

Principles of Meditative Listening

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For Joyce

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Introduction

I call it *outer listening* when I listen to you with empathy and acceptance; and when the effect of my listening is that you listen to yourself with empathy and acceptance.

I am able to listen to you partly because I spend time in *inner listening* and have learned to approach my own feelings with a degree of empathy and acceptance.

Yet I am inclined to believe that nobody learns inner listening without first receiving outer listening. There is a process of transmission. Listening flows across the centuries in an unbroken line. When somebody listened to me I learned to listen to myself. Having learned to listen to myself I can now listen to you.

For almost thirty years I have been slowly feeling my way towards a form of listening which is meant to do justice to the striking insights of Gene Gendlin without corrupting what is radical and indispensable in the work of Carl Rogers and Virginia Axline.

Carl and Virginia pioneered a form of listening in which the listener always lets the speaker take the lead. Gene, as he practised that form of listening, asked a question that we may put like this: *"If the listener is led by the speaker, what is the speaker led by?"*

When I speak of *meditative listening*, I have in mind a listening that is faithful to Carl's intention, whilst informed through and through by Gene's question. I have struggled to come up with a simple, unified scheme. This writing is the closest I can come to one at present.

Gene writes:

"It is unbelievable that after all these years we have totally failed to communicate client-centred listening in such a way that the other practitioners could have it. How can they go so long without it? How can they be so stupid? But then, I realize, that is largely our fault..."

"We can tell them that some of us do nothing else; that is how powerful this thing is. Some of us prefer to do nothing but that... And if the others try it even a few times, then they will discover what we know."

Gene Gendlin – "The Small Steps of the Therapy Process..."

I am happy to count myself among those who, as Gene says, *"do nothing but that"*: among those who have a principled objection to telling other people what to do inside themselves.

1 Inner listening

1.1 Meditative questions

I want to begin by saying something from the point of view of the speaker. As the speaker, I may come to the threshold of the unknown when you listen to me. And I may also find that place when I am alone. It will be easier to convey how it feels to stand in the presence of the unknown if I begin by talking about how it is when I am on my own.

1.1.1 The living feeling

It all starts at the moment when I ask, “*How am I feeling?*”

Day after day, I find a little time to be alone. I sit down quietly and listen to my feelings. I ask a simple question, “*How am I feeling?*” I don’t answer. I watch and wait. As I become aware of my feelings, a world of subtle sensations seems to open up in my body.

Every day when I go for my walk along the riverbank, I pause for a little while, just watching the water, wondering where a fish will rise. This is like that. Just as I hang around until I have some sense of the state of the river, I wait until I am in tune with the ebbs and flows of feeling in my body.

1.1.2 The living word

Now I ask another question, “*What is the feeling like?*”

The question seems simple enough. However, it may give rise to answers of two different kinds. I will call them the sterile answer and the living answer.

“*What is the feeling like?*” – “*I feel sad*”. Nothing has changed. My feeling is exactly the same. The act of naming has done nothing. The word *sad* is sterile.

“*What is the feeling like?*” – “*Sad?*” No, not exactly. “*Grief-stricken?*” No. “*Careworn?*” Uh-mm. Maybe? (At any rate, the feeling stirred a little.) “*Rueful?*” Well... Yes... Yes. “*Rueful*” is near enough.

The word *sad* was sterile. There was no life there. But the word *rueful* is a living word today. As soon as I found the word *rueful*, the feeling came to life. I felt at once a little bit different. *Rueful* was a living answer to the question, “*What is the feeling like?*”

1.1.3 *The living context*

Now I move on to a third question: “*What is it that makes me feel like this?*”

There may be no answer. Or many answers. Sometimes many things feed into one feeling. Very often, however, there is one main thing. The word *rueful* is a living word today: I feel *rueful*. In just the same way, there is often one living answer to the question: “*What is it that makes me feel like this?*”

“*What makes me feel rueful?*” – “*Oh my, a thousand things!*” Yes? (A wash of these things rolls up the beach and draws back into the sea.) “*What makes me rueful?*” – “*As if I didn’t know!*” The feeling wells up as the one thing becomes clear.

Certain deep failures and one above all. Long term failure in the very place where most I wanted success. A failure of attention, of energy, of courage, timeliness and responsiveness. All of that.

(“*But never a failure of love*”, says a voice. “*Remember that. Never a failure of love.*” True enough. There was never a failure of love. Somebody smiles, a little sadly.)

It is all so very familiar. Well then, is it *sterile*? It might seem tempting to say, yes. But no, it isn’t sterile. The coming of the word *rueful* was the coming of a precise knowledge. The word carried forward the feeling. So no, it isn’t sterile, but living. Had I settled for the word *sad*, which changed nothing, that would have been sterile.

As it is, however, I now have a living triad: the living feeling; the word that was a living word because it carried the feeling a little way forward; and a living, present sense of the context which gave rise to the feeling.

My three questions – “*How am I feeling?*” – “*What is the feeling like?*” – and “*What is it that makes me feel like this?*” – have brought something into focus that was fuzzy and obscure before. The water that was muddy and turbid is now limpid and transparent. Because of this coming of experience into focus, we call this form of meditation *experiential focusing*.

The feeling was not in focus until I came to it in a certain way. Now I can go about my day knowing that in an hour or two, when I come back to the first question – “*How am I feeling?*” – my feeling will have moved on somewhat and be just a little different.

When I find the living answer, I am made anew. It is even better, of course, when the search for the living answer is made in company.

1.2 *Meditative receptivity*

It is really enough when I find living answers to those first three questions. Whatever is troubling me or alive in me can then go underground. Some little step will come later which carries my life forward a short way.

Or maybe I will pause in the space made by the coming of the answers and into that space the next thing will come in a few moments. What is the next thing I want to say to you? Or, what is the next thing that the unknown wishes to reveal to me?

The first phase of inner listening is fairly tidy. I have my three questions and answers are likely to come when I ask them. The heart opens at first in a fairly predictable way. The second phase is anything but tidy, however. It is mysterious, moist and messy. For now I am at the edge of something that has nothing to do with my known self, my known take on the world.

And it seems to me that every single individual has a unique way of sitting at this edge. The ground is very private, very personal and deeply sensitive. We may as well say: "*Now you are standing by the burning bush*".

Who will speak? Who knows?

Meditative receptivity takes place in the presence of things that have always been thought of as sacred; and if, in these latter days, we no longer speak of the sacred, so much the worse for us.

So maybe it is something like prayer. That word, *prayer*, is so loaded that one might wish to avoid it, yet surely it has to be said. Until we come to "*a place where prayer has been valid*", to some secret zone of being "*where the soul's sap quivers*", we can't hope for the deeper thing to happen; we will not hear –

*"The voice of the hidden waterfall
And the children in the apple-tree
Not known, because not looked for
But heard, half-heard, in the stillness
Between two waves of the sea"*

– as Mr. Eliot expresses it. And without that hearing, without that presence of the sacred in our lives, what is life? So let's risk the loaded word, *prayer*.

There is a magic that happens when you listen intently within yourself or when you allow somebody to listen to you with empathy, acceptance and fidelity. Let's say clearly that this is the magic of prayer.

And let's not make it procedural. There is, and can be, no recipe for the sacred. There is only reverence. With surprise, when the sacred comes upon you unexpectedly. It is always unexpected, of course, since the sacred is the irruption of the unknown into your mundane life.

What follows is quite typical of my inner listening. Yours will surely be different. And that is how it has to be. This is not a model.

Gene has suggested three questions which might be floated gently at the edge of the unknown. They are rather strikingly unlike the meditative questions that belong to the first phase of inner listening. Those were definite questions, inviting clear answers. These are more like wonderings. They are soft, tentative and ambiguous. They invite something to happen that can't be foreknown.

1.2.1 *The most*

I ask: "What is the most ____ about this?"

I was feeling *rueful*, if you recall. There was a sense of failure: not a failure of love, but of attention, energy, courage, timeliness and responsiveness.

"What is the most *rueful* aspect of all this? What is it about this failure that makes me *rueful*? How come *rueful*?" I can ask in various ways.

Oh well. Where do I start? There is some feeling there, a little like shame: how could I have lived so much in the shallows? And pulling against it: how could I have been so preoccupied? *Rueful* turns out to be, not a state, but a conflict.

1.2.2 *The worst*

I ask: "What is the worst of this whole thing?"

Terrible, mind-numbing doubt. The burning fear that it will never be any different. Something like desolation, which makes courage hard and hope all but impossible.

1.2.3 *The direction*

I ask: *"Which way is life?"*

"Life? What's that?" – A withering sceptic lurches into view. I can see him in his rags, desperate for alcohol and utterly beyond hope. A foul-smelling, unlovable character. A street-sleeping ruin from the dregs of society.

Well, you're a surprise. Let's give you a little love and kindness – and see what wisdom you bring. I ask, *"Which way is life?"*

He says, "Look into my eyes!" I do so. Suddenly, I feel a rush of hot tears. I have no words for what just happened here. But something changed, like the coming of the horses in Edwin Muir's great poem:

"Our life is changed; their coming our beginning".

And I remember the Leonardo drawing of a horse in the Fitzwilliam Museum.

But let me turn back to the beggar – and suddenly I think of Muir's great sonnet, *To Franz Kafka*, with its profound forgiveness for the broken, the penitent and the mediocre. This thought brings a wave of deep feeling.

And the beggar? As I look into his eyes, something happens. There is a kind of exchange, a meeting, something given and received:

*"...for always night and day
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,
I hear it in the deep heart's core."*

With that, the journey is done. What does it mean? Who can tell?

It means the soul is alive. The voice of prayer is never silent. Above all:

*"Since even the good people can be saved,
It goes without saying that the broken people will be fine".*

On that note, I will end this exploration of meditative receptivity.

2 Outer listening

*Zigong asked, "Is there one word that can be practised for the whole of one's life?"
The Master said, "That would be empathy, perhaps".*

The Analects of Confucius ~ 15.24 (translated by Daniel Gardner)

2.1 *The natural line*

Everybody knows that it helps people when you meet them with kindness and compassion, when you listen to their thoughts and enter into their feelings, when they have a sense that you understand their lives and motivations, and when you follow (and help to clarify) their lines of reasoning concerning both matters of fact and questions of value.

Listening meets us where we are in our lives and invites us to accept ourselves just as we are.

Almost every human being, given an attentive listener, finds that a line of thoughts and feelings begins, has its own direction, and grows deeper little by little. One thought leads to another, one feeling deepens into another. Little by little there are many developments. This is *the natural line*.

All that is needed for the natural line to unfold is the presence of somebody who is willing to listen wholeheartedly.

The listener does not guide but is happy to be guided, doesn't direct but is happy to be directed, doesn't go in front but is happy to walk close behind. The encounter belongs to the speaker. The listener doesn't control the line of the conversation in any way and is always happy to follow the speaker's lead.

In every human being that ever lived, there is a strong tendency for a certain view of things to harden and rigidify, more and more so as it comes up against evidence of its falsity. This strange fact explains the power of listening. Listening reduces threat to a minimum. The speaker doesn't need to seize up. Listening makes as much space as possible for softening, acceptance, adaptation, creativity and change – for a new, more faithful contact with reality.

2.2 *The cycle of meditative listening*

Listening is very easy to understand:

*You listen carefully to what people tell you.
You try to imagine what it's like for them.
And you try to convey this.*

Though you can learn how to listen in ten minutes, after a lifetime of listening you will feel you are just a beginner.

There is a gentle rhythm of listening, feeling-in, and checking understandings. I call it *the cycle of meditative listening*:

*The speaker feels for what comes next
And finds a way to convey it.
The listener takes in what is said
And finds a way to receive it.*

Feeling and conveying, taking-in and receiving: in what sense is this cycle *meditative*?

It is a kind of meditation for the listener. The listener turns thoughtfully towards the speaker, a human being in contact with another human being, absorbed in welcoming and accepting the speaker's thoughts and feelings.

The cycle is also meditative for the speaker, who comes to feel, "*This time is mine to spend in any way I please*".

The speaker may fall into a mood of thoughtful and honest self-examination, and may come, little by little, to feel a deepening sense of self-acceptance. Sometimes the speaker will fall into a meditative silence, wondering:

*"How does this feel to me?"
"What is the feeling like?"
"What is it that makes me feel like this?"*

The speaker has come to a threshold and is in the presence of the unknown. Familiar stories are exhausted and drop away – and the passionate wisdom of the body at last has a chance to break through. It is like standing at the gates of dawn, like waiting for light to flood the morning sky.

2.3 *Three empathic intentions*

When I practise meditative listening, I have three empathic intentions. I call them *empathy, acceptance* and *fidelity*.

2.3.1 *I intend to check my understandings*

If you talk to me and I am simply present in silence, you are bound to wonder before long whether I am really following along step by step. Am I seeing the world as I always do or taking the risk of seeing things as you do?

If the silence goes on, you will very soon begin to have florid fantasies about me, filling the void with ghosts.

So it is likely to be very helpful if I say back to you each small piece of what you say. I want to check that I understand what you mean. I want to get a sense of the whole thing. I want to know how you feel at every point.

2.3.2 *I intend to offer simple acceptance*

Even though I check whether I understood what you said in the way you meant it, you may become fearful, suspecting me of hidden judgements. Perhaps I approve of this and scowl inwardly at that.

Such fears tend to break the natural line. They divert you, making it almost impossible to keep faith with the spontaneous unfolding of your thoughts and feelings. Why? Because you feel an almost irresistible pressure to censor things. It is only human to want to appear in a good light.

Acceptance matters, therefore, and has to be for real. If my acceptance is a fake – if I only pretend to feel accepting – it is useless. I'm sure to betray myself sooner or later. So I need to be as free as possible from praise or blame.

There is no method for conveying acceptance. It will be apparent in subtle ways: in the language of my body, in my tone of voice, manner and choice of words. You are likely to be extremely sensitive to my presence and will pick up countless small, involuntary signs which show whether I am listening with acceptance.

2.3.3 *I intend to be trustworthy*

Before I can listen to you, I have to be able to listen to myself. Why is this? It is partly because I can understand your feelings only on the basis of my own. I have direct and immediate access to my own feelings. Yours are hidden from me. You convey these hidden feelings to me in words, images, sounds and gestures.

I receive your feelings both by feeling with you and by feeling in response to you. My feelings enable me to make sense of yours, but I have to be able to tell which of my feelings echo yours and which feelings are my responses.

It makes sense to keep my responses to myself. I am here to listen to you. I want nothing to get in the way of that. Yet sometimes I do have to turn inwards and see how I am feeling, in order to keep things clean. For I want there to be nothing between us. I don't want any cloudiness in my feelings or intentions to emerge in subtle ways, so that it comes between you and the line of your thoughts and feelings.

Sometimes you may ask a direct question: "*How do you feel about this?*" Or, "*How do you feel about me?*" When this happens, I need to hear the question with empathy and acceptance. Here you are, feeling some doubts about me. I don't need to be thrown by your doubts. I can accept the question without abandoning my commitment to listening and following – always following.

Sometimes it may feel as if we have lost one another, as if we are out of touch. A shadow has fallen between us. The natural line is easily lost at such times.

What can I do? I may make a tentative guess at what you are feeling. I may pause to be aware of my own feelings. I hope to be gentle and accepting. And always, we are in touch with one another without words, just by being together. So we can be silent together. I need to stay awake, however, ready to respond when an opening happens along.

When I am listening, I keep my awareness the whole time on the natural line, the emerging thread of your thoughts and feelings. If it breaks, how did I break it? If the water runs shallow, how did I make the depths unsafe?

Usually you will have felt a gap, a slight jarring, a lapse or a tiny gulf of absence. Happily, most of these lapses are easily made good. The stream of thoughts and feelings runs once more.

Sometimes there are much more serious breaks. The thread is cut. The river dries up. There is a painful fracture. So it is that listening re-makes the listener.

For when I undertake to listen to you, I take the risk that listening will change me. When I am faced with such a fracture, I wonder how the break came. I want to understand how I let you down. I search for a path of restoration. And in that search, I may learn something about one of my blind spots. I may find my beliefs and values all up in the air. I may be forced to face some awkward truth about myself.

To ask why my empathy fractured is to ask a question that cuts through my evasions and exposes my infidelities. I may feel threatened or bewildered, bruised or anxious. I may be thrown off balance. I may become frightened or uncertain. Nevertheless, once having undertaken to listen, I want to be trustworthy. I want to be faithful to my undertaking.

Listening goes four ways: I listen, am listened to, and listen to myself. I hope to hold a space in which it will be easy for you to listen to yourself. This fourfold listening sets in motion a sixfold development which goes on for many years.

I become more like who I wish to be, and who I wish to be becomes more like who I am. I become more able to ask people to be the way I need, and more willing to accept them as they are. I get better at shaping the world, and happier to accept the human condition. In these six ways, the discord in my life resolves (slowly, so slowly) into harmony, peace and thankfulness.

Empathy is the foundation of the ethical life. By empathy, we shelter the rose of life from being trampled on by the pigs.

But how about the times when I am one of the pigs? There is no way to evade the call of emotional truthfulness and fidelity. Until I learn to relate to myself with self-empathy and self-acceptance, my empathy for others breaks down utterly.

And this thought brings us back to *inner listening*.

2.4 *A way of being*

This brings us at last to the ancient thought that *empathy* is the one word you can practise for the whole of your life.

Most of us are pretty much wrapped up in our own concerns. Sometimes we listen carefully to a friend or partner or to one of our children who is happy or upset. But much of the time we are self-absorbed. I wonder how it would be if you were to sweep everything else aside in favour of empathy, much as a champion tennis player wipes out all other serious interests to make time for endless practice?

You might perhaps decide that you will try to sustain the effort of empathy and acceptance in every encounter with another human being for the rest of your life. You don't want to do this? Very well. You don't have to. I'm not surprised. You don't have to make up your mind to go for a Gold Medal. Very few people choose to find out whether a particular commitment is worth the sacrifice.

But imagine for a moment that you did make a single-minded commitment to practice. You would have to put in the hours. The hours on the court shape the tennis-player. The hours at the piano shape the pianist. The hours of faithful listening shape the listener. By practising, we shape who we are. If you were to spend thousands of patient, dedicated hours listening to other people with empathy and acceptance, little by little you would be made anew. And no doubt your empathy and acceptance would illuminate the lives of many people around you.

Yet you would never give listening such a big place in your life, unless you were to feel that listening is as worthwhile as dancing or football. Is it? I can't say. That's for you to judge. I can say only how it is for me. To me, the ancient thought seems very beautiful. I love the thought that one might practise empathy alone forever. Still, something in me reels when I think it. Am I really intended to be endlessly, limitlessly available? It would seem an intolerable burden. What then? Let's try to think a little more clearly.

The life of empathy begins when somebody listens to you with understanding and gentleness, so that you come slowly (oh, so slowly!) to root your life very deeply in self-empathy and self-acceptance (and, as I have said, in the presence of the sacred). From there you spiral outwards little by little, offering empathy and acceptance to family and friends, to neighbours and colleagues, to strangers and outsiders, in an ever-widening circle of friendship and inclusiveness.

Nobody sets out with Olympic levels of commitment. Commitment grows with practice. One day you wake up and here you are, deep in the life of empathy. You walk cheerfully over the world, bringing empathy and acceptance in all countries, places, islands, nations wherever you come. The one word has filled your life with blessings and shines blessing all around you.

3 The open listening circle

Sometimes I invite a group of people to form an *open listening circle*. This is a circle of people who gather together, intending to listen to one another with understanding and acceptance.

The open listening circle is informal. Because of this it is very subtle. It calls for great sensitivity on the part of the participants:

*As we sit here together there are
Four things you might like to do.*

*You might hear what others say,
Aware of their moods and feelings.*

*You might say what you hear,
A naked saying that adds nothing.*

*You might close your eyes to attend
To a feeling that stirs within you.*

*And when something forms from that feeling
You might say a few words yourself.*

*If nobody says anything, we will have a very quiet time together.
Even so, many good things will happen in the silence.*

The texture of our listening is like weaving. As threads of word and silence pass to-and-fro across the circle, the cloth grows stronger and more beautiful, minute by minute.

A robust sense of community may arise in the circle. When we part we are often left with an abiding feeling of trust in one another.

I like to offer people a little preparation before forming an open listening circle. It seems good if they have some experience of the kind of meditation in which you do nothing at all other than listening to your feelings. And it helps if the circle has witnessed the kind of listening I call *meditative*, which is simply an unclouded offering of wholehearted empathy.

This kind of listening is nothing fey or weird. For thousands of years, ordinary men and women have gathered in small groups at times of conflict, mourning or celebration. They have stayed with deep feelings, allowed ingrained differences to move towards resolution, and come up with practical steps of common action.

About the author

It didn't all begin with Dibs. But Dibs arrived at a crucial intersection. I think it was in 1971 that I first read Virginia Axline's peerless book, Dibs in Search of Self. Many years later I studied the person-centred way of being with Brian Thorne and completed a Diploma in Spiritual Accompaniment. But I don't see the spiritual as "something more". Meditative listening is the whole of my spiritual life.

In March 1988, I went to Chicago to study with Gene Gendlin and became a Focusing Coordinator. When Gene and Mary Gendlin retired from running the Focusing Institute a couple of years ago, they asked me to help navigate the focusing community through a critical transition.

I teach piano-playing and offer spiritual accompaniment. I write poems and essays. I like to walk in the hills or by the sea. I love my garden. I'm happiest at home with my family.

About the tradition

Meditative listening owes everything to Gene Gendlin, the philosopher who came up with the name "focusing" when he made sense of the dynamic relationship between what we say, the feeling (or "felt sense") behind it, and the context in which we say it; and who gathered around him many friends at Changes International and elsewhere, who worked out (and still work out) ways to make the felt sense findable by thousands and thousands of people.

Gene said recently, "I learned everything from Carl Rogers". This reminds us that Gene still sees focusing as a branch of the person-centred approach which Carl first described in 1940. Sadly, many focusing people seem unable to understand Carl's nondirective way of relating to people. They are still trapped in an unequal way of relating, in which there are teachers who know and students who receive, guides who shape the process and focusers who are shaped. This is a great pity.

In the early days, the focusing movement was a further development of Carl's work, building on his attempts to give away to ordinary people the professional skills of the psychotherapist. Gene calls this "the politics of giving therapy away". One of the Changes crowd was Mary Hendricks-Gendlin, who used to speak of "felt sense literacy". Mary felt passionately that people have a universal human right to be treated with empathy-and-acceptance. We ought all to learn focusing for free, just as we ought all to have the chance to read and write.

When I speak of about "meditative listening", I mean to keep faith with the nondirective strategy that startled people during Carl's early years, is exquisitely realized in the work of Virginia Axline, and is the ground for all that Gene has done. Let's turn back to our origins! But what does that mean? Something very subtle: that you want the speaker to own the space completely, that you want to follow, not to get in the way of the natural line as it unfolds; but also that you want to be there as yourself, to be in a plain, real relationship, to meet as ordinary, fallible human souls. There will always be a tension between these two wantings.

