

Mindfulness of Listening

Gil Fronsdal

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So good morning everyone and welcome. So last week I talked about mindfulness of speaking and so to follow up this week I'd like to talk about mindfulness of listening. And listening has such so much overlap with mindfulness that sometimes I think that if you can't be mindful, listen. Or if you can't meditate, if you can't learn to meditate, learn to listen. There's a little story that I made up that once this person who lived next to the, who was visiting from another country for a year and was living next to the monastery and she started going visiting regularly and was taught some introduction to meditation and did some meditation and really was taken by this.

But then her family was going to move back to her home country where there was no Buddhism and no meditation. So she went to the abbess of the monastery and said, what do I do when I get home? Who is going to teach me to meditate? And the abbess said, ask around for the person who's the best listener and then ask them to teach you how to listen. So to listen well, as a form of mindfulness or a substitute for mindfulness. But ideally you do both.

Learn to be mindful and learn to listen. Learn to be mindful as you're listening. Learn to listen as you're mindful. There's tremendous value in listening. Some people, it's been said that some people have trouble listening because it involves a lack of control. And I suppose it does.

You don't control the people around you if you just listen. But we certainly can acquire a lot of control over ourselves, mastery over ourselves if we learn to listen. So I have two quotes here about listening. And I think they're kind of wonderful. One's a poem and both of them are poems. And the idea of the person is one has a person being really small and one has a person being really big.

So I include both for equal opportunity, equal representation. In case some of you don't like the idea of being small. And some of you don't like the idea of being big. I'll start with the big. This is from Walt Whitman, a very important American poet. This is his poem, called *Song of the Open Road*.

So it begins kind of with exclamation.

From this, hour, freedom.
From this hour, I ordain myself freed of limits and imaginary lines.
Listening to others and considering well what they say.
Pausing. Searching. Receiving. Contemplating. Gently.
But with an undeniable will.
Divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.
Divesting myself of the clinging that would cling to me.

And that's a powerful step for me, for listening. Listening to others and considering well what they say. Pausing. Searching. Receiving. Contemplating. Gently. But with an undeniable will. Divesting myself of the holds that would hold me.

I think it's a great Buddhist little paragraph there, lines of a poem. But it's together with this idea of freedom. Freedom, celebrated like this at the beginning, could be very self-centered. Especially in the individualistic culture that America has often been. It could even be more so an expression of our individualism, individuality, seize the day for oneself.

But immediately, I don't know, immediately, there's some lines in between I didn't include. But then this poem includes just a deep sense of listening. So after this listening to others, he writes,

I inhale droughts of space.
The east and the west are mine.
And the north and south are mine.
I'm larger. Better than I thought.
I didn't know I held so much goodness.
All seems beautiful to me.

Imagine if listening in that spirit. Listening that you're better and bigger and have more goodness in you than you know. So this is the one about being big. Listening.

And here's the one about being small. And this is by the poet Mae Sarton. It's titled, *Can I*

Weave a Nest of Silence? Isn't that evocative? Can I weave a nest of silence? And it refers to a small bird named a phoebe.

The phoebe sits on her nest hour after hour, day after day, waiting for life to burst out from under her warmth.

Can I weave a nest of silence?
Weave it of listening, listening, listening, layer upon layer.
But one must first become small.
Nothing but a presence.
Attentive as a nesting bird.
Pro-offering no slightest wish toward anything that might happen or be given.
Only the warm, faithful waiting.
Contained in one's smallness.
Beyond the question, the silence.
Beyond the answer, the silence.

I thought this was a great poem to represent meditation. Sitting, you know, sitting. And the Buddha did like in doing Buddhist practice, like an egg sitting on its eggs and incubating them. He uses language of, not his word, it's a modern word, but gestation. That having something be working and growing and developing and being born from within as we do this practice.

So I thought in that spirit, this poem about the bird sitting on its nest with its warmth, gestating something, letting something develop, the eggs develop until something gets born. And now Mae Sarton wants to do the same through her listening. Does a listening well? Does it give birth to something new? Does listening well gestate something, allow something else to happen? In you and in the person you listen to.

There are people whose job is to listen to people's stories. And they sometimes are referred to as midwives. That they hear things into birth. In their listening, things come alive. And that's why they're called midwifery people. In your listening to yourself, can you listen to yourself? To sit quietly.

And it would be different if you use the metaphor of listening for mindfulness than if you use the metaphor of seeing for mindfulness. For some people, seeing is much more active. And in fact, I know some people who actually engage their eyes when their eyes are closed in meditation. You know, they're trying to look and stare at their breath. Trying hard. It's a little bit harder to do that with listening.

Listening has to almost be a letting go of effort to listen well. There can be an act of choice to listen. But there's a kind of giving up control or giving up. It's almost like you have to let go of effort to listen really well. Your listening can be directional. But still, it's not. You have to kind of allow it to come.

There's less interference. And that's part of the power of mindfulness. When there's no interference. And we can just feel without any attachment. Know without any attachment. Just there. And to not be in a hurry. To wait. To be small. To build a nest.

And I like this very much. That part of meditation, especially in the early years of being a meditator, we're kind of beginning to kind of create something wonderful inside. A nest. A tenderness. A softness. A presence. A capacity to be present and hear.

Where the body begins to soften and relax. There's a yogic body that comes into play that slowly gets formed by meditating day by day by day. And the body itself shifts and changes. The heart shifts and changes. The mind shifts and changes. When less and less preoccupation, the mind doesn't wander off so much in thought. Something begins shifting and changing when we're not so riding our concerns, our preoccupations really tightly.

You know, really want something or don't want something. Or reacting. Liking and not liking. Drifting off in distractions. Not drifting off in distractions. Racing off in distractions. And so, with the idea that we're building a nest, as opposed to doing it to have an attainment. I'm going to get this. I'm going to be a really good meditator. I'm going to get the attainments of Buddhism.

Full enlightenment. I'm going to get the *jhānas*. I'm going to get this. I'm going to get that. But what if what we're doing is building a cocoon. Building a nest. Building a womb. Gestating something. That's a little bit more of the Buddha's understanding of what we're doing in meditation.

The Buddha did not present Buddha's practice as something we engineer. Something we construct. Something we build. He presented Buddha's practice all through language and metaphors that were creating the conditions for something to be born. Something to arise. Something to grow. And so, creating the conditions for something to grow can be represented by this metaphor of the nest.

It can be represented by being so still and quiet and warm. Incubate it. Bring warmth. Tenderness to all that you are. There's a wonderful story from the *Rāmāyaṇa* that sometimes I've quoted a lot. The Rāma is in the forest with companions. And Rāma hears a very faint

voice in the forest.

And he asks his companions, do you hear the voice? And they say no. But he hears the voice. So he kind of tries to figure out where it's coming from. Starts moving in that direction. And then very faintly he hears the voice is calling his name. Rāma. Rāma. And he asks his companions, do you hear the voice? No. We don't hear it.

So he goes closer and closer. And as he gets closer it's a little bit louder and louder. But still very quiet. And finally he comes to the source of it. And the source is a very big boulder. And coming out of the boulder is this voice. Rāma. Rāma. Kind of inviting him perhaps to come closer.

So Rāma takes and puts his two hands on the boulder. And immediately the boulder transforms itself into a beautiful woman who long ago had been someone had cast a spell on her and turned her into a solid boulder. But someone like Rāma had to come to dissolve her so she wouldn't be so petrified. And so how I interpret this wonderful story was Rāma listened. Only he could hear.

What is it only you can hear? What's calling you? What's calling you inside? What is it that's solid or petrified in you that's waiting to be touched? Waiting to be somehow held? Recognized? And so to sit in mindfulness as a listener to yourself. What is it that's speaking deep inside that doesn't have words? But this idea of listening deeply, deeply.

It's a little bit different than looking. Some people if they're looking for their depth, looking for the answer inside, people are really active. Searching. Searching around. Looking around. All the different places. Where can I find it? There must be some place here. Behind the navel. You know. In the back of the heart. You know. No, no. It has to be in the base of the brain. Where is it?

But you can't do that if you're listening. Listening you have to just be quiet. Quiet. Still. Listen. Feel. Sense. In some deeper and deeper way. So what is it that calls you? And I love the language of being called because that's been so much kind of how I've been operated in my adult life.

Called to meditation. Called to practice meditation. And the things that began happening to me when I meditated was basically say come, come here. This is good. This is the right place to be. This is where peace is. This is where harmony is. This is where the wholeness, your wholeness resides. Come here and let this wholeness grow. Come.

And so I then went from meditating every day to going living near a Buddhist center to becoming a resident of the center to going to live in a monastery. All, all because I felt this inner call to become, go into this deeper and deeper listening to what was calling me. And eventually there was a call to be of service. The call to be a teacher or to somehow support people in the suffering of the world.

In Buddhism, in Mahāyāna Buddhism they have this great bodhisattva, great celestial kind of being called Avalokiteśvara, Kuan Yin, Kannon in Japanese, and who is referred to as the one who hears the suffering of the world. Sometimes it's called the one who sees, yeah, who hears, who hears the suffering of the world. So this metaphor of hearing is there.

And Avalokiteśvara, this wonderful, there's statues of Avalokiteśvara. And we have actually one that's in the museum in Kansas City. We have a big photograph. They have a beautiful one there. It's up on the top of the steps. If you're brave and sign a liability form or take all full risks, you can go up the spiral staircase and see this wonderful photograph of that Kansas City Kuan Yin.

And it's in the pose of repose. It's sitting in a very relaxed position. The one who hears the cries of the world, who is relaxed at ease, who listens well. And maybe we can only listen well if we're relaxed and at ease. And to the suffering of the world, is it okay to be relaxed at ease, listen to the suffering of the world? Some people say absolutely not.

You have to be distressed. You have to be angry. You have to be distressed. You have to be distraught. You have to be, you know, show that you really care by being all worked up. That is not creating the nest. That's not creating the place of some deeper wellspring of growing and maturing and responding to the world.

Actually, it mitigates it. If we are caught in distress and anger, distraught over the conditions of the world, which is easy to do, it's actually maybe, in a certain way, very logical to do that. But in the end, we are held by what would hold you. To paraphrase Walt Whitman, but he said, divesting himself of the holds that would hold me.

And so, how do we listen well? So there's also a story in China of Kuan Yin there. Someone asks a Zen master, what's it like to be Kuan Yin? What's it like to listen to the sounds, the suffering of the world? And the Zen master says, it's like adjusting your pillow in the middle of the night. Isn't that weird?

But the idea is, I think the assumption is that the metaphor means that you're kind of half asleep and you adjust the pillow unselfconsciously. You feel something needs to be adjusted

and that simple, relaxed, unselfconscious adjusting the pillow, that's what it's like to be compassionate. There's a need, but there's no distress. There's something, and responding to that need.

So, how do we listen well to others? One way is to try to listen without the filters of our judgments, our stories, our interpretations of what's going on. And that's one of the values of mindfulness. The more mindful you become, the more you're also tracking yourself. You're tracking, whether you're actually responding to them in your mind and stop listening to what they're saying.

And I don't know if I'm just weird, but I've known myself to do that. That, what did the person just say? I'm just comparing my answer. And that's not healthy. So the idea to recognize that's happening, to no, no, listen, stay listening, stay present, hear the person out. And to be able to track yourself and know how we're kind of, and sometimes, occasionally I felt this tremendous power, this urge to speak.

Like, you know, it's like hard to keep my mouth shut, sometimes interrupting other people because of that power that's there. Mindfulness is supposed to protect us from that, unless the situation requires action. But listen, mindfulness also provides us with a lot of wisdom, a lot of understanding. If we can track ourselves as we listen, we can understand the reactions we have to what we hear.

We can understand the beliefs that are operating, the thoughts that come up, the judgments that come up. We can recognize the emotions that are coming up and the tensions that are coming up or the softness that comes up. We can kind of track what's happening inside of us. That doesn't make us a worse listener. It can actually make us a better listener. So all those things don't interfere. So we can listen better to the other.

And also, if we listen to ourselves while we're listening to others, it turns out part of who we are is in this wonderful, natural world. We're not a singular, independent thing. Who we are is partly co-created, all the time in the world. And so if we're tracking that and being present for it in ourselves, we're actually in this, we're watching and seeing the co-creation that happens.

If we only paid attention to ourselves, which some people are capable of doing, then we don't hear the other person. But if we only hear the other person, then we don't hear ourselves. And so I feel we're obligated to listen to someone 100%. We're supposed to be a good listener. It turns out we can't be a good listener if it's 100% with the other person.

And so what I like, the idea is that mindfulness helps us to have the attention 50-50. 50% here with oneself and 50% with someone else. And so I want to offer the alternative to these two poems. One poem is about becoming large and the other about becoming small. For me, the wonderful, delightful alternative is to disappear. That's the third option.

And so when the attention is really present, 50% to the person, 50% to what's all in here, then, as Walt Whitman says, the imaginary lines disappear. The imaginary boundaries disappear. The boundaries between self and other kind of disappear. And so this usual understanding and sense of self disappear that often interfere with listening well. And it's just such a pleasure to disappear this way.

And are you going to be unsafe in the world if those kinds of imaginary lines, separation, and you as a person is no longer there? How are you going to take care of yourself? You actually can take care of yourself better because you're tracking your feelings, your thoughts, the impact, the concerns, the beliefs. You really see what's going on, what's here. You get all the right information that you need.

You just don't package it into an identity that this is who I am, I'm supposed to be this way. And so you're able to then, in the conversation, to respond appropriately and take care of yourself. Because you have all the information from the other and listening to the other person, you hear them well. So it's not a dangerous thing, what I'm suggesting, but it's a great relief.

Isn't that nice? I mean, it's kind of a drag to be small. And it's kind of a drag to be big. But it's not a drag to disappear. There's no resistance anywhere. So to listen well.

And then one way to listen well to others is to let them know that you hear them. Active listening often means that we, kind of in a very simple way, you don't repeat everything they say, but even with one or two words, demonstrate that you've heard what they said. And even simply as saying, like, you know, oh Gil, you were talking about listening today. Well, then I know you heard. And something different can happen.

And so it can be very simple. But help people understand, know that you listened. More powerfully, help people know that you understood them. People have a tremendous need to be understood. If you have a need, one of the wonderful, I think, maybe pop psychology principles that I like, is if you have a need, offer it to others. Give it. So if you have a need to be understood, understand others.

It's an alchemy of that. It's very fascinating. If that's included in the nest of something, it's

growing. It's really fascinating what can happen. But, you know, just simply, it might be that people feel like, wow, the person's really interested in me. Maybe I should ask them how they are. And so then they initiate it.

But if you say to them, you never, you never listen to me. You're never shown interest in me. And, you know, then they get defensive and then they're not going to listen. But you kind of do this Aikido move. You know, you understand them. And, so, as a way of finishing these words, I'd like to re-read this one part of Walt Whitman's poem.

So may it be that listening is one of the ways that you're able to start letting go of some of your attachments and clinging. That listening is an antidote to holding on tight. That you begin letting go. Just like meditation is meant to be an antidote to holding on tight. Helping you to let go. So if you can't meditate, now you know what to do. Practice listening instead.

And listening you can practice all day long when you're with people or with yourself. Listen to yourself well. So those are my thoughts. And, with this fresh on your mind, and maybe inspired by it, or want to try it quickly, how about if you turn to one or two people next to you and say something about what arose for you in listening to this talk.

What inspired you? What was interesting to you? What protests you have? What you didn't, what you didn't like about it? And, but give the other people, one or two people with you, a chance to practice listening to you. But as you speak, be sure that you're listening to yourself as you speak. And don't speak for very long. Make it really brief. Because mostly this is a listening exercise.

So you want to just get over your, you're talking, so you can get, be doing the listening part. And as you listen to them, listen to yourself at 50-50. So have a, you know, friendly conversation. And those of you who don't want to be part of this, you're certainly welcome to go, go have tea. You're welcome also, sit quietly in here. And then we'll take five minutes or so just to kind of come back and have a few more words.

So, just make sure no one's sitting alone. Look around you. And then, I'll ring a bell when it's time to stop. So, what did you learn about yourself as a listener in that exercise? Anything? Were you listening? Anybody want to offer something? I do. But, that's fine. Yeah, but people online need it.

I found out that I'm not nearly as good of it as I think I am. That's it. That's progress. I also found out I'm not as good as I thought. And I like to give advice. So, in recognizing that, was that also progress? Definitely. Good. Definitely.

Well, I'll, just a quick one. I find for myself, if I'm excited, all my energy goes out. I mean, any kind of strong emotion, if I'm angry, it's like, the idea of bringing it back to myself is challenging. It's funny that you spoke before me because I was kind of going to say something similar. Just that the eagerness to speak can be distracting.

And it's nice being able to witness it and let it go so that we can drop in with one another in a more still and tender way. That was very nice to hear that you see it that way. Thank you. There's, there's, next. Oh. Go ahead. No, a quick comment. I just find that I get so interested in hearing more and learning about the person that sometimes I ask too many questions.

Now I finally understand what tune in and drop out means. I have just one little story to share, which is, I think, well, it's one of my favorite things about becoming a meditator. I've not, I've only been meditating about, seven or eight years, I want to say. But when I was an absolute beginner, I immediately fell in love with loving kindness and found it to be a very lovely thing to carry around during the day.

And I was very mindful of that in the beginning. It was the one piece I, I could carry. And all of a sudden, at work, at least once a day, someone would stop when we were done discussing and say, you're such a good listener. And I've never had that happen prior in my life. And I was very good at it then because I was so mindful of this new thing.

It doesn't happen nearly as often now. I don't know if I just went on to more complicated meditation concepts that I'm trying to master. But it was the most delightful gift from my practice. It might be my favorite thing. And it really is a shame. It doesn't happen very often, I have to confess. But it was a gift.

Well, you know, it's invaluable to always be a beginner. Another thought. Not the tune-in, drop-out kind, but I was thinking it's easy to really tune into listening when I'm speaking with strangers, not the people that I know in life. That's fascinating. There's so much history and complications and all kinds of things with people we know. Maybe it's, but they might be the most important people to listen to.

Well, thank you all very much. I hope this was nice for you. And this topic of listening is really central to a mindful life. And may you mindfully listen and listen mindfully. Thank you. Thank you.