

[Silence is Golden . . .](#)

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INSIGHT

## Silence is Golden . . .

Mind and emotions are becalmed as Hindus observe

Many think of silence simplistically, as just the absence of noise, or not speaking words. But silence, like life itself, is more complex and subtle than that. We all seek silent moments, islands in the sea of sound, to reflect upon and reap the lessons from life's experiences. Usually our quest for quietude is an outer search. We vacation to paradise or hike into the hills to escape the daily din. While Hindu saints and scriptures do emphasize the importance of serene surroundings as an aid to introspection, they stress more the cultivation of silence within. Outer peace is simply a means to help us find inner silence. Ultimately, we learn to maintain and enjoy innate serenity regardless of the cacophony that surrounds us. This is the basis of the Hindu practice of mauna, the vow to remain silent, and it is why some subdue speech altogether. Mauna is not the exclusive province of the sage. Brilliant orators and well-to-do intellectuals have also chosen to curb their speech. Mahatma Gandhi was perhaps the most prominent public figure to observe mauna. He tamed his tongue every Monday, communicating on that day only through writing.

The late Swami Nirmalananda of Karnataka had served the

Army Postal Service in Europe during World War II. He later held various government posts in India. He travelled the globe and studied well the world's religions and philosophies. In the end, his burning search for truth culminated in silence. "If you desire to live in peace," he said, "hear all that falls on your ears, see all that appears before your eyes, realize that everything is in accordance with the eternal law of nature, and be silent." He did not speak for eleven years, and thereafter spoke sparingly. When he did, it was with clarity and conviction. "Wisdom to me is not a set of words, but freshness and emptiness of the mind. Empty the mind by self-observation, self-awareness and inner attention. Thus make the mind shine like a mirror. Then nothing is seen or known but the limitless radiance of eternity. This is a wonderful source of ever-renewed joy and inspiration beyond words."

Mauna is practiced in varying degrees by spiritual leaders, ascetics, aspirants and householders alike, throughout India and abroad. Still, popular belief holds that the vow of silence can be followed only by ascetics and sages, that it lies beyond the capability of ordinary mortals. Hinduism Today correspondent, Choodie Shivaram of Bangalore, dispels this misconception, "I have seen ordinary people observing mauna in daily life. A very orthodox elderly cook in our house during my school days strictly observed mauna one day of the week. No matter how much we joked about her stony silence, she never budged. So, too, my great grand-aunt, Kadakka, observed mauna on certain days of the week. She insisted that we children keep perfect silence at least during meals. Of course, despite our valiant efforts, our childish giggles could not be contained."

Choodie continues, "In my childhood, an old friend of my father, Shri Chandrasekhar, would chat with me and my young friends. I had not seen him for many years, and I was shell-shocked last year when he refused to talk to me. Only later did I learn that he was observing mauna. Now in his eighties, Chandrasekhar spends most of his time at the Ramakrishna Math. He has been observing mauna for the past 17 years. Although with a wife and children, he speaks only for two hours on the first of every month. Even then, he is very choosy about to whom he speaks, and how much. Always clad in a white dhoti and half-sleeved white shirt, a sling bag over his shoulder, simplicity is his way of life."

Choodie heard Chandrasekhar's insights on his singular talking day last month: "Often people take me to be some worthless being, looking at my dress and silence. But it just does not matter to me. I began by talking for only one hour a day. After about one year, I began talking only once in a fortnight and gradually made it once a month. Now, I speak only two hours once a month. I plan to give it up totally. Besides talking, my communication is limited to written conversation with the brahmacharis in the ashram. That, too, is only done when I have to pass on some message or give instructions. I do not communicate with anyone else. I'm only a listener now. Silence teaches you to listen."

Prema Pandurang of Chennai is perhaps an unlikely candidate to have spontaneously taken a 41-day vow to remain mute. Prema is a famous religious lecturer in South India. She was a professor of English at Chennai's Presidency College for twenty-three years. She told Hinduism Today's publisher how silence came to her. "For a long time, I had been a speaker.

One day I woke up and said, 'Now. Let me see how it sounds--how it feels--if I don't speak.' It was not that anything in the world disgusted me. It was more the thought that there was so much sound around me, and I was creating most of it. I said, 'Let me be in silence and watch.' " Prema found the silence profound, and wrote down her inspirations in a small book, *Reflection on Silence*. She now continues her silence every Tuesday.

As austere as maunis may seem, most still shy away from the absolute vow. The strictest observance of mauna, utter silence, can seem unnatural to onlookers and impossible for those wishing to attempt it. Such a deliberate denial of human interaction is a stark withdrawal from a world structured and sustained with words. In *Sadhus, The Holy Men of India* (1991, Brijbasi, New Delhi), author Ramesh Bedi describes an encounter with a most extreme mauni. "Sadhus who take the vow of silence include those who will condescend to communicate with others by gesture or by writing things down and also those who take the absolute vow of silence, the *kashtha mauna* vow. *Kashtha* means wood. So this is the vow 'to be silent like a log of wood.' The *kashtha mauna* sadhu will partake in no communication at all with others. Only very penitential ones are capable of undertaking this vow. One such sadhu I encountered in 1938, in the foothills of the Shivalak Hills off Haridwar, even refused to accept the fruits and edibles offered to him. Having offered him a handful of mulberries once, I returned the next week to discover that these lay where I had left them. He didn't even look at them. Nearby villagers would regularly bring offerings of food, but the ascetic ate none of it, living on the wild fruits he found in the jungle."

More common are those who observe complete silence for shorter periods and those who communicate through writing. Baba Hari Dass of the Mount Madonna Center of California currently "talks" tersely through a book-sized chalkboard. But even he abandoned all outward expression for a period. "I was in kashtha mauna for one year. I did not use anything to communicate. There is always an advantage in removing the mind from worldly attachments, whatever the means. Mauna is one of the means." Baba gave up speaking over forty years ago. Sri Tiruchi Maha Swamigal of Kailash Ashram, Bangalore, undertook mauna for two years while living in a cave in the region of Tayumaneshwarar Temple, Tamil Nadu. The purpose of his vow was to "contemplate deeply upon his upcoming divine mission." Swami tells stories of the many snakes encountered in the cave. As they passed him by harmlessly, he found that even wild animals are tamed by a true practitioner of mauna.

Quest for quiet: To abruptly stop speaking may be too stern a step for most. But the benefits of mauna can be obtained in less arduous ways (see the Seven Sadhanas of Silence, page 32). If you have the desire, dedicating some time to silence can be easy. J.P. Vaswani advises, "First thing when you wake up in the morning, observe silence for at least ten minutes. This will help you to gather your thoughts." Sri Tiruchi Swami recommends that people with busy schedules fix a day or two in a week, or an hour or two in a day, for mauna. He elaborated to Hinduism Today, "An ordinary devotee can observe mauna daily during, before or after the morning worship (personal or communal) for a duration of about one to three hours. One can also be silent for one to three hours during the evenings before or after sunset. Silence can be practiced one or two days a week while keeping aloof from

one's normal schedules and activities. A visit to the temple can become extra special by including the discipline of not speaking. Also, one can make the vow of silence a part of one's pilgrimage. All days are suitable for mauna. The longer we can detach ourselves mentally from daily trivials, the better."

Recalling her own profound experience of silence, Prema Pandurang implores, "There is so much stress and tension today that everyone must observe silence--some time away from mother, father, child and wife, friends and everyone--at least a half-hour every day with no telephone calls in some corner of the house where one can see nature. Just sit and silently think about what you are doing. You'll be different. It is necessary. It brings your high blood pressure down, makes your pulse beat normally. You start recollecting whatever you've done and you start planning for what you're going to do. For this introspection you need silence, and that is why for the past eight years I've observed silence on Tuesdays."

One of the foremost reasons to curtail conversation is to conserve energy. Abstinence from speech transmutes the creative energies of the mind in the same way that sexual abstinence, brahmacharya, transmutes the physical energies. Baba Hari Dass explains, "We talk only by exhalation. The more we talk, the more we have to exhale and the more life energy we lose. Energy is lost primarily in two ways--by sex and by talking. The origin of both sound and sex is the muladhara chakra at the base of the spine. When we talk, we use tremendous energy. This can be felt if you stop talking for a few days and then start talking again. The energy we preserve through silence can be used for meditation."

A more mundane impetus for mauna is simply to stay out of trouble. Chandrasekhar confessed, "I have committed many mistakes. I have been harsh to people and have hurt many with my speech. Finally, I realized the importance of silence. In mauna, the mind projects all of our faults. They come like flashes. We begin to look within and see our mistakes. This helps us to rectify ourselves. This can solve many of life's petty problems. The natural mind is filled with compassion and Divinity. I think mauna is the first step towards realizing God. It detaches us from worldly pleasures."

In this regard, Rev. Swami Satchidananda, founder of Integral Yoga Institute, shares a Sanskrit proverb--"Mauna kalaka nasti." He explains, "Mauna means silence; kalaka means problems or quarrels and nasti means nonexistent. So this saying tells us, 'When you are silent, there are no quarrels.' By talking, we create problems because we do not know how much to talk, how to talk, what to talk and when to talk. So, the immediate benefit of mauna is to avoid problems. The other benefits then follow. The silence of speech leads to the silence of mind, because if you decide not to speak, what good are thoughts? Every time a thought comes, you cannot express it with words, so the mind ultimately says, 'Alright, what is the point of my thinking?' You get into a thoughtless state. But there is one more mauna, the bodily silence. That means you don't move around. You stay in one place. That helps the silences of speech and mind also." Swami's institute holds occasional silent retreats where participants study yoga and meditation, all the while remaining silent. During one retreat, he jested in his jovial way, "Observe all, but refrain from talking. I will do all the talking for you. Whatever you want to say, just leave it to me...I think you cannot talk too much about silence."

The Ribhu Gita tells us, "Sitting in silence is the holy ablution. Sitting in silence is the japa. Sitting in silence is the worship. Sitting in silence is the highest. Read silently to yourself about the experience that all is Brahman. In a moment, all the punya, merit, which would result from a million asvamedha, horse sacrifices, can be obtained" (verses 16.42 and 33.29).

## Seven Sadhanas of Silence

Some silence is golden, others are silver and a lot prove out just to be heavy metal--copper, iron, zinc or tin. A few kinds of silence are brazen brass. Silence can be learned. Let's begin at the bottom, by silencing the brass. To do this there is a sadhana, spiritual discipline, the first of the Seven Sadhanas of Silence.

The brass sadhana is to conquer jealousy, which bemoans, "She has more than I do. He gets everything he asks for, while I get nothing or very little. It's unfair." This noise goes on daily in the mind of those are in the jealousy chakra (sutala), located in the knees, which has to stop spinning in the astral areas of the inner mind to make way for peace of mind. How do we do this? It is easy. Just begin to stop talking to yourself about what is unfair. Let all mental arguments go. Drop the subject. Be silent about the issue. Such a silence provides a place for harmony of minds, while too much noisy complaining about "me and mine" gives no room for others.

The silence of tin is an even worse din. Have you ever heard a child beat on a tin can? That's how the force of anger sounds, "clank, clank, clank." Not musical, not melodious, not even nice. The noise of anger, which vibrates in the vitala chakra



located in the thighs, has to be quieted to enjoy even the smallest sliver of silver peace. How do we do this? Well, it is expensive. A monetary sum is paid for each outburst or even unexpressed wave of anger. A jar, labeled "anger penance," is established in the shrine room, into which a monetary sum is placed each time anger is experienced--the greater the expression, the larger the sum. The money collected is sent to the charity of one's choice on the first day of each month.

The silence of zinc comes next. It is quieting the force of fear. Yes, fear can produce a very noisy mind. But it is not beyond being controlled and courted into obedience. Fear creates. Often we create what we fear and make it happen by fearing that it might. We give it that energy, that possibility in our life. Fear vibrates in the atala chakra, located in the hips. To bring fear under control is a powerful accomplishment. How do we do this? One way is through the power of affirmation, reprogramming the subconscious mind. An affirmation is a series of positive words in line with a visual concept repeated time and time again. It can be repeated mentally or, preferably, verbally. Here is an effective affirmation for overcoming fear. "I am the complete master of all my forces. My spiritual energies govern and control the force fields wherever I am for the highest good. Through understanding, being a pure soul, full of spirited life, I am filled and thrilled with unlimited power now and forever." While repeating this affirmation, visualize a bright white protective shell around your outer aura with a round opening at the top. As you persist, the trembling voice of fear will desist.

Now, the silence of iron. Many of us have strong memories, which become stronger as years go by. As strong as iron, they

are there, rusting away in the muladhara chakra at the base of the spine. How do we silence memory? Write down or type in your computer all that you want to forget. Then burn up the paper. Writing down problems and burning them in any ordinary fire brings them from the subconscious into the external mind, releasing the suppressed emotion as the fire consumes the paper. The memory still exists, but it has lost its emotional power.

With the past thus stilled, we come to the silence of copper. We are climbing up the ladder of the chakras when we try to silence our reason, which in most of us is the noise of asking rhetorical and intellectual questions over and over again. Questions that have no answers. "Why did he do that? Does he not know better?" And on and on and on. It is important for seekers to silence the tendency to rationalize, to explain away, to excuse and defend the ego. To silence this svadhishtana chakra, located at the kidney level, some basic yoga must be done to empower the higher self. Controlled breathing, pranayama, helps harness and slow down the prana, energy, that spins this chakra, as does hatha yoga. Sit quietly with the spine in a straight line. Breathe naturally, as a baby breathes, by using the diaphragmatic muscles below the solar plexus. Inhale. The diaphragm pushes the stomach wall out, as the lower lungs inflate. Exhale. Relaxing the diaphragm, the air is expelled. Then pull the diaphragm in to push out the last bit of air. Nine counts in, hold one, nine counts out--this is a basic sadhana for the silence of copper.

With the intellect quieted a bit, we can seek the silence of silver, stilling the willpower located at the solar-plexus manipura chakra, which spins constantly, being the nerve

center that interconnects all the forces of the physical and astral bodies. How to quiet willpower? Competitiveness and aggression must stop, for these direct the pranas, or energies, down to the lower chakras. The force of willfulness in its negative expression makes noises about self preservation--"Take care of me first and forget others." This can be counteracted by the practice of speaking only that which is true, kind, helpful and necessary. The silver sadhana is to use willpower positively to control the tongue, to be a helpmate to silence by speaking little, and never boasting of ambitions or attainments.

With the willpower subdued, the silence of gold comes into view--without the L, it is God. So get the L out of it. Here silence is truly the voice of God. To quiet the anahata chakra, heart center, of understanding, soul knowing, vision and peaceful thoughts is not to be a metaphysical know-it-all. It means not being a prophet or big ego in speaking about how others should live, but rather silently living the example of how one should be.

Then we come to the platinum vishuddha chakra, in the throat. Here resides the force of divine love. Love is understanding, forgiveness, compassion and benevolent, selfless giving. It is the chakra that the yogis enter to be truly silent. Here they cannot speak. Here they feel good and fulfilled. True, writing on a chalk board communicates the essentials; other than that, in a room alone such yogis are silent. Not blank in consciousness. Silence does not mean emptiness as much as divine fullness. They are all-seeing, for the vishuddha chakra energies stimulate the third eye--the ajna chakra, the all-seeing, never-sleeping sight of the soul. Here we are truly

silent. In a room crowded with noise, we hear but a little of it. In meditation we soar beyond into the infinite of infinities.

How to quiet the highest chakras, which are quietness itself? The titanium metal of the ajna chakra of divine sight and the multifaceted gems of the sahasrara chakra at the top of the head? Do they speak, think, reason? Those who know and have experienced say no. These jivanmuktas are content in their silent knowing, not knowing all that they know. Their ever-watching presence on today's apparently hurting planet is an earned sukarma, good karma, for the human race. They are the beginning and end of all. They see the cosmic panorama of which the Vedas speak. "He contains all works, all desires, all perfumes and all tastes. He encompasses the whole universe; he is beyond speech and beyond desires. He is my atman within my heart, he is Brahman" (Sama Veda, Chandogya Upanishad 3.14.4.4). "Now, what people call 'the practice of silence' is really the disciplined life of a student of sacred knowledge, for only by leading such a life does one find the atman and meditate" (Chandogya Upanishad 5.5.4.3).

When to be silent then? Astrologers have an answer: one day each week, on the day ruled by one's current mahadasha planet--i.e., Monday for Moon dasha, Tuesday for Mars, etc. Some astrologers advise fasting and nonspeaking on that karmically critical day. If you don't know such details of your horoscope, an easy and pragmatic alternative is on the same day of the week you were born. Enough said.

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Speech needs company,

Silence needs solitude.  
Speech wants to conquer others,  
Silence helps conquer oneself.

Speech makes friends or foes,  
Silence befriends all.  
Speech demands respect,  
Silence commands it.

Speech is earth-bound,  
Silence is heaven-bound.  
Speech educates,  
Silence exalts.  
Speech is subjective,  
Silence objective.

Speech has regrets,  
Silence none.  
Speech has limitations,  
Silence is boundless.  
Speech needs effort,  
Silence a lot more.

Speech is human,  
Silence is Divine.  
While speaking you are heard by creatures,  
In silence you hear the creator.

Silence leads to a stillness of the mind,

Then to introspection,  
Then to self-cleansing,  
Finally to liberation.

Prema Pandurang