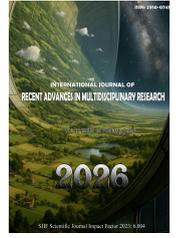




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RESEARCH ARTICLE

BEYOND WORDS: EXPLORING RAMANA MAHARSHI'S METHOD OF SILENCE

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the central role of silence (mouna) in the philosophy and spiritual practice of Sri Ramana Maharshi. Unlike many modern religious teachers who relied primarily on doctrinal exposition or ritual instruction, Ramana Maharshi upheld silence not merely as the absence of speech but as the very nature of the Self and the highest mode of spiritual transmission. The study explores how silence functions simultaneously as ontology, method, and realization in his teaching. It analyses his understanding of the 'I-thought' as the root of ego-consciousness and explains how the cessation of this thought reveals pure awareness, which he identifies as the silent Self. The paper further investigates the epistemological implications of his view, particularly his critique of conceptual and subject-object knowledge, emphasizing that true knowledge arises only in non-dual silence. Attention is also given to the role of silence in devotion, worship, initiation (diksha), and sat-sanga, demonstrating how silent presence operates as a transformative spiritual force independent of verbal instruction or physical proximity. By situating silence as the highest form of grace and teaching, the paper argues that Ramana Maharshi presents a radical reinterpretation of spiritual communication in which silence is both the path to Self-realization and its ultimate fulfillment.

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INTRODUCTION

Sri Ramana Maharshi stands as one of the most distinctive spiritual figures of modern Indian thought, primarily because of the central role he assigned to silence (mouna) as both the essence of spiritual realization and the most effective means of its transmission. Unlike many religious teachers who relied on discourse, doctrinal exposition, or ritual instruction, Ramana Maharshi demonstrated through his life that silence itself could function as a complete and transformative teaching. From the earliest stage of his life at Arunachala, he spoke very little, yet those who came into his presence often experienced a profound inner change. This influence did not depend on intellectual understanding or emotional persuasion; rather, it arose naturally through the silent power of his realized state. Even when he later answered questions and gave verbal guidance, he consistently emphasized that silence remained his highest and most direct teaching, while words were offered only as a concession to those who were unable to grasp the truth inwardly. In Ramana Maharshi's philosophy, silence is not to be understood merely as the absence of speech or outward activity. He used the term mouna to indicate the true nature of the Self. For him, "Your silence will have more effect than your words or deeds. That is the development of will-power. Then the world becomes the Kingdom of Heaven, which is within you."¹ Silence is the state beyond thought,

language, and conceptualization. It is a condition of complete stillness and clarity in which the mind no longer projects distinctions or dualities. He stated that: "That state which transcends speech and thought is mouna; it is meditation without mental activity. Subjugation of the mind is meditation; deep meditation is eternal speech. Silence is ever-speaking; it is the perennial flow of 'language'. It is interrupted by speaking; for words obstruct this mute language. Lectures may entertain individuals for hours without improving them. Silence, on the other hand, is permanent and benefits the whole of humanity. By silence, eloquence is meant. Oral lectures are not so eloquent as silence. Silence is unceasing eloquence. It is the best language. There is a state when words cease and silence prevails."² According to Ramana Maharshi, when the 'I-thought', which is the root of the ego, does not arise, what remains is pure awareness. This awareness is the Self, and its essential nature is silence. In this silent state, there is no separation between God, the individual soul, and the world. These distinctions arise only when the mind becomes active and turns outward. Thus, silence is not something newly attained but the natural state that is revealed when ignorance ceases. From this standpoint, Ramana Maharshi regarded all forms of objective and intellectual knowledge as inherently limited. Conceptual knowledge depends upon the division between subject and object, knower and known. While such knowledge may be useful in practical life, it cannot reveal the

ultimate truth. True knowledge is direct and non-dual; it arises only in silence, where the mind has ceased to function as an instrument of division. For Ramana Maharshi, therefore, silence itself is perfect knowledge, whereas words and concepts merely point toward it without ever fully capturing it. Silence also plays a crucial role in Ramana Maharshi's understanding of worship and devotion. He rejected the idea that spiritual life depends primarily on external rituals, ceremonies, or formal practices. While such practices may have preparatory value, they do not constitute true worship in the highest sense. True worship is *manasika-puja*, or mental worship, which consists in abiding silently as the Self. When the mind withdraws from external objects, gives up all attachments, and rests in its source, this state itself becomes silence. Such silence is not passive but intensely alive; it is devotion free from ego and desire. In this sense, silence is both devotion and liberation. Bondage arises when the mind forgets the Self and identifies with the body and world, while liberation consists in remaining firmly established in silent self-awareness.

Although Ramana Maharshi was always willing to respond to sincere questions, he repeatedly stated that silence was far more effective than speech. His silent teaching worked without effort or deliberate intention. Instead of instructing seekers in methods to discipline or control the mind, his presence itself induced stillness. Many seekers reported that merely sitting quietly in his presence brought about a spontaneous calming of thoughts. Some even attained Self-realization without receiving any verbal instruction at all. This form of teaching belongs to an ancient Indian tradition, which Ramana Maharshi himself acknowledged. He frequently referred to Dakshinamurti, the silent form of Shiva, who transmitted knowledge to the four sages without speaking a single word. For Ramana Maharshi, silence represented the highest form of initiation (*diksha*), superior to initiation by words, touch, or glance, because it worked directly at the level of being rather than through the intellect. A further important aspect of Ramana Maharshi's teaching is his insistence that the Guru's silent influence is not limited by physical distance. According to him, one need not be physically present near a realized sage in order to benefit from the Guru's grace. What matters is inward attention. This inward association is known as *sat-sanga*, which literally means association with truth or being. While *sat-sanga* is often interpreted as physical proximity to a saint, Ramana Maharshi emphasized that mental contact is more powerful and more essential. By turning the mind inward toward the Self or toward the Guru, the seeker comes into direct contact with this silent influence. Through such association, worldly attachments gradually weaken, latent mental tendencies are destroyed, and the mind becomes still. In this stillness, liberation is attained even while living in the world.

Ramana Maharshi also offered a radical reinterpretation of preaching and spiritual instruction. He questioned the common assumption that teaching requires public speaking or elaborate explanation. True teaching, he explained, is the direct communication of knowledge, and such communication takes place most effectively in silence. Speech arises only after the ego and thoughts have appeared, which means that words are already far removed from the original source of truth. Silence, by contrast, emerges directly from that source. For this reason, Ramana Maharshi described silence as 'over-speaking', while spoken words interrupt this deeper and more subtle form of

communication. What cannot be understood through years of discussion may sometimes be grasped instantaneously in silence, because silence addresses the root of individuality itself. It was stated by T. M. P. Mahadevan & G. V. Saroja as: "Silence is the universal language where there is no thought, but one understand the other. Silence is the over-speaking perennial flow of language; words interrupt and obstruct this mute language."³ In this context, Ramana Maharshi clarified the nature of grace and the role of the Guru. Grace is not something newly given or transferred from one person to another. It already exists as the Self. God, Guru, grace, and the Self are not separate entities but different names for the same reality. The Guru does not create realization but removes ignorance by dissolving the sense of individuality. Silent initiation works precisely in this way, by undermining the ego and establishing the seeker in non-dual awareness. Other forms of initiation depend on a subject-object relationship and therefore remain secondary to silence, which transcends all duality.

Ramana Maharshi also emphasized that the Guru is not the physical body. Even after the disappearance of the Guru's body, the Guru's influence continues, because the Guru is identical with the Self. Physical closeness may assist the seeker in the early stages, particularly in removing doubts, but ultimately realization depends on inward turning and self-abidance. Through continued association with realized sages, ignorance gradually dissolves, confusion ends, and the ever-present Self becomes clearly known. The connection between silence and Self-realization becomes especially clear in Ramana Maharshi's analysis of the mind. When the mind turns outward, the body, the world, and the sense of a separate 'I' arise together. The seer, the seen, and the act of seeing appear simultaneously, revealing how the mind creates multiplicity through ignorance. When the mind turns inward, however, it begins to dissolve. Abiding in the Heart, it merges with the Self, and realization occurs in silence. Self-realization is complete surrender, in which the mind subsides entirely into its source, leaving no trace of individuality. For this reason, a realized sage is called a *mouni*, one who lives in silence. This silence is not emptiness but fullness; it is the plenitude of being beyond all expression. For him "through constant enquiry one should make the mind stay in its source, without allowing it to wander away and get lost in the mazes of thought created by itself. All other disciplines such as breath-control and meditation on the forms of God should be regarded as auxiliary practices. They are useful so far as they help the mind to become quiescent and one-pointed. For the mind that has gained skill in concentration Self-enquiry becomes comparatively easy. It is by ceaseless enquiry that the thoughts are destroyed and the Self realised – the plenary Reality in which there is not even the 'I'-thought, the experience which is referred to as 'Silence'."⁴

Ramana Maharshi taught primarily through this living silence. Words were useful for beginners who were still strongly identified with the body and mind, but mature seekers received knowledge directly through his presence. His silent gaze and still being often awakened deep understanding without the need for explanation. Silence alone is capable of expressing non-duality, because non-dual truth cannot be grasped by language or thought. According to Mungala Venkataramiah, "Though he remains silent like one devoid of learning, yet his supineness is due to the implicit duality of the *vaikharivak* (spoken words) of the Vedas; his silence is the

highest expression of the realised non-duality which is after all the true content of the Vedas.”⁵This is why silence is said to be more powerful than all scriptures. True knowledge arises not through accumulation of concepts but through the disappearance of the ego. In conclusion, silence (mouna) occupies a central and unifying position in the philosophy of Sri Ramana Maharshi. It is the nature of the Self, the highest form of teaching, the purest mode of worship, the deepest expression of devotion, the most powerful initiation, and the state of liberation itself. While words may guide the seeker toward truth, silence alone reveals it directly. Through silence, the ego dissolves, the mind becomes still, and the seeker abides in the reality of the Self. Thus, in Ramana Maharshi’s teaching, silence is both the path to realization and the final fulfillment of spiritual life.

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