

DAVID BOHM AND PETER GARRETT ON DIALOGUE: PART 2

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DAVID BOHM: Previously we were talking about the difficulty of communication which has been so general in the human race, and suggesting Dialogue as a way of approaching this problem. It's not the usual meaning of the word 'dialogue' as in exchange or trading or negotiation — it may include that but it goes much further. It's really aimed at going into the whole thought process and changing the way the thought process occurs collectively. It will change our whole relationship. So its scope is very broad.

The question is, how do we set up a Dialogue? Well, one of the first points is that we set it up as far as possible in a circle or, if there are too many people, two concentric circles. We hope that between 20 and 40 people are in there — I'll explain that number presently. The purpose of the circle is to have everybody in a direct relation to each other, nobody favoured, rather as in a hunter— gatherer society, You'll find that in order to get the collective behaviour of thought you have to have a certain number of people. There is a certain weight, a certain power, which comes up when you have about 20 people, which you don't have when you have say ten or five. Also, in smaller numbers of people you tend to go into something more like a family situation which tends to have either people cosily adjusting to each other and not challenging each other, or accepting some kind of authority. But in the larger group, the first important point is that there should be no leader. This is quite unusual in our culture. There has to be a facilitator to help get it going but he should make himself unnecessary as soon as he can.

This may take some time. We picture this Dialogue as a sustained Dialogue, going on week after week, or perhaps every two weeks, for a long time, as much as a year, with more or less the same people coming in, though it could change slowly. This sustained feature is very important because people will find it hard to get going in a real Dialogue when they first meet, because our whole culture is against it.

We meet without a leader, and also without a set purpose or an agenda which is important because if we set a purpose we are going to limit the range of thought to that purpose and there will be some assumptions which cannot be questioned. The point is that Dialogue has to go into all the pressures that are behind our assumptions. It goes into the process of the thought behind our assumptions, not just the assumptions. If there are some assumptions that cannot be questioned, we cannot really get at this process. Therefore, as I said in connection with these North American Indians, the hunter—gatherer groups, we are not trying to solve any particular problems or to make decisions. We are having an empty space where we can explore, and attitudes change and people change in such a way that later, when they have to solve their problems, they'll understand each other and go about it differently.

So much for the way of setting it up. Now, you may recall that there is a lot of difficulty in communication. In the Dialogue we are not trying to just simply get rid of those difficulties, we want them to come out. As I said before with anger in individual thought, we are not trying to get rid of anger when we are exploring anger. We actually want to bring it out, though it may be unpleasant, so we can explore its structure and process and go much deeper.

In a Dialogue we want to explore the process of collective thought. I'm using here some notions which were suggested to me by Dr de Mar, a psychiatrist who works in London. He applied them to therapeutic groups, and to other kinds of groups, but he emphasised that its main purpose was not psychotherapy — it was really more like what I have just described. He actually called it socio—therapy because he felt the main illness is in society. Or you could call it cultural therapy — our culture is unwell. It may be that a kind of therapeutic affect might happen to people, but we're not aiming for that.

First of all, when you try to have such a Dialogue you'll find, as I said, that it's hard. People want a leader, they don't know what to say, they flounder around, they don't have a topic, they may think they're wasting their time. They say there are really two reasons why people get together: one is to have fun (and they're not having any fun), and the other is to accomplish a useful purpose (but they're not doing that either). So they say "why bother?". It's neither of those that we're after — we're trying to go deeper. There's a deep malaise in the whole human situation which we're trying to address.

The first difficulties which arise are rather elementary in nature — many groups have found this. You find people are playing various roles. Some people find it very easy to talk and dominate the conversation. Other people find it very hard to talk — they're shy or whatever reason. They have different roles. Some people take the dominant role. Some people are afraid of that and afraid of what fools they'll make of themselves and they take the role of keeping quiet. As it goes along, people have to be aware that they are in roles and possibly a facilitator can point this out as they get to know each other better — so you begin to get free of these roles.

The second point is you find that very often there is an impulse pressure, a compulsion almost, to get in there quickly and get your point of view across, if you are one of the talkers. Even if you're not, you have that pressure but you're holding back because you're frightened. Therefore, there is no time for people to absorb what has been said, or to let it ponder. People feel under pressure to get in, and people feel left out. The whole communication breaks down for this very elementary reason. This is nothing deep at all, but still we have got to address it.

Gradually, as the group works together, they'll get more sensitive. They will give each other space. This is not something that satisfies any formula. People just learn to be sensitive in this way. They give space so that people are not rushed. They also have to learn that they cannot engage in long trains of thought in a Dialogue, because meanwhile the whole conversation moves on and your thought is irrelevant. All sorts of little skills are learned like that. That is not the main point, but still it is an important point. We can't turn it into a technique — we learn it by doing it. The facilitator could help by pointing out what's going on occasionally.

Then we come to the crucial field of Dialogue, which is when we get to fundamental assumptions. People may very often avoid fundamental assumptions, remaining very polite with each other and avoiding difficult issues. That's normal and to be expected. All sorts of frustrations arise and we may feel that we're not getting anywhere. And we feel frustrated by the way people are talking or not talking, and jumping in or not jumping in. People will feel frustrated for hundreds of reasons. But the idea is that we stick with it because we know it's important, as we do in any job that may often be frustrating and unpleasant, and we're not getting anywhere for a long time and we're not enjoying it. This may happen from time to time.

So, we find that if we sustain the Dialogue we'll approach more fundamental issues, and assumptions come out which we didn't really know too much that we had. These assumptions have an emotional charge. They come out and may often be shocking because there may often be an assumption which to you seems natural, but to somebody else is outrageous. He'll ask "how could you have such an idea?".

Suppose, for example, that you have conservatives and left—wingers. They might talk politely with each other for a while, and then suddenly a political assumption comes out. Then there's trouble. We don't want to avoid this trouble, but we also don't want to have it run away with us so that it just degenerates into a fight. Here, not only the facilitator, but also other people can come in. Those who are not quite so attached to the assumptions can come in tangentially and moderate the issue, deflect it a bit, so it doesn't run away. Then we can become aware of these assumptions and look at them. We are now looking at them in a suspended form, as I say. The meaning of the word suspension, as I discussed previously, is not only holding back and reflecting back the impulse. When one of your basic assumptions comes up, you'll have an impulse to defend it, to fight, to get in there quickly. You're not letting it run away, but also you're not suppressing it, saying we should keep away from that topic. It's there sort of in front of you, reflecting.

So, the whole group now becomes a mirror for each person. The effect you have on the other person is a mirror, and also the effect the other person has on you. Seeing this whole process is very helpful in bringing out what's going on, because you can see that everybody's in the same boat. If you watch you'll see from the body language as well as from the verbal language that everybody's in much the same boat — they're just on opposite sides. The group may even polarize so that two very powerful groups are against each other. Then the moderator, or whoever is not in that polarisation has got to contribute to prevent it from running away. All the typical group phenomena will come out. This of course is well—known. We are not saying that these particular things have not probably arisen in many kinds of groups. But one of the new things we're aiming for is that this should come out. We're not trying to suppress it. We're looking at the process and we're not primarily trying to make a group of people who agree with each other, but really for us to get insight into this process and to learn its principles, so that not only can we make this group work, but we can make other groups work, and we can spread the whole notion to other people, either in practice or by theory.

It's important that a group should begin to develop some theoretical knowledge as it goes along, by making conclusions from observations, and the facilitator can help in that way, so that we keep on learning as we go along. For example, the sort of thing that comes up was that we had a group in Israel, and somebody innocently said "You know, the difficulty with the relationship between Jews and Arabs is that Zionism is getting in the way". He felt it was a very innocent statement, but somebody got up with his eyes popping out with a very big emotional charge and said: "Without Zionism the country would go to pieces". So they built up a big charge because here were two powerful emotions. It was typical of what I was saying before in the previous video, that you begin to defend your thought because the other person's assumptions threaten not only your thought, but the whole structure that has been built up from that kind of thought. The thought of Zionism has built up the structure of Israel, without it where would it be? On the other hand, that is clearly making trouble with whoever wants to make peace which is necessary too.

We're not trying to solve that problem in this Dialogue. But we're saying that if these people can stay with it together and work through it — it could easily break out into hatred in that question — but if they stay with that intense feeling of hatred and see the connection to the thought behind it, then a certain change takes place in the whole structure. There is a change. I can't discuss it now without going more into the nature of thought. But what happens, briefly, is that hatred sort of changes, and that energy changes into an energy which is no longer hatred, but into what we could call impersonal fellowship — that is participating together. It becomes an energy which is intelligent, whereas the previous state was unintelligent. These two people were just confronting each other practically in a state of hating each other, not able to listen to each other, not able to think clearly. The mind was rigid and unintelligent on both sides They were locking each other in that unintelligent situation. When intelligence comes in, there is a change because new assumptions can be explored, new ways. We're not stuck to the old assumptions.

You might come to a solution there, but the main point would not be that. Even if they never come to agree, the fact that they have been able to listen to each other is already a change of consciousness. The thing to notice is that this Dialogue is producing a change of consciousness. We come together with a lot of different assumptions from different subcultures. As they come out, if we can all listen to all the assumptions suspending them, and get through all these difficulties which our culture has instilled in us, then we will all have the same content of consciousness — even if we don't agree on it! — and therefore we have a new kind of consciousness where everybody has the same content, whereas previously people thought they had the same content, but didn't. The person who found Zionism a barrier did not have the same content. Everything had a different meaning to him than to the person who said that Zionism was absolutely necessary.

PETER GARRETT: How do you listen to allow our contents of consciousness to become the same?

DAVID BOHM: You have to listen to all the points of view, suspending them all. You have an impulse to defend your point of view and attack the other. Listening to the other you have an impulse to say what nonsense that is, how dangerous, how outrageous. You can't stop that, you just notice it. Listen not only to all the content, but listen to your reactions to all the content, and listen to the other person's reactions, which are also now publicly accessible. Watch it all. In the ideal situation everybody is doing the same. So the bond between them is ultimately much more fundamental than what separates them. The fact that they can do that is a much greater bond than the content that separates. That may not look obvious at first, but when you get into it, you'll see it. You'll find a bond of friendship begins to develop. Your differences even give intensity to it, because realising that there is something beyond those differences creates the kind of friendship which goes deeper than mere agreement on assumptions.

PETER GARRETT: The Greek term 'koinonia'...

DAVID BOHM: Yes, de Mar used that name. Koinonia means basically fellowship or mutual participation. It also meant to the early Christians a certain kind of love, an impersonal fellowship which they had when they got together. Emotionally and in feeling you have that, being together, and intellectually you have the same content. Therefore you are thinking together. When you have the same content and have the common feeling, then you can think together. Ordinarily a group of people don't think together because each one is trying to win, persuade or convince the other, therefore he doesn't really take up the other person's idea. When you're thinking by yourself,

properly, you might have one idea and it goes to another and another and so on. Now suppose you have an idea...

(There was the noise of a heavy downpour of rain on the roof) PETER GARRETT: The rain is coming down! Do carry on anyway.

DAVID BOHM: So in the Dialogue you have an idea and somebody hears it and he takes it up almost as if it was his own, and then somebody else takes it up, and the whole group is thinking together. It also means that they have common feeling, just as you would have while you're thinking by yourself. So that's getting more of a notion of the common consciousness, which does not, however, overwhelm the individual consciousness. It's not a mob, you see. It's not like the Neuremberg rallies where you had a common consciousness that was imposed, that overwhelmed the individual. The individual is still free to have another opinion, but then that is taken up by the group and it becomes part of the common consciousness. So there is no conflict there between the individual and the collective.

I think that kind of consciousness is different from the kind which we have developed in civilisation over the last 5,000 years or so. It may have been something like that over most of our history before then — well we didn't have a history, but our earlier development, our evolution. I'm suggesting that this sort of common consciousness is necessary to bring order to our social life, and also to create a new kind of culture.

The word culture, to me at least, means a shared meaning. We are able to share a common meaning. In each culture certain meanings are shared, and in subcultures there are smaller meanings. Where people don't share meanings, they find it very hard to communicate. There are fundamental meanings. Our present culture is highly incoherent: it has a vast range of subcultures and each one is full of meanings that don't cohere and people can't really talk about them. They argue about it and try to convince and persuade, and win. But that will never bring about this new shared meaning.

So the basic point is that in the group, if we persist and sustain the activity, we will develop what de Mare likes to call a micro—culture, which we could say is a microcosm of a potential culture for the whole of society. We could say that any group of 20 to 40 people is already a microcosm of the present society. It has all sorts of incoherent subcultures and meanings in it. In facing the problems of that, the difficulties, and bringing them to an end, we create a micro—culture which now becomes the microcosm of a new society, or at least it could be. So the meaning of this group is much more than to just solve problems, whatever they may be.

The point then is that this group needn't be a permanent group. It could hold together for a few years and people could go out and start new groups. The thing should spread. It has to start at the grassroots. It's most unlikely for groups like this to start in the highest government circles or in the UN! It's got to start with ordinary people or with people who are not caught up in all that stuff, and spread. It could start anywhere in any kind of a group, but I think that it is essential for people to see the importance, the necessity of this thing when they start, otherwise they'll never do it. There are going to be obstacles and difficulties which they'll have to go through and stay with.

PETER GARRETT: Would you say something about the relationship between thoughts and thinking, and feelings, and the physical experience of what's happening in the body while you're talking in a Dialogue?

DAVID BOHM: While we're talking in a Dialogue we have thoughts and feelings going on very much as with individuals, but in some ways they may get stronger, and the tie—up between our thoughts and the feelings in other people gets much greater. In general, let me say something about the tie—up between thoughts and feelings, and what the nature of thought is.

We begin with two words: thinking and thought. The word 'thinking' suggests an active process which you could be looking at and criticising and exchanging. The word 'thought' is the past participle of that — it's something which you have been thinking. Our culture ordinarily makes us say that after we've been thinking something, it just vanishes. But it doesn't: it becomes thought. It's something like a program, not really a memory of what you've said but the conclusions of what you've said, which may be what sort of person you should be, what your social obligations are, who you should be friends with, who you should be enemies with, who you've got to kill (in war), who's responsible for what, thousands of things which are very fundamental, how people are related, and so on.

That thought works automatically. It is not necessary to think it again. It affects the way you look at things and act. You can see that in driving a car. You have to be told a lot of things about driving, which are thought, and then it comes up in your action immediately, in the way you see things. A red light means stop. You don't stop to think, you just stop, and so on.

That works also in human relationships, and when people are talking in Dialogue, or in any other situation. The point is then that in this way you can see that thought is very much more important than people generally think. It's not merely intellectual. It also affects the way you move physically, and the way you respond emotionally because thought may give rise to feelings. We discussed that in connection with anger, saying that the thought that I have been mistreated will produce a feeling of anger. The thought that there's something dangerous will produce a feeling of fear.

Now we come to feelings. We don't in English have a corresponding distinction in feeling. The word feeling would suggest every one of these is active at present, now. But we could introduce a distinction between feelings and felts, saying that there are feelings which come up from the past. We know we've got them — they're memories of past feelings. Memories of past fears will produce fear. Memories of past pleasures will produce pleasure. Memories of past pains will produce pain. We can give them a name, and so on.

If you've gone through a traumatic experience and thought about it quite often, it can affect you for the rest of your life. In fact then it can be repressed and you get the feeling of not knowing the thought. So you then say "I've got a feeling", but you're treating it wrongly. It's a typical thing that thought does something and says it didn't do it. It produces a feeling and says that the feeling is there by itself. There are feelings which come by themselves, but in civilised life they are not as frequent as one would think. A large fraction of our feelings come from thought. In fact a great deal of our training and education consists of instilling feelings that people ought to have, such as fear of authority and all sorts of feelings of that kind, to get them to behave in the way they are supposed to behave.

This is general, it holds individually and collectively, that thoughts, feelings and the state of the body go together. They're really all part of one field which we could call the response of memory. There is one hopper (memory) into which the memory of thinking, the memory of feeling and the memory of action is all mixed up.

PETER GARRETT: Could you say something about the state of the body?

DAVID 801114: Yes, well, for example, the feeling of fear will induce adrenalin, tension in the body, increased heartbeat and so on. Remembering a state of fear will do the same thing. Remembering a situation which made fear can stir up your body in the same way. The same with pleasure, pain, and so on. All of these are happening in the Dialogue as well. What's required is that we notice the connection between the thoughts going on in the Dialogue, the feelings in the body and the emotions. You can also tell that other people are having the same reaction as you because it shows in the body language, and in the tone of voice and so on.

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Transcribed by Peter Garrett