

## *Seclusion*

*August 16, 2005*

When the mind begins to settle down, it gives rise to a sense of ease. And the ease, the texts say, comes from seclusion. So what kind of seclusion are they talking about?

To begin with, there's physical seclusion. You're not talking to anybody else right now. You're not interacting with other people. 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 any of 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. That right there lifts a lot of burdens off the mind. And it's good to appreciate that.

There's another passage in the texts 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, not quite wilderness here, but it's quiet. All the issues related to back home, if they come up in your mind, aren't really related to anything around you. Issues coming from outside are stripped away, or at least held at bay. That's physical seclusion.

But there's more than that. There's also mental seclusion. That operates on many layers. To begin with, you 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 a level of mental seclusion.

So you stay with the breath, trying to establish a frame of reference right here. Once you get the frame of reference, then as the texts say, 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, you can put issues like that aside. Those are issues of the world. There can be just awareness focused on the body in and of itself. And 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 here.

As you meditate, you're working in a sense of ease, in a sense of seclusion, but it's still work. The work here is being persistent, not getting careless. You'll notice, as soon as you start getting careless, that all the issues of the world start flooding in

again, and you're no longer secluded. You may be sitting here alone, but it's as if you've got a room full of people inside you, all jabbering away.

So do what you can to maintain your frame of reference. Every time you find yourself slipping off, just come back to this body sitting right here, with the sense of the breathing. Ask yourself: Where are your hands? Where are your feet? Where are the different parts the body? Locate yourself here. Try to fully inhabit the present moment. The more fully you can inhabit your body, a 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 and get the breath out, you can just let that stop. The breath is going to come in and out without your having to do anything to enhance it. As you stop pushing and pulling it, a sense of fullness in the body begins to grow. That's the beginning of rapture or refreshment. The Pali word *piti* can mean all kinds of things, but fullness, refreshment, and rapture are the closest to what we're working on here. Allow that sense of ease, that sense of fullness to stay.

And 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's no factor in the path called right anticipation, anticipating where it's going to go. There's right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration. Those are the factors you're working on right now. Anything that feels good, feels right, try to develop it. Nurture it. When you nurture it, it'll provide you with food. The traditional analogy for right concentration is stores of food that give you the nourishment you need on the path. If you're in a too great a hurry to do your discernment work—trying to figure this out, figure that out—after a while you find you've run out of food. Things get dry. Things gets scattered. So, knowing that the mind has to depend on a source of food, make concentration your food. 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.

The 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. He said that 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 to ripen. As you get more and more skilled with the concentration, you learn how to tap into that source of food at a moment's notice. But 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, longing for what's gone, remember that that's a form of non-seclusion as well. The Buddha once said that if the mind is without anticipation of the future, without longing after the past, it's freed up 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. That sense of fullness that you can have in the present doesn't get squeezed out from your trying to anticipate what's going to happen next.

In this way, the 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 need to gain insight, to gain understanding. Insight work takes energy. Often the insights you are going to be gaining concern things you're not going to like to see. After all, it's a matter of seeing your own ignorance. But it's a lot easier to look into things you don't like when you're well fed and you know that you have your place of seclusion inside.

This inner seclusion is ultimately the seclusion that really matters, because you can't stay at the monastery forever. But when you can develop that skill of having a frame of reference of just the body in and of itself, then you can be secluded mentally wherever you are. You can create the space, you can create the room you need in the present moment to develop the sense of fullness everywhere you go.

But for the moment, don't think about where you have to go. Think about where you are right now—and settle back into right now. Give the mind's potential for concentration the respect it deserves.