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 mediation.

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 empathic 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.

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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