



# Understanding 'the Silence' through sound

**Devashree Prabhu**  
explores her  
relationship with  
silence and sound

**D**uring my practice of meditation, I have always found a peaceful silence engulfing me. The silence that I experience in meditative states is totally different from the silence that is commonly known to us, ie the lack of physical sound, which I would prefer to describe as no-sound. The silence which I experience during meditations is what I call 'the Silence'. Silence here has a personal meaning for me. It is not really an absence of any physical sound but it is the gap between the sounds, the pause between the sentences that we speak and the quickly timed emptiness between our trains of thoughts. I think this silence does help us to understand and enjoy a musical



piece better, process our thoughts more thoroughly and in return we try to perceive everything around us with a fresh perspective, 'our' perspective, devoid of the burdens of any psychological expectations. But what I have also found, through daily experiences of meditations, is that the Silence is not only a state which can be entered or exited; the Silence is the state which is a constant in my life. The peace and harmony which the state brings is what is stored in me. All I needed to do was to understand this Silence completely.

What is ironic is that I have come to know that the Silence speaks. I recently attended a workshop in Indian Psychology, conducted by the Indian Psychology Institute (IPI), in Pondicherry, India. There, my facilitator told me that the Silence speaks its own language. So, how can we understand the language that the Silence speaks? When we stand in silence in front of a mountain, an ocean or a beautiful landscape, we experience the illusion that the Silence speaks through nature, but the absence of physical sound in that place is only a fragment of the great Silence that we are all part of. The Silence allows us to wonder and show appreciation. It allows us to reflect within ourselves. And it makes us feel at home.

We humans communicate and understand each other through language, be it verbal or non-verbal, such as sign/pictorial language. Even our thoughts use language. When we visit a foreign country we want to understand the language being spoken there so that we can communicate with the people who live there and feel less of an outsider. If I need to understand the language of the Silence that resides within me I also need to make an effort to learn it. But how?

“ Many spiritual traditions follow the path of music to attain a direct experience of oneness with the 'Divine' ”

A lot of interesting work exists on how music helps people to reach a state where they can experience this Silence. My interest led me to a literature search about the role of sound or music in achieving an altered state. Aldridge and Fachner sum it up: 'States of consciousness, where we lose our sense of identity with the body or with our perceptions are altered states of consciousness. Such states may be spontaneous and brought about by a variety of means: trauma, sleep disturbance, sensory challenges, neurochemical imbalance, epileptic seizure, or fever. They may also be induced by social behaviour, such as frenzied dancing or chanting!'

I found that many spiritual traditions follow the path of music to attain a direct experience of oneness with the 'Divine'. In the part of India where I come from, there is a famous sect called the *Varkaris*, who have their roots in the Bhakti religious movement of Hinduism and have a rich tradition of using songs and dance to evoke the divinity within them. They use *bhajans* and *kirtans* (devotional songs) to express their love for the divinity. *Sufi* singers use *qawalli* (Sufi devotional music) as a method of professing their love for the divine being. Other examples could be the *Joshimanis* from North-Eastern India and the *Bauls* from West Bengal. For all of them, music is an effective instrument to individually and collectively reach the absolute, supreme state (universal consciousness for me). Most also lay emphasis on the repetition of the many names of God.

Mantras are another example where sound has been used to experience the supreme consciousness. Swami Sivananda Radha, a yoga teacher, says, 'According to the *Upanishads*, the ancient scriptures of India, the original abode of the Mantra was the *Parma Akasha* or primeval ether, the eternal and immutable substratum of the universe, out of which, in the uttering of the primal sound *Vach*, the universe itself was created.'<sup>2</sup> It thus seems that the power of the spoken word is far greater than it could ever have been presumed. The constant repetition of a word creates a realisation of an idea in our mind, and a lasting impression in our consciousness.

### The power of sound

While I was practising transcendental meditation, I was given a root word to assist me to transcend my mental states. But, even prior to the practice of transcendental meditation, it was the utterance of the sound, OM, which helped me to understand the power of sound, in creating positive vibrations inside me. It not only created positive vibrations, but also helped me to easily meditate during times when I was grappling with concepts such as meditation, consciousness, spirituality, etc. It gave me a first-hand experience of feeling the power of sound.

You don't always have to have a reason to meditate using the sound OM. The sound just helps you sail through the layers of consciousness. The mantra of OM has been celebrated worldwide for its uses and benefits. It is called the 'seed syllable' and is a kind of holistic representation of all things around us. It gives us the power to recognise the importance of sound as the vehicle, and the recognition that there is something beyond our conscious states and that it is reachable.

I have always been intrigued by the power of music, in eliciting deep emotions within me. There is no specific genre of music which does the trick – it could be Enya one moment and Norah Jones the next, Western pop, or country, or Indian classical. No matter what the genre is, it stirs something deep within my heart. I used to think that lyrics held the key to good music, but I was wrong. Even while listening to Pandit Ravi Shankar playing the sitar, I experience the feeling of being transported to a completely different state, a state which seems to be beyond my normal waking conscious state. This all happens despite my not being trained in any kind of music, and not knowing how to play any musical instrument. But one thing is certain, I find music in all kinds of things around us. What amazes me most are the constant auditory stimulations present in our environment and the music that these produce: the waves matching the wind, the birds in sync with gushing leaves and the raindrops competing with the thunder. If you have ever been to a forest and spent some time alone admiring it, you will realise that the forest has a music of its own.

'From time immemorial the shaman hears the hidden music of the universe and sings it back through "medicine melodies," simple tonal configurations that reflect a sacred unity with nature and have the power to heal body, mind and spirit... Medicine melodies can be found in all traditions: from our own lullabies to Gregorian chants, Hebrew *davennens*, the *kirtans*, mantras and *ragas* from India, Tibetan ritual prayers, the *zhikrs* of the *Sufis*, Buddhist *sutras* and tantric chants, indigenous songs such as the *icaros*, and healing songs from Africa and the Americas.'<sup>3</sup> I feel that Silvia Nakkach, a teacher working in the field of sound and consciousness transformation, must be right when she says that the original function of music is to open our hearts to universal love. Even while I listen to a musician playing an instrument or singing a *raga* – melodic modes used in Indian Classical music – I feel a kind of connection to the feelings that they are trying to convey through the piece being played. How is it possible for a musician to take me along with them on their personal journey with the help of music? I once asked my teacher the reason for this. He told me in very simple terms that it is because the articulation of the sound takes place automatically in your body and this triggers the state of consciousness. According to the Indian Upanishads (the collection of Vedic texts) the state of consciousness is understood as the state where individual consciousness merges with cosmic consciousness.

The Silence for me is consciousness. This process from music to Silence is like the process of moving from 'becoming' to 'being', from 'manifestation' to the 'state' itself. It's the final culmination of our self in moving to the vastness. Music in its own way is necessary for us to understand and appreciate the presence of the Silence. The Silence for example is what we feel when we listen to a good song that makes us want to laugh and cry at the same time and creates in us an emotion which is difficult to describe. It's beyond words. It's the feeling that touches something within us that we had not known existed, that we had never been aware of.

### Reaching the Silence

The Silence is also like the concept of emptiness. The concept of emptiness has been beautifully explained in a little book called *Mr God, this is Anna*, by Fynn<sup>4</sup> where we come to understand that a yellow flower is anything but yellow. It absorbs all colours except yellow. As is also made clear in the book *Emptiness of Emptiness*, by Huntington<sup>5</sup>, the concept of emptiness is explained by the Madhyamika school of Buddhist thought as the exhaustion of all philosophical views. Huntington states that those who hold emptiness as a concept are incurable. Those who refer to emptiness as the mental image of emptiness are the most lost of the lost. The following example is given: if a physician gives medicine to a person to cure him of disease the person will only be described as completely cured if the medicine expels the disease from the person's body and gets expelled too. If the medicine cured all the original problems and yet remained in the stomach, unexpelled, the man's disease would be much worse. Thus, it is stressed that emptiness is the exhaustion of all philosophical views.

Let's use this concept analogically to understand the 'sonic consciousness'. When we come in contact with the no-sound state, we almost always try to fill it with our own little labels and meanings so that we understand the state. But what we miss in the process is the understanding of the no-sound state *in toto*. We do not try to learn the no-sound state; instead we use a shortcut to understand it by associating it with something that we already know: our past associations and information. The no-sound state is in fact filled with a constantly flowing sound in itself and the sound it has is beyond the understanding that we have acquired through all the information we have collected. We are in a way habituated to think of sounds even in a no-sound state because we have never in our life really thought about this state called the Silence. The complete understanding of this no-sound state requires us to unlearn and strip ourselves of all the knowledge and information we have accumulated over our lifetime. We need to be rewired and we need to reach the state where we know that we know nothing. Then we would be a little step

further along the path to understanding the Silence. This would also help us not only to understand that state called the Silence, but would also make us able to stay in that state until that state is us and we get defined by that state. Then, the Silence is known to us. We need to surrender ourselves completely to experience that kind of state. One way to do that is the way the *Varkaris*, *Sufis*, *Joshimanis* or *Bauls* have been doing for so many years.

It is amazing to know how the sounds we love, the sounds we give ourselves to, surrender to, help us so that we for once at least experience that perfect Silence. It's even amazing how we tune into music, tune our frequency to that vibration which we know will transport us to the ultimate state of freedom and peace, which we call the Silence. We should try to love the sounds and the music around us, and in doing so, we will appreciate the essence of the Silence. Personally I feel that shunning sound and music will not help us understand the Silence. Instead, inviting and understanding music in our life will help us find the Silence that we have always longed for. Because, within all music is the Silence. The Silence is everything that sound is.

### Biography

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