

# The Power of Silence

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**M**auna sādhanā is the celebration of the divine in the solitude of the self. *Mauna* is the language of infinity, of the eternal void that envelopes all. According to the *Bhagavadgita*, *mauna* is about training our minds, not just our mouths, to be silent. It is deeply transformative because it helps us quiet our thoughts and, more importantly, acknowledge the background of stillness that is our real nature. Silence deepens self-understanding by shutting the sensory gates, steering it away from outside. The first step in *mauna sādhanā* is *vāk mauna*, silence of speech. Human energy is often wasted in useless talk. Silence is not escapism but conscious self-restraint that saves one from speaking unpleasant truths, from wrangling and unwanted controversies. Yet silence of the ‘sewn-up lips’, whether forced or voluntary due to the exigency of circumstances, cannot be called silence.

There is a difference between Silence and *Mauna*. Silence often means shutting down the sensory organs, seeking inside for a deep understanding of yourself. On the other hand, *mauna* means being in the silence with self, reaching one step closer to the divine consciousness by means of converting the energy required to speak into spiritual energy. *Vipāssanā* or *vipāshyanā* is an old yogic practise used by Buddha to attain silence in the mind. *Vipāssanā* becomes part of *tapasyā*, austerity. In the process of *tapasyā* and meditation, there is no interaction with people, there is limited

food, limited speech or talk and for some time, one is isolated from the normal modes of communication. People just live in silence observing their mind and nature. Ramana Maharshi spontaneously spent years in silence, without even knowing about the practice of *mauna*. The revelation of the ocean of Pure Consciousness evidently caused him to remain silent, and he maintained that silence was his primary and most direct teaching. He described *mauna* as deeper than merely refraining from talking—it is the peaceful, unmoving, silent state of the Self, beyond all constructs of ‘noise.’

*Mauna* is much more than shutting our mouth for a few minutes every day. There are several ways we can practise silence, which will help us grow as an emotional and spiritual human being. Practising silence has its benefits on physical, mental, and spiritual well-being.

We can try listening to the Silence if we refrain ourselves from thinking about our chores, job, plans, reviews, meetings, etc., if we try to stay in the moment. But practising *mauna* is much more than just silence. It also includes active listening. When we perform our daily chores or work-related activities, we can try to listen to others more consciously. This will reduce the words we speak, resulting in the reduced loss of energy. We can be consciously aware of our speaking, that is, truly aware of the words that come out of our mouth. Before speaking, we should ask ourselves, is that needed to be said? This practice will

significantly reduce the superficial habit of unnecessary and unfruitful discussions we have every day.

I would like to present an incident from the autobiography of Torkom Saraydarian where he says that when he was a child, he was sent to a summer camp with his teacher and his friends, where his teacher instructed all the children to keep silence for three days. His teacher said, 'If, by mistake, someone says or whispers any word, he is to pay more attention so that he doesn't do it again. After the three days are over, we will discuss our experiences.' The first reaction was nervous laughter and feeling uneasy. After a while the children became serious and, during the day, they seemed to cling together in groups, as if there was fear in their hearts. By the next day, however, not talking seemed more natural to them; they were learning to communicate without speech and by the third day they could understand each other's expressions and gestures quite well. Of course, there were frequent temptations to speak, but no one gave in. On the third day, when the teacher instructed the children to discuss their experiences, John was silent for a while, but it was not surprising, for after three days, silence seemed a natural condition. Then, in a soft voice, he said, 'I began to feel that I exist. Never before had I experienced the sensation of my existence. Often it felt strange to me when I observed my body and its actions. It seemed to me that my body was an alien thing, and I felt a kind of fear.' Joseph said, 'I felt very energetic. I felt new energies in my arms, my legs, in my eyes. I slept longer and more soundly, and I smelled the greenery and the flowers more intensely. I enjoyed them more.' Charles said, 'I felt the same things and, also, I realized for the first time how much we talk all day and how much of it is

nonsense. I noticed that without talking, my logic was clearer, and the silence sharpened my ability to see the motives behind my actions and the actions of other people, too.'

Author's own experience in his own language is as follows: 'The whole time, I had a fight within me. I wasn't actually talking out loud, but inside my head, mentally, I kept up a monologue. It took until the third day before I could stop this inner talking and observe my environment without it. I also noticed that all of us, my friends and I, were in a calm mood, with very little emotional reaction. Our teacher said, "Speech is closely connected to our emotions. It sometimes acts the way a wind does on the sails of a little boat, pushing it farther and farther along on the sea." Another child Ajo said, "During the days of silence my memory became very clear. I recalled many, many events that I had forgotten or never even realized were in my mind. For example, I recalled an event that happened when I was only three years old, and I enjoyed that memory." Mark said, "I noticed, especially, that our facial expressions, our gestures and body movements were so meaningful. I had not been aware of that before."

'Teacher instructs the students to practise this exercise throughout their lives. He says, "Start with one day a year, then increase to two days a year, and gradually add a day until you achieve seven days of silence a year. Continue to practise silence for seven consecutive days of every year until you are fifty; then increase the number of days to ten; and after sixty to one month of each year for the rest of your life, periods of silence will help you live a longer and healthier life. They will keep full the reservoir of your physical, emotional, and mental energies. They will create a magnetic force around you. Your voice will be

effective and penetrating. You will understand people better. Your sensitivity to human need will increase tremendously and you will be leaders, wherever you are. Automatically, people will trust you. That is all I can say now”.

There are spiritual benefits of *mauna*; it allows us to introspect deeply. It enhances our appreciation towards life, along with our connection with the higher powers; it helps us to develop a witnessing attitude. It helps us to review our life from a third-person perspective. Silence clears our heads. It creates space within ourselves, to hear the voice of the Divine. It strengthens our mind to follow discipline, necessary to make our *sankalpa* or resolutions a success. By controlling our hormone secretions and blood pressure, *mauna* makes us feel happy. It increases our ability to focus on the things that really matter, like the purpose of our life, the nature of our existence, and higher consciousness.

Describing the benefits of *mauna*, Swami Sivananda affirmed: ‘Energy is wasted in idle talking and gossiping. Worldly people do not realize this. Mauna conserves the energy and you can turn out more mental and physical work. By the practice of mauna, the energy of speech is slowly transmuted or sublimated into *ojas shakti* or spiritual energy. Mauna develops will-force, curbs the impulse of speech, and gives peace of mind. You will get the power of endurance. You will not tell lies. You will have control over your speech. Mauna is a great help in the observance of truth and control of anger. Emotions are controlled and irritability vanishes. When one is ailing, observance of mauna will give great peace of mind.’

Peace follows silence. When we speak, we release a lot of energy. When we practise *mauna*, our power, wasted in

speech, gets transmuted into spiritual energy, helping us reach one step closer towards the Divine. ‘When the lips are silent, the heart has a hundred tongues’, says Rumi, ‘Listen! Calm up your mouth and be silent like an oyster shell, for that tongue of yours is the enemy of the soul, my friend’. Through silence, Rumi reaches a level of consciousness where he loses all his mundane identities.

*Mauna* is an inner journey towards one’s own self, it creates the space, the scope to meet our own original self which is not possible if we keep talking or speaking as it is all about the external world. In other words, there is real power in silence. In fact, Chinese philosopher Lau Tzu said, ‘Silence is a source of great strength’. A seed in the womb of mother earth lies in silence absorbing nourishment and other natural blessings until its expanded soul bursts forth into blossom. In spiritual life, silence creates an atmosphere and enables the seeker to find access to an inner sanctuary entirely hidden from the restless and turbulent material world. Whenever we are listening to fine music, if someone speaks or makes a noise we are distracted and often lose the subtle beauty of the music. Silence brings about surrender. That is why many places of worship maintain silence to aid prayer, meditation and surrender.

‘We can never hear the language of the soul if our ears are filled with the loud noises of the world’, said Swami Paramananda of Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Tapovan Maharaj and Ramana Maharshi, two great masters, were both established in the Self. Once they met at Thiuvannamalai, this was before Swami Tapovan Maharaj went to the Himalayas. Swami Tapovan Maharaj had gone to meet him at Arunachala Hill. Ramana Maharshi

was sitting in silence. Swami Tapovan Maharaj sat down too. They sat face to face for about half an hour but not a word was exchanged between them. After that Swami Tapovan Maharaj left. That was the highest form of communication. At that level words are an obstacle, an encumbrance and not necessary.

Buddha said, 'Do not speak until you can practise silence'. The power of silence is immense. If we can practise silence even for an hour, a lot of conflicts and fights will get resolved. Out of purity and silence come the words of power. Every movement that we make takes its toll on our *prānic* energy. Speech is the second largest consumer of energy after carnal pleasure. When we indulge in idle talk, gossip, unnecessary talk for long hours, we are draining *prānic* energy from our body. Our endeavour should be to conserve our *prānic* energy for higher purposes like meditation, contemplation, and introspection. If we have less *prānic* energy the brain gets heated up. That is why some people get headaches during meditation. When there is speech-silence, automatically the mind gets restrained. It is through the eyes, ears and speech that maximum extrovertedness happens. Only in a silent mind can we experience divinity. Only in still water is the reflection clear. A mind which is steady, sharp, single pointed and subtle can gain Self-knowledge.

It is a scientific fact that existence is a reverberation of energy. All vibrations in human experience translate into sound. Every form in the creation has a corresponding sound. This complex amalgamation of sounds is what we are experiencing as creation. The basis of all sound is *nishabda*. *Mauna* is an attempt to transit from being a piece of creation to the source of creation. This attribute-less,

dimension-less and boundless state of existence and experience is the aspiration of yoga. Sound is of the surface; silence is of the core. The core is a total absence of sound. Absence of sound means absence of reverberation, life, death, creation; absence of creation in one's experience leads to an enormous presence of the source of creation. So, a space which is beyond creation, a dimension which is beyond life and death, is what is referred to as silence or *nishabda*. One cannot do this; one can only *become* this.

Silence has great significance in spiritual practice. At the individual level, silence serves as the means for the individual soul to achieve union with the universal spirit in the Hindu practice of yoga. At the interpersonal level, silence is used to maintain harmony, avoid conflict. Without silence, we cannot progress far on the spiritual path. We will not become receptive to divine thoughts. It is in the silence of our mind that God pours divine wisdom and works His wonders. In Hindu spiritual tradition, the practice of silence is exemplified by the tradition of *munis*, the silent ones. It is through total silence of their minds and bodies, that they cross all barriers to reach the doors of Brahman.

Silence according to J. Krishnamurti, is more than the absence of noise—it's a deep psychological state. One has to go into the whole nature of silence. There is silence between two noises. There is silence between two thoughts. There is silence between two notes in music. There is silence after noise. There is silence when thought says, 'I must be silent,' and creates artificial silence, thinking it is real silence. There is silence when you sit quietly and force your mind to be silent. All these are artificial silences; they are not real, deep, uncultivated, unpremeditated silence.

Silence can only come psychologically when there is no resistance whatsoever. Then the mind, the brain itself, is utterly without movement. In that great depth of silence that is not induced, not cultivated, not practised, there may come that extraordinary sense of something immeasurable, nameless. The philosopher further says, 'Silence is difficult and arduous, it is not to be played with. It isn't something that you can experience by reading a book, or by listening to a talk, or by sitting together, or by retiring into a wood or a monastery. I am afraid none of these things will bring about this silence. This silence demands intense psychological work. You have to be burningly aware of your snobbishness, aware of your fears, your anxieties, your sense of guilt. And when you die to all that, then out of that dying comes the beauty of silence.'

It is very easy to understand the necessity for silence. During an ordinary day, when a constantly chattering mind, a constantly irritated mind, comes to rest, there is a feeling of being refreshed. The mind is refreshed, apart from anything else. So, silence itself is important. 'Silence is better than unmeaning words', said ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras. Pythagoras' discipline of silence required students to live five years in total silence. That requirement was reduced to two if you were already a serene and balanced person. Pythagoras believed that, through silence, the human soul could detach itself from any artifice or external object and return home.

According to Jainism, the main reason for any kind of misunderstanding and arguments is communication. The longer we maintain silence, the more we experience peace. The longer we remain silent, the

more we are able to have control over our thoughts, speech and action. The more we practise silence, the more we avoid negative emotions, thus maintaining healthy and peaceful relationships with others. We should strive to be in silence for at least one hour each day to experience the blissfulness of inner peace.

In the Buddhist tradition, a monk's vow of silence is a way to practise proper speech. Monks feel that they would avoid saying something negative by avoiding revealing anything that comes to mind. For them, it is a way to practise nonviolence. Almost all Buddhist traditions maintain some practice of noble silence, to varying degrees. That's not surprising considering the Buddha in the earliest texts speaks often in praise of silence.

For example, there is the near-total quiet of a *vipāssanā* meditation retreat, usually sustained for short but intensive periods of time. The use of silence in these scenarios has a purpose. It is to create the right conditions to be with ourselves and examine our internal world. We take some time just to observe this body, this mind, this heart. What's going on there? What's happening in this conglomeration we call our 'self'? It is essential that from time to time we find a moment to batten down the hatches and look closely at what is going on within our body and mind. When there is awareness, there is the possibility of growth, change, and transformation. Silence helps us cultivate this awareness, whether it is the collective silence of a Buddhist retreat or the solitary silence of our daily meditation practice. Cultivating this silence of speech and of the senses generally allows us to stop and see more clearly. This is what makes silence wholesome, makes it noble, a true foundation for wisdom and compassion. ■

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