

Being Lost

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August 27, 2023

Keywords: mindfulness, Eightfold Path, meditation, refuge, right view, right intention, non-harming, clinging, liberation, Buddha

I spent a good part of the summer in the wilderness or the edges of the wilderness places. And recently I was at one place where there were some people who are quite skilled and had wilderness skills and they were going to help some of the people who didn't have much skills talk about, you know, how to navigate in the wilderness. And so one of the skills is what to do when you're lost. And so I want to talk about, and then later there's a friend who studied with an indigenous person in Canada, an indigenous person herself, and she told the story of her elder finding someone who was lost, a boy who was lost. This story really had a big impact on her and really had a big impact on her Buddhist meditation practice. So this idea of lost has come to my mind.

So I thought, and I think not a few, it's not so far, not such a stretch to think about how, as a metaphor, being lost for how people are confused or lost or don't know how to find their way in their lives. It can be lost in relationships, confused, uncertain, what do we do now? It could be in a sense of purpose in life or work. It could be in oneself, one's identity, what's important for one, what are we supposed to do? It could be lost with our emotional lives. Emotional lives are quite difficult.

And often not obviously rational or obviously there for a clear reason that we can address. So some people feel lost in their emotional life. And so this idea of being lost, I think, is somewhere there is a common human phenomena. And so these two stories that I've been living with about being lost, I think might be a nice reference point. So the wilderness guides, a guide who was telling people what to do when they're lost, explained that the best thing you can do as soon as you're lost, stop, stand still in the wilderness. The people who get really lost in the wilderness and are not found easily are the ones who kind of stumble along trying to find their way and keep going and they don't know their way and they end up going

deeper and deeper into the wilderness and places where maybe it doesn't occur to others to find them.

But if you stop as soon as you're lost, then you're relatively close maybe to a place where other people go or where people think you've gone or something. So the idea of stop and be still. And that's counterintuitive because you're lost, it's dangerous, you have to do something. And so let's keep going, let's keep searching or something. But this emphasis was really stand still and wait. And someone will find you, especially if they know you're out in the wilderness.

If you didn't tell anyone, that's a sign of not being skilled in the wilderness either. So this idea of standing still when you're lost, I think is quite a wonderful thing in life in general. And one of the things that standing still does, and what it's a metaphor for, is not to keep going, not to keep spinning. And in the wilderness, if you stop and stand still, maybe there's opportunity to relax, to settle, to catch your breath, begin looking around in the environment. What's going on here? And people who panic when they get lost don't think very well, don't study their environment very well.

But if you stop and stand still, then all the surface tension, all that kind of extra stuff that we add on top of the situation has a chance to settle. And if you have a meditation practice, maybe even you sit down and meditate for a while to really let the surface, all the extra agitation, emotions, spinning of the mind, fear, settle enough so when you open your eyes, maybe you can look at the situation more clearly. And you notice, oh, it's kind of quiet. And now I can hear better. And quietly in the distance, I hear that river. You know, oh, the river. That's where I came from. I crossed the river. And now I know the direction of it. But you had to be quiet enough to hear it.

And, or it's quiet enough to think, oh, there's a hilltop just really close by. I wonder if I go to there and look, get that kind of the overview of the place. Maybe I'll have a better sense of where I came from or what's the direction to go. So just being calm, settling down, is powerful in all kinds of places when we feel like lost in our lives. And one of the things that does is stopping, whatever we do, stop and be still, meditate maybe, is what we're beginning to shed, allowing to settle away, is all the stuff that is extra, that's not needed, that gets in the way of our clarity, our wisdom, our kind of seeing, you know, what valuable landmarks there might be for us to find our way.

And so a big part of what meditation practice can do, mindfulness practice can do, is not what it gives us, but what it helps us to let go of. What we shed from it. If, in fact, we're agitated, afraid, caught up in what's going on, spinning, then it sheds all the stuff that's extra from

some kind of clear seeing. And this happened to me. I wasn't lost physically, but I was in the wilderness when I had this. I was living in a wilderness monastery, Buddhist monastery.

So I spent a lot of time walking in the mountains by myself. And we had days off in the monastery, and that's when I went walking in the wilderness, and sometimes on trails, sometimes off trails. But the first year in the monastery, a lot of what I did during these days off was be kind of miserable. Because that's when I was left alone enough to start thinking about, what am I going to do with this life of mine? And what should I do? I'd been accepted to graduate school, and I contacted the graduate school and told them that something important had come up and could I please defer for a year.

But I didn't tell them that the one important thing that came up was I was going to a Buddhist monastery. And they said, sure. So I knew that was waiting for me, this question, should I go to graduate school? And it was a graduate program to do some, be of service to the world in what I thought was an important way. And so this idea of being of service, it seems almost like, should I do that? Is it okay to do that? And were my motivations accurate? Is this the right thing to do? Should I continue in Buddhism? And you know, what should I do with my life?

And so I was in my twenties and was wondering what to do. And so because I couldn't figure it out and I had a lot of doubts about myself and doubts about my ability to choose, I was lost. And I was confused and I was miserable and, you know, with all this, how I was. And so this went on for many, many months. And at some point I was on some trail doing this usual kind of rumination, usual kind of questioning myself, wondering what to do. And I said, Gil, I said to myself, you're spending a lot of time and more and more time in your imagination of things other places and other times.

What you're going to do in the future and where some place where that might be where I might go do that. And I said, you know, this is just your imagination. It's not actually what's happening. What would happen? I realized I felt kind of hopeless after all these months of this kind of reflection and thinking. And I didn't feel like I could find an answer anymore that way. And so I made a decision to be still. I mean, I think I still walked on the trail, but to just start and to really stop all this movement of the mind and imagination and doubting and all that, and just take the next step, just show up for the next thing that was there.

So on this trail, the next step was literally the next step. And it was time to get back to the monastery. And you get back to the monastery, there it's all choreographed. They ring a bell and you have to go meditate. You know, ring another bell and you go eat and all this stuff. So I was really lucky that I made this decision. Literally, the decision was to start my life over.

And I don't know, maybe it's kind of naive to think you can do that. But I'm naive sometimes, that's okay. It serves me sometimes.

And so I said, okay, I'm gonna start over. But to start over in a Buddhist monastery, that's kind of unusual. I feel so lucky that that's where it was. Because then the next thing I had to do, the next step was the bell rang, you have to go meditate. What a great thing to do. And the next thing was to go do the work they have to do in living that monastic life. And so that just kept opening the doors. And in some very real way for me, my life did start over again at that point. But because I started in a monastery, that really kind of informed how my life then unfolded as it opened up step by step. And now I'm here with you because of that choice.

So that's not so bad, is it? I think it's great. And so this kind of being still, stopping, some kind of rumination, some kind of spinning of the mind, some kind of spinning in doubts and emotions, learning how to quiet all this. So that we can see differently. So we can start fresh. So we can, you know, maybe some different decision will come that cannot come when we're all spinning around when we're lost. And I think this is true in relationships too. It's so easy in relationships to be spinning and agitated and afraid and angry and doubtful and all kinds of things. But to really learn to stop and be still is maybe sometimes essential in relationships. Maybe not in the moment when it's difficult, but maybe if the relationship is going to last for some time, maybe you'll find some way to kind of really come and stop and be still and let the agitated mind, agitated heart quiet enough so that something different can happen.

Some different seeing. And so what's a different thing that can happen? So this is a second story from this indigenous person in Canada. So he'd spent a lot of time in the wilderness, in the woods, working and living. And at some point, where he had been his kind of homeland or place of it, became a national park in Canada. So he continued being there. And at some point there was a young boy, I don't know how old he was, maybe, I don't know, pretty young, who got lost. And the people in the park, the rangers and stuff, spent two days looking for him. And they couldn't find him. So they went to this man, Jim Seti, and said, can you help?

And so he said, take me to where the last place of the boy was seen. So he went there, and they took him there. And then he stood in that spot for half an hour without moving. He stood still, maybe just studying the spot. And then he said, this way. And he started walking into the woods, and he just followed, had some sense of where to go. And he went for some time. I think he went alone. And at some point he came to some place where he stopped and he said he hollered. And then something hollered back right there next to him.

And it was the boy. But the boy was petrified. So what he did was he just sat down next to the boy. And it took about half an hour for the boy to thaw and calm down to be able to somehow

have a conversation and be ready for something next. And then he brought him back to the world. And then he talked about that experience later. He said, how do you manage with that? And he said, well, every living being is unique. And you have to kind of find what's the unique thing about whatever, whoever it is, whatever it is, whatever creature. And then you can maybe follow them.

And what he was talking about was the boy had unique footprints. And he knew about the footprints of all the animals of the woods. So he knew how to differentiate. And so apparently standing there half an hour, one of the things he was doing was looking around, seeing what is the footprint of this boy like. And then he started following the traces of the footprints that he could find through the woods. And then he found the boy. And this thing about just, again, stopping and being still with the boy, accompanying the boy, so the boy could kind of begin to, in two days in the wilderness, you imagine he was terrified. And so the boy could kind of relax and calm down enough to be able to come along. So my friend then took this story that was very impactful for her and applied it to her meditation, that when she's lost, she has to stop and be still, and then search for the trail, the traces in herself, to find a way forward.

And one of the ways to do that, that I find very helpful for me in my meditation, is to be quiet enough, and then to ask myself the question, what inside of me is asking for attention? What inside of me is calling for attention or is inviting me or welcoming me, my attention? So rather than me having some idea I'm supposed to pay attention to something, and sometimes I've done that in a very assertive way. By golly, I'm going to get concentrated here. I'm just going to zoom in, you know, or I'm going to get rid of this pain. I'm going to use the bazooka approach to the grenade approach of mindfulness. Just going to go in there and just blast it away. I mean, that's not a very good approach to mindfulness. But the idea of being still and quiet, and then asking, what wants attention? What's inviting me in?

And often for me, when I begin meditation, it's my breathing. But there's a very different relationship to breathing when I'm still and quiet and ask, what is this that invites me? And then it's like now that I'm being invited, what is the tracks I'm following? And so the idea that I'm following something is very different than the idea that I'm trying to make something happen. I'm trying to build something. I'm trying to attain something. It's more like, again, I'm not the one who has designs of what's supposed to happen. I'm not the one who is, you know, trying to get something for myself. But there's a track to follow. The track of the invitation.

The tracks of what's calling or what's inviting me to follow itself. And so then I'll tune in to the breath, and it's more like, okay, I'm the tracker, or I'm the visitor, or I'm the person who reads the invitations. Like this, here, here. And so there's a track inside that we follow. And

sometimes it's the breathing, sometimes it's sensations in the body, sometimes it's emotions, sometimes the state of the mind, sometimes the content of the mind, the thoughts that I might be having. But there's a sense that I'm not so much in charge, I'm more in charge of the tracking, of listening for the invitation. So I do have a role. But I'm learning how to read the traces inside of myself. And just like this elder said that every living creature is unique. So each moment for us, each day that we show up for ourselves, we're kind of unique.

Our inner life is unique. And what is it? Let's discover what it is each time, rather than come with a preconceived idea of what it is. And many people come with preconceived ideas. Some people come with, like I did when I was walking those trails outside the monastery, I showed up with preconceived ideas about my inability to decide what to do for myself, my life, big decision in my life. That I'm just condemned to being a doubter. And that's, I showed up, I already showed up with, you know, in a challenging way with a preconceived idea that I couldn't do this. But is that really listening to the invitation? Is that really listening to what's asking, to what's called for? No. You have to kind of figure out how to stop and be still enough so that you can see in a fresh way.

Not to carry with you your prejudice, your preconceived ideas, your bias, your all kinds of things. So stop and be still. So the Buddha, there's a wonderful analogy the Buddha gives that has to do with being in the woods and finding something. And the analogy is about a woodworker, someone who worked in the woods, a forester, who wasn't lost, but spent a lot of time in the forest, but found the tracks, the traces, of an ancient road. The jungle had overgrown. He found the traces, the forester found the traces, and then followed the traces, and very slowly and cleared a little bit and followed traces and came to some great ancient capital city that had been fully overgrown. Maybe like the cities they're still finding on the Mayan peninsula in Mexico or something. That is amazing. We're still finding these long lost cities that have been overgrown.

And then the Buddha, this forester, then leaves the forest and goes to the monarchs of the realm and tells them, you know, I found this ancient road, traces of it. I found this ancient capital. And so the monarchs are happy and they arrange for the road to be cleared. They arranged for the capital to be declared and they all moved back into the happy, ever after capital. Something like that. And so it's an allegory, it's a metaphor. And it's meant to be a metaphor for yourself. That the ancient capital is our own freedom. Our own capacity to find a place where the heart is free of its distress, its troubles, its suffering. A liberated heart.

But to do that, the path that exists, that's overgrown, is the path in ourselves. And the path that's overgrown is with attachments, with clinging, with fears, with anxieties, with hatred

and condemnations and resentments and all kinds of things that grow and grow over a lifetime. And for some people, these can grow unabated without any limitation, just keep growing and growing. So by the time we reach a certain age, kind of something like in us has been overgrown so thoroughly, we don't even know that inside of us is this wonderful capital, this wonderful place, this wonderful home, this wonderful kind of place of being safe, being found. And so this invitation or this way of practicing where we're assuming, I'm going to follow the traces of what is asking for attention right now. It doesn't mean rumination. It doesn't mean keep thinking about things and thinking more and more and more. It's being still, being quiet enough to listen to something deeper than thoughts. Listen to what lies underneath your thoughts. And to listen quietly.

And then, oh, it's my breathing. Oh, there's my heartache. Oh, there's a tightness in my belly. Oh, there's a lot of energy and agitation and thinking. That kind of wants my attention. Let me hold that. Let me be with that. And then what now wants attention? Maybe more of the same. Or look at that. It's beginning to calm down. That calming seems to want attention. It seems to call me. And then we stay with that. And then slowly we find our way.

And in the Dharma, the way that we find is, a big part of it, is that we discover that the path itself is so precious. It's so wonderful to have a path of practice, that getting to the capital may be a secondary, but just the fact that following a path like this is an expression of freedom, is a manifestation of our freedom. Maybe not initially, but as we keep doing it and keep showing up and being mindful and being mindful of what's here, we start seeing that the act of mindfulness is an act of freedom. Meaning an act of mindfulness means we're no longer caught up in that moment, caught in our preoccupations, caught in our emotions, caught in our past, or caught in the future, or caught in our whatever it might be. We don't deny all those things, but we're not caught in it. Wow, this is what's happening. There's freedom here.

And so as we keep doing this movement of being still and quiet enough to have the mindfulness be full, where mindfulness can be there together with its freedom, then we begin appreciating more and more that simply the being on the path of doing this is something to celebrate. It's a refuge. And some people will find, oh this, now I've found my home. Now I find with this I have a sense of belonging in this universe. Because with this I belong in that freedom. Because the freedom is letting go of all the non-belonging. All the ideas that I shouldn't be here. All the ideas that, you know, other people's ideas I shouldn't be here or something. We let go in that freedom. Just this. Just this.

And then, for people who are Buddhist, that movement of freedom, each moment, is repre-

sented by the idea of going for refuge. And the Buddha talked about how you don't find your refuge in temples, you don't find refuge in, he even talked about back in ancient India, in sacred groves, sacred spots. You find refuge in this practice. You find refuge in what you see, how you see being caught, and how you see being free. This is how you find your freedom. And if you see that, then he says you can see a path. And the path that you need to clear, he says, is the *Eightfold Path*. But the *Eightfold Path* is not something outside of you. It's really something inside of you. And what it means is that part of it is the ethics. Three of the *Eightfold Path* is ethical. And you start seeing the invitation here is to not cause harm. That's what ethics is about. Not harm anyone. And is there an invitation? Is there a rightness? Something inside that calls on that? If you're still and quiet enough and can really be mindful and pay attention, I think all of us, there is an invitation, a call, a request, don't cause harm. Because when we intentionally cause harm, we're covering over our depths. We're covering over the capital with more debris, more weeds and all that. We're actually closing something down when we're hateful or hostile or something. And that doesn't feel good if you really pay attention. You can feel how we're diminished by that. So ethics comes naturally through this practice because that's what the deepest invitation is.

And so each of the steps of the *Eightfold Path*, some of you know what they are, is really an expression of something that's already in us. It's not an imposition from the outside. And so the value of stopping, being still. And maybe, if you're lost, something will find you. And what will find you is maybe the invitation, the traces, the tracks, the call here. Here is where to bring your attention. Here is where to attend to, to feel, to be with. This is where to walk. This is what to do. And then we kind of follow the traces and the tracks. And something beautiful begins happening, something free, and that kind of place. Now I've been found. Even if it's not a geographical place, maybe. It's never a geographical place in Buddhism. It's always here and now in yourself. And then you bring that with you wherever you go. So even when you're lost physically, you're not really lost to yourself. Isn't that nice?

So I hope that made sense for those of you who occasionally get lost. And if you don't get lost, great. Stay for the potluck anyway. So thank you very much. And we have a few minutes before we usually stop here. So anybody have any questions they want to ask or testimonials about being lost that relate to what I talked about? Anything? Oh, then I have a poem to read. But maybe I'll take some questions first and end with a poem. So. And if you say your name first, that would be nice.

Hi, I'm Caitlin. I was thinking of being lost in sense of trying to find purpose, which I think many of us find on our journey through life. And I was watching a YouTube video on such

thing, and a lot of it was about how when you are constantly putting your attention to the outside world, which is how modern society puts us on, like puts us towards, you actually lose sight of what's within, what your values are, and what's important to you. And so part of finding your purpose is looking within, which is very much in line with what you were saying. Wonderful, thank you.

And then part of that, the importance of that, is that there's all kinds of messages from culture, from society, from family, about what the real purpose of life should be about. And some of those don't serve us. They're not a match for who we are. But if we have to think, I have to be that way, but there's a dissonance between who you are and that thing, then it can be a lot of tension. I have to be rich. Or I have to have a career. It's all kinds of shoulds that we struggle under. And what happens if we can listen deeply within and become free of those social messages about what the purpose should be about? and find out what is it, what is it that makes our hearts sing? What makes our hearts feel happy and delighted? You wake up in the morning happy to do what you want to do. And the answer for some people, and this is kind of one of the things that I think spirituality often points to, is that one of the messages from our society is the answer to what is the purpose of my life, what should I do, is a thing, a what. you know, the career or a relationship or something. And spirituality often points to, rather than a what, a how. How we're going to be in the world. And some people find tremendous meaning in how they live more than what they live for, what they do. And that's a hard thing to justify in many segments of modern society. Because, you know, people ask, what do you do? Oh, I try to be kind. You know, that doesn't, you know, it's not what they're hoping for. Thank you.

Hi, I'm Margaret. You spoke a little bit about starting over or starting from scratch when you were in the monastery. Can you say a little bit more about how you did that or what that means to start over or be reborn? Well, it's possible that it was pretty fortunate that I did it in that situation. Because I'd been there already a year, and it was really deep in the wilderness. So we didn't get, newspapers we got were like several days old, and there was no internet then, and there was no TV there. So much of things had fallen away that normally I'd be caught up in. So that just made it really relatively easy, I think, compared to doing it in the middle of a busy life. And it made a big difference that I was meditating a lot. So that the meditation was also a very deep, embodied, and heartfelt kind of letting go. And I'd be doing it for some time then by that time. I'd been meditating probably for about five years by that time. So I had some skill. and letting go, but my mind from earlier in life had a lot of skills in picking up again after the meditation. So, you know, this I think was constant kind of this

pattern of letting go, then picking up and back into. But because I had this learned to let go in meditation, I had a reference point for what it was like to really just stop. And even having that reference point helped me then find my way and gave me some confidence in not needing to know, not needing to have all these plans ahead. So I don't think my answer is very adequate for you, but that's the best I could do right now. It's a good question.

I was imagining the path that you were talking about, and I believe you said something about maybe being on the path is more important than getting to the overgrown capital. And then you mentioned the *Eightfold Path*, and that did havoc with my imagination, and I saw the path splitting into eight different ways. And so I wonder if you could say more about how the *Eightfold Path* could help in our path towards finding ourselves. So it's giving you a clue, the *Eightfold Path*, of what you're looking for in the jungle. And we're looking for the first one is the right view. We're looking at for the perspective in which we look at our lives. And so what perspective is useful? And we ask, what perspective am I using? Is this a useful one? And what's the deeper request? What perspective really is being, you know, the deeper request of the heart or something? And then the second of the *Eightfold Path* is kind of the right attitude or the right intention or something. And so you ask, what's the attitude by which I'm going about my life? And what we're looking for is, more specifically, is an attitude of non-harming and non-cruelty. Sometimes people say, and non-greed or non-lust. And some people say, an attitude of being able to let go when it's appropriate, an attitude of kindness, an attitude of compassion. So what's the attitude? Okay, that's the footsteps of the little boy who's lost. Can we find that? The attitude. And then how we speak. how we act in the world, it turns out that you're not going to find your freedom through killing, stealing, and sexual misconduct. So, you know, that's a pretty big footstep to notice. And then what's called right, usually called right livelihood. I think that's maybe too, too modern of a concept. I think it's more broadly, a whole way in which we live, the lifestyle that we live. That includes work, but it's broader than just work. So what's the lifestyle I'm living? Is this lifestyle in harmony? What's the deeper request? What do I listen to? How do I pay attention to lifestyle? And then some people realize, I never thought about it. I'm just going along with what I was given. But we start questioning, what is the lifestyle I want to live? And then there's the sixth, the *Eightfold Path*, is what we endeavor to do. And here, the hint that Buddha gives with the footstep is not the what we do, but how we do it. And that is, the how is, is it healthy or not healthy? Or wholesome and unwholesome? So there is a differentiation we see between what is healthy and not healthy for ourselves. And that's the how. And then there's right mindfulness. So one of the traces is, do I have any mindfulness? And if I ask the question, what is awareness asking of me? What does awareness want from me? Rather than being the one who's mindful,

what happens? Because it's so important. And then a settled, focused, concentrated mind. That's another footstep. I now have this view of the eight paths are in parallel and going in the same direction. Great.

So I'm going to read the poem that I have brought along. And this is a somewhat famous poem, an English poem by David Wagoner. And it's called Lost.

Lost. Stand still. The trees ahead and the bushes beside you are not lost. Wherever you are is called here, and you must treat it as a powerful stranger. Must ask permission to know it and be known. The forest breathes. Listen. It answers. I have made this place around you. If you leave it, you may come back again, saying, Here. No tree, no two trees are the same to raven. No two branches are the same to wren. If what a tree or a bush does is lost on you, you are surely lost. Stand still. The forest knows where you are. You must let it. find you.

So thank you. And maybe because we're having a potluck, partly, it would be nice if you could take one or two minutes to say hello and introduce yourself to the person, maybe a couple of people next to you. And if you're, and welcome whoever, you're talking to. Even if this is your first time at IMC, you've been here long enough to welcome the person. And then they can get the potluck ready and we can do that. Thank you.