

Mark Unno

*Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism*

Week Four: “Deep Listening, Deep Hearing”

February 24, 2022



Welcome to the fourth of our four-part video Dharma Talk series, “Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism.” This episode is entitled “Deep Listening, Deep Hearing.” In the Shin Buddhist tradition, the teaching of deep listening and deep hearing is one of the most important teachings: deep listening, deep hearing to the voiceless voice of the oneness of reality; deep listening, deep hearing to the voiceless voice of the call of great compassion.

I’d like to illustrate this teaching through the story of a young woman, still a teenager, 14 years old. I learned of this story through a conference that I attended. I was a visiting professor of Buddhism and psychology in the psychotherapy program at Kyoto University. In that particular year, Kyoto University was the host for the annual meeting of the Japanese Association for Clinical Psychology. I was asked to be a respondent for a panel of papers. Initially I hesitated because it’s not my main field. My main field is Buddhist studies. But usually when they’re graduate student papers, even if it’s a big meeting, only a handful of people show up to listen, so I wasn’t too worried.

But when I got to the hall following the directions of the map that was given to me, I realized that it was the main conference hall that held 3,000 people. It was amphitheater-style seating, so I went down the aisle, and there was a panel of four graduate students and then another table off to the side with two chairs. I took one of the seats, and then the other respondent came in. The other respondent was Dr. Hayao Kawai, who was the founder of the entire association and its president. So I realized, “Oh, that’s the reason,” because none of these people came to hear me. They didn’t even know who I was. They came because of him. But I was quite nervous, and so I furiously took notes. They were all amazing presentations by these graduate students from Kyoto University. But I just want to share the story of one of them.

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As part of their work, not only do they have to do research, reading a lot of articles and books and writing papers, of course, they're going to become counselors and therapists themselves, so they have to do internships and practicums. So this particular graduate student, who was a young woman, was assigned to be the counselor at a junior high. This is the case of a young girl who was sent to her because there was genetic deafness in her family that came from the maternal side. She was given the option of having genetic testing for adult-onset deafness, so she was not deaf yet, and she didn't know she would become deaf, but she could have a genetic test to see if she might become deaf. Because the result of the test might have a dramatic impact on her mentally and emotionally, then they're required to go to counseling, and so that's what she was sent to this counselor, this graduate student.

After everything was explained to this young girl, it was her choice, her decision. She said, “I want to get the test.” Two weeks later, she got the test. The doctor virtually guaranteed that she would become completely deaf. After receiving the results, she had to go to counseling with this graduate student.

This graduate student said in her presentation that when she met this young girl, she didn't know what to say. The young girl said to her—this was all in Japanese, but I'll render it in English—“When I received the results, I died.” She didn't say, “I felt like I died.” She said, “I died.”

I think that's very understandable because this young woman had been recognized for her musical talent. Her music teacher, her violin teacher, had been taking her to concerts whenever somebody famous came to their city from around the world, Europe, the United States, elsewhere. She had been introduced to the best violin teacher in her area. She was eating, sleeping, and drinking violinist. That's who she was. Now, suddenly, she had lost that dream and, along with it, her identity as a violinist. That's why she said, “I died.”

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What do you say to someone who says, “I died”? You can’t say, “Oh, it’ll be OK.” There’s no form of therapy. Kyoto University is one of the leading centers of psychotherapy in Japan. They study all different forms: Jungian psychotherapy, object relations psychotherapy, cognitive behavioral psychotherapy. But none of these were going to do anything to help her with the fact that she had lost everything that she had put her whole being into: being a violinist.

So the graduate student who was making the presentation said, “I just remained silent.” The counseling session was 50 minutes. Complete silence after that. Every week, the young girl was sent to this counseling session, and every week, 50 minutes of complete silence. This went on for several weeks: complete silence.

Finally, the young girl began to speak. She said, “I’ve decided to visit the graves of my ancestors, my grandmother, my great-aunts.” So she went to visit, and then she came back for her next counseling session. Initially, again, it was silence. But finally, the young girl found the courage to speak up.

She said, “At first when I went to see Grandma and my great auntie, I was really angry. I said, ‘Why did you do this to me? You gave me the gift, this musical gift. But it’s so unfair. Now you’re taking it away from me before I can truly enjoy it. It’s so unfair.’” And I think we all agree it’s really unfair.

But she said, “As I kept talking to Grandma and my great aunt, I began to feel they were speaking to me. And I thought, ‘Wow, how hard it must have been for Grandma when there was no counseling, there were no therapists, that she was stigmatized for not being able to hear, the suffering she must have borne. But she was a strong woman. I know that because she raised my mother, and my mother raised me, and for the first time I feel this deep, deep connection with

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Grandma and with my great auntie. I don't know what I'm going to do with my life, but they have given me the strength, the courage that I need to go on and find out what life has in store for me.”

When I heard this presentation, I was left speechless. Kyoto University is one of the top two universities in Japan along with Tokyo University. They're like the Harvard and Yale or the Harvard and Princeton, whatever two best schools you'd like to pick out. This graduate student is brilliant. She had studied all the theories and methods of counseling and psychotherapy. But when she encountered this young violinist, she did not try to paper over the situation out of fear, pulling out some fancy words or concepts to try to appease the young girl. Instead, she remained steadfast in her heart of sincerity.

It wasn't just that they remained silent. But this young student, this graduate student, understood she needed to pay full attention to this young violinist with her whole being, listening to her silence. And I think that was absolutely instrumental in helping this young girl, this violinist, begin to listen deep within herself and then be able to listen to the voiceless voice of her grandmother and her great-aunt coming from beyond life and death, the voiceless voice of the oneness of reality, the voiceless voice of great compassion.

One of the most significant aspects of this presentation that I heard was that the graduate student did not rely on her knowledge or expertise. Instead, she realized, “I have no knowledge.” In Shin Buddhism, we would say she fully realized she was a foolish being when she came before this young girl, filled with ideas, but all of which turned out to be utterly useless like illusions, mere attachments. But fortunately, she herself, for whatever reason (because I have no reason to know that she came from a Buddhist or even Shin Buddhist background), was illuminated by a deeper, bigger truth that let her know it's OK. Let go of all that knowledge, and just be right there with the young violinist, for the young violinist.

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So in Shin Buddhism, the teaching of deep listening and deep hearing is to first realize I have no ability to listen, I have no ability to hear based on previously accumulated knowledge. I need to let go of everything I thought I knew and allow myself to be humbled in the light of the deeper truth, that greater truth, the deep flow of the oneness of reality, the heart of great compassion that holds both this young violinist and myself, far beyond anything we could imagine.

Shin Buddhism is the path of the foolish being illuminated, enveloped, and dissolved into the ocean of limitless light, of boundless compassion, of letting go of who I think I am or should be so that I can come into the deeper awareness of my deepest truest self, my deepest truest reality. And that is the point of realization where the foolish being filled with blind passions meets and is embraced by and dissolves into the awakening of infinite light. This is the teaching of *namu amida butsu*, the path of Shin Buddhism.

Thank you very much for this time in this video talk, and thank you if you’ve taken the opportunity to view and listen to the other Dharma Talks on this theme, “Opening the Heart of Great Compassion: The Path of Shin Buddhism.” Thank you very much.