

SPIRITUAL SILENCE -AN INDIAN PERSPECTIVE AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE IN MENTAL, EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL HEALTH.

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Abstract

The proposed theoretical research paper aims to highlight the importance of Spiritual Practice of Silence in the emotional and mental health. It will explore the indigenous philosophy and design of Spiritual Silence by acknowledging the prevalent practices in Hinduism and Buddhism and its effects on mental and emotional health. The main objective of this article is to establish Spiritual Silence as a veritable intervention tool in mental health by the virtue of its ingenuity in fostering self-awareness, increasing concentration, emotional regulation, volitional control over thoughts and reactions.

Keywords- Silence, Meta-awareness, spiritual wellbeing

Introduction

“Silence, the unique language, the ever-surging Heart, is the state of Grace”

-Sri Ramana Maharshi

Silence (Maun)- interpretations in Hinduism

Silence is often considered as the absence of noise. It spans from a momentary pause to arduous vows of silence with its significance ranging from allowing the noise to make sense to shifting perspectives. It is popular in many religious and spiritual practices where silence is awarded adjective of being the toughest of all sadhanas and penances. *Maun* (Practice of Silence) has contributed to the enlightenment of many spiritual gurus including Gautam Buddha. It is considered to be a harbinger of peace and tranquil, a language that is beyond words and connects one to the soul. The peace of mind is a much sought-after state in times of rising mental health issues. In the pandemic of emotional and mental issues including overthinking, anxiety, mood disorders, depression and others, the spiritual retreats have offered Silence as a practice to foster wellbeing.

Silence in Hinduism is interpreted multi-dimensionally and is found to be contributing to various aspects of the mind accordingly. Even though, Hinduism proclaims the creation of the Universe to be started by the primordial sound, the fact that everything was soundless anything took place, brings a lot of power to the soundlessness.

Silence, is hence interpreted as *Asat*, a word repeatedly used in *Rig Ved*, that is denoted as a background or a platform to emergence of sounds and a place where sound can be interpreted and insights can be derived. Therefore, *Asat*, is an indeterminate space that transcends all sounds and perceptions. It may be encapsulating chaos and order, arrangement of all the forms of sounds and perceptions, which again is a noise which moves downwards when distilled forms tones. (*Rig Veda* VII.104.1,10,11). And so, Ramana Maharshi affirms that all the roots of the inner chaos stem from *I* and when the ego is dissolved in the Heart, the eternal presence will be felt, which is where the thoughts from the ego also dissolve and what remains is silence(*maun*). This is the innermost core of the being.

यद्वाचाऽनभ्युदितं येन वागभ्युद्यते

यच्छ्रोत्रेण न श्रुणोति येन श्रोत्रमिदं श्रुतम्

तदेव ब्रह्म त्वं विद्धि नेदं यदिदमुपासते- [Eight Upanishads Vol.1](#). Advaita Ashrama. pp. 49–53

Meaning- That cannot be uttered with speech rather it reveals the speech

That cannot be heard, but reveals the ears

To become Brahman, not the object of worship

In Kena Upanishad, silence is interpreted as the gap between the knower and the knowing, a transcendental state which reveals the truth rather than telling the truth. It also affirms that even in the negativity of the thoughts, the gap established through silence will enable the knower to extract the truth from the known. This essential gap takes away the onus from the process of knowing and starts to be unaffected by the projections taking place between the state of knowing and not knowing, further allowing for the transcendence from a state of silence versus a state of non-silence. This transcendence gives the taste of Brahman (the eternal presence). This is how silence is experienced in the stillness of the being.

Stages of consciousness

It is established so far that the sacred space of silence is the ultimate or absolute goal of the spiritual practice of silence. This state is achieved by transcending limits of one level of consciousness to another. Consciousness here is the state of being aware of oneself and the surrounding, and so Vedic science proposes 4 levels of awareness or consciousness and 3 transition states that are-

1. Vaishvaanara (Conscious, Waking stage, Gross body)
2. Unmani – It is often depicted as the pleasurable state one finds himself when transitioning from a conscious state to dream state)
3. Taijasya (Dreaming, Unconscious stage, Subtle body)- This is the state where conscious and unconscious patterns are played out including desires, attractions, aversions and attachments.
4. Aladani- It is the transition state where latent patterns, thoughts and impressions (samskars) start to arise and unfolded. One has to move beyond the impressions and patterns and move forward.
5. Prajna- (Deep sleep, Subconscious stage, Causal body)- This is where the seeds of deeper patterns and impressions that wait for a favorable encouragement.
6. Samadhi- The transition state where the observer, observed and the object is collapsed into one. This happens in subtle state, and not consciously. It transcends one from the upheavals and crests and troughs of the earthly life after achieving self-realization.
7. Turiya (Super-consciousness, Absolute, Brahman)- This is the state where every other state emerges from and it permeates all of them. This is one proclaims "I am That", and is Still, in silence.

Silence, is the fastest way to reach Turiya or Super-consciousness, where all the external noise is abolished and focus is directed inwards, to the internal noise.

Because of the spiritual significance of Silence, an entire month of Bhadrapada or Bhadon (August- September) is dedicated to maun-vrat (vow of silence) intended for the purity of speech. Silence, here is used to bring austerity and control of sense organs (indriyas).

Maun in religions

Monastic silence in Christianity has roots in old testament in the psalms of David- "I was silent and still; I held my peace to no avail; my distress grew worse, my heart became hot within me. While I mused, the fire burned; then I spoke with my tongue" (Psalm 39: 3).

"For God alone my soul waits in silence; from him comes my salvation." (Psalm 62)

In Judaism, silence finds its place in monasteries, synagogues, yeshivas, and *beit midrash* (house of study) especially between prayers where there is observance of silence for 2 minutes.

In Buddhism, noble silence is a concept which aims to achieve the unification of body, mind and speech that allows for the understanding of underpinnings of the thought process and effects on speech and body. This in turn is said to help in examination of thoughts and entering a meditative state called jhana as unified mind.

Researches in Practice of Silence

Silence – the default state of the brain

The sense organs receive the stimulus from the environment that are conveyed to the brain, who then interprets, stores and manages the information and delegates the task or mode of action to the body. The brain hence becomes the executive manager in the entire process that has the important function to offer and is dependent on the environmental stimuli. But what happens when the outside noise is prohibited from entering the sense organs? Few significant researches have tried to monitor the neurological phenomena of the brain while doing executive functions of playing games and solving puzzles in-order to mark the conditions of heightened brain activity. One such research found that there are both positive and negative spikes while playing the mental games. The negative spikes made the researchers curious about its origin which they found to be present even in the relaxed state. This establishes a default or base line neuronal activity happening all the time in the brain, which can be called as default state of the brain.

In yet another study, physician Luciano Bernardi (2006) was observing the relaxing effects of music in the people's bodies where the cardiovascular parameters like blood pressure, heart rate and circulation in the brain were being monitored. He found that maximum relaxation was achieved in the absence of music (sound), to which he theorized that the silence, a contrast between noise, perhaps intensifies the arousal and concentrates the mind to achieve deeper relaxation.

The relaxing effects of silence is further accentuated by research done by Michael Wehr (2010) on the brains of mice which showed him a separate set of signals bursting when the sound is stopped and silence ensues. He concluded that continued silence helps the brain to relaxation.

Silence for mental and emotional wellbeing

Dr. K.S. Ayyar, a psychiatrist took part in the Vipassana retreat where there is 10-days long silence. He describes the experience to be starting with partial sensory deprivation as the electronics are also prohibited. This opened up a space for deeper thinking and examination of thoughts, where in the unconscious repressed feelings, sensations, impressions of

the past resurface into the conscious awareness. He also writes about the sympathetic and para-sympathetic activities like discharges from the nose, discomfort in the eyes, palpitations, vibrations, kinesthetic sensations, abdominal movement and sweating occurs and subsides. Muscular discomfort, fluctuations in the emotional states ranging from fearfulness to panic, from anger to sexual arousal also spike and subside. In conclusion, out of experience, he affirms the emotional, mental and physical shifts by the virtue of silence.

Silence as the background for meta-awareness and discernment

The mind is termed as vacillating by nature which is in constant search of information and keeps cycling the information to bring conclusions. This nature of mind leads to mind wandering when attention isn't focused on one task. Mindfulness-based meditation, rather allows for the mind to wander, which is proposed by Hagerty (2013) via a neurocognitive framework for the benefits that vacillating mind has to offer. This intense study used fMRI to show the stages of jhana practice of Sri Lankan Khema practitioner. They found that the mental training of mindfulness allows the practitioner to gain volitional control over the thoughts and emotion along with the awareness of the mind vacillating, thereby allowing for evaluation without suppressing or avoiding the flow of the mental content, as observed as DMN (Default Mode Network) activity. In the early stages, ventral striatal activity suggested subjective experience of joy in the early stages of the practice with decreased BOLD (Blood Oxygen Level Dependent) activity with basic state of concentration in visual, auditory, language and premotor regions of interest, slight shift to a lower frequency of α and θ bands in electroencephalogram.

In some notable researches, it is suggested that DMN activity consists of multiple subsystems of that further consists of different dimensions of stimulus-independent and stimulus-oriented activity in resting state. It has been reported that these DMN regions stimulate self-reflection in active states while in passive mental states it helps in evaluation of thoughts. Moreover, it was established that this self-referential processing allows one to observe oneself as the object of observance and judgements and evaluations of one's own thoughts, emotions, personalities and characters are effectively done.

Silence for neurogenesis and creativity

Although all sounds have short-term neurological effects but lacks lasting impact. Regenerative biologist of Duke University, Imke Kirste unintentionally found out that 2 hours of silence every day promoted cell development in hippocampus of mice that were subjected to various auditory stimuli. Hippocampus is associated with formation of memory that involves sense organs. The silence had more pronounced effect than information input. It was astonishing to observe the rise in alertness and sensitivity stimulating neurogenesis. The precedent in human brain in silence and neurogenesis is yet to be established and still the research promises health benefits and ingenious response of brain to issues at hand during silence. Hippocampus is associated with dementia and depression which in future prospects can bring promising hopes.

Silence for spiritual wellbeing

Deepak Chopra, in his article of August 2021 addresses the importance of silence in times of pandemic, where the stress is continuous and indefinite. The inner imbalance within the psyche and body due to continued stress call for homeostasis. According to Chopra, the silence can be a veritable solution for alignment of mind, body and soul as it offers choices as where to direct the attention during the practice. The choices he wrote about are as such- Fear or Love, Separation or Unity, Suffering or Bliss, Renewal or Habit, Self-esteem or Self-doubt, Security or Insecurity, Comfort or Stress, Acceptance or Resistance and Awareness or Unconsciousness.

Nissaragadatta Maharaj in his discourses talks about how silence is the stable ground one can rely on when things are set in chaos. He says-“It has nothing to do with effort. Just turn away, look between the thoughts, rather than at the thoughts. When you happen to walk in a crowd, you do not fight every man you meet, you just find your way between. When you fight, you invite a fight. But when you do not resist, you meet no resistance. When you do not play the game, you are out of it.”- I am That discourse.

Discussion

Silence is golden, as it what all spiritual enthusiasts are digging in for. It is both a state and a goal for yogis and silence practitioners. It is the base line mode the system operates on and hence silence can reset the body, mind and spirit. It is the foundation where from sound emerges and hence at this state every thought, action, impression, behaviour pattern can be monitored. The sense of agency and volitional control it offers to discern the useful to vain choices towards mental, emotional and spiritual wellbeing is indelible. This shows promising avenues for anxiety and overthinking issues where the person can achieve control and regulate the thoughts without getting carried away by them.

If any precedent in neurogenesis in human brain under silence can be brought about, then silence would deem of immense importance in dementia, Alzheimer's and other memory related issues. It will also ascertain creativity and efficient problem solving thereafter.

Furthermore, there is a solid evidence of silence promoting empathy (Laner. et al 2017), social connectiveness (Kok, Singer, 2017), pro-social behaviours (Luberto. et al.2017) especially in hyperactive children (Viglas-Perlman, 2017) and

cooperativity (Montero-Marin et al. 2016). Although Kreplin advised to consider the limitations of the studies because of the methodological nature of the studies.

There is still more to explore the effects of silence in cases of trauma especially PTSD and psychotic issues, even though evidence is more inclined towards neurotic illnesses and psycho-somatic ailments.

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