

INNERLISTENING

MEDITATION ON THE SOUND OF SILENCE



AJAHN AMARO

A song of Suchness clear and bright,
The boundless inner peace of light
Whose unremitting presence roars
Oceanic at its shores.

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DEDICATION

This small book is dedicated with wholehearted gratitude to Luang Por Sumedho, revealer of the Sound of Silence and the Unconditioned Reality it so richly represents.



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CONTENTS

Inner Listening	9
The inner sound and how to find it	10
The two dimensions of samādhi	11
Nada as a support for tranquillity – samatha	12
Nada as a support for insight – vipassanā	13
Nada enables you to listen to your thoughts	16
Nada, emptiness and suchness	19
Nada and ‘atammayatā’ – seeing the world in the mind	25
Nada embraces activity and engagement	28
Nada and the development of compassion	30
Nada helps seeing through self-view	34
Nada and questioning	36
Nada’s attributes	39
Nada as a symbol of transcendence	40
Nada and its different manifestations	42
Frequently asked questions	45
Quotations	73
References	80
About the author	83

INNER LISTENING

There are a number of themes that are very familiar to people who practise Buddhist meditation: ‘mindfulness of breathing’, where you focus on the rhythm of the breath; ‘walking meditation’, that revolves around the feeling of the footsteps as you walk up and down a path; the internal repetition of a mantra, such as ‘Bud-dho’ – these are all designed to help ground the attention in the presence of this very moment, this present reality.

Along with these more well-known methods there are many others that can serve a similar function. One of these is known as ‘inner listening’ or ‘meditation on the inner sound’ or, in Sanskrit, ‘*nada yoga*’. These terms all refer to attending to what has been called ‘the sound of silence’, or ‘the nada-sound’. ‘Nada’ is the Sanskrit word for ‘sound’ as well as being the Spanish word for ‘nothing’ – an interesting and accidentally meaningful coincidence.

THE INNER SOUND AND HOW TO FIND IT

The nada-sound is a high-pitched inner ringing tone. When you turn your attention toward your hearing, if you listen carefully to the sounds around you, you'll hear a continuous high-pitched sound, like a white noise – beginningless, endless – sparkling there in the background.

See if you can discern that sound and bring attention to it. For the moment there's no need to theorize about it or wonder about exactly what it might be, just turn your attention to it. See if you can detect that gentle inner vibration.

If you are able to hear that inner sound you can use the simple act of listening to it as another form of meditation practice. It can be used just like the breath as an object of awareness. Simply bring the attention to it and allow it to fill the whole sphere of your awareness.

THE TWO DIMENSIONS OF SAMĀDHI

Meditative concentration, samādhī, can be described as ‘a mental object filling the awareness for a period of time’ or ‘the fixing of the mind on a single object’. Thus samādhī is one-pointedness but this singleness of focus can function in two distinct ways. Firstly, we can think of it as ‘the point which excludes’, that is to say, it locks on to a single object and fences out everything else. Thus this first mode is a tight or narrow fixity, like using the spot-focus beam of an adjustable torch. This is the basis of *samatha*, meaning calmness or tranquillity.

The second mode can best be called ‘the point which includes’, i.e. it is an expansive awareness that makes the whole of the present moment the meditation object. The ‘one point’ is allowed to expand until it encompasses all the patterns of the present experience. Rather like when using the broad-beam mode of that same adjustable torch,

all the varied objects of the present are encompassed by the light of awareness, rather than there being a single brightly lit spot. This is the basis of vipassanā, or insight.

One of the great blessings of meditation on the inner sound is that it can easily support both these types of samādhi, the point which excludes as well as the point which includes.

NADA AS A SUPPORT FOR TRANQUILLITY – SAMATHA

We can make the inner sound a primary object of attention, letting it fill the whole space of what is known. Very consciously, we leave everything else – the feelings in the body, the noises we hear, the thoughts that might arise – remaining on the periphery, at the edges of our scope of interest. Instead we allow the inner sound to completely fill the focus of our attention, the space of this awareness. In this way it directly supports the establishment of samatha, tranquillity. We can use

it just like the breath, to dominate our attention, and to be a single object to help establish focus and stability, steadiness, a unity of attention in the present.

NADA AS A SUPPORT FOR INSIGHT – VIPASSANĀ

If we focus on the inner sound for a length of time sufficient to bring such a quality of firmness and steadiness, where the mind is resting easily in the present, we can then allow the sound to fall into the background. In this way it becomes like a screen on which all other sounds, physical sensations, moods and ideas are projected – like a screen upon which the movie of the rest of the patterns of our experience is displayed. And because of its plainness, its uniformity, it's a very good screen. It doesn't interfere with or confuse the other objects that are arising, yet it's very obviously present. It's like having a somewhat mottled screen or a distinctive screen against which

a movie is projected, so that if you pay attention you are aware there's a screen on which the light is being played. It reminds you, "This is just a movie. This is just a projection. This is not reality."

We can thus let the sound simply be a presence in the background, and because of that presence it helps to create a reminder. It supports the recollection, "Oh, these are just *sankhāras* – mental formations – arising and ceasing. All formations are unsatisfactory – *sabbe sankhārā dukkha*. If something is formed, if it's an 'it', if it's a 'thing', there is a quality of *dukkha* in its very impermanence, in its very 'thingness'. So don't attach, don't entangle, don't identify, don't take it to be owned or who and what we are. Let go."

Thus the sound's presence can support the ease with which every *sankhāra* – whether it's a physical sensation, a visual object, a taste or a smell, a mood, a refined state of happiness,

or whatever it might be – is seen as empty and ownerless. It helps to sustain an objectivity, an unentangled awareness, an unentangled participation in the present.

There is the flow of feeling, the weight of the body, the feeling of our clothes, the flow of moods, tiredness, doubt, understanding, inspiration, whatever it might be. It helps to sustain a clear objectivity amid patterns of mood and feeling and thought.

It helps to allow the heart to rest in a quality of attentive awareness, being that very knowing awareness that receives the flow of experience – knowing it, letting it go, recognizing its transparency, its emptiness, its insubstantiality.

The inner sound carries on in the background, reminding us that everything is Dhamma, everything is an attribute of nature, coming and going, changing, that's all. This is a truth we might have intuited for years, but which we forget because of

the confusion which comes from attaching to our personality, our memories, our moods and thoughts, discomfort in the body or our appetites.

The stress of attaching to the experiences of all our days since birth keeps the attention confused, entranced, bewildered. Nevertheless, we can use the presence of the nada-sound to help break the trance, to end that enchantment, to help us know the flow of feeling and mood for what it is, as patterns of nature, coming and going, changing, doing their thing. They are not who and what we are, and they can never really satisfy or, when seen with insight, disappoint us.

NADA ENABLES YOU TO LISTEN TO YOUR THOUGHTS

As you develop this inner listening as an aspect of formal meditation, you begin to notice how listening to a auditory

object helps you to learn to listen objectively to your thoughts, your moods.

In many respects the chatter of our thinking mind has no more meaning than the scintillating buzz of the nada-sound. It's just the vibrations of the thinking mind formed into conceptual patterns, that's all – just a long, continuous, murmuring stream of vibrations. We can thus learn to listen to our own thinking as we would listen to a stream of water, a splashing fountain or a chorus of song from a flock of birds, with the same kind of freedom from involvement or identification. It's only the murmuring brook of the mind, that's all. No big thing – nothing to get excited about, nothing to get disturbed about.

Now, that's quite easy to say, but we do tend to be infatuated with our stories, don't we? We love our stories, particularly the ones about ourselves: the good we've done, the bad we've done, the memorable, the poignant, the regrettable, and what we

want to do, what we hope to do, what we fear will happen to us, what others think of us.

These beloved patterns are all manifestations of the 'I' element, the habits of thinking in terms of 'I' and 'me' and 'mine' for a lifetime. In Pali these are called *ahamkāra*, 'I-making' and *mamamkāra*, 'mine-making', and they are the key attributes of self-view. These habits are what most effectively and repeatedly draw our attention into the realm of concepts which then carry the mind away. If a story has 'me' in it, it tends to be much more interesting than other more remote tales. This is extremely natural, a basic habit for all of us.

Accordingly, much of insight meditation, the development of vipassanā, is about just that – learning to recognize the 'I-making' and 'mine-making' habits within the thoughts we experience. *Ahamkāra* literally means 'made of I-ness', whereas *mamamkāra* means 'made of mine-ness'; true insight

is the recognizing of those habits and not being drawn in by the story; seeing its emptiness, its transparency and letting it go.

NADA, EMPTINESS AND SUCHNESS

Most Buddhist practitioners, regardless of tradition, are familiar with what are known as ‘the three characteristics of existence’ – *anicca*, *dukkha* and *anattā* (impermanence, unsatisfactoriness and not-self). These are the universal qualities of all experiences that arise and pass away, and recognizing their presence is the most active aspect of *vipassanā* meditation.

There are, however, other universal characteristics of existence that can be similarly employed to help free the heart from all limitation, burden and stress. Two of these characteristics, which operate as something of a pair, are called

suññatā and *tathatā*, meaning, respectively, emptiness and suchness. The term ‘emptiness’ derives from saying “No” to the phenomenal world: “I’m not going to believe in this. This is void, empty, hollow, not entirely real.”

‘Suchness’ is a quality that matches ‘emptiness’, in the same way that the right hand matches the left. In contrast to its partner, however, its nature derives from saying “Yes” to the universe. There might be no solid, separate, individual thing here – whether a thought, a daffodil or a mountain – yet there is *something*, there is an Ultimate Reality here that underlies, permeates, embraces, constitutes it all. The word ‘suchness’ thus expresses an appreciation of the true nature of that Reality, and its realization can be characterized as knowing and embodying the presence of the Unconditioned, the Deathless or *Amata-dhamma*.

When emptiness is spoken about in the Pali Canon, the scriptures of the Southern Buddhist world, it usually means

‘empty of self and what belongs to a self’, but it also refers to an insubstantiality of objects. When you develop the skill of inner listening and attending to the nada-sound it can greatly enhance your capacity to realize both these kinds of emptiness – the emptiness of both the subject and the object, of both self and other.

When you have established listening to the nada-sound in a reasonably firm and stable way, so that its shimmering silvery tone is a constant presence, it facilitates the recognition of the insubstantiality of all ‘I-’, ‘me-’ and ‘mine-’ based attitudes and thoughts, as described above. It is like a bright light by which we can clearly see the hollowness of bubbles as they float by.

Similarly, for all the mental objects that are experienced – such as things we see, hear, smell, taste and touch, and all the memories, plans, moods and ideas that arise in our minds – the presence of the nada-sound helps to illuminate the

transparency of all these patterns of consciousness. As the Buddha put it:

Material form is a lump of foam,
feeling a water bubble;
perception is just a mirage,
volitions like a plantain's trunk,
consciousness, a magic trick –
so says the Kinsman of the Sun.

However one may ponder it
or carefully inquire,
all appears both void and vacant
when it's seen in truth.

~ S 22.95

The nada-sound can help you to recollect the suchness of all experience as well. Though these qualities might seem to be

contradictory, it is more true to say that they are complementary. When you attend closely to the sound of silence and allow it to fill the inner space of awareness, its energetic quality, coupled with the formless richness of its presence, is a strong intuitive reminder of the quality of suchness. It is almost as if (at least for English speakers) the inner sound is expressing an infinite ‘issssssssss...’ or ‘thussssssssss...’ to nudge you back to reality.

Suchness is, by definition, hard to pin down conceptually. It has an intrinsically unapprehendable quality that might make it seem vague or unreal, but ironically that is a necessary part of its meaning. It is significant that the very word the Buddha coined to refer to himself was *Tathāgata* – meaning either ‘One who has come to suchness’ or ‘One who has gone to suchness’ depending upon the interpretation. So even though the word ‘suchness’ might carry an intangible tone to it, that is deliberate and it needs to be recognized as also conveying a fundamental reality.

A comparison might be made with the world of mathematics and the concept of the square root of minus one. In the world of real numbers there is no integer that you can multiply by itself to produce -1 . If, however, such a number *did* exist, then all sorts of interesting possibilities would unfold, as was discovered in ancient times and developed by mathematicians in the eighteenth century.

Intriguingly, even though this number doesn't exist in the real world and only has imaginary status, it still manages to be essential in constructing phase-shift oscillators (used for sound engineering), and is put to extensive use in such areas as computer graphics, robotics, signal processing, computer simulations and orbital mechanics.

This is to say that, just like suchness, even though it might be unapprehendable, it has a clear and demonstrable presence in the real world.^[1]

NADA AND 'ATAMMAYATĀ' – SEEING THE WORLD IN THE MIND

A third, even more subtle characteristic of existence is called '*atamayata*'. The word literally means 'not made of that'.

When the qualities of emptiness and suchness are considered, even though the 'I am' conceit, *asmi-māna*, might already have been seen through, there can still remain subtle traces of clinging; clinging to the idea of an objective world being known by a subjective knowing, even though no sense of 'I' is discernible at all. There can be the feeling of a 'this' which is knowing a 'that', and either saying "Yes" to it, in the case of suchness, or "No" in the case of emptiness.

Atamayata is the closure of that whole domain. It expresses the insight that, "There is no 'that.'" It is the genuine collapse of both the illusion of separateness of subject and object and of the discrimination between phenomena as being somehow substantially different from each other.

One way that you can develop this insight on a practical level is to combine listening to the nada-sound with a simple reflection, as follows.

We tend to think of the mind as being in the body. Actually we've got it wrong: the body is rather in the mind. Everything that we know about the body, now and at any previous time, has been known through the agency of our mind. This doesn't mean to say there isn't a physical world, but what we can say for certain is that the experience of the body, and the experience of the world, happen within our mind.

It's all happening here. And when that here-ness is truly recognized and woken up to, the world's externality, its separateness ceases. When we realize that we hold the whole world within us, its thing-ness, its other-ness has been checked. We are better able to recognize its true nature.

If you focus on the inner sound and then simply reflect, recollect that "The world is in my mind. My body and the world

are here in this space of awareness, permeated with the sound of silence,” this will eventually bring about a shift of vision. By holding things in this way, you suddenly find your body, the mind and the world all arriving at a resolution; there is a realization of orderly perfection. The world is balanced within that heart of vibrant silence.

Atammayatā is the quality in you that knows, “There is no *that*. There is only *this*.” Then, when the truth of this is realized, even ‘this-ness’, and ‘here-ness’ become meaningless. The presence of the nada-sound helps you to realize and maintain such a perspective. In this way the mind slowly loses its habit of always wanting to go out, becoming caught in the outflows, the *āsava*, and thus getting lost in worldly concerns. You will develop a comfortable containment, an inner composure and a freedom from the compulsions that beset the heart so readily and cause us to become so stranded and entangled.

Atammayatā helps the heart to break free from the subtlest

habits of restlessness and still the reverberations of our root delusions about the duality of subject and object. That stilling brings the heart to a realization: there is only the wholeness of the Dhamma, complete spaciousness and fulfilment. The apparent dualities of this and that, subject and object are seen to be essentially meaningless.

NADA EMBRACES ACTIVITY AND ENGAGEMENT

Once you have managed to develop a steady attention to the nada-sound during formal sitting meditation practice, you can extend it to be a part of walking meditation as well. You will find that though the eyes are open and the body is walking steadily back and forth between the two ends of your walking meditation path, you can still hear the nada-sound embracing everything. It is always there, solidly in the background, permeating all experience and helping you to remember that

all this is being known within the sphere of your awareness. The body and the world are indeed within the mind.

As you become more adept at sustaining attention on the sound of silence with these more varied sense objects, you find that it can be attended to in almost all situations. Your mindfulness becomes more robust.

When you are walking down a street, playing with your children, attending a business meeting, eating a meal, standing in a queue, sitting on a plane, talking with friends, watching TV, writing an article, visiting your mother... even amid raucous activity or in the presence of intense noises, like heavy traffic, a nearby chainsaw or a pneumatic drill, if you listen, it's always there. So we can always use it as a support for mindfulness and clear awareness.

Moreover, when we use it to remind us to keep things in perspective in this way, it helps us to relate to the activity in question with greater sensitivity. Somehow it seems not so

much to divide our attention as to enhance it. In addition, by attending to it amidst activity and engagement, it enables you to hold the situation with less self-concern cluttering the picture.

You are giving yourself an opportunity to respond mindfully to life's innumerable events and experiences, in accordance with nature's laws, rather than to react blindly out of habit and compulsion. You can free yourself from the endless cycles of urge and regret in which most of us find ourselves entrapped.

NADA AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF COMPASSION

In addition to helping to free the heart from such obstructive tendencies, and to support wholesome qualities amidst activity and engagement, the presence of the nada-sound can also be used to rouse and support kindness and compassion. When considering how we receive and engage with the world at large,

these are the most blessed and helpful qualities to cultivate.

It is significant that, in the Northern Buddhist tradition, the Bodhisattva Guan Yin, Avalokiteshvara, fulfils the role of being the embodiment of compassion. The name means ‘The One Who Attends to the Sounds of the World’ and in this regard, it is a powerful indication of where the roots of true compassion lie. Even though we might typecast compassion as mostly ‘doing helpful things for beings who are suffering’, this name (and indeed the meditation practice recommended by Guan Yin, as described below) points to the core quality as being rather a receptivity and attunement to the way things are. Then out of that radical caring acceptance, all the thousand hands of Guan Yin can go to work.

The characteristics of the Bodhisattva are a spiritual symbol pointing to ways in which we can train ourselves. We can take the practice of listening to the inner sound and use it to help us embody compassion in our lives. By opening the heart to attend

to the sound of silence and letting go of other preoccupations, we can be fully mindful and wisely attentive to the present moment and all it contains; through that mindful awareness, the innate compassionate disposition of the pure heart is awakened; that compassionate attitude then reaches out to the beings around us. In addition, the mere training to listen has its impact on the ways we relate to others. It was explained above how listening to the nada-sound helps us to listen to our thoughts, well, it works equally effectively for listening to other people. Kindness and compassion both involve a lot of patience and acceptance, and the practice of listening is a powerful means with which to hatch and mould them. To truly listen to another – without reacting, without infatuation, without dismissal, without boredom – is an art and a grace. To take in what a person is saying and, in this, to receive them completely, is a blessing to them and to yourself.

On a broader scale still we can extend this attitude of compassionate attention, listening to the sounds of the world, so that the heart is trained to encompass all beings and their travails. Importantly, this should not just be a hypothetical embrace, but rather – just as Avalokiteshvara not only listens but has many heads, hands and eyes, and skilful means – that attuning of our hearts to the entire world brings forth action and words that help in the most practical and tangible ways. In learning to attend to the sound of silence in a similar way – without infatuation, aversion or boredom – we are developing a direct path to those attitudes of kindness and compassion which are such sublime abiding places for the heart, and which illumine the world so beautifully.

NADA HELPS SEEING THROUGH SELF-VIEW

One of the key obstructions to such boundless attitudes is that reliable trouble-maker, self-view. We can, fortunately, use the inner sound, the nada, to support the effort to see through that self-creating habit of mind, and the compulsion to continually regenerate it.

One practice that can help free the heart from such compulsions is to meditate upon your own name. Begin by taking a moment to listen to the inner sound. Focus on that until the mind is clear and open, empty, and then simply voice your own name internally, whatever it might be. You listen to the sound of silence before, then the sound of silence within and then behind the sound of your name, and finally the sound of silence after you repeat it. 'A-ma-ro', 'Su-san', 'John'. See, feel what qualities that sound brings. It's only the sound of your own name, so familiar, so ordinary to us; see what happens

when it's dropped into the silence of the mind and really felt and known for a change. See what quality it brings, how it opens up the habit of seeing ourselves in a particular way. It loosens the boundaries. To our surprise, that name, those familiar syllables, can suddenly feel like the most peculiar, weird formulation in the world. Something in the heart stirs and intuits, "What's that got to do with anything real?" In that moment we realize that what the word forming our name is usually taken to refer to is actually a quality that is utterly non-personal. Voicing our name in the clear open space of wisdom like this can feel like trying to write it with a light beam on a waterfall. There is nothing to make a mark with and no surface that will provide traction.

This kind of practice can be both slightly disturbing and yet gloriously freeing, and if we do allow it to free us, all that remains is that taste of freedom and the sound of the rushing waterfall.

NADA AND QUESTIONING

Another perhaps even more direct way we can work with listening is to use a form of questioning to approach and dissolve habits of self-view.

Again, listen to the sound of silence, focus on it to steady the attention, let the mind be as silent and alert as possible, and then raise the question, “Who am I?”

First listen to the sound of silence. Then raise the question, and then attend; notice what happens when that question is sincerely asked, “Who am I?” We’re explicitly not looking for a verbal answer, a conceptual answer. But notice that there’s a gap, a brief gap after we pose the question and before any verbal answers, the conceptual answers, appear. When we really ask that question, “Who am I?”, or “*What* am I?”, there’s a gap, a space that opens up for a moment in which the heart intuits, in which it’s open to doubt about the presumptions that we’ve made about being a person: being a woman, a man, old, young.

There's a moment of "Oh!" before all the personal details start wading in. There's a gap, a hesitation. "Who *am* I?"

Let your attention rest in that gap after the end of the question and before the answers appear. Let your attention rest in that gap, in that spaciousness, because in the truest sense, the silence of the mind is the answer to the question. Allow and encourage the mind to rest in that open, attentive, unconstructed spaciousness, because in that moment self-view is interrupted. The normal self-creating habits are confused, confuted. The self-creating habit is caught in the act. Suddenly the camera is turned back on to the photographer before they can scurry away. It's the unconstructed, unconditioned moment. There's attention. The mind is alert, peaceful, bright. But there's no sense of self. It's extraordinarily simple, natural. Let the attention rest with that.

After a while, when other more habitual concerns have drifted in – an ache in the leg, the sound of a passing car, a tickle in

the nose – when the self-views have re-coalesced, then focus the mind attentively, come back to the nada-sound, listen, and raise the question again, “Who am I?”, to open up that same window of curiosity, of reality, to puncture the bubble of self-view for just a moment. Notice what it’s like when that bubble no longer colours, distorts our vision of things, and self-view falls away. What’s here? What is life like when that habit is interrupted?

As with the meditation on your name, this practice can be simultaneously threatening and relieving, but if we can be undistracted by either of those feelings and simply remain alert and open to the present, what is realized is the presence of purity, radiance, peacefulness, a radical normality and blessed simplicity, all held in the embrace of the roaring silence.

NADA'S ATTRIBUTES

Various attributes of the nada-sound embody helpful spiritual qualities, some of which lend it to being at least as universally accessible and useful as mindfulness of breathing, if not more so.

Firstly, using the nada-sound as a meditation object encourages the attitude of listening and receptivity. It requires one to be more the open-hearted experiencer than the director of an activity.

Secondly, the sound is not subject to personal control. Unlike the breath, which we can make longer or shorter or change in other ways at will, we can't choose to make the inner sound louder or softer, make it begin or end, or indeed do anything at all with it. We can either turn to it and pay attention or not, but it's not subject to personal direction or choice. It thus naturally encourages a realization of the utter impersonality of experience – it has no particular characteristic that makes

us think of it as ‘me’ or ‘mine’. It is not female or male, young or old, clever or stupid... it has no size or nationality, no colour or language... it simply is, with the impartiality of Nature itself.

Lastly, it’s energizing, it has a naturally arousing quality. The more we pay attention to it, the brighter it tends to make the mind. It works in a positive feedback loop, so that the stronger the attention on it, the more it feeds the capacity to be attentive. It thus supports the very act of meditation by helping the mind to be more alert.

NADA AS A SYMBOL OF TRANSCENDENCE

The sound of silence is an object in the sense realm that reflects many characteristics of the Dhamma as a transcendent quality, it can therefore act as a fine symbolic presence for it and be a good reminder of that Ultimate Truth.

For example, the nada-sound is always ‘here’. In this way it’s

a good symbol for the *sanditthiko* quality of Dhamma, that is, being ‘apparent here and now’.

It’s seemingly beginningless and endless, therefore well-representing the *akāliko* or timeless quality of Dhamma. It’s non-personal, ever-present.

Once we have noticed it, it encourages investigation, thus resonating the *ehipassiko* attribute of Dhamma, ‘inviting one to come and see’.

It leads inwards, discouraging absorption in the sense world, so the *opaneyiko* quality of the Dhamma is well-represented too.

Lastly, it takes the initiative of those interested to attend to and value it, so *paccattam veditabbo viññūhī* – ‘to be known by each wise person for themselves’ is suitably characterized by that attribute.

Thus, even though it is only a simple sense-object, at least within the Buddhist philosophical system, its attributes lend it to being a fine symbol for the Dhamma itself – a resonance,

if you like, in the sense realm of those fundamental and transcendent qualities of Ultimate Truth.

NADA AND ITS DIFFERENT MANIFESTATIONS

All that said, it is a fact that some people find it very difficult to discern this inner sound. Thus, on reading all this, you might be wondering, “What the heck is he talking about?”

Not everybody can pick up this experience easily in the realm of hearing. It can be that, because of our character traits, we have other ways in which we have been conditioned, say for example because you are a graphic artist, that inner vibration may be more discernible in terms of a visual quality, a subtle oscillation in the visual field. Or, if you have developed a lot of body awareness as a hatha yoga teacher, you might feel it in the body as a delicate, pervasive vibratory quality, a humming

resonance, a tingling in the hands or a subtle, energetic presence, a continuous vital current through the body.

Often how we pick it up depends on our conditioning, our own particular karmic habits and formations. From my experience of teaching this method for about twenty years, for most people it's most easily discernible in the realm of sound. That's why it's called 'nada-yoga' – the yoga, or the spiritual discipline, of sound – but if you are more able to apprehend that universal vibration through your vision, or your body, or even through taste or smell, that is an equally viable practice. The focusing on its presence and the dynamics of its effects function in exactly the same way, regardless of the sense-medium through which it is experienced. It can still be used for all the practices described above and will bring equivalent results.

If that's what your disposition is, that's where you're going to find the richest rewards: "Gold is where you find it," as they say.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: I have not seen this practice of listening to the sound of silence mentioned anywhere in the Suttas or in the traditional commentaries. Where does it come from?

A: At first this was a practice that Ven. Ajahn Sumedho thought he had discovered on his own.

He had lived for eleven years in the forests of Thailand, where you tend to do most of your formal meditation practice at night. Those nights were always filled with a cacophony of insect noise so, ironically, it was only after he had come to live in London in 1977, that he began to notice the inner sound. It was particularly clear during the middle of the night, in the still, snowy weather of the winter and then one day it became enormously loud, even as he walked down the busy street of Haverstock Hill.

It was so strong a presence that he began to experiment with using it as a meditation object, even though he'd never heard of such a thing before, and to his surprise he found it a very useful tool. As he wrote in his Foreword to a recent edition of the book 'The Law of Attention' by Edward Salim Michael^[2]:

"I had discovered this 'inner sound' many years before but had never heard or read any reference to this in the Pali Canon. I had developed a meditation practice referring to this background vibration and experienced great benefits in developing mindfulness while letting go of any thoughts. It allowed a perspective of transcendent awareness where one could reflect on the mental states that arise and cease in consciousness."

He has also spoken often about how the development of this inner listening had a profound effect on his attitude toward his meditation practice. Being newly arrived in a foreign and distinctly non-Buddhist country, and being in a small house in

a big and noisy city, he found a strong urge to retreat and get away, back to his beloved forests in Thailand and away from all these crowds of ‘pesky, pestering’ people. But a vividly clear insight eventually dawned that, rather than seeking the physical seclusion of *kāyaviveka*, he needed to develop the inner seclusion of *cittaviveka*. Furthermore, he found this newly-discovered practice of inner listening, attending to what he called the sound of silence, ideal for supporting this quality, this approach of finding seclusion within. This insight proved so central to his understanding of how best to work in this new environment that, when they did eventually move out of London, having been given a forest in West Sussex, he named the new monastery ‘Cittaviveka’ – coincidentally resonating with the name of the hamlet, Chithurst, where this new foundation was established.

After he had been using this practice for a few years, exploring its ins and outs and its results for himself, he began to

teach it to the fledgling community at Cittaviveka Monastery. He was aware that no reference to such a method was to be found in the Theravadan scriptures, but he felt that since it had such beneficial results, why not use it regardless?

In this light his approach was very similar to that of Ven. Mahasi Sayadaw, who developed his own method of insight meditation back in the 1950's. A couple of the elements of his 'Mahasi Method' have drawn criticism since they are not classical Theravadan meditation methods either – i.e. the practice of verbal 'noting', and observing the sensations caused by the breath at the abdomen. However, as Ajahn Sumedho himself found with listening to the sound of silence, if you put these techniques into practice and find that they are a support for establishing mindfulness, isn't it wiser to put them to use than to neglect them just because they might not be canonical?

The spirit of Buddhist practice is always directed towards using skilful means that will help bring about liberation and

the end of all dissatisfaction, all dukkha, so, if it works, then we should consider it a worthy thing.

Q: Has this kind of inner listening been used in other spiritual traditions? It has been called ‘nada yoga’, so it sounds like at least some other religious groups have discovered it.

A: After Ajahn Sumedho started to teach it, people began to mention to him how they had encountered it before, either through their own experimentation or through other groups that they had meditated with. He slowly began to find out that a rich variety of spiritual traditions had used it over the centuries.

One of his early such discoveries was the book mentioned above, by Edward Salim Michael. Again, from his Foreword to the 2010 edition:

“I remember finding this book at the Buddhist Society’s Summer School about twenty-five years ago. It had a photograph of a Buddha image on the cover, and I liked the title [which then was ‘The Way of Inner Vigilance’] – so I started skimming through it. The chapters on Nada Yoga especially intrigued me... [and] I appreciated Edward Salim Michael’s instructions on how to integrate awareness into daily life.”

The origins of Michael’s insights into nada yoga were mostly his own experience, influenced as well by Buddhist and Hindu yogic practices.

A number of years after Ajahn Sumedho encountered ‘The Way of Inner Vigilance’, and had started to incorporate some of the methods contained within it into his own practice and teaching, he met up with another well-developed locus of its use.

He was leading a retreat in California, in 1991, and the venue was a large monastery of the Northern Buddhist Tradition called

‘The City of Ten Thousand Buddhas’. Although the retreat was mostly geared towards the group of 60 lay Buddhists who had gathered from all over the USA for the event, there was a small number of monks and nuns from the host monastery there as well.

About halfway through the retreat Ajahn Sumedho introduced the practice of listening to the sound of silence. A day or so later the newly-appointed abbot of the monastery, Ven. Heng Ch’i, commented to the Ajahn, “You know, I think you have stumbled upon the Shūrangama Samādhi.” Understandably, Ajahn Sumedho was not sure what he was referring to, so the abbot explained.

“In our Chan Buddhist tradition, the key scripture is the Shūrangama Sutra and particularly the meditation teaching found within it. The Sutra describes 25 spiritual practices that different Bodhisattvas present to the Buddha as being the way that they themselves were liberated. The one that the Buddha

praises as the most effective is that of Avalokiteshvara, Guan Shi Yin Bodhisattva. It is a meditation based upon hearing. The Chinese of the Sutra can be translated in various ways, so we were never sure exactly what it meant. Guan Yin describes the method thus:

“I began with a practice based on the enlightened nature of hearing. First I redirected my hearing inward in order to enter the current of the sages...

“By the means that I have described, I entered through the gateway of the ear-faculty and perfected the inner illumination of samādhi. My mind that had once been dependent on perceived objects developed self-mastery and ease. By entering the current of the awakened ones and entering samādhi, I became fully awake. This then is the best method.”^[3]

“Shifu [Ven. Master Hsüan Hua, the founding abbot and teacher] would try to explain what this meant by telling us things like:

“To listen wisely is to listen inside, not outside. You do not allow your mind to chase after sounds. Earlier in the Sutra, the Buddha spoke of not following the six faculties [eye, ear, nose, tongue, body and mind] and not being influenced by them. You reverse your hearing to listen to your own true nature. Instead of listening to external sounds, you focus inwardly on your body and mind, you cease to seek outside yourself, and you turn around the light of your attention so that it will shine within yourself.”^[3]

“We would ask him what did it mean to ‘reverse your hearing’ and he would say things like, ‘You turn the hearing around to listen to the ear-organ, and of course that’s not the physical ear – understand?!’ But of course we mostly didn’t..

“So now with this method of inner listening that you have been teaching these last few days, it all starts to become a lot clearer – especially phrases like, ‘the current of the awakened ones’ – I finally understand what the practice is that has been so

important to our tradition. Thank you for solving the mystery of what those words meant – and thank you for teaching us how to use it!”

As time went by others would come along and describe practices and teachings that employ this same inner sound in a similar way. In recent years the Zen teacher Chozen Bays, of Great Vow Zen Monastery in Oregon, has spoken of how she feels this very sound, and the deep listening to it, are the basis of Hakuin Ekaku’s famous koan: “Two hands clap and there is a sound; (but) what is the sound of one hand?” As she has written:

“This koan, the Sound of One Hand, has become trivialized in the West, but its actual meaning is very profound. The koan is a question that cannot be answered by our usual method – by thinking. It can only be answered by non-thinking. It asks us to undertake deep listening, to listen as we never have before, to listen not only with our ears but with our entire being, our eyes, our skin, our bones and our heart.

“Deep listening requires complete receptivity. This means that nothing is being broadcast. There are no outflows. Deep listening asks us to quiet the body, the mouth and the mind. Our thoughts must be silent. Impossible, you might say. It is not impossible, not when you are listening so carefully that even the sounds of your thoughts are in the way of your listening. This is absorptive listening, complete absorption in sound.”^[4]

Thus, unbeknown to Ajahn Sumedho at the time, despite there being no references to such a practice in the Pali suttas or the classic Southern Buddhist commentaries, such as the *Visuddhimagga*, it had long been a part of Buddhist tradition after all.

In addition to these forebears in the Buddhist world, the practice of listening to the inner sound plays a significant role in many other spiritual traditions. For example, in the Sant Mat spiritual movement, which originated from the Sikh tradition, the ‘Meditation on the Inner Light and Sound’ includes the

practice of listening to the Sound Current, which they call the *Shabd, Naam*, or the ‘Word manifestation of God’.

Rather than in the Buddhist tradition, where the inner sound is not granted great spiritual significance in and of itself, in this and many other schools it is regarded as being of an intrinsically divine nature.

Various referred to as the Audible Life Stream, the Inner Sound, or the Sound Current, the *Shabd* is regarded as the esoteric essence of God which is available to all human beings – this is according to the *Shabd Path* teachings of Eckankar, Sant Mat and Surat *Shabd Yoga*.

In the words of this latter tradition, the inner sound is regarded as:

“The Essence of the Absolute Supreme Being, that is, the dynamic force of creative energy that was sent out, as sound vibration, from the Supreme Being into the abyss of space at the dawn of the universe’s manifestation, and that is being sent

forth, through the ages, framing all things that constitute and inhabit the universe.”^[5]

Surat Shabda Yoga describes its purpose as the ‘Union of the Soul with the Essence of the Absolute Supreme Being.’ Other expressions for this practice include the Path of Light and Sound, the Journey of Soul, and the Yoga of the Sound Current.

The inner sound has also been developed as a spiritual path or reference point in other traditions. It has been said that it goes by the following names in these various scriptures and philosophical works:

Naad, Akash Bani and *Sruti* in the Vedas

Nada and *Udgit* in the Upanishads

The Music of the Spheres taught by Pythagoras

Sraosha by Zoroaster

Kalma and *Kalam-i-Qadim* in the Qur’an

Naam, Akhand Kirtan and *Sacha Shabd* in the

Guru Granth Sahib

Q: When I follow your instructions to listen to the sound of silence, it seems a bit like tinnitus – are they related? I’ve always thought of that inner sound as a bit bothersome before; now you encourage me to listen to it, and lo and behold, I’ve come to delight in its presence. What’s going on here?

A: There’s an age-old principle in the building trade that says, when confronted by an unavoidable anomaly in a project you are working on – say, a cantilevered beam that sticks out into a room in an old house or an unbreakable boulder in the middle of a garden – “If you can’t hide it, make a feature of it.”

If we don’t come from a tradition that holds the nada-sound as being an exalted quality and, instead, we’ve been relating to it as an annoying intrusion, I’d suggest that most of us can change our attitude to it in a way analogous to that builders’ aphorism. As you describe it, this is just what you have found to be true. That which was bothersome can become an appreciated presence.

For the vast majority of people the nada-sound does not need to be an irritating or intrusive quality. Indeed, as you have found, even in the space of a few days or hours, with just a small shift in the attitude, that annoying rock that was ruining your lawn can be revisioned as a gladdening and lovely presence.

On one daylong workshop that I was teaching on this theme, a woman told the group that now that she could relate to it as a spiritual support and see that it was really a blessed companion, she was dealing with feelings of rage about all the money she had wasted going to so many specialist doctors about it, to no avail. “I’m really angry!” she laughed, “but I’m so relieved to be free of seeing it as a problem that I think I’ll get over it.”

On this, Chozen Bays has written:

“Many people come to me to complain that when they meditate, they are bothered by a loud ringing or buzzing in their ears. They are distressed, because their doctor has told them they have an incurable disease, tinnitus. When I question

them further I find that it is not tinnitus, but that they have begun to hear the sound that is called in Theravada Buddhism, the nada sound. Others have called it the sound of green, the sound of all living things or the sound between sounds. Some composers have said that 'A' is the fundamental tone and that when we voice it we are in resonance with the essential sound of all existence."^[4]

In a small proportion of people, usually for some organic reason, the inner sound is oppressively or catastrophically loud. In these cases, this kind of practice, inner listening, is unlikely to be helpful as a meditation, since the subjective intensity of the sound makes it unusable as an object to encourage peace and clarity. Similarly if you had emphysema, with painful and unreliable breathing problems, the practice of mindfulness of the breath is unlikely to be a very useful tool for you.

Q: So what actually is it? What causes this sound? Some traditions regard it as a divine presence, but a physiologist might say it's simply the electrical effect of neural impulses firing within your ears. What is it?

A: As far as the practice I've been describing here is concerned, it doesn't really matter.

One person says, "It's the Essence of the Absolute Supreme Being" another, "It's just your nervous system, buzzing away"; Pythagoras might say, "Since the sun, the moon and the planets all produce their own unique hum based on their revolutions, we hear this Music of the Spheres, which is inaudible externally to the human ear," and a practitioner of hatha yoga, "No, this is the resonance of your vital energy, your *prāna*, as it is processed through your seven chakras. It's the audible, felt presence of your psycho-physical energy system." "It's the Song of Suchness," "No! It's..." One could go on and on.

The point is not to theorize, making fixed judgements to no great effect, but to use the beneficial qualities of this omnipresent, universal vibration to help us wake up, and to be wise and peaceful.

It's rather like the breath. You can relate to the breath in a simple Western scientific way, as the lungs drawing necessary energy from oxygen in the atmosphere and expelling the waste carbon dioxide, or you can think of the breath as a cosmic, metaphysical quality – the prāna (which is the Sanskrit word for 'breath') of the Universe, moving in inexorable cycles. Irrespective of how you cast its significance – as cosmological or mechanical – you can watch the breath and use it to help you concentrate and be mindful.

Nada yoga is comparable and so that is the attitude I always encourage. Regardless of what it 'actually' is (if one can

meaningfully use that word here) we can put it to use, and the results of that use are real and very tangible.

Q: I've heard it said that if you can hear this sound it means you're enlightened – is this true? A friend of mine went to a very expensive meditation week-end where he learned this method. It might have done him some good but it seemed a bit overstated to me to call that enlightenment. What do you think?

A: I think that this teaching is priceless but not worth paying \$5,000 for a week-end! At least that was the price-tag I saw on one such event in the USA, a few years ago.

It is definitely NOT the case that, if you can hear the nada-sound, it means you are enlightened, at least not according to

the way the word is used in Buddhist circles. To be enlightened, using the classical Buddhist definitions, means that your heart and mind are irreversibly free of all greed, hatred and delusion, and incapable of selfish attitudes of any kind. Enlightened beings are totally pure-hearted – they will never act out of deceit, violence, dishonesty or sensual indulgence. They abide in a state of unshakeable peace, joy and independence. And they are very unlikely to be charging that kind of price for their teachings.

The nada-sound is a natural quality of experience that can be attended to and, if it is used wisely over an extended period of time, it can be a skilful means to aid genuine liberation.

It is natural for people, when they have had a good experience, to be enthusiastic to share that with others. Thus they might overstate their claims through a misperception.

Equally, having derived much benefit for themselves, people often wish to discover some deeper meaning to the experience,

or obtain some validation from outside. In this respect, when people from a Theravadan background have been introduced to this practice of inner listening, they sometimes exclaim things like, “You know the Buddha’s disciples were called the *Sāvaka-Sangha* – ‘The Community of Hearers’! It must mean that they were the ones who could hear the Inner Sound!” Or with an even more dubious etymological derivation, “You know how the word *Sotāpanna* [meaning one who has reached the first stage of enlightenment] is always translated as ‘Stream-enterer’. Well, I reckon they’ve got the wrong ‘sota’ – yes, it means ‘stream’ but ‘sota’ also means ‘the ear, the organ of hearing,’ with exactly the same spelling! So what it really means is, ‘One who has realized the Dhamma through the gateway of the ear-faculty.’ So one who is able to listen to the nada-sound is actually a *Sotāpanna*!”

Wrong again! This is wishful thinking, once more, for this is not what this particular ‘sota’ means, as many other teachings corroborate.^[6]

Furthermore, even if one could make a case for this ‘ear-enterer’ interpretation, it would take a lot more than just hearing the sound of silence to justify calling the experience a sign of having reached the first stage of enlightenment. To be a Sotāpanna means that the heart and mind are completely free of identification with the body and the personality, there is no attachment to, or confusion about, social and religious conventions and, lastly, one who has reached this realization has utterly gone beyond any doubt as to what is the path to liberation and what is not. This depth of awakening is way beyond whatever spiritual blessings might come from simply being able to hear the nada-sound.

In a similar vein I have also heard people make statements like, “It’s the sound of the Unconditioned,” or “It’s the Song of the Deathless,” and I’ve even made a few of these myself:

A song of Suchness clear and bright,
The boundless inner peace of light
Whose unremitting presence roars
Oceanic at its shores.^[7]

The error comes if we assume that since we can hear the inner sound, we have truly ‘found the Deathless’. Not so. All we can be sure of is that we’ve found a ringing in our ears. Once again, although these might be poetic and inspired utterances, and valid pointers toward the Truth, from the Buddhist perspective this additional presumption of attainment is seriously overestimating the case.

After all, consider those who have thought it was tinnitus and have been treating it as an annoying ailment – they might be very far indeed from any kind of spiritual accomplishment, and what’s more, they didn’t have to pay a lot of money to hear it either.

As mentioned before, at least from a Buddhist perspective, hearing the sound of silence can be a skilful means to *aid* liberation, but hearing it does not *constitute* liberation.

The nada-sound has attributes that make it an ideal symbol of the transcendent Dhamma, the Deathless, but it's crucial to bear in mind that: these qualities are symbols in the sense-realm for that which is intrinsically beyond the sense-realm. If we keep that in mind, it helps us to appreciate its presence, but without causing us to mistake the useful signpost for what it's like to arrive at the end of our journey.

Q: If I can't hear it, feel it, see it or anything... what then?

A: Well, as it was said, "Gold is where you find it", so if you can't discern this vibration in any mode, then maybe you need to dig somewhere else. That is to say, use a meditation method

that is more suited to your characteristics, such as mindfulness of breathing or loving-kindness meditation, or use a mantra.

Before you give up on it though, there are a couple of simple ways you can try that might help you to find it and then develop a capacity to use it. Firstly, just try putting your fingers in your ears. This might seem a bit coarse and obviously not what you'd want to use for a long-term practice, but it can be a good way to establish that initial contact – to exclude all external sounds as completely as possible and then see what remains in the hearing.

Secondly, and this is a bit more involved, when you next have a bath or go to a swimming pool, put your ears under the water and be very still. Once again, turn your attention toward the hearing faculty and just listen. Needless to say, if you are at a noisy public pool this is unlikely to make much of a difference, but if you can try this in the quiet, it can be an illuminating introduction to the inner sound.

IN CONCLUSION

In Buddhist practice you are always considering, “Does this work? What are the results of my efforts?” and, if the results are beneficial, you use that as an encouragement to continue on that tack. If however, your efforts are bearing no fruit, then you need to consider how you are working and what different approaches you might use.

It’s always important to recollect that these practices are for YOU. They are there to serve you, rather than for you to be subservient to them. So please take this method of inner listening and see if it works for you. If it does, then it’s the ‘right thing’ – and if it doesn’t, then may you find other ways to reach and to ascend the spiritual Mountain.

The rest is silence.

QUOTATIONS

THE SHŪRANGAMA SŪTRA

“I began with a practice based on the enlightened nature of hearing. First I redirected my hearing inward in order to enter the current of the sages. Then external sounds disappeared. With the direction of my hearing reversed and with sounds stilled, both sounds and silence cease to arise. So it was that, as I gradually progressed, what I heard and my awareness of what I heard came to an end. Even when that state of mind in which everything had come to an end disappeared, I did not rest. My awareness and the objects of my awareness were emptied, and when that process of emptying my awareness was wholly complete, then even that emptying

and what had been emptied vanished. Coming into being and ceasing to be themselves ceased to be. Then the ultimate stillness was revealed.

“All of a sudden I transcended the worlds of ordinary beings, and I also transcended the worlds of beings who have transcended the ordinary worlds. Everything in the ten directions was fully illuminated, and I gained two remarkable powers. First, my mind ascended to unite with the fundamental, wondrous, enlightened mind of all Buddhas in all ten directions, and my power of compassion became the same as theirs. Second, my mind descended to unite with all beings of the six destinies in all ten directions such that I felt their sorrows and their prayerful yearnings as my own.

[pp 234-5]

“I now respectfully say this to the World-Honored One –
 The One who came to be a Buddha in this Sahā world
 In order to transmit to us the true, essential teaching
 Meant for this place – I say that purity is found through hearing.
 All those who wish to gain samādhi’s mastery
 Will surely find that hearing is the way to enter.”

[p 253]

“Great Assembly! Ānanda! Halt the puppet show
 Of your distorted hearing! Merely turn your hearing round
 To listen to your genuine true nature,
 Which is the destination of the Path that is supreme.
 This is the genuine way to break through to enlightenment.”

[p 256]

*Excerpted from: ‘The Śūraṅgama Sūtra’^[3]
 Newly translated from the Chinese by the Śūraṅgama Sūtra
 Translation Committee of the Buddhist Text Translation Society*

THE CHĀNDOGYA UPANISHAD

Now, the light that shines higher than this heaven, on the backs of all, on the backs of everything, in the highest worlds, than which there are no higher – truly that is the same as the light which is here within a person. There is this hearing of it – when one closes one’s ears and hears a sound, a roar, as of a fire blazing.

[ChU 3.13.7 8]

*Quoted in ‘Mind Like Fire Unbound’ Ch. 1
Ven. Thanissaro Bhikkhu, trans.*

THE DHARMA BUMS

The silence is so intense that you can hear your own blood roar in your ears but louder than that by far is the mysterious roar which I always identify with the roaring of the diamond of

wisdom, the mysterious roar of silence itself, which is a great Shhhh reminding you of something you've seemed to have forgotten in the stress of your days since birth.

I wished I could explain it to those I loved, to my mother, to Japhy, but there just weren't any words to describe the nothingness and purity of it. "Is there a certain and definite teaching to be given to all living creatures?" was the question probably asked to beetlebrowed snowy Dipankara, and his answer was the roaring silence of the diamond.

'The Dharma Bums' Ch. 22
by Jack Kerouac

THE ASCENT OF MOUNT CARMEL

(SUBIDA DEL MONTE CARMELO)

Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing.

And even on the Mountain, nothing.

(Nada, nada, nada, nada, nada. Y en el Monte, nada.)

*The Ascent of Mount Carmel - The Way of Pure Spirit.
by St. John of the Cross*

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[3] *The Śūraṅgama Sūtra – With Excerpts from the Commentary by the Venerable Master Hsüan Hua* (Copyright © 2009 by the Buddhist Text Translation Society)

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[4] Unpublished manuscript – cf ‘*Deep Listening*’ a Dharma talk by Jan Chozen Bays
<http://www.zendust.org/audio/deep-listening>

[5] From ‘*Naam or Word*’ – ‘*Book Two: Shabd – The Sound Principle*’ by Sant Kirpal Singh
http://www.ruhanisatsangusa.org/naam/naam_shabd1.htm

[6] For example S 55.5: “Sāriputta, this is said: ‘The stream, the stream.’ What now, Sāriputta, is the stream?”
“This Noble Eightfold Path, venerable sir, is the stream; that is, right view, right intention, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.”
“Good, good, Sāriputta! This Noble Eightfold Path is the stream.”

[7] From the poem ‘*Self Portrait*’, by the author, in ‘*Silent Rain*’ p 263, and in ‘*Rain on the Nile*’ p 65

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

AJAHN AMARO began his training in the forest monasteries of northeast Thailand with Ajahn Chah in 1978. He continued his training under Ajahn Sumedho, first at Chithurst Monastery in West Sussex, England, and later at Amaravati Buddhist Monastery, where he lived for 10 years. In June 1996, Ajahn Amaro moved to California to establish Abhayagiri Monastery. Between January 1997 and July 2010 Ajahn Amaro guided Abhayagiri as co-abbot with Ajahn Pasanno. In summer 2010 Ajahn Amaro returned to Amaravati, on the invitation of Ajahn Sumedho, to take up the position of abbot there.



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