**Six Kinds of Loneliness**

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**To be without a reference point is the ultimate loneliness. It is also called enlightenment.**

In the middle way, there is no reference point. The mind with no reference point does not resolve itself, does not fixate or grasp. How could we possibly have no reference point? To have no reference point would be to change a deep-seated habitual response to the world: wanting to make it work out one way or the other. If I can’t go left or right, I will die! When we don’t go left or right, we feel like we are in a detox center. We’re alone, cold turkey with all the edginess that we’ve been trying to avoid by going left or right. That edginess can feel pretty heavy.

However, years and years of going to the left or right, going to yes or no, going to right or wrong has never really changed anything. Scrambling for security has never brought anything but momentary joy. It’s like changing the position of our legs in meditation. Our legs hurt from sitting cross-legged, so we move them. And then we feel, “Phew! What a relief!” But two and a half minutes later, we want to move them again. We keep moving around seeking pleasure, seeking comfort, and the satisfaction that we get is very short-lived.

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We hear a lot about the pain of *samsara*, and we also hear about liberation. But we don’t hear much about how painful it is to go from being completely stuck to becoming unstuck. The process of becoming unstuck requires tremendous bravery, because basically we are completely changing our way of perceiving reality, like changing our DNA. We are undoing a pattern that is not just our pattern. It’s the human pattern: we project onto the world a zillion possibilities of attaining resolution. We can have whiter teeth, a weed-free lawn, a strife-free life, a world without embarrassment. We can live happily every after. This pattern keeps us dissatisfied and causes us a lot of suffering.

**Our Birthright: The Middle Way**

As human beings, not only do we seek resolution, but we also feel that we deserve resolution. However, not only do we not deserve resolution, we suffer from resolution. We don’t deserve resolution; we deserve something better than that. We deserve our birthright, which is the middle way, an open state of mind that can relax with paradox and ambiguity. To the degree that we’ve been avoiding uncertainty, we’re naturally going to have withdrawal symptoms—withdrawal from always thinking that there’s a problem and that someone, somewhere, needs to fix it.

**The middle way encourages us to awaken the bravery that exists in everyone without exception, including you and me.**

The middle way is wide open, but it’s tough going, because it goes against the grain of an ancient neurotic pattern that we all share. When we feel lonely, when we feel hopeless, what we want to do is move to the right or the left. We don’t want to sit and feel what we feel. We don’t want to go through the detox. Yet the middle way encourages us to do just that. It encourages us to awaken the bravery that exists in everyone without exception, including you and me.

Meditation provides a way for us to train in the middle way—in staying right on the spot. We are encouraged not to judge whatever arises in our mind. In fact, we are encouraged not to even grasp whatever arises in our mind. What we usually call good or bad we simply acknowledge as thinking, without all the usual drama that goes along with right and wrong. We are instructed to let the thoughts come and go as if touching a bubble with a feather. This straightforward discipline prepares us to stop struggling and discover a fresh, unbiased state of being.

Top of Form



Bottom of Form

Top of Form

Bottom of Form

The experience of certain feelings can seem particularly pregnant with desire for resolution: loneliness, boredom, anxiety. Unless we can relax with these feelings, it’s very hard to stay in the middle when we experience them. We want victory or defeat, praise or blame. For example, if somebody abandons us, we don’t want to be with that raw discomfort. Instead, we conjure up a familiar identity of ourselves as a hapless victim. Or maybe we avoid the rawness by acting out and righteously telling the person how messed up he or she is. We automatically want to cover over the pain in one way or another, identifying with victory or victimhood.

**When we can rest in the middle, we begin to have a nonthreatening relationship with loneliness, a relaxing and cooling loneliness that completely turns our usual fearful patterns upside down.**

Usually we regard loneliness as an enemy. Heartache is not something we choose to invite in. It’s restless and pregnant and hot with the desire to escape and find something or someone to keep us company. When we can rest in the middle, we begin to have a nonthreatening relationship with loneliness, a relaxing and cooling loneliness that completely turns our usual fearful patterns upside down.

There are six ways of describing this kind of cool loneliness. They are: less desire, contentment, avoiding unnecessary activity, complete discipline, not wandering in the world of desire, and not seeking security from one’s discursive thoughts.

**Less Desire**

Less desire is the willingness to be lonely without resolution when everything in us yearns for something to cheer us up and change our mood. Practicing this kind of loneliness is a way of sowing seeds so that fundamental restlessness decreases. In meditation, for example, every time we label “thinking” instead of getting endlessly run around by our thoughts, we are training in just being here without dissociation. We can’t do that now to the degree that we weren’t willing to do it yesterday or the day before or last week or last year. After we practice less desire wholeheartedly and consistently, something shifts. We feel less desire in the sense of being less solidly seduced by our Very Important Story Lines. So even if the hot loneliness is there, and for 1.6 seconds we sit with that restlessness when yesterday we couldn’t sit for even one, that’s the journey of the warrior. That’s the path of bravery. The less we spin off and go crazy, the more we taste the satisfaction of cool loneliness. As the Zen master Katagiri Roshi often said, “One can be lonely and not be tossed away by it.”

**Contentment**

The second kind of loneliness is contentment. When we have nothing, we have nothing to lose. We don’t have anything to lose but being programmed in our guts to feel we have a lot to lose. Our feeling that we have a lot to lose is rooted in fear—of loneliness, of change, of anything that can’t be resolved, of nonexistence. The hope that we can avoid this feeling and the fear that we can’t become our reference point.When we draw a line down the center of a page, we know who we are if we’re on the right side and who we are if we’re on the left side. But we don’t know who we are when we don’t put ourselves on either side. Then we just don’t know what to do. We just don’t know. We have no reference point, no hand to hold. At that point we can either freak out or settle in. Contentment is a synonym for loneliness, cool loneliness, settling down with cool loneliness. We give up believing that being able to escape our loneliness is going to bring any lasting happiness or joy or sense of well-being or courage or strength. Usually we have to give up this belief about a billion times, again and again making friends with our jumpiness and dread, doing the same old thing a billion times with awareness. Then without our even noticing, something begins to shift. We can just be lonely with no alternatives, content to be right here with the mood and texture of what’s happening.

**Avoiding Unnecessary Activities**

The third kind of loneliness is avoiding unnecessary activities. When we’re lonely in a “hot” way, we look for something to save us; we look for a way out. We get this queasy feeling that we call loneliness, and our minds just go wild trying to come up with companions to save us from despair. That’s called unnecessary activity. It’s a way of keeping ourselves busy so we don’t have to feel any pain. It could take the form of obsessively daydreaming of true romance, or turning a tidbit of gossip into the six o’clock news, or even going off by ourselves into the wilderness.

The point is that in all these activities, we are seeking companionship in our usual, habitual way, using our same old repetitive ways of distancing ourselves from the demon loneliness. Could we just settle down and have some compassion and respect for ourselves? Could we stop trying to escape from being alone with ourselves? What about practicing not jumping and grabbing when we begin to panic? Relaxing with loneliness is a worthy occupation. As the Japanese poet Ryokan says, “If you want to find the meaning, stop chasing after so many things.”

**Complete Discipline**

Complete discipline is another component of cool loneliness. Complete discipline means that at every opportunity, we’re willing to come back, just gently come back to the present moment. This is loneliness as complete discipline. We’re willing to sit still, just be there, alone. We don’t particularly have to cultivate this kind of loneliness; we could just sit still long enough to realize it’s how things really are. We are fundamentally alone, and there is nothing anywhere to hold on to. Moreover, this is not a problem. In fact, it allows us to finally discover a completely unfabricated state of being. Our habitual assumptions—all our ideas about how things are—keep us from seeing anything in a fresh, open way. We say, “Oh yes, I know.” But we don’t know. We don’t ultimately know anything. There’s no certainty about anything. This basic truth hurts, and we want to run away from it. But coming back and relaxing with something as familiar as loneliness is good discipline for realizing the profundity of the unresolved moments of our lives. We are cheating ourselves when we run away from the ambiguity of loneliness.

**Not Wandering in the World of Desire**

Not wandering in the world of desire is another way of describing cool loneliness. Wandering in the world of desire involves looking for alternatives, seeking something to comfort us—food, drink, people. The word desire encompasses that addiction quality, the way we grab for something because we want to find a way to make things okay. That quality comes from never having grown up. We still want to go home and be able to open the refrigerator and find it full of our favorite goodies; when the going gets tough, we want to yell “Mom!” But what we’re doing as we progress along the path is leaving home and becoming homeless. Not wandering in the world of desire is about relating directly with how things are. Loneliness is not a problem. Loneliness is nothing to be solved. The same is true for any other experience we might have.

**Not Seeking Security from One’s Discursive Thoughts**

Another aspect of cool loneliness is not seeking security from one’s discursive thoughts. The rug’s been pulled; the jig is up; there is no way to get out of this one! We don’t even seek the companionship of our own constant conversation with ourselves about how it is and how it isn’t, whether it is or whether it isn’t, whether it should or whether it shouldn’t, whether it can or whether it can’t. With cool loneliness we do not expect security from our own internal chatter. That’s why we are instructed in meditation to label it “thinking.” It has no objective reality. It is transparent and ungraspable. We’re encouraged to just touch that chatter and let it go, not make much ado about nothing.

Cool loneliness allows us to look honestly and without aggression at our own minds. We can gradually drop our ideals of who we think we ought to be, or who we think we want to be, or who we think other people think we want to be or ought to be. We give it up and just look directly with compassion and humor at who we are. Then loneliness is no threat and heartache, no punishment.

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Cool loneliness doesn’t provide any resolution or give us ground under our feet. It challenges us to step into a world of no reference point without polarizing or solidifying. This is called the middle way, or the sacred path of the warrior.

When you wake up in the morning and out of nowhere comes the heartache of alienation and loneliness, could you use that as a golden opportunity? Rather than persecuting yourself or feeling that something terribly wrong is happening, right there in the moment of sadness and longing, could you relax and touch the limitless space of the human heart? The next time you get a chance, experiment with this.