

Growing Up Inside

January 11, 2014

Societies in the past used to have rites of passage to mark major transitions in your life—times when you could be alone and think about what the change in your life would mean. People used to grow up quite a bit during those periods. It could be the rite of passage from adolescence to adulthood, or mourning after a death. In Thailand, when a woman would give birth to a child, she'd have a whole month off. Her friends in the village would come and would build a fire next to her to keep her warm, give her massages, take care of the baby, so she could have time to rest and be herself again.

A lot of that is missing in modern society. So it's good that we can at least have some time out here at the monastery, because these rites of passage aren't just time for yourself. They're structured. Life here at the monastery has some structure, and you've got a task: working with the meditation, to give you some grounding. Otherwise you can spend two weeks alone and go crazy pretty easily. But the task here gives you some focus: how to get the mind to settle down, and step back from its thoughts.

This is an important part of growing more mature. You see certain identities that you've been taking on, and you step back from them, and say No. A while back I was reading a book by a psychologist who had focused on issues of adult development, not just child development, but how adults grow and mature as they grow older, and to what extent they can genuinely grow up. And he found that one of the most important things in the lives of people who do make a big change at adulthood, or after adulthood starts, is having someone to encourage them. This is the role of the teacher here. Yet it's not just encouragement, but it's also meant to provide another set of eyes.

In my own case with Ajaan Fuang, that first year I was there studying with him, I was hashing through a lot of my earlier life. Issues would come up, and I suddenly found myself reliving problems not only from college, but sometimes from high school and even grade school. Sometimes I'd talk to him about it, and even though he didn't always say anything in response, just being able to talk about the life of an American in an American grade school to a Thai monk gave me some perspective. Looking at my life through a very different set of eyes helped give me some distance from a lot of these issues.

So this is the kind of environment we're trying to create here— one where you have some time alone, but there's structure to it, and there's also another pair of

eyes to give you some distance. That quality of distance goes with a sense of humor, so you can learn to laugh good-naturedly at your old ways of thinking. That's the best way to outgrow them: to see that they may have made sense back in your old way of life, but given your new framework, given your new understanding of things, the shift of power in your own mind, you can see how ridiculous it would be to hold onto them any longer.

This is a lot of what insight is about: seeing your old foolishness, seeing you have been a fool, which is different from seeing that you are a fool. To believe that you *are* a fool leaves you with nothing to work with at all. But seeing that you *have* been a fool and that now you recognize your foolishness, that's how you grow. And this is why the task of the meditation is such an important backdrop for all this, because it gives you a sense of well-being inside, so that the laughter can be good-natured laughter.

There's an old saying from the Greeks, that the gods laugh at the foibles of human beings because the gods are one step removed from the human beings. They have distance and perspective. In the same way, you want to get to be one step removed from your old ways of thinking, your old ways of running your mind. So think of this opportunity as you're here to meditate as a rite of passage, and see what you can do to grow. No matter what your age may be, there's a lot of growing up we can all do. It's when you take responsibility for your actions, and realize that some of your ways of thinking and acting and speaking are going to have to change: That's how you grow.

This boils down to two main qualities. One is heedfulness, seeing that your actions really do make a difference, and that you've been careless in the past, but you've got to hold yourself to a higher standard now. Think of that phrase in the chant just now: "The world offers no shelter." There comes a point in everyone's life when you realize that the shelter of your parents is no longer there to protect you. It may happen while they're still alive, and you've got to stand on your own two feet. That's a lesson in heedfulness.

The other quality is restraint, realizing there are a lot of things that you might like to do, and that the children in your mental committee might like to do, but if you give in to those impulses, it's going to be bad; you're going to suffer. This is another reason why we have the meditation to fall back on. The sense of ease and well-being that you can create with the breath, the sense of feeling balanced and stable, means that the fact that you're giving up certain old ways of thinking and acting and speaking, doesn't make you feel deprived. You're gaining something better: an opportunity to get the mind really to settle down. And the fact that

you're getting the mind to be still makes it more sensitive to your actions and their results.

All these factors work together to make this a growing up experience. So even though we don't have rites of passage, we at least have time here at the monastery for ourselves, structured time for ourselves, where we can think things over, look at our lives, decide what's really of value, and then look within ourselves to see where we have the resources to bring that value about.