

Sound and Silence: the Vedic perspective

Sound in various forms is used in religious traditions and rituals, eg. the spoken word, chanting, singing hymns, ringing of bells, gongs, cymbals, the rhythmic clapping of hands, etc. The interesting and even surprising fact is that “Sound and Silence” are inseparably bound together even though we think they are different and not directly related. The title “Sound and Silence” is an indicator of the interplay between two things and many other similar examples of interacting pairs can be found in our normal daily experience.

A ‘tree’ is directly enveloped by ‘space’; the ‘tree’ exists in, is permeated by, is supported by ‘space’. But ‘space’ exists prior to, along with and continues after ‘tree’ disappears. A ‘movement’ like dance, is associated with ‘stillness’ which is present prior to, along with and continues after ‘dance’ ends. The ‘boom’ of a bass drum is encapsulated in ‘silence’; the ‘silence’ exists prior to, along with and continues after the ‘boom’ ends. So too with ‘music’ and ‘silence’. A ‘word’ is inseparably related to its silent meaning; the ‘word’ is a symbol or indicator directing us to the ‘meaning’ of the word. The ‘body’ is tangible and is intrinsically bound to the intangible ‘mind’.

Let us call tree, dance, boom, word, body, as the ‘former’ and their counterpart of space, stillness, silence, meaning, mind, respectively, as the ‘latter’. The above experiences show that the ‘former’ and the ‘latter’ are closely related.

The Vedic tradition uses these examples as a basis for enquiry and points out an interesting yet embarrassing corollary about ourselves: we focus on the ‘former’ and overlook, forget, miss or ignore the ‘latter’. The ‘former’ are perceivable and attractive to our senses and we tend to stop with them because they so absorbing, pleasurable and captivating. Think of the sonorous resonance of Beethoven’s symphonies or the beauty of movement in ballet.

A very important point: the ‘former’ are entirely dependent upon the ‘latter’. The ‘former’ *“live and move and have their being”* ... in the ‘latter’. The ‘latter’ are the substrate in which the ‘former’ exist. The presence of the ‘former’, their very existence depends entirely on the ‘latter’ and so have a dependent existence, but the ‘latter’ exist independently of the ‘former’.

The ‘former’ have certain characteristics: they have a boundary, are limited by time and space, are temporary and relative; they do give some satisfaction. But these same characteristics are also the cause for dissatisfaction because by their very nature, they come-and-go, arise and pass away, do not last, are limited, changing, ephemeral. Clinging to them, desiring more and more of them to fulfil oneself, hoping they never end, leads to disappointment, fear, anxiety, depression, ie. suffering.

By contrast, the ‘latter’ seem featureless. What can we directly say or describe about ‘space’ or ‘stillness’ or ‘silence’? Words fail. We are forced to use words which describe objects and then negate the words, when we refer to space or stillness or silence. For example, objects have form and to describe space, we negate ‘form’ with the word ‘form-less’. Similarly with limit-less, change-less, un-moving, etc. The ‘latter’ have characteristics which are diametrically opposite to the ‘former’. These ‘latter’ are always and already existent, present. They do not have a boundary, are bigger, broader, vast, unlimited. They are subtler than our senses and so are easily overlooked.

These comparative examples, like “sound and Silence”, are used by the Vedic tradition to encourage an even deeper enquiry into ourselves. It is the enquiry into that perennial question: “Who am I?” or that dictum: “Know Thyself”.

We currently take ourselves to be ‘person’, myself, me, ‘I’, an individual defined by qualities of our body, mind, possessions, relationships, roles, name, etc. This is perfectly normal. But if we take this to be the ONLY reality of ourselves, we limit ourselves. The examples given earlier show that we

focus on one aspect, the 'former', and overlook and ignore the other, the 'latter'. We do the same with ourselves. We focus on 'person' and miss a deeper dimension to ourselves, our inherent and true nature. Such ignorance is the default condition of human birth.

This other dimension of ourselves, also indicated by the word 'I', is already and always present, here and now. It is vaster, wider, broader, limitless, infinite, boundary-less, formless. Since it is not bound by space and time but is beyond them, this dimension is eternal, unmoving, unchanging. It is the basis, source, substrate or matrix from which our sense of 'person-hood' arises, is sustained by and resolves into at death.

The nature of this formless dimension is pure Presence-of-Being, unconditioned Awareness, complete Fulfillment-Lovingness, called in Sanskrit "Sat-cit-ananda" or in English as "Consciousness". This is the nature of pure Consciousness. The Vedic tradition names it "Brahman" which can be loosely translated as "Divinity". It is also referred to by the word "OM", the primordial word-sound emanating from the Absolute Silence and Stillness of pure Consciousness.

We unknowingly experience this dimension of ourselves every day, not fully but episodically, briefly. It is that inner experience of pure joy we have when we fall in love or hold our newborn in our arms or watch an amazing sunset or the beauty of the night sky or walk in nature or when we feel happy for no obvious reason. We also unknowingly experience it in deep, dreamless sleep and that is why everyone loves sleep.

This dimension is not a concept, not a theory, belief, philosophy, not mystical, not esoteric. It is as plain as daylight. In fact, daylight is another good metaphor. Light is present and enables us to see, but light does not actively participate in our seeing. Its presence allows us to see objects. When we look at an object, do we also recognise the light by which we see the object? Mostly, we do not. So too, with Consciousness.

Do I exist? Yes, I do. Am I present? Yes! I am! This presence of being, the sense of existing, is that dimension. By contrast, when someone dies, we say: "He is not present, not here anymore!" When he is alive, we say: "He is present!" This presence of being is that dimension of Consciousness, here and now.

Do I know? Am I aware? Yes! This awareness is that dimension. By contrast, when we are ignorant, we say: "I do not know!" When we know something, we say: "I know it. I am aware of it!" It is ironic that we can be aware even of our ignorance! We do admit: "I know / am aware that I am ignorant of XYZ! I am aware that I lack knowledge of it!" This awareness is that dimension of Consciousness, here and now.

Do I feel peaceful, fulfilled and loving, even if only occasionally and briefly? Yes! By contrast, when peace, fulfilment and lovingness is absent, we say: "I am anxious, depressed, empty, fearful, angry, etc.!" But when we experience that dimension, we say: "I am at peace. I feel fulfilled and loving." This peace, fulfilment and lovingness is that dimension of Consciousness, here and now.

Consciousness is what we are, here and now. We are not concepts, theories, beliefs or philosophies. We are living, sentient beings. Rather than only 'person', Consciousness is "THAT" which is looking out of our eyes right now reading this article, hearing through our ears, touching through our skin, tasting through our tongue, smelling through our nose, thinking with our mind. Like the example of light, Consciousness enables these actions to happen without participating in any of them.

It is "THAT" which pervades and enlivens, 'powers up', activates and sustains our human form, making it sentient and functioning. All activity occurs in the mind-body because of the presence of Consciousness. We usually use the active voice and say: "I am reading, seeing, tasting, etc." To be

accurate, the passive voice should be used: "Reading is happening through my mind-body because of the presence of Consciousness." By its mere presence, Consciousness vivifies and enables action to happen through the mind-body.

Although experienced occasionally, it is possible to recognise and live from this realisation permanently. We can be aware, peaceful, fulfilled and loving continuously despite change in circumstance. The inevitable duality of life continues unabated. There will always be ups and downs, beginnings and endings, pleasure and pain, success and failure, etc. We can experience them without being identified with them; we remain unchanged in our recognition of the Consciousness we are. This is freedom, liberation.

Our problem is that we have superimposed the sense of 'person' on to this dimension and taken 'person' to be the only reality of ourselves. We overlook this other dimension which is always and already present. Such projecting and overlooking is our fundamental mistake. We have 'expelled' ourselves from our Source. We have 'sold our birthright for a mess of potage'. In Vedic terminology, we are in samsara, the realm of suffering, here and now.

The solution is simple. Recognise this dimension within, live from it and be free, liberated, 'saved'. All it requires is a simple shift in perspective, an alteration in our view-point or what we really are, a change in our paradigm of ourselves.

The recognition of the Consciousness we are, is plain and direct. But because Consciousness is so subtle, beyond our senses for perception and beyond our mind for conceptualisation, we miss it and think it is only 'person' who is present. What is required of us is the direct recognition (re-cognition) of our innate nature which we have ignorantly overlooked. We need to make a distinction between what we have ('person') and what we really are ('Consciousness').

The ability to do so requires training to overcome our ignorance and ingrained mistaken notions, hence the different disciplines used, like study, listening to a teacher, spiritual practices, meditation, etc. In the Vedic tradition, such study and spiritual discipline is called Vedanta. To require training in this area is no different from requiring training for success in any other endeavour in life.

Once acquired, recognition of the pure Consciousness we already are, is immediate, direct and obvious; it is who we are, here and now. With recognition, comes inner Fulfilment, Peace and Lovingness. It is this everyone ultimately looks for in life. What a world it would be if everyone recognised and lived from this dimension of themselves, while using 'person' for transactions with each other in life.

'Sound' arises from, is sustained by and resolves into 'Silence' ... sound and Silence. It is an excellent metaphor for oneself, the interplay of ... 'person' and 'Consciousness' ... here and now.

May all come to this recognition in their lifetime.

OM Shanti Shanti Shanti. Peace.