

The Yoga of Loneliness

Diving Deep and Letting Go

BY CARRIE GROSSMAN

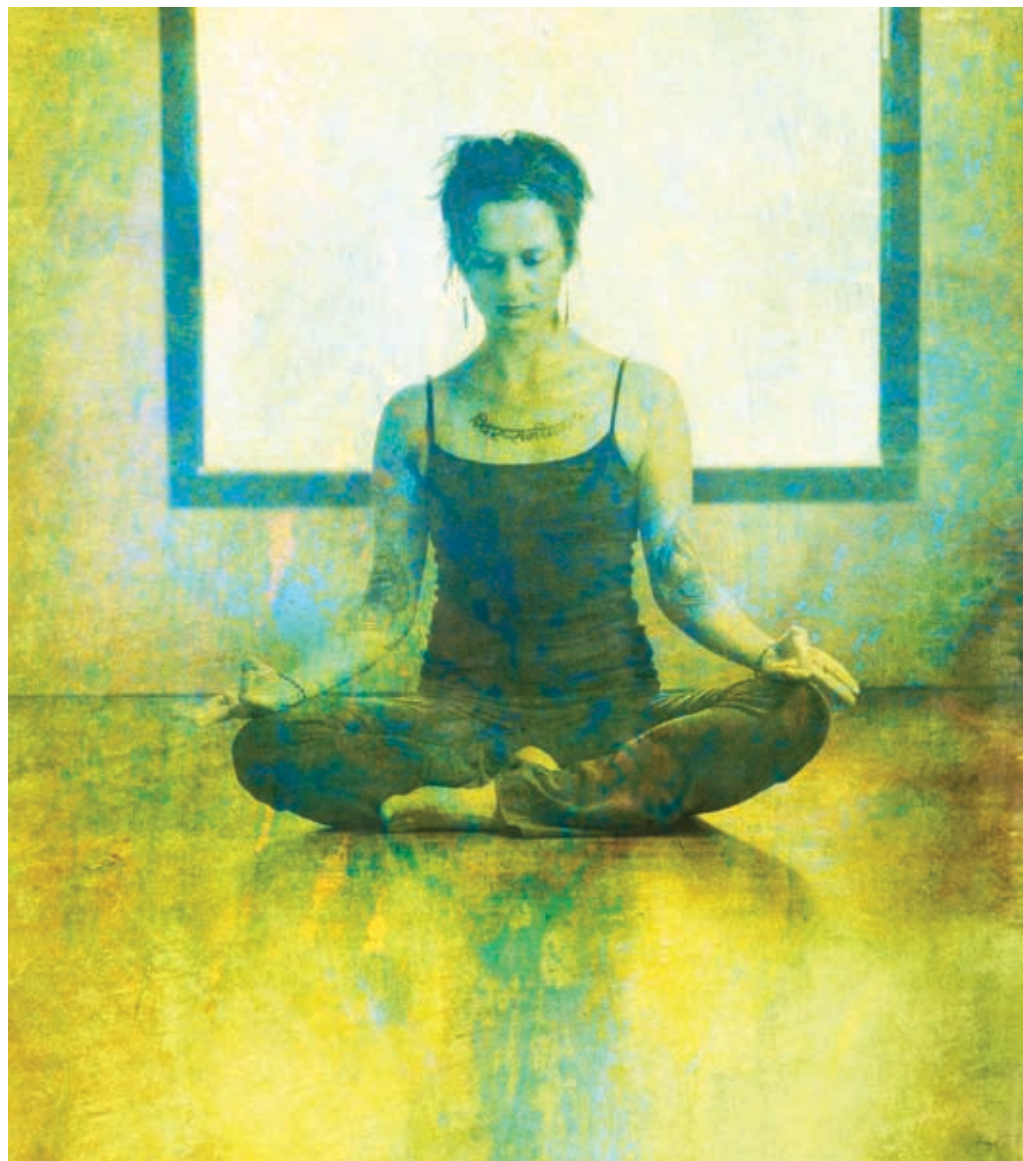
A few years ago, after moving to a new state, I decided to take myself on a date. Knowing no one, I drove from town to town until I found an appetizing restaurant. Seated at a small table with one flickering candle, compassionate diners smiled in my direction, and a waiter offered his condolences: “All alone on a Saturday night?”

Yes, I was alone, but quite content. I had just spent a few hours reading a book beneath the late afternoon sun, and now I was at a delectable bistro with nothing to do but eat and eavesdrop on other people’s dinner conversations. Life was grand.

It was only after I arrived home to my dark and desolate apartment that an uneasy feeling began to emerge. To distract myself I summoned a hammer from the toolbox and tried to hang a picture. It was midnight and the neighbors were sleeping, but that didn’t seem to matter; I just needed to do *something*. So I banged away until I made a mess of the cheap walls, and then sat down on the floor and burst into tears.

Suddenly, it seemed that nobody in the entire universe understood me. My stomach churned, my chest felt heavy, and I yearned for the company of another sentient being. Surrounded by nails and screwdrivers, half-empty boxes, and stacks of books, an indefinable longing pressed against my heart from deep inside.

Loneliness — a loaded subject, both fascinating and taboo. As human beings we all experience it from time to time but likely not with open arms. After all, loneliness hurts, as if we just endured a painful breakup with the cosmos only to be left dangling in a black hole



of isolation — not the most pleasurable experience on earth. When the feeling comes on strong, it seems that we are the only ones in the world who know it. From inside our citadel of separation, everyone else appears so darn together! What we don’t realize is that “every-one else” may share a similar perception about us. Because loneliness isn’t culturally acceptable, we often bear it in secret; it’s one emotion that isn’t easy to admit having. And many of us don’t have to admit it, let alone *feel* it, living in the busy world that we do.

Here in Techno-ville we have delightful devices at our disposal, but the cost of this virtual reality is that we often interact more with electronic companions than with human ones. We have hit-and-run connections based on texts and tweets. Facebook perpetually lures us with the promise of more “friends,” and everything we need — lawnmower to lover — is available on Craigslist.

Despite helping us to expand our social network, such tools are hardly substitutes for face-to-face connection and not nearly as satisfying. At the end of the day, don’t we all long for something tangible: a hand-written letter or a hand to hold? We are social creatures after all, and we need each other. As Viktor Frankl once said, “People cry for intimacy,” and it’s hard to get a good dose of it in cyberspace. Intimacy takes time to develop, like a fine wine, and requires a feeling of safety to offset the risk of self-disclosure. Without genuine companionship we can disconnect from others and begin to feel alone.

Social isolation is a growing concern in our hi-tech society and a difficult one to address. Studies have shown that loneliness can have detrimental effects on physical and mental health if sustained over time. Research by psychologists like John Cacioppo at the University of Chicago even suggests that the emotion is

contagious, much like the common cold.

Loneliness, of course, has little to do with being solo or sociable — it is just as likely in a crowd as in a cave. Although solitude brings a sense of contentment, loneliness has a quality of grasping and aversion: We want a quick escape route. It takes a great deal of courage to sit in the fire and feel. It's far easier to stuff the holes of our discontent, but in doing so we may miss something important. If used well, loneliness can open us to the deeper parts of our being, to our humanity — that tender ache at the center of the heart. At times it may be valuable to turn toward that ache to see what is there. We may discover a nameless longing shimmering beneath the surface.

While uncomfortable, longing can awaken us from the slumber of our self-centered sleep and stoke a fire in our soul. It is a potent energy, one that we can channel in any direction. We can hide from this energy or use it in unconstructive ways, but we can also harness it to our benefit. Art is often borne out of longing, and while loneliness is not always part of the experience, sometimes it does provide inspiration. As many artists, writers, and musicians know, longing is a highly charged state that contains much creative potential.

Mystics throughout the ages have plunged into the ocean of emptiness only to discover a profound light in the darkness of their yearning. Sufi poets like Rumi and Hafiz gave voice to their longing through ecstatic praise of the Beloved, while singer-saints like Kabir and Mirabai shared their sorrowful cries of separation in songs. These great beings revealed the value of longing as a powerful way for us to connect with the true source of who we are.

We needn't shy away from loneliness — or merely witness it, like the breath in meditation. Instead, we can dive right into the center of that pain and meet the question that loneliness begs of us: *Darling, what is it that you truly long for?*

Indeed. What *is* it that we truly desire? When we feel alienated, afraid, and alone, do we want the perfect mate, the sweetest dessert, or something far beyond: the solace of our very own Self? With practice, we can hold our loneliness like any yoga posture. Just as we breathe into tight, constricted areas of the body only to watch them relax and open, so too can we loosen the knot of loneliness with the light of our loving attention. As we do so, we surrender to the reality that we are not alone; we are — and always have been — intimately connected to the wondrous web of life. 🍃

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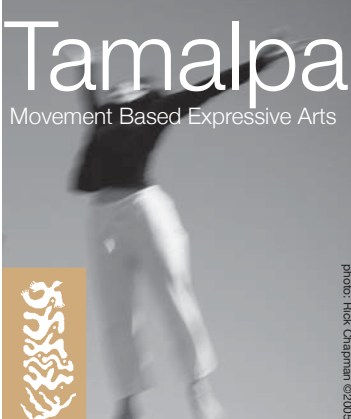


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