

# Silence

by Sophia



## WHAT'S COVERED

It is a safe bet to say that most people live fairly noisy lives. This is probably not by choice; it's just a noisy world. How many are accustomed to finding, entering, and understanding silence? Can it serve some purpose? Specifically, this lesson will cover:

1. Zazen
2. Vipassana and Samatha
3. Christian Monastic Traditions

## 1. Zazen

One foundational category in most of the Buddhist lines of teaching is the foundationless notion of sunyata. It's a Sanskrit word that's translated as "emptiness" and "openness." In the context of the many different silent **meditation** practices, you might think of it as the silence of an ontological being.

In the Zen Buddhist tradition, an essential practice is silent meditation called **zazen**. Zazen simply means "seated meditation." There are, however, traditional chants that are often a part of zazen practice.

Saying that the purpose of zazen is to achieve liberation from suffering and thus experience enlightenment is not quite accurate. Zazen practice is characteristically non-conceptual. Applying positive descriptions and attributes to the meditation process, in fact, moves the meditator further into the mental snares that cloud the experience of empty silence.

The Japanese term "mu" describes the emptiness or nothingness. Everything else is a construction of mind and therefore has no ultimate value. Silence is the space where the meditator might experience the purity of emptiness.



### DID YOU KNOW

Frequently, silence accompanies meals. The preparation and clean-up will often only involve necessary speech.

## 2. Vipassana and Samatha

The Samatha technique emphasizes strong concentration of mind, called jhana, focused on the object of meditation itself. The meditator, after achieving some relative state of concentration, will then engage in **Vipassana** meditation.

These two techniques often go together because the clarity of mind that can be reached with Samatha gives insight into the processes of mind and body that are occurring just as they are. Vipassana meditation allows one to see that. Silence supports this process as does a conscious awareness of one's inhalation and exhalation of breath.



### DID YOU KNOW

These two types of meditation don't always go together. There are Buddhist communities that are devoted more exclusively to Vipassana or Samatha techniques.



### TERMS TO KNOW

#### Meditation

A process of mental focus and relaxation, generally involving silence and physical inactivity, whereby an individual attempts to calm the mind, often in order to achieve a more spiritual state of mind or to set aside the cares that impede spiritual contemplation.

#### Zazen

In Zen Buddhism, a sitting meditation that is conducted either in silence or while chanting.

#### Vipassana

A Buddhist meditation technique requiring silence.

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## 3. Christian Monastic Traditions

Christianity also has a long history of monasticism infused with silence in the practice of contemplative prayer. This is one of the first Christian monasteries in Mount Sinai, Egypt, where it is believed that Moses received the Ten Commandments and witnessed God in the burning bush.

This Orthodox monastery, along with the Benedictine monasteries which are Roman Catholic throughout the world, presents the original monastic tradition. In the Middle Ages, other monastic orders emerged, and many of them are still thriving today.

The first monastic orders were Orthodox and Catholic and have a long history and solid, established tradition of **spiritual or monastic silence**, more so than in Protestantism, which didn't emerge until the 16th century.

However, the importance of silence is not unique to Catholicism. It plays a significant role in other elements of religious life for the general community of many traditions both within the broad diversity of Christianity and in other religions as well.

In general, one thing that hasn't changed for most of the orders is the commitment to contemplative life, silent prayer, and work as a means of getting closer to God in this life and the next. Many novices who are beginning to consider their training as a monk will undertake vows of silence, which last for different periods of time depending on the order.

During this period of silence, the novice undergoes profound introspection, perhaps in conversation with God about his or her future life commitment as a monk or a nun. In the silence of religious life, no one is excluded. So the laity are also encouraged to explore their relationship to silence and to God through this silence.



#### TERM TO KNOW

##### **Spiritual or Monastic Silence**

The practice of using silence as a means of prayer or spiritual contemplation, frequently practiced in Roman Catholic monasteries.



#### SUMMARY

This lesson started in Japan with Zen Buddhism and the practice of **zazen**, seated silent meditation. In zazen, silence is a vehicle, a method, and a practice for possibly experiencing emptiness or nothingness. The term that we used was “mu.” You then looked at other traditions and techniques of meditation called the **Vipassana and Samatha**. You also covered **Christian monastic traditions**. Silence is very much a part of monastic life in terms of getting closer to God in this life and the next life.

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