

NLP MODELLING PROJECT
FOR THE JOHN SEYMOUR ASSOCIATES PRACTITIONER TRAINING

DEEP LISTENING

BY

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This project is designed to provide a model of a high-level skill that is badly needed in the world of to-day. Much listening lacks understanding. Sometimes this is because the hearer is inattentive, and sometimes it is because the hearer has pre-judged the meaning of the words and body language. My objective was to reach out towards the skills of Buddha Avalokitesvara, the Buddha of Compassion, who by listening attentively was able to hear not only what was being said but also what was being left unsaid. You can find the full invocation of the name of Avalokitesvara at the end of the project.

Methodology

I worked with A.B. and with a group that included J.W. I have known A.B. for several years. Both from personal interaction with her and from observation, she appears to have high order listening skills. I see her frequently and can watch as an observer when she is listening to other people. This is an important professional activity in her work, where the primary focus is on kinaesthetic awareness, sometimes interacting with belief systems.

My approach with A.B. was to interview her for an hour and a half, during which I asked her questions that were based on the multi-level modelling strategy. As the interview progressed, I was able to take second and third positions and to move between them, in order to develop an understanding of her strategy for deep listening. At the same time, I could to some extent check what she was saying by putting it in the context of our own interaction.

Later, I used the information A.B. had given me, and my own intuitions, to assess the way A.B. worked with other people when I was present. The context was such that my presence had no inhibitory effect. I was able to act as observer on many occasions, including a few where the listening was not successful.

My interview with J.W. was in two parts. In the first part, she and I were members of a group that spent an hour discussing deep listening, primarily from a Buddhist perspective. In the second part, I pursued privately with J.W. some of the themes and ideas that had been aired during the group discussion. The format was thus entirely different from my interview with A.B. and provided a range of insights that were complementary to it.

Results - A.B.

Using question-and-answer, and observation of A.B. in both second and third position, I obtained the following information:

When/Where

1/ Deep listening skills are used in a professional context (that is, in teaching and counselling). They may also be used sparingly or in modified form in a social context. A.B. commented that if she used all of her skill in a social context, "People tend to spill out their

troubles to me." Though the professional context is normally associated with particular places, place is not an ingredient in the use of the skill: nor is time of day or season.

Actions

2/ A.B. allows her attention to rest on the client. She watches the whole person, not just the face, looking for repetitive patterns of movement, changes in skin tone and changes in breathing.

Sometimes a speaker may falter or dry up before the topic has been concluded. This happens with people who are not used to being heard, or who feel they are not worth being listened to. In this case, A.B. asks them to notice that she is still listening. She stresses that it is particularly important that the speaker should allow himself or herself to be aware that A.B. is still listening, rather than to be told that this is the case.

She listens to what she is being told. She does not agree, disagree or offer any experience of her own. When listening, she will examine particularly carefully anything that is associated with any physical changes in the speaker and may ask them if they would like to explain that part of their story again or in more detail. She does not otherwise interrupt.

A.B. gives good eye contact, but avoids exclusive concentration on eyes and eye movement.

Giving good attention is an act of will, rather than a matter of physical organisation. If it proves difficult, for example because the speaker is presenting a point of view to which she is not sympathetic, she reminds herself of her belief in the essential goodness of people. A.B. may also visualise the speaker as a small baby or child, with qualities of innocence and goodness which still exist within him or her and for which she can give credit.

Internal Capabilities

Before beginning to listen, A.B. organises herself to have a quiet mind, free from internal dialogue. When she is listening to the client, she gathers information without making any judgment about it. She looks for patterns, without necessarily responding to them. Pattern recognition is an important skill: thought patterns, speech patterns and physical patterns.

Values and Beliefs

A.B. is guided in her listening by a set of values and beliefs that are very important in her life. This means that listening is a high-level activity for her.

- She believes that humans are at heart good, and rational
- That everyone deserves to be listened to well and that good listening is a way to show that you care about your fellow-humans.

- That listening helps people to listen to themselves and assists their thinking.

That listening is also a way of caring for herself. "Listening helps me to be in touch with the real me."

- That good listening helps the listener to become a better person.

Results

Listening is producing positive results, if the speaker's thinking makes progress. This is easy to check, by question and answer. In most cases, the speaker who has a problem will already have the solution within them and thinking can advance without active advice from A.B. Indeed, giving active advice is not part of, or an adjunct to, deep listening as far as A.B. is concerned.

Snags

A.B. is aware that listening is not working, primarily from kinaesthetic feedback within herself. She has a highly developed sensory awareness and can relate emotional discomfort ("This feels wrong") to physical sensation (e.g. "My stomach is getting tense").

If she feels that listening is not working, she will first move relative to the speaker and test via sensory feedback to see if there is any improvement; alternatively, she may vary eye contact, and test in the same way. If neither of these succeeds, she will stop deep listening and revert to social listening, or move away altogether.

Results - J.W.

From the group and individual discussions, I learned the following:

1/ Deep listening skills are seen as useful almost all the time. There is much emphasis on listening to close family and friends, both within and between the generations. There is a general assumption that it is appropriate to give, or be prepared to give, deep attention to anyone, any place, any time.

Actions

J.W. prepares herself to listen in two ways. Physically, she makes sure that she is doing nothing that will get in the way of listening. So she will stop any conflicting physical activity - e.g. preparing a meal - and put her herself where she can comfortably see and hear the speaker.

It is important for J.W. that she does not interrupt the speaker. It also seems unlikely that she would want to offer specific advice, however strong might be the temptation to do so.

Internal_Capabilities

Mentally she makes sure that she can listen to the speaker without intrusive internal dialogue. She does this by a process called Mindfulness.

Mindfulness means many things. For this study a useful description is living in the present moment, free of internal dialogue or emotion about either the past or the future. Achieving mindfulness requires much practice and a vital element in the practice is awareness of breathing. J.W. therefore prepares her mind to listen by allowing herself to become aware of her breathing. This also permits her to let her attention, as well as her sight, fall on the speaker.

Members of the group particularly commented on the difficulty of deep listening in a family context, when emotions present in the speaker might create anger or fear in the listener. It seemed that mindfulness would be a help in situations like this.

Values and Beliefs

J.W. and the group are guided by Buddhist philosophy. Three themes are particularly relevant in this context. One is the existence of psychological pain and suffering as a more or less universal condition. The second is a personal mission to help ease this pain in appropriate ways. The third is that everyone has within them the seeds of enlightenment; from this it appears to follow that they also have the answers to their own problems and difficulties, once their thinking moves in the right direction.

Three other points of interest were made:

- Joys need to be listened to with the same care and attention as sorrows. The existence of suffering does not exclude or devalue the existence of joy and happiness.
- Listening may not always be a complete response to a particular difficulty.
- Kindness may not be an appropriate response, though the temptation to make kind remarks and comments is often strong.

Results

J.W. listens without expectation of result, laying all the emphasis on the listening process itself. Like A.B. she would refrain from giving advice.

Snags

These mirror the difficulties reported by A.B. though they are cast in different language.

Sometimes the listener cannot summon enough detachment, using mindfulness of breathing, to avoid being caught in the emotions of the speaker. Sometimes the listener becomes very aware that listening falls short of a complete response. Sometimes the speaker's point of view is

that the listener feels that his or her efforts are futile. In each of these difficulties, the listener would return to the breath and to the present moment, trusting this procedure to allow an insight to develop that would overcome the problem.

APPLICATION

1/ Prepare yourself to listen. Do this at three levels:

a/ Spiritually. Be aware that the person to whom you will listen is entitled to be heard and think that listening will be a positive benefit to him or her. Remind yourself that your role as a listener is part of your contribution to humanity.

b/ Mentally. Get yourself out of the way, so that your own thoughts do not interfere with your listening. Do this by allowing yourself to let your mind rest on your breathing for a few moments, so that you come fully into the present moment. If you are in any way still mentally or emotionally reluctant, remind yourself of the the qualities of goodness and innocence of the speaker at birth and remember that they are still present within.

c/ Physically. Be comfortable where you are, or move until you reach that position. Do nothing else: avoid splitting yourself between listening and some other activity.

2/ Allow your attention to rest on the speaker, making good but not excessive use of eye contact. Be aware of the whole person in his or her surroundings, and not simply the head and upper body. Notice if any patterns of movement or gesture or changes in skin tone or breathing are associated with patterns of speech. These may help you to a fuller understanding.

At the same time stay in tune with your own physical and emotional state throughout the listening. If you experience discomfort in either of these, you need to attend to it because it is a message to you about the quality of your interaction with the speaker. Move your body, alter your eye contact, or if all else fails terminate the interaction.

3/ Do not interrupt, unless to clarify something that you have not fully understood.

Do not offer comparable experiences of your own.

Do not make judgements about what you are hearing.

If the speaker falters or stops, and you are willing to continue listening, ask the speaker to notice that he or she still has your complete attention.

Do aim to understand what you are hearing and in particular to identify patterns of speech or movement which may assist your understanding.

4/ When the speaker has finished, check your breathing again as a reminder to stay in the moment. Remember your commitment to listening without judgement or prejudice. Once again, avoid commenting on the

details of what you have heard or giving comparable instances involving yourself or other people. Only advise if it is specifically requested. Even then, it is better to check with the speaker to see if their own thinking has altered; deep listening is also a way for people to listen to themselves.

Deep Listening

We invoke your name, Avalokitesvara. We aspire to learn your way of listening in order to help relieve the suffering in the world. You know how to listen in order to understand. We invoke your name in order to practise listening with all our attention and openheartedness. We will sit and listen without prejudice. We will sit and listen without judging or reacting. We will sit and listen in order to understand. We will sit and listen so attentively that we will be able to hear what the other person is saying and also what is being left unsaid. We know that just by listening deeply, we already alleviate a great deal of pain and suffering in the other person.