This zine is one
in a series of five.

Each contains an edited
version of a prelude to a
chapter from the book
Experiments in Listening
by Rajni Shah.

The book was published
by Rowman & Littlefield
in June 2021, as part of
the Performance Philosophy series.

If you would like to buy
the book, you can do so
using the discount code
RLFANDF30 (for 30% off)
at **rowman.com**.

One:

LISTENING

REPETITION

MEDITATION

READING

Notes

[1] There are other aspects to the practice of Vipassana, including a Code of Discipline containing eight precepts that must be followed at all times. The description included here is my personal recollection of the physical process during a sitting meditation. For a description of the full Code of Practice, see <http://www.dhamma.org/en/about/code>.

[2] It is important to note that it is compassion rather than empathy that is cultivated through the practice of Vipassana. The key difference being that empathy, a precursor to compassion, involves an attempt or impulse to feel what another person is feeling, and therefore risks being clouded by desire; compassion, from the Latin *con* + *passio* (a calque from the Greek *sum* + *páthos*) meaning 'with, together, jointly, at the same time' + 'feeling, suffering', implies an act of feeling that is in understanding or sympathy alongside, without an impulse to directly experience what the other person is feeling. See Chambers Dictionary of Etymology, ed. by Robert K. Barnhart (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1988), p. 196.

[3] Fiumara, p. 15.

[4] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Duke University Press, 2002), p. 24.

[5] Though Sedgwick herself is quick to note that '[e]ven to invoke nondualism, as plenty of Buddhist sutras point out, is to tumble right into a dualistic trap.' Sedgwick, p. 2.

[6] 'Such encounters as those with mortality and with Buddhism, which shape the last two chapters, have had some slip-slidy effects, for better or worse, on the strong consciousness of vocation that made a book like E*pistemology of the Closet* sound confident of its intervention on contemporaneous scenes of sexuality and critical theory.' Sedgwick, p. 2.

[7] Sedgwick, p. 166.

Indeed, in the context of Buddhist pedagogy Sedgwick notes that this process of learning what one already knows is most evident in the concept of reincarnation, in which a whole lifetime might only constitute one iteration of learning.

Sedgwick and Fiumara have very different writing styles, and the two books from which I have quoted here, at least superficially, cover different topics that fall within different disciplinary lines. And yet, both are grappling with the challenge of writing about thought structures that fall outside 'standard' or 'default' models; and both are attempting to challenge the structures within which the very thinking they are doing would ordinarily be held.

I have mentioned Sedgwick's writing about Buddhism and my own practice of Vipassana meditation, not because I want or even think it necessarily appropriate to place a special emphasis on practices that originate in Asia (and have been adopted or co-opted by other cultures), but because they both provide a way to describe modes of knowing that challenge default structures of thought within 'Western' thinking.

What I am trying to emphasise is not that my experience of reading is like meditation, or that listening is particularly Buddhist, but that in order to begin thinking about listening, the very notion of how we construe knowledge might need to shift. This might feel strange or even inappropriate at times. However, it is exactly in these moments of disorientation that the work of listening begins to become possible.

I was reading *The Other Side of Language: a philosophy of listening* by Gemma Corradi Fiumara for the second time when it happened.

I had imagined I would make swift progress, this being my second time through.

I feel myself pressed against the limits of my stupidity each time I read Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling*.

This is not only because the thinking in *Touching Feeling* (like that of Fiumara in *The Other Side of Language*) stretches the limits of my own knowledge, but because in this book Sedgwick is writing with as well as about what I will for simplicity's sake continue to call nondualistic thought.

In other words, she too is advocating a different kind of reading: one that does not rely on, and cannot be understood solely through a linear or cumulative idea of knowledge, but that requires an embrace of a more iterative or circular approach; one in which process and form are not separated from function, and in which stupidity and learning are often necessary bedfellows.

Later in the same book, Sedgwick writes:

> In Buddhist pedagogical thought [...] the apparent tautology of learning what you already know does not seem to constitute a paradox, nor an impasse, nor a scandal. It is not even a problem. If anything, it is a deliberate and defining practice.[7]

The process of reconciling oneself to this mode of thinking takes – to borrow Fiumara's words again – humility and faithfulness. It takes time and patience, and a willingness to step outside of systems which might feel familiar and comfortable.

In the concluding sentence to the introduction of her book *Touching Feeling*, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick states:

> In writing this book I've continually felt pressed against the limits of my stupidity, even as I've felt the promising closeness of transmissible gifts.[4]

Despite its appearance when taken out of context, describing herself as being 'pressed against the limits of [her] stupidity' is far from being a self-deprecating gesture.

What follows in the book is a lengthy and complex exploration of the relationships between the concept of pedagogy and various systems of thought or knowledge that might all be defined, more or less problematically, as 'nondualistic'.[5]

Sedgwick's comment about being pressed against the limits of her stupidity, then, is a typically astute move towards the very thinking she is attempting to do in the book – gracefully acknowledging that the work of the book lies not only in its content but in the complex relationships between content, process, and form.

Indeed, she is explicit in describing the arc of the book as being inevitably enmeshed with her personal journey while writing it, acknowledging what she calls the 'slip-slidy' effects of her own encounters with mortality and Buddhism that loosened her hold on the confident voice of some of her earlier theoretical works.[6]

Instead, I found a strange pattern emerging.

At every reading, rather than making progress as I had imagined, I read a little more slowly, often deliberately re-reading the same page many times.

On the first of these sittings, I think I must have read the first fifteen pages of the book.

On the second sitting, I started at the beginning again, and only got up to page seven.

The next time, I began again, this time reaching only page three.

The more engaged I felt with the act of reading, the slower it went.

~~I was, in fact, reading so slowly that I was almost going backwards.~~

Fiumara describes the listening mode as 'secondary' within a particular hierarchy of philosophical thinking. And this notion of the secondary or lesser is crucial to an understanding of how listening is typically perceived in an overwhelmingly speech-oriented society.

When I attempted to read Fiumara in the way I was used to, in what I might call my 'primary' or default mode, I found myself a little frustrated and disappointed. But then a different relationship with knowing began to emerge – one that had remained unavailable and invisible to me previously because of my own perceptions of how knowledge operates.

It was only when I was able to include my own mode of reading (rather than solely the facts conveyed by the words) as a form of knowledge in itself that the act of reading and re-reading began to shift.

*

What changed with each reading was of course not the text but my own mode of attentiveness. The reason I went back to the beginning so many times was initially because – even on a second reading – *The Other Side of Language* was a difficult text for me to read; quite simply, I had to repeat and go slowly in order to understand it.

But as I continued re-reading, making less and less progress each time, the parameters of the activity began to shift. My initial desire to understand dropped away and was replaced by another sensation. Eventually, I no longer felt attached to gaining a certain kind of predetermined understanding of the text, and instead became interested in where the act of reading itself might take me. To borrow Fiumara's words (below), I found myself shifting from an activity that was about mastery or grasping at knowledge towards a kind of 'dwelling with' the words on the page. According to Fiumara, it is this fundamental shift in how thinking happens that is necessary in order for listening to become possible:

> There is a demand here for a relationship with thinking anchored to humility and faithfulness, an approach which is unheard-of in our current thinking, revolving around grasping, mastering, using.
>
> This 'secondary' and yet unrenunciable philosophical perspective is characterized by the requirement that we dwell with, abide by, whatever we try to know; that we aim at coexistence-with, rather than knowledge-of.[3]

> I was, in fact, reading so slowly that I was almost going backwards.

Following my instincts, I allowed this pattern of slow reading to continue over quite a few days. At each sitting, I realised, I felt more like I was encountering the writing for the first time. There was something both compelling and familiar about this. Compelling because each re-reading seemed to bring me closer to the kind of listening that Fiumara describes in the book, and familiar because its rhythm was very similar to that of another practice I value greatly:

Vipassana meditation.

Here's where my experiences of practising Vipassana and reading Fiumara overlap.

Vipassana – a Pali word commonly translated as 'insight' or 'clear-seeing' – is a meditation practice based on the repetition of very simple patterns of observation. A practice of Vipassana typically begins with Anapana meditation, which involves observing the physical sensation of the breath as it enters and exits the body through the nostrils. This then moves into the full Vipassana meditation practice, which involves the same kind of observation throughout the body, beginning at the top of the head and passing through each part of the body in turn, before returning to the top of the head to begin again. This loop of observation is repeated until completion of the practice – in my experience usually an hour-long sitting.[1] The aim is to practice with equanimity: at each moment, to observe what is happening physically or emotionally – discomfort, pain, joy etc. – and to do so without engaging in a response, either of craving (desire) or aversion.

Vipassana is an attempt to 'see clearly' one's own patterns of sensation and reaction, and by virtue of not privileging one's own emotional response or narrative, to experience the world more compassionately.[2] In parallel with this, each time I (re-)read Fiumara's words, I found that I was able to do so with a little less of my own presumption getting in the way. Although unexpected and in some ways frustrating (in the sense that my intention to make progress with reading was frustrated), I would describe the process as a clarifying one: as my experience became less filtered through structures of knowledge and understanding that I already held, I felt it became more possible to encounter the words themselves as they were laid out on the page.

Depending on how I viewed the situation, it was either an increasingly (and repeatedly) frustrated attempt at completion, or it was a whole new way of experiencing 'reading'.