

Five Degrees of Silence

An attentive, listening attitude and practice leads to deeper levels of interior silence and stillness. This capacity for silence has five degrees: silence of speech, thought, will, the unconscious, and being. They unfold quite naturally as we respond to the call to go farther, a call that will integrate the insight and truth of stillness in all dimensions of our common human being.

The silence of speech. The silence of speech is important and obvious. It is only by disciplining our desire for talk that we become aware of an omnipresent reality behind the chatter. As we master our tongues, we experience a pervasive peace and a freedom from compulsive speech and then behavior. But the silence of speech, and the disciplining of our tendency to talk, is a sign of, and an invitation to, a more profound silence: that of mind or thought.

The silence of thought. The silence of thought aims at quieting the near ceaseless mental chatter, the stream of consciousness as one thought succeeds another. Meditation — particularly nondiscursive modes that don't involve thought but transcend thinking altogether — is designed to bring the peace of a quiet mind and a mental faculty resting in God. It takes years to learn this degree of silence, because it goes against our natural propensity. Like birds talking in trees as sunset approaches, our minds chatter endlessly within us. Meditation and sleep provide our only relief. But the silence of the mind is also a sign of and invitation to, a more ultimate degree of inner quiet: that of the will.

The silence of will. Whereas speech is only an external activity and some thought brings peace to our mental sphere, silence of the will takes the process to a psychological and moral depth not readily grasped in our culture, with its understanding of freedom as the capacity to will what you want and do as you like. To draw the will, each of our wills, to stillness of desire is not easy. Stillness of will is really detachment from desire, or at least selfish desires. It means having a nonpossessive attitude in all areas of our lives, to be freed from a bondage to passions, to avoid allowing our desires to lead or shape us. Silence of the will is a contemplative achievement; it is something the

Spirit provides if we ask for it, choose it, and work hard to maintain it.

Silence of the will requires a further degree of interior quiet, that of the silence of the unconscious. We cannot hope to quiet desire — especially selfish desire — unless we can get at the roots of the passions in their unconscious source. Since many desires have their seeds in the unconscious, we are called to an even deeper level of interior quiet, that of our unconscious life.

The silence of the unconscious. This focus of stillness takes a lot of work and grace. It cannot be achieved without persistent divine assistance, for it is God who works and acts in us to heal the roots of desire and the wounds of earlier experience. Part of the process of contemplation is precisely the elimination in the unconscious of desires that compete for God's attention. And yet even when the stillness of the unconscious dawns for us, there remains a final degree or stage of silence, what can be called the silence of being itself.

The silence of being. This silence of being means that every obstacle between the Divine and us has disappeared, overcome by the power and determination of God's love in us. In terms of our nature and God's, it is as if there is only God and God's eternal being. Our being is taken up in God's. Each of these degrees of silence works in tandem toward the greater good of our development into a permanent union with God. This permanent condition of union, and every stage in between, or on the way, depends on divine grace, and is, in my experience, pure gift. In this sense, stillness is the doorway to Being, to that which is ultimately real, the entrance into the fullness of the mystical life, that of the joys of union with God. Without this kind of stillness, the Divine Presence is barely perceptible. Perhaps this is one reason, in the Taoist tradition, it is observed: "Stillness is the greatest revelation!"

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