De-domesticated

September 29, 2022

As you engage in the practice, you take on new states of becoming. You become a new person and you shape the world around you in new ways. Because that’s what becoming is. A sense of who you are in a particular world of experience and your sense of yourself. You and yourself, in the sense of the world, are very intimately interconnected. You’ve developed habits and skills to negotiate the world as you know it. And there’s a general preference for the world to stay pretty much the same so that you know how to negotiate with it, learn how to deal with it, get what you want out of it. As you meditate, there’s a new you. And here in the monastery, it’s an outer world that’s conducive to developing that new you. But as you leave the monastery and go elsewhere, especially when you go back home, you find yourself running up against the become-ings of other people. And there’s a lot of pressure to revert to your old ways of doing things. After all, you’re part of those people’s worlds. And they feel more comfortable if they can anticipate how you’re going to behave, what your values are, the things that you can do together that give pleasure. And there’s a problem. If, as a meditator, you’ve decided that some of those things no longer give pleasure, you’ve got to be able to assert yourself that this is a new you. You might say there’s a pressure to stay domesticated. You’ve got to fight against that pressure. Now, the fight has to be done with goodwill, because after all, you are disturbing other people’s worlds. And that has an effect on them, their sense of who they are in relationship to you. I learned this lesson years back. It was my father’s first visit to Thailand after I’d ordained. It was the first time he’d seen me with my head shaved and wearing robes. And the second day he was there, he got sick. He blamed the ice. I thought it was something deeper. So that night, I went into his room, sat down next to his bed, turned off the light, and just talked to him. He had a sense that, yes, this was the son he had known. He looked different, was living a different life, had different values. But he was still basically the same son. The next day he was well. Now, as a monk dealing with parents, the fact that you are a monk wearing the robes, the head shaved, living in line with different rules, that really establishes the fact that you are a new person. And in that case, I had to establish the other fact that there was part of me still that hadn’t changed. But for a layperson going back home, it’s the other problem. They expect you to be the same. And they take it as an affront when you’re not. So you have to deal with a lot of goodwill, a lot of compassion, a lot of empathetic joy, and a lot of equanimity. In other words, develop the Brahma-vihara as much as you can. But at the same time, maintain your sense of values. Because as meditators, we are dealing with a part of ourselves that we don’t share with other people. And in a world, that has nothing to do with anyone else’s world. But the fact that we’re focused here means that we’re a different person in their world. So it does have an impact. But you want to maintain that focus. You don’t want to give in to their pressure. Because as the Buddha pointed out, the problem in life is suffering. This is something that each of us experiences for him or herself. “I can’t feel your suffering. You can’t feel my suffering.” No matter what politicians may say, they can’t feel your suffering. This is something we each experience in a part of our awareness that’s exclusively ours. It’s like that old question. You probably asked it at some point when you were a child. When you look at blue, do you see the same blue that other people see? You say the same word, but do they actually see the same color that you do? There’s no way of saying yes or no. There’s a certain part of our experience that is totally ours. And as the Buddha said, the source of the suffering also comes from within. And in that part of our experience, that is totally ours. And the path to the solution is that part of our experience. So our focus now is totally inward. And as we keep that focus, I wouldn’t say we’ve become undomesticated, because we’ve been domesticated enough many, many times. We’re de-domesticating ourselves. As a meditator, you’re de-domesticating yourself. As a domesticated person, your values are very different from the values of the home life. And you want to maintain that. Keep that vision clear. Keep that sense of direction clear. There’s your mind that runs up against other people’s expectations and your own tendency to just slip back into your old roles. That’s where you have to be firm but kind. Realize that for other people it is disturbing. It’s like an earthquake in their world, especially if they’re people really close to you. So try to be compassionate. Understand that they don’t understand you. And to whatever extent you can’t explain what you’re doing, fine. If there are things you can’t explain to them, just bring lots of goodwill. But at the same time, be equanimous about the fact that not everybody’s going to be pleased by the fact that you’ve decided to take on that problem of suffering. They’d much rather that you take on their problems or the problems that they see in the world around them. They don’t see your problem, which is why nobody else can solve your problem. That’s your responsibility, and you don’t want to abandon that responsibility. That’s the part of you that stays de-domesticated. So have a strong sense of where that boundary lies. I know there’s so much said about how as you develop the practice you get more and more a sense of interconnectedness. And there is a sense of compassion that grows because you realize that everybody else is experiencing the same problem you are. They have their own inner demons. They have their own inner sufferings. And the more you get in touch with your own sufferings inside, the more you’re compassionate for others. But at the same time, there’s a very strong sense of separateness. After all, this is pacchattam vedita bho viññuhi, something to be known by the observant for themselves, by themselves. If we were all one, then when the Buddha gained awakening, everybody would have been awakened. And if we still insist that we’re all one, then nobody’s going to get awakened but follow the Buddha himself. The Buddha himself was not awakened. There’s an aspect of us that’s separate, and it’s a separate problem that we each have to deal with. And as I said, nobody else can do this for you. And if you don’t do it now, when are you going to do it? So whether you’re at the monastery or at home, the problem is right now. This problem is still breathing down your neck. And you have to have a strong sense that you want to maintain that priority. After all, the Buddha made it his priority. All the things he could have taught after his awakening, all the many things he had seen and learned, come to know. He said it was like the leaves in a forest. Just that handful of leaves, i.e., the four noble truths. He saw that the problem, the suffering that we cause ourselves, is the number one problem. And when that problem is solved, everything is solved. But it’s an inner problem. And the work to get beyond suffering is inner work. Now, the fact that you’re focusing in here, as I said, will have an impact on others. You have to understand that and have some compassion for them. Treat them with lots of goodwill. But be firm in your sense of where your real work lies. You’re a new you in an old world. You’re a new you in other people’s worlds. But don’t let your world be circumscribed by theirs. Your world is a world in which there has been a Buddha. He’s taught the Dhamma. The Dhamma is still alive. The problem of suffering can be solved. So maintain that sense of the world, regardless of what comes in through the media, what comes in through the pressure from the people around you. This is why they say that when we take refuge in the Buddha, in the Dhamma, in the Sangha, the word sarana, which we translate as refuge, also means something you hold in mind, something you remember. Always remember the Buddha. And John Suat, after he’d had his accident, found that his ability to give Dhamma talks was pretty severely curtailed. He wanted to focus on the issues that he saw of most importance. And that was it. The only true safety in life, the only true refuge in life, is the triple gem. Always keep that in mind. Have the fact of the Buddha’s awakening define the world in which you live, regardless of how other people want to define you in their worlds. You get to define your world. And this is a world in which there’s hope. So try to stay, indeed, domesticated. You may not look that way outside, but maintain that attitude inside. And that’s what I’ll see you through.

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