Seclusion (Viveka)

Carol Wilson · Notable Dhamma Teachers — Carol Wilson · 1:00:59

Beautiful night, huh? Did you notice? There's something about how the beauty of nature, the moon and the clouds, can bring the mind into a kind of space and quietness sometimes. It's just lovely.

So tonight I want to talk about seclusion. The word in Pali is *viveka*.

When we first think about seclusion, we tend to think about it in terms of seclusion from other people—periods of solitude, periods of being alone. And this is a really important, respected, even vital part of so many spiritual traditions, isn't it? Times of renunciation, of solitude, of aloneness.

I want to share some reflections on that: the value of it, why we would do it, why it's so helpful. But also, in the way the Buddha talks about it in the teachings, seclusion isn't only about being secluded from other people. There's one quotation from a sutta where someone's asking the Buddha, "Do you know, sir, emancipation, release, seclusion for beings?" And Bhikkhu Bodhi, the great translator, notes that those are three designations for Nibbana: emancipation, release, seclusion for beings—that word *viveka*. So in that way it's being used as seclusion from dukkha, seclusion from the kilesas, from greed, hatred, and delusion. This idea of seclusion actually has a lot of different depths to it.

On the first level, which is really quite profound, there is this sense of spending some periods of time—and some people choose their whole life—secluded from other people, a life of being a recluse or a hermit. And in a small way, that's what we're all doing here. This form of intensive silent practice is really coming from a life of seclusion. And even though you may feel like you're more with people here than you ever are in your life—eighty of you all jammed together all the time, thinking "Please, seclusion, what do you mean?"—at least, hope to God, you're silent. And that's a little bit moving in that direction.

But it's a huge part of spiritual traditions. Jesus in the wilderness. The early Christian mystics. A few years ago, I was with a Swiss friend, and we were traveling in southern France. We went to visit in the Dordogne, in southwest France, two or three Tibetan monasteries that he knew—he was friends with some of the people who ran them. Two of them were under the auspices of the Karmapa, and one was a Dzogchen monastery.

What was interesting is that, not being in the Tibetan tradition, I wasn't really aware of these places. We got to one of them, and although it was Tibetan, all the people there were not Tibetan. Some were monks and nuns, some were lay people, but all different cultures—mostly Westerners, Europeans. They had just begun three-year, three-month, and three-day retreats. You've heard of that in the Tibetan tradition, right? It makes our three-month retreat seem like nothing.

They had just begun one. In a separate little enclave—there were four enclaves—over a hundred people had just started. In one of the enclaves, it was their first three-year retreat. In another, it was their second. In the others, it was their third. In still others, it was their fourth. So this is just quietly going on in France. All these hundred people on these three-year, three-month, and three-day retreats—their fourth one in a row. Can you imagine? They come out, earn a little money, and go back in again. Just to say: this is a tradition that's still alive in the world today, not only back in ancient times.

So how does this serve our aspiration for awakening in this practice? Whether we choose to be even more of a secluded person, or if our practice is really to awaken in daily life, here we are practicing a form of some kind of renunciation and seclusion. How can that be helpful?

I want to read from Thomas Merton, the American Trappist monk who was always drawn to being a hermit and mystic, but was always being called back by his superiors and not allowed to go be a real hermit. This is an encapsulation of something he said about the desert fathers—the early Christian desert fathers who went off into the desert completely alone in Egypt for practice: "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 for comparison.

I like that. Not that I'm a special person, but just more and more ordinary. But then still, why do we need, at times, to flee the world, to get away from the world, to discover how truly ordinary we are? You think, "I already know I'm really ordinary." But you don't really want to be ordinary. You want to be extraordinary. How can we be happy to be just ordinary?

Anyway, why do we need to get away? Thich Nhat Hanh speaks to this—why we would take time away from all the activity. Because it's not just this first form of seclusion called kāya viveka, or seclusion of body. We first think of it as being separate from people, because we get so caught up. But it's also about being removed from so much sense door activity, which we've touched on before.

So Thich Nhat Hanh is talking about both of these. He says, "We have lost our taste for silence. We do not know how to be with ourselves without something else to accompany us." He says a book, a telephone—you can tell how old this is. I would say with an iPhone, with our tablets, with our computers. Think about it. You don't have to think very long, do you? Go to a restaurant. How many people can sit there, never mind if they're alone, even when they're together, sitting there on their phones? Have you ever noticed that? Or we were somewhere recently, a restaurant with young people who looked like they were on a date, sitting there in pairs—but all on their phones. Really, to be alone without something to accompany us.

Thich Nhat Hanh continues: "The first thing for us to do is to return to ourselves in order to recover ourselves, to be our best, to reorganize our lives so that we do not allow society to colonize us." I actually

love that line. He uses it in a few places. We don't even recognize how society and the norms around us are colonizing us until we take some time away from other people, from the flood.

And this brings me to the third part I want to read, from Ajahn Chah. He talks about the flood of sensuality—just the flood of sense experience that we encounter throughout our days in daily life. We've talked about this, but I just like the way he says it. He says: "Sunk. We are sunk in sights, in sounds, in smells, in tastes, in bodily sensations." Just sunk in it. Sunk because we look at externals and we don't look inwardly.

He says it's like being a prisoner. Somebody else has control over you. When they tell you to sit, you have to sit. To walk, you have to walk. So being imprisoned by the senses is the same as that. No matter how hard you try, you can't shake it off.

Do you get a sense of that, or does it bring up a kind of resistance? "No, no, no—I'm not sunk in senses." Here, that's part of what we're doing. We're actually setting up conditions to allow us to pull out of this flood, this flood of sensuality. Not because it's bad, but because there's so much going on. As all these teachers say, we don't have a chance to just stop and look inwardly and even see what's true. What's going on for us?

And so the sense of kāya viveka isn't only about pulling away, creating some space from other people, but about stepping back from all the expectations and all the sense experience that we're just rolling in, day in and day out.

I don't know if you've ever noticed—I notice myself more and more in the last few years—whatever I've read or watched on TV or read on the computer, it can be something just stupid and passing the time, or something really useful. It doesn't really matter what it is. But when I get quiet, when I sit, or if I'm just going to bed, or just sitting quietly, whatever that was, it's just rolling around in my mind. In my heart, in my mind. If there were emotions involved—I really don't like watching big emotional movies anymore, because who needs fake emotions? There's enough going on in life. It's bad enough. I need to go suffer over somebody who never existed, and they lost this other person, and blah, blah, blah? Give me a break.

But I go to bed and that's what's rolling around in my mind. I think, why am I doing this? So we just need to get a little bit quiet to see this. We might resist: "I don't want to be quiet and see that, thank you very much." But this is what's just going on when we're sunk in this flood of sensuality—to the next thing, to the next thing, to the next thing. We don't have a chance to even see what the effect is.

So this kaya viveka is pulling out of being around people a lot, but also out of this overwhelming flood of sense experience. But I hope you know, when I say this and from what we've talked about all along, I'm not—the Buddha wasn't—saying that sense experience is a bad thing. It's life. It's what's happening. But he just said, let's set up some conditions so we can actually know what's happening instead of just being swept up with the next thing, the next thing, the next thing. When he says we're imprisoned by our sense

experience, I think what he really means is we're imprisoned by our habitual reactions, which marry us to the sense experience—reactions we don't recognize.

Now, this we've talked about, so I don't need to go into it too much. You've seen in the early days of retreat how maybe the first couple of days are nice and then it starts to get a little more awkward—or maybe it goes the other way. But there's a sense of having to fit into the schedule, the things that you miss, the things that you want, that noise. You're walking and there's a sound and it's unpleasant and you don't want to walk anymore. Your body hurts. We just react—the body hurts so you stop. It feels good, so you eat more. You're having a nice sitting, so you keep sitting. It starts to hurt, you get up. We are simply run by the reactions of mind to sense experience. Liking it, not liking it, making up a story about what it means about me, how can I fix it.

You may even remember the first few days when you spent time—maybe you don't, maybe you're past all this—getting your little nest arranged and figuring out your schedule. When am I going to eat? When am I going to shower? What works for me? What are these other people doing? I don't know if I want to sit here. I don't like those people. Let me find the right place. It takes up a lot of mental energy. Again, maybe you're past it, but it takes up a lot of mental energy. Even now, when I first come to sit myself in a new place, I've got to suss it out, got to figure it. After a couple days, you settle down, you get your drift going. But those first two days are kind of great to pay attention to because that's the mind imprisoned by reactions to sense experience, wanting to get it all copacetic so we don't have to deal with that anymore.

But it's not that sense experience is bad. It's just when we're sunk in the flood, we don't have the chance to even see what's happening. There's just too much.

So this kaya viveka, as you've seen—there's still plenty of sense experience going on, right? We're not unconscious. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching, and thinking—let us not forget—is still happening every moment. You might think, "What? We're still in the flood of sensuality, aren't we?" Maybe. But even so, hasn't there been—and be real about this, don't just automatically say no in your mind—haven't you noticed some more space and some quieting down in the mind, in the thoughts, even just a little at various moments? All the movies and stuff you've seen—hopefully you're not having to rerun them now. Your mind is running on what's for lunch, what's for dinner, what the person upstairs is doing, but it's not the same. There's more space. It starts to quiet down and we're starting to see the patterns, aren't we? Sometimes. Yes. Say yes. Sometimes.

But there's still a huge amount going on. So the other aspect of kaya viveka—what I want to talk about a little—is restraint at the sense doors. I want to talk about this especially because one of the instructions, one of the attitudes we've often been pointing to, is this sense that awareness can meet whatever's arising. Not needing to choose, not thinking that one thing is better than another thing, right? You've picked up that we've been saying that. This doesn't sound completely unfamiliar—just checking, you never know. And so from that point of view, now here I am coming in saying restraint at the sense doors can be really

supportive for clear seeing. And you might think: what the heck?

You just said whatever's going on. So this is where we can look and see what is skillful practice, how we can use particular techniques to support our deepening in awareness and wisdom. And it all comes down, of course, to what's the motivation. Was that this morning when James did intention as instructions? It was like a year ago, wasn't it? The sense of checking what's the motivation.

So restraint at the sense doors. What we mean by this in terms of practice is a kind of renunciation. But renunciation as we often think about it—in our culture here we have so much—can come together with a certain negativity. Maybe that's too strong, maybe not. But as the Buddha said before he was awakened, he would hear about renunciation and how good it was, and he would say, "But my heart did not leap up at the thought of renunciation. It felt like a sheer drop-off." That's a quotation from one of the suttas. Because he didn't understand the benefits of it.

So when we think of renunciation as an aversive cutting off, that's not renunciation. That's—guess what?—that's aversion. Restraint at the sense doors really means seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, touching. We're not saying it's bad to see and hear and smell and taste and touch, but we just restrain, become a little more inward.

For example, seeing is a good illustration. The sense of restraint at the sense doors would be just kind of renouncing that impulse to be looking around all the time. You know how you're walking and you're looking and you're thinking—and you can pretty much tell now when someone's a little spaced out, because when we're spaced out, looking is a way the energy just goes out through the eyes. You say, so what? You can be aware of it. You can. Sometimes. But restraint at the sense doors, in terms of support for the mind at peace, support for our heart that's more present, is to check it out. Restraint doesn't mean refusing to look. It means bringing—as Ajahn Buddhadasa, who I think one of us mentioned, this great Thai forest monk meditation teacher—he talked about restraint at the sense door simply meaning bringing together sati, mindfulness, and paññā, wisdom. He would talk about bringing sati-paññā to the point of sense contact.

So say restraint at the eye door. The first would be just to have a sense of renunciation: I'm just gonna maybe not look around so much. Not out of aversion, but to see: does this help me be more present? And then sati-paññā at the eye door would simply be being present and noticing what happens with eye contact.

Some people have mentioned to me after years of practice, you know, we think, "Well, I shouldn't look around," and that's just kind of a "should" and you get reactive and we get all tight and then we don't look around. I have a friend who thought of restraint at the eye door and walked around blindfolded for a couple of days on retreat. That's not really it. You can walk around blindfolded and be just filled with aversion and greed and not see it.

But noticing—if we aren't looking around all the time, then it's easier to be present when seeing really calls the attention. And noticing what happens when we go off into looking around.

A friend told me some years ago she was doing retreats, she'd been practicing a lot, and she was doing a long retreat on Maui. It's beautiful, you know, it's up high so you can look out, there's a beautiful view of the ocean. She said when she first went, whenever she was doing walking meditation, always outside, she was always looking at the view, almost like, "I have to look." You should look, here I am on Maui, you have to enjoy the view. And then she just started noticing all that lack of restraint at the eye door was just feeding craving. She was getting more and more unsettled, agitated.

So then, out of wisdom—renunciation comes from wisdom, and it's a renouncing of experience that brings us into more agitation and suffering—she said she just started walking along the side of a building and not looking up. Not out of tightness, but out of understanding. And it brought ease. It brought happiness.

It brought open space to her heart.

Later, people would say to her, "What's the matter with you? You're in Maui and you're not even looking up." And she said, "Because it was so much easier. So much peace."

So that's the wisdom of renunciation and restraint at the sense doors. But you could do the same thing, and it could be from aversion.

Another example, another story of friends. Quite a long time ago, they opened a retreat center—I won't say where it is, you'll know who it is—but anyway, opened a retreat center in Switzerland. And again, an even more beautiful spot with lakes and mountains right outside the front. You can't not look—you can't.

The year that they first opened it (I teach there every year), it was really funny because one of the people who was sort of running things said, "Everyone's just sitting outside, just staring at the lake and the mountains, staring at the lake and the mountains." And again, it's like, "I want to put up a big wall so they can't look at the lake and the mountains." It was really funny—I was cracking up. There was this sense of, "No, it's bad. Don't look. Don't look." That's not restraint. That's aversion. It's not necessarily a helpful attitude that the beauty is bad.

So restraint at the sense doors is really about bringing mindfulness and wisdom to the point of contact—whether it's hearing, seeing, smelling, tasting, thinking—when we can, and noticing the effect.

You can see this with unpleasant experience. When the Buddha talks about what causes ill will as a hindrance to keep growing, he says: unwise attention to the repugnance of an object, to whatever it is that's creating and bringing up ill will in your mind—you keep on focusing on that thing.

Have you ever noticed? Ayya Khema always gives the example: if you're really annoyed at someone and you keep on looking at them, what happens to the annoyance? It feeds it, doesn't it? You look at it—okay, that's lack of restraint at the eye door, and no *sati-paññā* at the eye door. And that keeps on feeding the ill

will.

So the restraint—"let me not look"—might feel a little hard, might really feel like a renunciation at first, because you just want to look. Because you want to suffer more. "Let me look and get really worked up. Let me look"—and it just turns into a cycle. So wisdom may come in and just say, "Okay, just don't look. Just try not to look." You want to look, but you don't. That's restraint.

And noticing how, over time, with the not looking, the heart and mind come back to peace. They come back to ease. And in this case, restraint and renunciation are not a giving up of something wonderful. They're a choice for our happiness and well-being, for greater understanding.

So that's what I mean by restraint at the sense doors—it's really fed by the motivation and the effect. And I'm not saying that sense experience is bad at all.

Even from the Buddha, a very short little couplet: "A bhikkhu keeps her eyes from wandering restlessly with desire. And her ears are deaf to chatter and gossip. She has no longing for new sweets to taste, nor has any desire to possess things in the world as her own."

Okay, that's pretty high, what he's saying—a strong statement. But the next line is: "Where she is in contact with sense impressions, she does not become sorrowful or sad. She should not begin to wish for some other kind of life, or tremble when confronted with fearful things."

So in other words, how I read that is: don't let your eyes and mind run restlessly with desire, but on the other hand, when you meet experience, don't tremble or wish it were different or be sad.

It's just what it is. Both of these perspectives are supportive of practice. And so our subtlety of practice, our flexibility of mind, our skillful means, involves seeing how seclusion—kāya viveka, seclusion from the flood of sensuality and from people—is supporting a clearer seeing of just what's going on. How is it supportive of inward looking, of more peace, more ease, less reactivity in mind and heart over time? We make choices based on that understanding.

Thich Nhat Hanh speaks to this beautifully. He talks about how we like to have our windows open, but if we leave our windows open all the time—and he's really talking about our sense doors—everything is coming in and just disturbing us. It's simply too much. So he says, "Sometimes a beginning meditator may want to leave the city and go off to the countryside to help close those windows that would trouble his spirit if left open. There he or she can become one with the quiet forest, rediscover and restore herself. The fresh and silent woods help you remain in awareness. Yet when awareness is well-rooted, when it can be maintained without faltering, then you may wish to return to the city and be there less troubled. But before you reach this point, you must be very careful, nourishing your awareness moment by moment, choosing the surroundings and sustenance that assist you the most."

This is really just as the Buddha is—very pragmatic. For many of us, I would say for most of us, unless

you're extremely unusual, seclusion of body and seclusion from a lot of interaction and seclusion from this flood of sensuality is extremely helpful and important to support clearer seeing, understanding, and greater peace.

And you may start to notice—hopefully you have—as the flood of sensuality and reactivity in the mind begins to slow down, doesn't it? Sometimes it's just a trickle. There are moments when there's not much at all. There are moments when there's sati-paññā at your sense door contact and there's really just nothing created around it. Silence. Space. That's really what I was alluding to, what I was feeling when I walked up and said, "Ah, the moon." That was sense contact. It was seeing. It was pleasant. But then the mind didn't have to do anything else about it. Ah, a sense of peace. We can notice that more.

And so this space, this silence, this more balanced awareness does grow as we give ourselves the opportunity to explore, to renounce, to have some restraint.

But—there's always a but—you may have noticed it's not like one-way traffic. As the flood of our habitual thinking and reaction and sense experiences begins to quiet down and there is more space and less reactivity in the mind, sometimes that actually leaves space, not just for the hindrances, but really for even more unexpected wild stuff to come up and be seen. Have any of you noticed that at all?

I want to read a story from the Desert Fathers, those early Christians in the centuries after Jesus. Saint Antony of Egypt was the most famous of the Desert Fathers. His life inspired thousands to leave their homes and follow him. He was from a really rich family. He heard the words of Jesus that you should sell all you have and give to the poor, and he actually believed it, did it, and went off way out into the desert. Finally he moved to a deserted fort, fifty miles south of Memphis in Egypt on the east bank of the Nile. 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 could stand this no longer and broke down the doors, expecting to release a wasted and emaciated maniac. However, Antony emerged healthy, sane, balanced, and full of advice on how to lead an ascetic life. 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. Really, the more I read, the sense of the retreat into solitude is balanced by the emergence to support and help others.

But the point I was making is this: being visited by what you could call demons is, unfortunately I'm afraid, a pretty inescapable part of our retreat from daily life into what comes up in our mind and heart as it becomes more quiet. So it's not that something is going wrong. It sure feels like something is going wrong because we hate this stuff. But that may be the reason we didn't really want to go into solitude in the first place. Seriously, you know?

So the demons are going to come up—the shrieks and groans of Saint Antony. Here it could be huge self-hatred, giant fear, patterns of mind like self-judgment, guilt, or greed. You know what your ones are by now. And deep down, you probably know them all. That's one thing. All these years of practice, they come up in different formations together. But mostly, we get the same old ones, the ones that come up and we think, "Oh yeah, I thought I worked through that one. Fifteen years ago." Hello! Let them in. They come up in a slightly different way.

Rage, guilt, pride, worthlessness—the shrieks and groans of St. Anthony. That's part of it all. And often we can miss it because the content may be all about how we're relating to the practice. It isn't good enough, it isn't deep enough, or it's too filled with this, or not enough of that—whatever the particular flavor. Because we're focusing on that content, we miss the fact that here's that demon of total worthlessness. Here's that demon of fear. Here's that demon of pride, whatever it is.

Just knowing that the seclusion may give space for these things to arise—but it's also allowing the mind and heart to grow in wisdom and depth and steadiness of awareness, sati-pañña—so that becomes the very tool and refuge we bring to meet the demons. Instead of thinking we're going to get rid of it by jumping to another sense pleasure, which is what we can do in our daily lives, never quite feeling it fully. Here it's like, "Oh no, I really need to get on the computer right now." Ever notice that? Suddenly it's so important. Or, "I've got to talk to someone right now." No. Just sit with it and see what's happening.

This is why it takes so much courage to come into a period of seclusion like this. Seclusion from our life, seclusion from our friends, seclusion from so much sense pleasure. It takes, I think, enormous courage. Some days more than others. Some days it's like, "Oh, this is great. I could do this forever." But the next day is another story. Just respect that in yourselves, in each other.

And one of the reasons we want to keep a sense of supporting each other's seclusion, of really not interacting with each other, is because you never know what's going on with another person. We don't even know what's going on with ourselves half the time, right? So whatever we think is going on with the other person is pretty much going to be projection. Just leave them alone. It's this great gift we give one another—to meet our demons in our own way, on our own terms, with the support of our own mindfulness and wisdom.

So that's kāya viveka. The next is citta viveka, which is seclusion of mind. A friend of mine says that kāya viveka means no body bothers you, and citta viveka means your mind doesn't bother you. It's just a shorthand, but I like that.

Citta viveka, seclusion of mind, really means the mind is secluded from the hindrances. Sometimes it's taken as meaning deep states of absorption, which is one form of citta viveka, but I want to talk about it not only as deep states of absorption but as when the mind is not being caught in kilesa—greed, hatred, delusion arising as a reaction to sense pleasures, as a reaction to experience.

In states of what you would call deep absorption, where the mind is really collected in one experience, states of jhāna—one of the main reasons it feels so onward-leading, why the mind feels so pure, is because when the mind is so absorbed, there's like no space for the kilesas to get in. They just don't even come in. It's not like you're fighting them off. They just don't come up, or something starts to arise and the mind goes, "No, I don't think so," and goes back.

Well, who wouldn't like that? It's nice, the sense of touching what the purity of mind and heart can feel like in a moment. It's not a steady state, it's not enlightenment, it doesn't last, it's conditional. But just to feel that is an expression of citta viveka.

But another way I want to talk about citta viveka is the silence of the non-reactive mind. Not the silence of nothing happening. As our mind quiets, and as the mindfulness awareness is getting a bit more steady—and it is getting more steady, right? In spurts. But there are times when it's more steady, when it's moving with its own momentum. It's not so much effort. And it can really be with different sense experiences, the six sense experiences coming and going. Have you had moments like that? Steady times like that?

In the times when awareness is getting more and more steady and the chatter is quieting down—though there can still be thoughts and such—this silence of the non-reactive mind begins to reveal itself. We start to experience, again like when I was looking at the moon, sense experience or thought or whatever, and the mind is simply quiet, with space around it, not needing to create anything around that experience. It's also a real experience of peace, of purity, that perhaps we don't often notice.

There's a word in Pali: *atammayatā*. Ajahn Buddhadasa, again in some of his writings toward the end of his life, said this is the ultimate Buddhist concept—*atammayatā*—which means something like "not being made up of this or that." You could say it's the state of heart and mind of non-concocting. We simply experience what's arising without concocting anything around it. I love the word "concocting" because it has that sense of just making something up out of nothing, on and on and on. Do you have any sense of what I mean?

The highest peace of mind and heart would be complete seclusion from the reactions of greed, hatred, and delusion—where they don't arise at all. But in this *citta viveka* of non-concocting, we can start to explore sense experience, both when the mind is not concocting and when it does concoct, seeing how each unfolds and what it leads to. This is where we can begin to experience *citta viveka*.

I read this from a Thai Ajahn—I think it was in *The Island*, though I encountered it somewhere else as well—from Luang Por Dun, a disciple of Ajahn Mun. This is his rewording of the Four Noble Truths. For me, this speaks directly to the mind, to *citta viveka*, the mind that's free from concocting:

The mind that goes out in order to satisfy its moods is the cause of suffering—the Second Noble Truth. Something happens, a sight, a sound, and the mind goes out. There's a whole story. That's the cause of

suffering.

The result that comes from the mind going out in order to satisfy its moods is suffering—the First Noble Truth.

The mind seeing the mind clearly is the path leading to the cessation of suffering. This is that *sati-paññā* at the mind door—just watching this concocting, how it comes up, how it leads to trouble, how it drops away.

The result of the mind seeing the mind clearly is the cessation of suffering.

Do you get that? This sense of... And this isn't rocket science to notice, is it? We're not talking about incredible subtlety here—the mind going out and making trouble. Just very simple, the difference.

Here's an example I wrote down. Just walking. There's a cold wind blowing. There's a sense of coldness and the perception of wind. It's unpleasant. The mind goes, "Ugh." The mind going out to satisfy: "I don't like this. It's cold. I feel disgruntled. Why is it cold like this? There aren't enough good walking places here at Spirit Rock inside, and I can't walk inside with my shoes on because I need to walk in my shoes," and on and on. That's the mind going out, fueled by—it's not rocket science—aversion or greed, creating a whole story.

The mind of non-concocting, *citta viveka*: Walking. Cold wind. Coolness. Unpleasant. That's it. The mind just doesn't do anything with it. That's *citta viveka*.

Now, what is truly normal and natural? This isn't some incredible esoteric state that we create. But by bringing *sati-paññā*, mindfulness and wisdom, just to watching—the same thing, *sati-paññā* at the mind door—watching the mind that concocts and the mind that doesn't, and just seeing the effect of each, simply keep noticing, keep watching with awareness. The wisdom comes in by itself.

But what I'd like to point to, and this is also from Buddhadasa: recognize those moments. The translation Santikaro uses of *suññatā* is "voidness," but recognize those moments, I would say, of just the peace, the space of non-concoction. Because often we'll go, "Oh, that's nice"—like looking at the moon—"Ah, the moon, that's nice, it's so pretty, I feel so... ah, it's nice." But we don't really recognize the quality in the mind that's awake, present, alert, where there's just the space of not creating anything around it.

So it can be really helpful to recognize—as Buddhadasa says—to generate a contentment with this kind of emptiness. At that moment there's no sense of anything particular, no sense of self. Just generate a contentment with that. Recognizing first when it's happening, instead of getting sunk again in the sense experience.

I use the moon as an example, but nature is one of the reasons, I think, that having retreats in lovely natural settings is so valuable. Partly we're just privileged to be able to be here—most of the retreats I teach are in some lovely settings, though some aren't. Some places in Burma, not so pretty, but some are. Nature can be really supportive in this way for us, if we can recognize how it works to incline our hearts

and minds toward being really present but without any concocting of wanting or aversion or making up a story.

I mean, we can also make up a story—don't get me wrong. We can make up a story about anything, and we do. But nature can be so helpful.

I'll give a couple of examples. I know from your own experience people often mention this, but the point is how we can consciously use nature to recognize citta viveka—the stillness of the non-reactive mind-heart.

Yesterday I went out to the Point Reyes seashore just by myself, simply to take a walk to the ocean, be there quietly, and walk back. And yes, there's much less sense bombardment than doing errands or being at home on the computer. So there's a sense of peace and spaciousness in the environment. Yes, it was mostly pleasant sense experience. It's a lot easier to talk about the non-reactive mind when it's pleasant and you're not being bombarded. I acknowledge all of that. But you can still get lost.

Still, I was noticing, sitting at the seashore—you get that sense of space from looking at the sky and the sea. But then you can notice that it's kind of like a metaphor for the internal space in the mind and heart when the mind isn't fixating on something and reacting. Just tuning into that citta viveka—the mind wasn't going off into wanting. It could do that with pleasant experience: "Oh, this is so nice, how can I have a vacation by the beach, how can I do this more, how can I live..." You could go off that way. But when it's just, "Ah, this"—notice, not just "this is nice," whatever. Notice that quality of vibrant, wakeful stillness, if you can put it that way, of the non-reactive mind and heart.

That's citta viveka. That isn't dependent on taking away sense experience. And it's easier to tune into—and lovely—when we're not too caught in craving, but it's certainly available as we begin to recognize it no matter what's happening.

So here's an alternative experience, also from my own life—being in Burma, where I was again this year for several weeks. I've been going there every year for quite some years. Those of you who've practiced in Burma, India, Asia, or have heard the endless stories about it, know it's noisy. Extremely noisy. Often at night there's just noise everywhere. There's not a sense that it should be quiet. Even in meditation centers, people will come by walking and talking at the top of their voices as they come and go. And we're like, "What? This is a meditation center. It should be quiet." That's something we made up, really.

But the noise I'm talking about here is the loudspeakers in villages all around—at any wedding or any event. They come on. It can be all day and all night. Sometimes I've been where it's day and night for three days and nights without stop. Loud, really loud. If you walk right by it on the road, it literally hurts your ears. This is just part of life there. Everyone has that.

One time we were staying in this village way out in the country—there was hardly any electricity. We had offered some solar panels, which was the only electricity. People have generators. So we're staying there, and at 3:30 in the morning this huge loudspeaker comes on with some Dhamma talk in Burmese.

Apparently they do this every night. 3:30. And then at 4:00, across the river, another one started. We asked someone, "Why? Doesn't it bother people? Not everyone's getting up at 3:30." They said, "Oh no, it's nice to lie in bed and listen to the Dhamma." We said, "Really? Okay."

So that's not my example of citta viveka. That's the opposite of citta viveka. But that kind of noise... I've noticed the last couple of years—I'm there, going to bed, and it starts. It's not every night, so you can't get regular, you never know. It starts, and it's like, "Whoa, this is really loud tonight." And the worst is when they start with karaoke—I can't tell you.

It starts really loud, and my mind will have a little reaction, and then I've really noticed the last couple of years, it's like, okay. And the mind just doesn't do anything with it. I didn't believe it at first. But now I don't even notice. It's like someone will say, "God, it was so loud last night." And I'm like, "Oh, was it?" And there's just the same quality of mind.

Now, it could be delusion. That's not citta viveka—that's delusion. You don't notice what's going on. That's not citta viveka. You may feel at peace, but there's not quite the aliveness, you know. But this is more that I can really see it. The mind does nothing with it. And every now and then, something particularly loud reaches out and grabs attention. And the mind goes, "Oh my God, if that goes on all night, I..." Let it go. Just let it go.

And then to really see—citta viveka grows as our wisdom grows, as our practice with seeing this grows. The mind inclines towards the peace of non-concocting because we're so much happier. This is really moving in the direction of the deepest seclusion, which is the ultimate seclusion from the kilesas, where they don't arise at all. Okay, that's down the road. But citta viveka is really something that we can experience—little, big, moment to moment—with pleasant, with unpleasant, with neutral, with big experiences, with little ones.

And in a way, I would just point us to recognizing the quality of it. "Oh, great, thank God, everything's okay." Why is everything okay? Notice what the mind and heart feel like at that point. Notice that wakefulness. At first there might be the thought, "I don't want to look too closely because I might get caught up in aversion and wanting again." At first it's like that—notice. But then you'll start to trust it. You'll trust it more and more because this is really taking refuge in awareness, taking refuge in the peaceful mind, in citta viveka, really coming to see that more and more.

Ajahn Chah's student Ajahn Jumnien, another Thai forest master, said: "At some point, the mind becomes so clear and balanced that whatever arises is seen and left untouched with no interference. One ceases to focus on any particular content, and all is recognized as simply mind and matter—an empty process arising and passing away on its own. A perfect balance of mind with no reactions. Then there is no longer any personal doing."

That's an expression of the seclusion of mind and heart that's really emancipated, that's freed from the

arising of kilesas. But we can experience this in moments. One ceases to focus on particular content, and all is recognized as mind and matter, arising and passing of its own. As Greg said earlier tonight, it's just nature. We just give it back to nature. And we're nature too.

I think our koan in terms of how we relate to seclusion—the choices we make around solitude, around seclusion from the sense doors, around restraint at the sense doors, around recognizing when the mind is balanced enough that we can really explore citta viveka without needing to shut down the sense doors, or when we need to support ourselves that way—is to recognize and trust more and more what the silence of the non-reactive mind feels like. And to tune into the motivations when we try to restrain or shut something out. Is the motivation from aversion or fear? "Oh no, this is so peaceful. If people start talking, if there's sound, that's going to wreck my peace." That's not citta viveka. That is holding on to a state.

Ramana Maharshi said: "Solitude is in the mind. A person might be in the midst of the world and yet maintain serenity. Such a one is in solitude. Another may stay in a remote forest and still be unable to control the mind. Such a one cannot be said to be in solitude."

Those attached to desire are unable to experience solitude wherever they are, whereas those who are not attached to desire are always in solitude, even when they are engaged in work and connection with people. That's the Buddha.

In the same way, there's a sutta that many of you are probably familiar with called the Elder Sutta—or in Thich Nhat Hanh's translation, "The Better Way to Live Alone." In this sutta, a bhikkhu comes to the Buddha and says there's an elder who only wants to be alone, and he says how wonderful it is to be alone. The Buddha goes and talks to this elder Thera about it. The Buddha asks the monk Thera, "Then how do you live alone?" And he replied, "I live alone. No one else lives with me. I praise the practice of being alone. I go for alms alone and I come back from the village alone. I sit in meditation alone. That is all. I am alone."

And so the Buddha said—this is Thich Nhat Hanh's translation, which tends to be a little softer—"It's obvious that you like the practice of living alone." He's not saying that that's bad, but he goes on to describe a better way, a more wonderful way to be alone: the way of deep observation, to see that the past no longer exists and the future has not yet come, and to dwell at ease in the present moment, free from desire. This is the same as what Ramana Maharshi was saying. When a person lives in this way, free from desire, just sunk in the present moment, there's no hesitation in his heart. He abandons anxieties and regrets, abandons binding desires, and cuts the fetters which prevent him from being free. This is called the better way to live alone. There is no more wonderful way of being alone than this.

So the kāya viveka, the bodily seclusion, and the citta viveka, the mental seclusion, are in support of our experiencing that purity of heart and mind—a better way of being alone, really secluded from craving, from the wanting, from the creating of the sense of self, the concocting, this endless concocting of a sense of self out of every sense experience.

And so our koan of what's supportive is really in service of moving in this direction of citta viveka that then leads to this deepening sense of abandoning clinging and the concocted sense of self, rather than an idea of what it should look like.

Seclusion isn't just about being isolated. If that isolation is leading to fear of people, resistance to noise, over-reactivity to experience, then what's being fed? What's being fed is aversion and fear and wanting. If you're in the middle of the world and your mind is getting more calm, less reactive, less given to concoction, what's being fed is wisdom and liberation.

So that's what we look at. What's being fed? What's being starved when we make our choices?

I want to say two things to close. The Buddha said, "Two things I never lost sight of while I was still an unenlightened bodhisattva. One is never to be lax in my effort"—in other words, not push, push, push, but never give up. Never give up. And the second: "Never to settle merely for wholesome states of mind." I love that one because it's so easy to do. We think, "Wow, this is so lovely. This is good enough. What more could I want? A little clinging—okay, so what? It's not really a problem." So just watch that—never settle for wholesome states of mind.

I'll end with one story, going back to that sense of how going off to live a life of real seclusion isn't to deny humanity or cut oneself off. Rather, the wisdom that comes out of that so often—as with Saint Anthony—expresses itself naturally, because the natural expression of wisdom is compassion.

This is from a review of a book about hermits. I don't even know the name of the book because I just cut out the review a few years ago. But this part describes a visit to an Anglican convent where the author meets a nun whose need for solitude had taken her to an abandoned cabin on a cliff way off somewhere in some remote place. Having repaired it, she lived there for eighteen years—but not quite alone, because people brought their troubles to her. However, rather than resisting that or feeling like they were intruding, she believed that the responsibility of the solitary one was "to stand at the intersection between the love of God and suffering humanity."

To me, that's a beautiful expression of the wisdom of the really secluded heart and mind—that it manifests as compassion. We stand at the intersection of the wisdom of God and suffering humanity. But along the way, we do what helps support us, even if it means meeting our demons.

Thank you for your attention.

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