

First Unitarian Universalist Society of Albany, New York
“What Emerges Out of Silence”

Rev. Samuel A. Trumbore January 22, 2012

Sermon

Deng Ming-Dao wrote: The deepest sound is silence. This may seem paradoxical only if we regard silence as an absence of life and vibration. But for a meditator, silence is sound unified with all of its opposites. It is both sound and soundlessness, and it is in this confluence that

The Buddha taught again and again:

Do not believe in anything simply because you have heard it.

Do not believe in anything simply because
it is spoken and rumored by many.

Do not believe in anything simply because
it is found written in your religious books.

Do not believe in anything merely
on the authority of your teachers and elders.

Do not believe in traditions because
they have been handed down for many generations.

But after observation and analysis,
when you find that anything agrees with reason and
is conducive to the good and benefit of one and all,
then accept it and live up to it.

Lao-Tse said: To the mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders.

After finishing the Sunday Service on New Year's Day, I drove to Barre, Massachusetts to begin ten days of silent meditation. Driving up to the center and unloading my luggage and meditation cushion and bench, the peace and quiet began to gently calm me down. This would be my third visit to the Insight Meditation Society Forest Refuge Retreat Center. The special retreat center was created for people to do long self-guided, meditation retreats. The facility is small with thirty individual rooms. The meditators on retreat set their own sitting and walking meditation schedule. Breakfast is served at 6:30am. Lunch at noon. Tea and light snacks are served at 5:30pm. Yogi jobs or voluntary work assignments are mostly accomplished during a one hour work period after breakfast. One optional group sit happens at 8:30am for 45 minutes. A one hour dharma talk is offered in the evening at 7:30pm twice a week. Every few days the meditator can meet with a teacher for fifteen minutes. Otherwise, we were on our own to dwell together in silence.

Great pains were taken in the design and construction of this retreat facility. It is set back from roads and surrounded by woods, away from any houses. The cork floors dampen the sound of footsteps. The meditation hall is separated from the rest of the facility by a long hallway. The about 35 by 35 foot square meditation hall, has a large, windowed cupola that gives the room an expansive airy feel. Radiant heat in the floor helped keep the room feeling comfortable even when the winter wind was blowing about the roof. In the front sits a statue of the Buddha on a large oblong shaped rock. The stillness of the meditation hall brought a sense of peace just by walking into it.

I practiced mindfulness meditation by sitting on a meditation bench quietly for 45 minutes to an hour alternated with very slow walking meditation for 20 to 30 minutes. If I tired, I'd do lying down meditation for 10 to 20 minutes. Whether walking, sitting, standing or lying down, I'd be striving to be mindful of what was arising, present and passing away in each moment. Rather than direct my mind to a certain subject, feeling or idea, I used my breath and body sensations as a way to bring my attention back, again and again, to the present moment. The undirected or manipulated physical sensations of breathing served as an anchor for my attention in the present moment and as a way to calm and concentrate my mind. The breath came in and out, deeply or shallowly, fast or slow or stopped briefly, according to its own, unplanned rhythm.

Not having a subject, feeling or idea to fill my mind with didn't mean that my mind was empty – far from it. Different from most people's normal, day to day consciousness, what appeared in my mind, my feelings, and my body were not planned or managed – they just happened. I occupied my consciousness intentionally with watching the physical sensations of breathing. The rest happened spontaneously.

Usually my mind gradually quiets down and my body relaxes over the first few days. It takes a while to let the busyness of daily living, tasks left undone, planning for the future, worries and concerns go. The body reflects the activity of the mind with lots of tension accumulated in the neck, shoulders and back. Groups of muscles first, then later individual ones would come to my attention. As their tension came into my awareness they would ache, tighten, warm, throb and release. My attention moved back and forth from the breath to the sensations, noticing each change without interfering with each change. My mantra was, keep calmly knowing change; keep calmly knowing change; keep calmly knowing change.

The third morning of my retreat, I felt really good. My relaxed body tingled with energy and vitality. My quieted mind stayed with the slow rising, moving and placing of each foot. I noticed with each step how my weight distributed over the sole of my foot and the tension or lack of it in my toes, comparing my right foot to my left foot. Rather than feeling any restlessness about completing a cycle of walking meditation my attention stayed with each step.

The sun shown bright and clear down from the cloudless sky through the large windows of the specially walled hallway meditation path to one side. My feet pleasantly warmed from the radiant heat in the floor. I gently noted the pleasantness of this moment. I thought, "This is heaven! I lack nothing essential nor wished for any more than this moment."

(Pause here to be with what emerges out of silence for 90 seconds)

Carlyle wrote: Silence is the element in which great things fashion themselves together.

When on retreat, one follows either five or eight precepts. The first five aren't difficult on a silent retreat: no killing, lying, stealing, using intoxicants or sexual activity. The second three are refraining from singing, dancing, personal adornments and perfumes, eating after noon, and refraining from using high and lofty beds or seating. I experimented with not eating after noon and found I didn't get hungry, that breakfast and lunch were sufficient for me while I was meditating. Again, refraining from singing, dancing and personal adornments wasn't hard at all at a retreat. The last one was beyond what I was willing to do – not the bed, I would have been happy to sleep on the floor. No, in the afternoon, I enjoyed taking a break from meditation, making a cup of tea, and sitting on this comfy couch they had in a corner of the dining hall. If my energy sagged and my mind clouded, the pleasure of a cup of tea on that couch got me ready to go back and try again.

As my mind got more and more quiet, my hearing got more and more sensitive. The sounds my digestive system made started worrying me. Could others hear the gurgling of my gut? It started sounding louder and louder. I adjusted what I was eating to see if I could stop those little sounds. Outside sounds started to get to me too. I started noticing airplanes flying around above the meditation hall. For all their effort to control surrounding noise, they couldn't control their airspace above the hall. I was surprised by just how much aerial activity there was, particularly on the weekend.

At meditation retreats, I strive to keep my attention close to my body. I don't look at other people or try to make contact. I'm there to meditate not to socialize. One of the ways I do that is by meditating without my glasses. That way if I happen to see someone's face, I see more of a blur and don't recognize facial expressions. So far, I'd been pretty successful. I had noticed one tall very obese woman who was meditating in what looked like a lounge chair as she couldn't sit in a regular chair or on a cushion on the floor. She would come outside after breakfast while did my yogi job, sweeping the paths and the decks of sand and dirt. At first I saw judgment flash across my mind. Recognizing a negative thought, brought feelings of regret. I decided to send her thoughts and feelings metta or loving kindness, appreciating that she was here, just as I was, seeking freedom from suffering. Seeing her outside sitting next to a large statue of the Buddha warmed my heart towards her.

My success containing my curiosity about the other meditators may have strayed a little into a sense of pride. Now, I resist any belief in things supernatural, always looking for a natural explanation for what happens. But the coincidence with thinking pridefully of my self-containment and what happened next felt a little supernatural. After having these prideful thoughts, an extremely attractive, shapely young woman sat down right in front of me to meditate. Waves of attraction washed over me immediately.

Now I'm a happily married man, not wanting or looking for a new partner. So the intensity of the attraction surprised me. Dragging my attention back to my breath, I watched the feeling of attraction carefully. Why should I be attracted to this stranger so strongly? Suddenly I remembered Kathy, one of five of us who shared a three bedroom flat in Berkeley over thirty years ago. This meditator in front of me's hair and the curve of her back reminded me of Kathy. I hadn't realized how much I had been attracted to Kathy who shared the front room with her boyfriend. Now, that pot smoking, Grateful Dead loving, waitress had come back and was an arms length away from me. In that moment, she was everything I could ever want in a partner.

(Pause here to be with what emerges out of silence for 90 seconds)

British writer James Allen wrote: As there are silent depths in the ocean which the fiercest storm cannot reach, so there are silent, holy depths of the heart of humanity which the storm of sin and sorrow can never disturb. To reach this silence and to live consciously in it is peace.

This kind of intense attraction is a common experience at retreats, one of the reasons for the no sexual activity prohibition. They call them Vipassana romances. It can go the other way too, to hatred, called Vipassana vendettas. And they are complete projections, fabrications of the imagination. I knew it too, having had that experience before ... with my rational mind. But my emotional mind wouldn't rest till I saw her face, just in case it really was Kathy.

Wise Shakespeare wrote: Doubt is a thief that often makes us fear to tread where we might have won.

The last retreat story I'd like to share with you this morning started on the last night of my retreat. Usually the evening talks are designed to inspire us and motivate our practice. Mindfulness practice one day can be very easy and effortless. The next day or even the next sitting can be so difficult, one feels lost. This talk that evening wasn't inspiring me. I had been up meditating since three am and was feeling tired. My knees ached as my energy dropped from the distraction of the discomfort.

That is when it happened. I started doubting my ability to do meditation. After all, I'd only been sitting there for an hour. Serious meditation students could sit for several hours, even days without moving. Who was I to think I could even do this. I'm now middle aged. My body isn't what it was in my 20's when I started meditating. All that was required to completely blow my meditation was a pretty woman to sit down in front of me. Gain complete enlightenment in this lifetime? Who was I kidding? I might be able to *comprehend* how to do it ... but could I actually *do* this practice? In that moment it seemed hopeless. After over 25 years of daily meditation, I was now asking myself, what's the use?

(Pause here to be with what emerges out of silence for 90 seconds)

I love these words by St. Francis: What is it that stands higher than words? Action. What stands higher than action? Silence.

I got up the next morning still mired in doubt. Deeply disappointed I'd be ending my meditation retreat this way, I got up, walked over and robotically sat down in the meditation hall. I took the refuges:

Buddham saranam gacchami
Dhammam saranam gacchami
Sangham saranam gacchami

To the Buddha I go for refuge
To the Dhamma or Truth I go for refuge
To the Sangha or community of practitioners I go for refuge

And a little while later, a light went on in my brain. Oh, I see it now, I'm experiencing the mind state of doubt. The mind state of doubt is one of the five hindrances in the practice of meditation, the practice of living, along with craving, hatred, sloth and restlessness. The hindrances are like clouds that hide the sun. They have no ultimate reality but work to undermine one's meditation practice, weakening one's commitment and resolve. Once I recognized this was happening, the cloud of doubt began to dissipate. Doubt was gone about half an hour later. My commitment, resolve, inner stillness and deep gratitude for the retreat and my practice returned as I packed my bags.

These stories are a sample of what emerged out of silence during my retreat. I noticed the deeper the silence, the more significant the emergence. Yet, even in the small silences of our daily lives, useful insights emerge. I hope during the periods of silence today, what emerged out of your silence had value for you. For in silence, the holy has the opportunity to arise.

As Christian mystic Meister Eckhart put it:

There is nothing so much like God in all the universe as silence.

Benediction

I conclude with these beautiful words by Thomas Merton:

It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am the more affection I have for them.... Solitude and silence teach me to love my brothers for what they are, not for what they say.

May what emerges from silence, calm and clarify our minds, teach and open our hearts and inspire and motivate our love for each other.