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The Rediscovery of Religious Silence in the Social Media Era: A Korean Case

Ignatius Kim Min-Soo

1. Introduction

We are used to live in a noisy world full of artificial things, accepting noise or constant sound as a price worth paying for contemporary convenience.¹ Various kinds of chaotic noise and sound from construction sites, congested streets, loud voices, spectacles of ads, or mobile phones give us so trouble frequently as to bring about the deterioration of human relationships or even human death. Recent neighbor disputes over noise traveling between floors left two people dead and several others injured. These similar cases have been increasing over years in Korean society. However, noises of the emerging smart age² are more delicate and complicated, different from analogue noises. In particular, the darker side of the smart age is characteristic of mentality and invisibility. The use of mobile phones or iTunes in the public space results in 'a kind of invisible violence' as the suffering and stress of the others. The bigger problem in the smart age, however, is ceaseless connection with different Social Network Services (SNS) that causes in a kind of an addiction by which reflection and contemplation are deprived of. In other words, those who are highly dependent on SNSs including Internet tend to become 'shallow and unthinkable'.³

¹ Kenny, Colum (2011). *The Power of Silence: Silent Communication in Daily Life*. London: Karnac, p. ix.

² The smart age means that distribution channels of contents have a kind of an information highway with the advent of smartphones and SNSs.

³ Carr, Nicolas (2011). *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. NY: W W Norton & Co Inc

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The purpose of this paper is to point out the very serious problems of SNS in Korean society and to stress and rediscover religious silence as an alternative to them. The Korean society is so competitive and sticky to an outcome principle that many people are harassed with self-exploitation and depression. It is reportedly asserted that this phenomenon causes from SNS in part. In spite of the definite advantage of SNS, it frequently keeps us from contemplation and reflection, eventually making us unthinkable. In recent Korean society, there are various movements, including secular and religious measures, which are aware of the need of silence in some forms such as healing, spirituality and therapy.

The paper assumes that silence is a vital way that facilitates intra- and inter-personal communications, leading into contemplation and reflection deprived by SNS. It first deals with the strength and weakness of SNS in Korean society, in particular giving more attention to its negative aspect. Secondly, it illustrates an important role of silence to overcome the negative effect of SNS, including the various problems that the current Korean society faces, and introduces a communication model concerning silence. Thirdly, it compares between Catholic ways (ex., silence retreat, Eucharistic adoration, Holy Hour or 'digital fast'⁴) and Buddhist ways (ex., Temple Stay) on the basis of the communication model suggested above. Consequently, the paper emphasizes the necessity of religious silence in the SNS era, the silence whose effect makes men thinkable and recovers their humanity

2. The Strength and Weakness of SNS

In the recent years, SNS (Social Network Service) has been a very important means of communication. It is reportedly that it is used by 82% of world-wide online population.⁵ According to Market Research Agency (eMarketers), the number of people to use SNS once a month has reached at least 1.2 billion until Dec. 2011 and this trend is expected to continue

⁴ Digital fast means to unplug from digital devices such as the Internet and smartphones at stated periods, like the traditional Catholic Lenten fast.

⁵ comScore (2011). Top 10 need-to-knows about social networking and where it's headed. *comScore Report*. 1-69.

until 2014. This means that, 2.2 billion people who correspond to 31.4% of the world-wide population use the Internet, and that the 12 million people, 54.5% of them, use SNS.⁶

According to the 2012 survey of Korea Internet and Security Agency, 47.5% of Korean smart phone users are those who experience SNSs such as Twitter, Facebook and Kakao talk. Among them, 78.5% uses SNS over once with average 0.99 hour per a day.⁷ It has been investigated that Korean SNS users have primarily the purpose of social networking with various people or personal relation management. According to DMC Report of the 'SNS user awareness', the purpose of SNS use is as follows: social networking management (76.1%), exchange of information (59.8%), management of personal history (29.5%), fun (42.6%), business (11.4%), and personal promotion (5.6%).⁸ In spite of the vast use of SNS, it has a weak and negative aspect as well as a strong and positive one simultaneously.

(1) The Strength of SNS

SNS has the positive impact on both the individual and the society. Twitter, one of most popular SNSs, is under the limelight due to the following seven reasons: involvement in social issues through the exchange of information, follower group formation based on the interaction, convenient function of communication, easy communication, relaxation and entertainment, the space for private writing, and the availability of 140-character posts.⁹ In case of Facebook, the reasons for its popular usage are as follows: the expression of identity, social interaction, usability, interaction with friends, searching for friend information, the good use of leisure, human relation management, escapism, participation,

⁶ eMarketer (2012). 29, Feb.

⁷ Korea Communications Commission and Korea Internet & Security Agency (Jan. 2013). *The Survey of Smart Phone Use in the second half of 2012*. p. 16.

⁸ Statistics Agency of South Korea (2012).

⁹ Shim, Hong-Jin and Hwang, You-Sun (2010). The Study of Micro-blogging use motivation: from the perspective of Tweeter. *The Journal of Korean Broadcasting*, 24(2), 192-234.

and breaking from loneliness, and so on.¹⁰ In addition, many people use cyberspace to gain the same experience like that they are there¹¹ and SNS enforces a weak network since it can be easily maintained at the cheap cost of the network¹² Eventually, SNS offers positive dimensions such as the formation and maintenance of relationship, trust-based social searching, and formation of public opinion and so on.

(2) The Weakness of SNS

SNS provides the good use of maintaining and enhancing the formation of a relationship and of sharing and spreading of information. However, it provokes its user's fatigue, that is, 'SNS fatigue', as a result of overusing the social network.¹³ According to the study of Kim, Hye-Youn and Oh, Joo-hyun, the SNS fatigue is derived from the burden of SNS management, information overload, and control loss in relationship¹⁴ Hyun-Jee and Jung, Dong-Hun show that the motivation factors of SNS fatigue are the burden of SNS management, reputation care, and acknowledged risk of information privacy.¹⁵ They point out SNS' discontinuance intention in terms of SNS fatigue and negative attitude toward SNS. Another study gives attention to the people who have resistance of the social media such as Twitter and Facebook that tends to be the use as innovation.¹⁶

From the perspective of SNS fatigue, the overloaded use of SNS brings significant damages to users themselves. The ubiquitous environment

¹⁰ Kim, You-Jung (2011). The Use and Gratification Study of SNS. *Media, Gender, and Culture*. 20, 71-105.

¹¹ Zhao, D., & Rosson, M. B. (Aug. 2010). *How and why people twitter: The role that micro-blogging plays in informal communication at work*. Paper presented at the ACM 2009 International Conference on Supporting group work. Retrieved from ACM.

¹² Donath, J., & Boyd, D. (2004). Public displays of connection. *BT Technology Journal*, 22(4), 71-82.

¹³ Kim, Hye-Youn and Oh, Joo-hyun. (2012). The Current Domestic and overseas SNS Reality and Social Meaning. *A Study of Information and Telecommunication*. 24(12), 19-42.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Lee, Hyun-Jee and Jung, Dong-Hun. (2013). A Study of Discontinuance Intention of Tweeter and Facebook. *Korean Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies*. 56(4).

¹⁶ Kim, Hyong-Jee and etc. (2012). A Study of Innovation Resistance among Social Media Non-Users. *Korean Journal of Journalism & Communication Studies*. 56(4), 439-464.

by smart phones equipped with the PC in hand can connect to the Internet anywhere, anytime with SNS like Twitter and Facebook, but the excessive use of smart phone and SNS causes in the colonization of private and public time. A recent survey shows that more than 60 percent of smart phone users tap on their handsets an average 30 times a day. Such a trend causes not only the danger of digital addiction but also brain fatigue. Therefore, the use of SNS may be time-wasting, making users uneasy (in particular unless they do not have their smart phone right now) and difficult their concentration, and so being at risk of addiction.

The representative symptoms of serious SNS addiction are as follows¹⁷: SNS users feel severely anxious and nervous when not in possession of a smart phone; they think they should reduce the use of smart phones, but do not succeed; they are deprived of sleep hours by using smart phones until late night; they continue to use smart phone without any reason or pay more fees than they expected. This addictive attitude toward smart phone and SNS not only becomes more and more fatigued with mental and physical exhaustion, but also puts their users under a lot of stress.

3. The Status of Korean Society related to SNS Fatigue

It is said that today Korean society is dominated by limitless competition making everyone dedicate themselves to being a winner. While such a limitless competition tends to bring about corruption by hook or crook, it drives many people to be exhausted physically and mentally and susceptible to potential illnesses such as depression and characteristic disorders. Professor Han criticizes the abnormality of a Korea based on strict discipline and ruthless competition in his book, 'Fatigue Society.'¹⁸ According to an interpretation of his discourse on fatigue society,

Korea is a 'society of undue meritocracy,' which forces each member to endure a never-ending race of productivity and efficiency, like a salesperson who must continue to rise to a

¹⁷ Lee, Gyun-Ho and etc. (2013). *Communication and Society*, Seoul: Ewha Press, p. 413.

¹⁸ Han, Byung-Cheol. (2012). *Fatigue Society*. Seoul: Literature and Intelligence Press.

higher rung by selling as much product as he or she can. The consequent competition for survival results in extreme fatigue and indifference. Those who do not reach the goal regard themselves as the underdogs of society. Such an inferiority complex in turn drives people into a state of mental and physical exhaustion.¹⁹

Korean society definitely can be defined as a result-oriented society to work to death and get tired without any coercion or pressure.²⁰ The obsessive outcome principle and the culture of competition that should win others are a factor to make Koreans tired and exhausted. Thanks to becoming more fatigue society by limitless competition culture, long working hours and result-oriented systems, Korean society faces various problems with higher levels of divorce rate, suicide death rate, and unemployment and lower birth rate, compared to those of OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) Furthermore, the problematic Korean society is intensified as it encounters SNS fatigue syndrome.

Nicolas Carr's book, 'The Shallows', accounts for how the exhausted Korean society can take a closer look at its problems in the light of SNS fatigue, as follows:

We want to be interrupted, because each interruption brings us a valuable piece of information... And so we ask the Internet to keep interrupting us, in ever more and different ways. We willingly accept the loss of concentration and focus, the division of our attention and the fragmentation of our thoughts, in return for the wealth of compelling or at least diverting information we receive. Tuning out is not an option many of us would consider.²¹

¹⁹ Oh, Jung-hun. (22 Mar. 2013). Fatigue School. *Koreatimes*.

²⁰ Ibid., Han, Byung-Cheol. (2012). 23-29.

²¹ Carr, Nicolas. (2011). *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. 133-134.

The Internet and SNS encourage the rapid, distracted sampling of small bits of information from many sources, but what we are losing is our capacity for concentration, contemplation, and reflection. This phenomenon is confirmed by Shin, Dong-Won, a Korean medical scientist. According to his explanation,²² the brain reacts continuously to outside stimulations particularly by the frequent usage of the digital devices. Thus the brain needs rest to enhance its function, which is achieved by the default mode network. If people quiet the brain through practices like meditation in default mode, it will improve its function. However, recently people can't afford to give time to their brains, which later blurs judgment because of a malfunction in perceiving information. It leads to spiritual energy exhaustion.

There is growing apprehension that Koreans have a trend toward 'an unthinkable man', like 'one dimensional man'²³ who conforms to the established order without any criticism and resistance in terms of false consciousness. They are at a risk to be dehumanized, who are interpellated by different social systems, lack independent thinking, and then lose their self. While the feelings of alienation, indifference, anger, and depression are rampant in Korean society, recent healing craze has spread with the pattern of spirituality in both the secular and sacred measures. These measures share a meditation method based on silence.

It is indeed believed that only way to heal the sick and tired Korean society, including SNS fatigue, is that everybody should recover inner communication through concentration, contemplation, and reflection, within silence. Professor Han asserts that Hannah Arendt, a German political theorist, figured out human being as speculative rather than active.²⁴ In other words, it is no exaggeration to say that the tragedy of this time results from the loss of contemplation ability. The keyword for rediscovering concentration, contemplation, and reflection is 'silence' that relates to both intra-personal and inter-personal communications.

²² Shin, Dong-Won, *Brain Healing & Digital Detox*, Century One, 2013, p. 280.

²³ Marcuse, Herbert. (1991). *One-Dimensional Man*. 2nd Edition, Boston: Beacon Press.

²⁴ Ibid, Han, Byung-Cheol. (2012). p. 46.

It helps unthinkable men to lead to self-examination and self-reflection as an inner communication.

4. Silence as a Communication Process

The rapid development and evolution of communication technology doesn't allow any room for silence in the modern world. Silence can be seen as inefficient and unproductive to modern people who are caught by perpetual access and data smog.²⁵ However, the more silence is rapidly deported or lost, the more the meaning and value of life is disappeared. To lose silence is to lose human nature.

Pope Benedict XVI recommends through his 46th World communications day message of 2012 that those who live in the digital age rely on search engines or SNSs too much, but should equip silence as a larger virtue. "Silence is a precious commodity that enables us to exercise proper discernment in the face of the surcharge of stimuli and data that we receive."²⁶ Mother Teresa also has stressed the importance of silence as follows: silence of eyes, ears, the tongue, the mind, and the heart.²⁷ She points out that we can hear the words of comfort given by God through silence and offer comfort to Jesus suffering within the poor with all our heart.

President Obama's latest "51 seconds' silence" has been highly appreciated as a masterful speech. He gave a silent speech at the memorial service that held in honor of victims dead wrongfully by 2011 shootings in Arizona. He kept silent without any words during 51 seconds, instead of expressing his feelings of anger and sadness. Such an action turned out to be more effective and formed a deep bond of sympathy. The moment of his silence seemed to be the time of healing and consolation for all Americans.

²⁵ Data smog is defined as overwhelming amount of information that would make it more difficult for the average individual to sift through and separate fact from fiction.

²⁶ Message of Pope Benedict XVI for the 46th World Communications Day. (20 May 2012). *Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization*.

²⁷ Mother Teresa. (1997). *In the Heart of the World: Thoughts, Stories, and Prayers*. California: The Mother Teresa Reader.

As mentioned already, silence is a kind of communication which leads to lead to contemplation through reflection and then allows those who are tired by fatigue and stress to recover their humanity. The important role of silence accompanies an inner communication process which is called intra-personal communication or self-communication. According to Pope Benedict XVI, "we observe the most authentic communication taking place between people who are in love: gestures, facial expressions and body language are signs by which they reveal themselves to each other. Joy, anxiety, and suffering can all be communicated in silence."²⁸ It is necessary to understand how such an inner communication occurs in the mind and spirit.

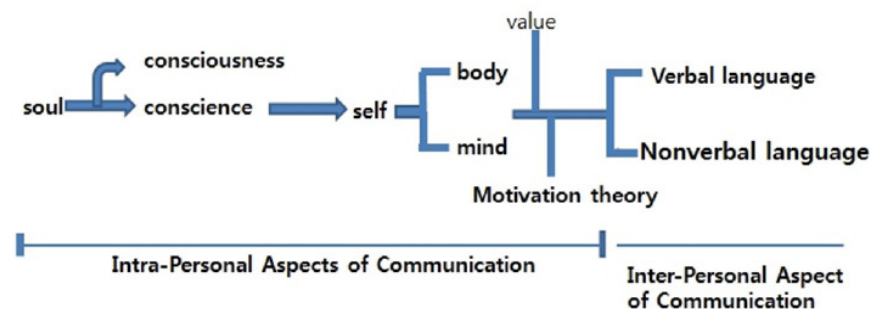
5. The Analysis of Silence Communication

All dimensions of communication are initiated from one's own self. Self-communication or intra-personal communication is fundamental in all forms of human communication as a process of thinking inside human beings: that is, the self, relationships with others, reflection on their environment, their interior monologue, and so on. When the fundamental communication operated from inside the self is in a good condition, the communication of different dimensions such as interpersonal communication, group communication, mass communication, and global communication is well done properly. Eventually the inner communication is a key element of communication, at the same time, the root to regulate all dimensions of communication.²⁹

Especially, it is very necessary to understand how silence plays an important role in the process of the inner communication. Above all, the following diagram suggested by professor Choi helps to figure out a basic principle on self-communication.

²⁸ Ibid., Message of Pope Benedict XVI for the 46th World Communications Day.

²⁹ Choi, Chang-Seop. (1994). *Self-Communication*. Seoul: Bumwoosa, 308-309.

Figure 1³⁰

According to figure 1, inter-personal communication presupposes intra-personal one. These two communications are not separate, but a process. A soul is the most basic element and works as a standard interactive among all kinds of elements. It prompts human instinct urges that make true through conscience beyond experiences. There are conscience and consciousness to connect between a soul and the self. While conscience is related to religion and ethics, consciousness is to psychology. The self is always developed by a process of motivation with different values and is composed of the body and the mind. Therefore, the self-communication or intra-personal communication forms inter-personal communication (verbal and nonverbal), passing the above interaction through the body.

However, it is silence that is necessary to operate the above communication model for intra- and inter-personal communication. It is difficult for the model to be carried out as long as noise, exhaustion, and speediness affect the self. On the contrary, Calmness, serenity, solitude, and silence induce to reflect the self, helping to facilitate intra-personal communication.

³⁰ Referred and revised on the basis of *ibid.*, p. 376.

6. The comparison of Catholicism and Buddhism regarding silence

All religions put emphasis on silence. As Pope Benedict XVI mentioned, “different religious traditions consider solitude and silence as privileged states which help people to rediscover themselves and that Truth which gives meaning to all things.”³¹ Christianity has preserved the importance of silence from Desert Fathers to modern spiritual practitioners. The reason that it needs silence is to be on with God in a severe solitude. To put it concretely, “silence is an apparatus that triggers and transforms the human heart from within to attain integration, liberation, inner transformation, and perfection in Christian life.”³²

In Buddhism, silence is a means of practicing asceticism in order to listen to his/her inner voice. It is always accompanied by Zen meditation and contemplation. Eventually, silence brings people to attain emptiness and absolute silence is for attaining enlightenment.

Recently those who are tired and suffer from stress tend to pursue secular or sacred spiritual healing programs for recovering the body and the mind. In particular, many of them follow the spiritual programs that the existing religions like Catholicism and Buddhism have practiced as a long-standing tradition. There have been retreats, Holy Hour, Eucharistic adoration, and pilgrimages to practice by participating in silent hours in the Catholic Church. In Buddhism, numerous people have attended at ‘Temple stay’³³ programs to perform silence. This phenomenon explains how much the Koreans want to be healed.

³¹ *Ibid.*, Message of Pope Benedict XVI for the 46th World Communications Day.

³² Seso, P. (2013). *The Role of Silence and Consequences for Pastoral Ministry*. MA Thesis. Manila: Graduate School University of Santo Tomas.

³³ Temple Stay is a unique cultural program which lets you experience the life of Buddhist practitioners at traditional temples which preserve the 1700 year old history of Korean Buddhism. Temple stay programs which have begun in 2002 usually include monastic formal meals with healthy, vegetarian dishes; tea ceremonies; morning and evening chant services; and “Seon” or Zen meditation. The communal Buddhist meal service or “Balwoo gongyang” is a unique way of eating in Korean temples, where food is consumed in total silence and not a single grain of rice is wasted.

Both Catholic and Buddhist programs mentioned above use silence for meditation in common. First of all, both are merged in inner and outer serenity to have an insight into the self, leading self-examination and self-reflection. In a Catholic way, there are two kinds of silence; meditative and contemplative ones. The meditative silence is an active and intentional communication which leads to self-reflection as a process of encountering God. On the other hand, the contemplative silence brings about a passive concentration in which God invites into his love, communicates and unites with us. In a Buddhist way, also, silence is a kind of instrument for concentration to escape from outer world. Another dimension of it is to enter into interior silence to discover the innermost center of the soul and to empty the mind.

However, there is a considerable difference between Catholicism and Buddhism in the process of the intra- and inter-communication model. In case of Catholicism, "Christian meditation is a term for form of prayer in which a structured attempt is made to get in touch with and deliberately reflect upon the revelations of God."³⁴ It is sometimes taken to mean the middle level in a broad three stage characterization of prayer: it then involves more reflection than first level vocal prayer, but is more structured than the multiple layers of contemplation in Christianity.³⁵ As an example of Christian meditation, Eucharistic meditations are always under silence, one by which someone can take a close look at his/her self and leads through his/her soul to God. Therefore, the communication model offered already can be revised to explain the process of Catholic meditation, as follows:

³⁴ Zanzig, Thomas. (2000). *Christian Meditation for Beginners*. Marilyn Kielbasa: Saint Mary's Press, p. 7.

³⁵ Griffin, Emilie. (2005). *Simple Ways to Pray: Spiritual Life in the Catholic Tradition*. NY: Sheed & Ward, p. 134.

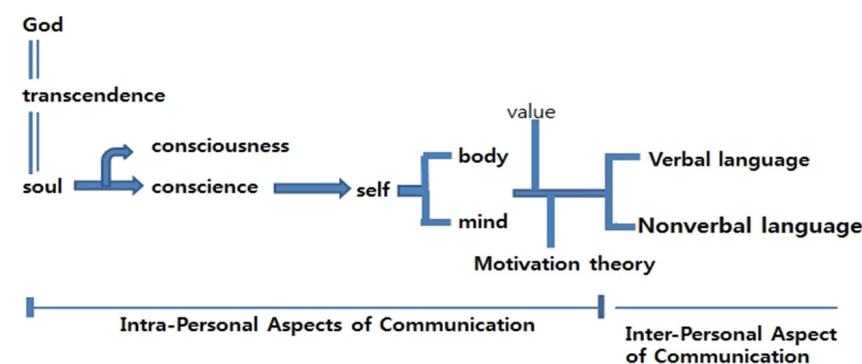


Figure 2³⁶

From Figure 2, a soul can meet and unite with God through His revelation and transcendence. However, the encounter with God is followed by an attitude of conversion and purification, a flight from "self" to the "You" of God and His illumination, based on silent contemplation.

In contrast with Catholic meditation, Buddhist meditation refers to the meditative practices associated with the religion and philosophy of Buddhism. It lacks of the concepts of God, salvation, and grace. Buddhists pursue meditation as part of the path toward Enlightenment or Nirvana. As seen by Temple stay programs, most of them offer some time for Zen meditation (Ch'am Sŏn). Not only Buddhist religious contents such as chanting, bowing, meditating, etc. are presented as part of monastic life in the temple stay program. All temple stay programs include the morning and evening ceremonial services (yebul), which consist of chanting and bowing in the main dharma hall. They also normally include sitting and walking meditation. Such Zen meditation with silent contemplation makes all of participants in the program self-reflective. If they take a close look at their soul through conscience and consciousness, they may attain "Euphoric states" or Nirvana.

³⁶ Ibid., Choi, Chang-Seop, p. 376.

The figure below presents a communication model for Nirvana that Buddhist meditation pursues.

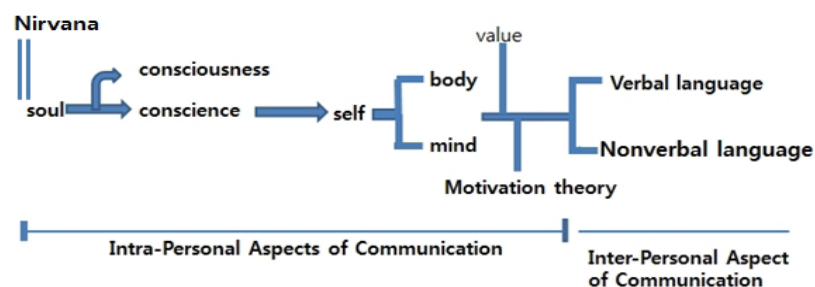


Figure 3

Nirvana obtained through Buddhist meditation should not be confused with prayer or assumed to be signs of the presence of God, a state that should always result in loving service to others.

Consequently, both Catholic and Buddhist meditations reach a soul through the self with assistance of silence, but show quite differences each other. There is no concept of God, salvation, and grace in Buddhism in principle. Moreover, while Buddhist meditation may suggest approaches to disengage the mind, Christian meditation aims to fill the mind with thoughts related to Biblical passages or Christian devotions.

7. Conclusion

The SNS era we live drives us to be tired and get stressful due to various kinds of noises. Such a fatigue society has brought about alienation, depression, and apathy, with severe social problems like high rate of suicide and divorce and social injustice. One of the most problematic things is to make us unthinkable as a result of overusing SNSs in part. Those who don't think of themselves anymore lose their self, including their

conscience and consciousness. Furthermore, their soul cannot experience any transcendence by which Catholics meet God and Buddhists Nirvana.

Recently, everyone hears the word “healing” being mentioned all around. There are things such as healing camp, healing leadership, healing land, healing concert, healing industry, healing food, healing marketing, healing therapy, healing journey, healing forest, healing meditation and so on. “Healing” seems to be the key concept of Korean society on these days. Why do we emphasize and talk about healing so passionately?

Above all, the healing process transcends merely listening to the inner voice. Though there are various healing methods, religious meditation through silence helps to cure and recover the self. However, there is a big difference between Catholicism and Buddhism in the communication model of meditation as intra-personal communication. In one word, it relies upon salvation in terms of God or his/her own efforts.

This paper has tried to stress the importance of religious silence rediscovery for overcoming the fatigue society of Korea. It may have some limits in explaining the analysis of the meditation process through silence in intra-personal communication. However, it expects its follow-up study to supplement.

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