eyes, noses, mouths, or other recognizable features of the faces you're trying to draw. Instead, you focus on drawing the space, say, between the eye and nose, the space between the nose and the mouth. And you end up with a much better likeness because you're focusing on things you don't normally focus on.

So it's the same with the pleasures and pains in the body. Instead of complaining about where there's stiffness or soreness or a sense of blockage in the body, focus on the areas where things are going well. Again Ajaan Lee: He says it's like going into a house where you know some of the floorboards are rotten, so you don't step there. You step where the floorboards are sound. Or when you're eating a mango, you don't eat the rotten spots. You eat the spots that are good. And you make the most of them. What this means is that you focus on the pleasure in a way that helps to maintain it and allow it to grow. When it feels good, you can spread it around. As the Buddha says, you want to suffuse the body with the sense of ease, the sense of fullness that grows as you focus on the breath.

All this comes under the second frame of reference: feelings in and of themselves as your frame of reference. If you read the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* on the topic, it's possible to understand it as telling you simply to stick with whatever feeling comes up, because there's just a list of the different types of feeling you could focus on: pleasant feelings, painful feelings, and neutral feelings; pleasure of the flesh—i.e., pleasures, physical or mental, relating to sensuality; pleasure not of the flesh—related to the practice of concentration— pain of the flesh, pain not of the flesh, and so on. The way these things are simply listed makes it sound like you just watch these feelings as they arise and pass away, without getting involved in them, without trying to foster skillful feelings or abandon unskillful ones.

But if you read the *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* in context, you realize that the Buddha is not telling you just to focus on whatever comes up willy-nilly. There's a sutta where he asks, "How do you develop the four establishments of mindfulness? You develop them by developing the eightfold path"—and that includes everything from right view on down through right effort and right concentration. Right mindfulness builds on right effort and is a natural continuation

of it; it's meant to lead toward right concentration. The *Mahasatipatthana Sutta* itself talks about ardency as one of the qualities you bring to this practice. The sutta itself doesn't explain ardency—that's one of the reasons that it's not a comprehensive treatment of mindfulness practice—but other passages in the Canon show that ardency means right effort, generating the desire to do what's skillful and to abandon what's unskillful. So in this context, some ways of focusing on pleasure are unskillful, and some ways of focusing on pleasure are skillful.

In some of the other suttas where the Buddha discusses feeling, he explicitly recommends ways to respond to different types of feelings. For example, with physical feelings: When pleasures of the flesh arise, you have to watch out for the tendency to get obsessed with passion around them. When pains of the flesh arise, watch out for the tendency to get obsessed with irritation around them. If you're trying to find a good basis for a solid happiness inside, you want to develop the pleasures not of the flesh, i.e., the pleasure that comes from concentration.

So learn how to gain some control over your feelings. Now this may sound strange. How can you control your feelings? Sometimes we have the sense that our feelings are who we really are, and that they're a given. But that's not how the Buddha explains them. He says that in every feeling there's an element of fabrication, i.e., an element of intention. This applies to physical feelings as well as to mental feelings. You want to learn how to see where that element of intention is, and how to engage in that element skillfully.

As he says that, for the sake of having a feeling, we fabricate these feelings. We take a potential for a feeling and, through our intention to have a feeling, turn it into an actual experience of a feeling. You wouldn't think that we would want to fabricate pain, but we're not skillful in our fabrication, so that's what we sometimes end up with. We want feelings of pleasure, but we often end up creating pain. Now there *are* certain givens: You've got a disease in your body, you've got aches and pains in your body that come from old kamma. You can't do much about that. But, as Ajaan Lee says, it's not that your body is totally pained. And you do have the choice: Where do you want to focus your attention? What do you want to maximize? Do you want to maximize the pain or maximize the pleasure?

What we're doing as we're sitting here meditating is learning how to develop the skills for maximizing skillful kinds of pleasure, skillful ways of approaching the pleasure. There are even skillful forms of distress. The Buddha talks about household distress and renunciation distress. Household distress is when you're not getting the physical feelings you want: You don't see the sights you'd like to see or hear the sounds you'd like to hear, smell the smells, taste the tastes, get the physical contacts you'd like to feel. Then you get upset. And for most of us, the way of dealing with this kind of distress is to try to find the things we want, i.e., replace household grief with household joy. That's when you get the sights and sounds and smells and tastes and tactile sensations and ideas you'd like.

But the Buddha says that the better course is to abandon household grief by relying on renunciate grief. Renunciate grief is when you think about the fact that you haven't gained awakening yet. You'd really like to gain the peace, you'd really like to gain the happiness and the freedom that come with awakening, and the fact disturbs you. Now this kind of grief actually goes someplace. It's like the tension when you pull back on a bow to shoot an arrow. It's what allows the arrow to fly. This kind of grief focuses you on what you really would like to do, and it focuses you on the fact that there is a path to that awakening.

So instead of just mucking around in the grief and joy that come from losing and then gaining, and losing and then gaining, and losing again the pleasures of the senses, you focus on

developing the elements of the path. And notice: The Buddha says to abandon household grief by relying on renunciate grief. And then he goes on to say, abandon renunciate grief by relying on renunciate joy, i.e., when you finally do attain some of that freedom, some of that happiness, some of that peace, through the practice.

But how do you abandon a feeling? When the Buddha talks about abandoning, or letting go, it's not that your mind has a hand that's grasping things. You're engaged in habitual activities, habitual ways of reacting, habitual ways of thinking, habitual ways of breathing, habitual ways of perceiving things, habitual ways of fashioning feelings. And as long as you keep repeating those habitual patterns, you're holding on. To let go means to stop. You realize that those old habits are not getting you what you want, so you just stop. Or you learn how to stop. It's not always automatic, but that's what you're aiming for: learning to see where your habitual ways of fabricating your experience are causing stress and pain, realizing that you can develop some alternative skills that don't produce that pain, and then focusing more and more on those skills. As I said earlier, there is an element of fabrication, an element of intention in all of our feelings, and so you want to focus on that.

There's bodily fabrication, the way you breathe; verbal fabrication, the way you direct your thoughts to a topic, such as a feeling, and then evaluate that feeling: Is it potentially skillful? Potentially not? What are you going to do with it? And then there's mental fabrication, which consists of the feelings themselves plus the perceptions that you hold in mind. Now all those fabrications are things you can learn how to manipulate, learn how to shape. You've got the raw materials. Sometimes the raw materials are a little recalcitrant, but there are things you can do with them.

So even though there's a pain or a weakness in the body, you don't have to obsess about the pain or the weakness. You can focus on where your strengths are; you can focus on where your pleasures are. Focus on different ways of breathing: What kind of breathing would give you more strength? What kind of breathing would give you more pleasure? Experiment. Learn about these things. Which ways of thinking about the breath and evaluating the breath give more pleasure? Which perceptions of the breath give more pleasure, give you more strength? These are all things you can manipulate, things you can play with. And just knowing that you're not just a hapless victim of your pains helps get you on the right side.

Sometimes a useful perception is seeing the pain as something receding from you. Think of yourself as sitting in the back of one of those old station wagons where the back seats face back. You're sitting there watching the road recede away from you as you're actually headed in the direction behind your back. So when a pain comes, it's not that it's actually coming at you. The pain is going, going, going, going away. You're watching it go, go, go away. Another pain may come to replace it, but that's just another pain that you're going to watch go, go, go. Hold that perception in mind, that you're not on the receiving end of a lot of this stuff, and things will be a lot easier to take. Because you do see that the individual moments of pain do go, go, go, go, go. And as you focus on that, it gives you less of a sense of being a victim, of being a target, and more of a sense of being in charge, of the choices you have.

I was involved in a psych experiment years back when I was in college. They had computers generating random numbers, and if your number came up for a particular psych experiment, you had to go. It was as if everyone in the whole college was a guinea pig for the Psych Department. And so it happened that during my four years as a student at the college, my name came up only once. But then when I returned after my time in Thailand, the fellowship that

had sent me to Thailand gave me a free year back. In the course of that one year, I came up for experiments twice. And both of the experiments were related to meditation—which was useful because I had been meditating already.

The relevant experiment was this: They would have you put your hand in a bucket of ice water with lots of ice, very cold. And then you were told to imagine that the cold in your hand, in this case it was my right hand, could somehow travel over to the left hand, and the warmth in the left hand could travel back to the right hand. “Just visualize that happening,” they said, “and see how long you can keep your hand in the bucket.” That’s what I was told. So I sat there with my hand in the bucket for five minutes. The experimenter finally said, “Okay, you can stop now. You’re breaking the curve.”

It turned out that I was in one of three groups. And fortunately I had been put in the group where you were given a handle on the pain. The first group was told, “Put your hand in the ice water and then take it out as soon as it gets unpleasant, as soon as you can’t stand it any longer.” The second group was told, “Put your hand in the bucket and just try to hold it there as long as you can.” And the third group was told what I was told. They gave you something to do with the pain, using your perception, using your breath, and a sense of the breath energy. They wouldn’t have explained it that way, but that’s what it was. And sure enough, the people in the third group could keep their hands in the ice water a lot longer than the other two.

So simply having that perception that you have a role to play in how much pain there’s going to be, and how much suffering there’s going to be: That gives you the confidence to face down a lot of pains that otherwise you couldn’t stand.

This is what mindfulness of feelings is all about: learning how to see the intentional element in the feeling you’re focusing on, and learning how to change the intentional element so that you’re not suffering so much, so that you can abandon unskillful ways of dealing with feelings and replace them with more skillful ones. Instead of jumping back and forth between household grief and household joy, or household distress and household joy, you jump over to renunciate grief, which, as I said, is like pulling back the bow that shoots the arrow over to renunciate joy. It’s what allows you to give rise not only to physical pleasure but also to mental pleasure, mental ease. Even when there are pains that you can’t change, you can still have a sense of mental ease around them. This is what that second frame of reference, feelings in and of themselves, is all about.

So always keep in mind the fact you do have some control over these things, that you want to find where the control is, and that you want to maximize it for the purpose of what’s skillful. That’s how you bring ardency to the practice of mindfulness.

And that’s how mindfulness is part of the path, because mindfulness is not just a matter of bringing bare attention to things. It’s a matter of keeping something in mind. In this case, you’re keeping in mind the fact that there is an intentional element in your feelings, and you can do something about it. You don’t want to forget that. You’ve got to keep that in mind at all times. That’s what you’re being mindful of. When you combine that with ardency and alertness, you get closer and closer to the point where you develop renunciate joy, seeing the results of your practice, seeing that the Buddha really did know what he was talking about: that we can find a peace, a freedom, and a happiness that are deathless. These aren’t just things written in books, or words in Dhamma talks. They’re things you can actually find inside.