

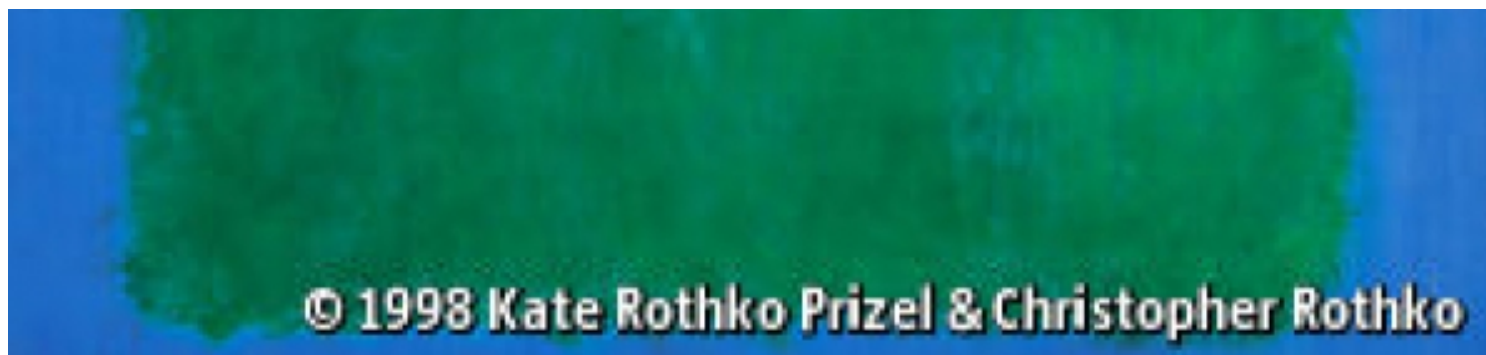
Christmas issue 2016

Silence

The power and meaning of silence

Where, how and why to be quiet





■ From the print edition | Christmas Specials

Dec 24th 2016 | MINGALADON TOWNSHIP

IF YOU had heard it on one of Yangon's chaotic streets you would have paid it little mind. It would have been a euphonious whisper swiftly lost in a cacophonous torrent. But in the pre-dawn quiet of the monastery it was as piercing as an air-raid siren. Shortly before 4am a monk struck two gongs, one about a second after the other. They sounded two different notes, the second just short of a fourth higher than the first. Then, pausing for a few seconds, the monk struck the gongs again. He did this several times.

The monastery began to stir: soft footsteps and the rustling of clothes—no voices. Most of the monks, nuns and lay worshippers filed out of their cells and into the *dhamma* halls—one for men and one for women—for an hour of seated meditation before the first of the day's two meals. Some instead did an hour of walking meditation: slow, deliberate, measured steps forward, hands clasped either in front or behind. After the morning meal the day's meditation, eating, sweeping, cleaning were done slowly, deliberately, and, for most lay worshippers, in complete silence.

The silence of this monastery, like most silence outside the fanciest anechoic chambers, is an aspiration rather than a fact. Not that long ago the chanting of the monks of Mingaladon would have carried over nothing but the fields and farms of what was then a rural township of Yangon, with little more than the crowing of cocks and lowing of cattle flowing back the other way. No longer. Though there are still farms in Mingaladon, it is also home to Myanmar's biggest and busiest airport, which is set to get even busier as the ever-less-secluded country assumes its place on the trails of backpackers and adventurous investors. Highway Number 3, a tributary to the busy Yangon-Mandalay Highway, bisects the township; in the monastery monks and laypeople alike meditate to the constant thrum of passing traffic.

But the silence of not speaking, as opposed to that of not hearing, persists. And, if anything, it gets more attractive as the noises outside the walls mount up. For someone whose working days are relentless blizzards of phone calls, e-mails, tweets and deadlines, and whose home life is filled with the constant screeching and breaking that only children at the demon-puppy stage can provide, a week spent in silent meditation within the monastery's walls sounded heavenly. No demands, an inward focus, time to breathe and reflect.

In fact, the plunge into silence proved powerfully disconcerting: like a cartoon character shoved over a cliff, running fruitlessly in mid-air. Your correspondent's modern mind craved stimulation; the sought-after silence brought only soured boredom. This, say meditation enthusiasts, is just the first stage: you have to push through it to reach something worthwhile on the other side. It turned out to be easier said—or easier to recall, in silence, someone else once saying—than done.

The quiet, once you are in it, is difficult. Saying you want it is easy, and commonplace. After the age of 30, if you tell any friend that you are in need of peace and quiet he is likely to nod in recognition. The demand is high enough that silence of all sorts is for sale. Noise-cancelling electronics, first discussed in public as a throwaway joke by the science-fiction author Arthur C. Clarke, now sit in hundreds of millions of dollars-worth of high-end world-excluding headphones. The intrepid, tight-lipped tourist can choose from silent retreats on six continents; many of the growing number headed for the seventh, Antarctica, probably do so in part out of yearning for a great white silence. Smaller doses of silent meditation, in the guise of mindfulness, are cropping up in secular school curricula across the Western world.

Finland boasts of its rural wooded silence as other countries sing the praises of their beaches or mountains: it markets itself as a silent tourist destination. Gordon Hempton, an "acoustic ecologist" (he records natural sounds) has designated a small chunk of territory deep in Olympic National Park in Washington state, far from roads and flight paths, "One Square Inch of Silence". He believes it is the quietest place in America's lower 48 states, and wants to keep it that way. He monitors the area for noise pollution, and tries to track down the offenders and ask them to quieten down.

Obviously, the inch is far from silent. The forest is alive with the whispers of nature: frogs and crickets, distant streams, squirrels and deer running over fallen leaves. This is the contradiction built into the pursuit of silence; the more sources of noise are stilled, the more the previously imperceptible rises to the level of perception. This was the essence of the silence that John Cage,

a composer, used in several of his works, most famously “4’33”, a composition for piano that consists of three movements. At the beginning of each the pianist opens the instrument’s lid, and at the end of each he closes it. No notes are played. The piece allows an audience to attend to the sounds around them and the questions within.

What the silence reveals can be grim. Samuel Beckett’s mimed plays “Act Without Words I” and “Act Without Words II” use silence to draw out the frustration, pointlessness and endured unendurability of life. His novel “The Unnamable” ends on a similar note (or absence of note): “I’ll never know, in the silence you don’t know, you must go on, I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” Beckett believed that “every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and nothingness”; and yet he went on writing them.

Fundamental though it is to some finished art, silence may matter even more as a circumstance for art’s creation. “The impulse to create begins—often terribly and fearfully—in a tunnel of silence,” wrote the American poet Adrienne Rich. In “The Aesthetics of Silence”, the writer and critic Susan Sontag urged artists to maintain a silent “zone of meditation” in order to protect their creative impulses from a world that wants to stifle them.

That said, stifling can be a silence of its own—one imposed through convention or power. In the censor’s hands silence can be a brutal intervention. Part of the strength of Harold Pinter’s plays, in which characters taunt, worry, threaten and displace each other with unnervingly long pauses, is their ability to dramatise in domestic form the silence imposed by states on many other political artists.

But although silence can be a necessary beginning, a tool of oppression and, properly deployed, a cutting critique of power, it is comparatively rare that it is the essence of an artist’s work. Few have trusted their audience to create the art without them, as Cage did; most feel a need to say something. For the deepest human relationships with silence—and also those most widely incorporated into the mundane life—turn not to art, but to religion

Through the earthquake, wind and fire

Some Christians, Buddhists and, to a lesser extent, Muslims have chosen silence for centuries, and there are rooms like those available in the Mingaladon monastery set aside for those who wish to explore its potential in Buddhist and Christian monasteries around the world. For the religious, silence offers a way to ponder and listen for the divine, the unsayable and inexplicable. Christians commonly choose silence because they believe in a god who speaks. They need to be

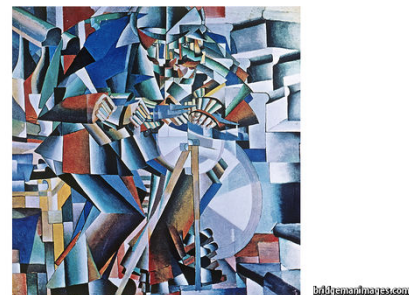
silent to create a space for him—always at the risk, as in Shûsaku Endô's novel, recently filmed by Martin Scorsese, that the silence remains unfulfilled, an abyss. Silence is also, the religions teach, personally improving. The Prophet Muhammad told Muslims that, "One can greatly beautify himself with two habits: good manners and lengthy silence." For Buddhists, silence teaches devotees to master their passions.

Silence is often a retreat from worldliness, and the inauthentic. Ignatius of Antioch, an early Church father, advised Christians at Ephesus: "It is better to be silent and be real than to talk and not be real"—foreshadowing by around 1,800 years Mark Twain's advice that it is better to keep one's mouth shut and be thought a fool than to open it and remove all doubt. It is also a way to avoid doing ill. One of the admonitions that comprise Buddhism's eightfold path is to practise *samma vaca*, or "right speech", which scriptures define as abstaining from false, slanderous, harsh and idle speech; all major religions counsel their adherents to choose their words carefully and use them sparingly. Religions can supplement the self control required for such abstinence in ways that may be helpful or oppressive; if the faithful cannot speak, they can ask no questions, preserving the authority of their superiors.

Many forms of religious practice make use of silence; some, such as that of Quakers, may consist of little else. But there are particular places where it really lives and breathes: in wildernesses like Mr Hempton's; in some monasteries.

Benedict, the sixth-century monk seen as the father of Christian monasticism, did not explicitly include silence in his rule, but in the cloistered life speech is widely seen as something requiring permission or exigency. Today monks

who live by the Rule of St Benedict in hundreds of (normally small) Trappist monasteries speak only sparingly.



The Knife Grinder: Kazimir Malevich

Thomas Merton, an influential American Trappist who was ordained in 1949, held that the only words required of a priest were those of the Mass. This disdain for speech (which caused him to agonise about his own copious writings) stemmed in part from his belief that God's words were beyond the scope of "human argument". Some things are mysterious, and not subject to analysis. One must be silent to understand them, and it is better to say nothing than to try to explain them. As Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian philosopher, put it in his "Tractatus Logico-philosophicus": "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must remain silent." It is not power that compels silence here, but the inadequacy of any attempt at communication.

The Buddha would have called this practice “Noble Silence”. When asked a question the answer to which he believed the questioner incapable of understanding, he said nothing. Usually these questions concerned the world’s fundamental nature; perhaps more than any other of the world’s great religions, Buddhism prizes the observable, and does not much concern itself trying to define the undefinable. When a disciple asked Buddha whether the universe was infinite or finite; or whether there is a self; or the more plaintive, “Will you tell me the truth?”: silence. Better no speech than speech that misleads, or answers that limit.

Buddha himself became liberated through silent meditation. Though Buddhism varies markedly with geography, from the wry, austere Japanese practice of Zen to the rigorous, state-entwined Theravada Buddhism practised in Myanmar and Thailand, silent meditation is generally the central practice of faithful Buddhists, whether monks, students, housewives or fishermen. When Mr Hempton says, of his square-inch of silence deep in the piney wilderness, that its silence “is not the absence of something. Silence is the presence of everything,” he is expressing a thought Buddhists would understand perfectly.

But the presence of everything—and of all of one’s self—is not always a release. It can be a burden. Around sunset on the second day of his seclusion in speechlessness, your correspondent realised that for all the equanimity offered by Buddhism, the psychological acuity of its founder’s teachings and the hospitality of the Mingaladon monks, he would rather be in one of the cars he could hear passing by on Highway Number 3, wherever it was going, than inside the *dhamma* hall, where he was supposed to be meditating. Having booked a seven-day retreat, he lasted a bit less than 70 hours. His still, small voice within, he decided on listening to it, was insufferable.

It is possible that pushing further would have brought a breakthrough, not a breakdown. It is also possible that, for many people, 15 minutes of silent meditation each morning and afternoon can be wonderful while 15 hours of it each day is both a waste of time and a greased slide into insanity.

Discovering the limit to the silence you can bear has its advantages. To some extent it can teach you to appreciate the irksome chaos and noise that led to the original yearning for silence—to realise that just as there can be inner tumult in silence, so there can be tranquillity in the thrum of activity. For all that, in English, the words are so often neighbours, “peace” and “quiet” are not necessarily conducive to each other. The Hebrew word “shalom” is reasonably translated as “peace”, but it has other shades of meaning too: completeness, prosperity, wholeness. These are

things that need not be silent. As Diarmuid MacCulloch writes in his quirky, insightful book “Silence: A Christian History”, in Old Testament scripture “peace and rest are associated with busy, regulated activity”. The preacher in “Ecclesiastes” tells his listener that “Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do, do it with thy might, for there is no work, nor device, nor knowledge, nor wisdom, in the grave, whither thou goest.” In its permanence and completeness, the grave is silent. But its peace is not one to seek out too soon.

There is a tradition of silence in those scriptures, too. “Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for Him,” the Psalmist says. But it is pulled at by the possibility of worldly, noisy peace, and the tension matters. Rescued from the austerity of the Mingaladon monastery and plunked down in hectic central Yangon, a refugee from silence may jostle less and smile more at the whorling sea of humanity that surrounds and presses in upon him. He may sit down for a steaming bowl of noodles at a packed stall on a narrow patch of pavement and see the customary elbows in the ribs from the diners on either side not as an annoyance to be endured but as signs of brotherhood, community and fellowship, to be received with love. He may even make a joyful noise unto whomever is listening.

Credits: © 1998 Kate Rothko Prizel & Christopher Rothko; © The Willem de Kooning Foundation

This article appeared in the Christmas Specials section of the print edition under the headline "The rest is..."