

2012-06-10 Mindfulness of Listening

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SPEAKERS

Gil Fronsdal

So last week, and Sunday morning I spoke about speaking, the practice of speaking, then both as a mindfulness practice and how useful it is to pay attention to how we speak, what motivates us to speak what goes on when we speak. And also the ethics of speaking, what right speech is and how to evaluate our speech, according to what is useful to speak and what's best to avoid. What I like to do today is to follow up this with, I think, one of my one of my favorite topics, especially when in relationship to speaking. And that is mindfulness of listening. Maybe listening is more important than speaking sometimes. And there's a wonderful saying from the ancient world that goes something like a God gave us two ears and one mouth. So we've listened twice as much as we speak. I'm fine. Also the fact that in the, in the early Buddhist tradition, the people who were the disciples, direct disciples of the Buddha were called listeners, listeners or hears savica. Rebecca's and probably because they were listening to the Buddha teach and that's how they became the disciples. But I kind of spire inspired by the idea that the value of listening, have some deep listening that can go on. I'm also fond of the, the that in the rules of St. Benedict, the Italian monastic Gothic monastic order, they begin, the rules begin apparently with the word. Maybe it's Latin or Italian. I don't know which one but a sculptor, a sculptor, Italian means Listen, and it's important of listening again. And listening as you know, has a lot of similarities with mindfulness. We sit down. And one way of one way I've liked myself to approach mindfulness has been to come up with synonyms for mindfulness, so don't get stuck in one idea of what it is. And different situations different these synonyms seem to work. One synonym that was very important for a long time for me was participation. So rather than how to be more mindful of situation, how to participate more fully in the situation, because I was a non participant in certain things, you know, I kind of like I didn't want to be involved in especially like working in the kitchen in the monastery. I, you know, I didn't really see if that was real practice. And, and so then I had to learn to practice less participate more fully. And the participation kind of idea I got from one of those wonderful, serendipitous kind of moments where I was going off to the Tassajara Zen monastery to be a student there. And they stopped in Carmel I don't know what they were stopping for. But I went into the bookstore. And I went to the spirituals shelves, and I randomly pulled down a book. And I opened it randomly. And it was a book by some back then he was called dufry john. And, and in there, what he said inside the book and the one page open, was something, something to the effect that one of the great problems people have is avoiding things avoiding participating. And so I didn't like the fact that it was worded negatively. So I rewarded myself in more positive ways, like, like, how can I participate more fully, and then they made me put me to work in the kitchen. So I got to practice, you know. So that was one synonym for mindfulness. Another synonym that I found valuable for me is listening as a synonym for mindfulness to listen deeply. And one of the reasons why listening works for me as a synonym is that listening Active qualities and listening. And there's a passive quality listening usually you don't try to most people you can strain to listen. But most people listen in a much more relaxed way than if you tell them look. And when the language of looking is used for mindfulness, like look inside yourself, watch your breath.

Many people translate that into a straining or separation from their experience. But listening is can be much more relaxing and more open.

And I think for many people associated with much less control, because you can't really control what you hear. Whereas maybe you can kind of control try to control what you see, or if you anyway, so the other way of listening as a synonym for mindfulness, even when it's not literally listening, you know, listening to what's going on inside listening, what's here is very nice. And there's a wonderful story that's sometimes been taught in art. tradition that comes from the Indian epic called the Ramayana and it has to do with Rama and God Rama. God Rama is walking through the woods with his companions. Rama heard someone call his name. None of his companions could hear anything. But he continued to hear a female voice calling him think Lee and distinctively Rama, Rama, Rama. He followed the sound until he came to a boulder, from which the cry seemed to emerge. Gently Rama placed his hands upon it. The minute he touched the rock, it began to move and dissolve and transform. Finally, a dignified woman stood before him. Her name was Elia. A curse had imprisoned her within the stone until someone touched it softly, lovingly. She had been there, Ian Crying out his name and a voice that only he could hear. So this is a very I think it's a, you know, very compelling or evocative kind of story or myth. Because of the way it's symbolic in many ways. One way I say you get a hint of how symbolic it is, is the woman who's kind of stuck in this rock for a long time. My name is Elia and aligns in Indic language in Sanskrit means home. And so like Himalaya means the home of the snow. And so you know, her name is home so where's home? Where do you find home? And is home something that's you've lost touch with? And you have to listen very quietly into for your for your name or something like that for your true self? To find it to come home to yourself? What parts of ourselves have become petrified? What parts of asides Have we lost touch with what parts of ourselves can know? What else here only you can hear and what parts of ourselves are shy or have a very faint voice, that in order for you to hear you have to get really quiet. And listen very carefully. I believe that some of the deepest, the most important parts of who we are, of how we function what comes out of us, I'd like to I'd like to think of it as being shy. And as shy means that it's very easy to kind of pulls away and retreats when it's not safe for it to be there when we're busy when it's we're too too active or too loud or all around us. And so what are the functions of meditation is to have the quiet and the peace and sense of inner safety. So that which is a shy or quiet within us has chance to come forth. So what is petrified what's the boulder that needs to dissolve? And the other thing I like about this story is that you have the boulder You know, he lovingly put his hands on the Boulder. The you know you usually think of a boulder If something is going to be the recipient of our love and our care and our gentleness, can certainly put her hands on it, and boulders, his big heavy rock, maybe it's an obstacle. Usually people don't find boulders very useful. And, and so we have things inside of ourselves that maybe are painful or hard or difficult or, you know, are seemingly unimportant. And, and so part of the function of mindfulness is to pay careful attention to that and not just to be aware of it or know that it's there. But to bring a certain kind of care and kindness gently hold as if our head our attention is like soft hands further attention softly on that which may be most hard, most difficult, maybe even most painful within ourselves, and then listen be there very carefully. So hear Rama was hearing listening to this voice, you know, calling out his name, so we listen. So I like the language of listening quite a bit. And then The question is, you know, how do we listen?

If listening is like mindfulness, then some of the qualities of mindfulness come into play when we listen, we offer our attention. We offer kind of a heightened sense of attention, maybe an interest or curiosity, what's going on here? with mindfulness, we learn to pay careful attention, without without emphasizing, controlling and fixing what a situation is, by just being present, often we say in a nonreactive way. And so is there a place for in listening to listen in nonreactive way to develop the capacity to listen, in the same way, in the same openness, the same non reactivity, the same equanimity, as we're developing

our mindfulness, to pay attention to ourselves in meditation, for example, or in other situations, and to listen to the world around us to listen to others, to listen to what people have to say. There is a kind of a joke or something I read many years ago of a man who is in therapy. And he's having difficulty with his wife. And so the therapist says, you know, you have to go home and really listen to your wife. So he goes, does that and he comes back to the therapist and said, You know, I listened to her, it didn't really help. And then the therapist sent him home again and said, Now now that you now you have to listen to what she's not saying. So, you know, it's there's one thing to listen to words, but it's another thing to listen to what's motivating the words what's behind the words with the feelings are what's between the words, to listen to what's not being said. Many marriages involve hours or how many partnerships involve you know, not necessarily secrets, but unwillingness to talk about certain things. some some relationships actually survive because they're, you know, because they have something they don't want to face. They don't talk about I don't think That freedom is found by not talking about things. So I think one of the qualities I think of I hope that comes out of Buddhist practice is a willingness to open up a willingness to talk about what is difficult, and a commitment to stay in there and stay present for that not turn away and work through it. I think from my Buddhist practice, I've developed a tremendous appreciation for how everything can be worked through, if the commitment to stay present is there and listen, and listen and be heard. I've been involved in many conflicts in my life. Some of them I was invited to be part of, in the sense in the sense of help trying to help out, you know, to help mediate or something. And, and I've what I've one of the primary things that I've learned about conflict is how tremendously important it is for people to be heard. Everyone to be heard, and I've been involved in in conflict when when parties were not not really fully heard, it seemed to aggravate the conflict is put fueled it even more. And I've been involved sometimes in helping with conflicts, where not only was people not heard, but sometimes their concerns were dismissed. And sometimes it's easy to dismiss people when sometimes their concerns don't seem to you to be valid or important. And so, you know, it's kind of Passover. But I think whenever there's conflict problems, people need to be heard first. And in some of the bigger conflicts that I've tried to help mediate with, I've heard I've seen that just being heard was the big thing that kind of created more peace than anything else. In fact, they don't a person doesn't have to be heard by the person they're in conflict with. Remember the word you know, I was in the ethics Council Committee. And there was all this conflict in the community and And the conflict wasn't being handled very well by that community and, and so that I was asked to get involved and help. And so I had the people the agreements, the people who were, who were hurt by what happened, I invited them to come and see me. And we spent a few hours and they just told me the whole story what happened and I listened very respectfully and carefully. And they appreciate it so much being heard. And after that, the energy that he had and attention they had around needing to be resolved to deal with it diminished dramatically. And it didn't go away. But now they were able to get back into it without charge of being hurt or being, you know, overly excited because no one was listening. The fact that they were heard by someone was useful. A few a couple of years ago, I was in Santa Cruz.

You know, I don't know it's called the main drag in Santa Cruz main road, whereas he's kind of a great place to walk. It's a great place to see humanity. And I like it down there. And we were walking down On that Main Street in Santa Cruz, and someone had a table like a card table, out in the street and two, two folding chairs and, and on the card table, there was a little card upright card that said, free empathy. And so I looked more carefully. In fact, the person who's offering free empathy was sitting on one chair and there was someone else sitting there talking. And what struck me was the person is offering free empathy. How intently he was listening. That's, you know, he, maybe he was he knew how to listen. That's why you could offer empathy, listening very carefully. Really there. Are there stories that I've heard probably you've heard them too if people have gone to places like Russia or Palestine or different places where there's big conflicts, especially where Americans are involved, somehow or other

and, and they'll sit down in the park with a sign that says, America willing to listen. There's a line of people who really appreciate it that he doesn't take turns and they'll tell Americans what you know what they feel like they want to say. I think it's a wonderful offering to offer our ear, our ears to people to listen. It's a great thing. So I think there's four. There's four principles for good listening, called the four A's of listening. And the first is our attention. And attention isn't always easy to come by. and attention for somebody practices mindfulness, attention, I think we learned as attention is not only paying attention to the person situation, but also paying attention to ourselves. So pay attention very carefully when we get bored or we start spacing out. And probably I hope that all of you because this happens to me. That's why I hope it's all of you are sometimes in conversations and you didn't quite hear what the last sentence was. Is that true? Some of you I'm not the only one. And a little bit embarrassing, you know, can you repeat that, please? But, you know, I find it very interesting to pay attention when there's a boredom or when we space out. Usually it's a sign of something interesting going on rather than something uninteresting. And so it's good to know that. What are the triggers? What are the reactions inside of ourselves as we listen? What happens to us when we listen? Are we to what degree are we willing to let go of control? There's a beautiful with listening, there's a careful attentive listening. There's an interesting interplay between controlling yourself, meaning not to give your impulses and reactivity, the upper hand, not to rush forward with your opinions, not to interrupt people, but to be in control of yourself enough that you can be balanced and relaxed and present. With your whole being with your body. Just be there. Maybe you don't like the word control, but for now, that's You know, it's since a control of yourself to be there at the end, but I think sense of controlling yourself also gives you a sense of power in the situation. It's harder to feel you're a victim of someone talking to you, if you feel like you're in control of yourself. And then also there's the other side of it is it is also giving up control and good listening, because you don't know what's going to come next. You don't know what the person is going to say. You don't know what has to be listened to. And you know, sometimes you don't know whether it's even useful to listen. I've been I've listened and wondered, is this really useful? And the person is going on and on? And what am i offering What am I doing this person's talking a lot? And, and, but, you know, some people have never been listened to before. And it's really especially so it's, you know, to offer to really carefully listen is a great gift to people who go on non sometimes. And sometimes it's useful to say it's enough, you know, or can I say something now or whatever You know, I think many of you know that one of the principles of therapy is after all these years of therapy and training in school and masters and PhD and therapy hours, and you know, all that the thing that therapists offers the most is listening.

The fact that you're able to listen really well. And there, you know, it seems to be very healing for many people, just to be heard properly. So we offer our attention and attention involves paying attention to ourselves as well. And the principle I try to do when I'm listening to people, is I try to have 50% of my attention on the person I'm listening to, and 50% of my attention to myself. And because I think it's so important to stay in touch with what's happening inside of me, so I can be a good listener. If I give too much of my attention to the person. It might seem, you know, logically that then I'm a good listener, I'm giving all my attention to the person, but I'm actually not listening fully. When I do that. I listened more fully When I'm actually also paying attention to myself 50% of the time, what's happening here? So the first day of good at good listening is attention. The second is to acknowledge what's happening. So to acknowledge someone else, what is you know what you hear people know that you've been listening if you repeat back what you've heard what's going on the other is a, which is affection, to listen affectionately with loving kindness with care. And if you don't like the word affection for all your listening, then it could be part of the maybe affection as an A and it's that way. It's there, but maybe a better word is it was empathy, to listen with empathy to listen to we're trying to understand the person some deeper way we understand what's going on for the person and what's going on behind the words. So when it goes on and on someone who's angry, someone's angry with you, perhaps what's most useful

is not that you defend yourself, but you listen with some kind of empathy you're willing to kind of put yourself in their shoes, what's going on for that person? And listen, before you react before you speak before you defend yourself, what's happening. And then the last one, a which I like, is affirmation. So even if you disagree with someone, is there something you can affirm is something that you can appreciate in that person, something you could say, you know, I hear you and you know, I don't necessarily agree with everything you said. But I really value how honest you are about Cece big space saying this, or I really value the fact that you're letting me know how you feel It's really important that this came out, thank you. Or you know, you're speaking with a lot of passion, it's great, you have so much passion for something. I think these these qualities of listening to you, you know, then people really feel like they're being heard and seen and recognized, which I think is the gift of really good listening.

So now, I want to ask you to participate in this talk like I did last week. And so the question for you is, what? What are some of the things you can listen to? Beyond the words that someone says, beyond the, the obvious meaning of the words that people say? What does it mean when you listen to someone, what are some of the other things that you can listen to Pay attention to notice.

Well, I think it's been said that person's body language and their, their face and something like that.

Yes.

Like that tone of voice that much more gets communicated that way then through

the body language communicates a lot. And usually it's not so dramatic. I apologize for taking the show until Yes, body language the big thing I have, it hasn't happened for a long time. But in the first years that I was teaching, I noticed this a number of people were I guess they were very uncomfortable. People are really uncomfortable kind of meeting kind of straight on and sometimes in polite is too much to do with procedures. But maybe I was overdoing it. But, but I would like the idea of really being there for someone and being kind of like, you know, Facing directly. So we were standing, and they would be like 90 degrees to me looking over their shoulders. And I would I turned around, I walked around them so I could face them. And they turned they could. And one person actually walked around 360 degrees. And I don't think the person knew it was unconscious about you know that body language said one thing. The rep Anderson who's one of the senior teachers attempts because then center, I don't know if it's still his practice or his custom, but many years ago, 25 years ago. He said that his way of listening to people, one of the things he does he does pay attention to body language, but he kind of takes their body language and how they are how their posture as a cue, and he kind of adjusts himself accordingly. So it because he's usually very upright it's kind of a little bit intimidating guy because he's so straight. But I guess if someone's slouches then against the wall, he'll slots against the wall. Or, you know, he's trying to match it so people feel comfortable and just kind of residents that can have to maybe. Thank you, Martha. Someone else work. Next.

What was the question again? What are we listening to? What are we? What are we listening to? If we're not just listening to the words? Is that

Yeah, what additional things can you listen to, in addition to what the words are? The obvious meaning of the words.

For me, there's a sense of listening to someone's emotional tone, their feelings,

our emotional body that is there as well.

So listening to their emotional body which the feelings that are there really important. Yeah, it's energetic. Hmm. And how do you listen to that? What do you

resonance when I'm present?

I have a sense of their feelings. Yes,

it's an energetic Like I know the Brain Stuff, mirror neurons,

but it's, it's being presence in

the field together with them.

Great, thank you. Let's move on to with pressing the front here.

So this is also, I think kind of a listening skill. But in my company we employ this but we also notice it when you talk to someone on the phone. It's interesting to notice that when we're speaking with someone, if you have a smile on your face, something else comes across that's, you know, you don't hear Yes, but you detect and so that's also the same skill is just speaking with a smile and also noticing when when you're on the phone hearing, you can tell when other people are in that space. So

they're listening to their smile, listening to their joy, but does your listening change if you're smiling?

He does. Yeah, I agree.

Yeah. So how did you have any sense of how it changes?

No, I think when we listen, you know, we're filtering all the time. And just having a smile on your face kind of affects your body. And I think it also affects your mindset. And so I think you're listening with with maybe just a little more joy or just that negative filter, the judgmental filter, I think, when the smile on your face it kind of, it'd be between.

Yeah. And I think I think in certain certain circumstances, people are much more willing to open up and because you feel like a friendly person, if you're smiling, sometimes smiling is not appropriate. You know, you know, you have to kind of, I sometimes have adapted down the smile. I happy to see someone who's smiling and they come in they say something tragic, and I got it. There's a wonderful man who's the chaplain at spiritual chaplain at Sequoia named Tom Harshman. And he comes down and once a year and teaches for our chaplaincy group here. And he said that when he was first a chaplain, he got feedback from people from other chaplain the people that he was I forget exactly what he said. So what the word is, but so be careful don't don't hold them to this word, but that he was kind of like too serious or too dour or something, you know, and he didn't feel that way. But you know, somehow, he said, you know, you have to smile occasionally. And so, he went home and for a while practice is smiling. And, and so he became much more fluent in smile and are able to smile, they're easy to smile. And in fact, I've known him now for many years and he has a very infectious smile, and

it's really wonderful to be around him because of his smile. And, and before I met him, if someone said that they practiced or smiling, I wouldn't have trusted it like, you know, This is like, you know, it's like you know what, you can kind of put on a smile for people. But now that I've met him I feel it's genuine really genuine. And it's part of his gift and going around meeting people this inappropriate time is he you know, as infectious smile. Someone else?

Well, there's two things that come to mind. One is

just this the stress and the voice, the inflection, you know, the way it rises and falls and volume and all those kinds of things convey a lot. So that's one thing and the other you already mentioned, which is what is not said. Sometimes there'll be a conversation and there's an elephant in the room and people don't want to look at it or name it.

Great. Yes, both those things are important.

I try to listen for what people want.

Sometimes it's clear, sometimes, you know, they just really want to ramble on to say they just want someone to listen to them. Sometimes they want people to agree with them when I can't hear what they want, or usually ask them. But I think that's been very useful for me and

what they want. What are you trying to accomplish within their speaking, try to listen to that's good. So right in front of you, Alicia, what you put into your hand.

So one thing that you said, Gil, that, that resonated for me was when you said 50% pay attention to the person that you're with and 50% pay attention to what's stirring in you. And that's what I listened to is. Often I find out I'm there present with somebody And then I notice that something that's actually changing in me, there's a reaction to maybe what their story is they're sharing. So I pay attention to that without leaving and being present for, I guess that maybe the word is allowing it to be there. And still being able to maybe self managed so I can be present for that person. But noticing and taking notes, so maybe come back to that after I'm done with that conversation.

Great. That's wonderful. And I appreciate your your language of self management, maybe it's better than my thing but self control. self management seems but good.

People have habits in their voice. And we can change our habits but it can be very difficult to listen to someone who has

the habit of anger, for example.

You note that the tone is angry, but there's nothing in this conversation that's about anger. And the same way in smiling we have we see people or talk to people who are smiling and have this gaiety. But there's Dori use an incredibly tragic that's coming out and they're laughing about it as a habit, and as a cover up

could be yes.

So there are many difficult parts of listening when the when there are lots of overlays on on the other side.

Yeah, I agree. And I think situations like that, that maybe it's becomes more important to pay attention to yourself, maybe then it should sometimes be 75% for you 25% that person because the reaction is so strong. And, and so if someone is speaking in an angry way, maybe a lot of attention has to go on you so that you could work through person could work through their reaction and their clinging their judgments around that. And so be able to continue to listen with to the anger angry voice or whatever, in an open, relaxed, clear way. I've had great conversations with people being angry with me. And, and just and just stayed very open and relaxed and just kind of let it kind of come and receive it. And it's, you know, I hope all of you get the experience to get the chance in your life someday to have someone who's angry with you. And just a really, you know, open respectful listening and just kind of let it come. Just don't don't don't have a stick anywhere, just be there. It's a it's a great thing to do. So, you know, don't go Don't go making the opportunity but but if the opportunity comes, you have some, you know, kind of like, oh, here's my chance. Most people don't think of it that way.

So one of the things I For both on the phone and in person is where the person's breath is, whether it's up in their chest, or it's down in their belly, what the pacing is, and that's a really good clue as to their emotional state and how they're relating to their own internal world. Great.

breath is good growth is a big problem for ourselves, do I pay attention my breath a lot and I noticed the shifting of it and it teaches me something about myself.

And part of empathy is then sometimes matching.

Yes. So then Bruni in the back.

One of the things I hear is the level of awareness with which the person is speaking and the level of awareness with what I'm listening. Meaning is the person telling me about Facts through the senses or thoughts beliefs through thinking or emotions through feelings or desires wishes the wanting or actions through, I'm going to do this or I'm going to do that and how I'm listening. What are my filters big because maybe I'm just listening. Maybe I have a strength of not seen facts, but not not seen feelings.

Good. Maybe they right in front of you there was I saw a hand before. Hi, I'm Jimmy. I also listened to bouncing off of the mirror neurons that were also mentioned. Sometimes I think I tend to feel what the other The person who's saying and if they're complaining or they're angry, I'm going along with the story. So I have to listen to myself and say, you know, those aren't my feelings that I'm listening to that that's, you know, that's their feelings. I don't own those feelings and create that separation in myself when I'm listening. Great. Related to that, I think is, is to know how gullible you are. Because, you know, I mean, I've had to watch myself in that way because someone can come with a very compelling story. And it can seem like this is how it's this is how what's really happened. And, but just be willing to kind of put a question mark behind it. I've heard that that person's point of view, maybe there's a different point of view. And I've been surprised by how some someone had a very, very compelling story. It seemed like must have been happened that way. And then someone else provided a missing piece of the story. That the first person just hadn't said. So how to listen respectfully and clearly. But then to be open to not necessarily take it as true, but still listen very respectfully and maybe could be true. And then be ready to when you listen to someone else to to be listening in a fresh way and not hold the first story too tightly as you listen to the next party point of view. I see a lot of hands. Maybe this can be the last one because it's time.

Okay, so this one has a little bit of humor in it.

As a grief counselor, the core of what I do is just listen, listen with a lot of compassion. And one thing that I think about is what happens when there are external distractions. So something incredibly priceless happened. This Week. And I was sitting with a woman who was she's probably the most despairing grief client I have right now who's married for 40 years and lost her husband. And week after week, you know, it's just heartbreaking, but she's healing by just talking. And for the last three sessions, and they're not always at the exact same time that I see her, right above the office, and the walls are very thin. There's been this rhythmic rocking, that gets faster and faster and faster. I don't know if people know what I'm referring to but, but what comes to mind is someone who's self pleasuring. So here I am listening to this and trying, that's where my mind is going. Wondering where her mind is going with all of this and trying to, you know, put that in the background and really pay attention. So second time it happened. You know, she, she just kind of had this little gesture of Ooh, you know, I just sort of chuckle. And then this this week, it was enough. She just couldn't contain herself. And, you know, she made some comments about what was literally happening and happening, and then made gestures of what they were doing. And this is all conjecture, because we don't really know. So in those moments, I was both being distracted over something that was so profound and serious of what we were, you know, the core of our communication and what really pulled it all together was humor, which is really extraordinary. So it's all about listening and how do you manage internal external distractions, and what happens in the relationship when those things occur?

So this this so called distraction maybe in the humor or something about it broke open the heart in some way. So because she needed to communicate in a deeper way and that allowed for that exactly. So, we do have a rhythmic problem here at IMC some of you probably heard, but there was the city's water meters. They're going to fix the meter on tomorrow morning. So those of you have been hearing the sound. It's gonna stop. We hope it's gonna stop soon. And it's not people. Thank you all.