

Listening and Inquiring for Shambhala Meetings

Purpose

Listening and Inquiring is a communication protocol to engage meeting participants with a question or statement and enable them to respond with insight beyond initial assumptions and habitual thinking. It is way to intentionally take our practice off the cushion and into our interactions. Listening and Inquiring is an aid to dialogue and decision-making based on principles that come from our training in mindfulness and awareness, warriorship and windhorse. It can be used to support many meeting objectives such as renewing a vision of collective purpose, deepening understanding of alternative perspectives, prioritizing budgets, developing action plans, or creating evaluation frameworks.

The practice engages people individually first and then moves in stages to interaction with others in a mindful, genuine, creative dialogue. It has been used successfully with groups of four to 60 people, but the more people there are the more time should be allowed for the Group Inquiry and Dialogue at the end.

Where to Begin

Before working with this process it is important to establish an appropriate question or statement that the group needs to work on. This may imply some pre-meeting work that is not part of the formal process. In general, everyone should start in agreement that the question or statement is what they need to consider as a group. As people develop new insights it is possible a new question may become even more important and that may require another session.

Time Frame

There should be a time frame so everyone knows how long the meeting will go. Allow at least an hour for groups new to the process. This can be flexible after people become familiar with each step.

Instructions

Individual Contemplation

1. Find the present moment.¹ (5-10 minutes)
Calm the mind by resting attention on your breathing for several minutes. If distracting thoughts arise, notice that you are thinking and simply come to the present moment by returning attention to the breath. The point is to bring your awareness to the present and to let your awareness open.

¹ This assumes the participants all have all had basic meditation instruction before and merely need a reminder here. For more complete meditation instruction see <http://www.shambhala.org/meditationinstruction.html>.

2. Hold the contemplation. (3-5 minutes)

Now bring up the specific contemplation for this session and use that as the focal point of your attention. At this point just stay with the words of the question or statement; repeat the question to yourself or just let it remain in your mind's eye. Notice any tendency to answer the question, but don't follow it out. Notice discursive thoughts and label them in same way you would during sitting practice: just *thinking*. Come back to the question or statement. There is no need in this step for analysis or storylines you may tell yourself. This part of the process trains your ability to remain focused on a particular contemplation.

3. Open to the meaning of the contemplation. (3-5 minutes)

Next, open your awareness and pay attention to what is happening in your whole experience of the question or statement. Relax the focus on the words. Notice if there is any emotional reaction, any strong thoughts, and let that mix with the quiet space, just as you would in sitting practice, without repressing or holding on.

Now notice especially any underlying *felt sense* in the present moment. A felt sense is more subtle than an emotional reaction because you have not built up a rationale; it isn't yet clear in words. We become aware of a felt sense when we patiently pay attention to the space of our body, not just the thoughts that appear in our head. It may seem like it's been there in the background, but not important enough to notice. Or it may seem new. You might consider the felt sense as sensations in your body, or subtle thoughts, or as intuition, and it may become apparent only when there is some calm abiding or harmony between body and mind. As in meditation, look directly at this felt sense without judgment. Let your attention be open but stay focused on present experience.

You may not always notice a felt sense right away. If there is no felt sense, just rest openly. It may come after a few minutes. If there is no felt sense there is no problem.

4. Find fresh language that fits the moment. (5-7 minutes)

You may notice something new about your response to the question or statement compared to the first quick thoughts. See if there is some new meaning to the contemplation. Find the fresh language from your complete present experience of the contemplation. Be patient and wait for words that fit best with your experience right now. There is where vipassana practice comes in – notice relationships, a panoramic view, and insight.

Finally, write down what comes to you – one or two paragraphs or simply list the points or images that came up. First, write down your responses to the question or statement without a lot of editing. Once you start writing, let it be “first thought, best thought.” Then ask yourself, “Is that all?” Explore the edges of what you are aware of in response to the contemplation, but be brief – write no more than a page. What you are writing about is what the question or statement really means to you at the moment. There will be time for more critical thinking later after interaction.

Listening and Inquiring

1. Reading and Listening (Steps 1-3 together, 7-10 minutes)

Break into pairs. One person volunteers to read out loud his or her response to the contemplation. The other person listens. Listen with self-awareness. This awareness has two aspects: 1) Notice the tendency to make judgments, to agree or disagree, to compare. The point is not to reject your own judgments, but to recognize your habitual pattern without feeling committed to it – just as if you were meditating alone. 2) Try to listen openly, beyond your judgments and assumptions. (Do not take notes while the first person is reading; focus your attention fully on the person speaking.)

It is important for the reader to stay with what was written. Otherwise, a rambling explanation will be more difficult to reflect back in the next step.

2. Reflecting (Paraphrasing Back).

The listener then offers what he or she heard by paraphrasing or reflecting back what has been said, trying to communicate just what the first person said *without adding to or interpreting their meaning*. The first person then confirms, corrects, or fills in if something important to them is missing.

Reflecting helps the reader develop some trust that he or she was really heard.

3. Inquiry.

The listener then asks questions to clarify what the first person meant. You may start with something that interested you in what was read – “What did you mean by _____?” “Can you say more about _____?” Avoid leading questions such as “When you said _____ did you mean _____?” “I thought the contemplation meant _____, didn’t it?” The purpose here is get at what the reader meant, not to lead or persuade the person to a different point of view or add to it yet.

Inquiry often leads the listener and the reader to a deeper understanding of what was written.

4. Alternating. (7-10 minutes)

The interactive process (steps 1-3) is then repeated so that first person now listens and the second person reads. Then inquiry proceeds as above. When both people have exchanged this way, trust and respect are deepened. Because there is a gentle risk of feeling embarrassed in this process, it requires a kind of warriorship and usually helps develop windhorse for both people.

5. Dialogue. (Optional – especially with people doing it for the first time.)

Pairs then explore the contemplation not from their personal points of view, but by creating a new meaning between them – this is a “flow of meaning between people” or a true dialogue. A dialogue in this sense is a mutual search for new meaning created in the present, not an attempt to win an argument.

6. Group Reflection. Steps 6-8, 10-15 minutes)
When the pairs are finished, the larger group reassembles and the instructor/facilitator asks for a few minutes of silence. The guided instruction at this point is, “find your breath and settle into the present moment...Now sense the space in the room and the connection you have with others, based on the interaction you just went through.” (*With more advanced practitioners you can ask them to return to the meaning of their responses and gradually expand their awareness to sense the presence and connection to others in the room.*)
7. Reading to the Group.
The facilitator then asks for volunteers to read out their contemplations to the whole group. If the group is small enough, each pair can read their contemplations and describe how they worked with it. In this way people get a sense of how the group responded as a whole and how the interactions shifted people’s understanding.
8. Group Inquiry and Dialogue.
As people read out their contemplations it may be fruitful to allow more inquiry, if time allows. The situation is now ripe to “*sense from the whole*” rather than the ego’s point of view; to find new meaning that comes from the present interaction in the group. With the trust and respect that was created in pairs, the group can engage in genuine dialogue -- a flow of meaning between people who are letting go of ego-centered perspectives and finding new ways to approach the contemplation.²

Where there is divergence, the point is not to arrive at agreement or consensus. **The point is to encourage people to hold what appear to be divergent views as if they could exchange places with others. It is then possible that something new may emerge, something generated from the present experience of the participants.**

² What is implied here by “letting go of ego-centered perspectives” is merely that one’s personal perspective is more apparent as only one possible view and consequently seen in a context relative to the whole group.