

The Spiritual Scientist

An Ezine for Those Who Think

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EXPERIENCE THE SOUND BEYOND SILENCE



“Most people speak because they find speech more tolerable than silence,” reads a cheeky T-shirt slogan. A blanket generalization, no doubt, but doesn't it contain a grain of truth? For many stressed and distressed people, even when their mouth is silent, their mind is screaming and speech offers an easy distraction from the turmoil within. That's why the Bhagavad-gita (17.16) declares mauna to be an austerity, not of the mouth, but of the mind. Mauna is not merely “the inability to speak” of the dumb or “the reluctance to speak” of the inarticulate or “the restriction of speech” of the talkative; it is the calmness of the mind that enables us to hear the guiding voice of God within.

Of course speech and silence both have their utility. In daily life, speech is a powerful and essential means for communication. Throughout history, social reformers (and de-formers) galvanized followers by their power of speech. On the other hand, seekers introspected for enlightenment through silence. Can we then conclude that speech is a vehicle for social transformation and silence for individual transformation?

The concluding aphorism of the Vedanta-sutra anavrttih shabdat resolves this dialectic by introducing an intriguing higher dimension – sound beyond silence.

Let's visualize our quest for happiness as movement on the abscissa (y-axis) of a mathematical model of life. We are all eternal spiritual beings, who due to spiritual amnesia are misidentifying ourselves with our temporary material bodies. Material activity – beginning with material speech – increases our forgetfulness of our natural spiritual joyfulness and incriminates us in unending anxiety and misery. Thus it falls on the negative y-axis. Material inactivity – beginning with material silence – checks our preoccupation with the temporal and offers relief, but it alone does not revive our spiritual memory. Srila Prabhupada compares inactivity and the liberation associate with it to convalescence – not sick, but not healthy either. So it falls on the origin (the zero point) on the y-axis. But spiritual activity – beginning with spiritual sound – cures our amnesia by linking our consciousness with the all-attractive reservoir of all pleasure, God and enlightens and enlivens us with divine wisdom and bliss. Hence it falls on the positive y-axis.

A mathematics novice may mistake the positive and negative axes to be identical. Similarly a spiritual neophyte may mistake spiritual and material sounds to be identical. But the difference can be understood through intelligence and experienced through practice. Just as a child unaware of paper currency sees no difference between waste paper and a 500/- rupee note, a spiritually

immature person unaware of spiritual values sees no difference between ordinary material sound and extraordinary spiritual sound. Material sound agitates our mind, spiritual sound pacifies it. Material sound aggravates and perpetuates our amnesia; spiritual sound alleviates and eradicates it. Material sound entangles us, spiritual sound liberates us.

When all sound is voiced through the same mouth, what makes a sound spiritual? Its connection with the source and sustenance of all spirituality – the supreme spiritual being, God, who resides on the positive infinity of the y-axis. Spiritual sound – the revealed word of God - is exalted in all the great wisdom traditions of the world. In the Judaeo-Christian tradition, St. John (1.1) states, "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God." In the Vedic traditions, hymns, verses, songs, mantras, bhajans and kirtans beckon adventurous spiritualists to higher realms of enlightenment and fulfillment. The greater the connection of the sound with God, the greater its spiritual potency. The sound most intimately connected with us is our own name. And as we are made in the image of God, the same applies to God too. Therefore the most powerful spiritual sound is the Holy Name of God. Indeed the holy name of God is non-different from God as asserted by Padma Purana *abhinnatvat nama namino*. Hence chanting the holy name brings us in immediate and direct contact with God and purifies us. Mantra meditation – meditation on the mantra made of the holy names of God - gradually tunes our consciousness to the spiritual level where we can receive the guidance of the Supersoul (who is non-different from the holy name) in the heart. Thus chanting achieves in one swift step what mauna takes two slow arduous steps – first silence the clamor of the mind and then perceive the voice of the Supersoul within. The Kali Santarana Upanishad, a scripture containing practices tailored for our current age, unequivocally states that "In this age, there is no means for purification other than the chanting of the maha manta Hare Krishna Hare Krishna Krishna Krishna Hare Hare Hare Rama Hare Rama Rama Rama Hare Hare."

Not only does the holy name purify most efficaciously, but also through group meditation on the sound of the holy name or sankirtan, devotees can simultaneously relish divine bliss and also share it with others. The Srimad Bhagavatam declares that "The narration of the pastimes of the Lord (spiritual sound) purifies the speaker, the hearer and the questioner." Thus spiritual sound synthesizes the virtues of material sound and silence, for it offers us a unique vehicle for simultaneous individual and social transformation. Hence Vedic insights call for a revised rendition of the traditional saying, "Speech is silver, silence is golden – but spiritual speech is diamond."

