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A Philosophy of Singing

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Silence

As they say, “Silence is golden.” But what has silence to do with singing? Possibly everything, for it is in the silence that the mind should relax the body and allow it to take the breath needed for singing. It is in the quiet place that our power is accessed. This newsletter will try to deal with the reason we have so much difficulty getting into this silence.

“Yesterday a butterfly flew through my open door and fluttered about in my room. Someone caught it and released it outside. It made me think about the life of a butterfly. A butterfly begins as a worm, which moves slowly and can’t see very far. Eventually the worm builds itself a cocoon, and in that dark, quiet space it stays for a long time. Finally, after what must seem like an eternity of darkness, it emerges as a butterfly.

The life history of a butterfly is similar to our practice. We have some misconceptions about both, however. You may imagine, for example, that because butterflies are pretty, then life in the cocoon before they emerge is also pretty. We don’t realize all that the worm must go through in order to become a butterfly. Similarly, when we begin to practice, we don’t realize the long and difficult transformation required of us. We have to see through our pursuit of outward things, the false gods of pleasure and security. We have to stop gobbling this and pursuing that in our shortsighted way, and simply relax into the cocoon, into the darkness of the pain that is our life.”

“Nothing Special” Living Zen Charlotte Joko Beck edited by Steve Smith

One reason we must go into this cocoon is that the world these days is a very noisy place. Being bombarded with sound day and night has become an accepted phenomenon. Only the very explosive sounds seem to attract our attention. If we were to be confronted with total silence, the result would be quite upsetting to our nervous system. We have become so accustomed to sound that when there is none, we suddenly become anxious and turn on the TV or the radio to return to a “normal noise level.” That thing called music is piped into almost everywhere we go. It does tend to keep the noise of human chatter down to a low roar in a restaurant, but it is rather off-putting to hear a 60’s rock and roll tape playing in a Chinese restaurant. Somehow—if you’re paying attention to the tunes—it makes the food taste different. Most consider it a “normal noise level” and are oblivious to it. It seems we have replaced quiet with noise, and we now require it as a must have for our normal comfort zone. Most cannot go about their daily tasks without the aid of earphones, cell phones, or TVs and radios blaring away. We’ve become as wired as the machines.

Getting into this quiet place is indeed quite a challenge. It is building that cocoon and staying there for a long time. The need for it seems to be growing by leaps and bounds, judging by the number of meditation classes and Yoga classes now available. Both deal with the problems caused by this overload of noise. The conscious mind is triggered by outside noise and becomes noisy itself. At this point, we don't even notice that our bodies have tensed up, no matter how slightly. The conscious mind is busy with itself. It can't be bothered about thinking about how tense our body really is. The job is to quiet the noise outside and then attempt to quiet the conscious mind long enough to access our intuitive mind again. The unconscious—the brain—has been forgotten. There is where our real problem solving lies. It's as though the conscious mind is drunk with all this noise and chatter that nothing gets through to our real selves. Our bodies are tense and we don't even breathe. If we continue to surround ourselves with people with noisy minds, it can trigger our own unless we're very vigilant. If we never go inside and find this quiet place inside our own bodies we don't break the old pattern.

In singing, the conscious mind has acquired much information that is really just so much noise anyway. As there is little information needed to sing, our job is to get rid of the noise in our conscious mind that keeps us from it. In other newsletters I have discussed information and knowledge, so now I am talking about why too much information stops the action of singing. Actually, it is stopping our breathing pattern. The noise in our conscious mind—"here comes a long phrase, here comes a high note, here comes a low note, etc., etc.,"—paralyses the body.

There is great movement in silence. In music that silence is a "rest." Probably a better way to state it would be "a relaxation to bring about an inhalation." The word rest implies absence of motion. In singing, however, the exact opposite is true. To allow this relaxation for breath to happen, the body is indeed in motion—every part of it. This relaxation inflates the diaphragm and allows the deepest breath possible, and also the most complete breath possible. The stomach relaxes, the back opens, the ribs swing out to allow space for the diaphragm to expand to its fullest extent. It is a terrifically restful feeling, and yet everything is moving—more than you ever thought. If the vocal mechanism is in place, what stops this wonderful feeling of allowing the body to do its job? You guessed it—instead of the body becoming active for the breath, that noisy mind is busy, busy, busy and fools us into thinking we really took a breath. The body is really paralyzed by the mind. The conscious mind is so addicted to chattering that no messages can get through from the brain to cure the problem. Once in a while a message will get through, and that is the moment we feel at ease, the singing is easy, and the result is our free voice. To quiet that noisy mind takes much discipline. It's like our nasty child who wants to stomp his/her foot if not catered to, so gives up very unwillingly.

Each rest in music is a chance for us to return to this quiet place. Usually the conscious mind is so busy being anxious about the next phrase that it tightens the body and therefore outwits itself. We continue to look for it rather than see it. The mind tries to produce the result, but actually ends up with the result it doesn't want. The rule of thumb should be, "Breathe slowly, sing fast." This will help us establish a new pattern in the brain because the mind is being restrained from jumping ahead before the body has a chance to rest and refresh itself. We begin by allowing a breath, and we end a phrase by allowing a breath. Simple. Each phrase should come from a completely relaxed position—same as dialing a telephone. Some of us still remember those phones. It took a little longer to dial the number, so they came up with a shortcut—just punch the

buttons. Now we don't have to wait for the dial to return to its place of rest before dialing the next digit. Especially in dramatic music, the body must always relax and allow the body to breathe before each phrase. Allow the body to take a complete breath every time—there is no such thing as a catch breath, a big breath, or a half breath. We must go to the bottom of the breath at each rest. This pattern takes time, but must be established to produce great and easy singing. Each rest can seem like an eternity at first because the conscious mind wants to rush ahead, but by establishing this pattern the mind finally stops its activity and allows the body to relax and breathe. Then the rhythm patterns of the music become our breathing pattern. The music shows us what to do if we but quiet that mind and allow the body to function as it was meant to do.

As opposed to the butterfly, the voice emerges in fits and starts. We only get glimpses of our butterfly—the whole voice—from time to time. Sometimes it is so fleeting that we are not even aware that it happened. Often in the Master Classes the listeners will hear it and the singer is still totally in the dark. Only when all the elements of the free voice have been in place for an extended period of time does the singer know how to allow the sound to happen. Our conscious mind is usually busy doing things and that activity pulls us out of the quiet space needed for the voice to emerge. Knowledge of how to sing only happens when the quiet of mind is maintained. Singing requires concentration to repeat the coordination each and every time.

Most of the singing we are hearing these days is based on this paralysis of the body by the mind. It is only when we silence the noise of the conscious mind that true singing can begin. Until then it is simply mechanical and manipulative. Since we have become addicted to so much noise, we are not aware that the singing we are hearing is noisy, coming from a noisy mind and a tense body. When we are asked to quiet our own mind and open our bodies to breathe we become frustrated and angry. Now we are really in a predicament because we become confused. It is the ego's way of fighting back. Until we give over to our unconscious mind, no revelations will happen and we stay in this confused state. The conscious mind now becomes hyperactive, and completely blocks any progress. At this juncture, it is better to stop practicing and have a cup of tea. Chill out! Otherwise the frustration for the conscious mind is too great. We are trying to force the butterfly out before it is fully formed, instead of staying inside the quiet of the cocoon and allowing it to emerge.

In a recital, the most important pieces are the first and last ones. In a phrase of music, the same holds true of the words. If the first word is correct the others can follow—vowel through vowel, not vowel to vowel. When starting a phrase, the conscious mind wants to jump in and help us breathe, pronounce the first word, and hold the breath to feel secure. The mind also wants to dictate how much air to use for each phrase. In great singing, we must go into that quiet place, still the mind from its activities, and allow the **body** to become active—expanding everywhere to allow breath into the body. The music tells us how much air to use. This “deposit of air,” as Caballe calls it, opens the vocal cords, allowing them to relax and drop, inflates the diaphragm to the bottom of our bodies, and allows air in to activate the pineal gland, letting enlightenment in and this gives access to the brain. We have bypassed the conscious mind! Now we can deal with the phrase because we are totally relaxed and in a totally different mental state. We have accessed our intuitive mind. Take the breath low and leave it low. Don't tense the body to move

the air to sing— that’s pushing. Allow the air to move away from the cords and set them vibrating. By vacuuming the air away the diaphragm is engaged for singing.

The conscious mind is furious! How dare the body know how to work without me! I’m in control of this voice! On and on it resists! It’s furious it can’t push that butterfly out of the cocoon. Unfortunately we remain the worm, squiggling around, not giving in to the quietness needed to emerge as a butterfly. The shorter word for it is ego. The ego does not want to let go. It takes a long time to surrender to this quiet time of the mind. Some metaphysicians have named this overactive mind the “race mind.” As the mind races around, we are more and more cut off from our real selves. Problems, small *or* large, cannot be solved by that little mind we are so loathe to abandon. Instead, we often fill it with more useless information to pacify its hyperactivity. We can know all the correct information intellectually, but if the body is not included in the equation we never become connected and move into knowledge. Only the higher mind can do that.

The conscious mind’s insistence on figuring out how to sing can only be stopped by going into our quiet place and “seeing” how the mechanism works. Practicing can be done mentally just as efficiently as physically. Doing endless series of exercises without engaging the brain is useless. If the brain knows how to do the exercises properly, then one can sing the piece of music properly. When one starts to sing a piece of music, however, the conscious mind begins to add things and becomes very active. It’s trying to be more expressive, more musical, more dramatic, more diction conscious, and we are sabotaging the music itself with this hyperactivity of the mind. We’re back in the race mind. Instead of “being” the music, we start “doing” the music. The composer has already written everything down on the page if we would only bring our attention there. Instead, the mind wiggles around like the worm instead of staying quiet and letting the butterfly emerge on its own accord. This wiggling causes the body to tense up. It’s actually fighting itself, but it’s back in control! Now our ego is happy again, and woe betide anyone who wants to stop this control.

This article was in the TV Guide, month unknown, probably April or May, 2001. The article called “wit craft” was written by Johanna Schneller in an article on actress Emma Thompson.

“Six years ago, Emma Thompson sat in a London recording studio watching an orchestra perform the score for “Sense and Sensibility,” a film she starred in and adapted from the Jane Austen novel. She observed how the musicians sat around reading until the moment their conductor tapped his baton. How they then put down their tea, picked up their instruments, and without any histrionics, played heartbreakingly beautiful music.

Thompson turned to the film’s producer, Lindsay Doran, and said, “That’s how art should be. It should go on in the midst of life and not be put on a pedestal. It should be what you do between sips of tea.”

“wit craft” Johanna Schneller TV Guide, ?, 2001

Because the singer *is* his/her instrument, it is easy to allow these histrionics to take over. Now we are stuck with the singer’s personality, and are impressed with this wild energy that does not serve the music, and sooner or later takes its toll on the instrument itself. The art of music has

been lost and replaced with calculated noise that entertains but does not elevate. Now we have the “singing-actress” which is neither fish nor fowl. Art is neither good nor bad—it simply *is*. The power of the voice that thrills us is coming from that dark, quiet place. When the worm stops contracting and wiggling around and rests in the cocoon for “what must seem like an eternity of darkness,” the inner expansion can take place and the butterfly emerges. If we embrace more and more information, we are adding more and more noise to the conscious mind. We are headed in the wrong direction. The ego is being served but the art isn’t. We can begin to detect this in performers by simply watching their body language. All the histrionics going on inside manifest themselves in the body. If they are wiggling around, the chest heaving, gasping for air, turning purple in the face, it should give us some clue that something is amiss. With all those histrionics going on we sometimes forget the correct sound of a great voice. We’re watching, not listening. We’re seeing, not hearing.

Great art comes from this quiet place. We must get into that quiet place on a daily basis, and shut out the noise we are surrounded by. Newspapers and radio and TV news reports can trigger us big time. Even our friends can trigger us if they are in their race mind. They can agitate our thoughts without us even knowing how that tenses our bodies, even on a small scale. We must know how to get in touch with our higher mind on command if there is any thought of becoming an artist. How about the art of living? Our bodies are tense without even being aware of it. How we sing is how we live. If we are constantly running from one place to another, from one thought to another, from one opinion to another, the singing reflects it. You can hear the opposite of this when you hear a great singer. They have a quiet respect for their art. They stay present to and focused on each phrase they are singing. They know how to access that creative side of themselves. They are not hysterical before a performance because they have done the quiet work in the cocoon. Fear does not stop their breathing. Now the butterfly can take wing. Our goal is to be in that same state of mind when we sing. By making a conscious effort to live that way as well puts us way ahead of the game. In this space the transformation will happen. It’s oftentimes not so pleasant to stay quietly in the cocoon, but it is the only way to succeed in this process. Without an awareness of silence, and the dedicated effort to quiet our mind, we can never experience this transformation in our lives. Silence gives us these golden moments. The more we relax into it, the richer we become.