

The Seekers Forum Transcript

The Treasures of Solitude: Learning from Silence

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The Seekers Forum
Awaken To Your Life

Welcome everybody. I hope you're having a good weekend. I'm excited about today's topic in particular because I'm a writer and for me the topic of silence and the connection of silence to spiritual life is especially significant.

I spend my life looking for the right words to capture reality, in verbs, in nouns, in punctuation. But at the same time, as a spiritual seeker, I'm aware that this is completely impossible in the final analysis, that no matter how carefully we choose words, they can never truly capture the experience of being alive.

Nowhere is that more obvious than in the realm of spirituality. Spirituality transcends the mental constructions of the mind, in the places where language lives by definition. You could say that spirituality actually begins where language ends and that awakening, which is the point of spiritual practice, begins with silence.

Awakening begins with silence. What does that mean? It means that without the ability to rest in silence, we can't experience presence or fully enter the moment that we're in. Until we learn to settle the turbulent mind, we can't begin to know who we are or savor the depths of our experience.

Instead, we spend our time skittering over things, over the surface of the mind, and are propelled by the voices inside our head. That's how most people live, mentally speaking, kind of hydroplaning through their lives, racing over silence, and in the process, missing the wonder. It's kind of like a sailor who zips around the world but never stops to get in the water.

Until we pause, we can never discover what's below the waves, that vast silent beauty of being itself. We miss out on presence, which means that we are not really here completely. Silence eludes us because as a species we are addicted to language. We're addicted to thoughts, to ideas. We're addicted to the sound of our own voice, whether it's the voice inside our head or our voice speaking to other people.

This voice that you call "you" narrates your stream of consciousness and seems to give you an identity. The trouble is that we confuse ourselves with what we are thinking and we come to believe that this thought stream inside the head is who we are, that self-conscious voice that's babbling on and on. Most of the self-talk, when we stop to notice, is petty and repetitive and judgmental.

And yet, we accept this self-talk, this ongoing babble inside our heads, as an unavoidable fact of life. It's not really until we interrupt the thought stream and actually stop to listen that we encounter the great silence that is beyond and below everything, a kind of womb of silence that we're resting inside. Most of the time we move through this silence with these helmets of noise attached to our heads.

But, what a spiritual seeker has learned to do is to remove the helmet of noise and meet ourselves in presence. The beauty of this encounter with presence, with silence, eventually stuns the mind into stillness. That's why we practice, that's why we meditate, that's why we pray, that's why we spend time in nature, in order to balance ourselves in the stillness.

But it's not easy to loosen this helmet of noise, as anyone knows who's been, for example, on a silent meditation retreat. I've done a lot of retreats in the Vipassana meditation tradition. At the beginning of those retreats, they always tell you to put ninety percent of your attention inside on yourself and only ten percent outside, which is the reverse of what we actually do, what we generally do in our lives. Instead, we were generally taught from an early age to be other-focused and to be interactive and engaged, and even when we're not talking, we're caught up in the details of our environment.

But on retreat this ratio is turned around. The attention shifts inward, which also changes the atmosphere of being in a group of other people. It's common on retreat to walk past another yogi without acknowledging one another, even in very close circumstances. At first this can seem quite strange.

I once spent a very awkward breakfast sitting across the table from a very famous actor on a meditation retreat, just the two of us. This fifteen minutes of trying not to let our eyes meet, focusing on the granola, and hearing them chew and not being able to talk, made me feel like I wanted to choke.

It takes some getting used to, to allow yourself to be alone together, to be silent in a group, because the desire to connect is so deep in us. And, of course, that's why we avoid letting go sometimes. That's why we avoid solitude, that's why we avoid silence.

We don't always like the solitary feeling that silence brings. We tend to think of solitude as being physically alone, but, in fact, the essence of solitude is silence, that silence within us where we meet ourselves. In the space that's left by words not spoken, we come to encounter ourselves one on one and that's, of course, why silence can be so threatening. We confront ourselves head on. We confront the is-ness of our lives, the just this-ness of our lives.

So much of what we do is actually an avoidance of this very is-ness, the just so-ness of life, trying to camouflage it with busyness and noise. Without meaning to, we actually distance ourselves from the very thing that can give us peace, the silence of the present moment, the simple thus-ness of existence, the feel of your breath moving in and out of your body.

To live a spiritual life, however we define that, silence is the price of admission. As Meher Baba, the great Parsi master, said, things that are real are given and received in silence. For the last thirty some odd years of Meher Baba's life, he didn't speak. He communicated through an alphabet board because he had seen how little verbal teaching had done to transform the people around him. As he put it, "Because man has been deaf to the principles and precepts laid down by God in the past, in this present form I observe silence. You have asked for and been given enough words, it is now time to live them."

My own teacher, Mother Meera, also gives her transmission in silence. She says the experience of bliss is beyond words. She also says that there's only one rhythm and that in silence you hear it. "When you live to the rhythm of silence, you become it slowly. Everything you do, you do to it."

Toward the end of his life, the Buddha was walking in a forest in autumn time with a group of his disciples, his monks, and he stopped and picked up a dry leaf and he said to them, “This is what I have said.” And then he turned and he gestured toward the sea of fallen leaves all around them in every direction. “And this is what I have not said,” the Buddha told them.

When silence comes, its effects are felt almost immediately. Without noise ringing in our ears, we encounter the presence, the infinite wonder of being in this fascinating, mysterious world of ours. That allows us to feel astonished by our existence, to have awe and wonder awakened in us.

Ralph Waldo Emerson talked about astonishment being our elemental way of being, when our vision is cleared and we stand in bare relationship to existence. He said, “The proper emotion is wonder.” How could we not be filled with wonder and astonishment by where we find ourselves when we’re actually paying attention.

Emerson said, “Let us express our astonishment before we are swallowed up in the yeast of the abyss. I will lift up my hands and say cosmos.” This reverence for the beauty of the world brings a kind of hush over the chattering mind. When we rest in silence, it restores our ability to be where we are, full stop, and to feel the aliveness both within and around us.

I’d like to just try an experiment with you. At the beginning of my writing classes, I always start with a minute of silence to gather our energies, come together, leave the outside world outside. I’d like to do that with you now.

If you’d like to join us, whenever you’re ready, gently close your eyes and take a couple of deep breaths in and out through the nostrils. We’ll sit for one minute together, please.

After the next exhalation, gently open your eyes and come into the room in soft focus.

What do you notice about your mind in this instant?

What opened up in you in that brief silence?

How did your sense of interiority deepen and bring with it perhaps a fuller sense of presence?

How did it make you more presence?

Or, did your mind rebel against being silent? And, if so, what thoughts or feelings arose in you?

These are critical questions to ask ourselves, especially in the hub-bub of busy lives. We can’t blame our lack of quiet or solitude on our circumstances. What prevents us from allowing more silence into our lives generally is the avoidance of solitude, that resistance to meeting ourselves.

Who are we when no one is around, when nobody can hear us, when nobody’s listening? If a person chatters in a forest, does he make a sound? This fear of silence is actually linked to the fear of non-existence, or worse, of disappearing from the world. That’s why we babble, to fill in the empty spaces with chattering, chattering with others and inside our heads, because silence and solitude actually remind us of mortality.

And that's precisely why silence is so important to pay attention to in spiritual life, because it reminds us to let go, to let be, to stop clinging to words, to stop honing to distractions in general, to stop using chatter and busyness as bulwarks against mortality.

One of my favorite writers, Samuel Beckett, spent his entire career trying to capture the importance of silence in his plays. He made silence a kind of character in his plays and the inability of people to stop frantically jabbering nonsense just to fill in the empty spaces. This is one of his ongoing themes.

In one of his plays, "Happy Days," a middle-aged woman appears on stage buried up to her waist in a mound of earth, dressed in pearls with her handbag to the side. She spends the whole play just chattering to her husband who you never see, who never shows himself, just talking to herself non-stop, as she's sitting there buried up to her chest. She puts on her hat. She takes it off. She brushes her teeth. She worries about the weather. She repeats over and over for no apparent reason, "Oh, this is a happy day," which is where the title of the play came from.

And then, when act two begins, and curtain comes up, Winnie, the name of this character, is buried up to her shoulders, the earth has gone up several feet. But she doesn't seem to notice it. She's just blathering on and on about nothing.

This is how we live our lives until we face the truth of things, just like Winnie in "Happy Days." She's scared that if she stops talking, the world will collapse. We do the same thing without realizing. We struggle to block out our fear of not only the unknown, but also the known, the familiar, the plain facts of our lives as they are.

But luckily there is a way out of this echo chamber that's closer and more accessible than we even know. When we allow ourselves to meet our deep silence, this permanent silence, this eternal silence is your friend. It's the friend who never abandons you and you find if you love your silence and your solitude, like a true friend, it will love you back. It sustains us.

So, ask yourself, what is your relationship to silence? Do you fill your life with chatter, with busyness to cover over that empty feeling? Do you realize that the empty feeling itself is actually a threshold of initiation that can give you entry to the riches and depths of your own inner being, if you allow yourself to cross it?

Do you confuse aloneness and solitude? That's very common. How does the reliance on distraction weaken you on your spiritual path? That's a major question. Do you have a practice for observing self-talk in this turbulence within the mind, to release yourself from its grip? And if so, what is that practice? How do you quiet down enough to feel the richness of simply being?

The poet and memoirist May Sarton put it this way: "Loneliness is poverty of self, solitude is richness of self."

What can you do to tap into your own richness, by letting go of the need for constant engagement?

These are such important questions to ask, especially at a time in the world when we're so plugged in all the time and bombarded with information.

Where do we find quiet?
Where do we find silence?

A few years back I left New York City after thirty years because I couldn't find any silence there. And I had a very quiet and privileged life. But I couldn't find that deep silence and there was a longing in me for something I couldn't put my finger on until I finally got that it was just wanting to hear nothing, and in that nothingness meet myself and have the experience of presence and connection to my own deep waters.

That's what I wanted to say to you today about the treasure of solitude.

Now, we're going to try something new in The Seekers Forum. I'm going to give you a question and ask for you to weigh in, either on video or on the telephone so that we can have a few minutes, hopefully, of genuine dialogue before we move into the general Q&A.

Today's question: How do you use busyness and noise as distractions from the present moment?