

## OF THE NOBLE SILENCE



*Translated by Alberto Gabba*

*Monks, develop concentration. A monk who has a concentrated mind has true understanding.*

*This truth that I have discovered is deep, hidden, difficult to understand, sweet and subtle, beyond words and thoughts, abstract in such a way that only the wise can grasp.*

*(Gotama Sakyamuni, known as Buddha)*

*Sit at the edge of dawn, the sun will rise for you. Sit on the edge of the night, the stars shine out for you. Sit on the edge of silence, God will speak to you.*

*(Vivekananda)*

For us modern men, “silence” is synonymous above all with absence, absence of life, absence of meaning. But apparently this was not the case for our ancestors, who had not yet lost the sense of the sacred, and sought it in silence. The prevailing religion today, mechanistic materialism, claims that only what can be verified is true, and this attitude has ended up erasing the sense of the sacred and the mystery from the Universe: today the majority of human beings believe that only exists what

possesses a wavelength perceptible to them. To believe, one would like the spiritual dimension to be audible and verifiable. Consequently, today’s man fears silence and wherever he goes, he seeks noise, or brings it with him, starting from the noise of his thoughts, because silence now only reminds him of the emptiness that inhabits him; silence pushes him to deal with himself. Hence his anguish, and hence his boredom. This man is well described by Sartre. In “Being and Nothingness” Sartre writes: “Man finds himself alone, wandering through this monstrous silence, free and alone, without assistance and without excuses, condemned to decide, without support of any kind, condemned forever to be free”. Sartre says “condemned”, because when it is not supported by meaning, freedom can only be a condemnation.

I would like to turn now to my experience of silence. In my personal experience, I would say that I discovered silence above all thanks to Assagioli’s exercise of disidentification. The disidentification exercise essentially consists in discovering, in a meditative attitude, who we really are. It is an exercise that includes first observing our sensations, which are constantly changing, then our emotions, which are even more changeable, and finally our thoughts, which are also always different, to then realize that our most intimate reality, in other words what we essentially are, is our awareness, consciousness that through attention observes sensations, emotions and thoughts, and leads us to identify with this pure consciousness. We are conscience that perceives our thoughts, our emotions and our sensations; we are the one who experiences not only external life, but also the so-called internal one. This is a decisive achievement, realizing that, compared to consciousness, even what we normally call interior life is actually something external, because it is external compared to the consciousness that perceives it. It is precisely from this possibility of observation that we can reach, identifying with it, the centre of consciousness; from this we will be able to act more effectively on our inner world, in a way comparable to how we act on the external one. Through this knowledge of ourselves we can possess ourselves and therefore transform ourselves. At this point we have understood that ultimately we are

consciousness; what we still have to discover is what consciousness is. Let's say it's much easier to say what it isn't. Because it is not and does not have a form, it is not something, but it allows things, both internal and external, to exist. We can add that it is very similar to emptiness and silence.

The void allows matter to exist, but it is not material; silence allows sounds, but it is not a sound. In consciousness we find its contents, but it is not a content. All three, consciousness, emptiness and silence, have in common that to get closer to them we need to reduce as much as possible what they include. In fact, we get closer to the void by reducing matter, we get closer to silence by thinning out sounds. In the same way we come closer to perceiving consciousness by thinning out its contents, whether physical, emotional or mental. Just as it is impossible to sense or imagine emptiness or absolute silence, it is equally difficult to perceive oneself as pure consciousness. In reality we cannot perceive them, we can deduce them, distinguishing them from what they contain. And at the same time, we discover that they have an existence superior to what they contain. Matter is born from the void, is surrounded by the void and disappears in the void, just as sound is born in silence, is surrounded by silence and ends in silence. In the same way, each of our perceptions is born in consciousness, lives in consciousness and dies in consciousness. But silence and emptiness do not die, their contents only continually change.

We know that the void, so difficult to perceive and think about, constitutes 99.99% of reality, given that our physicists tell us that if we made the nucleus of an atom the size of a pinhead the empty space around it would be as large as a St. Peter's square. Sounds are distinguishable only in silence, matter needs space, and if there were no consciousness, would the Universe exist? We know that for modern physics, matter is made up of particles which are actually waves, vibrations; this also brings us back to the identity between sound, matter and form, and therefore between silence, void and consciousness. And we are this consciousness, we are this void, we are this silence. If we discover this, we discover that life can be lived at various depths.

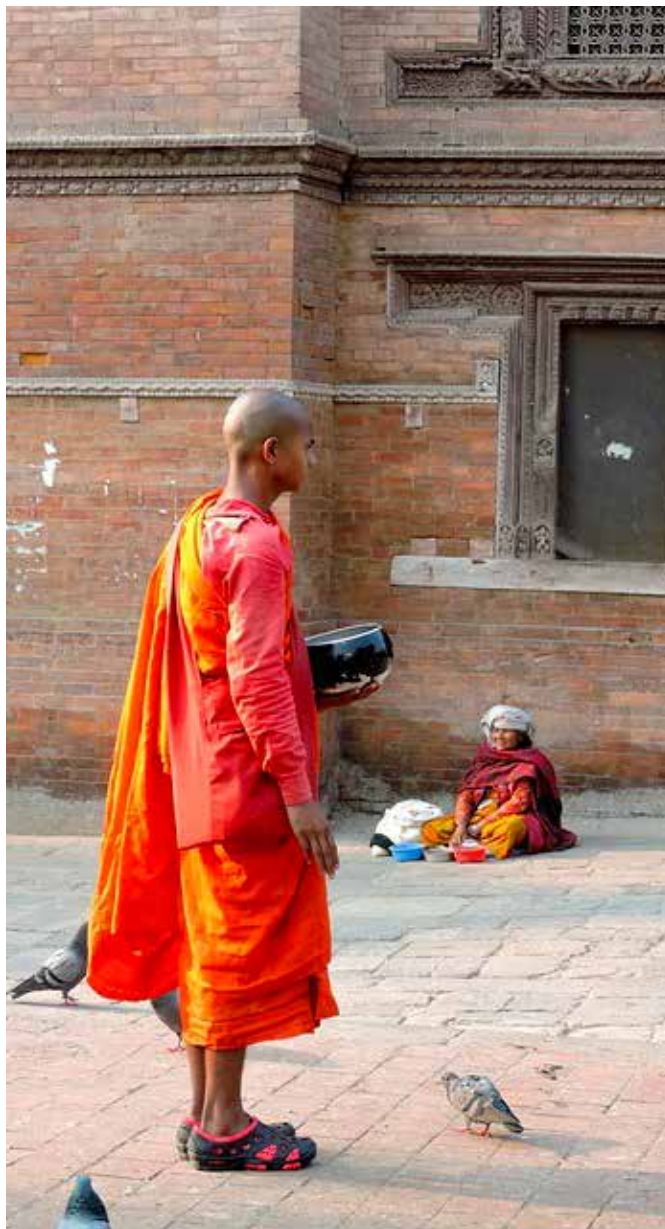
Of course, there are various types of silence. There is the silence of those who prefer to remain silent, there is the silence of those who cannot find the right words. Then there is the silence of those who have discovered something inexpressible, and are silent because it is impossible to express what they have experienced; it is the silence of those who have discovered that life and their experiences can go far beyond rationality and descriptive thought.

A discovery that I connect to a man born in the sixth century BC.

The sixth century BC was a unique century in the history of the evolution of human consciousness. In different and distant places on the planet, in approximately the same years, we are witnessing a great renewal of thought and of the ways in which spirituality is understood. In Israel, following the fall of Jerusalem at the hands of the Babylonians (587 BC), religiosity becomes something more intimate and more social at the same time, for the first time it happens that new prophets affirm that demonstrating mercy has more value than performing rites. In Iran we have the great spiritual renewal proposed by Zarathustra, which gives the individual the choice of field in the struggle between good and evil. In China we have Confucius and Lao Tze. The first invites the subjects of the empire to internalize the symbolic value of the rites, and urges man to reflect on his place in the world. Confucius is also the first of the great philosopher-reformers to identify his profound identity with silence, and Lao Tze, in a not dissimilar way, proposes the mystical union with the Tao, which is both the path and the unitive state. In Greece, in the same years we have those who are remembered as the fathers of Western thought. In our philosophy texts, great space is given to Greek philosophers, but we forget how much the flourishing of this thought was associated with a spiritual fervour, not dissimilar to that which has persisted for centuries in India.

There are many names, so I remind them briefly here: Anaximander and Anaximenes speak of an origin of the cosmos from the Apeiron, the unlimited, completely similar to the Vedic Akasha; Pythagoras founded a school of interior research in Crotona, where the novices

practiced silence for five years, and in Agrigento Empedocles, for whom everything changes but nothing is born and nothing dies, just like the Hindu rishis tries to teach salvation from the wheel of incarnations; Heraclitus was the first to speak of the Logos, just as in the Vedas we speak of Vac, an expression that means both word and thought, from which the cosmos was born and is governed.



Then there are Socrates and Plato, the first among the Greeks to speak of the individual soul, even if in India people have been talking about Atman for centuries. And in India, in those years, the character I was referring to was born, a prince named Sakyamuni, of the Gotama lineage, who tries to renew the religiosity of his places by bringing, he too, man's interiority back to the centre of the discussion, placing it above the mechanical nature of the ritual. He is not the only Indian spiritual reformer of the period, a contemporary of him being Vardamara Mahavira, the founder of the Jaina religion, to which Gandhi adhered, a doctrine that preaches the total renunciation of every form of violence, as a result of the attention of man to his inner truth.

We are therefore witnessing a kind of global spiritual revolution. The Jewish prophets, the sages of the Upanishads, the social and spiritual reformers of China, the Greek philosophers, all these enlightened beings preach an overcoming of the religious form, of the attention to ritual, to bring it back to the daily action of man; they perceive, each in different places, a hardening of spirituality in the formalisms of repetition, in magical faith, and preach to shift it onto the conscience of the individual, on his intention and on social action.

This belongs to the thoughts of all these wise men that I have named, but here we will talk above all about Prince Shakyamuni, about the concordances of his teaching with the modern religious spirit, and about the similarities with my Psychosynthesis.

Buddha's vision and feeling are extremely modern, I believe this is perceived even by those who have not studied Buddhism in depth. He rejects any ontology, he does not ask questions about what the world is, what man is and even less what God is.

He is not a theologian, he is not a philosopher.

So, is he? I hope that my answer does not seem belittling to anyone.

He's a psychologist. Buddha was, and remains - in my opinion - the greatest psychotherapist in history, so great that his method and teaching have had such resonance that they have risen to the level of religion. For some, the fact that Buddhism does not talk about God makes this doctrine not comparable to a religion. But for

Buddha, religion must be agnostic, because for him the claim to have an idea of God is idolatry. For Buddha, long before Wittgenstein, the inexpressible must not be expressed. We add that his is certainly a true religion, as it indicates a way of salvation and seeks to free man as much as possible also and above all from his mental prisons, his ideologies and self-imposed dogmas, thanks to a teaching that does not affirm and which does not deny God, but which highlights the futility, not only of speaking, but also of speculating on the unspeakable.

Today modernity, which has probably distanced man in a definitive way from the attitude of minority, from faith in the *ipse dixit* and in the dogmas of his own religion, finds it natural to feel akin to the mental attitude of the Buddha.

By now the majority of believers, just like those who declare not to believe, live without being influenced too much by the laws and dogmas of their own religious tradition, and the spirituality of those who believe in a transcendent dimension is less and less connected to ritual and formal duty, and is increasingly considered an internal condition, to be developed in a private sphere.

Precisely for this reason Buddhism is increasingly successful in the West, because since its inception it has refused to “think” the transcendent dimension, it has not tried to make the ineffable something on which to speculate rationally. To his followers’ questions about the further dimension, Buddha always responded with silence, as if to remember that all mental concepts actually lead away from the truth.

Its truth is a truth beyond words and beyond concepts, as it should be, given that it does not belong to contingency. True religion for Buddha can only be a religion that cannot have a concept of God, because even a mental concept of God is a fetish like a statue or a totem.

For us Westerners who have read Plato, Ficino and St. Thomas, it is difficult to understand this, not only from a religious point of view, but also from a philosophical one. For us, asking ourselves questions about the ultimate purpose of existence is a sign of inner life, of culture, of depth, a question that can allow us to face life in a condition of greater fullness. For Western thought, God can give meaning to existence, both individual and

social, and the death of God affirmed by Nietzsche has inexorably opened the doors to nihilistic thought.

My opinion is that in reality Sakyamuni wants his path to lead as directly as possible to realization, far from any lucubration, and rather than denying the value of the question in itself, he denies the sense of asking it on a discursive, mental level. He knows that any idea we have of the beyond will have nothing to do with the beyond, and any idea we have of the divine will have nothing to do with the divine. It would be to bring the beyond into contingency, to make the divine become a mental creature or idol. And mental idols are certainly more numerous than physical ones. I believe that religions were rational idolatries for him. Buddha denies the very value of the question on the existence of God, because it is a rumination on something that in reality is beyond existence as we can conceive it; he knows that the divine cannot be an object of thought, but I believe he knew that the divine can be encountered in what we Westerners call contemplation, a condition that requires the subject to achieve impersonality. Buddha knows that the answer to this question, so fundamental for man, is found on a level where this question can no longer be asked; he wants us to go beyond thought, beyond our own subjectivity, because ultimately even our own subjectivity originates from thought, and as long as the Self is present, God does not appear. Buddha’s answer to this question, crucial for every human being, is silence, because what can give an answer is not a concept but an existential state, the state of silence that coincides with pure being and joy, a state that he calls Nirvana. In this sublime but reachable state, silence is not a denial of the word or of thought, but a momentary overcoming of the same; consciousness is empty and devoid of content, above all it is devoid of the usual contents, but in reality precisely in this very intimate silence is true knowledge, true teaching: a teaching that is too broad to be translated into a concept. As in all the moments in which thought is absent, as in the moments in which we fully experience the present, the moments of great joy, of extreme concentration or contemplation of beauty, the recognition of the experience of the transcendent will come later, with the return to thought, but with it we will

find a renewed ease of intuition and a further, intimate ability to express new concepts, which will inevitably be entrusted to the imperfection of the word.

The contemplative knows that the word reveals and reveals, that is, it returns to veil what it has just revealed, because the sense of truth we find in the sentences of all the true mystics, rather than in the meaning of the words, lies in their vibration, a vibration that arises from silence and which usually leads us back to silence. It is no coincidence that the gospel tells us that “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God”; and the Vedas also say something very similar: “In the beginning there was only God, (Prajapati) his Word (Vac) was with him, and his Word was his second.” We find exactly the same words, written thousands of years earlier. And the words of these sacred writings tell us that the verb, or vac, the word, was from the beginning, but it was not the beginning. The principle was the only and pure consciousness, the principle was the void, it was silence. But a silence that was already an intention, a silence from which the word emerged, as creative as it brings with itself the original vibration, the vibration that brings us back to silence. It is silence that inspired all the great mystics and their words have always been inseparable from silence.

