

To Go Where You've Never Gone Before

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There's a series of suttas about future dangers that King Asoka once recommended that all monks and nuns listen to on a regular basis. And there's a recurring theme in the reflection on the dangers of aging, illness, death or, if you're staying in the forest, the immediate dangers all around you: In each case you realize, "I've got to practice so I can reach the as-yet un-reached, attain the as-yet un-attained, realize the as-yet unrealized, so that when aging, illness, and death come, I won't have to suffer from them."

Now, this is a heedful way of thinking, and the heedfulness lies in two things: one, in realizing that you have to get started in your practice right away, because death could come at any time, illness could come at any time. But also, two, in the realization that, for true safety, you need to go someplace you've never been before. As long as you haven't experienced the deathless, you've never been in a really safe place. If you just keep going to more unsafe places, you'll never find any real security.

The implication here, of course, is that we're not coming from a position of original purity or original goodness. It's not that we're originally bad, either. It's simply that the practice is not aimed at a return to someplace we've already been.

There is that passage where the Buddha said the mind is luminous, and it's darkened by visiting defilements. But he's not saying that the mind is originally pure. This is a point that Ajaan Maha Boowa made. As he said, if the Buddha had said the mind is originally pure, you could argue with him: If it was originally pure then how did it get defiled? And if a pure mind could be defiled, then if we were to bring it to purity again, what would keep it from getting defiled again?

But the Buddha simply said that it's luminous. Luminosity is a quality of the mind that's not necessarily pure. After all, the mind simply in concentration is luminous.

As someone once pointed out, there's that passage in the Canon saying that when the universe devolves, most beings go up to the Brahma levels, the levels that correspond to the second jhāna and beyond. They hang out there until the new universe comes back into being. Then they fall. So maybe we have an instinctive memory that we've been someplace that's luminous, and it's the best place we've been so far. We think we might want to go back—but

then we'd fall again. As heedful meditators, we want something safer than that.

If you don't want to think about rebirth, you can also think about the development of the animal kingdom. It's not the case that as we evolved from single cell organisms up to multi-cell organisms, up to animals to human-beings, we left our original purity. After all, animals all suffer.

I remember hearing a Zen teacher one time say that "Animals don't suffer, because they don't have any sense of self." But you look at them, and they're obviously suffering from fear. After all, they have all the forms of clinging: There's sensuality clinging. They have a sense of the pleasures they want to find in life. Even views: They have to have a sense of how the world works in order to find their pleasures.

Scientists did an experiment years back with some pigeons, where they put some pigeons in a box, and there were two bars they could push: a green bar and a red bar. If you pushed the green bar, you got some food. If you pushed the red bar, you didn't get any food. The pigeons in that box were very well-adjusted pigeons. They knew that if they wanted food, they'd press the green bar. The red bar was just to play around with.

In another box, the scientists arranged it so that if you pressed the green bar sometimes you got food, and sometimes you didn't get food. Sometimes if you pushed the red bar you got food, and sometimes you didn't. The pigeons placed in that box went basically berserk. They were very neurotic, very poorly adjusted pigeons.

What I mean by poorly adjusted pigeons: They started doing strange, destructive things to themselves. Which shows the connection between your idea of pleasure and how the world works what you should do in order to get the world to work for you. Even common animals cling to that. As for their sense of self, if they live in a world that doesn't make any sense at all—where they can't figure out how to find happiness in the world, they can't figure out which bars to push—they start getting self-destructive.

Their sense of self is damaged. Which means that a healthy sense of self depends on having some coherent sense of how the world works. Animals cling to these things. If they don't get what they want out of these things, they start going crazy. And it's the same with us.

We have our sensual desires, and our sense of the world comes from our sense of how to satisfy those desires. We start thinking because of the problem of pain, and how to get out of pain. As the Buddha said, we see that sensuality is the way out. Then we try to figure out the world so that we can gain a sense of what we have to do within that world to get the sensual

pleasures we want. And our sense of self—as the competent provider of the happiness we want, as a happy consumer of the happiness we want, and as the observer watching all of this going on: These facets of our sense of self are all tied up in our views about how to work the world.

But the sense of self is not something that only human beings have. As I said, even common animals need to have a rough sense of self, and a rough sense of pleasure, a rough sense of figuring out the world around them, and how they can manipulate it through their actions. So we're all coming from clinging and clinging and clinging. We're not coming from a place of purity.

Even the Brahmas up in the heavens that correspond to the second jhāna, they're clinging really hard to that second jhāna. So it's not the case that we're going to be safe by going back to where we were. If we go back, we just go back to clinging some more. We have to realize that we need to find something we haven't found before. Which means we're going to have to be doing things we haven't done before.

This is why it's so important to realize that we're not simply going back to someplace we've already been, because that would mean we'd simply do things we used to do somehow. But here, we're going to someplace new. We're going beyond the luminosity of concentration, trying to figure out: Why do we cling? Why do we need to have this sense of identity around our pleasures? Is there some way we can live where we don't have to be beings? Where we don't have to feed? That's what we're looking for, because after all, the feeding involves clinging, and clinging involves suffering.

So we try to feed the mind well; strengthen it, so that it can look into its attachments, look into its clings and cravings, and figure out how to let them go. This goes very much against the grain, which is why we hold to the four noble truths as our guide, because they tell us: There is a cause for suffering, but it's not where you think it is. There's also the cessation of the suffering that comes by allowing the cause to cease. And there's a path of practice that can take us there.

It's going to involve a lot of dispassion for our suffering and clinging. It's going to involve dispassion for our craving. So you have to keep in mind the message of the map the Buddha provides in the four noble truths: that it will be good to abandon our attachments here. Dispassion for these things will be a good thing to develop. We take that on faith as long as we haven't seen the deathless.

When you see the deathless, that's when, as the Buddha says, your conviction in the

Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha is verified. You're beginning to see what you hadn't seen before. There's still more work to do, but at least you have a toehold. In the image in the Canon, you've crossed the river to the point where you're not quite on the other shore, but your feet can reach the bottom, so you're not so likely to be swept away. You've reached a place of relative safety. If you're really heedful, you want to get up on the shore as soon as you can.

So you remember, heedfulness is not simply a matter of saying, "I've got to practice tonight more than I've done in the past, and be more diligent in the practice." It also involves having the right concept of where you're going. You're trying to go to someplace that's safe, and you don't want to let yourself rest content with anything that's not really safe.

When you do get into good states of concentration, remember: They're the path. That was the Buddha's discovery. He'd been taught by his teachers that they were the goal: states of the dimension of nothingness, the dimension of neither perception or non-perception. But his realization was that they're not the goal, but they can be used as the path to something he had never before reached.

You learn how to reflect on them. You learn how to look at them to see where there's still some clinging in there. Letting go of that clinging is going to be difficult because, after all, clinging is what defines us as beings. When the Buddha says that all beings subsist on food, he means all beings cling. That's a basic part of their identity—what they are.

So going someplace you've never been before, realizing something you never realized before, is going to require taking apart your sense of who you are. But we go on the conviction the Buddha was right: If you learn how to let go of your clinging and craving, you do find ultimate happiness, you do find ultimate safety, a dimension where there are no dangers at all.