



# FOUR RELIANCES

# KNOWING FOR YOURSELF

The Buddha's Teaching on Direct Inquiry and Embodied Wisdom

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## TEACHING ONE: The Four Reliances

A Framework for Autonomous Practice

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For more than twenty years, I've been sitting with the teaching of the **Four Reliances**, returning to it again and again, teaching it in retreat settings, watching how it lands in people's bodies and practice. These four principles have become foundational to everything I teach in QigongDharma, not because they're exotic or esoteric, but because they're so utterly practical.

The **Four Reliances** offer a complete framework for learning authentically without blind faith, without spiritual dependency, and without handing your authority over to anyone else. They answer the question every sincere practitioner eventually faces:

*How do I navigate the overwhelming landscape of spiritual teachings? How do I discern what's true? Whom can I trust?*

These *reliances* emerged in the Mahayana Buddhist tradition, though their spirit echoes throughout the Buddha's earliest teachings. They are:

1. **Rely on the Teaching, Not the Teacher**
2. **Rely on the Meaning, Not the Words**
3. **Rely on the Definitive Meaning, Not the Provisional**
4. **Rely on Wisdom Consciousness, Not the Ordinary**

Together, they form a path of autonomous awakening: a way to receive guidance while developing your own direct knowing, to honor tradition while trusting your own experience, and to learn from teachers without becoming dependent on their authority.

This is not about rejecting guidance or going it alone. It's about developing the discernment to know what's true, not because someone told you so, but because you've verified it in the laboratory of your own lived experience. Let's explore each reliance in depth.

## The First Reliance: Rely on the Teaching, Not the Teacher

*"Do not rely on what someone says simply because they say it, not a friend, not a family member, not a monk, not a respected teacher, not even one known throughout the world as wise or awakened."*

This is an astonishing invitation, even now. Spiritual communities often elevate the teacher's charisma, credentials, or reputation. We're taught to look for lineage, recognition, and signs of attainment. We evaluate teachings based on who delivers them: "Well, if they say it, it must be true." But the Buddha, and this teaching, cuts through all of this in one stroke:

*"Do not give your authority over to another person, no matter how impressive their presence or how refined their credentials. Why? Because truth does not live in personality. The teaching is not the teacher."*

Teachers are human beings, sometimes brilliant, and sometimes flawed; hopefully, always growing. They are not immune to confusion, just like the rest of us. A teacher might be deeply awake in one dimension and still working through attachment in another. They might have profound insight and still carry unexamined biases. They might be genuinely helpful and still be wrong about certain things.

What matters is not *who* speaks, but whether the validity of the teaching itself, when you examine it carefully and practice it sincerely, brings clarity and not confusion. Does it lead toward greater awareness and compassion, or toward self-centeredness and harm? Does it open you or close you down?

*"So rely on the Dharma (radiant truth) itself. Rely on the truth it points to, not the person who carries it. A teaching is valid not because someone important said it, but because when you test it in your own experience, it proves true."*

This is an invitation to become investigators rather than followers. To become scientists of our own consciousness. To accept nothing on faith that we cannot verify in the laboratory of our own lives.

I've seen this play out hundreds of times in teaching. Someone comes to a retreat carrying heavy expectations of what an "awakened teacher" should be, and those expectations create a kind of spiritual paralysis. They're so busy trying to figure out whether I'm "enlightened enough" to trust that they can't actually engage with the practice. They're evaluating credentials instead of practicing.

But when someone hears this first reliance, *rely on the teaching, not the teacher*, something shifts. The pressure releases. They stop looking at me and start looking at their own experience. They stop asking "Is this teacher worthy?" and start asking "Does this practice clarify? Does it open? Does it lead somewhere true?"

That's when the real work begins.

This teaching does not ask us to be skeptical for its own sake. It does not suggest we reject all guidance or become isolated in our own subjective experience. Teachers matter. Guidance matters. The **living transmission of wisdom** from person to person across generations matters profoundly. But the authority doesn't reside in the teacher's personality. It resides in the truth itself. And you discover that truth not by believing what someone tells you, but by practicing, observing, and seeing for yourself whether it bears fruit.

Does this teaching, when lived into deeply, lead to freedom? Does it generate compassion? Does it help you see through delusion? Does it create the natural alignment of thought, word, and deed?

If it does, you've found something reliable. Not because I said so. Not because the Buddha said so. But because you've verified it yourself, in your own body, your own breath, and your own lived experience.

This is what the first reliance offers: a way to receive teaching without dependence, to learn without surrendering your authority, to be guided without becoming a follower.

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## The Second Reliance: Rely on the Meaning, Not the Words

*"When you encounter teachings, whether in scriptures, in the words of teachers, or in your own intuition, do not rely on the words alone. Do not cling to the letter of what is said."*

The Buddha illustrated this beautifully: Words are like fingers pointing at the moon. The pointing is not the moon. Did the Buddha actually say this? I don't know, but it's a beautiful 'pointing out' that has been used over the ages and directs our attention toward the essence.

This is crucial, and it's where many practitioners get stuck. We treat sacred texts as if they were instruction manuals, as if getting the translation exactly right or parsing the grammar correctly would unlock some hidden truth. We argue about whether "mindfulness" or "recollection" is the better translation of sati. We debate whether the Buddha really said this or that, and whether one version is more authentic than another. This is not a useful endeavor, in my assessment.

These conversations have their place. Scholarship matters. Precision in translation matters. But if we stop at the words, we've missed the teaching entirely. Language is always incomplete. It arises from a particular culture, a particular historical moment, and a particular set of assumptions that both the speaker and the listener share. The Buddha was speaking to people in ancient India who believed in karma, rebirth, and renunciation as self-evident realities. When we read those exact words 2,500 years later in California or New York, we're bringing entirely different assumptions.

The words themselves can't carry the full meaning across that gap. We have to do more than read; we have to translate, interpret, and make the teaching real in our own contemporary lives.

*"So rely on the meaning that underlies the words. Rely on the spirit, the essence, the living truth to which the words point."*

I remember working with a student who was completely tangled up in trying to understand the technical term *anatta*, not-self. She'd read five different books, each offering a slightly different interpretation. Is it "no-self" or "not-self"? Does it mean there's no self at all, or just that the self we think we are is an illusion? She was so caught in the conceptual knot that she couldn't actually practice.

Finally, I asked her to stop reading for a month. Just sit. Just notice. When you're sitting in meditation and a thought arises, such as "I should be better at this," "I'm failing," or "I'm so peaceful right now," just notice: where is this "I" that's having these thoughts? Can you find it? Does it have a location? Does it stay the same from moment to moment?

A month later, she came back laughing. "It's so simple," she said. "The words were making it complicated, but the experience is just... there's no one home. Just awareness, just experience, but no solid 'me' at the center of it."

She'd penetrated through the words to the meaning. And the meaning wasn't a concept; it was a direct recognition, something she could return to again and again in her practice.

This is what the second reliance asks of us: Don't get lost in debates about translation. Don't mistake the map for the territory. Instead, ask yourself:

*What is this teaching really trying to illuminate?*

*What direct experience does it point me toward?*

*Can I know this meaning not just as an idea, but in the felt reality of my own body, my own breath, my own lived experience?*

When you read the Heart Sutra's famous line, "form is emptiness, emptiness is form", you could spend years parsing the Sanskrit, studying commentaries, analyzing the philosophical

implications. Or you could sit quietly, hold a stone in your hand, and feel its apparent solidity while simultaneously recognizing that it's mostly empty space, that its boundaries are permeable, that it's constantly changing, that "stone" is just a label you're placing on a dynamic process. Both approaches have value. But only the second one makes the teaching alive.

The meaning is what liberates. The words are just the vehicle. Sometimes the most profound teachings can't be expressed in words at all; they're transmitted in silence, in a gesture, or in the quality of presence between teacher and student.

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## The Third Reliance: Rely on the Definitive Meaning, Not the Provisional

*"There are two kinds of meaning in teachings. The first is what we call provisional meaning, teachings given for a particular time, to particular people, at a particular stage of understanding. These teachings are skillfully adapted to help someone move forward from where they are. But they are not ultimately true. They are like scaffolding, necessary for building, but not part of the final structure."*

This is a teaching about discernment, about recognizing that not all dharma is pointing to the same depth.

A teacher might speak of "self" or "soul" to someone who has completely lost their sense of self-worth, who needs to remember their inherent dignity before they can begin to investigate what "self" actually is. Or a teacher might use images of karmic punishment to help someone who's caught in destructive behavior find motivation to change. These can be useful, even necessary, teachings for certain people at certain times.

But they're provisional. They're stepping-stones, not the shore itself.

*"The second kind of meaning is what we call definitive meaning, the ultimate truth that does not depend on time, culture, or circumstance. The definitive meaning is what remains when all the provisional teachings have served their purpose. It is the taste of freedom itself."*

What is definitive?

- All beings are interconnected, arising together in mutual dependence
- Suffering comes from confusion about the nature of reality
- Greed, hatred, and delusion obscure our innate clarity
- Awakening is possible for everyone
- Compassion flows naturally when we see clearly
- Wisdom is not conceptual; it's direct, immediate knowing

These truths don't change whether you're in ancient India or modern America, whether you're a monastic or a parent, whether you've studied Buddhist philosophy for decades or you've never heard of the Buddha.

*"So rely on the definitive meaning. As you deepen your practice, you will naturally move beyond provisional teachings and discover the enduring reality they were pointing toward."*

In QigongDharma practice, we encounter this distinction constantly. A beginning student might need very precise instructions: "Stand with your feet shoulder-width apart. Bend your knees slightly. Sink your weight. Relax your shoulders." These instructions are provisional; they're useful scaffolding to help someone find the practice's basic structure.

But an experienced practitioner no longer thinks about foot position. They've moved beyond provisional instruction to the definitive experience: the feeling of qi moving through the body, the recognition of energetic opening and closing, and the embodied knowing that doesn't require words or measurement.

The provisional teaching served its purpose. Now it can fall away.

This doesn't mean we discard provisional teachings or treat them as "wrong." They're necessary. We need scaffolding to build. We need stepping stones to cross the stream. But we also need to recognize them for what they are, temporary supports, not final truths.

The invitation is always to ask: *What is the ultimate truth this teaching points toward? What will remain when all the words and concepts fall away?*

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## The Fourth Reliance: Rely on Wisdom, Not Ordinary Consciousness

*"Finally, regarding all meaning, both provisional and definitive, do not rely on ordinary consciousness, ordinary judgment, ordinary thinking. Rely on wisdom awareness. Rely on direct knowing."*

This is the heart of the matter, and it's easy to misunderstand.

Ordinary consciousness is brilliant. It's the faculty that analyzes, compares, plans, judges, and categorizes. It's how we navigate daily life, solve problems, and make decisions. The conceptual mind is not the enemy; it's a valuable tool.

But it is not the ordinary mind that awakens.

Wisdom is something entirely different. The Buddha called it *prajñā*, direct, non-conceptual knowing. It's not thinking *about* something; it's *seeing* directly. It's immediate. Embodied. Spacious. Silent. Unmistakable. You can't figure this out using ordinary mind.

*"When you taste salt, you do not think 'this is salt', you know salt directly through taste. When you see your beloved's face, you do not analyze whether this is the face you love. You see them directly. This direct knowing, this wisdom awareness, is what you must cultivate."*

I can tell you about saltiness. I can describe its chemical composition, explain how sodium and chloride ions interact with your taste receptors, reference scientific studies about taste perception. That's ordinary consciousness at work, analyzing, explaining, conceptualizing.

But none of that is the same as putting salt on your tongue. The direct taste is direct recognition, and in our teaching here, it is about wisdom.

In meditation, we always practice with this distinction. You sit down with the intention to observe the breath. At first, ordinary consciousness is very busy: "Am I doing this right? Is this what they mean by 'mindfulness'? My back hurts. This is boring. Oh, I'm supposed to be watching the breath. Wait, now I'm thinking about watching the breath instead of actually watching it..." All of this is conceptual mind, thinking *about* the practice.

But then, sometimes after minutes, sometimes after months, something shifts. The thinking quiets. And there's just... breathing. Just the sensation of air moving in and out. No commentary. No judgment. No analysis. Just the direct knowing of this breath, right now. That's wisdom awareness. It does not have to be more dramatic than this!

*"So, rely on 'wisdom awareness.' Do not only believe what you think about a teaching. Do not accept what your analytical mind concludes. Instead, practice. Meditate. Observe your own mind and heart directly. Bring the teaching into your body, into your lived experience. Wait for the moment when understanding arises not as an idea, but as direct knowing."*

This is why the Buddha can say "don't believe me," because he's not asking for belief. He's pointing you toward your own capacity for direct seeing. He's inviting you to discover for yourself what he discovered: that when the mind becomes quiet and clear, wisdom naturally arises, not as something added from outside, but as recognition of what was always already present.

This is the only reliance that will never fail you, because it doesn't depend on anyone else's words or anyone else's authority. It's your own awakening consciousness, your own direct knowing, your own wisdom, seeing clearly.

And this wisdom, once tasted, once recognized, becomes your most reliable guide.

## Practice Inquiries

These are not instructions to follow, but invitations to investigate. Bring them into your meditation, your qigong practice, your daily life. See what arises when you genuinely inquire.

### *On the First Reliance: Teaching, Not Teacher*

#### **In meditation:**

- Sit quietly and ask: Where do I give away my authority? To whom? What am I hoping they'll give me that I don't trust myself to discover?
- Notice when you're evaluating a teaching based on who said it rather than whether it's true. What changes when you separate the two?
- Bring to mind a teacher you deeply respect. Can you hold them in appreciation while recognizing they're human, and still growing? How does this feel in your body?

#### **In daily life:**

- Notice this week when you accept something as true simply because it comes from an expert, a spiritual teacher, or a respected friend. What happens if you pause and ask: "Is this actually true? How would I know?"
- Where are you waiting for permission from an authority figure to trust what you already know? What would change if you gave yourself that permission?

### *On the Second Reliance: Meaning, Not Words*

#### **In meditation:**

- Take a dharma teaching you've heard many times, perhaps a familiar sutra or well-known phrase. Instead of reciting the words, ask: What direct experience is this pointing to? Can I touch that experience right now, in this body, in this breath?
- Notice where you get stuck in concepts, in trying to "understand" something intellectually. What happens if you drop the thinking and simply feel? What opens?

### In qigong practice:

- When you receive instructions such as "sink your weight," "open the kua," and "relax the shoulders," notice the difference between thinking about the instruction and actually feeling what it points to. Can you move from the words to the meaning in your body?

## *On the Third Reliance: Definitive Meaning, Not Provisional*

### In contemplation:

- Examine a belief you hold about spiritual practice. Is this pointing toward ultimate truth, or is it a skillful stepping-stone for where you are right now? Can you hold it lightly, knowing it may need to evolve?
- Ask: What teachings am I clinging to that might be scaffolding rather than the building itself? What would happen if I let them go?

### In practice:

- Notice when you've outgrown an instruction but keep following it out of habit. What's the definitive experience underneath the provisional form? Can you trust that direct knowing?

## *On the Fourth Reliance: Wisdom, Not Ordinary Consciousness*

### In meditation:

- Notice the difference between thinking about your breath and actually feeling it. The first is ordinary consciousness analyzing; the second is direct knowing. Can you rest in the second?
- Watch a thought arise. Before engaging with its content, simply observe: Where does it come from? Where does it go? Can you know a thought directly without thinking about it?

### In daily life:

- This week, conduct a simple experiment: Notice when you're analyzing, conceptualizing, or thinking about something. Then pause and ask: Can I know this directly, without the thinking? What's the difference between understanding and direct knowing?

## *Integrating All Four Reliances*

### **A central practice:**

Return to this investigation again and again:

*Does this teaching, this practice, this path, when lived into deeply and honestly, lead me toward:*

- *Greater clarity or more confusion?*
- *More compassion or increased self-centeredness?*
- *Freedom or subtle entanglement?*
- *Opening or closing?*

*The answer doesn't come from thinking about it. It comes from living it and observing what actually happens.*

This is the heart of autonomous practice: You are the laboratory. Your life is the experiment. Your direct observation is the only authority that won't fail you.

Trust that.

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### **Translator's Note**

This teaching on the **Four Reliances** emerges from decades of study, practice, and lived experience. It is not a literal translation of any single source text. Still, rather, a contemplative rendering born of sitting with these principles over many years and watching how they work in contemporary practice.

**The Four Reliances** (*cattāri patisaraṇāni* in Pali, *tönpa zhi* in Tibetan) appear in various forms throughout Buddhist literature, most notably in Mahayana sutras like the *Nirvana Sutra* and in Tibetan commentarial traditions. Different sources phrase them slightly differently, but the essential meaning remains consistent.

My approach has been comparative and experiential rather than strictly philological. I've drawn on multiple translations, traditional commentaries, and contemporary interpretations, then asked: What is the living essence here? How do these reliances actually function in practice? What would this teaching sound like if it were being offered directly to contemporary Western practitioners?

I've woven in stories from my own teaching experience because these principles only come alive through actual practice. The Four Reliances are not abstract philosophy; they're a practical methodology for navigating the spiritual path with discernment and autonomy.

For those interested in traditional sources, I recommend consulting:

- The *Mahaparinirvana Sutra* (various translations)
- Mipham Rinpoche's commentary on the Four Reliances
- Contemporary teachers like Traleg Kyabgon and B. Alan Wallace who have written accessibly about these principles

But ultimately, the validity of this teaching, like all dharma, rests not on scholarly credentials or textual authority, but on whether it proves helpful in your own practice. Does it help you develop discernment? Does it free you from dependency while deepening your capacity for authentic learning? Does it point you back to your own direct knowing?

If so, it has served its purpose.

If not, set it aside and find what does work for you.

That itself is an expression of the Four Reliances in action.