

# Wise Listening (1 of 5) Listening Deeply

September 4, 2023

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

mindfulness, therapist, Buddhist monastery, communication, conflict, mediator, meditation, speech, timely, truthful, pleasant, beneficial, goodwill, *asculta*, Rule of St. Benedict, *The Monastery Within*

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Good day, and welcome to the first talk of our next series which will be centered on wise listening. Following last week's discussion about wise speech, I'll talk about wise listening. I will use the same five guidelines as I did for speech: listen in a timely way; listen in a truthful way; listen from the heart in a nourishing and pleasant way that can really touch people's hearts; listen in a way that's beneficial; and listen with goodwill.

Listening is both a practice in itself and a metaphor for practice. There are times when we are communicating but not literally listening – for example, people who are

deaf are not literally listening. There are also other ways by which we receive others' communication, such as email or sign language.

We can be receptive in a deep way, where we're sensing or feeling our way, observing in a deep way what is being communicated. It is said that a good part of successful therapy is the listening skill of the therapist. And a significant part of being a good friend is their listening skill.

Listening can also be very closely associated with spirituality. Historically, the first disciples of the Buddha were called the "listeners," not the "followers." Back in the time of the Buddha, there was no written communication, no radio, TV, or monitors. All the communication happened orally. People had to listen or speak for all the news. All the knowledge, education, entertainment, music, songs, and poetry were received from someone speaking them.

Because of that, I believe that people listened in a different way 2500 years ago. If they wanted to remember something, they couldn't go look up a poem to review it, or look up teachings to review them. They had to either memorize them themselves or go find someone else who had memorized them and could recite them.

When people really listen deeply enough and hear what is said, it goes deeply into the memory bank. This is actually an art or skill that many people in the modern world have lost or have never developed. I think the Rule of St. Benedict, the Catholic order, begins with the word “*asculta*,” Latin for “listen.” Listening well is very, very significant.

The quality of listening that makes it really healing or beneficial is when we can listen without asserting ourselves into the listening. We might want to insert our agenda, desires, wants, or our rejoinder into the conversation, where we can be raring to go like a thoroughbred at the start of a race. We’re just waiting for the start button; we’re ready to speak.

Instead, in a beneficial conversation, we’re listening as if what we’re hearing from someone needs to be complete. We’re interested in letting the whole thing register in a deep way. We hear almost as if we’re listening between the lines.

There's a little story I've heard of a man who is having trouble with his marriage. The therapist tells him, “You have to really listen to your wife.” So he does that. He comes back the next week and says, “Well, I listened, but nothing changed.” And the therapist said, “You have to also listen to what's between the words. What's *not* being said.”

In developing the ability to listen to the words, feelings, attitudes, concerns, history, and context, there are so many things that it takes time to feel, sense, and know them. They can't be known if we rush to judgment or rush to speak.

In Buddhist mindfulness practice, listening can be a model or example of how mindfulness can be.

Mindfulness has similar qualities to listening. We don't assert ourselves and we don't insert ourselves into the situation. We're receptive. We take in the situation deeply, letting it register, and feeling it. We notice how it impacts us on many different levels – in our mind, our heart, maybe even in our belly – as we feel and listen to what's happening here.

We are doing the same thing with another person. What is it like to come from their background, from their context in the world and in society? What is it like for them in the context of the joys and sufferings of their life? How is it for them coming from their hearts, their belly? What's happening for them?

To listen deeply is a powerful thing to do. For people who are doing mindfulness training – developing the capacity for mindfulness – this is a ready-made possibility for developing mindfulness in communication in the world and in relationships with others. If you want

to develop greater mindfulness, simultaneously develop greater skills in listening.

There's a story in my book, *The Monastery Within*, of a young person whose family moves away for a year to a distant country where there's a Buddhist monastery. The young person goes and learns about meditation, and finds it very meaningful. But after the year they return to their own country where there is no Buddhism and no meditation. No one seems to know anything about meditation. The young person asks the abbess, "Now that I've gone back to my home country, how can I continue my training in meditation?" The abbess said, "Ask around for the person who is the best listener in your community, and then learn from them." Listening well is so akin to mindfulness that it's a way of developing mindfulness in our lives and relationships.

Considering the guideline of listening being timely ... are we listening at the right time? Probably it's always the right time to listen deeply to someone. But if we only listen to them, and they're not interested in us or in our response, then at some point, of course, the time to listen is over.

The way to listen is not just listening passively, but listening actively. That's often the key to good listening – not being a passive listener, just letting people speak – but showing them that you understand them. Active

listening often means that you might say, “Oh, I understand. You're having trouble listening and that's a challenge for you.” Or “I understand; you have a lot of trouble at work. I hear that and it must be hard.” Just say little things that show you're listening and you're attentive.

I have been a conflict mediator in my life as a Buddhist teacher. The one thing I've learned is that conflict gets resolved much faster if the parties in a conflict know that they have been heard. Being heard means people have listened and have understood.

I think a nice guideline is that it is always the right time to listen. There's a saying that God gave us one mouth but two ears so we can listen twice as much as we speak. You can probably adjust that saying in different ways, but the idea is to prioritize listening more than speaking, because then when you speak, the speaking might be much more effective. You won't have to say so much. You won't have to repair so much. You won't have to explain yourself more or clarify. If you've listened well and really understood what's happening with others, then when you speak it can be easier to speak with the five guidelines for speech.

Today, if you'd like to practice and train in this during the next twenty-four hours, look for opportunities to listen well. If you're mostly alone, but you're listening to a

podcast or the radio, that's actually an interesting place to train in listening in a good way. Watch your mind, see what you're doing as you listen. How much are you losing yourself and losing this deeper way of listening? How much are you judging or reacting and losing the deeper listening below the words that are spoken, or losing the fullness of what's being said?

You could just be listening to something on the news. That's a particularly useful place to listen because the news is often offered in a way that could hook us in or get a reaction from us. Listen to politicians in a deeper way. Listen to your friends, your co-workers, your neighbors. See what it's like to listen in such a way that the people you're listening to understand that they're being heard – before you come back with your rejoinder. Of course, this doesn't always apply if there's just a fun light back-and-forth that is playful. But any time there's a more serious conversation, listening deeply is a wonderful practice.

Thank you very much. I look forward to tomorrow.