

The Art of Listening

by Amelie Yan-Gouiffes

"Listen carefully, my child, to your master's precepts, and incline the ear of your heart."

—St. Benedict, Prov. 4:20



Fifteen centuries ago, a young man called Benedict founded a monastic community in Italy. He wrote a manual of rules to help his fellow monks live their spiritual lives. The community still exists today; the members are known as the Benedictines. While you most likely have no intention to dive into monastic life, this ancient text can be relevant to your modern life and your personal development.

Paraphrasing St. Benedict's words of wisdom, we could say: "Listen to the ear of your heart." In this edition of the Happiness Toolkit, we will use St. Benedict's teaching to examine the art of listening.

HEARING IS NOT THE SAME AS LISTENING

We have no doubt what "hearing" means. Hearing is the function of a physical organ. It is an ability most people have, and, if one cannot hear, this is considered a disability. Listening is a related but different action.

At the basic level, listening requires at least some physical ability. You could be hard of hearing but still a fairly good listener. On the other hand, you might have perfect hearing but imperfect listening skills. Listening is a type of art that is nurtured through practice.

WE KNOW WHEN SOMEONE LISTENS

How many times have you been in a discussion when either your child or your spouse complains, usually with a raised voice, "You are not listening to me!" You might then insist that you *are* listening, and the plaintiff fires back, "No, you are not!"

This is a common dialogue that sometimes seems like it's being played back on loop.

How many times have you suspected you were not being listened to? You may have seen your friend's eyes turning blank, or maybe you simply had a gut feeling the person was not fully present. When someone is not listening, it's easy to tell.

HINTS FROM CHINESE WISDOM

There is an intuitive knowledge that qualifies listening beyond the physiological hearing function. Traditional Chinese wisdom and scripture give us precious hints of what else comes into play with listening.

Listening is not just about the ears. The Chinese character for the word "listening" can be broken down to show that listening is five-fold, requiring ears as well the use of eyes, minds, hearts, and undivided attention.

First, the eyes. We need to see our conversation partner and use the power of sight to connect, to show our interest, to grab some additional meaning through expressions and gestures.

This is not enough, though. While focusing with our ears and eyes, we must give our undivided attention. This means being fully present, managing the wandering mind, and truly engaging with what the person says. (We should be careful not to lose focus by concentrating instead on what to say next.)

Then there is the mind. We bring what we hear to the brain to reach an intellectual understanding and to process what we have heard.

Finally, there is the heart! (Have you ever noticed that the word "ear" is in the center of the word "heart?") The heart has again been included in the art of listening, from ancient China to St. Benedict's Italy, because we truly listen when we engage the heart. If we do so, even in the middle of a fierce disagreement, we can connect with our interlocutor, hold our intention, and reach a resolution or at least solid understanding.

LISTEN WITH THE INTENT TO UNDERSTAND

Stephen R. Covey, the author of best-seller *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Powerful Lessons in Personal Change*, boldly affirms that most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.

I often plead guilty. Do you?

We tend to listen carefully to point out what is "wrong" about what we hear, and then we may react nastily. Other times, and in a society where immediate answers are expected for everything, we don't



Health & Wellness

take time to listen. We prepare our answer while we hear, trying to skip essential steps of communication to speed up the process.

Instead, slow down. Don't be scared of a few beats of silence between the lines of dialogue. Once you're sure you've understood, you can give your reply, which is likely to be much more thoughtful than a harried response.

THE EAR OF THE HEART

The ear of the heart is not a judgmental ear; it invites us to seek the essence of the message. It is not about us, it is about the person in front of us. The ear of the heart is genuine, not contaminated with prejudices. It is fearless and does not get blocked with inner limitations.

Even if you are not a fluent Thai speaker, you probably know the word *kao-jai*, which means *to understand*. It is made of two parts: *kao*, meaning to take, and *jai*, meaning heart. Thai language tells us that real understanding means we must "take heart." We must be courageous in order to understand. And, to understand, we must practice, everyday, the art of listening.



WE TRULY LISTEN WHEN WE ENGAGE THE HEART.

TIPS FOR ACTIVE LISTENING

- Greek Philosopher Zeno of Citium told us, "We have two ears and one mouth, and so we should listen more than we say." When you hear yourself speaking a lot, slow down, create the space for others to share their view. Help them by asking questions starting with "what" or "how."
- Show interest and connection through your body language. Slightly bend forward, uncross your arms, and keep eye contact.
- Become the boss of your mind. When you start wondering about other things, bring your mind back to the listening task. When your mind is looking for counter-arguments, smile at it and come back to the heart and its ear.
- Once you have fully listened and it's your time to speak, you will connect with the mind for replying and your answer will be much more relevant and pertinent because you will have listened deeply.
- Use "and" instead of "but." On news programs, when the reporter shifts focus to their colleague, the reporter will often "and" to segue. It's a powerful tool when you are co-facilitating or holding a heated argument. The energy and the message of "and" is much more inclusive and positive.
- In a training or conference, review how many notes you are taking. When you are taking notes, you are focusing on your notes not on listening. Can you postpone the note writing until after the talk?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

"Be The Greatest You" is Amelie's motto and commitment to support people and corporations in unleashing their inner diamonds to unlock their full potential. Amelie provides coaching, training and public speaking.

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