

We are continuing to explore the Noble Eightfold Path. Last semester we looked at PANNA, the wisdom part of this training: skillful view and understanding, skillful intention and thinking. Please note, the class reviews are posted on my teacher page on the web site (under the classes/instruction tab), feel free to go back and review them any time you want to.

We are using Thich Nat Hanh's book "What the Buddha Taught", as a read along, so that you will have some commentary to think about before our evenings together. You can also simply look up the subject matter online to find various commentaries and discussions for reflection.

We will now explore SILA (ethics): speech, action, and livelihood or lifestyle.

There is traditional use of the word 'right', (as in right speech, right intention...) in Buddhist circles, which is not one that sits well. As much as possible, we will be using the words skillful, wise, mindful or harmonious instead. Just make a note of it for those times you might be looking something up online, or when reading the Thich Nat Hanh book.

There are two basic underlying foundations in looking at why we cultivate ethics as a part of a meditation practice:

1) Practice and life are inseparable, one does not have meaning or purpose without the other.

We don't find inner equanimity and peace to protect or isolate ourselves from turbulence in the world and in our community, we find it in order to bring it as our offering to the world.

This is the meaning of engaged practice. We practice to inform living.

Unengaged practice would be to practice as sort of a self protection, building a wall between us and frightening outside events we want to stay away from. This would be withdrawal. True practice is about engagement: with ourselves and our own conditioning, with friends, families, and our communities and the world as we experience life.

2) We don't cultivate these to 'fix' or 'improve' ourselves.

We cultivate sila because:

- a) it brings happiness and peace, both for ourselves and for those around us. This is not a form of self improvement, or because there is anything wrong with us.
- b) It aligns with the ground of our being, or innate nature, which is why it feels so good. Aligning with our inner being opens the door out of the small, ego identified mind to the realization beyond separation.

MINDFUL SPEECH SITS ON THE FOUNDATION OF MINDFUL LISTENING

The Eightfold Path instructs us that skillful speech is both finding words that are true, helpful, loving, and gentle, and avoiding that which is harsh, untrue, malicious or idle gossip.

In a broader view, skillful speech is not so much about finding the correct words, or the 'right' fix or advice. It's about being present and seeing what is needed, or not needed. It comes from silence, the inner awareness that can hold all feelings and reactivity in that larger container.

It comes from a foundation of listening. Listening is taking in and becoming aware and present of what's in front of us and within us. It means being open and hearing deeply.

We all experience how healing being truly heard is. Often, simply being listened to is enough. It opens us to whatever action might be needed. It feels accepting and loving, and gives permission to be human. It is one of the most healing energies we can offer to the world, which we all have to give.

It is also deeply nourishing to ourselves to be present for another. It feels good to be of service, to be available.

Finally, we can self-nourish in moments when we are in our own company, by closely paying attention to what we are feeling or needing.

Here are three guidelines for deep listening:

A) Listening with compassion.

Deep listening heals and relieves suffering. Feeling really heard is one of the great acts of love and kindness we can give to the world. Look openly at the other person, with a heart that sees your connection, your common ground.

Listen for the fourth voice, or the subtext. This is the underlying need, which may not be expressed directly in words. Sometimes, when someone is explaining or apologizing, the fourth voice is asking to be loved, to be assured of forgiveness

and friendship. What is the deeper need that is being expressed to you? What is their heart wanting that may not be in the words?

B) Listening to ourselves.

Another basis of skillful speech is mindfulness - awareness of our own thoughts and feelings. Mindful of your frame of mind, watching internal reactions, both positive and negative. How many times do we say words because we are responding from discomfort, reactions, or judgements that have arisen within ourselves? That our response is from our own uneasiness, not really anything about the person we are listening to? There was sharing about how often we derail what the other person is trying to say by asking questions or breaking into pauses or commiserating.

D) Listening from silence.

Being open to the deeper wordless essence that cannot be spoken, the truth that is beyond words. In silence is the connection to your deepest wisdom. It also holds the understanding that your response may not be in words.

These principles work equally listening to another and also listening to ourselves. Noticing things that trigger us, our own emotional and physical needs is not selfish. In taking care of ourselves, we then become available to attend to the needs of those around us.

It's not unlike the safety instructions we hear on airline flights: put your own oxygen mask on first before trying to assist another.

We did a listening exercise together, where we listened to a partner tell us something of concern. The feedback of being deeply heard included being understood, feeling welcome, accepted, not judged.

Some of the barriers that came up was feeling our own sense of wanting to know other details, getting caught up by triggering of our own experiences, and holding with our own discomfort. Sounds a bit like sitting meditation....

The point is not to be 'perfect' listeners, but to notice, to see what our experience is, what gets in the way - without fixing, which feels counterintuitive. The radical premise - which works - is that when we've noticed something come up enough times, and make space to see it without trying to change it, it simply loses steam, and fades away on its own. It lets go of us.

HOMEWORK

This Nat Hanh book: read section on right speech, p. 84-94

Practice deep listening, using the three guidelines. Pick one short interaction each day as a 'mindful listening' exercise, even if it's listening to the radio or TV.

Cultivating listening from silence, compassion and mindfulness will shed light on habitual patterns of responding with words, advice, fixing and commiserating. It also opens territory to deeper understanding of ourselves. See what happens when you listen without needing to fix or change anything.

Be sure to listen to yourself deeply also. Make space for noticing your own thoughts, feelings, and reactions.