

The Contours of Silence



Having arrived just before sunset and settled in to my room the night before, I awoke with the gentle sun of early dawn. My room in the New Camaldoli Monastery's retreat house* was utterly simple—bed, rocker, desk, chair—and perfectly comfortable. The west end of the room was a huge window and a door opening onto a small private garden area with a fig tree and the vast blue of the Pacific Ocean beyond.

As I sat for my first hour-long meditation of the day, I could see apricot-colored light spreading from the east, highlighting the yellow leaves that still clung to the fig tree, though it was nearing the end of December. With a gentle sigh, I settled into the sweet silence of the place. Sitting comfortably, with my back straight, I breathed deeply three times, each breath accompanied by a silent mantra

drawing my attention to aspects of the dynamic universe, concluding at the crown of my head with “AUM shanti, shanti, shanti (peace, peace, peace).”

I began watching my breath with softly focused awareness, feeling air whisper in my nostrils, accompanied by the gentle inner repetition of AUM. No sound disturbed the outer silence. Nor did any inner disturbance arise. Now and then a train of thought absorbed my attention, carrying it off like a will-o-the wisp in a soft breeze. Each time, when I became aware of that, I gently returned my focus to the flow of my breath and AUM. I sat in peaceful silence for an hour, then rose and quietly moved into a set of exercises to stretch and tone limbs and core.

Then, in silence, I went to find breakfast provided in the nearby kitchen, and brought it to my room where I could make hot tea with the electric kettle. I sat at the desk to eat, gratefully calling to mind the many hands of farmers and transporters and preparers who had made each bite nutritious and delicious, and the grand miracle of seed becoming food, which never ceases to evoke wonder. I gazed at the garden and the undulating ocean beyond. As I looked I realized that at the bottom of the scene, around a thousand feet below, I could see a small area where the rise and fall of the ocean surface formed into curling waves of white water surf . . . and the silence around me enabled me to hear each wave crash on the rocks and sand, though the sound that reached me was more like a gentle swoosh, swoosh. I was experiencing the quiet described by silence activist Gordon Hempton as “presence—not an absence of sound, but an absence of noise.”

Again I sat comfortably erect, closed my eyes, breathed deeply, and settled in to another hour of meditation. Knowing in advance that the monastery was out of

cell range and offered no wifi, I had also decided to come with no material to read or study, no writing or editing project to work on, and no intention but to settle deeply into silence. I felt immense gratitude for the opportunity to do so, hour after hour.

After sitting, I slowly rose and moved outside in walking meditation. I walked along a path near the retreat house and into a small grassy area overlooking the ocean, focusing my awareness on each step: feeling first my heel then toes contact the ground and bear my weight as the other foot slowly lifted, moved through the air, and gradually took the weight on heel then toes. As I walked, the warmth of the sun on face and hands, the bird songs and calls of the quail coming from the bushes now and then were sweet company.



I returned to my room and sat for another hour of meditation. More than once during my stay, I heard the sound of a single leaf falling off the fig tree: I could hear it detach, float down with the faintest of whispers of the wind on its dry edges, and join its brothers and sisters below, landing with a tiny rustle. The silence was not static, but rather rich with the ever-transforming nature of existence. It had the vibrancy that is the gift of heightened attunedness to the natural world.

Lunch for all of us staying in the retreat house and the small cabins tucked into the trees on the hillside below (around 15 or so) was kindly delivered by one of the monks to the small kitchen where we gathered in silence, exchanged smiles, filled our bowls, then dispersed to our rooms or benches or picnic table outside. I returned to my room where I sat with the window and door open, silently listening to the swoosh of the surf below. Then I heard a sound I often hear in the Gurukula garden: the literal hum of vibrating hummingbird wings, as one came to sip from the few remaining orange penstemon flowers on a bedraggled bush near the door. After the bustle of the lunch hour, the silence of the retreat house deepened again and I gratefully settled into meditation once more.

Unprompted by any attempt to remember or call them to mind, in the quiet hours of meditation, lines from Narayana Guru's *One Hundred Verses of Self-Instruction* often floated into my awareness, dear life companions, such as "everything, when contemplated, is the glorious embodiment of the sun that shines in the sky beyond," or "like waves rising in rows from the treasury of the watery deep, without any separate reality whatsoever." Most often they were the lines of verse five:

Worldly people, having slept, wake and think many thoughts;

ever wakefully witnessing all this shines an unlit lamp,
precious beyond words, that never fades;
ever seeing this, one should go forward.

While living a fully committed gurukula life of spiritual search and devoted service, I have also been aware (sometimes ruefully, sometimes gratefully, often emphatically) of myself as a person of this world, with five lively senses, inquiring mind, and active temperament, influenced by the interplay of the modalities of nature: *sattva* (pure-clear mirroring quality); *rajas* (active, colored, distorted quality); *tamas* (inertial factor, obscuring quality).

Although when I was a young (and naïve) seeker of transcendence, I aspired to full-time *sattva*-ness, Guru soon set me straight, saying that “as long as we are in this body,” his graceful fingers tapping his wrist, “we will be affected by the interplay of all three modalities, by the power of nature, our genetics and upbringing.” These dynamic factors manifest in daily life as our numerous interests, preoccupations, activities, reactions, and so on. As he wrote (in *Meditations on the Self*): “the question of giving up action doesn’t arise at all. All that is left to us is using our skill to bring both action and reaction into perfect resonance with the original rhythm and harmony of the undifferentiated spirit, on the surface of which arise all the waves, whirlpools, and tidal waves of action and counteraction.” And even when we sit still, they manifest as our stream of consciousness: our thoughts, sensations, and emotions. As Narayana Guru says, every day we “think many thoughts,” from the moment we wake until awareness curls into deep sleep.

Modern physics, biology, and psychology increasingly reveal that the world “out there” is fundamentally shaped by our perceiving “equipment,” by our senses, brains, and mental modulations—our thoughts create our world. The implications are far-reaching and debate-fostering. But the core understanding, the one that may be most helpful to us, is that we can change how we shape our world: our thoughts are malleable, especially when we develop our capacity to witness them.

In the same verse, Narayana Guru reminds us that—aside from waking, dreaming, and sleeping—our consciousness also is pure awareness, an ever-shining witness. Each thought or emotion can be like a train ready to carry us along with it, but we can choose not to get on the train. At first, the intensity of our thoughts or feelings may seem as unavoidable as a speeding express, but over time we develop the capacity to side-step or more readily become aware that we have been carried away. Just as our physical muscles become stronger with exercise and we become more agile, this capacity grows with practice.

After years of such practice, when a thought, emotion, or sensation would start to tug or captivate my awareness, this verse would gently guide me to watch it, become aware of its tenor, of the kind of inner vibration it set off, and return my focus to the steady illumination that makes all thoughts possible. When we practice shifting our identity from our specific thoughts to witnessing awareness, we develop our understanding that our thoughts come and go, but we do not have to “go with them.” Silence, stilling the body and mind, fosters our capacity to make that choice.

Later in the afternoon I walked down the monastery driveway to Highway 1 and back, two miles each way, all down in one direction and all up coming back. Every step was one of beauty. To the south, the Santa Lucia Mountains sloped gracefully into the Pacific, creating the gentle curve of a long bay. To the north, the mountains tumbled more steeply to the water and a stream flowed to the sea at the bottom of a deep valley, beyond which rose golden hills dotted with trees, rock outcroppings, and the shining plumes of pampas grass.



As I descended, the sound of cars on the highway below grew louder, along with the rhythmic sound of the surf and the rushing stream in the valley. The walk led past fragrant fennel and sage, live oaks and pines. On the return trip, the setting sun turned the hillsides a pink-orange and traced a shimmering path across the sea to the near shore below.



The warm afternoon air was fading as I again sat for meditation. As darkness settled, the surrounding silence deepened. Thoughts became the faintest of ripples and I settled into the kind of fluid meditation beautifully described by Guru in *That Alone*:

The best of all the meditations I know is not thinking or chanting or following some practice. It's allowing yourself to be lost, not directing your thoughts with any kind of motivated mind, not taking interest, not picking anything up, not feeding yourself on memories or paying heed to inner suggestions. It's not very difficult. It happens by itself, and then it affects others also. It's contagious. The silence envelops you and becomes very strong. You

cannot say what kind of experience it is, unless you are caught in it. This is something we are carrying with us all the time. . . . Short spells of it can be very refreshing and very reassuring. It will take you home.

We are carrying this with us all the time—an inner lake of silence into which we can immerse and float peacefully, fully supported, as on the calmest of oceans. But our active lives and increasingly noise-filled environments estrange us from our essence, our home. Taking time for a few days of silent retreat, taking time for silent meditation as part of daily life, acquaint us with this reality.

Before sleep, I walked outside on a path near the dark forms of tall cypress trees, leading the gaze upward. Away from city lights, the stars blazed brilliantly in the dark sky, the immensity of the galaxy cradled in the deep silence of the night.

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*New Camaldoli Hermitage, Big Sur: <https://contemplation.com/visit-us/>