

## **The Buddha's voice**

If we care to humbly listen – which means to attentively give ear – we can still hear the Buddha's voice today. That is, if we are not drowned by the voices of those we admire, of teachers we adore, rather than teachings that we should inspect and practise. Although we are aware of the advice to place the teaching above the teacher<sup>1</sup> – and we often echo this axiom in our talks with friends and audiences – this is often just another of those rituals that we lip piously.

The Buddha's voice is today drowned by the sounds of strange new Buddhas, cosmic Bodhi-sattvas from beyond, imaginative paradises, gods and demons borrowed and re-branded from other faiths. With our backs turned away to the Buddha, it is difficult to hear his voice, or to hear it clearly. We need to turn back to the Buddha and gaze at him sitting radiantly under the Bodhi tree nestled in the cool forests.

We can still see the forest, and if we look deep enough, we can still see the bodhi tree despite the forest. We only need to carefully examine this single ancient and noble tree, and the forest of mindful peace will embrace us. And if we spend some time sitting under this wisdom tree, we will, in the stillness of our hearts, hear what is frozen in the suttas, that we labour to thaw in translations and talks.

Indeed, without this ancient voice to guide and inspire us, the suttas will be but dead letters and funny stories told by eccentric gurus to win us over rather than to free us from ourselves. We need to carefully listen to the voice that guides us away from the fleeting worlds of sights, of sounds, of smells, of tastes, of touches, of thoughts.

From time to time, we need to leave these worlds, to leave them in their own orbits as it were, while we rest ourselves in spacious stillness. We need to renounce the world while we can, to just sit and be ourselves, free from the voices of the worlds. We must focus on only one voice, the peace of our mindfulness and meditation.

We could do this by sitting with a calm and experienced teacher, a spiritual friend, willing to accept us just as we are. From there, his dulcet voice reminds us to let go of tree-branches we cling to, swinging and harvesting the flowers and fruits of pleasures and knowledge. We need to come down to earth to touch it, and to sit in peace and stillness.

If we listen closely, we might notice that our meditation teacher's voice – the voice that issues forth from his meditation – is not his usual voice. Its dulcet tone soothes our nerves, pushing away our memories and dreams, so that we are here and now with our living breath.

Reviewing our meditation, or simply musing, we might notice the meditation teacher's voice is soft and healing. It is the voice with which he speaks to our hearts. It seems as if this voice is not his at all, but an ancient voice going back to his teacher, and the teacher's teacher, back to the Buddha himself.

It is a voice that cannot be learned or imitated. It is not the voice of vocal chords, not even of a toast-master. It does not come from his breath: it is already quite calm and restful. It is the voice of the radiant heart that beats with everything else around it, at peace with us.

We can only hear this voice, when we are ourselves breathing the same breath. Freeing every breath gently and gratefully. For, this is the breath of life. It has been with us since day one, and always there for us, no matter how we feel, happy or sad. This breath is our most loyal friend, truly constant, true and good: our beautiful breath.

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<sup>1</sup> For details, see “**The teacher or the teaching?**”, [SD 3.14](#).

To follow the Buddha's steps, we must learn to breathe, just as all life breathe. Just one breath at a time. We must breathe the same air that the Buddha breathes from the open spaces around the bodhi tree. Only when we have learned to breathe the Buddha's breath, we feel the true peace that the Buddha is.

There is no way we can hold such a breath, and we should never do so. For breaths must come, breaths must go. To breathe is to let go of all that we are not. We are not the things we have. No name; no fame. No gain; no loss. No praise; no blame. No joy; no pain. No body; no I. Just rising and falling of the breath. We *are* the breath.

When we sit still, we are the earth. Our tears and the morning dew are the same water. The fire that we are born with burns as the sun burns. When we breathe rightly, we are the wind. We are the mountains and trees, the rain and rivers, the candle and the sun, the air and space.

But we have one thing more: our heart that beats with our breath. They flow together, if we allow them. We live in breath; we sleep in breath; we wake in breath. We breathe, we sleep, we wake. The breath is the door to the peace deep in our inner space.

This is not the body's breath, but the heart's breath. It is without beginning, without end, without a middle. It is the breath of beauty, as it is found in all things beautiful. It is profound peace, the stillness in the heart of truth.

R377 Simple Joys 268

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