

To Listen

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Thank you, Gil. Good morning, everyone. I was kind of delighted, happy to hear Nancy's announcement about Thursday evening beginning again. We had a Thursday evening sitting at IMC for, I think, 30 years, probably, and maybe more. For many of those years, I taught it when we were in Palo Alto and in the beginning years here at IMC. And I am very fond of it, and it continued very nicely with wonderful teachers. Andrea Fella taught for many years, and a number of the new teachers taught it, and most recently Tanya taught it.

And so it was paused for a while, for about six months, and now we're starting again. So I'm just delighted to have it. The idea of starting it up is to start it up with an intro class, so that for people who are new, there would be a kind of entry into that Thursday evening. And so anyway, I'm just going to repeat what Nancy said as a kind of celebration.

So a story, a fable maybe, that I'm fond of, is one that you might have heard from me before, of a young woman, maybe a teenager, whose family moves for a year to a new country far from where they are. It happens to be a country where there's a Buddhist monastery right near where they live. So the teenager walks in and is curious about it and meets the abbess and gets introduced to meditation. Lo and behold, the monastery has a Thursday evening meditation for the public. So she starts going to it. And she learns to meditate during that year.

Then after a year, their family is going to go back to a place where there's no meditation in their land, there's no Buddhism. So she goes to the abbess and asks her, "When I go back to my country, how do I continue my meditation training? How do I keep learning more?" And the abbess said, "Well, when you go back to your place, ask around among all kinds of people for the person who knows how to listen the best, the best listener in the community. And when you identify that person, have them teach you how to listen. And that'll teach you all you need to know for meditation."

There's something very closely associated with the ability to listen well and mindfulness. We say that in *Vipassanā*, it means clear seeing, and we can translate it to listening, that we're cultivating clear listening. And I suspect that most of you see more clearly than you listen, especially when you listen to other people speak. Some people don't really know how to listen. Some people, I get the sense, it never really occurred to them to listen to someone else, to really listen, unless it was as a prompt to be able to speak and speak and speak.

And then we listen through the filter of our ideas, our feelings, our associations to people, our desires, our fears. There's a lot that's behind listening that is often invisible to us. But to listen well is to listen in both directions. To be able to listen clearly to what people are saying, and to listen clearly to what's going on inside us. What's the layer just beneath the words you hear from someone else? What is your inner speech? What's your inner thoughts and ideas, emotions and feelings? What's going on there?

And it's easy enough sometimes to be pulled into the conversation. So the subject of the conversation, what you have to say, what the person is saying, almost blinds you from really having a clear self-aware presence here. And the cost of that is that we don't listen well when we have a whole backlog, or a whole kind of background context of thoughts, reactions, judgments that are going on, and we don't know we have them. We're kind of hearing through the filter of that background. And it's not wrong to have a background, but all those thoughts and ideas and opinions you might have, desires and aversions, what we want to do in this practice is to know them and take them into account.

And then if you really know them well and take them into account, you might decide a few of them, just a few maybe, aren't needed. And you can put them aside. You know, let me be careful here. Let me listen without that filter. And let me, you know, what happens if I can listen without any filters at all? Or maybe there's a more useful filter here to listen to someone.

If you're listening to someone speak and something about what they said triggered some desire you have, they say, "I need to talk to a friend. I'm having a hard time. I recently went back to St. Louis and it was hard. I want to talk to someone. There's someone to hear me as I talk." Well, St. Louis is where you met your childhood sweetheart, and that didn't go so well. So you're listening to them, but really now you know relationships are difficult, that relationship is difficult, and I don't know about this person now. It's a whole different world going on.

Maybe if you really know how much that's triggered in you, you say, "Wait a minute. My friend is suffering. What if I listen through the filter of that, the person's suffering?" How will I listen if

I really want to know my friend? Maybe I will have thoughts. Maybe I'll have questions. Maybe I'll be listening to something. Maybe I'll be listening to what's behind the words. Maybe I'm listening to understand.

And, oh, they said X, Y. Does that mean Z? No, it means X, Y, and A for them. And wow, okay, so it's more complicated than I thought. Let me listen and find out. So, you know, sometimes we can change the context through which, the lens through which, we're listening in a way that's more beneficial. And sometimes we can drop a lot of the lenses, and we can just listen clearly.

And the same skill is what we're learning to do in meditation. We're learning to do that, to be present for ourselves. And here meditation, in some ways, is easier. Because maybe if your eyes are closed, you are a little bit more internal. You might be a little bit more oriented toward what's going on in there. And that can mean one of two things.

Ideally, it means that you see much more clearly what you're doing in there. And you're more likely to see what to be involved in, what to let go of. Right now, I just want to be with my breathing. I don't need to think about, you know, high school sweethearts that didn't work out. And so you stay present.

Sometimes in conversation it's so easy to lose ourselves in it that we don't really track ourselves that well. And we don't really track that we're spinning out into our thoughts and ideas. And maybe we even stop listening sometimes. I've been with people in whom I saw in their eyes that I seem to disappear. They were so involved in the conversation, like I feel like I can go like that, my head in front of their eyes, and, you know, like, "You know that I'm here?" We get really absorbed into some kind of preoccupation. And maybe I've been that way too.

Conversations are sometimes a place where people lose a lot of their mindfulness. And sometimes we do it in meditation as well. But to listen well. So listening, I like to think, is celebrated or has an honored place in Buddhism because in ancient India, in the time of the Buddha, there was no audio Dharma. You couldn't just get your device out and listen to any talk you wanted to that had ever been given in the last ten years.

And there were no books. There was nothing recorded. There were no libraries. Knowledge, information, religious teachings, it all went through oral transmission. Listening to someone speak, listening to someone chant, listening to someone tell a story, listening to someone singing. It was all through hearing that that people learned about just about everything that is transmitted, like we do now with books and things like that.

And so when the Buddha was going to tell some people something really important in his

teaching, he would preface it and say, "Okay, listen carefully. Listen carefully now." Because that was the vehicle, with the implication that there are ways of listening carefully and ways of listening casually or not carefully. Be really present here. Now this is important.

And it was particularly important back then because if someone had something really significant to say, really important to say, you couldn't go look it up later. "Can you give me the reference?" and then go to the library. The only library that existed was in your own memory. So you had to listen well enough not only to understand, but to let it sink in or fill you, or to be really present well.

Forty years ago, when I was a student at San Francisco Zen Center, there was a venerable elder Buddhist teacher in the West who came to teach, to give a talk there. And he came along with a senior student. So he gave a nice talk to the Zen students. I don't remember what he said exactly. But then he turned to his student, who had been listening, and asked his student to give a summary of what he had just said.

And the custom of that teacher was that his students had to listen so carefully to what he said that at the end they'd have to be able to summarize it for everyone else. Wow, okay, now you really have to listen, really take it in and listen. So you had to listen, you had to understand, and you had to memorize, which means that you have to be actively engaged in a certain kind of way. And what you learn in being more active in listening that way is also sometimes what's needed to be mindful in meditation.

And the art of meditation is how can you be deeply relaxed, at ease, but also really awake, really kind of energized in a certain way to really be present, without actively thinking you have to memorize anything, but so you can take it in deeply so that you would know later, "Oh, this is what happened." And this is the way I was trained in mindfulness when I was first introduced to this practice in Burma. We were all told to have a little notebook. We would write field notes about what happened in our meditation on retreat. And it was really field notes.

It was just really like, "My breathing was shallow. I noticed it. When I noticed it, it relaxed a little bit. It was still kind of shallow. I continued meditating. And then later I noticed that it had gotten really deep and quiet." Something, you know. It was never any commentary, no judgments, no story, no explanation, no why, just field notes.

And so when we meditated, we had to be alert enough to recognize what was happening so that we would remember it to write it down later. And I found that it was really helpful for me. It kind of created a kind of alertness, aliveness. I kind of delighted in this aliveness, to go, "Oh,

okay, what's happening here? Let me take it in. Let me feel it and be with it.” And it protected me from a wandering mind that took me away, because then I wouldn't have anything to say except, “My mind wandered for 45 minutes.” And that wasn't so good to tell the teacher.

And so just be present. And so it turns out that the word *sati*, the Pāli word for mindfulness, has a kind of secondary meaning, or is derived etymologically from a word that means memory, to remember. And I think it's such an important idea, remember, that I hope I get away with playing with the English language and say that to remember is to re-member, bring all the members back together. We're trying to be so present here now that all of who we are gets to come back together and be part of the picture, be connected to our body, our emotions, our thoughts, and how we are with other people.

Really, we recognize, how am I with them? What's operating when I'm listening to someone else? Am I mostly afraid? Am I mostly concerned with my opinions? One of the ways that I have been training people at IMC, and in some of the programs we have here, some of you have been in them, is how to be good listeners in conversation. Sometimes we do that here on Sunday even. But in some of these year-long programs I teach, we have people kind of form some dyads, small groups, and I often introduce them to people by saying, “This is not a talking exercise. You're going to be given a prompt to talk about. It's a listening exercise.”

And when it's your turn to talk, you're just giving other people a chance to listen. But it's really a listening practice for all of you, with the idea that if it's a talking exercise, people are more likely to think about what they're going to say when it's their turn, and then they're not listening. And then I often tell people, when it's your turn to speak, only say one point. Say it well, but not with too long of a story. Because the idea is you want to offer one point so people have something to listen to.

But then there's lots of time to hear the one point the other people say, because if you hear what they say, when it comes back to you, you might say something that you never dreamt of before. If you're the first person and you have a ten-minute monologue in a ten-minute exercise, you'll never hear what they have to say. And you're probably telling people what you already know. But if you are brief, let other people be brief, and it comes back to you, you might have been influenced by what they said. It triggered something, a memory, an idea, and you find yourself now sharing something that's brand new.

So the idea is training people how to converse in a way so that the conversation becomes dynamic. The conversation becomes something new that starts becoming curated, rather than just repeating the old stories because it's so important that people know your story. That's important sometimes. But there's a whole other thing that many people, I think, it

would be really useful to learn. This art of staying in a dynamic conversation, which requires being a good listener, knowing how to listen well, knowing how not to prepare and be caught in the reactions, and knowing how to speak from some deeper place inside when it's your turn to speak.

And to listen well, I think you're more likely then to have something that's quiet inside so that you have access to some deeper source inside when it's your turn to speak, some newer understanding, as opposed to staying on the surface level of your life, the stories, the ideas, the opinions that people are so quick to want to tell. And so in the time of the Buddha, listening was so important. That was the medium for it all. And probably they didn't have to teach people how important it is to listen well, because that's what there was.

And so the disciples of the Buddha, the people who were close disciples, are referred to in the ancient language as the listeners. *Sāvaka* means those who listened. And so that's how they're remembered. It's those people who sat with the Buddha and really listened. And they listened so deeply that they became the next generation of teachers.

So how do you listen that deeply? How do you really be present? And some of this also relates to how you listen to a Dharma talk. There are many ways of listening to a Dharma talk. There are many ways of listening to a conversation. And it varies by context and varies by what's needed.

And in terms of a Dharma talk, people go through phases in what they need to hear and how they need to listen. But at some point in practice, especially since we meditate before a Dharma talk, sometimes listening to a Dharma talk becomes an extension of the meditation. Rather than listening for information, you're listening for something deeper. You're listening for what can wash through you. Ideas, the tone of voice, the pacing, the feeling in the room, more than the ideas.

And I've had situations where I listened to Dharma talks where I felt radically changed by the Dharma talk. I entered into a kind of deep state of concentration, listened to it, very calm. And when I left, I realized I couldn't remember anything from the talk. I had listened well. In that context, it taught me something. It connected me to something deeper than the ideas of the talk.

And other times, it's the ideas that really spoke to me. And something went off, and something beautifully woke up in my mind, ideas, associations, and I became a different person. Wow, I'd never thought of that before. And then I would go home and be thinking about it, and working at it, and mulling it over, and digesting it. And that was the important thing.

But to hear that just now gave two different ways you might listen to a Dharma talk. It's possible for you to reflect on this. Oh, there's a choice in listening to a Dharma talk. It's not just sitting here to be entertained. It's not just sitting here to be a passive recipient of something and sit back and judge what's happening and measure it against, you know, like I could be watching Netflix or something. But how is it that you're taking it in? How are you listening? How are you present in a way that would be meaningful for you, important for you? What would be useful for you in how you listen to a talk?

And so, listening. Listening well. And one of the ways to listen well sometimes is to ask questions. Sometimes you can ask the person you're with questions to learn more. Sometimes it's the art of kind of broad or open questions that can be interpreted in many ways because you want to give the person lots of room to share what's important for them.

I mean, it could be something like, "Oh, tell me more. Is there anything more you want to say about that?" That's a very broad question. And so it gives them permission to find themselves. What's important? Or rather than you asking for the most precise detail that's important for you, "Oh, that seems really important to you. How is that important?" Or, "Wow, something really profound happened for you, or significant. What are the values that went into that decision?"

So just kind of to ask more. And sometimes you're going to ask deepening questions. Like if you ask, "What are the values?" or "How is that meaningful for you that you went to the wedding?" that's a little bit different than, you know, "What clothes did the couple wear?" That's nice, but what was meaningful for you about being there? You get a whole different answer.

So to ask, you know, what are you listening for? You're listening for the humanity of the person and the fullness, the heart of the person. What are the emotions that are underneath the words? Can you listen? And what's behind there? What's their background? What's going on? When is that intrusive? When is that kind of going into someone's private life? And when is it welcomed?

And how do you listen and ask questions about that? You know, "How are you feeling about that today?" That's very broad. They can probably not feel like you're probing. And they might say, "Okay." Then you say, "Okay." That's all they want to say. Or they might say, "Wow, thank you for asking. I didn't realize that I was still anxious. That caring, I didn't realize. Thank you. Now I understand myself better."

So to listen well, to listen with clarity, to think of listening as an extension of meditation, or

think of listening well, learning the art of listening, as something to learn, as an art to learn. I suspect a lot of people in our culture have never even thought that listening is a skill that we can get better at. And so now that you've heard this, for some of you, how can you imagine learning that skill, developing it? There are books on listening. There are articles about listening. How would you become a better listener?

And how is it that listening well directly benefits you as a meditator? Is there something you can learn in listening, a way that you can be in listening, that really supports the strengthening of your capacity to be really aware when you meditate? Listening cultivates mindfulness. Listening cultivates compassion. Listening can cultivate empathy and compassion, care. And all those also can be cultivated in meditation.

We're cultivating mindfulness, we're cultivating concentration, we're cultivating compassion and care as we're present for ourselves. What you learn in really listening well to others, can that translate to how you meditate better? And as you learn how to meditate better, what is it you can learn from that for how to be a better listener? So those are my thoughts for today. And partly because we have a tea, and partly after all this I should give you a chance to try.

So we'll take about, you know, maybe five, six minutes for those of you who would like to just turn to one or two people next to you and just say hello and introduce yourself. It is tea, so it's nice for people to say hello and for people who are new to be welcomed. And if you don't want to do this, you can certainly, when I finish speaking, you're welcome to go. You can come back for the tea if you want, walk around the block.

And some people choose not to be part of these discussions, but they stay in the room meditating or sit quietly with their eyes closed. And that's actually quite beautiful too. I think of it as supportive of everyone else. And it's sometimes quite lovely, the way of being present to hear all the happy sounds of talking around and not participating. So whatever you're comfortable with.

But the suggestion is that you share maybe one point, one example of a time in your life that you felt well listened to, and say a little bit of what that was like, and have a little conversation back and forth about that. And then another person can have a turn to talk. And remember, be brief and see how much you can go around and around and see what that does for each other. Is that okay?

And as you form little groups, like one or two people, look around and make sure no one's left alone. Because sometimes people coincidentally just look in the opposite direction and one person's left there sitting, like, "What do I do now?" So let's be inclusive. And I'll ring a bell

when it's time to stop, and we'll come back and talk a little bit more as a group. So please. Thank you. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

So, that felt like a lot of energy. So what would happen if we take a minute to sit quietly and for you to check in with yourself? And I'll ask you a question at the end of the minute. So if there's a question during this little quiet time right now for you to reflect on, in what ways were you a good listener in that conversation? And in what ways could you have been a better listener?

Okay, thank you. So anything any of you would like to say at this point, as we have just a few minutes left? A short comment, anything about listening or the talk or these questions, this meeting or discussion you had?

Thank you. Thanks, Gil, for the talk about listening. It was really helpful. I'm wondering, though, what do you do with all your feelings, thoughts, and everything you want to say? Especially if you're catching up with a friend or something's on your mind that's bothering you, what would you recommend to... I mean, this is stuff that comes up for me a lot when I try to meditate too. It's just all these thoughts or discomfort.

Yeah. So there's a lot one could possibly say, because the question you're asking is a really good one, and it's like the tip of the iceberg for how to be a human being. So there's a lot I could say, but I'll say something now. One thing is, with certain friendships, you can say what's happening for you. You know, "I have all this stuff inside that I feel like I want to share. I know we don't have much time, and I'm not expecting to, but I just want to let you know this is what's inside of me right now."

Just so they know too, it's shared. "Oh, okay, that's the situation, and okay, my friend is this way, I know her better now, and this is good." So just share what's happening, and who knows what will happen. Once you share what's going on underneath you with your friend, that allows something new to unfold that neither one of you could have ever imagined. So you might try sharing it. The person says, "Oh, I realize I can cancel my next meeting. And I want to hear. So let's go for a walk and really listen." Who knows what will happen?

The other is, that's the first thing. The second thing is, try to listen, like in meditation, try to listen or feel what's behind all of it. If you're able to go deep, deep inside, is there a common denominator, is there a common source for all these different things you want to say and be involved in and do? And it might be that they all trace back to kind of like one primary feeling or motivation or impulse. And what is that? Can you really discover what that is? And if you do, does that change what the conversation can be about, or change what's important for

you?

Thank you. The question that's on my mind is about discernment. So when you're listening to someone, what type of a filter is useful to have, good discernment?

Well, that's the question. I would like to propose that the best answer I could give is, keep asking yourself that question. And there are two reasons for replying that way. In some ways it's unsatisfying that I should answer it that way, but I want to explain why it's wise. One is that there is no one answer to that question. But I think what's a really wise life is a life that keeps asking that question.

So in each situation, you're oriented toward discovering what it means here and now. So I love that you have it. But keep asking it. And then the question is, you know, how are you discerning? It depends on if you understand the situation well. Is it the situation that's important, or is it you? And if you know the difference between those two, it might help you understand the answer to your question.

Thank you. Right next to you.

Thank you. Thank you, Gil, for the talk. The question I had was, I heard you say that if you're having like a long monologue of yourself talking, you're not really hearing the other person talking. And I'm wondering about the opposite of that. What if the other person has a really long monologue and they're holding you hostage? Any tips for how to handle that?

Yes. So again, it depends a lot on who the person is. If it's a really good trusted friend, you might point that out. You know, "I've been listening now, thank you. It sounds like this is really important for you. And I want to check in with you right now, make sure that we're on track because I'm beginning to zone out. It's been 20 minutes now, and we're close and important, and can we take this into account, and how should we go forward now?" So if it's really good, some people you can't do that with.

You know, they would get angry, they would be upset or something. So you have to be discerning. Sometimes you have to be clever and insert something that changes the direction of the conversation. You know, and sometimes it's as big as, "Excuse me, excuse me, I hear you, but I really need to go to the bathroom." And you don't have to tell them what you're going to do in the bathroom. You're just catching your breath and making a pause in the conversation.

So there are all kinds of strategies of what to do. But one of the really good things to do always is, when someone is talking a lot, try to listen carefully to why they might be doing this. What is going on more deeply for that person? Because everyone has depth. Everyone

has a background that's probably been difficult. Everyone's been shaped by the life they've lived. So try to listen more deeply. Why is this person going on and on? What's the need this person has?

Recently I had that situation in a social situation with someone, and I just stayed and listened and listened and participated, asked questions and commented. I was kind of surprised at how long this person was going to go on and on and change the subject, and this thing and this thing. It's all about the person's life. And I kind of thought, what's going on here? I said, "Oh, this person actually, I don't think, spends a lot of time with friends. So it doesn't really have a chance to actually share what's going on, their excitement about their life." So, oh, and then I relaxed more. Okay, I'll just go along with this.

Thank you so much. And I also loved the suggestion about seeing things through the lens that that person is suffering. That's really helpful.

Yeah. And then we can maybe be more patient or understand. And, you know, very occasionally, you have to be wise about this, you listen to something and you're able to say, "Oh, it seems like you're having a hard time." And that opens the door. Just comment, "Oh, yes, it's true." And then they don't need to tell you the story so much anymore. Now you're into what's more going on.

Anyway, so it's, you know, at least in Buddhism, the ideal is we want to care for everyone. Everyone's important. So we should stop because we do have the tea and some people have things to go to. But I'll stay here if you want to come and talk to me. But there is tea, so please, everyone's welcome to stay and say hello. And I don't know how long before they set it up, but it'll be soon. And please stay and enjoy the company. Thank you.