



## COMPREHENDING SUFFERING THROUGH DEEP LISTENING IN CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE: THE IMPACT ON THE LISTENERS' WORK AND LIFE

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### Abstract

**Background and Objectives:** Deep listening was shown to be essential in various contexts such as education, healthcare, research, leadership, counseling, and therapy. It did not involve merely hearing words or sounds but also required engaging with and providing a trustworthy space for the speaker. Deep listening played a crucial role in healing people's suffering, as it made them feel heard, understood, and respected. Numerous publications demonstrated the benefits of deep listening for speakers, who gained connection, understanding, and empathy and sometimes discovered better possibilities for problem-solving. However, there remained a knowledge gap in the scholarly area regarding the impact of deep listening on the listener. This research aimed to study the comprehension of suffering through the impact of deep listening on the listener, guided by the research questions: How did practicing deep listening bring about the listener's well-being, and what impact did practicing deep listening have on the listener's work and life.

**Methodology:** This study employed qualitative research with a documentary research methodology. The primary data sources included master theses in the Contemplative Education Curriculum from 2554-2566 B.E. The selection process followed criteria that required: 1) The thesis researchers to employ deep listening as a personal practice; and 2) The researchers to pursue self-inquiry on deep listening practice during the thesis process. Quality control criteria for handling documentary sources included authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning. The researchers collected two selected theses in both electronic and printed formats, reading and re-reading them while employing thematic analysis to uncover results that answered the research questions.

**Main Results:** Thematic analysis identified four key themes as the results of this research: 1) Practicing listening to the listener's inner voice; 2) Experiential learning on the meaningfulness of deep listening; 3) Cultivating loving kindness and compassion; and 4) Gaining a proper understanding of the nature of life.

**Involvement to Buddhadhamma:** This research article aligned with Applied Buddhism and was categorized under "Buddhism and the Development of Wisdom and Morality with Buddhism."



In practicing deep listening, listeners were required to avoid mixing their inner voices with those of the speakers. They observed their internal processes and remained mindful of this disturbance during the listening session. This process demanded mindful observation, particularly the close monitoring of the listeners' feelings and thoughts (Vedanānupassanā and Cittānupassanā Satipaṭṭhāna). Deep listening practitioners also practiced letting go of egoism to cultivate a mind of emptiness, allowing them to welcome the speakers' voices without bias. This research revealed that heightened awareness of their feelings and thoughts allowed listeners to study the structure of their suffering and resolve their issues more effectively. The research highlighted three categories of suffering, or Dukkha, in Buddhaddhamma: 1) Dukkha-vedana: Physical and mental discomfort; 2) Dukkata, A characteristic within the Three Marks of Existence (Tilakkhaṇa), and 3) Dukkha as a statement of suffering within the Four Noble Truths. This research focused on the third category, particularly the function of comprehending suffering (Pariñña).

**Conclusions:** Deep listening practice, as applied under contemplative frameworks, demonstrated its potential as a transformative tool for mindfulness-based personal and professional growth. This research highlighted how deep listening could enhance the quality of interpersonal relationships and promote psychological well-being by fostering self-awareness, experiential learning, cultivating compassion, and gaining a deeper understanding of life. Moreover, integrating mindfulness and compassion practices amplified the benefits of deep listening, making it a valuable exercise for individuals across various fields, including healthcare, education, and counseling.

**Keywords:** Deep Listening, Satipaṭṭhāna, Function Concerning the Four Noble Truth, Comprehension of Suffering, Contemplative Practice

## Introduction

In a world that was saturated with noise, where people often experienced superficial and fleeting communication, the art of deep listening emerged as a means to navigate profound human connection. Deep listening was demonstrated to be essential in various contexts such as education (Barss, 2019); (Mansumitchai et al., 2021); (Tacoh, 2023), healthcare (Bradshaw et al., 2022); (Kwame & Petrucka, 2021), leadership (Durning et al., 2022), research (Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 2022), counseling, and therapy (Sharmill et al., 2021). Deep listening transcended mere hearing; It involved empathy, understanding, and genuine engagement. Thus, it provided a safe space for healing (Rogers & Farson, 1987); (Weinstein et al., 2022). It went beyond simply hearing words; instead, it encompassed understanding the speaker's emotions, intentions, and the deeper meaning underlying their words (Hanh, 2008); (Hanh, 2011). According to Scharmer (2009); (2018), deep listening represents a process of opening the mind and heart of oneself and others to new possibilities and perspectives by accessing a deeper level of awareness. Regarding the Center of Contemplative Mind in Society, deep listening was defined as compassionate listening. It served as one crucial contemplative practice that helped people cultivate the



wisdom of the heart and led to real peace from the inside out. It was also used with the intention of transforming separation and conflict into opportunities for connection, healing, and peace within the community.

Practicing deep listening requires letting go of the listener's distractions (Hanh, 2008); (Hanh, 2011) and setting aside one's preconceptions and habitual ways of understanding or perceiving things (Scharmer, 2009). Instead, it became a process of fully immersing oneself in the present moment to truly understand and connect with the speaker. It involved creating an open and receptive space where both the speaker and the listener felt heard, understood, and respected. Listening deeply to someone in a problematic situation helps listeners realize the other person's suffering. Simultaneously, compassion and understanding bloomed within their hearts, enabling them to communicate peacefully (Hanh, 2012). Deep listening also tuned listeners into a deeper source of knowledge and wisdom that emerged from within the collective field of selves. The most challenging part of the process was cultivating awareness of the listener's inner landscape and shifting from downloading old perceptions to sensing the present moment of oneself, others, and the surrounding context. Scharmer described this process as "The art of seeing together" (Scharmer, 2009).

Scharmer (2009); (2018) articulated the quality of deep listening as the "Presencing" or "I-in-Now" state, which meant being interconnected with oneself, one's counterpart, and the whole system. The "Now" emphasized the quality of complete awareness and mindfulness of whatever existed and emerged in the moment. In summary, deep listening was a practice that fostered empathy, creativity, and transformational change by enabling individuals and groups to access their highest potential and engage more fully with the world around them. Wasi, a well-known Thai public intellectual and influential figure who based his ideas on Buddhist philosophy, democratic decentralization, civic society, and social reform, proposed deep listening as one path toward relational revolution, which led to spiritual health (Wasi, 2023).

The literature review revealed the use of deep listening across Eastern and Western cultures, spanning from ancient times to the New Age (Scharmer, 2009); (Scharmer, 2018); (Sharmill et al., 2021); (Ungunmerr-Baumann et al., 2022). Its profound impact was shown on those being listened to, as they gained connection, understanding, empathy and sometimes discovered better possibilities for problem-solving. However, a knowledge gap remained in the scholarly domain regarding the impact of deep listening on the listener. This article reported on research exploring how deep listening, as a contemplative practice, affected the listener's work and life.

### Objectives

This research aimed to study the comprehension of suffering through the impact of deep listening on the listener, guided by the research questions: How did the practice of deep listening bring about the listener's well-being, and what impact did practicing deep listening have on the listener's work and life.



## Methodology

This study was qualitative and employed a documentary research methodology (Tight, 2019). Primary data sources for this research were the master theses in the Contemplative Education Curriculum at Mahidol University.

### Selection Criteria:

Primary data sources included master theses in the Contemplative Education Curriculum from 2554-2566 B.E. The inclusion criteria were: 1) The thesis researcher employed deep listening as a personal practice, and 2) The researcher pursued self-inquiry on deep listening practice during the thesis process. The latter criterion was crucial because the self-inquiry process provided sufficient evidence to answer the research question. Table 1 illustrates the number of master theses conducted in each year. Three theses were conducted using deep listening in 2557, 2563, and 2566 B.E. However, the thesis from 2557 was excluded because it did not meet the self-inquiry criterion. Thus, the two selected theses for this research were: 1) My Inner Growth Through True Love Dialogue with Patients and Caregivers (Pienputtarapong, 2020) and 2) Life and Work on the Path of Contemplative Education: A Narrative Inquiry of a Floortime Therapist (Punyawattanakul, 2023). (Floortime is an intervention for developmental stimulation in special children, focusing on child-led playtime on the floor with an individualized and relationship-based approach.) The researchers collected these selected theses in electronic and printed formats for analysis.

These documents aligned with the quality control criteria for handling documentary sources, including authenticity, credibility, representativeness, and meaning (Mogalakwe, 2006).

**Table 1** Contemplative Education Theses in Each Year and the Selection of Data

Year B.E.	Number of Completed Theses	Number of Deep Listening Practice Research	Research Methodology in the Thesis	Selected for this Research
2554	2	-	-	-
2555	4	-	-	-
2556	5	-	-	-
2557	7	1	Action Research	-
2558	2	-	-	-
2559	8	-	-	-
2560	8	-	-	-
2561	1	-	-	-
2562	2	-	-	-
2563	12	1	Self-inquiry	Selected
2564	2	-	-	-
2565	2	-	-	-
2566	1	1	Self-inquiry	Selected



### **Research Ethical Review:**

This research was reviewed and approved by the Mahidol University Central Institutional Review Board (MU-CIRB) with the Certificate of Approval number MU-CIRB 2024/025.1202, dated February 12<sup>th</sup>, 2024.

### **Data Collection and Data Analysis:**

The researchers collected two selected documents in electronic and printed formats, which they read and re-read thoroughly. Each researcher applied thematic analysis, starting with open coding, followed by axial coding, to categorize the data into overarching themes. Three researcher meetings were organized to triangulate the findings, finalize the themes, and present the research results.

### **Confidentiality in Self-inquiry Research:**

In accordance with MU-CIRB guidelines, the researchers obtained permission and informed consent from the authors of the two theses to conduct this study. The authors were informed about the research scope and were asked to review all acquired data. To address confidentiality concerns, the researchers edited the content until receiving final approval from the authors before submitting this manuscript.

## **Results and Discussion**

Four themes arose as the results of this research, which were: 1) Practicing listening to the listener's inner voice; 2) Experiential learning on the meaningfulness of deep listening; 3) Cultivating loving kindness and compassion; and 4) True understanding of the nature of life. Discerning the listener's inner voice from the speaker's voice was identified as a crucial step in the practice of deep listening. As this process was repeated over the years, deep listening practitioners gained new insights through their experiences. They let go of old preconceptions about themselves and others. With a more open mind, they cultivated loving kindness and compassion in their professional and personal lives. Finally, they achieved a deeper understanding of the nature of life.

To present the results, this article defined the two thesis authors as "The listeners," with data quoted from each referred to as The Listener I and The Listener II.

### **Theme I: Practicing Listening to the Listener's Inner Voice**

In the practice of deep listening, the listeners were guided not to blend their inner voices with the speaker's voice. Instead, they observed their internal thought processes and became aware of potential disturbances (Hanh, 2008); (Hanh, 2011); (Scharmer, 2009). Through consistent practice, they became more skilled at distinguishing their inner voice from external influences, both during listening sessions and in daily life. This process fostered mindfulness, enabling them to engage attentively and non-judgmentally with their inner experiences in the present moment (Hanh, 2008); (Scharmer, 2009). This self-awareness allowed them to identify their true needs, desires, and motivations. As a result, they made more authentic decisions, cultivated greater self-trust, and improved their personal well-being.





The Listener I, a healthcare professional working in a major public hospital in Thailand, reflected on her practice of deep listening. She noted negative interactions with non-compliant patients during drug counseling sessions. Previously, she would say, "Would you choose to take this medicine or to die?" Through her practice, she reflected:

*"In the past, I frightened the patient that he would die from not taking the medicine. Now I learned that the patient is afraid of death from drug side effects. And me too, I'm afraid of his death from his non-compliance. We really have the same fear... of death. The cause of this patient's suffering is not the disease itself, but he is suffering from this fear. I would rather help him in another way, not just frightening him."* (Pienputtarapong, 2020)

Moreover, while she was aware of her inner landscape, she paused and made a better decision.

*"I was about to remind him to take his medicine but also, I noticed my irritation was forming. I held my reaction to his resentful answer and went back to observe my irritation...until it faded."* (Pienputtarapong, 2020)

The Listener II worked as a Floortime therapist for special needs children. He is one of the top performers in this profession. After years of working, he would like to expand his work to support the parents of special children, and from that, he practiced deep listening to those parents. Although with his full intention and the goodwill, he could not make it happen for long due to his inner critics.

*"I want to help every parent I meet so that they will be happy with their special children. But when I am in front of them, I don't know what to do. I listen to the parents, and then what? Is that enough? Will this really be helpful? These questions come as the inner critic again. I'm so exhausted from my own expectations, although reflections from the parents confirmed that they gained a positive feeling to be heard."* (Punyawattanakul, 2023)

*"I realize that I have to work with my inner critics and judgments so I can accept them more and more. I shall accept millions of mistakes I made and will learn from them."* (Punyawattanakul, 2023)

## Theme II: Experiential Learning on the Meaningfulness of Deep Listening

Building upon the previous theme, this theme explored the power of learning through direct experiences. Deep listening served as a powerful form of experiential learning, allowing individuals to gain direct and practical insights into the benefits and impacts of attentive, empathetic, and compassionate listening (Garrett & Chase, 2021). The listeners experienced



firsthand the profound impact that genuine listening had on their relationships and interactions with others. This experiential learning revealed a deep connection and understanding that the listeners had seldom encountered before. As the listeners observed the positive responses and improved communication resulting from their attentiveness, they came to truly appreciate the intrinsic value of deep listening (Hanh, 2011). This understanding reinforced their commitment to continue practicing deep listening, recognizing it as a meaningful and transformative tool for personal and interpersonal growth (Wasi, 2023). This theme examined how deep listening not only enhanced relationships and communication-both personally and professionally-but also fostered a deeper appreciation for the practice itself through lived experiences.

The Listener I recounted a case involving a patient known among her professional team for being resentful, harsh, and persistently non-compliant with treatment for years. Through deep listening, she achieved mutual understanding with the patient, stepping beyond her professional role to connect as one human being to another. Similarly, The Listener II shared his direct experience of how deep listening enhanced his self-understanding and personal transformation.

*"I was about to remind him to take his medicine, but I also noticed my irritation forming. I held back my reaction to his resentful answer and turned inward to observe my irritation... until it faded, and I felt an emptiness. I let go of my professional role and simply asked how he had been over the past year. He seemed surprised by the question and began sharing his tragic stories. I listened, listened, and listened... I don't even know how long it was. I focused on him with my whole heart. My inner voices gradually silenced, and all the bias I had disappeared. My tears ran as I heard his tragedy, and I sensed that he also acknowledged my feelings. We both understood at that moment that he had not intended to act so badly. Finally, he told me, "Thank you for your tears. They made me feel heard. No one has ever understood me like this before. I didn't want to do anything for myself. But now, I promise to take good care of myself for my beloved son." I was truly amazed by the impact of my listening."* (Pienputtarapong, 2020)

*"During a deep listening session, whenever my mind drifted away, I realized I could not hear the speaker's voice for a while. By observing my mind carefully during these moments, I began to notice my running thoughts in daily life as well. I learned many things about myself, especially the patterns of my thinking. This realization inspired me to practice deep listening more and more because it helped me better understand and improve myself."* (Punyawattanakul, 2023)

### Theme III: Cultivating Loving Kindness and Compassion

Loving kindness and compassion are two significant qualities of the mind described in Brahmavihara 4 (Somdet Phra Buddhaghosacharya (P. A. Payutto), 2021). In practicing deep



listening, the listeners had opportunities to foster an empathetic and supportive environment for the speaker (Hanh, 2011). By fully engaging with another person's narrative without judgment, the listeners developed a greater capacity for loving kindness and compassion. This empathetic engagement not only strengthened their relationships but also enhanced their ability to respond to others with genuine care and support derived from empathy and understanding. Over time, the practice of deep listening cultivated a more compassionate mindset, encouraging the listeners to approach all interactions with empathy and kindness.

The Listener I shared her experience regarding her relationship with her mother. She had long felt insecure about receiving enough love from her mother and always sought it. This insecurity often left her hurt by her mother's reactions. Although she tried to soothe herself by rationalizing the situation, her efforts were unsuccessful. Practicing deep listening provided her with an opportunity to observe and listen to her mother with a neutral heart.

*"The insecurity and doubts about my mom's love obstructed me from fully understanding her as she truly was for decades. When I was hurt by her reactions, I discarded all the good wishes I wanted to offer her. Instead, I demanded so much of her love. I tried analyzing her behavior to better understand her, but it didn't work. The true understanding appeared when I listened to my own suffering and began paying attention to her suffering as well. I learned that my mom rejected my support because she felt vulnerable and didn't want anyone to bother her. Indeed, she never truly rejected me."* (Pienputtarapong, 2020)

As a result, The Listener I learned to sit beside and support her mother at a proper emotional distance. She allowed her mother to unravel her suffering at her own pace, which eventually led to a natural and harmonious interaction between them. Similarly, The Listener II shared how practicing deep listening helped him cultivate self-compassion by gaining a deeper understanding of the parents of special needs children and by forgiving someone with whom he had a personal conflict.

*"I used to blame these parents, thinking, 'Why have children if you don't want to raise them?' or 'What kind of parent are you?' and 'Why don't you spend time doing floortime with your child?' But now, after listening to them, I understand that they have good intentions to help their kids. They are also exhausted by their everyday responsibilities. Some of them might not be ready to use floortime, but they still deeply love their children."* (Punyawattanakul, 2023)

Regarding a conflict in his personal life, The Listener II described how deep listening helped him recognize and change his pattern of thinking. In the past, he believed that each person should manage their own feelings and would often force the other person to feel bad while justifying his own position as "Right." He held onto anger for a long time and lacked





empathy for others. Through deep listening, he became aware of this behavioral pattern and learned to let go of anger-for both himself and the other person.

*"I took a glance at my own anger and let it move away instead of holding onto it tightly as I did before. Finally, even though it took a very long time, I let go of the anger, and I believe that one day my heart will be purified. I am glad that now our relationship has returned to normal."* (Punyawattanakul, 2023)

The iterative process of practicing deep listening enhanced the listeners' learning experiences. Both listeners deepened their understanding of the nature of life, a theme that will be explored in the next section.

#### Theme IV: True Understanding of the Nature of Life

Engaging in deep listening provided the listeners in their theses with insights into the complexities and interconnectedness of human experiences. This theme explored how the listeners gained insights from deep listening practice. The practice allowed them to understand the shared nature of human struggles, joys, and aspirations (Scharmer, 2009). As they deepened their understanding of others, the listeners acquired a more holistic perspective on life, recognizing the common threads uniting diverse experiences. This awareness fostered a sense of unity and interconnectedness, leading to a deeper appreciation of the human condition. Ultimately, deep listening guided the listeners toward a more profound understanding of life's nature, encouraging a more mindful and intentional approach to their lives.

Before practicing deep listening, The Listener II had sought to control everything to align with his imagined perfection. He placed high expectations on others and himself, striving to mold the world according to his wishes. However, practicing deep listening elevated his understanding to a new level: That things would always unfold as they were meant to. Regardless of the roles he assumed-whether as a floortime therapist, friend, son, or husband-he realized he would inevitably face uncertainty. What he could do best was to remain fully present with the person in front of him at the moment.

*"I understood the parents of special children more and more, and I learned that I didn't have to pressure myself or force them to do more. They had their own pace to learn. Although I couldn't understand them fully, I could do my best to support them and always respect their decisions."* (Punyawattanakul, 2023)

*"There were so many situations the parents had to deal with. I sensed their suffering-not only from having a special child but also from handling their lives, earning a living, and managing so many challenges. I believed that if they were soothed from these sufferings, they could be with their children in a more joyful way. I could help them release these sufferings by consciously listening to them."* (Punyawattanakul, 2023)



For The Listener I, deep listening brought her to the essential core of the practice, enabling her to expand this insight to relate to others. As a result of deep listening, she experienced joy and buoyancy in being fully present in each moment with a beginner's mind.

*"Deep listening introduced me to the meaningfulness of "Being present." At that moment, there was no past to consider nor future to expect. The only thing left was the present, where we all could focus. Whether good or bad, being present in that moment revealed a beginner's mind within me. I was always glad to welcome every experience, learn from it, try again, and constantly discover new possibilities to dismantle my old beliefs and biases." (Pienputtarapong, 2020)*

*"By truly being present, I opened new eyes to relate to the world. I saw the outer world and inner world moving together. I saw things as they were and admitted all that they were. I responded differently to the world." (Pienputtarapong, 2020)*

Traditionally, listening facilitates understanding at the individual and interpersonal level (Hinz et al., 2022). However, this research highlighted how deep listening differed due to the practitioner's inner quality. The essence of mindful self-observation and self-reflection embedded in contemplative practice expanded the understanding of self and others-both personally and professionally. Once the listeners gained a more holistic perspective on life, they tended to achieve a true realization of life's nature and leverage the state of interconnectedness (Hanh, 2011).

Furthermore, this deep listening approach offered a comprehensive and compassionate way to address the complexities of human suffering. The listeners first studied the structure of their own suffering, which they had previously attributed to others. Through this practice, they realized that their suffering arose from misunderstanding life's nature, allowing them to resolve situations more appropriately. This aligned with the Four Noble Truths' first function: To comprehend one's own suffering.

This result echoed findings from a prior study on counselors' suffering (Piyasirinanun et al., 2024). Counselors often spent extensive time listening to clients' problems, yet not all efforts led to resolution. This limitation sometimes caused counselors to feel devalued, despairing, exhausted, or experience compassion fatigue (Stoewen, 2020). Piyasirinanun et al. (2024) identified seven strategies counselors used to cope with suffering, categorized into two main groups: Personal development and community support. Personal development included contemplating one's suffering, mental development alongside clients, and cultivating mindfulness. The listeners in this research confirmed similar findings on these aspects.

Originality and Body of Knowledge

Due to the lack of scholarly knowledge regarding the impact of deep listening on the listener, this research highlighted significant findings drawn from the self-inquiry of two practitioners. Under the contemplative approach, deep listening practice was embedded through mindfulness-based self-observation and self-reflection. The process included practicing listening to the listener's inner voice, which related to Vedanānupassanā and Cittānupassanā Satipatthāna practices, and cultivating loving-kindness and compassion. Thus, the first to benefit from this process was the listener themselves rather than the speaker. This iterative exercise enabled practitioners to gain experiential learning about the process and outcomes of deep listening, inspiring them to continue practicing and learning. In this repetitive process, practitioners achieved a deeper understanding of the nature of life in various aspects and a greater comprehension of their suffering. This study revealed the significant psychological well-being benefits of deep listening for the listeners, both personally and professionally, as illustrated in the figure below.

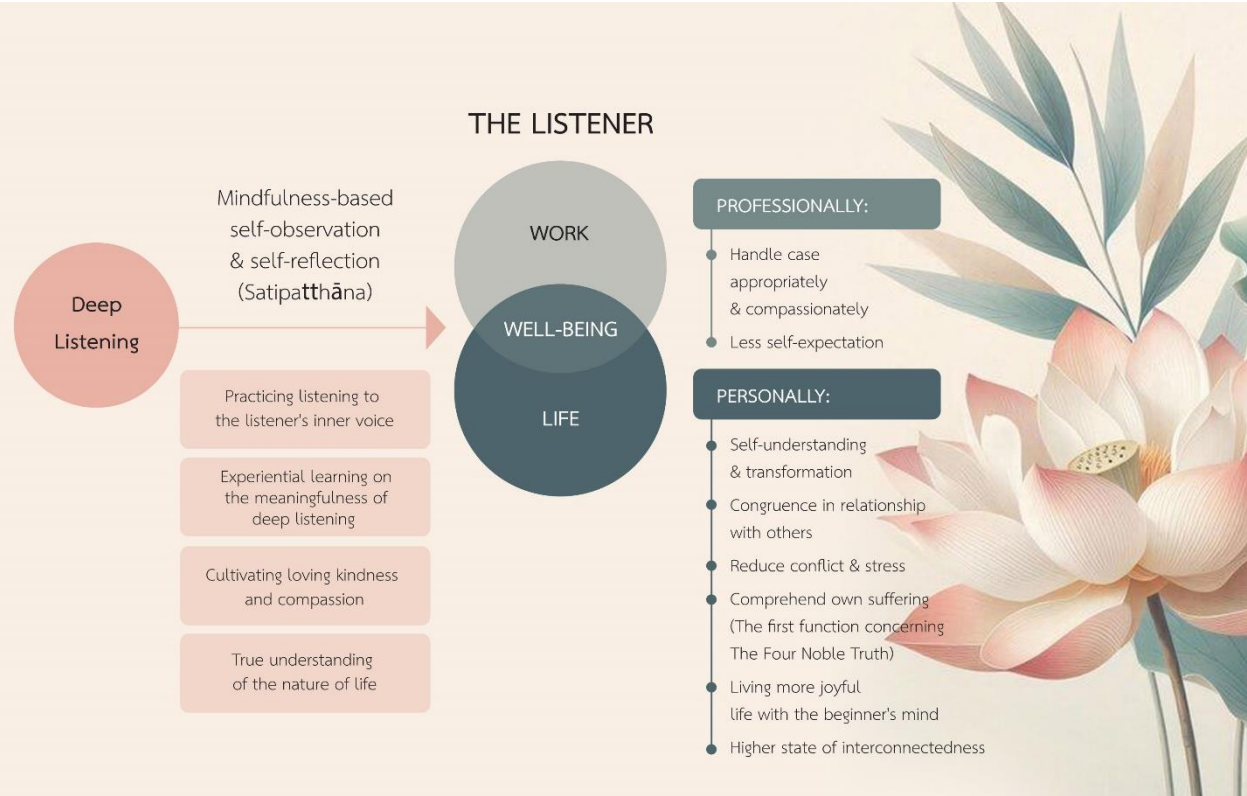


Figure 1 Impacts of Deep Listening on the Listeners' Work and Life

This research adhered to the qualitative research paradigm, with the advantages of deep listening narrated in the results section. Readers could adopt the practice by first observing and distinguishing their inner voice from the speaker's voice while listening. Both listeners in the study performed concurrent mindfulness practices regularly, which enhanced the quality of



their deep listening. However, this study did not provide quantified measurable outcomes. Future quantitative research could be conducted to provide more evidence on the impacts of deep listening practice.

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Deep listening has been shown to be an essential skill required for various professions, such as educators, healthcare professionals, counselors, and organizational leaders, as well as in interpersonal relationships. Traditional cultures in the Asia-Pacific region have employed deep listening as a community relational and healing activity. However, most people generally appreciate deep listening for its beneficial effects on the speaker or the community as a whole. This research addressed the scholarly knowledge gap regarding the impact of deep listening on the listener by reviewing two self-inquiry theses of deep listening practitioners. The authors of these theses embedded mindfulness-based self-observation and self-reflection into their practice. The results revealed a significant potential of deep listening to enhance the listeners' psychological well-being, both in their work and personal lives. The listeners reported living their lives more meaningfully and joyfully, even under uncertain circumstances. They also experienced improved interpersonal relationships and greater self-assurance. They learned to accept situations and deal with them more effectively. Furthermore, they demonstrated enhanced engagement in both work and life. The introspection they conducted brought about deeper self-understanding and transformation, enabling them to let go of some misperceptions about their work. This led to greater empathy in their relationships with clients. Regarding the impact on personal life, this research demonstrated that deep listening practitioners developed better relationships with their loved ones. They were uplifted by acknowledging interconnectedness and comprehending their own suffering, aligning with the first function of the Four Noble Truths. In summary, deep listening practice helped them live more joyfully in the present moment, with a beginner's mind. Given the crucial role of mindfulness-based self-observation evidenced in this research, deep listening practitioners in any field should be guided to learn and exercise this process.

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