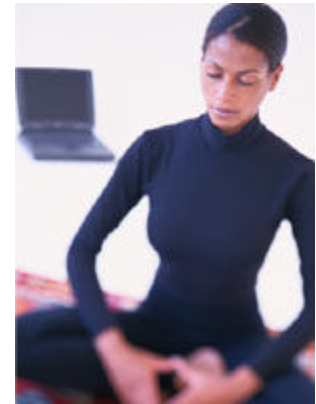


Surrendering to Silence

Rather than straining to quiet the mind in meditation, simply relax into the quiet that contains the mind.

By Catherine Ingram

Years ago I was in India when the Shankaracharya, one of the country's greatest spiritual leaders, passed away. *The Times of India* published a number of eulogies about the renowned master, one of which was written by a well-known journalist who was a friend of India's former prime minister, Indira Gandhi. It seems that Mrs. Gandhi would occasionally consult with the Shankaracharya in moments of turmoil during her administration as prime minister.



On one visit to the holy man, she invited her journalist friend to accompany her. They flew by private plane, and upon arrival Mrs. Gandhi was immediately taken to see the Shankaracharya alone. After a few hours she returned to the plane, and she and the journalist headed back home to New Delhi. The journalist noticed that a deep serenity had come over the prime minister, and after some time he could not help but ask, "Mrs. Gandhi, what happened in there?"

"It was wonderful," the prime minister replied. "I put all my questions to him, and he answered every one of them, but neither of us spoke a word."

The power of the Shankaracharya's presence was so strong it awakened the prime minister's remembrance of her own. She found herself in the quiet understanding wherein questions are either answered or fade away. "The still small voice within" turns out to be silent. It perceives with an intelligence that hasn't been learned, an intelligence that is innate.

Speech of the Heart

William Butler Yeats once said, "We can make our minds so like still water that beings gather about us to see their own images and so live for a moment with a clearer, perhaps even a fiercer life because of our silence." Just being in present awareness, at ease in our own quiet hearts, can make us a reflecting pool, and those who gather around will tend to see their own images. Many times I have had profound life realizations while sitting in the company of teachers, friends, or loved ones without their speaking a word. There is a presence that transmits itself loud and clear, if we attune to it. In awakened awareness we use language to communicate while knowing that another, more powerful communication is taking place in deeper awareness.

Over the course of nearly 30 years, I have attended countless silent retreats and shared stories with literally thousands of people during that span of time. I once found myself in a remote part of the world where I ran into someone I had known from several retreats. As I started walking toward him with a smile on my face, I thought to myself, Oh, there is my good friend, at which point I realized that because we had always been silent together, I had never actually known his name—nor did I know his nationality or his occupation. I knew nothing of his biography at all.

Yet I did know his being. I had seen him watching birds at sunset in the same spot each day. I had noticed the care with which he quietly removed his shoes before entering the meditation hall. I had been the recipient of his kindness when he had helped me carry some of my belongings out of the rain. We'd shared silent presence throughout the days and nights. However we had never once heard each other's stories. Our only communication had occurred in what singer-songwriter Van Morrison calls "the inarticulate speech of the heart."

In awakened awareness we don't need to pretend that we are only a conglomeration of stories, an aggregate of accomplishments, or a survivor of miseries. We are willing to gaze into the eyes of another person without fear or desire—without stories about who I am or who she is—and sense only the light of existence shining in a particular pair of eyes.

In retreats we also notice the power of words to condition perception. By naming things we invoke a preconceived picture of the object or event and therefore have a conditioned response to it, if only momentarily. Now, of course, language is a fantastic communication tool, necessary and useful. But it is helpful to know its place in our awareness and the limits of its usefulness. I frequently say, paraphrasing Shakespeare, "A rose by *no name at all* would smell as sweet."

There's an awareness that exists beyond words and allows our direct experience to be completely fresh. The more attuned we are to this awareness, the more quickly language and thought are analyzed for their usefulness and released. This occurs via a process which I call "steeping in silence," whereby the attention rests in quiet awareness and thus remains there more and more consistently, as it becomes stronger in its habit.

I always bring along a thermos of tea to my public dharma dialogues, and I sip the tea throughout the evening. Sometimes I forget to rinse out the thermos until the next morning, and if there is any tea left, it is much stronger than it was the night before. There was no tea bag in the thermos overnight—only the liquid. The tea became stronger by steeping in *itself*. Similarly, our awareness in quiet becomes stronger by steeping in itself.

This quiet does not suggest that one no longer speaks, cries, laughs, or shouts. It's a quietness of heart rather than an imposed cessation of speech or activity. It is the recognition of a depth in each of us that has never spoken, a quiet that simply allows anything to arise and pass through the mental landscape. Rather than straining to try to silence our minds (a practically hopeless task), we can simply relax into the quiet that contains the mind; then we become more accustomed to noticing the quiet rather than fixating on the noise of mostly useless thoughts. The habit of relaxing into the still center of pure presence, no matter what the mind may be doing, becomes an effortless living meditation, rather than an effort to meditate and still the mind.

Beyond Words

The adaptation to silence also dissolves barriers between ourselves and others. Although words are mainly intended to form bridges of communication, they often have the opposite effect. Many people use words simply to fill the void that they feel inside themselves. They are uncomfortable with silence, and so they chatter. They hope to connect with others, but often the chatter prevents any real communication. As they sense that they are not experiencing the intimate connection they hope for, they may even increase their chatter, going off into tangents of no relevance whatsoever in the hope that more words will somehow convey their feelings.

In awakened awareness, one recognizes in the chatter an attempt for contact. Underneath the babble is someone who wants to be accepted, understood, or loved. What is seen by clear awareness in such cases is the simplicity of being, the human warmth beneath the torrent of words. The words then become nothing more than a little static in an otherwise clear transmission. However, if both minds are full of static, there is little possibility for knowing each other in the place where two are one.

On the other hand, when two minds are well steeped in silence, a fantastic communication ensues. Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh once said of his friendship with Martin Luther King Jr., "You could tell him just a few things, and he understood the things you did not say."

I have been privileged several times to be in the company of great teachers meeting each other for the very first time. When I was younger, I remember hoping that I would be privy to esoteric dharma discussions among the great ones or that they would dissect their philosophical differences and provoke a general debate among their students. But what usually happened was that they would just twinkle at each other. They would politely exchange pleasantries or discuss the weather, but mostly they were quiet, just twinkling away.

Somebody once asked the great Indian teacher Nisargadatta Maharaj—whose dialogues in the classic book *I Am That* are some of the most powerful words on unbounded presence in print—what he thought might happen if he met Ramana Maharshi, another of the great saints of India. "Oh, we would probably be very happy," responded Nisargadatta Maharaj. "We may even exchange a few words."

**Reprinted by arrangement with Gotham Books, a division of Penguin Putnam, Inc.
Copyright © Catherine Ingram, 2003.**

Return to <http://www.yogajournal.com/practice/907>