



The Silent Treatment

The pleasure, pain and ultimate enlightenment of . . . Sssh.

By Jen Murphy

“I’VE ALWAYS ASSOCIATED silence with punishment. If I misbehaved as a little girl, I’d be sent to my room to reflect on my actions in solitude. When I broke a rule in school, my teacher would assign me quiet time. And as a writer, keeping silent—not using my voice—felt akin to an existential crisis. But after eight overstimulated years in New York City, silence had become elusive. So had stillness. As a magazine journalist in my early 30s, I was flying between coasts every other week and would often squeeze in a monthly assignment somewhere far-flung on top of that. I was in a state of perpetual motion, always thinking of what’s next rather than living in the moment.

“Go-mode,” as I called it, didn’t leave me time

ILLUSTRATION: JACK HUGHES

to cope with my emotions. While my career was at a high, my family and personal life were falling apart. My sister was struggling with money. My brother was serving time for a drug charge. My boyfriend was cheating on me. At the time, it seemed easier to forge ahead, saying yes to more TV appearances, conferences and assignments. Meanwhile, those suppressed emotions manifested themselves in my body as aches and pains. My psoas, our fight-or-flight muscle, was so tight my acupuncturist couldn’t even get a needle to stick. Concerned, he warned me I really needed to slow down.

I’d recently interviewed Khajak Keledjian, the founder and former CEO of the fashion retailer Intermix, and was intrigued when he told me about a 10-day vipassanā meditation retreat in Kaufman, Tex., he had attended for his 39th birthday. The experience had transformed him. “It was one of the most challenging things I’ve done in my life,” says Keledjian. “After the car service dropped me off, I nearly chased the car down the dusty road, thinking, ‘Don’t leave me!’” Taming the mind, he told me, led him to inner peace. “My biggest revelation: I wanted to rediscover who I was rather than be Mr. Mix. I didn’t want to be defined only by my work.” Upon returning to New York City, he sold his company, married his fiancée and started a family.

I was inspired by Keledjian’s experience, but Savasana, the closing pose in yoga, was the closest I’d come to practicing meditation. The idea of spending nearly 11 hours a day in seated meditation in complete silence—no phone, computer, books, exercise, journal or even eye contact—was daunting. And I wasn’t alone: Mark Cho, cofounder of the Hong Kong and New York menswear brand the Armoury, confesses he lasted just four of his 10 days at a vipassanā retreat. Still, even his abbreviated stay had a lasting impact. “I may not have been able to find the mental silence necessary to truly engage in vipassanā meditation,” Cho says, “but I realized very clearly that my phone generates a series of distractions that help drown out my thoughts. I now try to use my phone every other day.”

Luckily, Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in the Berkshires offers what I like to call “intro to silence.” Each January, the center holds Contemplative Week, a five-day retreat in which everyone, from the guests to the staff, is encouraged to observe voluntary social silence during meals and in common areas. While some guests joined workshops and lectures, others, myself included, wore tags with the words “In Loving Silence” to signal that communication was off-limits. Not quite ready for vipassanā, considered by some a more advanced form of meditation, I opted for this program devoted to metta, a less intense version intended to cultivate loving kindness for both oneself and others. The program also

MIDDLE: TONY FELQUEIRAS; BOTTOM: ANDREAS ENGEL

During Contemplative Week at Kripalu Center for Yoga & Health in the Berkshires, guests are encouraged to observe voluntary silence during meals and to hike in solitude or with the group.



incorporates movement in the form of yoga and walking meditation—a relief for an endorphin junkie like me.

By the end of day one, I was already restless. Our program presenters, Sharon Salzberg and Stephen Cope, guided us in dharma talks and meditation, during which my legs went numb. Sitting cross-legged on the cushiony bolster didn’t just throw my muscles for a loop—it clouded my brain, too, and my usual distractions and worries quickly piled up: the editor I never responded to, the flight I forgot to book, the dry cleaning still waiting to be picked up. Taking Salzberg’s advice, I returned to the metta phrase “May I be happy.” Reciting the mantra over and over was supposed

to help me let go of distraction and find wisdom.

But by day two I wasn't feeling any wiser. At breakfast, the lack of chitchat made it easier to hear the woman across from me chewing her turkey-bacon frittata. I felt an urge to yell, "Stop!" Instead, I moved my seat. A sense of calm came over me later that day during a hatha yoga session, when Cope encouraged us to connect with our breath. Later, during a two-hour guided meditation, I focused on making oceanlike inhalations and exhalations. Finally, for the first time, I felt myself relax.

On the third day, I was backsliding. I found myself staring at the black screen of my iPhone, obsessing over the unread e-mails that were hiding in my powered-down device's dark abyss. I couldn't take it anymore. But just as I was about to turn it



on, my roommate caught me in this scandalous act of defiance. Head down, I marched shamefully to the front desk and silently handed my phone over to the receptionist—no explanation needed.

The voice inside my head incessantly narrating everything in my life—my thoughts, my fears, my insecurities—had finally quieted down by day four, and "May I be happy" was at last starting to mean something to me. No day got easier, but every day went a little bit deeper, like slowly peeling away the layers of an onion. On our final day, my eyes unexpectedly swelled with tears during morning meditation. Emotions I had long tucked away were bubbling up—and it actually felt good. I left with a realization: I need to fix myself before I can try to fix everyone around me. Months later, I'm no longer silent—far from it—but the calm inside of me has helped me let go of distraction. And even find a little bit of wisdom.

At Kripalu, chakra yoga is among the many meditative practices to help guests find focus.

Quiet Time

Five new silent retreats to soothe the soul.

Mum's the Word

Set on a maharaja's 100-acre estate in the Himalayan foothills, **Ananda Spa** provides a tranquil backdrop for quieting the mind with its hush-hush Dhyana Meditation retreat. Yoga teachers guide guests through pratyahara (withdrawal of the senses or external influences) and dharana (focusing on mental awareness) and toward dhyana (continued meditative awareness) during seven-, 14- or 21-day retreats. anandaspa.com; prices start at \$1,940 per night

Whisper Friendly

As intense as you want it to be, **Four Seasons Resort Bali at Sayan's** new Guided by Gratitude retreat includes silence rituals, meditation, chakra balancing and hatha yoga. Led by former Buddhist nun Heny Ferawati,



Meditation is at the core of Ananda Spa's quiet retreats.

the program aims to restore inner peace—but embraces the silence in short spurts. fourseasons.com; prices start at about \$775 per night

Food for Thought

Every Thursday evening, **Rancho La Puerta** in Tecate, Baja California, Mexico, hosts a silent dinner at which guests are encouraged to be more conscious about the food they put in their bodies. The 90-minute five-course meal is enjoyed without conversation and accompanied by inspirational music. rancholapuerta.com; prices start at \$4,200 for the week

Loud and Proud

When **Miraval Berkshires** debuts in the mountains of western Massachusetts this spring, guests will absorb the silence of nature on the resort's trails—then let their emotions loose in soundproof rooms designed for scream therapy. Go ahead, let it all out. miravalberkshires.com; prices start at \$650 per night

Listen Up

Fogo Island Inn's remote location off the coast of Newfoundland lures guests wanting to unplug. Just looking out at the icy Atlantic through floor-to-ceiling windows can put you in a contemplative state. New listening retreats help guests turn inward while tapping into nature through a mix of yoga, meditation and reiki set to a soundtrack of wind and waves. fogoislandinn.ca; prices start at \$1,480 per night J.M.



A former Buddhist nun leads meditation at Four Seasons.

LEFT: JURIAN HUGHES; TOP RIGHT: KRAUSE; BOTTOM RIGHT: CHRISTIAN HORAN