

Introduction

Anyone can practice Deep Listening. The form given in this book has evolved from many years of **this** practice in workshops, retreats and classes.

What is Deep Listening?

This question is answered in the process of practicing listening with the understanding that the complex wave forms continuously transmitted to the auditory cortex from the outside world by the ear require active engagement with attention. Prompted by experience and learning listening takes place voluntarily. Listening is not the same as hearing and hearing is not the same as listening. The ear is constantly gathering and transmitting information - however attention to the auditory cortex can be tuned out. Very little of the information transmitted to the brain by the sense organs is perceived at a conscious level*. Reactions can take place without consciousness.

So what is consciousness?

Consciousness was considered an epiphenomenon by the scientific community and not seriously studied until more recently*. Consciousness had no location. Furthermore, evoked potentials in the brain appear up to a half second* before the individual is aware of a stimulus. The brain then remembers the stimulus as happening in the present moment or the immediate instant in one's sense of time. So perception in time is an illusion.

So what is consciousness?

Consciousness is awareness of stimuli and reactions in the moment. Consciousness is acting with awareness, presence and memory. What is learned is retained and retrievable. Information, knowledge of events, feelings and experiences can be brought forward from the past to the present. In this way one has self recognition.

The ear makes it possible to hear and to listen.

To **hear** physically means that vibrations or wave forms that are within the range of human hearing (in frequency typically 16hz to 20,000hz and **amplitude ** - ****) can be transmitted to the auditory cortex by the ear and perceived as sounds. However, the word *hear* has many more dynamics and meanings within a cultural history that is continually changing.

To hear according to the Miriam Webster Dictionary can mean "to listen attentively, or that information has been received especially by ear, or to hear somebody or some thing, or to consider something officially as a judge,

commissioner, or member of a jury, or to fully understand something, or to attend Mass or hear confession in a Roman Catholic Church”.

Listening has very little definition compared to hearing. Though the two words are often used interchangeably their meanings are different. To listen according to the Miriam Webster Dictionary means “to give attention to sound or sounds or to perceive with the ear, to hear with thoughtful attention, to consider seriously”.

To hear and to listen have a symbiotic relationship with somewhat interchangeable common usage.

I differentiate to hear and to listen. To hear is the physical means that enables perception. To listen is to give attention to what is perceived both acoustically and psychologically.

Hearing turns a certain range of vibrations into perceptible sounds.
(Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past*, Duke University Press, 2003, pg 96)

Listening takes place in the auditory cortex* (ADD QUOTE FROM LISTENING BY Handel MIT PRESS) and is based on the experience of the waveforms transmitted by the ear to the brain. We learn to associate and categorize sounds such as mama, papa, meow, running water, whistles, pops, clicks and myriads more sounds through experience. Many waveforms after first experience are discarded unnoticed without interpretation. Understanding and interpreting what the ear transmits to the brain is a process developing from instantaneous survival reactions to ideas that drive consciousness. The listening process continues and can be cultivated throughout one’s lifetime.

The word *listen* also has a cultural history and changing dynamics.

“The relationship between the physical stimulus and the phenomenal perception is not clear cut. The phenomenal world of the acoustic events of a listener is not necessarily that described by the physical properties of the sound energy. There is no sound pressure-variation that will always lead to one and only one perception. Similarly, there is no perception that always comes from one and only one pressure variation. If the converse were true---- If for every different sound percept there were a unique pattern of sound pressure and if each different sound pressure pattern led to a unique percept--- then the problem of auditory perception would be solved and not by psychologists. It would be solved by physicists who could accurately measure the sound pattern. Perceiving would become rote memorizing: all that would be necessary would be associating each sound pattern with its name or meaning.

This is not the case. Listening is not the same as hearing. The physical oressure wave enables perception but does not force it. Listening is active. It allows age, experience, expectation and expertise to influence perception.” Stephen Handel

So what is Deep Listening?

Deep has to do with complexity and boundaries or edges beyond ordinary or habitual understandings i.e. “the subject is too deep for me” or “she is a deep one”. A subject that is “too deep” surpasses one’s present understanding or has too many unknown parts to grasp easily. A “deep one” defies stereotypical knowing and may take either a long time, or never to understand or get to know.

Deep coupled with Listening or Deep Listening for me is learning to expand the perception of sounds to include the whole space/time continuum of sound – encountering the vastness and complexities as much as possible.

Simultaneously one ought to be able to target a sound or sequence of sounds as a focus within the space/time continuum and to perceive the detail or trajectory of the sound or sequence of sounds. Such focus should always return to, or be within the whole of the space/time continuum (context).

Such expansion means that one is connected to the whole of the environment and beyond.

What’s the difference between Deep Listening and meditation?

Deep Listening is a practice that is intended to heighten and expand consciousness of sound in as many dimensions of awareness and attentional dynamics as humanly possible.

The source for Deep Listening as a practice comes from my background and experience as a composer of concert music, as a performer and improviser. Deep Listening comes from noticing my listening or listening to my listening and discerning the effects on my mind/body continuum, from listening to others, to art and to life.

Deep Listening is a practice and term that does not come from any religious context even though the words sometimes are used by religious practitioners.

Thich Nhat Hanh is a Zen Buddhist monk whose usage of the term “deep listening” has a specific context as one of the “Five Mindfulness Trainings” that he proposes. This is a compassion-centered listening to restore communication in order to relieve suffering and bring happiness to all beings. Listening (as a practice in this sense) would be training to respond with calmness and clarity of mind. It is a determination and commitment to reconcile and resolve conflicts.

Meditation in all the meanings of the word is found and defined in diverse religions and spiritual practices. Meditation is used in all its rich variety of meanings to calm the mind and to promote receptivity or concentration.

In religious settings attention is directed to moral and ethical issues, values, beliefs and tenets of the particular faith and to connection with the divine, or a divine being, or beings.

Whether one is dwelling on something carefully and continually, or engaging in a serious study of a particular topic, planning or considering an action, meditation both religious and secular is attention engaged in particular ways - there is emptying, expansion and contraction of the mind: there is relaxation or "letting go" and focus (attention to a point). Meditation implies discipline and control. There is something to practice!

Deep Listening is a form of meditation. Attention is directed to the interplay of sounds and silences or sound/silence continuum. Sound is not limited to musical or speaking sounds but is inclusive of all perceptible vibrations (sonic formations).

The practice is intended to **expand consciousness** to the whole space/time continuum of sound/silences. Deep Listening a process that extends the listener to this continuum as well as to focus instantaneously on a single sound (engagement to targeted detail) or sequences of sound/silence.

In order to get to the discipline and control that meditation develops, relaxation as well as concentration is essential. The practice of Deep Listening is intended to **facilitate creativity** in art and life through this form of meditation. Creativity means the formation of new patterns.

Animals are Deep Listeners. When you enter an environment where there are birds, insects or animals, they are listening to you completely. You are received. Your presence may be the difference between life and death for the creatures of the environment. Listening is **survival!**

Humans have **ideas**. Ideas drive consciousness forward to new perceptions and perspectives.

Sounds carry **intelligence**. Ideas, feelings and memories are triggered by sounds. If you are too narrow in your awareness of sounds, you are likely to be disconnected from your environment. More often than not urban living causes narrow focus and disconnection. Too much information is coming in to the auditory cortex, or habit has narrowed listening to only what seems of value and concern to the listener. All else is tuned out or discarded as garbage.

Compassion (spiritual development) and **understanding** comes from listening impartially to the whole space/time continuum of sound --- not just what one is presently concerned about. In this way discovery and exploration can take place. New fields of thought can be opened and the individual may be expanded and

find opportunity to connect in new ways to communities of interest. Practice enhances openness.

The level of awareness of soundscape brought about by Deep Listening can lead to the possibility of shaping the sound technology and of urban environments. Deep Listening designers, engineers and city planners could enhance the quality of life as well as sound artists, composers and musicians.

Pauline Oliveros
June 24, 2003