

# The Social Life of Silence

by Sharon Hepburn

*Cet article examine la philosophie des camps de méditation bouddhiste Theravada où les personnes doivent observer un silence complet.*

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*We've vowed to keep silence of voice; to keep silence of body, doing nothing to distract others, nothing to draw attention to ourselves; to try to keep silence of mind, to stop the ceaseless wanderings of the mind away from the sensation of breath and body.*

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Four in the morning, a gong sounds and I know that a stooped woman with faint vision is nearby, making sure that I am not still sleeping, though I cannot believe it's four already: it can't be four, as we've only just gone to bed, well, six hours ago. Through the bamboo wall I hear her walk away on her rounds, and the gong sounds again. I rise, tired from a night of odd sensations, first in my legs, probably from having yesterday sat 12 hours in meditation I tell myself. But then my fingertips—searing pain, where does that come from—and then the legs again. It is a cold winter morning and a heavy mist envelopes the northern edge of the Kathmandu Valley, as we emerge from our rooms—me from a private “nun's cell,” most others from dormitories—shawls wrapped against the cold, as we move silently. We move nobly and silently as we have vowed to do for ten days. We've vowed to keep silence of voice, to remain quiet except to clarify the instructions from the teacher; to keep silence of body, doing nothing to distract others, nothing to draw attention to ourselves; to try to keep silence of mind, to stop the ceaseless wanderings of the mind away from the sensation of breath and body.

Sensation of body, mostly pain so far, and we move silently to the meditation hall to begin two hours of meditation practice before breakfast. I sit at the back of the hall so as to take refuge in leaning on the wall when pride permits it. Next to me is the one other white person, a French woman, and two crippled Nepalese. In front of me sits a 90-year-old woman, incontinent, who I envy for her ability to sleep cross-legged, her somnolence revealed only by occasional snoring. Ahead of us sit rows of women, the familiar shape of heads and shoulders draped in shawls. To our right, across the aisle, the men sit, in their separate space. And we sit in ours.

This is my second retreat.<sup>1</sup> The first time I came

encouraged by the grandmother of the family I lived with, who meditated for an hour each morning. Through her troubled life, as she tells it, she has known little but disappointment, betrayal, hard work, and the aggravation keeps coming. A son abandoned his own three sons because his new wife didn't want them, so the grandmother must raise them, and one of those children has now disappeared after a fight. She worries, money is tight. This meditation is good she says, it makes her peaceful, keeps her blood pressure down. And it is good, she told me, “for people like you who make themselves angry.” She often cites her teacher, the one I now listen to in the meditation hall, where a tape of his chants about the impermanence of suffering is playing. She cites him between her frequent outbursts repeating her litany of grievances, saying that he teaches you not to be angry, not to keep anger in your heart, “even if someone hits you.” Another friend convinced me to go: “afterwards,” she told me, “you won't mind the men bothering you in the street”—the staring, the hissing, the comments—“you will be calm about it, just understanding the source of their own ignorance and suffering, you will not be angry.”

The ancestors of some of these men here at the meditation camp—mostly of the Newari caste/ethnicity—and certainly some of their peers, and maybe even they themselves, are angry too. They are angry at the Nepalese state which is dominated politically, culturally, and linguistically by people whose own ancestors conquered the area some 200 years ago. Beginning in the 1920s, some Newari men were exiled from Nepal for active agitation against the state, a state which silenced opposition, and some chose to leave, seeking support for their cause in countries where they could freely speak of their plight and anger. While away some trained as Theravada monks and brought this tradition to Nepal, beginning an association between Theravada Buddhism and Newari language/ethnic movements that continues until this day: they spoke in the past, and they—these activist men—today continue to speak their opposition.<sup>2</sup>

The 6:30 a.m. breakfast bell, and we all rise to break the fast of the past 18 hours. We rise slowly, some creaking, most with eyes down. The men file out their door and we out ours. Some women come out of their sleeping rooms. Not for them the four o'clock sessions. For them this is a ten day break from the rounds of cooking and cleaning, and perhaps from agricultural work. Said one young bride, amazed that she was allowed to come: “For ten days I don't have to carry water, for ten days others cook my food.” Some plan their retreats with friends, meeting to talk and eat contraband food. Stopping in the women's wash area, an old woman searches for my eyes ... it's only

the second day and people are still testing to see who will talk to them, who will break the noble silence, who will keep them company.

An hour and a half until the next session. I badly want to sleep, but want to walk too. I join three other women walking around what in summer is a mosquito infested pool. A small pool, only a minute to walk around, even when keeping fairly noble silence of body. I think of infiltrating the men's walking area, the treed slope, the trail that winds around the small houses that they share, that passes the new residence complex with single rooms, for the men. Men and women are equal the teacher has told us, equal in our sharing of the Buddha Nature, equal in our capacity to reach enlightenment. We must just keep paying attention to the breath and remain equanimous.

Remain equanimous. Don't think about how the male workers chat as they walk through the women's area, discussing water supply problems, the preparations for a wedding that is coming up, and local political meetings, but who drop their voices to whispers if not silence as they come near the men's area. My irritation is just the attachments of my mind, my ignorance, the teacher tells us, and that "wanted things don't happen; unwanted things keep happening," and we must just accept it, stop our never-ending wanting and not-wanting, and liking and disliking, and approving and disapproving. The teacher repeatedly tells us the importance of absolute silence of speech, so as not to disturb ourselves or others. Yet, the workers continue to talk. But don't be irritated, don't say anything.

Men and women are equal under Buddhism, equal to work out their own salvation. It's just that women have a bit further to go. Some of these women are here to gain merit in the hope that they will earn a male rebirth. The Vinaya, the rules of monastic life attributed to the Buddha, make clear the hierarchy: a nun of even a hundred years must bow down to a monk "of even one day." Male and female are—the teachings tell us—an illusion, but it seems that men are further along the path to realizing that.

Silence of mind, yes. But how not to think of such things?

The next round of sitting begins at 8:00 a.m. and lasts until 11:00 a.m. This is only the second day, so the hours of "strong determination" have yet to begin. From the fifth day on we must sit three hours a day without moving. The pain invariably begins, for me, immediately the first hour begins. Through the technique you observe the pain and, in theory, do not react to it with aversion. It is craving—for wanted things—and aversion—to unwanted things, that keeps the body/mind in *samsara*, the endless cycle of rebirth. And so we are not to have aversion to the pain, or crave that the hour will end and release us. In this tradition of meditation as taught by S. N. Goenka, they say that your cravings and aversions of the past imprint on your very flesh, and that the cessation of craving and aversion during the meditation, even for brief moments, releases the *sankharas*—the imprints, the mental formations—of the past. It is that sense of release, of lightness,

of that fleeting taste of equanimity that has brought me back this second time.

After a few days the mind has settled somewhat. I think less intensely about those talking men, less of the absolute discrepancy between the men's and women's facilities. The feminist heart is still troubled, but wonders if that is because it is a western feminist heart.... Western enough and educated enough to think that women everywhere don't have the same aspirations, that they have different conceptions of men and women, and have different understandings of the nature of the universe that male and female exist in. The mind has settled a bit. If these teachings are true, then unwanted things will always happen, and the relative positions of men and women are just what's happening here, to be dealt with like any other craving or aversion.

For many Buddhists the pull between political action and inward looking meditation practice, the pull between widespread social liberation and personal spiritual liberation, has been great. Why sit hours in meditation when people suffer from the consequences of social injustice, poverty, and war? But why act in the political sphere if you yourself are so full of illusion and ignorance, that your actions will, in the end, just create more suffering?

I have been moved to a meditation cell built into the side of the hill, and during breaks I climb further up to look out over the Kathmandu Valley. Down in the Valley in the spring of 1990, the people of Nepal successfully moved to oppose the near totalitarian rule of a divine right monarch, they moved against the regime that some Newaris had been opposing for decades. With the consequent multi-party democracy people can now, for the first time in most of their lives, speak openly and freely about the present state and future direction of their country. Public debate is lively, and feelings run high as grievances from the past, pent up through years of legislated silence, are freely expressed. Newari dissent of the past has moved into the new political venues. At the end of my first retreat—at the end of ten days of silence—a man took me aside to show me his scrapbook of "what this is all about." A scrapbook with clippings and photographs depicting events in the growth of the Newari Theravada movement, the movement linked with the petitioning for ethnic and language rights, for over six decades now.

For these men our meditation teacher's exhortation to remain equanimous in the face of "unwanted things," to not keep anger in the heart, to remain silent, has its place: that place is in some parts of their own lives, perhaps, but in the political sphere that place does not exist. Perceived injustice is to be acted on, anger at repression is to be spoken, domination by those more powerful is to be resisted.

And the teacher's words have a place with the Newari women.

Silence of mind rests for moments in the meditation hall. Moments of stillness and clarity, where the world is seemingly reconfigured. The body dense with pain one

moment becomes light the next, a mass of moving energy so ephemeral that you sense you might move a hand through it unobstructed. You leave the camp after ten days with a sense of having moved for a moment through a door, into a room you didn't know existed before, and now you have moved out of the room and back into the world, but the door is ajar and you know it's there, to be opened or not. You float on the bus on the way home. People smile calmly, seemingly glowing. Intense moments of intimacy as people—these people so different from you, in language, and culture, and habit—look in your eyes and see you through a shared vision of what you both are. Silence is no longer an obstacle; speech not really necessary.

Silence descends with us from the ridge and into the Kathmandu Valley, where the clatter of life is overwhelming, but you just note that it's overwhelming, you don't react to it ... you observe your breath, and observe the sensation, and observe yourself feeling overwhelmed. Silence moves back with us into our homes and into the street, but it moves along different pathways because we—we men and women—live in a world where the roads we can walk, in silence, or giving voice to our situations, wind through different places, with different doors to pass through or leave closed.

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<sup>1</sup>I attended these retreats while doing research on aspects of identity, religion, and tourism in Nepal. That research was funded by the following agencies: The United States National Science Foundation (Doctoral Dissertation Improvement Grant No. BNS-9100365); the Joint Committee on South Asia of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies with funds provided by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation; the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada; and the Cornell Graduate School and Center for International Studies.

<sup>2</sup>For ethnographic and historical accounts of this movement (with bibliography) see Gellner.

#### References

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## Meditation on the Magnificat (Luke 1:25) from the Bible

*by Dorothee Sölle*

It is written that Mary said  
"he has shown strength with his arm  
he has scattered the proud,  
he has put down the mighty from their  
thrones  
and exalted them of low degree."

Today we express that differently.  
We shall dispossess our owners, and we  
shall laugh at  
those who claim to understand feminine  
nature.  
The rule of males over females will end.  
Objects will become subjects.  
They will achieve their own best rights.

It is written that Mary said,  
"He has filled the hungry with good things  
and the rich he has sent empty away.  
He has helped his servant Israel  
in remembrance of his mercy."

Today we express this differently.  
Women will go to the moon and sit in  
parliaments.  
Their desire for self determination will be  
fulfilled.  
The craving will be unnecessary and exploi-  
tation  
will come to an end.

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*Mary, the mother of Jesus, is often portrayed by some Christians as a model of submissive, obedient womanhood. However, the root meaning of her name is "rebellion." The Gospel of Luke 1:25ff. records her song of praise to God, commonly called "The Magnificat" and it is anything but the song of a submissive woman. The original words of Mary have been put in quotes—and the commentary indicates how contemporary Christian women interpret the passage. —Lois M. Wilson*