

## **TONE OF VOICE:**

### **The Value of Tuning In**

Our tone of voice reveals our intentions, moods, whether or not our hearts are open and so much more. Subtly listening to our own tone of voice can reveal everything about our intentions. These tones or vibrations can be a doorway to our deepest motivations guiding us to our hearts, moment to moment. It is a simple and inspiring practice to pay close attention to our tone of voice. When we do, this awareness gives us the chance to cultivate the purest qualities in our hearts and to notice when we, ourselves, or those around us, are in a defended state. When we become more attentive to how we sound, we will increase our capacity to be accountable for ourselves.

Early in my career, I was a volunteer counselor at the Foundation for the Junior Blind. I said to my class of ten legally blind children, “You have the disadvantage of not being able to see, but I’ll bet you also have the advantage of being able to recognize tones of voice and what they mean.”

I asked them to say the word, “Hello,” in a way that sounded frightened, angry, loving, sad and depressed. They paused for a few seconds, gathering their courage and they experimented. As each child spoke, I asked the others to report the tone they were hearing. It was uncanny how easy this was for almost all the children. Since they couldn’t see, their attention to their other senses was heightened and I asked them to notice when they were likely to use specific tones with particular people in their lives. Amazed at their aptitude, I encouraged them to experiment with warmer versus cooler tones. “Was the response significantly different?” I asked them.

They said that it was. The children realized they could improve the quality of their lives when they paid close attention to how their tones expressed their emotions. I explained that the real benefits came when they attempted to soften their hearts when they were angry. Similarly, when they were afraid, I said they needed to summon as much courage as possible, which is just

like a prayer for faith in themselves. I suggested they could use their tone of voice to help them see their emotional states and eventually to guide them to the best qualities of their hearts. For the children, these ideas were not a bit complicated. Rather, they were intuitively obvious.

## **HOW IT ALL BEGAN**

As children, most of us were hypersensitive to our parents' tones of voice. We could recognize certain qualities and attitudes, and although we didn't label them at the time, we knew what they meant. Unless we were abused or suffered some kind of injury, we were fully capable of hearing the quality of heart in our loved ones' tones of voice.

When our dad, mom, brother or sister were angry we could sense it in their voices, even if they swore they were fine. It was easy and automatic as certain sounds invited us to come closer, while others told us there was trouble and we needed to move away. We could usually tell when our own tones were friendly, angry, frightened, sad, and all the places in between. We understood not only what it meant to have a good attitude but also how it sounded. So what happened?

It seems that what was obvious at five years old, has become more difficult for us as adults, ever since we lost our capacity to trust the tones of others. Remember when you were a kid, your parents were angry and they told you it was your fault? You can see this in a mall or restaurant any time a frustrated mother yells at her child.

It's as if we were being told we were bad while the authorities were lobbing bombs at us. It was devastating to be hammered with an aggressive tone of voice and being told it was our problem. We were too young and inexperienced to defend ourselves and as a result, we lost faith in our ability to notice other's tones of voice as well as our own. In essence, we underwent a massive shutdown as we lost our basic trust and our capacity to listen to the quality of our own emotions, our heart and our intention. As we believed someone else's words without sensing their accompanying tone, we gradually started to listen to other people's words only, and lost our sensitivity to noticing their tone. After a number of times when the tone didn't match the words, it left us tone deaf.

Soon, most of us believed wholeheartedly that someone else's anger was our fault. We internalized this message and while our conscious minds may have forgotten the specifics, our unconscious feelings were imprinted. Our unconscious decided that someone else deserved an

aggressive reaction when they treated us with anger. If the aggression was directed at us, we instantly became afraid, guilty, hurt or angry.

In our youth, when people around us weren't accountable and congruent with their tone and their words, we lost our sensitivity to see tone exactly as it was. If they *had been* accountable, they might have said in a soft tone, "I'm angry right now, but I don't want to hurt or scare you. You have nothing to fear because the anger is my problem. But I do want to tell you what I just heard you say."

It is well understood that our parent's responses in our early childhood are main indicators of our mental health today. Because most of us didn't hear positive statements with tones to match, we came to believe that we didn't deserve to be loved. We lost the capacity to hear all kinds of healing tones and levels of our own anger. It depended upon our exposure as children.

For instance, some of us grew up in families that were depressed, frightened and/or withdrawn. When we asked our sad-sounding father if he was okay, and he said, "Yes, I'm fine," we were thrown into confusion. We lost faith in our own ability to hear and trust another person's tone of voice. This was a contagious condition that affected many of us in varying degrees. As we lost the capacity to trust our intuition, we created the tendency to follow our parents' lead, as we made statements that our tone of voice contradicted.

### **HOW DOES YOUR TONE SOUND TO YOU?**

In counseling, I regularly stop individuals mid-sentence and ask if they are aware of their tones. I might stop them many times to ask them to convey the tone in a way that feels better. This has proven to be an invaluable tool to support an individual to look for their heart in a practical, inoffensive, concrete way. The following two case studies are both excellent examples.

#### **SHARON**

Sharon was an emotionally assertive woman with a stereotypically New York edginess. An author, she was having difficulties with her agent, publishers, attorney, and just about anyone who got close to her.

"I must be picking the wrong people," she told me. "They're all giving me attitude." In that first session, she used an aggressive tone to describe her attorney as "a very hard person to talk with."

"How are you experiencing your own tone of voice right now?" I asked her.

She looked puzzled, as if she had never thought about that. “I guess I’m a bit frustrated, but it’s understandable, given how he’s been treating me.”

Aware that she was an honest woman, I told her in a soft and neutral tone, “My experience is that you sound extremely angry. I’m wondering if you sense that as you look closer?”

Irritated at my comment, she said, “I think you’re wrong and I don’t know why you’re judging me.”

That was just the response I was expecting. I persevered by saying, “Is that how you really feel as you listen to my tone of voice right now? What is your sense of your tone when you’re telling me I’m wrong?”

Sharon paused for a few seconds. It looked like she didn’t know if she wanted to hit me or thank me. In truth, she appreciated my attitude, and at the same time, she hated hearing what I was saying. “I don’t know,” she finally said in an exasperated tone.

I suggested that she reflect on what just happened, as if she were in a laboratory where she could see her own reactions and tones. I explained that this kind of exploration could go a long way in helping her with all of her relationships.

“I don’t know if you’re right,” she said in a much kinder voice, “but I appreciate your directness and I’ll think about it more.”

In her next session, she told me that she also had a major “attitude,” just like the people who were troubling her. This was a breakthrough. Over the next several months, she realized that for the rest of her life, she needed to stay aware of her tone of voice. She said, “I can see that my tone has been a major contributor to the problems in each of my relationships.”

She even acknowledged that in some relationships, she was the initiator. She knew that I appreciated her strength, because she could feel it in my attitude and tone of voice. In fact, my lack of reactivity when she was acting her anger out, gave her the space to really tune in to feel herself. Sharon saw that she was internalizing the tone of kindness, and she felt compassionate toward herself for having felt the need to act out so much anger.

In one of our last sessions, she said quite tenderly, “I can see why I’ve needed to use my anger so much. It was the only way I could be heard when I was young.” She smiled wryly. “I just missed twenty years of not realizing I don’t have to do it this way any more.”

## **CHARLES**

In the mid-1970s, two close friends and I coordinated a residential addiction treatment center for teenagers. Charles, a member of our center, was overtly anxious and uptight in such a

way that made him stand out as a target for the other boys in the home. At the dinner table, he would magnetize attacks to himself by saying with a victimized and agitated tone, “Why won’t you pass me the butter?” This daily occurrence became a reliable form of “entertainment” for the other boys.

I worked with Charles for several years on his situation and his progress was slow. He was so deeply entrenched in self-hatred and low self-esteem, becoming aware was difficult. He just thought everyone else was mean. “After all,” he said to me, “I’m not mean to anybody. I just want them to be nice to me.”

His tone vibrated anxiety and tension and I continuously asked him, “How does your tone sound to you when you ask someone to pass the butter?”

For an entire year, he remained steadfast in his belief that his problems were created by other people’s bad attitudes. When he continued to see himself as a victim, I asked him, “Why do you think they pick on you?”

I kept getting the same answer. “I don’t know,” he said. “That’s what confuses me.”

Throughout our work together, I continued to be aware of my own caring tone and one day, Charles had a mini-breakthrough. I asked him to repeat the words, “Why won’t you pass me the butter?” in as many different tones as possible. After several tries, he said in a neutral tone, “Pass me the butter, will you?”

With a hint of joy in my voice, I asked him if he could hear the difference.

“Yes,” he said. “I wasn’t nervous so I didn’t ask. I just told them what I wanted.”

“That’s going to work,” I assured him with great encouragement. “Why don’t you give it a try?”

I knew that if he could sustain a neutral tone, he would be no fun to pick on any more. He and I role-played scenes of others attempting to provoke him. Once Charles got the hang of not being the scapegoat, he drew in much less negativity and attacks.

### **FINDING YOUR UNCONSCIOUS TONES**

When I was in my twenties, I was a part of a group of close friends who enjoyed getting together and chanting a sound together; OM. The spiritual significance of a universal sound was never the important part to us. I often thought we could’ve used a word like “YUM” and it still would have been a joy. What motivated us was that the sounds we made opened our hearts and created a sense of connection and tenderness. We were all reaching for our hearts, using this

traditional eastern sound as a way of guiding us. This was one of my original inspirations for encouraging both friends and clients to use sounds of their own at the beach, in a car, or even in their backyards that could bring them closer to their pure hearts. In fact, the simple yearning for these tones is a healing experience, no matter the results.

When we increase our connection to our hearts, we can see that reflected in our tone. In fact, this is one of the most direct ways of seeing how interconnected we are or are not. Tone, like music, seems to be a universal way of creating connection and inspiration to develop our various meditations and practices. Then we can see the fruit of our labors showing up in a much more natural tone. You can do the following meditation on the spot, any moment, for the rest of your life.

### **MEDITATION: Finding Your Unconscious Tones And Yearning To Transform Them**

*Choose a safe and comfortable place where you are relaxed, alert and will not be distracted by the outside world. As you breathe, ask yourself, "Where is my tone of voice least anchored in my heart during the day, during my life?" Do this in a tender way, and be truly interested in the discovery so you can support yourself. Scan the key relationships in your life. Notice particular people who have a tendency to bring out your most defensive and discordant tones. Take a deep breath, and focus on relaxing. When you are aware of your reactive tone, feed the longing to feel the opposite healing tone that is rooted in your heart.*

*Let go of blaming anyone, especially yourself, and become a neutral investigator about where you have been most absent in noticing unpleasant or hurtful tones. Envision images of people who seem to bring out the worst in you. Who are these people? What is the tone that comes from inside of you when you think of them? It is a potential healing every time you notice such a moment in a nonjudgmental way.*

*Recognize that your tone of judgment inside yourself does not help when you see something you wish weren't there. Find the tones of tenderness and warmth that lies underneath. Deepen them as slowly and as much as possible. Take your time since the longer you stay aware of your tone, the greater the likelihood to find your heart and create less suffering for yourself and everyone around you. Recognize this as a kind of prayer or*

*contemplation. Keep allowing images of people to arise that evoke a tone that you find aggressive, unfriendly, painful, or stressful. Remind yourself that you are doing this to recognize where you suffer and cause suffering, so you can relieve it with fostering tones in your heart.*

*Notice without judgment, if you are enjoying this anchoring process as you search for your tones. As you go straight to your core truthfulness, focus on the most injurious ones that arise from inside you, and also notice the yearning to stay non-judgmental. Acknowledge the courage it takes to look at and be with these areas from which you normally run away. It is especially courageous when you don't judge yourself and it is a true miracle to see what you don't like and to carry a tone of kindness or even one of simple neutrality.*

*Breathe and just relax as you encourage yourself to carry the tone for which you yearn in your heart. Appreciate that this is a meditation you can do on the spot, any time you want for the rest of our life. Ask yourself, what tones you would like to foster most in your life today? Which ones you would like to stay on the alert for? Be inspired by your courage to face the tone of your life and the motivation to reach your heart.*

### **SEEING THE CHAIN REACTION**

Witnessing both our tone and the tones of others can help us see chain reactions as they are, and not act them out. I encourage my clients to pay close attention to others' tones as well as their own. Stopping them in the middle of a sentence and asking how they sound to themselves, is frequently humbling for those who are unaware of how they sound. If I am successful in using a caring tone of voice, (something to which I have deliberately invested a great deal of effort), this stopping in the middle usually stuns them into seeing a direct pathway to what their hearts are feeling.

They may be speaking in tones that are lecturing, irritating, demanding, complaining or intimidating, to name a few. When we pause together, I ask them to speak consciously in the tones that were unconscious. When they pay attention, they can usually hear exactly how they sound. We need to stay aware, however, that if we don't have a natural caring place inside us toward the person we are facing, we can't perform one. It has to be natural because while words may be confusing, tones don't lie.

As a result of bringing awareness to our own tones, we can often anticipate not only what tone we are likely to receive. We can also see how we interact with others. In this way, we can avoid knee jerk reactions and we can guide ourselves to our hearts instead of our defensive tones. When we are not blind-sided by someone's lecturing attitude, instead of withdrawing, we can stay more engaged. Instead of being aggressive, we can guide ourselves to a calmer tone.

This doesn't mean we won't have an internal reaction. We might very well have the same reactions for years to come, but through "pre-meditation," (anticipating ahead of time), we can learn to contain these reactions by focusing our attention on the qualities we want to energize in our hearts. We might focus on being more calm, courageous, patient or whatever else is most needed. Remember that this containment is not the same as suppression or lack of authenticity. Accepting these reactions instead of dumping them on someone else gives us a chance to harmlessly be with our true reactions while we respond with our hearts.

The importance of understanding these chain reactions in tone of voice became most apparent to me during my sessions. Whenever I was moved by a client's openness, I expressed how touched I felt, not only with my eyes and words, but also in my tone. I noticed that would lead to the client to feeling touched as well, and often resulted in breakthrough moments. In fact, any authentic heart opening between two people magnifies the chain reaction; we have a snowball effect on each other's hearts.

### **JULIE**

An attractive 27-year-old woman, Julie came into my office several years ago, suffering because she felt empty. During our second session, when she was in her empty state, I asked her, "Is it tolerable for you to remain there and feel the suffering?"

At first, she was perplexed by my question since she was so accustomed to doing everything possible to get out of this "dreaded" state. But I could tell that she picked up on my tone and attitude of deep respect and trust in her. She immediately relaxed and said, "Yes," in a way that expressed both relief and surprise. As we sat in that moment together, she said quite courageously, "I feel a hollow sensation running through my chest all the way down to my stomach."

"Keep staying with the experience and lets see what it really is," I responded with an encouraging tone." I could tell that she was continuing to relax more and more, as she was

responding to herself with curiosity and tenderness, rather than rejecting herself like she normally did.

“I feel like I am no one inside, and it scares me,” she said.

“I really appreciate that you trust yourself and our relationship enough to just stay with your experience. So you feel like you are nothing inside and you’re afraid that’s really who you are?” I asked.

Her resounding “Yes,” sounded like she was concerned, and at the same time, she was enjoying the adventure of discovery. She understood that she was no longer doing this alone, and she had an element of caring and curiosity that she was internalizing from her own tone. “I’m actually enjoying allowing myself to be empty without fighting it. It’s such a relief to not judge myself.”

I explained to her that it was my honor to share this kind of depth with her, and she began to cry. She was reflecting a deep sorrow for herself and a great deal of gratitude that she was able to drop to the bottom of her experience. “This is strange,” she said after a few minutes. “I’m peaceful and at the same time I still feel like I’m no-one. I’ve never felt such peace when I feel like I am a nobody.”

Julie was clearly picking up my feeling of reverence for her. She looked open and exquisitely beautiful as she dropped into what seemed like the universal experience of living underneath our defenses. Without describing this to her, I felt she was living right on the edge of her essential heart. I knew that was true when she began to interpret her emptiness as a natural experience, rather than something to be avoided.

“Is it tolerable to feel like you are no one?” I asked her.

“Right now, it is,” she said. “I feel alive in a way I can’t describe, but I’m not sure I can hold onto it without support.”

With a tone of great appreciation for her honesty, awareness and vulnerability, I said, “Of course you can’t do that right away. Learning how to care for your emptiness is going to take time. But you’re a quick study and you just got a taste of it. You’ve shown interest in your emptiness, rather than rejecting it. You brought your heart there.”

I was moved to tears myself by her naked state of vulnerability and she sighed with great relief and even some joy when she said, “I’m actually looking forward to visiting this nothingness with your support. And I can’t believe I am saying that.”

“It’s an honor that you let me be with you in this defenseless state,” I said. “I hope you can hear my feeling and tone of the richness I see in you. You were just mislabeling it, not recognizing this depth as a legitimate place that is inside all of us.”

This was a joyous example of one tone from the heart touching another. The content itself was rich and filled with an understanding of something from which we normally run away. However, the major healing came from the tones that she and I exchanged which were true examples of heart to heart contact.

The ramifications of such realizations can be wildly transformational. It gives us great incentive to watch our tone of voice, to be dedicated to our practices, and to see more clearly what the difference is between a healing session and one that doesn’t seem to be moving. It isn’t restricted only to sessions since it applies to all relationships. The main point is not to artificially change our tone of voice, but to use awareness of our tones to support reaching for our hearts. Listening to the sounds of our voices will let us know how close we are to reaching for our hearts.

## **CHALLENGING RELATIONSHIPS**

Think about the most difficult people in your life. What quality in their tone turns you off? When you take a good look, you will generally find one or more of their tones to which you have an aversion. Be specific as you scan these challenging relationships. Notice tones that adversely affect you like arrogance, intimidation, wounding, lecturing, superiority, melodrama, seriousness, and domination, being charming and being seductive.

Our greatest transformations occur when we see ourselves as a central part of a chain reaction that occurs with tone of voice in all relationships. Maybe our anger is triggered when one of our most difficult people seems to be lecturing us. Perhaps we come back with either an aggressive or distant tone. But if we have developed the ability to hear our own tone of voice, we will be able to recognize our suffering and that of others. Then we can use this awareness to move towards our needs and hearts.

Unfortunately, most of us don’t notice our own tones when we feel we have been severely “wronged.” We think our anger is justified, but blaming the other person renders us incapable of reaching towards our heart. It is a huge breakthrough to develop a great interest in our tone over

someone else's. The exception here is someone who nearly always blames themselves for the shortcomings of others. This relatively smaller group would benefit more from noting other's tones more than their own.

### **EXERCISE:**

Write down three tones that are most disturbing to you -- the ones that result in your losing your awareness. Next to each example, guide yourself with a specific tone you wish to encourage. \_\_\_\_\_

For example, if your disturbing tone is anxiety, you may wish to encourage a tone of peacefulness. If your disturbing tone is isolation, you may wish to encourage a tone of connection. Similarly, if it is accusatory, you might wish for a tone of acceptance.

As with all the suggestions and processes in this book, this requires a lot of practice, integrity, and emotional maturity. But it is worth the effort when we use the awareness of our tone as a catalyst to witness and guide us to the desired places inside our hearts.

We cannot stop others from sometimes mistaking our tones as critical because they are programmed with their prior wounds. That will inevitably occur. But we can be reasonably certain that if we use a tone that is strident or less anchored in our heart, we will get a similar tone back. When we use a tone that is heart-filled and compassionate, there is a good chance the other person will feel grateful and cared for. With this in mind, we can develop a motivation to pay attention to tone since there is a true and immediate payoff - - access to our own hearts and the hearts of those we love.

With a loving and conscious tone of voice, we can care for people we meet along the way, such as in the supermarket, on the street or in an airplane. It is a remarkable experiment to bring your heart to your tone of voice and witness the various responses. While everyone will not be receptive, you may be pleasantly surprised by how many people will be.

When we are facing our most difficult and aggressive people, we might try talking to them about how we are experiencing their tones. But more often than not, people are not willing to look at themselves in these vulnerable areas unless they are very close to you. Even then, they may not be approachable. This is why it is good to have a Plan B in place, to independently be able to guide yourself back toward the center of your heart, rather than reacting blindly with a defensive tone.

## **JIM**

Jim, a man in his forties came to see me because he felt distant from his wife. He was in love with her, he assured me, but he couldn't stand her tone when she was emotionally reactive with their kids. As he was describing her emotional "histrionics," I noticed that he curled his mouth in a condescending way.

I asked him with sincere curiosity, "Jim, what does your tone of voice sound like to you as you describe her?"

He deflected my question for the first couple sessions, repeating in a number of different ways, "It's really difficult to be with her when she is so volatile with one of our little ones." I recognized his tendency to stay vague in acknowledging his own tone of voice, which created distance. About four weeks into our sessions (I'd asked him about his own tone ten to fifteen times), he finally said, "I guess I am pretty reactive."

"Could you be a little more specific?" I asked him.

"I'm exasperated and frustrated," he said. "But of course, anyone would be."

Noticing his rationalization, I suggested that these kinds of "tonal patterns" could freeze a relationship into a sense of permanent distance, power struggles or alienation. "Can you see how your wife might be reacting to your exasperation and disdain?"

Jim heard me this time. Over the next month, the more he considered his frustration, the more he came to understand his contribution to the difficulty. I suggested he take a journal and do a simple two column exercise. In column one, he would list his wife's tone as the initiator. In column two, he would list his own as the recipient. I also encouraged him to notice whether he sometimes fell under column one as the initiator. As Jim's awareness of his tone became more constant, he got more committed to reaching inside for a tolerant and kind tone. When he talked about his wife, his attitude shifted to a greater kindness, a reflection of how he was responding.

One day, Jim was obviously eager and excited to tell me a story. A breakthrough had happened at home when he asked his wife in a kind tone, "Could you try to speak more tenderly to me and the kids?" She responded in a way she never had before, since his kindness had put her at ease. She promised to try and said she noticed a big difference in his caring tone. This led to an ongoing dialogue in which she began to catch her tendency to be emotionally volatile.

She told Jim, "I'm grateful that you're helping me relax enough to notice what I'm doing. I always felt judged by you. Now I feel you as more loving than I ever dreamed you could be." It

was the beginning of a new dimension of love where they each concentrated on noticing their own tones. This made for a different kind of music.

### **WITNESSING MY OWN TONES**

Working with clients like Jim over the years has motivated me to pay close attention to the subtle tones of my own voice in my sessions and in the world. As a counselor, I'd seen myself as caring or at least neutral most of the time, unless I had a rare client that significantly triggered my reactivity or judgment. As the years passed, however, it became apparent to me that I was not aware of certain elements of my own tones.

I realized that when I meditated or prayed, my tone became more passionate, tender, and light. I am not referring to performing a certain tone. I'm talking about the fact that I could use my natural tone to see how open or closed my heart was. I felt motivated to deepen my dedication to these practices, since I felt they were changing the quality of my life and the lives of those around me. I saw how restricted I felt by hearing my withdrawn tone. At other times I heard a subtle quality in my tone that made me come off as if I were "the expert." I expect that some people experienced this as a false sense of superior knowing, a tendency that I watch closely, since I know how old patterns inevitably reappear.

As I paid closer attention to my clients, I saw the importance of witnessing my own tone more carefully. I knew immediately that this awareness was vital and I felt even more motivated to move closer to my heart. Today, I look in the face of anyone I'm with to see an indication of the way I'm speaking. It's like a biofeedback system, one of the easiest ways to see whether or not we are interconnected. To me, tone, like music, seems to be a universal way to directly affect one another, providing inspiration to develop and express the fruits of our practice in a more natural tone.

I learned that if I am telling someone to watch his or her tones, with tension in my own, it automatically creates a resistance. Consider telling a partner or a friend to watch their tone. If they just used a negative tone, we forget to notice that it annoyed us and we reflected that tone right back to them. It is as if all human beings are naturally interconnected on a tonal level, which registers in the other person's body. Knowing all of this, before each of my meditation practices, I set an intention to be more sensitized to my tone of voice with the people I will be seeing on any given day.

### **EXERCISE:**

1. Write the names of two people in your life who are most challenging to you as a result of their tone or tones of voice. List the offending tones.
2. Write down the tone or tones with which you usually respond when you are not thinking. Be specific and attentive.
3. Guide yourself to the tone of voice you most want to use when you see these people next. List the specific tone or tones you are bringing to these moments.

## **TONING**

Each of us has blind spots when it comes to hearing certain tones. It can be helpful to ask a guide, friend or lover with sensitivity and courage, to let you know about these places in you -- and when they happen. Some of us can't see when we are agitated, rude, abrasive, facetious, or simply disinterested, so having it mirrored back can be enlightening. Hopefully, such mirroring will make us more receptive to hear when our heart isn't there, and it will catalyze the yearning so it can show up. This leads to contemplation, prayer and purifying of intention as we continue to seek out those who can give us the best feedback.

When you are alone, you can practice purifying your tone by placing your hand on your own heart. Ask yourself, "What quality does this person need from me? Will it be kindness, tenderness, passion, courage, receptivity?" Then you can ask/pray/yearn to remember to bring your tone to the quality of heart that is needed. Each time you do, you are helping yourself trust in your own sincerity of intention and motivation. See that you care enough to contemplate and inquire into your heart about how to stay open to what is needed in this exchange. Nothing can replace the internal confidence of experiencing yourself in a practice to purify your intentions, tone and quality of heart.

Ask yourself what intention you want to express in your exchange with various people on a given day. This can be done in advance as a form of prayer, meditation, or in the moment. For those of us who haven't paid close attention to our tone of voice in the past, be patient. It can take a while to reach a deep enough place from which we can speak in a different tone.

A friend and I once ran a group for people who were dealing with substance dependency. We wanted to support the individuals in the group to face what led them to their addictions. At the same time, we were concerned with how to lessen the risks of them falling back into the emptiness. I conferred with colleagues and we agreed to experiment with sing-along sessions.

I explained to the participants that for the first two thirds of the session, they would express their inner experiences and reactions to themselves or others in a light-hearted song. They could say literally anything they wanted to say, except for comments that were mean-spirited or destructive. For example, one person would sing lightly, "I'm feeling really empty right now."

Another person would sing back, "Thanks for being open."

Someone might sing, "I think you are an asshole with a hostile edge."

A lilted response would come back that said lightly, "Clean up your vibe."

Throughout these evenings, laughter rang out of our room and the spirit of lightness was the general tone. But at another level, there was a true acknowledgment of a deeper experience, which supported the open heart to be the dominant tone. This allowed the participants to visit the depth of their suffering in a dignified manner.

My friend and I, as well as the children involved, found these sessions were moving, spontaneous, alive, playful and deep, all at the same time. Sometimes an individual would break down, cry or get angry, and we reminded him or her to stay with the song as they expressed themselves. It wasn't easy but it was worth it since it allowed a person to hold the heart and the human experience at the same time.

When we ended the singing part of the session, during the last third of the evening, everyone decompressed and shared openly what got triggered. This allowed for a nice balance between the heart and the suffering. This toning process proved to be a blessing, as it allowed people to overcome and acknowledge their shame, fear and embarrassment whenever it was needed.

### **MEDITATION & PRAYER FOR TONE:**

*Visualize the people, one by one, whom you will see today. Ask yourself, what quality or tone and heart would allow the best contact with each person? For one, it might be tenderness, while for another, passion is being called for. And yet another may need calmness.*

*Recognize that each moment will be unique, that you can't know for sure what is needed, but you can know in a general sense, the state you want for your heart. What tone do you want to convey to this person?*

*Say to yourself, "May I be guided to the tone and quality of heart needed with the people I meet today. May I stay aware and in my heart, in order to convey the tone that is needed with people I run into by chance. May I recognize that the tone I carry will dictate be the quality of my life. May I remain closer and closer to my heart, and to the hearts around me."*