



the empty bell

The Empty Bell: Principles of Sharing

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Almost all gatherings at the Empty Bell include silence, and individual sharing in the group. In this society, such opportunities are rare, precious, and fragile. Over time, we have found that this kind of “holy conversation” is most fruitful when certain principles of understanding and behavior are followed.

Principles of Understanding

- 1) **Silence is the dwelling place of God**, and at the heart of authentic listening and speech. In silence, we are listening inwardly for the presence of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes we call this deep listening “practicing the Presence.”
- 2) Our minds are often involved in judgment and comparison (of ourselves and others). But practicing the Presence is a disciplined, **inward listening that is non-judgmental**. In this type of listening, we cultivate a tone of mercy, compassion and unconditional love toward ourselves and others. We are not looking for what is wrong or right about ourselves or others, but simply for “what is.” Deep listening requires an attitude of neutral, compassionate inquiry.
- 3) Authentic contact with God and others is always made in some present moment. But, too often, we are not truly present. Too often, we are distracted, thinking about the past or the future, or analyzing our experience. Our mind is sometimes a tree full of monkeys! One aim of our spiritual practice is **to be truly present** with our whole selves in each moment.
- 4) When we do speak, we are not merely trading information, or even sharing interesting stories about recent experiences, as in a support group. **Holy speech** comes from a deeper place, and **creates something new** as it is spoken. A new space, and new possibilities are opened up in the speaker’s and the listener’s heart.
- 5) **Good listening happens in the whole body**, not only in the ears and brain. When I listen to someone speak, I try to listen with my heart, belly, and skin.
- 6) Authentic speech emerges out of a deep, interior place where the old and new circulate, where what we already knew before we sat down, and what we don’t yet know somehow come together. In true speech there is something new for the speaker, some discovery, and a sense of aliveness that accompanies this new frontier. This inner frontier of new speech is the Holy Spirit, a dynamic, safe, and sacred place. The Holy Spirit is always new. **God is the newest thing there is**. These statements are not merely neat ideas, but rather, experiences.
- 7) The most powerful dimension of being with others is not only in the trading of personal stories, but in the felt-sense of simply being together. In this dimension, less is more. Without saying a word, **simply being-with** can be relaxing, blessed and fruitful. The story-telling is a further embodiment of being-with.
- 8) It is best when every person in the group feels at home, safe, and invited to share. In fruitful groups,

each individual intends **to listen the other members into speech**. In such groups, each individual inwardly invites his or her neighbor to speak first. We watch for and avoid competition to fill the silence with our own voice. This discipline isn't easy, because we all want and need to feel heard. But who is listening? It is a koan.

Principles of Behavior

Sitting

- 1) **Sit up straight** on your cushion, bench or chair. Please do not extend your legs into the center area. While keeping the spine straight, relax the body. Relax, but stay awake. We are on holy ground. If there is pain in the joints or the back, take a moment to bring awareness to the pain, and relax into it before shifting the body. Soften into the pain. Know that working with emotional and physical pain is an important part of the contemplative path.
- 2) Occasionally, during the sharing time, **bring awareness to your body**, especially to any areas of tension. Ask yourself what that tension is about, and then relax into the tension, to see what happens. At other times, bring awareness to your breathing, letting it be. Sometimes, that is where the real action is for you--not in the verbal conversation.

Speaking and Listening

- 1) **For new participants, it is better to listen more**, and to speak less or not at all in the first meeting, or until you feel a strong prompting from the Spirit. In this way, you can more easily catch the subtle, deep flow of dialogue that is practiced here. Feeling heard by the Spirit is as important as being heard by others.
- 2) **Listen for feelings** within yourself and within the other, as much as for content. In fact, consider emotions that arise, pleasant or unpleasant, as an important part of your spiritual practice. For example, I might ask myself, "What feelings are stirring within me as I listen to this person?" When I speak, I might ask myself, "Where in my body are these words coming from?" Consider such questions as koans that take us deeper without necessarily providing a final answer.
- 3) **Do not give advice**. We are here to plumb our own depths, from within our own bodies, not to tell others what to do, even necessarily to help them. If someone says, "I don't know what to do about such-and-such," simply listen with your inner ear and with your heart. Assume that people's not-knowing is a good thing, and that your job is simply to be with them lovingly in their not-knowing. This practice invites God into our not-knowing.
- 4) **Pay close attention to your pronouns**. When speaking, try to use the personal pronoun, "I". This pronoun carries more emotional and spiritual depth, and invites more intimacy. Occasionally, the pronouns "we" and "you" (when used to mean "anyone") are appropriate, especially when we speak about universal truths. But too often we leap to the universal level of things before we are truly grounded within our "I".
- 5) **A felt-sense of silence** must be maintained, **even in the midst of conversation**. "Billiard ball" or "ping-pong" conversation--where each individual's words ricochet off another's--tends to be unfruitful.

If things move too fast, depth is lost. Before speaking, breathe into your belly and into your motives for speaking. Asking yourself a question, such as “Why am I saying this now?” will deepen your self-knowledge and your subsequent speech. Give space to those speakers who may need to pause and then go on.

6) Before speaking, **be aware of those members who have not spoken yet**. Assume that they might need a little more silence in which to find their words. If you have already spoken, wait a bit longer before you speak again. Practice discernment. Stay awake!

7) You may notice **the lightness of the atmosphere here**. This lightness arises from the sense of safety that people feel to be themselves. It is not unusual for both tears and laughter to arise together, or in close proximity. Since the sharing is often deep and exploratory, we do not expect people to be smooth and elegant in their speech. We are simply sharing our experience with trusted friends.

Being in Community

1) **Consider everything that is shared as confidential**. That is, in all personal sharings, we do not tell others outside the group what a specific person said or did, unless we have that person’s permission. On the other hand, sharing our own personal experience of being in this community can be a gift to ourselves and to others when we do it with respect for individual confidentiality.

2) One of the most fruitful dimensions of being in a group is **working with judgments about others**, and with the mind’s tendency to compare oneself with others. Judgments and comparisons are not bad. Rather, they are simply how the mind works. Bring awareness to these inner activities, relax into them, and then explore them with an attitude of compassionate inquiry. Those who leave a group because they are uncomfortable with another member, miss a golden opportunity for knowing themselves and God more deeply. Stay with it! If problems persist, speak to the leader.

3) We encourage each member of our community to **create a period of silent meditation, contemplation or prayer, each day**.

4) **We support each other and pray for each other to live** lives of creativity and service in our work, families, and communities.

