The Mind on Its Own Two Feet

December 26, 2018

Seeing the cougar’s footprints today, coming through the monastery, reminds us that we are on the edge of the wilderness and there are wild things about. And the appropriate response is heedfulness. You’re not afraid to go out, but you know there are dangers. But you also know that there are ways of avoiding the dangers. So heedfulness is not simply the same thing as fear or worry. It’s a combination of fear and confidence. Confidence that you know some skills that can minimize the dangers. And, as the Buddha says, heedfulness lies at the basis of all skillful qualities. Because, as you saw, there are dangers in the mind, but there are also good potentials in the mind. That’s why heedfulness is appropriate. If you were to think of a higher power in Buddhism, that would be it, heedfulness. It’s a constellation of qualities—fear, skill, confidence, a desire for true happiness, a desire for true well-being. All these things rolled into one. That’s what we can depend on as we practice. We’re like little children. There are a lot of things we don’t know and a lot of ways we can cause harm to ourselves. Of course, when the Ajahns are talking about children, they’re not talking about the romantic idea that children are totally unsoiled and unstained until they become part of society. The main concern when you have a child is that the child will harm itself out of ignorance. You’ve got to train them, point out where the dangers are, but also point out how they can handle the dangers. In the beginning, we have to depend on the Buddha and the Dhamma and the Sangha to teach us these things. But we also have to learn how to internalize them so that we grow up, so we can learn how to stand on our own two feet and take on whatever’s coming up in the mind. So try to bring this attitude of heedfulness to your practice. We can’t rely on the idea that the mind is essentially good and all we have to do is uncover its essential goodness and it will shine forth. It has some goodness, and the goodness lies in its desire for its happiness to be genuine and for its happiness to be harmless. But we have all kinds of other things as well. There are parts of the mind that lie to each other, that cover things up. There are parts that get apathetic. There are parts that get lazy. And we’ll have to deal with these in the practice. So there will be kind of a war going on inside. And it’s the war of raising any child. The child is going to be fighting its parents. It’ll want to do things, and the parents will know better. But the child doesn’t know. So there’s going to be tension. And the best thing you can do, of course, is try to get the message through all the different identities that you’ve got in the mind. And that’ll take a while. It takes a while to sort these things out. But isn’t it a case where there’s a war between the parents and the children? There has to be some goodwill on the parents’ part. There’s something in the parents that the children can trust. So try to remind yourself that true happiness is possible and there’s no reason in the world to settle for anything less. And you want to hold to that. That’s the part where the goodness becomes trustworthy. And then we use the concentration to give the mind strength, give the good side strength, but also to convince the other parts of the mind that this path really is a good path. It’s not saving all of its rewards to the end. So when the Buddha talks about the practice in terms of raising a child, or the Ajahns in terms of raising a child, remember that we’re not here to indulge the child or to trust in its goodness. The child has to learn how to trust the good side of the mind. But the good side of the mind can’t trust the child. So you look inside and see which attitudes you have that are childish, and learn how not to trust them. The good part of every desire in the mind is that it doesn’t desire happiness, but there’s a lot of ignorance in a lot of these identities that we’ve had in the past. And it is good to think of them as identities. A while back we had the question about personality view. In the old days, they would translate “sikkhaya nithyati,” which is one of the fetters that’s abandoned at the stream entry, as “personality view.” And that creates all kinds of problems. We actually had a candidate here one time who was trying to get rid of his personality, thinking that’s what it was all about, complaining that the monks seemed to have personalities. And I think part of it was because he didn’t have much of a personality. He was looking for a religion where he’d have the advantage. But that’s not what the Buddha is talking about. If you look at all the different great disciples of the Buddha, they all had very different personalities. Ananda had one personality, and Mahagasipu had a very different one. Sariputta had another. These are the ones we see most clearly because they appear most often in the texts. Look at the Forest of the Jhansi. They had very strong personalities. The important thing was sorting out what things inside the mind were simply a matter of personality, which things were a part of defilement, which parts were okay to keep going, which ones you had to abandon. That’s something we all have to do. We’re not going to lose our personalities as we gain awakening. We’re just going to lose all the unskillful members of the committee. They’ll either be exiled or they’ll be brought over. The children inside their mind will learn how to grow up. That is, in any case, when you grow from a child to adulthood, there are some personality traits that stay the same. But other things will change. Your perspective, your sense of experience, your knowledge of what’s going on will grow, and your willingness to take the long view will grow. This is one of the paradoxes of the practice. On the one hand, we have to pay very careful attention to the present moment, take things step by step, but at the same time have that long view. It’s a combination of the willingness to be very precise, not just to go by your opinions, but to be very precise about what really has to be done right here, right now. The focus gets very small. But at the same time, as you read the results of your practice, you have to take the long view, realizing that even though you’re doing things that seem to be right in the present moment, there will be times when it doesn’t seem like anything is happening as a result. That’s why you have to realize, “This is a long-term project we’ve got going here.” So there will be ups and there’ll be downs. You have to learn how to talk to yourself so that the downs don’t get you down and the ups don’t get you uppity. And Jhana Mahaprabhu calls this quality. He talks about ekkatha, which can be translated as “singleness.” For him, it means a consistency of the mind that’s not shaken by the ups and downs. It just keeps plugging away with a sense of confidence, but also a sense of responsibility. Because it can happen often that the reason the results are not happening or not coming as fast as you’d like is because you’re doing something wrong. So you have to keep checking things. So you focus both on the long-term and on the immediate present. And learning how to develop the right combination of these things is a large part of maturity, a part of making yourself an adult as a practitioner. Then, one by one by one, you learn how to train the different committee members so they all become adults. Then things begin to settle down. Here again, John Lee says, “When children live with children, they are fighting all the time.” If you’re really a bunch of adults, then everybody’s at peace. So we’re here to train our inner children, but not to indulge them. You see that their main problem is ignorance. And they can often be very heedless. So we have to teach them some heedfulness. Which, in many ways, is another name for maturity. At the very least, it’s what brings maturity about.

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