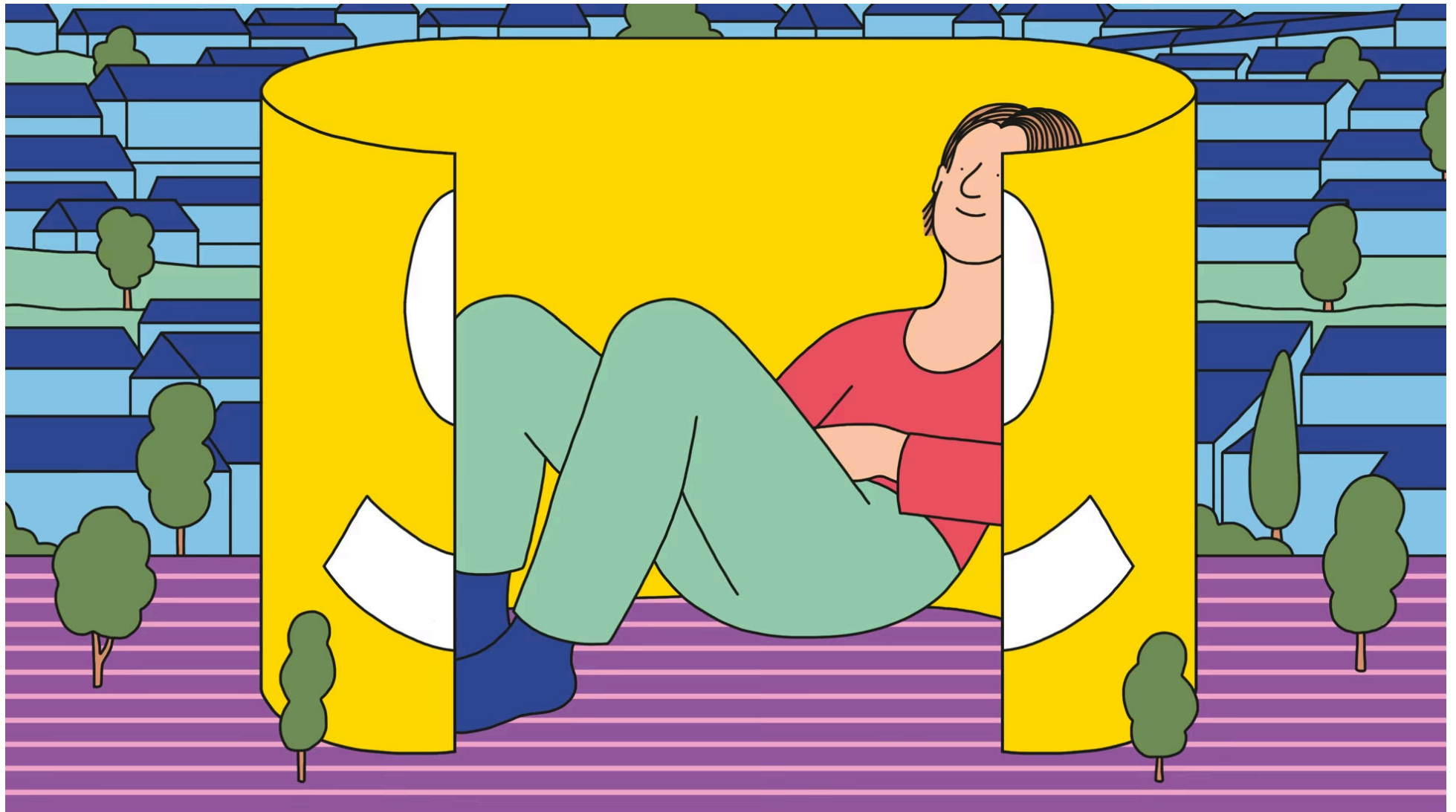


Why You Should Want to Be Alone

Used well, a dose of solitude can do you a world of good.



"A perfect solitude is, perhaps, the greatest punishment we can suffer," the philosopher David Hume wrote in his 1739 book, [A Treatise of Human Nature](#). "Every pleasure languishes when enjoyed a-part from company, and every pain becomes more cruel and intolerable." Very well, but I was interested in seeking an alternative viewpoint. So in April, I hiked to visit a hermit in the mountains above Dharamsala, India.

Geshe Lobsang Tsephel is a Tibetan Buddhist monk who has lived alone for the past 25 years, rarely seeing another person (he was generously making an exception for me). *Was his perfect solitude a punishment?*, I wanted to know.

High in the forest, I found Geshe Lobsang Tsephel's home: a small, one-room, unheated hut with a meditation mat that also functions as his bed, as well as bookshelves filled with volumes of Buddhist philosophy. He has a rustic stove outside on which to prepare his food. The scene is reminiscent of Henry David Thoreau's *Walden* (except rather more authentic: Thoreau's cabin was next to a busy [train track](#) right outside town, and his mother, who lived close by, [brought him food and did his laundry](#)).

Geshe Lobsang Tsephel wakes up at 6 a.m. and meditates five hours daily, until lunchtime. After a simple midday meal, he spends the afternoon studying ancient Tibetan texts. After a light supper, he practices physical and spiritual [tantric exercises](#) until it is time to sleep. Most days, he sees no humans at all. The nearest thing he has to company would be the monkeys that live all around and occasionally swipe his food.

[Arthur C. Brooks: To get out of your head, get out of your house](#)

Now in his mid-50s, Geshe Lobsang Tsephel was a young adult when he chose this way of life, in order to have more time to focus on meditation than he would get living in a community. "No distractions," he told me matter-of-factly. The underlying purpose was to raise his level of compassion toward others and improve his equanimity in the face of all things, positive and negative.

I asked Geshe Lobsang Tsephel whether he ever regrets choosing this life. "Never," he answered. "When I became a hermit, I was so happy." Indeed, he recommends some form of solitude for all of us. Spending a quarter century in a mountain hut might not work for you, but he advocated going on a retreat at least. "If you spend two or three months in isolation," he promised, "it will change your life." And if you can't manage that, he said, even two or three days on your own "will wake you up."

I suspect that part of the divergence between Geshe Lobsang Tsephel and Hume comes down to the difference between solitude and isolation. Whereas the former concept is usually voluntary and has positive connotations, the latter is associated with separateness from others for negative reasons. And that is true regardless of whether the isolation occurs voluntarily (disliking people) or by compulsion (being shunned); either way, it is considered destructive.

[Read: Whatever happened to all those care robots?](#)

For example, scholars studying isolation—that is, the condition of having no companions or confidants—among senior citizens have [found](#) that the condition drives down well-being; this finding holds across the social spectrum, independent of demographic factors.

Isolation is [also implicated](#) in negative health outcomes such as increased stress and inflammation, as well as reduced sleep and immune function.

Whether your separation from others is solitude or isolation depends largely on your circumstances, of course. But whether you experience being separated as solitude or isolation can also depend on your attitude (even when the separation is involuntary). In a 2023 study of senior citizens, scholars [reported](#) that some old people found their time alone to be positive and restorative; others said that they preferred to be alone because they thought social interactions were generally negative and uncomfortable. Not surprisingly, the first group rated their life satisfaction higher than the second group did, by 40 percent.

Matching almost perfectly what Geshe Lobsang Tsephel told me, the main benefits of solitude noted in the study include contemplation (time to think, ponder, or reflect); enjoyable solo activities such as reading; mental repose; autonomy; contentment in peace and quiet; and the ability to focus. Another study, from 2017, [showed](#) that solitude lowers high levels of emotional affect—turbulent moods, in ordinary parlance—and can lead to relaxation and lower stress. In other words, being by yourself is a great way to calm down when you feel overstimulated.

[Read: How much alone time for kids need?](#)

Most of us probably know this intuitively. But the researchers also found that the effect is true for both positive and negative arousal—whether you're in a very good mood or a really bad one—but with an important difference: The positive affect (good mood) can be maintained as you calm down in solitude if you make active use of positive thinking.

Being alone for its benefits, however, can contain a trap: “solitude inertia,” in which your good solitude inadvertently turns into bad isolation. In 2020, researchers studying people with depression [found](#) that those who sought solitude for its useful effects can “get stuck,” leading to isolation that exacerbates depressive symptoms. This suggests the importance for most of us of finding the sweet spot between being alone and being with others. As scholars have [pointed out](#), no one guaranteed formula exists for this.

So bear this in mind: You might be more of a Hume or more of a Geshe Lobsang Tsephel; the key is to experiment with being “a-part” and pay attention to your well-being.

On balance, I see good reasons to incorporate some solitude into your life. Here are three principles that you might want to keep in mind as you do.

1. Seek the positive

Remember that a big difference exists between being alone because of its benefits and being alone to avoid the costs of others' company. Set up specific short periods of solitude with tangible benefits in mind.

For example, schedule an afternoon alone to think deeply about a specific philosophical issue that you're wrestling with or a decision that you're working toward. Or dedicate the time to doing something you like doing by yourself, such as reading a great book. If your regular days are crazy or noisy, be conscious of basking in the peace and quiet. And if you're an excitable type (like me), plan a way to get a few hours, or even a few meaningful minutes, of solitude when you need to calm down.

[Read: How solitude feeds the brain](#)

2. Go away by yourself

If you can, schedule a two- or three-day silent getaway, as Geshe Lobsang Tsephel suggests. I try to do a slightly longer silent retreat every year, and I find it extremely valuable. Although I am with other people during parts of each day of the retreat, the complete silence we all observe has the same beneficial effect as pure solitude.

Similarly, I have twice [walked](#) the Camino de Santiago, a long pilgrimage across northern Spain. Although I did the trek with my wife, many hours of the day were spent in silent contemplation and prayer. The benefits to me have been enormous.

3. Become an E-hermit

A big isolation problem for many people today is that although they spend a huge amount of time online, they are lonely in real life. Scholars have [found](#) that people who use social media to maintain their relationships may actually feel lonelier than those who use the platforms for other reasons. You can reverse this finding by staying engaged in person *and* going completely offline for defined periods. You could, for instance, use your summer vacation to ditch the internet, or you could at least aim for web-free weekends.

[Arthur C. Brooks: What monastic mystics got right about life](#)

Near the end of our time together, I asked Geshe Lobsang Tsephel how he has changed as a person during his 25-year retreat. Eventually, he said, he felt free of attachment and resentment, free of liking and disliking, free of agreement and disagreement. This has completely changed his attitude toward other people; he is capable of seeing all human beings as equally worthy of love and compassion.

In fact, his compassion might extend beyond humans. As we were talking, a particularly brazen monkey approached us, hoping to find a piece of fruit to steal from the humble hermit. Calling his attention to the would-be thief, I asked Geshe Lobsang Tsephel how he maintained equanimity in such situations.

“Years ago,” he said, “I would have wanted to shoot him with a slingshot.” But today? “I remember that the monkey must be hungry like me.”

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