



A World of Not Looking and Not Listening

Buddhism in Every Step (H11)

Venerable Master Hsing Yun

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Written by
Venerable Master Hsing Yun

Translated by
Fo Guang Shan International Translation Center

Edited and proofread by
Scott Sandell and Leann Moore

Cover and book layout by
Xiaoyang Zhang

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A World of Not Looking and Not Listening

“One who truly knows how to listen, listens to the sound of silence. One who genuinely knows how to look, looks at the inner world.”

This was the wisdom imparted by Chan Master Mingdu, head of the meditation hall where I occasionally meditated during my early days at the Buddhist college. I did not understand this statement very well then, but I kept it in mind, having a feeling that profound Dharma meanings were embedded in it. I could not have guessed then the enormous influence it would have later in my life.

No Sights and No Sounds

At fifteen, I underwent the Triple Platform Ordination. As I arrived where the ordination was to take place

and looked around inquisitively at my surroundings, a hard bamboo cane forcefully struck my body.

“What are you looking at?” asked the preceptor.
“What in this world belongs to you?”



Hearing his words, I decided to close my eyes and stop looking. Now in a world of darkness, I lit

the light in my mind and realized that everything in the world is indeed within the mind. I learned to look inward, not outward; at the non-existing, not the existing; at the real, not the illusory; and at myself, not others.

Three months later, I opened my eyes while walking down a long, covered walkway. The sights—green hills, bodies of water, white clouds in the clear blue sky—were so beautiful to behold! After that period of self-reflection, I saw that the mountains were still the same mountains, and the waters were still the same waters, but my feelings about them were completely changed. Because of that period of looking within, to this day, I can still easily walk in the dark or climb stairs without using my eyes. Things in the world would be much more accurately perceived if we used use our minds' eyes instead of our physical ones.

Similarly, when we purchased the land to build Fo Guang Shan fifty years ago, the devotees despaired over the massive weeds, thorny bushes, and the impossibility of transportation to the monastery. Many asked, “Who will ever want to come here again?” Despite such views, I led the monastics to work. Together, we lugged rocks, transported dirt, cleared hills, and filled ditches, eventually creating a Buddhist haven out of the wilderness. Today, the Fo Guang Shan Monastery has become not only a major tourist attraction in Taiwan but a prominent

international center of Buddhism as well. Those who were initially reluctant to come have returned many times. This experience indicates that what we first see with our eyes is unreliable. Determination assures success; we must be resolute.

After my ordination in 1941, I studied at the Vinaya college at the temple. One night while on patrol, I heard leaves brushing against the bricks and insects buzzing in the still air. Without thinking, I paused to listen. Suddenly, a staff dealt a blow to my back:

“What are you listening to?” shouted the disciplinary officer. “Keep your ears to yourself! What should you be listening to in this world?”

At that admonishment, I began to abstain from listening, but that was terribly difficult. I resorted to stuffing my ears with cotton balls to keep from hearing sounds around me. Gradually, my hearing became purer, and my mind became brighter. However, just as I was beginning to appreciate the serenity of silence, I was slapped again.

“Why did you stuff your ears with cotton?” asked the instructor. “Open your ears and listen! What sounds shouldn’t you be hearing?”

I removed the cotton balls; all kinds of sounds rushed through the air and bombarded my brain. After I regained my focus, I suddenly realized that so many wonderful sounds exist in nature. I had to ask myself: for what had I used my ears in the past? I resolved from then on to listen only to facts, not

rumors; to good words, not slander; to the Dharma, not trivialities; and to truth, not falsities.

Fifty years later, in 1993, I returned home during the Chinese New Year to visit my mother. Zhao Puchu, president of the Buddhist Association of China, came from Beijing to Nanjing to greet me. During a delightful conversation, his wife, much amazed, commented, “My husband is usually hard of hearing and can’t often hear what others say. How can he hear everything that Venerable Master Hsing Yun said today?”

Zhao replied, “My ears only listen to words that need to be heard, not those that need not be.”

Indeed, hearing without listening and listening without hearing—this, I think, is the highest art form of hearing and listening.

I once had an experience of listening without hearing in 1954 during a seven-day retreat at Leiyin Temple in Ilan. Amid the continual recitation of Amitabha Buddha’s name, I entered into the tranquil state of Chan and Pure Land meditation.¹ I sensed the chanting of Amitabha Buddha’s name throughout every moment of those seven days. Even when I was away from the Buddha hall, the chanting still continued in my mind. Every mouthful at mealtime was charged with the recitation, “Amitabha Buddha!

1. Chan and Pure Land meditation combines the Chan practice of deep concentration to gain enlightenment and Pure Land’s vocal or silent repetition of Amitabha Buddha’s name.

Amitabha Buddha!” Even the sound of brushing my teeth became an utterance of “Amitabha Buddha.” Regardless of whether I was walking, standing, sitting, or even lying down, my every thought was filled with the name “Amitabha Buddha.” That seven-day retreat went as quickly as the snap of a finger. Nevertheless, that experience of letting go of the notions of self and others, unifying oneself and the outside world, and the falling away of a sense of time and finite space, vividly remains with me to this day.

While attending Jiaoshan Buddhist College at nineteen, I practiced observing silence and refrained from speaking. It was very difficult at first. There were times when I became negligent and spoke out of habit. Whenever that happened, I would remove myself to the back of the main hall and slap myself across the mouth until I bled. After observing silence in this manner for a year, not only was my mouth freed of sound, but my mind was also freed of thoughts of afflictions. Amid the tranquil silence, I immersed myself in observing all things as they truly were, and time and finite space seemed to expand. I realized how “a moment is an everlasting eon,” and I experienced how the infinitesimal encompasses the universe. When I finally spoke after ending my observance of silence, my classmates were amazed at how clear and quick my thinking and articulation had become. There is a saying: “Quietude leads one afar.”



It is only when we are in tranquil silence, not improperly looking, listening, or speaking, that we are able to rediscover ourselves, enhance our wisdom, see what others have not seen, hear what others have not heard, and say what others have not said.

This understanding reminded me of my grandmother's pickled vegetables: the more tightly sealed

the pickling jar was, the more luscious the pickle would become. Isn't the process of making a good pickle similar to how we cultivate our own practice by learning to guard our senses? Most often, we allow our eyes and ears to chase after sights and sounds, and our minds are constantly seeking outwards. It is no wonder that we cannot settle our minds enough to focus on the Buddhist path. Similarly, in Japan in 1963, I once spotted the figures of three monkeys sculpted on the beams of the Toshogu in Nikko National Park. One monkey had its hands over its eyes, the second over its ears, and the third over its mouth. I paused for a moment, and a deeper understanding struck me. Our six sense organs—eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body, and mind—constantly cling to objects in the external world; because of the six sense objects—sight, sound, smell, taste, touch, and dharma—we constantly make deluded differentiations that generate afflictions. If we constantly reflect on ourselves, not allowing our minds to roam amid the sense objects and various desires, and not to look at, listen to, and utter what ought not to be seen, heard, or said, we will not give rise to delusions and generate karma, more ignorance, and afflictions.

Forty years ago, I invited Yu Guoji to teach music at the Buddhist college. Because of his recommendation, we purchased a new, superior sound system to facilitate better instruction. He played a segment

of a symphony on the first day of class, and it was as if gusts of wind, lightning, and galloping horses were blasting from the speakers and filling the classroom. When it was over, he excitedly asked, “Of the segment you just heard, which portion sounded best?” One of the students, Venerable Yi Heng, rose and replied, “Sir, the best part was when it ended.”

Laozi² once remarked: “The five colors make the eyes blind; the five notes make the ears deaf.” The world’s multifarious sights and sounds blind, deafen, and disorient us. In order to settle our lives, we must penetrate the form that is free of forms, listen to the sound of silence, and speak the wordless speech.

A World of Sights and Sounds

Even while being free of forms and sounds, we can nevertheless make great impacts living in a world filled with them. For example, many times, I braved life-threatening dangers to distribute flyers and put up posters in the streets of China in the midst of war to propagate reform in Buddhism. Looking back now, I remember seeing only the future of Buddhism with my eyes and hearing only the agonized cries of living beings with my ears. I did not see weapons nor did I hear bombing, so naturally, I was not afraid.

2. Laozi was a philosopher in ancient China and the founder of Taoism.



Many individuals not only underestimate the functions of the eyes and ears but also do not know how to properly look with their eyes, listen with their ears, or speak with their mouths, even though they use them all the time. I have led many groups on pilgrimages and have noticed that people are often busy talking while the guides are making announcements. Group members usually insist on doing things their own way and blame others when things go wrong. They might ignore a posted sign that gave clear directions and run around asking passersby for instructions instead. Some lament that this is a common problem among people nowadays: we are so accustomed to using our mouths to talk but rarely use our eyes and ears to look and listen. Similarly, the Great Buddha Land at Fo Guang Shan is well-known worldwide; thousands come to visit every day. However, there have been people who, upon seeing that the Buddha statues are made of cement, dismiss the whole place as a culture of concrete, devoid of value. Without speculating on the mindset of those people, I cannot help but wonder: I have seen nothing but sacred statues of the Buddha during my fifty years at Fo Guang Shan, so how is it that some people only notice the cement and do not see the Buddhas? The reality is, just looking in itself is inadequate; we need to furthermore observe deeply, investigate thoroughly, and listen well.

My grandmother was a devout Buddhist since she was seventeen, and she was a kind and compassionate person. In spite of her being a good person, she lost some of her grandchildren when they were only three or four years old. However, she never cried or lamented about her loss to anyone, nor was she bothered by neighbors gossiping about her loss. Is it possible that she was without feeling, uncaring toward her grandchildren? Certainly not! Because she was a Buddhist most of her life, she saw through the events of the world, understanding that life and death are the same in essence. She understood that they are a part of life, clear manifestations of the law of karma. She therefore could face adversity without upset or exasperation.

When I first arrived in Taiwan, I had a tough time looking for a place to stay. I wandered around and spent many days in destitution. However, these experiences helped better my appreciation of the verse that filled my heart with joy:

*The sounds of the rippling creek are all words
of the Buddha;*

*The mountain scene is none other than the
body of the Dharma.*

I sometimes encountered ridicule and persecution when preaching in a community. However, I was never upset, because, to me, hardship is facilitating and encouraging. Hardship is a part of life;

when it is overcome, the true meaning of happiness can be better cherished. The best fruit comes from hard work and diligence; hence, I have always found life to be joyful.

Once, during a time when I was continuously propagating the Dharma through speeches and chanting, I caught a severe flu and lost my voice. In my calm, I thought, “It’s all right for me to become mute. Of all the people on earth, a mute is least likely to say the wrong thing.” Another time, a doctor told me that my legs had to be amputated because of severe arthritis. “If I can’t get around as easily, then I can spend more time studying and writing,” I told myself and remained at ease.

Even as we look at the immensely complex worldly events happening before our eyes, if we can understand all these phenomena in terms of Buddhist principles, we can reach the state where we are at ease contemplating people, at ease contemplating events, at ease contemplating things, at ease contemplating objects, at ease contemplating principles, and at ease contemplating the mind. To all that we encounter, we are without worry, without obstacle, and without confusion. Right there and then, we become the Bodhisattva Contemplating at Ease.³ What need is there for us to search outward, then?

3. “Bodhisattva Contemplating at Ease” is the English translation of the Sanskrit *Avalokitesvara* and the Chinese *Guanzizai*.

The same principle of understanding the world through Buddhism applies to listening. To be able to listen attentively is still not perfect. We must also learn to listen well: to listen to the good as we hear the bad; and to listen to the righteous as we hear the perverted. People ask how I would apply the Buddha's teachings in daily life. In fact, I learn the Dharma in everyday activities, interpersonal dealings, and coping with mundane matters. To illustrate, it was from instructors who were not skilled in teaching that I learned all the skills of teaching the Dharma. Buddhist colleges in the past did not place emphasis on teaching methods. Nevertheless, I would watch the way a teacher instructed his class, listen carefully, and think to myself, "If I were to teach this subject now, how would I explain this subject matter?" Gradually, the teachings as well as how to teach became a part of me. In addition, whether listening or giving a Buddhist lecture, I would apply the four reliances the Buddha taught to guide my study: rely on the Dharma and not the instructor; rely on the meaning and not the words; rely on the wisdom and not the knowledge; and rely on the ultimate truth and not the relative truth. I was able to comprehend, absorb, and digest the teachings, taking in and always retaining the essence of the Dharma while ridding my mind of unnecessary things. In this way, everything in the world may become a part of my treasure.



After forty years away from home, I could not find my way around my own village upon returning. At times, I have left Fo Guang Shan for a mere fortnight and would notice changes when I returned. After all, all phenomena arise due to the presence of necessary causes and conditions. Because various causes and conditions may come together and disperse anytime, the resulting people and events are impermanent, always changing. Whenever we see and hear, all sights and sounds exist due to dependent

origination and are empty by nature. Phenomena are not set in a fixed, inherent way, and the true reality of all things are without forms.

Years ago, someone asked a question at a seminar: "What does Fo Guang Shan look like?" Some compared it to the five fingers of a hand or the petals of an orchid; others suggested a traditional monastery or a modern temple. In my opinion, all the responders were both right and wrong. When I founded Fo Guang Shan, I did not have a set plan. I merely built when the causes and conditions were right. That is why Fo Guang Shan is made up of buildings of different kinds and encompasses a wide variety of activities. It is such a magnificent culmination because a mold was never cast. Some disciples complain about the current construction and say that the temple is not as quiet as it used to be, but to me, this is progress. I hear no noise; Fo Guang Shan is as peaceful and serene as it has always been, though it is changing.

Since I retired from the position of abbot, invitations to lectures, visits from Buddhists overseas, and the teaching of disciples have kept me just as busy as before. Although the days go by as if I am scrambling for every second, my state of mind has become brighter and emptier. I am always among people and amid activities. Yet, in a conversation or while conducting business, I can still enjoy the scenery, edit and write articles, outline lectures, and make

plans for the continued development of Buddhism because my mind is free of persons and matters. My disciples have regularly told me that I am an expert in solving interpersonal disputes and that any problem can be minimized or reduced to nothing in my hands. I believe this is because I listen patiently to complaints and give situations a thorough analysis. Most important, I listen to both sides of a story. I do not conclude based on one-sided information, nor do I judge based on one moment alone. I think if a person is able to truly listen attentively, listen well, and listen objectively, this person is close to being flawless!

I often wake up not knowing where I am, and at times, it feels as if I have forgotten who I am. Others keep telling me that I am too busy and that I should rest more, but I do not feel busy at all, because I have immersed my body, mind, and all my sense organs in the Buddha's teachings. Therefore, be it praise or insult, gain or loss, having or not having, coming or going, hungry or full, morning or evening, I do not make differentiations or cling to anything.

Helen Keller, blind in her eyes but not in her mind, was a great educator; Beethoven, deaf in his ears but not in his mind, composed many melodious masterpieces; Chan Master Deshan Xuanjian was enlightened when Longtan Chongxin extinguished a lamp; and five thousand bodhisattvas came to the realization of patience for the non-arising of

phenomena⁴ as a result of Vimalakirti's silence. I, not virtuous or wise, regret to say that I have accomplished nothing comparable to these remarkable actions, but from the bottom of my heart, I am grateful to Buddhism for teaching me the wonderful truth of formlessness, silence, and wordlessness. This teaching has enabled me to constantly serve sentient beings while living in Chan joy and has enabled me to not feel pained in suffering or stressed under pressure.

A Chan master once said:

Live freely with your true nature.

Open your mind, going along with conditions.

End your ordinary mind,

not seeking the understanding of saints.

If we can live this way here and now, indeed, this is our world of not looking and not listening.

4. This is the patience that comes from understanding that the nature of all things is empty and non-self and that phenomena fundamentally do not arise or cease.

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Fo Guang Shan Branch Temples

United States

Hsi Lai Temple

3456 Glenmark Dr., Hacienda Heights, CA 91745

Tel: (626) 961-9697

Website: www.hsilai.org

Email: info@ibps.org

San Diego Buddhist Association

4536 Park Blvd., San Diego, CA 92116

Tel: (619) 298-2800

Website: www.hsifangtemple.org

Email: sandiego@ibps.org

IBPS South Bay

21010 S. Figueroa St., Carson, CA 90745

Tel: (310) 533-5198

American Buddhist Cultural Society, Fremont

3850 Decoto Rd., Fremont, CA 94555

Tel: (510) 818-0077

Website: www.ibpsfremont.org

Email: Fremont@ibps.org

American Buddhist Cultural Society (San Bao Temple)

1750 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco, CA 94109

Tel: (415) 776-6538

Website: www.sanbaotemple.org

Email: abctemple@gmail.com

Light of Buddha Temple Inc.

632 Oak St., Oakland, CA 94607

Tel: (510) 835-0791

Fo Guang Shan Bodhi Temple

8786 Calvine Rd., Sacramento, CA 95828

Tel: (916) 689-4493

Email: sacramento@ibps.org

Denver Buddhist Cultural Society

2530 W. Alameda Ave., Denver, CO 80219

Tel: (303) 935-3889

Fo Guang Shan Hawaii

222 Queens St., Honolulu, HI 96813

Tel: (808) 395-4726

Nevada Buddhist Association

4189 S. Jones Blvd., Las Vegas, NV 89103

Tel: (702) 252-7339

Email: yinkim@fgs.org.tw

International Buddhist Association of Arizona

6703 N. 15th Pl., Phoenix, AZ 85014

Tel: (602) 604-0139

Email: ibpsphnx@uswest.net

Fo Guang Shan Guam

158 Boman St., Barrigada, Guam 96921

Tel: (671) 637-8678

Website: www.fgsguam.org

Chung Mei Buddhist Temple (I.B.P.S. Houston)

12550 Jebbia Ln., Stafford, TX 77477

Tel: (281) 495-3100

Website: www.houstonbuddhism.org

Email: chungmeitemple@gmail.com

FGS Xiang Yun Temple (IBPS Austin)

6720 N. Capital of Texas Hwy., Austin, TX 78731

Tel: (512) 346-6789

Website: www.ibps-austin.org

I.B.P.S. Dallas

1111 International Pkwy., Richardson, TX 75081

Tel: (972) 907-0588

Website: www.dallasibps.org

Email: dallas@ibps.org

I.B.P.S. Chicago

9S043 State Route 53, Naperville, IL 60565

Tel: (630) 910-1243

Website: www.ibpschicago.org

Fo Guang Shan St. Louis Buddhist Center

3109 Smiley Rd., Bridgeton, MO 63044

Tel: (314) 209-8882

Website: www.fgsstlbc.org

Email: fgsstl@gmail.com

I.B.P.S. New York

154-37 Barclay Ave., Flushing, NY 11355

Tel: (718) 939-8318

Website: www.fgsny.org

Email: newyork@ibps.org

I.B.P.S. New Jersey

1007 New Brunswick Ave., South Plainfield, NJ 07080

Tel: (908) 822-8620

Website: www.ibps.org/newjersey

Email: newjersey@ibps.org

I.B.P.S. Boston (Fo Guang Buddhist Temple Boston)

711 Concord Ave., Cambridge, MA 02138

Tel: (617) 547-6670

Email: boston@ibps.org

I.B.P.S. North Carolina

2529 Prince Dr., Raleigh, NC 27606

Tel: (919) 816-9866

Website: www.blianc.org

Email: nc@ibps.org

Guang Ming Temple (I.B.P.S. Florida)

6555 Hoffner Ave., Orlando, FL 32822

Tel: (407) 281-8482

Website: www.orlandobuddhism.org

Email: orlando@ibps.org

I.B.P.S. Miami

9341 NW 57th St., Tamarac, FL 33351

Tel: (954) 933-0055

Website: www.bliamiami.org

Canada

I.B.P.S. Toronto

6525 Millcreek Dr., Mississauga, Ontario L5N 7K6

Tel: (905) 814-0465

Website: www.fgs.ca

Email: info@fgs.ca

Vancouver I.B.P.S.

6680-8181 Cambie Rd., Richmond, BC V6X 3X9

Tel: (604) 273-0369

Website: ca-ecp.fgs.org.tw/FGS

Email: vanibps@telus.net

I.B.P.S. Edmonton

10232 103 St., Edmonton, Alberta T5J 0Y8

Tel: (780) 424-9744

Website: www.fgsedmonton.ca

Email: ibpsedm@shaw.ca

I.B.P.S. Montreal

3831 Rue Jean-Talon Est, Montreal, Quebec H2A 1Y3

Tel: (514) 721-2882

Website: www.ibpsmtl.org

Email: montreal@ibps.org

I.B.P.S. of Ottawa Carleton

1950 Scott St., Ottawa, ON K1Z 8L8 Canada

Tel: (613) 759-8111

Website: www.ibpsottawa.org

Email: Ottawa@ibps.org

South America

Asociacion Budista IBPS Argentina

Av. Cramer 1733 C.A. B.A., C1426 APC

Buenos Aires, Argentina

Tel: 54 (11) 4786-9969

I.B.P.S. Do Brasil

Estrada Municipal Fernando Nobre, 1461

Cep. 06705-490 Cotia

Sao Paulo, Brazil

Tel: 55 (11) 4612-2895

Templo Budista Fo Guang Shan Ee Chile

Santa Amelia Parcela 8, Talagante,

967000 Talagante, Region Metropolitana,

Chile

Tel: 56 (2) 817-2024 / 56 (2) 556-0056

I.B.P.S. Paraguay

Av. Adrian Jara 660, Piso 5 Shopping International

Ciudad del Este Paraguay

Tel: 595 (61) 500-952 / 595 (61) 511-573

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