

Deep Listening

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Deep listening is another requirement for all my classes, even when we are having an open discussion of issues between students. The reason deep listening is so important (in all facets of our lives) is because we must fully hear what the other person is saying BEFORE we can respond in a thoughtful manner. Otherwise it can seem like two people are talking about slightly different subjects – and they very well might be. Communication might be flawed without deep listening, and if it contains this flaw we lose any hope of actually connecting at all levels with the other person.

Deep Listening is similar to Unconditional Positive Regard in that it helps if we first quiet our mind, and achieve a condition of listening where we are free of distractions, interpretations, judgments, conclusions, or assumptions. Instead of trying to figure out what the person is saying, we must make sure our minds are open, curious, and interested – we must relax and try to see the world through the eyes of the person speaking.

This is more difficult than it might seem. Most of us assume that others think – more or less – the same way we do. However, we each have different personality types, different life circumstances, and different perspectives based on our life experiences. Sometimes we might be communicating from an emotional position, and other times from a position of logic, action, or spirit. Gender differences can get in the way of real communication. We are each afraid of some things, not of others, and have different needs we are trying to fulfill. Each of us will more than likely be at a different stage in our own development – resulting in the same words having completely different meaning to the two of us. And, one person might be talking from a deep inner perspective, another from that of a detached observer, another from the standpoint of a different culture, and someone else from the viewpoint of the collective.

Deep listening is not just an activity we do in the presence of others. Instead, as we will discuss many times in class this term, spiritual development requires staying with our own experience – in the moment – seeing, feeling, understanding what is going on inside ourselves at all times. Only in this manner can we discern when we are acting or feeling or interpreting out of habit or conditioned response. Only then can we truly have free choice and freedom of action. This practice is actually a deep listening within one's self.

Deep listening is effortless, it is fascinating, it is a letting go of our need to be right, better than someone else, to do, understand, analyze, interpret correctly. Deep listening does not trigger our own defense mechanisms or those of the other person. It

is not argumentative, intrusive, or belittling. It is a purely open and receptive state of mind.

Through the process of deep listening, we let go of any beliefs, prejudices, memories, or feelings we have for the other person. The goal of deep listening is to connect with the other person – Essence to Essence – and achieve some understanding at the deepest possible level. It is based on a feeling of unconditional love and respect, which makes it difficult for those of us who do not love ourselves very much. Our egos get in the way of deep listening because our natural tendency is to judge other people, listen to them critically, and assert our own point of view - which is, of course, always much more interesting.

Deep listening is not the norm in our society. Research studies by the International Listening Association indicate that we spend about 45 percent of our time listening, and about 55% of our time doing other things. However, we are distracted, preoccupied, or forgetful about 75 percent of the time we spend listening. The average attention span for adults is only about 22 seconds, and immediately after listening to someone talk, we recall only about half of what we've heard. This percentage shrinks to only about 20 percent within a few hours. Most of the time we don't listen well because we are distracted, other times because we feel anxiety when someone else has the floor – and not ourselves. My personal observation is that introverts listen better than extraverts, but that is the subject for another paper.

In order to facilitate deep listening in my classes I usually create the following structures for organizing the class:

1. Initially, at the beginning of class, I focus student awareness on our intention to listen deeply and practice unconditional positive regard. Intentionality is key to many things. However, any obstacles to this sincere intention must first be removed, so students should discuss openly any issues deeply pressing on them from the outside world before class discussion begins.
2. We try to listen to others without worrying about what we are going to say ourselves. Some degree of self-preparation helps this process, so that the student can listen to others without feeling significant performance anxiety.
3. In a go-round session, there are rules against cross-talking, asking questions, or making comments. A talking stick is often used for this purpose.
4. Try to speak with an open-heart – without regard to what you are saying or how you say it. It helps to know that you are not being judged by others when you do this, and the dialogue immediately reaches a deeper level of meaning. The circle must become a safe place to speak from the heart.
5. As in psychotherapy, confidentiality is key to creating a safe haven from the rest of the world. Students should be allowed to talk about what goes on in

class with their spouses and close friends. However, no names or hints should be given as to whom said what.

6. Closing the circle is also important because the real world is quite different from the environment we strive to create in class. We can continue to practice unconditional positive regard and deep listening when outside of class, but be aware other people are likely to be judging and critical of what they perceive you are doing. However, if you can get past this, and your friends begin to reflect these practices in their own behavior – well, this is how the world could change.