For Your Purposes

August 10, 2023

Something that primitive societies had that we’ve lost in modern society. And that’s a rite of passage from when you go from childhood to an adult. You get time out from society. They encourage you to go off on your own, and it’s time for you to reflect on what’s really important in your life, where you want your life to go. Of course, each society has its ways of interpreting, say, whatever visions you might have or realizations you might have. But at least they give you some time away, where you’re not constantly being indoctrinated. In modern society, they start getting you when you’re a child, and they don’t let up, and they’re not encouraged to take time off. And to look at things from your own perspective, what’s really important for you. In Thailand, they still have this temporary ordination. It’s time for young men, and occasionally for young women, to take time off from their work and their school and their family, to go and ordain and learn some of the collected wisdom of people who’ve dropped out of society, essentially. And so your perspective gives them on their lives. Some of them end up staying as monks, even though they intended to ordain only for a couple months. Others go back, and some totally forget what they learned. But some keep a foot in both worlds. And those are the ones who always seem to me to be the most sane of the laypeople. They can step in and out of their lay roles, step in and out of the world, outside, and not allow their minds to be totally consumed by the values of society. So when you take time to come to a monastery like this, you can regard it as something as a rite of passage, regardless of what your age is. It’s your time to step out and look at yourself, reflect on what the Dhamma has to teach you, the collected wisdom of the major dropout in world history, the Buddha, and all that’s built up over the centuries. And see if it has any insights for you, with the understanding that the Buddha left this knowledge behind, not because he was trying to exert power over anybody. When you look at the media today, you read stories about how the intelligence agencies have taken over a lot of the major websites, magazines, newspapers, and feed us their way of looking at things for their purposes. He was offering you some knowledge for your purposes. Because you look at your life, you look at your actions, and when you act, when you speak, when you do a physical action, when you think, it’s almost always for the purpose of happiness, and yet it’s often misguided. He’s offering you some guidance. So this is how you can act, speak, think, and what he said, “Don’t lead the society into suffering, but actually lead away from suffering.” And you can decide whether that’s what you want. He doesn’t impose his views on you, but he does have some very clear teachings on what is skillful and what’s not skillful, what should be done and what should not be done. But they’re not imposed. In the Sutta we chant sometimes, the Karana-Niyameta Sutta, it starts, “This is what should be done by one who aims at a state of peace.” Notice that the “should” is conditional. If you aim at a state of peace, this is what you should do. So the Buddha is very clear about what should and shouldn’t be done if you want to find peace, if you want to find well-being inside. But that’s your choice. But the important thing is you have some time off to watch your own mind and gain some skills in how to watch your own mind. Because the mind does have this tendency to create worlds for itself. And what’s inside a particular thought world, its sense of what’s right and what’s wrong, it’s really colored by that world. So you have to be careful about how you create worlds inside. Otherwise it’s like floating off in a bubble. Sometimes the bubble is red, sometimes it’s green, sometimes it’s blue. And if you’re in the bubble, everything is red, green, or blue, regardless of what it actually is outside. So one of the important skills here is learning how to step out of your thought worlds. This is why the Buddhist instructions for mindfulness are being with the body and in and of itself. In other words, your sensation of the body right here, right now. Putting aside greed and distress with reference to the world, any thought world. Just know how to let go. These are all qualities of mindfulness, ardency, alertness. Mindfulness is keeping your frame of reference in mind, which right now is the breath. Alertness is to watch what you’re actually doing as you try to stay with the breath. Ardency is trying to do this really well, putting your heart into it. If you find yourself slipping off, you come back. If you slip off again, you come back again. When you’re with the breath, you’re trying to make it as comfortable as you can. You’re not just here to accept whatever comes up. You are directing it in a way that creates a state of mind where you can observe yourself really clearly. That requires a sense of well-being, because you’re not going to stay in the present moment if it doesn’t feel good being here. So there’s a sense of ease, a sense of well-being, that you’re trying to create. There’s a purpose in that. It’s to allow you to see things clearly. Then the bodhi gives you questions to ask once the mind does settle down. You look to see what the mind is doing right now that’s creating any stress. There’ll be the stress of things that pull you away from the concentration, and there’ll be a little bit of stress in the concentration itself. But for the time being, you engage in the concentration. You focus on the things that would pull you away and see how they are inconstant, stressful, not self. In other words, you can’t really rely on them. Trying to find happiness in them is very stressful. So why claim them as yours? What we’re doing is putting the mind in a position where it can observe itself clearly, with objectivity, and without a lot of hunger. Because when you’re hungry for pleasure, you’re going to go for things that may not be in your best interest, and you end up not really seeing things clearly. It’s like having scientists work on a project where they’re feeding bananas to bamboos. But the scientists are hungry, so they end up eating all the bananas. They’re never going to really find out about the baboons, aside from seeing how baboons are like when they’re hungry. So you make sure the scientists are well endowed with money and all the material goods so they can look objectively at the baboons. And then they can ask questions. So the Buddha’s questions, as I said, are, “Where are you causing stress? What can you do to stop doing that? Why is there stress? What is the stress?” He points you to the fact that wherever there’s stress that’s clinging, you’re feeding on something. And you’re feeding because you’re hungry. So where is the hunger coming from? What can you do to put an end to that hunger? You look for the things that the mind tends to go for. You try to see what’s the allure of those things. When they arise, how do they arise? When they pass away, how do they pass away? When they come back again, why do you go for them? Can you see their drawbacks? When you see that the drawbacks outweigh the allure, that’s when you can gain some escape from them. So the purpose of this rite of passage here is to free you from all the misunderstandings and unskillful habits you have in your mind. And it’s to train you in the qualities of mind that you need in order to observe yourself well. So even if you don’t agree with the Buddha’s analysis, still you’ve learned a lot of useful qualities for observing yourself. Because if you can’t observe yourself, you end up doing a lot of unskillful things. And you have no possibility of undoing those bad habits if you’re more mindful, alert, ardent, more concentrated, more discerning. You’re in a much better position to judge what’s going on in your mind. Whether it’s something you want to follow through with or something you want to drop. These are questions and these are ways of looking at things that are for your own purpose. Society outside has other purposes for us. And the only way you can maintain your sanity is to be able to have your own set of very clear purposes, what you want out of life. So you can step out of the rules that society wants to impose on you and maintain at least some independence inside. And you need to do that right now. The Buddha gives you a frame of reference. Your sense of the body as you feel it right here, right now, as you’re breathing in, breathing out. And a set of questions to ask yourself so you can develop the qualities of mind you need, so you can really know yourself well.

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