Into the Silence

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November 21, 2026

Keywords: *Saṃyutta Nikāya*, greed-hatred-delusion, *samādhi*, *karma*, *saṃsāra*, *dukkha*, Dharma, Ajahn Chah, Shinzen Young, silence

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There are these social psychologists who publish influential work in prominent journals, but they're always kind of funny, which is not standard. A few years ago, they published a study titled, *"Do Conversations End When People Want Them To?"* This is from the research:

> "Surprisingly, behavioral science provides no answer to this fundamental question about the most ubiquitous of all human social activities. In two studies of 932 conversations, we asked conversants to report when they had wanted a conversation to end, and to estimate when their partner, who was a family member or friend in Study One and a stranger in Study Two, had wanted it to end. Results showed that conversations almost never ended when both conversants wanted them to, and rarely ended when even one conversant wanted them to. The average discrepancy between the desired and actual durations was roughly half the duration of the conversation. Conversants had little idea when their partners wanted to end, and underestimated how discrepant their partners' desires were from their own. These studies suggest that ending conversations is a classic coordination problem that humans are unable to solve because doing so requires information that they normally keep from each other. As a result, most conversations appear to end when no one wants them to."

That is my elaborate way of apologizing to Gil for talking too much in the treehouse over there. You know, just a quiet Norwegian man minding his own business, and he gets a roommate with a loudmouth New York Jew.

And so the theme, of course, is silence: silence and noise, the noise of the world, and reentering. There's much noise. Greed and hatred are noise. The craving to reproduce the self in the next moment, leaning forward—that's noise. To seek evidence again and again that, like, yes, the world is as I think it is, the world is as I thought it was—that's noise.

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The ascendancy of greed, hatred, and delusion in our world—heartbreaking noise—and these foundational energies that really foment civilization, in a sense. These forces of grasping, aversion, and insensitivity. The way that modernity and technology have largely scaled greed, hate, and delusion.

> *Saṃyutta Nikāya*: "All is a flame. The eye is a flame. Forms are a flame. Consciousness at the eye is a flame. Contact at the eye is a flame. Whatever there is that arises in dependence on contact at the eye, experienced as pleasure, pain, or neither pleasure nor pain, that too is a flame. A flame with what? A flame with the fire of greed, aversion, the fire of delusion—a flame. I tell you, with birth, aging, death, with sorrows, lamentations, pains, distresses, and despairs."

Maybe that's just a way of saying that there's so much noise, and there's silence. Health researchers have labeled the phenomenon of noise pollution. In the wild, our animals need to hear in order to adapt to their environment. Noise creates static in the system. Too much noise, noise pollution, is associated with stress and even cardiovascular disease, sleep trouble, and mental health struggles.

And then maybe we look through space at a distant star in the night, in the countryside, and silence just fills us. We don't exactly hear the silence; we become the silence.

I used to sit this retreat when I was in graduate school over Christmas break. It was usually a two-week retreat, and it fell over Christmas and New Year's. It was at La Casa de Maria, home to Sisters of the Immaculate Heart, these kind of progressive nuns that centered peace. There was a fire in the hills above that center.

The fire didn't reach the center, but a subsequent mudslide destroyed much of that campus. But for years, that was where I would go during the winter break from school. On this night, it was New Year's Eve, and we sat up. It was kind of intense, an intense schedule, and we sat up that night late.

We chanted in the new year, this kind of deep, guttural chant, loud. I don't know, maybe close to a hundred yogīs or so. We knew that when the chant ceased and the teacher rang the bell, that would signal that it was midnight Pacific time and that we were entering the new year. Of course, we first hear the silence when you're chanting loudly for a long time with a hundred people. When that stops, you really hear the silence.

Then we got up and filtered out, and there was kind of a silent celebration—a silent retreat and silent celebration—with sparkling apple cider. There was no music and no talking, but

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people were dancing together. I was just recovering from the intensity of the day, and I was happy to be off the *zafu* and in a chair. I was sitting out in the hills of Santa Barbara, and it was kind of cold.

It was a very clear night, and I was just looking up at the stars. It occurred to me that I was probably seeing at least some stars that might be millions of light years away, certainly many, many light years away. In that moment, there was the recognition: oh, that light took a million years to get to my eye right now. And that star, who knows where that even is now, if it's still alive? Over that expanse of space and time, just silence.

So we've explored these active dimensions of embodiment, emotion, and thought. It's not like we want to treat all of that as noise and just melt it away into stillness, spaciousness, silence. No, we honor that. We've explored the ways in which a supple, improvisational, sensitive, careful relationship to body, feeling, and thought can bring us into some measure of stillness.

Yesterday, there was a kind of exploration of spaciousness. A friend of mine said, "Hell is no space." Hell is no space. That feels about right. Suffering, as Gil was pointing to, and claustrophobia are closely linked.

Hell is no space. An egoic life, the kind of ordinary life that we return to, is its own kind of claustrophobia and its own peak contraction. When we contract into an imagined center point of our own being, suffering is a kind of gravitational force field that pulls inward. Suffering pulls in; freedom tends to expand out.

Suffering, clinging, and self co-vary like a kind of cluster. In that tangle, we lose sight entirely of the vastness. But we practice such that it's never far.

Sometimes, sitting at night with you all, I might say something like, "Yeah, just let the silence run right through you." Sometimes, sitting here in this seat, it's a little—I don't know, not always, but sometimes—it's a little painful to speak into the silence. I try to let the words come from silence and return to silence. I try to honor your silence.

The silence of this room—it's gotten very silent at times. Sometimes there's noise, but the silence is much louder. Silence, that silence that's pregnant with everything.

And so we return to our lives, and we find that our mind is not our own. It is the product of causes and conditions, and choicefulness is only one of many conditions. We cannot insist on silence by an act of will. But there is an encouragement to have a kind of Dharma north star.

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Something to come back to, something to remember, something that immediately cuts through noise and reminds you: stillness, spaciousness, silence. It might just be a tiny fraction of a moment. You don't even know if it was real. We might just have a tiny, tiny glimpse of something, but you begin to recognize that it's not imagined.

Let's not imagine that puncturing the sphere of noise is this microscopic moment. Maybe it gets a little heavier: the silence. Of course, I don't say any of this to make noise an enemy. There are no enemies in experience. To fight noise is just more noise.

There's this famous exchange of a monk complaining to Ajahn Chah about, I think, a party near the monastery and loud music being played. The monk said, "The noise is bothering me." Even I would know you do not say that to Ajahn Chah. You're just begging for it.

The noise is bothering me. And Ajahn Chah's response, of course, was, "No, you're bothering the noise." So, what would it mean to stop bothering the sound? To let sound flow through us, like in one door and out another.

We investigate. I'm sensitive to sound. We investigate what sound clanks into, this kind of intimate territory that feels like it needs protection, this kind of territoriality. To claim territory is to become territorial.

So, when we don't sense body as space, it feels like: wall off, protect something from this noise. And *samādhi* is a kind of silence that's louder than all noise. That's usually rendered as concentration, but as Gil said, unification. Maybe we render *samādhi* as non-ambivalence.

Samādhi is the kind of temporary resolution of ambivalence. Meaning that our whole life is pointed exactly in one direction. Ordinarily, all the arrows are pointing in all these different directions. All the vectors of our being are aimed toward so many things, so many objects, so many goals, so many cravings and aversions.

And then they line up. They point just to this breath. They point just to this person speaking. They point just to silence or space. This kind of silence, *samādhi*, is a kind of attentional satiety.

We have eaten. We are full. Actually satiated. We want only exactly what we have.

There's a lot of noise around that word *samādhi*. "I think too much," or, "I need to stop thinking," or, "I need to get more concentrated." There's a lot of noise around it. "I'm the kind of person who can or cannot do this or that."

We tend to think of the silence of *samādhi* as a kind of attentional job where we get to do something. But attention is the spear tip of *karma*. Meaning, attention reflects the past hour

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and the past day, the past year, this retreat, this life, deep evolutionary time. Attention, the spear tip of *karma*, is a very sensitive indicator of what's happening in our mind.

It is a kind of mirror of all our clinging and all our peace. Attention is closely linked to salience: what we determine is important and what can be left aside. What is foreground? What is background? What is our mind determining as important, moment by moment?

And to hear silence, we practice making the world less salient. The world must become a little less salient. The Dharma path is not a turning against life, but the world becomes a little less salient.

Our path helps us become less startled by imperfection, uncertainty, and permanence. The path helps us pre-grieve the inevitability of aging and change and ungraspability: the unpossessibility of life, the unpossessibility of each other. These kind of ritualistic practices of waking up, waking up to the changingness, make us maybe a little less startled by *saṃsāra*. It makes the world a little less salient, and silence begins to unsettle.

This is researcher Rui Goh:

> "Silence confronts us throughout our daily lives—a pause in conversation, or the hush at the end of a musical performance. What's the nature of these experiences? One possibility is that experiences of silence are simply cases in which we fail to hear, and then use our faculties of reasoning and judgment to infer it's silent. This cognitive view may be motivated by a deeper assumption about perception. Namely, that we can genuinely perceive only what is present in the world, not what is absent. However, an alternative possibility, which arguably does more justice to our phenomenology or subjective experience, is that we literally perceive silences. Silence is perceptual, not cognitive. Hearing silence is not a mere failure to hear sound, but rather a case of successful perception."

Then the researchers did a lot of very complex perceptual testing and experiments. They write:

> "Our results suggest that subjects do not simply register the durations of silent intervals, but rather construct object-like representations of silences, just as it does with sounds. What is the nature of these silence representations? Since representations of silence do not correspond to periods of sound, a natural way to conceive them is as contentless event representations—a kind of empty event file."

Empty event file. Contentless event representation. Can you hear the silence? Maybe there's noise in front of you, or to your right, but not behind you, not to your left.

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Maybe we notice that when we go from noise—maybe we're doing our yogī job—and then we put down the broom or the chef's knife or the vacuum, and then, for a moment, we really hear the silence. But then you get accustomed to the silence and don't hear it anymore. We're practicing not acclimatizing to silence.

Sometimes we hear silence. Sometimes we become silence. It isn't exactly me hearing the silence. There is only silence, and there's nothing else to be said. Nothing else can be said.

Thomas Metzinger:

> "Deep silence is the uncontracted quality of silent knowing itself, empty cognizance lacking any form of grasping or inner agency. It is not only non-conceptual; it's characterized by mental inaction. It never reacts, never makes a choice, never initiates an action. This awareness is that which never speaks. Pure awareness is that which would not even say, 'I am that,' which never speaks. That which says, 'I am that which never speaks,' is something else. This is an entirely silent, non-conceptual experience of the phenomenal character of awareness itself."

Our north star: still, spacious, silent. But how? How does this look in the midst of all the movement and the pressure and the sound to which we return? And it cannot be a fight between stillness and movement, spaciousness and contraction, noise and silence.

A teacher of mine, Shinzen Young, would say, in giving instructions, not a scintilla of preference between graveyard silence of the mind and the howling of discursive thinking. Not a scintilla of preference. The preference is just more noise.

We practice here such that, even for a moment, stillness and space and silence burn into our heart-mind. And part of why we come here, become so porous, and generate so much energy is that when we learn something amidst that porosity, it makes a deep mark, a deep stretch mark, on the brain. One teacher said that's part of why we sort of don't like the process of becoming more porous. It usually involves some measure of discomfort and pain and disorientation as we thaw deeply.

But when we do thaw deeply and become porous, which is its own facet, actually, of *samādhi*, what we learn makes a deep impression. And even if we can't live fully from the inside, it's never actually forgotten.

So sometimes we give the instruction, maybe we've given it in one way or another, to feel your body, to feel the space beyond your body, to feel the kind of gradient of density, the porousness, as you move from the constellation of sensations into space. And we can come

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to live that way amidst noise. Sometimes, not to feel beyond our body, but to feel, as Gil said, just beyond your views. To feel just beyond the vicissitudes of gain and loss, the silence just beyond.

To feel just beyond the horizon of our own life. And even as we live a kind of committed, engaged, responsible social life, there can be this slight dreamlike quality to your life that becomes more accessible. And the Dharma is so radical insofar as it asks us that you cannot have all the eggs in one basket called my life.

Now, of course, we get super activated and spun, and we'll be asked for patience that we cannot offer. There's some gracefulness about just becoming unbalanced. We try, as Gil has said, just not to make it worse. Because some of our pain feels to me karmically baked in.

We don't know how much noise we'll need to endure, but we'll need to endure. In a way, some of the Dharma is better at preventing fires than putting them out. Dharma is preventative medicine in many ways. And sometimes the fire that's been lit by greed, hate, and delusion—our own or somebody else's—and we desperately seek the kind of *dukkha*-free path out of that.

But there isn't a *dukkha*-free path. We sometimes just have to attune to where, okay, practice right now is not to look for the suffering-free. That doesn't exist. I'm just going to try to let these flames die down, not fan the flame.

And we use the lingering pain of that old *karma*. We use that to consolidate our love, to motivate us to be careful, to live in a way that's planting the seeds of well-being.

We listen to the silence in our own interpersonal life. Our whole self-story is surrounded by silence and space. Melodrama, melodrama—the self, the obscenity of our narcissism—needs to hear the silence beyond it. If we're to be happy, we just cannot take our ego's side.

As desperate as we are sometimes, as much shame would be released when we actually have to own up to this, yeah, to the kind of shame that comes when we marshal the courage not to take our side. It's like the shame leads us to double down on ego. But can we actually consciously experience that, not take our ego's side? To hear silence beyond that.

To be a self is to experience imposter syndrome. It's just the nature of self-view: it feels slightly ill-fitting. It feels like we're pulling a fast one on ourselves, on others, and we, of course, may get buried, buried. Sometimes we feel that kind of spasm of shame and defensiveness, and it feels like survival.

It's like, okay, okay, some forgiveness. We're always just trying to cope. Then we listen, listen

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again to the most distant sound, the most distant sound fading out. Hear the silence.

This realm is, really, in the silence. There's no positionality and no fight, no sides exactly, no winning. We talk about self-doubt so often, but what is more destructive to the fabric of society and to relationship is overconfidence. For me, somehow, this permanent possibility of being wrong, like living with that, alongside that, somehow the silence makes that more possible.

It drains some of the shame from that. Who said we're supposed to know? And so we practice a Dharma life of this give and receive, this kind of open loop of feedback. Life is just feedback, feedback moment by moment: listening, attuning, open, receiving, giving.

There are limits to our knowing. There will always be more. So this is from your cosmology stuff, right?

> "We can currently see a sphere around us extending out 46 billion light years in all directions, known as the observable universe. Light from galaxies beyond this space hasn't yet had time to reach us. On our leading cosmological theory, the rate at which new galaxies become visible will decline. And those currently more than 63 billion light years away will never become visible from the Earth. We could call the region within this distance the eventually observable universe. Accelerating expansion puts a limit on what we can ever affect. If today you shine a ray of light out into space, it could reach any galaxy that's currently less than 16 billion light years away. But galaxies further than this are being pulled away so quickly that neither light nor anything else we might send could ever affect them."

The silence beyond all that's known, the silence beyond the horizon of my own life, our own lives—just to try to listen there. I'm trying to learn about my finitude. I'm trying. I'm trying to learn about that as I notice the breath coming in and out, sound fading into silence, movement falling into stillness.

Trying to learn about my finitude. It feels like the unit of analysis is this lifetime. We usually take that to be the unit of analysis: my life right now. But maybe that's wrong.

Maybe we try to listen to the silence beyond the horizon of our own life. There's always been a lineage of wisdom and reverence and love, reverence for silence. There's always been that lineage, and we are in that lineage. It will continue after we're gone.

We do our best to contribute to it, plant trees in whose shade we'll never sit. It's taking refuge in stillness, space, and silence.

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