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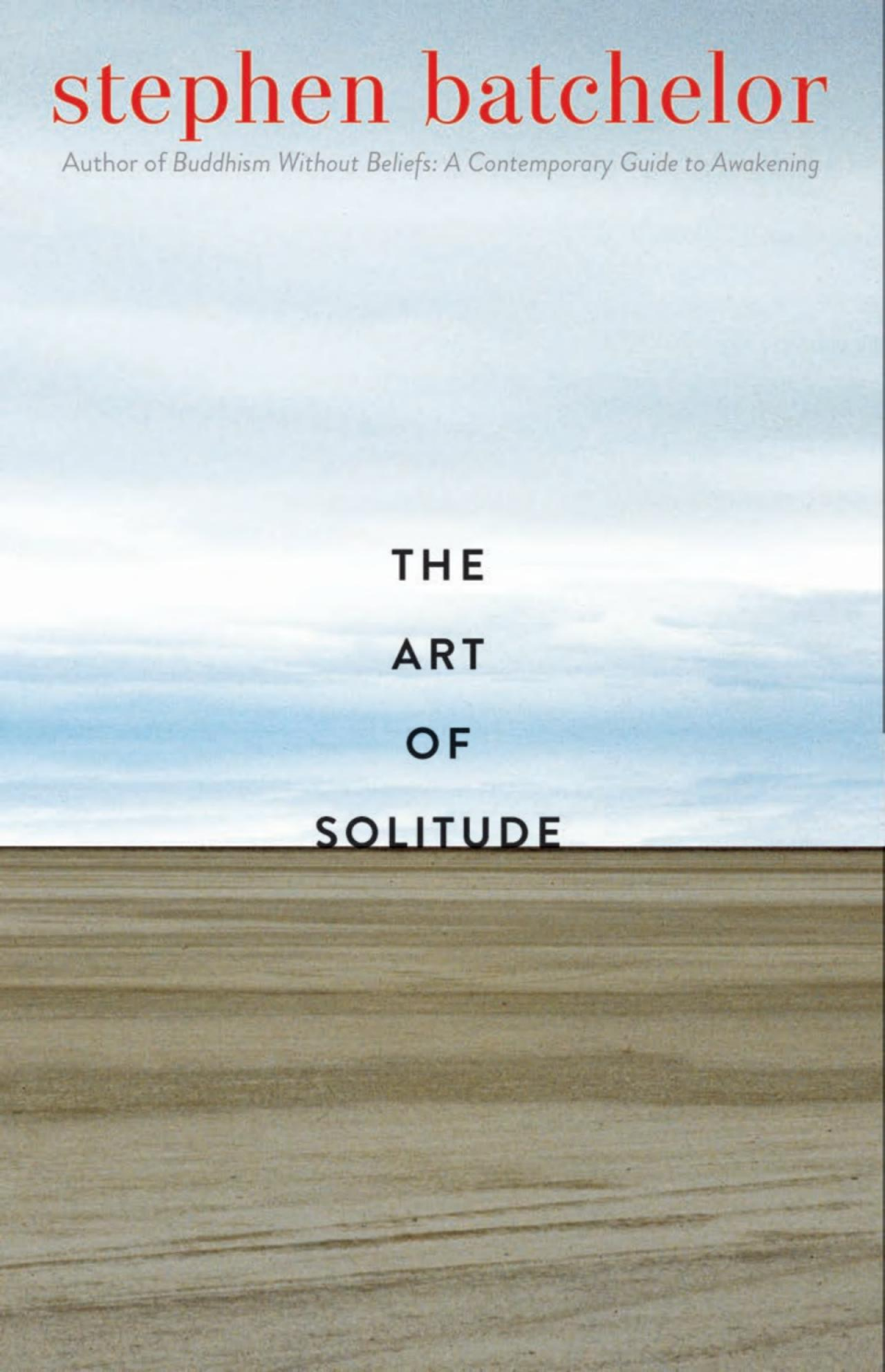
THE ART OF SOLITUDE



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the art of solitude

a meditation on

being alone with

others in this world

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preamble

Solitude is a fluid concept, ranging from the depths of loneliness to the saint's mystic rapture. In his poem *La Fin de Satan* the novelist Victor Hugo declared that "the entirety of hell is contained in one word: *solitude*." He later conceded: "Solitude is good for great minds but bad for small ones. It troubles brains that it does not illuminate." Yet Hugo was unable to go as far as his older English contemporary William Wordsworth, for whom solitude was a "bliss" that filled the heart with joy. Largely avoiding its extremes of hell and bliss, here I will explore the middle ground of solitude, which I consider a site of autonomy, wonder, contemplation, imagination, inspiration, and care.

I will treat solitude as a practice, a way of life—as understood by the Buddha and Montaigne alike—rather than seeking to analyze it as a discrete psychological state. I recognize isolation and alienation as the dark, tragic sides of solitude. Woven into our mortal condition, they are equally part of what it means to be alone, whether in a monastic cell, an artist's studio, or a troubled

marriage. Solitude, like love, is too complex and primal a dimension of human life ever to be captured in a single definition. I don't intend to "explain" solitude. I seek to disclose its extent and depth by telling stories of its practitioners.

This book is a multifaceted, paratactic exploration of what has supported my own practice of solitude over the past forty years. Spending time in remote places, appreciating and making art, practicing meditation and participating in retreats, drinking peyote and ayahuasca, and training myself to keep an open, questioning mind have all contributed to my ability to be alone and at ease with myself.

In 2013, I turned sixty. I took a sabbatical from my work as a teacher of meditation and philosophy, and spent much of the year traveling, studying, and making collages. In January I went by bus from Mumbai to Bhopal to visit the ancient rock-cut temples of India; in March, I attended a colloquium at the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies in Massachusetts on the emerging field of Secular Buddhism; in October I made a pilgrimage to South Korea to honor the thirtieth anniversary of the death of my Zen teacher Kusan Sunim; and in November I flew to Mexico to participate in a medicine circle with Don Toño, a shaman of the Huichol tribe.

At the Barre colloquium, the dharma teacher and scholar Gil Fronsdal presented his work on an early Buddhist scripture in the Pali language called the *Chapter of Eights* (*Aṭṭhakavagga*). In their directness, simplicity, and austerity, the 209 verses of the *Chapter of Eights* capture the pithy utterances of the Buddha as he "wandered alone like a rhinoceros" in the years before he established a

community. Largely devoid of Buddhist terminology, the verses advocate a life liberated from opinions and dogmatism.

The *Chapter of Eights* made a deep impression on me. Intrigued by the possibility that the four eight-verse poems near the beginning of the text might be the earliest record of the Buddha's teaching, I decided to translate them into English. Inspired by their rhythm and metaphors, I treated them as poetry rather than scripture. I titled my translation the *Four Eights*.

The *Four Eights* opens by raising the question of solitude itself:

> The creature concealed inside its cell—
> a man sunk in dark passions
> is a long, long way from solitude.
> FOUR EIGHTS, 1:1

I translated the Pali term *guhā* as "cell," though it could have been rendered as "cave" or "hiding place." *Guhā* is also linked to the word *guyha*, which means "secret." We can hide away and feel safe within the dark, silent interior of a cave. We can likewise retreat to those intimate places within ourselves that seem to afford comparable protection, where we can pursue our secret lives, alone and undisturbed.

In a letter to her friend Monna Alessa dei Saracini, the fourteenth-century scholar and mystic Catherine of Siena wrote:

> Make two homes for thyself, my daughter. One actual home in thy cell, that thou go not running about into many places, unless for necessity, or for obedience to the prioress, or for charity's sake; and another spiritual home, which thou art to carry with thee always—the cell of true self-knowledge, where thou shalt find within thyself knowledge of the goodness of God.

The "creature concealed inside its cell" need not be a nun meditating in a convent. It could be anyone who feels herself isolated and lonely in a bustling, noisy city. Yet either of these solitary people, remaining consumed and paralyzed by private anxieties, would, for the author of the *Four Eights*, be "a long, long way from solitude."

There is more to solitude than just being alone. True solitude is a way of being that needs to be cultivated. You cannot switch it on or off at will. Solitude is an art. Mental training is needed to refine and stabilize it. When you practice solitude, you dedicate yourself to the care of the soul.

For those who have rejected religion in favor of secular humanism, the notion of solitude may imply self-indulgence, navel-gazing, or solipsism. Inevitably, some may be drawn to solitude as a way of escaping responsibility and avoiding relationships. But for many it provides the time and space to develop the inner calm and autonomy needed to engage effectively and creatively with the world. Moments of quiet contemplation, whether before a work of art or while observing your breath, allow you to rethink what your life is about and reflect on what matters most for you. Solitude is not a luxury for the leisured few. It is an inescapable dimension of being human. Whether we are devout believers or devout atheists, in solitude we confront and explore the same existential questions.

My accounts in this book of ingesting psychedelics in shamanic ceremonies should not be taken as a blanket endorsement of their use. I am describing a journey rooted in my own personal and cultural history that may or may not be pertinent to the reader.

This project has returned me to my own beginnings as a writer. My first book, published in 1983, was called *Alone with Others: An Existential Approach to Buddhism*. As I put it then, I was intrigued by the paradox of "always finding ourselves inescapably *alone* and at the same time inescapably *together with others.*" I recognize now that a comparable aesthetic tension has informed my collage work. Drawing upon Western phenomenology and existentialism, *Alone with Others* presented a Buddhist understanding of human fulfillment ("awakening") as the integration of wisdom (*alone*) and compassion (*with others*). My interest in solitude is still driven by the same desire to make sense of this basic paradox of human existence.

While this book recounts—sometimes explicitly, sometimes implicitly—the inner story of my own struggle with Buddhism, and while I continue to draw on sources and themes from that tradition, I do not consider *The Art of Solitude* to be a Buddhist book. I am not interested in presenting a Buddhist interpretation of solitude. I want to share with you what practitioners of solitude, from varied backgrounds, disciplines, and traditions, have reported back from the coalface of their practice.

For the Chinese, to turn sixty means to have completed five twelve-year cycles of the zodiac. Each additional year of life is regarded as a bonus, a gift. In Korea, the strict behavioral conventions of Confucian society are relaxed at sixty. You often encounter groups of seniors tramping through the hills, singing songs, drinking *soju,* and making fools of themselves. I consider the five-year period it has taken me to write this book as a gift. I hope I have not squandered it.

My translation of the *Four Eights* is included as an appendix. All material originally in French, Pali, and Tibetan has been newly translated for this book by the author.

Stephen Batchelor
Aquitaine, France
JUNE 2019

the art of solitude

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I

Even on long summer days in rural England when it would not get dark until 10 PM, my mother insisted on sending her two sons to bed early, which I thought both unfair and pointless. Unable to sleep, I would close my eyes and imagine my prone body in its pajamas moving up and down the walls of the bedroom, gliding against the ceiling, then remaining stationary at a point of my choosing. I had no doubt that I was actually in those impossible locations rather than lying on my bed. I performed these maneuvers night after night. I took them very seriously. I never spoke to anyone else about what I was doing. They were exercises in pure solitude.

Another contemplation during those sleepless evenings was to dwell single-mindedly on a taste that was not of this world. This taste was neither pleasant nor unpleasant, only entirely different from all other tastes I knew. It was deeply familiar though I had no

and sundown," he wrote, "a great big bell sounds the Ave Maria. This racket makes my very tower shake."

On one wall, Montaigne inscribed his intention: "to withdraw and lie my head on the bosom of the Wise Virgins, where, in calm and serenity, I will pass the rest of my days." Relieved of the pressures of public service, he would devote himself to liberty, tranquility, and leisure. This was easier said than done. "The greatest service I could do for my mind," he had thought, "would be to leave it in complete idleness to care for itself, bring itself to a stop, and settle down." Instead,

> like a runaway horse galloping all over the place, it gave birth to weird, fantastic monsters, one after another, without order or design.

Unable to cope with this turmoil, he fell into depression. He lifted himself out by conducting a close observation and analysis of his inner life, which he wrote down in the hope of "making my mind ashamed of itself." So began his career as a philosopher and essayist.

Turmoil was not confined just to his mind. It raged all around him. Eight years earlier, in 1562, a bloody civil conflict between Catholics and Protestants erupted throughout France. The province of Guyenne, where he lived, was a major center of these religious wars, which would rage intermittently for the rest of his life. In the first year of violence, the nearby church of Montcaret was destroyed by Catholic troops in the battle to recover it from Protestants. The church of Saint-Michel-de-Montaigne, only a five-minute walk from his home, was burned to the ground. "The place where I dwell," he writes, "is always the first and last to be bombarded by our troubles." He recounts that he has

frequently gone to bed imagining that he would be "betrayed and bludgeoned to death that very night."

During Montaigne's first summer in his tower, King Charles IX and his mother, Catherine de Medici, triggered the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre. Fearing an uprising to avenge the attempted murder of the Protestant Admiral de Coligny, they ordered the assassination of all leading Protestants in Paris. Mob violence erupted, and Catholics rampaged through the streets attacking Protestants. The carnage spread through twelve other cities in France, including Bordeaux. Around ten thousand Protestants were slaughtered.

Montaigne admitted that when younger he could have been tempted to "share in the risks and challenges" of the Reformation. Inspired by figures like the Christian humanist Erasmus, he embraced the resurgence of reason and classical philosophy that characterized the Renaissance. His closest friend, Étienne de la Boétie, was the author of *Voluntary Servitude,* a discourse on the tyrannical nature of governments. At the request of his father, Montaigne had translated *Natural Theology,* a Latin work of the fifteenth-century Catalan doctor and philosopher Raimond Sebond. Sebond argued for an understanding of God inferred from observations of the natural world, thereby reconciling the demands of faith and reason, religion and science.

A year after the outbreak of civil war, Étienne de la Boétie died of dysentery at the age of thirty-two. Montaigne was devastated. His love for Étienne was an intellectual and emotional cornerstone of his life. He describes their friendship as one where "souls are blended and merged with each other in so perfect a union

that the seam which joins them is effaced and can no longer be found." La Boétie bequeathed his books to Montaigne, and they became the core of the library in the tower. He remained forever, I imagine, the implied reader of the *Essays.*

To honor the memory of his friend, Montaigne intended to include *Voluntary Servitude* in the first volume of his essays. He abandoned this idea on discovering that it had already been published "to an evil end by those who seek to upset and change the state of our political system without caring whether it will be an improvement." A similar fate befell his translation of Raimond Sebond's *Natural Theology,* which had also found favor among Protestant thinkers. This resulted in Montaigne's longest essay, a book-length mea culpa entitled *An Apology for Raimond Sebond,* in which he rejects Sebond's belief in the redemptive power of reason and replaces it with a philosophy of radical ignorance and unconditional faith.

For ten years he studied, thought, and wrote in his tower. The first edition of the *Essays,* in two volumes, was published in 1580 in Bordeaux. Montaigne was forty-seven. As befitted a loyal *seigneur,* he immediately left for Paris to present a copy to the new king, Henry III. Having made a favorable impression at court, he set off on a journey that took him through Switzerland, Germany, Austria, and much of Italy. He arrived in Rome at the end of November.

Montaigne went to Rome in order to make himself available to replace the outgoing French ambassador to the court of Pope Gregory XIII. As a gentleman of the Chamber of the King of France, a devout Catholic, a scholar fluent in Latin, and now a

philosopher and man of letters, he was well suited for this position. Since he was also a gentleman of the Chamber of the young Protestant King Henry of Navarre (who was also governor of Guyenne and second in line to the French throne), Montaigne would be an invaluable negotiator between the two sides in the wars of religion. He rented spacious lodgings, visited the historical sites, had an audience with the pope, and submitted the *Essays* to the papal authorities for approval. Then he waited patiently for the letter from Paris that would decide his fate.

"Ambition," he had written in his essay "On Solitude," included in the book now under scrutiny in the Apostolic Palace, "is the humor most at odds with retreat. Fame and repose cannot share the same lodgings." He criticized the Roman statesmen Pliny and Cicero for treating solitude as a judicious career move, a way to impress others with their learning and philosophical refinement. Those gentlemen, he observed, "just have their arms and legs outside society: their souls and thoughts remain more engaged with it than ever. They have stepped back only in order to make a better leap." Worldly renown, he declared, "is far removed from my calculations."

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has read before thrice in the night and thrice in the day in a tone not too high and not too low, not with senses agitated, not with wandering thought, in all tranquility, putting away indolence." Without inhibition I let these words ring out into the silence of the ravines and the wind.

I still have my copy of this faded brown hardback. By the smudged purple stamp of the Piccadilly Book Stall, I assume I bought it in Delhi in the early 1970s. It lies open before me now. The musty, peppery smell I associate with Indian books of that time invades my nostrils. I am returned to the forest, to my red-robed younger self cross-legged on the ground, earnestly reciting Śāntideva's words in a place "overshadowed with trees, with flowers, fruit, and leaves, with no danger from rabid dogs, where caves are and mountain slopes, easy to traverse, peaceful, incomparable."

What remains of that solitude now is my memory of the sweeping panorama of the plains of the Punjab, the immense arc of the heavens, and the embrace of the mountains that harbored this fragile dot of self-awareness. Once, a fabulous multicolored bird launched itself from the cliffs beneath, floated for an instant in the air, then disappeared from view. A herdsman and his goats came close to discovering me one afternoon. I peeked at them through a lattice of leaves as the animals grazed and the wiry, sun-blackened man in a coarse wool tunic lay on a rock.

Supplies exhausted and text recited, I trekked back to my room in the village of McLeod-ganj below. During my five days on the mountain I had acquired a taste for solitude that has been with me ever since.

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4

TEPOZTLÁN, MEXICO, NOVEMBER 2013

Nacho, his son Nacho, and I climb into a Mitsubishi Pajero, leave the grounds of the villa, and drive up into the wooded hills that encircle the old Indian town of Tepoztlán. I have eaten hardly anything all day and feel light-headed. Along the way we pick up the *mara'akame,* Don Toño, and his apprentices: Andrés, José-Luis, and Raúl. We stop at a farmhouse in the village of San Juan to collect a *metate,* a rectangular slab of what looks like dark pumice stone. The animated conversation suggests this is an object of some importance, but I cannot imagine why.

By the time we turn onto a steep dirt track in the forest, it is night. The SUV skids and whines as its wheels spin in the mud and leaves. We pile out and try to push it up the hill but to no avail. So we unload blankets, ponchos, bulging shopping bags, and the metate, divide them among us, and trudge ahead,

guided by the unsteady beam of a flashlight. We can see our breath in the damp air.

We come to a clearing where a simple, crudely built structure stands. A circle of wooden pillars supports a pointed roof made of corrugated iron sheets. Apart from a low wall running around its edge, the space is open to the elements. In the middle of the pounded mud floor is a pit filled with ash and bits of charcoal. We put down what we are carrying, then head outside to gather firewood for the ceremony.

No one seems to be in a hurry. The others chat, joke, and smoke cigarettes. It takes an hour or so to carry and drag enough branches and logs into the circular space to start making the fire. The mara'akame spreads out a blanket, sits down, and begins unpacking the shopping bags. Feathered instruments appear around him, then a tasseled hat, hand drums, boxes of cheap candles, cups, and, finally, a package carefully wrapped in white cloth.

From the contents of another bag, Andrés has constructed a makeshift altar. Before a cheap print of the Madonna of Guadeloupe he sets out candles and oranges. He invites each of us to place the texts we had been asked to prepare on the altar. That morning, I had copied out by hand the third poem of the *Four Eights.* "The priest without borders," says its final verse,

> doesn't seize on what he's known or beheld.
> Not passionate, not dispassionate,
> he doesn't posit anything as ultimate.
> FOUR EIGHTS, 3:8

I hope to remain true to this sentiment. With as much reverence as I can muster, I place the folded sheet of paper before the Madonna.

Don Toño gestures for us to come over to him. He is a short, stocky, dark-skinned man, like many of the peasant farmers I have seen elsewhere in Mexico. Under the yellowish light of a paraffin lamp he unknots the cloth-wrapped package to reveal a half dozen fresh peyote cacti that he and Andrés collected from the desert the day before. Each plump, dull green *lophophora williamsii* is about ten centimeters in diameter, composed of six symmetrical segments. The mara'akame cuts them open and passes the pieces around. He shows me, the newcomer, how to extract the fibers that are embedded in the cactus's flesh. This fiddly operation done, each piece is crushed with a cylindrical stone on the metate, at the base of which a funneled ledge allows the juices to run off into a bowl.

The juice is diluted with water, then unceremoniously poured into disposable plastic cups. We each take one. Following the others, I sip this drink until the cup is empty, then scoop out with my fingers the remaining filaments of flesh. It has a slightly bitter but not unpleasant taste. I feel the cold liquid settle in my empty stomach.

The mara'akame asks me about my reasons for taking part in this gathering. I tell him I have turned sixty this year and want to take stock of my life, to step back and consider what I have accomplished over the past forty years as a student, practitioner, and teacher of Buddhism. To do this, I have decided to revisit my experience with psychedelics, which had a formative effect on me as a young man in turning me toward the dharma. Now I am interested in taking these substances in the context of a religious ceremony, under the guidance of a shaman, in the company of

going about my business in such crowds—provided only occasionally and when it suits me. My fastidiousness, however, forcibly binds me to solitude. At home, in a busy household with many visitors, I see plenty of people but rarely those with whom I love to talk.

In ridding ourselves of the courthouse and marketplace we do not rid ourselves of the principal worries of our life. Ambition, covetousness, indecisiveness, fear, and desires hardly abandon us just because we change address. They pursue us into the monasteries and schools of philosophy themselves. Neither deserts nor caves nor hair shirts nor penance can extricate us from them.

That is why it is not enough to remove oneself from people, not enough to go somewhere else. We have to remove ourselves from the habits of the populace that are within us. We have to isolate our own self and return it to our possession. We carry our chains with us; we are not entirely free. We keep returning our gaze to the things we have left behind; we fantasize about them constantly.

Our malady grips us in the soul, and the soul cannot flee itself. So we must bring and draw it back into itself. That is true solitude: it can be enjoyed in towns and royal courts, but more conveniently apart.

The solitude which I love and advocate is primarily about bringing my emotions and thoughts back to myself, restricting and restraining not my footsteps but my desires and my anxiety, refusing to worry about external things, and fleeing for dear life from servitude and

obligations: retreating not so much from the crowd of humanity but from the crowd of human affairs.

The philosopher Antisthenes joked that a man ought to provide himself with possessions that float, so they can escape the sinking ship with him.

Of course we should have wives, children, possessions, and, above all, health: but not to become attached to them in such a way that our happiness depends on them.

Let these things be ours, but not so glued and joined to us that we cannot detach ourselves from them without ripping off our own skin in the process. The greatest thing in the world is to know how to be for yourself.

We should set aside a room at the back of the shop, just for ourselves, quite isolated, where, as the principal retreat for our solitude, we establish our true freedom. In there we should resume our usual conversation with ourselves—in privacy, with no contact or communication with anything outside—where we can chatter and laugh to ourselves as though we had no wife, no children, no possessions, no attendants, and no valets. So that when the time comes to lose these things, it will be nothing new for us to be without them.

We have a soul that can turn in on itself; it can keep itself company. It has the means to attack and defend, to give and receive. Don't worry that solitude will find you hunched up in boredom.

We must do like those animals who erase their tracks at the entrance of their lairs. It should no longer be your concern that the world speaks of you; your sole concern should be with how you speak to yourself.

Retreat into yourself, but first of all make yourself ready to receive yourself there. If you do not know how to govern yourself, it would be madness to entrust yourself to yourself. There are ways of failing in solitude as in society.

When I dance, I dance; when I sleep, I sleep. When I am walking alone in a beautiful orchard, at times my thoughts are occupied by what's happening elsewhere, at other times I bring them back to the walk, to the orchard, to the sweetness of that solitude, and to myself.

To tell the truth, confined solitude broadens my horizons and expands me outward: I throw myself into the affairs of state and into the wide world more willingly when I am alone.

6

Without noticing how or when, I find myself in an altered state of mind. My awareness is subtly but acutely heightened. Ecstatic, I feel electric ripples course through my body, making me want to stretch and moan. My spine straightens, as though to optimize the contemplation that is taking hold of me. I no longer have to concentrate; it happens by itself. Distraction is not an option; all random thoughts have ceased. I am intensely, silently conscious as I gaze into the breathing orange heart of the fire.

Andrés gently shakes the mara'akame awake. Don Toño sits up, puts on the wide-brimmed hat whose tassels swing in front of his eyes, picks up a hand drum, and begins to intone a haunting chant to the rhythm of its beat. There is a hypnotic beauty and poignancy to whatever he sings in his nasal voice. Something ancient and mournful resonates through his words in the Huichol tongue. Andrés lights a

cigarette and places it between Don Toño's lips. The mara'akame draws on it deeply and keeps drumming. Then he lies down again and goes back to sleep. This ritual is to be repeated several times during the course of the night.

Nacho the younger whispers in my ear: "What is the name of your grandfather?" I say: "Alfred." He says: "The fire is your grandfather. The Madonna is your grandmother." I sense that this is a cue for me to do something. I do not know what he means and feel no need to ask further. Immersed in my solitude, I am beatifically detached from everyone else while acutely aware of their presence and how it sustains me.

Raúl, a young workingman with dense black stubble, rises to his feet. He braces himself, spits into the fire several times, glares intently at the blaze, and launches into an impassioned confession. He wraps his arms around his body, rocks about unsteadily, wails and weeps as a torrent of words pours forth. At one point he makes as though to vomit into the flames, but without success. Andrés comes over and brushes Raúl's body from head to foot with feathers tied to a short stick that he then shakes at the fire as though dispelling droplets of water from them.

I am unmoved by but not dissociated from this unexpected demonstration of emotion. I feel utterly transparent and pure inside, yet entirely at one with Raúl's confession.

"Go talk to your grandfather," urges Nacho the younger. I ignore him.

A chipped enamel mug appears on the embers at the edge of the fire. We take it in turns to sip a hot brown beverage that warms and soothes the stomach. The taste is familiar but strange.

7

DELFT, DUTCH REPUBLIC, AROUND 1656

The maid sits at a dining table, head propped on her right arm. She is asleep. A plate of fruits, a closed decanter, and a fallen wineglass lie on the tablecloth before her. Through a half-open door I can see into another room behind. Whoever was here not long before has departed, leaving the girl alone with her reveries and dreams. If a lover has just stormed out, knocking over his glass, her face shows only weariness.

Johannes Vermeer kept returning to scenes of domestic solitude. A milkmaid stands in a kitchen pouring milk from an earthenware jug into an earthenware bowl on a table, her eyes and body in exact alignment for the trickle of white liquid to find its destination. She is serenely composed in the fulfillment of an everyday task. Like her, I too know what it is like both to pour milk from a jug and be conscious of pouring milk from a jug.

Around this time Johannes also painted a street scene in Delft, the city where he was born, lived, and died. He would have been in his late twenties, married with a steadily growing family. A woman sits in a doorway embroidering: two children kneel on the ground with their backs to the viewer—they might be spinning a top or playing with a kitten—and in an alley, a servant woman bends forward toward a broom. These human moments are nearly lost amid the chipped red brickwork, the cloudy sky, and the cobbled street. Absorbed in their tasks, these people inhabit their private worlds, oblivious to one another.

A woman sits behind a table, tuning a lute. Her eyes are turned toward a window, but her attention is elsewhere. I observe her listening to a sound only she can hear. A woman stands by a table where a silver water pitcher sits on a tray. With her left hand she holds the pitcher's handle; with her right she opens a window. She hovers in mid-movement, poised to be dazzled by the sun. A woman in a blue smock grips a letter in both hands. A pale light reveals her devouring eyes and parted lips as she digests the meaning of the words.

Vermeer captures from the inside what it is like to be human. He shows how it is for each of these women to be in silent, innocent conversation with herself. The Romanian philosopher Emil Cioran called Vermeer the "master of intimacy and confidential silences," who "softens the impact of solitude in an atmosphere of familiar interiors." These women are not nuns or hermits. They are briefly at rest in a world of bourgeois comfort and domestic routines. They are alone but do not appear lonely.

Between the forefinger and thumb of her right hand a woman suspends a delicate pair of scales over a table. The fingers of her left hand rest on the tabletop. Two open boxes, a yellow ribbon, pearl necklaces, and gold coins are spread out on its surface. Her gaze rests on the empty scales. She smiles faintly. Her muted features are bathed in a radiance that cannot be accounted for by the feeble sunlight from the curtained window. This secular Madonna appears indifferent to the riches before her.

The inner ease of these women is revealed as much by the paintings' compositional harmony, subdued colors, and play of light as by any facial expression or bodily posture. There is nothing static about this solitude. An almost photographic realism catches the figure as she slips between what has just happened and what is about to come. I glimpse a fleeting passage in a story I cannot know. There are no hard lines or contours in these works. Vermeer uses the technique of *sfumato:* the smoky blurring of edges, where one color (that of a sleeve) merges imperceptibly into another (that of a wall). This blurring heightens the illusion of depth and amplifies the poignant slippage of time.

A young woman in a yellow, ermine-trimmed jacket stands looking at herself in a mirror as she tries on a pearl necklace. I observe her observing herself. I sense her delight in herself. Another woman in the same jacket sits at a table writing a letter with a quill pen. She looks aside in midthought, searching for the right word or phrase. I see her thinking to herself. A girl bends over her worktable, immersed in sewing a piece of lace. I share her quiet joy in her craft. These women are self-sufficient in their solitude, each at ease with herself and her lot in life.

The citizens of the seventeenth-century Dutch Republic were prosperous enough to afford paintings that depicted the genteel leisure to which they aspired. The scenes of domestic contentment were also consoling diversions from an unstable and violent reality. In 1654, when Vermeer was twenty-one, thirty tons of gunpowder exploded in Delft, wrecking a quarter of the city, taking more than a hundred lives (including that of his fellow artist Carel Fabritius, painter of *The Goldfinch*), and injuring thousands. In the *rampjaar* of 1672, the Dutch found themselves simultaneously at war with France, England, and the prince-bishops of Münster and Cologne. As a defensive measure against invasion, they opened the dykes and flooded the low-lying land, which precipitated widespread economic collapse. Vermeer's widow, Catharina, recorded that thereafter her husband was unable to sell any work. He died suddenly three years later of unknown causes at the age of forty-three, leaving eleven daughters.

Apart from thirty-five surviving paintings and perfunctory mentions in parish, legal, and commercial records, we know nothing about Johannes Vermeer. Despite their naturalism, his works do not show what Vermeer saw either; they show what he, his patrons, or his clients wanted us to see. As I study them today in museums from Vienna to New York, I find myself looking for Vermeer. He must have stood, sat, or paced for many hours before these canvases stretched on their wooden supports. These objects from his world become fleetingly part of mine. He manufactured these things, fussed over them, struggled with them. As I peer at his solitary women, I see them seeing him. Their faces become the mirror in which he is reflected.

8

on mindfulness

gotama, the buddha

selected passages from the pali canon

If members of other traditions ask: "How did the wanderer Gotama mainly dwell during the three-month-rains retreat?" you should say: "During the rains, friends, he dwelt mainly in the collectedness that is mindfulness of breathing."

If one could completely say of anything: "That is a noble dwelling, that is a sacred dwelling, that is the dwelling of a true person," it is of collectedness that is mindfulness of breathing that one could say this.

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In order to manage their solitude, human beings in all cultures throughout history have medicated themselves. To this end they have sought out, prepared, refined, and ingested a wide range of substances from sugar to coffee, cigarettes to vodka, aspirin to heroin, cannabis to peyote. These medicines make you feel better in and about yourself. Instead of being overwhelmed by petty worries, you can tolerate and transcend them. When medicated, your levels of stress decline, your headaches go away, your anxiety disappears, boredom and loneliness vanish. You feel at ease in your aloneness, your senses are stimulated, you are more comfortable with others, and your imagination is often activated.

In his 1954 essay "The Doors of Perception," an account of taking mescaline for the first time, the English novelist and philosopher Aldous Huxley acknowledges that it "seems most unlikely that

humanity at large will ever be able to dispense with Artificial Paradises."

> Most men and women lead lives at the worst so painful, at the best so monotonous, poor and limited that the urge to escape, the longing to transcend themselves if only for a few moments, is and has always been one of the principal appetites of the soul.

Despite these deep longings, modern societies have broadly adopted a fearful and repressive attitude to psychoactive substances. "For unrestricted use," observes Huxley, "the West has permitted only alcohol and tobacco. All other chemical Doors in the Wall are labeled Dope, and their unauthorized takers are Fiends." Today, with the legalization of marijuana in Uruguay, Canada, and ten American states, as well as a renewed wave of research into the therapeutic value of psychedelics, the tide may be slowly turning.

It cannot be denied that with many of these substances we run a considerable risk of becoming addicted to them. We easily get locked into a cycle of craving them, enjoying them, and feeling depressed when their effects wear off. We may become dependent on taking a substance simply to feel normal. In order to obtain it, we may sacrifice our health or resort to criminality to finance our addiction. The problem lies not only in the nature of the substances themselves but in our individual and social confusion as to how to use them. And at the root of this confusion lies the matter of how to care for our soul, govern ourselves, and manage our solitude.

The first cigarette I smoked as a young teenager in a shady patch of woodland made me dizzy and nauseous. I lay down in a

sweat, my heart pounding, as I waited for its effects to pass. Such was the peer pressure around smoking tobacco and the allure that the culture of the time imparted to it that I managed to overcome my aversion to cigarettes. In truth, I could not quite see the point of tobacco. I never found it that pleasant, but for three or four years it became a habit nonetheless. I started drinking alcohol shortly afterward. At least beer and cider had the result of inducing euphoria and making me more socially at ease. But they also rendered me woozy, clumsy, and garrulous, and, if I drank too much, thick-headed, morose, and irritable for much of the next day. Again, none of these side effects dissuaded me from indulging in raucous, drink-fueled evenings with my friends.

Around the age of sixteen I was introduced to cannabis in the form of hashish. I found that it induced an enhanced state of awareness, which allowed me to consider my life with focused and lucid attention. When high on hashish, I marveled at the beauty of the natural world, enjoyed music and art more intensely, and became keenly aware of being a strange, self-conscious animal with thoughts, emotions, longings, and fears. Cannabis let me consider myself and the world from a perspective that was richer and more fascinating than that of ordinary consciousness. At times this could be troubling and even frightening, but the sharpened vision of life that it offered more than compensated for its dark side. It was through cannabis that I started becoming deeply curious about my own interiority and its possibilities.

During my final two years at school, I experimented with LSD. I must have taken it around twenty or thirty times. It produced a magnificently electrified version of what I experienced with can-

nabis. I was enraptured by the endlessly unfolding fractal patterns it produced behind my closed eyes; the sight of a beetle negotiating a blade of grass, the intricate webbing of a leaf, all raised to the level of mystical rapture. Even the one "bad trip" I had prompted a vision of Matthias Grünewald's sixteenth-century *Isenheim Altarpiece*—depicting the gruesome crucifixion and resplendent resurrection of Christ—and led me to hitchhike across France to see it, from Dinan in Brittany (where I had taken the LSD) to Colmar on the German border.

On becoming a monk at the age of twenty-one, I did not use any psychoactive substances for nearly ten years. Toward the end of my monastic training, while a monk in Korea, I occasionally smoked the leaves of the hemp plants the local farmers cultivated to make rope and cloth. After years of meditative training I found that I could better control the effects of cannabis. Instead of being spun off into trains of thrilling but incoherent thoughts, I could channel the power of the medicine to enhance my contemplation of the dharma. Not only could I reflect with greater acuity and precision, I was enabled to consider a topic from other angles altogether. In the sober light of hindsight, I would realize that some of the "insights" from such reveries were indeed fantastical, yet many turned out to be valuable advances in or confirmations of my understanding.

By taking cannabis as a monk, I learned that such substances generate a power in one's mind that is neither good nor bad in itself. What matters is whether or not you have the ability to turn this power to your own ends instead of being overwhelmed by it. In my case, this required that I first achieve a degree of

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He lets go of one position without taking another—
he's not defined by what he knows.
Nor does he join a dissenting faction—
he assumes no view at all.

FOUR EIGHTS, 4:5

On writing down his ideas, Montaigne was surprised to discover that his natural disposition had a philosophical bent. He noted that a new character had been born: "the accidental philosopher." At the same time, he lamented that even for educated people of his day philosophy had come to mean something "speculative and vain, without use or value." He blamed this on an arid intellectualism ("thereforeism") that had turned the discipline into a grim, forbidding topic. For him there was nothing more

"joyful, lively, or playful—I would almost say more sexy" than philosophy.

For Montaigne: "Astonishment is the foundation of all philosophy; inquiry the way it advances; and ignorance its goal." He recognizes and affirms "a kind of ignorance that is powerful and generous and no less honorable or courageous than knowledge." He calls such ignorance his "master form." It puzzles him that people are astonished only by "miracles and strange events" that seem to "hide themselves whenever I appear." By contrast, he declares:

> I have seen nothing more weird or miraculous than myself. Over time we get used to strange things, but the more I probe myself and know myself the more my oddity astonishes me and the less I understand who I am.

He quotes Socrates, "the wisest man ever," who, when asked what he knew, replied: "All I know is that I know nothing."

Strangeness is hardly restricted to oneself. "Just consider the fog through which we have to grope in order to comprehend the very things we hold in our hands," he suggests. "It is familiarity, rather than knowledge, that takes away their strangeness." Montaigne cites the Epicurean philosopher-poet Lucretius, who asks:

> Imagine if these things were shown to men now for the first time,
> Suddenly and with no warning. What could be declared
> More wondrous than these miracles no one before had dared
> Believe could even exist?

Montaigne was raised by his beloved but demanding father to be a Renaissance man. Until the age of seven, he was allowed to speak only Latin. His humanist education immersed him in the culture of ancient Greece and Rome. He came to live and breathe

the newly recovered works of Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Seneca, Plutarch, and others. He had favorite quotations painted on the beams and joists of his library for inspiration. He modeled himself on the eminent statesmen of antiquity, who ranged widely in their learning, not restricting themselves to one school of thought. He quotes Cicero: "I have to write, but in such a way as to affirm nothing; I shall always be seeking, mostly doubting, rarely trusting myself." Like Cicero, Montaigne kept circling back to the philosophical skepticism that originated with Socrates and Pyrrho.

Trained in the tradition of the "laughing" philosopher Democritus, Pyrrho accompanied Alexander the Great to India, where he studied with the sages encountered there. On returning to Greece, he led a simple life and taught philosophy. According to his student Timon:

> Pyrrho declared that things are equally in-different, un-measurable, and un-decidable. Therefore, neither our sensations nor our opinions tell us truths or falsehoods. We should not put the slightest trust in them, but be without judgment, without preference, and unwavering, saying about each thing that it no more is than is not, or both is and is not, or neither is or is not. The result for those who adopt this attitude will first be speechlessness, then untroubledness (*ataraxia*).

For Montaigne, "no other invention of the human mind has as much validity and utility" as Pyrrhonism, which presents man "naked, empty, and aware of his natural weakness." Pyrrhonists pursue an ongoing, open-ended inquiry that steers a middle way between affirmation and denial. Their aim, Montaigne says, "is to shake things up, to doubt, to inquire, to be certain of nothing,

to vouch for nothing." He admits that this approach is difficult to grasp. "Whoever can imagine a perpetual confession of ignorance, an unbiased judgment in each and every situation, can conceive of Pyrrhonism."

For Montaigne, Pyrrhonists seek ataraxia in order to achieve "immobility of judgment." Montaigne defines ataraxia as

> a peaceful and settled way of life untroubled by the pressure of opinions and the knowledge we pretend to have of things, which give birth to fear, avarice, envy, immoderate desires, ambition, pride, superstition, love of novelty, rebellion, disobedience, and opinionatedness, as well as most of our bodily ills.

As freedom from opinion and passion, ataraxia is another word for the kind of solitude Montaigne seeks. To be truly alone requires that we settle in a still and clear state of mind no longer troubled either by obsessive thoughts or by conflicting emotions.

Philosophical skepticism, Montaigne says, "can best be conceived as a question: '*Que sçay-je?*'—'What do I know?' " This became his slogan. He had it inscribed on his emblem, which depicted a pair of scales, symbolizing a commitment not to favor one opinion over any other. Pyrrhonists call this balancing act "suspension of judgment" (*epochê*), a practice that extends from solitary reflection to conversations with friends. "I care little about what topics are being discussed," admits Montaigne. "All opinions about them are one to me; and I am more or less indifferent about which view emerges victorious."

"Pyrrhonist philosophers," according to Montaigne,

> cannot express their approach to life in any known way of speaking. They need a new language: for ours is entirely formed of affirmative