

## Winter Listening

A gray and drizzly day here in Portland. After a glorious fall, winter arrives with clouds, rain and...quiet. Things get noticeably quieter in winter. Quiet, stillness is one of the traditional Chinese energetic associations with winter.

The quiet of the winter season is part of a natural cycle of change. Spring is new growth sprouting. Summer is exuberant fruition. Fall is gradual softening and letting go. All are relatively noisier than winter. Winter is stillness...and quiet. We may prefer one season, energy or quality over another, but they all are necessary, they all are mutually supportive. It is the quiet of winter that allows for the nature of the other seasons to emerge.

These days it is easy, and oh so tempting, to cover over the natural quiet of winter with...anything. Noise: music, earphones, car stereos, cell phones, television, movies. We can cover over the quiet with busyness, projects and lots of doing. This hasn't always been true. Before the electronics age, our ancestors had little escape from the natural stillness of winter. With less distraction they could notice the response of nature to the qualities of winter. Birds sitting still on branches. The pauses between rain showers. The fall of light mist has such a subtle, quiet quality. At times, even the wind becomes very soft, almost still. The decrease in sunlight softens the edges of most things.

The quiet of winter allows. It allows spaciousness. It allows time. Quiet allows each and everything to be, just as it is. Quiet allows listening.

Not listening to something as distraction, covering up of quiet, but listening to whatever the quiet presents. Listening is one of those fluid, remarkable skills that may be used in many different ways. We can use listening to distract; we can also use listening to be fully present in the moment, with whatever is.



The quiet of winter allows us a chance to explore listening in a very different way. In some ways listening is similar to breathing. We may always be breathing because it is automatic, but what is the quality of our breathing? What is the depth, fullness, expansive and contractive nature of each inhale and exhale? How far does the breath reach, to every cell? Can we notice the letting come and letting go of each and every breath?

Like breathing we may assume we are always listening, but...are we really? I mean *really* listening. Or are we listening as one part of a complicated multitasking juggling act of doing too many things in too little time?

For example, what happens when we hear a strange, unknown noise? Don't we immediately stop everything – talking, moving, thinking – and apply *all* of our attention

to listening. When we really need to listen carefully, we naturally create stillness. We don't have to wait for a strange noise to experience this. Try pausing for a moment here and notice the quality of listening just now, in this present moment.

What do you notice? What are the qualities of listening as you pause, bringing awareness to the listening? Not just the objects, the noises, the things we listen to. What is listening itself?

Winter is a good time to explore these questions. Sitting in the stillness and quiet a few observations surface.

Listening is not talking. We might listen to ourselves talk, but it is incredibly difficult to talk and listen to somebody or something else at the same time. Letting go of a need to be heard, insert an opinion, prove oneself right allows space for a deeper quality of listening.



Listening is not thinking. While listening to someone, our voice may be quiet, but internal thinking may be quite loud; formulating a response, what we'd rather be doing, judging or criticizing. Is that really listening? The thinking mind/voice dominates, taking up an incredible amount of space that could be fully engaged in listening.

Listening is not knowing. If someone is speaking about their experience of cooking carrots and my mind jumps in with all I know about cooking carrots, there's not much room for real listening. Even with listening to something familiar, we can still listen from a place of not knowing. Like, while listening to raindrops, an immediate reaction of, oh, I know that - it's raindrops,

defines, categorizes and directs listening somewhere else. Noticing that automatic and habitual response to familiar sounds may allow it to drop. Then, instantly full listening can occur without effort.

Listening is only itself, nothing but quiet, awareness, hearing, observing, and feeling what is happening in present time.

Deep listening seems to not be limited to the auditory senses. I notice listening when I feel someone's pulse. If I'm quiet, I hear the pulse as if it is talking to me, expressing itself, communicating something about the bodymind.

When someone is sick, really listening to a cough tells me more about its nature: dry, constricted, damp, phlegm, surface, deep, swollen. Sometimes getting sick is a great time to listen because we often don't have the energy to sustain our typical defenses and

resistance to fully listening to the moment. A ticking clock, the furnace turning on and off, air moving, the sound of footsteps echoing in the hallway.

Listening to another person talking may also go deeply, more than just audible recognition of words, sentences and ideas. It extends to a more subtle level of communication. Full listening is without distraction, noise or self-centered concern; it is without thinking or knowing that which is being heard. It could be anything: raindrops, wind in the trees, a bird's small chirp, an infant's sigh, the sound of laughter.

You don't have to believe me or anybody's words about listening. The beauty of this is that you can easily find out for yourself. Pause. Listen. What do you notice?

Starting with a gray and drizzly day, ending with deep listening and presence.  
Ah...thank you, winter.

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