Wilderness Mind

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A meditative life is one that gives you the space you need to look at the issues of life as a whole. If you’re too much involved in work and family and social action and all those other things, it can get you very easily entangled. You don’t have the space to get things into perspective. As I was saying the other night, you find yourself in these little tunnels. I know all you know is what was immediately behind you and what’s immediately in front of you, but what’s around you and the larger sense of where you’re going is very hard to figure out. Everything is there in the tunnel. When you meditate, you come up out of the ground, out of the tunnel, into the open air. You can see east, west, north, south, all around you. Then you get a chance to look at what’s really important in life. This is why the Buddha found it necessary to leave home. When you leave society and get out on your own, you can look at life as a whole. You can see what’s worthwhile and what’s not, what really matters and what doesn’t matter. There are a lot of things that matter down in the tunnel. But once you leave the tunnel, you begin to realize it’s pretty ridiculous. So you should value this opportunity to get out in the open air, get out of the intense tangling relationships that would otherwise define you, and ask yourself, “Well, how do you want to define yourself? In terms of what ideals do you want to define yourself? And how are you going to go about accomplishing them?” Those ideals are not things that you outgrow. I was reading the other day, there’s a book in which the idea is that you can have a practice in which you struggle and you strive and you overcome your weaknesses, you overcome your failings, you overcome your unskillful habits, and finally get to a point where there is no more suffering, where there’s a job that’s done. The book was saying that’s a very childish way of looking at the spiritual life. Well, it’s funny. That’s how the Buddha looked at the spiritual life. They talk about the monks who realized that once they’ve finally attained a full awakening, the job is done, they say. The task is complete. The holy life has been fulfilled. There is a point in the practice where you reach that. And it’s because of that point that the practice not only makes sense, it becomes something very important. Because there’s nothing else in the world that leads to any final point. You look at the work you can do in the world. You work day in, day out, day in, day out. The reason you have to stop working is because you get too old and too weak and too scatterbrained to do the job. So they lead you off and they let you go out to pasture for a while, but the job still needs doing, to find somebody else to take your place. The work of the world never gets done, but the work of the Dharma can get done. It does reach a point of completion. Because of that completion, the practice takes on a direction. Whether you attain that point in this lifetime or it takes many more lifetimes, that’s not really the issue. The issue is that you’ve got that goal in mind and you work towards it. The important thing is that you do what you can. It’s when you know that you can do these things and yet you get careless or complacent. That’s when you’re going to regret it. When you look back on your life and say, “Gee, I wish I’d had more time on the practice. Less time dawdling around. Less time fooling around.” That’s reason for regret. But if you realize, “Okay, I’ve got this much time. I’ve got this one day. I’ve got this one hour. I’ve got this one breath to practice.” Well, you just stick with it, stick with it, stick with it. Then even if you don’t get all the way in this lifetime, you look back on your life and say, “Well, I did what I could. I did what I could.” Then there’s a very definite sense of direction, momentum, that will carry you over. So it’s not lost. I’ve often said that when difficult decisions confront you, ask yourself, “If I were on my deathbed right now looking back on this decision, which choice will I wish I had made?” That helps get it into perspective. Death puts a lot of things into perspective. That’s why the wilderness is where Buddhism really thrives, because it’s not only outside of social entanglements, but you’re very close to death when you’re out there. You begin to realize so many things could happen to you. The web of connections that supports your life can get very thin. And while we’re in society, we tend to lose track of that. But when you’re out alone in the wilderness and there’s no danger around you, it becomes very apparent. And so wise people take the opportunity to really look, “Okay, what’s important, since everything is so tenuous? My allotted span of life here is totally unpredictable. What should I do right now?” And in that situation, the answer to that question becomes a lot more clear. The trick is to maintain that clarity even when you are living in a group, living with other people, not quite so face-to-face with things, even though you are. Death can happen just as easily in society as it can out in the middle of nowhere. But we get distracted, and the distractions make us lose our sense of perspective. So you want to keep this perspective as much as you can. That’s one of the functions of mindfulness. When the sun rises in the morning, you remind yourself, “Today could be the day that I die. Am I ready to go?” When the sun sets in the evening, “Tonight could be the night that I die. Am I ready to go?” And if the answer is no, what exactly is your unfinished business? What needs to be done? What’s the first priority? When you’re thinking this way, the priorities sort themselves out. Not only the priorities sort themselves out, but a lot of the issues in your mind. Which thoughts should you be thinking? What should you be dwelling on? What’s the most useful way to make use of this thought energy, these thought powers that you have? Are you going to turn them on yourself and destroy yourself, or are you going to use them for your own benefit? When issues are simplified and put into stark terms like this, they become a lot easier to deal with. What’s fluff, what’s unnecessary becomes a lot more obvious. So try to maintain this wilderness mind even as you’re here in the monastery. When you go back home, wherever you are, the mind has a very clear sense of what’s important and what’s not. It’s very alive to the choices you have here in the present moment and the importance of making as skillful a choice as you can. Each time you breathe in, each time you breathe out, make the breath the air of your life where you remember these things. When you’re with the breath, you can let go a lot of your other concerns, your other entanglements. Make this your inner wilderness, your inner wilderness. You’re like a wild sanctuary. The part of you that’s in the present moment, even though the present moment may be surrounded by people and other issues, but there’s this part of the present moment that doesn’t have to be entangled with them. So even though the people around you are all in tunnels, you can be in a wide open space inside. That’s when the wilderness becomes nothing. It’s not just a place, but an attitude of mind that can always be there.

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