

Deep Listening
A Composer's Sound Practice



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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.³¹ 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.³² Consciousness had no location. Furthermore, evoked potentials in the brain appear up to a half-second³³ 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 waveforms that are within the range of human hearing (in frequency typically 16hz to 20,000hz and amplitude 0.05dB to 130dB) 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."³⁴

Listening takes place in the auditory cortex³⁵ 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 conscious 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 throughout one's lifetime.

Physical descriptions of sound properties and listening do not explicate the phenomenal world of perception that takes place in the auditory cortex. According

to Stephen Handel in *Listening: An Introduction to the Perception of Auditory Events*,³⁶ “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.

Physicists then continue to study the nature of physical descriptions of sound and psychologists the perception of sound. Physicists can measure acoustics and pressure waves. Psychologists must measure the experience of the listeners. Thus neither discipline can solve auditory perception. Sound pressure patterns assist hearing but cultural history and experience influences listening.

So what is Deep Listening?

“Acoustic space is where time and space merge as they are articulated by sound.”³⁷

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 **bodymind**³⁸ 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 religious practitioners sometimes use the words. Thich Nhat Hanh is a Zen Buddhist monk whose usage of the term "deep listening"³⁹ 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 the sound/silence continuum. Sound is not limited to musical or speaking sounds, but is inclusive of all perceptible vibrations (sonic formations). The relationship of all perceptible sounds is important.

The practice is intended to **expand consciousness** to the whole space/time continuum of sound/silences. Deep Listening is 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 acquire 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, exceeding the limitations and boundaries of old patterns, or using old patterns in new ways.

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 into 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 of 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.

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Ways of Listening

Forms of Attention

Focal attention, like a lens, produces clear detail limited to the object of attention. **Global attention** is diffuse and continually expanding to take in the whole of the space/time continuum of sound. Sensitivity is to the flow of sounds and details are not necessarily clear. For example, the crowd noise at a baseball game changes when the focal crack of a bat against a ball is heard. If there is a home run, then the voices of the crowd unify from a fuzzy global rumble into a loud focused roar.

The practice of Deep Listening encourages the balancing of these two forms of attention so that one can flexibly employ both forms and recognize the difference between these two forms of listening.

There are many ways of listening to be discovered and explored. Listening is used in innumerable ways. Here are some of the ways:

“Detection, isolation, and interpretation of subtle variations in a sonic environment...listening in search, listening in readiness, and background listening...highly attuned to direction, timbre, and texture... Confessional—configuration of listening and speaking”.⁵⁰

Lou Gottlieb’s secret for listening to non-stop rappers: “Just listen to the melody of their talk, not to the content, as you would listen to a babbling brook”.⁵¹

Sending and Receiving

If you are speaking, singing, performing with an instrument or otherwise sounding, then you are sending. Are you receiving what you send and also receiving the whole of the space/time continuum of sound?

Use this mantra:

With each breath I send sound and receive sound.

Sound/Silence

There is no sound without silence before and after. Sound/silence is a symbiotic relationship. Sound and silence are relative to one another. Time relationships may be instantaneous to very long. Listening to sounds means listening to silences, and vice versa.

There is no absolute silence unless there is zero vibration. Silence means that we can hear no sounds. Silence is the space between sounds.

Palms of Hands

Rub the palms of the hands together vigorously to make them very warm and to energize the nerve endings.

Hold the palms a little apart and parallel in front of you and sense the energy field* between them as if you were holding a sphere or ball. Your hands maybe close together or further apart to perceive the effect.

Massage this ball of energy and gradually bring the palms of your hands to a folded position just under your navel. (Men place left hand under right hand, women right hand under left hand).⁵²

Receive the warmth from your palms into this lower body center (dan t'ien)⁵³

If you don't feel the subtle tingling sensations, your energy may be blocked by stiff shoulders or other tensions elsewhere in the body. Breathe deeply to release the tension and continue to sense the palms of your hands.

Soles of Feet

The soles of the feet are your connection to earth (even through the floor). The sole is sensitive with many nerve endings and connections to the inner organs.⁵⁴ As you stand, allow energy to flow to the soles of the feet.

Soften the knees and grip the earth.

Follow the sensations that return from the soles of the feet throughout the body. As you grip the earth with the soles of your feet, there is a reaction force—a return of energy from the earth. This reaction force can give you a feeling of strength.

By bringing attention to the soles of the feet,⁵⁵ energy can be raised in the body. The reaction force of gripping the earth with the feet in natural stance can help to promote circulation in the body.

Whole Body

As you listen, notice the impact and effects of sound throughout the body.
Notice when you feel sound in your body.
If you are in conversation, receive with your whole body what is being said.

Multi-dimensional Listening

Sounds are both temporal and spatial. As we converse with a partner, there is space between us created by the sound of our voices and the proximity of our bodies. The sound of the conversation can radiate out of the intended intimate space and be heard by others not necessarily included in the conversation. The intimate dimension is overlapping with a more public dimension that we may or may not be aware of. We can hear the dimensions of the space consciously and unconsciously. Simultaneously we may be taking in other dimensions—a dog barking outside, other conversations in the same room, passing traffic and so forth. Our global attention is engaging with numerous overlapping dimensions created by sounds. At the same time we may be imagining what to say next. We then feel the dimension of imagination or memory.

We are giving attention to more than one flow of sound, in parallel or simultaneously, as well as discerning the direction and context. For example, attending to a conversation, music and external sounds that are cues for something to happen, like a siren or telephone, without breaking any flow. Readiness to listen is always present while already engaged in listening.

Dimensions of sound/silence are the space created by the sound/silence, the instant of the sound/silence, the duration, the quality, the relationship between the listener and the sound/silence, the volume and location (actual and perceived).

The depth of listening is related to the expansion of consciousness brought about by inclusive listening. Inclusive listening is impartial, open and receiving and employs global attention. Deep Listening has limitless dimensions.

Attention narrows for exclusive listening. Exclusive listening gathers detail and employs focal attention. Focal attention is necessarily limited and specific. The depth of exclusive listening is clarity.

Listening is a spatial/temporal phenomenon.

Sound/silence is continual.

Listening also may have a kind of secrecy about it. One can listen to others without their knowing it. This is true of radio broadcasts or conversations that happen in a public place, or when someone chooses to listen surreptitiously to a private conversation (to overhear).