Seclusion

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 56:52

Someone once asked the Buddha, "Do you know, dear sir, emancipation, release, seclusion for beings?" Bhikkhu Bodhi, in his notes to his translation, makes the point that these three words—emancipation, release, and seclusion—are three designations, three definitions, three ways of talking about nirvana, freedom. I want to talk about the third of those tonight: seclusion.

Seclusion has various levels, but in terms of nirvana, Bhikkhu Bodhi says it really means seclusion from suffering, being separated from suffering.

When we first hear the word seclusion in English, the first aspect that comes to mind is physical seclusion, being separated from other people. That's certainly an aspect—that's really where it starts. Going through the history of all different religions, the hermit life has been a central aspect in many of them. Jesus spending years in the wilderness, the Buddha spending his six years in seclusion and then his whole monastic life, many ascetic wanderers. I don't have to go through it all.

I want to start by talking about this aspect of seclusion and move through how it serves our awakening. How is seclusion, how is this aloneness different from loneliness? People who don't really relate to or understand the contemplative life, or even the sense of the hermit life, often accuse it of being really self-centered, self-interested, a kind of passive turning away from the world that is unhelpful. Obviously I don't think that.

I was reading a book some years ago about different kinds of hermits. I don't even remember the author, but I want to read a few things from Thomas Merton and also about the Coptic hermits of Egypt in about 280 A.D.

This starts with 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. Along the Nile Valley, the desert is a silent presence always visible to the dwellers in towns and villages as they live in comfort. Its bare hills are the 'waste howling wilderness' of the Old Testament, the haunts of demons. 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."

That sets the tone. Then the book goes on to talk about St. Antony of Egypt, who is one of the most famous, one of the most well-known even now, of the Desert Fathers. There were apparently some desert mothers as well, but they had to masquerade as desert fathers. Not as well-known.

St. Antony of Egypt was the son of rich Christian parents, quite well to do. His parents died when he was young and left him well provided. But the book says that when he heard the words of Jesus to the rich—that you should sell all you have and give it to the poor—he somehow felt that they were spoken to him, and he did that. He sold everything he had and went into a life of solitude.

First he went to a local hermit to learn how to do the solitude thing. Then he went to live on the outskirts of the village, then moved further away. He finally ended up at a deserted fort on the bank of the Nile, way out in the desert. It said he lived alone here without seeing a human face for over twenty years, being brought supplies of bread and water every six months by friends. Sometimes the friends who brought these supplies would hear terrifying shrieks and groans from behind the locked doors. Eventually they could stand this no longer—it took them twenty years; they had some patience. They broke down the doors, expecting to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. Instead, Antony emerged healthy, sane, balanced, and really full of energy and advice to help people. He went to Alexandria to support Christians who were being persecuted by the Romans and spent the rest of his life alternating between retreats into solitude and emerging to help and advise others.

Something interesting was going on behind those locked doors in the waste howling wilderness. And it wasn't just for himself, because it really served for him to go out and be with and serve all beings.

So what's going on with that? What's this seclusion about?

The first aspect of seclusion is this separation from other humans. That's only the very beginning. It then moves from separation from humans—this is called in Pali *kāya-viveka*, seclusion of body. *Kāya* is body. This is the first aspect of seclusion of body, where we seclude ourselves from other human beings—not out of hatred, not out of fear, but out of allowing ourselves the space to turn inward and really understand more what's going on.

Again, he's talking about the Desert Fathers. "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 simply be themselves."

And Thich Nhat Hanh: "We've lost our taste for silence. We do not know how to be with ourselves without something else to accompany us—a book, a telephone, TV, conversation, you name it. We've lost our taste for being alone. So the first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our very best. We need to reorganize our daily lives so that we do not allow society to colonize us."

So that's the first, most basic sense of seclusion in the way of hermits—a period of time of solitude. In a way, it's what we're doing here without communication, to give ourselves some space, some time where we're not accompanied by other people, by our distractions, to turn inward and come to see what's going on. And that's what's happening, right? We don't always like what's going on, but that's an important part

of it.

Then comes the next aspect of kaya-viveka, seclusion of body. This is really the reason we would have seclusion from other people to begin with, which is actually seclusion of body from the flood of sense experience. I don't think I need to go into it at length, but in our daily life—and apparently it was the same back in ancient Egypt, apparently it was the same back in ancient India—there's just so much going on, so much sense experience: seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking. And it can be so powerful. There's so much happening that, as you know, we just get lost in the habits of mind of reaction to sense experience. And because it's happening so fast, it's harder to notice.

This is how Ajahn Chah describes it. He calls it kamogha, the flood of sensuality: "Sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations. We're sunk in them because we look at the externals. We look towards the sense experience. We don't look inwardly." We're not saying sense experience is bad—that's life. It's the sense of being sunk. In fact, similar to what Heather said last night from the Buddha, it's like being a slave when we're sunk in sense experiences. Somebody else has control over you. When they tell you to sit, you have to sit. When they tell you to walk, you have to walk. Being enslaved by the senses is the same. No matter how hard you try, you can't seem to shake it off. This is when our attention keeps being directed outward toward the senses. There's a pleasant sight—we're sunk in it. We're so flooded by it, we just move toward it. We like it. We get into liking. We get into the whole story. The next minute, there's something unpleasant. It's too hot. We don't even notice what's happening—there's aversion. I've got to do something. Throw off my robe. Open the window. Get out the door. Write a note. Do something. We go outside.

It's too cold—I've got to go up to where it's warm. It's too noisy—I've got to go to where it's quiet. It's too quiet—I've got to go to where there's some energy. We're just caught in the hound dog thing again. We've talked about this—being sunk in sense experience through the five or six senses. Again, it's not that there's anything wrong with sense experience.

This *kāya viveka*, this seclusion from the flood of sense experiences—we're not talking about going into a sensory deprivation tank where you don't experience anything. We're just talking about a little bit of seclusion so we have half a chance of noticing what's going on once in a while. Just how much seeing goes on! We talked about that the other day in one of the questions. The tendency is for the attention of the mind to just go out to sights, out to sights, never remembering to turn around and look at the mind.

The seclusion, the sense of simplifying, secluding ourselves from that flood we live with in our daily lives—that everyone pretty much lives with in daily life, in the information age, in the traffic age. God forbid you should walk fifty yards without calling somebody or texting somebody on your cell phone. You might be alone. You might not have any input. Somebody might not know you exist.

So we come here. There's still plenty of sense experience, and that's fine, because that's what we learn from. We'll go to that in a minute. But just the physical seclusion of body—we're not in our normal life.

There is much more austerity here, I assume. I mean, it's possible you could live more simply than this, sure. But I imagine for most of us, this is somewhat simpler. You don't have control over your food. You're sleeping in a relatively simple, austere room. You only have the clothes you brought. Hopefully you're not doing what happens halfway through the three-month course at IMS in the winter, when suddenly all these mail-order packages start arriving. L.L. Bean and REI, they're piling up in the foyer. Hopefully that's not going on here. Hopefully I didn't give you ideas.

So just this—this simplicity, this little bit of renunciation, this seclusion from the flood of senses. And then there's the flood of senses in our mind, the flood of reactivity, the flood of talking, the flood of endless commentary. You all know that. You've all talked about how the mind just reacts and discusses every single thing that happens. And a lot of you are mentioning—I know it changes—but a lot of you are mentioning that it's slowing down. It's less gripping. There's more of a sense of space. The relentless chatter and commenting can slow down.

This is just the beginning of being able to see the space of heart and mind that starts to have a possibility of glimmering through when we're not so sunk—not so much in the senses themselves, but in our reaction, in being really turned outwards towards all the sense experiences. It's like a little space where something other can be noticed.

There's an article in the New York Times Book Review by a woman about a book written by another woman who was also writing about hermits. She talked about unhappy hermits—people who really go off to be alone out of aversion and hatred and fear and phobia. We're not talking about that. But she says the positive is "an elected silence"—the expression is Gerard Manley Hopkins—"that gives us the possibility of cleansing the doors of our perception so that we might even see the world as Traherne did, saluted and surrounded by innumerable joys."

And that's what starts to happen—joys and sorrows both. But our perception, the doors of perception, get a little cleansed. A lot of you have mentioned the different ways this shows up: suddenly the sounds of the frogs are so clear, the bird calls are so clear, the moon when we come out and the stars seem so vivid. Our sense of the silence and the appreciation is so much more obvious. There's just some space, a little bit of space in awareness, to notice these things when we're not so sunk in this flood of sensuality. And sometimes just this is enough. Sometimes coming home from a retreat, that's the thing we remember.

I remember one retreat, years ago, one of my first retreats, sitting somewhere as a little lizard was crawling over a stone. That was it. I remember that moment. It was thirty years ago. Because the perception was just so clear. There wasn't any reaction. It was just that sense of what it does—it points our awareness back to the spaciousness, the silence of the pure heart, the pure mind. We begin to be able to get a glimmer of this because of this seclusion from being sunk in the flood of sensuality.

And as many of you mentioned, I've certainly found it true—being in nature is an enormous support for many people. Not for everyone, but for many, it's an enormous support to this. It's one of the real

blessings, I would say, one of our real privileges to be able to be on a retreat like this, and to be in a place that has beautiful nature all around us. Many of the retreats I teach in different places around the world tend to be located somewhere in nature—not always, sometimes it's in the city, but often there's nature nearby.

Just noticing, so many people here have mentioned the quiet, the steadiness, the peace, various aspects of being here—the space, the sky, the frogs. Somehow, because there's not so much to react to, there's not so much sense of "me" about it. It reflects back to us, if we can notice, that possibility of purity, of silence, of space in mind and heart.

So when you're in nature and you're experiencing that, first just let it in. But then see if your mind tends to posit, "Oh, it's because it's so beautiful, it's out there." And then come back, turn your awareness around again and notice the quality of heart, the quality of mind that's just silent at this moment—silent without all the reactions of liking, disliking, analyzing, me, me, me. Just the frog sound. Just the stillness of the stars.

Just that sense—I know you know this poem, but I'll read it—that you get from this poem by Wendell Berry:

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 peace isn't something that's out there in the stars, in the water, in the wood drake. That's the peace of a heart and mind that's non-reactive, non-clinging, not identified, really awake. It's wonderful we can use the experience of nature to recognize this over and over, but don't give it away to nature. Turn around and notice.

That's one of the beauties, the joys of a simple life of physical seclusion, seclusion from the flood of sensuality. It really makes awareness so much more accessible and available. And you can see, I think, just from what I've said so far, that this seclusion isn't about just creating that kind of state—oh, let me go throw myself down by the still waters and try to get peaceful again, and then hold on to it, come what may. It's not "let me get rid of everybody and then just have some peace." It's not that.

It's that this is supporting conditions to help us turn our attention away from being sunk in reactivity and sense experience and turn back and recognize what the heart and mind in a moment that's awake and free from clinging is like. That's available here and now. We just need to clear the decks a little bit so we can notice it.

So *kāyaviveka* also includes, as I'm saying, the simplification—which is a kind of renunciation, really.

Enforced renunciation, then chosen renunciation, just getting less and less involved with needing things, wanting things, doing things.

That's one of the reasons in Buddhist countries and monasteries why the eight precepts are often practiced. I'm not advocating that one should do that, but that's really the underlying sense of it—to just free us up a little more from involvement. So the sixth precept, not eating in the afternoon, it's not to prove something. It's just to see how much time and energy and wanting and dislike goes into eating, and how much time is freed up when we don't eat in the evening.

The next precept about not wearing ornaments or jewelry or going to entertainments—that's kind of obvious. But the other aspect is not wearing jewelry, not wearing ointments. Well, we can't wear much ointment here because we're in silence and you can't smell nice. It's just noticing the time we spend tending to looking good, tending to how we feel. Not that we have to deliberately look bad—it's the same thing, only in reverse. It's just noticing.

I've seen it myself when you're trying to decide what to put on that day. Notice what's going on in the mind, not with judgment, but notice what's feeding more craving, what's feeding more aversion, what feeds simplicity and space. When I was a nun, only having three outfits and they were all pretty much the same, you just took the clean one. It was actually really nice. You just get up and you put it on. And now I can tell I'm having a bad day when I'm sitting there looking, "Oh, what can I wear today?"

Oh, this doesn't feel right. And that one… you know, it's like, oh my God, who cares? Nobody, nobody but me. And it's just all this extra hoo-ha. So there's a sense of renunciation in that.

But another aspect of this simplicity, and this is really where our mindfulness practice begins to kick in and play a part, is what's called restraint at the sense doors. There's the *kāya-viveka*, this seclusion of actually being separated from sense experiences, so it's not even there to pull you. But restraint at the sense doors is really the way we practice with mindfulness and wisdom right at the point of sense contact.

This doesn't mean hating sense contact or avoiding the pleasant. It just means that when there's sense contact—the five physical senses or the mental—*sati-paññā*, mindfulness and wisdom, are right there at that point of sense contact. We see what the sense contact is, and we notice what the mind does with it. That's restraint.

Sometimes a little bit of restraint can help—looking down, for instance—because so much goes out through the eyes. Even the Buddha said this. There's a whole sutta about the way to awakening and the perfect practitioner, so to speak. I'll just read one stanza: "A bhikkhu, a practitioner, keeps her eyes from wandering restlessly with desire."

I can really relate to that. You're doing your walking meditation, but the eyes are wandering restlessly with desire, almost looking for something to connect with, looking for something to like or dislike or judge. In a sense, when you're walking and somebody walks past, you just have to look. You just have to

look. Sometimes it's almost impossible not to look, even when you're paying attention. The craving comes. You think, "I won't look. I won't look." You get really determined. And as soon as you let go, you look.

And what comes from the looking? Is it satisfying? Does it make you happy? I would say ten to one, it gives rise to judgment. "Oh, God, right. Why did I do that? I'm stupid." Or "They look better than me." Or "I'm doing better than them." Whatever. "Why did I do that?" Restlessly looking.

So that's the sense of restraint at the sense doors. It can be not just sending your energy restlessly out with your eyes, not just sending it restlessly out with the ears. But it doesn't mean doing what a friend of mine once did. He put a blindfold on at IMS and walked around for three days blindfolded. I would say that's ignorance, not restraint at the sense doors. We're not going to learn from that either.

But this sense of restraint, of renunciation—it doesn't get a good rap in this culture. How many of you thought, "Yeah, great, renunciation! I love that idea"? Maybe you did. I mean, you're already on the far side of the spectrum; you wouldn't even be here otherwise.

But this is an interesting sutta I found, because the Buddha acknowledged this same thing. It's a sutta where Ānanda comes with a householder named Tapussa to the Buddha. And the householder says, "We're householders who indulge in sensuality, delight in sensuality, enjoy sensuality, rejoice in sensuality. For us—indulging, delighting, enjoying, and rejoicing in sensuality—renunciation seems like a sheer drop-off. Yet I've heard that in this doctrine and discipline"—meaning in the Buddha's teaching—"the hearts of the very young monks and nuns leap up at renunciation, grow confident, steadfast, and firm, seeing it as peace."

So right here is where this teaching runs contrary to the great mass of people: in this issue of renunciation.

And the Buddha says, "So it is, Ananda. 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 renunciation. It did not grow confident, steadfast, or firm, seeing it as peace."

So the thought occurred to him, "Well, what's the cause? What's the reason? Why doesn't my heart leap up? Why don't I see renunciation as peace?"

And then the thought occurred to him—I actually love the way this is phrased, "the thought occurred to me," because I just get the sense of the impersonal nature of thought. The thought occurred to me. Although I know that's the English; it wouldn't play that way in Pali.

The thought occurred to him: "I haven't seen the drawback of sensual pleasures. I haven't pursued that. I haven't investigated that theme. I haven't understood the reward of renunciation. I haven't familiarized myself with it. That's why my heart doesn't leap up at renunciation, doesn't go steadfast, doesn't see it as peace."

Right there we have a real good example of the difference between intellectual understanding and real, deep, intuitive insight knowledge. And so showing that it was the same for the Buddha as it is for us. On some level, you really wouldn't be here if you didn't have some real understanding and trust that seclusion, that renunciation is somehow going to help us. Sometimes we just really love it too.

But as we pursue that theme, as we really investigate it—the joys, the rewards of simplicity, of restraint at the sense doors, of seclusion from being lost in senses—the rewards of that become clear. And as well, and this isn't with judgment, this is with interest: is it true that there are drawbacks to sense pleasures, to being so lost in that? So we explore that, and we see for ourselves.

And that's when renunciation really is—it's one of the paramis, the ten perfections, but it's also one of the three right attitudes or right ways of thinking, which is the second stage of the Eightfold Path. So renunciation is really a deep inner intention, an understanding of mind and heart. We could take everything away from us and just be sitting here burning with desire and hating it that everything's been taken away. That's not really renunciation.

But when the renunciation comes, it's just a little thing. I'm sure you've seen it here. Maybe you always have thirds at lunch or you always go down for tea, and one day you say, "You know, I really don't want that. I don't need it." It's not the "you stupid, you should." It's like, "Oh, I don't need that." The renunciation is really the seeing that the craving goes away and the space opens up. So true renunciation is actually a state of happiness, of simplicity, of joy.

But in our practice of restraint of the sense doors, it's not always, of course, that way. So the restraint is bringing in this satipañña, this mindfulness-wisdom, at the point of sense contact—seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, thinking, emotions—not to judge it or say it's bad, but to see how the mind behaves in contact with senses: pleasant, unpleasant, neutral.

We've talked about this a lot, so I don't think I have to go too much into it, but really this is, in terms of kāya-viveka, seclusion of body, where it starts to move into the next level: citta-viveka, seclusion of mind, seclusion of heart. We begin with the mindfulness of just noticing. Something pleasant comes, we notice it, and we notice what the mind does. Sometimes it just rests there—pleasant. Sometimes it appreciates. Sometimes we're not really quite there, and it goes off into that whole story, like I said before.

We notice with unpleasant. It can hit the unpleasant and just zoom off into a whirlwind of aversion and fear and reactivity. And there's a whole range in between, and it's possible with that restraint right at the sense door to notice the hearing, notice it's felt as unpleasant, notice the little leaning of aversion, and not have to go there.

Same with neutral, which is hard to even notice, never mind the delusion, the spacing out, the who-knows-what's-happened that accompanies it. But boredom is often a response to neutral.

So in this satipañña at the point of sense contact, mindfulness and wisdom, this is where the deep habits

of our mind and heart—the ones that cause so much suffering in our life—begin to be able to be seen more clearly.

I know you all know this. Sometimes it's very subtle, sometimes not so subtle. But this is where the seclusion from so much sense input, the spaciousness, the silence of mind, and the awareness we begin to touch serve as support, allowing us to really see how these habitual reactions of heart and mind—aversion, clinging, delusion—how they arise, how they're conditioned, where they go, how they feed our sense of self. And how, when there's mindfulness and wisdom right there, sometimes they simply don't happen. It's fascinating. That's a big part of what our practice is about. We don't have to get obsessive about it.

Sometimes these insights are really quite subtle. The examples I've been giving are relatively subtle—seeing the habits that come from our relationship with pleasant, unpleasant, and neutral. When the mental chatter has died down considerably and there isn't too much flood of input, sometimes that's just what you're knowing. You think nothing's going on. You're just having these sittings that seem painful and unpleasant, your mind a little reactive. You think, "I'm just tight. I have one sitting where I'm all tight and in pain, and then the next sitting is kind of relaxed and open and peaceful, and then tight again." You think nothing's going on.

But that's huge. Because what's happening there is really moment-to-moment seeing with mindfulness and wisdom. The cause and effect, the nature of physical and mental experiences arising constantly, the pleasant, unpleasant, or neutral constantly, and how suffering is created or not in the mind and heart, how the mind relates to it. Over and over and over. We're seeing that moment by moment by moment.

And the part of us that's impatient, in a hurry, thinks, "Well, I've seen it, I get it, it's time to move on. I didn't come here for one month just to have pleasant sitting, unpleasant sitting, pleasant walking. Something should happen, you know?" But moment after moment, this is a lot that's happening.

Part of me wants to go back to the day-blind stars and lie down. But no, you don't get to do that now. You get to walk and notice pain in the leg. You get to sit. "Oh, this is really nice and spacious. I don't have to do anything. Why doesn't it stay like this?" Oh, because I want it to. "Okay, I won't want, I won't want." And we're just watching it over and over again.

But in the space and silence, sometimes—not every retreat and not for everybody, but it really often happens—what comes up is not so subtle. The St. Anthony's demons start to emerge. The wailing, the shrieks and groans of St. Anthony behind the door. Sometimes, as the silence and the lack of our normal input take hold, as our normal conscious or unconscious ways of denial, of diversion, of filling ourselves up, of keeping these things down—as they're not there, and as we're cultivating moment after moment of mindfulness and wisdom, that accepting, receptive, kind awareness without hierarchy, just whatever's arising coming into receptive, present-moment awareness, as Heather was talking about last night—our denial systems stop being fed.

And so sometimes what comes up, and it can come up slowly about some little incident happening here, or it can come up with a huge rush and overwhelm us, but our sometimes really strong so-called demons start to emerge and overwhelm us for a while. Often the content starts out as something really small on the retreat—some little incident, something you said, some note you got. It could be anything. And your mind is going, "This doesn't make sense. I'm completely lost in terror over this little thing." And we fight with it, thinking "this doesn't make sense" for a while. But it has nothing to do with what's happening. It's just triggering our deep stuff.

So it's not only the five hindrances, which Heather talked about, but often for people it will come to whatever your really deep personal story is. It usually has a story. It may not. But whatever your demon is—self-hatred, terror, pride, fear of chaos, needing to control, sleepiness, worthlessness, helplessness—take your pick. You probably know yours, and if you don't, you will.

One of my teachers said, "In the light of awareness, all the snakes come up out of their holes." Not always, and not all at once.

Don't get into thinking that if it's not happening, something's wrong. Don't get into thinking that if it is happening, something's right or wrong. It's just that sometimes this happens. Rarely do we think, "Great, this is what practice is supposed to be like"—unless you've been really bored, and then you welcome it rather than boredom. And that's not helpful either.

But this is a really important, and when it's happening, essential part of practice. Most of us, on our journey, really want to get over this. We want to come out of the shrieks and groans, like Saint Anthony, balanced, sane, whole, helpful—but really deeply in this world. To truly be in this world, to really be able to be with other people, to be with all the suffering and confusion and hatred in the world, and the cruelty. I don't know—personally, I've got to see that in myself. If I can't meet it in myself, how am I going to be able to be with somebody else with compassion when they're manifesting it? How am I going to keep from just being beaten down psychologically just by reading the newspapers?

So this meeting, for ourselves, for our own freedom, our own ability to be with these demons when they arise without being so afraid we never even get near them—or without having them drive our behavior when they come up in our life, because they're so strong and we haven't really had practice meeting them, learning to understand them, learning to befriend them.

For me, whenever I get to a particular feeling—I usually feel it here—I don't have to go into my story; we all have our own stories. But when I start to get to the reactions of my mind, I start to get to what I call the crazy place, where I can tell my reactions are way, way, way over the edge of what's going on. And I can see that. But I believe in them. I mean, I'm not just going, "Oh yes, over the edge." I'm really feeling them. And I'm starting to feel crazy. "Oh, this is the crazy place." And I'm glad when I recognize that. Because then, when I can just feel the feelings—I don't have to find the story, but the feeling—the closer I get to it, it's like, "I'm going to die if I feel that." That's the story.

Then I'm really happy now. I didn't used to be, but now I'm really happy when I recognize that. Because I know I'm not going to die. And when the attention can just rest for a moment with that, just rest there—it doesn't fix it or anything—oh, it's like this. It's like all that crazy reactivity stuff, just for that moment, dies away, because that was all a smokescreen not to feel it. I didn't know this, but that's what it was—fifty years of smokescreen not to feel something.

So sure, we're sitting here, we're in the seclusion, there's more space for this to come up, and we won't always recognize it. But just know—just know it's an essential aspect of our journey. We need to honor it, respect the power of it, and know really deeply—I really believe this—the less we're in fear of it, the less we need to be driven by it, the more we're freed for compassionate response.

This is from Thomas Merton again, talking about the hermits: "The hermits who left the world as though escaping from a wreck did not merely intend to save themselves. They knew that they were helpless to do any good for others so long as they were floundering about in the wreckage. But once they got a foothold on solid ground, things were different. Then they had not only the power, but even the obligation to pull the world to safety after them."

So in my mind—and I'm only speaking for me—that's really the direction our seclusion is moving us in, the ability to really do that.

Seclusion of body moves into citta viveka, seclusion of mind. The classical definition of seclusion of mind-heart means secluded from the hindrances, the five that Heather spoke of. Often citta viveka is thought of only as shamatha, deep absorption practice on one object, but it's not that. Citta viveka really has different levels, but as there's moment after moment of just mindful presence, awareness, knowing what's happening—just as I've been talking about, just as we've all been talking about throughout our practice—moment after moment of that simple awareness, noticing the attitude, the pure awareness, moment after moment of that leads to this citta viveka. The mind, the heart, becomes more and more secluded from the hindrances.

Not like you're holding them away—"Oh no"—but you know those times, sometimes for a moment, sometimes lasting quite a while, where you're not putting out any effort, but you just kind of notice wanting and aversion is just not really coming up. And something comes across your field of vision that normally would trigger wanting or aversion, and it doesn't. You're even looking, kind of waiting. Where is it? Am I making this up? And it really doesn't come. Wow. We don't really trust that, but it's nice. It's definitely nice.

So that's the first step of citta viveka.

It comes from the steadiness of mindfulness. And it can deepen. It can deepen whether through one-pointed shamatha practice or through continuing steadiness of mindfulness, where it goes to a place that's not just a little bit secluded from the hindrances, but where the mind gets further and further away

from them. It's like becoming more secluded. The hindrances are weak and far away. Wanting and aversion just don't come in so much.

It feels much more stable, this state of mind. And it is a state of mind. It feels much more stable, where you're not so afraid—oh my God, if I do the wrong thing, self-judgment is going to come back. There's a way it's just more trustworthy.

This could be leading into deep absorption practice of jhana, but it also arises in moment-to-moment mindfulness with changing objects, like what Sayadaw U Pandita would talk about as khanika samadhi, momentary concentration, and vipassana jhanas. It's a place where the mind, the heart, feels really light, malleable. It's very pleasant. Mostly, we really like it. And it's useful, certainly, because we get to see what it's like when the mind and heart are non-reactive. We can touch that space of purity. We can really see that it's possible to be with very pleasant experience and not get lost in craving, not even have it come up. Oh, that's lovely.

But really important: keep the light of interest, of investigation, alive and awake in these states. It's really easy for us, especially when we first start to have states like this arise at times—we can't make them come, they just arise—it's easy to mistake that silence, that malleability, that peacefulness, that non-reactivity for something else. It feels like, "Oh, now I've got it. This is it. This is what I've been practicing for." And I mean, it's very good. Most of us would think, okay, that's good enough. If I could just have this, it would be good enough.

But that's not the point. It's a conditioned state. Don't mistake it for freedom. Don't mistake it for the real seclusion from suffering that is the heart and mind of non-clinging.

I've noticed two things that can happen in that space. You look and see for yourself. One is that we subtly get attached. We're really aware: there's no desire, there's no aversion, this space is nice. We even say, "I know, this is just a conditioned space, I know." But we subtly get lost again in looking at the space and forgetting to just notice the attitude of mind. Wanting can come in. Subtle identification can come in. It's just like, okay, this is good enough. We stop investigating. We get clinging.

Or the other thing is—and this is what I tend to do—we just get complacent. Oh, great. Now it's all here. Nothing else to do. No more craving, no more aversion. I can just coast around. At first it's true, in a state on retreat where you can just do whatever arises. You take a walk. You don't sit. You think it doesn't matter because the mind is clear. There's interest. It's balanced. It's stable. If someone says something to you and goes away, it doesn't rock the samadhi. You think, well, that's it. So gradually you just do more things and more things. And before you know it, you're down in the bookstore buying trinkets and writing letters.

You check and you go, wait. It doesn't quite have that same feeling. It slips up on us. We get complacent.

The Buddha said, "Two things I never lost sight of while I was still an unenlightened bodhisattva. One was

never to be lax, never to give up my effort. The second, never to settle merely for wholesome states of mind."

And that's powerful because, you know, mostly given in life, I'd settle for wholesome states of mind. But that's not freedom. It's wholesome states of mind. So he's just saying, keep looking. And that becomes our koan—not to mistake the wholesome states of mind, the peace of the non-reactive mind. Experience that. But a constructed state of citta-viveka, dependent on conditions, is going to also deconstruct when the conditions change.

Sometimes when it's peaceful and quiet, we get kind of clinging to it without realizing, and we think, we impute it to the circumstances. So when there's a noise, we get really upset because it's wrecking my quiet. And the quiet's what's giving me peace, right? Sometimes at the Forest Refuge in Barre, I won't even tell you the meetings we've gone through because there's this noise that happens when someone walks out the door near the meditation hall and bangs it. And then the people in the meditation hall hear that bang and it really upsets their samadhi. We have meetings about stuff like this. I would say that was misplacing what the real point of citta-viveka is. It's not to hold on to the silence. Don't mistake external silence for freedom or even for peace.

So our koan is to use the seclusion of bodies, seclusion from all the sense inputs, seclusion from the hindrances—to use it to keep recognizing that the silence, the space of freedom, is the silence in that moment of the heart and mind that's awake and free from clinging, free from sense of self. Clinging and sense of self pretty much go together. And that's our calling, to keep discovering that. Whenever we start to impute the peace outward, impute the freedom outward—and outward could be out to a very subtle state of mind—just turn around and notice the purity of awareness of the knowing mind itself.

This is the way Buddhadasa talks about it in his book *Heartwood of the Bodhi Tree*, which is a fascinating, really interesting book. He's talking about sunyata, usually translated as emptiness, but Santikaro translates it as voidness. Really he's just meaning it in two simple ways.

Sunyata in his first meaning simply means that all things and all beings are void or empty—how does he put it?—empty of a particular sense of self, just all conditions. He said that's everything: in the mind, in the heart, a speck of dust, a sparrow flying—empty of sense of self.

Then the second application—and that's one we can really look at in our own experience over and over—sunyata in its second application points to the quality of the mind, of the heart, when it is not grasping and clinging at anything. So we can turn around and notice that quality.

This is what he says: "I encourage you, in any moment that the mind, the heart has any measure of this voidness, this emptiness of clinging to anything—even if it's not absolutely or perfectly empty—keep recognizing it." Actually, on any one day, sunyata is there repeatedly. Sunyata as that quality of the heart and mind that's empty in that moment of clinging, of grasping to anything. Actually, on any one day,

sunyata is there repeatedly. Even if it's not an absolute fixed sunyata, it's still very good as long as we take the trouble to notice it. If we take an interest in this sort of voidness, this sunyata, that will make it easy to practice and to sink into it, to attain it more and more.

So he says, generate a contentment with voidness. Generating a contentment with just noticing the quality of heart, of mind, when it's not clinging or grasping at anything. No big lights going off. It's not conditional actually on any kind of seclusion. But in that moment, that's the seclusion from suffering. There's no grasping, there's no clinging, there's no identification. It's just this. That sense that Wendell Berry talks about, of just lying there, the peace of wild things. A moment of wakefulness without any grasping at anything, without any sense of me or mine. Just that.

As Buddhadasa says, we all have many moments of that. Every day, if we would just get interested in noticing.

And then if you cling the next moment, just notice that—how it feels different.

Again from Merton, this second-to-last reflection about the Desert Fathers. He's talking about one who is called to solitude:

"One who is called to solitude 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 that she has entered into a solitude that is really shared by everyone. And so her solitude is the foundation of a deep, pure, and gentle sympathy with all other humans. More, it is the doorway by which she enters into the mystery of God and brings others into that mystery by the power of her love and her humility."

Just a moment of emptiness.

I'll end with one other quotation that's very similar. Again, it's from another Christian, so it's using Christian terminology—a woman who was an Anglican nun. From this book about hermits: an Anglican nun whose need for solitude took her to an abandoned cabin on a cliff, which she fixed up and lived there for eighteen years. But not quite alone, because people kept coming and bringing their troubles to her. She was always welcoming and willing to meet them because of what she believed. She believed that the responsibility of the solitary is—these are her words—"to stand at the intersection between the love of God and suffering humanity."

The responsibility of the solitary: to stand at the intersection of the love of God and suffering humanity.

That's what we wake to. Seclusion from suffering.

So let's just sit quietly for a minute.

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