

Meditation on Five Sounds that can Heal the World

If we listen to the mind of silence,
every bird song and every whispering
of the pine branches in the wind will
speak to us.

Hanh 2015 pp 108

<u>Contents</u>		
		page
1. Preamble		2
2. Introduction to the Five Sounds		2
3. The Exercise in summary, and an original practice		3
	<i>An initial Meditation on Five Sounds of Silence Exercise</i>	3
4. The Essence of Meditations on the Sound of Silence		4
	I. The Sound of Wonder	4
	II. The Sound of the One Who Observes the world	4
	III. The Sound of OM (our origins in the cosmos)	5
	IV. The Sound of the Rising Tide: Our Original Nature	6
	Prelude	6
	To hear the sound	6
	V. The Sound of Impermanence / Inter-Being	7
	<i>Preamble</i>	7
	<i>Reflections on the nature of Life and Matter</i>	8
	VI. A Sixth Sound: <i>The Sound of Gratitude</i>	9
5. Summary Overview of Meditation on the Sound of Silence		10
	Figure 5: Overview of Meditation on the Sounds of Silence	10-11
6. Epilogue on “the one who observes”		13
7. Thematically related articles on web		15
8. Some Sources and References		16

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1. Preamble

Luis de Rivera, in his approach to Autogenic Training, introduces two specific forms of Meditation [de Rivera 2018] once the AT student has completed the basic AT training of the Standard Exercises. These are:

- Feeling the Feeling Meditation; and
- Meditation on Constructive Feelings.

In the Spring of 2018 my wife Bernie and I spent two weeks in the Lower Hamlet, Plum Village, southern France, a Buddhist meditation centre and retreat. There are now three Plum Villages, and they were founded in 1982 by Thích Nhất Hạnh (a Buddhist monk and Zen master) and Chân Không (a Buddhist nun). Their community is known as “The Order of Interbeing”.

During our time there we met a wonderful woman from America, who was planning to spend several weeks / months with the community. She introduced me to a book by Thich Nhat Hanh that I had not come across, called: *Silence: The Power of Quiet in a World Full of Noise*.

This meditation has been developed from ideas and concepts in Hanh’s book, which I found most moving. However, the idea behind “Meditations on Constructive Feelings” – and linking this with Autogenic Training, comes for Luis de Rivera’s Autogenics 3.0 [de Rivera 2018]; see also Part 7 of this article which includes other meditations in this series. Constructive Feeling Meditations can become an antidote to stress and distress.

2. Introduction to the Five Sounds

The experience of many humans over the last several decades has been that the world is becoming increasingly busy and noisy; this means we can easily lose touch with nature.

If we listen to the mind of silence, every bird song and every whispering of the pine branches in the wind will speak to us.

Hanh 2015 pp 108

There is an ancient teaching in Buddhist psychology on the importance of inner quiet within us for our personal and mindful development, attributed to Avalokiteśvara, who is regarded as one of the great teachers on compassion – and he dedicated his life to reducing the suffering in the world¹.

The name Avalokiteśvara means “the one who listens deeply to the sounds of the world” [Hanh 2015].

According to Buddhist tradition, Avalokiteśvara has the capacity to listen to all kinds of sounds. He can also utter five different kinds of sounds that can heal the world. If you listen you can find silence within yourself, and you can hear these five sounds.

Hanh 2015 p 10

¹ Such a person is sometimes called a Bodhisattva, whom we can regard as someone who has become enlightened, and dedicates their lives to reducing suffering in the world.



To hear these sounds, whether metaphorically or actually, usually requires a regular meditative type practice in which we can tune in to the quiet and silence within.

3. The Exercise in summary, and an original practice

We need to have already established a regular meditative type practice, such as Meditation, Yoga, Tai Chi or Autogenic Training. I suggest that we set aside say half an hour or so for this exercise², and start with a single sequence of the Autogenic Standard Exercises (either the Six or Ten Standard Exercise formats). The Five Sounds are:

- I. **The Sound of Wonder**
- II. **The Sound of the One Who Observes the world**
- III. **The Sound of OM: (our origins in the cosmos)**
- IV. **The Sound of the Rising Tide: Our Original Nature**
- V. **The Sound of Impermanence / Inter-Being**

In part 4 of this article, we will look in some detail at these Five Sounds.

An initial Meditation on Five Sounds of Silence Exercise

Prior to reading further, it is suggested that we practise this exercise once or twice so that we experience what the Five Sounds may mean to us – before they are influenced by what follows. This will make the experience more Autogenic.

The Practice:

- Carry out a Standard Exercise sequence once... and then
- Reflect on each of the five “Sounds” in turn, spending perhaps a few minutes on each.
- On completion, gently come out of the exercise, and write down your fresh experience.

4. The Essence /

² Which initially can be practised say two to four times a week.



4. The Essence of Meditations on the Sound of Silence

Each time I go through this meditation sequence, different things / awarenesses may come to mind. The following are some general reflections on the meditation.

I. The Sound of Wonder

The first is the Wonderful Sound, the sound of the wonders of life that are calling you. This is the sound of the birds, of the rain.....

Hanh 2015 p 10

We start the meditation with reflections on the sheer wonder of life, of sunlight, of fruits of the forest, of existence³ and the amazing fact that we are alive.

- We can reflect on these matters for several minutes before moving on.

II. The Sound of “the One who Observes the World”

This is the sound of listening,
the sound of silence

Hanh 2015 p 10

In this, we recognise and realise that we have this amazing ability to observe the world. In this part of the meditation we can focus on, for example, the sound of the wind in trees; the blue sky; or our own breath. alive

In an Autogenic Sequence, as the one who observes, we can, with mindful awareness, tune in to what is being experienced in, for example, our neck and shoulders area. As the one who observes, we can live-experience the world: i.e. *vivencia*⁴. If we are absorbed in nature, in that moment, we are a being without the concepts of me, mine, and discrimination⁵. This is essentially tuning into nature, tuning in to our own inner being, and so becoming in touch with the “still sacred voice within” – in the context of Jen⁶. Without nature, we cannot be; in this sense we are not a separate being observing nature: rather, we are a participant observer, depending, for example, on the oxygen from mother earth for each moment we are aware, each moment we are alive.

³ See related web article in this series: F 6.2: Constructive Feeling Meditation II: Existence.

⁴ *Vivencia*: a Spanish word that is difficult to translate. Luis de Rivera suggests the term *live-experience* [de Rivera 2018 p 29] (with the *live* as in *alive* – or *live-wire*).

⁵ For a helpful brief discussion on the importance of non-discrimination, see Hanh 2010 pp 58-64.

⁶ Jen: an ancient Chinese virtue valued above all others: human-heartedness [Watts 1995; page 25].



III. The transcendental sound of OM

As we listen with the silence, we may hear OM echoing through the Eons of time – going back to the Big Bang – or a time before that.



Background reflections on OM

Om is an ancient Sanskrit word and has been widely used in many different Indian Spiritual Practices, including Hinduism – for example, in the Vedas and Upanishads; and in Buddhist writings. Keown’s dictionary of Buddhism has this entry:

An ancient Indian sacred syllable. Various complex explanations of its meaning are found in exegetical literature and it characteristically prefixes most mantras used in Buddhism. It becomes a symbol of spiritual knowledge, especially emptiness⁷.....

Keown 2003 p 204

The web Free Dictionary has this definition:

OM: The supreme and most sacred syllable, consisting in Sanskrit of the three sounds (a), (u), and (m), representing various fundamental triads and believed to be the spoken essence of the universe. It is uttered as a mantra and in affirmations and blessings.

<https://www.thefreedictionary.com/Om>

In this meditation, we are more using OM as a way into the mystery and origins of the cosmos, life, and our existence.

There is a saying that if you want to make an apple pie from scratch, you first have to create the cosmos. Our present understanding is that our universe, and so mother earth, started with the Big Bang. Without these events of previous thousands of millennia, we would and could not be.

⁷ Emptiness in this context means that no one, no thing, has a separate self; this is sometimes described as “being empty of a separate self”. However, a more understandable rendering of the meaning of emptiness is that each person, each organism, and each thing in the cosmos is full of non-self elements [after Hanh]; this can lead to an insight into the nature of Inter-Being.



The third sound is the Brahma Sound. This is the transcendental sound, OM, which has a long history in Indian spiritual (metaphysical – IR) thought. The tradition is that the sound OM has the innate power to create the world.....” [Hanh 2015 p 11].

This, the third part of the meditation, awakens us to our long history, starting with the dawn of the cosmos. We only are because of our parents, our ancestors, their ancestors, going back to early life and pre-life forms; to the creation of atoms in the death throes of stars, that created heat and pressures sufficient to form large atoms such as Iron, vital for our being [Bizony 2007 pp 175-176].

OM reflections interlink with the First and Second Sound.

IV. The Sound of the Rising Tide

Prelude:

I love this sound. One morning on holiday in May 2019, Bernie and I were staying in a holiday cottage in Lanton, in the Scottish Borders. I was mentioning that I was writing this article, and specifically focusing on this fourth sound in relation to our original nature and Jen. Her response was most interesting – and in a way uncanny. She said: “This seems to me more like our original sound..... Is the original sound the sound we hear of the amniotic fluid while we are in our mother’s womb – with the rising and falling of her breathing?”

So we can inter-link this sound of the Rising Tide to very early experiences of our original nature: and for those of us blessed in utero with a nurturing mother (to be), we will axiomatically be living within the sphere of human-heartedness and CARE [Panksepp 1998]⁸.

To hear the sound

To hear this sound, we develop a mindful practice. Hanh alerts us to the dangers of misperceptions.

The fourth sound is the Sound of the Rising Tide. The sound symbolises the voice of the Awakened One. The teaching of the Awakened One can clear away any misunderstanding, remove affliction, and transform everything. It is penetrating and effective.

Hanh 2015 p 11
Slightly adapted

⁸ This will neuro-physiologically be integrated with the Social Engagement Systems and the Myelinated Ventral Vagus system that facilitates rest, repair, recuperation and nurturing – and a feeling of safety [Porges 2018].



Fundamental to this teaching is that of mindfulness – and compassion for all. We are all born with the potential to develop our CARE and nurturing circuits [Panksepp 1998].

In a recent meditation on this theme, it came to me that this Sound of the Rising Tide inter-is with “the still small voice within” – from a different spiritual tradition.

As we tune into the silence within us, we can gradually become in touch with our inner nature, or original nature. This is linked to the ancient Chinese concept of Jen, which was regarded as a quality higher than any other; that is:

🌱 Human Heartedness

This can be described in terms of the Sound of the Rising Tide, which we tune into axiomatically as our bodies settle: this is associated with the activation of our Social Engagement⁹ and CARE¹⁰ circuits.

Human Heartedness can become the heart of our social interactions and well-being, watered by our Nurturing and CARE circuits; and with mindfulness leads to compassion for all beings, flora and fauna, and our planet, as we continue to listen to the sound of the Rising Tide¹¹.

Human Heartedness flourishes when we feel safe [Porges 2011; 2017].

V. The Sound that Transcends all Sounds – Impermanence

Preamble:

The fifth sound is a reminder that all things are transient, including philosophies, concepts, and notions.

“The fifth sound is the Sound that Transcends All Sounds of the World. This is the sound of impermanence, a reminder not to get caught up in or attached to particular words or sounds. Many scholars have made the words of the Buddha’s teaching complicated and difficult to understand. But the Buddha said things very simply and did not get caught up in words. So if the teaching is complicated, it is not the sound of the Buddha.....

Wherever you go, you can hear the fifth sound. Even in prison, you can hear the Sound that Transcends All Sounds of the World”.

Hanh 2015 pp 11-12

⁹ Porges 2011

¹⁰ Panksepp 1998; Panksepp & Biven 2012

¹¹ This sound of the Rising Tide emerges when we feel safe, which itself is an attribute of regular Mental Training.



This fifth sound came as a surprise to me, yet on reflection it is fundamental to our existence. Nothing is permanent; all is in flux. As Heraclitus said:

- You cannot cross the same river twice.

Ever since the cosmos came into being, it has been evolving from one state into the next, in an eternal cosmic dance. Impermanence allows us to grow and become more mindful.

Reflections on the nature of Life and Matter

As we reflect on the nature of being, of the cosmos, we may begin to see that each thing, each being, is empty of a separate self. When I first heard of this concept of emptiness, I was greatly perplexed.

So what does emptiness mean in this context? It means that each thing, each being, you and I, are full of non-self elements. For example, we are full of the sun, the clouds, and the dust of long extinct stars. This is within the temporal modality of all things. Atoms and molecules enter our bodies through food, fluid, and breathing. They circulate in the body, or attach to parts of the body (e.g. becoming bone) for a time; and then they are returned to mother earth. So this is within the impermanence sphere.

On the other hand, in the sphere of space, being full of non-self elements leads to a somewhat different, interlinked, realisation. The atoms and molecules that enter our body, and make up our body at any moment in time, are part of the cosmic dance of matter – for example:

- ☼ being at one moment water in a cloud,
- ☼ being formed in the fusion heat of collapsing stars, and
- ☼ being the oxygen that we breathe in that may have just been released from the cypress tree we have been looking at.

We are impermanent in the sense that from conception to beyond death, our bodies are changing as matter in the form of, for example, food, oxygen and photons, enters our bodies, changes our bodies, and then leaves us in an altered state (both physically and psychically). At the same time, this very impermanence is intimately connected to the inter-relatedness of all things, and that none of us can be without the air, the earth, our ancestors; we inter-are.

In the domain of inter-being all is linked:

..... All things by immortal power
Near or Far
Hiddenly
To each other linked are,
That thou canst not stir a flower
Without troubling of a star.

Francis Thompson (c. 1859-1907)



The breathing phrase “Life Breathes Me” in the Autogenic sequence guides us into the realisation of Inter-Being.

So in this part of the meditation, we can reflect on the nature of:

- Impermanence
- Inter-Being
- The air we breathe – or breathes us.

All of these sounds are interlinked. The realisation of Impermanence and Inter-Being is, for example, interlinked with the one who observes – and being a participant observer.

6. A Sixth Sound: the Sound of Gratitude

Bernie and I meditate more or less every morning, and most evenings. On 8th March 2019, during our morning meditation, I was meditating on these Five Sounds that can transform the world; during reflections on the Fifth sound, a feeling of gratitude came over me. Gratitude to be alive, to experience the wonders of the world; gratitude for each breath, the sky, for the very fact of being conscious in this unfathomable world.

Initially I was reluctant to add this sixth sound, given the original Buddhist teachings of the Five Sounds that are expounded by Thich Nhat Hanh. However, when this same sense of gratitude during this form of meditation resonated within me repeatedly, I felt adding this sound was in harmony with the essence of Inter-Being.

“Interbeing” is a word that is not in the dictionary yet, but if we combine the prefix “inter” with the verb “to be”, we have a new verb, “inter-be”. If we look into this sheet of paper even more deeply, we can see the sunshine in it. If the sunshine is not there, the forest cannot grow. In fact, nothing can grow. And so, we know that the sunshine is also in this sheet of paper. The paper and the sunshine inter-are.

[Hanh 2012 pp 55-56]

We are all, as it were, conscious manifestations of the cosmos; we do not really know where we came from, where consciousness comes from: or where we go when conditions are no longer sufficient for us to manifest. Yet for most of us, most of the time, these are essentially unimportant set against the wondrous nature of life and being.



5. Summary Overview of Meditation on the Sound of Silence

Figure 6 below summarises the meditation. I have found it useful, between each section, to return to focus on the breathing, much as in the AT Standard Exercise on breathing. We can say silently to ourselves the phrase:

Preamble to Meditation

- Life Breathes me; or
- It Breathes me

	Schematic representation of a suggested breathing pattern prior to each section of the meditation	Suggested Breathing Repeats	<u>Comments / reflections</u>
Prelude		1	Breathing In, I am Aware I am Breathing In Breathing Out, I am Aware I am Breathing Out
I		3	Wonder (the wonders of life)
II		3	As we settle; as we become one with the present moment – in that silence, wonder arises. “The first sound is the Wonderful Sound, the sound of the wonders of life that are calling you. This is the sound of the birds, of the rain.....” [Hanh 2015] Reflect on wonder for several minutes.
III		3 +	The Sound of the One Who Observes the world (we are the one who observes)
IV /			We may come to a realisation that, as conscious beings, we have the privilege, capacity, and responsibility to observe the world with mindfulness.... And this can link us with the sages of the past. “The second sound is the Sound of the One Who Observes the Word. This is the sound of listening, the sound of silence.” In the light of our reflections on Inter-Being in Section 4: V above, we may begin to see this “the one who observes” more in terms of the “participant”; i.e. the participant in the two-way dance of observer / observed.
	OM		Listen with the silence. OM echoing through the Eons of time, since the Big Bang – or since before time. “The third sound is the Brahma Sound. This is the transcendental sound, Om, which has a long history in Indian spiritual (metaphysical – ^{IR}) thought.” [Hanh 2015]
Figure 5 Part 1 Overview of Meditation on the Sounds of Silence			



	Schematic representation of a suggested breathing pattern prior to each section of the meditation	Suggested Breathing Repeats	<u>Comments / reflections</u>
IV	The Sound of the Rising Tide	3	<p>This is the sound of Our Original Nature¹², which can be equated with Mindfulness, Compassion, Jen, and our:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ innate human-heartedness. <p>It can arise when we are feeling safe. Linking the meditation with our breathing in a mindful way facilitates a feeling of safety [Porges 2017].</p>
V /	The Sound of Impermanence	3	<p>We may tend to see life as permanent; yet the essence of all life, of each moment of the cosmos, is that of impermanence. Change is built into the fabric of existence; without impermanence, our children would not grow up and become artists, mechanics, teachers, gardeners, nurses or parents.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Being aware of impermanence each day of our lives facilitates an imminent awareness of the numinous quality and fragility of each present moment – and the shear wonder of consciousness and existence. <p>Impermanence is the essence of the eco-friendly nature of life. Each object of the universe is made up of “non-self elements”. In the human context, and the context of Buddhist psychology, this means that we do not have a permanent, separate self. Each day we take into our bodies non-self elements (such as water that was once floating in the sky as a cloud, and elements from long extinct stars). This highlights the impermanent nature of our bodies; yet also that we can only inter-be with the cosmos.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ☸ Reflections on impermanence thus leads us back to the Inter-Being nature of all that is.
VI	The Sound of Gratitude	3	<p>Reflecting on the realisation that we are conscious at all can lead to a sense of wonder. How apparently inanimate atoms and molecules can come together to create consciousness and feelings.</p>

Figure 5 Part 2
Overview of Meditation on the Sounds of Silence

¹² “At the core of the evolved features that define mammals is the role that social interaction plays in their survival. Functionally, the ability to establish feelings of safety within the social interactions underlies their survival and acts as a prepotent biological imperative” [Porges 2018 p 66]. Positive Social Engagement is underpinned by our CARE, PLAY, and wholesome SEEKING Circuits [Panksepp 1998]. Dobzhansky stated, in the context of evolution and the ‘survival of the fittest’, that “the fittest may also be the gentlest, because survival often requires mutual help and co-operation” [Porges op cit citing Dobzhansky ¹⁹⁶²].



Summarising Figure 5, we have:

- I. The Sound of Wonder
- II. The Sound of the One Who Observes the world (embracing the Participant Observer)
- III. The Sound of OM: (our origins in the cosmos)
- IV. The Sound of the Rising Tide: Our Original Nature
- V. The Sound of Impermanence / Inter-Being
- VI. The Sound of Gratitude.

6. Epilogue on /



6. Epilogue on “the one who observes”.

While editing this article, I found I had included two different, yet overlapping, perspectives on this matter – and both appear below.

Once we have established this Sounds of Silence Meditation, a further development of this part of the meditation can be salutary.

“The one who observes the world” is here taken to be you and me, each one of us that is aware that we are the observers of what is before us, or in our minds.

However, the concept of the “observer” is related to, or can be related to, the concept that we have a permanent, separate, self. If we are not careful, this “one who observes” can become conflated with concepts such as “I”, “me”, and “mine” – in a somewhat egotistical manner. Suzuki talks about this in Zen Mind, Beginner’s Mind, when he discusses the concept that we can have of making, or creating, things – and then we repeat: “I create, I create, I create” [Suzuki 1970 p 66]. Here Suzuki is warning us of the danger of hubris and of us imagining that we can actually create anything from scratch – for example, an apple pie!

Yet, if we are firmly established in the awareness of being empty of a separate self, we will be aware that we are full of non-self elements – such as the sun, the moon, the clouds, and elements from star-dust of long extinct stars. With this understanding, the concept of “me”, “mine” and “I by my own cleverness create....” dissolves. We only are because that is: e.g. the sun; our ancestors; our DNA; our Spiritual Ancestors. Moment by moment in our lives we are manifesting non-self elements.

A further understanding develops: we are not separate beings, but rather we a part of the cosmic dance..... and we become participants in what we observe: as participants we begin to realise that we and what we observe inter-are.

Without the other, without the other object, we cannot experience. As we observe a butterfly, we change; our neuro-physiology changes.



Hoverflies*, flowers, trees, the Amazon forests, and life on earth inter-are.

- 🌸 Thanks to Annie Sturgeon for putting me right as to what these insects are!



Pollinating matters

We cannot be the one who observes in isolation; in this sense, we are participant observers. The process of observation can change what we are observing.

“When you enter the world of elementary particles, you have to become a participant in order to understand something. You can no longer stand on the outside and remain just an observer. Today many scientists prefer the word ‘participant’ to the word ‘observer’.

[Hanh 2015 p 35]

With this realisation, we are no longer observers in the objective sense, rather we are participants in the world we observe; we are not separate from that world: we inter-are with it. If we take away the sun, or the clouds, or mother earth, we cannot be.

We are full of non-self elements; this is the sacred nature of life, of reality. Our authentic path must therefore reflect this sacred awareness¹³. An old proverb says^[Hanh 2017 p 67]:

- 🌸 Be humble, you are made of dust.
Be noble, you are made of stars ¹⁴

¹³ Sacred: without a sacred awareness of nature, we are at risk of destroying the ecosystems of our planet Earth. See Frawley 2004.

¹⁴ As far as I can see, the original was a Serbian Proverb: “Be humble for you are made of earth. Be noble for you are made of stars”; the above rendering in the main text is refracted through Hanh 2017 p 67.



7. Thematically related articles on web (or at present works in progress)

D-03	Look at the Cypress Tree (2015) (short version)	
E-03	Look at the Cypress Tree – <i>Autonomic Afferents and Well-Being</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Background Research Paper for talk given to the British Autogenic Society Annual Lecture London - 21st May 2016 (extended version of D-03) 	
F 1	A general introduction to Autogenics 3.0 (<i>based on the work of Luis de Rivera</i>)	
F 4	Some Consequences of Blocking Feelings – <i>of not allowing ourselves to feel the feeling</i>	
F 5A	Feeling the Feeling Meditation I	
F 5B	Feeling the Feeling Meditation II	
F 6.1	Constructive Feeling Meditation I: Calm	
F 6.2	Constructive Feeling Meditation II: Existence	
F 6.3	Constructive Feeling Meditation III: Zest	
F 6.4	Constructive Feeling Meditation: IV: Love and Self-Nurturing (especially in context of low self-esteem)	
F 6.5	Constructive Feeling Meditation: V: Inter-Being	
F 6.6	Constructive Feeling Meditation: VI: Compassion and Joy (the four immeasurables)	
F 7	Meditation on Five Sounds that can Heal the World (after Hanh) (this article)	
F 8	Meditation embracing Joy, Happiness, Inner Distress and Healing	

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12. Some sources and references

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