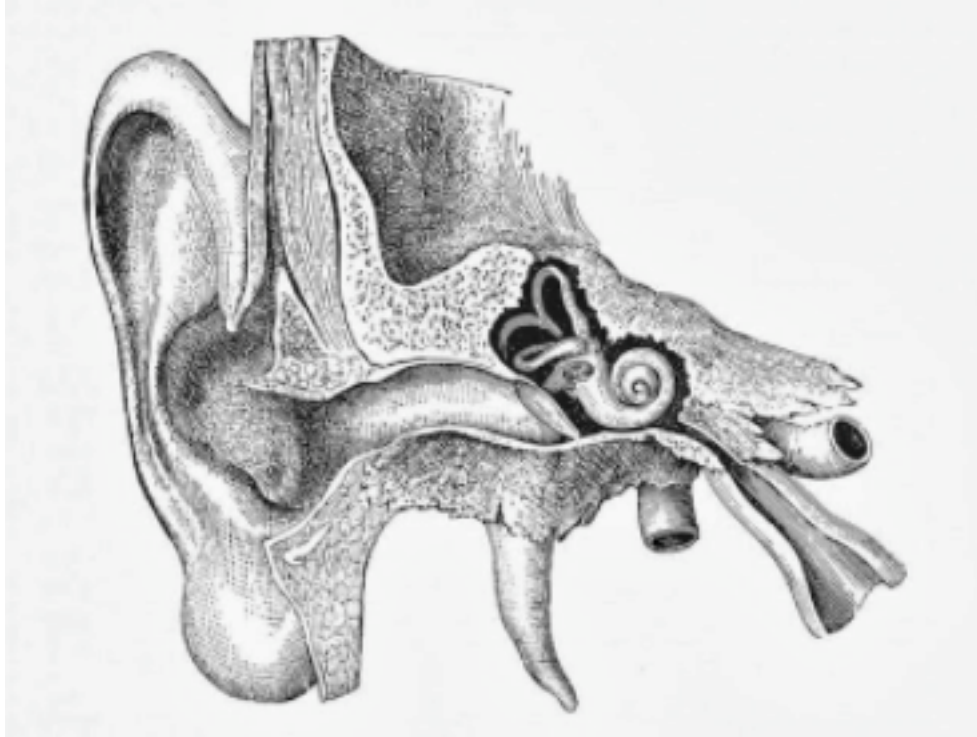


Musings on Hearing versus Listening in Tai Chi David Delaney, MA, ACR, LPC ~ (Mar 2021)



I have been on the path as an actor-singer all my life, and my field of interest and investigation has been singing. Singing demands a highly attuned and developed listening ability, without which you cannot reach the level of a virtuoso, someone who has mastery over her voice, especially when performing for a live audience or under stress. I have found that listening, a more advanced skill than hearing, must be developed with one's relaxed will or awareness.

To explore listening in life and in our tai chi, let's first look at our human auditory system. The vestibular-cochlear system of our inner ear (the structures at the end of the ear canal in the drawing) is a bridge to our nervous system that produces sensory perception and movement.

Our auditory system is one key to our survival. When humans lived in the wild, for example, if we did not take evasive action to the sounds we heard coming from the bushes, we might become a saber-toothed tiger's dinner!

Our auditory system is the first physiological system to be fully functional in utero (prior to five months). Our right ear provides information faster to the brain than does our left ear. In addition, the

ear has a neurological connection with the visual system as well. When doing tai chi, we need that conscious connection to be awake and online, rather than simply passive.

In addition, our inner ear is involved in kinesthesia (awareness of our self in space), postural awareness and orienting to the gravitational field, recharging our nervous system, detecting subtle changes in movement in our surroundings, and motivation.

In general, our auditory system allows us to listen to the substance and vibrations of life. We have a highly developed, pre-conscious instinct called the Orienting Response. The Orienting Response directs our brain to what it is focused on (in the present, thinking about the past, or imagining the future) and orients to a change in our environment. The essential questions: “Do I need to adapt here? Do I need to do anything for my survival in this moment?”

Since our auditory system is so pervasive in our lives, of course it is also pervasive in our tai chi practice. We encourage an alive, active posture. This tai chi physical alignment is the same as what is called the Listening Posture in Audio-Psycho-Phonology research. In Tai Chi, the crown of the cranium reaches toward heaven (we experience a slight upward rise internally) while we allow our chin to drop by imagining a one-pound weight dangling from it. Interestingly, this position orients the vestibular-cochlear system in the inner ear to the ideal orientation for peak function. This orientation of the inner ear structure has an immediate improvement on perception, awareness and overall kinesthesia. The other part of the Listening Posture is also found in tai chi: an alive, active extension internally that we call the pivot line.

If you are **actively listening** while doing tai chi, you will benefit the most from your practice. And if you are actively listening while practicing sensing hands with a partner, you will have more sensitivity and more success.

Another reason to learn tai chi is that it is one way to challenge your nervous system to continually develop. Neural plasticity is the capacity of the nervous system to modify itself, functionally and structurally, in response to experience, as well as injury. In brain research, it is recognized that we must challenge our nervous system in order to advance our energy conservation, a central survival function of our organism. In my experience, being active, while remaining in a dynamically relaxed listening orientation while simultaneously orienting to the vertical, as we do in tai chi, is a sufficient

challenge to continue to advance our neuro-plasticity capabilities. Here we have to recall the old adage of 'use it or lose it': if we are not actively ascending, we are passively on the decline, structurally and energetically. There is no neutral in the Universe!

So, I have a challenge for you: does your intention to actively listen while practicing tai chi change your practice and if so, in what way? I would love to 'listen' to what you discover!

Note: For more information, research the work of Dr. Alfred Tomatis, researcher and ear, nose and throat doctor from France. I practice his system of Audio-Psycho-Phonology today in my work with singers, since it can improve the voice through audio-vocal loop listening training.

David is a Tai chi teacher and author of the upcoming book "Intrinsic Singing"