



# SOLITARY

Article by Nick Dilks

I remember heading off into the forbidden countryside of Snowdonia, North Wales to do my first 'solitary retreat' sometime towards the end of the 90's. Forbidden because the whole area was sealed off due to a 'foot and mouth' disease scare, and livestock were being killed and burnt by the thousands across the UK, and the penalty for wandering into a forbidden zone was around \$7,500.

Hardly an auspicious occasion for this journey into the unknown, but a farmer had agreed to let me up into the small shepherd's hut in the middle of nowhere on his land for fourteen days. As I pulled up to the gate, he greeted me with his mutton-chop grey sideburns, flat-cap and green wellies. I trod through some chemical foot-bath and loaded my two-week food supplies into the trunk of his car. As we scaled a cliff-like road up towards my destination he warned me in his thick Welsh accent: "Now, don't go wandering off, mind. . . About 20 meters from the hut should be a'right but no more!" It was clear that this was going to be a very solitary. . . solitary!"

The Buddhist movement that I was in the process of getting ordained into was very keen that its trainees get to spend some time alone for at least two weeks as part of the process of making this commitment. This sounded mental to me but the theory was that it is almost impossible to know oneself thoroughly until one has experienced who you are away from other people. I suppose that a Vipassana meditation retreat gets about as close as possible to this amongst other people . . . but it really is a completely different experience being absolutely alone, as I soon found out!

In my first decade as a novice Buddhist, I spent about two years on Vipassana-style retreats but it was the yearly 'solitary' that taught me the most things about myself(s)! Reading was discouraged, so I really had absolutely nothing to do! On my debut I could not even go for a walk, so I would do some daily exercise, prepare and eat food, meditate. . . and then sit on a chair looking at the wall or out of the window. . . that was it. How I wish I had discovered tea back then! What an awesome way it would have been to spend some of my time.

Needless to say, my mind showed all of its craziness: I even started talking to the sheep in the neighboring field after a week—when I could avoid the trio of geese that threatened me most times when I stepped off the porch! If those guys weren't around, I would sometimes spend hours

throwing stones at a tin can on a wall just outside the house—anything to avoid this intense being with myself, away from distractions and other people.

I wonder if we can truly know ourselves until we have truly been alone in this way? This is probably why Tibetan novices go off and do their three year/three month/three day retreat before they can become a Lama. I found that a lot of hidden tendencies came up very strongly away from my friends and other general distractions. I worked in those days at a very busy Buddhist center in Manchester, England, so I was meeting people and doing things from dawn until late at night. Even in my meditation practice back then I was 'striving' to concentrate on my breath or to develop loving-kindness. Away from this in the silence of those Welsh mountains, all of the things that I was unconsciously avoiding turned up to volume ten. It was, shall we say, very humbling indeed! (I am very fortunate, though, to have always been amused by my foibles!)

But the peace that came at times and the self-knowledge and the confidence that I gained from this process made it all worthwhile. The shepherd's hut had a mezzanine bedroom in the wooden rafters with a beautifully fierce Padmasambhava shrine. As the incense burned, the silence around was the most profound I have ever known, and at times I descended into a depth of peace where it felt like my whole self was unraveling into bliss.

As I descended the mountain fourteen days later, my energy was amazing. (You really realize how much energy you waste talking when you only have the odd chat with some sheep for a fortnight!) And as I drove back to Manchester, I felt like Tom Hanks in *Castaway*, returning to civilization with a new love and gratitude for . . . other people. Over the years, I have had many occasions to agree with Sartre's view that 'Hell is other people' but at that moment he could not have been any more wrong! The confidence and clarity that I got from emerging from this mythical 'ordeal' was profound too.

I was quite the greenhorn back then. A year before, I had been a beer-guzzling member of the university rugby team who lifted weights and listened to Oasis all day. I was, shall we say, rarely in a refined state of mind. No wonder my first experience was so intense! As the years



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went by, the solitaries become easier as the roots of awareness seeped more deeply into my being and old patterns died away. It has been a while now since I went on a solitary, though I am thinking of perhaps doing one in August or perhaps next Chinese New Year, so my thoughts turn back this way. Now that I am a lover of tea I am excited to take this with me into that space for the first time.

For all of you who have never spent more than a few hours or a day alone, I would recommend that you try it. Take some tea with you and enjoy some long tea sessions away from everything: just you and the Leaf and the country air. You may find out some things about yourself

like Chia Tao, the wandering Chinese poet from the Tang Dynasty:

*The solitary bird  
loves the woods;  
your heart too  
not of this world*

