



## The Eightfold Path

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## IV. Skillful Speech

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### Part 3

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In the past two talks, we have explored skillful speech, examining the four factors of how we speak: being truthful, uplifting, gentle, and moderate. We next learned what the Buddha had to say about the times to be mindful of speaking: before, during, and after. And when we do plan to speak, the factors for well-spoken speech that we need to take into consideration: having good intentions, being truthful, speaking at the right time and place, being affectionate and beneficial. By reflecting on our intention, we might choose to change it to the benefit of the other or just let it go and not speak.

### Listening mindfully

During a conversation, when we are not speaking, we listen mindfully to truly be with the other person(s). Listening mindfully means that we are comfortable with silence, especially in our mind.

### The Role of Silence

T.S. Eliot addresses the role of silence in this excerpt from the Four Quartets:

“I said to my soul, be still, and let the dark come upon you  
Which shall be the darkness of God. As, in a theatre,  
The lights are extinguished, for the scene to be changed  
With a hollow rumble of wings, with a movement of darkness on darkness,  
And we know that the hills and the trees, the distant panorama  
And the bold imposing facade are all being rolled away—  
Or, as when an underground train, in the tube, stops too long between stations  
And the conversation rises and slowly fades into silence  
And you see behind every face the mental emptiness deepen

Leaving only the growing terror of nothing to think about;  
Or when, under ether, the mind is conscious but conscious of nothing—  
I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope  
For hope would be hope for the wrong thing; wait without love,  
For love would be love of the wrong thing; there is yet faith  
But the faith and the love and the hope are all in the waiting.  
Wait without thought, for you are not ready for thought:  
So the darkness shall be the light, and the stillness the dancing.”<sup>1</sup>

Letting the dark come upon you is allowing everything to be (as with the A in RAINS). When you are with another, can you wait without thought and truly listen from silence and be with whatever is said? And have faith that what will arise will be ok?

Mark C. Taylor notes: “Silence is as rare as it is essential. When was the last time you really heard silence? How long has it been since you saw a person sitting alone in silence? How often do you leave earphones and cell phones at home? Silence is disappearing as fast as the darkness dispersed by city lights. This loss is no accident—people have come to fear silence because it rends the veil of distraction that noise creates. But not all silence threatens; indeed, sometimes pauses are pregnant. In some places, silence can be an emptiness that is, paradoxically, full. You do not occupy this silence; it occupies you. Without silence, words can be neither spoken nor heard, and without words, silence is inaudible. Silence does not disappear when it is broken; for those who are not distracted, silence limns language as the necessary condition that exposes both its richness and its fragility. Silence is not just in the gaps and spaces that punctuate sentences but also within words as the lack that renders them fully articulate. To know what a person says, we must hear what remains unsaid. If we cannot hear silence, we do not know how to listen.”<sup>2</sup>

Can you remain in silence and hear what remains unsaid?

Krishnamurti notes: “Can one listen without any conclusion, without any comparison or judgment? I think there is an art to listening, which is to listen completely, without any motive, because a motive in listening is a distraction. If you can listen with complete attention, then there is no resistance, either to your own thoughts or to what is being said. But it is only the very silent, quiet mind that finds out what is true, not a mind which is furiously active, thinking, resisting.”<sup>3</sup>

In another quote, he goes on to say: ““Silence is difficult and arduous, it is not to be played with. It isn't something that you can experience by reading a book, or by listening to a talk, or by sitting together, or by retiring into a wood or a monastery. I am afraid none of these things will bring about this silence. This silence demands intense psychological work. You have to be burningly aware of your snobbishness, aware of your fears, your anxieties, your sense of guilt. And when you die to all that, then out of that dying comes the beauty of silence.”<sup>4</sup>

In a conversation, there are periods of silence – can you stand that?

This haiku conveys the end result of silence in a conversation:

*saying nothing;*  
*the guest, the host*  
*the white chrysanthemum*  
—Ryota Oshima<sup>5</sup>

### **Chan Practice for Listening to Silence**

Patricia Donegan in *Silence: Stillness* If we could slow down and stop for 10 minutes a day, we'd be amazed by the transformation<sup>6</sup> notes: "The Chan practice of listening to silence provides a way to refine our hearts and minds, thought after thought, to the point that they become ever more subtle and increasingly attuned to stillness and emptiness. As we progress, we realize how constricted we are by our discriminating mind. Our minds, not our hearing organs, make the distinction between sound and silence. But if you practice listening until you no longer make distinctions, you develop a power that is liberating. You're no longer pushed around by concepts, emotions, or other mental objects. Instead, you decide what to move or transform.

## **Four Steps for listening to Silence**

### **1 Deep breaths.**

Sit up straight with your chin slightly tucked in, eyes closed or partly open (to prevent daydreaming), and your mouth closed. Breathe in deeply from the dantian, the energy center located right under the navel. With each in-breath, be aware of the air passing through your throat and how it passes through the nose with each out-breath. This process helps us to breathe in fresh energy, known as chi, and expel stale energy.

Repeat this seven times.

### **2 Move the attention from the eyes to the nose, mouth, and heart.**

This step is especially geared toward stopping, or reining in, the monkey mind that we find so difficult to control. Start by gently moving your attention from the eyes to the area under the nose where you are breathing in and out. Let it rest there for a while. From there, move the attention to the mouth. Finally, shift your attention from your mouth to your heart. Try not to hold any thoughts, images, or attachments to experience. Our spiritual heart is empty; it has no shape, form, or size. Once this is done, start all over again from the eyes. Repeat this seven times.

### **3 Observe the breath.**

Breathe in and out naturally while fastening the monkey mind's attention to the breath. When you reach the state where the monkey no longer feels bound by the breath but instead enjoys staying there, then you have reached the stage of stopping. Your awareness is gentle and clear—it becomes one with the breath.

### **4 Listen to silence.**

While the previous three steps are intended to stop the wandering mind by letting it rest on the breath, the fourth step of listening has more to do with "seeing."

In preparation, start by relaxing your ears, head, neck, shoulders, and every cell in your body. Let the entire body quiet down completely. When you hear sounds from outside, like a human voice or the sound of a car passing by, listen to them as the sound of silence. When you tell yourself that distracting sounds are silent, they become that way. However, if you tell yourself that they are noisy and disturbing, that is what they will be. Keep listening to the sound of silence in everything, staying completely relaxed.

Hear the silence in the mountains and rivers, the great wide earth, the sky. Eventually, the whole universe will fall into deep silence. Perceive that same deep silence in yourself.

In this state, there is no sound whatsoever, and when you listen, you listen to the sound of no sound. Every thought returns into silence and becomes still. When practicing this technique, it is important not to force anything when listening but to remain relaxed and listen in a natural way.

Ultimately, it is our awareness unified with emptiness that is really listening to the silence. "Being aware of silence" and "seeing silence" are the same thing. Who is aware of silence? Who sees silence? It is our enlightened nature that is aware and sees. The next step in the practice is to dwell in the clarity of silence, and once you know how to do this, the last step is to enlighten your own mind by seeing your

true nature. It might take quite some time to reach these stages, but if you sustain your awareness of silence, then you will eventually reach it. Practicing slowly and steadily is very important. When you feel that your mind starts wandering again while listening to silence, return to step two and focus on the movement from eyes to nose to mouth to heart, with no thoughts or images in your heart.

Our true nature is the emptiness of all things, the “true formless form.” Chan practice is about seeing, hearing, being aware of, and clearly knowing this. It is about realizing that what we habitually see, hear, and are aware of and know is an illusion. We begin this practice of listening to tune into a deeper awareness that leads to the realization of emptiness, which in turn empties out our mistaken views and notions. Most importantly, this Chan practice lets us enter into the true form of enlightened nature.

Such form is eternal; it is unborn and never dies, is neither stained nor pure, neither increases nor diminishes. There is absolutely nothing here to hold on to: no rebirth in samsara; no world of bodily form, sensation, thought, impulse, or consciousness; no pain and no happiness, no gain and no loss. With our own practice, we, too, can enter the stream of our true nature and see our original face.”

### **Other factors in skillful listening**

I used to teach physicians good communication skills. Regarding listening, here are some key points.

Skillful listening requires:

- Appropriate body language that includes attentive posture, gestures if needed, attentive facial expressions and eye contact.
- Verbal techniques include silence, use of minimal encouragers, and open-ended questions.
- It is also helpful to paraphrase what the speaker has said to confirm that they understand that you understand what they said.

### **Impediments**

Here are some impediments to listening from a truly quiet space:

- Judging what the other person is saying
- Having ideas of how to “fix” the issue the person is presenting
- Having ideas on how to “fix” the person being listened to
- Reflecting on how the issues being presented are similar to the issues you are experiencing in your own life
- Thinking about the past or future
- Thinking of how you will respond to what the person is communicating

As each of these thought processes are recognized, allow them to immediately pass out of consciousness and go back to listening from the space of silence.

When we do listen from this clear and open space and wait until the other person has completed their thoughts, our reply comes from our awareness and it will be more relevant and meaningful. The person to whom we are speaking will know that they were heard (truly listened to).

### **The role of mindfulness in Skillful Speech**

Bhante G makes a key statement: “but by definition, mindfulness keeps us in control of what we think, how we act, and what we say. It’s impossible to shout at someone mindfully, or to abuse alcohol mindfully. If you are truly mindful, you cannot do these things!”<sup>7</sup>

## References

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/Poets/E/EliotTS/Isaidtomysou/index.html>

<sup>2</sup> Taylor, Mark C [Hearing Silence Select wisdom from sources old and new](#)

<sup>3</sup> Attributed to Krishnamurti. Specific reference not found.

<sup>4</sup> [Quote by Jiddu Krishnamurti: "Silence is difficult and arduous, it is not to..." \(goodreads.com\)](#)

<sup>5</sup> Donegan, Patricia [Silence: Stillness If we could slow down and stop for 10 minutes a day, we'd be amazed by the transformation](#)

<sup>6</sup> [Silence, Stillness \(tricycle.org\)](#)

<sup>7</sup> Bhante Gunaratana Eight Mindful Steps to Happiness p. 106