

# Going Beyond

## BUDDHA

Excerpt from the new book *Going Beyond Buddha: The Awakening Practice of Listening* by Zen Master Dae Gak. (Boston: Charles E. Tuttle Co., 1997.)

During my training for a Ph.D. in clinical psychology, I interned for one year at the Cleveland Psychiatric Institute, a state mental hospital in Ohio. My job was to work with the resident schizophrenic patients.

There was a secretary who worked in the main office. In the morning, she would come in and sit in a chair, and she'd stay there all day long, typing away. She had been there for years, knew everything there was to know about hospital politics, and shared her knowledge willingly. Her office was two or three doors down from mine, and we became good friends during my time there.

The offices were small. Mine was five by ten feet. So it was quite close quarters. The office had a desk, a large window, and two wooden captain's chairs with slats in the back. The ceilings were quite high, perhaps twelve feet, so one had the sense of being in a column. I would sit, and the patient and I would be quite close, almost knee to knee in these wooden chairs in this little office. If you have ever worked with schizophrenia, if you have ever known a schizophrenic or been schizophrenic, you know that sitting knee to knee with somebody in a little office is not paradise.

There is an interpersonal tension that develops between patient and doctor in those circumstances. In this tension of intimacy, in this intrusion of personal space, psychotic persons are put under such great stress that their typical dysfunctional adaptive behavior becomes exaggerated.

One day I was sitting with a woman who jerked and twitched as I tried to give her the Rorschach inkblot test. She asked me, "What is that noise?" I could hear nothing. It was silent.

She again insisted, "What is that noise? It is so loud in here! Can't you make them stop?"

I at once concluded that she was having an auditory hallucination, which is a key diagnostic sign of schizophrenia. She

became more and more agitated.

She said, "I want to get out of here. This is terrible. I don't have to take this test. I don't have to do this. You can't make me. And besides, it is so noisy in here, I can barely think."

From my point of view, it was extremely quiet. Our offices were on the quiet end of the hospital; it was like a morgue. Dead. Not much happening. People who did move around were so medicated that they didn't make too much noise. They just shuffled about quietly.

There we were, knee to knee, she, twitching and jerking and I, having to complete this Rorschach test so that it would be in her chart. I finally stopped the test and listened with her a moment.

I asked her what it sounded like. She said it sounded like a machine gun. Like somebody was killing somebody in the next room with a machine gun. So I listened. I said, "When you hear it, could you point it out?"

She said, "It's constant."

"OK, if it stops, would you tell me when it stops?"

So we sat together, listening. Just the two of us, listening. Test put aside; "she's the patient, I'm the psychologist" put aside because I was truly interested in finding out what was going on with this woman. I was no longer ready to dismiss her perceptions as auditory hallucinations. So we listened together.

She said, "There, it stopped. No, it started again."

Finally, I discovered, based on the rhythm of her stopping and starting, that the sound that was so intrusive in her consciousness was the secretary's typing, three offices down.

It took an enormous amount of effort for me to listen, to hear what she was hearing. When I finally discovered it and got in some rhythm with her, she was extremely pleased. No one had ever believed that the sounds she was hearing were real. People simply dismissed her, deciding that the sound she was hearing was a product of her own fantasy.

Since the early seventies, elaborate theories of schizophrenia have been developed regarding information-processing. One of the theories on certain kinds of schizophrenia is that the schizophrenic doesn't develop filtering mechanisms as "normal" individuals do. Nonschizophrenics are able to filter out irrelevant sound or memory. For example, you are able to read these words while filtering out the sounds around you, without even knowing it.

Each one of us has tones, firings, in our ears. There is a form of meditation where yogis listen to the sounds of their own vibrating eardrums. Yogis claim that if you focus on the sounds of your own vibrating eardrums, they become like trumpets, heaven's trumpets. With careful listening, time slows down. With the letting go of discriminating consciousness, sound becomes quite slow, wonderfully melodic.

But for some schizophrenics, this process requires very little meditation. Sound is so loud, and their ability to filter is so impaired, that they hear quite strongly what is normally filtered out.

I sat with this woman and listened and said, "That's the sound of the typewriter the secretary is typing on down the hall."

"Really? I don't believe you!"

"Yes, you don't believe me, but it does not have to be something bad."

"I still don't believe you."

"OK, but let us find out so you do not have to believe or not believe."

We walked down the hall slowly and we listened. Sure enough, she realized that it was simply the sound of the typewriter.

I don't know that it made any difference that she and I explored that sound. I never saw her again. That was the nature of my internship. People came, I spent a little time with them, and they went away. I never knew whether she was discharged or what happened. But we spent an afternoon listening and discovering each other. One human being stopped and listened with another.

The Zen school in which I teach is called Kwan Um. The school was founded by Zen Master Seung Sahn and is named after the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Kwan Se Um Bosal. *Kwan Um* means "perceive sound." Kwan Se Um Bosal is the bodhisattva who attained enlightenment when hearing the sounds of the world, listening. The story of her enlightenment is that she came to complete realization hearing the cries and sufferings of all beings. In iconography, she is often depicted riding a cloud and pouring the waters of compassion over the world.

A bodhisattva is any person or being whose life-direction is to help others. Kwan Se Um Bosal is the Korean name for the archetypal bodhisattva of compassion. In Sanskrit her name is Avalokitesvara; in China her name is Kwan Yin; and in Japan her name is Kanzeon or Kannon. In the West, this archetype is represented by Mary, the mother of Jesus. Mary also came to realization of the compassionate mind through listening. When



the angels came and told her she was to bear the child of God, she said, "Be it done unto me according to thy will."

Can we take a moment and listen, without listening to something in order to get the meaning out of it? Not making a discrimination, just listening. When someone talks, listen and perceive what is said. Are these three actions, two actions, or one action?

When a gong is struck and the vibration is heard, or when the stick hits the floor [*whack!*], there is sound, particular sound and hearing, particular hearing. Without the hearing faculty, there can be nothing heard. Hearing and sound are one movement. Perception of sound (hearing) and sound depend on each other.

Listening depends on nothing.

The mistake of *identifying* with the content of listening (what is heard) is continuous. And thus, there is belief in a solid, stable self. But the stuff of listening, which is sound (things heard), arises, dwells, and falls away. It is impermanent. Just as these words that are being read are arising, dwelling, and falling away. Just as all sensation arises, dwells, and falls away. So to create a fixed self by identifying with the stuff of listening—or for that matter, with the stuff of seeing, smelling, tasting, touching, or thinking—is to make a most grievous error. And yet the tendency to identify with the impermanent continues, and suffering is unending.