

Empty Bell Principles of Sharing

Almost all gatherings at the Empty Bell include both silence and sharing. In today's world, such opportunities to listen deeply, both inwardly and to each other, are precious, rare, and fragile. Over time, we have found that this kind of "holy conversation" is most fruitful when we follow certain principles of understanding and behavior.

Principles of Understanding

1) **Silence is a dwelling place of the Holy.** Silence lies at the heart of authentic listening and speech. In silence, we listen inwardly for the presence of the Sacred. Sometimes we call this deep listening "practicing the Presence."

2) **Our minds are often engaged in judgment and comparison**, busily evaluating ourselves and other people. By contrast, practicing the Presence is a disciplined, inner **listening that is non-judgmental**. We cultivate an intention not to judge, but to understand. We seek to maintain a stance of mercy, compassion and unconditional love toward ourselves and others. We look not for what is wrong or right about ourselves or others, but simply for "what is." Deep listening requires an attitude of neutral, compassionate inquiry.

3) **Authentic encounter** only takes place in the present moment. However, we are often not fully present. It is easy to become distracted and to get lost in thought about the past or future or in analysis of our experience. Our mind can be as jumpy as a tree full of monkeys, swinging from branch to branch. One aim of spiritual practice is to learn to steady the mind so that we **become fully present** and bring our whole selves to each moment.

4) **Our gatherings are not a forum, seminar, or group therapy.** When we speak, we are not merely exchanging information or sharing stories. **Holy speech** comes from a deeper place and **creates something new** as it is spoken. A new space and new possibilities open up in the speaker's and the listener's hearts.

5) **Good listening takes place in the whole body**, not only in the ears and brain. When we listen to someone speak, we try to listen with mind, heart, belly, and skin. In the process of listening deeply, we are affected; we are changed.

6) **Authentic speech** emerges out of a deep, interior place where old and new circulate--where what we knew before and what we don't yet know somehow come together. In sacred speech, the speaker discovers something new as s/he speaks, and feels a sense of aliveness. We interpret this kind of authentic speech as a sign of the Spirit's presence. The Spirit is always new. One of the mystics says that **God is the newest thing there is**. This statement is not just an idea or good theology – it is also an experience.

7) The most powerful dimension of being with others is in the felt sense of simply being together. For this reason, less is often more: silence can speak volumes, whereas words can obscure the depth of the moment. Without saying a word, **simply being-with** can be relaxing, blessed and fruitful.

8) It is best when every person in the group feels at home, safe, and invited to share. In fruitful groups, each individual intends **to listen the other members into speech**. In such groups, each individual inwardly invites his or her neighbor to speak first. We watch for and avoid competition to fill the silence with our own voice. This discipline isn't easy, because **we all want and need to feel heard**. But we are here to listen for the One who speaks in the silence and who is silently present as we speak.

Principles of Behavior

Sitting

1) **Sit up straight** on your cushion, bench or chair in a posture that allows you to be both relaxed and alert. If you feel any bodily pain, take a moment to bring awareness to the pain and to relax into it before shifting your body. Soften into the pain. Working with emotional and physical pain is an important part of the contemplative path. Moving around a lot can signal distraction.

2) During the sharing time, **bring awareness to your body** from time to time, especially to areas of tension. Be curious about the tension: what is it about? Then relax into the tension, to see what happens. At other times,

bring awareness to your breathing. Sometimes the real 'action' of the meeting may be in your growing awareness of your inner states, not in the verbal conversation.

Speaking and Listening

- 1) **For new participants, please listen more** and speak less or not at all in the first meeting, or until you feel a strong prompting from the Spirit. In this way, you can more easily catch the subtle, deep flow of dialogue that is practiced here. Feeling heard by the Spirit is as important as being heard by others.
- 2) **Listen for feelings**, as much as for content. In fact, consider emotions that arise, pleasant or unpleasant, as an important part of your spiritual practice. For example, I might ask myself, "What feelings are stirred up as I listen to this person?" As I speak, I might ask myself, "Where in my body are these words coming from?" Gently holding questions without rushing for an answer can be a powerful practice.
- 3) **Do not give advice.** We are here to plumb our own depths, from within our own bodies, not to advise others what to do or even necessarily to help them. If someone says, "I don't know what to do about such-and-such," simply listen with your heart. Trust that a person's 'not-knowing' may be a good place for that person to be right now. Your job is simply to be lovingly with them in that space of not-knowing. We hope to encourage each other to become more comfortable with not-knowing, so that something new and holy can arise.
- 4) **Pay close attention to your pronouns.** When speaking, try to use the personal pronoun, "I". This pronoun carries more emotional and spiritual depth, and invites more intimacy, than do other pronouns. Occasionally, the pronouns "we" and "you" (when used to mean "anyone") are appropriate, especially when speaking about universal truths. But too often we leap to the universal level of things before being truly grounded in our "I".
- 5) Please **maintain a felt sense of silence, even in the midst of conversation.** "Billiard ball" or "ping-pong" conversations – in which each individual's words ricochet quickly off another's – tend to be unfruitful. If things move too fast, depth is lost. Before speaking, breathe into your belly and notice your motives for speaking. Asking a question such as "Why am I saying this now?" will deepen your self-knowledge and your subsequent speech. Give space to those speakers who may need to pause and then go on.
- 6) Before speaking, **be aware of those members who have not yet spoken.** Assume that they may need a little more silence in which to find their words. If you have already spoken, wait a bit longer before you speak again. Practice discernment. Stay awake!
- 7) You may notice **the lightness of the atmosphere** here. This lightness arises from the sense of safety that people feel in being themselves. It is not unusual for both tears and laughter to arise together, or in close proximity. Since the sharing is often deep and exploratory, we do not expect people to be smooth and elegant in their speech. We are simply sharing our experience with trusted friends, and good humor indicates safety.

Being in Community

- 1) **Respect confidentiality.** We do not tell others outside the group what a specific person said or did, unless we have that person's permission. On the other hand, sharing our own personal experience of being in this community can be a gift to ourselves and to others, as long as we honor other people's confidentiality.
- 2) One of the most fruitful dimensions of being in a group is **working with judgments** and with the mind's tendency to compare oneself to others. Judgments and comparisons are not immoral or bad; they naturally arise in the mind; but they can divide us from ourselves and from each other, and cause suffering. When you notice these inner activities going on in your mind, explore them with an attitude of compassionate inquiry. We call this "sacred spelunking." Those who leave a group because they are uncomfortable with another member miss a golden opportunity for understanding themselves and the human condition more deeply. Stay with it! If problems persist, speak to the leader.
- 3) We encourage each member of our community to **create a daily period of silent meditation, contemplation or prayer.**
- 4) **We encourage each other and we pray for each other**, that each of us may live with integrity, compassion, and joy, and serve the common good.