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Loneliness: The 21st century pandemic

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January 5, 2025

According to the recent Global State of Connections report, a quarter of the world's population, around 1.92 billion, felt 'lonely' or 'very lonely'. Research indicates that loneliness is closely linked to depression, anxiety, substance abuse, heart disease, and a shortened lifespan. Loneliness has become a worldwide epidemic. Despite technological advancements and enhanced, instant connectivity with the world through social media, we are lonelier than ever. Loneliness is found

throughout society, including among people in marriages along with other strong relationships, and those with successful careers. People experience loneliness even when surrounded by other people.

Loneliness is usually taken as an absence of companionship, leading to sadness and suffering. The prevalent belief is that this void can be filled by adding social connections. Everyday language reinforces this mindset with terms that emphasize acquisition and achievement, “Add more, gain more, accumulate, collect, socialise, network” This approach reflects a superficial, generalized perspective on loneliness, overlooking its deeper existential aspects.

We are born ‘lonely’. When a child is born, the first instinct is to cry. This crying is not just a physical or biological reflex but also a psychological expression of distress. A newborn instinctively tries to hold onto something. If you offer your finger, the baby will grasp it tightly with its little fist. This inherent loneliness persists throughout a person’s life—at three, thirteen, thirty, fifty, or eighty years old—craving something to hold on to. This is because the ego, the I-tendency we are born with, is by definition lonely.

Ego (I) is essentially another name for incompleteness. Its fundamental statement is, “I am lonely,” and because it feels incomplete, empty, and hollow, it seeks the company of the world. Let’s look into it: Our senses show us nothing but the external world. We fill the void in different ways—accumulating wealth, pursuing relationships, indulging in customary social activities, or endlessly consuming entertainment. And we do all these things because we are not comfortable with ourselves. Yet, no matter what methods we try, loneliness remains.

Loneliness is a psychological expression infused in us by our environment—whether physical, societal, or circumstantial—that makes us believe that we are flawed or incomplete. Hence no external additions such as wealth, possessions, or relationships ever fulfill or complete us. The result is that one feels an impulsion to try more and more of these things, and gets only self-centred frustration and fear as the outcome. So the word ‘loneliness’ or ‘lonely’ is actually a misnomer. The one who calls himself lonely is actually never ‘lonely’. This person always has the company of his fears and desires. The lonely person is one who can never leave himself. He is always surrounded, not necessarily on the outside, but surely within. He is always thinking about himself, always busy with himself. He just cannot get rid of his own personal concerns.

Loneliness is far from an empty dinner table. It is a restaurant choked to capacity and serving distasteful dishes. Loneliness is not at all a barren desert. Loneliness is a teeming crowd. A world that is unknown. A world that really can never be fully known. Nevertheless, a world that is the

only hope of the lonely person.

Those who have deeply contemplated the situation of loneliness—scholars, sages, and wise individuals—have discovered that loneliness is not a deficiency but an excess. “You are already complete”, they say, “but in spite of that completeness, you carry something in excess, and that’s the problem”. The perception of incompleteness arises from not knowing one’s self, and hence adopting external identities offered or imposed by society and physicality. True completeness is achieved not by adding but subtracting what is unnecessary—the beliefs, identities, and expectations that obscure our inner wholeness.

“You are complete in yourself.” This is the fundamental Indic philosophy, but unfortunately, this is exactly what we are not taught. In Chapter 3, Verse 38 of the Bhagavad Gita, Shri Krishna says that under the cover of smoke, the light and existence of fire aren’t experienced. The smoke is an excess that obfuscates the fire. You don’t need to create the fire; you need to remove the smoke. The fire already exists; the Truth already exists. It’s just that Maya (illusion) has settled over it like a veil. You don’t need to attain the Truth; you simply need to remove the layers hiding it.

Vedanta offers a profound solution to all human suffering, including loneliness: understanding the “doer,” the one who is lonely. This understanding arises through self-knowledge—a continuous process of self-observation and introspection. Self-knowledge reveals the true nature of the self, the Truth that has been obscured by the “smoke” of ignorance. Through this clarity, the idea of loneliness dissolves, replaced by aloneness, an awareness of inner wholeness.

Self-observation, i.e. honestly looking at itself, turns into something that can smile at itself, not really frown, not really look at oneself in disgust. Now, this refined ego is no longer scared of looking at the mirror. When it is no longer scared of looking at the mirror, then it is alright with itself. When it is alright with itself, then it revels in being with itself. That is called aloneness!

Aloneness is the state of the ego, in which it does not despise or hate itself. Rather, it looks at and understands itself. It is the state of being in which you do not just think of the other as necessary to complete you. The other could be a person, an idea, an object, or anything. Aloneness does not have much to do with the so-called others; it has everything to do with oneself. Aloneness is when you are alright with yourself. It is not the absence of relationship; it is the presence of health in relationships. To the one who is alone, the world keeps changing shapes, forms, keeps flowing, but he is not carried away. So he is free to understand the world as it is. In understanding the world as it is, he becomes free of fear. And free of fear, he becomes free to plunge into the world. He might be with any color, any part, any mood of the world, something inside him remains free. Therefore he becomes available to live and experience fully.

To the lonely fellow, the world is both a danger and an opportunity. Hence, he cannot become available. He is necessarily attracted to some part, and afraid of the remaining. Even when he is with so-called friends, he is talking not to the friends, but to his projections of who they are. Fighting enemies, he is fighting phantoms. And loving friends, he is loving dreams. All his love is dream stuff. And that is why his love so frequently gets hurt.

Aloneness is not being free of others and living without others. Aloneness is to live without oneself. Aloneness is to get rid of the tendency to cling to the world, and to oneself. Be alright with yourself. Only then will you be able to have healthy and beautiful relationships with others.

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