

'Silence Is God's First Language'

Most religions consider a practice of 'intentional silence'--such as centering prayer--essential to spiritual awakening.

BY: Cynthia Bourgeault

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Deeper Silence, Deeper Self

"Silence is God's first language," wrote the 16th-century mystic John of the Cross. And silence is the normal context in which contemplative prayer takes place. But there is silence and then there is silence. There is an outer silence, an outer stopping of the words and busy-ness, but there is also a much more challenging interior silence, where the inner talking stops as well.

Most of us are familiar with this first kind of silence, although we don't get enough of it in our [spiritual](#) nurture. It's the kind of silence we normally practice in retreat times and quiet days; sometimes you'll hear it described as "free silence." With a break from the usual hurly-burly of your life, you have time to draw inward and allow your mind to meander. You may pore over a scriptural verse and let your imagination and feelings carry you more deeply into it. Or you may simply put the books away and go for a walk in the woods, allowing the tranquility of the setting and the relative quieting of external pressures bring you more deeply in touch with yourself. You listen carefully to how you're feeling, what you're wishing. In this kind of work, the free association of your mind provides the key to the renewal, and silence furnishes the backdrop where this work can go on.

But there is another kind of silence as well, far less familiar to most Christians. In this other kind of silence, the drill is exactly the opposite. In free silence, you encourage your mind to float where it will; in this other, sometimes called "intentional silence"-or to use the generic description, meditation-a deliberate effort is made to restrain the wandering of the mind, either by slowing down the thought process itself or by developing a means of detaching oneself from it.

Intentional silence almost always feels like work. It doesn't come naturally to most people, and there is in fact considerable resistance raised from the mind itself: "You mean I just sit there and make my mind a blank?" Then the inner talking begins in earnest, and you ask yourself, "How can this be prayer? How can God give me my imagination, reason, and feelings and then expect me not to use them?" "Where do 'I' go to if I stop thinking?" "Is it safe?"

Since centering prayer is a discipline of intentional silence, dealing with this internal resistance is an inevitable part of developing a practice. In fact, I've often said to participants at centering prayer introductory workshops that 90 percent of the trick in successfully establishing a practice lies in wanting to do it in the first place. So let's consider that question first.

The Art of Awakening

Perhaps the most powerful argument is the one from authority. Virtually every spiritual tradition that holds a vision of human transformation at its heart also claims that a practice of intentional silence is a non-negotiable. Period. You just have to do it. Whether it be the [meditation](#) of the yogic and Buddhist traditions, the zikr of the Sufis, the devkut of mystical [Judaism](#), or the contemplative prayer of the Christians, there is a universal affirmation that this form of spiritual practice is essential to spiritual awakening.

When I talk about "transformation" and "awakening," incidentally, I should make clear that I am not using [New Age](#) terminology. I am speaking of: "You must be born from above" (John 3:7 NRSV), or "Unless a grain of wheat fall into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit" (John 12:24), or perhaps most pointedly: "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for me will find it" (Matthew 16:24-25). Among the worldwide religions, [Christianity](#) is surely one of those most urgently and irrevocably set upon the total transformation of the human person. And while it's true that we don't have pictures of Jesus [teaching](#) meditation practice exactly-this can be read between the lines fairly easily on any number of occasions and more important, derived theologically.

Like most the great spiritual masters of our universe, Jesus taught from the conviction that we human beings are victims of a tragic case of mistaken identity. The person I normally take myself to be-that busy, anxious little "I" so preoccupied with its goals, fears, desires, and issues-is never even remotely the whole of who I am, and to seek the fulfillment of my life at this level means to miss out on the bigger life. This is why, according to his teaching, the one who tries to keep his "life" (i.e., the small one) will lose it, and the one who is willing to lose it will find the real thing. Beneath the surface there is a deeper and vastly more authentic Self, but its presence is usually veiled by the clamor of the smaller "I" with its insatiable needs and demands.

This confusion between small self and larger Self (variously known in the traditions as "True Self," "Essential Self," or "Real I") is the core illusion of the human condition, and penetrating this illusion is what awakening is all about.

Beyond Ordinary Awareness

But why is intentional silence so important to this process of awakening? One of the most effective ways of getting at this question comes through a simple bull's-eye diagram created by [Father Thomas Keating](#). It's called "Levels of Awareness."



The outer circle is called our "Ordinary Awareness." This is the mind as it usually thinks, and our sense of self tied to that way of thinking.

As human beings we are gifted with what is known as "self-reflexive consciousness": the capacity to stand outside ourselves and look upon ourselves in the third person. Because of this unique capacity of the mind (as far as we know, we're the only species so gifted), we are able to experience ourselves as unique persons, made up of unique qualities, capacities, and needs. The subject/ object polarity built into the way the mind works sets up the impression of "having" a distinct identity, informed by certain attributes and imbued with certain gifts that need to become fully expressed if my personhood is to be whole. That sets up a good deal of expectation-and also a good deal of anxiety.

If one really follows closely what thinking and selfhood feel like at this ordinary level, it is not a pretty picture. Into our head, out of nowhere, pop random thoughts, memories, associations, and sensations. Sometimes they are stimulated by the environment; more often by the environment triggering a memory or triggering a reaction or chain reaction.

I remember testing this for myself once. I had read somewhere that without spiritual training the human mind is unable to concentrate on anything for more than two minutes. Surely this must be wrong, I thought; with a Ph.D. and a couple of books under my belt, I figured my powers of concentration must be considerably better than that. So to test this theory, I set myself the task of noticing everything red in the next five-mile stretch of highway I was driving.

What a humiliation! I did all right for the first 30 seconds or so, until the next red thing that popped into my path happened to be a Dairy Queen. When I "woke up" again, several miles later, I realized I had been completely lost in a long reverie touched off by childhood memories of ice cream at the beach. So much for my superior powers of concentration!

The Buddhists smilingly call this "monkey mind." The little beast jumps from one tree limb to the other, taking the whole of us with it. And we would probably not be able to abide the inner chaos were it not for that stable sense of "self" created through the subject/ object polarity. At the center of

all that orbiting chaos, an apparent solidity is given by that self-reflexive "I," with its constant set of self-referential questions with which it probes and measures the universe: "How well am I doing?" "Is it safe here?" "What did she mean by that?" "Am I okay?"

Another name for "ordinary awareness" is "egoic thinking." It is the normal functioning zone of the human mind. It doesn't matter whether you're a Ph.D., a bishop, a nuclear physicist; how brilliantly intellectual or intensely devout you may be. Without special spiritual training, your sense of the world and your sense of yourself will be formed at this level of awareness. Even the so-called self-awareness tools of our times, from psychotherapy to Myers-Briggs personality typing to the enneagram, spend most of their effort merely resorting and clarifying the characteristics: "I am an INFP," "a gut-centered type," "a five," etc. This may yield insights into the workings of the personality, but it's still ordinary awareness.

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Deeper than this, in every single one of us though unbeknownst to most of us, is the level that Thomas Keating describes as our "spiritual awareness." "Awareness" might be too mental a word to describe it, however; the sensation is much more visceral, more like that tug I experienced as a child in Quaker meeting, drawing me down into my depths. You might picture it as a kind of interior compass whose magnetic north is always fixed on God. It's there; it's as much a part of what holds you in life as your breathing or your heartbeat. And its purpose, just like a compass, is for orientation. The problem is that most of us are not in touch with our spiritual awareness (or at least, not deeply and consistently enough in touch with it), let alone having any idea of what it's there for or how to use it. It comes upon us only rarely, sometimes in a moment of overpowering emotion, such as suddenly being moved to tears by watching a sunset or receiving the Eucharist. That "nostalgia for the divine" sweeps over us and we are left trembling before the presence of a Mystery almost more vivid and beautiful than we can bear. But ordinary life does not encourage such moments, and the impression fades, to be revisited only in our dreams, the usual repository of our spiritual awareness.

But spiritual awareness is actually a way of perceiving, just as ordinary awareness is a way of perceiving. And as with ordinary awareness, there is a sense of identity or selfhood generated through this mode of perception. The big difference between them is that whereas ordinary awareness perceives through self-reflexive consciousness, which splits the world into subject and object; spiritual awareness perceives through an intuitive grasp of the whole and an innate sense of belonging. It's something like sounding the note G on the piano and instantly hearing the D and the B that surround it and make it a chord. And since spiritual awareness is perception based on harmony, the sense of selfhood arising out of it is not plagued by that sense of isolation and anxiety that dominates life at the ordinary level of awareness.

The Divine Indwelling

If we have within us a compass pointing to the magnetic north of God, does this mean that God dwells within us, as the center of our being? Is that what the bull's-eye of Thomas Keating's diagram is all about-what he calls our "divine awareness"?

Cautiously, the answer to this question is "yes." I say "cautiously" because Christian theology makes very clear that the human being is not God and that the innermost core of our being is not itself divine. And yet theology has always upheld the reality of the "divine indwelling." As we move toward center, our own being and the divine being become more and more mysteriously interwoven. "There is in the soul a something in which God dwells, and there is in the soul a something in which the soul dwells in God," writes the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart, the subtlety of his words reflecting the delicacy of the motion. In our own times, Thomas Merton describes this "something" in a passage of astonishing clarity and beauty:

At the center of our being is a point of nothingness which is untouched by sin and illusion, a point of pure truth, a point or spark which belongs entirely to God, which is never at our disposal, from which God disposes of our lives, which is inaccessible to the fantasies of our own mind or the brutalities of our own will. This little point of nothingness and of absolute poverty is the pure glory of God written in us, as our poverty, as our indigence, as our son-ship. It is like a pure diamond blazing with the invisible light of heaven. It is in everybody, and if we could see it, we would see these billions of points of light coming together in the face and blaze of a sun that would make all the darkness and cruelty of life vanish completely. I have no program for this seeing. It is only given. But the gate of heaven is everywhere.

Notice how deftly Merton navigates the tricky theological waters here. His words are bold, in that he claims-to my knowledge more clearly than any other Christian mystical writer-that at the center of our being is an innermost point of truth which shares not only the likeness, but perhaps even the substance of God's own being. And yet, following the bent of Christian tradition, he makes it absolutely clear that access to this center is not at our command; it is entered only through the gateway of our complete poverty and nothingness.

The divine indwelling is the cornerstone of contemplative prayer. Thomas Keating refers to it as "our personal big bang," for it reveals the Source of our own being-the explosion of divine love into form which first gave rise to our personal life. It also reveals the direction in which our hearts must travel for a constantly renewed intimacy with this Source. As we enter contemplative prayer, we draw near the wellspring from which our being flows.

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