

Chatting and the Art of Noble Silence

By Jemi Reis McDonald

To discourage myself from chatting at retreats, with others and internally, is one of the most challenging forms of my training lately. In observing some of the reasons I return to it again and again despite my best intentions, I have come to recognize some aspects of the nature of chatting and especially its insidious timing.

With this recognition has come a greater motivation not to choose it, out of respect for my own effort in training and in being careful of the privacy and mental processes of others, both the lay sangha and my monk teachers. To choose not to chat at retreats has had the effect of broadening my awareness to include a helpful forbearance outside of retreat as well. This awareness closes an essential circle of intention for me, which is not to harbor a distinction between "training" and "ordinary daily life."

It is one of the first, and most helpful, instructions a monk will teach a newcomer to a temple: chatting is inappropriate to a reverent attitude, is counterproductive to practice and is discouraged. Participating in dharma talks, discussing specific questions in working meditation, speaking when necessary, even the friendly small talk about cats and dogs monks will sometimes initiate at the end of a meal are all part of Noble Silence in that they do not disrupt the mental texture of meditation. But chatting, the restless, acquisitive, detail-greedy thinking that takes so much room in the mind and speech, has to wait. There is an opportunity to catch up with sangha members at the informal meal at the very end of the retreat when chatting is possible. Though even then I've noticed that the retreat affects people so deeply that they tend to be more quiet with one another, talking thoughtfully rather than chatting.

Buddhist temples, through practice, are places of opportunity for personal revelation. The pace of these revelations is individual to each person and can range anywhere, from insights into quirks of personality all the way to the recognition of fully-matured, decades-old delusions brought about by ancient misunderstanding. At times these recognitions of serious practice can be somewhat uncomfortable and can carry a corresponding sense of vulnerability. These insights can be fragile as they enter the constellation of stronger elements of the mental environment. If treated with respect, they have a chance to gain their own place in this mental environment, and from there they can cross into the realm of action.

It can actually be very destructive to interrupt this kind of process by chatting with someone - say after a dharma talk or walking the grounds from one event to another - no matter how friendly the motive nor how innocent the gesture. It is hard work, but a deeply generous gift, to maintain one's silence and thereby guard everyone's separate experience. So it was, at a recent retreat, that I came to realize how deep a distraction chatting really is, how disorienting it can be and how costly a mistake this harmless-seeming action of mind or word can be.

If it begins with conversation, even a kind and concerned inquiry like "It's so good to see you, it's been so long, how *are* things?" then even when the conversation ends, the chatting continues internally, sometimes for hours or even days. If it begins in my mind, it frequently continues as painful social speculation that reaches into meditation and even to my desire to practice.

'Am I liked? Does this teacher approve of me? Am I one of the group? Do I understand this Zen thing? Am I doing this right? I can't see the results, is this useful?' These mental constructions borne of chatting and over-emphasis on social context both intrigue and irritate, dissipating the effort in retreat rather than focusing it.

Learning to recognize the destructive potential of chatting can begin to lessen the temptation to indulge in it. The willingness to explore Noble Silence and its means begins to teach one the simple and far-reaching ability to pause and observe. To train oneself to leave-off the

debate and discussion about reality is to leave oneself open to reality. For me, this is an essential step in training my 'self' to step back from center stage.

It's a very practical effort where anyone at any stage of training can succeed. I have to smile now to remember Rev. Master Phoebe pantomiming zipping her lip, which she does often, and it is a gesture both comical and deadly serious. It describes both Noble Silence at the temple and the internal reserve that allows room to forego being right all the time, or decrying one's fate. The poet Zen Master Ryokan wrote, "Lock up your lips in deep reticence to do your daily work." This silence cannot be imposed from "outside" the mind, but must be encouraged and trained to come from within. As this reticence settles itself internally, the stillness of meditation can radiate from one and allow reality to enter one's existence unmitigated by the incessant, disquieting quality of internal and social chatting.

Clearly Noble Silence is the corrective choice to chatting, but redirecting the impulse to chat is difficult because we live in chat in our workaday world. TV sets, radios and computers left running, speaking to our backs as we answer the phone. On any given day, we juggle one urgency with another and therefore feel needed and important. We take one phone call after another and feel central. We rush through a frantic overfilled work schedule and feel accomplished. Our society is very much with us on this, so we have a sense of belonging to a thriving system, which seems to justify the mad pace of things.

To let go of these affirmations of self is no small task. But I find that faith and my innate knowledge that there is a reality larger than myself also persists. This reality is so large, in fact, that one must cease seeking it with the mind of self and simply immerse oneself in it. The enormous subtlety of this effort is yet another reason for the ego to allow internal and social chatter to enter. No wonder it's so difficult to quiet ourselves, draw the line, listen to silence -- much less willfully generate it.

Unconsciously, we carry with us the texture of our workaday worlds even if we intend, in retreat, to leave those worlds and that scurrying behind. There is a sensation of suspense at the beginning of a retreat when not yet "sitting quietly, accepting," I am instead "sitting quietly, waiting." Internal chatting can come in very handily here to quell the discomfort of the transition. It's as though the habit-layer of lay life that is our urgency-preparedness is emptying itself but still retains its itchy sense of forward momentum. After a few days of intensive meditation, this momentum slows and even reverses: transforming into a sense of readiness from which anything can emerge, including unconditional openness; the clear water of bright-mindedness and the strength-in-relaxation that paves the way for acceptance.

For me the toughest times to resist chatting are at the beginning of a retreat if I'm not yet internally quiet, or when I'm still a little socially nervous. And then again in the middle of the retreat when the intensity and penetration of quiet is hard to allow in myself and becomes a little scary because of some things that I am reluctant to accept about myself. Another tough time is towards the end of a retreat, when I'm tired and beginning to anticipate the road home. It's easy to use each other to spark off a little of the difficult energy of these transitions with social chatting.

It sounds like it's one continuous tough time! Yet within this struggle for discipline with chatting, I do find interweaving moments of yield, acceptance and clear sight and these make all the effort of silence feel instinctively right. Through these challenging moments of mental chatter, there are rarely more important times to keep the knife of my attention on the sharpening steel of dharma and gently, gently stay there.

Just to observe the quiet of a sangha member in retreat is to inspire quiet in oneself, especially if one has momentarily forgotten discipline or if one is in a cloud of mental chaos and needs to see an example. And once quiet, one can, in turn, be the inspiration to another. This is how we communicate in retreat, this is how we "socialize" in a religious community: in silence. This is the agreement we make when we enter the gate and how we help each other keep that

agreement.

A retreat is deep territory, a provisional shelter that is the opportunity to learn to live with ourselves. This environment is not "provided" by the Zen master, sangha members or temple aesthetics. Where does this shelter come from?

Initially, this shelter comes from within ones effort and experience and only after this effort is seated in oneself can it be answered by the Zen master, **fellow** retreatants or the beauty of the surroundings.

The approach to retreat is ones own mind. If I go all the way to a temple, be it many miles away or even to my own heart and my own sitting place at home, it helps enormously to recognize the devotion I am answering and ready myself in gratitude. Only after that seed attitude is seated is it possible to join and enjoin the quiet of others. Beautifully, it becomes an invitation by attitude to all around one, a contagion of stillness.

If a monk in a kind but blunt manner, or even in irritation, says, "No chatting!" sometimes I am as embarrassed as a child chided for speaking out of turn in class. But I can also hear this as "Can we begin now? Have you readied yourself?" This is a responsibility we can all be proud of gaining skill in, this is the stuff of those sobering ancient Zen tales where someone travels for seven years, is asked one super-simple question and is accepted for training. Readiness belies chatting and begins in Noble Silence.

It is also the responsibility that allows me to stand next to Zen masters of decades'-long practice and feel confident to pray, sing, chant and bow in the same room with them and other lay sangha members.

In retreat, silence is the medium of shared devotion and is made manifest in passing one another with hands in gassho; in holding the hands together in shashu (ceremonial and walking meditation position) while walking the cloister or grounds; in bowing while entering a room and when leaving; in bowing when the teacher enters and in the sometimes awkward yet remarkably giving act of not speaking when someone sits near you on a bench during a short break in working meditation.

I observe myself carefully now in trying to sense the inner restlessness that leads to the many kinds of chatting. For me it's not so much what I say, though that is part of it. It's the care I take in the approach, the caring within the carefulness itself. That is the important attitude for me. It's a core sensation, not insularity (though that will do in a pinch), but just allowing meditation to dawn in me from inside, beginning to give it some room, even though I might be busily filling my car's gas tank or being uptight about leaving my family or even arguing with them in my tension from stress.

It has to begin somewhere, this non-chatting, and this is one of the true merits of approaching, doing and returning to retreats. All the difficulties that come before a retreat that can seem in contradiction to my noble efforts are rather opportunities to begin to let Noble Silence infuse my existence both inside and outside the temple.

When I find enough internal capability to tolerate and welcome the effort of silence, then I feel I have carried "retreat" out into my ordinary daily life and can offer it back again at the temple gate when I return. This begins to make my effort whole, in knowing the silence that is both the skill and its action, both the teacher and the subject.