

# An unusual silence

*"It cannot be sought by mindlessness, it cannot be understood by mindfulness. It cannot be reached by talking, it cannot be understood by silence."*

## **Chinese Zen master Ying-an**

**Peter:** Thank you very much. I appreciate the opportunity to make a presentation to the International Association for Spiritual Psychiatry. I enjoyed being here last year and it's a pleasure to be back again.

I want to use this opportunity to share with you the work I have been developing over the last twenty years. This work comes out of two important Buddhist traditions. One is a tradition called the Middle Way. Buddhism is often referred to as the Middle Way, but there is also a particular tradition within Buddhism that is called the Middle Way, or Madhyamaka. This tradition is very pro-active and forthright in the way that it dismantles fixations. This tradition has its origins in the brilliant dialectical mind of a second century Indian philosopher called Nagarjuna. My own approach is influenced by the Middle Way tradition, though it is also quite different from Nagarjuna's hard-edged methodology.

The other tradition that informs my approach is called the Complete Fulfillment tradition. This is a Tibetan spiritual tradition that has become very popular in the West in the last ten years or so. In Tibetan it is called the Dzogchen Tradition. It is also similar to another tradition called Mahamudra. In contrast to the Middle Way, the Complete Fulfillment tradition is very organic and free flowing. It teaches us how to effortlessly release tension and conflict, rather than systematically dismantle them as occurs in the Middle Way. My own approach synthesizes the essence of both these traditions into a comprehensive and contemporary form of psycho-spiritual work.

The initial intention of this work is to reveal our fixations. What do I mean by a fixation? I mean any impulse or energy to either change what we are experiencing, or to keep it the same. A fixation occurs when we are either rejecting, or hanging onto what we are experiencing.

One way to reveal our fixations is to observe our thinking. Our thoughts offer a continual series of signals that allow us to determine if we are rejecting or appropriating what is happening to us. If we are thinking, "I wish I were somewhere else." "I wish this would change." "This is boring, etc." this indicates a rejection of our experience, at some level. If we are thinking, "Wow, this is great." "I'm glad I came." "This is the right place to be." "I want more of this," then we are appropriating our experience: we want it to continue. So we can begin to observe our fixations by observing our thoughts.

We can also observe our fixations by becoming sensitive to what is happening at a somatic level. We begin to observe the impulse to either be where we are, or somewhere different, in terms of

the sensations that are arising in our body. At a bodily level we become sensitive to the feeling of being repelled out of our present physical circumstances. It is as though we feel a physical pressure to be somewhere other than where we are. This could be a feeling of wanting to avoid our body in some way, or a feeling that the environment is somehow pushing us away. Conversely, we also recognize the sensation of wanting to be right where we are. In an extreme manifestation, this is the feeling of being riveted to our seat, as it were-not wanting to move, for fear of losing some experience or opportunity. Thoughts that are consistent with this type of fixation are: "This is the place to be." "I don't want this to go away." "I wish so-and-so was here as well."

At this point I'd also like to note that the value in observing our fixations only arises because we feel that something is missing in our lives, and we believe we need to do something in order to remedy this situation. This presentation is relevant only because we are seeking a cause and solution to our suffering. If nothing was missing this whole process would be completely irrelevant.

However, it is also very easy to become fixated on the idea of observing our fixations. We can think there is some intrinsic value in doing this. In fact if we think there is some value in doing it, then we will condition ourselves to observe our fixations, even when this is quite unnecessary. If we become attached to the notion of observing our fixations, or any other type of spiritual process for that matter, we condition ourselves to becoming perpetual seekers. This is just to say that balance is required when observing our fixations, so we don't become self-aware in a neurotic or obsessive way.

I would now like to begin to interact with you, because it is only through demonstrating this approach that you will fully experience what I am talking about. In fact, one distinguishing feature of this work is that there is no strict demarcation between its theoretical and practical dimensions. Theory and practice are braided into a relatively seamless and integrated process.

So, I'm wondering what fixations, if any, are manifesting for us as a group right now. Are there any fixed assumptions structuring and limiting what we are doing right now?

**Participant:** Yes. I'm in the role of doing nothing, just being here, as a participant-receiving.

**Peter:** It is easy in these circumstances to fall into a passive role. The structure of this type of event establishes a firm differentiation between presenters (as speakers) and participants (as listeners). You can feel that there is an expectation that I essentially do whatever needs to be done. It is also worth observing that you challenged that assumption by simply observing its presence. By acknowledging that you could be very passive in this event, you actually corrected that style of engagement.

[Silence]

It feels to me as though there is now a slightly different mood in the room. In saying this, I'm just observing what is happening in the here and now. You are not quite sure what's going on, so there is a level of uncertainty. You can observe your relationship to that uncertainty in terms of whether you like it, or dislike it. Or, what amounts to the same thing, you can observe if you are feeling comfortable or uncomfortable. You might also note that what I have just said relieves some of the uncertainty by giving you something to do.

[Silence]

Right now it feels to me as though many of you are waiting. If I'm not providing intellectual material to stimulate you, you move into a mood or phase of waiting, which again is interrupted or displaced as soon as I begin doing what I'm doing now-talking and interpreting. At this point there is a preference for speech over silence.

Again, I am observing what is happening, as it is happening.

[Silence]

Again, you can see how easily the waiting creeps in. You can also experience the sensation of waiting in your bodies.

**Participant:** I think it is fear of the void, fear of the silence.

**Peter:** That may be what is happening for some of you. However, there is a range of responses to the silence that is occurring. For some it can trigger discomfort. For others, it is interesting. It can also support an experience of peace and serenity.

This process gives you an opportunity to observe your relationship to speech and silence. You can observe your attraction and aversion to the periods of silence.

**Participant:** Is it possible to be here free of any expectation about what is going to happen?

**Peter:** I think that would be very difficult. Firstly, as I have already said, this type of event conditions certain expectations. Also, what I am doing is somewhat at variance to those expectations. The very fact that you are sitting there, facing me, conditions the expectation that I am the source of something-some useful ideas or nice experiences. You have come here for something, and I am the person who is expected to deliver.

In more general terms, whenever we feel that something is missing we look for some idea, method, teaching, or material object, to displace that experience. This event-what is happening right now-is just one more iteration in the process of trying to displace the experience that something is not right. This isn't a negative judgment. Rather, it reflects how an experience of lack is very pervasive. We spend a good part of our lives thinking that "This isn't it," and that "Things could be better."

[Silence]

You can still feel the mood of expectancy. And there is still a sense of not knowing quite what to do with the silences. Actually, people are reacting quite differently to the silences.

**Participant:** For me, I feel something that is very strong. It's not so much the words we are exchanging, but rather an experience of presence. It is more than just meditation.

**Peter:** In general terms, I think that some of the experiences that do occur through meditation can be accelerated through a more pro-active inquiry of the type we are engaged in now.

[Silence]

I also appreciate the way you are drawing attention to the fact that this is a somatic experience as much as a cognitive one. There is a strong sense of being here physically, as opposed to just being intellectually entertained.

**Participant:** This experience is helping me to realize that when I come to listen to somebody, I indeed expect to hear something I don't yet know. When connecting in silence with all of you, I realize I highly enjoy sharing this presence. Thank you.

**Peter:** Thank you.

**Participant:** Can we have the same type of experience that an ascendant master can have living in outer space?

**Peter:** I can't answer that question because I've never thought about it. No response is occurring to me. I'm wondering if there is another question embedded in what you are asking. It might seem strange that I have no response, but at this moment I really can't put my head around your question. I would need to jump lanes to respond to you.

**Participant:** What I felt is, I felt there has been something broken. There was a kind of betrayal, because the discourse has been cut. It brings me back to what I am feeling in my body.

**Participant:** Maybe there is something wrong with me. I'm trying to observe my feelings, my expectations, and the content of my thoughts. I experience the silence, and observe that the silence brings peace. But then I start worrying because I think I might be missing out on something.

**Peter:** I appreciate what you have said. You can also experience the impulse or need to make sense of what is happening. When we reveal and experience that need it produces a shift in energy.

[Silence]

**Participant:** Now what?

**Peter:** Do you sense that I am saying that there is some goal to this process?

**Participant:** I presume you are trying to present something to us, and also I want to share in this experience.

**Peter:** What you are saying again demonstrates our need to know what is happening.

**Participant:** You have talked about fixations and said that if we observe these closely they can be revealed. What can we then do with that?

**Peter:** Why do we need to do anything? I said initially that observing our fixations only makes sense within the assumption that we need to do something. It occurs within the general experience

that something is missing and a commitment to change that situation. Of course, there are many, many things that one can do when one is feeling a sense of lack. Observing our fixations is one thing we can do. We can also observe the tendency to view this as a useful, or useless activity.

What you are saying points to our need to be doing something purposeful and meaningful. Usually, we will only engage in something if we can develop an interpretation that makes it intrinsically meaningful and useful. We need to validate our actions. I'm not telling you that this is important work, but nor am I saying that this is meaningless, because that would be another extreme.

**Participant:** I feel I have been monopolizing your attention.

**Peter:** I don't think you have. You are simply expressing a general need to know what you are doing. I acknowledge that we are heading in a different direction from what you may have expected. I also appreciate that people are feeling more and less comfortable with this experience. I appreciate that there are variety of responses.

**Participant:** It seems that the whole room now feels very comfortable-there are no strong reactions, no expectations. We have stopped looking for something. You are familiar with these kinds of experiences in a group, so what happens now? Does the silence just continue, or is there something else for us to capture?

**Peter:** Do you mean, is there a framework to make sense of this?

**Participant:** Yes.

**Peter:** You seem mildly concerned about what is going to happen next.

**Participant:** Yes.

**Peter:** I teach in many different contexts-to both large and small groups. This work evolves differently depending upon the context. But most events are punctuated by periods of analysis and periods of silence. You can also observe that the periods of silence arise naturally. They aren't being imposed through some instruction. The discipline is not to become attached to the silences, because then we would try to artificially extend them. Nor to try to interrupt them through fear or discomfort. From my side I don't try to shorten or prolong either the interactions, or the silences.

**Participant:** Can you repeat that?

**Peter:** The dynamic of this work is defined by operating from a space in which we don't try to artificially meddle with our experience. This means that we become aware of any impulse to prolong an experience (because we are enjoying it), or shorten it (because it is uncomfortable). In this way we avoid the extremes of trying to slow things down, or speed them up. Our capacity to allow life to develop with a sense of balance and naturalness depends on being able to sense what is happening at a somatic or bodily level. It is also a function of not seeking comfort, or trying to avoid discomfort.

**Participant:** There seems to be a continuity, an alignment, between what you are sharing here, and what I experience with clients in my psychiatric practice.

**Peter:** There is a clear opportunity for implementing what I am presenting in a clinical setting. This work offers a model for how to go beyond the helping relationship and achieve a transpersonal level of sharing.

**Participant:** Generally, I've thought that what is happening here is unreachable. You are communicating an experience that is ungraspable. Through this demonstration I have an experience of the "origin of being".

But I also feel that there is a paradox here because you came with the intention to share this experience with us. You yourself, are part of this experience. Your intention means that this isn't truly an egoless experience.

**Peter:** Do you feel you are caught in this experience right now?

**Participant:** We are caught by the fact that you came to demonstrate this to us.

**Peter:** But what makes you feel trapped right now? Are you connecting with what is happening right now, or in you inside an historical interpretation?

**Participant:** The fact that we are sharing this experience means that we are caught in each other's reality.

**Peter:** Perhaps, but there are many ways to interpret this experience. It seems to be very limiting to assume that communication necessarily traps us in some way. Communication can be a vehicle for freeing us from egocentric experiences.

**Participant:** But this experience is still influenced by your prior intentions.

**Peter:** Now you are presuming that I had a specific intention to do what I'm doing. Alternatively, I couldn't have done anything other than what I did. I don't know how to do anything else! While I have a general idea about what I am likely to be doing in a setting like this, I didn't know precisely how, or where, we would move today.

[Silence]

**Participant:** I thank you very much for this experience because it brings me a lot of joy. It is a picture of possibilities. I have had the opportunity to move to different locations: to be with myself, with the group, and in relationship with you. And finally, I have the freedom to adapt myself-to what you are offering.

**Peter:** Thank you.

**Participant:** I feel I have made a discovery. A spiritual master is simply a factor of mobility. Before coming here today I had a more fixed conception of spiritual mastery.

**Participant:** I appreciate this experience because it give me access to a new way of listening.

[Silence]

**Peter:** You will notice that this is now being interpreted as being positive and desirable. There is quite a different relationship to the periods of silence. I get the feeling you would like more of this.

[Silence]

**Participant:** I just want to share with you that I am deaf. But now I realize that silence is the ultimate solution to our problems, because this form of silence is the basis of everything.

**Peter:** Perhaps, but this type of silence doesn't occur independently of doing what we've been doing in terms of talking and observing. This type of work requires real balance and sensitivity since language and interpretation can be used to both expand and contract our experience of reality. As I said earlier, this is about being in a space where we prefer neither the silence nor the analysis.

**Participant:** I've been observing the rhythm of the periods of observation and moments of silence. I feel that these phases are alternating too fast for me, and this is creating some tension. I feel I need longer in each phase.

**Peter:** This could be so in your case. Your natural rhythm might different from other peoples'. Here we are trying to achieve a balance between what is appropriate for all of you collectively, without ignoring the range and diversity of individual responses to this space. With a group as large as this, there will always be some disparity between group and individual needs.

[Silence]

**Participant:** The real silence occurs in our awareness of whatever is there.

**Peter:** Yes. It would be limited to think of silence as merely the absence of speech. To some extent we have been focusing on physical silence today because in a conference setting, this work is distinguished by more silence than we would have expected. It has somewhat captured your attention. However, I prefer to describe this work as the creation of a disclosive space, which allows whatever is present to be there in a natural and uncontrived manner.

**Participant:** This space, this silence, has allowed me to go further into my feelings. I'm now observing more subtle changes in my experience. Thank you.

**Participant:** I think it is very important to be able to share this silence within a group because then the experience is more powerful and more rich. It lets us go deeper into our own and others' feelings. I think I have reached a state of emptiness that allows us to feel what is happening for others.

**Peter:** My sense is that right now we are experimenting with a way of being in which we are more fully available to what we are experiencing within us, and around us. We are reaching a point where we no longer need to manipulate, contrive, or suppress our feelings and thoughts.

I want to thank you all very much.

[Applause]

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