

1.

In Buddhist iconography, Avalokitasvara is a mythic character. Or not so mythic if you believe the Tibetans and see the current Dalai Lama as his most recent earthly incarnation. Anyway, the original Avalokitasvara, back at the time of the Buddha, attained enlightenment 'by ear' – that is to say, by listening.

Resting his attention entirely on the sound of silence he attained liberation from the delusions that – according to Buddhist thinking - cause suffering in life.

And when I say the sound of silence I am not being poetic. It's a technical term – also called the 'nada' sound. The sound of silence is that constant high-pitched ringing that we hear deep inside our head.

You can catch it in the silence of a bedroom in a strange country house, or deep underwater in a deserted swimming pool. And I find it rings particularly loud after a night out dancing. I've never heard a realistic explanation of the causes of this tiny noise – I like to think of it of the sound of electricity flowing in the brain – but whatever its source, it happens to be the perfect tool for meditation: a still, steady post standing in a turbulent river of change.

Rather perfectly the Sanskrit word nada translates as both sound and river. Although it's a vantage point from which you can see the river flow, it's not any different from the river itself. It's sound and silence.

If I stop speaking you can hear it.

[long silence and then very pianissimo the drone begins]

2.

Samadhi is the name given to a state of perfect concentration that's much prized by meditators.

Instead of leaping after every passing thought like a hyperactive monkey, the mind learns to stay still and steady and funnels all the energy it usually fritters outwards, inwards.

It's a pooling of energy. Every flicker of distraction gets redirected. Instead of worrying about things we cannot change or longing for things we can't have we turn all the longing and worrying off. Just for 20 minutes or so. We say: for these few minutes I will rest and invest all this energy I usually expend in worry and longing into stillness. Into a single bright, white point.

And that single-pointed concentration becomes a white hole. Eventually it's so strong that everything – every passing thought, every flicker of stress, every microscopic quiver of anxiety – everything flows into the centre of stillness. The state of samadhi becomes stable like gravity and nothing can shake it.

3.

The inner ear, shaped like a nautilus with three looped heads, is filled with liquid and set inside the walls of the skull in the densest bone in the body.

Sound waves funnelled down the trumpet of the outer ear get picked up the big, taut membrane of the eardrum and then amplified by a Heath Robinson-like construction of tiny bones. These pass the waves along through the middle ear to an oval window in the side of the bone-encased nautilus. Tapping on this window the waves are transferred into the fluid of the inner ear, which starts to shudder and vibrate in sympathy. Tiny hairs all along the spiral of the inner ear pick up these vibrations and excitedly turn them into electrical impulses.

Now the wave has moved from air to fluid to electricity. Once digitized into the lingua franca of the brain the real magic happens. Those chains of impulses – on and off – get transformed into birdsong, voices, coughs, counterpoint, music.

Outside is compressed air. Inside is music. In between is liquid.

4.

i.

In the Maha Assapura Sutta one of the Buddha's core teachings on meditation practice, he compares samadhi to a lake fed by underwater springs. There's no inflow of water from any visible direction and rain doesn't fill it, but the lake is constantly being replenished by currents of water which well-up, steeping coolness and freshness throughout. Likewise, samadhi soaks and permeates every cell of the meditators body and mind, filling them up with wave after wave of pleasure, like streams of continuous champagne bubbles.

ii.

Imagine if that flash of joy we feel just momentarily on the hot sand of the summer beach or as we walk barefoot on the grass for the first time of the year or when we lie curled up with our lover in December – Imagine if these moments could be extended indefinitely. Rather than fleeting, they become stable and unshakeable: states of delighted consciousness we chose to enter and we chose to stay in.

iii.

In these supernaturally sunny moods we're not inclined to chase hectically after things we like and bat away those things we don't because we're living in a profoundly contented mindstate in which everything – everything – seems delightful. Nothing coming from the external world can shadow us because our mind is lit up with from within.

5.

I worked with a soundman who escaped the Boxing Day tsunami in Phuket.

He was lying on his lounge reading his thriller and glanced up because he was aware of a flutter of excitement. People were walking out on the suddenly vast expanse of sand to look at the carpet of fish gasping for air. That's not right he said to himself – where's the sea gone?

Something inside him made him walk the other way. Fast. His toes gripping the sand, up the beach, up the hill to safety. He only looked round when he got to the top. His ears filled with that high-pitched ringing that comes to the fore in moments of white-hot stress.

When he turned round at the top of the hill he told me that - suddenly – he could hear everything: the cracking of the wooden buildings under the wall of water, the exact pitch of panic in human voices, the birds in the trees above him. And he saw he'd blindly, automatically, followed the only road that led up to the high ground. And down below, he could see other people who gone down the 2 or 3 deadends he'd walked past, trying to clamber up walls, falling back into the water. Being dragged away.

He told me that he had 2 thoughts in quick succession: I could have died. and then: I'm going to die anyway.

6.

The Tibetans have word 'shenpa' which describes the itch. The itch to get up and do something. The itch to find fault with someone, the itch to go and get a beer, the itch to dismiss something as rubbish, the itch to indulge the things we approve of. Before the action comes the itch.

The Tibetans know that scratching itches only make them worse and so they came up with the antidote to shenpa which is 'shenlok'

'Shenlok' means the emptying out or turning upside down of shenpa.

Instead of scratching you sit with the itch, savour the exquisite burn, resist the irresistible urge to do something and just allow the itch to pass. As it always does. Everything has a beginning, a middle and an end. Urges pass.

And the energy that you save by not chasing the urge powers samadhi.

You can't have stillness without watching the waves.

7.

Between singing and hearing is the little lake of the inner ear – which is river and pool.

After the wave, there is still water.

A wise Tibetan teacher said to sit samadhi was to become the ocean watching its own waves.

From the deep the massive breakers that roll across the surface are just the distant play of sunlight on the water. Seen from below, looking up through those shifting curtains of deep blue the surface is delightful even when turbulent.

He said: Sit like the ocean and delight in the waves.