

Dharmette: Using Reference Points

Transcribed and edited from a short talk by Gil Fronsdal on May 26, 2010

It can be very difficult to really see how our mind operates. It's very difficult to see how our mind gets attached, or how our mind is limited by its perceptions, its understanding, its attachments, its own sense of self. Sometimes the way the mind operates – the way we think, and live in and react to the world – seems so deeply natural that it's like the fish who doesn't see the water it swims in. We don't necessarily see the thoughts we live in, the reactions we live in, the attachments we live in. We grew up in a society, a family, of attached people where they encouraged you to cling to things. So it just seems like the most natural thing in the world, to cling, to hold onto all kinds of things. It's very hard to see all this, especially down at the more subtle levels of the mind.

One of the things that's really helpful is to have a reference point with which you see what is going on. The example I often like to give is of a very still, beautiful, shallow mountain creek. You look in the clear water and you can't tell that the water's flowing. It just seems like it's standing still until you put a stick in the water. You put it into the water vertically, and then a little wake gets formed at the edge of the stick, and then you actually see that the water is moving. In the same way, it's hard to see how much our mind moves, unless we have a reference point – unless we have some kind of stick we put in so that can see the wake of our mind.

There are many reference points you can have, but most of the reference points that are useful are ones that limit the free activity of the mind – the mind doesn't have a free-for-all to do what it wants. For example, in meditation being committed to sitting still and not moving will pretty quickly reveal some of the movements in your mind, some of the desires you have, your reactions to discomfort, your belief system around discomfort and comfort. All kind of things kick into play. I've sat with being still and committed to not moving, and it's been a tempest in there, in my mind, about reacting to that, being upset about it, concerned about it, trying to solve it, trying to fix it. And I say, "Wow, this mind is powerful." But if I'd given in and just moved, then I wouldn't have had a tempest. So which is better: to have moved and have a quiet mind, or to not move and see the tempest?

The suggestion is it's actually better to see the tempest, because then you have the chance to see what drives the mind, what the reactions are, and then you can look at it carefully and really address it. If you move, you give in to some kind of clinging and you don't see it, because it is part of what seems natural or obvious. This very simple thing of not moving when you sit is a reference point for looking at your life.

To live by the precepts, for example, is a reference point: "I'm committing myself to not doing these kinds of behavior." When you find yourself wanting to do those behaviors, then you have the reference point that shows you, "Oh maybe I shouldn't do this; I'm committed to not lying." And then you see all the movements towards being a little bit deceitful or not quite straight about how things are. That's a reference point.

In Buddhism we give ourselves a whole series of different reference points. One reference point that some people find helpful is to have a teacher. You check in with the teacher regularly. The teacher knows who you are, and you see yourself better in the context of contact with a teacher. That becomes a reference point. You can't just think whatever you wish. You're accountable to someone, and you offer your understanding. And you get to see your understanding more clearly because you're sharing it with someone, and they may have some feedback.

There's a reference point of choosing the breath. It's one thing to sit still. It's another thing to say, "Okay I'm going to stay with my breath the best I can, and that's my commitment." That's the stick you put in the mind. Then mostly what you are aware of is that you can't stay on the breath. You get to discover a tremendous amount of momentum in the mind. You had no idea there was so much preoccupation, concern, so much power, and everything, in the mind. Then you discover you have all these judgments about that: "This is bad. I'm a bad person, or a bad meditator, because my mind is agitated." You wouldn't have noticed that you had this tendency to judge yourself negatively if you'd given free rein to the mind to wander freely.

I've meditated without a reference point some times and congratulated myself for how good I was meditating [laughs] "You're doing really great." Then it dawned on me that maybe I should try counting my breath to find out, to test myself. "Are things really as good as I think they are?" I start counting my breath and I get to two and half,

and I realize that I felt comfortable and calm, but my mind was very powerful and was wandering off on all kinds of thoughts. I didn't really recognize how much my mind was wandering. It was easy going and relaxed. But it wasn't until I did the reference point of counting my breath that I saw, "Oh I guess I'm not so still or concentrated as I thought I was."

Using the breath, I can notice, "Oh, I judge myself negatively." That's useful information to know. If I'd given my mind free rein, I could have said, "Wow I'm doing really well," and "I'm so generous and compassionate to myself; I never feel bad about myself; I'm just a great guy." And then I start counting the breath, and I get to two and say, "Wow this mind is powerful. This is out of control, and I'm a terrible person because argh, look at that, deep inside is this latent tendency to judge negatively, which I wasn't aware of until I tried to hold myself to something."

It's rather unfortunate that so many people come to Buddhist practice and don't succeed well enough according to their standards, and then judge themselves negatively and get depressed about that. What you're supposed to do is to say, "Wow look at that! I have this tendency to judge myself negatively. I'm so glad I see it now. This is good. This is progress." Then back off, and be relaxed about it, and hold it lightly. Again, what we're trying to do is to use a reference point to learn what's going on. What's happening here? It's really important to try to meet that with compassion. To meet whatever you see, without further clinging, and being at ease with it.

The one reference point I wanted to end with today, that's really useful to have, is the reference point of ease itself. In or outside of meditation, you set yourself with some modicum of ease. Maybe you can't do a very good job of it, but some modicum of ease, of being peaceful, being calm. And you let that be your reference point. Then notice what takes you away from that. If you don't have a reference point of ease or calm, you might not realize that you're agitated. There are plenty of people who run around agitated and don't realize it. I know that I've been agitated at times, but there are layers and layers of agitation. I think, "Wow I'm kind of calm right now – well I was compared to the argument I had with that person, but I'm still spinning around a little bit." The more profound your experience of ease, the better reference point it becomes. The stiller the mind becomes, the more ease you have, the more thoroughly you can see the subtle movement of the mind.

That's one very powerful approach to Buddhist practice: establishing yourself in some modest amount of ease and then noticing what takes you away. Use the ease as your reference point and notice what takes you away. Notice what happens to you, just notice, notice, notice. What's going on? What happens? Take refuge in the noticing, not in the judgments you have. Notice, notice, notice and you'll understand yourself. If you use that reference point, you'll understand yourself in many different circumstances and in deep ways.

You might consider, what are your reference points? Some people have sickness as a reference point. Anything that limits you is a reference point. Sickness is a powerful reference point that really highlights things that are very hard to see otherwise. Certain obligations, like family obligations, can be reference point. "I don't want to do this," but you have to do it. So that becomes a reference point, and you see how you normally operate.

One of the qualities of these reference points is they limit the free ability for the mind to do whatever it damn well pleases – not in order to say that anything is wrong – but so we really see the power, the strength, and the subtlety of the attachment to clinging that might be operating – all in the service of becoming free and having a greater sense of peace.

May you all have a good reference point.