

SILENCE AND THE WORD

THE SECRET OF THE OCEAN AND THE WAVES

‘Just this Day’ 2015

I would like to begin by giving a little consideration to the title of this morning’s event, *Silence and the Word*. Our spiritual traditions have, in various ways throughout history, explained that what we perceive as created forms in all dimensions of experience – physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual - arise from a realm which is prior to that which is created; this is often described as the ‘unseen’, ‘formless’ or ‘unmanifest’ realm of existence. Although it is ultimately impossible to describe the unmanifest, there is a reflection of its quality in what we call silence or stillness. When for example, we listen, and allow attention to expand extensively to the great silence in which all sound and form arise and into which they return, we get a sense of the relationship between the form and the formless, sound and silence. There is no opposition between movement and stillness, sound and silence. A lovely analogy which we will consider a little later is the wave and the ocean. The wave appears to be a separate form and movement with independent existence but it is not different to or separate from the ocean. The depth of the ocean is still, the wave is in frantic movement, but it is the self-same ocean.

If we turn now to the concept of the ‘word’ as it appears in the title, it goes without saying that this is a huge subject about which great philosophers and theologians have pondered extensively. However, I would like to explain the context in which I have placed this concept for the purposes of this talk. The ‘word’ can be taken to refer to everything which is manifest, all created forms: physical, mental, emotional and spiritual. Our common notion of what we call the ‘word’ usually refers only to that which is spoken or thought, but here I am using it more extensively, as explained.

During this talk I will consider how education might introduce the human being to a practical understanding of the relationship between *Silence and the Word*, *the unmanifest and the manifest*, and how this may enhance the quality of life.

When I embarked upon the writing of this talk I encountered a familiar disconcerting experience: a void, a dark unknowing, whose only feature is the ghost of self-doubt confirming that one should never have agreed to speak! Fortunately, after a lengthy period of waiting, a chink of light usually appears. On this occasion it delivered this profound and well-known declaration by Kabir:

“I laugh when I hear that the fish in the ocean is thirsty.”¹

I would like to consider the meaning of this. Somewhere between birth and the age of three, an impression of a separate existence appears to emerge. With this feeling of separation, comes an existential pain which is accompanied by fear and a longing to return to ‘wholeness’, to ‘union’, to return ‘home’. In the impression of separation, there is an innate sense of loss, of incompleteness and a thirst for ultimate satisfaction arises. This is a common experience which nature seems to have in its pattern and our experience of the world encourages its consolidation. As language develops we learn to conceive of an ego which is called ‘me’ and everything else becomes ‘you’. Duality comes into existence: subject and object are born, and this illusion projects itself upon all that is seen and experienced. From this foundation, education, parenting, and the world in general serve efficiently to confirm the impression that ‘I’ need to improve, progress, become and acquire: the journey of attainment becomes what we call ‘life’.

The qualitative sense of our identity – ‘I am good’, ‘bad’, ‘lovable’, ‘unlovable’, ‘clever’, ‘stupid’, and so on - is determined through the mirror of the world; the judgements of the people we encounter and the activities upon which we engage. This renders the so-called individual vulnerable because the inherent core feeling of inadequacy seeks comfort and resolution in its dealings with a world which now appears threatening. So a mask is created, the persona or personality, which presents a seeming-self to the world.

In infancy there is simply the impression of the all-encompassing love of a parent: this is all that is; there is no ‘experiencer’. However, once there is the feeling of a separate identity and the sense of lack which accompanies it, the mirror of relationship, of other people, is needed to confirm my worth, to confirm that I am loveable. In addition, the world introduces the apparent separate self to the idea that there are actions which are good and actions which are bad; furthermore, it appears that we are associated with these results of action so we are seen

¹ SHASHIKANT NISHANT SHARMA (2013) Best Thoughts and Quotes of the World, p.178

as ‘a good person’ if we do good things and as ‘a bad person’ when we do bad things. And so it all evolves, and the human being becomes embroiled in the inevitable tyranny of doing and becoming. We feel ourselves to be cast out from the all-embracing presence of love which is, by nature, unconditional and immutable. As Richard Rohr puts it:

“We know ourselves in the security of those who hold us and gaze upon us. It’s not heard or seen or thought. It’s felt. That’s the original knowing. ...My mother’s eyes tell me I’m the beloved. But when I begin to see myself through eyes that compare, judge, and dismiss, then the division begins and conscious spirituality is needed. . . .True spirituality is always bringing us back to this original knowing that is unitive experience.”²

This raises a most important principle which should reside in the heart of all those who care for others, but especially as parents and teachers. The key to allowing another human being to flourish is to recognise that the essence of that person is pure, perfect and complete; as the Old Testament declares, we are *made in the image of God*. Nature is in a state of flux but the spirit of man is divine and unchanging. The descriptors we use here may vary, but it is true to say that a parent’s love for its child is like this, the love is unconditional. When we fall in love it is the same; we adore the perfect essence of the so-called other and it is known to be the truth of the person. Unless the teacher’s vision is focussed primarily on the beauty which the child really is, he or she will not be able to provide fully for the pupil’s development. Children derive the sense of who they really are from the eyes of those who care for them. The question for every parent and teacher is ‘What is it that you see when you look at that child?’ Nature delivers a variety of features, good and bad, all of which have to be dealt with appropriately, but throughout this process, the sight of the true guardian is focussed on the reality. In this way, the growing human being is given an opportunity to remember who she or he really is.

And so, to return to Kabir, our experience is that we are thirsty although we are, in reality, swimming in the ocean of love in which there is no lack. In order to quench this thirst many will turn to the spiritual search. Nevertheless, whether the search is for sensory, material, intellectual, emotional or spiritual attainment, the thirst arises from the same existential illusion of the pain of separation. Until we come to appreciate that the very search itself is

² RICHARD ROHR (2003) *Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer*, p.67-8

masking the truth that the one who is searching, the one seeking to acquire, is itself an illusion and that what is being sought for already exists in abundance, as all and everything, the efforts will continue in vain. Somehow, the illusion of separation needs to be dispelled so that there is an awakening to what is real. Sri Ramana Maharshi describes this conundrum precisely:

*“You have imposed non-existent limitations on yourself, or limits on your true nature of pure, infinite being. Now, you are displeased due to believing yourself to be a limited creature or character; and you have started out doing spiritual practices in order to transcend these non-existent limitations. However, if your mind and practice themselves presuppose the existence of these invented limits, how can you ever transcend them?”*³

How does this awakening happen? If the answer to this was simple we would have solved the heart of all human suffering a long time ago. However, what can be said is that spiritual teachers who really understand this truth can point towards it, but ultimately it is the mysterious power of grace which may or may not act to clear the vision of its delusion. On this matter, Laurence Freeman, a Benedictine monk and director of the World Community of Christian Meditation wrote:

*“The essential work of a spiritual teacher is just this: not to tell us what to **do** but to help us see who we **are**. The Self we come to know through its grace is not a separate, isolated little ego-self clinging to its memories, desires and fears. It is a field of consciousness similar to and indivisible from the Consciousness of the God of cosmic and biblical revelation alike: the one great ‘I AM’.”*⁴

Arising from this perspective is an important principle to understand. The illusory sense that we are a separate, individual ego-self is largely consolidated by thinking and in the West we have been taken over by its seeming importance. Descartes’ famous phrase, *cognito, ergo sum*, ‘I think, therefore I am’ was considered to be a revolutionary insight which ushered in the so-called Enlightenment; many of us would argue it was hugely misleading. As Richard Rohr put it in his book entitled *Everything Belongs*:

³ SRI RAMANA MAHARSI (1985) *Be as you are: The Teachings of Sri Ramana Maharshi*, p.16

⁴ LAURENCE FREEMAN (2001) *Jesus the Teacher Within*, p.63

‘The primary philosophical and spiritual problem in the West is the lie of individualism. ...The private self is clearly an illusion created by thinking. My life is not about me. I am about life! ...I need to recognize that I’m in a river that is bigger than I am. The foundation and flow of that river is love. Life is not about me; it’s about God, and God is about love. When we don’t know love, when we don’t experience love, when we experience only the insecurity and fragility of the small self, we become restless.... We even become violent and hateful because the unconscious knows “this is not who I am,” and “this is not who we are”’. Thus rage, anger, and disappointment have become widespread in ... people.’⁵

There is no doubt that the isolated state of the individual is the cause of much suffering whether our perspective is concern for the well-being of the microcosm or the macrocosm. Involvement in private thought which is centred on ‘me’ is indeed a significant cause of isolation and suffering. If we can become acquainted with the art of diving to the depth of the ocean, to a realm which is aware of the waves buffeting about on the surface but dwells in the quiet and stillness of the deep, our perspective changes radically. The waves may still be turbulent and in vigorous movement but they are known as waves, within the field of awareness, within our consciousness which is limitless and all-embracing. This is unconditional love in which everything which is, simply comes to pass. As Richard Rohr puts it:

“...In contemplation, we move to a different space where we see the illusion of separateness.”⁶

In addition to the deluding and isolating effects of me-centred thought, there is one other feature which is central to understanding the nature of release from the confines of separation. In me-centred thought, attention is focussed and absorbed in an imagined world woven by words, memory and future speculation. When we really pay attention to what is presently taking place, there is no sense of a separate self. This is a simple but remarkably profound and practical truth. Laurence Freeman comments on this:

“Stillness is the condition of unselfcentred attention. It is inherently compassionate and agile. ... We are silent whenever we pay attention. We pay attention when there is no ‘I’ thought, no self-reflective consciousness, no thought that we are the observer. This attention is the essence of prayer. Whenever we are in this state we are in prayer whether we are in church

⁵ RICHARD ROHR (2003) Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer, P.78-79

⁶ RICHARD ROHR (2003) Everything Belongs: The Gift of Contemplative Prayer, P.80

or supermarket, bedroom or boardroom, making love or making money. ...When we listen we return to silence.”⁷

How can education help to support the awakening to this forgotten truth? This is a question far removed from the common concerns of our educational systems. Nevertheless, the first step must surely be to recognise this larger perspective which understands something about the real nature of fulfilment. Our vision is commonly confined to materialistic notions of success which are necessarily fear-driven and productive of excessive measures of anxiety in our young people. The ‘me-centred’ culture to which the negative aspects of the digital world subject them is hugely damaging: obsessive concern with physical appearance; cyber-bullying and critical measures of isolation are all the result of an instrument which claims to bring people together. Mental illness, depression, and self-harming are the fruits of its destructive influence.

In addition, as we know only too well, our young people are losing the ability to communicate meaningfully – amongst themselves and within families who are all too often immersed in digital paraphernalia. Face to face, heart to heart communication which every soul longs for is hard to find. Relationships are superficial, fleeting and full of careless words. True communication is attentive: it comes from the heart which is resting in love, ready only to receive, empty in the silence from which everything arises.

One of the greatest problems which has arisen from excessive use of technology is the lack of ability to focus. Without the power of sustained attention, nothing of real worth in human endeavour is likely to be possible. Real learning, depth of understanding, creativity, artistic skill and power of communication all depend upon the ability to apply sustained attention. Perhaps even more important is that a distracted state of attention which is always flitting superficially from one sensation to another renders the human instrument increasingly insensitive to the condition of another. This has produced a growing harshness, a lack of empathy and kindness which is truly alarming. If we cannot see the needs of another or feel their pain, we lose our very humanity.

So, it becomes increasingly obvious that, from all perspectives, in order to meet the needs of young people today, access to deep, focussed, quiet, is vital. Their spiritual, emotional, mental and physical welfare depend upon it.

⁷ LAURENCE FREEMAN (2001) *Jesus the Teacher Within*, p.52-54

At the St James Schools meditation and quiet time have been a central part of the educational programme since the foundation of the schools forty years ago. Until the last decade, such practices were considered to be extremely weird and ‘new age’. However, concern for the mental and emotional health of young people has caused a powerful wave of interest in the value of meditative practice and ‘mindfulness’ has become hugely popular in schools, medical practices and businesses.

The essence of what is generally understood to be ‘mindful living’ has two aspects: the first is the simple discipline of living in the present rather than allowing the attention to get immersed in thought and imagining; the second aspect is meditative in nature. This involves sitting quietly and bringing the body, mind and senses into focus in the present. This in itself is refreshing in that it serves to release the commonly distracted condition from its confined awareness into a more expansive consciousness.

There is an additional and perhaps more subtle principle which is introduced in this context. Once attention is focussed in the present, people are asked to appreciate the self-evident truth that the various features of physical, mental or emotional experience appear and disappear within awareness: awareness remains constant; impressions and forms of experience come to pass. These experiences have a variety of qualitative impacts which come and go. The subtle distinction between unchanging awareness and the changing forms of experience is very important. It lends an understanding which allows a person to enjoy greater stability and ease in meeting the ever-changing conditions of life. For those concerned with addressing the well-being of children, adolescents or adults, this is of major significance for it goes to the heart of the matter.

At St James we have practised this simple approach through offering a two-minute pause before and after activities. This regular, whole-school practice provides a huge strength to the academic, emotional, physical and creative life of pupils: it opens the door to discovering the wealth of all that life offers. With the additional support of meditation, practised for longer periods at the start and end of every day, a person of any age can come to appreciate the enormous gift of the power of attention which again enriches every aspect of life. Ultimately, contemplative or meditative practice may offer direct experience of that which transcends the confines of mind.

Educationally it is important to offer a young person the means to open his or her experience to deeper levels of understanding. As mentioned earlier, this will depend upon the power to attend. On this point Simone Weil says:

*“Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty and ready to be penetrated by the object.”*⁸

Little is said nowadays about the importance of insight or revelation. Humanity has depended throughout history on the availability of extraordinary wisdom or understanding which is revealed through insight and revelation. More often than not, such occurrences come spontaneously and unexpectedly but when they do appear, the authority of the knowledge revealed is absolute and usually ‘universal’ in character. It is described as coming seemingly from ‘another source’; this means that it is recognised that the revealed understanding was not initiated by the so-called individual and neither did it arise from within its confines of effort, prior experience or knowledge. As we know, it has often been the case that such knowledge may well serve not only to direct a person’s life but invariably it may be of signal use to humanity as a whole. In this respect, it is useful to acknowledge that as the saying goes, ‘If God wants to send us a message, it is not helpful if he finds us otherwise engaged’!

In order to be receptive to the unexpected appearance of higher knowledge, the channels of communication must be open. This means that the person needs to be acquainted with a condition of simple, receptive attentiveness as they move through life.

Mental preoccupation is problematic for it removes the mind and heart from the gift of the present. The other great obstacle is arrogance; the presumption of knowing or being over-opinionated. If we think we have everything sorted out, at any level, - and particularly spiritually - the door will be shut. The most propitious condition is to live in the simplicity of ‘not-knowing’ and wait for knowledge to appear when and if it is necessary!

Whether or not our children’s lives are to be graced by revealed knowledge is not in our hands. What we can offer them is the strength which comes from access to stillness and the capacity to engage in activity with simplicity and full attention. It is obvious that when young people who have been trained in this way meet challenging situations, they draw upon deeper resources. It is wonderful to see the enhanced capacity to sustain attention in academic rigour, or the sensitive perception which lends a brilliance and beauty to artistic and creative

⁸ SIMON WEIL (1951) *Waiting on God*, p.72

pursuits. The power of all creativity rests in the ability to attend. We also need to teach them how to make full use of the power of speech: when these pupils learn the art of public speaking they discover the capacity to speak and think with clarity because they have learnt that all good speech depends upon sustained listening; words arise from the stillness of the unformed and return to it. When young people connect with this silence as they speak, their words are enlivened and real communication takes place.

When all is said and done, the human being is seeking to love and to be loved. Unless a young person is taught that ultimate fulfilment is found in giving rather than taking, that a selfish, me-centred life is a miserable life and a life which gives ever more expansively leads to happiness, he or she will be entirely at the mercy of ‘the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune’.

In summary, these essential principles can be passed on to young people as they move towards adulthood. Attending always to the reality of the human being, a teacher can guide the pupil to discover the power of attention, the beauty of silence, and the simple truth that service is the secret to a happy life. In this way, schools can foster in their pupils the conditions and understanding through which life, in all its splendour, may flourish.

The world is facing challenging times. The growth of violence, fear, hatred, division and isolation beckon the need to access deeper resources of the human spirit. The first question to address, in all its simplicity, is ‘Who am I?’, that most ancient of philosophic enquiries.

And once the illusion of separation is dispelled, it is seen that the ocean of unconditional love is one, and it is all and everything. It is complete. It always was complete and one, and always will be complete and one.