

THE FOCUS...

SAY NOTHING AT ALL

Everyone feels the urge to fill an uncomfortable silence with chatter and, in our fast-paced, adrenalin-fuelled lives, we often talk over others rather than listening to what they have to say. But what if we just shut up? On a silent retreat at one of India's top yoga destinations, Catherine Turner learns that quietness can have tumultuous results



REALLY, YOU AREN'T going to speak for five whole days?' That's the reaction I got when I told those around me I was going on a silent retreat. Most of them could not contemplate the idea. But it had been on my mind for a while. Now here I was, thousands of miles from home, just outside Bangalore at Shreyas, a serene set-up loved by in-the-know yogis, saying my final goodnight to fellow diners before beginning my silence the next day.

My mind churned with last-minute nerves, then I remembered what Balaji Nanabala, the jolly CEO, had told me at the end of the meditation session earlier that day – *mouna*, the Sanskrit for silence, is a rare opportunity to listen to oneself.

The path which had brought me to that moment was a long and winding one, part of a yoga journey that had started 15 years before. Initially, it was a physical practice that improved my flexibility, helped me relax and enhanced my wellbeing. The more I practised, the more I was drawn to the inner peace it brought, and I began to realise that the postures (*asanas*) are the starting point to prepare body and mind for sitting in silent meditation, ultimately leading us to achieve that sense of calm.

Glimpses of this deeper stillness made me want to experience more at a silent retreat, and there are many options. For example, *vipassana*, an ancient Buddhist technique which has been made popular in recent years by SN Goenka. But 10 days of sitting from 4.30am to 9pm, stopping only for meals and lectures with not even a pen and paper as a distraction, seemed extreme.

In the end, I decided on Shreyas because it is held within a framework of yogic-ashram discipline (early-morning *asana* classes, meditation and chanting, vegetarian

My Garden Tent room was also a great haven, more a lovely cottage with a canvas roof and a design that hit just the right balance of calming and haute-hippie. It had a kingsize bed, an outdoor shower and a private, walled terrace.

That first morning, I found myself a little discombobulated, counting the minutes until the yoga class at 6.30am. It was a one-to-one session and, had I been speaking, I'd have asked a million questions and made unnecessary comments. In yogic terms, words without thought behind them are a waste of vital energy (*prana*) and I could feel the difference immediately: I was able to stay focused throughout the class.

A HEADSTAND IN YOGA CLASS SENT A MASSIVE WAVE OF FEAR, ANGER AND GRIEF OVER ME

Afterwards, as I entered the dining room for breakfast, another little panic pang hit me. Sociable seating was set out around a table for the other guests. Mine was in the corner set for one, as I was solo in being silent (the programme is optional). My discomfort was momentary though; everyone smiled in acknowledgement. The size of the place helps – there are only 14 rooms – and silence is respected by guests and staff alike. I sat down and studied the thought-for-the-day card in front of me, which stated that eating without speaking improves digestion. I said a prayer to myself in thanks for the food I was about to eat (as per the card's instructions) and looked at the table setting: there were flowers from the garden, fresh fruit, a jug of dark-purple beet juice, cereals, nuts and honey. I ate slowly and felt truly satisfied.

I slipped easily into the routine of twice-daily yoga, meditation and chanting sessions, Ayurvedic massage, walking

years ago that month). Then, the headstand I attempted in yoga class sent a wave of fear, anger and grief over me. I let out uncontrollable sobs as I came down to rest. But as fast as the wave hit me, it subsided.

This was the pattern for the rest of my time in silence: huge rushes of emotion followed by release. Although painful on every level, I knew it was cathartic, as if all the hurt and sadness I'd bottled up over the years was being eked out bit by bit. I quickly learned to not be afraid of the emotions, but to allow them to rise and subside in the stillness of meditation.

It was a great lesson in observing the workings of mind and body. I noticed

niggly twangs in my lower back, neck and shoulders seemed to coincide with the rising up of emotions. It wasn't the type of pain you might get by carrying a heavy bag or picking up a box, but more subtle, a nerve-like sensation, which, if I sat in silence, would fade away with the feelings.

At Shreyas there is a spiritually supportive atmosphere, which makes it feel safe to let go, as well as a sense of giving back. The grounds, a 25-acre former coconut farm, include an organic fruit-and-vegetable plot. One of the highlights of my stay was helping to pick vegetables for lunch, which we served to children at an orphanage that was built by the retreat.

It turned out that not talking was the easy part. When it came to the end, I could have carried on in silence. My body felt cleansed; a week of eating in peace had calmed my stressed digestive system. My brain was still whirling when I left, but with a new perspective on making sense of it all. I now have more space in my head to think, and more clarity when it comes to making tough decisions. Of course, there is a place for talking about problems, but finding peace of mind is our own responsibility. It takes time alone to unravel uncomfortable feelings and reset priorities. Next year, I'm signing up for 10 days. 🙏

THEY SAY THAT WORDS WITHOUT THOUGHT BEHIND THEM ARE A WASTE OF VITAL ENERGY

food, no alcohol, no smoking), an extension of the practices I had tried before, so it seemed less daunting. Alongside yoga, the Ayurvedic doctors recommend treatments such as the Abhyanga massage, which improves sleep with herbal oils, to support you during the process, and also make dietary adjustments. All of this in a setting that has a shimmering turquoise pool, a neat spa and steam rooms, and secluded spots. I loved the beautiful little treehouse at the end of the garden, strewn with marigold flowers and floral-print cushions.

in the beautiful gardens and reading the recommended books, including *Spirituality: Transformation from Within & Without* by Swami Rama, a great overview of why we so often feel empty in a world where our spiritual side is frequently ignored. I wrote notes asking for anything I needed – incense for the room, tea after my meal. I felt great physically and floated about in a state of peacefulness. I couldn't stop smiling.

By day two, I was on an emotional rollercoaster. I'd woken up feeling sad at the loss of my dad (he had passed away two

Healing Holidays (+44 20 7843 3597; www.healingholidays.co.uk) offers a seven-night silent retreat at Shreyas from £2,095 per person based on two people sharing (or £2,695 for singles), full board, including a wellness consultation, personal yoga and meditation sessions, daily group activities, massages, flights and transfers