Seclusion

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The mind begins to settle down. It gives rise to a sense of ease. The ease is said to come from seclusion. So what kind of seclusion are they talking about? Well, to begin with, there is physical seclusion. You’re not talking to anybody else. You’re not interacting with other people. And all the burdens of interacting with other people are lifted for the time being. It’s even better when you’re out under the trees, all by yourself. You don’t have all the issues. You have all the issues of human beings, aside from you. You’re the one human being who’s left. But dealing with one human being is a lot easier than dealing with two. And that right there lifts a lot of burden off the mind. And it’s good to appreciate that. There’s another passage in the text where they talk about how, once you settle down, you remind yourself that here you are out in the middle of a very quiet countryside. We’re not quite wilderness here, but it’s quiet. And all the issues that would come up if you were back home, if they come up in your mind, aren’t really relating to anything around you. The issues coming in from outside are stripped away, or at least held at bay. That’s physical seclusion. But it’s more than that. There’s also mental seclusion. That operates on many layers. To begin with, try to put aside all the hindrances—sensual desire, ill-will, torpor and lethargy, restlessness and anxiety, and uncertainty. When you can put those at bay, that’s spiritual seclusion. That’s another level of seclusion called mental seclusion. So you stay with the breath, trying to develop a frame of reference right here. As I said, once you’ve got the frame of reference in the words of the text, you put aside greed and distress with reference to the world. In other words, your frame of reference is just the body sitting right here, right now, breathing in, breathing out. As for who you are and what your name is and all those other things, put those aside. Those are issues of the world. You can just be awareness, focused on the body in and of itself. Whether the body is sick or healthy, young or old, that doesn’t matter right now. Just what does it feel like to be in the body right now? Focus on that. Be mindful, be alert, and develop a quality called ardency, that you really stick with it. There’s work to do. As you meditate, we’re working in a sense of ease, in a sense of seclusion, but it’s still work. The work here is being persistent. It’s not getting careless. As you’ll notice, as soon as you start getting careless, all the issues of the world start flooding in and it’s no longer secluded. You may be sitting here alone, but it’s like you’ve got a room full of people in your head, all jabbering away. So do what you can to maintain that frame of reference. Every time you find yourself slipping off, just come back to this body, sitting right here. The sense of the breathing asks up, “Where are your hands? Where are your feet? Where are the different parts of the body?” Locate yourself here. Try to fully inhabit the present moment. The more fully you can inhabit your body, that sense of being aware of it all at once, the harder it is to slip off. Keep the breath comfortable. The more comfortable it is, the easier it is to stay with the breath. If you find yourself inadvertently squeezing or pulling or pushing to get the breath in, to get the breath out, you can just let that stop. The breath is going to come in and out without you having to do anything to enhance it. As you stop pushing and pulling it, there comes a sense of fullness in the body. That’s the beginning of rapture or refreshment. The Pali word bhitti can mean all kinds of things, but refreshment and rapture are the closest to what we’re working on here. Allow that sense of ease, that sense of fullness, to stay. One of the most important lessons in doing concentration practice is, don’t ask yourself, “Well, what’s next?” Learn to stay with what you’ve got and let the good things grow. There is no factor in the path called right anticipation, anticipating where it’s going to go. There’s right mindfulness, right concentration, right effort. Those are the factors you’re working on. Anything that feels good, that feels right, try to develop that. Nurture that. And when you nurture it, it’ll provide you with food. The traditional analogy for right concentration is stores of food. They give you the nourishment you need on the path. If you’re in too great a hurry to do your discernment work, trying to figure this out, figure that out, after all, you find you run out of food. Things get dry. Things get scattered. So knowing that the mind has to depend on a source of food, make concentration your food. Make the sense of ease, the sense of fullness that you can gain from concentration, make that your food. And don’t regard concentration as a waste of time. That chant we had just now talks about having respect for all three parts of the training, but then it repeats, “Having respect for concentration,” just for emphasis. How many times have you heard, “Don’t let yourself get attached to the concentration, don’t let yourself get involved in it. If states of ease or concentration arise, just note them and let them go.” Well, the Buddha never said that. Instead, if these states arise, nourish them, develop them, bring them to consummation. That means giving them time. Just like growing food. Any kind of plant requires time. And as you get more and more skilled at the concentration, you learn how to tap into that source of food at a moment’s notice. In the beginning, it takes time. So if you catch the mind leaning into the future, wondering what’s next, or leaning back into the past, remember, that’s a form of non-seclusion as well. The Buddha once said that the mind is without anticipations of the future, without longing after the past. It’s freed of a lot of its most bothersome companions. Just sit right here in the present. The more precisely present you can be, the more the present moment will have a chance to flourish, to grow. The sense of fullness that you can have in the present doesn’t get squeezed out as you try to anticipate what’s going to happen next. In this way, that sense of ease that can come from seclusion really has a chance to grow. And when it can grow, it can provide you with food, the nourishment you’re going to need to gain insight, to gain understanding. Because that work takes energy. Many times, the insights you’re going to be working on are things you’re not going to like. After all, it’s seeing your own ignorance. But it’s a lot easier to look into things you don’t like when you’re well fed. And when you know that you have your place of seclusion inside. Because this is ultimately the seclusion that really matters. You can’t stay here at the monastery forever. But when you can develop that skill of having a frame of reference, just the body in and of itself, then you can be secluded mentally wherever you are. And you can create the space, you can create the room you need in the present moment to develop this sense of fullness wherever you are. But for the moment, don’t think about where you’re going to have to go. Just be where you are right now and settle back into right now. And give the mind’s potential for concentration the respect it deserves.

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