

Wandering Aimlessly

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One of the first things you notice when you sit down to meditate is that your mind wanders. You make up your mind to stay focused on the breath, and two breaths later it's someplace else. That, the Buddha said, contains a lot of the problem right there—not in the attempt to concentrate the mind, but in the fact of wandering. That's all that samsara is. The mind wanders pretty aimlessly. It has its aims, but if you were to draw a map of its aims, the lines would head off in all sorts of different directions. This wouldn't be a problem if there weren't suffering and stress inherent in all this.

So that's what we need to learn about. As long as we don't see the suffering and stress, realizing that it's implicit in every kind of wandering there is, we're going to keep on wandering. Even if you get the mind nicely concentrated, you've wandered into a particular state. It's a state where you can stay for a long time, but eventually it's going to start falling apart. Even if you really can maintain that state throughout this lifetime and get to be reborn in corresponding Brahma world, it eventually falls apart. Then you wander someplace else.

In the process of wandering, you create a lot of things. This is what the whole issue of becoming and birth is about. There's a feeling and then there's a craving associated with the feeling, either to maintain it or to destroy it. Then you create the sense of yourself as both the consumer of the feeling—the person who's experiencing the feeling—and person who has to do something about the feeling, either to maintain it or to get rid of it. In creating your sense of self, there's also the creation of the world in which that self functions. In fact, the world often gets created first, and then you take birth in it. That's what becoming is. You create these worlds in the mind, or you tune in to a particular world when the mind reaches death. Craving carries over into another stated of becoming. Craving is called the *guide* in a lot of passages in the Canon, but again, the guide is often blind. The more blind it is, the more suffering it creates.

So we've got to learn how to give eyes to our craving. That's the first step. As long as you're going to wander, you might as well wander to good places. Create good places. Create a good wise sense of your own self. Because what is your sense of self? It's a strategy to create happiness, either by maintaining particular feelings of pleasure, or by trying to get rid of feelings of pain. The self is not just a grabber. A lot of people make that mistake. They think that your self is what grabs onto things and not-self is what lets go. But your self can also let go. You decide, "I

don't like this," and you get rid of it. Your self can even aim at annihilating itself. But then it turns out that annihilation is also another state. There are passages in the Canon where people take contemplation of not-self and end up in dimension of nothingness, which turns out to be another state. So that falls apart, too. Then they have to try something else.

You want to look into this problem and see what you can do about it. That was the Buddha's focus. He was primarily a problem-solver. He wasn't trying to map everything out, because the more you map things out, the more states of becoming you create. Even a basic sense of place is a part of a state of becoming. You situate yourself in a feeling, and then you build a world around it. You build your self around it, because it was a spot that's there. That's the becoming.

Once there's a *there*, then there's a *here* and an *over there*. As long as there's the here and over there, there's always going to be a sense of dissatisfaction. You want to be everywhere all at once, as long as there are places.

So the Buddha is saying that we are going to take the mind out of places entirely, or as some of the passages say, have neither here, nor there, nor in between. If you think about it in this way, it can get quite complex and confusing. But he says the problem is right in the craving, based on ignorance. Focus on that. Then the implications of what it means to let go of craving by developing knowledge will become a lot clearer. You'll know for yourself what it means not to have a place, not to be located in anything.

As he says, arahants experience feelings disjoined from them. The feeling is there as a sense of pleasure or pain in the body, but there's a sense of disconnection, because you don't go into the feeling. At the same time, you don't take a stance outside the feelings, because the mind doesn't have a place anymore. The feelings come, the feelings go, but it's just their business. Our business is not to wander after them or wander away from them.

To do that, we need to focus on the process of what the problem is: the craving and ignorance. I was reading a book recently on the issue of problem-solving: recognizing a problem, noticing when your intuitive sense of how to solve the problem is right, and learning how to observe when it's not. One essential thing is realizing that you don't need to know everything about a problem in order to solve it. You need to know just a few factors. In fact, if you clutter your mind up with too much information about the problem, you paralyze yourself or can mislead yourself very easily.

The book was talking about a hospital, Cook County Hospital in Chicago, which was having a lot of problems because it was way understaffed, way overburdened, and a lot of people were coming in reporting chest pain. They had

only a few emergency care units where they could look after people who actually were having heart attacks or were about to have heart attacks. And the question was, how do you figure out who coming with chest pain is just having indigestion or something else, and who's actually having a heart attack? A new administrator had just come on board, and he had read that someone had done research years back, figuring out what the really crucial signs were. This person had gone over records from many hospitals over many years, and had come up with just a few variables. In addition to the EKG, he looked at the questions: Is there fluid in the lungs? Is the patient's systolic pressure less than a hundred? Is the pain erratic? If the answers to those three questions was yes, then the person was either having a heart attack or was about to, and so deserved emergency care. Otherwise, no.

When the administrator asked the doctors in the hospital to try looking for just these factors, the doctors rebelled. They said, we have to go on our experience. We have to realize that there are many other factors involved. It can't be just these three.

So the administrator said, "Okay, we'll make an experiment." As it turned out, nobody had experimented on the data that this one scientist had put together. "For two years we'll do things as you've been doing them, looking at all the different variables, and coming up with your decisions. Then for the next two years, we'll try this system." I forget the precise figures, but it turned out that in the normal way that's done, 60 to 70% of the cases that were admitted to the emergency care actually were having heart attacks. Then when focusing just on those three variables, it went up to something like 95, 96%, a much higher level of accuracy.

In the same way, the Buddha has us focus on just a few factors, just a few variables, the ones that are crucial, and put everything else aside. This is why he was so careful about which questions he answered and which ones he didn't—and why his teaching doesn't get into the issues of: "Are we all the oneness? Are we all individual beings? Is the world a oneness or is it not? What happens to the person who gains awakening: Does he exist? Not exist? Both? Neither? Is the world eternal? Is it not? Is it infinite? Is it not?" All these were questions that he avoided, because they weren't the issue.

The issue is: Where is your ignorance? Where is your craving? If it's the kind of craving that leads to further becoming, then that's going to be a problem. And exactly what is it that we have to be knowledgeable about? The four noble truths. You may call them the four noble factors for solving the problem: Looking at the suffering and asking, "Where's the stress right now? What comes along with it? What can you do to put an end to the stress by abandoning its cause?"

So watch the movements of your mind in terms of those four factors. We usually don't see them because the movements of our mind are like arrows. They're pointing someplace else, they hope to get someplace else, and we're focused entirely on the place we want them to get. We don't look at the arrow itself, we don't look at the act of shooting the arrow, all these other things that are happening in the mind. As long as our knowledge is simply of what we're after, we're missing the four noble truths. They're in the process. You want to see the process as it happens in terms of these four factors.

When you can take it apart in that way, you act properly in line with each of the four factors: in other words, try to comprehend the stress, let go of the cause, let go of what's accompanying the stress, watch that happening, be clear about the letting go—because letting go is itself a type of act—and develop the qualities that enable you to let go more and more precisely. Develop those qualities. Work on them.

If you look at the movements of your mind from this perspective, it takes them apart. So whether the movement is heading toward a specific state or to oblivion or annihilation, watch the process. Don't go along for the ride. As the Buddha promises, when you apply this approach, suffering ends. And as for what the ramifications are in terms of existence, nonexistence, space, time, lack of space, lack of time, you'll find out for yourself.

Sometimes it's fun to play around with the whole idea: What it's like not having space or time? But all we can come up with if we approach it that way is a lot of different theories—mind boggling and fun to think about, but they don't really solve the problem. Focus on the four issues that the Buddha said are really crucial, the four factors. Then, when there comes an end to space and time, you'll know what it's like. And you'll realize that the Buddha was right. This is a solution to the problem. Focus on these four factors. Don't worry about other things.

So when the mind wanders, as it's going to do in the course of the hour, realize that it's a problem not just in terms of developing concentration. Get the mind concentrated and then learn to look in a very subtle way at the movements. If you apply the Buddha's approach, that's how you learn what the problem is, that's how you learn how to solve it, what the solution is, what it's like to have it solved. That way, there's no longer any felt need to keep on wandering.