

The Roomba bounces off the corner
Dharma talk, Dec. 14-16, 2018

We are so predictable.

Who do we think we are?
Whatever it is, we are not just that.

On retreat we can come to remember we are much more than anything our discursive mind can design or conclude.

It is a lab. We have stripped down all the demands and expectations, all the busyness, and are taking this time outside the normal flow of our lives to discover the limitations for our usual definitions of self. We are making room for an expanded understanding.

An unfolding.

Larger than we can imagine or devise.

It is a process of identifying and liberation, over and over again.
Who do we think we are?
What comes to mind? Good, bad, indifferent?

Well, not just that.
What else?

Not just that.
What else?

Not just that.

And we will notice when we get stuck in some particular corner of our minds, and our hearts, and our inclinations.

We will notice when we are like a forward moving robot, like a Roomba, stuck in a corner and does not know how to turn around, bouncing off the walls.

Each time we are stuck in this familiar corner, we can congratulate our self for noticing.

Bam. Bam. "I am no good." "They are mean" "I feel so empty, so I have failed." I feel so empty, so they have failed me." All your favorite corners will have a chance to emerge.

So many familiar tropes, on endless repeat.

What are your favorites?
Bam. Bam.

So, what do we do when we find our selves continually hitting the wall?

Well, if you are a human being, certainly you will find yourself despairing in your predicament. Aversion arising. "I hate this corner." And there will be the usual litany of complaints and blame.

Or maybe you will want to decorate your corner. If only there were a window, or wallpaper, and spend time adorning your corner. Lamenting that you don't have time to run get window treatments.

Or maybe this corner will come to feel like a refuge you are too afraid to leave.

Sometimes we think the whole world is this small corner.

We can never learn anything new if we are not aware we are cornered.

Most of the time, here in the corner, our complaints about love and betrayal and lack of justice and pain are so loud, that they become the whole world. We can't discover that that the quiet love we yearn for may already be present.

There is no nourishment available when we are fixated on our favorite corners. And usually that is our precise complaint.

So what can we do when we are lucky enough, awake enough to find our self banging against the walls?

How can we learn to do something new? Who else are we?

There is a Buddhist story that might be helpful.

A horse suddenly came galloping quickly down the road. It seemed as though the man on the horse had somewhere important to go.

Another man, who was standing alongside the road, shouted, "Where are you going?" and the man on the horse replied, "I don't know! Ask the horse!"

The horse can represent the energy of our habits of mind and body and emotions. We usually live at the mercy of these habits. These habits have been established out of old needs and as responses to old situations. They can be reinforced by our surroundings and our own mindlessness. We have gotten used to these habits, and mistake them for who we are.

So how do we realize the reins are already in our hands? How do we redirect the horse, with a gentle nudge of the reigns, or a slight prod with our heel, or a little sweet talk?

Using the modern robot metaphor, can we allow the little Roomba to learn something new? Apparently, there are internal programs for learning, waiting to be utilized.

What we need to do is really quite simple. Return to the breath. Feel the body simply sitting here. Come to our senses. What do I see and feel and hear and taste and smell? It is a simple 180. Sometimes there is a sudden shift. Mostly it is incremental learning. Over and over again.

The Roomba learns slowly, even as it just bangs against the wall, it is learning. And the learning path is not linear. It is experimental. Each time we get stuck banging around in the corner, if we are awake to the process, learning is taking place. This calls for patient awareness.

But sometimes, because some old habits don't let go easily, all the hindrances come rushing in to save you from leaving your familiar corner.

Hearing your favorite hindrances arise can let you know that you are onto something really good.

Doubt starts screaming—you can't do it! Don't try turning around. Don't look! You are this habit of self-pity, or anger, or resentment. You will be nothing without it!

Fear and worry will go into over-time! If I leave this corner, the wide-open room will be full of the unfamiliar—there may be serpents, or what if the world is flat and I will Roomba myself off the edge! Or there is fear that I will be undefended in a wide-open space!

Aversion might get fixated on the corner itself, busy screaming how much it hates it here and it is someone else's fault! Or I am in the corner because I am bad! I deserve to be in the corner.

Or you can sit in the corner and indulge all your cravings just to distract yourself.

Or you can pull up a sofa and a lovely pillow and fall asleep in the corner, protected by the bliss of ignorance, but not really. All the other hindrances lay dormant, dream-like. They can go to hide still further, or we can give permission for the longing for freedom to arise. The longing for freedom creates a yearning to awaken.

We can be onto all these patterns, and they can become signposts, to return to breathing, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, and feeling.

There is another Buddhist story that might be helpful:

One day a young Buddhist on his journey home came to the banks of a wide river. Staring hopelessly at the great obstacle in front of him, he pondered for hours on just how to cross such a wide barrier. Just as he was about to give up his pursuit to continue his journey he saw a great teacher on the other side of the river. The young Buddhist yells over to the teacher, "Oh wise one, can you tell me how to get to the other side of this river?" The teacher ponders for a moment, looks up and down the river and yells back, "My child, you are on the other side."

We are just sitting here. This moment, this spot, is the opportunity, always. Little Roomba, breathe. Turn the attention ever so slightly. The attention is the reigns of the horse. Choose your metaphor. Move your attention so gently. Breathe.

Notice when you become hooked by any content. Be that monk sitting by the bank of the river, letting the stream of consciousness just flow. You are just sitting here. Nothing to do. Nothing to create. Nothing to fix.

Can we then become interested in the quality of attention itself?
What is the energy level of the attention? We need not work too hard.

Here we have another story:

A martial arts student went to his teacher and said earnestly, "I am devoted to studying your martial system. How long will it take me to master it?"

The teacher's reply was casual, "Ten years." Impatiently, the student answered, "but I want to master it faster than that. I will work very hard. I will practice everyday, ten or more hours a day if I have to. How long will it take then?"

The teacher thought for a moment, "20 years."

This is not about hard work, it is calling upon us to be kindly present to whatever is arising. Even if it is painful. Even if it is joyous. Even when our complaints are justified. Even when we are being harsh, stupid, or blaming. Even if we are having a temper tantrum. Or we are sad. Grieving. Lonely. Entitled to something we are not getting. All these conditions are temporary. Let them come and go.

Let all these feelings arise, and you will find the equanimity which underlies them.

How do we do this? How do we not get attached or disdain any state where we find our selves? In these familiar corners, rather than repeatedly banging against the same wall, we breathe, and allow attention to be kind, and interested. Handling the reigns gently.

Propensity of personality, mood, states of arousal, all present. The pain and pleasure of being embodied. Present. All the familiar internal voices and tropes. Of course.

So, we are harnessing our attention, and we can ask: what is a wholesome direction for us to foster? How do we make our way into the unfamiliar part of the internal environment?

We give priority to kindness toward ourselves, even in how we object to kindness. Like we might soothe a baby. And if the baby is inconsolable, we will sit with her, until the feeling transforms into some new feeling. As it always does. Getting angry at the baby for having that feeling will never help. Kindness allows us to be patient, and gently hold the process. As we just sit here.

When we are in pain, or we witness the pain of others, we can hold it in spacious compassion. We are not going to eliminate the pain, but feel it and know its roots are deep. The depth of our pain with its underlying equanimity becomes the depth of our compassion. As we just sit here.

And we make room for delight, gladness and joy. And when the kill-joy shows up, we say “hello” to that, too.

Equanimity arises naturally as we just sit here, allowing our selves to become conscious. There is enormous strength in knowing we can stand feeling anything. And knowing it is temporary. We are grounded to the earth, as the stream of consciousness just flows. We are also the bedrock over which the stream flows.

Our little Roomba has a capacity to learn, turn from the corner where it gets repeatedly stuck. It may just end up in another corner, but we learn how to turn around, and come to our senses. And we get familiar with all our corners, and start to learn the lay of the rest of the room. Then we slowly discover there are more rooms, and even floors, to the mansion we are. It is pretty exciting to go exploring. We are cultivating all the tools we need: equanimity, kindness, patience, and attention. It is a matter of becoming skillful with these tools. That is why we are sitting here. With just enough energy in the attention that it rest so gently on what ever makes up this moment.

