

## **Day of Silent Practice**

This day of guided practice is an opportunity to immerse ourselves more deeply into the mindfulness practices we have been building up over the past few weeks. Much of the day will be spent in silence so we can deepen our experience of the practices, the spaces between them and explore the impact of being in silence while we are together as a group.

The day is an opportunity to spend time with ourselves in a nourishing way, without our usual agendas and responsibilities. It is a protected time to be away from our diary of things to do, our mobile phone, our work or other demands. The structure of the day will be spacious and laid out for you, as we simply move from one practice to another, taking away the need to make decisions about what we need to do next and allowing our mindfulness practice to be relatively seamless. Throughout the day, we will be practicing as a group, and even though we will not be communicating in the usual way, we will be supported by the group.

We invite you to come with your curiosity and openness and simply drop into the present moment, allowing the day to unfold in its own way. We will be moving through the guided practices in silence, taking silent mindful breaks, eating our lunch in silence and being together in silence. At the end of the day, we will have an opportunity to reflect and to share our experiences of the day in the group.

When we spend time in silence as a mindfulness practice, we have an opportunity to observe our experience more deeply. We have a chance to notice our reactions, our thought patterns and emotional responses. We can pay more attention to our body sensations, and the way the body moves as it goes between tasks. We can notice more clearly how the mind seeks out distraction. Watch out for the temptation to read any notices on the walls or the labels on food packets! We would like to encourage you to stay away from all reading, if possible, during the day.

In addition, we invite you to practice silence without making eye contact, but without shutting out your awareness or needing to stay apart from the group. Our focus is, therefore, a little more inward, so we can pay close attention to our mindfulness practice and whatever comes up for us as the day unfolds.

### **Reflections on Silence and Speech**

It may help for us to reflect somewhat on our experience of silence and its associations as we prepare for the day. For some people, even the thought of having a day without speaking can feel daunting and bring up a lot of anxiety. Some say that they have never spent this long before without speaking, and even speak in their sleep!

We have all had previous experience of silence, some of which may have been positive, but it is likely that some of it may have been difficult for us and will have left some negative associations.

We may associate silence with discomfort: not knowing what to say; walking into a room and experiencing people stopping talking; "being sent to Coventry"; being punished by other's refusing to talk to you; angry silences; feelings of isolation or being alone. We



may have used talking, or breaking silence with others, as a means of ending uncomfortable moments, seeking reassurance, being noticed or being seen. We may also have used silence with others as a means of communicating our anger, our disapproval, or our lack of interest.

We no doubt have also been in social occasions where, despite the words being spoken, there has not been any real meeting of people, where conversation has seemed empty and disconnected, devoid of a heart-felt quality, and failing to make any real connections. How much we can yearn in these situations for real contact, and the relief of being together with people without the need for small-talk, point-scoring, gossiping or the need to fill every gap with meaningless chatter.

There will have been times when we have connected to someone deeply in silence, and these can be profound moments: perhaps we are sitting on the side of the bed of someone who is sick or dying; perhaps we are sharing a precious moment with a loved one; or sharing a moment of true connection with another, where nothing needs to be said; or those privileged moments when we sit with another in a shared moment of understanding, each being held and witnessed by the other - the space between us energized, vibrant and alive. It is at these moments that time seems to stand still and we can appreciate the richness of connection and "being with" that can be experienced through silence.

In silence, we can find abundance and a wealth of communication. It occurs through a heightened sense of presence and intimacy in which our senses are open and live. It happens in those places where words seem superfluous: the soothing spaces after apologies which are well meaning; the knowing silences of forgiveness and acceptance; a loving gesture between people who know one another well; the sharing of an awe inspiring experience of shooting stars, a breath-taking sunset, or a velvety black midnight walk along a loch-side!

And silence can become a wonderful offering when we encounter the wonders of nature and the mystery of all things that cannot be explained. We may find communion in nature through silence: watching the grass hopper eat out of our hand; standing still in the forest with only our breath, face to face with the young deer appearing behind the next tree! There is a quality in these moments that we will disturb or even destroy if we try to put it into words. Words are often clumsy and limiting and can imprison living experience into conceptual moulds that our minds grasp onto. They can take us away from direct experience and drive us into our heads where the vitality of experience is frozen and deadened by thoughts.

Poetry often makes the attempt to bridge the gap between awe-inspiring experiences and our desires to communicate them. Mary Oliver's poem, "Stars", shares the experience of awe and wonder at observing the night sky filled with stars, and the seeming intrusion of language - the words which appear to try to explain and make sense of what is being experienced, and which provide a barrier to the direct observing. The poem is about the relationship between silence and the need to communicate. The words which come out of the silence are a celebration of what is observed and a gift in the form of the poem.

## **Stars**



Here in my head, language  
keeps making its tiny noises.

How can I hope to be friends  
with the hard white stars

whose flaring and hissing are not speech  
but a pure radiance?

How can I hope to be friends  
with the yawning spaces between them

where nothing, ever, is spoken?  
Tonight, at the edge of the field,

I stood very still, and looked up,  
and tried to be empty of words.

What joy was it, that almost found me?  
What amiable peace?

Then it was over, the wind  
roused up in the oak trees behind me

and I fell back easily.  
Earth has a hundred thousand pure  
contraltos -

even the distant night bird  
as it talks threat, as it talks love

over the cold, black fields.  
Once, deep in the woods,

I found the white skull of a bear  
and it was utterly silent -

and once a river otter, in a steel trap,  
and it too was utterly silent.

What can we do  
but keep on breathing in and out,

modest and willing, and in our places?  
*Listen, listen, I'm forever saying.*

*Listen to the river, to the hawk, to the hoof,*

*to the mockingbird, to the jack-in-the-pulpit*

then I come up with a few words, like a  
gift.  
Even as now.

Even as the darkness has remained the  
pure, deep darkness.  
Even as the stars have twirled a little,  
while I stood here,

looking up,  
one hot sentence after another.

### MARY OLIVER

From Mary Oliver, "West Wind", Mariner  
Books, 1997.



## The benefits of silence

When we quieten down our speaking, our thinking may initially seem very "loud" and active, but over time there is an opportunity for getting in touch with an inner stillness as the mind begins to settle. The mind starts to let go of concepts and naming, liking and disliking, wanting and not wanting, the running commentary, the explaining, the story telling, and so on. The mind can start to get in touch with a deeper awareness and a stillness which is a natural part of our being.

We may become aware of the energy which we usually invest in speaking and our habitual modes of communication and how tiring this can be! In contrast, we may find that over a period of silent practice we build up a more positive energy and that we can feel soothed by silence and the freedom from the pressures to speak.

Most importantly, we may find that we can meet ourselves more fully and come home to ourselves more deeply in these moments, even if this means getting in touch with some parts of ourselves, or some emotions, which we have been avoiding for some time.

Here are some comments from past course participants on the day of silence:

- *"I felt quite liberated".*
- *"Silence and freedom from the pressure to talk was glorious and made me aware of myself in a very warm, invigorating and pleasant way".*
- *"Whole day session of not speaking was a powerful exercise. I was able to be in touch with a sadness that I have denied, but feeling safe and contained to do so".*
- *"Full day session was very important to me – to experience the cumulative effect of several meditation sessions, silence and lack of eye-contact was very powerful".*

We hope that you will feel nourished by your day!

## Quotes on Silence



*The equivalent of external noise is the inner noise of thinking. The equivalent of external silence is inner stillness. When there is some silence around you – listen to it. That means just notice it. Pay attention to it. Listening to silence awakens the dimension of stillness within yourself, because it is only through stillness that you can be aware of silence. See that in the moment of noticing the silence around you, you are not thinking. You are aware, but not thinking.*

Eckhart Tolle from, "Stillness Speaks":

*A moment of silence... is a falling into the present moment with awareness and an openness of heart that allows for all our feelings, speakable and unspeakable, reconciling and vengeful, hopeful and despairing to just be here. It is a moment of pure being. It is also a nod to something deep within ourselves that we touch only briefly and then shy away from, perhaps out of discomfort or pure unfamiliarity. It is a bearing witness. In that bearing witness, we not only bear our burden better, but we demonstrate that we are larger than it is, that we have the capacity to hold it, to honour it, and to make a context for it and for ourselves, and so grow beyond it without ever forgetting.*

Jon Kabat Zinn, from his book, "Coming to our Senses", describing the observing of a moment of silence at the site of the disaster which has come to be known Ground Zero.

*You talk when you cease to be at peace with your thoughts.  
And when you can no longer dwell in the solitude of your heart, you live in your lips,  
and sound is a diversion and a pastime.  
And in much of your talking, thinking is half-murdered.  
For thought is a bird of space, that in a cage of words may indeed unfold its wings  
but cannot fly.*

*There are those among you who seek the talkative through fear of being alone.  
The silence of aloneness reveals to their eyes their naked selves and they would  
escape.*

*And there are those who talk, and without knowledge or forethought reveal a truth  
which they themselves do not understand.*

*And there are those who have the truth within them, but they tell it not in words.  
In the bosom of such as these, the spirit dwells in rhythmic silence.*

Kahlil Gibran, from "The Prophet" (1922)

## **Where everything is music**

Don't worry about saving these songs!  
And if one of our instruments breaks,  
It doesn't matter.

We have fallen into the place  
where everything is music.  
The strumming and the flute notes  
rise into the atmosphere,  
and even if the whole world's harp  
should burn up, there will still be  
hidden instruments playing.

So the candle flickers and goes out.  
We have a piece of flint, and a spark.

This singing art is sea foam.  
The graceful movements come from a pearl  
somewhere on the ocean floor.

Poems reach up like spindrift and the edge  
of driftwood along the beach, wanting!

They derive  
from a slow and powerful root  
that we can't see.

Stop the words now.  
Open the window in the centre of your chest,  
and let the spirits fly in and out.

#### RUMI

From "Whoever brought me here will have to take me home", translated Coleman Barks with John Moyne, Penguin Group, 1998.