

# The Art of Deep Listening

by *Richard Wolf* – April 12, 2019

**PRACTICE**



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Struggle to stay focused when you meditate? Learning to listen like a musician can deepen both your meditation practice and your mindfulness.

Musically minded people are naturally deep listeners.

The variety of nuances and qualities that they can discern within a few bars of music is absolutely stunning. They can identify sonic elements such as timbre, amplitude, frequencies, compression, texture, tone, attack, sustain, decay, and release; and there are musical elements such as tempo, harmony, melody, rhythm, and a multiplicity of subdivisions within each of these categories.

At the same time, a huge spectrum of human emotions can be felt through listening: aggression, tension, melancholy, anticipation, tranquility, levity, transcendence, joy, sensuality, and playfulness—all through changes in volume, tempo, or musical key.

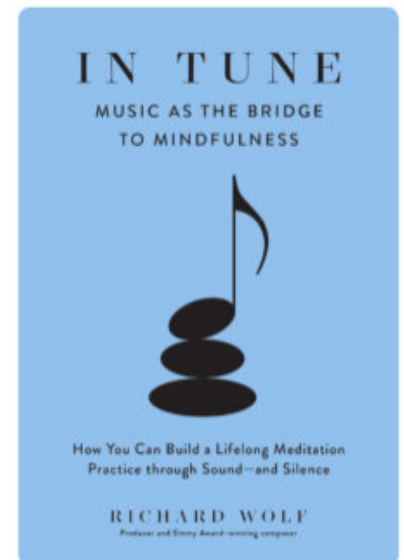
One of the central techniques in meditation is to use the breath as an object of concentration. But maintaining focus on the breath is not easy. **Deep listening can help make your breath capture your attention the same way an alluring melody can.** Listen to the sound of your breathing as if you're listening to the sound of music. Listen to your inhales and exhales with the same degree of intense interest and subtle discernment. Many of the same characteristics that you listen for in music may appear during your concentration on the breath. The sound of your own breathing is beautiful; it is the sound of your life.

Another method of concentration is to be aware of environmental sounds. This method is usually adopted after the mind has been stabilized by focusing on the breath. During sitting you may become aware of various sounds that pop up around you: the sounds of traffic, birds, voices, hammers, and so on. Noting these sounds as appearing in the field of your consciousness without getting caught by them, and knowing that you are aware of them, is a way to cultivate mindfulness. Again the ability to deeply listen as developed through music is being used as a tool of meditation.

There are modes of meditation that combine both these techniques of following the breath and noting environmental sounds. It is sometimes called “dual awareness” and is also an effective practice for developing both concentration and insight.

During meditation, it is normal to be distracted by thoughts.

You hear the sound of hammering outside your window, and you wonder what the construction is about, when it will stop—before you know it you've spun out of your seat and into a story. These thoughts are often spoken by our inner voice—mulling over talking points for an upcoming interview, or replaying the argument you had with your spouse, or pondering doubts about the tone you used to answer an email.





While listening to music in a serious manner we've learned to quiet this inner voice, or at least put it on "pause" so that we can focus on the sound of music. When we do get distracted by thoughts, the sound of our breathing will interrupt and bring us back to the breath. This becomes a reflexive process when we have made deep listening a way of attending to the breath.

The ability to quiet the inner voice and engage in deep listening is also an essential quality of daily mindfulness. We can really tune in to what another person is saying and hear them clearly. Dialing down the noise of our chattering inner voice and using our ability of subtle discernment—of keen observation—we can receive the various nuances in what the other person is trying to communicate. Most musicians are not aware that they have the capability to apply deep listening to other areas in the course of their daily lives. When they do apply deep listening, it can yield great benefits to their interpersonal relationships, communication skills, and emotional intelligence.

Deep listeners hear in multiple ways. If you can listen deeply, you not only listen to music with a refined cognitive awareness, but you *feel* the music with your body and soul. It is a holistic experience that can engage your whole being. A discerning audience can tease apart a stunning variety of sonic, emotional, and musical elements on a granular level.

This capacity for multidimensional awareness involving mind and body can be used to great effect during meditation. One of the most common methods of meditation—concentration on the breath—can be enlivened by focusing on both the sounds and the bodily sensations involved in breathing. In this mode, as you breathe your upper body rises with the inhalation and falls with the exhalation; your abdomen expands with the inhalation and contracts with the exhalation. You can focus on either the torso rising and falling or the abdomen expanding and contracting. Some followers of Zen emphasize focusing on the abdomen during meditation, paying special attention to actively contracting the abdomen as the maximum amount of oxygen is expelled. Others focus on the rising and falling of the chest, and still others include both bodily movements. You can choose whichever method you prefer. What's important is to attentively follow the breath both by listening and by maintaining awareness of the movement of the body. Once we achieve this, we can also listen to the silence between breaths. It is in that pause that we often find our greatest peace and gain our deepest insights.

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