

## DIALOGUES AND DISCUSSIONS



Learning how to listen and value the perspective of others, especially if you are averse to their views and positions and methods, is an important part of healing divisions that can fester and turn toxic, as we see happening so much in the world.

In certain circles within the world of business and the world of dharma, certainly within MBSR, we speak of *dialogue* as the outer counterpart to the inward cultivation of moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness, or mindfulness. Just as in the practice of mindfulness, we attend to whatever “voices” are arising in the mindspace and the nowspace, hearing, feeling, touching, tasting, knowing the full spectrum of each arising, its lingering, its passing away, and whatever imprint or aftermath it leaves in the next moment, without judgment or reaction (or awareness of judging and reacting if they do arise), so we can give ourselves over in the same way to being in conversation with others in dialogue. Just as we need to feel open and safe in our own meditation practice, so we need to create enough openness and safety and spaciousness of heart for people in a meeting to feel safe in speaking their minds and from their hearts without having to worry about being judged by others. No one needs to dominate in a dialogue, and indeed, it would cease being a dialogue at that point if one person or one group attempted to control

it. We watch the arising of and listen to the voicing of ideas, opinions, thoughts, and feelings, and drink them all in in a spirit of deep inquiry and intentionality, much as we do in resting in awareness in formal meditation practice, allowing it all to be treated as equally valid of at least being seen, heard, and known without editing, censoring, vetting, or rejecting. A greater intelligence that seems to reside in the group but is not in any one person often emerges, surprisingly, and with it a deeper collective understanding as a direct consequence of such spaciousness and openheartedness.

This is often sadly not the case when we are in meetings with colleagues at work, or in the domain of politics, or even in our own family, where contending agendas and positions may dominate discourse. The norm is to have discussions rather than dialogues. We discuss things endlessly in meetings. We have agendas, we plan for things to happen, we decide on a path and then execute our strategies and action plans. But often, there are hidden agendas and major power differentials between people in such discussions that remain unspoken, often even unknown by the participants, and which do a certain kind of violence within the process itself when the orthogonal dimension is not present or valued.

So it may be of value to bring mindfulness to the whole dimension of how we conduct ourselves in meetings with others, especially when the stakes are high, things need to get done, and the group needs to function coherently together, even within a diversity of sometimes strongly held views and opinions and positions. Whether it is General Motors developing its strategic plan for the future, or diplomatic deliberations, or peace talks, bringing mindfulness to the table, along with what some people call the elements of non-violent communication, becomes critical if there is a hope that a new level of understanding and accord might be reached that will further learning, growing, healing, mutual understanding, and the transforming of potential and possibility into actuality.

Learning to listen and participate in conversation with others is the heart of such healing, and of true communication and growing. It is an embodiment of relationality and mutual regard. No one's views, opinions, and feelings in a group are invalid, no matter what the power differentials. They only turn toxic or degrade the potential for "progress" coming out of

“process” if they are discounted or not attended to at all. It is healing simply to be heard, to be met, to be seen, to be known. And out of such meetings, true orthogonal possibilities can emerge, just as can happen through openly meeting oneself in silence and stillness.

For these reasons, I find it useful to distinguish between the terms “dialogue” and “discussion” and be mindful about their uses based on my relationship to and intentions for particular gatherings. I am not advocating striking the word “discussion” from our discourse, but to keep in mind what purpose discussions serve and how they often unfold in actuality, especially in the absence of a greater embrace of awareness and intentionality by the entire group. The word is defined as (1) to speak with others about, to talk over; and (2) to examine or consider (a subject) in speech or writing. It comes from Middle English *discussen*, to examine, from Anglo-Norman *discusser*, from Latin *discussus*, past participle of *discutere*—to break up (dis = apart; cussus = to shake, to strike). The deep meaning is to shake apart. The Indo-European root *kwet*, to shake or to strike, is also the root of concussion, percussion, and succussion. You get the drift.

“Dialogue,” on the other hand, stems from the Greek *dialogos*, conversation, from *dialektos*, to speak. *Dia* means “between,” and the Indo-European root *leg*, of *lektos*, means to speak. Thus, dialogue carries the meaning of speaking between or among in conversation, and often, as in the Socratic dialogues, in a spirit of deeply investigating together through open inquiry. The quality of the relational space is the key to emergences and openings.

Not a bad way to walk into a nine o’clock meeting, even if no one else suspects. But with time, groups can intentionally adopt this kind of approach to their common work, and in doing so, the work becomes a much more shared, and often far more creative and productive enterprise, or should I say, adventure?