

The child we still are

We all grow old, but many of us still need to grow up. We may be in our thirties, with double degrees, and various social awards and achievements, even earning a comfortable income, but our emotional age may be only that of a 7-year-old. Or, we could be a monastic well senior in years, famous and popular, well supported with offerings and funds, and deeply learned¹ -- but our emotional age is only that of a 7-year-old lay person.²

So what's wrong with being a 7-year-old child in a man's body? The short answer is that we may have built up a career and our externals, but a lot of work is still needed to build our inner character or higher self. When we have been raised in a well off family, we may have never really known what it means not to have something because we can buy almost anything we need or want. We easily choose the kinds of friends we want or reject them because we have the means. The friends we have tend to agree with us at least outwardly, and are always there for us at our beck and call.

Then, we get the best schooling that money can buy. This further boosts our self-confidence that we are intelligent and of an elite class. We go on to find a great job, or move to new jobs because we can do so, or for a new ambience, or simply to "upgrade" ourself. Being young and healthy, we might even consider ourself good-looking, and freely sow wild oats, and be admired so by our peers. In short, we feel we deserve the best things in life, and have things just the way we want them.

Indeed, for years, our life seems to be roses all along. We have a good job, a secure roof for our living and loving pleasures, and a willing partner or partners. Life seems always good, and things always seem to go our way. We simply get what we want, and have what we love or lust.

Our life may seem to be roses, but roses have thorns. The thorns have been pricking and bursting our little bubbles of self-confidence, but at first they don't really matter, because we could always get new balloons. Disagreements and quarrels occur, but are quickly forgotten, or rather we are distracted by pleasantries or pleasurable diversions. So life seems to move on, as it were.

Then, suddenly our biggest bubble bursts, and all the other bubbles seem to float away. Someone who loves us (so we thought) leaves us, or some past lurking pain raises its ugly head and harasses us (again). At first, we think or hope it will all pass. But the reality is that it has only been insidiously building up. It has reached bursting point. We have blown our life's balloon too hard.

Suddenly, we realize that we have lost those things that comforted and propped us, that have kept the self bubble inflated. Suddenly, we are stripped of all brandings and status symbols. We find ourselves naked and exposed, or caught in the face of some oncoming blinding head-lights, unable to see anything at all. We fall into panic attacks or is drowned in some deep anxiety. We even think of ending it all.

Fortunately, most of us know the nature of such situations and allow ourselves to be counselled and therapied. After all, we can afford them, whatever they cost. Then, things seem to correct themselves again. We could get back to our old routines, so it seems.

But are we really healed and healthy? We may be physically healthy again, even feel happy or "normal" again, but we still have yet to remove the roots of our emotional problems. In

¹ See **the (Ahita) Thera Sutta** (A 5.88), [SD 40a.16](#).

² See Reflection, "Right moves," R395, 2015.

Buddhist meditation therapy, we try to identify the roots of the problems, and work to remove, or at least weaken, them.

These roots are, of course, our past. They are the lingering but halting childishness that cling on to us like an old tattoo. Our expensive and fashionable clothes may hide them, but they are still there. These are tattoos with lives of their own, tenaciously working and tugging at the lines of our lives. We think we are in charge, but the “we” are those living tattoos of our past.

Self-healing can be difficult, and we are often deluded by our forgetfulness and false memories. We are like an ox-drawn cart whose wheels are caught in the rut of the carriage-road, going only where there are road and rut. We are stuck in our old ways. We even pride in the fact that we “can’t change,” that we’re “like that.” Yes, indeed, we are, but at great costs, which keep rising, but we do not know this,

We may have suffered, and it is trying to tell us that we are not really the person we thought we were. For a while, we were willing to learn, but there are still greater distractions. So we stop learning (again), and quickly forget the lesson. Now, we simply shy away from whatever we see as “causes” of our pains. We shut ourself away in some old and familiar comfort zone or bubble life of the safe and secluded past. We have simply regressed: gone back to our childish days. We do not even know this because we have hooded our heads with a virtual-reality helmet.

To be a “child” here means that we simply do not know how to love. We expect to be loved, but we do not even know what love is. Perhaps, we could blame our parents or those who should have loved us or taught us how to love. Blaming, as we know, only worsens the problem, not solve it.

We cannot *have* love because we do not *give* it to others. We think that love is something we “have” rather than what we “are.” We only have love when we show it: then we *are* loving and are, in turn, loved. A bell is only heard when we ring it. Even a flute of gold or silver makes no music, until we breathe living loving air into it with some skill. Loving is a skill to be learned and practised, too.

The more fortunate or wiser amongst us, then, might “retreat” into some monastic centres to spend some quiet healing time with happy monastics and congenial lay colleagues in a nurturing ambience. Or, we look for a spiritual mentor to learn how to heal and help ourself through spiritual friendship. This is a slow, often challenging process, but with time and patience, mentoring always works if the mentee allows it.

The mentor holds a Dharma mirror before us to help us see our true self. But the mirror seems clouded up at first: we get only a dim dark reflection of ourself, vaguely showing what we perceive ourself to be. After all, this mirror is our own mind that the mentor is teaching us to link up with our heart.

A heartless mind cannot see itself. So we have to close those unseeing eyes to feel our heart. This is perhaps the mentor’s toughest task: How do we see something we seem to lack? For that reason, a good mentor always insists, gently, of course, that we cultivate, in some way, lovingkindness.

The irony is that we have been so hurt that any hint of love is like rubbing salt into the mind’s wound. So the mentor skillfully guides and helps us see the good that lies hidden below all our pains and childishness. The mentor hears our garish music, songs sung out of tune with misfitting lyrics. He teaches us to harmonize our life’s music, and teaches us new lyrics so we hear our life’s old sweet songs with more spirit.

A mentor, then, has to take on the roles of parent, teacher, counsellor and friend. He begins by accepting the mentee just as he is. The mentee, on his part, has to work at being a child (again), a student, a counselee, and a friend. Only when he honestly sees the child that he really is, that he begins to father the man.³ Only when the mentee truly befriends the mentor does he learn to love again. For, only in giving love, do we *have* it, that we *are* loving.⁴

The greatest love is selfless love. It does not discern any “I” or “you,” but only “we.” It is a light that shines everywhere, not just a single “I-you” direction. It is a joyful love; indeed, a joy that sees good in ourself and in others. As we are, so are they; as they are, so are we. In this clear joyful light, we mature into healthy adults. Then, we have really known how to love and live.

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³ See William Wordsworth’s poem, “My heart leaps up when I behold,”
<http://www.bartleby.com/145/ww194.html>

⁴ This may appear to be transference, but it is really emulation, where there is conscious effort on both sides to learn from the relationship or spiritual friendship.