

The Power Of Silence



Entering The Silence

A GREAT deal has been said and written during the past few years about “entering the silence,” as the phrase goes. Without doubt, most of the teaching under this head is of great value. We live in a nervous, hurrying age, and too much cannot be said about the resources of the meditative life. Nevertheless, certain vaguenesses have crept in, and some people have followed the wrong clue in their search for the values of silence.

Recent tendencies have been so largely mystical that it is now necessary to differentiate more sharply than when the first edition of the present book was published. Moreover, certain problems have arisen that were not previously considered. It is important, then, to investigate the whole field afresh, not now for the purpose of suggestively describing the experience but for the sake of clearness.

1) The most superficial objection to the method that has been made is that, to “enter the silence” is to fall asleep. In such cases it may be that the experimenter needed rest, and if so nothing could have been better than sleep. Or, it may be that there was too much relaxation, a mere “letting go” rather than a change of activity. But mere relaxation is only a beginning. The essential is uplifting, enriching meditation, and meditation is not mere quietude.

It is doubtful if a purely passive mental state is a possibility for any individual, under any circumstances. Hence, to surrender all activity is to lose consciousness in sleep. On the other hand, to meditate successfully is to combine wise, discriminative receptivity with uplifting activity. It is not then a question of eliminating activity, but of substituting reposeful for nervous activity. It is the nervous wear and tear that works mischief.

To stop this is to be ready once more to return to work. Usually this nervous activity is restricted to a very limited region. To conquer the nervousness one must approach it with “the power of silence.” The emphasis is upon the “power” rather than upon the “silence.”

2) A faithful devotee of the doctrine once triumphantly exclaimed that now, at last, she could “enter the silence,” for she could make her mind a “perfect blank.” Now, it is often desirable to fall into a reverie, with no definite thought in mind. But to make the mind a “blank” would be to fall asleep.

During the waking hours the stream of consciousness constantly flows, and it is a question what trains of thought to give attention to, what ones to disregard or inhibit; for one must always give attention to something. One cannot empty the mind. But one may fill it with a chosen series of thoughts.

To withdraw the attention from particular objects would be to scatter one’s powers and cultivate mere vagueness. This is precisely the course one should not pursue. For it is development that is desired, not reversion to the great “undifferentiated.” To the cultivation of this habit of vagueness is due nearly all that is undesirable in spiritual meditation.

3) The notion that the mind should be made a “blank” is closely connected with another misunderstanding, namely, in regard to concentration. In the first place, it has been erroneously supposed that the mind can concentrate with no definite object to dwell upon; and in the second place, it has been thought that concentration is a sustained act of voluntary attention. These suppositions are psychologically as ungrounded as the notion that there can be a mental state of pure passivity.

It is a very common error to conclude that if the attention shifts one lacks the power of concentration. But careful observation confirms the statement made by Professor James, that “there is no such thing as voluntary attention sustained for more than a few seconds at a time. What is called sustained voluntary attention is a repetition of successive efforts which bring back the topic to mind. The topic once brought back, if a congenial one, develops . . . no one can possibly attend continuously to an object that does not change.”

Successful concentration consists, then, in continuous acts of attention given to various details of the object under consideration. No one can long attend to one idea. In fact an idea lingers but a moment. The succeeding moment brings, at best, only an idea that resembles it. It is not only impossible to hold the attention in one direction, without a break, but it is undesirable to try to do this.

No one should be discouraged who finds that the attention shifts from phase to phase of the general trend of consciousness.

This is the way of nature. Consciousness lives; it is not a dead affair. In all life there is change. The attainments which eventually come out of the realm of change are due to a succession of little movements. Unity is won by moving in a general direction. And likewise with the mind, unity or concentration is attained by continually bringing the attention back to the point. One should give no thought to the wanderings of attention, but simply turn the mind once more in the chosen direction.

To concentrate, then, is to gather the scattering lines of consciousness and focus them upon a unifying idea. Concentration is a highly active mental state, not mere passivity, or “letting go.”

To concentrate is to exclude. If your “silence” is to be of an uplifting sort, you must wisely select a line of profitable thinking, then give your mind so fully to it that undesirable thoughts will be shut out. If the consciousness of sensation intrudes, never mind the intrusion; fill your mind more actively with the thought which you wish to meditate upon. To be restfully silent is of course to be calm within. But it is a choice between activities, not between activity and passivity.

If you are to meditate in peace you must be peaceful.

But to be peaceful you must be so strong in your attitude of inner poise that no other activity can break into your concentrated repose. “Power through repose” is Miss Call’s phrase, that is, the power of repose, not the weakness of it. The majority of people are rather loosely put together. What they need is not to dangle and “let go,” but to take hold of themselves and turn their reorganised life into a wise channel.

Again, some devotees of the “silence” have thought that there was some sort of mysterious power or feeling which one might enter into by opening the mind in what they called a “spiritual” direction. Hence they have entered the silence with no particular idea in mind.

Now, it is desirable to help people out of the thought of “mysteries,” not into them. It is the clear-cut, the intelligible idea, that is the desirable. To set out upon a vague search for the mysterious is to open the door to all sorts of abnormal mental experiences. It is because of this that so many have found it altogether imprudent to try to enter the silence at all. But the trouble lay in themselves. We find what we look for. If you believe in the occult, you will invite it.

If you are in search of the sane, the quicker you cut loose from all vague groping after the mysterious the better.

For the majority, then, it is far wiser to choose an entirely definite idea, such as a passage from Scripture, and make the silent hour a decidedly intelligent religious experience, with clear-cut ideals in view. For it is fineness of thinking, the kind of thinking which refines, uplifts, purifies, that brings about the desirable states of repose. Such thinking clarifies the brain, whereas the vacuity above referred to muddles it.

Some people in these days have given themselves over to this vagueness to such an extent that they seem to have lost the power of discrimination. But unless one can discriminate one had better not try to enter the silence. If, then, you are unable to discover a refining thought of your own which will make your meditation definite, it would be well for you to read some uplifting book until you find an idea that is worth thinking about.

Do not then begin your meditation with a reverie. After you have actually settled down into restfulness, and found a desirable idea to dwell upon, that is, after you have thought for a while, you may well yield yourself to the mood you find yourself in. But it is the active linking which

leads to this, and what goes on in a state of reverie is subconscious “brooding” over some absorbing idea.

Hence it is that a reverie is oftentimes very productive. Granted an interesting thought, the mind is able to develop it. But if you put no corn in your mill you will have no meal; if you put in poor material you will produce poor results.

It is plain that we are considering the same thing under two heads. To concentrate is to discriminate, and one cannot discriminate unless one gives selective attention. The trouble, then, has been vagueness in regard to what the whole process of “entering the silence” is for. The feeling side of life has been cultivated at the expense of the intellectual. But to know what it is well to feel, that is, what sentiments are worthy of increase, one must first use one’s wits.

Mere indiscriminate “letting go” is never desirable.

But to go apart from “the madding crowd” and think for one’s self in wise solitude is highly desirable. Moreover, it is well to know how to absent one’s self from any environment one may chance to be in. To possess this power one must know how to concentrate. Concentration, then, is the beginning; and this is far simpler, after all, than many have thought.

The essential is first to have a clear idea of what concentration is not, then busy one’s self with what it is, that is, the persistent doing of whatever line of activity is chosen.

We are concentrating all the time, while we go about our daily tasks. There is nothing mysterious about it. Why not “enter the silence,” then, in the same common-sense sort of way that you would set about to make bread or kindle a fire? You can make a fine art of housework as well as of anything else. And there is more that is sound and wise in the well-ordered home than in all the occult gatherings that were ever gathered to meditate upon the indiscriminate.

4) Again, we see the vast importance not only of a sound theory of first principles but of intellectual standards, definite conclusions in regard to what is worthwhile. Vagueness concerning spiritual meditation springs largely out of the tendency to revert to Oriental pantheism and the Yogi practices. To accept mysticism in theory is to accept it in practice. To reject it philosophically is to reject it in conduct.

Hence the vast importance of Christian theism in contrast with all pantheistic systems.

The crucial question is this: Is God known through sense? If we conclude that He is, we at once put Him on the same level with ourselves. To lower Him to the sense-level is to reject all the distinctions which make intelligible our thought of Him as the Father. When all relationships have been reduced to a dead level, the door is opened wide to all the illusions and errors of mysticism.

It is then easy to say, “I and God are one,” to put the emphasis on the “I,” and hence to arrive at the point where all mysticism arrives—unless it is exceedingly careful—namely, at the stage of

mere egoism, if not egotism. It is but one step more to announce that “all is good,” hence to sweep away all ethical distinctions.

Christian theism very carefully distinguishes between God, the Father, and man, the worshipper. The Father is always in some sense above the personal self, or He is not known as the Father. To reduce Him to the realm of feeling is to mistake physical sensation for religious ecstasy, An untold number of illusions follow.

Only in the attitude of sonship does one maintain the right consciousness of relationship. The fact of Father-son relationship implies many considerations which lead directly away from pantheism.

One may of course hold that the divine presence is far more directly made known in the intimate precincts of the soul than through objective experience. But the closest relationship is still a relation, not an identification. Whatever the facts of the highest religious experience, it is clear that the experience means much or little according to the values attributed to it.

Each man’s account of it betrays his grade of development. As a matter of fact and as an affair of values, the experience is plainly relative. Hence the description of it should differentiate its various factors.

5) The fundamental error on the part of those who confuse the religious experience is undoubtedly the misconception of the place and value of the intellect. Throughout religious history one finds that the mystically inclined are either intellectually deficient, or have arrived at the conclusion that truth cannot be known through the intellect. This of course means that the revelation of God’s presence is theoretically limited to the realm of feeling.

No conclusion could be more inconsistent. For no one puts more emphasis upon the (intellectual) inferences drawn from the facts of religious experience than the devotee of mere feeling or mystic intuition. The chief difference between the rationalist and the mystic is that the former pursues his inferences to the end while the latter is satisfied with imperfect and unscrutinised conclusions.

Now, it requires but little reflection to discover that feeling comes first; immediate experience relates the mind to something objective, then thought seeks the meaning of that experience. The devotee of mere feeling in the religious world corresponds to the sensationalist in the world of nature.

It is the province of the idealist to correct the inferences of both, and point out that only by rational scrutiny may one learn what is real. The idealist is as ready as anyone to recognise the primacy of given experience, but he points out that, for better or worse, experience has the reality and meaning which ideas sign to it. Hence the importance of a fundamental inquiry into the nature of experience.

It is precisely by virtue of the searching analyses of reason that one is able at last to discriminate the sound from the unsound in the realm of feeling, to avoid the pitfalls of pantheism, yet preserve the values which are rightly attributable to the higher religious experiences.

It may even be said that God is knowable only through reason, for not until one rationally tests the pronouncements of experience is one able to differentiate sensation from the finer sentiments, to distinguish the human will from the divine love. Nothing is of greater importance, then, in the inner life than a sound idea of God. For the idea is the clue to wise adjustment, the principle of right action.

The clearer and more carefully considered the idea, the saner will be the conduct that is shaped by it. There could be no greater mistake, then, than to suppose it to be wrong to try to understand the soul's relationship to God.

The relative worth of the intellect once understood, one is in a position to pursue the empirical inquiry to the end, to discover the values of the meditative life, and enjoy the benefits of silence. For each new experience becomes food for thought, and hence is of value for conduct.

In the long run one learns that it is not mere accumulation of feelings that gives power and worth to life. Simply to pass through an experience is only to enter the first stage of development. It is the thought and the conduct that follow which test the experience. Hence the importance of mere receptivity should not be exaggerated.

In the long run, also, it is systematic intellectual development that most directly helps the mind to concentrate. For it is the intellect that organises, defines. The intellect contributes the form, the method, makes clear the principle or law. Granted the organisation, one is free to fill it with the spirit. Hence it is balance between spirit and form that is desirable.

The foundation of composure is philosophical conviction. It is not faith without reason, but faith rationally scrutinised and developed that gives this conviction. Hence we have seen the importance throughout our inquiry of keen discrimination and the gradual development of a theory of life. As valuable as first-hand experience may be, it is rendered far more valuable by reflection.

Moreover, we have seen the importance of discernment between the lower and higher levels of consciousness. It is the reduction to a dead level, the confusion between higher and lower that is responsible for many of the false inferences of the religious devotee. The experiences on the heights are no doubt of great value, but reason is alone capable of discerning their sanity.

The higher carefully distinguished from the lower, one is free to develop the resulting data into a system. The more highly developed the system, the profounder is one's basis of repose. And after a while one no longer cares for aught that is mystical. Experience proves that it is far more profitable to turn to the works of the really great philosophers for inspiration than to the works of rambling essayists.

6) Another objection to the method of “entering the silence” is that it is an artificial device made necessary, it may be, by the needs of our nervous, hurrying age. Ordinarily, it is said, one should avoid introspection.

This criticism is sound in large part. The “silence” is a device, of temporary value, easily leading into one-sided individualism, to the neglect of urgent social problems. If men always maintained a sanctuary of the spirit in the inner life, it would not be necessary to seek “the silence” self-consciously.

It is inner silence as a habit that is desirable. It is only necessary to give specific attention to the process in so far as the objective life intrudes upon the solitudes within. And introspection is only a passing stage in the experience. The ideal is to penetrate beyond mere self-consciousness to the holy of holies, to uplift the soul in worship, breathe a silent prayer to the Father.

Yet from another point of view the criticism is unfair, since it is a law of the spiritual life that renewed consecration is the beginning of all fresh activity; and the silent communion at its best is consecration. Regarded in this way, the experience is thoroughly normal, sound and sane.

It is not the device of the sickly, or the resource of the nervously inclined; but is a glad moment of recreation on the part of the man who worships God “in spirit and in truth.” It is a rediscovery of the primal sources of the spiritual life on the part of those who no longer find values in external symbols. It is the natural act of the self-reliant soul, an expression of the freedom of true individuality; and hence valuable as a means to an end.

7) Let us then endeavour to restate some of the values of the experience as concretely as possible. In the first place, there is need of readjustment. Life has become for the moment too complex, one is trying to accomplish over-much in a given hour or day. Hence there is great waste of energy and withal increasing nervous tension. The resource is to take the text “Sufficient for each day is its own trouble.”²⁶

It is a revelation to many people who have sought to enter fully into the present to discover how largely their consciousness is ordinarily concerned with distant things. The attention is constantly turned here and there by thoughts that disturb one’s repose. The past is regarded with regret, the future with fear and suspicion. Neglected duties occur to consciousness, and there is a sense of uncertainty in regard to what the mind ought to be engaged in.

The thought occurs that perhaps one ought to be elsewhere, instead of taking time for a quiet meditation. One has set aside precisely half an hour for thought and one watches the clock lest one overstep the limit. The nervous, hurrying tide of our modern life pulses through all one’s thinking, and not for one moment is the mind in repose.

Consequently, if you really wish to profit by a half-hour’s meditation make up your mind to put aside everything else. If duties occur to mind, decide when you will attend to them, and immediately dismiss them. When the past comes up laden with regret, leave it to bury its own dead.

Tell the future that you will attend to it when it arrives. If part of your consciousness is flying north, part south and the rest up and down, call it in from all directions, as if you were drawing in an arm, gathering your forces unto yourself. Settle down reposefully upon your chair. Let the present little environment contain all there is of you. When the mind flies off again, bring it back.

Yield yourself to the moment in full enjoyment. Disconnect from the rushing currents of modern thought, and become as moderate as if you were back in the old stage-coach days, before the era of record-breaking express trains and automobiles. Do not simply banish all thoughts from your mind, but whatever you think let your thoughts radiate, as it were, from the eternal present. Remember that you are a soul dwelling in eternity.

Live in the thought of eternity for a while, and let the world of time rage on.

If you do not see what is wise for you to do next year, what plans you ought to adopt for the coming month, what you should do tomorrow, ask yourself if there is something for you to do today. The chances are that you will find something that is very well worth doing today.

Probably you will find more in the living present than you can attend to, and there you were borrowing trouble for next year! When you have settled upon the wisest thing for today, do it as well as you can. Put your whole soul into it, let it be an artistic, philosophical performance. When that is well done you will readily see what to do next.

This resource never fails. When in doubt about the future, when in need of guidance, we can, at least, be true to the best we know now. That is all that anyone can ask of us. It is not necessary to consult a book or seek out a prophet. Within the breast there is a guide for all. The wise tendency of the present is related to the wisdom of all time. Brush all else aside, discover that tendency and move forward with it, and the way into the future will open.

This is a perfectly familiar thought—that the problem of today is sufficient unto today. Yet it is no small attainment to learn how to live in the present. It is a good rule to follow throughout the day, not simply during one's half-hour of silent seclusion. The silent time is needed largely as a preparation for the remainder of the day. Put yourself into the present, make a fresh start, then make a determined effort to stand by the present.

If you catch yourself scattering your forces, living past, present and future all at once, call yourself back into the living today. Draw in your mental arms, gather your powers into yourself, and once more start out. It is really a source of genuine pleasure—this full participation in the activity of life while it is yet here, as it passes. Not until we live reposefully do we begin to experience the benefit of our powers.

Each of us has a certain amount of power. That power is sufficient to carry us through life in health, strength and happiness, with abundant liberty to do good and profit by experience. Our powers may, of course, be increased. But right here and now we have sufficient power to live sanely if we would but possess it, acquire poise and use our Power wisely. The waste of energy in the average human machine is enormous.

We waste energy by the way we walk, by nervous habits of eating, talking, working, and the like. There is an economical, rhythmical way to spend our forces which will spare us the nervous wear and tear. It is the little interior tension and excitement which is most wearing.

One need not become a slow-coach in order to avoid this nervous waste of force. It is possible to move rapidly yet harmoniously, reposefully. Possess yourself within, be at home in your own mental world, and you may move as quickly as you please on the surface.

Some people wonder how it is that others who do not seem to be physically strong are able to do so much more in the same length of time. Here is one of the secrets. They have learned how to work. They do one thing at a time, and they do that well, moderately. They live for the time being in and for that particular activity, and there is no wear and tear due to borrowing trouble from other things.

Put in other terms, the attitude of which I am speaking is optimistic. It is a state in which one is willing to trust that the future will bring what is wise and right. Pessimism scatters force and borrows trouble galore. Optimism conserves our energies and does not even anticipate plans. Pessimism kicks against the pricks and creates friction. Optimism moves with the harmonious tide of life, and is content to be carried forward.

All these states are within our control. All of us may learn to live in the present. If the present is full of hardship, the best way to overcome the hardship is to meet it here and now. Our trials do not seem so hard when we settle down to meet them in their own environment. For the same circumstances which bring the trial also bring the power to meet it. All that we need is here. There is no need to complain of the universe.

But we must do our part by learning how to live wisely and profoundly in the eternal present.

Finally, life in the present opens the way to the discovery of untold resources in the mental world. For not until we begin the experiment do we learn the richness of our present thoughts. There is much wisdom awaiting recognition. Ordinarily we are too active to discover it. When we begin to settle down reposefully we learn that the soul is a centre of revelation, an organ of the divine life; that each individual point of view is of worth in relation to ultimate truth.

Much wisdom will be made known through us when we become silent enough and receptive enough to perceive it. To live in the present is truly to become ourselves, and to become one's self is to serve the higher Power. We know not who and what we are until we thus begin to live. Thus to live is to discover that we are also members of an eternal order of being where time matters not at all.