

The gift of Silence at Céile Dé Teaching Retreats

At the start of every Céile Dé retreat, we enjoy saying hello to each other, catching up with old friends and meeting new ones. For those of us who have lots to share, it makes sense to arrive as close as possible to the time the venue becomes available to us, which is usually several hours before we begin our retreat and move into silence.

'DIGITAL SILENCE'

A vital part of being on retreat these days is 'Digital Silence'; freedom from phone calls, tweeting, texting, emailing and surfing the web.

If you are in frequent communication with the outside world you are not on retreat, so enjoy some freedom from your mobile phone, tablet, laptop, Facebook, Twitter, or any other tie to the world you're retreating from. Once you have 'pinged' your loved ones to let them know you've arrived safely, turn off. If your phone is also your alarm clock, switch it to airplane mode for the course of the retreat; if you are unsure how to do this, ask for help before you leave home.

So that nobody becomes worried if they don't hear from you or can't contact you, be sure to tell your friends and family before you leave home that you will not be contactable by phone, text or email during your retreat. Give them the contact details of the retreat house, but make sure they know to get in touch only if it is truly urgent.

Crossing The Threshold of Silence

A simple ritual to mark our entry into peaceful silence on the first evening, and a similar gentle departure from silence on the last day, will help us to witness and bless the thresholds of our retreat gracefully.

In the Céile Dé tradition, holding silence gifts us with the opportunity to be held within a womb-like sacred container; within these nourishing walls some of the experiences so many of us increasingly hunger for these days might have a chance to be given life.

What draws you to the teachings and practices of the Céile Dé tradition?

What draws you to make a spiritual retreat?

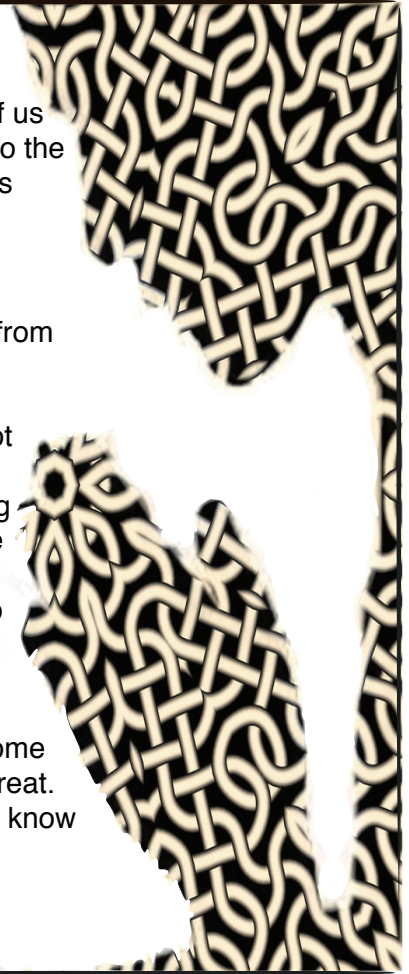
What, both within and around you, do you need to retreat from, in order to feel more whole again?

What do you hope to learn about yourself and your relationship with the Divine?

What might you be given, to take back with you, to weave into the rest of your life?

Silence is a powerful ally that will help you to discern new directions; you may like to explore these sacred questions in preparation for your retreat.

Our everyday, conditioned selves are mostly stuck in a rut of semi-conscious, automatic, almost mechanical behaviour, in which the persona (mask) takes the leading role, reading from an old script written by something unknown and hidden in the shadow. Adding a new ingredient, such as the sharing of loving silence with others, creates a context where the old patterns either cannot be played out or they become sufficiently magnified to be noticed for the first time, offering a chance to see ourselves in a new way and to invite something fresh and new to enter through a hitherto closed door inside our hearts.



In other words; silence, when used mindfully, could be experienced as a constriction by the limited, habitual self... but to our Deepest Self it is a key to liberation.

Some people ask, "a person who is naturally quiet by nature is not behaving very differently when they are silent within a group, so will their experience be less demanding, or maybe even less revelatory, than that of a more talkative person?" It may appear that way on the surface, but the inner life is about what is going on *inside*. Both introverts and extroverts have an equally rich soul life; but, whatever your type, your soul craves spaciousness; it's as if it cannot draw breath when buffeted by too many stimulations and distractions. Quieter people tend to withdraw to protect this part of themselves, whilst outgoing people might use their personalities as a shield that makes their deepest selves equally difficult to reach. That is why, in the monastic life, we say there are two kinds of silence; 'Outer Silence' and 'Inner Silence' - and whether or not we have plenty of the first kind in our lives, most of us hunger for the second, whether we know it or not.

OUTER SILENCE

By outer silence, I mean the absence of speech (including whispering) and taking care to avoid making other loud noises, such as slamming doors, stomping up stairs, etc..

There are a few, mostly obvious, exceptions to outer silence during our teaching retreats:

- When we are chanting or speaking prayers
- Teaching sessions
- Sessions in which questions and sharing are invited
- When we are sharing in 'anam chairdeas' ('soul-fellowship': sacred, intentional conversation)
- 'Necessary talk', such as an interaction with a staff member, or important questions like, "where's the coffee?" "can you remind me what time our next session starts?" or "the house is on fire!"

OUTER SILENCE, WHEN UNBROKEN, SHIFTS INTO SOMETHING ELSE...

Silence builds upon itself and becomes easier though time; if we break silence often, in many little fits and starts, we will not be gifted with this deepening process.

Even if you have reason to leave the grounds of our retreat house for a while, it is best to stay in silence as much as possible. If you are sharing a bedroom, you will be tempted to talk when you are alone together. If you do, you will always wonder what would have happened had you not broken the silence that was growing inside. You will also wonder if the person you spoke to really wanted to engage, or was merely worried they would upset you by asking you if they could stay in their silence.

Outer silence, given a chance, will send its roots into the soil of your soul and, after a while, you will feel it as a stillness so palpable that even your body will be wrapped by it. You are beginning to shift into inner silence.

INNER SILENCE

Inner silence is freedom from mental or emotional intrusion and distraction. If we view the holding of outer silence as a spiritual practice, rather like meditation; then inner silence, like the gift of *contemplatio*, is the sweet fruit of our labour. Refraining from thoughts or emotions that have an addictive quality, the ones that trap you and hold you hostage, seems an impossible task; you surely cannot control what you are thinking? It is true that once the thought has taken hold, your options are limited; but, with the subtle spiritual senses that inner silence gradually uncovers and develops, you can learn to see the distraction coming from afar *before* it has taken you over; and you can, if you sense the infinitesimal gap where True Choice resides, decline the invitation in favour of what Rumi describes as the "pull of what you truly love". It's hard to explain, it can only be experienced; when inner silence descends it does so as a Gift of Spirit and we are given the Peace that Passeth all Understanding. The ancient Gaels call it *Sámchrídeach* - Peace of Heart.

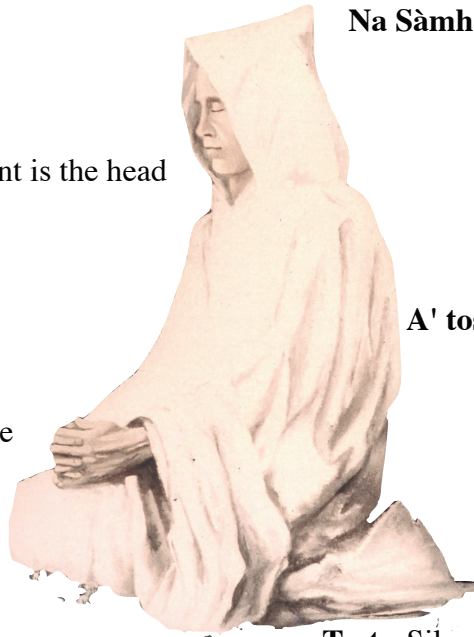
SILENCE IN THE SPIRITUAL TRADITION OF THE GAEL

Here are just a few Gaelic words and phrases that reveal how silence is valued in Celtic culture.

mar bhalbh dhriùchd - silent as the dew

gun smid tha ceann an eòlais - silent is the head of knowledge.

or-bhalbh - An incantation to silence



Na Sàmhanaich - The Silent People

A' tostachadh - The act or state of becoming silent

Tost - Silence, inner stillness and calm

deoch-chuimhneachain - A silent toast honouring the deceased or other departed friends.

ní thoet guth in son - (Old Irish) let not voice enter thy speech (of wordless prayer)

dá trían crábaid a dochtae - (Old Irish) Two thirds of Piety is silence

Congbail - (Old Irish) containing; keeping in; holding; maintaining; sustaining; preserving; foundation; habitation; establishment.