

# Wise Listening (4 of 5)

## Listening Beneficially

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### **SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

*attha*, goal, hindrance, patience, helpful, wise speech, freedom, well-being, peace, wisdom, compassion, cultivate, dharmic, car service, settledness, impatience, harm, Song of the Open Road, Walt Whitman

### **Gil Fronsdal**

Welcome to the fourth talk on wise listening. The topic is about listening in a way that is most beneficial and helpful for others. In terms of wise speech, the fourth criterion is to speak what is beneficial. The Pali word for “beneficial” is “*attha*,” which also means the “goal.” The goal is freedom. In Buddhism, classically, the goal is to be free of suffering.

When we apply this to listening, we listen from a place of freedom the best we can. We listen from a

place where the benefits we receive from meditation become a reference point for how to listen to others.

For example, I'm going someplace and I am running a little bit late. Someone wants to talk to me and I can feel inside that I'm impatient. I've learned to recognize that my impatience is my own. I've learned not to project that in any way onto other people and think poorly of them or think the problem is with them. Rather, I've learned that my impatience harms me. It is unfortunate that I should lose my settledness because of impatience.

I make it my practice to return to a place of settledness, openness, and freedom where I'm not caught in the impatience. The byproduct of that is that I can listen without impatience, which is a much better way to listen. I can listen with the highest benefit for me as a reference point. As I practice with that, with a little bit of luck, I can be available without that hindrance and just be there to listen to others.

That pattern of checking in with myself, noting what hindrances I have, and freeing myself of them means that I'm not trying to be or act patient when what is really happening is that I am impatient. When I am impatient, I'm caught up in my desires and I'm not listening. I'm caught up in needing to prove

myself or defend myself, and that gets in the way of really listening to someone.

Rather than insisting that I should listen, the practice is, “Gil, take a good look here.” I work on becoming free of these hindrances or at least free enough so that I can come into the listening without them. I'm a better listener as a byproduct of doing this inner work. If I am motivated to be a better listener, I know that first I should check in with and work on myself.

We listen in a way that's beneficial, in a way where we tap into the deepest benefits we know of that are available from practice, spirituality, or our lives. This is part of healthy, dharmic listening.

We listen in such a way that we have other people's welfare in mind as well. We listen in such a way that we hear people out. We give people the gift of listening so they feel heard. We can hold all they say spaciously, even if they have a tendency to over-speak and are dominating. Instead of being reactive toward that, we can step toward them, open up, and listen even more carefully (the very thing I sometimes don't want to do, because I don't want to reinforce the over-speaking). There is a wonderful Aikido in stepping forward, getting involved, doing active listening, and getting interested.

Sometimes people who speak too much haven't had the experience of others being really interested in them. Perhaps something deeper in them needs to be fed, or more needs to be met than just their words.

The idea of offering the highest benefit to others through our listening is a wonderful reference point for being a listener. It doesn't have to be this way all the time. Maybe it shouldn't be this way all the time. We don't want to be naive or overlook the context.

One of the gifts that can come out of this practice is not only becoming a good listener but listening in such a way that we're attuning or connecting ourselves to some deeper potential of freedom in the other person. One form this takes is to listen while appreciating something about the person that maybe they can't appreciate in themselves, such as their capacity for love or tenderness. Here's a person with life experiences that have been difficult and they're doing the best they can given their challenges.

Yesterday, I read the poem, "The Song of the Open Road," by Walt Whitman. There is a wonderful line (I think it's the second line of the poem) that goes something like, "I ask not for good fortune. I am good

fortune.” Rather than asserting himself and demanding the world provide him with benefits and good fortune, he says, “I am good fortune.”

The possibility of this practice is that rather than looking outside of ourselves to be happy or to be peaceful, we become our inner peace. We become inner happiness. We find it in ourselves. We take responsibility for finding it here inside.

Listening in a way that's beneficial and that has the highest welfare in mind can transform an individual. Yes, all kinds of conventional misfortunes can happen to us, but we are the good fortune. We are the free heart. We are the open mind.

Doing this is so beneficial that why would we allow ourselves to get carried away by impatience, or reactivity, or fear? We have a practice that helps us go back and find that place of good fortune, freedom, and openness. From there, we can listen to others, take care of what needs to be taken care of in the world, and take care of our challenges and our difficulties. We carry our good fortune with us.

Listening from the place in us that's most beneficial, having some sense of that is one of the values of this meditation practice. Finding a reference point of

well-being can help us listen to that beneficial place. We can be present in the world while we are connected and open to that place of well-being.

We can ask, what's the highest benefit here for me? Certainly, I ask this for myself. Frequently, I've been caught up in something that seems important, but it's not the highest benefit. I brought my car in for service yesterday and I was concerned about the price – would I be overcharged? But why would I cause myself tension with those kinds of concerns?

I had those thoughts in the back of my mind, but I relaxed and just stayed there and appreciated the service person, and it was a very nice conversation. I delighted in him, and he started smiling and was happy as well. At some point, he asked me, “How are you?” I said, honestly, “Oh, I'm quite happy,” because I was sitting there quite happily. I'd done my work to be in that kind of place. Then I said, “I'm quite happy, except I'm not so happy about the high price of the service.” I wasn't asking for anything but that was just true. The bill was a little bit expensive. He said, “OK, I'll take \$100 off.”

I don't know what you want to make of that little story. The important point is that here was a situation where I intended to be present. I was going to take

care of myself in the situation and not sacrifice my own well-being because of my fears and concerns. I was going to take care of the situation the best I could while caring for this place of freedom and not get caught by something in myself that compromised it. I became my own good fortune in the way that Walt Whitman talks about.

Listen, be present to others from our place of freedom, and do the inner work that keeps us close to that. That's really great – a fantastic thing to do.

Thank you. We have one more talk tomorrow on wise listening.