



WISSENSRAUM NO. 7

BEYOND LISTENING

The Essence of True Presence (Sparsha)

*How releasing the outer ear
opens the space for truth.*

“The deepest listening begins where the foreign ear no longer stands between a person and their own truth.”

Article · English

◆ 1. A Tone That Would Not Settle

Sometimes a thought does not begin with an answer, but with a tone that will not settle into place.

There are moments of listening in which something resonates that is louder than what is said. No sentence, no argument, no explanation — only a tone that remains, long after the words have moved on. A word that hangs too long in the air. A pause that will not dissolve until it has been asked what, exactly, is being heard here. Perhaps it was such a moment from which this text arose — not as an answer to any particular situation, but as an echo that would not be shaken off.

Ever since humans have spoken, they have carried their stories outward into the world. They seek an ear to receive them, a gaze to confirm them, a presence in which their pain grows lighter, if only for a moment. In this way, spaces of speaking, interpreting, and accompanying arise — necessary, often healing, sometimes life-saving. Friendships are carried by mutual listening. Whole professions grow out of it. Entire institutions rest on the promise that someone is there who listens.

And yet, scarcely noticed, an endless loop can arise, in which the word no longer leads to truth but takes its place. The person is heard without hearing themselves. They leave the conversation relieved, but not transformed, and return with the same story, once again in search of a foreign ear. This Knowledge Space asks what lies beyond that. Not as a denial of listening, but as its crossing — a space that favors neither speech nor silence, but carries both.

◆ 2. The Trap of Constant Availability

A listening presence is not the same as a listening space.

Where listening becomes institutionalized, taken for granted, a climate can easily arise that keeps a person from dwelling long enough within themselves. The presence of an ear that is always available becomes, tacitly, confused with the presence of a space that truly hears. The two sound alike. In the moment of conversation, they can feel almost identical. And yet a decisive difference lies between them: one can comfort. The other can enable transformation.

The voice meets a counterpart and rebounds from there back into the world, instead of sinking into its own depth. The conversation feels lighter afterward — for a while. But the lightness rarely lasts, because it did not arise from an encounter with one's own ground, but from momentary relief through another. The story remains. It is merely handed, for a moment, to someone else.

This is no indictment of listening itself. A conversation can very well lead into stillness rather than distract from it — when it is carried by genuine presence rather than mere availability. The question is not whether someone listens. The question is where the listening leads: back into the same narrative — or into the space where the narrative itself is no longer needed.

◆ 3. The Radical, Compassionate Withdrawal of the Outer Ear

A punishing withdrawal says: “Your story is too much for me.” A compassionate withdrawal says: “I see you — but I will no longer carry this cycle with you.”

Between the two lies a decisive difference. One turns away — out of exhaustion, overwhelm, sometimes indifference. The other remains turned toward the person and withdraws only from the role that keeps feeding the same repetition. It is a withdrawal born not of distance, but of clarity: listening no longer necessarily leads to truth once it merely sustains the repetition.

Such a withdrawal is rarely comfortable — neither for the one who enacts it, nor for the one who experiences it. It can feel like rejection, precisely because it disappoints the familiar expectation that every story will find an ear, however often it is told. And yet it offers something else. Not: Go. But: Stay — and meet yourself.

Perhaps compassion does not begin where someone listens still longer. Perhaps it begins where the outer ear steps back — so that the person can reach that silent threshold where no counterpart stands any longer between them and their own depth. This is not a withdrawal of relationship. It is a withdrawal of the function a relationship so easily assumes: the function of promising redemption from outside.

Even this withdrawal remains a transitional image, not an endpoint. As soon as an ear is spoken of that withdraws, an ear still exists — one that could give or withhold. The withdrawal points beyond itself. It is not yet what it points to.

◆ 4. Presence Is More Than Attendance

Attendance reacts, answers, confirms. Presence remains — even where it refuses to keep carrying the story.

Attendance means: someone is there, listens, reacts, answers, confirms. That is much, and not to be underestimated. Presence, though, reaches deeper. It means not leaving the person, while at the same time refusing to keep carrying their cycle any longer. The ear does not withdraw from the relationship, but from its role as perpetual bearer, interpreter, and redeemer.

The difference is subtle, but consequential. Attendance can be recognized by outward signs: eye contact, response, confirmation. Presence shows itself, rather, in what no longer happens — in the absence of the reflexive urge to comfort, to explain, to rescue. It holds the space without filling it.

“I do not leave you as a person. I only leave the role in which I am meant to carry your story for you.”

Whoever can speak this sentence inwardly, without it becoming an excuse for indifference, has touched something of what is called presence here.

◆ 5. The Tetralemma of Listening

At the boundary of human understanding, two possibilities are no longer enough.

Hearing. Not hearing. Hearing and not hearing. Neither hearing nor not hearing. Four stages that do not exclude one another but relieve one another, like layers resting upon each other rather than displacing one another.

At first, a person needs a counterpart to bear witness to what has never been heard — protection, witnessing, a first being-held. Then, at the second stage, continued listening can merely stabilize repetition and postpone the encounter with oneself; the ear becomes a way of evading one's own stillness. At the third stage, the counterpart still perceives, but no longer feeds the narrative movement — an in-between state in which old patterns still surface, without being given room any longer. And at the fourth stage, the rigid distribution of roles dissolves entirely. It is no longer about reception or rejection, only about what remains once both movements come to rest.

The tetralemma is not a stage model in the sense of progress. It describes, rather, four ways in which listening reaches its own limit — and what becomes conceivable beyond that limit. This fourfold structure draws on a form of logic known in the philosophical tradition as the tetralemma (*catuṣkoṭi*) (see Sources & Lines of Thought) — applied here to listening, not asserted as its received teaching.

◆ 6. Sparsha — The Fifth Dimension

Behind the word, and behind listening, lies a space that need not be produced.

Sparsha is not listening as an act performed by a subject toward an object. It is not another method, not a subtler form of therapy, not a seal of particularly mindful listening. It is the all-encompassing presence that need be neither summoned nor generated, because it already pervades the smallness of everyday life — the breath between two sentences, the sound of a passing car, the pause before someone answers.

The ever-present tone need not be sought. It is there — in the word and in silence, in listening and in the withdrawal of the ear, in noise, in pain, and in the inconspicuous. There is no moment in which it is absent, and no moment in which it is especially present. This is precisely what makes it so hard to grasp: it cannot be intensified, deepened, or approached through practice.

In the ever-present space, what already listens through us becomes apparent — long before anyone decides to listen or not to listen.

Even the talk of a “fifth dimension” is only a linguistic device here, not a sign of a next stage. Sparsha is not the fifth stage after the four ways of the tetralemma. What has no beginning can have no continuation either. The moment the fifth dimension is read as an intensification of the four stages, the very pyramid this text seeks to dissolve arises again — only with a new summit. (On the independent use of the term Sparsha, see Sources & Lines of Thought.)

◆ 7. Even One's Own Listening Is Still Separation

The path from the foreign ear to one's own listening may be a necessary transition. It is not the deeper ground.

Whoever releases the foreign ear often turns first to themselves. They begin to listen to themselves — their own voice, their own pain, their own story, no longer carrying it to another. This is a possible and often liberating step. Yet, looked at closely, it too remains a transition.

For even in listening to oneself a duality persists: a listener and something that is listened to. As long as someone listens to themselves, an inner self remains that listens, and an inner self remains that is listened to — only now both carry the same name. The separation has not dissolved. It has shifted inward.

Sparsha does not denote this refined form of self-encounter, nor does it denote its willed dissolution. It is not the result that arises once someone finally listens to themselves “correctly.” It is that in which this very listening, this listened-to, and this duality appear — before either of them is named.

◆ 8. No Higher Rank — Stillness as Space, Not Pyramid

Sparsha does not rise to the top of a pyramid.

There is no “more evolved” listener and no “not yet grown” speaker. The mental image of a ladder — from unconscious speaking, through the listening healer, to stillness at the summit — remains a movement upward: a comparison, a measure, a hierarchy that reproduces precisely the separation it claims to overcome.

The all-encompassing space knows no such direction. Speaker, listener, noise, and stillness appear within it equally, without rank, without sequence. Whoever stays silent much of the time has not advanced further than whoever speaks much of the time. Whoever has long practiced becoming still has attained nothing that is not equally accessible to someone who has never given it a thought. Stillness does not stand above speech. It pervades word, listening, and silence alike — as the same ground from which all three arise.

◆ 9. The End of Fixed Roles

The story seeks an ear. The ear confirms its own significance through the story. Both roles ceaselessly bring each other forth.

Speaker and listener appear to be two fixed positions — one presents, the other receives. Yet on closer view, both roles continually produce one another. The story needs an ear to be heard; the ear needs a story to fulfill its function. Neither stands alone.

In all-encompassing presence, speaker and listener dissolve — not because someone willfully abolishes them, but because they lose their assumed separateness. Listening is no longer asserted as a personal calling, just as speaking no longer needs an ear to confirm its meaning. What remains is not emptiness, but an encounter that no longer needs a fixed form in order to be real.

◆ 10. ALL-THAT-IS May Be — The Absolute Permission of Being

The abyss may be perceived without first being rendered harmless in words.

Sparsha does not immediately banish even the deepest pain, or a wish to die, into a diagnosis, a prohibition, or a method. It keeps the space open. Ambivalence may be. Not-knowing may be. Nothing needs to be hastily explained, classified, or resolved merely to make it more bearable for the one who listens.

This ontological permission, however, is not the same as ethical inaction. Where intervention in the physical world is necessary — where protection, help, or medical care is required — this continues, unchanged and without delay. The difference lies elsewhere: pain need not first be minimized in order to be seen at all. ALL-THAT-IS may be — not because some authority grants its permission, but because nothing can ever fall out of being.

Note: In cases of acute risk of suicide or a severe psychological crisis, this approach does not replace medical help. In an emergency, please contact local emergency services or a crisis helpline in your country.

◆ 11. The Spiritual Temptation

The moment presence is turned into a goal, the very movement of separation it was meant to dissolve begins again.

The human mind turns almost everything into a task. It asks: What should I do now? How do I attain Sparsha? How do I become more present, more still, more awake? These questions are understandable — and it is precisely within them that the subtlest of all temptations lies.

This temptation does not end with the coarser forms of spiritual ambition. It survives precisely in the subtlest sentences: “Hold the space.” “Be present.” “Become still.” “Listen deeper.” Each of these sentences can be true — and each of them can, at the same time, become a new norm by which it is measured who is already “further along.” In coaching, therapy, and spirituality, a new elite of the supposedly more present person arises all too easily — a hierarchy built from exactly the material stillness was meant to be free of.

As soon as listening, silence, or presence are understood as means to an end, the movement remains linear. Stillness becomes discipline. Sparsha becomes achievement — something to be measured, improved upon, distinguished by, in comparison with others. Yet what is already present cannot be produced by any procedure, cannot be listened out of existence, cannot be spiritually earned, cannot be attained through growth, and cannot be held in place through silence.

Sparsha does not begin when the word ends. It does not deepen when someone listens better. Word and stillness, seeking and apparent finding, already appear within what was never absent. Even this last, subtlest refinement — the image of a more present person — still belongs to the movement that seeks to overcome itself. Sparsha is what crosses through it as well. This is the quietest, and at the same time the most difficult, insight of this Knowledge Space: there is nothing to attain — not even the realization that there is nothing to attain.

◆ 12. The Consequence for Accompaniment

Those who accompany others should not only learn to listen better. They should learn to see through their own listening.

Coaches, therapists, chaplains, and all who listen professionally or out of closeness carry a particular responsibility. Their ear easily becomes a fixed presence in another person's life — reliable, valued, at times seemingly indispensable. Precisely here lies a quiet danger.

The foreign ear must not become a permanent dwelling. The deepest accompaniment does not make itself indispensable. It recognizes the moment when its own ear stands between a person and their immediate experience — and withdraws, so that space opens for the other's own stillness. This does not mean listening less. It means continually asking what this listening actually serves — the encounter, or one's own role as companion. None of this diminishes the empirical finding that the carrying relationship itself — the therapeutic alliance — is among the most reliable factors in effective accompaniment (see Sources & Lines of Thought): the point is not to think little of this relationship, but not to let it become the sole stage for a story that stands in its own way.

Whoever keeps this question open does not become a superfluous counterpart. They become an ear one is allowed to leave — and it is precisely there that its deepest task is fulfilled.

✦ 13. Sparsha in the Ordinary

Not in meditation. Not on retreat. Not in the therapy room. But in the ordinary.

Long before a sentence is spoken, the body already speaks: the breath that changes, the shoulders that rise, the gaze that avoids or holds, the voice that quickens or falters, a hand that closes, a withdrawal, a freezing, a pain, a rhythm. This is not diagnostics, not a sign to be interpreted. It is another manifestation of the same ground — pre-verbal presence that does not begin only in the sentence and does not end in silence.

And so Sparsha is not the special depth of a therapy room, or of a quiet moment of retreat. It is just as much in washing dishes as in the silence afterward. It is on the bus, in the crowd, in waiting for the next stop. It is in typing a message that no one means quite the way it will be read. It is in the argument in which both voices rise, and in the laughter that interrupts it. It is in the noise of a construction site, in setting down a cup, in the boredom of a waiting room, in the moment between two movements in which nothing in particular happens.

None of this leads to Sparsha. None of it falls outside it. This is precisely what makes this Knowledge Space uncomfortable for any notion of spiritual depth as something special, elevated, set apart from the ordinary. There is no consecrated place where presence begins, and no ordinary place it avoids.

✦ 14. Conclusion — Nothing Needs to Be Said

Perhaps, then, this text leads nowhere. Perhaps it does not answer the mind's familiar questions: What did I gain from this? What should I do now? What must I change?

Nothing needs to be said. Yet even what is said does not fall outside stillness.

No one must be saved in order to belong to ALL-THAT-IS. And no one can ever fall out of it.

Even the images that carried this text — the ear, the stillness, the tetralemma, the fifth dimension, presence — may, in the end, be let go of again. They were fingers pointing at something. They were never what they pointed to.

“The deepest listening begins where the foreign ear no longer stands between a person and their own truth.”

∞ Depth & Further Reading

Those who wish to explore the questions touched on here will find related depths within the WISSENSRÄUME series:

→ Wissensraum No. 3 — The Stillness of Rest: Space for Consciousness, Education, and Change

◇ Sources & Lines of Thought

This Knowledge Space does not present itself as a scholarly treatise. The following notes mark the conceptual and scholarly lines of thought its central images connect to — above all those of chapters 5, 6, and 12.

A note on terms: In this Knowledge Space, the term Sparsha is used in an independent, psycho-spiritual and philosophical sense developed by Kati Voß — denoting an all-encompassing presence that cannot be produced. It is not equivalent to the traditional Buddhist use of *sparśa* as “contact/touch” within the theory of perception (the coming-together of sense organ, sense object, and sense consciousness).

→ R. E. Buswell Jr., D. S. Lopez Jr. (eds.): *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton University Press, 2014. Entry “*sparśa*” — basis for the traditional Buddhist meaning of the term, from which this Knowledge Space’s usage consciously differs.

→ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: entries on *Catuṣkoṭi* / Nāgārjuna’s fourfold logic. Basis for the formal tetralemma structure that the “tetralemma of listening” (chapter 5) adapts as its own transposition, without claiming to be a received Buddhist teaching.

→ J. L. Garfield: *The Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nāgārjuna’s Mūlamadhyamakakārikā*. Oxford University Press, 1995. Background source on non-dual and four-valued logic.

→ C. R. Rogers: *On Becoming a Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy*. Houghton Mifflin, 1961. Basis for the person-centered stance (empathy, congruence, unconditional positive regard) that chapters 4 and 12 connect to.

→ E. S. Bordin: The Generalizability of the Psychoanalytic Concept of the Working Alliance. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research & Practice* 16(3) (1979), 252–260. Basis for the concept of the therapeutic alliance.

→ C. Flückiger, A. O. Del Re, B. E. Wampold, A. C. Horvath: The Alliance in Adult Psychotherapy: A Meta-Analytic Synthesis. *Psychotherapy* 55(4) (2018), 316–340. Meta-analysis (295 studies, over 30,000 patients) on the effect of the therapeutic relationship — background to chapters 2 and 4, which do not dismiss listening but examine its limit.

Sparsha, the “foreign ear,” “ALL-THAT-IS may be,” the distinction between presence and attendance, and one’s own listening as a remaining inner duality are independent conceptual coinages of this Knowledge Space and are not drawn directly from any of the works listed.

○ WISSENSRÄUME — Appreciation

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Thank you for your appreciation. It helps such content continue to come into being — quietly, lovingly, and in service of wholeness.

△ WISSENSRÄUME — Notice

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