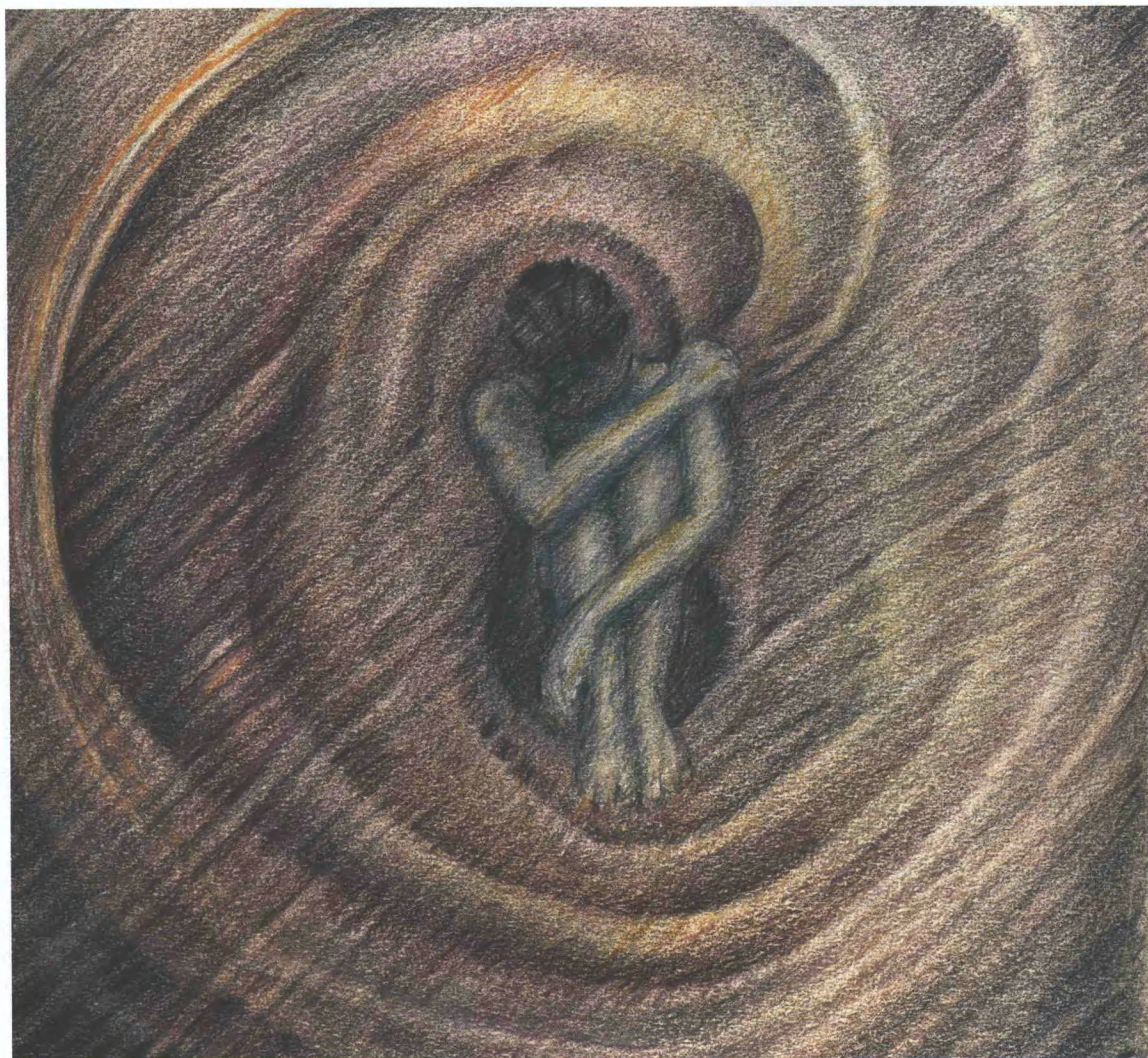


BY VEN. THUBTEN GYATSO

## When Loneliness is Your Closest Friend

*Transforming Loneliness into Strength*



**I**n the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal, custom calls for a young girl to be selected as the representative of a goddess and kept in a palace away from her family and friends. Her hair is never cut, and her feet are not allowed to touch the ground. She is finally released when she begins to menstruate – the “curse” becoming her savior – and another girl takes her place. People believe these little girls are fortunate, but my god-

less Buddhist mind is saddened by the isolation and loneliness they are forced to endure.

Some think that being a celibate Buddhist monk is an equally perverse situation. On my last day of work in Australia, before flying to Nepal to become ordained, in accordance with hospital tradition I went to the local pub with my fellow doctors for a farewell drink. There I was, the prospective Buddhist monk, sitting at a table with a



cigar in my mouth, a jug of beer in front of me, and my arms around two young lady doctors. Echoing my own doubts about whether it was possible to live the rest of my life alone, one of them asked, "But won't you miss the cuddles?"

"I don't know," I replied, "but I think it's worth trying."

Loneliness was no stranger to me. A few years earlier, I had left my love in Australia and gone to England for post-graduate study in medicine, and, let's face it, for adventure. I found it all: adventure, friends, interesting work and study, but when her letters arrived and memories invaded my mind, swinging London became the loneliest place in the world. I yearned for her to be with me and share my happiness.

My willingness to risk such loneliness again by becoming a monk was based on the inspiring example of the Lamas, and on insights I had gained from the Buddha's teachings. Nobody I had ever met could approach the Lamas' level of sanity, happiness, and humour. If I could learn how my mind functioned, and gain control over it like the Lamas, I could free myself from loneliness and all other forms of unhappiness. This is what Buddhism is all about.

We all experience loneliness in varying degrees throughout our lives, and we tend to blame the non-caring attitude of others, or society in general, for our isolation. It is true that external conditions for loneliness exist but the main cause for the misery of loneliness is the mistaken belief that we cannot be happy without a companion. Our self-image feels incomplete and, afraid to reveal our unhappiness to others, we withdraw into a world of self-doubt. This blocks our capacity to recognize the needs of others, our mind is less capable of loving, and friends become even harder to find.

When we were babies, our mothers nourished our bodies with milk and our minds with love. We were weaned from our mother's breast but not from her heart, and as we grew older, feeling the need for independence, we separated ourselves from maternal concern. We desired our mother's love, yet felt aversion to the demands she put upon us, and the way in which she made us feel like a child. Many adults even blame their mothers for the difficulty they have in establishing new relationships. They are half-right. The real problem is our craving for the love, recognition, and appreciation that we used to receive from our mother. This makes us place a subtle, psychological demand upon our partner to provide the maternal love we crave, but our pressure has the opposite effect – the more we demand the love of others, the more likely they are to withdraw their affection and distance themselves from us.

## Exercises for Transforming Loneliness

### MEDITATE

While in silence, go to the depth of your being. Begin to notice the part of you that is "witnessing" yourself, as distinct from your thoughts or your mind. Notice how your "Witness Self" is guiding and accompanying you.

### CONTEMPLATE SPIRITUAL TEACHERS

Think about your relationship with your teachers. Imagine their love and compassion emanating towards you. Feel this connection in your heart.

### CREATE YOUR OWN RETREAT

Think of monk and nuns, such as Ven. Tenzin Palmo, who spent 12 years in a cave, purifying her desires. Use this time to create your own "retreat" for purification in your life.

### GO ON DATES WITH YOURSELF

Treat yourself to dinner, movies or a hike. Invite only yourself. Get to know and appreciate yourself.

### BE ALONE, NOT LONELY

Remember that when you are "lonely," you are lacking another. But being "alone" means you are "All One."

### FOCUS ON OTHERS

Volunteering at a charity, serving at a community event, or giving to those in need are great ways to stop feeling sorry for yourself.

— The Editor

Desire for love can elevate us to great heights of happiness when we hear the words, "I love you," and can drive us to the depths of despair, even suicide, or murder, when somebody says they do not love us. The misery of loneliness is a deep well of self-pity from which we can emerge by realizing that, as we crave love, so do others, and the best thing to do in life is to take upon oneself the role of giver rather than receiver. I am not saying we should reject the love of others; my point is that we should free ourselves from our dependency upon love by abandoning self-concern and thinking only of the needs of others.

Paradoxically, giving love without wanting anything in return makes others love, recognize, and appreciate us even more. And so an important cure for loneliness is to love others without restraint and without demands. It's easy. Just think of what you can do or say to make others happy, and do it. If you find it difficult with adults, you can give love to children. Even young goddesses need love.

Ven. Thubten Gyatso is based in Mongolia, at Ganden Do Ngag Shedrup Ling. Contact: gyatso-mongolia@magicnet.mn50