

## Preparation for Listening

Kay Lindahl, founder of the Listening Center in Long Beach, California, says: “The cultural and religious diversity of our communities calls for a way of listening that transcends words and belief systems. Learning to truly listen to one another is the beginning of new understanding and compassion, which deepens and broadens our sense of community.”

Many of us would probably agree that in the world of politics little listening is currently going on, yet what can we say about the amount of listening that is present in our personal lives? When was the last time you felt you really heard what was being said to you, and the speaker knew you heard and appreciated it? Even when we think we are listening to others, it’s not uncommon to be distracted or preoccupied with details of our own lives to the extent that we forget what we’ve heard soon after any conversation. When we think we are focusing on what someone else is saying, sometimes we are preparing ourselves to speak. Even when we think we are relating to another by sharing a similar experience, doing so too quickly or vigorously can change the focus in such a way that the original speaker can feel shut down.

In *Heart to Heart*, Christine Robinson says, “It’s hard work to listen with an open heart rather than an analyzing mind. It requires putting aside judgment, categorization, and evaluation and instead just hearing the story that is told and the feelings behind it. Some people say they can feel themselves shift from their minds to hearts when they are listening. Some describe deep listening as a sacred experience.”

In a talk on “Living Together in Harmony,” Buddhist teacher Thich Nhat Hanh discusses deep listening. “We have to practice before we can listen deeply. Sometimes we can also translate ‘deep listening’ as compassionate listening, that is, to listen with compassion, or to listen with love. We hear with one aim only; we don’t listen in order to criticize, to blame, to correct the person who is speaking or to condemn the person.... We have to sit still, we have to sit with inner freedom, and we have to be one hundred percent present, body and mind, listening so the other can relieve his or her suffering.”

In covenant groups we practice this sort of deep listening. When listening at this deeper, “heart” level, the appropriate response may simply be silence, giving the speaker a safe space to express themselves in a way that provides them with an opportunity to learn about themselves.

What does the speaker need from the listener? Only to be seen and heard, according to Parker J. Palmer: “When you speak to me about your deepest questions, you do not want to be fixed or saved: you want to be seen and heard, to have your truth acknowledged and honored.”

True listening, like the art of conversation, is a skill we develop. We have to come out of our own insecurities and self-absorption, which takes confidence and relaxation. We have to care about another person, which takes maturity. Some stories and dialogues are painful or disturbing, so listening also takes bravery. They can also be boring, tedious, and irritating, so patience and compassion are required. Thus, the noble qualities of a good listener can overcome many of the faults of a poor conversationalist. And even though listening is a receptive act, it is a simultaneously dynamic endeavor that allows everyone to grow. *Sakyong Mipham*

## Questions to Ponder

Read the questions and ponder a few of them over several days to reflect on the role that listening has played in your life. At the Gathering, each person will have the opportunity to share reflections on their personal experience of listening. When you speak, other people will listen to you and not interrupt or question you.

1. Consider a situation in which you practiced deep listening or listening from the heart. How did that feel for you? Do think your listening had an effect on the speaker?
2. Think about one or more experiences when you were deeply listened to, when you felt you were really heard. What were your responses?
3. When you're reflecting on being listened to, it's natural for feelings to come up about *not* being listened to as well. Consider one or two of those times. How did you feel? *Note that you may not want to talk about painful memories. You don't have to consider all the questions, and you certainly don't have to talk to others about difficult things.*
4. What gets in the way and distracts you when you are trying to listen deeply?
5. Continue to reflect on experiences where you were deeply listened to. What insights about yourself have you gained when others have listened to you?

## Words of the Day

Before coming to the Gathering, consider a time when you felt truly listened to. Think of a few words, phrases, or metaphors that describe how you felt during that experience. Then think of a word or phrase to complete this sentence: When I was truly listened to, I felt . . . .

For example, your sentence might be “When I was truly listened to, I felt understood” or “When I was truly listened to, I felt like I really mattered.” Come to the Gathering with one or two words or phrases in mind to complete the sentence. We'll use them at the Gathering.