

Dharmette: Alone but not Lonely

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December 20, 2023

Good morning, still, everyone, and hello. The topic that came up, I just want to say I appreciated the six people that I met this morning in the practice discussion. It was really lovely to meet each of you and get a sense of you and your sincerity. And the topics you brought up were great.

One of them that came up that I thought maybe it'd be nice to, I couldn't finish the question, so I thought I would maybe say a few words about it. And that is the difference between loneliness and aloneness. And I think this is a very, two different things. Some people, they treat them the same.

But loneliness is debilitating. Loneliness is a feeling of lack, a feeling of somehow feeling, becoming depleted, feeling alone, feeling somehow abandoned or unconnected or not really feeling there's anybody there to support us and be with us. And human beings have a deep social need. And so that need is not being met. There could be a feeling of deficiency and a longing and even some kind of despair sometimes. All kinds of things. Depression can come from loneliness.

Aloneness, I'm fond of that it seems that the English word alone is a contraction of two words, all one. And I don't know, I haven't looked it up in the dictionaries, the etymology of it. But in my mother tongue, which is Norwegian, it's the same thing. It's alene. It's exactly the same. An means one. It's the same thing, all one. And so it suggests to me at least that a very different idea about being alone is we're all, we're just all one. We're complete. We're whole. And it's a possibility of feeling whole, feeling nurtured and nourished, feeling complete, not feeling any deficiency, independent of other people. It's a real possibility for us human beings.

And in some ways what Buddhist practice is taking us to is not to be apart from people, not to be physically alone, but to be in the world all one, all complete, whole, where we're not looking for others to fulfill us. We're not looking for others to prop us up. We're not looking for others to prove that we exist in some way. We're not looking to others for approval. We're not even looking for others for love. We just feel complete in ourselves.

So for me, the first time that I experienced something like this that was real game changer for me, I was working for a period of time on a small dairy farm in Norway. And a couple who were the farmers, they took advantage of the situation. I had been there for a while. I had been trained how to take care of the farm and the cows. And so they went on a vacation, which when you have cows, you can't really take a vacation because the cows need—it's like having little babies at home or some little kids. They need daily care. So I was the caretaker. And so for the first time in my life, I was alone for a week. I didn't talk to anyone for the week. There was—and it was a long time ago. There was no TV. There was no—they might have had a TV. They might have had a phone. I think they had a phone there, but a

landline. Remember, this was 1975, I think. So there was no internet. There was no cell phones, social media. Couldn't Facebook someone. I was really alone. And the only person I saw the whole week was the mail carrier. I would look out the window down the road. We were at the end of a road up in the mountains in a kind of valley, and kind of last house, last farm on the road. And in far distance, you could see that one day I saw the mail carrier walking up that dirt road and going to the few houses that were there. But that was it for the week.

So that was—I never had that alone. And the course of that week, I wasn't meditating. I was just living the farm life, doing the work, milking the cows, cooking my food. But in the course of the week, my mind got quieter. And there was this very strange experience I had where things around me—I remember being in the kitchen there—and everything sparkled. And I'd go outside, everything's sparkling. Everything seemed so acutely sensitive to perception in a beautiful way. And more than just the objects around me, my thoughts had that sparkle. I mean, I don't know if my thoughts were particularly good thoughts to have. But the fact that I was thinking had a sparkle to them. Wow. And it was a cute sense of—I think what was sparkling was not the things, but my attention, my awareness was kind of—had settled, had opened up. And it was no longer distracted by social preoccupations.

And I realized I spent a lot of my time preoccupied by social issues. Do they like me? Do they not like me? What am I supposed to say? What did they say? What I should have said? And all these things were going on. It kind of kept my mind busy, chattering all this. And all that over the week alone, all that settled down. And I felt this intimacy with myself and an intimacy with the world that I'd never experienced before.

My friends, the farmers, came back and it vanished quickly. But it made such a big impression on me that for many years, the question I was living by was, "How can I be alone with others?" I didn't want to become a hermit. That didn't seem to be the lesson to take from this experience. The lesson was, this was really important. This way of being, this is possible. Now, how can I do that together with other people in society, in relationship to others? And I felt that it's not about them behaving better. It was really about me understanding my own mind and what happens when I'm with people and in social situations. To understand my fears, to understand my judgments, to understand my conceits, to understand what I'm trying to, you know, social games I'm trying to play, to somehow be seen in the right way and accepted the right way. One of the neurotic things that I had was a desire, a wish for everyone to like me. Now it's okay to have that desire. It can be innocent. But for me it was neurotic. And it caused me a lot of suffering.

And it was only when I was finally in the Buddhist monastery meditating a lot that I saw how much I was doing it. And it wasn't just meditation, but I was put in a monastic position with a crew of people in a kitchen as the head cook, managing cook. And that was a recipe for making it impossible for everyone to like you. Kitchens are tough places to be. And a big crew of people. And so there I got to see it over and over again how much I was doing this social gymnastics, complicated gymnastics to try to figure

out how to get people to like me.

So I got to learn and see all these things I was doing. And by learning to see that, I learned not to do it. I learned how to relax that. And I learned just to be whole by myself. I learned to feel complete

as I am. That I'm enough just as I am. And I stopped searching outside of myself for validation. Searching outside of myself for where the dangers are and where the assaults would come in my self-concept. I learned that I was a lot safer in social situations than I had imagined I could be. I learned that if people could be angry with me, I could still feel whole and feel safe. I learned that if people wanted things from me and I didn't want to provide it to them, that I could be whole and complete, saying no, that was okay. I learned so many things about what it's like to rest in the oneness, the wholeness, the sense of completion. But that took a long time, a lot of study, a lot of understanding of what my mind was doing.

And so I learned the task that I set myself out to do when I was 20, 21 years old, which I learned to be alone with others. I don't say that very often because, I guess, you know, nice to see you, I feel very alone, but I'm happy with that. I don't think people hear that very well. So I don't say it that often. But another way of saying it is feeling, being independent, being present with others and feeling a sense of freedom in their presence with them and sharing that freedom with them. This sense of what I call being alone with others does not make me necessarily reserved or aloof. In my situation, it's actually made me more connected and more present for people than I was able to do earlier in my life.

So this topic that I'm bringing up today is predicated on the distinction between being lonely and being alone, and not to think of the same thing. That there is a way of being alone without being lonely. There is a way of being lonely and being surrounded by people. So the presence and absence of people is not necessarily the reason why we feel lonely. There's something going on within ourselves. And then to discover that, to find out what that is, and find some way of relaxing, of settling, letting go, of feeling, coming into, growing into a sense of being all one, being one whole, a sense of personal wholeness as we are with all our, with all our warts and blemishes and oddities, which I suspect a few of you have. Some oddities. The wonderful thing about being whole and feeling complete, that can include the ways you're a little odd. Isn't that nice? I think it's nice. But of course, those of you who have no oddities, that's appreciated too. So, thank you.