

Do Thoughts Ever Stop? Bhante Henepola Gunaratana Spring 1997 • Tricycle Magazine

Noble silence is the state of mind where there are no thoughts. The mind is totally silent. But thoughts can be stopped only if we train our mind to do so through correct meditation practice.

I use the phrase "quieting the mind" or "silencing the mind" to mean not having thought in the mind; but this does not mean slowing down the mind like slowing down a body's metabolism during hibernation. It simply means not having thought-creating habits in the mind.

A meditator should begin by paying undivided and uninterrupted attention to one single object without verbalizing the experience in the mind. When you verbalize and conceptualize things, on the one hand you interrupt your attention and on the other you perpetuate your thoughts.

The brain does not manufacture thoughts unless we stimulate it with habitual verbalizing. When we train ourselves by constant practice to stop verbalizing, the brain can experience things as they are. By silencing the mind, we can experience real peace. As long as various kinds of thoughts agitate the brain, we don't experience 100 percent peace.

Peace is not a thought, not a concept; it is a nonverbal experience. One can stay in this peaceful state for up to seven days. But before one attains such a totally peaceful state of mind, one should gradually train oneself to slow down thoughts. Once slowed down, thoughts fade away, and no more new thoughts are fed into the brain.

Even while not meditating, we experience many things—often deeply—for which there are no words. We may try to find a word or a verb for that experience. We may call it intuition. Yet intuitions may arise with no associated words or concepts. You can also listen to sounds without any words arising in the mind. It is said the best way to enjoy music is to listen to music. While hearing music, you listen to the sound without trying to verbalize the sound. Or consider how you listen to a bird's song: you don't verbalize the sound. You may say, "the robin sings like this." But that is your imagination.

This means that even outside of meditation you can experience many very subtle things simply by paying total attention to your senses. Most of the time, we verbalize things after we have experienced them, not while experiencing them. But when you pay total, nonverbal attention to something, you gain concentration that is not possible by verbalizing.

When you experience something, if you don't try to translate the experience into words you simply have the experience, not thoughts, sights, sounds, smells, tastes, touch—they can all be experienced directly without words. When you use words, you block your direct experience of sensory objects. Suppose the color white appears before your eyes. The whiteness reflects on your eyes. The mind knows it as it is. Only if you want to express what you have seen do you really need words. Yet whiteness is not a word, but what it is. Blackness is not a word, but what it is. The same is true for sweetness, bitterness, sourness, toughness, etc.—everything in your experience.

The brain does not manufacture thoughts from nothing. It has to be fed something to use as raw material for manufacturing thoughts. The raw material is what you have fed it in the past. If you do not feed the brain words, if you have trained it to avoid verbalizing, the silence will come.