

Hearing the Cries of the World

By Taizan Gendo (Mark Adams)

In this time of uncertainty and suffering we may be called to more than listening to the cries of the world. We may be called to action, to follow in the footsteps and example of a most favored saint in all of Zen— Avalokiteshvara bodhisattva.

This is heartfelt work, in a confusing, frightening, and painful time, when spiritual practice can be a powerful shared medicine, much more than simply a welcome, soothing balm of comforting habit. The reason it is such powerful medicine is that the bodhisattva ideal cuts to the heart of this mystery of being alive. And that mystery, that essence, is shunyata, the emptiness detailed so exquisitely in the Heart Sutra.

But accepting the emptiness of shunyata, how do we embrace the role of shedding blood and tears, searching desperately (and often futilely) for a skillful response? To suffer ourselves as a bodhisattva while recognizing the emptiness at the heart of all things?

The upaya (skillful means) required for this path seems celestial in quality —not earthly for us mortals. Perhaps this is why in our Mahayana practice of Zen, there are two types of bodhisattvas—earthly and transcendental. The first type (earthly) we may undertake to follow as intentions, as a vow in Jukai, with precepts and paramitas as the guiding lights. The second (celestial), serves as an inspiration for courage, for energy, for resilience, like a morning star. And like the sun, we can all feel it's effects, but we can never look at it directly with our naked eyes without losing our vision. Yet we know (feel) it is there.

Hearing the cries of the world is gut wrenching, despair-making, but essential to remind us of our intentions. Shunyata, “uncovered” and revealed through the meditative power of prajna paramita, holds the mysterious power of enlightenment that allows us to be effective and not “submerged by the things of the world” as the refrain in the Metta Sutra advises.

Instead of denying reality, or becoming numb to those cries, instead of generating elaborate myths of future rewards, ultimate answers, or a comforting meaning in suffering, recognizing Shunyata encourages us to

be with things exactly-as-they-are, just “thusness” and “suchness,” with an open-to-all, loving heart for all sentient beings, and with action—not just ideas, ideals, or meditation.

For each of us, the “how” will be specific to our circumstance, context, timing, and skills. The bodhisattva path is not general—it is specific, derived from the actions we take in response to hearing those cries.

With a deep bow,
—Taizan