Seclusion (Viveka)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 59:38

Tonight I'd like to talk about the topic of seclusion, which is the translation of the Pali word *viveka*.

Many of you might be familiar with a particular book of Ajahn Sumedho's called *Citta Viveka*, subtitled "Teachings from the Quiet Mind," but which more literally translates as "the secluded mind." I want to talk about various aspects of *viveka*, not only *citta viveka*. There's *kaya viveka*, which is seclusion of body, and *citta viveka*, seclusion of mind, leading into more refined types of mental seclusion. But there's also at least one place where the Buddha, according to Bhikkhu Bodhi, uses *viveka* as another designation for Nibbana. The particular quotation is: someone asked, "Do you know, dear sir, emancipation, release, seclusion for beings?" Bhikkhu Bodhi points out that those are meant as three designations for Nibbana—in that particular reference, seclusion really meaning separation from suffering.

This topic just interests me, so I'd like to talk about different aspects of seclusion, of *viveka*.

Obviously, on the level of *kaya viveka*, seclusion of body, that's a huge part of our practice. It's also, as I'm sure you know, a very intrinsic and respected aspect of most spiritual traditions that I know of—this sense of going into seclusion, whether it's an intensive retreat or simply seclusion in nature, going off alone into the wilderness. Various traditions have this as a central part, at least for the role of the mystic, if not for every single person who's part of that tradition. So a big part of what we're doing when we come on a retreat such as this, whether it's for a day or for six months, is moving into this aspect of the mystical tradition of pretty much all traditions.

I want to read a little bit about the early Christian desert fathers, because it hits on several aspects of what I want to talk about in relation to seclusion tonight. It's from a book about hermits from all different traditions. The author is talking about the desert fathers:

"The desert is the uninhabitable place. It is the region of desolation and solitude that surrounds and threatens the fertile plain." This is in Egypt. "Along the Nile Valley, the desert is a silent presence, always visible to the dwellers in towns and villages as they live in comfort on the rich, dark soil. Its bare hills are the waste howling wilderness of the Old Testament, the haunts of demons. And yet men and women have always been drawn from the comfort and security of their homes in the valley to the barren caves above in search of solitude."

Then they talk about perhaps the most famous of the Desert Fathers, Saint Antony of Egypt, whose life inspired thousands to leave their homes and follow him. He was the son of rich Christian parents who died in his youth, leaving him well provided for with a life of ease. But one day when he was in church

and he heard the words of Jesus to the rich young man—that he should sell all he had and give it to the poor—Antony inexplicably felt the words were spoken to him and actually did that, which is rare in this world. He gave everything he had. He went to a local hermit to learn how to live in solitude—went to a teacher. Then he went far, far into the desert until he finally ended up in a deserted fort in Pispyr on the east bank of the Nile. He lived alone without seeing a human face for over twenty years. His friends would bring him supplies of bread and water every six months. Sometimes the friends who brought these supplies would hear terrifying shrieks and groans from behind the locked doors. Eventually—twenty years eventually—they could stand this no longer and broke down the doors, expecting to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. Instead, Antony emerged healthy, sane, and balanced. He went to Alexandria to support the Christians who were being persecuted there and spent the rest of his life alternating between retreats into solitude and emerging to help and advise others.

I love that. It touches on so many aspects of what we're doing here. It's really a huge renunciation. Even just the *kaya viveka*, just the solitude of body. And it's not just for ourselves alone. And it requires meeting all of our demons.

So *kaya viveka*, solitude of body, is where we begin—simply by removing ourselves from the crowds, from so much busyness, from so much input of sense impression.

Why? How is this helpful?

Thomas Merton, who was one of the more famous relatively present-day Christian hermits, just wanted to be a hermit. He wasn't actually allowed to be a hermit that much; he was always yearning to be one. He said the search for solitude is a journey to discover the inner self. The monks fled to the desert to become ordinary. If they had gone there to be extraordinary, this would have meant taking the world with them as a standard of comparison. They lived among the rocks because they wanted to be themselves and to flee a world that divided them from themselves.

This isn't meaning fleeing the world with aversion because we hate everything and everybody, so we're going to go off into the rocks because they at least will leave us in peace—although I certainly, speaking for myself, on rare occasions have had that feeling: thank God I can escape into the silence.

But of course, that's not the ultimate reason. The true purpose is to become ordinary, to discover our inner self. And it's not simply to create some constructed state of inner or outer calm and quiet that we then hold on to for dear life. It's really so that, like St. Anthony, when we emerge, we're actually able to be more present—with compassion and less reactivity—in the world. It's not to leave the world out of hatred.

But just to even begin the inner journey, some seclusion on the physical level is really, really helpful. Seclusion from sense experience, first from all the input of people—of course we know that—and simply to stop feeding the craving for sense desire. Because there's so much overwhelming whirl of sense experience in our ordinary daily life, in our family life, in the flood of information, in the sense pleasures

available to us. It's just so much that it's really difficult to even disengage enough to see what else might be possible without physically removing ourselves, just a little.

This is Ajahn Chah talking about the flood of sensuality, which is really what leads us into needing some seclusion. He says: "We are sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations. We're sunk because we look outwardly at externals. We don't look inwardly. And it's like being a slave. Somebody else has control over you. It's as if they tell you to sit, you have to sit. When they say walk, you have to walk. Being enslaved by the senses is the same. No matter how hard you try, you can't shake it off."

And so really, just this first step of physical seclusion—coming to a retreat, just being quiet for an hour, coming here for six months, or fleeing into the desert for twenty years—is simply to begin to take our senses out of this flood of sensuality, to be able to begin to look inward. Instead of being so enslaved by sense pleasure and reaction to it that we don't even know how to disengage.

Thich Nhat Hanh writes: "We've lost our taste for silence. We don't know how to be ourselves without something else to accompany us. We need a book, telephone, TV. We've lost our taste for being alone. And the first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our best. We need to reorganize our lives so that we do not allow society to colonize us." We don't allow sense experience to colonize us.

And so, you know, of course some of you have just been here a few days, so what I'm about to say is more familiar to you. The rest of you—of course this is so far distant you'll have to vaguely remember. But you know how it is when we first come on retreat, those first few days, and the beginning disengagement from the flood of sensuality is so difficult. The restlessness, the sleepiness, and the endless chattering of the mind—which I know some of you, as I said, are so far beyond. But the endless chattering of the mind in response to sense pleasure, and just as the sense experiences are taken away as you come here, for some days it's as if the endless chattering of the sixth sense, the mind, is brought into high relief. As the rest of the senses quiet down a little, the chattering in the mind can almost get unbearable, right? "Oh my God, if this starts with this story again, I'm going to have to kill myself. I just can't bear it."

And over time, when we stop fighting that, even the flood of the endless chatter begins to slow down. I'm not saying stop, but it begins to slow down. It gets less obsessive. And just in this *kāya viveka*, just in this physical seclusion—without at the moment really having done much else in terms of formal practice—there begins to be some space. The attention, the senses, aren't turned so slavishly outward, externally. We're not in so much reaction to the chatter inwardly, and so it begins to slow down. It begins to open up like a space, or silence, however you experience it—in the mind, in the heart. Okay, maybe itty-bitty at first. But it's the beginning of recognizing that there's another possibility, another way to be. Just the seclusion of body and senses allows us to begin to recognize the possibility of living more at home in this inner space, this mental space or silence of awareness, with more potential for peace.

Along with the physical seclusion, most retreats—certainly in this tradition, and often when you read

about hermits in other traditions—nature plays a big part. Usually, given a choice, the Tibetan yogis go off to some remote, incredibly wild mountain cave. They don't usually pick a little basement apartment in Lhasa if they have a choice. I mean, it's not impossible, but there's something about nature that can be supremely supportive of deepening the *kāya viveka*, the seclusion of body. I find personally that nature tends to deepen in me something that reflects the inner silence, the inner spaciousness of mind and heart. It doesn't tend to feed the incessant chatter but just kind of leads into silence and space. It's as if nature reflects the inner silence and space of awareness, of the mind and heart.

And I think this can be very helpful, as often on retreats, when you're feeling really caught up or stressed or caught in judgment or a pattern or fear, we'll say: just cool out. Go walk in the woods.

Go sit. Go out tonight. Sit and look at the full moon. It's full moon night. It was clear when I came in. There's just something about it that, to me, just brings a stillness.

In fact, two nights ago, I was driving back from the airport, heading east, and the moon was just coming up over the horizon, really huge, right in front of the road. It brought this immediate stillness and silence to my mind—a little too much, actually, because I needed to be focusing on the highway. The moon would completely space me out, and then I'd get right back to driving. But it just has that capacity, and it's really useful to take us out of our chatter.

This is a familiar poem by Wendell Berry, but I want to read it because for me it evokes that inner sense of stillness that nature can help us to recognize:

When despair for the world grows in me and I awake in the night at the least sound in fear of what my life and my children's lives may be, I go and lie down where the wood drake rests in his beauty on the water and the great heron feeds. I come into the peace of wild things who do not tax their lives with forethought of grief. I come into the presence of still water and I feel above me the day-blind stars waiting with their light. For a time I rest in the grace of the world and am free.

That sense of freedom is really the freedom of total awareness and non-clinging. The ultimate viveka—seclusion, separation from suffering—is the peace, the spaciousness of the heart-mind of non-clinging. Just a touch of the silence, the spaciousness of awareness, makes it easier to cultivate more seclusion of body, leading to seclusion of mind, which leads us into the understanding and clear seeing that allows for an even deeper release of clinging, of suffering.

Of course, as we know, coming into the silence, the stillness, the aloneness of a retreat—or the desert, or wherever we're doing it, in our little basement apartment as well—isn't only that the chatter slows down, the heart and mind get expansive, we touch a moment of peace, the space of non-clinging, and that just keeps expanding and expanding until that's all there is. Smooth, smooth, easy. As we know, that isn't exactly the route all the time.

Remember what I read about the desert: "the region of desolation and solitude that surrounds and

threatens the fertile plain, the waste howling wilderness." The shrieks and groans of St. Anthony are also part of what arises in the course of our spiritual journey—almost not in spite of the seclusion but because of it. By entering consciously, willingly, into this space where we are withdrawing from the world of the flood of sensuality, withdrawing from our usual interactions with other people, from our usual distractions and ways that we spend our time, it's almost as if this space and silence gives room—calls up, invites—what you could call our deeper personal demons to emerge.

In the first days of retreat, they're more generic in terms of the hindrances: the sleepiness, the restlessness, desire and aversion (which are more than just hindrances), and doubt. As a retreat goes on, or as a period of physical seclusion continues, the demons might turn into something more subtle—or maybe they feel less subtle but more personally tuned to whatever each of our particular life-pattern demons happen to be. As a function of the silence and spaciousness deepening, of the endless chatter beginning to slow down, of us not having our usual flood of sense experience to turn to, it's almost as if we've invited these demons to come up.

There are times in every retreat where we're going to feel like St. Anthony behind those doors in the cave, shrieking and groaning. It might be ways that we're caught that are clear to us—our pattern, our so-called inner demon, whether it's self-hatred, judgment, worthlessness, or lust, or strong desire, or conceit, comparing, pride, the need to be perfect.

Sometimes we don't quite recognize it because the content of the demons, the deeper we go in our practice, often takes the form of how we relate to the practice itself. So we don't recognize it's a demon when we take out the whip and beat ourselves up every time we wander from the breath. Or when we think, "I'm pretty focused on the breath, but by this time it should be a lot better than this. By this time in the retreat, I should have twenty-five percent fewer thoughts than I'm having now"—some kind of insane thing that we made up out of God knows where and totally believe. That thought can be accompanied by self-hatred or judgment, or it can go the other way: pride. "I'm really doing good. Now look at that person. I've been here a lot less time than they have, and they don't look nearly as mindful as I do." However we do it, the demons very easily take the form of how we're relating to practice—which isn't a bad thing, but just recognize it.

Here's one clue: when the demons are there, we're suffering. Generally it doesn't take a huge subtlety of consciousness or awareness to recognize that we're suffering. We may not quite recognize what the hook is, but you really can tell it's different from lying down in the space of nature, in the peace of wild things. You really know something's changed here. It's not quite so spacious.

Sometimes we start to enter into demons that are not so personal but quite deep: fear of impermanence, total discomfort with instability, discomfort with chaos, trying to control what's happening or what's going to happen or how our practice is. Or, as I've mentioned in other talks, you don't think you're trying to control—you simply think you're trying to have a clear explanation of everything that's happening, why

and what it means and how it should be happening. That too is trying to fix chaos into some nice little box. It doesn't work, and we suffer. A form of the demons.

But it's not a mistake or wrong that these demons come up. It's part of it. I think I said this here before, but I love this line from one of my teachers: "In the light of awareness, all the snakes come out of their holes." That's really what it is. We go into the desert.

We really seclude ourselves from our usual distractions. And in the light of mindfulness—which is ultimately non-discriminating, simply heightening our awareness to notice whatever arises—it's as if these old friends appear. We have developed very subtle and useful defense mechanisms not to notice that they're there. But now these patterns seem to say, "Oh great, these mechanisms aren't quite operating," and whoosh, up they come.

This is wonderful, because until we see them in the light of awareness, in the light of day, until we turn around and recognize them—until that time, we're really the slaves, as Ajahn Chah says. We're the slaves of these demons, of these patterns of our mind. When self-judgment says, "Shut up and sit down," we do it. Or we do it in order not to recognize self-judgment. When pride says, "Do this so you look better," we do it, rather than turning around and recognizing the pride.

This is where learning to recognize these demons with mindfulness becomes the second aspect of kāya-viveka—not only being in physical seclusion, but using the attention to bring mindfulness, to have mindfulness-wisdom, satīpaññā as Ajahn Buddhadasa terms it, at the sense doors. In the moment of sense contact, in the moment of recognizing that a sense experience is happening—including the mental, which could include many of our demons: anger, worthlessness, inferiority, whatever—having mindfulness-wisdom at the sense door means recognizing its presence, connecting with mindfulness, recognizing it for what it is. Paññā. Satīpaññā. "Ah, that's mental experience—fear. That's mental experience—pride." Satīpaññā at the sense door is the second aspect of kāya-viveka, of seclusion of body. And this is really what gives us the power of seeing the demons for what they are.

There's a wonderful quotation in the book *Vision of Dhamma*, where the author talks about the power of naming. He discusses how primitive peoples believed that words exercised a magical power. He says that things that could be named had lost their secret power over humans, the horror of the unknown. To know the name of a force, a being, or an object was the same as mastery over it. This ancient belief in the magical potency of names also appears in fairy tales and myths, where the power of a demon is broken just by facing it courageously and pronouncing its name.

In some ways, this is exactly what goes on with observing power, mindfulness, satīpaññā, at the point of the sense doors' contact. There's a vast difference between being driven by self-judgment, by feelings of inferiority, by pride, and being able to turn around and say, "Ah, self-judgment feels like this." Maybe it's not as vast a difference as we would wish—we might wish it would all vanish as soon as we name it. But the power of being able to turn around with the courage of mindfulness and with the clear seeing of

paññā and name the particular force—that is really what takes the sense of self out of that particular demon. That's what takes the identification out, and the fear of it.

Eventually that demon doesn't even have to go away. It stops being unknown. It stops being so horrible. It stops driving us. We stop being enslaved to it. And really, there can be moments: "Okay, fear can be here or not. It really doesn't make that much difference." Self-judgment: "Yeah, I recognize this. It feels like this. It'll come, it'll go. It's not who I am." That truly comes from kāya-viveka and the continuity of mindfulness, observing power, satīpaññā at the sense doors.

There's a Jewish saying I once read—I don't know where, but I like it. It says that to name something is to know why God cannot be named. As soon as we name something—"Oh, that's what it is"—it's taken out of the realm of mystery, out of the realm of the unknowable, of freedom, of peace, of awareness. It's just become this conditioned phenomenon that comes due to conditions, passes due to conditions, comes again—maybe all too soon—due to conditions, and passes again. It's really different from mystery, from God, which can't be named. And this takes the fear, the horror out of these things.

So in kāya-viveka, it's not only a matter of removing ourselves physically from other beings and from the flood of sensuality, but of using this seclusion to cultivate the steadiness of mindfulness. As Sayadaw U Pandita describes it: "At first we remove ourselves from the environment of sense pleasures, but this is not enough. We also become mindful of whatever object arises at the six sense doors, directing the mind towards the object." This is very much the Mahasi style of describing it. As you direct the mind towards the object, it really connects—for that moment only—becomes stable, engrossed with the object, notices, can name what is arising, sense experience of any of the six senses. In that moment, the mind is free from desire, sense desire or aversion or delusion—just for that moment. It's knowing what's what. And that's really what we call restraint at the sense doors.

Doesn't mean we have to hide from every sense experience, but restraint is meeting it with full awareness, with sati-paññā. Moment after moment of this sati-paññā, of just meeting with full awareness without judgment, without aversion, without clinging—this is what then leads to the more stable quality of attention that verges into samadhi, where the mind is more easily and continually meeting each object.

And that's then moving into what is referred to as citta-viveka, where the mind, the heart, is secluded really from the hindrances. In citta-viveka, the mind is free from kilesas that are arising in reaction to sense pleasures. And this is a very pleasant state. Just having a mind free from kilesas just for a moment is really pleasant. The kilesas are burning. They're tormenting. That's one of the translations—torments of the mind. And so the secluded mind, the mind where the kilesas are just kept away through steadiness of moment after moment mindfulness, that's a very peaceful and soothing and refreshing experience.

And when we're trying to get there because we think it'll be nice? Forget that. All we're doing then is cultivating wanting and self-sense. But by the moment after moment of just noticing what's present and naming it without getting involved in liking, disliking, making a story about it, then citta-viveka develops

by itself.

So we get interested in noticing how the mind reacts to sense experience. This is from a disciple of Ramana Maharshi, describing how we can recognize all our patterns that we get caught in, our suffering demons. He says, "If you want to pay attention to a special area of danger, watch how the five senses operate"—although I would say six senses here. "It is the nature of the mind to seek stimulation through the senses. The mind catches hold of sense impressions and processes them in such a way that they produce long chains of uncontrolled thoughts. So learn to watch how your senses behave. Learn to watch how the mind reacts to sense impressions."

This is a whole very interesting aspect of our practice. When we get over hating the fact that as soon as we become aware of a tension in the neck, we go off into some whole long story about what it means. Or as soon as we smell some pleasant smell at 11:30 in the morning, we're off into the world of restaurants and dinner parties. As soon as we stop judging ourselves about that and can just get interested in noticing—oh, smell, pleasant, and the mind goes way out to lunch, literally and figuratively, on the smell—we say, oh, look at that. Come back to sati-pañña at the scent door. Smell, pleasant, really wanting to make something of this. Oh yeah, wanting feels like this—and it stops.

Unpleasant tightness in the neck, and the mind really goes into it: "Oh no, this again, it's how I'm sitting, if I could only find the right way to sit, maybe if I had a higher pillow, maybe if I could go to that good cranial sacral therapist I've heard about, he's only in Barry, I'm sure that would fix me up..." Oh, yeah. The mind is in a way just amusing itself rather than just noticing tension, tension, unpleasant.

But we don't judge this at all. We just get fascinated by watching this process. And in the fascination with it, we really see over and over, we get it viscerally, how these reactions, these habitual reactions of mind to every sense experience that happens, are just feeding our sense of self and the resultant suffering.

And really, it starts to get easier. It's more fulfilling. It makes us happier to meet the sense experience with sati-pañña. At first, it feels like we're really renouncing all the stories that make up the life story of me. And it feels like a real struggle. One of the reasons the discipline of samadhi practice can send our mind into tantrums, like a two-year-old: "I'm not coming back to the breath, and you can't make me. There's nothing you can do. I'm going to think about this, goddammit, and it's going to make me happy." And after about a million times, we get it: oh, this is really dukkha. It's much more pleasant, it's much more peaceful to just come back and feel fluttering, to just feel tension. Oh yeah, tension. There's peace, there's ease because there's no me, there's no story, there's nothing extra added.

And so in this way, the sati-pañña, the steadiness of mindfulness as attention meets each of the six sense experiences as they arise, leads us quite naturally into the peacefulness, the quietness, the calm and coolness of citta-viveka—the mind that's secluded from the hindrances. It's very pleasant.

And as we continue with practice, there can be times where the hindrances, or all the kilesas, fade to

become really, really remote. With citta-viveka, we can be quite at peace. But something happens, and the hindrances, they're just lurking around there, waiting for a crack, and they come rushing back in. As the mind at times gets more and more peaceful, the kilesas become as if much more remote. There's a whole Pali word for this, which I'm sure you're dying to know, and I'm sure you want to remember, so I'll just tell you. It's vikambana-viveka. Way, way remote. And this is a place where the body feels light and energized. The mind is soft and buoyant.

And yes, it's nice. This is a place where people often get caught. We can often mistake it for something more than it is. What is it? It's a constructed state where the mind is peaceful, and it's very nourishing because the kilesas aren't there. But if all we do is hang with that, it's nice, but it's not liberating insight. The kilesas, the torments, our patterns, our demons are not being uprooted. They're simply far, far away.

So it's very important, even in this state where it all feels so remote, not to just—well, you can have a few moments of really enjoying it. But then at some point, not to just think, "Well, this is it. There's no more work to do. Time to go home." And we do this. As someone was saying to me the other day, it was quite insightful: they saw how they'd hit this really lovely place of sukha, and everything was really nice. And they saw their mind saying, "Okay, well, I guess it's time to leave now." But they had the insight to see that this is another conditioned state, and it changed—which of course it had changed by the time we were talking.

So there are ways we get attached, some quite subtly and some not so subtly. We can get attached to the subtle state I'm describing, where the kilesas are far away, that state of seclusion of mind and heart. We can also get attached on the level of kaya viveka to the conditions themselves.

Just on the level of conditions, when you find yourself—and it happens on retreats—no matter how quiet it is here, there's some noise that just bugs the heck out of you. "What's this doing here? I need my silence in order to progress in my practice." And we all go there. "There's too many people." I don't think you could really say that here—you'd have to really try. But if the mind is in enough of a snit, you can find something. Somebody's doing something that's annoying you. They're not respecting the stillness in some way. There's some noise. You didn't get it perfect, and something is intruding on the silence, which is upsetting your practice. That's when we're leaning into holding on to the conditions.

But the conditions are only there to help us recognize the silence, the seclusion, the spaciousness, the way into awareness and non-clinging in ourselves. And then to recognize that this is accessible all the time, not only in the deva realm of the forest refuge when nobody's doing anything to bother you.

So we can get attached to the conditions—and that's not so subtle. And we can get attached to the real stillness, the quietness of mind, where it just feels like there are no problems anymore. What's the need to keep practicing? We get caught there by that stopping. That's what Sayadaw U Pandita calls "stopping within." Or we can simply be there, and we don't really feel we're attached, we're not holding onto it, but we stop investigating. We kind of just ride on the tranquility or the coolness, and we don't quite have the

energy of investigation—the enlightenment factors that Marcia talked about a couple of weeks ago. It's as if we get content.

I remember a friend who had been a forest monk in Thailand for eight or nine years. He said ultimately he got very happy there, very peaceful. And he ultimately left, came back to the West as a monk—which is really hard—and ended up disrobing. But he told me once that deep down, the reason he left is because it just got too easy. It got so peaceful and calm, but he could intuitively feel that a great deal of it—not all, of course, it's useful—but that it wasn't the end.

Ajahn Sumedho, in his book *Citta Awake*, tells a story about how after meditating for years in the forest up in northeastern Thailand, feeling totally cooled out and peaceful, he'd have to go to Bangkok to renew his visa. It would be as if I told you that you have to go to Gardner, to Walmart, and gave you a shopping list tomorrow. That would be a good test. How really equanimous and peaceful am I in the midst of...

I was in Walmart the other day, which is why I mentioned it. I was with my sister, and I said I call Walmart a vortex of suffering. You go in there to get one thing and you can't get out for hours. It's like a little minor hell realm. My sister, who doesn't really practice, was looking at me like, "What are you, crazy? What are you talking about, a vortex of evil?" But I lose it in Walmart, so I know I still have to keep going there from time to time to test myself.

Anyway, Ajahn Sumedho said he would find that not all of the peace would go, but some of it would. And so that's not liberation. That's not the full heart's release of non-clinging. There's still quite some conditioning: I'm peaceful, but only if nothing bothers me, or nothing new. I've gotten used to the bugs.

I've gotten used to these things. If something new comes in, I'm all shaken up." So that's when my friend said he left the monastery—in order to see that.

There's a quotation from the Buddha, which I'm summarizing rather than giving you exactly. But he said something to the effect that there were two things he never lost sight of. One was really putting out full effort. And the other was never getting content and thinking, "Well, this is good enough. I've put out enough effort, and this is good enough. I really don't need to keep practicing."

This doesn't mean staying in intensive practice forever. It doesn't mean you should never leave a retreat until you've finally achieved arahatship—we're not just trying to keep the place full here. But it does mean you don't leave retreat and think, "Well, that's it. I've done it. That was nice. Now I can cruise." Never thinking, as nice as this is, that it's good enough. But seeing if there are still tendencies to get lost in craving—that's then the use to which we put the seclusion of body and the seclusion of mind.

We're not cultivating citta-viveka only because it's refreshing and purifying and easeful. Those things are good—a pleasant abiding here and now, as the Buddha often said—but not an end in itself, not a place to say "okay" and come to rest. Rather, we use the subtlety of awareness, of mindfulness, of seeing, to then cultivate, to really begin to see and investigate the much more subtle arisings of clinging. The sense of

"me" around experience, the sense of conceit, of comparing, of self-importance—to really viscerally experience these on the much more subtle levels. Which is really what's going on for many, many of you here.

You think, "I'm not in some huge demon experience." But then we start to see how much the sense of self arises just around subtle experience—the sense of comparing, the sense of judgment. Not to be discouraged by that. It's great that we start to see it. That's what we use the seclusion from the stronger kilesas for, the seclusion from the flood of sensuality—to be able to explore, as the Buddha talked about it, perfecting living alone.

A couple of suttas. There's one where he's talking to a venerable elder monk. And the Buddha says to him, "Is it true, elder, that you live alone and praise the virtues of living alone?" And he says, "Yes, Lord." The Buddha says, "But how do you live alone? And how do you praise the virtues of living alone?" The monk said, "Lord, alone I enter the village for alms. Alone I return. Alone I sit withdrawn in meditation. Alone I do walking meditation. That is how I live alone and praise living alone."

The Buddha says, "Yes, there is that way of living alone. I don't say there isn't. But listen well to how your living alone can be perfected in its details. Pay close attention." "As you say, Blessed One," the monk replied. "How is living alone perfected in its details?"

Just a minor detail here. "This is the case where whatever is past is abandoned, whatever is future is relinquished, and any passion and desire with regard to states of being in the present is not held to, is not fed." In other words, any clinging, any aversion, any reaction to states of being in the present is not held onto, is not fed. That is how living alone is perfected in its details.

A much vaster, a much deeper and more subtle sense of living alone—much more to do with freedom.

Another sutta where he's talking to another monk on a similar subject says it in a different way. The monk asks him, "What does 'lone dweller' mean? What way is one dwelling with a partner, and what way is one dwelling alone?" And the Buddha says, "There are, Migajala"—that's the name of the monk—"forms cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, tantalizing." And that could be the inner eye as well, right? "If a bhikkhu, a practitioner, seeks delight in them, welcomes them, and remains holding to these forms, delight arises."

When there is delight, there is infatuation. When there is infatuation, there is bondage. Bound by this fetter, a bhikkhu is called one dwelling with a partner.

And then he goes through all the senses—sounds cognizable by the ear, odors by the nose, tastes cognizable by the tongue, tactile objects cognizable by the body, mental phenomena cognizable by the mind that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, tantalizing. And if we get lost in infatuation in relation to any of these, there is bondage.

Thus, he says, even though a bhikkhu who dwells thus resorts to forests and groves, to remote lodgings where there are few sounds and little noise, desolate, hidden from people, appropriate for seclusion, he is still called one dwelling with a partner. For what reason? Because craving is his partner, and he has not abandoned it. Therefore, he is called one dwelling with a partner.

And of course, the opposite holds true. If one does not seek delight, does not remain holding to any sense object, then the infatuation does not arise. When there's no infatuation, there is no bondage. And thus, released from this fetter, a bhikkhu is called a lone dweller.

And then, even though a bhikkhu who dwells thus lives in the vicinity of a village, associating with bhikkhus and bhikkhunis, with male and female lay followers, with kings and royal ministers, with sectarian teachers and their disciples, he is still called a lone dweller. For what reason? Because craving was his partner and he has abandoned it. Therefore, he is called a lone dweller.

This is really the point of viveka. This is the viveka of freedom—freedom from the bondage to clinging, to craving. And then, ostensibly, we could even spend the whole day in Walmart and be a lone dweller.

And that's the reason for the cultivation of seclusion of body, of the senses, and of the mind. To see that really, on a momentary level, to remember that that piece of non-clinging—the space in the heart and the mind that I personally find at times in nature—our koan really is to recognize that this is available, that non-clinging is what allows us to recognize and really live from this space, and that it's always available, only available here and now. In the silence and stillness and beauty of this retreat center, in the hubbub of our lives.

The retreat is simply to help us really understand how clinging is created in response to sense pleasures, in response to our stories, to experience the suffering of it and lose our fascination with it and let it go.

And here's a great poem by Lala, who was a woman mystic in northern India in the 1300s:

Some people abandon their homes.
Others abandon hermitages.
All this renunciation does nothing if you are not deeply conscious.
Day and night, be aware with each breath and live there.

That's our koan. Just seclusion and awakening from moment to moment. Deep awareness with each breath, and live there.

And then we really see, like St. Anthony, you know, we might go back and forth, but really we emerge—it's never just for ourselves, it quite naturally moves into a sense of compassion and kinship with all beings.

I want to read something from Thomas Merton. He's saying, the solitary is one who is aware of solitude in herself or himself as a basic and inevitable human reality, not just as something which affects him as an isolated individual. Hence, this solitude is the foundation of the deep, pure, and gentle sympathy with all

other humans, whether or not they are realizing the tragedy of their plight. More, the solitude is the doorway by which he enters into the mystery of God and brings others into that mystery by the power of his love and his humility.

Or to just end with the words of an Anglican nun I read about who loved solitude so much that she spent eighteen years living in an abandoned cabin that she fixed up on the edge of some remote cliff somewhere. I don't even know where. But she was not really quite alone because people kept coming to her and bringing their troubles to her. And when she was asked, "Why do you keep being so available when really what you love is the solitude?" she said that she believes that the responsibility of the solitary person like her is to stand at the intersection between the love of God and suffering humanity.

Really, the culmination of our seclusion.

May the beneficial energies generated by our sincere practice today and in these last days—may these be shared with all beings everywhere, in all realms, in all conditions of existence. May our practice be the cause for the happiness, the freedom from suffering, the awakening of ourselves and all beings everywhere.

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