Lean in Softly: Listening as Daily Practice

Dharma talk by Diana Clark

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Introduction

Good evening. Welcome.

I just returned from teaching a retreat, and it's not unusual that at the end of the retreat, or the second to last day, people are asking, "Well, this was great, but how do I take this into my daily life? This was fantastic. How can I have more of this at home? How can I practice like I did here at home?"

This is a perfectly legitimate question. Those of you who have been on retreat know that the retreat setting really offers quiet, settledness, and simplicity. Life is really simple when you're on retreat; there's just a schedule and very few decisions need to be made. And there's something about the community that kind of carries us along, that really supports us in unexpected ways. Of course, we want to take this with us.

More and more, IRC in particular, we're offering hybrid retreats—retreats that are in person as well as being online, maybe in the same way that this right now is being streamed live on YouTube. Retreats are on Zoom, but they're streamed live. But then, you know, you're still at home with all the responsibilities that you have at home.

So some of the questions that come up are not only, "How can I replicate the retreat experience?" or "How can I just meditate at home?" A lot of people just want to have a regular meditation practice. They say, "I saw what it feels like and the experiences when I do that, but how can I do this at home? It's not so easy."

I'd like to offer this evening a practice, a way that we can take our practice off the cushion into our life. Of course, I can also give you tips on how to have a regular meditation practice on the cushion, but I'm going to talk about just one thing in particular to do off the cushion that sometimes we underestimate—how powerful and supportive it can be. We tend to think it's either with my eyes closed sitting in a meditation posture or it doesn't have value. It has to look just like that.

But imagine this: you are at a family gathering, and somebody who is important to you, that you love, but they tend to say the same stories over and over and over again. And this person comes up to you, and you're able to be there and just meet them with care and respect, and connect with them and hear that story again. In a way, you can feel that there's something in them that

seems to relax or connect, or maybe they're a little bit more at ease because you are able to meet them when they showed up.

Lean in Softly: Listening as Daily Practice (link)

This practice of listening is such a tremendous, powerful practice that supports our mindfulness practice off the cushion. It's a way that we can bring retreat practice or anything into our daily life. Listening.

I would say that listening is one of the unsung gems of the Buddhist path. It doesn't fall into any neat and tidy member of the Eightfold Path. Even under Right Speech, we don't hear much about listening. But there's a way that we could say that this whole practice, mindfulness, is about listening. And there are so many opportunities in our life to listen: to listen to others, to listen to ourselves, maybe even to listen to the consequences of our actions. This is a kind of sensitivity to what happens from activities that we are doing or things that we say.

I'd like to start with this line from Mark Nepo. He's a philosopher and a poet, and he has this one line that I think is really great, that in some ways captures this. In this talk, I'll unpack this a little bit. Mark Nepo says, "To listen is to lean in softly with a willingness to be changed by what we hear."

To listen is to lean in softly with a willingness to be changed by what we hear.

It seems that so many of us come to a Buddhist practice because we have difficulties, we have dukkha[1], we have suffering. There's a way in which we're seeking some ease from our suffering, some freedom from some of these difficulties, or some clarity, understanding, relaxation, peace, and ease.

It's not uncommon that as we work with Buddhist teachings or come to a meditation center or go on a meditation retreat, that we find ourselves in spiritual relationships. Some of you might be familiar with this word, *kalyanamitta*[2]—good spiritual friends, people that support our practice. Part of the power of *kalyanamitta*, these spiritual relationships which aren't necessarily intimate relationships (though some of them are), is that just being together in this room makes it so much easier to sit and listen to a talk, right? In some ways, this is a spiritual relationship. We're not even speaking to one another; I'm doing all the talking, at least right now. There'll be Q&A later.

With these spiritual relationships, maybe we recognize in ourselves a wish to understand, but also maybe a wish to be understood, a wish to be heard or seen in some kind of way. Either that's directly with a conversation with somebody, or maybe by hearing something that you can relate to in a talk or in some of the conversations that happen in what we call the social hall before or after the talk. If we do feel like we're understood or understanding, it helps create the

conditions in which we can maybe start to understand the nature of our suffering, the nature of our dukkha. Maybe we can see it a little bit differently when it's reflected by others or we see it in others talking about it.

If we feel like we're seen or we recognize some things in others, there's a way in which we can relax a little bit. There's something comforting about having our experiences normalized, because what gets spoken about in dharma talks so often is not what the dominant culture is. To meditate or to have some of these ideas of, "I'm having some real dukkha here," or maybe not the word dukkha, you would say some suffering, existential crisis, or "I feel so confused," or "I find myself filled with all this ill will and hatred, I don't know what to do with it," or whatever it might be. There's this way that being heard or seeing ourselves in others allows us to find part of our own avenue out of suffering. It's not that we have to listen to find the complete instructions of exactly everything to do, but it creates the conditions in which our own wisdom can be known by ourselves.

To be sure, it's tremendously helpful to share with others and have direct conversations about what's happening. But there's also this subtle sense of relief, like, "Oh yeah, other people, they get it," or "I understand," or "Yeah, this resonates." Something like that can help us find our own way, not relying entirely on what we read in books or hear in dharma talks.

So maybe I'll just distinguish this idea between listening from hearing. Listening, I would say, is an active, deliberate activity, something that we do. We're intentionally putting our attention on something, in contrast to hearing, which just passively happens. We don't choose it. I don't even know if it's possible to not hear. I think if we have ears that work and there are sounds that happen, hearing arises. It's just a receptivity that humans have. But I would say even noticing the difference between hearing and listening, that alone is a mindfulness practice. The subtle movement of, "Oh yeah, what is that?" instead of just having background noise all the time. That alone is a tremendous practice because it's a subtle shift, which sometimes is from mindlessness to mindfulness. Just being sensitive to the difference between hearing and listening.

Listening to Others

There's this way to listen to others that's impactful, and part of it is to witness others, to allow others to be seen, to feel like they've been seen and heard. On retreats, I have practice discussions. People will describe something that's happening in their practice, and they'll speak for a certain amount of time. When it feels like the right time, I'm often saying, "Tell me more about something that they said." And then they will unfold and unpack it, and maybe there's a lot behind it or a wealth of fullness there.

It is not uncommon for after I say, "Tell me more about this," (this is part of what I've learned as a dharma teacher, my sensitivities to what to pull out to point to), they'll talk, and then I can notice a big exhale. Their shoulders go down a little bit, more relaxed, a little bit more completely present there, just by being witnessed, just by somebody listening. I didn't offer any profound wisdom or anything like that, just allowed them to say what needed to be said.

Or I'm often saying in practice discussions, "I'm not sure about this, tell me how this lands." So that's often a kind of listening instead of, "Okay, I have all the answers and sit still while I tell you what to do." Does anybody like that? I don't think so.

So there's this way that listening can be a way of witnessing, and we shouldn't underestimate how powerful that is. So often today, people feel lonely and disconnected. We've created a society that really promotes this, and we have these devices that make us feel like we're connected, but we're not really. It's not satisfying in a way that we want it to be.

So, is there a way that we can pay attention to others without being distracted? For example, maybe your friend is saying something, and they pause for a little bit, maybe while they're trying to think of a word. Often, there's this impulse in that little gap to slip in something to say, or we start thinking, "Okay, as soon as they finish up, I'm going to say my point, which is A, B, and C." We disconnect a little bit and get busy with our own thoughts.

Is there a way that you can notice, "Oh yeah, I'm crafting my reply here. I'm no longer really present with my friend"? There's a way in which we're thinking that what we have to say is definitely more important, and we're just waiting for them to finish. This happens a lot. Does it need to happen? Is there a way that we can trust that when they're finished saying that, our reply or response can arise? Maybe we'll have something completely different to say once we've allowed them to complete their thought.

I have been in conversations with people, and they're talking and talking and talking. I've thought, "Oh, is this ever going to end?" because they've already gone on to the next story. But what I've noticed is when I start to feel like, "Oh, should I interrupt?" most often, the vast majority of the time, people wrap it up. "Oh, I'm sorry. I'm giving you a long story. I just wanted to let you know this thing that happened." If we give them the opportunity, they often will wrap up on their own. I'm not saying everybody; there are people who can talk non-stop for hours. I've had this experience. It's quite something.

But is there a way that we can trust others and trust ourselves that we will have a response at the end of when they've been speaking? This choosing to avoid distraction is another mindfulness practice, such a strong support for our meditation practice. To notice, "Oh yeah, the mind is drifting into wanting to come up with a response or add something to the argument or counterargument," but instead to choose to stay present. This is mindfulness practice. This is

a little bit of mental discipline. This is the exact same movement, the exact same energy that we do when we're meditating on the cushion. But here, it's also supporting a connection with somebody.

We don't know what impact it has on people to really connect with them. We don't know what impact it has for us to really feel connected with somebody, that somebody feels like we care, to express our care in this way.

I've seen this many times, and I bet you have too: remarkable things happen when we leave space. When we don't jump right in, when we give our friend time to find words and to think about something, or even to say, "Is there anything more you want to say about that?" It's not uncommon for people's wisdom to just bubble up and be spoken out. "Yeah, now that I'm saying this, I see that actually all these problems have the same issue. And I didn't really see it until I just started hearing myself tell this story to you."

Listening to Ourselves

It's the same way for ourselves, right? If we give space to ourselves instead of this feeling like, "Nope, I have to fix this right now. I have to understand it right now. I got to figure it out and solve it or massage it, manufacture, manipulate, engineer," all these things we like to do with our experiences. Remarkable things can happen with space, and that includes with our meditation practice. Can we just recognize being lost in thought, hearing a sound, feeling the bodily sensations as we sit on the cushion or the chair? The same way we can do this with somebody that we're speaking with.

I would say that this attentive listening, this witnessing, is a somatic experience. It involves the body. While others are speaking, there can be a just a checking in. How's the throat? Is there a lump in the throat? Is the chest getting tight? Is the belly feeling relaxed? Or is there a sense of tightness when we are no longer really listening and present and open, and we really want to say something or we feel uncomfortable?

Can we just be aware of what the body is doing, aware of our posture? Sometimes our posture can tell us some of our emotions. We find ourselves with our hand on our hip, tapping our foot, and then it's like, "Oh yeah, okay, we're not really being present." Or, as an aside, now that a lot of people have smartwatches, I just notice the impact it has on me. So many people now are looking at their watch when I'm talking to them because they got a little notification. And then I just feel like I don't actually want to talk to you anymore. It just takes all the energy out of the situation. So, just a heads up for those of you who have smartwatches.

What is our body doing? What's our posture? Are we fidgeting? Are we looking at our watch, or are we paying attention? Are we have our eyes open, looking at the person who's speaking? This is part of attentive listening. In the same way, in meditation practice, we are checking in

with our posture. We're noticing if we are leaning forward, or sometimes our chin goes up, especially if there's a lot of planning. Or is there a way that we're slumping?

Years and years ago, at the beginning of my meditation practice, I didn't know that sometimes I would be like this, with my chin towards my chest, kind of slumping during meditation. And somebody said to me, "You know, Diana, why don't you sit upright and take a good posture when you're sitting?" And I thought, "Wow." I just started to notice. And I saw how, metaphorically or literally, so often in my life I had been collapsing into my posture. But to be sensitive to our posture when we're listening and when we're meditating is a tremendous practice.

So, listening to others, maybe witnessing and being attentive for them. But of course, listening to ourselves, and this is part of what the posture and the body can be about. What's maybe underneath our listening? What kind of attitudes are we bringing, or what intentions are we bringing?

It can be helpful to have some sensitivity to some of our conditioning. So often we want to help because we care, or because we feel a little bit uncomfortable that they are uncomfortable, and so we want their discomfort to end. So we try to help. Or there's also a way in which we want to be right. We want to be the one that has the answer. We want to be the one that gives them what they want. Sometimes people are sharing difficulties and problems with us, and we want to be the one that fixes everything even before we've fully heard or understood. Or maybe there's this way we just want to get our way. We don't think that explicitly, but there's a way we just want to be right and get our way.

It can be really helpful just to have this gentle inquiry: is there any flavor of this seeping into the way in which we're meeting others and the way in which we're listening? Because if we feel some of these things—we want to be right, we want to be viewed favorably, we want to get our own way—our intentions are rarely 100% pure. So we don't have to beat ourselves up. We can just recognize, "Oh yeah, okay, I like to be right. Everybody likes to be right." We have our preferences for how we are.

But if we are aware of our intentions, we can connect maybe with some deeper intentions, like, "Yeah, I want to be right, and I want to not cause harm." And to just remember, "Oh yeah, okay, I want things to be done my way, and I don't want to cause harm," or "I want to be part of the solution." And this recognition that in order to be part of the solution, it's helpful for us to really understand what the difficulty is, the problem that needs a solution. Or maybe some of our deeper intention is we want to connect with others or work with others to solve a problem or find a way forward, or we want to enhance our relationships or feel connection with people. So

even though our intentions might be a mixture, we can just remind ourselves of some of our deeper intentions as a way to support us for listening and being present for others.

There is also a teaching, of course, about this idea of generosity. It's an integral part of a Buddhist practice. It's helpful to consider listening as generosity. It's a way in which we are being generous with our time, generous with our attention. This is a support for our practice. And maybe just as we give generously in other arenas without expectations for particular outcomes, is there a way that we can listen attentively without particular outcomes, just as a way to honor and respect the person that is in front of us or on the other end of the phone, as the case may be?

Listening to Consequences

Now I'll just say briefly, this idea of listening to the consequences of our actions. I remember this so well. This was years ago. A few of us met for coffee, and a friend was sharing about some difficulty that she was having, and she asked for some advice. I listened for a little bit to understand what the difficulty was, and then I had an idea and I just jumped right in. "Okay, you know what you really should do is this, and then you should do that, and then you should do this." And then I just watched my friend kind of go, "Okay, thanks. Yeah, I think I better go now."

And then just the heartbreak I felt, like, "Oh yeah, just this jumping in with advice," even though they had asked for advice, but just thinking like I had it all figured out. Implicit was like, "I know and you don't know." Nobody likes that.

So we are responsible for our actions and the consequences of our actions. And maybe listening is also listening to the consequences of what we say and what we do. My friend at the time—this was many years ago—I didn't really know how to find a way back. I didn't even quite understand at the time what happened. And she left, and me and the other person were like, "Oh, what happened there?" I didn't immediately reach out to her, but just this recognition that it's our responsibility when we recognize that maybe we've erred or harmed or behaved in a way that wasn't so helpful. Not to blame, like, "Oh, she wasn't ready to hear advice," but just for us to recognize when our actions have maybe caused harm, even if it's slight harm, and for us to take the actions that seem appropriate to us. We might call this "after the fact listening" or something like that.

Poem: Willing

I'd like to close with this poem. You will not be surprised by the poet, Rosemary Wahtola Trommer[3], and it's called "Willing."

Let me listen. Let me not know what to say. Let me receive the world as it slurs and shrieks, hums and whispers, speaks and bleets. Let me lean ever closer in. There are walls I have built in

my ears. There is so much I would rather not hear. Let me listen. Let me receive with wonder. Let all be worthy of note. Let me be witness, eavesdropper, spy. Let me never pretend to be deaf. Let the world slip into me and change me as light changes a room. Let me be silent. Let me listen. And in listening, let me be new.

And she includes an epigraph, a little quote at the top of this poem. It's by Mark Nepo, this poet and philosopher I quoted at the beginning: "To listen is to lean in softly with a willingness to be changed by what we hear."

So listening as this practice that we can do all day, every day, many times a day, is such a support for practice. There's a way in which we can think practice has to be on the cushion or on retreat or at a meditation center. And to be sure, that's really powerful and helpful practice. But listening to others, to ourselves, after the fact listening—it's a tremendous support for our life, for our community, and for our practice.

Thank you.

Q&A

Questioner 1: Hi, Diana. Nice to see you. This topic to me really ties in or connects with Right Speech because the way you were describing interactions with retreat participants or friends who were sharing meaningful conversation, listening tends to be maybe a little bit easier for me in those situations. But when I think about the Eightfold Path and Right Speech, I am really bombarded these days with a lot of harsh speech, a lot of false speech, a lot of idle chatter, like all of the things that we're told to sort of guard against. And so when we are the recipients of that kind of harsh speech, for example, what does one do in terms of how you receive that or what is a wise way in which to listen and respond in those situations?

Diana Clark: When we're receiving harsh speech or idle chatter, when somebody is being unwise in their speech towards us.

Questioner 1: Right. I live right now in Washington D.C., and maybe I just live in a place that tends to be very political, but everybody is so angry. And it's so hard to just be bombarded with that anger. It really impacts me somatically. And I don't want to just perpetuate that or give that any more life than what it needs. So, what does listening look like in those situations?

Diana Clark: Yeah, I change the topic. "Yeah, I thought it was going to rain today." And it's quite something, it's quite effective, too. I pay attention, but I don't create the conditions in which they can go on and on. I have the great good fortune that many of my friends are Buddhist practitioners and they know about Right Speech and this kind of stuff. There have been times when I have said, "I really need to use the restroom," and just extricated myself from the situation, just not wanting to participate in that. It's interesting how people can even bond over

that, where if you don't want to engage in it, there's an element of being connected through being angry at something that we might have in common. It's almost like a little intoxicating. It's like an invitation to connect, but it's an invitation to connect in a way that's maybe not skillful.

Questioner 1: Yes. We called this like bonding through mutual outrage.

Diana Clark: Exactly. And I've even talked about before, there's this now, especially I would say probably in Washington, I'm imagining, there's this outrage industrial complex. The media, politics, it's just all about this. And then people are outraged if you're not outraged.

Questioner 1: Yes. Exactly. And then they don't know what to do with you.

Diana Clark: Yeah.

Questioner 2: You know, sometimes I notice in some friendships, in my social circle, I do a lot of listening, but the other person really is not interested in listening. And so you kind of face this choice, like, do I remain in relationship with this person, especially if you have a lot of common memories and relationships in common? It's hard to be skillful in those situations because even if you sort of break into the conversation and share, there's just not a whole lot of receptivity. I kind of struggle with that sometimes.

Diana Clark: No, this is a real thing. I want to acknowledge this. I know individuals like this as well, and sometimes I find myself just saying, "I'd like to interrupt here." And then I'll reflect back, "It seems like a common theme is X, Y, or Z." But I know that I won't get a lot of words in, and then boom, off they go. But I sometimes just use these words, "I'm going to interrupt here." And that seems to work as well as anything can, I guess. And then also, honestly, I do have a little heartbreak for these individuals that can talk non-stop for a really long time. Their need to be seen, or they're not seeing social cues or whatever. I'm just imagining that their lives have a lot of difficulties in them. Yeah, it's a little bit of heartbreak.

Questioner 3: I think I just need to speak about something I'm thinking about as you read the poems especially, and the meat of most of the topics you covered, like not knowing when you start a conversation if you can let go of some of the judgments, because that's another part of mindfulness. And how if you just purely listen as much as you can, there's a better understanding and there's less of "me" involved. It's just hearing. And I think both of those poems spoke to just not knowing. You can be present with what that other person feels and says. I know I have to do that all the time with my kids, with anyone really. And it offers a better place of being, rather than in your head. You're more in your heart and you're more connected. And you talked a little bit about that, maybe having faith in whatever the outcome of the conversation is going to be as a whole, and not thinking about what I want to help them with or respond with while they're speaking.

Diana Clark: Great. I love it. Thank you. I had these things in my notes but ran out of time, so I love that it showed up here in the Q&A. It's perfect. Thank you.

Questioner 4: I have a challenge, and I think it's something that, as far as how my mind works, is that I have to do quite a lot of work to remember what the conversation is about or remember if I wanted to say something in a conversation. It's interesting, especially in retreats, where after the retreat I'm so good at letting stuff go, and it's so difficult to follow conversations for me. And so I feel like that's a really interesting balance for me around accepting not trying to, because I get super caught up in trying to remember this thing I was going to say. There's a lot of efforting that then I'm not actually connecting and listening. And so I have to sort of balance this want to participate, where I'm keeping track of maybe thoughts that I have or questions that I have that I find interesting, but not be so distracted or so listening that I just forget all those things. It's an interesting balance that I'm still exploring.

Diana Clark: Yeah, I'll say for me, I notice if I'm efforting to try to remember, there's a little tightening that's happening, like, "Okay, I got to remember this." And there's a way in which I'm not so present anymore. I've discovered the more relaxed I am, the more the memory comes of what the key points are, if I'm just being receptive. But if I'm trying to remember, sure, I'll remember something, but I will have missed the nuance of something. And this I learned by accident, or maybe just by being relaxed and realizing, "Wow, I actually can remember things better when I'm relaxed." So I just offer this. And then I will also offer, if you don't remember anything, you can always say, "Wow, that was great. You know, it just slipped my mind though. I had a question and now I don't remember it." That's perfectly legitimate. Or, "Wow, I found that was interesting," or "I'm a little bit troubled, but now I can't remember." These are perfectly legitimate responses.

Questioner 4: Yeah, I agree. I love writing little bits down, too, because then I can just let them go and stay connected, which is nice. Oh, thank you.

Diana Clark: Yeah, you're welcome. Okay, so thank you. I wanted to close just by saying, may we lean in softly—lean in softly to others, to ourselves—and may we be willing to be changed by what we hear. A willingness. Maybe we won't be changed, maybe we'll realize, "Oh no, that's not it," but just having this willingness. Thank you, and I'm wishing you safe travels home.

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1. **Dukkha:** A Pali word often translated as "suffering," "stress," or "unsatisfactoriness." It refers to the fundamental unsatisfactoriness and painfulness of mundane life. ↩
2. **Kalyanamitta:** A Pali term that translates to "spiritual friend." In Buddhism, it refers to a companion who supports one's practice on the path to enlightenment. ↩

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