



SILENT SPACES

Article by Kaiya

It probably isn't common these days for a child to grow up with as much quiet as I did, surrounded by trees, water, animals and fields, not attending public schools, with more time to explore than anything else. I was always more comfortable in silence than out of it. I liked fishing with my grandfather so much for that reason too. It was tremendously peaceful, floating gently on the water, listening to the dragonflies and frogs and watching the herons stand in their graceful poses amongst the reeds. Often as not, we would spend eight or nine hours out there and not catch anything, but there wasn't any sense of disappointment or boredom, and I was always eager to go again. The fishing was at least as much an excuse to get out there and sit in those tranquil places as it was anything else. And when a fish was caught, like the sudden strikes of the herons, the excitement and action and all the noise were there and gone again in an instant, swallowed up by that pervasive stillness before you knew it.

As I grew up, I went through an awkward phase. I would force myself to attend parties or invitations to go out to bars and other social gatherings, in hopes that I might discover the appeal or the trick to the constant conversations and interactions that apparently were fulfilling aspects of most peoples' lives. Inevitably, however, those conversations struck me as strange, pointless or impossible to understand. Time and again I would go, watch, listen and wonder where all that motivation to talk was coming from, then finally shrug in frustration and leave early, wondering why on earth I dragged myself there in the first place. I seemed to be missing something, but I sure couldn't see what. Eventually I came to embrace my love of silence instead of feeling like I was strange.

As an adult, I continued to seek that silent space in Nature through rock climbing, canoeing, hiking, camping, etc. Unable to understand the noise, I wanted to share those silent spaces and the inspiration they always instilled in me (or so I perceived at that time) with others. It always tore at my heart when I would witness something incredible alone, knowing so many people were back in the city locked in their living rooms playing Xbox. From this urge, I came to love photography and the extra incentive it gave me to seek out the quietest, most ephemeral moments at those golden hours of the day in the remote corners of woods, streams, swamps and fields and do my best to bring them back to share with those less motivated, or perhaps unable to find those places and moments themselves. I

wanted to catch the silent spaces and carry them back to the world, to remind people who might have forgotten that such spaces still exist.

Space and silence; silence and space. Amidst the endless energies and interactions that surround us, there are perhaps no two greater Presences than these, entwined like lovers as they are throughout every corner of the Universe. Wherever we look (or listen), Silence is always there, patiently waiting to be heard. Silence is the space out of which noises arise and the space into which they pass away, like so many air bubbles arising and popping on the surface of the Ocean. As so many Daoist stories and adages point out, it is the space within the teapot, between the walls of the house, within the circle of the wagon-wheel that gives them their forms and enables their functions. Without space, there would be only an unwieldy, functionless block of matter. Eckhart Tolle often urges us to begin to listen to the all-pervasive silence surrounding the noise, and to notice the space between the objects wherever we are, instead of the objects. Or even to take note of the spaces between the words on this page instead of the letters. In shifting our attention away from these obvious, dense, solidified forms, our consciousness naturally focuses on the subtle, the transparent, the sublime; it shifts towards the light that surrounds us and then to the light which fills us, opening us to the tremendous power and Presence of the silent stillness that lies within.

Perhaps my favorite analogy is that of an instrument. So many instruments produce their beautiful tones by virtue of the empty spaces within, with each one's unique construction of this space within giving it a unique character—its own voice. Even within the same genre of instrument, no two are alike, and famous instruments are passed on from generation to generation, renowned in their own right in much the same way the famous instrumentalists themselves are remembered and renowned. The same is true of us. Without space, we don't resonate; we are like guitars that have been filled with concrete. If not for the fact that such silent space was present within me, I wouldn't have been so touched by those vistas I sought—I wouldn't have resounded with the music.

The advantage for me of those beautiful, wide open places in the world was also my disadvantage. They are literally brimming with so much Presence, so much Silence, that even the occasional noise or two is totally drowned out. Out there, the Presence of space and silence is so strong, so overwhelming, you feel as though you can reach out and touch it. It presses upon you physically,



overpowering your mind, washing over you and purifying you like a swim in the ocean. Perceiving the vastness and power of it to be so obviously ‘outside’, so much bigger than me, how could I ever imagine it might be no different than myself? In a way, it parallels the tendency to look to the dense objects in the room instead of the space. The Presence without was so much more obvious to me than the Presence within at first, it was easy to miss.

Trying to catch it and share it with my photography was a nice idea, but now I’ve come to see how flawed it was. I was treating those spaces as places I had to go to, as something I had to catch, to bring back and give to people, never realizing that it was within me all along. Best of all, I know now that it can’t be given to anyone. This seems depressing at first, but then you realize it’s actually so much better, because everyone has it already! It doesn’t matter if they live in a Villa on a cliff in Malibu or are serving a life term in prison, anyone can find it at any given moment; and it doesn’t take hours of hiking and scrambling through

bushes and rocks to find. All that is required is a skillful word, a finger pointing in the right direction—or perhaps a bowl of tea...

For me, of course, it was the bowl of tea. Tea finally introduced me to the recognition and discovery of those hidden pockets of silent space within myself. At the time I actually thought the quiet was “in the tea”, making that same mistaken distinction between it and myself. But as with those mountain vistas, tea has within it a natural inclination to touch that space within us, to find that chord in our hearts that resonates with Nature, Presence, silence and space.

As anyone who has drunk tea with us will tell you, paying respect to that place within us is an integral part of the tea we drink. So much so that it is often misconceived as some kind of ‘rule’ that tea ‘should’ be drunk in silence. I can’t count how many times I’ve had emails from afar along the lines of “We had such a nice tea ses-

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sion, but we weren't quiet like we should have been," or "We probably shouldn't have talked so much, but..."

But that there are no such "shoulds" or "shouldn'ts" is the great beauty of space, and a tea space is exactly that: the one serving tea is holding space for guests, and space allows for anything to happen. It has, well (How else to put this?), plenty of space! At the same time, it is important to approach a tea session with space *for* that space, as it were. After all, why is it that we are all sitting here gathered together at this table? If there were no pot of tea sitting there steaming away, waiting to fill our bowls, we wouldn't have sat down in the first place. That tea has been sitting in constant meditation longer than I ever could, be it a week, years, decades, or longer. For the sake of bringing us all there to commune with each other, this tea has willingly broken its devoted meditations to come out of its chamber to greet us and preside over this coming-together of spirits. It's no small gesture, and deserves our respect.

Sometimes we hear the old "Why tea?" question paired with wise words such as "the Dao can be found in anything, so why not apple juice?" Wu De recently gave us an awesome answer to this, and it was that although the Dao can be touched anywhere, be it walking up the stairs or drinking a glass of apple juice, it isn't everywhere you look that it touches you back. And as we have all discovered through these Living Teas that have found us, tea touches back! Tea is Nature; I spoke of thinking that silence was my friend, of growing up with silence. But tea was *born* in silence, and raised with it for a million years and more before I ever came kicking and screaming my way noisily into the world.

As such, how much greater is Tea's appreciation for and desire to share silent space than my own? So it should come as no surprise that, often, Tea asks us to spend a little time in communion with Her first, thus finding the silence within ourselves, purifying our spirits and opening a space out of which we can then turn to each other with brightness in our eyes and joy in our hearts and celebrate the light in one another, in whatever form that takes.

Taking that moment to introduce ourselves to the tea and find that space within ourselves opens us up and then enables us to truly communicate with each other in a meaningful way, instead of simply jumping uncomfortably from one topic to another for no reason. And what an opportunity it is, this chance to be introduced to silence by one so intimately and anciently acquainted! Perhaps someone at this table at this very moment has the opportunity to be introduced to that place within for the very first time in their life, as I once was, or perhaps someone who found it and lost it long ago is about to find it again! Such an opportunity may not present itself again for a long time, and I wouldn't want to interfere with anyone's chance to find what I have found.

Just imagine for a moment that you have received news that an ancient and wise old sage has broken

twenty years of meditation in distant mountains to come and share his wisdom before he passes away, and a group of your friends plan to attend. He sits in silence at the center of a great table, preparing to speak, when someone blurts out "Wow, it sure is a lot more humid here than where I'm from." Then across the table "Really? Where are you from?" A conversation ensues for the next hour, and suddenly everyone looks up and realizes the old sage has passed away right there in their midst, never to be encountered again.

We have our whole lives to be noisy, to talk about the weather, to discuss my story and listen to yours. Everywhere you look and everywhere you go, especially in cities, opportunities for noisiness and the facilitation of my own inner noisiness abound. It is a rare opportunity indeed to sit at a table with someone who can lead us into stillness. But that introduction only takes a moment, it need not go on for hours and hours, and in truth even a chatty tea session still has silence in between the gaps, there for the noticing by those that are awake. On the other hand, once that introduction is made and we begin to appreciate what is happening, the mind's silly questions and discomfort-driven conversations quite naturally fade and melt away, and nobody wants to talk anymore. Which is really what it boils down to. *Neither silence nor conversation should be contrived. Silence that springs from some 'should' and conversations that come out of discomfort or boredom are both unskillful.* But, when either of these arises spontaneously from our inner Center, then there really isn't any difference between them anymore.

Even if we didn't ignore the sage in our little story and engaged him in the conversation about the weather, he would happily tell us all about the temperature fluctuations in his cave with a twinkle in his eye and a smile on his face as he chatted away his last hour on this Earth. He looks around the table and sees only stillness anyway, whether the people there recognize it in themselves in that moment or not. Tea doesn't mind any conversation you care to have; She will preside over arguments and disagreements, negotiations, crude jokes, ridiculous songs and silly-faces (the last two abound around here). Tea is kind, compassionate and understanding. She knows that whether we are hearing what She has to say or not, we are moving ineluctably in that direction, even when we do our best to avoid it. After all, it makes no difference how noisy and cluttered we may make our lives, we will return to stillness and silence at the end of them...

Noise takes energy to produce. Cities must be eternally burning energy to produce all the noise necessary to constantly keep the silence at bay. But the moment there is no more energy to release, silence prevails again, effortlessly. It is very, very quiet the moment after a nuclear bomb has landed and expended itself. Silence and space are the letting-go of the universe. Zen is often described as letting-go. It takes no energy to let go of something, but a

lot of energy to hold on to it. It is natural to let go when drinking tea—to drink a few bowls in quiet reflection. We honor the silence in the tea, and the silence in ourselves. Yet even this distinction still leaves us missing something important. After all, what is silence if not space *for* noise to arise? You can't really separate the two, so if you imagine that the silence is somehow *against* the noise, then it's, well, just your imagination...

As all who come here soon discover, this tradition has a deep respect for and appreciation of that silent space, and its cultivation. But then there are those wacky, silly moments filled with noisiness and celebration too, which somehow seem to pass under the radar sometimes as “not it”, or even “breaking the rules”. Yes, without silence, the noise has nowhere to arise from, and nowhere to pass away into. In this sense, we can speak of the silence, the space, as being the greater powers. They are there before the noise, before the forms; they encompass them effortlessly, without expenditure of energy, which is the true definition of infinite power. They are the letting-go of the Universe itself; they are the spontaneous movements that arise from that letting-go which we all have the power within us to do at any time. When we bring our full Presence into any of

these moments, this is the binding force that encompasses all of them together, and the distinctions finally fade away.

So go on, don't judge yourself. Drink your tea naturally, without contrivance and without “shoulding” on it. The tea doesn't mind, only you can do that. At the same time, don't forget that this tea has had a long journey to come here and meet you today, and that She is old and wise and might have something of great value to share with you if you can shed a bit of that endearing human hastiness for a few minutes. It might well be that She just wants to have one last chatty evening of jokes and playful banter before She goes, just as much as She might want to give you a taste of what it's like to have been sitting in perfect stillness for a thousand years, you never know. Leave it up to the wisdom of the Tea to decide—she has an eye on what's good for us...

