

On Silence

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TO REALLY HEAR we must be silent. Sound exists against a background of silence, just as the foreground is in contrast with what is behind it. When the background is clear and empty then the foreground is vivid and bright.

We all experience this background silence. When we hear a sound, whether it be a note or a symphony, it exists against the backdrop of silence and space. This is true not only of sound but also of the objects of the other five senses. Just as our planet rests in space, thought and sensation are surrounded by silence. The thoughts and ideas which we think of as our mind rest in space and stillness. Silence is around this moment. This background cannot be known with the intellect, because as soon as some “thing” is perceived it has already been distinguished from what is behind it. Because it is ubiquitous it is called Great Silence, Great Stillness, or Great Space. But, even Great Silence becomes just another idea as soon as the intellectual mind tries to know it.

To experience Great Silence it is first important to empty the mind of ideas, notions, and insights. One common way to do this is through Buddhist meditation. There are many types of Buddhist meditation, and they all require our attention to be fully engaged with what is, right here, right now. This process is not easy. Usually we have to proceed through several stages to touch deep silence. It is helpful to begin by creating ordinary silence, finding a quiet environment free from normal distractions. Then we can begin formal meditation, turning the attention inwards, using “mindfulness and insight.” With mindfulness we first become aware of sensation, such as sound, and then with insight we look into it deeply. When we begin to meditate there is little awareness of silence. At first our attention is not focused on silence or sound, but on the endless stream of opinions, memories, and likes

and dislikes that obfuscate deeper awareness. Gradually, by letting go of distractions and repeatedly turning the attention back to the direct sensory experience of sound, sound becomes purified. There is “just sound.” When a concentrated mind rests completely on pure sound then we can take a step backward into a greater awareness of the silence around the sound.

To be aware of vast silence enables us to hear what someone else is saying uncluttered by the background noise of our own thoughts. Just as in a silent room a faint sound maybe clearly heard, when our mind is deeply quiet we can hear subtleties of speech and presentation that otherwise would go unnoticed. To be silent inside is to be open, willing to receive what the speaker wishes us to hear. To deeply listen and hear the sounds of the world, we must be familiar with silence.

There is a classic Zen story of a professor who visited a Zen master. The master greeted him and offered him tea. The professor said, “Please teach me about Zen.” The master began pouring tea. He continued pouring till the tea overflowed and splashed on the floor. “Stop, stop, the cup is full. No more will go in!” Master smiled and said, “Just so. You can’t put more in a full container. Before you can learn, you must empty your mind.”

The thinking mind is too full to know deep silence. It is always busy, separating this from that, defining, identifying, and creating. To experience deep silence the mind must be empty, not blurred by the interference of thoughts, opinions, worries, music, or images. These all require the mind to be active, engaged with past memories and future possibilities. When the mind rests in silence there are no or few thoughts. It is empty of judgment and opinion, free of fantasies of past and future. The mind, when it is silent, is always present. This is not a void, empty, dead state. It is like a vast universe of potential energy out of which all things arise.

Jizō Bosatsu (Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva 地藏菩薩) represents the archetypical vow to relieve suffering in all six realms of existence. Compassionate people who work to relieve suffering encounter many kinds of frightening, dark, and difficult circumstances. How can we as budding bodhisattvas do this? With Great Silence. Deep inner silence is of high value to anyone who works with violence, catastrophe, death, or great suffering. Hearing stories of torture, abuse, or cruelty with an angry or anxious mind can lead to hopelessness and despair. But, if we listen from a place of deep silence we can maintain some equanimity

and clarity of mind. Inner silence is not anxious. Inner silence is not reactive. Inner silence allows us to hear things clearly and deeply, to hear things as they really are. When we know things as they really are then we can respond effectively without reactivity and burnout.

Deep silence is the source of creativity. When the mind is busy we tend to look at things through our filters, our opinions, and our assumptions based on our past experience. But silence can be experienced only now, so what comes into the view of the silent mind can be seen freshly. This fresh eye can look on problems with more flexibility and creativity. The restricted mental filters through which we habitually view the world dissolve, allowing new perspectives and creative approaches to old challenges. For example, many artists experience blocks in creativity. No matter how hard they try what they produce feels stale, uninspired, or just wrong. Often the cause is attempting to “think” their way through a problem by grasping at old ideas that no longer work. When artists stop the mind, stop exerting effort to make something happen and rest in alert, aware silence—then out of the unbounded mind of silence creativity blossoms anew.

Experiencing silence of the mind is not easy. It can even be frightening when we first touch it because all that we are accustomed to relying on disappears. We enter a state of “not knowing.” In the ordinary way of thinking our lives are dependent on what and how much we know: knowing where we are, who we are, what we are going to do, what the outcome will be, and so on and on. The most important task of the maturing mind is to learn what will enable us to survive and succeed in society. Throughout life learning and being open to learning is essential for an intelligent life. But learning has an end. No matter how much we know there is always more that is unknown. Deep silence is the heart of the unknown, the Great Mystery. To let go, even for a few moments, of all that we know, and to step into the Great Mystery, can change our view of the world and of ourselves. We see that what we normally think of as “I” is only a small and pale reflection of our true nature, Deep Silence. To take this step is one of the perennial challenges of the spiritual path.

For people of our age, discovering the satisfaction and peace of silence is difficult. Silence is constantly challenged. Setting aside ignorance (Jpn. *mumyō* 無明, Skt. *avidyā*, Pāli *avijjā*; also Jpn. *chi* 癡 or Pāli *moha*, “delusion”) for the moment, these threats to silence fall into two basic categories, trying to get something we want (Jpn. *ken* 慳, Skt.

rāga; also *lobha*, or *trṣṇā*), or trying to get rid of something we don't want (Jpn. *shin* 瞋, Pāli *dosa*, Skt. *dveṣa*). We are taught from an early age that we should be able to buy what we want. We are educated by the media on what we "should" have, and how we "should" get it. Applying this one-sided view, we attempt to get anything we think might bring peace and pleasure. We insist that with enough effort, the best technique, or the perfect environment, we will get what will make us happy. When this grasping state of mind is applied to the spiritual life we try to capture the peace and wisdom of silence as if it were one more thing we could buy. But this attempt to get something, to "get" silence, to "make" inner peace happen, creates so much noise that real silence cannot be heard. Because this noise obscures the deep truth of our lives, some people are driven into ever greater frantic activity of the mind. To sit with a distressed person and guide his or her attention to what is present, to help him or her learn to quiet the mind, gives that person a touch of peace. In the Zen Buddhist tradition this is one of the principles that is used in private interview (Jpn. *sanzen* 参禅, or *dokusan* 獨參). The teacher sits, calmly in a quiet room, with his or her mind still, without judgment or expectation, waiting for a student to arrive. When the student enters this environment, sits quietly, and breaths attentively, the student resonates with the teacher's state of mind. In this way little by little the student can learn to feel the silence in him- or herself that is always present.

However, instead of delving into the silence of the Great Mystery, much of our society tries to get rid of it. As a culture we are averse to silence, often afraid of it. We have used our technical skills to try to fill silence, cover it over, with music, radio, television, movies, and iPods. People walk down the street in their own separate world of sound, wired directly into the ear. In most buildings, from homes to shopping malls, there is ubiquitous sound. Movies bombard all of the senses with sounds so intense they can be felt and seen. In the war against silence, we have created the greatest cacophony in human history, where inner and outer noise pollution has become so extreme that it is regarded as "normal." But it is not normal. Paying attention in this environment becomes like trying to have a conversation on a cell phone with poor reception in a crowded room with rock music playing. Without the ability to rest in silence, to know what is behind all of the noise, we become confused, unable to think clearly, unable to focus, distracted. To be healthy we must know silence.

The main weapon in the war against silence is desire or craving (Jpn. *ai* 愛, Skt. *tr̥ṣṇā*). Environmental noise covers over one level of silence, but it does not stop at the ear drum. As a culture we have chosen to subject ourselves to the relentless bombardment of noisy advertising. This goes directly into the mind. In silence there is no separation and therefore no desire. But when we attune our mind to the seductive noise of the world we become full of desires for things we do not have and did not know existed. Through media we begin to live stirred up, full of artificially generated emotions, which give us the illusion of living an exciting, pleasure-filled life. Instead, dissatisfaction and dismay (Jpn. *ku* 苦, Skt. *duḥkha*) with our self-generated insufficiency are the results. By trying to treat our dismay with still more noise, more desire, we fuel the source of suffering. The suffering that we then feel leads to violence by humans against the rest of the natural world. As the second noble truth says, “Craving is the origin of suffering.” Through craving we turn away from what we have always had, is always with us, in us, around us—silence.

But the deep silence that is underneath all things is always present, always available. It is not relative so it is worth nothing. It cannot be created, used up, bought, or sold. It cannot be killed, blown up, or destroyed. It can only be hidden, and what is hidden can be found. This is the eternal truth of Buddhism, that peace, nirvana, freedom is always possible. The Great Silence, Great Stillness, Great Space is the source of all things. It is Wisdom (Jpn. *chi* 智, Skt. *prajñā*), in which there is no distinguishing, no past, no future, no color, sound, taste, touch, sensation, or thought. And, though we may know about this possibility, we only recognize and understand through practice how far the power of silence extends. To know this we must listen with our whole body and mind.

