

# *Rites of Passage*

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Many ancient tribes marked the line between childhood and adulthood by sending the person off into the wilds to be alone. Some of the tribes called it a vision quest. The person could be alone for days to see what kind of vision would come up from within the mind, from within the heart, independent of the training he or she had received as a child. That was supposed to mark the person's entry into adulthood, to give a sense of what the adulthood would be all about. From that point on, the person would drop whatever childish things didn't fit in with the vision, and embark on adult life with a clear sense of direction.

Even in modern cultures, that's what the line between childhood and adulthood is: the point where we step back from the training we've received, step back from all the influences received as children, and find a place within where we can decide what our own ideas are, what our own sense of our direction in life is. It's a shame, though, that in modern culture the line is a fuzzy line. A fractured line. We don't have a formally recognized time of quietude to make the break in a clear and socially recognized way.

But that's what we do when we meditate: We step back from all the influences inside our mind—ideas that this is good, that's bad, you should do this, you shouldn't do that. You have to stop and really take stock of these things, find a place within where you can be really, really quiet, and then look clearly at these voices to see what they are. Instead of identifying with them, you watch them. You watch to see what they're coming from, where they're going, seeing them as part of a causal process. What kind of mind state do they come from, what kind of mind state do they encourage? Are those the kind of mind states you want to identify with?

This is essentially how the Buddha's teaching on not-self works: seeing the things that have control over our lives, that have power over our minds, and in the course of the meditation stepping back a bit from them, gaining enough independence from them that we can look at them simply as events and see if we really want to identify with them. As the Buddha pointed out in one of his discourses, you can't really look at these things as long as you're identifying with them. You've got to step back. This applies not only to ideas in the mind, but also to the body, this form we're sitting with here. The same principle also applies to

feelings of pleasure and pain as they come and go, to perceptions, to thought-constructs, even to our consciousness of things. Meditation gives us a place where we can step back from these things and watch them to see the influence they have over the mind, to decide whether that's an influence we'd like them to continue having.

So as we practice it's important to create this space where you can step back. The quietude and seclusion are important.

There are actually three kinds of seclusion. The first is physical seclusion, getting away from people. It's hard to get the random voices out of your mind when people are constantly feeding them into your ears. It's hard to focus on your own mind when you're running up against the contents of other people's minds all the time. You've got to get away. You've got to get out—which is what we're doing as we come here: finding a place of seclusion. We're not totally cut off from other people here, but at least we're in a place where the values of the practice are honored, where the bottom line is not the profit margin, where the bottom line is how you're training your mind—a place where we try to give space to one another, to show respect for on another's need for quietude, for concentration.

But there's still the problem that when we come out to a place like this, we don't leave our thoughts behind. Even though we may be surrounded by physical seclusion, there's still a lot of companionship in our minds as we go and sit out under the trees. Thoughts of the past come along; thoughts of the future come along. As long as we're tied up in these thoughts we're not really alone.

This is why we take the body in and of itself sitting here as our frame of reference. That's a way of developing mental seclusion, dropping unskillful mental states. We drop thoughts of past and future, and try to be right here with the body in the present moment. We drop thoughts of how much we'd like to see this thing or hear that thing or taste or touch the things we like. We're willing to let the mind be here secluded from all that.

Our culture is a funny one: It tends to distrust people who try to get away from sensual attachments—partly because the economy would collapse and partly because of the old Judaic-Protestant prejudice that people who try to abandon sensual attachments must be weird. The truth of the matter, though, is that there's a part of the mind that flourishes when it's not burdened with sensual attachments. When it's really secluded from sensual attachments, it blossoms. And part of the practice is learning to appreciate that very still center of the mind, the sense of wellbeing that comes from dropping all those attachments. Even though we're not yet letting go of them for good, we at least drop them for the time being.

Simply be with the sense of the breath coming in, going out, allowing it to fill the body. Allow it to find its own right rhythm. You nudge it a little bit here, nudge it a little bit there to make it feel good, and this makes it easier to get pulled into the present moment rather than into the future or the past. You develop a greater and greater sense of mental seclusion by just dropping those distractions, dropping all those voices and attitudes that pull you back or pull you forward. You allow yourself simply to be right here, absorbed in working with the breath, settled down with a sense of wellbeing, settled down with a sense of familiarity.

It takes time, of course, to get familiar with the present moment, because for the most part we're just running through. We're like a little kid who runs home—"Hi, Mom!"—grabs a sandwich and runs out again: That's "dinner." We have a fragmentary sense of the present moment as we rush through from the past to the future and from the future to the past.

The only time we really take notice of the present is when pain transfixes us here. Well, during the meditation, get a sense of pleasure and allow *that* to transfix you in here instead. This is what creates true mental seclusion. The past and the future drop away and all you've got left is the body sitting here breathing—right here, right now. You've got mindfulness reminding you to stay right here, alertness keeping watch over what's going on, and discernment absorbed in trying to understand it.

That's a much deeper and more satisfying sense of seclusion. Ultimately, it forms the basis for the third one, seclusion from craving. As the Buddha said, craving is our constant companion even when the mind is in the present. To cut through this craving, we have to call into question the things we've been identifying with. In his second sermon, the Buddha pointed out to the monks that if you let go of your attachment to form, feeling, perception, thought-constructs, and consciousness, what happens? In their case they attained Awakening. In other words, they became secluded even from their sense of who they were in the present moment—because our sense of who we are is composed of those five kinds of things, coupled with craving and clinging. Form: the form of the body. Feelings: You may identify with a pain, saying "This is my pain," or you may identify with a more metaphysical feeling, a larger sense of light or wellbeing, a sense of bliss. You may think that that's who your true self is. Then there's the label that says, "This is my self." That's a perception. Thought-constructs: You identify with your thinking, or the Thinker. Or you identify with the moment-to-moment consciousness of things.

As long as you identify with these things, you crave them. You're still not secluded from them. You still have companions. But when you create that still center inside and allow yourself simply to watch these things, you step back and

realize that you don't have to identify with them. Self-identification is an act. Our sense of who we are is something we create. As you step back from these things and allow that activity of repeatedly creating your sense of who you are to fall away, see what happens. Then learn to drop your sense of identification even with the still center inside. See what happens then. The Buddha says that an even greater sense of freedom comes. See if he's right.

When you taste that freedom, you're no longer a slave to these things. Instead, they become your tools. You can use them for good purposes.

So this process of gaining seclusion is a process not only of growing up but also of gaining freedom. We look at all the influences rushing around in our minds and we come to realize that we have the ability to choose which ideas are useful and which ones are not, which of the phenomena we're aware of are useful and which ones are not. We don't have to be driven around by them all the time.

For most of us, life is a story of just that: being driven around. And this involves a lot of conflict because there are so many conflicting voices in our minds. This or that person gets under our skin and all of a sudden we start identifying with their particular way of thinking; another way of thinking gets under our skin and that gets incorporated too. We never really have a chance to sit back and sort things through, to see where they're harmonious and where they're not.

A group of people called the Kalamas once asked the Buddha, "How do we know which of the many different teachings coming our way are true? One teacher comes and says  $x$  is true. Another person comes and says, 'Any person who says  $x$  is true is crazy.  $Y$  is true.' How do we know who's telling the truth?"

"Well," the Buddha said, "You can't go by outside teachers, you can't go by old texts, you can't go by received wisdom." That's the part of the teaching everybody remembers. But at the same time he also said that you can't go by your own sense of what you like, what seems logical, or what fits in with your preconceived notions. That doesn't give you any proof of truth, either. You have to look and see: When you do something, what are the results?

If you act on particular mental qualities, which ones give happy results, harmless results, and which ones give harmful results? In other words you have to look at cause and effect. This principle applies not only to outside teachers but also to the voices we tend to identify with in our minds.

You have to step back and see what happens if you follow a particular way of perceiving things. Say you've got a pain in your leg and you perceive or label the pain in a certain way: What happens? Is that a skillful way of labeling the pain? Could you label it some other way? Can you label it simply as "sensation" instead? Can you step back and simply watch the pain and the perception as a

series of events, part of a causal chain? What kind of freedom comes when you do that? This is how the teaching that the Buddha gave to the Kalamas applies not only outside but inside as well.

Even if we don't have the seclusion of vision quests any more in our culture, we do have a chance to find an even more thorough seclusion when we meditate. Meditation trains us in the ability to look and see what's in our minds, to decide what we really want to identify with and what we don't. So, it's through the meditation that we learn to grow up, we learn to gain independence, we learn to stand on our own two feet.

Ajaan Lee once made the comment that people who are still attached—still a slave to their thoughts, their bodies, and their feelings—are still children even if they're 80 years old. On the other hand, if you're the wise person who's no longer a slave to these things, then even if you're only seven years old, you're already an adult.

So think of the meditation as giving you a chance to step back and draw the line between childhood and adulthood. Draw the line, make it sharp, and then step over into adulthood by giving yourself that space, that sense of seclusion inside where you have time to sit down and watch things for what they really *do*. When you realize that you have the freedom to choose—and you take advantage of that freedom—that's when you've grown into an adult.