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# Awakening Through Sound – Lions Roar

*Guo Gu*

15–19 minutes

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**Guo Gu, contributor to the [“Glimpses of Buddhanature”](#) feature in the Fall 2023 issue of *Buddhadharma*, shares the practice of contemplation of hearing, a practice rooted in a method for awakening attributed to the bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara.**

In part of the Shurangama-sutra, the Buddha invites twenty-five different bodhisattva practitioners to explain to the rest of the assembly how they had reached awakening. When it's Avalokiteshvara's turn, the bodhisattva gives a description of his method of practice, the contemplation of hearing. The sutra says:

Thereupon Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva rose from his seat, prostrated himself with his head at the feet of the Buddha and declared: “I still remember that long before numbers of eons countless as the sand grains in the Ganges, a Buddha called Avalokiteshvara appeared in the world. Under Him, I gave rise to the Bodhi Mind. I was instructed by Him to enter *samadhi* by means of the hearing, contemplating, and practicing. At first,

amidst the stream of hearing, the object of sound ceased. Having stilled the hearing [of sounds], the attributes of sounds and silence also ceased to arise. Gradually progressing in this way, the hearing and that which was heard ceased. Even when that state in which everything had come to an end disappeared, I did not rest. Then, awareness and the objects of my awareness were emptied, and when that process of emptying my awareness was thoroughly perfected, even that emptying and that which had been emptied ceased. Then, arising and ceasing ceased to be; perfect extinction [i.e., *nirvana*] manifested.

Avalokiteshvara began by hearing all the cries of the world, which is sound, but then the sound disappeared. That's the first stage of Avalokiteshvara's practice, when the object of sound ceases to be.

His description presents six stages of practice:

1. Amidst the stream of hearing, the object of sound ceased.
2. Having stilled the hearing of the sound, the attributes of sounds and silence also ceased.
3. Gradually progressing this way, hearing and that which is heard ceased.
4. Then awareness and the object of awareness were emptied.
5. And when that process of emptying the awareness was thoroughly perfected, even that emptying and that which has been emptied ceased.
6. Then arising and ceasing ceased; perfect extinction, nirvana manifested.

What do each of these stages mean?

## The First Stage

First, sound ceased. What this means is that the meditator has stopped making distinctions between sounds and silence. In fact, silence *is* a sound from the standpoint of hearing. The hearing faculty can hear what we typically consider to be sounds, like birds chirping or cars driving by, but it can also hear silence, or the absence of specific sounds. As one meditates on hearing—as opposed to sound—the distinction between sounds, or between sounds and silence, will end. One will merely be experiencing hearing. At first, sounds will no longer distract. As discriminations and wandering thoughts diminish, sounds will also diminish, leaving only silence. The fact that this is the first stage should not suggest that this is easy. Usually, we're constantly pulled by sounds, and on the basis of that, give rise to all kinds of discriminations. So getting to this stage requires steady concentration.

The reason we hear specific sounds is because we selectively, through our discrimination, grasp at and reify the sounds that *appear to be* outside of us. The ordinary fragmented mind grasps at these sounds, attempts to identify them, and places them in relation to our sense of self. However, in this meditation, you may start by listening to a gentle, steady sound. However, once the mind settles, you must try not to focus on the sound but on the hearing itself. Why? Because sounds are perceived due to our discriminating mind. However subtle the discrimination is, it still hinders the development of deeper concentration. So when we start by listening to a sound, the idea is to just let the sound come to you. Be like a sound-absorbing board, absorbing any sound

back to silence.

At this first stage, as you relax your body and ground yourself into the sound, concentration will develop. Proceeding like this, you may feel like there's a physicality to sound, and hearing the sound can feel like you are embodying the sound—like it is going through you, subtly vibrating in you. As discrimination diminishes, sound will begin to vanish, leaving you with just hearing. As the mind becomes more simplified, concentrated, and unified, one hears silence. There is no *thing* that is heard. Into this stream of experiencing hearing, there is no longer any “object of sound.” Just silence. That's the first stage.

## **The Second Stage**

In the second stage, the attributes of sound and silence cease. It's worth understanding what this stage represents because it is a deep practice that cuts against our habits of mind. Unfortunately, the English word “attribute” does not quite capture the full meaning and nuance of the words used in Chinese or Sanskrit. In Sanskrit, there are two words related to the concept of “attribute,” each with their own meaning, sometimes overlapping. One is *nimitta*, and the other is *akara*. These terms refer to aspects of our experience. For example, in this meditation, at the first stage, the mind inevitably reifies the silence, holding on to it as an object of meditation. But what are you holding on to? You're holding on to the *nimitta*, a coarse sign or form of that experiencing; there's a subtle labeling of this sign as “silence.” This labeling of understanding is related to language, which is a sign, a mental construct, a form. At this stage in meditation, because sounds have ceased, the mind experiences hearing itself and naturally experiences the “silence,” and it is

reified as a *thing*, a nimitta. But here is where nimitta (the label) overlaps with akara (a perceptual image).

When you listen to sound, including silence, you think you're hearing the object, but you're hearing your construct or representation of it. It seems so real, as if it is *out there*, just as you hear it. But your brain has never been *out there*; it has never contacted anything out there. Your brain is inside of a dark skull. What is it experiencing? A mental construct, neurosynaptic signals. In Buddhism, this sign or construct is called akara. Normally, people can't distinguish between the perception and this sign because the process works so fast because it is instantaneous. But in truth, there is a gap between experiencing the object as it is, pure perception free from constructs, and then the subsequent moment where the construct is simulated.

In the second stage, the "attributes of sounds and silence" (i.e., the akara) have ceased—you are merely hearing, without any feature of sound or silence. Thus, at the second stage, when Avalokiteshvara says the attributes of sounds and silence ceased, that means there are no mental constructs. It is a "signless" contemplation. Not only is there no nimitta, but mind is also not generating akara.

Most of us experience the world through a lens of words and language. We are, after all, linguistic beings. Very subtly, even if it's an unformed thought of a word, there's very subtle language operating. And that means we are not actually experiencing others and things as they are. We are actually experiencing our own construct, filter, overlay. For example, perhaps you see someone dressed a certain way walking down the street, and you spontaneously form a judgment, like, he's this or he's that. We've

all done that. There are no obvious words going through our minds; it's an unformed concept based on language, but there's still a lot of judgment and expectations of what a person ought to appear. At the core, these are linguistic judgments, even if they don't appear through obvious words. We're bringing up memories through association, which flood and filter the present experience. On the basis of these overlays—what we bring to the experience—we make further predictions and compartmentalize the perception as good, bad, ugly, pretty, attraction, repulsion, or whatever descriptor we feel fits. We experience the world through these attributes or signs. Neuroscientists call this process “interoception.” This is the network of internal processes of intrinsic brain activity, where millions of nonstop neurological and synaptic predictions of sensory experiences occur in every moment of life.

How do we free ourselves from mistaking the signs we attribute to things with the things themselves? How do we experience things as they are? We can't think our way through it because thinking is a process of engaging in signs. We can't realize awakening by reading dharma books because that's just more words, more signs. Reading is necessary in the beginning to develop a correct view of practice, but we have to go beyond our deep-seated habit patterns of grasping at things through language. How do we do that? We can't depend on thoughts because signs are habitual, and they exist on the superficial layer of our minds. They are fragmented. Their distinct features are fragmentation, scatteredness, linking the past to future to present, continually moving. So how do we deal with scattered thoughts? We must have a method, (a nimitta), we must learn to stay with the method and learn to relax, ground, and embody it with contentment.

However, our habitual tendency is that we love everything else except the method. We are always being driven by craving, therefore cultivating a feeling tone of contentment is key. If you kickstart your meditation with contentment and love of your method of practice, bringing your attention to the method again and again with appreciation, then the mind will likely learn to stay with it.

As concentration becomes more refined, staying with the nimitta of hearing, passing from scatteredness to concentration, the sign (of sounds or silence) diminishes. When sounds vanish, there's only silence as a nimitta. When even this nimitta vanishes, there's still an akara, the perceptual image. It happens really fast, instant by instant by instant, moment to moment to moment. That's why it's important to stay with the *freshness* of each moment, because in that freshness, akara (perceptual image) also vanishes. The truth is that you are, instant by instant, actually experiencing the state free from these perceptual images. All through your life, you have been experiencing it. However, we've mistaken the next moment of thought, which is the akara (an image of what we're experiencing), to be the experience. In the freshness, you're experiencing things as they are.

Moment to moment, sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, thought—you're already free, experiencing things as they are in its freshness. Yet, often we grab onto the next moment, after the freshness, reifying the freshness as a *thing*. At this stage of practice, even if the object at this time is just this freshness, awareness is there in that moment. Awareness, freshness, and present moment: these three are one. But we must know that there's no such thing as "present moment." That's just another



label. Present moment is not a “thing”—just like there’s no such thing as self, which is just a flux of psychosomatic events we construct. It’s just *experiencing*.

### **The Third Stage**

This brings us to the third stage, “when hearing and that which is heard have ceased.” Even though the experiencing of freshness is present, there is still a subtle form of duality. When hearing and the object of hearing cease, there is only experiencing. Sometimes, people call this pure awareness. However, the word awareness is used so broadly that it has lost power, and often, what people refer to as awareness is actually self-consciousness. I use the term “experiencing” in order not to provide any reified notion of self. Regardless of the word used, the third stage is just the momentary experience of experiencing, and it has become palpable.

### **The Fourth Stage**

At the fourth stage, it says that “awareness and the object of awareness (or experiencing and the experience of experiencing) have ceased.” You can think of “awareness” or “experiencing” as a big umbrella under which different types of experiencing—of sight, of hearing, of taste, and touch, and so on—are present. In this case, experiencing hearing. At the third stage, the hearing and the heard drops, with only awareness or experiencing present. This experiencing can be grasped as self, which is an even more subtle level of discrimination.

### **The Fifth Stage**

What happens when “awareness and the object of awareness



have ceased”? In other words, when experiencing as experiencer drops? What remains? What’s present? Emptiness is present.

At this fifth stage, when experiencing is let go of, there arises the experience of emptiness, a hollowness, an openness, freedom. Self is still present; here, emptiness is grasped as self. For this reason, at the fifth stage, “emptiness... and the emptied ceased.” There is a letting go of this experience of freedom and emptying. This refers to a shallower kind of awakening in which a self temporarily vanishes, but there is still a subtle grasping, taking that vanishing, the emptiness, the freedom one has attained as a thing. Many Zen and Buddhist practitioners who experience shallower states of awakening can turn around and attach to that awakening as some kind of realization and give rise to arrogance. Their awakening has become a thing. Thus, it is necessary for the emptying to cease. This freedom must be dropped. From the Mahayana perspective, this letting go of realization is *prajña*—the wisdom of going beyond.

## **The Sixth Stage**

And then the sixth stage: rising and ceasing itself, which is birth and death, has ceased.

That’s why there is perfect extinction, which is genuine nirvana of the buddhas.

## **Just Keep Going, Like Avalokiteshvara**

There are a couple of important principles presented by this process. First, it’s important to have the correct view. The correct view is, you’ve been experiencing freedom all your life, but it gets

confused with notions and ideas. Words, language, and perceptual constructs get confused with the actual experience itself. We have mistaken our own overlays of things as things themselves. And it goes on so instantaneously that we've been duped. Know that freshness is always already present. This mistaken identity is something that occurs instantaneously and habitually. Most people are unable to recognize this subtle grasping. So the correct view is that while freedom is already present, the practice is, then, not to get caught up with our own self-referential overlays.

Second, humility. Understand there are ever more subtler, deeper layers of experience than whatever you think you've attained. So don't be satisfied with just a little. Avalokiteshvara wasn't. He said, "Even when that state in which everything had come to an end disappeared, I did not rest." The way our self-referential grasping manifests are subtle. So, keep going. Practice continues.

Start with sound and stay with that until you start to embody the sound. That's the beginning stage of oneness of method and yourself. Once your discriminating mind diminishes, the sound will become silent. You're naturally steered toward hearing as opposed to the sound that's heard. Then, when you let go of this construct of hearing, there is just experiencing, which is hearing—vivid, without label, just freshness. As you let go more, that experiencing is emptied. And even this emptiness must be dropped. Even the most subtle form of identity with arising and ceasing, motion and stillness, coming and going, freedom and liberation must be dropped.

Be patient. Don't contrive. Don't fabricate these stages. Humility. Never give rise to self-consciousness. Don't stand outside yourself and check, How am I doing? Don't take yourself as an object and

criticize it. All of these are forms of self-grasping. Don't get caught up with anything, pleasant or unpleasant. Be patient and persistent. Go slowly, stage by stage, and grasp nothing, seek nothing. Start with hearing and experiencing. Just keep going, like Avalokiteshvara.

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*The talk on the Heart Sūtra on which this article is based, and the accompanying meditation, were recorded and are posted on the Tallahassee Chan Center YouTube Channel [here](#) (the talk) and [here](#) (guided meditation)*