

From Being Bodies, Buddhist Women on the Dilemma of Embodiment,
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No Eye, Ear, Nose...

*No eye, ear, nose, tongue, body, mind;
No form, sound, smell, taste, touch, or objects of mind...*

Prajnaparimita Hridaya Sutra

No ear; no sound; no realm of hearing: in 1972 I lost my hearing and all the inner ear nerves which effect balance. This loss has been my life's greatest burden and greatest gift.

I dealt with this loss the way I'd always dealt with difficulties, which was to put my energy into the coping and not allow myself any self-pity. I was the mother of an infant, and although I felt vulnerable and sick, my upbringing didn't allow me to be needy. Coping "well" helped me to feel safe and in control at a time of my life when my physical condition was so terribly out of control. I couldn't hear; I couldn't even stand, walk, read or focus my eyes as the world swirled dizzily by my sick-bed in nauseating spirals. I was encapsulated in a bubble which none of the world's voices could penetrate.

After a month I began to crawl like a baby, knees rubbing sore on the hardwood floors. Slowly I learned to pull myself to my feet and took my first steps, stumbling across the eternity between dresser and door, door and bookshelf, keeping my balance visually. Lip-reading was not yet possible for me but at last my eyes could focus enough to read.

The Buddha tells us to "cultivate the body," but I abandoned the body like some discarded rag.. I denied my pain and grief, denied the new limits of my body, pulled myself together and coped. I coped well on the surface. I had a loving husband and friends, and fulfilling work as an sculptor and university teacher. I had two more beautiful children after I became deaf. I pushed away the anger and fear which threatened the safety of my life.

It is no surprise that I felt increasingly separate. One to one conversation was fine but when several people were talking together I felt like I was outside a window, looking in at a group gathered in warmth around a feast-laden table. I could only sit outside in the cold, and watch them with longing. Always this glass pane of silence divided us.

Of course friends tried to include me. They spoke slowly. Many learned to finger spell. Someone would fill me in on others' conversations. Soon I saw that it wasn't their thoughtlessness

but my longing and anger that caused me to suffer. That realization was almost worse. because then I began to criticize myself for not appreciating the loving concern of those around me.

It became clear that I needed to investigate my sense of separation. Indeed, my suffering forced such practice on me, How to do the needed work? I was young. I had not yet met Buddhist practice. *My Quaker devotional practice of many years nurtured me but gave me no tools to be more fully present.*

To attend the pain of daily life became my practice. I was a sculptor. Part of the work of a sculptor is creative but there are also hours of drudgery, polishing or filing huge pieces of bronze, for example, . Before I became deaf I used to play music in my studio as entertainment during the non-creative times. Suddenly there was no entertainment, *nothing* but the echo of my own thoughts. For the first nine months I memorized songs and sang to myself, but finally, this wore thin. Each day in the studio brought deeper discomfort.

What follows comes from my journal, written as I began to attend to that which cried for healing – not the deafness but the illusion of separate self.

March 1: Last week in class we were talking about the joy of creativity and some students commented that they loved that part of art but found much of the work boring. A student asked me what I “do” all day in my studio; am I always focused on my work? I felt some embarrassment as I told him about memorizing songs and singing to myself to combat the boredom.

Why was there embarrassment? Later, I realized that I’m losing a big chunk of each day by labeling it as “boring.” I’m also escaping from the pain of my deafness. Finally, I’m teaching the students that this pattern is okay. While meditating this morning I made the decision not to entertain myself the next few weeks but just to watch the thoughts and emotions and see what I’ve been running from.

March 2: Not diverting myself while I work is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I was cleaning the edges of a large piece with a power grinder and then with a file. After about an hour I felt so much restlessness and anger I had to stop and go for a walk.

March 3: This morning I tried to focus on my hands. Can I just watch their motion, knowing I’m filing when I’m filing?

Later: No! It doesn’t work. It became a chant, “filing up, filing down,” and had nothing to do with the experience of filing. There is such boredom with filing. Question: what is boredom?

March 4: I am so filled with anger, I don’t know what’s happening. *I tried* filing again, “up, down...” and again the words had nothing to do with the experience. I finally stopped and admitted to myself how much I hate this aspect of the work. There’s nothing to do but file. A

trained ape could do it. I'm feeling rage that my deafness has deprived me of the means to make this work bearable – listening to radio and feeling connected to people.

I took a long walk and asked myself what I'm really angry at. I don't hate the filing; I hate the deafness! I hate the silence! Why do I hate the silence so much?

March 7: I walked around the meadow yesterday with Mike [my 11 month old son] on my back. He fell asleep so I walked around the marsh and through the woods. It's the longest I've walked since I got sick. While walking, I realized I'm deaf here too but there's no anger. My mind is very still when I walk, not asking for entertainment. What's the difference? I feel connected to the trees, the sky. There's nothing I'm pushing away; therefore I don't need diversion. The singing is diversion, not from the boredom of grinding sculpture but from the intensity of the anger and pain of isolation.

March 8: While meditating this morning a wisdom deep within whispered, "Breathe...."

Later: I started working with the piece that still needs seams bronzed, using the welding torch. I must pay attention or I get burned. Breathe? I realized that when I work with the torch and am paying close attention, breath is very present. I began to watch myself breathing as I worked; no that's not quite right. I began to watch the breath moving in and out, the way I hold it with each circular motion of torch to rod, release when the bronze drips, hold it again as hand moves closer to the fire. It flowed all together, hands, fire, bronze, breath. I started to feel a great joy, like I was part of a dance. I don't understand it at all, but the morning's work flowed effortlessly, even joyfully, past.

March 11: Today I tried breathing while I filed. Attention shifted, almost imperceptibly, from breath to the movement of the hands, but the experience was different than last week when the noting of "up, down" was disconnected from the actual hands. Today I was just watching the hands, not forcing them, engaged in the same "dance" as with the breath and welding. I experienced something rather strange that I don't have words for, almost an intimate connection with the file and sculpture, a kind of love-making. It most definitely wasn't boring!

I still don't know what "boredom" is.

March 15: Today I found myself crying silently as I worked, just feeling sadness and letting tears run down my cheeks, not trying to push the reality of my deafness away. . The sadness is clean. It's uncomfortable, but workable.

What changed the same filing from "boring" to deeply connected ? It's continued that way for five days. With "boring" there was anger, not at the work but at the deafness which kept me from diverting myself from the work. I couldn't get away from "look what happened to me – not fair;" and all of that. It burned. *By* ending "boring" I allowed some of that pain without all

the “stop feeling sorry for yourself” shit I’ve been spouting. Feeling sorry for myself doesn’t solve anything, but maybe judging my feelings doesn’t solve anything either. When I stay with the work, with my breath, with my hands, my mind stops trying to use thought to lead me to safety. I’m just there.

March 19: I can’t control my mind with conscious will. Therefore, I can’t keep myself safe and comfortable. I don’t know how to phrase this. I’m beginning to see that my deepest pain is not from what’s happening or not happening in my life but from my relationship with it. My pain is not from the deafness but from how much I want to be rid of the deafness. But how can I ever make friends with this silence which so devastates me?

March 26: Non-boredom is connection! It doesn’t *accompany* connection; it *is* connection, a mind state in which I’m totally connected! Boredom is separation. When I’m separate from myself (i.e. disallowing my thoughts and feelings), I’m separate from my family, from my work.

April 2, 1973: Has it really been just a month that I’ve been working this way? I find deep joy in it, am finding I very much look forward to being in the studio. It’s become a time of deep focus and peacefulness. At one level mind is jumping around and at another level it’s totally concentrated, just watching the jumping with much spaciousness and no obsession to control. It’s the most peaceful thing I’ve ever done. I enjoy grinding seams! The bronze seems alive, responsive. Even “boredom” has become interesting!

It took me many years to really understand the nature of my suffering and even longer to understand and heal my relationship with my deafness, For all those years my *day-long* practice was just to breathe and create, breathe and file or weld, breathe and be. I spent hours a day, month after month, in this way for over a decade.

In those years my meditation practice changed and deepened. My suffering was less intense but still present and increasingly, practice led me to investigate the nature of that suffering and to understand how it grew out of a sense of separation, an agony of aloneness. What was separate? How had I become ensnared in what my deepest meditations taught me was illusion?

At one point I began to have nighttime dreams of a giant surf, of wanting to swim but finding the waves huge and forbidding. Every morning when I sat to meditate, the question would arise of whether I wanted to go down to the beach in my meditation, to a non-physical but still wild sea. My answer was always “no.” It became harder and harder to meditate. My back began to ache, first just while I was sitting, then in anticipation of it. I knew I was running from something, but I still wasn’t clear what it was.

Finally, one morning during meditation I said "yes." and went to the beach, opening to the experience of the waves while I sat. What follows comes from my journals,

Feb. 19: The surf is huge, the waves dark. I understand that I must submerge myself. I must take a single step into the unknown. A wave crashes down. I step into its ebb and see the next wave tower above me, black belly, white foam, feel it slap me under, roll me in its power. I am drowning. I can't breathe. Desperately I force my eyes open. I breathe deeply, gasping breaths of cool air in the safety of my room. I stop trembling. I close my eyes. I am back on the same beach. I do the whole thing again. Over and over and over. How much time goes by? My watch tells me later that it really was hours.

I beg for help. No! Wisdom assures me that I can do it. Suddenly, in the midst of a terrible wave, Barbara, the strong swimmer, takes over. "Don't fight it," I hear love's voice saying. "Be one with it." I start to swim with the wave. I gather momentum, I dive down and come up in the calmer swells beyond. I return to shore and do it again, and again, until I can enter the water, not without fear, but knowing how to harmonize with this previously overwhelming force. I am complete. All that I need to bring to this wave is within me.

Coming out of the sitting, I began to reflect: death is not an end but just another step. It is the step before birth. I need fear neither. It is all part of the process.

I began to do *metta* meditation. "May I be healed; may I find peace; may all beings be healed and find peace...."

So I had accepted my deafness as a death, and I had learned that I could survive that one step into the unknown, could allow myself to be overwhelmed, but I still didn't know where this was going.

Feb. 20: This morning I felt like I'd never meditated before. I couldn't sit still. I couldn't quiet my mind from its turmoil. My back, which has continued to hurt through these weeks, ached horribly. My legs were cramped; my forehead itched; I was alternately freezing and sweating. Most of all I felt so totally alone. "Sit with it," I told myself. "Just watch it. Watch all the pain and anxiety and see where it's going. Watch yourself wanting so desperately for things to be different." After well over an hour I got up. I walked around for a few minutes. The aloneness, the agitation came with me. I sat again.

The isolation became overwhelming. Searching for something that might help, I reached for the lines of the 23rd psalm "Yea though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil..." Into the space I had opened through this small kindness to myself

came the understanding: "You are never alone, but this is the isolation into which you've bound yourself. When do you remember feeling like this before? When do you last remember really needing that psalm

And with a rush all the memories came back. I saw those first weeks of my illness. All sound was gone. I couldn't focus my eyes. To turn my head even a bit brought waves of dizziness. I felt helpless and alone. I realized, in this morning's instant of remembered pain, that in 16 years I have never cried for my pain.

When I understood how I'd buried this pain, I just sat there on the floor and cried, and cried. The remembering hurt, but not nearly as badly as burying it had hurt. I wept for the loss of my hearing, I wept for the aloneness, I wept for the fear, I wept for the one in a glass prison, seeing, but totally cut off from the world. All that week I remembered and cried.

I had raged at my deafness but never allowed the pain into my heart. I simply buried it, and met any feelings of self-pity with contempt. I see that my deepest separation was from myself....

Feb. 21: Last night I shared this new awareness with Hal and cried with him, and felt his love. Today I lay in bed before dawn, in that same bed where I was once so ill, and cried for the frightened young woman who had to cope with this illness. I reached out to my ears, gently searching for the nerves that were oxygen starved and dead. They seemed to ask me for forgiveness for failing me. I touched my ears, that part of me that I've so often cursed, with love. Finally I reached out to myself, to the self I've so often criticized for feeling self-pity, for not "trying harder." "Barbara, I forgive you; Barbara, I love you."

Feb. 23: As the days pass, the nature of the tears has changed. They aren't as bitter anymore. There is some healing, some acceptance, in them. I found the image of a rosebud, closed tight and touched by frost. But the clouds have been moved and the sun is warm. Slowly the rose is unfolding. I do not force it. I just let the sun shine on it and allow it to unfold. I watch it. I cherish it. My tears water it and help it grow.

Feb. 25: This morning as I meditated, I discovered that my rose was not the only one, that it is part of a garden with so many rosebuds, all touched by frost, all closed tight. The sight of all those rosebuds touches my deepest compassion. I understand, suddenly, what is meant by not just "my pain," but "our pain," the pain of humanity, the isolation of us all. I am able to step beyond my own pain, to ask the sun to touch us all, to allow us all to unfold. My isolation is diminished daily as I watch my own bud, and the entire garden, blossom into the light.

Today I find I am no longer “deaf,” only that I hear on a different level, hear the silence! It is a wonderful gift! Yes, there’s still pain when my children laugh and I know I’ve missed the beauty of that sound. No, there is no longer suffering. My deafness reminds me to keep my heart open to the 10,000 joys and sorrows of us all.