

The Three Dimensions of Listening

2023 IACP Forum

Stephen Sulmeyer

“Listening to Me”: Mindfulness of Feelings

Mindfulness of our feelings is a process that must not and cannot be rushed. We need to assume a meditative rather than an analytical stance, which is about *allowing* rather than *doing*. By simply *being* with our feelings, whatever they happen to be, they naturally come into greater focus. By abiding patiently with our feelings we can discern what they are with greater specificity and exactitude. For example, we might notice that we feel sad. If we simply stay with the sadness, with an open and caring curiosity, without trying to force anything, it might reveal what *kind* of sadness it is, such as grief, or regret, or shame. In fact, we can ask, “what *kind* of sadness is this?” If, for example, we are feeling anger, we might notice not only what kind of anger, but also the *function* of the anger. Sometimes anger is an appropriate response to whatever is happening— often with the energy of something like “stop it!”—but sometimes anger operates as what I call a *covering emotion*, serving to cover up a much more vulnerable feeling, such as shame or guilt. Many people would rather feel angry (and hence powerful) than vulnerable (and hence weak). We might notice that what we’re feeling is more of a vague mood or a mental state, which we might not be able immediately to put our finger on. This is a common occurrence in conflict work when we experience stuckness or impasse: that feeling of the grinding of gears, the spinning of wheels in the mud. Sometimes we just have to sit with that unidentified state until it finally comes into focus. And that mood, when it finally comes into focus, is usually telling us not just what *we’re* feeling, not just what others are feeling, but what’s actually *happening* at a subtle but tangible level. For example, say the mood that clarifies itself is despair. That feeling might well be reflecting not only a sense of hopelessness as to how the negotiations are going, but perhaps also the state of the parties’ feelings and assumptions about themselves, about each other, or about their beliefs about the fundamental unfairness of life, or their belief that they can never catch a break. So the first step is to simply be with whatever feelings are arising within us, without an agenda other than to know more deeply and more intimately what they are. The Taoist concept of *wu-wei*, doing without doing, strikes me as exactly the right attitude to have.