Two Kinds of Seclusion

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Primitive cultures, they have a custom whereby when a person becomes old enough and the child is on the verge of becoming an adult, they send the child out into the wilderness to have a period of seclusion. Being alone by yourself, you’d gain a sense of your own identity, of who you were. Sometimes you’d be sent out to find a vision that would give you a vision of what your role in life would be. But however it was understood, the whole purpose of this was to give the child an opportunity to have some time alone. To get a sense of him or herself, an adult identity. And also a kind of strength. The strength that comes from being alone. Getting away from other people’s influences and getting away also from other people’s help. When you’re out alone like that, you have to discover your own resources. And that gives you a sense of inner strength. That you can then carry through with the rest of your life. Now presently, we’re missing that custom in our culture. Which is why so many adults seem so childish. They’ve never really had time to get away from not only the influence of their family, but also the influence of the media. Just really get outside and ask what’s really important in life. You get a taste of it sometimes when you go into the wilderness. But a lot of people will take the same old attitudes into the wilderness and never really question them. It’s for this reason that the Buddha recommended seclusion as an important part of the practice. Get away for a while. He would recommend that the monks go out into the wilderness, even the nuns. Back in those days, they were concerned that the nuns would get raped in the forest. Nuns were told to go out once a year as a group. Just to get away from their day-to-day life. And get a perspective, an outside perspective on their lives. So they could bring that outside perspective back in with them. So even though our culture doesn’t provide for this kind of seclusion, we should provide it for ourselves. Get some time away. The Buddha talks about two kinds of seclusion. The first is physical seclusion. Just getting away from other people. Spending time by yourself. And you’ll notice that as you’re sitting here, say, under the trees by yourself, you’re not alone. You’ve got all these voices. Voices in your mind telling you to do this, telling you to do that. This is good, that’s bad. And one of the things the breath does is give you a place to stay in the present moment where you’re not pushed around by these voices. You can watch them coming and going. And over time, you can begin to separate yourself from them. Recognize whose voice is that? What’s the intention behind the voice? Do you really believe that voice? This is a process that enables you to gain a sense of your own identity, your own set of values, what’s important in life, what you really want out of life. But the breath provides more than that, because the other part of seclusion is mental seclusion. The idea here is that you cut yourself away from the voices that pull you in. You go into the past or the future and be right here where you can fully inhabit the present moment. That kind of seclusion you can carry back with you. But what it requires is this ability to fully inhabit the present. And there’s a visceral sense to this. When you breathe, aware of the whole body. And you inhabit the whole body, because otherwise, if you look at your energy body, if you could take a picture of it, sometimes you’d find these huge gaping holes where you’re not really inhabiting certain parts of your body. And you begin to find that the energy of other people starts inhabiting those places that you’re not inhabiting. It’s almost like you’re possessed or partially possessed by them. In some cases, people are total daydreamers, not inhabiting their bodies at all. You hear stories in Thailand. People are actually possessed by spirits for a while because they’re not inhabiting their bodies. Somebody else comes in. And whether you understand that in a literal or figurative way, still you’ll notice that if you can carry this awareness of the whole body breathing, whole body breathing in and breathing out, the energy field of your body being full. You carry that into your interactions with other people. You notice that it changes the balance of power. Instead of you’re sucking in their energy or taking in their energy, you can sense their energy, but you don’t have to inhale it. You don’t have to bring it in. And this gives you a sense of your own self in the midst of other people. This is important. A lot of people find that they get overwhelmed by the desires or the ideas or just the energy of the people around them and have trouble establishing their own sense of space. But if you can learn how to fully inhabit your body, you have your own space. The Buddha calls this mindfulness immersed in the body. The body is saturated with a sense of ease and well-being. It comes from breathing well, being firmly centered inside. So this is a skill you want to develop. Once you’ve been able to locate the sensation of the breath and stay with it for a while, start exploring how the process of breathing feels in other parts of the body. Sometimes you’ll find that certain parts are missing, like a shoulder or parts of your back, parts of your torso. Sometimes your shoulder is missing. If you can locate where is your neck right now? Where is your forearm right now? And try to see where the two are connected. Gradually work through whatever blockage is keeping you from fully inhabiting that part of the body. As you can trace the connections, you begin to inhabit that part of the body. You may often find that it’s been starved for energy. At first, it may not seem a very pleasant place to be, but as you allow it to participate in the breathing, let it connect up with the rest of the body, you find it easier to inhabit the body fully. As you fully inhabit the body, there’s a shield of energy or a cocoon of energy that develops around us. And as you carry that cocoon of energy into your daily interactions with other people, you find it easier to fend off, say, unhealthy energy coming from them or oppressive energy coming from them. You’ve got your own space, you fill your own space. This way you can maintain a sense of mental seclusion even though physically you’re back involved with other people. And you’re talking with them and interacting with them. It’s not that you’re insensitive to what’s going on. In fact, you can become more sensitive to what’s going on because you’re not taking in their stuff. You can watch it going past. This way you can carry the benefits of your physical seclusion into your daily life with other people. This is one of the important skills in the practice. Because what we’re developing here is our ability to hold on to the customs of, say, America or whatever country we’re in. The Buddha talked about the customs of the noble ones, in which the highest value is placed on developing skillful qualities in the mind and abandoning unskillful ones. That’s the bottom line in the customs of the noble ones. Now the customs of other countries, they have other values which may or may not be healthy for the mind. Oftentimes they’re not. They tend to encourage our defilements or to make us do unrealistic demands on us. The customs of the noble ones are concerned primarily with this issue of where is your true happiness? What can you do to find true happiness? Because they posit a true happiness that doesn’t harm anyone at all. It doesn’t harm you. It doesn’t harm other people. It’s a happiness that’s clear-minded, totally blameless. And many cultures don’t have that. They don’t have room for that. It’s in their imagination. So if you find yourself in a culture like that, you have to be able to resist the values that are coming at you that would get in the way of that happiness. It’s our ability to fully inhabit your body and fully inhabit your own sense of values. Maintain your own sense of values, even though there are other pressures coming at you. Even from outside. This is an essential part of the practice. And it’s an important skill to work on at all times.

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