



WISSENSRAUM NO. 17

THE RADICAL PRESENCE

Why Silence Is the Biggest Taboo in Coaching

“Truth needs no voice. It needs space.”

◆ 1. When Accompaniment Stops Needing to Prove Itself

We have learned to recognize accompaniment by action.

Those who accompany ask questions. Those who coach set impulses, mirror, structure, and open up a new view. All of this has its place, and many people seek accompaniment precisely because they hope for a question, a perspective, or a structure from another human being. Yet beneath the method lies a quieter expectation that is hardly ever spoken: that something must happen in a conversation. A question is supposed to open the process, an impulse to set something in motion, an insight to arise, a change to become visible. Where this expectation fails to materialize, things quickly become uncomfortable, and not first for the one being accompanied, but for the one accompanying.

This Wissensraum therefore does not begin with the question of how a coach might ask better questions, interpret more cleverly, or lead more skillfully. It begins with a question that reaches deeper than the choice between speaking and silence: What remains of accompaniment when the one accompanying stops needing to confirm themselves as an accompanier through what they do? For the coach, too, brings themselves into the room. They bring knowledge, training, experience, and methods, and perhaps also the quiet wish to be effective and needed. Alongside the coachee's space stands a second space that is rarely made the object of reflection: the self-image of the one sitting opposite, and the fear of one's own ineffectiveness.

Radical presence is therefore not a new coaching method that could be added to the existing ones. It is an inquiry. It asks what remains when intervention steps back for a moment, and it asks this not only with regard to the person seeking accompaniment, but equally with regard to the person offering it. The question shifts quietly but consequentially. It no longer reads only: What does my counterpart need from me? It also reads: What in me believes it has to do something?

“*What in me believes it has to do something?*”

♦ 2. The Quiet Taboo of Intervention

Silence has long been familiar in coaching. The taboo lies deeper.

The title of this Wissensraum is deliberately provocative and should be read as such. Pauses, spaces for thought, and deliberate stepping back have long been part of the craft in many forms of professional accompaniment, and anyone who presented silence in coaching as entirely forbidden would do the practice an injustice. The taboo at issue here is subtler. It lies less in silence itself than in the idea that perhaps no intervention at all might be required. For intervention conveys action, action conveys effectiveness, and effectiveness confirms the professional role. Whoever leaves a space open without filling it forgoes this proof and must bear that their contribution remains, for the moment, invisible.

A conversation can thus become extraordinarily productive without leading into depth. Question and answer follow one another, reflection and a new question, a change of perspective and an interim conclusion, and every answer creates the occasion for the next impulse. All of it can be clever, empathic, and helpful. And yet the process remains ceaselessly within what can already be put into language. Productivity and depth are different categories, and it is one of the quiet confusions of professional accompaniment to mistake the one for the other.

At this point radical presence poses a question that cannot be answered by comparing methods. Must every inner process be carried forward simply because we have learned how to carry it forward? What happens to a fear that is not immediately explained, to a grief whose cause is not asked after, to an inner movement that need be neither named nor classified? And what happens to a person to whom, for a moment, no one says where their attention should go next, not even through the cleverest question? Perhaps there is a point at which precisely the absence of the next impulse makes possible something that would already acquire a direction through one more impulse.

♦ 3. The Question Is Never Neutral

A question can be open. It is hardly ever without direction.

Those who ask often believe they are giving the other person space. And indeed a good question can open space, by making a previously overlooked connection visible or loosening a rigid

perception. At the same time, every question carries a direction within it. “What does that do to you?” turns the gaze toward sensation. “What is holding you back?” presupposes that something holds back, and opens the search for an obstacle. “What do you need?” leads to a need, “What would be your next step?” into the future and into action. None of these questions is wrong, and therein lies the subtlety. They bring something into another person’s inner space that was not there in this form before, and thereby change the object of their attention.

Here a distinction opens up that Indian epistemology has known for a long time. It speaks of *pramāṇas*, the means from which valid knowledge can arise, and which of them are recognized differs from school to school. The Yoga Sūtra names three in 1.7: *Pratyakṣa*, direct perception; *Anumāna*, logical inference; and *Āgama*, reliable or authoritative testimony, conveyed for instance through transmitted teaching, scripture, or a source regarded as reliable. Other Indian theories of knowledge speak in this context of *Śabda*, verbal testimony. A coaching question is of course neither *Śabda* nor *Āgama* in this classical sense, and this equation is expressly not asserted here. As an analogy, however, something can be recognized: the question, too, enters a process of knowing as a linguistic impulse from outside. The mind takes it up, compares, remembers, discards, and infers, and the drawing of conclusions begins.

Radical presence is therefore not directed against the question. It develops a sensitivity to the fact that even the cleverest question is already an intervention in another person’s open perception. The art of accompanying would then consist not only in being able to ask good questions. It would equally consist in perceiving a possible question and not needing to ask it.

“*Even a good question remains something set from outside.*”

◆ 4. Knowing and Experiencing

There is a difference between knowing about something and experiencing it directly.

A person can speak about fear and experience fear. They can explain stillness and become still. They can understand a biography and nevertheless perceive something of the self that is not contained in any biographical explanation. Between these two ways of knowing lies a threshold that cannot be crossed with more information, and it is the actual subject of this Wissensraum. The conversation moves predominantly on one side of this threshold: it describes, interprets,

orders, and justifies. Nothing is to be said against that, as long as it is not forgotten that the description of an experience is not the experience.

The Vedānta tradition, which is polyphonic within itself, describes for this a classical movement of Śravaṇa, the hearing of the teaching, Manana, its reflective examination, and Nididhyāsana, deepening contemplation. It is already laid down in the Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad, which calls on us to hear the Self, to reflect on it, and to contemplate it deeply. Beyond this, the term Anubhava points to direct experiencing, or realized knowledge. Here, however, it should not be understood as a simple fourth member of a universally binding sequence of stages, for precisely this would turn the tradition into a Western developmental ladder that it does not know. In an image: what has been understood sinks from the head into lived existence, and knowledge that ripens in this way is no less precise than conceptual knowledge. It is merely no longer only a knowing about something.

For accompaniment, a question of astonishing simplicity follows: Where in this movement does a conversation currently dwell? A coaching process can remain for a long time within the space of hearing and reflective examination, in the space of impulse and reflection, and create a great deal of clarity there. But it can miss the moment in which a further linguistic impulse has already done its service and experience itself would be next. These concepts cannot simply be translated into a Western coaching method, and they are not meant to be. They can, however, make visible what is easily lost in the eagerness of asking.

“I can describe myself and, for a moment, experience what remains when none of these descriptions is needed.”

◆ 5. When Silence Teaches

Presence, too, can carry meaning without meaning being spoken.

It would be too simple to derive from what has been said the equation that the word belongs to the intellect and silence to truth. Precisely the tradition to which this Wissensraum refers does not support this equation. The word of the teaching is regarded there as a gateway to knowledge, reflective examination as an indispensable part of understanding, and mere silence is not regarded there as a sufficient path to knowledge. Whoever plays silence off against language shortens both.

And yet the same tradition knows yet another form of teaching. Tradition describes Dakṣiṇāmūrti, the south-facing teacher, as a young teacher who sits silently beneath a banyan tree while his older students are freed from their doubts in his presence, without his speaking a word. In the tradition surrounding Ramana Maharshi, too, silence holds a special place; his teaching is often associated with silent presence and with the idea of instruction beyond the spoken word. These are images and narratives from a spiritual teacher–student relationship, and they may not be claimed for professional coaching, which follows a different mandate, a different framework, and a different responsibility. As a counter-image, however, they pose a radical question to a Western understanding of transmission.

This question reads: Can presence itself carry meaning without meaning being spoken? If so, then accompaniment would be not only the exchange of impulses, but also the quality of how one person sits opposite another: whether they are waiting for something, whether they are evaluating, whether they want to bring something about, or whether they are simply there. The Wissensraum takes this question seriously without answering it. It leaves it standing as an opening that prevents Indian epistemology from being merely drawn upon to justify a coaching thesis that was already settled beforehand.

“*Can presence itself carry meaning without meaning being spoken?*”

◆ 6. The Alchemy of Shared Silence

Silence is not yet presence.

The presentation for this Wissensraum captures the encounter in an image from the kitchen and the workshop that can at the same time be read alchemically: water, oil, and heat. The water stands for the coachee's stream of thought, the constant flow of narrative, explanation, and worry. The oil stands for what lies deeper, which does not dissolve in the stream but shows itself only when the stream grows calmer. And the heat stands for the non-judgmental presence of a second human being who does not take over the process but gives it warmth. It is not the coach who dissolves something. A space arises in which something may change or may remain unchanged.

The image is strong, and it demands caution at the same time, for it touches a widespread misunderstanding. A person can remain silent while inwardly being entirely absent. They can be silent and judge, be silent and wait for a particular reaction, or be silent and already prepare

the next intervention. They can be silent because they do not know what to say, or because they use silence strategically so that something specific happens in the other. In all these cases silence, too, would still be a tool, and the inner coach would go on working undisturbed, only without words.

Radical presence begins deeper. It does not mean a falling silent of the mouth, but a withdrawal that reaches further: the willingness, for a moment, not to have to improve the other, not to have to understand the other, and not to have to lead the other toward a particular outcome. Then silence is not produced. It is released. And it lies in the nature of this release that it cannot be forced, dosed, or promised. It can open a space without any insight being guaranteed.

“Then silence is not produced. It is released.”

◆ 7. Alone Without Being Abandoned

The coach does not disappear. The coach's presence changes shape.

Two people sit opposite each other, and neither of them speaks. One is occupied with their own perception, the other is present without entering it. In this lies a peculiar simultaneity that is difficult to put into words: the person is alone and yet is not abandoned. They remain with themselves and know that someone is there. Both at once is rare, for in everyday life we usually assume that closeness requires something shared, a conversation, an activity, a mutual responding. Here, however, closeness consists precisely in the fact that responding may be absent.

The companion who continually sets the process in motion thereby becomes someone who endures its openness. This is not a lesser task, but a different one, and it often demands more. It takes stability to sit beside a person who is wrestling with something, and not to intervene. It takes trust in the other's own movement and, at the same time, alertness to when this space no longer holds. And it takes the willingness that even this trust may go unrewarded, because no one can show what the silence has led to.

In this, the Wissensraum touches the idea of the resonant space. Resonance does not arise only from two people ceaselessly doing something together. It can also consist in one person allowing the other to be fully with themselves, without leaving them alone in it. This is no

energetic claim and no transfer of knowledge. It is a relational space in which the other does not have to keep reacting to something brought to him or her from outside.

“Alone without being abandoned. Silence without a break in relationship. Space without a prescribed direction.”

◆ 8. The Real Taboo: Not Needing to Be Needed

Perhaps silence is not the biggest taboo at all. Perhaps the title conceals a deeper one.

With every professional role an identity arises. I ask, therefore I coach. I recognize, therefore I am competent. I set something in motion, therefore I am helpful. As long as these equations hold, they are hardly noticed, and they are not reprehensible either, for they describe how professional self-understanding is formed. But they make identity dependent on action, and for that reason it becomes difficult when action is not needed. Who is a coach who asks no question? Who is a teacher who explains nothing? Who is a companion when the other does not find their way through them at this moment?

At this point radical presence turns less toward the coachee than toward the coach. The person opposite perhaps needs nothing more than presence in this moment, and precisely then it is not they who reach a limit, but the companion. Can I remain present when my knowledge is not needed? Can I have a question without having to ask it? Can I perceive without immediately interpreting? Can I let a process happen of which I am not the author?

In this way silence becomes a mirror. It shows how hard it can be to leave a space open without occupying it with one's own significance. And it lets us glimpse the possibility that the real taboo lies not in falling silent, but in the dispensability of one's own intervention: in the possibility of, for a moment, not being needed and nevertheless remaining.

“Can I remain present when my knowledge is not needed?”

◆ 9. The Limit of Radical Presence

Silence is not fundamentally deeper than language.

So that the philosophical inquiry does not become a new doctrine of salvation through silence, it needs a counter-movement, and this belongs to the thought itself. Silence can open space. It can equally intensify insecurity, be experienced as withdrawal or rejection, or confront a person with inner states for which no sufficient stability is available at that moment. Particularly in the case of pronounced anxiety, trauma-related reactions, dissociative states, or psychological crises, long or unframed silence can be burdensome and, in the worst case, even destabilizing. In such situations coaching does not replace psychotherapeutic or medical treatment, and those who accompany bear the responsibility to recognize this and, where necessary, to refer to appropriate help.

Radical presence therefore demands no particular duration of silence and no method of non-intervention. It demands the capacity to perceive. Perhaps a person needs space right now. Perhaps they need a word, a question, orientation, or a clear boundary. Perhaps they need help that coaching cannot give. The radicality lies not in silence itself, but in freedom with regard to one's own tool. A coach who must speak is just as bound as one who makes silence a dogma. Presence begins where both remain possible, and where the companion can recognize what the present space can responsibly bear.

“*Those who are free with regard to their tools need neither speak nor be silent.*”

◆ 10. The Courage to Do Nothing

Doing nothing is not passivity. It is the willingness not to have to be the author of everything.

In this context, doing nothing means neither indifference nor inactivity, nor does it mean withdrawal into a comfortable reserve. It means the temporary relinquishing of the claim to be the author of what happens in the other person. This is possibly more demanding than any intervention, for intervention gives the coach a position, and silence takes it away for a moment. What remains then is presence, without a promise of insight, without a guarantee of change, and without a hidden goal that enough silence would have to reach.

The coach may possess competence without having to display it at every moment. They may know a question without asking it. They may act when action is required, and they may step back when their acting would merely fill the emptiness they can hardly bear. Perhaps therein lies the actual radicality of presence: not in silence and not in speaking, not in a method and not in an attitude that confirms itself, but in a presentness that needs neither of the two to be assured of itself.

It is also a form of courage that remains largely invisible. Whoever does nothing cannot show that they have done something. They cannot appeal to the result, for there may be none that could be named. They cannot know whether something has happened in the space they have kept free, will happen later, or will remain without visible consequence. Precisely therein lies the demand: the value of their presence cannot be measured by a visible outcome.

“Only the possibility that something becomes visible because no one wants to bring it forth.”

◆ 11. Conclusion — The Open Circle

In the beginning stood the question of which question must be asked. In the end stands the question of whether it must be asked at all.

The presentation for this Wissensraum ends with almost nothing: an open golden circle on a black ground and beneath it a single sentence. This image can conclude the movement of the entire text. It does not stand for an emptiness that would have to be filled, nor for a promise that will someday be fulfilled. It stands for a space that may remain open.

In the end, radical presence no longer asks which question a coach must ask. It asks whether they can remain present when no question needs to be asked any longer. And deeper still: What happens between two people when neither of them needs to change the moment? A text cannot answer this question. It can live on as an open question in the encounter of two people, where one is ready not to improve the other, but to meet them.

The images of this text as well, the water, the oil, the heat, the circle, the silent teacher, may in the end be let go of again. They were pointers and never what they pointed to. Whoever takes something away from this Wissensraum does best not to take it as a new method, but as an

attentiveness: for the moment in which a question lies on the tongue, and for the freedom to be able to speak it or let it rest.

“*Truth needs no voice. It needs space.*”

∞ Further Exploration

Those who wish to pursue the questions touched on here will find adjacent explorations in the WISSENSRÄUME series:

- Wissensraum No. 3 — The Stillness of Rest: Space for Consciousness, Education, and Change
- Wissensraum No. 7 — Beyond Listening: The Essence of True Presence (Sparsha)
- Wissensraum No. 13 — Truth: The 66 Gates of Inner Awakening
- Wissensraum No. 14 — Faithfulness to One's Own Perception

◇ Sources & Lines of Thought

This Wissensraum does not present itself as a scholarly treatise. The sources below mark the specialist and intellectual lines of thought to which its central statements connect — above all those of Chapters 3, 4 and 5.

- Edwin F. Bryant (ed. and trans.): The Yoga Sūtras of Patañjali. A New Edition, Translation, and Commentary with Insights from the Traditional Commentators. New York 2009. Yoga-Sūtra 1.7 (Chapter 3).
- Patrick Olivelle (ed. and trans.): The Early Upaniṣads. Annotated Text and Translation. New York 1998. Bṛhadāraṇyaka-Upaniṣad 2.4.5 and 4.5.6 (Chapter 4).
- Bimal Krishna Matilal: Perception. An Essay on Classical Indian Theories of Knowledge. Oxford 1986. On the theory of pramāṇa (Chapter 3).
- Sri Ramana Maharshi: Collected Works. Tiruvannamalai 2018 (9th ed.). Including the Dakṣiṇāmūrti-Stotra, attributed to Śaṅkara (Chapter 5).
- Munagala S. Venkataramiah (ed.): Talks with Sri Ramana Maharshi. Tiruvannamalai 1955. On silence as teaching (Chapter 5).
- Arthur Turner: Silence and its role in coaching practice. In: The Coaching Psychologist 15 (1), 2019. (Chapters 2 and 6).
- Nancy Kline: Time to Think. Listening to Ignite the Human Mind. London 1999. (Chapter 2).
- Carl R. Rogers: On Becoming a Person. A Therapist's View of Psychotherapy. Boston 1961. On acceptance and non-evaluation in helping relationships (Chapters 6 to 8).
- Hartmut Rosa: Resonance. A Sociology of Our Relationship to the World. Cambridge 2019. (Chapter 7).

◇ Glossary — Sanskrit · English

Note: The Sanskrit terms stem from different philosophical and religious contexts. Their application to coaching serves, in this Wissensraum, as a philosophical approach. It establishes neither an equation of traditions nor empirical proof of effectiveness for coaching methods.

Sanskrit	English	Meaning in this Wissensraum
Āgama	tradition; authoritative testimony	One of the three means of knowledge in Yoga Sūtra 1.7. Not to be equated with a coaching question.
Anubhava	direct experience; lived experience	Direct experiencing or realized knowledge; here not a compulsory fourth stage after Nididhyāsana.
Anumāna	inference	Knowing through inference. Analogously interesting in coaching for analytical and interpretive movements of thought.
Dakṣiṇāmūrti	south-facing form of Shiva	Teacher figure of the Advaita tradition, associated with instruction through silence; to be read as tradition.
Manana	reflection; reasoned examination	Reflection on what has been heard; part of the classical sequence Śravaṇa – Manana – Nididhyāsana.
Nididhyāsana	deepening contemplation; inward integration	Sustained engagement with the teaching that has been understood. “Meditation” is a possible translation, but does not fully capture the term; silence and Nididhyāsana are not to be equated causally.
Pramāṇa	means of valid knowledge	Means of valid knowledge. Which are recognized differs between the schools.
Pratyakṣa	direct perception	One of the three means of knowledge in Yoga Sūtra 1.7. Not generally to be equated with “self-realization” or “purest truth”.
Śabda	word; verbal testimony	In various Indian systems of knowledge, knowing through verbal testimony. Not synonymous with a “powerful coaching question”.
Śravaṇa	hearing; hearing the teaching	In the Vedāntic context, hearing the teaching; not merely receiving a coaching impulse.
Upaniṣad	Upanishad	Group of philosophical-religious Sanskrit texts; an essential textual basis of Vedānta.
Vedānta	“end of the Vedas”	Collective term for several philosophical traditions; not a single interpretation.

○ WISSENSRÄUME — Appreciation

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△ WISSENSRÄUME — Notice

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