

Thursday Dharma talk

Gil Fronsdal

September 03, 2026

Keywords: *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, satipaṭṭhāna, samādhi, vipassanā, Theravāda, Sōtō Zen, dhātu*, four elements, thirty-two parts of the body, liberation

When my children were young, we had a few children's books that were based on the power of ten. Either they would start with something, and then they would zoom in: power of ten, power of ten, going in and in and in. Then there were other books that went out and out and out into the cosmos, the universe. They were such cool books.

At different magnifications, there was a whole different relationship to what was going on. At some magnification that you were in, living in some months ago, you were thinking about IRC, then a retreat at IRC. Somehow, your imagination probably was taking in, a little bit, the whole sense of a retreat, the whole sense of the retreat center, what it would be like. You applied, and then at some point you were accepted, and now you had a different kind of relationship. Maybe that's almost like a power of ten closer.

Oh, and now I better think about this some. Am I sure I want to go for a whole month? What's that going to be like? How am I going to do my laundry? Then it was time to pack to come. Now the power of ten is getting closer.

It's not some general, vague idea of a month at IRC. Now you're looking at details: how many socks to bring. Some of you come from far away, and some of you are close by. Maybe, if you flew in from far away, the power of ten got closer just by landing at the airport in San Francisco. It was getting real, getting a little more substantial. It's not so much an imagination anymore. It's not just a potential.

Then you come, drive through the gate, and here it is. This is the property, the building. Wow, this is cool. Wow, it's peaceful. It's green, a well-taken-care-of landscape. Or, uh-oh, what have I signed up for here? This tall, ominous building—what's in there? Probably has dungeons and dragons. Uh-oh, something about looking at it has now caused anxiety.

But it's getting closer. Then you come into the building, and not a few people have said that the first time they came through the front doors, they immediately felt at home. They immediately felt at peace. Ah, okay, this is a good place. I can relax.

So now the place has an impact. You're here, and you're recognizing still a fairly large piece of real estate: the community hall downstairs. Maybe you come up to the meditation hall and get a sense of it. Then maybe you choose a place to sit, and so the powers of ten are gathering. Then you come here for your first sitting, maybe, and now you're on your seat. The power of ten now is here, just here.

Perhaps you're not quite here because your mind is racing, thinking about whether you brought enough socks, or something important like that. Or maybe you're still thinking about all the things that are undone, not here. You spent all this time thinking about coming here. Finally, you're here, and it frees you up to think about what's not here.

Then, after a couple of days, three days, three months, your mind finally quiets down. Now you feel like the power of ten has shifted again. Now you're here in your body. Maybe the mind is more at rest, more at peace with itself. Maybe the pull of what was so important before lessens.

Some people describe a certain point in meditation when they have arrived. "I'm here now. I've arrived. I finally have arrived. I'm really here." Something lets go, and we land. Okay, I'm landed. Feeling, I'm in my body. I'm in this place here.

The powers of ten have gotten smaller, and then continue. Something relaxes deeply inside, and maybe there's a sense of ease. You're not really pulled away, and the mind has a chance to rest some more, not be so active. The mind just finds itself settling into the breathing and just being there with the breathing. Wow, what a nice rhythm, and the wonderful waves washing over my chest, waves swimming by my heart, massaging it, lubricating it, loving it, coming and going. It's so good.

This breath is very soothing and settling, maybe. But at some point, the mind gets quieter still. It's not searching for anything, not having a story about waves swimming, washing back and forth over the heart. Lo and behold, the breathing doesn't feel like waves. It feels like distinct sensations.

In one inhale, there's a little pulling in the belly. There's a lifting in the chest or in the belly. There's a stretching of the rib cage, stretching of the diaphragm. There's a feeling of being full, feeling complete. Then there's a pausing of breathing in, and immediately there's a feeling of a tug.

Kind of the lungs, or something in the chest, has a desire, a call to exhale, to let go. So there's giving in, letting go, releasing. With releasing, the chest settles. Then something settles in the belly. Maybe near the end, there's a little pull again in the belly, and then something releases deeper.

You feel you come to the end of the exhale, and now the powers of ten have gotten even smaller, into something narrower, closer. Not because you do this as a technique, not because you're following instructions, but simply because the mind is so at ease with itself. It's no longer concerned about whether you brought enough socks. You wouldn't even think about that.

Or, if the sock thought came up one more time, you would say, "Wait a minute, I've had so many sock thoughts. It's really not that interesting. There's something better going on here. It's just nicer to be settled on the breathing." Clear comprehension is luckily operating, and it says, "Nope, no need to go one more time with socks. It's better. It took a long time to arrive, not only arrive but settle further and deeper. This feels intimate. This feels nice. Why leave it for socks?"

Some wisdom is operating: stay here, stay with this. So then the mind stays with the simple sensations of breathing. Something settles even further, and something relaxes in the mind even further. Somehow, the ordinary way in which you think about your body recedes. There is no constructing the body.

Now the edges of the body seem to disappear. The body doesn't seem to have any shape anymore. It just seems to be like a hum of different sensations. If you really kind of find out what's going on now, it's really gotten smaller and smaller: the world, less and less, simpler and simpler. This power of ten is getting smaller and more detailed: here, here, here.

So, in this *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, we have some of this operating here in the first foundation. In the very first exercise, part of it is:

Breathing in, I experience the whole body. Breathing out, I experience the whole body.
Breathing in, I relax the bodily formations, bodily reactivity, kind of throughout the body.

So the whole body is operating here, some sense of it. In the second exercise, again, it's the whole body. It's the posture the body is in. Then, in the third exercise, it begins coming closer in. The power of ten goes one step in, and it's no longer the whole body.

It's particular activities: the arm flexing, straightening out the arm, and bending the arm. Eating. Moving your head to look at something. Turning away, turning toward. Cleaning

yourself. So it's no longer the whole body, but it's getting to a subset of the body.

I think that's kind of a natural part of this process. As we get settled and arrive, we're more connected, more intimate, with whatever is happening in the moment. What's happening in the moment is our arm is bending. Then we're really there. What's happening now is just eating.

That seems like the only thing that's relevant, alive, or present. Just eating. As we practice, it's a movement toward the details, toward a smaller domain of the world: just here, just simple, getting simpler. In *Sōtō Zen*, it's said that one of the characteristics of *Sōtō Zen* is attention to detail. One of the characteristics of *vipassanā* practice in Burma was, in fact, the same thing.

They didn't use that language, but it was attention to detail. So, as we continue this *sati-paṭṭhāna*, we go from the whole body as a whole, to particular parts of the body that are active in different activities. Then the next exercise becomes just settling into the particular parts of the body. The whole body is no longer relevant. That's kind of dropped away.

You still have a whole body, but that's a little bit more conceptual. That needs more of the mind being active to conceive of the whole body, imagine it, feel it, be it. So then it goes on to this next exercise:

In this body, there is head hair, body hair, nails, teeth, skin, flesh, tendons, bones, bone marrow, kidneys, heart, liver, pleura, spleen, lungs, large intestines, small intestines, contents of the stomach, feces, bile, phlegm, pus, blood, sweat, fat, tears, grease, saliva, snot, joint fluid, and urine.

So now, when the idea is here, when it kind of starts to get a sense that the body is made up of these parts, it is not to deny the whole or to ignore it. But the mind starts getting simpler and simpler, and just the details are important now. Some of these details, of course, are a big deal for people. Some of us could write a personal biography of our life from the point of view of the first item on the list: head hair.

How that's changed over the years, what it meant to have it change, and what it meant culturally—it can be a pretty elaborate thing. Nails, teeth, skin, flesh. Some of these, as we get down into them, are preoccupations. But what begins to fall away are preoccupations. We're just getting simpler and simpler.

So, sitting and meditating, there might be a time you feel your hand—just a hand—or the fingers, or your sitting bones, the feet on the floor. The shoulders might stand out and highlight.

The position of the head. What's going on in the jaws? This becomes more interesting. This is where the mind goes and gravitates to.

That's very different. It's a very different here than it was to be here when you first arrived and walked into the community hall. That's a power of ten more distant, more wide. It was wonderful to be here that way, but at some point you're just here with the details of the body.

This is a very classic meditation practice in *Theravāda* Buddhism. In some monastic lineages, they give this meditation to reflect on, or think about, or focus on, feel, imagine, visualize—whatever it takes. It's called the thirty-two parts of the body. When they are first ordained in some *Theravāda* countries, a brand-new monastic is given this instruction to do this meditation practice, to go over and over it.

One of the reasons I very much like this description—I've hardly done any of this practice—is that I love the metaphor for it. Remember this: the Buddha uses the imagination to help us, a certain way of finding out how to be in this world, how to be in this practice, through these images he uses. He compares it to this:

Just as if a person with good eyesight were to look into a sack with an opening at each end, filled with various kinds of seeds, such as fine rice, paddy rice, mung beans, garbanzo beans, sesame seeds, and husked rice, that person would recognize: "This is fine rice. This is paddy rice. These are mung beans. These are garbanzo beans. These are sesame seeds." So a monastic reviews this very body, upward from the soles of the feet, then downward from the hair of the head, covered with skin and full of various kinds of unclean things.

They use the words "unclean things." I don't know about that. I retranslate it for my own purposes, and I call them unappetizing things. That makes sense. None of this is appetizing, but I don't want to call it unclean.

A few times in my life, I've had the occasion to look inside someone's body while they were having surgery. It was so beautiful. It wasn't unclean. It wasn't ugly or disgusting. It was just, wow. I felt like I was looking into the Grand Canyon.

It was like, wow, that's beautiful, amazing. But I think the idea is that it's unappetizing sometimes, because sometimes people are assigned this practice if they have a lot of strong sexual desire. Just imagine that person's insides, all the things that move around in there. That's supposed to help.

What I like about this is that I have a wonderful association with mounds of beans, mounds

of seeds. They're so beautiful when they're husked and clean and sitting there. It's like they sparkle. They're beautiful shapes, beautiful colors. It's beauty, and having them together sometimes in different combinations can be so beautiful.

So that's what I like about this. Calling it unclear, I don't know about that. Maybe that was snuck in there later. But certainly, this thing about beginning to see, naturally seeing more and more detail, is that the mind gets simpler and simpler. Just little details, just here.

What is it like? It becomes beautiful. There's beauty in this practice. Whether that's what's intended here or not, I don't know. But I know that there's beauty in this practice.

There's a beautiful breath. Some people call it a sweet breath. There are wonderful feelings of well-being that can begin moving through the body, as the body relaxes, as the body is at ease, as the body begins to come into harmony, into attunement with itself. One of the purposes of *samādhi* is not to get concentrated. That's such a small, little, dry, technical idea of a concentrated mind.

It misses the richness, the beauty, the wonderfulness of attention being present and allowing things to gather together in that attention, to come into harmony, come into attunement with itself. That's what unification is: gathering together. One of the reasons not to spend a lot of time lost in thought preoccupations is that your attention, your awareness, is a phenomenally precious resource. If you knew how valuable your awareness was, you would just stay cozy with it. You'd stay right there together with it.

Why would you leave it? Ever leave it? When it's like one of the best things in the universe. Wow, to be aware. But to use this modern metaphor of bandwidth, we only have so much bandwidth for awareness. There's nowhere you can pay for more. You get what you get.

Then we fill the bandwidth with thinking about socks, obsessing about the socks. Probably not the socks, but you have your own version of it. Thinking about the future, the past, this and that. It's okay to do it. It's not like a sin to do that.

It's not a crime here at IMC to spend your mind thinking a lot. However, you're clogging up the bandwidth. You're filling all the space, and there's no space for the kind of awareness that's going to make space for all these different attentional faculties, all these different neural networks, to start harmonizing and coordinating and coming together.

To be able to have the mind start becoming quiet, even if it's for a second and a half at a time—just quiet. Feel. Know. Sense. Observe. Have clear comprehension.

Have a kind of delightful intentness about being here in a way that clears the bandwidth,

clears the windshield from all the dust, so you can see more clearly. So that there's space for something that you can't see to happen. We can't see directly. You're making space for something to begin changing and shifting.

That could be called unification, gathering, a settling, an attunement, a coordination, a reorganization. That's very different than the way the neural firings organize themselves if we're scattered, when we're thinking and jumping around and contracted and attached and just so intent on getting what we want, or so intent on being angry with whatever we're angry with. All those ways of being preoccupied and caught are so unfortunate. You're really short-changing yourself in a huge way.

Of course, if that's your thing, please. But what we can start seeing here in retreat, I think, is that we're actually better off not crowding the attentional space, crowding awareness with all these thoughts and preoccupations. We can step back and see clearly. Make room for our thinking, and hold our thinking in wide space rather than being in it, feeding it. It's possible to let your thinking just recede into the background and really feel your way.

Maybe I like the language underneath. Not underneath in your unconscious, but just underneath in your body. If you're mostly thinking up in your head, what's under it, below the neck? What's happening in your belly? What's happening with your breathing in your chest?

Here, what are the direct feelings and sensations that are going on? That's how you start making room for this whole other process. One of the consequences of this is that we start seeing beauty. The leaves sparkle. The flowers are more vibrant.

The silver candy wrapper that was dropped on the floor: wow, isn't that nice? That's beautiful. Why would I pick it up and put it in the trash when it's so nice? You don't want to tell your friends at home that you have that kind of thought. They'll think you're weird.

But here, there's a whole different orientation. Like, "Oh wow, my foot just came down. The soles of my feet just touched the ground, and I feel that pressure and touching and the weight shifting." That's a delicacy. Who would have imagined? Wow, that's cool.

It isn't that the steps are beautiful in and of themselves. It isn't that the breath in and of itself is beautiful. People will get irritated with teachers like me for saying that because they look at their breath and it's just boring. I mean, like, it's completely boring. I mean, I can't imagine that you're telling me it's beautiful.

I mean, my breath is just a physiological movement of the chest that goes up and down, and there's nothing there. Why would I spend any time there? This is boring. Yes. What is boring,

what is not boring, is the beautiful awareness, the relaxed awareness, the calm awareness, the spacious awareness, the wholesome awareness that you bring to all these things.

For one thing, you're clearing away all the filters that are judging, all the filters that have desires, all the filters that want it to be a different way, all the filters that are trying to fix and maneuver and make things better. You're clear again. You're clearing the bandwidth. You're clearing the space.

Many things that conventionally have no interest for the mind are just kind of beautiful in and of themselves. As I'm saying this, I'm looking at the colors of the cushions in front of me, the empty seats, the blues and the browns, and how some of the browns shine in the light and some don't. I just find it kind of beautiful to look at all that, and the shapes of things. I may not have a good time just sitting here, but it's the quality of the attention that shifts.

It makes it all change. It's the quality of the attention, and how, with attention in the present moment that is settled, there is coordination of these different attentional factors, faculties, that begin operating together. Knowing operates together with sensing. Sensing operates together with knowing. The two become partners in this, and you can see back and forth how they work together.

Relaxing into awareness, relaxing so that awareness can grow, supports calming. Intending to be here, intending to be open and spacious, can be a support. Buckling down and straining with intention doesn't support. But there's a beauty in intention. Maybe use your imagination just very lightly, very simply.

Use imagination to point you here more fully, in a way of using imagination not to fill the bandwidth but to actually make more space for you to really want to stay with what you're experiencing, what you're with. Clear comprehension also begins to support you. The question becomes: "What can I do here to be more present?" What would be useful to pay attention to, and how should I pay attention to it?

Should this be something that should be felt in the body, or is it something that should be known? Or is this a time to have a little bit of a combination of both: sense and know, and sense again and know? These different faculties we have begin operating together and gathering together. In their own way, they find a harmony together that supports us to be here. That harmony also then contributes to the ability to start seeing this beauty, and more than that.

When things start working in harmony within our physiology, it tends to produce different chemicals for our system than if we're stressed. There are stress hormones, and there are

pleasure chemicals, which I don't like to say because it's so materialistic. Somehow, it diminishes the specialness of sitting here and having this joy and well-being coursing through the body. But it's there because of this harmony, this coming together here, this gathering.

So then the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* is going in a direction by itself. Because balls put on a hillside have only one direction, if there's no obstacle: those balls roll downhill. The mind, left alone without any obstacles, rolls to less and less energy, less and less force and work. That rolling downhill gets simpler and simpler.

As it rolls downhill, it gets simpler and simpler: to just now, just this. Arriving here becomes a smaller and smaller world that simultaneously seems to be bigger and bigger. It's like the mind or the awareness becomes expanded, even though what you're literally aware of is just a little, quiet tug in your belly as you breathe in. It just feels a little tug. It's so cute: right there, tug and release.

Or you feel the smoothness of the whole length of the inhale, the whole length of the exhale. Or you feel it is not smooth. It's actually little jerks, little steps, discrete little steps as you breathe out. So you start seeing more and more simply. The reference point for this is something that feels good, something that feels nice.

In the way I read this exercise here, it's the beautiful beans and rice in a bag. So then, there's one. I'm going to cover two exercises today. The second one is usually called the four elements. I prefer to call them the four properties, or the four qualities, because elements are so substantial.

You know, the four elements are things, elemental. But many times this word, *dhātu*, does not refer to things at all. Sometimes it refers to qualities or properties of the mind. The *dhātu*, the property or quality characteristic, of equanimity. You could call equanimity an element of the mind, and everyone knows you're not talking about something solid.

When we talk about the four elements, and they say it's earth, water, fire, and air or wind, then you're kind of a little bit dangerously getting into metaphysics. But here, the idea is that each of these represents sensations. Now we're getting deeper and deeper, quieter and quieter. We're getting closer in.

Now it's not the liver and the hair and these things that you can identify. But now you get so intimate, so subtle, that you no longer see things. You no longer see a hand, but you feel all the sensations of the hand. Those sensations are characterized by having these four properties or characteristics.

There's solidity. There's an earth quality: solidity, heaviness, hardness, softness. There's the

water quality: fluidity, humming, vibrating, movement. That's what's associated with the water quality. You can feel the hum of the hands, the vibration.

If you're really, really quiet, it might seem like maybe you actually do feel the flow of blood through different parts of your body, the flow of blood through your hands. That's considered the water property. Then there's the fire property, the heat that we can feel. We often say that means cold too: temperature. That's one of the attentional faculties that the modern world says we have.

There are temperature nerves; the whole job of the nerves is to tell us whether things are hot and cold. Then there's either the air property—sometimes they say air, air property. The word can also mean wind. So exactly what it is, but it also involves movement. It's a different kind of movement than the fluid movement that you sometimes can feel in the body.

What these are meant to be is somehow pointing us to not four elements, where everything is supposed to fit into these four boxes. What it's saying is that, at some point, as practice deepens, what something is in our body is no longer interesting to the mind. The mind is so close, so intimate now. You know, the powers of ten are getting closer still, closer still.

At some point, what something is, like a hand, is no longer interesting. The mind is not oriented that way because that's a construct. It's using memory. Your eyes are closed. Using memory to remember what a hand is seems innocent enough, to say, "I have a hand, of course."

But hand is a concept, and you have an idea of what the hand is. Then there are no more ideas operating. It's just the sensations. The mind has gotten quieter. It's not doing this extra work of constructing and remembering what it is.

It's just a hum. It's just warmth, coolness, pressure, heaviness, contact. It just gets simpler and simpler. Then here they have a metaphor that I almost wonder if we should censor, not use. Is it really helpful for meditators?

But I guess it's a risky job being a teacher. So the metaphor is:

Just as a butcher or a butcher's apprentice, having slaughtered a cow, having sat down at a crossroads, would cut it up in pieces.

So the idea is that the butcher is going to sell it, lays it out—hopefully not just on the ground—and you go by. The point being here is that when you buy a hunk of meat, the idea of the cow has disappeared, and you can't really put it all together again. That's not what's salient. It's kind of like that when you're really settled.

It isn't like you're a butcher, but it's gotten so simple you can't really see where it comes from. You can't put it together. It doesn't make sense to reorganize it or make it into something. It's just the sensations, the simple sensations.

Now, if I just, in the context of downtown or on a soapbox, said, "It's really good just to feel the sensations like a butcher slaughtering its cows," they would think I was weird. But here in this context, hopefully you don't. In fact, *vipassanā* practice, the way that I was taught in Burma, was technically what they said they were teaching us: a four-elements meditation. It was really meditation on sensations.

That was really the heart of what this was all about. To drop into this very, very quiet, peaceful place. What I'd like to convey, in spite of the butcher analogy, is that this is a welcome process. This is not straining. This is not trying to make something happen.

This is not something which you have to work at. It's almost the opposite. You're allowing the attention to become clear in the present moment. You're giving the attention a lot of bandwidth, so it's no longer agitated or stirred up by all the thoughts and ideas we have that belong to a different power of ten. We come down, down, so we can rest.

It's kind of like that ball rolling down the hill. It's coming to rest at the bottom of the hill. The mind is getting quieter, more peaceful, more quiet. It's just so beautiful. It's so wonderful.

It feels so right, like a homecoming. Ah, this is good. Then the teacher talks about the importance of the four elements, sensations, and so then: let's get to work. You tighten up. "I'm gonna stare those sensations down. I'm gonna really, really do this well."

That's not the way. That's not wholesome. That's not beautiful. That's not relaxed awareness. But in its own time, this is the direction it's going.

There's no hurry to get there, but it might be useful to hear that there is a kind of onward-leading nature. There is something inside of us. There's an intelligence inside of us that knows and understands where this is going. To be a little bit materialistic and simplistic, it's like saying that the ball knows where it's going. It's going downhill.

It wants to go downhill. It has enough intelligence to know that's where it's going to go. Something like that is happening in us as well. That's another reason to make room, clear the room in your awareness. Make room in it.

Don't fill it with your thoughts all the time, because that's where this deeper intelligence has a chance to surface and guide you and support you, even if you don't even recognize you're being guided. Something inside of you is guiding you and supporting you in a direction. In

the different Buddhist traditions, they say something similar. But in the *Theravāda* tradition, in the *suttas*, it literally says everything, everything converges, everything goes toward liberation.

It's a phenomenal claim. Everything. That's downhill. That's where the ball goes. That's where the whole system wants to go, because to be not liberated is actually a lot of work.

To be not liberated is tiring. To be not liberated is where there's energy: to be attached, to be caught. The whole system wants not to do this extra energy. It doesn't want to do this extra work. It has a natural movement toward release, release, release.

You don't have to be the person who does the releasing. All you have to do is be aware, stay close, and, as I said the first day, you don't have to change anything. You don't have to have anything be a project. Accept. Care for the way that you're aware.

Relax your awareness. Relax the knowing. Relax the sensing. Make room for the sensing. Can you be aware in some kind of way that, for you, is beautiful?

Can you kind of experiment? What does it take to know something and have it actually be kind of soft, clear, gentle? Maybe a little bit slower than usual. Maybe there's a pause before and after. Maybe a single act of knowing is like the single flower in a Japanese flower arrangement, enshrined in the only little alcove on the whole wall.

That flower becomes so beautiful by itself. Could it be that a simple act of knowing is like, wow, it's a miracle. How could this have happened, that I can know? Why do we even know anything? Why are we aware?

Most people are so preoccupied with what they're aware of, the object of awareness, that they don't notice how special it is to be aware. Just maybe, just maybe, your psychophysical system, given half a chance, will take you by the hand and guide you through the deepening layers, deepening powers of ten, deepening layers of release, letting go, freedom. Something inside of you knows that way. Yeah.