



## The Sound of Silence

*Silence is better than holiness.*  
Zen Master Seung Sahn

**I**T IS SAID THAT WHEN THE BUDDHA attained enlightenment, he sat in complete silence for an entire week, and tradition relates that his silence caused all the angels in heaven to become frightened.

“It is only once in a millennium a human blossoms in wisdom like the Buddha,” they exclaimed, “and now he is silent!”

Asked again and again to say something, the Buddha finally replied, “Those who know, know without me saying it. Those who do not know, will not know even if I say it. Any description of light is of little use to a blind man, and so I am silent... As revealed in many scriptures of the past, truth begins where words end.”

The Buddhist concept of ‘Noble Silence’ had its origin in this refusal of the Buddha to respond to questions from curious disciples about the ultimate nature of reality.

Various explanations have been offered for the Buddha’s silence: that he wanted to avoid idle speculation, that he was agnostic or indifferent about the subject, or even that he simply didn’t know how to answer.

Some misunderstood the Buddha’s silence as a negation, an indication that God did not exist or that Reality was unknowable.

The truth, of course, is much simpler: The Buddha simply didn’t feel that such questions were useful for spiritual seekers and, in fact, only distract attention from what is truly important. Furthermore, he didn’t want to be associated with any one philosophical tradition or point of view.

In a famous dialogue between the Buddha and the ascetic Vacchagotta, Vacchagotta pesters the Buddha unceasingly with complex, metaphysical questions, until finally, Buddha explains that any answers he could give about such matters were merely “a thicket of opinions, a wilderness of opinions, a contortion of opinions”... none of which lead to “direct knowledge or Awakening,” (Considering Vacchagotta’s stubborn, exasperating persistence, perhaps his name should have been Vaccha-gotcha!)

While the Buddha was an advocate of silence, it was not, however, simply to avoid distraction or potential misunderstanding. Above all, silence is a means toward putting the mind into a state of receptive awareness, as an alternative to the idle chatter that takes place in an unruly, undisciplined mind.

This familiar mental noise may be about money, relationships, recognition—about virtually anything—but the ceaseless chatter is always about fear and an unwillingness to simply *be* in the present moment. Silence, on the other hand, is about nothing. Silence is the underlying reality, the ocean, while noise is the wave on the water’s surface.

In today’s loud, frenetic society, silence is often seen as undesirable, and, in fact, many of us are unconsciously afraid of silence. We fill every empty moment with idle thoughts, words, or sensations—anything to avoid simply sitting in quiet stillness.

This is why meditation is so powerful. It breaks our obsession with *doing* and *thinking* and allows us to experience the groundless nature of simply *being*.

In this ‘Inner Silence,’ our mind becomes as clear and calm as a mountain lake, whose tranquil, undisturbed surface reflects perfectly the surrounding mountains and sky. This is when Silence truly becomes ‘noble.’

Moreover, when we cease our habitual focus on the parade of thoughts that make up the mind’s incessant chatter, and turn our attention instead to the ‘silent thinker’ behind it all, it becomes strikingly clear that this presence is not in itself just another thought, but instead, the witness to *all* our thoughts.

With consistent practice, over time it becomes possible to loosen one’s identity and sense of self from its attachment to the *content* of the mind and allow the silent *source* of the mind itself to shine forth.

Nisargadatta, the great teacher of Advaita (Non-duality), described this shift from mind-centered to awareness-centered consciousness eloquently when he said, “Mind is interested in what happens, while Awareness is interested in the mind itself. The child is after the toy, but the mother watches the child, not the toy.”

We may even discover that a deep sense of silent joy and contentment arise, no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, as our fears dissipate and our thoughts no longer hold such power over us.

Even if we find ourselves stuck in a noisy, distracting environment, ultimately it shouldn’t matter. As Nisargadatta explained, “If you know you are not the mind, what difference does it make if it’s noisy or quiet?”

It is said that before the First Chinese Patriarch of Chan (Zen) Buddhism, the Bodhidharma, returned to India, he gathered his disciples together, asking each of them in turn to say something by which they could demonstrate their understanding.

One by one the disciples all spoke, but when his turn came, one disciple, Dazu Huike, remained silent, only bowing deeply.

Bodhidharma passed on the robe and bowl representing dharma succession to Huike, designating him as the Second Patriarch. ■