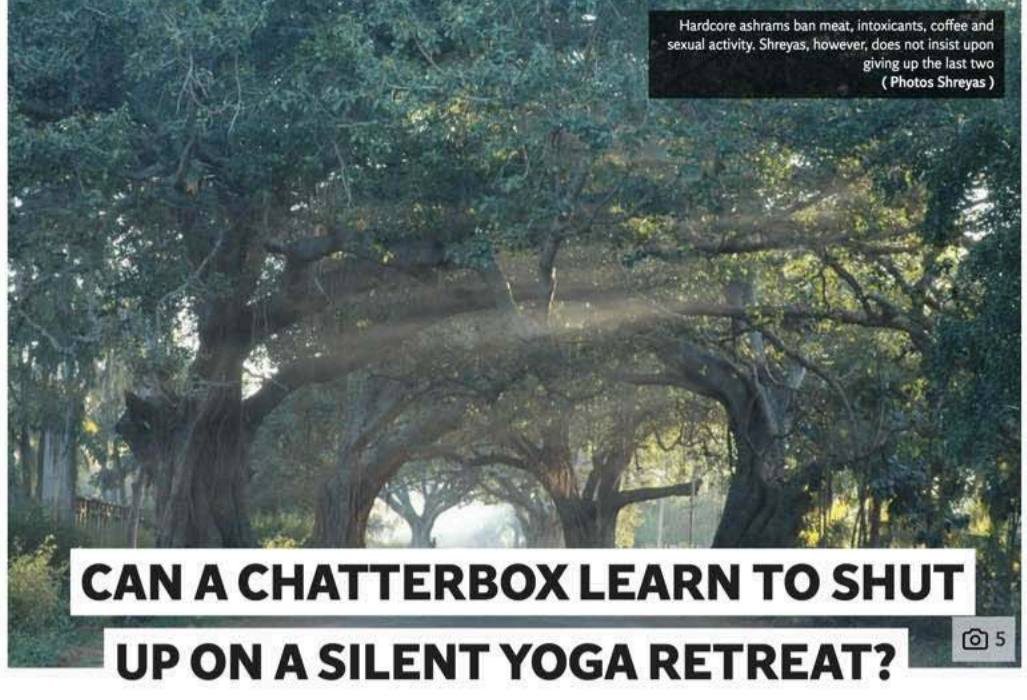


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INDY/LIFE



CAN A CHATTERBOX LEARN TO SHUT UP ON A SILENT YOGA RETREAT?

Silence may be golden but it's also a challenge

Caroline Phillips | Thursday 19 July 2018 07:45 |



I tried it with nuns in Kent once and managed just 24 hours – eight of which I spent sleeping. To be honest, I struggle with it when left to my own devices for the afternoon. Yet I'm determined to do it this time: achieve what folk undergo for years in Himalayan caves.

I'm talking about shutting up. Yes, I'm going on a silent retreat to "refresh my soul" and "cleanse my mind" – but it's not going to be easy. Words are what I do: writing, talking, talking over people. Can I send texts? Does emailing count as remaining silent? And what about sleep talking?

Wellness retreats were, until recently, all about pampering and escaping reality. But alongside the rise of mindfulness, the latest wellness trend is all about facing yourself. Emma Watson and Gisele Bündchen are both fans, and I hope to become one too at Shreyas, a yoga retreat near Bangalore, India, where I'll be keeping my lip zipped for five days straight.



How a yoga holiday in Kent could help refugees

Shreyas is set in a 25-acre erstwhile coconut farm with a nursery garden, mango trees and calves frolicking about the place. There's a thatched hideaway for meditation surrounded by marigolds, a new spa, yoga shala, meditation hall and swimming pool, and, to top it all off, my achingly cool villa – one of just 14 rooms on site, with a tarpaulin roof and al fresco shower.

Discreet staff are on hand to straighten flip-flops left outside buildings, festoon flower garlands around columns and leave spiritual meditations on pillows.

I suspect Shreyas offers a gentle introduction to practising silence. **Hardcore ashrams** ban meat, intoxicants, coffee and sexual activity – all of which have an "agitating" effect. Shreyas, however, does not insist upon giving up the last two.

There's no 4am wake-up call to meditation either, and I'm permitted to both read and write – so not all words are forbidden.



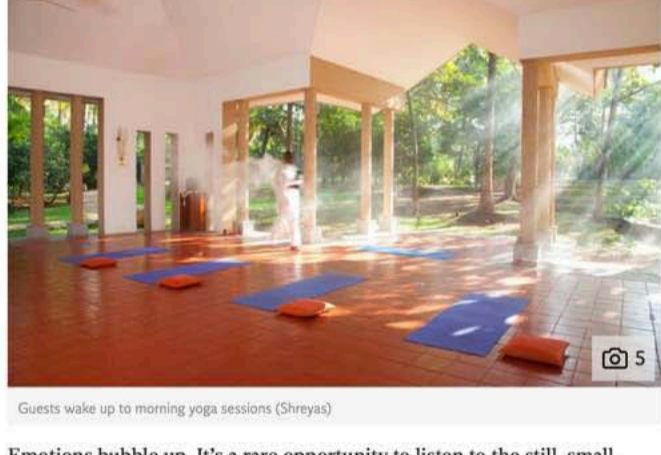
The meditation hideaway provides a peaceful space (Shreyas)

I meet with Bala, the retreat's head of yoga-cum-sage, who is clad in kurta pyjamas. He guides all silent retreatants, around one a month. My fellow guests are here only for the yoga: nobody else is going wordless.

"People generally choose to go silent when they're at a crossroads in their relationship or career," Bala explains. "In silence they become aware of their inner fears and conflicts, and answers may emerge."

My own personal crossroads concerns my newly empty nest. "You should limit any distractions when you're silent," Bala continues. "If you want to see your image in the surface of the lake, you have to stop disturbing the water by throwing stones into it." That's technology out, then.

Normally we're surrounded by sound and visual stimuli. We're so busy with our adrenaline-charged lives, our social media and email and Netflix, that we end up becoming disconnected from our interior lives. Keeping schtum allows us to hear that internal dialogue and become aware of how we really feel.



Guests wake up to morning yoga sessions (Shreyas)

Emotions bubble up. It's a rare opportunity to listen to the still, small voice within; to attain self-transformation through self-observation and self-healing through self-enquiry. That's the theory, anyway.

The morning after arriving, I start my silence – wearing a necklace with a card emblazoned with "Sssshhhhhhhreyas", effectively branding me a pariah for the duration. My lips aren't moving, but I can still hear me jabbering away in my head. God, I'm noisy.

Someone knocks at my door and I reply, "Hello?" Dammit. Then the villa phone rings. Am I meant to answer it with heavy breathing?



The retreat has a pool and extensive spa (Shreyas)

I've been given a pen, pad and a whiteboard outside my room for essential communication. "Yoga? now??" I scribble, but all unnecessary nattering is out. I cheat at the beginning and check my emails, but after two days, I start getting into the digital detox.

I feel most self-conscious when eating separately to the instructions on, as if I've been put on the naughty name. But I follow the directions on the meditation card. "Avoid standing or moving around as the digestive fires are at work," then "Take a deep breath," and "Say a silent prayer to Mother Nature for (my) food".

Watermelon soup is followed by organic bitter melon and aubergine masala, all of which have been chanted over by kitchen staff to imbue them with positive energy.

I'm so used to eating on the hoof that taking the time to taste, chew and be mindful of my meal is a revelation. I also pretend to read while earwiggling on other people's conversations – after three days, I'm really hearing people – and find it's a relief not having to think of things to say.

I enjoy twice daily yoga sessions, chanting and meditation, including Trataka (candle meditation) and a walking variation with Bala striding mindfully beside me. "Count the breaths for each step," he says.

I do Yoga Nidra – to attain a state of "sleepless sleep" between conscious and subconscious – lying on the floor in a darkened hall. "Free yourself from tension and negativity," instructs another guru. "Breathe out anger, sadness and jealousy, breathe in the universal energy of love."

I really think I've got the hang of it before realising that, actually, I just fell asleep.

All the mind and soul stuff is complemented by a focus on the body, with a range of spa treatments on offer, including one where I'm slathered in oil, wrapped in banana leaves and trussed up like a tropical Gulliver to detox for 30 minutes.



The new wellness trend is all about listening to your inner voice (Shreyas)

Overall my experience is a powerful initiation into silence-lite. I've learnt that speaking unnecessary words is a waste of vital prana (energy) and that it's sometimes essential to disconnect in order to reconnect. I've noticed the difference between my inner voice and my anxious, critical mind. I've had moments of serenity and joy.

Do I leave full of compassion? Mentally decluttered and able to face life's problems calmly? More aware, centred and equanimous?

Yes, a little of all of those, I'm either a monastic oddity or just bang on trend. Emma Watson, eat your retreat out.

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