

From Monkey Mind to Inner Silence: What could permanent loss of inner speech in meditators tell us about its purpose?

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The *Patañjalayogaśāstra* states that “the purpose of yoga is to stop the turnings of the mind”. Similar aims for meditation are found in other historical texts such as the *Haṭha Yoga Pradīpikā* and the Buddhist Pāli Canon, whilst in contemporary contemplative practices the idea that one should quiet the “monkey mind” is widespread. Given what we know about the human mind today, it is probable that these “mind turnings” refer to inner speech. Modern accounts suggest some long-term meditators have indeed been able to achieve a silencing of their inner speech as a permanent effect of their practice.

However, the cognitive sciences do not necessarily agree with these traditions that inner speech is unhelpful chatter and best abandoned. Despite the centrality of inner speech to the internal experience of most humans, it is still not well understood (Fernyhough, 2016), but its usefulness is generally assumed. Suggested functions for it include a means for conscious reasoning, forming memories or allowing different brain areas to communicate with each other (Langland-Hassan & Vicente, 2018). If that is the case, perhaps meditators are actually harming themselves by eradicating it. If they are not, however, it could overturn the current scientific assumption of utility. Either way, the experiences of meditators present a new source of evidence in a field that often struggles to answer questions about interior phenomena.

This paper will take an interdisciplinary approach, examining canonical texts, modern accounts of meditation experience and existing research within the cognitive sciences. It will openly invite discussion around the validity of combining these interdisciplinary methods in this manner. Ultimately, it will lay out compelling evidence that permanent loss of inner speech is a genuine phenomenon and explore the implications of this for our understanding of the operation of the conscious mind and the purpose of meditation.

Bio:

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Martha completed a 200 hours Yoga Teacher Training in 2016 in Nepal and was left with more questions than answers. She briefly taught yoga before discovering the SOAS MA in Traditions of Yoga and Meditation, which she did over 3 years from 2017-2020 and was awarded a distinction. She was also coordinator for the SOAS Centre of Yoga Studies from 2018-2020. Under the banner of IntoYoga, she has recently begun running small-scale yoga studies workshops on the Isle of Wight.

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