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# ME-TIME

The Revelation of Reframing of Being Alone

Interior Architecture (INSIDE)

"Our language has wisely sensed these two sides of man's being alone. It has created the word "loneliness" to express the pain of being alone. And it has created the word "solitude" to express the glory of being alone. Although, in daily life, we do not always distinguish these words, we should do so consistently and thus deepen our understanding of our human predicament."

Paul Tillich, *The Eternal Now*, 1963

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Étretat in France

Introduction



This summer, I traveled alone for the first time in my life. I went to France and when I stood alone on the cliff in Étretat, staring at the endless chalk cliff, ocean, and sky; and when I was breathing the cold air on a snowy mountain and smelling the forests in Chamonix, I realized it was just me, being alone by myself and my thoughts. This extraordinary experience made me start to reflect on the meaning of solitude.

Recalling my seven years of life in Guangzhou, the third-largest city in China, a hyper-connected society, I find being alone was a luxury. As Guangzhou statistics show, the population density in the center of the city is 18566 inhabitants per square kilometer.<sup>1</sup> When I traveled by subway at rush hours, I felt I was in a fish can and almost could not breathe. During the working hours, all kinds of meetings and social interactions exhausted me. And social media even made it worse. To be just by myself, I needed to avoid many levels of human contact, such as unplugging from the internet, turning off my mobile phone, and hiding in my bedroom to have some moments for myself. According to statistics, the percentage of young people worldwide who choose to live alone increases every year.<sup>2</sup> All kinds of solo services have developed rapidly, such as restaurants having single seats, karaoke for one-person, customized travel for single travelers, etc. It shows that there is a need for solitude to overcome the overwhelming urban life in the city. Especially now, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when people are urgently asked to keep social distance, we need to embrace solitude instead of escaping from the situation.

However, in my education and working experiences in the past, solitude was always neglected and devalued. When I was a kid, my parents and teachers taught me that social interaction, connection, and teamwork would play an essential role in my life. But they never mentioned how to deal with the situation when I would be alone and how significant this can be for my life. When I became a designer, most of my efforts aimed at creating communal shared spaces for social interactions rather than focusing on the

experience of being alone; I feel there is a stigma of solitude, which everyone wants to avoid and escape from its association.

One of my friends recently shared an experience with me she had in The Hague: It was a cold winter day, around 6 o'clock, it was already dark, she sat alone on a bench on the street to have a rest. A man came to her and asked: are you ok? You are sitting alone here! In this case, her solitude experience was to have a break and enjoy the time for herself. But for the man who addressed her, he perceived her being by herself as loneliness, sadness, and helplessness. There are many stigmas about being alone, even about wanting to be alone. People mistakenly conflate loneliness and solitude. In my experience, solitude and loneliness differ but are also related. Loneliness is a subjective feeling and occurs when I do not have a relationship with others. Solitude is a state of being alone and could be one of the reasons for loneliness.

Many artists and scientists spend much of their lives in solitude, and countless writers such as Descartes, Nietzsche, Shakespeare, Dickinson, and others have tapped into the theme of solitude.<sup>3</sup> For creative talents, solitude is an avenue for self-cleansing and reframing. Privacy allows people to think deeply and independently and to create space in their minds to reflect, solve problems, experiment, imagine, and be highly concentrated.

As a designer, I feel responsible for both designing spaces for communities and social interaction and creating solitude space. It is urgent and significant to raise awareness that solitude has many benefits and, on the contrary, being alone can be a positive state. To achieve this goal, I ask myself: how do people experience solitude, and why they want to? Do they have different solitary experiences and desire other mental

states (relaxation, freedom, inner peace, etc.)? How can I, as a designer, influence the experience of solitude in a positive sense?

In this thesis, I, first of all, would like to understand the concept of solitude myself. I will use the timeline as the tool to go through my own daily life experiences, to analyze where my privacy emerges and evade. Reading literature, watching films, and conducting interviews also help me find various privacy perspectives, as it is a very personal experience. Second, based on the different solitude types, I will use four other characters to explain why they seek solitude, their aims, how they do it, and the spatial features that influence the solitude experience. I will visit and interview some of them to obtain a deeper understanding of their solitude experience and find the glory moments of being alone. These stories from different characters are references for me to get inspired and potentially enhance my solitary experiences. In the end, I will obtain multiple inspirations for a variety of perspectives on solitude. In this way, I intend to show and invite people to experience the diversity of privacy and present a new spatial view on society's isolation.

1.Statistical Yearbook 2018 (in Chinese). Statistics Bureau of Guangzhou p.145  
2.Snell, K. D. M. (2017). "The rise of living alone and loneliness in history." *Social History*, 42(1), 2-28.°°  
3.David Vincent, *A History of Solitude* (Polity, 2020) p.89

## Chapter 1

My Solitary Journey

What does ALONE mean to you?

Alone is an adjective.

Alone means without any other people.

Alone means without the help of other people or things.

Alone means lonely and unhappy or without any friends.

Alone used after a noun to show that the person or thing mentioned is the only one

Alone used after a noun to emphasize one particular thing.

Alone means unique

leave somebody Alone means to stop annoying somebody or trying to get their attention

leave something Alone means to stop touching, changing, or moving something

stand Alone means to be independent or not connected with other people or ideas

Alone means brave

Meaning of solitude

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines solitude as "the state of being alone, especially when you find this pleasant; a lonely or secluded place."<sup>4</sup> The word 'solitude' can refer both to the state of being alone and to an actual place (a desert, waste or uninhabited, unfrequented, and virtually 'wild' area).

In the developmental-psychology domain, solitude means: a psychological experience of being alone - either by oneself or, if in the presence of others, without any social interaction.<sup>5</sup> I fully agree that I can experience solitude in my bedroom, where no one is present. Still, I also can experience solitude among people if I focus on my own thing and do not interact with others.

However, to experience solitude is a too subjective thing and varies according to each individual. For instance: I am a person who enjoys and loves the moment of being alone. In my opinion, solitude is my best friend that can accompany me all the time, but some of my friends think solitude is their enemy that needs to be avoided in their life.

Solitude and loneliness

In my experience, solitude is often regarded as a negative connotation such as loneliness, waste of time, pessimistic personality, etc. For me, being alone is a normal state, and it can be filled with any emotion, both positive and negative. So I could be lonely in confidentiality, but feeling lonely is not necessarily the same thing as experiencing solitude. It is the intentional withdrawal from social engagement. In isolation, I am not merely alone but have deliberately separated myself from others. Solitude is not about avoiding being with other people. It is about being with myself.

There is a dialogue in the well-known children's book *The Little Prince*, which clearly explains loneliness.

*"Where are the men?" the little prince, at last, took up the conversation again. "It is a little lonely in the desert."*

*"It is a little lonely among men," the snake said.<sup>6</sup>*

I agree with what the snake says - loneliness is a feeling. It involves the subjective perception of solitude, the discrepancy between my desired and actual social connection level. I could be surrounded by people, lying in bed next to my partner, at a party, or in the office, and still feel lonely. And I could be alone, millions of miles away from any human contact, and still feel joyfully connected to the world. So it does not matter if I am alone or being surrounded by people.

#### Pros and cons of solitude

Solitude is always a paradox for me. On the one hand, a figure of a lonely, helpless, and pathetic human being always emerges in my mind when I talk about solitude to others. On the other hand, I am still longing for it, which helps me release the pressure and find my voice. For a long time, we considered all social withdrawal types harmful, something people always reject and are afraid of its association. But research from the phycologist, Christopher R. Long, explains the value and positive effects of alone time.<sup>7</sup>

Solitude sparks creativity. Privacy is where the creative mind can happily and eagerly express itself when one can disengage from other people's demands and the world around.

Solitude improves productivity.<sup>8</sup> When I am at work, I am constantly distracted by my surroundings. With fewer distractions but more quietness, I can get my work done faster.

Spending time alone helps me gain more productivity regarding my jobs and focus on cooking for myself, crafting something in a DIY way, or doing something that I don't get time to do while I am at work.

Being alone can be helpful to build mental strength. We are social creatures, and we need to have strong connections with other people. But, solitude may be just as necessary. Studies show the ability to tolerate alone time is linked to increased happiness, better life satisfaction, and improved stress management.<sup>9</sup> People who enjoy alone time experience have less depression.

Alone time can release pressure. Without the stress of pleasing others in a social setting, it can help us relax and de-stress. When we spend time with ourselves, we become more aware of the stress-relieving process and focus on relaxing by engaging in yoga, painting, crafting, and meditation.

Even there are considerable upsides to solitude. I still need to remind my dear reader that certain preconditions must be met for solitude to be beneficial. Kenneth Rubin, a developmental psychologist at the University of Maryland, calls them the 'ifs'.<sup>10</sup> Solitude can be productive only: if it is voluntary, if one can regulate one's emotions effectively, if one can join a social group when desired, and if one can maintain positive relationships outside of it. When we meet preconditions, solitude can be refreshing. Otherwise, it can lead to painful loneliness and depression.

#### Classification of solitude

Except for the simple classification of solitude experiences as either positive or negative. The phycologist stepped further to distinguish nine varieties of solitude experiences: anonymity, creativity, diversion, inner peace, intimacy, loneliness, problem solving, self-discovery, and spirituality.<sup>11</sup> Each variety denotes a type of feelings and/or activities that may occur during periods of solitude.

(1)Anonymity

Not to consider social regulations and restraints, not to worry about what others thoughts, and to do what you want to do at the moment.

(2)Creativity

Expressing oneself in any novel idea and creative way, no matter what form it takes, such as drawing, writing, daydreaming, or other work that helps to active the brain.

(3)Diversion: Any activity that distracts you.

(4)Inner peace

Feeling calm, relaxed, and at peace with oneself, released from the stresses of daily life.

(5)Intimacy

Feeling especially close to someone you care about, perhaps a close friend, a loved one, a deceased relative, and so on. And this moment of solitude will strengthen the intimacy of this closeness.

(6)Loneliness

Feeling self-conscious, anxious, or depressed; longing for human interaction.

(7)Problem solving

Providing opportunities to think about a particular problem or decision and attempt to find an answer.

(8)Self-discovery

Being alone and focusing on oneself, one will have an epiphany of self-worth, insight, and a better understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses.

(9)Spirituality

Mystical experiences, feelings beyond reality, such as being part of God or close to God. This experience is often interpreted as religious, but can also be non-religious, such as the state of oblivion with nature.

Thus, in my opinion, solitude is not all about loneliness, it is diverse and common in my daily life. I think there are more than nine types of solitude as Christopher R. Long concluded and people seeking solitude in various reasons. I will use (four stories) to explore the different glory moments of being alone with different environment context and conditions.

4.Simpson & Weiner, *Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 2010)  
5.Christopher R. Long, *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*, Volume 33, Issue 1, p.21  
6.Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *The Little Prince* (Mariner Books, 2000) p.115  
7.Christopher R. Long, *Solitude Experiences: Varieties, Settings, and Individual Differences*, Volume: 29 issue: 5  
8.Julie C.Bowker, *Personality and Individual Differences*, Volume 119, p. 283.  
9.Christopher R. Long, *Solitude Experiences: Varieties, Settings, and Individual Differences*, Volume: 29 issue: 5  
10.Kenneth H. Rubin, *Social Withdrawal, Inhibition, and Shyness in Childhood* (Psychology Press, 1993) p.56  
11.Christopher R. Long, *Solitude Experiences: Varieties, Settings, and Individual Differences*, Volume: 29 issue: 5.

## Chapter 2 - Office Worker

Freedom, privacy and relaxation of solitude

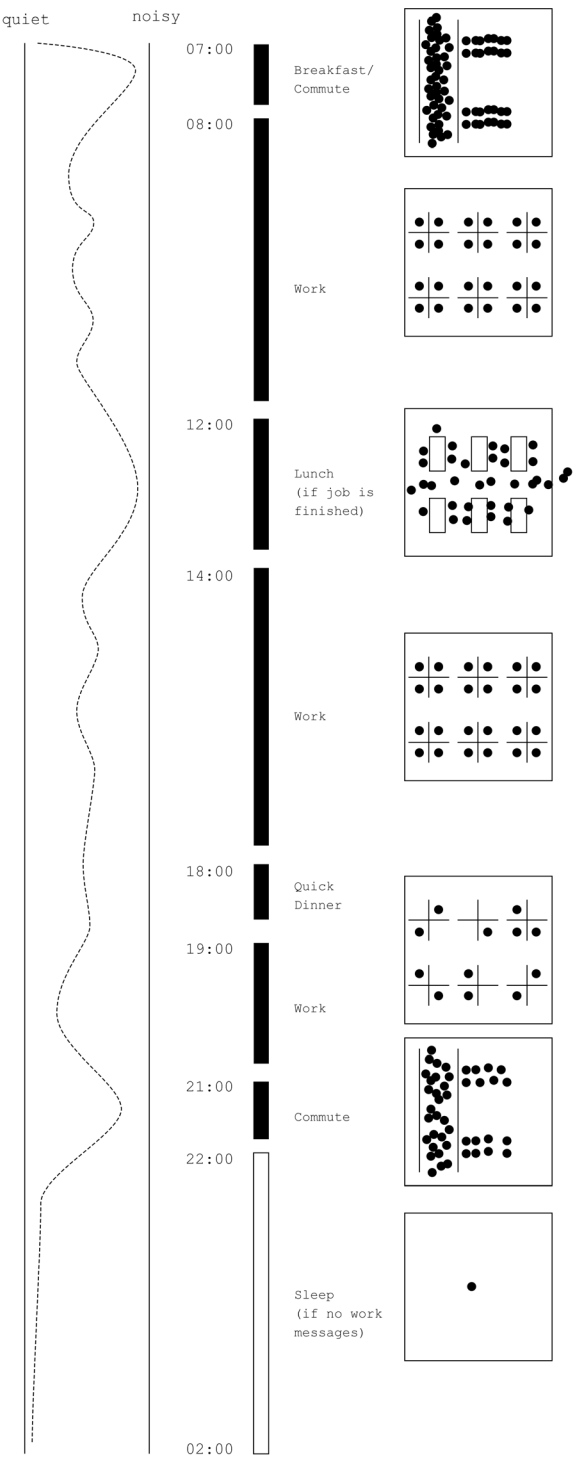
The first story is about the office worker living in the big cities; I was also one of them and working in Guangzhou, China. Guangzhou is the third-biggest city in China; 22 million people are living here. Like me, people from all over China left their hometown and came here to chase better career opportunities.

When I was on the way to the office, to the restaurant, to home, almost to everywhere, it was impossible to avoid the annoying crowd. It was always full of noise from people, cars, and loud advertisements from shops on the streets, making me want to escape. Except for the high density of Guangzhou, the fast-paced life also made me forget who I was. The endless meetings and social interactions with different people occupied my working hours, which lasted around 10 hours a day. More than two years working in Guangzhou made me gradually longing for moments just with myself.

Under this intensive lifestyle, the Japanese word "ohitorisama" expresses my longing well. "Ohitorisama" refers to people living and doing things alone, but it sounds more like a "party for one," one of my friends who lived in Japan for five years told me. The most representative example of "ohitorisama" is the rising dining alone these years in China, originally started in Japan. Restaurateurs are increasingly catering to solo diners' huge needs instead of relegating them behind a plant pot by the toilets.



Most of the restaurants have designed a row of small cubicle spots for single persons for eating alone in my experience. The customers usually eat facing the wall or facing the window. Each seat's partition can avoid eye contact from other customers and provide a little bit of privacy for themselves. The restaurant's central area is still for the people eating in a group, which shows only a small minority of customers





dining alone. For me, these restaurants just offer a quick meal for the busy office worker or single people to deal with the basic needs, instead of creating an enjoyable solitary time for the customers.



However, 'table for ONE' is different from the typical restaurant for solo diner I experienced. It is a pop-up restaurant in Taipei, specially designed to invite people to enjoy a solitary moment. Hsin-Lung, the event planner of 'table for ONE,' told me this restaurant aims to slow down the fast-paced life for a while and open the various possibilities to be alone.<sup>12</sup>

They designed to divide the space into three different parts: sedation, observation, and interaction. The 'sedation' area is the private space for the one who seeks absolute quietness and privacy. With the white curtain around and the plant on the ceiling, it is like the secret garden that allows customers to enjoy their time alone. The 'observation' area will enable customers to observe the pedestrians outside the window or other customers in the restaurant. So the seats are all along the wall or the window. Other chairs surround the 'interaction' area, and it is for the one who enjoys strangers' company. They organize the seats in different positions, side to side, back to back, front to back, side to back, etc. These other seats provide multiple choices to the customers, which they can choose freely instead of only facing the wall.

Besides the spatial organization, several props designed different activities inspired by their daily life to enrich the solitary experience, such as the headphone for enjoying music, the mirror for observing the surrounding in different ways, and paper for

drawing, writing thoughts, or secrets.

Hsin-Lung said this restaurant is always fully booked. Many people love it there because most of them working in the big city seldom have this particular time to enjoy a meal and take care just for themselves, but 'table for ONE' provided this opportunity. In his opinion, dining alone can be an incredibly empowering act. It shows that people value their own company and deserve a delicious meal just as much as those couples or a group of friends.

In this space, solitude is like punctuation in the fast-paced life. A paragraph without periods and commas would be exhausting to read. The strangers are no longer just passing by each other. They are all alone and respected to other's alone time so that they can slow down together and enjoy being alone together.

In this situation, solitude is a luxury gift for me after intensive work and overwhelming social interactions. It is a celebration of freedom, at which I have the complete autonomy to make decisions and choose on my own. It is also a private relaxing moment to release the pressure.



**Chapter 3 - Hikikomori**  
**(Modern-hermit)**

Self-protection and diversion of solitude

The second story is about Hikikomori (abbreviated as hiki), a group of people who hide inside their bedroom in the city and are described as "modern-day hermits."<sup>13</sup> It is different from the office worker seeking one moment for solitude in daily life. The hiki chose to live with solitude 24/7.

Hikikomori is a Japanese word that means "pulling inward, being confined" originally, also known as a social phenomenon that total withdrawal from society and seeking extreme degrees of social isolation and confinement.<sup>14</sup> As the Japanese Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare defines, Hikikomori is a condition in which the affected individuals refuse to leave their house, do not work, go to school, and isolate themselves from society in a single room and duration is at least six months.<sup>15</sup> According to Japan's Cabinet Office report, there are more than one million or more hiki in Japan, gradually becoming a global issue.

There's no unifying reason why these people become hiki. Some of them cannot cope with the pressure from people around them; some are unpopular or bullied in their school; some are unsuccessful in their careers. They feel ashamed that they cannot achieve what society expects, so they lock themselves in the room, don't trust people, and are afraid of joining the community again.

When I got acquainted with this social phenomenon initially, I felt it was a sad story. It seems the hiki cannot have a good relationship with people, so the only way they can do is to hide in their bedroom. It looks pathetic for some of the hiki who cannot get rid of their shame and failed against social pressure.



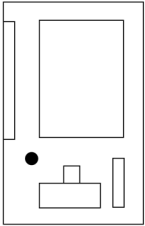
quiet

noisy

12:00



Bedroom



04:00

However, an interview from NHK (Japan's public broadcaster) changed my mind and provided another side of hiki's life.<sup>16</sup> They interviewed a hiki named Nito Souji, who stayed in his room for ten years.

*"I became a hikikomori to live every day doing only worthwhile things, so for me, the past ten years have been far more pleasant than working outside."*

His passion is about video games, but his family thought it is not a decent job. He finally can ignore the social standard and pressure during these ten years and became his dream video game developer. Now his video game is successful and popular on steam.<sup>17</sup>



He is not the only one who takes advantage of isolating time at home. Thanks to the internet, people who are afraid of social interactions in the real world can achieve their dreams and earn money through the internet and live a self-sufficient life. Some of them are manga artists, writers, cosplayers And delivery services, messengers, and electronic payments to solve everyday tasks.

Hiki designs and rules the bedroom as their small world. In this space, various clutter lying around the room reveals their secrets, hobbies, and dreams. A series of manga books on the bookshelf, a dozen of cosplay costumes in the closet, etc., are all telling

the story of their modern reclusive life as a small private museum. The bedroom is also compact, which everything is convenient and easy to grad without moving around.

For hiki, this bedroom is the stronghold or shield to protect themselves against social standards and expectations. The solitude becomes a productive place as their dream generator.<sup>13</sup>

13.Edd Gent, "The plight of Japan's modern hermits." (<https://www.bbc.com/future/article/20190129-the-plight-of-japans-modern-hermits>)  
14.Hamasaki, Yukiko, *Identifying Social Withdrawal (Hikikomori) Factors in Adolescents: Understanding the Hikikomori Spectrum* (2020).  
15.Tokyo: Japan's Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2010.  
16.Nito Souji was interviewed by NHK on Apr 25, 2020  
17.The Steam platform is the largest digital distribution platform for PC gaming.

## Chapter 4 - Artist

Creativity and concentration of solitude

AN ARTIST’S RELATION TO SOLITUDE:

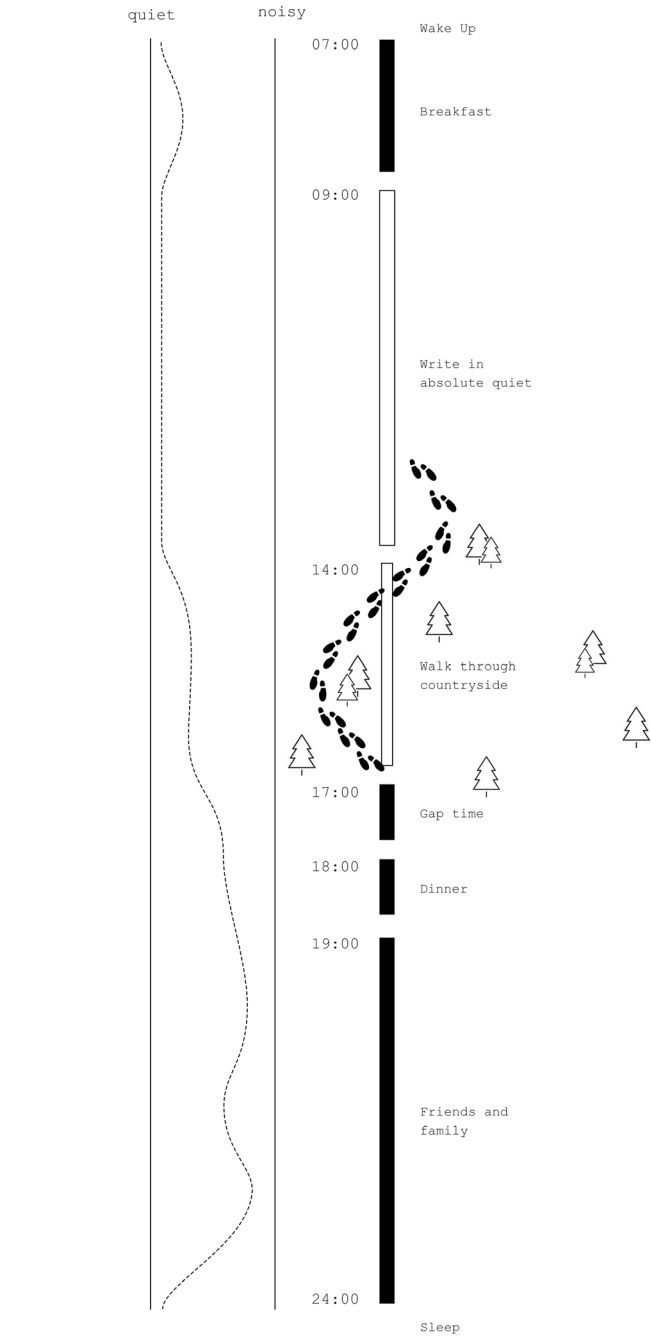
An artist must make time for the long periods of solitude

Solitude is extremely important

Away from home,  
Away from the studio,  
Away from family,  
Away from friends

An artist should stay for long periods of time at waterfalls  
An artist should stay for long periods of time at exploding volcanoes  
An artist should stay for long periods of time looking at fast-running rivers  
An artist should stay for long periods of time looking at the horizon where the  
ocean and sky meet  
An artist should stay for long periods of time looking at the stars in the night sky

Marina Abramović, *Walk Through Walls*, 2016





Solitude for the artist is different from the hiki who escapes from society. On the contrary, isolation helps the artist to encounter the world.

Marina Abramović, one of the most renowned and impactful performance artists, wrote a manifesto about the relationship between the artist and solitude. She argues that an artist must make time for the long periods of isolation, go out of home and the studio, get away from family and friends, take a solitary walk, and explore nature.<sup>18</sup> Here, Marina understands that solitude is essential for the artists to gain insight, reflect and criticize their work to improve upon their craft.

I also had a similar experience in nature. When I walked alone at the deserted beach, immersing myself in the vast ocean and sky, staring at the waves, gently drenching the sand. I felt I was small in front of it. And in the quiet natural environment, I can slow down and hear the voice from myself without any outside input. I think the creative act is a process that often unfolds in solitary reflection. The silence helps, both in acoustic and visual aspects. And a solitary walk also helps. As I was walking, my thoughts were beginning to flow with my body. It frees the mind to explore imaginary worlds

Many writers mentioned the solitary walk as their daily ritual to listen to themselves and organize thoughts.<sup>19</sup>

Henry David Thoreau, an American writer, poet and philosopher, is known for his book *Walden*.<sup>20</sup> In 1851, he delivered a fascinating lecture on walking at the Concord Lyceum. In his study, he observed,

*"I think that I cannot preserve my health and spirits unless I spend four hours a day at least – and it is commonly more than that – sauntering through the woods and over the hills and fields free from all worldly engagements."*

When a traveler asked Wordsworth's servant to show him her master's study, she answered, 'Here is his library, but his study is out of doors.'<sup>21</sup>

In this lecture, he analyzes the relationship between man and nature, trying to find a balance between society and human raw animal nature. Walking in the wild provides the answer to him instead of sitting and writing indoor.

Francesco Petrarch, an Italian scholar, poet, and humanist during the early Renaissance, is famous as a walking writer.<sup>22</sup> He took paper and pen with him, and on a spot that inspired him to sit down and start to write. He might sit down wherever he experiences inspiration, under the open sky, under a rock, or in the shade of a large pine tree. Petrarch does not advise the writer to sit down in a dark house; a deep, dark wood with high, dense trees; a small garden surrounded by high walls or hedges; or a dark cavern or cave.

Petrarch also compared the hilltop with an observation tower, from which one can watch from a distance human life, oneself, and the universe in transition. This meditation is not a source of depression and despair but hope and confidence.

So to the artist or the writer, solitude is where they can reflect their life and become intimate with their minds to have the creative act. The solitary walk with the vast and boundless view makes it happen.



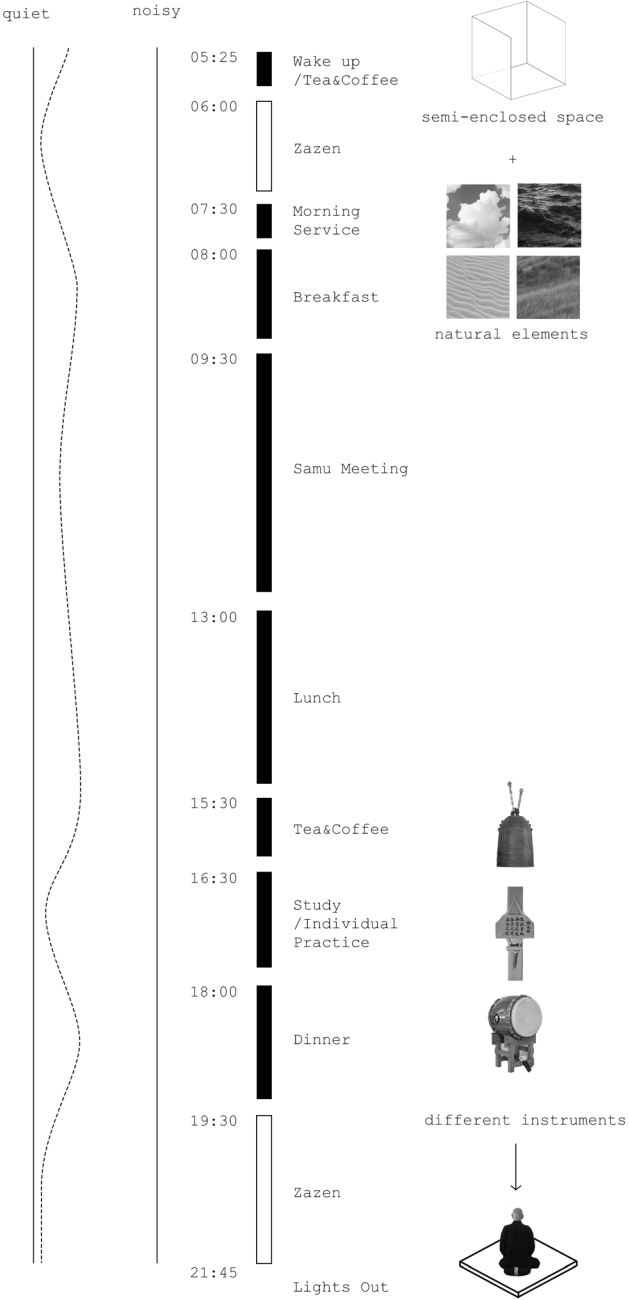
18. Marina Abramović, *Walk Through Walls* (Crown Archetype, 2016) p.248  
19. Mason Currey, *Daily Rituals: How Artists Work* (Knopf, 2013)  
20. This book details Thoreau's solitary experience over two years in a cabin he built near Walden Pond.  
21. "Walking". *The Atlantic Monthly, A Magazine of Literature, Art, and Politics*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields. IX (LVI): 657-674. June 1862.  
22. Karl A.E. Enenkel, *Solitude: Spaces, Places, and Times of Solitude in Late Medieval and Early Modern Cultures* (Brill, 2018) p.53

## Chapter 5 - Monk

Spiritual, inner-peace and self-discovery  
of solitude



Meditation Hall in Zen River



Compared to the office worker and hiki, the monk also seeks solitude, but they chose to withdraw from the city to find a peaceful and spiritual experience.

I visited an international Buddhist temple in the north of the Netherlands, named Zen River.<sup>23</sup> It is located far away from the city, taking around one hour by bus from Groningen. In the beginning, I guess their life must be isolated and challenging. But after I met them, I realized I was wrong. When I talked to them, I really can feel the peace and happiness inside of them, like they fear nothing.

The monk I interviewed named Robert, who is in charge of the reception in Zen River, answering telephone calls, emails and taking care of the various office jobs. He was trained to be a pianist when he was a student. He told me why he started to become a monk because he believes the zen style is an excellent way of practicing any art. He learned this from a famous book named *Zen in the Art of Archery*.<sup>24</sup> This book explains the way how archery students practice. They do not think that they want to hit the goal. What they think about is perfect concentration, the movement to the posture. And then it happens. What made him become a monk initially was the curiosity of the state of concentration that helped him practice the piano.

As Robert told me, they have a strictly fixed schedule for daily activities, including the meal, working, zazen, studying. With this schedule, everything becomes a ritual. There is no need to think about what they will do next to entirely focus on what they are doing at the moment without other thoughts distracted. He said the practice they follow is from the Japanese style and zazen is the heart of Japanese Zen Buddhist tradition. The aim of zazen is just sitting, suspending all judgmental thinking, letting words, images, and thoughts pass by without getting involved in them. This practice helps them to face and

discover themselves, to fight with fear.

They practice zazen both indoor and outdoor. When I visited the meditation hall, the first strong feeling is quietness. I could hear nothing except the heartbeats and breathe from myself. The light in the room can be adjusted to different brightness to fit the practice. Everyone has their seats with a nameplate which creates an invisible personal realm without any partition. Before the trial, there are a series of rituals. They ring the meditation bell, knock the wood board with a stick and play the drum as a start to help them adjust the mindset. During the practice, talking and eye contraction are forbidden. They don't interfere with others so that they can be solitary in a group.

Except for practicing indoor, they also practice zazen in nature. They use the wooden platform along the canal as an individual spot designed for fishing originally. The plant around the medium becomes the natural cover and creates a semi-enclosed safe space for zazen. In this place, quietness also involves. I could hear the water's sound from the canal, the sound of wild grass in the wind, but these sounds from nature do not break the silence.



Robert said the practice taught him about concentration and about facing himself in both the good and the bad one, accepting that life is like a wave, sometimes goes down and sometimes goes up, fear is nothing helpful.

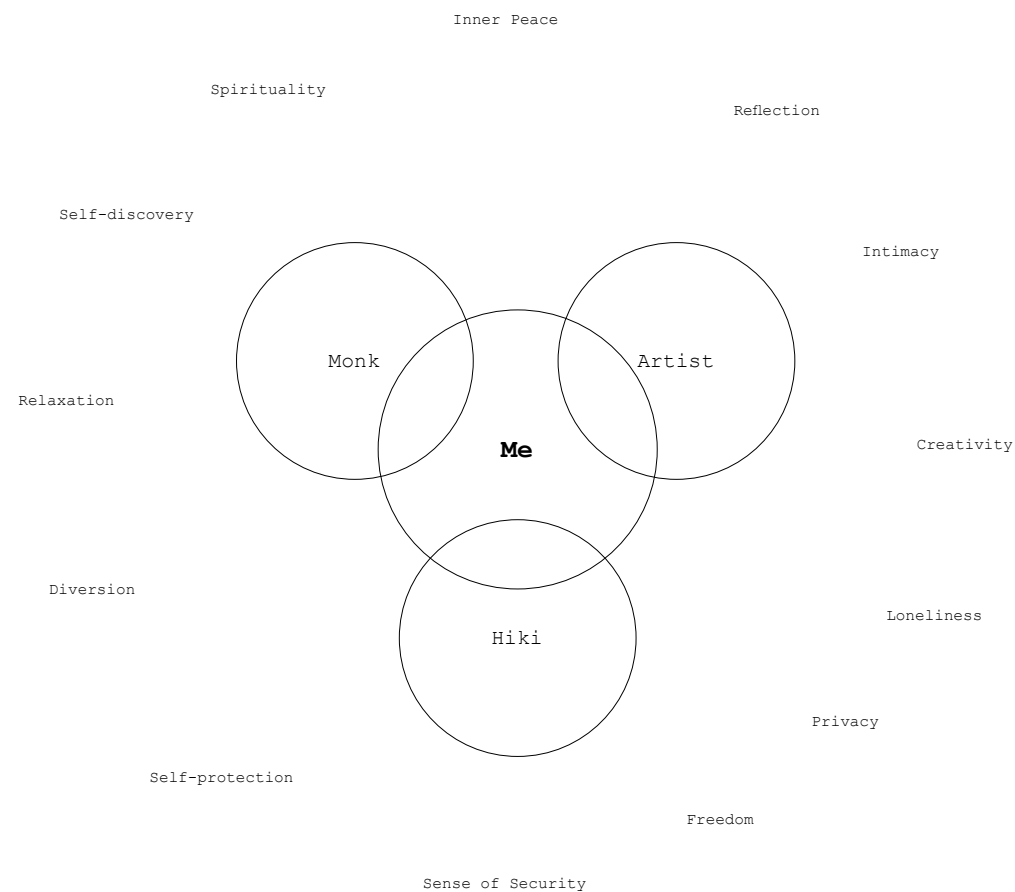
So, in this case, solitude is a place for self-discovery and concentration. It is practice and training. He uses meditation as a tool to have a spiritual experience, to fight with fears, to be more flexible and open to any thoughts.

Meditation At the Beach



## Conclusion

After the solitary journey



I am well aware of the fact that solitude may take place in all kinds of situations - in nature, in a crowded city, during the nighttime hours, or when I need to study, when I had an intensive day, when I lost my friend and when I am sad. The moment for solitude provides freedom, inner peace, and concentration for me, and I think it should be valued, especially in the hyper-connected society.

I perceive solitude as a social phenomenon, and there is nothing about religion. In my early research, a number of literatures shed light on solitude as a way to retreat and get closer to god, which bears a kind of religiousness. But solitude in my mind is a common moment that is needed in everyday life instead of a specific religious idea. And privacy, in contrast to loneliness, is habitually a positive social state. Occasionally, spending much of the time alone underwrites an individual's emotional well-being. Furthermore, time spent alone is associated with constructive public outcomes, including intimacy development, relaxation, freedom of expression, and creative insight. It is a break, a pause, a comma in this era of information explosion and fast-paced life, and it is a moment that always reminds me who I am. It can be concluded that solitude is an interpersonal and sociological phenomenon, and thus isolation should to be well-thought-out in societal settings to discover its multifaceted mechanism.

When I recall the stories of officer worker, hiki, artist and monk, it comes to my mind that timeline in their and our life is similar to the rhythm in music and solitary moments resemble pauses in our life music. Songs or symphonies have beginnings, and middles also endpoints. They have a period that moves quickly and slow parts. They have repeating rhythms, propulsion, proportion. And they have paused. Singers pause for breath. Musicians remain to move their fingers or shift their sheet music to a different concerto movement or song. These pauses often provide

pleasurable, sensitive times when the brain is in-between one task and another where it is thinking, pondering, considering. While the optimistic understanding of isolation



might improve an individual's lifestyle, like symphonies, solitude needs some kind of moderation or psycho-social adjustments for its effectiveness. Although privacy itself is considered an impartial state of being alone, it might result in different consequences if not well moderated. Therefore the meaning and the roles of isolation should be shaped and altered, rendering to an individual's diverse social settings.

Also, solitude is a place, a practice, and a temper. I think the perfect isolation can be divided into three parts:

- 1.Solitude in time, for instance, the silence of the night
- 2.Solitude in place, in which we choose for ourselves a suitable retreat for useful meditation
- 3.Solitude in spirit, when we are with our body in the middle of others, but inward-looking with our mind and consciousness.

For me, as a designer, it is impossible to control spirit and time but I can make a difference by designing a space. That's because changes in a space can have impact on people's perception of time and location and then lead to changes in emotion, enabling them to have a better solitude experience.

The idea of solitude is linked to an array of uninhabited, unfrequented, or remote outdoor places and led to ongoing experimentation with buildings and spaces that allowed for the desire for seclusion, withdrawal, and privacy. There are multiple ways to create solitude by distancing oneself, either spatially or internally, from the world. Privacy is constructed through both the external and internal senses, like withdrawing from physical human being first and then from human interaction.

Quietness is essential for solitude. It does not mean to stay with the absolute silence but withdraw from the sound made by the human. Like the monk practicing zazen, it is forbidden to talk. They start by talking, from noise. Withdrawing from noise and speaking presents him an opportunity to dwell

on his inner world. We also can experience it in the city, at the top of the building, overlooking the whole city life with a little bit of ambient sound from the city. I think the sound without any input and information is all good for the solitude.

Light is also essential for solitude. By withdrawing from light, people might have a feeling about the world completely different from what they usually feel as eyesight is one of the primary senses receiving information and also the sense that distracts people most. For instance, the darkness retreat is famous in Tibetan Buddhism. They practice in a space that complete absence of light. Because vision is our dominating sensation to get pieces of information, the darkness retreat gives other senses an opportunity to feel this world in a different way.

In the meantime, people have begun using high-tech devices such as computers and ipads connected to the internet for tweeting, sending electronic messages or text on phones. These have been rapidly crumpling the boundaries between the social and isolated areas. Technology permits human beings to network with others even during their time spent alone recurrently.

Consequently, the distinction between solitude and time and space spent with others is blurred as technology is attempting to meet the needs for isolation and connection at the same time. Therefore, as a designer, I choose to be alone, connected only with myself. To achieve my objectives effectively, I prefer to sidestep being on a continuum of connection, somewhere fully engrossed in total privacy, avoiding minimal and partial solitude.

However, solitude is paradoxical. People are longing for it and are afraid of it at the same time. It has been considered an inconvenience, something to avoid, a punishment, a realm of loners in history. Solitude is an ability that we obtained when we were still a baby. People develop this

capacity for successful solitude from a happy childhood with a caretaker accompanied but can leave a little space.

People who did not experience the accompanied solitude need to learn and practice solitude in the remaining life. Creating a private space should also be a balancing act that isolates people and makes different connectivity levels. It could be the connection to nature, to themselves, or to their surroundings.

Also, I realized from these stories that these different characters seeking solitude are all part of me.

In my daily schedule, sometimes I'm a bit of a monk, sitting still in nature to have some insight into myself. I would wish to emulate the moment of a monk practicing zazen for concentration and reflection. It would be perfect at the beginning of my day or before I start to work.

At times, I'm a bit of an artist, walking alone outside to obtain new observation and inspiration. On my way to work, there is no hurry to squeeze out of the subway station and run to the office. The artist's solitary walk for creativity, inspiration, organizing thoughts could be applied.

And sometimes I'm a bit of an office worker, enjoying the meal alone to celebrate my private time. A quiet place to refresh me in the workplace helps me slow down, observe the surroundings, and observe myself, making the rest of the day more productive.

After work, I'm a bit of hiki, hiding in my room to have a dream. The bedroom of hiki is comfort and a reminder that there is still a dream I am chasing.

No matter how different we are, be they monk, hiki, artist or office worker, we share similarities in solitude so that I manage to design various kinds of situations in which these solitary moments can shine in my own life. By inserting these solitary moments in my daily routine, I get to find a route toward inner peace amid today's bustling world and seek for a better version of myself, a more completed one.

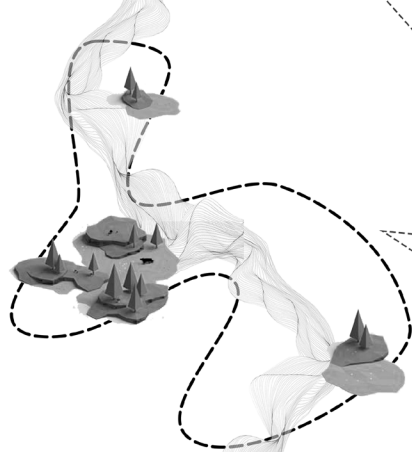
This series of solitude moments are meant for me and the people who have similar experiences and feelings to create a comfortable place to spend time with themselves.

These moments are also meant for society to tell them that solitude is not only about loneliness and negative feelings, but there are also various glory moments that we need in our lives. It should be valued instead of avoiding it.

Monk



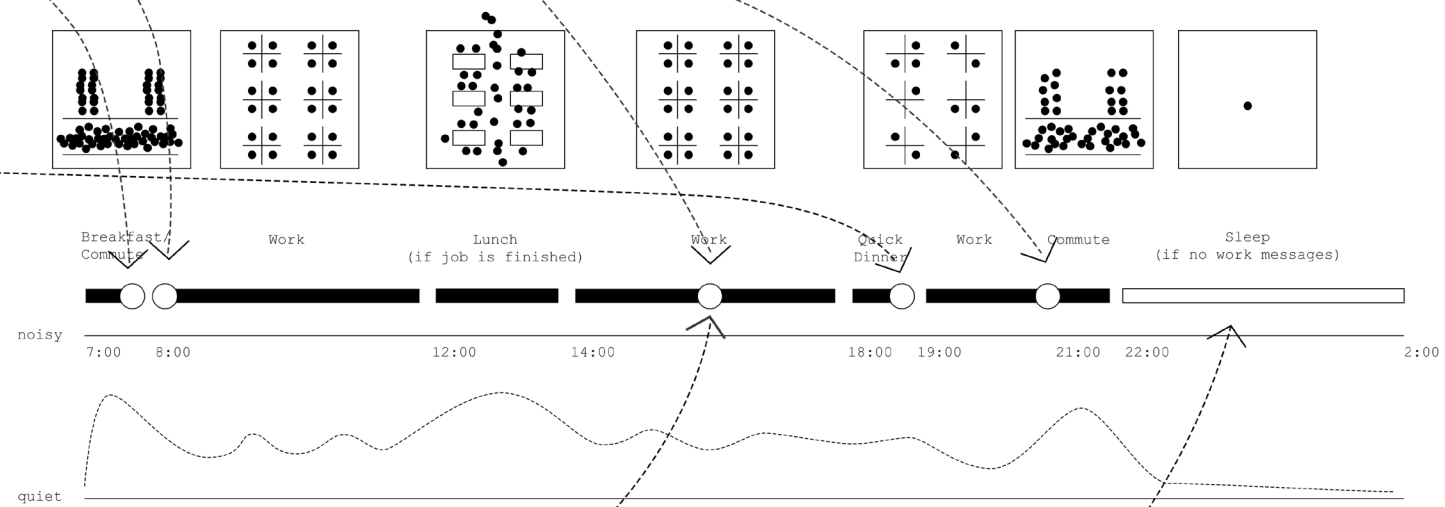
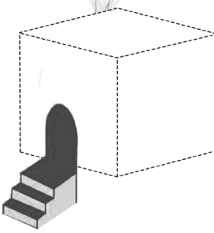
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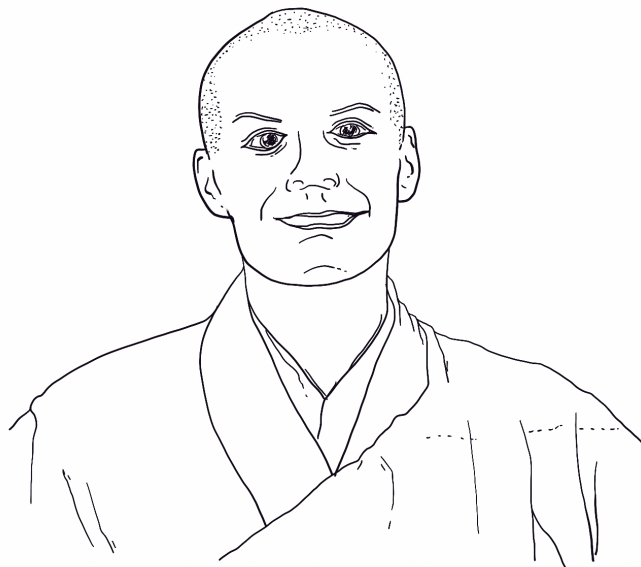
Me



Hiki



**\*Appendix**



**Robert Doin van de Roer**

A monk from an international Buddhist monastery, named Zen River.

*Me: Before I went to Zen River, I thought in monastery, everyone just retreats from the society and does things alone, like isolation. But after the tour, I found it's like a big family, it's warm and lively. What do you think the relationship between solitude and community?*

Robert: In the Japanese tradition we follow. Maybe just because of Japanese culture that it comes from, it's very group oriented means it's like a teamwork to do our program. And people can join and we give them a place in teams where they can also work in the garden, or they can also work in the kitchen under the guidance of the head cook. And so they are part of a team, but ultimately, you know, to work on my own mind, I can only do it myself. So I can be in an environment where I feel supported. And I feel safe. But still, I would have to find go into my own solitude because only I can go enter my mind and practice.

*Me: So for the Japanese style, they are not really retreat from the society, right? They don't need to, find a place far away from the city.*

Robert: Actually it is. Those temples are always traditionally based in a valley. And then on the in the top of the valley. So they're secluded and away from the busy of society definitely. Also if you do certain training, like I was in Japan for three months training. For the three months, you have to stay on the temple grounds. So you cannot go through the gate to the outside. Actually I did have a few outings. And normally you would stay all the time with your group of monks.

*Me: So in these three months, did you do the same program as you did before?*

Robert: Yeah, it's just a little bit like we do in Zen River. So getting up early, doing a meditation, doing chanting, breakfast, working, study time, the whole day program, almost no free time.

*Me: What is the purpose for this three months?*

Robert: The purpose is I think to retreat. A lot of the training is how to fit in how to submit to the authority, to submit to the program. Even if you don't

like to do this, still you have to do so. It's like a training to give yourself to what is needed that moment and give yourself to the program to follow. It is also tough, like muscle training. You know, maybe I'm tired but still I have to go on.

**Me: Really push yourself to do it.**

Robert: Yeah, that's right. It is pushed because the whole group is in the same situation, you don't want to be the weakling.

**Me: Okay. So this is not about solitude, right? It's about we can get through it together in this three month, it sounds like this. But you also did meditation right? in this three month.**

Robert: Yeah, so basically everybody, every time is in the same activity in the same room. But especially for the meditation, of course, you just sit there by yourself. And actually, in this central, we face a wall. Just looking at a blank wall. And just being completely without distraction. Just facing whatever it is in your mind. So if I really want to know my own mind, I have to force myself to not run away. And so if I sit still, I cannot go anywhere, I have only a wall. So whatever things need to come up, they will appear, so bad, you know, states of mind that I don't like. Maybe anger or things that I try to push down or that I don't want to know about myself. So because you open yourself, it's not only nice things, but also not so nice things that come to service or bad memories, or, you know. The training is how can you absorb, you know, your experiences from the past? And can you, because, firstly, you have to observe your own suffering, and then you can help others.

**Me: I mean solitude, maybe for you is the time to talk to yourself and to accept yourself, whatever the negative part all positive part.**

Robert: We see it as a training to yourselves, it's all years of training that you can, like, if you're trained to be a violinist. Endless training, you can become better. As you get more you can hear what you can improve. Thing is same with meditation. To get to that place, you need of course, to be not disturbed. So, solitude or not being distracted is a requirement. But as you saw in his service, that we have a very kind

of rich room. Yeah, or sounds. This is another aspect. There's one aspect is of looking in and being not distracted, whatever it is, that comes up and training, how to deal with your mind. Another aspect is more of celebration. This is more like team are listening to each other, doing it together, choreography.

**Me: So the chant is, like, really live at this moment with each other.**

Robert: It depends a little bit. We are a group of people who did not choose, we are not friends. We just attracted to this lifestyle. And so that's why we meet. Together with nice people I choose my friends of course. Because we have some question or we have I guess one of your first question maybe. (The first question is why you start sesshin for the first time?) I have been reading about Zen. I was 18 or 19. And there was something mysterious about if you do a certain art form, like I was training to be pianist. This zen style is a very good way of practicing any art. And so do you know there's a famous book Zen in the Art of Archery. So the archery student does not think about I want to hit the goal is just thinks about a perfectly concentration, the movement to posture. And then it happens. And this would be then also a way to practice any art. I was curious about the state of concentration that you forget about yourself and no longer aware that I want to practice music, I want to play beautiful music. And it just appears, instead of trying to do the best type of way of making music. So this was my entry into the Zen practice. And then I went to the Hague actually, I started in The Hague, a Zen group. And evening, I went once a week in the evening, to do introductory course and how to sit still in the posture, how to follow your breath, or come to breath. And not follow the thought patterns, the usual stories. And for me, it was interesting. And then the teacher said you shouldn't believe me because he was not having official rank or official position. Go to a real zen headmaster and go to do a retreat, session. So I did.

**Me: I see. So why you start the full time?**

Robert: For me, it was amazing. Totally, I felt completely different than I've ever felt. So it's also a little bit dangerous because I felt like I was superman.

**Me: Why do you think it's dangerous?**

Robert: Because it doesn't last. Then I came back down maybe your original level and depressed you know? That's always a beginner's mistake. So if you would do such a retreat, there is a chance that you enter zones in your mind that you didn't know it exists. And then it can be very wonderful zone, it can also be very bad. And it is safer, if there is a teacher around who can guide you. You say I have experienced this and this, what I do or I'm afraid or I'm completely happy. And then he can say, okay, practice this, or continue like this, to keep you on the right track. So you didn't get out of balance. And also you need a certain environment to be able to feel safe, so that you can just kind of forget who you are.

**Me: Like when I stand in front of the ocean. It seems like I start to forget myself, this kind of feeling?**

Robert: Yeah, that is a good example, actually. Because if you are driving a car, it's not so good ways to forget yourself, right. In nature, or in the ocean, something really big and I feel one with it or something. So if you feel really safe, then you can easily let go and let things happen that you are otherwise maybe defend yourself like, Oh, this is a bit scary. I'm not going to.

**Me: so it's nothing about like, the light is dark or bright, or the sound is noisy or quiet. It's just because you feel safe.**

Robert: I think so. Yeah. it wouldn't work if I observe myself from outside, it doesn't work.

**Me: You also mentioned when you enter that zone, it might be a super amazing experience but it's also could be dangerous, like go to the downside of yourself. So what is the trick to reverse this?**

Robert: The trick is to go and look at this. And get used to be in hell and heaven. You just see it as part of the normal. Just go with emotions and don't care too much. Just try to be of help for other people. That's basically the in Mahayana Buddhism, that's basically the reason to do what we do. It's not for myself, it's just to be a better person and be helpful for other people I can be, I cannot be really helpful if I'm scared, or if I'm always depressed or always

happy, I cannot help anybody. But if I'm used to going to heaven and to hell, to continue with myself and being basically a bodhisattva, somebody that wants to relieve the suffering of others. It doesn't matter what brings you. But it's important that you find something where you can contribute.

**Me: So it's also related to the question that what is the relationship between solitude and community?**

Robert: Maybe you need solitude and introspection, to find where can I be of help. That could be an answer. Because if I don't look inside, if I don't experience, if I cannot forget who I think I am, I will always keep defining myself. I am this kind of person. And here you can also try to forget yourself, do something else. take a risk. Doing something that you maybe good at it you don't know.

**Me: It sounds like you became more powerful than before.**

Robert: More flexible, more open to everything. You know, one nice thing of a famous quote is masteries the greatest gift is a gift of no fear. So I can show somebody that it's possible to live without fear. It is something that we can develop through the training. And when we do a retreat, and one of the guidelines is to not talk and also not make eye contact. It is so strong. It's better for me not to make eye contact, it's better for the other people, you should give people space to not have to deal with me. Give each other space. We don't talk. We don't have to say good morning. Because we don't have to make any politeness. We are a group. So we feel for each other, but we don't disturb each other. We don't interfere with each other. So for solitude, you don't really need to be by yourself. You can also be by yourself in a group. And especially, in our zendo you know, everybody has a seat with your nameplate. This is your seat, this is your life. And you can sit on one square meter, right? Like all life takes place on this one square meter. I'm not alone. There's a lot of people who do the same thing. So it's not about loneliness, but it's about kind of the strong sort of proud feeling. I can be alone I can be my master of my mind. I am not a victim of other people. I can just be by myself. We are not any better. And of course we are independent of everybody. Also it's healthy to have time alone.



**Hsin-Lung Chen**

An event planer for the pop-up restaurant in Taipei, named 'table for ONE'.

**Me:** *Why your team have this idea, to have a restaurant for one person?*

Hsin-Lung: Our team think we are always encouraged to socialize, intentionally or unintentionally in our daily life, but "being alone" is often labeled as lonely, uninteresting, and marginalized. The good things about being alone are seldom mentioned and praised. Therefore, we decided to provide an experience space exclusively for "one person" - table for ONE. We hope that table for ONE is not the end of the experience of being "alone", but the beginning, so that in the future, we can keep our "spare feeling" and open up our curiosity and sensibility to observe and experience the world, and then discover the beauty of life that exists but has been neglected.

So we thought there are variety of ways to be alone, we can start from eating alone.

**Me:** *So how do you apply this idea in this restaurant?*

Hsin-Lung: First, based on psychological and sociological research, we compiled several behaviors that have a positive impact on one person, and from them, we have developed a pathway: isolation, sedimentation, observation, imagination, and ultimately, recovery and creativity. The experience design is planned one by one in this line, away from the cell phone and isolated from the outside world for a short period of time, through the three dishes of precipitation, observation, imagination, and finally a dessert of free creation to give play to the creativity of "one person". In the second season, we have added some common behaviors in life: listening to music, looking in the mirror, reading, painting, writing letters, voting, confessing, etc., and transformed them into different interactive forms, hoping customers to rethink certain values through these behaviors.

**Me:** *For example?*

Hsin-Lung: For example, in the 'isolation' stage, we have a special bag for cell phones. Your phone will be put into this bag before the meal, and you can't take it out during the meal. During the 'sedation' stage, we will let customers put on the headphone and listen to three songs to help them organize their emotions. During the 'observation' stage, we put the main dish on a mirror, which allows customers to see things from a



different perspective than they normally do. They can observe the reflection, or just pick up the mirror and observe the customer behind them or the environment around them. The 'Imagine' stage is to use the e-book we provide to watch a chapter of the Little Prince before serving dessert. In the 'create' stage, the chef will put a dessert on the frame and four colors of edible pulp, customers can freely create, draw, paint and then eat it.

At the end of the meal, we designed an activity , 'Write a Letter'. You can write down your feelings, current situation, or anything you want to share on a piece of paper and send it to another person one month after the meal, and you will also receive a letter from someone else. This ending is like the life in the past when we were students without cell phones, when we would open our diaries and blogs after writing homework or eating, and write our daily feelings in the quiet of the night. This activity creates such an atmosphere of "being alone with ourselves", so that we can leave the noisy city life for a while and talk to ourselves again. In most of the participants' feedback, they mentioned that they could feel the peace of mind given by the environment and the activity at the moment, and that writing letters not only created a memory of the activity, but also triggered a "re-reflection" of the activity when they received letters from others a month later, extending the subsequent impact of the activity to a month later.

**Me: Do you have any special design for the solitude through space organization?**

Hsin-Lung: There are 24 single seats in this space, each of them facing with different views. The seats are divided into three main areas: "sedation", "observation" and "interaction" for those who have different needs. In some seats, you will enjoy the quietness of being alone and focus on your own time; in some seats, you will be an observer and will be able to watch the pedestrians outside the window, but at the same time, you will also become the scenery of the pedestrians; in some seats, you will be surrounded by other seats, so that you can enjoy the company of strangers around you and even start interaction. For example, we have a cylindrical space surrounded by white textile, with dried ferns above the seats as decoration. We call it 'Secret Garden'. Customers can sit in a very freedom way without being seen from the outside, they can enjoy the meal without any table

manners, they can cry secretly without the waiter finding out quickly.

In addition to the dining space, our bathroom is also designed as a 'confession room'. I think most of us have this experience: when we sit on the toilet, our brains will be connected to inspiration, or we will inexplicably remember something we regret, and we can't help but turn on the introspection mode. After we stand up, everything is washed away along with the water. In the first season, people write small white cards with white pens, like invisible ink pens, and write down secrets in a subtle way. Many people do not go out of the toilet for a long time, because they are reading the secrets. Especially when it's someone else's, there is an inexplicable joy in digging it up. However, when we know that the secret will be unearthed, it will cause reservation and concealment. Therefore, in the second season, we set up a recorder, which can only be recorded but not played back. You can't hear what you've left behind, whether it's a big tongue, a shaky voice, a rousing voice or a flat voice, so of course, no one else can hear you either. It is like the priest in a church, a quiet listener.

**Me: That sounds like the most popular one is that 'secret garden' right? People can be totally free and do anything they want.**

Hsin-Lung: Actually, no. We found that most of the people want to be a little bit far away from people but not isolated. The most popular location is B2, which we affectionately called "The Island", and the observation behind this choice is interesting. According to the Indian philosopher Jiddu Krishnamurti, 'people are distracted from their studies, entertainment, friendships, love, marriage, religion, faith, work, activities, interests, hobbies, desire for power and money... and so on. It is to distract the lonely heart from the inexplicable anxiety, panic and anxiety caused by the feeling of loneliness'. Most of the customers who come to a one-person table at the beginning will be a little uneasy at first, but of course there are also customers who are very comfortable from the beginning to the end, and with time and the restaurant's specially designed experience and atmosphere, within 15 minutes, people can be stable and at ease. Therefore, most people choose to be alone but not used to being alone, to keep a little distance, but not to feel closed off.

*Me: Do you have any stories to share that you didn't expect before?*

Hsin-Lung: In fact, many unexpected things have happened in each of the works, but the one that impressed me the most was a mother, almost 60 years old, who came alone to celebrate her birthday. When the mother left her seat to go to the bathroom, all the people there wrote small cards with birthday congratulations and stacked them on her table. "Behind her coming to participate in the experience, there is a longing for her loved ones and an emotional connection with people". When you are determined to gather courage and learn to enjoy the time of being alone, it triggers more precious warmth in your life. Besides this, at the one-person table, the relationship between people's positions is always the most interesting thing for me. People who do not know each other come alone, each at a table, they are back to back, back to side, side to side, front to back. They enjoy the time alone with themselves, but also share the tacit understanding of the solitude. This is also one of the reasons why we say that a table for one is a unique landscape in the city. Strangers are no longer just passing by each other. Here, although we are all alone, we slow down together and enjoy being alone together.

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