

MAKE A JOYFUL NOISE

How I Learned to Meditate amidst the Mayhem

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Do you imagine the universe is agitated?

Go into the desert at night and look out at the stars.

This practice should answer the question.

—Lao-Tzu

From childhood on, noise had been a problem for me. Actually, “problem” seemed an inadequate word to describe my inability to deal with unpleasant sounds. Because I needed to live in a very loud (and getting louder all the time) world, I learned to fake it.

When I was a beginning teacher, the deafening screams of the students in the schoolyard at recess became a stretching on the rack for the nerve endings in my ears, so acute and sensitive is my hearing. Because I loved those kids, their joyous exuberance was something I simply learned to tolerate, often with the dubious aid of a daily dose of aspirin.

I could go on with countless and often bizarre instances of my trials and tribulations with unruly sounds, or even natural ones, like the crunch of someone chewing, which tested my abilities at patience and decorum beyond all reason. Often, despite my best efforts, I literally had to leave a room or use earplugs or any number of schemes and devices to manage my unfortunate sensitivity to sound.

However, in one area of my life I ran into an insurmountable roadblock: when I first became a student of yoga and began meditation practice. All the right steps were taken. I slowed my breath, counted the exhalations, finally descending into the Silence in which I was so grateful to swim, and then any clamor, no matter how insignificant, would send me crashing back to the world in a furious wave of anger.

The precious minutes that had been set aside for meditation were wasted on calming myself down, all the while decrying my inability to ignore the din, with an equal vehemence aimed at its source. I tried to let the sounds pass like birds or clouds against the backdrop of a big blue-sky mind, but it simply would not work.

That is, until I realized that, in fact, I was meditating very successfully on one thing: the noise! It also came to my attention that the increasingly rowdy world we were now all forced to tolerate had become a dilemma for many more people. This discovery inspired me to write a poem:

Where Will It End?

The neighbors are at war.
It all started with a barking dog
(God spelled backwards)
Someone could not stand the howl, yip and yelp
so they put up a wind chime in an attempt
to feng shui it away but the tinkling annoyed
a third party who enlisted their teenage son
who proceeds to play his drums all Sunday
in a manic rat-a-tat-tat pattern
causing the guy next door
to go wild, fire up his chain saw
and flatten a stand of trees.
Then, silence, until the empty sound
of a leafless breeze reaches the chimes
setting off the dog . . .

I read and reread my poem, feeling I had captured the beginnings of a burgeoning cultural crisis, particularly for tightly packed urban dwellers like myself. More importantly, during this editing process, the light of a great paradox became clear to me: the very things that cause us pain are the paving stones on the road to our liberation. The cacophony keeping me from the bliss of a tranquil mind provided both the motivation and focus necessary to learn how to meditate and thus get in touch with my Higher Self.

It was around that time I read about a particular meditation technique called “Developing the Witness,”

whereby one is present in the moment to everything that is going on. It did not matter whether it was a bodily ache, an annoying thought, or, of course, the symphony of a garbage truck rumbling by on the street below, replete with squeaking brakes and crashing cans. As I began to note and name what was occurring—the cramping of my leg, a tickle at the end of my nose, the roar of a jet overhead, some strident chatter wafting in the window from a passerby on a cell phone—I could actually sit more benevolently with these discomforts by observing them in a neutral way.

I did not need to cling to the noise or whatever interference I became aware of, did not need to develop it in my mind. Feelings would arise, and I could simply be with them in the now, without attachment. I became the witness. As I once heard it said, I could “leave the risings in the risings.” The objective nature of the practice did wonders for me, bestowing a new and welcome inner repose, but I still had a long way to go. It was one thing to achieve a detached state in the privacy of my cross-legged posture at home during practice and quite another to do it out in the workaday world.

I had begun to tame my mind and along with it accommodate myself more easily to intrusive noise; somehow my heart lagged behind. Still, synchronicities now started arriving more frequently in my life. While introducing me to Self, my ongoing meditation practice also made me less preoccupied with disruptive ego-driven thoughts and more aware of intuitive feelings. These pointed me toward the unknown, toward opportunities for growth I might have missed before.

On vacation in a small lake community in Connecticut, I urged my husband to stop our car to browse through a book sale at a lovely old church. As I perused the rows of books, my eye was caught by an unassuming pamphlet describing various ways to develop a joyful heart. “OK,” I thought, “this one’s for me.” During the rest of our stay, the booklet remained packed away with

other mementos of our trip. I got around to picking up my little treasure about a week later. Back in the city and annoyed by some inconsiderate new neighbors, I randomly opened to a page.

It described a practice called *metta*, or loving-kindness meditation. I have learned various versions of it since then, but this simple one began by visualizing, in your heart center, an image of yourself and tenderly holding it in your heart while repeating, “May I be well, may I be happy, may I be filled with loving-kindness.” You can then, in turn, place your loved ones in your heart, do the same for each, progressing eventually to someone with whom there is conflict, and expand your compassionate heart even to them. In go my noisy neighbors!

I wish I could tell you that I was miraculously able to spread the love that had been radiating through me at the beginning of my metta practice to these boisterous folks immediately, showering the Godseed within their hearts with loving-kindness blessings. Alas, that day and very many to follow, I had no luck. However, I am persistent, like seed that grows in the womb of the earth, thrusting its way through frozen ground to one day bloom in spring.

The desire to make peace with my intense noise sensitivity gave me a goal: to have a tranquil center no matter how intrusive the world, no matter how loud. Out of this particular darkness, I welcomed the light of loving-kindness and compassion into my life, invited it to purify my intolerance to noise and those that made it. As the grain of sand irritates the oyster to create a pearl, so my practice transformed my noise sensitivity.

This did not happen overnight, nor even over weeks or months. Even now, I experience difficult days. However, meditation is a patient teacher, and gently things began to change. Gradually, gratefully, I uncovered the secret passage to an open heart. This is the prize beyond compare that meditation bestows on its faithful.



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