

The Power of Silence

In many traditions, one of the classic ways to approach the Divine is through silence.

There are several different ways to approach silence. One way is to put ourselves in quiet places in the world, such as going out in nature or perhaps to the local neighborhood park. We could also get up early in the morning and go out for a walk or sit and have a cup of tea and watch the birds on the porch. There are many opportunities for this type of physical silence if we seek them out.

For many of us, however, there's a tendency to get engaged in stimulating activities. We're always looking for the next thing: the next text, email, or tv program; the next show, drama or news item. With too much stimulation, there is an addictive quality of wanting "more." We can notice a subtle, or perhaps not so subtle, sense of anxiousness associated with this wanting more. We seem to be constantly looking for something that's more stimulating than what's happening right now, and we get caught up in that momentum. This isn't an individual failing; it's the human mind, which has been trained over eons to pay attention to whatever seems to be the most important thing at any given moment. As life has gotten busier, that tendency has become less about physical safety (as there are fewer lions about) and more about psychological safety or mental stimulation in a desperate effort to avoid the emptiness at the center of our own being.

It can, therefore, be valuable to seek out opportunities for silence and recognize that, "Yes, my mind is getting caught up in the anxious hope and expectation to experience something better than whatever is happening now." It's similar to mindlessly changing the channels on TV. "This channel's ok, but maybe the next one will be better, or maybe the one after that!" The mechanism is still the same. We believe that there will be a point of greater happiness sometime in the future and that fuels our desire, amplifies our anxiety, and accomplishes our unconscious objective to distract us from ourselves and keep boredom at bay.

It is useful to notice any compulsive ways that we use to distract ourselves. It can be felt in our bodies as restlessness or unsatisfactoriness. The antidote is spending quality time in silence. For example, being in a quiet room, gazing out the window, going for a walk early in the morning, or maybe watching the sunset. These types of quiet practices allow us to reconnect with Life as it is unfolding in the moment, rather than energizing our attempts to pursue a different, more stimulating, experience.

There are many opportunities during the day for a deeper connection with Life. We have the choice to avail ourselves of them, or not.

We can ask ourselves if we really need to engage in gossip or idle chatter. Sure, at times it can be enjoyable to do that with friends, which isn't a problem, but we can also choose at other times to spend some time alone. We don't need to fill every minute of the day with activity.

So, there can be silence in the outside world, like out in nature where we just hear natural sounds. And then, there's also silence at the interface between the outer and the inner word, such as which is when we choose not to speak and not to interact with our favorite electronic devices.

But, there's also a deeper dimension of silence. When we first try to explore our internal silence, we immediately notice how noisy our thoughts and emotions can be. We might find that our preference is to have a break from incessant thinking – to achieve a quieter state of mind. Many people who come to retreats talk about the desire to have a more peaceful mind, to find some freedom from constant thinking about the past and worrying about the future. But it's possible, as we sit quietly and notice the noisiness of our mind, to recognize that there's something deeper than the mental noise. Whatever notices that our mind is noisy, can't be noisy itself. Whatever notices noise has to be silent itself. We might discover that there is an awareness that is already silent.

It's very useful to see that, "Okay my mind might be busy, but there's something within that can notice the noisiness of my mind." What is that?

Try to tune into that deeper, quieter place. Even when there's activity in the mind, it is actually possible to notice the noisiness and to recognize a deeper quietness. And, perhaps, we may occasionally settle into a space of complete quiet and peace where thought drops away altogether. And that is, of course, beautiful too.

All of these ways of using silence are useful. Out in the world we can utilize the natural silence, where the silence within us resonates with the outer silence. And then, we can also use inner silence to give ourselves a break from life's busyness, so we have an opportunity to sense into what's most important to us in our lives.

Silence gives the opportunity for the answer to deeper questions to arise within us. It is a tool that's been around for thousands of years and it plays a key role in many spiritual traditions. Silence is something that we can honor and practice in our own lives. I would encourage you to give it the space in your day-to-day life that it deserves.

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