

Title	<i>Breathing is a gentle gesture</i>
Conversationalist	Marie Koldkjær Højlund
Conversation number	XV
Date	24th of November 2023
Place	The Pufendorf Institute, Lund University
Time of recording	55 minutes
Context	For almost a year we had been unable to meet and conduct a conversation in-person. This conversation was possible due to another meeting, which then influenced the content and situation of the conversation. We likely have to meet up again and continue the conversation.
Note for conversation	While sitting warm and safe inside a rather nice but also white and clinical ‘meeting’ room the weather went wild, by mixing rain, snow, hail and strong winds. Fascinating. We sat across from each other at a table. Drinking coffee and being careful not to forget the time, as new meetings awaited...

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Marie Koldkjær Højlund: []

- (Lukas Quist Lund): []

Okay, let's go.

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So is it in terms of practicing or talking about?

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Yeah, so I think that listening is almost like a default state of being for me in the sense that,
[]

[] It was, again, something pushing itself on me, you could say, that the world kind of pushed itself through listening. Again, that's weird because listening is in our everyday understanding something that kind of passively just happens, []

[] but very concretely I was like a very bad sleeper. []

[] I felt so entangled in this feeling of something like, almost like small insects or something. Like that

was approaching me in the dark. So I was also afraid of the dark. So anxious and sleepless.

[

] And then at some point you have to give up being afraid and being frustrated about not sleeping. [] And I think at that kind of threshold, something interesting happens [] Because then listening changes. [

] Is it a threat? Is it something I know? [] And then slowly after this threshold, because you're also so tired, exhausted, suddenly the sounds open up in new ways where it becomes [] It's the sound of, or information about the sound, but just like traveling into the imaginary as well and becoming something completely different and slowly just merging with dreams as well. [

] But then when you have to go into a room and listen to someone, and have a lecture, or you have to lecture yourself, you have to focus somehow differently. []

- [

] the difference between the hearing state in your sleep and then the listening state in your sleep? []

[]

- []

[]

[

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So in this situation, we are trying to listen to each other, focus in on that, and you could say there's the overheard or the conditioning surrounding sounds around us that we normally are not that focused on. But I think that's exactly what my experience as a child is, also because in the darkness you suddenly hear more or listen more, but it is sort of this feeling in a way that I'm all constantly under the surface of the ocean, you could say. [

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- [

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[

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- Because what does it mean to let go? In what ways is that conditioned? What are the premises, the starting point?

[]

- [

] And giving up my agency. And of course you can also talk about letting go the other way around, where I'm aware of the conditions that I am able to effect and I can let go of certain mechanisms there.

[]

- On purpose, []

[]

- Or position myself differently. [So yeah, yeah]

[]

- [

] Like the state of letting go of some kind of natural setting. And then letting go through meditation, where you're like aware of the question: what is even natural? And then there's letting go of what is in or of my own capacities.

[

] Listening capacities as something that of course is culturally conditioned and socially conditioned but also embodied into our different bodies, our different situations [

] totally out of their own agency [

] these capacities as something that is not natural but conditioned [

] you could say another perspective could be that letting go demands, I would say, a trust in the world [I

]

ontological security and so when you kind of meet in your life this break or rupture to the ontological security that's of course a phenomenological experience that we have, that we need, that we rely on, that we are in a safe situation right now, we can have this conversation, but then if something happens, suddenly there's a car accident or something happens in front of you that kind of disturbs this ontological security, it's like the world opens in a way, [] this is just our experience that there is an ontological security. [] the anxiety of being in this weird state between sleep and non-sleep where it's like I have to let go in the trust that I, that nothing will harm me. []

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[] a very philosophical discussion about, is there a world out there without me or, []

- [] a question about, what do you mean with the world then? [] Outside of me, it would be a different non-human world. Completely ungraspable for me as a human.

[]

- I cannot really speak about that.

No.

- It's like an unknown, unknown. []

]

[]

- []

So I don't know if you had that kind of thought when you were a kid, like, is the world there when I'm not here and all of that. I just think it's so profoundly interesting that when we are children, we ask ourselves the most fundamental philosophical problems, you know, in everyday life. It just comes up. And I'm just kind of so interested in how these questions emerge out of our relationship with the world when we are children as well. That there's something, there's an openness [

] I think that there's something in, at least in how, in listening, maybe that is slowly getting cultivated in specific ways, also through our education and our way of understanding the world [

] and at least in the Danish educational system, I would say that it's often closed, closing down these ways of listening or talking or discussing rather than opening up through the educational system. [

] Have you read it?

- No.

[]

- []

Okay. So for me, it was like, what? [

] And then we had a feedback session and my Danish teacher said; this was wrong. What you did. 'First of all, you shouldn't read this book. It's not, it's not the right age group for you. You shouldn't be enthusiastic, in a book review, []

- []

[]

- []

[]

- Was that traumatic in some way?

[

] how you should tone yourself down or kind of fit into the institution and be a good listener, be a good cultivated listener.

That's not like over enthusiastic []

- []

[]

- [] the Socratic dialogue. That is often this example of how to engage in a critical dialogue or whatever. She points to the idea that basically it's a monologue with good listening 'submissives' agreeing on specific times where they're supposed to be agreeing. And nobody really ever questioned the premise.

[]

- [] do you have hopes or wishes for what should be like a good listening situation for like students or those who want to engage critically?

That's what I'm thinking about 24 seven. [] uh, how is it snowing?

- []

Maybe it's just rain. I'm over enthusiastic. []

]

- []

[]

- []

[]

of that kind of empathy resonance idea in a good dialogue, a good, uh, listening exercise or whatever. About being resonant and uncritically, [

] I'm a bit afraid

resonance is a positive feedback mechanism that can break things. [

] I mean,

] I've been raised or, you know, cultivated or, to be a very empathic listener. And what the risk is that you forget yourself or you can't feel your own resonances or opinions or whatever it is, or be in tune with that. [

] I like, oh, oh, sorry.

- []

[

] so it's R-E-A-sonance. [

together. [] kind of force these two

]

- Do you think of that as in we are always positioned in a certain condition that has a reasoning? [

]

[

] responsible listening, I think, is the English translation [responsible listening, following *The Expulsion of the Other*, 2018 by Byung Chul Hans] [

] it's a breathing. So when you kind of breathe in, you have to take in the world in a way, but it opens also towards a breathing out. You invite someone in and you try to take them in and you become a host or a harbor for someone else.

] the more rhythmical analysis in a way of, or tonal analysis also of the conversation.

- There's something deeply profound for me with the idea of breathing as a model or a metaphor for what kind of listening do we want to achieve? [

] the state of things that depends on breathing. If we give it up, what do we then have? [

] that it makes sense because we cannot walk away from it. We have to incorporate it. We have to breathe.

[] what's an irresponsible listener [

] this feeling when you are listening to someone else and while they talk, you are at the same time figuring out what to answer.

- []

In academia at least, I think we're almost programmed to do that. Why? Because there's no time in that rhythm to breathe and to take in and to think about your answer and to actually respond in a responsible way to what the other person is saying.

- []

[] this kind of slowing down, this breathing as a metaphor, I think that for me is so meaningful in terms of for instance in a teaching situation, because it also helps me as a teacher to be more, to feel more secure and more, uh, grounded in that I'm not the one that's supposed to give the right answer in the second where you ask me something.

- Quite the opposite. Because if we think-with-breathing, and we want to insert it as some kind of default practice - 'paying attention' to it, slowing down the breathing, have time for deep breaths. Then it becomes this very gentle gesture in terms of; in order to allow things to happen, I'll hold back the words in order to breathe.

Exactly.

- And I will allow, invite, others to breathe with me. Even explicitly. Like let us just take 10 breaths. While we think of this question. And then we can discuss afterwards.

[] and I like the breathing because it's actually physical, possible for us to do it in the here and now situation. [

] But at the same time, it's hard for me to say to the students; resonate, just resonate. What is that?

- []
space and time for breathing is also a privilege []

Some of these emotions are terrible. [

] a lot of people have to push them away in order to just be and survive. [

]

It's too much, because as you say, the most profound encounters of this kind of maybe ontological security rupture of that is when we suddenly feel that the most embodied habitual

things that we do with our body suddenly become something we are aware of. [

] it's extremely powerful in a way where we have to be very aware of what it is that we're actually asking for and why. [

] learning spaces or what we call it, situations where we are in them to learn [] it's about something third. It's about something else. It's about something outside ourselves. I think that's important as well.

- [] almost as a strategy because if breathing and listening is also a question of politics, then how can we then deal with that? [] do it in a responsible, caring manner that is meaningful [

] as you say, with the learning spaces to take responsibility for what it is and what it is not and what it could be and what it shouldn't be and where does it come from? Where can it move into?

[] but maybe in just pausing and waiting and practicing it yourself, you cultivate a room [] And showing that this is a room where you can do that.

- [] as a way of activism, a way to push back it becomes even more meaningful. Because as a student, I'm often tasked with coming up with quick answers and assignments and a way for me to push back is to say, well, on the first page, please breathe. [

] there's no time for breathing.

So we could ask ourselves, what is activism in a slow way? Because I think that that's a crucial question today. [

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[

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- [

] I feel that if people are not able to understand mine taking time to reflect and breathe as a response maybe then their understanding of what it can mean to respond is very narrow. [

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[]

- So in some way it becomes more meaningful for myself to find other mediums to do it. [

]

Who's voices are heard in what way? And what voices are loud? And how are you allowed to respond?

- And what echo chambers those voices exist in. Because I think in terms of that it's also extremely important to be critical about for whom and when does the breathing scream up? [

]

[

] I don't know.

Responsible listening as a breathing inside this attention economy?

- [] I'm really bad at it when it really counts.

Exactly. Me too.

- I'm bad at slowing down in the situation of teaching and learning and actually just breathe.

Of course.

- Because I'm so worried.

[

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- [

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What would happen?

- [

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[] And I mean, I think that ... I think that very often it's ... I'm just not sure how to, or if it's possible. [

] how do we find meaning in a world that's so broken. [

] how certain

knowledge paradigms can kind of become invisible almost, it's just like when we walk into the hospital, we become patients, or we become relatives to a patient or visitors.

- [

]

And how does this system cultivate certain forms of knowledge that condition very specific rhythms that actually in many situations counteracts what the patient or the person there is supposed to be doing. For instance, healing or giving birth or whatever. [

]

- [] how many different kinds of breathings exist in there. []

[]

- [] Where to learn how to breathe. Where should we seek these practices? []

[]

- []

Breathing for you. []

- []

[]

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[]

- But wouldn't they be able just to program a different kind of breathing rhythm?

[]

- []

[

] entrainment you could say, attunement, with another word, is how our rhythms inside of our body and our rhythms synchronize with outside rhythms. That's a basic evolutionary function. Which is based on survival, that we are able to kind of adapt to our environment. [

]

- []

[

] It's just too far away from those rhythms. So, you cannot synchronize. It's not possible. So, I've been working on how to open up for attunement or entrainment in these situations. For instance, by allowing children to make rhythms themselves with alarm sounds, for instance. Before they go into a room, because then they can slowly habituate or embody these sounds before they meet them in a situation where it's scary [

] but in terms of our conversations as well.

- []

[]

- [

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I think that what we talked about already, that attention economy, the spaces that we are in that are structured so much on that, how do we afford or should we or can we or how can we slow that down? Or try to make space for these questions? That's a question I have absolutely no answer to at all. [

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- [

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[

] what is

listening to the liminal. To the limit, to the wall instead of through. What does that open? And how do we do that?

- [

] what are the limits of what we are able to grasp and what are the

limits of what our tools and practices that we engage with in order to even understand the position we have in our conditions. [

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- I think, yeah, we should probably end it.

Hi, hi. Bye.