

Mindfulness of Breathing (57) Meditative Seclusion

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

seclusion, *viveka*, sensory seclusion, integrated, mind, liberation, absorption, meditation, breathing, *ānāpānasati*, *samādhi*, clinging, satisfaction, hindrances, contentment, shelter, liberating, mind, separate

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Related to the topic of absorption, which I talked about in the guided meditation, is the idea often translated into English as “seclusion” – a concept the Buddha often refers to in meditation practice and on the path of liberation.

The Pali word for seclusion is *viveka*. More literally, *viveka* means to “separate something apart,” “become separate.” But in this context, seclusion is probably one of the better English words. No English word works well, but if we associate the word seclusion with being sheltered, protected, cozy, and nice, then it is one of the better ones.

We are secluded in the best possible sense of the word: cozy, warm, and contented, with a deep feeling of satisfaction – just being here, secluded somehow. It may be after a nice, long, invigorating walk in the cold – perhaps in stormy weather. We come inside, wrap ourselves in a nice blanket, and have a warm drink. We are cozy and alone, feeling secluded from all the difficulties of life around us.

The word seclusion is used in Buddhist teachings in a variety of different meanings. The first begins to give us a sense of what is to come. It refers to going on retreat. They didn't have the word "retreat" in the ancient language, but they said, "going to be secluded." To be secluded is to go someplace where you are separate from the hustle and bustle, from responsibilities and social interactions of daily life so you can really engage in the process of meditation.

Some people might say seclusion is a process of escaping the world – the real world. We have to face the real world. But what is more real, in terms of our minds and hearts, is that we are becoming integrated – not being fragmented and pulled in all kinds of directions by our thoughts and feelings. The process of meditation – becoming physically secluded from many of the aspects of the world – allows us to find inner health,

wholesomeness, and integration. And we bring this back into the world.

Seclusion is not pushing the world away or abandoning it, any more than being secluded in your bathroom while taking a shower is pushing away or rejecting the world. If we take a shower and become clean, we are a more pleasant person to be with in the world.

So there is the idea of meditative seclusion – going off on retreat. In the old days, it was going into the forest, perhaps, someplace where people could be alone. For some people, it might be in a room by yourself in the early morning. You may get up before everyone else and have the wonderful benefit of seclusion. There is nothing else to think about or be involved in – just practicing here. Then it is easier to get absorbed. It is easier to have the integration, wholeness, satisfaction, and contentment of being this way – of really settling in.

Then we become more and more secluded. Meditative seclusion happens when we stop being so concerned with the past and the future. Thoughts don't spin us out into other places and times. We are secluded from external thoughts that spin us away. If we *are* thinking, it is thoughts that keep us here, connected, and involved.

As we get more absorbed in meditation – more connected to and involved in it – we really sink into it. Then sensory seclusion happens. Sometimes we are not really involved in hearing, smelling, or seeing. Some sensing of the body may recede and disappear. Sometimes the body becomes very transparent or light. Or it seems to have no edges. Or the whole body may even seem to disappear.

This is because we are not really giving attention to the senses: hearing, seeing, touching, smelling, and tasting. They all recede. We still have the capacity to hear, taste, and do all these things, but they recede from where our attention is – where we are absorbed, and what we are involved in.

It's like when you're reading a really good book. You don't hear people talking anymore. You don't notice the sounds outside the house because you are so absorbed in the book. There is sensory seclusion.

Because there is absorption, sensory seclusion feels really good. It is like we're being pulled in. We are absorbed and delighted. We are enjoying it. The attention is getting centered, here, because it is starting to get concentrated and very present.

As it does so, and as the mind becomes quieter and more still, one of the functions of this is for us to become more sensitive to clinging and grasping – to how the mind gets attached and how it contracts. The more still, absorbed, and peaceful we can become, the more sensitive we become to the slightest movements of contraction, clinging, and resistance that go on in the mind and the heart. Then we have the opportunity to let go of that, or bring our attention to it and have it let go of itself. Over time, that becomes seclusion from the things we cling to.

One of the important steps in this process of seclusion is to be secluded and separated from – not involved with anymore – the five hindrances: sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and regrets, and doubt. We are so absorbed, connected, and involved with what we are doing in meditation – really absorbed. Dipping deeply into the world – the ocean of breathing – we are not getting pulled into those obstacles. Part of the contentment and satisfaction of meditation comes from not being involved anymore with the hindrances.

We are secluded from the hindrances. We are separated from them – as it's said in the ancient language. And that is temporary. In deep meditation, the hindrances fall away. But they come back when we come out of meditation, and the mind is no longer

concentrated. They may come back a little bit weaker than how they were before. But sooner or later, they will come back.

The ultimate seclusion is when we become more permanently separated from some of our clinging and attachment. This more permanent separation from attachment is called liberation. *Samādhi* practice is meant to support this process of liberation.

It is not just getting absorbed in feeling the healthiness, goodness, wholesomeness, and satisfaction – the continued contentment of being absorbed in the breathing, flowing with the breath – but rather, it is preparing the mind. The mind is softer, more workable, more able to let go – more malleable in a sense – so the ways in which it is contracted have room to breathe. The mind has room to let go and open up. We start feeling some of the seclusions that partake in or have qualities of liberation. For example, we are temporarily liberated from the hindrances.

This brings us to the twelfth step of the sixteen steps of mindfulness of breathing. The eleventh one is:

Breathing in, one concentrates the mind, unifies the mind, steadies the mind.

Breathing out, one unifies the mind, steadies the mind, composes the mind, or concentrates the mind

—

whatever the word *samādhi* is translated as.

And then, the twelfth step is that one liberates the mind:

Breathing in, one liberates the mind. Breathing out, one liberates the mind.

Now we are starting to get into the territory of the real purpose of Buddhist meditation, the area of liberation. We will continue with that tomorrow.

In the meantime, you might look for how you can lovingly and delightfully be absorbed in what you do during the day. Wash dishes being absorbed and *just* do that. Turn yourself over fully to the enjoyment without letting the mind take you away. There may be a lot of activities throughout the day that you can do like this. If you eat alone, for example, be absorbed in just eating. Learn to appreciate – or develop the capacity – to give yourself over fully to whatever you are doing while you're doing it.

There can be qualities of absorption that are like being involved in playing music in a nice way. These things support us in learning how to do meditation. You might

want to play around with that over the next twenty-four hours.

Thank you very much, and I look forward to our time tomorrow.