

What's Not on the Map

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In Thai they have a term—*arahan dib*, a “raw arahant” or an “uncooked arahant”—meaning someone who has read up on the texts, has everything all figured out beforehand, and then forces his meditation into the mold he learned from the texts. When he’s reached the end of his preconceived notions about where the practice leads, okay, there he is: success in the practice. As you can imagine, “raw arahant” is not a term of praise or admiration. It’s a term of derision for the inexperienced person who thinks he can have everything figured out all beforehand.

There’s another Thai phrase about someone who “knows before he’s born, who’s expert before he’s even tried his hand.” It’s basically the same idea.

What we’re working on here is not a body of facts you can simply memorized. We’re working on a skill, and where we’re coming from is ignorance. This means that although you can get a general sense of this skill beforehand by reading and listening to people talk, the actual practice is something you’ve got to learn to feel your way through. Getting that right feel for the practice is the essence of mastery.

The basic principles may apply to everybody, but no one else has ever trained your particular mind with its particular problems before. You’re the one who’s going to have to train it by mastering both the principles and the particulars. You’re coming from ignorance but you’re going to have to learn how to be your own teacher. This means learning how to learn from your particular mistakes: Make plans as to what you’re going to do, do it, and then see what happens. Try to work with your best intentions from the very beginning—what seems to make the most sense, what seems the right thing to do—but be prepared to make adjustments along the way.

This is at the essence of what the Buddha taught Rahula in the sutta I keep referring to. And I keep referring to it because it’s so basic and essential. You can’t always know beforehand how the results of your actions are going to turn out. Sometimes you *can* anticipate and so you work with your best anticipations, but you have to be alert to the fact that your anticipations can sometimes be wrong. And so the Buddha also teaches you how to deal with the discovery of mistaken anticipations, recognizing sometimes, while you’re doing something, that it’s wrong, so you learn to stop. Other times you can read the results of your actions only after they’re done. This requires honesty and integrity, and part of the way to learn honesty and integrity is to be willing to confess mistakes when you recognize them, to talk them over with someone further along on the path. This is because your willingness to be open and aboveboard with other people about these things translates into being open and aboveboard about them in your own internal conversation. You develop good habits this way. Your external habits of speaking become part of your internal dialogue.

So the practice is a combination of learning what you’ve picked up from other people, taking it to heart, and then also realizing that you’ve got to test it. Things may not come out the way you anticipated them. This is part of discernment. It

starts with learning from what you've heard and then thinking it through. Real insight, though, comes from developing these qualities in the mind.

It's like going out in the wilderness. You read the maps, you make your plans, but when you get out in the forest you realize that the forest doesn't look like the map. The map has splotches of solid pale green with red lines and little symbols on it. But when you look around yourself in the forest, you don't see those splotches, symbols, or lines. Now, the lines are relevant: They symbolize the paths through the forest. They give you a sketchy idea of what's out there. But you have to realize that there's a lot more out there than just the pale greens and reds of the map. There are actual trees, actual animals, actual changes in the lay of the land. So you make plans based on the map, but be prepared to throw your plans overboard as you meet up with new and unexpected things. This is an important part of the training: how to deal with the unexpected.

I had a friend back in high school who went into military training and later told me about having to do long-distance running as part of his training. One of the things I had hated most about high school phys-ed was long-distance running. It'd practically kill me. My worst memories of phys-ed class were having to do a mile run and coming back and getting dizzy, throwing up, and having to lie there on a bench in the locker room, feeling like I was going to die. So what my friend told me sounded like a horror story: Part of his military training was running for a mile with a full pack on his back. Of course, everybody was anticipating the finish line at the end of the mile. But as they reached the finish line, the instructor said, "Okay, one more quarter-mile." As you can imagine, there were complaints. But the instructor said, "Look, when you're engaged in a battle, you can't have predetermined lines about this is how far the enemy's going to chase you, or that you'll have to fight only up to five p.m. You may have some expectations of how long the battle is going to last, but you can never know. You've got to be prepared for it to last a really long time. And you've got to learn how to find the inner resources you can draw on when you get pushed beyond what you think are your limits."

The same holds true in the battle with defilements. You can never tell when greed is going to come up or how long it's going to keep coming back, coming back. There are times when lust seems to be really quiet for weeks and months on end, but you never know when it's going to come back in full strength, and you have to be prepared for that possibility.

So learning to deal with uncertainties is an important skill in the practice, because you'll have to deal with so many uncertainties both inside and out. You need to develop the right attitude, the right confidence in your ability to read a situation. And that kind of confidence comes not through attending self-esteem classes. It comes from actual practice in dealing with situations and, over time, learning how far your powers of observation can be relied on, and where they have to be further sharpened. Ajaan Maha Boowa makes the point that when the defilements are named in the books they come in nice, neat lists, but when they come up in your mind they don't follow the lists. They don't come in the proper order. They come all pell-mell, so you have to be ready to deal with them pell-mell, whatever the order they come in. As in that question the king of Thailand once asked Luang Puu Dune: "Which defilement do you have to deal with first?" Luang Puu's answer was, "Whichever one arises first." Sometimes there are going to be subtle ones and sometimes blatant ones. They don't line up neatly.

So, again, it's good to have names for the defilements to get a sense of what you might be dealing with, but be prepared for the fact that a lot of what's going to happen in your mind won't quite be the way it's described in the books. Ajaan Lee once commented that the ways of the mind are so many that no book on earth could possibly cover them all. But fortunately there are certain basic patterns you learn from, and you try applying them. Then when you've run through your list of skills and patterns, and you find that things are still not working, you've got to use your ingenuity and try new approaches.

This is why one of the worst attitudes you can have as a meditator is to hope that some ajaan is going to come and tell you to do X, and that's all you have to do. You don't have to think about it, just do X, X, X, X, X, obey his instructions, and you're guaranteed to come out right at the end. That's placing all the responsibility on the ajaan, and none on yourself. You've got to be willing to be responsible: to experiment, to try different approaches, and to learn how to read the results. That's the skill in the meditation. And that's how you develop discernment.

This comes from being willing to put yourself in uncertain situations: to have an adventure and not just an itinerary. Think of the itineraries on those cruises that go through the islands of the Alaskan panhandle. People basically stay in a floating hotel, and what kind of experience do they have? They get off at the different ports where they're thronged with guides vying to give them prepackaged, predigested experiences of the shrink-wrapped Alaskan wild. Then they come back home with their experience packages, but without having learned anything new. They didn't develop any skills. They just paid to be given a show. That's what itineraries are like. An adventure, though, is when you're willing to put yourself in an uncertain situation and to learn from the uncertainties. That's the only way you're going to gain real insight.

That's why the Buddha taught that there are three levels of discernment: the levels of understanding that come from listening, from thinking, and from developing qualities in the mind. Only in the actual developing do you begin to get an intuitive sense, a real feel, say, of what mindfulness is like, of what alertness is like, of what they can do. You may already know something about these qualities in their potential form, but as they grow they can branch out in unexpected ways. They can open up and connect to other qualities in the mind as well. So there's always an element of uncertainty in the practice that requires your own active participation in taking what you've learned and adjusting it to training the particulars of your mind. Because, as I said, no one else has ever trained your particular mind before, with your particular mix of defilements. You're the one who has to train it.

So pick up what lessons you can, read the maps, make your plans, but know that the plans can get washed away pretty quickly. And realize that being thrown on your own resources is not a bad thing. It's where genuine insight comes. As Ajaan Maha Boowa says, discernment doesn't arise until you find yourself cornered, at the end of your rope. It may not be a pleasant place to be, but it's where new alternatives show themselves if you're willing to look for them. Otherwise your practice is like processed cheese—no matter what kind of cheese goes into the factory, it all gets mixed with oil and comes out tasting the same. Kraft Velveeta has not changed much since I was a child. They may package it differently, but it's all very predictable, and all very blah. But we don't

want processed cheese in the practice. We don't want blah insights. We want something better than that.

Any practice that requires less than your full participation and less than your full willingness to put things on the line is never going to offer you any real surprises. Actually, awakening is quite a surprise when it comes. So learn how to deal with the little surprises, and the big surprises will have an opportunity to show you that there really is something special in life. After all, the Buddha said there are four noble truths. It's not that all life is suffering. Part of life is also the end of suffering—if you open yourself up to what often might seem like impossibilities, improbabilities. There's a passage where the Buddha says that we practice to see what we've never seen before, to attain what we've never attained before, to know what we've never known before. Which means being willing to do things we've never done before, to encounter things we've never planned for before. So learn to enjoy that adventurous aspect of the path, because it's crucial.