

Wherever You Go, There You Aren't

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You've probably heard the phrase, "Wherever you go, there you are." But for most of us that's not really the case. Wherever we go, there we *aren't*. We're always someplace else, thinking how much better things would be over there, or how much more interesting things are over there. We very rarely look right here, right here in the heart. Yet this is where all the issues in life come from: what's going on in the heart right now.

Meditation means being willing to look at what's right here, right now. It really goes against the grain. We're much more interested in pointing the finger at something else: The problem is someplace else. The solution is someplace else. The mind is often like a politician who, when the fingers are being pointed at the politician, is very clever at diverting everybody's attention someplace over there. Of course, in doing that, we never solve whatever our actual problems are. Even when we sit down to meditate, we're often more interested in what's over there.

There's a story Ajaan Maha Boowa tells of a nun he encountered one time. Years earlier, the nun had encountered Ajaan Mun. After sizing her up, Ajaan Mun had told her not to meditate. She came and reported this to Ajaan Maha Boowa. Ajaan Maha Boowa was perplexed, surprised. Usually Ajaan Mun told everybody to meditate. But then Ajaan Maha Boowa noticed what her meditation was like. She was very psychic, and she was always interested in what the devas and the beings of hell were doing. That's where her interests lay.

She'd been told by many of Ajaan Mun's students not to follow that kind of stuff because it didn't go anywhere. It didn't solve the problem of suffering. It was simply like turning on your TV at night. Yet she had never listened to these people. She hadn't even listened to Ajaan Mun. She kept on meditating in her own way because she liked to have visions of devas here, devas there.

Part of the problem was that in having that kind of knowledge, she had developed a fair amount of pride around it. And it took someone of Ajaan Maha Boowa's caliber to finally get her to turn around and look inside her own mind to see that that was where the real problem was.

But for most of us, though, our distractions are not even that interesting: just common, ordinary garden-variety distractions. "Right here is no good. Someplace else must be good." These are just plain old everyday distractions and yet they really have a pull. So you have to learn how to counteract them.

Ajaan Chah has a nice image for this. He says it's as if you lost something right here, you know you lost it right here, and yet you go looking someplace else to find what you lost. That's

doesn't work. If you know you lost something right here, you have to go looking right here for it.

What's lost right here is our awareness of what we're doing: creating suffering right here, clinging right here, letting things totally out of control right here. So in the beginning of the practice we have to learn how to look right here, even though we don't like what we see when we look right here. The mind is all over the place, things are not as calm, rapturous, or as wonderful as we'd like. It's like a bad TV show. You want to change the channel to something that's more interesting. Yet that's the whole problem: We're always changing the channel.

A large part of the meditation is not just the technique of learning how to stay with the breath. It's the attitude of reminding yourself that regardless of what comes up right here right now, whether the technique is working right away or not, there's always something to learn right here. Because this is where the opportunity is: You're not going to see what's happening way over there when you're standing right here. If you maintain the habit of looking over there, then even when you do get over there—in other words when “over there” becomes right here—you're going to be looking someplace else. Actually, what you see over there when you get there is going to be pretty much what you see right here, right now.

So you have to learn how to watch. Learn how to look at the mind in a way that actually helps solve the problem instead of compounding the problem. Part of this means bringing the right narrative to what you're doing, learning to look at the events of the mind simply as events, in and of themselves. This requires that you have the proper attitude. If you bring in the narrative of just being upset with yourself or down on yourself, that's not conducive to seeing things as they actually are.

You've got to have some appreciation for the fact that here you are learning how to bring the mind under some control. Even when it's not as pleasant or as absorbing as you'd like all the time, at least you're engaged in something really worthwhile. That in and of itself is something to congratulate yourself on.

As the Buddha said, it's a sign of a wise person who's willing to turn around and look at the mind as a first step toward bringing some control to the mind.

Ajaan Suwat tells of how when he first went to stay with Ajaan Mun. He'd been meditating for a couple of years up to that point, but his mind was still not as settled as he'd liked it to be. So one of the first things he said to Ajaan Mun was a complaint: “My mind is all over the place.” Ajaan Mun said, “At least you're aware of it. This is actually one of the things you learn in mindfulness practice: learning how to watch a scattered mind, a distracted mind, and recognize it as a scattered mind, as a distracted mind. It's a step in the right direction.”

Ajaan Suwat took the advice very well. He realized that Ajaan Mun was basically giving him encouragement. He wasn't telling him to accept the distracted mind as a distracted mind and not do anything with it. In other words, he wasn't teaching radical acceptance. He was telling Ajaan Suwat to accept the fact that this is the way things are right now, but you're

learning about them so you can begin to see where you can get a handle on them.

It's going to be awkward. It's like learning a new language, going into a new situation where things are unfamiliar. Your immediate reaction is always, "I want to go back to the language I've already mastered, to the situation I'm already familiar with." But you don't learn that way. You don't grow. You grow by putting yourself in a situation where it's awkward and you have the desire to learn from it. You have the right attitude, i.e., "I'm going to learn from my mistakes. It's natural that I'm going to have mistakes. It's natural that things are going to be difficult for a while. but this is a skill I really want to learn."

When you bring that attitude toward being right here, that's the proper narrative you should have. So many people approach meditation simply as a way to step out of their day-to-day narrative, rest for a while, but then when they step back into their daily life, they step back into the same old narrative. Nothing much gets changed aside from the fact that they've rested for a bit. What you really want to do is also to change the narratives. This means, one, the narratives that bring you into the meditation, so that you have the proper attitude to whatever comes up, and two, the narratives that you engage in as you leave meditation that help you to integrate what you've learned while sitting here with your eyes closed into what you're doing in your day-to-day life when your eyes are open.

One of those narratives is that you learn from watching whatever comes up, whether you like it or not. Because you lost it right here, you're not going to find it over there. You lost your alertness, you lost your mindfulness, your concentration, whatever. Well, pick it up right here. After all, this is where everything happens in life, this is where all the important decisions are being made: right here, right now.

So you can't let the pointing fingers that are currently pointing off to the right, off to the left, distract you. Look at the fingers. That old koan about the Zen master saying "Don't look at the finger pointing at the moon. Look at the moon." Well, you'd better look at that finger, because maybe it's really not pointing at the moon. Maybe it's pointing away from the moon. So examine the finger. Whose arm is it connected to? Is that someone you can trust? See what its agendas are. Why is it distracting you, asking to look someplace else?

If you can learn how to sit with these states of mind, after a while they'll open up.

So remember: The solution isn't over there. The solution is right here, right here in the heart. An important part of the meditation is learning to keep your gaze steady right here in the heart, to resist that constant temptation to look over there. So whenever that comes up, remind yourself, "No, right here." The thought that wants you to look over there is something you've got to look at right here.

When you see your way clear to be able to do this: That's when things will change. That nun, who finally was willing to submit to Ajaan Maha Boowa's instructions, later became known as an arahant. She didn't have much education, but when she finally realized that right here is where the problem is, i.e., right here in the mind, she was willing to turn around and

focus right here and see clear through the problem. That's the only place you're going to see through the problem: right here. So even though right here may not be the way you want it to be right now, it's the only place you can look where things eventually will be the way you want them. Don't let yourself get distracted.