

The Art of Listening

By Swami Chinmayananda

We can learn a lot from every event in life. Just as the honeybee has the special instrument (proboscis) to extract the very essence in the flowers, human beings have a special faculty (power of discrimination) to maintain the quality of life by learning the art of true listening.

Listening is the channel most often used for "learning." It is a vital communication function; it improves our ability of understanding, self-awareness and self-application.

Effective listening is not mere "hearing." In fact, we all know from our personal experiences that mere hearing – or poor listening – can very well result in:

- Frustration
- Indifference
- Misunderstandings
- Misleading judgments
- Embarrassment
- Poor human relations and
- Many other psychological blocks and maladjustments

Yes, listening has become almost a forgotten skill. Very often we are led to believe that speaking represents action and power, while listening connotes weakness and apathy. We find that resistance to listening tends to be the cultural norm!

Sometimes, we pay attention to what interests us, and block out larger areas of reality. Another block to listening occurs when we form an opinion about the level of what is being said. We label the information ahead of time as unimportant, too boring, too complex, or as being nothing new. Due to such internal distractions, we become biased listeners, and our minds are tuned out rather than tuned in!

Some people fake attention – just to please the speaker! Some have the habit of interrupting when others are talking. Personal problems sometimes manage to creep into our minds – diverting our attention – while someone else is talking. Fatigue is another limiting factor in listening, as listening takes concentration and effort. It is easier to daydream and let our minds become preoccupied when our energy level is low.

A semantic barrier is very common in most of us. No two persons have exactly the same meaning for the same word or expression. We evaluate an individual's competence and motivation through our semantic filters. We make judgments about people, based on our varied beliefs, knowledge, education, upbringing, what we understand, and what we see and perceive.

In short, the blind spots are within us. The angularities or the changing moods of the mind are barriers to effective listening. The barriers are caused by:

- Faulty memories
- Shades of ego
- Tendencies and attitudes
- Beliefs
- Images of past experiences
- Prejudices of the past
- Likes and dislikes
- Expectations and anxieties for the future

Only when we become aware of our blind spots will we be able to understand and reshape our beliefs, values, and attitudes. Therefore, it is necessary to train the mind to widen its perspective and see things in an objective way.

Let us have a "listening mind" – a mind that is open, unprejudiced, objective, alert, attentive, and relaxed.

Let us have a "balanced outlook" – enjoying spiritual strength, inner stability, mental beauty, and physical perfection.