

DEEP LISTENING

In Zen we have a famous koan, "What is the sound of one hand clapping?"

The entire koan is actually, "Two hands clap and there is a sound; (but) what is the sound of one hand?" This koan was used by the great eighteenth century Zen master Hakuin Ekaku, as a way to catalyze a spiritual awakening in his students. Hakuin's energetic teaching not only transformed the lives of many individuals, but also brought about a renaissance for Zen in Japan.

This koan, the Sound of One Hand, has become trivialized in the West, but its actual meaning is very profound. The koan is a question that cannot be answered by our usual method – by thinking. It can only be answered by non-thinking. It asks us to undertake deep listening, to listen as we never have before, to listen not only with our ears but with our entire being, our eyes, our skin, our bones and our heart.

Deep listening requires complete receptivity. This means that nothing is being broadcast. There are no outflows. Deep listening asks us to quiet the body, the mouth and the mind. Our thoughts must be silent. Impossible, you might say. It is not impossible, not when you are listening so carefully that even the sounds of your thoughts are in the way of your listening. This is absorptive listening, complete absorption in sound. In Zen instruction we say it is like the hushed attention of the audience at a symphony when the lights go down and you are waiting for the pleasure of the first notes. Or we say it is like sitting by the bedside of a loved one who is very sick and barely breathing. Each breath could be their last. Each breath tells you something very important, will they live or die? When you are listening in this way you will want to keep your mind very quiet, so you won't miss any aspect of the sounds, however subtle.

We have talked in this conference about the therapeutic importance of such deep listening. When the listener is transparent and non-reactive, such absorptive listening can draw the poison out of peoples' deep psychic wounds. By itself, deep listening can be healing, both to the one being listened to and to the listener.

A new therapeutic technique based upon Buddhist meditation, called Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction, or MBSR, has been shown in research studies to be effective in many diseases, from headaches to heart disease to psoriasis. Combinations of MBSR and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy have been shown to prevent relapse in depression. MBSR teaches people to be aware, to listen deeply and without judgement, to all the phenomena that arise. In the body this is sensations, in the mind, thoughts, and in the heart, emotions.

When we are able to listen with complete attention, we are able to discover many new things. Here are a few examples.

Listening with the heart

I have studied Zen with two Japanese Zen masters. In my 30 years with them I learned a way of listening to energy rather than words. They did not teach me this directly, but by example. I can only describe it in this rather crude way. You enter a room where there are Japanese people who are sitting together. Even though they are not speaking, you will be able to feel a certain

communication in the air of the room. It might feel like this (sound). You sit down and wait awhile, and then you feel the energy shift. Now it sounds like this (sound). After this shift occurs, one person might begin to speak. These long intervals of silent communion are as essential or even more essential to the “conversation” as the spoken words.

Silence makes Americans uncomfortable. In fact I have read that Japanese business men know this and are able to use it to their advantage in international business negotiations. They enter silence and simply wait. The Americans become so uncomfortable that they blurt out information or make an offer or a compromise prematurely.

I think the Japanese people learn this ability to listen to the fundamental tone in a person or group from birth. It is not so easy to teach this quiet listening, this *ishin denshin*, to Westerners. In silent retreats, especially retreats focusing on loving kindness meditation, Westerners begin to experience this way of tuning, this opening of the doors of the heart that is one of the gifts of silence.

Listening as the best way to enlightenment

The Buddhist scripture called the Surangama sutra describes a gathering of thousands of Buddhas and bodhisattvas. They came together for a professional meeting, just as we have done. They were talking about business matters. If this were a convention of hardware sales people, we would be talking about the best tools for different jobs. That’s exactly what all these Buddhas and bodhisattvas were talking about. They were discussing the best tools to bring the millions of people in the world out of their suffering and into enlightenment. After twenty five presentations on the various techniques that these very wise beings each thought was best, the Buddha selected the one most effective method for bringing people to enlightenment. It was deep listening.

“All you who listen here should turn inward your faculty of hearing to hear your own nature. This is how enlightenment is won.” “For those who wish to escape from samsara in their search for Nirvana’s heat, it is best to contemplate worldly sound.”

She who hears the sounds of the World

In the Surangama Sutra it is the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara who advocates for the power of deep listening as the best way to enlightenment. Avalokitesvara is called in China, Kuan Yin, in Japan, Kannon, in Tibet, Chinrezi. Avalokitesvara is depicted in both male and female forms, and is the embodiment of compassion. She is also called the one who hears the sounds of the world and responds.

At the great conference of enlightened beings, Avalokitesvara spoke about developing the “Hearing heart” which is undivided by seeing, feeling and knowing. The practice of pure listening involves listening as if you are a brand new baby. You have just been born. Your mind is pure, pristine. You have never heard the sounds of this world before. You have no idea what is making them. You have no words and therefore no thoughts. You can only listen, with curiosity and wide awareness. Your mind and heart are wide open, undivided.

When we can listen to our patients, our clients, our students, our difficult neighbors, our parents and our children, our friends and our enemies, and not be prejudiced by what we see, what we already know, or by our emotions, then we are practicing pure listening.

Hidden voices

When we listen deeply we are able to hear the silent distress underneath what our friends, our students, our clients or patients say. We learn to listen for a subtle change in timbre, an energetic stickiness, that signals what the real issue is.

A therapist might hear a client say:

“I was thinking about my work and all the troubles I’ve been having getting motivated and then I remembered my *father* (slight change in energy) and how he always said “The man is measured by what he produces.” “Aha,” you reply, “tell me more about what your father said.” Through deep listening you discover that you have been given the key to your exhausted client’s incessant drive.

A doctor might hear a patient say:

“Doctor, I know you said that all the tests are normal and that you think my headaches are due to tension, but I wonder if it could be *something else* that you haven’t thought of.”

“Aha,” You reply, “tell me the worst thing you can imagine that it might be.” Through deep listening you discover that when she was a child this woman watched helplessly as her beloved grandfather died in great pain from an inoperable brain tumor. Now you can go beyond the simple assurance that she does not have a brain tumor to address her fear and her anger, an underlying source of her headaches. You also can help her with her grief over the inevitability of sickness, old age and death.

Hidden music

When we are not listening to our own internal voices, when we are listening to the sounds of the world in new ways, we become able to hear sounds that we did not know existed. I will give you an example.

(Play) You have heard two sounds. The first is the ordinary sound of crickets chirping. Behind that you heard the sounds of crickets slowed down to human speed. (Play again) This piece is called God’s Cricket Chorus.

Now you will hear a piece of music that was so precious that it was only played once a year.

(Play) The music was kept secret until Mozart listened to it deeply, once, and was able to write the score out from memory. Mozart had an extraordinary capacity for deep listening.

When we slow time down, when we put aside all ruminating thoughts about the past, all anxious thoughts about the future, what will happen? We will enter the spaciousness of the present moment. What will we hear? A symphony played just for us.

Hidden language

Here is the language of dolphins (Play D sounds). People have suspected that dolphins and other cetaceans had “speech” for many years. However, the way that research on their language has been done was very unimaginative and restrictive. Recent research indicates that dolphins and other ocean dwelling mammals speak to each other and about each other using individual names. They acquire their names (called signature whistles) in infancy. (Play)

Dolphins separated from the land mammals 70 million (???) years ago and re-entered the sea. Their communication is adapted to their environment. Because of the way sound carries under water, human speech is easily distorted. Marine mammals communicate using clicks and whistles. When one dolphin uses echolocation clicks to find an object, let’s say a school of fish, other dolphins can “listen in” as if they are using a flashlight made of sound. The other dolphins then also can “see” the school of fish — the size and shape and the location within the ocean. They are seeing not with their eyes but with their ears, and --- they are seeing in three dimensions. In other words, dolphin language is three dimensional! Human brains may find it difficult even to imagine, let alone learn, this language. We may have to learn how to ask the marine mammals to help us listen deeply.

It is quite possible that dolphins have intelligence and language that is very different from human language, but in some ways surpasses ours. If so, this raises very serious ethical questions, as the mortality rate of dolphins held in captivity for research purposes is very high.

Sounds we misinterpret

Many people come to me to complain that when they meditate, they are bothered by a loud ringing or buzzing in their ears. They are distressed, because their doctor has told them they have an incurable disease, tinnitus. When I question them further I find that it is not tinnitus, but that they have begun to hear the sound that is called in Theravada Buddhism, the nada sound. Others have called it the sound of green, the sound of all living things or the sound between sounds.. Some composers have said that “A” is the fundamental tone and that when we voice it we are in resonance with the essential sound of all existence. Let’s try it out for ourselves — please chant with me “Ahhh.” (Take a bell?)

One woman I know was miserable because she had been told that she had a disease, tinnitus. When she began to meditate she learned that this was called the nada sound. She was told to listen to this sound carefully, and when she did, she began to enjoy it. She looked forward to her daily meditation and to listening to this sound. One day, after surgery on her jaw, the sound suddenly disappeared. She couldn’t hear it at all. She was miserable again. Where was her beautiful sound? After several months of distress she read a passage in a book saying, “Don’t try to hear this sound. Invite the sound in.” As she read these words, to her delight, she was suddenly able to hear the nada sound again.

The sound did not change, of course, but this woman went from hating it to loving it, to being angry over its loss, to being delighted when it “reappeared.” This is a beautiful example of how our human mind can plunge us into hell or lift us into heaven, to turn samsara into nirvana,

depending upon how we listen.

This is also true with how we are able to listen to human speech. It is not the sounds themselves that are pleasing or upsetting, it is what our minds adds to the sounds. If I say, “ ” to you, you will listen with curiosity and interest. What are these sounds? What could they mean? When the mind that knows is not involved, you are able to hear just the pure sound. However, if you happen to speak Polish, you will listen and become very upset. She’s cursing at me!! When we enter a state of deep listening, we become free of all our interpretations of sounds, and hear them just as they are.

Thus we can see the great power of deep listening to disconnect us from the clinging and aversion we attach to sounds, especially the sounds of the human voice. When we are able to just hear the sounds as they are, we are free to listen, and to respond or not. This is no small thing. It is a huge step away from suffering and toward happiness.

The lack of silence in our modern lives

I gave a Zen retreat in Alaska a few years ago. In the lodge next door two Catholic brothers were holding a silent confirmation retreat for teenagers. I went to greet them and they told me that these days every youth, even in Alaska, grow up in an environment of constant noise. There is no silence in their lives. They are bombarded from morning to night by noise and speech from boom boxes, car radios, TV’s, video games, and muzak at the shopping mall. Ten percent of two year olds in America have their own TV in their bedroom! Children grow up with music pouring directly into their ears, most of the day, from Walkman sets and i Pod earphones. We have found that many young people who come to our monastery have an unusual difficulty in attaining any degree of quiet mind during meditation. They find that when they sit in silence, their minds are playing music constantly. It often takes more than a year of meditation practice for this incessant mind-music to quiet down.

Everyone who sits in silent prayer or meditation discovers that there are not just songs, but also many voices in the mind. There are happy voices, angry voices, silly voices, loving voices and critical and judgmental voices. These many inner voices combine to create a notion of who we are, the “I am” of the inner world and they support the unique personality that we present to the outer world.

These inner voices are so used to their role in running our lives that they may become frightened of times when we sit still and are silent. In fact some non-Buddhist religious leaders advise against meditation strongly, saying that when the mind is quiet, the devil can invade and do mischief.

To be healthy we need to balance the constant inner noise – music, voices, inner dialogue – with silence. It takes energy to talk and to think. We need time when we are not putting out anything, not accomplishing anything, when we are very still and profoundly receptive. As a Catholic father has said, “God cannot talk to us if the line is always busy.” We cannot hear the sound of One Hand if our mind is full of chatter and noise. No outflows, no outflows.

Rather than creating more noise in our minds, we need to learn to be comfortable, to rest in silence. We can take our children to the forest and teach them to open their ears to the subtle voices of the wind, the moving branches, and the rain drops. The rest of creation is waiting for us to join them, for us to simply listening.

So many people complain of loneliness. When we open our ears and listen deeply, we can hear the sounds of the world, the voices of the birds in the long summer evenings, the squeak of bamboo growing in a summer night, the soft sound of snow falling, the buzz of a fly trapped inside a window. When we hear all these sounds we respond, with gratitude for this most precious gift, the gift of a human life. So many people tell me they feel lonely. With the gift of deep listening, we are never alone. We are embraced by the music of life, an endless symphony, played just for us. So many people tell me they feel empty inside. When we know that this silence, this emptiness, is not to be feared, that it is the source of all our potential and our creativity, then we can be at rest and completely content with what is, as it is. My deep thanks for your deep listening.

If you think about how humans evolved over hundreds of thousands of years, you will have some clues as to what we need to remain healthy.

Bodhisattvas might be able to hear the suffering of the world and respond, but our human bodies, minds and hearts are not built to take in all the suffering in the world. We developed over hundreds of thousands of years in social groups of 35 to 50. Cities are a new phenomenon in human evolution. Five hundred years ago there were only about 20 cities in the entire world with more than 100,000 inhabitants, three hundred years ago there were less than forty, and even in 1900 there were only 300. Now more than half the worlds population lives in large cities. We were built as human beings to cope with the happenings in a group that size, the joys, the sorrows, the births, the deaths of a group of less than 100 people.

Now our televisions, our news media, pour into our ears and eye the suffering of the entire world, the misery of hundreds of thousands of people on the other side of the earth. The more we listen deeply, the more pain we become aware of, not only in humans, but in all creations. Our caring hearts are open to this pain, but we feel helpless about how to respond. We can meet this reality of modern life in three ways. We can ignore the news from around the world, we can harden our hearts to it, or we can equip ourselves to handle it. The best tools to handle the reality of human suffering are spiritual tools. Spiritual tools help our minds to re- frame the overwhelming immensity of human suffering. If we are Christian we can try to understand it as part of God's plan for our salvation. If we are Buddhists we can try to experience the ease of nirvana within the pain of samsara. All of us must can practice to stretch our hearts to encompass it, all the cries of the world. Our faith gives us the means to respond to these cries.

Deep listening can heal us. Deep listening can teach us. Deep listening is a tool for investigation. Deep listening is a way to hold another's grief. Deep listening is a cure for boredom and existential alienation. Deep listening can ensure that we never feel alone or out of place. What is the sound of one hand? It is the sound of the home we did not know we had lost.

In the American version of the Japanese movie *Shall We Dance?* the stay-at-home mother (who gently confronts her husband, who has led a secret life learning ballroom dancing, “ QUOTE”
Deep listening provides such a witnessing for each person’s foolish, poignant and beautifully unique life. Deep listening honors each existence as an absolutely essential part of our own life. Deep listening honors each being’s life as an irreplaceable part of the whole, the whole of the great mystery of coming into life and dying.