

How to Listen to the Dhamma

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The Buddha would often begin his Dhamma talks by saying, “Listen and pay careful attention.” By that he didn’t just mean, “Listen to every word.” He also meant, “Listen using appropriate attention.” He never taught bare attention. As far as he was concerned, there were only two types of attention—appropriate and inappropriate—and appropriate attention is what you want to bring to the Dhamma as you listen to it. It means asking the right questions: “How does this Dhamma apply to my behavior? How does it apply to my mind right now?—particularly with regard to things I might do well to abandon and things I might do well to develop, both in outside behavior and in what’s going on in the mind.”

Appropriate attention reminds you that the Dhamma is all about comprehending suffering and abandoning the causes of suffering, so that you can bring an end to it. Appropriate attention basically asks two kinds of questions with regard to your behavior in general: “What’s skillful and should be developed, and what’s unskillful that should be abandoned?” Then, as you get into the mind: “Where is the suffering right now? What am I clinging to, how am I clinging to it, and where is the cause? What’s the craving that’s giving rise to this? What should I develop in the mind so that I can get rid of that craving, abandon it?”

When you listen to a Dhamma talk in this way, sometimes you find that nothing in the talk is related to what’s going on in your mind. It may be for other people with other problems, so you just let it pass. This is why the ajans would often say, “Don’t give your main attention to the Dhamma talk. Give your main attention to what’s going on in your mind as you meditate, and maybe 5% of your attention to the talk. If something in the talk is relevant to what you’re doing as you’re meditating, it’ll come into your mind on its own.”

They tell about how Ajaan Mun would give long Dhamma talks, and how almost every one of them would start with very basic principles in the practice and then work up to more refined principles, with the idea that each level of the talk would be appropriate for somebody in the audience. You’d sit there, focused on your breath, focused on your meditation. At some point he’d get to where you were in your path, and then he’d move on. That was what you were listening for: the part where he was talking about what’s going on in your mind right now. The rest you could leave for others. But while you’re listening to the part that *is* appropriate to you, ask yourself, “What am I doing right now that’s relevant to what’s being said? When there’s a discussion of unskillful mental states, do I have

those mental states right now? When there's a discussion of skillful ones, do I have those right now? Maybe the discussion will give me some ideas on how I can abandon what's unskillful and develop what's skillful." That's listening to the Dhamma talk in the right way.

The Buddha's descriptions of how to listen give some useful indications about how the practice of concentration is related to listening. He says that you should bring not only appropriate attention but also a quality he calls *ek'aggata*. Your mind should be *ek'agga*, which means it's gathered into one, around the topic of the talk. You're not split-off, thinking about other things—tomorrow's issues or yesterday's issues. You're focused on one thing: on what the talk is saying. Your mind is gathered around right here.

This point helps to explain how people can gain awakening while listening to Dhamma talks. When the mind is in right concentration, it's also said to be *ek'agga*, which some people say means one-pointed, so one-pointed that you're not even aware of your body, you're not aware of sounds. But if that were so, you wouldn't be able to listen to the Dhamma talk, you wouldn't be able to think thoughts of appropriate attention, because appropriate attention involves directed thought and evaluation, which are qualities of the first jhana. You let your thoughts flow along with the talk, and you evaluate what's being said as it relates to what's going on in your mind. That's what the appropriate attention is for.

So this clears up that issue: *Ek'aggatā*, the noun form, doesn't mean one-pointedness. It means "gathered into oneness." You can still hear, you can still be aware of your body, you can still know what's going on in your mind, and you're in a position where you can do something about it. That's one issue.

Another issue the Buddha talks about is how to get the mind into concentration by listening to a Dhamma talk. Sometimes people say, "How can jhana be necessary for awakening if people can gain awakening while they're listening to the Dhamma talk? We have lots of examples in the Canon." The Buddha explains: As you listen to the Dhamma, you're getting a sense of the Dhamma, you're sensitive to the Dhamma, you're sensitive to its meaning. In other words, you see how it applies to what's going on in your mind right now, and you actually follow along. Something that's said to be abandoned, you try abandoning it; something's to be developed, you develop it—and you begin to see the results.

As the Buddha said, a sense of joy comes from that. From that joy, there's rapture; from the rapture, your body is calmed. When the body is calm, there's a sense of pleasure, and that sense of pleasure then becomes the basis for getting the

mind centered in concentration. So in a case like that, you've listened enough to the talk to realize how it's useful for you, and you see the results. That brings the mind into concentration.

So, listening to a Dhamma talk doesn't preclude getting the mind into concentration. In fact, if you listen to the talk well, and the talk is relevant to what's going on in your mind, it can naturally lead to concentration. Then, from concentration, as the mind is really centered, you can develop more discernment that leads to release.

There are lots of cases in the Canon of people gaining the Dhamma eye as they listen to the talk by the Buddha, and it's expressed the same way again and again: "Whatever is subject to origination is all subject to cessation." Taken on its own, it sounds like a generalization about the fact of inconstancy. But you have to ask: In what kind of mental state would that observation arise naturally without your having been told beforehand? Because in all the cases in the Canon, nobody's been told ahead of time what the Dhamma eye is going to see.

There's one passage where Sariputta—who at that point was not yet ordained—has gained the Dhamma eye by listening to a very short talk by Ven. Assaji, one of the five brethren. He comes back to see his friend, Moggallana. Moggallana sees him coming from afar and says to him, "Your facilities are bright, your eyes are clear. Have you seen the deathless?" And Sariputta says, "Yes."

So that's the key: seeing the deathless. You work with the fabrications in your mind, get them really subtle, maintaining whatever quality of concentration you've got. Then, when discernment arises, you begin to see that even the concentration is fabricated, so the next question is: Where do you go to reduce the stress even in the fabricated concentration? You realize that wherever else you could go would also be a fabrication, and there comes an insight: the mind can neither stay here nor go there. Then it sees an alternative, and the alternative is totally unfabricated. That's the experience of the deathless.

One of the things you realize as you come back from that experience is that you've stepped out—outside of everything that is subject to origination. That thing you realized: It's not subject to origination, and it's also not subject to cessation, as everything that's originated would be. So the statement of the Dhamma eye is not just a general statement based on ordinary everyday experience. It's a realization that comes from something extraordinary.

So there is this possibility: listening to the Dhamma talk can take you to something extraordinary. As you follow along, see how it applies to what you're doing in your mind right now. Apply the teachings, and then head the mind toward disenchantment and dispassion. This can happen while you're listening to

a Dhamma talk and, as the Buddha said, it doesn't have to come from the Buddha himself. It can come from someone else who is practicing the path. It can also come while you're reflecting on the Dhamma, and even while you're teaching the Dhamma yourself. There have been cases of people giving Dhamma talks and gaining awakening while they give the talk.

There's one mentioned in the Canon: A monk who's sick and the other monks are concerned about him, that he may die. So they ask him about his attainment, and a series of questions goes back and forth. After he's said some pretty remarkable things about his attainments, they ask him, "Then are you an arahant?" and he says, "No not yet." "What are you still holding on to?" And as he's explaining what he's still holding on to, he lets go of it and gains full awakening.

So that can happen, too. You reflect on the Dhamma, you teach the Dhamma, even reciting the Dhamma—back in those days they were reciting in their own native language—and in all these cases, the Buddha said, these are possibilities for an opening to release. In addition to simply meditating, getting the mind into concentration on its own, there are other ways of inducing a state of concentration through joy in the Dhamma.

So when you're listening to the Dhamma, try to listen in a way that would give rise to a sense of joy, joy in the excellence of the Dhamma. Why is the Dhamma excellent? Because you apply it while it's being taught and you see results. That, the Buddha said, is the miracle of instruction.

Someone once asked him to show a few miracles to get more adherents, but he replied that people would always be dubious. If you read their minds, they'll wonder if there's some trick. You display psychic powers, they'll wonder if there's some trick. But if you teach them something that, when they put it into practice, actually gets results, they'll know there's no trick. This is the real deal. You know for sure that the teaching is true because you've truly put it into practice and seen the results.

So learn how to listen to the Dhamma properly, with appropriate attention. And remember that appropriate attention, especially as it applies to the four noble truths, carries some duties. When the talk points out something that should be abandoned, you actually try to abandon it. If it points out something that should be developed, you try to develop it. That way, in the Buddha's terms, you get sensitive to what the talk is aiming at, you get sensitive to the Dhamma and its meaning, and that's what gives rise to the joy that later becomes one of the causes for concentration, and the concentration can become a condition of a further insight.

This means, of course, that you approach the Dhamma with some right view, very basic right view: the conviction that you're here to train the mind because the mind *can* be trained and it will make a difference in your actions, and your actions will make a difference in your life. The Dhamma that's being taught can be applicable to what's going on in your mind right now, what you're doing in the mind right now, and you're in a position where you can test it. If you believe that much, you're ready to listen to the Dhamma in a way where you can really benefit.