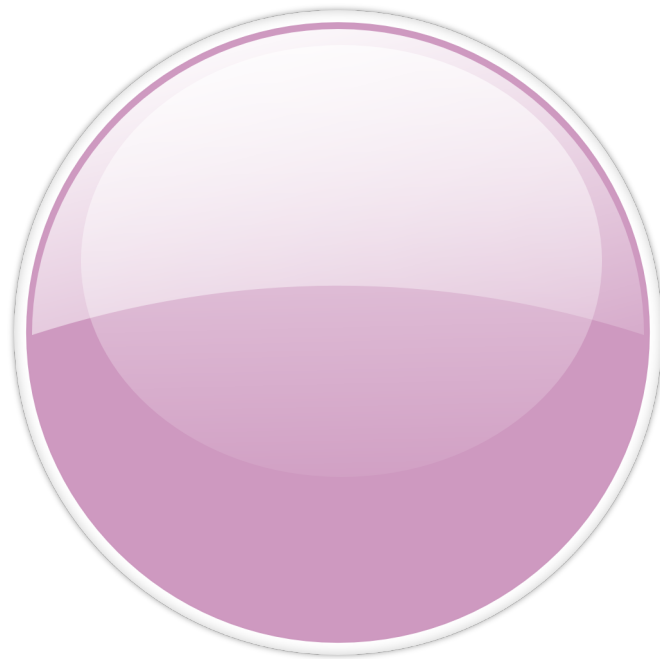


THE TRUE SOUND OF SILENCE



Andrew Marshall
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THE TRUE SOUND OF SILENCE

When we begin to meditate, whether that is sitting or walking meditation, or practise an art such as t'ai chi, we can become aware of a growing sense of silence that apparently comes from within us. Yet if we are unable to sleep at night and lie tossing and turning, we know without any doubt that silence is very difficult to attain. The night may be quiet but there are always noises, if not from the environment then certainly from our body. But in meditation it is different. Why?

The only silence that is possible is that which arises or emerges from stillness. Everything in our environment, though, is moving. Even when there is no appearance of movement, there is always a movement of energy. In an inanimate object, for example, the atoms molecules and particles are whizzing round at great speed. In fact, in the physical world there is probably nothing that is absolutely still. In turn, every movement creates vibration which translates into sound. Fortunately for us, most sound in the environment is beyond the thresholds of hearing – either too high or too low a frequency or simply too faint. So is it beyond human capacity to experience true silence and even if it is possible, is there any point in doing so?

What is being put forward in this short piece is that not only is the experience of silence possible but through it we come face to face with our own true nature, our very own source. This is very nourishing because it makes us whole and without it we cannot know who we really are.

To enjoy true stillness and silence may seem impossible because, after all, we live in physical bodies in a physical world where there is always

movement. Some people say that to sit or lie in an isolation tank is extraordinarily peaceful but even that can only shut off external noise. In any event, it is not practicable for most of us to do that and, even if it were, can we really only know ourselves by shutting everything else off?

The silence that we should really investigate is that which is ever present. Silence is inherent in every sound because there cannot be sound without silence, in the same way that there cannot be a solid object without space. Years ago, a concert pianist who was also a meditator often asked his audiences not only to listen to the notes but also to the gap between the notes and the silence between the movements because he understood the relationship between sound and silence. You cannot have music unless there is silence in which it may take form. Similarly, interior design may be thought to be all about colours, materials, furniture and other objects but it is really about the utilisation of those things in space; it deals with the relationship between objects and their spatial environment. The gap between objects is as important as the objects themselves in the same way that it is the relationship of notes to each other and to silence – the “space of sound” – that determines the quality of music.

So in our quest for silence, where should we seek it? First of all, we should determine where the *absence* of silence is and, without too much difficulty, we will find that it is in our awareness. If we hear a noise, it is because it arises in our awareness. For example, if we live near a busy road or railway, a visitor may wonder how on earth we could put up with the noise, yet for us it no longer intrudes into our awareness because we have become totally used to it. Our awareness is the key because the source and the measurable level of sound remain the same for both visitor and resident; it is the experience that is entirely different.

If we examine our awareness, we will find that there is much more noise going on than the sounds that reach us through the ears. Sitting in a quiet location with nothing to do, most of us will experience a great deal of noise in the form of mental chatter. Random thoughts will rise up as a continuous stream. So exhausting is this mental noise that most people will look for something to do; they will seek some distraction. Human nature drives us to want to occupy the mind because the mind will simply not be still. The constant mental chatter can make us feel uncomfortable because not only does it use up energy, it can also stir up emotional responses – all manner of feelings and desires – that adversely affect our sense of well-being. To lose oneself in a book, film or television programme can only provide temporary relief because once we stop that activity, the mental chatter starts up again.

What the meditator, or the t'ai chi practitioner who has advanced a little, experiences is that there is an underlying awareness that is rather like a screen or arena onto or in which all perceptions and thought processes arise or are displayed. With continued practice, that awareness becomes stronger and clearer until the realisation comes that our consciousness is absolutely silent in nature. It is just like the silence in which the musician's notes can be played and heard and is like the space in which all objects appear; but for us it is the space and silence in which all our thoughts, perceptions and feelings play. One trick or skill that we can learn is to become aware of the gaps between our thoughts. If we can do that – or rather if we *wil / do* it – our awareness will naturally grow stronger and a new sense of silence will start to pervade it.

To train the mind so that stillness starts to infuse it and become established is a lifetime's work because even once it is stable, it needs to be deepened and maintained. But rather than make it a task, we simply have to enjoy life as it is, from moment to moment, bringing every second of life into fullness. Sometimes we can sit and observe

the mind, looking for the gaps between thoughts or we can become conscious of space rather than the objects within it. When listening to music we can become more aware of the gaps of silence that make it what it is. Doing this helps us to realise and experience that every sound comes out of silence; just like a wave rising on the surface of water, it goes back into itself. If we practise t'ai chi or yoga, we can try listening for the silence in our movements and anyone can practise moving or walking slowly sometimes. All of us, too, can observe nature, how it is in a state of continual change and how all its sounds arise from the interplay of its various elements. Gradually, a sense of serenity begins to envelop us and in time it will become unshakeable.

In this way, each of us can truly come to know ourselves. Life will assume a true and profound richness in which there is no need to contrive or manipulate anything. A weak-minded individual may think we are shallow or ineffectual because we do not engage in gossip or in pursuits whose only goal is entertainment and diversion; but we should not judge that person because, just as snowflakes must eventually dissolve back into their natural element of water, all of us must eventually return to our true state. All of us emerge from the same silence; the only difference between us is how soon we choose to wake up to it.

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