

## **Contemplative Dialogue: Unleashing the Transformative Power of Communal Wisdom**

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This one method by which a group can engage in contemplative dialogue. Because we are paying attention to the field of relationship (the WE space) among us, this slow-moving manner of dialogue deepens our sense of union. Our intention is to move beyond the personal as we probe significant ideas together and listen deeply for truth in another's point of view.

Contemplative dialogue is a means of readying the ground for collective transformation, for helping shift from I to WE, from individualism to communion. This document offers an outline for this method, as well as additional information and reminders that may help participants as they practice contemplative dialogue.

### **Outline for a Contemplative Dialogue Session**

The session is led by a convener who gently moves the participants through the various phases.

Conveners use their own judgment as to how long each phase should be, checking for agreement with the participants as is appropriate.

1. Period of silence

2. Brief sharing of how each person is coming here right now

3. Building a container:

The convener poses a personal question and invites each participant to respond briefly. The question and the responses are meant to create a space where participants come to know one another at a deeper level and begin to develop some trust together.

4. Contemplative dialogue:

a. The convener poses the question that focuses the dialogue.

b. A period of silence follows. A piece of instrumental music might be played.

c. The dialogue begins. The participants allow each person who wishes to speak to do so once before anyone speaks for a second time.

d. Participants attempt to build on one another's insights as they listen carefully to each person and contribute their own insights, always being attentive to the emergence of shared wisdom in the dialogue.

e. The dialogue stops when there seems to be a natural ending (typically after no more than one hour).

5. Conclusion

a. The convener invites each person to share how he/she experienced the session and what the person noticed about what was being created through the dialogue.

## **Additional Information**

### **Building a Container Questions**

The following are some examples of questions that could be used to “build the container” among the participants:

Share a recent experience that touched your heart and spirit?

Share a recent experience of grace, of joy, of challenge, of God?

### **Choosing the Focus for the Contemplative Dialogue**

Before gathering, a group (or convener) decides together the general focus that becomes the basis for their dialogue. While the group might choose to read an article or use a thought from a book as the basis for dialogue, the more significant and pertinent to the group the question/thought offered, the more creative and transformative the dialogue. At times the convener may choose a question ahead of time that becomes the focus. At times it can be preferred that the group does not know the question ahead of time so the participants don't overthink the question before coming together. Stems for a question might be:

“What are you/we thinking and feeling about \_\_\_\_?” or

“What does it mean to say \_\_\_\_\_?”

### **Some Reminders about Contemplative Dialogue**

1. Be aware of the WE space that is created through our presence together and make that space conscious and sacred. Contemplative dialogue is about engaging meaningful conversations that are rooted in deep receptive listening. In this type of dialogue, you do not take your own position as final, but instead relax your grip on certainty and listen to the possibilities that surface from being in relationship with others.
2. Pay attention to what has deep meaning for you. Open your body to feel the impact of another's word.
3. If in a conversation you say what you already know, the new cannot come.
4. We are transformed by conversations that we have never had before.

### **Suggestions for the Practice of Contemplative Dialogue**

1. Speak briefly, use an economy of words, share the distilled version of your thought in no more than a few sentences, share what matters
2. Speak slowly from an inner attitude of quiet contemplation
3. Speak to the center (to the WE) and not to an individual
4. Move slowly through the dialogue, allowing for silence after a person speaks
5. As you listen, look at the person who is speaking
6. Listen without thinking about what you will say, letting your next thoughts emerge from the silence
7. Allow what another has said to stimulate your thinking in order to build bridges of connection in the circle to create shared meaning
8. Avoid sharing past knowledge, quoting something you have read, giving an automatic rapid response, using long involved thought patterns/stories/examples, over-contributing or under-contributing

9. Hold your own understandings lightly, tentatively; relax
10. Keep a spacious hospitality to explore differences

### **Making an Inquiry to the Group**

If a question arises in you that feels appropriate to place before the whole group, make a reverent inquiry about it – i.e., “I wonder ...” If the group participants agree to address the inquiry, the participants suspend what they may have been planning to say and instead focus on the inquiry.

### **Listening for the Sense of the Group**

1. Listen for what WE are saying in the group and what WE think
2. Ask: What is the meaning unfolding among us that is shared by all of us? What new possibility is rising?

### **Frequently Asked Questions about Contemplative Dialogue**

1. What makes this different from other experiences of dialogue?  
In a contemplative dialogue:
  - participants are intentional about maintaining a connection with their interior Source as they speak, allowing thoughts to spring from within this wellspring of creativity.
  - each person comes from an “I don’t know” mind so the conversation is fresh and new
  - attention is on the felt-sense of the shared field and allowing something new to emerge,
  - this is a way of being together that opens us to perceiving the in-breaking of the Divine within a community. As Jesus said, “Where two or three are gathered ...”
2. How can a group work with an article or an excerpt from a book?
  - The convener chooses a section/paragraph from an article/book and has a copy of that section for each person in the group. After starting the session with a period of silence,
  - the convener distributes the reading and invites the group to ponder it for two to three minutes. The convener invites the group to begin the dialogue. In some situations, the convener might use questions such as:
    - What does it mean to us to say ...?
    - What does it look like for us? How does this translate into our everyday lives?

The following are two examples that Liz Sweeney, SSJ used as a 'starters' for a contemplative dialogue session.

1. *Let's explore these thoughts of Thomas Merton in an experiential way so that we come to know this truth below as an embodied reality even as we speak.*  
... what is at the heart of Christian spirituality for Merton: the discovery of our true selves already resting in Christ, not Christ "out there" as a separate object but as "the Reality within our own reality, the Being within our own being, the life within our life." ... "If we believe in the Incarnation of the Son of God, there should be no one on earth in whom we are not prepared to see, in mystery, the presence of Christ. In Christ, God became

not only 'this' man but also in a broader and more mystical sense, yet no less truly, 'every man.'"

In Christopher Pramuk, *Sophia, The Hidden Christ of Thomas Merton*, p. 179

2. *Let's explore what it means to say ...*

We can accept that the ego is, "of course," desirous of gain, advantage, greed, and the like. By simply expecting it to be as it is, its nature can be accepted and then transcended. The ego just does what it has been trained to do over the millennia, and it still thinks that its survival depends on adherence to, and the practice of, its programs. Because of evolution, these programs have now become the antithesis of the intentions of the ethical person of today or of the serious spiritual seeker.

David Dawkins, in *Dissolving the Ego, Realizing the Self* (ed. Scott Jeffrey). p. 28

3. What are some guidelines for choosing the question for a contemplative dialogue session?

- That it be significant to the purpose or mission of the group
- That there's enough complexity in the question for creative insight and transformative possibility.