

INAUDIBLE LESSONS: INTERPRETING THE AMPLITUDE OF SILENCE IN THE *LOTUS SUTRA*

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The expression “silence speaks louder than words” encapsulates the quintessence of Buddhism, despite the religion’s enduring perpetuation by oral transmission and established manifestation through ritual incantation. While the centrality of verbal practices appears to contextualize the maxim as analogous to negative space art rather than occurring as a peripheral element, silence prevails as an elevated ideal and an ultimate objective in Buddhism. Without a distinction between “here” and “there,” “this” and “that,” the soundless and wordless condition epitomizes the paradox of encompassing everything in nothing. Resting on its capacity to bridge dichotomies, this essay explores the potential emphasis on silence to the extent that it defines the character of the Buddha, manifests a transcendental emotion, and provides respite from the discourse-driven narratives.

From canonical literature such as the *Lotus Sutra* and *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti* to contemporary texts like Sherab Chödzin Kohn’s *The Awakened One: A Life of the Buddha* and Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*, the dialogic presentation of the Buddha’s teachings, his followers’ preaching, and the collective practice of chanting compose narratives in addition to illuminating the philosophical reasoning behind the Buddhist world view. Across the four works, speech ensures the transference of knowledge, prompts appreciation of the Buddha, and kindles determination to become enlightened. It is propagative, like ripples in water. Not only does the content articulated by one individual directly reach countless listeners, but the vein of thoughts continuously replicates and renews, thereby transporting the same message throughout time and space. Moreover, the vibrations of sound heighten temporality and spatiality: they flow with time and diminish with distance. Many have carried on conversations late into the night, while others have missed the words cried from the farthest of distances or whispered in the lowest of breaths. For the sake of argument, the obverse interpretation engages the claim that silence yields the illusion of temporal suspension. In music, rests—moments absent of sound—break the course of notes; if the silence runs long enough, one’s attention may stray from the earlier melodic sequence, no longer following the rhythmic pattern. Granted, “supernatural powers of the Buddha” were involved, but a similar sentiment can be discerned in the Buddha and believers’ sitting in silence for fifty small kalpas, though appearing “to the members of the great assembly like only half a day.”¹

¹ Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 214.

Life brims with activity, and activity brims with sound. In comparison, silence, its inverse, seems slight and trivial in the instructions, commiserations, and entreaties recorded in the *Lotus Sutra*. Unfolding the ineffability of silence and presenting it in relation to sound in this essay might be regarded as a rather ironic, perhaps ultimately futile, exercise. With empirical phrases like “silent as the dead” and “dead silence,” the condition is frequently associated with inactivity and passivity. One might challenge that for those who are living, however, silence is an actively maintained state: “remain silent” and “keep one’s silence” are both indicative of intentional effort. Moreover, countless actions, packed with thoughts and emotions, are carried in silence. In one instance, Siddhartha unspeakingly “dwelt long on the words which Govinda had uttered.” In another, the Buddha “silently agreed to” the Brahma kings’ appeal “to turn the wheel of the Law, save living beings, and open up the way to nirvana.”² Silence can operate in tandem with action, but at times, it also exhibits deliberate inaction. The adage “silence is golden” captures the wisdom of saying nothing at inopportune moments, which the Buddha manifested when some people withdrew from the assembly before his preaching.

Nevertheless, the primacy of oral communication across the texts extends an interesting opportunity to reflect on the “antithetical” silence. The adjective is qualified in this instance because while “silence” is, by definition, an antonym of “sound,” being mindful of the core perception of nonduality in Buddhism and, as explained by Mañjuśrī and performed by Vimalakīrti, to set “silence” against “sound” without reservation would be overlooking its spiritual import.³ Drawing again from *Vimalakīrti*, another reason to abstain from differentiating the two comes from the Goddess, who informed Śāriputra not to “point to liberation by abandoning speech” or to claim inexpressibility because “the holy liberation is the equality of all things.”⁴ Even so, it is worthwhile to address the juxtaposition of the Buddha’s silence and his spoken instruction of the Law. Keeping to the interpretation of silence as “non-sound” and at once embracing its inclusion of everything, the Buddha’s silent sitting, his silent agreement, and his appreciation of those who preach to a silent place become meaningful episodes rather than fleeting transitions. The Buddha teaches in his silence.

Woven by dialogues and chants, the preceptive narratives are predominantly set in the presence of others. With external expressions grounding the scripture, the weight and gravity of silence are consequently delimited. That said, the qualified effect of capturing silence is by no means unique to Buddhist texts. Descriptions of silence are inherently encumbered by the format of books and the nature of words: through quotation marks or terms like “said,” “announced,” and “recited,” phonetic action is defined by textual vocalizers. In short, verbal commands actualize their denotation.

² Hermann Hesse, *Siddhartha*, trans. Hilda Rosner (New York: New Directions, 1957), 16; Watson, 124.

³ Referring to the scene in “The Dharma-Door of Nonduality” from Robert A. F. Thurman, trans., *The Holy Teaching of Vimalakīrti* (University Park: Pennsylvania State Univ. Press, 2003), 77.

⁴ Thurman, 59.

Meanwhile, when put in writing, “silent” and its related forms are unavoidably disassociated from its meaning—the degree of its removal is conditional on whether the text is read aloud or “silently” read with an inner voice. Either approach necessitates an “experience of language,” or to put it differently, the processing of sound- and word-associated linguistic components such as phonemes and morphemes.⁵

The Buddha speaks at length about his assorted pedagogic ways: “He is capable of giving to all living beings the Law of the Great Vehicle. But not all of them are capable of receiving it.”⁶ Silence prevails as an expedient means because “everything that is thought and expressed in words is one-sided, only half the truth”—wordlessness, on the other hand, reflecting “totality, completeness, unity,” removes the division between “illusion and truth.”⁷ Moreover, silence is practicable and experienced by all. Just as listeners may identify with the father’s anxiety in the burning house parable or relate to the travelers’ exhaustion in the phantom city parable, through being silent, they would come to penetrate the nondualistic truth, fathoming that “there is no ebb or flow of birth and death, and there is no existing in this world and later entering extinction.”⁸ There is no language in silence, so though “living beings have different natures, different desires, different actions, and different ways of thinking and making distinctions,” the soundless state is theoretically universally applicable.⁹ Nevertheless, its effectuality is contingent on the receptiveness of each individual, and many must ultimately recourse to the Buddha’s verbal guidance.

Begging the Buddha to explain his words, princes, kings, and bodhisattvas on occasions “[repeat] their request three times and more” in the *Lotus Sutra*.¹⁰ Heeding to their earnest pleas, the Buddha, before launching into his preaching, urges his audience that they “must listen carefully” in order to “understand the truthful words of the Thus Come One.”¹¹ Only when one is silent can one hear others: the Buddha leads by example in addition to verbally addressing the conduct. Towards the end of *Siddhartha*, the final exchange between Siddhartha and Vasudeva evocatively presents the paired practice of speaking-listening: “As he went on speaking and Vasudeva listened to him with a serene face, Siddhartha was more keenly aware than ever of Vasudeva’s attentiveness.”¹² Later, even without an active speaker, the two ferrymen sat in silence and “[listened] intently, completely absorbed, quite empty, taking in

⁵ Ben Alderson-Day and Charles Fernyhough, “Inner Speech: Development, Cognitive Functions, Phenomenology, and Neurobiology,” *Psychological Bulletin* 141, no. 5 (May 25, 2015): pp. 931–65. <https://doi.org/10.1037/bul0000021>.

⁶ Watson, 62. Also see 99.

⁷ Hesse, 115.

⁸ Watson, 226.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Watson, 225.

¹¹ Watson, 224–25.

¹² Hesse, 108.

everything,” ultimately hearing “the great song of a thousand voices consisted of one word: Om — perfection.”¹³

Many “heavenly and human beings” became voice-hearers upon listening to the Buddha expounding the Law of the twelve-linked chain of causation.¹⁴ Having achieved deep meditation practice, acquired understandings and transcendental powers, and been endowed with emancipations, their elevated state is described as liberation from the threefold world.¹⁵ Modern scientific research supports such a characterization, revealing that human brains are wired to prioritize hearing themselves when they speak; when outward-projecting speech is involved, the capacity to listen becomes self-centered.¹⁶ Under this condition, needless to say, talking over one another would be utterly unproductive. On that account, one might understand the voice-hearers as being liberated not only from “the things of the phenomenal world” but more importantly from themselves.¹⁷ To be sure, voice-hearers are still considered to be self-regarding, since they aspire to only “escape quickly from the threefold world and [...] attain nirvana” rather than to save others like those who seek the Great Vehicle.¹⁸

Where the Buddha falls silent or responds in silence, however, the meaning of the soundless condition becomes nuanced under different circumstances. At times it indicates a state of meditation; at others, it heightens the indescribability of the Law. That being so, lessons transmitted directly or imparted circuitously as similes and parables find expression in silence—the varied forms of Buddhist teachings collectively substantiate nonduality. The Buddha tells Ananda as such in *Vimalakīrti*: “There are buddha-fields that accomplish the buddha-work by means of teaching living beings words, definitions, and examples [...] there are utterly pure buddha-fields that accomplish the buddha-work for living beings without speech, by silence, inexpressibility, and unteachability [...] there are none that do not accomplish the buddha-work, because all discipline living beings.”¹⁹

The *Lotus Sutra*, meanwhile, predominantly details instruction by way of articulation. Concretely through words, the Buddha lectured on the importance of compassion and stipulated the duty of his disciples to save living beings through verbal preaching. The integrated use of expedient means, figures of speech, causes and conditions serve to guide, persuade, and inspire listeners to “renounce their attachments” and attain enlightenment.²⁰ Even so, the Buddha’s occasional reticence

¹³ Hesse, 110-11.

¹⁴ Watson, 131-32

¹⁵ Watson, 132.

¹⁶ Yasmin Anwar, “Our Brains Are Wired So We Can Better Hear Ourselves Speak, New Study Shows,” *Berkeley News*, December 8, 2010, accessed May 13, 2022. <https://news.berkeley.edu/2010/12/08/auditory/>.

¹⁷ Watson, 132.

¹⁸ Watson, 60.

¹⁹ Thurman, 86.

²⁰ Watson, 24, 31, 59.

in the text reveals his percipience regarding earthly subjects, whose epistemic limitations necessitate the enlightened being to perform acts of compassion and rescue in silence.

For those who are able to intuit the spiritual significance of silence—the counter-device in the *Lotus Sutra*—what lessons do they learn? While unchanging in form, three impressions of directionality can be gleaned from silence. In relation to different Buddhist precepts, the wordless condition aptly exudes encompassing, internal, or external influence. That said, all courses lead to personal liberation and encourage compassion.

Three characteristics constitute the encompassing function of silence: its facilitation for ubiquitous affinity with others given that all beings can be silent, its existence as a word-resisting state akin to indescribability, and its manifestation as an empty phenomenon. The first attribute has already been described at length above and the second has been alluded to at the beginning of the essay. Still, to summarize the latter, besides extending misleading distinctions as Siddhartha reflected, words are inescapably deficient in representing wordlessness. Furthermore, the *Lotus Sutra* contains a most compelling line linking the truth and silence: “This Law cannot be described, words fall silent before it.”²¹ In regard to the third attribute, the Buddha exposes “all phenomena as empty” and that they are actually “beyond the reach of all words [...] without volume, without limits.”²² Accordingly, lacking sounds or words, silence is the epitome of emptiness. Such quality is recommended because while championing the use of oral expressions to save living beings, the Buddha also warns his listeners of the perils of sound, particularly those that emerge in false statements and foul language. He maintains that for people who “speak ill [...] curse or slander [...] those who uphold the Sutra,” “injury will rebound upon the originator.”²³ The episode of Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated stating his skepticism of the dragon girl’s enlightenment, then promptly interrupted by her arrival and her words of praise for the Buddha, also sheds light on language-stimulated impropriety. Abrupt suspension of speech is rare in the *Lotus Sutra*, so its occurrence establishes the urgency of halting fallacious sounds. Later, as the bodhisattva continues his denunciation, the dragon girl responds not with language but action: she presents the Buddha with a precious jewel. In this instance, the substance of action over words is demonstrated.²⁴ At the end of the scene, Bodhisattva Wisdom Accumulated and others in the assembly “silently believed and accepted” the dragon girl’s attainment of Buddhahood—the return to silence corresponds to a return to correct behavior.²⁵

²¹ Watson, 25.

²² Watson, 198.

²³ Watson, 265, 304.

²⁴ Siddhartha expresses such a sentiment when he said to Govinda, “[Gautama’s] deeds and life are more important to me than his talk.” Hesse, 119.

²⁵ Watson, 189.

Two concepts account for the internal function of silence: it prevails in the desired frame of mind during meditation and inhibits the unfolding of the twelve-linked chain of causation. In *The Awakened One*, Gautama is silent as he goes through levels of meditation and “[unties] the knot of birth, old age, sickness, and death.”²⁶ Siddhartha corroborates the import of silence in deep contemplation, observing that the state permits the dispelling of time, granting individuals the possibility “to see simultaneously all the past, present and future,” or to put it differently, “neither past, nor present, nor future.”²⁷ Silence—the removal of vocal distinctions and the encompassing of everything as introduced previously—facilitates internal concentration, which is essential for living beings to recognize the truth of the threefold world. Still, there is a more organic reason behind the silence of meditation: “Just as, when one clears one’s throat, one is next ready to speak, past deeds create a certain inclination.”²⁸ Speaking—from the intention to action—is likened to the chain of causality. In addition to the root, however, it is worthwhile to note that silence presents as a direct corrective to other aspects within the twelve links, namely words, or “name and form,” and the tongue, which is one of the “six sense organs.”²⁹ Because silence intercepts the cause, wordlessness in meditation equates to a performance of the truth. Nondualism is hence simultaneously thought of and acted upon.

Three intentions sustain the external function of silence: it exhibits patience, demonstrates humility, and serves to save living beings under certain circumstances. From Vasudeva in *Siddhartha* to the Buddha in the *Lotus Sutra*, silence is a reaction. Having already advised Siddhartha to detach from his blind paternal love, rather than badgering his companion into action, Vasudeva chose to be “silent and waited, friendly, understanding, forbearing.”³⁰ On the one hand, given the impertinence of the boy, this sentiment is patience in the truest sense—Vasudeva tolerates the difficult child. On the other hand, his silent response also conveys compassion for Siddhartha—he understands the father’s sorrow and does not wish to cause further suffering. It may be observed that the soft strength of silence manifests in enlightened beings. The following quote is ascribed to Vasudeva but it could seamlessly be applied to describing the Buddha: “He did not speak, but his face silently radiated love and serenity, understanding and knowledge.”³¹ In accepting requests from members of the assembly, the Buddha does so silently.³² Choosing mute consent over declaring, “Yes, I will save you,” puts forward an impression of modesty and reveals the Buddha’s wisdom, since he recognizes that not all living beings can equally receive his direct

²⁶ Sherab Chödzin Kohn, *The Awakened One: A Life of the Buddha* (Boston: Shambhala, 1994), 33.

²⁷ Hesse, 116; Thurman, 63.

²⁸ Kohn, 34.

²⁹ Watson, 131.

³⁰ Hesse, 99.

³¹ Hesse, 109.

³² For example, in Watson, 124, “At that time the Great Universal Wisdom Excellence Thus Come One silently agreed to do so.”

instruction—the viability of being saved falls partly on those who need saving. There is a scene in the *Lotus Sutra* where the Buddha “was silent and did not try to detain” people who withdrew from the assembly.³³ It was an inopportune moment for them to receive his teaching; had those who were “overbearingly arrogant” stayed, they would have grown even more distant from enlightenment.³⁴ His silence in that instance at once carried kindness and humility. Lastly, coming from a different approach, though still pertinent to saving living beings, the Buddha’s claim to assume eternal silence prompted people to wonder, “But the Buddha now is silent and gives us no such order. What shall we do?”³⁵ In order to kindle a sense of urgency among living beings as well as to cultivate in them “a respectful and reverent mind,” “though in truth he does not enter extinction,” the internal condition of silence is projected externally as an expedient means.³⁶

In the threefold world, sound and silence are complementary states; both operate as expedient means to save living beings. That being so, the Buddha looks favorably upon people who strive to improve their spirituality in assemblies together with those preaching the Law “alone in an empty and silent place.”³⁷ The condition of wordlessness and soundlessness, however, still surface as the paramount goal of Buddhist practitioners given its comprehensive emptiness and profound causelessness. Siddhartha remarks that “words do not express thoughts very well. They always become a little different immediately after they are expressed, a little distorted, a little foolish.”³⁸ Meanwhile, as imparted in the *Lotus Sutra*, silence is a medium with the capacity to be nondualistic, a deterrent to setting in motion the cycle of suffering, and a means to act with kindness, compassion, and wisdom. Applicable beyond the religious context, the central lesson of opportunely receiving and expressing in silence contributes to the cultivation of personal tranquility and the development of interpersonal harmony.

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³³ Watson, 30.

³⁴ Watson, 29.

³⁵ Watson, 193.

³⁶ Watson, 227.

³⁷ Watson, 168.

³⁸ Hesse, 117.

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