

DAVID BOHM AND PETER GARRETT ON DIALOGUE: PART 1

(Video transcript: 30th June 1990, Mickleton, Glos)

DAVID BOHM: I am going to talk about Dialogue giving a different meaning to the word than is usual. The word derives from the Greek 'dia logos', where 'logos' is 'the word' or 'the meaning', and 'dia' means 'through' not 'two'. So it gets across the notion of a communication or energy flowing among people, through the space between them, rather than a discussion in which people go back and forth arguing, trying to make their points.

I want to ask why one should pay so much attention to Dialogue at this point. I think the reason is that, not only now but perhaps for thousands of years, human society has not been communicating very well. There has been a great deal of trouble due to failure of communication. At present, for example, we have so many nations, and so many religions and legislatures and other groups within society, and they don't really meet. They can't really agree on what should be done because each one has a different opinion, a different idea, and each one is trying to convince the other. Perhaps they occasionally convince each other, but in general there is a great deal of confusion and incoherence, and an inability to really deal with the problems that come up. The results are counter-productive.

As an example we could take the ecological crisis, which is the latest one. Without knowing it we have got ourselves into a situation where we may destroy our planet. Not only was it wrong for us to have got into this situation since there have been people warning us about it for a long time, but now that we are in it we can't seem to get people to agree on what to do about it. There are so many nations and such a vast change of the way we do things is needed in order to co-operate together. We are finding it very hard to get going.

There's a failure. We have a fragmentation. Each nation is broken off from the whole world although they are all interdependent. Within each nation there are so many groups, with disagreement between religions, within families, between one corporation and another and so on. Within corporations, the board, the management and labour force can't agree, but even the boards of directors cannot agree amongst themselves, just as labour unions within themselves can't agree. Families are breaking up. These are only a few examples of the general fragmentation that's going on.

'To fragment' means literally 'to smash or 'to break up'. It does not mean 'to divide'. We may divide things conveniently - like the sheep and the goats, or one thing and another - but to fragment means to break up things which are really one. The world is one but we are fragmented into many nations, and other divisions and distinctions, and we have a sort of fictional way of thinking. If we follow a fictional way of thinking we are going to be counter-productive.

The usual way of people trying to meet I would call a discussion. The word 'discussion' has the same root as 'percussion' and 'concussion'. It means literally 'to break up', it's a kind of analysis, but in addition it suggests a game where people try to pass the ball back and forth, each one trying to win. Now, in a Dialogue we want to have quite a different situation, as I suggested, where nobody in particular wins, but where we're all going to win together.

One of the first notions I ever had of Dialogue was many years ago when I read of about an anthropologist who visited a North American Indian tribe, probably hunter-gatherers, of about 20 to 40 people. He saw that they frequently gathered together in a circle, and they talked and talked. Nobody seemed to be in authority, and they didn't have any particular agenda or any particular purpose. They made no decisions - they just talked. But at the end they separated and seemed to know what to do. They had established a relationship with each other so that they could then deal with their practical problems and really communicate, and not get into the state we are often in where we are fighting over the problems and not communicating.

So, that is really the sort of thing I have in mind for Dialogue. It may prove very hard for us to do this, because for thousands of years our tradition has been otherwise. So when we get together we have a purpose; we have authority and hierarchy with some people having more value than others and their word counting more; and also we want to achieve something and we don't want to waste our time. So I am suggesting something that seems quite different. You may ask, if we have such pressing problems, why should we waste our time just talking. But I say that our problems originate because we can't engage in this activity of just talking, and therefore when we try to deal with our serious problems we find that we are not meeting.

In fact just this issue comes up in business. Within company boards directors find they're not really able to communicate. Each person is doing something which he doesn't realise is counter-productive. He is having an effect on the others, and then after he has had that effect he says that's a problem, and he tries to correct it while he keeps on producing the problem. He's behaving in a certain way, and of course everybody's doing it. Communication begins to break up over all sorts of issues which are not really relevant. I don't think I need explain this any further - it must be well known.

PETER GARRETT: One question I have is about the Green movement and the Ecology movement. Here people have a common interest and like and support each other, yet one has the sense that as it becomes larger it is likely to fragment.

DAVID BOHM: In America there's a group called Earth First, which believes that the whole human race is a bad job anyway and it wants to forget about everybody and try to preserve nature somehow. There are other groups among the Ecologists, among the Green movement, who have a more conservative approach, and they are already not getting on very well. There is probably even more fragmentation than that. Therefore they are going to become ineffective at the very least, and probably counter-productive. But that's only an example of the general counter-productivity all through our society: in congress, in business groups or in religious groups, or wherever you care to mention.

It's been taken for granted that that's the way we're going to go about it, but I am suggesting that it won't work that way. It's a very deep-rooted difficulty which goes back thousands of years. The suggestion is that we all originally came from hunter-gatherer groups, like the North American Indians, of 20 to 40 people I described, who could very readily get together and just talk, and understood each other. Later when we formed larger societies we couldn't do it anymore, and that's why we're in trouble.

Before we get further into this question of Dialogue, there's another matter to address, which is that communication always involves thought. We have got to communicate our thoughts, and also our feelings which are closely tied together with our thoughts. Take, for example, that if I think somebody is an enemy, if I have a good or valid reason to think that way, then I feel rather hostile towards him. I can't separate thoughts and feelings. If I have a feeling of fear or anger, then it's going to affect my thoughts, maybe distort them. So they are really only one process. We haven't really paid much attention to thought as a process. We have engaged in thoughts, but we hadn't paid any attention to it. We have only paid attention to the content and not the process.

Let's consider giving attention to thought. Why does thought require attention? Well, everything requires attention really. If we ran machines without paying attention to them, they would break down. Our thought, too, is a process and it requires attention otherwise it's going to go wrong.

I'll try to give some examples of the difficulty in thinking, in thought. One of these difficulties is just what I mentioned before - fragmentation, which originates in thought. It is thought that divides everything up. Every division we make is a result of how we think. The whole world is shades merging into one. We select certain things and separate them from others for convenience, at first. Later we give this separation great importance. We set up separate nations, which is entirely the result of our thinking, and then we begin to give them supreme importance. And then we begin to realize we can't settle issues between nations. Because each nation is sovereign and can do what it likes, and the other nation is the same, they have no way to settle issues, really.

Also, we divide between religions by thought, because separate religions are entirely the result of how we think. There are countless ways this happens. In the family the divisions are in thought. The whole way the family is set up is due to the way we think about it. In earlier societies they had a very different arrangement, and some of them thought quite differently.

Fragmentation is one of the difficulties of thought, but it has a deeper root, which is that thought is very active but the process of thought thinks that it is doing nothing - that it is just telling you the way things are. Almost everything around us has been determined by thought: all the buildings, factories, farms, aeroplanes, science, technology, religion, schools, nations, roads - whatever you care to mention. It is almost impossible in this world to find something which has not been affected by thought. Even at the South Pole we have pollution which is a result of how we have been thinking about how we want to do things. In fact this whole ecological problem is due to thought, because we have thought that the world is there for us to exploit, that it is infinite and so no matter what we did, it would all get dissolved away. But that thought was just simply not right.

One of the points is that when we see a problem, call it pollution or carbon dioxide or whatever, we say "we have got to solve that problem". But we are constantly producing that sort of problem, not only that problem but that sort of problem, by the way we go on with our thought. If we keep on thinking that the world is there solely for our convenience, then we are going to exploit it in some other way and we are going to make another problem somewhere. For example, we may clear up the pollution, but we may create some other difficulty such as economic chaos if we don't do it right. We might set up genetic engineering, but heaven knows, if just simple ordinary technology could produce such vast difficulties, imagine the kind of thing genetic engineering could get us into if we go on with the same way of thinking - everybody doing his genetic engineering, for whatever suits his fancy and the way he thinks.

The point is that thought produces results, but thought says it didn't do it. And that is a problem. The trouble is that some of those results that thought produces are considered to be very important and valuable. For example, thought produced the nation, and it says that the nation has an extremely high value, a supreme value, which overrides almost everything else. Therefore, the freedom of thought is interfered with. The same may be said about religion. Freedom of thought is interfered with, because if the nation has high value it is necessary to continue to think that the nation has high value. It is not enough only to say that it has high value, you've got to go on thinking it, otherwise you won't protect it. Therefore you've got to create a pressure to think that way. You've got to have an impulse, and make sure everybody has got the impulse to go on thinking that way about his religion, his nation, or his family or whatever it is that he gives high value. He's got to defend it.

You cannot defend something without first thinking the defence. There are those thoughts which might question the thing you want to defend, and you've got to push them aside. That may readily involve self-deception because you will simply push aside a lot of things you would rather not accept by saying they are wrong, by distorting the issue and so on. So you've got this danger of self-deception, which is a very counter-productive type of thought. Thought defends its basic assumptions, against evidence that they may be wrong. I don't know that I need any more examples because people must see it in every sphere.

In the family, whenever there's an argument, each person has some basic assumptions as to what's necessary, and they find themselves defending that against the other person's assumptions that are often quite different. These defences are not such that the person is paying attention and really wants to listen to what the other person has to say. He doesn't say to the other person, "I have this view, and you have that view, so I must listen to you because maybe you're partly right and maybe I'm partly right". That's not the way it goes! Rather, one person says "I'm right and you're wrong", and the other person says exactly the same thing, but they've just turned it around. That defence will generally involve defending thought against evidence that it's wrong, which is a form of self-deception. Now, if thought is self-deceptive in that way it is going to be counter-productive.

PETER GARRETT: Why do people defend their view and their opinions when there is evidence available that shows them to be invalid?

DAVID BOHM: Why do they defend it? Because they feel that there is something precious which that thought has created. Suppose you are involved in an industry which is producing something valuable - let's say the coal industry. Coal is very valuable and you want to keep the industry going, naturally. Along come some ecologists who say "well, this is producing carbon dioxide that may destroy the planet". They tend to say, as I've seen them say on television, "there is nothing in that at all." They don't really know what it's about. I saw a television programme where both the coal miners and owners agreed very nicely on that point, even though they disagreed on everything else.

The point is that by means of thought you create something, and in order to keep that thing going you've got to keep on thinking that that thought is right. If you have an organisation which has a certain structure of thought assumptions behind it, you can't keep that organisation going unless you keep on accepting the assumptions behind it.

You had between capitalism and communism exactly that problem - that there were two sets of assumptions about how society ought to run. If those assumptions were questioned, each one was

afraid that it would disintegrate that society. So therefore each one was saying “I’m right, you’re wrong” and kept on saying “you’re obviously deceiving yourself, you’re dishonest, hypocritical or whatever”. For the moment the conflict has been resolved because the communists have sort of caved in, but similar conflicts are arising all around. If one of them has been resolved, it has not solved the issue because that’s so pervasive.

PETER GARRETT: You’re suggesting that if, say, the members of the board of a corporation were sitting together, each of them might be defending certain positions and ideas without necessarily being aware they were doing it.

DAVID BOHM: Yes. Each one of them would have a different assumption of what the company is really about. I remember reading something sent to me by Bill Isaacs where that was the case. One group said the purpose of the company was one thing, and another group had a very different view. They seldom ever talked about it, and when they did they didn’t meet and couldn’t communicate. So they really were at cross purposes, and therefore communication was breaking down and was counter-productive because their measures didn’t really work.

PETER GARRETT: One way of dealing with that, presumably, is to have a strong hierarchy with a chairman or whatever who has overall authority

DAVID BOHM: Yes, that is the view the human race has taken for the past 5,000 or 10,000 years at least, that the only way to have large societies operating is through a powerful hierarchy which can impose its view as to what’s right. I think we’ve seen that in the long run it doesn’t work. Every society that has ever been set up until the present has actually degenerated and every civilisation has collapsed. People are now predicting the collapse of ours too. But even if you don’t wait for the collapse of the whole thing, there have been endless wars and fights and friction and chaos, and people are not satisfied. It’s not really working all that well.

PETER GARRETT: We are proposing a different way of dealing with it.

DAVID BOHM: In order to deal with this, we have got to look at thought, because the problem is originating in thought. Usually when you have a problem, you say I must think about it to solve it. What I’m trying to say is that thought is the problem. What, therefore, are we going to do? We could consider two kinds of thought - individual and collective. Individually I can think of various things, but a great deal of thought is what we do together. In fact most of it comes from the collective background. Language is collective. Most of our basic assumptions come from our society, including our whole assumptions about how society works, about what sort of person we are to be and about relationships, institutions and so on. Therefore we need to pay attention to thought both individually and collectively.

Perhaps I should say something about individual thought first. A typical way in which individual thought goes wrong is when a great deal of emotion comes up in connection with a certain issue which is important to you. The thought gets distorted. Let’s take a case where you get angry. Sustained anger will generally interfere with clear thought. For a moment you may have a flash of anger and it may be alright, but if you keep it going it is not going to be clear. The point is that you will find that anger is sustained by thought.

A typical case is this: Somebody keeps you waiting for several hours. You're getting more and more disturbed. You're saying "How can he treat me like this? He pays me no attention. He ignores me. He has something better to do and he did it." Then suddenly he appears two hours later and you ask him why he's late. He says "Oh, the train broke down." Well, if you believe him the anger goes; if you don't believe him it gets worse. It's clear that there was thought involved in sustaining anger, which was "I have a valid reason to be angry because he has been doing this and this to me". There is an assumption behind it, which is "I'm the sort of person to whom this and this should never happen, and it'll be terrible if it does". My self-esteem is affected. I'm frustrated. There are all sorts of things that happen because of that assumption. The assumption is not that "nobody should ever be late", but rather that "nobody should ever be late because he's ignoring me".

PETER GARRETT: Some of this seems to be born out of anger in relation to particular people, but the frustration seems to be born out of what is happening everywhere.

DAVID BOBM: This sort of situation is constantly producing frustration - this counter-productive type of thought with everybody having a different assumption and people blocking each other. You get frustrated, you have a sense of wanting to do something and being blocked. This frustration may give rise to anger, even to rage or hatred. They're very powerful emotions, and they're very destructive. You can see that going on all over the world where there's really a great deal of hatred between different groups. I don't even need to go into all that. It stores up and it's just looking for a discharge... If somebody is frustrating you who is more powerful than you are, you can't attack him, you can't do anything, so you keep it boiling in yourself. You find someone who's weaker and you let it out on him. You can pick a minority group and hate them. That's much safer and more satisfying.

A lot of the social troubles we have are due to this hatred which is stored up and which people can't express. The thing they hate is really too powerful for them to do anything about. The question is, what can we do about such thought? You can see that basically it's counter-productive. You may make the assumption that whatever your emotions are you can do nothing about them. But I've just demonstrated that you cannot maintain sustained anger without a valid reason to be angry. Now you can question that reason. Is this a valid reason to be angry? It's not only making me do things wrong, but it's probably affecting my heart and it might produce ulcers and bad health. So I've got a good reason now to question that, and I can begin to question it.

We need to do something which I call 'suspending' the reaction. When you are angry you start to react outwardly and you may just say something nasty. In primitive societies you would actually punch somebody in the nose, but we're stopped from doing that mostly now. Not always - sometimes there is violence. Suppose I try to suspend that reaction. Not only will I now not insult that person, but I will suspend the insult that I make inside of me. Even if I don't insult somebody outwardly, I am insulting him inside. So I will suspend that too. I hold it back. I reflect it back. I also think of it as suspended in front of me so that I can look at it sort of reflected back as if I were in front of a mirror. I'm looking at myself as if in a kind of mirror, and I can see things that I wouldn't have seen if I had simply carried out that anger, or if I had simply suppressed it and said "I'm not angry", which wouldn't have done much good either.

PETER GARRETT: In this way I might become aware of how I'm thinking.

DAVID BOHM: Yes, and of the connection of thinking and emotion. One thing I can do, for example, is to purposefully find the words that have made me angry. Suppose this fellow kept me waiting, and he didn't give a good excuse. It's simmered down, but then I can stir it up again by repeating the words "He kept me waiting for two hours, selfishly, not considering me at all", and so on. "That's typical of him - he's always doing that". If you say that seriously, you will find the anger coming up.

PETER GARRETT: Perhaps when we carry on talking we can go into how that might work collectively as well as individually.

DAVID BOHM: I think that this suspension is easier to see individually, but I brought it in with regard to the individual primarily to provide a background for the discussion of the collective behaviour.

Transcribed by Peter Garrett, 1990