

Friendship Leading to Seclusion

February 15, 2022

We come here to gain some seclusion so that we can focus on what's going on inside the mind. The texts talk about three kinds of seclusion: bodily seclusion, mental seclusion, and then seclusion from your attachments.

Bodily seclusion is when you're away from other people, as when you go off and sit in your hut, sit in your tent, sit under the trees, and there's nobody around except for you and the animals. But you can be secluded in that way and still have lots and lots of friends inside—or lots of enemies inside: your thoughts. Which is why you have to work on mental seclusion. But you don't start out simply by not thinking.

One of the Buddha's principles is that if you cannot find a good friend, then you go alone. But here you can actually create good friends inside. When the Buddha describes the beginning stages of right concentration, he talks about being secluded from sensuality, secluded from unskillful mental qualities. You do that through directed thought and evaluation. In other words, you use skillful thinking, talking to yourself in skillful ways, to pull yourself away from unskillful thinking.

Sensuality is your fascination with sensual fantasies, as when you're thinking about sex, thinking about food. The narratives of those kinds of fantasies can really pull you in. So you have to reflect on them: What are these fantasies made of? To what extent are you lying to yourself? And what real nourishment do you get out of those fantasies?

It's because of sensuality, the Buddha says, that we have to work and then we get into conflicts: conflicts in the family, conflicts in the town, conflicts between countries. And it's all because of this, our fantasies about how we would like to have the power to do this, the power to do that, because that's a lot of what sensual fantasy is: "I have the power to create whatever sensual pleasures I want."

So you use your directed thought to ask yourself, "Well, is that where real happiness is found?"

The same with seclusion from unskillful mental qualities. The Buddha lists these as the first seven factors of the wrong path: in other words, wrong view, wrong resolve, wrong speech, wrong action, wrong livelihood, wrong effort, wrong mindfulness. You have to look at your

behavior, look at your mind states, look at your views and your resolves. Anywhere where you see that something doesn't match up with the Buddha's standards, you have to say, "No, I've got to get out of that."

So you use your knowledge of what right view, right resolve, and so on can be. Those thoughts, the thoughts about the *right* version of these things, are your loyal friends inside.

Because you need friends to encourage you, "Yes, you can do this." If you find yourself feeling lonely, they can talk you into realizing that you've got a good opportunity here to really get to know yourself. If you're feeling discouraged, they give you encouragement.

When you're getting careless, your loyal friends protect you from your own heedlessness. In other words, they not only give you pep talks, but they also give you warnings. Those kinds of friends, as long as you need them, are good to have around, so don't seclude yourself from them just yet. Learn how to develop good friends inside, loyal friends inside, the ones that have your true well-being in mind.

Then, as the Buddha said, once you get yourself thinking in the right way, then you can think about not thinking: in other words, getting the mind to settle down in concentration. But even getting it to settle down still requires some directed thought and evaluation, as you turn from those conversations to simple conversation about the breath: how to get the mind to settle down here with the breath. Even here, you want to hang around with those friends, too. As long as the work needs to be done, as long as you're finding it hard to settle down and stay settled down, hang out with the friends who talk to you about what kind of breathing is useful, what ways of perceiving the breath are useful, how to get the breath so that it feels good inside, and—when it feels good—how to maintain that sense of feeling good.

This ability to maintain things is a weak point in our culture. We have the tendency to throw things together, get something done, and then move on, move on, move on. But here you're asked to hang around to look after this.

In Ajaan Lee's image, it's like a path that you follow back and forth, over and over, again and again and again. It may be boring to begin with, but if you're really observant, you begin to see things, little changes here, little changes there, something that wasn't on the path the other day that is on the path today. You get more and more familiar with the plants along the side of the path. There are the plants you can eat, and the plants you can't eat. You really get to know this path well. Because that's why we're doing concentration: It's not just to settle down and have some stillness for a while. You want to see the mind *in action*.

Ideally you've been working on your precepts, you've been working on your generosity, so you can see that the mind has at least some good qualities inside. It's a lot easier to look at the mind when it has good qualities than when it doesn't. But you really want to get to know it because there will be times when you see some unskillful things inside, things you don't like about your own mind, and you have to be able to deal with them in an intelligent way, instead of just running away from them or running toward them. You're using the concentration as your foundation for looking into them. Don't leave your foundation.

When you're in concentration, you can see how a mind state is constructed: what goes together with what, and how the mind talks to itself as it puts things together. If you're really familiar with the territory here, you can see these things clearly.

So learn how to talk to yourself in the right way. Be a good friend to yourself inside before you go for deeper and deeper states of seclusion—because after all, that's what right effort is. You're a good friend to yourself.

You make up your mind you're going to do something good—that's a good friend inside—and then you carry through with that intention. You generate the desire to stick with it. When the mind gets really still—it feels at ease with the breath and doesn't have a sense of being distracted—then you can put aside the directed thought and evaluation. The friends can stop talking. You can be with your new friend, the breath simply as it's coming in, as it's going out, with that sense of ease.

This is where your mental seclusion gets stronger. It then becomes a foundation for the next step, of course, which is seclusion from the defilements. You've gotten a taste of this as you deal with the hindrances that get in the way of concentration. It's simply that as your concentration gets deeper, you see subtler things.

But even then as you work with the defilements that come up—the subtle forms of greed, aversion, and delusion, states of becoming—you're going to need some good friends to talk to you: the knowledge you gained from the texts, the knowledge you've gained from your teachers, the knowledge you gained from your own practice

It's not the case that simply getting the mind in concentration fries the defilements away or burns them away. They lie there very still in the mind. You're going to need some inner conversation to stir them up again, so that you can see them in action—that they're really there. They're sleeping or lying there quietly while the mind is in concentration, but they're ready to flare up at any moment when you're having a lapse of mindfulness. If you want to see them

clearly, you have to ask the right questions that stir them up. This is where you depend again on your loyal friends inside.

So this is friendship leading to seclusion. You don't gain seclusion simply by running away. If you want it to be healthy seclusion, you take some good friends with you to begin with. This is the pattern of the training as a whole.

It's why the Buddha started the noble Sangha and the conventional Sangha. He didn't ordain people and send them straight out into the woods. He ordained them and he had them stay with their teachers for a while so that they could pick up the teacher's habits, pick up the teacher's way of looking at things, pick up some knowledge about the Buddha's teachings, both the Dhamma and the Vinaya, to provide the student with good friends inside.

So try to figure out who your loyal friends are right now—the ones that are happy to lead you to skillful seclusion—and develop them as best you can.