

## Effective Listening

by Piya Tan

One of my most rewarding feelings is to see the peaceful joy on the faces of my audience when we study the Suttas. It is unmistakable in many of them: it reflects a deeper peace within, and often they would share this with others. Many lives are changed for the better by hearing the Dharma. And the crowd is growing, too.

But we must not forget those who still say things like “The Suttas are *cheem* (very deep),” or “The Suttas are very serious,” and so on. This is often said after only one sitting. This may well be true because, perhaps because of the person’s *past* karma, or the day’s Sutta *is* a difficult one, or it happens that the person finds it difficult since it is his *first* time.

Perhaps, he has a short attention span, or cannot relate to any talk that has no joke, that is, without comic relief. Thankfully, the regulars at our Sutta classes enthusiastically encourage such newcomers by telling that not to give up at the first blush.

But why is it that some people enjoy Sutta classes, and some do not seem to. One good reason is that they are not aware of the steps of learning that underlie Buddhist training. So it is good to know something about this.

The three levels of Buddhist learning are: **the word level, the thought level, and the feeling level.**

The word level is simply that of *listening* to the Sutta study, allowing as many words to sink in as possible. Study notes are always provided, so we can make notes or read the texts again in our free time. Don’t worry about what you do not understand. The little pieces that you understand will somehow piece together in time, and form clearer and connected pictures.

The thought level is when you *reflect* on what you have heard or learned, relating it to your personal experiences and to what you have already known. When you look into the mirror of the Suttas you see yourself.

Just let what you have learned float around your mind, and somehow they will connect like stellar particles to form bright nebulas, and you begin to see other aspects of the teachings, and begin to understand yourself better. A new world opens to you.

The feeling level is the most important level: it is listening *without* words. Examine what you have learned in the stillness of your mind. What is the teaching pointing to? What are the Suttas trying to say about you? Sometimes we only listen to the words, without hearing the silence behind them. Remember when you *feel* happy: there are no words for it.

Dharma is like listening to beautiful music. You cannot enjoy it if you keep talking at it, or comparing this teacher’s sounds with that teacher’s sounds. You may like a teacher because *you* think that *he* thinks like *you*. Don’t just listen to the teacher, hear the Dharma; then all teachers would sound like *virtuosi playing the same beautiful music in different ways*.

To benefit most from Sutta study, you are advised to

(1) Calm the body: dress simple and comfortable, sit still, relax. Turn off the phones.

- (2) Calm your speech: in the Dharma hall, speak happily or remain quiet in a friendly way.
- (3) Calm your mind: let go of the past, let go of the future; be present in the Sutta study.

If you are silent enough, you will hear the Dharma speaking to you.

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