

Insight Dialogue: a relational Insight Meditation practice.

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Insight Dialogue (ID) is a form of Insight Meditation (*Vipassana*) developed over the past 30 years by Gregory Kramer (Kramer, 2017) to intentionally and explicitly explore and to express the full potential of the relational dimension of the meditative path and of the teachings (*Dhamma*). That is, a realization of the power of spiritual friendship (*kalyanamitta*) as a foundational factor in the path (Surrey & Hallisay, 2021), when penetrated in its fullness and comprehended in its radiating ubiquity. Or, one could also describe it as a form of Vipassana with a special focus on the potential of meditating together. ID is meant as a contemplative practice, it is aimed at liberation/freedom, which means that its first and final intention is soteriological. It is not meant as a kind of "mindfulness training" ultimately aimed at improving relational skills, or communication, or empathy or to ease interpersonal conflicts, though these can be welcomed side effects (like relaxation is a byproduct of individual mindfulness practice, not its fundamental aim).

Looking from the practical perspective of the meditative practice then, the questions are: is there a viable way to bring *sati*, as well as the other meditative qualities of the mind and heart, right in the midst of an actually occurring intersubjective process? Even while experiencing the use of language? Is it possible to cultivate the "factors of awakening" while in relation? Or even to amplify their intensity and power through meditating together?

The ID meditative instructions (also named "guidelines") are one possible answer to these questions. They are based and firmly established in the Insight Meditation tradition, yet at the same time they are meant and crafted to focus and support the practice in the domains of our relational experience.

ID, however, is not only based on these meditative guidelines. There are two other foundational dimensions that are essential and always present. The practice of Insight Dialogue arises from the interaction of these three dimensions (or bases): 1) cultivation of meditative qualities of the heartmind, 2) the wisdom teachings of the Buddhadhamma and 3) the power of our human relatedness.

a) Meditation: a sequence of meditative instructions that are derived from the Insight Meditation traditions but specifically aimed at supporting practicing together in relation.

The aim of ID is to cultivate liberative insight (*vipassana*) and awareness/release. In this, ID is a contemporary manifestation of the originary tenet of insight as the key factor for liberation: "Progress towards liberation sets in fact the context for the early Buddhist conception of vipassana, which stands for "liberating insight", that is, for the type of insight whose growth culminates in the total release of the mind from the grip of defilements and delusion. That is, "insight is not knowledge in the general sense, but penetrative knowledge acquired as a result of not looking *at* but looking *through* things" (Analayo, 2012, page 83).

b) BuddhaDhamma: the direct root of ID as a meditative and contemplative practice are the teachings of the Buddha. While in meditation participants are asked to investigate, using language in dialogue a "theme"- named "*contemplation*" in ID - proposed and introduced by the teacher. This theme is jointly contemplated while in practice by meditators, supported by the ID instructions. Often, not always, passages from the sutta are quoted literally during the presentation of the theme for contemplation. Sometimes the theme is an elaboration derived from the teachings. Importantly, in ID contemplations are offered by the teacher in a way that makes it possible to inquire and contemplate their reality in our direct experience, in our own lives. While each person speaks the truth of their experience, the shared exploration and investigation incline the heart-mind toward a truth encompassing

and yet beyond individual subjective experience. This “seeing” together in the present moment allows meditators to begin to realize the truth of the contemplated teaching as “intersubjective” truth. And, as this reality is apprehended in the co-arising evidence of shared or relational insight, we might say there is a manifestation of the dhamma as an “objective truth”, an expression of the natural lawfulness of our common human experience, of the “suchness” of “things as they are.” Notably, the *suttas* which ID mostly refers to are the “early Buddhist teachings”¹ as preserved in the Pali Canon.

c) Relationality: the dimension of relationality as such. That is, the experience of meditating with another – in dyads or small groups – the actual being in face- to- face relation with other meditators, the presence of another embodied human awareness facing and enlarging ours while in meditation. There is spiritual or meditative power in the reverberation and resonance experienced by the merging and unification of two or more “fields of awareness” and the energy made available for the practice by this condition. And, but not necessarily always, there can be the power of language -not taking us away from silence- but language arising out of silence and leading back to the shared silence- to express, offer, and concentrate what is known with mindfulness.

It is useful to visualize these three essential dimensions or “bases” as three intersecting circles. *Only if and when all* the three dimensions have been established, then - at the overlapping integration of the three circles - is the practice of ID actually realized. Each dimension alone does not suffice to generate the experience of relational meditation, yet each can be a doorway.

It is also important to emphasize that individual practice is an essential dimension of ID. Relational practice can deepen only when individual practice deepens, they co-arise.

It can be noted that this perspective on the “three bases” is deeply consonant with the original sense of *vipassana* in the early time of Buddhist tradition. As B. Analayo has underlined, “In fact, in the thought-world of the early discourses the term *vipassana* stands predominantly for insight as a *quality* to be developed. This thus differs from the modern day usage, where *vipassana* often stands representative for a particular form of meditation, usually a specific technique whose practice marks off one insight meditation tradition from another. The somewhat non-technical approach for the development of the quality of insight depicted in the discourses often involves the use of maxims, sayings or brief instructions. This does show that the teachings of the Buddhaddhamma play a crucial role in the development of insight. Yet, this certainly does not mean that insight is a matter of intellectual reflection. Quite to the contrary, in fact, *<there is no wisdom without meditating>* (Dhammapada, 372). But the teachings play an all-important role as a catalyst for the development of insight through meditation. Awareness of this catalyst function makes it clear why the practice of any modern day ‘vipassana’ technique is best paired with knowledge of and timely reflection on the Dhamma, in order for its awakening potential to be able to unfold” (Analayo, 2012, page 92, 93).

These three dimensions can also be seen as an expression of the “three refuges” of the buddhist tradition: Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. The relational dimension of sangha is illuminated in relational practice as a doorway to the three co-arising and interacting refuges/jewels. Sangha is understood in ID as more than just a group of individuals supporting each other practically, emotionally, motivationally. The power inherent in human relationality has the potential to incline the mind (s) toward the realization of *anatta*, and toward awakening together. From this perspective Sangha, as a jewel nested with the other jewels, may be understood as an enlarged

¹ The expression “early Buddhist discourses (or teachings)” refers to the discourses found in the Pali Canon and their parallels. Comparative study of these discourses allow us access to the earliest strata of Buddhist thought, inasmuch this has been preserved in textual records, and thereby enables us to reconstruct the thought of early Buddhism. Parallels to Pali discourses are often found in collections called *Āgamas*, which for the most part have been preserved in Chinese translation. At times parallels are also extant in Sanskrit fragments, or in Tibetan translation, or on rare occasions in other Asian languages (Analayo, 2017).

and shared meditative field, an enlarged, enhanced expression of heartmind. A fabric woven through spiritual friendships.

This application unlocks to mindfulness a vast area of experience which is so important in our lives and so crucial in producing conditioning and suffering, and that would be otherwise accessible only indirectly and retrospectively. It fosters deep insight into the constructed nature of “selfing”. Moreover, contemplating together the teachings while in meditation, can bring the liberating power of the teachings directly into the investigation of relationality and of human life in general. This modality of investigation allows a comprehension of the Dhamma that would simply not be possible in individual meditation.

The six ID instructions as a whole point to the *actuality* of experience - the suchness of things as they are, what mindfulness reveals in this present moment. In doing this they foster the conditions for the realization of a form of meditative insight we may call “relational insight”. Meditators can experiment with the simultaneous co-emerging of intuitive comprehension-often before words or beside, that is words “adjacent” to experience. It is fresh, vivid, emergent, transient and offered in the relational field, thus creating a sense of “knowing together now”. It is not “my truth” but rather an unfolding, simultaneous knowing, and an offering to one’s meditation partner in the practice of aligning with an emergent truth, what can be “seen” or known together in the field of non-personal intuitive awareness. Insights that might not have come from individual practice, and are even more vividly real and precious by the very fact- with release and joy- of being seen together, simultaneously in unison. Insights are known, so to say, more “objectively”- through and simultaneously beyond the personal subjective- insofar they arise intersubjectively.

Bhikkhu Bodhi writes “Since wisdom or insight is the chief instrument of enlightenment, the Buddha always asked his disciples to follow him on the basis of their own understanding, not from obedience or unquestioning trust. He calls his Dhamma *ehipassiko*, which means “Come and look” or “come and see for yourself”. He invites inquirers to investigate the teaching, to examine them in the light of their own reason and intelligence, and to gain confirmation of its truth for themselves. The Dhamma ... requires intelligence and sustained inquiry” (B. Bodhi, 2006). In relational meditation the Buddha instruction to “see for yourself”- *ehipassiko* - can grow into “see for yourselves”: when the truth is spoken and received in emergent dialogue, we begin to “see together”, beyond the self, beyond the “subjective.”

The step of practicing meditation while in relation and even using language, is usually considered too far or too impossible an undertaking in traditional Insight Meditation communities, where the practice of meditation is most often conceived as an individual silent endeavor.

Yet, in the *Maha Gosinga Sutta* (MN, 32), a small group of the very advanced disciples of the Buddha - all fully enlightened (*arahats*) - are each describing their particular Dharma path to the end of suffering - some speak for solitary meditation, others for developing psychic powers, for opening the dharma or wisdom eye, for studying and memorizing the dharma.

The *Bhikkhu Mogallana* describes the path he is following with these words:

*“Two Bhikkhus engaged in talk on deep dharma,
each asks questions and each answers, without foundering,
and the talk rolls on, in accordance with the Dharma.”*

This passage in the *Maha Gosinga* sutta can be seen as the textual root of the lineages developing dialogical practices such ID. It describes a deepening of Dharma through relational dialogue -we suggest grounded in Radical Relationality and the dynamic unfolding or forward movement of the Dhamma. When there is the state of Radical Relationality, the Dhamma shines through the meditators, and its universality illuminates the particularity of each mind/body.

The set of ID relational meditative instructions aims at growing and enhancing the application (*patthana*) of sati/mindfulness (and of the other meditative qualities inherent in the human mind) directly into the process of relationality. Being in actual relationship with another human being while in a meditative state of consciousness yields intensification of mindfulness and concentration, and thus the conditions to support inquiry more deeply into what is really happening, moment by moment, in the extreme complexity of relational processes.

ID and the *Brahmaviharas*: in relational practice, this establishment of mindfulness is cultivated face to face, heart to heart, sitting body to sitting body. With *sati*, the heart qualities -*metta*, *karuna*, *mudita*, *upekkha*- appear to arise naturally in relational practice. *Metta* seems to be an organic element or fruit of such relational engagement and *Karuna* a natural response of the heart to the suffering of another. These qualities of spiritual friendship are also cultivated, intensified, and amplified as a field of liberation. These heart qualities also become brighter, stronger, more powerful and penetrating as liberative factors.

The six meditative guidelines of Insight Dialogue: Pause, Relax, Open, Attune to Emergence, Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth

It is impossible to fully describe in words the ID guidelines, as they have to be – like any meditative instruction – experienced and realized in practice, again and again. At first sight the ID guidelines/instruction are – like any mindfulness meditation instruction – an invitation to pay attention and bring awareness in a certain way to certain aspects of the unfolding experience. Over time the deceptive simplicity of each guideline reveals its depth, layer after layer, and gradually opens to unexplored levels of awareness and penetrative clarity as to how relational experience is being constructed and to the possibility of accessing states of *less* constructed experience.

As in many of the Buddha’s teachings, one factor in a list of multiple factors is separated out to highlight and appreciate its contribution to the whole. This supports the meditator to direct attention toward the cultivation of that factor. However, when actually experienced in meditation (or in life) each factor flows into and suffuses all other factors. There is a naturally developing wholeness and flow of each and all together. This is true also with the ID instructions; each can be highlighted and practiced on its own. However, as the practice develops, there is a natural flow of all the guidelines working together and one naturally flows into the other.

The ID instructions are practiced together with eyes open, though there may be several moments when one drops into individual silent meditation. The instructions are intentionally short, simple, and they mostly are verbs. For the meditator it is crucial to understand which intention, which specific attentional actions are invited by each instruction, and also not to confuse this with the usual everyday meaning of these verbs .

“Pause” the first guideline/instruction, it is an invitation to pay a mindful, embodied, careful attention to the immense complexity and richness of relational processes, while in their flow. This intention requires, first of all, to withdraw (to stop or slow down) and suspend habitual functioning, where habits can become automatic and rigid to the point of resulting as a major factor contributing to psychopathology (Giommi et al. , 2023). We pause when experiencing conditions that usually trigger the mind towards automatic routines and habits, narrowing awareness into the verbal/linguistic domain, or in some “tunnel vision” induced by the reactivity to a perceived or actual emotional trigger.

“Pause” asks us to step aside, to interrupt or mitigate our habitual rushing forward in a state of mind of narrowed attentional focus. We can notice ourselves getting fused with any sensory contact, any thought, any emotional feeling arising for us. Pause stimulates us to keep remembering the freedom we have – anytime - to choose *sati* (intuitive awareness) instead of fusion with the flow of reactivity (thus creating confusion and ignorance). Once we begin to practice “Pause”, over time we start noticing several layers of phenomena already occurring in our experience that would have otherwise remained unseen and invisible, hidden in the background of enormous complexity of relational processes. And once we see, we start to penetrate and comprehend.

Yet, gradually the practice with the instruction “pause” can grow and expand, and can incline the mind toward the activation of other “factors of awakening”, those intensifying the mediative quality of a mind where *sati* is established: “investigation”, “energy”, “joy” as well as “tranquility”, “concentration” and “equanimity”. “Pause” practiced in relation supports the practice of each meditator. The relational practice of pause rests on each meditation partner sustaining mutually established mindfulness through their presence and practice. This is the first step in establishing mindfulness internally, externally and both -and as such an opening into the relational field.

“Relax” is the second ID instruction. Once we establish an intensified quality of mindfulness, we are better able to notice possible tensions or contractions, “*dukkha*”, in the body or in the mind. “Relax” is firstly an invitation to acknowledge, to directly touch the bare experience of tension, and then choosing to intentionally release, to let it go and - if it cannot be released – to let it be, to make space around it. Thus, “Relax” is an invitation to release the tensions in the body and in the mind, which brings more ease and stability. And vice versa, it is an invitation to increase tranquility and concentration which brings stability and equanimity. Mental stability and concentration are deeply connected.

Over time the practice of the instruction “Relax” grows in the intensification of the other “awakening factors” which foster a deeper calm in the body/mind: “tranquility” and “equanimity”.

Practicing “Relax” together allows each meditation partner to support relax for themselves and each other, as well as to establish calm and ease in the relational field.

“Pause” and “Relax” create the conditions to introduce the third instruction “Open”, which in a sense is the fully relational instruction, as it requires relational contact to be practiced, explored, established and realized together. It is an invitation to open awareness simultaneously internally and externally, while the “external” can be the presence and practice of another human being who is also opening to awareness with this shared intention. It is an invitation to explore the field of consciousness arising from the resonating attunement of “my” and “your” awareness while in meditation. The natural flow of Open, between internal and external can be established and experienced as an expanded field of awareness- a “space” of shared, inclusive, even compassionate aperture, a doorway to opening beyond “individual” or “my” awareness, to the condition of Radical Relationality- what has also been described as unconstructed (Kramer, 2007) or unobstructed intimacy. (Giommi and Surrey, in press)

In early stages of practice, this guideline is offered in a very practical way, with each meditator practicing mindfulness one at a time -noting first silently -and then through words- the flow of awareness in this way; “internal, external or both”, and then practicing with this way of describing- or noting- the flow of awareness, each offering and receiving experience simultaneously in the shared space of open awareness.

“Attune to emergence” is the meditation instruction inviting practitioners to pay attention to the rising and passing of phenomena, the direct “attunement” to knowing and meeting *anicca*, the characteristic of impermanence of phenomena. It is an invitation to attune to impermanence as manifesting in the unpredictable complexity of the flowing of individual and relational experience- which we might call attuning to co-emergence. To orient mindfulness through the wisdom of “not-knowing” imbued with fresh curiosity, discovery and investigation and expanding to what can be known or discovered through the open or shared, co-emergent space of awareness. “Attune to emergence” further points to what is mutually co-emerging and known in moment to moment by mindfulness, both internally and relationally, through the expanded space of open awareness. Externally in the relational field, internally in our body-mind, and both in the encompassing the space of “Open”. Knowing as “seeing”, and moving with the phenomena arising and passing in the condition of “Open” pointing to what is known together in the fluid, changing field, creating a condition for the emergence of relational insight.

The two remaining instructions, “Listen Deeply” and “Speak the Truth” rest on the establishment of all the previous guidelines and meditative cultivation, and make the radical move to bring voice and words into meditation. For example, without “Pause” (*sati*) and “Attune to Emergence” (*anicca*) speech can not touch the immediacy of the moment but remains overly conceptual, abstracted, narrative and habitual.

These last two guidelines are a practice of “Wise or Right view” (*sammaditthi*): the “voice of another” (*paratoghosa*) and “wise attention” (*yoniso manasikara*). They yield the fruits of wise view: the arising of the whole eightfold path as well as each path factor. They incline toward wise speech and wise listening. “Speak the truth” refers to speaking what is actually known in direct awareness. It is truth emerging in the moment that is aimed at disentangling from habitual speech or narrative stories; from identification as “my truth” or the story of Me.

Dialogue between spiritual friends or *dhammakhata*, dhamma talk, describes this power of speech and relational dialogue aimed at manifesting and realizing the dhamma, and of dhamma contemplation as an element of kalyana mita - spiritual friendship- as a relational practice. In ID, two or more voices attune in dialogue, listening deeply and speaking the truth, both are aimed at insight, at the dhamma, of seeing things as they are. Through shared practice, the disentangling and liberative process is supported by the presence of more than one “seeing truth”, building a greater clarity and reality of actuality of “truth” and less about “my” experience or “yours”. In a sense, this could be described as “purification” of speech, and a condition for and a fruit of the operation and liberative power of Radical Relationality. This guideline points to the intention to express in words the *actuality* of experience, the “suchness of things as they are”, what mindfulness reveals in this present moment. It is alive, emergent and offered in the relational field, thus creating a sense of “knowing together”. It is not “my truth” but rather an unfolding knowing, and an offering to one’s meditation partner in the shared practice of aligning with emergent truth- what can be seen or known together, and leading to “relational insight.”

This “speaking” is embodied and transmits the “ring or taste of authenticity”- transmitting factors or embodied qualities of heart and mind which are beyond the words, yet conveyed through the act of speaking mindfully. The intention or aspiration of “Speak the truth”, points to the power of the physical act of speaking as an action of the whole body and heart-mind which can vibrate or resonate in the unimpeded “between” or the relational space. “Voice” as the physical expression and transmission of the body-heart-mind speaking truth. It is co-arising with the guideline “Listen deeply”. This guideline inclines the listening toward “wise attention,” as attunement and receptive awareness -internally, externally and both -in the field of unobstructed “Open” to what is arising in the relational space.

With wise speech as a path factor, there is a further elaboration of “truth” to include the discernment of what is real and contextualized in this relational moment; what is kind, timely, beneficial, and spoken with a heart of compassion. It is a truth seen and felt: resonating through the whole body, leaving behind the residue of the false, the identification with the self, dropping away as truth declares itself, makes itself known, is simply present, evident.

The guideline “Listen Deeply” is the “copilot” of “Speak the Truth”, as this attunement to what is real or true is a quality of the speaker and listener, and each co-arises with the other, they are inseparable. Wise attention includes mindfulness, concentration and an inclination toward the truth, the Dhamma. Listening for and to the dhamma that is unfolding through the voice of the speaker. The practice of “Listen Deeply” is a meditative practice of cultivating fully embodied, direct awareness, listening at multiple sensory and ever more subtle levels, attuning to emergence, to the moment to moment changing display of Dhamma.

When the dialogue flows with no designated or separated speaker or listener, it may become impossible to distinguish who is practicing “Speak the truth” and who “Listen Deeply”, as the two guidelines become simultaneous, coarising, mutually influencing, two elements of one practice.

“The experience of “we are all one” arises not by dint of effort or by shoehorning our egos into a newly assumed nonself belief system. Rather, oneness is simply the temporary dissolution of the self through yielded, generous and boundlessly receptive listening. The Pause, then, is ongoing and infinite. Relax is accepting and replete with love. Open is extended and centerless in mutuality. Attune to emergence is realized as the living surrender to lucidity. No-self Listens Deeply as the Truth speaks itself” (Kramer, 2017, page 162)

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