

WHAT I LEARNED FROM SILENCE

O QUE APRENDI COM O SILÊNCIO

LO QUE APRENDÍ DEL SILENCIO

Sandra POTTMEIER¹
Caique Fernando FISTAROL²
Marta Helena Cúrio de CAETANO³

What I learned from silence is an autobiography written by Cláudia Dias Baptista de Souza, known as Coen Rōshi or Monja Coen. Brazilian Zen Buddhist female monk and official missionary of the Soto Shu tradition, founder of the Zendo Zen Buddhist Community in Brazil, Monja Coen.

The 216-page work, published in 2019 by Editora Planeta, consists of the following chapters (moments in Monja Coen's trajectory before and after her entry into Zen Buddhism), highlighted by her as: 1. *What I learned from silence*, 2. *Learnings*, 3. *New communities*, 4. *Unfinished memories*, and finally, 5. *From adolescence to monastic life*.

In it, Monja Coen (2019) narrates in a simple, clear, and engaging way “about her experiences of other times with the spotlight of her gaze firmly fixed on her time”, leaving in the course of the narrative, and therefore of her story, the marks lived and learned in the distinct “perfect, imperfect, and more than perfect pasts”, as the preface, Barros Filho, emphasizes in the book's opening (COEN, 2019, p. 3, our translation).

Such knowledge gathered and captivated by the author allows us to take a look at the different experiences that have constituted and still constitute people, worldwide referring to the Covid-19 Pandemic. It is in these physical, mental, and/or spiritual crises, not only the one circumscribed to the Coronavirus, but in more frequent manifestations of anxiety, depression, and loneliness, that a recollection is appropriate, not only of the distancing and/or social isolation, but of what we learn from silence from this opportunity to reflect, to be with oneself, to think about oneself and about human relationships. As Monja Coen (2019, p. 78,

¹ Federal University of Santa Catarina (UFSC), Florianópolis – SC – Brazil. Doctorate in Linguistics (UFSC). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7328-8656>. E-mail: pottmeyer@gmail.com

² Municipal Secretary of Education (SEMED), Blumenau – SC – Brazil. Curricular Coordinator of English Language and Bilingual Education. Master's in Education (FURB). ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7650-7324>. E-mail: cfersf@gmail.com

³ Regional University of Blumenau (FURB), Blumenau – SC – Brazil. Doctorate student in the Postgraduate Program in Education. ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6247-2463>. E-mail: mhelenacc@gmail.com

our translation) reflects and refracts in relation to her learnings and teachings, one can think of “An instant of zazen, a Buddha instant”, in which one understands from this perspective and/or philosophy that “Nothing is steady. Nothing is permanent” (COEN, 2019, p. 78, our translation).

Bakhtin and his Circle weaving in the concept of time and space “chronotope” (BAKHTIN, 2011[1979]) and the mobility of language(gem) as well as of subjects, i.e., people, moves in the same direction as Coen (2019) advocates. An instant, whether zazen or Buddha, implies a certain chronotope that is historically situated by the interactions we undertake and/or perform with the Other and with ourselves. In this sense, just like language, the subject is unfinished, inconclusive, mobile, changeable, discontinuous, which allows us to get closer to what Coen (2019) understands about transient or enduring experiences and livings. A little of this and a little of that. Or not this or not that. It is in this direction that one can go in search and slowly constitute and constitute this other-self and other-other through the culture of peace, as the author points out and defends.

This is an indispensable work for all who wish to know a little more about the history, the learning and the experiences that constituted the Monja Coen in her trajectory, as well as instigate the human being to reflect and recognize oneself through self-knowledge, to understand the inner self, and the interactions we undertake with others. It is worth mentioning that Coen's autobiography (2019) is constituted by an inverse process of the narrative of her history. She starts it from ‘today’, from the ‘now’, and leads the reader all the way through the writing of her past, of what has already been lived until she makes the reader meet the Cláudia Dias Baptista de Souza of her childhood, of her youth, the one whose “[hair was] still long and curly”, the one who “[could] weigh about 50kg”, the one who “[could] be a female monk” (COEN, 2019, p. 142, our translation).

What I learned from silence, first chapter, Coen tells of her first impressions, her initial contact with Zen-Buddhism at the Zen Center in Los Angeles, California, United States, where later, in 1983, at the age of 36, he takes monastic vows. Coen (2019) tells a little of daily life on the West Coast of the United States. Of her married life and of some fights with her husband that she didn't even know the reason for, of her work at Banco do Brasil, of her morning walks with her great walking companion, her dog Joshua, of the encounters on the street with her 86-year-old neighbor, Walter Sheetz. It was Sheetz who introduced her to the “current best-seller [...] *Alpha Brain Waves*” (COEN, 2019, p. 16, author's emphasis, our translation), when at the time she was in her “30s, weighed 47kg and worked out three hours a day, every day of the week, in classical ballet classes” (COEN, 2019, p. 16, our translation).

While reading the book that had arrived in the mail, dialoguing with several people (among them athletes) about such alpha mental waves and how they enter this alpha moment(s), that Coen came across the interview of a monk who meditated and that “it had been confirmed by neuroscientists that meditators enter alpha” (COEN, 2019, p. 18, our translation). Instigated, she wanted to learn more about the topic, meditation that made one go into an alpha state. “I looked up Z in the list and there was Los Angeles Zen Center. I called. There was a zazen practice for beginners on Sunday mornings” (COEN, 2019, p. 19, our translation). Even though she found it difficult to concentrate and meditate, as “[the] mind was jumping from one thought to another” (COEN, 2019, p. 20, our translation), she states that from that day on, “I began daily zazen practices” (COEN, 2019, p. 21, our translation). Gradually her routine changed. After a seven-day and seven-night retreat that greatly moved her, she cried without knowing the reason, that Coen, decided, quit her job at the bank, get separated from her husband, left her dog Joshua with her ex-husband, changed her clothes and shoes for “hakama - typical samurai clothing” (COEN, 2019, p. 29, our translation), dropped everything, because she wished to live in the community and become an apprentice.

Some of this knowledge is described by the author in the second chapter, *Learnings*. In it, Coen (2019) discusses what she learned on the journey in zazen life and the quest to “Find the True Self” (COEN, 2019, p. 75, our translation) when she became fully dedicated to Zen Buddhism upon her entry into Nagoya Monastery. The author relates her experience as a *trainee* (apprentice) in staying seven days and seven nights practicing Zen-Buddhism, “Before 5 a.m. until 9:30 p.m.” (COEN, 2019, p. 80, our translation). According to her, “Her legs and her back would hurt, and her knees would get burned” (COEN, 2019, p. 80, our translation). This whole process of transformation and constitution of Cláudia Dias Baptista de Souza to Monja Coen was occurring with moments of zazen, change of habits, haircut, and change in clothing.

Along this path, names like Maezumi Roshi, her master in Los Angeles (where it all began), Yogo Roshi, her ordination master, Aoyama Shundo Docho Roshi, her “training master and example of life inspiration” (COEN, 2019, p. 200, our translation), Dogen and Kojima Sensei, masters who were and are her references to this day. She emphasizes that: “I had become a female monk mainly because I had known the writings of master Dogen”. About Kojima Sensei, Coen (2019) stresses that, this female monk, broke through many barriers of the monastic world when she fought for female monks to have a voice and a turn, dressing in clothes that were not just black, that they could perform celebrations “ceremonies”, weddings, funerals (COEN, 2019, p. 61, our translation).

New communities, third chapter, Coen (2019, p. 116, our translation) discusses the work she was doing in Sapporo at Daishoji Temple: the officiating of burials and memorial ceremonies, that with the permission of the Sato Roshi abbot, she could first perform the wakes and later the burials; the outings “every morning to pray in the homes of families” together with her husband, the monk Shozan, as well as the “zazen for children, tea ceremony classes” were practiced by them “[d]uring three almost three years” in that locality (COEN, 2019, p. 117, our translation).

The experiences lived by Coen (2019) in this period cohere with her first lecture when she talked about transience and the master Sato Roshi had told her that it was not enough to talk about “nothing is steady, nothing is permanent”, he urged her to reflect that “everything is interrelated” (COEN, 2019, p. 117, our translation). That is, mine, yours, our words, and actions imprint cause and effect - action and reaction among those with whom we live, with whom we dialogue, with whom we learn and teach. From the mobilizations of the master Sato Roschi, Coen (2019, p. 117, our translation) allows us a zazen instant with you by stressing that “Nothing steady, nothing permanent and at the same time everything we do, speak and think stirs the web of life, is one of the vectors for present, future and past transformations”. According to Coen (2019, p. 117, our translation), “even the past is modified with our words, thoughts, and actions in the present.

In the fourth chapter, *Unfinished Memories*, the author begins a search for her past: who was Monja Coen before she was a female monk? As she asks herself to the reader: “Who was I before I became a female monk? How did I behave? How did I live? What kind of transformation occurred?” (COEN, 2019, p. 129, our translation). At the time of writing this work, 2019, the author had turned 72. What did she do until she was 28, when she took the first steps toward a change that was, to our way of understanding, radical, bold, and courageous?

She moved to London, rented a “*basement* – a type of apartment that is on the level below the sidewalk” (COEN, 2019, p. 130, author's emphasis, our translation), because it was more affordable (cheaper). She studied English at *West London College*. When Cláudia (Monja Coen) worked as a journalist at the ‘Jornal da Tarde’, she was always called to the “press conferences with leaders from other countries” (COEN, 2019, p. 131, our translation) and learning another language, in this case English “was the excuse I found” (COEN, 2019, p. 131, our translation) to have the opportunity to travel to London to learn the language.

She moved to Los Angeles. It was during this period that she married an American and began to look for *Self-Realization Fellowship* and to become interested in meditation.

However, she abandoned this practice to dedicate herself to ballet, and years later dedicated herself to meditation, practicing it at the Los Angeles Zen Center. Cláudia (Monja Coen) is a daughter, a sister, a mother, a grandmother, and a human being who sought her goal and found it in Zen Buddhism. She went through many obstacles until she became Monja Coen. She was abused as a child and, because of her young age, she had no idea what it was all about. She became aware of it when she became more mature. She took a vow of chastity, as she says, “My vow of chastity was broken when I was abused by another monk” (COEN, 2019, p. 144, our translation). She married this monk to protect herself from other monks, as she states, “The young husband was a perfect shield” (COEN, 2019, p. 144, our translation).

Prior to her entry into monastic life, Monja Coen had been married as a teenager and had her only child at the age of 17. She left everything behind, a house, husband, daughter, and a dog to dedicate herself entirely to the Zen Way at the age of 28. On this path, Coen (2019, p. 180) reflects that: “Forty-four years of meditation practice. I am no longer who I was. Nor am I who I will be. If I have hurt and bothered others, it was not my intention. I was looking for the Way, the light, the life. I thought that in sex, in drugs, and in music I would find meaning to an empty life”.

Finally, *From adolescence to monastic life*, Coen (2019) talks about her life before, during, and her entry into monastic life. In this last chapter woven by the author we glimpse an encounter between Monja Coen and a Cláudia Dias Baptista de Souza who has remained in the past. Coen (2019) discerns the beginning of the chapter recalling the ocean liner coming from Europe with her wedding dress in a pink and white trunk. The piece had been embroidered on her body in Paris. She also recalls that when she got married, she learned “how to fry eggs and make butter macaroni” (COEN, 2019, p. 190, our translation) and that she really wanted to get pregnant and couldn't. She was vain, “I went to the hairdresser every day. I did a lot of make-up, had long and painted nails, dressed in discreet, elegant clothes, wore three-quarter gloves, and smoked using cigarette holders” (COEN, 2019, p. 191, our translation).

She got pregnant and was very happy about it. However, it was in this period that Coen (2019) or rather, Cláudia along with her mother went to the hospital when her water broke, and because of some complaints from Cláudia, her husband decided to move out. Inclusively, she reports that her husband wanted it to be a boy. According to Coen (2019, p. 192, our translation), and we agree, “Women's lives were not easy. Men were allowed to do everything. And regarding women, almost nothing”. When her daughter turned two years old, Cláudia went to study, she soon dropped college to dedicate herself to the ‘Jornal da Tarde’, “I went to

be a professional journalist” (COEN, 2019, p. 195, our translation). From this hectic life running from work to home with her 350 motorcycle to see and take her daughter to school, “I drank, smoked, worked, and lived to the newspaper, day and night” (COEN, 2019, p. 195, our translation). Cláudia became years later, in a zazen instant, Monja Coen (2019). Zazen instant that changes us and allows us to change, to teach and learn collectively, constitutes us, and constitutes the Other. As Coen (2019, p. 216) states, “Living is to live”. Let us follow some teachings shared by this renowned Zen Buddhist Female monk “Hands in Prayer” (COEN, 2019, p. 2016, our translation) to meditate, ask, give thanks whatever your belief is, your religion, race, and creed. All of us are one when we are in prayer, in a zazen instant.

REFERENCES

BAKHTIN, M. M. **Estética da criação verbal**. Trad. Paulo Bezerra. 6. ed. São Paulo: Martins Fontes, 2011[1979].

COEN, M. **O que aprendi o silêncio**. São Paulo: Planeta, 2019.

How to reference this article

POTTMEIER, S.; FISTAROL, C. F.; CAETANO, M. H C. What I learned from silence. **Doxa: Rev. Bras. Psico. E Educ.**, Araraquara, v. 22, n. 00, e021009, 2021. e-ISSN: 2594-8385. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30715/doxa.v22i00.15479>

Submitted: 10/07/2021

Required revisions: 15/08/2021

Approved: 02/09/2021

Published: 01/10/2021

Responsible for the translation: Editora Ibero-Americana de Educação.

Translated by: Alexander Vinicius Leite da Silva - ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4672-8799>