

## *Two Kinds of Seclusion*

*March 8, 2007*

In primitive cultures, they have a custom whereby, when a person becomes old enough, a child on the verge of becoming an adult, they send the child out into the wilderness to have a period of seclusion. Being all by yourself, you get a sense of your own identity of who you are. Sometimes you're prescient enough to gain a vision that gives you a sense of what your role in life will be. But however it was understood, the whole purpose was to give the child an opportunity to have some time alone, to get a sense of him or herself, an adult identity, and also a kind of strength: the strength that comes from being alone, getting away from other people's influences, getting away also from other people's help. When you're out alone like that, you have to discover your own resources. That gives you a sense of inner strength that you can then carry through with the rest of your life.

At present, we're missing that custom in our culture, which is why so many adults seem so childish. They never really have time to get away from not only the influence of their family, but also influence of the media, to really get outside and ask what's really important in life. You get a taste of it sometimes when you go into the wilderness, but a lot of people take their same old attitudes into the wilderness and never really question them.

It's for this reason that the Buddha recommended seclusion as an important part of the practice. Get away for a while. He recommended that the monks go out into the wilderness, even the nuns. Even back in those days, when they were concerned that the nuns would get raped in the forest, the nuns were told to go out once a year as a group into the forest, just to get away from their day-to-day life. They could get an outside perspective on their lives and then they could bring that outside perspective back in with them.

So even though our culture doesn't provide for this kind of seclusion, we should provide it for ourselves. Get some time away.

The Buddha talked about two kinds of seclusion. First is physical seclusion, just getting away from other people, spending time by yourself. But you'll notice that, as you're sitting here under the trees by yourself, you're not really alone. You've got all these voices in your mind, telling you to do this, telling you to do that; this is good, that's bad. One of the things the breath does is that it gives you a place to stay in the present moment where you're not pushed around by these voices. You can watch them coming and going. Over time you can begin to separate yourself from them, recognize whose voice is that, what's the intention

behind that voice. Do you really believe that voice? This is a process that enables you to gain a sense of your own identity and your own set of values: what's important to you, what you really want out of life.

But the breath provides more than that, because the other part of seclusion is mental seclusion. The idea here is that you cut yourself away from the voices that pull you into the past or to the future, and be right here where you can fully inhabit the present moment.

That kind of seclusion you carry back with you. But it requires the ability to fully inhabit the present. There's a visceral sense to this when you breathe aware of the whole body, when you inhabit the whole body. Otherwise if you could take a picture of the energy in the body, you'd often find huge gaping holes where you're not really inhabiting certain parts of your body at all. You begin to find that the energy of other people starts inhabiting the places that you're not inhabiting. It's almost as if you're possessed or at least partially possessed by them. In some cases, people who are total daydreamers, not inhabiting their bodies at all, will actually get possessed by spirits for a while because they're not inhabiting their bodies. Somebody else comes in.

Now, whether you understand this in a literal or figurative way, still you notice that you can carry this awareness of the whole body breathing—whole body breathing in, breathing out, the energy field of your body being full: You can carry that into your interactions with other people and you'll notice that it changes the balance of power. Instead of your sucking in their energy or taking in their energy, you can sense theirs but you don't have to inhale it, you don't have to bring it in. This gives you a sense of your own self in the midst of other people.

This is important. A lot of people find they get overwhelmed by the desires or ideas or just the energy of the people around them and they have trouble establishing their own sense of space. But you can learn how to fully inhabit your body. You have your own space. The Buddha calls this mindfulness immersed in the body, the body saturated with the sense of ease and well-being that come from breathing well, being firmly centered inside.

This is a skill you want to develop. Once you're able to locate the most obvious sensations of the breath and stay with them for a while, start exploring how the process of breathing feels in other parts of the body. Sometimes you find certain parts are missing, such as a shoulder or parts of your back, parts of your torso. Suppose your shoulder seems to be missing. If you can locate where your neck is right now, where your forearm is right now, then try to see where the two are connected. The connection may actually seem to be outside the body, around the shoulder. You can gradually work through whatever the blockage that's keeping

you from fully inhabiting that part of the body. And as you can trace the connections, you begin to inhabit that part of the body. You may often find that it's been starved for energy.

At first, it may not seem a very pleasant place to be, but as you allow it to participate in the breathing, let it connect up with the rest of the body, you find it easier to inhabit the body fully, and as you fully inhabit the body, there's going to be a shield of energy or a cocoon of energy that develops around you. As you carry that cocoon of energy into your daily interactions with other people, you find it easier to fend off any unhealthy or oppressive energy coming from them. You've got your own space. You fill your own space.

In this way, you can maintain your sense of mental seclusion even though physically you're back involved with other people, talking with them, interacting with them. It's not that you're insensitive to what's going on. Actually, you become more sensitive to what's going on, because you're not taking in their stuff. You can watch it going past.

This way, you can carry the benefit of your physical seclusion into your daily life with other people. This is one of the important skills in the practice, because what we're developing is our ability to hold, not to the customs of, say, America, whatever country we're in. The Buddha talked about the customs of the noble ones, in which the highest value is placed on developing skillful qualities of the mind and abandoning the unskillful ones. That's the bottom line in the customs of the noble ones. In the customs of other countries, they have other values which may or may not be healthy for the mind—oftentimes not. They tend to encourage our defilements or to make unrealistic demands on us.

The customs of the noble ones are concerned primarily with this issue: Where is your true happiness? What can you do to find true happiness? A positive true happiness doesn't harm anyone at all: doesn't harm you, doesn't harm other people. It's a happiness that's clear-minded, totally blameless. Many cultures don't have room for that in their imagination. So if you find yourself in a culture like that, you have to be able to resist the values that are coming at you, that would get in the way of that happiness.

So your ability to fully inhabit your body, fully inhabit your own sense of values, maintain your sense of values, even though there are other pressures coming from outside: This is an essential part of the practice. It's an important skill to work on at all times.