

# Listening As Spiritual Practice

Marguerite Theophil

If we can tell our story to someone who listens, really listens, we find it easier to deal with our circumstances.

Anton Chekov brings home this message poignantly in his short story 'Misery'. Iona Potapov earns his living driving a horse-drawn cab. First to some passengers, then to someone he passes on the street, and finally to a fellow cab driver, this pained man repeatedly attempts to tell the story of his son who died just a week before, but no one wants to listen.

Potapov, we learn, has not really talked to anybody yet. He yearns to tell someone, anyone, about it; how his son suffered, what he said before he died, how he died; the father wants to describe little details of the funeral, of how he went to the hospital to collect his son's clothes. But there is no fellow human being who would listen to his story.

Finally, Iona goes to the stable to feed his mare and begins narrating his story. Chekhov writes, "The little mare munches, listens, and breathes on her master's hands," and we feel the desperate sadness in the last words: "Iona is carried away, and tells her all about it."

Chekov doesn't lecture us about how sad this is, how wrong; just lays out the story. And we are touched; perhaps shamed.

Listening appears such an easy thing to do, but we know from trying to really listen and trying to be listened to, that it isn't always so. Even those of us who imagine ourselves to be good listeners fall short. If your 'listening strategy' is to launch into commiseration, expressions of sympathy or support, or, heaven help us - advising, then you may need to review this. Even telling people "Oh yes, that happened to me, too..." even if we mean well,

may not be the best thing to do. We cut their flow, perhaps through our own need to fix things, our need to get out of the discomfort of another's pain, our need to appear understanding. And sadly, our needs make us ignore or marginalise the other's needs. We need to learn that the greatest gift we can bring to the listening process is ourselves. Yet paradoxically - the most important thing to do in order to listen well is to keep ourselves out of the way.

Often children understand better than we do. I once heard a delightful story about a little boy who was late getting home one day. When his mother asked why he was late, he explained that he had stopped to help a friend whose bicycle had broken down.

"But you don't know how to fix a bicycle," his mother said. "No," the little boy said, "But I stopped to be with him while he cried."

Margaret Wheatley, who wrote 'Turning to One Another: Simple Conversations to Restore Hope to the Future', has talked about this as an enduring truth: great healing is available when we listen to each other. "Listening is such a simple act. It requires us to be present ... we don't have to do anything else. We don't have to advise, or coach, or sound wise. We just have to be willing to sit there and listen. If we can do that, we create moments in which real healing is available."

Real, deep, healing listening can be likened to a spiritual practice that involves developing awareness, some serious un-learning and adopting new practices. Three practices are essential to cultivate for this spiritual discipline: a comfort with silence, non-verbal empathy, and being wholly present to another.

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# Ganesha, Remover Of Obstacles

Sudhamahi Regunathan

Ganesha offers lessons in how to be successful for devotees familiar with his incarnations as it's faith in the elephant-headed god that propels them. The neighbourhood temple to Ganesha is where they light a lamp, break a coconut and hope fervently that the deity also known as 'Remover of Obstacles' will pitch in to help. This belief comes with ancient stories of his prowess, even of his mount, the rat, which can reach any corner of the world and burrow through a mountain even.

Ganesha took many forms as visualised in the Mudgala Purana to show the path to success. Of them, eight are particularly significant. First, in his incarnation as Vakratunda or the one with a curved trunk when he vanquished the demon Matsarasura. Matsara means jealousy and the anger born thereof. His very birth is ascribed to a remiss by Indra and true to his nature the demon desired to rule all the three worlds. His boon of fearlessness from Shiva helped him and soon he was tormenting everyone, heady with power. Vakratunda cut him down to size. He comes riding a lion. He says, however well endowed you are, wisdom lies in knowing and understanding your limits.

Second, his avatar as Ekdanta or the one-tusked one was taken in order to subdue Madasura or the demon of vanity. In this avatar Ganesha stresses the need to not let illusions enter your head and intoxicate you with pride. This is possible only when you understand that you are but a part of the divine and that the divine energy is acting through you.

Third, Ganesha as Mohadara teaches us to get rid of moha or attachment by killing

the demon Moha. Fourth, as Gajanana he kills the demon Lobha or greed. Fifth, as Lambodara he overcomes krodha or the demon of anger. Lust is another demon of undoing and so the sixth is Ganesha's incarnation as a deformed Vikata who destroys the demon Kama. Seventh, as Vignaraja, he destroys the ogre of self-indulgence.

In his eighth incarnation as Dhumravarna he cuts at the root of it all, ahankara or arrogance. Brahma felt the sun, the sustainer of life, deserved the post of the minister of life actions and so appointed him as such. With this, the sun became so arrogant, that when he suddenly sneezed, the personification of arrogance, Ahantasura, was born. The terror he was wreaking and the misery he was bringing by his sheer arrogance was unimaginable. Eventually the gods prayed to Ganesha, asking him to end their suffering at the hands of Ahantasura.

Ganesha appeared as a smoke-coloured deity riding a rat. Ahantasura was overcome. Arrogance is the root of self-destruction, says Dhumravarna. Even though the sun is so powerful, his arrogance created havoc in the world.

Ganesha is elephant-faced, pot bellied and with short legs because he has no ego. And that is why the attributes which would otherwise be seen as disproportionate and strange now become endearing. We all have eight negative energies in some measure in us and we need to overcome them in order to control the ego. The ills that derive from these negative emotions manifest in a similar manner. It is divine power that makes you powerful, beautiful, desired... so do not ascribe it all to yourself, says Ganesha and that remains the most valuable lesson to success.

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