

Maria Reis Habito
Embodying Compassion
Week Two: “The Power of Silence”
November 12, 2018



My name is Maria Reis Habito. Today, I will talk about the power of silence. In my last talk, I spoke about the power of the vow of the bodhisattva of great compassion, also known as the bodhisattva *Kuan Yin* or *Kannon* in Japanese. Today, I want to address the question, “How do we come back to our true self?”

In my last talk, I spoke about the questions of “Who am I?” and “What is my life all about?” These questions are often the incentive that cause us to take up spiritual practice. I also spoke about Kuan Yin as an image of our true self; she embodies pure and boundless emptiness, luminosity, and the compassion that rises out of that dimension. How do we come home to that dimension of our true self?

The word *Zen*, or *Chan* in Chinese, comes from the Sanskrit expression *dhyana*, which means concentration in meditation. How do we practice this concentration in meditation? There are two basic elements of this in the Zen practice: stopping—*shamatha*—and seeing—*vipassana*. In other words, stopping our always busy and distracted mind, and seeing our true nature—seeing that dimension in ourselves that is boundless and brings us peace. How do we stop the active mind that takes us away from the here and now?

This is something that Kuan Yin teaches us in the *Surangama Sutra*, translated as the *Heroic March Sutra*, in the chapter, “Kuan Yin’s Method of Deep Listening.” You may come across Kuan Yin translated as *Avalokiteshvara*, which is the Sanskrit name for this bodhisattva. For those who are not familiar with the term bodhisattva, it means wisdom being.

As I said, the basis of stopping our always active and distracted mind is concentration. As the *Surangama Sutra* tells it, bodhisattva Kuan Yin was on an island listening to the sounds of the waves rolling in, receding, rolling in, receding. As Kuan Yin listened to the waves, they eventually became silent as they entered the ear.



The waves that we are usually engulfed in are the waves of our worries, fears, regrets about the past, anxiety about the future, and feelings of unhappiness in the present. These waves of our thoughts do not let us experience complete rest, transparency, and light. How do we deal with these waves?

We know from experience that if we are with someone, but our mind constantly takes us somewhere else, then we are not really present with that person. If we go to a concert and our mind is occupied with something else, then we miss the music. Or often, we are outside, perhaps taking a walk, and our mind is trying to solve some problem. By being hung up in our thoughts, we completely miss the present moment.

Let's say you are a musician. If you are not fully forgetting yourself in the music and there is something else on your mind, then the music cannot really move the listeners. How can we come back to this place of complete silence and openness of mind so that we can be present, aware of the present moment, and with that, become a present to others?

This is what the *Surangama Sutra* teaches us about the practice of listening to silence. This is one of the main methods that my own teacher—Hsin Tao of the Wu Sheng Monastery in Taiwan—teaches as a main practice. I just returned from a one-month retreat in Taiwan, where our whole practice was listening to silence.

Listening to silence is built on a meditation that most of us are familiar with—paying attention to our breath. We can imagine Kuan Yin sitting at the shore, listening to the waves, concentrating on breathing in and breathing out, and listening to the sound of the waves. This practice of listening to the silence settles down our very active and destructive mind and helps us reach a state of *samadhi*—deep concentration or absorption, a state of peace where our destructive mind comes to rest.



Zen practice is about *not thinking*. How do we reach that state of not thinking so that our conceptual mind can come to rest and our intuitive mind can open up? As Kuan Yin describes it in the *Surangama Sutra*, in listening to the sounds of the waves, the waves became silent. With that silence, there was no longer a distinction between sound and silence, between the one who is listening and the sounds themselves. This distinction between subject and object, which is our normal way of apprehending the world, fell away. The usual notion of the *I*, *me*, and *mine* as a subject as opposed to the object fell away, too. At the same time, the distinction between inside and outside completely dropped away. All that remained was the sound of the waves rolling in and rolling out.

As we are listening to the silence, is our capacity to hear either dependent on the silence or on the sounds? If we listen very deeply, we find that there are some sounds that we find disturbing. For example, if you are sitting in meditation and there is a sound from outside that is disturbing you, this idea that it is “disturbing you” is already a label affixed to the sound. At the end of the meditation, when the sound is gone, you recognize that it's silent, and acknowledge that the silence is nice. That is another judgment that we are not aware of.

Usually, in its daily course of functioning, our mind makes judgments without our awareness. We judge something as beautiful, we judge something as not so nice; we want this, and we don't want that. Our mind is constantly active, which is exhausting for us. This constant activity of the mind as it tries to categorize, quantify, and judge things takes us out of the present.

Kuan Yin is called our true, joyful, pure self. However, we often don't feel that joy because our heart and mind are burdened with so many things that don't make us joyful. This practice of listening to the silence and sounds helps us put away the burden of constant thinking. As we deeply enter into this space of listening to silence, the experience of a disturbing sound or the constantly thinking mind slowly subsides. With that, we enter a space of pure awareness of



sounds and the silence in those sounds. As we continue to listen, the silence opens up to an appreciation for the emptiness, because silence is that which underlies this whole existence. If you listen very carefully, you will observe that every sound arises out of the silence. Right now, there was an airplane passing by. We heard that sound and now it's gone. Where did the sound go?

Silence is the boundless horizon that forms the basis for everything in the world around us. In the *Surangama Sutra*, Kuan Yin explains that when listening to silence, both awareness and the object of awareness become empty. In other words, our awareness is completely emptied out of all judging thoughts. Even what we see or hear has a quality of emptiness and luminosity—we realize that they are no longer objects out there. Then, emptiness and awareness merge and reach a state of perfection. It is then that we can deepen into the reality that we are already in—that reality that motivates Kuan Yin's vow to save all beings. How could all beings be saved if they weren't saved from the beginning? How could anyone be liberated if this liberation was not already a part of who we are?

This practice of listening to silence can be practiced anywhere—not only when we are sitting on the cushion in meditation—but everywhere in our daily lives. For example, we can practice when we are driving a car. If there is another car that stops next to us and makes a lot of noise, perhaps it annoys us. But if our mind is attuned to silence, then we can see beyond that feeling of annoyance. Or if we are at work and emails come in all the time, we may start to feel stressed. If we take a deep breath and try to listen to the dimension of unbound silence in everything, then this feeling of stress will calm down and come to rest.

In our practice, we shouldn't attach to either sound or silence, but instead listen to a dimension beyond that: the silence beyond the silence. Then, awareness of our own emptiness and the emptiness of an object merge and come to perfection. But what is that perfection? To provide an



example, when we ring the bell at the end of a sit, we hear the sound of that bell. When we are attuned to listening to silence, that sound is not separate from us. However, if our legs hurt from sitting and we couldn't wait for the sound of the bell to end the meditation session, then as soon as we hear the sound, we think, “Ah, what a relief! Now I can get up. Now I can do other things. Why did I have to sit here so long?” It's a completely different experience.

The practice of listening to silence throughout our daily life brings us to a state of greater openness to and awareness of what is going on in ourselves and around us from a view of non-separateness. Non-separateness is also known as non-duality or absolute oneness.

Sometimes we are restless or impatient because we want to move along quickly. However, we must remember that the Buddha took six years of ascetic practice to reach enlightenment. We have our whole lives to practice. If we live every day with determination and compassion toward ourselves, then we have a good chance of reaching the state that Kuan Yin experienced by listening to the waves—that state that goes beyond *I* and *thou*, *he* and *she*, *inside* and *outside*, *noise* and *silence*. If we can experience the state of inner light and peace beyond these dualities, we can understand what is meant by true self as pure luminosity and emptiness. Those words not only guide us, but come from experience.

My own teacher, Master Hsin Tao, practiced listening to silence in graveyards in Taiwan for 12 years. After that, he continued his practice for two more years while fasting in a cave. So when he tells me, “This is your true self, go and experience it,” I try to follow. I invite you to come along and follow with me. I am going to give a short guided meditation on how to begin listening to silence.

Once you have been doing mindful breathing meditation and you feel settled in yourself, you can do the following. Sit and relax your ears, head, shoulders, and back. Relax your entire body and

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allow every cell in your body to relax and be happy. Then deeply listen to the silence—the silence in yourself and the silence in the universe. The heaven, the earth, the mountains, the rivers, the sun, the moon, and the stars are all completely silent. Listen to that silence. Quiet down. Settle down. Listen to the silence. Gently direct your ears into that silence without stressing anything. Relax your entire body and open up to the silence of the universe. Everything is in that deep silence, that silence of nothing there at all, that silence of no sound. Open up to that dimension of no sound. Listen to it in everything. Listen to that dimension of emptiness.

You can practice that wherever you are. Even if you are busy at work, you can take a minute or two to take a deep breath and listen to silence until you find yourself centered again. Then, you can pick up your work and continue on with your day.

It's a very helpful practice and I encourage you to try it out. If you need more information about it, there is a book I edited called *The Way of The Heart*, by Master Hsin Tao. It's available on Amazon. It provides the exact steps necessary to listen to silence and let your mind rest so that you can deeply enter samadhi.

To recap, in my first talk, I spoke about the power of the vow of the bodhisattva Kuan Yin as our motivation for practice. In this talk, I spoke about the how-to of practice—how to stop our discursive mind and instead see into the boundless empty dimension in everything by opening up and listening to silence. In my next talk, “The Power of Emptiness,” I will speak more about that dimension of emptiness and its relation to the teaching of bodhisattva Kuan Yin in the *Heart Sutra*.