

# *In Tune with Silence*



It's no secret that wisdom, insight, and serenity arise from a quiet state of mind. But how do you find silence amidst today's intense sensory experiences and, even more challenging, beyond thought itself? Nancy Jackson draws on the tradition of yoga to help you develop pathways to the silence within.

It's a busy world - even if you have created a perfect balance between rest and activity, relationship and solitude. More common is the experience of overload: too many events, too many choices, too many people, and too much bad news. Or the opposite: a sense of lack tainted by dullness and depression. Too much or too little, and you experience disorder and dissonance. Even when you're tuned into the harmony of your immediate environment, you're aware of innumerable colours, sounds, smells, tastes, and textures.

With this sensory input comes noise. Depending on how you live and what you do, you may experience the commotion of a workplace or school, the background din of a city or suburb, even the intruding sounds of the countryside - let alone the clamour of electronic media. Most likely, you have developed the capacity to tune out disturbances for any number of reasons that require concentration. Then, you can become absorbed in the task at hand.

Silence as a practice, however, is more than diverting your attention. Nor is

it the absence of sound. You can be enveloped in silence even while walking and working. Silence is the assurance of feeling centred and empowered. It's a sense of tranquility and expanded awareness, alone or amidst activity. Silence is deep and vibrant - a core spiritual experience.

### Chatter

Usually silence simply appears - an instant when an intruding sound stops and you are aware of the present moment. How do you nurture silence and forge pathways to reach it again and again? The great twentieth-century yogi, Ramana Maharshi, said silence is always present, "All you have to do is remove the coverings that conceal it."

Another well-loved sage, Anandamayi Ma, said, "Even when speech is suppressed, the activity of the mind still continues. All the same, silence helps control the mind. As the mind dives deeper, its activity slackens off." Like Ramana, she referred to a covering: "Supreme knowledge reveals itself. For destroying the 'veil', there are suitable spiritual disciplines and practices."

The most invasive obstruction to

silence comes from conversations with family, friends, co-workers, and strangers, either in person or on the all-pervading mobile. In conversation, you are required to respond. Conversation, of course, is essential in relationship and establishes rapport, compassion, and intimacy. But too much conversation depletes energy. If you're the talker, at some point you may notice the compulsion to continue talking. If you're the listener, how many times have you wanted to simply turn the talker off?

Even if you're not engaged in conversation, you can be subjected to the chatter of the mind. Consider the mind like a radio station: what channels do you listen to? Some people enjoy music and the repetition of popular song. Others listen to incessant commentary of observation, information, analysis, opinion, and dialogue. Sometimes this internal channel is based on facts and accurate memories, replaying impressions of events. Other times, the content is fiction - what could be or might have been.

What is your experience of internal talking? Certainly the mind is useful

when you need to focus. At its best, the mind absorbs information and impressions and offers intelligence and insight. It generates a full range of emotions and it gives us all the signals needed to navigate life. When the mind is unfocused, however, you might engage in a reverie of thoughts triggered by a memory or image. The

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thoughts branch off and follow an associative pattern. When feeling arises with thought, you might experience the pleasant quality of daydreaming - or you can spiral into negativity with thoughts seeming to circle around to repeat, picking up momentum. In time, whatever caused distress has passed, but the mind continues to rehash the story. Too often, it's easy to fall victim to wrong thinking. Judgements lock you in. By continually hearing your own thoughts, it's difficult to listen, to absorb new ideas, and to change.

Positive or negative, it is the nature of the mind to create thought. But thinking itself is a habit. When the mind grabs your attention, it will fabricate endless thought that often is ego-based: my thoughts, my feelings, my impressions, my opinions, my needs... When you turn your attention elsewhere, these seemingly urgent thoughts don't manifest. With practice, you can refocus your attention from chatter to awareness.

The great yogi Bhagawan Nityananda said, "In yoga, everything is accomplished by silence. We waste our energy in talking, thus giving much work to the tongue and to the breath in us. When this energy is harnessed and directed towards Self-realisation, we can accomplish our goal in a creditably short time."

### Listening instead of talking

The capacity to think is the quality that elevates the human experience and is nothing less than astounding. The ability to not think takes the human being to even higher levels. In his classic opening of the Yoga Sutras, Patanjali says, *yogas citta vriti nirodaha: yoga*

is the stilling of the thought-waves of the mind. If you are a meditator, you already know the challenges of a busy mind, beginning in a fraction of a second from awakening to a fraction of a second before falling asleep. It is the mind that keeps you awake at night and it is the absence of thought that allows refreshing deep sleep. The mind is the vehicle for thousands of millions of thoughts - or luminous silence.

You might want to take a minute now to listen. What are the sounds of your environment? Is there any talking? Can you distinguish the hum of motors or fans? The whoosh of air? Music? Birds? The rustle of the magazine? As you concentrate on outer sound, inner chatter naturally falls away. Try to sustain this awareness of listening for a few minutes.

Another method is to listen to the breath. Place your attention to the place where air enters your body and becomes breath. Notice this breath come in through the nostrils, down the back of the throat, expand the chest, then release into an exhalation. Continue for three full rounds. Extend the practice to ten rounds or ten minutes. How long can you maintain focus on this process?

The practice of yoga postures is listening to the body. Let's say you arrive at a yoga class filled with activity and thought. A few minutes of beginning

relaxation may or may not affect your agitated mind. Then, as you listen to the instructor and focus on movement, you experience tension and release - not only of the muscles and postures, but also of the mind. As you continue to concentrate on specific muscles and other parts of the body, your mind stays focused and learns to hold the focus longer and longer. The nagging pull of problems and plans falls away and you become present to the here and now. There, silence is born. And, as you continue through the movements of class, even when the mind tries to take you away from immediate activity, you can refocus on the present moment and rebalance in even a flashing moment of silence.

### Refocusing awareness

Silence arises in practice. A good place to begin is to observe the mind. Just notice the voice of your mind and the types of thoughts it presents. No matter how quickly thoughts are generated, there is space between them, similar to the space at the end of a sentence or when you take a breath while talking. Focus on finding the space between thought. If you've never tried this, it's not as hard as it sounds. But you may need to do this practice for a while before you can take the next step. When you're ready, the next step is to hold onto the space between thought and expand it, as though you are pushing a curtain open.

Now consider that beyond the curtain of the thinking mind is silence as the foundational state of the universe. With the curtain closed, sound is imposed: the noise of the outer world and the chatter of the mind. As you open the curtain to silence, you merge the experience of outer sensations with the silence of your inner being. Seeking silence and embracing the experience is a retreat from the stimulations of the outer world. But rather than a method of avoidance, it is an opening. As it expands, this opening begins to unveil the vast silent being-ness within. This is your own consciousness.

Through the practice of refocusing the mind right where you are - while

relaxing, driving, shopping - you can increase your experience of consciousness, becoming aware of your surroundings, as well as your mind and the quiet beyond thought. As you explore this state, how does it feel?

### Enjoy your own silence

Silence is its own experience of completeness. Sometimes you may enjoy a sense of quiet, stillness. At other times, clarity and vibrancy. Silence is your most intimate moment, listening to the whispers of universal connectedness. Once the mind settles, silence is what remains: no waves or ripples of disturbance. Clarity.

### Silence as a sounding board

Silence is the perfect basis for accessing inner wisdom. Generally, we tend to ask other people for input in the process of developing plans and choosing what to do. Sometimes, it's appropriate to talk something through. We also weigh pros and cons - the mind has infinite capacity

to review information and emotion to offer direction. But it also loves to ponder and brood, and especially gets fixed on "what if".

Inner silence is a practical method for seeking guidance. Like allowing agitated water to settle into mirror stillness, in silence comes truth. How do you know when your inner voice comes from wisdom rather than ego? Wisdom carries no story, has no explanation, takes no sides, and has no agenda.

Silence also opens the space for insight. What is insight? Like the classic light bulb in the head, insight is new brightness, a shift of understanding that allows you to experience the same situation from a different aspect. Insight can be subtle or shocking. You might feel a tingle, warmth, or chill. You can sometimes have a jolt of recognition, your heart may beat faster, or your breath can be taken away. As soon as you receive the right message or information, you know it. It rings true.

Most likely, you're well aware of the

times when your inner voice offered wisdom that you didn't follow. Usually it's followed with an admonition of, "I knew I should have done that differently". Just as important, it's a strong practice to acknowledge the times you did follow your intuition. It builds a track record of confidence. You create a pattern of recognising inner wisdom and you prepare the ground for possibilities beyond your previous experience. When the mind asks sincerely, the heart responds.

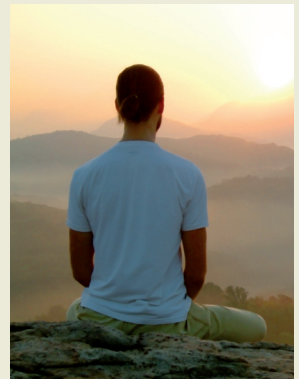
Why seek silence? In silence, you hear the whispers of wisdom, the pulse of the universe. Silence is refreshing and renews your energy. It is your essence. In silence, you remain present in full awareness living in the world, yet are not dominated by sensory experience. Without the chatter of the mind, silence is the vehicle to expand consciousness, develop intuition, and open to insight. When all other sound is set aside, silence is what remains. Through silence, you are in tune.

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## Expanding the silence within

*Meditation is the practice of listening carefully to the mind and guiding it towards quiet. In the Bhagavad Gita, the hero Arjuna complains that, “the mind is unsteady, tumultuous, powerful, obstinate. I consider the mind as difficult to master as the wind.” In the text, the all-knowing Krishna acknowledges it’s not easy. Yet he recommends sticking with it and says, “Your mind stands by itself, unmoving. Absorbed in deep meditation. This is the essence of yoga.”*

*Everyone is inundated with thought. No matter how centred and calm you might feel, thought occurs. Even if it’s noisy or busy where you are, you can always find the silence within. Some methods of silent mind are to patiently:*



- Become a friend of your mind. Tell the mind how useful it is and ask it to be quiet when you don't need it.
- Listen to your mind with compassion. Allow the excited mind to run out of commentary, like a young child telling you about an outing. When appropriate, you can commiserate, but be careful to not fuel a drama.
- Use the power of desire. In the same way as the mind can focus on a desire such as tea, coffee, or chocolate, use this power to focus on silence.
- Occupy the mind with a mantra. One classic from the Upanishads is the hamsa mantra. Ham (pronounced hum) on the in-breath and sa on the out-breath. With the breath comes silence.
- Stop the process of thinking. Some people imagine a light switch: on/off. Others invoke a stop sign, an imaginary wall or barrier, or a feather brush gently pushing away thought.
- Use inner chatter intentionally. For example, I am walking, walking; I am breathing - the breath enters, the breath releases. This is a method to be aware of your body as well as your mind.
- Become the witness. Focus on the sounds of your surroundings just as sound. Allow quiet awareness to surface.
- Sit within yourself. Place your attention at the heart, your emotional centre. Allow yourself to experience the vast expanse of your own consciousness.
- Guide your mind in a different direction. When it wants to chew on a situation, gently advise: “don't go there”. Choose silence instead.
- Don't get caught. The mind tickles and tantalizes, always trying to get your attention. A thinking mind cannot more readily access memory or information than a silent mind. Refrain from the enticements of the mind.
- Get connected. Silence is more intimate than words. In silence is understanding.

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