

Buddhist Practice of the Solitude

Solitude or withdrawal (*pañisallàna*, *pavivakà* or *viveka*) is the state of being secluded or separate from others. A person can **choose** to be solitary or be **forced** into it by others or by circumstances.

When solitude is **unwanted**, forced, it can result in loneliness, anxiety or fear.

When used at the right time, when you **choose solitude**, and in the right manner, it can have an important role in **spiritual development**.

After his baptism **Jesus** is said to have spent 40 days and nights alone in the desert, the “wilderness.”

Tradition says the young **Muhammad** had the habit of meditating alone for several weeks every year in a **cave** on Mt. Hira.

Among **Indigenous** peoples, the entering the solitude is ritually essential in rites of passage.

Inuit (Eskimo) “all true wisdom is to be found far from the dwellings of me, in the great solitudes.”

For the **Apsáalooke** and **Schitsu’umsh**, going to the seclusion of a mountain ridge critical aspect of any fasting and vision quest.

“I never found the companion that was so companionable as solitude.”

Henry David **Thoreau**, *Walden*

Before his **enlightenment** the **Buddha** too spent extended periods alone in the forests. Reminiscing on this time many years later he said:

“Such was my seclusion that I would plunge into some forest and live there. If I saw a cowherd, shepherd, grass-cutter, wood-gatherer or forester, I would flee so that they would not see me or me them” (M.I,79).

Even **after** attaining enlightenment he would occasionally go into solitude. In the **Saüyutta Nikàya** he is recorded as saying:

“I wish to go into solitude for half a month. No one is to come to see me except the one who brings my food” (S.V,12).

The Buddha made a distinction between **physical** and **psychological** solitude and considered the first to be the more important of the two (S.II,282; V,67).

For him, psychological solitude meant isolating the mind from negative thoughts and emotions.

He recognized that people can choose to be **physical** solitary for a variety of reasons, some positive, others less so.

Some wish to isolate themselves from others, he said, out of **foolishness** or confusion, for some **evil** purpose, because they are mad or mentally unstable, or simply because he praised it.

Even if one seeks prolonged physical solitude for the right reasons one still needs to monitor oneself carefully and intelligently. The **joy** of aloneness (*pavivekasukka*, A.IV,341) can subtly deteriorate into a shirking of one's responsibilities. Likewise, one can overdo it, over-reach oneself and end up straining the mind.

Hence the Buddha's caution: `One who goes into solitude will either sink to the bottom or rise to the top'(A.V,202).

The more appropriate reasons why one might seek solitude, the Buddha said, included because one's wants are **modest** (*appicchataü*), for **contentment** (*santuññhiü*), so as to examine oneself, **reflection** (*sallekhü*), out of an **appreciation** for aloneness (*pavivekaü*) and because it can be helpful for **spiritual growth** (*aññhitam*, A.III,219).

It is certainly true that regular periods of solitude and even occasional extended periods, can be **psychologically refreshing**. It can teach one **independence**, **rest the mind**, enhance an **appreciation of silence**, and give one the opportunity to have a good look at oneself - reflection.

But the most important benefit of the practice of solitude is in **dissolving of one's attachments**.

As the Buddha said:

“Apply yourself to solitude. One who does so will **see things as they are**” (S.III15).

The entire edifice of Buddhism, with all its myriad institutions and conceptual systems, rests on a single insight – **Suffering**. This is the **first of the Four Noble Truths** enunciated by the Buddha in the *Suttas*: Birth is attended with pain, decay is painful, disease is painful, death is painful. Union with the unpleasant is painful, painful is separation from the pleasant; and any craving that is unsatisfied, that too is painful. Our lives are full of pain and suffering.

The story of the life of **Gautama**, the man who became the Buddha, is a story usually taken to deny the view that one need have **tasted suffering** in childhood and youth in order to recognize the sad truths of the Buddhist doctrine of suffering, actually supports it. Most people know that in order to prevent just the sort of things that eventually happened, Gautama's royal father shielded him from every misfortune and provided him with every pleasure throughout his boyhood; but that on being exposed as a young man to the evidence of suffering represented by a sick person, an old person, and a corpse, he nonetheless intuited the impermanence of life and fled his palace to seek salvation. What is less often noted, though it is always included in every version of the story, is that far from having escaped every sorrow, Gautama had begun life by suffering perhaps the greatest one imaginable: his mother died when he was a week old, so that he was raised by her sister. Thus, even the Buddha himself conforms to my generalization that early traumatic loss may be a determining precondition for a frame of mind prepared to find the transience of life and love intolerable.

The source of suffering is the second Noble truth – Attachments - the clinging of desire to an object in the world. This leads inevitably to suffering, because of the impermanence of the

phenomenal realm: we are destined to lose everything we value, not least our mortal bodies, and so the more we desire and cling to anything in the world, the more we prepare for ourselves a greater sorrow. The solution to the riddle of life is thus plain: to avoid suffering, snuff out desire, cut off all clinging and attachment.

Enlightenment reveals that, in our ignorance, we failed to realize that **the self** no less than the objects of its clinging are illusions, impermanent phantoms that are best served by dispelling them before they inevitably disappoint us.

Embedded in the **Eightfold Path** (right concentration, right mindfulness, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort), the means to dissolve attachments and eliminate suffering, is the **practice of solitude**. The **solitude** on which the *suttas* insist is an **inner state of nonattachment**, not necessarily just a condition of being without actual living companions. In the *Migajalasutta* the Buddha makes this point clearly by **distinguishing** between the *eka vihari*, or the “one who lives alone” and the *saddutiya-vihari*, the “one who lives with others.” A monk who lives in seclusion but who still perceives shapes, sounds, tastes, and so on as pleasurable and hence desirable is to be counted among those who live with others; while on the other hand a monk genuinely freed of desire for anyone or anything, “even if living in the village, among monks and nuns, among men and women, among kings, royal ministers or members of other religious sects, even then such a monk can be called ‘one who lives alone,’ because he has given up desire, his companion” (Wijayaratna 1990, 116).

An **important text** that serves as the canonical basis for the **truly solitary life**, achievable in a community but more readily accomplished in isolated living circumstances, is the *Khaggavisana-sutta*, the “**Discourse of the Rhinoceros Horn**.” This text contains forty-one stanzas of four lines each, all of them ending with the same final line: “*eko care khaggavisannakappo*,” which may be translated as “go alone like the horn of the rhinoceros.” The rare and reclusive rhinoceros of the north Indian and Nepalese low country is not only an animal with a solitary way of life, but it is also remarkable for its single horn, a feature that sets it apart from the much more common two horned rhinoceros we have all seen at the zoo.

The Rhinoceros *sutta* praises the inclination to be alone with unfailing heart, abandoning father and mother, forsaking wife and children, leaving friends and friendship behind, renouncing home and property, breaking all ties. A couple of stanzas will suffice to set the tone:

Just as a large bamboo tree with its branches entangled in each other, such is the care one has with children and wife; but like the shoot of bamboo not clinging to anything let one wander alone like a rhinoceros. Having left son and wife, father and mother, wealth and corn, and relatives, the different objects of desire, let one wander alone like rhinoceros. (cited in Spiro 1982, 348)