CHAPTER 2
Joy of Seclusion

Which is worth more, a crowd of thousands,
or your own genuine solitude?
Freedom, or power over an entire nation?
A little while alone in your room
will prove more valuable than anything else
that could ever be given you.

—Rumi[1]

The buddha described the transition from ordinary consciousness to the altered state of jhana thus: "Secluded from sensory pleasures, secluded from unwholesome states, one enters and abides in the first jhana."[2] This chapter explores the search for seclusion through training the mind. It also considers the deeper implication of solitude as an awakening beyond separation.

First let it be said that "seclusion" does not imply repression or denial; it is not a state of alienation, loneliness, or division. The seclusion that supports a meditation practice is rooted in wisdom and clarity. Knowing what leads to suffering, you wisely choose a path that leads to happiness. The Buddha addressed this point quite simply:

If, by giving up a lesser happiness,
One could experience greater happiness,
A wise person would renounce the lesser
To behold the greater.[3]

Sparked by this basic instinct toward happiness, we follow the trajectory of training that will eventually carry us beyond conceivable delights.

The Buddhist teachings describe three kinds of seclusion: (1) physical aloneness that is experienced as we remove ourselves from complex social dynamics; (2) mental seclusion that describes the aloofness of the mind while it is absorbed in jhana—this marks a separation from unwholesome states and sensory pleasures; and (3) liberation as detachment from the root causes of suffering. This implies a suspension of conceptual proliferations.[4]

THE SECLUSION OF BEING ALONE

Physical solitude creates a temporary separation from the distractions and activities that fill daily life, but true external simplification involves more than renunciation of material possessions. It is a process that divests the heart of the activities and roles upon which personality relies. The Buddha suggested, "A bhikkhu resorts to a secluded resting place: the forest, the root of a tree, a mountain, a ravine, a hillside cave, a charnel ground, a jungle thicket, an open space, a heap of straw."[5] We could, of course, expand that list to include the modern option of a formal retreat center.

At the rudimentary level, this detachment may be likened to a spiritual vacation. A retreat may be for any length of time, from a single day of silence to many years. It can be a relief to take time away from the exaggerated responsibilities of your routine. Most people need some degree of periodic solitude to learn to calm the anxious heart and quiet the distracted mind. Alternating time for inner retreat with time fully engaged with career, family, and social concerns makes for a balanced approach to the lay lifestyle. Ultimately, silence supports depth in meditation, but it is through our social interactions that our understanding matures and is tested. The Buddha's life is an exemplary model for balancing seclusion with the compassionate engagement with society. There were periods in his ministry when he remained aloof from his disciples, and many times when he taught, led, and served the community.

I have a deep love for silence. It has been an indispensable asset on my own path of inner discovery. At the age of forty-three, I have spent approximately seven years in silence. Not everyone will need to or have the opportunity to undertake extended retreats, and concentration can still be developed in active social settings—but spiritual satisfaction is something you must discover alone. You might stay in a monastery, reserve a room at a retreat center, go camping in the mountains, sit in a city park, or abide comfortably in a quiet room in your own home. The place does not matter, although retreat centers offer the advantage of skilled teachers and safe conditions for the settling of the mind.

Unable to imagine the exquisite joy that arises from a quiet mind, many people presume a silent retreat would be boring, but when you enter retreat you leave behind your array of projects, distractions, and entertainments. You can allow the mind to unwind in a secluded shelter without the need to defend your safety or maintain your social roles. When you can arrange for a spiritual retreat, it is important to make the most of it by putting your worldly affairs in order before entering the silence. Don't bring entertainments with you. Give your mind a real vacation from your daily life routines. Let silence reveal a depth of knowledge that is usually unseen in the rapid swirl of daily personal achievements.

Concentration states depend upon the "protected" conditions of a retreat. They are, like all things, impermanent—and they dissipate after the retreat. Even so, the insights that arise due to the purity of concentration remain accessible long after the states of concentration have ended. Concentration does not need to be permanent to be important.[6] In the transition back to your ordinary routine, worldly activities may seem to be moving ridiculously fast. This period of adjustment poses no serious threat. It may be just a few hours, or a few days, weeks, or longer, depending upon the length of the retreat and the depths of concentration, but as you ease into your routine responsibilities, the wisdom gleaned through your meditation practice will emerge and inform your life.

FOR REFLECTION

How do you fill the space in your life? Do you preserve space for solitude, or is it squeezed out by compulsive busyness, noise from the radio, or trivial errands? Is it easy or difficult to be alone with yourself? Do you go from one relationship to the next, or is there space between relationships when you are content alone? How densely have you organized your life? If you were to describe how you spend your days, would your life sound like a schedule or a life you are happy to live?

Inspired by some early experiences in my meditation practice, I actively sought situations of solitude. At a small forest monastery in Chonburi Province, Thailand, I spent one retreat on a platform made of wooden planks. It had no walls, but was partially covered by a grass roof. My intention was, simply, to meditate there, alone. I did not leave the platform except briefly for the single daily meal, toilet, and a bath at a nearby stream. I wanted to allow the meditation practice to flow unrestricted by schedules and social conventions. I quickly discovered that I was never actually alone. I shared that simple platform with two snakes, the wind, birds, bugs, and the universe. The moon visited at night, the rain freely blew through, and the air was filled with flying and floating creatures. I lived among a natural community of friends.

Young and not yet understanding the deeper meanings of solitude, I sought greater seclusion in a cave in Krabi District, Thailand. The only entrance was through a tunnel that bent in such a way that no light penetrated. But even underground, in the total darkness of that cavern, life abounded. Bats cluttered the ceiling and a large white snake periodically appeared to feed on the bats. Sometimes local villagers entered with flashlights scavenging for bat droppings that are used as garden fertilizer. Even underground, I was not alone.

We may search for a quiet place to meditate, but true external solitude is not necessary, and may not even exist. I have come to understand solitude as an experience of relationship, specifically our relationship to reality. Lovers of solitude value this relationship and

give it attention. We devote time for meditation, time to listen to silence, time to breathe in the vastness of space that surrounds us, time to make friends with ourselves.

In a dialogue on solitude with a monk named Migajala, the Buddha elaborated on the attributes of two types of meditators, one described as "a lone dweller," the other as "one dwelling with a partner." The Buddha explains:

> There are, Migajala, forms cognizable by the eye that are desirable, lovely, agreeable, pleasing, sensually enticing, tantalizing. If a bhikkhu seeks delight in them, welcomes them, and remains holding to them, delight arises. When there is delight, there is infatuation. When there is infatuation, there is bondage. Bound by the fetter of delight, Migajala, a bhikkhu is called one dwelling with a partner. . . .
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> Migajala, even though a bhikkhu who dwells thus resorts to forests and groves, to remote lodgings where there are few sounds and little noise, desolate, hidden from people, appropriate for seclusion, he is still called one dwelling with a partner. For what reason? Because craving is his partner, and he has not abandoned it; therefore he is called one dwelling with a partner.[7]

Experiences can be pleasing and agreeable. If you seek gratification through that contact, infatuation will entrap consciousness and craving will be your companion. From a meditative perspective, solitude is not concerned with how many people populate your residence. Solitude is a contemplation of the question: What companions are we housing within our minds? Solitude does not demand we make other people go away; rather, in solitude we consider what states we are entertaining within our own minds. Is craving the company we wish to keep? Physical solitude minimizes the complexities of social life. It is, however, only a first step.

THE SOLITUDE OF A QUIET MIND

You take your mind with you whether you are at the beach, on a hike in the forest, in a formal meditation retreat, or spending a quiet day in the

garden. You may be sitting in a quiet place, but if your mind is agitated with judging thoughts, future plans, restlessness, or fantasy, you are not yet secluded for meditation. When I lived in India, serving my teacher, H. W. L. Poonja, one student requested a private meeting with Poonjaji. He said, "I want to see you alone before I leave." Poonjaji replied, "You are invited to see me alone. You come alone to me. Don't bring anyone with you, not your clothes, not your body, not your mind. Then you can see me alone."[8] He was not suggesting the student meet him without a shirt and pants but asking for a deeper level of relinquishment—a stripping away of the personality masks, social ranks, and self-image that habitually accompany us.

Do you ever stand that exposed, emptied of the facades of identity, without your roles, without identification with social status, utterly empty of concepts, not preoccupied with who you are and how you are perceived?

Inner solitude invites us to empty our minds of thoughts, reactions, and obstructive mental states like lust, aversion, restlessness, and doubt. Although the basic level of instruction for jhana practice is to simply set distractions and hindrances aside, mindfulness and understanding are needed to set them aside skillfully. Frantically batting thoughts and difficult mental states away as unwelcome intrusions while trying to rush into jhana won't work. You need to examine thoughts until their nature is unmistakably obvious. Then you will be able to sweep them aside easily and without denial.

It is imperative for the sincere meditator to unwaveringly witness the functions of desire, aversion, restlessness, and doubt, witness these forces arising—but without acting them out, without buying into them. See them arise as empty thoughts, and see them pass just as quickly. If they are not seen clearly, these mental states can obstruct progress in concentration. Doubt can assail the mind with indecision, worry, or chronic judgment. Unabated, the momentum of uncertainty can paralyze spiritual progress. Yet doubt is nothing more than a thought. Through examining the experience of doubt, you will come to understand doubt, rather than be consumed by it. Doubt is a category of thought that you can definitively set aside. The very instant you realize you are thinking you have an

opportunity to affect the patterns of mind. Thoughts of self can clutter attention with a plethora of diversified tales—preventing composure, stillness, and unification. Concentration abandons this diffusing activity. When you clearly perceive a thought, natural disinterest replaces identification with the stories. As the mind calms, mental seclusion is established.

The strategy for insight meditation is to meet difficult mind-states head-on and illuminate them with wisdom. In this way vipassana practices are described as "practicing near suffering." By escorting the attention to meet the basic and often painful facts, insight develops. On the other hand, when strengthening samadhi, disengage from obstructive energies quickly. Set the hindrances aside. Let them go. Clear a space in the mind. Infuse it with happiness. Don't give much attention to the hindrances, but instead preserve your energy for purifying the mind within the realm of happy wholesome states. In this way jhana practice is said to be "near to happiness." With the repeated dismissal of distractions, the mind settles and the hindrances lose their charge until they eventually stop arising.

The secluded mind is separated from unwholesome states. This sets the stage for absorption. Hindrances are not permanently uprooted, but they are very remote. At this point you must be firm in your resolve. Intrusions on the seclusion could shatter the tenuous foundation of

SETTING THOUGHTS ASIDE

It can be useful to develop a variety of methods for setting thoughts aside, like a meditator's tool kit.

One method is to "sweep thoughts into trash bins." One by one observe each thought, and then imagine you can toss it into a bin, clearing the space of mind from the clutter of mental proliferations. Take a moment to look at the thought, know it, but then diligently toss it aside.

Or, imagine thoughts flying at you like baseballs. You catch each one and roll it back. Don't pocket it. Just look at it, know what it is, consider it for a moment, and toss it away. And if it comes back, do it again.

concentration. The gross struggles with obstructions that habitually siphon off our energy have been overcome. Now energy is recaptured and accumulated for samadhi. These are the conditions that are prerequisites for jhana.

ULTIMATE SOLITUDE

The culmination of seclusion goes far beyond a quiet state of mind. The Buddha described true seclusion as an experience that is free from attachment. In a discussion with a monk named Elder, he said, "And how, Elder, is dwelling alone fulfilled in detail? Here, Elder, what lies in the past has been abandoned, what lies in the future has been relinquished, and desire and lust for present forms of individual existence has been thoroughly removed. It is in such a way, Elder, that dwelling alone is fulfilled in detail."[9] Thus, inner seclusion is a way of being that is freed from attachment to past, future, and even present perceptions. Consciousness ceases to take its stand on forms, feelings, perceptions, or thoughts. Nothing is taken up as a basis upon which to construct personal identity. This realization of the unfabricated nature of things brings the uncluttered mind to perfection. We don't just clear away physical and mental rubbish, and then rest in that neat and tidy mental space. The very constituents of personality are exposed as utterly empty. There is nothing there to hold, and no one to try. Nothing exists that would structure a relationship between assumed constructs of I and you, this and that, there and here, past and future.

Awakening is a realization that is utterly unshakable; what's more, it occurs to no one, requires no confirmation, and attains nothing. Such knowledge will transform your fundamental orientation in life. With no place to stop, ease is limitless; happiness is unbounded, and freedom realized. In a famous verse, the Buddha says,

Where water, earth, fire and wind have no footing,
there the stars do not shine,
the sun is not visible,
the moon does not appear,
darkness is not found.

And when a sage, a worthy one, through wisdom
has known this for himself,
then from form and name,
from pleasure and pain,
he is freed.[10]

Ultimately, seclusion is the separation from suffering—not sensations, feelings, or perceptions. Physical and mental seclusion creates conditions conducive to deep investigation. The seclusion of jhana is likened to learning to ride a bicycle with training wheels. The concentration states help you to stay balanced while you practice. Through the practice you let go in so many ways, until finally you ride without the crutch of those conditioned states. The Buddha described realization beyond the support of jhana:

> There is that sphere of being where there is no earth, no water, no fire nor wind; no experience of infinity of space, of infinity of consciousness, of nothingness or even of neither-perception-nor-non-perception; there is there neither this world nor another world, neither moon nor sun; this sphere of being I call neither a coming nor a going nor a staying still, neither a dying nor a reappearance; it has no basis, no evolution and no support. It is the end of suffering.[11]

COUNTING THE BREATH

As you direct your attention to the experience of breath at the nostrils, add a count in the pause between breaths. Breath in, breath out, count 1; breath in, breath out, count 2; breath in, breath out, count 3. Count the breaths from one to ten, then from ten to one, then from one to ten. Limiting the number to ten reduces the tendency to try to accomplish something. Several rounds can help focus the attention on the simple activity of breathing. This exercise emphasizes the directing function of attention. The danger with counting exercises is that excessive attention can be given to the conceptual number producing a superficial trance while automatically counting. You can work to counteract this danger by sustaining interest in the experience of each individual breath.