

# **Silence and Space: The Gift of Nothingness**

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Silent space is in the background of every thing, every thought, and every feeling we can experience. Many scholars claim that it is the kind loving space that holds it all with a sense of wonder and awe (e.g., e.g., Brach, 2013; Dass, 1971; Welwood, 2002; Wilber, 1970). Because silence and space are concepts referring to the absence of matter or sound, it is extremely challenging to explore. In many cases, it is ignored altogether. This article is an invitation for readers to explore these precious empty pockets of space and silence in life where we can catch glimpses of this ungraspable beauty and mystery. In addition, it is an invitation for readers to consider the value of offering this silence and space to each other to create a more peaceful and loving world.

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"Let any action you take come out of silence or loving"

Ajahn Shanti

Silent space is in the background of every thing, every thought, and every feeling we can experience. Many scholars claim that it is the loving space that holds it all (e.g., Brach, 2013; Dass, 1971; Welwood, 2002; Wilber, 1970). Because silence and space are concepts referring to the absence of matter or sound, it is very challenging to explore. I invite you to look for places where we can catch glimpses of this.

Arthur Rubinstein, the world famous pianist was once asked, "How can you use the notes with such mastery?" He answered, "I use the notes the same way that others do, but the pauses ... ah! That's where the art lies." Political activist and leader, Mohandas Gandhi was known to take one day a week to meditate and stay away from work. When he was asked why he did that, he said, "It is to ensure that all of my decisions in the following week come from the deepest possible place." That beautiful empty space is met in the pauses of life. It is those pauses that become the source of wise action and creativity. David Remnick (2005) quoted the novelist, Don Delillo, saying the following.

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"It (the writing) comes out of all the time a writer wastes. We stand around, look out the window, walk down the hall, come back to the page, and in those intervals, something subterranean is forming, a literal dream comes out of daydreaming. It's too deep to be attributed to clear sources (p. 141)."

When we are pausing and resting, we sometimes think we are just wasting time. Those pauses are actually the source of energy and inspiration. It is like sleep. It seems like an idle waste of time but it becomes the source of our energy and vitality the next day. It brings us back in touch with the very essence of our being. I invite you to consider the following verse (verse 11) from the *Tao te Ching*, one of the main scriptures of Taoism (Lao Tzu, 1992).

We join spokes together in a wheel,  
but it is the center hole  
that makes the wagon move.

We shape clay into a pot,  
but it is the emptiness inside  
that holds whatever we want.

We hammer wood for a house,  
but it is the inner space  
that makes it livable.

We work with being,  
but non-being is what we use.

(trans. Stephen Mitchell, p. 11 )

Silence and space is so difficult to find in modern society. We are so busy squeezing ourselves and each other into preshaped molds of what a good, successful, respectable human being should be like. It is like being stuffed in a sardine can. We have no space to pause. We have no space to be our natural selves. Most of us do not even know what that even means. When there is space, we can contact that deeper inner place that allows us to remember who we are. When there is space, we can listen to that inner voice that guides us to our calling. When there is space, we can listen to that inner voice that guides us to wise responses to the world. This is precisely why Mohandas Gandhi created that space; that one day to meditate every week. This is precisely why there was a holy Sabbath in Jewish and Christian traditions.

The most precious moments in life are discovered when we do nothing but look at the mountain, the sky, the stars, the ocean, the trees, the caterpillar, the flower, or our lover. We often sense a mysterious beauty when we do nothing but listen to the birds, the wind, or the waves. When we meditate and are fortunate enough to find delicious moments where we are empty of thoughts - there it is - truth, freedom, love, peace. Some people even call this God. Most of what we deeply value is found in those spaces. Many mystics throughout history have suggested that it is in the spaces in between the sounds, the busy-ness, the doing, where we find God. Meister Eckhart, the legendary Christian mystic and scholar, once said, "There is nothing so much like God in all the universe as silence."

By seeking and creating silence and space in our lives, we actually create silence and space for others. By remaining silent and listening, not asking for their attention, we give other people space to be themselves. This is why listening to others is so important. It sends the message to others saying, "I don't have to control you to love you. I can love you just as you are." Brenda Ueland (n.d.), a wonderful radio host and writer, once said the following about the art of listening.

"Now, how to listen? It's harder than you think. I don't believe in critical listening, for that only puts a person in a straitjacket of hesitancy. He begins to choose his words solemnly or primly. His little inner fountain cannot spring. Critical listeners dry you up. But creative listeners are those who want you to be recklessly yourself, even at your very worst, even vituperative, bad-tempered. They are laughing and just delighted with any manifestation of yourself, bad or good. For true listeners know that if you are bad-tempered it does not mean that you are always so. They don't love you just when you are nice; they love all of you."

Many of us have been fortunate enough to experience someone truly listening to us at some point in time. It may be when you were a young child or it may have been yesterday. Whenever this happens, it is truly a wonderful experience. The following is a poem by John Fox (n.d.) about this kind of experience.

### **When Someone Deeply Listens To You**

When someone deeply listens to you  
it is like holding out a dented cup  
you've had since childhood  
and watching it fill up with  
cold, fresh water.  
When it balances on top of the brim,  
you are understood.  
When it overflows and touches your skin,  
you are loved.

When someone deeply listens to you  
the room where you stay  
starts a new life  
and the place where you wrote  
your first poem  
begins to glow in your mind's eye.  
It is as if gold has been discovered!

When someone deeply listens to you  
your barefeet are on the earth  
and a beloved land that seemed distant  
is now at home within you.

If you long for this kind of experience again (or for the first time), I invite you to offer it to yourself. I invite you to sit down and put everything down and listen. Listen to everything your mind is saying and listen to the empty spaces in between the words, sound, and images appearing in your mind. When we receive this from others, it is a beautiful gift. When we receive it from ourselves, it is priceless. It is priceless because we know that we are available to listen to ourselves at any time. All we need to do is carve out a few minutes from our busy lives and voila! The love of your life is right here with you, ready to listen to everything you have to say.

We cannot see this beautiful, silent, loving space, that is our deepest essence, if our mind is too busy. This is why it is so difficult to be genuinely kind and loving to others when we are busy. There was once an interesting research study that examined our ability to be kind, caring, and loving when we feel busy. Darley and Bateson (1973) examined the reactions of students in a seminary to an emergency situation. These students were randomly divided into two groups. One group was asked to make a

speech about seminary jobs. The other group was asked to speak about the bible story of the Good Samaritan. Some of the participants in each of these groups was told that they were late for the task and others were told that they had a few minutes but they should head over to the room anyway. As they were walking over to the room where they were to give the speech, they passed a man sitting slumped in the doorway, who was moaning and coughing. The researchers were interested to see how many from each group would stop to help this man. The results showed that, the most powerful variable in predicting the helping behavior was the amount of "hurriedness" induced in the participant. The participants who were told that they had a few minutes were much more likely to help than the participants who were told they were late. Compared to the participants who were asked to speak about seminary jobs, the participants who were asked to speak about the Good Samaritan were more likely to help. However, this difference was not nearly as large as the difference between the hurried group and the non-hurried group. In her novel, *Precious Bane*, Mary Webb (1924), the legendary novelist and poet, wrote, "If you stop to be kind, you must swerve often from your path (p. 43)."

Tara Brach, my wonderful meditation teacher, often tells us that one of the signs we have lost sight of that beautiful space is "speeding". This study confirms this idea quite clearly. When we are busy, it is easy to lose sight of this. The Chinese character for the word, "busy" is written 忙. This character is made of two original characters put together. The left side comes from a character that looks like 心 and it means "soul," "heart," or "mind." The right side of the character is 亡 and it means "to lose" or "to die." Therefore, in this language, to be busy is to lose one's soul (mind), or to allow our heart to die. Recognizing space and silence is like contacting our heart or soul and nourishing it. When we are busy, we do the exact opposite. We distance ourselves from our heart and we deprive it from the nutrients it needs to survive and thrive. Unfortunately, this kind of "rushing" is pervasive in the modern world. Thomas Merton (1966), the legendary Christian mystic, wrote the following about rushing and busyness.

"There is a pervasive form of contemporary violence to which the idealist... most easily succumbs: activism and overwork. The rush and pressure of modern life are a form, perhaps the most common form, of its innate violence. To allow oneself to be carried away by the multitude of conflicting concerns, to surrender to too many demands, to commit oneself to too many projects, to want to help everyone in everything, is to succumb to violence. More than that, it is cooperation in violence. The frenzy of this kind of activism neutralizes our work for peace. It destroys our own inner capacity for peace. It destroys the fruitfulness of one's own work, because it kills the root of inner wisdom which makes work fruitful (p. 81)."

It seems that the wise people in the world are the people who do not forget the importance of space and silence. They know that it is in the glimpses of these silent spaces that we recognize who we really are deep inside (Maslow, 1971). And that remembering, allows us to "re-member" - to re-enter the world with the awareness that we are members; that we belong to this universe. It allows us to live knowing that this is where I am really supposed to be. This is where I belong. This is my home. Do you have a membership card yet? If you don't, I invite you to look into those spaces in between your active moments, the spaces between your thoughts, the spaces between the words we speak or hear, the spaces between yourself and others.

To conclude, I invite you to sit back and experience the following poem by Pablo Neruda (1997).

### **Keeping Quiet**

Now we will count to twelve  
and we will all keep still.

This one time upon the earth,  
let's not speak any language,  
let's stop for one second,  
and not move our arms so much.

It would be a delicious moment,  
without hurry, without locomotives,  
all of us would be together  
in a sudden uneasiness.

The fishermen in the cold sea  
would do no harm to the whales  
and the peasant gathering salt  
would look at his torn hands.

Those who prepare green wars,  
wars of gas, wars of fire,  
victories without survivors,  
would put on clean clothing  
and would walk alongside their brothers  
in the shade, without doing a thing.

What I want shouldn't be confused  
with final inactivity:  
life alone is what matters,  
I want nothing to do with death.

If we weren't unanimous  
about keeping our lives so much in motion,  
if we could do nothing for once,  
perhaps a great silence would  
interrupt this sadness,  
this never understanding ourselves  
and threatening ourselves with death,  
perhaps the earth is teaching us

when everything seems to be dead  
and then everything is alive.

Now I will count to twelve  
and you keep quiet and I'll go.

(trans. Stephen Mitchell, pp. 155-162)

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