

THE POWER OF DIALOGUE

By Marlea Welton, Los Angeles

**My practice of faith
means to create
the mutual understanding
between human beings
that is the fulfillment of truth
and amity.
All this is ultimately the product
of dialogue,
and again dialogue.
(Daisaku Ikeda)¹**

THE power of dialogue is immense. Since Shakyamuni's time, it has been the primary way in which Buddhism has spread. And today, with the individual seemingly dwarfed by mass media and technology, it is still the single most effective communication skill for creating a lasting impact on human lives.

The word *dialogue* comes from the Greek *dialogos*, the philosophical discussions between Socrates and Plato. Both philosophers considered dialogue as an ideal, as something not readily attainable. The Greek word *dia* means through. *Logos* has the multiple meanings of language, count, tell, say, speak, definition and reason. Dialogue literally means to convey something through words and language. But it has always been more than just the communication of words. In many ways, it has been seen as the sharing of self with another in a very profound context.

The format of the original dialogues was a face-to-face encounter between teacher (Socrates) and students (Plato, among others), between mentor and disciples. Since dialogue began from a theoretical basis, it has always been open to reinterpretation, and "consequently, no description is able to pin down its ultimate meaning."²

Since Plato's use of it in the fourth century B.C.E., dialogue has been an actively discussed topic in many disciplines. There are current interpretations to be found in anthropology, especially in the school known as post-modern linguistics. This transdisciplinary field is populated by physicists, linguists and philosophers who have concluded that an essential element of dialogue is the relationship between self and other. Taken as such, dialogue could be viewed as the supreme act of a bodhisattva who is aware of dependent origination and the common relatedness of all humanity. Dependent origination is the Buddhist doctrine of the interdependence of all things. It means that all beings and phenomena in the universe exist or arise only by virtue of their relationship with one another. No one exists outside the influence of others; nothing arises of its own accord.

As a means of conveying ideas, dialogue has always been seen in relation to other modes of presentation. In Plato's time, the effect of dialogue was contrasted to the impact of writing. In contemporary society, where the Internet, cell phones,

e-mail, faxes and teleconferencing afford a variety of means by which we can instantly communicate, having a face-to-face talk with one human being may seem primitive and insignificant. But, I believe, precisely because of this overwhelming informational input, nothing is more powerful than dialogue.

Dialogue and Buddhism

HISTORICALLY, Shakyamuni lived around the fifth century B.C.E. Socrates and Plato lived during the fourth century B.C.E. You might almost say that Plato created a word that would help to explain Buddhism to the West, because Buddhism has spread almost exclusively through dialogue, through the contact of one human being to another. Viewed from a Buddhist perspective, dialogue is even more than the Socratic ideal of an exchange of ideas; it is the sharing of one's life with another. It is the expression of one's entire being. When we engage in dialogue, we are embarking on a journey between self and other that changes our lives and the lives of others. We are learning from, by and about each other through this process.

In a collection of essays called *On Dialogue*,³ David Bohm, a physicist, says that "the picture or image that this derivation [from the Greek translation of *dialogos*] suggests is of a stream of meaning flowing among and through us and between us. This will make possible a flow of meaning in the whole group, out of which may emerge some new understanding. It's something new, which may not have been in the starting point at all. It's something creative. And this shared meaning is the "glue" or "cement" that holds people and societies together.⁴ If we utilize yet another metaphor and liken society to a ship and Nichiren Daishonin's Buddhism to the ocean, we might say that this glue or cement only becomes strong when the ship is sailing on the steady ocean—our organization of faith.

To reiterate, dialogue is self and other, mentor and disciple. It is a process of creativity and discovery. Dialogue is human revolution and a process of human evolution as well. Evolution, unlike progress and development, is never predictable. When a child is born and develops, he or she becomes an adult—predictable. But evolution, like dialogue, is a process fraught with chaos and excitement because we do not know where the journey will take us. The future of human evolution depends upon the process of enlightened dialogues—but that is a topic for another essay.

Because dialogue is the presentation of self, it is important that we share our best selves. Our quest for world peace is carried out by the seemingly simple act of talking calmly and patiently about Buddhism one on one.

THREE COMPONENTS OF DIALOGUE

THERE are three components of a true dialogue among human beings: physical presence, words and intent.

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Physical Presence

BEING in the physical presence of another human being carries meaning and value not available through written or technological communication. The biggest plus is increased trust. Seeing how people react through their body language or hearing their voice enhances the overall effectiveness of communicating. It is now possible to transmit our voices across space through technological advances. Voices ultimately originate from our physical selves. And, as it says in the writings of Nichiren Daishonin, "The voice does the Buddha's work" (*Gosho Zenshu*, p. 706). It is possible, for example, to have a dialogue over the telephone. However, the most effective dialogues occur in the physical presence of another human being. Even on an instinctual level, being able to smell another can give us clues of what to expect. Have you ever noticed the first thing your pets do when they meet someone new? That person must pass the smell test. To them smell equals trust. Another advantage in meeting face to face in the trust department is eye contact. There is nothing that reveals as much about another as looking into that person's eyes, which are often called the "windows of the soul." All these factors make dialogue a physical moment.

Words

PRESIDENT Ikeda has said: "Why do I emphasize the importance of dialogue? Because I believe that dialogue and discussion are the main proof of one's humanity. In other words, only when we are immersed in the ocean of language do we become truly human. In *Phaedo*, Plato astutely associates hatred of language (*misologos*) with hatred of man (*misanthropos*)."⁵ Of all the species on earth, only human beings have the gift of communicating through self-referential language. While other animals may be able to make sounds, we create meanings and convey these meanings through a variety of highly sophisticated systems known as languages. Edward Sapir, a linguist, has said that language is a "purely human non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotion and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols."⁶

Voluntarily producing symbols with wisdom is a further proof of our humanity. It is a measure of our wisdom when we use words in a way that creates value.

The process of dialogue is neutral. Although both the Socratic and Buddhist concepts are ideals, it is totally possible to manipulate, injure and slander another through dialogue. It is also possible to forever alter a relationship by refusing to engage in dialogue, testified by the 1991 incident in which the priesthood refused to engage in dialogue with the Soka Gakkai. Whether refusing to have dialogue, or whether deciding upon a positive or a negative dialogue, when we make any of these choices, it will become a life-changing moment. We need, therefore, to inform our choices and our words with wisdom.

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Intent

WE commonly explain the impact of dialogue by speaking of what was “behind” the words. This is the intent, or the heart, of the people who are involved. A common term we hear is having a “heart-to-heart” dialogue, another way of expressing the sharing of one’s self or essence with another. In Buddhism, we might call the intent or heart the single-minded determination of the person engaged in the act. Whatever we call it, intent is the power behind dialogue.

What is at the heart of a dialogue is what will be conveyed. It only takes one person to initiate a dialogue. Someone once asked President Ikeda how he conducts dialogues with such a wide variety of world figures, regardless of their country, political inclination or culture. He said that he begins his dialogue with the person before he ever meets them by chanting daimoku to the Gohonzon as if he were starting the dialogue. In addition, he tries to learn all that he can about the other person’s life, ideas and accomplishments. By the time he meets the person, it is as if he were continuing a thought they had begun before. After their talk is over, he will chant daimoku again so that the person will understand the true intent of what he was trying to transmit.

An Intimate Encounter

ADIALOGUE is an intimate, personal encounter. A dialogue must have elements of intimacy if it is to be effective; we are touching the life of another. It is a personal experience that will remain with you, and it is an encounter in the sense that it is a life-changing experience.

When I began practicing Nichiren Daishonin’s Buddhism thirty years ago, Eastern religions were being introduced in the United States via the media. In particular, I remember the Beatles promoting Eastern mysticism and the Maharishi’s meditation. But I found out about Buddhism from a friend. I had never heard of it from any available media source.

Soon after joining, I was able to hear President Ikeda give speeches in large auditoriums. On many occasions, he would actually apologize for having to speak to such a large number of people. He would preface his talk by saying that he wanted to be able to speak to us individually and even to hug us, but because of time constraints, he was unable to do so. So he asked us to imagine that we were in a coffee shop with him, talking across a table. And his voice seemed to reach me in that exact way, very quietly and as if he were looking into my eyes. I have always remembered that and thought this was the essence of Buddhism and why I loved practicing so much. It would have been easy to become depersonalized in the large auditorium or to feel anonymous by hearing about Buddhism on television—just one person in a lonely crowd. But that wasn’t my experience at all, and I believe that President Ikeda was demonstrating the power of talking one on one.

In order to write this article, I had many dialogues with friends and family, in groups at meetings and at salons (a kind of discussion meeting around a topic), on buses and at home. In doing so, I remembered that Shakyamuni traveled to so

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many places in India teaching Buddhism that he wore out his shoes. In my case, I could easily drive places (although I did have to get new tires!), but I saw the value in going out of my way to meet with people.

It was the effort required in seeking out the human connection, even though I did do my usual solitary research, which made this one of the most pleasurable articles I've ever written. I've gained so much from the experiences with others that I feel I should recognize all my partners in dialogue as the co-authors of this article. It was truly a collaborative event.

A dialogue is an encounter—it is a life-changing moment. A friend of mine at work described it in this way, and I thought it also perfectly expresses how you feel when you've had a dialogue. We will remember these encounters even after we forget the words that were spoken.

WHAT A DIALOGUE IS AND ISN'T

True dialogue is never the exchange of readily available knowledge, but also active organization of knowledge which was not in the world before.⁷ (Eric Jantsch)

IN addition to refusing to engage in a dialogue, there are a number of attitudes that prevent the process from occurring. Some obvious ones are an unwillingness to listen to another's opinion, a hidden agenda, or an authoritarian attitude. There are also subtle variations of these glaring problems. David Bohm,⁸ a physicist, believes one of the most important attitudes to bring to dialogue is the ability to suspend assumptions.

This means not only being open to what another has to say, but also being able to examine your own interpretation (including prejudices and pre-conceived ideas) about what the other person is *trying* to say. This is not always easy, especially when you are having a dialogue where there are gender, ethnic or age differences. Being totally open to another's ideas, as well as to your own new understanding, requires tremendous effort and patience. In some sense, we can even liken true dialogue to the process of human revolution.

Hidden agendas don't work in dialogue because a dialogue has no fixed goal. Peter Senge, in *The Fifth Discipline*, explains that Bohm contrasts dialogue to discussion by saying that, unlike other modes of face-to-face communication (meetings, discussions, lectures), dialogues are trying to "access a larger 'pool of common meaning.'"⁹ Discussions, he says, are more like Ping-Pong matches where ideas are analyzed and dissected, but where the idea is to win someone over to your way of thinking. Of course, no one can make a hard and fast distinction between discussion and dialogue—both are natural aspects of human communication.

Nevertheless, authoritarian attitudes don't work well in dialogues. No one has all the right answers. Anyone trying to impose ideas upon someone else will stop the free flow of association that is characteristic of dialogue. Senge¹⁰ says:

Dialogue can occur only when a group of people see each other as colleagues in mutual quest for deeper insight and clarity. Thinking of each other as colleagues is important because thought is participative. The conscious act of thinking of each other as colleagues contributes toward interacting as colleagues. This may sound simple, but it can make a profound difference.

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS OF DIALOGUE

One's desperate *ichinen* (determination) is strong enough to move another's heart, no matter how stubborn it may be.¹¹

THE key to dialogue is accessing that pool of common meaning through collaborative learning. We can incorporate aspects of dialogue into every form of human communication. If we have the desire to reach another human being, we will want to acquire attributes that lead to effective dialogues: learning to listen, being flexible and open, suspending assumptions and treating others as colleagues.

The obvious Buddhist uses of dialogue arise in giving encouragement and at discussion meetings. Success of either of these two events depends upon the attitude of mutual understanding. But there are some not so obvious ways that we use dialogue in our everyday practice.

We might say that even chanting to the Gohonzon is a kind of dialogue between ourselves and the universe. Although we know the Gohonzon does not respond directly, the answer to our prayers is often reflected in our environment or in a change of attitude, which is our internal environment. If, however, we do not suspend our assumptions about the "correct" answer to our prayers, we may ignore the solution and miss the wisdom of the Buddha, which the environment has provided.

Dialogue is also invaluable when we truly want to introduce others to Buddhism. To clearly prove the validity of Buddhism in this country, we have to start with trust. Trust evolves out of dialogue. Genuine understanding likewise comes from dialogue.

Again, it is not about imposing our will upon others. Someone with a superior or domineering attitude will probably not generate real trust or understanding.

Only when we reach another's heart will that person understand what we are trying to say.

We also need to be aware, that the people we talk to might be in denial about their own suffering and its cause. They may lack any insight into the true nature of life. There is a parable in the Lotus Sutra where a physician offers excellent medicine to his children, who have accidentally consumed poison. Deluded by the poison, they mistrust him and refuse to take the medicine, which would cure them. His compassion for his children moves him to fake his own death in order to bring them to their senses.

By being open and flexible, by chanting daimoku with a compassionate prayer to reach our friends' hearts and then engaging them in dialogue, we create an

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atmosphere of collaborative learning. We can spark in others a spirit to learn more, while at the same time learning more about them, about ourselves and about life.

Dialogue Today

IN businesses and corporations, dialogue and team leadership have led the way in creating a more democratic work environment. Peter Seng's book *The Fifth Discipline* is a blueprint for organizations aiming to incorporate more dialogue and collegiality into their decision-making.

Since the beginning of the twentieth century, dialogues have played an important part in global affairs. We often associate the word with international summit conferences or meetings between diplomats. There is even a Global Dialogue Institute that specializes in teaching religious and government organizations how to conduct what they call "deep dialogue."

Our own SGI president, Daisaku Ikeda, has conducted scores of such dialogues with leaders and scholars from around the world, and a number of these have been published in book form.

It Starts With One Person

PERHAPS the most important feature of dialogue is that anyone and everyone can do it. Dialogue all begins with you. It requires no special talent, and all that is needed is a desire to reach the heart of another and to know the heart of another.

As President Ikeda writes in the preface to his novel *The Human Revolution*: "A great human revolution in just a single individual will help achieve a change in the destiny of a nation, and further, will enable a change in the destiny of all humankind...."

The power of dialogue is immense. One's strong desire to reach the heart of another can change the destinies of the participants and society as a whole. Use it wisely. Use it often.

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