

By Nandini Sarkar

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The moments spent alone not just strengthen us to face life on our own, but also hugely enhance our creativity, efficiency, and spiritual strength, says **Nandini Sarkar**



This was way back in 1998. “You are not meditating!” Swami Shantananda gently chided the girl sitting next to me, at the YSS Ranchi ashram. Guiltily, she closed her eyes. Today, you don’t have to tell anyone to meditate. Everyone meditates. Now, the time has come to make a strong pitch for solitude. Edward G Brown puts it very well: Now, solitude could use some better PR! Most people seem to dread being alone. Today, old and young are all hyperactive. Everyone is checking their WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, Gmail, Instagram or Snapchat account every five minutes. Not to be left behind, even my local plant supplier, Dillip, sends me WhatsApp pictures of the latest happenings in the horticultural world. Enough please! It’s time to pull the plug and get unwired. It’s time to consciously zero in on solitude and then zero out to become a creative, energising, confident and joyous force in the world.

Shiva-Shakti

One of the best examples of the Zero in-Zero out principle is the Shiva- Shakti union. When Mahakali stands over a sleeping Mahadeva, this has an underlying meaning. As the sleeping Shiva, the Creator is alone, undistracted and deeply engrossed in meditation. Emerging from His meditative state, He takes the form of Mahakali, the creative energy or Shakti that creates countless worlds and keeps the play of Maya going, for the entertainment of countless beings. If we look around us, there will be several reminders right from our childhood, that we need to embrace solitude with the same effort with which we seek company or action.

Cave in Cuttack

My mother says she realised this when she was 56 years old. In that year, my brother and I both left home for higher studies and marriage, respectively. A supremely devoted mother, her whole world had revolved around us and doing things for us, so she was immediately sucked into a vacuum. Then, after retirement, my father was transferred on a judicial posting from happening Delhi to the sleepy town of Cuttack.

After us children, my mothers had relied heavily on her huge friends' circle and daily social circuit in Delhi to keep her juices flowing. Now, that too was rudely snatched away. Initially, she says, she found it maddening: the silence and the emptiness, punctuated only by the sound of mooing cows and bullocks that are ever present on the streets of Cuttack. Then japa came to her rescue. Some years before, she had taken mantra diksha from the Ramakrishna Mission. Now japa became her anchor and the silent house in Cuttack became her solitary cave. She meditated twice a day in solitude and took time off in between, to cook, paint and stitch, which she had not done for years in busy Delhi. Initially, she was forced to embrace the silence because there was no one to talk to and my father, the workaholic, was always busy. Gradually, she started enjoying the silence and the solitude. Japa gave her profound peace. In Cuttack, my father also suffered a massive heart attack. My mother remained calmly active at his hospital bedside, arranging medical help and doing non-stop japa by his bedside. When we arrived in Cuttack to see my father, we found her very composed. Fortunately, my father recovered without bypass surgery and with non-invasive heart treatment.

With this turning point, came another turning point: my father was transferred to Calcutta on another judicial posting and she was back in the city's social circuit. However, the lesson was learnt. Since then, my mother keeps an hour of silence, daily, faithfully, every morning in Calcutta, before she swings into her busy schedule with family, grandchildren, friends and the hundred things on offer in a metro. Even when she is ill she does her daily retreat in bed. I have never seen her miss a single day's japa, over the past many years. My mother has a cave-like puja room built into her master bedroom and when she retreats there each morning, with two dimly lit lamps and the humming sound of mantra, the whole house vibrates with the purity of her intention.

If you won't, life will

Like my mother, all of us, without exception, are going to be directed towards periods of aloneness. We will protest and say it's unfair; the Masters will call it spiritual cleansing. Children will leave home; parents and spouses will die; ill-health may hole us up and leave us on our own; retirement will create a vacuum; business may fail and leave us without friends; a particular workplace or family situation may leave us feeling lost and friendless. In ancient times, our wise ancestors prepared for this eventuality through the practice of vanaprastha. From the time they were born, they were prepared to retreat gracefully from worldly activities and they knew what to do when the time came. Even Krishna's friends, the Pandavas, spent 14 years in isolation. Solitude taught them so many lessons, the most important being self-awareness. Today, Vipassana practitioners do a 10-day silent retreat and emerge strengthened and recharged. They have prepared themselves to never feel lonely. Priyanka Gandhi came out of a 10-day Vipassana retreat, then went straight to meet her father, Rajiv Gandhi's killer in jail, and was able to forgive her. But it's tough without spiritual preparation. A relative of mine was widowed in her 20s, and was left alone with a child. While she bravely battled all sorts of troubles and difficulties, including her child's long tryst with depression, she always appeared grim and unhappy. I think the major reason is she never looked inward or spent time in contemplation. She was always moving from one Grim Duty to Another Grim Duty, one to-do list to another, without stopping to nourish her spirit. Life was always the Antagonist and she was the eternal Protagonist, grimly fighting the enemies. I met her last Sunday when she dropped by with some others and felt so sorry for her. Everyone else in the family group was laughing and happy but though she pretended to smile, it was a very superficial smile that did not reach her eyes or light up her face. O God! Take away everything, if you will, but do not take away selfawareness!



Susan Cain: Solitude is a crucial but underrated ingredient of creativity

Life is not meant to be lived unhappily, moving from one challenge to another. Solitude helps us to discover an unknown source of joy that wells up in the heart like a magical fountain. A friend of mine spends long periods in solitude. She says she feels happy for no reason and starts dancing and laughing for no reason. Yogis who spend long periods in silence state that they taste amrit or divine nectar trickling down from the brain. The best lesson solitude teaches is that we do not really need another person to make us feel whole or happy. Solitude gives us the gift of self-dependence and detachment from the ever-changing play of Maya. It helps us to call Maya's bluff. We learn that we can enjoy this world without becoming attached to it or depressed by a particular state of events because it's just a game and should not be taken too seriously.

Alone, the soul emerges

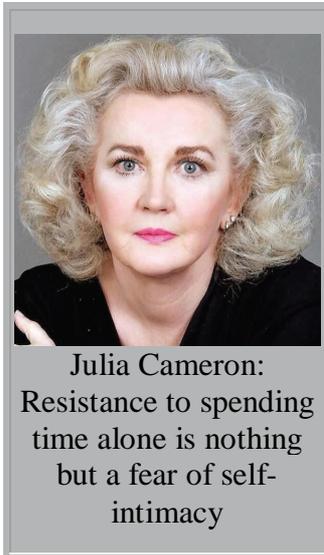
A 2014 research study found that moments of solitude – even small ones – when self-imposed, intentional, and fully appreciated, can have profound effects on our productivity and creative thinking. “Solitude is a crucial and underrated ingredient for creativity,” Susan Cain, author of the book, *Quiet*, told *Scientific American*. “From Darwin to Picasso to Dr Seuss, our greatest thinkers have often worked in solitude.” According to *Yoga Journal*, loneliness, like fear, is a threshold emotion – you have to pass through it if you want to enter the inner world. Solitude is that magical and transformative state that poets, mystics, and yogis celebrate as the great laboratory for self-awareness and spiritual growth. “Alone... and the soul emerges,” wrote the poet, Walt Whitman. Research has shown that in fact, one in every two or three people is an introvert – preferring alone time to stimulation and large groups of people. According to Cain, “You’d never guess that because introverts learn from an early age to pretend to be extroverts.”

The successful introvert

I remember the great example of my maternal grandfather, Benoy Bhushan Ghosh, a highly successful person and a committed introvert. A brilliant engineer and wealthy Bengali businessman in the Calcutta of the '50s and '60s, when the only businessmen were Marwaris, he was also largehearted and contributed enormously to the wellbeing of others. Dadu spoke little and to the point; he was always loving but somewhat detached. He exuded a tremendous aura of peace and strength. People called him a wise man and relied on his advice. Dadu would walk alone, silently, in the park, twice a day and have daily periods of contemplative silence, sitting in his hard, and straight-backed wooden chair. No rituals or outward emotion for him; he would sit quietly in silence. He was a dynamo of worldly and spiritual power and he had

learnt to embrace silence positively. From this and several other examples of great people, it is clear that creativity and efficiency need solitude to thrive.

Date with the self



Reed Larson, Professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Illinois, has studied the effects solitude has on the development and long-term well-being of teens and adolescents. He found that while being alone is, “not a particularly happy state in the moment, it nonetheless has a kind of a rebound effect. It’s kind of like a bitter medicine,” he says, creating more positive emotions and less self-reported depression down the line. Time alone allows us to order our priorities according to what we need, rather than the needs of others. And if you feel like this is silly or a waste of time, “recognise this resistance as a fear of intimacy – self-intimacy,” says Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist’s Way*. According to *Psychology Today*, what’s really blocking our joy in relationships, our creativity, and our peace of mind is a lack of solitude. Meaningful alone time, gives us heightened sensitivity. One hundred scientists who attended a Vipassana retreat for research, noted that shutting off the faculty of speech heightens awareness in other areas. It starts with a heightened sensitivity to our own breath, and then that focus and sensitivity is transferred to sights, sounds, sensations, thoughts, intentions, and emotions. They concluded that 10 days of silence is an enormous task, but making just 10 minutes of silence each day will have benefits. Research also shows that solitude improves memory. Combining solitude with a walk in nature will stimulate the hippocampus region of the brain, resulting in better memory. Psychologists say that during silence, the mind is best able to cultivate a form of mindful intention that motivates us to take action. At that point we have to ask ourselves three questions:

- If anything were possible, what would I welcome or create in my life?
- When I’m feeling most courageous and inspired, what do I want to offer the world?
- When I’m honest about how I suffer, what do I want to make peace with?

Removing the critical mind allows the imagination to build a strong subconscious intention that will fuel our goals. We start to get images and memories and ideas that are different than if we tried to answer those questions intellectually. UCLA research also showed that setting aside regular time to disengage, sit in silence, and mentally rest, improves the “folding” of the cortex and boosts our ability to process information. Carving out as little as 10 minutes to sit

still and visualise a peaceful scenery (rainforest, snow-falling, beach) will thicken grey matter in our brain.

So the benefits of solitude are many but the takers are still few. Personally, I have started making a conscious effort to embrace solitude, like I would embrace a long-lost friend. I have been greatly encouraged in my efforts. I spent a month away from the hurly-burly of our company headquarters in Calcutta, where I work nearly 12 hours a day and spend nearly eight hours each day, talking to colleagues and business associates. Alone, I experienced constant connect with Om. One day, sitting alone in my 32nd floor Mumbai flat, I was visited by a strikingly beautiful parrot, with the longest tail I have ever seen. It spent over three hours with me, looking at me and just sitting on the balcony railing. When I finally left the balcony and entered the adjoining study, it entered the room with me, still unafraid, quietly observing me and giving me company. I was star-struck, delighted and amazed at the play of Prakriti. If these be the fruits of solitude, for me, it is game, set and match!