

# Homeward Bound

Noirin Sheahan · Noirin's Essays · 4 min read

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Homeward Bound.

In the last days of retreat, my mind starts longing for home, projecting delight into the release from the rigours of the schedule, the inward focus and constant noting. In more sober moments, it laments the fact that my current commitment to the path will surely suffer when I'm let out into the big bad world.

I've just finished a month of the winter retreat at Satipanya, and sure enough, both predictions came true. There was the joy of release and my heart soared happily into the world beyond the gates of Satipanya. And there was the disappointment of seeing how quickly attachments reasserted their stranglehold. Take food for example: I had resolved to make a special effort at *mudita* (appreciative joy) at mealtimes on retreat. A surprising bonus was the ease with which I could listen to stomach sensors telling me when enough was enough. With this came the quiet joy of non-greed – seeing how much happier I was when I could confidently declare that that two modest meals a day is really all I needed. Over the past years, some inner demon had chosen food as an excuse to torture me with anxiety - what a relief to be able to chat quietly to this demon at last. So much unnecessary suffering! But on the journey home the demon gobbled up sandwiches, chips and a scone without a by-your-leave, and I tried lobbing a few thoughts of *mudita* in its direction to stem the guilt when another scone and apple tart followed at tea time!

Contemplating the fall from grace brought a temptation towards despair. But what good is that? The demon of greed isn't going to be overcome by aversion. I was glad to be able to detect and develop thoughts along the lines of "OK I'm far from enlightened, but I know the right direction and I'll get there eventually" to nudge my attitude towards acceptance and self-forgiveness.

In meditation I let myself feel the deep attachment to home amidst the backdrop of the seated body, the waves of breath. Every sinew strained outwards towards the roof and walls, the people beyond those walls, the memories and assurances that these walls contain. Attention was drawn to parts of my body associated with a mental brightness which proclaimed the story of 'me' and 'mine' in defiance of those darker regions where attention could barely skim. But as usual, curiosity got the better of me. Exploring those darker regions, defiance crumpled into gratitude that there is more to me than my proclamations. And that this 'more' is forgiving. Just acknowledging its presence stirs compassion for the *dukkha* that currently limits my self-knowledge.

In that sense, meditation is no different at home than it is on retreat. I'm always working at the limits of my understanding. At home though, pleasant feelings are more abundant what with the delights of relationships and news and entertainment not to speak of scones and apple tart! It's easy

to lose mindfulness and follow pleasant fantasies. The wake-up moment then sets the meditative challenge. Can I allow myself to feel the pleasure generated by the associations with home? The temptation is to quench the pleasure, assuming it represents only greed, hurry back to more neutral, manageable sensations like the breath. It takes courage to look a bit deeper and explore the emotionally charged bonds of attachment.

Although there is greed, this can be held in check by curiosity. Taut lines of tension clutch at feelings of delight and the wisdom of non-greed can only creep in tentatively. As my body relaxes its grip, delight takes on hues of anxiety & resentment as I sense myself losing my frail grasp on pleasure. These feelings clamour for attention, and it's easy to overlook suggestions of strength and

confidence seeping in with each breath. Acknowledging these is key. Breath by breath, the bonds of attachment transform to *mudita*.

Walking a tightrope between neediness and the fear of loss, the breath whispers gratitude for walls and floors I usually take for granted. Various people and circumstances that shape my life hover tentatively in mind, evoking their emotional footprint. In the space of meditation these dissolve into a bewildering flux of sensations and feelings. The pleasant ones stir joy and various shades of *metta*, the unpleasant ones confirm that everything dear to me will soon pass away. For a while my being finds a precarious peace in that blessed state of non-clinging where there is the courage to love a life that is forever slipping through my fingers, dissolving and disappearing, beyond any possibility of grasping or control.

Despite the new depth of understanding, it's easy to forget all that as soon I get off the cushion and launch into everyday life. The main challenge has been to count the blessings of home, rather than bow to the demons who insist that this just isn't good enough. With that bit more appreciation for what is usually taken for granted, I find more compassion for what disturbs me, more trust that all those I meet (even my nearest and dearest!) have the potential for full enlightenment, and thus are fully deserving of my care and attention.

In the deepest sense, we are all homeward bound. The draw towards freedom exceeds all worldly attachments. Once we sense this, there is no escape! The homing instinct keeps calling us back to presence, to our frail grasp on wisdom, to the path of non-attachment.

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