

Only the Mountain Remains

Practicing in Nature

Mark Coleman

As long as there are monastics who delight living in the forest at the foot of trees, the way of the Awakened Ones will not decline.

—DN II 77; AN IV 20.

I lead wilderness-based meditation retreats in many parts of the Western states, from Alaska to Baja, Mexico. Sometimes I am teased about my “work,” since it takes me to such pristine, idyllic nature preserves—some wonder whether the retreats are more like vacations than places for serious practice. For me, nothing could be further from the truth. I regard the wilderness as an ideal venue to touch the truth of the dharma, since it can emerge there with crystal clarity and vibrancy. It is also a place where we get to practice with many adversities and challenges, forcing us to our edge, where so much growth comes in our practice. Nature perennially teaches us about uncertainty, unpredictability, and our attachment to comfort and control. When we are out in the wilderness, the conditions so often force us to expand our capacity to stay mindful and centered amidst adversity, such as when snowed upon in the desert, meditating in a deluge of rain lasting several days, or when attacked by clouds of mosquitoes.

So what is it we can learn in the classroom of the outdoors? First and foremost, there is a beautiful, reciprocal relationship between meditative awareness and being in nature. Go anywhere in the natural world and you discover that you are invited to pay attention. Walk contemplatively in a verdant forest or alongside

the ocean and what Buddhadasa calls a “natural samadhi” gracefully grows. We don’t need much effort or concentration to pay attention: it comes forth effortlessly. Watch a sparrow hawk hover in stillness on a windy day, or listen to a thrush’s song in spring, and you can’t help but touch this natural attentiveness. It wakes us up and brings us alive in ways that the sterility, uniformity, and predictability of our houses, malls, and offices could never do.

Since being outdoors is such a visceral experience, we are invited to inhabit our senses. The body and the senses are always in the present moment. The simple act of being awake and attentive to our sensual field as we take a stroll in a meadow or alongside a stream brings us out of our thinking mind and into the present. Take some time to watch the waves persistently pound the shoreline and we are pulled in, mesmerized, by the feast of the senses. And, we begin to awaken attention’s delicious by-products: curiosity, wonder, joy, appreciation, calm, and even love. As Joanna Macy once said, “If we really pay attention to something, we can’t help but fall in love with it.”

With meditative training, we can utilize this mindful attention to perceive and receive the gifts of the natural world. The earth continually offers teachings to those alert enough to see. Everything in the natural world

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is constantly changing, in various stages of birth, regeneration, maturity, decay, or death. Apple blossoms, aspen leaves, cumulus clouds, and melting glaciers all whisper that every experience is fleeting, to be appreciated and enjoyed, but also to be let go of as it passes from the peak of its fullness.

Not only does being outdoors bring forth a mindful awareness, but it also cultivates many of the other qualities we seek to develop on the cushion. One example is spaciousness. Step out the front door of your office or house and what is the first thing you notice? Space. The mind opens up the moment we go out from the confines of our cubicles, cars and cabins. Look up at the cloudless sky, or take in a moonless night, and we immediately expand into something vast. Take in the extent of the ocean or a broad landscape, and we begin to sense how the experience of exterior space reveals and develops similar qualities in our own minds. Since it is space that allows for all phenomenal experience to be and to unfold, connecting with an inner experience of spaciousness is a soothing balm to a mind often cramped with the busyness of thought and scarcity. This can be so helpful when dealing with difficulties because it is precisely when we lose that spacious perspective that the reactive mind can arise in full force.

Another factor in ourselves we can better understand in nature is restlessness, one of the principal hindrances the Buddha considered as an obstacle in the meditative journey. Restlessness seems to be one of the defining characteristics of an over-caffeinated culture driven to running away from anything that requires simply being present. What a perfect antidote is the stillness and silence that envelops one sitting quietly in the shade of a willow by a river bank, watching the floating world go by. In nature we can sense the stillness that is present in movement, in the flight of a gull, or as wind invisibly sways the leafy treetops. The quietness

of an old grove of trees supports our mind and body to come into a calmer, grounded, more centered state. Since we are intimately entwined with our environment, spending time in such tranquil groves provides an ideal venue to cultivate samadhi, the calm, gathered attention so essential for meditative depth.

Silence is another quality so vital to the spiritual journey. Yet how is it that the natural world is rarely silent? Alone on a still, summer night we are accompanied by the staccato chorus of singing crickets; perhaps the Buddha was similarly serenaded on that auspicious night in Bodhgaya. Even in a remote desert canyon we hear the beating sound of frogs echoing off ancient, painted walls of stone. Yet amidst that din lies a stillness and silence that quiets the mind and touches the heart. Silence is not dependent upon an absence of sound. In nature we can discern a silence that pervades even the loudest thunderstorm. We sense it as a doorway to the mysterious, something beyond the rational mind and its interpretation of the senses. It is for the sake of this silence that sages from the earliest times have sought solace deep in the forest or in mountain hermitages.

For many, the natural world instills reverence. It is a place where people often sense the sacred, touch a mystery, or connect with a reality more vast than the limits of the ordinary mind. For myself, walking in an old-growth redwood forest, where elegant tree trunks stretch skyward for several hundred feet, feels more sacred than any church, temple or mosque, no matter how grand, ancient or ornate. I have heard many people say that their time in hills, woods, prairie or desert was at the heart of their spiritual practice. Some would not have said they were “meditating,” and may not have even considered themselves on a spiritual path. Yet looking into the brightness and clarity of their eyes as they spoke, it was clear that being outdoors was a profound, necessary and transformative

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experience that connected them with qualities of love and clarity, understanding and ease.

Many people have also spoken of how being outdoors awakens the simple joy of being alive. The experience of nature, whether for a farmer in the Midwest planting corn, an Inuit fishing in frozen waters, or children chasing seagulls on a beach in Peru, provides a unifying commonality of joy. Who hasn't heralded the blaze of crimson coating the skies at sunset, been moved by the surfacing of a whale, enjoyed the playfulness of dolphins, or been left breathless by the flight of an eagle floating on invisible thermals?

There is so much suffering in the world, so much pain, anguish, loss, betrayal, injustice, fear, and violence. And it's all so easy to focus on the negative. So much of dharma practice cultivates balance of mind. Nature in that respect provides a perfect antidote to a mind that overly dwells on what is wrong. Even in our times when the environment is so besieged and species are under huge threats for their very survival, the rose is still seducing us with its perfume, sunflowers still rotate in honor of the life-giving sun, and pelicans thread their way along the shoreline, skimming cresting waves of aquamarine. There are still no shortages of thrushes making our hearts sing, and leafy groves that bring a sweet contentment to the heart. It is essential in these times of global awareness, when it is so easy to be overwhelmed by the magnitude of problems, to go out and smell the roses, watch flowers bloom before our very eyes, and come back joyfully to the miracle of this moment.

What happens when we do this is that another important quality emerges: gratitude. These gifts of the heart keep our minds open and allow us to see the abundance we live in, providing a direct antidote to the scarcity consciousness of the ego-mind. When we are truly present there is an infinite array of things to be grateful for, from the moment the

morning sun warms our bones, to the wind bringing clouds of rain, to the food we eat that required the participation of so many life forms, from the micro-organisms in the soil, through the gopher and the farmer, to the macro movements of the sun and moon.

Perhaps most usefully, being in nature invites us to let go of our preoccupation with our own mind-created personal drama. This happens in part because nothing in the natural world is self-referencing. The redwoods are not proud of their lofty heights, the spotted turtle is not ashamed of his speed. When we are away from the world of people, so dominated by the needs of the ego, our own habits of self-reference can, with the support of meditative training, evaporate in the morning mist. In such moments, when we lose track of ourselves, we inhabit a simpler realm where there is just the coming and going of experience in the field of awareness. No self, no other, just what is.

As the Buddha said to Bahiya:

In the seen there will be merely the seen; in the heard there will be merely the heard; in the sensed there will be merely the sensed; in the cognized there will be merely the cognized. . . . Then you will be neither here nor beyond nor inbetween the two. This itself is the end of suffering. —Ud 8

Or as the Chinese poet Li Po has put it:

*The birds have vanished into the sky
And the last remaining clouds have passed away
We sit together the mountain and me
Until only the mountain remains.*

Mark Coleman teaches at Spirit Rock, leads Wilderness Meditation courses, and is the author of Awake in the Wild, published in 2006.