

Wandering On

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Human life is a wandering on. The life of all beings is a wandering on. There are periods when the wandering seems fine, and others when it's horrible. And it doesn't end with death. It keeps going on and on and on, which is why the Buddha said we have to find refuge—because of the amount of suffering we undergo in this wandering. It's impossible to calculate. There's that famous simile, of all the water in the ocean being less than the tears we've shed throughout this wandering on. Mount Palomar over there is smaller than the pile of bones we've left behind. The Buddha said that if someone were keeping all the bones that we had, and the bones didn't disintegrate, the bones would be higher than the highest mountain. All the bones from our bodies as human beings and elephants and tigers and dogs and cats and lizards and fish and all the other beings we've been, if you piled them all together, would be larger than that mountain over there.

This is why we need a place where we're not wandering—or if we do keep wandering on, we need to have a place, a home, that we can carry with us—just like that trailer or caravan outside the meditation hall. No matter where you go, you've got your home. That's the nature of a mind in concentration. As for the mind totally released, that's the one that doesn't have to wander anymore. As long as you're still a wanderer, you should at least have a comfortable place to stay, a place where you can feel at home no matter where you go.

This is why it's so important to develop this sense of being at home in the mind right here in the present moment. As the saying goes—wherever you go, there you are; whatever time it is, it's always the present. And if we learn to make a home right here, no matter where we are, we're at home. No matter when it is, we're at home right now. This is a very important skill, for otherwise we go through life wandering here, wandering there, and there is often a sense of being lost or cut off.

Most people go through life with this sense of being cut off. They feel that they're either cut off from their roots or cut off from their relationships, and so they try to connect with their roots, connect with their relationships, but that doesn't solve the problem. You can't go back home, as they say, because when you go back home, it's not home anymore. And when you're relating with other people, they're changing as much as you are, so that's a very unstable sense of connection.

Our root problem is that we're disconnected from ourselves. We don't know what's going on in our own minds because we're not here. With respect to the subconscious—it's not the case that subconscious currents aren't showing themselves all the time, it's just that we're not looking, we're not paying careful attention. Actually everything going on in the mind comes to the surface when you

stop—it's all right here. Our problem is that we aren't looking. We're looking someplace else. We're looking into the past. We're looking into the future. We're looking at the world outside, not looking at ourselves. And so we're cut off from ourselves.

This is why the breath is such an important place to stay. It's where the mind and the body can come to get in touch with each other, to resonate with each other, and you can have your home wherever the body is. You learn how to make yourself at home in the body. So settle down right here. All of the Buddha's teachings focus right here. Sometimes you look at the texts and they seem so extensive—covering the whole world, the whole universe. But the way the Buddha teaches is all designed to pull you back right here. When he talks about kamma and how it shapes the universe, his purpose is to focus your attention on the present moment because that's where kamma is being made. When he talks about not-self, he says to focus right here: What is there in the present moment that you can claim to be yourself?

Take everything apart in the body and the mind. What is there that's really true gold? You sift through a lot of dross, but you finally get to the gold. The whole point of the practice is the gold that lies right here. It's good to know that the gold is already here—if you ever need it, you can dig down—but it takes persistence to dig down. If you don't do the digging, then the gold can be buried right here and yet you can't use it to pay the bills, you can't use it to buy anything at all. So the important part of the practice is the digging down and the effort that goes into doing this. It's not all drudgery, it's not all sweat, but there is an important element of persistence, an important element of perseverance, endurance that makes all the difference in the practice between whether the gold is going to stay buried or whether you can unearth it and put it to use.

So we dig down right here. This is how we get in touch with ourselves. This is how we create a home. So many things are accomplished by simply getting the mind to settle down and be at home here in the present moment, familiar with the present moment. Don't go through life a stranger to yourself. If you're a stranger to yourself, you'll be a stranger with everybody. That's why we have the standards of the teaching to help us connect with ourselves, to see what within ourselves is delusion and what's not, to see what the delusion is covering up or where the delusion comes from.

When the Buddha talks about getting in touch with yourself, it's very different from what modern psychologists talk about. Modern psychologists say to get in touch with your feelings and learn how to express them. The Buddha assumes that you know how to express your feelings perfectly well, thank you, but that's not the problem. The problem is knowing what's really worthwhile in there, buried under our skins. It is not an easy thing, getting to know yourself, getting to know what's really worthwhile in yourself. A lot of your sense of yourself has to get thrown out because that's what's getting in the way.

So we use the teachings that are given to us to dig on down inside to find what's really worthwhile. It takes discipline. It takes perseverance. There are so many other things that we like to hold onto because we assume they provide happiness, because we assume they provide our home, and yet when you're connected there, that's where you suffer. When you latch onto things, that's where you suffer, so you really have to know how to let go and you need to have conviction that the Buddha knows what he's talking about. He wasn't just some Indian prince who gave teachings that apply only to Indians or only to Asians or only to people in the past. These teachings are universal in their import, universal in their meaning. And they apply to all of us. Only if you have that kind of conviction will you let go of the things that you tend to identify with, because they aren't the real you that you're trying to get in touch with. And when you finally do get in touch, there's no sense of "you" in there, but there *is* a sense of total security, totally being at home.

So this is what we work at as we dig down here in the present moment, finding a place where we can really settle in. Then our sense for what it means to settle in and our standards for settling in will grow higher and higher as we continue in the practice.

People who look back on their practice and are perfectly satisfied are of two sorts. On the one hand are the arahants who have the right to be satisfied with their practice because it really has ended suffering, and then there's everybody else. If you're not an arahant and you're satisfied with your practice, it's a sign that your practice has stopped short. The only way to keep growing with the practice has to come from the realization that your past efforts are still inadequate. You have to learn how to put up with that, learn how to accept that as part of progressing. It's a sign that you've gained wisdom. Ajaan Fuang used to say, "When you meditate you tend to see that your mind is in a bigger mess than it was before you meditated. That's because you're looking more carefully."

The image he gave was of a dusty room. If you dust it every day, you're going to notice every least bit of dust that comes into it. If you don't dust, you have no way of knowing how much dust has come in the past day, the past week, the past month, because it's all piled on top of all the other dust and you don't see any difference. But if you've been learning how to clean your mind day in, day out, day in, day out, you're going to notice the least little thing that comes in. The things in the past that you were perfectly satisfied to live with, you no longer want to live with them anymore. They're getting in the way. So it's a healthy sign that you look back on your practice and see that it's not what it could be, it's not what it could have been. And it's an even healthier sign that you don't let this thought depress you, and instead can take those higher standards and your greater sensitivity and apply them even more in the present moment and do something about the situation.

We in the West often have problems dealing with our own past failures, whereas the Buddha says, "Accept the fact that you're going to make mistakes. Learn from them. If you repeat the mistakes, that's when you have to be worried." If you made a mistake in the past but you realized it was a mistake and you're not

going to repeat it, that's simply part of growing, part of developing in the practice. But if you see the mistake and yet keep doing it over and over and over again, that's when there's something really wrong. That's what you have to watch out for.

So when life is a wandering on, practice in the Buddha's teaching gives some direction to the wandering. It gives it a goal. Without this kind of direction, you just wander any place, wherever the currents of your past kamma will lead you. As the Buddha said about going from one life to the next... You don't even have to think about one life to the next. Just look at your own mind across the day: How many ups and downs does it go through? The image that the Buddha gave is of throwing a stick up in the air. Sometimes it falls on this end, sometimes on that end, sometimes flat in the middle, all pretty random. Unless you give your life some direction, it's going to head to random destinations. Without a sense of direction, the wandering-on goes nowhere at all—it just keeps spinning back to the same old places, making the same old mistakes over and over again. The difference when you're on the path is that you see a mistake and you correct it. You don't know how many lifetimes it's going to take to get to the goal, but at least you know that if you have this one ability in mind, if you observe your own actions and body and speech and mind—what you do, what you say, what you think—if notice how these things function as a causal chain, then you're heading in the right direction.

That's what discernment is: seeing causes and effects right as they happen both in the immediate present and over the long haul. Watch what you're doing, see what happens as a result, and then adjust what you do and see how the results change. This is where real knowledge comes. If you're not in there adjusting the mind, you have no idea what's a cause and what's an effect in this stream of events flowing past you. But if you make changes in the mind, you know what the causes are and what the effects. You get more and more precise about watching these things, more and more observant. That's why an unreflective life doesn't go anywhere, but a reflective life, when you reflect on your words, your deeds and your thoughts, is a life that begins to take some direction. You see the causal principle right here in the present moment. Every moment is shaped by input from the past and input from the present. Input from the past, you can't do much about, but your input from the present is important. You get more and more sensitive to what you're doing in the course of the practice.

That's why the Buddha starts out with precepts. Look at your actions. When you lie, steal, kill, drink, or have illicit sex, when you drink, what comes as a result? You begin to realize that suffering is what comes. The suffering that comes from the impulse to do these things is much worse than the suffering that comes from not giving in to that impulse.

So this is how you start out—with the precepts. They hold a mirror to your actions. Then with concentration practice, the same principle applies: You hold a mirror to your mind. You give it something to do, one place to stay, and all of a sudden you're aware of how much it wanders. If you don't have this one object for it to focus on, you have no idea in the course of the day how many times it has wandered, where it has gone, because it's just going with the flow. It has no

resistance. But giving it one object to focus on is like putting a dam across a river: All of a sudden you realize how strong the current in that river is. Or like looking up at the clouds up in the sky: If you just lie on your back looking in the sky, you can't tell how fast the clouds are moving, which way they're going, because you have no point of reference. But if you look, say, at something still on the ground, like the top of a roof, a tree, a rock, whatever, then you can tell which way they go, how fast they go, what different levels of wind there are up in the sky. You give the mind something to focus on—like the breath—and all of a sudden you see all the other places that those clouds in the mind are blowing.

Ajaan Lee once said that the essence of the practice is learning to see the defilements and being quick to deal with them. So if you're looking at your practice and all you see is defilements, at least that's part of the practice. People who aren't practicing have no sense of what their defilements are. The word defilement doesn't even sound right to them. They complain, they object: *Their* minds aren't defiled. Their minds are perfectly fine as far as they're concerned. But when you practice, you begin to see that there is a difference between the clarity of the mind when it's settled down and still, and the murkiness of when it's moving all over the place.

When it's moving all around it's like water in a river—it picks up all the mud on the bottom and there's no chance for it to ever settle down and be clear. But when you get the mind in concentration, it's like taking water out of the river—it's the same muddy water—and putting it in a bowl beside the river. The mud in the water will eventually settle down and you'll have clear water. When the mind is settled down like this, it's even easier to see what it's doing. Even the slightest actions in terms of feelings, perceptions, thought-constructs, whatever, you see very, very clearly. You see what the mind is putting into the present moment even on this very subtle level and you learn to strip it away, layer by layer by layer by layer until finally there's nothing left to strip away—and that's what the practice is all about.

So the practice is a process of looking at your own actions, looking what you're putting into the present moment, seeing how it's causing suffering and how it's not really necessary, and so you let go. And this same process just gets more and more and more refined, more and more focused because your sensitivities get more and more refined as you practice. This is how the wandering develops a direction and comes to an end point. And when it comes to an end point, the Buddha said, there's no more suffering, there's no more sorrow because the mind has really arrived. You realize that whatever you thought you were looking for in the course of this life, it was actually this. It was just that you were confused, which is why you thought you were looking for something else.

So even though, as you practice, there is continued wandering, at least the wandering has a direction, a sense of going someplace. The important thing is that you maintain that sense of direction. Make up your mind that no matter where your life takes you—and it's going to take you lots of different places—you'll at least have this sense of direction to keep you on course. When you have the sense of being at home wherever you are, even though it's just a temporary home, it's

better than being totally rootless or cut off from your home. You take this home wherever you go, this sense of being at ease in the present moment, being familiar with the present moment. As you get to know this home even more and more precisely, the mind burrows more and more into the present moment and gains a sense of being settled, a sense of being established. As your concentration gets stronger, it digs even deeper right here. It goes way down inside.

So it's right here that all the wandering ends. Without this sense of goal, without this sense of settling in, the wandering will never end and it will be a constant strain, a constant struggle, constant suffering.

It's up to us to make the choice. As the Buddha said, the wise person is the one who sees the danger in the wandering and wants to get beyond it—the person who's heedful, who really loves him or herself, who doesn't want to suffer. That's the sort of person you can call wise and mature. So it's up to us to decide when we're going to grow up. But don't be slow in making the choice because the body grows old all the time, and after death you have no idea where you're going to go next. So while you're here, while the teachings are available, try to make the most of them.