AUTHENTIC LISTENING: Listening with the Body

Authentic listening begins with the practice of attending to the experience of breathing in and breathing out. As we divert attention from the ever-busy mind to a close observation of the sensations accompanying the act of breathing, we begin to return to a less-familiar dimension of self, of our living experience in each moment. We become aware of physical sensations and perhaps emotions which accompany or stimulate those sensations. By taking some time each day to simply sit quietly and be attentive to this embodied experience, we can develop some skill at recognizing our own patterns of response to what we see, hear, feel, taste and touch. In particular, it is very helpful to be able to recognize our own typical physical responses to emotional triggers.

Again, to the degree that we come to know ourselves and accept our own way of being, we develop the capacity to know others as they are and accept them as different from us, while still authentically themselves. This, as we will see later, becomes essential to the practice of empathy.

For now, it is enough to recognize that we do respond to others as we listen to what they have to say. Our responses may be rooted in our own history of similar experiences, so that the emotions that arise are our own. On the other hand, we can also resonate to the emotions we hear and feel as we engage with others that are arising directly from their experience as they share it with us. This resonance to THEIR emotions is Authentic Listening or Listening with the Body – as differentiated from listening with our minds and forming thoughts about what we're hearing. It's also known as Emotional Intelligence.

When we know ourselves well enough to know our own typical ways of experiencing anger, fear, sadness, frustration, anxiety, etc. and then we notice a new pattern of response while listening to another person's story, it's a pretty good clue that we are now resonating to their emotional experience, as it is reflecting in us. This is how we begin to create trust. When you can communicate to a person the very specific physical and emotional feelings you noticed in yourself while listening to their story, something quite amazing happens. They feel validated, affirmed, and legitimatized in a way that has never happened to them before. It can be a profound experience of acceptance and a release from those feelings of being different or strange that create a sense of isolation. This is listening with empathy, which we will explore more fully later on. It is the cornerstone of trust. The person now knows that you "get" them, and – more importantly – affirm their experience, at a very core level. This single exchange catalyzes the relationship and moves it to one of both trust and transformative potential.

Practice: to increase your understanding and knowledge of Authentic Listening, remind yourself to pay attention in some of your one-on-one conversations to what's happening in your body – sensations and emotions – as you listen. Imagine your entire trunk area as a giant listening ear that can take in ALL the relevant information the speaker is delivering to you, both intellectual and emotional. When you feel it is appropriate to do so, practice letting the speaker know what your experience has been as you listened.

BE VERY CAREFUL THAT YOU ONLY CONVEY YOUR OWN FEELINGS AS YOU LISTENED – NOT YOUR JUDGMENTS, CONCLUSIONS, OR ADVICE. If you feel compelled to share a similar life experience of your own, make it very brief – just enough detail to let the person know that you've been there too.