The Wilderness Tradition

July 6, 2008

We practice here as part of a wilderness tradition, not just the Thai wilderness tradition, which I think is a better translation of “sai-wat-pa” than “forest tradition.” After all, the Buddha himself went out into the wilderness. There’s been a long background to the Buddhist tradition that the practice survives because of the wilderness. For many of us, wilderness is Sierra Club wilderness. Lovely pictures, a nice, relaxing place to go. That’s because wilderness in the modern world has become little islands surrounded by a sea of civilization. But in the past, it wasn’t like that. It was the other way around. Civilization was little islands, and the wilderness was all around. To get a feel for what wilderness was like in the past, you can go to Alaska nowadays. A couple of years back, we went to Alaska. You’re out there in the middle of the forest with nobody around for miles and miles. Or if there were people around, you didn’t notice them. You had no sense of their being there. The wilderness was so large, and it seemed so indifferent. But the indifference was overwhelming. It didn’t care whether you lived or died. It could kill you very easily. There’s an old question, “If a tree falls in the forest and there’s no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?” If you were to die in the wilderness, would it make a sound? The ripples of your death would just get swallowed up in the total indifference of the trees and the mountains and the sky. A place like that is a great place to practice. One, because it’s so challenging. You really need the skills of the practice in order to stay alive, to maintain a sense of ease and well-being. There’s a message in the Taraka Tatha of a monk who’s sick out in the wilderness. He says, “Here I am, sick. What am I going to do? Are you going to go back home?” The monk says, “No, I’m going to stay.” Then he talks about how he’s going to take care of his mind, focusing on the four frames of reference, the seven factors for awakening, the five faculties. In other words, the main concern is not so much caring for the body as caring for the mind. You’re realizing that that’s your main necessity. It’s the survival of the good qualities of the mind that matters more than anything else, because you realize that this body is very fragile and who knows how long it’s going to last. The need for heedfulness really makes itself felt there. One little slip, and you’re in big trouble. When we were in Canada last year, we met with a woman who was part of her research project. She went up to one of the far northern islands in the Canadian archipelago. It was only after the plane dropped her off and left that she realized that she was totally alone on this island. If she broke her leg, she’d be in really bad shape. The plane wasn’t going to come back for another month, so she had to be very careful in all of her movements. If she fell, there’d be no one to come and pick her up and take her to the hospital. She’d be totally on her own. It’s good to induce that mind state even though we’re here. We’re in the midst of Southern California, surrounded by society, our little island of quiet here. But it’s good to call all of that to mind, because it helps to heighten the practice. The real question of survival here is not so much survival of the body or the comfort of the body. It’s the survival and comfort of the mind. That’s what really matters. And you have to be very, very heedful, because heedfulness, as the Buddha said, is the beginning of all skillful qualities. So even though our wilderness here in the monastery is not quite the same as the Alaskan wilderness, you can try to create a wilderness state of mind. That’s what going into the wilderness is all about. The Buddha never said monks had to stay all of their lives in the wilderness. In fact, Devadatta was the one who requested that there be a special rule created that monks should not leave the forest, not leave the wilderness. And the Buddha said no, because it’s not the physical wilderness that’s so important. It’s maintaining wilderness mind, being able to carry a sense of seclusion even as you go into society. And not just seclusion, but the quality of heedfulness and a strong sense of what your true priorities are. We actually live like wilderness people. Years back, when I was on my alms round one day, it struck me that I was living the life of a hunter and gatherer. The monks don’t keep stores of food. They eat what they get that day, and then they go hunt and gather the next day. Again, that’s a little bit compromised here because we stay in place, we have a kitchen, and we’ve got the orchard here. But the purpose of that, what you might call the economy, the wilderness economy, is to keep you focused on just what you need right here, right now. It’s to teach you contentment. So try to keep reminding yourself of that, that contentment is an important part of the practice. Even though we’ve got the hot summer months ahead of us, we still have enough comfort so we can still practice. Contentment, after all, is being content with things as they are, the physical circumstances of your life. Then the area for discontent, as the Buddha said, is not resting content with what your attainments are in the practice. In fact, the Buddha said this was one of the qualities that contributed to his awakening. He was never resting content with his mental attainments, the attainments of the heart and the practice. So again, it’s a physical contentment so that you can focus on the area that really needs to be developed, which is the qualities of the mind. So it keeps coming back to that theme. Sometimes physical hardships help to induce a kind of wilderness situation. You realize that your mind is your mainstay, and therefore it needs to be developed more than anything else. Even though what we have here is not a genuine wilderness, you want to develop those attitudes of wilderness mind. You want to develop a sense of contentment, not worrying about where the food is going to come from tomorrow. If you’ve got enough food for today, that’s fine. Then you can focus on the practice. Even though the weather is hot, you can still practice. Again, think of the monk who is sick. He found that he could depend on the Four Frames of Reference, the Seven Factors of Awakening, and the Five Faculties. That was his medicine. So on these hot afternoons, think about where your real medicine is. It lies in the mind. The mind is complaining about the heat. Ask yourself, “What does this complaining do? What does it accomplish? Does it fend off the heat?” Or does it make it worse? If you’re thinking about how much longer it’s going to be hot, how long it has been hot, you’re placing too much of a burden on the present moment. If you’re just with what’s happening right here, right now, and you’re heedful to work on developing what skillful qualities you can find right here, right now, you find that you can endure all kinds of things. When the good qualities of the mind develop, the unskillful ones get starved. But it’s through this process, through this process of care, of realizing there are dangers all around in your mind, there are all kinds of thoughts you could think. Ask yourself, “Which ones are the most useful ones to think? Which ones will lead to a genuine happiness?” That question the Buddha has you ask. Go to a Brahmin or a contemplative, someone who’s advanced on the practice, and ask that person, “What, when I do, will be to my long-term welfare and happiness?” As both the beginning of wisdom but also shows a lot of heedfulness, realizing that your actions are going to make the difference—in this case, primarily actions of your mind—and that the long-term happiness is the one that’s really valuable, the one that’s really worth it, because that’s the other quality of wilderness. It gets you away from the values of society. And you can ask yourself, “What’s really important in life? What’s important given that this body is so fragile, life is so fleeting?” And your only guarantee is that you have good qualities developed in the mind. So you begin to see that from the perspective of the wilderness, a lot of the Buddhist teachings, which may seem random and disconnected, all kind of come together, from heedfulness, which is the beginning of skillful qualities, all the way up to the wisdom and discernment that can set you free. So try to keep this quality of wilderness in mind. It helps keep the whole practice in perspective. [BLANK\_AUDIO]

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