A Rite of Passage

July 29, 2016

Ancient cultures used to have rites of passage, the point that marks where you become an adult. You go out, leave the village, leave your home. You’re out in the wilderness for a while. They would have different cultural ways of dealing with the rite of passage, but it did give the individual a time to get out. For many people, this was their first time really alone. Just try thinking about where they were going with their lives now that they were becoming adults and what that might mean, how they would become more self-directing, or at least get some sense of something inside themselves that was separate from being a child. They could look back at their childish ways and decide which things to drop and which things to keep, and think about the things they would have to take on as adults. We miss that in our culture, which is one of the reasons why you see so many adults behaving like children. They’ve never had a chance to sort things out. There’s much more of an echo chamber quality to our culture than a lot of old cultures. We tend to think of other cultures as being tied to their ways and set in their ways. And in some ways, yes. But as you look at modern culture, there’s a lot of unquestioned assumptions that get bandied around. So we need a place to step away from to see if they’re really skillful. Those are the two things. Step away and see if they’re skillful. Meditation gives you a place to step away, because it teaches you to step away from your thoughts. If you’re going to get the mind still, you can’t get involved with any thought, no matter how wonderful or inspiring or whatever. You’ve got to just drop it, drop it, drop it, because you want a place where the mind can step back and see things as processes. You want to see where they’re going. The Buddha talked about the point where he got on the path. He was able to divide his thoughts into two. On the one hand, there were thoughts of sensuality, ill will, and harmfulness. On the other hand, there were thoughts of renunciation, non-ill will, and harmlessness. The Buddha was looking at the thoughts not in terms of their content, but in terms of what they did, what was motivating them, what lay behind them, and then where they were going. To see that, you have to step out. It’s that ability to step out that put him on the path. And then the second part of this, you don’t just step out and look. You ask the question, “Which is skillful and what’s not?” When the Buddha talks about the various qualities, you can develop them through good or bad karma. He talks about how you can become a good-looking person, how you can become a wealthy person, how you can become a respected person, how you can gain discernment. And the discernment is the only one where it starts with a question, “What will I do that will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness?” In other words, what’s skillful? On the other hand, what’s unskillful? What’s blameworthy? What leads to my long-term harm and suffering? Again, the “what” is “what would I do it?” You look at things as actions, and you ask, “Where is this action going?” And here we’re talking about actions not only on the level of your bodily actions, but also in terms of the things you say and the things you think. What, when you think, will lead to your long-term welfare and happiness? What, when you think, will lead to your long-term harm and suffering? That can ask questions. This is the Buddha’s rite of passage. This is what makes you an adult. These are the questions that are worth asking. Without the questions, you don’t get any discernment. Because a question gives shape to a sense of something is not quite right, something is lacking. And you’re not going to know what’s going to fill the lack until you actually get a sense of what shape it is. Which is why it’s important to have good questions, because otherwise the shape of the question, if it has a hole, you’re going to fill it up. Sometimes you find that the hole is the wrong shape. It doesn’t really correspond to what your real problem is. But this question, “What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term welfare and happiness? What, when I do it, will lead to my long-term harm and suffering?” That’s the right shape, because it points to the right cause. I.e., your actions and what you really want. You want something that’s long-term in terms of your happiness. You don’t want long-term suffering. And you have to keep reminding yourself of that, because it’s so easy to go for the short-term. All too often you hear that Buddhism is all about being in the present moment and not worrying about the past or future. That’s not how the Buddha taught it. The only times he taught about being in the present moment is to work on developing skill ful qualities, i.e., qualities that will be useful in the future. And he emphasized the present moment because it’s the only moment you know you’ve got to do the work. So we’re not just hanging out in the present moment. We’re in the present moment because there’s work to be done here, and it’s going to have implications now and on into the future. So these are the terms you have to think in. And you have to get the mind really quiet in order to do that. That’s the stepping back part. That’s what tranquility is for. And then the insight is what comes from the questions. We’re not just noting things coming and going and trying to get dispassionate simply by noting. You have to ask questions. To what extent are you involved in the stress that these things cause? Can you recognize the stress? Because if you can’t recognize stress, how are you going to know it’s for your long-term welfare and happiness? You don’t even know the difference between stress and happiness. You have to be very still and watch these things and begin to see that the Buddha was right. It’s clinging aggregates. And the clinging is the real problem. The aggregates on their own are not that much of a problem. But we cling to these things. A thought comes in and we just go for it, take it on. A feeling comes in, an emotion comes in, something comes in, we just take it on without really thinking. So you need to step back and ask questions, ask the right questions. So right now as we’re working with the breath, it’s both stepping back, i.e., stepping back from the other thoughts, and asking some questions about the breath. What kind of breathing will be good now? What way of approaching the breath will be useful? If you find that you stick with a particular way of breathing and by the end of the hour you’re all tensed up, okay, you’re doing something wrong from the very beginning. You’re just getting yourself stuck in a feedback loop that just gets worse and worse and worse. So you have to notice, “When I focus on the breath, what do I do? What changes happen in the breath? Can I focus in a way that doesn’t lead to those negative changes?” Because sometimes the problem is with the breath on its own. You can fix that. But sometimes the problem is how you’re focusing on the breath. So it’s a double stepping back. You’re stepping back from the other thoughts and you’re also stepping back and watching your mind as it gets settled down with the breath, so you can figure out how to do it well. And John Lee talks about how, as you’re practicing, you can’t expect the teacher to cure your blindness. The teacher gives you the medicines, but you’ve got to learn how to put those eye drops in your eyes yourself. In other words, learn how to take note and learn how to be observant of what’s going on. After all, that’s how the Buddha himself learned. His question that led him on his path was, “What is skillful?” This is why he recommended it as the question that gives rise to discernment. How is he going to find that? Well, he ended up having to look at his own actions. He had to be observant on his own. He gives us directives and he gives us ideas for good places to look and good questions to ask, but the actual seeing is something we have to do ourselves. That means learning how to be very, very observant. So you’ve got to step back and get out of your old ways of thinking so you can examine them and see what really is skillful. Things that come from our childhood or from our culture are very harmful. Other things are not so bad. Other things are actually useful. So you have to learn how to sort them out. You have to put yourself in a position where you can sort them out with the confidence that you’re making the right choices. So as you meditate, you know that you’re heading in the right direction. As you come out of the meditation, you know you’ve got the right set of values. You’ve got a foundation inside where you can step back and see to what extent, as you talk to other people and deal with other people, you’re getting sucked back into unskillful mental states. You’re getting sucked back into the echo chamber. You’ve got to figure out how to not get sucked in that way. These are all skills that we learn by being observant, and it’s by being observant that our discernment develops. We learn how to discern and we figure out what the right answers are. We learn how to test the answers so we can be confident that what we’ve got is right. You don’t trust that anything that comes up or everything that comes up in the still mind is reliable. Because there are a lot of things that can come up in a concentrated mind that are wrong. But the concentration does give you the ability to step back and question. Step back and question. Ask the right questions. Don’t be just questioning. Ask the right questions. There are some questions that are really useless. Do your actions really make a difference? Yes, they do. You don’t have to ask that question again. Otherwise, you could say, “Well, I don’t really know if my actions make any difference or not.” That just puts the end of the path right there. That puts the end of any possible discernment. Discernment comes from the mind. Discernment comes from believing that your actions really do make a difference and there’s not going to be anybody to come around and clean up after you afterwards. So that places the onus on you. But it also gives you a lot of power to free yourself from the unskillful things in your cultural background or your family background or just whatever happened in your childhood. And to pass over into being an adult.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2016/160729_A_Rite_of_Passage.mp3>