Your Safe Ancestral Territory

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When you establish mindfulness, you’re basically trying to establish what you’re trying to keep in mind right now—your frame of reference for getting the mind into concentration and for developing discernment. Your frame of reference for the breath is the body in and of itself, but you also have feelings in and of themselves in and of themselves. In other words, the feelings of pleasure or ease or dis-ease that come up with the breath. And then there’s the mind in and of itself, what’s going on in the mind right now in terms of events. And then mental qualities, things that you’re trying to develop, things you’re trying to abandon. The in and of itself there is always important, because we’re not looking at these things in terms of the world. In fact, the other part of the formula is that you’re trying to subdue greed and distress with reference to the world. And that’s the world of your ideas about what’s going on outside, your ideas of who you are in that world. And anything that has to do with that frame of reference, you put aside. Because that frame of reference, as the Buddha said, is the realm of Mara. Whereas when you’re established in any of these other things in and of themselves, you’re in your ancestral territory, your safe place. There are passages in the Canon where the Buddha talks about this in terms of analogies. One is of a quail who’s wandered out of his ancestral territory and gets caught by a hawk. And as the hawk is carrying him away, the little quail laments, “Oh, my lack of merit! If only I had been staying in my own ancestral territory, this hawk would have been no match for me.” The hawk says, “What is your ancestral territory?” And the quail says, “It’s a field that’s been plowed with stones turned up.” And so the hawk releases him and says, “Okay, go ahead, go to your ancestral territory, but I’ll still get you even there.” So the quail goes down and he stands on one of the stones in the plowed-out field. He starts calling out, taunting the hawk, “Come and try to get me, you hawk! Come and get me, you hawk!” And the hawk swoops down and just as he’s about to catch the quail, the quail hides behind a rock, and the hawk shatters his breast. There’s another one where monkeys wander away from their ancestral territories and they get caught in traps, carried off by hunters. Well, the smart monkeys stay in their ancestral territory, while the hunters can’t get them. In other words, when you’re out in the world, all kinds of thoughts are going to come and they’re going to overwhelm you. Because in the context of the world, things that are just and unjust — your stories about who you are and who did things to you and who you did things to — those are all relevant. But when you come into this frame of reference or this context, you take all that apart. Pains in the body are simply feelings in and of themselves. Memories are mind states in and of themselves. Mental qualities are in and of themselves, either to be developed or not, based on whether you’re skillful. That gives a different set of priorities, a different set of standards. So when physical pain comes up, it’s just a feeling. And it’s not part of the narrative of who you are as the possessor of the feeling. The question is, is this a feeling to be developed or not? Because mindfulness doesn’t mean that you just take whatever comes. Remember, you’ve got duties with regard to these things. These are the duties that are related to the four noble truths. Suffering is to be comprehended. The path to the end of suffering is to be abandoned. Suffering is to be comprehended. Its cause is to be abandoned. Its cessation is to be realized, and the path to its cessation is to be developed. So those are your duties. When pain comes up, what is it? Well, it’s related to suffering. But it turns out it’s not the cause of suffering. The cause of suffering is the craving. In fact, even the suffering itself is not in the physical pain. This is something that sounds strange if you’re looking in terms of the world. You’re lying in a dentist’s chair, and the dentist is working on your teeth. The pain seems to be suffering, but the Buddha is saying, “No, the suffering is what the mind is doing with that feeling, that event.” You realize, what is your body? It’s got four elements, and the nature of the four elements is that they get in imbalance. And the fact that you have a body leaves you open to all kinds of assaults from the world. If you didn’t have a body, people couldn’t hit you, people couldn’t work on your teeth. But the fact that you have teeth, you have a body, okay, those things have to get worked on. There’s going to be pain there. And so the mind says, “Well, this shouldn’t be happening. They’re invading my space.” Your mind says, “Well, what do you expect? This is what you’ve laid claim to. Do you still want to lay claim to it right now?” And you say, “No.” Then you think about it in terms of how the Buddha analyzed suffering. He said, “The suffering is in the clinging.” The clinging here basically means there are certain thoughts that we repeat over and over and over again. We’re doing the suffering. We’re not simply on the receiving end of pain. We’re actually doing the suffering as we repeat these certain ideas that we cherish, that we can’t let go of. In other words, we can’t stop repeating them. And he asks, “Well, here it is. The clinging is the act of repeating this particular thought. Can you stop repeating that thought to yourself?” So you’re now looking at the pain. You’re looking at the mind’s events, not in terms of who you are in the world, but simply as events brought under the duties of the Four Noble Truths. And this is your ancestral territory. This is where you’re safe. Because thoughts that you couldn’t get rid of otherwise, that you couldn’t let go of otherwise, when you think about who you are in the world, in this context you can let go of them. You say, “This is a thought that’s totally arbitrary. I don’t have to do it. I don’t have to think it. It’s a lot easier to let it go.” Of course, old habits don’t go away so easily, but you’ve got to be firm in maintaining your frame of reference. The same with uncomfortable emotions. The suffering is not in the painful memory or the painful emotion. It’s the fact that we’re clinging to it. In that case, it’s a mind state. So do I have to hold on to this mind state? Do I have to keep repeating it to myself? And in the context of the world? No. If you’re out in the context of the world, there’ll be all sorts of reasons for holding on to that mind state—the long narratives about who you are and how you relate to other people, how you’ve been relating to other people, how they’ve been doing things to you. That’s greed and distress with reference to the world, and that’s what you’re trying to put aside. So you look at the thought simply as a thought. And if it’s an emotion, it’s going to have a physical side as well. You look at that in terms of the breath. Where can you change the breathing around this? Where can you change the perceptions? In other words, you’re looking at these things not in terms of who you are in a world, which are the terms of becoming. You’re looking at them in terms of your ancestral territory. Just a range of events, a range of actions, some of which can cause suffering, others of which can put an end to suffering. You want to develop the ones that put an end. In other words, the thoughts in the mind say, “Look, I don’t have to keep repeating this to myself. I don’t have to keep going back to this again and again.” In order to firm that up, the Buddha gives that analysis of how you look at how these things come, what originates them, what sparks them, and how they go. And you begin to realize that the events that cause suffering in the mind are not as continuous as you thought. So if there’s a physical pain or a painful emotion, they can seem to be very, very steady. But the act of clinging to these things comes and goes, comes and goes. And you want to see that. There are times when you cling to it and times when you don’t. Why do you pick it up when you cling to it? Why do you let it go when you don’t? You could sit here right now and think of all the horrible things that have happened in the world, things that have happened to you, things that have happened to other people. That’s one thing you could do. And when you think about things in terms of the world, it might be justified. But when you think of them in terms of trying to get the mind into concentration so you can understand how you’re creating suffering, how you stop, then there’s no reason for that at all. You change the context. So move into your ancestral territory to watch these things come and go. And then look for their allure. That’s the next step in the Buddha’s analysis. Why do you go for them? Why does the mind find these things attractive? It’s an action the mind is doing, this suffering. It’s got to be an allure someplace. The suffering itself is not what we find alluring. It’s the part of the allure where it’s connected to the allure, and we try to ignore it, like that story I told about Jahn Chah. We see a snake, one end has teeth, the other end doesn’t have teeth. We think the end without teeth is safe. So you grab hold of it, but it turns out it’s connected to the end with teeth. So the end with teeth comes around and bites you. You’ve got to ask, “Why is the snake tail so appealing? Why can’t I see the connection?” Because that’s the next part. You see the drawbacks. You see that they’re connected. They allure, and the drawbacks are part of the same snake. When you see that connection, that’s when you can develop this passion for snakes’ tails. So when you find yourself undergoing physical pain or mental pain, remind yourself that those are not the suffering. The suffering is the clinging to these things, and that’s totally optional. The whole point of this is that you can live in a world where there’s aging, illness, death, separation, and all kinds of injustice. But you don’t have to suffer from them. The suffering is something you’re adding. From the point of view of the world, you might say, “Well, you’re blaming the victim.” But from the point of view of the established mindfulness, you say, “Okay, this is a wise thing to do if you want to put an end to suffering.” You change the framework. You change the context. So move into your ancestral territory. The hawks can’t get you. The hunters can’t get you. This is the place where you’ll be safe.

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