Solitude Back in Fashion: Introducing the Uses of Being Alone

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Abstract
The state of solitude has always been associated with unusual human circumstances such as confinement in prison, a voluntary religious experience, or explorers charting new challenges in remotes lands. The contemporary global capitalist world, however, with advanced information technology and the many gadgets made available to those who can afford them, is seen by many to have increasingly become a world where individuals are living in solitude among the electronic sound and fury. Our world is a world of rising number of single-person household in major cities, increasing ownership of mobile gadget for communication and entertainment, and ironically escalating number of people suffering from psychological and emotional conditions. If the state of solitude has become a norm in our world, how can we reconcile with this condition and adapt ourselves to this new world? And is it possible to teach our future generations how to handle this state? The presentation is a work-in-progress report about learnings from interdisciplinary literature about solitude, and how this state of being can have positive "functions" in our daily life settings for leading a better life. it is hoped that some of the insights can be developed into exercises that can be taught in a classroom setting.

Keywords: Uses of solitude, mindfulness, self-understanding, interpersonal relationship, education

Introduction

This paper is a work-in-progress report of a study which I am doing to understand more about solitude, in particular whether solitude can help us live a better life. I can see that some of the activities related to being alone are coming "back in fashion", which might suggest that more and more people are beginning to appreciate the value of being alone. I am hoping that the findings of the study can be shared with my students, to help them learn more about themselves.

I will start this report with some information about how I was led to this topic. Last year I was awarded a fellowship to sharpen my leadership skills in higher education.[1] The fellowship included a semester-long stay at an Asian university to observe and learn at first hand, which meant that for the first time in more than 15 years I did not have to undertake any teaching for a whole semester. With more time on my hands, and completely alone in a place which was not home, I constructed for myself a very different daily routine. Besides my daily visits to the different administrative and academic units at my host university, the rest of the time I was on my own. I thus divided the time between surfing the internet for interesting things to learn, and reading books that I normally did not read when I was home preparing for classes or writing papers.

One day I clicked into the latest clip on YouTube and it happened to be a recorded talk given by a Hong Kong monk. In that hour-long session he was introducing his latest project which was a collection of photos published as a book, to raise money for charity. This monk, Venerable Chang Lin, is well recognized in Hong Kong because he used to be a well-known professional photographer, one of the best of his generation. His sudden renouncement of the world in 2009, giving up his very successful business, his wife who was a popular TV artist, and his family, made quite a few headlines then. Becoming a monk in his case does not mean hiding away and being detached from this world. Instead he has been very active in engaging with the local community through spreading the teachings of Buddha, and different kinds of charity work using his professional skills as a photographer and artist. In the session I listened to, he also recounted his journey of faith, how he was led to the road of the Dharma, to the point of deciding to give up all his worldly possessions including his family.

I had never been a fan of the Venerable when he was a professional photographer, nor had I ever tried to find out why he made the decision to practice the Dharma as a monk. But when I was alone in a foreign city, away from my family, friends and colleagues, living in a flat where nothing belonged to me, I was in a receptive state of mind toward this monk's story. Therefore I watched the hour-long YouTube recording and when finished I sought further recordings of Venerable Chang Lin's talks. And when I could no longer find anything from him, I started searching for similar kinds of talks given by other Hong Kong monastics. I ended up listening to dharma talks online and reading about Buddhism every single free moment I had in those months. I planned ahead and enrolled myself in Buddhist courses offered by a Dharma hall back in Hong Kong. When the next semester began, I not only resumed

[1] I was awarded a United Board Fellowship, which allowed me to be affiliated to an Asian university for a few months to learn about management in higher education through observation and hands-on experience.

my teaching, but also started my new life as a part-time student of a Masters degree in Buddhist Studies.[2] I became a Buddhist and continued to learn not only the doctrines but also the practices by participating in activities organized by a local Dharma hall.

The reason for this long personal story is to show the effect of the solitary state I was placed in during those months. Looking back I was very surprised by the changes that semester's stay in another city had brought to me. People do change of course, but usually we associate big changes in life with trauma. Actually many of my closest friends were worried when I told them of the new practices in my life because they thought my being alone during those months had adversely influenced my judgement, or something tragic had happened to me during those months. For me, it was simply because I was alone and detached from the usual communications and engagements I had with my family and friends. It was not tragedy that brought those changes, it was solitude.

The purpose of this report is not to convert anyone to a particular religious faith, but rather to try to understand the original context that allows or facilitates important decisions such as one's faith and subsequent lifestyle. It is an interesting topic because from my personal experience, I know that the solitary situation is an essential factor to my change; and I am aware of some trends advocating "mindfulness" in different forms in our society as an "improvement" to our currently very busy, hurried, and thus very stressful lifestyle. Here I am referring to a lot of secularized activities being presented as beneficial to us because our participation in them involves the cultivation of a certain mental state. Some of these activities include calligraphy, drawing such as Zentangle, flower arrangement, tea ceremony, even cooking and more mobile activities such as dancing and of course meditation (in a secularized context). Most of these activities have a long tradition already and are today presented as "back in fashion", not simply for commercial reasons, but I believe it is because in our normal daily life the opportunity to experience an extended period of calmness or tranquility that comes with solitude is not to be found if we do not deliberately seek for it.

Anthony Storr wrote in his book *Solitude: A Return to the Self* (1988) that:

> The capacity to be alone is a valuable resource when changes of mental attitude are required. After major alterations in circumstances, fundamental reappraisal of the significance and meaning of existence may be needed. In a culture in which interpersonal relationships are generally considered to provide the answer to every form of distress, it is sometimes difficult to persuade well-meaning helpers that solitude can be as therapeutic as emotional support. (Storr, 1988, p. 29)

Indeed common sense and our experience tells us that we all need different types of support from one another, we treasure relationships and we believe that meaningful interpersonal relationship is much more important than possession of material objects in contributing to a good life and happiness. There are also frequent surveys about happiness and their results confirm for us that those who enjoy good relationships (marital, friendship, even good working relationship) generally live longer and have a

[2] I enrolled as a part-time student at the Centre for Buddhist Studies, the University of Hong Kong, in September 2017.

stronger sense of well-being. Interpersonal relationship is a significant factor contributing to our well-being, there is no doubt; but solitude also has an unmistakable part to play in a meaningful and happy life.

What is solitude?

A very simple definition of solitude is a state of being alone, isolated from company, and probably disengaged from any type of communication. This description brings to mind a number of associations, some of which are not very positive. It is true that one may think of an idyllic picture of a person enjoying a free, peaceful and fulfilling time alone in perfect beautiful nature as solitude, but it can also be a prisoner being confined in isolation, banished from human contact and communication. To understand the role solitude can play in a good life, it is worth trying to be a bit more detailed in its description and to distinguish it from similar states of mind or sentiments.

Philip Koch in his book *Solitude: A Philosophical Encounter* (1994) tried to come up with a definition of solitude, by first interrogating a description of such a state. He chose a passage from the chapter entitled "Solitude" in Henry David Thoreau (1817-1862)'s book *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (1854). The text is a reflection upon simple living in natural surroundings. The work is described as "part personal declaration of independence, social experiment, voyage of spiritual discovery, satire, and—to some degree—a manual for self-reliance". The opening lines of this section, "Solitude", reads:

> This is a delicious evening, when the whole body is one sense, and imbibes delight through every pore. I go and come with a strange liberty in nature, a part of herself. As I walk along the stony shore of the pond in my shirt sleeves, though it is cool as well as cloudy and windy, and I see nothing special to attract me, all the elements are unusually congenial to me. The bullfrogs trump to usher in the night, and the note of the whippoorwill is borne on the rippling wind from over the water. Sympathy with the fluttering alder and poplar leaves almost takes away my breath; yet like the lake, my serenity is rippled but not ruffled. These small waves raised by the evening wind are as remote from storm as the smooth reflecting surface. Though it is now dark, the wind still blows and roars in the wood, the waves still dash, and some creatures lull the rest with their notes. The repose is never complete. The wildest animals do not repose, but seek their prey now; the fox, and skunk, and rabbit, now roam the fields and woods without fear. They are Nature's watchmen – links which connect the days of animated life. (Koch, 1994, p.13)

From this passage, he identified three features which he associated with solitude: physical isolation, social disengagement, and reflectiveness. But at the same time he could also think of other varieties of solitude in which one or other of these features were absent. After some evaluation of different kinds of solitary experiences, he came to a conclusion that of the three factors, social disengagement seems to be the essential factor for solitude to be present. "Solitude is, most ultimately, simply an experiential world in which other people are absent: that is enough for solitude, that is constant through all solitudes." (Koch, 1994, p.15)

> As the twentieth century draws to a close, we are still not sure what place solitude ought to have in our lives. We are becoming more communal, more political, more communicative, but we are also flying apart, fascinated with the varieties of the "return to nature" possible in activities such as gardening, wilderness camping, sunlight meditation. The divorce rate is rising but marriages are keeping pace. The true and balanced place of solitude in a human life is a philosophical question which has, for us, now, urgency. (Koch, 1994, p.9)

Koch wrote in 1994, which was the end of the 20th century. Reading his conclusion more than 20 years later, I still feel the relevance of what he wrote. Although information technology has brought dramatic changes to ways people communicate with one another and ways of living, to me, it has not taken away our need of solitude, as defined by Koch (and I am sure many other writers). In the daily life of an average working adult in Hong Kong (or a university student), being online means having access to an overwhelming amount of information (in Chinese we have a term "oceanic amount") from all kinds of sources, it also means that theoretically you are in connection with all your acquaintances who are online no matter where they are in the world. Being constantly online, however, is a strange state of being as one is bombarded by information, by requests for communication, but at the same time isolated by physical distance, and a lack of "real engagement" because these processes are conducted electronically. Many people will say that our life is very busy, overwhelming, but also very lonely and private. Many of us are trying to find ways to live a better life than this, and suggestions given to us include those "back in fashion" traditional practices which take place in, or even create, a state of solitude.

The Uses of Solitude

Koch observed in his book:

> How indeed can solitude function as a restorative if it does not provide its own intrinsic values? What exactly are they? As I have read over twenty-five centuries of celebrations of solitude, through Lao Tzu, Hesiod, Plato, Jesus, Seneca, Marcus Aurelius, Petrarch, St. Teresa of Avila, Montaigne, Rousseau, Goethe, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, Hazlitt, Hugo, Emerson, Thoreau, Dickinson, Whitman, Muir, Proust, Rilke, Byrd, Stevens, Eiseley, Carr, Tillich, Sarton, Camus, Storr, Kohák, and Koller, certain praises are repeated again and again." (Koch, 1994, p.6)

These praises he collected and organized them into five major ideas: freedom, attunement to self, attunement to nature, reflective perspective, and creativity. In his book he devoted chapters to each of these ideas and evaluate these praises noted by individual writers.

Anthony Storr actually devoted an entire chapter in his book to "The Uses of Solitude", from the perspective of a psychiatrist. He began the chapter with a discussion of bereavement and how different cultures have their own protocols of behaviour so that the bereaved person is given time to make changes in his/her life after the loss. As he wrote, "[m]ourning is one example of a long drawn out mental process leading to an eventual change of attitude. Instead of regarding life as necessarily bound up with, or even constituted by, the existence of an intimate relationship with the deceased person, the mourner comes to see matters differently. The mourner may or may not form new, intimate ties; but whether he or she does so

or not, the mourner usually comes to realize that the significance of life is not entirely constituted by personal relationships; that the life of a person without intimate relationships also has meaning." (Storr, 1988, p.32)

So, a "successfully" mourning period ends with a change of attitude, and to enable this success, many cultures have prescribed behaviours that allow the mourner to have "solitude" during mourning. He continued to cite examples of lesser changes of attitude in life: having a holiday/rest cure, having a retreat in both religious and secular contexts, or even simply changing a habit by breaking a daily routine. All these practices are simply providing a chance to the person involved to have the time and circumstances to reflect on his/her own needs and come to a new understanding of life. In terms of the virtues of solitude, Storr also cited examples of great religious leaders who emerged out of solitude enlightened and ready to share what had been revealed to them during that extended period of time: the Buddha, Jesus (according to St. Matthew and St. Luke), Mahomet, St. Catherine of Siena. (Storr, 1988, p.34)

Besides the long list of writers who, over the centuries have documented their praises of solitude, I have come across an example which gives me great inspiration. Edith Bone's (1889-1975) *Seven Years Solitary* (1957) is a personal record of her experience of solitary confinement in a prison in Hungary for seven years. Dr. Edith Bone was accused of spying for the British government when leaving Hungary in 1949, and arrested by the State Protection Authority (AVH). I could only imagine the situation she was in then: Dr. Bone was already over 60 years old, the prison condition was terrible, she was isolated and kept from company, she had no access to the outside world, and there was no certainty about what was to happen to her, she was not even put on trial. This was definitely not the kind of situation that one would associate with "solitude" especially when we are talking about solitude as a state that can give rise to positive results to the person experiencing it.

Dr. Bone's narrative, however, is an exemplary demonstration of what the mind can do to maintain a state of well-being even in a completely disadvantageous situation. She drew on her mental resources to recreate the "world" that she lived in, for example, by reconstructing the plots of the books she had read, by mentally taking walks that she had enjoyed before through streets of the many cities that she knew well, by translating poetry that she loved from one language to another (she knew six languages), making a mental inventory of her vocabulary in the 6 languages that she knew, and also by composing poetry of her own. These projects, and many others, were her design to keep her mind focused on goals she set for herself, and these actions successful kept her mind active, lively, and they kept her sanity during the seven long years in prison. Anthony Storr described her experience like this: "She is not only a shining example of courage which few could match, but also illustrates the point that a well-stocked, disciplined mind can prevent its own disruption." (Storr, 1988, p.48)

How in education we can make use of solitude as a concept and learning experience

Much encouraged by these examples of people who had benefited from experiences of solitude, I am eager to share these with my students, not only as fictional/historical personalities who had had inspiring experiences in their time, but also something that

we can "use" in our world where we are too busy, too occupied (physically and mentally), or even too ashamed to be alone. And when alone, many of us try our best to get out of that condition because it is seen in a negative light or eyed with suspicion. I would want to present solitude in a more positive light, and return it to its rightful position.

A short story written by Kate Chopin in 1894 entitled "The Story of an Hour" is one of my favorite stories to use in the classroom. It is a story about a young American wife Louise Mallard who suffered from a weak heart, and who was told at the beginning of the story that her husband's name was on the list of causalities of a train accident. She immediately broke down and then retired to the privacy of her own bedroom, while her own sister and a good friend of the family stayed with her in the house. The main part of the story is a description of the mental and emotional journey she went through while she was protected by the intimacy and solitariness of her bedroom. Looking out from the window, she saw a vibrant scene outside, peddlers selling their wares, new life coming out of tree tops, birds singing etc. This setting mirrors the quiet reflection and the coming to life of the lady's feelings, and in this solitude, she realized something that had always been there but had been repressed because of social expectations and probably the need to constantly interact with the people around her. Now in the solitary environment and the privacy of her own bedroom, she dared to allow herself to acknowledge that she yearned for freedom, and a life on her own in the future. At this point of realization, she cried out "free, body and soul free" (Chopin, 1894) to herself.

After emotionally accepting this new "self", she walked out of the bedroom, a changed person, (also because her own sister was worried about her being alone inside) and ready for her new life. Inside her own bedroom, in that solitary condition, she had time to focus on herself, and communicate with the depth of her being, to realize a wish that had been repressed by what was expected of her in that society. The story had depicted very well what solitude had done for Louise Mallard.

Ironically the story ends with the unexpected return of the supposedly dead husband, and the shock simply killed the wife. The story ended with a mocking tone when the third person narrator concluded: "When the doctors came they said she had died of heart disease—of joy that kills." The doctors' views, which might pretty much represent what everyone who didn't witness what happened in her bedroom thought, is of course wrong. We readers who were with Louise in her bedroom knew that she died of a broken heart – of disappointment.

I had used the story before to discuss different things: the basic structure of a short story, gender relations and changes, filmic adaptation of writing, and even using it as a stimulus for students to do their own creative stories. The psychological journey Louise Mallard had undertaken in solitude is one that students can understand, probably not from their own life experience, but from numerous other similar fictional and non-fictional narratives. This is certainly a dimension that can enrich the discussion and learning experience in class.

Conclusion

The encounter with solitude has been a very exciting journey for me so far, although I am still at a very preliminary stage in terms of finding out what it has done for many other people. From my own personal experience, it has given me the space to see a need for reflection and change, and indirectly encouraged me to seek more opportunities to engage with my own self. Much still needs to be discovered, if I want to share this with young people I work with. Let me just end this discussion with the words of Philip Koch:

> What, then, is solitude? It is a time in which experience is disengaged from other people. All of the other features of solitude that come intuitively to mind, the physical isolation, the reflective cast of mind, the freedom, the silence, the distinctive feel of space and time – all of these flow from that core feature, the absence of other in one's experiential world. Of course much remains to be said about this engaged experience, this curious region spreading out behind time's back in which you gaze from the absolute center of the world and your thinking is the only human voice. Perhaps, though, the possibilities – and limitations! – of doing solitude into English have emerged? (Koch, 1994, p.27)

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