

**“Timeout**

**Not Burnout”**



**Noise is bad for our hearing, concentration and circulation. The Jesuit Zen Master Niklaus Brantschen believes it is also bad for our soul. We talked with him about the meaning of silence.**

Interview: Michael Krobath

**Bulletin: Niklaus Brantschen, how much silence do you need every day?**

Niklaus Brantschen: 24 hours. I want to live in a perpetual state of inner quietude. But to retain this state permanently, I also have to take time to cultivate silence. That takes about an hour a day.

**What do you do to reach this peaceful state?**

I do nothing. I simply sit. In other words, I practice Zen meditation. Silence cannot be produced. It has nothing to do with the usual chatter and running around. It is a counterpoint to the busyness of everyday life.

**It sounds simple.**

But that's precisely what makes it so difficult. The story goes that when Michelangelo unveiled his statue of David in 1504, the Florentines asked him: "How did you do that?" His answer was: "It was easy. I simply got rid of all the bits that weren't David." The real art is to let go of what doesn't belong to your true nature. Then a deep inner peace will emerge.

**What's the use of that?**

When I sit and observe my breathing, I experience who I am. It's like a lake: If I don't splash around or throw stones, it becomes smooth

and calm, and I can see all the way to the bottom. Silence brings me to myself. It creates clarity.

**Your book "Weg der Stille" (Path of Silence) encourages people to be mindful of silence. Why is that important?**

The Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard once said: "If I were a physician and someone asked me: What do you advise? I would answer: Be still." Our everyday life is becoming ever more hectic, and the wheels of business and society are turning faster and faster. This stress is making us sick in body and soul. Silence is an effective, tried-and-tested remedy, with no side effects.

**Medicine is judged by its efficacy. What are the positive effects of silence on our well-being?**

People who seek and nurture silence are more balanced and relaxed, and are usually easier to get along with; they are more centered and present. And being present is itself a present for other people. People appreciate this quality, whether at home or at the office. A boss who loves silence is a good boss.

**In terms of evolution, noise seems to dominate over silence.**

**Is it possible that people don't need silence anymore?**

It's true that nowadays people can handle a high degree of complexity and have developed the ability to multitask. But I don't believe that in the longer term people will be able to live without silence. Especially as the noise increases, they will need to be able to retreat. The longing for silence is there.

**All the same, people are voluntarily exposing themselves to more and more stimulation. Contemplation and meditation don't seem to be quite the thing for the iPod generation.**

I disagree. Meditation and prayer are fundamentally human, as natural as breathing. Of course, there are skeptics who think this is something exotic or pious, but most people have good antennae for such things. Also, young people today are not as degenerate as we may think. And remember, it doesn't have to be Zen meditation; there are other paths to silence, for example hiking or walking in the woods. The most important thing is not to be afraid of silence, to be open to it.

**As a co-founder of the Lassalle-Institut in Bad Schönbunn, Switzerland, you primarily address managers. What are the managers who come to your courses looking for?**

Themselves. They have lost themselves. They want to reduce stress, sleep better, or come to terms with their life partner. Others are trying to find out whether to change careers, or they come to us to gain strength to get to grips with their everyday lives.

**Instant silence as spiritual fitness training?**

Zen is not a keep-fit method. Our efforts are directed toward initiating a change in consciousness. It's about the meaning of life, what is truly fulfilling. This isn't possible without silence, time and reflection.

**What is your experience of stressed managers suddenly confronted with silence?**

It's like slamming on the brakes. First, they experience a big jolt, then they draw a deep breath. Then they think: Thank goodness, it's okay. They start to reflect more. Silence is also a process of taking a step back. It enables them to get a new perspective and set new priorities. Instead of pursuing trivialities, they start looking forward and focus on the really important issues again.

**You write that homo oeconomicus is an atrophied human.**

**What do you mean by that?**

This notion comes from the physicist Hans-Peter Dürr. It describes >

people who block out what is most important, for example their heart or their spiritual intelligence. Spiritual intelligence refers to the way I stand, the way I breathe and how I view the world, whether my view is holistic or confined to my immediate surroundings. For better or worse, we humans have to make a go of it on spaceship Earth, so we need to think and act holistically. Some top managers in international business still have too little awareness of this. They lack the distance they would need to set the right priorities. In my view, this is one of the reasons for the current financial and economic crisis.

**Does the business world need spirituality?**

Oh yes. Otherwise it will just go round in circles. It's like a hamster in a wheel: Everything goes fine until something unexpected happens. The question is whether consumerism is the be-all and end-all, or whether less could actually be more.

**Doesn't a refusal to consume go against our whole economic system? After all, it depends on everyone producing and consuming more and more.**

I see the pressure to consume as a vicious circle that is destroying people. It can't keep spiralling upwards; we need a radical rethink. People will have to become more modest. Moderation is a core value that has been newly discovered.

**In your book, you write that it is society's duty to fight for less noise and more silence. How could society be organized to avoid noise and communication overkill and create more space?**

First you'd need the usual external measures: traffic calming, noise barriers, quiet rooms in public buildings, quiet compartments in trains. But the absence of noise does not equal silence. Having a fence around your garden is not enough if you want to grow good vegetables. You also have to tend and cultivate them.

**How can this be done?**

We need a culture of silence, we need to be brought up with it. It starts in infancy. The German word for breast-feeding, "stillen," is related to the word "still." If a mother nurses her child in a loud environment and her thoughts are distracted, the child may be fed but it won't be nourished by stillness. The process can continue in schools, where there are already teachers who have their students sit quietly for a few minutes before the lesson begins. And aware managers have designated a quiet room at the office. To cultivate silence you have to give it a place in your everyday life, because it won't happen without practice. You have to stop being busy to experience the power of silence.

**With the population explosion, urban growth and increasing traffic there are fewer and fewer oases of peace. Is silence becoming a luxury for the well-to-do?**

This line of reasoning applies to material values, but not to spiritual ones. Silence can be experienced everywhere. It's not something that can be bought. You're given it for free in the forest or in the mountains. It's not a question of money. It's a question of the time you take for it.

**Time is money and people are getting busier and busier. Don't you think you could end up being a lone voice in the wilderness?**

They say necessity is the mother of invention, and I'm finding that people are increasingly saying: "Now I'm really going to take the time." Because they sense that the time they spend in cultivating silence is a good investment. Afterwards they are much more aware, which has a beneficial effect on their life, work and performance. I am hopeful that more and more people will start choosing "time-out" over "burnout." <

**Advocate of Silence** Niklaus Brantschen, born 1937 in Randa in the Swiss Canton of Valais, is a Jesuit, priest and authorized Zen Master. In 1995, together with Pia Gyger, he founded the Lassalle-Institut in Bad Schönbrunn in Canton Zug, dedicated to Zen, ethics and leadership. His work is respected by managers and politicians as well as the general public. Brantschen is a popular speaker on the international scene and the author of numerous books. His book "Weg der Stille. Orientierung in einer lärmigen Welt" (Path of Silence: Finding the Way in a Noisy World) was published in 2004 by Herder Verlag.