

Solitary Confinement

November 5, 2013

Someone asked me the other day, "What's the value of being solitary like this?" Because, as she said, that's one of the worst punishments they can give you in prison: to throw you into solitary confinement. If you don't have any skills to fall back on, yes, being solitary can be pretty much torture.

But if you've got the skills, if you've got the tools you need for dealing with your own mind, then there's no problem. What's so crazy-making about solitary confinement is that you're forced to look at your own mind all the time. If you don't have any help, any outside skills, you really can go crazy.

But when you've got the skills to work with, you can step back from what's going on in your mind and see where you agree with it and where you don't. You realize that you have the freedom to go along with the mind or not to go along with the mind.

Then being in a place of solitude like this can be really liberating: You're not distracted by a lot of things outside. You've got the skills you need to deal with what's coming up inside. And you can really do some serious work.

Dig down through what your assumptions are. When a thought comes into your mind, why would you want to go with it? What's the appeal? What's going to be the payoff? What's going to be the actual payoff, as opposed to what you want the payoff to be?

When you see this clearly, then you can be freed from a lot of the things that go through your mind. Then you realize, as you rejoin human society, that you don't have as many hooks as you used to have. You aren't snagged by other people's attempts to cure just their own problems.

So it's a really important time when you're alone like this. Try to take advantage of it as much as you can. Use it to understand yourself. And when you understand yourself, everything else gets understood. If you don't understand your own mind, then everything is going to be unclear.

This is important work we're doing here. We've got the time; we've got the opportunity right now. There are not that many visitors. Things are quiet. So look as consistently as you can at your own mind.

And use the tools: the tools of the meditation, the tools of the breath, the tools of mindfulness and right view. See what old issues you can clear up.

That way, you get long-term benefit out of these short periods of quiet that we have.