

# **Listen Like Avalokiteshvara**

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Ngày Hành - in English this translates as: An Aspiration Day of Mindfulness Practice. During this one day retreat we will have the opportunity to become acquainted with each other's good qualities. You will be guided through some meditation practice techniques that will help you restore peace and joy; and calm your mind when you are nervous, depressed, worried, angry, and fearful. Most importantly, together, we will inspire and practice the profound vows of the Great Compassionate Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva. In Vietnamese we refer to Her as Đức Bồ Tát Quán Thế Âm. Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattava literally translates to "the awaking being who listens and responds to all cries in the world."

So when we invoke Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva we aspire to practice deep listening with all of our attention and openheartedness. If we learn to listen like Avalokiteshvara we will help relieve the suffering of many beings, including ourselves. You see the root of human suffering is caused by our inability to listen to ourselves, to others, and to the problems we encounter. We are too busy wrapping ourselves around the world we live in, which causes us to never take a moment to pause and listen to our true nature - the self of peace and joy. Instead, we listen to corrupt media, violence on the news, and peer pressure. We allow the network of social media to influence our ways of thinking, acting and speaking, leading to wrong doing. That's why, most of our decisions are based on our emotions that are influenced by others, not based on our own nature of right understanding. And this is why we suffer, and make others suffer as well.

In order to listen like Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva we have to come back to our own breathing and be mindful of the present moment. When we are aware of our breathing and dwell in the present moment, only then we are truly at peace and experiencing joy. The elements of peace and joy are what make us genuinely beautiful, both in mind and body: we think positively, we act productively, and we speak compassionately to one another. If everyone practices like this the world we live in can only become more beautiful and heavenly each day. Unfortunately, that is too ideal to wish upon because not everyone lives by this principle of life. However, we can begin with ourselves to bring joy to our family first. Like a pebble dropped in a still pond, starting where we are and expanding out. Our mindfulness can influence outward as we dedicate our practice to making the world a beautiful place to live for everyone.

In order to live by the principle of life, there are four basic, essential characteristics that we should develop: They are self-discipline, self-awareness, loving kindness-compassion, and right understanding. But how can we develop these skillful means? That's the question we need to ask and that's the aspiration we need to attain. First, let's examine these four essential characteristics, then let's look at the factors that help develop these characteristics.

The first essential characteristic is self-discipline. Self-discipline means having the ability to organize and manage our daily routines, school, job, family, time and money, and most importantly able to control feelings, self-talk, habits, and actions. Self-discipline equates to having the inner power to carry out whatever one wishes to accomplish through persistence, skill and confidence. That is why many studies have proven that children with self-discipline score higher, academically, than children that lack self-discipline. Even in the leadership role, self-discipline is a key characteristic a leader must have; whether a spiritual leader, political leader, activist leader or any source of leader. If a leader lacks self-discipline, then he or she will not be able to sustain their organization or their team.

The second essential characteristic is self-awareness. Self-awareness means having awareness of your inner self and your surroundings, and not being influenced by any of the conditions that lead you to instability. When your six sense organs (eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind) contact the six sense objects (forms, sounds, odors, flavors, objects, and dharma) you are aware and mindful of what you consume. This self consciousness and awareness then benefits your body and mind.

The third essential characteristic is loving kindness-compassion towards all living things. In Buddhism studies, when we speak of non-harm, we combine the words loving kindness and compassion (in Vietnamese refers as tu bi), and Loving kindness (“tu”) which means to offer joy; and compassion (“bi”) which means to help relieve grief. So, when we speak of loving kindness-compassion we not only offer joy but we also provide a way to help alleviate the suffering as well. For example, let's say one day your friend came to you and told you she feels depressed and wants to end her life. So, you comfort her by telling her how important she is to many people who love her dearly like yourself, her parents, family, friends and many that she can't imagine, and try to cheer her up and bringing joy to her. But that may only temporary help her relieve her suffering, and that's called loving kindness. In order to help end her depression you would strongly encourage her to seek spiritual guidance in meditation practice. To do this you could, for example, suggest she come to Dharma masters for guidance. With guided meditation practice she will gradually recover herself and find true peace within and never fall into depression again.

The fourth characteristic is right understanding. The fundamental right understanding is understanding the Four Noble Truths. The Four Noble Truths are the very first teachings of the Buddha after He attained Enlightenment. The first Noble Truth is that life is suffering; the Second Noble Truth is the truth of the cause of suffering in life; the Third Noble Truth is the truth of the end of suffering in life; and the Fourth Noble Truth is the path that ends all suffering. Making a commitment to this practice, and practicing fully, opens the way to true happiness. Therefore, when you understand the Four Noble Truths you will understand the Law of Cause and Effect, the Law of Impermanence, the Law of Interdependence - which mean we

don't blame others for our own problems, we don't hate or discriminate against anyone regardless, and we have clear perceptions in understanding the true nature of all phenomena. Even though we all go through life experiencing suffering at some stages in our lives, you have to remember success and happiness are attainable. If you put all of your effort, perseverance, and devotion towards your practice, in due time you will be rewarded.

Now let us learn how to develop self-discipline, self-awareness, loving kindness-compassion, and right understanding. There are four key factors that can help you develop these four essential characteristics. The first factor is to practice sitting meditation. Sitting meditation is like food for the mind. It helps you restore your inner peace and joy, just like you would feed your body three meals a day so that you can be healthy and strong. You don't need to sit a long period of time, you just need to practice five minutes in morning, five minutes in during the day, and five minutes in the evening before you go to sleep. When you do sitting meditation you allow your mind to enter a calm state and you give yourself the opportunity to observe your thoughts so you can eliminate the negative thoughts and nourish the positive thoughts, just simply by using your breathing.

To do sitting meditation, first you would find a comfortable posture. With your back straight, let your right hand rest, cupped on top of your left palm, your two thumbs touching each other - symbolizing your mind and body is oneness. Gently close your eyes, relax your whole body, calm your mind, and begin to follow your breathing. As you inhale, recognize that your in-breath is a gentle, long breath of fresh air. As you exhale, recognize that your out-breath is a gentle, long breath out, slowly releasing all tensions within. If you have a hard time focusing on your breathing this way, then you may want to start simply by counting your breaths. For example: breathing in and breathing out, silently count one; breathing in and breathing out, silently count two, until you get to ten then you start back at one again. Meditation is a very simple technique to practice but tremendously beneficial not only for your mind but for your body as well. That is why people who practice meditation look beautiful both inside and out.

The second factor is to have a structure for your daily activities. You need to organize a schedule so you won't spend your time aimlessly. An ideal schedule for school students is to have 7 hours of sleep, 2 hours of homework studies, 1 hour of reading, 1 hour of exercising or playing sports, 1 hour for hobbies interests, 2 hours to eat and bathe, 2 1/2 hours spent on behalf of your family (do whatever you can to help around the house and be productive and responsible to your family), 30 minutes for meditation practice, and the reminding 7 hours are the time you spend in school. For the weekend schedule you would have 14 hours of your time (outside of the regular daily schedule) to dedicate more freely. These 14 hours should include 3

hours towards going to temple for spiritual practice, 3 hours spending quality time with your family, and 2 hours for doing volunteer work. So you have 6 hours to spend on your own interests. If you are a productive person, you can achieve a lot in six hours.

The third factor is to apply mindful breathing in all of your daily formative actions: whether walking, standing, sitting, lying down, working, speaking, using a computer, online browsing, using network social media, watching the news or movies, texting, etc. You need to follow your breathing, so that you carry out your actions with stability and freedom. When you practice mindful breathing you will become more grateful and appreciative toward life and to what you have.

For example, when you walk you recognize every step you take and you feel joyful to be able to walk. This is done by recognizing that you are breathing in, and acknowledging to yourself, "I know that I am walking"; then recognizing that you are breathing out, and acknowledging to yourself, "Breathing out I feel joy." The same practice applies to speaking: "Breathing in, I know that I am speaking," breathing out, "May I speak kind and inspiration words." The same applies for when you're on the computer: breathing in, "I know that I am online browsing," breathing out, "May I only click the button that helps expand my learning and knowledge;" or, breathing in, "I know that I am texting messages," breathing out. "I am only providing kindness and compassion," and so on.

The fourth factor is to practice a less material lifestyle. Learn to practice living simply and modestly so you can dedicate more of your resources to your family, friends and others.

I conclude this opportunity to share with you by emphasizing how important it is to have these essential characteristics. I'd like to share with you a true story about a young man name Tom. About four and half years ago, when we first established Quan Am Nam Hai Monastery in Panama City, Florida, Tom came and knocked on the door and offered to help to work around the Monastery. After our conversations he gave me his email and suggested I email him when I needed his help or even just to borrow his truck. I reciprocated his kind offer by inviting him back to attend the Sunday meditation practice. I also offered that, if he needed any guidance in meditation practice, I would try my best to help.

One day I emailed Tom and asked if he could come to the Monastery and help out. Tom never replied back to my email, and two years later he showed up at the Monastery, but I didn't recognize him because he had gained so much weight. So, he refreshed my memory. He started out by apologizing to me and he started to share his story. During the previous two years he had been in and out of a mental hospital five times. The doctor had diagnosed him as having schizophrenia and anxiety disorders. He smoked a pack of cigarettes and drank 7 cans of soda a

day, and consumed an unhealthy diet. Fortunately for him, he had come to realize that he needed help and the only way out was to seek spiritual guidance, so he came to me.

Within about a year, with my guidance, and most importantly his full commitment to mindfulness meditation practice he was 100 % recovered. He no longer smoked or drank soda, instead he practiced a healthy diet and became a vegetarian and caffeine free. Though Tom was raised with a strong Catholic family background, after a year of practicing Buddhism with me he had converted to the Buddhist path and now he is devoted in his practice meditation and study of Buddhism and regularly gives a monthly donation to the Monastery.

Tom is one among many that I have guided in meditation and had helped change their lifestyle to a more physically and mentally stable one. Despite the severe mental disorders Tom encountered, he still managed to recover because he had the characteristics of self-discipline, self-awareness, compassion, and right understanding. Now he is very healthy and does not need to take any medication.

I hope Tom's story will inspire you to practice sitting meditation, mindful breathing, having a structured schedule, and a less material life-style and practice being more humble and modest. But most importantly, let us always inspire to practice deep listening, like Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, so we serve and act as a pure conduit in bringing joy to our families and to everyone.