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Keeping a Space for Stillness
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We can find some calm in our daily lives—we hope. We just follow our mindfulness exercises and try to remember to keep a sense of balance. But sometimes we want to practice deep meditation, and for this we need something that's very important for *samatha* and *jhana* particularly, called *viveka*, which means seclusion. It's sometimes translated as separation, but I don't think that is quite right, because it's more a seclusion where something doesn't impinge or disturb you.

What Is Viveka?

The practice of *jhana* is to be undertaken where you won't be disturbed. Now, I think anybody living in a house with children around and things going on and dogs knows that that is basically impossible, but you can go away and practice in a bedroom or have a special place for practice and you can still get that sense of seclusion—just shut the door for a moment. And it's a bit like being at a party: you can kind of shut the door and you can hear things going on in the distance, but you feel quiet where you are.

The Buddha said there were three kinds of seclusion, so I thought I'd say what they are, because I think it's useful to bear that in mind. *Jhana*—the practice of deep meditation—is called "born of seclusion," so it's born from *viveka*. This makes *viveka* a very important basis for the practice of the deeper meditative states.

The first kind of *viveka* is simply bodily seclusion—just going to sit somewhere quiet. In the summer, you can obviously sit under a tree or go outside. And of course, the word "quiet" doesn't exactly apply, as it didn't when the Buddha practiced in the jungle in ancient times, because if you go and sit in a woodland, it's actually quite a noisy place with all sorts of rustles and birds around. So the seclusion is really a bodily seclusion whereby you can sit somewhere where those noises won't intrude too much.

I like meditating by the ocean, by the sea. I go and hide in the sand dunes and do my practice there, because I quite like having that surrounding sense of the noise of the sea around before I begin my meditation. But people find spots that suit them if they do outside meditation. And similarly inside, it's good to have a place that you feel is your place for meditation, so that when you go there you feel settled and it reminds you of other times you've meditated. I've got a special cushion I use. Other people have various little rituals of various kinds that set them up. And chanting can be very helpful if you enjoy it—it can calm the mind. If you chant the refuges and precepts before a practice, you find it can really prepare the mind and the body for your meditation. So this is the bodily *viveka* that is needed for a *jhana* practice.

The First Jhana

Then there's the viveka of the first jhana, and this is the state from which all other jhanas can flow, arise, or emerge. This is the one that is "born of seclusion"—you need to be secluded to do it. I think the best example of this is the very famous example of the Buddha as a child, being left under a rose apple tree while a very noisy and fun plowing festival was going on with his father—the king, or monarch—pushing the plow at the ceremony. It was some sort of fertility ceremony, very earthy, with pleasant things going on in the background. But he was secluded, because that might have been going on in the background, but he was under the rose apple tree and just watched his breath. The commentaries say he watched his breath; the *Mahāsaccaka Sutta* itself just says he attained jhana. And he felt completely refreshed and happy. In that beautiful, mythical way the stories sometimes describe things, the shadow of the tree didn't move the whole time he was in deep meditation. So he felt very at peace, and it's like something in the world became still too.

The Jhana Factors

Now the factors of this first jhana—we're going to see them as quite simple and pleasant things we can cultivate in daily life. But with a different object, with a meditation object, in seclusion, they can be refreshed and used to help the transformation of the mind and the body. The first is *vitakka*, the initial applying of the mind. *Tak* is almost like to tap or to hit something—to apply the mind. *Vicara* is the roaming or exploring aspect of the mind that just goes over an object and looks at it in a more cyclical, or more rounded, kind of way—so like the bee going to the flower, the buzzing around is *vicara*. The third is *piti*, joy or energization as some people like to call it; Lance Cousins actually suggested that the word "love" was a very good translation for *piti*. The fourth is *sukha*, happiness or wellbeing. It's interesting that *sukha* is described at every level of the path: nibbana is described as *sukha*; keeping *sila*, being happy in the world, is described as happiness, *sukha*. So it's a quality we can have, we hope, in many activities, including meditation—but in meditation developed in seclusion, it becomes something else; it grows into a very deep kind of contentment. And the last one is the unification of the mind and the body. These five factors are what the mind needs to enter into jhana.

So when we're sitting in meditation on the breath, we do *vitakka* on the breath. And when we're digging the garden, we use *vitakka* to dig the garden. So it's the same aspect of our mind and body, but it has a very different object in meditation.

Nibanna

We've had bodily seclusion, and then we have the viveka of the first jhana—the seclusion from the senses and from the world around. So although there might be a general sense of the body, and the mind will include that, and the perception of what constitutes the body may change, there's a seclusion that isn't just of the body but of the mind and the heart as well. And that's the second kind of viveka. The third kind of viveka is nibbana. So it's almost like all three are very important and significant stages of seclusion. All of the jhana practice arises from establishing

that first, bodily seclusion, but also the viveka of being able to be secluded from all the events around us and the things that are distracting our mind.

So jhana is the state that is possible when this can be done. One of the points about jhana that has been pointed out to me is that sometimes in texts you get people who are practicing jhana when they're doing a walking practice. I'm not particularly using it in that sense, but I think it's like English words—if you think of the word "absorption": if you see a child coloring in a coloring book, you say, "Oh, they're really absorbed in what they're doing." But we don't mean that they're in an absorption, which is sometimes a translation for jhana. It's a word where somebody's doing something focused, like a walking practice, probably in seclusion. I think the rare references where somebody is said to be in jhāna when they're walking usually indicate a secluded meditation practice. So rather like this word "absorbed"—when the child is really busy with his coloring book, he's got some kind of conditions whereby he's not doing anything else and there aren't distractions. But where the word is usually used in Buddhist texts is for the sitting meditation, or lying down—as in the Buddha's practice on his deathbed, where the mind settles on one object.

And in a way it's a freeing of the attention from all the sense objects—this second kind of viveka. From all the distractions that are going around, the attention can be refreshed by finding an object which is naturally restorative and pleasant. So I'll try not to get too geeky about looking at things in too much detail, except the detail of how it applies to our lives—and that is a detail which is very important.

The practice of jhana is said to be a "happy abiding"—a happy abiding in visible reality: *diṭṭhadhamma-sukhavihara*. It's a very pleasant dwelling. A vihara is somewhere to live. So if you practice jhana, in absorption, in seclusion, it is a pleasant place to live. There's a commentary by somebody called Upatissa, which is less well-known than that of the later commentator Buddhaghosa, who wrote *The Path of Purification*. Upatissa wrote something called *The Path to Freedom*, a little before Buddhaghosa, we think. And he said that stillness is like a candle flame in a large palace: it illuminates everywhere. Now, what I like to think of that as is that the candle flame creates the palace, if you like—it makes us aware of all the potential in the mind that usually we don't see or know about. But if you have a steady, flickering light, then the palace that is our human birthright, the human mind, can be illuminated. Upatissa doesn't say this, but I feel it's a detail which is really interesting to explore and to see how a moment of stillness can do this for us—just change things and make them look different.

The Buddha was very respectful about the practice of jhana. After the incident at the rose apple tree, it was this state—which he describes in the *Mahasaccaka Sutta*—that seems to have set him on the path to enlightenment. I think that's interesting. The Buddha was practicing a lot of self-mortification before then, and really harming himself through his practices. Perhaps he needed to do that. But whatever it was, it wasn't giving him any wisdom; it was just making him quite miserable and dissatisfied. But he remembered this state and the sense of balance and joy it had brought. And he asked himself a very interesting question: "Why am I frightened of happiness?" Which I think is a very interesting question. Why am I frightened of the happiness

that is free from sense desire? What if this state is the way to realization? And what I like is the way he asks it with an optative—a grammatical form that suggests, it's almost like, "Hmm, why don't I? Why don't I try this?" And it's that spirit of playful investigation, which he remembered as a child, and which had been so lacking from his very grim and grueling routine, that makes him think: what if that's the way to wisdom?

And I find that very useful as a little story to think about the importance of jhana. We need our minds to be refreshed and to gather strength, and a stillness practice can do that. I don't think we need to think of it as something we have to attain all the time. I use the example of walking by the ocean: you just enjoy being in the presence of the calm of the sea and the fresh air, and then gradually you might learn the skills to be able to swim and to actually enter into the ocean and to be able to be safe in it. And good meditation teaching will help us to train those five jhana factors so that we can swim in the ocean as well as enjoy being in its proximity.

So the Buddha says that if one practices jhana even for a moment, even for a finger snap—if the monastic does this and dwells not devoid of jhana, they are one who follows the teacher's instruction and fulfills their advice. Not in vain do they receive the alms food of the land. So the Buddha is in effect saying that you only need one moment, and that in itself is very, very good—not that you only need it, but that one moment will make a great shift in your life.

And I think I sometimes hear discussions, or see debates on the internet, about people worrying whether they're doing the right kind of jhana—there's a whole thing at the moment about whether it's a commentary jhāna or a canon jhana. I would suggest not to worry about that, but just to try and find stillness in your practice and enjoy it. And you will be starting to develop what is needed to swim in the sea. And in fact, thinking about it too much is something the Buddha warns against. So I like this little passage where he says the range of jhāna cannot be conceived of with thinking—anyone overthinking all this would partake of madness and distress. So I think that's quite a useful warning for us not to overthink it, but to trust the mindfulness of the stillness in the practice and to see where it leads.

In the *Pasādika Sutta*—that's *Digha Nikaya 29*—the Buddha says that the jhānas are happinesses that lead to full awakening. They are considered really important in the ancient texts and just very happy states along the way. I remember Walpola Rahula, one of the early translators of Buddhism to the West, said that people sometimes get the idea that Buddhism is a very grim and gloomy religion because it talks about dukkha and things like that. But he said you've got to remember joy, and that the hallmark of Buddhist practice is that it is happy—that you feel happy in yourself. Now, we can't feel happy in ourselves all the time, but the practice is that this will be an outcome. It's not necessarily a goal, but it is an outcome.

And I'll just read a very famous Dhammapada verse, which I think shows the importance of jhāna in cultivating wisdom. It's an interesting verse because it shows us that if we want to look with wisdom, we have to look with peace—and it isn't wisdom if we're looking with grumpiness or hatred. That's not wisdom.

There is no jhana without wisdom. There is no wisdom for one not practicing jhana. One who has both jhana and wisdom is truly in the presence of nibbana.

So that's a very nice way to introduce and to think about the topic. And in fact, there are many texts where the Buddha compares the practice of jhana to rivers leading down to the sea. This is a very famous Upanishadic image of waters leading down to the ocean. The Buddha adapts it and says that jhānas eventually take us to liberation: you can't stop the flow of the water going down to the ocean, and the practice of jhāna inevitably leads to the ocean of enlightenment.

I like that Dhammapada quote about jhana and wisdom. And somebody pointed out to me that you could get in a loop, where you think: well, I can't have wisdom, so I don't have jhana—and vice versa. But you can set the soil and the conditions. And I feel that, with jhāna, we're just very lucky, if you like, just to get a glimpse of the seaside sometimes. And sometimes we might get a moment of wisdom. And that is the soil on which these jhāna factors depend. It feels to me like getting your house ready for a guest—everything's ready, you've got the spare room made up, you've got food in the fridge, you've got things ready—and it's like you're creating a space, a generous space, for something to happen. But you can't guarantee when or how your friend's going to turn up. You just create the space and hope they will.

And I feel that jhana is like that. We can't grab it. We can't say, "Right, I'm going to have jhana now"—except when one is very proficient, one may be able to enter such states more easily. But even then, it's like you can't capture a bird in your hands; it will come to you when it's ready. And maybe that's true of jhana and wisdom: we can set the conditions and hope they'll both come and visit us sometimes.