



# Reaching the Silence Within

The average person speaks 16,000 words a day. Tune it all out—and tune in some inner peace

**It is evening,** and I am sitting with my eyes closed in the spacious meditation hall of Spirit Rock, a Buddhist center in the hills of Northern California. Eager to experience silence at its most concentrated, I've signed up for a six-day silent meditation retreat. Meditation and silence are not synonymous, of course. And while I knew I would spend some time meditating, it was the silence I hoped to focus on.

The first thing I learned was that even in a place dedicated to human silence, noise intrudes. People (including myself) shift and cough; doors bang during breaks; spoons clatter against cereal bowls during our supposedly silent breakfasts.

And then there's the inner cacophony.

I'd arrived consumed with garden-variety worries and obsessions. My neck ached from too much computer time. My car had flooded in a storm, and on the day I packed up for this trip, the insurance company adjuster had told me they wouldn't pay for \$350 worth of the damage. I'd gotten an

Solitude and quiet may move you toward the serenity you crave.

irritating e-mail from the manager of a conference at which I had agreed to lead a writing workshop, and for my first days at Spirit Rock, I spent hours of what was supposed to be meditation time composing, then rewriting, smart responses to her in my head.

Then the microphone was taken over by the most neurotic of my inner voices—the ones I'm barely aware of in my ordinary life,

even though they're often in the background: You never became famous; your house is subpar; your man isn't good enough; plus, you're running so late that there's no time for yoga. Driven by those voices, I often rush at my to-do list without thinking through what really matters. I work too many hours, and then, after I collapse, spend hours on the Internet searching for the perfect raffia hat. →



PHOTO: JEREMY BROWNE/GALLEY STOCK



### QUIET THE RIOT

In other words, I flail. And the older I get, the less energy I have to waste on flailing. (Perhaps I'm not the only one: Of the 64 people on retreat with me, one third are midlife women.)

Here at Spirit Rock, I can't respond to those voices by doing too much. I am forced, at first, to do nothing but listen to them.

By day three, however, my inner state has changed. The neurotic voices get quieter, then disappear altogether. My neck ache goes away. My thoughts meander along, rather than speeding by like cars in a city tunnel. Some unknown source gives me the energy to sit upright, totally relaxed and silent. I realize that although I may not control the details of my life, I can control my peace of mind, if I choose to.

The insurance no longer seems worth fussing about. The irritating e-mail doesn't even need a response.

Why has simple silence had such a powerful effect? Perhaps it's because for three days I haven't had to make a good impression on anyone or reassure anyone that they've made a good impression on me. As a result, the firing of my usually hyperactive fight-or-flight neurons has slowed, and the mute button on my obsessive inner chatter has been pushed. In the absence of words, I notice other sounds and images: the twitter of birds, the sigh of the wind, bright raindrops on a bush outside the dining hall, the drumbeat of rain on square copper drainpipes.

And tonight, in the meditation hall, it's as if I'd descended into a dark well. The only sound I hear is the *ribbit* of a frog somewhere outside in the creek. My shoulders,

**+ Most religions recommend contemplation. Jesus went to the desert, Muhammad hid out in a cave north of Mecca and Buddha sat under the Bodhi Tree. But don't worry; you don't have to leave town. Wherever you may be, you can structure periods of rest and stillness free from interruption, input and conversation.**

**1. TAKE A 10-MINUTE SILENCE BREAK.**

If you're on a nature walk with your husband or friend, stop chatting for an agreed-upon period—maybe until you reach a certain tree or rock. Or stop at a vista and sit without speaking.

**2. GET UP HALF AN HOUR EARLY.** Even big cities are often quiet—or at least quieter—before the sun comes up. Set your alarm. Resist the urge to read the paper or turn on the television. Look at something beautiful: the view, if you have one, or a flower in a glass of water. Write in a journal. Savor the moment.

**3. EAT IN SILENCE.** Set aside your book. Get up from your computer. Turn off your cell phone. On your lunch hour, bring your food to a quiet spot in a park or on a rooftop. Get off automatic pilot. Eat your food as slowly as you can, tasting each mouthful, noticing the tastes and textures, swallowing each bite before you take the next. If you're with a companion, say grace and try a brief period of eating in silence.

**4. UNPLUG FOR A MORNING.** Every Tuesday for seven months, 300 managers and engineers at two U.S. sites of Intel Corporation set aside quiet time for creative work and thinking. They'd put DO NOT DISTURB signs on their doors, turn off incoming e-mail and instant messaging and switch their phones to voice mail. Set a time, and keep to it; self-help author Elaine St. James recommends that you block out this interval in your appointment book. Set a timer for an hour, and promise yourself not to seek or accept any input from the outside world until the buzzer goes off.

**5. UNPLUG FOR A WHOLE DAY.** Create a sanctuary at home. Shop for food ahead of time. Cover laptops and

BlackBerries with tablecloths so they don't create a sense of urgency. (Likewise, staring at unread newspapers and to-do lists does not promote peacefulness.) Unplug the phone (resisting its ring can be as distracting as taking the call). Pay attention to your breathing and the physical feelings of your body. Sit quietly, garden, wash dishes or just putter. But don't read (it can disturb the inner peace), and forget your have-to-do's. For inspiration, read *Sabbath*, by Wayne Muller, or *The Miracle of Mindfulness*, by Thich Nhat Hanh.

**6. GO ON A PERSONAL RETREAT.** All across the country, as retreats gain popularity, convents and monasteries that no longer shelter nuns and priests have been converted to interfaith guesthouses where you can spend a day, a week or even longer. Keeping



silence in a place where others have done so for decades can be far easier than doing it in your own space. Many centers have spiritual directors whom you can consult, and most are open to people of all religious traditions. (For a state-by-state directory, see [findthedivine.com](http://findthedivine.com).) But be warned: Longer retreats often bring you face-to-face with what you've been avoiding with

your busyness and distractedness. It's not usually pleasant to be alone with loneliness, heartache, frustration or unmet longings. Helen Cepero, author of *Journaling as Spiritual Practice*, suggests setting aside at least three days to move beyond the first inner restlessness and loneliness. She also suggests you bring along comfortable shoes and a notebook, and create a rhythm to the day that alternates periods of quiet sitting with walking and writing. "Listen to yourself," she says. "You'll learn what your heart is longing to do."

Above all, she says, don't transfer the hyped-up performance anxiety of the marketplace to the sanctuary. "I think people often come with really high expectations for themselves," she says. "That just doesn't work in a silent retreat. The biggest thing is to be attentive to what's there. Not what you anticipate, but what's there." —K.B.

PHOTO: P.E. REED/GETTY IMAGES



which usually ride up around my ears, have fallen about six inches. My face has softened like melting wax. My lips have relaxed from their habitual tight line. Instead of with the debris on the surface of my mind, I'm reveling in the peace below: the gentle rhythm of my breathing, the beating of my heart.

It's a rare experience in modern America, the noisiest, gabbiest, most interruption-prone culture that has existed since human life began. The loudest sound my great-great-grandparents heard on an average day was the ringing of their village church bell. Nobody interrupted their dinners with beeps; news arrived by letter or, less often, with a knock at the front door. They lived in the vast South African desert, and the backdrop of their lives was silence.

Contrast that with ordinary life in twenty-first-century America, where the background is a hum of machine noise so constant it goes unremarked: subways, freeways, leaf blowers, air conditioners, Jet Skis, televisions. Technology penetrates traditional boundaries of solitude and sanctuary: cell phones ring during funerals; helicopters buzz the Grand Canyon; bosses e-mail the house on Sunday morning. And then there are the 16,000-odd words, on average, that we each speak every day, and the thousands more we hear. Although research has yet to prove conclusively that all this noise is bad for one's health, a few studies suggest that it is a risk factor in heart attacks and that it stimulates the release of the stress hormone cortisol. (My defense: I never go anywhere without foam earplugs and a keychain-size TV-B-Gone device, which stealthily turns off the compulsory CNN in airport lounges and doctors' offices.)

### PIECES OF PEACE

+ **SPIRIT ROCK MEDITATION CENTER**, Box 169, Woodacre, California 94973, 415-488-0164, [spiritrock.org](http://spiritrock.org)

+ **INSIGHT MEDITATION SOCIETY**, 1230 Pleasant Street, Barre, Massachusetts 01005, 978-355-4378, [dharma.org](http://dharma.org)

+ **REMOTE DEVICE TO TURN OFF TV**, [tvbgone.com](http://tvbgone.com)

Back in the meditation hall, for breath after breath, nobody moves.

Then a man behind me clears his throat loudly. I stay relaxed, a minor miracle, given how easily I usually startle at sudden noises. My only reaction is in my right shoulder, where nerves fire and fade, like phosphorescence stirred up for an instant by an oar in night water.

The deep relaxation I feel is only the first and most tangible benefit of silence. Some of the women I respect the most have told me that their practice of regular periods of silence—as a counterweight to active, productive, emotionally connected lives—has benefits far deeper than simple de-stressing. Silence gives them access to parts of the self usually drowned out in social chatter. When the mind is not being stimulated and made anxious by outside sounds or by conversation, the balance of attention shifts away from surface concerns and into the wisdom of one's body. Developing a daily practice of spending even 15 to 20 minutes in silence is an easy way to get in touch with how we feel about the decisions we all have to make every day.

Elaine St. James, 65, author of the 1996 best-seller *Simplify Your Life*, has long maintained a practice of regular silence. In the early 1990s,



highly stressed by the demands of being a real estate investor, she spent four days in silence at a former convent in Santa Barbara, California, the seaside town where she had lived for many years. The retreat relaxed her and gave her time to compose a blueprint for simplifying her life. Some of the tasks she set for herself were easy, like dropping call waiting; others took longer, like selling her high-maintenance home and moving into a worry-free town house. Her plan took a few years to complete, but now her life is different, partly because she rises early enough each morning to have the time she needs for silence. During that quiet time she may contemplate her day, practice meditation, write about a problem she needs to sort out or ruminate on what the next phase of her life might look like. “The silence gives me the chance to get in touch with what I want rather than what the people around me expect,” she says.

Her practice of silence allows her to feel out her choices. Thinking about where she wanted to live, she noticed that when she imagined staying put in her familiar Santa Barbara surroundings, her chest felt constricted and her shoulders seemed weighed down. But when she imagined moving back to her Midwestern childhood home, which entailed various practical and career challenges, she could feel a sense of freedom and lightness at her center.

“Because our culture values thinking much more than feeling, we can easily miss the powerful messages that are coming from our bodies and our emotions,” St. James says. “Most of us have experienced those gut feelings we

later wished we’d paid attention to.”

She did move, and hasn’t once regretted the decision. The change has opened up a whole new world for her of friendships, family connections and a deep appreciation for the land.

Sylvia Boorstein, a psychotherapist who also teaches Buddhist meditation and is the author of the new book *Happiness Is an Inside*

that you may not have told yourself yet,” she says. “‘This problem that I was upset about, that was nothing, it’ll pass.’ Our wisest self introduces itself into that silent space.”

The day I got home from Spirit Rock, I found that I was more deliberate in how I used my energy. Instead of trying to do everything, I somehow did the right things, without even making a conscious

“The silence gives me a chance to get in touch with what I want rather than what the people around me expect.”

*Job*, adds that silence is an antidote to lives overly focused on the needs of others. “It doesn’t have to be something holy and elaborate, like a spiritual practice, but just a little me time,” says Boorstein, 72. “Silence is not self-centered. It simply counteracts the fact that women, stereotypically at least, are taught to listen not to themselves but to the demands of their community.”

In her own life, Boorstein found she couldn’t enjoy meditation retreats when her husband attended, because she’d be thinking about how it was going for him. So now she carves out a ritual space alone each morning, rising an hour before the rest of her household.

“I just sit by a window, holding a cup of coffee. I smell the aroma and I feel the warmth of the cup, and I sip the coffee,” says Boorstein, adding that she focuses on her senses rather than her thoughts. “It’s a different practice from meditation; it’s a practice of being present, of engaging all the senses.”

In the process, a less verbal, more intuitive aspect of the self arises. “When the mind is relaxed, it tells you things you need to know

effort. I started out by ignoring the mail and taking a nap. Once I was rested, I unpacked. At my office, I worked fewer hours, but more efficiently than usual. After months of procrastinating anxiously over my investment portfolio, I saw my adviser, did the relevant research and made changes in a single day. And I’m in touch with deeper questions I face about the shape my life will take as I approach another milestone birthday—questions I haven’t yet resolved.

The silent retreat has reminded me, once again, that a few quiet, contemplative moments can be more fruitful than hours of frantic, obsessive worry. So since I’ve returned, I’ve made a practice of getting up an hour earlier.

I don’t do formal meditation. Instead, I’ve returned to a half-forgotten personal ritual: sitting in silence in my study, jotting in a journal, watching the sky turn from dark blue to pale blue behind the willow tree in my neighbor’s garden. And when my shoulders start to creep up, I pay attention and relax them before they reach my ears. **M**