



The quiet revolution

If silence is indeed golden, how can city dwellers get some of the glow?

Words: Sue White

Big-city life offers many glittering promises: many of us anticipate that we'll be living in stunning warehouse conversions and have interesting careers and social calendars filled with memorable nights out. But if that warehouse is in an industrial area where trucks thunder past day and night, the high-flying job is downtown with jackhammers relentlessly pounding outside, and nightlife involves shouted conversations over the din of a fabulous new cocktail bar, an otherwise exciting cosmopolitan life can be so noisy that even a sliver of silence seems like an unattainable luxury.

For brain researcher Rick Van Der Zwan, noise is more than just an annoying by-product of city living. "Human beings are wired up to react to noise," he says, noting that it's the unusual noises our brains are most programmed to notice. While you

may do your best to switch off if you live under a flight path, any sound louder than the typical conversation level (60 or 70 decibels) can be problematic. "If everything goes quiet or if there are very loud sounds, there's a very strong, unconscious cue that causes you to act. To have those noise levels constantly means the monitoring for unusual sounds takes more effort, as it gets to a stage where, for your brain, it is always attracting attention. [For the brain] that is fairly stressful."

Deanna Tomerini, a lecturer at Griffith University's School of Environment, agrees: "Leading noise researchers agree that noise exposure can have detrimental

and measurable effects on human health." The effects themselves are wide and varied: noise affects both our physiological and cardiovascular systems, as well as disrupting much-needed sleep and interfering with communication.

Surrounded as we are by endless noise in our daily lives, it's no wonder that retreats and meditation courses are increasing in popularity. At the Vipassana Meditation Centre in the New South Wales Blue Mountains, around 1,000 people a year attend 10-day retreats. It's not easy: participants spend the duration of the program in silence and meditate for nine or 10 hours every day. "The first three days is about how to keep the mind on something as simple as the breath, and very patiently learning and training the mind to stay with that," says Anna Adams, one of the many volunteers who run the centre. "Silence is a very big part of it, because all the chattering and talking disturbs the mind so much. You're starting to learn the nature of the mind and body relationship. As the mind calms, you make clearer decisions and you're a nicer person to be around."

Adams says people from all walks of life take Vipassana: it's so popular that "Doing fine, doing Vipassana" bumper stickers are now spotted on BMWs and clapped-out Kombi vans alike. But regardless of whether the participant is a student, executive or fashion buyer, if they come to Vipassana straight from a hectic daily life, the most common reaction, according to Adams, is simply exhaustion: "Suddenly you discover how tired you really are. When all that busyness is taken away, and you realise nobody is going to ring you for the next nine days, the avalanche of tiredness hits."

Adams says that as the 10-day period continues, participants begin to feel energised. One participant, Sydney arts administrator Michele McDonald, agrees, saying: "After 10 days I definitely felt more energised, clearer and grounded." Long-term is more of a challenge. "Of course, when you get back into the real world it's easy to slip back into bad habits and stop practising every day," McDonald adds. "I thought afterwards that I would like to do it once a year, but of course I haven't done it since."

My own last attempt was in an Indian ashram that offered a week-long introductory course of yoga and meditation. To



Left: antique alabaster Buddha, \$995, from Ondene. Above: Durance incense, \$25. Catherine Memmi candles, \$79 each.

enhance the experience, the practice of silence was recommended until lunchtime. Of course, in the early mornings silence was easy to adhere to. After emitting a soft moan upon hearing the daily 5.30am wake-up bell, I soon reverted to mute, and the three-hour long morning yoga and meditation program provided a welcome opportunity for quiet introspection. But as the day progressed, holding my tongue proved more difficult. Eating breakfast with people from across the world without speaking, for instance, was tricky. Walking the ashram grounds in meditative quiet with my new friends was even tougher. We had dozens of thoughts to share, and suppressing them until lunchtime proved near impossible for almost everyone. Despite the best silent intentions, by the time we were lazing by the clear cool river in the Indian heat, thoughts, comments and the sheer desire to speak would bubble up and out.

But as the days passed, the peace eventually lulled me towards a quieter state of being. Even though I only achieved complete silence until lunchtime on a few days, I began enjoying this quieter world.

Finally, the practice of gently encouraging my mind to take a break from its chattering thoughts was slowly starting to stick. When the time arrived to re-enter the throngs of the Indian crowds, the sudden noise seemed a stark contrast from the inner quiet I had worked so hard to cultivate.

“It’s a wonderful thing to discover that your inner world is a resource that you can learn to draw upon”

For author and columnist Stephanie Dowrick, the noise we should be paying most attention to is the noise in our minds. “Internal noise is so debilitating – more debilitating than external noise, actually. Lots of people go on a holiday looking for peace and quiet, but they take their minds with them. Sometimes the external peace and quiet brings them peace of mind, but sometimes it doesn’t.”

So whether we’re bogged down in our daily lives, or simply not ready for a big stint of quiet, Dowrick says there are lots of things we can do to taste inner peace. “If you can have internal peace of mind, you can have it

anywhere – at the bus stop or in a traffic jam, if you practise a little bit.” Dowrick says we are not always comfortable with being silent. “We’re afraid if we give ourselves a little bit of space, all that we’ll feel is loneliness or isolation. It’s very understandable. That’s why it’s a wonderful thing to discover that your inner world is actually a resource that you can learn to draw upon bit by bit.” In her book *Choosing Happiness* (Allen & Unwin) she suggests as positive choices meditation, journal writing, gardening, inspirational reading, walking, listening to quiet music or just sitting and taking in the present moment. “The time you give to ‘being’,” says Dowrick, “could be the most important investment you make each day.” ■

LOOKING FOR PEACE AND QUIET

Vipassana centres teach this ancient meditation technique in 10 days of silence. Programs run from 4.30am until around 10pm, and all courses run by donation – simply contribute what you can afford. For more information, visit www.dhamma.org.au. The Brahma Kumaris’s World Spiritual University is a UN-affiliated organisation that offers meditation programs and short retreats across Australia. All programs are by donation. See www.brahmakumaris.com.au.