

## Mindfulness in Dialogue

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## Abstract

Mindfulness is a practice of training our attention and heightening our awareness of experience while holding a non-judgmental attitude towards whatever that experience is. Bohm Dialogue (referred to as Dialogue throughout this paper) is a method of inquiry into the nature of thought with an emphasis on how that impacts the way we relate to each other and to the world around us. What relationship do these two different methods, the first a very individual personal process and the second based on group interaction and presence, have to each other? How is the practice of mindfulness called forth in the practice of Dialogue? This paper gives an overview of each of these practices and proceeds to examine how they resonate with each other. This offers insights into how mindfulness practices might deepen the experience in Dialogue.

*Key words:* awareness, Bohm, dialogue, mindfulness, MBSR

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### I. INTRODUCTION

Mindfulness and Bohm Dialogue are each practices that have the potential to heighten our awareness of our internal experience and our relationship to others and to our environment. Mindfulness is the central practice of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). It is a practice that focuses on the development of conscious awareness of our own internal experience and how that affects our presence in and experience of the world in which we live. Dialogue, developed by the physicist, David Bohm, is a practice that focuses on developing awareness of our thought processes in the context of a group setting. Bohm's process of dialogue is sometimes known as Bohm Dialogue or Bohmian Dialogue. Bohm used simply the term 'dialogue'. In this paper, Dialogue (capitalized) will refer to the particular method that David Bohm (1996) lays out in his book, *On Dialogue*.

It is useful to examine the practice of mindfulness, as it is taught in the context of MBSR, to see where it resonates with approaches to participating in Dialogue. These two practices have deep similarities to each other in their development of a more conscious awareness of our own experience. An investigation of the practices taught in mindfulness training, along with the transformations this training can engender, illuminates how

mindfulness is inherent in and can inform the process of Dialogue. An investigation of Bohm's recommendations for approaches to Dialogue, allows us to see the deep similarities between mindfulness and Dialogue. The highlighting of these similarities and bringing the process of mindfulness into awareness in the context of Dialogue, deepens our experience and understanding of Dialogue.

Intertwined with this investigation of the relevance of mindfulness practices to that of the practice of Dialogue, is the thread of the move from a focus on the experience of the individual to a greater awareness of our experience of the collective. Mindfulness practices, while often practiced in the context group settings are largely an inward, individual experience of the opening of awareness. In Dialogue, this mindful focus is brought to the level of the collective as practitioners interact and open their awareness to each other and the sense of the group as a whole.

## II. THE PRACTICE OF MINDFULNESS

*I am sitting quietly, with eyes closed, in an upright alert position. I have brought my attention to the sensation of the breath in my body: the rise and fall of my chest; the expansion and contraction of my belly. I feel the smooth, cool flow of air entering my nostrils, descending through my throat, into my lungs; then the warm moist flow of the exhale. I begin to drift on my thoughts as they arise. Someone in the room (there are about twenty-five*

*participants here sitting in a large circle) shifts his or her position, causing the chair to squeak. Abruptly my awareness is brought back to the room, to the present moment. I note that my mind has wandered and bring my focus back to the breath, the sensations in my body, in the present. I move back and forth between these states of alert awareness and unfocused drifting in my thoughts. Eventually I enter a state of quiet, alert calmness where I become an observer, a witness to my experience, without judging or trying to control, to change it. My thoughts drift through and disperse. A slight discomfort arises in my leg. I allow my attention to rest on it, note it and then I return my focus to the ebb and flow of my breath. I am present to each moment as it arises, no longer lost within it.*

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) is a program developed by the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center. The program is designed to help those patients with illnesses exacerbated by stress to learn practices that can help the patients reduce their stress reactivity. Several techniques are taught to assist this process. Body scans, yoga, and sitting meditation are each learned as ways of becoming mindful in and to the present moment.

The practices of mindfulness train the practitioner to be present in moment-to-moment awareness, without judging or creating a story around the experience. By learning these practices, as described by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), in his book on MBSR, "... you are training your mind to be less reactive and more stable. You are making each moment

count. You are taking each moment as it comes, not valuing any one above any other” (p. 61). This process encourages the practitioner to become more discerning; to become aware of the ways that he/she often automatically categorizes and judges both inner and outer experience.

Two processes are taught early on in the MBSR program that support the development of mindfulness. One is the full body scan, in which the practitioner lies in a relaxed state, letting the focus of attention move through the body in a systematic way, taking note of the sensations experienced in each part of the body. This process develops both the ability to focus on one’s inward experience in a deliberate manner and also heightens one’s awareness of proprioception, the experience of the physical sensations in the body. In this practice the practitioner brings his/her attention to discrete parts of the body, slowly, one after the other, focusing on any sensation that arises in that part of the body. One practices being aware of the sensations as they arise, noting them without judging them as either good or bad, focusing on the experience of being simply aware of the sensation.

A second practice is a form of meditation, in the style of vipassana or insight meditation. This practice is similar to the body scan as it also develops an open focused awareness of experience without judgment. For this practice, the meditator starts by sitting quietly in a comfortable position and gently brings his/her attention to the sensation of the breath in the body. The breath, because it is a consistent somatic experience, is used as a place to return our attention to when we find that we have become caught up in our thoughts and

stories. During the early phases of learning the practice, the meditator can be guided in ways of developing an intentional focus on his/her internal experience in the moment. Important to the process is learning to approach the meditation with a relaxed, open attitude, without expectation of outcome, with an emphasis on learning to become aware of, to note and to witness one's experience in the moment without labeling it as either good or bad.

Learning how to be present to our current experience without judgment allows the possibility for us to see things as they are, rather than through the lens of our expectations and preconceived ideas. In *Full Catastrophe Living*, Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013) describes the various processes of MBSR. He writes, "The attitude with which you undertake the practice of paying attention and being in the present is crucial. It is the soil in which you will be cultivating your ability to calm your mind and to relax your body, to concentrate and to see more clearly (p. 19). This process of becoming mindful can allow a transformation of our experience, reducing our reactivity and stress responses to the vagaries and tensions of our life experience.

For the meditation practice the practitioner sits quietly in a comfortable but alert position. Often, initially, the focus is placed on the inflow and outflow of breath as that is a place of sensation that is consistent. As practitioners learn to bring the focus back to the breath each time they notice that their mind has wandered, the mind gradually quiets, allowing practitioners to rest in open awareness. Each moment is encountered as it is, without judgment, developing a moment-to-moment of awareness of things as they simply are

without thought interjecting itself in between the experience and the awareness of the experience.

With continuing practice, practitioners may begin to find that their relationship to their experience begins to transform. Pain and other difficult experiences are less likely to be reacted to with a contracting, stress response (thereby triggering all the metabolic stress responses of the body). Rather, the practitioner is able to witness his/her experience, acknowledging the presence of that experience with awareness, not unconscious reactivity. Also, as the practitioner learns to quiet his/her mind, allowing each moment to simply be as it is as it arises, a sense of spaciousness develops. Key to this process of transformation is the energy that is freed up. Kabat-Zinn (2013) describes this, “One way to think of this process of transformation is to think of mindfulness as a lens, taking the scattered and reactive energies of your mind and focusing them into a coherent source of energy for living, for problem solving, and for healing” (p. lxi). He goes on to note, “We routinely and unknowingly waste enormous amounts of energy in reacting automatically and unconsciously to the outside world and to our own inner experiences” (p. lxi). The energy that we normally use in allowing our minds to wander, daydream, obsess, and worry, is made available for responding with more awareness to each moment. Our energy is directed to attending to the experience in the moment without judgment or automatic reactivity.

Mindfulness requires an attitude of open, non-judgmental awareness. It is the process of being aware in each moment of the sensations of our bodies, the emotions we are



experiencing and the thoughts that are arising, noticing each as it arises without becoming absorbed by it. The practice of returning the focus to the breath each time that we notice that our attention has been drawn elsewhere, allows our minds to develop an ability to note our experience in the moment without judgment. Thought itself can become an object of mindful experience. As we learn to experience and notice the sensations of breathing without judgment, we can take this same attitude of mindfulness to our thoughts as they arise. In turning one's attention to thought the following instructions are suggested:

Note what feelings and moods are associated with different thought contents.... If you get lost in all this, just go back to your breathing until the attention stabilizes itself, and then, if you care to, reestablishing thinking as the primary object of attention. Remember, this is not an invitation to generate thoughts, simply an invitation to attend to their arising, their lingering if they linger, and their passing away in the field of awareness. This exercise requires a degree of stability in your attention. It might be best to practice this for relatively short periods of time in the early stages of practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 74).

With the extension of mindfulness from the sitting meditation and body scan practices, we can begin to practice mindfulness in all of everyday experience simply by bringing this practiced attitude of non-judgmental open awareness to each moment of experience. We can be curious: 'What am I feeling at this moment? What am I thinking at this moment? What are the sensations in my body? How am I reacting, responding?' Without

mentally asking the questions we can begin to notice our experience at all of these levels with an open awareness. As Kabat-Zinn (2013) describes, “It becomes a way of looking deeply into oneself in the spirit of self-inquiry and self-understanding” (p.lxii). This way of looking at oneself can underlie any experience that one undergoes.

Open awareness, noticing sensations, feelings and thoughts without judging, bringing one’s attention back to the present moment, are all core approaches to mindfulness. Kabat-Zinn (2013) frames the idea of non-judgment in mindfulness as suspension of judgment, “remind yourself that the practice involves suspending judgment and just watching whatever comes up” (p. lxii). We will come back to this concept of suspension again as we turn to our examination of Dialogue as proposed by the physicist, David Bohm.

### III. DIALOGUE

*I am sitting in a circle of twelve people, listening to individuals speak of their perceptions of the nature of reality. I find that, though I am listening intently, I have drawn my knees up in front of me and I am feeling irritated with what is happening in the group. The way the content is being presented by various individuals does not engage me though I am fascinated watching the dynamics at play before me. I become aware of my body posture. As I look around the circle I see that others have moved into positions that are either closed in, as mine is, or turned away from the*

*speakers. I find myself less and less interested in participating in the conversation. Eventually another woman in the group speaks up, speaking to the experience of a similar aggravation and disengagement with the content and tone of the dialogue. She speaks to her irritation with how one member of the group, while stating that he is interested in inquiry, speaks in declarative sentences. She feels he is presenting himself as the one who knows and that she is supposed to learn what he teaches. She states her aversion to this kind of presentation. I sit there fascinated as she so clearly sets out my own reactions to the current process of the group. Another member of the group points out how the woman who has just spoken presents her perceptions with an up lilt at the end of her sentences, giving them the sense of questions not declarations, allowing an openness for discussion. I become conscious of the fact that some of my irritation with the didactic style of the first man stems from my own tendency to speak in declarative sentences, thereby inadvertently shutting down the openness of the dialogue. I realize that this is something that I want to bring into heightened awareness; to see whether I can change the way I interact in this group and in the world around me. As I become aware of this my irritation and disengagement dissipate, and once again I am sitting in an open posture, present and engaged.*

Dialogue is a process of collective inquiry proposed by the physicist, David Bohm.

Bohm, a quantum physicist, was concerned with the issues confronting contemporary

societies and civilization. The process of Dialogue was inspired by a series of conversations that Bohm participated in with the Indian sage, Jiddhu Krishnamurti. Bohm was intrigued by the nature of thought and its role and impact in human behavior. As a way of exploring this question, he developed a form of collective inquiry that he termed Dialogue. Bohm used the term deliberately as an essential description of this process: *dia* being the Greek word for through; *logos*, as the word or the meaning of the word (Bohm, 1996, p.6). Bohm's Dialogue is an exploration of the nature of thought, through words. When Bohm uses the term 'thought', he not only refers to our conscious, conceptual, cognitive processes but also "our feelings, emotions, intentions and desires" (Bohm, Factor, Garrett, 1991, para. 11). All of these levels of thought are underpinned by assumptions and judgments that are often below the surface of our conscious awareness. As described by David Bohm, Donald Factor, and Peter Garrett (1991), in their seminal paper, 'Dialogue: A proposal,' " We are proposing a kind of collective inquiry not only into the content of what each of us says, thinks, and feels but also into the underlying motivations, assumptions and beliefs that lead us to do so" (para. 1). The process of Dialogue offers participants the opportunity to notice, to become aware of their underlying beliefs, feelings, and assumptions as individuals and as a collective. Dialogue sessions provide a venue that offers the possibility of individual and collective mindfulness and transformation. Through engaging in this approach, Bohm conceptualized the possibility of new and creative responses to current issues confronting humanity through a transformation of our process of thought.

The ideal structure of a Dialogue is to have the participants sit in a circle, so that each participant is able to see all of the other participants. Sitting in a circle allows for noticing not only one's own posture and what it reveals, but also that of each of the other participants. Participants are encouraged to observe their own and other's reactions and responses without judgment. This is part of the process of suspension. Suspension is brought to bear here in two ways. By bringing into one's own awareness and then verbalizing one's observations for the group, a participant suspends the observations for the whole group to become aware of and to work with. The second way of using suspension comes into play in this process, the suspension of one's judgment and reactivity, slowing down the process of response in order to observe thought (whatever it might consist of in the moment) more carefully. It is through this process that one can begin to identify the assumptions, beliefs, and emotional responses that underpin our thoughts, both as an individual and as a collective.

Suspension leads to a slowing down of the process of thought to observe it while it is actually occurring, in the moment. Bohm extends the concept of proprioception, the way that we can internally experience awareness of where our body parts are at any given time, to the experience of the process of thought. Through bringing our awareness to our body posture, our emotions, and the sensations that we feel in different parts of our bodies we can begin to become aware of thought as it arises. Through suspension of the process, bringing it into awareness and simply noticing it, we can begin to tease out the emotions, reactions, and assumptions that underlie and create our thoughts. The intention here is not to change or alter our thoughts but simply to note their existence. Suspension

encourages witnessing, which allows the movement from first person identification with one's thoughts and feelings, to third person noting while not being conflated with those thought and feelings. We 'have' our thoughts and feelings, rather 'be' them. The pause of suspension allows for the proprioception of our experience as the physical correlates come into awareness. In an article on Bohm's approach to Dialogue, Olen Gunnlaugson (2014) makes the point that suspension and attention put our thoughts "...in high relief against a background of awareness" thus changing our relationship to them (p. 26).

Dialogue sessions have no leader and no specific agenda. Whatever arises for participants in the moment is available for inquiry. Bohm (1996) writes:

In a dialogue we are not going to have any agenda, we are not going to try to accomplish any useful thing. As soon as we try to accomplish a useful purpose or goal, we will have an assumption behind it as to what is useful, and that assumption is going to limit us (p. 17).

Dialogue sessions provide a space for developing an awareness of how our assumptions and beliefs shape our reactions and responses to the world as they arise. When we are unaware of this shaping of our thought, we experience what Bohm refers to as incoherence. Incoherence is caused by our not seeing or experiencing things as they actually are but rather through the lens of our assumptions, beliefs, and emotions. This incoherence blocks our ability to allow new thoughts and solutions to emerge. Dialogue:

....allows a display of thought and meaning that makes possible a kind of collective proprioception or immediate mirroring back of both the content of thought and the less apparent, dynamic structures that govern it. In Dialogue

this can be experienced both individually and collectively. (Bohm, et al, 1991, para 12).

As we become aware of our thought processes in the moment, we create space, both individually and collectively for transformation and creativity to emerge.

#### IV. CONCLUDING THOUGHTS: Mindfulness in Dialogue

Through these inquiries into the practice of mindfulness and the process of Dialogue we can begin to see the commonalities of experience between these forms. Although in the first the locus of attention is on the individual and with the second it is on the collective process of a group, the practices have deep similarities. The terms awareness, proprioception, suspension, non-judgment and attention are used in describing both practices. Both forms have the intention of heightening awareness of experience as it is occurring in the present moment. Both caution against striving towards a particular outcome: Bohm emphasizes, “[Dialogue] is not concerned with deliberately trying to alter or change behavior nor to get the participants to move toward a predetermined goal” (Bohm, et al., 1991, para.17), while Kabat-Zinn (2013) iterates, “Almost everything we do we do for a purpose, to get something or somewhere. But in meditation this attitude can be a real obstacle. .... It has no goal other than for you to be yourself” (p. 26). In each the process of creativity and transformation has the potential to emerge because it is not constrained by expectation.

In the early stages of mindfulness practice, the focus is primarily inward, learning to be present to one's inner experience in a moment-to-moment fashion. As the practitioner develops this skill, he/she can bring it to bear in all the experiences of daily life, noticing experience of the world around one as well as the moment-to-moment internal experience. Proprioception plays an important role in the development of mindfulness. In a Dialogue session, the same kind of mindful moment-to-moment proprioceptive awareness is brought to bear on the experience of being in a group setting, of being part of a collective. The heightening of proprioceptive awareness is key to both practices. Proprioceptive awareness brings one's attention into the present moment, while allowing one to note and observe one's experience. Kabat-Zinn (2013) refers to this process as "...apprehending...another way of knowing for us, beyond merely thought based knowing" (p. xxxiv). He goes on to elaborate, "We have a word for this in English: 'awareness'. What is more we can hold our thoughts in awareness, and that gives us an entirely new perspective on them and on their content" (p. xxxiv). This statement has a striking similarity to the process of Dialogue and Bohm's assertion that we can have proprioception of thought (Bohm, 1996). With mindful proprioception of thought in Dialogue we can begin to reveal the feelings, sensations, and assumptions that underlie our thoughts to ourselves and to others, offering us "an entirely new perspective on them and their content."

Essential to Dialogue is the awareness that different assumptions engender different perspectives. When we can identify the differing underlying assumptions, without judging them, we are more able to embrace different perspectives. Kabat-Zinn (2013)



writes, “Mindfulness dramatically amplifies the probability that any activity in which you are engaged will result in an expansion of your perspective and your understanding of who you are (p. 98). Bringing mindfulness into a group setting as one does in Dialogue expands this to the understanding of other’s perspectives and increases one’s awareness of one’s participation in a collective. By highlighting how mindfulness is inherent in the process of Dialogue, bringing those qualities more fully into awareness, we have the potential of deepening our experiences of Dialogue.

And finally, while mindful meditation is an individual practice, it is often practiced in a group setting creating a community of practice. The Buddhist term for this is a ‘sangha.’ Dialogue is also a form of mindfulness practiced in a group setting. Here the emphasis moves from the individual to the collective. Dialogue, then, is a form of sangha, a community of practice of collective mindfulness. It is a movement from individual inner experience to the inner experience of collective thought. It is the move from the individual consciousness to the consciousness of the collective. So I end this investigation with a fascinating quote from Thich Nat Hanh (1994); “The next Buddha may be a sangha.”

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