How to Listen

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We’re learning his lessons and how to listen to Dhamma talk. There are five altogether. The first three have to do with respect. As he says, you don’t despise the person giving the talk. Two, you don’t despise what’s being said in the talk. And three, you don’t despise yourself. In other words, you open yourself to the possibility that something good might be said, something useful might be said in the talk. And you’re up to making good use of it. Think of all the people the Buddha gave Dhamma talks to, who gained stream-entry while listening. Part of it is because they opened their hearts. As in the case of Yassa, who was going through a lot of turmoil. He’d been entertained by his dancing women, and then he’d fallen asleep. And so the women said, “Well, why are we dancing if we’re dancing for him?” So they stopped, and they fell asleep. He happened to wake up, and he said it was like waking up into a charnel ground, people lying all over the place. So he had to leave the house, went wandering off, came across the Buddha, and Yassa had been complaining of this, what a turmoil he was in. And the Buddha said, “Come here, listen. Right here is not a turmoil.” So Yassa went in to listen. And the Buddha gave what’s called a graduated discourse. He talked about generosity, the goodness of generosity, virtue, the goodness of acting in harmless ways, basically affirming what people already knew about goodness. And went on to say that it gave results. Good results in this lifetime, good results in the next lifetime, even up to the sensual levels of heaven. And then he turned the tables. He said, “But even those sensual pleasures in heaven have their drawbacks. At any rate, they don’t last. And even when you fall from heaven, you fall hard.” So Yassa was thinking about that. He was already overcome with a sense of disgust for sensuality. And so he was inclined to listen to the Buddha when he said that. And then the Buddha said, “Well, there’s an alternative. There’s the alternative renunciation.” Renunciation doesn’t mean you just give up. You renounce sensual pleasures and you look for pleasures of a higher kind. And this gets into the fourth quality for listening to a Dhamma talk, which is you make your mind single. Ekkatha is the Pali word. Ekkatha, the noun version of that, is a definition of concentration. If you try to bring your mind to stillness, you find pleasure in the stillness. And you learn to appreciate it. All the factors of the path. Right concentration is the one that gets dropped most often. People say, “Well, it’s too hard nowadays.” It’s not necessary anyhow. All you need is discernment. All you need is wisdom, insight. You can go straight from mindfulness to insight. But the Buddha’s instructions for mindfulness basically are instructions on how to get the mind to settle down into oneness. So you’re listening to the talk and you can bring your mind to stillness. That’s an important factor in how to listen. And then when the Buddha would see that Jhasa was ready, then he taught him the Four Noble Truths. This goes into the fifth factor for how to listen, which is appropriate attention. Other questions. When you first get the mind to settle down, your thought is, “How can I make this last?” And there’s nothing wrong with that thought. Learning how to appreciate the pleasure of getting the mind into oneness. Finding pleasure apart from sensuality. That’s an important skill. One that should be cultivated. One that should be appreciated. But you realize it’s not an end in and of itself. It’s there for you to start asking questions about your mind. It’s by bringing the mind into oneness that you can actually observe it. Because there will be thoughts that branch out from that oneness, and you want to see them clearly. When thoughts branch out, where are they taking you? They’re taking you back to your old ways. And so you learn how to let them go. You realize that you are in a position where you can let them go. If we were totally passive, and we simply had to put up with whatever comes, then it would be okay to say, “Well, just learn how to accept whatever comes. There’s nothing you can do about it, so accept the passing show.” But we do have a choice. We can say no to certain things. We can say yes to others. That’s what appropriate attention is all about. Learning the right standards, what counts as skillful and what doesn’t count as skillful. And seeing that the issue of what is skillful and not skillful is the important question. And first, of course, what’s skillful is what inclines the mind to concentration. And then you can perfect that skill and incline it to deeper and deeper levels of stillness. You begin to realize that once you’ve got the mind firmly settled, firmly focused in a state of singleness, the thinking that got you there is now the disturbance. So you let that go. In other words, as you’ve been adjusting the breath, relating to the breath, getting the breath so that the breath and the mind can fit snugly together. Then when they’re snugly together, you don’t have to think anymore. Just let them stay together. When John Fung was coming, it was like raising a water buffalo. You’re trying to call the water buffalo to come to you. When it comes, you don’t have to call it anymore. You’re there. You can ride the buffalo. This way you ride the breath. And there’ll be a sense of intense refreshment, a sense of rapture. And then that becomes the disturbance. You want the mind quieter than that. So you keep peeling away these layers, layers of the concentration itself. You peel away, peel away. It’s like peeling an onion. You finally get to the point where there’s nothing more to peel away. That’s what appropriate attention is all about. And it gets you from the question of what is skillful and what is not skillful directly into the questions behind the four Noble Truths. Where is there stress here? And you see that in whatever still is wavering in the mind, whatever still is going up and down in the mind. And then you see the cause. What causes it to go up and down? What causes a rise in the level of stress? What happens when the stress goes down? And you notice that it’s something you’re doing. And the reason you can see it is because you’ve been practicing the path. So this question about what is skillful and what is not skillful morphs very quickly into the four Noble Truths. And you just keep peeling things away until there’s nothing left to peel away. That’s when the mind can open up to something that’s not fabricated, not put together. It’s through this process that you also gain the Dhamma-I. Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation. In other words, what is caused by fabrications in the mind will all have to fall away. The question is, what state of mind, in what state of mind, would that realization occur? It would be a state of mind in which you saw something that was not subject to fabrication. And did not fall away. It would be an experience of the deathless. That’s called knowing how to listen. You have respect for the talk, you get your mind still, and you start asking the right questions inside, inspired by the talk. Now gaining the Dhamma-I doesn’t necessarily mean changing your personality, but it does change your perception of what is possible in the world. It is possible through your own efforts to find a deathless happiness. You may not fully experience it, that’s what’s called stream-entry. There’s more work to be done. But it reorients you. You’ve seen something that’s not composed of any of the aggregates, but there is a consciousness there. So from that point on you would never identify yourself as being identical with the aggregates, or owning the aggregates, or being in them, or having them be in you. Your doubts about the Buddha have gone. And you realize it was through your own unskillful actions that you hadn’t seen this. Chastening parts of the experience is that you willfully ignored this aspect of your experience. And so stream-entry is not coming by pride. It’s coming by a sense of your own foolishness. But at the same time there’s an intense sense of relief that there is something deathless and you can find it. That’s why it’s such a momentous experience. But as I said, it may not change your personality. There’s stories in the canon. Mahapajapati, after she became a stream-enterer, was still very stubborn. Roja, a very self-centered member of the noble class, was still very self-centered after he became a stream-enterer. The first thing he said to the Buddha was, “From now on the Sangha should receive gifts from me and nobody else.” So obviously there’s more work to be done. That’s the case of Upali, the householder. Originally he’d been a follower of the Jains, and he went one day to try to disprove the Buddha’s teachings. And in his conversation with the Buddha, he kept on refusing to listen to the Buddha’s reasons, saying, “I’m still not convinced, I’m still not convinced.” And for convincing reasons he finally said, “Well, actually I was convinced by your first reason, but I wanted to see how far you could go.” So he’s not the most appealing character. And then when the leader of the Jains finds out what has happened and comes to visit him, Upali really rubs it in that he’s no longer a follower of the Jains. So we’re not trying to work on a change in the personality. Stream-entry can happen to all kinds of people. That’s the case of the would-be assassin that was sent to kill the Buddha, who ended up putting down his bows and arrows, came in to listen to the Dhamma, and became a stream-enterer. That’s the case of a woman who was coming back from playing around with her serving ladies. They’d go down for a picnic. She stopped by to see the Buddha on the way back, listened to the Dhamma talk, and became a non-returner. So it can happen to all kinds of people. It’s from that point on that you are said to be in training, in other words, the real work starts. You have a sense of where you’re going, what needs to be done, and the question simply is, can you get it done? It’s the course of that training that you start polishing away your defilements even further. Of course, it’s good to polish away whatever ones you can before then, to prepare yourself to get into training. Because we’re training not only the intellect, we’re training the heart, we’re training the character, we’re training your will. It’s an all-around training. But the real training begins when you see where it’s going. You know where the arrow is aimed, and it’s simply a matter of following the arrow all the way to the end. And it starts with knowing how to listen, and how to take the Dhamma inside and get the most out of it. So remember these five qualities. You don’t despise the speaker, you don’t despise the Dhamma, you don’t despise yourself. You develop singleness of mind as you listen. And then you apply appropriate attention, asking the right questions. And that’s how you find something really special inside.

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