

Wise Listening (3 of 5) Listening from the Heart

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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Good morning and welcome to the third talk on wise listening, which I could also have called “listening with care.”

There's a story in the Ramayana, one of the great classics of Indian literature and religion. Rama is walking in the forest when he hears a very faint voice. He can't quite hear what it says, but he's listening and getting very quiet, very still. Maybe he stands still so he can hear better. What's this voice he hears in the forest?

He still can't quite hear what it's saying, but after a while he gets some sense of the direction from which the voice is coming. He follows the guiding voice, and

as he gets closer to the source, he begins hearing what the voice is saying. It is saying his name, “Rama, Rama.”

Finally he comes to this very large boulder. It seems like the voice is coming from inside the boulder. So then he gently puts his hand out and touches the boulder, and the boulder kind of dissolves. A woman emerges out of the boulder and they greet each other. In a sense he meets himself, that part of himself which is petrified, that's locked in, frozen, hidden, and lost even to himself.

The idea is to listen (or sense or feel) without the filters of our desires, our ideas of self, and our conceits about how terrible or wonderful we are that define and limit us – to listen with no hindrances. There's no aversion, no agitation, no spinning of stories, no bringing along the luggage of the past. We can learn how to listen in a peaceful, quiet, deep way, not just listening with the ears but listening with the whole body or listening with the heart. Then we may hear within us something that is calling us, maybe not with our name. In the language of the Buddha, it's the Dharma that's calling us: “Come here, come here.” It invites us to come, invites us to investigate: “Come and see.”

If we can listen to this sometimes very subtle voice that's within and then follow it, get closer to it, sense it, then we can do the equivalent of putting our hands gently on the rock. The image that I like is that of cupping our hands together and coming underneath and just holding what's there with support. Sometimes what's deep inside is fear. Sometimes it's sorrow. Sometimes it's hurt. Just hold it gently and then whatever is petrified, whatever is frozen, whatever is locked within has a chance to dissolve.

So here we have a story of listening deeply, listening and hearing and going along with what we're hearing. Some people say that listening requires some degree of letting go of control. If we don't like what we're seeing, we can close our eyes and we can look away. We can't do the same thing with the ears. You can put ear plugs in or cover your ears, but the ears are just more open to what's there. There is a letting go of control with hearing.

Part of the challenge of really good listening is the balance between exercising the control to listen and the letting go of control of what we're hearing. We're listening to ourselves in a deep way, finding this kind of balance – having enough control to really listen, but in such a way that we let go of control of what we are listening to. Then we allow the sound, the sensation, or the feeling to show itself.

There is a wonderful poem by Walt Whitman called "Song of the Open Road." In the middle of this long poem is a short section that reads as follows:

"From this hour, freedom!
From this hour I ordain myself loosened of limits and
imaginary lines,
Listening to others, and considering well what they
say,
Pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating,
Gently, but with undeniable will, divesting myself of
the holds that would hold me.
I inhale draughts of space.
The east and the west are mine, and the north and
south are mine.
I am larger, better than I thought.
I did not know I held so much goodness.
All seems beautiful to me."

Here we have a wonderful combination of letting go of "holds" – attachments, letting go of control even. At the same time there is a very clear sense of being in charge of himself. First he makes a very strong statement, a kind of promise or assertion, that "from now on I'm going to be free." How can he can say that with confidence? You can't just make yourself free, of course. I think that he's seen something inside of himself, some capacity to release himself from bondage, to attain his own inner freedom. "I ordain

myself loosened of limits and imaginary lines”: this is right out of Buddhism. We limit ourselves with our thoughts, constructs, imaginary lines, and with the definitions that we use to understand ourselves, other people, and the world around us.

Furthermore, he's going to listen to others. He's not saying the result of his freedom is that he's going to do whatever he wants, overriding people and not caring for them. The first thing he says he's going to do with his freedom is to listen to others and consider well what they say. I hear this to mean giving them the benefit of the doubt and listening well. What “listening well” means for me is you want to listen below their words. You want to listen even below the surface emotions that are driving their words. Listen to their goodness that's deep inside. Listen to the pain. Listen to that potential for goodness and freedom from pain that's deep inside everyone. Listen in such a way that you may begin to awaken that possibility of freedom in them.

The first thing he says he will do with his freedom is to listen to others, pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating, and divesting himself of “what holds that would hold me.” Then, after listening, he talks about infinite space – becoming everything, becoming large and spacious. When he has let go of what holds him – his attachments – then there's a feeling of

expansiveness. “I am larger, better than I thought. I did not know I held so much goodness.”

Imagine listening to others. Will you know that they are better than they've ever thought? The third guideline for speaking the Buddha gave is speaking in a way that goes right to the heart, touches other people's hearts, touches your own heart. So with listening, listen from the heart, listen in a way that touches the hearts of others. Listen in such a way that you have let go of your attachments so you can be attuned to the potential for freedom and peace and happiness that others have.

If we're only reacting to others' surface emotions, their anger, their bitterness, their complaints, their fears, their anxieties, we kind of stay at that level and might even reinforce the message that those emotions are all that counts, that's all there is. We don't want to deny them and not see or understand them but, if you can, listen to what's deeper. Listen in a way that touches a person's heart. Listen from your heart, from your capacity for a deeper tenderness, a deeper love, a deeper care.

Maybe then you can begin doing the work that Walt Whitman describes: pausing, searching, receiving, contemplating. Maybe that will allow you to be attuned to how others are larger and better than you think, but

also they're better than *they* ever thought. Maybe showing them this is your gift to them: you appreciate them. You see they hold more goodness than they ever realized.

Affirming and recognizing the goodness of others is what allows it to come forth. It's amazing what seeing someone's goodness makes room for and allows to come forth. It would not come forth if we remained in our reactivity to them, or in trying to control them or fix them.

So listen well. Listen to what calls you in the forest deep inside, and listen to what's deep inside the forests of others. May we all listen to each other well, and in that listening bring forth the best in all of us. Thank you.