

# Experiencing Silence • Polysemic value of silence in introspection and social relations

## Reflective Piece

### ABSTRACT

This short text is a simple reflection on the meanings and importance of silence. Starting from the sensory experience of silence I had with a local informant at Kennin-ji in Kyoto, Japan, I reflect on the various meanings of silence. On the one hand, the therapeutic and introspective silence of a temple garden immersed in the city; on the other hand, a fake silence, made of sounds and noises, that does not generate quietness, but anxiety and social distance.

**keywords:** silence, social distance, Japan, quietness, introspection

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Entering Kennin-ji is in itself a highly emotional experience. This is not something that lies in the structure of the buildings that make up the complex, nor the perfection of nature expertly guided by the hand of man that adorns the courtyard. It is not even in the smell of wood, perhaps incense, which smacks of history, of cleanliness, of the sacred. Initial excitement comes from touch and hearing. The contact of the bare foot on that wood that seems ancient, but is not. The sound of the beams creaking with each step. It matters little whether it is a heavier step like mine, or a very light one, like Rei's, who with her slender build acted as my guide through the city of Kyoto. Perhaps it was the good fortune of being two of the very few visitors touring the temple that morning. Perhaps it was just the place that communicated that emotion that I could translate as serenity. The sacredness of the place required us to speak in low voices. This sacredness was not something exclusively religious. As Noriko Maejima (2010) suggests, sacredness is something constructed

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## Experiencing Silence :

through the relationship that various agents, with their interests, have to the place. These interests can include a religious aspect, of course. But it can also be a certain context or a social condition not related to religion that gives the value of sacredness to a place. It is not a single element that can transform the location or a building into a sacred place. Instead, there are various perspectives of various agents to give this value. It is not a structured meaning created by features, but a dynamic one created by different ontologies that are born from the relation between the agents. In my case, sacredness included, yes, a religious element, but it also included the awe of being in that place, of the architectural beauty and those sensations I felt. Sacredness was not identifiable as something intrinsic to the place, but as the action the place exerted on me through my senses, and my desire, in return, to welcome and be embraced by that awe.

Rei explained something about the temple but, partly because of her veiled voice, partly because of my less-than-perfect Japanese, I struggled to understand what she was telling me. I dared not ask her to repeat it, as it seemed inappropriate to disturb the quiet of the place. I thought my footsteps were already disturbing that silence enough. The sight was certainly gratified by the beauty of the place. Aesthetic values are reflected in every tiny architectural detail, in every hue of the artwork entitled 'Raijin and Fūjin', by Tawaraya Sōtatsu, in every brushstroke of Kaihō Yūshō's 'Dragons and Clouds'. I like to imagine, surely mistakenly, that this applies to every visitor to the temple. Admiring such magnificence makes it difficult to think that anyone could remain indifferent before it. But surely some visitors leave the temple with

the idea that they have wasted time, thinking that there is nothing particularly worthwhile to see. I could have spent hours observing, enraptured by a beauty that surpassed the preemptive image I had of Kennin-ji. But it was the silence we encountered shortly after that represented the climax of the experience. Passing from one corridor to another, we came to a garden called Chōontei, meaning 'the garden of the sound of the tide'. Sight is usually conceived as the strongest of the senses. Often, the first relationship between us and our surroundings is mediated by this sense. In that first moment of encounter with the garden, my hearing was paying no attention to the creaking of floorboards, to some voice coming veiled from the corridors, if there were any. Only sight connected me to the place, as my eyes were invaded by that mixture of green, wood and stone, combined in an almost unreal perfection. We sat on the edge of the courtyard. I can recall my sight was so fulfilled that I could swear my eyes closed on their own. And it was there that what I felt was the real beauty of the Chōontei emerged. In the darkness that closed eyelids created, an almost total silence arose. Our footsteps ceased, and people's voices seemed more distant, to the point of disappearing. The presence of other people did not disturb us, because anyone who arrived there could only become part of that quietness. Or so I like to think. For a few seconds or minutes, I also immersed myself in that silence. Honestly, it is something I am not so used to. I come from a country town where people on the street shout even at deep night. And if no one does, there is the nature talking. Moreover, we were in Kyoto, not in a remote temple somewhere deep in the mountains. About 30 meters as the crow flies separated us from

Donguri-Dori, the road we had traveled only a few minutes earlier. There were cars and people, stores and bars on that street. Is it possible that in that precise moment everyone in the city was silent just so we could enjoy that silence?

Obviously not. It must be part of the magic of the place to have recreated that unnatural silence. Of course, nature has its sounds, and it is not total silence. Hearing allows us to enjoy various things, such as music, the voice of a loved one, the voice of family members. And those voices we always recognize can comfort us. But at the same time, it is the sense that more than others keeps us out of danger. It is the sense that is activated when sight fails to tell us that we our safety is at risk. There in that silence, there are no familiar voices, no music. Only the sound of the wind. And there, in front of that garden, silence takes the form of introspection. Without an external visual or auditory object to turn one's attention to, the focus of thought becomes the voice from within, one's memory, the construction of the simulation of the self in that particular environment. That, at least, is what happened to me. In a study about the interrelationship between nature and silence, Pfeifer, Fiedler and Wittmann (2020) showed that, while silence both indoors and in a natural context is effective in relaxation, in the outdoor condition it is easier to reach a stronger present orientation and a reduced past one. In that moment, it was difficult to realize the geographical place where I actually was. The city seemed like a faraway place. Kyoto is not a chaotic city like Tokyo, Milan, or Taipei. It is formed by a harmonious blend of beige and brown hues, blending with refined shapes, elegant gestures, and quietude. It is an impression perhaps only mine, but it

is a still vivid memory I have of that magnificent city. It seemed that everyone in the city participated in this staging, which only tourists can disturb. As I surely disturbed it with my frantic picture-taking, my wanting to observe and consume the landscape, and asking questions. But even I had to surrender to the silence of the Chōontei. And somehow it was good for me. 'Silence itself is a fertile mode in which the self is enriched and strengthened, the source of that quiet growth in which distortions of the self can be reflected upon and then transformed' (Elson, 2001, p. 351). Perhaps that is the purpose of that garden. The opportunity to close one's eyes, turning away from any visual focus and in the silence of the place, reflect on the distortions of the self, trying to recalibrate them by coming out transformed, if only slightly.

Silence has an important value in Japan. It is practiced in many Zen arts. And these arts, a word that in Japan means both aesthetic arts and crafts, are a part of the country's identity. It does not mean that everyone practices them or follows their principles. But in some contexts, it seems that everyone can embrace the meaning and the practices connected with Zen. One such practice is mu, the void or emptiness with its silence. Another principle is the interconnection between the self and the environment or the universe, where other individuals are also present. I have experienced what I would call mu by practicing karate, taking part in a tea ceremony, or observing an acquaintance practicing ikebana. And in the mu, I felt connected to the other participants, my fellow students or my sensei. In particular, the practice of karate and the words of my sensei, made me better understand the importance of silence, emptiness and interconnection

## Experiencing Silence :

with others. This use of silence also extends to the everydayness of language.

Takie Lebra (1987) explains that the prevalence of silence in Japan relates to individuals' awareness of being interconnected. This factor inhibits vocal self-assertion. There is a polysemic value in silence. It is a value made up of truth, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance. These are values that stand at opposite extremes. Defiant silence is expressive and assertive of the self. Silence as social discretion is useful in gaining social acceptance and pushes the individual to restrain from revealing that internal truth, whether cognitive, moral, or emotional. Lebra explains that 'the Japanese view the person as sharply split into inner and outer parts, and believe that truth lies only in the inner realm as symbolically localized in the heart or belly' (1987, p. 345).

Silence is thus a way of expressing the truth of oneself toward the people with whom one is connected. But in order to express this truth without becoming embarrassed, it is first necessary to know one's own emotions, thoughts, judgments, and perceptions. That is, introspection is necessary to understand if and how this truth can be expressed. Going back to the example of karate and the teaching I received, creating mu and silence is meant to promote an understanding of one's position in relation to the opponent, and to understand what the opponent can do, where he can strike. In short, mu and silence allow at the same time introspection and interconnection with the opponent.

Yet there is also another silence, not unique to Japan, but a product of modernity. This silence stands at the opposite of both the silence I experienced at Kennin-ji and the polysemic silence part

of Japanese communication. First of all because it is not a true silence, as it is not opposite to noise. In fact, it is not an absence of voices or sounds. It is not a silence that helps one to enter in contact with the self in quietness. In my opinion, it does not even allow for interconnectedness. It is a silence made of noise and voices, but these do not help communication. Nor do they allow introspection. It is an egoic and anti-social silence. As in Kennin-ji we can physically find ourselves in an urban area and experience silence. But urban silence is made up of loud noises and continuous voices, never veiled. It is a different silence. We experience it in the invasion of the space by text (Augé, 1995, p. 99), in social atomization, in our feeling alone. We can be surrounded by people talking and still be immersed in silence. And we end up reading voices on a screen instead of hearing them. Reading, however, does not drive away that silence.

This kind of silence does not allow introspection. It does not allow us to find peace, in terms of inner quietness. This kind of silence generates stress. It is a fake silence because it is constantly interrupted by messages, notifications, and pushes. And attention always falls on that noise that pushes us to believe we are lonely people, even when all around us there are thousands of voices. As Sherry Turkle suggests, when we feel lonely and isolated by the real people around us, we search for 'for another hit of what feels like connection' (2011, p. 227). And we need to talk, to communicate. Humans, in general, seek for sociality. We have a bio-cultural need to communicate, to be connected to other people. And spoken words have been the primary tool of communication for a really long time. At Kennin-ji it is different. During the silence, one does not feel alone. The presence of other people around me was

strong. I was part of a group. Apart from Rei, strangers. Yet in those moments, silence was the connecting force between everyone present. Like an unspoken agreement between strangers, no one dared to speak, aware that it would break the enchantment. You do not need to be religious or spiritual, nor do you even need to know a Zen practice to understand the meaning of that silence. There is no need for a conscious analysis of the surroundings. I sit, I close my eyes and I let my mind create a state I call quietness and serenity. Obviously this is a personal emotion, as it is not possible for me to read other people's minds. I do not know what those people feel or how much they know about Zen practices. But what I felt in that moment was a connection, and that required the projection of that feeling of mine onto other people. To feel connected I had to believe that other people were connected to me. Rei confessed to me later that she is not particularly religious. Like many Japanese she visits temples and shrines on special occasions, such as during her freshman year or when some events, such as a college entrance test, require extra help. She too, however, confirmed to me that in that silence she felt happy. I discussed this with her months later, specifically asking if she remembered that day at Kennin-ji and that experience of quietness. The conversation passed from silence to loneliness, as she told me she feels lonely at times, because she communicates with friends through messages, but not actually talking with them. I was of course one of those friends, as most of this communication happened through SMS.

A few years after that experience at Kennin-ji I am now thinking back to how meaningful that experience of silence was. Obviously, I did not learn to meditate

in those few moments of silence, nor did I find satori (enlightenment) in that instant. Yet somehow, every time I pick up the notes of that trip, I cannot help but stop and think back to that silence. Above all, I think about what the fake silence is stealing from us. Technology, in the form of digital communication, robbed from us the necessity of the open-ended conversation. Or, as Turkle suggests, of the courage for this kind of conversation: 'For most purposes, and some-times even intimate ones, they [people] would rather send a text message than hear a voice on the phone or be opposite someone face-to-face (Turkle, 2015, p. 22). I see this lack of face-to-face conversation as a kind of silence, the one I defined as fake. And this silence is definitely not the therapeutic silence that results in introspection. It is about that silence that creates social distance, and at the same time, it keeps people busy with textuality, notifications and noises, and thus does not provide space for communication with oneself. It is only about not communicating with others. It places barriers between ourselves and others. It turns into loneliness, not connections. It ends up generating anxiety and stress. Those notes on silence are important to me, because I, like many, experience fake silence on a daily basis. But the experience at Kennin-ji provided me with a valuable tool to understand that there is good and therapeutic silence. And I believe that silence has transformed me. It was not an immediate change, but with time I learned to keep my phone more off than on, to ask people for meetings rather than discuss by email, even when meetings are just online. I learned to use my voice and ask others to use their voices with me. As a result, I can better manage the open-ended conversations. And most of all, I

## Experiencing Silence :

learned to use those moments of real silence, when there are no noises and no voices, to talk with myself. I wonder if the Chōontei is meant for just this kind of metamorphosis of silence, allowing a person like me, used to connecting silence and loneliness, to understand silence as something positive and to be sought after. Maybe it was my occasion to find out that silence is something that can communicate and create connections, as the garden taught me to close my eyes and just follow my hearing, finding polysemous voices in the pure sound of the silence of a garden.

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