Seclusion (Viveka)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 58:50

What I want to talk about tonight is seclusion, or viveka. There's a line in the Sutta Nikaya where someone says, "Do you know, dear sir, emancipation, release, seclusion for beings?" And Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his footnote, says that these are three different designations for nirvana: emancipation, release, seclusion for beings—viveka.

I'm going to talk about different aspects of seclusion, starting with the most obvious one: the sense of being secluded from people, being on retreat. In all the different aspects of seclusion—and they're not hierarchical—how is it supportive for us in recognizing the natural peace, in recognizing and coming back again and again to the heart and mind of non-clinging? Why and how is seclusion supportive and helpful? And is it necessary? Do you have to be secluded?

The first aspect is going on retreat, this kind of separation from the hubbub, from other people, to the point of living completely secluded. In our culture, and probably even back with the Buddha, it was always somewhat questioned. It wasn't always accepted by everyone. Even in myself, sometimes the feeling arises: why should I need to separate from life and go on retreat? Is awakening, is mindfulness, is being able to recognize how the mind works—do I have to be separated from so-called life? As if this isn't life and that is life. But do I have to be separated? And how does the separation help? Obviously, we think it helps. Hopefully, that's why you're here.

I've read a couple of books about the early Christian desert fathers. If you want to talk about physical seclusion, they really had it down. The most famous one I've read about is St. Anthony of Egypt. His life inspired thousands of people to leave their homes and follow him. When he actually renounced and went off into the most secluded part of the desert in Egypt, it was about 285 A.D., two or three hundred years after Jesus. He was a Christian from a wealthy family. His parents died, and he had a lot of money. But he heard the Christian teaching to give all you have to the poor and follow Jesus. And as one writer said, he actually believed it and did it, gave away everything he had and went to the desert to be alone.

He kept going to more and more remote places until finally he ended up in a deserted fort on the east bank of the Nile, fifty miles south of Memphis. He lived alone without seeing a human face for over twenty years, being brought 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, they couldn't stand this any longer—it took them twenty years—and they broke down the doors, expecting to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. But Anthony emerged healthy, sane, and balanced. He went to Alexandria to support Christians who were being persecuted there, and then he spent the rest of his life

alternating between helping people, giving advice, being present for people, and going back into retreat.

I find the whole thing really interesting. Who knows what went on for him in those twenty years. But I think in a little way, we can imagine just a little bit of what we're here for.

So that's the first kind of seclusion—the most obvious, the grossest—actual seclusion from other human beings. And of course, the point of it isn't because we hate other human beings. Hopefully not. Or if that's the point in the beginning, hopefully that doesn't stay the point.

Thomas Merton, the Trappist monk who spent a lot of his life wanting to be a hermit, wrote about this extensively. 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 become extraordinary, this would have meant taking the world with them as a standard of comparison. They lived among the rocks just because they wanted to be themselves." Just to become ordinary. I love that. Sometimes I feel like my biggest aspiration in practice is just to become totally ordinary. Nothing special.

So this is seclusion of body, out of this wanting to discover ourselves—how does the mind work? How does the heart work? That's just the very beginning. It's a lot, just being quiet, being away from people, being away from engagement. But certainly in our practice, that's just the very beginning. The seclusion from other people, the seclusion from the busyness of our lives, is really simply a support to help us be a little more secluded from what Ajahn Chah calls the flood of sense experience.

It's not even just about other people, but about all of it. This is when we talk about renunciation. We come to a place like this, a retreat, where we are with other people but we're not speaking, and we're secluded from so much of the sensory input that we experience in our daily life—the five physical senses and also the mental input. There's so much of it.

This is from Ajahn Chah. He calls it kamogha, a flood of sensuality. He says we're sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations—sunk in them. We're sunk because we look at the externals. We look at these experiences. We don't look internally. It's like being a slave. Somebody else has control over you. When they tell you to sit, you have to sit. To walk, you have to walk. He doesn't mean the people setting up the schedule of the retreat. He means being sunk in wanting sense experience. Being enslaved by the senses is like this.

When we come on retreat, when we have this seclusion of body—this first aspect, kaya viveka, seclusion from people—we're more secluded, of course not completely, from the flood of sensuality. Not because sense experience is somehow bad or wrong, but just because there's so much of it, we're so overwhelmed. There's mostly no space to notice the silence of heart, of mind. There's no space to just notice that we're nothing but space. There's no space to recognize the quiet of a mind that's not enthralled to reaction, to sense experience. So we need to give it a little external, almost artificial space, just to be able to see, to recognize another possibility of how to be.

We're bombarded by seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, information, news, conversation. This was true even when the Buddha was teaching. Now, it's unbelievable. Walk through an airport and notice how many people have cell phones. One in two or one in three are walking through talking on them. "Oh, hi, now I'm walking through the airport." "The plane has landed." "Now I'm at my luggage." "Just called to say hi." God knows we can't be quiet for a minute. We have to know that we exist.

So when we come on retreat, when we seclude ourselves physically from so much, we're just left with the flood of our mind, the mental input. But over the days—in the beginning of any retreat, I don't care if you've sat for thirty-five years or it's your first retreat—it's a rare person whose mind doesn't either fall asleep or get really restless or go all over the place, because it's like an addict coming off cold turkey. Not completely cold turkey, because it can keep creating thoughts and reactions to the thoughts and endless stories and memories, until you just want to throw up from it. And then finally, the flood begins to slow down a little bit.

That's what's so great. It slows down by itself. We might think we're doing something—feel the breath in and out, feel the sensations, walk up and down. But that's not slowing the flood. That is the flood. That's the blah, blah, blah chatter. Finally, we get sick of that. We shut up.

I think if we just came here, sat and walked, shut up, didn't write notes, didn't read, and just stayed here for a while, things would get really quiet in the mind. You don't actually have to do so much. Just stop doing.

So the relentless chatter starts to slow down a little bit in this kaya viveka. We begin maybe to notice there's a little space here. When you say it's in the mind, in the heart, it's not really anywhere. We just start to notice, when the mind isn't obsessively relating to and sinking itself into sense experience. That's what Ajahn Chah means by saying we're always looking out. The attention notices hearing. It sinks into that. What does it mean? It notices a taste. It's really in that taste, exploring it, really in that thought, in the aversion. Everything's external, whether it's mental or physical.

When that obsessive relational activity slows down a little, as Nisargadatta says, in the silence, just be quiet, free from the obsession with what next. And in the silence, something may be heard that's ordinarily too fine and subtle for perception. We start to notice the possibility of peace, calmness, the mind that's non-reactive, the heart that's not on fire. Or just no special words at all. Just a moment when the mind isn't shouting and nothing much is going on. You don't even think of it as peace. You don't think of it as anything. But these little moments start to be more noticeable.

It's not that they don't happen in life, but they're fast. And we're really good at filling them up. But it starts to happen. This is the first and most obvious supporting reason for kaya viveka, seclusion of body—just separating from so much sensory input.

You've probably noticed, you've all done lots of retreats, how often meditation centers and monasteries

tend to be in beautiful, natural places when there's that possibility. And you must have noticed how in some way nature, the beauty of nature just being how it is, the naturalness, the silence of it, is also a huge support for just letting go of the absorption in the flood of sense experience.

Seeing nature, smelling the leaves, hearing the birds—all of that is still sense experience. It's pleasant. Noticing pleasant, that's fine. I'm not taking this out of the realm of sense experience. But somehow being here with the wind and the leaves and the smell of the leaves and the birds brings us into a sense of presence and peace a little different from watching television. Somehow it's different. Being in nature, ever since the time of the Buddha—he's always saying, there are these roots of trees, there are these forests, go sit there—there's a sense of appreciating the stillness of nature. Not stillness meaning nothing's happening, but the stillness that it touches in our mind and heart of non-reactivity.

For me, what being in nature does on retreat is just that: ah, we stop fighting it. We just open. There's no resistance. It brings us into a sense of presence, an appreciation, but a presence that's not filled with desiring, with wanting. It's the silence of non-self-referencing. When you're just sitting outside and there's just that "ah," before it gets to "I'm sitting here enjoying nature"—just the space, the peace, the silence. It mirrors the space, the peace, the silence of mind, of citta. It allows us to recognize this.

Even in the Buddha's time, the monk of his sangha renowned as the most ascetic was Mahakashapa. But he loved nature. People sometimes think that the renunciate ascetic is kind of sour and not liking anything, that you wouldn't appreciate nature because that's just clinging to pleasant experience. But no. This is a poem from Kashapa:

Strung with garlands of flowering vines,
this patch of earth delights the mind.
The lovely calls of elephants sound.
These rocky crags do please me so.
The shimmering hue of darkening clouds,
cool waters in pure streams flowing,
enveloped by Indra's ladybugs,
these rocky crags do please me so.
Like the lofty peaks of looming clouds,
like the most refined of palaces,
the lovely calls of tuskers sound,
these rocky crags do please me so.

You really get the sense of appreciation of the beauty. And being that he was an arahant, he ends it making the point: *There is not so much contentment for me in this five-fold music as in truly seeing Dhamma with a well-collected mind.* The beauty, the pleasure, the peace of nature is the support for seeing Dhamma.

Don't confuse appreciating nature with being sunk in the flood of sensuality. Use the beauty of nature. Use

the silence. Use the peace that it helps us recognize in our heart and mind—the lack of self-referencing. If the mind is using nature as a way of sinking into sensuality instead, you'll notice it, because peace won't be what you're experiencing. "I want the leaves to be prettier. I want them to be redder. I want the turkeys to come." That's wanting. That has nothing to do with the peace of the Dhamma. Our mind can do that with anything, but that doesn't mean there's something wrong with nature. It's just noticing.

Using this aspect of kaya viveka is really very powerful and accessible. It's lovely. Those times when you're all caught up in a struggle in your mind and you don't even know what, sometimes I just go outside and stand or walk, not trying to fix it. You've got to give that up. But just go and be outside and let it all go into the world, into the universe. The silence, the peace—that's our natural birthright. It's always available, always accessible. We can just put down the burden, put down the fixing it, put down the ideas for a little bit. Nature's a huge support in this way.

Thich Nhat Hanh wrote: "Our senses are our windows to the outside world. And sometimes the wind blows and disturbs everything within us. Many of us leave our windows open all the time, allowing the sights and sounds of the world to invade us, to penetrate us and expose our sad, troubled selves. We feel so cold and lonely and afraid. Do you ever find yourself watching an awful TV program, but you can't turn it off? The noise, the explosions of gunfire—it's upsetting, yet you don't get up and turn it off. Why do you torture yourself in this way? Don't you want to close your windows? Are you afraid of solitude, the emptiness and the loneliness you may find?"

That touches an important aspect of seclusion of body, seclusion from the senses, because it's a choice we make. We're doing this out of a choice for our own awakening, our own well-being. It's not like we've been taken prisoner and put into a sensory deprivation tank. It's a choice we're making.

All of you know that in this choice of withdrawing from constant bombardment, withdrawing our senses, the space of peace, of completeness, of quiet is not always the only thing that can arise. St. Anthony's shrieking and groaning behind the doors. Thich Nhat Hanh asks: are you afraid of what you may find if you close the windows, if you turn off the TV?

Sometimes, even when we know in our mind that physical withdrawal, solitude, pulling back from so much sense input is useful, that it's going to support our awakening, support our recognizing the natural peace that's our birthright—even when we know that experientially, there can still be a kind of kicking and screaming.

Even the Buddha, before he was the Buddha, speaks about this. There's a sutta where a householder comes to him and says, "Sir, we're householders. We indulge in sensuality, we delight in sensuality, we enjoy sensuality, we rejoice in sensuality. For us, renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off. Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline, the hearts of the young monks leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace. So right here is where this doctrine is contrary to the great mass of people, this issue of renunciation."

And the Buddha says, "So it is. Even I myself, before my awakening, when I was still an unawakened bodhisatta, I thought renunciation is good, seclusion is good. But my heart did not leap up at the idea. It did not grow confident or steadfast or firm, seeing it as peace."

Then the thought occurred to him—I like how he says "the thought occurred," giving that sense that the thought's just coming and going—the thought occurred: "What is the cause? What is the reason why my heart does not leap up at renunciation, doesn't see it as peace?" Then the thought occurred: "I haven't seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that theme. I haven't understood the reward of renunciation. I have not familiarized myself with it. That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't understand it, doesn't see it as peace."

This is so straightforward and obvious, but I find it encouraging. Sunk in the flood of sensuality, the mind that's really in the habit of wanting and aversion and reaction and amusing itself—it's not really very amusing, but anyway—it's not going to say, "Oh yeah, great, let me just drop all of this stuff and be silent."

We come on retreat, the first day the mind says, "Why did I do this?" Maybe not the first day—the first day it's all nice. Then the second day, the third day: "Why am I doing this?" We start concocting all kinds of things to do and think and talk about and worry about. And then there's some quiet, some space, some peace. We re-recognize the natural state. And then, for many people, not everybody all the time, but for everybody sometime—the moans, the shrieks, the groans. We start to think, "Oh, this is why I didn't want to be quiet." We start to see the things that maybe the incessant sense busyness, the incessant thinking, the incessant input has really been shutting out.

For all of us, it can be whatever our particular demons might be. Self-judgment starts getting so loud. People say, "How could I not have noticed that every single thought I ever have is judgment?" It's not true, of course—no one has every single thought as the same mental state. But we start to notice how often. Whether it's judgment or needing to control or guilt or sorrow or comparing or fear of chaos or worthlessness or pride—whatever your particular ones are, they're going to come up. That's part of it. That's part of what the silence, the seclusion allows: for these things that have been pushed away, but at a price, to come up.

The next aspect of this kaya viveka, seclusion of body, is really our mindfulness or restraint at the sense doors—the moment-to-moment mindfulness. This is what supports us when these demons, when the shrieks and the groans and all the stuff that's been kept down starts to emerge.

Restraint at the sense doors is often talked about as renunciation, but the way Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it, I love. He calls it satipañña, mindfulness-wisdom at the moment of sense door contact. There's seeing, there's feeling sadness, there's hearing, there's thinking, whatever. Sati is of course just our moment-to-moment bare attention, just meeting what's happening just as it is. Wisdom—we can't make wisdom be there, but the moment-to-moment bare attention, just meeting, seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, sensing with the body and the emotional, the thinking realm, moment after moment.

This aspect of seclusion, restraint at the sense doors, doesn't mean shutting all the windows, as Thich Nhat Hanh said—you just narrow it down. We're still having the six sense doors and the six sense door contact. This satipañña at the moment of sense door contact is the restraint: you bring the attention, it meets what's happening right at the point of contact, and it just doesn't have to proliferate any further. It doesn't have to judge or compare or remember or make up a story. And if it does happen, that's the next sense door contact—the thought, the emotion, the memory. "Oh, thinking."

There's no sense that whatever's arising is wrong or bad. This aspect of seclusion, of restraint at the sense doors, doesn't mean pushing away anything. It means that mindful, simple awareness right here. Right here, right here, right here. That's what our practice is from the moment we walk in the door, and hopefully the rest of our life too.

That's what is our support when the demons start to shriek, when it really gets wild. In a way, it's good that this doesn't usually happen in the first couple of days, when the mind is just falling asleep and getting restless. We're cultivating, developing the moment-to-moment restraint at the sense doors. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking—just this, just this, just this. It doesn't matter what this is. So when "just this" is suddenly intense, "Oh, yeah, this too, this too." That's also restraint at the sense doors. Satipañña, mindfulness wisdom. The wisdom arises just from the steadiness of bare attention. This is an aspect of seclusion, of restraint, of renunciation.

We're not shutting out the world. We're not shutting off the senses. And this is where this seclusion that helps us cultivate moment-to-moment awareness and wisdom is going to be able to take us back out into the world of people, of more stuff coming in. We're clearing the decks with the physical seclusion so that we can actually have a little space to notice how the mind works, how it gets sucked into sense contact and lost, how with just awareness that doesn't have to happen. But also how the sense contact is not the enemy. It's not a problem. And that includes the mental sense door.

So seclusion is not motivated by thinking that sense experience, human beings, anything is bad. Or that awareness, that freedom of heart and mind, that non-clinging is dependent on not having certain sense things present. That's conditioned. It can't be conditioned. But we're using conditions because we're so sunk in the other way of being and in the reactions that we need to artificially create a little space, a lot of space, over and over.

In a way, when the stuff starts coming up and the demons are shrieking, that's great. That's where we really learn the strength of moment-to-moment awareness, where we learn that it's accessible. Sometimes we're really lost in the shrieking and the groaning and whatever's going on behind those closed doors. But sometimes we all have that moment where, "Oh, it's just this. It doesn't have to go away to know the peace of heart and mind of non-clinging. It doesn't have to go away. I don't have to be different. Nothing has to be different."

The only shift is a shift of interest, of awareness, from really being so absorbed and sunk in the

object—even when the object is my emotional crisis, it's still an object—to the awareness of. Awareness gets more interesting, the object less so.

Andrew Olendzki, in one of his articles, put it this way: "As sati, as mindfulness grows, our mental attention is gradually shifted from the objects of awareness to the process of being aware. This comes from an attitude of letting go of the object, abandoning attachment to the object." And as I said, the object includes any of the six senses, including all our stories and thoughts about me.

The mind is a dynamic process. When that mind and attention is stuck on what has arisen, kind of glued to it—as Ajahn Chah says, sunk in sensuality—then the mind seems rigid and limited. But the mind that is letting go moment after moment just keeps opening into the emerging flow. The flow just keeps on flowing. Mind is also part of that flow, moment after moment. Our practice isn't about lining up and changing and getting the right flow of objects so we don't have to be bothered anymore. It's the whole shift from being sunk in any sense experience at all. And viveka, seclusion, is just a support for this.

Moment after moment of simple mindful presence, this restraint at the sense door—just not shooting off—leads to citta viveka, or seclusion of mind. Classically, it's defined as the moment when the mind is secluded from the hindrances. This is often in the suttas when the Buddha says, "Secluded from the hindrances, the mind entered the first jhana." That's often the little phrase that's the prelude to moving into the deep absorptions: secluded from the hindrances.

It doesn't have to be deep absorption states, though. We all experience times of citta viveka when the mind is secluded from the hindrances. There are moments when the hindrances aren't there—times when your moment-after-moment attention is getting more steady, the mind is quieting down, and you're noticing more, even if it's not quite conscious, the peace, the stillness of the non-reactive heart and mind. As that begins to be more felt, more noticed, it becomes a little more likely to occur in consciousness. One moment of mindfulness is a proximate cause for the next moment of mindfulness. One moment of anger is a good indication for the next moment of anger when we're caught in it. So moment after moment of mindfulness quite naturally leads to citta viveka.

Whether it's deep absorption concentration or moment-to-moment just being with what happens, we like it. It's lovely. Those times when you're not thinking, "Oh God, when's anger going to come back? I'm having a moment of peace, but I know craving's going to come." The citta viveka is more like a relaxed space where just for some time, those old hindrances just aren't coming. It feels very spacious, relaxed, light, unified. It's not like you look around and think, "Wow, they're really not here. This feels nice." If you say all that stuff, then you're gone. But it gets less brittle, more reliable, more flexible. It's not like you have to hold on to your concentration, have to protect it because something's going to come back.

It's really just this: because the peace is more accessible, the non-clinging mind is more familiar, more tangible. And clinging and aversion and being sunk—it just isn't very interesting anymore. The more flexible and relaxed and steady this state is—and it is a state, not the end of things—the less appealing all

the regular sense pleasures are. To the point that things you really thought were so important, from that place, you just can't even... Who cares if I ever experience that again? Who cares? It's so gross, so crass. There's just a subtleness.

This is citta viveka, whether it's deep concentration or in a more broad, flexible way. It's not the end of things. It's not what we aspire to. But it is another level of seclusion, and it leads to what Sayadaw U Pandita calls vikkhambhana viveka, a more subtle sense of seclusion, where the hindrances are not only not there, but very far. They're really quiet. There's a sense they just couldn't get in there, even if you tried. The mind is very light and soft and buoyant and pliable. It's nice. This is not freedom, though. We like it, but it's not freedom.

But as the mind gets more and more secluded from being sunk in sense pleasures, from reactivity, from the hindrances, the lightness, the emptiness, the buoyancy, the non-reactivity, and the ability to be with anything gets more and more pronounced, recognizable, familiar. That's the value of this seclusion—not that it's a state to hold on to, because you can't, we can't, it's going to go—but that within it, just as without it but a bit easier, we can recognize that peace, the emptiness, the non-clinging.

But as it gets more subtle, the seclusion is very tricky because we fall so easily into what's called corruptions of insight—upakilesa—where we get basically attached because it's so nice. In the citta viveka, in all its various forms, one big thing that happens is at some point attachment creeps in. Usually we don't notice it right away because attachment isn't there. The hindrances are far away. But gradually, little by little, the attachment can really creep in. It's subtle. We don't recognize it until it's not there, until that nice citta viveka isn't there anymore. We really think we weren't attached. But so much of our practice, even without realizing it, can come to be around trying to get back to that state, that experience. "That's what freedom is. These grosser things can't be freedom. It has to be that." We don't see that this is conditioning. That can't be freedom.

The more subtle level is so much nicer than anything we normally experience that sometimes we may know it's not freedom, but we say, "You know what, it's good enough. I'll settle for this." And that's when we start getting attached to the silence, attached to retreat. We start yearning for retreat or not wanting anything to do with other people. Or on retreat, any sound—God forbid there should ever be a sound. We run around trying to stop all the sounds because it's going to wreck somebody's practice, impede their silence, their liberation.

I've been part of meetings where we're talking for twenty minutes about how sometimes people walk out that door and people sitting in the hall hear it open and it's going to destroy their practice. And I had just come back from Asia, where noise is not exactly the issue. Nobody is thinking there shouldn't be noise. Great, let them slam the door. Let there be some noise.

We can get reactive, obsessive, trying to protect our seclusion of mind, our viveka. Or we get dull—"This is good enough, this is it, this is all there is." Very subtly, something turns off the interest, the investigation.

"Okay, now I know. This is it." If we relax in a way that means we don't need awareness anymore, it's going to take care of itself, we tune off into dullness.

The Buddha once said two things he never lost sight of when he was still an unenlightened bodhisatta: one was never to be lax in his energy, and the second was never to settle merely for wholesome and pleasant states of mind. That's a lot more difficult than it sounds. "All this work. This is great." Not settling doesn't mean we have to hate the wholesome and pleasant states of mind, but not to land there as me. Not to land there with clinging. Keep looking. Keep exploring.

I had a friend who was a monk in Thailand for many years, living in the forest. His life was very peaceful. His mind seemed really calm, equanimous, untroubled. You could think, "This is freedom." But at some point, he realized, "No, the conditions are supporting peace, calmness, equanimity. But I don't think it's freedom. I'm just getting dull." That realization motivated him to leave Thailand, come back to the States, and disrobe. And he found out it was true—clinging was still arising in the mind and heart.

I'm not saying we have to look for trouble. We can support ourselves. But not to settle merely for wholesome states of mind, merely for peace.

This brings us to the third kind of seclusion: seclusion from suffering—the way I described it in the beginning, seclusion of beings as a synonym for awakening, or suññatā, emptiness.

This is how Ajahn Buddhadasa talks about it. First, suññatā refers to the characteristic or fundamental nature of all things: the fact that the character of all things is voidness, emptiness of inherent self. The second application points to the quality of the mind when it is not grasping and clinging at anything. The character of the mind when it isn't attaching to anything is called voidness also. To know Dhamma means that Dhamma is truly present and that we are aware of it. To know suññatā means that voidness is manifest in awareness.

I encourage you: in any moment that the mind is aware of any measure of emptiness, of voidness, even if it's not absolute or perfect, keep on recognizing it. On any one day, emptiness—remember, the quality of the mind and heart that's not clinging to anything—is there repeatedly in our awareness. Even if it's not the absolute suññatā, it's still very good. As long as we take the trouble to notice it. If we take an interest in this sort of emptiness, this voidness, right from the start, it will generate a contentment with voidness. It makes it easier to practice, to recognize, and to really come to know it more and more deeply.

In a way, that's the point of all our seclusion: to help awareness notice voidness, emptiness, the heart and mind of non-clinging, seclusion from suffering in a moment. It may not be the end of things, but it's still very good, and it's arising really very frequently every day in our minds, especially here.

When we're set on looking for experience or reacting to experience we don't like, we're still caught in the flood of sensuality. We don't notice just the moments of emptiness—nothing special, no reference point to me, no reference point to anything. They're not like big fireworks going off. Nothing special. But over and

over, we learn to recognize them. We don't have to generate a contentment with voidness. That happens by itself. It's very trustworthy, this sense of attention moving more and more to the process of awareness and less and less sinking into whatever the object is. The emptiness becomes more and more obvious.

Our task is to learn to recognize and trust that the silence, the space, the emptiness is within, always accessible, not dependent on seclusion—though the seclusion helps us learn to recognize and re-recognize. It's not dependent on any particular experience.

It is easier for most of us to recognize the heart and mind of non-clinging, just little moments of it, to recognize how we're lost in reactivity and sensuality, when we have a measure of physical and mental seclusion. Otherwise there's just too much going on. But we don't have to stay locked in that seclusion. We don't have to be afraid. We have to find somehow that as long as it's dependent on the situation, it still isn't free. It isn't stable enough. It isn't strong enough. We haven't really stabilized in it. So it's how to take it back into the world.

This is our practice for whatever we do after this. It doesn't mean one couldn't be a hermit or a contemplative or live really silently. That's also possible. But even that won't always be the case.

Thomas Merton wrote: "One who is called to solitude is not called to solitude to cultivate the illusion that he is different, withdrawn, and elevated. He is called to emptiness. And in this emptiness, she does not find points upon which to base a contrast between herself and others. On the contrary, she realizes, although perhaps confusedly at first, that she has

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