

Aspects of Receptivity and Listening

By Miranda Mellis

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Abstract

Aspects of Receptivity and Listening is an ethical inquiry into what it means to practice, cultivate, and learn how to listen and be receptive for the purposes of socially engaged Buddhist chaplaincy, service, and spiritual care work. The premise of this thesis is that inner chaplaincy—reflecting on and sharing knowledge about and experiences of the internal processes that support *how* we do care work—in this case by theorizing our practice of listening—is an essential part of our training. Through analysis of interviews conducted for the purposes of this thesis, as well as through reflections on my motivations for pursuing this topic and including close readings of a range of other kinds of texts, I have gleaned that active listening and receptivity involves body awareness, the temporal practice of presence via coming alongside others, and a nonjudgmental openness to difference. I have also gained insight into the continuity between listening receptively as a healing social practice and listening receptively as a solitary contemplative practice.

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Three certainties interrupt listening: assumptions (I already know who you are and what you will say); arrogance (what you are and have to say are not relevant to or important to me; you do not matter); and fear (listening to you may require something of me). Listening matters. Listening requires that I quiet my own experience to make room for another's.

Zalika Gardner

Attention consists of suspending our thought, leaving it detached, empty, and ready to be penetrated by the object. It means holding in abeyance what we already know about this object. With respect to these already formulated thoughts, we should be like a man on a mountain who gazes into the distance and as he does so notices without actually looking at them the forests and plains below. Above all our thoughts should be empty, waiting, not seeking anything, but ready to receive in its naked truth the object that is to penetrate it. Many errors are due to the fact that thought has seized upon some idea too hastily and being thus prematurely blocked is not open to the truth. The cause is always that we have wanted to be too active. We have wanted to carry out a search. We do not obtain the most precious gifts by going in search of them, but by waiting for them.

Simone Weil

Up from listening bubbles a speaking.

Lisbeth Lipari

Introduction

This cross disciplinary thesis is centered on effective techniques and practices of listening and receptivity. To that end I've assembled a dossier of interviews that shed light on what those who practice listening and receptivity as a primary discipline, as their day-to-day practice, have to say about how they listen.

The discipline of active listening, important for many forms of work, is at the core of socially engaged Buddhist chaplaincy. Chaplaincy begins and ends with receptivity as the condition of possibility for care; it continuously returns to it in contemplative practice and in social engagement. For my thesis, then, I explore the receptive disposition as the contemplatives' relational mode; as a catch-all term that describes the socially engaged contemplative's entrainment; as a particular kind of discipline; and as an essential practice for chaplaincy.

Receptivity has a special relationship to presence. This relationship is also explored here. If we are talking about *presence* we are talking about a time-sense, tense, and temporality, therefore views about time—conditioning about time, and historical and cultural constructions of time—pertain. I don't go into depth on this topic but touch on it. It is an area for possible further research in the future. I also touch on the idea of community formation through shared listening, at the end of the thesis.

Challenges and contradictions that make it difficult to become and remain receptive are explored, particularly as these pertain to childhood conditioning to be receptive as a strategy for coping with parental narcissism.

Methods

Receptivity is an element in all forms of service and work to some extent. Broadly speaking, it is primary to employment of all kinds, most particularly care work. It is valued as a particular kind of labor in an era when emotional intelligence is considered a job skill. But only certain forms of work require that we practice receptivity consciously and reflexively. I interviewed people for whom this is the case, including ten Buddhist chaplains. I also interviewed a scholar of comparative religion who is a practitioner of Zen Buddhism; a psychotherapist; artists with a primary focus on listening; a researcher of liminal states and lucid dreaming; several educators; and a certified facilitator of Deep Listening, a process derived from the work of experimental composer Pauline Oliveros.

By interviewing practitioners of listening, I hoped to learn more about how others who take listening as a practice think about it, and to increase my own and my reader's understanding of and capacity for receptive listening. The interviews allowed me to look at what kinds of experiences and practices enable us to become more receptive, such as experiences of and encounters with teachings and teachers, in therapy, in sesshin, while serving, and in relationships of all kinds.

The main questions I explore are:

- How do people for whom listening is a primary practice and their main work, including Buddhist chaplains, therapists, scholars, educators, and artists, describe and practice receptivity in the form of active listening and how do these compare?
- What are the challenges associated with receptivity and presence and what allows people to be more receptive and present?

- If presence is something that occurs in time, then how do views about time affect our ability to be present?

To unpack the interviews, I used thematic analysis. I broke the interviews down into preliminary codes based on the questions. I took notes on interviewees' responses to the codes. As I discovered recurring themes or important differences, I color-coded themes and contrasts. I named, defined, and reviewed themes, patterns, and differences and integrated what I learned from them into my discussion section as they related to my topics. Please see the appendix for complete transcripts of the interviews.

The following questions were sent to 30 people in summer 2019, mostly Buddhist chaplains—working chaplains and chaplains-in-training—as well as others for whom listening is a primary discipline in one way or another. I received 15 responses. The interviews may be found in the appendix.

Interview Questions:

- 1) What is good listening?
- 2) What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?
- 3) How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?
- 4) What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?
- 5) How do you know when you are listening well?
- 6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?
- 7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?
- 8) How do you know when you are present?
- 9) What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?
- 10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?
- 11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

Conducting thematic analysis of my interviews enabled me to discern how different perspectives, intentions, and sensoria produce different kinds of listening. I discuss what

receptivity looks and feels like in practice, juxtaposing how interviewees describe their listening practices by putting their responses into a comparative conversation. As scholar of comparative religion Jeffrey Kripal puts it, “Human beings *must* compare to make sense of anything” (Kripal, 2017, p. 306). For instance, some people see physical stillness as important for listening, but others don’t. Some people practice listening and receptivity as a form of care in response to, and in contexts redolent of, failures of care. Some people make note of the material, social conditions of possibility for listening and others are focused on interiority. Some understand presence and listening as synonyms, while others see them as distinct and offer varying ideas of how they’re related. What is generally shared in common across the board is the ability to inwardly ‘scan’ (for biases, distractions, tensions, emotions, reactions, projections, interpretations, etc.) and then to be able to remove and release obstacles to presence revealed in this ‘scanning’ process.

My approach to my sources is what literature review expert Diana Ridley (2012) calls “recursive” (p. 17). She defines this as an approach to the review in which the literature is integrated throughout rather than presented in a discrete chapter. I introduce and use relevant terminology as a stimulus for my own thinking along the way. I focus on interviews and then open the thesis up to include authors as themes enlarge. Because the interviews provide a good deal of insight into the practice of listening, I draw upon other texts to develop the theme of what it can mean to be listened to. Primary to this exploration is Eve Kosovksy Sedgwick, a Buddhist, artist, scholar, teacher, and a seminal, foundational figure for affect studies and queer theory. The main text of interest here is called *A Dialogue on Love* which is an account of Sedgwick’s experiences in therapy during the latter period of her life when she learned she had a terminal illness.

Discussion

Listening happens differently, contingently, contextually. Yet the quality of listening does not inherently depend on identity, material conditions, or social location. No matter who or where you are, to be *capable* of listening actively implies a degree of freedom, however contingent, from situational determinants. Listening well is improvisatory, having no particular outcome in mind other than to have listened well. This forgoing of ulterior motive and outcome for the benefit of the other and of the interaction is tacitly non-hierarchical and un-controlling. In her interview Buddhist chaplain and nurse Kathleen Turner muses on her own “intention to connect and receive” through listening: “Can I remain in that moment, full of its potential energy, for longer?” (see Appendix A, page 53). To be able to choose to listen this way—to listen not as a matter of revealing or accounting, of confession or *getting-at*, not for evaluating the other, not to rehearse as you wait your turn to speak, or diagnose or correct, not to acquire data or typologies, not to assess romantic, economic, academic, spiritual, or ideological fitness or the lack thereof, not for the extraction of value or the determination of category, not for the baring-of-all, but as *bearing witness* is to enact listening as an embodied instrument skillfully tuned not to *play*, but rather *not* to play, tuned for what Byung-Chul Han (2015) calls ‘negative potency’. This is the power *not* to do in any average or expected way, being free of the compulsion to act, or to be seen as acting. It is to be “free of a rushing, intrusive Something” (Han, 2015, p. 24) as Han puts it, which is the inability to be outwardly still yet inwardly active. The important distinction here is between compulsive action and intentional action. To practice active listening is to activate care, to harness one’s capacity to act on behalf of another’s capacity to act, to let their speech acts act upon one’s imagination and heart.

Listening is considered a skill; it also has an aesthetic element. I believe it can be called an art. However, it is an art that is, by necessity, never perfected, because to practice the negative potency of the receptive is to dwell in the space of potential.

Listening is a slowing down that impedes the compulsion to assert knowing or act knowing. Listening is not knowing, that is why it is improvisatory, closely related to arts of improvisation like jazz where to play is to attend to what is emergent, what is possible, in contrast with the recitative, incantatory, invocative mode of playing that is entailed by reading music or playing a known tune. It is a different kind of mastery than is entailed by knowing-how. In fact, it is contingent upon not knowing, thus the centrality of the tenet of Not Knowing in Buddhist chaplaincy. Not Knowing does not only allow for the virtues of humility and curiosity, but it is the condition of possibility for the new to arise, for spontaneity, and in my view, the most profound gift of active listening is the way it allows us to surprise ourselves, to arrive at something new. This spontaneity is a product of the openness of the listener. For Evelyn Hampton, a Buddhist fiction writer “to listen actively is to receive another’s words as if they were a tangible material; the process feels physical” (see Appendix page 59). To hear speech is to sense matter for her, perhaps because, as a fiction writer, as an artist, language is her medium; the material of her craft. It is the active, embodied quality of her openness that causes her to feel another’s words physically. Here listening is its own unusual kind of art, with its own special kind of mastery that is the opposite of our associations with mastery with something complete or completed. Rather this mastery is alive to incompleteness and indeterminacy. In *The Fire and the Tale* Giorgio Agamben writes that “mastery is not formal perfection but quite the opposite: it is the preservation of potentiality in the act . . .” (Agamben, 2017, p. 42).

To remain with potential is to be attuned to the not-yet. It is an ethical act of allowing, a temporal form of faith in, and care for, the possible and the emergent. How does one “remain”? The prefix re- means “back” or “again” and in all of its usages it evokes the cyclicity of presence, its ebb and flow.

Chaplain Karen Lohman speaks of leaving what she calls a “longer than usual, silent pause” (see Appendix A, page 47). She finds that when she does so, “I might think the conversation is over, then it shifts and the person I am with goes into a story or comments on something at the heart of their situation, or a memory arises gives an insight or brings tears” (ibid.).

We feel, so often, the not-yet, the edge of something, an overwhelming problem, the not yet free, not yet well, not yet loved, not yet healed, not yet cared for, or the actively undone, the active unbecoming. Our lived experience of time oscillates between senses of stasis and senses of change, senses of absence and presence.

I am not *waiting* when I am being present and receptive. I am not waiting to receive what Han calls “Something.”

Buddhist chaplains describe the primacy of kinesthetic, proprioceptive body awareness for presence and deep listening. Raka Banerjee feels a sense of “stability in my stomach as I open to another” but has a “hard time listening . . . when I’m feeling physically unwell or suffering emotionally” (see Appendix A, page 31). Lohman said that for her, listening well is listening for subtext, listening for “energy behind and around words spoken” (see Appendix A, page 46). Most people I interviewed said that effectively attending to another requires knowing how to simultaneously attend to self both in the moment, and in an ongoing way. Buddhist

chaplain Linda Atkins said that having a “lifelong commitment to keep learning more about what triggers me is essential” (see Appendix page 29).

For everyone that I interviewed, chaplains and otherwise, the ability to ‘toggle’ attention between conscious interoception and exteroception appears to be *the* foundational entrainment for receptive presence, for the shared management of vulnerable states.¹ Interviewees consistently described pulsations between inside and outside, self and other and characterized listening as forming a kind of channel between these pairs. For Buddhist educator and fiction writer Evelyn Hampton, “to listen actively is . . . as much about awareness of myself as it is about awareness of another” (see Appendix page 42).

Zen Buddhist and religious studies scholar, author, and podcaster Erik Davis speaks of the “willingness to both rest on the boundary between those categories [‘inside’ and ‘outside’] and feel its instability, even its disappearance” (see Appendix page 35). Buddhist chaplain and nurse Kathleen Turner likens listening to being in a rocking chair in “the moment when the chair is just getting ready to rock forward . . . the rhythm of attention is . . . flowing forward and backward . . . why does it extend and why recede?” Resonantly, in *Listening* Jean-Luc Nancy writes of listening as moving towards and away, saying that “To be listening is always to be on the edge of meaning . . .” (Nancy, 2006, p. 5). Finding these oscillations of attention mysterious, asking why they extend and recede, Turner nonetheless works to balance and hone her awareness along this edge space, noticing a “detriment to the relational space” if there is an “over-allocation to myself” (see Appendix A, page 53).

Active listening takes energy, and people I interviewed spoke to what it involves for it to be, as it were, a sustainable, renewable form of energy. Hampton finds that while active listening

¹ Interoception is the sense of the internal state of the body. It helps you understand and feel what is going on in your body. Exteroception is sensitivity to stimuli originating outside of the body.

requires energy and can be draining, it can generate and “return” energy (ibid.). Atkins, finds that if she’s exhausted after a day of listening, “that tells me I was expending too much effort” (see Appendix page 29).

For filmmaker and listening artist Lynn Marie Kirby, it is necessary to go outside of the house. Listening is an acoustic practice of attuning as much to the *site* of listening as to the sounds. She describes visiting the chapel at St. Juan Capistrano and going into a side room “full of Milagros: hands, hearts, internal organs. As I stood inside the small space I could hear and feel all the reverberating pain” (see Appendix page 45).

In her interview, liminal dream researcher and author Jennifer Dumpert said that she knows she is listening well when she “senses a field of listening all around me.” For her

Someone truly listening creates presence in the speaker, someone speaking with confident, calm, solid presence promotes listening . . . When we all feel like we can express ourselves well and that people listen, the conversations get much better . . . Too many of us feel the need to jockey to be heard and understood, and that makes for a certain percentage of ego performance in our talking. My best conversations come with people with whom I don’t feel like I need to assert opinions and they don’t either, even if our opinions are strong (see Appendix page 39).

Psychoanalyst, social worker, and poet Adam Weg thinks of therapeutic listening as “an invitation to my interlocutor to think with me” (see Appendix page 56). To be invited to *think with me* is to invite equality and to assume the potential for us to make discoveries together. The ethics and an aesthetics in his practice combines his intuitions as a practicing poet with his training as an analyst: “My brow forms a sort of camera that projects images and thoughts onto the back of my mind, which I attend to while still focusing the camera. Occasionally I share these ‘thoughts’ if they make me want to sing” (ibid.). Listening entails respect for the privacy, and the opacity, the unknowability, of the other. Presence is not the same as transparency. Presence and absence are equally important:

There is a relationship between absence and listening, and I feel like my approach requires me to be as much absent as I am present. I think one feels listened to when one's thoughts go somewhere, disappear, and then reappear touched in some way. I don't think that involves only the presence of the other, it involves their absence or deep privacy or inaccessibility as well (ibid.).

There is a continuum, an entwinement of presence and absence in this characterization of listening. Presence is in a way contingent upon, inseparable from absence. Relatedly psychoanalyst Jean Laplanche writes that “We offer the analysand a ‘hollow’, our own interior benevolent neutrality, a benevolent neutrality concerning our own enigma” (2010, p. 9). For Laplanche, it is the listener/analyst's capacity for internal alterity, for the ability to “hollow out” a conventional self by “respect[ing]and maintain[ing] the other in me,” that creates the conditions of possibility for receiving, respecting, and maintaining the enigma of the other. For, “there is no reason,” as psychoanalyst Adam Philips writes, “to believe that everything in a life—each thought, feeling, action, dream—can be linked, or must fit in. It is the making coherent of a life—the forcing of a pattern—that people often suffer from (symptoms are ways of willing coherence)” (Philips, 1995, p. 71). Philips posits a kind of disciplined listening that nonetheless does not seek an interpretation more authoritative than experience. For Philips, this is a way of listening that can

help re-evoke, to elicit, the lived experience of the dream—its affective content—rather than to translate it into a substitute parallel text, one supposedly more authoritative than the manifest content of the dream . . . The dream becomes the place of—or the psychic space for—different versions of self-experience, a setting for other voices. The dream becomes an evocative object as opposed to an informative one. (They are not, necessarily, mutually exclusive.) . . . trying to locate what cannot be stolen from the patient—what, in the dream, is beyond appropriation. (Philips, 1995, p. 72)

To translate a dream into a “substitute parallel text” may not be a problem. Positing that interpretation as “supposedly more authoritative” robs the dreamer of their agency. Erring on the

side of caution is to not trust one's distrust. It is to trust in, put faith in, the principle that people may be able to find their own solutions.

In *Zen Sand: The Book of Capping Phrases for Koan Practice* Victor Sogen Hori writes that “In the crisis of self-doubt . . . one experiences the koan not as an object standing before the mind that investigates it, but as the seeking mind itself” (Hori, 2010, p.8). Our work as listeners is to find our own, and allow others to find, way-seeking mind – “the seeking mind itself.” Perhaps the listener can also be understood metaphorically to be a sort of *prosthetic* way-seeking mind.² Here I am thinking of how receptive presence can be co-regulating in such a way as to allow a being so received to recollect their own presence, their own reality, embodiment, and truth.

More prosaically, at the minimum, to be ‘good enough’, as Weg has it, “presence is not intrusive . . . I mainly need my presences not to be anxious. That makes them automatically not-bad. But not necessarily good” (ibid.). Similarly, in chaplaincy, non-anxious presence and staying a ‘half-step behind’ (being non-intrusive) is fundamental to our training.

Facilitator, educator, writer and astrologer Sarah Fontaine describes intentional lacks and absences as part and parcel of expansive inclusion. The other “feels my lack of agitation as respect for them”, listening is the “absence of interior bracing, an absence of urgency.” In the next sentence she uses the verb ‘include’ twice to describe the relation between these salutary absences and the ability to include truth and compassion: “[T]he mind is constantly making up stories and almost always they don’t include as much compassion and understanding as is needed to include the whole truth of a situation. Listening reminds me to listen more . . . it’s almost never

² In medicine, a prosthesis (plural: prostheses; from Ancient Greek prosthesis, “addition, application, attachment”) or prosthetic implant is an artificial device that replaces a missing body part, which may be lost through trauma or illness.

the case that I have enough information . . . to judge a situation. It's almost never the case that I have enough information" (see Appendix page 40).

Having explored the art of listening, what goes into listening as a suite of techniques and skills, as a professional and/or spiritual disposition, and as a discipline and/or practice, what about the experience of being listened to?

In my research I have not found a more lucid account of what it is like to be well listened to than *A Dialogue on Love* (1999), by Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick, in which the author describes not only what she experienced by entering into therapy to be professionally listened to, but what it meant to her and gave her. This exemplary account combines dialogue, reminiscence, verse, and Sedgwick's therapist's notes. With an educator's knack for and desire to empower others, to draw them out, Sedgwick writes of an empowering form of receptivity which recognizes that to receive others openly is also to disseminate what she calls, in an elegant turn of phrase, "free-floating remediation" (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 169).

Empowering forms of receptivity involve bringing generosity and ethics to bear on our perceptions of one another in ways that are capacitating and capacity-building: "I want to start out powdering people with fairy dust when I first know them," she writes, "like there's a working hypothesis that I'll trust them, we're playing the same exciting game, that they're radiant, kind, mysteriously talented, spiritually powerful" (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 108). At the same time, the way her parents were towards her when she was a child made her into someone who tried to "turn them into who I need them to be in order to nurture me properly" (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 170).

Here is a double-edged sword: the very capacity Sedgwick has to generously give away her enlightenment—to, as she puts it, make other people smarter—is linked to early, strenuous efforts to at once capacitate, heal, survive, shore up her parents, to mitigate harms to and from them in

order that they might care properly for her. She is forced into this by her parents' inconstancy and non-attunement.

She is particularly marked by repeated experiences of the sudden falling off of her mother's interest without warning. In one poem she describes herself as her mother's therapist: "That is: I've had an / immemorial motive / of eliciting, / supporting, helping / *her* inhabit and extend / a certain 'true self'" (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 100).

Her relationship with her mother causes her to "learn a rather imposing / habit of silence / about my own needs" (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 100). She becomes someone for whom it is "generally easier for me to take responsibility for somebody else's self-perception than becoming visible to myself" (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 167). As a child, Sedgwick's work was to be present, attentive to her parents. She was in no position to demand of them that they grant her *their* presences.

It is notable that in wisdom traditions contemplatives, sages, and spiritual caregivers of all genders are compared to and called, metaphorically, mothers; perhaps they should be called great mothers! For as we learned from Sedgwick, simply being a mother does not make you a receptive good listener.

Having explored with Sedgwick what it is like to be listened to, it becomes clear that whether there is good listening or not on the part of one's parents will be deeply formative. There is a loss not just for the child who isn't listened to, but for the parent who cannot listen, who is not capable of reflecting on the quality and effect of their own presence or lack thereof, because the capacity to be receptive is not just a gift one gives to others, but contains within it the possibility of receiving unexpected gifts of learning from the other.

For example, to return to the interviews, in answer to a question about presence, film professor and Harvard Divinity School graduate student in Buddhist studies Bernadine Mellis

speaks of the teachings she receives from her child about parenting as attunement to presence. In this anecdote, being presence need not entail interaction. Children especially benefit from the kind of quiet accompaniment that chaplains offer in so many settings. A field of togetherness is fostered by “being listening” as Lisbeth Lipari (2014) puts it; listening, in this case, to the “sound” of no one and nothing missing:

My five-year-old teaches me about presence every day. This morning, he was playing and I was preparing for a meeting. He came and asked me to play with him. When I joined the game I realized he really didn’t want me to play, there was nothing for me to do, he was doing the game himself. But he wanted me to be with him fully, even if I was only nearby washing dishes or looking out the window. While I was preparing for the meeting, my mind was in the future, in a problem that wasn’t in front of me. He wanted me to be in the house in the morning with him, the way he was in the house in the morning, fully (see Appendix page 49).

Here, the child, trusting his parent, can notice her lack of presence and confidently ask for its return. For Sedgwick, caught in role reversal, making up for her parent’s lack of presence required being hyper-vigilantly, overly present to *them* with little chance of reciprocity.

Always attending to the experience of others, one loses track of one’s own. The capacity to listen to and empower others for those so entrained, if a gift, may have begun as a coping strategy, and comes at a cost. Through self-examination one can become more aware of one’s patterns and motivations to see that one is not practicing receptivity as a coping mechanism. Buddhist chaplain Raka Banerjee came to the realization, in her own contemplations, that “by only listening and never sharing I was contributing to an uneven power dynamic . . . not opening up to the humility of being served myself . . . there is power to be gained in listening and it is not always a positive thing” (see Appendix A, page 32).

Therapy allows Sedgwick to begin to *hear* herself, to drop the survival strategies of childhood. It is a place where “talking to someone else is also talking to myself” (Sedgwick,

1999, p. 115). In principle, the purpose of therapy is not to perpetuate the narcissistic situation by merely reversing it, so much as to remedy it by consciously formalizing and making explicit the ways in which allocations of attention, its quality and distribution, are the ground of relation. Here, active listening is a mutual practice of attending differently than one was raised to. Receptivity is not submission, not coping—it is active, chosen.

Listening is healing when, if, and because mutuality and interest are not contingent on performance, unacknowledged power differentials, unshared vulnerabilities, or unspoken rules. Instead, in principle, the rules are spoken, as are the vulnerabilities.

Sedgwick finds her therapist Shannon's interest to be *reliable*. She longs for this unflappable interest, for what their "loose-knit colloquy" allows (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 43). His presence "carefully, deliberately won't visibly register anything but attention. Won't register excitement, hurt, anxiety, threatenedness, arousal" (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 71). She notes of his listening mien that it moves "tracelessly inward" (Sedgwick, 1999, p. 71). Interviewee Anna Wolfe-Pauly, a facilitator of Deep Listening originated by Pauline Oliveros, says of listening

it generates a sensation of going through a tunnel but in my own body . . . it begins at my organ of attention—could be in a sound and so in my ear, or it could be in my eye say if I am listening to a person talk about something very tender and I am looking at them. This sensation then travels into the back of my neck. After the neck it can be difficult. This is the point where I experience allowance—can I sustain my listening? Am I able to let myself go into the tunnel? This depends on my environment, my state of mind, and my ability to give in to the listening (see Appendix page 59).

This turning inward, this intimate withdrawal of the ear which is also the condition of possibility for resonance is related to what Sedgwick calls Shannon's "absorbency." The twinning of withdrawal and presence, this "going through the tunnel", is what allows one to "absorb" another. Imaginatively and somatically locating or perhaps in some sense even disappearing into inner space allows for this absorbency.

The Zen parable of the empty cup comes to mind: *how can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?*³ The cup is a metaphor for the receptive principle. In religious practice a cup, or chalice, is often used for drinking during ceremony. The Holy Chalice is the vessel Jesus used to serve the wine at the Last Supper. The water in ceremonial cups is purifying, washing away that which would obstruct the divine, clear seeing, or receptivity to the other. The cup is emptied so that it may receive.

Chaplaincy entails “holding space.” To hold space is to bound boundlessness. It also involves a disposition to welcome and accept what is, in fact, interminable: presence; a present-time that holds pasts. Lynn Kirby speaks of using site-specific listening practices to become receptive to time and history “attuning to the site itself . . . being open to the history of a place” to sense into “reverberations across time . . . the energy left hanging for us to receive. How we tap into this or activate this movement across time, when we listen deeply, has been a concern of mine. Places are haunted by their histories and I think we can access those histories” (see Appendix page 45).

To hold space is to put space “on hold” or “in the hold” as it were, to become its channel, its resonance chamber, to host and receive; to be empty, beginning by opening to one’s own fluid emptiness, the “tunnel” of the ear, of the body, of time.

There is an active emptiness—an interfering with interference, an impeding of impedance—to receive, to hear, to open channels, as it were—channels being so much of what the body is comprised of, envelopes in which what is heard and felt shade into each other. Jennifer Dumpert describes a time when she was able to tell that a loved one was approaching in a public, crowded

³ The convention of the invisible psychoanalyst comes to mind as well, as does the confession booth and the ancient pedagogical practice of *acousmatics*, where the student listens to an unseen teacher, as if the visual interferes with the uptake of the audible.

place not by looking at or for him, but by attending to the “sound or presence of him”: “I knew that if I climbed off the path . . . he wouldn’t see me and I wouldn’t be able to see him. Then I decided that even without looking, I would know which of the many people walking down the path was him, either from the sound or presence of him. I was right” (see Appendix page 39).

The metaphysical notion and practice of “channeling” speaks to an intuition that the body as a whole is a spirit that can take in, through hearing, guidance that seems to emanate from beyond the self.

“Poetry-by-dictation” is another “channeling” activity used to hear what otherwise is crowded out by self-interest, judgment, agendas, or preoccupations with what is to come or what has already passed. It involves “getting out of the way” by attending to the present-time action of writing without intention for the *content* of the writing at hand. Instead intention is directed to listening for something without knowing what it is, keeping “your ideas closed and your mind open” (Spicer and Gizzi, 1998 p. 18). Here receptivity is to language itself as a collaborator. The art is one of receptivity itself.

Two key antecedents for contemporary artists who take listening and receptivity as central to their practice are John Cage and Pauline Oliveros. Anna Wolfe-Pauly and Lynn Kirby both reflected on the primacy of Pauline Oliveros’ listening pedagogy in their interviews. Oliveros brought listening and performing together, teaching listening *as* performance. Wolfe-Pauly speaks of learning how to listen by performing Oliveros’ *Sonic Meditations*, which was “just simply to listen as far as you possibly could. I felt like I was receiving sound from the other side of the North Sea. I felt like I could hear tones I had never heard before and had a sensation at the edge of my ears that I had also never had before” (see Appendix page 60). Kirby describes learning from Oliveros about becoming present through listening and creating sound:

[T]he generosity in Pauline's notes on *Teach Yourself to Fly* invites us all to be slowly present to one another before we gradually make sound. This is the fundamental power of this form of listening: being present before making any sound (see Appendix page 45).

Lisbeth Lipari (2014) feels that communities are formed and unified by shared experiences of, as she puts it *being* listening, together. In her essay "Pedagogy of Buddhism," Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick writes of the Buddhist canon that "scenes of teaching and learning are universally desired ends as much as they are instrumental means . . . none wishes for anything more precious than to receive Dharma teachings" (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 161). These generalizations—that in Buddhist canons "multitudinous forms and levels of being," however heterogeneous, all share a single desire, to hear the Dharma, and that the Mahayana scriptures "comprise nothing but a series of dramatized scenes of instruction"—describe scenes of *listening* as liberatory in and of themselves (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 161).

The idea that shared listening forms communities is central to the theories of the art collective Ultra-Red for whom active shared listening forms one crucial component of a political praxis of disciplined listening which, however, done only for its own sake, that is, solely for aesthetic or educational purposes (their example is John Cage's avant-garde composition "4'33") is *incomplete*.

They posit protocols for a form of listening that is at once a "record and catalyst for collective reflection, analysis, and *action to come* [my italics] . . . the question 'What did you hear?' becomes itself a protocol—the primary protocol—that choreographs an inquiry."

For Ultra-Red, listening contributes to relational literacy. It both "requires and generates literacy":

Since it puts subjects into relation with each other and with the world, listening has the potential to contribute significantly to the constitution of collectivity. Yet

the constitutive process far exceeds any listening procedure in and of itself (URXX, 2011, p. 4).

The implication of this statement by Ultra-Red is that the listening we do as individuals when we are gathered together is tertiary to the fact that we *are* so gathered and that constituting ourselves as a group in this way, as a precondition for positive social action, is not an epiphenomena of shared listening but its purpose.

Conclusion

Having listened to the forgoing listeners, I've learned better what it means to listen well as a chaplain-in-training, as a life-long practitioner of contemplative arts, and as an educator. It's clear that the ability to share enabling presence with another in a given present moment is predicated on a commitment moment-by-moment and over a lifetime to continuous self-examination and self-awareness of what might get in the way of presence. In this sense, to be present here and now is to continuously open to the emerging presences, in one's body, of past experiences, close and distant, and the relative acuities and qualities of, so to speak, these "past-present" tenses (tensions) in the body.

In my volunteer position at a local family shelter, the only one in the county I live in, I regularly find myself providing active listening to residents of all ages. I hold space for people (which often as not also entails holding myriad babies). As I have been taught to do in Upaya's Buddhist chaplaincy training, I practice being an "aimless nobody." I listen for opportunities to listen; I am attentive for opportunities to attend; I am receptive for opportunities to receive. And

the shift from ambient attending, listening, and receiving to focalized attending, listening, and receiving arises when a need for it arises.

I notice that the emptier I become, the fuller the other becomes. I try to counter the social, political and economic neglect, harm, and mistreatment towards residents which the shelter is at once symptomatic of, and reparative towards, by being as present and receptive as I can to everyone I interact with there, offering informal chaplaincy, “free-floating remediation” as Sedgwick puts it. This receptivity does not pick and choose. Simply: it is a developing *capacity*, a capaciousness-in-process.

Between December 2018 and April 2019 I taught a contemplative writing class called “Beginner’s Mind” on Saturdays at the Mission Creek Corrections Center for Women. We wrote and talked about many things, often returning to the question of what is beginner’s mind in this space? How can we come fresh without judgment to every moment in the oppressive context of prison? How do we have dreams for ourselves while also living wholeheartedly and fully in the present? Students asked me to define the word ‘contemplative.’ Rather than give my definition of it, we did some writing recollecting personal moments of quiet listening and attending, including spiritual states and feelings, to try to name for ourselves what might constitute a contemplative mood in our own experience. We talked about the facility for recollecting ourselves, for reverie and insight, for being present. Several people spoke about hearing the ravens that congregate in the trees beyond the prison fences. We talked about liminal states between dreaming and awakening and how we can gain insight from unusual experiences that happen in ordinary moments. A young woman in prison on drug charges for the second time in her young life who was ordinarily very quiet and unsure of herself spontaneously began to tell us about a remarkable dream.

In her dream she was looking out of a window of the prison, a window that she realized was also a mirror. She saw her brothers approaching, but she also saw herself. She began to wave to her brothers, calling their names. Then she heard her father's voice saying *recall, recall* and she understood that he was "recalling" her brothers away from the window because he didn't want them to be, as she put it, "exposed" to her.⁴ At that her brothers float backwards, away from her. She woke up hearing the word *recall* on the loudspeaker that segments time at the prison, breaking apart the day with the crackling, agitating commands that charge the molecules with social control. The sharing of this dream in this moment felt miraculous. It brought us into a quiet, shared, contemplative space. The feeling of respect and gladness for this moment of opening up was palpable.

One of the important things I have learned in chaplaincy that has been deepened for me by writing this thesis is that my ability to be present, receptive, and listening in spaces where trauma is active be it a prison, a shelter, or a classroom is contingent upon cutting off past and future and being open, quietly receding into the moment in a way that allows others to come forward, to open, to be and to discover themselves in all their fullness and complexity.

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⁴ The word "recall" is used to announce breakfast at the prison.

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APPENDIX: INTERVIEWS WITH LISTENERS

The interviews appear below in alphabetical order by last name of interviewee. Interviews have been formatted for consistency and in some cases very lightly edited for clarity.

Linda Atkins, Buddhist hospice chaplain

1)What is good listening?

It may depend on who is determining whether it's good or not: Is it for me to say I was listening well, or for the person I was listening to to say that? I recently spent 80 minutes with a patient who said four or five times, "Thank you so much. It's so helpful to talk to someone who understands!" Every time she said it, I wondered, how does she know I understand? I never said, "I understand," and I also never screamed, "I don't understand!" I suspect she assumed that I understood because I'm the chaplain, and in that conversation, at least, that seemed to be more than enough. If I get to be the one to say if my listening is good, then I would say that, at a minimum, it is listening where my mind doesn't wander: where I hear all the words, and preferably notice facial expression and body language and what type of eye contact there is. Next, I think it's essential for me to have some understanding of what my stuff is, so I can notice when it's getting triggered, along with a lifelong commitment to keep learning more about what triggers me. If I'm exhausted after a day of listening, that tells me I was expending too much effort. I think the purpose of listening is to allow people to hear themselves speaking their own wisdom—not for me to know what advice to give them or what book or practice to recommend. I think there has to be a feeling of positive regard for listening to be good. Ideally, the speaker is sensing, "This person likes me! She's interested in what I'm saying!"

2)What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

It requires my willingness to try to listen well, and it requires the ability to be mindful of my body, thoughts and emotions. It makes possible a healing relationship, and allows me to take in things that change me and make my world bigger.

3)How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

I am more and more often managing to remember what Roshi said about how if we are practicing, the person we are with is practicing, too, so quite often I literally feel my feet on the floor and am aware of being able to feel that. I am not sure where I feel listening in my body, other than the spot I am using as a place to be mindful of. I aspire to be a very still listener, but feel that I often fall short. I have a bad habit of nodding reflexively; sometimes people nod back every time I nod, making me wish even more that I could rid myself of this habit.

4)What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

So many things: having a general understanding of what the cultural situation might be, while remembering that knowing about a group might mean nothing about knowing about a person. Various trainings in Clinical Pastoral Education, including the focus on intra- and interpersonal dynamics, to help us be more familiar with our patterns. Certain books. One that comes first to mind is an anthology called *When Professionals Weep*.⁵ First and foremost is the practice of mindfulness / zazen / vipassana. One thing that interferes with listening well is when I have an

⁵ *When Professionals Weep: Emotional and Countertransference Responses in Palliative and End-of-Life Care* (Series in Death, Dying, and Bereavement) by Renee S. Katz and Therese A. Johnson | Feb 7, 2016

immediate judgment about a person and don't notice it: This person is just wasting my time. This rich person doesn't have any real problems. (Ugh.)

5) How do you know when you are listening well?

I have noticed more than once that when I am really aware of my emotions when I'm with a patient (or family member), the patient also expresses emotion, as if there has been some sort of direct invitation from one body of emotion to another. I find it really satisfying when that happens, on the theory (big in CPE, though I'm not positive I entirely agree) that effective listening elicits emotion. Assuming that is good, it's satisfying when it happens.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

I think the only things I can be present to are my own experience of the six sense doors. I can't directly be present to what someone else hears or feels; the interface is my own ears and my own body. So, good presence is when I'm aware of as much as possible of what's arriving via the sense doors, and consciously open to sensing more: Frank Ostaseski's "What else is here?"

7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

I think a daily meditation practice is essential.

8) How do you know when you are present?

When I am consciously aware of any sensory experience, including thoughts and feelings.

9) What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

I think there can't be good listening without presence.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

In CPE, you write "verbatim," where you try to reconstruct sentence by sentence a whole conversation with another person, along with observations about the appearance of the person and the room, your state of mind going in, reactions and responses during the conversation, etc. These are then examined, word by word, by you and a peer group. This was extremely effective in bringing to light when I had made an assumption and what kinds of assumptions were habitual for me.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

I remember being on retreat at Spirit Rock and sitting with severe pain over the course of a few days. I was unhappy ... unhappy ... unhappy ... and then happy. I suddenly realized that, while my body still hurt just as much, my mind was perfectly happy. What I learned was that the effort to be present—to be mindful—eventually liberated suffering, because the suffering was in fact entirely mental. Once my mind was able to accommodate an experience, the suffering was gone, even if the back pain wasn't.

12) Anything else to add/other thoughts about listening and presence?

I think listening with presence is a form of love and something that people crave and appreciate, and something which can heal.

Raka Banerjee, Buddhist chaplain

1)What is good listening?

Good listening is characterized by being fully present and attentive to the speaker, listening not just with your mind but with your open heart to honor the speaker's truth.

2)What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

Listening requires integrity and presence. It generates intimacy and makes possible new, deep ways of connecting across any and all boundaries.

3)How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

I feel listening in a sort of leaning forward with an open heart. I feel it in the attentiveness of my mind to the speaker. I feel it in the stability of my stomach as I open to another. I would describe my way of listening as a practice of opening to non-separation.

4)What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

I listen well when I am calm, grounded in myself, and undistracted by agitations in my mind, body or environment. I have a hard time listening well in noisy or busy environments, when I'm feeling physically unwell, or if I'm suffering emotionally.

5) How do you know when you are listening well?

I know when I'm listening well by the subtle bodily and facial cues that I receive from the speaker which let me know that they are feeling heard. I can also tell by the level of mental cross-talk (ideally none) in my own mind, and my level of distractedness by agitations in body, mind or environment.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

Good presence is open, caring, calm, empathetic, loving, safe, quiet, and steady.

7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

A good presence is facilitated by the ability to ground oneself in any circumstance of body, mind or environment. In my experience, a strong meditative background is extremely helpful to enable presence even in difficult circumstances.

8)How do you know when you are present?

This is very hard to answer—I feel like “I just know.” I'm undistracted and steady. Every part of my mind and heart is here.

9)What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

Presence is created by one's internal state and expressed through innumerable bodily and facial cues. Listening is wholeheartedly focusing that presence on another.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

At one point in my life, I realized that in many of my relationships, I was only listening and not actually sharing myself. I had been unwittingly operating under an impression that listening was a service that I could provide to my loved ones. But I realized that by only listening and never sharing, I was contributing to an uneven power dynamic within those relationships, where I felt that I was there to serve that person, but was not opening up to the humility of being served myself. I learned that there is power to be gained in listening, and it is not always a purely positive thing.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

My mentor has a very calm, intentional presence. Whenever I'm with her, or even just on the phone, I feel myself adjusting to it and settling into it—speaking in a calmer and more intentional way myself. It teaches me how someone's presence can have a strong effect on others' behavior in ways that are not clearly observable or understandable to me.

Natascha Bruckner, Buddhist chaplain

1)What is good listening?

Good listening is quiet, focused, mindful attention on the one who is communicating.

2)What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

Listening requires me to set aside my thoughts, agendas, plans, and expectations. It generates peace and stillness in me, and space for the other person to express their thoughts and feelings openly and fully.

3)How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

I feel it as a quietness in my body and a quickening of attention to the present moment. If I'm listening on the phone or in a sangha setting, I like to close my eyes to block visual stimuli so I can be absorbed in the person's words, voice, and pauses. These are great questions and I am looking forward to sitting with them more in the future, noticing how I listen.

4)What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)?

I have learned a lot about listening from Thich Nhat Hanh. He advises listening with the sole purpose of allowing other person to empty their heart and be heard. He suggests that even if the speaker has a misperception, the listener doesn't correct them but just simply listens. Putting his teachings into practice has helped me not to interfere or interrupt others while they are speaking, and to hold others with a feeling of compassion and acceptance no matter what they are saying.

What interferes with listening well?

When I am mentally caught up in my opinions, when I have judgments about the person or what they are expressing, when I have an agenda or want to give advice – these things interfere with listening well.

5)How do you know when you are listening well?

My mind becomes quiet and my body relaxes. Often, I am surprised by what I hear. The feeling of newness and surprise is a sign to me that I am really listening to the other person, not attaching to my expectations about what they'll say.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

I believe good presence is nonjudgmental, compassionate, mindful presence.

7)What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

A strong and regular meditation practice cultivates a mind that is more able to practice good presence. Being around others who are practicing mindful presence is conducive to deepening my sense of presence.

8)How do you know when you are present?

My senses come alive, and life feels vivid, unfiltered, and real.

9)What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

Listening is an element, a facet of presence. Listening is possible when I am mindfully present.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

An astrologer once described me as a person who is “wired to be a confidante,” and she advised me to pay attention to the cycle that people go through when they confide in me. They start by talking about something trivial; this is a way of finding out if I am really paying attention. Once they see that they have my attention, they initiate a “dump cycle” of emptying out whatever they need to say. It is like emptying a sump pump. First, they pour out the relatively superficial information (the clear water at the top of the barrel), and as they continue talking, the “muddier” water comes out – and then finally the sludge, or the most intense part of the story and emotions they are experiencing. In the process, as they get into more intense sharing, they often pause, sigh, and/or repeat themselves. I’ve found the astrologer’s description to be true, for the most part. Everyone has their own pace, and some people take an hour to go through this emptying process, while others only need 5 or 10 minutes. When they are done and “cleared out,” they tend to thank me for listening and move on to a lighter topic. The astrologer told me that if I give advice to the person talking, it shuts them up – it stops the whole process, so it’s likely they won’t be able to empty out the “sludge.” There’s more about this in a blog post I wrote on being a confidante: <https://nataschabruckner.wordpress.com/2011/02/16/confessions-of-a-confidante-thoughts-on-deep-listening/>

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

Here are a few blog posts that connect with this question and a few of the other questions above: <https://nataschabruckner.wordpress.com/2013/06/>

Follow-up question:

Do you feel listened to/heard regularly in your life? What makes you feel well listened to?

It is rare that I feel deeply listened to. When I feel someone is listening to me well, I have a sense that there’s ample time for me to speak as long as I need or want to speak. The listener is mostly quiet – even throughout my pauses and slow unfurling of realization as I talk. There is a sense of utter nonjudgment and acceptance of me as I am, no matter what I say. They show empathy via occasional responses or sounds or expressions. They may ask questions or give supportive reflections but they don’t give advice unless I ask for it.

Erik Davis, historian of religion, author, and podcaster

1)What is good listening?

(Note: There is an interesting unspoken fork in the road in this question: are we talking about the overall experience of listening, or of listening in its social sense, of listening to another human speak? Though I suspect there is a lot about the latter in your program I have stayed mostly with the former, just because I think about it more (although it applies to (some) of the latter of course). I have always been a good listener in the social sense, just a gift really, grokking meanings, empathically sensing affect, waiting before responding, tuning into where folks “are coming from,” etc., so it is less of a *practice* for me. Its just a choice whether to fall away from it or not.) So: good listening: Alert attention, to events “inside” and “outside,” and the willingness to both rest on the boundary between those categories and feel its instability, even its disappearance.

2)What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

It requires an alert mode of meditation that is both incorporeal and almost tactile, and it makes possible presence precisely! As well as situatedness. We are of course situated with vision but it rarely feels that way: with proper listening space—as well as its relational organization-- both reveals, is revealed, and makes possible.

3)How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

Stillness for sure, though not necessarily physical immobility. A quieting of the mind. An attention to timbre, the texture or feel or surface quality fluctuations of a sound. It feels like immersing my whole body, including my head, into a bath of sound, like I am opening up to the water I am swimming in and don’t usually notice. I believe this is true on a physics level as well: the air is an invisible fluid, and we hear because sound waves are propagated through that medium, unlike in deep space for example. So we are already submerged, and the listening is an attunement first to the surface of the body in its immediate contact with the surrounding medium, as well as a felt or phenomenological sense of immersion in a space of listening that contains both sounds and silences. Listening as surround-sound.

4)What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

How to be still even when moving. Dissolving reactivity and naming wherever possible. Dissolving the mind’s tendency to glom onto specific sounds and sources as the focused organization of the soundspace. If the listening is ambient it is often disturbed by speech in a language I can understand because I am drawn into semantics. However if the focus is to listen to a person, then the spatial stillness all still applies, but the focus is allowed to fall on the person as source of the action, with corresponding less emphasis on the surround-sound effect.

5)How do you know when you are listening well?

When I am aware of the dimension of space around me and through me, when there is little reactivity, when there is little naming (i.e., I “recognize” the sound as a motorcycle, but my listening is mostly timbral and dynamic, following a flow rather than a named event: “a motorcycle is passing”). When I am in deep listening, there is a very subtle shift in time and

presence that is, from another angle, huge. It's a very clear shift, I know it when it is happening, and it has to do with how listening deeply tunes into the passing present with a kind of immediacy that is more (in my belief) than just "now" because, as with music, the very now-ness of the medium requires a bit of pastness and future-ness, but the whole flow is still "brought online" with an unmistakable quality of presence and abiding that no longer has to be struggled for, that simply flows and unfolds in electric, crystalline presence. Occasionally at the moment, there is the actual disappearance of the boundary of inside and outside, so that the sounds are just happening in my mind and in the environment at the same time and in the same way. Sound is no longer a transmission from outside, but a pure event. Wonderful!

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

What Haraway calls "staying with the trouble." It is easy to have good presence when there is connection and things are lovely. But can we tenderly hold resistance, fear, judgment, repulsion, etc. I am sad to say I don't do spiritual care or much socially engaged stuff (not sure why), but one of my practices is that if street people or particularly "crazy" street people get my eye and say something to me, I respond, whether I want to or not. Often it goes well and is fun, and sometimes it's kinda scary, and occasionally it's very scary. But it is a practice of presence.

7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

Stillness, tons of meditation, but also an ability to "taste" experience, which is my way of getting over dualism. Like: I am not in a nondual state: there is the traffic and me driving the car, or the motorcycle and this sad old white guy meditating. But by tasting the phenomenon, there is a meeting of substance and "Taste", including my reactions, but coupled with a willingness and engagement to just taste beyond preferences (even though preferences arise). It's like smelling a funky smell and just staying with the funky smell: "Ah, what makes this repulsive, what are its "notes"? Feces, rotting corpse, rotting vegetables, fish sauce, smelly socks, stale sweat, etc."

8) How do you know when you are present?

There is nowhere else to go. But usually there is a change in the quality of space. This is particularly noticeable within meditation, whether eyes half open or closed: there is a shift, a crisp opening, a "clearing" in the visual field. Also a change in time: it does not require much effort to stay in the flow, which again I do not experience (or think about) as a "Now" but more of a passing present, a Bergsonian *duree* (by the way did you read that Aeon article about how Bergson suffered because so many women liked his work?).

9) What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

Profound in my view. Listening is my portal number one to presence. But listening for me involves other sensory modalities: taste (as explained), touch (through timbre and the proprioceptive sense of the body in space), vision (the dimension of space can be felt/seen as well as heard). For me, the listening usually leads to presence, but if I find myself in presence through another practice — I could say breathing perhaps, but this is very much a listening practice for me as well — then there is a choice whether to tune more fully into listening.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

I remember distinctly the first time in meditation that the boundary between inside and outside, mind-hearing and sound-environment, totally dissolved into what at that point was probably my most intense but also gentle sense of pure presence. Around the same time, I stumbled across the teachings on sound in the Surangama Sutra, which is very worth working with! It also ties in with the role of sound in some Zen awakening experiences. Sometimes cannabis can help with this dissolution—the funny thing is that once I have had this experience with a particular sound source (like crashing waves, which I first totally tuned into when I was stoned) it is much easier to access later. When I am near crashing waves it takes about 5 seconds of silent stillness to tune into presence through the quasi-linear spatial unfolding of the delicious frothy wave crash.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

They almost all involve listening! I guess the other one was when I watched a puppy die. It was not an animal I knew, so though it was cute and sweet I didn't already have an emotional connection. But we cared for it as best we could and I remember how frightened he looked. I guess that experience taught me that presence is often more important than having a particular emotional reaction or coming from your emotional reaction, or navigating an experience emotion-forward. Not that presence and affect are opposed, but they shift the focus and tonality.

Jennifer Dumpert, author of Liminal Dreaming: Exploring Consciousness at the Edges of Sleep

1) What are you doing when you listen actively?

Active listening is one of my primary meditation practices so I do it often, when outside, when lying down, when pausing from work. For example, I try to track the furthestest sound, or listen for how many sounds I can hear at once. I stop whatever it is I'm doing when I listen actively, Writing, walking on the street, lying in bed, and sitting in my window are prime contenders.

2) What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

It requires me to quiet down myself, which is one of my goals.

3) How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

I listen with everything, a fully paused moment, like a cat who has stopped, frozen, rotating ears. I think it probably generates some tension in my body, a sort of full on pause of everything, with physical attentiveness.

4) What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

Listening became a primary practice of mine during the years that I was a dedicated Zen practitioner and often did 3- 5- 7- and 10-day meditation retreats in the San Jacinto mountains east of LA, up high in the midst of woods. One could hear the wind in the trees very far off. As I write this, the fog horns in the Bay started booming out their particular, haunting sound. Last week, I visited Buffalo, NY, on a book tour. I grew up in that crumbling rust belt city. Sleeping in the room in which I slept as a kid, I enjoyed the late night freight trains rattling by, eerie and beautiful.

5) How do you know when you are listening well?

I sense a field of listening all around me.

6) Do you feel well listened to in your life? What makes you feel well listened to?

Often not. I often feel interrupted. However, I recently published a book and the difference in the degree to which people actually allow me voice and authority has changed drastically, to a disturbing degree, in fact. As a middle aged woman, I feel that people discounted a lot of what I said until the external force of the book publishing world gave me authority to speak.

7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your personal and professional experience?

When we all feel like we can express ourselves well and that people listen, the conversations get much better. Too many of us feel the need to jockey to be heard and understood and that makes for a certain percentage of ego performance in our talking. My best conversations come with people with whom I don't feel like I need to assert opinions and they don't either, even if our opinions are strong.

8) *How do you know when you are present?*

There's a very physical quality to presence, a slowing down and focusing. When truly present, I don't hurry, I don't flutter off, neither bodily nor with attention. It's almost like a hush.

9) *What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?*

A very intense feedback loop between the two. Someone truly listening creates presence in the speaker, someone speaking with confident, calm, solid presence promotes listening.

10) *Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?*

I recently attended a performance of Carmen with my in-laws, a slightly dull performance. I learned back in my chair, entered a state of hypnagogia, and listened. Mostly I drifted through the liminal dream zone, but whenever the music changed, I would open my eyes and read the super titles, then go back in. Doing that, I was able to track the plot though mostly I was lounging in dream space. Coasting the sound and attention and hypnagogia kept my mind just below the line of consciousness that delineates sleep and dream and somehow that unlocked incredibly vivid sensual memory. I remembered the public pool where I went swimming as a kid, the smell of the chlorine, the arrangement and color of lockers, the clanging sound of the metal lockers closing and opening, distant shouts of kids up the steps to the pool, the wet sounds of feet on cement around the pool. The something involves the relationship of sound and memory, the way that sound could anchor the experience.

11) *Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?*

Sitting on the path at Esalen years ago, I wanted to climb out on a rock to watch the sunset, but I was waiting for my spouse to come down from the hot tubs and I knew that if I climbed off the path and looked the other way, he wouldn't see me and I wouldn't be able to see him. Then I decided that even without looking, I would know which of the many people walking down the path was him without looking, either from the sound or presence of him. I was right.

Sarah Fontaine, astrologer, facilitator, author, healer, and mother

1) What is good listening?

Listening while repeatedly checking in with oneself, re-awakening to the truth that you really don't know. Listening while maintaining beginner's mind. But beginner's mind isn't something to maintain! It's something to re-find, over and over.

2) What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

Listening requires that you discipline the mind, help guide it away from the tendency for certainty and rigidity and an attachment to knowing. Discipline sounds less compassionate than I mean. Listening requires vigilance in seeing and managing the small mind, which is a form of love. It makes possible the beautiful surprise again and again of discovering perspectives different from one's own. For example, today on the plane I saw a woman playing games on her phone and I felt bad for her / judged her, and when we talked she told me she left her 3-year-old for the first time for the weekend and didn't know what to do with herself. The mind is constantly making up stories, almost always they don't include as much compassion and understanding as needed to include the whole truth of a situation. Listening reminds me to listen more, to wait before I decide I have enough information to judge a situation. It's almost never the case that I have enough information.

3) How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

It's an absence of a furrowed brow, an absence of interior bracing, an absence of urgency to speak. An inner spaciousness in the third eye area. The practice is returning to the feet, returning awareness to the body to remind the nervous system it can relax. That it doesn't need the information received to be any certain way. Listening as a practice is attention which is a form of love. It can't be done with too much effort, there has to be an openness.

4) What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

Breathing, all the learning about mindfulness and especially anatta, the not-self idea is so helpful. The more caught up in a self I am, the more I can't listen because I need all sorts of circumstances to be a certain way. Rigid beliefs and assumptions interfere with listening, but it's usually hard to see the assumptions. Looking for them is the activity of listening I think. When the mind is calm and the heart is cultivated, listening is a natural state, it's quite easy.

5) How do you know when you are listening well?

It's a feeling, and usually the other person (in the case of one-on-one interactions) feels my lack of agitation as respect for them, that there's a lot of freedom to be whatever way for everyone involved.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

A balance between detachment / equanimity and the deepest humility that life is ruthless sometimes and kicks anyone's ass—humility that prevents any righteousness, keeping it relentlessly real.

7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

Whatever way one can stay connected to not getting too “spiritual”—not thinking that somehow we know what others need or are exempt from suffering and confusion.

8) How do you know when you are present?

My heart is there and feels tireless, like it has endless capacity. It’s a feeling.

9) What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

They might be the same thing. Like that Mother Teresa quote about how she and god just listen to each other but no one talks.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

I learn more about listening every day in my relationship with Kyle. I constantly think I know about the situation at hand and through the energetic shifts as we struggle and find connection, I see how malleable it all is and when I can listen and not take it too personally so much space for love opens up, new space all the time, for realizing how I saw the situation in a limited way.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

My experience existing with my newborn baby, Day, is learning presence anew over and over. His version of presence, how his mind doesn’t jump to the future or past yet, how liberating, trusting, loving that is.

This interview is with Evelyn Hampton, fiction writer, teacher, Buddhist

1) *What is good listening?*

When I listen actively, I feel like I'm taking in another's words as if they were a tangible material; the process feels physical. It also involves noting when I've not understood or taken something in, and prompting for more information / clarification. It's as much about awareness of myself as it is about awareness of another. In contrast, when I'm NOT actively listening, I'm easily distracted from others and myself, even while believing that I'm still listening.

2) *What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?*

It requires energy of me; sometimes it "returns" this energy to me, or helps me to generate energy, but not always. In other words, it can be draining. What it makes possible — a greater capacity for connecting with others, a tangible sense of being "with" others (when it's active), and I learn more about the world.

3) *How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?* I feel listening as a pressure in my head. It's really a tangible, sometimes pulsating pressure that radiates through the center of my forehead. It can be uncomfortable; when it is uncomfortable, it's sometimes a signal that I'm trying too hard, or just tired. If I'm listening to something difficult to process — because it's complex or visceral, for instance — I can sense tension throughout my shoulders and stomach. I'm not sure that I have a listening practice — this question makes me curious about how I could.

4) *What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?*

Meditation practices, particularly those oriented towards cultivating concentration, help me in listening in that I understand the cues my body sends when I've checked out, or my mind has wandered. The training of "bringing attention back" is pretty ingrained in me, I think. Yet I sometimes think that some mental drift is helpful in certain situations when listening; if my focus is too rigid, for instance, I might not be able to offer imaginative or flexible suggestions, if asked to.

5) *How do you know when you are listening well?*

I think I depend on cues, verbal or gestural feedback, from whomever I'm listening to. I guess I don't consider "listening well" to necessarily include remembering all the details of a conversation. It more has to do with a felt sense of connection, and how that connection happens feels pretty mysterious to me.

6) *What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?*

In general, yes. I feel very fortunate to be able to write for people willing to read what I have to say. I've been thinking a lot about listening and being heard in terms of my aging parents — they pretty often now forget what I've told them and ask me the same questions about my life over and over: and while I realize it's not that they're "not listening," it can feel like that sometimes.

7) *What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?*

There's someone I work with in a university / teaching context who has amazing presence — there's just a sense of close connection when she's in dialogue; even if there are many people in the room, her attention never feels divided. I've noticed that she uses her body more than most people do during conversations, as if listening for her is a kind of movement, and this movement allows her to remain present. She's also very open about saying if she hasn't understood something and asking a speaker to repeat what she's said.

8) *How do you know when you are present?*

How I know I'm present — I'm generally pretty quick to cue into when my mind has wandered — it's a sense of waking up from sleep and realizing I've missed what's been happening in the room. There are tangible gaps in my memory of the conversation if I've tuned out. When I'm present, there's a sense of smoothness and continuity.

9) *What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?*

I think they're not necessarily entwined but can feel very connected. When I'm with my dad, for instance, it can feel like he's not "present" if it becomes apparent that he's forgotten something I've just said. It's as if the aging process is physically moving him farther and farther away from me. Yet to him, I think that when we spend time together he feels he is *with* me; that he is being present. Yet I know from times when I've been sick that I can be very present with another person but not able to converse or even really listen to what they're saying. I think "presence" might be mostly conveyed nonverbally, at least for me.

10) *Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?*

An experience that taught me about listening — what comes to mind might be more about awareness of others' feelings, but feels related for me to listening. I remember this moment after my 5th birthday party when, after my friends had gone home, my mom pointed out that I'd hurt one of my friend's feelings by not including her in a game I was playing with a few other kids. It's my first memory of being able to connect my actions to another's feelings, and of feeling hurt that I'd hurt someone else — and of realizing I have the power to hurt others through my attention / lack of it.

11) *Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?*

Visiting my grandmother in the hospital shortly before she died. She had a tube down her throat so we couldn't speak, but her presence in the room was enormous. I was more aware of *her* than I'd ever been. At one point it was so overwhelming that I fainted.

This interview is with Lynn Marie Kirby, artist and professor

I am just going to write about listening, keeping your questions in mind, inspired by your thoughts, but not necessarily answering the questions in order.

I am thrilled that you are asking these questions as *listening* is something I have been thinking a lot about, and trying to practice as the basis for my art-making, indeed since we first met, and I was listening around 24th Street in San Francisco.

One of the things that I think I try to do when listening is really what one might call a process of attunement, paying attention to the presence of others and to the site of listening itself. Sound vibrates through the air in wave patterns and much of it is absorbed in the receiving bodies of listeners. The receiving body absorbs more than just sound, as listening is not only done with the ears but with our whole body, thus listening calls upon a multi-sensory practice of sympathetic resonance.

My attention to sound goes back many years, but I only came to understand that *listening* was foundational to my work about fifteen years ago.

“I am trying to become a better listener ... listening is a shared gathering...social community does not arise just because of speaking but because of listening. We become one when we listen together — to an opera, to a politician, to the wind blowing through the trees, or to God.... not that we will come to agree, or to see things the same way, or even come to understand in the same way. But we share the experience of *being* listening — and up from the listening bubbles a speaking,” from Lisbeth Lipari’s *Listening, Thinking, Being*.

I think I am a better listener outside my own home. Miranda, you ask about the relationship of presence and listening. We cannot really hear unless we are present and available. I know I am often a distracted listener, looking things up on my phone when in the presence of others, rushing to get ready to leave the house, only partly present, all the daily distractions of doing, this is not being present. Why is it harder to listen at home? Even as I make so much work about the domestic sphere! I seem to need to carve out a space for paying attention, to frame this practice; maybe someday there will be less of a boundary between presence and listening.

History:

I began to pay attention to listening in thinking of soundscapes, first for creating sound pieces, and sound for films and performances, and only later did I begin to pay attention to the act of listening itself. I was inspired when I came upon Barry Truax’s exercises for listening. The Canadians have a long history of thinking about sound and working with sound. I was inspired by Murray Schafer’s practice of silence and “ear cleaning” and listening walks, all exercises I have done in various ways with my students.

But I only really began to think of *listening as a practice* through Pauline Oliveros. In the mid 1990’s I invited Pauline to come as a visiting artist to a sound class I was organizing at CCA

where I teach. She introduced us to her Deep Listening practice, a form of sonic meditation, of making sound together, based on listening to the sounds of the person sitting or lying next to you.

During this visit to CCA, Pauline was also an artist in residence at the Exploratorium. She invited me to come visit her there and play with her. A highpoint of my life was this encounter with Pauline, I played the crystal bowl — she played the harmonium. As much as I love sound and music, I am not a musician, and said so to Pauline. She said all we have to do is listen to one another. We did for over an hour, listened intently to one another and made sound to and with one another.

I recently used her sonic mediation *Teach yourself to Fly* in a deep listening session at an exhibition of mine. In this sonic mediation the space is lit with dim blue light, people sit facing one another. I had lit the space blue for my show, as I was working with the color blue, as in the Marian blue of the Virgin Mary's capes in Renaissance painting — in a project about missing tenderness. This blue space was inside an alcove in a Catholic church.

“Begin by simply observing your own breathing. Always be an observer. Gradually allow your breathing to become audible. Then gradually introduce your voice.” This generosity in Pauline's notes on *Teach yourself to Fly* invites us all to be slowly present to one another before we gradually make sound. This is the fundamental power of this form of listening, the being present before making any sound. So simple, so powerful, so difficult to really practice!

I want to go back to this idea of listening, as not only an acoustic practice, but also to the idea of attuning to the site itself. For me this means a receptivity to reverberations across time, being open to the history of a place, what happened, or did not happen — the energy left hanging for us to receive. How we tap into this or activate this movement across time, when we listen deeply, has been a concern of mine. Places are haunted by their histories and I think we can access these histories. Just being present is not always enough, sometimes we must research and explore and reach out beyond our own knowledge, as listening is not only located within us, but around us.

I think listening takes places both in the company of others and by oneself.

I often feel listened to with friends, especially one friend who is amazing, always. I do remember growing up that I was very aware of the adults who actually listened. It was a wonderful experience; made me feel special, also made me believe what I said mattered. I wonder if I listen enough to my own students, or my friends, or my husband? I do feel almost a tingle when I am truly present, truly listening. Sometimes this sensation is transformative, even transcendent; sometimes the sensation is too intense and overwhelming. Many years ago I visited the chapel at St. Juan Capistrano. There was a small side room off the main chapel full of Milagros: hands, hearts, internal organs. As I stood inside the small space I could hear and feel all the reverberant pain, I had to leave.

Karen Lohman, Buddhist chaplain

1)What is good listening?

Good listening is about hearing the sub-text and seeing if the words said match the face, the essence of the heart, the context; it is about being, feeling open. Not interrupting. Not going into big emotional reactions. Holding space.

2)What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

Listening requires me to set down my judgment, or just notice it with kindness. It generates possibilities, questions, at times, spaciousness perhaps...depends on content and context.

3)How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

I listen with my heart, if I am wholly present. I am in my body and notice my breath, a soft gaze, a soft jaw, hands loose, hips fluid, yet grounded through my belly and feet. I notice where I might react or tense or begin to space out if I am triggered in my listening or responding to the “energy behind or around” the words spoken.

4)What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

Setting aside myself, opening to a big-view, my natural openness and curiosity supports my listening. Buddhist training in “not knowing”, sitting, Dharma training, Quaker meeting, time alone in nature, doing art with open, relaxed focus. Practicing energy work, sitting with the dying and recently deceased beings, while taking a view that all beings are inter-connected; being a somewhat introverted, visual and sensate, empath orients me to listening.

5)How do you know when you are listening well?

When those I listen to seem to relax and open-up, to discover something about life or their situation. When they hear themselves and get an insight. I feel very relaxed, alive, present and okay with not knowing what is coming next. I can reflect back to the individual in an appropriate, thoughtful manner.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism? A warm-heartedness, a sense of curiosity and vulnerability, backed-up by a grounded, centered strength. Being like a clear pool.

7)What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

Good will. Positive self-care, being rested. A willingness to be open. A safe environment where individuals feel respected, heard, valued, not judged. Nature or natural beauty is present; valued.

8)How do you know when you are present?

When my mind isn't wandering, distracted or making lists. When I feel centered, relatively calm, curious, open.

9)What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

One must be present to listen fully. One can listen and have a whole other commentary going on and not be present, but still be listening. Presence deepens and concentrates listening. (They are friends.)

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

Many times in my work as a hospital chaplain, I leave what might commonly feel like a longer than usual, silent pause. I am very comfortable with this, usually. Often the outcome after such a pause, is that I might think the conversation is over, then it shifts and the person I am with, goes into a story or comments on something at the heart of their situation, or a memory arises that gives and insight or brings tears.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

(goes hand-in-hand with #10.)

12) Anything else to add/other thoughts about listening and presence?

I need to be well hydrated and take breaks outside or be kind to myself to listen and be present. I have to be present to my own needs.

Bernadine Mellis, filmmaker, student at the Harvard Divinity School, and mother

1)What is good listening?

I often listen with a sense of what I think the person I'm talking to is going to say or is trying to say or might really mean. I think this is probably not good listening. Good listening might be listening without trying to get the listening part right. I seem to only be able to define this in negative terms!

2)What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

It requires some slowing down or stillness. It makes possible connection and learning and even change.

3)How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

I think I listen with my whole self when I really listen. I sit up and organize myself internally like one big cocked puppy ear! I don't know that I have a listening practice as such, but maybe I ought to develop one.

4)What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

Meditation and cultivating comfort with uncertainty, with not knowing, are helpful practices for listening. Anxiety, perfectionism, trying to do too many things at once interfere.

5)How do you know when you are listening well?

I'm able to be attentive outwardly as opposed to tending to my own impulses.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

The word "good" is throwing me for a loop. I don't know?

7)What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

Not having a lot on my mind, like when I'm going to check email next, and not trying to figure things out, like whether something is okay or not.

8)How do you know when you are present?

I don't feel like I have to do something besides what I'm doing, and I'm not wondering if things are okay or not.

9)What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

Listening is a pleasure when I'm present.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

Meeting with a student, thinking she's upset about a particular thing, trying to counsel her on that, seeing her frustration and realizing that I haven't listened long enough and missed what is really going on.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

My child teaches me about presence every day. This morning, he was playing and I was preparing for a meeting later today. He came and asked me to play with him. When I joined his game I realized he really didn't want me to play, there was nothing for me to do, he was doing the game himself. But he wanted me to be with him fully, even if I was only nearby washing dishes or looking out the window. While I was preparing for the meeting, my mind was in the future, in a problem that wasn't in front of me. He wanted me to be in the house in the morning with him the way he was in the house in the morning fully.

Stephanie Monroney, Buddhist chaplain, executive director, Plymouth Healing Communities

1)What is good listening?

Attunement to the other's mental, emotional and physical state without having an agenda or expected outcome on my own part. But it also involves attunement to my mental, emotional and physical states as well.

2)What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

Listening requires that I be aware of my own bodily presence (breath, sensory focus, etc.) and that I be aware of the "other's" bodily presence at the same time. It requires that I be aware of my own internal landscape—that I do a "check-in" with myself at the beginning (and perhaps intermittently during the listening session if I feel my presence begin to stray or weaken) but then I have to shift the focus away from myself and let it rest on the person who is talking. Listening generates meaningful connections with others but it also engenders a deeper awareness of, and connection with, my "self".

3)How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

Hmmm... I think I can answer "when" I listen better than "how". But the "how" is gradually shifting as I begin to practice more deeply with presence and loving kindness. Since it takes effort for me to shift out of problem-solving listening mode and into simple "receiving" mode, I am more aware of the "hows" that must be employed to make that shift (see response to #5). When I am listening to another and it is in regards to "problem solving" or brainstorming I "feel" it quite literally across my forehead as if there is track running around my head (a sort of "halo") and the words and ideas are going around the track. When I am listening to someone and it is about an experience or an emotion (joy, sorrow, fear, frustration) where I feel the listening in my body will depend on which type of presence I am bringing. If I am in "fix-it" mode, then I will feel it in my head AND in my heart center. But when I drop my own agenda and attempts to come up with a solution then there is a very visceral and physical shift away from my forehead and into my chest and abdomen. My "way" of listening as a practice is still in a fledgling state. For listening to be a practice (vs. an automatic and conditioned response or reaction to another person talking or sharing) means I have to mentally check in with myself (similar to internally reciting the G.R.A.C.E. mnemonic) and settle myself for the experience.⁶ It does not come naturally yet. Or like Zazen which still requires me to do a mental checklist and to self-correct at the beginning and throughout the sit, the practice of deep listening requires me to make lots of little adjustments along the way.

4)What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

What allows: Zazen, dokusan, and council are practices and trainings that allow me to listen well. Dropping my ego and need to fix things is a disposition that I am trying to develop in order to allow me to be more present and to listen wholeheartedly and pointedly. Being truly curious

⁶ See *Standing at the Edge* by Joan Halifax (Macmillan, 2017). Created by Halifax, G.R.A.C.E. is a protocol and mnemonic for caregivers. The letters stand for: **G**ather attention; **R**ecall intention; **A**ttune to self/other/the situation; **C**onsider what serves; **E**ngage, and **E**nd.

also allows me to listen well. What interferes: Distractions interfere with listening well. Having my own agenda or being attached to an outcome prevents me from listening well. Feeling as if there must be some sort of resolution or closure (i.e. being uncomfortable with open endings, ambiguity, and unresolved tensions) gets in the way of skillful listening.

5) How do you know when you are listening well?

My thoughts are settled (versus scattered) and my body feels as if I am leaning into the conversation even if I am sitting back. My arms are uncrossed and my face feels soft. I am tracking not just the words but the body language of the speaker. When I am truly listening well, time slows down and I don't feel the need to fill spaces and gaps.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

As Roshi Joan would put it, "attunement to self and other". And I think the Three Tenets [of the Zen Peacemaker's Order: Not-Knowing; Bearing Witness; and Compassionate Action] provide a solid and quite succinct path to good presence in spiritual care and socially engaged Buddhism. Good presence means staying right with whatever arises without dredging up the past or projecting unto the future.

7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

A quiet mind and a still body.

8) How do you know when you are present?

When my mind is not elsewhere or calculating when this engagement will end or seeking out an ending to the engagement. I know I am present when my body is still and my eyes are "steady"—I don't have to be looking directly at the person because sometimes that is not called for or may either shut the speaker down or provoke her— but my gaze, wherever it is, is steady and soft, similar to the way I rest my eyes in Zazen.

9) What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

Correlative in that I believe deep listening can only take place with presence—I cannot truly "hear" another if I am not fully present. But, if I turn it around and ask myself whether listening is necessary to practice presence I would say yes, but listening is not the only thing required—I need to attune my other senses (besides hearing) as well. So, for instance, if I am with another person, presence is absolutely required if I am going to practice deep listening. But if I am not in dialogue with another—let's say I am simply walking down the street and I am trying to be fully present—then listening is only one sense that needs to be in attunement for me to be fully present.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

A deaf and almost mute customer at the food bank where I used to work would sometimes attempt to communicate something that had obviously angered or outraged her, gesticulating wildly, grunting as she mouthed words I could not decipher and flashing her eyes angrily. In the past, whenever this would happen, I felt anxious because my smattering of ASL and finger spelling meant I could not really communicate very well with her. I would also feel trapped and powerless because I didn't know what to do or how to help. My orientation toward action and problem-solving would quickly erect a barrier between us because, while she was expressing her

pain, I was up in my head trying to figure out what I thought it was she wanted versus just listening to her. Once, however, I found myself face to face with her and, after the obligatory exchange about how we did not have any canned chicken or mayo, she nodded a quick “I understand”. At that point, instead of returning back into the food bank, I just stood there with her and made intimate eye contact. She began to communicate and to gesticulate forcefully about something that had happened recently and that had obviously upset her. For the first time, I relaxed and just watched her hands and facial features as she told her story. I didn’t try to figure out WHAT she was saying or whether or not I could help. I just softened the front of my body, stood attentively, and took all of her in. I let curiosity be my guide and I rested in not knowing and bearing witness. There was no action that could be taken but I was fully present in that moment of connection with this fellow human being. I learned that listening does not have to be “transactional” or linear with a beginning and a firm and resolved ending. It can just be a mutual presence.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

I work in permanent supportive housing. I am the director of an organization that provides small scale supportive housing to people who have mental illness and who have experienced homelessness. Recently, several residents of one apartment complex were VERY angry and frightened when another resident made some very specific threats about his intentions to inflict bodily harm on other residents. I went to the community room of the complex and spent many hours just hearing and absorbing all of the fear and anger that was being expressed. I worked at composing my body and facial expressions, at keeping my head and heart present in the room, and at not being triggered myself. I made space for the expressions of outrage. In so doing, I later learned that my presence not only assured the residents that they were being heard but it also helped the young Resident Services Coordinator (a staff member) to feel that she was supported and not alone in all of this. It is important to note however, that what I also learned about presence is that we need to know when it is appropriate to withdraw our presence as well. In very volatile situations, having “presence” can also mean knowing how and when to say “OK, we are getting nowhere with this current dialogue or I cannot absorb any more anger and I am going to step back for a moment but I promise to return.” In certain situations, presence can and should be momentarily interrupted for the emotional, mental and/or physical safety of one or more people in the situation.

Kathleen Turner, Buddhist chaplain and nurse

1) What is good listening?

I think I ended up answering this question in #s 3, 4, and 5.

2) What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

Listening asks me to hit STOP on these tracks in my head: *My Cherished Thoughts*, *What I Bet This Other Person Is About To Say*, and *What They Need To Hear*. I really need to just shut up, get present, and open the door. Listening is that door, through which both people might be changed.

3) How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

I experience listening as a transitional point between being still and leaning in. When I was little, I spent hours every day rocking in a chair. That moment when the chair is just getting ready to rock forward is what listening feels like to me. In my body, mind, and emotions there has been a settledness. I may physically be more aware of the dependent parts of my body, or just aware that I have stopped fidgeting. Then arises an intention to connect, to receive, in a way that is hopefully beneficial. How is this a practice? Well, I hadn't considered them as practices until now, but here are some things I've been curious about: Can I remain in that moment, full of its potential energy, for longer? What helps or hinders that? The rhythm of attention is like rocking in a chair, flowing forward and backward. What is happening? Why does it extend and why recede? How does allocating some of my attention to the above meta-processes impact my listening? (Often I notice an over-allocation to myself, to the detriment of the relational space. Then I need to drop the exercise and just listen. I might reflect on the exchange later to try and learn.)

4) What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

Sensory overload makes it very difficult for me to listen well. My nervous system surges and crashes in big tsunami waves. As a new grad RN in the ICU, I had a patient one night on a cardiac monitor, 12 IV infusions running, a ventilator, a dialysis machine, and another machine that inflated and deflated a balloon inside his aorta to support his failing heart. He was in extremis and trying to convey something to me. This caused one machine to start alarming which caused all the others to start alarming. I felt a clenching in my chest and started shaking. I sat down on the floor by his bed and started repeating "shut up, shut up." I meant the machines, but I bet my patient thought I meant him. I did not want another patient to feel that way, which became and remains my motivation to keep working with that challenge. The ICU has provided constant opportunities to practice remaining stable, attentive, and engaged rather than shutting down. What has helped the most, both in cultivating listening and presence, is a willingness to keep trying, learning, and trying again. Practice on the cushion supports that, and provides a neutral opportunity to keep bringing myself back. The Trauma Resilience Model (now Social Resilience Model) skills are tools I use every day, as are the components of GRACE. Incorporating more walking meditation has given me practice with staying embodied in mindful motion. This gives me experience with recognizing when I am not in a good state to listen and to respond appropriately.

5) *How do you know when you are listening well?*

On my end, I come away with something I did not know or see or understand before. The encounter did not simply reinforce my expectations. Those are my outcomes; in the moment I can only meta-observe my internal tone, the rhythm of my attention, attune to the other person, and modulate the expression of my listening to better align with what they seem to need. Whether I am listening *well* might actually be related not just to something I am doing but also something about that other person's experience. I don't know what that would be. One hint is that if I am nursing well a person receives healing even though they did not get a reprieve from their critical illness. Maybe listening well has something similar going on.

6) *What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?*

At the end of a raucous "Last Supper" in *Jesus Christ Superstar*, Jesus quietly sings: "Will none of you wait with me? . . . Will no one stay awake with me?" and then goes into his garden of Gethsemane lament. Jesus does not ask that the apostles rescue him, only be *with* him. The work of moving from "take this cup away" to "I will drink" is his to do. What does he expect the presence of his comrades to contribute? It's unclear and possibly irrelevant. The request was made— not "comfort me, fix me, solve my problems" but "Wait with me . . . stay awake with me . . .". That request echoes from buddhas and bodhisattvas as well. If I listen from the heart, I might hear the same cry up and down the halls of the ICU. Those whom we serve and those to whom we turn for refuge offer the same call. Someone must respond. Why not me, or you? That's my working hypothesis, anyway.

7) *What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?*

See #8.

8) *How do you know when you are present?*

I recognize when I have lost presence or chosen for whatever reason NOT to be present. When I AM present, it is like losing time when driving *except the exact opposite*. If I zone out on the road, it's because I'm chasing my own trains of thought—entirely small self-absorbed. Once I come back into relation with the world, I'm 8 exits farther down. If I drop into being truly present for someone else, I am simply in that moment of relationship. When the moment ends, either organically or through small self bursting in, I see the footprints of the presence no longer there. The flipsides of similar processes. A challenge for me has been not to completely dissociate into someone else's experience and mistake that for being present with them. Doing this does not really benefit anyone. It's like when I used to smoke cigarettes. I wasn't hungry anymore, but neither was I nourished. Working on changing this dissociative default setting has given me abundant chances to explore why I have it, create an alternative, and wire it in. My intention to be of service to others and therefore to cultivate attributes and conditions which make that possible is my key resource. You might have a different set of barriers and facilitators.

9) *What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?*

This is a really hard question. Maybe presence is a prerequisite orientation for listening. To do a quick thought experiment—can I be not-present and listen? I hear what the other person is saying, the sounds forming words forming sentences. Their speech is like knocks on the door of my

brain. I notice it and open the door, but once the words are in, I leave the room. With this mechanism, everything that is NOT being said goes unheard; there's not even the metaphorical knock. There is no intention, no concern, no vulnerability. My role in such a scene could just as effectively be played by a pet rock. So, the result of this thought-experiment suggests that presence is required to truly listen (at least for me). Could one be present and not listen? Yes. I think of open awareness meditation as an example of this. On the other hand, if there's such a thing as non-referential listening, then maybe meditation is more like that. Maybe near death one might be simply be present.

Listening might also serve as a support for presence. Listening keeps my intention to open and serve at the forefront. The resource of this intention refreshes my presence when presence fades and starts surreptitiously checking its watch.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

From one of my journals: Mr. F's blood pressure was so low, and his edema so severe, that he had no palpable pulses. Because he was on a ventilator, his chest continued to rise and fall. The only way to know whether Mr. F was in cardiac arrest was to listen for heart tones with my stethoscope. One little boy next to me was very interested and so I handed him the earpieces. He listened and listened . . . then smiled. "Grandpa!" The boy had a job—to listen to Grandpa. I thanked him for his help a few hours later, when the patient had died. That little boy set a positive example for his family and for the staff. He kept his grandfather company on his final journey. He did not turn away. Listening can be, as it was in this case, a gift of fearlessness.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

In the weeks that my grandmother was dying and could no longer leave her bed, my little dog Francesca would stay with her. Frannie was just out of puppyhood and had had no occasion to become familiar with smells of blood and death and medicine. Still, she lay next to my Grandma day after day. Even when Grandma became too sick to move much or wake up all the way, her hand would find its way onto the dog—not petting, just resting. Something was there for both of them in these exchanges, a sense of non-intrusive mutuality. I think of these moments and try to recreate for my dying patients what my little dog brought to hers.

12) Anything else to add/other thoughts about listening and presence?

Reading back over what I've written, I see that the way I talk about listening and presence conveys effort. This is a mistaken description on my part. The practicing, the cultivation of qualities, that requires intention and work (at least for me). But, that investment means that presence unfurls and is maintained under more strenuous circumstances with less effort. Like the physical heart with exercise.

Adam Weg, poet and psychotherapist

1) *What are you doing when you listen actively?*

I think I am basically “thinking” about is being said to me, or trying to have a thought. I have some games that I play that help me, sort of like writing prompts, but basically I'm just thinking, and probably more or less implicitly inviting my interlocutor to think with me.

2) *What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?*

Focus and openness. It makes possible meaningful new ideas.

3) *How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?*

My brow forms a sort of camera that projects images and thoughts onto the back of my mind, which I attend to while still focusing the camera. Occasionally I share these “thoughts” if they make me want to sing.

4) *What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?*

Sleep. Clinical supervision. Some readings. Experiences attempting to write and make art. All allow me to listen well. Managerial oversight interferes with my ability to listen well.

5) *How do you know when you are listening well?*

My mind is humming.

6) *Do you feel well listened to in your life? What makes you feel well listened to?*

Sometimes -- when I am having a new thought with someone else, whether a professional or a friend.

7) *What facilitates/allows for good presence in your personal and professional experience?*

Not sure. I think for me good presence is not intrusive, so I mainly need my presences not to be anxious. That makes them automatically not-bad. But not necessarily good.

8) *How do you know when you are present?*

I am never quite sure.

9) *What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?*

There is a relationship but I also think there is a relationship between absence and listening, and I feel like my approach requires me to be as much absent as I am present. I think one feels listened to when one's thoughts go somewhere, disappear, and then reappear touched in some way. I don't think that involves only the presence of the other, it involves their absence or deep privacy or inaccessibility as well.

10) *Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?* Too many.

11) *Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?* Fewer.

David White, Buddhist hospice chaplain

1) What is good listening?

Undivided, heart-felt attention.

2) What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

Being “other-centered”, interested, alert, open and patient. It generates rapport, trust, connection, understanding and intimacy.

3) How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

Carefully, intentionally, mindfully. Ideally in the heart-center yet sometimes in the mind, other times in various chakras. “Listening from the heart” is my intentional practice. In addition, an acknowledgement of our shared condition / shared suffering, from which naturally arises compassion.

4) What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

Mindfulness practice and now Zen practice have trained me to be a better listener. What interferes: The judging mind, thinking “I know”, being tired, self-centered or just not present.

5) How do you know when you are listening well?

When the other person feels heard, seen, validated, understood and cared for.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

“G.R.A.C.E” + reflective / active listening (“please say more about that?” “it sounds like you’re feeling...” “are you saying...?”)

7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

Mindfulness, not knowing, bearing witness, being patient, being open and curious

8) How do you know when you are present?

Time falls away, attention sharpens, breathing slows, and there’s a deep feeling of connection / reverence with the “other” and with the timeless now.

9) What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

Both are marked by sweet surrender to and recognition of the precious time and truth that is being shared.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

A good listener allows me to talk and to reflect in the uninterrupted silence often leading to deeper understanding and clarity. Sadly, the “teacher” is often the pain / separation of *not* feeling listened to, understood or heard.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

The emptiness that sometimes presents itself during meditation . . . spacious, timeless, connected to form *and* the formless simultaneously.

Anna Wolfe-Pauly, artist, practitioner and facilitator of Deep Listening™

1) What is good listening?

Good listening is listening that foregoes any expectation of what will be received.

2) What does listening require of you? What does it generate, or make possible?

Listening requires complete and immediate openness. When I can give myself over to it I feel like I do in anticipation of a bath being drawn. Listening requires my attention and fullness of experience. It generates a sensation of going through a tunnel but in my own body. Another way of talking about the tunnel could be just to say that listening generates presence. Listening gives me presence.

3) How do you listen? Where do you feel listening in your body? How would you describe your way of listening, as a practice?

I listen with everything that is me. When I am captivated by my listening I begin to go into the internal tunnel that I mentioned previously and it begins at my organ of attention—could be in a sound and so in my ear or it could be in my eye say if I am listening to a person talk about something very tender and I am looking at them. This sensation then travels into the back of my neck. After the neck it can be difficult. This is the point where I experience allowance—can I sustain my listening? Am I able to let myself go into the tunnel? This depends on my environment, my state of mind, and my ability to give into the listening.

4) What allows you to listen well (what trainings, conditions, teachings, dispositions, etc.)? What interferes with listening well?

Ease of spirit and space. When whatever I am listening to and with has complete ease and openness I find it is much easier for me to relax into the listening, to trust the listening—when I feel like the environment is responsive to my desire to give in to it. This sense of mutuality supports me. When there are a lot of agendas and things are moving quickly I find that it takes extra effort for me to find the listening.

5) How do you know when you are listening well?

When I can go into the tunnel and there is flow in the listening experience. Listening then starts to feel like a process of communication in itself.

6) What are the qualities or attributes of good presence in spiritual care, contemplative inquiry, and/or socially engaged Buddhism?

From my experience, good presence in spiritual care has so much to do with finding the pace of the person receiving care and finding ways to enter into that. It is exploratory and gentle.

7) What facilitates/allows for good presence in your experience?

Moving with the pace of the breath which almost always means going slower than I would think to go. Ease—no internal rush. Soft and non-directive attention.

8) How do you know when you are present?

I feel the involuntary movement of my breath in my belly and have no expectation of myself or my environment. I am not thinking. My heart expands.

9) What would you say is the relationship between presence and listening?

Presence is a state. Listening is a process.

10) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about listening?

OH MAN! A difficult experience to describe but I was at Findhorn in Scotland with someone very close to me and we were inside of a meditation hall all alone and it was deeply quiet but the whole world was in the air and the light was rosy red and dim. We went in there to perform one of Pauline Oliveros' Sonic Meditations which I think was just simply to listen as far as you possibly could. I felt like I was receiving sound from the other side of the North Sea. I felt like I could hear tones I had never heard before and had a sensation at the edge of my ears that I had also never had before.

11) Can you recall an experience that taught you something about presence?

Recently I found my way into an unexpected conversation processing my mother-in-law's divorce from her husband of thirty years. My partner was also there and it gradually became more and more emotional. I felt and saw a lot coming up for her and also felt the discomfort of these intense emotions surfacing with me and her son. Rather than react I just stayed with what was happening and asked her questions as I could see that she wanted to tell her story. I don't think this is something that I would have known how to do except within the event itself.