

THE SPIRIT AND PRACTICE OF NOBLE SILENCE AT VALLECITOS MOUNTAIN REFUGE

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Do you remember...

Do you remember a time, perhaps when you were a child, when no one was asking you to do anything? You may have been sitting quietly by yourself, in a room with sunshine coming in, or rain pattering softly against the window, or under a tree, listening to the sounds of the world around you, or even standing at a bus stop in a big city on a spring day. In moments of contentment and mindful awareness, time seems to slow down. You are perfectly content to be just who you are, just where you are. I hope you can remember such a time. If you can't, I hope you can imagine what this might be like.

Perhaps you also remember a time when you were very upset. Your head was filled with repetitive thoughts, your emotions were roller-coastering, and you felt like exploding. Someone asked you what was wrong and you might have said, "Please, just leave me alone!" or "Give me some space!" You knew that the first thing you needed to do was be by yourself, "to get a grip" and refrain from doing or saying anything impulsively that you might regret later. Maybe you took a walk, listened to some music, or did some household chores. After awhile, you felt much better, and you knew what to do to address the situation constructively.

What we call the practice of Noble Silence during a mindfulness retreat serves both these purposes: contentedly appreciating our everyday lives; and quietly being with our difficulties and suffering in order to gain clarity and to access our inner wisdom.

Contented appreciation

The practice of Noble Silence means that we refrain from talking, gesturing, writing to one another, and sometimes even making eye contact with one another, in order to give each other a wonderful and rare gift. This is the gift of allowing each other to experience the joy and contentment of our lives in a new way – truly being, truly together, truly being together. The practitioners at the retreat form a community, and Noble Silence

gives us the opportunity to get to know one another in a very different, new way. Instead of asking, “Hi, what’s your name? What do you do? Where do you live? What movies have you seen lately?” we sit, walk, eat, and work together, side by side, in respectful and loving silence.

When the community practices together harmoniously, there is a quality of Noble Silence that feels like peaceful ripening. Standing under a fruit tree, we know that the apple or pear or persimmon above our head is ripening in the sunshine, but we can’t see or hear it ripening because its maturation and sweetening is happening slowly and invisibly. My original meditation teacher used to say, “Being is becoming.” When we practice Noble Silence in this manner, we give ourselves and each other the opportunity to deeply experience the present moment. If we’re always talking, always interacting with other people, always thinking about what we need to do, usually we’re running on habit energy. The practice of Noble Silence is a gift of creative spaciousness for ourselves and others. In this human silence, we can bloom and ripen very beautifully. We might suddenly hear with great poignancy the buzzing wings of the hummingbirds at the feeder, or the sound of water running in the kitchen as lunch is being prepared for us. We might smell and feel things we never noticed before. When we are quiet we become more receptive to everything around us and inside us. We have the chance to learn new things in a fresh way, to experience a genuine “aha!” moment.

Being with our suffering in order to transform it

We also practice Noble Silence in order to be with our individual and collective forms of suffering – irritation, anger, grief, self-hatred, despair – with patience, mindful awareness, and the support of the retreat community and the teachers. Every one of us knows how it feels to be hurt and to suffer deeply, or to feel lost and confused. When practicing Noble Silence in a mindfulness retreat, please remember that every person around you is probably experiencing various difficulties and challenges. They are doing their best. If we feel annoyed because we think someone is breathing loudly or stepping noisily in the meditation hall, we practice Noble Silence in order to cultivate compassion. Perhaps that other person has a sinus problem, or is recovering from knee surgery. Whatever it is, we practice respect, compassion, loving kindness, and forgiveness for ourselves and others so that each person present has the full opportunity to go through whatever it is they need to go through, and to have their own unique retreat experience. The practice of Noble Silence is meant to be a very supportive way of being in a community that is doing deep spiritual work. Like trees, we grow silently together, and send down deep roots.

Some people can become quite tense when practicing Noble Silence. If we hear someone whispering to another person, we may feel, “You are ruining my retreat! I can’t concentrate on my practice!” If we are in a meditation center in a city, we may become angry when an ambulance or fire truck goes by with the siren making a loud noise. It’s important to remember that the purpose of Noble Silence is not for the world to become

silent. It's not about controlling other people or the environment. Noble Silence has a relaxed, alert, open, and receptive quality. It is simply the practice of being with whatever is arising, without trying to change it or fix it. Even if we think of a way that the retreat could be "better" we don't need to express it during the retreat. The teachers and retreat staff have put a lot of effort into the schedule, teaching the practices, and making sure everyone is fed and has a place to sleep. With our basic needs attended to, we are free to have a real experience of being fully present to ourselves.

Coming to a retreat with our partner or close friend

Sometimes we might come to a retreat with our partner or our close friend, someone to whom we feel a special connection. Outside of a retreat, our natural tendency might be to discuss and compare experiences with our partner or friend, to get support for difficult moments and to celebrate insights and joyful moments by talking about them. However, the Noble Silence retreat experience is constructed in a different manner so that we might have new insights, and fresh experiences. Many couples do silent meditation retreats together, and understand that they do not need to talk, gesture, or make eye contact with one another during the retreat; in fact, their relationship may gently deepen by being together in silence. Couples may choose to room with one another, or separately, during a retreat, basing their choice on whatever arrangement is most beneficial to their practice of mindfulness and to the retreat community as a whole.

It's perfectly normal...

Because the practice of Noble Silence and mindfulness tends to make most people more sensitive, thoughts, feelings, and perceptions can become greatly magnified during a retreat. This is completely normal.

Practicing mindful awareness doesn't mean we always feel calm, or "spiritual." It simply means that we practice being aware of whatever we are feeling and thinking, seeing, hearing, touching, smelling, and tasting, without reacting in habitual ways. We may only have to practice for a little time to experience the benefits of mindfulness in small or large ways. Sometimes this is called the experience of Big Mind, which has qualities that are often compared to the great ocean, the boundless sky, and the receptive Mother Earth. Thoughts, feelings, and perceptions come and go like clouds in the sky. Sometimes there is sadness, sometimes boredom or joy. Sitting quietly, breath following breath, day turns to afternoon and then to night, and seasons pass. Mindful awareness is the gift we give to ourselves and to others that connects us to our innate capacity for profound joy, liberation, and transformative wisdom for ourselves and for our society.