Mental Seclusion

September 30, 2018

We’re in a quiet place that Ajahn Suwat used to like to call his quiet corner, or our quiet corner, secluded from our ordinary daily affairs, cut off from a lot of the connections that we have with the world outside, so that we can take care of the big problem in our lives, which is the fact that we want happiness but we do things that cause suffering, both for ourselves and for others. The problem is that even though we’re physically secluded, our minds are still dealing with a lot of the things outside. This is one of the first lessons we have to learn as we come to a place like this, to cut ourselves off not only physically but also mentally. The Buddhist meditation instructions start with keeping track of the body in and of itself. In other words, the body not in the world, but just the fact that you’ve got a body sitting here right now. You’re not concerned with how the body looks to other people, or whether it’s strong enough to do the work you want to do, or any other issues that have to do with the world. Simply the fact that you’ve got a body sitting here, breathing, focus directly on that. Then he says, put aside greed and distress with reference to the world, any issues that relate to the world as they come up, things you’re happy about, things you’re not happy about. Just put them aside for the time being. Years back, when I was in Thailand, there was a woman who came to meditate at the monastery. She stayed for two weeks, and the second day she came to say goodbye to Jon Fung. She was going to go back home. So I asked her, “I thought you were going to stay for two weeks.” She said, “Well, I’ve been thinking about my family. Who’s going to cook for them? Who’s going to look after them?” He said, “Tell yourself that you’ve died. If you were really dead, they’d have to be able to fend for themselves one way or another.” That’s a good way to think right now. For the duration of the retreat, as far as the world is concerned, you’ve died. You have no responsibilities out there. Nothing you have to think about, nothing you have to plan for. You can focus your attention fully on the mind. Because it’s in this way that we develop what the Buddha calls the heightened mind, the mind that’s not a slave to defilements, not a slave to the issues of the world. A mind that can lift itself up above. But to develop that kind of power, we first have to make the mind very small. In other words, it’s concerned only with your body right here, right now. Let the world go, and create a place inside where the mind can stay with a sense of ease. Take a couple of good long deep in-and-out breaths. Notice where you feel the breathing process in the body. Let your attention settle there, and then try to stay there all the way through the in-breath, all the way through the out-breath. Ask yourself if the breath is comfortable. If you’re not sure, you can try different ways of breathing. Longer, shorter, deeper, more shallow, heavier, lighter, faster. Slower. Think of the breath as a whole body process. You want the whole body to be nourished by the energy, because that’s what you’re really focusing on. Not so much the air coming in and out through the nose, but the energy flow in the body. It’s going to be more prominent in some places than others, but keep your attention right there, wherever it’s prominent. And as for anything else that comes up? Your rule of thumb right now is anything that’s not related to getting the mind to stay with the breath, you don’t want to get involved. No matter how important or interesting or entertaining the thought may be, it’s not what you want right now. You’re working on something different. The ability to keep your awareness here in the present moment, keep it steadily here. This is going to require three qualities. One is mindfulness, which, for all you may have heard about what mindfulness means, actually means keeping something in mind. That’s the Buddha’s meaning for the term. In this case, you’re keeping in mind the fact that you want to stay with the breath. And if you’ve done breath meditation before, you may want to keep in mind things that have worked and things that haven’t worked, and getting the mind to settle down. With a sense of well-being. That’s the first quality, mindfulness. The second quality is alertness. Pay careful attention to what you’re doing right now. And also look at the results of what you’re doing right now. You want to be on top of what’s actually happening right here, but not just anything that’s happening. Focus your attention on your own actions. Your actions can also mean actions in the mind. Your intentions, your perceptions. What kind of image do you have of the breath when you breathe in? Does it help, or does it not? And if the mind is staying with the breath, try to be as sensitive as possible to the breathing. This moves into the third quality, ardency. You want to do this well. So while you’re with the breath, try to be super sensitive to how the breathing feels in the body. If you find the mind wandering off, bring it right back. If it wanders off again, bring it back again. Ten times, a hundred times. Don’t give in. You’re here to develop these qualities. This is how you do it, by resisting the mind’s tendency just to go with whatever flow comes out of the mind. You want to resist that flow for the time being. You want to keep your attention right here. Like a post in a river. The water flows past the river, but the post doesn’t move. As you get more sensitive to the breathing and also more sensitive to the images that the mind has of the breathing, you might ask yourself, “Can I change that image? Would it make it better?” You might think of the body as like a sponge. As you breathe in and out, the breath energy is not coming in and out only through the nose. All the pores of the skin. Think of it being good breath energy coming in, nourishing the nerves, nourishing your blood vessels, creating a sense of well-being that fills the body. Because that’s the state you want with this state of heightened mind, where awareness fills the body, breath energy fills the body, a sense of ease fills the body. Think of them all together. This right here begins to raise the level of the mind, because you’re developing a sense of ease that doesn’t have to depend on sight, sound, smell, taste, tactile sensations. It depends simply on your ability to be with the body in the present moment, to inhabit how the body feels from within. This is called the pleasure of form, as opposed to the pleasures of sensuality. It’s a higher pleasure. It’s a pleasure where the mind is clear, satisfied. This is what we’re working on. Because once you get this sense of well-being, then you realize you don’t have to depend on things out in the world being just a certain way. You develop more resilience, and you have a sense of well-being that is not shaken by things in the world. That’s the quality of what the Buddha calls the heightened mind, or one of the qualities. But it comes from these basic instructions. Put aside all your concerns of the world. Just be with the body in and of itself right here, your sense of the body sitting here, and try to develop these three qualities of mindfulness, alertness, and ardency. In other words, you do this well. You’re taking some very basic things—just breath, awareness—and you’re making something good out of them. This is one of those cases where well-being doesn’t have to depend on things being just so, or nicely arranged outside. It depends on your skill. And skill comes from persistence. You just stick with it. The mind winders off, you bring it back. It winders off again, you bring it back again. Don’t get discouraged. You’re developing new habits in mind. And you’re raising the level of the mind. So it’s not a slave to the world. That was one of Ajaan Fuang’s favorite things to say. He said, “We’re not anybody’s servant.” The problem is that we’re a servant to our own greed, aversion, delusion, fears, resentments, whatever. So that even when we pull ourselves out of the world to come to a quiet place like this, we still find that we’re burdened. So you want to give the mind an alternative way of relating to itself so it’s not a slave to these things anymore. And it starts right here, your awareness of the breath in the present moment. You can build a sense of well-being around this, a clear-headed sense of well-being, so that when other emotions come into the mind you can see them as something separate. You don’t have to follow them, you don’t have to identify with them. You put yourself more in control. And that’s where the level of the mind grows higher. As the Buddha said, the heightened mind is one of the universal teachings of all the Buddhas, not only our Buddha, but all the Buddhas of the past. And it’s your devotion to the heightened mind, or commitment to the heightened mind, that you want to raise the level of your mind so you’re not a slave to the world, not a slave to your defilements. This is one of the ways in which we develop the skill that helps to solve that problem. The problem of why it is that, even though we want happiness and everything we do is aimed at happiness, we end up causing so much suffering. But when you raise the level of the mind, it can see things more clearly. It can see what you’re doing, see where you’ve been wrong in the past. It can be very matter-of-fact about changing your habits so you’re not a slave to your old habits anymore. You can rise above them.

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