

## *Neither Here nor There*

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The Buddha's definition of the cravings that cause suffering states that they delight "now here, now there." In other words, they focus on locations, either physical or mental. Throughout the Canon, the Buddha speaks of how important it is to detect the location of a particular craving if you want to abandon it.

In the Mahā Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta (DN 22), for instance, he notes that craving can be located in anything in the world that the mind finds endearing or alluring. Then he breaks down what he means by "world": the internal sense media—the senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste, touch, and ideation—or their external objects: sights, sounds, aromas, flavors, tactile sensations, and ideas—or any of the activities that surround sensory experience:

contact between the senses and their objects,  
consciousness at that contact,  
feeling born of the contact,  
perceptions of sensory objects,  
intentions for sensory objects,  
craving for sensory objects,  
thoughts directed at sensory objects, and  
evaluation of sensory objects.

As the sutta states, craving can arise and settle in any of these spots. For example, if you crave another person, that craving could be focused on the sight or the touch of that person, your perceptions of that person, your intentions toward that person, or even on the act of craving itself: You want to experience lust, and the other person is simply an excuse to incite that experience.

If, seeing the dangers of craving, you want to abandon it and bring it to a full stop, you have to do so at the spot where it's located. For example, if your craving for a person is focused on the act of craving, you won't be able to abandon it if you simply deconstruct your perceptions of the person. You have to locate where exactly that craving craves craving itself.

In contrast, the Canon states again and again that the end of craving leads to a liberation—unbinding—beyond locations.

"When there is no you there, you are neither here nor yonder nor between the two. This, just this, is the end of stress." — *Ud 1:10*

There is that dimension, monks, where there is ... neither this world, nor the next world, nor sun, nor moon. And there, I say, there is neither coming, nor going, nor staying; neither passing away nor arising: unestablished, unevolving, without support [mental object]. This, just this, is the end of stress." — *Ud 8:1*

“There being no passing away or arising, there is neither a here nor a there nor a between-the-two. This, just this, is the end of stress.” — *Ud 8:4*

One of the Canon’s idioms for a heart or mind freed from locations is that it’s “everywhere released.”

Gone to the beyond of becoming,  
you let go of in front,  
let go of behind,  
let go of between.

With a heart everywhere released,  
you don’t come again to birth  
& aging. — *Dhp 348*

*Sister Subhā:*

I—unimpassioned, unblemished,  
with a mind everywhere released...

Knowing the unattractiveness  
of fabricated things,  
my heart adheres nowhere at all. — *Thig 14*

When totally awakened people pass away, they are said to be unbound through “unestablished consciousness” (SN 22:87). The suttas have an analogy for this type of consciousness: a light beam that doesn’t land on any surface at all (SN 12:64).

As the Buddha noted, we’ve been landing here and there for eons, wandering on from one location to another with craving as our companion (Sn 3:12). In his terminology, we’ve been going from one becoming (*bhava*) to another. What this means is that as a desire gets centered in a particular location, a world comes into focus around that location, and we take on a sense of self-identity within that world. This combination of a sense of self operating in a particular world of experience is what’s meant by “becoming.” The fact that a location is the beginning point or nucleus, both of the world of experience and the corresponding sense of self, means that a focal location is central not only to our sense of *where* we are, but also of *who* we are.

What keeps us wandering from location to location is that, as one particular becoming falls apart, we latch onto another desire, around which a new becoming can form. In other words, when “here” falls apart, we crave another “there” to focus on, which, when we find it and enter into it, becomes our new “here.” This process happens both on a micro level—as we go from one thought-world to another within the mind—and on the macro level, as when we die in one plane of existence and search for another place, on this plane or another, in which to take birth.

The Buddha’s analogy for what happens at death is a fire that latches on to the wind, which carries it a far distance. The fire stands for the being—a bundle of attachments (SN 23:2)—going on to a new birth; the wind stands for craving, to which the being clings for its sustenance. The place in the far distance to which the fire is carried stands for the next birth (SN 44:9).

This image gives an idea of how compulsive and undependable the process of rebirth can be. Wind has the potential to be extremely erratic and blind, and fire the potential to be destructive as it spreads. Yet our addiction to the process is strong. It's how we look for happiness even though, as the Buddha pointed out repeatedly, it's why we keep on creating suffering for ourselves over and over again (SN 7:12). If we want to put an end to suffering, we have to put out the fire. This means leaving no location to which the fire could cling for sustenance.

Because we define ourselves—consciously or not—around particular locations, this is a tall order. The whole idea of existing without location sounds alien. We've spent our many lives so focused on locations, fascinated by all the possible "there's" we could go, that it's hard to imagine that a total lack of location could offer any prospect for happiness at all. Even the idioms of our language make this point: When we say that something is neither here nor there, we mean that it's inconsequential or irrelevant. When Gertrude Stein said of her hometown, Oakland, that there was no *there* there, she meant her remark as a putdown. For something to be worthy of our attention, we feel, it has to be definitely here or there or both. We'll require more than an act of the imagination to convince ourselves that a "neither-here-nor-there" could not only be an attractive idea, but actually the ultimate goal for the heart and mind.

This was the challenge the Buddha faced in his own practice, and—after finding the freedom that comes from being everywhere released—that he faced in teaching others to see that it was a worthwhile goal.

In meeting this challenge, he devised several strategies for bringing his listeners to a point where every alluring "here" or "there" was seen to have drawbacks, and that release from every here and there was the only attractive option remaining. In other words, he had to corner his listeners in such a way that total freedom was the only escape.

He accomplished this task through a wide variety of approaches, which fall into two overall strategies.

In the first strategy, the Buddha would get his listeners to see that there are levels of being much preferable to the human. Once they set their hearts firmly on going to one of those levels after death, they would be willing to admit the drawbacks of the human level, and to abandon any desire to return here. Then he would point out the drawbacks of even those higher levels of being. When his listeners were ready to see the drawbacks both of "here" and "there," he would point out the rewards of escaping from both. If his listeners were strong in their sense of wanting no here nor there at all, they'd be willing to try the escape.

In the second strategy, the Buddha would have his listeners focus on the unreliability of the components of their experience in the here-and-now, such as the five aggregates or the six sense media. Once they had a strong sense of the drawbacks of the present moment, he would then point out that all possible future moments anywhere in the cosmos—however blatant or subtle, common or sublime, far or near the level of being—would be made up of the same components. When his listeners gained a strong sense of the limitations of any

experience in any location, he would point out the escape from those limitations: disenchantment and dispassion for all the components of temporal existence. Here, too, if his listeners were able to see that escape as offering the only positive alternative, they would go for it.

The first strategy, the Buddha used most often with people who were still immersed in sensuality. The second, he used primarily with people who had already seen the drawbacks of sensuality, and had mastered the alternative pleasure of right concentration.

We can learn a lot by looking at some examples of how the Buddha used these overall strategies and adapted them to the cravings of his specific listeners. What's noteworthy is that he used these two approaches both in situations where his listeners were examining their minds in peaceful, relatively normal circumstances, and in situations where his listeners were possibly dying, and where the question of location was acute: When you know you're about to die, you're keenly aware that you're being evicted from "here," so the mind is preoccupied with whatever "there" it can find in order to escape the pain that comes with the end of this particular becoming.

Still, you don't have to be facing imminent death for the Buddha's strategies for cornering your mind to give the desired results. One of the most famous examples of his first strategy—getting you focused on the pleasures of heaven, and then helping you to see that drawbacks of aspiring to heaven—is a case in point.

The story concerns the Buddha's half-brother, Ven. Nanda. After ordaining, he finds that he doesn't enjoy the celibate life. He keeps thinking of the Sakyan beauty who, as he left home, glanced at him with her hair half-combed and said, "Hurry back, master." So he wants to disrobe.

When he informs the Buddha of his plans, the Buddha decides to take Nanda's mind off the Sakyan beauty. Holding him by the arm, he levitates up to the heaven of the Thirty-three. There Nanda sees 500 dove-footed nymphs—this apparently means that their feet were stained red with henna—waiting on Sakka, the ruler of the devas of the Thirty-three.

The Blessed One said to Ven. Nanda, "Nanda, do you see these 500 dove-footed nymphs?"

"Yes, lord."

"What do you think, Nanda? Which is lovelier, better looking, more charming: the Sakyan girl, the envy of the countryside, or these 500 dove-footed nymphs?"

"Lord, compared to these 500 dove-footed nymphs, the Sakyan girl, the envy of the countryside, is like a cauterized monkey with its ears & nose cut off. She doesn't count. She's not even a small fraction. There's no comparison. The 500 dove-footed nymphs are lovelier, better looking, more charming."

"Then take joy, Nanda! Take joy! I am your guarantor for getting 500 dove-footed nymphs."

“If the Blessed One is my guarantor for getting 500 dove-footed nymphs, I will enjoy leading the holy life under the Blessed One.”

They then return to Earth. Nanda begins to practice with his mind set on the reward he'll get after death, but word gets out among the monks as to why he's practicing so seriously. So they start addressing him as they would a hired hand or a person who's been bought out: He wants to be paid with nymphs. You can imagine how Nanda, raised in the noble warrior caste, would find their comments extremely shameful and degrading—and this is apparently what the Buddha had in mind. So Nanda now starts meditating in earnest—we can assume that this means developing right view, right concentration, and all the other factors of the path—and as a result, he gains full awakening. He then goes to the Buddha to release him from his promise of 500 nymphs, only to learn that at the moment when he, Nanda, awakened, the Buddha was automatically released from that promise (Ud 3:2).

Another example of this strategy of focusing a person's mind on the pleasures of heaven and then undercutting any desire to go there also concerns one of the Buddha's relatives, this time his cousin, Mahānāma. The Buddha has been spending the Rains retreat near Mahānāma's home, and now, at the end of the Rains, is getting ready to set off wandering. Mahānāma comes to him with a question: If, in the Buddha's absence, a discerning lay person is approaching death, how should that person be advised?

The way the Buddha addresses this question shows that “discerning lay person” in this instance means a stream-winner, someone who has had a first taste of the deathless. He tells Mahānāma to remind the person that he is endowed with the virtues of a stream-winner, which should allay his fears of going to a bad destination.

Then the Buddha recommends asking the person if he has any worries or concerns about his family. If he does, Mahānāma should remind him that he's now in a position where he can't do anything for his family, so he should set his mind on abandoning those concerns.

Once this has been accomplished, Mahānāma should ask the dying person if he has any concerns about leaving behind the sensual pleasures of the human world. If the dying person says Yes—after all, stream-winners have not fully mastered right concentration, and they haven't yet abandoned the fetter of sensual passion—Mahānāma should call his attention to the fact that the pleasures of one of the lower levels of the sensual heavens, the devas of the Four Great Kings, are more splendid and refined than human sensual pleasures. He should set his heart on those.

Once the dying person has managed that, Mahānāma is to get him to set his heart on ever more refined levels of the sensual heavens, and then on the non-sensual pleasures of the Brahmās. These pleasures are those of at least the first level of right concentration. Even though the dying person may not have mastered right concentration, he would have had at least a taste of right concentration at his experience of stream-entry (SN 55:5). If the dying person can

bring the pleasure of that concentration to mind, then Mahānāma is to remind him that even the Brahmās are subject to the sufferings entailed in self-identity. The dying person should set his heart on abandoning self-identity. If he can manage that, then his mind can become fully released (SN 55:54).

In both of these cases, the Buddha's strategy is first to get his listener to see the drawbacks of the pleasures of the human realm by focusing on the more refined pleasures of the heavenly realms. This helps to loosen the listener's attachment to "here." Then the Buddha gets him to see the drawbacks of even the heavenly realms. In Nanda's case, he does this indirectly, by allowing Nanda to see that if he focuses on heavenly pleasures, he'll be subject to ridicule, and that the desire for heavenly pleasures is, in and of itself, degrading. In the case of the dying person, the approach is more direct: Even the pleasures of right concentration as experienced by Brahmās are inherently subject to the pains and sufferings associated with maintaining a sense of self-identity. This helps to loosen the listener's attachment to "there." When the listener finds himself confined by the choice between here and there—in other words, he sees the need to choose between the two, in and of itself, as confining, and there's no better location to go to—then the mind is ready for the opening that leads beyond that choice, and so beyond locations of every sort.

As for the Buddha's second strategy—pointing out the drawbacks of the components making up present-moment experience and then teaching that all possible experience, on any level of the cosmos, would be composed of the same components—here again there are cases where he uses this strategy with people in more normal circumstances, and cases where he uses it with people facing imminent death.

An example of the first case is the Buddha's second discourse (SN 22:59). Here he's speaking to the five brethren, all of whom have attained stream-entry, the first level of awakening. In his first discourse (SN 56:11), the Buddha has already taught them that clinging to the five aggregates of form, feeling, perception, fabrications, and consciousness constitutes suffering. In their experience of stream-entry—either on hearing the first discourse or soon after—they have already had a taste of what it's like to abandon clinging for the aggregates momentarily. Now he's going to show them how to abandon that clinging for good.

The process involves three main steps. The first step is a questionnaire. The Buddha asks the brethren to examine each of the aggregates one by one to see if that aggregate is constant or inconstant. The answer: inconstant. If something is inconstant, is it easeful or stressful? Stressful. If something is inconstant and stressful, is it fitting to regard it as, "This is mine. This is my self. This is what I am"? No.

This questionnaire leads to a clear value judgment: that the component factors that make up "here" are not worthy of clinging or laying claim to.

The second step is to extrapolate from here: The Buddha notes that all instances of the aggregates, "past, future, or present; internal or external; blatant or subtle; common or sublime; far or near" are also to be regarded with right

discernment as: “This is not mine. This is not my self. This is not what I am.” In other words, any possible “there” is also not worth clinging to.

In the third step, the Buddha points out the rewards of judging any possible here or there as unworthy of attachment: You become disenchanted with all possible aggregates. Then, from disenchantment, comes dispassion; from dispassion, release. When the mind is released, there comes the knowledge: “released.” You discern that “Birth is ended, the holy life fulfilled, the task done. There is nothing further for this world.”

While following the Buddha every step along the way through this three-step process, the minds of all five of the brethren are totally released.

A second case of this second strategy concerns the monk, Ven. Girimānanda. Ven. Ānanda comes to the Buddha to tell him that Girimānanda is severely ill, and that it would be good if the Buddha would visit him, out of sympathy. Instead of accepting the invitation, the Buddha tells Ānanda to go himself and to teach ten perceptions to Girimānanda; when he hears these perceptions, his illness might subside. The Buddha then lists the ten perceptions.

What’s interesting here is that even though the perceptions are ostensibly meant to put an end to Girimānanda’s illness—which, when Ānanda teaches them to Girimānanda, they actually do—the content of the ten perceptions seems tailored to the needs of a person on the verge of death.

The ten perceptions are these:

- 1) The perception of inconstancy: perceiving the five aggregates as inconstant.
- 2) The perception of not-self: perceiving the six senses along with their objects as not-self.
- 3) The perception of unattractiveness: analyzing the body into its many unclean parts.
- 4) The perception of drawbacks: listing many of the diseases to which the body is prey.
- 5) The perception of abandoning: not allowing unskillful mind states—such as sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness—to remain in the mind.
- 6) The perception of dispassion: perceiving the dispassion leading to unbinding as something exquisite.
- 7) The perception of cessation: perceiving the cessation leading to unbinding as something exquisite.
- 8) The perception of distaste for any world: abandoning any attachments for or obsessions with any world at all.
- 9) The perception of the undesirability of all fabrications: developing a sense of horror and disgust toward all fabrications.
- 10) Mindfulness of in-and-out breathing: training in the Buddha’s standard sixteen-step formula for practicing breath meditation.

These perceptions fall into four classes. Perceptions in the first class, 5 and 10, concern practices for getting the mind beyond thoughts of sensuality and into right concentration. Perceptions in the second class, 1 and 2, concern the drawbacks of the fabricated components that go into making up the experience of

“here.” Perceptions in the third class, 8 and 9, concern the drawbacks of any possible world of rebirth “there,” inasmuch as all worlds are composed of fabrications. Perceptions in the fourth class, 6 and 7, focus on dispassion and cessation as an excellent alternative to both here and there.

Perceptions 3 and 4, focused on the drawbacks of having a body, play multiple roles. As adjuncts to 5 and 10, they help get the mind into concentration. As adjuncts to 1 and 2, they focus the mind on the drawbacks of “here.” Given that desire for the body can lead to rebirth, they also can be used to focus on the drawbacks of “there.”

So even though the perceptions are not listed in the same three-step order as the Buddha’s teaching to the five brethren, they contain all the elements of his second major approach for getting his listeners to develop dispassion for here and there, and to see the alternative to here and there as a positive goal. Rather than pinning his hopes on heavenly pleasures, Girimānanda is to get his mind in a state of concentration, and from there he can see—as the Buddha states in AN 9:36—that even concentration is composed of the aggregates. When he can see the drawbacks of the aggregates even in blissful states of concentration, he’s ready for the remaining perceptions and the remaining steps in the Buddha’s strategy.

The important point in all these examples is that the Buddha brings his listeners to a mind state in which they are essentially cornered, where they see that the best possible options on which they could set their hearts—either here at this point in space and time, or somewhere else in space and time—all have their drawbacks. If they could imagine another spot in space and time that might hold promise for a satisfying happiness, they’d still be able to find a location for their cravings, and not be able to let go of them. But if they sense themselves genuinely confined by this range of choices, seeing that no possible location holds any allure, only then will they willingly open their hearts to the possibility of a choice that’s neither here nor there. That’s how they become totally unbound: by neither staying here nor going someplace else. Because the experience of space and time is defined by choices of “here” or “there,” staying or going, the alternative to these choices goes beyond space and time. That’s the unconditioned.

The Buddha illustrates this point with a simile. When a deva asks him how he crossed over the flood, and he answers, “I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place” (SN 1:1). His statement is sometimes interpreted as meaning that he didn’t exert himself too much or too little, but that’s not what he’s saying. He defied the coordinates of space and time by neither staying here nor going anywhere else there. As he further explains to the deva, he was able to do that because he saw the drawbacks of staying here or going there: “When I pushed forward, I was whirled about. When I stayed in place, I sank. And so I crossed over the flood without pushing forward, without staying in place.”

It was only because he was fully sensitive to the drawbacks of here and there, and was willing to open his heart and mind to the advantages of neither here nor there, that he was able to attain total release.

Our problem is that we're still fascinated by the possibilities offered by all the here's and there's of the world. We're proud of our ability to fashion pleasure out of even the most unlikely raw materials we can find in space and time. Only when we allow ourselves to fully admit that the Buddha was right—that the possibilities of all worlds are actually confining (SN 2:7)—will we be able to experience something better than what any here-and-now or there-and-then have to offer.