



# Deep Listening

An Interview with Gregory Kramer

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*Any application of the practice can be a door that, when opened, reveals something important about grasping and freedom.*

**I presume you didn't graduate high school saying to yourself, "I'm going to spend my life teaching Dharma." Might there have been a few steps between there and here? How did you get into all this, Gregory?**

Actually, I did graduate high school feeling a close affinity to the internal life. That's just how I was as a kid. I didn't have a word for it at the time, but I have always had a strong interest in how things actually are—what in Buddhism is called wisdom. It took some of the manifestations you would expect, given the shape of society in that era, like psychology and poetry. When I read *The Three Pillars of Zen* at the age of 17, I actually felt a kind of crisis, wondering if I should become a monk. After some soul searching, I realized I wasn't ready for it. I had work to do in the world so I followed my inclination to be a musician.

**Let me guess...electric shakuhachi?**

Close. Privately, I was a pianist, but my public face was as an electronic

music composer/performer. I was part of the downtown New York avant garde electronic music scene in the 70s. I was doing music for modern dance and films, performing concerts, that kind of thing. It wasn't rock and roll—I performed and sculpted noise. That led to an interest in music technology, and I spent some time as an inventor, developer—a different kind of creativity—and ersatz businessperson. My work with sound, particularly a complex musical controller I was building with Bob Moog, led me into science, of all things. I was dealing with all this complex control, then found myself at the Santa Fe Institute exploring how sound could be used to represent complex systems, so I began to research sonification, and edited the first book on auditory displays. But throughout all that, my heart was centered in meditation and the dharma. I was studying and practicing in various ways, having been trained by my first teacher, Anagarika Dhammadina, and then later by Venerable Ananda Maitreya, Achan Sobin, and Punnaji Mahathera.

**How did you run into your teachers?**

In 1974, I happened to be attending a one-week seminar with a yoga teacher at an ashram in Canada, when one day at lunch some people mentioned there was a Buddhist nun living up the road; would I like to go visit her? I didn't really know what a Buddhist nun was, but I went along, and trundling up from her garden was this woman dressed in brown. It was Anagarika Dhammadina, who immediately struck me as profoundly clear, wise, and present. The next day, I went back to visit her alone to kind of drink up whatever was going on here. I was already in the throes of discovering mindfulness by then: I'd read a lot of spiritual literature available at the time and visited some communities. I could see that the spiritual path was about being awake, and I was trying in my own awkward way to wake up. And it was awkward! So when I met her, I recognized how present she was and that she was clearly drawing from a tradition that was centered on being awake.

There was nothing theoretical or abstract about her: she was an astonishing combination of an earthy Austrian peasant woman living on the land in Canada, and profound mystic talking about liberation. Her first job with me was to help me be a decent person. I was your typical, completely self-centered, Western, middle-class kid. She would have nothing to do with that. She made no bones about knocking me upside the head because, to her, there was no distinction whatsoever between being a decent person and being awakened. She was as much a tough grandmother as she was a spiritual teacher.

### **And she taught you meditation?**

Yes, she taught me vipassana, and soon added a good deal of dharma and abhidhamma. I would not see her very often; in fact, her first instructions to me took about ten minutes. But for the next year, and from there on out, I practiced diligently in between our meetings. She had no particular urge to be a teacher and was more interested in continuing her own path, so she would invite teachers from elsewhere, both for her own sake and for her students. In this way, she introduced me to my other three primary teachers. First, Ananda Maitreya Maha Nayaka Thero, then Ajaan Sobin. At the time of her death, she introduced me to and I began working with Ven. Punnaji Mahathera. So over a twenty year period, my study was a wonderful *mélange* of Theravada teachings from Sri Lanka and Thailand.

### **It sounds like an unusual and fortunate dharma education.**

It was incredible! It had this quality of going back to the source. It was outside the Western vipassana tradition, yet was very much in the Theravada tradition. As respected as these teachers were, it was clear that each, in their own way, was also a kind of iconoclast. It was

remarkable to me to discover over time just how diverse the tradition could be. You might think that when you go back to the root tradition, everyone would be teaching the same thing. But each of the teachers not only had their own personality, and therefore a unique way of expressing the teachings, but the teachings themselves also seemed to be open to a vast range of understanding and interpretation, dependent upon how you translate a key term or what aspect of the teaching is emphasized. Venerable Punnaji, in particular, radically re-approached and re-translated key dharma terms in brilliant and spot-on ways. I was indeed fortunate to have been exposed to so many subtly diverse perspectives and to be led to the core—the suttas and direct personal experience—from where all of it came.

Insight Dialogue is the extension of silent meditation into the interpersonal sphere.

### **At some point you made some kind of transition, from dhamma practice being a part-time concern that went parallel to other things in your life, to it becoming a primary focus. Can you say something about that?**

I can, because the transition was actually quite explicit. Though dhamma was my deepest love and concern, I intentionally avoided making teaching my vocation in the world because I was concerned that my tendency towards accomplishment or self-making might take over. I had seen the teacher role affect a lot of people in negative ways, and knew I could well run into the same problems. But the centrality of the dharma in my life was a trend that wouldn't hold back. In the nineties, my primary scientific research was in

sonification and perception, but my growing interest in questions of human transformation and consciousness studies brought the dharma more front and center. I embarked upon a Ph.D. project having to do with ways of bringing the qualities of mind cultivated in vipassana meditation to being in dialogue using online communications. This is when Insight Dialogue first began to emerge.

### **What is Insight Dialogue, in a nutshell?**

It's the extension of personal, silent meditation practice into the interpersonal sphere. The technique, the qualities cultivated, and the intentions of the vipassana tradition are all maintained—*sati* (mindfulness), *samādhi* (concentration), and *sammā ditṭhi* (right view) remain central to the process—and these qualities are brought to the interpersonal engagement with others. Just as you carefully attend to sense data and bring awareness to mental states during silent vipassana retreats, you can also attend to the words being spoken to you by others, along with all sorts of nonverbal signals that come along with communication. The heart vibrates, the organism vibrates, and this is known.

### **What is the precedent for this practice in the early tradition?**

The evidence is everywhere in the discourses, but the most striking, clear statement of it is right there in the *Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta*, the *Discourse on the Foundations of Mindfulness*. In the refrain repeated again and again in that text, the Buddha speaks about observing the whole range of phenomena *internally, externally, and both internally and externally*. This passage is so often glossed over, and emphasis is usually placed upon an introspective and even introverted approach to vipassana meditation. But as I understand

the instructions here, the practice is not complete unless one learns to attend just as carefully and precisely to external, or perhaps objective, phenomena. This must include interpersonal phenomena, a huge aspect of our lives as relational, social beings. I discovered only gradually how powerful and deeply rooted in the tradition this way of practicing really is.

Let's take mindfulness as an example (though we could take almost any aspect of the dhamma). Internally, I'm mindful of this body as I'm sitting here talking to you: I'm mindful of the pleasant and unpleasant sensations, of my mind states and emotions. I might also be mindful of the hindrances or the enlightenment factors as they arise in this heart-mind right now. I might also open and extend my awareness from the internal and personal to the mutual, or shared, moments. I might be mindful of the words being spoken, of your body and how you're moving your body. I might be mindful that I'm turning back internally to my reactions to what you've said, and to my aversion and craving, my concerns, my fears. Then I could turn outward again, noticing the impermanence of what's external, which, right now, is you. You are changing moment to moment as you speak, as you look at me, and so on. Then, I can reflect upon both what's internal and external. The heart/mind becomes flexible, calm and alert. We begin to see things as they are.

Looking at mindfulness meditation in the way I've come to understand and implement the teachings, the internal *and* external refers to the entire relational moment, to what Martin Buber called *the between*. It involves finding a whole notion of interpersonal contact—this voice of mine speaking and reaching your ears; a moment of ear contact; then you speak to me and your voice reaches my ears. Out of this language there is mind contact. There is visual contact and other kinds of energetic contact, and a relational

moment unfolds, with both internal and external aspects. Indeed, it often becomes difficult to say where one leaves off and the other begins. The rigid boundaries between self and other—built up since infancy or even before it—begin to soften. This, of course, reveals and challenges the whole enterprise of constructing duality. This can be directly experienced in Insight Dialogue, where we meditate together.

Look at what a tremendous amount of our suffering is interpersonal.

**It's true that many people—students and teachers both—don't know what to make of the external part of the instruction, especially when it comes to feeling tones or mental objects. It sounds like you may be opening up, and completing, an important but overlooked part of the classical teachings here.**

It feels solid and not just an opportunistic interpretation, especially when you look at the rest of the Buddha's teachings in this interpersonal light: interpersonal doubt and lust, relational grasping, energy and fear, all the way down to the ways dependent origination unfolds in the presence of others. As I began teaching this way, and the practice got deeper and deeper, the insights people were having got more profound and beautiful. As I immersed myself in the suttas, I saw that the whole dispensation of the Buddha, when construed to cover the interpersonal, had that same depth interpersonally that it does personally.

The noble truth of suffering is another example that easily comes to hand. Yes, suffering is personal, including as it does bodily pain and aging and death, and the existential issues of what am I doing with my life and so forth. But

look at what a tremendous amount of our suffering is interpersonal. Not only are others often the source of my pain (have you ever been in relationship?), but so much of what I do causes suffering to others, either directly or quite indirectly—we discern the seeds of compassion.

Then you go on to say, if that's the case, then the cause of this interpersonal suffering must also be interpersonal *taṇhā*, that is, craving, hunger. You look inside your life, you look inside your own heart, and you don't have to look very far to find it. Yes, I've got interpersonal hungers going on. I do hunger for interpersonal pleasure. I do fear interpersonal pain. I do hunger to be seen, to exist, to be acknowledged, interpersonally. I also fear nonbeing. I do hunger to escape. These are the cravings for existence and non-existence, understood interpersonally. All these hungers together are the roots of my suffering.

Of course, if you've gone that far, you can't help but take the next step and ask, is the third noble truth true, interpersonally? What might my life look like with the cessation of interpersonal hunger? Might the stillness and love I cultivate be continually available to others? Might their love be available to me? Can I live with others in the world with the expansiveness, openness, availability, and tranquility of heart that comes from the cessation of these social or interpersonal hungers, and the grasping they create? Lovingkindness and compassion are not theory: they are lived experience.

### **Is it a matter of greater intimacy?**

You know, that's an interesting word, and it obviously comes up in my retreats or the practice groups that form. I've learned to distinguish two important facets of intimacy. One is constructed intimacy, which is what we usually think of when we use the word

intimacy. Perhaps we've constructed a life together, as husband or wife, as business partners, or in a long-term friendship. This is intimate in the sense that we feel familiar, close, understood, and safe. We feel this way because the fibers woven between us are so refined, so numerous, so deeply set in our neurological structure.

But, there is also a quality of intimacy that is unconstructed, that is found in the absence of all of that. We are intimate because there is nothing in between us. This is what arises in meditation when we have direct contact with experience, and that experience encompasses another person, or other people. Not only is my direct contact with experience occurring in my own internal meditation—seeing is seeing, hearing is hearing, and so forth—but it is also happening while being present with another, with eyes open, with ears open, having stepped outside the whole constructed sense of self and other. This is unconstructed intimacy.

Unconstructed intimacy is not built around a sense of self—or of non-self, for that matter. It is not built at all. It is the essence of impermanence, of emptiness, the essence of *anatta*, of *shunyata*. *Shunyata* extends to the whole of our lives, even this place—human relationships—where it is usually most obviously absent. The third noble truth, interpersonally understood, thus reveals a quality of being with others. It is a quality of coming to rest without clinging and seeing things as they actually are.

**I've certainly noticed that a number of people, many with extensive experience of silent, personal meditation, find the Insight Dialogue work quite remarkable.**

Isn't that amazing? It inspires me deeply. I'll tell you why that is, as I understand it. It's well-acknowledged by many people involved in this work that in traditional practice it's possible to bypass

a lot of issues and thereby miss a lot of insights. The mind is very powerful, and can protect those places of tension, confusion, and hurt from being known. But a lot of that hiding becomes impossible when you bring the practice out into the open air with others, where every moment of interpersonal practice is met by, supported by, and even challenged by others. Experience is met with unfettered receptivity, which is the essential nature of awareness, internally and externally. This quality of openness is the essence of the transformative moment—clinging is released and hungers diminish. This includes but is not limited to identified, psychological release. It extends to the mystery of awakening.

Whether we're with one other person or twenty others, all are attending to the very same moment, providing a bright beacon of mindfulness, care, and compassion. So we are waking each other up to these qualities. There's very little room at these retreats for lethargy. So an Insight Dialogue retreat tends to be challenging in the early stages, a real crucible for the practice, and then blissful in the later stages as a stillness develops from letting go. We regularly encounter capacities for relational peace, joy and insight that we did not know existed.

One of the many interesting places this leads is towards understanding the constructed nature of our issues with such things as race, ethnicity, gender and power. With interpersonal meditation, the nature of our constructs of self and other become very clear, just as in personal meditation our self-constructs become clear. One sees



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those constructs in dynamic, IMAX cinematography. You really see how you're constructing yourself to others, and constructing a sense of who they are as well. It can be appalling; it can be pretty funny; it can be freeing.

**This could have a dramatic impact on things, given that so many of the world's problems are caused and exacerbated by a lack of ability to communicate.**

It's an inability to know that while we're communicating we are doing all this constructing, and that we end up communicating through our constructs and our constructed sense of the other. In interpersonal meditation, you see that in real time. You actually see yourself doing it because you're bringing mindfulness and tranquility to it.

This work can give us a deeper understanding of what it is to live with others and be with others in ongoing, intimate relationships. What might it bring to my relationship to my father and mother, or my sons or daughters, to my spouse or my housemates, or to my work partners? We learn how our hungers for pleasure, or to be seen, or to hide, impact all of our relationships. Things can unbind in those relationships, and they become

opportunities for awakening and freedom rather than tying tighter the knots of our interpersonal habits and fears.

**That sounds both frightening and compelling at the same time.**

It's not trivial work. But then again, the dhamma is both compelling and frightening at the same time, isn't it? It's the interpersonal face of the same thing. As it is with personal practice, we live out the wisdom that comes from this meditation. Also, we can apply the practice per se, for example in therapy, conflict resolution, education, substance abuse work, or artistic collaborations. Ultimately, though, any particular application can be another door that, when opened, reveals something important about grasping and freedom. Personal and interpersonal practice are not in conflict, they are profoundly synergistic.

**You've been moving in some new directions recently, haven't you? What can you tell us about Dharma Contemplation?**

What I am calling Dharma Contemplation can be understood as the interpersonal practice of right view. It has grown from my own experience of the richness of the Buddha's teachings, which is to say my encounters with the suttas, the words of the Buddha recorded in the earliest literature of the Pali Canon. As I was reading a discourse, I would come upon something that struck me as profound and important, and I would just stop. I would soak in the words, settle into the phrases, and dwell in what the text was saying on many levels—intellectually, emotionally. I would ask the question, "How does this really touch my life?" As I did so it felt as if the teachings would almost move into my body, into my heart, and saturate my whole mind state. It was a deep learning.

When I came upon the Christian practice of *lectio divina*, a formalized way of bringing the words of Jesus and the New Testament scriptures to life in many layers, I took that as an inspiration. The Jewish practice of Midrash, and the secular experience of reading poetry, also infiltrated the practice. I began to develop a form of encountering the words of the Buddha that unfolded in stages, like *lectio divina*, and adapted it to dialogue practice, where wisdom comes from many, not just one.

Dharma Contemplation is primarily a group practice that can take place either face to face or online. We take small segments of the Buddha's teachings, translated into English, and go gradually through several phases. First, we just absorb the teachings, we listen to them just like when they were first spoken. Then, we speak out to the group whatever words strike us in some way. Silence, or online pauses, surround the words. We begin to internalize them, even memorize them. Next, we explore their meaning with the intellect, asking what certain words, phrases, or metaphors actually mean.

Then we shift to the heart and explore our emotional responses, noticing more subtle resonances we might have to words like, say, "relinquishment" or "abundance." After exploring meaning and emotion in the text, we enter into dialogue about how this truth manifests now, in our lives. This is the in-the-moment experience of the Buddha's teaching. This moves us towards silence. Eventually we settle into personal, internal contemplation, and just let the teachings ripen inside us.

**What these two practices, Dharma Contemplation and Insight Dialogue, seem to have in common with your earlier life in music and auditory displays is that all involve very careful listening. All you life's pursuits center around savoring the textures and**

**bringing out the nuances of sound, in the broadest sense of the word.**

I think you are right: it's a matter of being attuned to contact with the world, and also of being awake in the moment of experience. Careful listening has always been for me a mindful experience of impermanence. As I listen, I am energized to remain in that moment as it unfolds. If I am performing music, whoever else is listening is invited to ride that moment of living experience with me. We are joined, you might say, dialogically: with other musicians or the audience when performing, with other meditators in Insight Dialogue, and with other students of the Buddha's teaching in Dharma Contemplation. Touching the same moment. This moment.

In sonification, as you listen intently to the aural transmission of complex data sets, you are forming mental models shaped by that data, and based on that perceptual experience, understanding arises. Being fully present in that moment and attuning to these sensations and perceptions, one becomes utterly present—much like meditation, right?

**Any last thoughts, Gregory?**

Just the reminder that interpersonal meditation practice, just like personal meditation practice, goes well beyond mindfulness. We can talk about mindfulness in society—and that is a great start. But when we really drop down, with meditative insight, and have the entire scope of the dharma to apply directly to our encounters in society, it becomes vast. Not only is it a matter of how can I cultivate mindfulness when I'm in conflict, but how can I cultivate right effort, how can I cultivate right view, how can I develop wisdom? It's both daunting and inspiring to catch glimpses of how much wider and, I dare say, deeper, the teachings can be applied to our entire lives.