

# "Wherever You Go, There You Are"\*

by Jon Kabat-Zinn

Have you ever noticed that there is no running away from anything? That, sooner or later, the things that you don't want to deal with and try to escape from, or paper over and pretend aren't there, catch up with you--especially if they have to do with old patterns and fears? The romantic notion is that if it's no good over here, you have only to go over there and things will be different. If this job is not good, change jobs. If this wife is no good, change wives. If this town is no good, change towns. If these children are a problem, leave them for other people to look after. The underlying thinking is that the reason for your troubles is outside you--in the location, in others, in circumstances. Change the location, change the circumstances, and everything will fall into place; you can start over, have a new beginning.

The trouble with this way of seeing is that it conveniently ignores the fact that you carry your head and your heart, what some would call your "karma," around with you. You cannot escape yourself, try as you might. And what reason, other than pure wishful thinking, would you have to suspect that things would be different or better somewhere else anyway? Sooner or later, the same problems would arise if in fact they stem in large part from your patterns of seeing, thinking, and behaving. Too often, our lives cease working because we cease working at life, because we are unwilling to take responsibility for things as they are, and to work with our difficulties. We don't understand that it is actually possible to attain clarity, understanding, and transformation right in the middle of what is here and now, however problematic it may be. But it is easier and less threatening to our sense of self to project our involvement in our problems onto other people and the environment.

It is so much easier to find fault, to blame, to believe that what is needed is a change on the outside, an escape from the forces that are holding you back, preventing you from growing, from finding happiness. You can even blame yourself for it all and, in the ultimate escape from responsibility, run away feeling that you have made a hopeless mess of things, or that you are damaged beyond repair. In either case, you believe that you are incapable of true change or growth, and that you need to spare others any more pain by removing yourself from the scene.

The casualties of this way of looking at things are all over the place. Look virtually anywhere and you will find broken relationships, broken families, broken people--wanderers with no roots, lost, going from this place to that, this job to that, this relationship to that, this idea of salvation to that, in the desperate hope that the right person, the right job, the right place, the right book will make it all better. Or feeling isolated, unlovable, and in despair, having given up looking and even making any attempt, however misguided, to find peace of mind.

By itself, meditation does not confer immunity from this pattern of looking elsewhere for answers and solutions to one's problems. Sometimes people chronically go from one technique to another, or from teacher to teacher, or tradition to tradition, looking for that special something, that special teaching, that special relationship, that momentary "high" which will open the door to self-understanding and liberation. But this can turn into serious delusion, an unending quest to escape looking at what is closest to home and perhaps most painful. Out of fear and yearning for someone special to help them to see clearly, people sometimes fall into unhealthy relationships with meditation teachers, forgetting that no matter how good the teacher, ultimately you have to live the inner work yourself, and that work always comes from the cloth of your own life.

Some people even wind up misusing teacher-led meditation retreats as a way to keep afloat in their lives rather than as an extended opportunity to look deeply into themselves. On retreat, in a certain way everything is easy. The bare necessities of living are taken care of. The world makes sense. All I have to do is sit and walk, be mindful, stay in the present, be cooked for and fed by a caring staff, listen to the great wisdom that is being put out by people who have worked deeply on themselves and have attained considerable understanding and harmony in their lives, and I will be transformed, inspired to live more fully myself, know how to be in the world, have a better perspective on my own problems.

To a large extent, this is all true. Good teachers and long periods of isolated meditation on retreat can be profoundly valuable and healing. If one is willing to look at everything that comes up during a retreat. But there is also the danger, which needs to be looked out for, that retreats can become a retreat from life in the world, and that one's "transformation" will, in the end, be only skin deep. Perhaps it will last a few days, weeks, or months after the retreat ends, then it's back to the same old pattern and lack of clarity in relationships, and looking forward to the next retreat, or the next great teacher, or a pilgrimage to Asia, or some other romantic fantasy in which things will deepen or become clearer and you will be a better person.

This way of thinking and seeing is an all-too-prevalent trap. There is no successful escaping from yourself in the long run, only transformation. It doesn't matter whether you are using drugs or meditation, alcohol or Club Med, divorce or quitting your job. There can be no resolution leading to growth until the present situation has been faced completely and you have opened to it with mindfulness, allowing the roughness of the situation itself to sand down your own rough edges. In other words, you must be willing to let life itself become your teacher.

This is the path of working where you find yourself, with what is found here and now. This, then, really is it... this place, this relationship, this dilemma, this job. The challenge of mindfulness is to work with the very circumstances that you find yourself in--no matter how unpleasant, how discouraging, how limited, how unending and stuck they may appear to be--and to make sure that you have done everything in your power to use their energies to transform yourself before you decide to cut your losses and move on. It is right here that the real work needs to happen.

So, if you think your meditation practice is dull, or no good, or that the conditions aren't right where you find yourself, and you think that if only you were in a cave in the Himalayas, or at an Asian monastery, or on a beach in the tropics, or at a retreat in some natural setting, things would be better, your meditation stronger.... think again. When you got to your cave or your beach or your retreat, there you would be, with the same mind, the same body, the very same breath that you already have here. After fifteen minutes or so in the cave, you might get lonely, or want more light, or the roof might drip water on you. If you were on the beach, it might be raining or cold. If you were on retreat, you might not like the teachers, or the food, or your room. There is always something to dislike. So why not let go and admit that you might as well be at home wherever you are? Right in that moment, you touch the core of your being and invite mindfulness to enter and heal. If you understand this, then and only then will the cave, the monastery, the beach, the retreat center, offer up their true richness to you. But so will all other moments and places.

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\*Excerpted from *Wherever You Go, There You Are*, by Jon Kabat-Zinn, Hyperion, 1994, pp. 195-200.

