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**My Accidental Silent Retreat**

BY [**Alexandra Starr**](http://yogainternational.com/profile/17414) ON **January 30, 2014**

I didn’t consciously seek to be cut off from the world. But when I found myself in a foreign country whose language I didn’t speak, I discovered the unexpected joys of silence.

At first, living in silence felt lonely. At the beginning of a three-month stay in Vienna, Austria, this spring, I was surprised by how isolating it was to live in a city where I couldn’t speak the language. That made me either strikingly naive or semi-amnesic, because I had been in this situation before: In 2004, I spent nine weeks on my own in Japan, and my Japanese did not extend beyond sayonara. To be unable to string together an intelligible sentence in a foreign country means even mundane exchanges—“pretty weather, no?”—are stripped from your life.

You aren’t in a position to eavesdrop, watch TV, or scan the headlines at the local newsstand. Even when you are surrounded in an overcrowded café or on a busy street corner, you feel apart. Physically present, but encased in a bubble.

Being a functional deaf-mute is humbling. After a passerby tried vainly for a quarter of an hour to send me to the Belvedere Gallery (which turned out to be just 100 feet away), I stopped asking for directions. It’s also hard to grasp how primordial the urge to speak is until you forego daily conversations. I came to realize that sharing the events of the day over dinner with my husband helps me understand how I feel about my interactions and work. Losing those evening sessions left a void that even phone calls and e-mail exchanges couldn’t fill.

After a while, though, I noticed benefits to being verbally disconnected. For one thing, visual observation changes when you can’t participate in conversations or eavesdrop on other people’s. When you really take the time to look, the mundane—flowers in a canister on the ledge of a café window, the colorful rows of dried figs and apricots and cranberries at the open-air market—can suddenly seem precious, and beautiful.

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I learned, too, that connections do not hinge on speech. In Japan and Austria I had moments of real attachment and understanding with children and old people. It’s not that people in these age groups are somehow different in those countries—I was the one who changed. Without the pressure of verbally communicating, I was more primed to live in the moment. Children—and people who are edging to the end of their lives—seem more disposed to inhabit that state of mind. With little to distract me, I could meet them there. Silence opened my eyes, in more than the literal sense.

Increased awareness and greater appreciation for one’s surroundings can be just the preliminary dividends of living in silence. The real state of grace comes when we quiet our minds and cultivate an inner calm. I am—to put it charitably—a beginning meditator. But tentative steps to tame the whirlwind in my brain have provided a sense of what it could be like to focus my attention and manage my thoughts. Even more extraordinary benefits can emerge, if one achieves a level of mastery. “The goal of concentration…is the same in all cases; namely, to reach the Ground of our being, the Self,” write Swami Shraddhananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana in Seeing God Everywhere: A Practical Guide to Spiritual Living. “To the extent that we can do this, we proportionately develop mental composure, strength, and peace.”

At this point, the silence I have experienced in my life is of a more superficial variety: I’ve spent many days without talking, but haven’t managed to sustain a calm, quiet mind for more than half an hour at a time. I didn’t consciously seek to be linguistically cut off from the world. But now, back in my familiar surroundings, sometimes all too aware of what is buzzing around me, I can take full measure of what the practice of silence gave me.

It feels like no small thing.

**The Absence of Words**

Exploring my bookshelf, I realize that some of the writers I have most loved wrote paeans to silence and the intense observation and reverence it can help foster. In The Snow Leopard, Peter Matthiessen’s memoir of his trek in the Himalayas, the author describes how he achieved communion with his environment: “I ring with life,” he writes, “and the mountains ring, and when I can hear it, there is a ringing that we share.” Annie Dillard’s Pilgrim at Tinker Creek—a chronicle of her year in the wilds of Virginia—often reads like a handbook on how to live. I found this underlined passage in my dog-eared copy: “Beauty and grace are performed whether or not we sense them. The least we can do is try to be there.”

“More important than outward silence is inward silence,” write Swami Shraddhananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, “and that is not so easily available to us.”

Abroad, on my own, I felt I was there for those moments. One of my most treasured memories from Japan occurred in a garden in the outskirts of Tokyo. It was a late fall afternoon, and the leaves blazed like crimson cutouts against the sky. At first I thought I was alone, but I turned around to see an old woman clothed in a periwinkle sweater and white hat admiring the same scene. She reached her arms out to me and flashed a smile of unadulterated joy. I felt as if we’d shared a secret, even though we hadn’t exchanged a word.

During my first weekend in Vienna, I had a similar moment of mutual wonder: On the grounds of the Liechtenstein Palace, I was surprised to witness a brown-and-white speckled duck leading a parade of chicks into the pond of the exquisitely preserved garden. The other person who was taking in the scene was a little boy, who seemed literally speechless. He looked at me and pointed at the gaggle. Yes, I tried to smile back. I see—and you are right to be amazed. This connection does not generally happen in the middle of a two-million-person metropolis.

What made those memories truly precious is that they were shared. I remember the faces of both that little boy and old woman with precision, even though I do not know their names and never heard the sound of their voices. Phrases like “we had a long talk” are often shorthand for conveying intimacy. But speech does not always draw us closer. We have all experienced conversations where the most important issue—the thought that pervades everything that is being said—is not articulated. Talking can be toxic in more overt ways, too. “We slander someone and build someone else up,” Swami Ajaya observes in Yoga Psychology. “Words used this way create a sense of isolation and separation from others and put us in a judgmental position. Words often create a barrier.”

Refraining from speech, Swami Ajaya points out, helps us distinguish between the trivial and profound in our communication. There is another, perhaps unexpected, benefit: It gives us energy. Talking can be draining. When we abstain from it, we can redirect our focus and efforts toward higher spiritual pursuits. Like, for example, cultivating silence within ourselves.

**The Profounder Gifts of Silence**

Isolated contemplation is a bedrock of spiritual practice. It is not a coincidence that religious figures ranging from Christ to Mohammed refrained from words and nourishment before they began proselytizing. In the Native American tradition, young men coming of age would spend time on their own in nature before rejoining their communities. Hours of prayer are a staple of convent life; silent retreats are becoming a common element of regular meditation practice. “More important than outward silence is inward silence,” write Swami Shraddhananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, “and that is not so easily available to us.”

That is—in my experience—a profound understatement. I spent days without talking in Vienna and Tokyo, but my internal soliloquy progressed full throttle. My journal swelled to overlarge proportions, filled with sharp directives to get pitches out to my editors. In Japan, I never adjusted to the time difference completely and suffered for weeks from insomnia. I may have not been articulating a torrent of thoughts, but they raged inside unabated.

I consulted a yoga and meditation teacher in anticipation of writing this piece, lamenting that I felt ill-equipped to write about the joys of a consciously cultivated silent mind. He gave me a beginner’s assignment: On a walk, regulate my breathing, count from one to five, and then back down again. I protested that even if I managed to do this, it would be insufficient to write with any authority on internal silence. “You may surprise yourself,” he responded. “Try it.”

The next morning, as I set out for a half-hour stroll from my apartment to the Institute for Human Sciences (where I was in residence in Vienna), I followed my teacher’s instructions. I knew the route well; aside from making sure I wasn’t run over, my mind was free to drift or focus. I didn’t think, though, that I would be able to maintain my numeric mantra for the entire time.

Yet for the most part, I did. Actively directing my thoughts, synchronizing my countdown with my breathing, was challenging. There were distractions: Sometimes the sounds of immense buses rumbling past made it difficult to hear myself, and that shook my concentration. I involuntarily read the titles of books in the window of an English-language bookshop. I caught myself wondering how to capture the experience in prose—which, of course, pulled me out of the present moment.

Still, the stretches when I was able to maintain my concentration made my mind feel sharper and purer. At times it felt almost transporting. Later in the day, as I dealt with deadlines and packing up my office, I thought back nostalgically to my walk. I wanted to access that clear mind again.

It didn’t completely leave me. In the midst of mentally castigating myself for not making sufficient progress on an article, I just cut the internal invective off. Dipping my toe into the most basic kind of meditation offered the hope of leaving behind ingrained, unhealthy habits.

The most experienced meditators speak of more than a peaceful mind. To attain a profound inner silence is, in the words of Swami Shraddhananda and Pravrajika Vrajaprana, the equivalent of “reach[ing] the center of tranquility, the source of infinite security and happiness.” Or, as the Zen monk Seng-ts’an declared thousands of years ago, “step aside from all thinking, and there is nowhere you can’t go.”

It begins with abstaining from speech, which, in our familiar surroundings, can be particularly hard to do. You can start small, setting aside just one morning a week to observe silence, although Swami Ajaya recommends trying for an entire day. Silent retreats—where experienced meditators lead visitors through several days of contemplation—can help advanced and beginner practitioners alike. I’ve begun looking at potential retreats to attend with my husband. Contemplation without spoken words would not have sounded like a vacation to me as recently as four months ago. In fact, at that moment, I craved company, and the intimacy of words. But I want to harness the fleeting moments of joy that unbidden silence offered to me when I was in Vienna. It feels too precious, and possibly transforming, to wait for the next solo trip to reintroduce it into my life.