

Looking for Essence in the Wilderness

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There's a poem in the canon where Ven. Maha Kassapa is talking about the beauties of the wilderness and how refreshing it is to stay in the wilderness. Historically it's interesting because it's the oldest wilderness poetry we know of, appreciating not only nature, but wild nature, totally away from farming and other human activities. And it's also interesting that Maha Kassapa, who has the reputation of being so stern, could be so appreciative of the beauties of nature.

But then as the poem concludes, the real joy of being out in the wilderness is that it's easier to get the mind to settle down. It's a good place for developing strong concentration, because there are so few distractions and so many dangers. Things can happen very easily in the wilderness, and you're all alone, or you're with very few people, and getting help is difficult.

I know someone who was part of a research project way up on Axel Heiberg Island. She was going to spend a month or two alone on the island, and she was all excited about going. But then as the plane left after dropping her off, she suddenly realized that anything could happen, and she'd have nobody to help. After a while she got used to it, but still there was that sense of terror that swept over her for a few minutes, with the realization that we're so dependent on the comforts of civilization that we tend to forget about them. Its strange: We're so dependent, and yet we forget.

But this is the way it is throughout conditioned reality, and being in the wilderness brings it more sharply into life. Conditionality is so fleeting. Things arise because of conditions, and the conditions are always changing. They talk about river of time flowing, and as with any river you stick your finger into the river and then you stick it in again, and it's not the same river. It's changed. Or whatever it is you cling to, as the Buddha said, it's simply a matter of the time it takes to decide that you're going to cling to something, and that thing has already changed. It's already changed into something else.

So, both because we have the beauties of nature and the quiet of nature, and also the dangers of nature out here, it makes you realize you've got to find a refuge inside. That's what the concentration is. Concentration, here, covers both insight and tranquility, because the practice of getting the mind to settle down requires that you understand the mind. You don't just force it to be still. You try to understand the conditions in the mind so that you can create something that's relatively lasting. But even this is not an ultimate refuge. As the Buddha said, the

essence of all experiences, or the essence of all actions—he uses the word dhamma, which seems to have a special sense as your experiences or actions—is release. You find pleasure here staying, being out in the wild. The conditions have been ideal for the past week, and yet you can't make them stay that way.

I found, when I went down to the meadow and I only had a few minutes to sit there, that the first thought that came to my mind was, “I hope I can do this again.” Of course, what that means is that the experience itself is not satisfying. It keeps changing, changing, changing. If it's something you like, you hope it comes again, but then it's still not enough. It's only when you can dig down into the mind, into the midst of that experience, and find release: That's when you've found something of true value, or in the Buddha's word, the heartwood of that experience. Everything else is totally devoid of essence, but this is the essence.

This doesn't mean the trees have release or the grass in the meadows has release, it's simply in the mind as it's experiencing the trees and the grass and the sunlight coming through the branches. If you're going to look for essence, you have to look in the mind that's experiencing these things but is not attached to them, not clinging to them.

Even your sense of yourself, you as a being, is a product of attachment. That's the Buddha's definition. Sometimes you hear it said that the Buddha said there really is no being there, there is no you there, but he never said that. A monk once asked him what a being is, and the Buddha gave him an answer: Wherever there is attachment, that's where there's going to be a being—what the Buddha calls the process of I-making and my-making. It's a process of trying to pin something down inside. But as you're holding onto experiences, even as you're trying to pin something down, it's already changed.

So, you have to look at the part of the mind that's not creating an “I” around this, is not creating a sense of passion or attachment. And that's where the essence of that experience is going to be—and the freedom. As the Buddha said, when the mind is free, it's released everywhere. It's not confined to any particular location; it doesn't fasten on anything.

So that's the quality of mind we're trying to find. It can be with good things and bad things, and not make its happiness depend on the good things or bad things. We get the mind still so that we can see the actions of the mind as it's creating passion or aversion around something. If we get the mind really still and very alert, we can start seeing our delusions as well, and realize that whatever we create out of those things is simply going to fall apart. Your sense of you, who you are, is created out of things that are going to fall apart. It's not that there's no you. You've created this you, but you have to keep on creating it. And the happiness

for you that you're going to create out of this world is going to depend on things are changing all the time, as long as you have passion for them. The Buddha's not saying there's no you there, it's just that "you" is a construct built out of passion. And as long as we see that it's worth the effort, we're going to keep creating it and holding onto it.

So, we meditate to see that there's something of greater value so that we're not simply here appreciating the beauties of nature. We're making use of them. There's a passage where the Buddha talks about a monk going out in the wilderness. He sits down and holds onto the perception of wilderness. He realizes that all the disturbances of village life, all the disturbances of human society, are not here. This state is empty of that, but there is still a disturbance of being in wilderness. And the disturbance there, of course, is what comes from the dangers, the aloneness in the face of what could happen to your body, what could happen to the things you have.

So, you drop that perception and you simply go to the perception of the elements, and then from the elements you go through space, and then through awareness itself, and up through the different levels of formless concentration. In each case you realize that the disturbance that was there in the previous state is no longer there. Finally, through this process of progressively emptying itself of disturbance, you can get the mind to a point where it has no more greed, aversion, and delusion for things, and that's your dwelling. You're not dwelling in nature anymore. You're dwelling in emptiness. Of course, emptiness is not located anywhere. But we can use this location as a way to get there, where the air is clean, the temperature has been just right for the past week, it's been quiet. We could simply enjoy the location, enjoy the pleasures of nature, or we could put them to use. Because in the Buddha's teachings, even though he stresses the importance of wilderness, it's because it's useful for training the mind.

So, if you're working on getting the mind more concentrated or trying to work on gaining some insight into how the mind creates suffering out of all kinds of things good and bad, remember, that's the purpose of being here. This opens all kinds of opportunities for the mind. Our time here is fleeting, so make the best use of it, because as things go with time, they just disappear, disappear. There's a saying in Thai that time consumes everything as it consumes itself. But if you find something of real value, and especially if you can find what's essential in all of this, which is the release, then you do have something good to show for the fact that time has passed, something that time can't consume. The goodness of passing time, even though it will disappear, is the goodness of release, and that never changes. That's why it's of essential worth.