

# *Using Mindfulness and Insight to Transform Loneliness*

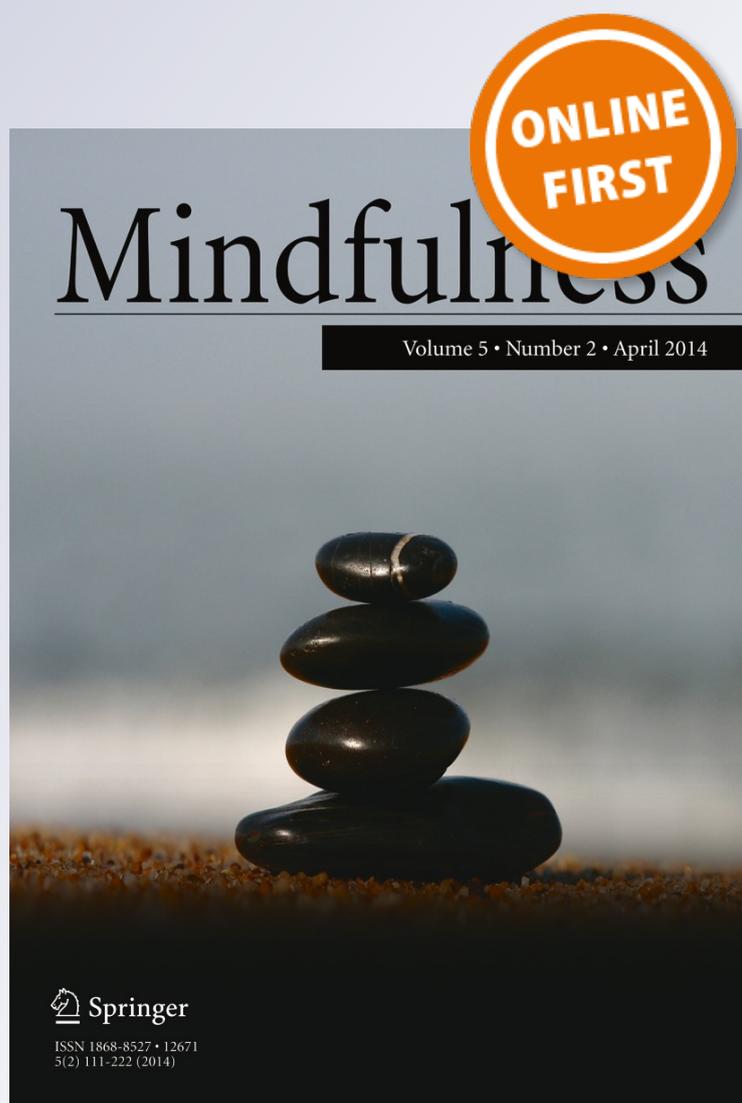
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## Using Mindfulness and Insight to Transform Loneliness

Edo Shonin · William Van Gordon

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It is probably fair to say that most people experience different degrees of loneliness at some point in their lives. This could be a short-lived sensation of loneliness that lasts for only a few minutes whilst waiting alone at an old and run-down train station, or it could be a more chronic and deep-seated form of loneliness that lasts for many years following a relationship breakup or a death of a loved one. Although these two different forms of loneliness affect people in very different ways, from the Buddhist perspective, their underlying causes are deemed to be the same.

According to Buddhist philosophy, any kind of psychological pain, distress, or confusion arises due to us developing very entrenched and mistaken views about exactly who and what we think we are. In other words, because we continuously reinforce our sense of self and become highly involved with our self-preservation, we construct and then harbour various ideas about what we think will make us happy. Generally speaking, unless we have chosen to fully immerse ourselves in (authentic) spiritual practice, these ideas and plans are often governed by mundane and worldly aspirations and only lead to further suffering. As a means of operationalizing this notion within Western psychological and clinical domains, we recently introduced the concept of *ontological addiction*, which is defined as “*the unwillingness to relinquish an erroneous and deep-rooted belief in an inherently existing ‘self’ or ‘I’ as well as the ‘impaired functionality’ that arises from such a belief*”. Therefore, as will be explicated further below, loneliness has less to do with us being without the friendship or affection of others, and more to do with us not being mindful of our true and ultimate nature. Consequently, even people that would not normally be

considered as suffering from loneliness according to Western conventions, would still be considered as lonely and psycho-spiritually impaired according to Buddhist philosophy.

In addition to mood disturbance, research demonstrates that loneliness is frequently associated with a feeling of total voidness—a big black hole that threatens to swallow people up into everlasting oblivion. Accordingly, most people believe that to avoid feeling lonely and to keep this voidness at bay, they need to spend most of their time in the company of a partner, family, and friends and to surround themselves with other forms of company such as wealth, a successful career, and perhaps pastimes such as writing a blog, working out at the gym, or playing computer games. However, when these “anti-loneliness strategies” break down or become too boring, then people invariably revert to more extreme measures in order to avoid the feeling of emptiness and being all alone. Examples of such extreme (and maladaptive) behavioural strategies might be the excessive use of alcohol or drugs, becoming addicted to work, overuse of a mobile phone, self-harming, going on a religious trip, diving head-first into the latest health trend, jumping into relationships, going on shopping sprees, or having meaningless one-night stands. Needless to say, all of the above behaviours are not a solution to loneliness, but generally tend to keep us eternally distracted in order to avoid having to confront loneliness at its source.

Thus, loneliness, in whatever form it arises, ultimately represents a rejecting of the present moment and a desire to be somewhere else or with somebody else. Feeling lonely means that we are not satisfied with the present moment and that we want to modify it in order to live in some fantasized future or in the ungraspable past. This is similar to an astronaut that goes into space to try to find new planets and life forms, whilst not appreciating the beauty and diversity of life that already exists on this planet. Therefore, to transform loneliness, rather than the astronaut that explores external space, we should really be training to become a psychonaut that explores

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the internal space of our own mind. You would probably be really surprised at the number of professionals and experts that we meet who have never earnestly begun to explore their own minds, yet who, on a daily basis, offer advice to others about how to overcome mental health problems or other issues of a psychological nature.

Our mission as a psychonaut is to be courageous enough to explore the seemingly empty voidness that exists within our own being. Of course, one of the best ways to do this is to become aware of and relax into this “empty space” by practicing mindfulness. This can be done by not only practicing mindfulness of our thoughts and mental processes, but by practicing mindfulness of the empty space that exists between each individual thought. Just like waves that emerge from and roll across the ocean, thoughts emerge from the mind and then dance across its surface. By tracing these thoughts back to their source or by relaxing into the space between them, with sustained practice, we can gradually familiarize ourselves with the very fabric and ocean-like empty expanse of the mind.

Indeed, it is in the very heart of the feeling of voidness, or the very heart of the feeling of loneliness, where we can encounter and then be bathed by the company of our own spiritual awareness. By finding and then awakening the spiritual presence that lies dormant within each and every one of us, our whole perspective on life begins to change. When we start to truly get to know and make friends with ourselves, the desire to fill our life with meaningless activities and superficial interpersonal transactions naturally starts to disintegrate. We begin to find that everything we ever needed and everything we ever wanted is right there inside of us. We begin to feel absolutely grounded, unequivocally alive, and continuously nourished by the company of our own spiritual presence. This friendship that we start to make with ourselves is completely unconditional, and when we have cultivated that friendship a little bit more, we find that profound peace is available on demand.

At this point, we can start to see other people and phenomena exactly as they are. We no longer allow the changing moods of others to influence our happiness, and we are just as content with being alone as we are when in the company of others. We can be perfectly content with who we are and with where we are. We can enjoy simply being without feeling the need to be somebody in particular. We can embrace the naked mind itself as the object of mindfulness practice and by so doing, rays of insight will naturally start to shine through. The reason for this is because in addition to compassion, insight is the fundamental nature of mind—it just needs the nourishment of mindfulness in order to reveal itself.

By using mindfulness as a basis for cultivating insight, we can begin to understand that it is directly within emptiness or voidness where total fullness and contentment can be found. As implied by the aforementioned ontological addiction construct, human beings (and indeed all phenomena) are essentially *empty*

of an inherent existence. For example, the human being comprises the five elements of water, wind (i.e., air), earth (i.e., food), sun (i.e., heat/energy), and space (i.e., in the bodily cavities and between molecules, etc.). Therefore, if we examine ourselves deeply and practise full awareness of the body, we find the wind, trees, rain, clouds, oceans, sun, minerals, plants, animals, planets, and so forth. We find all of these things but we do not find anything that we can call an independently existing self. This is the same as saying that we are empty of an inherent ‘I’. However, it is for this very reason—our being empty of an intrinsic self—that we can also say and realize that we are full of absolutely all things. Thus, in *emptiness* or voidness, there is also *fullness*.

Perhaps one way to explain this principle further is to return to the metaphor of the ocean and the waves. Most people can be likened to a wave that forgets it is also part of the ocean. However, in wanting to express its creative potential, the wave gets caught up in itself. It starts to think it is completely independent of all other waves, and of the ocean more generally. The wave becomes more and more concerned with itself and with its own preservation. It wants to become bigger and better than the other waves and it wants to live forever. However, as the wave continues to develop and feed its own ego, it becomes increasingly ignorant of its impermanent, interdependent, and empty nature. The more the wave gets involved with itself, the more ignorant it becomes. The only thing that the wave can experience at this point is loneliness and suffering because the wave has developed impossible ideas about itself—it is going to be let down. Although the wave has become very selfish and ignorant, never once does it actually separate from the ocean. All the wave has to do is deconstruct some of its false ideas and awaken to the realization that it is connected to the ocean. In fact, when the wave “wakes up” or becomes enlightened in this way, it does not just realize that it is connected to the ocean, but it actually becomes the ocean. Now the wave is everywhere all at once, and it knows every single drop of the ocean in intimate detail. The wave does not have to go to great lengths to learn about the ocean, it knows about the ocean without trying. It has become an enlightened being, it has defeated death. This enlightened being has infinite and unconditional compassion for all of the other “potentially enlightened beings” that choose to suffer and remain ignorant of their true nature.

It does not matter whether we read the teachings of the original Buddhist sutras, or the essence tantric writings by the likes of Longchenpa—all of the Buddhist teachings emphasize the importance of not relying for our happiness on the company of other people or material possessions. You see, it might be difficult to accept, but the truth is that every single one of us comes into this world all alone, and we leave this world all alone. At the time of death, family, friends, and partners mean absolutely nothing. Just like waking from a dream, the memory of such people rapidly begins to disintegrate. The only thing we can take with us at death is the spiritual awareness that we have managed to cultivate whilst we were alive. In this manner, spiritual realization is really the only reliable friendship that we

have the possibility of cultivating. So cultivate that friendship now, my dears. Make the choice of being born into the family of noble beings whose friendship is pure and unconditional, and that outlasts even time itself.

We would like to conclude this article with a short reflection that we wrote called *Simply Being with Nothing to Be*:

*Simply Being with Nothing to Be*

Nowhere to go, nothing to do  
No reputation to build, none to defend  
No possessions to amass, none to protect  
This is fearlessness born of *Apranihita*.

Simply here, simply now  
Simply birth, simply death  
Simply content, simply aware  
Simply abiding, simply being.

No space, no time  
So no here, no now.  
No self, no other  
So no attachment, no aversion.

Letting go with nothing to let go of  
Practice with no path to walk  
Simply being with nothing to be.  
This is the all-pervading wisdom of *Dharmadhatu*.

Note that *Apranihita* and *Dharmadhatu* are Sanskrit words that mean 'desirelessness/aimlessness' and the 'realm of unconditioned truth', respectively.

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