Independence

September 21, 2013

Everyone needs a place of seclusion, a place where they can get away from other people and deal with all the people in their heads, all the various voices, all the various opinions. Get some seclusion from them as well. Living in the world is hard enough. Lots of different people, lots of different opinions. And everybody wants to have a little piece of you. Everyone wants some control over you. So when you come off to a place like this, sometimes they’ll say, “Why are you going off on your own? Why are you cutting yourself off from other people?” They’re afraid you’ll slip out of their grasp. But then, do you want to be in their grasp? People can be helpful. We, as human beings, are social animals. But there’s a part of us that doesn’t have to be an animal. Part of us wants to find some peace, wants to find some real, genuine happiness. And you don’t find it in other people. That old Zen koan, “Does the dog have buddha-nature?” And the answer is no. If we take buddha-nature to be true peace, you’re not going to find it in the dog. You’re going to find it in yourself. That’s where you look. So you have to get away. The Buddha himself got away. And there’s what’s called physical seclusion, and there’s mental seclusion. Physical seclusion is when you get away from other people, but you find that you still have a lot of baggage left over that you’re carrying around. Mental seclusion is learning how to put aside your thoughts. Thoughts of the past, thoughts of the future. John Fuing would sometimes tell people who’d come to stay at the monastery, “Assume that you’ve died. You don’t have to go back. You don’t have to think about going back. You don’t have to think about the past. You’re here in a new life. You’re here all by yourself.” And then every time a thought of the past, or a future, or the people you’ve left behind, or the people you’re going back to, comes up, just keep reminding yourself, “You’ve died. You’ve died.” Then you have to ask yourself, “Suppose you really have died. What would that be like? What would you have left? Would you have the state of your mind?” So you’ve got to work on that. So it doesn’t fall prey to all the different unskillful voices inside. And to help with that, we work with the breath, giving yourself a good solid place inside and also giving yourself something to do while you’re here. Because otherwise the mind, without a lot of outside influences coming in, just goes all over the place. And you look at it when it dreams at night, when reality doesn’t place any restrictions on it, and all kinds of stuff come churning out of the mind. And the same thing can happen if you’re just sitting alone out under the trees. So you focus on the breath so the mind has a focal point, has a point of reference, and you make it comfortable. It’s one of the few processes in the body that you do have some control over. So take advantage of that fact. Some people wonder, “Aren’t you supposed to just accept things as they arise?” Well, one of the things you should accept is that you are exerting some control over things already, in the way you breathe, in the way you think. And a lot of that control that you’re exerting is under the radar. You don’t see it. These are the secret members of the committee. If you think in terms of politics, these are not the politicians. They’re the bankrollers behind the politicians. But to see them, you have to look carefully. And to look carefully, you’ve got to be quiet. Then you begin to see, “Oh, the way I approach a situation has a huge effect on what’s going to happen in that situation. The attitudes I bring shape the people I meet.” If you find yourself meeting a lot of disagreeable people, you might have to turn around and ask yourself, “Well, what am I doing?” And whether they’re really disagreeable or not, that’s not the issue. The fact is, you’ve got to look at your mind to see how it’s shaping things. So try your best to shape it well. Think about the breath. Evaluate the breath. Which means basically several things. One, does it feel comfortable or not? If it doesn’t, what can you do? What can you do to make it more comfortable? Two, when it’s comfortable, how do you keep it comfortable? It’s not that you find one rhythm that’s going to carry you through the whole hour. Sometimes a certain rhythm will work for five minutes and then it’s not quite so interesting anymore. That’s when you’ve got to change. And as you maintain it, then you want to put it to use. When you think of expanding the sense of ease and well-being throughout the body, thinking of the breath energy, going down the spine, out the legs, going down the shoulders, out the arms, going through your torso, coming into the head. If you find there’s a lot of tension in the body, think of the breath energy going down and relaxing. If you’re feeling sluggish, think of it energizing you. The point is, when there’s pleasure there, you don’t want to just sit and wallow in a little bit of pleasure because it’s going to leave you. It’ll make the mind blur out. So you learn how to expand the range of your awareness and then expand the pleasure. And that gives you a foundation so that when thoughts come into the mind you’re not so likely to jump after them. Then you realize you’ve got a lot of conversations going on in your head, and you’ve been believing way too many of them. Being with the breath gives you a position where you can stop and look and not have to take sides. You don’t have to decide whether you agree or disagree. It’s one of those conversations that you don’t have to get involved with at all. And the more you can step back from those conversations, the better off you’ll be. Think of them as conversations between people in another world. Think of the old conversations about if the world is flat, where does the moon go when it goes down, when it comes up again? Well, you know the world’s not flat, but you can read lots of different opinions people had about how the moon went under the world and came back up again. Or why people don’t fall off the edge of the world, or do they fall off the edge of the world? In other words, conversations that you know are based on wrong assumptions and there’s no reason to get involved. Learn how to look at a lot of the conversations in your own mind in the same way. Strange conversations, people from another culture, from another time. Anything that can help pull you out so you can have a time of peace. A time where you’re not being pulled around by all these voices, where you can gain some inner strength. It’s only when you have this kind of inner strength that you can begin to trust yourself. And it’s only when you can learn how to trust yourself that you get a sense of who out there you can trust. Otherwise, if there’s no trust inside, then there’s nobody out there. Outside that you know, that you can resonate with. So you can trust yourself to be able to step out of these conversations and look after your own peace of mind. That’s a really important skill to develop. It’s a really important part of inner strength. And this is something only you have to know about. Because you’re dealing with the politics inside your own mind. And again, the different voices in your mind want to pull you into their orbit. They want to exert some control over you. At least, that’s how it seems. But you begin to realize, after a while, that a lot of them are just random voices and you’ve attributed different intentions to them. And you can pull out of that. So one of the skills we’re learning here is how to pull out of conversations. The world has lots of conversations going on and they want everybody to get involved in the conversation. Again, a lot of this has to do with trying to exert some power over you, keep pulling you in with all sorts of strange ideas. And here’s your time to exert some of your own power inside. Develop your own inner strength, your own inner independence. And if you’re afraid that you won’t be able to live in the world, actually it’s when you have this inner independence that you can live in the world and not get scarred. And fortunately, you don’t have to be in a quiet place all the time in order to benefit from this practice. You learn to develop a little quiet place inside and learn how to carry that back with you. So even when you’re in the world, part of you is not. Then you find that once you get used to this, you don’t have a sense of being cut off from people. You have a sense of being protected. You’ve got your safe place inside. And it’s stable. It takes a while to master this, but once it’s really stable, then you find it’s a lot easier to live in the world and not get blown around by all the winds of the world. Because we’re not here to please anyone. As John Fung used to say, “Nobody paid us to be born. We’re not beholden to anybody.” It’s up to us what we want to do with our lives. The noblest thing is to find a happiness that’s harmless, a happiness that’s true, a happiness that doesn’t need to take anything away from anyone else. And it’s here inside that it’s going to be found.

<https://www.dhammatalks.org/Archive/y2013/130921_Independence.mp3.mp3>