

Loneliness – and friendship

It is not physical solitude that engenders loneliness, but mental isolation, which the mere physical proximity of others can never completely eradicate.

To some extent such loneliness is inherent in conditioned existence. The very fact of one's subjectivity – that one has a sense of ego, or separate self – means that one will always feel to some extent cut off from others. The mere fact that others are others means that you are isolated and therefore experience loneliness. If you are sufficiently mindful you will notice that subtle sense of loneliness in your experience all the time, even – perhaps particularly – when you are with a good friend. The better you know someone and the more time you spend with them, the more you realize they are fundamentally different and ultimately separate from you. They think differently from you: they don't really penetrate into your thoughts, nor do you ever quite succeed in seeing things from their point of view. In the end you don't understand how it feels to be them, and nor can they understand how it feels to be you.

So, although you may live for years side by side with someone who is very dear to you, your very closeness may help you to see that you are really on our own. This is the kind of insight that can emerge from being aware and mindful when you are with another person. There can be warmth and companionship, but no amount of good friendship can – or should – alleviate the existential loneliness of conditioned existence. If companionship does help you to forget it, that isn't really a good thing. We should not expect from others more than they are able to give.

True spiritual fellowship fosters communication in its most mature sense: mutual responsiveness across a chasm. Even though you share your heartfelt ideal, you are both aware that as long as there is a sense of separate selfhood, you will always feel an element of loneliness, when you are on your own and even when you are with a friend. Indeed, it is your shared ideal that reminds you of that chasm between you. The more that knowledge is implicit in your communication, the more effective the communication will be. If you are in a reasonably positive state of mind, such an insight will be exhilarating rather than depressing. A good friend is someone with whom you can be alone.

Sangharakshita, *The Yogi's Joy*, p. 15-16

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