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Growing in Our Aloneness

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A few years back I was spending some time at a well-known Yoga Institute in the Mumbai area. The sessions there focused on various aspects of the Yoga lifestyle and approach to living. In one session, the teacher put a question to the class. The question was: what has been the motivation behind most of your actions in Life?

A good question. The room was silent.. I reflected and offered the answer that came immediately to my mind. Before answering, I was wondering what the response would bring... Loneliness was my answer. From the back of the room there was silence, as I was, again, not sure what response my answer would bring. Would I be ridiculed, laughed at, ignored? Suddenly, one person and then another, and then another was saying "yes, loneliness, yes, I agree". The teacher was not prepared for this response. She had wanted to steer the session in another direction. I had learned something from her question. I learned that a question can, as we learn, as we share, as we teach, direct ones attention to something that they can learn from, and learn with. A question can assist us in accessing something in our psyche that can bring insight.

It made me reflect on another event in my life, about thirty years ago, or more. At that time I had a lot of problems, confusion about who I was, what I should be, could be. I called home one night, and found out that my neighbor had died. She was woman, a young woman, a professor, and the gossip was that she had committed suicide. I reflected on the times I had seen her, and reflected more closely on how she had been a young woman, a respected woman, a successful woman. Why? Loneliness? Hurt in love? Fear of being alone for ever? Regrets about the past?

One thing that I have seen in life, travelling to different places, having had various experiences myself, teaching, sharing and learning Yoga for a number of years is that loneliness can affect individuals of all social, economic and ethnic backgrounds. Perhaps there is nothing surprising about this realization, but it seems to tell us something about the character of being alone.

Aloneness, and those painful and confused feelings that are part of it, are an integral part of life. We can live in fear of it and the experience or we can understand that it is part of the human experience and understand how to experience it and grow with and from it in a skillful manner.

In our time alone, we can, if we have been made aware of these things, use our body, mind and breath to nourish us as we understand and apply the teachings and practice of a path.

For many individuals, their painful times alone come after a failed relationship- a relationship that they put a lot of their time, energy, emotions and being into, hoping that it would bring them fulfillment and the unknown answers to their expectations of

what happiness and a relationship should be. This type of aloneness and the lonely feelings that accompany it can be most painful for men and women to deal with.

Out of reasons of a failed relationship, or just feeling isolated and lonely, some individuals fall into the mental trap of thinking that they are unlovable, inferior or do not have gifts to offer, insights and other attributes that others can love and respect.

We try to remind individuals that they can use their aloneness as a way, a time and opportunity to grow, to nurture ourselves where they have more strength, wisdom, peace and insight. This may, for some, require the submission to a set of teachings, a teacher, new habits, which an individual may find threatening. It may require mental, emotional and physical efforts that are difficult to put forth.

Loneliness or feeling lonely may be thought of as an unskillful awareness of ones time alone. In these feelings, we can be lead to a host of other confused feelings. For example, we might experience guilt, shame, the feeling of being unlovable, inadequacy, and inferiority. We can consequently attach to things and people which may damage us. We may lose the trust in ourselves which is necessary for growth and maintaining a healthy balance to living. We need to be aware that we do not want to get into a state where we are excessively harsh and judgmental about ourselves and others or feel inferior or superior to them.

Our ability to trust ourselves and others can be and has been compromised by various factors and experiences.

These factors may include our diet and sleep habits, our leisure activities, and the balance and harmony of the various activities within the mind and body. The Yogic approach to life and living, consisting of postures, breathing, relaxation, meditation, ethics, diet, sleep and leisure activities directly addresses these attitudes and actions that bring about problems and confused feelings regarding life.

Some events and experiences may include trauma, short and long term abuse of an emotional, physical or sexual nature, failed and problematic relationships and chronic self-abuse through drinking, drugs, and other addictive behaviors which can be subtle and socially acceptable, or quite overt and frowned on by society and against the law.

These events can cause and leave short and long term scars and troubled feelings and thought/emotional patterns and reactions. These are difficult to deal with, more difficult than just making changes in habits regarding diet and sleep. Sometimes these feelings will interfere with the ability to make necessary changes.

It is also regrettable that in our confusion and aloneness, we may not have individuals available who have the insight and ability or are willing to take the time and make the effort to assist us in a way that we need.

Sexually addictive behaviors, even though seemingly pleasurable, are unfortunately risky because this type of sharing, regardless of its intimacy, surrender and trust, may not carry over to other aspects of a relationship. Do we always need to be with someone from the opposite or same gender in order to feel loved, centered and whole? Does our sharing with another always have to have a physical aspect to it?

As someone who has been involved in the practice, study and teaching of Yoga and Buddhism for a number of years, and someone who has survived being sexually abused, being a substance abuser for a number of years, and going to prison, I seriously believe that these paths and practices are powerful and beneficial in helping an individual become more focused and grounded. They bring clarity to, and simplicity in living.

Below are listed a brief overview of these paths and resources for further study of them:

The Yoga of the Eight Limbs (Astanga Yoga)

Universal vows (Yamas)

Non-violence (Ahimsa)
Honesty (Satya)
Non-stealing (Asteya)
Celibacy (Brahmacharya)
Non-greed (Aparigraha)

Personal observances (Niyamas)

Purity (Sauca)
Contentment (Santosa)
Austerity (Tapas)
Self-study (Svadyaya)
Surrender to a higher power (Ishvara pranidhana)

Methods

Posture (Asana)
Breath regulation (Pranayama)
Sense withdrawal (Pratyahara)
Concentration (Dharana)
Meditation (Dhyana)
Liberation (Samadhi)

The Noble Eightfold Path (Ariya Antangikka Magga)

Right View (Samma Dithhi)

There is suffering (Dukkhe nana)
There is an origin to suffering (Dukkhasamudaye nana)
There is a cessation of suffering (Dukkhanirodhe nana)
There is a way leading to its cessation (Dukkhanirodhagaminipatipadaya nana)

Right Intention (Samma Sankappa)

Intention of renunciation (Nekkhamma sankappa)
Intention of good will (Abyapada sankappa)
Intention of harmlessness (Avihimsa sankappa)

Right Speech (Samma Vaca)

Abstaining from false speech (Musavada veramani)
Abstaining from slanderous speech (Pisunaya vacaya veramani)

Abstaining from harsh speech (Pharusaya vacaya veramani)
Abstaining from idle chatter (Samphapalapa veramani)

Right Action (Samma Kammanta)

Abstaining from taking life (Panatipata veramani)
Abstaining from stealing (Adinnadana veramani)
Abstaining from sexual misconduct (Kamesu micchacara veramani)

Right Livelihood (Samma Ajiva)

Giving up wrong livelihood (Miccha ajjivam pahaya)
One earns ones living by a right form of livelihood (Samma ajivena jivitam kappeti)

Right Effort (Samma Vayama)

The effort to restrain defilements (Samvarappadhana)
The effort to abandon defilements (Pahanappadhana)
The effort to develop wholesome states (Bhavanappadhana)
The effort to maintain wholesome states (Anuakkhanappadhana)

Right Mindfulness (Samma Sati)

Mindful contemplation of the body (Kayanupassana)
Mindful contemplation of the feelings (Vedananupassana)
Mindful contemplation of the mind (Cittanupassana)
Mindful contemplation of phenomena (Dhammanupassana)

Right Concentration (Samma Samadhi)

The first jhana (Pathamajjhana)
The second jhana (Dutiyaajjhana)
The third jhana (Tatiyaajjhana)
The fourth jhana (Catutthajjhana)

Recommended resources on the path and practice of Astanga Yoga (Raja Yoga)

The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali by Swami Aranya
The Science of Yoga by I.K. Taimni
Light on The Yoga Sutras of Patanjali by B.K.S. Iyengar
Patanjalis Yoga Sutras by Swami Prabhavanda
Raja Yoga by Swami Vivekenanda
The Philosophy, Psychology and Practice of Yoga by Swami Chidananda

Recommended Resources on The Noble Eightfold Path of Buddhism

The Buddhas Ancient Path by Piyadassi Thera
The Noble Eightfold Path: A Way to the End of Suffering by Bhikkhu Boddhi
The Word of the Buddha by Nyanatiloka Maha Thera

About the Author

John C. Kimbrough teaches Yoga, Buddhism and English and is a freelance writer who lives in Bangkok, Thailand. He was born in New York City and has lived in Asia for the last 16 years. He writes on Yoga, Buddhism, and better and more skillful living within the context of Yoga and Buddhism. He hopes to encourage the development of ones own cultivated mindfulness.

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