

## Rabbit Hole or Rat Hole?

By [Nelly Kaufer](#), Lead Teacher Pine Street Sangha

Faces etch with fear when I invite students to let their mind be free in meditation. Someone exclaims “I can’t go down that rabbit hole”. She lets me know that I don’t understand just how dangerous her mind traps are. Is she afraid she’ll go down a rat hole full of inescapable vermin?

I try and assure them that the conditions within the meditation are safe and encourage them; if it gets too hard, they can always end the meditation early. People rarely take me up on this option because they tend to enjoy the freedom of this more unstructured meditation approach.

The conditions I suggest in meditation are inherently safe. Be gentle with yourself on the journey and be curious about what you meet up with. You have permission to travel as you like and the power to step off the journey as needed. Yes, you’re on an adventure and you don’t know where it will lead. But aren’t you often not in charge the way you would like?

The fear can feel primal, beyond words. Getting caught in the same old grooves, digging in deeper and deeper. There’s a word for this kind of repetition in Buddhism, “samsara” and it’s said to be the nature of the world we live in. Yes, we want to be free of it; it is grueling.

In our attempt to release ourselves, we look anywhere else. Find strategies to avoid the patterns of thought and emotion that repeat and entrap us. Meditation instructions can function this way, give us a different attentional focus that brings relief. But our habitual patterns are right around the corner waiting to pounce when our guard is down. What we don’t know can be the most dangerous. When we invite difficult thoughts and feelings in with gentleness and curiosity they become easier to tolerate. It defangs them.

There are safeguards in meditation, we don’t get consumed by our fears forever. We get whisked away by the swirl of colors behind our eyes or the subtle touch of the breath. Maybe our attention naturally settles on the whoosh of the wind or the song playing inside our minds. Before we know it the bell rings, we end the meditation and curiously feel better.

After meditation, we contemplate the painful experiences along with the uplifting ones, learning how they operate and what they want. Our experience is complex; full of rabbits and rats, friends and enemies, delight and dread and so much more. Smooth and tight, somber and exhilarating. The rabbit led Alice on a journey to Wonderland.

Though you’re not in charge of the itinerary, maybe you can trust your developing discernment. Sometimes you’ll feel lost, then find new, unexpected directions. Let’s take a meditative adventure “down the rabbit hole”, who knows, you might end up in Wonderland for a while.