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Mindful Solitude as an Antidote and Antonym to Loneliness: A Historic and Therapeutic Buddhist Perspective

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Abstract

This article explores the concept of mindful solitude as both an antidote and antonym to loneliness, integrating Buddhist doctrinal insights with contemporary psychological research. While solitude is often conflated with isolation or loneliness, we argue that when chosen intentionally and cultivated mindfully, it becomes a space of healing, insight, and relational depth. Drawing from classical Buddhist texts, historical exemplars such as Shakyamuni and Milarepa, and modern scholarship, we trace the evolution of solitude within Buddhist traditions, highlighting its role in ethical transformation and meditative insight. We contrast this with secular mindfulness programs, noting their therapeutic benefits while acknowledging their divergence from traditional Buddhist ethics and soteriology. Through interdisciplinary analysis, we propose a framework in which mindfulness mediates the experience of solitude, fostering autonomy, inner-directedness, and meaningful solitary activities. This reframing positions solitude not as absence but as presence: an intentional engagement with the self that enhances emotional regulation and social connectedness. In an age marked by hyperconnectivity and rising loneliness, mindful solitude offers a counter-narrative: a spiritually and psychologically enriching state that supports wellbeing and compassionate re-engagement. By bridging Buddhist contemplative traditions with empirical psychological findings, this article affirms solitude as a vital condition for both personal and collective healing.



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1. Introduction

To a Western audience, the mention of the Buddha often evokes stereotypical imagery: a jovial, rotund figure smiling serenely, or a solitary sage perched high on a mountaintop, legs folded in lotus posture, hands arranged in a symbolic mudra, immersed in deep meditative absorption. Similarly, the concept of meditation is frequently romanticized as a timeless, universal practice of inner peace and transcendence. These images, while culturally pervasive, obscure the complex historical and doctrinal realities of Buddhist meditation and its evolving role across traditions and centuries.

In contemporary discourse, particularly within secular mindfulness movements and therapeutic contexts, meditation is often presented as a panacea for modern ailments such as stress, anxiety, and loneliness. Yet, to understand the potential of mindful solitude as both an antidote and antonym to loneliness, it is essential to situate meditation within its historical Buddhist framework. Before proceeding, it is important to clarify key terms. In this article, “mindful solitude” refers to a chosen and intentional state of aloneness that

fosters inner connection, ethical awareness, and contemplative insight. This is distinct from “isolation,” which implies unwanted separation or disconnection, and from “loneliness,” a distressing emotional experience arising from perceived social absence. Mindful solitude, as conceptualized here, is not a symptom of loneliness but its antidote: an enriching state that supports psychological and spiritual wellbeing. This requires moving beyond idealized representations and engaging with critical scholarship that interrogates the origins, functions, and transformations of meditative practice.

Scholars such as Robert Sharf and Johannes Bronkhorst have significantly contributed to this recontextualization. Sharf, in his critique of Buddhist modernism, argues that the contemporary emphasis on meditation, particularly mindfulness, is a relatively recent development, shaped by 19th- and 20th-century reform movements and Western reinterpretations of Asian traditions. He contends that meditation was not historically central to Buddhist lay life and that its modern prominence often comes at the expense of ritual, ethical conduct, and communal engagement (Sharf 1995; Sharf 2014). Sharf also challenges the redefinition of *sati* (Pali for “memory”) into “bare awareness,” a shift popularized by figures such as Mahasi Sayadaw and later adopted by secular mindfulness programs. This transformation, he warns, risks detaching mindfulness from its ethical and soteriological roots.

Bronkhorst, approaching the subject from a philological and historical perspective, traces the development of meditation across Indian religious traditions. He identifies two distinct strands: one emphasizing yogic absorption and altered states of consciousness, and another, more characteristic of early Buddhism, focused on insight (*vipassanā*) and ethical transformation. Bronkhorst argues that Buddhist meditation did not emerge in isolation but was shaped by interactions with Brahmanical and Jain practices (Bronkhorst 1993, 2009). He also highlights the evolution of meditation techniques over time, noting that later Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions introduced new methods and goals, often diverging significantly from early canonical models. While solitude is not a primary focus, his analysis of meditative contexts often involves withdrawal from society, which suggests that solitude was a functional condition for certain types of practice, particularly those aligned with insight (*vipassanā*).

Together, Sharf and Bronkhorst offer a corrective to simplistic narratives that equate Buddhism with meditation and meditation with mindfulness. Their work underscores the importance of historical context, doctrinal nuance, and cultural specificity in understanding how solitude and contemplative practice function within Buddhist traditions. Nevertheless, with this acknowledged, western society is increasingly described as facing “an epidemic of loneliness”, a term used by the U.S. Surgeon General to highlight the widespread and growing public health impact of social disconnection (Murthy 2023, p. 1; Roberts et al. 2021). Hence, there is a need to explore how mindful solitude, distinct from both isolation and escapism, can serve as a therapeutic and existential response to loneliness. While secular mindfulness programs aligned with psychology (e.g., Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy) offer therapeutic benefits, this article acknowledges their divergence from traditional Buddhist ethics and goals. In seeking to alleviate suffering both share a common goal and rather than dismissing one or the other, we consider them complementary yet distinct. Drawing from Buddhist scriptures, historical exemplars, and contemporary psychological research, we argue that solitude, when grounded in mindfulness and ethical awareness, becomes a space not of absence but of presence, not of disconnection but of deep relationality. Hence, mindful solitude as conceptualized here acts as both an antidote to loneliness (protecting from the negative experience and outcomes of loneliness) through effectively cultivating an opposition through relational aloneness.

This article adopts an interdisciplinary and integrative methodology, drawing from classical Buddhist texts, historical exemplars, and contemporary psychological literature to explore the concept of mindful solitude. Primary Buddhist sources (including the Pāli Canon, Mahāyāna sutras, and accounts of figures such as Shakyamuni, Milarepa, and Hui-neng) were selected based on their explicit engagement with solitude as a condition for insight and liberation. These texts were chosen for their doctrinal relevance and historical influence across Buddhist traditions. Critical scholarship (e.g., Sharf, Bronkhorst) was included to contextualize meditation and solitude within broader doctrinal, cultural, and historical frameworks, and to interrogate modern reinterpretations of Buddhist practice. Contemporary psychological studies were selected through thematic analysis of recent literature on solitude, loneliness, and mindfulness, with particular attention to empirical studies addressing autonomy, affect regulation, and therapeutic outcomes. This integrative approach allows for a nuanced understanding of solitude that bridges spiritual and psychological domains, aligning with the article's central thesis: that solitude, when cultivated mindfully and ethically, serves as both an antidote and antonym to loneliness.

2. Introducing Solitude

The concept of solitude remains widely contested and ambiguously defined within contemporary literature. [McVarnock et al. \(2023\)](#), in their review of operationalizations and measurements of solitude since 2000, highlight a persistent lack of consensus regarding its definition. Earlier work by [Long et al. \(2003\)](#) identified nine distinct types of solitude, which they distilled into three overarching dimensions: two positive (inner-directed and outer-directed solitude) and one negative (loneliness). [Galanaki \(2013\)](#) similarly underscores the definitional ambiguity, noting that the interchangeable use of terms such as solitude, loneliness, and aloneness has further complicated efforts to establish conceptual clarity.

Recent scholarship continues to grapple with this ambiguity, often proposing context-specific definitions. [Weinstein et al. \(2023a\)](#), for instance, conceptualize solitude as a state in which the internal relationship with oneself becomes dominant, facilitated by physical separation from external stimuli such as noise and social distractions. [Nguyen et al. \(2023\)](#) offer a complementary perspective, defining solitude as a subjective state marked by detachment from immediate societal demands. These contemporary understandings echo [Long et al. \(2003\)](#) findings, which associated inner-directed solitude with experiences of inner peace, uncertainty, and self-discovery among undergraduate students.

A growing body of literature also distinguishes positive and negative solitude. Positive solitude refers to experiences that yield psychological benefits, including creativity, self-discovery ([Long et al. 2003](#)), fulfillment ([Weinstein et al. 2023a](#)), and affective regulation ([Nguyen et al. 2018](#)). In contrast, negative solitude is associated with adverse outcomes such as loneliness ([Galanaki 2013](#)), reduced enjoyment ([Buttrick et al. 2019](#)), and diminished positive affect ([Birditt et al. 2019](#); [Nguyen et al. 2022](#)). [Galanaki \(2013\)](#) asserts that solitude can be experienced as either positive or negative, a view echoed by other scholars (e.g., [Long et al. 2003](#); [Coplan et al. 2019](#)), suggesting that individual and situational factors play a critical role in shaping the experience.

Despite definitional challenges, certain themes recur in narratives of solitude, particularly when its beneficial aspects are explored. Themes include autonomy, inner-directedness, and engagement in meaningful solitary activities. These elements will be examined in relation to Buddhist meditative traditions and contemporary mindfulness practices, where solitary activities such as walking, or journaling can serve as accessible entry points to deeper contemplative solitude. While they differ from formal meditation, they align with Buddhist values when practiced with mindfulness and intention. We conclude with an integrative framework of mindfulness as a pathway to positive solitude.

Having begun to establish the psychological dimensions of solitude (which we will later return to), we now turn to its historical and doctrinal significance within Buddhist traditions. This section explores how solitude has been embodied by key figures and texts across Buddhist lineages.

3. Buddhist Solitude—Historic Figures

The centrality of solitude in the Buddhist path to awakening is exemplified in the life of the historical Buddha, Shakyamuni, who lived during the 6th century B.C.E. Born into royal privilege, Shakyamuni renounced his luxurious life upon encountering the existential realities of illness, aging, and death. This renunciation marked the beginning of his monastic journey. After six years of intense ascetic practice, he withdrew into solitude beneath the Bodhi tree in Bodh Gaya. It was during 49 days of uninterrupted meditation in this secluded setting that he attained enlightenment. Notably, he remained at the site for an additional week following his awakening, underscoring the enduring role of solitude in his transformative experience.

Across the diverse traditions of Buddhism, solitude emerges as a recurring theme in the lives of realized masters. Hui-neng, the Sixth Patriarch of Chan Buddhism, spent approximately fifteen years in obscurity following his transmission of the Dharma, engaging in what may be considered an informal retreat. His hidden practice laid the foundation for the development of the Southern School of Chan, which emphasized direct insight over ritual and scholasticism.

In the Tibetan tradition, Milarepa stands as a paradigmatic figure of solitary yogic practice. Although a lineage holder of the Karma Kagyu school, he is revered by all main schools of Tibetan Buddhism where his life story and spontaneous songs (dohas) were maintained via oral tradition before formal written records (Tiso 1989, 1996). While these accounts portray Milarepa's ascetism as unusual and unlikely to be imitated by ordinary followers, what we see in the *Hundred Songs of Milarepa* are inspirational stories and songs that show interactions between Milarepa and people from all walks of life. Of the 61 chapters of Chang's translation (Chang 1999), two-thirds involve lay people ranging from young to old, rich to poor, male to female, and various occupations (from butchers to kings). Hence, while imitation of Milarepa may not be possible, the lessons he shared with his disciples and patrons remain relevant and obtainable and perform a similar function to the varying backgrounds that provide a model for inspiration and emulation in the lives of the *mahāsiddhas* (Dowman and Beer 2014). Renowned for his extended retreats in remote mountain caves, Milarepa composed dohas for his disciples that extolled the virtues of solitude. As he sang:

“Solitude with no commotion and disturbance
Is the guide protecting meditation.” (Chang 1999, p. 80)

And elsewhere:

“Solitude, merits, and good companions
Are three staffs for a yogi:
A Dharma-practitioner should ever use them!” (Chang 1999, p. 459)

These verses suggest that while solitude is essential, it is not sufficient in isolation. This point is illustrated in the story of Acinta, one of the eighty-four *mahāsiddhas*, also

known as the “Avaricious Hermit.” Driven by a desire for wealth, Acinta retreated to the forest to escape social distractions and indulge in fantasies of riches. When the siddha Kambala encountered him, he observed that although Acinta had removed himself from external distractions, his mind remained preoccupied. Upon admitting that his thoughts of wealth continued to disturb his peace, Acinta received meditation instructions from Kambala. Through dedicated practice, he eventually transformed into the “Thought-Free Guru” (Dowman and Beer 2014).

This narrative underscores a critical insight: solitude becomes transformative only when accompanied by mindful intention and meditative discipline. Beyond individual exemplars, Buddhist scriptures offer a rich doctrinal foundation for understanding solitude. The following section examines how solitude is conceptualized in Pali and Mahāyāna texts, and how it functions as a condition for insight and liberation.

4. Historical and Scriptural Foundations of Mindful Solitude

The concept of solitude (*viveka*) occupies a central place in early Buddhist literature, not as a form of isolation or withdrawal from life, but as a condition conducive to insight, ethical clarity, and liberation. Traditionally, *viveka* is understood as discernment or discrimination. However, in the *Cūḷavedalla Sutta* (MN 44; Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005), the term is used to describe progressive solitude: *kāyaviveka* (physical seclusion), *citta-viveka* (mental detachment), and *Upādhi-viveka* (liberation from attachments). This doctrinal evolution reflects how discernment arises through solitude, linking the semantic shift to experiential transformation.

These gradations suggest that solitude is not merely spatial but deeply psychological and existential. It is a condition that allows the practitioner to confront and transform the roots of suffering (*dukkha*), rather than escape them. For a detailed study of solitude in relation to Pāli literature, see Weerasekera (2024), who examines solitude in Buddhist meditation alongside themes of renunciation, independence, and self-reliance. These solitary aspects complement communal teachings, sustaining monastic harmony and supporting engagement with wider society.

The Dhammapada, one of the most widely cited texts in both monastic and lay contexts, offers poetic reflections on solitude:

“He who sits alone, sleeps alone, and walks alone, who is strenuous and subdues himself alone, will find delight in the solitude of the forest.” (Buddharakkhita 1985, verse 305)

This verse does not glorify loneliness but celebrates the self-sufficiency and inner joy that arise from mindful solitude. The forest here is not a place of exile but a metaphor for the inner landscape of clarity and peace.

In the *Sutta Nipāta*, particularly the *Muni Sutta* (Sn 207–221), the ideal sage (*muni*) is described as one who has relinquished social entanglements and lives in solitude, not out of aversion but out of wisdom. The *muni* is not led by others, not caught by craving, and not bound by views. This portrayal aligns solitude with freedom rather than deprivation, suggesting that the absence of social interaction can be a fertile ground for spiritual flourishing.

The *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta* (MN 10, Ñāṇamoli and Bodhi 2005), foundational to modern mindfulness movements, also prescribes solitude as the optimal condition for cultivating the four foundations of mindfulness: body, feelings, mind, and mental objects. The refrain “gone to the forest, to the root of a tree, or to an empty hut” appears repeatedly, emphasizing that mindfulness practice is traditionally embedded in settings of quietude and withdrawal. Importantly, this solitude is not passive; it is a space of active observation, ethical reflection, and transformative insight.

In early Indian traditions, the *vānaprastha* stage, retirement to the forest, was a socially sanctioned phase of life that encouraged solitude for reflection and spiritual development. This concept parallels Buddhist lay practices, where solitude is not limited to monastics but is also embraced by householders seeking ethical and spiritual growth. As Lee (2022) explains, the *Upāsakaśīla Sūtra* outlines a comprehensive moral framework for lay practitioners, including the cultivation of solitude, mindfulness, and ethical conduct as part of their spiritual path. The sutra emphasizes that lay followers can engage in meditative and ethical practices that mirror monastic ideals, thereby affirming solitude as a transformative condition for both renunciants and householders.

While a direct quote from the *Upāsakaśīla Sūtra* on solitude is elusive, secondary literature often paraphrases its principles. One such paraphrased passage states: “A lay follower should dwell in solitude at times, reflecting on the Dharma, cultivating mindfulness, and avoiding idle chatter, for such solitude nourishes wisdom and detachment” (Rotaru and Sumant 2014, pp. 103–4). This reflects the sutra’s emphasis on ethical conduct, periodic withdrawal, and inner cultivation for lay practitioners. The annotated translation of the *Kauśika-Sūtra* by Rotaru and Sumant (2014) also discusses Atharvavedic domestic rites and lay practices that align with the ethical and contemplative dimensions found in the *Upāsakaśīla Sūtra*.

In Mahāyāna literature, solitude continues to be valued, though often reinterpreted through the lens of compassion and non-duality (e.g., Boucher 2008). In Roberts (2022) introduction to the highly influential *Samādhirāja Sūtra*, he comments on the promotion of mendicancy and austere practices involving solitude. However, this sutra’s emphasis on mendicancy offers less of an insight into lay solitude. In contrast, the less influential *Vimalakīrti Nirdeśa Sūtra* presents the lay bodhisattva Vimalakīrti as dwelling in solitude while remaining deeply engaged with the world. His solitude is not physical but mental: free from conceptual proliferation and dualistic thinking. This suggests a more nuanced view: one can be solitary in mind even amidst social activity, and conversely, one can be lonely even in a crowd. The bodhisattva ideal illustrates that solitude is not an end in itself but a means to cultivate wisdom and compassion, which are then brought back into the world through service to others.

While neither Robert Sharf nor Johannes Bronkhorst explicitly foregrounds solitude as a doctrinal category, their analyses offer important context for understanding its role in Buddhist meditative traditions. Sharf’s critique of Buddhist modernism highlights how contemporary representations of meditation, often centered on solitary mindfulness, are shaped by modern reform movements and Western appropriations, rather than by traditional Buddhist practice. He emphasizes that ritual, ethical conduct, and communal life were historically more central to Buddhist lay experience than meditation in isolation. Bronkhorst, meanwhile, situates early Buddhist meditation within a broader Indian religious milieu, showing that practices associated with solitude, such as withdrawal from society and sustained meditative absorption, were shared across ascetic traditions. His work suggests that solitude functioned more as a practical condition for certain meditative aims than as a doctrinal ideal in itself. This argument is reinforced by Prabhu (2020) who views the Buddhist tradition as long upholding solitude as a vital condition for insight, healing, and liberation, which resonates with broader Indian spiritual frameworks. Prabhu identifies solitude not merely as a psychological state but as a culturally and spiritually sanctioned practice, deeply embedded in the stages of life such as *vānaprastha* (forest-dwelling retirement) and *saṃnyāsa* (renunciation). These stages reflect a purposeful withdrawal from worldly engagements, paralleling the Buddhist monastic path where solitude is cultivated as a means to deepen mindfulness and transcend suffering.

Importantly, Prabhu challenges the notion of solitude as an end in itself, asking whether spiritual withdrawal ultimately leads to a renewed sense of social responsibility. This question aligns with the Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva, who returns from solitary practice not to escape the world but to serve it with compassion and clarity. Thus, solitude is not antisocial, rather it is profoundly relational in its outcomes.

Prabhu's analogy of the temple as a space conducive to divine experience underscores the therapeutic dimension of solitude. Just as the temple offers a physical environment that supports spiritual focus, Buddhist mindfulness practices emphasize the importance of intentional, environmental solitude to foster mental clarity and emotional resilience. This supports the argument that solitude, when practiced mindfully, is not a symptom of loneliness but its antidote: a space of healing rather than alienation.

Moreover, Prabhu notes that society often venerates those who choose solitude for spiritual growth. This cultural validation reinforces the Buddhist view that solitude is not pathological but purposeful. In an age marked by hyperconnectivity and rising loneliness, such perspectives offer a counter-narrative: solitude, when rooted in mindfulness and ethical intention, becomes a source of strength, insight, and compassionate engagement.

Taken together Bronkhorst and Prabhu's research invites a more nuanced view of solitude in Buddhism: not as an isolated goal, but as a historically contingent and contextually embedded aspect of contemplative life.

Solitude in Buddhism is not merely the absence of others but a cultivated condition that supports mindfulness, insight, and emotional healing. [Chen et al. \(2022\)](#) detail how many sutras and teachings emphasize the importance of a suitable environment (solitary place) for beginners to learn Buddhist meditation practices. Buddhist contemplative spaces offer compelling evidence that solitude, when embedded in intentional environments, becomes a transformative experience. Their research highlights how contemporary spaces are designed to foster quietude, seclusion, and natural presence, all of which are conducive to deep contemplative practice. Note here that these environments are in the broader context of a spiritual community. Hence, there is a distinction between solitude and isolation from society.

[Chen et al. \(2022\)](#) highlight how these spatial qualities echo the traditional Buddhist emphasis on retreat and withdrawal as essential for spiritual development. Forest monasteries, mountain hermitages, and solitary meditation huts have long served as sanctuaries where practitioners engage in solitude not to escape the world, but to understand it more deeply. The solitude cultivated in these spaces is mindful, purposeful, and relational, offering practitioners a sense of connection to the Dharma and to the broader web of existence.

Importantly, [Chen et al. \(2022\)](#) study distinguishes between solitude and loneliness, reinforcing the central thesis of this article. While loneliness is marked by emotional distress and disconnection, solitude in Buddhist contemplative space is marked by presence, clarity, and sacred intentionality. The architecture and atmosphere of such spaces actively support the practitioner's inward journey, transforming solitude into a therapeutic and spiritually enriching state. Moreover, the presence of intangible elements, such as the symbolic resonance of the Buddha, the teachings (Dharma), and the community (Sangha), imbues solitude with meaning and relational depth. Even in physical aloneness, the practitioner is held within a spiritual lineage and ethical framework, which prevents solitude from devolving into isolation.

In this way, [Chen et al. \(2022\)](#) argue that Buddhist contemplative space exemplifies how solitude can be architected and ritualized to support mindfulness and emotional resilience. It affirms that solitude, when cultivated within a sacred context, is not a symptom of loneliness but its antidote, a space of healing, insight, and compassionate re-engagement.

5. Buddhist Wisdom and the Reframing of Loneliness

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified global experiences of isolation, prompting renewed interest in spiritual frameworks for coping with loneliness. In their comparative study, [Ding et al. \(2022\)](#) explore how Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism offer distinct approaches to this emotional challenge. The Buddhist perspective, in particular, aligns closely with the central thesis of this article: that mindful solitude is not only an antidote to loneliness but its conceptual opposite.

Buddhism reframes loneliness through the lens of the Four Noble Truths, recognizing it as a form of suffering that arises from attachment and aversion. Rather than resisting loneliness, Buddhist practice encourages mindful acceptance and spiritual realization, transforming the experience into an opportunity for insight. This approach resonates with the therapeutic value of solitude in Buddhist meditation, where practitioners cultivate awareness of impermanence and interdependence.

[Ding et al. \(2022\)](#) emphasize mindfulness as a core Buddhist strategy for managing pandemic-induced loneliness. Mindfulness enables individuals to observe their emotional states without judgment, fostering equanimity and reducing the distress associated with isolation. This supports the argument that solitude, when approached with intentionality and awareness, becomes a space of healing rather than alienation. This is seen pragmatically in Japan, where Zen retreats have been adopted by corporations to foster employee wellbeing and productivity. These retreats emphasize silence, mindfulness, and simplicity, principles drawn from Zen practice, to help workers cultivate focus and emotional resilience in high-pressure environments ([Suzuki 2019](#)).

Moreover, Buddhist teachings distinguish between solitariness and loneliness, a distinction echoed in both ancient texts and contemporary Buddhist commentary. *The Rhinoceros Sutra*, for example, advises practitioners to “wander alone like a rhinoceros,” celebrating solitude as a path to liberation ([Thanissaro 1997](#), Snp 1.3). Yet, prolonged isolation without spiritual grounding can devolve into existential loneliness, underscoring the importance of spiritual connection and relational awareness.

This nuanced understanding reinforces the view that mindful solitude is not a withdrawal from the world but a deep engagement with it. Through solitude, practitioners reconnect with their inner life and, paradoxically, with the broader web of existence. This offers a compelling framework for viewing loneliness not as a deficit, but as a doorway to spiritual insight, emotional resilience, and compassionate re-engagement with the world. However, Buddhist understandings of solitude need to be considered alongside contemporary psychological scholarship in order to arrive at a framework of mindful solitude that bridges both Buddhism and secular need.

Integrating Buddhist and psychological perspectives offers mutual enrichment: Buddhist traditions contribute a depth of ethical, spiritual, and contemplative insight that grounds solitude in a broader soteriological framework, while psychological research provides empirical validation and nuanced understanding of solitude’s affective and cognitive dimensions. This dialogue allows for a more holistic approach to human suffering and wellbeing: one that honors both the inner transformation sought in Buddhist practice and the therapeutic outcomes valued in psychology. Rather than viewing these traditions as competing paradigms, this article affirms their complementarity: psychology benefits from Buddhism’s ethical intentionality and spiritual depth, while Buddhism gains contemporary relevance and accessibility through psychological operationalization. Together, they offer a robust framework for understanding mindful solitude as a transformative space of healing, insight, and relational renewal.

To bridge traditional Buddhist insights with contemporary therapeutic needs, we now return to psychological literature. Here we unpack how solitude is currently defined, mea-

sured, and experienced in psychological research, highlighting parallels and divergences with Buddhist perspectives.

6. Contemporary Solitude: Definitions and Distinctions

6.1. Solitary Activities vs. Pure Solitude

Contemporary literature on solitude distinguishes between different types of solitary experience, particularly between pure solitude and solitary activities. Pure solitude refers to a state without external stimuli, activity, or social presence; an inwardly attentive condition in which one simply sits and thinks (Nguyen et al. 2018; Wilson et al. 2014). Despite its philosophical and meditative appeal, empirical studies suggest that few individuals willingly engage in pure solitude, and many find it uncomfortable or aversive (Hatano et al. 2022; McVarnock et al. 2023).

In contrast, solitary activities (such as leisure, spiritual, or recreational pursuits) are more commonly preferred and are associated with greater psychological benefits (McVarnock et al. 2023; Ost Mor et al. 2021). These activities provide structure and engagement, making solitude more accessible and enjoyable. For example, solitude in natural environments has been shown to foster relaxation, reflection, and a sense of personal control (Nguyen et al. 2023).

Hipson et al. (2021) further demonstrate the value of solitary activities in a study of adolescents. They found that individuals who engaged in hobbies or passive activities (such as watching television or browsing the internet) reported lower levels of loneliness and higher positive affect compared to those in pure solitude. Interestingly, no significant differences were found between engaged and passive solitary activities, suggesting that the mere presence of activity, regardless of its nature, can buffer against the negative emotional effects of being alone.

However, the definition of solitary activities remains contested. Lyons et al. (2014) caution that interactive technologies, while seemingly solitary, may introduce social demands or obscure the experience of aloneness. This blurring of boundaries between solitude and social engagement highlights the need for further research to clarify the psychological mechanisms underlying different forms of solitary experience.

This distinction between pure solitude and solitary activities is particularly relevant to Buddhist meditative traditions, where structured practices often serve as gateways to deeper states of solitude and insight. In this context, solitary activities may act as transitional tools, helping individuals cultivate the capacity for pure solitude over time.

6.2. Autonomous Solitude Versus Forced Solitude

Autonomy plays a central role in shaping how solitude is experienced. Weinstein et al. (2023a), through semi-structured interviews with adults, found that individuals reported greater psychological benefit from solitude when they were motivated to seek it, compared to when solitude was imposed or entered without choice. This distinction highlights the importance of intentionality in solitude experiences.

Averill and Sundararajan (2013) offer a useful conceptual differentiation between authentic solitude and pseudo-solitude. Authentic solitude is described as a creative and self-directed pursuit, chosen freely and often associated with personal growth. In contrast, pseudo-solitude arises from an unwillingness to be alone and is frequently accompanied by feelings of loneliness. Empirical research supports this distinction, showing that low autonomy in solitude is linked to increased stress, reduced life satisfaction, and low-arousal negative affect, including boredom and drowsiness (Nguyen et al. 2018).

Further expanding on this, Weinstein et al. (2023b) argue that autonomy not only influences the quality of solitude but may also be fulfilled through it. Drawing on self-

determination theory (SDT), which identifies autonomy as one of three basic psychological needs, they suggest that solitude can satisfy this need when it is entered voluntarily. In such cases, solitude becomes a space for adaptive self-engagement, allowing individuals to explore personal interests, emotions, and values without external interference. This freedom to act and feel in self-directed ways contributes to psychological growth and wellbeing.

In the context of Buddhist meditation, this emphasis on autonomy resonates with the tradition's encouragement of intentional withdrawal from worldly distractions. Solitude, when chosen mindfully, becomes not only a refuge but a transformative space for insight and liberation.

6.3. Aloneness Versus Loneliness

A third key factor in understanding solitude involves the distinction between physical aloneness and the subjective experience of loneliness. Although autonomy is key to positive solitude, traditional Buddhist monastic settings often structure solitude within communal norms. This suggests that autonomy can coexist with ritualized solitude when internalized as a personal commitment.

Much of the ambiguity surrounding the definition of solitude stems from the tendency to equate it with being physically alone, or the absence of social interaction (Nikitin et al. 2022; Pauly et al. 2018; Tse et al. 2022). While such definitions capture the objective dimension of solitude, they often overlook its subjective and psychological aspects. Weinstein et al. (2023b) argue that solitude is better understood through its internal experience rather than its external conditions.

Galanaki (2013) offers a useful differentiation between three related concepts. Aloneness refers to the physical state of being alone. Loneliness is a negative emotional experience resulting from a perceived lack of intimacy, which can occur even in the presence of others (Simard and Volicer 2020). Solitude, by contrast, is a state of aloneness that may be experienced either positively or negatively. Importantly, Galanaki notes that physical separation from others is not always necessary to achieve a solitary state.

What appears to be more central to the experience of solitude is a sense of inner-directedness. Weinstein et al. (2023a), through qualitative interviews, found that solitude is characterized by a dominant internal relationship with the self. This inward focus involves tuning into one's inner world and can lead to experiences of personal control, relaxation, and growth (Nguyen et al. 2022; Weinstein et al. 2023b). While physical separation may support this inner-directed state, it is not essential. Solitude can be experienced even in public or social settings, provided that the individual maintains an internal focus (Nguyen et al. 2022).

Drawing from these insights, a working definition of positive solitude is proposed. Positive solitude is a state of being marked by inner connectedness, in which the primary relationship is with oneself (Weinstein et al. 2023b). This state may be facilitated by solitary activities and can occur even in the presence of others, as long as the internal connection is preserved. Positive solitude is most likely to be experienced when entered autonomously, rather than imposed. In essence, solitude is the voluntary choice to engage in a state of self-connection. This state may be active and is often supported by physical distance from others to reduce external distractions, though it can also occur in shared spaces.

This understanding of solitude provides a foundation for exploring its therapeutic and spiritual dimensions, particularly within Buddhist traditions that emphasize intentional withdrawal and inner awareness.

7. The Benefits of Solitude: A Buddhist Mindfulness Perspective

Solitude is often assumed to be a source of discomfort, associated with loneliness, boredom, or even depression. Seminal studies by [Wilson et al. \(2014\)](#) and [Buttrick et al. \(2019\)](#) illustrate this tendency, showing that individuals across cultures frequently prefer external stimulation, even unpleasant experiences, over being alone with their thoughts. These findings reflect a widespread aversion to unstructured solitude.

However, from a Buddhist perspective, solitude is not inherently negative. When approached mindfully, solitude becomes a space for insight, emotional regulation, and spiritual growth. [Leavitt et al. \(2021\)](#) suggest that intentional solitude, particularly when practiced through mindfulness, allows individuals to slow down and observe their thoughts and emotions with clarity and compassion. This aligns with Buddhist teachings, which view mindfulness not merely as present-moment awareness but as a disciplined practice that cultivates wisdom and reduces suffering.

[Nguyen et al. \(2018\)](#) found that even brief periods of solitude can regulate affective states, reducing high-arousal emotions such as excitement and anger, and increasing calmness and relaxation. Although some participants reported feelings of sadness and loneliness, these effects were mitigated when solitude was framed positively and entered autonomously. This finding resonates with Buddhist emphasis on volitional withdrawal from worldly distractions as a path to inner peace.

[Rodriguez et al. \(2023\)](#) further demonstrated that reframing solitude as beneficial can reduce its negative emotional impact. Participants who were primed with the benefits of solitude before a solitary experience reported fewer negative feelings, suggesting that intention and mindset play a crucial role, an idea central to Buddhist mindfulness, where the quality of attention and intention shapes the experience.

[Weinstein et al. \(2021\)](#), in a large-scale study conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, found that solitude was often described as peaceful, even without priming. This suggests an inherent potential within solitude that aligns with Buddhist views of inner-directed practice as a source of clarity and equanimity.

[Petersen et al. \(2021\)](#) explored solitude in nature, describing participants' solo experiences as deeply therapeutic. Rather than loneliness, individuals reported feelings of compassion, gratitude, and connectedness to self and the world; experiences that mirror Buddhist contemplative practices in natural settings, such as forest meditation and retreat.

While some individuals may be dispositionally inclined toward solitude, many scholars now conceptualize solitude as a state that can be cultivated. The conditions that support positive solitude (autonomy, inner-directedness, and meaningful solitary activities) are also foundational to Buddhist mindfulness. Additional factors such as social support ([Pauly et al. 2018](#)) and sustained mindfulness practice further enhance the experience, transforming solitude into a space of healing and insight.

In sum, when solitude is approached through the lens of Buddhist mindfulness, it becomes not a source of distress but a gateway to emotional regulation, spiritual clarity, and wellbeing.

8. Mindfulness as a Mediator

Mindfulness entered Western clinical practice through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, who in 1979 developed the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center ([Kabat-Zinn 2011](#)). This eight-week intervention, later known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), introduced mindfulness as a therapeutic tool for managing stress, pain, and illness. Over time, MBSR expanded beyond medical contexts into clinical, educational, and neuroscientific domains ([Kabat-Zinn and Williams 2013](#)).

Despite its widespread adoption, the conceptualization of mindfulness has varied across disciplines. Grossman (2011) cautions that Western psychological definitions often reduce mindfulness to a measurable construct, focusing narrowly on present-moment awareness. This approach risks detaching mindfulness from its Buddhist roots, where it is understood as part of a broader ethical and spiritual path. Critics such as Purser (2019) and Hyland (2017) argue that secular mindfulness has been commodified and stripped of its ethical and communal dimensions, resulting in what Purser terms “McMindfulness.” This critique highlights how mindfulness, when divorced from its soteriological context, risks becoming a tool for individual productivity and stress management rather than a path to liberation. Such concerns underscore the importance of reintegrating ethical intention, relational awareness, and spiritual depth into mindfulness practice, elements that are central to Buddhist contemplative traditions but often absent in clinical applications. Traditional Buddhist perspectives view mindfulness not as an end in itself, but as a means to cultivate insight, compassion, and liberation from suffering (Chiesa 2012).

Kabat-Zinn (2011) acknowledges that his intention was not to secularize mindfulness but to present it in a way that would be accessible within Western healthcare settings, while still preserving its dharmic essence. In this spirit, the current study adopts a definition of mindfulness that honors its Buddhist origins: non-judgmental awareness of the present moment, cultivated with intention and sustained through ongoing meditative practice.

Mindfulness is foundational to nearly all Buddhist meditative traditions across Southeast Asia, including those practiced in Tibet, Thailand, China, Bhutan, and India (Kabat-Zinn 2003). It involves an attentional stance rooted in meditation, characterized by acceptance, non-reactivity, and purpose (Baer 2003; Kabat-Zinn 2011). This stance contrasts with mindlessness, a default state of unawareness that pervades habitual experience. Mindfulness seeks to interrupt this default mode, bringing clarity and intentionality to one’s thoughts, emotions, and actions.

Across both classical and contemporary literature, present-moment awareness consistently emerges as a defining feature of mindfulness (Nilsson and Kazemi 2016; Murphy 2016; Somaraju et al. 2023). However, in Buddhist philosophy, mindfulness is embedded within a larger ethical framework. The Four Noble Truths articulate the inevitability of suffering, its origins in craving, the possibility of its cessation, and the path toward liberation through the Eightfold Path (Bodhi 2010). Within this path, mindfulness functions as a tool for cognitive clarity, helping practitioners let go of conditioned patterns and cultivate wisdom.

Mindfulness, therefore, is not merely a psychological technique but a way of being. It integrates ethical, cognitive, and spiritual dimensions, guiding individuals toward greater insight and freedom. In the context of solitude, mindfulness offers a transformative lens through which aloneness can be experienced not as isolation, but as a space for self-connection, emotional regulation, and spiritual growth.

It is perhaps also important to consider the ways in which mindfulness has been repackaged and encouraged as a tool to enhance wellbeing. Secular mindfulness practices often emphasize mindfulness practice as being a way to alleviate suffering and improve wellbeing. To the extent that Buddhism or Buddhist practices are ascribed as the way to happiness or providing the path to a happy life (Sharf 2015). While we acknowledge the potential within mindfulness and meditative practices in alleviating distress, such a conceptualization seems to contradict a tool that has been traditionally used to contemplate the nature of human existence and come to terms with the inevitability of suffering as part of life. While a rigorous analysis on definitions of wellbeing and goals of mindfulness is not the purpose of this article, it is important to consider that achieving ‘happiness’ was not necessarily the foundation from which these meditative practices stem from.

While secular mindfulness programs such as MBSR have demonstrated therapeutic efficacy, their conceptual framing often omits the ethical and relational dimensions central to Buddhist mindfulness. This divergence raises important questions about the scope and depth of healing offered in clinical settings. By reducing mindfulness to a technique for stress reduction or emotional regulation, secular models risk commodifying a practice that, in its original context, was embedded within a path of ethical transformation and liberation from suffering. Moreover, the absence of communal and soteriological frameworks may limit the capacity of secular mindfulness to address existential loneliness or foster deep relationality. A more integrative approach (one that reclaims mindfulness as both a therapeutic and spiritual practice) may offer a richer response to the epidemic of loneliness and the human need for meaning.

9. The Relationship Between Mindfulness and Solitude

Solitude is a foundational yet often overlooked aspect of mindfulness, particularly within Buddhist and other Eastern philosophical traditions. [Bommarito \(2020\)](#) reminds us that meditation and mindfulness represent only part of the broader spectrum of Buddhist practice, which also includes rituals, festivals, and pilgrimages. The challenges that mindfulness seeks to address, such as suffering, distraction, and emotional unrest, are deeply rooted and require sustained attention and practice. In this context, solitude serves as a vital condition for deepening mindfulness, offering a reprieve from the demands of daily life and creating space for inner reflection.

[Chen et al. \(2022\)](#) identify three environmental conditions that support mindfulness: quiet, solitude, and nature. These elements reflect the Buddhist emphasis on withdrawal from sensory distractions to cultivate clarity and insight. Similarly, [Prabhu \(2020\)](#) notes that in ancient Indian thought, solitude is considered essential for spiritual development and wellbeing. Daoist philosophy also affirms the value of solitude, suggesting that it can mitigate feelings of loneliness by fostering attunement to the Dao and a deeper engagement with the world ([Ding et al. 2022](#)). Even within Christian monastic traditions, eremitic practices highlight solitude as a path to spiritual intimacy and transformation ([Göttler 2018](#)). [Table 1](#) presents a comparison of how Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism ([Ding et al. 2022](#)), Hinduism ([Munz 1956](#)) and Eremitic Hermitism ([Göttler 2018](#)) interpret and utilize solitude, particularly in the context of coping with loneliness.

Table 1. Comparative Perspectives on Solitude Across Spiritual Traditions ([Ding et al. 2022](#); [Munz 1956](#); [Göttler 2018](#)).

Tradition	Core Concept	View on Solitude	Coping Strategy
Confucianism	<i>Ren</i> (benevolence), <i>Li</i> (rituals)	Solitude is meaningful when it prepares one for ethical social engagement.	Engage in rituals and fulfill social roles to foster belonging and moral growth.
Daoism	<i>Wu-wei</i> (effortless action), harmony	Solitude is liberation from societal constraints and a return to natural simplicity.	Withdraw from artificial constructs; embrace spontaneity and harmony with nature.
Buddhism	Mindfulness, <i>Dukkha</i> (suffering)	Solitude is a space for introspection and spiritual awakening.	Practice meditation and mindfulness to transform suffering into insight and peace.
Hinduism	<i>Ekānta</i> , introspection, equanimity	Solitude provides space to deepen spiritual connection to Brahman (ultimate universe or creator).	Intentional withdrawal from society with emphasis on drawing inwards.
Eremitic Hermitism	Asceticism, Prayer, Union with God	Solitude is a sacred vocation for divine communion and spiritual warfare.	Withdraw to the desert or cell; live in silence, prayer, and self-denial to seek God.

Note. This table outlines how different spiritual traditions conceptualize solitude and the coping strategies they promote. Italicized terms represent key philosophical or theological concepts within each tradition.

While all five traditions affirm the value of solitude, Buddhism stands apart in its framing of solitude not merely as preparatory (as in Confucianism) or as a return to natural spontaneity (as in Daoism), but as a direct condition for insight into the nature of suffering and the cultivation of liberation. The Buddhist view of solitude differs in its emphasis on mindfulness as a mediating condition. Unlike Hinduism, where solitude often serves to deepen union with a transcendent absolute (Brahman), or Eremitic Hermitism, where solitude is a sacred vocation for divine communion, Buddhist solitude is fundamentally diagnostic and transformative: it is a space where the practitioner confronts impermanence, craving, and self-construction. Moreover, Buddhist solitude is not an end but a means to cultivate mindfulness, ethical clarity, and ultimately, compassionate re-engagement with the world. This relational return, embodied in the bodhisattva ideal, distinguishes Buddhist solitude as both inwardly liberating and outwardly responsive, offering a unique synthesis of introspection and ethical action.

These cross-cultural perspectives converge on a shared understanding: solitude, when chosen intentionally, facilitates connection with a higher self or spiritual truth. Within Buddhism, this connection is cultivated through mindfulness, which encourages practitioners to turn inward, observe their thoughts without judgment, and develop insight into the nature of suffering and impermanence.

Leavitt et al. (2021) argue that the rise of mindfulness in Western contexts, particularly through Kabat-Zinn's work in the 1980s, coincided with a renewed appreciation for intentional solitude and stillness. While theoretical links between mindfulness and solitude have been proposed (Bommarito 2020; Cleveland 2020; Leavitt et al. 2021), empirical research remains limited. One notable exception is Soysal and Bakalm's (2021) study, which found that mindfulness mediates the relationship between solitude and life satisfaction. Their findings suggest that mindfulness enhances the quality of solitude, transforming it into a source of psychological wellbeing.

Further support comes from Hartstone and Medvedev (2021), who examined New Zealand undergraduate students' experiences across three phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. Their longitudinal study revealed that individuals with higher baseline levels of mindfulness and life satisfaction experienced significantly less anxiety, depression, and stress during lockdown. These findings suggest that mindfulness may buffer against the emotional toll of social isolation, particularly during periods of enforced solitude. Lee et al. (2020) similarly reported increased loneliness and depression among young adults during the pandemic, reinforcing the need to understand how mindfulness and solitude interact to support mental health.

Taken together, these findings point to a reciprocal relationship between mindfulness and solitude. Mindfulness enhances the capacity to experience solitude positively, while solitude provides the conditions necessary for deepening mindfulness. This interplay is central to Buddhist contemplative practice, where solitude is not merely a physical state but a spiritual orientation that fosters insight, emotional regulation, and ultimately, liberation from suffering.

Drawing together insights from Buddhist doctrine, historical exemplars, and psychological research, we propose an integrated framework. This model illustrates how mindfulness mediates the experience of solitude, transforming it into a source of wellbeing and resilience.

10. An Integrated Framework: Mindfulness as a Pathway to Positive Solitude and Wellbeing

This framework illustrates the interrelated processes through which mindfulness facilitates positive solitude, ultimately countering loneliness and enhancing wellbeing (see

Figure 1; bolded terms in the text correspond to key components of the framework). It integrates Buddhist philosophical principles with contemporary psychological research, as discussed throughout the article. Each concept is linked to the relevant section where it is explored in detail.

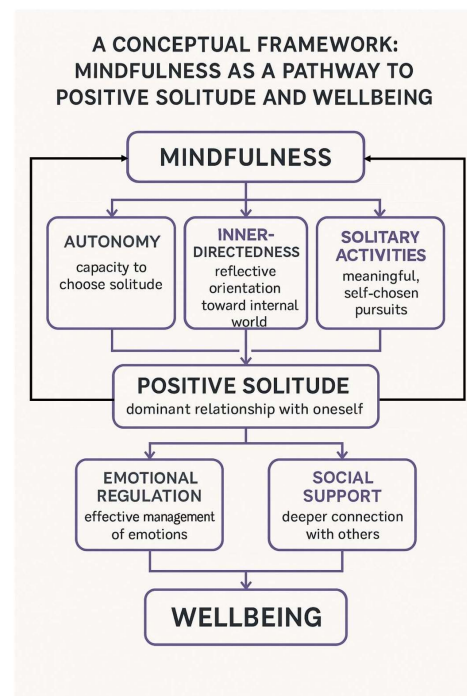


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework.

Mindfulness (refer to 8 & 9), defined as non-judgmental awareness of the present moment cultivated through intentional practice, initiates a transformative process. In Buddhist tradition, this is reflected in the Buddha’s 49-day solitary meditation under the Bodhi tree, Milarepa’s mountain retreats and poetic praise of solitude, and the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*’s emphasis on solitude as the optimal condition for cultivating mindfulness.

It supports three foundational conditions:

Autonomy (refer to 2, 4 & 6.2):

- Psychological: Choosing solitude freely rather than experiencing it as imposed.
- Buddhist: The muni (sage) in the *Muni Sutta* lives in solitude “not led by others,” reflecting volitional withdrawal rooted in wisdom.

Inner-Directedness (refer to 2 & 4):

- Psychological: A reflective orientation toward one’s internal world.
- Buddhist: *Cittaviveka* (mental detachment) and *Upādhiviveka* (liberation from attachments) in the *Cūlavēdalla Sutta* illustrate solitude as a path to insight and freedom from suffering.

Solitary Activities (2, 4 & 6.1):

- Psychological: Engagement in meaningful, self-chosen pursuits.
- Buddhist: Practices such as meditation, chanting, and ethical reflection in forest monasteries and hermitages exemplify solitude as purposeful and transformative.

Together, these conditions give rise to **positive solitude**, a state in which the dominant relationship is with oneself (refer to 2, 6.3, & 7). This form of solitude is not merely the absence of others but a chosen and enriching experience that supports psychological and spiritual growth. In Buddhist contemplative spaces, solitude is architected and ritualized

to support mindfulness, embedded in a spiritual lineage (Dharma, Sangha), preventing isolation, and a space of healing, insight, and compassionate re-engagement.

Positive solitude contributes to two key outcomes:

Emotional Regulation (refer to 4, 5, 7, 8, 9):

- Psychological: Mindfulness helps process and manage emotions.
- Buddhist: Solitude allows practitioners to confront suffering (*dukkha*) and cultivate equanimity.

Relational depth (refer to 4, 5 & 8):

- Psychological: Solitude fosters clarity, compassion, and gratitude, enhancing relationships.
- Buddhist: The bodhisattva ideal (e.g., *Vimalakīrti*) shows that solitude deepens relational capacity, enabling compassionate service.

These outcomes help to counter loneliness, reframing aloneness as a constructive and fulfilling experience. Ultimately, this process leads to enhanced **wellbeing**, characterized by greater life satisfaction, reduced psychological distress, and a deeper sense of meaning and purpose.

This framework underscores the therapeutic and spiritual potential of solitude when cultivated mindfully, aligning with Buddhist perspectives that view solitude not as isolation, but as a gateway to insight and liberation. It illustrates the interrelated processes through which mindfulness facilitates positive solitude, ultimately countering loneliness and enhancing wellbeing. It integrates Buddhist philosophical principles, as exemplified in historical figures, canonical texts, and contemplative spaces, with contemporary psychological research.

11. Conclusions

Mindful solitude reframes aloneness not as absence, but as presence: a chosen and enriching experience that fosters emotional regulation, contemplative insight, and relational depth. Throughout this article, we have explored solitude as a spiritually and ethically grounded condition for healing, drawing from Buddhist doctrine, historical exemplars, and contemporary psychological research. What distinguishes this study is its integrative approach: by bringing Buddhist contemplative traditions into dialogue with empirical psychology, we offer a framework in which mindfulness mediates solitude through autonomy, inner-directedness, and meaningful solitary activities. This synthesis affirms solitude as a vital condition for wellbeing, not only in therapeutic terms but also within a broader soteriological and ethical context.

Where previous research has tended to treat solitude and loneliness as binary opposites or has focused narrowly on either psychological or spiritual dimensions, this article proposes a more nuanced and relational model. It acknowledges the divergence between secular mindfulness programs and traditional Buddhist ethics while affirming their complementarity in addressing suffering.

In an age marked by hyperconnectivity and rising loneliness, mindful solitude offers a counter-narrative: a space of intentional withdrawal that supports clarity, resilience, and compassionate re-engagement with the world.

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