



# The Value of Seclusion

## by Walt Opie

*In this personal essay, Walt Opie touches on the benefits and challenges of seclusion. Seclusion, Walt points out, is conducive for Buddhist practice; he sees this in the suttas, the recommendations of contemporary Thai Forest teachers, and his own experience. Walt goes on to reflect on his relationship with the figures of Jack Kerouac and Gary Snyder, who took jobs as fire lookouts precisely because of the solitude. Remembering hiking up to their fire towers as a young man, he describes how his understanding of practice, seclusion, and living well has changed over time.*

*“The only Zen you find on the tops of mountains is the Zen you bring up there.”*

—Robert M. Pirsig, *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*

*“If I don’t get a vision on Desolation Peak my name ain’t Blake...”*

—Jack Kerouac, letter to Lucien Carr dated February 24, 1956

During these COVID-19 times, I’ve been appreciating the mornings when my partner takes our daughter to school or summer camp, and I’m suddenly alone in the house. Often I’ll switch my cell phone to airplane mode and settle into

sitting meditation on a cushion. Although it's not necessarily a problem either way, with any luck nobody is outside using a leaf blower, backing up a truck with that loud beeping sound, or running a chainsaw at full throttle. My whole system relaxes into this quiet, spacious stillness created by the knowledge that no interruptions are imminent, at least for the next 20-30 minutes. This is the joy of seclusion, if only on a miniature scale.

Seclusion—both bodily and mental—is a topic I've been pondering quite a bit lately. I'm talking about seclusion as an aid to our practice that then allows us to be more skillful and compassionate when we engage with this challenging world, and definitely not seclusion as a form of escape or burying one's head in the sand. According to the suttas, the Buddha frequently urged his followers to go “to the forest or to the root of a tree or to an empty hut”<sup>[1]</sup> to practice meditation away from the hubbub of city or village life in ancient India. Of course, these days we might instead simply stay home indoors, go to a retreat center, or if resources allow, perhaps rent (or borrow) a cabin in the woods à la Airbnb.

One of my teachers, the scholar-monk Bhikkhu Anālayo, has written that seclusion “is accorded a high value in early Buddhism” and “even just to talk about seclusion is commendable, since such a topic for conversation will lead onwards to the final goal.”<sup>[2]</sup> My understanding is that this valuing of seclusion was intended to counterbalance what most people in society valued more highly; namely, social activity and keeping busy.

Meditation masters in the Thai Forest Tradition like Ajahn Mun (1870-1949) also greatly valued seclusion. He was known to be quite reclusive, roaming the remote forest wilderness areas of northern Thailand and Laos trying his best to avoid contact with others—even earnest students out looking for him—so he could spend the days and nights in uninterrupted meditation practice.

The beloved teacher Ajahn Chah (1918-1992), who was also known to seek out secluded places for personal practice, once said in a dharma talk, “In the beginning stages of Dhamma practice, physical seclusion is of vital importance.”<sup>[3]</sup> He explained how Sariputta, one of the Buddha’s foremost disciples, had taught that physical seclusion helped create the conditions for mental seclusion, which in turn created the conditions for “seclusion from mental defilements, enlightenment.” Ajahn Chah further encouraged his students with this bold pronouncement: “Today, or sometime soon, seek out a lonely cremation ground in a remote forest far from any habitation. Experiment with living all alone. Or seek out a fear-inspiring mountain peak.”

When I was younger, I occasionally sought out mountain peaks for other reasons. In the summer of 1997, I was 31 and living in Seattle. This was at a time before I had established a regular meditation practice, although I did meditate sporadically and my interest in Buddhism was growing. A public affairs firm had recently laid me off after a year working on a successful statewide political campaign, so I was collecting unemployment benefits and trying to figure out my next job. With my friend Scott (not his real name to protect his privacy), I started taking long hikes on the weekends in the nearby Washington State wilderness.

One day, as we looked through a trail guide for the region, Scott and I came across the description of a hike up to Desolation Peak in the North Cascades where the famous Beat writer Jack Kerouac served as a fire lookout during the summer of 1956. The trail guide also listed the hike to the top of nearby Sourdough Mountain, where Kerouac’s friend, acclaimed poet and environmental activist Gary Snyder, had been a fire lookout in the summer of 1953 (and his Reed College pal Phillip Whalen took it over in 1955). Snyder and Whalen had encouraged Kerouac to apply for a fire lookout job not long after they all met during the fall of 1955 in San Francisco, through fellow poet Allen Ginsberg.

Scott and I immediately vowed that we were going to hike up to these two mountain peaks together as soon as possible, starting with Desolation. This fired us up with a real sense of purpose, given that we had both read Kerouac and Snyder. I was more enthusiastic about Kerouac at the time, having obsessed over *On the Road* and *The Dharma Bums* in my wayward youth (by this time I'd even driven across the continental U.S. three times with *On the Road* particularly in mind). Meanwhile, Scott preferred Snyder, believing Kerouac was too self-absorbed. I knew he was flawed in multiple ways and an obvious alcoholic (like me, although at least I was in recovery), but I figured this gave ole Jack his restless drive to keep writing and exploring. I had admired the poems by Snyder that I remembered reading, especially "I Went Into the Maverick Bar," but I didn't know that much about him yet.

Before you can even start hiking up the mountain to Desolation Peak, you have to hire an expensive water taxi to ferry you across Ross Lake. The taxi drops you off near the trailhead. The guy who drove us in his shiny metal boat was named Tom and had a long, grey ponytail. Tom barely spoke a word to us as we cruised through the slightly choppy waters of the pristine alpine lake. I wrote in my journal that this aspect of the trip made it seem "like something out of a modern *Odyssey* story."

We reached the summit for the first time on July 31, 1997, as I recorded in my journal (we made another visit the



next year). Scott had purchased new hiking boots for the trip, and the steep, demanding switchback trail gave him terrible blisters on the heels of his feet by the time we got to the top, just above 6,000 feet. My hands got a lot of mosquito bites, despite being lathered in organic insect repellent. Still, for both of us it was well worth the effort. The views from up there were exactly as Kerouac had described in the opening sentence of *Desolation Angels*: "Those afternoons, those lazy afternoons, when I used to sit, or lie down, on Desolation Peak, sometimes on the alpine grass, hundreds of miles

of snowcovered rock all around, looming Mount Hozomeen on my north, vast snowy Jack to the south, the enchanted picture of the lake below to the west and the snowy hump of Mt. Baker beyond..." I carried a new copy of that book with me on the hike and read it aloud to compare his words with reality. They matched.

We had just missed the current fire lookout who was stationed on the mountain at that time—we heard she had gone down for a night or two—but at least the fire lookout cabin was not closed up for the winter yet, so we could see inside through the glass windows where it presumably looked almost the same as when Kerouac had stayed in it. We spent the night on the mountain at the designated campsite, having obtained the proper permit ahead of time. The next morning we went back to the top and stared at the views all around. In my journal, I wrote: "We aren't that high in altitude but the vantage points are nonetheless incredible everywhere you look and see so much wonder, beauty, wildflowers, fir trees, mountain ridges, mountain peaks, mountain crevices and connected, jagged grey-blue body masses." The two of us celebrated together, mainly by smiling and gawking continuously at the vastness of it all. (On the second trip there, I painted a little watercolor of the mountains and the lake below in varied hues of blue and green that captured the spirit of the scene pretty well.)

Scott and I made the hike up to Sourdough Mountain about two months later on September 20th. My birthday is earlier in September, so I had just turned 32. Kerouac was 34 when he spent 63 days on Desolation staring at Mount Hozomeen, which he often called "The Void" in reference to the Buddhist concept of emptiness. Meanwhile Snyder (eight years younger than Jack) was in his 20s during his two summers as a fire lookout. In my journal this time, I wrote, "Scott and I just reached camp on Sourdough... I am sitting on some rocks next to the raging creek with my boots off. A blister has begun to stretch and puss on my right heel, but it is tolerable." So that time I was the one who got blisters. Our

campsite was about a mile below the fire lookout tower where Snyder stayed.

The next day we hiked to the top where we could see the barn-red Sourdough lookout cabin perched on a large slab of rock in the distance. As we approached, we came upon a medium-sized black bear eating huckleberries at the edge of a small alpine meadow. This seemed serendipitous to me and echoed Snyder's important early poem "A Berry Feast" (one line is, "Bear has been eating the berries") which he read for the crowd at Six Gallery in San Francisco the same night Ginsberg first read his poem "Howl." Fortunately, the black bear was more interested in eating berries than in investigating us. The bear sauntered quietly away behind some bushes. We posed for a few photos by the closed up wooden lookout shack and left. Once again, the views from up there were spectacular. Snyder describes it succinctly in his wonderful poem "Mid-August at Sourdough Mountain Lookout" which ends: "Looking down for miles/Through high still air." Like our trip to Desolation, we agreed it was another successful pilgrimage.

For someone sunk in confusion,  
—Even if well concealed in a hiding place (or cave)—  
Seclusion is far away.  
In this world, it's not easy to let go of desires!  
--Translated by Gil Fronsdal, *The Buddha Before Buddhism*

Mental seclusion is not a given simply because we are secluded somewhere in the physical realm. In fact, bodily seclusion without the proper preparation can be very challenging and may not culminate in much mental seclusion, or peace of mind, at all. In the Bhayabherava Sutta (MN 4), a brahmin says to the Buddha, "Master Gotama, remote jungle-thicket resting places in the forest are hard to endure, seclusion is hard to practice, and it is hard to enjoy solitude. One would think the jungles must rob a bhikkhu of his mind, if he has no concentration."

The Buddha replies, "That is so, brahmin, that is so."

Furthermore, the Buddha tells him, if someone goes to a remote forest location and they have not been practicing ethical behavior in body, speech, mind, and livelihood, then in all that solitude “they evoke unwholesome fear and dread.” However, he tells the brahmin, “Seeing in myself this purity of bodily conduct (as well as verbal conduct, mental conduct, and livelihood), I found great solace in dwelling in the forest.” He goes on to explain that if someone who is “devoid of wisdom” goes to a remote forest location, they will also “evoke unwholesome fear and dread” (the suttas tend to use a lot of repetition given this was originally an oral tradition). Then he describes how he was able to subdue this fear and dread when it did arise under certain circumstances, eventually culminating in “my mind concentrated and unified.” Finally he entered the first four jhanas, or meditative absorptions, one at a time, purified his mind, and ultimately reached liberation as a natural progression.

In his practice guide on the four foundations of mindfulness, Anālayo says, “Satipaṭṭhāna meditation... establishes seclusion from the hindrances (sensual desire, ill will, sloth and torpor, restlessness and worry, and doubt). During actual practice we keep an eye on this condition of seclusion, viveka (in Pali), by maintaining mindfulness of the present moment without succumbing to distraction.”<sup>[4]</sup>

In another sutta, the Buddha said, “Bhikkhus, make an exertion in seclusion. A bhikkhu who is secluded understands things as they really are.”<sup>[5]</sup> Ultimately, it is this ability to see things “as they really are” that lies at the heart of seclusion. When we are truly able to drop our preoccupations with the world, supported by bodily and mental seclusion, then it becomes possible to develop the key insights often described in early Buddhist texts, especially seeing the impermanent, unsatisfactory, and impersonal nature of all conditioned things. Seeing this can potentially lead us to stop chasing these fleeting experiences, to abandon craving and let go of attachments, and perhaps with the right conditions, to discover the peace of liberation or nibbāna. Hopefully, what we also find along the way is a truly reliable refuge that

brings wholesome forms of joy and happiness born of this very seclusion.

A few years after our hikes to Desolation and Sourdough, I again got laid off—this time from a full-time editor job at a dot-com. As a result, I moved back to San Francisco (where I had lived before) to attend graduate school for writing. During my first year, I took a poetry seminar where we were asked to choose a poet, write a paper about their work, and give the class a presentation. Somewhat on a whim, I chose to focus on the poetry of Gary Snyder. This led me to start doing incessant research on Snyder and eventually Kerouac, too.

Although it is a fictionalized account, the story of *The Dharma Bums* focuses on the real-life friendship between its author and Snyder (Japhy Ryder in the novel). The two shared a strong interest in Buddhism, as well as prose writing and poetry. Kerouac's knowledge of Buddhism came mainly from reading books on the subject, such as *The Buddhist Bible*, edited by Dwight Goddard. Snyder was a more accomplished Buddhist scholar and practitioner even then, before he spent years in Japan learning directly from several different Rinzai Zen teachers. In *Kerouac: A Biography*, Ann Charters writes: "Gary had been studying Japanese for three years, preparing for his trip to a Zen monastery. He was also translating the Chinese poet Han-Shan the fall Jack met him. Modest about his own scholarship, Gary accepted Jack on his own terms as an original... The two of them disagreed on most points of Buddhist thought, though their disagreements were primarily differences of emphasis."<sup>[6]</sup>

At one point in the spring of 1956 they shared a cabin in Marin County for a few weeks. This gave Kerouac a chance to observe Snyder's Buddhist routines up close. "What Jack admired most was Gary's religious discipline," Charters writes, "And the intense dedication of his Buddhist activity throughout his waking hours... Living together with Snyder in Mill Valley, he was most impressed by Gary's meditations (which he did first thing in the morning, and again briefly at mid-afternoon and right before bed)" (248).

As I continued my research, what started to shift was my personal admiration, or allegiance even, from Kerouac to Snyder—whom even Kerouac himself called “a great new hero of American culture” via the character Alvah Goldbook (Ginsberg) in *The Dharma Bums*. Having been to those two memorable mountain peaks where each of these guys had spent a summer, I could picture them up there on their separate mountains alone, comparing in my mind’s eye how they each dealt with the isolation and seclusion quite differently.

In an essay in *Lonesome Traveler*, Kerouac wrote of his mindset approaching the fire lookout job: “I was looking forward to an experience men seldom earn in this modern world: complete and comfortable solitude in the wilderness, day and night, sixty-three days and nights to be exact.” Unfortunately, Charters explained, “In reality, Kerouac had set himself too hard a test. Two months of sudden enforced solitude was, as Snyder would have said, a ‘mind-bending experience’ for any man, being totally alone... for the first long stretch of his life, in the midst of a frighteningly vast and impersonal sweep of mountains, crags, boulders, lakes and valleys” (254).

It didn’t help that Kerouac was dependent on alcohol, Benzedrine (a brand of amphetamine) and cigarettes when he arrived at his fire lookout. Given that he purposely didn’t bring much (if any) booze or drugs with him, he must have experienced some withdrawal symptoms. When the tobacco he used for rolling his own cigarettes ran out, in desperation he radioed for more and got another tin. My sense is that he was bored and somewhat miserable much of the time (“Time drags,” he wrote in his journal)—perhaps consistently experiencing something like what the Buddha called “unwholesome fear and dread.”

Charters tells us: “It’s possible that the summer of 1956 was the only period in Kerouac’s life in which he could have tried to live the life of solitude he’d written and talked about so much... Like most of the experiences in Jack’s life, the reality of what happened was considerably different from

his anticipation... What happened to him on the mountaintop was that almost nothing happened... By the end of it what he felt most intensely was his own loneliness”

(250). In *Subterranean Kerouac: The Hidden Life of Jack Kerouac*, Ellis Amburn even writes, “Some observers thought he’d become unhinged by too much isolation” when he first returned to civilization. One of his first acts was to go find a bar in Seattle and order a beer.<sup>[7]</sup>

At the very least, John Suiter writes in *Poets on the Peaks: Gary Snyder, Phillip Whalen and Jack Kerouac in the North Cascades*, “Unlike Gary, who had come off his lookouts with some sadness, Kerouac on his final day was more than ready to leave.”<sup>[8]</sup> Kerouac wrote in his journal, “I want to come down RIGHT AWAY because the smell of onions on my hand as I bring blueberries to my lips on the mountainside suddenly reminds me... of the World to which I want to return at once.” (Charters, 1973, 269)

By contrast, Suiter writes: “For Snyder, however, such complete and lengthy solitude was exactly what he had come to the mountains hoping to find. To him, solitude was not a thing to be endured, but savored” (32). Snyder puts it this way near the end of his book *Mountains and Rivers Without End*: “Two seasons on lookouts... in what was then the Mount Baker National Forest, not far south of the Canadian border, gave me full opportunity to watch the change of mood over vast landscapes... The prolonged stay in mountain huts also gave me my first opportunity to seriously sit cross-legged, in the practical and traditional posture of Buddhist meditation.”

Suiter tells the story of how somebody asked Blackie Burns—perhaps the most experienced and respected of the Forest Service men—who he felt was, “the best on the forest” at that time. Blackie’s careful response was, “I like that boy Snyder on Sourdough. He’s a calm son of a bitch” (78). This was no doubt high praise coming from a seasoned Forest Service man like Burns. (Snyder dedicated his first book, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems*, published in 1959, to Blackie Burns and others.)

Unlike Kerouac who wasn't mentally prepared for that level of isolation, Snyder clearly thrived amidst the seclusion of being a fire lookout, which I attributed to both his temperament since childhood, yet also to his steady, deliberate Buddhist practice. I realized this was more like who I now aspired to be, especially after roughly 15 years of continuous sobriety with many emotional ups and downs, and a renewed interest in meditation.

I don't share all of this to put Kerouac down—after all, he was only human and did successfully complete his fire watch period. I still appreciate much of his writing and how he brought a real enthusiasm for Buddhism to a larger Western audience through his books. The point is simply that after delving deeper into my research, I realized I no longer wanted to emulate Kerouac the way I once did. It also was not lost on me that he died a sad, alcoholic death (related to cirrhosis) in 1969 at the relatively young age of 47. Instead, I now wanted to steer my life much more in the direction that Snyder followed (who is still alive, aged 92). This was an important revelation for me at that time. In fact, Snyder is now considered “the Poet Laureate of Deep Ecology” and remains a great inspiration to me for his ongoing environmental work combined with Buddhist wisdom.<sup>[9]</sup>

Not long after I finished graduate school and somewhat fortified by the example of Snyder, I attended my first residential retreat for five days at an insight meditation center in Northern California. Soon after that retreat, I attended another twice as long, followed by many more. This same meditation center even hired me for a full-time position that ended up lasting far longer than any job I have ever held, before or since—until I left of my own accord to sit a two-month retreat in 2013.

And, thanks to my ever-evolving understanding of the practice, I now find that the wholesome bliss of dwelling in deep seclusion—even if sometimes it's only for 20-30 minutes at home by myself—is much more satisfying than I ever would have imagined it could be before. As Gary Snyder's translation of a Han-Shan poem reads:

“Once at Cold Mountain, troubles cease—  
No more tangled, hung-up mind.”<sup>[10]</sup>

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- [1] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Middle Length Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, in association with the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies, 1995), 145/MN 10.4.
- [2] Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Excursions into the Thought-World of the Pali Discourses* (Onalaska, WA: Pariyatti Press, 2012), 258.
- [3] Ajahn Chah, *The Collected Teachings of Ajahn Chah* (Northumberland, UK: Aruna Publications, 2011), 465.
- [4] Bhikkhu Anālayo, *Satipaṭṭhāna Meditation: A Practice Guide* (Cambridge, UK: Windhorse Publications, 2018), 189.
- [5] Bhikkhu Bodhi, *The Connected Discourses of the Buddha* (Boston, MA: Wisdom Publications, 2000), 248/SN III 6.
- [6] Ann Charters, *Kerouac: A Biography* (New York, NY: St. Martin’s Press, 1973), 243.
- [7] Jim Jones, *Jack Kerouac in Seattle* (Salt Lake City: Elik Press, 2004), 2020.
- [8] John Suiter, *Poets on the Peaks: Gary Snyder, Phillip Whalen and Jack Kerouac in the North Cascades* (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 2002), 225.
- [9] See Jason Wirth, “Gary Snyder, [Dōgen](#), and the [EcoSangha](#): The Practice of the Wild in the Anthropocene,” *Insight Journal*, 2019.
- [10] Gary Snyder, *Riprap and Cold Mountain Poems* (Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint, 1958), 57.