## Reflections on 'Aspects of Silence' –29th September 2021 – prepared by Hazel

**Opening words:** This week, we are meditating in person again and have a transcript for those unable to join us. We have included some resources to help you in your meditation. If you are meditating alone but would like to feel 'with us' we meditate at 7.30pm on Wednesday in Wisdom Centre/ our homes. The tradition we meditate in is Centring Prayer which is fully inclusive of all traditions of Christian Meditation and welcoming of World Traditions.

**Welcome to Christian Meditation in the Centring Prayer Tradition:** A very warm welcome from Fiona, Marie, Rob, Hazel and Paul, the leaders of the Christian Meditation group at Wisdom Centre, Romsey. The whole session is about 50 minutes. We meditate beginning with an opening prayer followed by reflections and then 25 minutes of silence. We hope you enjoy your meditation with us.

**Opening Prayer:** Eternal God, through our meditation may the ears of our hearts be attentive to your Word. May we seek and find You. Awakened to Your presence may we be joyful, embodying peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-awareness. May we follow Your teaching, seeking also, the wisdom of the Holy Fathers and Mothers. May we, therefore, commit to community, love of earth, peace and justice making. **Amen**

**Introduction**: Today's reflection is on 'silence' and it follows on from last month's exploration of 'stillness'. Silence has subtle differences from stillness but like 'stillness', it has a range of perspectives. This is an opportunity to explore what silence means to each of us and how this might link to our meditation practice. In the resources section at the end of this transcript, there are links to some further reflections on silence and meditation by James Finley[7] and John Butler[8].

**Self-care in silence**: As always with meditation, self-care is important. Some people love silence and cannot get enough of it. Others find silence difficult. Do allow yourself to notice your own experience and what you need in this time. It may not always be appropriate to meditate for a full 25 minutes and it is more important to stay grounded in your practice, whether that might be a shorter time of sitting, or going out for a quiet walk in nature, noticing your breath whilst doing practical tasks, or meeting a friend and noticing the spaces in the conversation.

**Contrasting reflections:** Let us begin by sitting with a few reflections by others on various aspects of 'silence':

*For God alone my soul waits in silence, for my hope is from him*. (Psalm 62:5*)*

*Let silence take you to the core of life.* (Rumi)

*We realize the importance of our voices only when we are silenced*. (Malala Yousafzai)

*If the Lord had not been my help my soul would soon have lived in the land of silence. (*Psalm 94:17)

*O God, do not keep silence; do not hold your peace or be still, O God! (*Psalm 83:1)

**Sound, silence and thinking:** In the above quotations, the word 'silence' is used in different ways. It may depict a time of waiting with clear focus, or an absence of other distractions, a letting go of the ego-self, not speaking up about something, an absence of the company of another, or a sense of desolation.

Whilst the word 'stillness' when taken literally, indicates a slowing or absence of movement, the word silence indicates an absence of sound. Although sound arises from movement, and sound is movement, human experiences of each differ. Sound is experienced as an auditory perception and movement as tactile or interoceptive perception. We can sit still and speak, or we can move and keep quiet. We may, or may not, hear our breath or heartbeat whilst sitting still, and even as we sit still there is movement in our chest as we breathe, and in all of our internal organs and systems. But when it comes to our inner awareness of our

thoughts, the distinction between noise, motion and thinking can blur. Humans generally think in strings of words, images, or a combination of both[1]. Ralph Lewis[2] (professor of psychiatry) explains how our thoughts are 'maps representing and corresponding to things that our brains have either perceived with our senses, felt with our emotions, or formed as an action plan. All of these are electrochemically mediated processes.' For example, he says, the sound of a thunderclap is 'transformed from a specific pattern of sound waves in the air, to a corresponding pattern of vibrations transmitted through your eardrum and the small bones in your middle ear to your cochlea, to a corresponding pattern of electrochemical impulses along the auditory nerve, to corresponding signals in neurons in the auditory cortex and association cortex. It also activates fear circuitry, relayed via the amygdala, and perhaps also visual circuitry that records what you saw at that moment. Signals are transmitted between neurons by chemical neurotransmitters. The entire widely distributed network activated throughout the cerebral cortex by this stimulus *is* the experience at that moment.'

And yet, we don't actually need stimuli from our ears to hear sound. For example, Sigmund Freud[3] writes that in our dreams 'there is no actual source of sound around; all the voices are silently generated by our minds, not by some external entity.' Audiologist Dr Rivka Strom[4] explains that tinnitus is believed to be generated by the brain and not the ear and can be experienced as very loud noise by people who were born deaf, as well as those with good hearing or hearing loss.

**Seeking silence:** Katherine Bouton[5], who is partially deaf, asks the question: 'What do we hear when there's nothing at all to hear? She observes that George Prochnik, the author of *In Pursuit of Silence*, went in search of the quietest place in the world and eventually found himself in the basement sanctuary of the Trappist New Melleray Abbey, in Iowa. The monk who showed him the way warned him, Prochnik writes, "that the silence of the room was so intense that it was likely to 'take me outside of my comfort zone.'" Some people from big cities, the monk added, find themselves "physically unable to remain in the chapel for even five minutes." As it turned out, it wasn't as quiet as it might have been. There was another monk in the room, "a large man sitting with his legs wide apart and his hands on his thighs, breathing quite loudly." But that doesn't seem to have disturbed Prochnik's sense of the deep silence. The monks, he observed, listen to silence for self-knowledge. Far from being out of his comfort zone, he was disappointed when it was time to leave.'

Creative writer Sara Maitland[6] wrote about her own search for silence and her study of it in its various forms. She travelled to the mountainous Sinai Desert to experience something of the silence known by the Desert Fathers and Mothers and this is her description of her experience one night: 'It was absolutely still, absolutely silent. The desert night was not very dark and the sky was *deep* – the stars did actually 'twinkle', and I had a sense of their distance – some are nearer, seem nearer, as well as larger or brighter: The sky was not a black ceiling, but an infinite recession. In the night the starlit silence, the time, the distance – the infinite. Yet underneath my hand when I reached out from the sleeping bag, the sand was made of *tiny* grains, very cool and clean, fine-textured, soft against my fingers. It was probably the most profound silence I have ever engaged with. It was this intensity of silence that I had come to listen to; this was the silence that the desert hermits sought here in this desert, while they engaged in their enormous courageous battle against 'the world, the flesh and the devil' and their own noisy selves. Through that desert night I conceived a vast, lovely and awestruck sense of God. God, in this desert. …. I started to think that perhaps silence *is* God. Perhaps God is silence – the shining, spinning ring 'of pure and endless light'. … Perhaps the verb 'God' – speaking, creating – is one more reflex of the infinite generosity, the self-giving abandonment, the kenotic love of God. … Far from 'all silence is waiting to be broken' perhaps all speech is crying out 'like a woman in travail' to be reabsorbed into silence, into death, into liminal space that opens out in to the presence of the everlasting silence.'

**Invitation to Silence:** It is hard to capture the ineffable nature of silence. Even such well-chosen words as Sara Maitland's cannot fully do it justice. If the noise of our thoughts manifests in words and images, what is it like when we have no words or images? Today's transcript is purposely image-free to minimise 'noise' and this also gives us space to take a few minutes to notice 'silence'. As we turn the page, we might observe what arises for us as we open ourselves to a space that fades into blank wordlessness.

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**Reflections before meditation:** Let us return now to a few more perspectives on silence:

*The trees, the flowers, the plants grow in silence. The stars, the sun, the moon move in silence. Silence gives us a new perspective.* (Saint Mother Teresa)

*The silence of the spheres is the music of a wedding feast.* (Thomas Merton)

*Silence is not just the space or medium through which sound comes. Rather silence comes to voice in sound.* (John O'Donohue)

*Prayer is sitting in silence until it silences us, choosing gratitude until we are grateful.* (Fr Richard Rohr)

**Beginning Meditation:** As we prepare for our meditation, we might feel more attuned today to sounds outside of us and within us, or the silence from which these arise; and so we allow all this to be just as it is. You might take a moment to notice any tightness in your shoulders and neck and allow any tension in your muscles to relax. Allow your back to rest upright. Be conscious of where your body is touching the chair. Allow your breathing to settle; allow your body to slow down. You may wish to repeat a sacred word silently, bring to mind an image or simply return to the rhythm of your breath when your mind wanders.

**Meditation for 25-minutes.**

**Final reflections:**

*Peace is letting go—returning to the silence that cannot enter the realm of words because it is too pure to be contained in words. Malidoma Patrice Somé*

*At the core of the world and at the core of the soul is silence that ripples with the music of beauty and the whisperings of the eternal. John O'Donohue*

**Closing prayer:** Loving and Eternal God, we thank you for the gifts of prayer, meditation and contemplation. We thank you for being with us and for this community. May we, therefore, pray with all others, as one community, one world and one spirit to One God…Moments of your personal prayer follow…**Amen.**

Thank you for meditating with us, please join us again soon. Stay safe and well.

**Resources:**


(1) Healthline Language Do deaf people think in a certain language?
(2) Ralph Lewis, 'What Actually Is a Thought? And How Is Information Physical?' in Psychology Today.
(3) Sigmund Freud (1900) 'The Interpretation of Dreams'
(4) Dr Rivka Strom, in article by Laura Garrick on Tinnitus
(5) Katherine Bouton 'Silence is Noisy' in www.sciencefriday.com
(6) Sara Maitland (2008) 'A Book of Silence: A journey in search of the pleasures and powers of silence' Granta Publications.
(7) James Finley Thomas Merton's Path to the Palace of Nowhere – Levels of Silence. YouTube
(8) John Butler The Language of Silence




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