

Developing Mental Seclusion

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It's good to get out in a place like this where you're in physical seclusion: away from all the responsibilities and all the entanglements of the world out there. You have a chance to be yourself, be by yourself, look at yourself.

Of course, you find that physical seclusion isn't everything. You've got to develop mental seclusion as well, because otherwise you're just carrying a lot of baggage with you. Sit down and there's the baggage piled up all around you, pressing in on you.

So you have to remind yourself: You don't need to think about those things right now. The mind needs some time to be by itself, to look after itself, and to develop the skills you'll need to be able to look after yourself. You need mindfulness, alertness—really seeing clearly what's going on—and then the ardency and strength to do something about it.

If you see something unskilful is coming up—such as greed, aversion, or delusion—what are you going to do? If the mind hasn't been trained, you just give in. You follow them wherever they take you. It's like a person driving up: You're standing on the side of the road and they say, "Jump in!" You jump in. Only then you turn and ask the person, "Well, who are you? Where are we going?" By that time they've taken you who-knows-where. So any thought that comes by: Ask yourself, "Do I really have to go with that? Where is it going to take me?"

Remind yourself that you've got a better place to stay. This is what the meditation is all about: to give you that better place to stay, so that the mind can be protected from all of its other conversations and companions and committee members that would pull you off in other directions.

We need this ability to make these distinctions to decide, "Yes, I'll go with this," or "No, I won't go with that." Because there are lots of times in life when we're going to have to depend on ourselves to look after our minds. We can't depend on our friends, we can't depend on our doctors, we can't depend on anybody in the family. Because at that point the mind has reached a point where these people can't reach deep down inside us. It's just you and your inner conversation at that point.

So you want to have some order in that conversation, have some parliamentary procedure as to who gets to speak, who doesn't have to speak. And at the moment you try to minimize the speaking as much as possible, just thinking about the breath, talking about the breath. As Ajaan Lee says, learn to converse with your

breath, asking it how it feels, listening to what it has to say. Make the breath your companion for the time being.

And as you get to know the breath, you get to know the mind a lot better as well. It gives you a good foundation so that when someone else comes in and wants to talk, you can say, "No, I've already got a good conversation going right here." And no matter how insistent they are, you can say, "Look, I want to develop this relationship and then we'll talk about you after a while." Most of those other thoughts that are coming in are old friends, old enemies, old whatever anyhow. You don't need to go with them. You know them already. You want to make better friends with the breath right now.

So as long as the mind is going to be chatting with itself, chat with the breath, chat about the breath. This way you can shed a lot of the other things that would come in and bother you. You can really focus on this one conversation, get it going really well.

When you've got this good conversation going, you don't have to give in to these other harmful conversations. In that way, the mind really does begin to gain a sense of what it's like to be happily by itself, to be sufficient for itself, able to let go of all its other responsibilities, all of its other cares.

So for the time being learn how to take care of yourself, because that's a skill you're always going to need.