

The Power of Silence

by Steven Taylor

Modern humans have lost touch with their inner "true self". Silence and stillness are a means to recovering happiness and contentment.

In the modern world silence has practically ceased to exist. The human race has stamped its authority over the planet Earth not just by covering its surface with concrete and destroying its plant and animal life, but also by burying the natural sounds of the Earth beneath a cacophony of man-made noise. We live our lives against the background of this cacophony, with the jagged mechanical sounds of urban-industrial society continually assaulting our ears: the roar of cars, aero planes and trains, the clanging and thudding of machinery, the noise of building and renovating, the chatter of radios and TVs in other people's cars and houses, and pop music blaring from every conceivable place. But nothing, of course, has done more to obliterate silence than the car. In the modern world it's very difficult to go anywhere where there's no possibility of being disturbed by the sound of passing cars, and the only chance that city or town dwellers get to experience something of the quietness which existed everywhere in the pre-car world is sometimes on Sundays, when the mad rushing to and fro of modern life slows down. This quietness seems so foreign now that it seems difficult to believe that a hundred years ago and before it was everywhere all the time. Back then this quietness would even have filled the busiest city centres, which would have probably had a noise level equivalent to that of a modern small village.

There's also more noise than ever before inside our houses. It's unusual to go into a house nowadays where there isn't at least one television set chattering away somewhere, even if the residents aren't actually watching it, and other forms of home entertainment compete against TV to produce the most noise: radios, CD players, computer and video games etc. In fact the only sound which is largely absent from people's houses nowadays is the voices of their occupants actually talking to one another.

Living in the midst of all this noise is bound to have a bad effect on us. All man-made noise is fundamentally disturbing—we find the sound of birds singing or of wind rushing through trees pleasing, but mechanical noise always jars and grates. And since we live our lives against a background of mechanical noise it follows that there's always an undercurrent of agitation inside us, produced by the noise. This noise is certainly one of the reasons why modern life is so stressful as well. In modern life our senses are bombarded with massive amounts of external stimuli—our fields of vision are always crowded with different (and constantly shifting) things, and our ears are bombarded with a bewildering variety of sounds, all of which clamor for our attention. Our senses have to absorb and process all this material, which takes up a lot of energy, and means that we're liable to become drained of energy or 'run down' easily. We can get out of this state by removing ourselves from all external stimuli and letting our energy-batteries naturally recharge themselves—i.e., by relaxing. But there's so much external stimuli around in the modern world and people are so unaccustomed to the absence of it, that we may never be able relax properly, which could mean living in a permanently 'run down' state.

This lack of quietness has also meant is that people are no longer used to silence, and have even, as a result, become afraid of it. Along with inactivity, silence has become something which most people are determined to avoid at all costs, and which, when they are confronted with it, unnerves them. People have become so used to the frantic pace and the ceaseless activity of modern life that they feel uneasy when they're left at a loose end with nothing to occupy their attention even for a few moments, and they feel equally uneasy when the noise they live their lives against the background of subsides. Why else is it that they need to have their radios and televisions chattering away in the background even when they're not paying attention to them?

In other words, in the modern world silence has become an enemy. And this is a terrible shame, because in reality silence is one of our greatest friends, and can—if it's allowed to reveal itself to us—have a powerfully beneficial effect on us.

Inner Noise

It's not just the noise outside us which causes us problems, though, but also the noise inside us.

In the same way that the natural quietness and stillness of the world around us is always covered over with man-made noise, the natural quietness of our minds is constantly disturbed by the chattering of our ego-selves. This chattering fills our minds from the moment we wake up in the morning till the moment we go to sleep at night—an

endless stream of daydreams, memories, deliberations, worries, plans etc. which we have no control over and which even continues (in the form of dreams) when we fall asleep. This 'inner noise' has as many bad effects as the mechanical noise outside us. It actually creates problems in our lives, when we mull over tiny inconveniences or uncertainties which seem to become important just because we're giving so much attention to them, and when we imagine all kinds of possible scenarios about future events instead of just taking them as they come. It means that we don't live in the present, because we're always either planning for and anticipating the future or remembering the past—'wandering about in times that do not belong to us and never thinking of the one that does' as Blaise Pascal wrote. This constant inner chattering also means that we can never give our full attention to our surroundings and to the activities of our lives. Our attention is always partly taken up by the thoughts in our minds, so that wherever we are and whatever we're doing we're never completely there.

It's probably possible to say that there's also more of this 'inner noise' inside human beings than there's ever been before. The hectic pace and the constant activity of our lives, the massive amount of external stimuli we're bombarded with, and the barrage of information which the mass media sends our way, have made our minds more restless and active. We've got to juggle dozens of different problems and concerns in our minds just to get by from day to day, and every new thing we see or every new piece of information which is sent our way is potentially the beginning of a whole new train of thought to occupy our minds.

The True Self

Ultimately, the most serious consequence of both this inner chattering and the noise and activity of the modern world is that they separate us from our true selves.

Our 'true self' might be called the ground, or the essence, of our beings. It's the pure consciousness inside us, the consciousness-in-itself which remains when we're not actually conscious of anything. It's what remains when the activity of our senses and the activity of our minds cease. The sense-impressions we absorb from the world and the thoughts which run through our minds are like the images on a cinema screen, but our 'true self' is the cinema screen itself, which is still there even when there aren't any images being projected on to it.

Experiencing this 'consciousness-in-itself' can have a massively therapeutic effect. It brings a sense of being firmly rooted in ourselves, of being truly who we are. We also have a sense of being truly where we are, realizing that before we were only half-present, and everything we see around us seems intensely real and alive, as if our perceptions have become much more acute. But above all, we experience a profound sense of inner peace and natural happiness. As the Hindu and Buddhist traditions have always held, the nature of consciousness-in-itself (which means the consciousness inside us and the consciousness which pervades the whole universe) is bliss. Getting into contact with the pure consciousness inside us enables us, therefore, to experience this bliss. Indeed, it could be said that it's only when we do this that we can experience true happiness. Usually what we think of as happiness is hedonistic or ego-based—that is, based around pressing instinctive 'pleasure buttons' or around receiving attention and praise from others and increasing our self-esteem. But the kind of deep and rich happiness we experience when we're in touch with the ground or essence of our beings is a natural, spiritual happiness, which doesn't depend on anything external, and doesn't vanish as soon as the thing which produced it is taken away. It's a happiness which comes from experiencing the divine inside us—and also the divine inside everything else, since the pure consciousness inside us is the same pure consciousness inside everything else, and the pure consciousness of the universe itself.

Making Contact with the True Self

Whether we're in touch with this 'true self' or not depends on how much external stimuli our senses are taking in from the world around us, and on how much activity there is going on in our minds. If there is a lot of noise, movement and activity taking place around us then we can't help but give our attention to it; and in the same way, when there is a lot of 'inner noise' taking place we have to give our attention to that too. And when our attention is completely absorbed in this way—either by external stimuli on their own, such as when we watch TV; by 'inner noise' on its own, such as when we daydream; or by both of them at the same time—it's impossible for us to be in contact with our 'true self' to any degree, in the same way that it's impossible to see a cinema screen in itself when it's full of dancing images. Being in contact with our 'true self' is a state of attentionless-ness, when our minds are completely empty.

What we have to do if we want to get into contact with this part of ourselves is, therefore, to withdraw our attention from these things. And this is, of course, what we do when we meditate: first of all, we remove ourselves from external stimuli, by sitting in a quiet room and closing our eyes. And then there's only 'inner noise' standing between us and consciousness-in-itself, which we try to quieten by concentrating on a mantra or on our breathing. If we manage to stop the inner noise (and therefore stop our attention being absorbed in it) pure consciousness immerses us and we become our true selves.

And this brings us back to the most serious problem caused by the massive amount of external stimuli (including noise) which our senses are bombarded with in the modern world, and by the intensified 'inner noise' which modern life generates. It's not just a question of completely closing yourself off to external stimuli and shutting down 'inner noise', so that you can experience a state of total immersion in pure consciousness. It's possible to have a foot in both camps, so to speak—to live a normal life in the world, being exposed to external stimuli and experiencing inner noise, and at the same time still be rooted in your real self. That is, it's possible to be partially immersed in consciousness-in-itself, and for your attention to be partially absorbed by external stimuli and inner talk. But this can only happen when there is just a moderate degree of both of the latter.

It would probably have been quite easy for our ancestors to live in this way, because they weren't exposed to a great deal of external stimuli and because their lives were relatively slow-paced and stress-free, which would have meant that their attention needn't have been completely absorbed by external stimuli and inner talk. Perhaps this even partly explains why native peoples seem to possess a natural contentment which modern city dwellers have lost—because their more sedate lives mean that they're able to be in touch with the ground of their being as they go about their lives, and that they can therefore continually experience something of the bliss of which is the nature of consciousness-in-itself.

For us, however, this has become very difficult. There's always so much noise and activity both inside and outside us that our attention is always completely absorbed, so that we can't be in contact with our real selves. We spend all our time living outside ourselves, lost in the external world of activity and stimuli or in the inner world of our own thoughts. We're like a person who plans to go away for a few days but finds so much to occupy them in the place they go to that they never go home again, and never again experience the peace and contentment which lie there. This is certainly one of the reasons why so many people nowadays seem to live in a state of dissatisfaction—because they've lost touch with the natural happiness inside them. That natural happiness has been buried underneath a storm of external stimuli and what Meister Eckhart called 'the storm of inward thought'.

As a result of this it's essential for us, in the modern world, to go out of our way to cultivate silence ourselves. Circumstances may oblige us to live in cities, and our jobs may be stressful and demanding, but we're still free to remove ourselves from external stimuli and to try to quieten our minds by meditating, going out into the countryside, or just by sitting quietly in our rooms. We don't have to fill our free time with attention-absorbing distractions like TV and computer games, which take us even further away from ourselves. We should do the opposite: stop our attention being absorbed like this so that we can find ourselves again.