

In the *Sburangama* Sutra, twenty five bodhisattvas tell the Buddha how they achieved realization. In the last story, Kwan Yin, which means “to perceive the sound,” bows before the Buddha and describes the stages of her meditation practice. In Soto Zen we understand that realization sometimes comes instantaneously but often comes in stages like climbing one mountain peak after another. So Kwan Yin describes the stages of her realization in the context of her work with hearing and listening. She begins by saying, “World Honored One, I remember, when as many kalpas ago as sands in the Ganges, there was a Buddha in the world named Hearing the World’s Sounds.

“It was under that Buddha that I brought forth my resolve to practice. That Buddha taught me to enter samadhi through a process of hearing and listening. Initially, I entered the flow through hearing and I let go of the idea of objects. I didn't experience objects anymore. Since sense objects require motion, my sense organs were quiet. So two characteristics of movement and stillness crystallized and did not arise. The whole world became quiet. After that, gradually advancing, hearing and what was heard both disappeared. Once hearing was ended, there was nothing to rely on and awareness and the objects of awareness became open. When the emptiness of awareness reached ultimate perfection, emptiness and what was being emptied then also ceased.”

She goes on to say that she became united with all living beings in all the directions of space and time. Her being became permeated with hearing the sounds of the world and she developed a “kind regard” for all beings, equally. This level of listening goes beyond distinctions of sound and returns to the very source of hearing, which is our self nature. Through the dharma gate of the sense of hearing she returned to her self. In a letter to the abbess of the shinryu-ji Monastery, Dogen said: “Once upon a time a certain Bodhisattva found illumination by concentrating on all sounds with reverent awe. If someone living now desires to understand the essence of the spirit-as-such identical with Buddha-as-such, she shall search instantly when hearing a sound for whom who listens to it.”

Her compassion for all living beings arises out of a deep and open listening that just lets things come and go without grasping at sounds. Apparently, she lived by the sea where she discovered how to listen to the coming and going of the tides without

grasping onto either the sounds of the waves or the silence of their absence. Normally, we attach ourselves to the transient sounds of the waves and how they grow louder and softer. But her listening was just a wide-open sensitivity to what was in front of her. She realized that the sounds of the waves were neither permanent nor substantial. They arose and fell within the field created by her ability to hear. By allowing the sounds to “fall off” and letting go of deluded attachments she is following the teaching of the Diamond Sutra of “not arousing one’s mind by abiding in sound.”

From what she said in the sutra you can put together a three step meditation practice which you can practice on your cushions or as you go about your day-to- day activities.

Step 1: The first step is to let go of thoughts and images as you listen to the external sounds in your environment: a bus going by, a car door slamming, a bird singing. You don’t have to specifically listen. You don’t have to think about it. You just let the sounds enter your awareness and your body. You don’t have to search specifically for sounds — they are already there. You just observe them and let them be. You relax and pay attention to sounds growing louder and softer without doing anything. You find that you hear sounds without identifying them. Eventually you find that you can hear silence too. Just as a car door slamming is an object of hearing so too is the silence afterwards. They are both phenomena.

This is called “entering the flow of sound.” It’s the first stage of this practice. Anyone can do it because we do it all the time. But now we are being asked to turn it into a cultivation method. “Entering the flow” means letting go of the sound you hear. Let it arise, but don’t analyze it, just know it when it comes. And there really isn’t anything you need to let go of because there is really nothing substantial to hold onto. After a while you will notice that your mind begins to settle. This is the first stage of the practice.

Step2: Gradually you stop trying to listen and the mind quiets down even more. This stage is called *all the sound that enters quiets down*. You let go of all sounds and rest in a state of cessation or stillness or silence. This is the state of *Samadhi*. You are quiet in front of quietness itself.

Step3. But there is one more step. You need to see that silence is as much an object of hearing as are sounds. They are both sense objects. So you need to let go of silence too. According to Kwan Yin, “When sense and the objects of sense both become empty, then emptiness and sense merge and reach a state of absolute perfection. This, according to Kwan Yin is a manifestation of the emptiness of Nirvana.

Her practice teaches us that the best way for us to achieve the First Great Vow, the wish to free all beings, is to listen to the world’s sounds, especially the cries of the world with an open receptivity. You begin to see that life itself is the unfolding of compassion. When you wholeheartedly take in the cries of the world, compassion naturally arises. Our practice is not about fussing about and fixing things. It is about wholehearted listening with a loving presence to the world as it is, within us and outside of us.

Legend says that she is always listening and all we have to do is call out her name and disasters will be averted and help will appear. You call and she hears. And as soon as she hears, help appears. Compassion and help are part of the universe and part of ourselves. But we have to do something to receive this help. We have to listen—really listen— with the whole of ourselves. According to Dogen, if we listen with our entire being, we eliminate the space between the self and what we are listening to. He says that *we need to listen with our eyes and see with our ears*. We have to be completely open to everything around us and inside us. If we do this, the conditions of our lives are transformed and help appears—not from some place far away in a Buddha heaven—but from the Presence that fills our bodies.

Let’s try an experiment. Find a relaxed, attentive posture. Lower your gaze to about three feet and front of you and take three deep breaths. Now repeat to yourself, “Listen with your eyes and see with your ears.” Notice how the mind attempts to reject this statement as nonsense. But it was written by the founder of our lineage so keep it as a question, as a way of looking at your experience in a completely new way. So let go of your thoughts and return to your breath.

Doshi rings bell...

As you listen to the bell, follow how the echoes fade gradually into space. Don't hold onto the sounds; don't try to make them clearer or louder. Notice how you change. Notice how the outlines of your body become less and less closed as you become filled with sound. There is no object of sound and no you. There is just sound. The air you breathe is sound. Let the echoes fade into silence, into emptiness. Don't grasp at anything. Let everything go. Notice how the silence fills you. Notice how clear and attentive your mind is. Notice how open you feel to what is around you. Now, open your eyes wider and take in everything around you. This is a form of Kwan Yin's meditation practice.