

Dialogical Inquiry as Spiritual Practice

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The term "dialogue" derives from the Greek word *dialogos*, which can be translated as "meaning flowing through" (*dia*: through; *logos*: word, meaning). Dialogue is usually contrasted with argumentative discussion, which stems from the Latin *discutere* ("to smash into pieces"). These two forms of conversation need not be at odds, however. Instead, the practice of dialogical inquiry may be understood as a blend of both dialogue and discussion that can function as a spiritual practice. Fostering the strengths of both dialogue and discussion while avoiding their weaknesses, dialogical inquiry can become a practice of interpersonal or relational meditation.

In a discussion, people often feel as if they are in a win/lose situation. Participants usually battle to make their views prevail (this is regarded as a victory), and defend them against the attacks of their opponents (in order to avoid being defeated). As linguists George Lakoff and Mark Johnson point out in *Metaphors We Live By*, the metaphor underlying both academic writing and ordinary conversations is "argument is war." Accordingly, the skills of critical thinking and writing (logic, argumentation, rhetoric, etc.) are used as weapons to beat opponents and enemies (i.e., people who do not share our viewpoints).

Argumentative discussion's strengths include sharply putting in relief genuine differences among viewpoints, pushing people to give adequate reasons for their beliefs, and, when skillfully practiced, promoting the dialectical development of ideas. Its shortcomings are well known; argumentative discussion can foster a strong self-identification and attachment to one's own views, lead participants to personalize criticism, hinder the spontaneous flow of ideas, and make it difficult for people to revise their assumptions and change their minds (in some academic circles, changing one's mind is almost a synonym of defeat!). Attachment to one's ideas often turns the conversation into

a battlefield characterized by polarization, fragmentation, and stagnation, rather than an encounter characterized by emphatic understanding, co-operative inquiry, and mutual transformation.

In dialogue, by contrast, participants are encouraged to suspend their assumptions and explore them together in playful and non-confrontational ways. Two central elements of the practice of dialogue are awareness of the context in which ideas are spawned and the creative exploration of alternatives. Generally, dialogue has no pre-established agenda and in dialogue there is nothing to prove or defend. This encourages a situation in which no one is attempting to win because, as David Bohm puts it in *On Dialogue*, "in a dialogue, everybody wins."

Dialogue's strengths are that people learn to detach themselves from their assumptions, which allows them not only to feel more relaxed when receiving criticism of their views, but also to be able to change them when useful or necessary.

Furthermore, in dialogue, people learn to listen deeply to each other, as well as to consciously participate in the collective creation of meaning. The main shortcoming of this approach is that, deprived of its polemic and argumentative force, dialogue tends to lose its critical power and degenerate into a friendly, nice, but often inconsequential conversation in which there is little room for healthy criticism and genuine disagreement (the tyranny of the "yes, but" is substituted by the equally problematic despotism of the "yes, and"). Also, the fact that dialogue has no pre-established agenda often hinders the adequate exploration of specific issues whose resolution or clarification may require more sustained, focused, and deeper attention.

The practice of dialogical inquiry attempts to integrate the strengths of dialogue and discussion while avoiding their shortcomings. In a mindfully maintained dialogical encounter, argumentation and polemics can become penetrating tools to playfully inquire into the possibilities and limitations of all views. If we are able to passionately argue for what we consider to be truth at any given moment with humbleness and non-attachment, then we can recapture the critical force of dialogue while preventing the conversation from becoming a battle.

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The Spiritual Potential of Dialogical Inquiry

Dialogue and discussion are widely applied to the study of spiritual matters, but are hardly ever thought of in spiritual terms, at least in U.S. culture. Yet, once we grasp the concept of dialogical inquiry, we can find at least ten elements common to both dialogical inquiry and many spiritual paths and traditions. These similarities show how dialogical inquiry can be framed and practiced in ways that foster the development of spiritual skills, values, insights, and transformation.

1. Practice: Rather than a technique to be learned and used following a set of instructions, dialogical inquiry is a practice. Dialogical inquiry is a way to practice mindfulness and other contemplative skills (non-attachment, self-surrender, ego-transcendence, etc.) in the intersubjective world that emerges out of the encounter between two or more conscious beings. As with any practice, then, dialogical inquiry can only be learned through direct experience and conscious participation.

2. Mindfulness: To practice mindfulness in the intersubjective world involves observing the observer (observing our own consciousness, thoughts, emotions, and body sensations), as well as paying attention to all these dimensions of being in our dialogical partners. As in mindfulness meditative practices, the quality of this attention is non-judgmental, open, curious, receptive, and appreciative.

3. Generosity: In dialogical inquiry, the virtue of generosity can be cultivated through the practices of active listening and mindful speech.

Active listening is an act of generosity in which we offer our full presence and attention to another human being. Active listening to other human beings means being with them from the beginning to the end of their communication, and avoiding entanglement in our own mental constructions and interpretations so that we do not miss or distort what others are saying. Active listening entails paying attention not only to the linguistic content (what is expressed), but also to the whole person (how it is expressed, which emotions are present, which body reactions, etc.). Paradoxically, a crucial element of active listening is "inner listening," that is, the anchoring of a small portion of our awareness in ourselves (through body-awareness, observing the observer, etc.) while giving the rest of our attention to the other person. The practice of "inner listening" during verbal exchanges prevents states of uncritical absorption into what other people are saying and helps us to be with them in a more conscious way.

Mindful speech is the practice of expressing our ideas in the spirit of truthfulness and compassion. To practice mindful speech is to speak our own truth with force and clarity, even if this involves taking risks or overcoming fears. When addressing the ideas of others, we can practice both appreciation and the art of constructive criticism, i.e., criticism that is not hurtful, hostile, mocking, or cruel (harsh language,

labeling, personalizing, etc.). We can critique ideas we consider distorted or problematic with both passion and compassion, without condemning the people who hold them.

4. Unconditional Acceptance: Regardless of whether we agree or disagree with an expressed view, we can unconditionally accept all contributions to the conversation as efforts on the part of the participants to articulate what they consider to be true at a given moment. Testing our views in the fire of intersubjective scrutiny can be risky and threatening, especially if we are too identified with them. In any event, we may want to keep in mind that, when expressing views, both we and our peers may be taking risks, disclosing openness and honesty, and displaying vulnerability to criticism. With this in mind, all contributions can be valued and respected even if we do not agree with their content.

5. Service: To be at the service of "something" greater than our own personal agendas or acquired viewpoints is another important element of dialogical inquiry. The meaning of this "something" may vary for different people. For some it may be the search for truth; for others the expression of truthfulness with ourselves and others; for others the collective flow of ideas and generation of shared meaning; or for others, the searching for liberation from self-centered ways of being. Whatever is the case, to be at the service of "something" beyond our egocentric agendas is a transpersonal motivation crucial for developing non-attachment to our views.

6. Non-Attachment: The art of dialogical inquiry invites us to practice non-attachment with regard to our own ideas, beliefs, and values. It is fundamental to be aware that we are not our thoughts, beliefs, and values; we must be aware that we have acquired all of them from different sources (parents, teachers, books, situations, experiences, etc.) at some point in our individual biographies. Aware of the fact that all our ideas and opinions are the product of specific contexts and experiences, we do not need to identify ourselves with them; we need not defend them at all costs. As David Bohm puts it: "If the opinion is right, it doesn't need such a reaction. And if it is wrong, why should you defend it?" To practice non-attachment gradually allows us to explore our ideas in more playful and relaxed ways, rather than trying to make them prevail, trying to receive validation for holding them, or feeling defensive when they are critiqued. The practice of non-attachment to our views opens unlimited possibilities for constructive transformations of ourselves and our lives, allowing us, for example, to let go of assumptions that inhibit our growth or have become problematic.

Of course, and this is extremely important, non-attachment to our views does not mean that we cannot take a stance, be passionate about our convictions, or forcefully critique ideas we consider erroneous, distorting, or problematic. It simply means that we do not need to hold our beliefs as the Truth or dogmatically defend them against any critique.

Genuine dialogical inquiry can only occur when our commitment to truth, truthfulness, and liberation is greater

than our attachment to our ideas. And conversely, whenever our attachment to our ideas surpasses our commitment to truth, truthfulness, and liberation, we should realize that, captives of a blind intellectual self-slavery, we have ceased to be free human beings.

7. Humor: Non-attachment allows us to be playful with both our own ideas and the ideas of others. Non-attachment helps us to respond to seemingly erroneous or distorted views with humor, understanding, and compassion, rather than with denial, defensiveness, aggressiveness, or rationalization. Humor is one of the best antidotes for destructive self-criticism and criticism of others. Practicing dialogical inquiry can be fun and liberating!

8. Openness: To engage in a dialogical inquiry is to be open to learn, to be challenged, and to be enriched by the views of others and the new meanings that are collectively created by engaging with others. To observe the evolution of our views through the process may serve as an index of how genuinely we are engaged in the practice of dialogical inquiry. If our views have not changed at all in our dialogue with others, then we may have good reason to be suspicious about our attachments and openness to others. A useful way to respond to this situation is to carefully examine how attached we may be to the ideas we learned in the past.

9. Transformation: When we are open to learn and be enriched by the other, it is very likely—and perhaps inevitable—that we will be transformed during the inquiry process. The transformative element of dialogical inquiry cannot be overemphasized. Dialogical inquiry is a transformative practice that challenges us to expand our consciousness and worldview through the practice of mindful communication, non-attachment, and openness to the other.

10. Liberation: The practice of dialogical inquiry can be emancipatory not only at personal and interpersonal levels,

but also spiritually. As we have seen, the uncovering of assumptions can help us to transform limiting views about ourselves, others, and the world. As for the spiritual level, we have in the West a very restrictive understanding of the conditions for spiritual insight or spiritual liberation, tending to consider, for example, that these events are individual inner experiences that occur only while we are meditating in a retreat or walking by ourselves on the beach. In contrast, the world spiritual literature abounds with stories in which profound spiritual insights and even final liberation occurred in a conversational or interpersonal context. In any event, to open ourselves to the possibility of liberation in an interpersonal context may not only make more room for its occurrence, but also bring mindfulness to our relationships and motivate us to become less self-centered in our everyday life.

Challenges of Dialogical Inquiry

Practitioners of dialogical inquiry will face several challenges. To pursue dialogical inquiry, we must be able to free ourselves from our attachments to particular modes of communication, or even from verbal communication at the expense of non-verbal ways of knowing. Finally, we must be able to free ourselves from the forced expectation of consensus, no matter how desirable such consensus may be.

The first challenge is the importance of refusing to privilege any style of thinking or communication. A genuinely dialogical encounter must be able to house and value the different forms of reflection and communication. It is common in discussion groups, for example, that more “thinking-type” people tend to dismiss more “feeling-type” ones as too personal, touchy-feely, emotional, flaky (such dismissal is even sometimes disparagingly termed “women’s talk”). And conversely, “feeling-type” individuals tend to judge the “thinking-type” style of communication as too



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heady, abstract, disembodied, detached or even oppressive and patriarchal. Too often, this dynamic emerges between genders, usually fostering further polarization between these styles of communication. It is fundamental to realize that both styles of thinking and communication are valid, necessary, and complementary.

Another common clash in conversational style comes from the distinction between theoretical models and frameworks and the personal experiences (emotional, social, spiritual, etc.) from which they emerge. But this clash does not really make sense. On the one hand, this grounding in experience can grant theoretical models validity. On the other hand, such personal accounts may eventually require some form of theoretical articulation to acquire force, clarity, and, most importantly, applicability to other people or situations. Otherwise, they remain personally edifying, but ultimately idiosyncratic and solipsistic stories.

Communication differences may also be grounded in multicultural diversity. Conversationalists from different cultural backgrounds may display different styles of thinking, communication or exposition of ideas of which we must become aware and to which we should become open.

The second major challenge of dialogical inquiry does not revolve around the actual method of communication at all, but is rather the need to make room for the non-linguistic and non-rational dimensions of human nature, like the voice and wisdom of our instincts, our bodies, our hearts, our intuition, and our transconceptual awareness. These dimensions of our being may have information extremely relevant for our inquiry. Therefore, we are challenged to make room not only for verbal exchange, but also for somatic interaction, emotional expression, and even silent communion. Games, ritual, prayer, meditation, storytelling, artwork, or dramatization are among the possible vehicles to convey the messages of these fundamental aspects of ourselves.

Finally, it is important to stress that the goal of dialogical inquiry is not necessarily the attainment of consensus. Defenders of "consensus building" conversations usually fear that disagreement will lead to conflict (and even violence). This belief falsely assumes that shared resolutions and actions must necessarily stem from identical positions or viewpoints. Although there are certainly situations in which a consensus of views can be crucial (e.g., certain political decisions or medical diagnoses), in many cases ideological disagreements in personal and social arenas may have no implications for our practical decisions or actions: Agreement on the course of actions can perfectly follow from diversity of opinion. Furthermore, it is not clear that we must always attain consensus on shared actions before going forward. As the Dalai Lama points out, arguably one of the most pressing challenges of our present world situation is to learn to live in harmony with people holding different views. To be sure, agreement is one of the most desirable outcomes of most human encounters (it naturally

fosters a sense of fellowship, connection, etc.), but to a priori impose it as the goal of our conversations may create unnecessary constraints to the inquiry process itself.

Philosophically, consensus approaches—such as can be found in traditional science or certain forms of critical theory—are rooted in two fundamental beliefs: (1) there is only one world (metaphysical monism); and (2) there can be only one right interpretation or one final Truth that everybody everywhere will accept once we fully free ourselves from ignorance and external and internal coercion (critical monism). Both beliefs are questionable. In my opinion, the discussion about whether there is one world or a multiplicity of different worlds is ultimately a semantic one, and therefore metaphysically a pseudo-problem. Even admitting the existence of an independent, pregiven single world, however, it is quite possible that there can be equally free and rational disagreements about its nature, a plurality of "right" interpretations, and, in addition, that no single model can map reality in all its complexity and be proclaimed as paradigmatic for the rest.

Goals of Dialogical Inquiry

But if we are not necessarily looking for agreement or the Truth, why in the world are we engaged in dialogue in the first place? Among the many possible answers, you may consider the following (and please feel free to add to the list others that may speak to you):

- to learn how to carry out collective inquiry;
- to learn how to give and receive constructive criticism;
- to practice relational mindfulness in communication (generosity, non-attachment, openness, etc.);
- to rethink, articulate, and express our own truths;
- to develop and put to the test our truths in the fire of intersubjective opinion;
- to expand our horizons of understanding;
- to free ourselves from the tyranny and shortcomings of dogmatic, rigid, tacit, coercive, distorting, limiting, partial, biased, or misinformed views;
- to learn and emphatically engage different views and ways of thinking and experiencing the world;
- to be enriched, edified, or transformed by new information or perspectives;
- to genuinely open ourselves to others;
- to raise new and deeper questions that may open us to the Mystery out of which everything arises;
- and, perhaps, to experientially understand the nature of truth and what it means to be human.

Dialogical inquiry is a doorway to spiritual awakening because it invites us to expand our consciousness, making our relationships fertile places for spiritual realization and contributing to the emergence of a human community that truly honors the spirit of the Between. □