

My day of silence

Now I love to talk. I'm a communicator. Talking is what I do. I like to laugh and chat and tell jokes. Anyone who comes to my yoga classes will know that at some point I'll start talking about Bake off, Game of Thrones or whatever else comes into my head! My volume is usually set to 10, or even 11 - think Spinal Tap

The idea of me being quiet for a day was met with mirth and incredulity from my family and friends, with a lot of laughter and ribbing at my expense. It is also the thing I have been asked about so I decided to share my experience with you all.

I've just spent a week at Oxford University at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre Summer School – Investigating Mind without Losing Heart; Mindfulness, Fragility and Compassion with Chris Cullen, Melanie Fennell, Willem Kuyken and Mark Williams.

The fourth day was a silent practice day – the idea of a day of silence was fairly horrifying for me and to be honest I'd almost decided to bail out by first morning break before I even started. Even though I am a yoga teacher, I'm not a great meditator and I've always struggled to quieten my mind. I went into the day with no expectations and an open mind but was already looking forward to skiving off and going shopping in Oxford city centre. Because basically I don't do quiet.

The day was led by two experts in the field of mindfulness and MBCT (mindfulness based cognitive therapy) Chris Cullen and Mark Williams. Chris is a teacher at the Oxford Mindfulness Centre, co-founded the Mindfulness in Schools Project and teaches mindfulness courses for MP's in Parliament and has a psychotherapy practice in Oxford. Mark Williams is Emeritus Professor of Clinical Psychology, University of Oxford, and was Founding Director of the Oxford Mindfulness Centre. With colleagues John Teasdale (Cambridge) and Zindel Segal (Toronto) he developed Mindfulness-based Cognitive Therapy.

We were told how the day would run and to 'surf the urge' to use our phones (which of course were switched off) and slow down the word count in our minds. The mantra for the day if one was needed was, 'What is this?' and we were encouraged to enjoy the moments of peace and stillness. We settled in with a seated guided meditation and then lying down for a 40 minute body scan. So far so good. Then we wandered outside for some mindful movement – some gentle stretching in the sunshine. Back inside for another seated guided meditation, followed by a half hour break for refreshments and of course no talking.

I was enjoying the day even though I've always struggled with meditation and having a busy, chatty mind, but I decided to give it til lunchtime before I went off to shop up a storm. More seated guided meditation, then mindful walking for about 15 minutes outside which was about finding your own track and then walking for about 10 steps then turn around and walk back, and repeat. I spotted a sculpture of a little owl up in the tree as well as becoming very aware of the smells of the trees and the grass.

Another longer seated guided meditation for about 25 minutes and then some journal writing before off for a 90 minute lunch break.

The staff were aware what was going on so they didn't think we had all been hit by a zombie apocalypse. No sitting with my new pals Ingela and Jackie, I walked into the dining hall and noticed that Ingela has sat somewhere different (we creatures of habit had sat in the same seats for the last 3 days with each other) and I also went and sat somewhere else too. With my back to the room and hunched over my food reading my book, I was totally miffed and appalled when someone sat down and said hi. What? Seriously?? I had a flash of indignation that she had 'broken the code'. That poor lady – habit to sit down and be polite and say hi to the person opposite you - she was mortified and spoke no more.

That was when it hit me that I was really enjoying not having to be 'social'. It was a relief to not have to make eye contact with anyone if I didn't want to. Not have to make social niceties or exchange chit chat with anyone. It was fantastic! I then went off to my favourite new coffee shop, Brew, and broke the code. "Large skinny latte to go." I then carried on and looked in a lovely flower shop, just smiling at the staff and really enjoying taking in the smells and sights of the flowers, potted trees and succulents. I decided that I was really quite enjoying myself and that I would see if I could make it through the afternoon.

Back to my seat for a 35 minute loving kindness guided meditation – this was the only time during the day that I thought, 'I'm getting a bit bored of this now.' The thought lasted for approximately 60 seconds and then I was totally absorbed in the meditation again. Back outside for another mindful walking session when this time I walked around the grounds of St Hughs College taking in the buildings and flowers in the gorgeous gardens, the sun on my skin and the wind on my face. I was realising that I wasn't tired at all, that I was feeling more calm than I had done in forever and was relishing this freedom of non communication. Then the ideas started flowing.

Another 15 minute seated meditation, mostly in silence, and then I sat and journalled through the next refreshment break – ideas for retreats, my classes, new workshops, retreat content Out it all came.

After the break we were told to journal or sit in stillness then we would be coming out of the silence. Not going to lie, I was not happy about this. I didn't really want to start talking again. At this point I wondered who am I – talking is what I do? We got into pairs and sat side by side, shoulder to shoulder but facing in opposite directions and one person would whisper about the day's experience whilst the other listened, then the listener would feedback what they had heard then the first would add anything else or clarify a point – then we chatted together properly.

My opening line was, 'Well I don't know if I want to say anything at all ...' It didn't last long and I did start to talk about how I had found the day – it was a revelation. Not only did I finally begin to feel I really could meditate effectively, 'properly' even, and at long last understood why people love to meditate.

I made some notes about my experiences – they were

- heightened awareness in general
- awareness of touch – feeling itches and then a heightened response when scratching that itch
- I do scratch quite a lot
- A feeling of deep relaxation and calm
- I was seated for over 35 minutes and I liked it.
- Carrying tension in right shoulder even when I thought I was relaxed
- I meditated for about 2 and half hours in one day – and I liked it.

One of my ideas was to run a silent yoga retreat for a day – it will be on Saturday 11th November at the Moat House at Acton Trussell near Stafford and it's going to be really powerful. Email me if you want to book a space!!

The power of silence. Amazing.

claudia@yogabyclaudia.com

